

With The Hanks

Michael Lanz

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Foreword

This is a fan-fiction story from the universe of J.L. Williams's *Between Worlds* book series. None of this story should be considered canon. Creation and free distribution of this eBook had been approved by J.L. Williams prior to creation. This is a work of pure fiction.

CHAPTER 1

WHITE FLAKES OF SNOW sparkled in the sky as they danced towards the ground. They joined the others that have come before, adding to the long stretches of soft barricades along the street. A lone, ruby red SUV charged down the partially plowed street at speeds much too fast for the icy roads. Any local would have known better not to drive that fast, let alone use the defroster on the windshield, but Zendari was no local.

“I can’t believe my sisters.” Zendari grumbled over the radio. “Oh Zendari, just meet us out in some hodunk town. We’ll have a family reunion. It’ll be great.”

She slammed the steering wheel with her palm and put more pressure on the gas pedal. Snow and ice covered the windshield and the wipers did little to change that fact. Her anger had dulled her senses, to the point she did not realize the vehicle was a bit too cold for her body to handle. She wore a puffy purple coat and thick wool mittens with pine trees on them, but that was not enough to keep her warm in such cold weather. Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel and her body started to shake.

“Just when I thought I could trust them again. That they turned over a new leaf. No, instead they send me to a frozen deathtrap. I’m a

Goddess damned Interior Agent! And for what? Because I didn't get a growth spurt like everyone else?" Zendari almost yelled over the sound of bells from the radio.

Her vision was almost entirely white, except for a brown, rapidly approaching figure in the distance. This new color caught her eye and she squinted to see through the windshield. It kept getting closer, until her eyes got big, realizing what it was. She slammed on the brakes, but her wheels grabbed nothing but slick ice. Zendari turned the steering wheel hard to the right and the vehicle kept sliding forward. She kept hammering at the breaks, but all the vehicle did was groan.

"Run Bambi! Run!" Zendari yelled, clinging to the wheel of her runaway vehicle.

As if the deer heard her cries, it bounded off to the right and over the giant mounds of snow just in the nick of time. The vehicle slid past where the deer had been and started to spin. Zendari reached for her seatbelt, but it refused to move. The walls of snow were getting closer and she was still fighting with her stubborn seatbelt.

"Come on. Come on!" she said, continuing to pull the belt with all her might. By the time her vehicle turned back around, the seatbelt relented. She strapped it across her chest at the same moment her vehicle jerked forward. The snow consumed the front of her vehicle and crunched against the glass windshield. Her head whipped forward and the boxing glove humans called an airbag punched her whole body deep into the seat.

The last time she was hit that hard, her older sister, Val'ren, was standing over her with her fists in the air. Zendari's head was spinning, but at least it was still attached. She opened her blurry eyes, half expecting Val'ren to be making a victory lap around the vehicle. Instead it was a giant latex pillow with blue blood smeared on it. She struggled

to move it aside to see the damage, but it was clear she was not going anywhere soon.

With a sigh, Zendari leaned forward to let the airbag at least try to be a pillow. The radio crackled between Jingle Bells and the local weather warning that was in effect. She closed her eyes and tried to think about what to do next. She was out in the middle of nowhere and there was no one for miles. Zendari knew that a trek back into town would have been a death sentence. Then an idea popped in her head.

“My omni-pad!” Zendari said and opened her eyes. She looked over to the passenger seat where her omni-pad should have been, but nothing was there. She moved the airbag a little and got a clear view of the windshield with a rectangular hole where her omni-pad surely got ejected from the vehicle. Snow covered the hole, making a pocket where the device traveled in the snow.

She zipped her puffy coat all the way up to her neck and made sure her mittens were on. Zendari regretted not listening to the human at the hardware store to buy a shovel for her vehicle. The snow was still falling and if she waited, it would only take longer. She pushed open the door and rolled out of the vehicle. Her knees hit the frozen ground and it felt like she was wearing no pants. A chill rushed through her legs and stiffened her back.

Zendari got up slowly and started to dig into the snow above the hood of her vehicle. The snow broke away easy enough, but each stroke stung her fingers. She only got halfway through before she had to stop. The heat from the SUV radiated from the hood, but it gave little comfort for the rest of her body.

“At least the vehicle still works,” she said to herself. Unfortunately, the vehicle must have heard her. The SUV shuddered and the shake of the engine ceased along with the accompanying idle sound. She

pounded the dead machine with her fists, leaving two dents in the hood. "You killed me!"

Her frustration caused a cascade of snow from the passenger side to cover her side of the hood, eliminating all the progress she made. She let out another roar and kicked the tire, that only left her with a stinging feeling in her foot. Zendari hopped around on one foot in the middle of the road, holding her throbbing foot. It would have been a comical ending to her short time on Earth if it was not for a station wagon that came to her rescue.

Once she saw the lights, she stood there like the deer, frozen by the dread of someone seeing her like this. After all, she was an Interior Agent. She had a reputation to uphold. The car came to a stop and a man got out of the car. His camo coat and orange hat stood out in the mostly white outdoors.

"Do you need any help?" the man asked.

Zendari stood there contemplating her situation. On one hand, she did need help. Her vehicle was stuck in the snowbank and her omni-pad was playing hide and seek. On the other hand, she had her reputation as a Shil'vati woman, let alone an Interior Agent to consider. Her family and coworkers would never let her live it down. They would be telling this story until she died. But if she didn't accept, she wouldn't make it to the next day.

The man walked up to her and Zendari put her foot down, realizing how ridiculous she looked. He waved at her and repeated himself slower. She knew what he was saying, but her mind was still calculating what to say. Zendari never struggled with the English language, learning it years ago during the beginning of the occupation. What she did struggle with was talking to a man, especially one so handsome.

His chin could cut the ice they were standing on and he stood almost a foot shorter than her. He made her feel tall, unlike her sisters or really any Shil’vati woman she had ever met.

“Can you hear me?” the man asked and waved his hand in front of her face.

She shook her head. “Sorry, yes I can hear you.”

“What are you doing in the middle of the road?”

“My vehicle...”

“Oh, wow. How did you manage that?” the man asked, walking over to her vehicle.

“I swerved to hit a deer.”

“To hit a deer?” the man said with a smirk.

Zendari blushed. “No, I mean to *not* hit a deer.”

“I know what you meant,” the man chuckled. “You must have been driving pretty fast. Not used to Minnesota roads?”

“Not used to any of this,” Zendari admitted, rubbing her arms to keep herself warm.

The man inspected the hood and turned back to her. “Well, your SUV ain’t going anywhere. Where were you headed?”

“To the military base north of here.”

“That’s a long way still. I’ll tell you what, my brother and I are headed to our family get-together. When we get there, I’ll get my truck and I can take you the rest of the way from there. What do you say?”

“Thank you. Mr...?”

“Hanks. But you can call me Joseph. Come on, John’s got the car nice and warm,” Joseph said, waving her over.

Zendari didn’t need to be told twice, following him to the station wagon. Joseph went to the back of the station wagon to open the tailgate, while Zendari pulled on the handle of the rear passenger side door. It didn’t budge, mocking her strength.

“Sorry, you’ll have to crawl in back here. The back doors won’t open,” Joseph said.

Zendari walked over to him, pondering to herself why their doors weren’t working. The vehicle looked old, with wood paneling along the sides. Joseph reached inside and was pushing aside colorful boxes of different shapes and sizes.

“You can move the presents. Hope that is enough room for you.”

“I’ll make it work,” Zendari said. She put on a brave face, crawling headfirst into the vehicle. Internally, her heart thumped in her tight chest. She felt like she was being squeezed by a boa constrictor. The tailgate clunked behind her, causing her to jump. She looked out the right window and saw Joseph walk up to the front. His gait reminded her of the penguins she saw from a training video.

From the front seat, John was watching her in the rear view mirror. He had never talked to a Shil’vati before, only seeing them in passing when they were working. It felt strange to see one without their military gear, but it reminded him they weren’t that much different than human women. And from his angle, she was quite a sight to behold. Her lilac skin and golden eyes were quite enchanting. The rest of her body he couldn’t make out, but judging from her strong neck, she was a knockout underneath all that.

Joseph got in the vehicle and wacked his brother in the shoulder. “John, stop staring at her like dad always did and introduce yourself. She speaks English.”

John turned around in his seat to face her. “I’m sorry. My name’s John. What’s your name?”

“Zendari. It’s nice to meet you John and thank you for taking me,” Zendari said.

“Don’t worry about it, we’re glad we can help,” Joseph said.

“You’re lucky we found you. Not too many people come out this far, especially on Christmas Eve,” John added, before putting the car into drive.

“Christmas Eve? That is today?” Zendari asked. She had a vague idea of the holiday, but always got confused. It was never clear to her how a jolly old fat man in a red suit had anything to do with the birth of some baby deity from a virgin woman. Not to mention the flying reindeer, elves, snowmen, and colorful pine trees. She liked the idea of it all, but it was so foreign to her.

“It sure is! Tonight we get to open those bad boys back there,” John said, pointing his thumb at the gifts.

“Only one.” Joseph corrected his brother. “We save the rest for tomorrow. You don’t celebrate Christmas by chance?”

“I have not. I hope I’m not burdening you at all. I heard Christmas is a sacred human holiday,” Zendari said.

“Not at all. Tis the season for giving. And besides, John would love that I don’t drink all his eggnog,” Joseph remarked.

“If there is any left. Susie is probably on her fourth glass by now. That’s what we get for being on Santa duty,” John said, picking up speed ever so slightly.

“Santa Duty? Is this a military holiday?” Zendari asked, getting more confused about this holiday by the second.

Joseph laughed. “No. That’s what we call picking up all the gifts. Every year we keep all the gifts for the whole family at our place, that way no one can open their gifts early.”

“Except this year, my truck is in the shop and Joseph, The Deer Slayer, here has his whole truck bed full of blood from the buck he shot last night. So, we are stuck driving mom’s station wagon to pick up gifts this year,” John added.

“What does this have to do with the large old man?” Zendari asked.

The brothers both laughed, realizing their guest was thoroughly confused. John was content with letting Zendari spin her wheels, trying to decipher their strange holiday tradition. Joseph, on the other hand, was much more merciful.

“Santa is the guy who gives all the good little boys and girls gifts. He flies around in a magical sleigh with his reindeer and a giant red sack full of gifts. That’s kind of what we are doing. This is our sleigh and we are on a mission to bring holiday cheer!” Joseph said.

Zendari was starting to understand and her fear of the tight quarters was easing. It helped that their voices were relaxing and she was able to see out the front windshield. The warm car cradled her in its embrace, allowing her to stop shaking. Her feet were still cold, but that was a problem for later. This was the first time she had ever been in a conversation with two men that weren’t suspected rebels. She wanted to make the best of it.

“So, how big is your family? There are a lot of gifts back here.” Zendari asked.

“Despite the amount of gifts, most of these are for our sister’s kids. Our sister, Susan has five little munchkins to take care of. Lilly, Billy, Willy, Milly, and Gretchen. Between us, I think they missed a huge opportunity to name her Gilly,” John said.

Zendari laughed. “You can’t be serious?”

“Oh, he is. Gilly would have been a great name! I give Susan’s husband, Barry, a hard time about it all the time,” Joseph said.

“So, you have all these gifts for them? They are pretty lucky kids.”

“They aren’t all for them. We have a few gifts for each other, our mom and our aunt and uncle. We don’t get anything for Susan or Barry because we spend so much on their kids, which they prefer.

“Neither of you have any kids?” Zendari asked.

“Nope. But I’m content with being the best uncle ever!” John said.

“How about you? Any family back home waiting for you?” Joseph asked her.

Zendari could only conjure the image of her three older sisters and two brothers. None of which she had much of a desire to see again.

“No. No one is waiting for me back home,” Zendari said.

“I get it. You Space Marine chicks gotta keep things all classified and such. Worried some rebel is going to find out about your boyfriend or something,” John said, smirking to himself.

Zendari laughed and her cheeks turned a faint blue. “I don’t have a boyfriend. And I’m no Marine.”

“Whatever you say, Major Zendari!” John said, with a salute.

Zendari couldn’t help but blush more. She didn’t know if John was flirting with her or just being cute. Either way, she didn’t want to ruin it like the other women she had seen before. Thinking with their clam before their head.

“I fancy myself more of a General,” she said, playing along.

“Woah, my apologies General! This grunt can’t tell the difference between the top brass and topper brass,” John said, putting on his best impression of a gruff soldier.

“Are you really a General?” Joseph asked, thinking it was more than playful sarcasm.

“No. I’m actually an Interior Agent.”

“You really shouldn’t go around telling people you’re a spy. Kinda defeats the purpose,” Joseph said, wanting in on the fun banter.

Zendari shook her head and smiled. “Not a secret agent. An Interior Agent.”

“What is that?”

“I guess the closest comparison would be like your FBI.”

“A lady of the law! What brought you out here? Drug dealers, gangs, deer murders? Got that last one right here,” John said, pushing his brother.

“If you must know, I was actually out here to meet my sisters,” Zendari said.

“How did it go?” Joseph asked.

“About as well as any other year.”

Joseph and John knew what she meant. They had never had such an experience with their family, but they knew of plenty whose family lives were less than ideal. She tried to smile through it, but it was a weak attempt.

“Their loss is our gain then,” Joseph said, with a smile.

Zendari looked at him and saw he genuinely cared. She was not used to anyone, especially human males, being so kind to a complete stranger like her. Sure, she understood why men hated them so much, but to see two who were so nice made her darkness a little brighter. She held onto that feeling until they finally arrived at their mom’s home.

They pulled into the unplowed driveway that had tire tracks to follow between rows of snow covered pine trees. Looking into the tree line, it was almost untouched, except for the few squirrel tracks. Following the tracks, they pulled into a small section of snow that had been shoveled out. Three vehicles were parked, including a black truck that must have been Joseph’s. The snow was coming down more, but the wind was blocked by the surrounding trees.

“Here we are,” John announced, pulling up next to the truck.

“Would you like to come in and warm up a bit while you wait? Our mom makes the best hot chocolate,” Joseph offered.

“I have never had hot chocolate. Is it good?” Zendari asked.

“Well that settles that. I’ll help you get out of there,” Joseph said, opening the door and looking at John. “Tell mom we got company.”

John nodded and went inside, while Joseph let down the tailgate to help Zendari out. She started to crawl backwards toward the frigid air that was leaking inside the car when she heard a rip under her.

“What was that?” Joseph asked.

Zendari looked down and saw her purple coat with a large rip on the left side. The insulation of the coat was coming out and getting all over the back. She tried to cover it up, but the damage was already done.

“I’m so sorry. We must have had something sticking up in there. We’ll get you a new one.”

“It’s fine. Really,” Zendari said, getting out of the vehicle.

“I insist. You can’t be out in this weather without a good coat,” Joseph said, guiding her toward the house.

The house stood in front of them as a monument to wilderness living with the normal modern amenities. The entire building was made of dark oak wood, except the two-car garage. Frost accumulated under the large window pane to the left that revealed kids rushing off into another room after John. Joseph and Zendari went up to the red door with a decorative wreath made of the same pines from the forest and brushed their feet on the clean brown rug that said, ‘Happy Trails’ before going inside.

When the door opened, she wanted to hug the warm air that escaped the house. She stepped inside and took in the wonderful smell of gingerbread cookies baking in the oven. Zendari shivered in place, letting the warm air flow all around her.

“Feel free to make yourself at home. I’ll go get the truck ready,” Joseph said.

“Oh no you aren’t mister!” a woman yelled from the other room. A light patter of footsteps echoed around the wall, coming straight

for them. "You aren't going anywhere on Christmas Eve! Not in this weather."

The woman rounded the corner and stopped dead in her tracks. She was an inch or two shorter than Joseph, having to look up at the tall purple alien in her doorway. Her brown hair was put up in a bun that drew attention away from her messy red and green apron.

"When your brother told me you had a girl coming over, he never mentioned she would be so...tall."

"Zendari, meet my mother, Charlene," Joseph said.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Zendari said, extending her fist.

"We hug in this family," Charlene said, ignoring her fist and wrapping her arms around Zendari's waist. Her face squished into Zendari's coat, causing the insulation to fall out. She let go of Zendari, who stood there still stiff as a board from the surprise hug. "What did my boy do to your coat?"

"She..." Joseph started, but it was no use. Charlene's attention turned to Joseph.

"How many times do I have to tell you to be careful?" Charlene said and looked up to Zendari. "He can be so rough sometimes."

"It was really an accident," Zendari said.

"Nothing is an accident with that boy. You take that coat off and he will get you something nice and warm to wear."

Zendari hugged her coat. She knew how humans felt about Shil'vati's lack of modesty and didn't want to give her the wrong idea. "Oh, I really shouldn't."

"I can stitch that up for you later," Charlene said, pulling on her coat like a child. "Joseph, go get a coat from the closet."

"I'm really fine," Zendari said, but Charlene was stronger and quicker than Zendari anticipated. In one quick motion, Charlene took off Zendari's coat, revealing a form fitting black shirt that didn't leave

much to the imagination. Joseph quickly took off his coat and handed it to her, sparing his mother such a sight.

“You do know it’s cold outside, young lady,” Charlene said and helped put Joseph’s coat on her. It was a bit small, but it did the job. “Joseph, why don’t you get our guest a more appropriate outfit.”

“I was going to get the truck ready.”

“You will do no such thing. The radio said there is zero visibility on the roads with more snow coming in. I’m not losing my son because he wants to go parking with his girlfriend.”

Zendari blushed a bright blue, flattered by her statement. It wasn’t in any way true, but the fact that she didn’t outright disapprove of her was welcoming. Zendari always figured human parents would have been protective of their sons, especially with Shil’vati women, given their reputation.

“Is that what John told you?” Joseph said, crossing his arms.

“Nevermind what he told me. You aren’t going anywhere, but to find this fine lady something proper to wear,” Charlene said and escorted Zendari away from him. “Now tell me how you two first met! He never tells me anything about his love life.”

“Um...” Zendari said and looked back at Joseph who had already made his way into the door to the garage.

“My boy is easy on the eyes, isn’t he? He gets that from his father,” Charlene said.

Zendari couldn’t deny he was easy on the eyes, but she felt ambushed being left with his mother. Charlene didn’t stop talking, asking Zendari a flurry of questions that made her head spin. Before she even answered one of those questions, she was saved by John, who had a cup in each hand of something steamy.

“Quit pestering this poor woman. How can she answer you if you don’t wait to hear her answer?” John said to his mother and handed

Zendari a cup. Zendari held it between her mittens and inhaled the hot steam. Her whole body quivered as the brown drink warmed her before she even took a sip.

“I’m sorry, I just get all excited when I have guests. Would you like some marshmallows with that?” Charlene asked.

Zendari looked at her drink that was so smooth and inviting. She would have been happy with it as it was, but she was never one to turn down those fluffy white puffballs.

“I would love that. Thank you.”

Charlene waved her into the kitchen, where the children were all gathered around a wood table, watching a man in a green sweater swing an old watch by a chain. The children were transfixed by the swinging pendulum, moving their heads back and forth to follow it. Zendari smiled, seeing the children all at the edge of their seats, waiting for what would happen next. Charlene brought over the bag of marshmallows and offered her them. Zendari jumped a little, surprised how she snuck up on her.

“Oh, thank you,” Zendari said, taking two from the bag. She dropped them in her drink, where they floated, waiting for their demise.

“You going to tell me how you two met or am I going to have to feed you to those little ones?” Charlene said, gesturing to the mesmerized children.

“Your sons helped me today after I ended up in a snowbank,” she said and took a sip of her drink. Her eyes lit up and licked her lips. “Mmm. This is really good!”

“I should’ve known John was lying with that toothy grin of his. I’m so sorry for giving you a hard time,” Charlene said, putting her hand on Zendari’s arm.

“It’s fine. I’m honored that you think I would be the kind of woman your son would go for.”

“I was hoping he found someone. He is so secretive with his love life. Never wants to talk about it with me, but I get it. Macho and all that.”

Zendari knew what that was like all too well. Shil’vati society put a lot of pressure on women to act tough and hide their feelings around men. Coming to Earth, she related with the men more often than the women. The human women may have shared the same biology, but not their approach to much else. It was like a planet where the roles were reversed.

“I’m sure he will find someone. He has been nothing but kind to me,” Zendari said.

“He better have been. I raised him to treat a woman properly,” Charlene said and heard footsteps coming from the hallway. “Speak of the devil.”

Joseph came up to them holding a bright red Santa suit. The sleeves were long and the white cuffs were brighter than the snow outside. It was far too big for any of the others to comfortably wear.

“This is all I could find that will fit. We aren’t the tallest bunch around here,” Joseph said, holding it up to her.

“That will look wonderful on you,” Charlene said, encouraging her to put it on.

Zendari quickly shed Joseph’s coat and put on the Santa jacket. It was big around the midsection, but otherwise it fit her well. She missed the warmth from Joseph’s coat, but she knew this would warm up nicely for her eventually.

“How do I look?” Zendari asked.

“She looks beautiful. Doesn’t she, Joseph?” Charlene said.

“Yes...yes she does,” he said, catching something in his throat.

All this talking started to get the attention of the rest of the family. Two women came out from the sunroom to the right of the table where the children were still transfixed. One was wearing a green and red sweater with the words, 'Ho Ho Ho' written on it. Her face had a few wrinkles and streaks of gray in her smooth blonde hair. The other was much younger, sporting a red sweater with a giant snowman on it. She was not in a pleasant mood.

"Who is this?" the younger woman said, barely containing her disdain.

"This is Zendari," Joseph said, giving his sister a serious look before facing Zendari. "This is my sister, Susan and my aunt, Chelsea."

"It is a pleasure to meet you! How nice of you to join us," Chelsea said, offering her a fist bump. Susan, on the other hand, gave no warm welcome. She opted to continue questioning this outsider, much to Joseph and Charlene's disapproval.

"Zendari, do you have a last name?"

"D'Quirlen," Zendari answered, not wanting to upset her.

"What brings you to our little family get-together?"

Zendari was caught off guard by such a passive aggressive woman. She knew exactly what Susan was implying and didn't want to step on anyone's toes. After all, she was a guest in their home.

"My vehicle broke down. Your brothers were nice enough to give me a ride. I might not even have made it to tomorrow if they didn't find me," Zendari said, in an attempt to disable her line of questioning.

Susan was about to open her rude mouth again when Joseph decided that was going to be the end of it. "Why don't you go get Barry. We want to eat soon."

"I don't have a coat..." Susan began to say, before Joseph tossed his coat on her head.

“There you go. All nice and warm for you.”

Susan ripped the coat off her head and put on the fakest smile in the universe, walking past them. It was a silently tense moment that was forgotten as soon as Chelsea started talking.

“Zendari, that is a beautiful name! And you ladies are all so tall. What do they feed you?” Chelsea asked, complimenting her height, which was a first for Zendari.

“I’m actually the shortest of my family, if you don’t count my brothers,” Zendari said.

“Would have fooled me. You’re probably taller than my husband.” Chelsea turned her head toward the man in the green sweater who was still entertaining the little ones. “Charles, come over here. I want to see if she is taller than you.”

Zendari shifted on her feet and tried to hide behind the tiny cup of chocolatey goodness in her hands. She never enjoyed anyone reminding her of her height, which was brought up constantly. This time, she knew the family wasn’t being malicious, but it was still difficult. Charles got up from his seat and tossed the watch into the other room, which prompted all the children to rush after it. Their excited screams filled the house and Charles greeted Zendari with a fist bump.

“I didn’t realize we had a Shil’vati over. I was a little preoccupied with the kiddos. My name is Charles.”

“Zendari.”

“It is a pleasure.”

“Look at that. She is still taller than my husband. Wow. It is amazing!” Chelsea said, going up on her tiptoes to see the difference.

“Please excuse my wife. She can get a little fanatical when it comes to you aliens. Before you all showed up, she was big into alien conspiracies,” Charles said, gently pushing Chelsea down to earth.

“Do I live up to the expectations?” Zendari asked.

“You blew them out of the water my dear! I have so many questions—“

“And we can save all of those for dinner,” Joseph interrupted Chelsea. “I’m going to give her the tour.”

“Aren’t you going to cut the turkey?” Charlene asked.

“John can do it. All he is doing is sitting around drinking eggnog.” Joseph said and led Zendari into the next room where the kids were wrestling over the one pocketwatch to rule them all. Windows surrounded all three sides of the room, showing off sled tracks outside from the kids playing earlier. In the corner, was a single rocking chair facing toward the north window. “Sorry about my family. They can be a bit insensitive.”

“It’s alright. I don’t mind,” Zendari said.

“Well, this is the sunroom. It’s not much, but these munchkins all seem to be in here the most.”

The children were so focused on fighting each other and touching the watch, they did not realize there was a giant in their midst. The first one to realize this was the youngest, who was wearing a green and white sundress. She leaped over the pile and went up to Joseph, who kneeled down to her level.

“How’s it going, Silly?” Joseph said with a smirk.

“That’s not my name!” Gretchen said.

“Whatever you say, Gilly.”

Gretchen responded with a punch to his shoulder. She may have had a little fist, but she packed quite a wallop.

Joseph put his hands up and laughed. “Okay. Okay. Go easy on me, Gretch.”

“Who is that?” Gretchen asked, pointing at her.

“This is my friend, Zendari. She is going to celebrate Christmas with us today.”

Gretchen shrugged. "Okay. Nice to meet you Zenrawree.

Zendari waved at her before Gretchen went back into the pile, screaming along with the rest. Zendari giggled and turned to Joseph.

"She is a feisty one."

"You have no idea." Joseph said and walked her back past the table to a staircase. "Up here are the guest rooms. They aren't much, but you don't need much for just sleeping."

They walked up the stairs and there were three rooms, each with their doors open. The first one on the right had five mattresses all packed together covering the whole floor with blue blankets scattered all over. In the next room to the left was a king size bed and two suitcases opened on the bed. The final room had another king sized bed and cardboard boxes filling the rest of the space.

Joseph scratched his head. "I guess mom's been doing some packing. I was going to have you sleep up here, but it looks like there isn't any room."

"I can sleep on the floor. It's not a problem," she said, hugging herself.

"Is it too cold up here?" Joseph asked.

She shook her head. "No."

"You don't have to be that polite. Heat doesn't get up here for some reason. And they say hot air is supposed to rise," Joseph said, before leading her back downstairs. They slipped past his aunt and mother who were mocking John's cutting skills.

"I can take over the tour, if you want to cut this up?" John said, holding up the knife.

"Nope. That's what you get for what you told mom," Joseph said.

"From where I'm standing, I didn't say anything untruthful," John said with that familiar grin.

Joseph waved him off. "And here is the living room."

The living room had a green sofa in the center right of the room with a Christmas tree tucked in the corner out of sight of the windows. Its lights and bulb decorations put on a light show that welcomed everyone. Zendari felt warmer once she entered the room as heat radiated from the chimney to the left. It was strange that on the other side of the wall was the entryway to the door, making her wonder how the piping worked.

“We will be sleeping here tonight. We gave all the mattresses to the kids, but the ground never bothered me,” Joseph explained.

“We?” Zendari asked and blushed. Was she about to get lucky...twice.

“I mean—we will all be on the floor. Not that we are sleeping together.”

“Okay. Yeah. Just wanted to make sure...” Zendari said. They both couldn’t look each other in the eye, both blushing so hard you could see the color change in their faces from space.

“Let’s go check on the meal. I’m sure it’s done,” Joseph said, changing the subject before the silence became too awkward.

“Yes. Let’s.”

Noise filled the kitchen of everyone digging into their food. The children all sat on one end nearest the sunroom, watching Zendari at the head of the table. They giggled after each bite she took of the different foods on her plate as if they did something to her food. Susan sat opposite of her with a permanent frown on her face that she hid with her loud chewing. Her husband, Barry, was sitting next to the children, making sure they ate everything.

“Should I be concerned?” Zendari asked as she held up the shrimp on her fork. The children all watched her with their mouths agape.

“She’s gonna eat her own kind,” Lilly whispered to Billy.

“Shrimp aren’t aliens,” Billy said, much too loud.

“Kids, stop watching our guest eat. Your food is getting cold,” Barry said, reaching his fork to steal a shrimp which gathered protest from all his kids at once.

“Don’t worry about them. They have never seen a Shil’vati up close without armor on.” John reassured Zendari. “How’s the shrimp?”

She took a bite and her eyes lit up. The warm butter that lathered the shrimp was as satisfying as the crunch in her teeth.

“It is really good. All of it is.”

“I knew I was a master chief!” John said, before getting wacked in the arm by his mother.

“You mean I’m the master chief. All you did was cut the turkey,” Charlene said.

John rubbed his arm, pretending that it hurt him. “No love for the meat carving artist. Typical.”

“This is far from artistry,” Joseph said, holding up his mangled piece of meat.

“Artists are never appreciated in their time.”

Zendari continued eating and enjoying the brothers going at each other. They both seemed to enjoy themselves, trying to find a better way to come back each time. The whole family sharing this moment together made her wish her family was like this. Willing to set aside some time from their busy lives to spend it with each other. Instead all she got was a few messages every once in a while from her brothers. Her sisters never wanted to be around her and after all these years, things hadn’t changed.

She didn't dwell on it though. This family had been so good to her. They made her feel like part of the family, despite not knowing anything about her. At least most of them.

"Zendari, what is your family like? Why aren't you spending the holidays with them?" Susan asked, clearly making a point.

"Susan!" Charlene said, shocked her daughter would be so rude.

"I was supposed to see them today. We had plans to meet in town, but I guess they couldn't make it," Zendari said. She didn't know how else to answer that question without bumming out the whole room. Even still, her answer said volumes to her troubles.

"Must have been the roads. They can be dangerous for newcomers," Charlene said, trying to comfort her.

"Or they didn't want you ruining their Christmas either," Susan said.

Joseph slammed the table and stood up from his seat. The chair slid back, almost falling over.

"Susan. In the garage. Now," Joseph said with authority.

"I was just—"

"That was not a request. Now."

Susan put on her fake smile and got up, following Joseph to the garage. The rest of the family was quiet, unsure what to say next. Thankfully, kids have no filter.

"Mommy's in trouble," Lilly said.

"Is she going to get a spanking?" Billy asked.

"She was being naughty, wasn't she," Barry said.

"I don't think spankings work on mommy," Gretchen said.

"What makes you say that?" Barry asked, curious why she would say that.

"Because mommy always tells you to spank her harder. I heard her last week through the door at home. What did mommy do that time?"

Chelsea snorted into her eggnog and Charles chuckled to himself. Zendari blushed, surprised such a topic would come up at the human dinner table.

“That...is between us. You eat your food kiddo,” Barry said, ruffling Gretchen’s hair.

Gretchen fought his hand away and went back to her food without another thought. Zendari on the other hand, had plenty more thoughts. The most pressing was what Joseph was going to say to his sister. Susan had been icy to her since the beginning and she didn’t think she did anything to offend her. Whatever it was, she was dying to find out.

“Um...where is your bathroom?” Zendari asked.

“Oh, right where you walked in, the door next to the garage,” Charlene said.

“Thank you,” Zendari said and walked over to the door. She looked back at the table to make sure no one was watching before going over to the door to the garage. She cracked it just enough so she could hear their conversation.

“What is your deal, Susan?” Joseph asked. His voice was stern and unwavering.

“What is my deal? What about you?”

“Me?”

“You bring some purp into our mom’s house.”

“She is a guest. She had nowhere else to go.”

“You didn’t have to pick her up.”

“And what? Leave her on the side of the road to die of frostbite.”

“Everyone else would have.”

“Dad wouldn’t have.”

“You don’t care what dad would have done.”

“What is this really about? Come on. She isn’t bad.”

“You gave her dad’s jacket!”

“The Santa outfit?”

“He was the only one who was supposed to wear that.”

“When was that a rule?”

“It is the last thing we have of his that still smells like him,” Susan said, crying into her hands.

Joseph hesitated for a second before he went up to her and gave her a hug. “I miss dad too.”

Susan cried into his chest and felt Joseph rub her back. She wanted to say something more, but all that came out was tears.

“Before dad died, he told me something I will never forget,” Joseph said. Susan looked up at him with her watery eyes. “Take in the weary so that no one bears that burden alone. Only then will peace show itself.”

“You trying to make me feel worse?” Susan sniffed.

“I’m letting you know that dad would much rather you be kind to strangers than worry about an old costume.” Joseph let go of her. “And besides, I think of all the people who could use some holiday cheer, it is her. Her family didn’t even show up. How would you feel?”

Susan wiped the tears from her eyes. “I should apologize, shouldn’t I?”

“At a minimum.”

Zendari backed away from the door. She had no idea they lost their dad. Thinking back on it, she should have figured, but it never came to her. Her own dad died when she was young, so she never knew what it was like to have a male to look up to. She couldn’t imagine the pain they all were going through.

Before she could jump into the bathroom, the door opened. Joseph came out first, followed by Susan, both of which were surprised to see her.

“Too much hot chocolate?” Joseph asked.

“Oh, yeah...I was just using the bathroom,” Zendari said, hoping her lie was good enough to convince them she wasn’t eavesdropping.

“Zendari, I owe you an apology,” Susan said.

“It’s okay,” Zendari said.

“No. It’s not okay. You didn’t deserve my attitude. I was mad for the wrong reasons and I took it out on you. Can you forgive me?”

“I’m sorry for interrupting your Christmas. I know it is a sacred holiday for your people.”

“Nonsense, we love having you here,” Joseph said.

“And to make it up to you, would you like to do the honors of being Santa Claus this year?” Susan asked.

“I thought Santa Claus was an old fat man?” Zendari asked, confused why he wasn’t here.

Susan laughed. “Santa Claus isn’t real. Our dad used to dress up as him and give us our gifts.”

“Just don’t tell the kids that,” Joseph added.

“Don’t tell the kids what?” John asked, joining in the conversation.

“Zendari is going to be Santa this year,” Susan said, assuming her answer was yes.

“Nice. Purple Santa to the rescue!” John said, downing another glass of eggnog.

“Is it going to work? Everyone knows what I look like. And like John said, I don’t look anything like an old white guy with a beard.”

“Eh, it will be fine. Santa had to be an alien anyway. Flying around the whole world in a single night and eating cookies. I don’t know any humans who can do that,” John said.

“He makes a good point. So, what do you say?” Joseph asked.

Zendari didn’t have to think about it, letting a smile come over her face. Christmas had seemed so foreign to her at first, but being around

this family made it feel magical. She was not going to turn down such a high honor, let alone Susan's way of apologizing.

"Where is my beard?" Zendari asked.

Zendari was looking in a mirror inside the garage while John and Joseph took out some of the gifts from the car. Susan meandered around a puddle of water from the car, holding a bright red sack.

"Here you go, Santa," Susan said, handing her the sack.

"Thanks. What is the phrase again? Yo yo yo?" Zendari asked, stroking her long white beard.

"Ho ho ho. You have to make your voice a little deeper too." Susan walked back toward the car. "How are the gifts coming, elves?"

"Still cobbling away," Joseph said, writing something on one of the boxes.

"Let's get a move on. Barry can only keep them entertained for so long."

John waddled over with a pile of gifts in his arms, stacked to his face. "Yeah, we wouldn't want you to get spanked."

Zendari and John chuckled amongst each other as John dropped all the gifts into the sack. The wrapping paper crinkled until they all rested inside, filling out the sack.

"You sure you can handle all that, Santa?" John teased.

Zendari flexed her bicep that was still hidden in her costume. "I'm pretty confident."

John poked her arm, realizing it was all rock solid muscle underneath the furry sleeve. "Joseph could have used those muscles earlier. He needed a four-wheeler to pull that buck out of the snow."

“What could I have used?” Joseph said, putting a few more gifts into the sack.

“Have you felt these pipes on her? Talk about jacked Santa,” John said, still poking her arm.

Zendari’s face turned blue from his compliments. She never hit the gym much, but John’s kind words reminded her that men still admired a tone body. Susan was the last to join them, holding a pillow and a red hat with a white furry ball at the end that jingled.

“The final touches.” Susan stuffed the pillow under Zendari’s coat to fill out the costume. Zendari took the hat from her and smooched it on her head so it would stay still. The bell at the end jingled and tickled the back of her neck.

“Am I Santa Claus yet?” Zendari asked, holding her plushy belly.

“Close as you’ll ever be,” Susan said and opened the door. “After you, Santa.”

Zendari picked up the sack and slung it over her shoulder with ease. She made her way out the door and into the living room where the kids were all playing with Charles and Chelsea on the floor. Willy was crawling on Barry, who was spread eagle on the floor, when he spotted Zendari first.

“Santa! Santa’s here!” the boy said, flopping to the floor before running up to her. The other children all yelled with joy as they rushed her. Their little bodies pounded into her legs, almost knocking her onto the couch.

“Ho ho ho. Merry Christmas!” Zendari said, giving her best Santa impression. Lilly and Billy tried to pull on the sack while Willy and Milly clung to each of her legs. Zendari lifted her feet with a little struggle and made her way to the couch to sit down. Gretchen waited until Zendari was seated before rushing up to her.

“You’re not Santa Claus,” Gretchen accused.

“If that isn’t Santa Claus, I guess you’re not getting a gift.” Susan warned, walking into the room with her brothers. Gretchen stood up straight and jumped next to Zendari on the couch.

“You’re Santa Claus,” Gretchen said, snuggling her head under Zendari’s armpit.

Zendari smiled at Susan while Charlene came running into the room with an old digital camera in her hand.

“Pictures! Pictures!” she said, stepping on Barry to get a good spot. “Come on kids, say cheese for grandma!”

“Cheese!” the kids said, sprawled at Zendari’s feet or in her lap. The flash went off and the kids resumed their playful assault on Santa.

“Presents please!” Milly said, who somehow crawled onto her lap.

“Let me see what I have in here,” Zendari said, reaching into the sack and pulling out a present. “This one says, Lilly.”

“Yay!” Lilly said and leaped onto the couch to grab her gift before running back to Barry.

“What do you say Lilly?” Barry said, holding Lilly in his arm.

“Thank you, Mr. Santa Claus!” Lilly said.

“You’re very welcome, Lilly,” Zendari said.

Zendari felt an immense sort of joy pretending to play the fabled Santa Claus. Every time she handed out a gift, she got a warm feeling in her chest watching the kids light up with pure joy. Once all the gifts were passed out to everyone, they ripped into them. Joseph leaned over to her and poked the sack.

“There’s one more gift in there,” Joseph said.

Zendari looked up at him. He was smiling from ear to ear, gesturing to the sack with his head. She dug around and felt the wrapping paper. Pulling it out, it was a soft item that had someone’s name crossed out and her name over it.

“I couldn’t. This was for someone else.”

“I bought it for John, but I have a feeling you will appreciate it more. And besides, he has a bunch of them already,” Joseph said.

Zendari kept looking at him. His eyes were gentle and warm as the hot chocolate she had. She wanted to do something for him, but was unsure what she could do to show her appreciation. At least one that wouldn't be misconstrued.

“Thank you.”

“Go on and open it,” Joseph said.

She ripped the paper in one motion. The sound of the ripped paper blended in with others, who were tearing their wrapping paper into confetti. Laying in her hand was a red scarf with white letters that said, ‘Tis the season, to freeze my ass.’ Zendari laughed and wrapped it around her neck.

“I love it!” Zendari said, hugging the dangling portion. The next second, she felt two pairs of lips kiss her on each cheek. Her face turned into a blueberry with eyes, she blushed so hard. She looked back and forth between John and Joseph, who were both smiling. “What was...I—kiss?”

John laughed, holding mistletoe above her head. “Surprise Mistletoe Attack!”

“What is...Mistletoe?” Zendari asked, still struggling to keep her composure.

“You don't know what that is either? I'm surprised you Shil'vati don't know that one at least,” John said.

“I've never heard of it.”

“It's a holiday tradition. Anyone who is caught under the mistletoe gets a kiss,” Joseph explained.

Her heart fluttered faster than the snow blew around outside. It was her first time being kissed and by two men no less. Like a rabid animal that had a taste for blood, she wanted more. Zendari reached her hand

up to snatch the mistletoe from John, but he was too quick, moving it away with ease.

“Greedy one we got here,” John teased.

“Come over here with that. I need more education on how it works,” Zendari said, trying to reach over the couch.

“We have no time for that. It’s time for songs!” Joseph said and the children cheered.

“Jingle Bells! Jingle Bells! Jingle all the way!” Milly sang at the top of her lungs.

Joseph jumped on the couch next to Zendari and they all sang along with Milly. Zendari was overwhelmed with all the love in the room. Their voices harmonized like angels and it brought her a sense of peace she hadn’t felt before. To be in a room where everyone loved each other and she couldn’t help but feel that love extended to her. She was a complete stranger hours ago and now she had a man by her side who wanted nothing more than to make her day merry.

She took a chance and wrapped her arm around him, not knowing how he would react. Zendari watched his reaction, half expecting him to freeze like she did. Instead Joseph snuggled closer to her and slipped his hand behind her back. He felt so warm, she never wanted to let go. Her muscles relaxed and her voice wavered upon feeling his arm on the small of her back. This was what family was supposed to be like and she enjoyed it.

Once all the songs were sung and the kids were thoroughly tucked out from playing with their toys, it was time to go to sleep. Susan and Barry herded their little ones up the stairs with Charles and Chelsea shortly behind them. Charlene was back and forth, bringing in pillows and blankets for the rest of them to sleep. John was already passed out, still clutching his mostly drunk eggnog at the base of the couch. Charlene just put a blanket over him, not bothering to wake him up.

“I got your nest all made up. Chelsea says you need it extra warm so I moved it closer to the fireplace,” Charlene said.

“I really appreciate this. You are really kind,” Zendari said, moving down to the floor. She wouldn’t have moved, but Joseph was getting up, so she knew it was her cue.

“And remember you two, no funny business in my house,” Charlene said.

“Whatever you heard about Shil’vati are just rumors, mom.” Joseph said.

“I wasn’t talking to her, mister.” Charlene wagged her finger at him. “I may be old, but I’m not blind.”

Zendari looked up at Joseph, who gave his mom a hug goodnight. Did Charlene really mean that? Was he interested in her? If that kiss was any indicator, she would say yes, but she knew humans were sometimes flirts like that. Her mind ran through the whole day, trying to think back on any subtle hints he may have been dropping her. It was a code to crack and she was up for the challenge. That was until Joseph sat down next to her and made it all perfectly clear.

“I don’t know if that fire is going to be warm enough for you tonight,” Joseph said, crawling under the blankets. “Best snuggle up to me. Just to make sure.”

Joseph turned his back to her and moved back until he could feel her Santa costume against him. She pulled him in close, trying to absorb all the warmth from her little spoon.

“You know, I hear the snow storm is supposed to get worse tomorrow. You might not be able to leave for at least another day until they can clear off the roads.”

“What a shame. I had so many plans,” Zendari said, squeezing him a little tighter.

He kissed her on the wrist and burrowed deeper into the pillow between them. “Merry Christmas, Zendari.”

“Merry Christmas, Joseph.”

She held him tight, watching the Christmas lights cheer at her victory. How she went from almost dying on a frozen Minnesota road to snuggling under a fire with the hottest man she had met was beyond her. She thought the Goddess was watching over her. Or that little baby dude this whole holiday was based around. To her though, none of that mattered. What mattered was the person in her arms and his family that welcomed her into their lives without a second thought. For the first time she finally felt at home. For the first time, she felt truly loved. It was a story she would proudly tell her family one day. The first of many, Christmases with the Hanks.

CHAPTER 2

THE WIND HOWLED AGAINST the windows of the ruby red SUV. Snow banks flanked the roads, blocking the view of the open fields, but not the tops of the pine trees in the distance. Almost two months ago, Zendari was barreling down the very same road, frustrated with her family. This time, she was driving just as fast in the opposite direction. Instead of pent up anger bursting at the seams, she had a pit in her stomach that felt heavier the longer she drove. She wished it was simply food poisoning, but it was something worse. Her nerves.

Ever since she spent Christmas with Joseph's family, she felt like she was floating on clouds. Joseph had been more than a gracious host, but a compassionate and caring man. One that she was determined to win over on the most romantic day for humans: Valentine's Day. She had scoured the data-net, learning everything there was to know about this sacred day. Cupid, hearts, candy, all of it. To her it was still not enough and she couldn't leave such an opportunity to chance, so she called in an expert she could trust.

"Call Susan," Zendari said to the vehicle.

"Calling Floran," a robotic voice answered from the speakers.

"No! Call Susan."

“Calling Nor’an.”

“Arggh! Stupid human phone. Cancel call,” Zendari said, trying to use the screen on her phone. All it did was turn her audio call into a video chat. Her face and red scarf, that was wrapped around her neck, showed up on the small screen before it disappeared and in its place was her brother. His face was narrow and sported a blonde fohawk. He resembled a human punk rock girl, except with small tusks and purple skin.

“Zen. I have to say I’m surprised to hear from you...and why is your camera quality so bad on your omni-pad?” Nor’an asked, squinting into the camera.

Zendari kept touching the screen but nothing changed. “I’m using a human phone until my omni-pad is fixed. I wasn’t trying to call you.”

“And yet here I am. So sis, how was your Christmas?” Nor’an asked, unwilling to hide his snickering.

“It was good. If it wasn’t for you all ditching me, I would have never met my human boyfriend.”

“Come on, Zen. You don’t have to lie. You froze your tits off didn’t you?”

“I’m not lying. I am actually going shopping right now with his sister to pick out the perfect gift for Valentine’s Day.”

Nor’an laughed, causing the speakers to crackle. “You tell the best stories, Zen. Have fun shopping for your ‘boyfriend.’”

Zendari’s hand gripped the steering wheel tighter, causing the pine trees on her mittens to stretch. She looked down at the phone with newfound determination. “You want to make it interesting? I bet you a thousand credits I will have a picture with him by the end of the day.”

“How will I know it is your boyfriend and not some random man you paid off or extorted?”

“He is about a foot shorter than me, brown hair, chiseled jaw, and sexy. Unlike you.”

“You’re on. And I want to see you two kissing. Anyone can stand together.”

“Deal.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see those pictures,” Nor’an said and waved before the video cut out.

Zendari closed her eyelids tight. She had never even kissed him before, let alone knew if they were really dating. They had kept in contact ever since, talking or doing video calls, but they have never really brought up their relationship status. She was sure he would agree they were dating, but after talking to Nor’an, her confidence was shaken.

She looked back at the road in front of her to distract herself from her negative thoughts when she saw a doe standing in her lane. Zendari slammed on the brakes and turned the steering wheel. History was about to repeat itself.

“Move! Out of the way!” Zendari yelled trying to turn the wheel. Instead of spinning out, she kept sliding while the deer stood undeterred by her approach. “Agggghh!”

At the last moment, her front tires got traction and turned her off into the snowbank. The SUV plowed into the snow, stopping mere inches from the deer. Zendari banged into the steering wheel, but her airbag didn’t go off. Her chest took the brunt of it, squishing her camo jacket against her boobs. She felt like someone smacked her with a tire iron, but it beat getting punched by the airbag.

Zendari looked out of her window at the deer. It watched her, flicking its tail like it was mocking her.

“Look what you did, Bambi. Are you happy?” Zendari said, throwing her arms up in the air.

The deer turned it's back to her and kicked the grill, causing the engine to wind down to a stop and smoke to escape out the hood.

"Alright, that's it you little bastard!" Zendari said, fighting her seatbelt. She ripped it off and opened the door. Cold air rushed into the totaled SUV, sending a chill down her entire body. She ignored the pain, wanting to give the deer a piece of her mind. Zendari got one foot out of the SUV before it pranced away and over the opposite snowbank.

"I see why Joseph shoots you! You're all furry monsters!" she yelled, waving her fist at it.

Her rage turned to shivers as she promptly got back inside and closed the door. She had been in this situation before, but this time her way of communicating with someone wasn't thrown out the window.

"Call Susan," Zendari said, rubbing the end of her scarf against her face.

"Calling Nor'an."

After a while of fiddling with her phone that was a bit too small for her big fingers, she got a hold of Susan. Susan's dirty white van pulled up to her on the side of the road. Grubby hands clung to the window in the back of the van, along with muffled screams of excitement. Zendari got out and quickly jumped into the passenger side of the van. The heat from the van blasted her shivering body while the screams from the children in the back overwhelmed her ears.

"Zenrawree!" Gretchen yelled above her other siblings. She jumped up and down in her seat, letting her ponytails bounce with her.

“Hello Gretchen.” Zendari said back to her and faced Susan.
“Thank you for picking me up.”

“You sure have a problem with icy roads,” Susan said, putting the van into drive.

“I have a problem with deer being on the road.”

“I’ll have to tell Joseph to shoot some more deer. Don’t want his favorite Shil’vati getting in fender benders all the time.”

“Please don’t tell him. I don’t want him to think this is a regular thing,” Zendari said, letting out a hint of desperation in her voice.

Susan looked over at her. “Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

“It’s not safe with me. I’m too honest,” Billy said, unashamed.

“If no one asks you, you don’t have to say anything, Billy,” Susan said.

“But what if someone does? Do you want us to lie?” Milly asked, covering her mouth in shock.

“No one is going to ask you.”

“Don’t worry Zenrawree. I’m good at keeping secrets. I keep them all the time,” Gretchen said.

“You do?” Zendari asked.

“Yeah. Like last week Joseph made me keep a secret.”

“What was it?”

Gretchen opened her mouth, before closing it again and smiled. “I can’t tell you that. It’s a secret!”

Zendari found Gretchen both adorable and intriguing. The Interior Agent inside of her wanted to push Gretchen for more information, hoping to find anything she knew about Joseph, but she decided against it. It would have been unfair and not to mention unethical to use her skills against a child. There were better ways to acquire that information, not to mention she had a bigger task ahead of her. Finding the perfect gift.

In no time the high snow banks were replaced with brick buildings and cleared sidewalks. People walked outside along the shops that tried to entice them with their wares. The van stopped at a stop sign while an elderly man waddled across the street in front of them. Along the sidewalks up ahead, cars were parked bumper to bumper, leaving no room for them.

“I should have known today was going to be a busy day.” Susan said and looked at Zendari. “Do you have any ideas of what you are going to get Joseph?”

“I have no idea. Is chocolate enough? I could only find on the data-net what to get women.”

“That’s because usually it’s the guy who gets something for the woman.”

“You don’t give anything to Barry?”

“I do...” Susan said, blushing ever so slightly. Zendari caught on what she meant, but the kids were not so observant.

“No, she doesn’t. Daddy always brings mounds of chocolate and all he gets is a kiss. We should get Daddy something this year,” Gretchen said and the other kids all sounded off in agreement.

“You think Daddy needs something?” Susan said.

“Yeah!” the children said in unison.

“Alright, we’ll get him something too. But you will need to pick it out.”

“Yay!”

Zendari laughed at how excited Susan’s kids got. They had an easy job. Their dad would love whatever they picked out, but she knew her task wouldn’t be that easy. That didn’t stop her from getting their opinion.

“So, what would your dad like?” Zendari asked the children.

“He likes working in the garage. Let’s get him a car!” Billy said with glee.

“Too expensive sweetie,” Susan said without taking her eyes off the road, searching for a parking spot.

“What about a puppy?” Lilly asked.

“We are trying to get a gift for Daddy, not you.”

“How about a hat?” Willy said, playing with the red beanie on his head.

“He doesn’t wear hats.”

“That’s why we should get him one. So he doesn’t keep pulling his hair out.”

“Pulling his hair out?” Susan asked.

“Daddy says he has no hair on his head cause his boss makes him pull it out.”

“That is not true. Daddy is just going bald.”

“Why is Daddy going bald?” Milly asked.

“Because he is getting older.”

“Am I going to be bald?” Willy said, putting his hands on his head.

“I want to be bald so I can be just like Dad!” Billy said.

“Okay kids, we are here,” Susan said and pulled into an open section near the sidewalk.

The kids unbuckled their seatbelts and were about to go to the door when Susan turned around in her seat.

“We have some rules before we go outside. What are they?” Susan asked the children.

“Bundle up!” Milly said, putting on her pink beanie.

“What else?”

“Pick up our garbage,” Willy said, crumpling up a chip bag wrapper that was at his feet.

“And finally?”

“No running off,” Gretchen said.

“That’s right. You will be staying near me or Zendari at all times. You understand?”

All their little heads nodded in unison. Zendari was impressed that Susan commanded them so easily. They sat in their seats, waiting patiently for her to give them the go ahead.

“Alright, let’s go shopping,” Susan said and left the vehicle.

Zendari got out on the sidewalk and the children funneled out. They ran down the sidewalk toward the shops, completely forgetting what they were told mere seconds ago.

“Hey, what did I say about running off!” Susan yelled at them, causing them to all stop in their tracks. Only Gretchen listened to the instructions and stood next to Zendari.

“I’m staying with Zenrawree. She’s my friend,” Gretchen said, giving her muscular leg a hug.

Zendari smiled and looked down at Gretchen, who was squeezing her so tight it made her foot tingle. The little girl was so adorable it warmed Zendari’s heart. Not to mention Gretchen literally warmed her leg, because it was stupid cold outside.

“Come here, my little buddy heater,” Zendari said, scooping Gretchen up in her arms. She held Gretchen close, trying to sap the heat from her.

“What’s a buddy heater?” Gretchen asked.

“It is a little heater. At least that is what Joseph told me.”

“I’m not a heater.”

“For me you are, buddy.”

Zendari shook her a little and Gretchen giggled. Susan rounded up the others and they all walked to the first store on their left. A giant baby with wings hung in the window display, holding a bow and arrow. They all went inside and gazed upon the beauty inside.

Pink and red hearts dangled by fishing line and soothing sounds from a violin rained down on them. The shelves on the left were filled with the standard holiday affair. Boxed chocolates, cute teddy bears, and hearts of every variety and size. Plush hearts, candy shaped hearts, even cards shaped like hearts. The kids were quick to spot it and dashed around the racks of clothes in the center of the store to get there first.

“I want a teddy bear!” Milly yelled and was the first to take one off the shelf.

“No touching,” Susan said and Milly quickly put the bear back, not wanting to face her mother’s wrath if she disobeyed.

“I didn’t realize there was a whole store dedicated to Valentine’s Day,” Zendari said, moving aside one of the shirts on the circular rack that said, ‘Will you be mine?’

“The owner really likes this time of year.”

“More than you realize,” a woman said, walking up to Susan and giving her a hug. She wore pink framed glasses that were much too big for her head and had little red paper hearts sprinkled in her blonde hair. “Who is this?”

“Sarah, this is Zendari,” Susan said, gesturing to Sarah. “Zendari, this is Sarah. She owns this place.”

Zendari put Gretchen down and extended a fist. “It’s nice to meet you. Your store is amazing.”

Sarah bumped her fist. “Thank you. I take great pride in it. What brings you two here?”

“I am helping my friend find a gift for Joseph,” Susan said.

“Well, you have come to the right place. My store is the only one that has anything romantic in this whole town. What does he like?”

“Honestly, he mostly has hunting on the brain. You wouldn’t happen to have a deer heart by chance?” Zendari admitted.

“Classic Joseph. I’m not sure why I asked. I should’ve known.” Sarah said, shaking her head. “As much as it pains me to say it, he will probably want something from the next store over.”

Zendari looked over to the right. There was a large entrance that split the wall and led to a less decorated area. Two men were walking through the entrance with heart shaped boxes full of chocolates in their arms.

“John owns that store. I’m sure he’ll give you a discount if you say you’re buying something for Joseph,” Sarah said.

Behind Sarah there was a crash and the sound of hundreds of small marbles rolling on the floor rang out.

“You’re in trouble!” Lilly said.

“What did they do now?” Susan said and marched over to the commotion. Sarah followed her. They both rounded one of the shelves and a man in a blue coat was trying to put a giant white bear holding a heart back on the shelf. At his feet were multicolored candies and Willy was clung to the man’s back. “Willy! Get off of that man!”

The man stopped trying to wrestle with the bear and turned around, trying to hide the box of chocolates behind his back. Sarah shook her head and left to grab a broom.

“Barry? What are you doing here?” Susan asked, surprised to see her husband here.

“What am I doing? I thought you were watching the kids?” Barry asked.

“I am. I was helping Zendari find a gift.”

Milly snatched the box of chocolates from Barry and ran to her mother, holding up the heart shaped box. “Mommy look! He got you chocolate!”

“Kids, why don’t you all go help Sarah clean up this mess,” Barry said, taking Willy off his back.

“But we didn’t do it,” Billy whined.

“I’ll let you eat what you pick up,” Sarah said, holding one piece in her hand.

The kids didn’t need to be told twice, immediately bending down to pick up as much candy as they could fit in their winter hats. Susan walked around her kids, gave Barry a hug and a peck on the lips.

“You really shouldn’t wait until the day of,” Susan said.

“I’m a guy. It’s what we do,” Barry said, smiling at her.

She smiled back. “Were you going to buy me a bear too?”

“Figured it would be better than you moaning into your pillow,” he said with a wink.

“Barry!” Susan said, slapping him in the chest and looked around to make sure no one heard him.

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it?”

Susan’s eyes narrowed and darted back and forth before coming to an answer. “You better get two. The kids will want to play with it and I’m not sharing.”

“Should I be worried? Hope I’m not replacing myself with someone more...bearable,” Barry teased.

“I don’t think you have to worry about that.” Susan pecked him on the lips again before turning to watch their kids crawl all over the floor. “Where’s Gretchen?”

Gretchen was indeed not with the rest of her siblings, but sticking close to her alien friend. Zendari let the chaos ensue in the store and took Sarah’s advice to check out the adjacent store. They both walked inside and the entire place was different. The colorful colors were replaced with camo patterns and fishing nets. Hanging above them were fake pheasants, pretending to soar in the air. The romantic music faded from their ears as the sound of elk calls bounced around the

room. It was a whole new world of camo outfits, shelves full of ammo and metal traps, and a rack of rifles behind a single glass countertop.

“Look! There is Uncle John!” Gretchen said and ran over to the right of the counter where John was handing a bag to a customer. “Uncle John!”

John turned and caught Gretchen before she ran him over. “Gretch! What are you doing here?”

“I’m helping Zenrawree!”

Zendari walked over and waved to him.

“General, What a nice surprise.” John said, giving her a salute.

Zendari laughed. “Hey John, how’s it going?”

“Good. I heard you were going to be in town. You taking care of the little munchkins?”

“No, Gretchen is helping me shop for Joseph.”

“See, I told you. I’m helping!” Gretchen said with glee.

“For Joseph.” John said, looking at the backroom door behind the counter. “Why here?”

“He likes hunting and Sarah recommended me to you. But I’m hopeless when it comes to all this.” Zendari said, gesturing to the room.

“Joseph is a lucky guy. Usually it is the man who gets the gifts.”

“So I’ve been told. I just want to make this gift special. Let him know I really care about him. Can you help me?”

John tapped his chin a few times and nodded. “I think I can. Wait here.”

John went into the backroom and came back out shortly with a large brown cloth, complete with antlers and a red nose. He held it up for her to see, smiling from ear to ear. It looked like a felt deer was skinned to warn off the other deer.

“What is that?” Zendari asked.

“It’s a deer costume. Well, technically it is just fabric I put over an animatronic for Christmas, but ever since that thing died, I haven’t had much use for it.”

“You want me to buy your useless garbage?”

“It’s not useless. You just need to be creative. It is full of potential,” John said, handing it to her.

Zendari sniffed it. It was stale, but at least it didn’t smell like anything truly terrible. “Are you sure I can’t just get him a box of ammo or something?”

“He has plenty of ammo. Heck everything in this store he has in some fashion...except this deer.”

Zendari looked at the deer costume in her hand. It hung from her fingers, trying to touch the ground. She contemplated just getting some chocolates like everyone else, until she heard John speak again.

“If you want to impress him. This is it. I’m telling you,” John said.

She looked into his eyes. Her instincts told her there was more to it than he was leading on, but her desire to impress Joseph outweighed that. If John said it would work, she had to believe him. He was his brother after all.

“Okay, I’ll take it. How much is it?”

“I’ll give you the family discount. Three hundred credits.”

“Three hundred? For this?”

“It is expensive to make and fits on an animatronic. Rare find, especially out here.”

“Fine, I’ll take it.”

John took it from her and rang up the order. She looked around the store, hoping something else would change her mind, when she noticed Gretchen was not next to her.

“Gretchen?” Zendari said, spinning around.

Gretchen was at least ten feet behind her, struggling to lift up a black crossbow.

“Look at me Zenrawree! I’m a hunter!”

Zendari moved toward her with her hands out. “Gretchen, put it down.”

She heard a click and the bolt went screaming out of the crossbow. It whizzed past Zendari and straight into the deer costume John was holding next to his head in a plastic bag. The bolt ripped the bag out of his hand and sunk into the wall with a firm thump. John looked over at them with big eyes, thankful he didn’t see it coming or he would have soiled his pants. Zendari took the weapon from her and Gretchen clapped.

“I bagged a buck! Yay!”

Zendari looked back at John to see if he was alright.

“Oh God, Joseph was right. She’s going to be just like her mother.”

While John was busy being almost skewered by his niece, Joseph had been laying on the red couch in the backroom of the store. He heard a thump on the wall, but ignored it, worried more about his own troubles.

“Come on Joseph, think. What would she like?” Joseph said to the grimy pizza stain on the ceiling above him.

In the past, this time of year never registered to him. He had not been with many women to begin with and somehow Valentines Day never occurred when he was dating anyone. It didn’t help that his attempts at romantic gestures in past relationships had ended rather poorly. He did not want to repeat the debacle with Janet Harbrough.

All these years later and she was probably still finding glitter in the shower. This time it was going to be different. No grand displays, but it needed to still capture the essence that he cared about her. Something creative to show he cared, yet not too flashy. He banged his head against the couch arm, hoping to knock some excellent idea from his head. Nothing came to him, except John, who looked like he had witnessed a murder.

“John, I’m glad you’re here. You need to help me find a gift for Zendari,” Joseph said, sitting up from the couch.

“Nope. I can’t help both of you find gifts for each other.”

“Both?”

“Yeah. Zendari is here.”

Joseph sprung up from the couch. “She is? Where?”

“She just left with that crazy niece of ours. I’m telling you, Gretchen is going to be the death of me.”

Joseph went over to the door and John stopped him in his tracks.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To visit Zendari. I didn’t realize she was going to be in town so early.”

“What about helping me run the store?”

“I think I can take a few minutes to talk to my girlfriend.”

“You already took your lunch in here.”

“You do know I’m not your employee?”

“Not with that attitude you aren’t.”

Joseph moved past him and opened the door. “It will only take a minute.”

“You owe me!”

Joseph jogged out from the counter and into the adjacent shop where Zendari was walking with Gretchen, looking at the various

clothes on the circular racks. He failed to notice the bag she was toting with a crossbow bolt stuck out of it.

“Zendari.”

Zendari turned around and saw her boyfriend, looking handsome as ever in a dark green shirt tucked into his brown pants. She almost didn’t recognize him, used to seeing him in some kind of camo or plaid jacket.

“Joseph. What are you doing here?” Zendari asked, hiding the bag behind her back.

“I told my brother I would help him out today at the shop. You look great by the way.”

Zendari blushed a shade of blue while Gretchen furrowed her brow, upset that Joseph had not noticed her.

“How do I look?” Gretchen asked.

Joseph looked down at her and smiled. “You look great too, Gretch! You hanging out with Zendari today?”

Gretchen smiled and squinted her eyes, happy with his response. “I’m helping her shop for you!”

“Really? What did she get me?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s a secret,” she huffed.

Joseph laughed. “Good. Gotta make sure my little secret keeper can still do her job.”

“Are we still meeting at your place tonight?” Zendari asked.

“Yes, by the way, how do you feel about spaghetti?”

“I’ve never had it. Is it good?”

“You’ve never had spaghetti?” Gretchen asked, completely flabbergasted by her response.

“That’s perfect. That way you can’t compare mine to those Italians.”

“Hey Joseph, we got customers here,” John yelled from the other room.

“Duty calls. I’ll see you tonight,” Joseph said and hustled back to the customer who was waiting near the counter.

Zendari watched his tight butt scamper off. It had been so long that she had seen him in the flesh. And he was looking better than ever. She knew she had to step up her game if she was going to bag this buck. Luckily, her perverted mind was good for more than daydreaming. An idea popped in her head and she was sure it was going to work.

“When are we getting spaghetti?” Gretchen asked.

“Oh, it’s just going to be him and I. We know your mom has something better planned for you.”

“Better than spaghetti?” Gretchen asked before immediately running toward her mom. “Mom! Are we having macaroni?”

Zendari laughed and shook her head. Gretchen was such a giddy little girl. It never ceased to amaze her how much energy that little girl had. It also got her thinking, what is macaroni?

The sun had faded upon the land, handing off the task to the light poles outside. Joseph waved goodbye to the last customer who went out with the crossbow that nearly took his brother’s head off hours ago. The wind blew the winter chill inside while the door was open for a brief moment. Joseph shook from the cold, but it reminded him that he needed to get back home if he was going to get the meal ready for Zendari. His shift with John bore more benefits than helping out

his brother's ailing store. It gave him reassurance that a simple meal would be enough to please her. It wasn't extravagant, but it was new to her. Joseph was not one to leave it to chance however, so he also dipped into Sarah's store to pick up a box of chocolates. If his cooking wasn't up to snuff, at least she wouldn't be completely disappointed.

"John, I'm going to head out. Remember, don't come home until late tonight," Joseph said, walking backwards toward the store's street entrance with the box of chocolates in his arms.

"No problems here. I'm going to be closing up late. Will give me time to do inventory."

"Is that what we are calling this?" Sarah asked, walking toward John with a cookie pan full of chocolate balls with white frosting drizzled over them.

"So, this is why you didn't mind me having the house tonight?" Joseph teased.

"You mind your own business. I'm sure your lady is starving by now," John said, waving him off.

"*This* lady is starving right now," Sarah said, eating one of the balls off the pan. "Mmmm. Almost as good as the real thing."

"I better leave you two to it then. Have fun with your *inventory*," Joseph said, unable to get the smirk off his face.

John was going to say more, but Sarah demanded his attention. She turned his head toward her and pushed a chocolate ball in his mouth. The ball was rough against his throat as he swallowed it in one gulp.

"Our oven was on the fritz last night, otherwise I was going to make you some too," John said just as the bell chimed over the entrance door.

"That's okay. I like the organic ones better anyways," Sarah said, putting the pan on the counter. Her eyes glanced down before coming

back to meet his gaze. She had only one desire and there was no question as to what it was.

“You don’t want to be wined and dined first?”

She ran her fingers along his cheek. “I like my dessert before my meal.”

“How about we take this to the backroom then?” John asked.

“Why? You worried someone is going to get an eyeful?”

“Yeah. My brother is probably still watching us.”

They both looked over to see Joseph watching them from outside the window. He was giving them a kissy face as he held the box of chocolates close to his chest.

“You best get going before I decide to crash your party,” John yelled at Joseph. Joseph gave him a wry smile and moved on. He got to his black truck that was parked around the backside of the building and headed home. His drive was not far, casually driving down the sparsely lit road to the residential part of town.

Houses flanked him on both sides with little variation in colors and design. Mostly one floor houses with snow in the yards. Footprints littered a few yards from kids at play earlier in the morning. He turned left and right, weaving down the different streets until he found his house among the rest. The faded auburn color blended in with the rest of the houses, with the lights on inside.

“Dang it, John. You left the lights on again,” Joseph said as he pulled into the plowed driveway up to the garage. He dismounted from the truck, not forgetting his box of chocolates and went up to the front door.

The screen door creaked as he opened it and tried the doorknob. His fears were confirmed when the knob turned without resistance. “You’re lucky we live in a small town, John.”

He went inside and closed the door. His attention went from the door to inside the house when he heard a single creak. He lifted his foot and heard the same creak coming from the floorboards. Joseph shrugged and hung his coat up on the hanger. He knew his house was old, but he was hoping the floors wouldn't creak already. With his shoes off, he moved into the kitchen on his right. The linoleum floor didn't offer a sound, but was covered in scratches and scuffs from the years of use.

Joseph started to make some noise, gathering the kettle and pasta from their respective cabinet and pantry shelf. He turned on the water and heard an unexpected thump before the water crashed against the bottom of the kettle. Joseph turned off the facet, listening for anything else. No other sound was made as the water swirled in the kettle. He slowly turned on the facet again, listening for anything out of the ordinary, but all he heard was the water filling up the kettle.

Joseph sighed and went to turn on the burner on the stove. The knob turned, but the light underneath it did not go on. He turned it back off, making an audible click, and turned it back to high. Still nothing. He tried the other knobs and they all responded the same. Joseph put his hand on each burner, but the coils were rough and cold. He opened the stove door and inside was a pan with a sticky note on it. It read: 'In case I forget to tell you, the oven doesn't work.'

"You gotta be kidding me," Joseph said, pulling out the pan. "Now what am I going to make her?"

That was when a ringing came from the hall. Joseph knew he had his phone and John was using his phone at the store to take pictures. That left only one possibility. Someone was in his house. Joseph crept up to the corner of the wall that led into the hall. A few feet down and to the right was where the sound was coming from. It was his room. The ringing stopped, but he did not, going up to his door. His heart

pounded in his ears as he approached the door. He held the pan in both hands, ready to attack at any moment. His door was ajar and light came from inside.

Joseph knew it was now or never. He dashed through the door with his shoulder leading. The door smacked into the wall inside and standing next to his bed was Zendari dressed in what looked to be a skinned deer. The antlers and head sat on her head, while her arms and legs fit in the rest. Protruding out the side was a crossbow bolt and a thick red substance that looked more like sauce than blood. The only thing left exposed in the costume was her torso, which showcased her toned abs and lacy bra that had trouble containing her perky nipples.

“Zendari? What are you doing here?”

“Thanks for driving me, Barry,” Zendari said, sitting next to him.

“Don’t mention it. I’ll take any excuse to get away from the kids for another hour. So, what are you planning for him?”

“I don’t know yet. I bought this deer skin from John, but I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with it.”

“You could always wear it.” Barry laughed.

“What is it with your family and costumes?”

Barry raised his fingers up over the steering wheel. “I’m just saying, I bet he would get a kick out of you running around on all fours.”

“I bet you didn’t do that for your wife.”

“Actually...”

“No, you didn’t!” Zendari gasped.

“It wasn’t a deer costume, but I’m telling you. Those Hanks really love their performers.”

Zendari sat up in her seat, excited to hear more. “Okay, storytime. I need to know more.”

“Oh darn. We’re here,” Barry said, putting the vehicle in park. Zendari didn’t move one bit.

“I’m not going anywhere until I hear this.”

Barry handed her a bronze key. “Here is the key to get in. Good luck.”

Zendari shook her head and smiled, waiting for him to tell her more. Barry clicked a button on the door, lowering the passenger side window. The wind rushed into the car, cutting through her coat and scarf with ease. She thought about trying to tough it out, but she had already begun shaking.

“You win this round. Next time, I want to hear about this!” Zendari said, getting out of the car.

“Have fun!” Barry waved and closed the window to his car.

Zendari ran up to the door to try the key. It took a few attempts to get the key in the lock with her mittens on but she got it and hurried inside. She closed the door behind her and saw Barry drive off. The house was a massive improvement from outside, but it still left her cold. She made it a priority to find the thermostat, seeing as Joseph would be there for a few hours.

This was the first time she had ever been in his house. He had given her a tour with his webcam, but it was nothing like actually being there. She took a deep breath, but didn’t smell anything. Maybe he was using that scent masker he always went on about? She looked over to the left where there was a white, hand sized device on the wall with a number on the screen that read sixty five.

“This must be it,” Zendari said, taking a closer look at the screen. “He won’t mind if I move it up a bit.”

She pressed the arrow on the thermostat until the number read eighty five. Taking a step back, she heard the heater kick in, attempting to follow her command. Happy with her small victory, she dug into her bag and removed the large deer costume. The deer's head flipped down, staring at her with its lifeless black marble eyes. She poked at the bolt that jutted out from the costume and it gave her an idea.

“Can't have a wounded deer without some blood.”

Zendari went into the kitchen and made a beeline for the refrigerator. She figured he had plenty of jars of blood in there. He always said they never let anything to waste and if the freezer is filled with the meat, that must have meant the extra blood would go in the refrigerator. She opened it up and all that was in there was a gallon of milk, half a dozen eggs, a white package of venison, and a Blue-Grail.

“Wow, John wasn't kidding about him being a bloodthirsty hunter. He didn't leave one jar,” Zendari said to herself and closed the door. She tapped her chin and looked around the kitchen. “Maybe blood doesn't need to be refrigerated.”

She started rifling through the cabinets, pulling out everything to make sure she didn't miss anything. Left behind in her wake was a myriad of cooking supplies, containers, and glassware sprawled along the countertop. It took her quite a while, getting distracted by the occasional strange utensils she came across. Eventually, she got to the pantry, where she found her prize. The shelves were full of canned foods and pasta boxes. On the third shelf, next to a box of spaghetti was a jar filled with chunky red sauce.

Zendari grabbed the jar and read the label.

“Pre-eggo. Prego? I didn't know they branded this stuff.”

She turned around and saw the mess she had made in the kitchen. All the cabinets were wide open, begging that its former contents be returned to their rightful homes. Zendari realized in that moment she

might have gone too far going through all his stuff, but thankfully she knew a thing or two about covering her tracks. One of her many talents was her ability to remember where things were. It came in handy when she forgot to document evidence at a crime scene and started walking away with it.

Zendari took a deep breath. Time was not on her side and there were quite a bit of items that had to go back. She closed her eyes and recalled how everything was placed before she ravaged them. One item at a time, she started putting them back like someone would put a puzzle together. She took great care with every placement until she got down to the last one. With all the cabinets closed, all that was left was the jar of “blood” and the costume.

The lid made a pop sound when she opened it, allowing a pleasant aroma to escape into her nose. Her eyebrows raised, taken aback by the pleasant smell. She dug her fingers into the jar, scooping out a glob of it and smearing it into the costume. It didn’t feel like blood, but she had no idea what deer blood was like. It looked red like normal human blood, albeit thicker. Once she was satisfied with the bloodstain she created, Zendari held up her fingers that were still slathered in the sauce. She stuck her tongue out, curious what it would taste like. The taste piqued her interest much like the initial smell.

“I see why he drinks this stuff. Deer blood is good.”

Before she could start on drinking the entire jar, she saw headlights shine outside the window. She hadn’t even noticed it was dark outside already. Zendari ran to the window and saw the tail end of a black truck pull up into the driveway.

It was Joseph.

She went back to the pantry, putting the jar back and went to hide with her costume. Zendari hung a left, out of the kitchen and went into the first room she could find. She could hear Joseph coming inside

and closed her door when it let off a loud creak. Zendari froze, hoping he did not hear anything. She could hear him speak, but couldn't make out what he was saying. Once she heard Joseph moving around in the kitchen, she took that as her cue to get dressed.

It was only a matter of time and she needed to be ready. She tore off her warm clothes, throwing them haphazardly on the bed. Left only with her revealing bra and compression shorts, she stepped into the deer costume. The costume stretched around her strong legs, but became baggy for her butt and midsection. She tried to readjust it when she tripped and fell. Her hands thumped against the soft carpet, but it didn't dampen the sound completely. She waited for a second on all fours, half dressed. There was still noise coming from the kitchen, so she finished donning the costume.

Her midsection wasn't fully covered, but she liked it that way. After all, she was trying to impress him. Have to show off her assets at some point. She adjusted the bolt in the costume, so it didn't poke her in the side and looked over at the mirror to see what she looked like. It wasn't perfect, but she had to admit, she was one sexy deer. Zendari still felt like something was missing. She walked around the front of the bed and saw a whiteboard.

Joseph had been drawing out the different animals and spelling them for her when they did their video calls. She may have spoken the language well enough, but reading was still hit or miss. There was even a faded black outline of the squirrels he drew for her. She put the whiteboard on the bed and grabbed the marker, hoping to show off her writing skills. It had to be clever, yet heartfelt and she knew exactly what to say. She wrote it all down, but it still wasn't quite what she wanted to say. That was when her phone rang.

"Shit," Zendari said, tossing the marker.

She fumbled with the phone and noticed it was Nor'an again. Her fingers were not registering through the cloth and she didn't want to undo all her work to answer it. Instead she looked around the room, looking for a place to stash it. The ringing kept coming, making her more nervous by the second. In a panic, she opened the window to the left of the bed and tossed it outside. The phone punched into the snow, sticking out enough for her to still see it. Before she could close the window, she spun around at the sound of the door being bashed in

“Zendari? What are you doing here?” Joseph said, holding the pan like a club.

“I...um...” Zendari quickly grabbed the whiteboard, letting her written words speak more eloquently than her mind could muster at the moment. Her heart pounded in anticipation, unsure how he would react.

“You got me in the heart.” Joseph read out loud with a smile across his face. “You even dressed up like a deer.”

“You like it?”

Joseph laughed. “I love it.”

He put down the pan and went up to her. She lowered the sign, her mind racing with all the possibilities. Joseph came up so close, she could almost taste his lips. She wanted to pounce on him, but the anticipation was just as intoxicating. He paused for a moment, making sure he cleared her tusks before laying a passionate kiss on her lips.

Zendari knew her first kiss would be special, but she didn't expect it to affect her whole body. A tingling sensation shot across her whole body in a wave like fashion. His warm lips made her forget that there was a breeze coming in from the window. He pulled away all too soon and wiggled the bolt.

“You used my marinara sauce, didn’t you?” Joseph asked, licking his lips.

“What is marinara sauce?”

“The stuff I tasted on your lips and I assume you used in your amazing cosplay. What did you think you used?”

“...deer blood?”

Joseph laughed. “Why would I keep deer blood in the pantry?”

“Well I didn’t find any in your refrigerator...”

Joseph burst out into more laughter, unable to control himself.

“What is so funny?” Zendari asked.

“You think I actually drink deer blood.”

“John said you were a bloodthirsty hunter. And you did mention you didn’t waste any part of the animal.”

“Oh Zendari, I have so much more to teach you.” Joseph pulled on the fabric of her outfit. “This outfit looks familiar.”

“Your brother sold it to me. Said it used to live on some animatronic robot.”

“He didn’t charge you for this?”

“Don’t worry, he gave me the family discount.”

Joseph shook his head and smiled as he went over to close the window. That little rat didn’t pay anything for it. Their mom made it for John years ago. She would have been upset with him charging anyone for it, let alone Zendari. He put his mild irritation behind him. Standing in front of him was a beautiful woman who went above and beyond to make this Valentine’s Day special. The least he could do was show his appreciation.

“Say, have I ever shown you how to field strip a deer?” Joseph said in a lower voice, walking back to her. If his voice didn’t say it, his eyes sure did as they wandered below her neckline.

“I don’t think so. Is it hard?” Zendari asked.

Joseph ran his finger along the groove in her abdomen. Zendari's legs almost quivered in excitement. His warm touch almost took her breath away.

"Oh, very. Might take a few tries to get it right," Joseph said, moving his lips closer to hers.

"Good thing I'm a fast learner," Zendari said.

"Then let's get started," Joseph said and kissed her. He didn't hold it for long, ripping the bolt out of her costume and pushing her on the soft bed. Zendari was surprised by his forcefulness, but she was not one to complain as he tore his shirt off. It was happening and he wasn't going to be the only one with all the control. She reached up and wrapped her hands around his back, pulling him into her.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Zendari." Joseph kissed her neck.

"Happy Valentine's Day indeed."

The two went at it like any young couple in love would. The bed spring creaked, the headboard padded the wall and pleasurable moans leaked from the window. It wasn't loud enough for the neighbors to hear, but it was for the cold phone outside that was perfectly perched in the snow to witness everything before their bodies hit the bed. Nor'an's mouth was agape, still processing what he just saw, let alone hearing the sounds of his sister getting it on with a human male. He didn't snap out of his shock until the headboard stopped knocking.

"Val'ren is going to be so jealous," Nor'an said with a maniacal grin.

"You ready again?" Nor'an heard Joseph say.

"No way!" Nor'an said and the headboard went back to slapping the wall. He started typing away on his omni-pad. 'You are not going to believe what Zendari is doing right now!'

CHAPTER 3

ZENDARI ONCE AGAIN CRUISED down the same familiar road in a new, white SUV. The rental company was getting frustrated with the amount of claims she had tallied up in the past few months and decided to take her out of the equation completely, getting her a self-driving vehicle. It was defeminizing, since the roads were finally getting better. There was no ice on the road and the once tall snow banks have been reduced to small, dirty white mounds along the ditch, allowing her to see the beautiful green pine trees in the distance. She talked to her boss about getting a real vehicle, but she was not going to hear it, concerned more about the company she had been keeping.

“Agent D’Quirlen, did you get those documents I sent you?” her boss asked, coming over the car speakers. Her voice was a little electronic sounding in parts of her speech that Zendari chalked down to an issue with syncing on her omni-pad.

Zendari reached over to her omni-pad in the adjacent seat and tapped it a few times, bringing up the file. “I have it right here.”

“Good. That is the preliminary report on possible rebel activity in the area. We intercepted some communications and those nerds up in space think there is something brewing.”

Zendari scrolled through a portion of the information, recognizing some of the text and emojis. Nothing stood out to her as a concern until a picture of her brother's face popped up on her omni-pad. 'Incoming Call: Nor'an.'

"Shit," Zendari said just loud enough to hear as she tried to swipe it away.

"Shit is right. If we have rebels acting up around there, it could be another red zone, and the local governess won't want that."

Zendari breathed a sigh of relief as she got rid of his call, unlike last time. "I understand. I'm on it."

"You better be," her boss said, pausing for a little bit. "Speaking of being on *it*, I hear you found yourself a local man."

"I have. And speaking to that, did you get my request for living off base?" Zendari asked. She felt weird having to ask where she could live, like she was less of an Interior Agent and more like a grunt.

"I did."

"And?"

"I will need to do a bit more digging on this Hanks family before I can give you an answer."

"You don't trust my judgment?" Zendari said. "I'm telling you, they are wonderful citizens of the Imperium."

"I just want to make sure you are thinking with your head and not your clam. I saw the pictures. I'm sure he lives up to the hype of the fabled 'human stamina.'"

Zendari shifted in her seat. "I never sent you any pictures."

"Just make sure you don't forget who you are working for. Males may come and go, but this empire will last forever if we do our job right."

Zendari clicked a button on the car steering wheel and the call ended. Her boss was spying on her. It came with the territory, but it

bothered her that there were pictures of Joseph circulating around. Also, where would she get them? She never noticed anyone taking photos of them whenever they were together, except for Christmas. That was only one and Joseph's mother was not one for using fancy technology to share it with the world. Either someone was spying on them, she wasn't as observant as she thought, or those nerds up in space were misusing their orbital surveillance capabilities. Before she could muse those options again, her omni-pad chimed. It was a text from Nor'an.

Nor'an: Hey, why are you dodging my calls?

Zendari: I was in a meeting.

Nor'an: So you aren't now?

Zendari: Don't bother. I'm not going to answer...unless you got the credits you owe me?

Nor'an: How about I keep the credits if I promise not to tell Val'ren about that boy of yours?

Zendari: I know you told her already you little shit.

Nor'an: You can't know that.

Zendari: You forget I'm an Interior Agent. I know everything.

Zendari sat back in her seat, amused with herself. Val'ren called that same night Nor'an got his proof. Nor'an could never keep a secret. Zendari was thankful for that, since it gave her a chance to rub it in Val'ren's face. She looked out at the horizon, recalling how jealous Val'ren was seeing Joseph cuddling in her arms. For the first time, there was something she was better at than her sister, relationships. Her omni-pad chimed again, getting her attention.

Nor'an: Fine. When is a good time we can come visit?

Zendari: We?

Nor'an: Voltan and me. Gotta vet this guy first. See if he is good enough for our sister.

Zendari: I'll think about it.

Zendari looked up from her screen and saw the reason she was stuck in this self-driving SUV. Bambi. The deer was standing in the road, staring at her, ready to ruin another vehicle. Zendari's heat thumped as she grabbed the steering wheel and pumped on the brake.

"Self Driving Mode On. Manual Override Disabled," the vehicle said, continuing onward without a care for the deer ahead.

"Slow down. I can't have another wreck on my record!"

"No obstruction ahead. Command denied."

"What? I could have given voice commands this whole time!" Zendari said, looking at the large screen in the middle of the console. It had taken her ten minutes to type in the address at the rental place. The person there even laughed at her for taking so long. "Manual Override."

"I'm sorry. Manual Override is disabled. Do you want to change your destination?"

"No. Just stop the vehicle! It's an emergency!" Zendari yelled at the vehicle, bearing down on the immovable steering wheel.

The vehicle hit the brakes, but it was too late. Zendari tensed up, preparing to hit the deer at almost full speed. The deer jumped up, while its legs got taken out underneath it. There was a thump, followed by a crash as the deer's back spidered the windshield's glass. Zendari screamed and the deer made a strange noise as the vehicle came to a stop, throwing the deer off the hood. With the uncanny grace of a cat, it landed on all fours and looked back at the damage it caused.

Zendari's mouth was agape, surprised that the glass held and that the deer was still alive. The deer stuck its tongue out at her and then pranced off. Zendari watched in silence as the deer bounded away without a care in the world, seemingly unaffected by what should have been a fatal hit.

“Manual Override engaged. It appears you have gotten into an accident.”

“No, no, no. You did!” Zendari said, shaking her accusing finger at the vehicle screen.

“Don’t worry, Zen-dar-ee. Self Driving Mode will be activated. Sending vehicle damage diagnostics for claim adjustment.”

“No! Don’t you dare blame this on me!”

“Diagnostics sent. Cause of accident, driver negligence. Continuing to destination,” the vehicle said and started moving again.

Zendari sighed and her omni-pad chimed again from the floor by her foot. She picked it up and saw a message from Susan. ‘You still coming?’

Despite Zendari’s rough start to the day, she was looking forward to the rest of it. She had promised Susan she would take care of the kids for the evening. Joseph was all about family and what better way to impress him than to show she can take care of his sister’s kids. It helped that she enjoyed those kids, especially Gretchen.

Unfortunately, she had to deal with the embarrassment of her most recent accident before getting there. Her vehicle strolled into town, catching the eye of everyone on the street. The fender was bent, hood dented, and the glass was almost impossible to see out of. She caught the eye of an elderly woman who covered her mouth in shock on the sidewalk.

“It’s fine. It’s a rental.” Zendari said, waving to her.

