

Where Willows Won't Grow

Lia Black



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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WHERE WILLOWS WON'T GROW

By Lia Black

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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WHERE WILLOWS WON'T GROW

By Lia Black

Photo Description

A black and white image of a bearded man, naked, bound and blindfolded.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Here I am. Tied, blindfolded and ready to be put up for auction, as if I were a precious painting, an ancient statue or a fine piece of antique furniture.

After six months of undercover investigations I am finally a step away from identifying who's behind a ruthless organization of male prostitution. To what extent will I have to push myself to do my duty? But most of all, why is a part of me so excited about what is going to happen?

Sincerely,

Giulio

Story Info

Genre: science fiction, futuristic

Tags: dark, undercover cop, prostitution ring, interspecies, hurt/comfort, tentacles (yes, tentacles), abduction, drug references

Content Warnings: graphic violence, rape, dubious consent, references to child sexual abuse, character death (secondary), extreme taboo: gruesome alien sex, sounding, sadism

Word Count: 45,396

Dedication

To Giulio, for letting me go a little nuts with his very cool prompt.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jaye McKenna and Steve Madill for beta-reading. Thanks to Elizabetta, Samantha, and all of the Love's Landscapes volunteers for, once again, putting together and pulling off this wonderful event!

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Chapter One

He thought there were twelve of them. Twelve young men, stinking of sweat and apprehension as they rode naked, bound and blindfolded in the back of a transport shuttle.

The seats were cold metal benches, covered only by rough terrycloth towels, and he'd had the unfortunate luck to be settled over the point where one towel ended and the other began, digging a sharp seam against his scrotum. It was made worse by the spreader bar between his knees. It forced his legs open, causing his bare thigh to rub against the man beside him, who jerked away and whimpered with every brush of his skin.

"It'll be okay," he whispered to the man—or hoped he had. Blood was roaring in his ears along with the steady hum of the shuttle's engine. *Focus*. He had to keep a clear head—pay attention to everything without inviting too much notice—otherwise the entire investigation would be compromised, and six months worth of diligent police work would vanish right along with the leader of this illegal prostitution ring.

This was not the kind of operation that had safe words. Once he'd been picked up, Detective Alex Kley was on his own for the duration. The problem was, already this seemed like something much bigger and more dangerous than the Office of Federation Security had initially believed.

It was not a matter of luck that he'd been chosen. Alex knew that people had made bargains and taken payoffs to get him into the best position to be sent to the top earning brothel house owned by the leader of this insidious group.

They had been trying to bring this sex-ring down for years, but it seemed that each time they got close, the leader pulled up stakes and disappeared, only to return in another form someplace else.

While the OFS was certain that the individual was not human, it seemed his house favored human males of Alex's appearance, so all Alex had to do was to give a convincing performance.

At this point, Alex had little doubt that he was as convincingly scared shitless as the rest of these men.

The guy beside Alex began shivering; his clammy skin and heavy breathing indicative of a person going through symptoms of withdrawal. Alex wasn't surprised that there was at least one drug user among the bunch—part of the

reason that this organization had remained undetected for so long was because they were picking up cheap rent-boys and back-alley hustlers. Because of the social demographic they targeted, no one had really missed one less hooligan on the block—or even twelve, for that matter.

Almost no one. Some of the young men had families, something Alex didn't have—or at least no one who would notice his absence, which was why he was the best candidate to be here; tied up, blindfolded, and trying to keep a seam from rubbing his nuts raw.

Despite the necessity and ultimate good that would come from infiltrating an illegal prostitution ring, there were few romantic partners who would be able to handle extreme infidelity in the line of duty. And having a gay son working as an undercover agent on a sex-crimes investigation wasn't often a source of pride for parents.

Pride was something Alex had given up on years ago, along with any fantasies of ever having a normal life. He was too jaded. He'd come into the OFS right out of the military—a spoiled, yet naive, rich kid who'd managed to advance by using his good looks. When he'd first been approached to work in the sex-crimes unit, he thought it was a wet dream come true. Getting paid legitimately to party, taking money and gifts from old perverts then sending them off to the penal colonies, sampling the latest aphrodisiacs and club-drugs to maintain the mirage. And, of course, the sex. Intimacy was something Alex had never understood; sex was just an activity, a means to an end.

Unfortunately, it would all be coming to an end soon. Although he would be thirty in a month, he was blessed—or possibly cursed—with a face that looked ten years younger. But in five years or less, that might no longer be the case. Even if he could maintain his youthful appearance indefinitely, his soul was quickly becoming putrid; every case killed his humanity a little more.

The vehicle lurched to a stop, and Alex smelled the sharp tang of exhaust when the door slid open.

“All right, whores, end of the line.”

The unfamiliar voice startled Alex; meanwhile, the junkie beside him had broken down and was sniveling and rocking in his seat.

“Shh,” Alex tried to soothe the man quietly, offering a press of his thigh that he hoped might be taken as reassurance.

The hydraulics dipped under the weight of the men coming on board. These

were the handlers, though he had no idea what they looked like. Alex believed that they were all human, judging by the ease at which they had gotten through the Federation checkpoints. Humans were one of the few races who maintained colonies outside of their home world, so shipments through space were commonplace. As long as everyone on board a vessel was human and the operators had their paperwork, there were no questions asked.

That was another reason why it had taken so long for the authorities to figure out just what was going on—no one cared enough to be suspicious. While humans had helped to establish the Federation of Allied Races, the allegiances were purely political. Humans were only taken seriously because they usually had the biggest guns.

Alex breathed a sigh of relief as the spreader bar between his legs was unlocked. His thigh muscles burned when he was hauled to his feet, and his knees buckled, but arms on either side caught him and lowered him to the ground. Alex could feel the roughness of a carpeted mat under his feet—the kind with sculpted artificial pile that felt as forgiving as stone.

“Now listen up,” a man began to speak, his voice roughened by smoke, weather, or injury. “You’re all here because you’ve robbed from us. You’ve either borrowed money that you haven’t paid back, or you’ve stolen drugs, food, booze... This here is where you will be auctioned off and sent out to your new homes where you can try to work off your debts. Back on the streets you’ve managed to stay alive by fucking strangers, so this won’t be a whole lot different than that. You’ll fuck who we say, when we say, where we say. In return, you get food, shelter, medical attention, and maybe a couple of years added to your worthless lives.”

Alex knew it was just a ploy. At some point in their lives, practically all of these men had found it necessary to borrow more money than they could pay back, or stolen some small item—probably food, out of necessity—that made this lie seem somewhat plausible. In reality, regardless of the crimes with which they had been charged, there was no way any one of them could hope to work off his alleged debt.

They were herded into a hallway, judging by the way the sounds bounced off of close, solid surfaces. Alex tried to memorize the sensation of his body moving through space as he counted his footsteps. He would need all of this information when it came time to close out this case.

The group was led down the hallway and into a larger room. *Forty-eight*

steps. Alex could see a faint glow bleeding through the bottom edge of his blindfold, indicating that the room was brightly lit. It was warm—comfortably so, despite the discomfort of being naked, bound and in serious need of a shower.

He cocked his head, listening to the hum of conversations originating from elsewhere in the room before another male voice addressed the group.

“This is the auction block, whores. Do your best to look pretty, and make sure you do what you’re told.”

