

Synchronised

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So, with that warning in mind, proceed. And enjoy.



“Welcome to the palace,” Seb murmured as the doors to the apartment slid open. He pushed North’s wheelchair through into the lobby, and then fetched their luggage in from the hall. That gave North plenty of time to roll over to the living room, which opened out into the kitchen and dining area. Wow—so huge. Had to be bigger than five spacer apartments put together, at least.

The far wall was all glass, the clear blue sky inviting a newcomer to step forward and look out. The muted brown and cream furniture stood on a dark polished stone floor, and the whole space was filled with glorious light from the huge windows. Large landscapes in oils hung on the walls, and the elegant glass and pottery lamps also appeared to be pieces of original art. It was more decorous, expensive taste than North had been exposed to in his short life, and he still had to wonder how Seb had managed to pay for it just on their joint accommodation allowance.

Seb came up behind him and put his hand on North’s chair. “Like it?”

“It’s great. Do we have a view?”

“Of course we have a view. You think I’m paying for a place up on Nuel Lake without a view of the damn thing? Careful,” he cautioned as North eased himself up into a wobbly standing position. He hated the wheelchair but even walking a few steps still left him winded.

He allowed Seb to take his arm as he headed slowly over to the balcony doors. It still embarrassed him to need Seb’s help—or anyone’s—but he never minded an excuse for Seb to

put those long-fingered, capable hands on him. No, not at all.

Seb pressed the door lock and the glass door slid open. He helped North over to the balcony rail. “There. One view, as requested.”

North shaded his eyes against the light and looked out across the unimpeded vista. “That’s really something.”

Nuel Lake, famous for the purity of its water and the beauty of the surrounding mountains, shimmered before them like a blue diamond in the late morning sun. Snow-capped peaks bordered it on the distant shore, but here in Ostna, warm breezes wafted across them, carrying the faint, happy cries of the children playing on the white sands of the wide beach. North longed to go down to the water, to swim, to let the sun leach away the never-ending cold in his bones, but he was a while from being ready for that. He’d been in hospital nearly two weeks, and would be there yet if Seb hadn’t sweet-talked the doctors into letting him convalesce in Terta’s most renowned resort. North still wasn’t completely sure why Seb had gone to all that trouble, but he sure wasn’t going to argue with anything that got him out of that damn hospital bed.

“Here, sit.” Seb fetched one of the natty padded chairs and placed it where North only had to lower himself down. “Are you cold? Do you want—”

“Seb, I’m fine. I’m not cold. Stop fussing.”

“I’m not.” North made a ‘pffft’ noise at him. “I’m going to fetch a beer. Juice for you?”

“No, a beer.”

“No alcohol,” Seb said, folding his arms decisively. “I had to sign a form and everything.”

North screwed up his nose. “Trust me to be stuck with Captain Follow the Regs or Die.”

“In this case, that could be true. When you dump the last of the Karhal venom out of your body and your liver’s back to normal, you can have as much beer as you like.”

“Meanie.”

“Don’t be juvenile.” Seb laughed at North’s pout, and patted his shoulder. “Back in a—”

“If I can’t have a beer, can I have a kiss?”

North held his breath, hoping he hadn’t just overstepped the mark. They hadn’t talked about this since that conversation in the hospital garden. He’d kind of been hoping Seb was still thinking about it though. Bringing him to a place like this, just the two of them...surely that meant he was thinking about it.

Seb leaned down and kissed him on the lips, a firm, brief caress that offered no promises, yet

reminded North's body just how much more Seb could give, if he wanted. North had to clench his fists on his thighs to stop himself grabbing Seb's shirt and dragging the man close. This had to be at Seb's pace, or not at all. He'd screwed this up once. He wasn't going to do it again.

Seb stroked his cheek and smiled as he straightened up. "Back in a tick."

North unclenched his hands and forced himself to relax. Look at the lake, he told himself. Pretty water, nice mountains. Seb's mouth....

Whoa, getting ahead of yourself there, boy. *Again*. At least Seb hadn't said no, but some of his friendliness had to be guilt. *That*, they'd talked about over the days until Seb had wangled North's release. Seb blamed himself for North's injury, even for Marta and Wegner's deaths, although how he could have stopped those, North had no idea. But then North felt guilty too, for being alive while they were dead, so he sort of knew what Seb was going through. It didn't have to make sense to be real.

He closed his eyes and basked in the warmth of the sun and gentle winds, as if he could regain his strength by letting it soak into him. He kept waiting to feel normal. Every morning, he woke up, feeling fine, in no pain, but then he'd try to do something as normal as get up and go to the bathroom, and his legs shook and his heart pounded as if he'd run ten clicks with a full pack. He *was* improving, just incredibly slowly.

He rubbed the patch on his thigh where the Karhal had struck him. It still felt sensitive, though he'd been assured there was no residual damage. He found it hard to believe how much it had hurt. Being in such pain, and not being able to move, had terrified him. He'd felt Seb lifting him, heard Seb and Jati frantically trying to help, putting him into stasis, but he hadn't been able to move or even twitch. At least he'd felt Seb's kiss, though. He hadn't told him that. So far as Seb knew, North had been out from when the Karhal venomised him. He didn't think it would help his captain to know Marta and Wegner had probably been aware of what had been happening to them. He hadn't even told Jati. Better that he was the only one with *those* nightmares.

He heard the glass door slide open, and twisted around to watch Seb walk over with their drinks. "There you go," Seb said, handing him an ice-cold garim juice. He pulled another chair over and sat down, then lifted his beer. "To a swift recovery."

"And a nice vacation."

Seb smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I feel like I should be up there, looking for the damn things."

"If they need you, they know where to find you. You earned the break, Seb. Not that you'll be getting one, looking after me."

"How much work is that? It's not like you need bedpans. I don't even need to cook or do housework. Not sure I can get used to it." He grinned as he sipped his beer. "To tell you the

truth, I've never had a holiday with so much taken care of."

"Not even with Kurt?" *Shit*. He could have bitten his tongue. "Sorry, just ignore—"

"It's okay." Seb rubbed a finger thoughtfully through the condensation on his beer bottle as he spoke. "No, we never...I mean, that might have been part of the problem. We never did go away for an extended vacation together. Either he was working or I was. We had a honeymoon that lasted four days before I got called in for an emergency, and when I had time for make-up leave, he wasn't free. We used to go off for weekends every so often...we stopped doing that though. After the war."

"Forget I mentioned it, Seb."

Seb stared out over the railing towards the lake. "No, it's fine. I don't want to...dance around it. I was married, now I'm not. Just a fact." He smiled, lines around his mouth a little tight. "Jati'll be jealous when she sees all this."

"You had to go and invite her." North sighed heavily. "She gives me so much shit."

Seb's smile widened. "She does. Why do you think I asked her to stay?"

"Bastard."

