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Pandora Project: Runaway Star

TOP SHELF

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Prologue

Life was perfect, or as close as it could come while death remained unsolved. People spoke often about whether or not Elysium had been attained in the land of the living. The old wounds that had scarred the Earth were healing, there was little hunger, and there was room enough for all. Slowly, the Earth was being returned to a garden state, and five great colonies hung in space around her like attendants to a queen. There were no armies, no wars, and little strife. It seemed that the human race had outgrown its terrible past; alone in all the universe, it had finally come to peace with itself.

And then, one day, the noises came. They would've gone unheard save for a mining station listening at the verge of what humanity considered to be its territory. At first, they went unattended, but then they came with greater frequency until they could no longer be explained as random phenomena seeping out of the great unknown. They had a cadence to them that spoke of urgency and a pattern to them that could only be language.

Quietly, in the recesses of government research centers, satellites were built and cast out into space, weaving a net to catch as many of the strange noises as possible. And in the basement of a small building on the colony of Tethys, everything heard was gathered to be deciphered.

The team dedicated to the project was small, one professor of linguistics, two graduate students, and one intern. For five years they worked in secret, and one day, they understood what was being said.

Something was coming. Something large, something dangerous. Something like a multitude. And *they* were coming, too.

Two weeks later, a probe chasing whispers through deep space encountered something that had not been there before. It came from nowhere and hung floating in the void, whispering the message that they had been hearing all along. They called it Pandora, because they had no idea what might be inside her.

In the face of opposition from those who thought the human race would be better served by staying home and minding its own business, a small handful of scientists, soldiers, and adventurers scraped together the funds and the approval of the Senate.

They dusted off an old colony ship from the days when the human race thought it might like to reach further out into the stars, found long-abandoned plans for starfighters and weapons, and began making their preparations to go meet Pandora and find out what she

had brought the human race. And, perhaps more importantly, to find out what might be coming behind her, of which she had tried so desperately to warn them.

Chapter One

"I can't believe you're doing this to us again." Macy sprawled on the bench by Sender's locker, hands tucked behind his head, watching Sender with an attempt at a pitiful expression. Unlike Sender, he was dressed for the weekend, looking relaxed in black fatigues.

Sender shrugged into his flightsuit and ignored Macy's look, turning away to run a finger over the blessed icon that hung in his locker to watch over him. "I do it every time some desk jockey with a hand on the purse strings wants to take a run around the sky in a Harpy." He closed his locker with a bang that echoed in the empty room and headed for the mirrors to make sure he looked presentable. "Go on without me; I'll sign the squad out before I go up."

"That's bad luck. You know we all have to go together." Macy rolled to his feet and tagged after Sender. "Besides, if I leave, who's going to help you hose puke out of the cockpit?"

"I'll manage. I recall doing it after I took you up the first time." Sender looked at Macy in the mirror and laughed at his dark expression. Macy was usually sunny, blond, and good-natured; he didn't look particularly convincing when he glared.

"Hey! I was just a kid then."

Sender wet his hands and ducked his head to run them through his hair, hoping to settle his wild curls into some semblance of order. "Still are..." He needed a haircut; his hair was starting to take on a life of its own.

The doors slammed open. Voices, laughter, and the sound of footsteps rolled into the locker room just ahead of Quirinus Squadron.

"Trying to get prettier?" Lee, a lean, dark pilot with a wicked grin, smacked Sender on the ass on her way past. "Wondered what Callisto Squadron wasted its time on while the rest of us were learning how to fight."

"I keep saying he's past his limit." Macy snickered and reached over to rumple Sender's hair while Sender was turning around to answer Lee.

"I'm trying to look presentable," Sender muttered, giving up and turning away from the mirror. "Unless anyone else feels like taking the latest tourist up for me?"

"Not me." Lee was half out of her flightsuit, and she stripped off her bra with a sigh of relief; her skin was sleek with sweat under the watery overhead lights. The cooling systems in the Harpies needed more work. "You're on your own."

The lead pilot for Quirinus patted Sender on the shoulder. "They like you better, anyway." There wasn't any rancor in Iantu's voice, and his grin wasn't regretful in the least. "I'm sorry, man."

"I hate you all." Sender ran his hand through his hair again.

"Cut that out." Macy cuffed him. "You looked fine when you started. Shit, you looked fine when you rolled out of bed this morning. Shame all the pretty's wasted on me. You need a nice boyfriend to remind you."

"Not this again. I'm going." Sender reached over and stole Macy's sunglasses off his head instead of going back to his own locker for a pair. They were probably his, anyway. He started toward the door and Macy slid ahead of him to check the door open with one shoulder.

"I'll help you get Juvie One ready to go," Macy offered cheerily. "The sooner we get your sorry, favor-doing ass in the air, the sooner we get to go get drunk and laid."

"Let no one suggest you haven't distilled the meaning of life."

"Fuck, no." Macy sauntered on ahead toward the flight deck, hands in his pockets. "The sooner you recognize me as your guru, the happier you'll be."

Sender rolled his eyes and decided not to argue the point. Macy was probably right, but Sender wasn't about to give in just yet.

The monorail from the city out to New McMurdo Base swayed along a smooth curve around the massive water reservoir separating the two areas. Elios stretched his legs out and leaned back in his first class seat. "I appreciate this, Doc," he said quietly to the older man beside him.

"You may be cursing my name before the day is out, once you've been up in one of those contraptions." Senator Darlington laughed and patted Elios on the knee.

"Excuse me." One of Darlington's aides, a woman Elios thought he recognized, stopped by their seats, holding a datapad out toward Elios tentatively. "Doctor Campbell? You need to sign these releases before you can go up. Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne just sent them over."

"I think if Doctor Campbell were going to sue the government for pain and suffering, he'd have done it when they assigned him to me as an intern seven years ago," Darlington said wryly. Still, he passed the pad over to Elios, who couldn't help laughing quietly.

"I could hardly call the Pandora Project a hardship," Elios said, signing the releases without looking at them. There wasn't anything that was going to stop him from getting up into the air, not if he could help it. "I'm not sure where else I was going to get paid to solve language puzzles."

"Thank you, Doctor. We'll be arriving on base in ten minutes." The aide took the pad back when Elios was done, then offered another to the senator. "Another message from Senator Tai, sir." She looked apologetic.

"Perhaps I should be the one suing." Darlington took the pad and rolled his eyes.

Elios laughed, feeling sympathetic, and reached for the mineral water he'd been served. Doc was having lunch, a light pasta dish with seafood, but Elios had passed it up in favor of not throwing up in the jet he was going to get to ride in. It was a small sacrifice to make. After the year he'd had, it was time that something special happened.

As they trekked along the long curve of the torus, the lake on one side of them and a tree line on the other, Elios looked up through the clear ceiling of the monorail. Above him, the sky was a perfect, engineered blue devoid of clouds. In less than an hour, he'd be up there, almost close enough to touch. He'd never been ill on a shuttle in atmosphere; he was sure he'd be fine. Maybe he was hoping to leave a little of the past behind before launch.

With luck -- and some significant maneuvering from Doc -- that would only be a few months away, and then he'd be up in space and up to his ears in new translations. The Pandora Project was already the most exciting thing Elios had ever been involved with, and the trip out into space to actually see the ship itself would just make it more incredible. Elios could hardly wait.

The monorail halted noiselessly at the base and a handful of marines were standing at attention on the platform, waiting for the senator to step out. Going anywhere with Doc was an adventure these days, but the eye-candy was excellent. Elios waited until Doc was on his feet to follow him out.

After five years away on Tethys Colony, Elios was still getting used to Luna's brilliant days again. For all that he'd been born and raised here, and had been back for a while now, he was always forgetting his sunglasses. He was starting to get fine lines from squinting so much. Still, he couldn't bring himself to care, aside from the occasional headache; it was a luxury to feel the real sun instead of the artificial light that made up the days of the other colonies.

There was so much to see here. Elios was busy looking around and not paying particular attention to Doc and his staff being greeted by some officer. Only Earth still had any kind of militia outside the peacekeeping forces and, for all that things were kept low-key here, the base still felt like it bristled with power.

Like most of the base, the hangar ahead of them was constructed of clear, smoky panels, and Elios could see the shapes of some of the fighter craft housed inside. Just the sight of their sleek lines gave him a thrill. The idea that in minutes he would be in one, leaping skyward, was so exciting that he could hardly contain himself. He felt like a boy again, full of optimism and fresh starts.

"Welcome, Senator Darlington." A tall woman with close-cropped black curls and dark skin came striding across the compound to meet them, a junior officer trailing in her wake. Her insignia marked her as a lieutenant-commander, once Elios had reviewed the number of bars under the officer's spiral on her sleeve. "It's an honor to have you come visit us." She held out her hand to the senator. "Lieutenant-Commander Flavia Ozanne at your service."

"It's no hardship to come by, Lieutenant-Commander," the senator said, giving Ozanne a charming smile and shaking her hand. "I'm thrilled that you managed to fit us into your busy schedule. And, I'll admit, getting a sneak peek often helps me keep going through all those dry budget meetings." Doc had always been a charmer, even before his career in politics, back when he was head of linguistics on the Pandora Project and Elios had been his first intern.

"Still, it's good to see you." Ozanne gestured for them to follow her; the senatorial staff and all but two of the marines were left behind as they entered the restricted area of the hangar. "We get a fair deal of criticism lately, and not a lot of actual interest in what we really do."

She led them through a small door and into the hangar, where the smells of fuel and metal hung thick in the air and the hum of machinery made Ozanne raise her voice. "You can see the latest single-seat Harpies here, under inspection." She gestured to a row of the sleek jets up on cradles, being attended to by technicians like insects in a hive.

Elios' eyes trailed enviously over the Harpies. The dark fighter jets looked as though they were perpetually tensed for take-off, yearning for the skies. He didn't blame them. He felt the need to break free more than ever these days.

The Harpies were all uniform, sleek arrowheads, except for words and artwork painted on the tail fins. The words must be nicknames or call-signs, Elios realized, just like the old days. Names like "Ahi," "Maris," "Secundus," and "Grace," evoked the virtues, dreams, and fond memories of their pilots.

The vaulted hangar was like a cathedral, the high ceilings full of shadows. After a moment of scrutiny, Elios made out the shapes of more ships clutched in cradles high above his head. It was a little worrying to find himself walking underneath, but he was sure that the locking system on the cradles was secure.

Conserving room was important here, and would be more so once they were on the *Auriga*, on their way out into deep space. There wasn't much to make one feel small like standing under sixty-ton machines that hung overhead like toys suspended from a child's bedroom ceiling.

"I've made arrangements for Doctor Campbell to go up in a training unit with one of our instructors, Lieutenant Kinnison." Elios heard his name and turned to see Ozanne smiling at him; he realized that she'd been talking all along and he hadn't heard a word. "He's exceptionally competent. You're sure you don't want to go for a ride, Senator?"

"Quite sure," Doc assured her, laughing. "Elios here can be adventurous for me. He's young."

Elios flashed a smile at them both and said, "Thank you for taking the time to do this. I'm sure you're all very busy."

"We're never too busy for a supportive voice in the senate," Ozanne said. She directed them to where one of the Harpies stood, partially stripped of its armor. "As you can see, we started with a fairly traditional frame. There are a limited number of fighter jets made these days, usually just to replace the standing forces on Earth. Nothing like this has been in development for space flight until now. All we had were the pipe-dreams of long-dead engineers. We had to do a fair bit of materials engineering to stay within our weight limit while including weaponry, which hasn't been a concern on any dual-environment vessel to date."

The exposed skeleton of the Harpy was beautiful, but it looked remarkably fragile. Her inner workings looked organic, but that might have been because her main fluid networks were red and blue, like a network of blood vessels.

"The new shuttles are being developed by the same team, aren't they?" Elios followed Doc and Ozanne through the hangar. He'd actually get to ride in those, once they arrived at the Pandora.

"Our funds were too limited to start shuttle design from the ground up. The design team is retrofitting a pair of standard commercial shuttles as transport vehicles. They're the most compact ones on the market, especially for their durability." Ozanne turned and gestured toward the back of the hangar.

Compact was a highly relative term. The shuttles were massive compared to the sleek fighter jets, squat and powerful, with their short wings folded up in back while they were at rest. Where the Harpies looked like raptors ready to leap, the shuttles were merely

utility vehicles and were painted a standard gray-green that did nothing to lessen the effect. They might seat a dozen people or so and some equipment. There would be no large expeditions off the *Auriga*.

Doc gave Elios a little frown over the mention of funding. Getting more money for the military, such as it was, was always problematic. For this project, it was doubly so. No one wanted to throw money at some leap into the unknown, not when life at home was so calm and certain.

"They'll keep you in one piece, and the engineering crew will learn your needs and alter them on the go until they're perfect," Ozanne assured them. "We have the finest technical crew in all the colonies. Doctor Campbell, why don't I send you up for your ride while Senator Darlington and I discuss the boring things, like finances and scheduling?"

"Thank you." Elios tried not to grin too broadly. "I'd like that."

"Your pilot is sure to bring Doctor Campbell back in one piece, yes?" The flash in Doc's eyes said that he was clearly teasing Elios. "He's really terribly useful; we'd hate to have to make do without him."

"I promise," Ozanne said firmly. "And we can't do without Lieutenant Kinnison, either. He's the one with the infinite patience for the cadets." She thumbed the radio clipped to one shoulder strap and it hummed. "Lieutenant Kinnison to the field," she ordered. Letting go of the radio, she pointed to the wide doors at the far end of the hangar. "He'll meet us out there, gentlemen."

Outside, the sharp sunlight glittered off of the single Harpy waiting on the tarmac. Ozanne raised her hand to wave at someone coming out of one of the other buildings that backed onto the airfield. "Ready to go, Sky?" she called.

Long strides carried the man toward them. Even without anything to compare him to out on the blacktop, he was very tall and broad. He was carrying two helmets in one hand, and he snapped off a casual salute with the other. "Yes, ma'am."

Elios was sure he wasn't letting anything show on his face right up until Doc murmured, "I don't think they'll let you keep him. But I could ask."

Elios composed himself a little more and tried not to laugh. "I'll be fine, thanks." Doc was impossible sometimes.

When the pilot got closer, catching up to them near the Harpy, he was more than just tall and broad: he was downright impressive. His black flightsuit hung perfectly on his powerful body. His hair was glossy dark curls and, once he'd joined them, Elios couldn't miss how blue his eyes were. He looked like a living recruitment poster.

"Flight plan's logged and we're ready to go," Kinnison said to Ozanne. Then he gave Elios a warm smile that made a dimple show in his left cheek.

Elios had a terrible weakness for tall and broad. Now, after having seen Kinnison, he was going to have to add dimples to his list of weaknesses. The man was gorgeous.

Elios couldn't keep from smiling back, shaking his hair out of his eyes as he tilted his head to look up at the pilot. Just incredibly gorgeous. Elios was going to have to thank Doc for the scenery, as well as the ride, now.

"Is that for me?" he asked, pointing to the extra helmet, the one that didn't have a name painted on it.

"Wouldn't do to have you knocking your head around," Ozanne said, answering for the lieutenant. "You're in good hands now, Doctor Campbell. Senator, would you like to join me on the observation deck? I'll be able to give you an overview of the project from there and you can keep an eye on Doctor Campbell. Sky, we need the good doctor back in one piece, so take care of him."

"Yes, ma'am." Kinnison nodded at Doc. "Enjoy your stay, sir."

"Certainly." Doc gave Elios a smile and a pat on the shoulder. "Have fun," he said, before he let Ozanne lead him away.

"See you later, Doc," Elios said, giving a quick wave as he turned his attention to Lieutenant Kinnison.

He looked up and then up a little more to smile at the pilot. Gods, but the man was tall; Elios wasn't, so that made it all the more obvious. "I really appreciate all this," he said sincerely. "I know you must have better things to do."

"Not a problem, Doctor. Come on and we'll get you strapped in first. You can change your mind any time, as well." The lieutenant pointed to the rungs of a ladder molded into the side of the Harpy. "You'll get a better view from the back seat."

Elios eyed the ladder. It would take a certain amount of athleticism to get up into the cockpit, but it wasn't impossible. Judging it carefully, he grabbed hold and swung himself up. He was glad that he'd chosen to wear casual clothing and sensible shoes. It wasn't as easy as he might have liked, getting up, but years of training for the annual Ludi Romani boxing competitions had kept him fit enough not to embarrass himself.

Once Elios had found his way into the back seat without incident, the lieutenant tossed the helmets into the front seat and swung up to sit on the cockpit's edge. "You'll have to excuse me while I fasten you in, sir." He gave Elios a sweet, apologetic smile. "Your seat is more than just a seat. It's what's going to keep you safe in an emergency. You want to stay in it as long as you're in motion."

Reaching over, Kinnison started strapping Elios into a very secure six-point harness, starting at his shoulders and working down to the thigh-straps. The seat was almost like a cradle, comfortable and protective, right down to Elios' feet.

"Elios. My name is Elios. If we're worrying about emergencies, you may as well call me by my given name," Elios said, laughing a little. Humor would help distract him from the gorgeous man's hands sliding over his body, he hoped, especially when those hands ended up fiddling with straps over his thighs.

"Sender," Kinnison said. "And like the Lieutenant-Commander said, my call-sign is Sky." He could have gotten the name any number of ways. His height, his eyes... Elios' thoughts were drifting again. "Nice to meet you." And then Sender ran his fingers under the straps and jerked hard, making sure they were locked but not too tight.

Elios held his breath and tried really hard not to enjoy it too much. Even the man's hands were gorgeous. Up close, Elios could see him in minute detail. His lashes were thick and black like his glossy curls; his mouth was so pretty that Elios wanted to lean forward and lick where Sender's teeth sank into his lower lip as he concentrated on getting Elios settled in. Sender's skin was fine and pale, completely unlined. The pilot was young, younger than Elios was, for certain.

"You'll probably want these." Sender pulled a pair of sunglasses from a compartment down by the side of the seat. "It's bright up there."

"Thanks." Elios accepted the sunglasses, hoping that Sender hadn't noticed the way his breath had caught when Sender slipped his fingers between the straps and Elios' thighs. "It's nice to meet you, too," he added, recovering with some effort.

"If you have second thoughts at any time, you let me know." Sender handed the spare helmet to Elios. "Okay?" His smile was warm and reassuring, probably well-practiced from dealing with new pilots, and Elios could see why he was the one taking guests up for a spin.

"Okay." Elios put the helmet on, smiling back at Sender. "You're the one doing all the work, I guess, so I'm not too worried." He wasn't. Excited, yes. Nervous, not nearly so much.

"Here." Sender reached out and fastened the chin-strap securely. "You need your helmet to stay in place so you can hear me. Or, more likely, yell at me not to do that bumpy thing, which is what most people do. That's fine, but the bumpy thing is caused by air warming and cooling in layers and causing pockets of turbulence. Can't do a thing about it." Sender grabbed his own helmet and slid into the front seat. He was far more efficient strapping himself in.

"Thank you for the warning. I'll try not to yell at you." Elios laughed and hoped he didn't make a fool of himself. He'd asked Doc for this, the only strings he'd ever asked his old mentor to pull for him, and he really didn't want to screw it up.

"It would be completely smooth if we were out in space. Boring, even." Sender got himself settled and hit a button on the panel in front of him, bringing the canopy down. He grabbed it before it closed completely and slammed it into place with a bang. There was a crackle when he activated the radios in the cockpit and the channels went live. "Control, Juventas One, preparing for takeoff."

"You're all clear, Sky." The voice on the other end was male, young, and more than a little cheeky. "Seeing as we're all down here waiting for you to be done."

Sender laughed and sighed. "Channels are open, Ace. Be polite." There was a cough and rumble from the engines that went right through Elios' body and then settled to a low thrum as the Harpy started taxiing toward the long, narrow runway. "We'll be about an hour, as long as Doctor Campbell feels like putting up with my company, and then I'll sign your pass."

"Copy that, Juventas One. You're cleared for takeoff and confirmed for flight through civilian zones, plan zero-nine-five-Juventas-Alpha-three." This time the voice was far more professional.

The radio hum cut out and Sender laughed. "Excuse my second-in-command," he said dryly. "Someone's got a terminal beer deficiency and a weekend pass coming up."

"No problem," Elios said, laughing. "I know the feeling." Or he had known. It had been a long time since he'd felt that anticipation, at least until now. It had been too long since he'd gone out to do anything fun, and never anything like this.

Sender brought the Harpy around at the end of the runway, hands moving over the array of lights and controls as he fired up all the appropriate systems.

"The sky is pretty empty today," he said quietly as he started them accelerating down the runway. "Should be a nice ride." Elios was getting a little nervous now, but Sender's voice was so calm and soothing, like this was nothing but a walk in the park. "It's too bad we can't skip out beyond the shields, but that's against the rules right now. There's going to be a lot of pressure on takeoff. Just relax and don't forget to breathe. I don't want you passing out before we hit cruising speed."

"Okay," Elios said, trying to keep his voice steady. He took slow breaths against the growing pressure in his chest and tried to relax.

The scenery turned into a blur, the pressure built, and the engines roared until there was a strange, uneasy sensation. Elios realized that the wheels had lifted off the pavement.

From there, the ascent was sharp and painful, like a hand was pushing Elios back into the contoured seat.

"Control, this is Juventas One. We have takeoff." Sender's voice was as calm as it had been on the ground.

"Copy, Juventas One. This is Control. Enjoy your flight. Airspace around your path remains empty at this hour; we'll update you with any changes. Control out."

The pressure started to ease and the Harpy leveled out. Suddenly, Elios could breathe again.

"How're you doing back there?" Sender asked.

"Better now that my stomach isn't trying to climb out my throat," Elios said, trying to keep his voice light. He was grinning already, though, as he looked out the window and saw the ground far below.

"What, you don't like that part?" There was laughter in Sender's voice and it made Elios feel warm. Sender brought them about in a slow, lazy turn over the base, banking slightly. "After a while, you learn to love it. Means everything's going perfectly." He had a distinct Themis accent, meaning that not only was he from the old colony, it was likely that he was from one of the poor, industrial neighborhoods.

"I doubt I'm going to be able to learn to love it, since this is probably the only chance I'm going to get to do this." Elios looked out at New McMurdo as they flew over it. Even from the relatively short distance, everything looked so small. It was easy to forget that they lived in a place that was more than ordinary, especially when Elios' days were so full of the mundane that it drowned out the fact that his work was actually translating fragmented messages from an alien race.

"You never know." Elios wondered if Sender was smiling when he spoke. It sounded like he was. "We're limited in how low we can fly," Sender went on. "But I'll drop down to let you get a look."

They traced the path of the monorail back toward the main colony and then caught up with one on its way out around the loop toward the port end. Elios could see everything from here: the neighborhoods, the industrial sector, the parks and small lakes. It was amazing to see it all alive and interconnected. His life left him feeling isolated, shuttling between work and home on a little three-block track. With grocery delivery, shopping from home, and long hours of work, there was almost no reason for him to go anywhere else. Except that it was out there.

"It's beautiful up here." Elios was hardly aware that he'd spoken aloud.

"It really is," Sender said. "Can't decide what I like better some days, but there's a hell of a lot less to run into in space." Then he laughed. "Even if some of the cadets have made me rethink that lately. If it's solid, they'll find it." He sped up and overtook the monorail, looping out toward the edge of the colony, toward the agricultural zone and the oxygen fields. There was room to move out here, and the speed pressed down on Elios' body.

"What's it like, taking one of these out past the shields?" Elios asked, watching the monorail disappear from beneath them in a silver flicker. He was in awe of how different everything looked from up here. There were no windows in the transport shuttles or the airdock stations over the colonies, no way to look out at the colonies from so high up. Everything was enclosed and normalized.

"Surreal. First time I took off into space, it was amazing, and it still is. All those shots you see taken from space? It really all looks like that, and the Harpy cockpit is more than half window." Sender reached up and knocked on the wrap-around canopy. "You lie back in your seat and there's space just outside. When you come out of atmosphere, it's like being born, especially when you're coming off of Earth. You can't hear, you can't breathe, and you can feel your skin wrapped over your bones and your insides against your spine. And then you're out and not only can you breathe, you don't weigh anything. Your heart trips over its own feet. You're dizzy and there's nothing above you but stars."

While Sender spoke, he brought them through a surprisingly gentle turn that tipped them sideways so that Elios could see above and below. "Incredible," Elios murmured, lost in Sender's words. He was too old -- almost thirty, now -- to join the Colonial Guard, but looking at the colony stretched out beneath him and the expanse of space hinted at through the shields above, he wished he were a few years younger.

After looping lazily over the main colony for a while, letting Elios soak it all in, Sender turned them back toward the base. "We're going to head back to base," he said, "so we can have a little fun before you have to go back down."

"Okay." Elios watched the displays in front of him while they turned, a little curious as to how they worked. He was able to figure out their altitude, heading, and speed fairly quickly. The other displays were more elusive.

"They get really fidgety when you start turning rolls in civilian airspace. Up we go." Sender's warning came just as he started to climb toward the upper shields of the colony, accelerating slightly.

Elios swallowed a small, startled noise when the Harpy started to accelerate, even though Sender had warned him. He laughed at himself a little and asked, "You mean there's something more fun than this?"

"I have a new set of toy guns on this Harpy -- not the real thing, since the kids are likely to shoot their own feet off or something -- and we can make a few runs at the target drones and fire off a few test rounds. And," Sender leveled the jet out and made it rock

gently from side to side as though it were swinging in the cradle, "we can see how you like flying upside down, if you want."

Elios laughed. "Sure. Might as well get the whole experience while I'm up here." No wonder Doc didn't like the idea of going up in one of the Harpies himself.

"Tell me if you change your mind." Sender sent them hurtling back toward the air space over New McMurdo.

Elios took a slow breath and gripped the arms of his seat, determined that he wasn't going to change his mind about this. He'd never imagined that he'd get to do this, and he didn't want to waste a moment of the experience.

And what an experience it turned out to be. Lazy, stomach-churning loops, tight turns, and high-speed passes by drone targets while Sender instructed Elios on how to use the ship's training weaponry. Elios discovered that the average, well-intentioned linguist couldn't hit the broad side of a shuttle, even with tracking equipment, which made Sender's ability to hit a mark the size of Elios' palm without relying on the targeting display even more impressive.

And then it was time to go back to the ground. A call down to Control to confirm their approach and then a lazy slide back to ground, a touchdown and rumble of tires without a bounce or jolt to show for it. "You're almost home free," Sender said as they were decelerating down the runway.

That was Elios' signal that his adventure was almost over. It had been such a thrill, flying through the atmosphere like that, spinning over and over, failing terribly at hitting any of the targets Sender let him shoot at. And now he was done. He sighed a little, laughing, and said, "It's a little late for a career change, but... damn. You've got an amazing job."

"It's been good to me so far," Sender said. "We'll head straight to the hangar and hand J-One here over to the techs to check out and retrieve all her data. I'm sure Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne's talking the senator's ear off, not that he really needs telling twice." They slowed down and turned off the runway, taxiing the last several hundred feet into the waiting hangar.

Elios laughed a little. "He's used to it, I think. I keep telling him that's what he gets for going into politics." He watched the airfield pass by, shaking his head. *What a great ride.* "So how long have you been doing this?" he asked, curious. He was asking to make conversation, not because he wanted to guess the good-looking pilot's age. Really.

"About six years." Everything was dimmer in the hangar; Sender took off his sunglasses and then his helmet. "Not nearly long enough." There were technicians and a couple of servicemen running toward the Harpy, and when it finally stopped, they started blocking the wheels and getting ready to take care of it.

"I'll make sure you get yourself undone," Sender said, shutting down the Harpy's systems. "And then I'll help you down. The first thing that happens when most people get their feet on the ground is they get dizzy. Last thing I need is to get you back in one piece and then have you crack your head open on the hangar floor."

With the Harpy's hum dying away, Sender slithered out of his harness and popped the canopy open. He got one foot over the side on the ladder rungs and the other on the arm of his seat so he could lean over and help Elios out of his harness.

Elios followed Sender's lead, getting rid of the sunglasses and helmet, but he waited for Sender to help with everything else. "Thanks," he said, trying to keep his arms and hands out of Sender's way while Sender got the harness undone. He was sorry they were done, but more sorry that Sender was going to be done touching him so soon. It was a struggle not to reach out and touch in return.

Sender got Elios out of the harness quickly enough. "No problem." He tossed both helmets down to a technician and then jumped down. "Take it easy getting out," he reminded Elios. Sender waited at the bottom of the ladder to help Elios down and to steady him when he got his feet on the ground.

Elios was careful as he got up and swung himself over onto the ladder. It was short, and he could really only go down two steps with his feet before he had to let them dangle and climb down with just his arms. He held onto the last rung and then dropped to the floor, weaving a little as his body suddenly had to adjust to the fact that they weren't moving anymore. Dizzy, yes.

Sender laughed and slid an arm around Elios' waist before he could do more than weave a little. "Steady there. The senator would have my hide if you took a header." His arm was strong, solid, and so was the rest of him when he pulled Elios into him. "Give it a minute, it'll pass."

"Thanks." Oh, not fair. Elios had been doing such a good job of forgetting how attractive Sender was. He closed his eyes, but that actually made the dizziness feel worse, so he opened them again. "I don't think he'd be after your hide, but I bet he'd laugh at me," Elios murmured.

"I have the feeling that your brain is the important part on you." Sender laughed and ruffled Elios' hair as he steered them away from the Harpy. "We'll just make sure it stays where it should."

"Doc might agree," Elios allowed. With Sender standing right there, Elios couldn't help thinking that there were other parts of his body that were more important to keep in working order.

"How are you doing?" Sender let go of Elios cautiously and looked down at him with a warm smile. Elios had to remind himself that flirting was not appropriate here.

"I think I'm okay now," he said, cautiously shaking his hair back out of his face. Nothing untoward happened, and Elios stepped back a little, feeling more stable. "Thank you for taking me up there. That was great. Really."

"Not a problem. You managed that better than a lot of the cadets do first time." Sender was about to say something else when a blond man who was almost his height pounced him from behind.

The newcomer wrapped his arms around Sender's shoulders and gave Elios a brilliant grin before turning to Sender. "Done now?"

Sender didn't budge, just turned his head so he was nose to nose with the other man. "Ace..."

"Yes?"

"Do I look done?"

"A little."

"Where's Ozanne?"

"On her way down."

"So, am I done?"

"Only if you're going to deprive me so you can follow orders."

"Yes, I plan to do that."

"Tell him he's done." The newcomer gave Elios an appealing smile. "You can even come with us. That's a good excuse. Full tour, all the atmosphere..."

"Drunken pilots having sex under the tables," Sender said dryly.

"Well, maybe if he's nice about it," Ace countered cheerily.

Elios had held back his laughter at the exchange -- barely -- right up until the bit about the sex, and then he couldn't help himself. "You must be the one I heard on the radio," he said.

Ace dropped down from Sender's shoulders and held his hand out to Elios. "Second Lieutenant Macy Sawyer at your service." He was an incredibly handsome young man with blond hair, blue eyes, a dark tan, and an upper-class Earth accent. "I'm Sky's whipping boy."

"Elios Campbell," Elios said, shaking Macy's hand. His own accent was toned down by several years spent on Tethys, but it was pure Luna.

Sender rolled his eyes and shook his head at Macy. "You're hard done by, yes, you are. You could come with us," Sender said to Elios. "Celebrate your first flight."

"I don't want to intrude," Elios said as he turned to Sender. He'd definitely like to go along with them, though. It would be nice to do something to celebrate going up in one of the Harpies. Nice to celebrate doing something new at all. And, honestly, Elios wanted to spend more time with Sender.

"You're not intruding." Sender looked up to see the Senator coming into the hangar with Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne. "You have to head back to the main colony anyway, don't you?"

"Yeah, he's done here for the day and I was just going to head back to the lab." The senator's staff were probably all impatient to get him back into the office, but there wasn't anyone impatient for Elios to get back into the lab, not today.

"So, how was your trip, Doctor Campbell?" Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne gave him a warm smile as she approached the three of them. "I do believe we might have worried the Senator a little on a few of those passes." She gave Sender a look, and he had the good grace to look a little sheepish.

Elios laughed and shook his head. "It was great. Lieutenant Kinnison was kind enough to indulge my over-active sense of adventure."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Senator Darlington said, holding out his hand for Sender to shake. "I appreciate you taking time out of your schedule. And you as well, Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne. Your review of the Harpy program was most informative. I'll have a lot to talk about in the next discussion about funding."

"Not a problem at all, Senator." Sender shook the Senator's hand. "Always happy to be of service. If you ever change your mind about taking a ride, I'd be honored to take you up."

"I think watching is excitement enough for me," Senator Darlington said with a little laugh.

"Just let us know, Senator. Thank you for your time, Lieutenant," Ozanne said. "We've held Callisto Squadron up long enough, I think, gentlemen. Kinnison, Sawyer, get going before the rest of the squad mutinies on you."

Sender came to attention briefly and nodded at Ozanne. "Yes, ma'am. If it's not a problem, we invited Doctor Campbell to join us, since he's had his first flight."

Senator Darlington nodded. "That's fine with me if it's all right with Lieutenant-Commander Ozanne." The senator didn't actually have much control over what Elios was or wasn't allowed to do, but since Elios was here as Doc's guest, it was a something of a formality that needed to be observed.

"What the boys do on their own time is their business," Ozanne said lightly. "They haven't lost anyone yet. Have a good time, gentlemen. Senator, why don't I walk you back to the rail station? The pilots will be catching a later car."

"Thank you, yes. I would appreciate that." Senator Darlington nodded at Elios, a quick goodbye, and followed Ozanne when she led him away.

"Sign the form now," Macy said, grabbing Sender by the front of the flightsuit as soon as Ozanne and the senator had turned away.

Sender laughed at him and pulled a datapad out of the pocket of Macy's jacket so he could scrawl his name on the screen. Elios supposed giving permission for pilots to go running about required something more official than a thumbprint. "There. Three-day pass. Happy?" He gave Elios a smile. "Macy will get you coffee or something; I've got to change. I'll be right back."

"Okay." Elios smiled back at Sender because, really, how could he not, when the man had a smile like that? As Sender walked away, Elios slipped his hands into his pockets and tilted his head to smile at Macy. "Sorry I delayed your pass," he said, though he was still a bit too thrilled by his experience in the Harpy to be truly apologetic.

"No problem. Cheers on not puking in the plane," Macy said, slapping Elios on the shoulder. "Happens more often than you'd think. Coffee? Water?" He nodded down the length of the hangar to the offices at the far end.

"Coffee would be great, thanks." Elios laughed. "I was a little worried on takeoff," he admitted, "but once we leveled out, it wasn't nearly so unsettling."

"Sky's a damn good pilot," Macy said easily, leading the way to a small lounge between the offices where an automated beverage station kept the engineers and technicians supplied with hot coffee. "Most people freak out during rolls, though. You must've been behaving yourself for him to show you the good stuff. Or something." Macy gave Elios a grin as he filled a mug and passed it over.

"Guess I got lucky," Elios answered. He wasn't quite sure what to make of Macy's grin, but he had to admit he'd like to have gotten a bit luckier where Sender was concerned.

"Hang tight," Macy said. "I've got something to take care of before we leave. I promise we won't forget you." Macy went to the viewer console at one side of the room and brought up a recording. "Here, why don't you get a look at your flight from the outside." He tossed Elios the remote for the viewer and Elios caught it with one hand.

"Seriously?" Elios hadn't been aware that the flight had been recorded, but now that he thought of it, it made perfect sense. "Thanks."

"No problem," Macy said as he headed for the door. "Least I can do for abandoning you to wait for us." With that, Macy was at the door, and Elios sat down to watch the sleek Harpy taxi down the runway. He wondered if there was some way he could get a copy for himself; he'd watch it over and over just to make the sensations come back and to remind him of how much bigger life was than he had let it become.

Chapter Two

"Well?"

"What?" Sender stopped halfway out of his flightsuit and eyed Macy warily.

"He's cute."

"Macy. No." Sender pulled his suit off all the way, stripped off his briefs, and padded over to stuff them in the laundry.

"I mean, if you like the 'young genius from a good family with a possible political future' type." Macy kept on in spite of the warning. "He's a linguist. I heard the senator telling Ozanne." Sender grabbed the nearest offensive weapon, a towel left dangling off the end of the row of lockers, balled it up, and threw it at Macy's head. "That sounds vaguely... hey."

"I said no." Sender tried not to actually stomp off to the showers, because any time Macy got to him, Macy won.

The locker room was dim and grey and slightly clammy at the best of times. At the end of the day, it was slick with condensation from sweat and breath and showers. The organic smell and treacherous footing were as familiar as Sender's boots and bed. Sender palmed the button beside one of the nozzles and stuck his head under the spray before the water had started warming up.

"He likes you." Macy had followed him, but wisely stopped beyond the reach of the water. "He was practically snuggling you when he got out of the plane."

"He was dizzy. People always are after the first flight." Sender filled his palm with gel and started scrubbing quickly. "And I can't believe you invited him to go out with us."

"You didn't say no." Macy lounged against the wall, looking smug.

"I was being polite. Being polite to the friends of senators is a good thing." Sender worked the lather up his body and got more gel to wash out his hair. "What the hell makes you think he's interested in me?"

"I've seen vending machines get interested in you, Sky." Macy defaulted to his nickname for Sender, the one he'd given Sender because of his height, and the one that had stuck

and become his call-sign for the last four years. "You know, the whole me being into women thing aside, you are really fucking hot. I keep telling you this."

"I thought it was all part of your plan to drive me stark, raving mad." Sender ducked his head under the water before the foam got into his eyes.

"Nah." Macy started speaking as soon as Sender had finished rinsing his hair and was shaking the water and foam out of his ears. "I'd do you. I mean, if you weren't my best friend and it wouldn't make things awkward."

Sender glared at Macy. He really didn't need to know that. "Nice try. And I don't need you to set me up with anyone."

"It's time for you to graduate from one-night stands." Macy threw a towel at Sender once he'd turned the water off.

"This is not an educational facility." Sender started drying himself off. "I don't need to graduate from anything."

"I know you. You're not happy." Macy was getting stubborn now, arms crossed over his chest, frown creasing his brow.

"I'm ecstatic. Blissful." Sender tossed the towel down the nearest laundry chute on his way back to his locker. "I have a good job, great pay, tons of adventure, and I live with the prettiest man on base. How can I go wrong?"

"Okay, then why don't you just have some fun," Macy suggested. "You don't need a boyfriend, even though it would probably make you stupidly happy, fine. Just, you know, take him for a spin."

Sender had to admit that Doctor Campbell -- Elios -- wasn't unattractive. Hell, the man was downright handsome in that classic Roman way, with the olive skin and the beautiful, soft curls and wide brown eyes. "And jeopardize our funding a little more when it doesn't work out?" There was an argument Macy couldn't win.

"What, you're going to have sex wrong?" Macy wouldn't leave it alone. "You do everything else right."

"I'm going to have to kill you and stuff you out an airlock or something, at this rate."

"You are the only single man in history to turn down a perfectly decent piece of ass." Macy had his hands on his hips when Sender turned around to glare at him. "You should have been a priest."

"Low. And I'm sure there have been other men in history who have managed not to have sex with anything that would stay still long enough." Sender grabbed fresh clothing out of

his locker and started dressing. Now he really was ignoring Macy. He should have started a while ago. Being a priest was out of the question where he came from. Liking men was out of the question, really, no matter what he did with his life.

"Tell me you didn't have a nice time." Macy stole one of Sender's boots, lightning fast, before Sender could stop him. He held it behind his back and hopped over the bench so that Sender couldn't reach him.

"Flying is always good." Sender put the rest of his clothes on and tried to decide whether or not he was going to try and get that boot back or whether he was going to go all the way over to the barracks to get his other pair.

"You're telling me you didn't talk the whole time?" Macy swung the boot by the laces.

"You are such a child," Sender growled. He reached, but Macy pulled the boot back. "Fine, I'll go get the other pair." He threw the second boot at Macy and put his socks in his pocket. He got out his datapad and shoved it in another pocket. Slamming his locker when he was done was not an accident.

"You did. I know it." Macy started juggling Sender's boots. "You like him."

Sender headed for the door, unmoved by Macy's antics.

"Hey." Macy took off down a different aisle and cut in front of Sender before he got to the doors. "At least think about it. Look, I'm just looking out for you."

Macy could seem so damn sincere when he wanted to. "Let it go," Sender said. "Please."

"I will. As long as you think about it. I just want you to be happy." Macy offered the boots back. "Seriously."

"I don't know." Sender sighed and took his boots from Macy, feeling all the frustration go out of his chest in a rush. He sat down at the end of a bench to put his socks and boots on.

"What if he makes the first move? Will you think about it then?" Macy crouched down and contorted himself so that he could look at Sender's face while Sender was lacing up his boots.

Sender laughed helplessly and shoved Macy's shoulder, tipping him over onto his ass. "Why are you such a pain?"

"Because you are the nicest person I know and you're supposed to be happy." Macy looked up at Sender and gave him a little scowl. "So stop being such a jackass and give it a chance."

Sender stood up and offered Macy his hand. "I'll think about it."

Macy used Sender's hand to pull himself to his feet, grinning from ear to ear. "I win," he chirped. He punched Sender in the shoulder before Sender could hit him first, and then took off, laughing.

Sender resisted the urge to bang his head on the nearest locker and followed at a more sedate pace.

The pilots claimed that starting every pass at the same bar was good luck. Tonight, that bar was packed with warm bodies and filled with lights and music. Pitchers of beer seemed to evaporate the moment they hit the tables, and most of the pilots alternated between dancing and drinking with a great deal of abandon. Sender was more reserved than the rest, obviously keeping an eye on things at the start of the night. He didn't seem to be very good at relaxing and shifting gears. Elios was trying to watch him without drawing too much attention to the fact that he couldn't keep his eyes off the big man.

"So, what do you do again?" Xochi, a petite, gold-skinned pilot with a wedding ring on each hand, passed Elios another beer.

"Languages," Elios said, accepting the beer with a nod of thanks. "I'm a linguist with the project." He took a sip of the beer and smiled at her. "Nothing as exciting as flying the Harpies."

He really enjoyed his work, and the new breakthroughs they been making in the structure and grammar of the Pandoran language were fascinating, but he doubted that would seem exciting at all to someone who flew fighter jets for a living.

"We have always wanted our very own linguist." Delorean was a lanky young woman, probably the youngest of the Callisto pilots. She was more than a little drunk and her very solemn sweetness was hilarious. "I think we should keep you." She gave Elios a crooked smile and ruffled his hair. "Look how cute you are."

Macy came over to murmur in Xochi's ear, distracting her.

Elios laughed at Delorean, shaking his head. "Your very own linguist? What would you need with one of those?" He ran a hand through his hair to keep it from tightening into sweat-damp curls from Delorean's ruffling.

"I don't know, but we could definitely think of something," Delorean said sweetly, batting her eyelashes.

"My turn? Why is it always my turn?" Macy said piteously, straightening and giving Xochi a pathetic look.

"Because you're the responsible one," Xochi said, obviously only barely managing to keep a straight face.

Elios had only spent a few hours with Macy, but that made him nearly choke on his beer. He turned his head to look up at Macy. Whatever it was Macy had to do, responsibility couldn't possibly be involved. The man was a pilot, so Elios was sure he was responsible in the air; on the ground, it looked like Macy was made of nothing but hot and trouble.

"I don't think I'd be much use translating the displays on your jets," Elios said, turning his attention back to Delorean. He offered her a little smile, but he didn't respond to the light flirting. He wasn't interested in her, not in the slightest, even with her long black hair, wide green eyes, and sweet nature.

"Elios can be useful," Delorean chirped. "He's smart and clever and wily, I'm sure. Make him do it." She gave Elios a brilliant smile. "I told you I'd think of something."

"What is it that I'm doing?" Elios asked cautiously.

"Making Sky stop talking simulation programming with Vaughn and getting him out on the dance floor," Macy said, as though he were proposing that Elios slam his head on the wall for a while.

"It's important that everyone has fun," Delorean explained. "Because then we all have a reason to get through the next few weeks."

"He is far too polite to say no to someone who's not us," Xochi said pensively. "You're screwed, Campbell. It is your turn."

"My turn?" Elios blinked in surprise. He glanced over at Sender, across the table, immersed in conversation with another pilot. "Okay. Make them stop talking. And get him on the dance floor." He wasn't quite sure why they made it sound like punishment. Dancing with Sender seemed like a great idea. "...Is there anything I should know before I go over there?"

"No, we'll go easy on you since it's your first time." Macy offered Elios a hand up. "Just go ask him to dance; he'll say yes." There was a flicker of mischief in Macy's expression, but that seemed to be the norm. Elios let it slide.

"Right." Elios slipped his hand into Macy's and stood up. He didn't let go right away, instead tipping his head back to look up at the rather attractive blond man. "If he breaks me because I asked him to dance, I'm blaming you," Elios said with an easy smile. "Just so you know."

"I don't think it's the dancing I'd worry about." Now Macy's grin was purely up to no good. He let go of Elios' hand and gave him a smack on the ass. "Good luck." Macy slid

into the seat that Elios had just vacated and busied himself groping Delorean and dodging her answering wallop.

They really were an adorable bunch, caught somewhere between being children and being too old for their ages. Elios realized how isolated they really were. He was the only civilian who had talked to them all night other than the serving staff. The press hadn't gotten around to making heroes of them yet. So far, they were just a handful of thrill-seekers draining the government coffers.

Elios wove through the mass of people to get around to the other side of the table where Sender was sitting. When Elios glanced back at Macy, the blond pilot waved him on, grinning, and Elios steeled himself for the approach.

Okay. Get him to stop talking, get him to start dancing. Elios could do that. It wasn't like it'd been forever since he'd been in a nightclub. He went often enough; there was no reason this should feel unusual.

When there was a brief lull in the conversation, Elios put a hand on Sender's shoulder to get his attention and smiled down at him. "Hey."

Sender looked up and his expression, at least, wasn't uninviting. "You're not leaving already, are you?"

"No." Elios' smile broadened and he shook his head, feeling sheepish. "Unless you mean leaving the table, but for that I was hoping you would join me." He gestured toward the dance floor, crowded as it was, and tilted his head to give Sender an appealing look. "Come dance with me?"

Sender didn't answer right away. Instead, he dipped a napkin in his beer, rolled it up, and nailed Macy square in the temple with the sodden missile. Then he dried his hands on another napkin while Macy sputtered and looked incensed for all of five seconds and Xochi nearly choked on her beer.

"Sure," Sender said, giving Elios a grin and getting up. "Sorry they put you up to this."

"Don't worry about it," Elios said, as they walked out toward the dance floor. "It's not like they had to bribe me or anything." Well, maybe they had, but he didn't think it counted if the challenge and the bribe were the same thing.

"You're a good sport." Sender caught Elios around the waist and stepped out of the way of a drunken pair of students stumbling off the dance floor. "Still having fun?"

"More and more all the time," Elios murmured, just loud enough to be heard if Sender was listening closely. This was definitely more fun than spending another evening stuck in the lab with his ex, Aric, or home alone again.

Elios liked dancing, and Sender was a good dancer. The dance floor was crowded, keeping their bodies close, and Sender's body felt so good against Elios'. Sender had taken off his jacket back at the table to reveal nothing but a thin black tank top. It showed off his muscular arms and rather a lot of smooth, pale skin that Elios had to remind himself he really ought not put his mouth on.

"You've done your duty," Sender pointed out when the music slowed. "I'm sure Macy owes you a couple beers." He wasn't making any moves to leave, though, and neither was Elios.

Elios shook his hair back and looked up at Sender with a slow smile. "I told you he didn't have to bribe me to dance with you."

"He's a little pushy," Sender said, just loud enough to be heard over the music. "That would mean you want to dance with me, then?" Sender slid his hand along Elios' waist to pull him in even closer.

"It seemed like a good place to start," Elios teased. He was happy and relaxed. He couldn't stop smiling, and he hoped he didn't look too ridiculous doing it. He slid his hand up Sender's arm to rest on the bare curve of his shoulder, moving with Sender as the music started to pick up again. It felt so good, so right, and Elios wondered if maybe he shouldn't be a little afraid of it.

He couldn't bring himself to care, feeling reckless with happiness. Letting himself melt into Sender's strong arms, he gave in to the moment.

Sender soaked up that smile, unable to keep from returning it. Elios was good to look at, with his soft, dark curls and his soft, dark eyes. He really did have a beautiful mouth. The man was gorgeous, and he put up with the pilots well. There were so many reasons to be interested.

Having sex with people he knew didn't fit into Sender's life. Still, maybe it was time to consider it, like Macy kept insisting. No one here cared about that kind of thing; it was so different from life on Themis. Besides, he wasn't likely to run into Elios again any time soon.

His mind rolled it over and over again, unable to just let it go while he had Elios in his arms, looking dreamy and contented just to be there. Sender wondered if there was a similar expression on his own face. It was amazing that he made someone else feel that good just by doing this.

He could back out. He could just let Elios go on his way. He could say he'd done his duty and danced and he could go back and sit down. The revenge that his squad would take on him for passing this up didn't bother him at all. Regretting this -- that would bother him.

The music mellowed further, turning warm and lazy. Sender shifted so that Elios was held closer in his arms. Elios' fingers slid up Sender's arm and shoulder, trailing along the line of his neck. That felt like the invitation to a kiss and Sender leaned in to take it before he could change his mind.

Elios' mouth was soft under Sender's and his hand curled around the back of Sender's neck. His tongue brushed Sender's lips and Sender gave him what he wanted, letting him in. The kisses weren't gentle and discreet for long. Elios' fingers slipped into the curls at the nape of Sender's neck, clinging possessively as he kissed Sender with more aggression.

Sender yielded to the kisses, sliding one hand along the small of Elios' back, finding Elios' shirt warm and damp with sweat from dancing. They were still dancing, technically, though the longer the kisses lasted, the less it was about music.

The dance floor was hot and dark and no one cared if two people were kissing instead of dancing. It wasn't as though there weren't a lot of other people doing the same. While he wasn't thinking too much about it, Sender's hand on Elios' waist slid down to the curve of Elios' ass. When Elios' tongue slid into Sender's mouth again, he curled his own along it, sucking gently.