The woman did not change her expression, making Zendari realize the side window was still up. To the elderly woman, she must have

appeared to be psychotic. She ignored her and the rest of the onlookers after that and soon enough she was out of the town and at Susan's house. It was huge; twice the size of Joseph's house with spotless white siding and sharp brown asphalt shingles. A wide double window was to the left of the door, where Billy was staring out at her. The yard was shaded by tall oak trees that had piles of snow built into little forts. One in particular, had a little car slammed into the side of the fort.

Zendari got out of the car with a hint of concern on her face. She noticed a ramp near the devastated fort and put two and two together. Even the little ones were crazy. The door closed and the sound of shifting glass grinded behind her. She was glad to be out of that deathtrap and headed across the warzone of fun, up to the door. Zendari didn't get time to admire the impressive craftsmanship of the house as the children all pounded on the window. Their collective high pitched voices leaked from the closed window. Zendari waved and they all scattered as Barry came rushing into the room, yelling at them.

Susan went to the door on the left and opened it for Zendari. "Zendari."

"Susan, I hope I'm not late."

Susan went up to her and gave her a hug. Zendari flinched ever so slightly before returning a friendly embrace. Zendari was still getting used to this custom, but it was starting to grow on her.

"You aren't," Susan said and noticed the smashed SUV on the street. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I think Bambi has it out for me. Even self-driving cars are no match for that furry bastard."

Susan laughed, "Well, at least you won't have to drive anywhere else. Come in."

Zendari followed Susan inside and was greeted by all the children. They all tried to talk over each other, excited to see her. Gretchen came

sprinting toward her, going down a short, narrow hall that separated the living room from the carpeted entryway.

“Zenrawree!” Gretchen screamed above them all, smashing through the group to get to her. She clamped on to her leg like she was dangling from a cliff.

“Good to see you too, Gretchen. And Milly, Willy, Billy, and Lilly.” Zendari said, smiling at each one of them.

Barry walked in from the living room on the right and ruffled Billy’s hair. “Kids, we need to show Zendari around the house quick. Go play in the living room.”

They all listened without hesitation, chasing after Billy, who had pulled out a piece of taffy from his jeans. That alone would keep them occupied for a while, but Gretchen was still a holdout.

“Gretchen, that means you too,” Susan said.

“I want to hang out with Zenrawree.”

Zendari went to one knee and Gretchen adjusted her grip to still hang on to her, “Hey, we are going to hangout all night. I just need a few minutes with your parents.”

“You promise?”

“I promise. Who else is going to help me handle all those trouble-makers in there?”

Gretchen beamed and gave her another quick hug before joining her siblings in the living room.

“She really likes you. Once I told her you were coming to watch them instead of Mrs. Patterson, she insisted on getting to bed early so she could stay up with you tonight,” Susan said.

Zendari put her hand over her chest. Her stomach felt floaty, flattered by their daughter’s infatuation with her. Zendari didn’t know who Mrs. Patterson was, but she was stoked to be ranked above her.

“She is a great kid. Must take after her mother.”

“You know, if you get tired of Joseph’s place, I think we could find a place here for a live-in nanny.” Susan joked.

“I’m sure she won’t get tired of Joseph’s place. Too nice a view,” Barry said, winking at Zendari.

Zendari blushed. Barry had a sick mind, but he wasn’t wrong. Susan rolled her eyes and pulled Zendari with her through the hall into the kitchen. It had a light hardwood floor with a dark oak dining table on the left. On the right was a granite island and the normal kitchen amenities. Sink, oven, refrigerator, pantry, microwave, and wood cabinets that were a few shades darker than the floor. Susan let go of Zendari and walked over to the pantry.

“Whatever you want to make for food is in the pantry. Plates are up here...” Susan began, pointing out everything in the kitchen. Zendari just nodded along, not really paying attention. She was here to take care of children, not learn where to find food. “...and snacks are on the bottom.”

Zendari took a mental note of that. Snacks were important. That was it though. The rest went in and out of her head, knowing she would figure it out. After all, it was a kitchen, not a spaceship.

“Do you have any questions?” Susan asked.

“Oh no, Joseph is going to come later to help me out with making food.”

“Strange. When I ask him to watch my kids, he’s always busy. Now that he has a girlfriend, all of sudden he can be here,” she teased, walking back to her.

“Actually, I do have a question. Which room is theirs when I have to put them to bed?”

“Already thinking about getting them to bed? Or are you just trying to see which bed will be free for you and Joseph tonight?” Susan said, nudging her.

“Ignore her. She always gets this way when we have date night,” Barry said, looking at Susan. He was wearing a leather coat and holding Susan’s blue suede coat with faux fur cuffs. She batted her eyes at him, letting him know what she was expecting tonight. He handed her the coat and turned back to Zendari. “The kids will tell you where they sleep. Make sure they are in bed by nine.”

“I will,” Zendari said.

“If the house is on fire, the fire extinguisher is in the garage. Call Susan if you need anything,” Barry said, making his way back to the front door.

“Why would the house be on fire?”

Barry shook his head and got the door. “Willy. He is the pyro in the family. Don’t let him near the matches.”

“I wanted to give her the whole tour,” Susan said, putting her arm through her coat sleeve.

“No time. Don’t want to miss our reservation.”

“Ooh, where are you taking me?”

“That’s a secret.”

Susan raised her eyebrows and smiled, looking at Zendari. “I have the best husband.”

“You two have fun. I’ll make sure they are all safe,” Zendari said.

“Bye kids!” Susan called into the living room.

The children all said in unison, “Bye, Mom!”

With that, the door closed and Zendari was left with the little terrors in the living room. She didn’t know what to expect, but she was ready for the challenge. If she could interrogate criminals for hours on end, she could corral a bunch of kids for an evening. Then she felt a tap on the arm. She looked down to where she expected to see one of the kids, but instead it was a piece of taffy. Zendari picked up the brown candy

and looked out into the living room where a pile of children were all entangled in each other.

“She’s got it! Get her!” Willy yelled, and they all rushed her at once.

“Hey. No. Don’t you—” Zendari said before she was tackled to the floor. They may have been small, but their collective strength and enthusiasm was more than enough to compensate for her strength. She held the candy up in the air, while the kids piled on top of her like jackals, all wanting a shot at a marcel of food. “Gretchen... help me.”

While Zendari was surviving the cage match with the little ones, Joseph was back at John’s shop, waiting behind an elderly gentleman who was purchasing a number fourteen double long, metal spring trap. He placed it on the table and reached into his drab green coat to pay for it.

“Look at that. What are you trying to catch, Mr. Patterson?” John asked, ringing up the item.

“I saw a huge fucking lynx roaming around our neighborhood last night. I wasn’t quick enough to get the rifle, so I thought this time I would catch it first.”

“Huge lynx, you say? I guess they get pretty big. You do know though, it is illegal to trap them.”

“Not this one. Let the DNR fine me whatever. This fucker is mine.”

“Well, the trap you have here is overkill,” John said, pointing to the teeth. “Are you sure you don’t want something smaller?”

“No way. I want to hear it yell outside my door. God knows my hearing wasn’t what it used to be.”

John and Joseph chuckled to themselves. He was a character, that was for sure. John handed him the bag with the trap inside. "That'll be two hundred."

"Well worth it," Mr. Patterson said, putting the exact amount on the table. "You boys stay safe out there."

"We will," Joseph said, stepping aside to let him by.

"Make sure to let Susan or Barry know where you put that thing. We don't want those kids running into it," John added.

"Hell, I'm going to have Billy help me set it up. Put some hair on that boy's chest."

John and Joseph laughed and shook their heads while Mr. Patterson left.

Joseph pointed his thumb back at Mr. Patterson. "Are you sure you should have sold him that thing?"

"Don't worry, he won't be catching anything with it. I never even told him how to use it. Remember the last time he tried to set up a hammock?"

"I should bring over a first aid kit when I head up there. Don't want him to bleed out before getting to the hospital."

"You're heading over to Susan's?"

"Yeah. Zendari is taking care of her kids. I said I would come and help her."

"Then why are you here?"

"I was looking to get some bows so I can teach them to shoot."

John stepped back from the counter. "I don't know... giving Gretchen a bow is a bad idea."

"She'll be fine. Susan has been getting on my case about teaching the kids some hunting skills--"

"Nope. I'm not buying it. There is another reason you want these bows," John said, crossing his arms.

Joseph smirked, “Well I thought Zendari—”

“Ah ha! That’s why! You just want to impress your girlfriend. Show her how good you are with kids and such.” John pointed at him.

“Maybe. Is that so bad?”

“No. It’s actually a pretty good idea,” John said and walked around the counter toward a row of bows off to the left. “But you’re gonna have to pay a rental fee.”

Joseph followed him. “No, I’m not. Not after I found out you sold Zendari that deer suit Mom made.”

“She insisted.”

“You and I both know that isn’t true,” Joseph said, picking up a camo compound bow.

“At least it stayed in the family.”

“Fine, I’ll tell Mom you sold it to my girlfriend. See how she—”

“Okay, okay,” John said, waving his hands around. “I won’t charge you anything, just don’t say anything to Mom.”

“You are so generous,” Joseph said, pulling back the bow. His shoulder felt tight as the strings resisted him until his draw hand was at his cheek. The bow felt light, but a bit big in his hand. It would be perfect for Zendari. “I’ll take this one now. Can you bring the rest to Susan’s tonight? I want to show the kids what to look forward to.”

“Yeah, I can do that. And hey, is there any chance I can get that deer suit back? I don’t want you holding this over my head forever.”

Joseph smirked, “Um... I don’t think you want it back.”

“You didn’t?”

“I mean, we both fit in it. It’s a little tight, but it really seals in the—”

“Don’t finish that sentence, I beg of you.” John said, throwing up his hand.

Joseph laughed and eased the bowstrings back to normal, “I’ll see you tonight then. And throw in some arrows.”

John waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah.”

Joseph smiled and left the shop. He never intended on using the Mom card, but it worked quite well. This was the best way he could recoup the credits Zendari spent on him. John needed credits and Joseph needed favors. It was a win/win. Joseph got to his truck and threw the bow in the back.

“I wonder what those kids are getting up to with Zendari.”

“Incoming!” Willy yelled as he shot a Nerf dart across the room at his brother.

Billy was up on the top of the headrest of the dark brown couch in the middle of the living room. He tapped his elbow, preparing to launch ‘The People’s Elbow’ on his sister, Milly. She was prepared, laying on the carpet with her large furry teddy bear to use as a shield. The dart, though, had other plans for Billy’s amateur run at TV wrestling. It smacked him in the neck, causing him to fall on the seat cushion below.

Billy’s fall was not the end of Willy’s terror. When Billy fell on the cushion, the springs on the other cushion sprung, sending Lilly, who was simply laying on the couch trying to get a piece of gum out of her hair, head over heels into the lamp alongside the couch. Somehow, the lamp did not break and fell forward as Gretchen was running around, knocking her to the floor.

Zendari came rushing from the kitchen with a damp rag full of ash after hearing the commotion in the living room. She was busy putting out a fire Willy started in the sink. Why he wanted to burn a stack of toothpicks was beyond her, but at least he didn’t do it on the floor.

“Willy, what did you do?” Zendari asked.

“It was Billy. I swear,” Willy said, pointing at the couch.

She took a few steps into the living room, witnessing the rest of them on the floor. Gretchen rubbed her shoulder and looked ready to make Billy pay for that when she saw Zendari.

“Billy threw the lamp at me.” Gretchen whined.

“I did not. That was Lilly.”

“No! Now I have two stuck in my hair,” Lilly said, running her fingers through her hair, stopping at the two chunks of partially chewed gum. “Zendari, can you help me?”

Zendari went over and picked Lilly up with ease. She used the same cloth to try to pry the stubborn gum from her hair, wondering where they were getting it from.

“Billy, you apologize to Gretchen,” Zendari said.

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s not what Willy said.”

Billy turned to Willy. Willy met Billy’s vengeful eyes, knowing what came next for him. There was only one thing he could do. He tossed his nerf gun and ran for it.

“Get back here!” Billy yelled, chasing after him.

Zendari was about to say something, but dropped it. *Handle one problem at a time*, she thought to herself. She started to make progress, getting the biggest chunks from Lilly’s hair, while Gretchen pulled on her arm.

“Come on Zenrawree. Come and play with me,” Gretchen begged.

“Can you help me get the gum out of her hair?” Zendari asked.

“But she can get the gum out of her own hair.”

“I want to go outside!” Milly said, throwing her bear in the air.

Then she heard a crash in the other room, followed by Billy saying, “You’re gonna be in trouble.”

“Am not. It was your fault.” Willy protested.

All the chaos in the house was starting to overwhelm her. She couldn't be everywhere at once and the house was looking more like the warzone outside in the yard with every second. Gretchen kept tugging on her and the children's voices didn't stop, but her omni-pad broke through the storm, chiming on the windowsill.

“Oh thank the Goddess, that must be Joseph.” Zendari said, going over to the window with Lilly and Gretchen in tow.

She answered the call without looking at the screen, focusing on the black truck that was parked behind her outside.

“Oh hey Zen, I hope I didn't call at a bad time?” Nor'an said, with a devious grin.

“Nor'an?” Zendari said, looking down at her omni-pad.

“Who else would it be?”

“Whose Noorand?” Gretchen asked.

“I don't have time for this,” Zendari responded to him in Shil.

“I hear children. Did you go get yourself pregnant already?” he asked, purely to get under her skin.

“Goodbye, Nor'an.” Zendari said in English and hung up.

“Who was that? She was pretty.” Lilly said.

“That was my brother—” The doorbell rang, diverting her attention to the door. “Joseph!”

Zendari rushed to the door. Her angel was here to rescue her from Susan's overwhelming kids. She opened the door and standing in front of her was the man she needed. He wore a plaid red jacket and tight jeans that, under normal circumstances, would have prompted her to make a suggestive comment. But these were not normal circumstances.

“Thank the Goddess you're here!”

Joseph chuckled. “You look like you have your hands full.”

“You have no idea.”

“Zendari has a pretty brother,” Lilly said.

“Does she?” Joseph said. The sound of sliding chairs came from the kitchen, followed by a slap against wood. “What was that?”

“It must be Billy and Willy. Since when were boys so rowdy?” Zendari asked.

“Since always. Don’t worry, I’ll show you how it’s done.” Joseph walked into the living room and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Billy. Willy. Your favorite uncle is here.”

“Uncle John!” they both said in unison and sprinted from the kitchen into the room.

“Uncle John? You know, that hurts.” Joseph said while Milly giggled.

“You’re my favorite, Uncle Joseph,” Milly said.

“Thanks Milly,” Joseph said before the two boys came slamming into his shins. He turned his attention to them. “Oh, you two wanna play rough, huh?”

Joseph picked Billy up by the torso and tossed him on the couch. Billy giggled when he hit the cushions and rolled off to come at him again. Willy tried to pull Joseph’s leg, but he was no match for a grown adult. Joseph picked him up and tossed him into Billy.

“Oof.” Billy said as Willy laid on top of him. Milly got off the floor and swung her teddy bear at Joseph, wanting in on the battle.

Joseph wrapped her up in his arms with the teddy bear. “Rar, got you!”

Milly giggled and kicked her feet in the air.

“Now’s our chance! Get him!” Billy said to Willy. The boys scrambled to their feet and charged again, this time successfully taking him down to the ground. Joseph fell on his back, careful not to hurt Milly.

“Dogpile!” Willy yelled, causing Lilly and Gretchen to join in.

The children swarmed him as he tried to fight them off. He was all smiles as the screaming children mauled him. Zendari couldn't help but smile, watching Joseph play with the kids. She had very little memories of her dad, but she knew he wouldn't have had the energy to hold off this army.

"We won!" Willy exclaimed, sitting on his chest, while the rest each pinned a limb to the floor.

Joseph pretended he couldn't move, straining and groaning, "You all forget. I have backup."

Zendari knew it was her cue and went over to him. The kids all screamed, yet their faces were all smiles. She reached down and put her arms around his back. Willy rolled out of the way and tried to pull her arm away, but her arm wasn't going anywhere. Zendari lifted Joseph up without an issue and the kids all slid off.

"Woah! You're strong," Billy said in amazement.

Zendari smiled at Billy. Then her eyes got big and brows shot up, feeling a gentle wet kiss on her cheek. She blushed and turned her head to face Joseph, who was smirking at her.

"Thanks for helping me out. I knew I could count on you," Joseph said.

"Anytime," Zendari said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. It was such a small gesture, but it took her breath away all the same. She wanted to feel like that all the time, but the kids were demanding.

"Eww. Gross." Willy said while Billy made gagging noises. Gretchen was not one to watch her friend be teased and swiftly punched both of them in the shoulder. Lilly and Milly laughed at the boys, who both rubbed their own shoulders.

"Alright, no more hitting. I bet you all are hungry." Joseph said, still suspended in air.

"Yeah!" Milly said, jumping up and down.

“Gretchen, if you apologize to your brothers, I will make you all macaroni.”

Gretchen perked upon hearing her favorite food. “I’m sorry, Billy. I’m sorry, Willy.”

“Now kiss and make up.”

“Ew. No way.” Willy said, sticking out his tongue.

“I’m just kidding. Go set the table. Whoever does the nicest job gets the first serving.”

The herd blasted off, almost leaving smoke in their wake like in the cartoons. Joseph chuckled to himself while Zendari kept her eyes on his smiling face.

“How are you so amazing?” Zendari asked, in complete awe of him.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Zendari brought him into her chest and gave him a kiss. Thier lips smacked, but not for long, since Joseph knew if he left the kids alone for too long, they would cause trouble. He put his hand on her face, admiring her smooth skin and playing with her small tusk.

“I didn’t poke you, did I?” Zendari asked, speaking softly.

“I wouldn’t mind if you did.”

“Mac-a-roni! Mac-a-roni!” the kids chanted in the other room.

Joseph smiled, “Duty calls. You’re gonna have to put me down.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Oh, you’re gonna want to. I make the best macaroni.”

Zendari helped bring over the large kettle of golden noodles. It amazed her how a few packets of powder and a lot of little tube noodles boiled in water made such a delicious-looking meal. She gazed upon it with

wonder, breathing in the wonderful scent of Joseph's accomplishment. Joseph was walking around the table, pouring everyone milk, while the kids could hardly contain their excitement.

"I want the first spoonful!" Milly said.

"No, I do!" Willy said.

"I think Zendari should get the first scoop since she hasn't had macaroni before." Joseph said, giving a cup to Lilly.

"You haven't had macaroni?" Billy asked in astonishment.

"Nope. Is it good?" Zendari asked, putting the kettle on the table hot-pad.

"Yes!" all the kids said in unison.

"Can't argue with that," Joseph said, taking the milk away to get a serving spoon.

He came back and all the kids put their plates up, hoping he forgot the suggestion he just made mere seconds ago. Joseph dug the spoon into the sloppy golden pasta and hovered it over their plates, taunting them. The kids all protested his action and then he placed the first spoonful on Zendari's plate.

"You might want to sit down before the kids try to take it," Joseph said to Zendari, watching Gretchen out of the corner of his eye.

Zendari sat down and waited for the other kids to all get served. Her face had a permanent smile, admiring Joseph's care for his nieces and nephews. He treated them like his own, and it made her feel like the luckiest woman in the galaxy. Once he was done, he sat down next to her and they all dug in. Zendari took her first bite and she couldn't help but say something.

"Mmmm. That is so good!" Zendari said.

"Told you. I'm a good cook," he said with his mouth half full.

She nodded her head in agreement and kept eating. It was so hot it almost burnt her tongue, but she didn't care. She couldn't help herself,

showing in more with each forkful. Zendari was the first to finish and went for more, piling it up on her plate.

“So, kids, what did you all do today?” Joseph asked. Zendari stopped eating and looked over at Willy. She shook her head, but Willy was not one to lie.

“I started stuff on fire!” Willy said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, Zendari said I could as long as I did it in the sink—”

“Lilly, why don’t you tell us what you did today? I’m sure Joseph will want to hear that,” Zendari said, cutting him off.

“I chewed gum and hid it around the house.”

That explained why she kept getting gum caught in her hair. Zendari had no sympathy for her now, not to mention she was another one who made her look bad. Their obliviousness to how it reflected on her was startling. There were no words, so she put her hand on her head, trying to think where Willy put the matches.

“I jumped off the couch. It was fun!” Billy said.

Joseph laughed, “It sounds like you all had fun with Zendari, then?”

“Yeah!” the kids said, nodding their heads.

“Well, how about after we eat, we watch a movie?” Joseph asked.

“Yay!”

Joseph looked over at Zendari and rubbed her arm. His reassuring smile took the tension out of her neck that she didn’t realize was there. It told her all she needed to know. Everything was okay. She scarfed down her meal and helped him with the dishes while the kids were tasked with finding the movie to watch. They all ran off, except Willy, who Zendari held back for a second.

“Hey, where did you put the matches?” Zendari whispered, so Joseph didn’t hear it over the sound of running water.

“I got rid of the evidence. Just like you said,” Willy said with glee.

“No, where did you put it?”

“It’s gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?”

“I burnt it.”

“All the matches?”

“Yeah. So they could fit down the drain.”

Zendari let him go and shook her head. That was the last time she would give any concessions to the pyro. She went to join Joseph, helping him dry the wet dishes with a cloth.

“I warned you they could be a handful,” Joseph said, handing her a dish.

“I didn’t realize how much energy they had. I thought they would get tired sooner.”

“Nope. Kids are giant bundles of near infinite energy, but it sounds like you did good.”

“You really think so?”

“Oh yeah. I honestly thought they would have been dragging you along the floor after a few hours,” he said, handing her the large kettle.

“Oh, they tried.”

“I hope they didn’t tire you out too much.” Joseph said, pinching her butt, causing her to almost drop the kettle, “I was hoping after we put the kids to bed, we could do our own playing.”

Zendari ran the cloth furiously around the entire kettle and put it on the counter, still not entirely dry. “We better start that movie, then.”

“I’ll put the dishes away. You go help them pick a movie out,” Joseph said.

She wanted to stay and be helpful, but her drive to get to the end of the night was more powerful. Zendari skipped into the room and sat down next to the kids who were all huddled around a cabinet next to

the window full of DVDs. Billy opened the cabinet above, revealing an old tube television inside.

“Have you decided on a movie?” Zendari asked.

“We need help,” Gretchen said, scooching next to her.

“Well, what do we have?”

“What about George of the Jungle?” Willy said, showing her the cover of a bare chested man swinging on a vine.

Zendari snatched the case from his hand, putting it against her body. “Um... I don’t think that is appropriate. Anything else?”

“Tarzan!” Lilly said, showing her an even more revealing cover.

Zendari took that one away, too. *This must be their porno stash. Please let there not be another one.*

“Surely, there is something else?”

“Hercules!” Billy said, showing her the buff cartoon.

Zendari could barely sit still, being flashed by all these insanely attractive men. She turned her head to the kitchen. “Joseph, we could use your help here.”

Joseph came walking in, sensing the concern in her voice. She handed him the movies and he shrugged. “These are all great.”

Zendari couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth. She knew humans were sex crazed, but even the little ones? What kind of company would make such movies for kids?

“Um... Joseph. Don’t you think it is a little inappropriate?”

Joseph cocked his head, unsure what she was talking about. He tried to read her expression and then realized his mistake. At least they didn’t show her Jungle Book. Susan would have probably been arrested.

“Okay kids, how about we watch Babe?”

“What is that?” Lilly asked.

Zendari thought the same thing, watching Joseph rummage through the collection of movies. Soon her thoughts morphed from wondering what movie he was searching for to what she was going to get into with him tonight. His tight pants did all kinds of things to her, but Gretchen brought her back to reality.

“Zenrawree, can we have snacks?” Gretchen asked.

“Sure, I don’t see why not.”

“Yay! Milly, come on!” Gretchen said, waving her sister to follow her. They both ran off to gather snacks and Joseph emerged from the cabinet with the movie in hand, showcasing a pig and other farm animals on the cover.

“I knew Susan would have it.” Joseph put it into the DVD player under the TV.

“What is it about?” Billy asked.

“It’s about talking animals. Trust me, you’ll like it.”

“Animals!” Lilly said, jumping up and down.

Upon hearing their sister, the other two girls came rushing back with a variety of snacks in their arms. One of the chip bags Gretchen was holding was almost as tall as her, albeit half the bag was filled with air. Joseph turned around and shook his head.

“Nope, we aren’t having all those snacks. Pick two.”

Zendari plucked the chip bag from Gretchen. “Pick one.”

The crinkling of bags and shaking of the rest of the snack’s contents splashed on the floor, while Milly held her one treasure in her hand.

“The snack that smiles back, God’s fish!” Milly sang with glee.

“You mean Goldfish,” Billy corrected his sister.

“God’s fish!” she said, shaking her bag furiously.

Joseph scooped both of them up, one in each arm, and sat down next to Zendari. “You two can fight later. It’s movie time.”

Gretchen plopped down on Zendari's lap and moved the bag aside to be closer to her. Zendari wrapped her up, eliciting a giggle. Willy laid down at the adult's feet and turned up the volume, letting the intro music take command of his attention. Zendari leaned back against the soft couch, realizing no one was actually sitting on it. She contemplated making a claim for it, but Lilly leaped up on top. It was fine with Zendari; she had her favorite little human in her arms and the man who made her life worth so much more than she could imagine by her side. This was what a family was supposed to be and she soaked it in. *I could live like this forever.*

The credits rolled, and the music played while the kids' heads laid limp and eyes closed. Only Joseph and Zendari were awake, sharing a silent gaze as the kids slept. A bit of drool dripped onto Joseph's shoulder from Lilly, who was curled up above him.

"How did you like the movie?" Joseph whispered.

"It was good. I'm still surprised the kids wanted to watch these pornos," Zendari said, lifting the other suggestions up.

"I forget how you Shil'vati get all hot and bothered from a bare man's chest. These movies are not nearly as suggestive to us as it is to you."

Zendari had never heard that phrase before, but from the context, it reminded her what she was looking forward to after.

"Speaking of hot and bothered, we should probably get these kids to bed so we can get to our *playtime*."

Joseph got up and carefully lifted the two in his arms. Their dead weight made it more challenging, while their limbs dangled below the

rest of their bodies, but Joseph still managed. "I like the way you think. Follow me."

Zendari brushed the crumbs off her lap and put Gretchen over her shoulder, along with Lilly, before picking up Willy. None of them protested, completely lost to their dreams of talking sheep. She followed him up and into their bedrooms. They went into the boys' room first, full of clothes on the floor, waiting to trip them. The walls were light blue and had pictures that were hard to make out in the dark. Two beds sat in the middle, with a lane between them. On both sides of the bed were simple wood dressers with various loose papers scattered on top. They tucked them into their respective beds and went over to the girls' room.

The girls' room was a bit more spacious, given it needed to fit three beds. They had to share one dresser, but they got a closet that sat at the end of their beds. It was as wide as the three beds, making Zendari wonder how someone would go about making such a long closet. They tucked all three of them in, leaving Gretchen for last. Zendari took extra care, making sure her hair didn't get in the way. She brushed the hair aside and Gretchen's eyes flickered open.

"Zenrawree?" Gretchen said weakly, barely holding on to consciousness.

"Go to sleep. You need your rest."

"Okay."

And with that, her little eyes closed once again. Zendari couldn't help but smile, watching her adorable little body twitch ever so slightly. In that moment, Zendari was jealous of Susan, having such amazing kids to care for, forgetting about the amount of chaos they came with. The next second, she felt the arms of her man going around her waist and a gentle kiss on her upper arm.

"They are adorable, aren't they?" Joseph asked.

“Susan is one lucky woman,” she said, petting his arm, watching Gretchen sleep.

“I don’t think she is the *only* lucky woman.”

Zendari turned around, noticing the devious sparkle in his eyes. She was tired, but not enough to stop her. He led her by the hand, out of the room that she closed on the way out. Once the door was closed, she jerked him into her and went nose to nose with him.

“Which room, *Babe*?” Zendari asked in a sultry voice.

Joseph snorted, which caused her to snort too. Their lungs hurt, trying to hold in their laughter. They were two little dirty piglets, at least in the mind. Before either could turn their silent laughing fit into something more sexual, there was a panicky knock on the door. Joseph and Zendari shared a collective glance before rushing down the stairs.

Joseph beat her to the door, but she moved him aside, preparing for anything that was on the other side of that door. Her heart beat fast, knowing she might have to react if there was something dangerous. She let out a breath and wrenched the door open. It was John. He was breathing fast and clearly spooked.

“John? What’s going on? We just put the kids to sleep,” Joseph said.

“I need your help.”

John had just loaded up all the bows and arrows into his camo truck and went back inside to grab his keys to lock up. Waiting for him behind the counter was Sarah, with her hair disheveled and her unbuttoned white shirt doing a bad job of hiding her red bra. She was spinning his keys on her finger, licking her lips.

“Looking for these?” she asked in a sultry voice.

“Ugh, why do you torture me like this?” John groaned, reaching out for his keys.

She pulled them away. “You know, you could always wait until morning. It’s not like he needs them right away.”

“As much as I want to have another round with you, I do need to get those over to him. Can’t give him another reason to hold that deer costume fiasco over my head.”

“You are such a momma’s boy,” Sarah said, handing him the keys. “I like that about you.”

John leaned across the table and pecked her on the cherry lips. “Mmmm. I like *that* about you.”

“Go on now. Before I change my mind.”

John smirked and jogged over to the door to lock up. She turned off the lights for him and he was off to bring joy to his nieces and nephews. His drive wasn’t long, but enough to think back on another blissful evening with Sarah. They hadn’t been dating long, but he felt she was different from the other women he had been with in the past. She wasn’t grossed out by hunting, nor did she mind his messy backroom, despite her immaculate shop. He didn’t think she would be into him, but his charm was more than she could bear.

John drove up to the curb, where he parked behind John’s truck. The lights were still on inside the house, yet he didn’t see anyone inside. He didn’t pay it any mind and got out of his truck to unload the bows. The small amount of snow crunched under his boots and the door dinged as he opened it. He reached in to grab the bows when he heard the snow crunch behind him.

John pulled away from the truck and saw a white tail whip behind one of the forts in the yard.

“Holy shit.”

He reached back inside to grab the yellow bow on the top and dug down at the floorboard to pick up an arrow. Notching the arrow, he pulled back the bowstring and encroached on the lurking cat. John went around the side, trying to make his steps as quiet as possible. His whole body shook with fear or excitement. It was hard to tell which, with the adrenaline of the hunt coursing through his veins.

The shade from the trees made the moonlight above less useful, but it was enough light to make out the face of the cat. White with streaks of black fur cover the cat's face. Mr. Patterson was right. The head was about as big as his and he could only imagine how big the whole cat could be. He took aim and the cat's face turned to him. Something about it spooked him, making his grip slip around the bowstring. The arrow sped through the air and cut with ease through the snow fort, causing the cat to... swear?

"Fuck." John heard and freaked out, thinking his shot went through the other side and hit Mr. Patterson. The voice didn't sound the same, but he was too panicked to notice, rushing up to the fort.

He rounded it and laying there was the cat, holding its shoulder where the arrow was sticking out. Taking another look at it, it looked less like a cat and more like a werewolf. A female werewolf at that, judging from her well-endowed chest. His brain tried to register it as a big cat. She had claws, fur, and a tail, yet he couldn't get past the boobs. Cats didn't have boobs... at least none he had ever seen.

She hissed in pain and said something in a language he didn't understand.

"Aggh!" John screamed and kicked her in the head, knocking her out cold. His breathing got faster and shallow, trying to figure out what to do next. *Holy shit. Holy shit. Holy shit.* That same phrase kept circling in his brain while he paced in the front yard.

"The DNR is gonna have a field day with me," John said to himself.

He kept pacing until he realized where he was again. Surely Joseph knew what to do with exotic animals. John ran to the door and pounded on it. He kept looking around, hoping no one else was going to walk out and see what happened. Then, Zendari opened the door with Joseph off to the side. They were worried about him, but he couldn't focus on anything else other than what was lying in the snow behind him.

"I need your help," John said, ignoring whatever Joseph asked him.

"What's wrong?" Zendari asked.

"I think I just shot an endangered species. The DNR is gonna be pissed," John said, making his way back into the yard.

Joseph and Zendari followed him outside, concerned by his panicked tone. They went up to his furry problem and Zendari's eyes almost burst out of her skull.

"What did you do?" Zendari almost shouted.

"Oh God, how bad is it?" John asked, pulling on his hair.

Zendari kneeled down next to the downed feline while Joseph stood off to the side, trying to figure out why it looked so familiar.

"That is one big cat. Mr. Patterson wasn't kidding," Joseph said.

Zendari looked up at them. "This isn't some cat. This is Karn'a."

CHAPTER 4.

“WHAT IS A KARN’A?” John asked, worried it was rare on an intergalactic scale.

“That’s her name, Karn’a. She is a Marine.”

“Oh shit,” Joseph said and looked at John.

John’s lip quivered and knees rattled as he observed the scene. His troubles were worse than the DNR or whatever the intergalactic equivalent was. He had shot a Marine. This was going to be criminal.

“I... I didn’t know. How was I supposed to know? Wasn’t she supposed to announce herself or something?” John’s voice wavered.

Zendari stood up after checking her pulse. “Thankfully, you didn’t kill her, but we can’t keep her out here.”

“Should we call an ambulance?” Joseph asked.

“No,” Zendari said quickly.

“Why not?”

This was bad. There was only one way the Marines were going to see this shooting. John would be hauled off to prison and Joseph would resent her for it. Hell, if she didn’t arrest him right now, her career might not survive, let alone her relationship. And what was Karn’a doing so far from base outside Susan’s house to begin with?

Something was not right, and she was not going to see Joseph's family destroyed because of this.

"Grab her legs. We'll put her in the truck."

John went to it right away, eager to right his wrong, but Joseph didn't budge.

"What are you doing? Getting rid of the body?" Joseph asked.

"If we bring her to the hospital, they will ask questions," Zendari said, grabbing under her arms.

"So, she is better off dead?"

"No. I'm not going to kill her." She lifted Karn'a up with a grunt. "I need to interrogate her."

"Interrogate her?"

"She wasn't supposed to be here. The Marines work with their pod, but I don't see any others, do you?"

"All the more reason to report it. I don't want you to get in trouble," Joseph said, pointing at her with an open hand.

Zendari sighed. "Joseph, if we just report this, John will go to prison. I don't want that. You don't want that."

"I don't want that," John added, raising his hand, letting Karn'a's leg fall back into the snow.

"If I find out why she was here, that will help our case and give me more time to come up with better options."

Zendari didn't want to mention her investigation or anything else that would add to his fears. She had to protect him and this was her way of doing that, even if her career was on the line. Her eyes watched him, hoping he would concede to her plan. She only had to wait a moment until he nodded.

"Okay, grab her leg. She's a heavy one," Zendari ordered.

Together, they all lifted the Rakiri and put her in the bed of John's camo truck. She banged around a bit in the back, and her claws

scratched against the bare metal, but that was the least of their concern if she woke up. John ran around to start the truck and Zendari opened the passenger seat.

“We’re going back to your place. You stay with the kids until I call you,” Zendari said to Joseph.

Joseph felt like the helpless woman in the movies, watching the strong man ride off to fight the villain. He should have been the one to do this, but someone had to watch the kids. His stomach churned, worried about what was going to happen to John and her if they failed. Who would’ve thought being on the sidelines would hurt more than actually going off to fight the good fight?

“Be safe.”

“I will,” Zendari said and gave him a kiss goodbye before jumping in the truck.

They sped off and Joseph watched from the street as they disappeared into the night. He couldn’t help but shake the terrible feeling in his gut that this was only the beginning of their problems.

“How is she so heavy?” John groaned, trying to bring her through the front door. They had to turn her to make sure the arrow didn’t brush against the frame. The sound of a pen being dragged across a wood table scratched its way into their ears as the arrow notch slid along the door.

It reminded him of getting the Christmas tree in every year. And every year, the pine needles scratched the door frame.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Zendari asked, frustration leaking in her voice.

“I always hated setting up the Christmas tree.”

Zendari simply shook her head, unsure how carrying a body through the threshold of a house correlated with their holiday traditions. She had to focus on what she was going to say when Karn’a finally woke up. She had a feeling: *Oh hey Karn’a, my boyfriend’s brother shot you because he thought you were a cat. We’re okay, right?* was not going to work. Sure, Zendari didn’t know much about the Marine, but she doubted a simple misunderstanding would be so unforgivable. Which was why she needed to find out why Karn’a was snooping around by herself in the first place. She had her suspicions, but until Karn’a woke up, she had to wait.

They placed her on the kitchen floor, while Zendari went into Joseph’s room to find some restraints. She had left a new pair of cuffs at his place the last time she was there as an excuse to see him on short notice. It was a little disappointing that their first use would be on this furball, but sacrifices had to be made.

While she was in the other room, John wetted a washcloth and kneeled down next to her. He matted her fur, doing his best to clean the bloody area around the arrow. There was much less blood than he thought there would be, which allowed him to breathe easier. The more he looked at her, the more he realized she was a woman. An alien woman with a lot of fur, but a woman nonetheless. And his eyes kept traveling down to her chest far too often to be helpful.

“I better get her a blanket,” John remarked to himself, getting up. His knees cracked, which hid the sound of the Rakiri twitching awake.

He only got a step away before he felt a furry cord wrap around his ankle. Once he looked down at the surprising sensation, his foot was yanked from under him. His body slapped the kitchen floor and he heard a low growl. The sting in his bones from crashing onto the floor

paled in comparison to the sudden fear of being fileted by those sharp claws.

His body screeched across the floor, as the Rakiri pulled him into her. She tried to lift her arm up to grab him by the throat, but the pain that shot through her arm forced her to settle with his thigh. Her claws depressed the fabric, making sure her enemy knew the danger of fighting.

“Don’t move, or you’ll pay,” she said in Shil. Her eyesight was blurry, still adjusting to being unconscious for almost an half hour. That was when she smelt what distracted her the first time, giving her pause once again.

“Zendari, she’s awake!” John called.

Her claws let up upon hearing her name. “Zendari?”

Zendari ran back into the kitchen with one of Joseph’s shirts in hand. She saw John on the floor, captured by the wounded Marine. Karn’a’s face turned to horror, knowing full well how it looked... and what was about to happen.

Karn’a tried to explain, but Zendari was already on top of her, wiggling on the arrow. She hissed in pain and released John from her grasp.

“Stop! I wasn’t going to hurt him,” Karn’a begged.

“I’ll stop when you tell me why you were outside my boyfriend’s sister’s house,” Zendari answered in Shil, tightening her grip around the arrow.

Karn’a closed her eyes preparing for another painful jolt, “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, just don’t twist it.”

Zendari smiled and let go of the arrow. For as tough as they made the Marines out to be, Karn’a was a little kitten in comparison. Maybe her reputation had some clout around base after all?

“Start talking,” Zendari ordered.

“The commander tasked me with gathering intelligence on you,” Karn’a said, switching to English, without a hint of a foreign accent to be found.

“You speak English?” John and Zendari said in unison.

Karn’a looked back at Zendari. “You aren’t the only one with ambitions on this planet.”

“Why are you spying on us?” Zendari asked.

“The commander believes you are blinded by your own relationship to make an unbiased judgement on the company you keep,” she said and turned to give John a saucy look. “I can see why.”

Zendari snapped her fingers. “Eyes back here, horny. I’m not done with my questions.”

“What more do you want to know?”

“Did she only send you or are there others?”

“No one knows I’m here if that is what you’re asking,” Karn’a replied and then a devious thought came into her mind. “But I am going to have to report this when you let me go. After all, all rebel activity needs to be reported.”

Zendari was afraid she would pull something like this. It was almost normal procedure for an Interior Agent. Use family influence and blackmail to get favors. To hear it from a Marine almost felt insulting, reminding her how big of a screw up this really was. She had half a mind to threaten Karn’a into submission, but she didn’t want that getting back to Joseph. Judging from the smirk that was growing on the Marine’s face, she didn’t believe John was a rebel, leaving room for some kind of compromise.

“What will it cost me to keep this quiet?” Zendari inquired.

Karn’a turned to John and winked. “A date with this hunk of man candy.”

John froze, unsure how to react to a sexy alien cat wanting to date him. All that came out of his mouth was stutters and incoherent mumbling. All that did was make Karn'a laugh, forgetting about the arrow in her shoulder.

"Deal," Zendari said without hesitation.

John snapped his head to Zendari. "Deal?"

"Just give us a second," Zendari said, escorting him into the living room. The floor may have been soft, but it didn't ease John's nerves.

"What do you mean, deal?" John said in a hushed tone, incredulously.

"You need to do this."

"Can't we just get her a discount at my shop? I'm willing to give a whole forty percent off anything."

Zendari glanced over his shoulder, watching Karn'a tail swish back and forth. There was no way she was going to accept anything less and to Zendari, it was really nothing.

"It's only a date. You don't even have to have sex with her," Zendari tried to assure him.

"I can't. I have a girlfriend."

"Oh, I know," Karn'a said, sniffing in the air.

Zendari rolled her eyes and moved John farther around the corner by the couch. She didn't know if she was more frustrated with Karn'a's interruption or John's insistence on monogamy. "You won't have one if you don't. If she reports you, you will be going to prison."

"But it was an accident. From my angle, she looked like the lynx Mr. Patterson described. That should count for something?"

"Who's Mr. Patterson?" she asked and immediately waved her hands. "Doesn't matter. The facts are, if you don't do this, you are never going to see your family again. Is that what you want?"

John's eyes darted back and forth, trying to come up with an alternative. He thought he could exchange information on rebel activity. Mr. Patterson could pass as a rebel. All he had to do was get him ranting about taxes or government restrictions. John decided against it though, knowing Mrs. Patterson would kick his ass and stop making him cookies. Damn, those cookies were good.

"Fine. Mr. Patterson would probably get off anyway," John said, mostly grumbling to himself.

"Good. Now tell her the good news," Zendari said, turning him back to the kitchen.

John raised his finger and tried to look back at her. "But you can't tell Sarah about this."

Karn'a was waiting for them, sitting on the floor with her tail wiping the floor. She had a big smile on her face, excited that her blackmail worked.

"Sounds like you were listening," Zendari said.

"The whole time," she said with a smile.

John folded his arms in front of himself. "Then there will be some ground rules. One, you cannot tell my girlfriend."

"Already noted."

"Two, I get to choose where we meet."

"A man who takes charge? I could get used to that."

"Three, no sex. It's not gonna happen."

"What if it goes well? We probably don't want to put restrictions on it." Karn'a argued in a playful tone.

"Those are my conditions. Take it or leave it."

Karn'a wasn't a fan of his last condition, but she didn't think this would actually work to begin with. She sat in silence, pretending to ponder his proposition for no other reason than to find out if he would sweat. His demeanor didn't change, which caused her to purr.

“Agreed, but I need to know. What did you shoot me with?”

“A bow and arrow. Wasn’t the normal one I hunt with, so you should really be thanking whatever God you pray to.”

Oh, she was praying all right. A sexy male hunter just hunted *her* for prey. She thought back to how he stalked her and smelt of fresh love making. That alone made her wet. It also made the scar that would surely come from her attack all the more hot. *Praise the Dirt Mother indeed.*

Joseph paced back and forth inside the house. The torrent of snacks and crumbs at his feet was of little consequence. His worries were elsewhere, back at his home, where John and Zendari were coming up with a plan to get out of this mess. One that he needed to help with. He had his phone in his hand, resisting the urge to call. They needed to focus on their problem, so he couldn’t go about distracting them. Time went slow while he waited in agony for Susan and Barry to arrive when he realized, *why don’t I just call them?*

He tapped their number into his phone until he saw the lights from their van. “Thank God.”

Joseph heard the crunching under his feet of some uneaten chips and crackers and hurried to clean it up. The crumbs resisted his hands, flying around with every pass he made to scrape them out. He didn’t have time to clean it all up, including the dirty wet spots he left on the carpet from his socks.

“I’ll just blame it on Billy,” Joseph said, gathering all the bags and putting them back in the pantry.

He heard the rumble of the lock and made his way to the door to open up for them. The door creaked open and Susan peeked her head in, secretly hoping her kids were still awake.

“Are my kids asleep?” Susan asked the empty room, not seeing Joseph approach.

“Yep. We tucked them all in,” Joseph said while Barry guided Susan inside. “How was your date?”

“It was wonderful,” Susan said. “How were my kids?”

“Little messy, but otherwise, we survived.”

“Where is Zendari?” Barry asked.

“She had to leave early. Work called,” Joseph said with a disappointed smirk.

Susan took off her coat. “That’s too bad. I wonder if it has anything to do with the convoy we saw on the way in.”

Joseph gulped, “Convoy?”

“Yeah, there were those big APC looking things speeding down the road. Must have been going to something big. Hope everyone is alright.”

His chest felt tight and itchy all over. They were going to something big alright. He made his way to the door, squeezing past them. “I’m sorry, I just remembered I left the oven on at home. I better get back before the house is on fire.”

“Okay, thank Zendari when you see her for me.”

Joseph waved goodbye, not really listening to his sister. He ran to the truck and peeled out as fast as he could. The houses passed him by while the engine roared along the quiet, dark road. His mind was racing, worried that he would lose two people he loved in one night. The drive wasn’t far from her house and soon he saw the convoy they were talking about.

Blue and red lights flashed ahead, much in the same way police lights did. It was one of the many things the local governess of the region kept to maintain some sense of normalcy for the people. Despite how other regions were handled, their region had the least amount of issues, and some of that could be attributed to the rural town vibe that the local governess tried hard to maintain. Navralin Vumars was a rare breed of noble, willing to give lots of concessions that other governesses wouldn't even bother entertain, but if it allowed her to brag about keeping a green zone to her other colleagues, it was worth it. Today though, might not be that day.

Joseph pulled up behind one of the armored vehicles on the curb, since his driveway was blocked by another one and a third was parked in his yard, right in front of the door. Normally, he would be pissed that their vehicle ruined his grass with their heavy tires, but he had bigger concerns. He got out of the truck, leaving his door wide open, and marched up to his house. Standing at the perimeter was a Marine, dressed in her full combat gear and emotionless helmet.

"Stop," the Marine said, holding her hand out.

"This is my house. What is going on?"

"Identify yourself."

"Joseph Hanks. I live here," he said, walking past her.

"Wait. Stop," the Marine said, confused why he didn't follow her orders.

Joseph ignored her and trudged through the little snow still in his yard. Coming out of the front door on a hovering stretcher was Karn'a. Her ears dropped and flopped around as she wobbled her head.

"I wuv dis planet!" Karn'a declared, despite her slurred speech.

"Shut up, you dumb furball, or I'm not giving you any more sedatives," one of the Shil'vati medics said as they lifted her into the transport.

Joseph didn't understand what they were saying, even though he was pretty sure Karn'a was speaking English, but it sounded promising, given her upbeat tone. That was when he was spun around by the Marine that kept yelling at him. He couldn't see her face, but her grip was not unlike a vice.

"Listen here you little—"

"Private, what are you doing away from your post?" a Shil'vati woman said, holding her helmet under her arm. Her black hair was pulled into a bun and, judging from the insignia on her armor, she was in charge.

"This male—"

The helmetless woman slapped the Private across the helmet, "He can go. Next time, listen to your comms."

Joseph didn't bother with pleasantries and went right inside. He found Zendari and John sitting on their couch while another Shil'vati was asking them questions, holding the bloody arrow in her hand.

"Tell me again how one of my Marines got this thing stuck in her arm?" the Shil'vati asked, waving the arrow around like a wand.

"John was showing me how to shoot a bow and Karn'a insisted on holding up a target for me to shoot," Zendari said.

The Shil'vati raised an eyebrow. "In the kitchen?"

"Yeah. I know it's weird, but it was the only place to do it in the house," John said, pointing toward Joseph. "What are you doing here?"

The Shil'vati turned, noticing Joseph as well. "You must be Joseph Hanks."

"What's going on?" Joseph asked, trying to pretend he had no idea.

"It appears your brother here had the poor idea of teaching this ancient form of marksmanship to your girlfriend and led to injuring one of my Marines."

“I’m so sorry. Is she okay?”

“She’ll be fine,” she said, lingering a little longer than normal before turning back to Zendari. “As for you, Agent D’Quirlen, my report will be sent to Commander Tojen. I’m sure she will want to talk to you in person about this.”

“Yes, Major. Will that be all?”

“Yes. You all have a good night,” the major said and left, but not without winking at Joseph.

Joseph was a bit surprised by her subtle wink, but at least it reassured him nothing terrible was going to happen to them. He went up to Zendari and gave her a hug, glad she was not being carted off to some space gulag. Zendari held him tight while smiling at John.

Joseph let go of Zendari, holding her at arm’s length. “What did you say to her?”

“It wasn’t so much what we said, as much as agreed to,” Zendari smirked.

“What was that?”

“It’s none of your business.” John huffed.

Joseph turned around, “If you don’t tell me, she will.”

John glared at Joseph, but he knew it wasn’t going to dissuade him from dropping it. This was not how he imagined this evening going.

“I... agreed to go on a date with her.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all? Do you not remember that I have a girlfriend? A human one. Who I really like, by the way.”

“I’m sure she will be fine with it. It’s only one date.”

“Oh, she’s not going to know about it. And you aren’t saying anything to her.”

Joseph put his hands up. “Okay, don’t worry. I won’t say anything.”

“Good.” John said and walked toward his room. “I’m taking a shower. Get this alien blood off my hands.”

Joseph laughed, happy to see his brother had still maintained his wit. He was worried this was going to ruin his whole family, but in the end, it was just another story he could tell his mom later. Much later.

He returned his attention to Zendari, who he was really worried about. She stuck her neck out for his brother and, by extension, him. None of his previous girlfriends would have done anything that selfless for him. Zendari was a catch, but he didn’t know if he could continue being left completely in the dark about what she did. At least to his understanding, Marines didn’t go sneaking around without a reason.

“Zendari, I have a question?”

“Yes?”

“Did Karn’a say why she was sneaking around my sister’s place?”

Zendari heard the concern in his voice. It was reasonable given his life was almost turned upside down because a Marine had to go get herself shot in Susan’s front yard. She had this urge to tell him nothing, but he deserved more than that. It was his family that was affected, all because of her investigation that really hadn’t even begun yet.

“It had to do with my investigation.”

“What investigation?” Joseph asked and heard the water from the shower go on in the other room.

“My boss has tasked me with rooting out some potential rebels operating in your town.”

“Here? Rebels?” Joseph said, surprised there would be any real troublemakers in his small town.

“Possibly. I don’t know for sure, but when Commander Tojen wants something done, it gets done.”

Joseph scratched his head. “Then, if you are investigating rebels, why was Karn’a spying on us?”

“I think my boss questioned my ability to do my job and sent someone to make sure I was working.”

“Should we expect more of this?”

“No. I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Zendari said, taking his hand in hers.

Joseph saw on her face she was genuine. There was still more she knew that she wasn’t going to tell him, but he thought it was fair. He wasn’t an investigator after all and caulked it down to protecting him. It didn’t ease all his worries, but enough to get to sleep tonight. As long as she was by his side.

He rubbed her smooth hands and smiled. “I’m going to take a shower before John uses all the hot water. Care to join me?”

Zendari almost jumped at the idea before her omni-pad, which was laying haphazardly on the couch, chimed, tearing away her attention. On the screen, she saw an incoming message from Commander Tojen. Damn clam jammer.

“I better check that message quick. Keep the water warm for me,” Zendari said, picking up her omni-pad while Joseph made his way to the bathroom.

Zendari swiped her screen and viewed the message. All it said was four words, which did not inspire confidence: **We need to talk...**

CHAPTER 5.

“TROUBLE FOLLOWS YOU EVERYWHERE, doesn’t it, Agent D’Quirlen?” Commander Tojen asked once Zendari took her first step in the plush office.

Zendari did not look forward to having this conversation with her boss, but at least the view was nice. A rectangular glass window sat at Commander Tojen’s back, which overlooked the endless forest of pine trees that had shed most of the snow. It was a sight that made her want to take a deep breath and enjoy the fresh smell of the outdoors, even if it was still far too cold for her to fully enjoy.

“You wanted to talk to me, Commander?”

“I was hoping you would do most of the talking. Starting with why you lied about shooting a Marine with a broadhead. What the hell is a broadhead, anyways?”

“Actually, it was a target arrow. Broadheads have little fins that—”

“For Goddess’ sake woman, that was rhetorical,” Commander Tojen interrupted.

Zendari couldn’t help but stand a little taller, proud that she remembered that tidbit of information Joseph taught her. She stayed quiet while Commander Tojen rolled her eyes.

“Not the part about why you lied. Why did one of those men shoot my Marine?”

“Why was *your Marine* there to begin with?” Zendari asked, crossing her arms.

“Because I wasn’t convinced you could make an impartial judgment about them,” Commander Tojen said in a tone with a hint of regret.

Zendari raised a brow. “Sounds like that has changed?”

“No. It sounds like no one on this base can. I picked Private Karn’a because she wanted to be an Interior Agent. Figured she would try to impress if that meant she could move up in the Imperium. Yet all she comes back to report is she is going on a date with this John fellow. Talked about it like she didn’t have a hole in her shoulder.”

Zendari smirked. Not surprised Karn’a would brag about a date with a human the second she got onto base. At least she kept her mouth shut about the other part, but the jig was up. The commander knew and since she didn’t want to make an example of them, there was no point in testing her luck.

“I lied because I didn’t want John to get in trouble,” Zendari admitted.

“What actually happened?”

“John was coming to Susan’s to drop off some bows for the kids when he had mistaken her for a lynx.”

“What’s a lynx?”

“A big cat, to my understanding. I guess they can be dangerous, so he took out a bow and tried to shoot her.”

Commander Tojen slapped the table. “That explains a lot. He’s a hunter. No wonder Private Karn’a is gushing over him.”

“It really was a big misunderstanding, and he freaked out when he realized what he did. Trust me, he is no rebel insurgent. None of them are.”

“Now that is a much more convincing story.” Commander Tojen got up from her leather brown chair and tapped her omni-pad a few times. Almost immediately after she was done, Zendari’s omni-pad dinged. Zendari glanced at it and beamed.

“You approved my request,” she said, almost shaking with excitement.

“Yeah, the rental company is starting to get on my ass about your driving, not to mention you will be closer to your assignment.”

Zendari wanted to protest the point about her driving, but she let it go. She was finally going to be able to spend more time with her boyfriend. Something after this morning, she was looking forward to.

“Thank you, Commander Tojen. I really appreciate it.”

“You can thank me by working on your investigation. You’re dismissed.” Commander Tojen waved her away.

Zendari spun on the purple carpet and left as fast as she could. Closing the door behind her, she almost squealed with excitement, like the little piggy from the movie she watched. No more having to share showers or toilets with who knows how many other soldiers. She was finally free. Zendari went off to her room, gathered her things, and trotted toward the parking area where Joseph was waiting for her.

The cool breeze chilled her body, but it was an improvement over the freezing temperatures she had to endure the last few months. She wanted to enjoy the smell of freedom, but the cold wouldn’t quite let her. Her steps quickened upon seeing his black truck and a group of thirsty Marines all huddled around the driver’s side window. Their collective laughter carried with the wind, filling the open lot with joy.

“And you have a brother?” one of the Marines asked.

“Sorry ladies, you are gonna have to wait your turn,” Karn’a said, leaning against the frame of Joseph’s open window. Her shoulder was

bandaged and she gritted her teeth, trying to hide the pain behind her smile.

“I still can’t believe someone related to this sexy man would go out with you,” another Marine jested.

“What can I say? I’m just that irresistible,” she said and saw Zendari coming up to the passenger side door. “And here she is, the one who introduced us.”

“Hey, what’s with all the bags?” Joseph asked as she opened the back door.

“I got good news.” Zendari threw her bags in the backseat, closed the door, and got in the passenger seat. “My housing request got approved.”

“That is good news!” Joseph said and turned his attention back to the crowd of Marines. “Well ladies, it’s been fun chatting with you all, but we gotta go.”

The Marines all expressed their disappointment with a variety of groans and sunk heads, yet they didn’t budge. Karn’a started waving them away from the truck, knowing their flirting time was over.

“Go on now, I’ll tell you all later how I caught a man so sexy,” Karn’a boasted, waiting for them to walk off before whipping her head to Joseph. “Thanks again for letting me puff myself up in front of them. Really does a girl’s ego some good.”

“No problem. And you make sure to treat my brother nice,” Joseph said, not unlike a father politely warning a young man how he should behave with his daughter at prom.

“Will do.” The vehicle lurched as Joseph put the vehicle in drive, letting out a grinding sound that reminded Karn’a of something she wanted to ask. “Oh, before you go, are there any cultural taboos I should be aware of when going on a first date?”

“Just be yourself and don’t wear anything too revealing. Might give off the wrong vibe you are going for.”

“Or the right one?” She winked.

Joseph chuckled, “Good luck, Karn’a. I’m sure he’ll call you soon enough to schedule something.”

She patted his truck farewell and he drove off the base, down the long familiar road that Zendari had taken, hopefully for one of the last times. Zendari watched Joseph smile as his head wobbled back and forth, bobbling along with the bumps in the road.

“What are you so smiley about?” Zendari asked.

“Besides my girlfriend living with me?” He winked at her. “Kind of excited for John.”

“For John? Why?”

Joseph shrugged, “I got to talking with Karn’a and she isn’t that bad of a woman, despite her extorting John for a date. She seems like the kind of woman he would get along with.”

“Really? Her?”

“Yeah.”

Zendari waited, expecting him to say more, but nothing followed. “Not going to elaborate?”

“Nope. I’m more interested in how your talk with the principal went.”

Zendari wasn’t fully familiar with the term, but from the context knew he was referring to her meeting.

“Better than expected, actually. Didn’t think I would get approval to live off base after last night.”

Joseph smiled. “Come on, details. I’m dying here.”

“Commander Tojen just wanted to know the real story behind what happened last night. Apparently, our ruse wasn’t enough with Karn’a being unable to play it cool.”

“And you told me he was going to go to prison. Starting to sound like you planned this whole thing so you could get in my pants,” Joseph teased.

“Yes. Give up the perfect opportunity at the warm house to risk it all for a night of fondling you in the shower.”

“Don’t forget what we did this morning,” he said, glancing at her.

How could she forget? Twice before breakfast and once after in the shower. The libido was strong with this one and she was happy to reap all the benefits. She locked onto his eyes, thinking maybe they could go for number four. He didn’t seem against it and she scanned the horizon for any cars that were unlikely to drive down this long empty road when she saw the only figure that would stop her sex drive right in its tracks.

“Watch out!” she yelled, pointing to the deer in the middle of the road.

John swerved, thinking there was something he didn’t see, but there was nothing except a little doe up ahead. He slowed down and readjusted his grip on the steering wheel.

“Are you serious right now?” Joseph said, trying to hold off the bite in his tone.

She glared daggers at the deer, unable to listen to him. “Bambi.”

His nostrils flared for a brief moment, until he saw her hunched forward, head almost against the glass, watching the deer with the focus of a sniper. He wanted to be mad, but realized this must have been the deer that was responsible for all her accidents. Joseph pulled the truck slowly up to the deer that walked to the other lane, wanting to give them space.

“Pull over, I’m going to shoot that bastard,” Zendari said, reaching behind her seat for one of the bows in the back.

Joseph stopped the truck and couldn't help but chuckle at his girlfriend frantically trying to find an arrow to go with the bright purple bow.

"Better hurry. She's getting away." Joseph said, snorting at the end.

"Argh! Move aside bows!"

After a few more moments of rubbing the bows against each other, she finally retrieved an arrow. Her anger rattled inside her fists, gripping tight around the bow as she aimed like she saw in the movies. The driver's side window rolled down.

"You know how to use that thing?" Joseph said, moving the arrow out of the way of his head.

"Yes," she said, struggling to notch the arrow. The deer stopped for a second, staring at them before bounding off into the field. She didn't notice it, focused on the finicky arrow.

Joseph lowered her bow. "You can stop now. The deer ran off."

She slammed the bow and arrow on her lap and let out a frustrated grunt.

"Let me guess, that was the doe that totaled your last three vehicles?"

She just nodded, ready to pout like Gretchen did. He thought it was adorable for as "feminine" as she claimed to be. At this moment, she wasn't much different than a little human girl.

"Well, I guess I'm gonna have to teach you how to shoot if you're gonna be ready to bag that doe by hunting season."

She met his gaze, thinking about his offer. An opportunity to kill that little reputation ruiner. A devious smirk ran across her face, thinking of all the ways she could destroy that deer once and for all.

"When can we start?"

Zendari's enthusiasm for learning to shoot started to wane when she found out she was not the only one invited. She should have figured as much, given how many bows were in the back of his truck. Joseph called Susan right away to take the kids off her hands for the afternoon, which Susan didn't hesitate to agree to. Before Zendari knew it, they were already at Susan's house once again and the kids all piled in the bed of the truck.

"Are you sure this is safe?" Zendari asked, given her rational fear of sudden braking for woodland creatures.

"Yeah, the kids love it. I'll just take it slow and we don't have that far to go."

The kids rapped on the back window and let out their excited shrieks, impatient with the lack of movement. Zendari looked back at them, seeing all their smiling faces... and Billy licking the window. Joseph took that as his cue and backed up, resulting in the banging of metal. The kids laughed and ducked down, holding on to whatever they could.

"See, they love it," Joseph said and started driving to the place.

Zendari had to agree, seeing those kids in the back. She was almost jealous of them, but then she remembered it was cold outside. Joseph kept the truck warm for her and she appreciated it.

"Is there anything else I should know so I don't look like a complete beginner in front of your nieces and nephews?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm sure you will catch on much quicker than them," Joseph said, patting her leg.

She felt deep in her gut that wasn't going to be the case. Willy was a crack shot with that foam dart gun, and she had seen what Gretchen can do with a crossbow. Oh, Gretchen.

"Hey, um... you might need to watch out for Gretchen. She can be a little wild," Zendari said.

“Wouldn’t be my first time teaching children.”

Not even a few minutes later, they had arrived at the place. A long steel building with a rounded roof and no windows sat alone in a clearing. They left muddy tracks as they pulled next to a few cars that were already parked outside. The kids yelled and hopped out of the truck bed, splatting mud on the red sedan next to them.

“Can you grab the bows and bring the kids inside? I’ll go pay,” Joseph said, turning off the truck.

“I’ll pay.”

“No, it was my idea. I got it.”

“I can pay. It’s no problem,” Zendari said, getting out of the truck.

Joseph realized this was once again one of those cultural differences. It was taking him a while to wrap his head around her, insisting on doing what men traditionally do here. He still didn’t want her paying for all his sister’s kids’ lane fees.

“How about this, I pay for this and when we go out next, you pay for dinner?”

Zendari wasn’t thrilled about not being allowed to provide for him, but she knew there would have to be some compromises. Just like any good relationship.

“Okay, but then I’m taking you out someplace nice.”

“Olive Garden it is.” Joseph smiled and went inside.

Zendari got out of the truck and went to the backseat to get the bows out. “Why would he want to go to an olive garden?”

“We’re going to Olive Garden?” Gretchen asked, smiling up at her with her pink boots covered in mud.

“No, we’re going here, silly. Wanna help me with the bows?”

She responded with excited jumping, splashing mud everywhere. Taking that as a yes, Zendari handed her a bow. Gretchen ran inside,

catching up with her siblings who were already inside. Before the door closed, she heard Billy say, "Where did you get that?"

Zendari shook her head. For some reason, these little kids brought joy to her heart. Sure, she wanted this to be a date with Joseph, away from the family, but at least the kids were delightful.

"Maybe this will be fun after all."

Lilly raised her hand. "Can we shoot now?"

Joseph stood in front of the row of kids, who all sat rather impatiently on the blue cushioned bench while he explained to them how to treat the bow. Zendari would have normally found it rather dry as well, but the presenter's flimsy white T-shirt kept her attention. If the kids weren't here, she had half a mind to go back to Al at the counter and pay him to turn the heat up more in the hopes of getting another glimpse at Joseph's bare chest.

"Show me how you hold your bows," Joseph asked, waking Zendari up from her daydream.

They all stood in a line and pointed their bows straight ahead. Their little arms were up to the task, as he went down the line correcting any flaw in their stance or hold. He got to Zendari, who felt a little silly holding a small purple bow.

"That one might be a bit small for you," Joseph said, handing her a larger one. "That should fit you better."

She took the bow, covered completely in a camo pattern that stood in stark contrast to the colorful bows. It actually fit in her hand and had more heft to it, unlike the paperweight she was using earlier.

Pulling the bowstring back, Zendari was able to actually aim how she was taught.

“Lookin good.”

Her smile grew, and she moved her face away from the bowstring. “Just wait till you see me shoot.”

“I’m shooting first!” Billy rushed over to the barrel of arrows behind Joseph and took one out.

Joseph turned. “Billy, did I say you could touch the arrows?”

The arrow went clunk as it dropped back into the barrel. “No, Uncle Joseph.”

“Step back from the arrows. Milly is going to shoot first.”

“Yay!” Milly said, rushing next to Billy.

Joseph took an arrow and helped Milly notch it on the bowstring. After that, he left the rest up to her. Milly’s little arms shook until she got the bow pulled back. Her aim dipped down and then corrected, compensating from the sudden jerk of the string giving up its resistance.

“Line up the middle pin inside the loop.”

Milly steadied her aim and squinted her dominant eye, following his instruction. She let out a breath and the string shot forward, launching the arrow toward the white box target. The red and yellow feathers were reduced to streaks of color, cutting through the stale air. Her eyes grew big, hearing the thunk of the arrow plunging into the fibers of the target.

“Bull’s-eye!” Milly punched her fist in the air. Joseph gave her a high five.

“Good job, Milly.”

Little did anyone know, she wasn’t going to be the only one to succeed. One by one, Joseph had the kids take their first shots to correct any issues he found and they all hit the bull’s-eye. Zendari watched in

shock at how easy the kids made it look, putting pressure on her to match them.

“Alright, Zendari, your turn,” Joseph said.

Zendari stepped up to him, gingerly taking an arrow from the barrel. This was going to be her moment to flirt with him, but now all she could think about was not missing the target. She put on a happy face, pretending not to have a care in the world. Deep down though, she was focused on the target. The colorful arrows obstructed her sight of the black bull’s-eye, but she knew where it was. She pulled it back, took aim, and released. Instead of the thunk of victory or the scratching of carbon fiber, there was a crack. The arrow crashed into the floor and exploded into shards that flacked the target.

The kids all snickered, taking joy in Zendari’s miscalculation. All except Gretchen, who, like last time, was quick to defend her friend.

“That’s okay, Zenrawree. You’ll get it next time.”

“Which sight were you aiming with?” Joseph asked, unable to hide his smile.

“Um... the middle one?” Zendari didn’t know what went wrong, and the whole process was a blur. She thought she did everything correctly.

“Okay kids, go get the arrow,” Joseph said.

The kids all rushed down to the target, ignoring a middle-aged gentleman in a puffy, green plaid farm coat who was lurking behind them. He watched the group, sporting dark circles under his eyes. His expression was no different from someone trying to figure out a difficult puzzle.

“Can I help you with somethin?” Al asked, rolling a two-wheel cart of box targets.

The man shook out of his daze. “Um... yes. How much are bow rentals?”

“I’ll let you shoot free for an hour if you help me with these targets. God knows my back isn’t what it used to be,” Al said, holding his hand to his lower back.

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

Al let go of the handles, rocking the top box almost off of the stack. He pointed his wrinkled finger at the open area off to the side of Joseph’s group. “The targets go there. When you’re done, I got another two in the back for you to set up.”

The man nodded and rolled the cart next to the target where the kids were having a heck of a time getting their arrows out. Lilly was tugging on her arrow while the others held the box still.

“Mister, can you help us?” Milly asked, sitting on the box.

The man smiled and left his cart to help the youngsters. He put his hands in his pocket, feeling around for a little circular device. This was the closest he was going to get to any of them, so he knew he had to go for it. Taking his hands out of his pockets, he hid the silver device in his palm. He approached Lilly, who at this point had her feet up on the target, pulling with all her might. His hand hovered behind her back, ready to place the device on her coat, when the arrow went free.

She fell straight to the floor, landing on his foot. Her hand swung up with the arrow in her hand, slapping him in the neck with the shaft. The man felt the sting of the slap, but it was a success. The device in his hand was gone. His mission was complete.

“Sorry, Mister,” Lilly said.

“It’s okay. Why don’t you let me handle that,” the man said, rubbing his neck a little.

He took out all the arrows with relative ease, handing them off to Willy.

“Thanks, Mister!” Willy said and ran off with the others.

The man smiled, more delighted that his plan had worked... or so he thought. Something crunched under his boot. He moved his foot aside and there was his device in all its chrome glory. Instinctually, his head turned back to Lilly, thinking somehow it was a mistake. It was not.

He picked up his still serviceable device and went over to finish setting up the targets. The battle may have been lost, but he knew there would be another opportunity.

Arrows flew at different intervals as the kids all got their own targets to shoot at. Cheers of joy echoed throughout the room every time an arrow hit the bull's-eye. The only one who was not cheering was Zendari. Still unable to hit that elusive black dot in the center, she let out another frustrated growl after hitting the target in the top corner.

"Why is this so difficult?" Zendari said to no one in particular. She looked over to her right, watching Gretchen hit another bull's-eye.

"Yay! Look what I did, Zenraweeee!"

Zendari was so jealous. A little kid was out shooting her. It had to be a fluke that all these kids were crack shots without ever shooting a bow before.

"How long have you been shooting? I refuse to believe this is your first time."

Before Gretchen could answer, her attention whipped over to Joseph, whose voice carried down all the lanes.

"No more shooting. Time to take a snack break," Joseph said.

"Yay, snacks!" Gretchen said, running over to him, leaving Zendari with no firm answer.

Joseph gave them his card and together, the kids made a mad dash to the vending machine in the corner. Al chuckled to himself, watching the kids crowd around the machine filled with crunchy treats.

“Al, make sure they don’t drain me out of credits,” Joseph said.

“Will do.”

Satisfied with Al’s assurance, he went over to Zendari who was back at it. She sensed he was watching and wanted to impress him. Again, she took aim, this time focusing on the target. Behind them was the mysterious man again, pretending to watch as well. In reality, he was taking the advantage of everyone being distracted to plant his device on one of the many coats that were piled on the bench.

Zendari kept both her eyes open and slowly released the string. The target rocked back and forth from the force of the arrow skimming across the top and catching at the back end. The arrow dropped down behind the target, leaving the feathers exposed on top like a flag, mocking her shot.

“Graaaw!” she roared, kicking her foot back. Her heel made contact with one of the kids’ muddy boots that they somehow weren’t wearing anymore. It lifted and flung straight into the man’s face, which was sure to leave a bootmark.

“Woah, what’s wrong?” Joseph asked.

Zendari gestured to the target. “I can’t hit that stupid target.”

“It’s your first time. Nobody is great the first time.”

“Your nieces and nephews are.”

Joseph scratched his chin. He couldn’t argue with that. They were much better than he anticipated. Like little Robin Hoods. It brought him back to his memories of being out shot by Susan when he was younger. Zendari acted just like him. Frustrated and a bit pouty.

“Well, they are the exception. Must have got all that innate shooting talent from Susan. She was always a better shot. Frustrated the hell out of me.”

“But she’s a woman. You shouldn’t be...” she stopped mid-sentence, remembering the gender dynamics. It would be the equivalent of her brother beating her. Something that would strike a blow to her femininity for sure. “... oh.”

“Yeah, but my dad always reminded me of something I will never forget. There will always be people better than you at something. That doesn’t mean that you’re less than.”

Zendari let Joseph’s words from his father percolate in her brain. It was totally something you would say to your kid to make them feel better, but at the same time, she needed to hear that. In that moment, it gave her some perspective she never had before. Her whole life she had competed against her sisters, who were always better than her. She thought she needed to best them. It was part of her competitive drive. But with those simple words, she realized her self worth wasn’t about her status as an Interior Agent or how well she shot a bow. It was about how you responded in those moments that mattered to the people that matter most.

She was having quite the revelation in the most unlikely of places and situations, but it was nonetheless eye opening. She had an ego to let go of and there was no better time to try than now.

“You know, Joseph. I needed to hear that.”

“Good. Now let’s try again. And as a little extra incentive, for every good hit you do, I’ll give you a good *hit*.”

Zendari liked the sound of that. She grabbed another arrow from the barrel in front of her and notched it on the bow.

“When you pull it back this time, try indexing the string against your tusk,” Joseph encouraged.

With the bow brought back, she aligned it so the string rubbed between where the tusk and her skin met. Her eyes narrowed, determined to finally hit her opponent. She let the air leave her lungs along with the string from her fingers. Time slowed down for her, watching the arrow burst off like a dog in a race. It wobbled and then steadied as it hit the target squarely in the second ring.

She thrust her hands in the air, still holding onto the bow. "Yes!"

Her whole body surged with energy, excited to land a shot that was at least close to where she was aiming. She continued to gawk at her achievement until she felt the unmistakable feeling of Joseph's hand pinching her butt. Zendari jumped a little by surprise, but it wasn't unwanted.

"Oh, wow. What do I get if I get another one?" Zendari asked, admiring his naughty grin.

"Hit another one and find out."

His voice was airy and sent a quiver through her whole body. She went to grab another arrow when she heard the sound of snack bags falling behind her. They both turned around to find Gretchen with what was a handful of assorted chip bags at her feet. Her little jaw was agape, shocked by Joseph's actions.

"You pinched her butt!"

"She pinched me first. I was just getting her back," Joseph said in a weak attempt to fake innocence.

"Zendari would never do that."

"Don't worry, Gretchen. I'll get him back for it later," Zendari said and then saw the man rubbing his muddy face. "Sir, are you alright?"

"Where did that boot even come from?" he said, feeling the tread marks that stamped his face.

They went over to him, checking to make sure he was indeed alright. Zendari was the most concerned. The last thing she wanted was to be labeled a boy basher.

“Are you sure we can’t get you anything? Ice or—”

“No, I’m fine,” the man said, patting Joseph on the back. With a quick flick, he tucked the device he had tried to plant earlier under the back collar of Joseph’s coat. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’d been kicked in the head before. Won’t be the last if ol’bessy has anything to say about it.”

“If you say so, Tim. Say, what brought you in today?” Joseph asked.

“I was gonna get some practice in, but I just remembered my son is heading off with some friends. Cows don’t feed themselves, you know,” Tim said and moved toward the exit. “You two take care now.”

“We will.”

Tim nodded with a weak smile and walked away. He went through the doors and out to his car, where his flip phone was waiting for him on the center console. Flipping it open, he typed in a message that needed no interpretation on the other end.

My part is done. You handle the rest.

CHAPTER 6.

JOHN FELT A RUMBLE in his khakis just as he was waving goodbye to another satisfied customer. He took out his phone, wondering who would be texting him. Anyone who texted him on a regular basis was either working or too busy with their girlfriend to bother him. Swiping open the lock screen, he stared at the text.

“Who are you texting?” Sarah asked, sneaking up behind him.

John fumbled his phone in both hands and quickly shoved it back in his pocket. “Oh, it was just Joseph checking in on me.”

“Is everything alright? I was meaning to catch you earlier when you came in. I heard something went down at your place last night.”

“Yeah, it was a simple misunderstanding,” he said with a casual wave.

“Simple misunderstanding? Did Zendari have anything to do with it?” Sarah asked, getting defensive.

“No, no. Nothing like that,” John said and thought about what he should tell her. He couldn’t mention agreeing to go out on a date with a Rakiri, but he had to tell her something. The truth was an option... at least half of it. “If I tell you, you have to promise to keep it a secret. I don’t want this getting around. It’s kinda embarrassing.”

“I promise.”

“Okay, do you know Mr. Patterson?”

“Yeah, the old grouchy guy who lives by Susan and Barry.”

“Yes. Anyways, he came in yesterday to buy a trap to catch a giant lynx.”

“You didn’t sell him one, did you?”

“Of course I did. You’ve seen my balance sheet. I need all the money I can get.”

Sarah put her hands on her hip. “It isn’t that bad.”

“Do you want to hear the story or not?”

Sarah sighed, “Continue.”

“I sold him the trap and didn’t think much of it. When I brought those bows over to Susan’s, though, I saw what he was talking about.”

“You saw a lynx? Aren’t they rare?”

“That’s where this gets complicated. Naturally, I grabbed a bow and tried to shoot it. Last thing we need is one of those attacking her kids or Mr. Patterson actually attempting to set up that trap. So, I shot it through one of the snow forts in the front yard, but I found out it wasn’t a lynx.”

“What was it?”

“It was a Rakiri.”

“You shot an alien?”

“It was a big misunderstanding. She looked exactly like a giant cat from my angle. And in my defense, she never identified herself.”

Sarah lightly punched him. “That’s what she gets for snooping around unannounced.”

“I’m just glad I’m a lousy shot,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Sarah moved up closer to him and gazed into his eyes. “I’m just glad you are alright.”

John removed his hand from his back and wrapped it around her. He was enchanted by her soft smile and eyelashes that waved at him. Sarah was one of a kind and, more importantly, made his heart skip when she was near. His lips could resist her no more and went in for a kiss. Leave it to his brother to ruin it though.

The bell above the door jingled and in came Joseph, holding a bow with the string dangling to the floor. “Woah, kissing on the job? Do I need to contact HR?”

John turned his head and scowled at the intruder. It became even worse when he realized what was in his hand.

“What did you do to my bow?”

“It was all Billy’s fault,” Joseph said, coming up to the counter and placing it on the table.

John picked up the bow and inspected it. His hand followed the string up, noting where it broke. “There is no way Billy did this. What happened?”

“Damn. Thought I would give it a try,” Joseph said to Sarah before addressing his perturbed brother. “Shortly after I taught Zendari how to hit the target, she pulled it a bit too far back and snapped it.”

“A bit too far? How was she using it?”

“Don’t worry, I will pay you back.”

“How?”

“I’ll watch the shop whenever you *need*.”

John’s eyes glanced at Sarah. He knew what Joseph was implying, which made him concerned that somehow his brother’s simple inflection would reveal the deal he made yesterday. She opened her mouth and he prepared for the worst.

“Did you hear that? Sounds like someone wants us to go on a proper date for a change,” Sarah said to John.

John sighed a breath of relief. “Well, I guess I can fix this. And I’m sure Sarah would like to go out for once when there’s still light out.”

Sarah gave him a squeeze. The crisis was averted, but a new one presented itself.

“Say, we should go on a double date sometime?” Sarah offered to Joseph.

“Yeah, that would be a great idea. What day were you—”

A bell rang with fury as a middle-aged woman in Sarah’s shop pressed the bell several times. Her impatience spewed with each ring.

“Ope, I better get back. Good seeing you again, Joseph,” Sarah said, waving goodbye to them.

Joseph returned the wave and turned his attention back to his brother. “I guess the question is, which woman are you bringing?”

“Keep it down.” John hushed, but it got him thinking. “Hey, do you think Karn’a would mind going on a double date?”

“Wow, scared of her, much? She isn’t that bad.”

“She... wait... how do you know what she’s like?”

Joseph smiled. “I talked to her today. And she is excited to go out with you.”

John rolled his eyes. This was not news to him. That Rakiri had it bad for him. Most women would have been turned off by being shot with an arrow, yet a part of John felt it only made her more attracted to him. Women always seemed unpredictable to him and Karn’a was even more so. For all he knew, his first date would be his last, getting kidnapped and forced into some weird sex slave cult.

“Are you sure? She could be dangerous? Or maybe she wants to get me alone to enact her real revenge?”

Joseph laughed, “Relax. Zendari would turn her into meow meow mix if she hurt you. No, I think you two might actually hit it off.”

John took the bow off the counter and placed it on the floor, out of sight. "What makes you say that?"

"No reason." Joseph smirked and walked backwards to the entrance door. "You let me know when and I'll cover for you."

"Where are the other bows?"

"I told the kids they could hold on to them. They wanted to show off their skills when they get home." Joseph looked over his shoulder and saw the kids in the back testing the shocks in his truck.

"That sounds like a bad idea," John said.

Joseph shrugged. "Eh, it will be Susan's problem."

And with that, Joseph left his brother to tend to the shop. Zendari was waiting for him, not to mention the crazy kids in the back who might have had too much sugar. He yelled at the kids to sit down and got in the vehicle. Zendari was on her omni-pad, reading through case files. It wasn't a lot to go on, but she had a hard time focusing with all the fun going on in the bed of the truck.

"How did it go? Was he mad?" Zendari asked, squinting a little as if she was preparing to get hit.

"Don't worry about the damage. I'll have you pay me back... *in other ways.*"

A grin grew on her face. She liked the sound of that. Zendari put her omni-pad aside, giving him her full attention.

"What other ways were you thinking?"

"I think another costume is in order."

"Ugh, what is it with you Hanks and costumes?" she groaned.

"I think you will like this one." He paused and started the truck. The engine revved and vibrated the entire vehicle. "It involves an apron... and nothing else."

Zendari's mischievous smirk returned, and she slapped the center column. Four times in one day was on the table and she had a feeling she wouldn't be dressed for long.

“Let's get these kids dropped off already.”

CHAPTER 7.

JOHN LEANED AGAINST HIS truck while he scanned his surroundings. An open field, flanked on all sides by forest laid in front of his vehicle. There was nothing to see that he hadn't seen a thousand times before on this dreary day. A single worn path wormed across the field and off to the right where it certainly continued. He kicked the dirt at his feet and checked the time. Ten minutes until ten o'clock. His instructions were clear, yet he still felt nervous. He was about to check his phone again when a blacked out SUV came driving in from the old dirt road that led here. If this went sideways, the last thing he wanted was to get boxed in.

The vehicle pulled up next to his truck. John's nerves tied a knot in his chest. He patted his pants and some of the tightness went away upon feeling the knife in his pocket. John wasn't going to do anything out here without some kind of protection. He took a deep breath, taking in the crisp air. *It's go time*, he thought to himself and stepped toward the opening door.

Two dark boots hit the ground, then a paw wrapped around the side of the door. Karn'a peeked around the door with a platter of two cups of something steamy. "Hey there cutie!"

John did not expect such a peppy Rakiri to greet him, nor one so attractive. Despite having seen her basically naked, with clothes on, she seemed more appealing somehow. Sporting a white compression shirt, a black leather jacket and matching leather jeans, she reminded him of a biker chick. A biker chick with a tail and covered in fur. His body struggled with the sight, torn between aroused and concerned.

“Hi...”

She came up to him, offering a cup, “I got you a hot chocolate. Got to keep my date warm on a cold morning like this.”

“Thanks...” John said and took it. Taking a sip, it allowed him to think of what to say. After all, it wasn’t everyday he was extorted into going out with someone.

Karn’a hid her smirk behind her own cup as she took a sip. Her nose was always the most sensitive, and she was positive there was more in the air than simply appreciation for the delicious drink. It was fleeting, holding for as long as a thought, but she knew he liked what he saw. This was her opportunity and she was determined not to waste it by going for the kill too soon.

“Why did you want to meet out here?” Karn’a asked.

Because no one will see us out here. Last thing I need is for my girlfriend to think I’m cheating on her. “I heard you were big into hunting, so I thought we could go on a nature walk,” John said.

“We can’t go hunting? I was hoping I could watch how you hunt from your perspective.”

“No, hunting season is over for anything worth hunting. Also, you aren’t even dressed for it.”

“I can always take this off—” she said, about to take off her coat.

“No need.” John waved, praying she didn’t try to seduce him any more than necessary. “Better to stay warm. It’s a long path.”

Karn'a pulled her coat tight. Her tail wagged behind herself. He wanted to play it slow. *Alright John, you want me to take it real slow. I'll play your game... for now.*

"Lead the way then," she said.

They made their way down the path, side by side. She purposely brushed her tail against the back of his calf every so many steps while he told her about the area. At first, John didn't think much of it, but once they got into shorter grass, he was wondering what that was. He glanced back a few times, but Karn'a was quick enough to move her tail away in time. She could have played it off innocently enough, but she enjoyed toying with him. Eventually though, he wised up and realized that it was her doing, turning around completely.

"Is there something wrong?" Karn'a asked, mirroring him.

"Your tail. Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what?"

"You kept hitting me in the back of the leg. You don't feel it?" John asked, almost in disbelief.

She shrugged and did her best to hide another smirk. "My tail must have a mind of its own."

Her act worked, causing his voice to grow softer, "Really?"

Without warning, her tail went behind his back and pushed him into her. She caught him in her arms, making sure his face was against her chest.

"See, I can't control this darn tail of mine."

John pried his face out of her boobs, somehow able to look up at her instead of her more obvious assets. She had a devilish smile on her face.

"Real smooth, Romeo," John said sarcastically, pushing off of her.

"Oh, come on. It was playful and you know it," she said, dropping the act.

John agreed. If he had a tail, he would have totally done something like that. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction though.

"Forcing me into your boobs is hardly a turn on for men," he said and took another sip of his hot chocolate.

Karn's ears dropped ever so slightly. Her tail stunt was an attempt at making him relax, but all it did was make him more distant. She had to ease off a little.

"Sorry, I just thought you were cold."

John snorted his drink out his nose. He did not expect her to say that, nor that it would come out so apologetic. His spray of brown covered the ground and dripped from his nose, burning all the way out. He winced in pain while she laughed at his misfortune.

"Next time, I'm aiming for you," John retorted.

"Does it burn?"

"More than you realize." John snorted again and wiped his nose.

Karn's offered her sleeve, "You can wipe your nose juice on me. It was my fault after all."

John held in his laugh and wiped off his hands on his pants. *Nose juice. What?*

"Thanks, but I'm fine. Just don't make me laugh next time I'm drinking this."

"I can't promise that."

After their little fiasco, the rest of their walk showed promise. John went on about the different animals around the area and Karn's listened intently, while injecting jokes whenever she could. All the names were unfamiliar to her, but she was finally happy to put a name to the

little furry tree bandits who stole her slice of pizza one night on patrol. The farther they got in the forest, the smaller the trail got.

“I think it’s time to go off the beaten path. I’ll show you where Joseph’s stand is,” John said, veering off.

“Stand? Stand for what? You sell lemonade out here?” Karn’a said, following him.

John ducked under a low branch. “Tree stand. It’s for hunting. I’m surprised for someone so into this you have never heard of a tree stand.”

“I guess I have a lot to learn,” Karn’a said, admiring her view. Mostly of John’s butt, but the trees were nice too.

The ground crunched under their feet and the occasional branch snapped after pushing past a thick portion of trees. If they were stalking a prey, they were doing a horrible job at it. Normally, Karn’a would have been more stealthy, but her boots were not made for this hike. After much weaving between branches, they arrived at a thick tree. A stool, almost twenty feet up, had a skeletonized metal platform attached to it. A trail of steel spike steps jutted out from the bark, going up to the platform. Karn’a didn’t know what she was expecting, but it wasn’t that.