"Language," Seb chided. North stuck his tongue out. "What did I say about being juvenile? Anyway, she won't be here for two weeks. By then you could be well enough to head out swimming. She and I can sit here, sipping fine wine—"

"Making notes."

"You never know." North didn't trust that innocent tone. "Drink your juice. The doctors said lots of fluids, remember?"

"Yeah, then I have to go to the bathroom, which means getting up and walking."

"Exercise is good for you too."

"I'm going to get no sympathy at all from you, am I?"

"Nope." Seb grinned and took another sip of his beer. "I looked into podder hire. I thought we could take a drive up into the mountains later in the week. There are some lake cruises if you feel like that kind of thing. There's plenty to do."

"Just thinking about doing stuff makes me tired. I'm *so* ready to be over this."

"Better than the alternative."

“Yeah.” North sipped his juice and thought about what the alternative could have been. He was tired of this too, thinking about death all the time. A few weeks ago, he’d lived like he’d live forever. Death just wasn’t something he’d been afraid of, or spent any time contemplating. Now he knew life came to an end in a solid, personal way he’d never done before. Seb had come to that realisation a long time ago. Being in the war, facing death, having friends die—there was no escaping it. It was the kind of knowledge that changed a person forever.

“Something wrong, North?”

“No. No more than usual. What were you like at my age?”

Seb frowned a little. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, were you serious? Like you are now?”

“I don’t think so. I probably wasn’t as brainless as you.” North pulled a face and Seb grinned. “I can’t remember. I was mad keen on flying—terrestrial, orbital, deep space, you name it.”

“Friends?”

“Are you asking me if I was always a moody loner? No, but I was never as good with people as you and Jati are. It’s something I envy. I’m too old to learn the way now. Unless you’re a shameless manipulator, it’s either something you have or you don’t.”

“I think I’d rather have an honest moody loner than someone I couldn’t trust,” North said.

“Same here. But moody loners make shitty lovers, North.”

North thrust his chin out. “I don’t scare that easy, cap’n.”

Seb laughed and shook his head. “You really don’t.”

North grinned, and for a moment or two, it was like all that had happened between them, hadn’t. It was like North’s first few days on board the *Naurus*, getting to know his new boss, becoming his friend. Seb had always been happiest on duty, where he had distractions, a purpose. Or at least, where he could hide the misery better. North had been a damn fool to believe the act.

Seb finished his beer and set the bottle down on the ground. “Fancy lunch? I only have to order it.”

North considered. “Sure. How much is this costing again?”

Seb winked. “Less than you think. Some of our passengers had some very grateful—and wealthy—relatives.”

“Really? Wow. How grateful?”

“*Very* grateful.”

“Isn’t that against regulations?”

“What Central doesn’t know, won’t hurt them.”

With that, he went inside. North blinked in surprise. And there he’d been, thinking his captain had too much of a log up his arse to ever break a regulation.

They ate on the balcony, the beautiful weather too seductive to ignore. The apartment was part of a holiday complex with a restaurant and bar downstairs, and the meals came from its kitchens. After ship grub and hospital fare, it seemed like the finest food North had ever eaten, and his appetite, which had deserted him while he’d been so ill, came roaring back—at least temporarily. He ran out of steam halfway through, and stared mournfully at the delicious roast meat he simply couldn’t finish.

“I *want* to eat it, I really do.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll put it in the cooler.”

“Not the point,” he whined. “I’m a grown man and I can’t even eat what a five-year-old could put away.”

“North, no five-year-old could have saved Jati’s life. Cut yourself some slack, will you? You nearly died. All things considered, a small appetite is nothing to fret about.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Seb looked steadily at him. “No. No, it’s not. I’ve been in your place, and I know what it’s like. One day you’ll realise the truth of what I’m saying, and be glad.”

“So shut up and count my blessings?”

Seb went to take the plate. “Talk as much as you like.”

North put his hand on Seb’s wrist. “Sorry for bitching.”

“You were bitching? I didn’t notice.” He bent and kissed the top of North’s head. “Let me take this inside.”

Wow. The unexpectedness of the gesture, so sweet, blew away North’s dark mood in an instant. He grinned at Seb’s back. He was seeing a whole other side to the man. He liked it. Liked it a lot.



Seb took their plates inside, searched around for a clean plate to cover North's half-eaten meal, and put the food in the cooler. Then he leaned on the sink and wondered what the hell he was doing. He'd told himself he needed to take it slow. Not lead North on. Re-establish their damaged friendship first and then see about the rest.

But he'd already kissed him twice today, and wanted to do it again. Wanted to do it again much too soon. His body was racing ahead of his emotions, urging him to move on North before he had a damn thing to offer the man. Or at least, enough of something to offer him. It wasn't fair on North to accept what he was so obviously willing to offer, just because Seb wanted it, and it was available. That was what had screwed them up before.

He hadn't realised...no, bullshit, as Jati was fond of saying. He *had* realised just fine what being alone with North could do to him. Even hoped it could do. But the split in his feelings still remained. Part of him wanted not to be alone, to be with North because North was a fine, handsome, kind person. Part of him wanted to avoid any situation that would add to the pain that just never went away. The pain with Kurt's name on it. The pain of losing what had been most precious to him, and still was.

Kurt had moved on. That had hurt too. But Kurt had accepted the death of their marriage long before Seb had, if he ever had. Now Kurt had his new husband, a new life, a new job. Seb was exactly where he'd been when they'd separated nearly two years ago—alone, aching, frozen in his misery.

Okay, maybe not so frozen anymore, but thawing was painful too. Talking to North was a little too much like being with Kurt in those first, happy days. When he was young and immortal, and their futures had been all ahead of them, theirs for the making.

He shook his head. Dwelling on Kurt wasn't fair on North, or himself. This vacation was supposed to be about healing, not scratching at old misery.

"Seb? Everything okay?"

North leaned against the glass door, pale, shaky. Handsome as ever.

"Sure it is. Here." Seb went over and took him by the arm, helping him inside. North preferred to be on his feet, but it tugged at Seb's guilt to feel him trembling with the effort of staying upright, moving even a few steps. Going to the closest leather sofa was almost beyond him, but the man gritted his teeth and kept going. Seb lowered him down with care. "Should have stayed outside."

"Sun's shifted. Too hot, and my butt was going numb."

“Oh.”

“Yeah. In fact....” North kicked off his sandals, and swung his legs up onto the sofa. At least, he tried to. Seb had to help. “Thanks. That’s better.” He eased himself along and then lay down. “Oooh, nice. This probably cost more than a month’s rent on my flat.”

“More like two. I used to own one a bit like it. Kurt’s got it now.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Wouldn’t fit into a spacer flat anyway.”

North stretched luxuriously. “Now all I need is a pillow. Mind passing me one?”

Seb reached for a cushion, then hesitated. The idea of sitting on an armchair while North lay so far away seemed so unfriendly. “How about....” He sat down, and nudged his thigh under North’s head. “That do?”

North stared up at him. “Yeah. That’s fine. Comfortable for you?”