Alex flinched as a bare hand smacked his ass, and he listened to it continue randomly down the line. So he was at an end, or very close to one. He just had no idea what end, or if that even mattered at all. All he had to do was what he always had—just like the man said: *look pretty and do what you’re told.*

From further down and to his right, a man’s voice said: “You, you, and you.” Then the quiet padding of bare feet across the wooden floor. A dull echo with each step indicated that there was a hollow space under the floorboards. Were they on a stage? A moment later, the murmurs quieted, then began again more earnestly, and the man with the gravelly voice began the opening bids.

“This little blond one is twenty-two, no visible scars. As you can see, he’s got a wide mouth built for sucking cock. Bidding will start at—”

“Mine.”

Alex felt a chill at the base of his spine when he heard the new voice. Likely male, judging by the pitch, but the accent and strange bell-like reverberation indicated that it was not human. *Fuck.* They were being auctioned off to aliens. While it wasn’t completely unexpected, this particular one seemed to be given first dibs without offering a bid. That meant he had some influence, and this was likely the man that Alex was supposed to impress. Although he’d been assured that he had just what these skin-traders were looking for, Alex couldn’t help but be nervous that something would go wrong and this entire thing would come crashing down.

Chapter Two

The bidding had gone on for nearly an hour before Alex was called to the block. His legs were beginning to cramp and he rocked, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He'd heard the unknown alien claim five men in total, and Alex was the last man up.

His heart was beating much faster than it should be, and his body felt hot. If it had been fear driving his anticipation, that might have been preferable to the tension pulling through his groin. He was getting an erection, knowing that he was going to be out in front of a large group of strangers to be auctioned off like a piece of antique furniture. *What a fucked up time to realize a new kink.* Obviously, the handlers were aware of his semi, and when he was escorted out and made to stand on a rubber mat, the murmurs of conversation grew louder.

Gee, Alex, how did you manage to fuck up six month's worth of investigation and get yourself shot in the head? Unfortunately, even that scenario wasn't enough to make his dick behave.

Worry settled in. The sounds of the audience's voices seemed different to him, but because none of them were using Earthspeak, he had no clue whether they approved of what they were seeing.

"This fine specimen—"

"Make him kneel."

It was that alien again. Alex's heart stuttered against his ribs. Someone—probably the guy who brought him out—squeezed Alex's shoulders, indicating that he should be down on his knees. *Fuck.* Another little twinge from his traitorous cock down below.

Alex could feel the man's gaze upon him, beyond all of the other eyes cast his way. The man moved almost silently; the rustle of his clothing was the only thing that gave away his location.

"This one..." the alien mused.

Alex opened his mouth slightly when he felt the man's gloved hand pressing under his chin. He smelled leather, and heard the rasp of it against his beard. Alex swallowed audibly, his throat constricting as the man moved his thumb against his lower lip, teasing it open.

The thumb pushed up under his top lip, feeling sticky against his front teeth.

“Hm. Fairly straight bite. Minor chip in number six, but hardly anything to take down his value...”

Alex choked back a protest as the man moved his hand to pinch his nose.

“Nice straight bridge, a bit aquiline from a break, but appears to have been handled surgically... you said he doesn't snore, right?” The man was talking to someone else in the room.

“We didn't hear him,” came the answer. “Do you want the footage?”

“That won't be necessary.” The alien had turned his attention back to Alex. He pinched and pulled at Alex's face and hair for what was far too long, before Alex felt the man's now bare hands resting on his shoulders. Tetradactylous—three fingers and one thumb—and slightly cool; the digits were long and smooth against his skin. Alex searched through his education, trying to match these physical characteristics with a known race and came up blank. There were some races that had a similar hand structure, but none he knew of that had that tonal quality to their speech.

“Wide... well-formed clavicle... good muscle tone... you eat regular meals?”

It took Alex a moment to realize he was being addressed directly.

“Sir. Yes. I mean, when I could get them, sir.” *God*, he *hoped* it was male.

“Mm. You're thinner than I'd expect from a man of your stature, but that's fine.”

The alien seemed to ignore Alex's cock and walked around behind him. “Put him on his feet.”

Someone ambled over and shoved his hands under Alex's armpits, jerking him roughly to his feet.

The alien hissed, “Careful, idiot—you'll bruise him!”

Alex wobbled from the numbness that had started working its way up his calves.

“Please bend forward.”

Alex's heart turned to ice in his chest. *Was this alien going to fuck him in front of all of these people?*

Having little choice, Alex leaned forward onto the man in front of him, who held him in a dispassionate, but steadying embrace.

Those cool, smooth fingers moved down either side of Alex's spine, pressing firmly as they assessed him. "Good. Straight, strong back."

The fingers pushed into the divots above his ass, then moved lower, squeezing his gluteus muscles and slowly, agonizingly, slipping between and spreading his cheeks apart. Alex heard the snap of latex and the unpleasant sound of air accompanying gel being squeezed from a tube. Although he anticipated what was to come next, Alex nearly hit the ceiling when he felt the probe of cool, slimy fingers pressing against his puckered hole.

"Relax..." the man encouraged, reminiscent of a physician. "Tight. You're a top normally, aren't you?"

Alex bobbed his head and acid burned its way up his throat.

"Hm. But you're not entirely averse to some anal play..."

Alex gasped and his muscles clenched around the slick finger that curled up against his prostate, causing more blood to rush to his cock. He bit his lip and tried to jerk away, but the man in front squeezed him so hard that Alex saw white flashes behind his eyelids.

He was not spared any humiliation. The way the man's finger moved inside of him was making it clear that he was touching Alex for the purpose of watching his body's reaction. Alex's cock started to weep as the alien continued to milk his prostate, and then, just as the pressure was beginning to build, the alien stopped and removed his hand.

Alex whimpered at the sound of the latex glove being turned inside out and dropping quietly to the mat.

"Clean him up—inside and out. This one will go into the ring," the alien said finally, and the volume of voices below the stage began to chatter louder.

The ring? Whatever it was, Alex had a feeling that it was not going to be good.

Cleaning him up "inside and out" was just that. Alex had never understood the concept of enema play, and after having a hose shoved up his ass and being pumped full of water, he could honestly say he wasn't a fan. It left him feeling strangely light-headed and hollow; a little doped up, and if ever there was a time that Alex needed to remain aware and in control, it was now.

They waited to remove his blindfold and handcuffs until they'd finished cleaning out his intestines—smart move. Once he was unbound, two men sent him into a large glass-walled shower.

Alex blinked like a newborn pup as he forced his eyes to adjust to the lights in the room. It didn't help that everything was shiny and white, but the steam fogging up the enclosed shower managed to dull some of the glare. He noticed a few other men getting the same treatment, their expressions mirroring the bewilderment he felt. Along with the five naked men there were six other men wearing charcoal military-style uniforms, keeping an eye on them all. Their presence discouraged any attempts at conversation.

The showers all shut off at the same time and each of them was tossed a clean towel, which was taken away as soon as they were deemed dry enough. Alex shivered; beads of water dripped from the ends of his hair and ran down his spine like tiny cubes of ice.

They were led through an open doorway into a room that resembled a barbershop, and each man was placed in a chair to have their faces shaved clean.

Alex tried to get a look at the other men who had been chosen by the alien. He thought that there might be something about them all that was similar enough to warrant comparison, but from what he could see, except the fact that they were all human, that was not the case.