Elios made a small, wanting sound that Sender felt more than heard, and he kissed Sender a little harder, a little deeper, then pulled back. "So is your pass long enough that I could invite you back to my place?"

"It is," Sender answered honestly, before he could censor himself.

"Oh, good," Elios murmured, kissing Sender and pressing up against him. "Want to come back to my place then? Coffee, tea, beer, privacy; I'll get you anything you want."

Privacy. Elios' place. It sounded heavenly, if Sender's Heaven weren't strictly opposed to that sort of thing. Sender kissed Elios again as reward for bringing it up anyway. "Sure." Sender was more interested in stealing a last kiss than he was interested in answering. It kept him from thinking too hard about it. He might expect a bit of good-natured teasing after from his squad, but he really didn't care.

The last kiss turned into a series of kisses, hot and wet and demanding, kisses that went straight down Sender's spine and made him ache with want. Privacy and bed seemed irrelevant when Elios kissed him that way.

Still, Sender was fairly disciplined, and his instincts kicked in before he started taking Elios' clothes off. He pulled away and inhaled. "We should go," he reminded Elios.

"We should," Elios agreed, untangling his fingers from Sender's hair and stroking it down before he stepped back. "You need to get your jacket, right?"

"I do. So do you." Sender led Elios back to the table to get their jackets so they could leave. Fresh air might help clear his head.

The squad didn't say a word when he got to the table. Lore just handed over the jackets with a sweet smile for Elios. The way Macy didn't tease and the way the others studiously ignored them as though nothing was amiss was, Sender knew, their way of approving of the whole affair. He wished their approval were enough to counter his past.

The fresh air did help. It cooled the sweat on the way to the rail stop, but it did nothing to cool Sender's attraction for his unexpected date. Though it was dark, there were plenty of people out and about under the star-pricked sky and low-hanging globes of light that lined the streets. That didn't stop Sender from wanting to push Elios up against the nearest wall and figure out some mutually satisfying way of getting off. He wasn't used to feeling like this, like his blood was on fire, like he didn't care who was watching.

Boarding the monorail, Elios caught an overhead handhold and leaned back against one of the posts that ran down the center of the car. He pushed his hair back with his free hand and offered Sender a slow smile. There were only a few other passengers on board right now, and no one was paying attention to them.

If Sender was going to Hell for this, and he was still sure he would, having a few people see him kiss Elios wasn't going to make it worse. That smile made him want to get down on his knees just to watch Elios' face change, so bracing one hand on the post Elios was leaning on and bending to give him a kiss seemed like a good compromise.

He could feel Elios smile against his lips before kissing him back, just soft little kisses to tide them over until they could get to Elios' apartment. It was going to be a long ride.

The little kisses were effective on a whole other level, too. They felt good, sweet, and Sender wanted to feel that again, that tenderness that promised to last beyond the moment of pleasure. It was new for him, so different from the feeling of a one-night stand. He returned Elios' soft little kisses, savoring each one.

As the monorail slowed, Elios tilted his head to kiss Sender's cheek instead. "This is our stop," he said. "I'm not too far from the station."

Sender glanced up at the display at the front of the car so he'd know where he was -- Southport Station -- and let Elios lead him off the car. After a few minutes of walking, it occurred to Sender that it might be okay if he slid his arm around Elios' shoulders, so he gave it a try. When Elios slid his arm around Sender's waist and tilted his head back to smile up at him, Sender ducked his head to steal another little kiss. It felt good. Natural. He'd never imagined being with someone like this before.

It was just a few blocks to Elios' apartment in a small building that had been designed to look like it was from an era hundreds of years before. Elios led the way up three flights of stairs and down a short hall. Even the apartment doors fit the décor, being crafted from wood and opening on hinges with the push of a brass handle.

Sender had never seen real wood outside of rosary beads and religious icons until he'd left Themis. Elios pressed his palm against the lettering that marked his apartment as "3D" and the lock clicked. He touched the handle and swung the door open.

"Home, sweet home." Elios took Sender's hand and drew him inside, then closed the door behind them.

The living area was almost the size of the apartment that Sender remembered from his childhood. It was sparsely furnished, as though to emphasize the space, but what furniture there was had elegant, archaic lines and soft, richly colored upholstery. There were even plants flourishing near the windows, tall and green, of a kind Sender had never seen before.

Sender took a moment just to look. He'd seen homes like this in movies, but he'd never been in one. A large screen filled one wall, and a long sofa took up space along the opposite wall. Obviously, Elios used the sofa for actual seating. The few chairs placed around the room were otherwise occupied: two of the three had stacks of blankets folded on the seats, and the third was piled high with empty, flattened packing cartons.

A wooden table took up the far corner of the room. There were tiny, hand-carved icons placed along the surface and one larger icon bound in woven ribbons on the shelf above. It took Sender a moment to realize it was an altar. Elios was Roman, of course.

When humans colonized space and established Luna on Earth's moon, the Romans had been the first to volunteer. Now they were one of the most populous cultures not just on Luna, but in all the colonies save for Themis. Sender had never been in a Roman home before, either.

There was no time to feel awkward in such a beautiful place, because Elios had tossed his own jacket aside and was leaning up to kiss Sender while he pushed Sender's jacket off of his shoulders. Sender slid out of the jacket and let Elios throw it aside as well. As soon as it was gone, he cupped Elios' face in his hands and kissed him hungrily, indulging in how much he wanted this. As soon as his lips touched Elios', he felt at home.

Elios kissed so fiercely and his hands on Sender's skin were so possessive, pushing up under Sender's shirt without hesitation, that it made Sender weak in the knees. Elios made an impatient noise when Sender's shirt caught around his wrists and Sender, without thinking, pulled away to strip the offending article from his body. He had no idea where it fell, but Elios' shirt joined it a moment later and then they were skin on skin.

Fumbling sex in the back room of a bar or in someone's narrow bunk didn't allow for luxuries like this, for sliding hands over flesh and kissing until they forgot to breathe. There was no going back from this, not just this night, but this experience.

Elios' body felt so good under Sender's hands, so good pressed against him. He wanted this: another man's body, another man's mouth, another man's voice saying his name. Somehow, he'd always made excuses for himself, as though it wouldn't be so bad if there were some reason he was with another man other than that it was what fit his soul.

"Bedroom," Elios said, tugging at Sender's belt to get him to move. "Now." His soft voice was rough with want and had an edge to it that needed obeying. Sender moved and then, somehow, they were on their way to the bedroom.

The journey was lost in the way Elios' beautiful bronze skin felt under Sender's hands. Elios was warm and sleek and strong, and he kissed Sender in a way that made it feel as though he knew everything Sender had ever wanted and could give it to him.

"Still too many clothes, I think," Elios murmured. He stopped Sender just inside of the bedroom and stood on his toes to bite playfully at Sender's lower lip. His fingers found one of Sender's nipples and plucked at it gently.

"Me or you?" Sender found the buckle of Elios' belt and started undoing it. He kissed Elios' throat and shoulder and then worked his way down. Sender had to kneel down to unlace his own boots; he might as well do something while he was on his knees.

"Both." Elios feathered his fingers through Sender's hair and then put a hand on Sender's shoulder for balance while he kicked off his shoes.

Once he got down on his knees, Sender lost all sense of urgency. He kissed Elios' flat belly, licking at his navel and the thin line of hair leading down from it. Still, he remembered to at least unlace his own boots before he let himself open Elios' pants.

In the dim light of the bedside lamp, Sender could make out tattoos on Elios' body, black vines that curled around from his back and continued to spiral around one thigh as Sender pushed Elios' pants down. He couldn't resist licking, following a tendril that wandered toward Elios' groin, and Elios' fingers found his hair again, tightening, then petting.

Sender slowly stripped Elios bare, fingers touching everything he uncovered, kissing Elios' thighs and stroking the strong curves of his calves worshipfully. He had never had the time to do this with anyone before, and Elios was a beautiful subject for exploration. For all his earlier impatience, Elios let Sender do as he pleased, quiet except for soft sighs when some touch of Sender's lips or tongue pleased him more than the rest.

When Elios was completely naked, Sender licked at the tattoos again, his big hands wrapping around Elios' hips. He should get up, he should take his own clothing off, he

shouldn't even be here, he should do so many other things that weren't looking up at Elios and curling his tongue along the underside of Elios' cock.

As much as he tried to resist this, he always gave in. This time, he was just skipping the hopeless stage. He'd save his self-loathing for the morning after.

Elios shivered and moaned softly, tilting his head to look down at Sender. His curls tumbled around his face and over his forehead into his eyes, but he didn't shove them back. He stroked his hands through Sender's hair instead, his touch soothing. "Having fun?" His smile was teasing but kind.

There wasn't any answer to that but to give in, to draw Elios' cock into his mouth and fill himself up with the taste of it. Giving in made everything so good. Elios' cock was hard and hot and sleek in Sender's mouth, and Sender shivered with how badly he wanted all of this, in spite of everything he'd learned was right.

Elios' smile was lost as he moaned and his expression shifted to something soft and wondering, as though he were surprised at Sender's choice. All Sender could think was how good Elios tasted and how much he wanted to hear more of those soft noises of pleasure. He slid his hands around to cup Elios' ass as he drew Elios' cock in deep, over and over again.

After a few moments, they moved together, Elios fucking Sender's mouth as much as Sender was sucking him off. Every thrust made Sender shudder. It felt so good that when Elios arched and shivered, coming hard and flooding Sender's mouth with semen, Sender almost lost control and came with the sheer pleasure of it.

When Elios was steadier, he crouched down, bracing himself against Sender's body to keep steady, and cupped Sender's cheek in one hand. "You look good like that," he said, stroking Sender's cheek gently. Then Elios was kissing him again, sliding his other hand down to cup Sender's cock through his pants.

Sender moaned at the touch, kissing Elios back and sucking Elios' tongue into his mouth. The compliment made him warm through, and he slid his hands up Elios' bare back to draw him in. He was so close to losing control, shivering at Elios' palm sliding against his cock, and he couldn't bring himself to care.

But Elios gave him a last little squeeze that made him whimper and then muttered, "Bed." He pulled away and stood up, reaching for Sender's hand as he did. "I want you in bed."

The pause let Sender regain a little control, and he stood obediently. Elios let go then and turned away to crawl up onto the bed. Sender could see the vines curling across Elios' ass and up to the small of his back, and he wanted to trace them all with his tongue. Elios sprawled in the middle of the bed, looking golden against the black sheets, and watched Sender through the fall of his curls.

"You're still wearing too many clothes," Elios said, smiling.

Sender bent and pulled off his boots and socks, then skinned out of his briefs and pants together, feeling how damp they were where they'd trapped his erection against his body. He'd lost most of his sense of shame about being naked in his years in the Colonial Guard, and the look on Elios' face was hungry and beautiful enough to wash the rest away.

"Better?" He waited, letting Elios look.

"Much." Elios pushed himself up, leaning on one elbow. "But you're too far away. I could look at you all night, but that'd be a waste of time." He held out his hand to Sender. "I'm more of a hands-on guy anyway."

Sender took Elios' hand and let himself be drawn into the bed. The sheets were warm and silky, so smooth, and the bed was soft and luxurious. Sender leaned in for a kiss and, as promised, Elios was very hands-on. He wrapped both hands around Sender's cock and stroked, exploring with his fingertips as he went. The touch left Sender trembling, and he would have forgotten how to kiss except that Elios' mouth on his was a constant reminder.

When he seemed satisfied with his exploration, Elios pushed Sender over onto his back, following him down into the pillows with deep, slow kisses. Sender yielded to it, and then Elios was pulling away to look at him.

Elios sat back on his heels and looked Sender over, trailing his fingers over Sender's chest and down to his thighs. Approval showed clearly on Elios' face, and he pushed Sender's thighs apart a little further to stroke the smooth, tender inner flesh. His expression was still approving when he bent his head to tease his tongue over the head of Sender's cock.

Sender's breath caught, and he bit back a whimper, dropping his hands to the sheets instead of reaching for Elios. He'd been waiting so long and it wasn't just the sensation of Elios' tongue that was affecting him. It was that that they were here, together, not as two bodies in need, but two people who were learning to know each other. There was no telling how long he could last, but he had some tiny sense of self-control, still, enough to savor the moment.

Elios sucked on just the head for a moment, his hand still moving over the shaft, and then he pulled away. He didn't go far, though, just slithered down between Sender's legs and licked his balls instead. Carefully, he sucked them into his mouth, rolling the soft skin over his tongue. He cupped Sender's hips in his hands and slid his hands over the curves of Sender's ass, one thumb brushing gently along the crease.

That felt unbelievably good. Sender's back arched a little and he stepped his feet apart further and drew his knees up a little more, opening himself up to Elios' touches. This

was all new, but it was so good. He pushed down any fleeting reflexive worries about whether this was right or not. It was just them together; it wasn't hurting anyone. It was all good.

Teasing first with the dry tips of his fingers, Elios touched and pressed lightly against Sender's entrance. He was testing, as though making sure touches like that were welcomed, wanted, before he did anything else. Sender writhed, pushing against Elios' fingers before he even knew what he was doing. He wanted Elios so badly, any way he could have him. Suddenly, he was dizzy with need.

Elios licked and kissed along the shaft of Sender's cock and finally sucked him in deep. Just as soon as Sender thought he couldn't take anymore, Elios pulled away just long enough to grab a little tube from the bedside drawer. Elios wasn't gone long enough for Sender to complain; instead, he was biting his lip to keep from crying out and shuddering at the sensations of Elios sucking him down while pushing one slick finger into him. The idea of being fucked was almost irresistible, but this slow tease of fingers in him was good in a way he hadn't had before.

It didn't take long for Sender to be writhing on the edge of orgasm, leaking pre-come and gasping for breath. He loved the sensation of Elios' fingers invading him, sliding into him, and when Elios curved them just right and hit his prostate, it was incredible. And Elios looked so damn good doing it, too. His dark hair fell around his face, shadowing him, but not so much that Sender couldn't see how beautiful he was, how intent.

Without warning, Elios pulled away, slipping his fingers out. He slicked his cock with one quick motion and moved over Sender, starting to push in again, with his cock this time instead of his fingers. That caught Sender by surprise, but it was only because he hadn't expected to get what he wanted so much.

Gasping, he moved to make it easier for Elios to fuck him, drawing his knees up and opening himself up for every thrust. He wanted to come so badly, knew he could without Elios ever touching him; all he needed was a few more pushes of Elios' cock to make him fall apart.

Bracing himself over Sender, Elios fucked him deep and quick. Once they'd settled into a rhythm, their bodies working together, he leaned up to catch Sender's mouth in a kiss, and Sender met him halfway. Elios' mouth was hot and good and reassuring and Sender whimpered, his body tensing around Elios' cock. The first heat of orgasm hit Sender hard; it felt beyond good to be fucked like this and, suddenly, he was crying out, his back arching and his head falling back as he came, spattering his chest and belly with come.

Elios moaned, shuddering hard, and he fucked Sender through the orgasm. He didn't falter, didn't let up as Sender's body tensed around his cock in waves. Sender came hard and long, driven by Elios' movements. His body was taut with pleasure and he could hardly remember to breathe. He wanted this, wanted it hard, and he wanted to hear and feel Elios come when he couldn't hold out any longer.

He got what he wanted, like Elios could read his mind. He got fucked hard and fast and deep, making him writhe until he was wrung dry. Finally, he got Elios crying out, shaking as he started to come. Elios was unsteady, still gasping for breath when he pulled out so he could slide his body up over Sender's to coax more kisses out of him.

Kisses and touches. Sender slid his fingers into Elios' hair and kissed him deeply, still shivering a little from the intensity of their sex. Elios purred into the kisses.

"So good," he murmured against Sender's lips.

All Sender had to say to that was a soft noise of agreement that was almost lost in the next kiss. Elios felt amazing against him, and it felt incredible to be here like this, in bed together; it felt right and comfortable and Sender didn't want to think about what it meant, if it meant anything, that this felt so good.

After a while, Elios pulled away. "I should get something to clean you up with," he whispered.

"Mm." Sender agreed but slid his hands down to cup Elios' ass for a moment, then he let Elios go. "I'm pretty sure I can do it myself," he pointed out. He was feeling pretty sticky.

"You could," Elios agreed, pressing little kisses to Sender's lips. "But then you'd have to get up. And you look really good right where you are." Elios gave Sender one last kiss, flashed him a quick grin, and then rolled away, padding across the room and into the bathroom.

Sender laughed quietly at that and watched Elios walk across the room, out of sight. Once Elios wasn't there to look at, Sender looked around the room. It was fairly dim in here, but Sender could tell that the room was large and well-furnished. The bed he was lying on was incredibly comfortable and, if he let himself, he could have drifted off to sleep.

"You look tired," Elios said with a little grin, padding back over to the bed. He sat down beside Sender and drew the cloth gently over Sender's belly. "Did I wear you out?"

"New cadets did that," Sender said, smiling at Elios. It was surreal to have someone else taking care of him like this. "I need to keep up with my test schedule and the new kids. Hazards of a small budget. I don't mind."

He distracted himself by reaching out to stroke Elios' hair and then tucked it back behind Elios' ear. He could lose himself in looking at Elios. "I shouldn't call the cadets kids," he said almost absently. Elios probably had better security clearance than he did, so he could relax. "They're all at least my age; we're pulling in new pilots from the existing troops to cut down on the security concerns." Sender was watching Elios as he spoke, his thumb following the line of Elios' jaw. Elios really was a beautiful man.

"Where did they get the rest of you?" Elios asked, curious. "I mean... I know you're all with the Guard, but I never really thought about how you go about creating a whole new division of the military just for one project. Especially one with security issues like this one." Elois' hand kept the cloth moving, slow and gentle over Sender's belly, and finally, carefully, over his cock, cleaning away the traces of come.

Sender shivered with the touch, but he kept still, letting Elios do what he pleased. "Macy, Lore, and I all signed on for flight testing and piloting, in and out of atmosphere. We didn't always know for sure we'd be doing this and not flying transport. A few of us are techs and engineers who passed the requirements for pilot. Some are commercial or shuttle pilots who passed the security scans. They skimmed the incoming pilot candidates, then once they needed more than us a few years ago, widened the search."

As hard and fast as Elios had fucked Sender, he was slow and gentle now, cleaning him up. He slid a hand under one of Sender's thighs, drawing it up so that he could wipe away the come and lube between Sender's legs. "We don't hear much about the military end of the project out here," he murmured, tilting his head to brush a soft kiss over Sender's palm.

"We don't hear much of anything," Sender said quietly, moving his hand to brush his fingertips over Elios' lips in turn. "We just do our jobs." It was strange to be touched like this; he wasn't used to it at all. In some ways it was less comfortable than sex, but it was also soothing. Both Elios' gentleness and his demanding nature were equally appealing.

"The only reason I know as much as I do -- about the Harpies, I mean -- is because of Doctor Darlington." Elios finally put the cloth aside, dropping it onto his pants where they were puddled on the floor, and then slid up over Sender's body again to kiss him lightly on the lips. "You could come into the lab with me. If you fly the Harpies, I'm sure you've got enough clearance to see what we're doing."

"When?" Sender got both arms around Elios again and kissed him back just as lightly. He was genuinely curious and it felt like a good idea.

"Mmm." Elios wriggled around a little. "You busy tomorrow?"

"No plans, no." Sender moved with Elios until they were settled together in a surprisingly comfortable arrangement. Elios wasn't making any moves to kick him out, and Sender didn't mind staying. It was just as well, since that looked like what was happening here. He'd never spent the night with anyone before, but it felt good.

"I ought to go in for at least a few minutes, anyway. I was running a program to compare some text sequences for similarities and it should be done by morning." Elios reached past Sender to tap the remote that would set the dim lights to off, confirming that he had no intention of kicking Sender out of his bed just yet. "You can come in with me; I'll show you around a little, and you can see what we're doing that's going to need your sexy little fighter jets."

Sender laughed a little, but it was mostly because, unexpectedly, he was actually happy at the moment. "I'd like to come in with you then," he said. He nuzzled against Elios' hair, breathing him in, and stroked Elios' back slowly.

"Good," Elios said simply, closing his eyes as Sender petted him. It wasn't long before he started to drift off to sleep.

Sender stayed awake a little longer, stroking Elios' back and soaking it all in. It felt so good to be here, to have someone curled up with him like this. He pressed a kiss to Elios' temple and closed his eyes, letting himself drift off into dreams.

Chapter Three

Elios' alarm was quiet, but it was always enough to wake him. He drifted into awareness, still wrapped up in the warmth of Sender's body. He didn't let himself think it was something he could get used to, no matter how blissfully good it felt. Being held in the arms of someone so much bigger and stronger made him feel right in a way nothing else did, and his instinct was to soak it all in. Instead, he carefully slipped away, turning off the alarm, and rolled out of bed.

There were small windows along the far wall, hidden behind dark curtains, but they let in just enough sun around the edges that Elios could see that Sender was still beautiful. Elios smiled and turned away to pad into the bathroom; it was nice to know the attraction wasn't just due to a rush of adrenaline from the flight or the haze of a little too much beer. He showered quickly and untangled the mess of his damp hair, then went back to the bedroom to see that Sender had curled over onto his belly.

The pretty man had tattoos of his own, some on his upper arms that Elios had seen last night, and another that he hadn't. A celestial compass rose was nestled between Sender's shoulder blades and, from it, a grand set of wings stretched out to cover the width of his back. It was an amazing design made even more beautiful by the contrast of Sender's pale skin.

Slowly, Elios crawled back up on the bed, mouthing along the line of Sender's spine. He wasn't sure if he wanted to work his way up to those wings, or down further to taste where he'd been last night. Sender's skin was surprisingly soft under his lips, smooth and warm.

Sender murmured softly, contentedly, something that sounded like Elios' name. Up to the wings it was, at least for now. Sender's voice was too sweet and sleepy for anything else. He sounded so trusting and vulnerable that it made Elios feel warm all the way through. Elios kissed his way up Sender's spine and out over the expanse of one beautifully inked wing, then leaned in to brush a soft kiss over Sender's cheek, his own damp hair falling forward over his shoulder to drag against Sender's arm.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," he teased quietly, nuzzling back behind Sender's ear.

Sender laughed quietly. "Morning," he murmured, stifling a yawn. He snuggled into the bed a little more, but managed to sort his hands out enough to reach back and stroke Elios' hair and cheek.

Elios turned his head to kiss Sender's palm -- no sense not being friendly to the gorgeous man he'd somehow managed to bring home with him last night -- and dropped another kiss on the edge of the wing on Sender's shoulder. "I like the wings," he murmured against Sender's skin. "Very pretty. Gorgeous artwork." Gorgeous man. Fitting, that.

"Thanks," Sender said sleepily. "Took for-damn-ever. Sure you know that." He rolled over and stretched out, making the bed seem small, and his back and shoulders crackled in protest.

"I've done my fair share of time under a needle," Elios agreed, offering up another little kiss, this one to Sender's lips. "Maybe more than." The vines, the alphabet winding around his biceps, the lambda on the back of his neck, the red-figure Ganymede on his shoulder... and it was always, always tempting to get more of them.

Sender took that kiss and gave Elios another in turn. "Hardly any such thing." He leaned up and kissed Elios lightly again. "We collect them." He shifted so that Elios could see his right shoulder, which was slowly being covered with tattoos.

It was obviously an invitation; Elios tilted his head, working to decipher what the marks meant. His fingers trailed over them as he tried to connect the symbols to what he knew of military insignias and codes -- which was, he had to admit now, very little.

He put the problem aside long enough to kiss Sender again, instead. "So is there a story behind every one of them?" he asked when he was done, his curiosity getting the better of him. It usually did.

"Something like that. Helps us know each other. You'll see them on Marines, too, different ones. Lieutenant," Sender said, running his finger over his shoulder, "Callisto. Squad Leader. Harpy pilot. Shuttle pilot. Test pilot. These are all the places I've flown." Sender ran his finger over lines of bars and numbers. "Black over blue for space over colony, black over green for space over planet, black over black for space, blue over green for atmosphere." The numbers between the bars were obviously coordinates. Sender tapped an empty area. "For Pandora and whatever comes after that."

It was something of a language, or at least a code. "The stories behind them, well, you have to ask for those. Some are boring," Sender said. He turned his arm so that Elios could see the inside of his wrist. "For pilots we've lost." There was a blue flower with a golden center like a little sun.

Elios glanced up at Sender's face, surprised. No one had said that some of the pilots had died, not even Doc. Thinking about it, though, it made sense. The pilots were flying an experimental aircraft that was changing all the time. It shouldn't have been a surprise at all. He nodded slowly, reaching out to brush his fingertips over the flower and then the blank space where the code for the Pandora Project would go.

"Have there been many?" Elios asked softly, cautiously. People having died for the project wasn't something he'd ever had to think about before, not really.

"No more than you'd expect," Sender said quietly, vaguely, glossing it over. "Too many, but it could always have been more."

"Even one is too many," Elios murmured, "but I guess it shouldn't surprise me." He shook his head and lifted Sender's wrist to his mouth, brushing his lips over the flower and then leaning in to brush his lips over Sender's mouth, too.

He'd just been up in one of the Harpies yesterday; it made him feel a little closer to the loss of the pilots that had died in the process of bringing the program far enough along that he could have that opportunity. He could understand why they'd take the risks, how incredible it was to be so free.

Sender cupped Elios' cheek in one hand, drawing him back for a slow, sweet kiss. "Thanks," he said softly against Elios' mouth, and then he kissed Elios again.

Elios didn't have anything to say to that, or at least nothing that could be said with words. He gave Sender kisses instead of words: sweet and gentle kisses, slow and soft and deep.

He liked Sender, more and more the longer they talked, and the whole conversation made him sad and uncomfortable in ways he couldn't describe, like he was getting a taste of a reality he hadn't quite been ready for. It had been easier when he'd had the illusion that Sender was carefree and invulnerable. Now, he could see how ephemeral Sender's beauty was, and he had had a glimpse of what would be lost if Sender, or any of them, died.

Elios let himself be coaxed in for more of those gentle kisses, settling himself against Sender's body. After a while, his kisses turned to soft nuzzles, and he murmured, "I should let you shower. The coffee should be ready by now, and I can make some breakfast before I show you the lab, if you're hungry."

"Breakfast would be great." Sender rolled Elios over in the sheets, making him laugh, but the laughter faded when Sender kissed him again, thoroughly. He was tempted to stay in bed and coax more kisses like that from Sender, but when Sender finally moved off him, Elios slid away and rolled out of bed.

"You can use whatever," he said, waving at the bathroom. "There's probably a new toothbrush under the counter, in with the little travel-sized things, and there's towels on the rack." He certainly didn't have any clean clothes he could offer, not in Sender's size, but he knew Sender had changed before they went to the bar, so that would have to do. He flashed Sender another smile and padded to the closet to find some clothes for himself.

"Thanks." Sender rolled out of bed and headed straight for the bathroom.

After slithering into a clean if well-worn pair of jeans and a T-shirt he'd had since undergrad, Elios headed out to the kitchen to figure out some food. The coffee was ready, thanks to the timer, but he left it in the machine so it wouldn't get cold. He didn't want to get out the waffle-maker, so he settled on eggs and ham instead and popped some bread on another skillet to make toast.

He went through the motions of getting breakfast on the table, listening to the shower running. He felt good all over, not just physically, and that was a little unnerving. He was still getting used to this apartment -- he'd only moved in last year -- and it was free of all of the memories of his intense, ill-fated relationship with Aric. He wasn't sure he wanted to imprint it with memories of something that wouldn't last, not so soon.

The area designated as the linguistics laboratory looked like it should have been divided into cubicles, but it had been left open to facilitate communication and sharing between the researchers. In spite of the openness, it could be silent for hours when all of them were under their headsets, listening and watching the sounds play out on the huge wall screens. The room was burgeoning with technical equipment, a fortune's worth.

The largest screen was set into the back wall with a large conference table in front of it. Right now, the table was used more for storage than conferencing. There were datapads and headsets and half-assembled translation units cluttering it and leaving little space for anything else. Usually, there were more than a dozen linguists and interns crammed into the room amongst all the equipment. Fortunately, the lab was empty today.

Elios led Sender over to his workstation and slipped into his seat. "This is the first transmission we managed to translate." What had been shared with the public had been minimal, to reduce speculation and potential panic. The audio file was musical and mysterious, much like the songs of the whales that thrived in Earth's oceans.

"It's beautiful." Sender tilted his head, listening, then looked down at Elios. "What did it say?"

"It was an introduction, a greeting." Elios glanced at Sender over his shoulder, past a curl of his own hair. "The later ones sound more like warnings, or distress calls. And then we got the text transmissions. Coordinates, and more warnings. We still don't know what it all means."

Sender reached out and tucked that curl behind Elios' ear, tenderly, and it felt so sweet. "And then finally, the Pandora." A great ship emerging from nowhere to drift in space. "And a lot of silence."

Elios nodded. The silence was worse. "And now just silence and an empty ship."

"I can't wait to get out there," Sender said, smiling down at Elios.

"It's going to be incredible," Elios said. The idea of going to see the Pandora, going up in the *Auriga*, was even more exciting than going up in the Harpy had been.

The lab door slid open and Elios turned without moving away from Sender, to see who it was. Two little children he hadn't expected to see again came racing through the door and skidded to a halt when they saw him. David and Celeste. His children. Elios tensed and relaxed, all in the time it took for his heart to beat, and moved past Sender.

David cried, "Daddy!" and came running to hug him.

Elios had just got his arms around David, who had a mass of blond curls and big brown eyes to rival Elios' own, when Aric walked in behind them.

"David!" Aric snapped, and all the tension rushed back into Elios' chest. He wasn't going to let Aric see him hurt.

Elios put David down carefully and kissed him on the top of his head, smiled at Celeste, and then said, coldly, "Aric." The situation couldn't get much worse than this. Elios glanced warily over at Sender, hoping the big man wasn't going to take offense at any of it.

Sender stayed where he was, leaning against Elios' desk, arms folded across his chest. He looked impassive but not openly angry. Still, his blue eyes were icy.

"Leave Elios alone," Aric said to the children. His gaze flicked to Sender as he added, "And his friend."

Elios' eyes closed and he took a slow breath. "Celeste, they've got more ice cream sandwiches in the freezer by the administration office. Why don't you and David check if they've got the ones with the chocolate chips?"

Celeste was older than David by a few years, old enough to remember her mother before Elios, and to have some idea of how these things worked. She glanced at Aric and then reached out to take David's hand, leading him out of the room. Elios felt sick watching them leave, seeing how practiced she was at clearing out when the grownups in her life were about to go at it.

As soon as the door slid shut again, Aric said, "You know Maeve doesn't want you to see them."

Elios stepped up to Aric as though Aric's greater size meant nothing to him. Aric wasn't nearly the fighter Elios was. "If you don't want them to see me, don't bring them to the lab when you know damn well I'm going to be here. You know what I'm working on. Call ahead if you want to keep me away from them."

Aric didn't seem to have an answer for that, looking startled at the outburst. Elios sighed, frustrated with everything. "Forget it, Aric. Do what you think is best. You always do." He turned away from Aric and grabbed a datapad off the desk by Sender. He glanced up at Sender's face, trying to apologize with his eyes where Aric couldn't see. "I've got what I came in for," he said quietly. "Let's go."

"Good idea," Sender said, giving Elios a little smile. Somehow, it helped a bit. Sender pushed away from the desk, pulling himself up to his full height, with an extra inch added on by his flight boots, and he headed for the door. He didn't posture or glare; he was absolutely inscrutable. "Nice to meet you, Aric," he said pleasantly, giving Aric a smile on his way past. He stopped at the doorway, one hand keeping the doors open to let Elios go ahead of him.

Aric murmured some sort of greeting in response to Sender's words, but it wasn't entirely audible. Elios slipped out without letting himself even glance at Aric, and when the door slid shut behind him, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know they'd be coming in today." He ran a hand through his hair and tucked the datapad into a pocket. "Do you want to get some lunch?"

"Sure. Do you want to make sure the kids are okay?" Sender looked up and down the hall as though trying to figure out where they'd gone. "Maybe let them know you're done here?" He was still so calm, and his voice was soft.

Elios went very still and closed his eyes. This was harder than he'd imagined, and he still had to keep a decent face on. When he opened them again, he glanced back at the lab door. Aric still hadn't come out, so he nodded. "Yeah," he said. "Thanks."

He walked down the hall toward the admin office. Past a few desks was a closet-sized room with a refrigerator. David and Celeste were in there, sitting at a table, sharing an ice cream sandwich with chocolate chips.

"Hey, guys," Elios said, kneeling down beside David's chair. He stroked his hand over David's hair and smiled at Celeste.

"Hi, Elios," she said quietly, glancing back at Sender as though she was trying to figure out who he was and where his place was in all this.

"Hey, sweetheart. How's the ice cream?"

"Yummy." David beamed at Elios with a sticky, chocolaty smile.

Sender stayed quiet, leaning against the doorframe, probably keeping an eye out down the hall for Aric. It let Elios relax a little, knowing that Aric couldn't just come storming down and upset the children more.

"I think Papa's waiting for you two in the lab," Elios said, kissing David's sticky cheek. "You should finish up your ice cream."

David pushed the last of his half of the sandwich into his mouth and announced, "I'm all done!" Elios laughed and got a napkin to mop him up.

Celeste licked the last of the ice cream from her fingertips and came over to give Elios a hug. "Miss you," she whispered. That hurt so much it was all Elios could do to keep breathing. He hugged her back, then got yet another napkin to wipe David's little face clean. As soon as David was cleaned up, Celeste took his hand and led him out with a soft, "Sorry."

Elios stayed there, crouched by the empty chair, for a long moment. Finally, Sender came over to Elios and ran a gentle hand over his hair. "Come on," he said quietly. Now his expression was something other than neutral, sad and caring. "Kids are in the lab with him now."

"Yeah." Elios pushed himself to his feet and turned around to face Sender, nodding. He shoved his hands into his pockets and forced a smile. "Lunch?"

"Sure." As they walked out, Sender slid an arm around Elios' shoulders as he had last night, but this time it was more of a reassuring hug.

Elios let Sender lead him out. He hoped he was doing a passable impression of someone who wasn't still crushed by having lost his lover and children. He couldn't fool himself, though. Even having someone else's arm around him didn't ease the pain.

"Think we could come up with lunch back at your place?" Sender asked, heading for Elios' apartment without waiting for an answer.

"Yeah, I've got food," Elios said, surprised and relieved. He could probably have dealt with being in public, but being at home was more comfortable. It was a relief when he was finally letting them in his front door.

"What are you hungry for?" Elios asked, though he wasn't hungry at all anymore. He glanced back at Sender, over his shoulder, and reevaluated that thought. He just wasn't hungry for food.

Sender slipped off his jacket and hung it up properly. "Not much," he said quietly. He caught up to Elios, looking like he was weighing something in his head, and then reached out to smooth Elios' dark, unruly curls back. "You?"

"Lunch can wait," Elios agreed, tilting his head into Sender's touch. It was a shitty situation to drag someone into after a first -- he hoped it was a first and not an only -- night together, dropping him in the middle of what probably looked like an ugly divorce.

Not that that was too far from the truth, except that they'd never gotten married -- Elios had returned the ring to the shop he'd bought it from after Aric left him; he'd never imagined he could have such horrible timing -- and he had no legal ties to the children. So far, though, Sender hadn't run scared, so maybe Sender could deal with all this. Elios gave him a little smile, trying to recover from the mess.

Sender leaned down to kiss Elios' smile, gently at first, but not at all tentatively. It was so good, like a drink of water on a brutally hot day. Elios made a soft, surprised sound and opened up to the kiss like he was letting Sender in, and his hands slid up over Sender's shoulders and into his short hair. He leaned up into the kiss, not demanding like he had been last night, but almost pleading instead.

One of Sender's hands tangled in Elios' hair, the other went to the small of his back to hold him close. Sender kissed him fiercely, tongue pushing in and curling against Elios'. He radiated protectiveness and want all at once and he growled a little, softly, and wrapped Elios up in his arms.

Oh, that was so good. Perfect. Elios didn't let himself think about what he was doing, what he was getting himself into by letting this wash away his pain. He whimpered into the kisses and sucked at Sender's tongue, wanting more. Sender gave him what he wanted, hot and deep. In the part of his mind that wasn't lost in those kisses and the warmth of Sender's arms around him, Elios knew they were moving to the bedroom, tugging their clothes off.

He was pulled in against Sender's bare chest the moment their shirts were gone, wrapped up in another protective embrace. Being held like that that made him feel, even if it was just for the moment, like it was going to be all right. Elios ran both hands down Sender's powerful body, sliding one between them to cup Sender's erection through his pants. With a flash, he knew what he wanted and he moved to get the lube from the drawer.

"Clothes off," Sender said softly once Elios had pushed the lube into his hand. That Sender could take control of the situation so easily was such a relief. Acting was better than thinking, so Elios did what he was told, shedding the last of his clothes and crawling up into his bed.

He was watching, now, watching Sender strip down, watching Sender move closer. Sender followed and kissed him again, sliding one arm under Elios' shoulders to hold him close. Holding the lube in that hand, he flipped it open and slicked the fingers of his other hand while he kissed Elios the way he had before, fierce and hungry, tongue pushing into Elios' mouth like fucking.

Moaning into the kisses, arching against Sender's body, Elios slid his fingers into Sender's hair and kissed him back with all the heat and want and need that were building in his spine. He had never been very good at being passive, and so he couldn't simply let Sender fuck him. He had to ask for it, to beg for it, to show Sender how much he wanted it.

Sender curled his slick hand around Elios' cock first, stroking slowly, just a few times, and then kept moving down. He was gentle without being tentative, and it helped Elios relax. Sender slid one finger in first, making everything slick and pleasurable.

For every kiss Elios gave, Sender kissed him back just as hungrily, holding him close. Sender's erection rubbed against Elios' hip as he slowly worked a second finger in until Elios was taking both in all the way. Just seconds after Sender's third finger slipped in, Elios was whimpering softly and moving to fuck himself on Sender's fingers. He didn't want to think about how long it had been since he'd had this, since he'd asked for it. He spread his legs and opened up, arching into the touches and moaning, because no matter how long it had been for Elios, Sender was making it feel very, very good.

"Fuck me," Elios gasped, finally, his body still moving against Sender's fingers. It wasn't a difficult decision now. All his reservations were lost in how badly he wanted to be filled up by Sender's cock. The man's fingers were fantastic; he had such big hands, but Elios wanted more.

"Like this or on your knees?" Sender's fingers didn't stop moving, and he mouthed Elios' lips, waiting for an answer.

Just the thought of Sender's weight on his back, big and heavy and hot, curling over him as his cock pushed inside, was enough to make Elios shudder and moan again. It would be harder to kiss like that, but the position had other benefits to make up for it. "Knees," he breathed, and then he whimpered when Sender's fingers pushed in again and hit just the right spot. "Oh, fuck. On my knees. I want to feel it."

Sender kissed him hard one more time, then slid his fingers out and shifted so Elios could move. "Go on," he said gently.

It took Elios a moment to gather himself together enough to actually move. He rolled over, stretching out on his belly in front of Sender first, to loosen the muscles that had gotten tight as his body begged for Sender's fingers. He pushed himself up onto his knees and elbows, looking back at Sender over his shoulder, watching Sender move to kneel behind him. He felt so close to coming that all it would take was another touch to push him over the edge.

The pressure of Sender's cock pushing into him put a little more distance between Elios and orgasm, for all that Sender was gentle and patient. Elios pushed back, far faster than the careful pace Sender was setting, and breathed as his body opened up. It burned, but he didn't have the patience to wait for his body to remember how this was supposed to work.

He took Sender in all the way and then shuddered as his body started to adjust. Sender was big all over. It was perfect, and so were the soft kisses that Sender gave him, across his shoulders and then on his cheek. Elios turned his head a little more to catch Sender's mouth in a hot kiss, begging wordlessly for more.

Sender braced both hands on the bed so that he could move freely, his broad body sheltering Elios' underneath him. Growling softly, Sender bit gently at Elios' lips, then nuzzled in the curve of his neck to do it again, and Elios was overwhelmed with how safe he felt. He arched back into the curve of Sender's body, and Sender answered him by moving a little faster, fucking him a little deeper.

Writhing, Elios moved with Sender's new, faster rhythm. It was enough to make Elios shudder and beg. "Please. Oh, fuck, Sender..." His words trailed off as another moan surfaced. He'd all but forgotten his need for distraction in the midst of the rush of pleasure. "So good. Deep. I want..." He wanted Sender. He was opened up and alive and everything Sender did felt perfect and made him want more.

Shaking his hair forward left Elios' neck and shoulders bare for Sender's mouth. Elios was sure, in the brief flashes of coherence he managed to snatch between overwhelming rushes of pleasure, that being fucked hadn't ever felt quite this good before. If it had, he wouldn't have been able to resist asking for it for so long. In the end, he wasn't very good at denying himself. Every thrust, every breath pushed him closer to orgasm, made him more unsteady. He started to cry out long before he actually started to come, when the rush was just too intense to keep it all inside.

Sender wrapped one arm around Elios' chest to hold him close, safe, with his back to Sender's chest. Sender covered Elios' skin with kisses and gasped Elios' name. Elios cried out again and again, and his cries edged closer to shouts or screams the closer he came to orgasm. Finally, with a hard push back to drive Sender's cock deep into him, he was coming, shuddering hard and grinding himself back against Sender's body to feel as much as he could of Sender's cock inside him.

Elios' orgasm was too long, too good, lasting until he was almost desperate to breathe again. When he could finally think enough to realize Sender was still hard inside him, still fucking him, he gasped Sender's name and arched back against him, coaxing Sender into following him over the edge. Sender cried out, fucking Elios hard and unsteadily as he came.

After, Elios let his body slide down into the sheets, curling himself to bring Sender down over him. He breathed slowly, deliberately, until the unsteady hitches finally faded away. Sender curled his body around Elios' and kissed the back of his neck, shifting so that Elios was wrapped up in his arms and half-hidden under the weight of his body.

The warmth and weight of Sender's body was a treat, and Elios stretched a little beneath him, purring at how good everything felt. It felt so comfortable that Elios didn't want to move for a long while. He lay there, snuggled up in Sender's arms, and relaxed.

Finally, though, when all the shivers and gasps had long since faded, he spoke. He knew he owed Sender some kind of explanation for what had happened at the lab.

"They aren't mine," he murmured. "David doesn't remember their mother -- he isn't old enough to really remember anything before me in Aric's life -- but Celeste does."

"They love you, though," Sender said quietly, as though that was all that mattered. Sender stroked Elios' hair, soothing him.

Elios nodded and slowly let go of more tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "They do. But it doesn't matter. Last year, Aric married his intern. I don't know how long they'd been together before that, but the wedding was a month after I moved out."

They'd probably been together behind his back long before then. Elios had had plenty of time alone to think about it. "She's smarter than his first wife," he continued, trying not to sound as bitter as he felt. "Maybe just because she knows he was with me, so she knows what to look for." And keeping Elios away from the kids was high on her list of wedges to drive between the two of them, to make sure Aric kept his promises.

"I'm so sorry." Sender kissed Elios' shoulder and held him a little closer. "That was wrong of them," he said simply.

Elios smiled a little, sadly, where Sender couldn't see. "Thank you." He sighed and stretched and wrapped himself up in Sender's arms again. "I just thought you'd want to know what was going on this morning. I wouldn't have taken you in there if I'd thought he was going to come in. That's... not exactly the kind of thing I usually drag people I've only just met into."

"You didn't have to explain." Sender snuggled Elios close, and it felt so good. "You couldn't do anything about it. You and the children weren't behaving badly." He kissed the curve of Elios' neck. "I'm not bothered. So promise me you won't worry about that."

"Okay." Elios acquiesced easily because he could feel that Sender was relaxed and comfortable behind him.

"Good." Sender smiled and it came across in his voice. "I can go if you want some time to yourself," he offered. He didn't show any indication of wanting to leave. He was very thoroughly wrapped around Elios' body, snuggling him up.

Elios didn't really want him to leave either. "Time to myself? Just when I was wondering if you'd be able to do that again?" he teased, laughing and wriggling back against

Sender's body. He didn't really need the sex again, but he was comfortable. And if Sender did want to go again... well, he certainly wasn't going to turn it down.

Sender laughed at that and hugged Elios, then kissed his cheek. "Keep squirming like that and you'll answer your own question before you know it."

Elios laughed again, but he didn't squirm around anymore, except to get himself turned around to face Sender. "You really are very good at that," he murmured, tipping his head up to catch Sender's mouth in a kiss.

Kissing Elios back, Sender snuggled him up again. "I'm glad you think so," he said. "The feeling's mutual."

Elios laughed happily, honestly pleased with how things were going. "We should do it all again sometime," he said, smiling and pressing another kiss to Sender's lips. "But maybe it can wait until after we clean up and I get you some lunch?"

"If you insist." Sender ducked his head and nibbled Elios' shoulder. "You might be safer if I get fed." It probably took a lot to keep Sender's powerful body going.

"Who told you I wanted to be safe?" Elios asked, laughing. He wriggled out of Sender's arms, though, and rolled out of bed, savoring the aches as his body reminded him what he'd just spent the better part of an hour doing. "Come on, let's get cleaned up. And if you're nice to me, I'll make you grilled cheese sandwiches and fruit salad for lunch."

"I can think of better ways for you not to be safe," Sender said, propping himself up on one elbow to watch Elios move. "God, but you are gorgeous."

Elios was surprised into blushing slightly, and then he smiled. "Coming from a man who looks like Adonis himself, that's quite a compliment." Elios rarely suffered any lack of self-esteem, but it felt good to be looked at like that, to see the appreciation in Sender's expression.

"I don't much care for looking in the mirror," Sender said quietly, still looking Elios over. "But I like looking at you." He pushed himself up to sitting and then stood, coming over to kiss Elios on the mouth.

Still smiling, Elios leaned up to meet the kiss. "Do it all you like," he invited. "I'm certainly not going to complain." He gave Sender another kiss and found Sender's hand with his own, then wound their fingers together. "Shower," he murmured. "We can rinse off before lunch." And then he would, quite probably, have to let Sender leave. He'd taken up quite a lot of the pilot's pass time already.

"Good idea," Sender said easily. He let Elios lead him off to the shower, and Elios tried not to be too pleased at what he'd managed to catch. It wasn't a good time for this sort of thing, and he wasn't ready for it. This was just a fling, Elios told himself sternly, no

matter how good Sender made him feel. It was nothing but a happy coincidence that Sender was everything he needed right now.

Chapter Four

"Stop it." Macy slammed a tool locker shut and threw the rag in his hand at Sender. It hit him in the side of the head, and Sender caught it before it hit the floor.

"Stop what?" Sender gave Macy an exasperated look and used the rag to wipe the hinges of the emergency burn kit he was checking.

The mid-day sun slanted in through the open hangar doors, and every Harpy in service was out on the blacktop. All the equipment in the hangar was out on the floor and the pilots and technicians were going through all the kits, tools, hoses, cables, and cradles before heading out to check over the Harpies. It was a boring chore and, worse, one that had to be done perfectly or else an emergency could get worse than it needed to be. They'd been up since before dawn and no one was in a very good mood; boring, tedious tasks never made the pilots very happy.

"Stewing," Macy said unhelpfully.

"I'm not stewing." Sender counted the number of gel packs in the kit and compared it to the number on his datapad, and then he checked each expiration date. The fact that all of this safety gear was here for their benefit in case of a crash -- for all the good it did them after the fact -- wasn't improving anyone's mood.

"I've lived with you for four years, Sky." Macy got to his feet and signed off on the tool locker. He leaned into it, pushing it toward its niche, and Sender shook his head, hoping Macy would drop it.

No such luck. Macy came over to help him lock the burn kit into place on the wall and then kicked him in the ankle. "Go away, Sky. Outside."

"Who's in charge here?" Sender stopped himself from doing what he was told, turning back to give Macy a disparaging look. Macy looked tired and scruffy, as he usually did after a three-day pass, and the grime smudged over his slightly freckled nose and cheeks didn't make him look any better.

"Not you." Macy stuck his tongue out. He reached out and plucked at Sender's sweat-damp T-shirt. "Not when you made both of us miss lunch. Get lost."

"Brat." Sender rolled his eyes and headed out as he was told. Outside, Sender tipped his sunglasses down and took a breath of the clean air outside. It was beautiful on Luna all

the time, with the natural sunlight and the sweet air. The sky created by the atmospheric shields was an amazing blue that Sender had only seen in pictures before he joined the army. It didn't matter to him that it was synthesized; it was blue.

He sprawled on a crate of wheel parts up against the side of the hangar and watched the technicians taking the panels off of the ten Harpies from Bellona Squadron. Beyond them, the ten Harpies from Quirinus were waiting to be tended. In the distance, far down the blacktop, the sun made rainbows in the spray bouncing off of Callisto's Harpies. He would watch over the technicians when it was Callisto's turn to be inspected, just like Sheridan was doing now, with her second, Terrace, a step behind her. The twenty Harpies of Juventas, the double-quad of trainees, didn't require the same inspections since they were stripped-down older models that hadn't been upgraded in months.

He'd never really imagined himself doing this, had never really imagined himself doing anything other than what his father had done, working in a factory under the dull grey curve of what passed for a sky on Themis Colony. When the recruiter had picked him out of his graduating class, he hadn't taken the job for Luna's sky or for the thrill of pushing the limits of his body and his aircraft in testing. He'd taken it because of the numbers on the paper in front of him. Twice the pay of any job Themis had to offer and, maybe more importantly, one less person on the crowded colony. It made his parents' life better in every way.

"It can't have been that bad." Macy sat down beside him and Sender leaned over to take one of the cups of coffee and a sandwich before Macy managed to overbalance everything he was juggling.

"It wasn't." It had been incredible, pure bliss. Sender unwrapped the sandwich and peeled back the bread to see what was inside. Sliced meat, probably not actual meat but it was hard to tell, and real vegetables. They were fed well, on top of everything else.

"For you, that makes sense." Macy leaned back on the wall with his shoulder to Sender's.

"Thanks." Sender took a bite of his sandwich, and they ate for a while in silence.

"How was it?" Macy opened up his coffee and crumpled up the wrapper from his first sandwich.

Sender sighed and reached for another sandwich. "Good."

"You sound like your dog just died."