“I’m good.” He smiled down as if there was absolutely nothing at all strange about having his subordinate’s head a centimetre or so from his crotch. “Are you going to take a nap?”

“No. Not tired, just shaky. That Karhal venom is really nasty shit.”

“It really is.”

“You think there are more of them out there? Really?”

As ever, the conversation turned so easily to what had nearly killed North. Hard to avoid it really, with all the spacers in lockdown and the planetary orbit under intense surveillance, while military pilots combed near space, looking for signs of Karhal incursion.

“I really don’t know. I hope not. They’re not solitary creatures though.”

North grunted in agreement. “I don’t know how you guys went out to fight them. I don’t think I could. Not now I’ve been up close. My hands shake just thinking about it.”

“We didn’t know what they were like before we set out, and once you’re in a battle situation, adrenalin and trying to keep your friends alive takes over. That’s why the military always prefer younger pilots. No imagination,” he said, giving North a smile and poking him gently in the forehead.

“Got plenty of that now.”

“Sadly, yes.”

North fell silent. Seb was content not to talk either, instead amusing himself by contemplating North’s long legs, and the way his loose trousers bunched up and drew attention to his crotch. Too easy to remember what the trousers concealed, how fine the body under the clothes, the thick, heavy....

He forced his eyes away. *Dirty old man*. It wasn’t like North was deliberately putting on a show.

But he couldn’t stop looking at North. At his big hands that could handle controls and equipment with deceptive delicacy, or stroke a man where....

Damn it, he’d get hard if he kept this up, and North would notice *that* in a second. He wished he’d grabbed a book or something before he’d sat down. Fetching one now would look a bit obvious.

North’s hair. Safe enough. No one got hard looking at hair. As usual, it was a tousled mess, longer than regulation, so he’d need to have it cut before he returned to duty. That wouldn’t be for at least a month, since they had that much leave regardless of how long North took to recover. No one knew for sure how long that would be.

Almost of its own volition, Seb’s hand came up to touch one of the pale blond curls. The colour was otherworldly. Little kids had hair like this, not twenty-five-year-old space pilots. But it was fitting. For all his self-assurance, his easy sexuality, there was a childlike naivety about North. Or there used to be. The sadness lurking in his eyes now was new. The angelic hair belonged to someone who’d crashed hard to earth, seen the ugliness of the universe, where before he’d only known its wonders.

North shifted and Seb’s fingers slid easily through his hair. Just as they would have done through Kurt’s. *Shit*.

North looked up at him. “S nice. Always liked people touching my hair.”

“I shouldn’t...”

“Why not?”

Seb moved his hand away. “It’s not right. I’m not ready. Not fair on you.”

North took that much more calmly than Seb expected. “All right. You know, I think I will take that nap. Mind if I stay here?”

Seb shook his head, not trusting his voice. North closed his eyes and rolled over, his hand sliding over the edge of the sofa and curling easily around Seb’s ankle. A trusting, friendly grip. Not sexual at all, unless you wanted the man doing it like burning fire.

It was then that Seb knew he had two choices here. Give in or walk out. Around North, keeping his distance, holding in his desire, was impossible. If he left now, he'd hurt North again, and this time, there'd be no retrieving it. But...he'd avoid a bigger fuck up. Avoid pulling a decent guy into his slipstream, dragging him into the mess that was Seb's head.

Be left alone, and wanting.

North needed more than want. He was in love. Had made no secret of it. Had seen no reason to. North wasn't ashamed of his feelings, good or bad. Fear, love, anger—he never hid from any of it. Seb wished he could be that brave, just once.

Maybe now was the time for it. Did he love North? No. Was he half way there? More than likely. All the elements were there. Liking. Respect. Desire. Admiration for North's honesty and his courage under fire. It would take very little to kick over into something more.

Loving Kurt had been like a whirlwind. They'd slept together on the first date, had moved in together three weeks later, married in six months. *And divorced after ten years*, Seb reflected sourly. The only thing that had taken time was killing their relationship. But Seb had known within hours of meeting Kurt that he was the one. The one for ever. He'd never love anyone again, not as much as he loved this man. Kurt had said he felt the same.

Kurt, who was now married to another man, living on another planet.

Seb put his hand on North's hair, threading his fingers through the dense curls. He wasn't ready, but maybe he just had to be. Like the first time he'd gone out in a fighter, to take on an enemy he could barely comprehend. *Be brave, you idiot*. But be careful too. This time around, he didn't have the luxury of not knowing how badly this could go.

He carded the blond hair, letting it slide and slip through his fingers, locks twining silkily against his roughened skin. Bright, new, shiny. Like North had been when they'd first met. Not so new now. Not so shiny. But bright, still so bright and handsome and brave. Seb wished he'd seen it—North throwing himself at the Karhal to save Jati, distracting the creature from her at the real risk of his own life. Seb would have done the same thing for either of them. At least, he damn well hoped he would. North had never been to war, or fired a shot in anger, but he'd been ready in an instant to lay down his life for a comrade. That kind of courage divided people into those who had it, and those who hoped they have it. North had it. Most didn't. Most never found that out.

North twisted his head and looked up at him, his blue eyes pure in colour as the lake beyond their window. "Seb?"

He cleared his throat. "I want to be brave."

"Scared I'll hurt you?"

"No. That I'll hurt you. It's all I seem to do with people."

“*One* person. You said yourself, the war changed everything. Lots of marriages broke up after the war. You aren’t some freak.” He reached up and tugged at Seb’s hand, enfolding it in his own. “I know you don’t trust me to hold it together if it doesn’t work out. I gave you plenty of reasons to believe that. I know you’re not over him. I *know* the chances are it won’t work. I still want to be your friend and help you through it. The problem is, I want to sleep with you while I’m doing it.”

North’s grin was infectious. Seb felt his mouth curving up in response. “I guess that makes two of us. I want you. Hell I want you. But I don’t—”

“Love me. Yeah. I know, you told me. My eyes are wide open. And I mean it. I want to be friends.”

“With benefits.”

“Um, well...yeah. Cos the benefits are beneficial.”

Seb had to laugh. “You’re sick, North.”

“No need to be rude, cap’n.”

“You know what I mean, idiot.” He freed his hand so he could stroke North’s face. “Start slow. If I need you to back off, please don’t fight me.”

“I won’t. Just don’t lie to me anymore.”

“No.” North nuzzled against his hand. “I thought you wanted a nap.”

“I did but someone kept distracting me. Distract me some more, I like it.”

In this position, there wasn’t much they could do except touch, stroke, caress. North lay passively as Seb’s hands roved cautiously, curiously. Exploring the feel of his broad chest under the light shirt, the slight stubble on his cheeks. Tracing the arch of fine, pale brows on the classically handsome features. All the while, North watched him with those wide, intensely blue eyes of his, not saying a word, not showing any reaction. At least...not on his face. His body reacted for sure, same as Seb’s, but Seb wanted to do this first. Get to know North as more than a convenient fuck.

