

LEXI ANDER



Salvaging

TOBY'S HEART

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SALVAGING TOBY'S HEART

By Lexi Ander

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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SALVAGING TOBY'S HEART

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Photo Description

In the background there are cryogenic-containers with shadowy figures inside. In the forefront is a large, muscular blue male with a headful of very long, slender tentacles ending in cockheads. He is holding a brown-haired, sculpted human man whom he's having sex with. The man's shirt is torn, the remnants held in place by a shoulder holster. A firearm is in his right hand, as if he's expecting someone to walk in on them.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It was supposed to be basic find and retrieve job even if the planet was little known and in the edge of the territories. Nothing went right with that job. My ship got damaged on the landing, there is nothing but jungle out here and I have no idea where the thing I'm looking for could even be and now I have apparently found the natives too. I so don't need any more distractions but he sure knows how to get persuasive with those hairs of his.

I would like this to be a sci-fi adventure story. There can be some dub-con but in the end it's about falling in love with his alien.

No BDSM, but otherwise I'm not too particular about the content.

Sincerely,

Eepa

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: military men, spacemen/aliens, interspecies, attempted child abduction, illegal lab experimentation, tentacle fetish, public sex

Content Warnings: this is a lighthearted smexy tentacle story, not a dub-con
^_^

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SALVAGING TOBY'S HEART

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Chapter One

“Fuck. My. Life.”

Toby stared down at the blinking light on the ship's console. A message waited for him, and he really didn't want to listen to it. Not now. Not ever. He'd volunteered for this salvage mission on the edge of who-knew-where to get away from the office and the planet. Somehow, Spencer found out he was on an away mission and sent the message straight to the ship's system. Un-fucking-believable. Who told Spencer he was gone and gave him the IP address of *The Whirlwind*?

Why did his dad insist on the new feature requiring the messages to be opened before the option to delete became available? Oh, that was right, because Toby's asshole little brother, Maximillien, had a bad habit of deleting messages from the home office when he used the company ships for non-work-related business. It always happened when Maximillien became enthralled with his newest conquest. Too wrapped up in whoever warmed his bed, he ignored the messages from their dad to return the ship to the home office. Usually arriving a day late, he'd scramble, deleting the message and claiming he never received anything from Wentworth Salvage. Fed up with Maximillien's disregard, their father, Weston Wentworth, owner of the family business, decided all messages had to be opened. The system could then date and time-stamp a delivery receipt. With that one small change, his brother brought the vessel home on time, but sometimes there was an extra passenger or two when Maximillien arrived.

In order to delete the memo, Toby had to at least open the electronic mail, but if he opened the message the holo vid would start up right away. He'd learned months ago, anything Spencer Powell sent to him held nothing but salt and vinegar.

“Just open the file and delete it. Quickly,” he mumbled to himself, finger hesitating above the button.

Since Toby had broken off the relationship with Spencer, his ex began sending vids to his work email. If he'd known the amount of vitriol Spencer was going to dump on him, Toby wouldn't have opened the first message. The vid played automatically, and the coworkers sitting closest to him saw Spencer's taunting firsthand.

Toby didn't think the breakup had been filled with that much anger. He and Spencer met before he retired from the Federation. When he came home, he'd spent six months planetside endeavoring to make a life with his boyfriend. Their relationship slowly went downhill until Toby said enough was enough and moved out. Which brought him back to the insistent blinking light.

"Goddamn it!" Toby shoved out of the pilot's seat and ensured the autopilot was engaged before he made his way to the mess hall. If he had to sit through another damned vid from Spencer, he wanted a huge cup of the sludge that was supposed to be coffee.

Ginger sat at the table, a plate of fresh fruit in front of her when Toby stormed in. He could feel her eyes on him as he waited impatiently for the machine to fill up his travel mug. He had to push the button twice because the device's measure of "one cup" wasn't Toby's.

The Whirlwind could support a full complement crew of ten, depending on the scope of the salvage. Since this job was a pick-up-and-go, Toby brought only two crew members with him. Ginger Rodriguez was their grease monkey, the ship's engineer, responsible for keeping the vessel up and going. Nicius Asmarsson, the biohazards specialist, would be responsible for the cargo they'd soon acquire.

While waiting for his mug to fill, his thoughts drifted back to his ex. Why couldn't Spencer leave him alone? Toby thought Spencer would become tired of this hurtful game since Toby refused to respond in any way. He'd known people like Spencer when he served in the Federation. If he ignored them long enough, they always floated away, so why hadn't Spencer? Over two months ago he'd removed himself from Spencer's life, and still Spencer hadn't given up taunting him.

"What has you brooding? Is there a problem with the pickup?" Ginger shoved an orange slice into her mouth, chewing slowly.

"What? No." Toby grimaced. Ginger had been one of his coworkers who'd seen the first holovid. Although Spencer was only making a fool of himself, Toby found talking about the situation difficult. Spencer had taken their private life and spread the details around. Toby had never been ashamed of who he was, of what he desired, but lately he'd begun to wonder if he was the one with the problem, not Spencer.

"Back at the office, you only get that look when Dirtbag sends you one of his special greetings." Ginger wrinkled her nose, staring knowingly at Toby when he didn't immediately reply.

Sitting down across from her, Toby blew on his coffee, stalling. Ginger's dark hair was wound into a bun on the top of her head. The black grease marks on her face always made Toby think rugby player instead of mechanic. She had that look about her that made everyone hurriedly move out of her way, him included.

"You should report him, you know. A stalker is a stalker. He's not right in the head. One of these days he's going to snap and go crazy. You have to nip this in the bud right now, before you go home, and your pet rabbit is the makings of a stew."

That was an image he could've done without.

"I've thought about it." If he did file a report with the authorities, and word of it was leaked, then Spencer would more than likely lose his job. Many companies had codes of conduct that stretched their corporate fingers into a civilian's private life. If Spencer was fired for breaching a code, the likelihood of him finding another job in the same field would be close to nil. Toby wasn't a bastard, and he had no wish to harm Spencer's livelihood, but Spencer needed to stop and move on.

"He's just angry with me. Once he calms down or finds someone new, he'll forget about me. What do they say? Don't engage. Ignore bad behavior—or something like that."

Ginger snorted. "Right. If he were my ex-boyfriend, I would've already laid him out and had the police at his door. They would explain to him the term 'boundaries' when I slapped him with a restraining order. It's bullshit that you're putting up with his juvenile crap. You're too soft. You shouldn't be worrying about the consequences of his actions. He's a big boy. If he can't think before he acts, then he deserves whatever he has coming."

Toby took a long sip of his coffee. How did he explain that the thought of reporting Spencer made him feel like he failed, as if he was somehow emasculated? He was former Special Forces; he should be able to take care of his problems without the help of the police. But if he engaged Spencer, then Spencer's actions would only become worse.

"He just wants to get a rise out of me. All he had to do was tell me..." Toby didn't want to go there. The reason for the breakup was too private, and even though Toby refused to say, Spencer had no problem verbally expressing why in great detail during his vids. "He didn't have to lie to me and waste six months trying to make something work that simply couldn't."

“Report him, Toby. What he’s doing is shitty and cruel and just plain creepy.” Ginger shoved the last of her orange slices into her mouth. Her expression was telling him he was a moron, and perhaps she was correct.

Spencer was overreacting to their breakup, which hadn’t been all that bad, or so Toby thought. Disappointing and hurtful, yes. But there hadn’t been any drama prior to Toby calling it quits and walking away. No fighting. No yelling. Toby had moved his stuff out after he explained why they couldn’t continue as they were. Maybe he’d been oblivious to who Spencer really was. He did spend eight months in a relationship, and even though they hadn’t fought, there had still been warning signs. The white lies Spencer told him and he’d ignored because Spencer had said what he wanted to hear. Gradually, their relationship broke down when it became obvious that Spencer never wanted or needed the same things Toby did.

Ginger put away her utensils, and on the way out of the mess hall, she gave Toby a friendly clap on the back. She was right. Ignoring Spencer wasn’t doing any good. After rising to refill his cup with more of the bitter brew, he headed back to the cockpit.

Before sitting back down in the pilot’s seat, he closed and barred the door behind him. It was bad enough the first vid had been seen by some of his coworkers. The rumors of what Spencer did had made the rounds at the office before the end of the day. Toby didn’t want Ginger or Nicius to overhear what else Spencer had to say. After sitting in front of the console, he sipped his sludge and gave himself a mental pep talk. Perhaps this message was Spencer apologizing and swearing to move on.

What did he have to worry about? He’d participated in over one thousand missions for the Federation. He’d overcome overwhelming odds. Saved a countless number of lives. Almost always brought his team back home, safe and sound. He could handle whatever Spencer threw his way. But when he pressed the button to open the message, all the positive thoughts amounted to nothing because even though he was tough and could defend himself in a physical fight, his heart was more fragile than his body. He’d made himself vulnerable to Spencer because he believed he was in love, and thought Spencer had loved him in return.

The holovid opened automatically to a bedroom decorated in red silk. Spencer was gazing into the camera, his sandy hair flopping into his brown eyes with every thrust Spencer’s bed partner made. Toby always wondered

what a handsome guy like Spencer saw in a military grunt like him. Toby spent most of his life in the Federation. All his skills, his expertise, ran in weapons, strategy, and planning military operations. Really, outside of the Federation, he wasn't a catch. But there had been a time when Spencer had looked at Toby as if he'd hung the moon.

“Yes, baby, give it to me with your big cock,” Spencer gasped, the sound of skin slapping on skin growing louder. “I haven't had a real man fuck me in so long.”

Toby closed the holovid, leaned back in the flight chair, and rubbed his eyes. He didn't need to watch the whole vid to know what Spencer said, to know what Spencer thought of Toby. This holovid was no different. In every one Spencer sent to him, Spencer was being screwed in some fashion, Spencer's expression contorting in rapture as he came. Then, at the end, Spencer would speak to Toby. His eyes alight with a cruel gleam as he found various ways to say how worthless he thought Toby was. With each vid Spencer's words became meaner and more vicious.

The first couple of holovids, Toby made the mistake of actually watching. Spencer simply spoke into the camera. “Have you found someone who'd actually want to fuck you, Toby? You might as well spend the rest of your boring life using your hand because no one will respect you after you beg for dick. What a fucking turn off. The whole Mr. Fucking Special Ops Macho Man way you carried yourself was a lie. I don't even know why I stayed with you. For someone who likes to receive, you're lousy at giving. A twink is a better fuck than you.” Spencer knew how to exploit Toby's insecurities and hurt him. Even knowing their relationship couldn't work because they were incompatible, something inside Toby broke. He might not've been madly in love with Spencer, but Toby had loved him.

Later the holovids were of Spencer getting fucked first, just to show Toby how much more enjoyment Spencer had with other men than him. When would Spencer stop? When would he be satisfied he'd humiliated Toby enough?

Chapter Two

Instead of deleting the message as he'd originally planned, Toby took Ginger's advice. Spencer's behavior had escalated, and Toby didn't want to find out how far Spencer was willing to go for his revenge. He sent the holovid to his planet's Protect and Serve department. He completed the online report. Then he sent his dad a request, asking him to forward all the other messages from Toby's work computer, giving him the address and the case file number. Afterwards, staring at the confirmation message that his files had been received and assigned to an officer, Toby's heart beat a bit too fast, and apprehension roiled in his gut. There was no going back now.

He'd been upfront with Spencer to begin with. Toby could be versatile, but he did have a preference. Toby hated dating because the men who gravitated to him assumed that, with his build and military background, he'd be growly and aggressive in bed. Fact of the matter was, Toby wanted—what the hell he did or didn't want didn't matter because he wasn't ever going to have it. He'd never spend enough time planetside to find someone who complemented him. He might as well get used to using his hand and invest in a complement of toys because Toby was certain the search for the type of man he wanted would yield nothing. Compromising with Spencer had turned out disastrous. He'd save himself the heartache and leave well enough alone. He had spent ten years in the Federation mostly alone; he could do so once again.

The console lit up with a proximity alert. Toby strapped on his harness and activated the intercom message to let the crew know they were on approach to *Genesis Nine*. When the cataloguers swept through this section of the galaxy sixty to seventy years ago, they documented a lush planet full of life with a small indigenous population and no technology. *Genesis Nine* was declared a Federation wilderness preserve, and at the end of two hundred years the status would be reevaluated. If the population reached a certain level of technological advancement, then the Federation would send ambassadors to make first contact. Its protected status would remain until the population met the requirements to gain entrance into the Federation's Assembly of Representatives.

This section of space was on the edge of nowhere and usually didn't receive much traffic, but the Federation began patrolling the area when the Merchant's Guild plotted a new travel course for hazardous cargo. There were two

inhabited planets in this section of space that were considered “close” but really weren't by travel standards.

Quintessential Chemicals reported they'd lost contact with their crew in this sector. When a Federation patrol last swung through the system, their scans hit upon the locator beacon as they escorted a prison ship. The information was sent to base, and the Federation automatically contacted Wentworth Salvage for retrieval and cleanup.

Toby had been given access to the electronic sweep information that the patrol had taken. The cargo of the *SV Ark Royal* was listed as carrying a complement of hazardous chemicals, but a biohazard leak hadn't been detected, which was excellent news because cleaning up one would've been an environmental nightmare. The Federation also supplied a cargo list for the downed vessel. Toby had an idea of the equipment he needed to bring, and that was why his crew included only two people, other than himself. He didn't need more for a grab-and-go job. Maximillien would be coming along to clean up the actual wreckage after he finished his current assignment.

Activating the scanners to pinpoint the exact location of the crash site, Toby panned the cameras so he could look out over the planet's upper atmosphere. He was surprised at how beautiful and green the surface was. Usually, wilderness preserves weren't so visibly lush. The waters of the planet's vast oceans were a deep blue-green. It all created an ideal picture of a lovely vacation spot, if someone was into such things.

Toby had spent a good portion of his life in space. Never once had he regretted the decision, but there had been times when he dreamed about spending lazy days at a cabin in the middle of nowhere, fishing at the crack of dawn with someone special. Then he spent six months planetside with Spencer. They'd never left the city. Toby found the constant noise and crowds hard to handle. Then there was the odor. No matter where they went, the streets smelled of refuse, which became worse when it rained. Toby would rather crawl through the intestinal track of a giant Lamarthian worm than have to endure the stench again. When his father offered him a pilot's position with the family business, he'd never been so glad to return to space.

He switched off the cameras, upset with himself for allowing Spencer to get under his skin—again. If he found someone to share his life with, then great, but it wasn't imperative. Or so he tried to make himself believe. He had friends and family, and he could find somewhere to fish. He could learn to relax alone—maybe. Toby gave a strained grin to his reflection on the monitor.

“Hoorah.” *Pep talk to self completed*, he thought sarcastically. Fervently he wished someone would smack him upside the head.

Once the scans were finished, Toby was relieved to have something to do. As he reviewed the data, his concern grew. The first sweep reported an abundance of life on the planet with no tech. The photographs of what was supposed to be the crash site told a whole different story. He double-checked the data because there was no incapacitated ship where the beacon indicated. Visibly, he couldn't see any part of a ship, nor was there obvious damage to the area. The jungle was pristine and unbroken, with the exception of a very recognizable landing pad where one shouldn't be. Perhaps they had technical problems and the vessel vaporized? With the exception of the beacon? Not likely.

An itch started between his shoulder blades, Toby's own private warning system when something wasn't kosher. His instincts had never been wrong. Packing the data up, he sent the file to Wentworth's Federation contact, then he called his crew to the prep room.

Ginger entered with Nicius following closely. He'd changed his bleach blond hair to bright pink with dark blue tips. Toby swore his retinas ached every time he ran into his biohazard specialist. Nicius was twice Ginger's size, but if it came down to a fight, Toby would lay his money on Ginger any day. Not that Nicius couldn't hold his own if he had to. But he had too many facial piercings that could be ripped out, and ultimately, Nicius was the type of person who'd try to sweet talk his way out of a confrontation. If his wiles were ineffective, then Nicius would stealthily slip away for help instead.

Normally, Toby wouldn't have called this meeting, but with the complications that had cropped up, he needed to bring them up to speed before they dropped to the surface. Toby put the vid on the screen, zooming in on the location of the beacon.

Nicius moved closer. “Wow, someone told a big fib, didn't they? That suspiciously looks like a landing pad. Where's the vessel?”

“Without obvious debris, I believe the ship is cloaked.” Toby zoomed the camera into an area that looked as if it were a shadow, but what cast it couldn't be seen. He couldn't be sure if the vessel was actually there until he arrived on location. “The data has already been sent to the Federation, but regulations state we have to offer help to survivors since it was reported as a wreck. There are no life signs in or around the site. Either they are dead or have joined the natives, which I highly doubt but can't discount.”

“Supposing this is an illegal operation—God only knows what they’d want here—but if they’re alive, don’t you think they’d stay with the ship?” Ginger asked as she approached the monitors.

Toby shrugged. “We won’t know for sure until we check it out—if we check it out.”

“What do you mean ‘if’?” Ginger asked.

Nicius met Toby’s gaze, his expression telling Toby he understood why before Nicius said, “Well, for one, there isn’t an obvious crash site.” Nicius magnified the landing strip. “For another, it’s illegal for any ship carrying toxic chemicals to have the ability to cloak. All the readings I see here don’t register any biohazard signatures. Whatever Quintessential Chemicals is doing out here, I can almost guarantee that it is very illegal.”

“Why? I mean, there’s no technology. I can’t imagine the natives have something to trade. Even if the planet has valuable minerals, any mining operation would be shut down before it has even begun. Am I wrong to believe that with the new trade route being right there, any illegal activity would be noticed?” Ginger inquired.

Toby turned off the screens. “Maybe the patrols would notice, maybe not. The planet has only been scanned, not explored. Nobody knows what’s out there. The crew could have any number of reasons to leave the safety of the ship. We won’t know the reason why or have an idea of what’s truly going on until we go down and take a look.

“What I would like to do is set down and check for survivors, just in case my assumptions are wrong. Verify there aren’t any biohazards aboard, because there is an indigenous population. I would hate for them to be affected or accidentally hurt through carelessness on Quintessential’s part or our own reluctance to confirm the facts. If you two are uncomfortable investigating, then we can retreat to an orbital position and wait for back up. You didn’t sign on for a possible rescue. Since it’s just three of us, we can wait here for a Federation patrol to arrive.”

Ginger chewed on her bottom lip. “If we’re being paranoid assholes, and the crew really needs our help... I’m okay with going planetside.”

Toby glanced to Nicius. “I can go and check out the ship by myself,” he offered, giving Nicius an out. “A quick inspection before returning.”

Nicius was shaking his head before Toby finished speaking. “I’m not former military, but even I know you shouldn’t go out there alone. I’ll go with

you. Besides, the other option for the crew's absence is that they were overcome by the local wildlife. They may need medical care, and you can't move the injured by yourself."

Toby gave an exaggerated shudder, making Nicius grin. He'd been on several missions where the area's wildlife was more dangerous than the adversary he tracked. Who knew what the vibrant green canopy hid?

"All right, since we're in agreement, prepare for atmospheric entry. We won't be touching down too close to the landing pad in case there's something hinky going on with the ship and crew. Nicius and I will take the rover overground. If the cargo is indeed biohazard, we can bring it back with us. Ginger, you stay here and have the ship ready for takeoff in case we have to drop and run."

Chapter Three

After answering Ginger's and Nicius's questions, Toby returned to the bridge. A couple of messages waited for him. The first one was from the company's Federation contact. "Wentworth, this is Shepherd. What kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?"