There was a young man with blond hair who Alex guessed must have been the first one on the block. His features were hard, and he seemed to be making an effort to square his shoulders and maintain a scowl. He did have a wide mouth with a thick upper lip. Not handsome, yet interesting enough that he might be considered somewhat attractive.

From Alex's vantage point, he could only make out two others: a man with deep, caramel-colored skin and shoulder-length black hair; and a much larger man with brown, spiky hair tipped with blond. This man was broad-shouldered and thick with muscle. By comparison, Alex was five-ten and about one-hundred and seventy pounds of lean mass—or had been about a week ago.

An older human, looking completely ridiculous in a black tuxedo, walked into the center of the room. Bald, he appeared to be in his mid fifties with red, splotchy skin and a thick, brown beard streaked with gray. As soon as he started to talk, Alex recognized him as the gravelly voiced auctioneer.

“Okay, whores, the reason you have been separated is because Willow House has taken an interest in you. That’s top-of-the-line in brothels—you all must be pretty special. But six of you is too many, so you’re going to participate in an elimination match of sorts. Winners go to the House.”

“What do the losers get?” Alex asked. *Elimination* sounded uncomfortably final to him.

The man turned and grinned at Alex with yellow, gapped teeth. He had a black spot that bled out from one iris, discoloring the white of his eye. “Besides getting a dick up the ass, they get sent to whichever off-world stable that placed the highest bet against them.” He clapped his hands together, making the little blond jump in his seat. “Now this here is wrestling with a twist. No punching, scratching, biting, or goddamn hair pulling. You win by pinning your opponent and fucking him in the ass.”

“W-what?” The blond’s scowl had turned to something resembling terror, and Alex had to admit that he was feeling pretty terrified himself.

“You heard me, boy. You whores should be used to it. If you ain’t, well you’re gonna be one way or another.”

Alex exhaled a shuddering breath and caught the big spiky-haired guy smirking in his direction. *Nope. This was not going to be good at all.*

Chapter Three

They had been escorted single file down a long, dark hallway, up a short set of stairs, and onto a stage—probably the same one they'd been on previously. Alex had gotten a look at the other two men as they were lining them up: a ginger-haired man of short stature, but stockier than the blond, and a handsome dark-skinned man whose eyes were shifting as he tried to look everywhere at once.

“This isn't funny, man,” he said when Alex caught his gaze. The men in the military fatigues were moving between them, covering their bodies with oil.

Alex offered a tiny shake of his head. *No. Not funny at all.*

Once Alex got where he was going, if he could get within twenty feet of a communications kiosk, his embedded aural transmitter would send out a signal that could be picked up by any passing patrols—even on the other side of the invisible boundary in space. The problem was that he wouldn't know for certain a signal was received until help arrived—or didn't.

OFS had never discussed what happened then.

“F-fuckin' watch your hands!” the little blond stammered and jerked backwards when oiled hands moved too close to his cock.

“Yeah, you should be paying more attention to his asshole because I'm going right in there.” It was the big guy, and he was looking at the blond with a predatory sneer.

The blond's bravado shriveled smaller than his limp dick, and his rodent-like eyes kept a wary watch on the giant to his left.

When the curtain opened, Alex squinted, momentarily blinded by the bright lights turned towards them. He blinked to try and make out any faces in the audience—to see if any at all were human, but the most he caught a glimpse of were some blurry silhouettes of bobbing heads. He could hear the occasional clink of glasses and the closer they walked to the roped-off wrestling mat, the heavier the air became with sweet-and-bitter smelling smoke. The vapors were making him feel a little light-headed, and he recognized the aroma of at least one illegal drug.

“No! No! This isn't—I ain't doin' this!” The caramel-skinned man backed up and started swinging as he was ushered towards the ring.

He slipped as a result of the oil covering him from head to toe and he landed hard on his back on the stage floor. Instantly, he was surrounded by four men wearing fatigues, and one jabbed him with a stun baton. The young victim's body became momentarily rigid—every muscle flexed to its maximum before he went limp—then he lay there twitching and panting. He was wrapped in a blanket and carried back behind the curtain.

Hisses and boos emanated from the audience. Alex exchanged a nervous glance with the dark-skinned man a moment before the man was gestured in between the ropes and took his place on the wrestling mat.

A large timer was projected above the stage, the glowing orange numbers held at a count of 180 seconds.

The man's opponent was the stockier redhead, and the two circled each other for what felt like a small eternity, each man sizing up the other, before the timer reached 120 and the audience started to grumble. At that point, the two men rushed together, upper bodies shoving in concert like sumo wrestlers as each one tried to get a hold on the other's slippery skin.

The ginger went down first. Slipping on the oily mat, he wrapped his hands around the darker man's waist and pulled him down as he went. In an instant, they became a writhing tangle of flesh and limbs. The oil made their skin slick and shiny; gleaming espresso muscles sliding over smooth strawberries and cream. The ginger was thicker and stronger than his opponent, but the dark-skinned man was more flexible, and he coiled around his rival, slipping out from underneath him before he could be pinned. Whether it was from the physical contact, testosterone, or the intoxicating vapors filling the air, Alex noticed that both men were hard. The darker man's cock was cut, thin and curved like polished mahogany from his glistening black nest of curls, while the ginger's was uncut and about average length, but built thick like the rest of him.

Alex took in a shuddering breath as his own cock began to fill. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the big man stroking his sizable hard-on as he watched the two on display.

The dark-skinned man grabbed the other man's arms and shoved him forward on the mat, forcing his shoulders down and ass up, but the angle was all wrong for entry. Before he could make it right, the ginger did a somersault, flinging the lighter-weight man over his back and landing on his back on top of him. The air rushed out of the wrestler underneath with a heavy *whoosh*.

Somehow, the dark arms still held on, curling around into a half nelson, but neither man had managed to successfully mount the other, and the timer ran out.

It was a draw. More complaints echoed around the stage as two of the handlers came in and got the men apart. They were led out of the ring to separate sides, given water and a fresh application of oil, as they rested up before their next round.

One of the handlers perked up his head and moved towards the edge of the stage, crouching to speak to someone in the audience. He stood up and turned around, gesturing towards the ginger and the little blond. Apparently, somebody had decided that these two should be next.

From all outward appearances, the ginger would be the clear winner. He was roughly the same height as the blond, but probably outweighed him by close to seventy-five pounds. The blond was scrawny by comparison. Yet the exertion still evident from the first battle made them seem slightly better matched, at least initially.

The blond was obviously a street fighter. He was fast and fought dirty as he dropped into a crouch and swept the ginger down at the knees, then hopped on his back like a greasy, shaved spider monkey. He hooked one leg around the other guy's waist, and turned his ankle to mash against the ginger's cock with his toes. Alex looked around, expecting one of the handlers to intervene, but the two men either hadn't seen it, or really didn't care.

The ginger gulped in a noisy breath and his face turned purple. A second later, he was down, his chest pressed against his knees, and the little blond raised his skinny hips and started fucking him hard and fast.

The timer stopped and a bell sounded, nearly drowned out by the cheers from the crowd.

Three handlers entered the wrestling ring, and it took two to pull the blond off the ginger's back. His little eyes were glittering and his pupils blown wide as his cock stood out red and straining, wanting to finish pounding the other man into submission.

Alex felt sick to his stomach, as repulsed by his own reaction as to the act itself. It had turned him on to see the other man dominated so completely, while at the same time he prayed that it wouldn't happen to him. Even though his position in the top house had been almost assured, this could change

everything. If he didn't get through this, he would be sent off to some other stable and literally fucked in every way—at least until he could get out a signal and hope for a ride home.