“There is Joseph’s stand. He’s bagged some of the biggest deer from this spot,” John said, pointing up at it.

“You just wait for your prey to come by?”

“Yeah. Less risk of deer seeing you and you don’t have to lug around a bow all day.”

“Sounds lazy.”

“That’s how I like it. I can drink a beer, take a nap, and if my legs get stiff, I go for a walk.”

“You can’t be serious?” Karn’a asked, confuddled by his strange hunting tactics.

John went up to the tree and started climbing to the stand. “Joseph said the same thing to me last year. How would you prefer me to hunt?”

“You could try not drinking. I’m sure the deer can smell it.”

John got up to the top of the stand and sat down on the stool. His feet tapped against the metal platform and he pretended to pull back on an imaginary bow. “Well, tell that to the buck I shot last November. He certainly liked my beer.”

Karn’a watched in awe, imagining a real bow in his hands. The wound on her shoulder throbbed, reminding her of the night he shot her. It gave her a flutter in her chest and her knees became weak. The power he exuded was breathtaking as he stared out into the forest, exerting his dominance.

“That is so hot,” Karn’a said to herself, petting her own tail.

John looked down, unable to hear what she said. “What was that?”

“I said, do you mind if I come up?”

“I don’t know if we will both fit up here.”

Karn’a didn’t wait for him to come down, protracting her claws and scaling the tree. The claws dug plenty deep into the bark, not slipping once. She got to the top in a few pounces and hung off to the side. Her tail wrapped around the stool post and she swung next to him.

“I think we can.” Karn’a lifted him up onto her lap as she sat down in his place. The stand sank a little but held strong. “We just need to get cozy.”

John froze, not realizing how swiftly the chain of events happened. He didn’t like sharing a stand that was likely over weight capacity, let alone how vulnerable he felt being with a strong Rakiri. Her arm came across his chest to keep him safe, which caused him to tense for a moment.

“Don’t worry, John. I got you,” Karn’a said, still with one hand clung to the tree.

His concern of being in a falling tree stand melted away with every passing second. He was expecting her to make another move, but that move never came. Instead, she put her head next to him, fur tickling his cheek, trying to see where he was looking.

“You’re right. It is nice up here,” Karn’a said.

John’s heartbeat eased, and he relaxed against her soft body. She wrapped him up in her black coat and settled into the seat. If John was hunting, he would’ve been asleep in a few minutes from the cozy position he was in.

“You know why I go hunting?”

“It’s clearly not to actually kill something.” Karn’a smirked and John responded with a chuckle.

“No, I come out here to get away from my problems. It’s a nice place to sit and think. To leave everything behind and enjoy being in the moment.”

“Problems? What could a sexy man like you possibly be worried about?”

“Plenty.”

“Care to talk about it?”

John let silence fill the void. Did he really want to open up to a complete stranger? He couldn’t tell her everything, but it was cheaper than getting a therapist. Maybe an alien might have a different perspective.

She didn’t push for a response, content with watching the forest with him. Karn’a thought her question was going to be left unanswered when he finally spoke.

“I have been having... problems at my shop,” John said.

“What kind of problems?”

“Money is running out and my debt is getting bigger every year. It’s so bad, even with Joseph helping for free and paying full price for stuff, it’s not enough. At this rate, I might have to sell it and work for a major outfitter or something.”

“Outfitter? What is that?”

“A store that sells hunting and fishing supplies. Clothing, traps, weapons, rods, lures, bait. You name it, we sell it. They are just so much bigger and can offer better prices than me.”

Karn’a couldn’t believe her ears. Not only did he hunt, but he worked in a place that revolved around it. It would have been great news if not for him being rather downtrodden by the whole situation. She heard the hopelessness in his voice and knew she needed to do something.

“Have you asked your girlfriend for help? Or Zendari?”

“I suspect my girlfriend has been the one putting extra money in the till. She has seen my book work and tries to assure me it isn’t that bad, but I know the truth. If I don’t have a miracle happen, this next hunting season may be my last.”

“I think you will make it, John. Who knows, it’s still early in the year. Things could look up,” Karn’a said, while secretly plotting how she could be that miracle for him. He didn’t respond right away, just staring out into the woods. It was completely still, minus the scurrying squirrel in the distance.

“I am so surprised this thing is holding us right now. It’s only rated for three hundred pounds,” John said, trying to change the subject.

Karn’a squeezed him a little tighter. “Are you trying to say I’m fat?”

“No, but I do need to take a piss. You mind letting me go?”

Just as she was about to shift on the seat, the strap around the back snapped and the stand fell. Karn’a still had her one hand in the tree, but they slid down regardless. Bark rained down on them until her

foot caught one of the steps. She gritted her teeth, feeling the sudden motion and extra weight wear on her injured shoulder. What was most important was that he was safe.

John clung to her arm, while his feet flailed in the air. He took a breath that he didn't realize he was holding and she lowered him so his feet could reach the step.

"Are you okay?" Karn'a asked, keeping a paw on him so he wouldn't fall.

"I might not need to pee now."

Karn'a felt bad for wrecking his brother's stand, but John didn't mind. It was another one he could sell to Joseph and was long overdue. He tried to reassure her it was fine, but she insisted on bringing it back with them, dragging it along like a deer carcass.

"I have to apologize and get it fixed for him," Karn'a said.

"You really don't. I could sure use the sale on a new one."

"Regardless, I need to make up for it. I don't want him thinking I am irresponsible."

"Fine, but I actually do have to still take that piss." John moved behind a closer cluster of trees. His feet crunched the sticks on the ground while he made sure he was out of sight. The mild seclusion of the trees gave him some time to reflect on how the date went.

He didn't know exactly what he was expecting, but he had to admit he was having a good time. Karn'a was playful, yet comforting when he was venting about his work. Just thinking about that made him feel guilty. It was the last thing someone would want to listen to on a first date, yet she didn't mind. She wanted to listen or at least pretended to,

for his sake. He could do better and thankfully there was still time to make up for his little pity party.

With the shake of a leg, he took aim at a fallen tree. The stream of his urine pattered against the bark followed by the sound of a creaky door underneath. John glanced around his surroundings, thinking it was a tree swaying or something, but then he heard it again. It was coming from under the log. He pondered what it could be while he tried to finish peeing. There was no rush and cutting off mid stream was not worth it.

Once he was done, he zipped up his pants and went around to the end of the log where the sound appeared to multiply. All that did was intensify John's curiosity. He crouched down and out came a baby cat, pouncing on his boot. The little one pawed at him and he shuffled back.

"Well, what are you doing all the way out here little feller?" John asked and two more came out of the log.

They joined in on the adorable onslaught and John smiled. It was strange for cats to be out this far, but then he noticed the black tufts on their ears. They weren't cats. They were lynxes.

John got up and backed away. The last thing he wanted was to get attacked by a mother protecting her young. Unfortunately, he didn't move fast enough. The growl of two larger ones came from the trees, followed by two pairs of dark eyes glaring back at him. John, in all his infinite wisdom, did the only thing that came to mind. Try to negotiate.

"Hey there mamma lynx. I didn't touch your kids." John put his hands up. "They wanted to play with me. It was an honest mistake. Will never happen again."

John backpedaled slowly, but the growls grew more intense. The little lynxes bounded over to John, unconcerned with the consequences for him.

“No, stay back little ones. You’re gonna get me in trouble,” John said, trying to back away faster. The extra pace must have triggered something in the older, furrier lynx and it pounced. “Shit!”

John turned and ran like hell through the trees. “Karn’a! Help!”

He only made it through his concealment before he felt the lynx land on his back. It was much heavier than he thought, reminding him of his uncle’s dog, Betty. Except Betty didn’t want to rip him to shreds. The lynx roared something god awful and started tearing into his jacket. Ripping fabric was loud in his ears and he knew it wasn’t long before those claws caught more than clothing. His heart pounded as he tried to crawl away, but the lynx was firmly on top of him. John tried to grab anything to hit it when a thought jumped into his head. *Is this how I die? Eaten by an overgrown cat.* His thought did not last once he saw Karn’a running toward him.

Karn’a let out a primal roar that would cause anyone to run in fear, but the lynx ignored such warning and paid for it. She dove at the lynx, leading with her injured shoulder. It wasn’t her smartest move, but it got the lynx off of him. The problem was, this lynx played dirty. It scratched at her wound, causing jolts of pain to radiate down the whole arm.

She groaned in pain, while the lynx attacked her other incoming arm. The claws cut through her jacket with some resistance and it pinned her to the ground with all its bodyweight. Karn’a’s free arm hurt too much to move and her tight pants prevented any useful movement below her waist. It was looking bad. She hissed at the lynx, but the dog-sized cat would not relent. That was until John had the final word.

Rushing in, John stabbed the lynx through the gut with his knife. Warm blood leaked out of the lynx, flowing down the handle. John didn't dwell on the successful strike, following up three more times. With each grunt, his blade slammed deeper into the lynx. Karn'a watched in awe of his feat, finding the whole thing more arousing by the second. His eyes were focused on one aim and dedicated his whole body to the task. He stopped thrusting his blade into the lynx, allowing it to retreat into the forest.

Karn'a stayed still, her eyes watching his chest rise and fall from the strenuous activity. Blood dripped from his fist, staining her shirt. She was so overwhelmed with his sensual musk; she let out a gasp of pure pleasure. *Oh, please let me be next.*

"Are you alright?" John asked.

At that moment, she felt ashamed. She was so aroused by his kill, daydreaming about what he could do to her with his smaller penetration tool, that she didn't think to actually check on him.

"I'm... more than fine. Are you okay?" Karn'a asked, using her tail to swipe his shredded jacket.

"I'm lucky I was wearing a coat... and that you were here. You saved my life."

Karn'a blushed. "And you saved mine."

John didn't know what to do next. His emotions were swirling between relief and lust. Under his knees, her wet shirt and matted fur felt like being on a pillow. For some inexplicable reason, he felt the urge to straddle her and remove her wet shirt. His brain chastised him for such a thought. *You have a girlfriend. Don't you dare,* he told himself. He shook his head and got off of her, wiping the blood on his pant leg.

"Let me help you up," John said, reaching down.

Karn'a took his hand and draped her arm over his shoulder. "I hurt my arm. Do you mind?"

"Not at all."

They both exchanged smiles and made their way back to the trail. Karn'a's injury wasn't that bad, but any excuse to hold him a little longer was worth it. She didn't know if she was going to get another date out of it, so she enjoyed it while she could. Her tail wrapped around his waist and he didn't protest. *Maybe he is into me?*

They walked the trail in silence, both splattered with blood. It was the longest she had ever gone without talking, but it felt right. They shared a moment of survival that no one could take from them. And she was sure he was processing the whole thing still.

She just wrapped her tail around me. Can I bang her now? John tried to reason with himself, but the invisible angel on his shoulder wouldn't let him succumb to his perverse thoughts. He had a loyal girlfriend waiting for him. She would not take kindly to such an act, nor would he blame her. He took a deep breath, trying to calm the stirring below his pants. *Damn that tail is so soft.*

It felt like a blink and they were already back to the open field, where their cars were still waiting for them. John thanked his lucky stars they had made it back already, because he didn't know how long he could hold off his urges around her soft fur. She let go of him once they got to her vehicle and he felt uncomfortable. He wanted her to hold him again, as if he was a child who needed comfort. His whole body shook, feeling a chill of the air breeze through his slotted coat.

"I guess this is it," Karn'a said, lingering by her vehicle door.

"I guess it is."

Karn'a nodded and gave him a weak smile. She wasn't going to push for something, even though he was the hottest man on this side of the galaxy. If the date went differently, maybe she would have, but he

had been through enough already. He didn't need another thirsty alien trying to push anything. She opened her car door.

"Karn'a?"

She turned her head to him. His voice wavered, sounding almost nervous, "Yes?"

"I had a good time today. Despite..." John said, gesturing to his bloody torso.

Karn'a laughed. "Yeah, I did too—"

"And I was hoping I could see you again. Go on a date that isn't by forced conscription."

"I would like that."

John slapped his truck. Horny John may have lost this round, but he would have a second chance. "Then it's a date. I promise next time, there won't be killer wildlife."

"You stay safe, cutie." Karn'a winked and got into her vehicle.

She drove off, watching John leaning against his truck from her rearview mirror. Her whole body shook, trying to keep her composure. Once she was far enough that she was sure he couldn't hear her, she howled with all her might.

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I can't believe it worked! I need to get shot more often."

Meanwhile, John was outside and he could have sworn he heard her howl above the engine of her vehicle. Instead of laughing, he was filled with dread. *A second date. What are you thinking?* He had no answer for himself. There was no way to justify it. Sarah was his girlfriend, yet here he was, setting up a second date in the hope he doesn't have enough strength to hold off Karn'a's advances. He was pathetic, but he didn't care. That fur was soft and she was fun. John turned his head to get a better look at his shredded coat.

“I can’t go back looking like this. I wonder if Karn’a likes her men wearing leather?”

CHAPTER 8.

JOHN WAS PRACTICALLY GLOWING as he tried on one of the many hunting jackets he had at his shop. The mirror reflected his vibrant smile and cocky posture. The jacket itself was irrelevant. He was feeling good and that was all that mattered. The only thing that could ruin his day was what walked through the door. Joseph.

“Hey, how did your date go?” Joseph asked from the other end of the store.

John whipped his head over to Sarah’s store, where he heard women discussing something about chocolate. It was a momentary relief. The rack of clothes swayed in his wake as he rushed over to Joseph and put his hand over his loud mouth. “Quiet, you. She might hear us.”

Joseph tried to speak, but all that came out was mumbling. John released his hand slowly, giving him a warning glare.

“Maybe I wouldn’t have to if you talked to me yesterday about it? Zendari and I were curious.”

Joseph had a point. Once John got home, he had avoided them like the plague. He took a shower and then snuck into his room when he heard them making out on the couch. It was not something he wanted to discuss with anyone. He was both ashamed and thrilled by how it went. How would he be able to explain that to anyone?

“It was okay.”

“Just okay? That’s all you’re going to say? She wasn’t pushy with you, was she, son?” Joseph mocked, pretending to act like their dad.

“No. She was... fine. But we did break your tree stand. Correction, she broke your tree stand. I had nothing to do with that.”

“What? What are you talking about? Now, you have to tell me what happened?”

John walked back toward the counter. “You didn’t just come here to hear how my day went yesterday, did you?”

“I came here for my wallet,” Joseph said, following him. “But what happened to my stand?”

“Those stands are not made for those alien girls. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“What’s not made for aliens?” Sarah said, joining their conversation. John almost turned white, thinking back if he said anything that gave him away.

“Zendari and Joseph tried to fit up in his tree stand. I told him three hundred pounds was the limit, not a challenge, but he didn’t listen to me.” John answered quickly with a casual shrug before Joseph could ruin him.

On the outside, John appeared to be fine, if not a little eccentric. On the inside, however, he was a sub springing leaks at the bottom of the Mariana Trench. Joseph knew what Sarah meant to him and took his fable in stride.

“Yep. My bro was right. I guess I thought I was lighter.”

“You just need to get yourself a lighter girl,” Sarah said, putting her arm around John. “I know John and I could fit. Isn’t that right?”

John was sweating something fierce, yet the room was plenty cool. It was an easy answer, but her touch reminded him of what he had done

yesterday. The thoughts he had. The plans he made. *Oh God, don't let her ask me what I did yesterday.*

"Yes... err... yes. I might need to lose a few pounds, but we definitely would fit up there."

Joseph smiled, knowing all too well that John was acting weird. Sarah would find out soon enough and he didn't want to be the reason.

"Well, John, can you grab my wallet in the back? I need it before I can head off to work."

John took that opportunity to break away from her hug of guilt and go into the back room while Sarah continued to make small talk with Joseph.

"You are working already?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, Mr. and Mrs. Kenroll want to get into wildlife photography. I'm grossly unqualified and I have a feeling they know that. They probably just want to spend time in the woods and make sure they aren't mauled by a bear or something."

"Well, that's awfully nice of you."

"No, it's nice of them. I'm getting two hundred credits per outing. They have already scheduled three." John came back and handed him his wallet. "Thanks, John. I'll see you around, Sarah."

Sarah waved goodbye and turned her attention back to her man. Her eyes were soft and loving, yet that made John's stomach grow sick. He had betrayed her and he didn't know where to go from here. Once the bell above the door rang, he had to say something to her.

"How... how has your day been?" John asked, rubbing the back of his neck.

"John, are you okay? You seem off today."

Oh no, she knows I'm being weird. Quick, do something not weird. All he could think of was distracting her mouth. He kissed her red lips,

which tasted like honey. It was not what he was expecting, but he had to do something. She tried to pull away, yet he kept his lips on hers. He needed more time to think.

Sarah kept pulling back until she outstretched her arms. “Okay, what’s wrong? You don’t ever kiss me like that.”

“Nothing is wrong. I just—”

“Does it have to do with your meeting at the bank yesterday?”

John froze. He didn’t remember lying about where he was going. Was this a trick? Did she suspect him? Or was he just that forgetful?

“The bank?”

“Yeah, you were going to ask about getting a different interest rate?”

Now that he heard it out loud, it sounded right. He did casually mention it to her. His lies were getting out of hand and there weren’t that many he had to juggle. He only had three secrets: he had a date with a Rakiri, that Rakiri broke Joseph’s stand, and he doesn’t like Sarah’s goulash. That’s it.

“Um... yeah... about that... see—”

The bell rang above the door again, and John glanced over at it. He had to do a double take, realizing it wasn’t some regular customer. It was Karn’a. The air got sucked out of his lungs, witnessing the tall, furry alien walk over to them. She dressed like a secret agent from the movies, in a slimming black long sleeve shirt and pants. His jaw dropped and turned back to his girlfriend, who interpreted shock as simply that.

Sarah waved. “Hello, I think you’re looking for my shop. It is over this way.”

Karn’a returned the wave and smelt a familiar scent. It brought her back to the night she was shot. This was the woman John had been with. She couldn’t remember if it was Sarah or Salara. Either way, she wasn’t here for her. She was here for him.

“I was actually looking for some hunting supplies. Was hoping someone could help me with what I need?” Karn’a responded.

John gulped. The closer Karn’a got, the smaller the room felt. She could ruin him in a second with one wrong word. His skin felt clammy and stuck to his shirt. There was nowhere for him to go, but thankfully, there was mercy in this world. Boxes in the other shop fell on the floor, followed by the wails of a little girl.

“Ope, I better go,” Sarah said to Karn’a and discretely squeezed John’s butt behind the table. She leaned into his ear and whispered. “We’ll continue this later over *lunch*.”

John straightened up. He knew what lunch was code for. And he enjoyed her strong, boney fingers on his ass. The problem was, he was all wound up and left alone with a hot Rakiri. If only she knew how he felt about Karn’a. It would have been the last thing she would have done. Sarah jogged back to her shop, and Karn’a put her paws on the countertop.

“I see why you like her. She’s handsy.” Karn’a winked.

“What are you doing here?” John said in a hushed tone.

“I’m here to support your business. You said you could use all the money you could get.”

John cursed himself. He didn’t realize she would actually stop by and buy from him, but he did appreciate the gesture. The problem was less about her and more about him. He actually liked Karn’a and didn’t know how much self control he had left after yesterday.

“Oh... I guess what are you looking for, then?”

“I was hoping to find a nice jacket that could go with this,” Karn’a said, outstretching her arms. “Something to help me blend in with the locals.”

John laughed. “Hate to break it to you, you aren’t going to blend in.”

“I’m sure you can find me *something*,” Karn’a said. She was not a fool to what John was hiding behind the counter. Her senses were keen and he was aroused. Whether it was from her beautiful figure or Sarah’s inappropriate touching, it didn’t matter to Karn’a. She enjoyed the intoxicating scent. *I can’t wait for our next date.*

John pretended to search under his counter for something, drawing thoughts of monster trucks and clowns to his mind. He wasn’t going to walk around the counter until the serpent was calm. Clowns never failed to deflate him and it worked once again in seconds. He sprung back up and walked over to the row of coats he was looking at earlier. “Right this way.”

The coat rack was filled with different types of camo jackets. Most of it was different shades of greens and browns, with a few snow camo options. There was one pink camo jacket, but it was going to be much too small for her. He took the biggest one he found, mostly brown with a few splashes of green mixed in. The outside felt like a low grit sandpaper, but the inside was smooth like fine linen. He handed it to her, and she donned it immediately.

Her body warmed up after only wearing it for a few seconds, which brought a smile to her face. It was much warmer than the flimsy black leather jacket that she converted into a sleeveless vest last night. This was exactly what she needed.

“How do I look?” Karn’a asked, zipping it up.

John felt a relief that he could finally look at her without conjuring some perverted image in his head. She was a knockout either way and the puffy coat didn’t hide that fact. Her voice had returned to a less teasing form, but it somehow made her even hotter to him.

“You look great.”

“Good. I was hoping to impress this guy I know on our next date.”

“*Really?* Who is this fellow? Do I know him?”

Her eyes locked onto his, and she gave him a sly grin. “He is a shorter guy who is really into hunting. Owns his own shop, is funny, and easy on the eyes.”

“Hmmm. Sounds too good to be true.”

“Well, I’m talking to him right now. He said he would love to join me on the dance floor tonight at Paretta’s Bar.”

“What time?”

“Eight o’clock. He wants to keep it on the down low though,” Karn’a said, playing it cool until the end. “Right? That’s the right term for it?”

John chuckled. She had the perfect combination of sexy confidence and adorable awareness. “Yes, it is. And it sounds like a fun time. I’ll be there.”

The birds happily chirped at Joseph as he closed the door of his truck and slung a backpack over his shoulder. The sun was not shining, hiding again in the gray clouds, but there was no reason to be glum. There was money to be made and the spring air was refreshing. Parked next to him at the edge of the tree line was a seafoam green van, where his clients were getting their own gear in order.

“Arnold, did you pack my bear spray?” Mrs. Kenroll asked. Her white sweater with a pine tree in the middle was a far cry from camo, but it was the most green or brown clothes she had.

“We have bear spray? Since when?” Mr. Kenroll asked, adjusting his glasses. He went the other direction with his attire, opting for the soldier look. His Vietnam era military surplus gear may have matched the environment, but the face paint was excessive.

Mrs. Kenroll pushed something puffy down in her bag and zipped it up. "Since I heard grizzly bears are nature's most deadly killers."

"You don't have to worry about bears. I'll protect us." Mr. Kenroll whipped out a .44 Magnum that was huge in his dainty hand. Instead of its beautiful silver steel shine, it was coated in the same ugly camo pattern he was wearing.

"You won't need any of those," Joseph said, approaching them. "There are just black bears out here and they are more scared of us."

Mrs. Kenroll shouldered her bag and grabbed a pair of binoculars that was laying next to Mr. Kenroll's bag. "I'm glad. Last thing I want is to get eaten before I have grandkids."

"If you're worried about that, you shouldn't have married Rambo over there."

Mrs. Kenroll backhanded him in the gut and smirked. Joseph was right about Mr. Kenroll. The man was a little careless, placing the revolver on top of his pack, pointing near them. It made Joseph uneasy and it only got worse when Mr. Kenroll lifted the pack up, somehow forgetting he just placed the gun on it. It thunked against the van floor, getting Mr. Kenroll's attention.

"Oops. Clumsy me." Mr. Kenroll shrugged and picked up the man destroyer.

Joseph shook his head. "Who gave you permission to have a gun?"

"Does the mountain lion ask for permission to have claws? I think not!"

"You better be careful, Arnold. I hear Joseph is dating a cop," Mrs. Kenroll said.

"A lady of the law? Is she easy on the eyes or has the donuts got to her?" Mr. Kenroll asked, holstering his weapon.

"This trip isn't about me, it's about getting you two some good pictures. And we're burning daylight."

Mr. and Mrs. Kenroll looked at each other as if the other had packed the only thing they actually needed. In sync, they both shook their heads. They felt silly, so focused on everything else they would need that cameras somehow didn't make the checklist.

"Um... I guess we are gonna have to take pictures with our eyes," Mr. Kenroll said, trying to laugh it off.

"You can still show us around? Can't you?" Mrs. Kenroll asked.

It didn't matter to Joseph. If anything, it gave him more time to actually learn how to use one of their fancy cameras anyways. If they were this forgetful, he didn't expect them to be competent with the camera either. Also making a couple hundred credits for a glorified nature walk wasn't a bad gig.

"Of course. And we can practice composition with your binoculars. It's the same concept, except with less zoom." Joseph reassured them, yet he had no idea if that was true. All that mattered was they got a move on. Zendari wanted to take him out somewhere special tonight, so they couldn't be out too late.

With that, they all embarked into the woods and began their hike. Fallen branches and pine needles crunched under their boots while Joseph explained where different kinds of animals liked to be. He pointed out different paths and any tracks they came across. Joseph was a treasure trove of information, and Mrs. Kenroll furiously wrote it all down in her small notepad. Mr. Kenroll nodded along, constantly looking back like there was someone following them. This went on for an hour until they got to a large boulder that overlooked a little pond.

Joseph was the first to go up it, granting him a great vantage point. The water was placid while a deer stood still, merely a few feet away from the pond on the other side. It spotted him, but made no sudden movement until the other two made it up on the rock with him.

"Awe, isn't that deer pretty?" Mrs. Kenroll swooned.

That was all it took to spook the deer and it ran off, deeper into the woods. Mr. Kenroll used his binoculars to track it until the brush became too thick. “That was fascinating. Did you see how close we were?”

You would have been closer if you stayed quiet, Joseph thought to himself. He wanted to watch the deer for longer, but he forgot that he brought along two of the most ineffective stalkers in the world. It was part of his job though. To make them better. He took a deep breath of the crisp pine air.

“Next time we see a deer, you may not want to talk. They are easily spooked.”

“But it was so cute. How can I not say something?” Mrs. Kenroll said.

Joseph thought of someone who wouldn’t have. Well, maybe she would have muttered some swears before she reached for anything to slaughter it with. His mind went back to Zendari and how flustered she got around that deer. It was going to be fun hunting with her in the fall. A little smile sneaked on his face, catching Mrs. Kenroll’s attention.

“I know that look. Were you thinking about your little girlfriend, excuse me, *tall* girlfriend?” Mrs. Kenroll asked, nudging Joseph’s shoulder.

“Tall girlfriend? You found a Scandinavian chick? I thought you said she was fat?” Mr. Kenroll asked, taking his eyes off the binoculars for a second.

“No, he’s dating one of those purps.”

“What’s her name? I bet it is something exotic, like Tatiana or Bailey.”

Joseph quirked an eyebrow. “Since when was Bailey an exotic name?”

“That’s our dog’s name, but she is a shitzu, so that is kind of exotic,” Mrs. Kenroll added.

Joseph laughed. He was positive they were screwing with him at this point. Or they were some of the most dense people he had ever met. Either way, she wasn’t wrong. He was thinking about her and she was about as exotic as it gets. “Her name is Zendari, and she is actually short for a Shil’vati, which is more than fine with me.”

“What a wonderful name! How long have you been dating?” Mrs. Kenroll asked.

“A few months now and I have a date with her tonight, so we are only going to stay up here a little longer before we move on. You should really practice looking through your binoculars.”

Mrs. Kenroll put them up to her eyes and pointed back from where they came, but was not ready to drop their conversation. “Where is she taking you tonight?”

“Not sure. She said it was going to be fancy, so I have to dress up.”

“Careful bud, next thing you know she is going to be moving in with you,” Mr. Kenroll chimed in.

Joseph didn’t see the problem with that. It was much more convenient, and he had someone who could pay rent. It was a little fast in some ways, but he was positive about it.

“Oh, I think I spotted your girl. She’s a cutie,” Mrs. Kenroll said.

“For some reason, I doubt you found a purple alien this far out in the woods,” Joseph said, not bothering to entertain her delusion. Zendari was out investigating a lead. She didn’t have time to be following their motley crew around the forest.

“Well, they are purple, right?”

Joseph noticed the change in her tone. It wasn’t teasing. She was serious.

Mr. Kenroll went over and aimed his binoculars where she was looking. "I don't see any... oh yeah, there is one."

"Hey, there! Hello!" Mrs. Kenroll said, waving at whoever was there.

Joseph turned to see for himself, and sure enough, there was a Shil'vati in a black hoodie and jeans. He didn't get to see who it was as she turned and ran for it. It enraged him, knowing that the Imperium was still spying on him. He wasn't going to let this one go without getting a good look at his stalker. Zendari would want to know who has been snooping on him.

He jumped off the boulder and ran after her. Their footsteps and heavy breathing was all that lingered in the air, both running as fast as they could over the uneven terrain. The Shil'vati had a huge head start, but Joseph was determined to close the significant gap. Branches slapped them as they sped past the trees, unyielding in their strides. The Shil'vati eventually held her rib cage, no doubt from the exertion that was taxing on her. Shil'vati have never been known for their endurance, but she was giving it her all. Lucky for her, Joseph had not run in years, making his pursuit less than a guarantee.

The Shil'vati was the first to break through the tree line and across a small field where a rusty white van was parked. She got in and started up the vehicle by the time Joseph reached the field. He continued to pursue, his lungs burning with every forced step. This would work out better than expected. All he needed was a plate number and Zendari could look it up. The problem was the van turned broadside to him and did its best to go over the bumpy field. It also didn't help when gunshots went off.

"Suck on this!" Mr. Kenroll said, blasting away at the van. How he caught up to Joseph so fast was anyone's guess, but he was a terrible

shot. Two of the shots hit the dirt, three missed completely, and his last shot punched a hole in the side near the tail light.

“What are you doing?” Joseph yelled, covering his ears.

“She was bad, right?” Mr. Kenroll asked, lowering his smoking revolver.

“Bad? I didn’t even know who she was!”

“Then why did you chase her?”

Joseph didn’t have a good answer. It was more out of frustration than anything. He felt rather stupid and asked himself the question he should have before chasing her. *What if I did catch her?*

“Why did you shoot at her?” Joseph asked, unwilling to answer his question.

“I figured that was the thing you do. Give a little warning that we aren’t to be messed with.”

Joseph snatched the revolver from his hand. “You’re gonna get in trouble with this. I better hold on to it.”

The revolver was still hot in his hand, but his frustration made the pain nonexistent. Not only did a spy get away, but Mr. Kenroll might have caused even more problems. The last thing he wanted was to be accused of being part of the rebellion. Zendari’s boss had probably suspected them after John’s stunt with the bow, and now with Rambo here, it wasn’t looking up. Mrs. Kenroll came running up to them, completely out of breath.

“I... heard... gunshots... is... everyone... okay?” She asked between labored breaths.

Joseph held up the gun. “Yeah. Your boneheaded husband thought it was a good idea to shoot at her.”

“Arnold!”

“It was just warning shots,” Mr. Kenroll said, although it may have been to assuage his own ego for missing wildly.

“I better call Zendari. She will know what to do.”

Joseph took out his phone and dialed her number. The dial tone rang, berating him with every pulse. This shouldn't have been the call he was making. It should have been a fun one, trying to coax out more information on their date tonight, not how to get out of trouble after firing upon a Shil. At the end of the third ring, she answered.

“Joseph?” Zendari asked.

“Hey, Zendari. Sorry to call you like this, but I have a bit of a situation here.”

“Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, it's nothing like that. I just need your advice on something,” Joseph said, pacing around.

Zendari let out a sigh of relief. “What's going on?”

“Someone was following us out here. A Shil'vati. When I went to confront her, she ran off. I was frustrated and, for some reason, I decided to chase after her.”

“Did you get a good look at her?”

“No, she was too far away. I did follow her to her van and that is where the problem is...” Joseph lifted the phone from his ear and shook his head at Mr. Kenroll. She was going to think everyone he knew was a rebel for sure.

“Go on.”

“My client here decided he needed to shoot at the escaping van—”

“Those were warning shots,” Mr. Kenroll interjected.

“I don't know if he hit her, but I have a feeling firing upon service women is a crime, even if they are spying on us.”

Zendari didn't say anything. All Joseph could make out on the other side was a faint sound of a siren.

“Don't worry, I'll handle it,” Zendari said after a few seconds of silence. “We can talk about this later. I'm getting pulled over.”

“You’re getting pulled over? What happened?”

“I gotta go. See you tonight. Love you.”

The line went dead. Joseph stared off into the distance, playing back the last two words she said. *She loves me.* Now that he thought about it, they had never actually said they love each other before. It wouldn’t be inaccurate, given he couldn’t get enough of her, but for her to say it first made him feel special. And a little self-conscious. *Am I supposed to say it back to her? If I don’t say it right away, will she be mad?* His questions kept multiplying in his head until he had to return to reality. Their relationship was moving fast, yet he couldn’t deny his feelings. Joseph was falling for her, too. He blocked it all out and decided that tonight they would talk about it. And why she was getting pulled over.

Zendari was sitting in a saggy car seat that smelt of moldy soup. Stains patched her seat and the one next to her, while warm dust mostly blew out of the vents. When she asked to borrow Barry’s van, she didn’t realize they had two. Obviously, the kids all wanted to go with her on her surveillance mission, but Susan had to go shopping. That meant loading them all in the good van, leaving Zendari with a rusty bucket that made a squeaky sound when she turned. There was a moment where she thought about calling the rental company, but Commander Tojen would have likely come down in person to kick her ass.

She had to deal with what she got, which included her mission. Spying on her boyfriend. Commander Tojen made it clear everyone was a suspect until proven otherwise. The two people with Joseph were not excluded. She didn’t know much about the Kenrolls, except what she could find on the data-net. It was mostly just pictures of their

dog, Bailey or their children, who were about Joseph's age. Nothing screamed rebellious to her, but if she didn't do it, someone else would. It made her feel better that she was going to handle it instead of some other thirsty bitch.

The vehicle lurched as it transitioned from the smooth asphalt to the bumpy field. Her head bobbed around and her omni-pad banged against the passenger door. The squeaking was gone, yet part of her felt the rest of the van was just louder. Once she got up to the tree line, she threw it into park and grabbed her omni-pad. It rumbled and said 'Drone Safe to Deploy' on the screen. She tapped the screen, and a video feed from Joseph's truck tailgate appeared, along with audio.

"Lady of the law? Is she easy—" the audio scratched before returning, "or has the donuts got to her?"

"I only had one doughnut! Joseph, you better tell him I'm not fat." Zendari said, while trying to manipulate the controls on the drone. He avoided the subject, which made her wonder if he did think she was fat. She pinched her stomach and there wasn't much to grab. "Yeah, I could totally afford to have at least three more doughnuts."

Soon, the drone started to listen to her commands. It hovered a few inches off the truck bed and was basically a transparent oval the size of a baseball with a camera on the front. She planted it in his truck last night while he was sleeping. That normally small act gave her a tight feeling in her chest. All the sneaking around and not being entirely honest with him made her nervous. She knew he would be upset if he found out, so she had to be extra careful.

The audio feed got weaker as Joseph and the Kenrolls made their way into the forest. It was time to see what the little drone could do. She tapped away at the screen and the drone hovered silently above the truck. Being careful to keep her distance, she followed the group. It coasted over the vegetation below, only disturbing the lightest sticks

directly below it. The transparent nature made it easily blend in with the rest of the forest. That came in handy when Mr. Kenroll turned around every so often. She didn't know if he could hear it, but he never mentioned it to Joseph or Mrs. Kenroll.

They had traveled for a few minutes before the drone started flashing warnings on her screen. The video feed cut in and out, followed by dips in elevation.

"Come on you stupid thing, work," Zendari said, slapping her omni-pad. Almost out of protest after her third wack, the feed cut off completely. "No, no, no. Wake up! I'm sorry I hit you. Come back!"

Her words were no use. The drone was gone. The screen flashed red letters on the screen with a button that said 'Retrieval'. She tapped on it, clinging to the last bit of hope she didn't just destroy an expensive prototype. The screen showed an orbital surveillance feed of the entire forest. In the top right, it said 'Compiling Imaging and Tracking data'. Zendari had no idea what that all meant until it revealed itself. Zooming into the forest, it displayed a 3D render where it was last seen which put Google Street View to shame.

The drab forest was on full display, showcasing the rugged beauty. Bold red dashes plotted a trail in two directions. One charted a path that predicted where Joseph and company were going. The other plotted from the drone to her current position. It was quite the technological marvel, but it was all lost on Zendari. She just wanted to retrieve the drone and get enough recorded audio to prove they weren't rebels.

She clambered out of the vehicle and started into the woods. Following the augmented reality on her omni-pad, she followed the trail to the drone. Sticks snapped at her feet and branches tried to pull at her hoodie. It took longer than she thought it would, but she had to stop often to pry spiky branches off her clothes.

When she got to the location, her omni-pad beeped once at her. The stealth tech was so advanced, she had difficulty seeing it without pointing her omni-pad at it. It was hot to the touch, but that didn't bother her, opting to use it as a hand warmer. She stowed it in her hoodie pocket and followed the next path.

The path led her in the right direction, where she made out the three going up to a boulder. This was the perfect time to get a good vantage point. She moved off to the side where the recommended trail was and pulled out a black monocular. With no standard glass to speak of, the image on the tiny screen flashed between two different variations of thermal before adjusting to a standard color one. She watched the three on the rock while the audio started to playback.

"I thought you said she was fat?"

"Damn you doughnuts," Zendari said under her breath. The more she listened though, she heard the adoration in Joseph's voice. He was smitten with her. Her mild frustration had turned to happiness, realizing Joseph was excited for their date tonight, as well as Mrs. Kenroll's interest in them. It was comforting that the Kenrolls didn't feel the urge to make some negative comment and appeared genuinely interested in their relationship. She was ready to mark them off her list when Mrs. Kenroll looked right at her. *Maybe she doesn't see me?*

"Oh, I think I spotted your girl. She's a cutie," Mrs. Kenroll said.

"I am pretty good looking... wait," Zendari said, and then the realization hit her. She was spotted. "Shit."

Her heartbeat quickened as she stowed her monocular in her pocket with the drone. The men were staring at her, but it was hard to make out their reactions to her presence. She couldn't afford to get found out by Joseph, so she did the only thing she could think of. Run.

Zendari tore off, smashing through tree limbs that got in her way. She could hear him pursuing in the distance, making faster strides than

her. The distance he had to cover to reach her was considerable, but she was not going to underestimate his stamina. Her feet pounded the ground, trying to get all the power she could to propel herself faster. It didn't take long before her lungs felt like they were on fire. Her calves tightened, making her think there were rocks inside her body. Zendari's body was pleading for her to stop, but she declined. The van was in sight, and she was not going to give up.

She dug deep to get to the van, knowing Joseph was not far behind. Zendari whipped open the van door, started it up, and peeled out of there. The vehicle jostled over the bumpy terrain, but it didn't matter to Zendari. All that mattered was she got away without him knowing it was her. Joseph was still coming, no doubt to catch the license plate. She turned and drove in such a way that he could not read them.

Her breath was ragged, but a smile came over her face. She was fairly confident Joseph didn't recognize her, which meant another crisis was averted, until gunshots started popping off. Out of reflex, she ducked and hit the pedal to the floor.

"Shit shit shit!" She said as one of the bullets dinged the van. The van bounced in the air a few times, groaning from the rough ride. *Goddess, don't let me die like this! I promise never to spy on my boyfriend again!* Her prayers were answered as the shots ceased and she was able to get onto the highway road. Not taking any chances, she drove as fast as she could. The van engine whined in protest, but it still obeyed.

She took a few quick breaths, trying to calm down. "Okay Zendari, you're alright. You made it. Smooth sailing from here."

As if on cue, her omni-pad rang. Zendari's eyes went over to the screen and dread took hold in her mind. It was Joseph. Why would he be calling her? Did he know it was her? Or worse, was he injured from whoever was shooting? It rang again and her hand hovered over it. She took a calming last breath. *Play it cool. You don't know what he wants.*

Zendari tapped the screen. “Joseph?”

“Hey, Zendari. Sorry to call you like this, but I have a bit of a situation here,” Joseph said.

Oh Goddess, someone is hurt, she thought to herself. “Is everyone okay?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing like that. I just need your advice on something.”

A rush of relief flowed over her. No one was hurt. “What’s going on?”

Joseph explained the situation and Zendari felt better by the second. She wasn’t spotted... well, at least by them. Behind her, a siren kicked on, accompanied by red and blue lights. She checked her speedometer and it was clear why a cop was ready to pull her over. Her concentration had been broken from the conversation, but to her, the new problem was talking her way out of another mark on her driving record.

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it. We can talk about this later. I’m getting pulled over,” she said, pulling the van to the side of the road.

He asked her a question, but she wasn’t listening, too focused on finding her ID.

“I gotta go. See you tonight. Love you.” She ended the call and tossed the contents of her hoodie pocket into the center column. The drone rolled off onto the seat along with her monocular. All that remained were a few pieces of old human paper currency and a canister of cinnamon breath fresheners. What was missing was her ID.

The doors outside closed and two figures walked toward her vehicle, one on each side. Coming up along the passenger side was a human man dressed in a tan state patrol uniform. His pants matched his groomed mustache in color. It was an odd sight to see, given that Imperium Marines had covered most law enforcement duties in the area. On the other side was a Shil’vati that looked strange wearing the

same uniform and sunglasses. It gave her pause long enough for the towering officer to get up to the door and rap on the window.

Zendari rolled down the window and was greeted by another familiar face. "Larlin?"

"That's Officer Larlin to you, missy," Officer Larlin said, taking off her shades. She wore a big smile on her face and stuck her head in the window. "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"Why are you wearing that?"

"It's pretty great, right?" Officer Larlin said, playing with her shiny badge. "The local governess started a new program for Marines to learn how to police humans the way they were used to before the occupation. They gave us uniforms, all these neat gadgets, and not to mention a hot partner."

Officer Larlin flashed her partner a saucy wink while she hiked up her belt. The other officer's face was stone cold and glared at her.

"Officer Larlin," the male officer's voice was stern and carried with it the ire of an angry drill sergeant. No need to remind her of being professional when those two simple words would do.

"Oh, yeah..." Officer Larlin cleared her throat, switching to her more professional voice. "License and registration, please."

"I don't have any on me."

"Alright ma'am, what is your name?" She asked, pulling out a pad of notebook paper and clicking her pen.

Zendari frowned. "You know my name."

"Ma'am, don't get testy with me."

"Come on, Larlin. Stop screwing around."

"Ugh, you're no fun," she said, dropping the act. "Really, though, why don't you have your ID?"

Zendari thought she had it. She never left anywhere without it. Then all at once, the image of where it was came to her mind. It

was still perched on Joseph's dresser, along with her gun. Neither was going to help her over there, so she had to improvise.

"I was on a surveillance mission," Zendari said, noticing the other officer was eyeing her devices. "Couldn't afford to have it on me if I got caught."

Officer Larlin's mouth dropped. "Woah, that is so cool. Does that have anything to do with the bullet hole in the side of your van?"

"Yes, things didn't go quite as expected."

"Where did you come from? We can circle back and get them for you," she offered, excited to get some action.

"No, I have them right where I want them. I don't want to ruin my investigation."

Officer Larlin smiled. "You know Zendari, despite what everyone says about you, you are pretty cool."

"Cool enough for you to let me go?" *Wait, what do they say about me?*

"I'll have to talk to my hot boss." Officer Larlin looked at her partner. "Can we let her go? She's an Interior Agent."

"Everyone is equal in the eyes of the law, Officer Larlin," the other officer said.

Officer Larlin turned back to Zendari with a heavy heart. "I'm sorry, Zendari. I'm going to have to cite you before we let you go. Protocol and all that."

"For what?"

"Speeding. You were going almost a hundred in a sixty." Officer Larlin said and then addressed her partner. "Can you grab my omni-pad in the squad?"

Her partner shook his head and walked back to the squad car. He grumbled to himself, at least thankful he got a short break away from

his partner. Officer Larlin waited for him to get out of earshot before whispering to Zendari.

“I’ll give you a warning if you give me some tips on how to seduce him.”

“Seduce who?” Zendari asked, confused by the sudden one eighty.

“Mr. Hot Stuff over there. My partner. He’s been riding me all day with this policing stuff, but all I want to do is ride him. If you get what I mean.”

That made more sense. She was thinking with her clam before her brain. Zendari didn’t want another bill to pay and this seemed like the least amount of resistance for her.

“He looks like someone you need to impress. I bet he will be more receptive to you if you take it more seriously,” Zendari said.

“I am taking it seriously,” she said, putting her hands on her belt.

“Calling him a hot boss doesn’t sound professional.”

Officer Larlin thought about it. She had been a little too cavalier about the whole situation. To him, it was a serious job, and she had been treating it like a cake assignment. She would feel upset if he acted the same way, if he was like that in the Marines.

“Fine, I’ll be a professional outside of the squad. Inside though, I’m flirting my little heart out. He is only training me for a few more weeks and I’m not missing my shot.”

The officer came back with the omni-pad in hand. Officer Larlin took it and walked toward the back of the van to take a picture of the bullet hole and fill out the relevant forms. The other officer stayed by Zendari, watching her carefully. His stone cold expression softened to one of pure observation, giving Zendari an idea.

“You should give her some slack. She is just acting like that because she likes you,” Zendari said to him.

“Trust me, I caught onto that,” he said, glancing back at her.

“You’re telling me nothing about her gets you going?”

The officer didn’t answer the question, opting to help his partner with the paperwork. If he wasn’t so hard to read, she could have sworn he had the faintest smile on his face. Maybe she was delusional, or maybe Officer Larlin was more charming than she realized. Officer Larlin’s partner tapped the screen a few times and said something to her before she returned to Zendari with the good news.

“I submitted your ticket to Commander Tojen. Don’t worry, it was just a warning. Also, what did you say to him?”

Zendari cringed. She didn’t want Commander Tojen to know. It was just going to be another hard explanation as to why someone who wasn’t a rebel was firing at her. “Just to cut you some slack, why?”

“He was nice... well, nicer. Not the grumpy cat I had earlier. More like a mildly annoyed gerbil.”

“Well, I wish you luck with your gerbil,” Zendari said, putting the vehicle into drive.

“Thanks, Zendari. Drive slower now or I’ll have to pull you over again.”

Zendari waved goodbye and drove off, watching the two talk in front of the squad. He wasn’t berating her, so maybe there was hope for such an unlikely couple. Zendari didn’t care too much though, she had her own problems. Mainly, how was she going to navigate her date tonight?

CHAPTER 9.

ITALIAN MUSIC SAILED GENTLY over the large restaurant, which was mostly drowned out by the conversations at the other tables. The ting of metal echoed next to Zendari as the table over dug into their delicious soups filled with chicken and dumplings. Zendari wore a slimming purple evening gown normally destined for a gala. It was initially to showcase her toned legs, but now it was to keep her cool. Not from the heat, which she could use a few more degrees hotter, but from their impending conversation. He was dressed up in a black suit with a thin blue tie and sat stiff in his chair.

“When you said we were going out somewhere fancy, I didn’t realize you meant Olive Garden,” Joseph said.

“Is this not fancy?”

“It’s a nice place, but I think we are a bit overdressed.”

Zendari glanced around the room, taking note that the attire was more inline when attending a high end golf course. They were the only ones dressed so well, making her sweat more.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve known when they said they didn’t take reservations.”

“Don’t be. Not everyday I get to see you in a dress that showcases your natural beauty so well.”

Zendari's face flushed blue. "So, I'm not fat?"

"Of course not. Where would you get that idea?"

"Nowhere." Zendari smiled at her menu, glad she misheard the afternoon conversation. "What is good here?"

"I would personally recommend the Eggplant Parmigiana," the waiter said, walking up behind her.

Zendari almost jumped out of her seat from the sudden elegant voice that spoke to her seemingly out of nowhere. "Holy shi—"

"My apologies, ma'dam. I am so sorry to have frightened you."

Joseph laughed and slapped the table, pleased with her sudden childlike outburst. "No need, that was great!"

"It's okay. I didn't see you there," Zendari said, calming herself. The waiter stood at the side, holding a notepad and a napkin draped over his arm.

"Welcome to Olive Garden. My name is Xavier and I will be your server this evening. Can I start either of you off with something to drink?"

"Just water, please," Joseph said.

The waiter nodded and left them alone once again. Joseph was grinning ear to ear, while Zendari's heart was still thumping in her chest. Xavier came out of nowhere, yet her reaction was a cumulation of stress and lies she held in.

"Did you see him?" Zendari asked, pointing behind herself.

"Yeah, but your reaction was priceless." Joseph tried to imitate her shocked facial expression. "You seem tense. What's up?"

I almost got shot by your gun-wielding friend and I am lying to you every second I sit here pretending like I wasn't spying on you this afternoon. "Nothing. Just still winding down from my investigation."

"Yeah, how did that go? Also, why did you get pulled over?"

“I was speeding. Silly me. The person who I was investigating spotted me, so I had to get out of there quick.”

“Do you think they know who you are? Are they dangerous?”

Zendari kept sweating. Was he playing with her, waiting for a confession, or was he simply concerned? Her tongue ran along her inner cheeks, trying to get more moisture in her suddenly dry mouth.

“No. They weren’t dangerous to my understanding, but better they don’t know who I was. Speaking of surveillance, you said someone was spying on you?”

“Another Shil’vati. I didn’t get a good look at her, but she was following us. I thought the Interior was done spying on me?” She saw the anger boiling under his skin. His fist balled up around the spoon in his hand and his face was contorted. It lasted a split second before he relaxed his muscles. “Sorry, I’m getting all flustered. It just bothers me that I don’t have any privacy. I’m so glad I have a woman like you, though. I know you wouldn’t go around spying on me.”

The waiter came by with the drinks just in time, placing them down. Zendari was the first to snatch her drink from the table and took a swig. Her throat bulged, gulping down the water, begging for an answer to navigate this date at the bottom. He thought so highly of her, yet she was guilty of the very thing he despised. It killed her even more to not say something, yet if she did, the date would be ruined. How was she going to recover from this?

“Did you two have time to look at the menu?”

“Yes, I’ll have the Tour of Italy,” Joseph said.

Xavier scribbled it down and turned to Zendari, who was still gulping down water. “And for you?”

She put the near empty glass down and gasped. “I’ll take the Eggplant thing. It sounds good. Do you have anything stronger?” She picked up her glass and rattled the ice inside it.

The waiter hid his concern behind a fake smile, worried if she was going to be the first drunk of the evening based on how quickly she downed her tall glass of water. “Yes, our drink options are on the back—”

“Just surprise me.” Zendari handed him the menu.

The waiter took their menus and was off to fill the order. Joseph gave her a concerned smile.

“Are you sure you are okay? You are acting strange.”

“What? Me? Strange? Why would you say that?”

“You always get the Red Grain. I think I know my woman better than that.”

Oh Goddess, my act is falling apart. How do you recover from this? Flash him? No, too many people around. Spill water on his suit? No, he looks too cute in it... although it would give me an excuse to get him out of it. No. Come on, Zendari, think with your head! There is a solution here you aren't seeing.

“Excuse me, ma’dam,” Xavier said, tapping her on the shoulder before speaking. Once again, Zendari jumped in her seat, this time from a crack heard under the chair.

“Goddess Xavier, you gotta stop sneaking up on me.”

“My apologies. I just remembered I forgot to ask if you wanted soup or salad?”

“We’ll take two Chicken Gnocchi soups,” Joseph answered.

“Once again, ma’dam, I am terribly sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Zendari said, wondering for a split second if Xavier simply floated around like a ghost. His stealth was uncanny.

The waiter left them once again, making Joseph more concerned than amused.

“Zendari, you’re really jumpy. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just... need to use the restroom.”

Zendari got up and made a beeline for the women's room, passing the succulent smell of hot marinara sauce in the kitchen. She went inside and checked every stall, ensuring she was all alone before going up to the mirror. Her dress sparkled in the dimly lit bathroom, hiding any imperfections she had. Her golden irises stared back at her, begging to set her straight.

“Okay, Zendari, you need to get your act together. Joseph knows something is up and lying is going to be an uphill battle. But you can't tell him you were spying on him. He's going to think you don't respect or trust him. If he finds out, though, it will be worse.”

She placed her hands on the sink and turned on the water, letting the sound hide her echoing voice. Last thing she wanted was someone to listen in. They would think she was crazy talking to herself in front of a mirror. Her frustration eased as she took some more breaths through her mouth. Someone left a massive dump in one of the toilets, leaving the room smelling like a sewer. There was a hint of perfume in the air, but it wasn't enough to mask the awful stench. The bathroom was becoming less welcoming by the second, but it helped hurry her decision about what she was going to do.

“I better tell him.”

The door swung open and a woman wearing a purple coat and pearls around her neck came inside. Her dress was far more elegant than the other women and almost screamed pompous given the establishment. She had her hair done up in a bun and quirked her face upon taking her first breath.

“What is that ghastly smell?”

“That ain't no gas. Someone dropped a hefty one in the middle stall,” Zendari said and went up to the door. “Might want to breathe out of your mouth.”

The woman gagged, but Zendari had no time to help the woman. Her tone reminded Zendari of the nobles she was desperately trying to avoid. It didn't do her any favors at work, but it beat having to listen to pretentiousness. Making her way back to the table, the soup had already arrived and Joseph was munching on their infamous breadsticks which were sure to fill anyone up.

"Did you start without me?" Zendari asked, sitting down.

"You have to try the breadsticks. They are the best thing here."

Zendari plucked one from the basket and took a bite. The combination of hot, mushy bread covered in a salty glaze made her moan in ecstasy.

"This is so good! Too bad they only give us a few," she said, checking how many were left in the basket.

"It's unlimited. They will keep bringing them out if we keep eating them. Same with the soup."

She had almost forgotten about the soup right in front of her. Zendari took a sip and she let out the same little moan. It was more creamy and not salty, but still pleasing to her taste buds.

"How is everything so good?"

"You like it more than my macaroni?"

"Joseph. I would never say that. And you need to give yourself some more credit. Your penis isn't that small," she said in a fake serious tone.

Joseph's eyes watered from holding in the soup. He paused for a moment and focused before swallowing it. "You almost killed me with that one."

You better hold on then. Cause this one is going to hurt. Zendari sighed and put her spoon down. "Joseph, I need to tell you something."

"Is this about dropping the L word on me?"

"What? L word?" Zendari asked, thrown off completely by his question.

“That’s why you have been acting so weird earlier, isn’t it? Because you said you *loved* me.”

Zendari’s eyes flickered ever so slightly back and forth. She didn’t remember saying that, but it wasn’t untrue. Her heart beat faster, torn between what she was going to say next. The room got quieter, almost as if people were waiting to hear her answer. Zendari took a quick sip of soup and cleared her throat.

“It’s more than that... I-I-”

“How is everything so far?” Xavier asked, holding a plate of spaghetti.

Zendari’s arms went up and knocked the plate out of his hand. He tried to catch it, but it was too late. His clothes resembled that of a slaughterhouse employee after a long shift. The only difference being his stains smelt and tasted good. Some noodles clung to the sauce on his shirt, while the rest rested on the floor below the cracked plate.

“I’m so sorry. Please let me help you,” Zendari said, bending down to pick up the plate. Her motion was enough to cause another crack in the chair, collapsing below her. Besides the thunk from hitting the floor, there was a loud ripping sound. At first she thought she ruined the tablecloth, but inspecting her dress, realized the chair leg had retaliated against her. There was a singular rip, going almost up to her hip along the side of the dress.

Joseph got up and rounded the table. “Are you alright?”

Zendari looked up at the two men. One wore a scowl and the other stared back with concerned eyes. His eyes peered into her soul, making the whole situation worse. If the other people weren’t watching them before, they were now. Her body felt heavy from all the attention, combined with struggling to tell Joseph the truth. She got up and couldn’t look either of them in the eyes.

“I’m really sorry,” Zendari said, swiping her credit chit at the machine on the table and walking out the door.

Joseph stood there for a moment before grabbing her coat on the floor and chasing after her. By the time he got outside, she was sitting on the sidewalk curb, with her hands on her head. Something had been bothering Zendari, and Joseph needed to get to the bottom of it. He cautiously walked up to her, sat down, and covered her back with her coat.

“Zendari, what’s wrong?”

“It was me.” Her voice was barely audible and downtrodden.

“It was you? What was you?”

Zendari faced him. “That Shil’vati you saw in the woods. That was me.”

“You were spying on me?”

She nodded her head, unable to repeat her shame. Her body shivered, yet she couldn’t tell if it was from the cold or what he would say next.

“I can’t believe you would do that. Why? Don’t you trust me?”

“No, it’s not like that—”

“Then explain it to me, because it sure feels like that,” Joseph said, his voice raised with every word.

“I had to. My boss—Commander Tojen needed more on you and your clients—”

“So, you just spied on me? Why didn’t you ask?”

“If I didn’t do it, someone else would have.”

Joseph stood up. “Zendari, you said this wouldn’t happen again. You assured me.”

“And this was how I could make that happen. If I didn’t do it, they would have had someone other than me be in that forest. Someone with far less respect for you or the Kenrolls.” Zendari got up and stayed

at his eyeline. Her lips quivered, worried that she could lose him at any moment. “Joseph, please. I don’t want to lose you. I should have never lied, and I’m sorry.”

Joseph’s face was stern until the end of her explanation. She was worried about losing him. Sure, he was pissed, but he wasn’t considering breaking up over it. Hearing those words made a knot in his stomach and his chest tighten. Maybe he wasn’t clear enough to her about how much she meant to him? If she knew, it would’ve never crossed her mind.

“You won’t lose me,” Joseph said, making his tone gentle. “I’m just frustrated. To me, respecting my privacy shows you trust me.”

“I know. And I promise not to spy on you again.”

“You swear on the Goddess’s life?”

“I already did that when your friend tried to shoot me.” Joseph let out a chuckle, followed by Zendari. A simple gesture broke the tension and left them both with a caring smile to share. She put her hand on his bristled face and he clasped her hand with his. They stared into each other’s eyes, allowing their hearts to beat in sync. “Do you forgive me?”

“I think I can forgive you. But you’re gonna have to pay for that.”

“What is it? I’ll do it.”

“I’m thinking no sex for a week.”

“Have you seen me in this dress? It would almost be a crime not to ravage me. Is there some other punishment? Maybe like clean the house or something?”

Joseph had to admit, she did look amazing in that dress. The extra rip went all the way up to her hip, practically begging him to see what more could be exposed. He enjoyed her body as much as her personality, but he was sure that would be the best way to get the point across. “That ain’t a punishment. You like to clean.”

Damn. Next time I'm not telling him what kind of man's work I like just to impress him. "But I'm a liar. I hate cleaning."

Joseph smirked. "Nope, you aren't getting out of that."

"Ugh, next you're gonna say I can't kiss you."

"I'm not that cruel."

Zendari's face lit up and grew a devilish smirk. If she made herself irresistible, it would be hard to enforce her punishment. She moved her lips closer and Joseph didn't break away. In one forceful move, she wrapped him up and laid on him a kiss for the ages. Her tongue squirmed into his mouth, charming his smaller one. She could taste the salt on his lips while she squeezed him tighter against her chest. His hands traveled lower, grasping firmly around her butt.

She pulled away far enough to speak, inches from his tasty lips. "Are you reconsidering?"

"Nope. You're just punishing yourself more."

"Maybe I'm not trying hard enough?"

"All I'm thinking about right now is clowns and taxes. You're never gonna get me going," Joseph said and tapped her to put him down.

"Clowns? I would have thought that would have been a turn on?"

"Why would you think that?" Joseph glanced around to see if anyone was watching them, when he spotted a familiar face walking on the other side of the empty street and pointed at him. "Hey, is that..."

"Karn'a and John? It was about time those two went out," Zendari said, watching the couple walk and laugh together.

"Yeah, but they already went yesterday."

Zendari and Joseph both turned to each other with their mouths agape. Two dates in two days. Somebody was smitten for that kitten.

John played with the wet coaster at the bar, his eyes fixated on the frosted glass of the door. Music was bumping and feet were pounding upstairs to the beat. His feet tapped idly, but he was otherwise consumed with the possibility of Karn'a walking through at any minute. Other people in the bar were minding their own business, going on with their own conversations at the various tables. He glanced at them occasionally, but found it was not worth it. The lighting was so dim, there was no way to make out who was sitting in the back. He could hear them, but not really see them.

"Can I see some identification?" the bouncer asked, as the door opened. Standing in the doorway was Karn'a, wearing the new coat she got and the same black outfit underneath.

"Does military ID count?" Karn'a said, pretending to be dumb.

John didn't need to see the bouncer's face to know he was agitated. His triceps tensed and he stood up from his stool to be more intimidating. Before the bouncer could ruin their date, John swooped in.

"I was wondering when you would show up," John said, coming up to the bouncer.

"Is she with you?"

"Yes, sir. And don't worry, I will make sure she doesn't get into any trouble."

The bouncer glared at him and sat back down, not willing to cause a scene. Karn'a wasted no time going up to John and embracing him. Her tail patting him on the butt.

"You really shouldn't promise something you can't control, cutie."

"I am pretty sure I can keep you out of trouble."

"But the question is, for how long?" Her devious stare met his cocky smile. Tonight was going to be special. She knew it. He knew it. Hell, even the bouncer probably knew it. The music was vibrating through his feet and he was feeling the groove.

“Care to dance?” John asked, glancing up above them.

“You sure you can keep up with me?”

John led the way up the stairs on the other end of the bar. People stared at the Rakiri, but didn’t make any comments. Neither John nor Karn’a cared if they did. They were about to get their dance on. They hung their coats on a coat rack that was next to the stairs and went up. As they ascended the spiral staircase, the music got louder, shaking the banister. Karn’a had to let go of the railing, worried it would rile her up too much. She was on the prowl, and the last thing she wanted was to get too eager too fast. It was a delicate cat-and-mouse game, despite her heavy flirting.

They emerged from the stairs to find people shoulder to shoulder in a giant mob. Lights flashed different colors and strobed in purposeful intervals. It was a lot to take in, but she focused on him, who was hopping up and down to find a good spot for them in the crowd. She shook her head and grabbed him by the wrist.

“Follow me, hot stuff,” she said over the music and pushed her way through the crowd. Karn’a parted the sea of people, most of whom ignored the alien in the room, too focused on dancing. She didn’t mind the tight quarters or random people bumping into her, because she was on a mission: Operation Seduce Johnny. They stopped at a spot in the crowd where they got a full foot of separation from another person. Compared to the rest of the room, they were given plenty of space. “Show me what you got.”

The build up of the song kept rising until the base dropped, letting John unleash his inner dance animal. His head bobbed and feet sprung into action. John may have been a human, but his dance moves were alien. Nothing about his movements matched the beat nor resembled more than random flailing of his limbs.

Karn'a gave him some space, trying to decipher how to dance with the little tornado in front of her. She was expecting something either corny or sexy. This man was weird, but she liked weird. *Embrace the crazy.*

She whipped her head in sync with her tail and tried to match the manic energy John was giving off. There was no matching him, but she gave it her best for the entire song. Her breathing became heavy like she had sprinted the whole time by the end.

"You tired already?" John teased, changing his moves to actually match the R&B tempo of the next song.

"No way. I'm just getting started."

Karn'a took advantage of the sexier music to get more physical. She moved in close and lifted his hands above his head. The only warning she gave was a wink and spun him around. Wasting no time, she began grinding against him. Her eyes rolled in the back of her head, while he kept backing up into her. Karn'a's tail instinctually hooked around his shin and traveled up his thigh to his crotch. The bulge in his pants put a smile on her face.

John spun back around to face her, shaking his head. "You're being a naughty kitty."

"I'm just dancing and from the looks of it, you like my moves."

John untangled her tail from his leg, holding it like a microphone, and sang into it. "Promiscuous Girl, you're teasin' me!"

Karn'a laughed and put her paw on his shoulder. If the rest of the song was how he was feeling, she was going to be purring in no time. His smile made her fur stand on end, but it was taken away in a flash as a man who reeked of vodka and bad decisions came up to them.

"Purp fucker!" The drunk stumbled and took a swing at John. Karn'a shielded John, taking the weak punch in the back of her arm. It tingled, but was far from truly painful. She took her tail and pushed

the stumbling man over. One poke to the chest was all it took and the man was on the floor, slurring curses at them. The crowd didn't take notice, except for everyone immediately around them. Karn'a wanted to say something to the judging faces, but no words came out. All they saw was her push the drunkard over and the likelihood of changing their perspective on a loud dance floor was next to impossible.

"We better get out of here," John said, pulling her through the crowd.

People were shouting as they passed through, growing angrier by the second. Nobody followed them as they went down the stairs to grab their coats. John sighed, watching her don her coat. He wanted to continue dancing with his hot date to one of his favorite songs, but that drunk asshole had to ruin it. He saw she was disappointed too, from the slight droop in her ears. The bar was no longer safe, since the others could come down and hassle them. They had to leave, but he was determined to keep the good times going.

"Don't worry, I know a better place. There isn't a big dance floor, but I think less eyes on us will be better," John said.

Karn'a perked up a bit, happy the night was not ruined. "Lead the way."

They walked down the sidewalk, their breath visible under the street lamps. A few cars drove by, surely gawking at the unusual couple rather than the various other bars on both sides of the street. The sidewalk was empty, despite the numerous bars full of people and subjectively mild weather.

"You sure have some good moves. I bet your mom wouldn't approve, though."

Karn'a shrugged. "I don't know. I never knew her."

"Oh... I'm sorry."

“Don’t be. You can’t miss what you never had,” she waved it off. “Let me guess, your mom wouldn’t have approved?”

“Of course she would. She loves cats!” he said, throwing his arms wide open.

She smiled and playfully pushed him. “No, of your dance moves, ya goof.”

“I’m innocent in this. You were the one grinding on me.”

“I recall you not stopping me.”

John smirked at her, both sharing silent satisfaction for a moment. He slid in closer, tucking his arm under her coat, around her back. “It’s one of my favorite songs. I couldn’t stop dancing, even if I wanted to.”

“That’s your favorite song? I would have taken you for a country boy?”

“I can like all sorts of music. Let me guess, you are more of a rock and roll girl?”

“Anything to get the blood pressure up. Doesn’t matter what it is.”

They stopped at the end of the intersection and took a right. Walking along the side of the building, they saw a parking lot separating a Denny’s restaurant from the bars. The Denny’s had boards over the windows and shattered glass doors, making the small ‘Closed’ sign hanging from the handle seem obvious.

“What? Since when did Denny’s close?” John asked himself.

“That’s okay. Honestly, I like just walking with you around the city. I’ve never been here.”

“You’ve never been deployed here? I assumed you had when you picked out the bar.”

“Nope, I just chose this city because I remembered you wanted to keep our date on the down low.”

John’s eyebrows went up. He never thought about that. His dick was doing all the thinking. If she wasn’t so aware, he would have

followed her to a closer restaurant and be doomed by now. “Thanks for that. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. Although I have to say, I don’t mind sharing a man. Are you sure she would mind?”

“The only human women I know that are okay with polygamy are Mormon. And I’m pretty sure she ain’t Mormon.”

Karn’a tapped her chin. “Strange. You teach your kids to share, but when you get older, that changes.”

“I think sharing a relationship is a bit different than sharing a toy.”

“Maybe, but the concept is the same. Sharing is caring and all that.”

John pondered her line of reasoning. It wasn’t an angle he saw coming, but it made sense. If Sarah cared about him, she wouldn’t mind sharing him. He had a lot to offer, and it would be a shame to deprive this wonderful Rakiri of his gifts. His logic caused a stirring inside him, begging for permission to show Karn’a the night of her life.

“You know what? I think you’re right. Sharing is caring. No reason I can’t be with both of you,” John said, holding her tighter.

Yes! He wants it too! Just don’t screw it up now. “Where to next?” Karn’a asked.

“Joseph is supposed to be out on a date, so maybe back to my place? You can show me your *other* dance moves.”

“Counter offer. I have a hotel room not far from here. More privacy and if you stay overnight there is free breakfast in the morning.”

“I do love a free breakfast.” Karn’a gave him a fierce stare that would have been terrifying to any poor creature that looked up at her, but John was all smiles. John knew what lurked behind that face. It was the same animal instinct he had. The primal urge to make her his. His hand slid down her waist and stopped below her belly button.

She didn't stop him, but his stomach gurgled so loud it almost was mistaken for a fart. "I think I'm going to need some fuel first."

Karn'a was patient while they roamed the aisles of the nearest gas station. If John needed something to eat before showing her what human stamina was capable of, she could wait. Colorful chip bags and candy surrounded them while a dull hum from above pestered them to make a decision and get out.

John held a stick of beef jerky in his hand while he pointed at the chips. "Which one do you want? My treat."

"No, I'm paying. You need to save your money."

"I think I can afford a bag of chips." John grabbed a bag of Funyuns and shook it. "How about this one?"

"What does it taste like?"

"Fun."

She shook her head. "I'll eat whatever you pick."

John tucked the Funyuns under his arm and grabbed a bag of cheesy popcorn. If the sex wasn't good, at least they would have good snacks. Not that he had any doubts. Joseph never complained about Zendari and Karn'a was way hotter. Her fur was softer than a cloud and her tail was giving him a lot of ideas.

"Now for drinks!" John said, raising his jerky up as if it was a cavalry sword.

John dashed over to the back wall and let his fingers run along the icy glass doors. The cold drinks stared back at him, fighting to stand out to him. A tall can of Coors was calling his name, but he needed all the help he could get tonight. He opened the door, letting the frosty

air shroud him. Karn'a stayed back, admiring how the fog gave him an air of mystery.

"You don't want beer?" Karn'a asked, pointing to the door next to her.

The fans from the freezer died down as the door clapped closed. He held up two green Gatorade bottles in his one hand. "I need to stay hydrated if I'm going to live up to the hype of our fabled human stamina."

Karn'a's tail wagged behind her. *He wants to impress me. How did I get so lucky?* She went nose to nose with him. Her chest rose, crumpling the bags in John's arms. The corner of the bag poked her, but it didn't bother her. She opened the glass door and plucked another Gatorade with her tail. "We better get another, just in case."

Together, they went up to the counter and paid for their food, putting it all in a plastic bag. John tried to pay, but Karn'a boxed him out, swiping her own credit chit. She used her tail to lead him out the door while he waved his card at her.

"You really won't let me pay?"

"Sorry, cutie. Until you get your finances in order, I'm paying."

"You get some kind of enjoyment out of this, don't you?" John said, folding his arms.

"You know, you're cuter when you're frustrated."

John didn't respond, taking a swig of his drink. He was tempted to go back inside and buy something to make a point, but it sounded petty in his head. She was being thoughtful, yet he hadn't been as reciprocal.

"What else do you get enjoyment out of? Besides the obvious?" John asked.

"Hunting or sex? They are both obvious to me," she winked at him.

“That’s all you like to do? I imagine a woman like you had more hobbies than that.”

“I do like to swim. Really anything outdoors. I’m pretty open to new things.”

“Have you ever played frisbee golf?”

Karn’a cocked her head. “I’ve never heard of a friz bee. What is it?”

“It’s a game where you throw a disc into a basket. We have a course that weaves through the woods back in town. I might have to show it to you sometime.”

“It sounds primitive. I like it!”

They kept walking along the sidewalk where the red brick hotel was in the distance. John wasn’t familiar with the hotels in the area, because he never saw a reason to go to one when he lived twenty odd minutes away. That was until today.

Karn’a wasn’t focused on the upcoming hotel, instead keeping the conversation going. There wouldn’t be much talking once they got inside, and she wanted to loosen him up some more. They had gotten onto the topic of sports and John could tell her brain only had one thing on her mind.

“...so why can’t women play in men’s sports?” Karn’a asked.

“I think you know why,” John replied, hip checking her.

“Because we would win.”

“No, because you would be groping the men the whole time.”

“I haven’t groped you.”

“Have you already forgotten the dance floor?” he said, feigning shock.

Karn’a put her hands up. “I was looking for my credit chit.”

“In my pants?”

“Wouldn’t be the craziest place I left it?”

John snorted which caused her to laugh in response. Their combined laughter blocked out the rest of the world while they hung on each other. He enjoyed Karn'a's company and her innocently perverted jokes. His eyes met hers and smiled, excited to get to the next part of their evening.

"John! Karn'a!" Joseph said, behind them.

John froze. His brother was here? But how? *Didn't he go on a date?* He turned around and noticed the Olive Garden across the street. His eyes got big, realizing his mistake. Zendari asked him about Olive Garden today. How could he have been so foolish?

"Joseph? Zendari? What a pleasant surprise." John said between his teeth.

"How is your *date* going?" Zendari asked.

"Quite well," Karn'a said, pulling John closer to her with her tail. "We were just getting some fuel for tonight."

John gave them a sheepish smile, hoping Joseph didn't understand what she meant by that. The problem was Joseph wasn't dense and even Zendari knew better, since John was already in a relationship with Sarah. And they were quick to act.

"John, can I speak to you for a minute?" Joseph beckoned him over with his hand.

John unwrapped himself from Karn'a and walked over to Joseph. His head sank a little, knowing exactly what he was going to say. Zendari stayed with Karn'a, giving them space to talk.

"What are you doing?"

"What? We are just having snacks at her place."

Joseph's eyebrows raised, maintaining eye contact with John. "Does Sarah know about this?"

"Yes."

Joseph reached for his phone. "Really? Let me call her then—"

“No, no!” John said, putting his hands on his brother. “Okay, fine. She doesn’t know.”

“Doesn’t know what? That you are on a second date or you were about to cheat on her?”

“You’re not going to tell her, are you?”

“Depends... are you going to cheat on her?”

“Don’t think of it as cheating. Think of it as sharing. And come on, look at her. You can’t tell me she isn’t the hottest alien you have ever seen.”

Joseph glanced over John’s shoulder. She was pretty, but he only had eyes for the purple goddess standing next to her. Her dress was stunning and posed in such a way that her toned leg almost entirely escaped her dress. He never paid much attention to her legs, but tonight that was all he could think about.

“It isn’t sharing if you never even asked if she was open to it.”

John hung his head down. Joseph was right. He had betrayed Sarah enough as it is. If he wanted any shot at keeping either relationship, he needed to stop now before it went too far.

“Do you think Sarah would be open to it?” John asked.

“You really want to pursue two relationships?”

John looked over his shoulder. He saw Karn’a nodding along with whatever Zendari was saying. From the look on her face, she was getting the same lecture. One they both needed to hear, but it also gave John hope. Karn’a may be more than just a sexy flirt, given how she was taking the news.

“I would like to try.”

Joseph shrugged. “Then you better go tell her.”

John turned around and dragged his feet back to the women. He was getting cock blocked, but it was for the best. The night had been

one long blue balling event, but if it gave him a shot at two women, it would be worth it.

“Karn’a, I need to talk to Sarah before we can continue this. I’m sorry,” John said.

“No, I’m sorry. I should’ve been more sensitive to your culture of monogamy. I knew you had a girlfriend and I still pushed for this.”

John nodded. “I wouldn’t mind you walking me back to my vehicle?”

“I would like that.” Karn’a smiled. She didn’t get the prize she yearned for, but it wasn’t a definitive no. Zendari made a good point about respect and she was not going to soon forget it.

Zendari stood next to Joseph, and they watched the horny couple walk back from which they came. The night was getting cooler, but she held Joseph close for warmth. “I still think they are a cute couple.”

“What did you say to her?”

“I reminded her that the success of a family comes from harmony with your sister wives. In your spite one of them, life ain’t going to be so easy.”

“Sister wives? It’s a bit early to talk about marriage.”

“Yes, but she heard me out. Least we know she is thinking long term, rather than a wham bam, thank you, man.”

Joseph chuckled to himself. She butchered that phrase, but what she said to Karn’a spoke a lot about her, too. Zendari cared about family, though, if he was being honest, it should not have been a surprise. Her family life had been less than stellar, so she wanted what she never had.

“Speaking of whamming and bamming. I may have been a little too hasty about your punishment,” Joseph said, still watching the couple leave.

Zendari looked down at him and smiled. "It was the dress, wasn't it?"

"I'll never tell."

"Oh, are you challenging me? I will have you know I'm one of the best interrogators in the Imperium."

"The best? I would like to see that."

"Then follow me."

Zendari guided Joseph by the hand, back to her van that was parked a row back from the rest of the cars in the restaurant parking lot. The panel door slid open, revealing the back seats all covered in clean, brown bath towels. Before Joseph could enjoy the fresh smell of lavender that was emanating from the van, he was pushed inside. She climbed in after him, slamming the door closed.

"Looks like you were planning this from the beginning."

"A good agent is always prepared," she said, straddling him on the seat. Her dress moved aside, revealing her entire bare leg. "Are we going to do this the easy way or the *hard* way?"

Joseph ran his hand along her smooth leg. Her muscles were tight and toned. He undid his tie with one hand and threw it into the next seat. "Do your worst."

Once those words were uttered, she was let loose. The van rocked back and forth, side to side. Moans and groans escaped out the open driver's side window while an elderly couple was walking to their car nearby.

"Tell me! Was it the dress?" Zendari yelled, partially out of breath.

"You're gonna have to do better than that, Interior scum! Really put your back into it this time."

The van shocks struggled to keep the van upright, with their bodies slamming against the side. More groans followed, along with some wet slapping. The elderly woman outside gasped.

“George, call the police. A man is being beaten.” The elderly woman asked, her voice wavering with concern.

George chuckled, knowing that wasn’t the case. “Okay, I’ll do that.” He dialed the number into his phone and called.

“911, what is your emergency?”

“Hi, I’m at the Olive Garden parking lot and we have a bit of a situation involving a Shil. Can I talk with an officer?”

“Yes, one second while I transfer you.”

George tapped his feet merrily while he waited. It was only a few seconds and someone responded.

“This is Officer Larlin.”

“Yes, I would like to report a crime in progress...”

CHAPTER 10.

RED AND BLUE LIGHT covered the surrounding buildings, while the siren went off. The squad tires squealed from the sudden acceleration. Officer Larlin's expression was stern after hearing what the man had reported and her partner noticed the obvious change.

"I'm glad you are finally taking this job seriously."

"I take boy bashing very seriously. This bitch is gonna pay!" Officer Larlin said, turning the steering wheel hard.

The vehicle skidded along the road, slightly lifting off the ground. Her hands gripped the wheel tighter, almost trying to squeeze the life out of it. She gritted her teeth, wishing this vehicle was faster.

"Careful, we can't help anyone if we die on the way there."

"Don't worry, Tenson." Her eyes narrowed on the road ahead. "We'll make it there."

She zoomed down the road, zigging and zagging to get to the place. When they got closer, she turned off the siren and lights to not spook the criminal. Pulling up to the parking lot, they saw a van rocking back and forth.

"Four ten to dispatch, on scene," Officer Larlin said into her radio and threw the car into park. Her seat belt snapped back and she was

the first out the door. The van stopped rocking for a moment and she took her baton out. *I'm coming for you, bitch.*

"Out with it! I need to know!" Zendari yelled.

"I could do this all day," Joseph responded, followed by the van rocking again. He let out a few grunts, which only enraged Officer Larlin.

Officer Larlin didn't bother announce herself or wait for her partner. A brave man was taking a beating and she had to stop it! She whipped open the door with her baton ready. Her mouth went agape from what she saw going on in the backseat. Zendari was on her back, dress pulled down below her breasts. Joseph had a hand on each one while straddling her. His shirt and jacket were open, allowing Zendari a view of his masculine chest.

"Woah..." Officer Larlin said, lowering her baton.

Joseph grabbed the towel over the seat next to him and covered Zendari with it. The embarrassment of being walked in started to take hold in his mind. He felt less exposed with his shirt and jacket still on, but he was acutely aware he was stuck inside Zendari.

"Larlin! What are you doing here?" Zendari yelled, exasperated by the interruption.

"We... um... got a call. They thought someone was being beat up."

"Officer, do you mind if we get dressed? I'd rather not have this conversation like this," Joseph asked.

Officer Larlin flushed blue and stepped away from the door. Officer Tenson was behind her, putting his taser away.

"Was that the same woman from earlier?" Officer Tenson asked.

"Yes, and I guess, her boyfriend."

"Ah, well this will be a quick one. You take her, I'll take the guy."

"For what?" she asked, putting her baton away.

“We want to be thorough. Hate to let them go and find out what happened in there wasn’t consensual.”

Officer Larlin never thought of that. It was hard for her to believe given how Joseph was positioned, but Officer Tenson was right. Better safe than sorry. Zendari came out first, her hair disheveled and dress full of wrinkles. The elegance the dress gave off earlier in the evening was long gone, sullied by their passionate love making.

Joseph was next out, looking over at the driver’s side door. “Zendari, you left the window open.”

“Oops.”

“Zendari, come over here,” Officer Larlin said, bringing them far enough away from the men so their conversation couldn’t be heard. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“You sure you don’t need my ID? I have it this time.”

“No, I am just making sure you didn’t take advantage of him.”

“Does that sound like me?”

“I don’t know you that well. And weren’t you the one who told me I need to take this more seriously? This is me, taking it seriously.”

Zendari nodded. “Okay. I didn’t take advantage of him. He wanted to have sex, so I brought him to the van. We were... kind of role playing.”

“Kind of? How so?” Officer Larlin asked, more curious for her own personal reasons than professional.

“I wanted to know why he had a change of heart for sex tonight. He said I was never going to get it out of him. I had to prove him wrong.”

“Did you?”

“I was about to if you didn’t show up.”

Officer Larlin shrugged. “Well at least you got some. I’m still working on Officer Hot Stuff.” Her partner waved her over. “Stay here, we’re almost done.”

Officer Larlin went over to her partner, who was ready with Joseph's answer.

"He says it was consensual. What did she say?" her partner asked.

"Same. I guess they like to role play," Officer Larlin said, winking at Joseph.

Joseph blushed. "Can we go now?"

"Yeah, you two can go. Next time, find a more secluded area," Officer Tenson said.

"Yes, Officer."

Joseph went back to Zendari, talking for a brief moment before giving her a kiss goodbye. Officer Larlin swooned over the two as they went their separate ways. Officer Tenson on the other hand could care less about it, wondering about something else.

"Care to explain why you were ready to beat the shit out of whoever was in the van?" Officer Tenson asked.

"It was supposed to be a fight in progress. What did you think I was going to do?"

"It seemed like more than that. Almost personal."

Officer Larlin stared at a piece of broken up asphalt on the parking lot that was painted yellow from the parking stripe. "I had a younger brother who was beaten by an older woman. He almost died."

Officer Tenson nodded in acknowledgement. He wasn't much for comforting people, let alone aliens. The job had made him cold, but he wasn't entirely without a soul. He patted her on the back.

"That's why I joined the Marines. So I could protect all the other men who couldn't defend themselves. Even if that meant I needed to set some of my fellow Marines straight."

"You had to do that a lot?"

"Once or twice," she shrugged, still focused on the ground.

"Maybe you can tell me about it over a drink after shift?"

Officer Larlin turned to him. “Really?”

“Yeah, but you can’t be acting all solemn like you are now. It just bums me out.”

Her face beamed with joy. The whole day she had been trying to wear him down with jokes, innuendos, and positivity, when all it took was some vulnerability. Larlin couldn’t contain her happiness, skipping over to the squad.

“Come on, let’s go. Those drinks are calling our name!”

CHAPTER 11.

THE PAN SIZZLED WHILE the butter melted faster than a snowman on a warm spring day. Yellow egg yolks landed in the pan, silencing the sizzling for a moment. Metal springs clattered as browned toast sprung up from the toaster, ready to be served. Dragging their feet into the room was Zendari and Joseph, both rubbing their eyes. Joseph was in his boxers and a thin white shirt, while Zendari was in her uniform.

“John, are you... making breakfast?” Joseph asked his brother, who was manning the stove.

“Yep. I wanted to give you a little thank you for setting me straight last night,” John said, stirring the eggs with a spatula. “How did your date go?”

Zendari glared at Joseph and shook her head. It was embarrassing enough that Larlin knew. The whole town didn’t need to know as well. Lucky for her, Joseph felt the same way. If it was John, the story would have been around the town in less than half a day. Gossip traveled, but it seemed to always go faster with John.

“It went good. Do you have any idea how you are going to ask Sarah?” Joseph said, while Zendari went over to swipe the toast off the counter.

“No. I was actually hoping Zendari could help me with that.”

Zendari froze with a piece of toast in her hand. “Don’t look at me. I don’t understand Earth women at all. If Joseph told me there was another woman joining us, I would say the more the merrier.”

“Really? You don’t want me all to yourself?” Joseph asked.

“I never said that. I just wouldn’t be against another woman around the house. Could use them when I have to face my family, which reminds me—” She took a bite of toast, munching on it a little before finishing her thought. “My brothers are coming over today.”

“I thought you didn’t like your family?”

“I don’t mind my brother, Voltan. He messaged me yesterday when he found out I was dating you. Apparently he hadn’t been in contact with anyone in the family for months after getting back from his fashion tour.”

“Fashion tour? Is your brother a model?”

“Hey, can we get back to helping me out here?” John said, scraping the fluffy scrambled eggs onto two plates.

Zendari picked up her plate and dug in the drawer to get some forks. “Well, if I learned anything from yesterday. Being up front and fully transparent from the beginning helps. If she cares about you, she will at least hear you out.”

Her words did not bring solace like he was hoping. He had told a few lies and although they weren’t many; they did hide a pretty big secret. What made it worse was they met, or would that be a good thing? He turned off the stovetop, his hands shaking with nervous energy.

“Don’t worry about it, John. Whatever is going to happen will happen. No reason to get worked up about it,” Joseph said and took a bite of the eggs. “Besides, she would be a fool to get rid of you. These eggs are amazing!”

John's spirits were lifted a bit by the compliment. He wished he had that kind of outlook, but no, he had to worry. Deep down, John didn't feel worthy of the relationship with Sarah because of what he did, or really, what he was going to do. To ask for her permission to date another woman was a big ask, but one he wanted to at least explore. It was a new world with new possibilities.

"I better get going. Wish me luck," John said, grabbing his coat and heading out the door.

"Good luck!" the couple said, their mouths still full with eggs. Their muffled voices were equally amusing to each other and they snorted. Joseph tried to cover his mouth from the following cough, as little bits of egg flew back on the plate.

Joseph smiled. "You are such a dork."

"I don't know what a dork is, but right back at you," Zendari said, wiping her nose.

"So, when are those brothers of yours coming over?"

"Later today. They didn't tell me. I hate putting you on the spot at last minute, but I forgot with everything going on last night."

"Don't you worry. I will have this place all ready to go by the time they arrive. What kind of food do they like?"