"Never had a dog."

"Define good. The sex was good, the sleep was good, you did each other's nails..." Macy tipped his sunglasses up to look at Sender.

"Shut up." Sender couldn't help laughing at Macy.

"Never underestimate the benefits of mutual grooming. How was it?"

"It was all good." Sender gestured vaguely with his sandwich and reached for his coffee with his other hand. "Really good." It had been better than good. Sender fell quiet while a shuttle came in overhead to make a gentle touchdown on the main landing pad on the other side of the complex. Once the engine whine dropped to a purr that resonated even over to the hangar, he continued. "His ex is a complete jackass."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good. You talked about ex-boyfriends?" Macy looked skeptical. "You were supposed to be having so much sex neither of you could walk or talk."

"No, he works with his. And we had to drop by his lab so he could check a program he was running," Sender explained. "His ex showed up and was... appalling."

"Well, at least he's showing some good taste this time." Macy settled back beside Sender, nudging his shoulder against Sender's again.

"This time?"

"Yeah. Don't tell me I have to call him and give him your number." Macy elbowed Sender gently.

Sender was quiet a moment and then he sighed. "No, you don't." He paused and then admitted, "I'm calling him tomorrow tonight. My schedule's the weird one."

Macy laughed, pleased. "See, I knew it. So what's wrong?"

"What else?" Sender let his head fall back against the wall. Guilt was still gnawing at him. His parents would be shattered if they knew what he'd been up to over the weekend. Even if he hardly talked to them anymore, it mattered to him. Telling himself they were wrong in their convictions didn't help anymore. He'd almost come to terms with his temporary lapses, a few minutes of pleasure with random strangers, but this was new territory.

"Damn it." Macy slid his arm around Sender's neck and pulled him into a rough headlock that doubled as a hug, and then scrubbed his knuckles painfully over Sender's scalp. "Okay. Repeat after me: There's nothing wrong with me. I deserve to be happy."

Laughing a little, Sender put his coffee down so he wouldn't spill it. "Macy..." It was serious when the real names came out.

"Don't make me bring in reinforcements."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Sender said obediently. "I deserve to be happy."

Macy slapped his cheek sharply. "Like you mean it, soldier."

Sender laughed harder, even if he wanted to punch something -- something other than Macy -- in frustration. "It's hard," he said at last. He relaxed in Macy's arms, and Macy hugged him tighter.

It *was* hard. Hating himself for what he was wasn't easy, and it felt crazy, ludicrous, to feel that way in Luna's open, loving society. But it was harder than he ever would have imagined to turn his back on everything he'd been raised to believe.

"You do things that... damn it, are way harder than this. You risk your fucking life every time you go up." Macy let him go and shoved him back to sitting up, and Sender picked up his coffee again to take a drink. "You deserve this. If you don't call him, I will hurt your ass. And then you'll both be sad."

Sender swallowed before he choked on his coffee. Four years together and it always caught him off-guard that Macy had no qualms about making sexual jokes like that. "I'm going to call him," he promised. Even if it was going to nag at him that he was doing it, even if the idea was already giving him flashes of nausea, of vertigo and disorientation, as though he had no sense of which way was up anymore. And that was so strange, because he'd never had a flash of it, no matter how high he flew.

"It's not like you're risking your life," Macy pointed out reasonably while stealing the rest of Sender's sandwich out of his hand to take a bite.

"Just my soul." Sender took the sandwich back when Macy was done with it, feeling grim and ill. He stared at it and then put it down.

"You still really believe that?" Macy never lost his temper when it mattered, no matter how many times they came back to the same subject.

"Sometimes," Sender admitted. "Most of the time."

"Mostly when you're happy," Macy said, without sarcasm.

"Yeah." Sender took a slow breath and let it out. Macy had a point, as usual. Macy might be two years younger than he was, but sometimes he was decades smarter. "But I don't feel it when I'm with him. I don't know what the hell is happening, but don't let me fuck this up."

"I won't. You should be happy." Macy picked up the sandwich and handed it back to Sender. "Eat your lunch. You can't not eat just because life is good. Moron."

"I know." Sender took the sandwich back and forced himself to take a bite. He did know. And part of him knew he should be happy, that he should have a life like other people, with someone to love. Someones to love, plural, if he was going to let Macy and many of his friends have a say in organizing his life.

"Prove it," Macy said, sounding a little smug.

"You want me to have a relationship just so you'll stop nagging me?" Sender elbowed Macy in the ribs hard enough to almost knock him off the crate.

Macy laughed at Sender and regained his balance. "Hey, whatever works."

"I'll think about it." Sender took another bite of his sandwich. "Maybe if you throw in not leaving your socks on the floor."

Macy snorted. "Don't push your luck, boy."

"Juventas, let me see formation B-12. If we can do it right today, we might get back in time for me to have dinner. Break into your teams and come back over me."

Sender was cruising through the midnight of space. The moon loomed huge on his left, and Earth to his right was a brilliant orb. The sun was a distant fireball that warmed him as he banked to come about. His Harpy was thrumming softly, all systems green. Above him now, the twenty ships of the Juventas squadron, all the trainee pilots, sorted themselves out into their Alpha and Beta teams.

It wasn't quite the crisp roll-out that Callisto, Quirinus, and Bellona managed when they were splitting up from the standard parade formation, but it was getting there. Sender tracked them, able to pick out each pilot from their place in the ranks each team created. Four, three, and three, each team fell into a three-tiered wedge.

In Alpha, he needed to keep an eye on Yarden and Jiang. In Beta, Ellil was a little laggy as usual, but not so much that Sender was going to yell at her just now. She'd just get upset and run right up Sondven's tailpipe again. Veli, one of his usual problems, was holding position pretty well, but Sender wasn't holding his breath until after the rollovers. And then some people didn't look at their readouts. One of Alpha's wingmen was a good three meters out of line from the rest.

"J-Alpha Nine, you're riding high," he snapped. What was with that kid, Gyatso, that he couldn't read his instruments to see the plane his teammates were riding? It was a little green line. How hard could it be? "Stop looking out the damn window and look at your HUD." Sender clicked off the radio before his exasperated sigh carried to all of them. This was taking all the fun out of being out in space.

Maybe he was burning the candle at both ends a little too often, working this job and his own, the way his temper was wearing thin. It was hard to concentrate on all twenty of them at once; Sender's eyes kept threatening to cross, and he yawned. He'd been up too late talking to Elios again. Macy had effectively ended the call by getting into Sender's bed and falling asleep on him to make his point. It was the snoring that had been the real issue.

The two groups shot off in different directions, the subgroups pulling together and splitting up so that there were only six clusters to watch, four triads stacked two and one and two quads stacked two and one with a six o'clock shadow, usually the squad leader. While Sender watched, the squad leader on each side, Harvey and Diya, shot out and front and started the rollover that would bring them all back to cross over above him.

That, of course, was assuming that all went well. In a fight, formations went to hell. But developing the body sense for close-quarters flight, being able to play off of each other, and, most importantly, not running into each other, was best done in formations first, without the guns. Then it was time to introduce chaos, when order was flawless.

There went Veli again, starting to lose it. It was just a tremor in the line of the Harpy's wings, but Sender could see him failing already. Sender thumped his helmet back against his seat. He had no idea what he was going to do with the man once he got him in atmosphere formations.

Veli had great reflexes and an amazing understanding of mechanics. A former shuttle engineer, he had passed the tests for pilot with flying colors. His marksmanship was fantastic. If he could just hold it together in certain formations, he'd make a good pilot. He kept washing out whenever they started playing with up and down, though.

Sender opened up a channel straight to him. "J-Beta Five, just hang where you are," he said firmly.

"Sir..." Veli's voice was about as steady as his Harpy's wings.

"Watch your HUD," Sender said. "Just watch the display. Ignore everything else."

"I can't do this." Veli's voice cracked. "I can't do this upside down."

"You're in space, Veli. There's no up and down. Keep your position; you don't get a choice here. You can do it." Sender used the man's name to try and calm him down. He was going to get a tranquilizer for the man at this rate. Just pray or something, he snapped silently. It worked for me.

The two teams were coming back at each other at under quarter-throttle now. "J-Alpha Four, slow down, you're about to eat Two's exhaust." It was like herding cats, not that Sender had ever tried. Doctor Temple, the head engineer, used the term all the time and it sounded good.

"Sorry, man." That was Yarden, everyone's favorite speedster. You had to expect it from a former racer. The guy still didn't have the hang of saying "sir," and it drove Sender around the bend because he didn't know what important things Yarden didn't have the hang of if he couldn't remember to use "sir."

"J-Alpha Team, you're the ones offset in this maneuver," Sender reminded them. They'd forgotten the first time, and it had been a catastrophe. This set of newbies were going to get him fired. Macy and Lore's group, the first ones he'd taught, they'd been a breeze.

He watched Alpha adjust and he hoped that Beta, the newer team, would be able to hold it together. The sudden cloud of fast-moving ships brought out the weirdest reactions in people. Sender was lucky in that sheer terror just made him very, very focused. Macy tended to get high as a damn kite on it, which made him hell to deal with after any big bust-up.

Finally, they crossed the x-axis and trundled past each other. It looked hellishly fast the first times you did it, though. To Sender, it looked like a grandmother's pace. It all went well and he was about to exhale when something caught his eye. He knew what it was before everything went to hell.

Veli. Again. The man's Harpy lurched, diving "upward" toward Sender, and his exhaust just caught Jiang's tail. She was lagging; Veli was losing it. Jiang lurched toward Gyatso, who was out of line again, and Veli overcorrected to go plunging toward Vojtek. The radio channel burst into chaos: Harvey and Diya barking orders, Vojtek snapping at Ellil to get out of the way as he dove her way to get out of Veli's path, Ellil shrieking once with panic. Yarden went shooting out past Harvey, Alpha's formation crumbled outward and Beta's formation fell in on itself, sparks fountaining as Vojtek scraped past Ellil, who hadn't moved fast enough.

Sender brought his hand down on the break key. Space and all the chaos in there disappeared and he was locked in a little simulator pod, breathing stale air, his head pounding, staring at nothing inside his visor. For the moment, there was silence. He opened the channel again. There was still silence except for some harsh breathing.

"I want you all to run solo sims on that formation," he said calmly. There was no sense yelling right now. He could yell later. "Three times." With the computer flying all the other ships, each person would only have their own errors to cope with. "I'll have your performance evals in your boxes tomorrow."

"Sir, yes, sir." It was a subdued response. Sender shut off the channel and let them babble among themselves. They were doing better, but they had to stop with this flinching and the crap about up and down. It hadn't been too long. They'd just finished logging their basic flight hours and individual patterns in atmosphere and in space.

Sender got out of the pod, wondering what the hell inspired someone his height to take up a profession that involved being crammed in a small space. Under his helmet, his hair was damp with sweat, his neck and back hurt, and he needed to piss. Leading his own squad was not this stressful.

All the pods were closed, status lights blinking cheerily, save one. Veli sat on the steps, head in his hands, helmet on the floor. The air was heavy with the smell of vomit; Sender was used to it by now. Everyone knew where the hose was to clean up.

"You held it together," Sender said as he came up to Veli. He put his hand on Veli's shoulder and crouched down in front of him. "You almost had it. Sulo." The edge in Sender's voice saying his first name made Veli look up. The man was seven years older than Sender, but he didn't look it right now. He looked terrified. "It's the sims. You're good at this."

"I just probably killed three people," Veli said. He rubbed his hands over his face and then through his hair.

"No. You ran into some sims." Sender smacked him on the shoulder. "You're too smart for this, Veli. Look at me." He waited until Veli's bloodshot brown eyes were on his. "I'm not letting you fuck up, okay? When it's time for live formations, I'll be there with you. If you're going to run into anyone, you can run into me and get it out of your system."

That got him a snort that might have been a laugh. "You're insane, sir," Veli said.

"It's no big deal," Sender said. "This is just practice. I want you to set your sims on hex pictures for now." The hex pictures would make everything look less real, pixilated, and might make Veli focus on the task instead of the potential disaster.

"I can't believe you won't kick me out." Veli wiped his face on one arm.

"Don't puke in my plane and I won't kick you out," Sender said dryly. He stood up, wincing at how sore he was.

"Standards are low around here," Veli said. He sounded better and he got up as well, trying to shake off the jitters that gripped him.

"At least you can remember to call me 'sir,'" Sender pointed out. He reached out and gave Veli's shoulder one last squeeze. "My job is to make sure you don't kill yourselves or each other. And I'm not going to start being bad at that now. Clean up and go shower. Get your next three formation runs in my box by tomorrow morning and we'll call it even."

"Thank you, sir." Veli had it together enough to salute, and Sender gave him a grin.

"Good man. I'll see you tomorrow." Sender kept his expression cheerful, hiding how much he just wanted to get out of there. Veli turned away to go get the hose and Sender refrained from beating himself in the head with his helmet on the way out.

This crunch-time intensive training was the pits. It wasn't giving anyone the chance to develop the instincts, to make the moves automatic. Ozanne kept reassuring the senior officers that they'd have training time once the *Auriga* got out to the Pandora. Sender wasn't sure they'd make it long enough to get on the *Auriga* at this rate. He needed a shower, and dinner, and a beer. And he needed to see Elios. Only two more days.

"So, you're too good to talk to your sister anymore?" Zilla eyed Elios through the screen he'd flipped on to make the call and looked rather suspicious.

"I'm sorry," Elios said, refusing to be at all flustered. "I just had a call I wasn't expecting."

"Like last week."

"Okay, like last week, but it won't happen again," Elios promised. He settled back in his chair with a cup of tea and gave his sister a winning smile. Zilla was his age and looked almost nothing like him -- they'd been born into the same family, just to different mothers and fathers -- but they shared the same high intellect and curious mind. Zilla was a little taller than Elios was, her skin far darker, and her hair more tightly curled. "How are the kids?"

"They're good." Zilla leaned forward and tapped her screen. "Here, I'll send you some pictures from the park today. Kasper is too cool to play with the twins, of course, now that he's all grown up and almost six." She rolled her eyes at that and then leaned back just in time for a lean orange tabby to leap into her lap. "Apparently Kroto says 'Hello.'"

Elios laughed and wiggled his fingers at the screen. "Hi, Kroto." Obliging, Kroto sniffed at it, watching the movement. Having a cat again would be nice, when he had the time.

Zilla moved the cat's tail out of her face, wrinkling her nose. "Are we all done here?" There was a mew down by her foot and she laughed, bending out of sight of the camera for a moment and coming back up with a little fluff of kitten. "Apparently not. Come here, cutie." The kitten was a tortoise-shell, black and brown streaked with amber, with ridiculously large paws for its size. "Ohani's cat had kittens and we call this little boy Number Three."

"Number Three?" Elios couldn't help laughing. "Did you run out of names?"

"We weren't sure he was going to make it, so we just called him that. We didn't want the kids getting too attached." Zilla settled little Number Three between her breasts where he

curled into a ball and purred loud enough that Elios could just make it out over the speakers. Kroto nosed the kitten and then settled down with a grumpy noise, just the tip of his disgruntled tail visible on the screen, flicking back and forth.

"You should call him Schrodinger," Elios teased. "The cat who was or wasn't."

"Very funny," Zilla said, laughing at him while she petted the little cat. "That's a long name for someone so small. He's doing fine now. Since we're talking about names," she added, looking up at Elios, "what's his name?"

His? Oh. Elios blinked, then shrugged. "Whose name?" Just when he thought he was safe.

"Come on, Elios." Zilla rolled her eyes. "It's been a year since you broke up with Aric." She always said it like Aric hadn't just dumped him and married someone else without warning. "And you're on a call with someone else two Thursdays running?"

"He had the last couple Thursday nights off," Elios mumbled, then took a sip of his tea. "It's not like we talk all the time." Just once a day or so, plus emails, for the last two weeks. Elios just wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Zilla about Sender yet. He wasn't sure he wanted to think too hard about it, himself.

"Uh-huh." Zilla's expression softened and she gave him her best "big sister" look. "El. It's about time. As long as you're happy, right?"

When she looked at him like that, Elios wished it weren't so far to her place that it was inconvenient to just drop in. He'd crashed there after Aric left him and spent hours with his head on her shoulder, crying until his eyes burned and he was out of tears. "Yeah. He's a nice guy. It's just... a casual thing." It was, because that was all Elios was up for, still.

"What's he do?" Zilla petted Kroto, who'd stood up to nose the kitten, checking to see if maybe he'd like that spot better, even if there was no way he was going to fit in it.

"He's a pilot," Elios said, trying to keep his expression neutral, trying not to let the smile he felt welling up when he thought of Sender and flying show through. It was just the flying, he told himself. "He took me up when Senator Darlington got us a tour of the testing facility a couple weeks ago."

"I see," Zilla said slowly. "And does your pilot have a name?"

Elios rolled his eyes at her. "He's not mine." He caught her expression and sighed. "Sender," he said at last. "Kinnison."

Zilla frowned a little. "Themis boy, is he?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?" Elios took another drink of tea, puzzling a little at her frown.

"It's a traditional old colony name, that one. Backward place like Themis is about the only place you'll still find them." Zilla shrugged, then smiled at Elios. "So, when do you see him again?"

"This weekend," Elios admitted. Saying it out loud was harder than he thought. "I invited him to stay over while he's on a pass."

"Oh?" Zilla's expression spoke volumes, and Elios swore that her curls were twitching like the cat's tail.

"He doesn't get evenings off like normal people." Elios tried not to sound defensive. "And... he's just... he stayed over last time. And we went to the lab and ran into Aric and the kids." He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Aric was an ass. But it was okay anyway."

Zilla gave Elios a warm smile. "I think I might be able to like him a bit, if he's good to you."

"He's just a good person, period," Elios said firmly.

All the emails and long conversations had given him a good feel for that. He felt like he knew Sender's entire squad, all ten of them, through the affectionate lens of Sender's recounting of their antics. And more than once he'd ended up talking to Macy, who was a constant in Sender's life since he and Sender shared a room. Other times Vaughn, the tall, twitchy computer technician, had been there with them, and more often than not Lore or Xochi would peek in and look over Sender's shoulder to say hi as well. "His squad loves him."

"Good," Zilla said firmly. "Just be happy, okay, El?" She gave him that big sister look again. "Because it really is about time."

Elios' relationship with Aric hadn't exactly been smooth all the way through, but he'd loved raising David and Celeste so much that he'd been willing to overlook anything that wasn't overtly awful. "Yeah, it is," he said at last. "So, since I can't tell you about my job, tell me about yours."

"My glamorous job editing astrophysics texts?" Zilla laughed at him and almost sent Schrodinger tumbling down onto Kroto. She rescued the kitten with one hand, still laughing.

"I meant the kids, but that'll do, too," Elios said, settling down with his tea again and trying to relax. He tapped his screen to bring up the pictures Zilla had sent. Submerging himself in the reality of her happy life helped him forget how lonely he was, even if it was just for a little while.

Chapter Five

The gym was the one stop in Elios' life that wasn't within three blocks of his apartment; it was right on the edge of New McMurdo. It was the one that was open and staffed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, though, and that had made it far more appealing than any of the gyms more conveniently located. This evening he was sparring against one of his usual partners: a tall man named Ming who was just as lean and wiry as Elios himself.

Sometimes Ming beat him, sometimes he beat Ming. Tonight it looked like it would be the latter. It was nearing the end of their scheduled session, and Elios could see the time wearing on Ming. It was wearing on him, too. His hair was held back in braids, instead of down around his face, but it was still damp with sweat. His whole body shone with sweat, and, in the end, that helped him more than it hindered.

Ming's grip on his leg didn't take, and Elios slid away, pulling upright and aiming another quick kick that would knock Ming back down from where he was starting to get to his feet. Dropping to one knee on Ming's chest, he grinned as Ming patted the mat. "Time's up anyway," he said easily, standing again and offering Ming a hand up.

"Thanks for the round," Ming said, grinning back as Elios hauled him to his feet.

"Good as always," Elios replied. He checked his watch and realized he needed to hurry. "I've got to run. Have a good week." Giving Ming a wave, Elios headed for the showers. He needed to get cleaned up and dressed for his date with Sender. The sparring after work had kept him from being anxious, waiting for Sender to finish up his work for the week.

Elios scrubbed himself clean, toweled off, and got dressed, trying not to think too hard about how he was feeling about the weekend. He put on black slacks, an off-white shirt, black jacket, and he brushed his hair out as he dried it so that it hung in loose waves over his shoulders. He stuffed his fighting gear -- shorts, plus wraps for his hands and feet -- into a small bag and came out to look for Sender in the lobby.

At first, he wasn't sure that Sender was there at all. He was looking for the tall pilot in his stark black uniform. But then his eye came back to an exceptionally attractive man with a very serious expression sitting in one of the lounge chairs in the lobby and reading a datapad. With a start, Elios realized that it was Sender.

Sender was wearing a blue shirt the color of his eyes tucked into a dark charcoal pair of pants under a soft, dark jacket. He was wearing shoes, not boots, and looked like any other professional young man. Out of uniform, he looked his age, which Elios had worked out was twenty-five at the most.

Fuck, but the man was gorgeous. Elios hadn't expected Sender to look even better in civilian clothes than he had in uniform. Elios took a moment to just look and then finally walked up to stand over Sender's stretched out legs. "Hey, there."

Sender looked up at Elios and then smiled. "Hi. You looked good down there." He clicked the stylus back into the pad and tucked it away in his jacket. "Have a good time?"

"You were watching?" Elios was surprised. Sender must've come in early; they hadn't finished late. He smiled, though. Sender's smile was too sweet not to return. "Thanks, yeah. Ming's a great sparring partner."

"I'm glad I got here early." Sender stood up, taking his bag with him. "It's good to see you again." He leaned down just enough that Elios could kiss him, soft and sweet.

"It's good to see you, too."

Sender pulled away from the kiss slowly, shouldered his bag, and then nodded toward the door. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am." Elios smiled at Sender again and slid his own bag over his shoulder, then turned to lead Sender out of the gym. The restaurant wasn't too far away, within walking distance. "You look good," he said, as they walked down the sidewalk. Very good.

"Thank Macy and the rest of the troublemakers," Sender said, laughing. "You should be warned, they've decided to meddle. They trapped me in my quarters and made me try on clothes for them, so they could decide what I should bring. If there's anything particularly weird in my things, we'll know who's to blame. Anything... edible. Or anything." Sender gave Elios a rather apprehensive look. "I'm outnumbered there, you know."

"Meddling?" Elios looked up at Sender and laughed softly. "I won't hold it against you if there's anything odd in your bag," he promised, smiling. "Don't worry about it. Out here, it's just you and me."

"They have this idea that I like you." Sender put his arm around Elios' shoulders and grinned down at him. "I really don't know where they got it from."

"Do they?" Elios leaned into Sender's embrace and slid his arm around Sender's waist, under the back of his jacket, to curl his thumb into one of his belt loops. "Well, I hope they're right. Since I'm pretty sure I like you."

"They know me better than anyone else, so..." Sender shrugged and laughed.

Elios smiled up at Sender, a purely happy smile, and drew him into a nearby restaurant. "Come this way. I figure I subjected you to my cooking enough last time, you might appreciate something made by a professional," he said as a young woman with long blonde hair piled high atop her head led them to a table along the back wall.

"I've been eating army food for six years," Sender reminded him. "You don't need to coddle me."

"Think of it as coddling me," Elios offered, as they sat down. "This way, I get to eat someone's cooking other than my own." He gave Sender another smile and started to look at the menu in front of him.

"That, I can get behind." Sender's answering smile was warm. It felt so good; Elios had to force himself to actually pay attention to the menu.

When the waitress came back, Elios gave her his order and waited while Sender did the same. She walked away again, and Elios smiled at Sender. "So they didn't let you pack your own bag?"

"I'm lucky they let me brush my own teeth," Sender said, rolling his eyes. "I don't mind it; it keeps them busy. They like to take care of me because I take care of them. And as close as we all are, one body's business is everybody's business. You get used to it." He seemed pretty happy with the arrangement, all told.

"Sounds like family," Elios said, laughing a little. "Or mine, at least. They don't know when to mind their own business, but they definitely know when not to."

"That's about it. It's like having a big family of people who are used to throwing themselves out of atmosphere strapped to big rockets, so it's pretty hard to convince them there's something they shouldn't do," Sender said dryly.

The rest of dinner was just like that. Chatting, doing the kind of further get-to-know-you things that Elios had been pretty sure he wouldn't have the attention span for unless they were in public. He would've been too busy remembering what Sender had looked like spread out on his bed, too busy remembering what he'd felt like with Sender warm and heavy over his back.

When dinner was over, Elios paid, over Sender's objections, and led Sender back to the rail station so they could catch a car back to his apartment building. "What are you in the mood for?" he asked, as he palmed them into his apartment. "Movie? Dessert?" He flashed Sender a teasing grin that said there were other options he wasn't naming, but Sender could choose one of those if he wanted it.

"Either? Both?" Sender followed Elios in and, once the door was closed, he caught up to Elios and slid an arm around his waist. Ducking his head, he pulled Elios in for a kiss.

Elios wrapped both arms around Sender's neck and kissed him back. This was one of the options he hadn't named. He'd very much like to spend a serious amount of time doing just this. He'd been thinking about it for quite some time now. Still, he did pull away eventually, because Sender said he wanted dessert and a movie. "I'll get dessert," he said, getting rid of his shoes and jacket. "You can get comfortable."

They ended up curled up on the couch, watching something Elios couldn't even have named once the title was off the screen, sharing a dish of dark chocolate pudding between them. If Elios had been planning on not getting distracted, he realized, he probably should not have gotten pudding out. He let Sender feed him a few spoonfuls before he couldn't resist kissing Sender instead.

He cupped Sender's face in both his hands and kissed him slowly, licking into his mouth. It wasn't about sex -- except when it was -- but it was about telling Sender without words that he was glad Sender was here.

Sender smiled against Elios' mouth and moved to put the bowl down for a moment. He coaxed Elios close with hands and kisses, shifting so that he could lean back against the arm of the couch, one foot on the couch and one on the floor, with Elios settled against him between his thighs.

Elios purred contentedly and kissed Sender a little more before he settled down. Being snuggled up with Sender like this felt good, more comfortable than he'd expected, and with his cheek rubbing slow, small circles against Sender's chest, he opened his eyes to watch a bit of the movie.

Rescuing the bowl, Sender put both spoons into the pudding and offered it to Elios to look after, since he was busy cuddling Elios against him. He stroked Elios' hair and nuzzled a little. "Things okay at work?"

"Yeah," Elios said, because he thought he knew what Sender was really asking. Aric hadn't been an issue since that weekend. "I've been working with Kimbra and her intern on some of the more nuanced translations, so we'll have a solid base to work from when we go." When, not if. There was always some question about whether the project would make it off the ground, but Elios was confident in Senator Darlington's ability to champion their cause.

"Good." Sender took one of the spoons and helped himself to some pudding. He made a contented noise at the taste. "They're pushing the next set of design changes through," he said after some silence. "It's a good sign."

"So you'll be testing another version of the Harpy soon?" Elios picked up the other spoon and ate a little more of the pudding, too.

"Yep. Brand new and shiny. Squeaks and all." Sender laughed a little. "Can't wait to see what she looks like. They stripped her weight down a lot, increased the efficiency of her life support, and made her a little easier to load with the weapons. This'll be our first run with the new shield systems. I've seen them used on drones, but this time is the first that we'll actually be inside, looking out."

Squeaks and all. All of a sudden, Elios wanted to ask, to tell, Sender to be careful. He really didn't have the right to say anything like that; they weren't there yet. It was a shock -- one he'd been getting a lot lately, where Sender was concerned -- that he wanted them to be there. "Shields and better life support sound like some pretty good upgrades," he said finally, settling on that to be as close as he was going to get to what he wanted to say.

"Better shields mean less weight. Less weight means better things for us in atmo," Sender said, happily oblivious to any concern Elios might have. "And more room to cram in some more equipment. Or weapons." He had another spoonful of pudding, then nuzzled Elios' hair a little.

Elios forced himself to relax, to not think about anything going wrong in the tests. "How often do they do this? Revise the design and put it into development, I mean."

"Not often. I mean, they're always tweaking. But once in a while, they make such a huge change to one of the dominant systems that the whole thing needs to be revised." Sender noticed that Elios wasn't eating and offered him the next spoonful of pudding.

"Sometimes, they can strip things down and switch a system out. But with this, they're actually screwing around with the frame and the lines, not just the infrastructure but the foundation itself. So. Whole new bird. I can't wait." He did sound a little like a kid ready for a present.

Elios gave in and laughed at how excited Sender sounded, not laughing at him, but just pleased that Sender was so happy with things. "So it'll look different than the one I rode in?" he asked as he leaned in to take the bowl of the spoon into his mouth.

"A little. Different slope to the wings, a little sleeker, a lower set of missile brackets." Sender fed Elios the pudding and then took a bite for himself. "Most people can't tell the difference between one model and the next, which makes them whine about spending. But since they're pushing this version through, that means something even better than just a new Harpy." He kissed Elios' cheek. "Means we might be getting to go sooner rather than later. Otherwise, they wouldn't have the money or the rush to get it done."

"I hope so." Elios turned his head to catch Sender's lips with his own, smiling into the kiss. He wanted to go, wanted to see the ship where the messages had originated, wanted to have more text, more audio to compare for translations. He'd been waiting for years already.

Sender mouthed at Elios' lips, then licked any taste of chocolate from them before kissing him again. "It'll be a good trip."

Elios purred his agreement, leaning up over Sender's body to put the bowl of pudding down again, so he could kiss Sender more easily. He turned in Sender's arms, half-kneeling with one thigh tucked up close between Sender's legs, and licked his way into Sender's mouth. It was going to be a very good trip.

He kissed Sender hungrily, cupping Sender's face in his hands before sliding them back into Sender's hair, and Sender yielded to him with an ease that just spurred Elios on. It wasn't long before he was undoing Sender's shirt, shifting so that his knee nudged up behind Sender's balls, spreading him open even more.

The pressure elicited a soft sound from Sender that was so needy and submissive and raw that Elios shivered and moved on to undo Sender's belt. He kissed away from Sender's mouth to lap at his nipples, biting gently to hear Sender moan. It sounded so good when he got what he wanted. Elios' hands were unsteady by the time he got Sender's pants undone.

He teased a little, mouthing through the fabric of Sender's briefs, kissing and licking and breathing until Sender whispered, "God, you feel good." Sender's fingers slid through his hair, not demanding anything, just a tender touch that made Elios feel warm through.

"You taste good," Elios murmured. He got one hand inside Sender's briefs, curling his fingers around Sender's long, thick cock. Elios didn't hesitate before dropping down and sucking it into his mouth all at once.

Sender's soft moans turned into a sharp cry, Elios' name, when Elios took him in like that. "Oh, please," Sender whispered, once he managed to catch his breath. He petted Elios' hair gently, at odds with the tension in his body, always so gentle.

Elios sucked and swallowed and moaned around Sender's cock. The thick weight of it on his tongue made him shiver as he pulled back so that he could tease at the head with the tip of his tongue and then suck him down again. Sender tasted so good. Elios let himself enjoy every second of it, playing his tongue over the shaft and head, filling himself up over and over again.

"Gorgeous," Sender breathed, and Elios realized that Sender was looking down at him. Sender stroked Elios' cheek tenderly then shuddered and relaxed, letting himself respond. His breath caught with almost every pass of Elios' mouth and his hips rocked a little, pushing his cock across Elios' tongue.

Perfect. Elios shuddered and whimpered around Sender's cock, moving a little faster. The push of Sender's cock over his tongue, meeting his own pace, was a thrill that sent heat rushing through him.

Sender gasped and pushed a little deeper into Elios' mouth with a low moan. He slid his hand under Elios' hair, stroking the nape of Elios' neck, curling his fingers and thumb around lightly. Elios let Sender push into his mouth, curving his neck back into Sender's strong hand and whining sharply. He shuddered hard and sucked harder, faster, swallowing.

Sender's back arched and his body went taut, he gasped Elios' name again. He thrust into Elios' mouth over and over again until he shuddered and started to come with a cry, his hand tightening on the back of Elios' neck.

Elios swallowed, shivering and moaning at the taste of Sender's come spilling over the back of his tongue, down his throat. His whole body felt as sensitized as his mouth and lips had become, and the hand on the back of his neck was both the magnet drawing sensation from his mouth through the rest of his body and the only thing keeping him grounded.

Elios was reluctant to let Sender's cock slip out of his mouth, but he did. He resisted coming up for a kiss when Sender's hand on the back of his neck coaxed him up. Instead he tucked his face against Sender's hip and gasped for breath, still shivering, trying not to come from just the brush of fabric against his cock when he shifted position.

"Give me a minute," he murmured, his voice rough and unsteady, thick with need. Sender waited, petting the nape of Elios' neck gently, the other hand stroking Elios' hair.

When Elios felt like he had some kind of self-control, like he wasn't going to ruin his pants as soon as he knelt up, he moved. Slowly, he lifted his head and climbed up over Sender's body, getting one knee on either side of Sender's hips, and leaned in to brush a soft kiss over Sender's lips.

Cupping Elios' face in his hands, Sender kissed him back gently, slowly licking his way into Elios' mouth. He kissed Elios like he was lost in it, like he wanted nothing but to kiss like this, to worship Elios' mouth for a moment or two that got longer and longer as they kissed.

The kisses helped to stabilize Elios' arousal, so that it wasn't sparking and popping in his spine with every touch of Sender's tongue, Sender's hands. He was still riding a wave of need, but it wasn't so overwhelming just now, and he savored the opportunity to breathe and to enjoy the gentle, tender kisses and care.

Once Elios was steadier, Sender petted down his chest with one hand to his pants, still kissing him. Elios shuddered and moaned as soon as he realized where Sender's hand was heading and tightened his hands on Sender's shoulders, pressing deeper into the kisses so he wouldn't outright beg for Sender to touch him as he undid Elios' pants.

Elios ended up begging anyway, pulling back from the kisses as soon as Sender's hand brushed his cock to whisper, "Fuck. Please." His hips shivered with the effort of holding still, and he opened his eyes.

Sender started stroking him slowly, wrapping his big hand around Elios' cock to give him just enough friction. Hands tight on Sender's shoulders, Elios rocked his hips just a little, whimpering open-mouthed between little gasping breaths, and tried to keep from coming long enough that he could enjoy the feel of Sender's big hand sliding over his cock.

Sender watched, bringing his free hand up to cup Elios' cheek. "You are so beautiful," he said softly, as though he didn't mean to say it aloud.

Elios turned his face into the touch, his lips sliding over Sender's skin and his breath dusting Sender's palm with heat. It was supposed to be a kiss, but Elios was too far gone for that; he shuddered hard, biting down on the heel of Sender's palm in a vain attempt to muffle his cries, and fell apart.

It was intense, more than Elios would've thought a simple handjob could be. But if he'd figured out anything in the past few weeks, it was that nothing with Sender was going to be quite like he was used to. Still shivering, Elios collapsed against Sender's chest, tucking his face against the curve of Sender's neck and murmuring something almost entirely unintelligible, but that might have been, "Fuck, so good."

Sender wrapped his arms around Elios, holding him close. He kissed Elios' hair, laughing quietly. "Good," he said softly.

After a while, Elios pushed himself away and took off his own shirt to clean them both up. They were both still a little sticky when he was done, but it was good enough.

"Still want to watch the movie?" Sender tucked some of Elios' curls back and gave him a smile. Elios couldn't help laughing.

"Sure." Elios leaned forward and gave Sender a kiss while they got their pants done up, then he snuggled down against Sender's chest. He couldn't for the life of him figure out what was going on with the movie, but it hardly mattered. All that really mattered was that they were together tonight.

Sender woke up first with Elios in his arms, feeling warm and happy. They'd simply gone to bed the night before, getting ready and crawling between the sheets together. In some ways, that was more intimate than sex, to go through the motions of mundane life side by side.

When Elios finally woke up, he pushed Sender back into the pillows to explore his body. Eventually, he nudged Sender over onto his belly, and Elios' gentle tracing of the wings

tattooed on Sender's back turned into something more, and then Elios was reaching for the lube, murmuring soft compliments and sliding his hard cock against Sender's ass.

It was sweet morning sex that would have been maddeningly slow if Sender hadn't been feeling so mellow. Elios was an incredibly good lover, attentive and intelligent, and Sender felt safe with him, body and soul.

They fell asleep again afterwards, Elios in Sender's arms. Sender tried to stay awake a little longer to enjoy the way he felt, but he drifted off, too, in spite of the soft morning light creeping in around the blinds.

When they woke again, they got dressed slowly and managed to keep their hands off of each other long enough to make breakfast. In addition to everything else, Elios was a good cook, at least as long as it was breakfast. Fed, clean, and dressed, they made it to the monorail and headed into Luna's core because Elios had it in his head that they should go to the museum there.

The trip to the museum didn't take very long on the monorail, and Elios happily dragged Sender inside. "My sister has been telling me about this exhibit for about a month now, but I haven't had a chance to come over here and see it yet," he said as they passed through the archway into the section of the museum where the aircraft exhibit was being held.

Sender had found actual sneakers in his bag to wear today and decided he was going to beat Macy with them when he got back. It felt so odd not to be wearing boots; he just felt wrong, on uneven footing. "You sure you're not just bringing me because it's got airplanes?" Sender got Elios' hand in his and kept up easily. The museum was busy enough, and there were more than a few little children scampering about.

"I'm bringing you because it has airplanes," Elios agreed easily. "I'm here because it has spaceships." He grinned and pointed toward a hall that led off the main exhibit. "My sister's an astrophysicist. She grew up listening to me babble about ancient languages, and I listened to her talk about the stars. I guess we kind of rubbed off on each other a little."

"Well, I'll be happy all day, then," Sender said amiably. He would be; he was happy with Elios, and he pushed away the inevitable inner tension in order to enjoy it.

"Oh, good." Elios smiled up at Sender, nudging him closer to the first display: a model of one of the early designs for man-powered flight. "I'd hate to be boring."

"I think you'd have to work hard at being boring." Sender let himself be redirected and took his eyes off of Elios. He grinned at the sight of the old machine. "You'd have had to be crazy to go up in one of those," he said, completely ignoring the fact that he was probably crazy to strap himself into prototype jets and take them for a spin, in and out of atmosphere.

"Bicycles with wings," Elios murmured, shaking his head. "I guess you'd get to see everything around you. And break every bone in your body when you mis-pedaled."

"It might be kind of fun," Sender said slowly. "I wonder if Doctor Temple could make one." He narrowed his eyes. "I mean, you'd have to crash, first, before you got hurt. It's not automatically dangerous." That was his mantra in the Harpies. He had to crash, first.

"You're insane," Elios announced, laughing and hooking his fingers through Sender's belt loop to drag him away to the next display.

"Well, if you assume you're going to crash, you're only going to crash," Sender protested. "You probably wouldn't crash if you were careful."

"*Probably*," Elios stressed, rolling his eyes and laughing again. "This looks a little safer," he said of the small, metal-bodied propeller plane. "At least there'd be some kind of protection. And propellers to keep you in the air."

"You and your new-fangled ideas," Sender said, sliding his arm around Elios' shoulders. "That looks interesting enough, but..." The other one looked a lot more... challenging. Not dangerous. Just challenging. Maybe six years as a test pilot really had skewed his perceptions a little.

"So is that why you're a test pilot?" Elios asked. "The danger factor?"

"No." Sender laughed quietly. "I didn't really think I'd like that part when I signed on. I had the reflexes and the math skills, so I was recommended right out of school. On Themis, it was that or factory work for me. It was the pay that was the real draw."

"Themis doesn't have a lot of opportunities for anything else, does it?"

"Not really, no. And it's crowded." Sender wandered toward the next display when they were done looking at the little single-engine plane, his arm still around Elios. "It was best for everyone that I take a job off-colony. It was a big benefit to my parents."

Themis was the oldest free-floating colony, the most conservative, and the very poorest. Getting away from Themis was the hardest thing Sender had ever done, something he hadn't even known he'd wanted until he was on the shuttle, looking back at the colony receding in the distance until he lost it in the shadow of the Earth.

"Is it hard not to be able to tell them what you're doing?" Elios put his head on Sender's shoulder for a moment, then tugged him a little closer to the biplane display.

"Not really." Sender shrugged and looked at the biplane hanging in front of him. "I send them money. They send me pictures of my baby sister. I go home for the holy days when

I can. That probably sounds bad, but... my parents are practical people. They're not really interested in the details."

"My family is huge," Elios murmured. "And pretty close-knit. There are a lot of us kids, but I'm closest to my sister Zilla. She's the astrophysicist. We were born just a few months apart, so..."

"That must be nice." Sender's smile was subdued, polite. "I don't get to see Katy much, obviously. And, well, she's twenty years younger than I am. So it's kind of hard to be close other than in the drooled-on way. You wouldn't think I'd miss her, but I do."

The thought of Katy made him happy, though, and he smiled more. Katy was a tiny blonde wonder as far as Sender was concerned. From the moment he'd gotten to hold her, he'd been in love. She was everything he wasn't: petite, opinionated, and, of course, a little girl. He looked forward to calling home just to hear her talk and to watch her play in front of the screen. She was four now, and he had no idea what she thought of him.

"She's... She was born after you left for the Guard?" Elios looked puzzled.

"You can only have one child on Themis, unless you qualify for another one." Sender led Elios around so that he could take a look at the engine through the open panels on the other side of the model. "After I was accepted into the flight test program, my parents qualified for another child, partly because I was gone and partly because I was in service. So they got to try again."

Sender hadn't intended that to come out sounding quite so much like the truth, or at least like Sender's truth, since his parents didn't know he was only interested in men. And he planned to keep it that way. He could tell himself that it was practical, that they might cut him off and not let him help out financially if they knew, but under the pragmatism and altruism, he was ashamed. And that, in turn, made him feel even worse.

"So you haven't gotten to spend much time with her at all, have you?" Elios asked quietly.

"Not really." Feeling distant, Sender studied the old combustion engines, his eyes tracing the fuel lines and the electrical wiring. "Just when I go home for holy days. I'd see her more, if I could. But things are busy." And soon he'd go out on the *Auriga*, and who knows when he'd see her again. He was trying hard not to think about that.

"I'm sorry."

"It is what it is." Sender looked down at Elios and gave him a smile. "They're happy. They have a better life now." That was all that really mattered. Things were going well for them right now, and it made Sender feel good that he was helping do that, no matter what they would have thought if they knew the truth.

Elios smiled up at him and drew him along to the next display but didn't ask any more questions. He was quiet other than pointing out a few things about the planes they were looking at, asking the occasional question.

Sender could feel the shift, and the silence, and he wasn't sure what it was that made Elios so quiet at first. Maybe the fact that he was from such a conservative colony was a problem. And then he remembered Aric, Aric who had left Elios for a woman because it was better that way. That idea was incomprehensible to Sender, to leave; it would be a lie he couldn't live with.

Still, Sender understood Elios' silence. Sender would have understood if Elios decided he couldn't go on with this. He tightened his arm around Elios' shoulders and ducked his head to kiss Elios' hair, just once. The last thing he wanted was for this to end early, and he wanted to tell Elios he wasn't like that. The problem was, he couldn't be sure, himself. He fought it all the time.

Elios smiled again and leaned into Sender's embrace, cutting through Sender's shadowed introspection. "Come see the spaceships with me?" he asked sweetly, pointing over to the hallway where the exhibit diverged.

"Anything you want," Sender said gently. He was lucky to be here, in this beautiful place, and even luckier to be with Elios. He nudged Elios gently toward the other archway, smiling again. If Elios could push away the shadows, so could he.

"So, no movies?" Elios teased, as they walked in and the door closed behind them. "But it worked out so nicely last night..." He laughed and toed off his shoes, then pulled his sweatshirt up over his head and wandered back to the bedroom.

"We could watch the match," Sender said, taking off his jacket and hanging it up, then leaving his shoes beside Elios'. There was a major set of fights tonight, and Sender thought Elios might like to watch. And he meant to let Elios watch the whole thing. Really.

When Elios came padding out of the bedroom, Sender had brought a couple beers out from the kitchen and was finding the match on the viewer.

"Did you want to get into something more comfortable?" Elios offered. When Sender looked up, Elios was stripped down to a pair of soft, black lounge pants that hung low on his hips and clung to the shape of his body, showing off his strong thighs. That was so very, very distracting. Knowing there was probably nothing under them didn't help at all.

"Sure." It would only be polite, since Elios had changed. Sender left the match on the viewer and put down the remote. "I'll be right back." There had to be something in his bag; he thought he remembered white pants that he'd told Macy he wouldn't need. He

wouldn't mention that he'd actually worn them, and he wouldn't bother with a shirt, since Elios hadn't.

Elios was sprawled on the couch when Sender came back, not leaving much room for Sender. Elios looked up, and Sender wondered whether he got that ravenous expression when he looked at Elios. If he did, he just hoped it wasn't painted on his face in public. He had the feeling that Elios didn't care if other people saw how he looked at Sender. Elios sat up and beckoned, and Sender couldn't help himself, he padded over and leaned down to kiss Elios on the mouth.

"You are gorgeous," Elios murmured against Sender's lips. He sat up as he spoke, tangling one hand in Sender's hair and tugging him down.

Sender sat down with his back to one arm of the couch, so Elios could lean on him. After a bit of sorting out their limbs, Elios was in Sender's arms, belly down against Sender's, and he licked at one of Sender's nipples before settling his cheek against Sender's chest so that he could watch the fight.

Laughing quietly, Sender stroked Elios' hair and shifted so that Elios fit against him just right. "Comfortable?" He kissed the top of Elios' head and then took a drink of beer. This was another perfect night.

If Elios could have read Sender's mind, he'd have agreed completely. "Very," he declared, settling in against Sender's new position. "You make an excellent pillow." He got distracted by the fight again: the men fighting had locked themselves together, grappling for position.

"Glad to be of service." Sender kissed Elios' hair again and settled in to watch the fight.

Later, when the first round of the fight was over, there was a short break before the next round began. Elios was still and quiet against Sender's chest for a few minutes before he asked, so quietly it was barely audible over the noise of the fight announcers' chatter, "Your parents don't know, do they?"

"No. And it's better that way." There wasn't any bitterness in Sender's voice, just sadness. He rubbed his cheek against Elios' hair as though trying to comfort them both.

Elios nodded slowly, his hair sliding against Sender's chest. "I'm sorry. That must be hard for you." He wasn't sure how to figure out if this was going to hurt him, or if he even could figure out if it was going to hurt him. But he had to bring it up, even if he'd rather avoid the topic entirely.

"It was." Sender took a drink of beer. "Is. The job makes it easier. I can't change any of it. So it is what it is. I am what I am."

Elios wriggled up onto his hands so that he could see Sender's face. When Sender pulled the beer bottle away again, Elios leaned in to kiss him softly. "I'm sorry," he said again, and took a slow breath. "Are you sure this is what you want?" *This, a man, me.* It would be easier for Sender to find a woman to settle down with, so that he could be more comfortable with his family.

Sender looked surprised, then he shook his head slowly. "I've tried everything short of spacing myself, Elios. It's not a matter of what I want." Sender cupped Elios' face in one hand, stroking his cheekbone with his thumb. "I can't... not be like this. I can live with this, with them not knowing. That way, they let me help them out, and I get to see Katy once in a while. I understand if you're not okay with it. I'm not going to lose them, even if I have to lie."

Elios nodded again and said, softly, "Okay." If Sender was okay with lying to his parents, Elios wasn't going to argue. It meant he'd never meet them, or the little sister who so obviously had Sender completely enchanted, but if that meant Sender could deal with everything, Elios had no reason to complain. He leaned in, slowly, and brushed his lips over Sender's. "Whatever you need to do," he murmured and then kissed Sender again.

"If things go better for them, I could," Sender said unsteadily, kissing Elios back. "But they need me. I can't do that to them." He sounded like he'd already betrayed them. "I wish it were different."

"Don't cut yourself off from your family," Elios said, shaking his head. He turned around and reached back for his own bottle of beer, drinking more than a third of it at once. Slowly, he settled himself down against Sender's chest again, facing the viewer, where the fight had started up. He wasn't really watching, though; he was still focusing on his conversation with Sender. "You shouldn't have to choose one over the other."

"I don't want to." Sender kissed Elios' hair and rested his cheek against it. "I have a long time before Katy's old enough to understand or work it out. I don't want to waste it."

Elios turned his head enough to press a gentle kiss to Sender's chest. He didn't have a good answer for Sender; there was really nothing he could say to make it easier. So he kissed Sender instead, hoping it would soothe Sender a little. He was quiet for a while, half-watching the fight as he turned things over in his mind. Finally, giving them both a reprieve, he murmured, "I'll probably miss the Ludi Romani fights this year, if we're gone as long as I think we will be."

"I'm sure there'll be something on the *Auriga*," Sender said. He twisted a little to put aside his empty beer bottle. Wrapping both arms around Elios, he nuzzled into Elios' hair.

"I hope so." Elios had fought in the Ludi Romani ceremonial fights on Luna every year since he was old enough, excepting the years when he'd fought on Tethys instead. He put his bottle down on the floor beside the couch and stroked his hand over Sender's arm,

petting him. "Otherwise, I'm training three times a week for nothing," he said with a little smile, tilting his head back to kiss Sender's cheek.

"Well, you look good doing it," Sender teased gently. He turned his head and brushed a kiss over Elios' mouth. "Beautiful," he added, softly.

Elios smiled and kissed Sender back. "I'll have to invite you to come watch a whole session some time," he said, "if that's the kind of compliments I get." He nibbled gently at Sender's lower lip, still smiling. He liked that Sender liked the way he looked.

"I'd like that," Sender said quietly, smiling at the nibbling. "I like you." He slid his hand into Elios' hair and tilted his head a little to kiss Elios thoroughly.

Elios shifted up on his knees over Sender's lap, so he could answer the kiss, purring into it. "I like you, too," he whispered against Sender's lips and then kissed his way back into Sender's mouth.

Sender let Elios in and moaned softly into Elios' mouth, rocking his hips for more friction against Elios' body. He licked and sucked at Elios' tongue, working his fingers down through Elios' hair to the nape of his neck again.