No, he had no choice. He wouldn't lose now that they had finally come so close to identifying the leader of this group and shutting them down for good.

“You.”

Alex realized that the handler was talking to him. Dread settled into his stomach as he moved towards the mat, and the handler raised the rope for him to climb inside.

The rubber mat was glazed with oil and sweat. Alex stared at it dolefully; unaware of his opponent until the dark-skinned man was led to the ring.

In a way, Alex was relieved to see that he wasn't fighting the spiky-haired giant, who was still grinning and stroking his cock. *Christ, could that thing get any bigger?*

He was momentarily caught off guard by his opponent charging towards him even before the timer began its countdown.

Alex spun out of the way and caught the guy's arm, twisting it up between his shoulder blades, but he couldn't get a good grip because of the oil. The man slipped free, then tried to roll clear for another attack. He hesitated, his upper lip curled, baring his teeth as he fixed Alex with a predatory gaze.

The smoke, Alex realized, was beginning to affect him. His body felt light and hot, and lightning flared through his core. He glanced down to see the guy's ebony rod at full mast, already beginning to bead with pre. The man licked his lips, his pupils dilated as he rocked like a cobra, ready to strike.

If he was a cobra, well then, Alex would just have to be a mongoose.

They charged, coming together in a feral embrace, close enough to kiss had they not been hissing through their teeth with the struggle for dominance.

Alex's logic slipped away, until he became nothing but base need and instinct. *Grab him. Take him down, and fuck him.* There was no Detective Alex Kley, just a beast driven to breed.

The man let out a furious battle cry and the crowd cheered back. He shot towards Alex like a bull, head down and aiming for his stomach. Alex responded as a matador should, arching out of the way with a fluid grace. He

turned on his toes as the man started past him, and circled his arms around his waist. Jerking the man against his body, Alex thrust forward with his hips, impaling the man with his cock.

The dark-skinned man yelped, and Alex roared triumphantly, following him down to the mat, deafened by the crackle of blood in his ears as he continued to piston into the man who was clutching futilely at the mat beneath him.

It wasn't until he was wrestled back by several handlers that the drug-haze dissipated enough for Alex to make sense of what had just happened. He heard the man sobbing, and saw his hole gaping and raw. Alex's heart stuttered in his chest and his blood turned to ice. Shaking his head, he slipped away from the handlers outside of the ring and dropped to his knees on the floor, dry heaving so hard that he thought he'd puke out his own guts. *What the fuck had he just done?* He'd just raped another man—reduced him to flesh, and he'd relished every depraved moment of his cock shredding apart the other man's dignity.

Someone patted him on the back, handed him a bottle of water, and cracked a capsule of ammonium carbonate under his nose.

Alex jerked to attention, the sharp tang burning his nostrils. *How long had he been out of it?* He heard the crowd cheering loudly, and the little blond screamed through his torturous defeat.

He looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with the spiky-haired man, who pointed at him with a vicious grin. He grabbed his turgid cock and pumped it for show, riling up the crowd even more.

“Just give me a minute.” Alex held up his hand as he was approached by a handler.

“You wanna forfeit?” the man asked him, making ready to rise and call off the fight.

“No. I just need a minute to focus.” Alex turned to sit facing the mat as he sipped his water. The blond was shaking, red-faced, and had a large white towel draped over his shoulders. He moved stiffly and looked slightly dazed. Two handlers escorted him to the edge of the stage. They spoke with someone who was obscured by the shadows, then the little blond was helped down a set of hidden stairs nearby, and he too disappeared out of view. It wasn't what had happened before. The others who had lost had gone back behind the stage.

Alex might have considered it further, but currently he had other worries. He reminded himself that sometimes good people had to do bad things to help

set things right. In the last several years it had become almost a mantra. But Alex didn't feel like he was a good person, or that he ever had been. *That's why he was so perfect for this job.*

He reminded himself that this wasn't about him. He was here to protect the young men who had come before him, the agent who'd come before him, and to prevent anyone else from becoming a victim. Alex used to eat this line of noble bullshit for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Under the current conditions, it wasn't holding up.

"Ready now?" The handler had returned and he bent down to peer into Alex's face.

"Yeah." Alex got to his feet, trying to gather up his energy and willpower to get through this, rather than focusing on his all too eager opponent.

He didn't have to win yet—just draw. Maybe that would give him a few more minutes to figure out a strategy. Maybe the audience would get bored and they'd pit them against each other in some other way. *Yeah, like in a rousing game of rock-paper-scissors?*

On his way into the ring, Alex took an inventory of his opponent. Six-foot-five if he was an inch. Probably tipping the scales at around two-fifty, and all of it thick muscle. He was built like a goddamn superhero. *Draw?* Alex knew he'd be lucky if he even managed to walk again after this giant split his ass in two.

"Here, kitty kitty," the big guy crooned, a maniacal grin cleaving his face from ear to ear.

The animal part of Alex would revert to fight or flight mentality, and every muscle was twitching as his instincts told him to run. Despite the intoxicating vapors rising in a cloud around the stage, he tried to maintain enough control to remain lucid as the starting buzzer sounded.

The two men circled each other, each one looking for the weakness that would give him the upper hand. Or in Alex's case, the one place he could grab onto that would keep this guy from fucking him up until the time clock ran out.

The giant's skin was flushed from the adrenaline circulating through his blood. At some point he'd have to hit the physiological wall, and Alex prayed that it would be soon enough to save himself.

One advantage he had over the larger man was speed. As the guy lunged forward, Alex dropped and rolled, somersaulting out of his reach. But the giant did something unexpected. Instead of turning around for another attack, he launched himself backwards, landing halfway on top of Alex and grabbing hold

of one of his thighs. Alex didn't wait to catch his breath before he forced himself to roll right up and over the giant's face on his way out of his grasp. If jamming his dick in the guy's ear counted, Alex might have been the clear winner, but since it didn't, all it had managed to do was to piss the guy off.

"You're going to bleed, bitch!" the giant roared, struggling to sit up on the oil-slicked mat. He managed to roll instead, and reached out, snagging Alex's leg and dragging him back down. Alex couldn't get enough traction on the slippery rubber surface to get away, and he felt himself being dragged closer to the suffocating heat of the giant's body.

He began to panic, flopping around like a fish as he was pulled closer to his doom. The roar of the crowd was deafening, and Alex knew that not even the buzzer would save him. The crowd clearly expected a winner, and Alex knew it wouldn't be him.

Shit, shit, shit! Alex cursed every part of this investigation from his CO to the victims. This entire thing had been set up from beginning to end, but nobody had warned him about this. Nobody had warned him that getting fucked up the ass by the wrong person could send this case and his career to hell.

Something rising up outside of the ring caught Alex's attention. The most frightening and captivating creature was moving towards the mat; a beautiful demon with snow-white hair and obsidian skin, dressed in blood-red robes.

Everything in the world stopped but for this creature.

Almost human—and yet too exotic to be anything but an alien species. His cheekbones were wide and high, his silver eyes were angular—tapered on each end. They seemed to be taking apart Alex's brain, piece by piece, and laying out the blocks to examine their contents. A broad mouth, and lips shaped like a bowed heart, revealed the dagger-edges of the alien's teeth when he spoke.

"Stop."