Toby grinned at the recorded holovid. He and Shepherd had been teamed up a couple of times over the years, before Shepherd took a promotion becoming Captain Emmanuel Shepherd. All their combined operations had ended with somewhat of a bang. Shepherd's favorite story to tell was their assignment escorting a Valuvian priestess. A sixteen-block stretch of the capitol had been blown to hell and back. Half the devastation wasn't Toby's fault, but Shepherd always told the story as if Toby single-handedly caused the damage. Okay, so his rocket might have toppled the replica of Cleopatra's Needle, but seriously, what was he supposed to do? Let the priestess be murdered?

"Regulations state you have to search for survivors, but I noticed your manifest only lists two other crew members. If you wait, a patrol will be there in twenty-four to forty-eight hours. You have good instincts—use them if you go planetside. You know what, strike that, don't go down. Wait for my guys. Who knows what trouble you'll cause before they get there. Send confirmation you've received this message." The line filled with rough static, as if something dragged over Shepherd's microphone, and he faintly heard a few choice swear words. He'd have to remember those for later. Then Shepherd said, "Goddamn it! I bet he's already poking around on the surface."

Toby fought a laugh. Shepherd didn't have any authority over him—as long as he didn't break the law. That little niggle he'd learned to listen to said he needed to go planetside. Besides, just because he planned to uncover the intent of the crew of *SV Ark Royal* didn't necessarily mean he would land in trouble. Toby had his own suspicions about what *Ark Royal* was up to. He knew how to be careful.

What he couldn't do was leave Shepherd thinking he hadn't picked up the message. He grinned impishly as he recorded the one he sent back to Shepherd. "Your wisdom has been received, oh, wise one." That would at least give Shepherd a timestamp if anything were to go wrong. Better safe than sorry.

The second message was a terse one from his dad. No sooner than Toby had finished listening to it than the console lit up with an incoming call.

“Dad?”

“Tobias, why in the world did you not tell me that smug little bastard was harassing you?” The live holovid was crackly, but he could still clearly see Weston Wentworth squinting into his camera phone. Toby hoped he'd look as good as his dad when he was that age. Bright blue eyes with salt-and-pepper hair, his dad never worried about attending any of the Federation's family-oriented events alone. He had the body of a man thirty years his junior, and his smile was like a siren's call to all the women who crossed his path.

Toby grimaced. “Because I didn't believe Spencer would get this... this... focused. I thought he'd stop. It's not like he was violent or anything—”

Weston made a rude noise. “You had to file a police report. His behavior is psychotic. I knew I should've taken him to *Dump Twenty-One* when he began sniffing around. There was something squirrely about him then, but Wolfegang said to leave you alone and let you live your life.”

Dump Twenty-One was a refuse planet where all waste material went to be recycled. Spencer would've had to wait a couple of months to be picked up or until a barge allowing passengers transported him off the rock. Toby choked on his bottled-up laughter because it was no hardship imagining Spencer stranded. He didn't know what surprised him more: his father's hidden dislike for Spencer or his older brother counseling their father to leave Spencer alone. Wolfe relentlessly teased Toby, and he would've thought Wolfe would be the one to prank Spencer that ruthlessly.

“That's mean, Dad.”

Obviously, his dad didn't find the situation funny as he scowled fiercely at Toby. “No, what's mean is what he does and says in those holovids.”

Horror washed through Toby. “Oh, God. Please tell me you didn't watch them.”

Weston had the grace to flush with embarrassment. “Of course I watched the vids. I wanted to know what that pencil-dick did to make you report it to the police. If you want my opinion, you can do a hell of a lot better than his skinny ass. The sounds he makes would deflate any man's dick.”

“Dad!” Toby wanted to melt into his chair. He couldn't remember a time he'd been so mortified, and he wasn't the one in the holovids.

Weston crossed his arms, his frown deepening even as he flushed a bright red. “Well. It's true. I imagine he had some decent qualities out of bed,

although the few times I met him, they weren't in evidence. You spent a decade as a Federation Special Forces trooper, gallivanting across the galaxy, doing God knows what. Knowing you, you kept to your guns and didn't fraternize with your fellow officers. It's no wonder you fell for a smooth-talking pretty face."

"I wasn't sex deprived," Toby defended, but judging by his dad's expression, Weston didn't believe him.

Toby almost regretted telling his dad he didn't screw around with other service men. He'd made the confession when his dad had gifted a supersized box of condoms to Toby after his first year in the Federation. Weston had heard the talk of the other soldiers at a family luncheon hosted by the Federation. Toby had wanted to reassure his dad that he kept his head, big and little, out of the Federations ranks. He'd seen how it muddied the waters, and too many good teams split apart because people couldn't get along afterwards. It was a good policy to have, and he had the fortitude to wait for shore leave to scratch that particular itch.

"You had to be in order to believe anything that came out of his mouth. Now that you're out, you can date servicemen. That friend of yours who flirts, Shepherd, you could call him up. I never understood why you didn't break the rules for him."

Was his dad playing matchmaker? Or... "When did you start liking men?"

Weston rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't, not in that way, but there are some who are eye-catching. Even to those of us who're straight. I'm just saying, he seemed like someone who was smart and would be in a relationship for the long haul."

Toby stared, flummoxed. "Dad, are you trying to marry me off?"

"Not necessarily. I just want you to be happy."

Toby squinted, an ache forming behind his eyes. "This conversation is too weird to be having right now, if ever. If you really want to continue this, then we'll talk when I get back. But just so you know, I'm happy." Mostly. "Anyways, I have news on the salvage job for Quintessential Chemicals. I had to call the Federation."

Toby filled his dad in, transferring all the files and vids collected so far to the home office. However, Toby did leave out that Shepherd was the person he spoke with. He had a feeling his dad would grab on to that tidbit and run with it. Honestly, that his dad remembered Shepherd at all was amazing.

“Well, you be careful. I’m sending Wolfe your way with some extra crew members.”

If this had been any other situation, Toby would’ve told his dad no because Wolfe’s team was frightening. Toby had seen some hair-raising shit, worked with people whom he’d never want to meet again under any circumstances. When Wolfe’s crew was around, he itched for a sidearm. They were the ones dispatched when the salvage was located in dangerous territories or sectors that weren’t patrolled by the Federation. But with the gut feeling Toby had about the vessel on the surface of *Genesis Nine*, he would gladly accept Wolfe’s help.

“Record everything. We’ll need to give it to the lawyers. Quintessential Chemicals will pay us double for this bullshit.”

After Toby promised to be careful, again, Weston cut the connection. Toby plotted a course. Within the hour they would land one click from the *SV Ark Royal*. Before donning his biosuit, he shrugged into his shoulder holster and checked his sidearm. He strapped the large hunting knife Wolfe gave him to his thigh. Over the bulky biosuit, he buckled the belt that held the holster to his second weapon, a standard shockwand. A jolt from the wand would incapacitate any animal up to four hundred fifty-three kilograms.

Once again strapped into the ship’s pilot seat, Toby retracted the protective plating that covered his windows. The closer view of the jungle against a cloudless sky caught and held Toby’s attention. He hadn’t seen a surface this stunning since leaving the Federation.

The vapor trail following the glow of a flare shot up from the jungle. Toby startled, trying to maneuver out of its path. Or at least he thought it was a flare until the discharge exploded, the light so bright Toby shielded his eyes with his hand. After *The Whirlwind* passed through the gray cloud, the engines gave a distinct *clunk*, and the flight yoke seized as the ever-present hum of the engines cut off. Toby’s stomach crawled up his throat as the vessel quickly lost altitude.

Toby cursed, using the new words he learned from Shepherd’s holo vid, working furiously to get the thrusters back up and the flaps out. The landing was rough, but at least they didn’t crash. If *The Whirlwind* hadn’t been traveling at such a high speed, they would’ve dropped faster. Instead, the velocity had worked to his advantage, giving Toby the time needed to manually override the systems that operated the flaps and ignited the secondary vertical thrusters. If not for that, *The Whirlwind* would’ve been sending its own distress signal.

Adrenaline coursed through him, and his hands trembled slightly. That had been too close. He'd left the Federation behind for this very reason. His commanders kept sending his team into situations where they'd barely escape by the skin of their teeth. He could honestly say he didn't miss the excitement, not one bit. When he found the person who shot the rocket that fouled his engine, he'd tan their hide. At least now he knew someone was alive.

After the adrenaline high passed and his hands quit trembling, Toby made his way to the cargo bay. Dressed the same as Toby, Nicius waited by the material mover, a battered yellow rover. Ginger stood next to the bay door, calibrating the ship's systems with the cuff covering her left forearm. From that one device, she'd control the ship regardless of where she was onboard.

Before Toby could speak, Ginger held out her hand. "I already received the report. I'll get the engine back up while you're taking a look around."

"Radio me if it's something that can't be fixed. I set up the monitors in the prep room with the live feed of the area around *The Whirlwind*, as well as to record the video from our biosuits." The biohazard suits he and Nicius wore had cameras situated in the helmet with a secondary camera next to the company logo over the left breast.

Ginger nodded. "You guys watch your asses out there."

Nicius took the seat behind the wheel of the rover, and Toby climbed up the side rail into the modified shield well. The rover roared to life, and Ginger opened the bay door, dropping the ramp then lowering the energy shields. Toby winced inwardly at the amount of noise made by the rumbling engine. Salvage jobs rarely needed stealth, but he wished they had one of the quieter machines because the rover was loudly stating, "Here we are!" to everything within hearing distance. The upside—the animal life for kilometers around would be warned off—hopefully.

Before the jungle engulfed them completely, Toby glanced back at *The Whirlwind*, looking for the faint blue glow of the ship's shields. Feeling better, knowing Ginger was secure, he returned his attention to the surrounding area. The hair on the back of his neck rose. His grip on the sidebar tightened, and he dropped his free hand to the shockwand, loosening the baton in its holster. They were being watched, Toby was sure, but other than some foliage moving in an odd way, he didn't see anyone or anything. But he could swear... Toby attempted to shake off the sensation, but the telltale itch persisted.

Chapter Four

The trek to the landing pad took longer than Toby liked. As *Genesis Nine* was a wilderness preserve, they had to leave as little footprint as possible while planetside. Although Toby had a pretty good idea that the crew of *SV Ark Royal* had ignored that particular law. The variety of trees was astounding, but the ones with bases wider than the circumference of his ship were the real beauties. They stretched high overhead, natural skyscrapers with heavy vines climbing the sides with white leaves that resembled papier-mâché snowflakes larger than a humanoid head. Black flowers with waving yellow filaments hung like lanterns overhead. In contrast to the beauty overhead, there were plants with gaping sharklike jaws with pulpy, brilliantly colored florae within, and low spiky petals that gave the impression the plant would hungrily snatch up unsuspecting small animals.

Everywhere Toby looked there was something new to see, but he dared not let down his guard or become distracted. He couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched. When they broke through the jungle to the clearing, Toby was ecstatic. The trees had been removed for the asphalt landing strip some time ago if he read the state of the surrounding foliage correctly. He turned slowly to ensure his vid feed captured everything he could see. The landing pad showed frequent usage. The question was—why?

“Someone's been a naughty boy,” Ginger commented over the comlink. “Toby, walk around the area for a better scope of the intrusion.”

“Sure thing.”

Nicius brought the rover to a halt, and Toby jumped off, returning to the edge that sloped into an apron that allowed smaller vehicles like the rover to leave the landing area. He walked to the edge until he came to a plowed dirt road that wound through the trees. Overhead, the canopy helped to disguise the man-made course.

Toby's gut roiled. His dad wouldn't be the only one who'd want a copy of the vid feed. This was a long time operation. The number of laws Quintessential Chemicals broke kept rising. Why would they report the “wreck” when they had to know any salvage company would contact the Federation over the illegal activities?

He returned to where Nicius had parked the rover, waiting for him. Hopping out of the driver's seat, Nicius went to the rear of the vehicle and unstrapped a

large box. Toby helped him carry it to the edge of where the concealed ship sat. Once the device was armed, he and Nicius hurried back to the rover and ducked behind it.

The sudden flash was bright even though he'd been turned away with his eyes covered. Peering over the edge of the material mover, Toby got his first look at the wreck that wasn't a wreck. The *SV Ark Royal* was a very expensive vessel, not some clunky biohazards ship.

"Toby, I think you two should come back. We are obviously in way over our heads." Ginger sounded uneasy.

"Agreed, but first we need to check for the crew. Someone sent up that flare." *And find out what kind of cargo these assholes carried.* "Do me a favor and contact Captain Shepherd, the company's Federation liaison. Send him a live feed, would you?" *Just in case.*

"Already on it. Hurry your asses up," Ginger snapped.

Turning back to the *SV Ark Royal*, an open bay door beckoned. Toby felt as if he peered into the maw of a beast. He was tempted to open his biosuit to retrieve his sidearm, but he didn't mess with the integrity of his protective gear. Instead, he drew the shockwand.

"Nicius, if you want, you can stay out here while I make a quick sweep of the ship."

Toby chuckled when Nicius squinted at him. "We should stick together." Nicius glanced over to the jungle. Did he feel as if they were being watched too?

As a kid, Toby loved the old time classics such as Jurassic Park—one of his favorite Hollywood movies. With the itch between his shoulders, he could vividly imagine a T. Rex thrashing through the forest, making enough noise to telegraph his lumbering approach. He'd thought such things pure fantasy until he joined the Federation and, on his first mission, was chased through a similar forest by a miniature T. Rex-shaped beast.

He waited and listened, but his instincts told him they were still being watched, not hunted. Regardless, they needed to get back to *The Whirlwind* soon.

Turning on his heel, he approached the ramp. "Hello, *Ark Royal*. Wentworth Salvage here. Anybody aboard?"

“Anybody alive,” Nicus quipped under his breath, giving Toby a dark smile.

When no answer came, they tromped up the ramp. Toby made extra noise. No sense getting shot because someone hadn't heard them coming. The motion sensor lights came on, and Toby called out again. Nicus crossed to the sophisticated-looking vehicles sitting strapped into bays. They were still locked down for flight or as if they hadn't been unstrapped for use after the ship landed. Further down, two other bays were empty.

Nicus tapped the logo on one of the rovers. “I've heard of this company. PHR Labs was the company that developed the vaccine for the coughing pox.”

Toby flinched. He had been a child, but old enough to remember the horror of the outbreak. A superbug resistant to all treatments swept through the Human population. Millions died. There wasn't a family untouched by the epidemic. Toby's mother and older sister had succumbed to the pox when Toby was six. PHR Labs had produced a medicine and then a vaccine more quickly than the critics thought should be possible. He recalled the angry accusations that the superbug had been engineered in the same labs that produced the cure, but he was too young to care about such things. PHR Labs seemed to have slipped into obscurity afterwards—until now.

Toby lead the way further into the ship, occasionally calling out even though he had an idea no one would answer. There was a whole lot of nothing on the lower levels: living quarters, recreation room, and mess hall. The ship's flight deck was locked down tight with all its systems requiring passwords and palm prints.

On the upper level, they found labs behind observation windows. The first ones had rows of shelves, containing globes of various types of plants. As Toby moved further down the hall, the labs turned more ominous—metal tables with restraints and equipment that didn't have any business on a ship.

“If the crew's dead, I'm not feeling very charitable toward them right now,” Nicus said after they passed a room that had restraints imbedded into the wall with a host of wires hanging from the ceiling.

“Look up.” Toby pointed to the top of the windows where the lip of a retractable wall could be seen. Searching for a switch, Toby found one at the very end. When he activated the pane, a wall fell to cover the windows, effectively hiding the rooms beyond.

“Assholes,” Nicus mumbled, considerable heat filling his voice.

Coming to the end of another hallway, the door was marked with a huge yellow biohazard symbol. When the hatch swooshed open, the room beyond was lined with racks of canisters carefully labeled.

Nicius picked up one and smirked at Toby. "Empty."

"What else are they hiding?" Toby knew they should turn around and leave. They had enough evidence for his dad and the Federation, but he felt in his gut there was more. Those restraints held humanoid people. Where were they?

"Here," Nicius called from the back of the room.

Toby followed the sound of Nicius tinkering with something on the wall. "Are you hot-wiring a panel? Do I even want to know where you learned to do that?"

Toby knew his dad employed people of dubious character, but he hadn't pegged Nicius to be one of them.

Nicius flashed a secretive grin over his shoulder, the helmet hiding half of his expression. "Nothing so drastic. Just something I learned when salvaging abandoned containers and we don't want to damage the case."

A door that hadn't been there before swooshed open, and just beyond were rows of cryo-containers. Each one held a person from different races. Toby suspected they were all from planets under Federation protection. People that most didn't know anything about because they hadn't the technology to emerge from the respective planets as of yet. Rage burned through him as he walked by each frost-clouded, glass-covered holding chamber. He counted eighteen in all, and made sure the cameras caught the labels above each occupant. Some within looked to be relatively untouched while others showed evidence of longtime abuse.

"I'm so ready to leave." Nicius's voice warbled. When Toby turned to look at him, Nicius's dark eyes shone suspiciously liquid. Nicius didn't have Toby's experience. He gave himself a mental kick for letting Nicius come this far.

"I'm sorry. Come on." He grasped Nicius's elbow and led him back the way they came, using the lift instead of winding their way back through the ship.

By the time Toby followed Nicius down the ramp to the landing pad, he'd worked himself up into a rage. Long ago, he'd stopped shedding tears over such sights, instead turning the emotion into anger. He was already devising plans to release the occupants of the cryo-containers. He would need help because he

could imagine that many of them would come out of cryo-sleep fighting, not that he blamed them. In the same circumstances, he'd do the same.

He unlatched his helmet, releasing a stream of colorfully descriptive cuss words he hadn't used since leaving the Federation.

Growling with frustration, he hailed *The Whirlwind*, "Hey, Ginger, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear. Your Captain Shepherd, he doesn't know you so well, does he, *mijo*? He's pissed we're planetside. Then he had kittens when he saw the vid-feed. I've already decided I'm going to write a book. This crazy shit is going to be all over the news. Are you headed back now? I made some popcorn."

"Toby," Nicius said in a loud whisper.

"Just a second, Nicius." Toby wanted to kick something or someone, but threw his helmet instead. "Ginger, did you get the engine back up and running?"

She hesitated. "No, still working on it."

"Then I need you to engage the cloak."

"Toby."

He waved his hand at Nicius. They had to hurry and make preparations. "There is no way Quintessential Chemicals reported *SV Ark Royal* as wrecked. They're going to try and clean this mess up before the Federation arrives. Turn off all unnecessary systems and leave as little electro-signature as possible. Hopefully they'll think *The Whirlwind* is one of their rovers. A couple seemed to be missing."

"Toby!" His elbow was snagged in Nicius's firm grip.

"What!" He followed Nicius's trembling finger to where the rover sat. "Oh."

There stood several very large males, or at least Toby thought they were males. The newcomers, possibly natives, didn't carry any obvious weapons, but that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. Surprisingly, they had very humanoid bodies and facial features. They wore pants with lacings along the outside of the thighs and over the groin. Briefly, Toby stared at the obvious bulges, wondering how humanlike the rest of their bodies were.