But they were only men, after all, and patience had its limits. North reached up and grabbed his wrist. “Seb.” His voice was husky. “Please.”

Seb slid out from under him, and knelt in front of the sofa, looking down. “You’re not up to—”

North put his hand at Seb’s neck and dragged him down. “Yes I am.”

Holding back, restraining himself, was impossible. North kissed with all the passion of youth and

the confidence of a popular, good-looking man. He took no prisoners when it came to sex, commanding and demanding with tongue and talented lips. The very taste of him short-circuited Seb's brain, the slide and brush of his tongue sending little electric shocks through him. It felt like being twenty again, when the world was ripe and there to be plucked.

The sofa was wide enough for both of them—just—and North moved back, urging him up alongside him. Seb had no power to resist, because lying toe to toe with an attractive, willing man was something he'd always adored. Something about measuring himself against another, feeling the hard lines of masculine musculature, strong arms around him and against him...it had always been a turn on for him. He loved men's bodies. Not just their cocks or asses. Narrow pelvis, long thighs, broad chest. North had it all. Seb had as much chance of resisting him as he did of stopping the sun coming up.

North's hold on him, the little thrusts of his hips, became less urgent once he had Seb on the sofa. He seemed happy just to kiss and hold tightly, Seb's thigh pressed hard against his crotch. The man could kiss with his whole body. Seb let himself be lost in the sweetness of it all. North had been a hard, vigorous lover, that one night they'd shared. This tenderness, this languorous care, was new, and all too beguiling. It hadn't been what Seb had wanted that night, but if he'd seen this side of North, walking out that next morning would have been impossible. Rough screws were easy to find. Gentleness, not so much.

He kept waiting for North to suggest they took it into the bedroom, for a hint that North wanted more than this. But North was apparently happy just as they were. So Seb relaxed, and did what he so rarely did—allowed himself to enjoy the moment, and not think about the future, or what it all meant.

“Seb?”

“Hmmm?” He was investigating North's sensitive earlobe and didn't want to be interrupted.

“Gotta pee.”

“Oh.”

The sofa had sucked them down, so disentangling limbs and clothes from its grasp took a little while. When North sat up and surveyed their rumpled state, he grinned. “You come to this place often, cap'n?”

“Not as often as I'd like.” Seb leaned in and kissed him. “I like this.”

North put his arm around Seb's waist. “Yeah. I like the rest of it too, though.”

“Who doesn't?”

“Well yeah. So. I think I kinda need....”

“Here we go.”

North grimaced as he stood with Seb’s help. “I almost feel normal lying down. Then I stand up, and I have to remember it all over again.”

“You’ve got time to heal. And I think we can come up with ways of keeping you amused.” Seb rubbed his face against North’s stubble. “Maybe you should find time to shave, Pilot.”

“Maybe I like the look of you all beard-burned, cap’n. ‘Course, I like the look of you anyway.”

“No compliments. I’m bashful.” North hooted with derision. Seb slapped his tightly muscled arse. “Mind your manners.”

“Oh right. Forgot I was dealing with one of my elders.”

Seb arched an eyebrow at him, but declined to rise to the bait. He figured that would annoy North more.

The bathroom was where assistance was firmly declined, though North would need help showering at some point—and why Seb hadn’t realised just how intimate that would be, he didn’t know. Except he probably had. His subconscious had plans for him, apparently.

North practically fell into his arms as he came out of the bathroom. Seb caught him and held him up. “Careful there, Pilot.” North just grinned and kissed him, which was nice. “You know, we could spend all afternoon necking....”

North nuzzled under his chin. “Mmmm, sounds like a plan.”

“...Or we could go for a swim.”

North frowned. “Don’t think I can manage the beach.”

“No—here. There’s a pool on the roof. All the families will be on the beach. Should be quiet.”

“Seb, I don’t think—”

“Why not try it? Is it because of the chair?”

“Everyone looks at me like I’m a cripple.”

Seb grabbed a fist full of North’s shirt, and hauled him up straight. “Jason Uten North, you’re a decorated hero of the planetary alliance, and so am I. Anyone wants to look at you funny, they can talk to me. I’ll remind them who the hell we are and how the hell we got those medals. Now, Lieutenant, what do we say to anyone who treats us with disrespect?”

North grinned. “Fuck ‘em, sir?”

“Fuck ‘em, Pilot,” Seb agreed firmly. “Now, are you coming for a swim or are you going to let those *civilians* make you too ashamed to be seen in public?”

“Nossir, sir!”

“That’s my man. Come on.”



The pool was as luxuriously appointed as the rest of the building—lots of glass and polished stone, tasteful sculptures and elegant planting breaking up the large space. There were three large pools, and a number of smaller spas, all laid out to invite exploration, but also ease of access to the bar and restrooms. Part of it was open to the sky, part under shade. Music played quietly against a background of babbling fountains.

They had it almost to themselves, just as Seb thought they would. North tried to sit up as straight and proud as he could, but despite Seb’s defiant words, he couldn’t help feeling self-conscious as the gaze of an elderly couple, reclining on loungers near one of the spa pools, fell on him and slid away just as quickly. He didn’t know why he felt ashamed—it wasn’t a crime to be injured or ill. He just hated looking at people at waist level—and having them look down on him all the time.

Apart from the couple studiously avoiding his eyes, there was only a young family in the children’s pool. Everyone else was staff—bartenders, attendants, waiters, and lifeguards. At least if he got into difficulties, there’d be plenty of people to jump in and save him.

One of the attendants rushed up and offered to help. Seb waved him back. “Thank you, I’ve got Lieutenant North myself. Just towels, and if you have an adult buoyancy aid, that’d be good.”

“Seb!” North hissed. “I don’t need—”

“Calm down, North. This is supposed to be fun.”

“Yeah, right,” North muttered. He’d been enjoying himself on the sofa. He didn’t see why they had to come up here now. He’d probably spend about two minutes in the pool before his legs gave out.

“Don’t sulk. Come on, stand up.”

A male lifeguard came over and without fuss, helped Seb take North over to the steps. “Easy. Plenty of time. At your own pace,” Seb murmured as North entered the smaller of the three main

pools.

Blood warm water lapped invitingly at his ankles, and with the two men helping him, he found himself safely immersed in no time at all. The sudden weightlessness, removing the burden from his treacherous legs, was an instant relief, and he grinned in surprise.

“Told you you’d enjoy it,” Seb said. “Thanks, I’ve got him,” he told the lifeguard.

“Just call me if you want anything, sir. My name’s Istvan. Izzy for short.”

“Thank you, Izzy.”

He gave them a dazzling smile and climbed out, tight swimsuit clinging to a very attractive butt. North nudged Seb who seemed to be spending just a *little* too long in admiration. “Now I know why you wanted to come up here.”