Zendari finished her plate and brought it over to the sink. "I don't think you will have it here. Honestly, everything you make is great. You choose."

Joseph noticed her heading for her coat and felt compelled to tease her before she left. She had it coming after springing unexpected guests on him.

"Where are you going?"

"To work. Following up on a possible lead."

"It better not be me," John said, strutting up to her.

“I learned my lesson.” Zendari put on her coat. “If my brothers come early, let me know.”

Joseph came up behind her and snaked his hand under her uniform, up to her breasts. In the same motion, he leaned against her leg, making sure she felt what was lurking under his pants. “Did I ever mention how sexy you look in your uniform?”

Zendari stood up at attention, pleasantly surprised by his forwardness. Her eyes rolled back into her skull when he squeezed. “Oh, Joseph. You know what I like.”

That was all the pleasure she was going to get as he took his hand back and slapped her on the ass. “Alright, you better get going.”

“You know, I have time for a quickie.”

“I don’t. I have to get this house ready for your brothers.”

“Ah, you’re such a clam tease!” Zendari groaned.

Joseph waved innocently back to her. “That’s what you get for yesterday.”

Zendari cursed herself. Not only did she miss out on another session with her man, but she was going to be thinking about his cock the whole day. It was torture, knowing she wouldn’t even have time before her brothers arrived. In the past she never worried about any pent up energy, but now she had enough to rip the door off its hinges. Before she left, she snatched the keys from Joseph’s coat pocket that was hanging next to the door.

“I’m going to take your truck. Looks more professional than a van with a bullet hole in it.”

“Please don’t get shot at then. It’s my only vehicle.”

“I make no promises.”

John opened his shop and noticed Sarah was not in yet. It was a relief that he had more time to think about how he would broach the subject, but it was also the first time she had never been in early to open. Once she got in to open her store, John was busy with a customer. During the whole transaction, all he could think about was how she would react. Would she hit him? Yell at him? Give him the silent treatment? It was a lot for him to comprehend, but none of the scenarios in his head ended well. No amount of work took his mind off the impending conversation, yet when lunchtime came around, his answer was sure to be revealed.

The clock struck twelve and John went inside the backroom to sit on the couch, knowing she would meet him there. It was their usual meeting spot for feasting and fucking, but he was confident there would be neither today. Sarah pushed open the door with her shoulder, holding a steaming white bowl with two oven mitts.

“Hey there, I got goulash!” Sarah said, dancing over to him.

“Oh, yay... my favorite...” John said in a tone that did not match his words.

“What’s wrong? You love my goulash.”

John sighed. “I... have something to ask you. And I think I know how you will respond, but I still feel like I need to ask either way.”

Sarah put the goulash down on an empty part of a shelf and sat down next to him. Her furrowed brow showed concern. He had been acting weird lately, and it was looking like she was about to get an answer as to why. “What did you want to ask me?”

“Actually, before I ask you anything, I should come clean on some things.” John waited for some kind of reaction, but she sat still. Her attention was solely on him and nothing could break it. This was going to be harder than he thought. “Remember that night, when I said I shot a Rakiri?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, that wasn’t the whole story. See, after I shot her, she kinda blackmailed me.”

“But she was the one trespassing!” Sarah said, almost standing up from anger.

“I know, but that is not how the Imperium would see it. So, I had to play along.”

“What did she ask of you?”

“She wanted to go out on a date.”

Sarah calmed down. “Oh... that was it?”

“I thought you would be angrier at that?”

“It’s just a date. I thought she was going to have you do something dangerous or sinister.”

Her answer threw John off, but he still had a feeling the next part wouldn’t be taken as nicely. He scratched the back of his head. “Glad you see it that way, because that isn’t all.”

“What do you mean?”

John squinted and turned his shoulder, bracing for the worst. “After our date, I kinda set up another one.”

“Why?” Sarah asked, much calmer than expected.

“I honestly don’t know, but that’s where it leads me to my question. Would you mind if our relationship wasn’t exclusive?”

“Sounds like you do know. You want to get with an alien, like your brother.”

“She has a name. It’s Karn’a. And I think she might actually help our relationship.”

Sarah didn’t respond right away. John watched her emotionless face, with every second of silence torture to him. He knew he shouldn’t have brought it up. She was going to burst out in rage at any second. He was sure of it.

“Okay,” she said and nodded her head.

“Before you... wait... you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah. If you think this other woman will help our relationship, then I will support your decision.”

“Well, this isn’t solely my decision—”

Sarah put her hand on his knee. “John, I trust you. I just need to know one thing.”

“Yes?”

“Did you cheat on me?”

Define cheating. “No. We didn’t have sex.”

“Good,” Sarah said and kissed him on the cheek. “I just want you back to normal. Not this weird guy who was clearly hiding something. And after hearing about Joseph getting with one of them, I figured it wouldn’t be long before you would want the same thing. All I ask is you be completely honest with me, no matter what as we navigate this new world together.”

“I can do that.”

Sarah slapped him on the knee and went over to her goulash. “Now, how about we eat? I know you love my goulash.”

“Speaking of being honest...”

“No. You don’t like my goulash?” Sarah asked, way more hurt than him dropping the other revelation.

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. And you put so much time into it.”

“Anything else you want to tell me while you’re being honest?”

John tried to smile without invoking her wrath. “Nope. That’s it. All fresh out of secrets.”

“Good. Now tell me about this alien, Karn’a. I want to make sure she is good enough for our new harem,” Sarah said, bringing the goulash over.

John stirred in his seat, finding it strange that he was talking to his girlfriend about his other girlfriend. He knew men who would kill to be with a woman so open to this arrangement, yet it still felt foreign to him. His parents never raised him like this, so he had no one to turn to on any of the pitfalls. If there was anything he learned, it was that communication was paramount in any relationship, so with this, doubly so.

“She is fun and flirty. Like you in some ways, but different. Hard to explain exactly. And she likes to hunt.”

“Thank God! Now I can stay inside while you freeze your butt off out there.”

John laughed, “You never said you don’t like hunting?”

“I don’t mind hunting. I just don’t know why you insist on going out on the coldest days.”

“Everyone is out when it’s nice. The deer don’t expect their predators to be waiting for them at negative ten.”

“Have you told Karn’a how cold it can get?”

“I think she—” John said before he heard the ringing of the bell on his desk outside.

“You didn’t put up your sign?”

“I did. We have another forty minutes.” John checked his watch. “Probably just Joseph being an ass.”

John went to the door, peeking out, and saw two Shil’vati that were much smaller than Zendari. They looked more like flat-chested women from Earth. One had a mohawk, gold earrings, and wore all black. The other was more sophisticated, wearing an elegant multi-color coat with a silky blue shirt underneath.

“Is that the sexy man we have heard so much about?” the biker one said in a robotic voice, pointing at him. Sarah poked her head out from

around the door too, curious to see who it was. "Oh, look, Voltan. Another one."

John went back inside with Sarah and they exchanged confused looks.

"Who are they?" Sarah asked.

"I have no idea. But a customer is a customer."

John was about to go out again, when she grabbed him by the arm. "Remember. I approved only one alien. Not two or three."

"Then you better come out with me. Make sure I behave."

She rolled her eyes and pushed him out the door. He wore a smile the whole time and went up to his attractive customers.

"Hello ladies, how can I help you?"

"Ladies? Do we look like women to you?" The biker one asked. John noticed the voice English translation was coming from an omni-pad he had in his hand.

"Please excuse my brother. He is pretty dense when it comes to other civilizations," Voltan said in perfect English. He took off his glove before slapping his brother with it. "My name is Voltan and this is my brother, Nor'an. It is nice to finally meet you, Joseph."

"I guess I'm not the only one mistaken today. I'm not Joseph, I'm his brother, John. You must be Zendari's brothers," John said, extending his hand to greet them. Voltan shook his hand without hesitation and Nor'an watched in awe of the strange human greeting.

"This is so weird," Nor'an said, shaking his hand.

"If you're looking for my brother, he is probably at home getting ready for you two," John said and Sarah came up next to him, hearing they were Zendari's brothers.

"And who is this?" Nor'an asked, leaning over the counter.

"This is my girlfriend, Sarah."

“It’s nice to meet you two,” she said, extending her fist to greet them both. “What brings you two here?”

“We thought Joseph worked here, but I guess we were mistaken,” Voltan said.

“We were hoping to catch him off guard and take him to lunch,” Nor’an said.

“If you guys want lunch. Sarah made goulash,” John offered.

“What is goo losh?” Voltan asked.

“Come on back, it’s still hot.” Sarah said, ushering them over. Nor’an was quick to run around and follow her inside, while Voltan lingered, noticing the coat rack full of clothes.

“You like those?” John asked.

“May I take a look?”

“Sure,” John said, walking with him over to the camo clothing.

Voltan went through each one, absorbed by the various camo patterns. His smile grew bigger with every one he pulled out and looked at in the mirror.

“These are truly remarkable. What do you call these?” Voltan asked, looking at himself in the mirror holding up one.

“Hunting jackets. Camo jacket. Whichever you prefer.”

“How much does it cost?”

“This one is only—”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll take it and your entire stock,” Voltan said, slipping it on. The jacket took seconds to warm his body and relaxed his tense shoulders, swaddling him in puffy comfort.

“Really? You want them all?”

“Yes. I can sell these to the Rakiri. Exotic hunting jackets that don’t sacrifice fashion for function.”

John could almost kiss him. Not only did he sell hunting jackets in the off-season, he didn't have to charge the sale price. Voltan could be the miracle he needed to save his struggling business.

"That is excellent. How about we go eat and I can tell you all about your purchase?"

"That sounds great!"

The dirt road kicked up dust as Zendari drove to the possible suspect's home. Her latest intelligence report found a truck that was last spotted in this area supplying known rebellion sympathizers. They could not determine what was being supplied, so Zendari was tasked with finding out. The name for the property was Timothy McGee. A farmer, given the agriculture designation on the property. It was also a safe bet when the road was flanked by large fields and a rough-looking barn was up ahead. A few trees obstructed her view of the house when she drove in. Behind his house was a rusty shed, partially shaded by a nearby tree. It all appeared unassuming, but Zendari wasn't one to take chances, given her intel.

She parked right outside the white house with a clear view of the inside kitchen from the glass patio doors. There was no one she could see, but the lights were on. Zendari checked her service weapon, re-holstered it, and got out of the truck. To greet her was an orange barnyard cat, running around the front of the truck and rubbed against her leg.

"Aren't you a friendly little kitty?" Zendari said, petting it. "Do you know where Timothy is?"

The cat meowed and walked toward the house door. At that moment, Timothy walked out of the door. He had the same dark circles under his eyes, yet they opened a bit wider upon seeing her.

No way. Can cats actually understand me? “Hello, are you Mr. Timothy McGee?”

“I am. Who are you?” Timothy asked, pretending he did not recognize her from the archery place.

“I’m Interior Agent D’Quirlen. I was hoping you could help me out with an investigation I am working on?”

“I’m not sure I can be of much help. I am a simple farmer with a lot of work to do today.”

“Don’t let me stop you. I just have a few questions and will need to take a look around.”

Timothy’s tired face hardened. “I don’t feel comfortable with you snooping around my place unattended. Last thing I need is some purp getting hurt cause she put her hand in the baler.”

“Can you spare a few minutes then? I just need to check your shed and barn,” Zendari said, pointing to each.

Timothy watched her face, trying to determine how much she knew. He was tempted to play the warrant card, but all that would do is make him look guilty. He wasn’t even sure warrants were a thing now that the Imperium had taken over.

“Fine. Let’s make it quick. Where do you want to go first?”

“The shed.”

Zendari followed Timothy over to the shed with the cat running ahead. The brown, industrial sized garage door was closed, but the side door was left wide open for the cat to go inside.

“What kind of equipment do you put in here?” Zendari asked as they approached the door.

“I have the tractor and baler in here as well as some odds and ends. Are you looking for something specific?”

“Just getting an idea of what is on a typical farm around here,” Zendari said, motioning him to step inside first.

It was dark with the only light coming from the door. The green tractor stood tall in the shed, making it a tight fit to get around it. Her hands felt tighter and her breathing changed as she tried to squeeze by the tractor to get to the other side. Her body pressed against the garage door and front of the tractor, reminding her that the confines were much closer than she liked. Grease mucked up her fingers, but she couldn't see the extent in the dark. The whole shed smelt of oil and was starting to give her a headache.

“You done back there?” Timothy asked from the door.

“Can I get some light? It's hard to see back here.”

“There is nothing back there. Just a workbench, tools, and a welder. Nothing fancy.”

“I still would like to see it. Can you open this door?” Zendari asked while she cleared the narrow pass and fumbled around in the dark.

“Garage door hasn't worked in a while. On my list of things to fix today.”

Zendari bumped into a few more things before finding the arc welder. “No worries. I found the welder. It should give me enough light.”

No later than her words escaped her mouth, the garage door lurched to life and the chains above rattled, lifting the door. The light shined on her from the opening door, applauding her quick thinking. When the rest of the shed was lit, it also showed her that little welder stunt would have backfired. Next to her foot was an open can of gasoline and the entire floor was soaked in oil.

Besides the obvious fire hazard of his shed, Timothy was telling the truth. There was only a basic workbench and assorted tools littered all on top. It didn't appear he was working on anything sinister, nor was there room for a truck.

"You satisfied?" Timothy asked, walking over to her.

"What are you working on?" Zendari asked, genuinely curious how he could get anything done in such a messy work area. She thought about asking why he lied to her about the door, but at least he didn't let her torch the whole place.

"Nothing at the moment. I fixed the tractor yesterday. My workbench always looks like that."

She wasn't entirely satisfied with his answer while nodding her head in acknowledgement of what he was saying, but there was not much more to find here. What she needed to find was that truck. Without it, she was snooping around his place, looking for who knows what.

"Okay. Let's check out the barn."

Timothy led her across the small patch of grass toward the red barn. Paint chips flaked off the side, exposing bare wood. The smell of confined animal droppings leaked from the barn door. Zendari quirked her nose from the smell, not used to the overwhelming scent. Once Timothy opened the barn door, the smell might as well have been a mist that clung to her clothes. There was no escaping it.

She stepped inside and noticed a red sedan parked in the middle, sandwiched between lanes of wood horse stalls. There were no horses to be found and hay was piled up high in one stall to her right. Farther down, she heard the mooing of cows but didn't see them, her view blocked by something with a tarp over it.

"Aren't there supposed to be animals in these?" Zendari asked, pointing to the empty stalls.

“Had to sell my horses. Got to be too expensive. When you have to choose between feeding the cows and the horses, it is a no-brainer.”

Zendari strolled along the stalls, noticing bags of fertilizer filling the entire stall to the right of the muddy car.

“That is an awful lot of fertilizer,” she commented, while her attention moved to the tarp. It had the outline of a truck. Possibly the one from her intel.

“Need a lot for my fields,” Timothy said, watching her carefully as she examined the tarp.

She ran her hand across the rough canvas, feeling the contour of the truck bed until she got to the tailgate. Her heart pounded with anticipation. Was this the vehicle? She bent down and lifted the tarp, revealing the faded green tailgate with rust around the bumper. This was the truck. Before she could move the tarp over to see what was in the bed, Timothy slapped his hand on top.

“You want to go see the cows behind you? I’m sure you will find them much more interesting than my rusty old truck.”

Zendari watched his facial expression. The lines in his face may have suggested he was being friendly, but the veins in his hands bulged around his tense fingers. Whatever was in that truck, he didn’t want her to see. At this point, it didn’t matter. She had her guy and there was no point at pushing him yet.

“I think—” she began before someone fell from above. A teenager dressed in blue overalls bounced off the hood of the tarped truck and rolled on the hard ground. Both Zendari and Timothy jumped at the sudden clang as his body dented the vehicle. They ran around the vehicle and kneeled down by the teen.

“David, what were you doing up there?” Timothy asked.

“Sorry. I was—” The teenager looked over at Zendari, his tongue tied. His words came out all incoherent and started to sweat. He had

an explanation planned, but seeing her up close made it impossible. “I-I-I... um...”

She blushed, noticing his eyes were glued to her boobs. *I knew this uniform made me look sexy.* “He must have hit his head pretty hard. Let’s get him up.”

Zendari picked him up without issue, waking him out of his hormone fueled trance. He still could not meet her gaze, but words actually formed this time.

“Thank you, I’m fine though.”

“Are you sure? That was quite a fall,” she said, looking up at the rafters.

Her chest puffed up from a simple motion, practically begging David to sneak another peek. His eyes wandered back, prompting Timothy to slap him on the back of the head.

“You better go milk the cows. Keep your mind busy,” Timothy said and guided his son toward the back.

Zendari smirked and stood a little taller, knowing Joseph wasn’t the only one who found her attractive. Her investigation was over for now. All she could do was think about Joseph and what she wanted to do to him before her brothers showed up. With any luck, she could make it back in time.

“I think I’ve taken up enough of your time, Mr. McGee. If I need anything, I will let you know,” Zendari said and went back to the truck. Once she was in, her first call was to her boss.

“Agent D’Quirlen, this better be good,” Commander Tojen said.

“I can confirm that intelligence report. The truck is Mr. McGee’s and although I didn’t see what was in the bed, I have a feeling fertilizer could be possible.”

“Bomb making material? Did you see it?”

“He has bags that fill an entire horse stall. He claims it is for farming, but if he is involved with the rebellion in any way, I’m sure they would want some.”

“Good work. I will get 24 hour surveillance on his property after I’m done here,” Commander Tojen said.

“Cleanup on aisle three. Clean up on aisle three,” a voice said over the intercom on Commander Tojen’s line.

“What was that? Where are you?”

“It’s my day off. I can be wherever I want to be,” Commander Tojen said and hung up.

“Strange.” Zendari shrugged. As curious as she was about where her commander likes to spend her vacation time, there were more pressing matters. Her brothers were coming over and she wanted to beat them there. Between the stress of walking through a rebel sympathizer’s barn and Joseph’s teasing, she needed a release. The engine rumbled to life and she drove down the driveway, leaving a cloud of dust in her wake. Watching her from the barn door was Timothy with his phone in hand. The text read: ‘You need to handle this. One just came to my house.’

CHAPTER 12

JOSEPH LIFTED THE SAGGING couch with one hand as the whirling sound of the vacuum zoomed underneath. The crunch and clunk of hard pieces the roller picked up caused him to pull away. On the carpet were small black marbles, which were no doubt the cause of the god-awful sound. He thought back and remembered the last time he had his sister's kids at his place. It was right before the hunting season.

“Wow. I guess I need to clean this more often,” Joseph said and put the couch down, not bothering to remove the marbles.

He turned off the loud vacuum and reached into his pocket for the list. Joseph concluded that if Zendari acted more like guys on Earth, her brothers would act more like women. So, he tried to think like a woman and figure out what all needed to be done around the house to prepare for company. He pulled out a little piece of paper from his pocket to consult his to-do list. First was dust and vacuum, which he was happy to check off. Next was to prepare food. He had been cooking for years, so he wasn't worried on that front. After that it was... just the number three.

“Hmmm. I thought I had more.”

Then, there was a knock at the door. Joseph walked up to the window and saw a patrol vehicle outside. *What did I do now?* He opened the door and standing in front of him was Nor'an and Voltan, both smiling ear to ear. Joseph was a bit taken aback, not thinking Zendari's brothers would look so similar to Earth women in stature.

"You must be Zendari's brothers," Joseph said with a smile, extending a fist.

Voltan bumped his fist first. "Yes. My name is Voltan, and this is Nor'an. I have to say it is a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Same here. How did you guys get here?" Joseph asked, noticing no other vehicle out front.

"We got a police escort. It was a much better arrangement than a standard military transport."

"Speak for yourself, Voltan. I would have preferred a bunch of thirsty Marines all trying to fight over me than that," Nor'an said, pointing his thumb back at the police vehicle.

Joseph was not expecting the omni-pad in Nor'an's hand to do all the talking. It threw him off a little, but reminded him not all Shil spoke English.

"Why do you say that?" Joseph asked.

Nor'an gestured back to the vehicle. "All Officer Larlin did was flirt with that other human. It was almost as if we weren't even there."

"Don't mind him," Voltan said, pushing his brother aside. "He gets upset when women aren't giving him all the attention."

"I do not!"

"Can we come in?" Voltan asked, ignoring his brother.

"Oh yeah, sorry, please." Joseph stepped aside and they both came inside.

They kept their coats on, realizing it wasn't vastly warmer inside than out. Joseph had turned down the heat, not expecting anyone for

a few more hours. He anticipated working up a sweat, so the cooler the better. Voltan walked into the living room and nodded.

“Your house is very clean.”

“Thanks. I just got done. I wasn’t expecting you two for a few hours.”

“Good! Now we have more time to interrogate you,” Nor’an said, jumping onto the couch. His body hardly bounced from the worn out springs below the deformed cushions. “How much does Zendari weigh now? This couch is destroyed.”

Joseph blushed, knowing it wasn’t her weight that destroyed it, which Nor’an caught immediately.

“It is true! You humans are as horny as our women,” Nor’an said with a grin on his face.

“Nor’an, can you not be obnoxious or gross for a few minutes,” Voltan said.

“Fine... after this. So how was she?”

Voltan reached for his omni-pad, while Nor’an kept it out of reach. They wrestled each other on the couch until Joseph snatched the device. He typed away on the pad and then handed it back to Nor’an, who stuck his tongue out in response. Voltan got a glimpse of his answer as well and swooned.

“That is really sweet. You’re a keeper in my book, even if your decorating skill could use some work,” Voltan said.

“What’s wrong with my decorating?” Joseph said, looking over to the painting he put up today above the couch. It showed a stag staring off into the distance with the forest at its back.

“It doesn’t match the theme. I’ll show you.”

And thus began the hourish long tour, where Voltan went around the house with Joseph, pointing out how he could improve the space. Nor’an tagged along purely out of curiosity, ignoring Voltan’s lecture.

Joseph put on a happy face and silently cursed himself for trying to improve the room with a painting. The final stop before looping back to the kitchen was John's room, which they weren't willing to enter with the locker room smell that wafted into their noses.

"What is that smell?" Voltan asked, waving his hand in front of him.

"My brother, John. John sweats when he sleeps ever since Zendari moved in. That and he likes to eat in bed. I am willing to bet there is moldy food somewhere in there."

Voltan closed the door and gave it an extra tug to make sure it wasn't going to open. "You should really tell him to clean his room."

Joseph shrugged. "I don't go in there and Zendari hasn't said anything. I can see why he hasn't brought his girlfriend though."

"You mean Sarah?" Nor'an asked.

"Yeah... how do you know about her?"

The house door swung open and in barged John with a half eaten pan of goulash. Following behind him was Sarah, dressed in a white and green floral sundress holding a covered red box of crumbly desserts.

"Are we late?" John asked, kicking off his shoes.

"Um... I didn't know you were coming," Joseph said, confused by his presence.

"I forgot to tell you. We ran into your brother and his girlfriend earlier today. We invited them to dinner. Have you had their goulash? It is amazing," Voltan said, going over to them to help take the food.

"I haven't started anything yet," Joseph said, walking into the kitchen.

"That's okay. I bet Voltan would love to learn how I make my famous tater tot hotdish," Sarah said.

Voltan clapped like an excited schoolgirl, giddy to get away from her overbearing parents and sleep over at a friend's house. "If it's anything like your goo losh, I will probably eat so much I'll die."

Sarah pointed at him with a big smile on her face. "No, that's the dessert. You can't just have one."

Voltan laughed, and they took over the kitchen in no time. Joseph grabbed three beers and went into the living room, partly relieved that Sarah wanted to take the lead on cooking. Nor'an tried to swipe the mysterious dessert from the red container, but Sarah was quick to shoo him away, forcing him to join the brothers.

"So Nor'an, what was Zendari like when she was a kid?" John asked, handing him a beer.

"Oh you know women, always trying to get into trouble. Rough house. Normal girl stuff." Nor'an took a swig, enjoying the barley taste. "Too bad she couldn't outdo me."

"That's normal guy stuff for us. Not really a woman thing here."

Nor'an shook his head. "Speaking of women, I hear you two are in an 'open relationship'. I thought humans were monogamous?"

"We are trying it out."

"Excellent. I've never been with a human woman before. Do you have any tips?"

John chugged his mostly full drink, his throat bulging with each gulp. Joseph and Nor'an watched him in silence, waiting for his answer. Once there was nothing left at the bottom to delay his reply, he stopped and hit his chest, prompting a burp.

"I need another one of these. I'll be right back," John responded and went into the kitchen.

Joseph shifted awkwardly on his feet. "Do you play any sports?"

Zendari picked up her pace in town, thinking more and more about who was waiting for her at home. It was still daylight and, with any luck, her brothers would show up fashionably late. It was going to be stressful for her, seeing them again in-person after so long. She needed some pre-party release and the vibrations of the truck were a constant reminder.

She pulled into the driveway, behind John's truck, completely ignoring the squad parked out front. Her focus was singular. Nothing could break her concentration. Joseph was standing outside, putting his phone away, no doubt calling her. Zendari was overjoyed to see him and needed his help. The door closed behind her. Her steps were fast and close together, trying to hold it together. He smiled at her and opened his arms for a hug, which she took and picked him up.

"Woah, someone is excited," Joseph said, wrapping his feet around her.

"I need you to do something for me," she whispered in his ear before kissing him on the neck.

"What is it?" Joseph said, trying to squirm out of her grip, but all she did was pin him to the wall.

"I need you to fuck my brains out before my brothers get here. Can you do that for me?"

"Um... they're already here."

Zendari stopped kissing and looked into his eyes, hoping his tone was just sarcasm. It wasn't.

"What? How?"

"They've been here awhile. So has Sarah and John."

Zendari put one hand on the wall, hoping it would cave in under her frustration. There was a saving grace. They were distracted.

"They won't know you are gone for a few minutes then. We'll do it in the van."

“Yeah, but I don’t want the officers to break it up again.”

“How would they do that?”

Joseph pointed to the vehicle, which from the outside point of view made him look like a child in his mother’s arms pointing at a candy he wanted. Zendari turned her head and saw Officer Larlin give her a thumbs up from the squad car, followed by an obscene gesture. All hope died in that moment and with it, her libido. She put him down and he rubbed her cheek.

“Sorry babe. Look on the bright side, I got your back in there. Your brothers say anything mean, I will be there to set them straight.”

“Please don’t. I just need you by my side.”

“Always.”

Zendari took a deep breath and straightened out her uniform while Joseph waited to open the door. Inside would be the first time she had seen her brothers face to face in years. All her good and bad memories rushed to her head like a raging storm. *It won’t be that bad. Your sisters were way worse*, she told herself.

She gave him a nod, and he opened the door. Voltan was the first to see her while he brought the steaming pan of hotdish over to the table.

“Zendari! You came just in time.” Voltan put down the pan of golden delight on the brown hot pad and went over to give her a hug, wearing blue oven mitts. “How long has it been?”

Zendari squeezed him, noticing his body was more frail than Joseph. “Too long. How was your flight in?”

“Nor’an enjoyed the flight more than I did. Once those Marines knew I wasn’t interested, they flocked to him.”

“That was pretty great. Got a bunch of numbers, most of which I don’t think I’ll be calling,” Nor’an said in his native language, walking up to them. “What took you so long? We were thinking about starting a search party.”

“I was working. Criminals don’t arrest themselves,” Zendari responded.

“I gotta say, that is impressive.”

“Thanks—”

“That you are able to leave this man alone for a whole day. I always thought you would be clingy once some stiff gave you the time of day,” Nor’an finished.

Zendari balled up her knuckles, doing her best to hold back her anger. She expected to be insulted at some point, but Joseph was off limits. Joseph noticed her body language change after whatever Nor’an said, but Voltan was quick to play peacemaker.

“Why don’t we all eat? I would love to hear about all the thrilling adventures you have been up to,” Voltan said, pulling Zendari to the table. He also left Nor’an with a quick kick to the knee to remind him to behave.

“Ow,” Nor’an said, holding his knee.

Joseph clapped him on the back, watching everyone else gather around the table. “Look on the bright side, at least he didn’t flick you in the dick.”

Nor’an face turned to shock. “You humans do that to each other?”

“Yep. And if you make Zendari mad again, I’ll show you what it feels like. I speak from experience when I tell you, that shit stings,” Joseph said as a matter of fact and joined the group.

Nor’an stood still for an extra few moments, contemplating the human’s threat. *Damn Zen, you sure know how to pick them.*

They were all shoulder to shoulder around the table, enjoying the hot and mushy meal. Mushroom soup was the paste that held the healthy amount of ground beef and green beans below the salty tater tots. Zendari took the largest helping and ate hers the fastest. Once she asked Voltan what he had been up to, it was like having a TV dinner, with no need to interrupt. While Voltan went on and on about the different planets he traveled to and designs he created, Nor'an was putting the moves on Sarah.

Nor'an whispered into her ear the little English he did know, causing her to giggle. John sat across from them, twiddling with his last tater tot, yet his focus was on them. Voltan's words were far quieter than his own thoughts. *She sure took this whole thing quite well. Is she getting back at me? And why him? He just wants a quick lay.* His thoughts kept flowing through him, but there were no answers to be found.

"You saving room for dessert?" Joseph asked John, knocking him out of his trance.

"Uh... yeah. Sarah, you want to grab the dessert?"

"Sure," Sarah said and gracefully got up from her seat, letting her fingers linger over Nor'an's shoulder. She grabbed the box and took off the lid, revealing dark brown cookies. "If you liked the meal, you will love my cookies."

Nor'an didn't hesitate to take one and eat it, maintaining eye contact with her. His eyes dilated, and he felt a rush of energy take hold of him. His hands shook and heart pounded in his chest.

"Wow. Now those are good cookies!" Nor'an said, devouring another one.

"I'm glad you like them. You can have as many as you like."

"Oh, I will." Nor'an said with his mouth full, grabbing two more.

“Zendari? Voltan?” Sarah said, holding the box over the table for them to grab them.

“I’ll have one later,” Voltan said and continued talking to Zendari. Zendari took two from the box, tossing one to Joseph.

“Thanks babe.” Joseph said, catching it with two hands and taking a bite right away. “Mmm. That is good.”

Zendari absentmindedly took a sniff of the cookie in her hand, feeling a tingle in her nostrils. It broke her concentration, remembering that sensation occurring on a separate occasion. “Sarah, what is in these?”

“The normal cookie ingredients. Flour, eggs, butter, sugar.”

“And minty. Don’t forget minty,” Joseph said.

Zendari’s cookie clattered against her dirty plate. Her whole body froze. “What did you say?”

“Minty. They taste like Andes mints. Are you allergic?”

She never got to answer before Nor’an slipped off his seat onto the floor. His body broke into convulsions and thick foam bubbled out of his open mouth. Zendari launched her seat across the floor, turning her brother on his side immediately.

“Go get Larlin,” she ordered to no one in particular. Joseph was the first out the door while the rest all stood around, unsure what to do next. Seconds went by like hours as Zendari watched her brother quiver uncontrollably. It cut her deep that there was nothing she could do to help him. Officer Larlin came in with Officer Tenson right behind her, carrying a medical bag.

The rest was all a blur to Zendari. From the radio traffic, to the paramedics loading him into the transport, to Joseph driving her to the hospital. It all meshed together into one terrible nightmare she could not wake up from. Joseph tried to talk to her, but she was

unresponsive, caught in a daze that didn't break until Joseph finally shook her in the waiting room.

"Zendari, the doctor is here," Joseph whispered.

Where is here? She looked around the room, noticing the white walls and dull grey seats. The smell of bleach was heavy in the air, matching her heavy heart. Once her eyes landed on the human doctor, she stood up immediately.

"Is he okay?" Zendari asked.

"Yes. I had to consult some Shil'vati doctors to make sure we were caring for him correctly, but they assured me he will be alright."

"Can I see him?"

"Yes. He is resting though."

"I'll be quiet." Zendari said, and Joseph stepped forward to follow her when the doctor stopped him.

"We are only allowing immediate family back there at the moment, sir. You'll have to wait out here," the doctor said.

Joseph nodded, not offended in the slightest. Zendari turned around, confused why that would be an issue. She was going to say something, but Joseph put it all to rest.

"That's okay. When Voltan gets back, I will let him know you're back there already. If you need anything, let me know and I can run out and get it," Joseph said to Zendari.

Zendari's heart ached. She wanted him by her side, but his support from afar would have to do for now. With a nod, she left him in the lobby and followed the doctor to Nor'an's room. They navigated through the maze-like halls until they arrived at a room with a blue curtain. The doctor pulled back the veil and laying on an elevated bed was Nor'an, dressed in a hospital gown and IVs stuck in his arm.

"If you need anything, a nurse will be just outside," the doctor whispered and left them to be alone.

The machines by his bed beeped in a consistent tone, acting as a sort of white noise. Seeing her brother in such a state made her knees weak. She went to his side and pulled up a seat, watching his chest rise and fall softly. Zendari took his frail hand, rubbing it ever so gently in hers.

“Zendari?” Nor’an said weakly without opening his eyes.

“How did you know it was me?”

“Your monster hands. It also wouldn’t kill you to use some moisturizer.”

Zendari laughed, almost on the verge of tears. “Sounds like your personality is still intact.”

“Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital. You had a mint overdose.”

“That sounds about right. At least this time I don’t have to worry about impregnating some noble chick... wait... did I have sex with Sarah?”

“What?” Zendari shook her head, filled with so many questions. “No. What is this about impregnating a noble? Did she poison you?”

Nor’an chastised himself silently for missing out on sex with a human before answering her question. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure that kid is someone else’s.”

“Nor’an,” Zendari said, sternly.

“Calm down. You’re making me want to get a third overdose.”

“Give me a name.”

“Sarah,” he smirked.

“That wasn’t on purpose. What is this noble woman’s name?”

“I ain’t telling you that.”

“Fine, then I want my thousand credits you owe me.”

“Fralain Haslara. While you’re at it, can you have her stop messaging me? Every week I’m bombarded with ‘You need to take care of our kid’

or ‘You’re a lousy husband’. Yeah, cause that is going to get me to come back,” Nor’an said, rolling his eyes.

“You married her?” Zendari said, raising her voice, before remembering she needed to be quiet for the other patients next door.

“Can you really marry someone if you don’t remember it?”

“Yes...”

“She should’ve known it wasn’t going to work out. I wasn’t in my right mind.”

“Sounds like you still aren’t.”

“Nor’an!” Voltan said, running to him and giving him a hug. His hands were greasy, slathering Nor’an’s exposed back and bedding.

“What is on your hands?”

“Oh sorry, Zendari’s Rakiri friend got me something to eat. The burgers here are to die for. Do you want me to get you one?”

“Thanks, but I don’t need any more food that will kill me for a while.”

“Hold it, Karn’a is here?” Zendari asked.

“Yeah. She really knows how to lighten the mood,” Voltan said and turned his attention to Nor’an. “Don’t worry, I messaged your wife to let her know what happened and that you’re okay.”

“You did what!” Nor’an said, energy rushing back to him.

“I know you like to be all feminine and not let anyone take care of you, but she—”

Nor’an started pulling on his IVs. “I need to get out of here.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Zendari said, moving his hand away.

“I’m not staying here. She knows where I am now.”

“You’ve been avoiding her? Why? She’s your wife,” Voltan asked.

“Wife is such a strong word. More like, woman I banged once.”

“Nor’an. That’s no way to talk about her.”

“I can say whatever I please. You don’t know her like I do.”

“Sweetums? Is that you?” a high-pitched voice said from outside. The curtain moved aside and ducking down to come in was a Shil’vati dressed in a dark purple robe, pulling along a little Shil’vati boy. A golden necklace hugged her muscular, yet thin neck, matching the color of her worried eyes. “Nor’an.”

Nor’an laid his head back on his pillow and looked to the ceiling in defeat. His wife had found him. All thanks to his brother. He felt her arms lay over him as she kissed his neck, but he didn’t even budge.

“Nor’an. Please tell me you are okay,” Fralain said.

“I’m fine. It was just an overdose.”

“An overdose! You’re still using drugs?”

“I just ate some spiked cookies.”

“An assassin. I knew someone would try to get to me through you,” Fralain said. “I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have let you galavant off. From now on, I won’t let you out of my sight.”

“Don’t worry, Noble Haslara. It wasn’t like that. Sarah didn’t know how bad mint was to us. It was an honest mistake,” Zendari said.

Fralain turned to Zendari. “Sarah sounds like a human name. How do you know she is not a rebellion member?”

“She is dating my boyfriend’s brother. We had them over for dinner. Even my boyfriend didn’t know mint is bad. I wouldn’t expect her to know either.”

“I can vouch for her as well. She is in the lobby right now, freaking out about almost killing him,” Voltan added.

“I wish she did kill me,” Nor’an muttered.

Fralain returned her attention back to Nor’an, not hearing what he said. “I guess that doesn’t matter right now. All that matters is that you are safe.”

“I don’t feel safe,” he said, referring more to her than anyone.

“I know. But don’t worry. I already arranged for you to be brought back home to the capital. And I promise to be a better wife. My therapist has shown me that the way I have been treating you after you left was wrong. It’s hard to take care of our child by myself. He needs a father, and all I did was push you away. Can you forgive me?”

“Home? We live on Shil? Since when?”

“Since always. Do you really not remember?”

Nor’an shook his head. He had no recollection of ever living on Shil... at least with her. His eyes drifted to the side of his bed, noticing the little boy pulling on Fralain’s sleeve.

“I’m hungry,” the little Shil’vati boy said.

“I can take him. Do you want me to get you something too?” Zendari asked.

“Yes, please. Thank you,” Fralain said.

Zendari took the little boy’s hand, and they walked back out to the lobby. She was glad her brother was okay and his wife didn’t seem like the bitch she was made out to be. If this was torture for Nor’an, he deserved it, because their boy was adorable with his little blue vest and white pants.

“Are you my other mom?” the little boy asked.

“No, I am your aunt, Zendari. What is your name?”

“My name is Da’var, but my human classmates call me Davy, which I like more.”

“Human classmates? You go to school here?”

“Yep, mom says it will make me smarter to know more than one language.”

“Your mother is right. I couldn’t even do my job here if it wasn’t for knowing English.”

“What do you do?” he asked, swinging her arm.

“I am an Interior Agent.”

Davy's eyes lit up, like he met a rockstar out in public. "Woah. That is so cool!"

"It is pretty cool. And if you study hard and be a good boy, you could be an Interior Agent when you grow up too," Zendari opened the door to the lobby, where everyone was waiting nervously for them.

Sarah was pacing back and forth, while John and Joseph both sat next to each other, talking about something. Karn'a walked in from the other entrance of the lobby with a tray full of food. They all noticed Zendari at the same time and went over to her, but none more eager than Sarah.

"Is he okay?" Sarah asked first, her voice almost cracked with worry.

"He is alright," Zendari said and Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. "His wife is with him now. I was just going to take Davy here to get some food."

"I'll come with you," Joseph said.

"If they need us for anything, let me know," Zendari said to Sarah.

Sarah nodded. "Of course. We'll be here."

Zendari, Joseph, and Davy left the lobby and Sarah turned around, almost running into the tray in Karn'a's hand.

"Sorry about that," Karn'a said, moving the tray out of the way.

Sarah stared up at the Rakiri, who wore standard Marine combat gear, minus the helmet or rifle. She recognized Karn'a immediately from seeing her at John's shop. Less sensual than last time, which put her at ease, despite the handgun on her hip.

"You must be Karn'a. John was telling me about you."

"I hope only good things. I thought you two could use some food, so I picked some up when I was down there with Voltan."

"Thanks Karn'a. I always get hungry when I'm stressed," John said, taking the tray from her and sitting down, hoping to avoid this conversation, lest he screw it up.

Karn'a glanced at John before returning her attention to Sarah. Her heart was pounding, hopeful that the conversation went well between them, but it was still unclear to her. The suspense of not knowing for sure, drove her nuts.

"Did John talk to you about... *us*?" Karn'a asked.

"He did. I said I would be willing to give it a try."

"Yes!" Karn'a pumped her fist, before trying to return to playing it cool. "I mean... good. I'm glad."

Sarah laughed. "You're really excited about this?"

"How can you not be? Have you seen him?" They both looked back at John, who was devouring the crunchy chicken tenders, not bothering to use the plastic forks. Ketchup was smeared all over his lips, reminding Karn'a of a carnivore at the end of a meal. "That is so hot."

"Eating chicken tenders? That's what turns you on?" Sarah asked with a hint of concern in her voice.

"Look how he attacks it. Full commitment, unafraid of how messy he gets," Karn'a said and faced Sarah. "I want to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

"For sharing him with me. I heard about your culture and how this arrangement is not normal. It must have been hard for you to do this, so I am grateful that you would allow me to court him as well."

Sarah's eyes flickered for a second, surprised by how genuine she was. She always thought these women were just about sex, but she appeared to be different. It reassured her that this arrangement would work out for the best after all.

"You're welcome. I think first though, we should have some ground rules," Sarah said.

"Sounds good to me. What do you have in mind?"

"I've never done this, so... I actually don't know where to begin."

“Well, I promise that I will always ask you in advance what days I want him. Maybe we can make some type of schedule, to make it fair.”

“I would like that, but what if he wants one of us on a day the other is supposed to have him?”

Karn’a shrugged. “I think we have to let him decide. Otherwise he will feel like we are just controlling him.”

“Interesting, what about today...”

Sarah locked eyes with Karn’a and they both knew where this was going. Like two cowboys in a duel, they stood perfectly still, waiting for the other to make the first move. There was no malice in their eyes, but instead a mutual respect and a competitive spirit. Karn’a blinked first and Sarah went over to John, moving the tray aside to sit on his lap.

John reached for the tray of food, almost done with his last chicken tender. “Oh, I was almost done with that.”

She responded by wiggling her butt lower on his crotch until she fell off to the side, sitting next to him on the same seat. Her attempt to arouse didn’t work quite as planned, but she wrapped her arm around the back of his neck and gave him a kiss. “How is the food?”

“It’s pretty good. You should really try some.”

Karn’a sat down next to him and took the last chicken tender. John’s eyes followed it as she waved it in front of him. “Do you want this?”

“Yeah...”

She moved the piece of chicken closer to his mouth, and her tail tickled his ear. John leaned forward to eat it when Sarah swooped in first to eat it from Karn’a’s hand.

“Mmmm. That is good. Almost as good as the other tender,” Sarah said into John’s ear.

That was not lost on John, nor when Karn’a licked his lips clean of the ketchup. Her tongue was grippy, yet exuded the will go farther.

The sudden attention from both of them, made John a little nervous. It wasn't unwanted per se, but he was plenty aware of where they were and people were starting to stare. One woman covered her young boy's eyes, scoffing at him.

"This is a hospital," the woman said, disgust unconcealed in her tone.

The two women recoiled immediately, realizing how juvenile they were being. There was no need to be getting so heavy in the middle of the lobby, although Karn'a's only qualm was that she was still in her combat gear. If there was anyone filming this, it would have been embarrassing for her unit and continued the perception they were all sex starved women. Not that she wasn't, but professionalism had to take precedent.

"She's right. What do you say we find a room and continue this in private?" Karn'a offered.

"Um... all three of us?" Sarah asked.

"Why not?"

John saw Sarah's expression and knew she would not go for it. It was her eyes that gave it away. The way they went down and to the right for a split second and she wiggled her nose. That was one thing he always picked up on her when she was uncomfortable with something. The first trouble in paradise had already begun, but John was determined to mitigate the problem.

"I'm not comfortable with a three-way. I don't want one of you to not get the attention you both deserve," John said.

"That's okay," Karn'a said, sensing it had less to do with him than Sarah. "Sarah, you should eat something. I hear the panini is good."

Sarah took the sandwich off the tray and relaxed next to John. "Thanks Karn'a. I appreciate it."

“Can I have a cookie?” Davy said, pointing to the array of snacks at the checkout.

“Sorry Davy, I can’t take any chances with cookies right now,” Zendari said, ready to pay the cashier.

Joseph smiled down at Davy, holding the tray of food that was flooded with french fries, two burgers, and a boxed salad. “Don’t worry about the cookie, you’re gonna have to help me eat all these fries. Didn’t you say they were your favorite?”

“Yeah, but... cookie,” Davy said, still holding out hope.

“I’ll tell you what, if you are a good boy I will ask your mom if you can have a cookie. How does that sound?”

“Okay.”

Zendari paid for the meal and they all went into the large commons area to eat. It was barren, with only a few nurses sitting on the far side. The white table tops were all spotless, and the floor was wet from a recent cleaning. They sat down at a closest table and Davy was the first to start on the crispy fries. While his mouth was preoccupied, Joseph took the chance to ask how she was doing.

“How are you holding up?” Joseph asked, sitting across from her with Davy by his side.

Zendari grabbed the salad from the tray. “I’m better now that I know he isn’t going to die.”

Her tone was even, but it wasn’t convincing enough for Joseph to drop it. She reached out to get the plastic fork on the tray when he put his hand on top of hers. Zendari met his gaze, noticing the gentle care in his eyes matched his soft hands.

“You don’t have to hide your feelings around me. I’m here for you.”

His calming voice relaxed her, but it would not bring her to reveal anything. He didn't need to be burdened with her worries, which seemed to change by the moment. Her worry was that she would never see her brother again, despite how consistently terrible he was to her. Nor'an may have been an ass, but he was still family. Zendari's new worry was about all the things he had not mentioned. The drug use. The surprise family. His lack of care for them.

She always believed Nor'an would change once he had a family of his own, but he was no different. Selfish and reckless. For a woman, that always led to something bad, but for a man, it would likely lead to his early death. The galaxy was not a safe place and his kind of behavior attracted the worst women around. Ones who would prey on such a man and not care what happened to him. She had been spared from witnessing it firsthand, but her other colleagues have told plenty of stories of what happens to careless men.

All things considered, she was grateful the noble Nor'an shackled up with was at least trying to be better. Maybe it was for her son, or him, but Fralain didn't give off the vibe Zendari was expecting. Most nobles were so full of themselves or had so much power, that corruption and manipulation was second nature. Fralain appeared genuine and had the ability to admit her faults. A rarity among that group for sure. It probably would do Nor'an some good to be with his family, even if he had been a lousy husband up to this point. Joseph was still waiting for her reply as her hand was trapped under his.

"I don't want to burden you with everything going on in my head."

"You're not a burden. You could never be, no matter what is going on inside that beautiful head of yours."

"How do you always know what to say to me?" Zendari asked, putting her other hand on top of his.

Joseph smirked. “You didn’t know this? I can read your mind, obviously.”

Zendari laughed, while Davy held a fry to his mouth, only listening to the last part of their conversation.

“You can read minds?” Davy asked, stupefied by his claim.

“I sure can,” Joseph said, laying on the sarcasm thick.

“What am I thinking right now?” Davy said, closing his eyes tight, conjuring something in his mind.

“You’re thinking about that cookie.”

“Yes! How did you do that?” Davy exclaimed, excited to learn of Joseph’s prowess.

Joseph winked at Zendari. “It’s a human thing.”

Interrupting the beautiful moment was the chime from Zendari’s omni-pad. She saw it was Commander Tojen and stepped away from the table to take the call. “Commander Tojen?”

“Agent D’Quirlin, I am sorry to hear about your brother. How is he holding up?”

“He is awake. I’m not sure how long he will need to stay here, but I think he will be okay.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Zendari watched Joseph and Davy sword fighting with french fries and longed to be back there. “I am in the middle of a meal. Was that all you called about?”

“No. I need you to go back to Mr. McGee’s residence again.”

“Why?”

“We haven’t set up surveillance yet and it was reported a few weapons were stolen from his house. I need you to investigate.”

“Can’t you have the local police do it? Officer Larlin would probably love to do something like this.”

“I contacted their dispatch. All are out on other calls, I can’t get a hold of Karn’a, and sending my Marines might make matters worse. It just leaves you.”

“Karn’a is here. I’ll tell her to call you.”

“No need. You both go then. I don’t want one of you winding up dead if he is in fact dangerous.”

Zendari squeezed her omni-pad, wishing she never answered it. She wanted to be with Joseph, but duty was calling. If there were any leads to be uncovered, she needed to head out sooner than later.

“Yes, Commander.”

The call ended, and with it, so had her relaxing time with Joseph. She came back to the table, took the salad, and went around to him. Joseph looked up at her, knowing she got bad news.

“You have to go?” Joseph asked.

“Yeah. Can you take Davy back up?”

“Of course. You be safe.”

“Karn’a is coming with me. I’ll be safe.”

Joseph stood up and kissed her on the cheek. “Make sure she goes through the door first. She has armor this time.”

She chuckled. “Will do.”

CHAPTER 13.

“HOW MUCH FURTHER?” KARN’A asked, paying attention to the road. The only light around was the stars in the sky and the headlights illuminating the endless dirt path. Small rocks thrown from the wheels pitter-pattered underneath the vehicle, reminding them they were far from normal civilization.

Zendari pointed ahead. “Turn here. It will be at the end of this road.”

“Where are we headed again?”

“Timothy McGee’s farm.”

“Why is it so far away though? You know I was this close to scoring with John tonight,” Karn’a said, gesturing with her fingers.

“I’m sure you will have plenty of other opportunities. And besides, do you really want your first time to be at a hospital?”

“I’m not picky, but now you got me thinking. The woods would be nice. Feel the dirt in our feet. Maybe he pins me against a tree—”

“I’m gonna stop you there. I don’t want to hear about your fantasies with my boyfriend’s brother.”

“Fine. Sex aside though, I am excited to see where this relationship will go. Sarah seems nice and honestly, I found it fun, us both competing for his attention. Reminds me of hunting, both racing to see

who could get to him first. Too bad she turned down the three-way idea. It would have been fun.”

Zendari looked over at Karn'a, who wore a big smile on her face. “Karn'a, as your friend. Can I tell you something?”

“Of course. What?”

“Never say the words ‘three way’ ever again.”

“What? You’re saying you wouldn’t be open to it? Has human monogamy been rubbing off on you?” Karn'a teased.

“I am all for him having multiple wives. What I do mind is sharing the same bed with them at the same time. You’re just asking for trouble.”

“Sounds to me like someone is a little self-conscious. Don’t worry, if you stick with me long enough, you will be confident in no time.”

Zendari rolled her eyes at her foolish, yet confident friend. She warned her and that was the best she could do. The light from the farmhouse was the beacon in the distance. Karn'a picked up the pace, excited to finally get to their destination. They pulled up to the farmhouse, where Zendari noticed Timothy and David standing around the kitchen island. David was the first to spot them, pointing them out to his dad. Timothy walked up to the window to see their vehicle and went over to the door.

Karn'a put on her helmet and shut off the vehicle. “Ready to rock?”

“You might want to leave the helmet. We are here to talk to him, not intimate him.”

“But he is a rebel sympathizer. What if he tries to shoot me in the head?”

“He didn’t kill me when I was here today. I doubt he called in a stolen weapons report just to have me killed.”

“Then why did you bring me?”

Zendari opened the door. “In case I’m wrong.”

Karn'a sat there for a moment, now more torn than ever if she needed her helmet or not. Her claws tapped on the side until she made her decision. "Too late. It's already on."

Zendari was almost up to the door, where Timothy stood off to the side, holding the door open for her. Karn'a got out and jogged over to them, prompting a comment from Timothy.

"I see you brought a friend with you, Agent D'Quirlen. Little bit overdressed if you ask me."

"I thought another mind wouldn't hurt. You reported weapons were stolen?" Zendari asked him.

Timothy gestured for her to go inside. "Yes, I'll show you."

In the house, the yellow fluorescent light buzzed above them. To her right was a handmade wooden bookshelf full of framed pictures. Most of them pictured a brown-haired, blue-eyed woman with freckles on her cheeks. She was always smiling and in a few were posing with Timothy and David.

"Is this your wife? She is beautiful," Zendari asked.

Timothy let Karn'a in and he stood beside Zendari, looking at the picture she was referring to. The woman was in a blue dress, hugging Timothy, who was coated in mud from head to toe. Her foot was kicked up in the air and didn't seem to care how dirty he was. It was as if the blue sky and the hardworking man in her arms was all she needed to be happy. The picture was a beautiful moment captured for eternity. Timothy grabbed the picture, reliving that memory once again.

"That was Lauren. She passed away a few years ago," Timothy said, rubbing the metallic frame.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Timothy closed his eyes, trying to hold back his frustration by the simple show of empathy. Empathy he wanted all those years ago. “The gun cabinet is up ahead.”

He led the way, walking past the kitchen into the living room. The hardwood floor creaked below them as he brought them into the living room that barely fit all three of them. A couch was on their left, facing the TV on the opposite wall. Straight ahead was the gun cabinet in question. It was made of wood with clear glass windows in the doors. A far cry from high security and one of the windows was shattered, with shards of glass all sitting on the purple felt next to a lone shotgun.

“My son saw it when he came in to make us food. They took my hunting rifle and handgun.”

“What time did he notice it?” Zendari asked.

“About seven.”

“Did anyone else come here after I left?”

“Not that I saw, but I was out in the back field most of the day. I wouldn’t be able to hear or see anyone from there with the tractor going.”

Zendari kneeled down to inspect the glass, but there was nothing that stood out. It was a simple smash and grab. There was nothing obvious left behind, besides a dark spot in the felt. She touched it and grease stuck to her finger. Taking a sniff, it smelt of oil, reminding her of the shed where the tractor was.

“Aren’t you going to write what I said down? Or take pictures?”

Zendari stood up and pointed to Karn’a. “That’s what she is for.”

Karn’a turned her head to her, hiding her shock behind the visor. She did not know she was supposed to record everything, too distracted by the antlers hanging above the TV. “Yeah—that’s why I’m here...”

Ignoring her friend's lack of focus, she spotted another drop of oil where the wood floor met the linoleum floor. She followed the trail and tapped Karn'a on the shoulder. "Finish up questioning him. I'm going to take a look around the house."

Normally, she would have asked more questions, but the dark oil spots called to her, almost as if, if she didn't follow them now, her lead would be lost forever. The next spot was not perfectly circular, but had a tail to it, suggesting directionality. Her head turned to the hallway on her left. She could see another room at the end and a staircase midway down the hall going up to the second floor. David was sitting on the staircase, typing away on his phone, absorbed with whoever he was messaging. Zendari walked into the hallway, keeping her eyes on the floor, but there was nothing more to go on. The only place on the floor she didn't check was under David's shoes and she figured it didn't hurt to talk to the witness who actually found the guns missing to begin with.

David had not heard her come up to him, so she leaned over to see what he was doing on the phone. It was a group text thread with his friends teasing him about the purp that was at his house.

Kenny: I bet you called it in so you could see her again. Didn't get a good enough look at the goods the first time.

David: I did not!

Roger: Pfff, I would have. You should ask her for a real picture. Something I can work with here.

David: You guys are gross.

Kenny: Says the guy who stalks her from the rafters.

David: It wasn't like that...

He had not clicked send on his last message as he kept re-writing what he was going to reply. His face contorted, struggling to find the right words for what he wanted to say.

“What picture are they talking about?” Zendari said, causing David to fumble his phone and almost jump to his feet.

“Um... nothing. I-um...”

Zendari glanced down at his feet that moved, noticing not even as much as a smear on the wood floor. Another bust, but at least his reaction brightened the mood. “Relax. It’s not a crime to take a picture of me. Unless it makes me look fat. Then I’m going to have to confiscate your phone.”

A smile escaped his lips, but he was unable to look at her. He said nothing, ashamed about a magnitude of things both seen and unseen. His phone was grasped in hand, knuckles white as milk from the cow.

“Your dad says you noticed the guns were missing?”

“Yeah.”

“When was the last time you saw the guns in the cabinet?”

“This morning, before you arrived.”

“Did you see anyone come in or leave after I left?”

David stirred in his seat on the step. She had seen it too many times before. He wanted to say something, but he needed an extra push. Zendari sat down next to him on the staircase, while he scooted against the wall. He glanced at her chest for a split second, before tearing his face away, hoping not to embarrass himself any further.

“I’m flattered that you find me attractive,” Zendari said.

“What? I didn’t say that?”

“You do know, women aren’t blind? We can see when you’re checking us out. Only your earth women are so prude that they are disgusted when a man gives them attention.”

“I’m sorry. I should have never—”

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t tell you how many times I was guilty of the same thing when I was your age. It can be hard to talk around a

beautiful man or I guess woman in your case. I'm just a normal person, just like you. You can just talk to me."

David finally made eye contact with her. Her golden eyes begged him to tell the truth and he was powerless to do otherwise.

"I'm not sure the guns were stolen," David admitted.

"Why not?"

"I was milking cows and had the barn door open. I was in and out all day and the only vehicle I saw coming and going was dad's truck."

"When was this?"

"An hour to two before I even went inside the house. I didn't pay much attention since I was working, but dad did load something in the backseat of his truck."

Zendari leaned back and thought about the possibility. She was confident Timothy was a rebel sympathizer at a minimum and clearly patient. What didn't sit right with her was David's willingness to turn on his dad so quickly. If she was any other agent, Timothy would have been hauled off to an interrogation room until he admitted his guilt. Thankfully, she had more patience than most and saw an opportunity to gain more insight on the boy's motivations.

"Does your dad hold any resentment toward the Imperium?"

"I don't know if he does anymore. We don't really talk about it."

"What do you mean *anymore*?"

David sighed. "When my mom died, dad took it really bad. Blamed the Imperium for her death."

"How did she die, if you don't mind my asking?" Zendari asked.

"Leukemia. We tried to get the Imperium doctors to help her, but they said their medical technology was only for soldiers at the time..."

Zendari put her hand on his shoulder. She felt the deep pain radiate in his body with each shallow breath. She was used to hearing people suffering from their military actions, but it was a first for her to see

their resentment based on medical inaction. Something that should have never happened. A failure for them to protect their new citizens and one that could lead to more deaths if nothing is done to stop it.

“I’m sorry that we failed you and your mother. You all deserved better than that.”

David stared at the floor, unsure what more to say. An apology was nice and all, but it didn’t bring back his mom. Zendari always struggled in these moments, but a thought jumped into her head that would be a step in the right direction. She slowly reached over and took his phone from his hand, which he didn’t resist, but his head followed the phone. Zendari started typing away, peaking David’s curiosity.

“What are you doing?”

Zendari handed the phone back. “If you ever need to talk to someone or those guns ever magically return, you can always call me.”

“Thank you, Agent D’Quirlen.”

She ruffled his hair. “You can call me Zendari. All the cute boys do.”

David blushed as she got up to leave. He saw her name and phone number in his contacts, giving him one last idea. “Zendari?”

Zendari turned around, wondering what he wanted to add. “Yes?”

“Do you mind if I get a photo of you? For my contacts page.”

“You know that many girls named Zendari?”

“You would be surprised.”

Zendari laughed, knowing he was full of shit. He probably just wanted a better picture to send to his friends, which she wasn’t opposed to. At least it would be on her terms. She kneeled down to his level, and he took a picture of her. He even showed it to her as a show of good faith.

“Can you send that to me? My boyfriend would love another photo for the refrigerator.”

“Sure,” David tapped away on his phone then put it away. “You have a boyfriend?”

She got to her feet, hearing the creek of the floor below her. “What? You didn’t think I could find someone?”

“No—”

“Hey Zendari, I’m done with Timothy. Are we good here?” Karn’a asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Yeah, just one sec,” Zendari answered, still looking at David. “Remember, if you need anything, give me a call.”

David nodded and with that Zendari left with Karn’a, followed closely by Timothy until they left his house. The women waited until they were back inside the vehicle before speaking.

“Did he give you any serial numbers on those guns?” Zendari asked, while Karn’a took off her helmet.

“Nope. Sounds like none of the doors were locked either, so all the thief had to do was walk right in.”

“If there was a thief,” Zendari said, watching Timothy stand outside, waiting for them to leave. His stare gave her an uneasy feeling in her stomach. Like he knew something they didn’t.

“What do you mean? You don’t think the guns were stolen?”

“His son wasn’t so sure.”

“Really? Why would Timothy falsely report stolen weapons?”

“I can think of a few reasons. None of them are good.”

CHAPTER 14.

A MONTH HAD GONE by and the stolen weapons had not shown up. Zendari was hoping David would come through and either convince his dad to stop whatever he was planning or at least report something. Neither had transpired. She was not one to dwell on it too much, since surveillance on their land had begun after filing the report. Zendari got weekly updates, but nothing had come of it. The other suspected rebels in the town she investigated had also turned out to be a dead end. None of this discouraged her though. She had a wonderful man to take her mind off work and the weather was getting nice.

Vibrant green grass glowed under the bright sun that kept her warm as she looked out across the open field. At the end, there was a metal basket with chains in the distance. Her head then went lower, watching Joseph's black shoes wiggle at the end of their picnic blanket. Zendari laid back down on the blanket, taking in how the sun gently shined on him, while he idly stared up at the sky.

"It is a beautiful day," Joseph said, taking a deep breath of the fresh air.

"And I couldn't ask for a better man to spend it with."

Joseph turned to his side, matching her pose. He watched her eyes move back and forth, as if she was trying to decipher what he was thinking. If his smile wasn't enough of an indication, surely his fingers walking toward her and over her bare stomach was.

"Are you sure you aren't cold? You could always wear my shirt," Joseph offered, pulling on the collar of his loose white T-shirt.

"Gosh, can't I just enjoy time with my boyfriend without him propositioning me every few minutes?" Zendari teased.

"I simply want to make sure you aren't cold. Given how hot you like it in the house, I didn't think you would wear a sports bra and gym shorts."

"You said we were playing a sport. What else would I wear?"

"Normal clothes. Frisbee golf isn't as intense as you think."

Zendari scooted closer to him and he wrapped his arm around the small of her back. Her face mere inches from his, smelling his cinnamon breath. "Maybe we could make it a bit more intense?"

"What do you have in mind?"

Neither of them said anything, eyes locked on each other. Their hearts beat in sync, louder than the birds chirping around them. Nothing more needed to be said before they kissed and Joseph rolled up on top of her. Zendari wrapped her arms around him out of reflex, while her tongue worked its way into his mouth. Her mind started to drift, fantasizing where this was going next when a frisbee whacked her in the ribs. They both separated and saw Karn'a jogging over to them.

"Got'em! Hey John, do I get any points for hitting the other team?" Karn'a called back to John who was still coming up the hill.

"That's not how this works. Why?" John asked.

"Bummer," Karn'a said. Zendari picked up the frisbee and chucked it at her, which Karn'a caught with cat-like reflexes. Her paws stung

from the solid plastic slamming into the soft pads on her hand. "Ow, I felt that one. Did I interrupt something?"

"Yeah. And that frisbee hurts like a bitch."

"Good. You know this is a public course. Think of the children."

Joseph got off of Zendari and looked over the side of the hill where John was coming up. John had a puffy black satchel slung over his shoulder and wore a loose fitting Minnesota Twins jersey with a matching baseball cap. It was a contrast to Karn'a's camo t-shirt that was definitely a size too small, with her breasts too large to let the lower half of the shirt touch her stomach.

"If we are thinking of the children, your shirt is too small," Joseph argued.

"What? It fits me just right, doesn't it cutie?" Karn'a asked John who walked up next to her.

"What fits you right?" John asked, pulling a beer out of his satchel.

Karn'a whipped her tail around John's wrist, sliding the beer from his hand. "My outfit."

"Yep, it fits you perfectly." John slapped her on the spandex ass. The welcomed surprise caused her to drop the beer, which he caught in one smooth motion. "As long as it doesn't rip when you move, it fits."

"Where is Sarah? She planned this double date," Joseph said, wanting to switch topics.

"Her uncle made a surprise visit all the way from Ireland yesterday. He is only going to be here for another day and I guess the whole family is going to be there," John said.

"Shouldn't you be there?" Zendari asked, unsure why he wouldn't be.

"She said it was only family. I guess they were going to be discussing wills and such. Stuff I agree, I don't have any say in."

“Not yet. I see how she looks at you. She will propose in no time,” Karn’a said.

John put on a fake smile, and the beer can cracked under his power. He was supposed to be the one to propose, and he was far from ready to make such a big decision. Joseph felt the silence grow between them and knew better than to let it linger.

Joseph clapped his hands together, drawing everyone’s attention. “Alright, so do you two know how to play frisbee golf?”

“Nope. I thought you scored points by hitting people,” Karn’a said, spinning the frisbee on her finger.

Zendari also shook her head, but was eager to hear him explain it.

“Okay, the objective is to throw your frisbee into the basket, which is...” Joseph pointed over to the metal cage on the far side of the field.

“That over there with the chains.”

“That’s it?” Zendari asked.

“Yep. All you do is keep track of how many throws it took you. The person with the least throws by the end wins.”

“So, no teams. Well then, you are all going down!” Karn’a said, slinging her frisbee across the field. It wavered in the air and bent to the left, landing on the edge of the hill, halfway from the target.

“Pff. You call that good. Hold my beer,” John said, handing off his beer to Karn’a and pulling a bright orange frisbee from the bag. He took a few steps to the right to center himself, wound up, and launched the frisbee into the sky. It stayed true, coming down for a soft landing only a few yards away from the target. John turned around, flexing his muscles for the briefest of moments before lunging at Karn’a who was chugging his beer.

“No! The source of my power!” John said, being held back with some difficulty.

Karn'a licked her lips and let out a satisfying burp. "Ah, that is good."

Joseph went over to John, who was far too preoccupied with getting his beer back, and took his bag from him. Inside, there were three more beers and some frisbees. He took a yellow and a purple frisbee out of the bag, handing the purple one to Zendari. Both frisbees had seen better days, with scratches and dirt embedded in them.

"Don't worry, John always starts off good, but by the time we get into the woods, he will be a mess." Joseph assured Zendari and did his throw. It was the weakest one yet, bending to the right and rolling forward once it hit the grass. John would have definitely made a smart comment about his weak throw, but he was still battling Karn'a for the last drop of his beer. Joseph turned back to Zendari and shrugged. "Let's see what you got."

Zendari squared herself with the basket and did the motion a few times, mimicking what they had done earlier. She took a few steps back, wound up and threw it as far as she could. The amount of power she put into the throw was no match for her poor release, causing it to land short of Joseph's throw.

"Don't make me suck it out of you!" John said, tossing aside the empty can Karn'a handed back to him.

Karn'a egged him on, hoping he would try it. "Oh, I bet you can't."

John sized her up and took a few steps back, "Alright, you asked for this."

Karn'a continued to tease him, motioning with both hands to come at her. He charged and leaped into her arms, doing his best to suck the remnants of the beer off her sweet tongue. She struggled to hold him up, knees weak from his passionate display of tomfoolery. He didn't stay long, pulling away from her and she had to let him down.

"Did you learn your lesson?"

“Mmm. I don’t think so, I think I need another one.”

“Too bad. You aren’t getting another kiss until you beat me on one of these holes.”

“What if I beat you in the whole game?” Karn’a asked, in an airy voice. The challenge set her heart beating faster and her paws tingled.

“Maybe we celebrate in the woods. And if you are an extra good kitty, I might consider that one thing you mentioned,” John said, clacking his teeth together.

Karn’a almost melted where she stood. It took all the self-restraint she could muster not to moan, imagining him biting into her supple breasts. John smirked with satisfaction, knowing she was properly motivated and likely too excited about the end, that it could be enough distraction for him to beat her in the hard part of the course. It also elicited the other outcome he was hoping for.

Karn’a dashed over to Joseph and Zendari, who already started making their way to their frisbees, not wanting to watch them make out, and snatched the bag. She plucked another beer from the bag that had beads of sweat on the cold can. Cracking it open, she handed it to John, happy as can be.

“Your beer, my majesty,” Karn’a said, comically bowing to him.

“That’s more like it,” John said, taking a sip. His sip turned into a chug as Karn’a held her finger under the can, lifting it higher and higher with each gulp.

“It’s the source of your power. Can’t have you let me win,” Karn’a smirked.

John struggled to chug the beer, realizing his plan wasn’t as fool-proof as he thought. All he really wanted was the beers to himself, yet if he couldn’t enjoy them at his leisure, he could be drunk before hole three. He tore the beer away, letting some feed the grass below. “You

better throw your frisbee. Otherwise, you get extra points if I score before you.”

Karn’a slung the bag on his shoulder, in the hope it would slow him down, and sprinted over to her frisbee. John watched as his sexy girlfriend ran off and he chuckled to himself. She was so gullible, but he needed all the help he could get. That woman was a fierce competitor, and he wasn’t so sure he was ready to back up his end of the deal. She had mentioned to him a little fantasy of hers and he didn’t have the heart to say no when she brought it up. John didn’t want her to think he didn’t value her or her primal fantasies, no matter how concerning they were to him. He knew if he tried to do what she wanted on Sarah, he would have gotten a swift kick in the balls and a slap across the face. With Karn’a though, she was a different animal completely.

He took another sip of his beer and put it back in the bag. “Alright John, don’t screw this up.”

On the other side of the field, the other couple had both thrown their frisbees again, landing near the basket, and made their way to finish the hole.

“Looks like you’re getting the hang of it.” Joseph nudged.

Zendari pushed him back. “It’s not that hard.”

“Oh really, want to make it interesting?”

“What do you have in mind?” Zendari asked.

“You beat me, you choose where we eat after.”

“And if I don’t?”

A mischievous grin went over Joseph’s face. All he needed was a curly mustache and he would have been a supervillain. Zendari knew that look all too well.

“No. Not going to happen.”

“Oh, come on.”

Zendari shook her head with the defiance of Gretchen when she didn't want to eat her broccoli. "Nope. You can't make me."

"It's not even bad. The kids would love it."

"If it isn't that bad, you do it."

"You know I'm not tall enough. It would probably fit you perfectly."

"Forget it. Not worth it."

"Fine, counter offer. I win, you wear the mascot uniform at Billy's baseball game, but if you win, I owe you three favors."

"What kind of favors?"

"Anything you want. You name it. I'll make it happen. You want me to watch those weird alien shows on the data net? Done. Want a massage? Done. Want more than a massage?" Joseph winked. "Anything you want, assuming I can do it, is yours. I can't say no."

Zendari pondered that proposition. *Whatever I want?* Her mind wandered, thinking about what she would use that kind of power for. "Hmmm, make it five and we have a deal."

"Four. And the first sex request won't count."

"Deal," Zendari said, and the chains clattered together from Karn'a sinking her throw.

"Yes! John, did you see that?" Karn'a said.

"That was great. Excellent throw," John said, gritting his teeth. *Damn. This was going to be harder than I thought.*

The next two holes were more straight shots over the open field, yet only yielded John a one throw lead on Karn'a. Joseph and Zendari played more conservative, unable to break the tie between them. They were almost at the end of the fourth hole, where the basket was in the tree line. Joseph's throw thunked against an oak tree and laid on the gravel path in the woods. Karn'a and John laughed, waiting for them both by the basket already.

Zendari was up, and she tried to succeed where Joseph failed. She threw the frisbee higher in the air, aiming more to the right. It curved back to the left, missing the tree and crashing into the chains. Zendari jumped up and down, while Joseph jogged over to her to give her a high five.

“That was a good shot!”

“I think I see why you like playing this game. It’s pretty fun,” Zendari said with a permanent smile on her face.

“Doesn’t hurt that you are winning our bet,” Joseph added, walking with her to the basket.

Joseph tossed his frisbee in with ease and they both grabbed their frisbees. Zendari held hers up in victory when suddenly a hole blasted right through it. Within the same second, the report of a rifle shot echoed through the woods, scattering the birds. She froze for a second, comprehending what happened. Then her instincts kicked in.

The frisbee fell to the ground and she tackled Joseph, moving him out of the line of fire. Another shot went out. Zendari held Joseph close, hiding behind a stump of a wide oak tree. She glanced over at Karn’a who had John under her foot while she had her back to a different tree.

“Do you see the shooter?” Zendari yelled over at Karn’a.

“No—” Bark splintered from Karn’a’s cover, forcing her to stay hidden.

Zendari reached for her weapon, but all she felt was her slick shorts. Her anxiety shot up, frantically trying to think her way out of this. Another shot rang out, the bullet zinging above their heads. She rolled to her side, making sure Joseph was lower to the ground.

“Karn’a, please tell me you have a weapon in that bag,” Zendari said.

“No. I’m gonna cut this brotherfucker open with my own bare claws!”

“You have a plan for that?”

“Yeah, whoever it is can’t shoot us both. I say we charge.”

“Are you insane?” Zendari asked, not liking the odds of them charging an unknown enemy with a projectile weapon without any armor.

“Nobody shoots at my man and gets to live to tell the tale!” Karn’a extended her claws, ready to get moving. “On three.”

“Joseph, when we break cover, run in the opposite direction,” Zendari said.

“I’m not leaving you,” Joseph said.

“One.”

“You need to let someone know we’re here. There is no time,” Zendari said.

Her eyes glowed, burning into him her will. She couldn’t afford to lose him. Her heart couldn’t take being unable to save the man she loved, so any sacrifice to ensure that end, she was prepared to do.

“Two.”

“Zen—” Joseph began, but Zendari laid on him a passionate kiss reserved for loved ones going off to war, likely never to return.

“If I make it back, I’ll wear that outfit,” Zendari said.

Joseph gave her a sad smile. There was no convincing her otherwise.

“Three!”

Zendari pushed off the ground to her feet and leaped over the stump. Karn’a ran forward as well, into the unknown. No more shots were fired as they weaved around trees and bounded toward their best guess where the shots were coming from. Her heart raced, worried the next step was going to be her last. Karn’a went forward without fear, focused on her new prey.

Karn’a had laser focus. It was kill or be killed and she was determined to be the one doing the killing. She sprinted past the open gravel trail

that winded to the next hole and pounced into the brush where she was sure to find the shooter. Her claws did not get any satisfaction, except for digging into the walnut stock of the abandoned rifle. She left the rifle on the bed of pushed down foliage and climbed the nearest tree, hoping to catch a glimpse of the coward.

Zendari caught up to her, hearing the unpleasant growl of her friend. The sticks snapped underneath her as she stumbled upon the rifle. The bolt was closed and the smell of gunpowder leaked from the barrel.

Karn'a slid back down the tree. "I don't see anyone. Whoever it was, they ran like mad to get out of here."

"No use chasing now. We will want to preserve the scene. Go get Joseph and John so they know where to direct our backup."

Karn'a nodded and ran off to get the men, while Zendari stared back at the rifle. The simplistic fusion of nature and metallurgy was a deadly force in the right hands. Thankfully, now it was nothing more than an inanimate object, waiting to be put to use again. The longer she stared at it, the more she was convinced whose weapon it was. Timothy McGee.

Joseph watched the woods fill up with Marines. Karn'a was giving out orders for different pods, while Zendari helped the forensics team with the rifle. It was surreal watching the two women work and gave him a greater appreciation for what they did. The Marines followed Karn'a's orders without hesitation, splitting off further into the woods to search. John would have been impressed, but he was too busy showing two from the forensics team the shot up frisbee and where

they took cover. Joseph frankly didn't think she had it in her to be so serious, unlike Zendari. He watched her take careful notes until a call came in on her omni-pad.

"Status report," Command Tojen demanded.

"Marines are searching for the shooter as we speak. We have the weapon and no one is hurt. Do we have orbital surveillance available?"

"Your whole region should have been covered after your boyfriend called me. When I know more, you will be the first to know."

"I should get ready to handle the press. They will want—"

"I don't want you or anyone there breathing a word about this to the press. Last thing I need is Governess Vumars up my ass because of possible rebel activity. If you have to say anything, say it was a hunting accident."

"In May?"

"I gotta go. Follow up on those leads and handle this quickly." Commander Tojen said sternly and hung up.

Zendari lowered her omni-pad, not excited with all the secrecy. There was a dangerous criminal on the loose and the people were not allowed to know. Normally keeping people in the dark wasn't an issue, but she had grown quite fond of the people the longer she had been here. They deserved to know, if for no other reason, to avoid the person responsible. To keep the kids safe. It made her think of Susan and her kids. Zendari couldn't live with herself if any of them died simply because they didn't know who was out there. She started scrolling to find Susan's number when one of the women from forensics came up to her.

"Agent D'Quirlen, we are done here. We are going to take the weapon back to the lab and head out."

"That's fine. Send me all the photos and lab results as soon as you can," Zendari said.

“Will do. Where did the others go?” the forensics woman asked.

They both turned their attention farther down the hole where John was surrounded by the rest of the forensics team. They were all laughing while he took another swig from his beer.

“If I had another beer and a better idea where that bastard was, I could have taken him out with this here frisbee,” John gloated, tossing the frisbee in the air to himself. It was quite the exaggeration, but the women didn’t mind, finding his sense of humor in the situation quite refreshing.

“I think I found your team,” Zendari said.

“Where did you find a man like him?”

“Oh, he’s not hers. That’s my man,” Karn’a said, walking past them both to shoo away the thirsty science jockeys.

Karn’a pushed past the crowd, making John’s smile widen.

“There she is! The woman of the hour!” John exclaimed, putting his arm around her waist.

Karn’a was positively beaming with pride. John saw her as the hero she always wanted to be. She may not have caught the fiend, but what she did catch was far better. His adoration.

“What tales have you been telling these women?”

“I was just saying if you didn’t pin me to the ground with those strong legs of yours, I would have taken the shooter out with my trusty frisbee here.” John bragged. Karn’a laughed and hugged him. “But I know my kitty wanted to play with the mouse.”

“He sure talks a big game, doesn’t he, ladies?” Karn’a said, getting a few laughs.

“You’ve seen my throw. Absolutely lethal.”

Karn’a smiled and shook her head. “No, it’s not.”

“It was to your chances at beating me.” John smirked.

Ooohs went from the crowd and Karn'a had no comeback, but to smile and shake him lightly. She didn't want to be reminded in front of her peers that a man was beating her at any sport. John noticed the subtle change in her posture, reminding him of how Sarah acted when he said something she didn't like. Karn'a outwardly did a better job of hiding it, but he had been more aware of his actions ever since he had been dating two women. More attention to his women's needs was required and he rose to the occasion, even in his slightly inebriated state. Or the adrenaline was still flowing, increasing his awareness. It was tough for him to tell.

"Let's get a move on," the lead forensics technician said behind the group. "Agent D'Quirlen needs our results as soon as possible."

The other forensics technicians nodded and reluctantly left Karn'a and John to themselves, while Zendari went over to Joseph to check on him. He was waiting for her, pushing off the tree he had been leaning against. His hair was frazzled, but his face was hopeful as always.

"How did it go?" Joseph asked.

"Don't worry, we'll catch them. How are you holding up?"

"Better now that I know you're safe." Joseph kissed her on the cheek and hugged her. "Let me guess, you need to work?"

"As long as that shooter is still on the loose, you're in danger."

"Why do I feel they weren't shooting at me?" Joseph asked, letting go of her.

Zendari cocked her head. "What makes you say that?"

"You're an Interior Agent investigating rebel activity. You really think I am in danger?"

"Everyone around here knows we're dating. If they want to get to me, they could come after you all the same."

"Then you better find that shooter. Cause I want to enjoy my summer with you, not be looking over my shoulder."

Zendari saw the frustration behind his otherwise upbeat reply. Neither of them wanted to be hunted. If the shooter was still in the woods, she was confident the Marines would find them. That was still no excuse to cover her own leads, which would require another trip to Mr. McGee's place to confirm the weapon found was indeed his. If it was, she was going to demand more from him this time around.

"I better get on it." Zendari pecked him on the cheek and went over to Karn'a, who was enjoying a beer with John. "Drop the beer, we got to go."

"Where? Did they find them?" Karn'a asked.

"We're going to follow up with Mr. McGee."

"The farmer? You think that was the stolen weapon?"

"I sure hope so. It will at least give us a place to start. Where are your keys?"

"I'll drive." John burped and jingled the keys.

"No, you're not," Karn'a said, snatching the keys from him. The keys were not in her hands for longer than a second and Zendari took them from her.

"Neither are you. John, you are going home with Joseph," Zendari said, walking away. "Come on, Karn'a."

Karn'a went to follow when she felt a tug on her tail. She turned to see John holding on to her like he was ready for a tug-of-war match. His eyebrows bounced up and down, beckoning her one last time. Unable to refuse, she came to him, where he leaned in close and whispered to her.

"When you're done playing hero, meet back at my place. I'll give you a hero's welcome," John said, biting her ear ever so gently.

Karn'a eyes went into the back of her head and purred. Her arm fur stood on end, while she rested a paw on his chest. His heartbeat was

steady, not fluttering with lust like hers was. He lowered her paw from his chest and made eye contact with her.

“You’re gonna have to wait. Besides, you’ll like sober me better.”

“Can’t wait. I’ll be back before you know it, cutie.”

Zendari wasn’t waiting for her partner to catch up, opting to call Susan on her way to Karn’a’s vehicle. It was only one ring and she answered, with children yelling in the background.

“This is Susan. Hey, don’t touch that,” Susan said, talking to her children at the same time.

“It’s Zendari. Where are you at?”

“At home, trying to corral these rascals so we can head out to the park. Willy, put that down right now!”

“Don’t. You should stay home.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Susan’s tone changed to worry.

“I’m not supposed to say. We are working on it, but it would be safer if you didn’t go anywhere.”

“What about Barry? He’s at work.”

“He’ll be fine there. If you need more details, call Joseph. Whatever you do though, please don’t spread this around. I am really not supposed to say anything.”

“Should I lock the doors? Do I need to get the gun?”

“It shouldn’t come to that. Stay indoors and I will let you know when it is safe to leave.”

“Criminals sure pick a perfect day to ruin for everyone.”

“They sure do. Hopefully, I will be calling you soon.”

“Stay safe, Zendari.

“You too.”

Zendari hung up and walked a little faster to the vehicle. It may have been a bit alarmist to tell her to stay sheltered in place, but better to be safe than sorry. If the shooter was hunting them all the way out here,

they had to have a vehicle of some sort. A chase was a real possibility and lots of things could happen. She didn't want a head on collision with Susan's van or her kids getting run over at a park to be one of them. It also reminded her of the urgency of this whole situation. They needed to find this shooter before anyone else got hurt out of fleeing desperation. It was her job to protect them, along with the rest of the town she loved so much. *Timothy better have answers.*

CHAPTER 15.

“DID I THROW MY helmet up there?” Karn’a said from the back seat, mostly dressed in her combat gear. She rustled through the sea of camo jackets, traps, duck calls, and other various hunting supplies, trying to recall where it went. Her tail swung back and slapped Zendari in the face when she reached out to uncover another layer of the mess underneath an extra puffy coat.

“No.” Zendari swatted her tail out of her face, trying to see the road ahead. “What do you have all back there?”

“It’s John’s work stuff. I said I would help him haul it. I also have Joseph’s new stand that I was going to propose we put up after frisbee,” Karn’a said, scratching the metal with her claws before pulling it up, revealing her helmet underneath. “There’s my helmet! I was wondering where you ran off to.”

“You bought him a new stand? What happened to the old one?”

Karn’a slid back into her seat and held her helmet in her lap like a bucket of popcorn, picking out a bag of green arrow nocks. “We broke it. Don’t worry though, I got a heavier duty one so you both can fit in it this hunting season.”

Zendari didn't get to respond, interrupted by her omni-pad on the center column. Karn'a glanced at the screen, noticing an unfamiliar name.

"Who is David?"

"Answer it."

Karn'a tapped the screen and the teen's voice came over the car speakers.

"Zendari, I need your help."

"What's wrong?" Zendari asked, hearing the worry in his voice.

"My dad got home and has been pacing in the kitchen ever since. He is seriously spooked by something. When I tried to ask what was wrong, he flipped out on me. I've never seen him like this."

Zendari pushed her foot down and the engine revved louder. "Don't worry, David. I'm on my way as we speak."

"Did something happen?"

"That's what I'm going to find out. Can you leave the house?"

"I'm in the barn right now."

"Good. Stay there. I'll be there soon." Zendari hung up and turned onto the dirt road. Dust flew up as the vehicle drifted on the loose soil. Karn'a held onto the dash and her helmet rolled off her lap onto her shoes.

"Sounds like Timmy knows something."

"We better get to him first."

The vehicle flew down the country road, only slowing down to turn. It wasn't long before they arrived at the farmhouse, slamming on the brakes. The vehicle had hardly gotten thrown into park before they opened the doors. Dust drifted on behind them, obscuring their vision of inside the house, where Timothy definitely saw them and ran out of sight. Neither Zendari nor Karn'a saw him and went up to the door, knocking to announce their presence.

“This is Agent D’Quirlen. Open up.”

No response came, but the wooden whack of the back door. Zendari motioned with her head and Karn’a ran around the house to the back.

“Mr. McGee, we need to talk to you—Hey, no, don’t go back inside!” Karn’a said from the back of the house. The door smacked closed again and the chase was on.

Zendari went inside to head him off, running through the kitchen to the hallway at the end. Her feet slid on the slick floor when trying to round the corner and ended up using the wall to stop her momentum. On the other side of the short hallway was Timothy, wearing dirty clothes and sweating profusely. He stopped in his tracks, not expecting to see her there.

“Mr. McGee, we need to talk with you,” Zendari said, pushing off the wall.

His eyes moved toward the stairs before he made a dash for it, but Zendari couldn’t afford to let him get up there. She tackled him into the staircase wall, two steps up the stairs. Pinning him, he tried to fight his way out of her grip, but he wasn’t strong enough. He screamed, but it didn’t change his situation. His fate was sealed when Karn’a came in and both women brought him to the floor.

“Mr. McGee, all we want to do is talk. Why are you trying to run?” Zendari asked, kneeling on his back.

Timothy said nothing, still struggling on the ground to get away. Karn’a put his arm behind his back and reached for her cuffs when she stopped. Zendari knew she was listening to someone on comms for an update and focused her attention on Timothy so they didn’t lose control of him. Once Karn’a came back to reality, she twisted his wrist extra hard. He screamed in pain after an audible snap escaped his body.

“Karn’a, what are you doing?” Zendari asked.

“Surveillance came back. Vehicle found fleeing the scene registered to this bastard. Some rusted trash bucket with a green tailgate,” Karn’a said, putting the cuffs on him.

Zendari’s grip tightened around his upper arm, cracking her knuckles. Her body shook with rage. The man who tried to kill her and her boyfriend was in her grasp. He was going to pay for what he did. She grabbed him by the back of the neck and lifted him up with Karn’a’s help. Zendari bonked his head against the wall in front of him before taking his arm and escorting him outside.

They brought him to the SUV and threw him in the backseat, with Karn’a going in behind him.

“Bag him. We are going to interrogate him somewhere else,” Zendari said, closing the door. She went to open the driver’s door when she spotted David watching them from the barn entrance. He was petrified in place, unable to comprehend what was happening. Zendari let go of the door handle and walked over to him. She didn’t know what to say to a boy who was about to lose his father because he was a criminal.