Tearing his eyes away, he noted the two who were baldheaded wore long sleeve shirts while the others with slender, smooth tentacles instead of hair were bare chested. Was the lack of clothing a sign of rank or something else? On average, their tentacles seemed to be about shoulder length, with the exception of the ones belonging to the two who stood in the forefront of the group. Where the other's had skin tones in light shades of red, orange, and yellow, those two were much darker. One of the males was a deep purple, his skin highlighted with black. His tentacles reached midback, with several draped across his shoulders and around his neck. As dramatically pretty as he was, the blue male was the one who caught and held Toby's attention.

He raked his gaze down the length of the dark turquoise body. Toby thought he had to be at least a head taller than Toby's own six foot four, with a hard, sculpted body that Toby wished he could explore. If any of them were the leader, Toby would place his money on the male who stared back at him with an appreciative eye.

"Who are they?" Nicius whispered. He'd moved close, and Toby felt him hook fingers into the back of Toby's belt.

The movement brought Toby back to himself. He was slightly stunned and a bit ashamed that in the middle of a dangerous situation he'd inappropriately popped wood in a sudden rush of lust. He cleared his throat and answered Nicius, "My first guess would be natives."

Frustrated in more ways than one, Toby forced himself to put aside the unwanted attraction, and he reassessed these newcomers with military eyes. In addition to not carrying weapons, they didn't act hostile or agitated. Toby had read a quick profile on the indigenous people of the planet. There hadn't been photos, but the descriptions were pretty close to what he saw before him.

The one with the turquoise skin, who so fascinated Toby, stood taller than the others, and as he'd suspected, the others deferred to him. Easily twice Toby's width, and with more muscle than the most stalwart Human bodybuilder, Toby could see how the leader could easily intimidate someone by just standing there. From his brow, running in rows to the back of his head, the leader had a mass of smooth, ropelike tentacles falling in thick waves to his knees. His tentacles seemed to undulate in the wind, until Toby realized the air was still. Did his tentacles move of their own accord? What did they feel like? The leatherlike pants hugged the leader, showing every curve of muscle in his legs and a package—*oh, lordy*—that seemed to be evidence he was very male.

Enthralled, he caught the leader's gaze. Damn if he didn't trip all of Toby's kink switches—which was extremely inappropriate, but his dick didn't care as it attempted to stand up and wave.

Speaking of waving, the apparent leader of the natives slowly moved toward them, his blue tentacles doing what looked like a happy dance. Toby cocked his head to the side. Was he seeing things? Perhaps his dad was correct, and he was sex starved, because from the tips of the tentacles emerged what appeared to be cockheads.

“Well, light my fire, that's a first.”

“First what?” Nicius made a garbled noise.

“Stay behind me. If all else fails, retreat to *The Royal* and close the bay door.”

“I doubt that will work, considering we're surrounded. What are we supposed to do?” Nicius's voice held only a slight tremor.

Toby glanced over his shoulder to see another six males. He quickly assessed Nicius, satisfied to see he was holding up well. Mustering a confidence he didn't entirely feel, he grinned at Nicius and raised his hands in the air.

“The only thing we can. Say hello and hope they're friendly.”

Nicius snorted, raising his free hand, his other still clutching the back of Toby's belt. “Considering the crew from the *SV Ark Royal* is missing, I kinda doubt they're friends.”

“Positive thoughts, Nicius. Positive thoughts.” Toby hoped the natives weren't cannibals. An unbidden grin twitched on his lips. Then again, being “eaten” by big, blue, and handsome wouldn't be so bad.

Chapter Five

Sol was notified when the sensors alerted the compound of another vessel entering orbit around the planet. Normally, he'd watch from home base as the ship was scanned for sentient life and technology as they'd done many times in the past. They'd been left alone for centuries. Hiding their presence from the probing vessels with ease, they'd lived in relative peace... until a ship landed and built a landing platform.

Five days ago, the sages ordered whole communities moved, further hiding evidence of their intelligence from those who wandered their jungles with the curiosity of the very young. Some of the people smelled of old, bitter blood, and he recognized the hard gazes of others who had no compunction about killing. He'd explored off-world enough to understand these people were up to no good. But the sages had refused to listen. Instead of forcing the intruders out, his people hid. Since then, trepidation had built among the citizens as they wondered why the outsiders had come.

Many extrapolated the newcomers were pirates—black marketers looking for an out of the way location to hide their stashes. Others believed them to be a Federation-sanctioned biological expedition, especially since some of the crew members gathered soil, water, and plant samples. Sol had discovered the outsiders were a cross between the two extremes: an illegal lab that captured indigenous peoples. Sol's team had uncovered the hidden rooms where experiments had obviously taken place.

When the outsiders came too close to discovering the groves, Sol had the whole of them gathered up and detained until the sages could decide on a course of action. He contained a few of the scientists in a room with a potted bence. Native to the planet, the bence was a special flower whose fragrance loosened men's tongues. Upon questioning the captured crew, they confessed to be searching for cures to diseases as well as attempting to devise hybrids for military contracts. The captives hadn't told Sol anything he hadn't already discovered from the supposedly encrypted files, but they'd only been in custody for a couple of days. He might have uncovered more if he hadn't been pulled from the questioning to investigate the new ship that arrived.

While the clan heads met to discuss contacting the outside world, Sol was charged with ensuring the safety of the people. Now another vessel had arrived. Sol had been expecting them, although who'd been sent was a surprise.

According to the data gleaned from the communications between *The Whirlwind* and the Federation, Wentworth Salvage had been sent on a seemingly easy assignment. Regardless of what he'd overheard, Sol exercised caution, waiting to see what would happen. He knew the salvage company could be a front for the lab company in an attempt to capture one of the Vohnahs or retrieve what the lab company didn't want found.

"There are only three life signs on board." Elion Xharlion, Sol's second-in-command joined him, dropping in a crouch behind the brush hiding Sol from the view of the small craft. "Their captain sent a message to the Federation patrol, once from orbit and again a few minutes ago."

"Have we heard back from the team tracking the person who sent up the rocket?" They had been startled by the appearance of the armament. He'd been under the impression all of *SV Ark Royal's* personnel had been rounded up. He'd immediately sent out scouts to apprehend whoever had given the alert. The unexpected side effect was *The Whirlwind* had been compromised and almost crashed.

Elion's thick, deep-purple tentacles wrapped around his shoulders, patches of glossy black dotting the underside of the short appendages. Not as tall or broad as Sol, Elion was thicker around the chest and thighs. His compelling golden-orange eyes had caught Elion many a Human lover on the few occasions Elion had accompanied Sol off-planet.

"Do you think the outsider will make his way to this ship if he's able?" Elion pointed to *The Whirlwind*.

"Perhaps. We'll leave a team here to keep watch over *The Whirlwind*. It disturbs me that a member of *Ark Royal's* crew slipped through our grasp. I want him found before he damages or harms something else. I don't want to ask the Federation for help to track down one person. There have been too many outsiders traipsing through our forests as it is." As angry as Sol was about the situation, he rarely let his ire show. His men would take their cues from him, and he needed them calm and rational.

At least one issue had been taken out of their hands. With the Federation on the way, their involvement would make the sages' debate about contacting others for assistance easier. Sol's tentacles moved restlessly, the only outward evidence of his internal agitation. The actions of the crew of *SV Ark Royal* would change the simple, peaceful lives of his people.

Elion spoke low, bringing Sol out of his thoughts. “The captain of *The Whirlwind* ignored the last message from the Federation. The advice was prudent since they only have three crew members.”

Sol didn't agree. “Any leader worth his salt would want to make sure no one was in need of assistance or rescue.”

Elion snorted. “But they are only three.”

Sol understood what Elion was implying. He and Elion sometimes left the planet to explore the nearest inhabited worlds. They both considered the variety of races eye-opening, but found most to be soft, vulnerable, and with terrible instincts. “I guess we'll see what kind of leader he is.”

The ramp to the bay door dropped, and a machine lumbered out carrying two of the three crewmen. Both were covered head to toe in white protective suits.

“What species are they?” Sol asked in a low voice. He couldn't remember if he'd been given a designation in the initial report.

Elion smirked. “Human.” With that tidbit of information Elion activated his personal shield, disappearing before Sol's eyes.

“You did that on purpose,” he accused, and a chuckle sounded off to Sol's right. Quickly, Sol activated his own shield before the Humans spotted him. He had a few choice words for Elion. Sol enjoyed the company of Humans. They were exotic in appearance, in how they tasted, and each one had their own unique bouquet of pheromones. Sol's length hardened at the mere thought of running his hands over the mixture of silky soft skin in contrast to the rough texture of body hair. Sol's people didn't have body hair of any kind, and he found the combination on the Humans intriguing.

The machine chugged by, and he noticed the two Humans didn't force their way through the jungle. The one standing on the side of the vehicle glanced about, his eyes never staying long on one location. He held himself ready—much like the fighters of Sol's team would.

The brief glimpse through the clear faceplate of the helmet gave Sol the view of short, light-brown hair and a strong chin. Bright, blue eyes met Sol's. He held his breath, certain the Human saw past the cloak. Then the gaze moved on. For some reason, disappointment weighed on Sol as he watched the vehicle rumble past. Before he could follow, the Human looked back, meeting Sol's gaze again, his brow creased in an expression of thought or perhaps confusion.

Sol could already hear Elion calling him every kind of fool for being elated. The Human might not see Sol's people, but he sensed their presence.

If only the situation was different, he would've pursued the Human and coaxed him to adorn his bed. Unfortunately, he had duties he couldn't put aside, but perhaps later, if the Human was amiable.

Sol and his team followed the two Humans and their obnoxious machine through the jungle. They took care to disturb their surroundings as little as possible, already setting themselves apart from those who came before. Sol began to think of the male as "his Human" after the third time his gaze stopped on Sol. He found he wanted very much for his Human to see him, to look upon him. Sol wondered if the man would like what he saw.

The team easily paced the battered yellow vehicle. Sol sped up because he hungered to see more of his Human's face and the hints at the form hidden by the baggy protective gear. Not that he particularly cared how his Human's body was shaped. Sol found all Humans exotic in all their differences. In the excursions off-planet, Sol had greedily sampled many, but to be able to see the features of the one who peaked his curiosity—the thought of exploring the body under the bulky white suit heated his blood. Suddenly Sol was impatient and agitated. He was eager to be at the end of his subterfuge and meet the curious man.

When they parked the machine on the landing pad, the way his Human moved confirmed what Sol'd expected. He was a warrior, stalking like a predator toward the *SV Ark Royal*. When he ordered his crew member to send the live footage to the Federation, the Human's intentions were clear, pleasing Sol immensely. He would've been sorely disappointed if his Human had been in league with the company responsible for abducting people from other worlds.

Sol sent a quick message to the clan sages, waiting impatiently for their orders. The sages detested the need to interact with the Federation, but unfortunately, there would be no choice.

The communicator alerted him to the reply from the elders. They actually sounded relieved, probably because the intruders would be taken off their hands. Sol flinched as he listened to the rest, his gaze immediately going to Elion where he spoke to a member of the team. Elion excused himself and moved to Sol's side. Sol dropped his shield, his team following suit. The need to hide their presence from the crew of *The Whirlwind* no longer needed.

“The clan leaders have placed me in charge of liaising with the Federation when they arrive. I’m only allowed to assign unmated males to the patrol teams,” Sol supplied at Elion’s questioning expression.

“You’ve been telling them for some time we couldn’t stay hidden forever,” Elion replied.

There were some Vohnahs who were like Sol and ventured off-world from time to time. In the past, Vohnahs had been considered a great warrior race, roaming the universe, and conquering all who opposed them. The older and wiser of the people had yearned for peace, but there was a price: Vohnahs aggression had only been countered by sexual satiation, otherwise they warred among themselves. Once a balance had been found, the Vohnahs remained on their homeworld enjoying the solitude, using their advanced technology to hide their presence from all others.

Now the Vohnahs had been in seclusion for ages. Normally, Sol didn’t mind living in solitude, with predictable days and devoting time to his favorite projects. Those who created family clusters spent half the time reveling in sexual comfort with their chosen partners. There were those like Sol who ventured off-world, bringing back news and information from the neighboring planets. Although the majority returned home, a few didn’t, only to be seen on news-vids in the middle of some foreign battle.

Unique among his people, Sol stayed unmatched longer than most, the sages worried about his balance of aggression. When he teetered on the edge, Sol left for the closest settlement and spent months seeking sexual gratification among the exotic Humans. But he always returned home to protect his people. Sol didn’t choose to be alone—he simply hadn’t discovered one he found worthy of starting a family cluster with.

“Even if the sages didn’t abhor outside contact, you would still be the best candidate to speak with the Federation.” Elion bumped Sol’s shoulder. “None of the other unmated are as at ease as you among outsiders. You like Humans. I think the only worry the elders have is that you might fuck your way through the Federation’s delegation.”

Sol scowled, ignoring Elion’s laughter. “The sages worry too much over outsiders influencing us. We would not be easily tipped back into a life of bloodshed and violence. I do believe they should’ve sent sated males. They would be more balanced than the men I have now.” Sol didn’t confide he was having problems keeping his mind on the issue at hand and off a particular

Human who hadn't even spoken a word to him. If Sol was this on edge, then how close was his team?

"You don't think the unmated will fall into bloodlust, do you?" Elion's gaze raked over their team members. "Sometimes I think the sages are more worried about their own welfare without considering the whole."

"I fear their overconfidence is my fault. All of the unmated who've been trained by me have been taught how to remain balanced, even though they haven't settled into family clusters. The same principles will not work if they have to fight and defend the clans." The sages were aware of this, most of them being old enough to remember the side effects of war themselves.

"Then I suggest we open the coupling tent tonight. I don't believe we will have time to do more than that to ready the unmated," Elion suggested.

"Quintessential Chemicals will send others to retrieve their vessel and what it hides. If they arrive before the Federation, we will be forced to fight whether we want to or not."

Elion glanced to the vessel again, and Sol narrowed his eyes at his second-in-command. "What?"

Elion straightened to his full height. "The one Human seemed to be able to sense us. I was thinking I would—"

Sol released a low rumbling noise. Elion lusted after his Human. His smooth tentacles writhed around his knees, a sign of rising aggravation. Elion's skin darkened, his shorter, thicker tentacles fanning out around him like a halo. Typically, Sol wasn't possessive over a potential bed partner. They were plentiful, and he knew where to find ones who were willing. But his Human with the excellent instincts and the stride of a strong male wasn't one he wanted to release to another.

With a quick smile and a low bow, Elion stepped away, his challenging posture suddenly gone. "If the male doesn't choose you as his bed partner, then I reserve the right to seek his companionship later."

At that moment, the two Humans stomped loudly down the ship's ramp. Sol's Human removed his helmet, talking aloud, giving orders, probably to his crew member back at his own ship. His gestures were aggressive, angry. The scent carried on the wind was most intoxicating. Sol had never wanted a male as he wanted this one.

The smaller Human noticed Sol's team and froze, but his Human remained oblivious in his righteous rage. The distraction gave Sol time to take in the golden skin of the male's face. The light-brown hair was short, and Sol imagined how it would feel against his palms. His Human had a dark swath of facial hair on his lower cheeks, chin, and around his mouth. Sol had been taught this was called stubble. He rumbled his approval, wanting to run his tongue over the rough texture, leave teeth marks on that strong chin. The man wasn't as pale as those who spent most of their time in space. A straight prominent nose between those brilliant blue eyes that didn't seem to miss anything—well, until that moment.

Sol listened with half an ear to what his Human said, waiting to see how the man reacted to the presence of his team. The smaller Human called him Toby. Sol grinned at knowing one more thing about the male he wanted to be his. When Toby finally noticed they were not alone, he wasn't disappointed in Toby's reaction. The posture of Toby's body changed, going on alert, but not turning hostile. He held his hands out away from his body even as he slowly took in Sol and the other males surrounding them. A cocky grin twisted Toby's lips, revealing a set of deep dimples. Sol didn't tamp down his body's instinctual reaction to Toby's heated stare. His tentacles moved about him, the ends opening up to release mating pheromones.

Not wanting to scare Toby or his crewmate, Sol slowly approached. "Elion, keep your distance until I can garner his—their cooperation."

Elion laughed. "We'll pull back. Just try to not seduce him on the landing pad."

Sol refrained from sending a frown over his shoulder to Elion. He would ensure Toby chose him before they went back to the compound. Otherwise, Elion would do as he'd promised and pursue Toby. Sol had no wish to see if Elion would back away from a formal challenge.

As he approached, Toby and his companion raised their hands into the air. He enjoyed the way Toby's gaze raked over his form. Sol switched to merchant Standard English. "Greetings, I am Commander Sol Inari of the Vohnahs."

He stopped a couple of meters away and looked down at Toby. Up close, his Human was more attractive than he first thought. His eyes caught on the path Toby's pink tongue made as he licked his lips. Was he nervous? Did the tang of arousal clouding the air belong to Toby or his companion? What had Toby called the man? Nicius? Glancing to the male who partially hid behind

Toby, Sol read only shock and a hint of fear from Nicius. Then the arousal had to be Toby's, which pleased Sol immensely.

"Uhm. Hello. Toby Wentworth of Wentworth Salvage. We were sent to clean up a wreck." Toby hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "They lied." He paused. "Negative, Ginger. Work on getting the ship operational."

Sol tilted his head, hoping Toby would trust him enough to explain, even though Sol knew Toby spoke to the crew member back at his ship. He hid a grin when Toby did just that.

Toby pointed to the device in his ear. "Sorry, having multiple conversations at once. We experienced some electrical problems earlier, but we'll be on our way shortly."

"I'm sorry the rocket harmed your ship. We are looking into what happened." Sol glanced at the *SV Ark Royal*. His team had to address the cryochambers before he could take Toby back to the compound.

Toby followed his gaze, a deep frown marring his forehead, and his open, friendly expression turned suspicious. Before Sol knew what Toby was doing, he unzipped the front of the biosuit, and reached under his arm, withdrawing a weapon. Sol grinned. He shouldn't have, because Toby could seriously injure him, though he couldn't help but find he was very pleased his Human was so well prepared.

"This planet is under a protected status, but you're speaking merchant English. Are you the crew of the *SV Ark Royal*? We have no wish to get in your way. If you'll step aside, we will go back to our ship and leave." Toby's eyes flicked to something behind Sol, but Sol didn't take his eyes off of Toby. He only hoped Elion didn't do anything to cause Toby to shoot him.

"We are not the crew of this ship." Sol couldn't keep the snarl out of his voice. "We have them in custody and—"

Toby stiffened, and Sol reacted on instinct. His tentacles were such a length that the distance between he and Toby was easy to cross in a split second. From the end of one shot a clear substance that landed on Toby's chin. Toby frowned, freeing one of his hands from the weapon to wipe at his face.

"Did you just spit at me?" Toby's nose wrinkled.

"Not exactly," Sol replied, rushing forward to catch Toby as his eyes rolled up in the back of his head and he crumpled toward the ground.

Toby's crewmate went down with him. Sol belatedly realized the Human Nicius had been holding on to Toby, and he bit back a snarl. Who was Nicius to Toby to hold on to him in such a way?

"Holy shit, what did you do to Toby?" Nicius's eyes were wild as he jerked his hand from Toby's belt. Instead of scrabbling away, as Sol thought he would, Nicius surged forward and shoved at Sol's chest. Not that the puny movement actually moved Sol. "Leave him alone. He did nothing wrong. We just want to go back to our ship."

Nicius scrabbled to withdraw a baton from his belt, and Sol caught his hands. "He has not been harmed. I wouldn't have had to put him to sleep if he hadn't pulled the weapon. I could not allow him to harm me or my men. We are not the fools who came here upon that ship. For now, the two of you will accompany us to our camp."