“You’ve got me on that, Pilot. Oh, thank you,” he said as the attendant returned with a lurid purple water noodle, and tossed it to Seb.

“I’m *not* using that thing.”

“Suit yourself.” Seb let it float away. “Now, just let go. Let the water take the strain.”

Seb kept hold of him as they moved out to deeper water. All North had to do was relax and let Seb and the water do the work. The water was salty, he was surprised to realise.

“All the pools are around here. They mine the salt in the mountains,” Seb said when North remarked on it. “The area’s famous for its mineral baths. Supposed to be restorative. There’s something to it, apparently. Not just myths.”

“So they’re used to—”

“Yeah. They see people worse than you all the time. Those old-timers are probably here for the same reason. So stop worrying about how you look, North. Izzy was checking you out,” he whispered into North’s hair as they headed towards the far end.

“He was not!”

“Was too. Don’t blame him.”

“He wasn’t. Was he?”

Seb chuckled. “I thought so. You know, that noodle would help you move around on your own. If you don’t want to be so dependent, I mean.”

North gave in. His captain had it all planned, and he wondered how much advance warning the

staff had received about this. The foam rod tucked easily around his back and under his arms, supporting him, and he could propel himself along with only the slightest movements of his feet or hands. Seb swam away, letting him float free.

The water allowed him to shed the last feel of the hospital from his skin, and gave him the illusion of strength that did wonders for his confidence. He didn't even mind the stupid noodle since no one was looking at him, and even if they were, they'd only see a man using a perfectly ordinary pool toy. In the water, he was as fit and able as anyone else, at least to the casual onlooker.

Seb swam back from time to time, giving him a little tow, or discreetly caressing his back or arm under the water, even leaning in to kiss his cheek once or twice. Something had changed with Seb. A decision had been made. Maybe only to just enjoy this holiday and the intimacy, but it had been a choice, firmly made. North would have expected his captain to be all knotted up about it. Instead, he was enjoying it. He'd given himself permission to.

Izzy kept watch on them, and whenever he caught North's eye, gave him a big grin. Cute guy, definitely. Glossy black hair, smooth brown skin, flashing perfect teeth. Probably a big hit with the ladies. North might have been interested once, but now he'd had Seb. Now he knew what he wanted and it wasn't some random pretty boy. He wanted the incredibly brave, incredibly generous, fucked up mess that was Sebastien ven Hester.

The big question was, now that there was actually a chance he might win him—what would he do with him? Could he really offer anything to someone like Seb? His husband had been a doctor, a surgeon—a highly educated, well-respected professional. Seb was a qualified engineer by training, one of the smartest men North had ever encountered. North was just a flyboy.

He wasn't used to feeling insecure. Jati had told him more than once his biggest failing was overconfidence, both as a lover and a pilot. Seb made him feel like a big clumsy kid.

"Now what's making you all frowny, North? I swear, you young things just don't know how to enjoy yourselves."

North splashed him and Seb ducked, grinning. "Leave me alone. I *am* enjoying myself. Not much fun for you though."

"Are you kidding? I love this. If they'd fit a pool on the *Naurus*, I'd be in heaven."

"A pool on a spaceship. Now that I'd like to see."

"Admit it—you'd like it better than heavygrav gym work."

"Cap'n, I like almost *anything* better than heavygrav gym work."

"What about quadro-boxing? Like that?"

“Never done much of it. Why, do you?”

“Get back on your feet and I’ll show you. Much better for fitness.”

“You’re on.” Seb smiled as if North had given him some especially wonderful gift. “You don’t have a boxing partner? Did Kurt—”

There he went again. He needed to keep his fucking mouth shut about Seb’s ex.

Seb didn’t show any particular reaction to North’s tactlessness. “No. He liked to run, which I do too. Quadro-boxing’s more a military thing, I guess.”

“Working off aggression.”

“Working it up too, sometimes.” Seb eyed him thoughtfully. “Beating you to a pulp would be a pleasure.”

“Hah, you wish.”

“Not really. How are you doing? Tired yet?”

North assessed his condition. “I’m good, but I think I should get out before I’m exhausted. We can come up here again, right?”

“Any time.”

Izzy rushed over to help him out, and the attendant brought over a fresh bathrobe to wrap around him. Seb directed him over to a lounge rather than the wheelchair, which had mysteriously disappeared—maybe it made the place look bad.

Seb wrapped a towel around his hips and sat down on the lounge next to him. “Thought you might like a drink and a rest before we go down.”

“Sure, why not?” It was nice up here, and it wasn’t like they had other stuff to do.

They were in the shaded part of the pool area, but the air was humid and verging towards uncomfortably warm, so the breeze on his wet legs and the cold drink felt pretty good. Sitting around and doing nothing didn’t usually appeal much but if he had to, there were worse places to be. In the bathrobe, stretched out on the lounge, cold juice in hand, he looked just the same as any other guest. A few more people had come in while they’d been swimming. The glances they tossed Seb and North’s way had only been idly curious. A couple, frankly admiring. It was the most normal he’d felt since before the fight with the Karhal.

It gave him a chance to look his fill at Seb. For an older guy, he was definitely well kept. Genetics had blessed him with good skin and good bones, but the lean muscles were all his own hard work, and the intelligent brown eyes reflected the man inside, not his ancestors. Right now,

his normally hawkish, slightly worried expression had softened. North had never seen Seb relax this much before. Of course, they'd never spent much of their downtime together. On duty, Seb was always busy, always working on paperwork, or repairs, or exercising, when he wasn't actually in the cockpit, flying the ship. Watching him like this, long brown legs crossed elegantly at the ankles, sipping a beer appreciatively, was a whole new experience for North.

Had to wonder if Seb and Kurt had spent more time doing this kind of thing, whether they'd still be together. North had no idea. Never met the man. He didn't want to. He couldn't imagine liking someone who could let Seb slip through his fingers, however much Seb blamed himself for the failure of his marriage.

Seb drained the last drop from his beer bottle. "I'm ready for a shower. You?"

North set his empty glass down. "Yeah. Seb, let me walk to the elevator?"

Seb gave him a long look, then nodded. He signalled to an attendant and spoke to him. "Okay, he'll meet us in the lobby. Take my arm. Slowly, North."

North gritted his teeth and put all his energy into getting to his feet and standing as normally as possible. Seb held his arm until he was upright, then pulled him into a hug. "When you're ready," he murmured.

Seb made it look like all the touching was sex, not weakness. North could have kissed him. Hell, he did kiss him. "Thanks," he whispered against Seb's ear.

"You're welcome. Hold onto my arm. I'll hang onto your waist."

They walked out like that, as if they were so in love they couldn't wait to be alone together. A pretty young woman giggled as they passed, and winked at North. He grinned back at her and she giggled again.

"You're incorrigible," Seb muttered.

"Keeping up appearances, boss." He kept grinning to hide the fact his legs were about to give way. Just a little further...a few more steps.