“What’s going on?” David asked, still unmoved.

“I’m sorry to break this to you, but we spotted his truck fleeing a crime scene. We need to take him in for questioning, but it’s not looking good,” she said, wanting to level with him.

“Was I right? Did he lie about the stolen weapons?”

“I think he is more involved than that.”

David lowered his head. “Is he going to jail?”

Zendari’s waning anger turned to pity for the boy. His dad was about to be taken away for the foreseeable future and likely the farm, given that his son wasn’t making any money to keep it. David’s life was about to be drastically changed forever, but there was no one else to

blame but his dad. “Do you have anyone to call? Family or friends you can stay with?”

“My grandma. She lives in the cities.”

“You should call her. I’ll check on you later today.”

David nodded, and tears welled in his eyes. It hurt Zendari, watching the boy cry. She gave him a hug and he completely broke down, wailing into her stomach. There was nothing more she could do but pat his back and hold him. He needed a good cry, and she was there to comfort him.

Zendari held his head, rubbing his hair. “I know. I know.”

Zendari didn’t take the same way back, opting to drive the opposite way they came from. At first Karn’a thought there was a security reason, but once they went off-road and to a small shack at the end of a wild prairie, she knew this was something else.

“We’re not heading back to base?” Karn’a asked.

“Nope,” Zendari said, head bobbing from the shocks not keeping up with the terrain.

“Not going to tell me why?”

“I’m not waiting a few more hours to get my answers.” Her head flung forward from the sudden stop and put it in park. She turned around in her seat to face Karn’a, who braced herself on the passenger seat headrest. “Or do you want to interrogate him while we drive?”

Karn’a met her serious stare. It was a side she had never seen from Zendari. There was an edge to her tone that made her a little scared or what she was going to do to their prisoner. Interior Agents were

known to act shady, but she never saw Zendari as that kind of woman. Until now.

Zendari got out of the vehicle and roughly threw him out, letting him hit the ground. He coughed, not expecting the sudden drop. Karn'a crawled out and got him up to his feet.

"Put him inside and tie him up. Then meet me out here," Zendari ordered, tossing her some rope she found on the floorboard.

Karn'a took Timothy inside, where birds scattered once she opened the door. The windows were shattered and the wood floors creaked when she brought him into the center of the room. There were three plastic chairs all facing each other, all covered in white bird poop. Karn'a picked the cleanest one and tied him to it.

"What are you doing to me? Where am I?" Timothy yelled.

"Honestly, I have no idea where we are. Safe to say though, there is no point in running," Karn'a said, finishing her knot behind his back.

"Let me go! I demand a lawyer!"

"I don't think you're gonna get one of those. Sorry, bud."

Timothy rocked back and forth in his chair until he tipped over. Karn'a propped him back up and dusted the dirt off his head.

"I'll be back. Don't hurt yourself while I'm gone."

Timothy kept yelling at her, but she ignored him, concerned about what Zendari was planning. She saw the trunk door open, and some supplies piled up next to Zendari. Karn'a jogged over to her and tapped on the side of the vehicle to let her know she was there.

"Zendari, what are you planning to do to him?" Karn'a asked.

"You don't have a blowtorch in here, by chance?"

"What? You're not not going to do that. I won't let you!"

Zendari pulled herself out of the trunk, holding a climbing stick. "Relax. I was kidding."

"Then what is your plan? And does it involve that stick?"

“Normally, I would play the waiting game. Carefully craft questions, convince him the truth will set him free, stuff like that. But I want faster results today,” Zendari said, shifting through her pile to grab some duct tape and a metal trap. “And yes, it involves this stick.”

“Faster results? Why?”

“You must not have been briefed on it, but I confirmed he has been supplying a rebel faction with fertilizer to make bombs.”

“He’s a bomb maker!”

“No, just the supplier. Which made me think on the way here, what if he wasn’t the shooter?”

“Why wouldn’t he be the shooter?”

“He’s too valuable to commit a crime like this. A rebel group with a inconspicuous way of getting bomb making material would be worth protecting. Which would mean keeping a low profile.”

Karn’a scratched her head. “Then why report stolen weapons? Wouldn’t that put him on our radar?”

“I’m not sure of the angle yet. But I’m sure all will be revealed,” Zendari said, finishing her contraption. Duct tape was applied liberally to anchor the metal trap to the walking stick. She wielded it like a spear, with the jaws of the trap open, ready to feast. Unbeknownst to her, there were also two googly eyes attached to the trap, making it look like an off-brand Chain Chomp.

“That does not look safe.”

Zendari waved her off. “It looks threatening, though. We need threatening. Now I think there is a chance we can play good cop, bad cop with this.”

“What is that? Some type of twisted Interior interrogation technique?”

Zendari lowered her instrument in disbelief. “Have you not seen an Earth cop movie?”

Karn'a shrugged.

"One of us intimidates him to rattle him, while the other is nice and gets his confession. Good cop, bad cop."

Karn'a nodded along, not entirely following.

"I'll go first. You wait outside and come barging in when he starts to scream. Don't be afraid to really ream me out," Zendari said and went to the shack.

She slapped herself a few times, getting pumped up to go inside. *Here we go, time to unlock the little psycho.* Zendari kicked open the door and rushed into the room.

"Okay Timmy, no more games! You're going to tell me what I want to know or I'm going to feed your fingers to my little hungry hippo here," Zendari declared.

"Who the fuck is that?" Timothy said, whipping his head all around, unable to see with the hood still on his head.

"Oh." Zendari lowered her rod of torture and took off the bag over his head. His eyes adjusted to his new surroundings, which were not much brighter than the bag, but enough to see Zendari return to her warrior stance. She had a manic look in her eye. "Now, start talking."

"About what?"

"You know what? You didn't try to run from us because you were innocent."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Don't play dumb. We spotted your truck leaving the shooting."

"That—" Timothy stopped abruptly, not saying anymore.

"Come on, finish your thought."

Timothy stayed quiet, opting to stare blankly ahead. It was a strange response, but she was sure to get his attention.

“Okay, fine. You want to play hardball. I’ll play.” Zendari walked behind him and moved the jaws of the trap toward his fingers. Timothy tried to move away, but he wasn’t going anywhere fast.

“Hey, what are you doing!”

“If you don’t want to talk, I have ways of making you talk,” she said, inching it closer and closer.

“No! Don’t!” Timothy squirmed and the chair squeaked under his rocking. His screams got louder and more shrill with every second that passed, watching the metal teeth get closer.

The trap tooth tickled his finger. Zendari could almost feel the trap beg to be unleashed on her victim. *Karn’a, where are you?*

In the nick of time, Karn’a came bursting in, swinging her helmet at Zendari. “Get away from him! We need him alive!”

“I was just going to take some fingers.”

“No! You go put everything away in the vehicle. I’m going to handle this.”

Zendari dropped the end on the floor, causing the trap to snap so hard it made Timothy jump. She dragged it behind as she left, allowing Karn’a to have her part in the grand act.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. McGee. Please excuse my colleague. She can get a little passionate about justice.”

“She almost cut my fingers off!”

“Yeah, she likes to collect them, but hey, everyone needs a hobby,” she said, pulling up a chair.

Timothy’s eyes almost bulged out of his head from her surprising candor regarding Zendari’s supposed human finger collection. “You let psychopaths like that in your police force?”

“She’s an Interior Agent. They hire psychopaths almost exclusively. One second, they are your stand up professional and the next they want your fingers.”

“Then what are you?”

“Just a woman who wants to know the truth. Like who tried to shoot us at the frisbee golf course?”

“Why would I ever tell you that?”

“Don’t worry, Mr. McGee. We have enough evidence on you to lock you up for a long time. Supplying bomb making material to known rebels is a serious crime.”

“Then why am I here? If you have enough to arrest me, take me away.”

“We need to know who your accomplice is. We have the rifle, but the handgun is still missing.”

Timothy stayed quiet, glaring at her. He still wasn’t properly motivated. Karn’a was. She had a man waiting for her and she was not going to miss it. And that thought of almost losing her man gave her a spark of creative inspiration. The mother of all bluffs.

“Mr. McGee. That shooter almost killed a man I care about. I take that quite personally. I am going to give you one opportunity to tell me who the shooter was or I am going to have Zendari go back to your farm, cut up your son’s fingers and bring them back here for you.”

Timothy lunged at her, being immediately stopped by his tight restraints. His veins popped in his arms from the pointless struggle and stomped on the ground.

“You son of bitch! Don’t you dare touch my son!”

“Tell me what I want to know!”

Timothy was seething with rage. His chest rose and the scowl on his face could have been deadly. Karn’a maintained her composure, even though it pained her to put someone through such distress. She had no idea how Zendari handled it so gracefully.

“Zenda—”

“It was me! I was the shooter.”

Zendari pushed open the door, hearing the whole conversation. Karn'a ignored it, staying on point.

"You were the shooter? No one else?"

Timothy shook his head. "No one else."

"Where is the handgun, then?" Zendari asked, skeptical of his answer.

"It's in my truck."

"Why did you try to kill us?" Karn'a asked.

"You promise not to hurt my son?" His eyes were filled with tears, shaking with shame and fear for his son. Karn'a and Zendari both cringed, hearing that out loud. They never would have done such a thing, but he certainly thought they would. It made them feel like the monsters they were pretending to be.

"I promise. We won't hurt him," Karn'a said.

Timothy sniffled, and Karn'a offered her hand to wipe his tears. His eyes darted between her hand and her eyes, seeing she was genuine. He wiped his face and then bit her.

"Ow!" Karn'a said, falling back out of her chair.

"That's what you get for threatening my son! You don't deserve my explanation!" Timothy roared.

Zendari forcefully unstrapped him from the chair and picked him up, dragging him back out to the SUV. They had gotten all they were going to get, and it was enough for now. Zendari put him in the back, not bothering to bag him this time. He confessed, so his conviction would be swift. Karn'a joined her outside as the door slammed shut.

"You okay?" Zendari asked, picking up her mangled stick on the ground.

"I feel bad about threatening his kid. It was kind of a low blow."

"Yeah, I did not expect you to go there. What made you think that would work?"

Karn'a shrugged. "Not sure. I figured since the kid was still at home and not bruised like a peach, the dad still loved him."

"Well, I'm glad that worked, because my little finger eater broke." Zendari held up the stick that had the trap dangling by a strip of the tape, googly eyes bopping around.

"What's with the eyes? Were you trying to scare him or make him laugh?"

Zendari took a closer look at it and laughed. "I didn't even see that! I'm surprised he took me seriously at all."

"How did you not? You put it together?"

"I guess I didn't pay attention." Zendari went to the trunk and tossed everything back into the vehicle. "It's over now, though. Let's get this guy back to base."

"I'll drive," Karn'a said, taking the keys from her.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm plenty sober now. And besides, Commander Tojen doesn't want you driving to base."

"That was the winter. The deer attacked me!" Zendari whined.

"Can't take the chance. This is a rental."

Zendari grumbled to herself as she went around to the passenger side door. "I can't wait until hunting season."

They drove in the dark with their vehicle a hundred fifty pounds lighter, ready to return home after such a long day. Between getting shot at, arresting the shooter, driving for several hours, and processing him at the base, Zendari wanted to take a shower and go to bed. The only part of the day that was a relief was the time she spent with Joseph

and hearing Gretchen's voice on the phone when she told Susan it was safe. That kid always brought her peace, no matter how stressful things got. Zendari's eyes drooped, while Karn'a was bouncing in her seat as they got closer to home.

"How are you not tired right now?" Zendari asked.

"John invited me over. I'm getting a *hero's* welcome."

"Did you already tell him you squeezed the confession out of Mr. McGee?"

"Nope. I'm waiting to tell him in person. I hear guys get a real hard on for that sort of thing."

Zendari snorted, unable to hide her amusement. "I'm pretty sure he prefers your body over how you brought a farmer to justice."

"Aw, thanks," Karn'a said, putting her hand on Zendari's shoulder. "I knew I was hot, but it never hurts to hear it from a friend."

Zendari rolled her eyes and the vehicle lurched to a stop on the side of the road in front of the house. The lights were on and Karn'a could hardly contain her excitement. She flew out of the SUV, locking it before Zendari touched the handle. Zendari pounded on the window and yelled at her, but she was almost to the door, unable to hear her. That was until Zendari opened the door and the alarm went off.

"Shut it off!" Zendari yelled over the incessant beeping that was sure to wake the neighbors.

Karn'a fumbled with the keys until she clicked it off. The door opened and Karn'a spun around to find John at the door.

"Your hero has returned!" Karn'a said, striking a pose with her fists on her hips and face to the sky.

"Yeah, she has. Come here, you," John said.

Karn'a swooped lower and backed him up into the house. Their lips collided in a raw way, more akin to eating than love making. Her boots scratched dirt over the floor, leaving behind the faintest of marks

behind. Joseph watched from the living room, noticing they didn't close the door.

"Where is Zendari?" Joseph asked, going to the door.

Karn'a lifted her lips for a second to answer him and pointed to the door with her tail. It was enough for him, seeing Zendari walk up to the door. Her uniform was wrinkled and her hair was frazzled as she tiredly walked through the threshold.

"Long day I see," Joseph said, kissing her on the cheek. "How did it go?"

"We got him. It was Mr. McGee," Zendari said.

"I got the confession out of him," Karn'a told John, not wanting to be outdone.

"Mr. McGee? Tim? The farmer at the edge of town?" Joseph asked, surprised by the revelation.

"Is there another?"

"Why would he do that? He's got a son," John said, breaking away from the passionate kissing to hear what Zendari was saying.

"Yeah, what's going to happen to him?" Joseph asked.

"David is going to live with his grandma for a while," Zendari assured them both. "And as for why his dad tried to kill us, he wouldn't say."

"Well, at least it is over, right?" John asked, turning his attention to Karn'a.

"You're right it is. You can sleep easy knowing another criminal is off the streets," Karn'a said.

John tugged on her combat gear and grinned. "Oh, I don't know how much sleeping I'm going to get tonight."

Karn'a was practically salivating, wanting to take him right there. He had a sparkle in his eye which she spotted a mile away. One that promised a night of fun and new experiences. It was also one that

Zendari saw as her cue to go to bed. Sleep was calling her name, and she was going to take advantage of it.

“I’m going to turn in. Don’t have too much fun,” Zendari said, waving to John and Karn’a.

“Goodnight General,” John saluted her and waited for Joseph to leave with her before grabbing Karn’a’s thigh. “Now that they’re gone, where would you like to celebrate? Right here or my room?”

“How about the woods?” Karn’a asked, her ears perking up.

“I’m not quite ready for that... but I am willing to do the other part of that request.” John moved his head to her chest and bit at the fabric.

“Good enough for me. To the bedroom it is!”

John pulled away and took her by the hand, leading her to his bedroom. Body odor and moldy cheese swirled inside the messy room. Clothes were all over the floor, and his bed was unmade. The nightstand on the left was filled with loose coins and a lone digital alarm clock that flashed twelve.

“What is that smell?” Karn’a asked, taking a deep breath.

John tossed a single shirt from his bed onto the floor, failing to really make it more presentable. “Sorry about that. I haven’t had time to clean.”

“Don’t be. I love it!” Karn’a said. It drove her wild, standing toe to toe with him. From his manly scent to his unsculpted body, there was nothing more special to her than being with him in his most natural habitat. Unafraid to be himself. She pushed him on the bed and the springs squeaked as his body bounced on top. “Take off that shirt, mister.”

“Take yours off first.”

“With pleasure.”

Karn'a worked at unzipping her gear, but it stuck to her well. She danced around, trying to get it off, when she slipped on a silky shirt. The entire floor rumbled, getting a laugh out of John.

"You okay? Do you need any help?"

"Nope. I've almost got it," she said, squirming out of her gear and poked her head above the bed.

John smiled and pulled the covers over him. He then pulled the shirt over his head and waved it around before tossing it at her. She yipped in excitement and slinked her way around the side of the bed, keeping her eyes on her prey. He maintained eye contact with her, enthralled by her intense focus.

He patted the bed. "Here kitty, kitty, kitty. I got a nice treat for you."

She lifted the covers and slipped in next to him. Without warning, John got on top of her and pinned her arms down. Karn'a purred and her tail went limp, enjoying his playful attempt to hold her down. Her eyes transfixed on his bare chest.

"We should have a safe word," John said.

"Oh, I don't think I will need a safe word."

"You sure? I can bite pretty hard."

"Do your worst," Karn'a said, tensing all her muscles below her neck.

That was the bell and the first round commenced. The headboard knocked against the wall and springs squeaked like a cheering crowd. None of it was louder than her screams of ecstasy.

"Ooh John! Yes! Yes!" Karn'a exclaimed.

On the other side of the wall, Joseph and Zendari were settling into bed when they heard the couple next door. Zendari tried to close her eyes and Joseph stared up at the ceiling, neither able to escape their screams.

“Harder! Harder!” Karn’a said, followed by an elongated moan that was part pain, part pleasure. The headboard kept knocking, and then suddenly stopped. Zendari sighed in relief, thinking maybe John was a quicker shot than Joseph.

“Did I hurt you?” John asked.

“I don’t see a mark. Don’t be afraid to really bite down.”

That was all the correction there was, and they were back at it. Karn’a’s screams got louder and the squeaky springs got more frantic. Zendari covered her head with the pillow after seeing Joseph doing the same thing. It helped a little, but wouldn’t help her sleep.

“YES! HARDER! HARDER!”

Shortly after her near shrieking, she gasped and then the pace slowly trailed off. The walls held back their heavy breathing and Zendari slowly removed the pillow from her ears.

“Is it over?” Zendari asked.

“I sure hope so. Any louder and the neighbors are going to call the police.”

Zendari sighed and scooted closer to Joseph, her eyes still closed. She hugged him tight, gathering the extra warmth from the little spoon. A smile was on her face while she nuzzled her head into his neck. “You’re so warm.”

“Zendari,” Joseph said, staring at the wall. His mind still thinking back to when they were frisbee golfing. How he felt being completely helpless and worse, knew that Zendari’s life was in danger.

“Yes?”

Joseph kissed her arm. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too... me too.”

No more words needed to be said as they both slowly drifted off to sleep. In the other room, Karn’a and John were still catching their breath. Their chests raised and lowered in unison, and Karn’a played

with the fresh bite mark that was left on her boob. A little blood leaked from it, yet all that did was get her more hot and bothered.

“That was the best sex I have ever had,” Karn’a said.

“That’s what you said last time.”

“And it just keeps getting better. Now I have a souvenir to mark the occasion,” she said, removing her hand from it.

John looked at the impression he left on her and sat up. “I hurt you. I’m so—”

“No. I love it. There is nothing hotter than a man marking his territory.”

“That looks bad. It might leave a scar.”

“Good. I hope it does. It will match my other one quite nicely.”

“Other one?”

“Yeah. Or did you forget you shot me with an arrow?” Karn’a said, showing off the ragged scar on her shoulder.

“I still feel bad about that.”

“You shouldn’t. If it wasn’t for that, we would have never met. I wear it with pride, just like I will this new one. I wish it was a little higher, though, so I could flaunt it easier.”

John petted her fur to cover the scar on her shoulder and leaned against her. Her fur was soft, although a bit damp from their aggressive session. After hearing how she felt about scars, he thought it would be a good time to share how he felt about her.

“Karn’a, can I be vulnerable with you for a minute?”

Karn’a’s attention peaked, turning on her side to face him. “Yes, of course.”

“When I was on the ground today and the bullets were flying. I was really scared.”

“It’s okay to be—”

“I was scared that I was going to lose you.”

Karn'a smiled gently and rubbed his arm. She had never had a man who cared about her before. It warmed her heart, knowing she was more to him than a fun lay. "You don't need to worry about losing me. If I can take an arrow to the arm, I'm sure I can take anything else you humans have in store for me."

"You're not invincible, Karn'a. No matter how much you think you are."

"Well, I haven't died yet. Can't really discount the possibility."

"Alright, Miss Invincible, time to test that theory."

John dipped under the covers, and Karn'a yipped with excitement. What he was doing under there was anyone's guess, but she had an idea. *I think I love this man.*

CHAPTER 16.

A MONTH HAD FLOWN by since Karn'a and Zendari arrested Timothy and he had finally been convicted. The trial was swift, but the whole case still left Zendari with some questions. They never found Mr. McGee's handgun. She double checked with the team that went to retrieve the truck and they showed her their helmet cams to confirm there was no handgun. It didn't affect his conviction, but she still had that lingering feeling he had an accomplice. Timothy either lied about the handgun or there had to be another person involved. And her mind kept telling her the less likely possibility.

Zendari shook herself out of her own thoughts as Joseph came skipping toward her with a giant gopher head in his arms. It was comically big with equally outlandish facial features like bucked teeth and a goofy smile.

"Here you go, the final piece to your uniform." Joseph said, handing her the mascot head.

She tucked it under her arm and adjusted the rest of her furry uniform. It was much more roomy than anything else she wore and came with an annoying long tail.

"Are you sure I need the helmet? Can't I go out there without it?"

"Are you getting cold feet already?"

“No... I just think the helmet might make it too hot. It is a bright day, after all,” Zendari said, pointing to the blue sky with not a single cloud to hide the sun’s rays.

Joseph gasped, realizing why she was so hesitant. “Zendari, are you afraid of helmets?”

You mean giant suffocation bags. No, why would anyone be afraid of them? “I’m not afraid, per se.”

Joseph pushed the helmet closer to her face. “Good, cause the kids are waiting.”

“You sure I can’t wear the deer costume instead? At least I can see in that thing.”

“You’re brave enough to run into a hail of gunfire, but not put on a mascot helmet?”

“When you put it that way, I sound silly.”

Joseph jumped up on his tippy toes and kissed her on the cheek. “But you’re my silly alien. And remember, be lively. The kids really love Gump the gopher.”

“His name is Gump?”

“I don’t make the names. Good luck out there!” Joseph said, jogging out from behind the shed and over to the bleachers.

Zendari held the helmet, staring back at the gopher’s giant felt eyes. She had her concerns and the gopher did not ease them with his near psychopathic cheeriness. “You better not suffocate me.”

She put on the helmet and her vision became impaired. Her pulse quickened, but she focused on her breathing. Counting to four with each inhale and exhale, she calmed herself. Zendari was worried her flashbacks would come back to when she was in training, but they didn’t.

The crowd in the stands stomped their feet and chanted. “Gumpy! Gumpy! Gumpy!”

It was her cue, and she took one last breath. *Here we go. For the children.* She ran out from behind the shed and over to the bleachers. Everyone cheered, stomping louder on the metal bleachers. Zendari spotted all of Susan's kids, minus Billy, in a row, each shouting at the top of their lungs among the full stands. The other adults and children were excited to see the mascot, but none more than Karn'a, who was up in the top corner with Sarah and John.

"Woo! Go Gophers!" Karn'a yelled from the top, throwing popcorn at her, which only rained down on the people below them.

Karn'a and the children's enthusiasm gave Zendari more confidence and energy to break out into some dance moves. The announcer was quick on the soundboard, playing some upbeat music to match her rhythm.

"Welcome baseball fans to the first game of the season. Today's matchup is going to be a doozy. We have the Jumpin Jackrabbits..." The announcer began until he was interrupted by half the stands cheering, clearly the family of the other team as the young boys in red baseball uniforms ran out into the field. "Versus the Grand Slammin Gophers."

Everyone else cheered, while Zendari hyped up the crowd. The boys in the dugout turned around and pulled on the fence separating them from their fans. Their smiling faces warmed their parents' hearts.

"Alright, Billy, you're up first today," Barry said, tucking his clipboard under his arm. Billy jumped away from the bench and ran over to his dad, who took off his blue baseball cap and traded him a batter's helmet. "Tuck in your shirt, bud."

Billy tucked in one portion he missed and spun around. "Am I good?"

"Mom will be proud. Now go knock 'em dead." Barry said, patting him on the butt.

Billy picked up a bat from the ground and skipped to the plate, ready to hit it out of the park. He got into his stance, bending a little at the knees. His bat wagged above his head, waiting patiently for the pitcher to throw the ball. The pitcher dug his cleat into the mound and brought his glove to his face. They both stared each other down, two tiny gladiators sizing the other up. Once the pitcher was satisfied, he wound up and let the ball fly. The ball hurdled toward the plate and Billy kept his eye on the ball. A crack echoed down the field and the ball went screaming to the shortstop.

The crowd hollered and Billy ran for first base, not waiting to see where the ball was going. His run stopped prematurely as the crowd clapped and others cheered even louder. The shortstop cowered in fear, eyes shut tight while the ball was stuck in his outstretched glove.

“Nice catch, Jamenson!” a dad yelled to his son from the stands. Billy turned around, disappointed that his solid hit didn’t result in at least a single. His little head was down and his helmet was dangling by his fingertips. Barry got the next boy up to bat and went over to console his son.

“Billy, that was a good hit.”

“But I didn’t make it on base.”

“He had a good catch. Nothing you can do about that,” Barry said and lifted Billy’s chin up. “You did a good job. Hold your head up high.” Billy gave him a weak smile and Barry put his cap back on his head. “That’s my boy.”

Barry returned his attention to the game, while Zendari came by to cheer the little guy up.

“That’s okay, Billy, you’ll get it next time,” Zendari said.

“Gumpy, why do you sound like a girl?”

Oh shit, am I supposed to sound like something else? She cleared her throat and thought back to how those squirrels sounded in the movies. “Ahem, I mean. Chuck chuck qaw!”

Billy giggled. “Who are you?”

“I am a gopher. Can’t you tell by my tail?”

“You sound like that alien my uncle is dating.”

“I hope that’s a good thing. Otherwise, I’m going to have to paddle you,” Zendari said, wielding her tail like a hammer.

Billy laughed. “Don’t worry, Gumpy. You’re way better than her. You’re so furry.”

Zendari didn’t bother to hide the amusement on her face since Billy couldn’t see her. At least he didn’t say something mean. It also made her think about Karn’a. She was as furry as they come and it could create competition for the favorite alien in the family. Good thing Karn’a didn’t hear him.

“I better get back to entertaining the crowd. You keep up the good fight, Billy!”

“Will do, Gumpy!”

A loud crack came from the bat, gaining everyone’s attention. The ball sailed into the outfield where one of the players was picking flowers. Well, mostly dandelions, but mom certainly wouldn’t mind the gesture. Kids screamed at the top of their lungs while the batter started rounding first base. The outfielder was oblivious to everyone, focused on collecting more plants for the vase at home. That was until he saw the ball next to an extra big dandelion he was going to get. He picked up the ball and his team was yelling at him to throw it. The outfielder dropped all his dandelions and chucked the ball toward the infield by the time the batter had hit third base and was going home.

It was too late as the second baseman whipped it to the catcher. The runner had touched home plate and ran to his team, who were all

jumping inside the dugout. The young boy came in, getting high-fives from all his teammates. Zendari cheered with the rest of the crowd, high-fiving the row of people at the bottom, regardless of what team they cheered for. Then two boys from the dugout came running at her with a blowup mallet, which they used to whack her a few times.

“Hey, why are you hitting me?” Zendari asked.

“It’s tradition. We always hit you when we score a point. Don’t you remember that, Gumpy?” one of the boys said.

Zendari snatched the mallet from them and raised it above her head. “Now it’s my turn.”

The boys ran off screaming while she chased them back into the dugout. She swung at the fence a few times, rattling the metal links until she dropped the mallet where she stood and went back to her fans. Zendari smiled, feeling the laughter and joy of everyone around her. It was a feeling she hadn’t experienced before, but one she was glad she did. *If I ever retire from the Interior, I know what I’m doing.*

The next two innings went fast, with the pitchers striking out most of the batters. Zendari tried to keep the crowd engaged, but they ended up breaking into their own conversations. She took that as her cue to get some water at the concessions stand. The stand was a simple brick structure with a simple green roof. Freshly popped popcorn and grilled meat smells leaked into her costume, yet her thirst needed to be quenched first. A teenage girl in a yellow T-shirt smiled from behind the counter and waved as she approached.

“What can I get for you, Gumpy?”

“I’ll take a water.”

“One water, coming right up,” she said, going back to the cooler.

Zendari tried to reach into her pocket and realized there were no pockets. Coming to her rescue, though, was Joseph, who had his money already out.

“You’re doing great out there,” Joseph said, nudging her. “Miss, can you make that two waters?”

The teen pulled out two bottled waters, dripping with ice water that pooled on the counter. “That will be two credits.”

Joseph swiped his credit chit and handed Zendari a water. She took off her gopher head and wrenched on the slippery bottle cap. “Remind me to pay you back.”

“No need, this is your credit chit.” Joseph smiled and held it up for her to see her name on it.

Zendari patted herself down, unable to tell what was still in her pocket. “How did you get it?”

“I have my ways.” He winked at her. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to get to anything with that on and by the end, I thought you would want to share a hotdog or something.”

She finally cracked the seal on the plastic cap and took a swig. Her eyes locked on him, wondering if the hotdog reference was an innuendo or an innocent offer. Either way, she was going to say yes.

“How did I do so far? Am I living up to Gumpy’s name?”

“I think so. Your stamina is going to have to improve if you’re going to make it to the end.”

“As long as I keep getting water, I think I’ll make it.”

“Costume too hot?”

“No, it’s hard to keep up all this energy. I don’t know how that other gopher mascot does it.”

“Must be a human stamina thing,” Joseph said, helping her get the mascot helmet back on. “At least they don’t put you in a cage like the jackrabbit’s mascot.

They both looked over to the other team dugout, where the flower picking outfielder was trying to feed the ugly dandelions to the bunny they had in a metal cage.

“They don’t ask him to do too much, I see.”

“Speaking of doing too much, can you do a cartwheel?”

“I can do a bad cartwheel. Why?”

“Perfect, the kids will love it.”

“What is this about a cartwheel?” Karn’a asked, walking up to them.

“Gumpy here is going to do a cartwheel next inning,” Joseph said.

“Then you better get going. The inning is almost over.”

“What? How?” Zendari asked.

“Lots of strikeouts, I guess. At least that’s what I’m told.”

“You better get back out there, Gumpy,” Joseph said, pushing her toward the bleachers. She wasn’t quite ready to take on the crowd, but when duty calls, duty calls. Zendari marched forward to take on the next inning, while Joseph stayed behind with Karn’a. “You’re able to leave John alone?”

“I am getting Sarah some more popcorn since I threw most of it at that mascot.”

“How is that working out?”

“Fine so far. Sarah doesn’t communicate as much as I would like, but I still get plenty of time with John, so I can’t complain,” Karn’a said and pointed to the popcorn, which the teen silently caught onto.

Joseph smirked. “John has no complaints. I can always tell when he has been with you.”

“It’s that shit-eating grin, isn’t it?”

“That or I hear you two on the other side of the wall at night. Would it kill you to keep it down?”

The teenager behind the counter averted her gaze, pretending to not listen to their conversation and put the bucket of popcorn on the counter. Karn’a went over to pay for it, leaning on the counter until she got the teen’s attention.

“I’ll give you a tip, girl. You ever find yourself a man you care about, shout his praise whenever you can. He’ll thank you for it. More than once.” Karn’a swiped her credit chit, took her bowl of popcorn, and turned to face Joseph again. “And to answer your question, it would kill me. But I will let John know you said that. It might finally encourage him to let me take him out in the woods.”

Joseph rolled his eyes. “You really are something.”

“One of a kind—that sneaky little bitch,” Karn’a said, noticing Sarah making out with John. “Well, played Sarah. You’re gonna need that head start.”

Karn’a jogged back to the stands, going around the back so she didn’t interrupt the game. She leaped up to the top and put the popcorn on John’s lap. The popcorn rustled, and some fell on the step, breaking John away from Sarah’s passionate kissing.

“You have room for one more?” Karn’a asked, not waiting for a reply. Her mouth was over his before he could react. Sarah didn’t want to be outplayed and kissed him too, both vying for his sole attention. Soon the popcorn was in the air and some of the teen boys on the other end were watching the three go at it, wishing they could have been in John’s place. John was on his back, half way dangling over the edge. He was being held up by Karn’a while the two women leaned over, unwilling to relent.

Zendari whipped her tail like she just didn’t care when she saw the commotion unfold and people nearby were brushing the popcorn out

of their hair. Her head was fully into character and thought of a genius idea to break up the three. She skipped into the dugout and took a single baseball from a bag on the ground. Coming back to the crowd, she pointed at the troublemakers and held the baseball up. The kids giggled, knowing exactly what was going to happen. Zendari wound up like the pitcher and chucked it at Karn'a. There was plenty of heat on it, making a thud against her fur.

Karn'a groaned in pain and lost her grip, causing all three to fall off the back. More groans came from below, but they were drowned out by the kids' and adults' laughter. Zendari jumped up and down with her fists in the air. The crowd was entertained, and she was living up to the prankster ideals of the mascot creed. It made her feel lighter, which was going to help for the next part.

Not long after the crowd calmed down, Karn'a rounded the bleachers, wanting to give the gopher a piece of her mind. She stormed up to Zendari, who mocked her kissing. The crowd got a kick out of it, making Karn'a's quest to fight for her man's honor all the more certain.

"Alright Gimpy, you wanna dance? I'm ready when you are!" Karn'a said, putting up her dukes.

Zendari thought it was hilarious and put her fists up in response.

"Cat fight!" a teen yelled from the stands and it got everyone's attention, even the baseball players.

Zendari bobbed and weaved, throwing little jabs, shadow boxing her from a few feet away. She was playing up to the crowd, but Karn'a had no such desire, going in for a punch to the gut. It didn't hurt much, given the amount of padding, but she played it up for the crowd, doubling over. Karn'a didn't let up, continuing with a few more. The teenagers were cheering on Karn'a, but Zendari had a trick up her sleeve. She pushed through another gut punch and gave her a

big hug. Zendari rocked back and forth with her, pretending to dance with the enraged kitten.

Everyone laughed while Karn'a's fists tightened and tackled her to the ground. She punched the mascot's head off, revealing Zendari laughing hysterically.

"Zendari?"

"Who else would it be?" Zendari said, barely able to talk.

Karn'a punched her one last time for good measure, but her anger subsided fast once she got off her. "Why did you do that?"

"I thought it was funny. And by the way, you hit like a little boy."

The crowd laughed, and Gretchen ran down the stairs to jump on Zendari. "Zenraweee! You're Gumpy?"

"I sure am. How did you like our performance?"

"Why are you fighting a big kitty?"

Zendari sat up and pointed to Karn'a. "Gretchen, I would like you to meet my friend Karn'a. She is a Rakiri, not a kitty."

Karn'a extended a fist to her, and Gretchen bumped her knuckles. Karn'a had never realized how boney the tiny human hands were.

"Nice to meet you, Carra. Your fur is really soft."

Close enough. "Nice to meet you, too. You enjoying the game?"

"Yep. Mom got us all popcorn. Would you like some?"

"Oh, I got plenty on the bleachers. Thank you, though."

Gretchen turned back to Zendari, who was about to put her helmet back on. "Are you going to watch the rest of the game with me?"

"Sorry, I gotta do the cheering, otherwise who will entertain the crowd?"

"Can Carra do it? She's furry."

Zendari and Gretchen looked at her with puppy dog eyes. Their collective faces made Karn'a avert her gaze so she wouldn't be compelled to do it.

“Come on Karn’a, can you really say no to this face?” Zendari asked, holding Gretchen up.

Karn’a went against her own better judgement and laid eyes on her pleading little face. It was impossible to say no, and she knew it.

“Fine. But only because you do terrible cartwheels,” Karn’a said to Zendari, getting a hug from Gretchen.

“Ouch, that hurts more than your punches,” Zendari said, giving her the mascot head. “Come on, I’ll show you how to get into this thing.”

The three all went back behind the shed, and in no time, Karn’a was all suited up. No longer a fine feline, but a larger-than-life gopher. Karn’a poked a hole inside the suit that led to the gopher tail, allowing her to use it more accurately than anyone who had worn it before. She waved her new tail, giving it a test drive.

“Now watch and learn, ladies, how a real gopher wows a crowd,” Karn’a said, running back to the crowd and doing a perfect cartwheel.

Gretchen put her hand on Zendari’s leg. “Don’t worry, I can’t do a cartwheel either.”

“Thanks, Gretchen.” Zendari put her hand on Gretchen’s shoulder. “How about we finish watching the game?”

“Yeah!” Gretchen zoomed off, back to the bleachers where Joseph was waiting to grab her. She kicked her feet in the air and giggled, but was going nowhere. He had captured her in the hopes of luring his girlfriend over. It worked like a charm as she sat down next to him. Together, they all watched the game and Karn’a’s impressive cheerleading that was about to be tested after another score.

Billy had the mallet this time and snuck up on Karn’a, who was attempting to get the YMCA started. Once she got to ‘C’, Billy came in swinging. It squeaked with each hit, getting her attention.

“Alright mister, my turn,” Karn’a said and turned her back to him.

Her tail whipped back and forth, blocking his strikes, not unlike a sword battle. She had the superior skill and eventually disarmed him. Billy was astonished by the mascot's skill, but she was not done with him yet. He stumbled, feeling like a heavy pillow hit him, and retreated into the safety of the dugout, smiling ear to ear.

"I bet you can't get us in here," Billy said, prompting a few more to join in on taunting her.

Karn'a smiled, unable to resist a challenge. She ducked her head and squeezed into the narrow entrance of the dugout, causing the kids to all scream. Baseball caps pummeled her, but she pushed on, grabbing a hold of the first boy she could and throwing him over her shoulder.

"He's mine now. Wahahaha!" Karn'a said, walking away with him.

"Get Gumpy!" one boy yelled, and the whole bullpen went after her.

She only got out of the dugout when she felt a shooting pain up her calf muscle. Karn'a looked back at one of the boys winding up again, ready to take another whack at the back of her leg with his bat.

"Let go of Kenny!" the boy yelled.

These boys are insane! She put the boy down and leaped out of the way of another swing.

"Swing and a miss," Karn'a taunted, now in a better position to dodge the little boy's attacks.

"I got my eye on you, Gumpy," the boy warned and went back to the dugout, where he was praised for saving Kenny.

Karn'a rubbed the back of her leg, still feeling the dull pain. The mascot outfit did some to lessen the blow, yet that boy could sure swing. *Note to self: Don't go in the dugout. Human boys can get mean.*

It was the bottom of the sixth and one out remaining. The bases were loaded. The crowd was completely silent, besides Zendari munching on a frankfurter. Karn'a was leaning against the fence, intently watching the last batter come to the plate. The young boy knocked the dirt off his shoes with his bat and assumed the position. He was the biggest boy on the Jackrabbit's team and had the best shot of hitting a homerun. The pitcher took a deep breath, attempting to steady his nerves. They only needed one more out, and he was determined to make it happen.

The pitcher wound up and threw it low. That didn't stop the batter from going for it. The crack from the bat sounded, and the ball was launched high into centerfield. Billy tracked it and ran to where it was going. He lifted his glove in the air, partially blinded by the sun. His heart pounded in his little chest, hoping his guess was good enough. The ball smacked into his glove and he fell to the ground.

The crowd all stood up, wondering if he came up with it or not. Zendari hoisted Gretchen up on her shoulders to get a better view. Karn'a was holding her tail, worried he was hurt. The seconds passed, and the crowd became more nervous. Barry made his way across the field to check on him when there was movement. Billy lifted his glove up in triumph, holding the worn ball in his mitt.

"Yay! He caught it!" Gretchen said, and the rest of the crowd erupted in cheers. Billy jogged to his team, who were already rushing to him. They lifted him up and chanted his name, bringing him back to the dugout to revel in their victory.

Once the clapping and cheering subsided, parents and relatives went to get their children. Zendari waited with Joseph at the bleachers and was tackled by the rest of Susan's minions.

"Zendari!" Milly said, hugging her.

"Hey Milly, how did you like the game?" Zendari asked.

"It was amazing! Billy was great!" Lilly answered for her.

"I still think Gumpy is the best," Willy said.

"Aw, thanks Willy," Zendari said.

"For what?"

Zendari almost couldn't believe it. Did Willy not know she was Gumpy? "You didn't notice me in the gopher costume?"

Willy pointed to Karn'a, who was petting John with her tail. "But Gumpy is right there."

Zendari shook her head. Willy must not have been the observant one in the family. Joseph chuckled to himself, acknowledging her masked frustration.

"Well Willy, you want to meet Gumpy?" Joseph asked.

"Can I?"

"Yep. Zendari and I happen to be good friends with Gumpy."

"But Zen—" Gretchen said, before Joseph muffled her mouth.

"Go over and say hi. Gumpy doesn't bite," Joseph said and Willy ran off, followed by Lilly and Milly. Gretchen didn't take kindly to being silenced and licked his palm. "Did you lick me?"

"Willy needs to know the truth!" Gretchen demanded.

"Don't worry, he'll figure it out. He's smart."

"No, he's not." Gretchen dismounted from Zendari and ran over to her brother.

Joseph chuckled and gave Zendari a hug, both watching the kids try to catch Gumpy's tail. It was a calming sight that brought a simple joy to them.

"I still think you did a better job than Karn'a."

"You really think so?" Zendari said, holding him tighter.

Joseph shrugged. "I mean, her tail work is much better, but there's nothing you can do about that."

Zendari gasped. "I thought I did great with the tail!"

“You did. Best I’ve ever seen with someone who didn’t have one.”

“Oh, now you’re backpedaling.”

“I am not,” he scoffed.

“Are too.”

“You are the best alien to ever grace that gopher costume, bar none. And I can prove it to you.”

“How?”

Joseph whispered into her ear and she perked up instantly. Her posture was perfect and if her ears could stand at full attention, they would have. It was an unusual offer, but one she was eager to agree to.

“Do we have to wait until tonight?” Zendari asked.

“Impatient, are we?”

“I sacrificed a lot getting in that costume. I had to face fears, conquer my inner demons, defeat—“

“You’re so dramatic,” Joseph said, cutting off her heroic retelling.

She batted her eyes at him, trying to perfect her puppy dog pout face. He shook his head in defiance, but he was no match as she kept leaning further and further into him.

“Please?”

“Fine. But only because you asked nicely.” Joseph stood behind her and started massaging her shoulders. Her neck went back and she closed her eyes, enjoying his gentle touch for a few seconds before she suddenly snapped forward.

“On second thought, we should wait.”

Joseph crossed his arms. “Let me guess, you’re hoping this becomes more than a massage?”

Zendari turned to face him, smiled, and nodded. She felt herself giving way to his small, yet strong fingers. Self-control in public wasn’t an issue, but something about how his hands caressed her shoulders

made her rethink that notion. Last thing she wanted was to get in trouble for getting too hot and heavy. And Susan's timing was perfect.

"Are you two up to no good over here?" Susan asked, hopping down the bleachers toward them.

"You know it," Joseph said.

"Say, who's in the gopher costume?"

"That's Karn'a. John's girlfriend," Zendari said.

"Oh, the cat lady. I was wondering where she snuck off to after she beat you up." Susan looked over at her kids, who were all mauling the poor mascot, trying to tackle her to the ground. "We never met. How is she?"

"She's a firecracker. Definitely keeps John on his toes," Joseph said.

"Good. John could use that in his life. And Sarah seems to be taking it well."

"Well Susie, first it was me and now John. Barry might be next."

"The hell he is," Susan said, leaving some levity in her voice. "I'd beat the shit out of him if he even thought about it."

"If I thought about what?" Barry said, walking up to them.

"Joseph here thinks you're next to find an alien girl."

Barry went up a step and kissed Susan on the cheek. "Pfff. I have a hard enough time pleasing you, let alone another woman."

"You succeed more than you think." Susan patted him on the butt and stepped down to the ground. "I'm going to get Billy. Can you wrangle the others?"

"Yes ma'am."

Barry sauntered over to the gaggle of children who were sprawled out on the floor, exhausted from trying to take Karn'a down. Karn'a kneeled down in front of Willy, who had his fists up, ready to punch her.

"Come on buster, show me what you got," Karn'a egged him on.

John, being an agent of chaos, sized her up before he kicked her mascot head so that it spun one eighty.

“Hey, who turned out the lights?” Karn’a asked, feeling around for the front of her head.

Willy and the other kids went into a fit of laughter, watching her try to turn her head around. Zendari and Joseph watched from afar, enjoying the entertainment.

“I knew the kids would like her,” Joseph said.

“Hopefully not more than me,” Zendari said.

“Not after you learn how to make macaroni like me, they won’t.”

“That’s your claim to fame. Macaroni?”

Joseph winked. “It’s certainly not my sparkling personality.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

She leaned in to kiss him when Gretchen somehow snuck up on them. The little bundle of energy jumped up and stuck her head in-between them.

“I heard macaroni.”

CHAPTER 17.

THE THRONGS OF VOICES carried from around the corner of a blue house, where Zendari and Joseph were walking hand in hand along the worn street. Groups of people were walking behind them, while a lone car drove past, trying to find a parking spot. The smell of hotdogs on the grill trailed into their noses while one house across the street was having a barbeque and elderly neighbors were gawking at the busy street of people.

“There sure are a lot of people here,” Zendari said, turning her head back to acknowledge the flood behind them.

“We haven’t even gotten there yet. I’m sure there is a couple thousand already there.”

“Wow. I didn’t realize these fairs were such a big deal.”

“It’s just a county fair. The state fair is the big one around here. If I remember right, it is the biggest one in the nation.”

“And you’re taking me to the small one? Why?” Zendari teased.

“The small ones are way better. Less lines, less congestion, less problems.”

“I do like less problems.”

They rounded the corner and in front of them was the gate. Beyond it was a large green shed and plenty of open land to park rows of trac-

tors. Kids climbed around on the giant machines, while some farmers chatted with parents. The smell reminded Zendari of Timothy's farm. Her memories of that day rushed back to her. Worst of all was leaving that poor boy fatherless. She told herself it was for the best, but it still didn't change the fact that David had lost both his parents to the Imperium.

Ever since that day, David hadn't called her once. She tried to reach out to him a few different times to offer any assistance she could, but never got a message back. It was disheartening, but at least she had a supportive man to keep her distracted.

Joseph pulled on her arm, leading her over to the barn and away from her sad thoughts. "You're gonna love the bunnies."

"Bunnies? I thought you said there were only farm animals here?" Zendari said, perking up.

"How can you have a fair without bunnies?"

They went inside the shed, and the place was filled with rows of animals. Sheep, llamas, and goats filled the various pens in the middle, while the walls were covered with stacks of caged bunnies. Zendari almost entirely ignored all the other animals, delighted with the little bunnies. Their little noses twitched, and some hopped around in their cage while others slept. She put her finger through one of the holes in the cage to pet a black and white bunny. It only tolerated a few strokes on the top of its head before it hopped to the other side of the cage.

"They are so fluffy," Zendari said, smiling bright.

Joseph stuck his finger in the cage next to her and the white bunny licked his finger. "I knew you would like them. Check out this little guy."

Zendari put her finger in the cage, but the bunny took one sniff and bounded away like the other one. She smelled her finger and shrugged. "My hand doesn't smell."

“Bunnies don’t lie.” Joseph smirked. Zendari pushed her hand in his face, tapping both sides of his nose between her spread out fingers. Joseph held her hand down and laughed. “Okay, Okay. I relent. You smell good. Like lavender.”

“That’s your problem,” a pale young woman with dull red hair said. She was feeding a brown bunny in the next cage over a dark leaf of lettuce. “Bunnies don’t like the smell of lavender.”

Zendari stared at her hands. Betrayed by her own natural smell. How she longed to finally pet those adorable creatures, yet they would never accept her like the other humans. It was a tragedy, but one she did not share alone. Pouncing on her shoulders was her other furry friend, dressed like Daisy Duke, happy to see her.

“Don’t worry, none of these critters like me either,” Karn’a said, letting go of her shoulders and tapping on one of the cages. The bunny inside rushed to the corner and shivered. “But they do make me hungry for some reason.”

“Karn’a, what are you doing here?” Zendari asked, giving her a fist bump.

“John wanted to take Sarah and I out. I hear they crash cars here for fun!”

“John off with Sarah?” Joseph asked, greeting her as well with a fist bump.

“No, Sarah will meet us tonight for the derby. I get Johnny all to myself until then,” Karn’a said, pointing behind Joseph.

He turned around and saw John getting smacked with a face full of spit from the woolly llama. John stumbled into the bunny cages that rattled and one opened.

“Agh, why! What did I do to you?” John proclaimed, covering his eyes while two children laughed at him.

Karn’a laughed. “He is something, isn’t he?”

“He sure is,” Joseph responded, yet his meaning was the opposite of hers.

John stumbled over to them, wiping the gooey saliva from his face and eyes. It dropped off of him and made his eyes red. “Alpacas are mean.”

“That was a llama,” Joseph said.

“Sure it was,” John said, walking over to Karn’a and wiping his face off on her arm.

“What do I look like to you, a rag?” Karn’a took her arm away.

“You’re just mad the bunnies won’t let you touch them.”

“And I’m starving. If I stay here any longer, I’m going to eat one of these little ones.” The kids within ear shot screamed and ran out of the shed, prompting the adults to look in Karn’a direction. She was a bit surprised by all the attention, but was not going to apologize. “What? I was talking about the bunnies, not your children.”

The people maintained their icy gazes, as Joseph herded them out of the building. “We better get going before the townspeople break out their pitchforks.”

“Nice one,” John said and pulled Karn’a away from the irritated people inside. He had almost forgotten that people actually didn’t like their new alien visitors, but all it took was an offhand comment to show people’s true colors. Thankfully, Karn’a let it go pretty fast as they got outside. She had a new enemy. His name was Ringo.

Vicious barks erupted from the muscular German Shepard as he kicked up dirt. Holding him back was none other than Officer Larlin, dressed in her standard uniform and pristine hat. Her muscular arms flexed, pulling the leash back on her four-legged friend.

“No Ringo! Bad! You’re scaring the children!” Officer Larlin commanded, getting the dog down to a dull roar.

Karn'a didn't take her eyes off Ringo, baring her teeth, although not going so far as to hiss at him. John chuckled to himself, wondering how deep the natural rivalry spread, even across galaxies.

"Larlin, you're here too?" Zendari said. "Where's your partner?"

"You're looking at him. I promise, he's normally much nicer."

"What happened to Mr. Hot Stuff?" Zendari asked and noticed Joseph gave her a confused look. "Her words, not mine."

"He had to go train the next group of recruits. Once I completed my training, they gave me a choice of partner."

"And you chose a dog. Good choice." Joseph kneeled down to block the dog's view of Karn'a. It worked wonders on calming the four-legged officer, who wagged his tail after a few well-placed scratches behind the ear.

"I thought it was easier than having a male partner."

"You got tired of flirting with men? Never thought you would say that," Zendari said.

"I didn't get tired of it. I just have someone in my life now and I don't want to screw it up." Officer Larlin kneeled down next to her dog and patted him on his little vest. Her little partner backed up next to her so she could scratch his head.

"So, who is the lucky guy?"

Officer Larlin looked up at her with a quirky grin. "Mr. Hot Stuff."

Zendari couldn't help but be happy for her. She loved being with Joseph. Her life before him was filled with frustration, but ever since she met him, most of it went away. The job came with unavoidable stress and problems, but Joseph was always there to ease her worries. Every woman deserved a man like that, and Larlin was no exception.

"I'm glad that worked out between you two," Zendari said.

During the duration of this conversation, John had tugged on Karn'a to get her away from the lovable K-9 dog. She hadn't let up her focus, plotting ways to slice and dice the confrontational hound.

"Well, I'm going to take this one away before she goes all killer Marine on your dog. It was nice meeting you, officer." John waved and tugged on her tail to get her attention.

Officer Larlin waved to him and got up with Joseph. "It was nice seeing you two again, under normal circumstances."

"Don't be a stranger now, you too, Officer Larlin," Joseph said to them and took Zendari's hand.

"I won't. Don't have too much fun today or my partner here will sniff you out." Speaking of sniffing, a child ran by, holding a corndog in her hand. Ringo was drawn to it like a magnet, running after the child and bringing Officer Larlin along for the ride. "Woah!"

She tripped and fell, being dragged with surprising force. The child ran, forcing Ringo to increase his pace if he wanted a chance at the tasty breaded hotdog with ketchup that dripped like blood on the ground. It was a sight that brought laughter from the kids on the tractors and farmers enjoying their local law enforcement interacting with the community. Even if it was a little costly to her dignity.

"Mmmm. This is good. What do you call this again?" Zendari said, shoving another curd in her mouth.

"Cheese curds. You have to stop ordering by just pointing at the picture." Joseph plucked the last cheesy curd from her plate.

Zendari grabbed his wrist, not ready to give up on the last nugget of cheesy goodness. After all, she paid for it. "I asked if you wanted anything. You said no."

Joseph glanced between her eyes and the lone cheese curds in his hand still. She might have been strong, but she wasn't fast. He dove his head toward his fingers, but Zendari anticipated his move, pulling him across the bench seat closer to her face. They both went for the last cheese curd, but Zendari's tongue was longer, wrapping around it first. She tasted the contrasting saltiness of his fingers before the blessed curd was covered by Joseph's lips. Her lips followed and soon her tongue had given up on the prize, settling for him instead.

Out of reflex, her hand drifted down to his lower back and leaned into him. She braced herself with her other hand on the table, smashing the white and red checkered basket her food came in. Nothing was going to stop her from embracing her man, except for disgusted onlookers.

"There are children present. Ugh!" A woman in a pink dress scoffed as she walked by with her two young boys in tow, both who were fascinated by what they were watching.

Zendari pulled away and flushed blue, forgetting where she was. Joseph finished gulping down the food he stole and smiled at her.

"Boo lady! It was just getting good," Karn'a said behind them, taking a bite of her steaming chicken kabob.

Joseph sat up. "You liked the show?"

"I sure did. Who would have thought Zendari was such a passionate lover?"

"Who is a passionate lover?" John asked, walking next to Karn'a. His hands were full with a corndog in one and a beer in the other.

"Zendari," Karn'a said, eyeing his corndog. "She is giving me some ideas."

Karn'a leaned into his corndog, but John moved it away. A little too fast, in fact. The corndog flung right off the stick and straight into the nearby garbage container.

"Damn," John said.

Karn'a burst into laughter and slapped him on the back. "What are the odds!"

"Five seconds rule. Go get it, quick," Joseph added, causing Zendari to snort from holding in her laugh.

"Har har har. Laugh it up. At least I still got my beer."

What John didn't know was during all the commotion, a little yellow friend flew on his beer and decided to crawl inside. Hidden from his sight, John took a sip of his beer and felt the sting of the defensive wasp. The beer can fell to the floor, sloshing some on his jeans and spilling out the rest in the dirt. Also flowing out of the can was his attacker, sprawling around in the wet soil.

"What the fu—" John said, censoring himself and spotting the culprit to his pain, narrowing his eyes. "You."

His shoe came down with a splat, pulverizing the little flying bastard. It made his pain subside for only a moment, knowing that the insect was no more.

"John, are you okay?" Karn'a asked, checking on his face.

"That bee stung me," John said, touching his lips.

Karn'a saw it swell and thought back to a movie she watched about sucking out snake venom. It was a snake bite, but she figured there wasn't much different between stingers and fangs. She put her lips around his puffy lower lip and did her best to suck it while he squirmed.

John pushed her away and cursed. "What are you doing?"

"Sucking the venom out. Isn't that what you do?"

“Not from a bee sting,” John said. His knuckles turned white from holding back the pain that throbbed on his lips.

“I’ll find you a medic,” Karn’a said, holding him still and her eyes darted around for the nearest medical tent. Her voice wavered and was more apologetic than anything Zendari or Joseph had ever seen. Almost panicking.

“They got someone inside the building over there,” Joseph offered.

Karn’a didn’t hesitate, scooping John up in her arms and moving as fast as she could to the large cement building. Joseph didn’t know what to think, turning back to Zendari.

“That was weird. She seemed really worried.”

“I wouldn’t look into it. She is probably desperate to play out those bachelor-in-a-bind fantasies,” Zendari said, waving him off.

“Bachelor in a bind?” Joseph chuckled to himself. “I have never heard it that way.”

“It sounds better in my language.”

“Well, since those two will be busy, how about we go on a ride?”

Zendari bumped him in the shoulder and feigned shock. “Joseph, we’re in public.”

“You know what I mean, you,” he said, nudging her back.

Zendari stood up and offered her hand to him. “I do. But these will never be as much fun.”

“You haven’t been on The Sizzler.”

“Make a path people!” Karn’a yelled, trying to part the crowd of people packed inside the building.

Rows of exhibits were set up, showcasing different products varying from gardening to home improvement. People were shoulder to shoulder, weaving between others who were watching the different demonstrations. Karn'a barged through, ignoring John's protests. She had spotted the red cross flag above the crowd and was determined to get him there.

Once they got through the most congested part, she dashed over to the medical station in the corner. One EMT was standing there next to an empty seat and a few stacks of unopened water bottles. Karn'a came in fast, setting him down gently in the chair.

"He needs help. He was stung by a bee," Karn'a told the EMT.

"Is he allergic?"

"No, I'm not. I am fine."

"He got stung on the lip," Karn'a said, ignoring him.

The EMT took a closer look before nodding and went back into his bag. John shot Karn'a a nasty glare that wasn't at all effective at getting her to back down. She kneeled down next to him and held his hand, waiting for the EMT to come back with an ice pack and a bottle of ibuprofen.

"Ice pack for the swelling and take two for the pain," the EMT said, handing both to him.

"Thanks. Sorry about her," John said, gesturing to Karn'a.

"No problem. If you're thirsty, help yourself to some water. I'll be back."

John swallowed the two pills and placed the ice pack on his lip. He turned to face Karn'a, who helped hold the ice pack to his face and squeezed his other hand so tight he could feel her frantic heartbeat. John hadn't seen this side of Karn'a, and it concerned him. From what he had known of her, this was the last way she would act. All scared

and nervous. He removed the ice pack from his face and looked into her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” John asked.

“Was that an anti-venom pill?”

“No, just a painkiller,” John said and then it hit him. “Karn’a, did you think I was poisoned?”

“You aren’t?”

“No. It was a bee sting.”

“Don’t all creatures with stingers have poison?”

“They don’t all kill us.”

“Oh...” Karn’a said and thought about how she acted. It was definitely dramatic and not all that feminine. She tried to think of a joke or some way out of this embarrassing moment, but he didn’t let her go.

“Why were you so scared?”

“I wasn’t scared... I was...”

“Come on. I know you better than that. And didn’t you tell me it’s okay to be scared?”

“It’s okay for you to be scared—”

“Why? Because I’m a man and you’re a strong, sexy woman.”

“Well—”

“Yet you seemed calm when the bullets were flying. If there was a time to be scared, I would’ve figured it was then.”

“I could handle that. This though...” Karn’a said, gesturing to all of him. “I can’t do anything.”

John put the ice pack on the ground, and his hand cupped the back of her neck. He gently scratched her neck, moving aside her fur. Her shoulders relaxed and she let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

“Did you lose someone to something like this?” John asked, hoping to get to the core of her worry.

This caught her off guard and brought the repressed memory of her childhood to the forefront. She stirred in her seat, wondering if she should talk to him about it. His eyes begged her to and she was powerless to resist.

“My dad died when I was really young. Poisoned by his best friend, I learned later. All I knew then was he said he was stung by something and the next moment he was convulsing on the floor.”

“I had no idea.”

Karn’a lowered her head. “It’s not something I like to talk about.”

John lifted her chin up to meet his caring gaze. “I’m glad you did, though.”

Karn’a gave him a weak smile, still reflecting on her painful memory. She hadn’t brought that up to anyone in many years, yet here she was, spilling her guts out to him. All because of a little bee sting.

“Is that why you joined the Marines, then? To get revenge on your dad’s murderer?”

“No. He was killed not long after for dealing weapons to the Alliance. When the Imperium took me in, Sergeant Vascal watched over me. She was the mother I never had and being a recruiter, she easily sold me on joining.”

“What did she tell you? You were going to shoot bad guys and get all the dick you could ever want?” John teased.

“She never mentioned how good alien dick was,” Karn’a said, winking at him.

“You all this horny?”

“I’m a simple woman. I like to hunt and fuck. As the Dirt Mother intended.”

John pulled his arm away and patted her on the lap. "I can't do either of those on an empty stomach. Let's go get some food."

Karn'a brightened up and shot to her feet, pulling him with her. Her worries faded into the background with her rough memories. It was time to be in the present with the man she loved. They had new memories to make and they were going to make them. *I wonder what that corndog tastes like?*

"Make it stop! Make it stop!" Zendari yelled, grabbing on the front metal bar for dear life. The metal started bending while Joseph laughed at her outburst as they spun around and around. The children and parents in the other pods laughed at her as well, but she didn't notice, focusing on keeping her food down.

"It's not even spinning that fast." Joseph threw his hands up in the air. "Woohoo!"

Oh Goddess, don't let me throw up all over him, she thought and held her hand over her mouth. Her head throbbed, and every spin pushed her closer to sharing those cheese curds with everyone. The rest of the world was a giant blur until her prayers were answered. The ride winded down, providing some relief.

"How did you like it?" Joseph said, knowing the answer.

Zendari refused to answer, worrying that if she opened her mouth, her struggle would have been for nothing. Once the bars unlocked, she got up and stumbled toward the exit, rushing to the nearest garbage can to hurl. She sounded like a dying lion, launching a steady flow of chunky vomit into the garbage. It at least spared everyone from the rancid smell.

Joseph went up behind her, held her hair away, and rubbed her back. “Not a fan of spinning rides, I see.”

“Last time I listen to you on what rides are fun.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll get you a water. You sit down.”

Joseph guided her over to the bench nearby and went to the closest food vendor to buy water. She felt like a child being taken care of, but at this point, she wasn’t going to fight it. The front of her head felt like someone was pushing on it and her throat felt scarred. Zendari closed her eyes and focused on breathing. *That was not worth it.*

“Here’s your water and I got some Advil as well,” Joseph said.

“What is Advil?” Zendari asked, opening her eyes.

“It’s for your headache. Or do you not have one?”

Zendari took the pills and chased them with a swig of water. “I do. How did you know?”

“John gets sick on those rides, too. He doesn’t have the willpower to not throw up on me, though.” Joseph rubbed her back and scooched closer to her.

Zendari didn’t know if it was his kind words, the pills, or his pleasant back rubs, but the pressure in her head began to ease. She continued drinking when she noticed Karn’a and John walking up to them. John had not learned his lesson, clutching a new beer in his hand and a half eaten corndog.

“Uh-oh, you went on one of those deathtraps with Joseph?” John asked Zendari.

“That obvious?”

“Yep.”

“She didn’t throw up on me. More than I can say about you,” Joseph shot back.

“You were in the splash zone. I have no regrets.”

“Does that mean I don’t get to go on any rides with you?” Karn’a asked.

“I’ll go on the Ferris wheel,” John said, pointing to the massive ride that moved at the speed of a glacier.

Karn’a watched the giant wheel spin, waiting to hear cheers that never came, unlike the other rides. “Looks boring and slow.”

Zendari looked over her shoulder to look at it. *I like boring. I like slow.* It was the perfect place to get away from the crowd and rest up before the demolition derby. Not to mention, she was hoping a make out session would be in order without prude parents ruining the fun.

John finished his beer and crushed it in his hand. “Fine, how about you show off your hunting prowess and win me a bear?”

“Now that sounds like fun. Point me in the right direction, cutie.”

John slapped her on the ass and led the way. Karn’a’s mouth was frozen open, hoping to win more than a bear after it was all said and done. Joseph waved goodbye to them and turned his attention to Zendari.

“You feeling better?”

“A little. Do you want to go on the Ferris wheel?”

“You want to? You feel up for it?”

“Yeah. It seems my kind of speed.”

Joseph nodded and helped her up. They went hand in hand over to the Ferris wheel, passing by the sound of screaming children and carnival music. It was a joyous sound to behold that made the wait more pleasant. They watched the other people go around and around in their colorful pods. It was mesmerizing to her and eventually brought her mind back to the missing handgun. *There has to be an accomplice. Who is Mr. McGee protecting?*

“We’re up, babe,” Joseph said, taking her hand.

She came back to reality once again and went inside the small pod. There was a simple roof above them, but nothing enclosed, which made her fear of tight quarters much easier to handle. It also helped that Joseph had leaned against her. His body always comforted her, no matter where she was. The door clicked shut, and the pod rocked a little as they ascended. Zendari held onto Joseph, not expecting the sudden motion.

“Don’t worry, that’s the worst it gets,” Joseph reassured her.

“Sorry. Just a little skittish after that last one still.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” Joseph said, hugging her tight. “I got you.”

Zendari watched below, spotting Karn’a out of the crowd throwing a ball at a stack of metal pins. From all the arm flailing, she wasn’t doing too well. Her attention moved away from the carnival games to the rest of the fairgrounds. The higher they got, the more impressive the fair was. People were spread out everywhere, but heavily concentrated around the gaggle of food vendors and rides. Along the edge of the grounds, near the residential area, she saw the three long pole sheds they went through.

“That was where we saw the giant gourd with the blue ribbon,” she said, pointing to the two sheds in the distance.

“Yep. Did you want to go there again?”

“Naw. You’ve seen one giant vegetable, you’ve seen them all.”

“Not according to Karn’a,” Joseph snickered.

“She thinks anything that looks remotely like a dick is fascinating.”

“In her defense, she was hungry.”

Zendari smiled and shook her head. “You and I know exactly what she was hungry for.”

“You’re right.” Joseph nodded. “It was the cheese curds.”

Zendari snorted and they both laughed. She hugged him a little tighter, and he pecked her on the neck. The pod came to a gradual stop, almost at the top. Feeling the motion end, they soaked in the spectacular view above everything. Joseph rested his head on her shoulder, relaxing with every breath she took.

“This view is amazing.”

“It sure is.” Joseph glanced up at her and saw her staring out over the land. “What’s been on your mind lately?”

Zendari kept her eyes forward, not wanting to look away from the setting sun in the distance. “What do you mean?”

“Today, you have been a little distant at times. What’s up?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. It’s probably nothing.”

Joseph sat up and rested his hand on her lap. “I want to know. I promise I won’t worry as much as you do.”

Zendari looked down at his hand and then at him. His attention was fully on her. She squeezed his hand, feeling his calloused palm. They were not the hands of the delicate men from her planet, but of the one who helped split wood yesterday so his elderly neighbor could have a bonfire. He was tougher than she gave him credit for. *I better tell him.*

“I have been thinking about Mr. McGee.”

“Why? He’s in jail.”

“I know, but we never recovered the handgun. The Marines combed the forest and no one found it in his car. He denies giving it to anyone, but I can’t shake the feeling he is lying.”

“You think there is someone else out there?”

She turned to him. “I hope not.”

Joseph saw the deep concern on her face. It pained him to see her like that, but he was glad she said something. At least now he could try to help her.

“If there is, we’ll handle it together.” Joseph caressed her cheek, playing with her small tusk. The air leaving her nostrils tickled the back of his fingers. “In the meantime, we should make some memories together.”

“What do you have in mind?” Zendari asked. Joseph’s hand shifted around the back of her head and pulled her in for a kiss. The fading sun felt hotter on her skin as she flushed blue. He didn’t kiss her on the lips, but on her neck. “Um... my lips are up here.”

“Did you forget you vomited?” Joseph said, taking a breath before going back at it.

Zendari held her free hand up to her mouth and did a quick smell test. He was right. Even she wouldn’t kiss herself. She didn’t get to think much more on the topic as his hand slid down between her legs, causing her to jump in her seat.

“Joseph!”

“What? I thought you would like it?” His dastardly grin was on full display.

“I do... but we’re in public.”

“No one can see us up here.”

Zendari looked down, hoping no one was paying them any mind. “What if it starts to move again?”

“I paid the guy twenty credits to keep it up here extra long. I’m sure we have time.”

Zendari thought about it. They were high up, and it was hard to see the people below them. Joseph tugged on his shirt, letting a little of his chest be exposed. Her urge to maintain some semblance of decorum was outweighed by her thirst for him. She was no match for his persuasive offer.

“Only until it starts moving.”

Joseph went back to mauling her neck while she let out a gasp, giving in to what he had planned for her. His hand snaked down her thigh, teasing her with every little movement. She let her head hang back, staring up at the few clouds in the sky. *How did I get so lucky?* Then her luck ran out. The Ferris wheel jerked to life and began its descent.

“Oh, come on. We had at least a few more minutes,” Joseph said.

Zendari sat up and let out a labored breath. “It’s okay. I appreciate the gesture.”

Joseph cocked his head. “I’m a little surprised you aren’t more frustrated.”

“Maybe I’m getting more mature and don’t have the constant need for sex?” she said, laying on the sarcasm thick.

“Really? Okay, so you won’t mind if we didn’t have sex for the next wee—”

“Oh, Goddess I was kidding! Please! No!” Zendari begged frantically.

Joseph belted out in laughter while she shook him by the arms. It was the same approach Gretchen did when she didn’t want something to happen. Clearly, Gretchen was rubbing off on her when it should be the other way around. Not that it bothered Joseph. Zendari may not have been as adorable, but she more than made up for it in enthusiasm.

“You know I would never do that to you.”

“Thank the Goddess!” Zendari said, exasperated.

Joseph gave her a peck on the lips and immediately regretted it. His whole face cringed, tasting a small amount of vomit. “Yeah, we need to get you something for that.”

The bright stadium lights shone from above while the sky had turned completely black. People were crowding into the stands that surrounded the large oval muddy arena. Fresh popcorn filled the air as the two couples found some open seats in the back at the top.

“I still can’t believe you spent that much on a stuffed teddy bear,” Zendari said, poking the oversized plush brown bear in Karn’a’s arm before Joseph slid in between them both.

“You can’t put a price on victory!”

“Victory sure is expensive,” John said.

“For you, though, it is worth it.” Karn’a turned toward John to have their own conversation. “Did you let Sarah know where we are?”

“Yeah, she said she is going to be a little late.”

“She’ll probably want you for the rest of the night, I guess.”

John shrugged. “I guess.”

In the distance, car engines were revving out of sight, getting ready to enter the arena. Karn’a let her tail sneak up under his arm and rubbed against his chin. “I was thinking... before these cars start smashing each other, maybe you could smash me?”

Karn’a had his full attention. John’s eyes wandered down to her busty figure that still sported the faded scar on her breast. She shifted closer to him and he felt the little denim that was around her muscular legs. It didn’t take much to get his engine revved.

“You do look great in that,” John reasoned.

“I look better out of it.”

John shot up from his seat and Karn’a parroted him, eager to get busy. He made his way down, past the shoulder to shoulder people with Karn’a holding his hand behind him. Karn’a tossed the bear to Zendari, almost knocking her over.

“Where are you two going?” Zendari said, moving the bear out of her face.

“Getting snacks,” John said and bounded down the bleachers. Karn’a flashed Zendari a smile that told a much different story.

“Those two are not getting snacks,” Zendari said to Joseph.

“Then they are going to miss it. The cars are getting ready.” Joseph pointed to the end of the arena where the gate was open and rough looking cars were driving in. Whines and cracks roared from the vehicles, sounding more like angry monsters. The cars all drove in, finding their own starting position. People cheered and the announcer’s voice came over the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to the main event! Tonight’s derby is going to be one for the ages. We have thirty cars of pure raging steel, all fighting to be the last one standing. Let them know you’re here!”

The crowd erupted into cheers and stomped their feet. Zendari and Joseph joined in, caught up in the contagious excitement. The announcer started naming off the drivers for the night.

“Competing in his fifteenth straight derby, in car number eighty-two, we have our reigning champion, Dak Flanders.”

Again the crowd cheered and Dak leaned out of the window of his car to wave to the fans. Zendari clapped, having no idea who that was. She was more concerned with who was driving the cars.

“Joseph, are these all men driving?”

“Of course. Occasionally, a few women try it, but most don’t see the draw in smashing into other cars willingly,” Joseph said.

“It doesn’t look safe.”

Joseph shrugged. “They have fire extinguishers.”

“Fire extinguishers! For what?”

“In case the car catches fire. Happened last year. Guy got stuck in his car, but they put out the fire before it got too bad.”

Zendari hugged the bear tighter. It gave her some comfort, but none more than Joseph, who rubbed her back.

“Next year you should try out. God knows you have the experience,” Joseph said and waited for her reaction.

Zendari wrapped her arm around him, squishing his face into the bear. “What was that about my driving?”

“We could call your car, The Deer Smasher,” he said, his words muffled by the bear, but still audible. She moved the bear away and smiled at him. His teasing made her forget all her worries and focus on what mattered. Him.

“If I’m going to do that, I’m tying Bambi on the front of my hood.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

The announcer finished with the introductions and went into some of the rules when John and Karn’a returned with no snacks.

“Hey, where’s the snacks?” Joseph asked, pretending he wasn’t fully aware of what they really were doing.

“All out. Who would have thought?” John said.

The cars all roared to life. Their metal frames shook, reminding John what Karn’a was like in the men’s bathroom a few minutes ago. He had to cover her mouth to keep her quiet, but the quivering was impossible to stop. The backfire from the exhaust shouted for attention.

“Woo! Yeah! Let’s see some smashin!” Karn’a yelled above the noise.

“On your marks. Get set... GO!” the announcer yelled.

Mud flew from the tires as they sped off toward each other. The crowd in the front got sprayed by Dak’s car, causing more cheers. In seconds, the first collision occurred, both going head on like rams. The engines screamed all over, competing to get the attention of the people over the sound of scraping metal and solid hits.

Karn'a was on the edge of her seat, jumping up at every big hit, while John yelled in approval. Zendari, on the other hand, watched with one eye behind the bear, crushing it in her grip. She didn't want anyone to get hurt and kept thinking it was Joseph in one of those metal death traps. As the event went on and cars were being eliminated, her worries melted away. She imagined there would be more smoke and fire, but most cars that got hit hard enough either stopped moving or the tires spun in place, flinging mud on their killers.

Her grip loosened on the bear as the cars whittled down to the last five. Two were chasing a slow-moving, banged up sedan and another vehicle was lining up a finishing ram near the edge of the track.

"Come on! Get him!" Zendari yelled, as Dak charged in to finish off the mostly stalled car.

What she didn't notice was the red laser dot that glowed on her. It danced up her body, occasionally pushing over to the bear in her grasp. Dak's car slammed into his opponent, followed by a loud crack. Debris shattered and flew up into the crowd, causing everyone to react. Something zipped past Zendari much faster than the debris below, slicing the arm of the teddy bear. She heard the whiz of the bullet and saw the fluff fly out.

"Get down." Zendari tackled Joseph, shielding him from more gunfire that never came. Karn'a was up on her feet, cheering too loud to notice or hear them, unlike John.

"Hey, what's going on?" John asked and pulled on Karn'a's tail to get her attention.

"We're being shot at."

Karn'a scanned the horizon, noticing nothing out of the ordinary. Screaming fans, loud cars, and another crash and crack that made Zendari flinch. She had seen it once before with a veteran who was in

the first wave of the occupation. The symptoms were all there. Karn'a sat down and put her hand on Zendari's shoulder.

"Zendari, you're safe. No one is here to kill you. It was just a crash."

"That wasn't debris that flew past my head!"

Karn'a tried to lift her off of Joseph, but she was hunkered down and swatted her away. "Joseph, talk some sense into her."

"Hey babe, I'm okay. You're okay," Joseph said, mostly talking to her breasts.

"You gotta stay down. I don't see the shooter."

"If there was a shooter, they would have run off by now. Too many witnesses."

Zendari thought about it. There was no higher position and they were encircled. He was right. Their human guns made far too much noise to not get someone's attention. She let up off him slowly, monitoring the crowd across from them, searching for any commotion. Nothing stood out to her as everyone cheered from another finishing blow on another derby car.

"I got to get Officer Larlin to lock down the arena. Karn'a, keep him safe," Zendari said and raced down the bleachers, pushing people aside.

"Wait!" Joseph said, following her.

She didn't hear him or know that he was following. Zendari was too focused on making sure the assassin wouldn't get away. Running along the crowded main floor, she kept her head on a swivel, half expecting to find her shooter making a break for it somewhere else in the crowd. That wasn't the case, which instead carried her feet faster. Rushing past the concessions, she found Officer Larlin outside the entrance waving to a couple walking by.

“Have a nice day. Hope you enjoyed the fair,” Officer Larlin said. Ringo barked when Zendari ran up to them, turning her attention. “Oh, Zendari, how was the derby?”

“You gotta lock it down,” Zendari said, out of breath.

“What? Why? What’s happening?”

“We have a shooter inside—”

“Zendari! Wait up,” Joseph said, jogging up to them and not nearly as winded. Not far behind him was John and Karn’a, who was carrying her wounded stuffed bear.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Officer Larlin demanded.

“Someone took a shot at me—”

“No one took a shot at you. It was debris from the crash,” Karn’a said.

“It was not debris!”

Officer Larlin saw what was going on. She had been read in on the shooting incident in the woods. She knew the signs. “Zendari, can I talk to you in private?”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“Come over here, please,” her voice still calm and almost more sincere.

Zendari glanced back at all her friends, none of them believing her claim. Their worried faces all stared back at her, like she was the one in crisis. *I can’t be imagining this. I can’t be*, she reasoned, and walked with Officer Larlin.

“I heard what happened in the woods. With Mr. McGee.”

“This has nothing to do—”

“Doesn’t it? You hear a loud car backfire and it sounds like a rifle. My aunt went through the same thing. Everyone is triggered differently.”

“I don’t have PTSD.”

“Then why are you the only one who heard anything? Were they sitting next to you?”

“Yes.”

“How come you’re the only one who heard it?” Officer Larlin asked and gestured to Karn’a. “Karn’a is a Rakiri. She has better hearing than both of us.”

“It was loud in there. Must have been timed with the crash.”

Officer Larlin put her hand on Zendari’s shoulder. “Do you know how unlikely that is? Someone takes a shot at you in the middle of a crowded stadium full of people.”

Zendari kept thinking back. She heard the zip of the bullet. It was unmistakable. And the bear, it was ripped. The cars didn’t generate that much force to fling metal all the way up to them. She was positive, but no one else believed her. Zendari turned back around and saw Sarah joining them, with arms full of popcorn and large soft drinks.

“I was wondering where you all went,” Sarah said.

“Did you just get here?” John asked.

“No, I was calling, looking for you.”

“We were on the south side. Didn’t you get my text?”

“You said the north side.”

“No, I didn’t.” John pulled out his phone and went right to the message. “Damn autocorrect.”

That was when Zendari had an idea. One last hope of having a witness. She went over to them, leaving Officer Larlin. “Sarah, did you hear any gunshots when you were over there?”

“Sure. Those cars sound like guns.”

“No, I mean actual gunshots. From the crowd?”

“Is there something going on?” Sarah asked, looking between her and the others.

Zendari was deflated, and cheers could be heard from the arena of the final wreck. No one believed her, yet she knew what she heard. What she saw. Joseph walked up to her, concern written all over his face.

“You believe me... don’t you?” Zendari asked.

Joseph hugged her. “I’m here for you.”

Karn’a joined them, along with John, giving her a group hug. “We all are.”

Zendari stared ahead, past Sarah, watching the people trickle out of the stadium. Her assassin was getting away and everyone thought she was suffering from traumatic stress. It was too late to do anymore. She had lost this round, but at least her suspicions had been confirmed. There was an accomplice, and she was going to find out who.

CHAPTER 18.

ZENDARI WAS SITTING ON the bed, tapping away at her omni-pad, getting the latest results from orbital surveillance. It had taken a long time to get it, seeing as she asked for all the people who attended the derby. The girls up in space worked their butts off, narrowing down suspects, but it would all be worth it if they caught the shooter. She wanted to get to work on it right away, but a duffle bag was launched in her face.

“Your bag isn’t packed. Karn’a and Sarah will be here soon,” Joseph said, already dressed for the day in a white shirt and tan shorts.

“I still have a lot of work to do.”

“And it can wait until we get back.” Joseph walked over to the bed and took the omni-pad from her hands.

“Hey!”

“You can have it back when you’re in the car.”

Zendari lunged at him, grabbing him around his lower back and pulling him on top of her. He smelt fresh from the shower and water dripped from his hair onto her chest.

“Who made you the boss?”

“You need this vacation. We both do,” Joseph said, eyes dead set on her.

“But—”

Joseph shushed her lips with his finger. “No buts. Those criminals will still be there when we get back.”

Her sigh could have been heard from the other room, giving in to his demands. She had to admit, a vacation with him was something she was looking forward to. It was the timing that was not ideal.

“Fine. Can I have my omni-pad back?”

“When you’re done packing,” Joseph said, getting off of her. “And if you get done before the others show up, maybe we pick up where we left off last night.”

Zendari rolled off the bed and rummaged through the dresser, grabbing whatever clothes she could find. Last night was a blur, but she remembered his bare chest on hers at one point. It was another long day of investigations, so some release was well deserved.

Joseph left her to pack and closed the door behind him. He jumped back, surprised to see Karn’a leaning against the wall, casually waiting for him to show up.

“Oooh, what were you two up to last night?” Karn’a asked, a devilish grin on full display.

“How did you get in? I never heard you come in.”

“I fear you are underestimating the sneakiness, sir,” she said, giving her best spanish John Turturro impression.

“Well, I can see what you two were up to.”

“I like feet. I do not know why.”

Joseph waved his hand dismissively and walked by her in the hall. “Okay, I get it. You liked the movie.”

“Would you like me to change your socks?”

“John, come get your girlfriend, she’s being weird,” Joseph said, going into the kitchen where John was eating fruity pebbles.

“Did she use the socks line on you?” John asked.

“You owe me a foot massage!” Karn’a said, joining them in the kitchen.

“Was it organic?” John asked her.

“It totally was.”

“What are you two going on about?” Joseph asked.

“I bet her she couldn’t use the socks line on you *organically*,” John explained, looking at Karn’a again briefly. “So, what’s the verdict?”

“Depends. What do you have to do?” Joseph asked.

“He owes me a foot massage,” Karn’a said, confident in her victory.

“And if you win?” he asked John.

“She needs to spend more one-on-one time with Sarah.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Joseph, can we have a word?” Karn’a asked, not waiting to hear his answer and guided him away from John. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure John wasn’t eavesdropping. “You know I like you. You’re my pal. I can tell you stuff, right?”

“Sure?”

“Sarah is boring.”

“She doesn’t seem boring.”

Karn’a faced him and threw her paws in the air. “All she talks about is boy stuff. Clothes, make-up, dieting.”

“I think that is the first time I have ever heard that sentence in my entire life.”

“It’s torture. When she’s around John, she’s fine, but when it’s just us, I would rather die. You gotta help me!” Karn’a said, shaking him by the shoulders.

“If I do, you have to help me.”

“Anything.”

Joseph saw the comical desperation in her eyes. He resisted the urge to laugh and got right to what he wanted.

“You need to babysit my sister’s kids this upcoming hunting season when she asks.”

“Deal,” Karn’a said and spun him around to the kitchen. “Now go tell him the good news.”

Joseph went back into the kitchen when he heard the creak of the door. Sarah came in, wearing a white sun hat that almost touched both sides of the doorframe, distracting his attention from her hot pink mini skirt.

“Hey Joseph.” Sarah waved to him, closing the door behind her.

“You look ready. I like the hat.”

“Thanks. I’m hoping not to get my face burnt this year,” she said, coming up behind John to give him a kiss on the cheek. “How’s my favorite man?”

John gulped, forcing the cereal painfully down his gullet. “Good. Did you throw your stuff in my truck?”

“Already did. I only saw one bag. Is Karn’a not coming?”

“That’s hers. I have my stuff already up there.”

Karn’a nudged Joseph. “Ah hem.”

“Oh, right. Yeah John, you owe her a foot massage,” Joseph said, fulfilling his end of the bargain and getting himself a bowl of cereal from the counter.

“What deal did she make with you?” John asked, knowing he was full of it.

The cereal clanged in the bowl until it sounded like grains of sand being poured. “Nothing. She has a knack for impressions.”

“Told you,” Karn’a bragged.

John shook his head. Karn’a was a little liar, but he didn’t mind. There was no way that pervert wanted only a foot massage. He was positive. He took his bowl to the sink and put the box of cereal away. “We better get going. It’s a decent drive to the cabin.”

“I call shotgun!” Karn’a said, and Sarah locked eyes with her. Their competition had begun.

“Can’t call it from inside the house,” Sarah said, and ran to the door. Her hat flapped as if she was trying to take flight while Karn’a chased after her.

“Looks like you got your hands full with those two,” Joseph remarked.

“You’re just jealous you don’t have two babes after you.”

Joseph looked back at his room, imagining Zendari still desperately trying to find all her clothes for the weekend. That was the woman he always wanted. Someone who pursued him as much as he pursued her. Despite her recent struggles and the occasional argument, he still loved her more than she could ever know.

“No need for two when I already have the perfect one.”

The paved road was a distant memory. The canopy of leaves almost towered over their vehicle as they drove down the weaving dirt road. Deer watched from the safety of the forest brush on either side, not daring to cross until the loud machine was gone. Small dirt clumps bounced around in the wheel well for so long it became background noise.

“Are we there yet?” Karn’a said, head glued to the window.

“Almost,” John said.

He took another turn and passed a few other driveways that led to different cabins. Going all the way to the end, he turned off to the left in the cul de sac where the sign read, ‘Hanks’. The dangling limbs of

the trees scratched against the truck. They only traveled ten meters before they saw Susan's van parked behind next to the cabin.

The cabin was dark brown and appeared to be made of pure oak logs. Standing two stories tall with a green roof, it was bigger than Joseph's house. The back had one window with the curtains drawn and plenty of freshly cut grass surrounded it. John pulled up next to the van, able to see the majestic blue water of the lake ahead. Kids were playing on the sandy beach, while Susan was fishing with Billy on the dock. John shut off the truck and turned around to his passengers.

"Thank you for flying John Country Airlines. It is one fifteen central time in sunny Minnesota. I hope you all enjoy your stay and welcome to the most relaxing place on Earth." John winked at Karn'a and got out.

Everyone piled out of the truck, doors closing one after another, alerting the kids on the beach.

Gretchen tossed her little sand shovel and sprinted across the yard, leaping over the empty fire ring. "Zenrawree!"

"Gretchen!" Zendari said and walked over to her with the bag slung over her shoulder.

While those two reunited, Joseph heard the screen door smack, followed by soft, yet hurried footsteps. He didn't need to see who it was. She was going to make herself known.

"Is that my boys?" Charlene asked as she rounded the corner. "Joseph!"

"Hey Mom." He didn't get much time to respond as she was dotting all over him immediately.