It felt good, the way that Sender's hips worked to press against him. Elios kept kissing him, a long, slow kiss. He rubbed his fingers over one nipple, circling it, then slid his hand down to do the same to Sender's navel, his fingertip dipping in with every revolution.

"You feel good," Elios purred against Sender's lips. "Such soft skin." He petted and circled and eventually his hips pulled away so that he could slide his hand down to tease a little more. His fingertips trailed over the silky pants Sender wore, tracing the shape of his cock through them.

Sender's breath caught, and he kissed Elios back hungrily, his submissiveness sliding away for a moment as his hand tightened in Elios' hair. Elios moaned and arched, his back bowing as he pressed back into the fist in his hair. His hand slid down further, teasing over Sender's balls and then back up to run his thumb over the head of Sender's cock.

Sender's hand slid down Elios' chest to mirror his movements, one big hand curling around Elios' cock. Sender bit at Elios' lower lip and kissed him harder, shivering with pleasure. Suddenly, Sender's laziness was gone and he was all need and tension.

Elios kissed him back wantonly, hips moving to push his cock through Sender's hand, through the soft fabric of his pants. He stroked Sender again, felt the length and the weight in his hand, and pulled back enough to say, "Tell me what you want."

"You." Sender kissed him again, hard. "Just you. Fuck me, let me fuck you, I don't care." His next kiss was almost pleading. "I just want to feel you. Please."

"I don't..." Elios stopped, and then started again. "Yeah, yeah. Okay, yeah. Bed," he murmured, pressing kisses to Sender's lips between words. "Bed now." He squeezed Sender's cock and then pulled away, shaking Sender's hand from his hair so he could stand. His foot bumped the bottle of beer he'd left on the floor, and it wobbled, and he dipped down to catch it and put it on the table. "Come on," he said, holding one hand out to Sender.

Sender took his hand and stood, drawing Elios in for another kiss before he let Elios lead him to the bedroom.

They stripped bare, a brief fumbling of hands on fabric, and Elios was grateful that he'd suggested getting changed. He sprawled across his bed and Sender followed, dipping his head to kiss Elios' inner thigh. Nuzzling at Elios' thigh and his hip, Sender slowed, shifting to gentle, submissive movements. When he stopped to look up at Elios, his cheek resting on Elios' hip, his expression was all adoration and invitation.

Sender's hair was just long enough that when Elios slid his fingers into it, he could get a grip on it. He could feel Sender's breath on his skin, on his cock, and oh how he wanted. "You look so good," he praised softly, his gaze traveling over Sender's pale, strong body stretched out in front of him.

Elios was rewarded by the hot wash of Sender's tongue over his cock, making him moan. Elios pulled one knee up but tried not to rock his hips too much, tried not to push. Sender kept licking. He licked at Elios' balls and then up the shaft, curling his tongue against the sensitive spot at the underside of the head, and looked up at Elios again, wide-eyed.

"Sender... Fuck." Elios panted, writhing a little. He wanted to fuck Sender's mouth, he wanted to fuck Sender, he wanted Sender to shove fingers into him and fuck him with them until he screamed. There was so much he wanted, and the adoring, almost innocent expression on Sender's face seemed to invite all of it.

"Fuck, your *mouth*," Elios moaned, his hand clenching and unclenching in Sender's hair. He dragged it away, then, and let himself slip back down onto the bed.

When Elios let go of his hair, Sender explored Elios' cock with his tongue a little longer, then replaced his mouth with his hand, ever so gently, as he moved up Elios' body, washing Elios' skin with his tongue. What he wanted, Elios decided, was to have that mouth all over him. Sender's mouth was hot and soft and perfect, and it slid over Elios' skin like silk.

Eyes closed, Elios let the sensations wash over him -- hot mouth, sharp teeth, careful friction -- rocking his hips and fucking the circle of Sender's hand as he made sounds he never would have admitted to outside of the bedroom. Finally, he couldn't hold back any

longer and he just let himself go, thrusting hard and coming in hot streaks over his own chest, feeling completely indulged and sated.

Sender stroked Elios through his orgasm and then leaned up to kiss Elios' mouth, soft and slow. Just one kiss, though, because then he was bringing his hand to his own mouth to lick it clean.

Elios groaned when he realized what Sender was doing and leaned up to flick his tongue against Sender's, catching the faint traces of his come on Sender's lips while Sender focused on cleaning off his hand.

Sender kissed Elios one more time when his hand was clean and then ducked his head to kiss Elios on the chest. He licked and nibbled at one of Elios' nipples first, then started cleaning come from Elios' skin. His mouth was hot and wet and slick and he worked slowly, being very thorough.

"Feels good," Elios purred, stroking his hands through Sender's short curls again. He was still hungry, wanting to feel Sender come for him, but he could be patient and let Sender clean him up first, especially since it felt so damn good.

Sender glanced up at Elios as he started to delicately clean Elios' cock off with his tongue, his eyes wide and dark. Elios' breath caught and his hips jerked a little, reacting to the intense sensations. He pushed himself up on one elbow so he could look down at Sender and parted his legs a little more. It was an invitation, but it was also meant just to give Sender more space to occupy.

Sender settled down between Elios' thighs and licked him clean, hands gently stroking the insides of Elios' thighs. He looked up at Elios again as he nuzzled in the curls at the base of Elios' cock, breathing in the scent, and then ran his tongue over Elios' balls.

Elios writhed and took his hand away from Sender's hair so he wouldn't pull. Fuck, that felt good, so intense, too intense, and he wasn't going to complain a bit. Sender curled his tongue around Elios' balls and pulled them into his mouth, sucking on them with a low moan. He tongued them, making soft noises of pleasure, and then let them slip out of his mouth so he could lick and kiss Elios' thighs, the tendon between thigh and body, and run his tongue behind Elios' balls before he drew them back into his mouth again.

"Sender," Elios purred. There were no demands in his tone, just pure pleasure. Sender's gentle, persistent attention was such a turn-on. It was like the man was trying to hit every button Elios had all in the name of indulging him, and Elios felt completely undone by it.

Sender bit down, ever so gently, just his teeth pressing into the flesh of Elios' thigh, as though experimenting with the idea. Elios gasped, shivering under the touch of Sender's teeth. This time, when he said Sender's name, it was a warning, a plea, a demand, all at once. Sender shivered and did it again, a fraction of an inch over, closing his eyes and stifling his whimper against Elios' skin.

Before he had a chance to realize what he was doing, Elios had untangled one hand from the sheets and threaded it through Sender's hair, pulling him in, pressing Sender's mouth against his skin. Elios moaned, wanting more, and gasped, "Please. Sender..." Fingers, cock, tongue, something, anything. He let his hand slide away so that Sender could move.

Sender shifted to his knees so that he could lean over Elios and kiss him hard and deep, petting between his thighs with one hand and reaching the drawer for the lube with the other.

Elios moaned into Sender's kisses, arching against the fingers petting between his legs. He could hear the soft sounds of his bedside drawer opening, and he knew what Sender was going after. He should've been thinking about how to stop Sender without hurting his feelings, how to distract him into doing something else, but he wasn't. Elios wanted this. He remembered what it had felt like last time, and he wanted that again.

Instead of demanding, pushing Sender over and taking control again, Elios was writhing and begging with soft, half-formed words. Waiting for Sender to be inside him was almost unbearable, and when it happened, Elios wound himself around Sender, holding him close. Sender kissed him, breath unsteady against Elios' lips, and moved inside him slowly at first, but harder with Elios' little demands. The man had stamina and patience, and Elios was going to take advantage of all of it.

Coming the second time was as good and as indulgent as the first time, Elios' cock sliding against Sender's slick, rippled belly until he came with a gasp. Sender came with his face buried in the curve of Elios' neck, a gesture that felt sweet and vulnerable in spite of the way he was fucking Elios deep and fast. Elios stroked Sender's hair and kissed his hot cheek, murmuring little praises and compliments until Sender shuddered and sighed and relaxed.

"Over," Elios muttered, nudging at Sender's shoulder, and Sender obliged, rolling them both over so that Elios was sprawled across Sender's broad chest with his head on Sender's shoulder. "That was so good," he admitted. "So, so good."

Sender made a little noise of agreement and wrapped his arms around Elios, holding him close. It was nice. No, it was more than nice. It was safe and good, the way Sender made him feel so often when they were together. Things just got better and better, even when Elios was afraid they could go horribly wrong.

Slowly, Elios lifted his head so he could kiss Sender on the mouth. It was a slow, soft kiss, saying everything he wasn't sure he should be saying out loud. How good that felt, how much he wanted to do it again, how he wanted this to last, how much he was starting to care about Sender. He wanted to believe that the kisses Sender gave him in return were saying all the same things.

The rush of orgasm was fading, and so was Elios. He started to get drowsy, his kisses slower and lazier. He murmured wordlessly against Sender's lips and nuzzled down his jaw to tuck his face against Sender's neck again, closing his eyes. The pressure inside him, Sender's cock still opening him up, was a heady reminder of what they'd just done and how good it had felt, and it lulled him with every breath.

Sender shifted to get the blankets where he could tug them up and cover Elios and himself, tucking them in together. That made Elios murmur contentedly. He was so tired and he was so tired of being lonely. Pressing a kiss to Sender's chest, he let his eyes fall shut. Sender was warm and solid and real beneath him, and it felt good to just let himself slip off to sleep.

Chapter Six

The next day was the kind of day that Sender had only dreamed about. Maybe he hadn't even dreamed about it. He'd just been aware that other people had days like this, but not him. The more the day wore on, the more he was sure that he'd done the right thing, deciding to be with Elios this way. The morning had started with the kind of sex that made him not want to get out of bed all day, but Elios had tempted him with breakfast and a day out in the real world, so he'd relented without needing much coaxing at all.

They'd been to Luna's beach, where they swam and basked in the sun and ate ice cream, and to the park, where they'd wandered under the trees and walked barefoot in the grass. Afterward, they'd eaten seafood at a little restaurant by the water. The only thing that kept Sender from being embarrassed by the fact that he knew he was looking at Elios in a rather affectionate manner, in spite of any attempt to the contrary, was the distinct impression that Elios was looking at him the same way.

It was night by the time they were out on the boardwalk again, and Sender took Elios' hand in his as he had whenever he could during the day. "Did you want to go anywhere else?" he asked quietly. He didn't much care, as long as they were together.

"Just home," Elios said, petting his thumb over the back of Sender's hand and looking up at him with a small smile.

"Home, then." It wasn't Sender's home, but that didn't matter to him right then. He ducked his head to kiss Elios just once, mustering some courage. When he pulled back, he didn't try to hide exactly how incredibly warm and tight his chest felt and how light his head was, just from touching Elios a little, just being anywhere near him at all, really.

Elios smiled wider, his eyes softening, when he saw Sender's expression. "Did you have fun today?" he asked, letting go of Sender's hand to slide his arm around Sender's waist instead. He glanced around to find the nearest rail station, then started moving that way.

"Yes, thank you." Sender slid his arm around Elios' shoulders as they started walking. "Time with you might almost be as good as flying," he added, teasing a little. It was true, though. Elios made him giddy and happy at once.

Elios petted his hand over Sender's side and laughed happily. The station wasn't too far away, and soon they were in one of the cars, waiting for it to start moving. "Want to watch a movie or something when we get back?" he asked.

"Sure." Sender smiled down at Elios. "A whole movie?" he teased a little more. Their track record of watching anything was just terrible.

"We can try," Elios said, laughing again. "I'll let you choose what we watch."

"Maybe that will help," Sender said solemnly. He could do solemn incredibly well, really, when he had to. But Elios made him smile in spite of himself. "I haven't seen too many movies lately."

"And I keep interrupting them." Elios leaned up to brush a soft kiss over Sender's lips, and the train started to move, jarring him and making him press forward against Sender. "I'll try to do better this time," he promised with a smile, stepping back again.

"I'm sure it's not all your fault," Sender said graciously.

Elios laughed. "I'm glad you realize how incredibly distracting you are."

"I'm not distracting," Sender protested. "It's you that keeps distracting me. I'm just weak and can't resist."

"You are," Elios said, smiling and leaning in to press a soft kiss to Sender's cheek. "Very distracting. It's the smiling, I think. You have such soft lips that I can't help but get distracted by the idea of kissing them."

"I can't help the smiling," Sender said contritely. "You make me happy." He gave Elios an utterly innocent look. It really wasn't his fault. Not at all.

Elios leaned up to kiss Sender. Apparently, Sender didn't need to be smiling in order to be distracting. "Well, I'm not going to object to that," he murmured, and then kissed Sender again.

Once they were back at Elios' apartment, Sender waited while Elios let them in, shaking his jacket off of his shoulders.

Inside, Elios slipped off his shoes and jacket and pointed Sender toward the couch and the viewer remote. "I'm going to get something to drink while you pick out a movie," he said. "Do you want something?"

"Whatever you're having," Sender said, kicking off his shoes -- that really was convenient compared to boots -- and hanging up his jacket. That done, he wandered over to find something to watch. He liked something that wasn't too slow but wasn't all explosions and chases, either.

Elios came back with two bottles of beer and sprawled out over the couch enough that he was definitely not leaving much room for Sender, unless Sender wanted to lean on him.

He was willing to share the beer, though, and offered Sender one of the bottles. "Found anything good?"

"Hm. Car chases, good scenery, and some characters. So, yes." Sender came to get his beer and settled himself in with Elios as though it were the most natural thing in the world, working himself around so that his head was on Elios' shoulder and they were touching as much as possible. They fit together like they were made for each other. That done, he made a contented little noise and turned the movie on.

"Car chases are good," Elios murmured, taking a sip of his beer as the opening scene began. There weren't any cars on the colonies, not like on Earth. Sender had always wanted to drive one, just to see what it was like, to see how it compared to flying jets.

The best part of the movie, really, was lying on the couch with Elios. And the movie was more than a little romantic in parts, which was also very nice, and felt very appropriate. Sender could have dealt without the rather unhappy middle parts about being separated and everything being so uncertain and more than a little dangerous -- he tried not to think of anything he was up to as being dangerous -- but at least the ending was happy, if a little bittersweet.

"Made it all the way through," Elios said softly. He'd nuzzled in behind Sender's ear during the last scene, and now that the credits were rolling, he didn't seem in any hurry to pull away.

"Should we mark it on the calendar?" Sender teased gently, the words slipping out before he could censor them. They really shouldn't be thinking or talking about anything that might imply they'd be together next month, much less next year.

Elios slid a hand up to cup Sender's cheek and pulled back from his ear only to press in against his mouth. He kissed Sender gently, tenderly.

Sender kissed back almost tentatively. The moment seemed fragile and he didn't want anything to break. This had been one of the best days he could remember, and it wasn't over yet.

"We should," Elios said softly, and then he kissed Sender again, just as gently as before.

Oh. Sender had no idea what to think or do about that, but he was suddenly happy in a way that made the rest of the day, briefly, look dim. Happy, and then terrified at the same time. All he could do was kiss Elios back, his mouth soft and a little needy.

Elios' kisses were gentle reassurance, and he stroked his fingertips over the lines of Sender's jaw and cheekbone. Sender knew immediately that this couldn't be easy for him; he'd heard the pain in Elios' voice when he'd talked about Aric. There was so much danger that he could hurt Elios, if he cared for Sender anywhere near as much as Sender cared for him.

Sender didn't want to do anything to hurt Elios. He'd never had anyone feel much of anything for him before, beyond his squad, and that was hardly an intimate relationship. Elios made him feel like no one else had, had come along at a time when he was ready to step away from his old life and try a new one.

The kisses helped, irrationally enough; they eased a little of Sender's fears. Elios made him happy, and he seemed to make Elios happy. If they didn't do this now, it would never happen, and it was better to have it than not. Sender reached up to pet Elios' hair and to slide his hand under it to stroke Elios' neck. Elios shifted so they were even closer, snuggling Sender against him.

More contact was perfect. Sender needed it just now, craved it, and he made a soft noise of need when they sorted themselves out to touch as much as possible. This was good, even if it wasn't right, but even that he had to argue in the silent moments. How could anything that made two people happy like this, and hurt no one else, not be right? He tilted his head slightly as he kissed Elios softly, begging wordlessly for more kisses, more of Elios.

With a little more shifting, they fit together perfectly all over again. And that was when Sender suddenly had a word for what was happening here. Love. That was so remarkable; he'd never thought it would happen to him, and he was afraid he was wrong, but he didn't have any other word for how he felt. He leaned up into their kisses, his mouth soft and hungry on Elios'.

"Bed," Elios whispered against his mouth.

Sender got up and took Elios' hand to help him to his feet. Elios didn't let go, but drew him toward the bedroom, rewarding him with little kisses. Elios' hands slid under Sender's shirt, and Sender took the cue easily enough, pushing Elios' shirt up with both hands flat against his chest. Stripping each other bare was a luxury, a chance to touch and admire all over again.

Before Elios could get Sender's pants undone, though, Sender dropped to his knees to kiss Elios' belly and undo his belt and fly. He pressed kisses over Elios' belly and down as he slid Elios' pants and boxers off of his hips.

Lifting one foot at a time to step out of his clothes, Elios looked down at Sender kneeling in front of him. "You're really gorgeous, you know." It wasn't a question, just a statement.

"Can't really take credit for that." Sender kissed Elios' belly again and ran his hands all over Elios' hips and ass. "But I'm glad you think so." He tongued the fine trail of hair below Elios' navel and then licked up to dip his tongue in, probing gently as he kissed.

Elios laughed a little breathlessly and threaded his fingers through Sender's short, dark curls. "I do. Gorgeous and smart and funny. And also, you have a really great mouth," he confided, grinning. "I think you should come back here, so I can kiss it."

"Should I take my clothes off first?" Sender gave Elios his best absolutely innocent look, as though his hands weren't curled around Elios' cool, bare ass right now, as if he weren't thinking of sucking Elios' cock into his mouth.

"Mmm, if you let me do it, I'm likely to get distracted."

"Get in bed, then, and I'll come let you kiss me." That was a good compromise. Sender let Elios go and stood to strip out of the rest of his clothes.

"Promise?" Elios asked, teasing. He backed off and crawled up on the bed, lying down and watching Sender undress.

Sender stripped down and tossed his clothes aside, smiling at Elios out of pure happiness. He crawled up onto the bed after Elios and leaned over him, offering a kiss. "I promise," he said quietly.

"Oh, good." Elios tipped his head up and kissed Sender softly, just light brushes of his lips against Sender's. He slid one hand over Sender's bare chest and down to his hip, curling around it, while his other hand curled around the back of Sender's neck and held him close for the kisses.

Elios pushed Sender over onto his back and rolled up over him. Elios was so demanding and sweet at once, working one knee between Sender's to get him to spread his thighs, all while kissing and touching and soothing at the same time.

Elios was so lean and strong and his touches so experienced, he turned Sender on more by the minute. It wasn't long before Sender was begging, at least with the way he moved under Elios and the soft noises that came with his exhalations. His cheeks flushed a little with shame, because his need was so transparent, but he could hardly hide it when it hit him that way.

"You're so hot," Elios purred, nibbling and sucking at Sender's lower lip. "I love how you respond to me." He kissed down to Sender's neck and nibbled his throat and collarbone, his fingers still petting behind Sender's balls.

The praise made Sender flush more, his cheeks hot with it. "I can't help it," he confessed. He stroked Elios' hair with one hand and tilted his head back, all submission and none of it contrived. "You just... you do it to me." His breath was unsteady now, and he felt like he was more than naked.

"Get the lube," Elios said softly as his fingers played and teased. Sender stretched out to reach for the drawer, and Elios purred, "So pretty," and pressed in gently with one finger, just a suggestion of what was to come.

"Please," Sender said. *Please don't tease. Please have me.* He shifted, pushing against Elios' fingers, not caring that they were dry. He didn't mean to sound so desperate. He found the lube and offered it to Elios.

Elios nuzzled up behind Sender's ear and bit lightly, then knelt up to take the lube and slick his fingers. "Anything you want," he promised, brushing his slick fingers down between Sender's legs again. "Just tell me what you want, what you like."

"You." That wasn't helpful, and Sender knew it. "Fuck me," he clarified, shivering at Elios' touch. "I just want to feel you."

"I can do that." Elios kissed Sender on the mouth and slowly pushed one slick finger inside. "I want that, too," he murmured against Sender's lips. "I want to feel you come while I'm inside you."

"Please." The word was out before Sender knew he was thinking it. All he wanted was that, to feel Elios inside him. He slid one hand into Elios' hair and leaned up to kiss him deeper, pleading wordlessly.

Sender didn't want Elios to take too long, though the fingers inside him were driving him crazy all on their own. Now that he was being honest with himself, he wanted Elios' cock inside him, and that was all there was to it. He drew his knees up to open himself as Elios finally gave him what he wanted, whimpering softly.

"So good," Elios whispered, and then he kissed Sender back, sucking at Sender's tongue as he thrust a little harder. With his clean hand, he thumbed Sender's nipple and then pinched it gently.

That sent a little shock of pleasure down to Sender's groin, and he moaned into their kisses. *More, please.* Everything Elios did felt so good. He slid his hand down from Elios' back and over the curve of his ass, pulling him in a little harder still.

Elios growled a little at the pressure, the feel of Sender's hand cupping his ass, and settled his knees further apart as he fucked Sender harder. "Whatever you want," he promised again, licking his way back into Sender's mouth.

Sender made himself pull his hands away for the moment, because he didn't want to push or pull too much. He put them behind his knees to open himself up more for Elios and tightened around him deliberately. "You," he said again. "Just you."

Elios groaned and slid his hand further down to trace the smooth head of Sender's cock with his fingertips. He kissed away from Sender's mouth and sucked and licked along the side of his neck.

"Fuck," Sender whispered, arching his neck to let Elios at his pale, taut skin. "Please." The touch on his cock made him dizzy with want, and he moved under Elios, trying to get as much of Elios as he could.

"Anything you want." He bit lightly and slid his fingers further down, running around the ridge of Sender's cockhead and then rubbing at the underside, up near the tip where it was so sensitive.

Both sensations made Sender cry out and tighten around Elios again. All he wanted was Elios, as much as he could have. "Fuck me," he begged, letting himself say it. "Harder. Please. I want you so much."

Elios knelt up and got his knees on either side of Sender's hips, up under his thighs. He wrapped his hands around the tops of Sender's thighs, holding on as he started to fuck Sender with quick, hard thrusts, just this side of rough.

That was perfect, and Sender's back arched as he let himself go, making wordless noises of pure pleasure, surrendering to Elios and how good Elios made him feel. Nothing felt as good as this, and he gave in shamelessly to the sudden urge to touch himself, sliding his fingers over his cock.

"Look at you," Elios murmured with mingled awe and desire.

Sender hardly heard him, and it was just as well; contemplating what he looked like might well have derailed him permanently. He was more than ready for this but not quite ready to think about how he looked all spread out under Elios, legs spread and head back, jacking off as Elios fucked him hard. Sender cried out a little with every thrust, his hand moving in time with Elios' hips, pre-come dripping from his cock and onto his belly.

His body went taut and tightened around Elios' cock. His hand was slick with pre-come, and every pass over his cock made his breath catch. Getting off on his own was nothing like this, nothing at all. Finally, he was writhing and crying out Elios' name and coming all over his belly and chest.

Through it, Sender was aware of Elios' sharp gasps and moans and the way that he shook as he came, fucking Sender relentlessly. It was incredible to feel Elios coming at the same time, and it made the rush of pleasure even better. Sender finally started to relax enough to breathe and focus on Elios' face. That had been so good.

Still shivering with pleasure, Elios let Sender's legs slide down as he pulled out. He braced himself on his hands and leaned over Sender's body to kiss him softly on the

mouth. "I like the way you say please," he murmured, and then kissed Sender again before he could answer.

Oh. There was something sweet and viscerally satisfying about hearing that. Sender slipped his clean hand into Elios' hair and kissed him back, answering with his mouth instead of with words. Elios indulged him for a long time with slow kisses and little touches that eventually had Sender unraveling into a sleepy daze.

"Shower now, baby," Elios murmured. He petted Sender's hair tenderly and nuzzled his nose against Sender's. "You'll sleep better if we do." Sender didn't want to move, but he knew Elios was right. Elios rolled off of him, and Sender followed without complaint, stretching and luxuriating in all the little aches and pains that came from exceptionally good sex.

After their shower, when Elios got Sender into bed, he stretched out beside Sender and propped himself up on one elbow. He nuzzled lightly at Sender's cheek and lips, and his fingers petted delicately over Sender's face and through his hair.

Sender ran his fingers over Elios' cheek and down his throat. Just touching Elios was better than sex with most people. He kissed Elios when he came near enough but lay relaxed and spread out on his back in the sheets, feeling peaceful as long as he didn't think too far ahead.

Finally, Elios reached over and pressed the remote to turn off the lights. In the dark, he kept tracing his fingertips lightly over Sender's face, like he was making a topographical map of Sender's features in his mind. The touches were barely there, brushing over Sender's eyebrows and eyelashes, over the seam of his lips and up the line of his nose, almost soothing in their slow, easy pace.

With that gentle petting, Sender couldn't help drifting. It felt so good, like there was no way he could doubt that he was cared for and wanted. His breathing slowed and softened as sleep crept up on him.

Elios woke slowly, even reluctantly. He was wrapped up in Sender's arms and it would be a long time before he woke up like this again; he didn't even know when, and that made him want to cling to every second, before he was even fully awake. Sender was awake, his breathing too shallow and self-conscious for sleeping. Elios pressed kisses to Sender's warm, smooth chest as soon as he couldn't pretend he was sleeping anymore.

"Hi," Sender murmured. He snuggled Elios closer, indulging Elios' need for closeness for a little while. Eyes closed, Elios lay against Sender's chest and tried not to think about the emotions that were swirling in his chest. He knew exactly what he was feeling already, the growing sense of attachment and deep affection. This wasn't the casual sex he'd been

counting on. Flyboys were supposed to be charming and charismatic, but not sweet and good and genuine. At least not in the way that made Elios want to keep them close.

Sender wasn't a flyboy, though Elios sometimes wished he was. Sender almost glowed with how good he was, how sweet and tender, how yielding and commanding by turns, as though it cost him nothing to change. And he was humble and faithful, devoted to his family no matter how much it hurt, looking after them and adoring his baby sister from a distance because to do that was more important than anything else. Everything that made Elios afraid he would get his heart broken was something that he loved about the man.

Elios sighed heavily, and Sender stroked his back, though Sender's breathing was that of sleep again. Even in his sleep, he was sweet and loving. He was brave, too, almost fearless, from what his squad had to say about him when they had the chance to brag to Elios. Maybe it was time that Elios followed suit. He had courage all his own, and the rewards could be incredible.

The memory of how Sender had looked last night wasn't hurting Elios' mental argument on why he should be jumping into another relationship. The man was simply stunning, and the sight of him spread out and begging Elios to fuck him -- and, yes, there was always the awareness that Sender was trespassing on forbidden ground to be with him -- kept playing in Elios' head over and over again.

Elios' morning erection had decided it wasn't going away, and his body hummed with need all over again. When Sender woke up, they were going to have to do something about it. Elios kissed up under Sender's chin, tasting the warmth there. Sender shifted and rolled them over onto their sides with a low noise and draped one leg over both of Elios'. That wasn't helping Elios' arousal at all, and he wriggled against Sender a little.

"Hi," Sender said. His voice was thick with sleepiness, and Elios couldn't help smiling at it. He stroked Sender's chest as Sender pulled away and stretched, yawning. That was so pretty, all that muscle under pale skin.

Elios was about to speak, but before he could get any words out, Sender slid down with a sinuous movement and drew Elios' cock into his mouth. Elios gasped, his words and his train of thought lost. Sender cupped Elios' hip gently and moved slow and easy, exploring Elios' erection with his tongue. Slowly, Sender nudged Elios over onto his back and lay between his legs to fuck his mouth on Elios' cock.

"Oh, fuck," Elios murmured. He pushed himself up on his elbows to look down at Sender. "I love your mouth. So good."

Sender looked so soft and sleepy still, dark hair in disarray and pale cheeks flushed. But he was intent on his task, awake enough to make Elios make all manner of helpless little noises as Sender's tongue played around the head of his cock. Elios gave up and let himself fall back into the pillows. He didn't have anywhere near enough self-control to

keep watching; instead, he stared blankly at the ceiling, hands fisted in the sheets, and those noises kept spilling out of him.

Sender drew Elios' cock in over and over again until Elios felt like he was going to explode, trembling and arching. Sender made him wait, though, letting Elios' cock slip away and licking down to suck on Elios' balls. That was almost better. Elios was incoherent now, pulling his knees up and apart to open himself up, writhing and dripping pre-come onto his own belly.

Eventually, Sender came back to lick up the pre-come from Elios' belly and then the head of his cock. Elios focused enough to watch him now, watching Sender's tongue moving over the hot, dark head of his cock. Sender looked up at him, blue eyes hazy with pleasure, and then drew Elios' cock back into his mouth.

There was nothing slow about it now. The suction of Sender's mouth was demanding, and his tongue lapped hungrily at the underside of Elios' cock. It was too much to resist, and Elios arched, crying out as he started to come. Sender drew his orgasm out one hot pulse at a time, and Elios kept making noises he couldn't stop, lost in how good it felt and unable to hold back.

When it was over, Elios was trembling and his skin felt electrified. Sender crawled up to snuggle beside him, and Elios could feel Sender's cock, heavy and hot and hard, pressed against his hip. He inhaled sharply, turning to press his back against Sender's chest and to feel the hot ridge of Sender's erection sliding between his asscheeks. After coming like that was the best time to be fucked, as far as Elios was concerned.

"Fuck me," Elios muttered. Maybe the words weren't coming out right, because Sender didn't move right away. Elios pushed back harder, tilting his hips and writhing until the head of Sender's cock, blunt and wide, pressed into him. "Fuck me," he chanted softly. "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me." The times he'd been ready to say that he didn't let men fuck him were long gone.

Sender was moving then, shifting and picking up the lube before Elios could impale himself on Sender's cock without it. He slid two slick fingers in at once instead, and Elios whined, pulling one knee up to open himself more. Even with Sender's fingers pushing into him, it wasn't enough, not even when Sender made it three fingers. Elios ground back against them. "More. Fuck me."

Being taken, Sender's cock replacing his fingers and opening Elios up as it pressed in, was like being split open. Sender was moving slow and patient, but Elios was forcing himself back against Sender's cock, taking it in as fast as he could without pain cutting through his pleasure.

"Shh," Sender soothed, stroking Elios' side and belly and kissing his shoulder. "Easy."

"Now," Elios ground out, grunting softly as he pushed back until his ass was nestled against Sender's hips. "On my knees. Fuck me." He knew exactly what he wanted, dreamed about it and woke up to jerk off to the lingering scenes.

Sender wrapped one arm around Elios' chest and moved them easily. He was so strong and his body covered Elios' completely. Elios pressed back into him, growling with impatience until Sender started moving, and then he was gasping with pleasure.

"Yeah, fuck, you're so good," Elios panted, moving with Sender. Sender's cock was big and hard and thick inside him, and sent ripples of pleasure through his body. Maybe he wasn't going to come again, but that didn't matter; it was like he was still coming, like he'd never stopped.

Sender buried his face in Elios' hair, growling softly with every thrust, then bit and licked at the back of his neck. Fucking like this felt primal, basic, and Sender made Elios feel so safe, protected from everything. Every thrust drove a whimper out of Elios, low and pleasure-filled. He let his head fall forward, baring the nape of his neck to Sender's tongue and teeth, like a surrender.

Sender's mouth was hot on the back of Elios' neck, covering it with hot, wet kisses and sharp bites as he fucked Elios relentlessly. He was making incoherent sounds that might have occasionally been Elios' name. The intensity was incredible, tearing through Elios.

Finally, Sender bit down on the nape of Elios' neck, fucking him without holding anything back, letting go and coming in hot rushes. His whole body shook with it, and he cried out helplessly against Elios' skin. Elios was shaking, flushed and overwhelmed with pleasure even without coming.

"Oh, fuck," Elios breathed, his body still trembling with the impact of Sender's orgasm. Even after the past two times, he wouldn't have guessed that Sender fucking him would feel so fantastically good.

Sender curled himself around Elios as he turned onto his side, taking Elios with him and wrapping Elios up in strong arms. Elios just purred and let himself be held, snuggling back into the welcoming curve of Sender's body. He felt perfect, lazy and sated and alive. He wrapped his arms over Sender's, keeping them tucked together. Sender planted tender kisses along Elios' shoulder and up under his ear. Sender was quiet, but Elios was contented with the silence; Sender's actions did all the talking for him.

"Mmm, feels so good when you do that," Elios murmured, reaching back with one arm to slide his fingers into Sender's hair. He loved the way Sender's body felt against his, wrapped around his.

Sender nuzzled the curve of Elios' ear and kissed it softly. "You feel good," he whispered. He snuggled Elios a little closer. "Good morning," he added.

"Very good," Elios agreed, arching a little and then settling back into Sender's embrace. "That was a fantastic way to wake up."

"Waking up with you is," Sender said, kissing Elios on the cheek. He was right. It didn't matter what they did.

Elios turned his head to catch Sender's mouth with his own. "We should wake up together again soon," he murmured. He wanted to spend more time with Sender, to not have to wait two weeks to even go to dinner with him again.

"As soon as I can," Sender promised, kissing Elios back.

"How about dinner sometime in the week?" Elios asked, as a compromise, because he knew waking up together required more of a time commitment and more maneuvering of the schedule. He shifted and turned over to make it easier to see Sender's face and to kiss his pretty mouth.

"My schedule is tight," Sender said. "I'll get whatever time off I can." He stroked Elios' cheek and kissed him tenderly. "Let me talk to my CO and see where they can spare me. Usually I'm working a job and a half, at least, so I'll have to see what I can do to get some normal hours. I'll find time to see you next week. I promise."

"Whenever you have time," Elios soothed. He was disappointed that even dinner would be a problem, but he wasn't going to show it and have Sender feel guilty about it. "I can wait."

"I can't," Sender said quietly, kissing Elios again. "I need to see you."

Oh, baby. This time, the warmth that spread through Elios wasn't desire, but happiness. Elios reached up to brush his fingertips over Sender's cheek and kissed him back, slow and tender. "I love you," he admitted quietly, and then kissed Sender again so he wouldn't have to see Sender's face if the reaction wasn't what he hoped for.

Sender's breath caught, and he pulled back from the kiss to look at Elios' face. "I love you, too." He said it like it was the simplest thing in the world.

Elios smiled slowly and then tipped his head back for another kiss. "You're pretty damn wonderful, you know?"

"No." Sender laughed helplessly and kissed Elios anyway. "But I believe anything you say."

"Good, then you'll believe me when I say that it's imperative that you're here in my bed when I get back from the kitchen with breakfast," Elios teased, kissing him again.

"Tell me again," Sender asked quietly, pulling Elios a little closer.

Elios' smile fell away and he said, softly and seriously, "I love you. I do. I wasn't... I wasn't going to say anything, because... it's just too soon... but I wanted you to know." The whole thing was actually pretty terrifying, considering how badly his last relationship had gone, but Sender was sweet and kind and generous, and keeping it to himself wasn't going to stop Elios from loving him.

Sender kissed Elios' forehead gently. "I love you, too, Elios. I think you're the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me." He looked down at Elios in his arms and smiled a little, though his eyes were sad. "I didn't think I'd ever hear that... like this."

"You should hear it every day," Elios murmured, already thinking about daily calls and emails to remind Sender how he felt, to remind him what he had waiting for him.

"As long as you want to say it." Sender kissed him softly.

"As long as you want to hear it." Elios started to slip away then, saying, "I should get breakfast if I'm going to keep you naked in my bed all day. Some fruit?"

"Please." Sender kissed Elios one more time. "I'll stay right here. Promise."

"Good." Elios gave him a happy smile and rolled off the bed, heading to the bathroom to clean up first.

He felt good all the way through, though there was a little sadness still lingering. It was just fear for all the ways he could get his heart broken here. If he had to choose, though, he'd rather get it broken by Sender leaving than by losing Sender to his job.

"You're impossible," he told his reflection as he washed up. He'd been doomed from the start with the way he'd felt so safe with Sender in the beginning, the way he'd felt when Sender had slid an arm around him to keep him safe and steady after flying. There was so much good about it all, Elios had to smile. This time, maybe, it would be all right.

Sender put the last of his things in his bag and looked over at Elios, who was sitting on the bed. The slump of Elios' shoulders echoed Sender's mood. Sender didn't want to go back; Elios didn't want him to go. It wouldn't be too long until the *Auriga* was ready to go, Sender promised himself. Then they'd be able to be together as much as they wanted.

"You don't have to come with me," he said. He stood and slung his bag over his shoulder.

"I'm trying to delay the inevitable." Elios gave him a sad smile and came over for a soft kiss. If there'd been any other train that would have gotten Sender back in time, he'd still be in bed with Elios. He kissed Elios tenderly, just once.

"Okay." Sender slid his arm around Elios' shoulders. "Let's go, then."

The walk to the rail stop seemed too short. Sender kept Elios as close as he could, ducking his head once in a while to kiss Elios' hair. Elios leaned into him in return, their bodies almost merged together. It was early evening, the sky darkened to a uniform soft indigo, and the air was cool.

"Tell Macy I said thank you," Elios said, as they waited for the monorail to arrive.

"What for?" Sender laughed quietly and looked down at Elios.

"Well, I get the feeling that he was going to make sure you made it here, no matter what," Elios pointed out.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Macy had been up to something, trying to set Sender up with Elios from the start. "Ah, yes." Sender shook his head, smiling. "I'll do that, once he's done beating me to get all the details out of me. He's very persistent. And I'm very lucky."

"You are. He's a good friend." Elios put his head on Sender's shoulder, and Sender kissed him; Macy was definitely a good friend, and Sender was definitely lucky.

The monorail pulled in, slowing to a stop with a low hum and crackle. The doors slid open and people poured off. It would get emptier as it made its rounds, carrying people from the city core to their homes. Elios drew Sender into the car with him and they found two seats together along one side.

"I wasn't just talking about him," Sender clarified. He got one arm around Elios' shoulders again, pulling him in a little closer. He looked down at Elios, feeling some wonderment as always that this person actually loved him. It was still so amazing and new.

"Oh." Elios smiled as he caught on, and his cheeks flushed rosy under their usual bronze color.

"You are so beautiful when you smile," Sender said, just softly enough for Elios to hear. He leaned in to nuzzle Elios' nose with his own, aware that they were targets of a few glances. And, really, he didn't care. This wasn't Themis. The looks had no malice in them; there was no harm in this. "All the time, really," he added. Even first thing in the morning, Elios was gorgeous.

Surprise showed briefly on Elios' face. "Thank you." His cheeks darkened just a little more, and Sender ran his fingers over one, to feel the softness and the heat.

"It's true." Sender drew his thumb along Elios' cheekbone. "You don't have to thank me." He wanted to soak up everything he could about Elios before they had to leave each

other. It wasn't just that he didn't want to be away from Elios, that wasn't the problem. It was just that things were so new and tentative, he wasn't sure yet that they were going to get it all back next time.

"Flattery will get you... well, everywhere, really," Elios murmured with a wry grin. He leaned into the gentle touch, though, the rest of his expression -- closed eyes, unfurrowed brow -- giving away just how much he was enjoying it.

"Pity it's just the truth, then." Sender kissed Elios on the forehead while his eyes were closed. Elios' skin was so soft against his lips. "You want me to call you tomorrow?" Macy would be dragging details out of him tonight. "Or tonight?" He could always shut Macy in the closet for a while.

"Whenever you've got time," Elios answered, shifting in his seat so he was facing Sender a little more and managing to do it without opening his eyes.

Sender propped his elbow up on the back of the seat so he could stroke Elios' cheek and hair with tender little brushes of his fingers. "I'll call you tonight. You can tell Macy I'm not just humoring him to get him off my back."

Elios' eyes opened then and he laughed softly. "Going to give him all the intimate details?" he teased, still leaning into Sender's gentle touches.

"Hardly." Sender leaned in to brush a kiss over Elios' lips. "If he wasn't there, that's not my problem." Fortunately, that wasn't something he needed to worry about at the moment.

Elios leaned a little closer to steal a soft kiss. "I'll be home tonight, but you can call whenever you have time. If I'm working, I can take a break."

Sender slid his fingers into Elios' hair and kissed his cheek, then rubbed his own against it, trying to get a little closer. Elios made a little sound like a purr and nuzzled further back until his nose was tucked against the soft skin under Sender's ear.

"I'll call tonight. And maybe tomorrow, too, between shifts." Sender kissed the delicate shell of Elios' ear. "Kind of hard for you to reach me." Elios could leave a message or, if he was lucky, catch Sender in his room, but that was really only once or twice a day, and not always at the same time.

"Mmm. Good point." Elios tilted his head to offer up his ear. "I'll save all my racy messages for email, then."

That made Sender laugh softly, and he kissed Elios' ear tenderly. The idea that someone would be sending him anything of the sort was something of a thrill. "I'll look forward to those." He nuzzled Elios' ear and hair; the more he did this, the freer he felt, the more

comfortable he was. It was like there was no way he could ever go back behind the stifling mask he'd tried to wear for so long.

Elios smiled and tipped his head so he could kiss Sender's mouth, a light brush of lips. "I'll be sure to send lots of them, then," he teased. "I don't want you to forget what's waiting for you."

"I won't. I promise." Sender kissed Elios back lightly, then straightened so that he could look at Elios once more, clearly. He wasn't sure what to say, there was a lot he wanted to say to Elios, but they'd be talking again soon. In hours. He studied Elios' face, tucking Elios' curls back behind his ear.

When the train started to slow, Elios flinched slightly, and Sender felt hollow in his chest. They were pulling up to the station that would allow Sender to transfer over to the base rail system, which meant it was time for him to say goodbye. Elios sighed and laced his fingers with Sender's, grabbing Sender's duffel with his other hand. "Time to get off," he said, tilting his head toward the slowly opening doors.

Sender stood and gently drew Elios to his feet. Giving Elios' hand a gentle squeeze, he turned and headed for the doors. Elios followed Sender out and all the way over to the transfer point, where he tugged on Sender's hand to stop him. He smiled up at Sender and leaned in for a kiss.

Sender cupped Elios' cheek with his free hand and kissed him slowly and thoroughly, making it last. He never would have dared to do this before, not in public, not in front of his own people coming and going from the base, whether Elios knew it or not. It was a conscious, deliberate choice on his part, trying to tell Elios that this was where he really wanted to be, this was who he wanted to be. Elios kissed him back, hot and sweet, until the first bell rang to sound the departure of the base rail cars.

"I love you," Elios said, his lips still brushing Sender's.

Sender kissed Elios fiercely for that and then pulled away to look down at him. "I love you, too," he said seriously. "I'll see you soon." He had to, one way or another.

"Okay." A smile pulled at Elios' lips, just a small one. After a moment, he took a breath and offered up Sender's bag like a gift. "Be safe. Have fun with Macy."

"I will. I'll be thinking of you when I'm flying." Sender slung the bag over his shoulder so he had both hands free to pull Elios into his arms for one last kiss, shameless and passionate.

Elios' hands ended up tangled in Sender's hair, and he made low, wanting sounds as he kissed Sender back fiercely. He pressed himself against Sender and, for a few seconds, Sender forgot that they were saying goodbye for some undetermined length of time.

The signal for the train sounded again, and Sender pulled away reluctantly. "I love you," he said again. "As soon as I can, I promise." He brushed one last kiss over Elios' lips.

"I love you, too." Elios offered Sender a smile, another gift. He squeezed Sender's arm and then let go, stepping back. "I'll talk to you tonight."

"I'll call you once Macy and his henchmen finish with me." Sender brushed his fingers over Elios' cheek and backed away. He didn't want to look away, but eventually he had to turn to navigate the platform and get to the train back to New McMurdo.

The trip back to New McMurdo was a little rowdy -- Sender wasn't the only one coming back from a pass -- but he sat off to himself and watched the buffer zone go by outside the window. For someone who'd never been in any kind of romantic relationship before, he felt like he wasn't screwing anything up. He was completely happy with how things were with Elios and only regretted the separation. Even more remarkable, he was, for the moment, completely happy with himself.

Chapter Seven

Elios slipped off his headphones and straightened, wincing as the motion made his lower back ache. His ears were still full of the song-like transmissions they'd spent years unraveling. For all of their success in deciphering one set of sounds, another was no easier to understand. There was a depth to the language, nuances that escaped simple translation. Running it through machines only worked to identify the sounds. There was something about the whole that required a sentient listener to grasp.

Some days Elios didn't feel nearly sentient enough. He signed out and grabbed his jacket so that he could go for a walk and find something to eat. His head was fuzzy with the effort of concentrating for so long. The idea of fresh air and light was very appealing.

Outside, Elios took a deep breath and looked up and down the street. There were restaurants and shops one way, a park the other. He didn't want to be closed in, so he headed for the park. There was a bit of wind today, and it was warm and bright. Under the canopies of the trees in the park, he was reminded of being under other trees with Sender.

The thought made Elios sigh with contentment, and he couldn't help smiling. He bought a soda and a wrap stuffed with roasted vegetables from a vendor working by a small pond and took them over to a bench where he could sit and watch the white ducks paddling about. Before he started eating, though, he put his lunch down and pulled out his datapad so that he could send Sender a quick email.

Was there such a thing as giving someone too much attention? Elios smiled as he thought about all the things he wanted to tell Sender and hadn't yet today: how beautiful he looked while he was sleeping, how good it felt to see him stretched out in Elios' bed, and all the things that bubbled up in Elios' mind at the thought of Sender's bare body spread out like that.

"Hey." The voice was familiar and it sent all of Elios' warm, delicious fantasies crashing to the ground.

"What the fuck do you want?" Elios put the datapad away hastily and then turned to look at Aric.

"Actually, I come here sometimes, this being a free colony and all. Sometimes on my own, sometimes to meet Maeve and the kids for lunch," Aric said, his jaw already setting unpleasantly. He shook his head. "I saw you here, and I was going to apologize for the

other weekend and try to explain, since you were on your own right now. You don't seem to be very often."

"I don't have much interest in being alone," Elios shot back. "And you don't need to explain. Actually, I don't want you to explain or apologize. I don't give a damn. But thanks for the reminder of why we're not together anymore. It's always good to get a refresher in case I forget."

"You never give me a chance, do you?" Aric shook his head again, his expression disbelieving. "Even when I'm trying to make something right, you just have to get all over it all over again."

Elios' neck and shoulders stung with tension, his throat was tight and his stomach was churning. "Don't try and make me into the bad guy here." He got up and grabbed his lunch, not that he was going to be able to eat it now. "None of this was my idea. I didn't want to ruin my family, you did."

"Elios, wait." Aric stopped just short of grabbing Elios' arm. Good thing, too, because last time he'd tried anything physical, Elios had knocked him cold. "I acted like crap at the office, in front of the kids. I can act better than that. But at least you could stop ignoring me at work. How am I supposed to discuss our progress with you when you're so hostile? It's making for a bad environment for everyone."

Elios stopped cold, wondering how much more it would take to make his head explode. He was aware of several families at the playground, the one he avoided so that he didn't have to remember what it was like to play there with the kids. His kids. He could hear the laughter of children and it hurt horribly.

"A bad environment?" Elios turned slowly to look at Aric. "You cheated on me with your intern, who worked with us both, and then you invited everyone in the office to your wedding, and you think me not talking to you in a social manner is making your work environment a bad one? Are you insane?" The need to yell and scream was overridden only by the desire not to give Aric the satisfaction.

"If you ever gave me a chance to actually talk to you about things, maybe it wouldn't be so bad." Aric said, spreading his hands helplessly.

"You had your chance to explain. I didn't need to hear anything after 'better for the kids.'" Elios shook his head and turned away. "Now I'm doing what's best for them." Walking away before he hit their father.

"I'm just trying to make things better," Aric called after him.

Elios tossed lunch away on the way out of the park. His eyes were blurry with tears of frustration and loss. Aric wouldn't leave it alone, wouldn't leave him alone. It was like he wanted Elios to forgive him, even to give his blessing for the entire clusterfuck. Elios

might have been madly in love with Aric once, but nothing was going to make him buy into the idea that losing the children he'd raised for almost three years was best for everyone.

Elios had no idea where he was going, he just knew he needed to walk this off or he really was going to make their work environment a lousy one. His head was just starting to clear when his datapad chimed. If it was Aric, there was going to be a huge problem. But the number wasn't local; it was a secure line, which meant it could be Doc or it could be Sender.

"Hello?"

"Hey." Sender's voice was such a relief that Elios thought his knees were going to give way. There was a little café a few doors down and Elios headed that way, thinking maybe he could get a seat. "Did I miss your lunch break?"

"No, no, you didn't." It was incredible how fast Elios could go from furious to elated just because of a single call. "I left the lab and went out for a walk." It was almost the whole truth, and Elios didn't want to burden Sender with the details of his troubles with Aric.

"Good. I would have called a little earlier, but I was working with Doctor Temple on the new set of sims programs. Looks like we're getting our new birds sooner than later." Sender sounded like a little kid.

"That's great. Does anyone else know?" Elios stepped into the café and gestured at the board, indicating to the young man behind the counter that he wanted a serving of chocolate mousse and a *corretto cognac*. It wasn't a proper lunch, but after coping with Aric, he desperately needed something sweet, especially since Sender wasn't there to kiss.

"Well, I can't keep a damn thing from Macy." Sender laughed, and then Elios could hear the sound of engines in the background. "And Sheridan and Skylar know, of course. Probably their seconds... it doesn't take long for things to spread, even when no one says anything."

Elios found a seat outside for himself and settled down, stretching out his legs. The tension in his body was leaching away, and he felt unsteady now. "You're worse than a bunch of old ladies," he accused.

That got him what he wanted, more of Sender's laughter. "Just about. Though I'm pretty sure we drink more."

"You just *think* there's tea in the teapot," Elios said firmly. That got him more laughter, and the cold in his chest melted. There was another rush of engines in the background. "Where are you right now?"

"Out on the blacktop," Sender said. "The supply crates out by the main doors. Sunny and a great view. Quirinus is running drills. They're good."

"Better than Callisto?" Elios teased. The server, slim and pretty androgynous, brought Elios his coffee and his dessert, leaving it with a smile and a wink and a toss of blond curls.