He met Nicius's scowl and waited to see if the Human had anything more to say. When Nicius remained silent, Sol checked the weapon Toby had dropped, making sure the safety was on before he motioned to Elion. "Change the security settings on the ship and lock it up. Send a team back to extract the cryo-containers and bring them to the medical facilities at the compound. With luck, we can free them from their cryo-sleep before the Federation arrives. Besides, I suspect Quintessential Chemicals will attempt to steal the vessel back. The information this ship holds isn't something they would want the Federation to discover. I want six guards on duty here at all times, and two sets on the salvage vessel. I will take these two back to the compound. Meet me when you are finished."

Elion nodded in acknowledgement before he issued orders in a raised voice. Nicius wrenched his hands free from Sol, hissing, "Don't touch him!"

He sat back on his heels, hoping the space would calm Nicius. "We mean neither one of you harm."

Nicius pulled Toby's head into his lap. "We have nothing to do with that ship. We were only supposed to check for biohazards."

Sol made soft noises of agreement, watching Nicius's trembling hand pat Toby's chest. "Nicius." He waited until Nicius lifted his gaze. "We know you are not involved."

"They are monsters." Nicius gave a fair imitation of a predator's growl.

“Agreed. Once the Federation arrives, we will hand over the *Ark Royal*'s crew. But until then, allow us to show you and Toby our hospitality. The two of you would be the first real guests we Vohnahs have invited into our homes.”

Nicius stilled, and his gaze moved to something behind Sol. He turned to see Elion approaching. Sol glanced between the two of them, noticing the agitated movements of Nicius's hands had lessened as he watched Elion with open curiosity—which Elion returned.

Narrowing his eyes as he considered, Sol quickly made a decision. “Nicius, I would like to introduce my second-in-command, Elion Xharlion.”

Elion sat on his heels next to Sol and held out his hand. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Nicius's eyes widened, but instead of pulling away, as Sol feared he might, Nicius tentatively placed his white-gloved hand in Elion's.

“Nicius Asmarsson, biohazards specialist for Wentworth Salvage. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

Sol held back his smirk when Elion placed his other hand over Nicius's. Elion's gaze dropped to where Toby lay, a small frown marring his expression. “Perhaps we should get your friend out of the sun to someplace more comfortable.”

Nicius chewed his lip as he contemplated, his hand still held by Elion. “We're not prisoners?”

“No, you two would be honored guests,” Sol reassured, tamping down on the impulse to take Toby from Nicius, but he knew the action wouldn't do anything to convince Nicius that he and Toby weren't going to be harmed.

Finally, Nicius nodded. “All right.”

Sol indicated Toby. “May I?”

Barely waiting for assent from Nicius, Sol gently gathered Toby in his arms. Nicius removed his helmet and gloves, nervously running his hand through his pink and blue hair. His gaze kept darting up to Elion's, and when Elion offered to help Nicius to stand, Nicius readily accepted.

“Tell me, Nicius, have you worked with Wentworth Salvage for long? I have been to other worlds and would be very interested...”

Sol tuned out Elion's chatter. Once he secured Toby against his chest, he rose to his feet. He refrained from burying his nose in Toby's hair and filling

his nose with that delectable scent that had been teasing him since Toby had removed his helmet. His tentacles began to dance again as his excitement rose at the thought of Toby adorning his bed. What sounds would he make? It was a pity he had to sedate Toby, but he couldn't take the chance that Toby would disregard his words or overreact.

As oldest among the unmated, his tentacles had matured into their many uses. He could lure and incapacitate his prey, incite his men into battle frenzy, heal minor cuts, heighten his bed partner's arousal, or bind another to him. The chemical makeup of his venom could be changed at will and was part of the reason he'd been chosen as commander of his people's defense.

Elion and Nicius, along with two of Sol's men, followed him back to the compound. The rest stayed to carry out Elion's orders. Sol took a path opposite of the one the Humans had created. When a wall of entwined trees and vines loomed before him, Sol didn't hesitate, but walked through a space in the illusion. On the other side, a long tunnel stretched out before him. The barrier around the compound was partially real with only a handful of places where his people could enter. At the end of the tunnel was an observation room where his identity was verified before a guard opened an unseen door.

The guard glanced down at his Human, lust flaring in his eyes. Sol cradled Toby closer. No other would taste the treat he held. Elion had been correct. They would have to open the coupling tent tonight. Giving a few terse orders, Sol hurried away, anxious to get Toby within the safety of his rooms. He didn't need any others forming an interest in Toby. Even as he thought it, Sol scowled because never had he worried about competing with his brethren for the attentions of a man. He'd been attracted to Humans before and fumbled for a reason why he wanted Toby more than any other that had crossed Sol's path.

The compound resembled a small village. The dwellings were incorporated into the naturally hollow echo trees that grew to be twenty stories high with the circumference rivaling that of many moderately sized space vessels. His people built homes and businesses within the interior of the massive trunks. Bridges spanned overhead, connecting one to another, so people wouldn't have to descend in order to go from place to place. Sol loved the natural, simplistic design, preferring the sight to the more prominent metal and stone buildings of the neighboring worlds.

Not wanting to deal with the internal stairs, he used the lift. Nudging the pulley, the platform raised quickly upwards, passing several balconies until he came to his own. Stepping off, Sol sent the lift back to the ground before

carrying Toby inside. He'd never been so satisfied to bring a bed partner to his rooms before and wondered, fleetingly, if Toby would consider staying with Sol for a while.

But he was getting ahead of himself. Toby could be uninterested. The thought made Sol rumble with displeasure. He laid Toby on the bed then divested him of the white protective suit. He grinned impishly into the camera he found on the suit's breast. Toby's crewmate was probably worried. Plucking the earpiece from Toby, Sol held it to the side of his head, the device too diminutive for him to wear. He was immediately assaulted with a barrage of expletives that made him smile into the camera.

"You smug, arrogant bastard. Just you wait until the rest of us get here. If one hair on his head is hurt, they will skin you alive!"

"He is in no danger from us, from me. He was the one to pull his weapon. As you have seen, I haven't placed him in a holding cell, where the other intruders are being kept, but brought him to my personal accommodations." Sol turned the camera so she—he assumed the crewmate was female by the sound of her voice, even as vicious as she sounded—could see the room.

"He is not some sex toy for you to play with. His heart is battered enough without having to endure a rutting idiot."

He turned the camera back to himself, frowning then lifting his lip in distaste, showing her exactly what he thought of her accusations. "We Vohnahs aren't a depraved people who would force ourselves on the unwilling."

Although other races had once viewed the Vohnahs as nothing more than brutish thugs whose only qualities were their prowess on the battlefield and in the bedchamber, his people were a civilized race. They forced none into companionship, but that didn't mean Sol wouldn't attempt to seduce Toby to his bed.

Understanding the concern of Toby's crewmate didn't mean he would endure anymore berating. "You would be wise to heed Toby's orders. Cloak your ship. Power down unnecessary systems, and hopefully, you will be passed over if Quintessential Chemicals scans the surface before attempting to reclaim their vessel. Pray your Federation comes in time because if we go into battle, your Human eyes will not like what you will see."

Sol threw both the suit and the comlink into a drawer and slammed it closed. Normally, he ignored the snide comments and accusations from other races when he was off-world; he simply left the establishment, unbothered,

because their opinions mattered not at all to him. What if Toby made the same assumptions as his crewmate? What did she mean Toby's heart was battered enough? Who would abuse Toby so? As far as Sol could tell, Toby was a man of integrity, if Toby's words and behavior after leaving the *SV Ark Royal* was taken into account. He was a man esteemed enough by his crew that one stayed even though his body language said he wanted to flee and the other issued threats.

For the first time since his youth, Sol considered courting someone. Instead of being startled by the revelation, he seriously pondered the idea. He lusted after Toby, more so than he had over others. If he wanted to, he could explain the heightened interest with the fact he found Toby's form especially pleasing to the eye. He stared down at Toby laying atop pristine white bedclothes. His navy blue pants hugged his thighs just as snugly as the shirt molded to Toby's torso like a second skin.

Sol retrieved a warm cloth, making sure he cleaned off all the traces of the essence that had put Toby to sleep. Toby's scent, the alluring mixture of man and musk, deepened any surface desire Sol felt. Vohnahs were a people with a heightened sense of smell, easily sorting through odors and pheromones to pinpoint those they found most pleasing. Toby's scent made Sol's skin tighten and aroused him without any accompanying touches.

Moving to the foot of the bed, Sol removed Toby's shoes before adjusting the gauze netting that would keep the insects away from Toby and allowed him to rest without disturbance. He sighed, watching Toby breathe, and pushed away the superficial excuses, admitting, if only to himself, that he'd been ready to search for someone to build a family cluster with for some time now. He was only holding off because the sages would have fought him if he wished to bring a Human home. Outsiders were expressly forbidden from coming planetside. Not that he had a Human in mind before now. He had planned to search once the issue with *SV Ark Royal* was taken care of. It was unusual that one caught his attention so quickly. When he traveled off-world, he usually sat and watched, choosing his quarry with care. Then again, Sol's selection had always been Human civilians. He'd stayed away from the Federation officers in deference to keeping his people's secrets.

Toby had intrigued him from the beginning, and the interest had only deepened. With Toby, Sol saw someone whom he admired just from watching and listening. He looked forward to getting to know Toby because he had the feeling Toby Wentworth had layers, and Sol would enjoy peeling each one

back to learn about the man. That Toby seemed attracted in return gave Sol heart. It was time he put down roots. He would offer Toby a courtship, making sure his Human understood that a courtship wasn't a promise but an exercise to gauge compatibility.

He quietly left the room, heading to the food pantry. Sol had scented Toby's sexual desire, but there was the worry Toby wouldn't be interested in settling down and building a family. He'd met many Humans who preferred brief dalliances to love affairs. If so, then Sol would move on, although the thought made his chest ache with disappointment. But that didn't mean Sol wouldn't try to persuade Toby. With a wide grin and renewed determination, he entered the pantry to see if he had something savory to feed Toby when he woke. Sol wondered if the delectable Human had a sweet tooth.

Chapter Six

A heavenly scent woke Toby. When did any of his brothers learn how to cook? Opening his eyes, the sight before him made him sit up quickly because he didn't recognize anything about his surroundings. What had happened suddenly came back. He and Nicius encountered what could possibly be natives. The one who spoke to him, Sol Inari, with his hard, sculpted body and hair—tentacles—Toby wanted to fondle, had approached them, speaking merchant Standard English. Toby actually had to look up into that brooding face with eyes that spoke of heat, and lust, and naughty things Toby didn't dare wish for.

Shoving aside his wayward thoughts, he rolled off the bed and almost became entangled in the sheer curtains. He landed on the floor in a crouch, heart pounding as he assessed himself. He wasn't chained or imprisoned that he could tell. The knife was still strapped to his leg. His gaze quickly scanned his surroundings, taking everything in.

The room looked like any bedroom that he'd ever seen, although the furnishings were more extravagant than most. The furniture was made of beautifully carved wood that would cost a small fortune back home. There were personal touches everywhere that told Toby someone regularly used the room. Golden wood paneled the walls and floors. The bed was massive with gauzy curtains hanging from the ceiling. Glancing around, he noted two doorways and an open window.

Quietly he crossed the room and looked out. He was shocked to see how high up he was—in a tree. But oh, wow, the view was spectacular. He leaned further over the windowsill for a better look at the suspended bridges and colorful walkways draped like Christmas lights through the branches. He'd never seen the like, and the urge to explore hit Toby hard. He could imagine spending days lounging under the canopies, making love—

Toby quickly stepped away from the window, angry with himself. Here he was in an unknown and possibly dangerous situation, daydreaming about something he would never, ever have. Ignoring the ache in his chest, Toby checked out the two open doorways. One led to a closet with neatly arranged clothing made from materials Toby didn't recognize. The other opened to a short hallway leading to a common room. The polished wood continued, only broken up by colorful woven rugs and a long, low table surrounded by jewel-toned pillows.

From what he'd seen so far, it was obvious the people who'd met him and Nicius outside the *SV Ark Royal* were really natives and not the missing crew members as Toby had thought. Guilt over jumping to conclusions swamped Toby. He drew his weapon on an innocent. It was suspicious that someone from a nature preserve, who didn't have the technology to leave the surface, spoke fluent merchant Standard English. Merchant English was the common language used by all the races for trade. It was the one language they all shared after they were invited into the Assembly of Representatives. Thinking upon the issue, Toby acknowledged there could be a number of reasons for Sol's knowledge. Perhaps this planet had more visitors than the Federation was aware of.

He put the question aside for later. Toby was surprised that he hadn't been confined for threatening Sol with a weapon, and he wondered why, even as he was thankful he hadn't lost his freedom.

He followed a humming and came upon the native commander, Sol Inari, the same person he'd pulled his weapon on. Sol stood in what Toby assumed was a food preparation area. Unlike the modern kitchens he was used to, there weren't any devices or electronics that he could see. He guessed it made sense. All the scans had come up with nothing when they'd looked for technology.

Sol had his back to him. From what Toby could see on the counter, Sol seemed to be working on carving some kind of fruit. He still only wore the britches that looked to be made of a kind of leather or hide. Not that Toby minded because the view of the unadorned broad back was more than nice. Everything about Sol flipped every single one of Toby's switches, at least the ones he admitted to himself. If he weren't technically on a job, Toby would be working to see if they were sexually compatible. His heart sped at the thought even as he remembered the snide comments by some of Spencer's friends.

While staying on the surface, Toby had accompanied Spencer to many meet and greets. At the time, he'd argued with some of Spencer's more elitist, snobbish friends, who'd complained how some Humans were indiscriminate in their choices in sexual partners and mated with every race they came across. Toby knew and was friends with many non-Humans. Who was he or anyone else to tell anyone who they chose to love was wrong? Toby hadn't indulged himself in exploring his attraction to the few non-Humans he'd met while on a mission. Usually his assignments with the Federation got in the way, but there was more than one time a non-Human had turned his head and sparked his lust. But not as much as this being before him. Toby had never been so distracted from his duties before. He'd always sneered at the recruit who couldn't focus

past his libido, and here he was, no better for all the lascivious thoughts running through his mind about what he'd really like Sol to do to him.

The direction of his thoughts would get him nowhere fast. He'd learned his lesson. *Do not covet what you cannot have.* He must've made some kind of noise because Sol stood to his full height and glanced over his shoulder. Toby swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry at the tempered heat in Sol's eyes. The long tentacles that had been languidly swaying around Sol's body moved faster, the end of the blunt tips expanding. Never in his life had he ever seen anything so... so... fucking erotic. Toby couldn't take his eyes off the smooth appendages, wondering what they would feel like in his hands. Were the ends really what they appeared to be? Cockheads?

As enthralled as he was, Toby missed Sol's question.

"Are you hungry?" Sol repeated.

"Oh!" All he'd had was the coffee sludge aboard *The Whirlwind*. He was starving, but he wasn't sure if he should take food from Sol. If he couldn't stomach the fare, Toby didn't want to offend him. "Yes, but—"

"Have a seat over there." Sol indicated a low table surrounded by bright pillows before turning back to his food preparation.

Toby stood there, not sure what to do, and he realized he was approaching the situation as if he were still Federation personnel, acting as if he had a mission to complete. He wasn't part of the Federation anymore. He didn't need to be back at *SV Ark Royal*, waiting for orders from his commander. Nor did he need to hunt down the crew who'd broken Federation law. What he needed to know was his crew were safe and in no danger, but that didn't mean he had to go without eating or declining Sol's hospitality. For the moment, he would surmise that if he was being treated well then Nicius was too.

He blushed, the tips of his ears heating, when Sol glanced back to see he hadn't moved. "There was a man with me, Nicius. Do you know where he is?"

Sol laid the knife on the counter and wiped his hands on a cloth as he turned to Toby. "Your crewmate is with my second-in-command. The two of you are our guests. Elion is most likely giving Nicius a tour of our compound. I can take you to see him after we eat, if you so desire."

Toby didn't think that he could feel any worse about drawing his sidearm on Sol as he did at that moment. He cleared his throat and shifted on his feet, thinking about how much of an idiot he was. "Is there something that I can do to help? You really don't need to go through all of this trouble for me."

Sol's grin was wicked, an unspoken promise. That direct gaze distracted Toby from his guilt and caused his stomach to somersault with want. "I am finished. Come, sit with me." When Sol stepped back, he revealed a platter of what appeared to be fruits and vegetables cut into shapes that resembled animals and plants.

Toby followed Sol, sitting cross-legged where Sol indicated. Sol set the platter on the table and went back into the preparation area. He was a little taken aback when Sol returned with a bowl of hot water, and knelt next to Toby.

"May I?" Sol tapped Toby's socked foot. It took a moment for Toby to understand what Sol offered.

"You don't have to." Toby reached for the washcloth, but Sol moved it out of his reach.

"But I want to." Sol gave Toby a sly grin that Toby found himself returning before he wiped the expression from his face. "Please, I insist. We cannot eat until this is done."

Feeling guilty for giving Sol a hard time, Toby untucked his feet. With great care Sol removed Toby's socks. The act seemed intimate, confusing Toby. He'd never heard of such customs, but would he really, having spent the majority of his life around soldiers?

To distract himself, Toby asked, "Have you seen my biosuit? I should contact my ship and let them know I'm fine."

Sol dipped the cloth into the bowl of steaming water. "Your other crew member aboard *The Whirlwind* is quite irate. She had a few choice words for me when I attempted to alleviate her concerns about your welfare. I dare say she doesn't like me much." The twist of Sol's lips was more a grimace than a smile.

Toby snorted out an abrupt laugh because he could imagine what Ginger had to say. "I apologize if she was offensive."

Sol's ministrations were gentle but thorough. The water smelled a little like lavender and vanilla.

"No need. She's only concerned for you. I understood this even as she aggravated me." Sol gave Toby a toothy grin that held Toby spellbound. A light-blue tongue peeked out from between those not-quite-humanoid teeth as if Sol restrained himself from licking his lips.

Toby's gaze moved over the masculine planes of Sol's face, noting the differences and similarities between the two of them. He finally looked into Sol's light-colored eyes, almost the same hue as Sol's skin, and he wondered, quite inappropriately, if everything about Sol was a shade of turquoise.

Wait. Was the distance between them closing? Toby held his breath. Was Sol going to kiss him? Did Vohnahs even kiss? What would Sol taste like?

Sol's voice was barely above a whisper. "I think it is quite evident I am attracted to you. If what I'm scenting from you means anything, then you are just as drawn to me. I would like to know more about you. Where you come from. Do you have family? I welcome whatever you deem appropriate to share with me."

Toby frowned at having some of his own thoughts tossed back at him. He wanted to know more, but he knew he shouldn't get involved. He'd been almost enthralled with Sol from the moment Toby laid eyes on him. Sol was huge, more than a head taller than Toby, making him seem small and fragile for the first time in his life, and he didn't know if he liked the feeling. Besides, he'd seen the other males with Sol. They were all very attractive, even if they were different in size, shape, and color. With the beautiful men who surrounded Sol, Toby didn't understand why someone like Sol would be interested in him. Was he some kind of novelty?

Unintentionally, the question slipped through Toby's lips. "Why?"