The attendant stepped forward smartly with the wheelchair as Seb and North rounded the corner. North collapsed into it gratefully, then squeezed Seb's hand. "Owe you."

"Not likely. Thanks, I've got him."

The attendant bowed, then summoned the elevator for them. North kept hold of Seb's hand until they were inside. "I mean it, I really owe you."

"You really don't. Enough of that, okay?"

Seb's mouth was set tight, so North shut up until they were back in the apartment. Then he took control of the chair and wheeled around to face his friend.

"Seb, what happened to me isn't your fault. Things happened the way they did because they had to. You had to control the clones. I couldn't. We needed you. We'd all be dead now if you hadn't been working things."

"I should have picked up on the Karhal sooner." Seb walked over to the balcony door and stared out through it. "I would have done if I hadn't been so distracted. And that *was* my fault."

"So? I was part of that, so it's my fault too."

"You weren't in charge. We lost two good people because I had my head up my arse, North. We nearly lost the entire ship and the passengers. It was blind luck that we didn't."

"Every time we come back from a run, luck's part of what kept us safe. Sometimes, it goes the other way. You have to let this go."

Seb shook his head. "I can't. It's what being a captain *means*. Total responsibility. So please stop thanking me. It only makes it worse."

"You really are fucked up, aren't you?"

Seb snorted. "You're only working this out now?"

"Of course not. Come here. Seb, come over, I need your help."

Seb dragged himself away from the window, his expression giving nothing away. "What do you need?"

"Need to stand up. Hold me, will you?"

Seb let North take hold of his arms, and hauled him to his feet. As soon as he was upright, North put his arms around Seb's waist and pulled him close. "I'm thanking you because you helped me feel a little less helpless, and for being a good friend. You're only a man, not a god. You fuck up, I fuck up. Everyone does. The three of us, we brought the ship home."

"Marta and Wegner—"

"Died, I know. They'd be the last people to let you get away with blaming yourself for this. Sure, you might have detected the Karhal sooner, but you said yourself, the venom stopped the *Naurus* telling you what was happening. The BRAIN only makes you telepathic, not an oracle." He sighed at Seb's set expression. "I wish Jati was here. She'd kick your arse so damn hard."

"She did. Repeatedly."

“Good.”

He kept looking at Seb, pleading silently with the man to leave it be. Finally Seb sighed. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Amazing. At last he gets it.”

“Cheeky brat.”

North grinned. “Yeah.” He leaned in and kissed Seb firmly on the lips. The taste of salt reminded him he needed to clean up. “Help me shower, boss?”

“It’s all disabled-friendly. I’m sure you can—”

“But I might fall over. You know, when I wash my back or something.”

“You’re overplaying your hand.”

North pouted because it would make Seb laugh, and it did. “Incorrigible,” Seb muttered, as he shifted position to help North walk to the bathroom.

Seb hadn’t seen him naked since that night, but if it bothered him, he wasn’t showing it. He helped North out of the bathrobe, and stripped his swimsuit off, before easing him down on to the seat in the shower.

“Probably be easier if you showered with me,” North said. “What? It would be.”

Seb tsked. “I really should have left you for Jati to sort out. Or that medic with the big—”

“No, please.” North shuddered. “She was mean.”

“I’m sure you deserved it. That look isn’t going to work on me every time, you realise. Sooner or later, I’ll become immune.”

“Aw, cap’n. Anyway, I’ve already seen all you’ve got, and I’m kinda hanging out here....”

Seb heaved a long-suffering sigh. “You’re persistent, I’ll give you that.” He tossed the towel aside and stepped easily out of his swimsuit. *Oh yeah.* Just as good as North remembered. Seb shook his head at North’s frank admiration. “Tongue, mouth. Inside. Now.”

“Can’t help it. You’re damn fine, boss.”

“Reminding me you’re my subordinate in this situation is *not* going to help, you realise.”

“Well, I’m not *always* under you, am I.”

“Reminding me of *that* probably won’t help either.” Seb picked up the showerhead and adjusted the water flow and temperature. “Eyes closed.”

Despite his apparent irritation, Seb’s care was gentle. He rinsed the salt water from North’s hair and body, then used the complimentary bath puff the apartment had provided to spread cleanser over North’s skin. North kept his eyes closed, concentrating on Seb’s fingers, the glide of the slightly scratchy puff, the smell of the cleanser and the warm water on his skin. Seb’s breathing was even, deep. North imagined that muscled chest moving in time with each breath. His cock bobbing with every heartbeat.

Only, that was him. How could he not be hard with the man he loved, touching him like this?

The water whooshed on, and Seb rinsed him again. “All done. Not washing your hair, not today. You’ll only come to expect it.”

North opened his eyes, and found himself staring more or less directly at Seb’s groin. Looked like he wasn’t the only one feeling a little stimulated. “How about you?”

“Thank you, but I can wash myself.”

“Can I watch?”

“No.” Seb dropped to his knees, then stared up at him. “Because I want to do this.”

He bent his head and put his mouth on North’s cock. North’s hands clenched tight on the edge of the shower seat. “Shit, Seb....”

Seb’s lips sliding back and forth on him, his tongue licking and tasting, one hand on North’s cock, the other on his own, fisting his erection...so mesmerising. He never thought Seb would...and without him even asking. Fuck, it was a wet dream coming true.

“Yeah, good, Seb, please, yeah,” he babbled. He put his hands on Seb’s hair, caressing carefully, encouraging, trying not to thrust, but wanting so much more, wanting it to go on. Seb’s mouth was so damn hot, and his tongue should be illegal. North’s legs trembled, but not with weakness this time. His body was caught in an earthquake, a one-man seismic event called Sebastien ven Hester.

He gasped as he came, Seb’s hand holding his balls tight and his mouth keeping possession of North’s cock until he’d spent the last drop. North’s heart thudded fast as he tried to bring his breathing under control. “Shit,” he whispered. “Shit.”

He could smell the yeastiness of come over the cleanser, but Seb had....

He looked down as Seb set him free, and realised Seb had dealt with his own need. “I would...would’ve taken care of that for you, cap’n.”

Seb smiled at him, dark eyes serene and for once, happy. “You can, later.” He stood and quickly washed away the traces of their lust, then soaped up and rinsed off in quick, economical movements. North could only watch, limp and relaxed, admiring the water cascading down Seb’s tautly perfect body.

Seb hooked a towel from outside the cubicle and began to dry North’s hair.

“Guess I know where I’ll be sleeping tonight.”

Seb stopped and looked down. “Well, you might need help or something.”

“Yeah. Just a safety precaution.”

“Of course.” But he spoiled it by grinning, and North grinned back. Yeah. This could work, if they were careful. It sure could be fun trying.



“They let Jason stay in a place like this?”

Seb smiled as he grabbed Jati’s bag from the hallway, and followed her in. “Now, now, don’t start so soon. He’s been shaking in his boots about you turning up.”

“Good.” She stepped up and kissed his cheek. “How are you, cap’n?”