"You look thin. Have you been eating?"

"How come you never ask John that?"

"Because he never turns down my pie. Where is that man? I hear we have company!" Charlene said, waving to Sarah. John emerged from

around the truck with Karn'a and Charlene's mouth almost hit the floor. She maintained her smile, but was confused. She knew Zendari and Sarah, but the giant cat woman was a new one in more than one way. "Who is this?"

John smiled. "Karn'a, this is my mom, Charlene. Mom, this is Karn'a. My other girlfriend."

"Huh, I... didn't expect that..." Charlene was dumbfounded, trying to piece together what was going on. Aliens were complicated enough, but two girlfriends were harder to get her head around. She looked to Sarah for confirmation, which she nodded. "You two... are okay with this?"

"Yes. Karn'a is great once you get to know her," Sarah reassured her.

Karn'a came up to her more cautiously, unsure how to take her previous comment, extending her fist. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Hanks. Thank you for having me this weekend."

Charlene snapped out of her shock upon hearing her talk. She seemed like a nice enough woman and if a human woman was willing to give her a chance, she was going to, too.

Charlene knocked her fist aside and hugged her around the waist. "We hug in this family. It's nice to meet you, Karn'a."

Karn'a picked her up off her feet and hugged her, matching her energy. Charlene practically melted in her furry arms and Karn'a could feel it. If there was a time to impress, this was it. Karn'a purred and rubbed her cheek against her head. She didn't kiss ass much, but when she did, she was the best.

"Your fur is so soft," Charlene said.

"Thank you. I love your shirt." Karn'a tugged on Charlene's soft pink shirt with a loon on it.

"If you like my shirt, you will love going out on the boat. We see loons all the time on the lake."

“When can we go!” Karn’a vibrated with excitement.

“Not until I go get some more oil,” Barry said, joining the group. His hands and shirt were covered in oil.

“I have oil,” Charlene said, pointing at the pontoon. “There was a whole bottle in there.”

Barry held his hands up. “Empty bottle.”

“Then you hurry back. We want to get out there while there is daylight.”

“I’ll take you,” John said and went to his truck.

Both Karn’a and Sarah turned to him, not wanting to be left alone, yet neither could say anything. Instead, they stood there awkwardly, unsure what to do next. Lucky for them, Charlene was all about being busy.

“Come inside, I’ll give you the tour while we wait,” Charlene said and went back to the door.

“Hey Zendari, we’re going inside,” Karn’a said to Zendari, who was learning a secret handshake Gretchen made up for them.

“Come on, Gretchen, you can show me where I’m sleeping.” Zendari picked her up and brushed off her sandy feet.

They all went inside and their collective mouths dropped. It was a spacious room with faux wood floors. On the left was the living room with two couches and a green area rug. The lamp was near the window and the left most wall had a recessed bookshelf filled with murder mystery books. The bindings were all worn and added some color to the otherwise earthy tones of the room. In the back was a wooden staircase made of a lighter wood and a bear hide draped over the railing.

To the right was the kitchen. The countertop made an L shape and had all new appliances. There was a pine wood dining table near the window, which had a pile of chip bags and other delectable treats.

The whole place smelt of pine needles and was much roomier than Joseph's place. Charlene briefly showed them the two obvious rooms and pointed to the lone entryway in the middle.

"Through there is the bathroom on the left. There is a room at the end where Barry and Susan will be staying and my room is on the right. You all will be up here though," Charlene said and went up the stairs. Everyone followed her up the creaky stairs that were all sanded smooth. At the top were four beds positioned in no apparent pattern. "I didn't realize there were going to be five of you, so the boys will have to double up."

"Where are you sleeping, Gretchen?" Zendari asked, not upset about getting her own bed. She definitely preferred Joseph's warm body next to her, but it was a small sacrifice to make his mom happy.

"I'm sleeping under the stairs!"

"Yes, all the kids have their sleeping bags under there. They were so adorable last night," Charlene mentioned.

While Charlene went on about the kids, Karn'a was devising a plan to get some alone time with John, which she aptly named Operation Freedom Feet. The problem was she had a lot of obstacles.

There was no privacy upstairs, and the kids were downstairs. That would mean she would have to be extra quiet or risk the kids wandering upstairs to be scarred for life and landing her on the child predator list. So inside the cabin was a no go, because if you can't be loud, there was no point.

That would mean she needed to coax him outside. Karn'a had been unsuccessful in the past, but she was hoping her luck would turn around. After all, he owed her a *massage*. The next obstacle was when. She assumed they would all be together for most of the day, not leaving much time to sneak away. A lull could work, but it likely would only

happen at night. Before she could get farther in her half-baked plan, Sarah tapped her on the shoulder while the rest went back downstairs.

“Which bed do you want?” Sarah asked.

“The one with John.”

“Me and you both.”

“You think she would mind if we moved our beds together with him?”

“I wouldn’t. She still thinks Zendari and Joseph aren’t sleeping together.”

Karn’a sneezed with laughter. “Seriously?”

“Might be best if we don’t tell her. I’m surprised she took us both to dating John so well. Best not push our luck.”

Karn’a sighed and sat on the bed with a clear view of the outside through the railing. “I’ll take this one. At least that way I can see outside.”

“Don’t be bummed. I’ll make you my famous ice cream cake for dinner.”

“What is ice cream?”

“Oh, you’re in for a treat, then.”

Barry’s feet dangled in the air over the seat while he filled up the motor with oil. The wood planks of the dock clattered from the kids running to the pontoon, wearing their towels like capes.

“Boat ride! Boat ride! Boat ride!” The kids all chanted. Their dad emerged from the pontoon with a grunt and closed the back compartment behind the white seats. His shirt was still stained, but his hands got out this time unscathed.

“Are you ready for a boat ride?”

“Yay!” the kids shouted and jumped into the boat.

Charlene led the rest of the adults to the dock, bringing her bag full of suntan lotion, towels, glasses, and a book, just in case. Zendari walked alongside her, getting more nervous by the second upon noticing that Billy and Willy were not wearing shirts.

“Um... Charlene. Isn't it a little inappropriate for the boys to be without shirts on?” Zendari asked.

“You're right,” she said. “They need suntan lotion.” She dug around in her bag. “Those pale boys are going to burn like a lobster.”

“Mom, remember how I told you her culture is kind of the opposite in some things?” Joseph chimed in.

“Yes, dear.”

“Well, would you let the girls run around without shirts on?”

“Of course not... oh.” Charlene said, finally understanding. “Billy. Willy. Put your shirts on.”

“Why? It's so hot out here,” Willy whined.

“Listen to your grandma or else she won't get you any s'mores tonight,” Barry said, realizing Zendari and Karn'a would probably be uncomfortable with how the boys were dressed, or rather, lack thereof.

Zendari's nerves eased as they got on the pontoon. Milly and Lilly were jumping up and down in the middle. Billy was looking over the side to find more fish to catch. Willy was trying to hide from the sun under his blanket, and Gretchen was watching the propeller spin under the rippling water as the motor rumbled to life. It was a joyful sight that brought her mind far away from the omni-pad of suspects in the cabin. This was her time to relax, and she was going to embrace it.

Without delay, Susan and Joseph untied the ropes from the dock and they were off to explore the small lake. Thick trees covered the

shore with a few docks throughout where other cabins were. No one else was out on the lake and the gentle breeze of fresh air calmed all who took it in. The serenity of the entire experience was lost on Billy, still glued to the water, getting Karn'a's attention.

"What are you looking at?" Karn'a asked, leaning over the boat next to him.

"I'm trying to find fish. Mom says there are walleye here."

"What's a walleye?"

"It's a big fish with a spiky fin!" Billy pounded the seat, determination painted on his little face, like a hard-boiled detective who wanted the truth out of his suspect. "I'm going to catch one!"

Karn'a chuckled to herself. He was dead serious. The boat motor calmed down and they coasted to the middle of the lake. Lilly and Milly were the first in the water, jumping in without fear. The water splashed on Zendari, making her whole body rigid.

"Come on, Zenrawree, let go in!" Gretchen said, pulling on her arm.

"You go ahead. Warm the water up for me."

"Alright, suit yourself," Joseph said, getting up from the seat next to her and picking up Gretchen. Gretchen's screams weren't going to save her as he jumped in the water with her.

Billy's face scrunched from all the splashing and swimming that was guaranteed to scare away the fish. The kid's laughter gave Karn'a an idea to cheer up the grumpy boy. She wasn't positive it would work, but it was worth a try.

"You want to know how to catch that fish?"

"How?"

"You got to swim after it." Karn'a flung him over her shoulder and picked up Willy in her other arm. Both squirmed in her grasp, but

it was too late. Her body was already in motion, running to the end. “Cannonball!”

With the grace of a newborn giraffe, they splashed into the water and emerged seconds later, spitting water out of their mouths. Susan sat on Barry’s lap, watching the kids play with Karn’a. Karn’a was smiling ear to ear, swimming after them around the boat. Charlene got her trusty digital camera out and started snapping pictures.

“John, you need to get in there,” Charlene said.

John stopped, about to crack the tab on his first beer of the afternoon. Sarah was laying on his lap, soaking up the sun. “I can’t. I’m pinned down here.”

“Oh, come on. Sarah, you tell him.”

“You are blocking my sun.” Sarah winked.

“I see how it is.” John got off the seat and walked over to Zendari, who had built up the courage to sit off the ledge and dip her toes in the water. “But I’m not going alone.”

John pushed Zendari in with his foot and flexed his arms in victory. The kids laughed and splashed at him as Zendari came up shaking.

“Shhhiiii– that’s cold,” Zendari said, grabbing the ledge of the pontoon with one hand.

“Your turn, John,” Sarah said.

“Pfff. I’m drinking my beer first,” John said.

With all the distractions, no one saw Karn’a lurking under the pontoon, except Zendari. She pressed her finger to her lips and Zendari nodded. Revenge was a dish best served wet. Karn’a waited for the crack of the can before she sprung up and grabbed him by the shirt. John’s lips chased the beer, going head over heels into the water.

“Yay!” the kids cheered.

John’s head bobbed above the water, searching for his beer. “No! My beer!”

“That’s what you get,” Zendari said, still shaking.

Karn’a swam up to John and dumped the can of lake water and beer on her head.

“There was probably still some in there,” John moaned.

Karn’a went nose to nose with him, careful not to scratch him while they treaded water. “Then you better lick it up.”

She waited in the hopes he would kiss her, but the kids had other plans, splashing them both. They both turned to see Gretchen and her siblings all smiling, waiting for retaliation.

“Now you’re gonna get it,” Karn’a said and swam after them and their excited screams. John joined in the pursuit, not wanting to let his favorite feline have all the fun.

The family were enjoying themselves, while Zendari was trying to stop shaking. Her body relaxed when she felt Joseph hug her from behind.

“You look cold.”

“Don’t ever leave me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Joseph went around to her front, making sure to stay glued to her. Her nipples were so hard, he could have sworn they cut through her bathing suit. “I didn’t think the water was that cold.”

“How are you not freezing?”

“I guess I run hotter than you.”

“No one is hotter than you,” she said, flashing him a shivering smile.

“Mmm, I don’t know. I think there is someone hotter than me,”

Joseph teased in a higher pitch.

“Not possible.”

“She’s purple, has cute little tusks—”

“That could be anyone—”

“She’s tall.”

“I’m not tall.”

“And her nipples are sharp as a knife.”

Zendari rolled her eyes. “Probably Larlin.”

Joseph laughed, followed shortly by Zendari. It lasted for a few seconds before his tender eyes met hers. He shuffled a little higher up on her and wrapped his legs around her back. He needed a better position for the next part.

Zendari put her free hand on the rung in front of her, under the boat, swinging like on the monkey bars toward the middle to give them some privacy. She leaned in and kissed his extra wet mouth. His lips tasted more like lake water, but it didn’t matter. All she wanted him to know was that she loved him.

“Whatever you two are doing down there better be PG,” Charlene said, stomping on the floor above them.

Joseph broke away from the kiss and smirked. “Nope, it’s rated R. Better not come down here.”

Zendari snorted, almost clunking him on the head. Charlene’s normally quiet feet pounded on the floor as she made it to the end and stuck her head down to see them. Given the loud booming, Zendari thought she was mad, but instead, she snapped a picture of them.

“Hey, what if we weren’t decent under here?” Joseph said, still teasing his mom.

“I know my boy better than that,” she said, snapping another picture. “You two are so adorable. Reminds me of when I was dating your father. He couldn’t keep his hands off me.”

“Like father, like son, I see,” Zendari said.

“He sure is. You two have fun... but not too much fun.” Charlene snapped a final picture and went back topside to watch her grandkids.

Zendari turned her attention back to him. “What was your dad like?”

“Oh man, where do I even start...” Joseph began and stared at the ceiling for a second until he thought of something. “He was always positive, sometimes to the point of frustrating. And quick to lift someone up when they were down. He always seemed to have the right words to say, whether it was a well-timed joke, some sage advice, or simply listening. I still remember one time, he took me to a homeless shelter to help serve food and I’ll never forget it...”

Zendari kept listening to the details, and her concern grew with every word. The fact that people were too poor to afford food or lodging was disheartening to hear. It reminded her of the atrocities the Alliance and Consortium pedaled. All the innocent, suffering people when there was a better solution.

“He told me, ‘Son, the measure of a man is not his actions alone. It is the heart behind his actions.’ That was the kind of man he was. I was there because I was told to be, but he was there because he wanted to be. He drove me to be better that day and every day since. If I end up half the man he was, I’ll die happy,” Joseph finished.

Zendari wiped her face, hiding her tears in with the rest of the water from her hand. The compassion in his words told her more than she bargained for. *You are more like that man than you will ever know*, Zendari told herself, but couldn’t find the same words for him.

“He sounds like you,” Zendari said.

“I wish.”

“Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Oh, right to the short jokes.”

Zendari laughed. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” Joseph pecked her on the cheek. “Let’s get you out of here. I bet a nice warm towel is calling your name.”

“I would like that.”

Embers sailed into the sky as another log was thrown on the crackling fire. The sun had faded behind the trees and the stars would soon take their rightful place in the sky. Zendari was coming from the cabin, wearing a large maroon sweater, and her arms were full of logs that Barry needed to keep the fire going. The kids were all wrapped up in their blankets, watching their dad stir up the fire, while Joseph finished placing the last chair around the fire.

“Who wants s’mores?” Charlene sang, kicking open the screen door. Her hands were full of graham crackers and chocolate. Following her was Karn’a, already eating the marshmallows out of one of the bags.

“Mmmm. These puffy sugar clouds are great!” Karn’a exclaimed.

“Those aren’t all for you,” Sarah said, behind her, carrying out the metal pokers.

John was waiting by the door to ambush his favorite women. He was going to go for Sarah, but getting stabbed wasn’t his idea of a good time. Karn’a was the better choice. Soft fur, soft sweater, and soft food. Nothing could go wrong. John tackled her from behind and wrapped around, falling to the ground. All he did was interrupt her stride... and steal all the marshmallows.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Karn’a said.

“Stealing the marshmallows. Whahaha!” John got back up to his feet and ran to the fire.

Something primal went off in Karn’a’s head, watching him run away from her. It was an overwhelming urge to chase him. To hunt him. To love him. She bolted after him, catching him much faster than expected since he slowed down, trying to stuff a few marshmallows in his mouth. Karn’a lunged out and brought him into her body.

Turning her back, they both slid on the grass, stopping before the pavers around the fire.

“Gotcha,” Karn’a whispered to him.

“Kids, quick! Save the marshmallows!” John yelled.

The kids all ran around the chairs and took the bags of marshmallows from John as he fought off Karn’a’s playful attempts to stop them. Their laughter brought a smile to John’s face from his simple victory, not to mention Karn’a grippy tongue on his neck.

“You taste much better. I think I’ll keep you instead,” Karn’a said in a husky voice.

John spun around in her arms to face her, noticing the windmill logo on the sweater. “You wearing my dad’s sweater?”

“Your mom got it for me. You like?”

“You pull it off well.”

Her chest rose, making sure it hugged her a little tighter to show off. “I’d rather you pull it off.”

John glanced down and gave her a smile. Then a sharp sting hit his leg. He reflexively grabbed his leg and rolled off of her, seeing Sarah over them with the metal poker in hand.

“You’re getting s’mores last,” Sarah said.

John gasped. “How come?”

“You didn’t help us get anything ready.”

“Neither did Billy.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, leaving a remnant of a smile on her face. His pseudo innocence was hard to resist. The kids all gathered around Susan and Charlene, impatiently waiting for them to divvy up the chocolate and crackers. Zendari piled the wood up for Barry and sat down next to Joseph, who watched his nieces and nephews.

“These s’mores must be something,” Zendari said.

Joseph sat up in his seat. “Yeah, the kids love them. A classic camp-fire treat... wait... you’ve never had one.”

Zendari shrugged. “That’s okay. I had plenty to eat for—”

“Hey Mom, can we get a s’more over here? Zendari’s never had one before.”

“One s’more, coming right up,” Charlene said, taking a poker from Sarah.

“I wanna make it!” Gretchen said, tugging on her grandma’s pant leg.

Charlene handed her the poker with a puffy marshmallow on it. “Okay Gretchen, just be careful not to burn it to a crisp.”

Gretchen quickly flung it toward the fire, causing it to fly off the poker and into the flames. “Uh-oh.”

Charlene chuckled to herself and put another one on for her. “This time, be careful.”

Gretchen overcorrected, moving the marshmallow painfully slow over the fire. It balanced over the top of the flames, turning light brown before their eyes. Zendari found it peaceful, listening to the gentle crackling of the fire while the other kids joined in on roasting a marshmallow. In no time, Gretchen was done and Susan helped sandwich the marshmallow between the two crackers. She jumped around with the excitement of a fox, eager to take the snack over to Zendari.

“There you go,” Susan said.

“Thanks Mom!” Gretchen skipped over to Zendari, gracing her with a s’more worthy of the name.

Zendari carefully took it from her, feeling the cracker smoosh the melted chocolate and marshmallow. “Thanks Gretchen. It looks great.”

Gretchen didn't leave her side and held her breath, waiting to see her take the first bite. Zendari was going to wait for others, but Gretchen would have passed out by then. *Let's hope it's good*, she told herself, and took a bite.

"Mmmm. That is really good! You're the best s'more maker I know," Zendari said.

Gretchen did a goofy little dance and ran back to her mom. "Mom! Mom! She likes it! I'm the best s'more maker in the galaxy!"

Zendari put her hand on Joseph's. "She is so adorable."

"She sure is. And speaking of adorable, looks like Billy made a new friend," Joseph said, gesturing to the other side of the fire where Billy walked over with a s'more to give to Karn'a.

"Here you go Car Na," Billy said, handing her a s'more.

"Aww. Thanks Billy."

"I was wondering if you could show me how you caught that fish with your hands?"

"I sure will, kiddo," Karn'a said, ruffling up his hair with her free hand and taking a bite of the s'more. Her eyes shot open, surprised by the delightful taste and crunchy, yet mushy texture. Billy took that as a good sign and hurried back to make another one with his dad. Karn'a turned to John, offering some of her s'more. "You want some?"

"You can have that one. I like mine less black."

"What are you talking about?" Karn'a inspected her food, and the marshmallow was black as obsidian, except where she bit. She shrugged it off. "Eh, that just means it's well done, right?"

"Not quite how that works."

Karn'a gulped down the rest of it in one go and pulled John's seat closer to her with her tail. Everyone was distracted, still making s'mores, making it the best time to enact her plan. The time window

was short, but she would have to make it work. She leaned in and whispered into his ear.

“Me. You. Out in the woods. What do you say?”

John quirked his head, a bit surprised by the forwardness of it all. “Really? Right now?”

Karn’a put her paw on his chest. “You got me all worked up. And tonight won’t work, given the sleeping arrangements. We just need to excuse ourselves for a minute or two.”

John looked around at the family, all preoccupied at the moment. If there was a time, it was now. They just needed an excuse. Karn’a’s paw slithered down to his hips, and he knew he had to act fast. John took her hand and stood to his feet.

“We are going to get more firewood,” John announced to the group.

“But we have plenty,” Barry said.

“If we’re going to be out all night, we’re going to need more than that,” John said and whirled around his seat, bringing Karn’a with him.

The kids cheered, thinking they wouldn’t have a bedtime. Susan started to temper her kids’ expectations, but it was enough for the two crazy lovers to run off into the darkness with no more fuss.

“She’s getting wood alright,” Zendari remarked to Joseph.

“I don’t think so. The mosquitos are gonna bite the shit out of them.”

“Okay everyone, who wants to hear a scary story?” Charlene asked.

“I do!” Milly said, raising her hand. Her siblings also shot up their hands and jumped in place, except Willy, who was sitting down in his little red chair munching on a s’more.

“Sit down everyone. I got a good story for you.”

The kids scrambled to get a seat, excited to hear a story from grandma. Barry lifted Billy out of his chair and sat down, letting his son sit

on his lap. The whole family gave Charlene their undivided attention while she paced around the empty side of the fire.

“Many years ago, on a dark night like tonight. There were five young children who were camping with their parents in the middle of the woods...”

The kids gasped and looked at each other, thinking it was about them. Their little feet tapped on the pavers, excited to hear more.

“They were the best little children in the whole world and their parents loved them dearly, but that didn’t mean they didn’t get into trouble...”

The kids giggled and eyed their parents.

“The parents had tucked them into their sleeping bags and told them to not leave the tent without them. Otherwise, the dreaded WomBoo would get them.”

“What is a WomBoo?” Lilly asked.

“That is exactly what the children asked too,” Charlene said, pointing to her. “It was a large, furry creature with teeth that could sear flesh from bone with a single bite.” She chopped her teeth together, getting Lilly to hide her arms inside her towel. “And the worst part... it loved to eat children.”

“Oh, no!” Milly said, hiding behind her towel. Gretchen jumped out of her seat and crawled into Zendari’s lap.

“Cool!” Willy said.

“What happened next?” Zendari asked, rubbing Gretchen’s arms.

“They all went to sleep, but soon the children woke up one by one, hearing music in the bushes, followed by a voice.” Charlene cleared her throat and began moaning like a ghost. “‘Would you like to play with me?’ the voice said to them. Naturally, the children were curious and forgot the warning their parents gave them. One by one they went out of the tent and followed the voice.”

The boys were on the edge of their seats, while the girls were all hiding behind anything they could find. Charlene was proud of herself and continued her story.

“When they pushed through the bushes, there were toys galore! Teddy bears, model trains, airplanes, paddle balls, you name it. It was there.”

Milly and Lilly sighed in relief.

“They ran to the toys, overwhelmed with the mountains of fun available to them. But once they tried to pick up the toys, they phased through their hands like a cloud. It was a trap!” Charlene clapped her hands, causing the kids to jump. She put her hands in the air, imitating a bear. “Behind them, the ferocious beast stood on two legs and said ‘You should have listened to your parents.’”

Wild screams came from the kids as standing behind her in the shadows was a tall, furry creature. The kids scrambled out of their seats and pointed at the approaching figure. Gretchen buried her head in Zendari and shook with fright. Zendari, though, was trying to hold back her laughter along with the other adults. Charlene turned around and chuckled, seeing Karn’a walking in with John behind her.

“It’s just Karn’a,” Charlene said and noticed neither of them had firewood. “Where’s the firewood?”

John put his hand on his mother’s shoulder. “The mosquitos won.”

Karn’a sat down, doing her best to hide her disappointment, while John scratched at the numerous bug bites on his arms and face. Joseph was right. The mosquitos were out in force.

“I told you to wear a long sleeve,” Charlene said.

“I’ll remember that next time,” John said and sat down next to Karn’a. He scratched the back of her neck, hoping to give her some relief. “I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t realize those mosquitoes bothered you so much,” Karn’a said.

Sarah got up and brought her chair over to them, wanting to join in on their hushed conversation. “What are you two talking about?”

“About how those flying bloodsuckers drained me of half my blood,” John said and wrapped his other arm around her shoulders. “Was mom telling a scary story?”

“The kids certainly thought so.”

The kids began putting their chairs back up, minus Billy, who ran over to give Karn’a a hug.

“Don’t worry, you’re not a WomBoo,” Billy said.

“What is a WomBoo?”

Billy continued to hug her, and she patted him on the back. Karn’a looked to John for an answer, but he was as lost as she was.

“It’s from the story. I’m a little surprised she described you as the monster instead of Zendari,” Sarah said casually.

“I’m not a monster,” Karn’a gasped, feigning offense.

Billy hugged her tighter. “I know you’re not. You’re the best!”

“Thanks Billy.”

The rest of the night was spent around the dying fire, telling jokes and eating until there was nothing left but crumbs. Susan was the first to get up and gather her little minions.

“Time for bed, everyone,” Susan said, getting the expected groans from them.

“Listen to your mother, otherwise the wombat is gonna get you,” Barry said.

“You mean WomBoo!” Gretchen said.

“Say goodnight.”

The kids all spoke at the same time, drowning out any intelligible words besides ‘night.’ Gretchen gave Zendari a big hug and ran off to

get ready for bed, as did Billy with Karn'a. Their little arms showed more love to them than their body could contain. It warmed Karn'a and Zendari's hearts and brought a welcomed end to their long day of fun. Barry followed Lilly, the straggler of the group, and they all went inside, leaving Charlene with her boys and their women.

"Ladies, do you mind if I talk to my boys in private?" Charlene asked.

"Sure. I might as well get ready for bed anyways," Karn'a said, and kissed John on the cheek. "Don't stay out too late."

Zendari did the same to Joseph, waved to Charlene, and followed Sarah to the cabin. Around the fire, all that was heard was the crickets out of sight and the occasional snap of the withering fire. It hadn't been this quiet since they were kids and in trouble for doing something. This time, it might be for doing *someone*.

"You going to tell us what you want to talk about?" John asked.

Charlene waited a second, trying to find the right words. "I want to talk about why you have two girlfriends."

Joseph started to get up from his seat. "This doesn't sound like something I need to be here for—"

"No, it does Joseph." Her voice was stern, but not quite angry. She sighed and continued. "John, when you said you were bringing more company, I thought you were bringing a dog or a cat. Not another woman."

"I should have led with that on the phone then, shouldn't I have?" John nervously chuckled.

"You should've. But more importantly, why?"

"I wanted you to meet her."

"No, why did you feel the need to date two women at the same time?"

"They are okay with—"

“That’s not what I asked. Why do *you* need to date them both?”

“I like them both.”

Charlene pinched the bridge of her nose. “Son, you’re asking for trouble doing what you’re doing. I don’t want you to hurt those girls.”

“I’m not going to hurt them.”

“You better be sure of that. Sarah puts on a brave face, but I’m not so sure she is all for it.”

“What makes you say that? Did she say something to you?”

“No, but she’s a woman from this planet. We tend to be jealous and greedy with our men. Don’t think I didn’t notice you spent most of the day with Karn’a.”

John nodded and thought about what she was saying. He hadn’t realized it, but the time they spent together wasn’t equal. Sarah may not have said anything, simply because she didn’t want to rock the boat. He needed to do better.

“I’ll make it up to Sarah. And I want to assure you, I really am dedicated to both of them. I care about them both a lot,” John said.

“I hope you know what you’re doing. You can even ask Joseph how hard it is to please one woman.”

“Yeah, it can be really *hard* sometimes,” Joseph sarcastically said. It was not difficult to make Zendari happy. She didn’t need all the little things he would do for her, like make breakfast or set aside her clothes for the next day. All she wanted was a man to come home to and enjoy life with. It never seemed to matter where they went or what they did, although sex was sure pretty high up on her favorite couple activities.

“See, even your brother struggles to handle one woman. I’m sure alien relationships have their new challenges,” Charlene said, blind to his sarcasm, unlike John.

They sure do. Never thought I would live to find a woman with a higher sex drive than me. “Oh yeah, loads. You have no idea how many times we have fought over who gets to open the pickle jar.”

Charlene caught that comment. “Joseph, do you not see the problem?”

“John’s a grown man, and they are grown women. They can do what they want. And to that, I am going to go to bed.” Joseph got up from his seat and hugged his mom goodnight. “Don’t worry, John will figure it out.”

Charlene squeezed him tight in her boney arms, hoping he was right before letting him go to the cabin. His footsteps grew louder, forcing Karn’a to jump away from the door. She had heard most of their conversation through the door, despite the kids still being rambunctious under the stairs as they wound down for bed. Her instincts told her she better not be downstairs when he comes in or he is gonna know she was listening. With her cat-like stealth, she ran past the kids and up the stairs to her bed. Sarah was already getting settled and Zendari was brushing her teeth on her bed.

“You listening to their conversation?” Zendari asked Karn’a, putting her brush away and spitting into a little tin.

“You know, you can use the bathroom downstairs,” Sarah said.

“Willy is in there. I’d rather not wait, and it’s not like I need a mirror or privacy to brush my teeth,” Zendari said, zipping up her night bag and laid on her bed, looking to Karn’a. “So, what did they say?”

Karn’a thought about what John said. It was an encouraging sign that he wanted to spend so much time with her, but this relationship was more than them. Sarah needed her time, too. It also gave her an excellent idea on how to do that. Ignoring Zendari’s question, she went over to the boys’ bed and pushed it against Sarah’s.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked.

“Charlene made a good point that you haven’t had a lot of time with John today. I was hogging him to myself and I didn’t consider your feelings. I hope this will make up for it,” Karn’a said.

“Then where is Joseph going to sleep?” Zendari asked, giving up on her last question.

“I’m sure you and Joseph can figure that out.”

Zendari got off the bed and started making a bed out of clothes from her bag. “I’m not risking getting on Charlene’s bad side. She still thinks we haven’t slept together.”

Karn’a didn’t care about Zendari’s hangup, focusing on Sarah’s reaction. She sat up in her bed and smiled at her. Not like normal, where she was friendly or excited. It was reserved and genuine. Sarah took her gesture for exactly what it was. An attempt at being a good friend.

“Thanks Karn’a. I really appreciate it,” Sarah said.

“It’s for the best. If I was in your position, the whole cabin would hear me.”

“Yeah, I know,” Zendari said, slapping yet another bundle of clothes on the ground for her pillow.

Karn’a flopped on her bed in time to see John and his mom walking up to the cabin. She admired him so much and hoped her gesture would bond them all more closely. Being part of a pack was something she never truly thought of until their first real date. After spending more time with his whole family, it was now all she wanted. If that meant sacrificing some time with him, so be it.

After some time of Joseph and John riling up the kids and Susan yelling at them, they went upstairs to find their bed missing. Karn’a waved with her fingers at John and purred, getting his attention.

“Where did our bed go?” John asked her.

“Looks like Sarah wants you to cuddle with her.”

John turned to see Sarah tucked under the covers and patted the bed next to her. He checked over his shoulder and slinked over to his bed.

“Was this your idea?” John asked, sliding into bed next to Sarah.

“It was Karn’a’s.”

“It’s good to see my two favorite women getting along.” John kissed Sarah on the cheek and smiled at Karn’a. “Goodnight Karn’a.”

Such a simple phrase made her heart skip a beat. She may not have gotten to sleep in his bed, but his words would give her comfort tonight. That and watching Zendari and Joseph fight over who was sleeping on the floor.

“I’m the man, I’ll sleep on the floor,” Joseph said.

“Exactly. You’re the man. You’re sleeping on the bed.” Zendari countered, sitting him down on the bed.

“You know, this is stupid. Just sleep with me.”

“I can’t afford to get on your mom’s bad side. I have a chance at being her favorite.”

“You already are her favorite. And besides, she would blame me anyways.”

“I’m not so—” Zendari began and was pulled onto the bed. His arms and legs pinned her arms to her side, trapping her on bed.

“There. Right where you belong,” Joseph said.

Zendari wanted to be mad, but his smile was contagious. His loving arms and warm body were always welcome, but the thought of his mother walking up there gave her pause. She needed reassurances.

“Fine, but if your mom comes up here, it was all your idea,” Zendari demanded.

Joseph let go of her. “It was my idea.”

Zendari pulled over the covers and reached over to the wall to turn out the lights. The cabin went dark, with only moonlight leaking in

from the window downstairs. Joseph tried to be the big spoon, but she turned him around much quicker than he expected.

“Also, no tempting me tonight.”

“What makes you think I would do that?” Joseph said, the darkness hiding his mischievous grin.

“Experience.”

“I thought you liked being poked in the morning?”

“I can still sleep on the floor,” Zendari threatened, although that was the last place she wanted to be. She knew she was near powerless to the snake between his legs. It would be awfully embarrassing if her mom walked in on them, or worse, the kids.

“No, no. Fine. I’ll be good. We can find some other time to play hide the twinkie.”

Zendari kissed him on the neck and cuddled with him. “Have a good night.”

He kissed her hand and relaxed as she held him like a teddy bear. “You too.”

CHAPTER 19.

THEIR TRIP TO THE cabin had come and gone in the blink of an eye. Zendari wished she could have gone back to the cabin one more time before summer ended, but her work had taken up most of her time. All the fun of fishing, swimming, and mudding along forest trails were replaced with endless leads she needed to follow. It was dangerous work, but given the investigation of her suspects so far, she was in more danger of dying from Joseph's mad driving on the trails.

Zendari clenched her omni-pad while sitting at the table, thinking back to when they went up that sixty degree hill on his four-wheeler. *He is a madman*, she thought to herself.

"Are you listening to me?" Commander Tojen asked, her voice coming through her omni-pad speakers.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Care to explain why you had dossiers made up of hundreds of people attending some ho-dunk car race?"

"It was a demolition derby--"

"Oh Goddess D'Quirlen, do I sound like I care about what the event was?"

"No, ma'am."

“Start explaining yourself,” she growled.

“I was shot at while attending the derby. I think it is Mr. McGee’s accomplice.”

“Then why am I only hearing about this now? It’s been over a month!”

Zendari didn’t have a good answer for that. With everyone thinking she was suffering from PTSD, she had no intention of ever telling Commander Tojen. Karn’a would have been asked to corroborate her story and it would have led to mandatory therapy sessions, not to mention dropping the case. It was something she refused to do. There was no way she could live with herself if the assassin came back and hurt Joseph or his family.

“I thought I could solve it quickly before you found out,” Zendari admitted.

“You know what I think? I think you are making this up so you can spend more time with your boyfriend.”

“I am not. I promise you.”

“Was there anyone else with you?”

She didn’t want to answer that, but she was running out of options. “Karn’a and our boyfriends.”

“I will check with her then. In the meantime, I want you to stop investigating these people.”

“Why? What does it hurt?”

“If this gets out about the kind of surveillance we are doing on them, people will get angry. Angry people attract rebels and rebels turn green zones into red zones. Do you want that?”

Zendari did not agree, seeing as she had been doing surveillance and investigations for months without much backlash, yet she knew to pick her battles. Besides, Commander Tojen wouldn’t know if she continued anyways. “No, ma’am.”

“Good. Expect a call from me later today about your next assignment,” Commander Tojen said and hung up.

Zendari slumped in her seat. She had been so busy; she forgot about what that meant when she was done. The Imperium stretched across the galaxy, and that meant she could be transferred anywhere... even away from Joseph. Her heart ached, thinking about how she couldn't protect him if she was millions of miles away. She needed to solve this case and a breakthrough was right in front of her. A still image from one of the Marine's helmet cams stared back at her, showing the floorboard of Timothy's truck. Sprinkled over them were little pink paper hearts. Zendari didn't take Timothy as a romantic, given his wife was dead, but that didn't mean he wasn't seeing someone. And there was only one place in town that sold anything with hearts. Sarah's shop.

Ringling bells from above announced Zendari's arrival. She unbundled her worn plaid coat that she found in Joseph's shed, happy to be out of the cold. It wasn't terrible, but she was missing the heat. She glanced around and saw no one was inside, except Sarah, who was up on a high ladder, placing a gumball machine on the top shelf.

“Do you need some help?” Zendari asked from below.

“Zendari!” Sarah said, wiping her hands on her thin jeans. “What are you doing here?”

“I was actually hoping you could help me on a case I am working on?”

Sarah climbed down the ladder. “A case? What kind of case?”

“I found some new evidence in the McGee case that might help me find out who was working with him.”

“Working with him? Wasn’t he a lone shooter?”

Sarah didn’t believe there was another suspect. With Karn’a in her ear about it, it wasn’t surprising. It was frustrating for Zendari to think about, but it wasn’t Sarah’s fault. She had no idea what was going on.

“I found some heart paper mache in his truck. He didn’t seem to be the romantic type. Did he ever come by here to buy anything?”

“I can’t say I’ve ever seen him around here.”

“Can I see your purchase records?”

“Of course.” Sarah walked behind her counter and pulled the information up on her computer. Zendari stood behind her while she scrolled to the day before his arrest.

“Stop. I need it from here until the beginning of the year.” Zendari pointed to the screen, reading some of the names.

Sarah clicked a few times on the screen and soon the printer under the desk came to life, shooting out dozens of pages. “I just realized you probably want it digitally?”

“It will be fine. I’ll take what you got here.”

Zendari took the respectable stack of papers and tucked it under her arm. “Thanks for the help, Sarah.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“And if anyone asks, I was never here.”

Sarah pretended to zip her mouth shut and threw away the key. Zendari had just watched a movie with that expression in it and was thankful Joseph was there to explain it. There were so many different gestures and she was always excited to learn a new one, since her grasp on the English language was getting close to mastery.

“Thanks again. You may have just helped me crack this case.”

Zendari was on her knees, spreading the papers around in the back of Susan's old van. Technically, it was actually hers, since she bought it off Susan a few weeks ago. Joseph needed his truck and she needed to have something, even if it was a junker. The back seats were torn out, since they were an embarrassing reminder of being walked in on by Officer Larlin. In its place was a simple plywood floor that hurt her knees, but was going to be worth it if she found the accomplice. She went through each piece of paper, circling names that matched the remaining suspects on her list.

Her body shook occasionally, feeling the breeze that leaked in from the bullet hole in the van. It was an oversight not to cover it up, but it wasn't going to stop her. After hours of combing through everything and the occasional hot chocolate break, she finally narrowed down her suspects. None of them she recognized and all of them men. No matter how long she had been on Earth, she was never going to get used to seeing men as the main perpetrator of violent crimes.

Zendari left the papers on the floor and crawled up to the driver's seat. She tossed her omni-pad to her partner in the passenger seat. He was always quiet, almost stoic, if not for his fluffy exterior and dead eyes. After taking a bullet for her, she kept him around as a good luck charm.

"Okay Agent Stuffins, are you ready to bust this case wide open?" Zendari asked. The only response she got was the teddy bear's head falling into the window. Her hands gripped the steering wheel and put it into drive. "That's what I thought. Let's ride!"

Her van lurched a few times before finally smoothing out and speeding down the road. This was her moment, and she was feeling good. A huge break in the case and plenty of sugar tended to keep

her spirits high. Joseph was out in the woods with a client, so he was far away from any would-be assassin. She finally had the advantage and nothing was going to spoil it... until her omni-pad rang. It was Commander Tojen.

“Commander Tojen?”

“I got done talking with Karn’a. She claims no one shot at you,” Commander Tojen said, her voice much more subdued than earlier.

“I can explain—”

“You don’t need to. There is no shame in admitting you’re struggling—”

“I don’t have—”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses. It is my job to make sure you get the help you need. I have already submitted the paperwork to have you suspended—”

“No! I am fine—”

“With full pay until the end of the year...”

Zendari’s mouth went agape and turned to her fluffy partner, equally shocked by the revelation. *Did I hear that right? With full pay? Until the end of the year?*

“I... don’t know what to say...”

“Nothing. All you need to do is get better. Which means no more work. That is an order.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you,” Zendari said, happy to hear she wasn’t getting transferred or, worse, fired.

The call ended, and Zendari had arrived at the destination. She had a big smile on her face as she adjusted the gun on her hip. Not everyday someone gets full pay to not work for several months. It gave her all the more motivation to find this assassin. Zendari flew out of the car and almost skipped up to the mesa-like house. Large brick archways loomed over the mahogany door. It was an oddity for the area, but

it didn't matter to her. She saw someone moving around inside from the window and her whole tone became serious, snapping her back to the gravity of the situation. *Game face now. This could very well be the killer.*

Zendari knocked on the door and heard a faint female voice coming from inside. The door opened to a short, black-haired young woman, wearing an apron that said 'Kiss the Cook.' In the woman's hand was a whisk, still dripping with egg.

"Can I help... woah..." the woman said, noticing how tall Zendari was.

"Hello there, you must be Mrs. Zenweiler. Is your husband home?"

"I'm sorry, he is out. Who are you?"

"I'm Interior Agent D'Quirlen. I was hoping to talk to your husband about a case I am working on."

"Is he in trouble?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Not at the moment. I just need to ask him some questions."

"He is out with a hunting guide he hired. If you leave your number, I can have him call you when he gets back."

Zendari's heart almost stopped. *A hunting guide.* "This hunting guide, do you know his name?"

"Oh, it was Mr. Hawkins. Or was it Mr. Hanks? I can't remember. Adam said, but I'm not good with names."

Joseph! Zendari ran back to her van without even saying goodbye and put the pedal to the metal. She knew where he was hunting and started calling him. The dial tone kept ringing, forcing her heavy foot farther down with every ring unanswered. Where there was once happiness and hope in her heart, it was replaced with a knot of dread.

"Come on, Joseph! Answer your phone."

In no time, she was speeding down a dirt road as the tree line kept getting closer. She saw his truck parked next to a dirty green jeep with

no doors. They were still there, but where exactly, she didn't know. She parked right behind the jeep boxing it in, in case a chase came out of it. This guy wasn't getting away.

Zendari ran out of the van, not bothering to close the door, and drew her handgun. Her heart was pounding as she approached the vehicles with caution. There were no signs of a struggle and not a word to be heard. Searching both vehicles, she found no sign of them. It was hardly a relief, meaning her next task was finding them. She thought back to her conversations with him, trying to glean any information that could be helpful. All she could remember was that you want to be upwind from a deer. She checked the wind with her finger and plotted her general course in the woods.

The leaves crunched under her feet while she followed the narrow deer trail that weaved through the woods. It would have been an enjoyable walk with the fall colors if not for Joseph hunting with an assassin. The trail eventually stopped at a deer bed, surrounded by thick brush. She crouched down in it and took a break, gazing up at the trees. It was eerie, not hearing a single animal. The forest held its breath, seemingly waiting for her to move out of her cover. Then a snap of a stick got her attention.

She turned her head and crawled to the edge of the bed, peaking out of the foliage. There was nothing to see until an arrow came zooming at her. Zendari fell flat, but the arrow was much faster, punching a hole in her sleeve.

"Shit," she whispered, and stayed as low as possible.

"Did you hear that?" an unfamiliar voice said in the distance.

"Yeah," Joseph said. He stood up in the deer stand, cupping his hands around his mouth. "Hey, is anyone out there?"

"Joseph! Are you okay?" Zendari yelled. She rolled up her sleeve, noticing a mere scratch and blue blood smeared around the cut.

“Zendari? Is that you?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry, I’m here to rescue you.”

“From what?” Joseph said and swiped Adam’s bow. “Next time, Adam, don’t shoot at something you can’t see.”

“From Mr. Zenweiler.”

“From me? What did I do?” Adam asked Joseph. Joseph ignored him and addressed Zendari before things got further out of hand.

“Zendari, I’m coming down. Are you okay?” Joseph asked and silently motioned for Adam to follow him.

“I’ve been better,” Zendari said, trying to see where they were to get a shot off.

His feet crunched under the leaves, followed by Adam’s as they jumped from the steps off the tree. He walked over to her with the bow way above his head. “You can come out, babe. I got the bow.”

Zendari slowly peaked out with her weapon at the ready in case Adam was forcing him to say that. The first person she saw was Joseph, followed by Adam with clearly nothing in his hand. After a few seconds, she finally relented and holstered her weapon.

“What were you doing in there?” Joseph asked.

“I was trying to find you,” she said and came out of her cover. “I had a break in the case and when I heard one of my suspects was out with you, I assumed the worst.”

“Suspect? What did I do?” Adam said.

Zendari narrowed her eyes, trying to detect any deception in his tone. “You shot at me, for starters.”

“It was an accident. I thought you were a deer.”

“In his defense, you are supposed to wear orange,” Joseph added.

Zendari took a deep breath to compose herself. She may have been a bit too hasty, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t the man she was after.

There were important questions burning in her head. Ones that she needed answered.

“Mr. Zenweiler, I need you to answer some important questions for me.”

“Okay... but who are you?” Adam asked.

“Remember, I said my girlfriend was in law enforcement?” Joseph said.

Adam’s eyes got big, realizing how much trouble he could be in. “Oh, you are *her*. I’m so sorry, officer. What can I do for you?”

“You can tell me what you bought at Chocolate Hearts Shoppe a few months ago.”

“I bought my wife a box of chocolate hearts and a small teddy bear.”

Zendari knew what he was talking about. It didn’t have any tiny hearts with it, being one of the first things you can find in the store. Yet that didn’t mean he didn’t track it in his shoes from walking around there.

“Can you tell me where you were sitting at the county fair destruction derby?”

“I honestly can’t remember. My wife was with me the whole time though, she might remember.”

“Can she corroborate being with you the whole time?”

“Yes. I never left my seat once the derby started. My nephew was one of the drivers. Did something happen there?”

Zendari ignored his question. “Can you call your wife? I want to speak with her.”

Adam reached down into his camo overalls and pulled out his phone. He dialed the number and Zendari looked over to Joseph, who was scratching his head. *I will explain it to you*, she mouthed to him before Mrs. Zenweiler answered the phone.

“Adam? Are you okay?”

“Yes. Why?”

“There was an Interior Agent at our door. She was asking about you and then she ran off. I feared the worst.”

“I am actually talking to her right now and she has a question for you,” Adam said, putting the phone on speaker.

“Mrs. Zenweiler, do you remember going to the county fair derby with your husband?” Zendari asked.

“Yes. Sammy was competing that night. We wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“Did you or your husband ever leave your seats once it started?”

“Nope. No need when Adam had the popcorn.”

She wanted desperately for there to be some inconsistency, but her gut knew the truth. Mrs. Zenweiler didn’t sound like the kind of woman to lie to authority, and if she was being honest, they both seemed like a nice couple. It pained her to admit it, but she was wrong.

“Last question, did either of you see or hear anything out of the ordinary when you were there?” Zendari asked.

Adam shook his head and his wife said no. Zendari didn’t blame them. It was loud at the derby. If she didn’t know any better, she would have started to second guess if there was indeed a shooter. For now, though, she struck out.

“Is there anything else you need from us?” Adam asked, ready to hang up.

“No, that should be it.”

Adam said goodbye to his wife and hung up. “I’m going to head out. No chance we are going to get a deer now.”

He took his bow from Joseph and walked away. His head was down, residing to the fact that he wasn’t going to surprise his buddies back at the lodge.

“Sorry for ruining your hunt,” Zendari called out to him, but he didn’t look back.

Joseph stood next to her, watching Adam leave. “I have a feeling he’s not going to hire me again.”

“I’m really sorry. I overreacted,” she said, turning to face him.

“Want to explain why?”

“I got a break in the case. New evidence that proves Mr. McGee had an accomplice.”

“Zen—”

“I have proof. I swear.”

“I thought you were going to drop it. Did you talk to your boss? Commander Toe Jam?”

Zendari chuckled. “It’s Tojen. And I actually did. Good news, she is letting me take the rest of the year off.”

“That doesn’t sound like good news. You didn’t get fired, did you?” Joseph asked.

“No. She just thought I needed a break from wrangling criminals...”

“She doesn’t believe you either.”

Zendari grabbed him by the shoulders, desperate to put a positive spin on her suspension. “But that’s okay. Once I find this assassin, we’ll have more time to—”

“No. Your boss told you to stop. That’s what you’re going to do.”

“My boss doesn’t understand.”

“I think she does. You have been at it ever since we got back from the cabin. Late nights. Weekends. You even made one of those creepy line diagrams you see in movies.”

Zendari cringed. “You saw that?”

“You put it in my garage. Of course I saw it.” Joseph sighed. “Point is, it has been an obsession lately, and it needs to stop.”

Zendari hadn't realized the toll her investigation was taking on him until now. He didn't mention it before, but how could he? She was always gone. There needed to be a change and it was up to her to do it.

"Okay," Zendari said.

"Okay what?"

"I will listen to my boss and drop it."

"Today."

Damn it. "What about tomorrow?"

Joseph raised his eyebrows, not unlike an upset parent. He didn't give that look much, but when he did, she knew not to risk it.

She threw her hands up in the air in surrender. "Okay, today."

"That's my girl." Joseph gave her a hug.

She returned the gesture and stared up at the leaves that were beginning to change colors for the season. Now that she was so close, giving up seemed idiotic. But Joseph needed it. No use in trying to catch a criminal if it meant their relationship didn't survive through it.

"The leaves sure are pretty."

"We haven't even gotten to peak season yet," Joseph said and took her by the hand away from the trail. "Come on, I'll show you what to look forward to."

He led her past through the trees until they spotted a shorter one in the middle of a clearing. The leaves were a mix of oranges, yellows, and reds, reminding her of a fire. The beautiful tree hadn't lost more than a few leaves, still full and radiant.

"That is... beautiful," Zendari said, hardly able to believe such colors were possible from a tree.

"Imagine most of this forest looking just like that. It's practically a pastime just driving around and checking out the view this time of year."

“That sounds amazing,” she said, still mesmerized by the colors.

Joseph gave her a side hug. “Not as amazing as you.”

She looked down at him, at his smiling face. He was always full of compliments, and she appreciated it. “You forgive me for ruining your hunt?”

“Only on one condition...” he playfully said.

“What?”

“When we go hunting, you shoot that deer.”

“Tell me when and where. I’m ready to shoot that bastard.”

CHAPTER 20.

KITTY KAT: I HAVE a surprise for you!

John: You got me a puppy?

Kitty Kat: Something better.

John: *gasp* two puppies! I'm not sure I could handle that. They are kinda a handful.

Kitty Kat: Hahaha no, even better!!

John: Okay, what is it?

Kitty Kat: They should be arriving shortly...

John put down his phone on the counter. "They?"

The bell above the door rang and Officer Larlin rushed inside, chest heaving as if she had been running for her life. She leaned against the nearest shelf, trying to catch her breath.

"I... made it."

"Can I help you?" John asked, walking around the counter.

Officer Larlin went over to him, holding up a flyer that was in her hand. "You are about to be very busy."

John looked at the flyer in her hands and had no idea what it said since it was written in Shil. He did notice the hand drawn tree on the side and what looked like a generous rendition of him given the

six-pack abs, massive arms, and large bulge in-between the legs. If that is how Karn'a saw him, he was flattered... and confused.

“What am I looking at here?”

“Oh right, I forget you humans don't all know Shil,” Officer Larlin said. She puffed up her chest and cleared her throat as if announcing a decree for the kingdom. “It says: ‘Help Save My Boyfriend's Shop! Attention Marines, I have a new mission for you. There is a sexy man at 375 Cormet Avenue who is in need of your help. He runs a modest hunting supply store and your patronage is vital for him to continue serving this community for the next year. He sells traps, guns, ammo, jackets... the list goes on forever! Any amount you're willing to spend goes a long way. P.S. He is open to polygamy (aka a traditional relationship), so who knows, maybe you have a shot too.”

John's head was spinning. It was both thoughtful and not thought out. He needed the extra business since Voltan did not order nearly as many coats as he was hoping. There was a deal pending for more, but it wasn't going to close before the end of the year. The problem with Karn'a's approach was that she just sent who knows how many horny Marines to him, all hoping for a shot. Not to mention, what would Sarah think?

“How many do you think will be here?” John asked, hoping it was going to be a manageable number.

“I saw three transports on my way here. I'm sure more will follow. Once I saw the flyer, I came running.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Not to you. I imagine there will be brawls, though. Karn'a put blood in the water. The sharks are going to fight for you,” Officer Larlin said, glancing around the store to get her bearings. “Are there any other entrances?”

From Sarah's shop, John heard the sound of a strong Shil accent.
Oh-no. They're here.

"Is this three seven five Cormet Avenue?" the Shil'vati asked, while a few other Marines browsed the store full of chocolate.

"Yes, it is. Can I help you with anything today?"

"Hmmm. The flyer said there was supposed to be a man here. And I expected there to be more... hunting stuff."

"Flyer?"

She held up the flyer for Sarah. Apparently, she can read Shil.

"Karn'a! You little furry bastard!" Sarah yelled, and marched into John's store. The fury in her eyes matched her stride, searching for her foe.

John put his hands out. "Hey Sarah, funny thing—"

"Did you put her up to this?"

"No! I had no idea."

Sarah scanned the room, thinking of where Karn'a might be hiding. John stepped in front of her and held her still. Her body shook with rage in his hands.

"Where is she?"

"She's not here. But it's okay. At least now I have more customers."

"I agreed to share you with Karn'a. Not with the whole Marine base like some gigolo."

"It was probably just a sales tactic. You know, sex sells and all that."

"Sure it was..."

John sighed. "Hey, I promise not to go home with any of the women. I only have eyes for you and Karn'a."

"You better promise," she said, crossing her arms.

"I'll even send them your way for snacks," John said, kissing her on the cheek. "Now run along, I got some sales to make."

Sarah glared at him suspiciously, but gave in, walking back to her store where the Marines were waiting for her with bags of chocolate. She pointed them to John's store and they were quick to check out before feasting their eyes on the man candy.

"Mmmm. He looks better than in the picture," the Shil'vati said, licking her lips. The other two Marines made similar comments flanking him as if he was the enemy.

"Can I interest you ladies in anything on the shelves?"

"I like what you got right here," one of the other Marines said, squeezing his butt.

John was caught off guard by the forwardness... and by Officer Larlin's thunderous punch to that Marine's face. The offending Marine crashed into the hard floor, spreading her bag of chocolate candies all over.

"You will show this man respect, Marines!" Officer Larlin barked. "Or I will show you what happens when you don't."

The other two took a step back from him, worried merely getting close would result in a beatdown. John had a guardian angel he didn't expect he needed, nor did he get the vibe she could ever be so authoritative.

Not even seconds later, his store door opened. Standing in the doorway was a Marine frozen in place, shocked to see someone already on the floor. Behind her were a few more Marines and others were walking in from the left, forming a line outside the window on the sidewalk.

John turned to Officer Larlin. "This is going to be a long day."

For the first time ever, John had to break out the ticket dispenser. He had got it as a gag gift one year, but all it did was collect dust in the back. John never dreamed he would have so many customers in his store at once, holding little white slips of paper, waiting their turn to be served. He needed reinforcements and after twenty minutes, she had arrived.

Karn'a pushed open the door, holding a roll of ticket paper. "Wow! This place is packed."

John had finished checking out his latest customer and waved Karn'a over. "I'm so glad you're here. You're going to run the till and announce the next numbers, while I handle the floor. Do you remember how to do everything?"

"Come on, John. I'm a natural," she said, coming around the counter.

"Good," John said, kissing her on the cheek. "And you might want to send customers to Sarah's. She is pretty pissed at you for this."

"You knock 'em dead, tiger."

John flashed her an amused smile and went off to find number twenty-three in the sea of purple. Karn'a looked around the full room and basked in her accomplishment. The turnout was excellent and other Marines getting off later would surely be in as well. Her master plan to help her man was working. And another customer was coming to the counter with a tent in her arms.

"Did you find everything alright?" Karn'a asked, as she rang up the tent.

"I think so. I hope this one is big enough," the thin Shil'vati said.

"You going camping?"

"With my podmates. Finally got leave and we wanted to explore the forests before it gets too cold."

"You should probably buy a coat, too. They are really warm."

“Thanks. I’ll let Minera know,” she said, texting her podmate, who was also somewhere in the mass of bodies.

“Is this all then?”

“Hopefully not. Minera is going to try to convince that sexy man to come with us.”

Karn’a looked both ways and leaned in closer. “You want to know a little secret to improve your odds?”

“What do you know?” Her desperation was showing from the sudden head movement toward her.

“You see that lady over there?” Karn’a said, pointing to Sarah in the adjacent store.

“Yeah.”

“She sells the best chocolate around. John loves that stuff. Can’t get enough.”

“I better tell Minera—”

“Or you could buy some now? Why should she be the only one who takes a swing at him?”

The Shil’vati thought about it for a moment and snatched her tent from the counter, almost running to Sarah. Karn’a got a kick out watching these desperate women do anything to impress one man. Also, she needed to do right by Sarah, so if that meant taking advantage of a few fellow Marines, it was a small price to pay.

John came back to the counter holding a bow with his latest customer. She was wearing several camo coats, with the price tags dangling and an ecstatic smile. Dragging behind her was a cooler overflowing with cooking supplies and a few arrows.

“We got a big spender over here,” John said, placing the bow on the counter.

“Wow, this is a lot. You got big plans?” Karn’a asked her.

“I told her about my brother. Who would have thought so many women were interested in guided hunts?” John said, excited to pass his blessing on to his brother.

Yeah, that’s what they’re interested in, Karn’a thought to herself while she started entering everything.

“My podmates are going camping this weekend, but when John here said he wasn’t available to join us, he told me about his brother who does private guides through the forest!” Minera said, practically glowing.

“Wow, that is something,” Karn’a said, feigning excitement. She was actually a little concerned.

John was handing his brother’s contact info out like candy to Marines. At least her stunt was in a public place. Joseph would be all alone in a secluded woods. All it would take was one Marine who couldn’t take no for an answer and he would be in big trouble. Most of them were stand-up women, but that didn’t mean they all were. Karn’a wanted to warn him, but he had already run off, calling for number thirty. That didn’t leave her entirely without options, though.

Minera had the smile of a child on Christmas until she saw the price tag of all the items she bought. “That is... a lot.”

“You bought a lot. Aren’t you splitting it with your podmates?”

“Yeah, but I hope I have enough to pay for the guide, too.”

“I tell you what, if you buy something from Sarah over there, I will ask Joseph to give you a significant discount,” Karn’a offered.

“Really? You would do that for me?”

“Of course, but you also have to do another thing for me.”

“What?”

Karn’a’s demeanor changed in an instant, becoming deadly serious. “Warn anyone else who is signing up for his guides that if he comes

back with so much as a scratch, not only will I personally skin them alive, but an Interior Agent will be knocking on their door.”

Minera gulped, noticing her sharp teeth sparkle from her not so friendly smile. “I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“Make sure the others know that too, Minera.”

Minera paid for her items and ran off toward Sarah’s shop. Karn’a felt a little guilty for her threat, but she knew it might have been necessary. Joseph was practically family at this point, and she needed to protect him somehow. A threat wasn’t much, but she had a feeling it was enough to keep them in line.

It was a long day for everyone with the constant flow of customers. All of them were Marines, except for Mr. Patterson, who could give two fucks who was there, or in line for that matter. He walked up to the counter, completely ignoring the short line that was forming in front of the counter with a box of handgun ammo.

“Christ Almighty, John finally got a worker who wasn’t family,” Mr. Patterson said, pulling out his billfold. “Does he pay you in catnip?”

“Um... sir, there is a line,” Karn’a said, trying to be polite.

“And if I have to wait behind that, I’ll die of old age. Ring me up sweetheart, I don’t have all day.”

Karn’a gave the woman behind him a sympathetic look and worked on getting him out of her hair as quickly as possible. Too bad he was extra chatty today.

“What are you supposed to be? I know about them Purps, but I’ve never seen one of you.”

"I'm a Rakiri. My name's Karn'a."

"Karn'a. Hmmm. That name sounds familiar. I think my wife said something about you."

"Hey old timer, how are you doing?" John said, walking up behind him.

"I'm doing well. Was just talking to your new employee."

"Oh, Karn'a isn't my employee. She's my girlfriend."

Mr. Patterson blinked rapidly and reeled back. "Your girlfriend? You're fucking a cat?"

"She's a woman. A Rakiri woman."

"She has fur, a tail, and purrs. Sounds like a cat to me."

"Every woman purrs if you treat her right," Karn'a interjected.

Mr. Patterson looked at her and chuckled. "Quick and witty. I take back my comment. You're too good for him."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're holding up the line," John smirked, and handed him the box of ammo.

"Just remember. Keep a water spritzer nearby in case she gets out of line." Mr. Patterson walked away, pretending to spray him with an imaginary spritzer.

John simply shook his head and smiled. He wished he had more time to talk, but if he wanted to close up this century, he needed to help Karn'a at the counter. Together, Karn'a and John made quick work of the remaining customers and sent them on to Sarah's, where they could satisfy their sweet tooth. Once it was all said and done, his shelves were picked clean. The bow rack was empty as well as the coats. All that was left were a few old guns and a single box of shotgun ammo.

"You did a good job today," John said, holding her around the waist and admiring the near empty store.

"*We* did a good job today."

“If it wasn’t for your flattering flyer, none of this would have happened.”

Her mouth quirked into a smile. “You liked my little drawing?”

“I did. Little exaggerated, but aren’t all cartoons?”

“To me, that wasn’t an exaggeration. You are larger than life.”

John looked up into her eyes. She saw him as a short Amazonian king. Her tired smile was all he needed for confirmation.

“How about I go grab Sarah and we celebrate?” John offered.

“I would like that.”

Officer Larlin finished up the last of her rounds, making sure there was no one left, and walked up to the counter.

“You would’ve sworn this was a closeout sale. I was sure hoping to pick up something,” Officer Larlin said.

John let go of Karn’a and grabbed the shotgun still on the display. The scratched wood stock and ribbed pump showed its age, but a classic was still a classic. He snatched the last box of shells and gave both to her.

“For watching my back this morning and the entire day today,” John said.

“How much?”

“Free. Consider it a thank you.”

“I insist. I need to pay for it.”

“How about a favor, then?”

Officer Larlin thought about it, glancing between him and the shotgun. The weapon in her hand felt solid, eating away at her resolve. Her boyfriend always said he wanted a shotgun.

“Two favors. I know how much this costs. I’ve been doing my research,” Officer Larlin said, examining the weapon.

“I always wanted a cop in my pocket. Is this what it feels like to be a mob boss?” John asked Karn’a.

“Nothing illegal. I can’t do that again.”

“Again?” Karn’a asked, trying to hold in her laughter.

“Can I use one of my favors to know what you did?” John asked.

“No, you can’t.” Officer Larlin held up the rifle. “You two have a good night.”

“You too,” the couple said, waving goodbye. The bell rang for their last customer and Sarah joined them with a big smile on her face.

“You know Karn’a, when I first heard about your plan, I was furious—”

“You were lucky you weren’t here. The claws were out.” John added quickly before she continued.

“But now, after seeing all the business we got, it was a pretty good idea after all. Easily the best sales day ever.” Sarah hugged Karn’a, burrowing her head into her stomach. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And no reason for the fun to stop. We are going out to celebrate.”

Sarah let go of her. “You two should go. The downside of doing so well is I have to restock, among other things. In case you forgot, Halloween is coming up.”

“I can help you tomorrow, all day if need be. Come on, we’re a pack. We should be celebrating this victory as one.”

“I’ll be working all day tomorrow either way. It’s fine, really. I had him last night anyways.”

“Are you sure?” John asked.

“I am. You two have fun,” Sarah said, backing away toward her shop.

“Before you go, I do have other good news I wanted to share with you both,” Karn’a said with a big smile on her face. “As of tomorrow, I am officially going to be an Interior Agent.”

“That’s great news!” John said.

“Congratulations,” Sarah said.

“I thought you said it was going to take longer?”

“It was, but now that Zendari is taking a leave of absence, they need someone to fill her place. Commander Tojen put in a good word and boom.” Karn’a clapped her hands to emphasize the boom. “I’m in!”

“Zendari’s on leave?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, Commander Tojen felt she needed to take a break from it all and focus on herself for a few months. When she gets back, they’ll ship me off to training.”

“Woah, so at the end of the year, you’re going to be gone?” John asked. The women both heard the pain in his voice. Sarah felt it was her cue for them to talk in private and took her leave. John held Karn’a’s hand, rubbing the pad of her paw. “How long is training?”

“It’s only a few months.”

“That’s going to be a long time to not see your smiling face.”

“I will still be able to call you and Sarah is here.”

John nodded, not completely sold on the idea. He didn’t think about where her career would take her. She was always nearby so that it never dawned on him she was still at the will of the Imperium. His whole family had always lived nearby, so the idea of falling for a woman who would be traveling for work was about as foreign as her species. He would have to talk to his brother to see how he planned on handling such a situation, but in the meantime, he was going to live in the moment.

“We’ll work out the logistics later. Tonight, we celebrate!”

CHAPTER 21.

IF IT WAS UP to Joseph, Zendari would have been out in the woods before September was gone, but life had different plans. The beginning of the busy season was usually lighter, with plenty of days for him to go out hunting by himself. This year, his schedule was booked with names, some of which he couldn't pronounce. John's impromptu plan was a huge boon for business. By the time October rolled around, Joseph just had to pick a day and stick to it.

The day he picked was perfect, at least for him. Fall was in full swing with fallen leaves covering the ground, the sun was high in the sky, and the air was brisk. For Joseph, the conditions were excellent for hunting, but Zendari was not as enthused, remembering what cold weather felt like again. She followed Joseph through the woods, bundled up in a few layers of flannel clothing and a black rifle slung over her shoulder. Her outer layer was the thickest, matching the fall colors around them. Zendari didn't let her hands leave her pockets until they got to the stand.

It was about sixteen feet up on the thickest tree around. The stand was all metal, with enough room for them to both fit comfortably on the seat and walk around each other if need be. Joseph went up first, showing her the different footholds to take up the tree. She followed

his lead, happy to get a glance at his tight butt on the way up. Joseph got situated in his seat and hung his bow on a little stub that grew out near his head. By the time he turned to check on Zendari, she was already sitting down next to him with the rifle on her lap.

“You excited?” Joseph whispered.

“You have no idea.”

Joseph scooted closer and leaned against her. Together they listened in silence to the birds singing around them and squirrels’ feet scratching the bark on the trees as they scurried about. Their hearts beat in unity, enjoying the serenity of it all. No distractions, no expectations, no worries. They didn’t speak for over an hour until Joseph broke the silence, whispering gently in her ear.

“You are much better at this than the others.”

“I am?” she asked, matching his volume.

“Yeah, by now the other women would have complained about the cold or never stopped talking, for that matter. Often loudly.”

Zendari burrowed her hands deeper into her pockets and smiled, trying to hide the fact her hands were freezing. With all his lessons, her own self study, and natural desire to impress him, she didn’t want to show weakness. This was important to him and her. He loved to hunt, and she wanted to murder that car destroying terror once and for all. Her numb hands could wait a few more hours.

“What can I say, I am amazing.”

Joseph slid his hand into her pocket to grab her hand, noticing it was ice cold. “Zendari, your hands are freezing.”

“No, they’re not. They’re numb. Freezing implies I can still feel them.”

He stood up, took her hands out of her pockets, and stuck them under his armpits. She let out a gasp of relief, feeling the blood go back into her fingers.

“You feel warmer now?” Joseph asked.

Zendari let her eyes close, focusing on the warm sensation gracing her hands. “Mmmm. It’s better than sex.”

“You should’ve told me your hands were getting cold.”

“I didn’t want to ruin the moment.”

“No moment is ruined when you’re in it.”

She opened her eyes. His nose was touching hers. If it wasn’t for the rifle between them, she would have pulled him into her. Instead, she settled for a tender kiss from his warm lips. It was a beautiful moment that, for the first time, she had to interrupt. Out of the corner of her eye, almost a hundred feet away, was the creature they had been waiting for. Bambi.

Zendari moved him aside and stood up slowly. Her knees cracked from the movement, causing the deer to turn its head towards them. She matched the deer, frozen in place. Where the deer stood completely still, Zendari used that time to raise the rifle up at a glacial pace. Her heart pounded in her chest, making the still woods sound like sitting next to the bass speaker at a concert.

“Nice and slow. Don’t forget the safety,” Joseph coached.

She did as she was told, bringing the rifle up and clicking the safety. Her small tusk made it easy to find the proper cheek weld and lined up her eye effortlessly with the scope. The deer was large in her new view, being able to make out the details in its dirty fur. It stared back at her, almost begging to be shot. She was more than happy to oblige.

“You’re mine now,” Zendari said under her breath and adjusted her feet on the platform. What she didn’t know was how close she was to the edge. Her foot slipped and down she fell. “Woah!”

She landed on her butt before sliding off the ledge. Flipping head over heels, the only thing stopping her from smacking the ground was a dangling strap with a loop around it that perfectly cinched around

her ankle. Her body jerked violently against gravity as the strap held her up, but the rifle escaped her grasp and continued to the ground.

There was a soft thunk, followed by a stupendous bang as the rifle discharged. She looked to where the rifle was pointing, hoping there was nobody in the way, yet there was. The deer collapsed in an instant, flopping to the side, never to get up again. It took her a moment to parse together what happened as the report of the rifle echoed farther into the woods, but once she did, she could not contain herself.

“I did it!” Zendari yelled upside down, punching both her fists above her head in victory.

Joseph rushed down the tree, more worried about the dangling alien than her once in a lifetime trickshot. He got to the ground and kicked the rifle aside, inspecting her face, given it was the only thing he could reach. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I am great! I did it! I killed Bambi!”

Joseph saw over his shoulder that the deer was lying on the ground, motionless. The situation could have ended a lot differently, but he had to admit, it was a once in a lifetime shot.

“You aliens sure have strange shooting techniques,” Joseph smirked.

Zendari spun by her ankle, trying to keep Joseph in her line of sight. “You’re just jealous I got to shoot something and you didn’t.”

“I don’t know if *you* shot it. I think the tree should get some credit.”

“Fifty fifty. That’s the best I can do.”

Joseph laughed. “How about I get you down from there?”

“How about you get those lips over here and finish what you started,” Zendari said, stretching her arms out to reach him, wiggling her fingers impatiently.

Joseph went up on his tiptoes, held her steady, and let her have it. To Zendari, his lips were better than any words he could have said. The thrill of defeating her four-legged foe was replaced with his

intoxicating touch. His warm hands caressed her cheek, reminding her how cold she actually was. She wanted to continue, but under different circumstances.

“Can you cut me down?”

“Now you want me to cut you down? Why the sudden change of heart?” Joseph teased her, making his way up the tree.

“I’m still cold.”

Joseph got to the top and pulled out his knife, sawing at the strap. “You know I can always cut that deer open like a tauntaun and have you crawl inside to stay warm?”

“That sounds... excessive.”

“It kept Luke warm.”

“I don’t want to be lukewarm. I want to be fully warm,” Zendari said, knowing full well what he meant. If he was going to tease her, she was going to, too.

Joseph stopped sawing. “No, Luke warm. Not lukewarm. Don’t you remember Star Wars?”

“Nope. Who is Lukewarm? And what does he have to do with gutting deer?”

Joseph heard her snickering to herself, realizing he was being played. He shook his smiling head and cut the rest of the strap without warning her. Luckily, her rifle caught her fall, banging her shoulder on the steel.

“Thanks for the heads up,” she said, rubbing her shoulder and getting to her feet.

“You’re welcome.” Joseph made his way down the tree where Zendari was waiting for him. She slid her hands under his clothes, picking him up by the armpits. His feet dangled below him while she walked with him toward the deer. “You know you can put me down?”

“I could, but then who would warm my hands?”

“Give me a few seconds and we can have that deer open in no time.”

She shook her head in defiance. “I’m not crawling inside that thing. Not going to happen.”

“You know I’m kidding.”

Zendari raised an eyebrow. “Do I?”

“I promise. Can you let me down? I feel like a kid when you hold me like this.”

Zendari put him down and ruffled his hair. “I don’t see you as a kid.”

“Says the woman who just ruffled my hair like I am a child.”

“How do you know that isn’t a normal Shil’vati greeting?”

“Cause I know you better than that. Grab your rifle. Let’s get a look at it.”

Zendari picked up her rifle and followed Joseph over to her slain enemy. They were both expecting more blood and searched the body, unable to find the entry wound. Joseph scoured the body, getting more confused by the second, until Zendari saw the hole in the deer’s head.

“I’m a pretty good shot,” Zendari said, turning the head to Joseph.

“What are the odds?” Joseph said, flabbergasted by the revelation.

“The Goddess smiles on me today.”

Joseph took a few steps back and took out his phone. “Then how about you smile for me, my Goddess?”

She positioned herself behind the deer and leaned her rifle on the kill like she had seen from the other hunting photos. This was a rite of passage for many and one she was honored to go through. Zendari grabbed the deer by the ears, noticing the deer wasn’t taking it as seriously with its tongue sticking out. Wanting to be different from the other photos she saw, she stuck her tongue out, too. It was a goofy

set of circumstances that got her here and she will not be outdone by a dead deer.

“You two goofballs,” Joseph said and snapped the picture. Forever that moment would live in his home, reminding him of the alien that captured his heart. *Thanks Bambi. Without you, I would have never known this majestic woman.*

CHAPTER 22.

MINIONS, SCARECROWS, GHOSTS, AND other little monsters ran around the lit streets with bags of candy and laughter. The convincing howl of a wolf made the moonlight sky appear more vibrant than normal. Not a soul outside was who they appeared to be and Zendari was no exception. Dressed in a sexy nurse costume that outlined her form quite well, she walked alongside Joseph, or as she called him, Doctor Hanks, based on his profession accurate attire. Both had stethoscopes over the shoulders and smiles on their faces as they walked up to Susan's door.

"Can you tell me again why I couldn't go as a human?" Zendari asked, pulling her skirt down a little more so she was somewhat presentable to the kids.

"Do you remember me explaining blackface to you?"

"Yeah."

"It's not quite the same thing, but it's the closest example I have of a really bad idea. Some may not care, but I can guarantee someone will."

Zendari played with her stethoscope, pouting a little. "I still think it would have been funny."

"Well, I'm not having sex with you if you're wearing a freaky human skin suit."

“But you will in a deer suit? Joseph, you have strange standards.”

She rang the doorbell, and the thundering of feet came rushing to the door. The lock clicked open and to greet them was a bunch of happy characters holding white bags. Milly was a princess, Lilly was a witch, Billy was the red Power Ranger, Willy was a ghost, and Gretchen was a police officer.

“Boo!” Willy said before the others cheered.

Joseph jumped, clearly faking it, but it was enough to make his audience believe it. Gretchen pushed past her siblings and hugged Zendari.

“You’re under arrest!” Gretchen said.

“Aww. Are you supposed to be a police officer?”

“They didn’t have Interior Agent costumes at the store, but Mom said this was close enough.”

“It sure is,” Zendari said and picked her up.

Hearing the words “Interior Agent” brought her thoughts back to her investigation she had to walk away from. Zendari looked at Joseph, who couldn’t tell that she had a secret. She never dropped the investigation as much as passed off the busy work to Karn’a. Since she was her replacement, she convinced Karn’a that these leads needed to be followed up for “rebel activity.”

Karn’a probably knew why she wanted the list of people investigated, but she never questioned her. While Joseph had been gallivanting off with new clients, she had been “hanging out with Karn’a.” It wasn’t a lie, per se. She had been spending time with Karn’a, but it was for work rather than fun.

The rest of the kids rushed out of the door as Barry came from the kitchen with Susan. Barry had an orange caveman costume on with a seafoam green tie, while Susan wore a white dress and dyed her hair orange.

"Kids, what are the rules when going out?" Barry asked his kids.

"Stay near Uncle Joseph," the kids said in unison.

"And Zenrawree!" Gretchen added.

"Good. Now go pester the Pattersons."

Gretchen leaped from Zendari's arms and led her siblings toward their first victim of the evening.

"Thanks for taking the kids. We never get to spend Halloween together," Susan said, hugging Barry.

"No problem, Wilma. Someone has to make sure Fred doesn't eat all the candy," Joseph said. Zendari was caught off guard by the names, but figured it was some inside joke she didn't know about.

"You two have fun. And make sure Lilly doesn't eat all her candy before she gets home," Barry said, closing the door on them.

Through the door, Joseph and Zendari could hear Barry say, "Fred need Wilma." They both looked at each other and smirked.

"I wonder what they are doing?" Zendari teased.

"Doing what we should do after this."

"I like the way you think... Doctor Hanks."

"No time for flirting, Nurse D'Quirlen. We have patients to save!" Joseph said, and they walked hand in hand over to The Patterson's house.

The kids were huddled around the door with their bags outstretched, and a familiar group of three were approaching from the sidewalk. Sarah was an angel with majestic gold wings, a halo, and white dress. Karn'a was a demon. Her red latex jumpsuit hid all her fur, minus her face. She carried a red trident and her tail had a spade at the end. Both of them flanked John, who was dressed like Paul Bunyan. It was a lazy costume given the amount of flannel they owned already, but the fake beard was quite convincing.

“Here you go. Don’t eat it all at once,” Mrs. Patterson said to the children in her oversized pumpkin outfit. The kids’ bags were a little fuller and they turned to run down the path when John blocked their escape.

“Uncle John!” Willy said and ran into him, almost knocking him over.

“Casper! What are you doing here?”

John played with his favorite ghost, while Billy went to hug Karn’a. His little arms were a vice grip around her leg. She tickled under his arms, getting him to laugh and let go.

“Are you a Power Ranger?” Karn’a asked.

“Yes! How did you know?” Billy said, excited to hear the alien knew about his favorite show.

“I watch TV. And the red one is my favorite too.”

Billy proceeded to do his best karate moves, which looked more like interpretive dance. So not too far off from the show. Karn’a watched his adorable little performance while the girls all ran up to Sarah.

“You’re pretty,” Milly said.

“Thank you, my princess.” Sarah gave a little bow. “But you are far more pretty than me.”

“What about me?” Lilly asked, twirling in a circle.

“You are a beautiful witch. And Gretchen, I like your little police uniform.”

“I’m an Interior Agent!”

“Oh...” Sarah said and switched the conversation. “You kids want candy?”

“You have candy?” the girls asked.

“What kind of angel would I be?” Sarah said and put a candy bar in each of their bags.

“What do you say?” Joseph said, joining the group with Zendari.

“Thank you, Sarah!” the girls said.

“You’re very welcome,” Sarah said.

“Alright kiddos, you ready to hit the next house?” Joseph asked.

“Yeah!” the kids said.

“What about Karn’a? Can she come with us?” Billy asked.

“Why do you think we’re here? To let you get all the candy?” Karn’a said, poking him gently with her rubber trident.

Billy did a few karate chops at her weapon while she backpedaled, bringing on an impromptu fight. Karn’a stabbed at him with some well telegraphed strikes, allowing him to dodge or block each one. He was holding his own well, but the other kids felt compelled to join in.

“Get her!” Lilly yelled, leading the rest of the small force after Karn’a.

“You’ll never catch me! Whahaha!” Karn’a said, retreating to the next house down the block. The rest of the adults laughed, watching the gaggle of kids chase after her. Her tail wagged just out of reach of the kids’ grasp, taunting them the whole time.

“She sure has plenty of energy,” Zendari said.

“I introduced her to caffeine today. She’s gonna crash hard tonight,” John said.

In no time, other kids from across the street joined in with the group. It became a giant herd of characters chasing her. Her playful run turned into a legitimate one, unable to handle the whole crowd.

“We better help her out.” Joseph said and they all ran to help out their furry demon friend.

Karn’a ditched her trident so she could run unabated. “There’s so many of them!”

After dealing with the aftermath of almost all the children on the block chasing Karn'a, the group got back on track to their main objective. Getting candy. The kids ran up to the next door, pulling Zendari with them. Karn'a hung back with Joseph, trying to still catch her breath, while John and Sarah went back to find the missing trident.

"How are those kids still full of energy?" Karn'a said.

"They didn't run as fast as you. And they're kids. By the time they get home, I'm sure they will fall asleep pretty quick, assuming they don't eat any candy."

"I could use some candy."

"You look like you could use it," Joseph said, tossing her a Tootsie roll.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, not seeing a bag in his hand.

He waved his hands. "Magic."

"You two were meant for each other. Both are so sneaky," Karn'a said, tossing the whole thing in her mouth.

"Um... you're not supposed to eat the wrapper."

"You sound like John. Next, you're going to tell me I can't eat the Saran wrap over my reheated meals."

You're lucky the Imperium solved the cancer problem. Probably wouldn't hurt to have her stomach pumped, too. "You really enjoy food like that?"

She shrugged. "Eh. Figure it fills me up more. You humans don't make very big meals."

"That wasn't a meal." Joseph tossed her another candy.

"To Sarah it might be." Karn'a peeled off the wrapper this time and chewed it. "Damn, you're right. It does taste better."

Zendari came back with the children all bouncing around, pleased with their haul. Gretchen stuck close to Zendari while the others went up to Joseph to show off all their candy.

“Look what we got!” Lilly said. Joseph peered inside and snatched a small piece of taffy. “Hey!”

“Candy tax.” He tossed it to Karn’a, who caught it in her mouth.

“Don’t worry, it wasn’t good anyway,” Karn’a said with a smirk.

“You owe me candy!” Lilly demanded.

“It’s okay, Lilly. You can have my taffy,” Willy said, putting a few in her bag.

“That was nice of you, Willy.” Zendari encouraged him.

“Thanks Willy,” Lilly said and gave him a hug. It was an adorable moment that brought smiles on the adults’ faces. Then Lilly glared at Joseph. “Don’t give candy to Uncle Joseph. He’s a meanie.”

Lilly marched off to the next house, leaving Joseph a bit stunned by her response. He had a mischievous smile on his face and was by no means hurt by her comment. Joseph knew he was asking for it.

Karn’a nudged him. “Looks like you made it on her list.”

“I don’t know why I’m the bad guy. You’re the one who ate it.”

“No one likes doctors. Everyone knows this,” Karn’a teased and ushered the rest of the children over to the next house, while Zendari came over to comfort her favorite doctor.

“Don’t worry doctor, I like you,” Zendari said. “Even though you are a dirty candy stealer.”

“The only one who steals things around here is you,” Joseph responded.

“Wha-? What did I steal?”

Joseph smiled. “My heart.”

Zendari felt like she was floating on doves. She loved hearing how much she meant to him. The last few weeks had been less time together, given his newfound popularity, but it hadn’t dampened his love for her, nor she for him. She went in for a kiss when she felt a little hand tug on her dress.

“Gretchen?” Zendari said, realizing she didn’t run off with the others. “What are you doing here?”

“Mom said I need to stay near you and Uncle Joseph.”

“Where was that dedication when you were chasing after Karn’a earlier?” Joseph asked, slightly agitated by the ruined moment.

Gretchen just shrugged her shoulders. Her smile and little uniform were too cute to be mad at. Joseph looked at Zendari and they both had the same idea. They each took Gretchen by the hand and walked together, swinging the little girl in-between them. Karn’a and the group had already moved on to the next house, but that didn’t mean Gretchen had to miss out. At the door, a middle-aged man wearing a cowboy outfit stood at the door. His six shooters on his hips glinted from the porch light.

“Howdy, partners. What can I do for y’all?” the man asked with a fake southern drawl.

“Trick or Treat!” Gretchen said, being released and holding out her bag.

“Why isn’t it a little law woman?” he said, crouching down to her height. “What kind of candy do you like?”

“Chocolate!”

“I’ll go wrestle up some chocolate. Be right back.”

She was jumping up and down with excitement as he left inside, but Zendari was sweating. She recognized the man from her list of suspects. Leonard Pax. Karn’a didn’t recognize him, but she hadn’t been through them all. Zendari was practically obsessed with memorizing all their faces. And the worst part, his file confirmed two registered firearms. Both revolvers like the ones in his holsters.

Zendari moved off to the side and tried to peek into the curtain-covered windows. Leonard never acknowledged her, but that could easily mean he was playing it cool before he ambushed them.

“Hey, psst. What are you doing?” Joseph whispered.

“I recognized him.”

“From what?”

“You remember I had a list of suspects? For that... *thing*. He was one of them,” Zendari said, not wanting to alarm Gretchen.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m great at memorizing faces. I’m sure.”

“Here you go, officer,” Leonard said, handing Gretchen a king sized chocolate bar.

“Thank you, Mr. Suspect.”

“Suspect?” Leonard said and noticed Zendari hanging out by the window. “What are you doing over there?”

It looked bad and there was no real way to walk this back. Lying was never her strong suit, but she would have to give it a try.

“I was... admiring your curtains. They are beautiful. Where did you get them?” Zendari asked.

“No, she wasn’t. She was investigating you. Zenrawree is an Interior Agent and I’m her trusty sidekick!” Gretchen said.

“An Interior Agent?” Leonard said. His hands rested by his side, casually pretending to not be on alert. He had heard stories of what Interior Agents were like and he did not want to be a victim.

Joseph hugged Gretchen around the shoulders. “It’s a game they like to play. Don’t mind her.”

Leonard appeared to relax a little, but Zendari did not. She stiffly walked over to Joseph and Gretchen and ushered them away.

“Sorry about her. She thinks everyone is a suspect,” Zendari said, hoping not to play her hand.

“But you said—“ Gretchen began before being muzzled by Joseph’s hand.

“Happy Halloween!” Joseph said and waved goodbye as they all left.

Zendari kept looking over her shoulder while Leonard simply watched from his door. It was unnerving for her, but at least they all got out of there in one piece. She didn’t expect to see him or anyone on this route. None of the registered residents were her suspects, yet there he was. Which meant either the information on her dossier was wrong or he was visiting a friend.

Joseph told Gretchen to join others while he had a private conversation with Zendari.

“Did you do that on purpose?” Joseph asked.

“I swear I didn’t know he was going to be there. None of my suspects even live on this street.”

He gauged her innocent face. She always struggled at lying, and he had gotten better at reading her tells. None were present, yet he was still bothered by the whole ordeal.

“You are supposed to be off of work.”

“And I am.” Zendari pointed back at the house. “I didn’t ask him a single question, unless you think curtains are vital to an attempted murder investigation.”

“Are they?”

Zendari held his hands in hers and put her forehead to his. She needed him to know she was serious. “All I want is to do is spend Halloween with you and the kids.”

“And ask Leonard some questions. Come on, Zendari, I know you better than that.”

“I can have Karn’a do that. She’s been doing a good job so far.”

Joseph pulled his head away. “Wait... so far... you and Karn’a are still working that case.”

Shit. “Um...”

“Don’t lie to me.”

Zendari paused, thinking of her options, which disappeared the longer she was silent. *No reason to lie to him.* She winced before she spoke. “I have been training her. And no better training than a real case...”

“Well, your training must be going well, because she didn’t recognize him,” he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, faces aren’t her strong suit. Smells though, she can—”

“You are unbelievable.” He paced around, thinking of what to say next. The disappointment on his face cut Zendari to her core. She knew she messed up, but she had a good reason. Love.

“I’m sorry. I take it personally when someone tries to kill the only man I have ever loved.”