"Why do I want to know you?" Sol asked, and Toby nodded. Dipping the cloth in the scented water again, the corner of Sol's mouth tipped up in a wry smile. "I've been to several other planets and mingled with many Humans, but none interested me enough to consider more than one or two trysts. I will make my intentions plain. I would like to take you to my bed." Sol's gaze turned molten as his eyes raked down Toby's body. "I would very much like to make you scream with pleasure. Discover secrets you've kept from your other bed partners. But not only that, you intrigue me because you are more than what you seem. I would seduce you to stay by my side, to see if this attraction could turn to more. And then, if we find we are compatible in more ways than one, I would entice you to remain."

Toby leaned back on his elbows as Sol slowly ran the cloth over his foot. This was all too surreal for him to solidly grasp at the moment. Wariness rose as he remembered meeting Spencer. The heated glances they'd shared. How excited Toby had felt, being the center of Spencer's attention. The hope that

grew when they'd discussed their likes and dislikes to test their "compatibility." And it had all been a lie. Spencer had assessed him and then told him what he wanted to hear.

There was no denying his attraction to Sol. He'd wanted to be underneath the intriguing male the moment he'd laid eyes on him, but what came after? Sol's planet was under Federation protection. He would be made to leave without Sol, no matter what argument he gave to be allowed to stay. If for some reason he could take Sol with him, how long would Sol's interest last? Toby led a quiet life. He couldn't imagine Sol would want to stay in one place once he had seen what the galaxies had to offer beyond this backwater area of space.

When Toby didn't reply, Sol continued washing his feet. Toby tried to keep his distance, but he found the deed harder than he thought while Sol massaged his foot in all the right spots, soothing aches he didn't even know he had. Toby lamented he was adding so many things to his once short list of kinks. Big males. Blue skin. Tentacles. And now, foot rubs.

Somehow he'd ended up on his back, eyes closed as Sol kneaded his thumbs into the pad of Toby's foot. Unbidden, a low moan escaped when something definitely harder clamped down on the side of his arch. His dick jerked, and Toby refrained from adjusting his groin because he didn't want to draw Sol's attention to his burgeoning erection. He refused to open his eyes. He was afraid he knew what Sol did, and Toby was doing his best to be good. He didn't want to lead Sol on when there couldn't be anything between them. Of course they could have a romp in bed and scratch each other's itch, but he didn't want Sol to only think of him as... as... easy... indiscriminate.

So he struggled to get his body under control. Baseball stats. Reciting the names of the parts to every gun he'd had to break down and put back together. Nothing distracted him long enough for his dick to go soft, and he realized that as long as Sol touched him, nothing could completely steal his attention away.

When something wrapped around his calf, Toby's eyes popped open. A couple of Sol's tentacles moved up to his knee, squeezing his lower leg rhythmically. Thank God the tips were covered because Toby didn't think he could resist touching one if it was bared. A sharp pinch on his heel drew Toby's gaze to Sol where he watched Sol scrape his teeth along the edge of his heel. Embarrassingly, he whimpered which caused Sol's eyes to light up with delight. Damn it, he was trying to pretend Sol didn't affect him, and with a single nip, Toby had given himself away.

Toby threw an arm over his eyes, suddenly needing a moment to himself. He felt too exposed. Too vulnerable. Too... he had to pull it together. He was a soldier, a fighter. He couldn't let himself become overwhelmed like an untried virgin when someone showed him a kindness or did something thoughtful—or discovered an erogenous zone he had no fucking clue he had. He could be calm and courteous and friendly, but baring himself to another again terrified him more than being swallowed by a giant Lamarthian worm.

Sol released his foot. “My apologies. I have made you uncomfortable. Touching you in such a small manner is hard because I want to explore you in other ways that will lead to us becoming entangled in my bed covers. I had not meant to step over certain boundaries.”

Toby peeked under his arm to see Sol brooding, his mouth twisted down, not in aggravation, but a sort of sadness that caused Toby's gut to clench. It was for the best though because Toby wouldn't be allowed to stay unless the Federation changed the status of the planet. He had the impression Sol's people valued their privacy, otherwise why hide? Would Sol consider traveling with Toby? He wasn't sure he could keep Sol's attention for any length of time anyway.

“Come.” Sol settled himself on a large silky pillow. “I have kept you from eating, and you are probably starved.”

Toby sat up, watching as Sol chose pieces from the carved wooden platter. But instead of handing the small plate to Toby, Sol plucked up a bite-sized piece and held it in front of Toby's lips. Oh, Lordy, he couldn't see how this was going to be any better than Sol massaging his feet.

Chapter Seven

Sol was perplexed by Toby's suddenly distant behavior. He could smell his Human's arousal, see the lust-filled gazes Toby sent him, and yet he resisted Sol's attempts at seduction. Toby had made the most electrifying noises while Sol dug his thumbs into taut muscles. But when Toby looked at him, Sol could see the war going on within. He wished he knew the reason why. Did Toby's reticence have to do with what the woman had said about a bruised heart?

Most Humans he'd met on the neighboring planets threw themselves into sex, reveling in the carnal act of giving and taking so both parties came away sated and satisfied. Toby seemed to work hard to restrain himself, and Sol wondered if he came from a culture that frowned upon certain sexual acts. He didn't believe so because of how Toby blatantly stared with an expression of open need before he schooled his features back into neutrality. He didn't attempt to explain his behavior, because he was afraid of repercussions.

What Toby's crewmate had said over the comlink kept coming back to Sol. Had someone abused Toby's affection? Sol withheld the derisive snort. Any male throwing Toby away was an idiot, but their loss was Sol's gain. He would cherish what they had not. Perhaps he only needed to prove to Toby his intentions were different from those who came before.

Shoring up his confidence, Sol offered a morsel from the plate. A hard, cheese-like cube he'd carved into a favored flower that proclaimed amorous intensions. Toby gained a wide-eyed, caged expression, and Sol almost pulled away. Did no one show care to this beautiful man? Sol wanted to growl, take Toby away from all that had harmed his heart, and spend time showing him how worthy he was to be doted on.

"Tell me." Sol swallowed because his voice came out low and full of gravel. "Tell me of your family. Vohnahs build clusters. Our young grow under the care of many mothers and fathers until the time comes for them to form their own cluster."

The smile Toby gave him told Sol his choice of conversation was well received. Toby relaxed and opened his mouth to accept the food Sol held for him. He grinned smugly at the small noise of pleasure Toby made as he chewed, nodding his head as Toby spoke of his small family cluster. He lamented with Toby for the loss of his mother and sister, made approving

noises when he spoke of his older brother Wolfe, and laughed as he explained Maximillien's antics. He listened intently when Toby described his service to the Federation.

Toby threw his head back and laughed. "So there I was, lost in the frozen tundra of Gek'mor, trying to return the chrysalis larva of the ruling tribe, and being hunted by a Lamarthian worm."

Sol watched Toby chew, his chest squeezing painfully with anticipation. "You are here, so I assume you escaped."

Toby's eyes twinkled, shaking his head as he swallowed. "No. The worm ate both of us and was in the process of taking us back to its master when I shot my way out of the damn thing. When my team found us, I was making my way out still cradling the chrysalis larva. We were lucky the child was in transition, otherwise I'm not sure she would've survived." The bridge of Toby's nose scrunched cutely as he gave a twisted grin. "Her tribe was very thankful, but I was terribly sick and burned from what the worm carried in its stomach. While I was recuperating, I decided that enough was enough and applied for retirement."

Toby's expression turned thoughtful, almost worried. "You understand the Federation is coming? Your planet is protected by them, and the crew of the *SV Ark Royal* has broken several laws."

He offered Toby a slice of honey melon, his eyes following the path of Toby's tongue as it licked the gooey sweetness from his lips. "We are aware. We enjoy our self-imposed isolation, but we do remain mindful of the galaxy around us."

Sol chose another honey melon piece because he wanted to see Toby lick his lips again.

"Do the peoples from the closest planets visit you? Is that how you know merchant English?" Toby had long ago stopped blushing when Sol presented him with a morsel. A small victory Sol would gladly claim.

"No. I have traveled to those worlds myself. Unfortunately, the Federation will discover we aren't as primitive as we seem. We once roamed the galaxies seeking one conquest after another."

Toby straightened, chewing slower, as if he rolled Sol's words over in his mind. Sol waited patiently.

"You have traveled off-world?"

Sol nodded his head, hiding a smile. He must have been doing a better job of seducing Toby if he didn't catch Sol's earlier admission about going to other planets and meeting Humans. Surprise drew him out of his smug ruminations when Toby picked up a slice of fruit and presented it to him. Toby didn't understand what the action meant, but Sol still opened his mouth and allowed Toby to feed him.

“So your isolation is self-imposed?”

Sol licked his lips, aware Toby watched the motion, his eyes growing dark with desire. “Yes, we once were a people of war. Now we value a quiet life.”

Toby's gaze darted to the open balcony, a wistfulness overcoming his expression. “I, too, sometimes yearn for a quiet life. It's what I wanted when I retired from the Federation. I had hoped to settle down. I wanted to spend my weekends fishing and just lazing about in the sun.”

“What happened?” Toby flushed. It wasn't an expression of sexual heat, but one of abject embarrassment. When Toby didn't immediately answer, Sol let his intuition guide him. “There was a time when I didn't think I would ever leave the planet. I had a lover whom I adored and a family who doted on me. I wanted to start a family, create our own cluster. I had this vision we would spend our nights reveling in each other and our days pursuing our community interests. Too late I discovered he wasn't interested in me but had been trying to get closer to one of my brothers.”

Toby touched Sol's knee. “I'm so sorry.”

Sol shrugged, the pain of deception had long ago dissipated. “He denied me when I proposed. That was the first time I traveled off-world. I discovered a brothel on the nearest world and spent several days there, encountering my first Humans. When I returned home, it was to find my brother in the company of the one who broke my heart. If I hadn't come back from the trip as sated as I was, I would've had more than words with Mitcah. When my brother discovered Mitcah's deception, he broke off the relationship.”

Toby swallowed what he'd been chewing. “What do you mean, if you hadn't been as sated? What does that have to do with whether or not you knocked Mitcah's lights out?” Sol hid a secret smile at the angry tone of Toby's voice and the way his hands fisted in his lap.

Sol replied, explaining carefully so there was no misunderstanding. He wanted Toby to know him. He may be humanoid in body, but he wasn't Human. “Even when we fought our way through the galaxies, we had

heightened sexuality, especially after a bloody battle. The only qualities the other races saw in us was as unrelenting fighters or as oversexed questers for sexual satiation.” Sol liked that Toby’s frown deepened, concern clearly written in his eyes. Sol didn’t tell Toby the Vohnahs’ technology was far superior, albeit cleverly hidden. Perhaps they had hidden for too long?

Sol shook off his dark thoughts and continued. “After exploring the stars, my people found they loved the peace of their homeworld more than uncovering the mysteries of the universe. The intricacies of interspecies politics bored them, so they returned to our planet, content to be left alone in solitude. Settling wasn’t as easy as the sages thought it would be. We are aggressive by nature and warred among ourselves. The sages discovered that coupling frequently released chemicals that calmed us and tempered our aggression. When I returned home completely satiated, Mitcah’s actions didn’t stir my ire.”

Sol desired for Toby to accept him for who and what he was, and for the first time, Sol felt nervousness curl in his stomach as he watched Toby for any hint of distaste.

“Do you know how rare it is for a people to collectively address something like that and act together to find a solution? Humans bicker and debate. Someone always thinks their way of doing something is the superior way. I’ve sat through hours of the Assembly of Representatives, listening to the finer points being hashed out, when the most important issue was shuffled off to the side. You are very fortunate.”

Sol grinned ruefully. “Nowadays, the sages only worry about keeping our solitude. They worry we will return to the old ways. There have been a few who have left to pursue the thrill of battle.”

He’d become so relaxed with Toby, he forgot to keep his tentacles to himself. Toby startled when Sol casually caressed his leg with one. An apology sat on his tongue, but he forgot what he was going to say when Toby grasped the appendage a hand’s width from the end. Unbidden, the end peeled back to expose the tender tip. Toby stared as if mesmerized, his grip gentle.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is the purpose of your tentacles?” The tips of Toby’s ears turned bright red.

A clear liquid beaded on the tip, and Sol swallowed thickly. “They have many uses along the lines of luring, attacking, or mating. Each tentacle houses several secretion sacks. As you know, one purpose is a sedative. If my team went into battle, they would release a mist that would incite any who inhaled it

into a battle lust. Sexually they have several purposes. When I'm attracted to someone, they will secrete a mixture that can heighten our sexual pleasure." Sol kept Toby from touching the tip, using a cloth to wipe it clean. "If you touched and ingested the liquid, we would both be sexually aroused until we sated the desire. I would be able to scent my essence within you and unable to stop myself from taking you. The desire could be put off for a time, but once the threshold of tolerance is met, the trees can fall down around us, and we wouldn't be able to stop until I came, buried within you."

"Oh," Toby gasped, but his scent of arousal only increased, teasing Sol with the knowledge that the thought had turned Toby on even more.

Did he know he caressed Sol's tentacle? The warmth of Toby's hand against the sensitive skin had Sol holding his breath so that he wouldn't release a moan. The drag of Toby's calloused thumb sent a shiver up Sol's spine. If Toby actually used his tongue on the appendage, Sol was sure he would find release within seconds. Toby seemed lost in thought, and Sol didn't wish to interrupt, but the tantalizing touches were causing his other tentacles to come alive. If he didn't make Toby stop, then he would end up holding Toby down while he kissed the breath out of his Human.

"Did you still wish to see your crewmate, Nicius?" When Toby released the appendage, albeit reluctantly, Sol felt bereft.

"Yes, I need to see him and check in with Ginger." Toby gave him a wistful smile, and Sol sighed, not sure if he'd won Toby over, even a little bit.

Chapter Eight

Toby was confused. Discovering Sol and his people were more advanced than he'd originally thought was jarring. Glancing around he didn't *see* any technology, but according to Sol the Vohnahs had been to space and back. Was it possible for their tech to be so far advanced he could be looking directly at it and not know?

The other fact that, at the same time, settled and upset him was: Sol knew of Humans. His interest in Toby wasn't because he was a novelty, but something else altogether, which made Toby want to reconsider his stance on perhaps staying. Memories of taking a chance not too long ago reminded him his heart was healing from the thumps he'd already received. He wasn't sure he wanted to look any closer at Sol's attentiveness, except he wanted Sol to fuck him so bad he could almost taste it. Even with Spencer, the desire or the lust hadn't been anywhere near this visceral, and the single-mindedness of his reaction to Sol scared the hell out of him. His hunger for the touches, for the way Sol looked at him... Toby had spent his adult life waiting for someone to look at him like Sol did. He wanted to rage, why now? Could he find a way to fight for the right to stay? Could he take another chance so close on the heels of disappointment?

He sighed softly as Sol rose and left the table. Everything about Sol utterly distracted Toby. He'd forgotten about Nicius and felt like a complete jerk because of it. He couldn't take his eyes off the broad muscular back and tight leather pants that teased Toby with how snugly they molded to Sol's form. What would his family say if he did stick around to see how well he and Sol got along? His dad was already trying to pair him up with Shepherd... Toby made a face. Shepherd was great as a friend, but Toby wasn't attracted to him. Would he let his dad down by leaving the family business for a little while? He'd only been working with him for two months, and Toby didn't want to be one of those fickle employees who couldn't stay somewhere for long, but if he dared to hope...

Sol returned with his comlink and biosuit. Then he gathered the empty dishes and politely crossed the room to the preparation area, giving Toby a bit of privacy as he contacted Ginger. He fitted the comlink to his ear and found the camera in the biosuit.

"Hey, Ginger, do you read me?"

“You! You! You! I have been going out of my mind worrying about you. Are you all right? Did Mr. Cocktacles molest you?”

Toby choked, trying to hold back the laughter because really, the descriptive word fit to a T and made him think smutty, smutty thoughts. “His name is Sol,” Toby rasped out once he had the coughing under control. “He’s been nothing but hospitable.”

“Oh, I’m sure he has.” Toby could imagine Ginger squinting her eyes at him. “Mr. Cocktacles is going to have some explaining to do when your brothers get here. I reported everything to Weston. I won’t be surprised if he pulls everyone off their jobs to rescue you—”

“Who said I needed to be rescued? I’m a highly trained officer of the—okay formerly of the Federation, but still,” he hissed into the comlink, embarrassed, because if he’d been using the training he just toted out, then he wouldn’t have been caught unaware. No, he’d been taken down by something Sol excreted from his tentacles. All his training and expertise went out the window when his dick sat up and waved at Sol. And it was on holovid. Fucking awesome.

Ginger clucked her tongue at him. “I did what I was supposed to do, and I only told your dad the facts. You’re going to have to sort out the details with him once he arrives. I can lose the vid if you want. I’m going to have to erase Nicius’s feed anyway.”

Toby groaned, drawing Sol’s attention. He waved Sol off because really, he did not want to explain that Wentworth and friends were going to invade Sol’s planet because he’d been careless. “Can you contact my dad and let him know I’m perfectly fine. We are on our way to see Nicius. I would like to stick around until the Federation arrives.” Possibly longer.

“I’ll tell him but that doesn’t mean he won’t check on you himself. He had a fit when I told him I was trying to recover the vid feed.” There was a hint of laughter in Ginger’s voice, and Toby suspected it was at his expense.

“Thank you.” The last thing he needed was for his dad to see him vulnerable.

“You bet. Unfortunately I didn’t stop the live feed to the Federation in time. Captain Shepherd has a copy of what occurred. I’ll send him a message that you’re unharmed and pissed someone got the upper hand.” He really needed a surface to bang his head on, because the news was just getting better and better. He’d forgotten about the live feed to the Federation. He was no longer in the

service, therefore his mistake wouldn't—shouldn't matter. Shepherd would give him a hard time about letting his guard down, but in the end, Toby didn't have to answer to Shepherd, for anything.

On the other hand, he attempted to convince himself he had nothing to be anxious about when it came to his family. But a tiny voice snorted at his feeble assertion. Ever since the conversation with Sol, Toby had been contemplating sticking around if he could come up with a reason. He didn't want his dad to come into the situation with a prejudice already in place because Toby drew his sidearm after making the wrong assumption. He'd only known Sol for a few hours, and already he wanted his dad to like Sol.

"Toby?" The laughter had left Ginger's voice, and he mentally shook himself.

A change of subject was in order. "How are the repairs coming on the ship?"

There was a long pause before Ginger answered. "The debris field that flare left behind—"

"I'm pretty sure it was some kind of rocket."

"Well, that would explain the shrapnel. I believe I found all of the pieces and welded the sections where the engine's shielding and exhaust were punctured. I won't be sure until I can test it. Your dad said Maximillien can pick up our ship and take it back to the home office. I can have a full team go over everything there."

"All right. I'm going to go check on Nicius and make sure he's okay."

"Oh, you might want to wait for... half an hour or so."

Toby frowned. "Why?"

Ginger giggled. "Well, after they took Nicius in, the purple guy rubbed his feet and fed him, and lo and behold, Nicius stripped and tackled Mr. Purple. I'm telling you, I'm going to run out of popcorn."

The second time in minutes, Toby was choking. "Wait. You were yelling at me and accusing me of—" Toby took a couple of steps further away from Sol and whispered "—having sex with Sol when you're watching Nicius?"

"There's a difference. You were out cold, and I was worried something happened that was nonconsensual. I knew without a doubt that Nicius was willing," Ginger said rationally.

Toby wasn't sure how to respond, because he did understand. "Stop watching Nicius. I'll check on him later. You cloaked the ship, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I don't like it. I can't see if something is coming."