"Of course not. Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm glad you called." Elios took a fork full of mousse and attempted a bite. Hopefully his stomach would accept the treat.

"Everything okay?" Sender's voice shifted from humorous to worried without hesitation.

"Yeah, it's okay." Elios sighed and relaxed a little more. The mousse was perfect, the coffee bitter but mellowed by the hint of cognac, a breeze pulled at his hair, the sun warmed his skin, and the server cast him another interested look on the way by. Best of all, he was talking to the person he loved. "I'm just glad you called."

"I was thinking about you," Sender said simply. "It's such a beautiful day, and I was watching other people go up and wishing you were here."

That was bliss. "I love you," Elios said softly.

"I love you, too. Are you busy Saturday?"

"No?" Maybe life could get a little bit better. "Why?" Elios stretched and felt his back pop in a very pleasing manner.

"I can get part of the day off. From about nine until three. I didn't know if you wanted to meet me somewhere."

Elios could hear the want in Sender's voice, the way it roughened as he spoke, and it made heat build under his skin. "We could get a room," Elios suggested quietly. "I could bring lunch, and we could spend the time there." There were numerous things they could do with six hours on a Saturday, but the only ones Elios wanted to bother with were the ones that were just for the two of them.

"That sounds perfect." Elios could hear Sender's slow exhalation. "I miss you."

They talked, they wrote, they even had some of the most incredible video sex Elios had ever had -- Sender was by far the best thing ever to happen to Elios' viewing screen -- but it wasn't the same as being in each others' arms. "I miss you, too, baby," Elios said. He took another bite of mousse and decided he might need to bring something like that on the weekend.

"Tell me about your day," Elios prompted, trying to get Sender's mind off of their separation. He couldn't talk where he was, where people could overhear him, but he could listen. Sender's Themis accent had become so dear to him, it didn't matter what the man was saying except that Elios cared about every moment of Sender's day, almost more than his own.

A few hours together weren't nearly enough, Elios thought. He was sprawled across Sender's chest, trying to catch his breath, in a bed in a cheap motel room near the base. It wasn't a nice place, but it was clean, and that was all that mattered. Elios hadn't planned to be looking at the room much anyway. He was running his fingers over the religious icons tattooed on Sender's left arm, rather mindless of their significance.

"I love you," he said. Sender stroked Elios' hair and inhaled, his chest moving under Elios' cheek, then exhaled with a sigh.

"I love you, too," Sender said. "So much, Elios." Elios could feel how relaxed he was, the muscles in his long limbs soft under Elios' touch. The little motel room smelled like sex now, instead of disinfectant, and the taste of Sender's come still lingered in the back of Elios' throat. Elios' clothing was in a crumpled heap on the floor; Sender's uniform was folded neatly on a chair.

"So, what did you have to do to get this time off?" Elios kissed Sender's chest, then licked to taste his skin again. They hadn't talked yet, hadn't said much of anything beyond "I miss you" and "I love you" and the sounds they made while having sex.

"Just had to work late a couple nights." Sender snuggled Elios against him, wrapping strong arms around Elios and holding him close. Even if Sender'd had to do more, Elios had a feeling he wouldn't hear about it.

"Don't work too much," he murmured, knowing already that it was futile. Sender just laughed. "Okay, well, don't work so much that you don't have any energy for me."

"I think I can do that." Sender kissed Elios' hair, and Elios tilted his head back for a kiss on the mouth.

Sender kissed him and rolled them both over so that Elios was lying on his back with Sender's weight over him. He loved how big and heavy Sender felt; it felt safe, especially since he knew how careful Sender was not to hurt him. Elios stroked Sender's cheek as they kissed, marveling at how good it was to be with him. Sender sorted them out so that Elios was lying in the crook of Sender's arm, sheltered and warmed by Sender's body.

"I got a memo yesterday that there's another gala event for the project," Elios said during a pause in the kisses.

Sender made a disgruntled noise; Elios wasn't sure if that was because of the lack of kissing or because of the upcoming event. "Those things are torture," Sender said, and then kissed Elios again, resolving the question.

"I don't mind them." Elios kissed Sender as soon as he'd spoken, so as not to deprive the poor man. "Maybe you'd like them better if you came with me."

"I might," Sender said, ducking his head to kiss the curve of Elios' throat. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Elios couldn't help laughing. That was so typical. "Yes, I want you to come with me. Get up here." He got his fingers into Sender's hair and tugged to get Sender to raise his head. Sender obeyed and gave Elios an innocent look. "Come with me. Be my date."

It would be so good not to go alone, to be seen in public with his new lover. But Elios had no idea if that would be difficult for Sender. His culture was one that wouldn't ever condone their relationship, and Elios had a strong sense that Sender was, for all that he had no secrets from his friends, a private person.

"I'd like that." The answer came far easier than Elios had been expecting, and warmth washed through him.

"Don't mind being seen in public with me?" Elios teased. Under it, though, he had to admit that he was a little afraid of losing Sender, still.

Sender just shook his head, his expression turning sad. "I love you," he said. "What kind of man would I be if I didn't want the world to know that? Next to flying, you're the best thing to happen to me."

Getting that kind of admission out of a pilot was quite a victory, and it made Elios smile. "Okay. Then we'll go together." He leaned up to kiss Sender on the mouth. "And I'll teach you how to survive these things. It's a skill."

"I like it when you teach me things," Sender said, his expression completely disingenuous. Elios laughed at him again.

"Oh, what should I teach you now, then?" He wriggled suggestively under Sender's body.

"I think I need a refresher in how damn good it is when you fuck me." Sender's voice got a little rough, and Elios purred.

"I think I could go over that after lunch," he said, after pretending to think about it a moment. "I wouldn't want you to forget." Sender just kissed him hard and hot, and Elios wound his hands in Sender's hair. Maybe lunch could wait. Everything could wait while they were together.

"Calling me on a Saturday?" Zilla's voice in Elios' ear was warm, worried. Elios sat alone in a car on the monorail, watching the world go by outside the window.

"Can't I call my sister on a day that's not a Thursday?" Elios tried to keep his voice light.

"Sure you can. Are you on the train?" He could hear children's voices in the background and wished, again, that he lived closer to them.

"Yeah, I am. Got the car all to myself today." There were some pilots and soldiers in the car ahead of him, but most of the people off duty had gone into town yesterday. Elios was grateful for the peace. He wasn't really aware of the way he sighed, just of the ache in his chest.

Zilla had a good ear, though. "What's wrong, El?" The children's voices faded in the background as she moved to somewhere quiet.

"I love him, Zil," Elios admitted. It was harder than saying it to Sender, and he felt his throat tighten.

"Oh, El." It sounded like she was saying she was sorry. "It hasn't been that long, has it?"

"It didn't have to be very long," Elios said, letting his head fall back against his seat. He couldn't help smiling when he thought about Sender, even if he was still feeling pain from the past. "Not saying it wasn't going to make it not true. And his job, well..." That was something that Elios tried very hard not to think about.

"Doesn't always allow for people to take their time?" He could feel Zilla's understanding and her smile from here, even though he couldn't see her while he was just using his headset phone.

"That. Yes. We're going to Doc's gala and dinner together next month." Elios was looking forward to it already, if only because they were going to get to see each other again for certain.

"Your first big event together?" Zilla laughed quietly. "You want me to come do your hair?"

Elios laughed as well. Getting his hair to settle down into the silky, orderly ringlets of the classic style for formal events was no easy feat. "I wish you could."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I'll just work it out myself, with swearing," Elios answered. "I usually do."

Zilla snorted, and he could hear her exasperation. "I meant about your... being in love. You are, right? It's not just that you love him?"

"Yes." Elios felt a little like he'd stepped off a cliff when he said it. "And I will be. I have to be okay again sometime, right?"

"Too late for me to tell you to slow down, isn't it?" Zilla sounded resigned, but not unhappy.

"Oh, way too late." Elios laughed and shook his head. He could still smell Sender on his skin, still felt Sender's touch on his body. It was reassuring. "I think it was too late right about the first time I saw him." He had fond memories of that moment, of looking up to see Sender's sweet smile, of how his eyes were bluer than the sky behind him.

"That's awful, El," Zilla said, laughing now. "Seriously. Have you been drinking?"

"Not alcohol," he said, trying to sound innocent, but she just laughed harder.

"When do we get to meet him? Will you bring him to the twins' birthday?" It was still a few months away, but Elios had already booked the time off.

"I'll tell him about it," Elios promised. "I know he'll come if he can. He's too polite for his own good." He wondered how Sender would feel about it and knew that Sender would come, even if it were hard on him. How he could not love someone like that was beyond Elios. "It's not always easy for him," he added quietly. "Themis wasn't exactly a good place to grow up for him."

"So I understand." Zilla's voice was soft and sympathetic. "He doesn't have to come. We'd just like to meet him. That's all."

"I know he doesn't. He'll do it, though, if he thinks it'll make me happy." Elios knew that for a certainty.

"I like him more and more all the time," Zilla said. She was smiling, Elios could tell. She had never liked Aric at all, though she'd been pleasant for the sake of Elios and the children. "How's he feel about kids?"

"His squad acts like a bunch of preschoolers sometimes," Elios said. Zilla laughed at that, but then Elios thought back to how Sender had been the one time they'd run into Aric and the children. He realized that Sender's anger then hadn't really been about him at all. It had been about the children; the way that Sender wanted to go and check on them after, the expression on his face, was proof enough of that. Elios had just been too upset to consider it at the time. "No, actually, I think he likes them. He has a baby sister, and he loves her to pieces."

"Better and better," Zilla said. "Send us pictures soon."

"I will," Elios promised. "As soon as I take ones that won't give you a heart attack to see them. I have lots of those." Zilla made a strangled noise that sounded distinctly like her choking on her tea. Elios knew it well.

"Elios!"

"Well, it's true!" Elios tried to sound innocent. "I'll send you the ones from the dinner, okay? We'll both look prettier than usual, and we'll have our clothes on."

"Your mother's been bothering me for information. Maybe you should send me some of the others to hush her up," Zilla suggested.

"No, no, I don't want her trying to steal him from me," Elios said, laughing. "I promise you. Decent pictures as soon as I can."

"Good. And keep sounding so happy," Zilla ordered.

"I will. Can I talk to the kids?" Elios loved that part of daytime calls. Kasper was getting old enough to hold a conversation.

"I'll go get Kas. He has some new dinosaur toys to tell you all about," Zilla said.

Elios could hear her get up and start moving, heard her calling for Kasper. He was going to miss them horribly while he was away on the *Auriga*. But he'd be with Sender then and, when they got home, maybe they'd all find a way to be closer again.

Chapter Eight

Sender ran his fingers under the collar of his dress uniform. It consisted of a high-collared white shirt under a long black jacket that came up almost as high under his chin, a wide belt at the waist, tailored black slacks, and high black boots. Frankly, he felt ridiculous.

"I think you're too hot to go out," Macy said. He was lounging against one of the bathroom sinks, watching Sender. "I'm afraid I'll have to tell your date you can't make it."

"Don't even go there." Sender ran his hands through his hair, wondering how the hell he was going to get the curls to behave without slathering them with some kind of gel. There simply hadn't been time for him to fit in a haircut with someone who knew what they were doing. "I don't want him to think I don't want to be there with him." There was an edge in his voice he couldn't quite control; he was tenser than he wanted to admit.

"Easy, tiger." Lore came in and patted Sender's shoulder. He didn't miss the dirty look she shot Macy. "We all want you to be there." She leaned her cheek on his arm and looked at him in the mirror. Her expression was completely affectionate. "You look so pretty. Come on, Xo and I can help you with your hair. You really should grow it out."

"I'd look like a tangled bush," Sender said, sighing. He was resigned to letting the two girls fuss with his hair. It usually came out looking nicer than if he was allowed to do it himself.

"Aww, we'd keep it nice for you." Lore took his hand and tugged him away from the mirror. She was all lanky, coltish limbs, but there was a lot of strength to her, as Macy inevitably discovered every time he tried to tickle her. Sometimes, Sender thought he forgot on purpose.

"Or you could shave your head," Macy suggested, following them out of the squad's bathroom and into the common room. "I could do it for you while you sleep." He seemed a little out of sorts, but Sender didn't have time to work out why. It wasn't a hangover, and Sender was pretty sure he was getting laid pretty frequently, since he was out of their shared room most evenings.

"You wouldn't want to find the bolts on your landing gear loosened," Sender said dryly. He would never hurt Macy, no matter what Macy did, but he really didn't want to get into a pissing contest right now.

"I could do without that." Macy flung himself across one of the couches without regard for the fact that Corbin, their navigator, was already there.

"Hey." Corbin smacked Macy over the head with the datapad he'd been reading. The stocky, dark-skinned man had a good sense of humor; anyone else would have pitched Macy onto the floor.

"Now, let's make you pretty." Lore pushed Sender to sit down in the nearest chair. "Just stay still."

"You look like you're going to a funeral." Xochi came out of her room with a handful of little bottles and tubes. Sender couldn't have said what they were. The whole idea of doing more than keeping his hair too short to cause trouble and wearing his flightsuit or fatigues all the time was beyond him.

"I can't help it that it's black." Sender plucked at the front of his uniform.

"I mean your face," Xochi said, tapping his nose with one finger.

"He's just nervous," Lore said. She took one of the tubes from Xochi and poured some of the contents into her palm. "Don't bother him. He'll be fine."

"Maybe having his social life dissected by his subordinates is getting on his nerves." Vaughn was wearing headphones and working over at one of the consoles, but Sender never knew when he was listening in.

"That could be it." Corbin shoved at Macy's shoulder. "Ace, move a little. I can't breathe, you big bastard." Macy made a grumpy noise but shifted so that Corbin could breathe, flopping back down with a grunt. "Better," Corbin said, still sounding a little stifled. He put his datapad down anyway and petted Macy obligingly.

Maybe that was all that was wrong, Sender thought, trying to distract himself from the anxious knot in his stomach. Macy was young; maybe he just needed more attention than he'd been getting lately. "I'm fine," Sender reassured them, watching Macy's face to see if the tension left it as Corbin rubbed the back of his neck. "I just hate these things. I feel like I'm on display."

"You are," Xochi said unhelpfully. She tilted his chin up and opened up another little tube to reveal a tiny brush that she brought toward Sender's left eye.

"Hey." He jerked back, bumping into Lore, who squeaked. "What's that?" He eyed the brush and then Xochi suspiciously.

"It'll make your eyes look bigger. D'van wears it all the time." Xochi tried again, and Sender backed away a second time.

"I'm sure your husband has excellent taste, but I don't think I need anything on my face." Sender wondered how he was going to get out of this one. D'van was a stunning older man, a slim and gregarious civil servant with long silver hair and coppery skin; he and Sender couldn't have been more different. He would probably see D'van at the gala, but D'van would be there with Shakira, the third partner in their marriage, a navigator on the *Auriga*.

"Leave him be," Corbin said, just as Macy was saying, "Leave him alone."

Xochi gave the two of them an exasperated look. "And you two are up on the latest fashion?" She might have hated formal events and dressing up, but she was always aware of etiquette and style; she and Macy seemed to delight in dressing Sender at every opportunity.

"I don't need fashion," Sender snapped. Being the subject of their loving attention and the focus of their bickering was going to give him a coronary before he got out the door. "I fly a very fast plane and I shoot things. I think I've done my part for the Colonial Congress. I just don't want my hair sticking up."

"It won't be," Lore soothed. Her slim fingers felt rather nice in Sender's hair as she tamed it into soft curls. "You don't need makeup to look pretty. He's from Themis, Xo. He'll just look silly with makeup."

"I think he'd look just fine. Sophisticated." Xochi sniffed and put the cosmetics away.

"He doesn't need to look sophisticated." Lore held her hand out, and Xochi put a little spray bottle into it. "No one will take him seriously if he does. I wouldn't wear it either."

Sender closed his eyes and held his breath, remembering the time that Lore had accidentally caught him in the face with a blast of whatever was in the little bottle. At least it didn't smell like anything.

"How's that?" Lore stepped away from her handiwork, and Sender took a breath and then opened his eyes to see the two inspecting him.

"Not bad." Xochi fiddled with the hair over his ears, twisting it back and away. "I think it looks better with the sides smoother, though."

"You're right. It'll do," Lore agreed. "I still think he should grow it out. He'd look so nice with it all long and curly."

"Nothing wrong with short hair." Xochi's hair was shorter than Sender's. "Okay, you can go now."

"Don't forget your bag," Macy said. He'd relaxed a little onto Corbin's chest, though he still didn't look happy. "And you got your pass signed by Ozanne, right?"

"Yes. And I brushed my teeth and tied my own boots." Sender stood and raised a hand to run it through his hair.

"No!" Lore smacked his wrist, her hand flashing out faster than Sender could pull his away. "No touching it. Let Elios make it messy." She gave a happy little bounce and clapped her hands. "I can't believe you have a boyfriend."

"It's so cute," Xochi added, beaming.

"It's not like anyone told him it would be a good idea," Macy said. He pushed away from Corbin, who helped him up with a shove.

"At last." Corbin stretched out with a sigh. "Have fun, Sky."

"Uh huh, have fun," Vaughn chimed in absently. He seemed to listen for key words in whatever conversations were going on around him.

The idea of having a boyfriend was still a little alien to Sender, but he liked the way it felt. "You were right," he said to Macy. "Happy?"

Macy stood there, hands in the pockets of his fatigue pants, a strange expression on his face, and then he smiled. "Yeah, I'm happy. Come on, princess. I'll walk you to the station. I'll even carry your bag."

"Have fun." Lore kissed Sender on the cheek, then passed him off to Xochi, who did the same.

"I will," Sender promised. A weekend with Elios couldn't be anything but fun. "See you all in a couple days. Vaughn, will you go over the sims and..."

"Check the Juventas files against the last four years for progression and project the competency outcome for all cadets," Vaughn filled in. He actually looked away from the screen long enough to give Sender a grin. "I got it." His long, ebony fingers were still moving over the keys, as though his hands had a sentience all their own.

"Thanks." Sender turned to the door to find Macy standing there, Sender's bag over his shoulder, looking impatient. "Coming, dear," he said. Macy bumped the pressure pad, and the door slid open for them.

"You okay with this?" Macy asked, once they were out of the barracks and making their way across the residential quad toward the station.

"I'll make it through. I hate these things, but it's not like I haven't been going for the last couple years." Sender tugged at his collar again. No matter what he did, it always felt too tight, even if he could fit a finger or two under it.

"I didn't mean that. I mean this whole thing with Elios. Dating. Whatever you're doing." Macy wasn't looking at Sender; he was watching a shuttle cruising down from the docking bays overhead, moving across the darkened sky toward the city.

"It's good." Sender put his hands in his pockets and bumped Macy with his shoulder. "You were right. About all of it. Thanks."

"What are friends for?" Macy bumped Sender back and then looked over to grin at him. "You really have been in a better mood lately. It's good to see you happy."

"I haven't even burst into flames yet," Sender added, and then laughed. He'd come a long way in the last ten years since he'd realized that he was gay, long past when he'd been afraid that would actually happen to him. He could still remember the feeling, and it was so good to be free of it, to be free to be loved.

"Well, just keep using lots of lube," Macy said sagely, then dodged the swat that Sender aimed at him. "What?"

"Jerk," Sender said, laughing.

"Idiot," Macy retorted.

"You love me anyway," Sender said. That was usually Macy's line. He slid his arm around Macy's shoulders as Macy wandered back his way.

"Yeah, I do." Macy leaned into him as the lights of the station came into view. "And don't you forget it."

"I won't," Sender promised. No matter how perfect life was with Elios, there would always be room in it for his best friend. There was never any question of that. His anxiety about the evening had slid away, pushed aside by Macy's teasing and the ensuing laughter, as well as the reminder of how good it was to be with Elios.

As they walked to the station, Sender found himself actually looking forward to the evening as well as the weekend. Maybe he'd dance with Elios tonight. Maybe he'd dance with his lover in front of everyone else, secure in the knowledge that no one would think less of him and, better yet, he wasn't going to burst into flames.

"I assume you're coming with a friend?" Ozanne asked as she and Sender walked toward the hall where the gala was being held. "I don't remember inflicting the honor of attending on you this time." She laughed a little and nodded toward Sheridan and a few of her pilots who were walking ahead. "It's Bellona's turn to suffer."

"Yes." Sender felt his cheeks flush, and he was glad of the dark and the cool breeze. "My boyfriend actually." That felt good to say, and Sender smiled.

"I thought that was why you were getting time off on weekends." Ozanne reached over and patted Sender on the arm. "Good. I was getting worried about you, Kinnison."

"Worried?" Sender looked down at his commanding officer. "Was something wrong?" His hours had been good, his flight results almost perfect, and his students seemed to be doing well in spite of the hurried training program.

"You mean aside from the fact that you were doing the work of two men and taking a day off every month at most?" Ozanne looked up at him and shook her head. By the light of the lamps lining the path they were on, he could see exasperation in her expression.

"Well, I didn't... was that a problem?" Sender had no idea that working too much could be a problem. He didn't think his hours were too long by Themis standards. Things were more relaxed on other colonies and especially here on Luna.

Ozanne just laughed at him and shook her head. "You're a piece of work, Kinnison. In a good way," she added hastily. "I just like to see my people having personal lives as well. Means they stick around longer, and I was hoping you might be making a career of this, that you might take my job some day."

"Only when you're done with it, ma'am," Sender said, feeling warmed by her compliment. "The service has been good to me so far; I don't see why I'd want to leave." This was home now.

"Glad to hear it." Ozanne nodded and patted Sender's arm again. "I'll keep it in mind. So, who's the lucky guy?"

"Doctor Campbell," Sender admitted, feeling his cheeks warm again.

"Oh," Ozanne said after a pause. "The senator's friend? The one who went flying with you?" She sounded pleased, and then she laughed a little.

"That one," Sender said.

"That's awfully romantic." Now Ozanne sounded startlingly like anyone else, instead of like Sender's commanding officer. He looked at her in surprise, and she gave him a smile that made her look softer and younger. "You met in the air and all that," she explained. "At least he knows what you do, a little."

"True." Sender hadn't thought about it that way. It was rather romantic, when he thought about it, the way that their one night together had turned into a relationship he couldn't imagine living without. "He loved flying." Elios understood, and that made it even easier to love him.

"Well, as long as he keeps you happy," Ozanne said. "I like it when my people are doing well, and it's going to be a long trip on the *Auriga*."

"Can't wait to go," Sender said, feeling a smile creep over his face. They were almost at the steps of the embassy hall where the gala was being held. There were bright lights outside, huge banners hanging down the front of the building, and already he could hear a little music.

"Well, let's do a good job tonight," Ozanne said briskly. "The more asses we kiss, the sooner we'll hit the black. I'm going to go make sure Sheridan knows who to talk to. You have a good night with your fellow, Kinnison."

"Thank you, ma'am." Somewhere inside, Elios was waiting for him. Sender couldn't wait to get there.

This wasn't Sender's first gala, but it was the first one he'd been looking forward to. The military contingent, in crisp black uniforms, filtered into the crowd through one of the side entrances. They dispersed quickly, heading off to talk to the various politicians and representatives with whom they were associated. Sender, for his part, was looking for Elios, and he spotted him after a moment's searching. He came up from behind, quietly, and slid his hand along the small of Elios' back. "You look good enough to eat," he said in a low voice.

The touch startled Elios, but he relaxed as Sender's voice washed over him. "Want a taste?" he teased. When he tipped his head back, his hair fell back from his face in perfect ringlets. He looked elegant in an old-style tuxedo almost as atavistic as the togas worn by some of the other guests.

"Yes, please." Sender gave Elios an extremely appealing smile and reached out to run a finger over one of Elios' spiral curls. "You do look gorgeous. I could get to like these things if I get to look at you all night." It was hard to keep his expression anything approaching neutral; Elios looked wonderful, and Sender had missed him while they'd been apart.

"I'm glad you could come," Elios murmured, turning around to face Sender so he could lean up and steal a soft kiss. "Let me look at you." He took a step back and looked Sender over, his smile growing. "You're the one who looks gorgeous. I didn't think anything could look better than your flight suit, but your dress uniform is... really something."

Sender refrained from rolling his eyes at the compliment and submitted to being admired. "It's hard to get it wrong," he pointed out. It was easy to look good in a uniform, as far as he was concerned. He got himself clean, put it on in the right order, and went out.

"Yes, well, a tuxedo is pretty similar for infallibility," Elios pointed out in return. He grinned, though, and reached out to lace his fingers with Sender's. "So I can't really take any credit for looking good either, by that logic."

"Stop turning my logic against me." Sender brought Elios' hand up and kissed the back of it. "Are you ready to start making the rounds?"

"Mm. Doc wouldn't forgive me if I stayed in the corner making eyes at you all night, I suppose," Elios murmured. He leaned up, though, his free hand braced on Sender's chest, and stole another quick kiss. "Okay. Now I'm ready."

"I think we ought to do our best to help get the program off the ground." Sender smiled down at Elios. After all, the sooner the *Auriga* was off on its adventure, the sooner they would be together.

"Yes, yes. Of course." Elios squeezed Sender's hand gently and then turned to look out at the crowd.

It was easiest to join a group of people talking, so that there was less chance of interrupting something private. Elios nodded toward a small group of elegantly dressed older people, one of whom Sender recognized as a senator. "That way? That's Senator Athanas; she's a friend of Doc's. She can introduce us to a few people."

"Lead on." Sender put himself back into professional mode, for all that he was holding Elios' hand, and let Elios lead him toward the senator, a tiny woman in a bright silk sari. "I hope we can get somewhere tonight," he murmured. "And not just because I'm waiting on the new Harpies."

"Soon, I hope," Elios agreed. He led Sender over to the group he'd pointed out, smiling pleasantly.

They were talking about the renovations being made to the *Auriga*'s internal structure, which was happening even as the project's funding was in question. Sender was more aware of those things than Elios, who was quiet, listening, especially where the space to put the Harpies was concerned. It was easy enough to slip into the conversation and defer to Elios when the topic switched to the academic aspects of the project. All in all, it was going rather well, far easier than dealing with things on his own.

When there was a pause in the fray, Sender slid his arm around Elios' waist as they stepped aside, and he snagged a pair of full champagne glasses from a passing waiter's tray.

"Dry work," he said, smiling down at Elios and handing him a glass.

"Thanks." Elios flashed Sender a smile and took a sip of the champagne. Then he smiled more broadly and nodded toward Senator Darlington coming their way. "Hey, Doc."

"Elios, it's good to see you here," Senator Darlington said, squeezing his shoulder lightly before turning to Sender. "Lieutenant Kinnison, right?" he asked, holding out his hand to shake. He was good with names and faces; it was a useful skill, now that he was more politician than scientist.

"That's right, Senator." Sender gave Darlington a smile and shook his hand. "It's good to see you again, sir."

Darlington's eyes flicked back and forth between Sender and Elios, assessing, and then he smiled a little more. "So, are you looking forward to putting the new Harpies through their paces, Lieutenant?" he asked, apparently satisfied with whatever he'd determined.

"Just a little, sir." Sender managed to look properly sheepish. "I'm trying to be patient." He gave Elios a look; Elios knew full well exactly how much Sender was looking forward to the new Harpies. Sender tried to be good about it, he really did.

"Well, after tonight, I'm sure you'll get your chance." Darlington looked around at the crowd, pleased. "I think we'll get to push the funding for the redesign through Appropriations pretty easily. Feelings have been positive about the program, from what I'm seeing."

Elios smiled. "We're all hoping the funding goes through." If it didn't, the whole project would be further delayed, and every delay made it seem more like this wasn't an urgent problem, like it could be put off indefinitely. "It'll make the next round a little easier when it does."

"Hopefully people will start to get the picture." Sender looked around as well. "We need to go. We can't just destroy something without understanding it. I think that most people just didn't understand exactly how much we know." He looked down at Elios and smiled fondly. "Thanks to all the work that's been done, we know enough to know we have to do this." For all of his obsession with the Harpies, Sender was also dedicated to the whole concept of the Pandora Project. Elios knew that the idea of it thrilled Sender to the core; that he could be a part of something so beautiful still amazed him.

For that, Elios gave Sender a brilliant smile. "If they were listening to the speeches earlier, then they know now."

"I'll keep doing my part," Senator Darlington said "We'll keep the project on track." He glanced around the room and then nodded. "I'm hoping you'll be set to launch in just a few months. I'd rather not keep the project in limbo too much longer than that."

"Thank you for all the support, all your work," Sender said. Elios could tell that Sender was completely sincere; it wasn't something he had to say out of politeness. Senator Darlington was the whole reason he was here, that he had a job and had escaped Themis. "If things keep going like this, we'll be on our way sooner than later. Hopefully sooner."

Darlington laughed a little. "This project is my baby," he admitted. "I was still splitting my time between the capital and the university when the first transmissions came in. It's not like my support is purely selfless."

"Neither is mine," Sender admitted, grinning. He gave Elios a sweet look. "Still, I appreciate everything you've done."

"It's been my pleasure." Darlington snagged a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and sighed. "Time for me to make my last rounds. Elios, send me an update sometime this week, would you?"

"No problem, Doc. I can get some of the people from the other labs to send me what they've got, too, see if I can give you a full picture of what we're doing."

"Thanks." Darlington squeezed Elios' shoulder again and then offered Sender his hand.

"Have a good evening, sir," Sender said, shaking Darlington's hand. "It was good to see you again."

"And you." Darlington gave Elios another friendly -- almost fatherly -- glance, then disappeared into the crowd, winding his way through the powerful men and women upon whose support the success of the project hinged.

"Ready to get back into the fray?" Sender tightened the arm around Elios' waist a little, giving him a bit of a hug. Sender let his expression show how he really felt, just for a moment, all the love and warmth he felt every time he looked at Elios.

Elios made an agreeable sort of sound and leaned into Sender's body. "You got some free time after this, or do you have to head back to base?"

"I have tonight." Sender leaned in to steal a tiny kiss. "And tomorrow," he added quietly. "And the day after that. If you want me, that is." He gave Elios an adoring smile.

Elios smiled, his whole face lighting up with pleasure. "You have the whole weekend off?" he asked, just to be sure.

"I have the whole weekend with you," Sender said softly. "Just us. Two nights, two days." He pulled Elios a little closer. "I needed to be with you."

Turning to face Sender a bit more, Elios reached up to cup his cheek. "Two nights and two days," he murmured.

"We can do anything you want." Sender turned his head and kissed Elios' palm. "I'm all yours."

"I want to wake up with you." Elios smiled, then, and nodded back toward the crowd. "Let's finish up here so that we can get back to my place before the monorail is too crowded."

"A few more good words and then we can go." Sender knew they'd be useless sooner rather than later anyway. He couldn't wait to get out of here with Elios. "I can pick up my things on the way out."

"Mmm." Elios leaned up to steal a kiss, fast and hot, then turned away to find a destination, some crowd of politicians or sponsors he could woo with his research and his charm. He saw what he was looking for and wound his hand with Sender's, drawing him along to join them.

It was hard to concentrate, but Sender managed. The people were intelligent and attentive, and the conversation was good. It was really nice to be around smart people, even if they made him feel a little slow and uncertain. Still, when they'd done their work and could escape gracefully, he was grateful. He steered Elios toward the coat check where he'd left his bag. "That was fairly painless."

"I think it went well," Elios said, handing over the tag that would get him his coat back. "And now it's over." He smiled up at Sender. When the clerk came back with his coat, he pulled it on and shook his hair out over his shoulders. "Ready to go?"

"Ready as I can be." Sender stole a kiss from Elios and then smiled down at him. "Let's go."

Elios led the way back outside and toward the rail station. They walked slowly, for all that Elios wanted to get Sender home and get his hands all over the man. The night was as perfect as every other, except that he got to be with Sender right now, and that made it special.

They wandered down the winding path, through the pine trees, and under the soft golden lamps to the rail station, Elios leaning into Sender's body, Sender's arm around his shoulders. Then they were slipping into a car, and Elios was nudging Sender back against one of the poles in the center. He reached up to grab hold of a loop, keeping himself steady as he leaned in to tempt Sender into kisses they wouldn't have dared indulge in at the dinner.

Sender cupped Elios' cheek in one hand and kissed him slowly, nothing shy or restrained, just a slow, hot, lingering kiss. Pressing up against Sender, Elios kissed him back and then slowly pulled away. "Want to watch a movie or something?" he asked. He wanted to

do more than just rush to the bedroom and fuck, because that's what they'd been spending their Saturdays doing, and this weekend was more than that. They had more time.

"Movie, sports, anything you want." Sender shrugged and smiled. "I just want to be next to you, just... touch you. Look at you. Be in the same room with you."

"That sounds perfect." Elios kissed along Sender's jaw. "We'll get into something more comfortable and curl up on the couch for awhile. Just relax. And then maybe I'll get down on my knees and suck you until you scream."

Sender ducked his head to kiss the side of Elios' neck under the fall of curls, biting at the skin there. "I love you," he whispered, his voice rough with need.

"I love you, too." Elios nuzzled against Sender's cheek, soothing with gentle strokes of his fingers through Sender's hair. "I've missed you."

Sender pulled Elios close with one arm, holding onto him. "I've missed you, too. I can't believe how lucky I am just to get this much, though," he said softly.

It wasn't too much longer before the car pulled to a stop at Elios' station, and he kissed Sender's cheek before pulling away. "Let's go. Back to my place, so I can get out of this." He tugged at his tuxedo jacket.

"Good idea." Sender shouldered his bag and followed Elios, slipping an arm around Elios once they were both out of the train.

Once they were inside his apartment, Elios immediately started stripping. It wasn't a rush to the bedroom for sex, but he'd been in the tux for hours, and he wanted out now, thanks. He wandered toward the bedroom with Sender in his wake, unbuttoning as he went. "I'm not sure what's worse," he grumbled, "the damn tuxedo, or that I had to spend an hour curling my hair this afternoon."

That made Sender laugh, and he reached out to take things as Elios stripped. "Whichever one it is, you look good. But I think I like the way you look in the morning best."

Elios' head came up, and he smiled, laughing softly, and then ducked his head again to finish unbuttoning his shirt. "Well, you'll get that, too," he said, stripping down and tossing everything over toward the bag he'd have to send to be dry-cleaned later. "Since you're staying the weekend."

"You know, you don't have to get dressed again," Sender said, looking Elios over appreciatively. "I promise to keep you warm."

Of course, there wouldn't be a lot of movie watching if they were both naked. Then again, there might not be a lot of movie watching even if they were dressed. Elios smiled a little and dragged one hand over his half-hard cock, considering whether he wanted to get

dressed again or not. He could do naked, he decided, shrugging and running his fingers through his hair, shaking it out.

"Okay." He looked Sender over and then came up to start unbuttoning the jacket of Sender's dress uniform. "But you should get undressed, then."

"I thought you liked my uniform," Sender teased. "You sure you don't want to just snuggle it for a while?" Sender reached out to stroke Elios' sides and around to the curve of his ass, ducking his head to nuzzle in Elios' curls.

"Sender, baby, if I 'snuggle' your uniform, it's going to get sticky pretty damn fast, and I don't know how public your laundry system is," Elios said, sliding his arms up and around the back of Sender's neck but trying to keep his lower body away from Sender's clothes. Elios had developed a bit of a uniform fetish that he'd tried, and failed, to stomp out.

"Could drop it off at the cleaner in the morning," Sender said, shrugging. He pulled Elios close and kissed him slowly. "I like it when you call me 'baby,'" he added softly.

Gods, but the man sounded so good when he used that sweet tone of voice. Elios gave in, pressing himself against Sender's body. The uniform was warm and textured against his bare skin, making him shiver and moan into the kisses. He went from half-hard to fully aroused and aching in a matter of seconds, thanks to the woven fabric rubbing against his cock.

Sender purred and cupped Elios' ass in his hands. He shifted so that Elios' cock slid against his thigh, pulling Elios close enough that the buttons and insignia of his uniform pressed into Elios' skin. That made Elios moan again, arching his body and sliding his mouth along Sender's jaw until he was nipping and licking just along the edge of Sender's collar, dampening fabric and skin alike. His hips started to move, pushing his cock against Sender's thigh, against Sender's pant leg, needing the friction.

Sender leaned in to slip the fingers of one hand between Elios' thighs, stroking up behind his balls. They'd said they weren't going to get straight to the sex, but Sender seemed bound and determined to turn Elios on. Elios probably would've been content to wait, if not for the temptation of Sender in uniform. He'd never had a uniform kink before now, and he was blaming Sender for it entirely. Or he would when he was finished rubbing himself against it, breathing out little moans against Sender's skin and biting lightly at the side of his neck.

Sender slid one hand up the line of Elios' spine to the nape of his neck, holding him with one big hand wrapped halfway around his neck, the other hand still petting between Elios' thighs. Sender was just fine with Elios having a uniform kink, by the way he was responding.

It hadn't helped the development of that particular kink that Sender had chosen to suck Elios off a few weeks before without ever getting himself out of his uniform. It hadn't been the dress uniform, but now Sender-plus-uniform was high on Elios' list of turn-ons. He rocked his hips, pushing against the hand between his legs and then against Sender's thigh, his breath coming faster.

Sender pulled his hand away from between Elios' thighs and slicked his fingers with his mouth before slipping them back, pressing a little to let Elios feel it before starting to tease one inside.

"Oh, fuck," Elios breathed, shivering and pushing back hard against Sender's finger. He hadn't really been thinking coherently about what he wanted, but now that it was there, he wanted it *now*.

Sender slid that finger into him, fucking him with it without hesitation, pushing Elios' hips forward with every thrust. The hand on the back of Elios' neck was strong, almost tight, and Elios loved the reminder of how much larger and more powerful Sender was. Elios was usually so in control of himself, but in Sender's arms, with Sender's hands driving his pleasure, he didn't have to keep it together.

It didn't take long before Elios was gasping Sender's name, shuddering and arching, begging for just a little more sensation, pressure, something that would let him come. "Please."

Sender tightened his hand on the back of Elios' neck and slid a second finger in beside the first. He moved enough to brush his mouth across Elios', breathing in Elios' breath with every short exhalation.

That was enough. Elios' pleas bled off into one long, sharp cry as he started to come, fucking himself on Sender's fingers, pushing his cock against Sender's thigh and shuddering hard. The press of fabric and hard buttons, zippers, and pins against his bare skin just made it all the more intense.

Sender fucked Elios with his fingers until Elios started to relax, then drew them out slowly, cupping the curve of Elios' ass instead, supporting him with that hand and the hand on the back of his neck. He brushed little kisses over Elios' mouth, soothing. Elios answered with breathless, delicate kisses of his own. It took him a moment to realize his eyes were closed, and he opened them to blink slowly at Sender, still feeling a little dazed and overwhelmed.

"You are so..." Sender stopped and kissed Elios lightly on the mouth. "I love you," he said.

That had been so good. "I love you, too," Elios whispered, kissing Sender back. He nuzzled at Sender's mouth, purring with pleasure and contentment.

"Ready to go watch a movie now?" Sender smiled and kissed Elios a little longer, stroking his back.

"Mmm." Elios wriggled a little and then settled his feet flat on the floor and took a tiny step back. "But maybe you should get out of your uniform first?" he suggested, his cheeks hot. It was so rare that he ever let himself go like that. He reached for the tissue box on his bedside table, pulling out a few to clean himself up.

"I think I'm ready for that." Sender finished unbuttoning his jacket and shirt and then sat down to take off his shoes and socks. That done, he stood up again to strip his clothes off, folding them partially and dropping them on the floor beside his bag.

Elios dropped the tissues into the wastebasket and stepped forward into Sender's arms once Sender was naked. Sender's cock was so hard against Elios' skin, so needy, and Sender was so patient and undemanding. "Gorgeous," he muttered, turning his head to lick a long line up the side of Sender's neck. "D'you want me to suck you now? Or d'you wanna wait?" After a short pause, he added, "Or you could fuck me."

Sender turned his head to kiss Elios on the mouth, slow and hot. He'd been laid back about it all, and Elios loved that about him, the way Sender let Elios have his way. "Knees?" he murmured against Elios' mouth. "Back? Up against the wall?"

"Yeah, yeah," Elios murmured. "The wall. I want to feel you pressed against me." And if they got into the bed, he knew they wouldn't be getting back out. "There's lube in the drawer. Condoms, too." Using condoms this time would mean less cleanup.

Sender reached into the drawer for a condom and lube, then kissed Elios again, stepping him backward toward the nearest wall. "Turn around." His voice was low, a soft growl.

The wall was solid under Elios' hands, grounding him as he turned away and stepped his feet apart, leaving himself open and exposed. He wanted this so much, wanted to feel Sender's cock pushing into him. The disconnect between them made him ache; he couldn't see, couldn't touch, and Sender wasn't touching him yet either. He took a slow breath, though, and waited.

Moments later, Sender was sliding one slick finger into him, then another. Sender kept going until he had three fingers moving smoothly in and out of Elios' body. Every push of Sender's fingers made Elios moan. He'd just come and wouldn't be able to get it up again, but that didn't mean that this didn't feel fantastic.

"So good," he mumbled, panting. "Feels so fucking good when you touch me like that. Come on, baby. Fuck me." Sender's self-control made Elios want to reach out and shake him sometimes.

Sender finally gave in. He turned Elios around and picked him up, pushing him with his back to the wall, all in one smooth movement. Sender didn't try to push into Elios' body

yet, just kissed Elios instead, hot and fierce. The pause gave Elios a chance to get comfortable, wrapping his legs high around Sender's hips and his arms tight over Sender's shoulders. He kissed Sender back wantonly, mouth opening up for Sender's tongue just like his body had for Sender's fingers. Sender was so strong, it was like Elios weighed nearly nothing to him; it was a rush to be caught up like this in his arms.

Sender shifted so that he could push into Elios, whimpering into Elios' mouth. His weight pressed Elios back against the wall, driving him in deeper still. Fuck, but the man was big in every way. Elios moaned, low and soft, the sound only tapering off after Sender's cock was all the way in and he could inhale again.

"Fuck me," he mumbled against Sender's lips. "Fuck me, fuck me..." He wanted to feel it, wanted it so bad he was writhing against the wall, against Sender, trying to force him to move.

Sender got one hand tangled in the hair at the nape of Elios' neck, the other hand tight on Elios' hip, and he kissed Elios hard as he started to move. Once Sender started, he gave Elios exactly what he wanted: deep, hard strokes that moved their bodies together.

Elios' mumbling turned into sharp moans as Sender fucked him. He kissed Sender, deep and hard, too focused on the feel of Sender's cock pushing into him to spare any thought for gentling his kisses. Hot, messy kisses, teeth bumping lips, tongues catching on teeth, breathing each others' noises of pleasure, it was all perfect sex.

The wall was hard against Elios' back, but he hardly noticed it. He wound his fingers into Sender's hair and writhed between him and the wall, begging for more. Everything felt so good, so intense, even though he'd already come once.

It wasn't long before Sender's shivers turned into unsteady shudders and his moans turned into soft, breathless cries. He rolled his hips, trying to get deeper, and his body was taut, muscles standing out in sharp relief as he slid toward orgasm.

"Come on, baby," Elios moaned, managing to pull together enough self-control that he could deliberately tighten his body around Sender's cock. "Want to feel it when you come."

Sender buried his face in Elios' hair, biting at the curve of Elios' neck, letting all of his weight pin Elios to the wall as he fucked Elios hard and fast. He came with a gasp, breathing Elios' name as his teeth slid along Elios' skin, shaking and pushing in deep until he stopped with a shudder.

Elios was left panting, arching into the thrusts until they stopped and then slumping over Sender's shoulder. "So fucking good," he murmured, like it was a revelation. "You always feel so fucking good."

Sender rubbed his cheek against Elios' shoulder in acknowledgment before he spoke; he seemed totally dazed. At least he had the presence of mind to stand a little straighter to take some of his weight off of Elios, though. "So do you," he managed to say at last.

Elios just purred and nuzzled against Sender's shoulder. After a few minutes, he nibbled at Sender's earlobe and wriggled a little, wanting to be put down. While being fucked like this was a thrill, he was much happier standing on his own two feet.

Sender laughed and moved, sliding out of Elios, then carefully letting him down. Sender held Elios with an arm around his waist, keeping Elios steady.

Settling his feet apart for balance, Elios tilted his head back and smiled up at Sender. "How about that movie?" he asked, teasing a little. They'd gotten so very, very distracted.

"Sounds good." Sender brushed a kiss over Elios' mouth and then reached for the tissues. "I think I could actually concentrate now."

Elios plucked a few tissues from Sender's hand and wiped away the last of the lube, while Sender got rid of the condom and cleaned himself up. "I'm gonna go see what I can find to watch," he said, stealing another kiss and then padding out to the living room on slightly unsteady legs.

Elios settled on a movie with reasonably realistic fight scenes and incredibly unrealistic explosions. He smiled when a very naked Sender came out of the bedroom, shifting back up off the couch so they could arrange themselves comfortably together. Sender had a couple blankets in hand, which was good because Elios' back was feeling the chill.

Sender kissed Elios and shook the blankets out, tossing them over the back of the couch so they could be tugged down over them once they were snuggled together. He put a pillow against the arm of the couch and then sprawled there rather gracefully, holding his hands out to Elios and offering himself up as a pillow.

Elios grinned and crawled over Sender's body, tucking himself down between Sender's legs and leaning back against his chest. "Mmm. Comfortable?" Elios asked, wriggling a little as he settled into place.

"Perfect." Sender tucked them in and folded Elios up in his arms. He kissed Elios on the shoulder and sighed. "Really perfect."

"Yeah," Elios agreed, feeling lazy and content. Sender was here, he was here, and he wasn't going to think about how long it had been since the last time they'd been able to curl up together like this. Elios pushed any thoughts of the past and the future out of his head and relaxed into Sender's arms, like they had all the time in the world to spend together.

Chapter Nine

This time, the black was real. Sender and the rest of Callisto squadron turned over Luna Colony and darted between the markers on the training course, heading for a set of target drones. It felt so good to be here, cradled in the Harpy's seat, HUD shimmering like a veil between his eyes and the stars.

Ozanne controlled the course; she was the one evaluating their performance. All Sender had to do was command and fly. A weight was off of his shoulders out here. The target drones flashed red on his display, and the clusters broke up into spheres, tiny comets propelled by fiery tails. Sender watched the pattern for less than a heartbeat and then opened up the radio channel to the whole squad.

"Break out, down the middle," he told them. The spheres were moving along two planes; the squad would hit more if they split up. He knew this would take them across each other's flight paths, but that was a chance he was going to have to take. They'd been at this long enough not to shoot each other. "Do what you need to do."

His half of the squad split from Macy's with a precision and timing that would make the cadets green with envy when they watched the recordings tomorrow. Omri was on his left, Glaw on his right, two weapons specialists with steady, even tempers who suited him well as wingmen in this move. Xochi and Corrado, hotter tempered, were just above him; they made a perfect pairing when it was time to go chasing across the void in full combat.

Full combat was the time when he would roll back and find Macy as soon as he could, and they would go roaring through the fray. There was nothing like plunging into a firefight with the flicker of Macy's presence at the edge of his vision. Macy was the one who let him do his job. Sender never second-guessed Macy, hadn't since he'd put Macy in that position. The flare of practice lasers hitting drones flowered as Macy's team got in range of their group first.

A shot from an unseen offensive drone lanced across the nose of Sender's Harpy, and he swore. "Change-up," he pointed out, in case anyone hadn't been paying attention. "Break." The Harpies all scattered, Xochi and Corrado rolling away, Glaw and Omri following Sender down and into the first cluster of drones. "Drop the HUDs."

The offensive drones hadn't shown up on the scanners -- the pilots were going to go have to go with bare eyes to hunt them down, taking away their ability to track each other easily. It was only practice, only a drill, but it was enough to make Sender sweat. The

unexpected was the true test of any team. He caught sight of the drone that had fired at him and was about to fire when it flared and went dark with a shot from Omri's guns.

Sender locked sight on a target drone instead, but as he did, it disappeared from his scanners and a bolt of light flashed from the vicinity toward Corrado. "Acid, move," he snapped. Corrado fired his thrusters and skipped out of the way as Sender nailed the drone with three shots, the last of which hit enough to make it flare up and fall dark again.

It was nothing less than hell. Target drones appeared and disappeared on the scanners, firing and then fading away. Dead drones revived to fire on them from behind without warning, and there was no way to eliminate them entirely. It would be one thing if they were manned ships, but they were little balls of machinery with thrusters, less than a tenth the size of a Harpy, and the Harpies were tiny by space-going standards. Twenty minutes later, they were still up to their ears in the damn things when Sender made the call.

"Machine guns on short-burst. Anyone shoots each other, I will kill you myself." There was nothing prohibiting him from using live projectiles of that size in practice combat. Anything else was out of the question. If Ozanne had a problem with it, she could take it up with him. This wasn't ending, and he had no script for it other than to neutralize all targets.

The first drone shattered with a burst from Macy's guns, and he whooped triumphantly. Sender cut across to shoot out another drone from behind him before it turned offensive and shot him in the ass. "Pay attention, Ace," he grumbled. Some days Macy was worse than the cadets.

The hell of the previous half-hour turned into a firefight that took less than five minutes to wrap up. Sender was ready for a shower and a nap, possibly some juice and cookies. "We're clear," he said, after they'd crossed the area with an all-sensors sweep and the computers had run a count of all tracked objects. "Let's go home."

Home was back to the airlocks high on Luna. They fit in two at a time and dropped down for a landing. Sender and Macy hung back as the others went ahead. "Wonder how long it took Quirinus to call for the guns," Macy said quietly. He still sounded a little breathless.

"No idea. We'll find out tomorrow. Bellona goes up this afternoon."

Sender wouldn't be able to relax until he'd watched the recorded fight over and over again. It would take hours. He wanted to know everything they'd done right and, most importantly, everything they'd done wrong. This was as close as they'd come to real combat so far, using live rounds. That threw him off far worse than anything else.

Dropping down through the colony's atmosphere was calming, and Sender felt quieted by the time they landed. He just wanted to see the recordings. That was all. He abandoned

his Harpy to the hands of the technicians and dropped to the hangar floor in time to see Ozanne striding across it toward him.

"Now we find out whether or not I fucked up," he murmured as he heard Macy's footfalls behind him.

"You didn't." Macy's hand on his shoulder was fleeting, and then they both saluted.