“Doing okay, actually. Needed the break. You?”

She shrugged. “Maybe it was a mistake to go home. Kinda missed the two of you.”

He reached out for her hand. “Now you’re here, and I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“Even with North around.”

“Especially with North around.”

She sniffed. “So where is the big lug anyway?”

“Getting a haircut in your honour, so don’t be mean about it.”

“You’re no fun at all, you know.”

“Yes, I do know. North takes pains to remind me at least once a day. Beer? Juice? Coffee?”

“Oooh, a cold beer would be lovely.”

She wandered around the apartment while he fetched the drinks. “Shall we sit on the balcony?”

She agreed and he opened the door. She whistled as she looked out over the railing. “That is some view, Seb. This must be costing an arm and a leg.”

“A testicle and a kidney too. Worth every damn credit. Here.”

She accepted the beer and cocked her head. “You look...better. I thought after two weeks with North, one of you would have killed the other.”

“Uh...no, we sorted a few things out. Have a seat.”

She continued to give him that penetrating look even as she sat down. “You look well,” he said. “Nice dress.”

“Thanks. Don’t change the subject. What exactly did you sort out, cap’n?” She leaned forward. “You made friends?”

“Yes, we made friends.” *And the rest.* “What’s the news from the capital?”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but gave in. “You’re not keeping up?”

“Figured if I needed to know, they’d contact me. Is anything happening?”

She pulled a face. “Yes and no. They found signs of Karhal activity in the Terli sector, but they couldn’t tell how long the debris had been there. No one’s seen a ship or any live ones. The last Mum heard was that they were going to go with tightening up the *cordon sanitaire* and hope for the best. They’re sure nothing’s got through the defences. They were lucky we stopped ours.”

Seb winced. He didn’t like talking about good luck when two of his people had died. “I suppose a definitive answer isn’t going to be possible. Your mother’s still busy on the refits?”

“Every engineer on the planet is. They’re hoping to have cargo moving in four weeks. Passengers...maybe two months. The government are getting it in the neck.”

“It’ll be worse if a Karhal eats a passenger. Doesn’t count if it’s crew, obviously.”

“We’re expendable, didn’t you realise?”

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I knew that before I flew into my first battle, Jati.”

“Sorry, Seb. Nothing personal.”

He touched her knee. “Not mad at you. Some of the things that were said at Central got straight

up my nose.”

“I bet.” She made an effort to smile. “So, about you and North.”

The front door opened and closed and before Seb could feel relief at the reprieve, North rushed through the doorway and pulled Jati up into a hug. “Jatila!”

“Let me go, you thug.” She squirmed out of his embrace and glared at him. “Wow, was that the best haircut you could get around here?”

North gave Seb a look. “Did I tell you? I told you, didn’t I. Jati, don’t be a bitch.”

He bent over and kissed Seb on the lips. It had become a habit with the two of them. It obviously hadn’t occurred to North not to—at least, not yet. Seeing Jati’s obvious shock, Seb pushed North away. “Uh....”

“Oh. You didn’t...?”

“Not yet.”

Jati folded her arms. “Made ‘friends’, Captain ven Hester?”

“Well, we are friends. All three of us.”

“I thought he’d have told you.” North, perhaps wisely, backed away from Jati’s trained feet. “Um.”

“So now you know.” Seb decided the best defence was to pretend there wasn’t a problem to deal with. “North, grab yourself a drink. No beer.”

“Nag, nag....”

He went inside. Seb picked up his own drink and sipped it, willing Jati not to make *too* big a deal of this.

“It happened sooner than I thought it would,” she said, her voice quiet.

“Same here. It’s really not much more than friendship, but I’m not pretending it might not lead to a lot more. Or that part of me hopes it will. It’s been good for me. He’s good for me. So are you.”

“Thanks, but I hope I don’t have to sleep with you.”

He chuckled at her expression. “The situation is already confused enough, regulation-wise, without sleeping with *two* of my subordinates. I’m going to have so much damn paperwork to fill

out when we get back, just to make it all legal.”

“If you’re looking for sympathy....”

“No. I’m sorry if it hurts you.”

“It’s...just a bit of a surprise. So soon, I mean. Damn, I thought I was over this.” She rubbed her nose. “I am,” she said firmly. “He looks good. Walking okay and everything.”

Seb wished he could talk to her about the pain she felt over the situation with North, but it wasn’t his place. It was for the two of them. “He tires more easily, and his liver function isn’t back to normal. The doctors here are happy enough.”

“Don’t talk to me about doctors.” North stepped out onto the balcony and pulled up a chair exactly equidistant between Seb and Jati. “Vultures and vampires, every one of them.”

Seb could sympathise. “Jati says there’s no definite signs of Karhal and no breach of the defences.”

“Good. Call-up still valid?”

“I guess so.” She picked up her beer and took a sip. “No one’s told me otherwise. There are a lot of spacers knocking around with bugger all to do.”

“I suggest you forget about all that and have a proper break,” Seb told her. “Now North’s on his feet again, we’re planning a run or two up the mountains. There’s plenty to do, and North’s been champing at the bit to show you around.”

North glanced at him but fortunately didn’t give the lie away. “Yeah, I have.”

“In fact,” Seb said, looking at his lover, “why don’t you and Jati go for a walk on the beach before supper?”

“Seb, aren’t you—”

“There were a few things I wanted to check out about the podder hire, maps and so on,” he lied smoothly. “Jati, this is the best time of day for a walk down there. All the families have gone home, but it’s still warm.”

North picked up on his theme. “Yeah, he’s right. You can bring your beer.”

Jati gave Seb a dubious look, but stood. “All right, Jason.”

“Jatila....”

“Play nicely, you two, or you’ll go to bed without your supper.”

She made a face at him. “If you say so, *sir*.”

“Take your time, lieutenants.”

He waited on the balcony until he saw them emerge on the street below, walking towards the beach. North seemed to be talking, racing to keep up with Jati striding along with her arms folded. A few seconds later North stopped and pulled her into a hug. They remained like that for a good minute or more, and when they separated, North kept hold of Jati’s hand. They walked on like that.

Seb sighed. He wanted the two of them to make peace, because he wanted Jati here and he wanted the next two weeks to be as restful and easy as the previous two had been. Perhaps it had been unrealistic to expect her to just accept the change in North’s and his relationship, but he honestly thought she’d be unsurprised, maybe even pleased. She might be, once the shock wore off.

Well, what was done was done. He had no intention of changing the situation with North to suit her, but he wouldn’t force her to accept it before she was ready either. Jati was an emotionally mature adult. She’d cope, with kindness and understanding. So they all would.



“I don’t get why you’re mad at me again, Jati. You know me and Seb—”

She stalked past him, beer bottle in one hand like a weapon, arms folded tight like armour. “I *thought* you understood what I told you about taking it easy, going slow. Do you really think he’s ready for this?”