"I know. Hopefully the Federation will arrive soon. I'll contact you in a couple of hours. Stay safe." He waited for Ginger to sign off before he removed the comlink from his ear and laid it atop his folded biosuit.

"Is there a problem?" Sol moved slowly across the room, concern lining his features.

Toby had known large men who reveled in their power, using their size to pressure, to push and bully until they received what they wanted. For such a large male, Sol seemed gentle, caring. Toby had met such gentle giants before, but they usually seemed painfully shy outside of Sol's forthright expression of his attraction to Toby. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of lover Sol would make before he forcefully pushed the question away.

Toby gave a soft snort. "Not really. It seems one of your men is keeping Nicius pretty occupied." He quickly relayed what Ginger told him.

Sol threw his head back and laughed. "That would be Elion, my second-in-command."

Toby smiled back at Sol, liking the way his voice sounded when filled with mirth, how Sol's face was open and somehow more stunning than he was the moment before. That little voice popped up again, telling him he was treading deep waters. He would fall for the Vohnahs if he didn't watch his step.

He cleared his suddenly dry throat. "Nicius isn't in any danger, is he?"

Sol's grin softened. He held out his hand to Toby. "No, he's fine. Come. I will show you the compound before we visit Elion's."

Toby stared at the outstretched hand, feeling somehow that if he took it and went with Sol, something would change. He wasn't sure what, just a gut feeling, and since his gut had never been wrong before, Toby paused. He attempted to bring up the part of him that would always be a soldier to act as a shield, but even as he tried to build a barrier between himself and Sol, one look into those impossibly blue eyes and it all fell.

If he was honest with himself, he was afraid. The way Sol made him feel, how Sol looked at him, touched him and stirred within Toby a buried longing he was terrified to indulge in. Even when he and Spencer were at their

strongest, Toby hadn't felt anything close to the desire Sol stirred within him with just a simple glance. Sol made him feel alive. Cherished. If Toby allowed himself to be vulnerable again, to pursue the very things he was afraid to hope for and invested everything in the unspoken promise in Sol's gaze—Toby didn't know if he could bear it if Sol suddenly withdrew.

Sol stood there, ever patient, while Toby vacillated between accepting and denying what he wanted. They had spent the last couple of hours sharing stories of their lives and experiences. So far, Sol had been upfront and honest with him. He needed to do the same. "I don't trust myself with you. You seem to be able to tell I'm attracted to you, but you need to understand I'm not those other Humans, Sol. If I allow myself to take what you are offering, then I'll expect more. I guess you could say if I lived here among your people, I would be one of the young males who wished to settle down and begin my own family cluster. Please don't offer me anything if you're only looking for a night or two. If for some reason you're serious, I'm not sure the Federation will let me stay—"

With ground-eating strides, Sol crossed the space between them. Toby didn't know what he said that caused Sol to rush, but he didn't expect the kiss, first gentle, then consuming. Stunned only for the barest of seconds, Toby responded, freeing the pent-up desire he'd been trying to stave off. Hunger washed through him in a huge rolling wave, leaving him trembling in its wake. He pushed up on his toes, clutching Sol's forearms to steady himself, belatedly realizing Sol cupped his face. He wasn't used to kissing someone taller than himself, but all of his internal musings fell away when he opened his mouth and let Sol in.

Why had he fought this? His worries and concerns didn't show themselves as Toby relinquished control to Sol. It'd been so long since a lover had simply taken over that Toby had swallowed any hope or expectation of finding a partner who was truly dominant and not simply playing at it.

His back bumped against a smooth wooden wall. Sol's hands grasped him under the ass and lifted. Toby automatically wrapped his legs around Sol's waist, the angle of the kiss changing to something not so strained. Sol's growl of pleasure caused gooseflesh to erupt over his skin. He was so hard he ached all over, and he did what he'd wanted to do since first laying eyes on Sol. He ran his fingertips over Sol's brow where the tentacles began. The skin was smooth and soft under his touch. Toby gained an absurd amount of pleasure from Sol's breathy and decadent moans as he explored. He lifted his chin as Sol

licked over his stubble and down the side of his neck. He tightened his legs around Sol, barely holding on to the last of his dignity by refraining from humping Sol. When Sol pulled back, Toby grinned at the sight of kiss-swollen lips. Instead of the red or pink he was used to, the skin around Sol's lips turned a darker blue. Sol's blue-gray tongue swiped over the rim of his mouth as if he chased any remaining taste of Toby.

Being in Sol's arms, pressed chest to chest, so close they shared breath, Toby let himself believe there could be something more than attraction between them. He liked Sol, the way his mind worked, how thoughtful he could be, his humor... Toby could almost hear his old team jeering at him.

One of the reasons he'd left the service was to remove himself from the overly macho environment. Anything soft or tender was considered a weakness, and he'd been tired of putting up a front, of hiding, of holding back. Even with Spencer, any show of affection, such as the sending of gifts, was looked down upon. They were men. Men did *not* do girly things like send each other flowers. He too had expected Toby to act in a certain way, even after their many talks. He was tired of being what everyone else wanted him to be. He wanted to walk down the street and hold his lover's hand. He didn't want to worry that if he automatically kissed his partner in public, he would be yelled at in private.

From the beginning, Sol was different. Sure, the difference had been his appearance, but Sol had taken time to show him care and kindness mixed in with the heat-filled gazes and lingering touches. He was obviously a dangerous male, and from the stories Sol shared, Toby's original assumption had been correct. Yet, Sol was comfortable with showing gentleness—and Toby had greedily eaten it up.

His stomach twisted in knots as he contemplated where he and Sol would go from here. He hoped—prayed—that what he considered doing wouldn't crush his already battered heart because if this was how Sol truly was, given time, perhaps there could be more between them than lust.

Chapter Nine

Reining himself in and tempering his reaction to Toby's words had been the hardest thing Sol had ever done. He sorely wanted to drag Toby to his bed and spend the next several days learning every part of him. He was no fool. He'd seen Toby's struggle, smelled his fear, and Sol's instinctive reaction had been to soothe him. He didn't understand what internal battle Toby fought, but he would patiently and constantly remind Toby he wanted a courtship. He could wait until Toby was ready.

With great reluctance, Sol separated himself from Toby even though it meant Toby could no longer stroke his tentacles. Did Toby even know how tantalizing and drugging that touch was? It had been some time since a partner had cared enough to stroke Sol to completion by simply fondling his tentacles. Perhaps, one day soon, Toby would be inclined to do so.

Gently placing Toby on his feet, Sol stepped away and immediately adjusted his rigid length. He ached for release, but he would wait. A chance at a lasting relationship held more value than something quick and fleeting. He wouldn't lose Toby because he didn't have the patience to finish courting him. He would have this male sated in his bed and firmly ensconced into every facet of his waking life. As much as he would love to start in the bedchamber, he needed to entice Toby with something other than his love-making skills.

The small whimper from Toby made Sol smile. *Later*, he silently promised, *later your whimpers will not be subdued or bitten back.*

"I promised to show you the compound. I've seen you look out the windows with interest. Come see my home and tell me what you think."

Toby's cheeks pinked as he attempted to casually adjust himself, sending Sol a smile so soft it bordered on shy. When they moved out onto the balcony, Sol activated the pulley.

"So there are no misunderstandings, Toby. I do wish for you to stay. I have washed your feet and fed you from my hands. These are acts that initiate a formal courtship among my people. I intend to show you where and how I live to entice you to consider staying to see if you and I can be—I want more than a roll in my bed. I want your uniforms to be hung next to mine. I want... I want many things and have every intention of convincing you to be mine."

Toby's cheeks then his neck flushed brighter as he licked his lips. Sol didn't scent the bitter tang of worry or fear, only the sharpness of arousal. The lift approached, and he worked the ropes to bring the platform to a stop at his balcony. Stepping aboard, Sol waited for Toby to follow, pleased when he stepped in close and looped an arm around Sol's waist. He could guess that having a simple rope as the only safety protocol on the lift was a bit intimidating, and was probably the reason Toby stood so close, but Sol hoped one day Toby would do so because he enjoyed being near him.

Toby gaped, looking everywhere as if he wanted to take in the view all at once. Sol wondered if Toby's home had forests and such. As far as Sol knew, Humans and many other races lived in man-made buildings. Although interesting, he much preferred his home in the living trees to the ones made of metal and stone.

"I don't think I've seen something this beautiful before, and I've been to many different worlds." The awe in Toby's voice made Sol preen, just a little bit. "You said this is a compound. It's not a city?"

"No, this is where the unattached males live. They are a part of our planetary defense. I hesitate to say army because they are not what you or your Federation would envision for an army. They are trained for combat, but they have never been tried in battle. They work in teams, going from village to village to make sure there are no disputes or disturbances the sages cannot handle." The lift came to a stop, and Sol guided Toby off.

"And address the intrusion of an unknown vessel?" Toby added, looking around before turning his eyes skyward.

Toby's wide-eyed wonder spurred Sol to try to see his home as if for the first time. A certain pride filled him at Toby's obvious approval, and he answered the question. "Sometimes, yes. Not many vessels land. There have been a couple that needed repairs, and we watched, staying hidden. Others come to collect plants, and those too we leave alone."

Toby's gaze hardened. "The *SV Ark Royal* wished to collect more. I saw their secrets. Were any of your people hurt?"

"No, but we had to wait for the sages to bicker over whether we should force them to leave or contact the Federation for help. The crew forced our hand when they accidentally discovered the doorway to one of the villages and one of our groves. We took them into custody, and the sages turned to debating whether to contact the Federation or force the intruders to stay. But the stress

and threat of violence their presence engenders can cause the unmated to become unbalanced. The decision was taken out of their hands when you sent a message to the Federation. Our elders have no wish to give up their isolation, but it is time for us to have some interaction with those around us.”

“I can understand their concern, but it would’ve been easier to have the intruders arrested when they landed without authorization than to hide in the shadows and hope they would leave,” Toby said, his brows raising in question when Sol grinned wide.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“What about the rocket that fouled the engines of my ship? I recall you said that wasn’t the action of your people.” Toby’s face flushed scarlet. “About that, I’m really sorry that I pulled a weapon on you. I jumped to conclusions based on the information I had. I should have—”

Sol clamped a hand on Toby’s shoulder, pulling him to a stop. “I understand. How were you supposed to know we are not the primitives the Federation reports that we are?” He ran a finger along Toby’s jawline, pleased when Toby didn’t pull away. “I spoke a language such savage peoples wouldn’t know. I would’ve come to the same conclusions.”

Toby nodded even though his expression clearly said he had his doubts.

“Come. I would like to show you the pools.” He led Toby toward the center of the compound to the natural springs, musing the whole while at how Toby had understood the issue and perhaps could help Sol devise a plan the sages would accept, so they could better defend their home.

The afternoon went quickly. He reveled in the pleasure Toby took at each new wonder he revealed. Toby explored with such exuberance that Sol found himself caught up in the excitement and the disappointment when he recalled he’d promised to take Toby to see Nicius. Toby’s expression had fallen until Sol commented they could return the next day.

Now, outside of Elion’s balcony, he stood silently behind Toby as he knocked on the open door frame. Nicius and Elion were eating, both only wearing lounge pants. Nicius’s face and chest were flushed, his bright hair ruffled, but his expression clearly stated he was quite sated. Elion, on the other hand, seemed distressed that they had been interrupted.

Sol pulled his friend to the side, so Toby could speak with Nicius. “How goes your day, Elion?”

He was surprised at the disgruntled growl Elion released. "I do not know if I can convince him to stay." Elion explained in a low voice. "He enjoys his work and has stated several times he is happy where he is, and yet he stares at me just so when he takes food from my hand, as if he would rather eat me than what I have presented him. I have sent him over into completion several times, and yet he will not consider my proposal." Elion almost spit out the last words, worry and hurt and longing playing over his expression as if he could not decide which emotion consumed him the most.

Sol found Elion's predicament humorous until he realized Elion, like himself, didn't want a dalliance but wanted to keep his Human. "My friend, have you inquired as to what he wants?"

Elion's purple tentacles, which had been writhing with his rising agitation, stopped in midmotion. "What do you mean?"

"If he enjoys his work, then ask if you can travel with him. Did you stop to think that he is the one attempting to woo you to go off-world with him? When you both are ready, you can return and set up your own cluster. Does it have to be right now?" Sol smiled warmly when Elion's lavender eyes widened, then darkened.

"You think he wants me to follow him then?" Elion turned and gave Nicius and Toby a considering look.

"It is best if you ask him." Sol chuckled. If he read Elion by scent alone, Elion's obvious turmoil settled into curiosity mixed with growing excitement.

His second-in-command grunted, clearly not paying attention to him or what he said. The whole of his regard was on Nicius, who kept glancing over Toby's shoulder, eyes touching on Elion before Toby snagged Nicius's attention again.

When Toby seemed to be finished speaking with Nicius, Sol grasped Elion's elbow before he returned to Nicius's side. When Elion shot him a questioning glance, Sol repeated his advice. "Ask him what he wants. Do not hold your tongue and hope he understands you or our culture. Speak plainly with him."

This time Elion nodded his understanding, murmuring a thank you to Sol before returning to Nicius. Sol met Toby by the door. Toby chuckled low and soft, shaking his head but not revealing the conversation with his crewmate. Perhaps Toby's talk with Nicius wasn't so different than his with Elion.

Stepping onto the lift, Toby moved in close to Sol again. This time not only did he loop an arm around Sol's waist, but placed his free hand over Sol's stomach and lightly stroked. Dusk had fallen, announcing the end of the day. One of the best Sol had had in a very long time.

At the bottom, Toby took Sol's hand and pulled him into a long, dark shadow. To Sol's delight, Toby initiated the kiss, the action unrestrained. No trace of worry or fear laced the sharp aroma of arousal. This was what he'd been waiting for, and he released a low growl of approval. He needed to get them home, but he wanted a drink of the sweet taste of Toby's eager lips first.

"I've decided I don't care." Toby gasped when they broke for air. "I've been afraid to say what I wanted, to pursue this attraction because of the sneers of a few, whose words shouldn't matter. And you probably don't understand any of what I said."

Sol could see it clearly then in Toby's eyes, the hurt and vulnerability caused by either word or deed from someone he probably trusted, perhaps loved. Just as Ginger had said, someone had battered Toby's heart, and he'd closed himself off. Sol was honored and humbled that Toby was showing him this level of trust. Mayhap with only his body at the moment, but Sol would endeavor to win more because he also wanted Toby's clever mind and hopefully, eventually, he could salvage Toby's heart, winning Toby's love.

He was no fool, to say such would only scare Toby away. He'd been around Humans enough to understand their instincts were almost nonexistent. What intuitions they possessed were often ignored or discounted, so when another gave a declaration before the Human could verify what their instincts told them, they reacted with distrust and suspicion. So he held his silence, for patience would win him what he wanted.

"I would like to see where this attraction goes, Sol. I'll have to speak to my family, and we'll need to work through whatever red tape the Federation—"

Sol snarled. "The Federation will not keep you from me." He paused, immediately realizing his mistake.

What happened next was unexpected. Toby's eyes had widened, pupils swallowing what was left of his iris, and the scent of arousal sharpened as if Toby was turned on more by Sol's aggressiveness. The smile curling Sol's lips was one of wicked intent, and he snarled low again. Toby trembled in his arms, a whispered moan telling Sol all he needed to know. Toby enjoyed the soft caresses and the gentleness Sol had exhibited. He'd put on his best behavior

while working to win over Toby, but it seemed Toby also enjoyed a bit of possessiveness as well. Oh, how he'd love to discover just how aggressive Toby liked his lover to be.

His tentacles rose, the tips extending from their sheaths as they wrapped around Toby's legs, rucking up Toby's shirt as they caressed his skin. Sol cupped Toby's cheeks and dove in, forcing his way past trembling lips to lick inside, to suck on the tongue that met his. He voraciously ate every delicious gasp and moan. Sol wanted to roar in triumph, but the thought was cut off when Toby grasped a couple of tentacles and squeezed.

Sol tore his mouth away to release his own groan of rampant want. His whole body thrummed with urgent desire. Toby's knowing grin flashed before he squeezed again, causing Sol to pant as small fingers of lightning zipped up his tentacles and down his spine. The tender tips were completely exposed and slick with Sol's personal aphrodisiac. Toby studied the appendage before raising his devouring gaze to Sol's.

"What will happen if I place the end in my mouth?" This time Sol was the one to tremble hard. "Will it hurt you if I sucked on it? Will the fluid harm me?" Toby licked his lips as if the thought of tasting Sol's flesh made his mouth water.

Sol swallowed thickly. "My tentacles are one of the most sensitive places on my body. As long as you don't bite, I gain a great deal of pleasure from you handling them. As for the essence they release, if you ingest it, you will become aroused and stay so until we are both sated. I will be able to smell my essence mixed in your scent, and I won't be able to refrain from taking you. Do not consume it if you are not looking for completion."

Sol held his breath, wondering what was going through Toby's mind when he glanced back down to the tentacle held in his fist. He didn't have to wait long because Toby ran the flat of his tongue over the tip. Sol's eyelids fluttered and closed as Toby sealed his mouth around the exposed rim and sucked. He fell to his knees, clutching Toby to him, all of his tentacles wrapping around Toby to cradle him. Sol trembled, freeing one hand to tear at the lacings of his pants. He needed to be free. He needed to be inside Toby.

Chapter Ten

Toby had never tasted anything so sweet, so decadent, in all of his life. Sol's essence was thick and rich, like a honey but not. He couldn't get enough, suckling and licking the tip until no trace was left. It didn't escape his notice that one simple action had brought Sol to his knees or how the rest of the tentacles had securely wrapped around him. He was held tight in a way he'd never been before, caressed everywhere as Sol's tentacles had securely wound around him.

He caught up another tentacle and brought the end to his mouth, which subsequently went dry when he glanced down and saw Sol's very large, very erect cock. He blinked, mesmerized, realizing he should've expected something larger than he'd normally see, considering Sol's size.

Toby looked up to Sol's face to see a worried expression. "Many Humans said I was too large and refused to allow me to—"

Toby took the tip out of his mouth, heart hammering hard at the thought of having Sol buried in him. "I don't care what they said, you're using that on me. You won't hurt me." He wondered briefly if he should explain he had a whole arsenal of toys he used regularly after he'd realized he wasn't going to be topped on a regular basis in the way he'd hoped.

Toby figured Sol would find out soon enough he could handle every inch of Sol. He put the tip of the tentacle back in his mouth and sucked, swirling his tongue around the sensitive head. Sol groaned, head tipped back, mouth opened on a loud pant. The smell of something floral perfumed the air. Instead of being cloying and off-putting, Toby inhaled deeply of the heady scent, and his muscles tightened in anticipation. If he wasn't careful, he would beg Sol to take him right there in the shadows.

The thick essence coated Toby's tongue, and he swore all of his senses became heightened. He could smell Sol's clean sweat mixed with the other spicy scent. Every caress of the tentacles caused his skin to tingle, and he was so hard he could pound nails with his dick. The material of his shirt gave under the onslaught of the multiple appendages pulling, and the material ripped across the upper chest.

Suddenly, all around them lights flared to life and a loud strange noise sounded. Toby went on alert even as Sol snarled. Sol didn't have to say

anything for Toby to understand something was seriously wrong. Sol rose and lifted Toby to his feet. He immediately missed the touch as the appendages withdrew. Sol tucked himself back into his pants, and Toby inspected his shirt. It was ripped across the front, gaping open to expose the skin underneath, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Toby hurried after Sol, doing double time in order to keep up with Sol's long strides. Vohnahs rushed everywhere, but they all seemed to be about a task, and none acted panicked. Words were shouted, but since Toby didn't speak their language, he kept his gaze on Sol to gauge what he'd need to do.