Ozanne looked positively grim. "I need to speak to you, Kinnison." She nodded toward her office. "Sawyer, take over and debrief the team."

"Yes, ma'am." Macy saluted again and then loped off across the hangar toward the pilots' area.

"Ma'am?" Sender had been sure that he hadn't really fucked up, but now he didn't know. "There was no provision about not using the guns..."

"That's not it," Ozanne said. "Let's go." She led the way across the hangar and up to her office.

Ozanne's office was a spacious room that overlooked the main hangar; nothing happened down there without her knowing it. Doctor Temple, the irascible head engineer, had his office next to Ozanne's. Sender would rather be getting an earful from the fierce little man than waiting here in Ozanne's peaceful space, with her grim silence.

"Sit down, Sender," Ozanne said, pointing at a chair.

That wasn't good at all. Sender did as he was told, realizing that he was still carrying his helmet. He set it down by his feet and watched Ozanne. She didn't walk around to take her seat behind her desk; instead, she came to lean on it in front of him. He wanted to blurt out questions, reasoning for things he'd done, choices he'd made. "Ma'am?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," Ozanne began quietly, and Sender felt his life start to fall apart. "There was an accident on Themis last night. The forty-ninth line over Peterston collapsed. The news reached us today, from the Guard there, that your parents were on it."

"Katy?" It was the only word Sender could get out.

"She wasn't with them. It was the homebound train." Ozanne looked pained, and she moved to put her hand on Sender's shoulder, crouching down a little so that she was looking Sender in the eyes. "They were both killed, Sender. I don't have any details other than that."

Sender stood up so fast that Ozanne almost fell over trying to get out of his way. He ran his hands through his hair and walked to the windows where he could see the technicians

cleaning the Harpies out so that the diagnostics could be run. "Are you sure?" There were so many people on Themis, so many people who could have been on that train instead. "Their names, our names, they're common, I have two cousins named..."

"They've both been identified." Ozanne's voice was gentle, cutting across his desperate babble. "You can take a look at the identifying shots that were forwarded to me as well, if you want. But I've already made arrangements for you to go home on an emergency pass, and you can take care of all the details in person."

The world felt like it had frozen, like they stood in a moment where Sender could still say "no" and none of it would be true. His heart was pounding so loudly that he couldn't hear anything else for a moment. He knew Ozanne was talking, but he couldn't make himself listen. Instead, he leaned his forehead on the cool glass and closed his eyes.

"Sky." Ozanne's hand was on his shoulder again. "Anything you need, just let me know. We'll do anything we can from here. I'm so sorry." She sounded so sad, so maternal. "Can you be ready to go in an hour? I've got a hold on a seat on a private shuttle that's agreed to take you if you can make it."

Sender took a breath and straightened up, pushing away from the window and turning his back on the scene below. "I'll be ready, ma'am." He couldn't bring himself to look at her face. "Thank you."

"Take as long as you need there," she said. "Just let me know when you can come back."

There wasn't any question for her that he was coming back. Sender went and picked up his helmet, staring blankly at "Sky" scrawled on the side in pale blue script. "I will, ma'am," he said, once he realized that he was being rude.

"Go on." Ozanne crossed and touched the pad to open her door. "I'll get the instructions to you for your flight out, the details of your pass and all."

"Thank you, ma'am." Sender made himself look at her, and she looked as sad as she'd sounded. He wasn't sure what he felt. Blank. Numb. Horrified.

"Anything you need." Ozanne stopped him in the doorway with one hand on his arm. "I mean it, Sender. We look after our own. I'll be by to walk you down to the station."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said again, automatically. She let him go then, and he wandered out into the hall, his feet carrying him to his quarters without his mind ever knowing about it.

Sender was staring blankly at his duffle bag, trying to decide if he'd forgotten anything, when he heard the chatter of his team returning. Moments later, the door to the room he shared with Macy slid open and Macy stepped in.

"Hey, man," Macy said, sounding cautious. "You were supposed to call for using the guns; no troubles there. So, what happened?"

"My parents are dead." Sender didn't know how flat, how bare it sounded, until it was out of his mouth. He couldn't find any other way to say it, though.

There was silence, then a soft thud as Macy leaned against the door. "Fuck," he said, his voice soft. "Are you... what... is Katy okay?" Eventually he came up with a question Sender could answer.

"Yeah. She wasn't with them." Sender decided that he had everything and zipped up the bag, then checked his watch. "I have to go. Ozanne got me a flight back already." There wasn't any time to grieve, no time to feel the impact of leaving this family behind to face Themis alone.

"Now, right now?" Macy came over and grabbed the handle of the bag as Sender was reaching for it. "Alone?"

"You have to stay here and take care of the squad," Sender said, tugging gently at the handle to make Macy let go. He couldn't look at Macy right now. "I'll be fine."

"Bullshit." Macy let go of the bag and shoved Sender back from the bed, wrapping him up in a hug whether he wanted it or not.

"I have to go." Sender tried pushing away, but Macy was strong, all muscle, and it would be a fight to get away. Sender didn't have the energy for it, so he gave up and wrapped his arms around Macy in return, letting his cheek rest on Macy's shoulder. "I have to go, Ace," he said again.

"The team will be fine without me," Macy said stubbornly. He stroked Sender's back, rubbed his cheek against Sender's hair. "They can't make you go alone. You'll get lost or forget to eat or take candy from strangers."

"If I get candy, I won't forget to eat, and I can ask the strangers for directions," Sender said, without thinking about it. Arguing with Macy was something he could do -- and, Macy claimed, he had done -- in his sleep. Macy was so solid against him, so familiar and real, Sender could almost believe him when he said that Sender couldn't go without him. But Sender wasn't about to let him win this one. "I can deal."

"It's not right." Macy looked stricken when Sender pushed away, sadder than Sender could make himself feel.

"None of it is." Sender felt like he should cry while he still had the chance to do it on Macy's shoulder, but it wouldn't come. "I need to go. I set up the training schedule for the squad and for the cadets." He moved away from Macy to point at his terminal. "Don't try and handle Juventas on your own. Leave that to Skylar and Sheridan to split up. You'll see that I've broken it down here."

There was a kind of refuge in the mundane, organizational details. Sender sat down to bring up the multiple schedules, and Macy stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, paying attention as Sender talked.

"I'll take care of it all," Macy promised. He rubbed at Sender's shoulders gently, careful not to hurt the taut muscles there. "Don't even think about it."

If I don't think about it, I have to think about them, Sender thought. "I'll try not to," he said. Macy's hands felt good on his shoulders, their room felt safe, the laughter from the outer room sounded so right. This was home now. And he had to leave. He'd call Elios when he knew what was really going on. If he talked to Elios, he knew he'd fall apart. "I really have to go. Can't miss my flight."

"I'll walk you down," Macy offered.

"Stay here." Sender stood up and collected his bag, slinging it over one shoulder. "You'll need to explain what's going on and make arrangements. Take Glaw for your second," he ordered over Macy trying to protest being left behind. "He'll keep your frisky ass in line. Everyone else but Vaughn is too new, and you'll need him to run your breakdowns while you and Glaw analyze them." He took a breath and headed out to the common room, Macy on his heels.

Sender wasn't sure how he was going to tell them he had to go, but when he stepped out, they were already quiet. Ozanne stood in the doorway, hands in her pockets. "Ready to go?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." Sender looked his squad over. "I've got to go home for a few days," he said, not wanting to get into it further. "Macy's in charge. He'll explain everything." He looked over his shoulder at Macy.

"I'll take care of it." Macy looked like he'd aged five years in the last five minutes. "You go on. Don't worry about us, Sky."

"I'll be back," Sender promised. Lore looked like she was about to cry even if she didn't know why; Xochi and Vaughn didn't look much happier. He loved them all ridiculously much, Sender realized. All he wanted was to come back to them.

"We need to make the rail," Ozanne said. She gave Sender an apologetic look. "Sorry."

Sender found a grin for his squad. "Don't give Macy too much trouble. He's delicate. Be good until I come home." And then he was following Ozanne out the door, grateful that someone was there to lead the way.

"I'll keep an eye on them all," Ozanne promised as she led him down the halls of the barracks. "Just take care of yourself."

"Yes, ma'am." When there was nothing left to do, when he couldn't think, following orders was a comfort. When the orders ran out, Sender would be on his own, and he'd have to manage alone. He wasn't going to think about it until the last minute, wasn't going to think about any of it until he was away from here. He didn't want to waste a minute of numbness before reality caught up with him.

Reality found Sender on the train from Karel Station to Juden Center, after nearly a day without sleep. The train was grim and grey inside and out, stinking of rust and oil and sweat and despair. It rocked back and forth on the line with a rattle and racket that put Sender's teeth on edge. There was nowhere to sit; the Themis transit system was so overburdened that factories staggered their shifts so that citizens could get to work at all.

Sender hung onto one of the overhead loops to keep his balance and tried to ignore the stares. In his uniform, he stood out among the factory workers' jumpers and the office workers' tunics; it was impossible to disappear into his grief. He had to keep refusing tired people who kept trying to offer him a seat. It wasn't right. None of it was right.

It was hot in the car, hot with exhalations and the press of bodies. There was almost no air to breathe. The trip was nearly two hours long, not an unusual commute time for the colony. Sender's mother and father had made a trip like this twice a working day for the whole of their adult lives.

Themis was all industry; Luna was agriculture and education and science and military installations, mostly open space save for the main city. The population here was over a hundred times that of Luna, the star of the colonies. Themis was no one's star; she was a silent drudge spinning on the far side of things, turning out products like one great manufacturing machine with a billion cogs of flesh.

The train slowed at the hub of Sender's home sector, Decius, with a wail of brakes and wheels on the rail. Sender made his way to the doors, washing out into the lower levels of Decius Central with the other tired passengers. Most of them were crossing the platforms to make their connections; Sender was headed for the lifts that wound upward and into the workings of the city administration.

The map on his datapad was the only thing that kept Sender from getting lost inside what was an office building the size of an entire block of Selene City on Luna. Finally, he found his way to the Directorate for Family Affairs, a plaza halfway up the Center. There

was a small park at the plaza's center, fountains burbling and greenery flourishing under golden lamps. Sender could see where it led into a playground between offices, could hear children's voices, and wondered where Katy was.

The main processing office was immediately to his left, though. The office was, as with much of Themis, crowded with people waiting to be attended to. Sender took a number at the front desk, gave his name to a clerk, and then found a place to lean against the wall while he waited. He called up his papers and codes that would let him deal with his parents' deaths.

All around him, people were waiting quietly, some grieving and others anxious. A young woman with a child clinging to her hand was seated across from him; Sender tried not to think about why she was here. Themis had a strict one-child policy; a second could be a terrible strain on a family, so much so that Themis was the most common source of adopted children in the colonies. He had his datapad so he could review some of the statistics from Callisto's training session; there was that much to keep him busy and distract him from the ache of standing so long and the reality that pressed in around him and made it hard to breathe.

"Hi."

Sender was interrupted by a little voice. The child was staring up at him, head tilted back, hands on his hips. He was an adorable little boy, dark curls and bronze skin that reminded Sender of Elios. "Hi," Sender said quietly. He crouched down to be at the child's level.

"What's that?" The child pointed at the large datapad Sender was working on. Sender had forgotten what it was like to be without at least a small one.

"That's my work," he said. "Do you want to see?"

"Jacob," the woman hissed. "Leave the nice man alone."

"It's okay." Sender gave her a reassuring smile. There was something familiar about her, but it could just have been the familiar look of Themis women, the long braided hair and pale skin and tired eyes that reminded him of his mother. "Here." He pulled up a loop of the Harpies flying in formation out in space, nothing that wouldn't have made the news at some point.

"That's outside." Jacob pointed at the screen.

"Yep." Sender smiled at him. "That's outside over Luna. See?" He thumbed the viewing angle to show the ships sweeping past a glowing curve of Luna's shields.

"Fast." Jacob leaned against Sender, watching with wide eyes. "This a show?"

Sender couldn't help laughing. "No. This is my work." He thumbed the angle pad again and zoomed in on the lead Harpy. "That's my ship."

"You fly it?" Jacob was suitably impressed, looking at Sender with awe.

"I do. That's my job. And I teach other people how to fly." Sender guessed that the boy was older than Katy by a year or two, an age he could remember being.

"Cool." Jacob looked back in time to watch Sender's Harpy slip past Macy's, close enough that they could almost have reached out and touched each other, and he startled. "That was close! You almost ran into that guy."

"That's my best friend," Sender said, laughing quietly. "I would never run into him, and he would never run into me. That's why we can do that. We're never afraid."

"That's crazy." Jacob sounded more envious than critical, though.

"It is, a little," Sender admitted. "But we make sure we know what we're doing before we go fooling around. You have to take a lot of classes, a lot of tests."

"School." Jacob's tone and the twist of his expression spoke volumes.

"You got it. It took me a year to learn how to do that." Sender tapped the screen as his Harpy rolled over two and a half times and took a run at a target, belly toward the camera. He remembered that move, Luna over his head and all of space below him. He loved flying like that.

"Cool," Jacob breathed, leaning into Sender again. "You live there?"

"I live where the commander tells me to live," Sender said honestly. "But I live there for now." He wondered if his life would have been different if it had ever occurred to him as child that he could escape Themis and flee to a better place. He might have ended up where he was right now, but maybe he would have been happier, more hopeful.

"Lieutenant Kinnison?" The voice came from the front of the office. Sender was surprised; he'd expected to be here for hours. Then he felt terribly guilty because he realized they'd probably moved him up to the front of the queue because of his rank.

"Take care." Sender straightened and ruffled Jacob's hair, then shouldered his bag.

"Bye." Jacob went skittering back across the office to his mother. She gave Sender a smile, and he couldn't tell whether it was sad or grateful. Maybe it was both; they often went hand in hand on Themis.

The man behind the desk looked like time had faded him to the same soft grey as his office. Once, he might have been Sender's height, but now he was bent, shoulders curled inward. "Lieutenant Kinnison," he said softly, his voice thin. "I am Notary Aloysius. Your parents, Farther and Arcadia Kinnison, were killed in the derailment accident above Peterston two days past, leaving one minor child and some assets. You will need to give proof of your identity, and then take custody of the bodies. I also have on file their last will and testament, made jointly and within the last five years." He pushed an ancient palm scanner across to Sender.

"Where is Katy?" Sender took the scanner and pressed his hand to it, waiting while it read his palm and sent the information back to the central database for confirmation. Life on Themis felt as though it were being played back to him at half-speed.

"The minor child is in custody here at the Directorate," Aloysius said. He took the scanner back and set it aside, waiting for a response. "I am going to assume that the Colonial Guard has not erroneously sent me the wrong Lieutenant Kinnison and proceed with the confirmations." He laughed a little, as though he'd made a joke, and then turned the screen of his terminal around. "Here is the viewer that will allow you to confirm the identity of the deceased persons."

"I want to see them," Sender said, feeling anger surge up inside him. He wanted to break the screen, break the cheap, listing desk between them, break the grey little man, and keep moving until he'd torn everything down between him and his family. "Not on a screen."

Aloysius blinked, fixing Sender with a watery-blue glare. "You may see them in person once the confirmations are complete and you take custody of the bodies." He tapped a button on his console and a split-screen picture came up without further warning.

There was death you knew, and then there was death that was a stranger. Sender had seen the dead before, dead he knew, dead he had seen die, and he knew that death. His parents looked waxen, freshly washed, and cold. That death was a stranger to him. He wanted to go and cover them with warm blankets, dab their colorless mouths with hot tea until they woke.

"Are these the persons in question, namely Farther Paul Kinnison and Arcadia Maria Kinnison?"

"Yes." Sender felt like the grey of Themis was seeping into him and sucking away his grief. Accidents happened. They were good people. They were with God now. *All things have a purpose*. They wouldn't want him to be unhappy. Except that he was.

"And we can see that you are, indeed, Sender Joseph Kinnison. The minor child will be available for collection between the hours of four and six this evening." Aloysius turned the terminal screen back to him, taking the image of Sender's parents away. "I will release to you a recording of your parents' last will and testament. You are the sole heir and

executor of their estate. What you do with it and the minor child is up to you, as there was no provision for her to be given to the state or to another citizen."

"Can I take her off Themis with me?" He could take Katy away; he could take her home to Luna where she could play under the blue arch of the artificial sky and know a little bit of freedom.

Aloysius was busy pecking away at his console keys with spindly fingers. He didn't look up. "You will need to apply for an adoption order to remove a minor child from Themis. I will include the forms in the package you will pick up with her when you come back. If you choose not to collect the minor child, she will remain in the custody of the Directorate for no less than two years, after which she will be eligible for colony-side adoption." Aloysius did look up now, peering over at Sender. "If you prefer to relinquish your custodial rights at any time, it would be in the child's best interest to do so while she is still young."

"I... no." Sender felt like he was going to vomit. Abandoning Katy was the last thing he wanted to do. "I want her."

"Between the hours of four and six in the evening, then." Aloysius poked a few more keys. "The relevant data has been transferred to you. I simply need your signature here." He shoved another scanner toward Sender. Sender picked it up and scrawled his name in the lighted area above the notary stamp. The scanner beeped cheerfully, and Aloysius held his hand out for it again. "My condolences on your loss," he rattled off. "Best of luck with your child. If you have any concerns, don't hesitate to consult the colony parenting database."

"Thank you," Sender said tightly, getting to his feet.

"Should you intend to re-apply for residency on Themis, you may wish to place a deposit on your familial home as soon as possible, to renew the lease in your name," Aloysius added helpfully. "It will be reassigned within twelve days of their deaths."

"I'll keep that in mind." Sender wanted nothing more than to grab Katy and go, but he had things to attend to first, like his parents' funeral. That they were dead was still surreal. "Thank you again."

He pushed through the door and followed the green arrows toward the exit, back through the waiting room where he'd entered. The boy he'd spoken to was gone, and Sender wondered what he and his mother had been there for. Was she a widow, was she giving him up, was she carrying a baby she was arranging to give up? What could he do even if he knew? The possibilities were all dull and grim.

Going outside, such as it was, standing in the little indoor park, did little to lift the weight off of Sender's chest. The air was so stale here; it was like all the oxygen had been sucked out of it by a billion bodies struggling to survive. He tried not to think about it. The

morgue was so far down it might as well have been in Hell. He had to go there first, to find his parents.

The morgue was cold from the moment Sender stepped off of the lift, and it was dark, probably another energy conserving measure. The colony was constantly in a state of energy emergency. This was just another modular office with floors that could be hosed down: nothing special. He pushed his hands into his pockets and found the desk where a young woman was working, dressed in an insulated jumper. A little heat lamp on her desk kept her fingers from freezing.

"Can I help you, sir?" She rubbed her hands together and gave him a warm smile. Her pale cheeks were flushed with the cold, but her eyes were bright and alive.

"I'm here to identify and make arrangements for the Kinnisons," he said. The impact of it hit him after he'd spoken, and the heat of tears filled his head and knotted up his throat.

"Just a moment." She typed the name into her console, her fingers flying far faster than the aging notary's. "Yes. Farther and Arcadia, the rail crash."

"Can you tell me how they died?" No one had told him yet. Sender knew his voice was rough, cracking, and he couldn't stop it yet.

"I can, yes. Just a moment and I'll have their bodies brought out from the crypts and into a private viewing chamber." She gave him a sympathetic look. "While we're waiting, have you made arrangements for their burials?"

There was no burial as such on Themis. Land simply didn't exist in that quantity, not on Themis or on any of the other Lagrange Point colonies. Luna had been built on Earth's moon, so it had been able to grow over the years, but the Lagrange Point colonies were wholly manmade in a variation on the Stanford Torus design and couldn't be expanded, no matter how the populations grew.

Each colony made its own accommodations for burial based on its population's needs. On Themis, that meant a choice between having the bodies loaded into pods that would, when the carrier was full, be launched toward the sun, having the bodies cremated and the ashes stored in one of the "cemeteries" on the underside of Themis, or having them cremated and keeping the ashes. Sender didn't plan to stay here forever, though they might want to.

"Cremation. And I'll take possession of the remains." He could change his mind later and have them interred before he left. Maybe he would wait until Katy was older and they could choose to do it together.

"You'll just need to sign here." She passed over another signature pad, and Sender scrawled his name on it again. When he was done, she took it back and pressed a button that brought a "please wait" sign up on her desk. "Let's go, then."

Sender followed her down one darkened hall after another until he figured out that they were following the little row of blue lights down near the floor. There were five different colors. Technicians and morticians passed them here and there, some bearing equipment or files, others pushing gurneys with body bags.

"I'm Aimee," the girl said as they walked. "I'm also a grief counselor. If there's anything I can do for you right now, just let me know."

In the near-dark, Sender could just make out her smile and the sympathy on her face. "Thank you, but I think I'll be fine. I just need to get home."

"Home?" Aimee stopped outside a set of double doors; behind them there was a soft glow.

"Luna," Sender explained. "With the Colonial Guard."

"Oh." Her expression changed a little and she looked at him with more interest. "That's what the uniform is about, then. Your parents must have been very proud of you." She pushed open one of the doors and gestured for him to go in.

"I hope so." Were they? Sender would never know now.

"Would you like me to stay?" There were two gurneys in the room, side by side, draped with white cloths marked with a large gold cross and hemmed in dark red. Aimee moved to turn back the coverings one at a time.

"No, thank you. You said you knew how they died?" Sender couldn't bring himself to go closer just yet. He let his bag slip to the floor and realized that his hands were trembling.

"Yes." Aimee consulted a small reader that hung from a cord around her neck. "Farther Paul Kinnison, age forty-seven, primary cause of death was a closed head injury. Arcadia Maria Kinnison, age forty-one, primary cause of death was suffocation due to compression."

"Thank you." Sender felt like he was made of ice, and the chill in the room had little to do with it. His father's death might have been fairly quick. His mother, though... he walked over to see her.

She looked so terribly young. Like she was sleeping. Like Lore when she was sleeping, soft skin and long, dark braids. Next to her, his father looked stern and calm, his jawline and mouth hidden behind his beard. Sender moved the sheets so that he could take her hand in his. He had never seen it without her wedding ring, without the thin band of gold

that joined her to his father. That wasn't right. It was with her personal effects, if he was lucky.

Her hand in his blurred, and Sender realized that his eyes were full of tears. He had no idea if Aimee was still in the room with him.

"I'm sorry, Mama," Sender said. His voice shook and his tears fell on her white hand and arm. "I wish I was there. I hope it didn't hurt too much." If he'd been there with them, maybe he'd have been able to save them. "I missed you. I'm sorry I wasn't a better son." Maybe it was all his fault, this awful thing. Sender kissed the back of her hand and then her forehead. "I'll take care of Katy, Mama," he promised.

He hadn't hung onto her this hard when it had been time for him to leave Themis to go to the training program. She'd hung onto him like he was tearing her heart out by leaving, but all he'd been able to think of was getting away. He'd been so desperate to leave so he could breathe, so he could live without humiliating them with what he was.

"I'm sorry." It was all he had to say now. He put his face down beside hers, and she smelled of disinfectant instead of her harsh shampoo and cheap perfume. "Mama, I'm so sorry." His tears made her cheeks wet as though she were crying with him. There was no bringing her back, and no comfort from the God that didn't love him, no answer to the questions he had now.

Sender pulled away before his knees gave out entirely and he fell to pieces. The last thing he needed was for them to call a priest in to calm him. He let go of his mother's hand and wiped her face, and then walked around to say goodbye to his father. It was surreal to see his father looking so peaceful, his big hands still at last folded on his chest. There was only a little silver in his father's hair, at the temples, but his beard was streaked with it.

"I'm sorry, Papa," Sender said, calmer now. "I wish I could have been a better son to you." Papa would only accept so much money from Sender every month, enough to pay for Katy to have nice things and for her to have a little room of her own, not enough for them to move. "I wish you'd let me." Maybe if they hadn't been living in the old neighborhood, they'd still be alive. Maybe. The past was clustered with so many possibilities that would never become anything but regrets. "I love you." He leaned over and kissed his father on the forehead, touched the hands that had held him, taught him, disciplined him over the years.

It was time to say goodbye to them, to step away and let the morticians finish their task of reducing them to the dust and ash from which they'd come. Sender couldn't make himself move. If he just stood here, if he never moved again, it was as though they'd still be there. Their bodies were whole, just waiting for them to move back in. It had all been some terrible mistake, some warning shot from God to get Sender to take His word seriously.

If Sender would do anything, everything God wanted, maybe he'd send Sender's parents back to their bodies, and then they could sit up and hug him and tell him it was all going

to be okay. Sender felt himself shaking, and he couldn't make it stop. He was sleep-deprived and starving and his head was trying to tell him that he was really doing the killing by sending them off to the incinerators. If he didn't give the word, they could always come home.

But it didn't work that way. Sender tucked his father's hands back under the covers and tugged them up around his broad shoulders. "Goodbye, Papa. Go with God." God would be glad to see Sender's father, Sender hoped, willing to forgive him and Sender's mother for having such a bad son. Sender kissed his father goodbye and stepped away.

It was harder with his mother. Sender kissed her hands and tucked her in under her white covering. He pulled his knife out of his pocket and teased a long strand of her dark hair out of one of her braids with careful fingers so he could cut it off and coil it up, putting it away in his breast pocket. Someday, he would buy Katy a locket and put that lock of hair in it for her to remember her mother by. Sender rearranged her hair so that she still looked the way he remembered and kissed her goodbye. "Go with God, Mama. I love you."

There was nothing more to do, nothing more to say. Sender could have had all the time in the world, but it wouldn't have been enough. He wiped his face on a handkerchief he found shoved in one of his pockets and tried to compose himself. This wasn't happening.

He should have brought Macy with him. He should have brought Elios with him. There was no way he could have known how hard this was going to be. He wanted to find Ozanne and ask her to be sure that he'd done everything he could. But it was just him here in this cold room with his parents' bodies, and it was time to go. Sender squared his shoulders and made himself pick up his bag and turn around.

Aimee was waiting for him in the hall, looking concerned. "Do you need anything?"

"No, thank you. I'll wait for it to be over." Sender hoped that his voice would stop breaking soon.

"I'll have it taken care of right now." Aimee reached out and patted Sender's arm. "There's a waiting room on your right back at the lobby. I'll find you there." She left him there, disappearing back into the room with Sender's parents.

Sender wanted to follow her, to tell her to stop, to wait just a moment longer. He watched through the door as she covered their faces up, getting one last glimpse of them. They were together now, he knew. And Katy would see them again some day; he knew that, too. He wouldn't, though. He knew that as well. A technician came in and helped Aimee wheel both gurneys out the other doors.

Long after the room was empty, Sender stood there in the darkened hall and stared into the glass, catching sight of his own tear-stained face in it at last. That was enough to make him turn away. He couldn't stand to look at himself right now. He followed the

little blue glows through the dark, back toward what other light there was, where he waited for Aimee to bring him the twin urns that held the last of his parents.

Chapter Ten

By four o'clock, Sender was ready to just go back to Luna, leaving everything behind but Katy. The urns containing his parents' ashes had taken three hours to be delivered to him, three hours in which he'd paced the waiting room, filled out an adoption petition, stared blindly at his datapad, and thumbed through one of several Books of the Shepherd stacked on a side table. No matter what technology brought, Books of the Shepherd had always been available in paper. Sender owned one; his mother had made sure he'd taken it with him when he went to Luna. He hadn't touched it in years. Now, on his way to collect his sister, he wondered if that had been a terrible mistake. Once he had Katy back, he wouldn't make that same mistake again.

"I'm here to pick up Katy Kinnison," he told the matron in the Children's Hall of the Directorate. It felt like he was back in school, with the sterile white halls hung with children's art and the matrons and masters all in uniform. The matron herself was tall and broad-shouldered, steel-grey hair pulled back under her wimple; Themis bred strong workers, if nothing else.

"Kinnison, Katharina Arcadia," the matron said, referring to a small datapad. "The orders of custody have been filled?"

"Yes." Sender prayed that there hadn't been a database breakdown or anything. He could be stuck on Themis for days waiting for a genetic test to prove their relationship or, worse, he could lose Katy entirely. "I was at the Directorate this morning to have my identity confirmed." Or there could be a whole world of paperwork no one had told him about.

"I'll fetch the child," the matron said, after a quick glimpse at Sender's credentials.

Now, it felt wrong that it should be so easy. What if someone else had come for Katy? Sender wondered what would have happened then. Fortunately, it wasn't as though anyone here was after an extra child. He paced the lobby of the Children's Hall, listening to the bright little voices in the distance and the occasional cry of an infant.

Children were only here temporarily; after two weeks, they were moved to other homes on Themis, children's homes. The idea of Katy living in one was unbearable. Sender had been in one once, visiting a school friend. It had made his family's one-bedroom apartment look less small and dingy when Sender went home after. Eight boys to a room, six rooms to the house, and only a few matrons to look after them all.

The patter of little feet rushing his way made Sender lose his place in his memories, jerked back to the present.

"Sen!" It had been months since he'd seen her in person, and every time he was amazed that she remembered who he was and how much she'd grown. Katy pulled away from the matron and came racing to him, blonde braids bouncing, arms out wide to hug him.

Sender swept her up in a hug -- she felt like a feather, she was so small -- and kissed her cheek and hair. "Katy," he murmured. "Hi, sweetheart."

"I missed you." Katy's little arms were so tight around his neck that Sender could hardly breathe. "Sen, you come home." It was half-demand, half-question.

"Yeah, I'm home. We're both going home." Where that was, exactly, was uncertain. What Sender was sure of was that they were together, and everything would work out as long as that was true.

"Mama and Papa have to come home." Katy pressed her cheek against Sender's neck and hung on as he tried to sign the datapad for her release into his custody. There was no way he was putting her down.

"They can't, sweetheart." Sender got the forms signed, and one of the young sisters, a girl in her teens all dressed in white, brought Sender a bag that had Katy's things.

"Why not?" Katy snuffled and kicked Sender in the hip. "They has to come home."

"Our policy is to allow the new guardian to explain these circumstances," the matron said, handing Sender his bag to shoulder along with Katy's. "Provided they arrive within a fortnight."

"Thanks." Sender wasn't sure if he was really grateful or not. "Is that everything?" It was barely four-thirty and he was done here.

"Have you entered your petition to adopt?" the matron asked, keeping her voice low.

"Earlier, yes." Sender tried to concentrate in spite of the wriggling, kicking, snuffling child on his hip. How anyone did this was beyond him. Maybe Elios would know.

"It should be reviewed and processed within the week, as this is an intrafamily adoption." The matron gave Sender what was meant to be a warm smile. "Someone will come to interview you, but that will be all."

"Thank you, matron." Sender remembered to be polite at the last minute. He shifted Katy on his hip -- she was whimpering about wanting to eat -- and she kneed him in the kidney instead.

"Don't forget to contact the colony parenting database if you have any concerns," the matron reminded him.

"I won't. Thank you." Sender headed for the doors, one arm full of Katy, the other full of their things, including the carefully wrapped urns containing their parents' ashes. She didn't even know.

"I want Mama," Katy said, as soon as they were outside. "Are we going to see Mama?"

There was no easy way to do this, no good time. Sender sat down on a bench in the little park inside this building locked inside the architecture of Themis, this tiny reminder of how things had once been, and found a chocolate bar in one of the pockets of his bag. He gave that to Katy and let her share a bottle of water with him, and she seemed to perk up.

"Better?" There was chocolate smeared on her chin, and Sender wet a handkerchief with the last of the water to wipe Katy's face and hands. She sputtered at the indignity but let him wash her clean.

"Can we see Mama now?" Katy looked hopeful. She picked up the handkerchief to dry her little hands on the hem. "I all clean."

"Katy, sweetheart, we can't see Mama." Maybe he should have waited, should have asked if they'd let her see their parents' bodies, but maybe that would be too much for her. It was better to tell her here, under the green trees, by the blue fountains.

Katy's face crumpled and her lip twitched. "I want Mama. Where is she?"

"Katy, Mama and Papa were in an accident. There was a bad accident." Sender smoothed back her hair and looked down at her worried little face. "Mama and Papa are dead, Katy. Their bodies got hurt real bad and so God took their spirits away to Heaven and they don't hurt anymore."

Katy's eyes filled with tears, and she gulped, looking away from Sender's face to tug at the insignia on his uniform jacket. "God makes them better, though."

Sender kissed her hair and wiped away the tears that were falling down her cheeks. "Not this time, Katy. When people's bodies get hurt too bad, their spirits can't stay here anymore, and they go away to be with God."

"I want to go, too." Katy was crying now, little hiccupping sobs, and Sender thought his heart was going to break. "I want them."

"I do, too," Sender said, trying not to break down and cry as well, hoping his voice was steady enough so that his emotions wouldn't frighten her. "I miss them lots already. But they can't come back, and we can't go there. Not yet."

"When?" Katy slumped against Sender's arm, pushing her face between his arm and chest, sobbing. "When do I see Mama?"

"When it's time for you to go, probably not for a long, long time." Sender petted her hair and rocked her gently. "But Mama can see you. Mama will be looking after you from Heaven. I promise. Mama loves you so much, and Papa, too. They can see you right now. Mama and Papa can see us both. We just can't see them."

"Tell them come back," Katy wailed. "I want them back." She pushed away from Sender to glare up at him, flushed and furious. "You tell them stop it."

"I wish I could, sweetheart," Sender said. He tried to stroke her hair again, but she pushed his hand away.

"You make your plane go up high-high and get them," Katy said, wiping her face on her sleeve. "Mama said you go high like to Heaven. You go in your plane now."

"I can't, Katy." Sender swallowed hard and blinked back tears. If only it were so easy. "It doesn't work that way. People who die don't come back. They have to be apart from us until it's our turn to die."

"But that's too long!" Katy burst into tears again. "I want her now."

"I know." Sender gave up on making sense of it for her and just wrapped his arms around her. "I do, too. But I'm here, and we're going to be okay."

Katy raged and cried so long that Sender was afraid she was going to be sick. He tried to offer her bites of a protein bar, but she would have none of it. Sender sat on the bench under the beautiful dwarf trees and held Katy, enduring her bursts of fury with all the little kicks and punches, until she cried herself to sleep on his shoulder.

He was surprised that she had grasped the tragedy so quickly and completely. It was as though she'd known about it already, somewhere in her child's mind, and his presence, his words, made her theories real. Perhaps she had known. People talked around children, forgetting that little ones like Katy were often far wiser than their years suggested.

Once she was still and quiet, Sender got up carefully and gathered their things, then headed for the lift. The ride home would be nearly four hours on the train, and Sender wanted to get most of it done while she was asleep. On the platform, jostled by the sea of bodies moving from point to point, Sender realized that part of him had never really left, that Themis still felt like home. It was just a home he'd never wanted to have.

The apartment his parents and Katy had lived in was smaller than the lounge that Callisto shared. There was a room for her, though, little more than an alcove with a door, and a

room for them, and the main living area. For this area of Themis, that was luxury. Sender found dinner in the freezer, the packages marked with his mother's handwriting. It felt like he was babysitting, like she would be back any time now. She would scold him for making dinner himself, for doing her job.

Everything he did, he did with Katy on his hip. She wailed when he tried to leave her outside the bathroom so he could simply take a piss, so he brought her in with him and managed one-handed, her little face pushed into his neck because she didn't want to see anything "yucky." Sender would have given a great deal for an extra pair of hands.

He managed to feed her that way, too, and get her ready for bed. She wouldn't stay in her room, growing hysterical at the prospect, so he wrapped her up in a blanket and let her sleep on his lap while he read and answered the mail in the family inbox.

His parents were part of a large and very connected extended family through the church, and there were literally hundreds of condolences and offers of assistance addressed to Sender. There were even offers from some families to take Katy in. While Sender would never have given her up, those touched him deeply, that someone would take on the terrible taxation burden for an extra child or give up the opportunity to have a child of their own.

Once he was sure Katy was sound asleep, there was the deacon to call, to arrange a funeral service for his parents. He knew the deacon, he discovered: Erland, a schoolmate who'd been two terms ahead of him. Handsome and serious, Erland had been one of Sender's first crushes. There had been nothing sexual about it then, just a quiet awe at Erland's beauty and prowess at sport, as well as his pious and sincere devotion to the church.

Nothing had changed, really. Erland was as beautiful as ever, and as kind and devout. It was soothing, in a way.

"Tomorrow evening at mass," Erland said, his expression sad. "Father Benedict will be presiding; he was close to your parents for many years. I'm so sorry for your loss, Sender."

"Thank you." Sender sighed and accommodated Katy as she wriggled one arm out of her blanket. "At least I still have her." He gave Katy a kiss on her sweaty brow.

"Indeed. I didn't hear if you'd married yet or not." Erland looked concerned.

"No." Sender shook his head and tried not to blush. Talking to a priest, even a junior one, about his personal life was not an obstacle he was prepared to navigate right now. "I've been busy."

"Of course. Are you sure you wouldn't rather her be raised properly?" Erland steeped his fingers and rested his chin on them. "We have several families who are willing to take her in. She's a lovely child, and precocious as well."

"I'm sure I'll manage." The idea of anyone taking Katy from him was unbearable. "I have friends on Luna, my squad and others. I won't be doing it alone."

"You plan to take her from Themis?" Erland looked disapproving now, no longer sad or worried. "Are you sure that's wise? You've been out there, Sender. It's one thing for a grown man to leave to make his living. There are places that are not proper for a child to be brought up. Heathens and pagans and all manner of sinners."

"I know." Oh, God, Sender knew. And he loved so many of them. He craved Elios' touch and voice and kiss right now so much that it hurt. "I'll make sure to raise her the way my parents would have wanted." He could do that, somehow.

Erland nodded, not quite placated. "See that you do, Sender. She's one of God's children. You must safeguard her against the world. It's a great burden, to raise a child well, as your parents did for you."

"I will." Sender looked down at Katy sleeping in his arms, and the enormity of it hit him all at once. Erland was right. He couldn't just take Katy out into the world. She could make her choices when she was grown, as he had, but it was his duty to raise her well. "I will raise her well. I couldn't dishonor my parents by doing otherwise."

"You've always been a good person, Sender." Erland gave him a smile now. "God bless you." He made the sign of the cross over the screen. "I'll see to it that all the arrangements for the mass are made. My sister and the other women can see to the reception afterwards in the church hall."

"Thank you. I don't know what else to say." Having any kind of familiar smile, any kind of support here, was such a relief.

"Don't say anything to me," Erland said, still smiling. "Talk to God, if you want to give thanks to anyone right now. He is watching over you, still."

"I will," Sender promised. Maybe he would. He and God weren't on speaking terms, but for the sake of his parents, he could try. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"I look forward to it," Erland said. "God bless."

With that, the connection went dark and Sender sagged back in the seat with Katy in his arms. He took her to the couch and cautiously tucked her in. She stayed asleep, so he crept off to the shower where he stripped down and locked himself in the little cubicle.

The water was hot, if harsh and smelling of chemicals. The noise of it hitting the sides of the cubicle covered up the sound of Sender's sobs. He sank down to sit on the cold, textured acrylic with his head in his hands and let himself cry. He was going to have to get it over with sooner or later. He couldn't be crying in front of Katy.

When he was done, he dried off and covered himself up with his father's faded grey dressing gown so he could go and find some pajamas. The robe smelled like his father, so familiar it made tears come to his eyes again. Sender stood there and hugged himself, letting himself feel the closeness. His father hadn't hugged him since he was a child, but Sender remembered the exact feel of it.

"I'm sorry," he said, keeping his voice down so that he wouldn't wake Katy.

Their will was still waiting to be viewed, but Sender didn't know how much more he could take tonight. What he wanted was to curl up with Elios and put his head on Elios' chest. He would wait to watch the will tomorrow, after the funeral. One thing at a time.

There was nowhere to sleep on the couch with Katy, so Sender changed into his pajamas and stretched out in his father's worn chair with a blanket that his mother had made. He dozed for a while and then woke to see the time. Maybe Elios would be home and awake. He could always try.

It wasn't like Sender not to answer calls or emails, but Elios tried not to worry. If the new version of the Harpy had been released, Sender would be busy with the changes, Elios told himself. He tried to ignore the chill every time he checked his messages and found nothing from Sender, over and over again. Three days, and he'd heard nothing.

Elios pushed his chair back from his desk in his apartment and made himself get up and get ready for bed. Checking over and over again for new messages wasn't getting his work done and it was only making that cold fear of abandonment in the pit of his stomach spread. He turned off his viewing screen and headed for the bedroom. He'd gotten his shirt off when the alert for an incoming call hummed softly from the datapad in his pocket.

Yanking the shirt back on, Elios dashed out to answer it. He collapsed onto the couch, flipped the coffee-table screen open, and tapped the receive symbol. Sender was on the other end of the line, and the delay count at the bottom of the screen told Elios that he was calling from a long way away. Themis. And he looked terrible.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Suddenly the issue of Elios' insecurities seemed terribly small.

"I'm sorry I haven't called." Sender ran a hand through his hair, a familiar gesture that tugged at Elios' heart to see it again. "There was an accident here on Themis. I had to come back for Katy."

Elios pieced it together. The accident on Themis had made the news -- dozens of people killed -- and it hadn't even crossed Elios' mind that it would affect him in any way. He'd simply looked the other way until something of interest came on the viewer. "Is she okay? Are you okay?"

Sender nodded and then slumped in his chair. "My parents are dead." His expression was as empty as his voice, and Elios wanted to reach through the screen, across all those miles, and touch him.

"I'm so sorry." The words were utterly insufficient. "Was Katy with them?"

"She's fine." Sender leaned out of the way and tapped the focus on the old call terminal so that Elios could see the little girl curled up with her stuffed bunny on the couch behind him. Katy was a tiny, pale blonde child with Sender's curls grown out long and gone wild from her sleeping. Her lower lip was pushed out in a pout and her little brow was furrowed, even in her sleep. "See?"

Katie was precious, even sleeping, even with unhappiness still imprinted on her pretty features. "Is there anything you need? Anything I can do from here?"

Sender shook his head as he settled back into his seat and changed the focus so that Elios could see his face. "I wish there were," he admitted. "The funeral is tomorrow."

"When are you... I mean, are you coming home?" Elios hadn't thought of the consequences until the question slipped out of his mouth. Then he was cold all the way through. If Sender didn't come back, Elios had no idea what he'd do.

"Tomorrow, or the day after, depending on how long it takes me to sort out my parents' affairs." Sender rubbed both hands over his face and took a deep breath. "I haven't even watched their will," he said quietly. "If I do it tonight, I don't know if it'll be too hard to get through tomorrow."

He was coming back. Elios felt weak with relief in the same moment that his heart ached for how sad and tired Sender sounded. "Then wait. You don't need to know any of it right away." Elios tried to speak with all the tenderness that was welling up inside him right now. His words were the only things that could touch Sender from here, so he wanted to make the most of them. "You know you can call me anytime. It doesn't matter when. I love you, baby."

Sender's expression twisted as though he were about to break down right then, but he shook his head and took a breath that sounded like it hurt. "I will," he said "I'm just trying to get through this as fast as possible so I can get back, so I can do my job."

Elios knew him well enough to understand that work would be a kind of panacea, that Sender would use all the stress and exhaustion of his tasks to carry him through the pain

of losing his parents. It might not be the way that Elios would have chosen for Sender, but he had to respect the way the man had learned to live his life. "Are you bringing Katy back with you?"

"I'm going to try. There's paperwork," Sender waved a hand vaguely, "I'll have to see whether or not Ozanne can help me. Legally, she's mine, but I don't know if I can take her off of Themis."

That made Elios' chest clench again. "They have to let you come back," he said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. This was not about him, this was about Sender, and as much as it would devastate Elios for Sender not come back, it would be worse for Sender to be trapped on Themis. "You're invaluable to the project. You know they'll do anything they can to get you back."

"I'm counting on it," Sender said. "Katy and I can live in family residence together, and I can continue my work. At the very least, they need me to finish training the cadets before the *Auriga* leaves."

It wasn't nearly enough assurance, but it was all that Elios had for now. "You can call me," he said. "I can meet you at the port when you come in."

"I'll probably be coming in by military transport," Sender said. "Otherwise, I'll call you and let you know."

"Okay," Elios said, nodding. He should've known that Sender would be private with his pain, but it didn't help his sense of isolation. "If it makes you feel any better, Doc mentioned that the new funding would be coming through. That means you'll be getting your new Harpies soon."

Sender mustered up a smile for Elios and, even though he was tired and unshaven, he looked beautiful. Elios was reminded every once in awhile, and it startled him every time, how beautiful Sender was. "It'll give me something to do," he said. A few days ago the news would have made him ecstatic, but Elios would settle for a smile right now. Sender looked over his shoulder and then back at Elios. "I should go. I need to try and sleep, or pack her things if I can't."

Elios wanted to stay on the line, to stay up all night even if Sender fell asleep, but he knew they couldn't do that. He would have been happy to pay the cost of the call between Themis and Luna, but talking could wake Katy, and he didn't want to make things any harder for Sender. "Okay, baby," he said. He couldn't help reaching out and brushing his fingers across the screen as though he were touching Sender's lips. "I'm so sorry about your parents. Call me if you need anything, please."

Sender nodded and came up with another one of those smiles for Elios. "I will," he said. "I love you, Elios."

"I love you, too, baby." Just hearing it made Elios feel a little better. Before Elios was ready for it, Sender closed the connection and Elios was left staring at a blank screen.

It felt as though he'd lost something, even if he couldn't say what. Elios wrapped his arms around himself and watched the screen as though he could summon Sender's image back up with his longing alone. And then he felt guilty. This wasn't about him. This was about Sender and about a little girl who had just lost her Mama and her Papa and whose world would never be the same.

Elios closed the videophone and got to his feet. There was no way he was going to be able to sleep now. In the kitchen, he started to make himself a cup of tea and tried to run over all the possible scenarios for the future in his head. There was no way that Sender would be able to keep his position on the *Auriga* while raising a child on his own.

Elios sat down at the kitchen table and waited for the kettle to boil. Regulations demanded that personnel in high-risk positions not be solely responsible for minor children. The *Auriga* was intended to be a family vessel, but there were no provisions for orphans outside of the most extreme emergencies. If Sender intended to go on the expedition, he would need a partner capable of caring for Katy.

It only made sense that Elios should be that partner; at least, Elios hoped that it made sense. They had never talked about the future, not like that. There was no question that they intended to continue their relationship, but this was completely unexpected. When the kettle boiled, Elios got up to make the tea.

He felt guilty, irrationally guilty, and selfish. This could be everything he ever wanted all wrapped up in one horrible accident. He could have Sender, he could have that sweet little girl who looked so much like Sender to raise, and he could have the family that Aric had stolen from him.

Elios finished making his tea and tidied up. None of this was anything that he could've brought on Sender's family, and they wouldn't appreciate any offerings he might make to Pluto or Proserpina on their behalf. Still, he felt guilty. Somewhere, deep inside, he had disliked them fiercely, and he wondered if he would have felt differently if they'd ever met.

Now, he would never know. Now, Sender would never know whether or not they would have forgiven him for who he was. That thought alone, that Sender should feel the need to seek forgiveness for simply being human, brought a fresh rush of anger with it, and Elios forced himself to let it go before he started grinding his teeth and thinking extremely ill of the dead.

Tea in hand, Elios curled up in bed and let himself daydream a little about what life would be like with Sender and Katy. Those thoughts made him happy enough that by the time he finished his tea, he snuggled down in the blankets and went to sleep easily. They would make it through this time of grief, he would be there for Sender, and their lives

would go on happily together. The thoughts were perfect, dreamy, and just close enough to possible that he could hang onto them.

The funeral mass was dark and grim, and more than once Sender felt like he was going to crumple under the mass of Themis steel around him and the silent remonstrance of the saints lining the cathedral and the weight of his own sorrow. He'd been out in the far reaches of space, out in the void with nothing but a few pinpricks of light to guide him, and that darkness was nothing like this. The pressure of takeoff through atmosphere was nothing like the crushing knowledge that he was condemned.

Katy was a warm, damp weight on his hip; her little arms around his neck and her tears on his collar grounded him. Her soft sobs reminded him that he could breathe. He had to be breathing. He was singing hymns he knew so well that he didn't have to think of the words, saying prayers that he no longer understood in his soul. Down on his knees, up on his feet, over and over again.

Then it was time for him to step up into the pulpit, clinging to his little sister as much as she clung to him, and read a passage from the *Book of the Shepherd*.

The souls of the just rest in the hand of God where no torment will touch them.
Though they seem to be dead, their deaths utter obliteration, they are in peace.
Those who have been punished by men shall have hope of immortality, the
abused shall be greatly blessed, those whom God has tried and found worthy. God
shall test them as gold, He shall gather them to himself as sacrificial offerings.
The faithful shall abide with God in love: His care is with the elect.

His care is with the elect. The faithful. Amen. The lights above the pulpit fell on Sender's head and shoulders, on Katy's hair, and she looked up at him when he was finished reading.

"Say 'Amen,'" he prompted her, his voice low.

"Amen," she said obediently.

She was so trusting, so innocent. Sender kissed her damp brow and then stepped away from the pulpit, walking down the steps of the dais toward his seat. She deserved every chance to be faithful to God, every chance to be one of the holy ones. Who was he to sully her pure little life?

His parents, their faces looming large on viewing screens overhead, looked down on them with sad eyes. *I'm sorry*, Sender thought, looking up at them. *I'm so sorry*. If he hadn't been so busy reveling in sin and freedom, maybe he would have been closer to them. Maybe he would have been home more. Maybe none of this would have happened.

He'd had the chance to change things long before they happened, the chance to deflect God's will with his own obedience, and he'd failed.

Sender cuddled Katy in his lap and tried to make himself listen to the priest. There was no way he could be proud of what he'd done with his life, with himself. His parents had lived blameless lives scattered with the little sins of being human and had struggled to purify themselves of even those small transgressions. It was the least Sender could do to honor that now that they were gone.

"We trust you with Katy," Arcadia said, her voice soft. She looked into the camera, and Sender felt like he was looking right back at her. "I know it won't be easy for you, caring for a little girl."

"You should marry," Farther told him. It was not so much a suggestion as a demand, and Sender had heard it before. "If you haven't already. It's not right for a man to be unwed so long."

"You don't have to take care of us anymore," Arcadia added. "I know that's why you haven't married yet, Sender. But you only have one family to support now."