“He’s the one making the moves. I’m not going any faster than he wants. Damn it, will you slow down?” He looked around to see if anyone was listening to them argue. “And do we have to do this in public?”

“You brought it up. It’s not like you haven’t fucked this up before.”

He grabbed her shoulder and made her turn. Her narrowed eyes promised a knee to the crotch. “Hon, please? I missed you so much.”

“Oh, North....”

He wrapped his arms around her. “I listened to what you told me, honest,” he murmured against her hair. We’ve been talking, and we *are* taking it slow. He listened to you too. None of this

would be possible without your help.”

“Well that’s *something*, at least.”

He kissed her forehead. “Neither of us want to rub your nose in it. You know how I feel about him.”

She leaned back and looked into his eyes. “Do you know how he feels about you? Because if he’s tossing the ‘L’ word around—”

“He’s not. He’s been completely straight with me. We’ve been talking, I told you. About what happened with, you know, Marta and Wegner, and all that. And his marriage. You and me.” She thumped him lightly on the back. “You’ve got him wrapped around your finger, you realise. He’s been telling me off about how I treated you.”

She managed a grin. “Good. The more people the better.”

He hugged her again. “You bet. But I’m getting to know him so much better. I liked him before, but there’s more to him. I guess you could say we’re dating. I don’t know where it’ll go but...I’m enjoying the trip.”

“Just don’t hurt him. And don’t let him hurt you.”

“Doing my best, sweetheart.” He kissed her cheek, then took her hand. “Come on. The beach is gorgeous this time of day.”

They walked on, hand in hand. She didn’t say anything until they reached the sand, and she slipped off her sandals. “Oh, that’s lovely.” She spent a few moments scuffing the sand and playing in it with her toes. “I’ve always loved the beach.”

“Seb says—”

She held up her hand. “Can we...not talk about him for a bit? I love the guy but....”

North didn’t know what was going on in her head, but he respected her wishes. “Sure. Want to paddle?”

The water was warm, though not as warm as the pool at the apartments. He told her about how he’d used it to help build up strength in his legs, and how it seemed to hasten his return to health.

“The doctors did say they didn’t know how fast the recovery would be.”

“Yeah. But one day I could barely get out of bed without help, and the next, I was almost normal. I still need to take it slow but walking’s fine.”

She nodded and walked on. “How’s your family?” he ventured when she didn’t say anything for

a minute or two.

“Fine. Nosy. So normal. It’s weird. They all work in aeronautics but none of them really understand...it’s hard to talk about the job.”

“Yeah. I get that with my parents.” Though he wondered if it was the job or other things Jati had longed to share and hadn’t been able to.

“I wish they’d end the lockdown.”

“You’re that keen to go back into space? I’m sure not.”

She glanced at him. “No...I don’t like sitting around, that’s all.”

“But you’re due leave. Don’t you want to be here?”

“Oh, you can be so stupid sometimes, North.”

Probably true, at least when it came to her. “Then explain it.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay.”

North kept waiting for the explosion which never came. Jati remained stressed and snippy for a long while, but as they walked on along the beautiful beach, she eventually relaxed, even became a little clingy. He was happy to put his arm around her and feed the need for comfort that she wouldn’t actually come right out and admit to. She wouldn’t say what was really bothering her, though he could guess pretty well, based on the crap in his own head. She talked a lot about her mother, and home, and when they would be flying again. By the time they returned to the apartment, she passed for normal, but North didn’t need Seb’s concerned looks to know it was only an act.

By evening, sharing a bottle of wine with Seb and growing just a little tiddly, the act came closer to being the real thing, though she kept off anything remotely difficult, and Seb steered the conversation onto safer topics whenever there was a danger they might end up talking about things that would stir troubled emotions. It was more tactful than North thought Seb could be, but then this protectiveness of both of them was new.

When the meal was done, even before they’d cleared the plates, she stood. “Listen, I’m whacked. Anyone mind if I hit the sack early?”

“Of course not,” Seb said. “Is there anything you need? Room okay?”

She grinned. “Perfect host. No, the room’s really nice. I’ll sleep like the dead, I think.”

She came over to North and hugged him hard. “Sleep well.” He kissed her forehead and let her go.

Then she went to Seb and hugged him too, to their captain’s obvious surprise. “G’night, guys.” She stepped back from Seb, gave them a wobbly smile. “Keep the noise down, okay?”

“Jati, are you okay?”

She turned to North. “I’m fine. I really, really need to be here. Thanks for letting me.”

“It’s a pleasure, Jati.” Seb gave her the full force of his dark eyes. “Sleep well. Breakfast on the beach sound okay to you?”

“Maybe. I might sleep in.” She yawned and stretched luxuriously. “I really feel like I’m on vacation now. See you.”

She slipped into her room. Seb glanced at North, and then went over to the dining area to clean up and load the dishes. North wiped down the surfaces, working in silence. Only once they were safely in their bedroom, did North unburden himself.

“Is she going to be all right? She seems so brittle.”

“Yes, I think so. At first, I thought it was us. Then I realised it’s still Marta and Wegner and all the rest of it. Now I wish I’d invited her a week ago.”

North came over and ‘helped’ Seb undress, which was actually an excuse for some personal touching and groping. He’d been deprived all afternoon, holding back out of respect of Jati’s feelings. “I’m glad she wasn’t here. Too many things to handle at once. It might have been too explosive.”

“True. But now she is, we concentrate on helping her.” Seb cupped his chin and kissed him long and deep. “We have the nights.”

“Yeah, we do.” Then he thumped Seb in the shoulder.

“Ow. What the hell was that for?”

“You lied. You said some wealthy passengers paid for this.”

“No, I didn’t. I said we had some wealthy and grateful passengers’ relatives, and you assumed.”

North made a face at him. “Whatever, Captain ven Hester. I can’t let you pay for this on your own. It must cost a fortune.”

“Not really. I did get special rates for being here a month, and a hefty discount on account of my decoration—did I tell you that’s about the only thing that damn medal is good for? I consider it

money well spent, and what else am I using it for now? I don't even have to run a house at the moment."

"Yeah, but—"

Seb kissed him again, and started to unbutton North's shirt with a determined expression that promised fun and games for all in very short order. "Enough. I wanted a holiday, I wanted to look after you, and I wanted to help Jati. Using my salary for the things I *like* to do is a novelty. Let me enjoy it, will you?"

"Okay. So I guess I better make sure you get good value for money." Seb paused, a puzzled expression on his face. "Doing the things you like to do. Doing the *people* you like to do. Am I being too subtle for you?"

"As always, North, subtlety is not your strong point. I catch your drift. Now take off your damn trousers and get into bed. I have plans."

"I love it when you're all masterful and captainy."

"Behave or I'll sic Jatila on you."

"No need to be nasty."

Seb slapped his backside. "Enough backchat, Lieutenant. Trousers off. Value for money starts now."

North grinned. Now that was a challenge he could get *right* behind.

The End