They approached a squat, bushy tree with a set of double doors that opened to what Toby thought looked like an armory. Sol spoke quickly to the men there before he returned to Toby's side with two arm braces in one hand and Toby's sidearm and holster in the other.

Sol murmured low, "The team sent to search for the person who discharged the rocket earlier reported in without locating him. We assumed we'd missed one of the *SV Ark Royal's* crew members. Three ships have currently landed and another five are in orbit. It is believed the person acted as a beacon for those who've newly arrived. Earlier I left a team to retrieve the cryo-chambers off the ship, and they are now on their way here. Forerunners arrived, reporting the team was almost caught leaving with the cryo-chambers and are now being pursued. My team and I will leave to meet up and give them cover, so they may retreat here."

Toby nodded his understanding as he strapped on his holster and checked the energy cartridge. It was good for one hundred shots, but he had a feeling that possibly wouldn't be enough.

Sol grasped Toby's left arm and slid on one of the arm braces. "You can stay here—"

"Forget it. I'm going with you," Toby said, his voice low, full of vehemence.

Sol's feral grin brightened his eyes with pleasure. "Well, then, I'll show you how to use our cloak."

The quick tutorial was done while they were on the move. Toby thought surely he'd lose his hard-on, but he didn't, and he had to stop to adjust himself, otherwise the activity caused painful pressure to his groin. He caught sight of Sol's own trapped erection and remembered what he'd said about the taking of Sol's essence.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Sol,” Toby said when he caught up. How was he to know their smexy time would be interrupted?

Toby gulped as Sol’s grin turned smoldering. “I will hold out, but once this is over, I will not be able to restrain myself.” Sol’s words were apologetic, but the promise in his gaze made Toby hope the skirmish wouldn’t last long. Now that he’d made up his mind, he desperately wanted to be on the receiving end of Sol’s undivided attention.

Sol and his team armed themselves with what Toby assumed to be weapons, though the devices resembled gnarled lengths of wood. Before leaving the compound, they all activated their cloaks. Sol had explained the armband created an optical illusion that would cause Toby to be invisible. As each member of the team engaged their cloak, one by one, they disappeared from Toby’s sight. He was surprised he could see the team again when he switched on his own armband, although they appeared wavering to his sight. He’d worried about hitting one of them accidentally without being able to see them, but now the concern was wiped away.

Keeping up with Sol and his team was no easy feat. The only thing saving Toby was that he’d continued to train after leaving the service, otherwise he had no doubt he’d been left in their dust within moments. As it was, he pushed himself to keep up. There was no road per se, but what he’d considered a game trail. Toby didn’t know how they were going to move the cryo-containers through the jungle.

His question was answered when they met the first of the oblong hovercrafts. The open air vehicle was only wide enough for two men seated side by side but almost five times as long. Behind the driver and his companion the cryo-container lay on its side. The severed hoses and wires were abruptly truncated with the exception of those attached to some kind of machine that seemed to keep the integrity of the containers. It made sense the Vohnahs wouldn’t want to awaken the occupants in an environment where they had obviously been abused. Especially with the threat of Quintessential Chemicals sending an extraction team for their secret cargo.

Toby followed the rest of the team when Sol slowed to speak to the driver. They passed vehicle after vehicle and after counting all eighteen cryo-containers, Toby was relieved to know the Vohnahs had had time to grab all of the people held by Quintessential Chemicals. The procession was followed closely by another team that Sol stopped to speak with, becoming visible briefly.

The forest was dark, but for some reason Toby could see quite well, and he wondered if that was something else their armbands helped with. The team took up positions on either side of the path while waiting for Sol to return. Toby leaned against a tree and gasped for breath, thinking he should add a couple of extra miles to his runs. The jungle was dotted with bobbing lights from those who pursued the stolen cryo-containers. The flashlights told Toby those sent to retrieve *SV Ark Royal* weren't equipped with night gear. They were either amateurs or they hadn't planned for the possibility their ship would be looted of its captives in the night.

When Sol approached, they all gathered around. Toby felt exposed since they weren't shielded by cover. Did they not worry about heat signatures? Sol spoke quickly, and Toby waited, hating that he couldn't understand what Sol said. After he finished, he translated for Toby.

"The rear guard was able to hold off the intruders, giving the drivers time to put distance between them and their pursuers. Once the hovercrafts were far enough away, the team engaged their cloaks and caught up. There are about a thirty or so mercenaries following. What worries me is another group was seen heading toward the nearest village. They have an active grove of unprotected young that aren't behind a barrier."

Toby had no idea what Sol meant by a grove or what it had to do with children, but there wasn't time for more questions. "So we take out these pursuers and then head over to the grove?"

Sol nodded. "I want you to use this instead of your sidearm." Sol handed him a gnarled piece of wood, the length of his forearm and surprisingly hefty. "Touch the men with this end of the stunner, then push here. They'll go down silently. Place one of these tags on the body so those who come behind us will be able to find them and take them in custody. My team is stressed as it is and won't be able to handle the scent of blood. There is no telling what will happen. The sages and I would like to present a good face to the Federation."

Toby holstered his sidearm and took the weapon Sol handed to him, ensuring he knew how to use the device. He followed Sol as they made their way at a slower pace toward the oncoming mercenaries.

Taking up the rear outside, Toby noticed several things. One, Sol's team moved as quietly as ghosts. He was the only one who made any noise, which wasn't very noticeable or telling to the enemy, but still much louder than Sol's people.

The second thing was the plant life swayed away from them. At first, he thought the effect was the armband, but for the fact that the plants didn't move for him. No, the foliage's strange behavior had everything to do with Sol's people.

Subduing the mercenaries was ridiculously easy. With the cloak shielding their approach, stealth was the main issue. When Toby tapped and pulled the trigger, each mercenary was out and down before they knew what hit them. Toby dropped a marker on the body and moved off to the next target. There was slightly more than thirty. The mercenaries were probably joined by another team, not that the additional numbers helped them.

Once all the pursuers were down, he followed the team into a thick copse of trees. The men spread out, and Toby discovered why when they pulled on hidden cords and were whisked up into the canopy.

"Here." Sol pointed. "Step there."

Toby moved onto a wooden circle attached to a vine.

"Use both hands after you pull the cord out of the niche. Hold on tight."

Toby pulled the knotted vine out of the hole in the tree, and he practically flew upwards. He barely held back the exclamation of glee as he rose high into the canopy. He came to a stop next to a small walkway. Sol rose not a couple of meters away, motioning for Toby to hurry. He swore he would make Sol bring him back later, so they could do that again. Quickly pushing away the thoughts of future fun, he followed Sol, envying his grace and balance. The other team members were scurrying through the canopy of the neighboring trees, then they suddenly seemed to just... fly. Toby abruptly halted, sure his eyes played tricks on him.

"Toby," Sol called.

Confused, he hurried, albeit not as fast as Sol because his balance wasn't as perfect. They came to the end of the platform. Anchored to the trunk overhead was a rope stretched horizontally out into the distance. Sol grabbed one of the slings and helped Toby slip into it. Each time Sol touched Toby's skin, a jolt went through him. If his concentration hadn't already been shot by Sol's nearness, it would've dawned on him earlier that this was a zip line. He sat in the sling and stuffed the stunner in the pocket on the outside of his thigh. The wooden grip was above his head, but there didn't seem to be any other safety gear to ensure he didn't slip out and fall to his death. Although, if they didn't get some downtime so Sol could fuck him, he might die of want anyway.

Sol grabbed his face, tilting his chin up. "Are you listening to me?"

Toby felt chagrined. The exhilaration of the ride, the zing of adrenaline coursing through him, the added underlying sexual tension, and his growing need to secret Sol off to a secluded corner and beg to be taken played havoc with his attention span. He felt like a green cadet, too embarrassed for words.

Sol smiled softly. "This will drop you onto the edge of the grove. Don't harm the flowers. We should be able to make quick work of the mercenaries before they can do any lasting damage. Be careful."

The kiss curled Toby's toes, and his dick pulsed. God, he needed to get laid soon or he'd end up with blue balls. Suddenly Sol broke away, if the snarling growl was any indication, Sol was having the same difficulties. Well, then, Toby didn't feel so bad. Abruptly, he was pushed off the platform, and he zipped away. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Sol step into his own sling.

He tore his eyes away, struggling to keep his mind on the task, anger ignited and growing as he thought about his spectacular night being interrupted. About people sneaking around the galaxy, kidnapping innocent people and experimenting on them. About the assholes who were attempting to abduct the Vohnahs' young. Earlier Sol had said that the crew of *SV Ark Royal* had discovered one of the shielded villages and nearby grove that wasn't behind a barrier. They were all in custody. Unless the missing man that had been eluding Sol's search team was the one who located the children for the newly arrived. But Toby was still unsure how the grove related to the Vohnahs' young. The thought of children being placed in one of those glass rooms turned Toby's simmering anger to rage.

Suddenly, Toby's line cleared the treetops and before him lay a huge grove filled with extremely large flowers. The florae glowed in the center, creating lights of multiple colors, from blues and purples to... wait... the buds were the exact same colors as the skin of Sol's people. Were the flowers the young Sol spoke of?

Below him, a huge contingent of mercenaries made their way toward the grove. A group to the right broke away, slipping deeper into the field of vibrant buds in a different direction than the main body of fighters. They carried something he couldn't make out at that distance. Sol's men moved to meet the main body, but none seemed to know about the smaller group.

Toby made a snap decision. Judging the distance to the ground to be safe, he slithered out of the sling and released his grip on the bar. The arm brace

snagged for a second on the swing, jerking Toby's left shoulder painfully before he was let loose. Landing on the balls of his feet, barely, Toby rolled. The stunner in his pocket jabbed his thigh hard, probably bruising him. Behind him the mercenaries were yelling, but Toby didn't glance at the scene, sure the Vohnahs knew what they were doing. He veered off into the grove in the direction he'd last seen the smaller group. But not a couple of meters later, his left forearm was given a painful jolt before his shield fizzled and fell. Immediately he lost his night vision.

Stumbling to a halt, he crouched behind a glowing flower bud, blinking hard. Everything had gone dark with the exception of the soft glow from the blossoms, creating a sharp contrast of light against the black shadows. Precious seconds slipped by as he allowed his vision to adjust. The florae were huge, taller than Toby. The fat base was cupped by large green leaves coming directly from the ground without the benefit of a stem. The ends of the outer petals were curved up and outwards, thick and pulpy, soft to the touch. Inside, the closed inner bud sat fat and heavy, encompassing a fluid that sloshed about as a dark shape moved. The more Toby stared, the better he made out the figure curled in on itself.

Young. *Children.*

The pods held the Vohnahs' children. Why? What did it mean? Were they a part of the blossom? Perhaps they had a symbiotic relationship with the bud or were they the flower? Toby's heart squeezed. They were all so vulnerable, easy pickings for ruthless people determined to take one.

With renewed determination, Toby snuck cautiously through the grove, searching for the interlopers. A noise ahead made him pull the stunner out of his pocket. He understood now why he couldn't use his firearm. Any shot could potentially puncture one of the buds, thus harming the child within. He thought about drawing his knife, but Sol had said the Vohnahs would be affected by the smell of blood. He would have to make do with the stunner. On quiet feet, Toby crept forward.

Mercenaries milled around, too many for Toby to count correctly. They guarded four men who wore the common uniforms of scientists or lab technicians. Gathered at the base of one of the buds, the scientists weren't paying attention to their surroundings. The mercenaries paced about with nervous agitation, the obvious sounds of their brethren losing to the Vohnahs was like music drifting on the night wind. The scientists cut off the overhanging tips of the flower's petals, folding them into clear bags. One had tapped the

base of the bulb while another held a container to catch the yellow fluid that poured forth. The last one unfolded what looked to be a stretcher, metal restraints clanking against the bar.

The mercenaries were Toby's first target. There wasn't time to pick them off using stealth and shadows. With the loss of the cloak, he knew he couldn't overcome all of them, but he could buy time needed for Sol and his team to find them. Yelling a hair-raising bellow to let Sol know where he was, Toby attacked. Jabbing the stunner as quickly as he could into several who reached for him, the scientists yelled at the mercenaries not to fire their weapons, probably afraid the young would be damaged.

Toby snarled, punching a fist into a gut only to bruise his knuckles against the body armor of someone who reached past the stunner. He fought and kicked and attempted to bring down as many people as possible when a blow to the back of his head brought him to his knees. A couple of well-placed kicks and a staggering round of being slammed in the back with the butt of a rifle caused Toby to lose track of his stunner as he struggled to stay upright.

Falling to his knees, his muscles sore and head throbbing, he glanced over at the scientists to see one raise a knife to slice open the flower bud. He reacted. Drawing his knife, he threw it and had a brief moment of sweet satisfaction as the blade pierced the man's throat to the hilt. He took another hard kick to his stomach that made him expel all of his air. Another slam of a hard rifle butt between his shoulder blades knocked him to the ground face first. He tasted blood as he rolled over coughing, but still able to kick the nearest mercenary in the balls.

A very lionlike roar pierced the night air, and everyone halted, staring like sheep at the slaughter as Sol appeared in the soft glow of the bulbs. At that moment, Toby thought Sol looked larger than life, the once soft and smiling visage now the mask of rage of an avenging angel. Sol's tentacles snapped around his body like a nest of angry snakes.

A few of the mercenaries fired their weapons, and Toby screamed when Sol took a couple of slugs to the chest. Surprisingly, he seemed unfazed, his tentacles snapping out and hitting the mercenaries closest to him. Toby lurched to his feet and tackled a man ready to fire on Sol again, and snapped his neck. Rolling, Toby grabbed his dropped stunner and jabbed another mercenary in the nape. For what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes, Toby fought alongside Sol until they were the only two standing.

Sol's guttural noises continued until Toby turned and rushed to him. Sol had several wounds that seeped a clear fluid, and he didn't know what he could do to help.

"Sol, you're injured." God, where could he touch and not hurt Sol further?

Sol wrapped his fingers around Toby's bicep and pulled him into a fierce embrace. "I heard your yell and smelled your blood... I came as fast I could... and then you were on the ground, and I thought... I thought... I have never been so terrified in my life."

The sound of Sol's rough, emotional voice made Toby swallow convulsively. "I'm fine. You're the one who needs medical treatment," Toby groused, giving up the fight and embracing Sol, finally settling on clutching Sol's hips, the only place where he didn't appear harmed.

"You're still bleeding." Sol abruptly released Toby and turned him around to sniff the egg-sized lump he sported on the back of his head. Toby held still for Sol's inspection that decidedly turned weird.

"Did you just lick me? Sol, that's not sanitary." Toby squirmed but couldn't break Sol's hold.

"Stand still. I'm trying to help you."

As strange as it was, he stopped attempting to wiggle from Sol's grip, and allowed Sol to clean his wound. At least that was what Toby told himself, because the imagined visual of what Sol really was doing made Toby's stomach lurch, and not in a good way. If he really was going to stick around, he'd have to become used to the differences between their two species. Oddly, the pounding in his head did ease, and Sol's tentative touch quit hurting. Before he could consider why, the bud the scientists had attempted to cut open shuddered, the shadowy figure within writhing in the glowing fluid.

"Sol, look," Toby said with rising alarm.

A tear formed in the petal, elongating as yellow fluid began to seep ever faster and the bud's integrity degraded. Sol released him, calling out in his native tongue. Toby hoped Sol was calling for help because he didn't know what to do. Moving as close as he dared to the bulbous bottom, he reached up and pressed against the pulpy material on either side of the tear, pushing the ends together, hoping that would stay—or at least slow down—the loss of fluid.

"Toby."

He didn't have time to answer or even to glance at Sol because a split second later the tear erupted, and the thick fluid poured over Toby's head. He stepped back to keep from being drowned only to rush forward again and catch the form that rode along with the wave of liquid exiting the bud.

Toby fell on his ass, cradling a child the size of a Human four-year-old. He was covered in a thick goo that smelled light and sweet. Hairless, tentacle-less, and with the skin of a dusky rose, Toby gaped in awe at the small figure who stared back at him with large pink eyes.

Chapter Eleven

The cleanup had taken hours, and Sol had barely held on to his self-control. His body hummed painfully with the need for release. That he and Toby had parted ways once they returned to the compound helped, somewhat. If Toby had continued to remain close, Sol would have been driven to take him by smell alone.

As he was the one to have first contact with the young, she refused to release Toby until her family arrived to claim her. From there on out, she would recognize Toby's scent as clan and would seek him out if she smelled him close by, whether her family liked it or not. The news of how Toby had fought against overwhelming odds to save her spread like wildfire throughout the compound, and hopefully, his deeds would ease the ruffled feathers of her cluster since she imprinted on one not their own.

The Federation currently orbited the planet, arriving closely behind several ships from Wentworth Salvage. For the time being, Sol placed Elion in charge of communications since he was one of the few already sated. Those who fought had been sent immediately to the couplings tent. Two days should see a good portion of the males balanced enough for normal duties. Sol's own blood still thrummed, triggered hours before by Toby's scent mixing with his own mating essence. How his body hurt, and he wasn't sure how much longer he would have to wait for his own satiation. He'd never gone so long without succumbing to his base desires, and people's reactions to him told him that he wasn't hiding his rising aggression levels as well as he thought. He needed Toby soon, before he did something he would regret.

While Sol held on to his faculties, he gave Elion instructions on how to handle the Federation until he was able to meet with their Captain Shepherd. He huffed a laugh under his breath at the memory of how shocked the man had been when Sol had contacted him. The primitives weren't as primitive as the good captain was led to believe. The sages had already placed him in charge of liaising with the captain, and he'd requested that Toby, as a former officer, be allowed to attend Sol in the communications with the Federation. They hadn't agreed, yet, but Sol had a feeling they would. Until then, Elion was in command of the communications, arranging for a delegation to meet with Sol in a couple of days.

The cryo-containers had made the journey to the compound unscathed, and the medical staff had quickly hooked up the containers and made sure the people within were stabilized and in relatively good health, not that it said much for a few of the poor souls.

“There are eighteen different races of multiple genders in the pods, Commander. After speaking with Captain Shepherd, he promised to help us discover where they are from.” The chief of staff, Mella Mea, held the data tablet to her chest, her deep-green tentacles swaying in agitation as she spoke.

Sol nodded, batting down the rage that attempted to rise at the list of injuries some of the captives had. Captain Shepherd wasn't happy that the cryo-containers had been removed from the ship or that Sol planned to free the captives from the frozen environment. The Vohnahs' labs were still more advanced than those of Humans, which Sol made clear to the captain, but he did promise to allow a couple of doctors down for observation only. Sol argued the people once free of the cryo-sleep wouldn't trust any Human after the abuse they received. Captain Shepherd reluctantly agreed.

“How soon will you start bringing them out of the sleep?” Sol stopped in front of a cryo-container. Only the face was visible, the rest of the body was wrapped protectively in a set of bedraggled feathered wings. The being had strong facial features with long droopy ears cupped by a curl of horns.

“We will begin today after we set up a suite and choose a companion to meet with them. Fresh teams are being sent from the mountain compound, so I don't have to worry about their balance. I thought we would bring the first one out of sleep and have them help us to free the others. The hope is he will give us information about the others to help us make the transition easier for the captives as we free them.” Mella Mea placed her hand on the frosted glass, her expression full of compassion.