"You'll have no trouble finding work on Themis." Farther put a hand on Arcadia's arm, and she fell silent. "See that you renew the lease on the apartment so that you don't lose it. That way Katharina won't have to leave her creche."

"If you can move somewhere like Teresa Station, though, to be near Minne and Tasker, you should." Arcadia glanced at Farther and then dropped her eyes to her hands before looking back at the camera. "I just want you to be happy, both of you. Katy knows some of the children there, and Minne will be teaching at the Teresa Creche."

"Where you are is good enough." Farther frowned at the camera. "It did you well enough, it will do Katharina well to grow up in a strong community, in the church. That is the most important thing." Sender could feel his father's eyes cutting into him as though he could see the doubts in Sender's soul. "Nothing of the body matters if the soul is lost."

"Your father is right." Arcadia's voice was soft. "Take care of Katy, Sender." She wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief, her composure finally crumbling at the idea of possibly leaving her children behind. "I know that if anything happens, you will be good for her."

"Hush. Nothing's going to happen to us. Besides, he knows what he needs to do if it does." Farther patted Arcadia's arm, his eyes still fixed on the camera with singular intensity. "He's a good son." Sender thought his heart would stop at those words. "You have been," Farther said, as though the words were heavy, "a good son. I'm proud of you."

Sender didn't watch the last moments of the recording; he couldn't see the viewer screen, even if he could have borne another moment of it. He put his face in his hands and cried until he couldn't breathe anymore. He would have cried until he was sick but for a little hand on his shoulder.

"Sen-sen?" Katy, stuffed bunny in tow, had crawled out of her little bed and come to find him. "Don't cry, Sen-sen." Her voice wavered and a sympathetic sob caught in her throat. When Sender wiped the tears from his eyes and focused on her, she looked pale and frightened.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, reaching out to pull her into his lap.

"No crying." Katy thumped against his chest, hiccupping and trying not to cry as well. "Mama and Papa are happy now."

"They are," Sender assured her. He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her gently. "And we're going to be fine. You and me, together." Her hair was tangled in wild curls that were going to take him forever to brush out tomorrow. He would have to start braiding it for her at night.

"Now, you got a baby, right?" Katy hugged her bunny and snuggled against him. "You keep me?"

"You're my baby," Sender said, rocking her. "I'm keeping you. You're my baby and I'm going to take care of you forever."

Katy nodded and shoved her bunny against him. "And Bunny?"

"And Bunny," Sender said. "Everything's going to be okay. Everyone gets to be together," he promised. "Just like Mama and Papa wanted."

Chapter Eleven

Elios had tried terribly hard to be patient, waiting for Sender to come home. He knew he had to give Sender the time and space to work out what was going on in his life. As if moving into a new apartment with a four-year-old weren't difficult enough, the new Harpies were in, and that meant even more work for the pilots. Finally, though, there was a message. *Meet me at the park.*

It was as flawless a day as it had been when Elios had taken Sender there the first time. Leaving the office behind, Elios followed the trail along the lake toward the children's playground where Sender would be with Katy. He slipped off his shoes and socks and rolled up the cuffs of his pants so that he could walk barefoot across the grass, soaking in the sun and the air.

When he neared the playground, Elios could see Sender sitting on one of the benches, back to Elios, watching the children play. Getting closer, Elios could see his dark curls against the pale skin of his neck where Elios loved to bite and mark. The memory of Sender's scent and taste and the noises Sender made in bed hit Elios with a wave of need and longing.

"Hi, baby," Elios said, pitching his voice so that Sender would be the only one to hear him. "It's good to see you again." So good. Sender was wearing old fatigue pants and a black T-shirt that clung to every curve of muscle on his torso. His boots and socks were by his bare feet, along with a bag that had a stuffed bunny peering out of it.

"Hi." Sender gave Elios that tired smile again, and Elios wanted to kiss him right then and there, but he wasn't sure what Katy would make of it. "I'm glad you could come."

"Any time." Elios sat down next to Sender and dropped his shoes on the bench. "You doing okay?" He looked away from Sender to search the playset for a glimpse of Katy. She was there, up in one of the forts; Elios was sure that flash of pale blonde hair was her. Blonde hair like that was almost as rare as red, at least among those without the money to pick and choose.

"I've been better." Sender leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and Elios could all but hear the tight muscles in his back creaking with it. "At least I have her." He gestured toward the little blonde flicker that popped out of the fort and dropped into one of the sliding tubes. "They did find a way for me to take her off Themis after all."

"She's lucky to have you," Elios said. "She looks like she's having fun." That didn't mean that the child wasn't having a hard time, but it was a good sign that she was coping with the losses well.

"We're both lucky. I was afraid they wouldn't have let me have her." Sender smiled as Katy came trotting over, something clutched in one little hand. "There were a fair number of people offering to take her, but I couldn't do it."

Katy clambered into Sender's lap, bullying her way in with experienced shoves of her elbows and knees. "This comed off." She opened her hand to present Sender with a stray pink barrette. Her hair was pulled back into twin ponytails held together with white bobbles. Several barrettes held back escaping curls and bangs that threatened to get in her eyes.

"Here." Sender took the barrette and settled her in his lap so he could put it back where it belonged. Katy eyed Elios suspiciously from over the curve of Sender's arm as he worked. "This is my friend Elios," Sender said. "Remember, I told you about him? He works near here instead of on the base."

"Hi." Elios gave Katy a smile, hoping to reassure her. "You must be Katy. Sender told me a lot about you."

"Hi," Katy said, leaning her head on Sender's chest and peeking at Elios. After a moment, she gave him a smile in return. "You have nice hair," she said thoughtfully, looking like she was trying to sort him into one of her mental categories. Sender laughed as he gently captured some of her curls back in the barrette again.

Elios' smile widened at that, and he tilted his head to look her over. "Thank you. You have nice hair, too. I like your barrettes; they're very pretty."

"Do you have some?" Boys with long hair were a bit of a mystery to her, apparently, because her little brow furrowed slightly.

"I do, actually," Elios admitted. "But mine are made out of little pieces of wood. I don't wear them much; they're mostly for special occasions." Usually, he just kept his hair down or pulled it back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Katy thought about this a little longer; since hers were made of pink and lavender and white plastic, this seemed to make some sense. "Boy barrettes," she said finally, having placed Elios firmly in the boy category but making an exception for his hair. "I have girl ones."

Sender let her down again when she kicked him in the thigh. Some of the other children were shouting about something and it had caught her attention. "I have to go now," she announced solemnly, as though she were departing for a board meeting. With that, she ran back to the playground, curls and dress bouncing and swinging.

"She's adorable," Elios said, grinning and turning back to Sender as Katy ran away. A little odd, with her obvious confusion about his hair, but he could understand why that might be. She'd grown up in on Themis, where gender roles were still fixed and archaic.

"She is. My parents loved her very much." Sender watched her slip right back into the group at play; she was a very social little person by the look of it. "And now I need to take care of her for them."

"You must be doing a good job so far," Elios said, looking back out over the playground to find her again. "She seems happy." As happy as a little girl who'd just lost her parents was going to be, at any rate.

"She has her moments. Are you hungry?" Sender turned to Elios and reached out to touch his hand, just once. It was a little touch, but it felt like a kiss.

"Yeah, I came right over. You want me to go get something?" Elios looked around for the concession carts that toured the park, offering all manner of meals for the visitors.

"I can do it." Sender got to his feet. "You mind watching Katy?"

"Not at all." That sounded perfect. Elios could see her kneeling in the sand under the forts, digging industriously. He got up and gave Sender a smile. "Let's just tell her where you'll be."

"Sure." Sender got up and, for a moment, Elios thought Sender was about to kiss him, but the kiss never came. Instead, Sender pulled himself back and headed over to the sandbox. "Katy, sweetheart..." He crouched down to talk to her, and Elios followed. "...Elios is going to watch you. What do you want? You want a hot dog?"

"With ketchup," Katy reminded Sender. "Please," she added belatedly.

"Good girl." Sender kissed her on the head, and she squirmed away. Grownups were such a hassle. Elios couldn't help laughing at that.

"Something along those lines for me," Elios said. "Not so much with the ketchup."

"Got it." Sender ducked under the forts and out the other side. "I'll be right back," he promised Katy. She was standing up as though she'd just realized that he was actually leaving her to go do something, little hands clutched together.

"No..." Katy took a few steps toward him, and Elios followed her out the other side of the sandbox. "I come, too."

"You stay with Elios." Sender crouched down and gave her a kiss. "Bunny is over by the bench, watching you play. You don't want to leave Bunny, do you?"

"No." Katy looked as though she was about to cry, lower lip pushing out a little.

"Come on." Elios offered her his hand. "We can go and get Bunny and wash our hands for lunch. You can even help pick out a picnic spot."

Katy hesitated, torn, but then she put her hand in Elios'. It was a very tiny hand, and very dirty. "Okay. Bunny misses me." Elios had missed little dirty hands and loyalties to raggedy, stuffed things.

"Good girl." Sender kissed her again and hugged her, then straightened and stepped back.

"Is Bunny going to share your hot dog?" Elios asked as he led her back toward the bench.

"Bunnies don't eat hot dogs!" Katy looked up at Elios incredulously. Did grownups know nothing? "They eats carrots and veggie-tables."

"Did Sender bring some of those?" Elios tried not to laugh at her expression. She was looking at him as though he was possibly soft in the head.

"Yes!" Katy bounced to emphasize the word. "And red puppa."

It took Elios a moment to work out what that was. "Red peppers?"

"They good." Katy nodded vigorously. She slipped her hand out of Elios' and scampered to rescue Bunny from the bag. Bunny was a very nice looking, if well-loved, velvety brown rabbit with a serious expression and long ears lined with pink satin. "Hi, Bunny," Katy said cheerfully. "You miss me? It's okay, I back now." She gave Bunny a reassuring squeeze.

Elios put his shoes and Sender's boots in one section of the bag and then shouldered it. "Let's go wash our hands." He pointed to a water fountain and hand-wash station. "And then we can pick a spot to eat."

"We got to go at the beach," Katy announced, tagging along behind Elios as he led the way to the fountain. "Sen-sen let me go in the water." This, apparently, was a very big deal, given her tone. "It's a big, big water." She looked up at Elios. "It's pretty here. Smells pretty, too."

"Luna is very beautiful." Elios stroked Katy's hair gently as she clambered up on the step that would let her reach the fountain. "I'm glad you like it here." He took Bunny while she washed her hands and then dried them under the air jets.

"You like it?" Katy took Bunny back and set Bunny on her hip as though it were a baby.

"I love Luna." Elios washed his hands as well. "I was born here. I like living here. It's a nice place for children."

"You got a kid?" Katy took Elios' hand again, and he led her toward a grassy area under some trees.

Now was not the time to explain things to her about Aric and David and Celeste. "No, not yet. I like kids, though. I hope to have lots of kids some day."

"You can only have one!" Katy rolled her eyes and shook her head. Poor Elios, he must be wrong in the head.

"On Luna, you can have lots of kids." Elios sat down in the shade with his back to a tree and smiled as Katy gave him a suspicious scowl. "You can on most colonies. Themis is just a little different."

"You needs a wife first," Katy pointed out, thumping down and sitting Bunny on her lap. "Sen-sen needs one. Papa said."

This was not territory that Elios wanted to get into. "There's lots of different families here on Luna," he said gently. "You'll find that out when you start daycare." The transition was going to be very hard on her, at this rate. He dug around in the bag and came up with the little containers of vegetables. "Have you met your new teachers yet?"

"Uh-huh." Katy nodded. "Michel and Su Li and Uzoma. Sen-sen went to school with me." She gave Elios a sly look. "He is too big for daycare. He can't sit in the chairs."

That picture made Elios laugh. "Yes, you're right. He is."

"There you are." Sender came across the grass, hands full with a tray that held their lunches. "Is everyone hungry?"

"Me!" Katy wriggled and bounced, eager to eat. "Bunny hungry, too."

"Okay." Sender gave Elios the tray and sat down. "Everyone has to sit still so that they can have their lunch."

It was a perfect afternoon, a perfect time together. Elios watched Katy, trying to get a grasp on her mercurial moods. When he looked at Sender, there was a weariness and sorrow in Sender's expression that worried him, but he put it down to the stress of the last weeks. It would be okay.

"She's adjusting well," he said to Sender when lunch was over and Sender had sent Katy off with the trash to drop it in a nearby bin.

"She is." Sender sounded grim and tired. "I hope it's not too much of a shock for her when we go back to Themis."

That shocked Elios into whipping his head around to look at Sender again. "You're going back there? For good?"

"It's what my parents wanted for her. They wanted me to raise her the way they would have; they trusted me to do it." Sender looked terribly haunted, emptied out. "I have to. For her. For them."

Elios' chest twisted painfully. "You're going to..." He stopped talking and swallowed hard. "What about the project, the Harpies?" Sender had been so excited about getting to fly the new Harpies, about going up in the *Auriga*, about seeing the Pandora. Elios could hardly fathom what had happened to make it all go wrong.

"I'm staying on a little longer. Macy's taking over for me, and I'll be handling the training for a while. I can't go." Sender shook his head and then refocused on his little sister. "I can't go while I have her."

Sender couldn't take Katy on the *Auriga* without a second guardian, and if he was going to raise her like his parents would've, Elios realized with another painful twist in his chest, that meant Elios couldn't be that second guardian. Yet again, someone else's ideas of what was right had screwed him out of a relationship, a family. "I see," he said quietly, not knowing what else he could say. "How long are you staying here?"

"Maybe a month. I wish it could be longer." There was only the slightest hint of unsteadiness in Sender's voice. A month. "I'm sorry." His expression was so resolute, so determined, that it left Elios cold.

Elios looked away, his shoulders curled over. He blinked slowly, looking blindly out over the playground. "Yeah," he said softly. "Me, too." Taking a slow, deep breath, he spoke without looking back at Sender. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

"No," Sender said quietly, and now there was a thread of pain in his voice. "I just... I needed to tell you sooner rather than later. So you... so we could..." He stopped speaking and shook his head.

Elios had to clench his jaw to bite back everything that crowded into his throat. Ugly, angry, hurt things. And, behind them, he wanted so badly to argue with Sender, to tell Sender not to do this. He wanted to tell Sender not to teach Katy that people like Elios didn't deserve to be happy, the way Sender's parents had obviously taught Sender. In the end, though, he knew it was Sender's decision and that arguing with him wouldn't do any good. And he didn't want Katy to see Sender upset so soon after the loss of her parents.

So he didn't say any of that. Instead he said, "Okay," and took another slow breath before finally looking back at Sender. Sender's face was nearly white except for the darkness

under his eyes. "I'm sure you'll do great with her. Have a safe trip back to Themis, when you go. I need... I need to get back to the lab." He needed to get away before he said something he couldn't take back.

"Take care of yourself. Please." Sender was sitting with his arms looped over his knees, hands clasped together so hard that the knuckles were white, as though he were trying not to reach out for Elios. If Elios could have willed him to do it, he would have.

"Yeah." Elios nodded and swallowed hard so he could force more words past the lump in his throat. "You, too." He pulled his socks back on and forced his feet into his shoes fast enough that they slid a little on the grass. Pushing himself to his feet, he shoved his hands into his pockets and looked down at Sender. "I'll--" see you later. Except he wouldn't. He shook his head and turned away. "I'm sorry about your parents," he said finally, and then started to walk back up the grass to the sidewalk.

Sender didn't come after him, and Elios kept walking. He wanted too much to turn around, to rage at Sender for not saying something the minute Elios had showed up at the park. How could Sender give Elios those moments of hope before tearing it all away? Elios clenched his fists in his pockets to keep from lashing out at things.

Elios didn't go back to the lab. He got on the monorail and stared blindly out the window until he reached May Junction and realized that he'd traveled out of the city. There was nothing to do but buy a coffee at the junction café and get on the train that would take him somewhere safe. The presence of people all around him was enough to keep him from bursting into tears.

The tears stayed back until he was walking up the path to Zilla's little home set in the Campania Latifundia, an agricultural community. The hours of travel seemed to have blurred together; he hardly remembered the ride out on the cart-train that carried goods and workers around the latifundia. All he knew was that he needed not to be alone right now.

"El?" Zilla was in the front yard, plucking handfuls of herbs from her garden, making use of the last of the light. "Honey, what's wrong?" She dropped the herbs into the basket at her feet and held her arms out to him.

She looked like something out of a painting of ancient times, in her dress and apron with her sleeves rolled up, her hair wound around her head in braids like a farmer's wife. Elios buried his face in her shoulder and let her wrap him up in a hug. She smelled like herbs and soap, clean and sweet.

For a moment, the tears wouldn't come, and then they did. Elios let her lead him to the garden swing, where she pulled him into her arms and held him while he cried. They rocked gently, Zilla making the swing move by pushing off with one bare foot, and she

stroked his hair slowly. She didn't ask any questions or try and get him to stop, not until he was out of tears for the moment.

"Come on," Zilla said, when he had been quiet for a while. "Let's get you settled in."

Elios felt sick and dizzy. The last time he had cried that hard had been when Aric left him. "He's going back to Themis," he said.

"I'm so sorry, honey." Zilla stroked his hair again and kissed it. "What happened?"

"It's not even his fault." Elios sat up, only to sag back against the cushions of the swing. "His parents died in that big rail disaster there."

"Oh, El." In the failing light, he could make out the sadness in Zilla's expression. "Honey, I'm so sorry." She offered him a handkerchief from her pocket. "I'm so sorry for both of you."

"It's completely fucked up." Elios blew his nose and wiped his face, trying not to lose his composure again. "He's got to raise his little sister, and he's going to raise her the way they wanted. It's wrong. He's giving up everything."

Zilla slid her arm around him again and pulled him close, giving up on the idea of getting him into a room for now. "I'm sorry," she said again. "Life is terrible like that sometimes."

"I love him, Zil." Elios' voice broke. Suddenly, he wanted to get back on the monorail and go back to the city; he wanted to go to the base and bang on Sender's door and tell him this couldn't happen. It couldn't happen. They loved each other.

"I know, El." Zilla set her cheek on his hair. "Sometimes that's not enough, honey. Not when life gets in the way."

Elios closed his eyes and let her rock the swing. He couldn't go forward and he couldn't go back. His heart felt like it was tearing him up inside with its broken edges. All he could do was stay very still and wait for the hurting to stop.

Chapter Twelve

"I can't do this." Veli stood on the blacktop next to Juventas Five and looked Sender in the eye. "I can't do this set, sir." He was pale under the natural darkness of his skin, ashen, and tight around the mouth.

Sender had been through this with him over and over again. "You did fine when we were in the tandem plane," he pointed out. "And your sims are coming along." They needed to get past this set of maneuvers so that he could move the entire squad along to the next phase of training. "You've done this move in space. It should be even easier to orient yourself here in atmosphere."

It was so hard not to snap at the man, not to order him into the damn cockpit and just tell him not to screw up. Sender was so tired that his bones hurt. His eyes were on fire from lack of sleep. And he had to get this training done before the end of the month, so that Juventas would be in a position to go on without him. So that everyone could go on without him.

"I'm going to fuck this up," Veli said. Sender was used to hearing it by now.

"You're one of my best pilots," Sender said, forcing his tone to stay gentle. "Your targeting skills make everyone else look like they're cross-eyed. You're an excellent navigator. And you know your plane. I wouldn't ask you to do this if I didn't think you had the skills."

Veli had the skills. He'd just managed to think himself into a couple bad roll-outs and he kept getting more anxious, not less, every time he got it right. The man hadn't screwed up in weeks; Sender wasn't worried about his skills, just his state of mind.

"I know." Veli took a slow breath and let it out. "It's just that in the tandem plane, you were right there."

"And I'll be right there this time, too," Sender assured him. "Just in a different plane. I'll still be talking you through. You really need to be more of a jackass, Veli." He grinned and smacked Veli lightly on the shoulder. "Arrogance will get you a long way in this business."

"I'll try and work on that, sir." Veli laughed and then shook his head, cracking his neck. "Okay. Just had to get all that out of my system. I think I can do this now."

"You know how to get out of it if you get in trouble," Sender reminded him. "Hit the autopilot and it'll help you get out of a bad roll."

"Yes, sir." Veli nodded and saluted. "Time to bite the bullet, then."

"Time, indeed." Sender gestured for him to get up into the cockpit and turned away to get into Juventas One.

The old Harpy with the tandem seat was the one he'd flown with Elios, and every time Sender got in it, he felt a pang of loss. It was just one more little pain in the whole collection of pains that he had to carry. At least he had good memories.

Macy was standing at the edge of the blacktop, leaning on the supply crates where he and Sender used to eat lunch while they watched Quirinus drilling. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and he looked grim. He did that a lot lately; he and Sender did nothing but fight, to the point that they'd stopped talking just to get some work done.

From here, Sender could make out the bruise flowering on Macy's jaw. He'd hit his best friend the night before, pushed too far by Macy's persistent arguments that he was making a huge mistake.

"You're going to raise her to think that someone like Elios is disgusting," Macy had hissed. They'd been trying to keep their voices down so they wouldn't wake Katy. "You really want to do that? She's going to learn how to despise the man you love as much as your parents would have. Him and you."

Sender had never in his life lost his temper like that, had never struck someone in anger, and he hardly remembered doing it. The next thing he'd known, he was hauling Macy up off the living room floor by the front of his uniform and dragging him toward the door.

"Get out of my house." He'd wrenched the door open and shoved Macy out into the hallway. He remembered that he could hardly breathe then, and he felt it again now, a fist of tears clenched around his throat. "Get out and stay out."

"You're making the biggest mistake of your life." Macy had caught himself before he fell, with one hand on the wall. "Stop doing this, Sender. You're killing me."

Sender had been too furious to take in his words. "I will if you bring up my parents again." He'd closed the door before Macy could say anything else.

Now he wanted to say he was sorry, and he didn't know how. He didn't have time, either. He pulled himself up into the cockpit and strapped in.

"Juventas One, ready for takeoff," he said, as soon as he was settled. "Juventas Five, what's your status?"

"Ready to roll, sir," Veli said. He sounded better than he had down on the blacktop.

"Tower, this is Juventas One and Juventas Five, requesting runway clearance. Over."

"Juventas One, this is Tower. You have clearance to take off. Your flight plan has been registered. We are expecting no traffic in the training zone."

Sender threw the switches that would start him rolling toward the runway. "Juventas Five, follow me up as soon as I'm clear."

"Yes, sir," Veli said.

The pressure of gravity and the leap into the sky helped Sender shed some of the grief and confusion that he felt. It was the one time he still felt whole, when he was flying. All his fears of raising Katy badly, his fears for his own future, the loss of his parents, and the loss of his dreams, they all faded into the background while Sender was airborne.

Sender took off and looped around the training course while Veli got off the ground. He led the cadet through the course over and over again and then flew just off to Veli's starboard side while they did it the other way.

"Let's try a roll over," Sender said at last.

"Yes, sir," came the uncertain reply. They'd done it successfully with the two-man Harpy, Sender reminded himself. And Veli had kept it together during the sims.

"I'll go first, then you go. Just keep it steady." Sender's voice was calm and even, reassuring. Sender took his Harpy through a smooth, clean roll, coming up to zero tilt. "Go on now."

Veli pulled ahead a little, and Sender dropped down to keep an eye on him through the clear canopy of the Harpy. "Okay, sir," Veli said. Sender still didn't like the uncertainty in the man's voice, but he let it go.

It went well until the Harpy hit ninety-degrees. Sometimes, there was something about watching the horizon pass by overhead that altered a pilot's sense of direction. Cadets usually outgrew the sensation. Sometimes, when they were new, they panicked. There was no reason for it at this stage, but Veli pulled back too hard and not only was he rolling over, he was turning back and down.

"Nose down," Sender barked. It didn't matter where the ground was, down was always in the same direction. The order didn't help. Veli plunged toward Sender, accelerating and rolling over simultaneously, and Sender started to drop away. He wasn't fast enough, not in the aging training Harpy.

One wing of Veli's Harpy slammed across the cockpit, metal screamed as the planes slid past each other, wings catching. The impact shook Sender hard enough to rattle his teeth, but he kept control of his Harpy as best he could while Veli's Harpy spun them around. The sound of something catching fire was a dull thump and then a roar. Flame splashed up the side of the cockpit and they started spiraling down.

"Cut your engines and bail," Sender snapped. "Now, now, now. Everyone else, clear the area." He hoped Veli was conscious and collected enough to obey. Suddenly, his plane listed with the dead weight of Veli's Harpy and the sideways lurch was enough to disengage the two planes. For a moment, Sender got his Harpy under control long enough to assess the situation. "Juventas Five, eject."

The console registered Veli's obedience, flashing a warning on the training panel as the cockpit blew off of Juventas Five and Veli was ejected. Now it was time for Sender to take care of himself.

There was a rending noise as fire suddenly engulfed the second seat of the Harpy and splashed Sender with flame and heat. Sender held his breath while he got his mask in place and hit the flame retardant release. Foam spewed out and the flames pulled back, but he could still hear them and he was still breathing smoke. All he could do was ignore them gnawing at his seat and blackening the canopy while he got himself free.

Sender reached out and pulled the ejection latch. There was a strange rending noise and the canopy lifted off one side enough to let a rush of air into the cockpit, but the damaged side was locked down tight and the function failed. The fresh infusion of oxygen fed the flames and they snarled up around him.

"Control, this is Juventas One."

"Juventas One, eject." Sender couldn't tell who it was, but their calm helped a little as he struggled to keep the damaged Harpy stable.

"Can't," he said tightly. Fire flared up to his left, inside and out. "I need to put her down." It was getting harder to see, and he couldn't get the canopy down now to stop the constant scream of air from feeding the flames.

"Drop her where you can, we're sending fire and rescue out."

There was no way to see clearly beyond the cockpit, but the HUD was still working and showed him the position of the base and the runway. Sender had done this so many times that he could have done it in his sleep. He was choking on smoke and his eyes were glazed with tears. The landscape remained the same. The controls were where they'd always been. He could do this.

Long after the fact, Sender could never quite remember how he got down in the crippled Harpy. The fact that he'd had no choice had been a major factor. The old training plane

held together until he smacked her down at an angle and smeared her across the middle of the runway and off into the dead-land around the hangars.

He remembered the moment of relief when her landing gear hit the tarmac, that second of thinking it was all going to work out, and then the sickness as she bucked and rolled, and after that, nothing much at all.

"Go away, Aric," Elios said quietly, his tone flat and distant. Aric was like a pit bull: he'd scented trouble and he wasn't going to let it go until he was satisfied. He'd been sniffing around for weeks, ever since Elios had taken a few days off to go cry on Zilla's shoulder. She'd sent Elios back with the little runt cat, Schrodinger, in tow, so that the apartment wouldn't be empty.

Fortunately for Elios, the lab was never empty these days, either. With the boost in funding, everyone was pushing to get as much done as they could, more certain than ever that they'd be going up in the *Auriga* in the next month or two. One of the other linguists called out for Aric's attention, rescuing Elios from more poking and prodding at his wounds, and Elios turned back to his computer, trying to get some work done.

Before he'd even managed to pull up his files, the computer flashed an incoming call and Elios sighed, flicking his stylus over to answer the call. They'd been getting more calls than usual, lately, from politicians and other officials wanting to know how things were coming along. He pushed back his hair and looked up at the screen, startling at the face he saw there. "Macy?"

"Don't hang up." Macy put out a hand as though he could actually stop Elios from doing so. He looked terrible. He was dirty, his eyes were bloodshot, and he was sallow under the smudges on his face. "I need your help."

"What's wrong?" Adrenaline surged and Elios' breath came faster before he even knew why. He glanced back at the lab, making sure that Aric was busy with something else.

"I need someone to pick Katy up. Someone to keep an eye on her tonight. I just..." Macy shook his head and took a breath. "I can't do it."

Elios' confusion twisted into something closer to fear. A few weeks wasn't anywhere near long enough not to care about what that meant. Something had happened to Sender. Macy wouldn't call for any other reason. "Are you sure I'm the person who should be doing that?" he asked anyway, forcing himself calm before he'd let himself ask about Sender.

"I really don't have a lot of choice of people who are good with kids around here," Macy said, his voice tight as though he were trying to keep from yelling and being unreasonable. There was a dark bruise on his jaw, and Elios wondered if he'd been hurt as well. "Not anyone who's not going to be on duty again soon, and not anyone that Sky

would trust with her. If..." Macy shook his head again, as though he were trying to clear it. "When he wakes up, he'll want to know that she's okay."

"I--" Elios looked away from the screen, trying to figure out how to say no. "What happened?" he asked, stalling.

"One of the new kids lost it during a roll over and slammed into him." Macy shook his head. "Look, man, I'll just get someone else to take her. I'll get one of the people at the daycare to take her home. I just thought, you know, he wouldn't worry if he knew she was with you. He trusts you."

That wasn't fair. And Sender was hurt; it must've been pretty bad, if Macy was calling, instead of just going to get her and taking her to the hospital to see Sender and then waiting for Sender to get out. "I'll do it," Elios said, barely audible. "How do I get to the daycare once I transfer to the base rail?"

"It's in the residential area, the line loops through there first. Fourth stop in, past the residences, before the commissary. I'll leave the apartment unlocked and the key on the desk here." Macy slumped back in his seat, exhaling slowly. "I'd meet you, but I'd rather be at the hospital. I know it's shitty of me to ask."

Elios swallowed hard and stared at Macy through the screen, lost. "Yeah." Macy had no idea, really. "Will they release her to me?"

"If I tell them to, yeah." Macy looked somewhere between apologetic and stricken. "I'm..." He waved his hand vaguely and shook his head. "Next of kin."

Elios nodded, going a little paler at the thought and trying not to think that if Sender's parents hadn't died, maybe someday that might've been him and not Macy. "Do you know her routine? When they have dinner, any of that?" he asked, typing in the numbers he needed to send to Macy.

"He has a schedule on the fridge," Macy said, his expression shifting to affectionate tolerance. "He's so fucking organized it makes my teeth hurt."

"Okay. Do you-- Will you call me when you can, let me know if I can take her to see him?" Elios asked, running out of things to say to delay this. "She's only met me once." When Sender had broken up with him. "So I don't know how well she's going to cope with me. I'll do what I can, though."

"I will. If she can. I don't know... there was a lot of fire when he went down. I haven't really seen him yet. But I'll let you know as soon as I do. She's a good little kid; I'm sure you'll be okay."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." If it wasn't, Elios would think of something. The park, or the aquarium, or something to distract her for a while. "I-- Okay. What time do I need to get her?" he asked finally, glancing at the clock.

"You've got until five," Macy said. It wasn't long, but it would let Elios get things together and get over to the base. "She's not used to going into the evening care here, but she can if she has to."

"Okay. Thanks." Elios looked back at the lab again, checking to see who was still around. "I'll be there," he said when he turned back to the screen. "I can hand off my projects to one of the interns if I have to. I'm going to go now, so I can get out of here on time."

"All right. If he wakes up, at least maybe he won't try and get out of bed and go get her." Macy rolled his eyes, but Elios could well imagine that he was actually worried that Sender might do just that. "I'll call you if anything changes, and I'll send you my number so you can ring me if you need anything."

"Thank you," Elios said, and he meant it. He was grateful that Macy had thought to call him, of all people, even though it also put him in a terrible position, one he wouldn't have ever chosen to put himself in again. "I'll talk to you later." He clicked the disconnect and started wrapping things up for the day.

When he stood up and turned to go, he almost ran into Aric.

"Everything okay?" Aric was looking down at him, his expression pure concern.

"Fine." Elios stepped around him, praying that Aric wouldn't make anything more of him leaving early. "Kimbra, I have to run take care of something," he said, pitching his voice to carry across the lab.

Kimbra Ruqayya, the third linguist on the project, tossed back her dark hair and straightened. "You okay?" She gave Aric a disapproving look and crossed the lab to Elios. "Will you be back tomorrow?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, I might be a little late. Just a little scheduling problem that a friend needs my help with." Elios mustered up a smile for her. "I'm fine."

Kimbra patted his arm. "Okay. If you get a chance to look at my files on transmission twelve, minutes four through six, let me know what you think."

"I will." That much Elios could do on the train on the way to the base. He ducked out of the lab before anyone could ask him anything else.

"You're not okay, El."

Aric had followed him out into the hall. Elios spun around and took two steps back toward him, so angry that Aric actually stepped away. "Whose fault is that?" Elios hissed. "Whose fucking fault is it that I'm not okay? Because I don't recall breaking up with anyone and keeping them away from their kids. I don't recall turning the lab into fucking Avernus by flaunting my new relationship around. Oh, wait, it wasn't really a *new* relationship, was it, Aric? It must have been a relief not to have to sneak around behind my back after a year." It felt so good to lash out at someone.

"Elios, I'm sorry." Aric started to reach out to touch Elios, but Elios' expression was enough to make him stop cold. "I'm just worried about you. I'm worried about the project," he added. "Whatever's going on, we need your best work."

"You didn't just tell me that you're worried about the quality of my work." Elios' fist clenched, and he was hard pressed not to hit Aric. It would feel so good to hit someone for all of this. "I'm not the one relying on my intern for more than just bedroom service. Was that why you married her, Aric? Less competition? Worried about your job security?"

"I married her because I love her," Aric spat back. It was so easy to push his buttons. "Because it was good for the children. Because she was willing to put them first instead of her career."

Elios felt like he'd been punched in the chest. The pure injustice of it all was overwhelming. "Fuck you, Aric." That was the only thing he could say, the only response he had that wasn't violence. Elios forced himself to turn away before he did something he wouldn't regret at all.

"Elios, I'm sorry." Aric's voice carried after him. "That was out of line of me. Fuck it. Elios, please..."

Elios let the doors close on Aric's voice and was grateful that Aric had the good sense not to come after him again. The anger was good, too. It was keeping him from falling apart at the idea that something had happened to Sender. The likelihood was that the man was just fine, he'd just knocked himself on the head, and he'd be up and around tomorrow. Elios held on to that idea as he waited for at the rail station for the train that seemed to take forever to arrive.

Chapter Thirteen

A few minutes before five, Elios walked into the entrance for the base daycare center, and spoke to the person at the desk about retrieving Katy. Macy had already called, so everything went relatively smoothly once they'd confirmed his identification -- though there had been mild confusion because he didn't have military clearance -- and Katy was brought out by one of the staff.

"Hey, Katy," he said, crouching down to be at her level. "Remember me? I'm Elios; we met at the park a few weeks ago."

"Hi." Katy looked him over for a minute and then nodded. "I 'member. You taking me home now, yes?" She looked up at the dark-haired, dark-skinned man who had brought her out, and he smiled down at her.

"That's right. Elios is here to take you home and make you dinner, because Sender can't come just now," he said gently.

"Yes, I'm going to take you home. Are you all ready to go?" Elios asked Katy, flashing a grateful smile up at the man who'd brought her out.

This was just as difficult as he'd expected. Katy was adorable, and she looked so much like a small, blonde version of Sender that Elios couldn't help the way his chest twisted up inside with longing, wishing this could've been his.

Katy was in a little blue dress today, and sandals, with blue bows on her ponytails. She took her little backpack from her caregiver and put it on, then reached out for Elios' hand. "All ready," she said, looking up at him.

"Thank you," Elios said to the caregiver, standing up with Katy's little hand in his. "Let's go. You can help me find my way," he invited, smiling gently down at Katy. "I've never been to your new home before." Macy had given him the address, but he thought having something to focus on might help Katy relax with him.

"I know where it is." Katy forged forth like a wee blonde tugboat. "Come this way."

She headed for the doors, towing Elios along. It was a walk down the path to the residences, past a small park that was empty at this hour, and then up an elevator into a tiny fourth-floor apartment in the rather drab military residence. Katy had no compunction about talking to Elios, she chattered on -- sometimes lisping, sometimes

lapsing into speech patterns of a much younger child -- about daycare and something about puppets and also pointed out the important things along the way.

There were many important landmarks: the place you could get ice cream and the swings and her favorite slide and the climbers that she fell off last week and, see, she could reach the button for her floor when they reached the lift. She hopped about in the lift while she gave Elios a list of everything she was willing to eat for dinner and what she thought was icky and "bleah."

Elios laughed at her firm declarations about what was acceptable dinner fare and led her out of the elevator when it stopped. Macy had taken care of the door issue, so once they were inside, Elios said, "Hey, sweetheart, why don't you put your things away, and I'll get started on dinner, okay?"

"Ookay," Katy said, rolling her eyes in exaggeration of exactly how unfair this whole putting things away was. Then she hoppity-skipped off to hang her backpack up and unpack it carefully, putting everything where it belonged.

As soon as Katy was out of the room, Elios' smile fell away. He wrapped his arms around himself and looked around and very carefully did not throw anything or punch anything or sit down and cry. He shuffled into the kitchen, took a slow breath, and started reading the tidy little schedule Sender had posted on the refrigerator. He could do this. He could.

When Katy came back, she had traded her school dress for a one-piece jumper with pink kittens on it, and her bows were out of her hair. She had in her hands a book and a pencil case, and she put them on the table and then climbed up into her booster seat. "Is Sender coming home for dinner?" She opened her case and started laying her crayons out in a neat line.

"I'm not sure, sweetheart," Elios admitted, and promptly started lying through his teeth, except where it wasn't *strictly* a lie. "I don't know how late he'll be. Macy called me because they were in the middle of something, asked if I could help out." He kept his attention on the cupboards, sorting through them until he found what he wanted and then starting to mix things together for dinner.

"Okay." Katy frowned at her crayons and carefully picked up a blue one, then put it down in favor of a slightly bluer blue one. "I like Macy. He's funny. Sender says he's..." She paused here, looking for the word. "Im'ture."

"Immature," Elios repeated, thinking that over and laughing a little. "Maybe. Macy is a nice guy. He cares about Sender a lot." As much as he wanted to blame Macy for the whole mess he was in, from getting him involved with Sender to dragging him here to take care of Katy, he couldn't. Macy had been trying to help. It wasn't Macy's fault everything hurt so damn much.

"Macy come here last night." Katy's face fell. "They yelled at each other. Again. I don't like it then. They yell quiet, but I hear."

Elios' smile fell away again, and he wanted so badly to curl in on himself and just let the ache overwhelm him for a while. He could guess why they were yelling at each other, at least part of it. Macy wouldn't be happy about Sender going back to Themis, not going on the *Auriga*. "I'm sorry they yelled at each other, sweetheart. I think Macy's probably sad that he's going to miss Sender when you two go back to Themis, and sometimes people act like they're angry when really they're just very, very sad."

"Sen is always sad," Katy said matter-of-factly. She picked up a red crayon to color a balloon. "Sad and tired. I don't want to go to Themis. I want to go in the big ship with everyone else."

Elios swallowed hard and shoved the meal into the oven to cook, then took a breath and turned around to face Katy again. "Do you--" He stopped himself from asking if she meant it. "You've made some friends at daycare, then?" he asked carefully, instead. Because he didn't have the right to encourage her to ask Sender to stay, to go on the *Auriga* instead of going back to Themis. No matter how much he wanted to.

Katy looked up and nodded at Elios, smiling. "I have friends. I like it here. It's pretty. And clean. And everything smells nice." She carefully colored in a curve, frowning at her paper. "Lots of people are going on the big ship. I want to go, too. No one else has to go to Themis."

"You don't miss your friends from Themis?" Elios asked carefully, not wanting to stir memories of her parents, but wanting to help by pointing out that she'd be going home, rather than on the *Auriga*.

Katy thought about this a little. "Sometimes. I call them and see them. But here is lots of fun parks and trees and things, and one of my friends has a cat." This was a very big deal as far as Katy was concerned. "Cats are nice and soft and they bomp you with they head to say hi. We don't get to have a cat on Themis."

"I have a cat," Elios said, without thinking about the consequences. "His name is Schrodinger. He was a present from my sister."

"Can I see him?" Katy's face lit up, and if her ears could have, they'd have perked right up.

"I'll see what I can do," Elios said carefully, but he was smiling again. "I bet he'd like you. He likes to play. I got him a little knitted duck on a string to play with, and he loves to roll around on his back and bat it around in his paws."

"I like cats," Katy said firmly. "They soft. And you pet them and they 'rrrr.'" She made a passable imitation of a cat purring away. "It's funny."

"I like cats, too," Elios agreed. "I had one when I was about your age. Or, well, my sister and I shared her. Mama Isolde got us one when we turned five. Our birthdays are only a few weeks apart, so it was a great present for both of us."

"Do you still have a mama?" Katy tilted her head and looked up at Elios.

Oh. Shit. Elios hadn't meant to remind her of her parents. And, on top of that, he had no idea how she'd react to the truth, but he gave it to her anyway. "Yeah, sweetheart, I do. I've got four mamas. I have a big family."

"That's nice." Katy looked sad, but she managed a smile. "I wish I had more than one mama, so I would still have one." She looked down at her picture and carefully colored around the edge of the balloon so she wouldn't go outside the line.

Elios came over to sit down at the table. "I had three papas, too," he told her gently. "But Papa Tane died a few years ago. It was hard for all of us, but we felt better when we were together. Like you and Sender are together now."

Katy nodded and blinked, and tears ran down her cheeks, though she kept on coloring stoically. She loved her brother, but it wasn't the same as her parents; Elios understood that. "I wish Mama and Papa could come here," she said very quietly. A tear splashed onto her page, and she blotted it with the sleeve of her kitty jumper.

"I'm sure they wish they could be here, too," Elios said softly, reaching out to brush a tear off her chin with his thumb. As many hateful things as he'd thought about them in the past weeks, he knew Sender's parents wouldn't have left their little girl voluntarily.

"It's nice here," Katy said, her little voice wavering. Another tear fell on her page, and then another, until she pushed the book away and buried her face in her arms on the table.

Elios gave in and slid out his chair so he could gather Katy up into his lap. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he whispered, petting her hair with gentle fingers.

Katy cried for a while, clutching at Elios' shirt, and then her tears tapered off. She didn't move to get up right away; she just cuddled against him until the oven timer sounded. She was so small and warm against Elios' chest; he had to struggle not to feel attached to her already.

When he heard the timer, Elios kissed the top of Katy's head and said, "I'm going to take care of dinner, okay, sweetheart?"

"Okay." Katy wiped her face with her sleeve and moved to get back into her seat so she could wait for dinner. She looked abjectly miserable, small and lost.

She looked like Elios felt, but he knew better than to show it. He got up and pulled dinner out of the oven, then searched until he found plates and glasses and flatware. The height difference between him and Sender was making finding things difficult. A few minutes later, he was sliding a plate of macaroni and cheese in front of Katy and settling himself down beside her.

Katy picked at her meal at first, but then her appetite came back and she cleaned her plate. She helped Elios clear the table and then showed him where everything was so she could get ready for bed. Her curls needed brushing out and put into braids so she could go to sleep, and her night clothes were a long nightie with lace trim that made her look even more angelic.

She had a little children's *Book of the Shepherd* with pictures that she wanted Elios to read for her bedtime story; the one about a shepherd and his lost lamb was her favorite. Overall, she was perfectly behaved and adorable, even more so once she fell asleep with her bunny clutched in her arms.

Elios had felt strange reading the stories, but he did it anyway. They were sort of like the stories of his own gods, but he couldn't help thinking, as he read, that this book, these stories, were why he wasn't allowed to be with Sender anymore. And that hurt. Once Katy was asleep, he found his way back to the kitchen and flopped down into one of the chairs, curling himself over and burying his head under his arms to try to muffle the soft, broken sounds he was making.

A few moments later, there was a soft tap at the front door and then it opened slowly. "Hey," Macy said softly.

Elios jerked upright, wiping at his face. "Hey," he said quietly, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Hey, Macy. In the kitchen." The whole place was dim, just a light under the cupboards casting shadows around the room.

Macy stepped in; he looked haggard and worn, like he'd aged ten years in the past day. "You okay?" He rummaged through one of the upper cupboards, finding a bottle of scotch. "Need a drink?"

Elios didn't bother dignifying that first question with a response. The second, though, he could answer. "Fuck, yes." He got up to find a couple glasses, standing on his toes to get them out for Macy.

Macy poured them both a generous drink, then carried the bottle and his drink over to the table. "He's got a head made of stone. Or something stronger," he said, without preamble, and then took a drink. "Too bad the rest of him isn't the same, but he'll live. Engineers are thrilled that he found out the one way to guarantee that the eject function doesn't work on the Harpies."

"Huh." Elios started drinking before he'd managed to sit down. When he stopped to breathe, he asked, "So how badly is he hurt? I didn't know what to tell Katy." Before Macy could answer, Elios was drinking again. Drinking was a brilliant idea, and only the fact that Elios didn't drink alone had kept him from doing more of it. Macy refilled his glass for him before answering.

"He's a bit of a mess, but surprisingly okay. Broken leg, burns, had his head rattled, bruised all to shit, a few lacerations, breathed smoke, but he really should be worse off. He was doing great until he lost the runway and rolled the old clunker. If he'd had a bit better angle, he'd have walked away." Macy finished his drink while he talked and refilled both their glasses. "Anyone else, they'd be peeling them off the ground."

Elios was going to blame what happened next on the booze, or the macaroni and cheese, he decided. He pushed himself to his feet and walked to the bathroom, where he knelt down and promptly threw up into the toilet until his stomach was empty. Resting his head on the rim, he took slow, deep breaths to be sure that it wasn't going to happen again. Once he was steadier, he got up to wipe his mouth and wash his hands before he came back out to keep drinking.

Macy was waiting for Elios without apparent concern. He said nothing, just had another drink. "They cleaned him up," he continued. "Operated on that leg, worked on the burns, that kind of thing. They were pretty surprised when they got him all cleaned up, how good he was. He's sort of conscious. Got his eyes open, figured out who I was, asked me how the cadet that ran into him was." Macy drained his glass, poured himself another. "Being a man of restraint, I didn't strangle him."

"I get the impression you've been toeing that line a lot lately," Elios muttered, remembering what Katy had said about the two of them arguing. He took a drink to rinse the bitter taste out of his mouth. It helped, so Elios had another.

"Trampling it." Macy seemed remarkably unrepentant about it. He lifted his jaw to show Elios the bruise there. "He hit me last night. Threw me out."

"Surprised you didn't hit him first." All the deities knew that Elios wanted to do so most days, when he wasn't grieving the loss. "He's wrong. About all of it."

"Nah, he's not." Macy poured himself another glass of scotch, and Elios watched him incredulously. The man couldn't be drunk already.

"What?"

"He's wrong from our perspective," Macy clarified. He leaned over and poured Elios another drink. "But not from his. Would you turn your back on your faith and your family for love?"

"I would if it and they were wrong." Elios watched the low light dancing in the scotch in his glass, casting patterns on the white table. "Fuck, I'm starting to think my way of doing things is wrong and theirs is right, the luck I'm having. Or I just have shitty taste in men. I may as well give up linguistics and join the Pythian priesthood. Celibacy would be easier than this. I'm tired of not being good enough just because I have a dick." Maybe less alcohol would've been better. Maybe being less angry would be better.

Macy shook his head and wagged a finger at Elios. "Look, I know he still loves you. He needs to take Katy back to Themis, and your lives there would not be easy. He wouldn't want that for you."

Elios laughed and it came out bitter. "Macy, going back to Themis wasn't why he broke up with me. I mean, sure, he couldn't take me back there with him. But even if he stayed here, I don't think he would've stayed with me. How could he, and still teach her to be like their parents? Unless he wanted me to be his dirty little secret and, really, I'd rather think that never crossed his mind."

Macy tossed back his scotch and poured himself another. "You're not being discriminated against because you have a dick; it's because you went out with him for what? Not even two months. And his parents, with whom he's got this twisted-up relationship, go and die and their last wish is that he take his baby sister and go live on Themis and raise her right. So, he's giving up his whole life, not just you, to do exactly what they wanted. If you were a woman, I don't think he'd be willing to wreck your entire career and everything you wanted in life just to keep you with him."

Yeah, okay. Elios could see that. He and Sender hadn't really had a chance to talk about the details. "The whole damn situation is fucked up." He sighed and let his head fall against the back of the chair. "He... he really can't do this. I mean, even leaving me out of the equation, he shouldn't be giving everything up so that he can be the perfect son to people who would've hated him if they'd really known him."

"Sometimes I think I'm backing him into a corner or something, but I can't shut up," Macy admitted. He was probably on his way to being very drunk, but he was still articulating well enough. "He can't do this. That's why I keep getting into his face about it. If I have to, I will come back from the Pandora and go to Themis and get in his face all over again. I hate this. I hate it so much. I hate them. I'm down to crying and begging to make him change his mind, and I guess I'll do that if I have to."

"I wonder if Katy's told him she doesn't want to go back," Elios murmured, sipping at his scotch. "I mean, she told me. But if he doesn't know... I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't make a difference. But he loves her. And Themis isn't a good place to grow up."

"Then tell him," Macy said, reaching for the bottle again. There wasn't much left, and he offered it to Elios first before pouring himself another drink. "He should know. If Katy's anything like him, she knows better than to rock the boat, even at her age. Show no mercy. Or, if you don't feel you can because he dumped you and blew you off, I will."

"I don't know if he'll listen to me, but I'll tell him. I don't know if it'll change his mind, but he should have all the information." Elios took another drink. "And that's a pretty damn big piece of information to be missing."

"I hope he listens to you. I think he's listening to me, but he can't get out of this obligation. He loves his baby, though, and I can't see him taking her back to Themis if she doesn't want to go." Macy poured himself the last of the scotch and sat back in his chair. "If he tries to leave, well, I suppose I could always hit him over the head and hide him on the *Auriga*."

"You need help with that, let me know," Elios murmured, finishing off his scotch and settling back in his chair. "I'll try to talk to him tomorrow, maybe. If he's not too out of it from the pain meds." Now that he was drunk, talking sounded like it might be a good plan. He remembered that he'd had reasons not to do it before, but he didn't remember what they were.

Macy tossed back the last of his scotch and stood up, swaying, to take the empty bottle to the trash. "You gonna be okay here tonight?"

"Yeah. I'll just... I should've stopped at home and gotten some clothes or something. I'll have to do that in the morning." Elios watched Macy, eyebrows raised. "You want to stay here, too? You look like you're going to have some trouble walking back to your place."