It was the voice Alex had heard earlier. The one owned by the alien who had sent them here, to this ring, and was now choosing to end the game he'd begun. Alex remained spellbound until he felt the weight of the other man lifted off of him and hands pulling him up from the floor.

"Clean them up," said the black-skinned alien beauty. "I want them both."

Chapter Four

He'd wanted three this time, and a variety. Who was Illythe to question the demands of the Scion?

While Illythe hadn't got the humans in the varied skin shades he'd hoped for, he'd rather have the best candidates in Willow House, and the size differences in the trio might make for interesting combinations.

The little one was going to be trying with his unfortunate speech impediment, but he could be kept quiet by any number of methods. For the time being, he'd been treated for his injuries and put to bed until morning when the others were set to arrive.

Of the three, it had been the dark-haired man who'd captivated Illythe the most. Lean, strong; with an intelligent and handsome face, and a beautiful human body. He would be popular. Illythe should have been proud of his choice. Instead, he was trying not to succumb to the ache that was starting behind his eyes.

He told himself that it was the trip to the auction house that had caused his discomfort. It had been years since he'd ventured out among others, and even his guards had been uneasy with all of the attention paid to him by the other patrons. They all knew who and what he was. It was a truth he abhorred, but could not deny.

Illythe looked himself over in the full-length mirror. He had been told to wear red tonight. He never liked the color red, but the Scion insisted he looked his best in it; that it was the color of vitality, life, and love. Illythe snorted, shaking his head at his reflection. He'd never known any of those things... not for a long time, or without pain, anyway.

He glanced over at the bed, made up, covered in plastic sheeting, and ready to handle tonight's activities. Red lanterns hung on the walls, giving the room a soft glow.

Illythe had been told that Willow House was fashioned to resemble an ancient Earth brothel in a place once called Japan. Although none of it was made from the traditional materials once found in such places, it was good enough to create a fantasy that pleased the Scion and his most important guests.

Outside there was a courtyard with a high wall surrounding artificial trees

that produced cherry blossoms year-round. It was all too theatrical for Illythe, who was forced to endure the whims and wishes of the Scion.

Tonight, the Scion wished for Illythe to wear a *yukata* and *hanhaba obi*—basically an overly complicated robe and narrow sash—with nothing underneath. It annoyed Illythe that even now he was not permitted to choose his own wardrobe, but after nearly three decades he should have been used to it. Unfortunately, Illythe and the Scion came from races with very long natural lifespans, though there was nothing natural about Illythe's life.

Illythe had been a child—a young prince from a nomadic clan of warriors—when the technologically superior Gengein attacked his planet. It had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with profit. In less than seventy-two hours, an entire race was destroyed, and a preadolescent prince had become a sexual plaything for a group of Gengein soldiers. It had been the Scion—a general in the Gengein military—who had rescued him, if one could call it that. It was a confounding irony that the one who led the attack on Illythe's planet had saved him from being killed. Illythe both hated and loved him; he wanted to see the Scion dead, while believing that he would not be able to live without him.

His father would be ashamed if he could see what a coward his son had become. But his father was dead. All of those brave and honor-bound warriors were dead, so truly, what good was such a thing as honor?

Willow House was a new establishment in a new location, but the same old business. The multitude of Brecchian guards in this place were mostly to keep an eye on the Scion's business interests and on Illythe. Anti-Federation races and criminals of all sorts came to Omanai Station, and their leaders came to Willow House. Occasionally, they came unscheduled, and the guards kept such events from escalating into all sorts of problems.

But aside from that, the large number of guards were here to make certain Illythe stayed put. Three or four Brecchian he could handle easily, despite their weapons. He'd proved this before, at the last place he managed for the Scion.

The private entrance at the back of Illythe's room slid open as he was finishing up his preparations for the Scion's arrival. The large alien who entered cast his ominous shadow over Illythe, who had long ago stopped flinching over such trivial surprises, despite the fact that something inside of him always recoiled from his presence.

Illythe sighed, setting down the comb he'd been using to straighten his long, white hair.

“Troubles, Illythe?” The Scion wore a white suit, contrasting his smooth brown skin. Illythe had never quite decided if it was comical or terrifying when the large alien tried to fit himself into human fashion. Of course, any garments had to be specially tailored to account for the extra set of arms, not to mention the highly specialized sex organs, which required the addition of a large pouch below the waistband.

Illythe conjured a smile and raised his hand to accept the bottle of spirits the Scion had brought him.

“Thank you, Scion. No, no troubles.” He watched the large creature settle onto the sofa in the room as he poured them each a drink. “Three new *kagema* will be arriving this evening. I hope that the guests will find them to their liking.” Illythe gritted his teeth, annoyed at the insistence that he use foreign words to pretty up the truth. *More kidnapped human whores all set to suffer innumerable humiliations by being playthings for foreign species.*

Illythe moved to the sofa and handed the Scion his glass, and then dutifully sank to the cushion at the Scion's feet. He arched his neck, his lips parting as the Scion's brown fingers brushed gently at his hair, then immediately hated himself for falling prey to his body's conditioned response.

The Scion chuckled softly, patting the sofa beside him. “You have three of them now. It may be exhausting trying to teach them all.”

“I only want the best for you.” Illythe rose and settled into the small space on the sofa next to the Scion. He sipped at the cloudy liquid in his glass. *Genvian spirits.* The liqueur bubbled sweet on his tongue, and flowed in a hot and cold river down his throat, seeping quickly through his tissues and into his bloodstream. It raised his body temperature, and his black skin lightened to gray under a wash of red freckles blossoming over his chest and thighs.

“You were the best.” The Scion's voice lowered an octave, lust filling his tone like gravel. “You still are.”

Illythe heard the whisper of the Scion's long appendages rustling behind the silk and linen fabric of his suit as the larger alien moved up closer behind him. He shivered at the fimbrial caress of this species' mouth on the back of his neck, his body responding from memory and the intoxicants in his system. Blood surged to his cock and Illythe sighed, raising his hips in trained invitation.

The alien behind him chuckled, and two sets of arms came around to rid him of his clothing. He should be grateful that he was allowed a role as mentor,

and not confined to his former position as slave. That the Scion had cared for him enough to let him age gracefully, rather than chained to his bed, was appreciated, and so these occasional forays into his former life could be tolerated with certain caveats—or so Illythe told himself.

“Exquisite.” As the Scion breathed, the cilia waved in his mouth cavity, his red tongue appearing just behind the blushing fringe.

The instincts cultivated by his former slave status took over, and Illythe groaned, rising to his knees and leaning forward to rest his elbows on the arm of the sofa. He curved his spine, lifting his ass high and rocking his hips for the master's approval.

Glancing over his shoulder briefly, he saw the fabric covering the alien's genitalia slide down, and Illythe swallowed back the rising gall in his throat.

The first time he'd been raped by the Gengein, it had left a scar on his psyche that would never fade, despite the decades of pleasure since. Although not recognized as a member race, the intelligent alien species was one of the least human looking of those known by the Federation of Allied Races. At eight feet tall and adorned with a veil of thin, fleshy appendages, the Gengein was a thing of nightmares for most human beings. But these features were not nearly as frightening as the creature's sexual organs.

The heady aroma of the Scion's mating secretions filled Illythe's head, the scent so overwhelming he could taste it, as he felt the first tentative probes of his anus. He whimpered as the alien's mouth tickled against his opening, and the long, hot tongue began to lap at the tightly puckered flesh. The beast's saliva flowed like sap between Illythe's cheeks, and slicked him up for entry as the Scion's pointed tongue drilled inside.