“You know what I am more mad about?” Joseph asked. Zendari froze, hanging on his next words that were sure to come. “That you won’t include me. I want to help you, but you won’t let me.”

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You mean like right now?”

Zendari finally understood. He had mentioned it other times before, but now she finally got what it meant to him. She needed to let go of her innate will to protect him, otherwise she would lose him.

“You’re right. I hurt you, but I refuse to drop this case. So, are you coming with me to talk to him?”

“Now?”

“You wanted to be involved. I’m involving you. If he is innocent, this will be a short conversation. If not... this might be a shorter conversation,” Zendari said, fired up from their argument.

Joseph thought about the kids. *Karn’a can handle them for a few minutes.* “Lead the way.”

Zendari led alright. She jogged back over to Leonard's place, where he was waiting with his hands on his hips.

"Mr. Pax, I would like to apologize," Zendari led with, knowing the rest was going to be a lot. "You *are* a suspect in my investigation. My name is Agent D'Quirlen and I actually need you to answer some of my questions?"

"Am I in trouble?"

"No, she just wants to check you off her list," Joseph said, joining her.

"Do you have some time? Or do we need to do this at the base?" Zendari suggested more than asked. Her patience was waning, still trying to calm down from the argument earlier.

Leonard glanced inside the house before letting them in and closing the door behind him. Zendari didn't know if that was to signal someone or simply an innocent gesture. Either way, she was taking no chances.

"Before we begin, I'm going to have to ask you to take off your guns."

John and Sarah searched through people's yards with a small flashlight. They had been at it for over an hour, with no sign of the giant weapon. The neighbors didn't mind and neither did the kids, ignoring them as they went to the next house.

"I think some kid ran off with it." John turned off the light. "We should probably get back to the group."

Sarah hugged his arm. "Can we stay a few minutes longer? I like spending time with you."

“I guess. If Zendari can handle those kiddos by herself, Karn’a will make it even easier.”

“Yeah...”

“Is there something wrong? Are you two fighting?” John asked, catching her tone immediately.

“Karn’a and me? No. But I’m concerned.”

“Concerned? About what?”

“How well do you know Zendari?”

“Not super well, but Joseph loves her. And she has never given me a reason to question her. Why do you ask?”

Sarah trailed behind him, pulling his arm to her. “She is an Interior Agent. Have you not heard the stories?”

“They didn’t sound any different than the ones we gave to our Feds. And they definitely don’t match Zendari, even if she eats all my cereal.”

“John, I’m being serious. What if she is just with Joseph to infiltrate some rebel cell?”

“I may not know much, but I know when two people are in love.” John pointed generally where he thought Zendari and Joseph were. “Those two. They are in love. And as far as infiltrating rebels, I say good. Fuck those guys.”

Sarah gasped. “Those are our fellow humans. How can you not care what happens to them?”

“After I got shot at by one, I can safely say, they are no friends of mine.”

“Mr. McGee wasn’t a bad guy. He lost his wife. He was grieving.”

“Lot of ways to grieve. Shooting Karn’a and I isn’t one of them,” John said and broke from her grip, running to the trident they were looking for. “Found it! Can’t believe this sucker took so long to find.”

Sarah gave him a hurt smile. John saw his candor was not as appreciated as it was around Karn’a. One woman loved his ability to simply

speaking his mind, while the other preferred a more measured response. He knew he went too far and came back to dial it back a bit.

“It was a shame Mr. McGee didn’t know how to better cope with his feelings. And you don’t have to worry about Zendari. Joseph trusts her, so I trust her. After all, she did help me avoid prison time.”

“I guess you’re right. I might be worried about nothing.”

John booped her nose with the trident and she turned to him, scrunching her nose. In the distance, Karn’a was leading the pack of kids down the street, all marching in formation. The kids still swung their candy bags behind her, but it was the best she could do to get them to follow her.

“Left. Left. Left. Right. Left.” Karn’a ordered as the kids started skipping past her when they spotted John and Sarah. “What? Guys, you are supposed to wait until... whatever.”

The kids all surrounded them, showing off their half full bags of candy. Lilly was the wildest of them all running around the group. John broke away from the mob to talk to Karn’a, since he noticed a certain couple missing.

“Where did Joseph and Zendari go?” John asked.

“No idea. They left me with all the kids. I bet they are...” Karn’a said before noticing Billy right next to her, staring up at her. She leaned in and whispered into John’s ear. “... having S.E.X.”

“What is sex?” Billy said.

John turned Billy away and immediately led him back to the others, praying silently that didn’t get back to Susan. “That is something you don’t need to worry about for a long time. Boring grown up stuff like taxes and mortgages.”

“What’s a mortgage?”

Please God, let him only remember that one.

What happened to Zendari and Joseph was much worse than either of them predicted. A quick conversation turned into a hostage situation faster than they could blink. It started with an innocent old woman who simply offered them some water. Forty minutes later, they were both stuck to the bottom of a sagging, faded green couch. Their hands were occupied with tea and a whole spread of food blocked their escape. Zendari leaned in to whisper to Joseph while the elderly woman kept going on about her Garfield collection.

“Is Garfield a god of yours?” Zendari asked, trying to remember some of the alien mythology lessons she had.

“Nope.”

“Are you going to tell her that?”

“Nope.”

The woman put the last plush Garfield down and clapped her hands. “How did you enjoy the food?”

Zendari looked at the spread of gross looking cheeses and slimy meats that masked the old people smell of the whole house. She wasn’t a picky eater, but if she didn’t know any better, they were trying to poison her.

“It was great, Mrs. Pax. But we really must be going,” Joseph said, trying to get up.

“Nonsense. Weren’t you going to ask my boy some questions?”

“We already did.” Zendari shuffled around the tray and stood up. “Thank you again for the food and your cooperation.”

“Are you sure you don’t want any for the road?” Mrs. Pax asked.

“No, we are quite full. Had too much candy beforehand,” Joseph lied, gently pushing Zendari to the door.

Mrs. Pax waved as they left. “Okay then, don’t be a stranger.”

Joseph waved back to her and they walked as fast as possible without making it look like they were running away. If this was what most of her investigations were like, he actually felt sorry for her, not to mention Leonard.

“Well, what’s the verdict, Detective?” Joseph asked.

“Garfield is more likely the shooter. You saw those eyes, didn’t you?”

“Was he the last one on your list?”

Zendari shook her head. “There are a few more to go. Do you want to know who?”

“No need.” Joseph took a big breath of the crisp air and stopped her. “I’m glad you finally involved me in what you are doing. Is there any chance you can have Karn’a follow up on the rest?”

“It’s going to be hard...”

“I can make it easier. You can be my bodyguard for my next few hunts.”

“Bodyguard? Joseph, did someone do something to you? Who was she?”

“No one did anything to me. Unless you count Minera accidentally knocking me out of the stand.”

Zendari’s eyes narrowed, remembering the bruise that was around his ankle last week. “You said that was a rope.”

“In her defense, she did catch me. She has a vice grip. And if you were there, that wouldn’t have happened... probably. It would at least be something to keep you occupied.”

She thought about it. More time with Joseph was what she wanted, even if it was in the freezing cold. Thinking about the upcoming hunts made her shiver, which also was partly from the tea wearing off. Joseph was quick to remedy that, throwing his warm doctor coat over her shoulders.

“You really want me to come with?” she asked.

“More than anything.”

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“Hold me. It’s colder than I remember.”

Joseph hugged her tight as they walked together down the street. He looked around and had no idea which way the kids went. “Do you know where Karn’a is?”

“No idea, but she knows to get them back home. I bet they are on their way now.”

Together they went back to Susan’s home, where they saw the kids playing in the yard. Karn’a was spread eagle on the ground, her chest moving up and down. John and Sarah were chasing the kids until they spotted them.

“Hey, where were you?” John called out.

“We got held up at Mrs. Pax’s place,” Joseph said and walked up to John, who broke away from the chaos.

“Mrs. Pax? The cat lady?”

“Garfield actually.”

“Huh, I always knew there was something off about her.”

“How were the kids?”

John turned his head back to his defeated girlfriend. “Karn’a had her fill. Lasted way longer than I thought she would.”

“I haven’t yet begun to fight!” Karn’a declared from the ground, lifting her wobbling arm up in defiance of her exhaustion.

“Where is Barry and Susan?” Zendari asked.

“Inside still. Based on what I heard, it’s best for the kids to stay outside a little longer. Don’t want them scarred for life,” John said.

“Are they as loud as you and Karn’a?”

“No one is as loud as Karn’a.”

“Amen!” Karn’a said, dropping her arm.

Zendari hugged Joseph and waved. “Well, I think you guys can handle it from here. We are going to head back ho—“

“No, no, no. You left Karn’a all by herself with the little munchkins. Your turn to actually watch them.” John said and turned to the group. “Sarah, Zendari, and Joseph are here to relieve us.”

Sarah stopped chasing the kids and jogged over to them. The kids noticed and ran over to the adults, hoping to play a new game.

“See ya kids. Have fun with Uncle Joseph,” John said.

“Is Karn’a staying?” Billy asked.

Karn’a snuck up behind him and lifted him in the air. He giggled as she shook him around. “Sorry buddy, I got to go. We’ll hang out again soon.”

“You promise?”

“Of course. At the very least, I will see you on that turkey day.”

Billy did a little fist pump. “Yes!”

She was about to put him down when he hugged her around the neck. Her heart melted, feeling the little boy’s arms digging into her. “Aww. I’ll miss you too, bud.”

Karn’a put him down and waved goodbye. The kids waved back, and the door opened behind. The two cave people emerged, both drenched in sweat. Susan adjusted her hair, but there was no saving that mess and Barry’s tie was missing. Whatever they were up to, it was quite the frenzy.

“Come on inside, kids. It’s time for bed,” Barry said.

Gretchen gave Zendari a goodnight hug and the kids all ran inside, picking up their bags of candy that was outside the door. They all piled in and Lilly didn’t get two steps inside before she threw up on the floor. Brown and green chunks came spewing out, drenching the carpet.

“Oh, Lilly,” Susan said and kneeled down next to her. “Did you eat your candy?”

“...yes.”

“Joseph, I told you not to let her have taffy.”

“That was Karn’a’s fault. All the way,” Joseph said, unafraid to throw her under the bus.

“You never told me she wasn’t supposed to eat that,” Zendari said.

“Why else would I take candy from her? Also, I don’t blame her stomach. Those things are nasty.”

Susan carried her sick little one away to get showered, and Barry shrugged. “Sounds like you all had fun?”

“Not as much as you,” Zendari said, wiping the sweat off his arm with her finger.

“Yeah, we really needed that. Thanks for watching the kids. We appreciate it.”

“We love watching them. It was our pleasure.”

“And if you would excuse us, the nurse and I have an appointment we need to keep,” Joseph said, pulling her away.

“Have a good night.” Barry waved. “See you at Thanksgiving.”

“See ya,” they said in unison, and walked back to the truck.

“What is this appointment?” Zendari asked, wondering what he had planned for the rest of the evening.

Joseph winked at her. “It’s with Doctor Hanks. You’re scheduled for a full body physical. Going to have to check for lumps... among other things...”

“I’ve never had a male doctor before.”

Joseph put his stethoscope on and put it to her chest. Her muscles tighten from the sudden cold metal on her skin. “Your heart is racing. You nervous?”

“Excited. Do we have to wait till we get to the house?”

“The waiting is the best part.” Joseph squeezed her boob and skipped over to the truck door.

“You are such a tease. You know that?”

“I was going to say the same about you in that little nurse outfit. Now get in, we want to beat John home.”

CHAPTER 23.

“**A** H-CHOO!” JOSEPH SNEEZED, WAKING up Zendari from her light sleep.

She rolled over to him in bed and felt him shaking. “What’s wrong?”

Joseph tried to clear his scratchy throat, tasting the slimy phlegm building up at the base of his tongue. One of his nostrils was clear, while the other was jammed full of green mucus. When he tried to answer, his voice was weak. “Nothing.”

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“It’s probably just the flu.” He grabbed the blankets and tried to bundle up tighter.

“Why have I heard of that? What is it?” Zendari mused and grabbed her omni-pad to search for the answer. Her eyes darted across the screen until she saw the number of deaths it caused a year. The omni-pad flew across the room and she hugged him as if he was on his deathbed. “You’re dying!”

“I’m not dying.”

“I better call John. No, the hospital!” Zendari said, jumping out of bed.

“No hospital and certainly not John. He has work to do,” Joseph protested and sneezed again. “Can you get me a tissue?”

Zendari picked up her omni-pad and dashed out the door. In the bathroom, she found the tissues and time to make a call. She dialed John up and he answered surprisingly quick.

“How’s my favorite furball?” John asked, clearly not checking his caller ID.

“It’s Zendari.”

“General? How are the troops doing? Private Joseph staying in line?”

“John, I don’t have time for games. Joseph is sick. I think he has... the flu.”

“*Okay...*” he responded, really dragging it out.

“You don’t sound concerned?”

“He is always a little baby when he gets sick. Just get him a decongestant and cough drops. He will be fine.”

“Where do I get those?”

“At a pharmacy, heck I think they are at the grocery store too,” John said, and a bell rang in the background. “I gotta go. Don’t let that little baby boss you around. Remember, you’re in charge, General.”

He hung up before Zendari could get another word in. She leaned on the counter, smooshing the tissue box in her hand. Her reflection in the mirror showed worry lines on her forehead. No one was taking this seriously. *Maybe John is right. I’m just overreacting.* She pushed off the counter and went back into the room. He was still shaking under the blankets and his head was drenched in sweat.

“I got the tissues.” Zendari kneeled by his side and handed him one. His arms moved slowly to take it from her and he let out a toot from his nose trumpet.

“Thank you,” Joseph said and closed his eyes.

It was the weakest she had ever seen him. His frail body curled up in their blankets was more than she could bear. If he didn't want the hospital, the hospital would come to him!

"I'll be right back."

Zendari marched out of the room and through the kitchen. Without disrupting her stride, she swiped the keys off the table and threw on her coat. He was not going to die on her watch. Not if she had anything to say about it.

Giant aisles of food stood in front of her as a monument to sustenance. She had been with Joseph a few times, but she was paying more attention to him than the food going in the cart. Signs above each aisle mocked her tentative grasp of reading English. Little of her English reading classes actually covered basic stuff like food, which was a major hindsight in the education program. *Goddess, if you're listening, I need your help. Guide my way.*

"Cleanup on aisle ten," a female voice said over the intercom.

"I know my numbers!" Zendari said, looking up at the intercom, believing it was a sign from the Goddess.

"Good for you," a crotchety old woman grumbled, walking by with a walker.

Zendari's shoulders slumped a little and she glanced around, checking to see if anyone else heard her. Out loud, she sounded like a kid. In her head, she was a genius. *Thank you Goddess.*

She went off to the left until she almost reached the end. At the end of the aisle was a tipped over canister and blue liquid pooled on the clean floor. Zendari began her search, checking out both sides for

anything that remotely looked like medicine. Going by the pictures, most of it was cleaning supplies for the house or car. It didn't take her long and she had gotten to the end with nothing.

"Hmm. I thought for sure this would be it," Zendari said to herself.

What she did find was the last person she expected to see. Commander Tojen. She was wearing a skintight long sleeve shirt under a drab green jacket with matching leggings. The blonde hair almost made her a completely different woman, but her voice was unmistakable, even if she was flirting.

"We meet again," Commander Tojen said, reaching for the same package of steak in the open freezer as the thin man next to her.

The man adjusted his glasses and looked up at the towering woman. His friendly smile welcomed the surprise. "I guess so. Mlisha, is it?"

"You remembered my name?"

The man chuckled. "I don't know anyone else like you who shops here."

"What can I say, they have the best meat in town." Her husky tone and Russian-like accent was almost predatory, clearly insinuating something other than what was in the freezer.

He bobbed his head and reached into the freezer. "I don't know about the best, but the steaks are good. How do you like your meat?"

"*Raw*, but I'll take it any way I can get it."

"I am more of a medium well kind of guy myself, but I guess to each their own."

Zendari had to make this disaster stop. Her boss was downright embarrassing herself. He was clearly more dense than a sack of rocks. Also, she might know where to find the medicine.

"Commander Tojen." Zendari waved to her.

If Commander Tojen's eyes could speak, they would have said, "What are you doing here!" followed by, "Leave now or I will end you!"

That still didn't dissuade her. She needed help and she was going to get it.

"Commander? And you said you were a humble soldier," the man said, nudging her. Commander Tojen blushed a dark blue. She didn't want to boast about her status to get a guy, unlike others above her, but if it came out organically, who was she to argue.

"Agent D'Quirlen, what do we owe the pleasure?" Commander Tojen asked, trying her best to keep a brave face.

"Who's your friend?" Zendari asked.

"My name is Cal Harrington. It's nice to meet you," the man said, tucking the steak under his arm so he could shake her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Cal. Is my boss giving you any trouble?"

"Oh no, we were just discussing how we like our steaks. Do you like them raw, too?"

"Can you excuse us for a minute?" Commander Tojen said and guided Zendari a few steps away so they could have a somewhat private conversation. "Leave now."

"You need to work on your flirting skills."

"I am not going to let you ruin months of recon. Leave and I won't extend your suspension," Commander Tojen said in a hushed, yet serious tone.

"Point me in the direction of the medicine and I will be out of your hair."

"You passed it. Other side of row ten. Now go."

Instead of leaving, Zendari decided to do her a favor. To Zendari, months of recon was pointless with this guy, not to mention creepy. He was as dense as a rock and sometimes, the only way to get it through was with brute force. She walked up to him and whispered in his ear.

Commander Tojen was on the verge of rage, but had to hide it, otherwise she would've definitely ruin her shot with Cal. There was

some pointing and Cal's eyes grew big with realization. She froze, unsure if that reaction was good or bad. *Zendari, I'm going to kill you.*

Zendari said goodbye and patted her stunned boss on the back. "You're welcome."

Cal came up to Commander Tojen, and her whole body snapped to attention. Fear ran through her veins like ice water, bringing her back to the first week of boot camp. The drill sergeants walked just like him, except instead of receiving a tongue lashing, she got something much more pleasant.

"Have you ever gone skiing before?"

Zendari was driving back from the store with a plastic bag full of whatever was on the shelf. She had no idea what to get, so what stood out got put in. Agent Stuffins held onto everything and gave her an idea she should have thought before.

"Why don't I call his mom?"

Zendari dialed her number and she answered immediately.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Hanks, this is Zendari."

"Oh, hello dear. It's nice to hear from you. How is everything?" Her voice was so joyful it put a smile on Zendari's face.

"That's why I am calling. Joseph is sick and—"

"Say no more. I'll be right over!"

"Really? Thank you. I—" Zendari stopped when she hung up on her. "Wow, that was easy."

She didn't think about it again and pulled into the driveway. With her bag of medicine, she hurried inside to help her man and tell him

the good news. When she got to his room, he was slowly walking back into his bed.

“Let me help you.” Zendari tossed the bag on the blanket and assisted him into the bed. She tucked him in and grabbed the chalky pill bottle out of the bag. “I got you medicine.”

“Tums? That’s more for stomach aches.”

She reached into the bag again, pulling out the pink bottle. “How about this?”

“That’s for diarrhea.”

Zendari sighed and tried again and again, each item for something completely unrelated. The bag was soon empty and her spirits were crushed. He patted her hand, trying to reassure her that the hundred credits she spent were not all in vain. Her incompetence was hard to swallow, but at least not all hope was lost.

“Don’t worry, I called your mom and she will be here soon to help.”

Joseph sat up in bed, and a newfound energy emerged from his body. “You didn’t? Quick, call her back, tell her it was a joke. I’m feeling better.”

“You are not. Your voice is still all nasally. Why don’t you want your mom here?”

“You don’t understand. She—” He began and then the house door was kicked in.

“Joseph, where are you?” Charlene asked, marching to their room.

“Oh no, she’s here. Quick, do something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Get in bed. She won’t stay if she thinks we are having sex.”

Zendari crossed her arms. “You’re not thinking clearly. If I can’t take you to the hospital, you’re gonna have to deal with your mom.”

Charlene barged into the room, and Joseph's hope of avoiding her smothering affection was over. She made a beeline for her son and put her large black purse down that appeared to be bursting at the seams.

"I came as soon as Zendari called. Are you alright?"

"Yes, Mom." Joseph rolled his eyes while she pet his head. His voice was still nasally.

"That doesn't sound alright to me." She reached into her bag and pulled out an ear thermometer. Joseph cringed from the cold tip that slammed into his ear. There was a click, and then the panic began. "A hundred! Have you been drinking any liquids?"

"N—"

"Zendari, go get some water. He needs to be hydrated," Charlene barked at Zendari and reached into her bag, focused on finding the ibuprofen. "You take four of these, mister."

"That is excessive."

"Come on, girl, snap to!" Charlene ordered.

Zendari was interested in learning what Charlene was giving him, but that would have to wait. She went to get a glass of water while Charlene basically shoved the pills down his mouth.

"Have you eaten anything yet? Do you have any tissues?" she asked, ignoring the box that was on the end table.

Joseph swallowed the pills, wincing a little. The pills stuck to his throat, but nothing he couldn't handle. "Mom, I will be fine."

"I'll make you some chicken noodle soup."

He said nothing. It had been years since he had his mom's famous chicken noodle soup. If there was one thing he gained from this, it was that.

Zendari came rushing in, sloshing the water in the tall glass. "I got the water."

“Thank you, my dear,” Charlene said, bringing down her intensity and took the glass from her. She started to tip it toward Joseph’s lips and he had to grab it from her so she didn’t waterboard him.

“Thanks you two,” Joseph said, taking a breather.

“You finish that up. I want three more down before soup is done.” Charlene kissed her son on the forehead and got up from his bedside. “Come on Zendari, I’ll teach you how to make my famous chicken noodle soup.”

“Don’t we need someone to watch him?”

“He needs to rest. We won’t be far.”

Joseph waved goodbye and the ladies went into the kitchen. Charlene wasted no time opening up everything, searching for a large kettle. She was on a mission, and Zendari was eager to help.

“What do we need?”

“I need a large kettle, ladle, noodles, celery, carrots, chicken, and chicken broth.”

“Kettle is up there and ladle is over there.” Zendari pointed out and went over to the refrigerator for the chicken, carrots, and celery.

Charlene filled up the kettle of water and went over to her pantry to find the noodles and chicken broth. Together they made a great team that made prepping a breeze. Charlene showed each step of the process, making it as simple as possible. Once all the ingredients were added, all that was left was to let it sit on the burner and stir.

“Easy, right?” Charlene asked.

“Much easier than I thought it would be.”

“You know, I really appreciate you calling me. My boys don’t visit me much, so it was nice to see him.”

“No problem. I have to be honest, I’m not very good at taking care of people.”

“On the bright side, you got everything you need for any other illness he could get.”

Zendari laughed nervously and scratched the back of her neck. “You saw that.”

“Honey, there is nothing to be ashamed of. You don’t know humans. It would be like judging him for getting you the wrong medicine when you’re sick. You’re both aliens to each other.”

“I would just tell him to take me to the hospital.”

“You must have good insurance,” Charlene said, tapping the ladle on the kettle.

“Um... everyone does. It’s free.”

“Sure it is.” Charlene patted her on the hand and gave her the ladle. “Once it starts bubbling, make sure to stir regularly and if it is going to boil over, take it off the burner.”

Charlene left Zendari to watch the food while she went back to check on her favorite son. His eyes were closed and his nose whistled with every small breath. She always loved watching her boys sleep. It brought her peace, knowing her boys were still around. What didn’t bring her peace was clutter, and his room was a mess. “How can Zendari stand this mess of his?” she asked herself.

She started to pick up his dirty shirts, shorts, and socks when she kicked something hard in his jeans pocket. Her instinct of cleaning out all the pockets before laundry kicked in and pulled out a purple jewelry box. Charlene held it, stunned by what it likely contained. It brought her back to when her husband proposed all those years ago.

“Mom? What are you doing?” Joseph asked.

“Honey, what is this?” Charlene asked, showing him what was in her hand.

“What do you think it is?” Joseph smiled.

She crawled on her knees to his bedside, still holding it in front of her. "This... this is a big decision."

"It is. And it is long overdue."

"Are you sure? This is for forever. Death till you part."

"You know, mom, it's like dad always said. When you find The One, you just know." Joseph opened the box for her. Inside was a gold band. Nothing complex or diamond studded. Simple. Like love should be. "She's always been the one. It just took me this long to build up the courage."

Charlene was overwhelmed by his sincere answer. She wiped a tear that was forming around her eye and sniffed. "I have to admit, I was hoping for grandkids."

"That's what John is for."

She chuckled and gave him a hug. Charlene nuzzled her head in his neck, not worried about him dripping on her. It was an exciting moment and she was happy that soon she would get to watch her son walk down the aisle. *I wish your father was here to see this*, she thought, while trying to fight back more tears. They held each other for a few quiet moments before Zendari knocked on the door. Charlene quickly swiped the box and slipped it into her pocket.

"Soup is ready," Zendari said, peeking inside.

"Excellent." Charlene wiped her wet face and grabbed the water glass from the end table. "I'll help you."

Zendari wasn't blind to the tears on Charlene's face. Part of her wished she had the hearing Karn'a did. Whatever they were talking about must have gotten pretty heavy, and she didn't know if it was her place to ask. Charlene went right for the soup in the kitchen and took a sip.

"Mmmm. This is wonderful! You did a great job, Zendari."

"Thanks, Mrs. Hanks."

Charlene scooped up a bowl and savored the aromatic smell of chicken broth. "Please, call me Charlene. And dig in. He isn't going to eat it all."

Zendari didn't have to be told twice. She grabbed two bowls, pouring one for Charlene and herself. Charlene didn't wait for her, going to give her son some of the best soup on this side of the galaxy. Once Zendari found the hot pads and spoons, she joined them in the bedroom, where Joseph was taking small sips at a time.

"Good soup," Joseph said, sniffing repeatedly to stop the drainage from ruining his food.

"Zendari made it."

"She did? Babe, I gotta say, best meal you made yet."

Zendari blushed and handed a bowl to Charlene. "I had a great teacher."

The women shared a loving smile and joined Joseph in loudly slurping their soup like peasants. Civility and manners were for the rich. For the family, there was no better sound than the slurping of lips and pinging of metal on ceramic as the last morsels of food were retrieved from the bowl. Not many words were said while they ate, and Joseph was ready to get back to doing absolutely nothing.

Charlene and Zendari took his droopy eyes as a cue to let him rest and took the bowls back into the kitchen. While they cleaned up the mess and put away the extra soup, Charlene couldn't help but get a gauge for Zendari's openness to marriage.

"How long have you two been dating?"

"Ever since Valentine's Day," Zendari said, yet in the back of her head she thought it was really since last Christmas.

"He hasn't scared you off, I see."

Zendari laughed and shook her head. "No, he could never scare me away. If anything, I'm surprised I haven't scared him off."

Charlene put her hand on Zendari's arm. "You are special Zendari. I can tell by the way he looks at you. You mean a lot to him."

"He means a lot to me, too. I would do anything for him. You raised an amazing son."

"Aww. Thank you, dear. And if my opinion is worth anything, I think you would make a great wife."

Zendari's heart soared from the surprising compliment. She had given proposing to Joseph some serious thought, but with the assassin still on the loose, she put it on the back burner. If things got bad, at least he wouldn't have to be a widower. She didn't want him to walk around with a label like that, if the worst were to happen. It was better in her mind that this case gets solved, once and for all, before she would ask, let alone try to get Charlene's blessing. The fact that she gave it so freely, created a new desire for her to catch the assassin. Zendari said nothing more and hugged the little woman tight.

Charlene didn't expect the sudden affection, but did appreciate it. Her ribs didn't, but with her newfound discovery of free healthcare, she can get new ribs. She was thinking titanium, because Zendari's excited hugs were going to be the death of her if this became a regular occurrence. Charlene squeaked and Zendari caught the hint her hug was far too strong for the fragile woman.

"Ope, I'm so sorry," Zendari apologized and let her go.

"Ope? You're starting to sound like a real Minnesotan."

"This whole place has been rubbing off on me, I guess. Who knows, next I will be putting maple syrup on everything."

Charlene laughed. "We ain't that far north. You can keep the syrup to a reasonable amount."

"Tell that to John."

Both the women laughed and finished doing the dishes. Their conversation went on, and Charlene grew more confident in Joseph's

decision by the minute. She was going to be quite the daughter-in-law, but more importantly, they both loved each other. Time flew by and after Charlene imparted some of her wisdom to her, she was confident Joseph was going to be in good hands.

“I better get going, dear. It was lovely chatting with you.”

“You too, Charlene. Did you want to say goodbye to Joseph?”

“No need. I’ll see you two for Thanksgiving soon enough.” Charlene hugged Zendari and made her way to the door. “Take care of my baby.”

“I will.”

They said their goodbyes and soon Zendari’s attention was brought back to the kitchen where Joseph’s sneeze betrayed his stealthy approach. His body was hunched and weakly waved to her.

“What are you doing up?”

“I want more soup.”

“You get back in bed. Your mom—”

“My mom’s not here. I can do what I want,” Joseph said defiantly. Zendari smirked and marched over to him. That look in her eye made him backpedal away from her. “Okay, I’m going back. Just—”

Zendari picked him up into a cradle carry. His weak body had no fight in him to resist. “You are going to bed. I’ll bring you soup.”

“I can get my own soup,” he pouted, resting his head on her boob. She was softer than his pillow, which made him even grumpier for some illogical reason.

“I’m taking care of you and that’s final,” Zendari said, bringing him into the bedroom and tucking him in.

His body slumped perfectly into the impression on his bed, while he watched her leave to go get him soup. He never liked being waited on by his mom, smothering him with affection. It was always a bit too

much for Joseph, yet having Zendari take care of him showed him how much both women cared.

After a few minutes to reheat the soup, Zendari came in with a hot bowl. She handed it to him and he put it on the end table. He patted the bed next to him. "Can you join me?"

"Sure?" she said, partly confused why he didn't want to eat his hot soup right away, and slipped into bed with him. He cuddled up next to her, and she held him tight. "Don't you want your soup?"

"I just want you." He kissed her hand. "Thank you for taking care of me... and calling Mom."

"No need to thank me. I will always take care of you." She went to kiss him on the cheek, and he turned to face her. Both their noses touched, feeling the slimy mucus from his nose. It didn't bother her and kissed him anyway.

"You probably shouldn't be kissing me. I could get you sick."

"I don't get sick. And besides, whatever illness you have shouldn't get me. Same reason you have been banging my brains out and we haven't had to worry about a baby on the way."

"Speaking of banging..." Joseph said and snuck his hand under the covers to caress her thigh. "How about I thank you properly?"

Do all humans get horny when they're sick? "No way buster. You're sick and need your rest. When you're better, you can."

"But I am feeling better."

"Eat your soup and rest. Or I'm getting out of this bed," she said, even though a part of her didn't want him to stop rubbing her thigh.

"Okay," he said, retracting his hand. "But can you stay with me? Your body feels nice."

"I'm not going anywhere."

CHAPTER 24.

ZENDARI CROSSED THE LAST suspect off her list while the truck bobbed down the dirt road. Karn'a had called in the early morning to give her the news. She didn't want to believe it. All those suspects and none of them were the shooter. There must've been a mistake. Was she not as good at spotting liars as she thought? Was Karn'a? Zendari kept scrolling through her list of photos, wondering if she needed to start all over. *How is this possible? We missed something... but where?*

Joseph reached across the center column and plucked the omni-pad from her hands. "You've spent enough time on that this morning."

"But—"

"No buts. You can work on it tomorrow. Today is only for fun." Joseph tossed the omni-pad in the backseat and rested his hand, palm up on the center column.

"You're right," Zendari said, taking his hand. "Remind me again what this holiday is about?"

"It's about giving thanks for all we have received. And this year, I have a lot to be thankful for." Joseph rubbed her hand with his thumb and smiled.

“I have a lot to be thankful for too,” Zendari said and looked over her shoulder in the backseat where a box of meat in white packaging was sitting next to her omni-pad. “I can finally get to see what Bambi tastes like.”

“You’ve had venison before. It all tastes mostly the same.”

“Not this one though. I’m going to enjoy it much more,” Zendari said with a maniacal smile.

Joseph laughed. “Easy there girl, you’re gonna scare the kids with that look.”

“They aren’t here now. I can look however I want.”

“Not anymore.” Joseph pointed ahead and Susan’s kids were running after a flying football in the dirt lot in front of their grandma’s house.

John’s truck was parked next to Susan’s van and Karn’a was taking the turkey out of the backseat. She was dressed much more appropriately than Joseph was used to. A brown bomber jacket, black pants and a brown swede beret. Joseph had no idea what she was wearing underneath, but he had a feeling she was trying to be less sexual to impress his mom.

Joseph pulled up next to the truck and honked his horn. The kids cheered and the football went skidding across the hood of his truck. He laughed, but Barry was quick to chew Willy out for it. Normally Joseph was rather defensive of his truck, but today he was excited. Family was all around, food was going to be great, and a ring box was burning a hole in his pocket. All he needed was to find the perfect time to ask her.

The kids waited outside his truck, eager to greet them. All the girls waited by Zendari’s door while Willy got a talking to from his dad, and Billy helped Karn’a with the food.

“You ready?” Joseph asked, gesturing to her adoring fans.

“You’re just jealous they love me.”

“I can’t blame them. You’re hard not to love.” He winked and opened the door. Joseph took it upon himself to bring in the venison while Zendari dealt with the kids.

“Zenrawee!”

“Gretchen!” Zendari said and picked her up. “Milly, Lilly, how are you two doing?”

“We’re doing good! Do you want to play Five Hundred with us?” Lilly asked.

“What’s that?”

“It’s where one person throws the ball and calls out the points it is worth if you catch it. If you get five hundred, then you get to throw,” Milly explained.

They all looked at her with their pleading eyes. How could she say no? Zendari bundled her scarf a little tighter and zipped her coat up all the way. It was time to have fun, no matter how cold it was.

“Sounds like fun. Who throws first?”

While Zendari played with the kids, Joseph followed Karn’a inside to help get food ready. The house smelled of fresh gravy that was cooking on the stovetop. They kicked off their shoes in the hall and walked into the kitchen, where John and Sarah were chatting by the dinner table with Charles and Chelsea. Charlene went up Karn’a to take the giant bird from her and give her a proper hug.

“It’s so good to see you again, Karn’a!”

“You too, Mrs. Hanks. And your home is lovely,” Karn’a said, checking out the new environment. There were little fake stuffed

turkeys above the cabinets and colorful leaves decorated the living room to her left. On the kitchen table was a giant cornucopia with small gourds piling out. It was all quite festive and made Karn'a feel more at home.

"Aw, I try," Charlene said and Chelsea came rushing up to them.

"Oh my..." Chelsea said and turned blue from holding her breath in a weak attempt at containing her excitement. "A Rakiri! I can't believe it!"

Karn'a gave her a nervous smile, unsure if the woman was going to give herself an aneurysm. She had never experienced such a fandom like answer, given she was never popular, regardless of planet she had been on.

"Can I... touch your fur?" Chelsea asked, already reaching for her.

"Ummm... I guess?"

Chelsea felt the furry hand and almost melted right there. Her eyes grew with astonishment, while Charlene rolled her own.

"I'm sorry for her. You must get frustrated with everyone wanting to feel your fur," Charlene apologized.

"No, it's alright. I don't normally get this kind of attention." Karn'a raised her tail in front of Chelsea, who followed it like a cat follows a laser, enticed by the enchanting swaying motion. "Not everyday I can mesmerize someone with my tail either."

Chelsea snapped out of it and blushed. "I apologize, I just get carried away by you aliens. My name is Chelsea by the way."

Karn'a bumped her fist, surprised she wasn't going to get another hug. She had gotten so used to it, she actually liked it. "Nice to meet you. My name is Karn'a."

"I have so many questions for you, do you mind?"

"Not at all."

“Ooooh goodie!” she shrieked and pulled her toward the table to introduce her to Charles. He wore a red sweater with a turkey that was waving a USA flag. An odd choice given that the USA was essentially toppled, but it was the only festive shirt he had for Thanksgiving.

“Karn’a, this is my husband, Charles.”

Charles smiled and fist bumped Karn’a. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“You too. How are all the men on this planet so handsome?”

Charles chuckled. “Hahaha. Careful, my wife is right here. She can get mighty jealous.”

“I do not,” Chelsea said with a smile that hinted he was right, but not in this situation. “Is it true men are a rarity in the galaxy?”

“Unfortunately, especially one so tall like your husband.”

“See, I knew I was a catch,” Charles said, tucking Chelsea under his arm.

She snuggled under his arm and continued firing off questions. Where is your home planet? What is your culture like? Does everyone have the same fur color? These and more kept coming, but Karn’a was willing to indulge her. It wasn’t everyday she was asked, so she found it rather refreshing.

With Karn’a preoccupied, Sarah and John volunteered to prepare the turkey. Charlene tried to get the rest of the food ready and actively shooed Joseph away whenever he tried to help. After his attempt at retrieving the silverware failed, he decided to go see what his girlfriend was up to.

Outside, Zendari’s breath was a mist in front of her shivering face. Her hands were tucked in her pockets and she danced in place to keep the circulation flowing. The other kids were running around, waiting for Milly to throw the ball on the other side.

“Tree hundred, dead or alive!” Milly yelled and hurled the ball in the air.

The football went flying over the little ones, but well within reach of Zendari. She went to catch it with one hand and regretted it immediately. The ball smacked her open palm like a brick that was left in the void of space and landed at her feet, where the little monsters all went for it.

“Ow!” Zendari said, shaking her hand out and grabbing Lilly with her other hand, unconcerned about getting the ball.

“Unhand me!” Lilly yelled.

“You’re so warm,” she said, holding her close.

“I got it!” Gretchen declared and ran over to Milly with the ball raised over her head in victory.

Joseph laughed at the whole scene and walked over. “You know, you’re supposed to go for the ball.”

“Joseph!” Zendari said and put the kicking child down. She ran at him like he had returned from war, giving him a big hug. “Ahh, a bigger heater.”

“You can’t be that cold? Haven’t you built up a tolerance yet?”

“My hands are freezing. My face is freezing. My feet are freezing—”

Joseph kissed her on the cheek. “There. Now your face isn’t freezing.”

“Do they need me inside to help make food?”

“Nope. They kicked me out too. Do you want my gloves?”

She readjusted her grip and slid her hands under his coat onto his bare back, making him tense up.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding,” Joseph said, barely able to speak from the sudden shock.

“Ahhh,” Zendari said, her face not unlike the one she made when hitting orgasm. “That’s the stuff.”

Joseph broke a smile, finding the frigid experience comical. “You need to invest in gloves.”

“But I can’t catch the ball with them on.”

“You can’t catch it carrying me either.”

Zendari turned and went back to the gaggle of children who were ready to catch the next ball. “Challenge accepted.”

“500 hundred!” Gretchen yelled.

The ball made a beeline straight for them. It was going much too fast for Zendari to react in time, hitting Joseph right in the back. The dull thwack from his coat offered some protection, but the nose of the football acted like a spear. His grunt went unheard as Barry called out to the children.

“Come inside, kids. Food is almost ready,” Barry said. The children came running, funneling inside.

“How? Karn’a just brought in the turkey?” Joseph asked him as Zendari put him back down.

“Your mother was already cooking one. I guess she thought we needed two.”

Joseph nodded and turned to Zendari. “That does sound like her. Ready to eat?”

“As long as it’s hot.”

Everyone crowded around the table, watching Sarah place the turkey in the middle of the smorgasbord of food already there. Steam rose from the well cooked bird and was cut into sizable cuts instead of mulched meat like last year. Willy reached his hand out to grab the spoon of mashed potatoes and was quickly swatted on the back of the hand by Susan.

“You wait, Mister,” Susan said, waiting for Sarah to sit down next to John on the other side.

A glass tinged at the head of the table, where Charlene stood up to make her toast.

“First, I would like to say thank you all for coming today. I know the holidays can get busy, so I’m happy that you all could come.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Joseph said.

Charlene watched him hug Zendari and was so excited for him. Zendari had no idea what awaited her and Charlene was hoping she would still be around to see her son get married.

“And in the spirit of Thanksgiving, I think we should go around and say what we are thankful for this year. Obviously, mine is for the whole family to be here and healthy.”

“I’m thankful that aliens walk among us and that they are such beautiful people!” Chelsea said, waving to Karn’a.

“I’m thankful Karn’a and Zendari aren’t easily offended.” Charles added, getting a chuckle out of them both. They found Chelsea endearing, but weren’t blind to her strange level of obsession with them.

Barry and Susan said they were thankful for their children. Their children had better and less obvious answers though.

“I’m thankful for Karn’a teaching me how to fish,” Billy said.

Karn’a held her hand over her chest. The little boy was so sweet to her and it made her feel extra special. She was not part of the family and was unsure how everyone felt about her given the Minnesota nice reputation. Billy was different. He said what he felt and was brutally honest, like most kids his age. It gave her hope that if Billy liked her, the rest of the family did too.

“Aww. Thanks, Billy. I’m thankful for you too.”

“That doesn’t count for yours,” John said, elbowing her.

“I’m thankful that Zenrawee is my friend!”

Zendari pulled Gretchen's chair closer and gave her a hug with her free arm. "I'm thankful for this little one too. As well as all of you. You have all been so welcoming and I will never forget that."

Everyone smiled, but none brighter than Charlene. She looked to Joseph, praying he would propose to Zendari right there, but no such satisfaction she would get.

"I think we all know what I'm thankful for." Joseph gazed lovingly into Zendari's eyes.

"Aw, thanks bro. I'm thankful for you too," John teased, getting some laughs from the children.

"Well, I am thankful for Sarah," Karn'a said next, surprising her. "She has been great to get to know over the last few months and I'm thankful for her being such a giving partner in our relationship with John."

John was taken aback by her short speech. It was like pulling teeth to get them to spend time together, but they must have turned a corner. He was always amazed at how many layers she had.

"I'm thankful for the turkey... and these two wonderful women. Without them, I have no idea where I'd be." John put his arms around both of them, laying a kiss on each.

Sarah pushed him away and stood up so she could speak, while Karn'a did some inappropriate touching of John under the table with her tail. He squirmed in his seat and tried to move the furry tail away, but she was motivated to have some discreet fun.

"I'm thankful for you, Charlene. You are the glue that keeps this family together and through all the tough times you have been strong and poised. We should all raise a glass." Sarah lifted her glass, hoping Karn'a would stop. It did work, as she followed everyone else in raising a toast. "To Charlene, the best host and an excellent mother who raised three great children."

“Here here!” Joseph said and they all clinked glasses.

“Now let’s dig in!”

No time was wasted as Barry grabbed the spoon before Willy could. The parents served their children first, while Zendari reached across the table to get some turkey for Joseph. He wasn’t used to Zendari serving him, but he certainly appreciated the gesture as she piled a large heap of dark meat on his plate.

“I’m so spoiled,” Joseph said, taking the plate from her.

“No, I’m pretty sure I’m spoiled,” she said, making a plate up for Gretchen.

Gretchen took the plate of meat, green beans, and carrots from Zendari. “Thank you, Zenraweee.”

“Don’t mention it, buddy.”

Zendari paced herself, taking as much as Joseph had and sat down to let the other have a shot at it. Karn’a was not as considerate, taking a whole leg and half a breast. She skipped the vegetables and potatoes, wanting to focus on the delicious meat that was still steaming.

“How do you eat all that?” John asked.

“A big girl like me has to eat. Otherwise I’ll shrivel up and die,” Karn’a said, taking a bite of the juicy meat.

“How much do you need to eat to maintain your weight?” Chelsea asked.

Karn’a had her mouth full and still tried to answer her question. “I don’t know. Lots.”

“She just says that. I bet she could eat half of what is on her plate and be okay.”

“You shouldn’t assume, John. Aliens have different biologies than us,” Chelsea said.

“Yeah John, you shouldn’t assume,” Karn’a smirked and struggled to hold in her laughter. He was right, but she wanted the turkey.

Charlene cooked the bird to perfection and nothing was going to get between Karn'a and the best tasting bird on this planet.

John loved their little playful tiffs and stole a piece of the white meat from her plate to make a point. "You're right, I shouldn't assume. I might need to eat this, to make sure you don't get sick."

"Get your grubby fingers away from my meat, or I'll sic Billy on you."

"Oh no! Whatever will I do."

Karn'a faced Billy, ready to make John eat his adorable words. "Billy, Maneuver number four."

Billy jumped away from his seat and went around the table behind John. He reached into his back pocket and took his billfold.

"Hey!" John said, trying to grab at him, but Billy ducked out of the way and handed it to Karn'a.

"Thanks Billy, you did good. Now go eat your food," Karn'a said and saluted him.

Billy did the same and ran back to his seat to eat. John watched the whole situation, dumbstruck by Billy's willingness to follow orders. He pondered to himself, *What are the other three maneuvers?*

"And that's what you get for stealing my meat."

"Give me back my wallet."

"You're going to have to earn it," Karn'a said, putting it down her shirt between her breasts. A classic hiding spot to prevent men from retrieving it. Not that she would complain if he did.

On the other side of the table, Joseph reflexively reached for his back pocket, hoping there weren't other little pocket thieves running about. He sighed, feeling the box still in his pocket. It also reminded him of another little surprise he had in-store for Zendari.

"Oh, Zendari, I forgot to tell you. Your sister called yesterday. Val'ren, I think she said her name was."

"I'm sorry about her. She can be the worst."

"Actually she was nice. We got to talking and she was apologetic about last year and was wondering if she could make it up to you," Joseph said, gauging how to deliver the next part.

Zendari rolled her eyes. "I'm sure she was. What did she have in mind?"

"She wanted to join us for Christmas."

Zendari heard the hopeful crest in his tone. One that to her, indicated it was less of a suggestion and instead a foregone conclusion.

"Joseph, please tell me you didn't invite her?"

"Um... heh... I invited the whole family." He smiled in an attempt to soften it, realizing his decision was not received like he had hoped it would.

"You did what!"

Joseph sat on a plastic storage bin as Zendari paced around the garage. It was the only private place to continue the discussion that wouldn't disrupt his family or the wildlife. Although, a little cooling down outside may have been necessary.

"Why did you do that!" Zendari said, towering over him.

"I thought it would be good for you to settle the beef you have between your sisters once and for all. No better day than that one."

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday? Why wait until now?"

"I remembered now..."

Zendari waved her hands around in frustration. "Come on, Joseph. You know I can't stand them. All they will do is ruin the get-together."

“But they’re your family. How can you forgive them if you never see them?”

“Easy. Just never see them. Forgive by forgetting.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I have ever heard,” he said, standing up.

Zendari marched up to him and shoved her finger in his face. “No, you want to know what is dumb? Inviting my terrible sisters and expecting me to be excited.”

“Your brothers are coming too.”

“Augh, you really don’t get it do you? Can’t your little human brain comprehend that my sisters are pure evil.”

“I comprehend fine,” he said, swatting her hand away. His voice became fierce, matching her body language. “You need to give them a chance. If not for them, for you. You need this.”

“You don’t get to say what I need.”

“I will when it is so painfully obvious.”

She tried to walk past him, but he stepped in front of her, unwilling to let her leave. Her anger was boiling, thinking about how her sisters mocked and tortured her. Zendari thought she had let it go, but after finding out they would be back in her life again, she wasn’t going to stand for it. He kept blocking her path, making her more enraged by the second.

“Out of my way.”

“We aren’t done yet.”

She tried to move quickly past him, but he was too quick for his own good, taking the force of her elbow to his jaw. His hands slapped the concrete floor and slid on his back. Zendari froze. *Oh Goddess, what have I done?*

“Oh no!” she said and kneeled down next to him. Her hands hovered over him, trying to figure out how bad it was. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“You can say sorry to me, why not your sisters?” Joseph asked, spitting out a small amount of blood from his cut lip on the floor. His eye contact was unnerving and demanded answers.

“I love you. Them, I don’t.” Her tears welled in her eyes, on the verge of falling down her face.

“I don’t believe that. You wouldn’t have gone to see them on Christmas if that was true. And I saw how you reacted when Nor’an was in the hospital. That is love.”

“That was different.”

“No, it wasn’t. Sure, they hurt you, but we all hurt the ones we love at some point. You can’t let that get in the way of forgiving someone or you will always be running.”

Her gut turned from hearing his impassioned words. It took a man bleeding on the floor to make her realize that her sisters had a hold on her far worse than the occasional beating or mean prank. She gave them control of her life, without either of them knowing. And she knew if there was any future with Joseph, that had to change.

Zendari couldn’t hold her tears back any longer, crying into her hands. In the back of her mind, she knew she wasn’t supposed to cry, yet there was no stopping it. All the memories of her sisters’ abuse came flooding back to her. Fights, mean pranks, and overall neglect reared its ugly head. Then, in one fell swoop, it disappeared.

Zendari felt Joseph’s arms around her and the weight of her past disappeared. She had an epiphany. The lashing out of her sisters’ wasn’t out of their hatred for her. It was from losing their dad. They were all older than her and if she was being honest, none of it really started to get bad until after he died. Joseph wiped the tears from her face and she lifted her chin to look at him.

“Why are you always right?” Zendari said, sniffing still.

“It’s a curse, I know. But someone has to bear it.” He smirked, hoping to bring some levity to their situation. Zendari snorted and Joseph did the same. His joke worked, but he didn’t want to leave it at that, rubbing her cheek with his palm. “I will be with you every step of the way. This will be good for you.”

She nodded. “Not just me, probably them as well.”

They held each other for a few more minutes and regained their composure before showing their faces back inside. Dinner was already done and the kids were playing upstairs while the adults all hung around in the living room. Joseph and Zendari stuck their heads around the wall and Charlene was the first to greet them.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.

Zendari nodded and hugged Joseph. “Yeah, everything is better now. I’m sorry for my little outburst.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. We all get a little mad at Joseph every once and awhile.”

“Yeah, like last week when he forgot to close up my shop,” John said, lounging on the carpeted floor, head resting on Karn’a lap. She was petting his hair gently and smiled.

“Actually, that was me,” Karn’a admitted.

John spun on his back to look up at her. “What?”

“I told Joseph I was going to close up shop for him and then Sarah asked me to help close up hers. Then we got to talking, she invited me for drinks before your date and I completely forgot about it.”

“When were you going to tell me this?”

“Never.”

“Well damn. I’ve been taking it out on the wrong person,” John said and lunged at Karn’a.

His feeble hands slipped under her open jacket, tickling her under her arms. She laughed and rolled around with him. Chelsea watched them from the fireplace like she was observing a nature documentary, taking notes on her phone.

“Hey, stop it!” Karn’a said, unable to stop laughing.

“No way. Unless you’re going to give my wallet back?”

“Okay, okay,” Karn’a said, waving her hands. He stopped and sat up waiting for her to make good on her deal. She panted, not unlike a dog, trying to catch her breath. Once she felt good enough to speak, she decided to tease him more. “What did you want again?”

“You know very well what I want.”

She zipped up her coat and squeezed her arms together. “You’re gonna have to remind me.”

John shook his head and got up. “When I come back, I expect my wallet, little lady.”

“Where are you going?” Susan asked, cuddling with Barry on the couch.

“Bathroom and then going to get a beer. Anyone want anything?”

“I’ll take one,” Charles said, taking Chelsea’s phone away.

“Joseph? Zendari? Mom? Anything?”

“We’re fine. Thanks though,” Joseph said and went with Zendari to sit next to Karn’a. They all looked at Joseph, secretly hoping he would spill the beans on what happened in the garage. He wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction. “So Charles, how was Florida?”

“You went to Florida?” Susan asked, immediately longing for the hot sands and relaxing water.

“It was nice. We...” Charles went on, regaling them with their adventures. Normally running from gators and catching sea creatures

would have interested Karn'a, but she was still thinking about the conversation in the garage. There was no way she wasn't going to eavesdrop on them and after hearing Zendari's struggles, she wanted to let her know she wasn't alone.

"Hey, Zendari," Karn'a said in a low voice, not to interrupt the other conversation.

"Yeah?"

"I just want to let you know. I'm here for you too. You're like the sister I never had." Karn'a put her paw on Zendari's shoulder.

Zendari tapped her paw. "Thanks Karn'a. I appreciate it."

"I don't just mean moral support. You say the word and I'll beat the shit out of them."

"Thanks... sis," Zendari said and noticed Sarah wasn't around. "Hey where is Sarah?"

"She's making dessert in the kitchen."

"I'll go check on her," Zendari said and went to the kitchen. Nobody else noticed her leave as Charles explained how Chelsea got swept away by a group of crabs on the beach.

In the kitchen, Sarah was all alone, dumping some white powder into the chocolate mix. She glanced behind herself, seeing Zendari.

"Hey Zendari, I am almost done with the dessert. Want to lick the spoon?" Sarah said, offering it up to her.

"I could use some food. I missed out on most of the dinner." Zendari approached her and took the spoon. It was thick chocolate that had white powder sprinkled all over. A strange tingle tickled her nostrils, reminding her of the day Nor'an overdosed on mint. She got a better look at the container she was using. White Tic Tacs. *Did she just grind up mints into the desert?* "Um... what exactly is in this?"

"It's my own secret recipe. Go on and try it."

"There isn't any mint in this, is there?" Zendari asked, testing her.

“No, of course not. I learned my lesson with your brother. No mints for you.”

“Then why did you grind up those Tic Tacs into it?” Zendari accused, putting the spoon down.

Sarah turned the tic tac container in her hand, reading the label. An icy gaze fell over her flushed face and the once pleasant cook wishing to fill the family with sweets was replaced by eyes of hate, a destroyer of worlds.

Her hand dropped below out of view. “I wish you never saw that.”

She drew a handgun on Zendari before she could react. The red laser sat steady against Zendari’s chest.

Zendari’s thoughts went into overdrive with the evidence from her case flooding back to her. The missing handgun, the little hearts in Timothy’s truck, the suspects all coming back with nothing. It all started to make sense.

“It was you.”

“Which part? Me trying to poison you or trying to shoot you?”

Zendari felt the urge to lunge at her, but her legs wouldn’t move. Her knuckles cracked from the fists she made, knowing any sudden movement would be her last. Then the toilet flushed from the bathroom and out came John, rubbing his belly.

“I just emptied the tank, ready for a refuel. How is the—” John said, walking toward them when he noticed Sarah pointing a gun at Zendari. “Sarah, what are you doing?”

Sarah gestured with her gun for Zendari to move. “I think it’s time we go to the living room. I would hate to have to repeat myself.”

If Zendari’s glare could kill, it would have. She complied and went with John back into the living room. Chelsea was the first to see them and scrambled to her feet.

“Holy hell! What are you doing?” Chelsea said, getting everyone’s attention.

“Shut up, Chelsea!”

Everyone got to their feet, still processing what was happening. Zendari and John returned to the group, who were all watching Sarah wave her gun around. Confusion was the most prominent emotion among them, minus Karn’a. She retracted her claws and had a killer look in her eye that was unmistakable.

“Don’t even think about it Karn’a or John gets it first,” Sarah warned.

“Why are you doing this?” John asked. His heart burned with every word, seeing Sarah’s rageful eyes stare back at him.

“You people are all pathetic. The Imperium invaded our planet. Our home! And because they didn’t destroy this little town, you happily bowed to your new overlords. You are a disgrace to the human race.”

“You were Mr. McGee’s accomplice,” Zendari said, hoping to get at least some closure before they died.

Sarah turned to Zendari. “Accomplice? No, he was the fall guy. And that would have never had to happen if you just ate my dessert instead of your dumb brother.”

Zendari stepped forward, but stopped when she pointed the gun at her. She wanted to punch the smug look that was forming on Sarah’s face. The only thing stopping her was that gun.

“Not so fast. You haven’t even heard how I did it. Or do you not want me to help solve your case?” Sarah’s smile was maniacal, enjoying her moment of victory. No one said a word, giving her the floor once again. “It all started when you walked into my store on Valentine’s Day. I had been waiting for a moment to really contribute to the

rebellion and I took that opportunity. I needed to get closer to you, so there was no better way than dating John.”

John might as well have been shot right there. He blinked and his mouth was agape. *This whole time. She never even loved me.* “So it was all a lie?”

“Of course. What kind of self respecting woman would genuinely agree to a harem? Especially to one with a furry abomination.”

“I knew I never liked you,” Karn’a said.

“Well, the feelings are mutual. And if Timothy sighted in his rifle better, I could have taken you both out that day.”

Karn’a growled. “You were the shooter.”

“I’m surprised you, of all people, didn’t know. So much for your superior sense of smell. I shouldn’t complain though, it gave me another shot at Zendari at the derby, albeit a difficult shot.”

“What are you going to do now? You can’t shoot us all,” Zendari stated.

“I don’t need to.” She pointed the gun at Joseph. “If any of you try anything I will shoot him and then John.”

Zendari and Karn’a went rigid. There was no disillusionment; they were not faster than a bullet. Neither of them could live with themselves if their men died, so Zendari gave an offer Sarah wouldn’t refuse.

“You know what would be more important to the rebels? Information. You let them go, I promise to tell you all I know about the Interior. Weaknesses, operational secrets, current cases, everything.”

“That’s a tempting offer, but everyone knows who I am. I can’t let any of you go.”

Suddenly the door opened. The sound of little shoes being kicked off echoed around the wall before Willy and Billy came running in with a gaudy, camo patterned revolver.

“Uncle Joseph! Look what we found in your truck!” Willy said, waving the weapon around, yet only Joseph ducked out of the way.

“Look, they are already playing cops and robbers without us,” Billy said, pointing at Sarah.

Willy took up his shooting stance and aimed at Sarah. “Reach for the sky!”

“That’s cute boys,” Sarah said, only turning her head to address them. “You two go upstairs. The adults need to talk.”

“Not gonna happen criminal scum,” Willy said, aiming down the sight.

“Pew pew pew!” Billy said, shooting her with finger guns. “Come on Willy, get her!”

“Boys, hand the gun to me,” Joseph said calmly.

“Don’t worry citizen, I’ll save you.” Willy closed his eyes as he squeezed the heavy trigger.

Joseph tackled Zendari to the ground as the gun shot. The bullet went screaming toward Sarah’s hand, smashing into her gun and sending the gun flying into Charles. Karn’a took the opportunity to pounce and brought Sarah down like a baby deer in a cougar’s grip. She sunk her claws into her, letting her know how she felt about being betrayed.

“You aren’t going anywhere, bitch,” Karn’a snarled while Sarah screamed in pain.

Susan and Barry ran around the couch, scooping the stupefied boys up in their arms, running them upstairs to safety. Zendari scrambled back to her feet to help Karn’a restrain her, yet not before Charlene came over and kicked Sarah in the head.

“That’s what you get for threatening my boys!” Charlene said.

Zendari stepped between her and Sarah and pointed to the revolver on the floor. “Go get that gun. We’ll handle this.”

John started calling the police, while Chelsea, Charles, and Joseph watched the aliens take Sarah into the garage. Sarah dragged her feet, which only made the pain more searing from Karn'a's dug in claws. Zendari grabbed a rope that was sitting on top of a stack of cardboard boxes and they tied her up to an old metal chair. Only once she was secure did Karn'a relent, dripping blood on the floor.

"Arggghhh! I will kill you! Both of you!" Sarah yelled at them.

"We should kill you for what you did," Karn'a said.

"For what I did? Your kind killed millions!"

"And you were going to senselessly kill a whole family. I'm not going to justify what the Imperium did, but you will pay for your own crimes."

Outside the garage, they heard tires crunch the dirt as a vehicle stopped outside. Doors clapped shut and in no time the door to the garage opened. Ringo was the first one in, barking at Karn'a immediately.

"Ringo stop! She is friendly!" Officer Larlin said, holding the erratic dog back.

Karn'a hissed at the dog, remembering Ringo from their last encounter. She went behind Sarah and used her as a literal human shield. "You wanna bite something. Eat this chew toy."

Ringo's bark calmed and became silent after a few more violent tugs and commands from Officer Larlin.

"Who is this?" Officer Larlin asked.

"A rebel. She tried to assassinate Zendari at the derby. Even admitted to the shooting that Mr. McGee was arrested for," Karn'a said.

"The derby?" Officer Larlin said and looked at Zendari. "I'm so sorry. I thought..."

"Nothing to be sorry about. All that matters is we got her."

Officer Larlin nodded and helped Karn'a bring Sarah into the squad car. Ringo followed them, growling the whole time and barking after every sudden move. Zendari went back into the house where Joseph was waiting for her with both guns in his hands.

"You probably will need these," Joseph offered. She ignored the guns and gave him a big hug. The weight of worry had lifted, knowing that he was safe. Her investigation was over and the most stressful case of her life was closed. Zendari squeezed him so tight, Joseph had to tap out. "I'm glad you're safe too."

Zendari took the guns from his hands, inspecting the magnum in particular. "How did you know this was real?"

"It was the one Mr. Kenroll shot at you with. I was holding on to it until he learned to be responsible."

"Then why do you still have it?"

"He's still not responsible."

"Neither are you, dipshit," Susan said, coming out of nowhere to punch him in the arm.

"Hey!" Joseph massaged his arm.

"That's for leaving your truck unlocked with a loaded gun inside. My kids could have shot each other."

"Can this wait until later? Clearly we are having a moment here," Joseph said, pointing to Zendari. Susan huffed and went back into the kitchen to let off some steam. Joseph shook his head and turned his attention back to Zendari. "So, where were we?"

"You were telling me how Mr. Kenroll is almost as irresponsible as you." Zendari smirked.

"Hmm. No, I think we were talking about how I saved your life. Or did you forget how I heroically moved you out of the way?"

"It's moments like these where I can tell you two are brothers," Zendari said, gesturing to John who was watching Sarah get hauled away from the doorway.

"Good riddance! I hope you puke up that turkey," John yelled out the door.

That can be arranged, Karn'a thought as she put Sarah in the backseat. Sarah's ropes were removed, but her hands were still bound by cold steel. Officer Larlin went back inside to get Zendari, giving Karn'a a moment of opportunity.

"This is for John," Karn'a whispered and punched Sarah so hard in the gut there was no other reaction than forceful vomit. Ringo barked something fierce, hearing the chunks of partially digested meat hit the floor. Karn'a stepped aside, letting Ringo in the backseat. He was more concerned with the free food that coated Sarah's socks. "Merry Thanksgiving, you filthy animal."

She slammed the door and saw John coming to her, taking each step gingerly on the cold ground. He flew into her arms, unafraid of the blood that still clung to her claws and fur. His lips met hers and his hand scratched the back of her ear just right, sending a tingle down her spine.

"You got to work on your one-liners," John said.

Karn'a moved him to the squad and pinned him to the hood, her nose never breaking contact with his. "Just shut up and kiss me again."

"Get off my squad!" Officer Larlin ordered, walking outside with Zendari. "And where is Ringo?"

Officer Larlin went to break up the couple who were not listening to anything she had to say, while Joseph caught up to Zendari outside.

"Wait," Joseph said, running over to her with a plate in his hand. Zendari turned around, seeing a large plate of turkey and mashed

potatoes smothered in gravy in his hand. "Have Karn'a drive. You need to eat something."

She took the plate and smiled. "You sound like your mom."

"If you don't want your food..." Joseph said, reaching out for it again.

"No—" Zendari dodged his advance and held the plate above her head. "I appreciate it. Thank you."

"Will you be back soon?"

"Probably not. Going to be a lot of paperwork that Commander Tojen will want done today. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I will see you at home then." Joseph kissed her. "That way I can *apologize* properly."

"I like the sound of that." Zendari turned to Karn'a who was already walking toward her. "You're driving. Let's go."

"Where did you get that food?" Karn'a asked, catching the keys that were tossed to her.

"This is all mine. Don't even think about it."

"Could you spare a leg?"

"I'll think about it."

And with that they got in the truck and watched the whole family come out to see them off. Their simple gesture meant a lot to them. The Hanks admired and respected what they did and treated them as family. It was more than either woman was used to. A loving family that cared what happened to them.

"We sure lucked out, didn't we?" Karn'a said, waving goodbye as she drove away.

"We sure did."

CHAPTER 25.

WITH SARAH OUT OF the way, resting in prison, the following few weeks were busy. Zendari had been called onto base a few times to meet with Commander Tojen. Initially, Commander Tojen was mad at her for lying about having PTSD and no amount of correcting her was going to fix that. The only thing stopping Commander Tojen from sending Zendari halfway across the galaxy was her intervention with Cal. He had been good to Commander Tojen and it showed in her demeanor with every meeting. By their fourth meeting, Zendari didn't even recognize her anymore.

"Have you ever watched the snow fall?" Commander Tojen asked, gazing out her office window. Zendari stood by the desk between them, unsure why she was called once again to her office.

"Not for long."

"It is so beautiful. Every flake is unique in its own way, yet you need to get up close to really see it," Commander Tojen said, reaching her hand out as if the snowflakes outside were going to land on her palm. "What a beautiful planet."

"Um... are you okay, Commander?"

Commander Tojen spun in her chair to face Zendari. “I have never felt better.” She then slapped the desk and stood up. “I’m going to do it!”

“Do... what?” Zendari had no idea what was going on. If she didn’t know any better, she would’ve thought Commander Tojen had finally lost it.

“I’m going to propose.”

“What? To Cal? Already?” Zendari said and waved her hands. “Commander, with all due respect—”

“Zendari, I admire you. The way you held yourself, against all the adversity in your way. It is commendable.”

“Thank you—”

“I mean, you had a lot going against you. You’re short, a workaholic, and the way you dress... it’s a miracle you held on to a man.”

What’s wrong with how I dress? Zendari thought to herself, wearing her favorite scarf and puffy purple jacket.

“It made me reflect on myself. Although I’m not short, nor a bad dresser, I had to admit, I work too much, and that is something Cal doesn’t deserve.”

Zendari didn’t know how to respond to being insulted by her boss. She thought it was best to stay quiet and let Commander Tojen get through whatever weird epiphany she wanted.

“Life is too short, so effective immediately I am stepping down as Commander of this base. I wanted you to be the first to know.” Commander Tojen said and started typing on her omni-pad.

“Why me?”

Commander Tojen went around the desk and gave her a big hug. “You helped me find the love of my life. I’m not sure why you waited so long, but I’m seizing the opportunity while I’m still young enough for him.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea? You’ve only been dating for a month.”

“And I feel like I’ve known him a lifetime. We are kindred spirits, destined to live together amongst the stars.”

Zendari was released from the hug and tried to talk more sense into her. “But what about the military? You have to work somewhere?”

“Relax. I have a pension coming and with my experience, I can find a job anywhere. It’s now time to take charge of my life and live a little.” Commander Tojen said and continued tapping away. She was quiet for a few seconds and then smiled at Zendari. “I have a few surprises for you.”

The whole situation was a sudden shock and Zendari was still struggling over the Commander’s insane idea to propose to Cal, let alone leave the military. It was all happening so fast. *Was this what a mid-life crisis looks like?*

“First, I know how you want to stay with your boyfriend, so I spoke with Governess Vumars and after your big bust, she agreed to make you the lead detective of the new investigation unit for the region.”

“Vumars? She wants me? I—I don’t know what to say?”

“You say nothing. I’ve already accepted on your behalf. You start next year. And you get to pick your team.”

Zendari held her scarf tight so she didn’t spontaneously burst out in song and dance. No more risk of transfer and will still get to do the job she loved.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“That’s not all. A little birdy told me your family was going to be in town, so I took the liberty of bringing them here.”

Zendari’s eyes grew huge and gulped. “They’re here?”

“Yes. They are waiting for you in the lobby.” Commander Tojen walked back behind her desk and revealed a pair of wooden snowshoes. “What are you still doing here? Get going. You’re burning daylight.”

Zendari took a slow step back. She was not prepared to face them yet. They were supposed to meet her at Charlene’s place, so at least she had backup. Here, she was completely outnumbered. She needed a distraction.

“What are those for?” Zendari asked, even though she knew the answer.

“They are for walking in the snow. Cal wanted to show me his favorite trail. No better place to pop the question.” Commander Tojen walked toward her and turned Zendari around. “Now get out of my office. Your family is waiting.”

Zendari was practically pushed out of the office, left to face her most difficult challenge yet. Surviving her sister’s.

She walked to the lobby, each step making her hold her scarf closer to her chest. It was the only backup she had. A little reminder of who loves her the most. *Come on, you can do this! You know Joseph is rooting for you.*

Zendari got to the lobby and stopped. Her sisters were all there. Val’ren was leaning over Waylin, watching her play a game on her omni-pad. They both had matching black hair that was combed and down, lapping over their purple and blue coats, respectively. Next to them was Malran. Unlike her other muscular sisters, she was scrawny, but made up for it by being a head taller than them. Malran was enthralled with a magazine about guns and ammo. None of them spotted Zendari, until Nor’an ratted her out.

“There she is! We were starting to think you ditched us,” Nor’an said, kicking off the opposite wall of his sister’s.

Zendari put on a polite smile and made her way over. Her sisters put away their things and Val'ren was the first to greet her... with a punch to the gut. She hunched over instantly, feeling the force flow right through her stomach.

"Little sis, how can you fall for that again? After all these years, I thought you would have wised up," Val'ren said.

"I thought at some point, you would stop. I guess we were both wrong." Zendari groaned and did her best to stand up straight. The pain was gradually going away, but not the follow up comments.

"Didn't the Interior teach you all those fighting moves? Seems they really are all talk."

"They taught me plenty. Nothing stops a cheap shot."

Val'ren took a step back and got into a boxing stance, weaving back and forth. "Let's see it then. I bet I can still knock you out in under a minute."

Zendari's stomach ached in protest and she agreed. Her sister's fists were always formidable and had only gotten more lethal as she got older. It didn't help that Val'ren was a pro boxer by trade. Val'ren was never one to control herself and was itching for a fight, in and out of the ring. If she didn't get her dukes up soon, another punch was going to come anyway. To Zendari's relief, a hero emerged from behind them.

"Zendari!" Davy yelled, zipping past her sisters and leaped into her arms.

"Davy!" Zendari hugged him up, lifting him with relative ease and tugged on his bright blue coat. "You have impeccable timing."

"What does impeccable mean?"

"It means faultless, my little blueberry," Fralain said, walking over to join the group in her white trench coat. She took Davy from Zendari

and gave her a one armed hug. "Thank you again for inviting us over. I always wanted to meet my husband's side of the family."

Zendari didn't realize Fralain was invited, but it was a bigger relief. Her sisters couldn't be their normal nasty selves with an influential noble around. It was going to make the drive more bearable.

"I'm glad you could make it. I hope you don't mind, it will be a bit cramped in my van," Zendari said, counting everyone there.

"How cramped are we talking?" Waylin asked.

"Follow me, I'll show you."

"I think I'm going to be sick." Malran covered her mouth, rubbing shoulder to shoulder with Val'ren.

The women were in the back of the van, sitting on the bare plywood, while Davy ran back and forth between them. To him, the space was fairly big, but to the women, the walls might as well been craving in. Waylin didn't want to watch Malran struggle to keep her food down the whole trip, so she got up and leaned over the driver's seat to at least see outside.

"How long until we get there?" Waylin asked.

"Not too much longer," Zendari said.

Waylin glanced in the back, where Malran was one bump away from making the van uninhabitable. "Is there a reason we couldn't take a military transport?"

"Because I drove my van here."

"You bought this thing? Why?" Waylin didn't hide her disgust for it in her tone.

“I think it’s comfy,” Nor’an said, offering his support for a change. He held Agent Stuffins in his arms and noticed the rip in the arm. “What happened to this?”

“Got shot during the derby,” Zendari said casually.

“Shot at? What happened?”

“Do you remember Sarah?”

“How could I forget? She was sexy and her cookies were great.”

Fralain’s ears perked up in the back, catching Davy in her arms. She wanted to hear what else her husband had gotten into while galavanting across the galaxy, but what she heard would send her into the stratosphere.

“Turns out, she purposely spiked those cookies to kill me. What you’re holding was her third attempt at killing me.”

“What!” Fralain said, jumping to her feet. The van rocked as she went to the passenger seat and hugged Nor’an around the seat. Her eyes went to Zendari, who was still focused on the road. “I thought you said she was trustworthy?”

“I was wrong. You don’t have to worry though. She’s in prison and we threw away the key.”

“Good.” Fralain kissed Nor’an on the head. “I don’t know what I would do without my sweetums.”

“I know what I would do,” Nor’an grumbled under his breath, squeezing the stuffed bear in frustration.

“Is that why you have a bullet hole in your van?” Waylin asked.

Zendari looked over her shoulder and saw the black duct tape she had over it was on the floor. “So much for tape. But no. Completely unrelated incident. It was a simple misunderstanding.”

“Since when did misunderstandings involve guns?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We have a long way to go.” Waylin countered.

Zendari slammed on the brakes and her van went sliding. Waylin caught Davy while the other two sisters rolled up to the front, smashing into the back of Fralain's legs. Vomit spewed from Malran, splashing on the board between her legs. The smell was not immediate, but was sure to be unpleasant, judging from the orange slop. Neither that nor their screams were Zendari's concern as the vehicle slid to a stop.

The vehicle rumbled and her eyes narrowed, focusing all her attention on the four legged creature in front of her. Bambi. *Don't you try it.*

The deer stood still in the middle of the road, unafraid of them.

"What is that thing?" Waylin asked.

"It is the worst animal on this planet. A deer," Zendari said.

"What's a deer?" Val'ren asked, being careful not to touch her sister's partially digested carrot cake.

"That." Waylin pointed. "What do we do?"

"We drive slowly around it," Zendari said, letting off the brake.

"I think I would rather you hit it," Malran said, somewhat dazed on the ground.

"Trust me. You don't." Zendari drove up to and steered around it. The deer did not budge and never broke eye contact with her. Her hands twitched, expecting the deer to attack her at any moment. Instead, it went up to the window and licked it.

"Aw, that is cute," Nor'an said. "It doesn't look bad."

Then running in from the right, five more deer leaped onto the road and surrounded the vehicle, circling it like sharks in the water. Zendari checked her mirrors, there was nowhere to go. *Oh no, they know I killed one of their own. This is retaliation.*

"Why are they circling us?" Waylin asked in a wavering tone.

"I don't know."

One of the deer banged its head into the side of the van, causing Malran to jump. "They're attacking!"

"Get us out of here!" Fralain yelled in a panic.

Zendari slammed on the gas and turned to the left, trying to dodge the deer in front. It dodged her vehicle and they sped away from the gang of deer, leaving them in a flurry of snow. Malran stumbled back toward the door, taking a peek out the rear window. The deer were... chasing them.

"They're still coming!"

Zendari pushed the pedal all the way and checked her side mirror. She wasn't lying, they were chasing her. Joseph always said they were harmless, skittish creatures. Zendari wished she had a recording, because Joseph was never going to believe this.

"I'll lose them," Zendari said, drifting off the paved road onto a poorly shoveled dirt road.

Everyone held on to whatever was bolted down, feeling the force push them toward the van wall. There were more screams, but Zendari was all smiles, happy with her wheelwoman skills. Joseph had taught her how to drive in winter and it made her feel like a pro driver. The van bobbed a little from the uneven road, but the more distance between them and the oddly aggressive deer, the better.

The deer gave up their pursuit at the beginning of the road they took, watching the van speed away. Malran smiled and pounded the top of the van. "They stopped!"

"You saved us!" Fralain said, slapping Zendari on the shoulder.

Zendari smiled, liking Nor'an's wife more every second. Val'ren on the other hand, was not a fan of others getting the spotlight.

"I could've taken them. You should've stopped and let me at them," Val'ren said.

"I can go back."

“No!” everyone else said in unison.

Zendari silently chuckled to herself. The deer “attack” made an impression. She glanced in the rear view mirror and could have sworn Waylin was genuinely scared she was going to turn around. Her face quirked a little, but the dead giveaway was the iron grip she had on the headrest. Zendari felt the fabric give under her sister’s powerful fingers. For the first time, Zendari was the one they relied on.

“I’m kidding. We are almost there anyway.”

She pulled up to the house where Karn’a was putting around on a four-wheeler, towing Milly and Lilly behind in the snow tube. Billy was on the seat behind Karn’a, hugging her camo coat. The two girls cheered louder than the roar of the engine.

“Faster! Faster!” the girls chanted.

Karn’a tried to oblige, but was having troubles with the foot shifter. When John showed her how to do it, it gave a distinct metal thunk, but when she tried, it made no such sound. Not to mention, it was hard to get her foot under it in the first place.

“I’m working on it,” Karn’a said, standing up to get more leverage. She hooked her foot under the shifter and after a few attempts, the vehicle lurched forward. “Now we’re talkin!”

The vehicle sped off around the house, with the girls waving good-bye to Zendari. They were the only ones who saw her, but that wouldn’t last long. She pulled up next to Joseph’s truck and looked behind to check out her passengers.

“We are here.”

Malran was the first out the back, grateful to be out of the tiny driving coffin. She didn’t care that her face was cold the second she got outside, anywhere was better than there. The rest all piled out and followed Zendari to the house when her favorite little friend ambushed them.

“Zenrawee!” Gretchen yelled, tackling her leg.

“Gretchen!” Zendari said, kneeling down to give her a hug.

Gretchen savored it for all but two seconds, noticing she was not the only purple giant. “Who are they?”

“That is my family. This is my brother Nor’an, his wife, Fralain, and my sister’s...”

Gretchen stopped listening, focused on the little Shil’vati boy about her height. He waved at her and she was compelled to introduce herself.

“You’re pretty. My name is Gretchen. What’s your name?”

“Thank you. My friends call me Davy.”

“Do you want to help me catch my sister’s?”

“Mom, can I?” Davy asked, tucking his hands in his pockets.

Gretchen took off her mittens and handed them to Davy. “Take my mittens. They will keep you warm.”

“Thanks.” Davy gingerly took the gloves and had to agree, they did the job. It also helped that her hands were almost sweaty from chasing the four-wheeler. Fralain saw how readily the little girl helped out her boy, making her much more comfortable about the situation.

Fralain kneeled down to meet Gretchen’s eye line, doing one last check to see if she was the kind of girl who could be trusted with her son. Gretchen’s smile was innocent and enough for anyone’s approval.

“You take care of my boy, you hear me,” Fralain said.

“I will,” Gretchen said and took Davy’s hand. “Come on!”

Everyone watched the two run into the backyard, hand in hand, toward the loud engine of the four-wheeler. Fralain smiled, happy that her son was socializing. Playdates didn’t come by much, given every family needed to be vetted ahead of time and the ones that passed all seemed to never want him over. It was frustrating for her son, since

the only time he could play with his friends was at school, but with any luck, his new cousins would be his friends.

Zendari's sisters and Nor'an rushed inside, not wanting to be out in the cold any longer. Fralain watched her kid round the house and stared off into the distance.

"You coming in?" Zendari asked.

"I'm going to watch Davy for a little while. I'll be in soon."

Fralain's boots crunched the snow and made her way to the back. Zendari was partially bummed she was not coming, but her sisters haven't been too bad so far. Maybe time away did make them more tolerable?

She went inside and Joseph was already ambushed by her sisters. They took off their coats, hoping to show off their assets best they could, despite their thankfully modest festive sweaters. Zendari walked up behind the semi-circle of women, hoping to hear what they were saying.

"I love your sweaters," Joseph said, trying to be polite.

"Thank you," Malran said, puffing her chest up. It was also one of the only phrases she was confident saying in English.

Waylin reached her hand out to part his hair, making him realize how much taller and stronger these women were than Zendari. Her grasp of English was much better, albeit with a thick Russian-like accent.

"How did man like you get to being with a small woman like Zendari?" Waylin asked, admiring his tuskless face.

"She ain't small to me," Joseph said, defending her.

"The galaxy is a dangerous place. A man like you needs to be protected. You need someone stronger and bigger." Val'ren said and flexed her bicep. The sweater stretched and the tiny fibers groaned to stay together. "You wanna feel what a strong woman feels like?"

“Already have. And here she is now,” Joseph said as Zendari pushed past her sisters to give him a side hug. His hand wrapped around her hip, giving it a firm squeeze. “Yep, she feels pretty strong to me.”

“Looks like you met my sisters. Where did Nor’an run off to?” Zendari asked.

“He is in the kitchen with Voltan. I think he is looking for an omni-pad to use,” Joseph said.

“Holy shit! You weren’t kidding. They are giants!” Chelsea said to her husband, being brought into the crowded hall.

“Charles, Chelsea. These are Zendari’s sisters, Malran, Val’reu, and Waylin,” Joseph said, introducing them.

They extended their fists in greeting and Chelsea was off to the races.

“Wow. And I thought Zendari was tall,” Chelsea said and started fondling Val’reu still flexed muscle. “And strong. That is solid.”

“Thank... you?” Val’reu said, confused why this woman was strangely obsessed with her muscles.

Charles pulled Chelsea away by the shoulders to not further make their new guests more uncomfortable. “I apologize. My wife is super fascinated with aliens.”

“What about you? Seeing anything you like?” Waylin asked, battling her eyes at him.

Charles laughed. “Flirting with me in front of my wife? I guess the rumors are true.”

“All good I hope.”

Chelsea saw the lust in Waylin’s eyes. She had never seen it in Zendari or Karn’a, who were already busy courting the other men in the family. These women though, were all single and ready to mingle. Thankfully she didn’t need to intervene as the sound of bells came

rushing down the stairs. Charlene was coming to greet her guests the only way she knew how.

“Do I hear more guests?” Charlene sang, rushing past the kitchen with her red sweater. The white cuffs matched her hat, which jingled as her head bobbed. Everyone stepped aside for Charlene to come through and see her giant guests. She ran to Val’ren and gave her a hug. “How are you, my dear?”

Val’ren froze, not sure why this little woman was hugging her. It was not a greeting she was used to, especially from a stranger. “I’m... doing fine?”

“I’m sorry, I should probably introduce myself. My name is Charlene, Joseph’s mom. What are your ladies’ names?”

“My name is Val’ren. And these are my sister’s Waylin and Malran,” she said, gesturing to them.

Charlene gave each of them a hug, which they returned hesitantly. They were not used to such hospitality, nor seeing an excitable old woman. Malran rathered liked the hug, petting her soft hair.

“Your hair, soft,” Malran said.

“Thank you. You are so kind. Would you like anything to drink? I have hot chocolate!”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Zendari said, taking Joseph with her. She wanted a head start and a cup of that majestic brown liquid, before having to deal with her sisters. Joseph felt her tense muscles. This was going to be tough for her, but it was going well so far.

“Relax. Everything is going well,” Joseph said, pouring her a cup.

It didn’t start that way. “Easy for you to say, they aren’t your sisters.” Zendari took the cup and took a deep breath of the soothing, warm smell of chocolaty goodness.

“No, they may not be, but they seem nice. A little forward, but nowhere near the stories you told me.”

“They are on their best behavior. Put some eggnog in them, and they will be terrible.”

“What about eggnog?” Nor’an said in his native tongue, downing a fresh glass like it was water.

“Don’t give any to Val’ren. You know how she gets with alcohol,” Zendari responded.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. You’re not the only one dreading this.”

Zendari battered her eyes in astonishment. “I thought you were close with them?”

Nor’an poured another glass. “I’m talking about my wife. What in The Deep are you talking about?”

“You’re terrible, you know that?”

“What are you two talking about?” Joseph interjected, trying to bring the conversation to something he could understand. Nor’an grabbed the omni-pad on the counter and spoke into it.

“Eggnog is mine. No touching.”

“I don’t think John is going to take kindly to that.”

Then suddenly a crash came through the window in the sunroom. Everyone whipped their heads to see Karn’a rolling out of the room and standing up all in one motion next to the kitchen table.

“Whew! Don’t worry. I’m okay. Throttle got caught,” Karn’a assured everyone inside who were all staring at her.

“Awesome!” Willy and Billy said from outside as the cold winter air started to enter the house.

John came running up past the boys, where the window was completely shattered. His breath was abated and the hot air clouded his vision. “Karn’a, are you okay?”

“Never been better, cutie!” she said, giving him a thumbs up. “At least I know what I’m getting your mother for Christmas.”

Karn'a's accidental attempt at becoming a professional stunt performer was just the distraction Zendari was hoping for. Karn'a, John, Charles, and Zendari's sisters all went to help seal garbage bags around the window, leaving her a few minutes to properly psych herself up for dealing with them the rest of the day. Her sisters felt compelled to help, if for no other reason than to flirt with the final available male of the family.

Malran held up the corner of the bag to the window frame and watched John walk under her arms to attach more tape. Her perverted mind fantasied about what kind of mischief he could get into down there. The stretching of duct tape off the roll sent her brain into overdrive, formulating the best pickup line she could muster.

"I bet you keep me warm."

John was caught off guard by the terrible English and guessed what she meant. "Yeah, this should help. We can also close the sliding doors to this room."

Malran's head drooped in defeat, knowing her words didn't come out like she intended. John finished her side and handed the tape to Val'ren, who was holding up the middle with Charles.

"You sure you don't want me to hoist you up? You have been doing a good job so far," Val'ren said.

"Naw, I did my part. Time to go get some egnog! Anyone want some?" John asked the group.

Karn'a raised her hand, holding down the lower corner by Waylin's knees. "I'll take one."

"Same," Charles said.

The sisters also said yes, even though Malran really wanted to try the hot chocolate Zendari had. She couldn't remember the word they used for it, leaving her to the mercy of the group.

"I don't have that many hands. You want to help me, Malran, is it?" John asked, pointing to her.

"Yes!" Malran let go of her corner and followed him into the kitchen. *He remembered my name. That must be a good sign!*

They got to the kitchen where Charlene was hugging up Fralain, who had finally come inside with her son. The kids all played in the living room by the Christmas tree. Their excited screams echoed into the kitchen, but weren't unbearable. Voltan was checking the temperature of the meat, while Nor'an slammed another glass of eggnog down his gullet. Zendari and Joseph were having their own conversation which John felt compelled to interrupt.

"I see you two didn't feel a need to help out," John said, squeezing past them to get to the eggnog.

"You know what they say, six is a party, eight is a crowd," Joseph retorted.

Nor'an saw John coming for his delicious nectar and glanced between his glass and the pitcher. There was no time and he couldn't afford to be sober. He took the pitcher and started chugging it.

"That's for everyone, bud," John said, stopping him from getting too far and pointed at the cabinet behind Nor'an. "Glasses are up there."

Malran reached above them both and took down six tall glasses. She was all smiles, thinking this could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship. The problem was, English was not her strong suit.

"Here go you. Glasses!" Malran said.