"I'm real good at falling down," Macy said confidently. "I should go fall down in my room. By myself. Alone. Or maybe I'll go fall down on Lore. She likes that."

"I'm sure she'll appreciate that you picked her to fall down on when you're drunk," Elios said dryly.

"She's used to it lately." Macy took a breath and shook his head to clear it, then caught himself on the wall before he lurched over. "What are friends for, anyway? I mean, if you can't fall down drunk on someone..." He straightened up with dignity. "Come on over to the infirmary tomorrow. It's marked on the walkway signs. I'll probably be there. With a hangover."

"Yeah. Drink a lot of water, okay?" Elios pushed himself to his feet and walked slowly and carefully over to Macy. "If you're going to be in the infirmary anyway, you may as well see if you can get something from one of the doctors for the hangover you're going to have."

"I will." Macy looked down at Elios for a minute. "You want him back?"

The question was a shock. Elios shoved his shaking hands into his pockets and looked away. "I'm in love with him," he said quietly, as if that was answer enough. Maybe it was.

"You said you had shitty taste in men," Macy pointed out, putting one hand on the wall for balance.

Elios felt himself curling inward, shoulders slumping, and he shook his head. "Just. It's kind of a pattern, now. Right down to the adorable children I'm not good enough to raise. I already went through the whole thing with Aric, my ex, and I'm getting tired of it."

Macy reached out to put his hand on Elios' shoulder, rubbing gently. "I'm really sorry. It is different. I swear it is. He's a big fucking messed-up idiot, but he would never screw you over."

"I know." Elios did know, but it still wasn't easy. He sighed quietly and raised his head to look at Macy. "I'm okay. Whatever happens between me and Sender, I don't want to just let him ruin his life without even trying to find some kind of compromise so that he doesn't have to go back there."

"You are so not okay," Macy said, laughing quietly but not unkindly. "And neither is he. I just wanted to be clear on stuff, since I keep yanking his chain about things. I just thought it was done between you, at least on your end. If it's not, well, it's not. It's good to know."

"I... No. I guess it's not. Or it doesn't have to be, if he doesn't want it to be." Elios tilted his head, though, and admitted, "I know it would be easier for him to go on the *Auriga* if he was with me. Because of Katy. But I don't want that to be why he changes his mind about me." He didn't think Sender would do that, but it kept going through his head, so he had to say it.

"Changes his mind from what?" Macy frowned owlshly at Elios.

"Are you paying attention?" Elios asked, frowning back at him, trying to focus. "He broke up with me. Because he was trying to do what his parents wanted. Like going back to Themis. And not having sex with men. Because I really don't think their idea of a 'good parent' for Katy was someone who likes to suck dick, Macy. I don't know how easy it'd be for him to turn his back on everything his parents wanted him to do, to be." He got it, now, that Sender's decision wasn't personal. But that didn't really change what Sender's choices were, and how hard they'd be.

Macy sighed and sagged against the wall. "He loves you. And he never said he broke up with you. Not to me. He said it was over because he had to go back. Nothing more."

Elios wrapped his arms around himself and tried not to sway. Sender hadn't said he didn't want to be with him, just that he was taking Katy back to Themis. Elios just hadn't been able to absorb anything except the fact that it was over between them. He was still angry, but he wasn't sure it was all over, not anymore. That didn't stop it from hurting right now, though, and he didn't want to lie here alone and feel the hope eating him from the inside out.

"You sure you don't want to stay here?" he asked Macy. "I'm going to sleep on the couch. You could have his bed, head out in the morning when you're steadier on your feet."

"I should get back, be with the squad. I may have Sky's job, but he's still the boss, and they're pretty upset about him going down." Macy gave Elios a warm smile. "I'll stay if you need me, though. They've got each other. I know this sucks for you right now."

Oh. Elios didn't think about the good reasons why Macy should get back to his own place. "No, that's okay. You should get back there. I'll be fine." He would. It was just one little girl. And an apartment full of space he could've shared. "I'll see you at the infirmary tomorrow morning."

"Fair enough." Macy wrapped Elios up in a warm hug, just for a moment, startling him. Macy smelled of scotch and jet fuel and smoke and sweat. He smelled male and tired, and he hugged Elios with strong arms. "Hang in there," he murmured.

Elios wrapped his arms around Macy and patted his back, turning his head to tuck his face down near Macy's shoulder. It felt good, warm and friendly and comforting. "Thanks. You, too," he murmured. Then he unwound himself and slowly stepped back, before the rasp of Macy's uniform against his cheek reminded him of someone else's uniform, before he got caught up in who Macy wasn't, rather than remembering who he was.

"See you tomorrow." Macy navigated to the door fairly well and gave Elios a smile and wave before he let himself out to lurch back to the barracks and collapse among his squadmates. They were going to be a litter of drunken, lost, miserable puppies tonight, knowing how they felt about Sender.

Elios, on the other hand, cleaned up the glasses and collapsed onto the couch. He'd have a headache the size of Earth itself in the morning, but tonight had been worth it. Macy was a good friend. He was Sender's friend, not Elios', but in this case it didn't much matter, and Elios was grateful to him.

Chapter Fourteen

Elios had plenty to think about the next day. Unfortunately, most of his cognitive abilities were devoted to getting a wriggly, fretful four-year-old ready for daycare and navigating a bright, loud world with a raging hangover. He managed to get Katy's hair into something resembling order and sent her to brush her teeth and wash her hands before she went to school, while he tidied up.

Macy had been right that the apartment was spotless, if only because there was so little in it other than Katy's toys. There was nothing of Sender in it, save for his things in the closet and his handwriting on the chart in the kitchen. It was as though he'd disappeared. More present were his parents, in the form of photographs and a collection of religious icons on a shelf.

They looked unyielding, especially Sender's father. The lines of his face were echoed in the faces of the saints on the shelf, down to the fierce blue eyes and the heavy beard. He looked like the depiction of God in Katy's illustrated *Book of the Shepherd*. Elios could see why Sender would be convinced that his father wouldn't accept him, why he'd been convinced God wouldn't accept him. In some families, it was easy to confuse the two.

"All ready." Katy came back, dragging her school bag and Bunny behind her. "Is Sen coming home soon?" She was a patient child, obviously used to random adults overseeing her routine, but everyone had their limits. Elios wasn't sure how much of the truth to tell her.

"I think so," Elios said, holding out a hand to her. "I'm going to go see him after I drop you off at daycare, and I'll find out when you can see him, okay?"

"Okay." Katy's face fell, and she sighed heavily as she shouldered her school bag. Her hand in Elios' was cold, and she didn't look at him as he led her to the door. The sadness coming off of her was palpable.

"I'm sure he's sorry to be away from you so long," Elios assured her gently as they walked to the lift. "Sometimes these things happen. Do you want to press the button for me?"

"No." Katy stood stiffly, waiting for him to push the button to summon the lift, clutching Bunny to her side, her eyes fixed on her pink shoes.

Elios pressed the button and then crouched down to be at Katy's level. "Do you need a hug?" Katy turned her head away, pushing her face into the top of Bunny's head. "Are you mad at me?"

All he got was a nod, but it was something. The lift came and Elios stepped in, drawing Katy in after him. In the lift, he crouched down again to talk to her.

"It's okay if you're mad, but I can't change Sender not being here," he reminded her. "Are you mad at him, too?"

Another nod, and Katy looked at him out of the corner of one eye.

"He would be here if he could be, sweetheart. I promise it's going to be okay." Elios held his arms out to her, offering her a hug again. This time she sidled into his arms and leaned on him just a little. Elios gave in and picked her up as the lift doors opened. Keeping his distance from her was as hard as it had been to keep his distance from her brother.

"I'm going to be here for you until Sender can be back," Elios found himself saying as he carried her down the path toward the daycare.

It was another perfect day on the colony, and the bright sun cut right through the sunglasses he'd borrowed from Sender, making his head feel like it was on fire from the inside out. Katy's little arms around his neck were too tight; Bunny bounced against Elios' back as he walked. *All I really want*, he thought, *is to throw up, drink a lot of water, cry, and go back to sleep*. Instead, he had a long train ride and a day of work with Aric hanging over his shoulder to look forward to.

As he dropped Katy off at daycare and waved to her as she went to hang up her school bag, Elios realized that underneath it all, what he really wanted, still, was for this to be his life. He was furious at Sender, even if he had no idea whether Sender was even well enough for it to be worth Elios' time being furious, but that didn't mean he wanted it to be over. It wasn't fair to any of them, and Elios could dig his heels in just as hard as Sender if he wanted to.

"Doctor Campbell?" The tall, dark-skinned man who'd brought Katy out the day before gave Elios a hesitant wave to get his attention. "I'm the head teacher for the juniors. Doctor Uzoma Ishiga." He held out a hand to Elios. "Just call me Uzoma; all the children do."

"Hi." Elios shook his head to clear it and regretted it immediately. Still, he rallied and shook Uzoma's hand. "Elios."

"Nice to meet you." Uzoma checked the reader he held in his hand and frowned. "Have you heard any news on Lieutenant Kinnison? Does Katy know?"

"Nothing beyond the fact that he's stable." Elios shoved his hands in his pockets and tried to look as though he wasn't worried. Katy was heading back their way, hand-in-hand with a little boy who was as dark as she was pale. The two were whispering quite seriously. "I'm going over this morning to see how he's doing, to see if Katy can see him. I haven't told her that he's injured, just that he's held over at work. She seemed to accept that."

"I'll let the other teachers know, then." Uzoma made a note on the reader. "This is the kind of thing we need to handle carefully."

"Thanks." Elios gave the man a grateful smile and then turned to give Katy his attention as she came up to him, leaving her friend behind. "I'm going to pick you up after school," he said, crouching down to be at her level.

"What about Sender?" Katy's lower lip trembled.

"We'll go see him then," Elios promised. One way or another, he couldn't keep this from her. He just needed to see the damage for himself so he could prepare her. "He misses you a lot."

"I miss him more." Katy tugged at Elios' sleeve and looked crestfallen. "I don't want to go to daycare today. I want to see Sen-sen."

"It's going to be a little while before Sender's ready to see you," Uzoma said. He held his hand out to Katy. "Why don't we go see Su Li over at the art station and you can sit with her while you make something nice for your brother?"

"I'm sure he'd love that." Elios gave Uzoma a grateful look as he stood up. His head pounded with every move, and he really needed to get something in his stomach before the dregs of last night's binge came up on their own. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he told Katy.

Katy's eyes brimmed with tears, but she was too obedient to defy her teacher. "Okay. I make him something."

"Come on." Uzoma's voice was soothing, and he drew Katy away from Elios slowly. "We're going to have a nice day together," he said.

Katy went with him willingly enough but kept looking over her shoulder at Elios with wide blue eyes that were so full of sadness that Elios' chest ached. Elios remembered Sender's blue eyes when he'd said he was going back to Themis, how much sorrow they'd held, and Macy's blue eyes when he sat in Sender's kitchen, drinking Sender's scotch and saying that he'd cry and beg if that was what would change Sender's mind.

Elios felt it just as deeply. None of them needed to be this sad. He waved goodbye to Katy and headed out into the piercing sunlight, hoping that Sender would be well enough for Elios to tell him how he really felt.

Consciousness came back to Sender slowly. For a long time, he drifted in a white haze of numbness over a sea of pain, feeling grateful for the peace of it. It was better than being asleep. It was being nowhere: no sorrow, no pain, no guilt, nothing at all to plague him. He knew he was hurt, but it felt unreal until the medication started to fade.

The searing pain in his left arm and shoulder harried him back to being awake. The medication held him down, made his eyelids heavy, and he couldn't move. Panic struck as he realized that he was paralyzed even though the anesthetics weren't working anymore. He forced his eyes open, terrified, and struggled to speak.

There were loud noises, soft voices, and people around him, touching him, moving him. The pain receded and the paralysis faded. Something in his throat choked him as they drew it out, and he panicked again, but then it was gone and he could breathe. The air tasted like metal and fire and antiseptics; his first inhalation made him cough and he gagged on fluid.

"Easy, tiger." The voice was a woman's, calm and a little amused. Sender could see her face, and she smiled as she slid a tube into his mouth. The fluid was drawn away and he could breathe again. "It'll take a few minutes to get all that crap out," she explained. "Coughing is good."

That was good to know, as he spent the next interminable stretch of minutes wracked with coughing. His lungs rebelled against the very stuff that had healed them, and the nurse patiently coached him through it, giving him clean oxygen between coughing spasms. Finally, Sender started to feel human again.

"Where's Veli?" he asked, as soon as the nurse pulled the tube out of his mouth again.

"Your cadet is just fine," she said. "You can have visitors in a little while. I want you to behave yourself and not try getting up like you did last night."

"Last night?" How long had he been asleep? Sender was about to try and get up when he remembered that he'd just been told not to do so.

"It's been a busy twenty-four hours." The nurse smoothed out Sender's bedclothes and patted his hand. "Stay still. Someone will be in to see you soon."

Sender turned to watch her go. One wall of his room was glass from ceiling to floor; a panel of it slid aside to let the nurse out and beyond her he could see the nurses' station. People came and went in the halls. He felt exposed and ashamed, naked.

A cursory inspection proved that he was, indeed, bare under the light thermal blankets covering him. His left leg was encased in a brace, from what he could tell, and his left

arm was wrapped up and immobilized. He was lying in a soft, cushioned bed that made it feel like he was floating.

The accident played in his mind over and over again, and it made him cold. Who would have taken care of Katy if he'd died?

All the more reason to return to Themis. All the passion and conviction in the world, all the love he had for his job, none of it was worth leaving his baby with no one. He'd been waiting for someone to talk him out of returning, for someone to break through the arguments that he couldn't get out of alone.

"Hey." The voice startled Sender out of his thoughts. Macy stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets. He hesitated there, and Sender took him in, from the exhaustion in his eyes to the bruise on his jaw to the uncertainty in his body language.

"Hi." There were so many things Sender wished he could change, things he wished he could undo and unsay. "Veli okay?"

"Like I told you last night, he's physically fine." Macy shrugged. "Ozanne's pulling him."

"Can't do that now." Raising his voice set off a coughing fit. "We're short already," Sender finished, when he could.

"Only because you're leaving," Macy pointed out mercilessly. "She's bringing Derringer back in to replace Veli."

"Derringer washed out." The idea of having the empty-headed miner back on a squad made Sender's head hurt more than it already did.

"Barely." Macy shrugged again. "She won't crash into anyone, at least."

Sure, the girl could hardly remember to tie her own boots, and she drew hearts and flowers on anything that stayed still long enough, but she wasn't going to crash into anyone. Maybe. Sender closed his eyes. It wasn't his problem anymore, or it wouldn't be, soon.

"So." Macy stepped in and the door hushed shut behind him. "Did near-death shake anything loose in that damn head of yours?"

"I can't leave Katy alone." Sender opened his eyes to find Macy standing over him. "She needs her family."

"And what about me and the squad? We're the fucking help?" There wasn't any heat in Macy's voice. He sounded defeated, and that made Sender ache more. "What about Elios?"

"He walked away as soon as I told him I couldn't stay." Sender closed his eyes again.
"Macy, I can't have this argument right now."

"He came back." Macy's hand was warm and gentle, stroking Sender's cheek. "You big idiot. Who do you think I got to look after your baby?"

"He what?" Sender's eyes flew open again, and Macy was looking back at him expectantly.

"Came back to look after Katy. Couldn't think of anyone else to call, and we needed to get the test runs done on time." Macy gave Sender a crooked smile. "So, he came. I thought you'd feel better knowing someone you trusted was with her."

Sender did feel better. "You shouldn't have done that to him."

"Yeah, well, I did." Macy was unrepentant. "And he forgives me for it. He wants you back, Sky." All the hope that Sender kept trampling down was right there in Macy's eyes.

"I can't."

"You said Katy needed family," Macy said, persisting. "And you could die in some freak accident on Themis, in some damn factory or running a shuttle. It happens. And then who'd get her, Sky? Some relative? You want them raising her? You look me in the eye and, knowing what you know now, you tell me that you want to send her back there and risk just anyone getting her if something happens to you."

"I'm not likely to die like that," Sender pointed out, trying not to lose his composure. He couldn't have this argument right now. He just couldn't. He closed his eyes again.

"She's not going to Hell, Sky. I read up on what your folks believed, years ago. I can't stand the thought that you still believe it, too." Macy took Sender's good hand and held it carefully in his, stroking the back of it. "They loved you, and I know you loved them, but you have to stop this. You are killing yourself. You're going to die inside and leave Katy alone even if you're still walking around."

"Macy..." *Please stop.*

"I gotta go before the doctor throws me out." Sender felt Macy's lips press against his forehead, dry and rough. He smelled of old sweat and all the smells of the hangar. "Don't die on me, Sky. Because I don't know how to save you from here on out."

Sender didn't want to watch Macy walk away. Once, he might have prayed for help, but he realized that he'd stopped doing it a long time ago. He was doing all this for a god he didn't even trust would save him, not even for Katy's sake. And he was going to turn Katy's soul over to that god? Either that was God, and Sender didn't want anything to do with it, or that wasn't God at all.

"Lieutenant." The doctor's greeting startled Sender; for a moment he wasn't sure the voice had come from outside his head. "Let's take a look, shall we?"

Nurses folded the blankets up and down so that they lay across Sender's hips and the rest of him was bare. Sender turned his head to look out into the hall, but he couldn't see Macy out there. *What about me and the squad? What about Elios? I don't know how to save you from here on out.*

Sometimes a person just had a flawed spot in their mind that made it so that even the simplest things were an impossibility. Like Veli and his inability to cope when his world was turned upside down physically. That didn't mean he was right about where the ground and sky were. It meant that he had to trust things outside himself to be his compass. Sender had been so frustrated with Veli's inability to do it, hadn't been able to understand why Veli couldn't just look at the instruments, and here he was, doing the same thing. He didn't want to crash; he didn't want to take the people he loved down with him.

Elios stood outside the infirmary for a while, weighing whether or not to go find Sender. He could take care of Katy and go home when he wasn't needed anymore. He could turn around now and save himself the pain of being rejected again. But that pain would fade. Giving up was going to last forever.

He found Macy before he found Sender. Macy was sprawled across a set of chairs in a hall near the nurses' station, one arm tucked under his head. At first, Elios thought he was asleep -- as though anyone could sleep on those chairs -- but then Macy shifted and gave Elios a groggy smile. "Hey," he said softly. "Nurse said he fell back asleep but he's allowed visitors now. I was just waiting until you showed up, but I can stay if you want."

"I... have no idea," Elios admitted, shoving his hands into his pockets and looking away. He'd slept like shit and he had a hangover and his eyes hurt and he had a headache and he was still wearing yesterday's clothes and the man he loved was lying in a hospital bed. Not ideal conditions for decision-making. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm just... I'm going to go in and sit down, wait until he wakes up. You can... do whatever. Go get something to eat, stay, whatever you want."

"I'm going to grab something to eat then, now that it'll stay put." Macy made a wry face and rolled to his feet. "He's in and out; he may wake up while I'm gone." He patted Elios on the shoulder. "I'll be back in a bit. He's right there." He pointed down the hall and Elios could see the name "Kinnison" on a wall-screen.

"Thanks." Elios wasn't sure he'd made the right choice, telling Macy to go ahead, but it was done now.

Sender's room was fully visible behind a wall of glass, and for that Elios was grateful. It gave him a moment to himself to take in all the damage and compose himself again. He needed it.

Sender's right side looked whole, though Elios couldn't tell what was going on below his waist where the blankets covered him. He was bruised, his chest purpled where the harness had held him in his seat. Sender's left side was obviously in worse shape, by the look of things.

Elios remembered that kind, reassuring smile as Sender had talked about accidents and how Elios needed to stay in his seat in an emergency. It seemed like a lifetime ago. He'd trusted Sender with his life, then. In a Harpy, he still would. Whether he could down here on the ground was another story. The door slid open for him as he paced the length of the glass, trying to decide whether or not to go in.

Sender didn't move when the door opened, so Elios walked in, trying to keep his footfalls light. There was a chair by the bed, so Elios settled in it and leaned on the edge of the bed, studying Sender while he was still submerged in sleep. The man was still beautiful, but the lingering scent of burned flesh was a reminder that his beauty was going to be transient.

Elios cautiously let his hand brush Sender's. There were bruises and stitches on his right hand; the nails were torn and the knuckles raw from trying to get out of the Harpy.

"Oh, baby," Elios breathed. Sender was a survivor. The decision to undo himself, to throw his life away on Themis, made so little sense.

How Elios could be this hurt and angry and still love Sender so much was beyond him. The turmoil made his head pound worse than ever, and still, Sender slept. Elios crossed his arms on the side of the bed and put his head down on them to make the hammering going on inside stop. Just a moment wouldn't hurt.

A gentle hand on his hair woke Elios from his accidental nap. Fingers trailed over his temple and played through his curls, delicately untangling them. He'd missed that touch so much. It was tempting to stay very still and let it continue, but he made himself open his eyes and lift his head.

"Hey," he said, his voice rough with worry. "You're awake." It was obvious, but it was easier than saying any of the other things he wanted to say. *I love you. Don't walk away. Please don't leave me.*

"For the moment." Sender's voice was unsteady. He touched Elios' hair again, smoothing it back and tucking it behind Elios' ear. His expression was a study in melting affection, though his eyes were sad. "Thanks for taking care of Katy. I'm glad she wasn't with a stranger."

Elios tried not to think about how yesterday's call might've been Macy telling him that Sender was dead, rather than asking him to take care of Katy. And then he had to try not to wonder if Macy would've called, would've told him, if it hadn't been for the fact that he needed help. Elios wasn't going to ask, not ever. "She's a good kid. Sweet."

"She is. She doesn't deserve this crap." Sender sounded defeated. "She deserves to be happy."

"Then maybe you should ask her what she wants." Elios straightened and pulled away. He couldn't think with Sender's gentle fingers on his skin. "Because she told me she doesn't want to go back to Themis."

Sender stared at Elios, then tried to run his hands through his hair the way he always did when he was frustrated. Thwarted by the bandages around his left arm, he sagged back into the pillows and closed his eyes. "I should have asked her," he said, his voice almost inaudible. "No one ever asked me anything... did she say anything else?"

"Just that you're sad all the time," Elios said. Macy had said to show no mercy, and Elios wasn't in any mood to be delicate about this. "That you fight with Macy and it upsets her. That all her new friends are going on the *Auriga* and she doesn't know why she can't go, too. She loves Luna. She wishes your parents could have come and lived here."

"I'm already doing it all wrong." Sender reached for the controls to raise the head of the bed; they were beyond his reach and probably for good reason. Elios got to it before he did. "I keep trying and I'm just fucking up all over the place."

"Well, start not fucking up by lying still." Elios put the controls further away, hanging them up above the headboard. "And then listen. Listen to your family. To Katy and Macy and the squad." *Not me.* It hurt to feel it, but he'd walked away. Sender had made the choice without him, and that was all there was to it.

"I want to do the right thing." Sender shook his head and then looked away. "I want her to have a good life. I want her to be safe."

"I know, baby." It was so easy to call him that, still. "They loved her," Elios said, even though he hated them more than he could possibly explain. "If she's happy, they will be, too." And he knew that wasn't true, knew that Sender knew it, but it should have been the truth. Katy's happiness should have mattered more than the arcane rules of some cult-like sect of their church. Maybe Elios was wrong; maybe it did matter more. Maybe they would've been happy for Sender, too.

"Obedience, not happiness, is the true measure of a life well-lived," Sender said, as though he were quoting something he'd had drilled into his head. "Man is born full of sin and his path returns to it always if he does not keep faith with God and teachings of His Church. Any happiness that is found outside of obedience to God is the work of the Devil and that way lies damnation. Without God and His most holy law, no right order is given

man, no happiness worthy of the name can be attained." Sender laughed softly, and then his breath caught.

"That's..." Elios tried, but he couldn't find the right words to say how horrifying that was. He thought of his gods and their demands and the sacrifices he'd made for them and would continue to make, and none of them, none of it, was as terrible and inhuman as the words that had just come out of Sender's mouth. "I'm sorry," he said finally, and looked away. He wished Macy were here. Macy might know what to say. How could he fight against something so deep and so dark and so soul-killing?

"If it was just me," Sender said softly, "when it was just me, it was one thing. But it's not anymore. I'm scared," he admitted at last, as tears welled up in his eyes. "She's so little and so good and so new and I don't want to ruin her. They trusted me with this perfect little thing, and I don't want to betray them or her, not for my own happiness." In the end, Elios knew, that mattered the least of all to Sender.

"You won't ruin her, or betray her. Let her tell you what will make her happy. I don't think it will be anything so terrible that it would be too much for you to give." Elios squeezed Sender's arm lightly and then pulled back. "You're a good person, Sender, and you'll be a good parent, too."

"Thanks. For everything, Elios."

That sounded more like goodbye than the apologies had, when Sender had said he couldn't stay with the project. Elios gave a jerky nod and wrapped his arms around himself in the guise of crossing them over his chest. "I should... I should let you get some rest. I told Katy I'd bring her back here tonight to see you. So." So he needed to go. He really did need to go. He wasn't sure how much longer he could stand to sit here while two dead people broke his heart.

"I'll see you tonight, then." Sender looked like he wanted to say something else, there was tension in him still, but he exhaled and kept silent while Elios got to his feet.

"When I bring her, sure." Elios forced himself not to simply flee to make the ache in his chest subside. He gave Sender a smile and headed for the door. The door slid open as Elios approached, giving him his escape.

"Elios." Sender's voice stopped him at the threshold. "I don't know which way up is anymore."

Elios turned and started back into the room, worried. "What do you mean?" Sender was lying there, almost as white as the sheets, save for the bruises and blood. "Should I get the doctor?" Macy said Sender had managed to give himself a concussion along with the rest.

"No." Sender reached out, and Elios took his hand without thinking about it. In spite of everything, Sender's grip was still so strong, hanging on to Elios as if his life depended on it. "I mean I don't know what's right anymore, where I should be going. Like Veli couldn't tell which way was up once he lost the horizon. I can't do this on my own."

Oh. "Oh, baby." Elios let Sender pull him back to the side of the bed, and he leaned over to stroke Sender's forehead with his free hand.

"I don't know what to do." Sender looked more lost and wounded now than he had when Elios had come in, and Elios knew it was because the physical injuries were trivial.

"Get better." That was the first priority. Elios smoothed Sender's hair back, looking into his dark blue eyes. He wanted to get lost in them, to kiss Sender's dry, cracked lips, to press himself against Sender's body and never let go, but he had to take care of himself. They needed time. "Nothing's happening until you're well. Everyone will still be here when you're better." They wouldn't be around much longer than that, but Elios hoped they'd accelerate Sender's healing a little.

"Everyone -- even you?" Sender's eyes were so fierce, like he could pull himself up from drowning just by locking his gaze on Elios'.

"If you want me." It was true, even if Elios felt like a madman for letting the words come out. He couldn't lie to Sender, though.

"I do." Sender let go of Elios' hand to cup his cheek. "I never stopped, Elios. Never. I just got lost."

Sender wouldn't lie to him either. "Then get well." Elios turned his head to brush a kiss over Sender's palm. "We'll talk when you get home. Maybe we can figure out which way is up."

Leaving Sender's hospital room was one of the hardest things Elios had ever done. On some level, he worried that if he left, everything would be different when he came back. When the nurse started dropping unobtrusive hints about letting Sender get his rest, Elios finally pulled himself together. He wasn't ready to go to the lab, though, so he found himself wandering the halls of the hospital.

His wandering turned out to be less random than he'd thought; he wound up standing at the entrance to the hospital chapel. Even if there weren't any Roman priests or priestesses inside, the prayer might help him settle his thoughts. He slipped inside and went to kneel at the plain wooden altar used by all the various sects and religions of the Colonies.

While Elios was kneeling there, a woman in long white robes with a white veil over her head entered with a lamp in hand. She set the lamp on a pillar and stepped up to tend the

fire at the head of the temple. Her feet were bare, and she moved silently, gracefully. When she turned away from the fire, she smiled at Elios.

Elios nodded respectfully. Only Vestals tended the fire. Perhaps talking to her would be more helpful than simply stewing in his own confusion. After all, it wasn't just romance he needed guidance with; it was building a life, a home, and a family, with Sender and his sister. "I've come to seek the guidance of Vesta," he said quietly.

"You look like it." She was older than he was, with dark olive skin and pale green eyes. Holding out her hand, she continued, "Would you like to speak privately?"

"Please." Elios slipped his hand into hers and stood. He followed her into one of the little curtained alcoves designed so people could speak away from the others using the chapel. Once they were seated on the little bench and the curtain was drawn, he realized he wasn't sure where to start, or what to say. The priestess was silent, letting him think. Finally, he whispered, "I don't know what I'm doing. I don't want to get hurt again."

"No one wants that. But life is painful," she said gently. "To avoid pain can be to avoid living." Her expression was sympathetic; she wasn't merely mouthing platitudes.

He didn't want to stop living. It felt like he'd done that since he walked away from Sender in the park that day. Like life had been on pause ever since and hadn't started again until he got that call from Macy. "He's already chosen his parents' beliefs over me once, though," he pointed out. How could he be sure that wouldn't happen again?

"It's not uncommon to return home when we're frightened or confused," the priestess said. "It's what we know. You speak as though he's come back to you, though. Why?"

"He..." Elios stopped to think about it. Why *did* he think they had a second chance? "He asked if I would still be here when he got well. He asked me not to leave him."

"He needs you?" The priestess tilted her head and gave Elios a little smile.

Elios smiled uncertainly. "Maybe. I think I need him. I've felt so empty."

"Not all roads are smooth, and new paths never are." She put her hand on Elios'. "It's difficult to travel in new territory. Frightening. Old paths are easier to find. But it sounds like he might be ready to walk a new one, if you were with him. Does that sound about right?"

Elios stayed quiet for a long moment, thinking. Was he ready to support Sender through all of this? To support Katy? Just thinking about the pair sent a rush of warmth through him that gave him his answer. "Yes." He wanted to be there to support Sender and Katy, to help them. He was ready. He smiled and pressed the Vestal's hand between both of his. "Thank you."

"Sometimes, one needs another source of light to see a situation for what it truly is." She raised her other hand, reaching out to touch Elios' forehead to bless him. "May your path together be easier."

Elios closed his eyes. "Thank you," he said again, when she moved her hand away. He stood and quietly walked out, feeling somehow lighter and more certain of his decisions than he had in weeks.

Chapter Fifteen

"You're sure he's ready to go home?" Macy gave the doctor a suspicious look.

Sender finished tying his boots -- a painstaking process with his still-healing arm and leg -- and was sorry because now he couldn't throw one at Macy. "I'm sure," he said firmly.

Doctor Yang just laughed at both of them. "I'm sure as well," he said. He was an older man, old enough to be their father, and he'd seen enough of their antics over the last few days to be amused. "He can't go back on duty for a while yet, but I suggest that you get back in the sims as soon as possible, Lieutenant." The laughter died away, and he crossed his arms over the datapad that he held against his chest. "And I've arranged for a third psychiatric evaluation for you once you start back in them. A fourth will follow once you're back in your Harpy. You may be required to attend counseling."

Sender sighed heavily and leaned back in his chair. "I'm fine," he said, for what felt like the millionth time.

"You feel fine," Yang corrected. "You don't know how you'll feel when you get back in the cockpit." He referenced his datapad and then gave Sender a smile. "You've had more than one trauma recently, I see. Your first two evaluations were very solid, though. You've always scored well. I don't think you have anything to worry about. Just be aware that we're not nearly done with you yet. We need you back for more treatments anyway."

Treatments. Such a mundane word for a hell of a lot of pain. Accelerated healing was a brilliant invention, but it hurt and it wore on the body's reserves. The last week had been an endless cycle of treatments and recovery.

"I wish I was looking forward to it." Sender grabbed his crutches and used them to get to his feet, warding Macy's help off with a glare.

"Keeping it up isn't optional." Doctor Yang shook a finger at Sender. "I know you want to get back in the air. If you cooperate, I'll be speaking to Lieutenant Commander Ozanne in no time. In the meantime, I'll see you in two days."

"Yes, sir." Sender watched Macy shoulder the bag that held Sender's spare clothes, resistance bands for exercise, and medications.

"Get lots of rest," Yang said. "No partying tonight. I know you boys."

"I have to get home to my little girl," Sender reminded him. His little girl. Katy. She was his now, and it still startled him sometimes.

"Ah, yes," Dr. Yang said, smiling. "I'm sure she'll be glad to have you home. Go on then, both of you. I'll see you in a couple days."

Dr. Yang left the room, and Sender and Macy stood there a moment, looking at each other. So much had changed in just a few days, it seemed. The crash had turned everything upside down. Or maybe it had turned things right side up, finally. Sender hoped so.

"Ready to go home?" Macy shoved his hands in his pockets and gave Sender a little smile.

"Yeah," Sender said. "I wasn't sure I was going to get to see it again."

It was slow going on the way back to Sender's apartment. His leg still hurt too much to bear weight, and his burned arm had recovered, but not enough that he could use it easily. He could tell that watching him struggle was making Macy twitchy.

"Stop that," he muttered, watching Macy fidget out of the corner of his eye.

"Stop what?" Macy took a few steps ahead of him and turned around to walk backward so they could look at each other.

"Wanting to help me."

"I can't help it." Macy shrugged. "It's kind of my job, if you hadn't noticed."

"I haven't forgotten." Sender mustered up a smile for his friend. "It's kind of hard to forget when you keep doing it so well."

"Whether you like it or not." Macy grinned, and Sender couldn't resist reaching out to poke him with a crutch.

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." Sender shook his head as Macy dodged out of the way, and then turned his attention back to the business of simply keeping upright and moving forward.

"What are you going to say to Elios when you get home?" Macy skipped back a few steps to make sure he was out of crutch range.

"I don't know." Sender had been trying not to think about it. Elios hadn't left Katy so far. He'd stayed to take care of her while Sender was in the hospital and brought her for regular visits. Elios and Sender hadn't talked, though, not since the first day Elios had come to the hospital.

"What? Are you just hoping he'll forget to go home?" Macy didn't look impressed.

"No." Sender hadn't been thinking that, but he had to admit it would be pretty convenient if Elios simply decided to stay.

"Do you want him to stay?"

"Yes." Why they had to have this conversation out here, out in the open, while Sender was struggling with the mechanics of simply walking, was beyond Sender's understanding; maybe it was because Macy had him trapped here.

"He'd stay for Katy, if nothing else," Macy pointed out.

"That's exactly what I don't want," Sender said. Gritting his teeth wasn't making the pain any less. "I don't need him to stay, I mean not in the functional sense, not so that we can go on the *Auriga*."

"Xochi told me that she offered to let you and Katy move in with her and her wife." Macy was quiet for a few steps, thinking. "It's not a bad idea. I know she and her wife want kids. That would give you time to work things out with Elios, even if we do get called to the *Auriga* early."

"That's what I was thinking," Sender said. "It might be easier."

"But it's not what you want," Macy said. He stopped walking, and Sender, moving along with his head down, almost ran into him. "And I think, maybe, it's not what he wants."

"I fucked up really bad, Macy." Sender caught his balance on his crutches. "I don't know if I have any business asking for more than what Elios has done already."

"He loves you." Macy cuffed Sender lightly upside the head. "Of course you have business asking. If you don't, how will you ever find out?"

"He loves me," Sender admitted. "But I don't know if that's been the best thing for him so far."

"That's for him to decide." Macy crossed his arms over his chest, looking stubborn. Sender knew he was in trouble; Macy usually won any fight he started with that look on his face. He'd gotten his way about Sender staying, in the end. "You have to promise that you'll at least talk to him about it. I'm serious, Sender. Promise."

If Sender stood here any longer he was going to give up on the whole standing thing and sit down. Moving forward was what had kept him on his feet. Macy obviously wasn't moving until he got what he wanted. "I promise," Sender said. "I'll talk to him." The idea filled him with dread.

"I'll take care of Katy while you do." Macy gave Sender a triumphant smile. "I'm glad we got that worked out. Let's go, or they'll start dinner without us."

"Coming." Sender took a deep breath and started moving again. He could see the apartment building from here. He was almost home.

Elios had seen more of Sender's apartment than his own in the past weeks. He'd all but moved in, bringing a fresh duffel bag of clothes and toiletries every few days. His own kitchen was nearly empty, but he'd made sure Sender's was well-stocked so he could cook for himself and Katy while Sender was in the hospital. He'd even gone so far as to bring Schrodinger over, with his litterbox, toys, and food, because the kitten would have been terribly unhappy staying in the empty apartment. Katy had been thrilled by the addition.

Katy was home from school for the afternoon. Once she was clean and changed, just like every day after school this week, she came running down the hall to play with Schro. She was utterly enamored of the kitten. On Themis, they couldn't have pets; it was simply too crowded. She was very good with the little guy. There hadn't been a single altercation between them. Half the time, Katy got too excited to even touch the kitten; she'd just clasp her hands tight and squeak, wiggling with happiness.

Elios sat on the floor near them, watching just in case the kitten got over-stimulated and lashed out. So far, though, Schro was happily batting at a tiny ball with a bell inside, pouncing on it whenever Katy rolled it in his direction.

"He likes sports," Katy said happily. She got down, mimicking Schro's pose with her head near the ground and her backside in the air. "I like sports." She patted the ball back at Schro and giggled madly when Schro pounced on it.

It was like a mismatched game of football, with Elios in the role of the color-card-wielding referee. Luckily, he never had to pull his cards. "I think he likes playing with you."

"I love him," Katy said. "He's a good boy. I wish he could stay." She sighed heavily. Elios going home, and the misery of it all had become something of a theme as Sender got better. It wasn't completely clear if this was because she would miss Schro more than Elios or not, but Katy had started worrying.

Elios wished he could stay, too, but there wasn't anything he could say to Katy that wouldn't give her false hope. She'd lost enough; he didn't want to be anything but honest with her about this. Unfortunately, he didn't know what was happening either, so he'd stuck with the idea that he'd be leaving, taking Schro with him, and they wouldn't be seeing each other again. "He'll miss you, too."

Katy picked up the "fluff on a string" that always got Schro wound up and tapped the fluff on Schro's nose. "You have to make sure he's not sad." She gave Elios a stern look.

"I promise," Elios said solemnly. He'd probably be relying on Schro to make sure *he* wasn't sad.

Katy was giggling at Schro's antics -- trying to catch the fluff while lying on his back with his ball clenched in his little mouth -- when the front door opened. Both child and kitten froze, eyes wide.

"I'll take your meds to the kitchen." Macy's voice came drifting down the hall.

"Thanks," Sender replied.

Katy launched herself in that direction with an earsplitting shriek of joy. "Sen-sen!"

Elios' heart twisted in his chest. He was facing away from the doorway, so he couldn't see Sender, but he knew Sender was there. Elios took another moment to collect himself, batting a little ball at Schro instead of turning around to face Sender.

By the time Sender was at the front door, his heart was pounding. He wished he could say it was because he couldn't wait to see Katy and Elios, but it was really more because he was ready to fall down. Macy helped him inside and was turning away to take Sender's medicine to the kitchen when there was a shriek and the thunder of little girl feet. Sender braced for the impact.

"Whoa, kiddo." Macy was diverted from his mission by a flying four-year-old. He got an arm around Katy before she collided with her brother's injured leg.

Instantly, her shrieks of happiness turned into a wail of outrage. "Sen-sen." Kicking at Macy, she flung herself toward Sender, sobbing.

"Easy..." Sender leaned the crutch from his good side against the wall and reached out to take Katy from Macy. His poor little girl; she was so easily upset these days. "Come here, sweetheart." Katy scrambled onto Sender as soon as Macy let her, wrapping her arms around his neck. She clung to him and sobbed against his neck, overwhelmed by having him home. At this rate, his heart was going to break before he got to sit down.

"I think she's happy you're home." Elios was leaning against the archway with his hands shoved into his pockets. It was so good to come home to him. The yearning in Sender's chest was like a compass, bringing him back to Elios again and again.

"Shout if you need anything," Macy said. He waved the bag of medicine in the air, then carried it into the kitchen.

Sender shot Macy a grateful look. "I'm happy to be home," he said. He kissed Katy's hair to comfort her and started moving toward the living room. He felt bleached out and brittle, but the tired smile he gave Elios went all the way from his heart to his eyes. "I'll be happier when I'm sitting down," he admitted.

"Let's get you to the couch, then."

Sender managed to get to the couch and sit down without having to let Katy go. Once they were there, he could get both arms around her and hold on. "I missed you," he whispered to her. She saw him, at least by the screen on the living room wall, every day, but that wasn't the same as being home. "Everything's okay now, sweetheart. I'm home."

Katy's tears tapered off, and she settled for snuggling instead. Schro padded over to put his tiny paws on Sender's leg, ears perked curiously. "This Schro," Katy said, falling back into baby talk. "He nice." The kitten was adorable and curious, just like Katy. No wonder they got on well. Sender's hospital room walls had been covered with drawings of the kitten, and it was nice to meet the original now.

"I'm glad he came to keep you company." Sender's hand, reaching down to pet the kitten, looked huge by comparison. That something so tiny was alive and aware amazed him.

"I love him," Katy said, still sniffing. She, too, leaned over to pet Schro on the head.

"I think he loves you, too," Sender said gently. He looked at Elios over Katy's head when he said it. Elios met his eyes, nodding. Maybe Elios loved Katy, too. Maybe, if Sender was very lucky, Elios still loved him as much as he loved Elios. He hoped so.

When Schro decided to climb Mount Sender, using Sender's bad leg as an approach, Sender got a hand under the kitten's bottom and boosted him up, wincing. It was a bad day when a kitten was a problem. Fortunately, Schro weighed almost nothing and was quite happy to be picked up.

Once the kitten was in Sender's lap, Schro climbed all over him to explore and made Katy giggle. Eventually, Katy and the kitten snuggled up against Sender's chest and Katy drifted off, worn out from crying. Schro was trying to tunnel down into Sender's hip to dig himself a softer bed there. Apparently, Sender's hipbone was offending his delicate kitty bottom.

"I think this is yours," Sender said, scooping Schro up in one hand and offering him back to Elios.

Laughing a little, Elios took Schro out of Sender's hand. He tucked the kitten into both hands, snuggled against his chest, and within a few seconds Schro was sleeping, too. Elios looked back up at Sender, smiling gently. "She missed you."

"I missed her so much." Sender kissed Katy, but his eyes were still on Elios. Macy, probably drawn by the absence of Katy's voice, came in quietly.

"Miss her too much to let me take her off your hands for a little while? Dinner's heating; I can tuck her in for a nap." Macy gave Sender a knowing smile as he swooped in to take Katy away.

"I think I can deal with that." It was starting to hurt Sender's arm, holding her.

"Besides." Macy was whispering now, taking Katy carefully from Sender's arms. "You need to talk to Elios." He was shameless. With a smile for Elios, he carried a sleepily grumbling Katy off toward her room.

All the movement woke Schrodinger, and he glared sleepily at Elios before padding off to curl up and fall asleep in his little cat bed.

When Macy and Katy were safely out of earshot, Elios offered Sender an uncertain smile. "Do you need anything? More of your pain meds? Water?"

"Nothing right now." Sender felt just as uncertain, and he hated how it came out in his voice. He wasn't relishing this conversation; too much was riding on him finding the right words, and he wasn't always good at that. "Thank you for not leaving," he said, starting there. He wanted to pull Elios to him, but he was in too much pain from getting back to the apartment to even reach out. "Katy wouldn't be okay if it weren't for you." If he could have, he'd simply have taken Elios to bed.

Elios looked toward the hall that led to her bedroom. "I hope she is. She's a sweet girl. I tried to make everything as stable as I could."

Katy was easier to talk about than them, the two of them, if there was a them to talk about. Macy was going to kill Sender if Sender didn't actually talk to Elios about it, though. "She needs stability," Sender said quietly, trying to work himself up to it. "You... we..."

Sender gave up trying to frame things somehow in terms of what Katy needed. "Do you want to try and make this work?" He was too tired to be graceful about things. Knowing the answer to that was so important: there was nothing else Sender could say without knowing it. "Is there something left to make work?" Elios had had all this time to think; Sender hadn't been able to focus on much beyond the pain of healing and physiotherapy.

Elios was quiet for a moment, processing. "I think so," he finally admitted. "I wouldn't still be here, otherwise."

"I'm not going back to Themis," Sender said quietly. Elios didn't know about the offer that Xochi had made. She hadn't been the only one to offer, just the most likely one to suit life with Katy and Sender. Elios looked pained, and lost, and startled by the

announcement. "If I have to, I'll move in with Xochi and her wife Shakira. Shakira's a navigator, so she qualifies to be Katy's guardian. You can see Katy no matter what you choose. I want you to know that. Always."

The pain Elios had felt over losing David and Celeste was something Sender would never forget. Asking him to take care of Katy while Sender recovered had been so unfair, and yet Sender wouldn't have wanted just anyone else there. He trusted Elios with her, to be a good parent to her.

"But I'd rather go with you," Sender said, feeling cold sweat creep up the back of his neck. He didn't deserve it, after he'd been ready to leave, but he couldn't keep the truth from Elios. "I want us to be with you."

"I'd rather you come with me, too," Elios said slowly, and then he smiled. Sender was sure that his utter relief was painted all over his face. Elios slid over on the couch and leaned in, carefully bracing his hand against the arm of the couch so he wouldn't bump any of Sender's bruises or burns, pressing a tentative kiss to the corner of Sender's mouth. "Be with me?"

Oh. Sender was pretty sure he was shaking. "Yes," he whispered. Turning his head, he kissed Elios on the lips. "I want to be with you. So much. I missed you, Elios."

"I missed you, too." Maybe that was a given, but it was so good to hear Elios say the words. Kissing Sender again, softly, Elios petted his hand over Sender's cheek. "Next time we have to figure things out, do you think we could manage it without serious injury? Seeing you in that hospital bed was like walking through Avernus."

"Macy promised just to kick the crap out of me next time." Sender turned his head to nuzzle into Elios' hand. "There won't be a next time," he added. "Not like this, Elios. Never."

Elios rested his forehead lightly on Sender's shoulder, nodding a little. "Good. I'm not sure I could handle going through this again," he said honestly.

"Me either, Elios." Sender got his good arm around Elios to hold him close. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm not sorry I tried to do the right thing. I'm sorry I got it so wrong." He was still scared of this, scared of what it meant for him, but he couldn't not be true to himself.

"I know how hard it must have been for you to make those decisions," Elios murmured. It wasn't all right, but Elios understanding a little helped make Sender feel less horrible. "I love you. I won't let this go again."

"I want it to work," Sender whispered. There was no doubt in his mind that he was the luckiest man in the world right now. He was about to say something else when there was a miserable little wail from down the hall.

"I want Sen-sen." Katy's nap obviously hadn't lasted, and Sender wasn't surprised that Macy hadn't been able to coax her back to sleep. She was stubborn about it at the best of times.

"Okay, okay," Macy said gently. He came out with a sleepy, weepy Katy in his arms. He looked from Sender to Elios, obviously weighing the scene. Whatever he saw must have satisfied him because he gave Sender a smile. Macy carried Katy to Sender and carefully helped Sender sort himself out with Katy held safe in his arms.

"Sen-sen." Katy glared at Macy and Elios, then snuggled up to Sender. Something in the kitchen chimed softly.

"That's dinner. I'll set the table." Macy straightened up and gave Sender a stern look. Sender couldn't figure out what he was in trouble for this time. "Sorry I couldn't keep her settled longer."

"We talked about it!" Sender protested. "It's okay." He looked over at Elios, and he was filled with a rush of affection all over again. "We're going to make it work."

"We talked about it," Elios agreed, smiling at Macy. It would be okay; Sender knew that now. They'd figure it out. Elios pushed himself to his feet. "I'll help set the table."

As Elios got up, Sender's datapad over on the desk started beeping, then Macy's started beeping in his pocket. Sender tried to get up before thinking about it and gasped in pain.

"No," Katy protested. "Stay here!"

"I'll get mine," Macy said hastily, digging in his pocket.

Elios looked between the two, frozen where he stood. Sender felt just as paralyzed. What would be happening that would require calls at this hour, especially to someone like Sender, who still wasn't back on active duty yet? As he was wondering, his own datapad started sounding the same alert. He fumbled to pause it, watching Macy, who thumbed the pad to send the message to the big screen.

Sender held onto Katy and looked over at Elios, worried. They'd only just gotten back together, and he was afraid something was going to pull them apart again. Schro, disgruntled by the commotion, staggered out of his bed and lurched up onto the couch where he stretched out with a huge yawn, his tiny tail straight up like an exclamation point.

The living room screen lit up with the image of the military news desk. A ticker ran across the bottom of the screen, reading: "Announcement for all Pandora Project clearances, all sections, civilian and military." The young announcer, fresh and crisp in desk uniform, was beaming.

"All sections will report for briefing at oh-eight-hundred hours. This announcement is for all clearance levels. The Pandora Project will enter pre-launch stage in seventy-two hours. All military personnel are to return to base by zero-hundred hours. All civilian personnel are to return to the Selene-McMurdo limits by oh-seven-hundred hours. This release has been approved by Lieutenant Helle Taylor, Colonial Guard Department of Special Projects."

Macy turned to them, grinning. "We're going," he said, looking like he was about to burst with excitement. "Damn, Sky, but you do like to cut it close."

It took a moment for it to sink in for Sender, but as it dawned on him, he turned to look at Elios. They were really going. It was finally happening. The call to go to the *Auriga* had come through. He had figured out which way was up just in time.

Elios gaped at Macy for a moment, and then a smile broke out over his face. He swooped in to kiss Sender soundly, then turned around to hug Macy, too. Macy laughed and scooped Elios up in a hug, spinning him around before letting him go. Katy looked at them and then at Sender with wide eyes, ready to be excited but too confused to figure out why.

"We're going on the big ship," Sender told her. "Soon." He felt like a little kid again, full of hope and anticipation.

"Everyone?" Katy looked over at Elios and then back at her brother before twisting around to look for Schro. The sleepy kitten was sitting on the couch, yawning hugely. "Even Schro?"

"Everyone." Sender looked over at Elios, feeling like his chest was going to burst. It was time for them to set out for uncharted country, in every way, but they wouldn't be going alone. "Everyone's going together."

-end-