As horrific as sex could be with these aliens, it could also be incredibly sensual, provided that the Gengein involved cared about his partner's pleasure. Illythe gasped and moaned as the Scion's tongue wiggled against the gland buried inside of him. He pushed his hips back, desiring more of the incredible sensations. Two of the Scion's hands came around to tug at the rings through Illythe's swollen nipples; twisting and milking the sharp nubs of reddened flesh.

“Bed,” the Scion said but one word as he drew out his tongue, and Illythe went scrambling to the oversized mattress, reassuming his position of submission with his shoulders down and his ass waving in the air. Blood

pounded in his ears as his heart beat faster. The Scion was on the bed, kneeling behind him, poised and ready for entry.

The alien's cock rose long and thick, ribbed along the shaft and surrounded by the same tendrils of flesh that moved around its skull. They slithered over Illythe's flanks, some wrapping around his cock, while others encircled his balls, pulling them down and away from his body, and rubbing them in his sac. Illythe's cock throbbed in the warm bindings of flesh, and they squeezed and released him, tugging lightly on the piercing through his crown, and wringing from his lips another appreciative moan. There were times when the Scion had chained him by the rings through his cock and nipples, and touching them served as a reminder of the pleasure and pain it could inspire.

Illythe felt the moisture of the blunt tip of the Scion's cock now pushing against his saliva-lubricated hole. The secretions aided entry as the alien slipped inside, relaxing and readying the channel for the remainder of the breeding process. He seated himself deeply, pausing for a few moments before he began to move back and forth inside of Illythe, the thick ribbing on his cock sending shudders of delight as he pistoned slowly, then began to work up a rhythm, rocking Illythe's taut body against the bed. One of the Scion's hands pressed against Illythe's mouth. Illythe opened it to take in two thick, brown fingers, and sucked on them to aid in stifling his screams.

The first thing to occur prior to the Gengein orgasm was the feeler slithering into the slit of Illythe's penis, working its way into his urethral tube and vibrating ever so slightly as it released the antitoxins into his system. This was to counteract the poisonous effects of the Gengein spermatozoa on a life-form that was incompatible with its breed. This was not the part that incited the screaming, however. While initially uncomfortable, there had been times where Illythe had experienced mind-shattering bliss as the talented appendages—sometimes as many as three—squirmed inside of his cock and milked the come from his balls. It caused a terrifying buildup of pressure, which ultimately culminated in an orgasm that often went on for minutes at a time. But the Scion was not content today to just let Illythe take his own pleasure.

Illythe's breath began to come in quick bursts as he felt the first indications of the Scion's cock preparing for orgasm inside of him. The organ swelled and began to unfurl, the soft flesh rolling and peeling back as it turned itself inside out, and the sharp spines of the inner lining were exposed.

Illythe squeezed his eyes shut tightly and screamed into the muffling hand,

his spit foaming against the Scion's soft, sticky palm. He felt the capillaries burst in his eyes, and his bladder constricted as his body went rigid with agony. The spines pierced through his sensitive inner tissues as the Scion's cock bloated from his impending orgasm, and blood slicked Illythe's insides. Illythe's own orgasm was trapped within his testicles by the appendages creating a tourniquet around his cock and balls, even as the tentacles inside began to vibrate faster, signaling the near completion of the Gengein's breeding act.

The Scion roared as his orgasm exploded through his cock, the needles flexing inside to inject the semen through Illythe's rectal walls. At the same time, the tentacles filling and squeezing Illythe's cock released him and his own come burst out of him, making his orgasm feel more like a kick to his groin than the pleasure it should have been. Illythe choked, his screams long inaudible as the Scion's cock pumped the remainder of its caustic load into his body, then finally the spines retracted and the organ went limp, slithering out in a mess of blood and come.

Illythe's body went heavy as his brain compensated for what it perceived to be a traumatic injury, and finally, mercifully, his consciousness shut down. *Thank the Divines—the Scion had been gentle this time.*

Chapter Five

Alex and the spiky-haired giant had been bathed, somewhat dressed, and sedated for their journey. When Alex woke up, there was a shadowy angel hovering over him.

Alex blinked to clear his vision, but the black-skinned angel was still there. He'd begun to believe that it was a statue until it blinked its silver eyes. In that moment, everything came rushing back to him, and he sat up with a gasp, then regretted it as his brain sloshed around in his skull like the worst hangover he'd ever had.

"You're finally awake," the now somewhat familiar alien said. He had been sitting on Alex's bed, and Alex felt the mattress rise slightly when he stood up. The alien angel moved stiffly around the small room, as though it caused him pain to do so, and poured a cup of water, bringing it to Alex.

"Where is this place?" Alex asked him.

"Omanai."

Omanai. It was a station settlement, outside of Federation jurisdiction, known by the OFS for its red-light district and shady merchants. It was off-limits to humans, but that didn't always stop the more unscrupulous ones from coming for a visit. Contraband of all sorts was available here, if one knew where and how to buy it.

When the alien turned, Alex saw him wince, and asked without thinking, "Are you hurt?"

The alien stared at him for a moment before answering, or rather, not answering him.

"I am Illythe. You shall call me Mentor. What first name are you called?" The tone was neither kind nor harsh, and maybe it was the lack of any emotional inflection that made it so unnerving.

"Alex... sir."

"Alex," Mentor Illythe repeated. His accent drew it out like a purr. "You've slept through lunch, Alex, but if you check with the cook, she will make you something suitable. I expect you to be in the north hall by two." Illythe indicated what appeared to be an antique pendulum clock hanging on the wall, then he walked out the sliding door.

Alex stared after him for the few moments it took to process his instructions, then he looked around the room.

It was small—only large enough for a bed, a dresser, and a nightstand, all of which were of very simple design. There was a small lamp with a red glass shade, and the walls were gray panels above black lacquered wainscoting. The sliding door had frosted panels that seemed more like paper than glass, but were undoubtedly neither one. The style of everything was somewhat familiar—Earth-based and older... Japanese, perhaps? Often, alien species became obsessed with certain periods of Earth's history for the design. French Baroque, American Antebellum, Italian Renaissance, Edo-Period Japan... usually they mixed the styles with varying results. His favorite example of design gone wrong was an ostentatious Rococo throne used as the captain's chair for an otherwise sleek Federation fighter vessel.

Alex sat up much more slowly this time, swinging his legs off the side of the mattress. He sniffed at the water. Detecting nothing other than the usual sterilizing chemicals—a smell like bleach and rubbing alcohol—he sipped it, and then gulped the rest down when his thirst got the better of him. It burned his throat slightly, and tasted a little like vinegar, but nothing beyond the range of normal for treated water.

He'd been dressed in a very simple outfit: off-white drawstring pants and a shirt of the same fabric. A pair of slippers sat on the woven mat next to the bed, and Alex slid his bare feet into them.

It seemed odd that he'd be allowed to just wander around the house, until Alex slid open the door and saw what resembled a large samurai warrior outside of his room.

The samurai was actually a Brecchian, a bulky, bipedal race with a head that looked like a toad's except for the two rows of tiny serrated teeth that filled up their wide mouths. Although *it*—because Brecchian were asexual—was dressed like an ancient Japanese warrior, Alex knew there were more than simple metal scales and leather strips making up the armor. As if seeing an alien dressed like a samurai warrior wasn't clue enough, the large plasma rifle and stun baton were also indications that Alex hadn't stepped back in time.