“If there is anything you need, do not hesitate to contact Elion.”

Her expression hardened. “I will not allow any nonsense from the Human doctors. If they get in my way, I will send them back to the Federation.”

He grinned at Mella Mea's vehemence. “Agreed. Their observation is a courtesy only. Keep me informed of their progress.”

After bidding her farewell, Sol moved through the medical facility, heading for the stairs on his way out to track down Toby. An intoxicating scent hit him hard, stopping him in his tracks. He stood in the middle of the corridor, the dark

wood paneling feeding the shadows of the dimly lit hallway. He lifted his nose, inhaling deeply, searching for... there. Just inside the exit stood Toby. His length, which had been semihard without Toby's scent, immediately responded. He grunted at the sudden ache, releasing a low growl of warning when Toby's gaze landed on him.

Spreading his saliva over Toby's wound had not only mended the injury on Toby's head, but it had also continued to work its way through Toby's system, healing his other hurts quicker than normal. The earlier bruising from the beating had mostly vanished. Toby had cleaned off a majority of the nectar from the damaged bud, but he still wore the clothes saturated by the sweet fluid. But it didn't—couldn't—mask the mating scent that flooded the corridor from Toby's pores.

He stood stock still, for if he moved now, he'd rush Toby and take him right there on the floor. He was all too aware the size of his manhood scared Humans. The few who swore he wasn't too big had been hurt. He didn't want that for Toby. He wanted their first time to be languid and gentle. He wished to take his time to ensure Toby's body was ready to accept him without tearing. But stars have mercy, the alluring scent Toby emanated called to a primal part of Sol.

After sighting Sol, Toby charged across the space, shoving Sol hard into an alcove that led to an empty recovery suite. Sol staggered backward from Toby's surprising strength, snarling with approval. His back slammed into the wall as Toby shut the door behind them.

His Human invaded his space until they stood chest to chest with Toby staring hungrily up into Sol's eyes. "I'm not waiting any longer. They've all had their time with you. Tell me your duty is done. Tell me you want me. My skin feels like it's crawling, and my vision is wonky. *Please, Sol.*"

Toby's pleading tone wasn't necessary. Sol's tenuous control faltered. He ripped at his lacings as Toby stepped back and stripped off his pants, his shoes and socks completely forgotten in the rush. Sol's tentacles swarmed around Toby, the ragged shirt tearing away leaving only the sleeves and shoulders, only Toby's shoulder holster holding the remaining material in place. Sol pushed him into the wall, his chest covering Toby's back. Toby seemed so small when compared to Sol's people, but he fought with such ferocity. So *small*. Sol couldn't just take him, otherwise he'd hurt Toby. If he did, Sol would never forgive himself.

He pressed his erection into the small of Toby's back. The feel on Toby's hot skin against his was almost heart-stopping. Finally able to touch him after such a long night of being so close yet so far away, the desire to find completion with Toby spurred Sol's arousal. Perhaps Toby wouldn't mind taking Sol in hand, or perhaps using his mouth. The sound that escaped Sol was more of a whimper than a moan, because even though he could reach completion that way, he needed to plant his seed within Toby to counteract the essence Toby had ingested. He was so fucked.

"You aren't going to hurt me. I promise. I can take you." Toby glanced over his shoulder.

"You don't know what you're saying." Sol made himself step back, his body trembling hard as he wrestled for control, fought to safeguard the one person who had quickly become the most important person to him, or damn near it.

Toby turned, his chest heaving as if he'd run an hour through the jungle. Sol could practically feel the touch of Toby's heated gaze as it traveled down his body, coming to rest on his groin. Toby licked his lips. "Oh, yes, I absolutely know what I'm talking about. Trust me to know my body. I cannot wait until you're inside of me."

Sol wanted to argue, but Toby gave a little hop, and Sol immediately caught him, his tentacles securely wrapped around Toby as his legs snaked around Sol's waist. "Toby," he gasped, hands kneading Toby's round ass. Toby's hard length pressed into his belly. If he did not stop... Sol didn't want Toby to regret the encounter. "I don't want to hurt you. I want to love you slowly, like you deserve."

"And if I want hard and fast right now?" Toby challenged.

He trembled again when Toby's rough fingers threaded through the base of his tentacles, slowly pulling Sol closer as if Toby was giving Sol a chance to say no one more time. But he couldn't. The need in Toby's gaze, the hunger, the hope and shy affection Sol saw there broke the last thread of his control, and he crushed Toby's lips against his. He growled into the fierce kiss, surprised to hear Toby greet him with a growl of his own.

Toby met Sol's wildness head on, and Sol reveled in it, basked in the way his touch caused Toby to writhe and rub against him. The room quickly filled with the scent of Sol's essence as the ends of his tentacles wept, coating him and Toby in a light oil. He pressed Toby up against the wall, fingertips brushing

against the tight pucker where Sol would enter him to find Toby was already slick. Toby tore away from the kiss, head thrown back as he moaned, low and guttural, when Sol pushed two fingers in to test Toby's readiness.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Finally. Now, Sol, I need you right now." Toby's gaze became heavy lidded, filled with a fathomless longing that Sol wanted to satisfy.

"How are you slick?" Sol gritted out, the red haze of lust wrapping around the edge of his vision as he quickly collected the essence from several of his tentacles and rubbed the fluid onto his own length. He rubbed the head of his length along the cleft of Toby's ass, releasing a hiss of pleasure. He couldn't stop now if he'd wanted to.

A grin, more feral than wicked, flashed across Toby's kiss-swollen lips. "I came prepared to *take* what I wanted." Loosening his legs, Toby suddenly bore down and did what he said he would. Toby took Sol, sheathing Sol's rigid length within his tight, hot channel.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Toby rumbled, the cords of his neck going taut. "I need you, Sol."

Sol erupted with movement, grasping Toby's hips as he thrust again and again. Toby squeezed around him, voicing his delight, demanding more. Sol's tentacles caressed and rubbed, trying to touch Toby everywhere at once. Toby's hands became entangled in the mass of appendages, the rough handling spurring Sol's arousal higher than he'd ever experienced. Coupling with Toby was glorious, and yet he needed more.

"Damn it, Sol. Give me all of your cock. Quit holding out on me, you bastard."

Toby was right. The angle wasn't right. He needed to be deeper, but he didn't want to put Toby on the floor. Glancing around the room, his gaze fell upon the bed. Toby clamped his teeth on the cords of Sol's neck, gnawing lightly, causing the warmth in his stomach to burn hotter. Carrying Toby across the floor, he held Toby close to his chest as he laid Toby on his back, but Toby seemed to have something else in mind.

"On your back."

Sol growled low at Toby's demanding tone, but he rolled. Toby sat up, sliding further down on Sol's length, a decadent noise of pleasure coming from Toby's mouth. Toby rode him, hard and rough and wild, and so beautiful Sol's

chest ached at the sight. Toby's cock jutted out from his body as if begging Sol to touch it. When he did, Toby sped up, sweat slicking his skin as Sol stroked him lightly. He didn't want Toby to come yet. Sol trembled with the effort of holding back, allowing Toby to have his way with Sol's body. But soon, he would need to take what he wanted.

Toby's ravenous gaze dropped to his, and Sol knew what Toby really needed. "Please," Toby panted.

Gnashing his teeth, Sol pushed Toby off and rolled him onto his stomach. Without word or warning, he shoved his way inside the uplifted ass. Toby called out, his words slightly garbled but the "Fuck, yes" could still be discerned. Sol thrust hard, pulling Toby back onto him. He'd thought it would be days before Toby could take every inch of him. As he moved, he watched his length pierce Toby over and over, Toby's body stretched wide around his girth as if Toby was made for Sol.

Toby's words became more filthy and begging with every passing minute. Sol couldn't hold back the low, animalistic noises that bubbled forth. He took Toby, stamping a part of himself on Toby's skin. His grip on Toby's hips would leave bruises, just as the nips he gave Toby across the back of his shoulders would, but only for a brief time before they healed. When Toby turned in his embrace, they writhed and clutched each other. Toby's soft touches turned just as bruising as Sol's, and he reveled in the possessive gleam in that brilliant, blue gaze.

All of Sol's senses were filled with Toby and only Toby to the point where he wasn't aware of the clueless doctor who entered the room until Toby snarled, chasing the poor male out by drawing his weapon. After that, none dared to interrupt them. He licked and sucked and bit, listening when Toby demanded harder, faster, until Toby's body clamped down on him. Sol felt as if his length was caught in a vise, and his body seized as his essence was released into Toby's tight heat. The salty, bitter tang of Toby's cum painted Sol's skin, and the pearly fluid was greedily absorbed into Sol's system to be saved and used at a later date.

Sol tightened his arms around Toby, rolling so that Toby collapsed onto his chest. He listened to Toby's breathing even as he languidly stroked Toby's strong back. Sated, for the moment, Sol contemplated moving them to his rooms. Toby was the first to stir, turning his head so Sol could see his face. The lazy smile and soft look in Toby's eyes made Sol's insides flip.

“Maybe we should take this somewhere more private.” Toby prodded the discoloration in Sol’s skin where he’d been hit with a projectile. “We have much to discuss, I think.”

“I will answer any questions you have,” he promised, his softening erection slipping from Toby’s body.

Toby’s nose scrunched. “Can we find somewhere to wash up first?”

They gathered their clothes and made their way from the building. Thankfully no one stopped them as they crossed the compound to the spring baths. Their clothes were collected to be cleaned, although Toby’s shirt was a lost cause, and new ones brought to them. On the way to the lift, Toby took Sol’s hand, glancing at Sol from the corner of his eye, shoulders relaxing when Sol squeezed. Stepping from the lift to the balcony, Sol led Toby to the low table and bid him to sit, while he retrieved some food.

When he returned, Toby had removed his shoes and socks, his feet tucked under his body. A bowl of water and a washcloth sat next to Toby. Sol’s heart sped as Toby directed him to sit down. When he did, Toby gently and thoroughly washed his feet. The fare was simple, fruit and cheese. He opened his mouth to accept the food from Toby’s hand, the brush of fingertips against his lips thrilling. With each piece, Toby scooted closer to him until he straddled Sol’s lap, looking quite pleased with himself.

“So. Your people are florae?” Toby used a clean cloth to wipe Sol’s mouth before he cleaned his hands. “I’ve met a people descended from trees before, but not flowers.”

Sol rested his palms on Toby’s hips. “It is a closely held secret, although I’m not sure how long it will stay as such. When we roamed the universe, we didn’t speak of our home, and none cared to discover our origins, only interested in our ability to fight battles.”

Toby met Sol’s gaze, his expression solemn. “I’ll hold your secret close. It’s none of their business what your people are comprised of. We can say the scientists were trying to harvest a sentient plant your people have been sworn to protect. Anything beyond that the Federation doesn’t need to know.”

“Our thoughts exactly.”

Sol turned to the balcony where one of the sages, Anya, stood. She wore the hide pants that all Vohnahs wore and nothing else. If Toby was shocked at what Humans thought of as partial nudity, his expression didn’t telegraph it as he slowly moved off of Sol.

“Anya.” Sol rose to his feet, hands outstretched to receive her. Her skin was the palest of yellows with orange accents. Her white tentacles were as long as Sol’s.

“I am glad to see you well and sated after such a trying ordeal.” She ran her hands over the darker patches of his skin. In a couple of days, the healing would be complete and his coloring would once again be even. “I had been told you were injured, but I see there will be no lasting damage.”

Toby slowly approached, and Sol beamed at the possessive glint in Toby’s eyes as he watched Anya inspect Sol.

“You must be the Human our young males are giving such accolades to.” Anya held her hands out to Toby, the gesture monumental and Toby none the wiser.

Toby took her hands in his, blushing at her wide smile. “I’m only glad I could be of service.”

“I hope you and Sol will be of service to us again. We sages hoped you would be amiable to assisting Sol as he liaises with the Federation. I did not mean to eavesdrop on your conversation, but I am glad to know you understand our need for privacy. There are qualities about us that, if discovered, would only cause more like Quintessential Chemicals to seek us out.” Toby touched the back of his head as if remembering his injury. Sol knew the wound was gone, and Toby was intelligent enough to put together the puzzle.

“We know we cannot hide forever, but we would like time to come up with a plan to keep ourselves from being hunted. Would you assist us in this endeavor, Toby Wentworth? It would require you spend a great deal of time with us, but I had heard you might not be as adverse to that move as I originally thought.”

Anya glanced from Toby to Sol, and Sol held his breath, anxious to know Toby’s answer.

Toby’s blush deepened even more. “I’d been considering it but hadn’t spoken to Sol about the possibility.”

“Excellent.” Anya beamed. “I will leave you two to make plans. Elion has put off meeting with the Federation until tomorrow evening. I also understand your family has arrived. They were given authorization to retrieve *The Whirlwind*, and the crewmember aboard was shuttled up to one of their vessels in orbit. They are more than welcome to stay at the compound with you. We are having rooms readied for them on the lower floors.”

Anya gave Toby a quick kiss on both cheeks before leaving. Sol frowned after her until Toby laughed. "You don't need to worry. She doesn't do anything for me."

Momentarily placated, he allowed Toby to lead him back to the table where he answered a barrage of questions. Yes, Vohnahs were descendants of a carnivorous plant. The males of the compound were the young, unattached males. Their sexual maturity could be gauged by the length of their tentacles. Yes, those who were bald were still very young. Yes, Vohnahs are very long lived.

Sol moved on weary legs to the sleeping chamber. A couple of hours rest in the sun and he would be revived. Toby would be so too, as long as he continued to consume some part of Sol. If Toby decided to stay and eventually form a family cluster with Sol, then he'd speak to Toby about how being Sol's mate, ingesting Sol's essence, would over time lengthen his life as well. It had been a while since a Vohnahs had to explain to a potential mate outside of their race what effects their body fluids had on long term couplings. That discussion could wait until later. At the moment, they needed rest. They had the Federation to deal with, and Sol wanted to meet Toby's family.

Curled around Toby's form, he inhaled the fragrance of Toby's skin. He still gave off their combined scents, but before he could remark on it, sleep took Sol under.

The sensation of Toby's warm mouth around the tip of his tentacle pulled Sol from deep rest. A gurgling moan was the first noise of greeting Sol gave as Toby's handsome face came into view.

"I've been dying to know if I can make you come just from handling your tentacles." The wicked grin Toby flashed him made Sol's heart stutter.

Epilogue

Toby paced.

“You are going to wear a path in that stretch of earth if you don't stop.”

He glanced to where Sol sat on the ground, leaning back on his elbows in the shadow of one of the large buds. Around them the grove was a veritable splendor of color. From a bird's eye view, every imaginable hue could be seen. The sight was one of the most beautiful wonders Toby had ever laid eyes on.

Sol patted the ground next to him. “Come. Sit with me. I don't know why you're agitated.”

He dropped down next to Sol. “What if something goes wrong?”

Sol sat up, and Toby leaned into him, loving the feeling of Sol's arm wrapped around his shoulders. The last couple of years had been the best of his entire life. After reporting Spencer to the authorities, Toby stopped receiving the disturbing holovids. He'd never imagined how different sharing his life with Sol would be compared to the brief time with Spencer. Granted, integrating their lives and learning about the Vohnahs hadn't always been easy, but Toby wouldn't give up what they'd built together for anything. It was hard to recall what his life had been like before. When he'd stepped foot on *Genesis Nine*, his heart was bruised and sore. He thought he would spend the majority of his life alone because he'd been tired of compromising himself for the sake of others. Then came Sol, with his persistent conviction they could be something special. Toby had *hoped*, but it still had taken time for him to *believe*.

Becoming the liaison for the Vohnahs actually helped, giving Toby purpose, a place within the community, and removing the stress of finding out where he fit. Without that, their relationship might have failed, because Toby couldn't stand being idle. If he hadn't had a place he belonged, then he would've headed back out to the stars. Sol swore Toby wouldn't have left without him, but Toby was glad he didn't have to find out.

Elion followed Nicius into space and now worked for Wentworth Salvage as a pilot. Toby had kept in touch and as of their last communication, Nicius still planned to drag Elion all over the galaxy before entertaining thoughts of settling down.

“Are we late?” Wolfe's gruff voice called.

Toby rose to embrace his older brother. Wolfe was slightly taller than him, taking after their mother with dark hair and hazel eyes. His inherited good looks were marred by a crooked nose that had been broken more times than Toby probably knew of. A scar bisected his left brow and to this day, Wolfe refused to speak of it. His clothing was dark and tight, embellished by wide silver cuffs at his wrists and a handful of rings on his fingers. Toby always thought that Wolfe would pierce his ears, but as of yet, his lobes were unadorned. Toby wondered if the number of fights and scuffles Wolfe found himself in was the reason.

Behind Wolfe was Maximillien, followed by their dad, who approached at a slower pace. Maximillien was like Toby, a younger version of their father, but with finer features that made him much prettier and more sought after than any of the Wentworth men.

“No, you’re not—”

The blue bud trembled, and Toby immediately forgot about his brothers. He and Sol approached the flower, the shadowy form within twisting. A small hand pressed against the wall of the petal.

The day Sol asked Toby if he wanted to have young with him, Toby had been skeptical, and then slightly horrified as he imagined his body manipulated in uncomfortable ways to allow him to bear children. He'd been pissed beyond measure when Sol couldn't stop laughing at him. But once Sol calmed he explained Vohnahs were self-fertile, and he'd absorbed enough of Toby's essence to combine their DNA to form the seed. All they needed to do was visit a grove and choose a flower where the seed would grow. Eventually, Toby agreed and now he anxiously waited to hold his child.

“Holy shit, would you look at that,” Maximillien breathed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Toby saw their dad smack Maximillien on the head. “How many times have I told you to watch your language? We have a child on the way, and you don’t need to be cussing in front of the little one.”

Smiling, Toby put them out of mind when the top of the bud slowly peeled down. Sol was tall enough to lean over and grasp their young, slowly bringing the child out of the nourishing nectar. He had a lighter-blue skin than Sol, touched with white highlights and a smattering of white freckles on his small nose and cheeks. The little one blinked slowly, as if coming out of a deep sleep.

Toby grabbed the soft cloths they'd brought with them. One to clean him off, and another they'd use to wrap him securely. After several minutes, Sol had

the boy completely removed from the bud. Toby tenderly cleaned the goo away, counting fingers and toes with a growing awe. When he finished and had the child wrapped up, Sol sat back down. They all gathered around to peer at the newest member of their little cluster.

Then the moment hit Toby hard. "Holy shit! I'm a dad!"

Toby didn't duck fast enough to keep from being hit in the back of the head. "If you don't quit cussing, your brother won't. Besides, you don't want to be a bad example for your son, do you?"

He didn't care. He waited, slightly impatient, for Sol to hand their son over. He was the same size as Izzi, the little one Toby had caught after the scientists had damaged her bud beyond repair.

"What are you going to name him?" Wolfe asked. Toby glanced up at the odd note in his brother's voice to see an expression of longing Wolfe tried to hide.

"We were thinking Jairo or Aron," Sol said, his grin huge and proud.

Large blue eyes stared up at Toby, and he smiled, heart aching with joy as his own eyes clouded. When Toby glanced to Sol, he wondered how the hell he got so lucky. A good life, a great family, and now a partner and a beautiful child of his own. When Sol leaned into him, Toby tasted the salty honey of Sol's tears on his lips and knew Sol was just as thankful as he was.

The End

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a notebook, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

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