John chuckled to himself and poured the glasses, much to Nor'an's dismay. He got to the last glass, when Nor'an pulled the pitcher away from him to ensure there was enough for another glass.

"That is plenty. My sister's don't need that much," Nor'an said.

"They're big girls. I assume this isn't much for them if Karn'a is any measure," John said and took three glasses, leaving the others for Malran.

They left Nor'an to drown his sorrows in what was left, while Zendari held up Malran for a second. Her grammar was atrocious and Zendari thought maybe a helpful tip might warm her up.

"It is 'here you go,' not 'here go you.'" Zendari said, offering a friendly smile.

"Nobody asked you," Malran said in Shil.

To Joseph, her foreign words didn't sound mean, but Zendari's dejected response said otherwise. Joseph held her hand, watching John and Malran return to the room to cheers as the drinks arrived.

"She said something mean?" Joseph asked.

"I was trying to be helpful. Typical Malran. Can't take advice from anyone. I don't know why I thought today would be any different."

Joseph leaned his head on her arm. "Maybe she is just hungry. I know I can get snippy when I'm hungry."

"Are you hungry?" Charlene asked Joseph, walking into the kitchen with Fralain. "I have summer sausage and cheese in the refrigerator. Why don't you make a platter of snacks for everyone?"

"Or Nor'an could do it? Goddess knows he hasn't helped out yet," Voltan chimed in.

Nor'an burped rather loudly and hit his chest. "That sounds like a good idea. I could eat."

"You are preparing food, not eating food."

“Eh, I can do both,” Nor’an said and opened the refrigerator. The cheese was easy to find, given the yellow brick said cheddar cheese on the wrapper in both Shil and English. The sausage on the other hand was a bit harder. “What does sausage look like?”

Charlene blinked, realizing it was the omni-pad on the counter that was doing the talking for him. “It is the cylinder of meat. Should be above the crisper.”

He had no idea what a crisper was and picked up the thick slab of meat. *Ab, the dick meat. Why am I not surprised?* “Found it.”

Fralain blushed bluer than the deep end of a pool, seeing her husband holding the girthy sausage in his hand. It reminded her of their first night together. The night that would lead to their beautiful boy, who was playing in the other room, being born. Nor’an was a freak, but ever since he left, she hadn’t gotten the opportunity to see that side of him again.

“Oh my...” Fralain said. “Is that appropriate?”

“It’s sausage. Oh, I didn’t ask, are you allergic to anything?” Charlene asked apologetically.

“No, she’s not allergic. I bet she could eat this entire thing whole,” Nor’an said, acknowledging what Fralain was thinking.

“We’ll cut this up. Here, I’ll show you,” Charlene said, taking over for him.

Nor’an kept his gaze on Fralain, moving his eyebrows up and down. He could feel the buzz coming on and with it, his wife seemed more likable by the second.

Fralain came closer to him, thinking he was finally warming up to her again. *Maybe there is such a thing as Christmas Miracles*, she thought to herself, wrapping her arm around him to watch the demonstration. There was no smart comment and he smiled up at her. It made her feel like all the work on herself was starting to pay off in

their relationship as well. She held him tight and almost puked once Charlene cut the tip of the sausage off.

“You cut an inch or less thick slices, like this.” Charlene demonstrated, cutting another one.

All Fralain could see was an overly joyful woman, gleefully cutting up a dick. She looked away to Nor’an, hoping for some comfort from his gaze, but he laughed maniacally.

“What’s the matter? I thought you were hungry?” Nor’an said, knowing full well how she saw it.

“Here you go, try some.” Charlene offered both of them a slice.

Nor’an took it without hesitation and chewed it up good. Fralain was hesitant, holding it in her fingertips.

“Just pretend it is a dick and you’ll be fine,” Nor’an said in Shil, teasing her. He knew she got weird about food that looked like genitalia. Grapes were another one she couldn’t eat without gagging.

It’s not a dick. It is a circle of meat. Way different, she told herself and threw it in her mouth. It was a bit tangy, but her eyebrows raised in satisfaction. “That is... pretty good actually.”

“I can cut you another slice—”

“No, I’m good. I’ll save some for everyone else,” she said and looked away from the little butcher who kept slicing away.

Charlene continued cutting, forgetting completely that she asked Joseph to do it. Joseph didn’t mind, wanting to stay close to Zendari during her trials with her side of the family. She had a tough job ahead. Forgive her sisters for all that they had done to her. Joseph didn’t have that kind of baggage, but he knew Zendari could overcome it. She cared about her family, no matter how bad they supposedly were. He knew that for sure. No woman could love him like Zendari did, if she didn’t care about them.

“Do you know when you are going to talk with them?” Joseph asked.

“No idea.” Zendari took another sip of her hot chocolate to keep her mouth busy.

All she wanted to do was to get through this holiday with minimal damage. Actually forgiving them was second on that list. She knew she had to, but Joseph’s words on Thanksgiving were more powerful then, not now. She needed some words of encouragement and Joseph was there to deliver.

“I recommend the sooner the better. Maybe I’m selfish, but I want to enjoy this day with you and celebrate your victory, not watch you worry about what they will say,” Joseph said and rubbed her back.

His gentle touch soothed her tense muscles more than the hot chocolate ever could. He was in her corner and she was invincible with him by her side. Zendari put her cup down and took a deep breath.

“You’re right. I’m going to do it.”

“Turkey is done!” Voltan said.

“After dinner.”

The big family was gathered around the table, salivating at the perfectly cooked turkey, bowls of mashed potatoes, wild rice, and gravy, not to mention the platter of shrimp and other foods on the counter behind them. Gretchen normally sat next to Zendari, but this time she sat on the other end of the line of children, next to Davy. Zendari was counting on her little friend to sit beside her, but instead Val’ren took her place.

“This all looks amazing,” Val’ren said, sucking up to Charlene.

"It was all Voltan. He insisted," Charlene said, quick to give credit where it was due.

"It was the least I could do. You have been such a humble host and I always wanted to cook a turkey," Voltan said with humility.

"Can we eat now?" Willy asked. "I'm starving."

"Don't we say grace? I was told humans say grace before dinner," Voltan asked, excited to be part of their ancient human ritual.

"Grace. There it's been said." John reached his fork across the table before getting his hand swatted by his mom. "Hey!"

"Don't you hey me. They want to pray with us. We should do it more often anyways," Charlene said and clasped her hands. "Joseph, would you do the honors?"

Damn. Joseph bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Thank you Lord..."

The adult aliens were caught off guard by everyone bowing their heads, even Zendari. He had never prayed before, at least in her presence over dinner, or anything. Voltan listened carefully to Joseph and was fascinated by the children, who didn't get distracted by anything else, even Davy.

Fralain saw her son acting like everyone else and didn't know what to think. She didn't put much credence to a goddess or a god of any kind. To her, it was more akin to holding onto old ways of life for the sake of keeping folklore alive in the culture. There was a charm to it, but nothing she gave any considerable thought to. She had to admit, he sure looked adorable with his scrunched up nose and shut eyelids.

"...Amen."

"Amen," the rest said and began to dig in.

Fralain leaned over to her son and put her hand on his back. "Where did you learn that from?"

"From school. Everyone does it before they eat," Davy said.

“Huh. I never knew that,” Fralain said, thinking about what school she sent him to.

The whole prayer reminded Zendari of Thanksgiving, except much shorter and no one else had to do any talking. She preferred that in some ways.

“I didn’t know you guys prayed over dinner,” Zendari said to Joseph.

“We did more when Dad was around. He would insist. Probably would be mad at me for not doing it more.”

Zendari put her hand on his. “I wouldn’t. I think you did great.”

Joseph smiled and put his other hand on top of hers. “Thanks.”

Val’reen reached across the table to grab the bowl of mashed potatoes. She slapped half the bowl on her plate and crafted it to look like a white volcano. All it needed was gravy and turkey to be complete.

“Maybe save some for everyone else. I know the kids like it,” Zendari said, doing well to keep her tone polite.

“Whatever you say small tits,” Val’reen said in Shil and put the most pathetic amount of potatoes back in the bowl. “Is there more eggnog?”

Zendari frowned at her sister’s lack of consideration. Milly’s worried face stared at the mountain of potatoes, hoping there would be some left for her. It was something Zendari could not accept. She took the bowl and spoon and served the children to ensure at least they got some. She loved mashed potatoes, but if Val’reen wasn’t going to sacrifice, then Zendari would have to go without for the sake of the children.

By the time Zendari got back to her seat, there were no more potatoes. Instead, she had a healthy portion of turkey, some rice, and a few shrimps waiting on her plate. It still wasn’t potatoes, but that didn’t matter. Joseph was watching out for her.

Zendari ignored her rude sister and watched Waylin, seeing if she was a better candidate to talk to first. Waylin was sitting between Karn'a and Charles, shoulder to shoulder. Her calculated eyes watched him, waiting for a good time to bring up conversation.

"Charles, how you meet your wife?" Waylin asked.

"Funny story, I met her at a work conference in Vegas."

"You two work together?"

"No. That's the funny part. Apparently there was a UFO convention going on at the same time. I mistakenly entered the wrong room, although I should've known, there were flying saucers hanging on the ceiling and everyone wasn't dressed in business attire," Charles said and hugged his wife who was struggling to shove the turkey at the end of her fork into her mouth from his light shaking. "Then I laid eyes on this woman and it was all over. Love at first sight."

"Just like that?"

"Yep. She was so cute with those little green alien pins on her black vest and frazzled hair. I sat through the whole presentation next to her. No idea what they were talking about, but I had good company."

"I bet I could being good company," Waylin said with a gentle smile.

"You don't quit, do you?"

"I don't know meaning of the word," she sat up straight, head pointed to the sky.

He chuckled, not sure if she was being confident or actually not knowing the definition. Either way, it was amusing to him. Charles turned to his wife. "Looks like you got some competition."

Chelsea put her fork down and glared daggers at him. "What did you say?"

"I said, you *don't* have any competition. None at all." Charles patted her on the back. "Heh heh."

Waylin didn't catch what he said, which was for the best. Zendari figured the better mood she was in, the more likely she would listen to her. She tended to be the more judging of the three and the worse her mood got, the more insufferable she became. Luckily, dinner went smoothly, with more eating than talking. The food was delicious and not a single spec was left by the end.

The kids excused themselves from the table, running off to go play in the living room, while Charlene, Chelsea, Susan, and Voltan washed the dishes. Barry and Charles went to watch the kids with Fralain, much to Waylin's dismay. That didn't keep her down for longer than a few seconds, turning her attention to the other man of the family.

"How did you two meeting?" Waylin asked Karn'a and John.

John and Karn'a shared glances, deciding silently how they wanted to tell their story. Too bad Karn'a wasn't a mind reader, nor subtle.

"He shot me with an arrow."

"Cupid's arrow?" Malran asked, fascinated by the folklore of a magical arrow that could make anyone fall in love.

"No, a literal arrow. It was so hot!" Karn'a said, switching to Shil.

"No way! He shot you?" Val'ren said.

"He did. Thought I was a giant cat. Once he saw I was a knockout, naturally he begged me to go out with him, if for nothing else to apologize for his feminine conduct."

"If by knockout, you mean he knocked you out and by begged you mean—," Zendari said.

Karn'a laughed obnoxiously to shut her up, but the damage was already done.

"He knocked you out?" Val'ren said, almost falling out of her seat. "But he is so small."

"What are you all saying? I wanna laugh," John said, looking between everyone's amused faces.

“Did you really knock her out?” Val’reu asked John.

John saw the wounded pride that hid behind Karn’a’s smile. He was not going to let her down. He put his arm around her and scooted his chair as close as he could to her.

“I may be strong, but I’m not that strong. She faked that, all part of her master plan to seduce me,” John said and turned Karn’a’s chin toward him. “And it worked.”

If Karn’a was standing, her legs would have gone limp. He had come to her rescue in a way she hadn’t expected. Lying to protect her pride, which she didn’t realize she needed protecting. It was a weakness of hers, but one that John compensated for. She rubbed her head against him and purred.

Zendari saw her sister’s jealous faces. They wanted a man who looked at them like that. One who truly loved the person they were with. Instead, they were like many of the galaxy’s women. Single and looking in on what true love was about.

Malran reached for Nor’an’s omni-pad and spoke into it. “Are you looking for another?”

“I tried that. I think I’m going to try to stick to one for now,” John said.

“What about you, handsome? Ever wonder what it is like to be with a *real* Shil’vati woman?” Val’reu asked Joseph as if Zendari was not sitting between them.

Joseph didn’t appreciate the snide comment, but he had a way of getting back at her without being rude in return. A grin slowly grew on his face, thinking about his diabolical plan.

“I might be open to it, but you need to prove yourself,” Joseph said. Zendari turned her head to him. Her disapproving face screamed: *What are you doing!*

“How?”

“You need to watch the kids. Zendari did it all by herself, no problem. If you can keep up, I’ll consider it.”

Zendari smiled ear to ear. *You magnificent bastard. I knew I loved you!*

“Is this an opening invitation?” Waylin asked, raising her hand.

“Sure, why not.”

The seats slid across the floor as Waylin and Malran sprinted into the other room. Val’ren got up and pointed at him. “Prepare to be impressed.”

Val’ren left them and Zendari leaned on his shoulder.

“You sure that was smart to send all of them? They might be able to do it.”

“I doubt it. They don’t have the motivation nor the love you do for those kids,” Joseph said, squeezing her knee.

“Not to mention you.”

“That goes without saying,” Joseph said and pulled mistletoe out of his pocket. He dangled it above her head before going in for a passionate kiss.

Her whole body relaxed once his lips hit hers. There was no one left in the house for that brief moment. Zendari savored it, yet it was fleeting between the excited screams from the other room and Karn’a snatching the mistletoe from Joseph’s hand.

“I need to borrow this.” Karn’a turned to John, who had got up from his seat. She shook it in her hand and licked her lips.

“Don’t even think about it.” John backpedaled slowly to the stairs as she kept encroaching.

“I know the rules of mistletoe. Now come over here and give me a smooch.”

“Not gonna happen. You still got turkey breath.”

She continued to shake it as he rounded the banister. *He is going to make me chase him. Doesn't he know I love the pursuit... or...*

"I'm going to chase you," Karn'a warned, begging he would run for it.

John flashed her a smile before bolting up the stairs. "You'll never catch me!"

She darted after him and bounded up the stairs. There were two thuds that followed. One from John tripping near the top of the stairs, slamming his knee into the carpeted step and the other from her tackling him. Karn'a wasted no time flipping him around and pinned him with her body.

"I caught you," she whispered into his ear.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Devour you."

John put his forehead to hers, staring into her eyes that hungered for him. "Then what is taking you so long?"

"What are you two doing?" Charlene said from the base of the stairs, initially worried someone got hurt when she heard the noise.

Karn'a held the mistletoe up. "Just following the law of mistletoe."

Charlene couldn't help but break a smile. She had never heard that one before. "You two sure make a lot of noise for kissing."

"You should hear us when—ow," Karn'a said, getting a pinch from John.

"We'll be quieter. Promise," John said from underneath her.

Charlene shook her head and walked away. She didn't know who was the bigger troublemaker, the one who broke her nice window or her son who clearly had other intentions with his girlfriend. Once she was out of earshot, John lifted Karn'a off of him.

"Why did you pinch me?" Karn'a asked.

He tilted his head down and his eyes up at her. "You need to ask?"

“I was going to say when we play board games,” she said innocently as possible.

“Sure you were. When was the last time we played a board game?”

“Is it so bad she knows her son bucks like a wild Turox?”

“I still don’t know what that is,” John said, pecking her on the cheek. “And yes, I think she would kill me if she knew.”

Karn’a brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. “Good thing I can protect you.”

John held on to hand, petting it ever so gently. Her tone was serious, but not in an intense way. In a loving way that felt like a warm blanket on a cold day. It was clear she loved him and didn’t care who knew. John loved that about her.

“I know.”

“How are you still moving?” Waylin asked, sprawled out on the floor while Lilly kept pulling on her arm.

“Again! Again!” Lilly begged.

“No again. Too tired.”

“Please!”

“Ask Malran,” she said pointing to her sister, who was on the couch, equally exhausted.

“Ask me? What?”

Lilly ran over to Malran, pulling on her arm. “Can you throw me up in the air like Waylin? Please!”

Malran pointed to her other sister. “Val’ren.”

Val’ren was struggling to stay upright as both the boys kept charging at her. She had been able to throw them around with ease, but their

seemingly endless energy was enough to tire any Shil'vati. Val'ren tried to throw Billy away, but he went nowhere, landing back on the floor, mere inches from her.

Lilly came running in, tackling her in the leg. It was enough to bring Val'ren to her knees.

"Throw me!" Lilly said.

"I'll try."

"Throw me too!" Milly said, coming back from the bathroom.

Between lifting Lilly up and Milly jumping on her back it was too much for her to bear. She fell to the side and hugged Lilly. "Sorry. You are too much."

"You're exhausted already?" Zendari asked, walking into the room with Joseph.

"Where is everyone else?" Joseph asked, noticing Barry and Fralain we're gone.

"They went to find Gretchen and Davy. They ran off somewhere," Val'ren said.

Joseph turned to Zendari and gestured to her tired sisters. She knew what he was implying and it was the best opportunity. They were all tired, so they had to listen to her. It was going to be awkward, but she had to do it.

"Hey kids, wanna play a game?" Joseph asked.

"Yeah!" they all said in unison.

"Come with me." Joseph waved them over into the hall and they ran to catch up. It left the room clear for what Zendari had to say.

She walked in-between her sister's bodies and took a deep breath. *You need to do this.*

"Can I talk to you all for a second?"

"Agh, I guess..." Val'ren said, yet her sisters were more curious by Zendari's somber tone.

Zendari closed her eyes, trying to ignore Val'ren. She had her peace to say and she was going to say it. "You know, it wasn't my idea for you to all come here today... because of how you treated me..."

Malran and Waylin looked down at the ground, knowing exactly what she meant. Val'ren didn't bat an eye, but didn't interrupt her either.

"Joseph wanted to meet my family. He thought it would be good for me."

"You sure he just didn't want to trade up?" Val'ren said with a smirk.

Zendari faced her other sisters before continuing, noticing they were actually receptive to what she was saying. "My whole life, you all tormented me. Yet last year today, I came here in the hopes of making amends. We hadn't seen each other in a long time and I was hoping to bury the hatchet once and for all."

"What does 'burry thee hatch-et' mean?" Malran asked in Shil, trying out the strange phrase.

"Sorry, Earth term. It means to set aside our differences and get along."

Waylin's guilt weighed on her face. "You remember that..."

"Hard not to. If Joseph wasn't there, I probably would have froze to death." Zendari glanced between the three sets of eyes to gauge their silent responses. Val'ren still wasn't phased, but her other sisters were fully engaged on what she had to say. It was enough for her though. "So, I just wanted to say, I forgive you for what you did and I hope we can move on from it."

"Really?" Malran asked. "Just like that?"

"Joseph taught me what love really looks like. And despite what you all did, I still love you." Zendari was almost surprised that those words came out of her mouth. It sounded insane outloud, but Waylin and

Malran hugged her all the same. Tears ran from their eyes, as Zendari patted them on the back.

“We’re sorry, Zendari,” Waylin sniffled.

“We’ll make it up to you. We promise,” Malran added.

“Stop acting like a bunch of boys, you are embarrassing yourselves,” Val’ren said.

“You don’t even feel a little bad about what we did to her?” Waylin asked, breaking away from the hug.

“No. I don’t.” Val’ren stood up. Her temperament hardened by the second. “She turned out fine. If anything, she should be thanking me. Never would have gotten that stiff without us.”

She turned to walk away when she felt a sharp claw pressing up under her jaw.

“Nobody calls Joseph a stiff,” Karn’a said. Her approach was so smooth and silent, even the sisters didn’t see her until Val’ren felt her. The eyes of a true warrior scanned Val’ren’s body for any weaknesses she could take advantage of. “Apologize.”

“And if I don’t?”

Karn’a pressed a little harder, causing her to retreat so that the claw didn’t break the skin. “I will cut you open and see if you bleed shit instead of blood.”

“Karn’a, let her go. It’s okay,” Zendari said calmly.

“Did you hear what she said!”

“Can you all give us the room?” Zendari asked, trying to be the calm one. Karn’a gave Val’ren one last threatening glare before leaving with Waylin and Malran. Val’ren stood there for a few seconds, thinking about what to do next when Zendari spoke her mind. “I think I know why you do it.”

“Do what?” Val’ren responded with a bite in her voice.

“This,” Zendari said, gesturing to all of her. “Hitting me, making rude comments. It took me until recently to figure it out, but I think I get it now.”

Val’reen stared at her and didn’t move an inch as if frozen with anticipation.

“You weren’t the only one who lost Dad. We all did.”

“You don’t know anything.”

“I know you were closer to him than I ever could have been. At least you got quality time with him. I never did.”

Val’reen stepped up to her. “You had lots of time.”

“I don’t remember much of it. Or have you forgotten I was a little kid when he died?”

Val’reen thought about it for the first time in a long time. Zendari was a kid and far too young at the time to realize that their dad had little time left. Val’reen remembered their father spending the last days of his life with Zendari, rather than his other children. She had blamed Zendari for that, but after giving it some real thought, it made sense.

Their dad wanted Zendari to have memories of him. If she was young, she wouldn’t remember much, unlike Val’reen who had plenty of great childhood memories of him. Val’reen’s clenched fist became softer upon the revelation. All the anger she harbored inside her turned to ash.

“I guess... I never thought of it that way...” Val’reen said, unable to look her in the eye.

Zendari took a step closer and put her hand on Val’reen’s shoulder. “I was hoping we could move on from here. Fresh start.”

Val’reen paused and looked into her eyes. Zendari was a stronger woman than her after all and no amount of muscles could change that. It was a gut check, but one she needed a long time ago.

“I would like that,” Val’ren said. Zendari went to give her a hug, but Val’ren stepped away. “I’m not hugging though. One was enough with that little woman. Any more and people will think I’m an emotional boy.”

Zendari chortled and nodded. “We wouldn’t want that.”

“And I’m sorry for calling your boyfriend a stiff. He seems like a pretty good guy.”

“He is.”

“You think I have a shot with him?”

“You know he sent you on an impossible challenge?” Zendari said, hiding the fact that she lasted much longer than all three of them combined.

“I must not have made a good impression.”

“That and I’m pretty sure he is monogamous. Who knows though, maybe he’ll change his mind.”

Val’ren gave her an apologetic smile. “If he does, let me know. I would like another chance at making it up to you.”

“I know one way you can start,” Zendari said, walking toward the garage.

“How?”

“Have you ever heard of Santa Claus?”

Christmas lights dangled above Davy and Gretchen as they chased each other around the tower of cardboard boxes in the garage. Their little feet pattered on the floor, slightly louder than their stifled laughter. They didn’t want to make too much noise, playing a secondary

game of hide and seek with their parents. Eventually though, Davy got tired out and couldn't run anymore, stopping to catch his breath.

"Are... you... an athlete?" Davy asked between breaths.

Gretchen shrugged. "I don't think so."

"You never... run out... of energy?"

"I'm pretty normal in my class. Maybe you have asthma?"

"What's that?"

"It's when your lungs don't breathe good. You need a little puffer to get more air."

"Mom never told me I had asthma," Davy said, thinking back on all the other times he was short of breath.

"Did you talk to a doctor?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"I guess I don't."

Gretchen put her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Davy. I still like you, even if your lungs don't."

"Thanks Gretchen," Davy said and looked up at a flickering light above them. Directly above them was an evergreen plant with white berries tied together with a red ribbon. "What is that?"

Gretchen looked up and gasped. "It's a mistletoe."

"What is that?"

"It's a plant and whoever stands under it must be kissed."

"By who?" Davy asked, not fully grasping what she meant.

"By whoever is nearby."

Davy's gaze fell onto hers. His face turned dark blue from blushing so hard. He could hear his mother's voice in his head, warning him of little girls and their ill intentions. Gretchen stood in front of him, playing with her hair, waiting for him to make the first move. His eyes

began to wander everywhere except at her, hoping they could go back to playing. Then the door opened.

“Charlene said the costume should be in here,” Zendari said, walking with Val’re inside the garage.

Davy whipped his head to the noise. He was saved! Before he looked back at Gretchen, he felt a pair of wet lips peck him on the cheek. The quiet smack got the attention of the adults, who rounded the corner to see Gretchen recoil in time to look perfectly innocent with her hands behind her back. The evidence of her little show of affection was still written on Davy’s face, which was so bright it almost outshined the lights above.

“What are you two doing back here?” Val’re asked with a smirk.

“Nothing. Just playing,” Gretchen said with some pep.

“Just playing... well your parents are looking for you,” Zendari said. Gretchen skipped past them and Davy was left behind, still stunned by the kiss he didn’t know he wanted. Zendari kneeled down in front of him, offering a friendly smile. “You okay, Davy?”

“I-uh-um...”

“First time you’ve been kissed before?”

Davy nodded, still staring off into the distance.

“Why don’t you go into the kitchen, I bet Charlene has cookies coming out.”

Davy said nothing, making his way to the door as if he was on autopilot. Val’re and Zendari watched him waddle away, chuckling to themselves.

“I wish I could make a guy do that,” Val’re said.

Zendari went through one of the stacked boxes, finding the Santa suit at the top. “After you put this on, you’re going to be swatting the guys away with a stick.”

She showed her the large red suit with puffy white cuffs. It was different from the one she had worn, much larger to fit her sisters. Val'ren took it from her and held it up, impressed with the vibrant color.

"This is what Santa Claus wears?"

"Joseph made it. He was hoping this year one of you could be Santa Claus." Zendari took out the matching beard and black belt with purple trimming. "What do you think?"

Val'ren tried it all on, donning it in seconds. The sleeves hugged her muscles and ran slimmer in the torso, which she appreciated. "Your boyfriend is a real seemster. Next, you're going to tell me he can cook too."

"Macaroni is his specialty," she said, searching through the boxes for a large sack.

Val'ren was thoroughly jealous. Her sister had everything she ever wanted and then some. *I better take notes. She must have some secret to getting a man like that.*

"What are you looking for?"

"The Santa sack. Can't have you bringing out gifts for all the little ones without it."

Val'ren opened the box next to Zendari that wasn't opened. "Is it this?"

Zendari looked and saw the velvet red sack, plump full of gifts. "It is! Help me get it out of there."

They pulled on it as the cardboard box struggled to hold onto the sack full of presents. It took a few tugs, but it eventually surrendered to their strength. The sack was much fuller than last year, but Val'ren was up for the challenge, hoisting it over her shoulder.

"How do I look?"

“Like Santa Claus. Remember, you are pretending to be a jolly old man. His catchphrase is Ho Ho Ho!”

“Should I be pointing to Waylin when I say it?”

“Not hoe. Ho.” Zendari corrected, smiling from her joke. “And you need to really put your belly into it.”

“Ho ho ho.”

“Is Santa Claus already here?” Joseph asked, peeking into the garage. He looked to Zendari who smiled back at him with soft eyes. Eyes that told him everything was going to be alright.

“I think so. Is everyone back inside?”

“Yeah. Fralain is huddled by the fire. Apparently Davy was inside the whole time.”

“We found him under the mistletoe with Gretchen.”

Joseph covered his mouth. “Scandalous. If I knew she was into boys already, I would have just put a bow on Davy. Would have saved me some money.”

Zendari chuckled and waved him away. “Go get the others in the living room. We’ll be right out.”

Joseph closed the door behind him and called for everyone to join him in the living room. The kids all cheered, knowing exactly what time it was. It was a sound that reminded Val’ren of the crowd she regularly entertained. Instead of bashing skulls, she was there to bring holiday cheer. Either way, she felt a surge of energy, drawing on the excitement in the other room.

“Thank you for letting me make it up to you,” Val’ren said.

“You can thank me later. Go spread some holiday cheer.”

Val’ren patted her on the shoulder and went up to the door. Taking a deep breath and letting it out was all she needed to prepare. The door flung open and she went through the breach, ready to deliver.

“Ho ho ho! Merry Christmas!” Val’reu said and walked into the living room.

“Santa!” the kids exclaimed, jumping up and down.

Davy sat quietly on his mom’s lap, nibbling on a cookie by the fire, watching Val’reu prance around the living room with a large sack. He had no idea what was inside, nor the significance of Santa. Charlene stood next to Fralain with her camera ready to capture the beautiful moments. The adults all sat along the wall, smiling at the joyful kids who wanted nothing more than to hug Santa.

Zendari was the last to join the room, wearing a green elf hat she grabbed on the way out of the garage. There were a lot more gifts than last year and she wanted to help organize the chaos. She helped sit Santa down and held out her hand to prevent all of them from storming Santa.

“Lilly, you need to wait. Santa hasn’t even opened his sack yet,” Zendari said.

“But I want my gift.”

“We all want our gifts, but you have to wait your turn. Otherwise your gift will turn to coal.”

“Oh no!” Milly ran up to Lilly and shook her desperately. “You don’t want your gift to turn to coal!”

They hugged each other for no apparent reason, and got a bunch of awws from Waylin and Malran. Val’reu did her best belly laugh and reached in for the first gift.

“Billy.”

Billy ran up and took the gift from her in two hands. “Thank you Mr. Santa Claus.”

“You’re very welcome, Billy.”

He ran back and slid on his knees toward John and Karn’a to share his gift. John was wrapped up in Karn’a embrace and she opened up

her arm for Billy to join. The corner of the box stabbed John, causing him to squint in pain.

“What did Santa get you, a pike?” John groaned.

The rest of the family ignored their little conversation, excited to see the reaction of the next child receiving their gift. It went down the line, with Milly, Willy, and Lilly getting their gifts before an unexpected name was called.

“Davy.”

Davy perked up and pointed to himself. “Me?”

“Yes you, little Davy. Come on over,” Val’ren said.

Davy gave his partially eaten cookie to his mom and ran over to get his gift. It was a long box that made the sack much shorter when removed. The colorful wrapping of a deer prancing in the woods made Davy light up.

“Thank you, Mr. Claus,” Davy said and returned to his mom. Fralain held him in her arms, munching down the rest of his cookie he forgot in lieu of the long box in his hand. “What is it, Mom?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out soon,” Fralain said.

Santa continued to hand out the gifts, leaving no one without something in their hand except Zendari. Val’ren tossed the empty sack aside and as if on cue, everyone started ripping into their gifts. Throughout the rustling and ripping of paper, some kids’ voices were louder than others.

“Woah, look what Davy got!” Willy said, pointing to him.

He was going to be the talk of the town, because what he got was a lever action BB gun. The cardboard box proudly displayed the rifle, promising endless fun and many dead squirrels. Davy stared at it in awe as the other kids rushed over to gawk at his gift.

“Can I keep it, Mom?” Davy asked.

Fralain smiled, hiding her concern about her little boy playing with guns. The box warnings littered all over caused her anxiety to increase by the second. *Goddess, please don't let my boy become a tomgirl.* "Sure sweetie. But we'll need to read the instructions first."

"Thanks Mom!" Davy said, hugging her up. It didn't take away her concerns, but to see her boy happy was always a highlight of her day... even if it meant he needed to launch BBs at chipmunks that totally deserve what they have coming to them.

While everyone was distracted, Zendari went over to Joseph who was inspecting the perfect wrapping on his small gift.

Joseph looked up from his gift. "Is this from you?"

"It's from Santa, silly," Zendari said.

"What is it?"

"Open it and find out."

Joseph smirked and peeled it open to find a rectangular tin with a lid of a deer painted on it. He slid off the lid and inside were two tickets with some foreign language on it. "What is this?"

"Karn'a helped me get it. I know you love hunting, so I got us tickets to go on a guided hunt on her home planet, Dirt."

"Now that's what I called an exotic hunt," he said, slapping the tickets in his hand. "I love it. Thanks babe."

"Hey, Zendari what did you get?" Karn'a asked.

"I got my man right here. What else could I want?"

"What? I think you need to check that sack again," Joseph said, smirking at her.

Zendari perked up and went back over to the sack. She shook it out and there was nothing.

"Yeah there's nothi—" she began as she turned around to see Joseph on one knee, holding an open ring box, displaying the symbol of his

love for her. Gasps and hushed squeaks of the audience circled them both, surprised as much as Zendari was.

“One year ago today, when you held me in your arms and we said goodnight to each other by the fire, I knew at that moment, you were the one for me. No other woman is as brave, strong, caring, and quirky as you are. I have been a lucky man to witness that on a daily basis and I don’t ever want to miss out on another one. So, Zendari D’Quirlen, will you marry me?”

Zendari tried her best, but there was no stopping the waterworks. His loving gaze pierced through her soul, offering his eternal devotion in return for her own. All she had to do was give an answer. An easy answer.

“Yes. A million times yes, I’ll marry you.”

He took the ring out of the box and placed it on her finger. The simple band might as well glowed as it slid snugly on. She didn’t admire it for more than a second before hugging him. They shared a loving embrace and a short, yet passionate kiss while the big family all cheered and clapped. Gretchen ran over and hugged Zendari on the leg while the rest all gathered around them.

“Does this mean you’re my auntie?” Gretchen asked, still wrapped around her leg.

“It sure does,” Charlene said for Zendari and gave her new daughter-in-law a hug. “Welcome to the family, Zendari.”

The rest of the family took their turns congratulating the happy couple. Karn’a waited for the crowd to move into the kitchen to get drinks before congratulating them. She took Zendari’s hand, checking out the gold band on her finger.

“I guess he topped your gift. Congratulations.”

“Thanks Karn’a. For everything. You have been a great friend over these last few months. Helping me catch an assassin, watching out for me—”

“Don’t mention it. If it wasn’t for you and Joseph, I wouldn’t have the life I have now,” she said and glanced back at John. “I am blessed to have a guy who loves me too. To see you getting married gives me hope for my future. I just hope it can survive a few months of training away from here.”

Zendari smiled, realizing her other good news hadn’t passed down to everyone yet. “Maybe you won’t need to be away from here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Commander Tojen gave me some other good news. I am heading up a new investigation division here and I was told I get to handpick my team.”

“You aren’t serious?”

“How would you like to be my number two? You need to learn a bit more, but nothing I couldn’t teach you or learn on the job.”

Karn’a leaped on her, squeezing her so tight there was an audible pop. “I would love that! Thank you!”

“Agh... you’re crushing me,” Zendari struggled to say.

“Sorry.” Karn’a let her go and patted her on the shoulder. “I better go tell John the good news!”

Karn’a skipped over to the boys and quickly gave Joseph a hug before taking John away to celebrate the promotion. Songs were coming from the kitchen and the happy couple was being called to join them. Together they sang and drank until almost midnight when people started trailing off to bed.

Charlene was better prepared this year and made room for everyone upstairs, yet Zendari and Joseph still opted for the fireplace. The happy couple grabbed some blankets and pillows, making their nest

for the night. Zendari held him in her arms, cuddling close to her little spoon. Joseph closed his eyes, relaxing in her strong, yet comfortable embrace.

“I never thought today would turn out like this. A better job, making up with my sisters, and a proposal. It’s a lot of blessings to take in,” Zendari said.

“Christmas is all about miracles. And I can’t think of anyone who deserved it more.” Joseph played with the ring on her finger, spinning it back and forth.

Zendari wanted to cry again, but she was far too tired to muster more tears. She kissed the back of his neck and sighed. “Merry Christmas, Joseph.”

“Merry Christmas, my love.”

And with that they both drifted off to sleep. The crackle of the fireplace sang them a calming song that the snowflakes outside danced to. They both dreamed of each other and the future that was in store for them. One unified vision of happiness. It would be the last Christmas as Zendari D’Quirlen and Joseph Hanks.

CHAPTER 26

“WE AREN’T GOING TO make it,” Zendari said, hugging Agent Stuffins so tight a living person would have suffocated.

Karn’a wrenched on the steering wheel, while the muffled scream of a woman came from the back of their patrol vehicle. Her badge on the chain lanyard swayed with the momentum of the vehicle, brushing her pink polo shirt. “Don’t worry, we will make it.”

“I knew we should have let Larlin handle it. She doesn’t need to be early.”

“We have plenty of time.”

“Do we? This was supposed to be in and out. Ten minutes tops,” Zendari said and a car honked at them.

“Watch it, pal!” Karn’a waved her fist at the loud car and continued her reckless driving through the light traffic. Their heads rocked back and forth while their prisoner in the backseat struggled to stay upright.

“And what are we going to do with her?” Zendari asked, pointing to the brown-haired woman who was handcuffed behind her back.

“You could always let me go?” their prisoner offered.

“Not a chance, boy basher,” Karn’a said.

“I never beat my boyfriend,” the prisoner said.

“Just tried to stab him?”

She flopped over to the side, still trying to squirm out of her cuffs. “Allegedly.”

“Can you believe her?” Karn’a asked Zendari. “We see it firsthand and she still denies it.”

“Watch out!” Zendari said, pointing to an oncoming car. Karn’a turned away, inches from trading paint with the car in the other lane. The other car laid on their horn, which was fully justified given Karn’a’s complete lack of safety.

“Whew, that was a close one.”

“You can slow down. I would like to make it there in one piece.”

“Speaking of.” Karn’a turned onto another road and took a right toward a parking lot where a bunch of cars were already parked. “We are here.”

Zendari had to wait for them to pass the row of snow covered pine trees before being able to gaze upon her destination. The all-white, two floor, gym-sized building stood as a large, yet cozy haven among the endless forest in the background. Her heart beat faster with anticipation as they pulled up as close as they could to the front. Rushing outside to greet them was Chelsea, dressed in a red strapless dress, waving at them with her phone in her hand.

“She’s here! She’s here!” Chelsea yelled and stutter-stepped to avoid slipping on the ice.

Zendari got out of the vehicle. “Chelsea, we aren’t late are we?”

“Of course not. The wedding never starts without the bride.” Chelsea grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to the building. “Come on, I’ll show you where we’re all getting ready.”

Karn’a turned off the vehicle and opened the door when their prisoner pipped up again.

“Hey, you’re not going to leave me here?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not monster. I’ll bring you out a piece of cake later. Sit tight,” Karn’a said and shut the door. The prisoner started yelling and hitting the window, but it was hard to hear from the outside. A family of four walked by the vehicle and gave the person in the back a concerned look. Karn’a felt compelled to say something. “Boy Bashers, am I right? Bunch of spazzy little bitches.”

The family gave her the same look and hurried inside. Karn’a shrugged and chalked their lack of amusement down to the cold. Their approval didn’t matter to her anyways, she had a more important job: Operation Get Zendari Married.

The chaos had only just begun for Zendari as she was whisked into the women’s changing room. Her sisters were all there, wearing the same lavender V-neck dresses with spaghetti shoulder straps. Zendari considered having them wear something more modest, but the saleswoman at the store insisted it wouldn’t be too much. Clearly she wasn’t used to Shil’vati proportions.

“Damn, she made it. I told Joseph if she gets cold feet, I was going to marry him,” Waylin said and put down her makeup.

“What did he say to that?” Zendari asked while practically being pushed toward the mirror by Chelsea. Susan ran over to the other side of the room to get the dress.

Waylin smirked. “He sounded open to it.”

“He was being nice. I’m surprised you didn’t notice the cute man on your arm during rehearsal,” Val’ren said.

“Oh I did.” Waylin licked her lips. “I’ve never heard that accent before. Very sexy.”

“Oh no, I missed rehearsal!” Zendari said as she watched Chelsea frantically do her makeup.

“You will be fine. All you have to do is walk down the aisle, say your vows, and say I do. It is easy.” Chelsea reassured her.

It brought her stress down a little, but it was brought back up again as Charlene came running into the room. “She’s not dressed yet?”

“She just got here,” Susan said, bringing over the white dress to Zendari.

“I better tell the organ player.”

“We don’t have an organ here...” Susan answered, but Charlene already ran off. Zendari needed a distraction while she got her dress on and it came in the form of listening to her sisters talk about the groomsmen.

“Well my man is from Colorado. I bet he has better stamina than a Turox living in the mountains,” Val’ren said with pride.

“I like my men more manly anyways,” Malran said. “Bob is such an adorable little guy with those glasses. Makes his eyes look bigger than they are.”

“You need someone like that. Don’t want your man to overpower you,” Waylin said, lifting Malran’s scrawny arm (at least by Shil’vati standards) up.

Zendari chuckled to herself, amused by her sister’s delusion that because they were paired up with these groomsmen they were somehow dating them. Karn’a came running in, throwing her shirt and badge across the room.

“I’m not late! I’m not late!” Karn’a declared, rushing over to her dress. She shimmied out of her pants and her duty belt made a loud noise from the gun and other fun gadgets hitting the wood floor. Her dress was on in seconds and hurried to run a comb through her fur.

“You’re fine. I’m not even ready yet,” Zendari said as Chelsea picked up her pace.

“Tell that to Mom.”

“Mom?” Zendari asked.

Karn’a kept her attention on the mirror, trying to make sure nothing was out of place. “Yeah. I’m catching that bouquet tonight. Then John will have to marry me and I will be part of your pack and I will call Charlene, Mom.”

“Kind of presumptuous of you?”

“Not really. I have a great vertical and cat-like reflexes.”

“You know, the bouquet toss is just a fun tradition humans do. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Karn’a faced her and pointed the comb at herself. “I’ve done my research. It is supposed to decide who gets to walk down the aisle next. It’s going to be me.”

“All done,” Chelsea declared. “You look stunning.”

Zendari turned to look in the mirror while the rest of the women all swooned over her. She had to admit, she was beautiful. Her hair was a classic half-up, half-down with a little pink flower tucked in the back. The white floral, strapless dress fit her perfectly, down to her toes. She opted to wear flats instead of heels given the height difference and the fact she hated heels. Last thing she wanted was to roll her ankle trying to walk on those mini stilts.

Charlene came in and gasped. “Oh my... Zendari, you are gorgeous!”

All the ladies talked over each other, but the love in the room was certainly felt. It brought a tear to Charlene’s and Chelsea’s eyes, but Zendari was able to hold it together. She promised herself she wouldn’t cry... at least until after.

“We ready, boys!” John said, walking into the men’s changing area, already suited up.

The groomsmen responded with inaudible grunts, still working on their lavender ties. None of the men had a real need for tying ties, let alone a half-windsor. Thankfully, Voltan was there to help the few who were struggling. Nor’an laid on the couch, watching his brother work his magical hands, which Voltan noticed.

“You could help out, you know?”

“Can’t. I’m watching the little one,” Nor’an said.

Voltan glanced around the room. There was no sign of Davy anywhere. “I don’t see him.”

“We are playing hide and seek.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be seeking then?”

“Eventually.”

“Well, if you aren’t part of the wedding party, you need to get out of here.”

Nor’an sat up. “Why? You’re here.”

“I’m helping. You’re not.”

“I am here for moral support. Joseph needs a guy here to talk him out of the worst decision of his life.”

Voltan finished Bob’s tie and threw a small bag of pretzels at him. “I can’t believe you think so lowly of our sister.”

“Not our sister. Just marriage in general. Look at me,” Nor’an said, popping open the bag. “I’m married and I’m miserable. I think someone should warn him.”

“Maybe you should try in your own marriage. You might be less miserable.”

Pairs of footsteps came toward the room from the hall, along with laughter as Joseph walked up to the room with Fralain. She wore a dark purple robe with white edging, which contrasted nicely next to Joseph's black suit and dark purple tie.

"I think he might be in here," Joseph said, still smiling from Fralain's joke. "Yep, there he is."

Fralain peeked into the room and spotted Nor'an on the couch, munching on a pretzel. "Sweetums, there you are. I've been looking all over for you."

"I should've hid with Davy," Nor'an mumbled to himself.

"I'm sorry dear, what did you say?"

"I said I was watching Davy."

"Where is our little boy?" Fralain asked, looking around the room, eager to see his cute little face in the adorable baby blue suit she got him.

He shrugged. "He's hiding. We're playing a game."

"Good, so I can borrow you for a few minutes. I was going to talk to Governess Vumars about my proposal for a new school. I could use you by my side."

Nor'an got up and tossed the half eaten bag of pretzels on the couch. "I better go find Davy. Don't want him hiding in the closet all day."

"Nonsense, he'll be fine for a few minutes." Fralain tucked him under her arm as he tried to pass her in the entryway and they walked back to the lobby. "By the way, you look sexy in your suit."

Joseph watched the two leave and shrugged, having no idea what their conversation was about. He figured he should try to learn Shil, but today was not the day. Today, he was getting married to the love of his life. A fallen angel who came from the stars to give his life more joy than he thought possible.

Joseph got in the room and Voltan had finished the final tie. His groomsmen all came up to him, hooping and hollering.

“Lookin good, Joey,” Lenny said, patting him on the shoulders.

“You clean up pretty good,” Carson said, brushing a single strand of hair clung to his suit.

“Almost as good as those bridesmaids,” Bob added.

Joseph chuckled. “Thanks guys. I’m just glad you all could make it on such short notice.”

“I always thought it took like a year or something. How did you swing it so fast?” Carson asked.

“Zendari’s not picky... and it helps to know a few nobles.”

They all had a good laugh and Billy ran into the room with Willy right behind him. The two boys were holding the flower girl’s bouquets and hid within the group of men before Gretchen and Milly got there.

“Billy, give those back!” Milly said. Gretchen was less for words and charged in after the boys. The two boys weaved between the men’s legs, but ended up cornering themselves. In a last ditch effort to avoid Gretchen’s wrath, they tossed her the flowers and ran around her, quick to make their escape.

John knelt down to help Gretchen arrange the sweet smelling flowers again and handed one bouquet to Milly.

“Thanks, Uncle John,” the girls said.

“Don’t mention it. And I have to say, you two look great,” John said, pulling on their light pink dresses. “Did your mom pick these out?”

Milly nodded and smiled, but Gretchen was still fuming at her brother’s treachery. She wanted her best friend’s wedding to go off without a hitch. They were going to pay.

“I’m going to pound those two for messing with Zenrawree’s flowers.”

John chuckled at her adorable anger, but he also knew better than to let it fester. If she was anything like her mother, she needed to be calmed down quickly or else Billy and Willy were in for a bruising.

“It’s okay, Gretchen. The flowers aren’t hurt.” John started and then a genius idea came to him. “And besides, wouldn’t you rather hang out with Davy?”

“Davy’s here?” Gretchen asked, perking up instantly.

“He sure is. He is playing hide and seek with Nor’an, but I bet you can find him first,” Voltan added.

“Come on, let’s go!” Gretchen said to Milly and the two girls dashed off to find the little alien boy.

John gave Voltan a thumbs up. “Nice. Send them on a wild goose chase.”

“No, Davy is actually playing hide and seek. Nor’an will never find him. Goddess, I wish that man would be responsible for once.”

“We are just about ready upstairs. Is the groom dressed?” the wedding planner said, leaning her head into the doorway around the corner.

“We all are,” Joseph said.

“Excellent! Let’s get everyone moving upstairs then.”

“You heard the lady, mount up, boys!” Lenny said, waving everyone to follow him.

“I’m going to do some mounting alright,” Bob said, nudging Joseph.

“Easy there, Bobber. My sister-in-laws are desperate. I don’t want my reception turning into an orgy,” Joseph said.

“Come on, Joseph. I’m a classy guy. I will totally wait until we get back to the hotel.”

"I'm just worried they won't want to."

"Woah, I didn't get that vibe from them earlier," Carson said with a smirk. "But good to know."

Joseph shook his head, realizing his friends were still the same guys he met in school, for better and for worse. He didn't regret inviting them though. This was a time for everyone to celebrate the happiest moment of his life. A bond which would be forever written in the stars. John didn't give him any time for his mind to wander, hanging on him from behind.

"Shall we get you married?" John asked.

"We shall."

The rows of white foldable chairs were filled with people and aliens alike. Their conversations floated up into the peaked ceiling, making it seem all the more busy. Light shined in from the windows on both sides, warming those who sat closest to the walls. The groomsmen waited outside in the lobby alongside the bridesmaids, perfectly content with chatting up their partners.

Malran pulled her shoulders back to fix her posture and kept her eyes forward, nervous about talking with Bob. She thought she made a good first impression at rehearsal, given her English had much improved, yet his nerdy frame was intimidating to her. *Come on, he is just a guy. Talk to him*, she told herself.

"So, how do you know Joseph?" Malran asked, turning to face his magnified blue eyes.

"We were friends since middle school. Used to play baseball together."

“Is that the game with the bat?” she asked, pretending to swing an invisible club.

“Yep. Haven’t played it in awhile though. How about you? How do you know the bride?”

“She is my younger sister.”

“Oh...” Bob said and looked forward. “If you ask me, I think you are the more attractive one.”

Malran’s knees became weak and her cheeks turned a bright blue. Bob hadn’t ever met Zendari to Malran’s knowledge, but she wasn’t going to mention it. He said his compliment so nonchalantly she didn’t know how to proceed. *Is he playing hard to get or simply being polite*, she thought to herself.

“Well, if you are asking me, you are the most handsome man here.” Malran struggled to keep her composure. He turned his head back to her and she smiled.

“Then it would be a crime for the two most beautiful people here to not hang out with each other at the reception. Wouldn’t you agree?”

It’s a date! He’s into me! Thank the Goddess! “Agreed.”

Malran shook with excitement and it was not lost on Val’reen. Val’reen was using the time to get to know Carson. Zendari recommended going slow with human men for the best chance of success. And she wanted success after hearing about his hobbies.

“How do you go snowboarding in the summer?”

“I don’t. When it gets nicer, I do other stuff like white river rafting, skydiving, body surfing, and cave exploring. Basically, if it can get my adrenaline up, I’m there.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun. Are these all solo activities?”

Carson smirked. “They don’t have to be. You interested?”

“Tell me more about this, ‘body surfing.’”

Carson went on to tell her all she needed to know about his hobby, as well as throwing in some easy to understand innuendoes. Val'ren's attention hung on his every word, but none more than the conversation behind them. Waylin and Lenny were discussing the intricacies of running a cattle ranch. It was hardly an entertaining conversation, at least for anyone else.

To Waylin, his southern accent and intelligent analysis made her feel more engaged than any other conversation she had ever had with a man. She didn't feel compelled to flirt with him or make a suggestive comment. It was like watching an alien documentary, but she got to actually talk with the expert.

Joseph waited in the back of the line with John and his mom. He found the conversations in front of him much more amusing than Charlene constantly trying to fix his hair.

"His hair is fine," John said and pulled his mom's hands away from Joseph.

"It is now," Charlene said, believing it was her contribution that made it so. "I'm so excited for you, Joseph."

"Thanks, Mom." Joseph smiled and looked back at the women's changing room. It was only going to be a few more minutes and his life would be changed forever. He imagined what she looked like in her dress and how lucky he was to have her in his life. A true companion he could spend the rest of his life with. His one and only love.

While Joseph's brother and mom talked his ear off, Karn'a was busy with helping Zendari with her nerves. Zendari paced around the room, her emotions swirling every which way.

"You need to breathe."

"I am breathing," Zendari said, taking a deep breath after.

"What are you so nervous about? You're getting married?"

"What if he gets cold feet?"

“He’s not. I saw him outside. He looks almost as nice as John.”

“I should’ve got here sooner. I don’t know what to do.”

Karn’a held her pacing friend still and looked her straight in the eye.

“Repeat after me. I, Zendari D’Quirlen.”

“Hanks.”

“Hanks?” Karn’a asked, cocking her head. “You’re taking his name?”

“Of course. Hanks is such an exotic name,” Zendari said, relaxing as she said it out loud.

“Whatever, repeat after me. I, Zendari Hanks.”

“I, Zendari Hanks.”

“Am the best goddess damn woman in the whole galaxy.”

“Heh, am the best goddess damn woman in the whole galaxy,”

Zendari said, almost unable to hold in her own laughter.

“Joseph is lucky to have me.”

Her smile grew with every word. “Joseph is lucky to have me.”

“And I will love him for the rest of my life.”

“You should’ve wrote my vows.”

Karn’a’s ear perked up, catching the soft music and footsteps of people entering the sanctuary. It was her cue to leave, but not without a last word of encouragement.

“I gotta go. I will be by your side the whole time. Then after, we party!” Karn’a said, dancing her way out the door.

Zendari laughed at her goofy friend while she left her alone with her thoughts. The music was faint, but told the story of a coming union. One she was excited to have with the best man imaginable. She went up to the door, peeking out to see a glimpse of Joseph walking into the sanctuary with his mother. *He didn’t run out. That’s a good sign.*

“Knock knock,” Voltan said, pretending to knock on the door frame, clearly seeing her.

“Voltan? Did you not get a seat?”

“I have the best one. The wedding planner mentioned to me it was customary for the father to walk down the aisle to give away the bride. Seeing as that isn’t possible, would you mind if I did?”

Zendari did her best not to cry, wiping away nonexistent tears and nodded. “I would like that very much.”

He presented his arm and she took it, allowing him to guide her up to the closed doors. The music stopped for a moment and the crowd stood in anticipation of her arrival. Zendari felt like a queen, with her loyal subjects ready to honor her on the most special day of her life. The violins began playing *Canon in D* and the doors opened. It was her time to shine.

She walked out in full view of everyone, matching her cadence with the elegant song. Zendari glanced at the friends and family around her, all with smiling faces. Susan’s kids were bouncing up and down, waving at her frantically. They were all between Barry and Susan, except for Gretchen and Milly, who were standing up front by Joseph. On the other side, Commander Tojen finger waved at her while hugging her husband. The happy couple were sitting next to her least favorite brother and his sweet wife. Zendari smiled at them, but didn’t have the courage to maintain her gaze long since Governess Vumars was sitting next to them.

Having her current boss at the wedding was a bit nerve racking. She was the most powerful noble in the region, not to mention intimidating, standing almost three feet above her. They have never met in-person, so this was her first real impression. Her mind didn’t linger on her reputation more than another step as she made eye contact with the man of the hour.

Joseph stood with his hands down and crossed in front of him. His smiling face was all she needed to see, allowing the music to slip into

the background. Her body would have floated away if Voltan wasn't anchoring her to the floor. The closer she got to Joseph, the brighter her smile became.

It's finally happening, Zendari thought to herself.

Joseph stepped forward and bumped Voltan's fist. "You mind if I take this angel off your hands?"

"If you must." Voltan rolled his eyes and smiled. He released Zendari and she gave him a big hug before going with Joseph.

Joseph's touch felt like being wrapped in a blanket, fresh out of the dryer. His gaze was all consuming and distracted her from the priest's words. She was supposed to listen and absorb the whole experience, but all she could do was focus on Joseph. It was the only man she wanted to hear from, trying to converse with him in body language and hand rubbing alone.

The priest went through his speech and invited the couple to share their vows. She didn't hear that and Joseph had to bring her back to the world.

"Zendari, the vows," Joseph said gently.

"Oh, sorry. Yeah." She laughed and patted him on the hand. "I got lost in your eyes there for a second."

Joseph pointed to his eyes. "I know, they should have a warning label on these bad boys."

Everyone laughed and Karn'a nodded in exaggerated approval, while looking at John. It was a calming break from the formality of the ceremony, which helped Zendari gather her thoughts. Davy came up to the couple with the rings on a purple velvet pillow. They both grabbed each other's rings.

Zendari took a deep breath and readied herself. *Here we go*. "Joseph, I promise to love you as you have loved me. To show patience when things get difficult and to show kindness always. I don't promise to

be perfect, but I promise to always be there for you. I'm sure we will have more tough times ahead, but I don't know anyone I would rather spend it with. I love you, Joseph Hanks. Forever and always."

Joseph kissed her hand that slid the ring on his finger and smiled. "How am I supposed to top that?"

"I'm sure you will. You know I'm easy to please."

"Here it goes." Joseph cleared his throat. "Zendari, this is my promise to you. I promise to keep you warm on cold winter nights. I promise to distract you after long days chasing criminals, even if that means tossing your omni-pad in the freezer."

Zendari smiled not unlike a little child, raising her shoulders up to her ears. She looked out into the crowd and saw Governess Vumars pleased with Joseph's little joke that spoke volumes of her work ethic. Her gaze returned quickly, as he continued.

"I promise to share all that I have. Every part of me. Including my love, which burns bright like a never ending flame. You make my life better by being in it and I promise to do the same. To make your life better until my last living breath. I love you Zendari D'Quirlen. I love you."

Zendari sniffled, trying to hold back tears, but failing. She didn't expect to break down, but the loving way he ended his speech made it impossible for her not to. Joseph reached up and wiped away her tears.

"Do you two need a second?" the priest asked, holding his bible in front of him.

"I'm ready." Zendari nodded and sniffled one last time, still gazing at Joseph.

"Well then, Zendari D'Quirlen, do you take Joseph to be your lawfully wedded husband? To have and to hold this day forward, until death do you part?"

"I do."

“And Joseph—”

“I do.”

The priest chuckled. “Then by the powers invested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now—”

Neither waited for him to finish, going in for a passionate kiss. The crowd cheered and clapped, but the noise was not heard over the beating of their own hearts. It was the moment where their lives were now permanently one, sealed with a sacred kiss. Once they broke away, the world came flooding back to them.

“I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Hanks.”

The Hanks held their hands up in victory and walked down the aisle, waving to their adoring fans. Officer Larlin reached across her boyfriend to fist bump Zendari as she walked by, while everyone clapped or hollered. Davy followed right behind the newlyweds with Gretchen and Milly in each arm. The women in the seats swooned over the kids’ adorable skipping and his blueberry blue face, but none more than Fralain.

“Isn’t he so cute, Sweetums?” Fralain asked Nor’an.

“You better watch out for those girls. Looks like one is eyeing him up,” Nor’an said, noticing Gretchen’s attention was mostly on Davy.

Fralain paid more attention to the girls and indeed noticed Gretchen was quite infatuated with her little boy. Something she was not quite sure she was prepared to handle. Her little boy being the attention of girls already.

“They are just excited for Zendari,” Fralain said, mostly to reassure herself. Too bad Nor’an wasn’t going to feed her delusion. He was there to feed her fear.

“I don’t think so. If I remember right, one of those two we’re kissing Davy at the Christmas party.”

“What!” Fralain said, but not so loud to draw attention to herself.

“Didn’t you know?” Nor’an not so much asked as stated with a devious smile.

“No. How do you know?”

“Val’ren told me.”

Fralain wanted to run to her boy, but the wedding party was still leaving. If she knew those girls were taking advantage of her boy, she would have never left him out of her sight. She sat in her seat, tapping her feet on the floor, which Karn’a picked up on as she passed her.

“Uh-oh, we might have some drama coming,” Karn’a warned John as they got to the doors.

“You’re telling me. I heard there is only a cash bar downstairs. It should be a crime to pay for drinks at a wedding,” John said.

“Not that. I heard some pretty aggressive foot tapping in the crowd. Someone is going to have words with someone.”

“Foot tapping? That’s all you got?” John playfully tugged on her ear. “What do they teach you at Zendari’s School of Police Craft? Deciphering the guilt of a fart?”

Karn’a reached into her bra and fished out a credit chit. “She taught me to listen to my man’s needs.”

“You’re going to buy me a drink?”

“Not me.” She paused for a second to think on how to tell him she came upon the money in her hand. “Let’s just say a nice lady offered to pay for slowing us down this morning.”

“She just gave you her card?” John asked, shocked by such an extreme act of kindness.

More like thrown at me when trying to run, but yes. “Yep. Super nice of her.”

John shrugged, not wanting to think too far into it. It was his brother’s big day and his girlfriend was offering drinks. He was going to enjoy it. “Alright, let’s party!”

The throngs of voices echoed throughout the large gathering area. Circular tables were set up along the walls and a long rectangular table made up the head table. It left the center for people to mingle and would become the dance floor after dinner. Nobody had sat down, opting to either loiter around the bar near the entrance or in the middle. The kids chased each other through the crowd of people, laughing above the collective conversations.

John had gotten his first drink of the evening and joined the chatty group of bridesmaids and groomsmen in the middle.

“So ladies, what is your favorite thing about Earth?” Carson asked.

Val’ren and Waylin looked at each other and laughed. “The men.”

“Woah!” Lenny said with a happily surprised look. “You still say that after meeting Bob? I gotta question your taste.”

“Say, where is Bob?” John asked and took a sip of his beer.

“Probably with Malran. They were getting pretty handsy right after the ceremony,” Val’ren said, hoping her luck would go that way as well.

“Yeah, I had to remind Bob what Joseph told him,” Carson said.

“What was that?” Waylin asked, curious what boys talked about to each other.

Lenny looked at Carson and shook his head, but Carson wasn’t listening. He was confident they wouldn’t be opposed and went for it. “He asked us not to have sex with you ladies until after the reception.”

Waylin and Val’ren beamed, albeit Waylin did a better job of hiding her excitement. Sex was on the table and they didn’t even have to lure them with their impressive dance moves and riveting conversation. Lenny averted his eyes, ashamed his friend brought it up. Waylin

caught it and changed her posture to mirror his, hoping he didn't think she was too eager. Val'ren was a different story though.

"You two really want to have sex with us?" Val'ren asked.

"Only if you do."

"When is the reception normally over?"

"We should probably stay for at least the meal. Would be rude to leave before that."

"I'm going to find the caterer," Val'ren said and walked away.

"Wait up." Carson jogged after her. It left Waylin and Lenny awkwardly looking at each other, unable to find words all of a sudden. John didn't have any idea how to follow up from that, so he did what he did best in these moments. He left.

"I better go find Karn'a. You two have fun, but not too much fun." John took another sip of his drink and left the busy room in search for his favorite furry friend.

He exited the room and noticed how much quieter it was immediately. The white walls had decorative pine tree designs, making the lobby appear darker. John took a few steps into the center of the lobby and heard the little footsteps of Gretchen chasing Davy down the hall.

"Uncle John, catch him!" Gretchen yelled.

John scooped Davy up in one arm. "Gotcha."

Davy kicked his little feet to run away, but the ground had already forsaken him. He was stuck in John's arm until he put him down when Gretchen caught up and tagged him.

"That's cheating. He stopped me," Davy protested.

"Have either of you seen Karn'a?" John asked.

"Nope," Gretchen said, pulling Davy away from John.

"Who is Karn'a?" Davy asked.

"She's his girlfriend," Gretchen explained.

"Was she the one we heard in the treadmill room?"

“Treadmill room?” John asked, surprised they had a gym here.

“Yeah, she sounded out of breath, but it was hard to hear with the door closed.”

“Okaayy,” John said, realizing where Malran was. “Why don’t you and Gretchen go find your seats? I have a feeling we’re eating soon.”

“Come on, Davy! You’re sitting next to me! I’ll show you.”

Gretchen pulled Davy away and John watched the two run back to the party. He couldn’t help but feel happy for them. They were both so innocent and thankfully did not see inside the “treadmill room.” He was going to start his own investigation, if for no other reason than to screw with Bob when Karn’a pounced on him.

“There you are,” Karn’a said, giving him a bear hug from behind.

“I was looking for you. Where did you go?”

“I had to check on something, but I’m back now.” Karn’a’s ears twitched, hearing the couple in the “treadmill room” down the hall begin again. The moans were muffled, but plenty distinguishable to Karn’a. “Sounds like someone is getting busy.”

“How good are those ears?” John asked, looking down the hall, but unable to hear anything.

“Almost as good as my sense of smell,” she said, sniffing his neck.

“You like what you smell?” John asked, laying on a sensual tone.

“Oh yeah.” She licked her lips. “I smell lamb chops. Food is almost ready.”

John laughed and kissed her hand. “Then we better get back inside. Do you have your toast ready?”

“I’m supposed to make my own toast? Since when? We don’t even have a toaster here.”

“The speech? Are you screwing with me right now?”

“Of course not. If I was screwing you, you would know.” Karn’a let him go and slapped him on the ass.

John staggered toward the door and looked back at her. She pretended to be innocent, but was far from. He extended his hand as an invitation. "You play your cards right, you will be by the end of the night."

The sound of silverware clinking against the plates filled the room. Food had been served and people were hungry. Karn'a dug into her food like a savage, devouring her steaming lamb chop. The other women at the head table were more proper, taking their time to enjoy the meal. Malran kept glancing over at Bob, who winked at her while having a conversation with the other guys. All of them were happy, but none more than the bride and groom.

Joseph and Zendari held hands as they ate and admired the people all around them. Zendari pointed to the kids table on the right and cooed. Davy and Susan's kids were all at one table, playing with the water glasses. Gretchen watched in awe as Davy was able to make his glass sing first, rubbing his finger around the top of the glass. It was easily the most adorable sight to see, except for Fralain, who was two tables away, watching Gretchen lean closer and closer to her boy.

You better keep your lips off my boy, Fralain warned Gretchen in her head. She wanted to be there to make sure her boy was safe from her, but she was stuck chatting with Governess Vumars, Commander Tojen, and Cal.

"You two are married?" Governess Vumars asked Commander Tojen.

“Yes, we are. Got married at the courthouse three weeks ago,” Commander Tojen said, holding Cal’s hand. He kissed her hand and took a swig of his water. “It still feels like we are on our honeymoon.”

“It sure does,” Cal said. “Governess Vumars, are you married?”

“Yes, unfortunately none of my husbands could make it.”

“Husbands? As in, plural?”

“Yes. Malik is back on Shil, taking care of our seventh child, while Gillon is on Dirt, trying to get more funding for his non-profit.”

Cal turned to Commander Tojen with a worried look in his eye. She knew polygamy wouldn’t bode well for him and needed to put his worries to rest about her searching for more men.

“Governess Vumars is one of the few I know with multiple husbands. Even Noble Haslara only has one husband, isn’t that right?” Commander Tojen asked Fralain, trying to bring her into the conversation.

“Huh,” Fralain said, hearing her name. She was caught off-guard, but was listening passively enough to answer. “Yes, just me and Nor’an.”

“I heard he suffered from an overdose awhile back. How has he been?” Governess Vumars asked.

Fralain was hardly listening, looking beyond her to keep an eye on Gretchen. Gretchen was using her napkin to clean Davy’s face. “Keep your hands off him.”

“Excuse me?” Governess Vumars said, shocked by her answer.

“Not you, Governess,” Fralain said and stood up. She was going to break those two up if it was the last thing she did. Fralain marched over to the table and was about to say something when Nor’an came out of nowhere, stumbling into her arms.

“Hey babe, you are lookin good,” Nor’an said, slurring his words, yet still able to keep his sloshing drink from spilling.

“Nor’an, are you drunk?”

“No,” he burped and his eyes had trouble focusing when he looked up at her. “Why would you think that?”

“You’re drunk. Go sit down while I handle this.” Fralian tried to move him aside, but he didn’t let her pass.

“Handle what?”

“I need to talk to this little girl.”

“Oh come on, babe. Davy will be fine. He could use a little female attention.”

“Not at this age.”

“We’re at a wedding. You need to lighten up,” Nor’an said and offered her his drink. “Drink with me.”

Karn’a heard the impending problem ahead and ran over to the DJ to take the microphone. “I would like everyone’s attention.”

Everyone slowly stopped eating and gave Karn’a their attention as she returned to the head table. “Hello everyone, for those that don’t know me, I’m Karn’a, Zendari’s better half.”

Zendari gave her a swift punch to the shoulder, but smiling all the same. Some people laughed in the audience, but most sat quiet, waiting for her to continue.

“Zendari and I have known each other for a few years, but we were never really close until last year when I met John. In the last few months, I got to know so much about Zendari and how amazing she was. She has been the sister I have never had and I am so thankful to be part of her big day today.”

She paused and glanced at Zendari, who was hugging Joseph and watching her like a good movie.

“What I want to talk about though, is her best quality she is going to bring to her marriage.”

“Oh, consider me intrigued,” Joseph said, shaking his wife.

“Her greatest quality is her strength. I’m not just talking about her pipes, which she does pack quite the wallop,” Karn’a said, rubbing her shoulder, prompting a few laughs. “I am talking about her strength to withstand adversity. To be strong in the face of danger. To be strong when things don’t go according to plan. To see it through to the end, no matter what. If there was one thing she needs to make a long lasting relationship last, I would say it is that. No matter what happens, I am sure she will always be strong in her commitment to Joseph.”

Karn’a raised her glass and everyone followed. “To Zendari and Joseph, may your love outlive us all.”

“Here here!” John said and they all drank to a wonderful speech that successfully got Fralain and Nor’an back to their seats.

Zendari got up and gave Karn’a a hug. “Thank you Karn’a. That was beautiful.”

John took the microphone from Karn’a and patted Joseph on the back. “I don’t know how I am going to follow that, but here it goes.” He cleared his throat and continued. “What can I say about this couple that we don’t already know? Clearly, Joseph married up.”

Nor’an snorted his drink across the table as the translation came in, covering Governess Vumars in the sticky liquid.

“In all seriousness though, Joseph is a pretty special guy. He has unparalleled patience and a kind heart. And I guess he looks okay.” A few chuckles came from the left side and Minera whistled from the back table. “All I really want to say is I wish my brother and his beautiful bride a lifetime of happiness. If Dad was still here today, I know he would be proud you two found each other.”

John raised his glass, watching his brother nod in approval. “To the happy couple!”

More clinking and drinking ensued. Joseph gave his brother a big hug. “Good speech. Couldn’t have said it better.”

Zendari hugged him up too and took the microphone. She stood next to Joseph and stared into his eyes before gaining the composure to speak next. Her speech wasn't so much for them as him, so she kept her attention on Joseph.

"When I first came here to this little ice box you call a home, I was at an all-time low. Literally, probably hours away from freezing to death, not to mention going through some family problems. Little did I know, you would be more than just a sexy alien who saved my life, but also the one who captured my heart."

Awws came from the crowd and Joseph rubbed her hand, urging her to continue.

"You showed me what it was truly like to feel loved and show love to others. You helped me reconcile with my sisters and stuck by me through our tough times. Now I am at an all-time high. And it is because you have been in my life."

Joseph held her hand and smiled at her. She lifted her glass.

"Joseph, I am so glad I found you and will never let you go. To many more years of love and laughter."

The sound of clinking glasses was muted as Joseph went in for a kiss, which got more oohs and awws from their friends and families. His love for her dripped from his lips, causing her heart to flutter. Joseph slowly pulled his head away and took the mic from her. He waited for everyone to calm down before giving his speech.

"Zendari, when I first saw you in the middle of the road, jumping around and holding your foot, I thought, 'Dang, you're a good dancer,'" Joseph said. Everyone chuckled and Zendari blushed. Even when Joseph was teasing her, she still came out looking good. "From that day on, I knew you were special, but I had no words to describe it. As I got to know you, I learned there aren't any words to describe what you mean to me."

Zendari gently held his chin in her hand, dreamily gazing into his eyes.

“So I had to marry you, that way I could show you for the rest of my life what you mean to me.” Joseph placed his hand over hers and smiled. “Go ahead and kiss me. I know you want to.”

Zendari swooped down and kissed him again, getting cheers and whistles from the crowd. She really let him have it, pushing him back into John’s lap and bracing herself on the table. John sat there laughing as the two made out right there.

“Easy you two, save some for later,” John remarked and the couple broke it up.

The DJ finally got the speakers hooked up and the music started pumping by accident, getting the kids all excited. Lilly was the first out of her seat and ran to the center.

“Let’s dance!”

There was no stopping the dancing fever as people and aliens alike went out on the dance floor. The DJ was frantically trying to correct his mistake, but by the time he figured it out, there was no reason to stop. Neither Joseph nor Zendari cared about the first dance, wanting to enjoy their party however it came. The upbeat music allowed Waylin to show off her impressive moves as well as tire out the kids by the fourth song. Slowly people started to make their way back to their tables or to the bar, allowing the DJ to gain some control of the playlist and slow the tempo down. Zendari and Joseph secretly took the time to cut the giant cake while most were distracted on the dance floor.

“How did you like it?” Joseph said, feeding her a slice.

She held his wrist still, licking up the frosting still on his fingers. “Mmmm. Almost tastes as good as you.”

“That good? I don’t believe it.”

Zendari took another slice from the table and guided it into his mouth like a spaceship flying into a docking bay during a battle. She even added some plane sound effects, which got him laughing. He recoiled a little so she didn’t smash the whole piece in his mouth.

“Okay, okay,” he said and swallowed the sugary cake. “I can only eat so much at a time.”

“It’s good, isn’t it.”

“You’re right though, not quite as good as you.”

Karn’a slipped between them both and took two slices of cake, interrupting their cute moment.

“John can’t get his own cake?” Zendari asked.

“Oh no, this is for our ‘other’ guest.” Karn’a winked at her.

“Other guest? What is she talking about?” Joseph asked.

Zendari’s eyes got big, completely forgetting about the prisoner in the back of their vehicle. It wasn’t her intention to leave the woman out there, but at least Karn’a was taking care of her.

“Nothing you have to worry about. Karn’a has it covered,” Zendari said and then addressed Karn’a. “Can you have Larlin take her home when she leaves?”

“Sure can. Don’t throw the bouquet while I’m gone,” Karn’a said as she left.

“Then you better hurry,” she called back to her.

Karn’a picked up her pace, bringing a smile to Zendari’s face. Her furry friend took it way too seriously, so it was fun to watch her squirm. She waited with Joseph for her to return, when Mr. Patterson came up to congratulate them again.

“Save some cake for us,” Mr. Patterson said, giving Joseph a hug.

“How are you doing, Mr. Patterson?”

“Could be better if I didn’t have to pay for my drink,” he said and took a piece of cake from the table. “This isn’t some weird alien cake, is it?”

“Yep. Came all the way from Shil. I don’t think you will like it,” Zendari lied in a weak attempt to stop him from eating it.

Mr. Patterson stuck his fork into the cake and took a satisfied sniff. “Nice try. You can’t bullshit a bullshitter.”

“Nothing gets past you, Mr. Patterson.”

He pointed his fork at her and was already swallowing his first bite. It took him a few seconds to respond, struggling to get it down his gullet. “Nothing ever does, my dear. Nothing ever does.”

Their conversation didn’t get any farther as Karn’a came rushing in with no more cake in her hands. “I didn’t miss it, did I?”

“No.” Zendari smiled and grabbed the bouquet on the table. She turned her head back to Mr. Patterson, waving the flowers. “Duty calls.”

“Remember to throw it low. Make them fight for it,” Mr. Patterson said, pretending to throw an elbow.

Zendari laughed and went with Karn’a out on the main floor where all the other single ladies congregated. Karn’a was the only alien of the bunch, as the other bridesmaids opted to watch the event with their groomsmen. The other ladies were nowhere near as tall as Karn’a, nor took it as seriously. Karn’a sized up her competition and planned for the numerous flight paths the bouquet could take.

“You ready, ladies?” Zendari asked and they all cheered with excitement, except Karn’a, tracking the bouquet with her eyes. The bride turned around and closed her eyes. “Here we go!”

The bouquet soared into the air and Karn’a’s instinct kicked in. She leaped up in the air, while holding down the tallest woman next to her.

It fumbled in her hands as she came back down and the surrounding women attacked. A flurry of hands slapped and hit each other, all trying to get the elusive set of flowers. Karn'a used her body and fell to the ground on top of it and the women jumped on top of her as if going for a loose ball in a football game. Lilly and Milly saw the women all tangled up and thought they were playing a game.

"Dogpile!" Milly yelled and the two girls ran up and joined the pile of bodies.

Zendari turned around and saw the chaos, going over quickly to help them up. There were a few groans of pain, but overall spirits were high, eager to see who came up with it. One by one they got up until only Karn'a remained. She sprung to her feet, raising the bouquet in victory, basking in the glory of clapping women. The music switched to a slower tempo and single men flocked to the dance floor to snatch up the single ladies. None of them were as bold as Billy, going up to Karn'a.

He tugged on her dress to get her attention. "Excuse me."

Karn'a looked down, noticing her little friend all dressed up in his little suit. "Hey there Billy."

"Can I have this dance?" Billy asked, holding his hand up.

Karn'a bent down and took his hand. She couldn't say no to his nervous little face, even if she wanted to. "I would be honored."

"Awww," Zendari said, watching the two dance, swaying with the music. She was going to find Joseph when Lenny came up to her.

"Alright, little lady, you need a dance partner," Lenny said, taking her in his arms and swaying with her.

"I was actually going to dance with Joseph..." She spun her head around, trying to spot him, while not being impolite.

"He's gonna have to wait in line like the rest of us."

“Line?” Zendari asked and saw a line forming of guys waiting to dance with her. “What’s going on?”

“You’ve never heard of the dollar dance? I guess I shouldn’t be surprised with you being an alien and all.”

“What’s a dollar dance?”

“It’s where everyone pays a dollar, or I guess, in this case a credit, to dance with the bride or groom.”

“Really?” Zendari said, checking out the guys. It felt good to see so many men interested in her. *Wow, I’m quite popular.* “I guess I can find Joseph later.”

While Zendari danced with the ever growing line, Joseph had his fair share of women who wanted a minute with the groom. Waylin tried to ask him for help with Lenny while the other human women simply wanted a charming man to dance with. Joseph enjoyed his time with all of them, but Minera was the most interesting.

“How does it feel to be a married man?” Minera asked.

Joseph shrugged, swaying with her and doing his best not to let her breasts knock him out. “About the same as always. I’m glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she said and took the lead, spinning him around. “Not everyday that my favorite hunting guide gets married.”

“You have a lot of hunting guides?”

“None I like as much as you.”

Joseph smirked. “Are you flirting with me at my own wedding?”

“Maybe... is it working?”

“Nope.”

“You’re not polygamous like your brother?”

“I only got eyes for Zendari,” Joseph said, working hard not to lower his gaze.

“That’s a shame. I guess I wasted my time getting Zendari’s blessing then.”

“Blessing?”

“Yeah, Zendari is okay with me courting you. If anything, she encouraged it.”

Joseph looked over at Zendari and shook his head, completely believing the claim. “Is that why you scheduled more guides even though the hunting season is over? You think I will fall madly in love with you with enough time?”

“Guaranteed. Once you get to know me, I am kinda irresistible.”

They both laughed and the song had come to a close. She maintained eye contact with him, hoping to get his answer before letting him go to the next woman. And indeed an answer she received.

“I want to focus on enjoying my life with my wife first before even considering taking on another woman.”

“By all means take your time. If you ever want to, let me know.” Minera let him go gracefully. “And congratulations. I wish you two nothing but happiness.”

“Thanks Minera. I’ll see you in a month.”

She took his rejection well, hanging on to a glimmer of hope. It also helped that Voltan was unaccompanied and relaxing by the bar. After all, it would be a shame not to cast a wide net. Eventually she’ll catch something.

While she tried her hand at Zendari’s better brother, the other brother was busy keeping Fralain away from Gretchen and Davy on the dance floor. His inability to reliably stand up under his own power forced Fralain to hold him while they danced. He rested his head in her bosom and rubbed her back.

“Have I ever told you your boobs make excellent pillows?” Nor’an said, being unable to stare anywhere else.

“No,” Fralain said, preoccupied with watching her son dance.

“Well, they are. Not too hard, not too soft. They remind me of those waterbeds. Have you ever been on a waterbed?”

“No.”

Nor’an lifted his head away. “I feel like you’re not listening to me.”

“I am. Boobs are waterbeds.”

“You know, this isn’t healthy, Fralain. Smothering our child isn’t going to help him.”

“At least I am there for him,” she said and gasped, surprising herself with what had been dwelling deep inside for far too long. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s okay. I deserved that.” Nor’an sighed. “Maybe it is the booze talking or what Voltan said earlier, but I need to apologize to you.”

“No, you don’t—”

“Yes I do. I ran out on you and our kid. It wasn’t your fault, it was mine.”

Fralain didn’t know what to say. This had been the most honest and open he had been with her ever. She didn’t want to ruin it by saying the wrong thing and kept her mouth shut, letting the drunk little man find his next words.

“I have no excuse for what I did and to be honest, it made me more miserable. Always trying to find affection in a different woman. Carthina, Polinena, Nor’an... damn that was a weird one.”

“Do you have a point?” Fralain asked, getting annoyed with the other women he started listing off.

“Sorry. My point is, I haven’t been a good husband and I want to actually try. And as my first attempt, let me help by saying breaking up those two kids is a bad idea.”

“Why?”

“If he’s anything like me, which I’m sure he is, at least a little, if you tell him he can’t be with someone, he’ll do it to spite you. At the very least, he won’t listen to your future warnings of women to look out for. And I know you don’t want that.”

Fralain looked back at their boy. He was smiling ear to ear as the two kids danced together like the rest of the adults. She didn’t want to lose her boy, so if that meant listening to her drunk husband, so be it.

“Did you mean what you said? About trying?”

Nor’an hiccuped. “I think so. You might want to record this though. Just in case sober me protests.”

Fralain laughed and Nor’an patted her butt like a bongo. He had trouble controlling his hands and she enjoyed the playful attention. She hadn’t experienced this side of him since their wedding and there was no time to waste.

“How about we get out of here? I find us a hotel with a waterbed and you can show me how it works?”

“What about Davy? Aren’t you supposed to be the responsible parent?”

“I’ll have Susan take him and throw his bag in their van. Davy always wanted to have a sleepover anyways,” Fralain reasoned.

“Sounds like a plan.”

The dances started to wind down as people had left throughout the evening. Karn’a had said her goodbyes to Billy and the whole gang, who needed to get back at a decent time. She had seen Larlin off as well, getting her to bring the criminal to jail. It left her free to enjoy

the remainder of her evening with the man she loved most. Not to mention brag about what she caught.

“Hey there, cutie. Look what I got,” Karn’a said, approaching him at the bar.

“Aye! You caught it! I can’t believe I missed it,” John said, giving her a hug.

“You know what it means, right?”

“That you have a good vertical? Did you throw any elbows?”

“It means we are going to get married next? Doesn’t it?”

“Hmmm. You really think so?” John teased.

“You don’t?” Karn’a asked, genuinely scared. John saw his teasing didn’t quite land and was quick to make it up... in his own way.

“I do, but there is more to it than that. You need to also grant the first request your groom to be asks of you. Otherwise it is void.”

“You name it and I’ll do it. Anything.”

He watched her stand at attention, ready to do whatever he asked. John loved how much devotion she had for him, even if it was excessive. It was a lot of power for one man to hold, but he used it wisely. To grant a request she had longed for from him. He went up on his tip toes and whispered into her ear. She smiled ear to ear.

“Really?” she asked.

“If it’s not too cold for you, or if you wanted to still dance, we could—”

She swept him off his feet and bridle carried him away. There were a few onlookers wondering what was up and she was quick to tell them, seeing as there were no kids around anymore.

“If you hear any screaming outside, don’t worry, it’s just me getting fucked by the best man on this planet!”

“Did you really have to tell them?” John asked.

“Yes. I don’t want people interrupting us like what happened to Zendari and Joseph. What a mood killer,” Karn’a said and turned around, realizing she didn’t want to take the chance others would stumble upon them. “Can I have everyone’s attention, please?”

Not everyone heard her, but it was enough for her to be satisfied. She could feel the tension in John’s whole body, so she decided to soften her declaration for his sake.

“If you hear a screaming woman in the woods, don’t worry, it’s just me.” Karn’a didn’t dwell on the confused looks of people at the reception. She had a man to please and he was getting heavier by the second. Turning away, she looked at John, who wore a slightly perturbed look on his face. “What?”

“You really are something, you know that?”

“No, you are,” she said, pushing her nose against his. “Now let’s get our coats and I will show you a good time.”

They left the party and the other bridesmaids thought it was their cue to leave as well. If the maid of honor could galavant off with a man, why couldn’t they? Malran and Bob didn’t need to say anything to each other, running off to the “treadmill room.” Val’re finished her drink with a satisfying gasp and turned to Carson.

“Does your offer still stand for tonight?” Val’re asked.

“It sure does. If you don’t mind hotel beds?”

“As long as you’re in it, I think I’ll manage.”

Carson offered his hand and she let him lead the way. Another bridesmaid down and only one left. Waylin was still dancing with Lenny. She fought herself not to turn blue from holding him, which got easier throughout the night. His body was hot in more than one way and after overhearing what her other sisters were going to get into this evening, she was nervous.

She envied them in a way, but also didn't want the man in front of her to be a one night stand. He was far too interesting and kind to risk on a hormone fueled night of fun. Her eyes wandered from his chest to his face constantly, but never missed a word he spoke. Lenny was the kind of man she had been looking for.

"I have had a wonderful night, Lenny," Waylin said, still swaying with the music.

"I have too. You're a lot different than your sisters."

"I am? How so?"

"For starters, you didn't try to tear my clothes off when I showed interest in you."

"I don't think with my clam. I think with my head."

Lenny gave her a little laugh. "Your clam? I have to say, I have never heard that one before."

"It's a common phrase where we come from."

"Is it common for women on your planet to be sex hounds?"

"Unfortunately..." She apologized.

"Then I guess I found a gem." Lenny smiled at her and she reciprocated. "I know this is kind of sudden, but how would you like to visit me this week at my ranch? You could get to see my cattle first hand instead of just hearing about them."

Did he just ask me out? No, he asked me to stay with him! Stay calm, breathe. You would be a guest, it's not like you're getting married. Waylin let out a breath, giving her a few extra seconds to think. "I would like that."

He snuggled up closer to her and they kept dancing as the DJ made the last call of the night.

"This will be the final song of the evening, so if I could ask everyone to clear the floor for the bride and groom's last dance."

The couples still out there moved to the sides by the tables and watched the newlyweds take center stage. Zendari held Joseph close and listened to the sweet music. They rocked back and forth with the rhythm and spoke softly to each other.

“I never told you how beautiful you look in your dress, have I?”

Zendari blushed. “It’s only the fourth time today.”

“And I meant it every time,” he said, rubbing the small of her back.

“How do you always know what to say to make me smile?”

“I can read your mind.” Joseph squinted, pretending to concentrate extra hard, getting her to laugh.

“Stop it. You’re going to find out the honeymoon surprise,” she teased.

“Honeymoon surprise? I thought that was the hunting trip?”

Zendari shook her head and smiled. “Nope.”

“What is it then?”

“You’re the mind reader. You tell me.”

He tickled her under her armpits and she went into a giggle fit for a few short seconds. He waited for her to calm down before saying anything. “You really are the perfect woman for me.”

“And you’re the perfect man for me.”

Her heart fluttered as the music heightened her love for him in the moment. Their faces got closer and closer, both waiting for the other to kiss.

“I know I’ve already said it, but I can’t stop saying it. I love you, Zendari,” Joseph almost whispered, yet it was plenty loud for her.

“I love you too, Joseph.”

They kissed for the last time of the evening as the music came to a close and the full howling sound of the “wind” from outside leaked through the walls. Their love was forever captured in a final picture Charlene shot of the loving couple. It still to this day sits on their

refrigerator door, along with the other memories of their courtship.
And plenty of space for many more.

THE END

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