Brecchian were usually freelance mercenaries, so someone had to be paying well, especially if they were asking them to play dress up.

The bulbous yellow eyes followed Alex's uncertain trip down the hallway.

He passed a few more doors that were open, showing bedrooms identical to the one he'd been in, and a few other doors that were closed. He was about to ask another one of the samurai for directions when he saw a large letter "N" painted above an archway. Well, that likely solved one mystery. Now to find the kitchen.

"Hey—"

Alex spun around at the sound of the human voice calling to him from behind. It was the spiky-haired giant, looking about as confused as Alex felt.

"Hey," Alex answered him tentatively. The guy *had* just tried to fuck him into submission not so long ago.

"Do you know where the hell we are?"

Alex shrugged and waited for the bigger man to catch up.

The guy flinched when he brushed against one of the house guards and the creature growled at him. "Shit—it's alive?"

Although he'd been off-world several times, Alex hadn't really considered the fact that most Earth-born had never seen aliens outside of the media—if even that. It wasn't that they didn't know they existed, but only those who lived near the big centers of government or had been off-world would come in contact with any.

The reality slowly settled in with him as well; odds were that at least ninety percent of the clientele here would be non-human... and this being a brothel, he would be expected to service them. *Cripes*. While he'd known that he might have to engage in some unsavory activities to maintain his cover, he was wondering just how unsavory some of the species with whom he'd be *engaging* might be.

"Name's Bryant—what's your name?"

"Alex." He thought he smelled something like food, so Alex started to follow the scent down a wider corridor.

"Are we the only ones here? I mean, besides that black-skinned dude... that's a dude right?"

Alex offered Bryant a sidelong glance, not really wanting to carry on a conversation with him, but not seeing any way out of it. "Yeah, he's male."

"What is he? He's hot enough to be a woman... think there are any women here?"

"I don't know." Alex figured his answer should suffice to cover all of Bryant's questions as he rounded the corner to an open kitchen.

There was an older female working in the kitchen. She was from a race that appeared vaguely human—Jowan, he thought. She jerked her head towards an open doorway on the opposite end that turned out to be a dining room.

The smaller blond man was sitting at the only table in the room, eating some kind of pastry when Alex and Bryant entered. He froze mid-bite when he saw Bryant.

"Hey, little dude." Bryant winked at the blond, who moved to the other side of the table to put space between them.

"D-don't l-l-little dude m-me!" the blond stammered, his face so red that his hair seemed to glow.

"Aw, you're not still mad about the match are you?" Bryant scratched the top of his own head, ruffling his spiky hair.

"Y-you h-hurt me!"

Normally Alex might have let them argue or work it out between themselves, but frankly, his head was hurting, he was starving, and he suspected that things might just escalate between the two.

"Look, everybody hurt somebody. None of us had a choice." He grabbed one of the pastries off of the tray, at this point too hungry to care whether it had been drugged or not.

"So what's your name?" Alex finally asked the smaller blond man, trying to keep conversation as neutral as possible.

The blond's murky brown eyes sparkled and he grinned, his entire demeanor changing from fearful to flirtatious. "M-M-Melvin. You c-can call me Mel."

"I'm Alex and that's Bryant," Alex said, then looked around for something to drink. Of course it was too much to ask for to get a decent cup of coffee here. While the pastries weren't terrible, each bite turned into a lump of paste as it slid down his throat. He got up and poured himself some water from a pitcher on the sideboard, examining the layout of the dining room. It was done in the same style as the rest of the house, a pseudo-ancient Japanese design. It was an attractive style, although admittedly a strange choice, and it revealed the owner's fetishism of the Earth culture.

Some kind of light, natural, or otherwise, shone through the large frosted panels along one wall.

"I guess there are just the three of us?" Alex asked the question, but doubted either of them knew the answer.

"I d-didn't s-see any others," Mel stammered, watching him through veiled eyes.

"So, Alley-cat," Bryant started as he leaned back in his chair, "how long you been a whore?" He reached up over his head, flexing his meaty biceps. Alex wondered how long the sleeves of his shirt would last as they were pulled taut across the muscles.

"What's it to you?" Alex asked, not in the mood to be friendly with either of these men. He was still trying to figure out how he was going to handle this situation, whatever this situation turned out to be.

"Oh, sensitive? Lemme guess, your step daddy used to fuck you, and your momma didn't love you enough to kick him out, so you left, right?"

"Bingo," Alex said, noncommittal, as he looked around for a clock.

"I-it's n-none of your b-business," Mel defended him, but Alex was already heading for the doorway. It was two o'clock; time to get this show on the road.

The others followed Alex out and down the hallway, deferring to his assumed familiarity with the interior. Around every corner, they encountered another faux-samurai, bringing the count thus far to seven in Alex's estimation. One was bad enough, but seven of these monsters left little doubt that this was the highest earning brothel on Omanai, and someone wanted to keep it that way. Although Alex had to wonder if the guards were there to protect the guests, the workers, or the house itself. It added another difficult wrinkle to an already complex case.

At the end of the north hallway, the double-panel doors were open, and Illythe—or *the mentor*—was standing in roughly the center of the room, dressed like a geisha. He wore all black, without the traditional makeup, and instead of a fan, he had a leather whip coiled loosely in one hand. His face was set in the kind of placid gaze that only one who has given up hope could achieve. Alex found it curious, and a little unnerving. Perhaps he was wrong, and the blank expression was only a natural trait for this species he'd never known existed.

“This is Willow House,” the mentor said, and his silver-glass eyes seemed to focus on the three of them at once. “This is the jewel in the Crown of Seven Houses. You are fortunate to be here, so please remember that throughout your stay.”

He began to walk slowly in a gliding sort of half-circle, his movements so precise, it was nearly a dance.

“Willow House, like all of the Seven Houses, is owned by the Scion.”

The Scion. That was a name Alex hadn't heard before. Was Illythe speaking the word in reference to an individual or the organization?

Mel was standing beside Alex, also watching Illythe with interest that bordered on awe. Bryant seemed more interested in the fake orchids standing in a planter. Bryant likely didn't realize they were artificial—they looked real enough, but Alex knew that nothing living could thrive in such a place. Ironic that they would call the brothel Willow House in a place where willows wouldn't grow.

Alex had been trying to find a way to phrase his question so that he could get more information about what or who the Scion was without raising suspicions, but Illythe began speaking again.

“In your former lives, you did what men wanted you to do for money, or drugs. Here you will do what you are instructed to do by the house, for the house.”

“Does that include dressing up like a woman?”

Alex could *hear* the weight of the air increase after Bryant spoke, then stood there with a self-satisfied smirk. Alex glanced quickly down at the whip and wondered if Mentor Illythe planned on using it. He wished he would, if for no other reason than just to shut Bryant up so that Alex could try to get some answers.

“And what first name are you called?” Illythe asked softly, moving up very close to Bryant.

“Bryant.” When he said it, Alex saw the upward tilt of Bryant's chin, and the squaring of his shoulders. He was playing tough, and all Alex could do was to stand by and wait for the train wreck.

“Bryant,” Illythe repeated. He tapped the whip lightly against his leg—just enough to make a soft rustle against the silk.

Alex hadn't realized how tall Illythe was until he stood close to Bryant. They were approximately the same height, but Illythe was a lot leaner than Bryant, and he carried himself with the kind of aloof grace that could only be achieved after years of practice and self-awareness.

"Well, Bryant," Illythe cocked his head pensively; his voice remained calm and bereft of any emotion. "Because I speak for the house as its master, you'll do anything I tell you to do and you will be honored to do so."

Bryant opened his mouth to say something that turned into a loud huff of air as Illythe punched him hard in the stomach, without so much as visibly tensing a muscle. With that same impassive grace, Illythe grabbed the doubled-over man by his spiky hair and forced him to his knees. He pushed Bryant's face against the black satiny brocade covering his crotch.

"If the house tells you to suck its cock, you will do it until you can't feel your tongue."

Alex swallowed hard; shocked, afraid, and aroused all at the same time. He glanced up and met Illythe's silver eyes.

"Alex, Mel, undo your pants. You are the house today."

Mel seemed quite eager to untie the drawstring and pull the waistband of his bottoms under his balls, but Alex hesitated, again meeting the mentor's icy gaze.

"Alex?" Illythe raised an eyebrow. He was still grinding Bryant's face against his groin while Bryant let out some muffled coughing.

Alex lowered his gaze, his eyes trying to be anywhere but on the mentor or the man he held. "I, uh..."

Illythe pulled on Mel's shirt to bring him closer, and then he turned Bryant's head, pushing him into Mel's eager cock.

"Suck," Illythe instructed, and strode over to Alex.

"Mentor, I'm sorry..." Alex shivered when Illythe's thin fingers brushed across his shoulder and down his chest.

"You are not aroused by the thought of that man sucking your cock?"

Alex glanced over briefly to Mel and Bryant. Mel was grinning triumphantly down at the man who'd been forced to suck him off. Alex looked away, curling his upper lip.

“No. Not like that, especially.”

“Mm.” Illythe hummed softly, tugging lightly on the collar of Alex’s shirt before turning away. “I knew you were different.”

Alex’s throat tightened. In an undercover situation, different wasn’t a good thing. He thought he should say something, but couldn’t come up with a single worthwhile thing as he followed Illythe to the back of the room where there was a small sofa.

“Mel, don’t ejaculate yet,” Illythe instructed as they went past. He pointed Alex to the sofa. “Sit down.”

Alex sat down, forcing his knees to bend beneath muscles that had gone rigid with apprehension. “W-what are you—?” he gasped when Illythe went to his knees between his legs and unlaced Alex’s pants, fishing out his already hardening cock. Suddenly he was in the moist, sweltering cave of the alien’s mouth. Alex’s eyes rolled back in his skull despite his attempts to deny his body’s reaction.

Fuck... was that a forked tongue? Studs? As good as it felt—and it felt incredible—Alex struggled to keep from becoming too overwhelmed to keep his wits about him. What if he had some poison stinger down his throat? What if he meant to bite with those sharp teeth of his?

Illythe paused, raising his antimony-colored eyes to Alex’s reddening face. “Relax. Enjoy it, but don’t come.”

Alex nodded vigorously then covered his mouth with his hand as a moan slipped out. The mentor’s tongue was all over him, the split working around the ferrule and the flared edge of his sensitive crown, stroking both sides and the center at once. Those studs in this tongue rubbed Alex like little fingers, and Illythe even managed to push one into the slit of his penis, popping it out like a cork a second later. He had never been so aware of his own skin to the total exclusion of the rest of his body. It was incredible, and it was dangerous as hell, and that made it all that much hotter.

“Don’t come,” Illythe reminded, whispering against his rigid cock. He rubbed Alex’s beading precome all around his flushed glans with his thumb while his other three fingers curled tightly around the straining shaft.

Alex gritted his teeth and bobbed his head, his body tensing on the cusp of orgasm.

“Mel, bring Bryant here, but don’t let him stop sucking.”

Mel and Bryant shuffled awkwardly sideways, Mel's pants pooling around his ankles in the process. Alex might have laughed, but the pressure in his groin was growing tighter, and frankly, he was a little concerned about what Illythe had in mind.

Illythe gently pushed Alex's upper body back onto the sofa. He pulled a sealed condom from under his thick sash and ripped the packaging with his sharp teeth, rolling it down over Alex's erection. Then he coaxed Mel over, with Bryant still attached like a giant lamprey. "Have a seat, Mel."

Alex choked out a cry as Mel dutifully spread his cheeks and Illythe guided Alex's cock into Mel's hole.

Had he not been so close to coming already, he might not have reacted so strongly or immediately to the well-stretched orifice sliding around him, but it was different being watched, and when he came, clinging onto Mel's arms as he gave a thrust then emptied, his eyes belonged solely to Illythe. It was a strange, surreal feeling. Having sex with someone he wasn't particularly attracted to, and didn't necessarily like, while the most beautiful man he'd ever seen watched stoically a few feet away. Alex didn't even notice when Mel came—half of it down Bryant's throat and the rest in his face. He didn't notice anything but those cold, silver eyes; laying him out, separating him piece by piece, and examining his soul.

Chapter Six

After being allowed a few moments to recover from the bizarre, unanticipated three-way, Illythe explained to them the rules of Willow House.

“You have each been given a private room. This is your room, not one where you will entertain guests. You three may be asked to entertain some clients simultaneously, you may be required to perform as a group, a duo, or individually. It is forbidden to meet with guests outside of the registry, or with those who are registered, but beyond an appointed time. You are here to make money for the house which will, in turn, see to your needs. If you feel your needs require clandestine meetings or love-affairs, you will soon learn that feelings have no place here, and neither do you.”

Illythe began pacing slowly; letting loose, and then coiling the whip once more in his hand. It appeared to Alex as though he was making a clear effort to avoid eye contact, which allowed Alex to stare at him more intently. Aside from his pretty face, it was difficult to determine much more than his height given the flowing, layered garments he wore. Although they suited him to a degree, Alex couldn't help but wonder if Illythe wore them to create an artificial sense of softness and fragility—something by which other people could underestimate him. It had obviously worked in Bryant's case.

“Sir? Mentor Illythe? What happens when someone is sent away from the house?” Alex asked.

Illythe focused his gaze squarely on him. “If you obey the rules, you needn't concern yourself.”

Alex offered a terse nod. He had to assume that to disobey to the point of being sent away meant death, but to keep asking questions might raise suspicions. As dumb as they seemed, Mel and Bryant apparently knew when to remain silent. Alex decided it was better to follow their lead in this case.

Illythe went on, listing off the house rules.

“Never kiss a client on the mouth. Many of these species reserve such things for pair-bonding. It is sacred, and an insult to their culture to be kissed by anyone who is not a mate.”

Alex again caught Illythe's eyes. It was difficult to know what those furtive looks meant. Perhaps the mentor was testing him? Alex worried that maybe his

lack of an initially eager performance with Bryant and Mel had made Illythe suspicious. But really, even prostitutes could be a little bit discerning in their tastes, right?

The mentor continued, “You will be expected to rest and take care of your bodies. Food provided is meant to keep your human bodies healthy and fit. You will visit the gymnasium here four times a week for an hour each morning at nine, unless special circumstances prevail. Two days a week you may have personal time—that is, you won’t be serving clients, though you will always be subject to the rules and whims of the house. Physical contact between any workers that is not done for the benefit of a client is prohibited, as is masturbating without being instructed to do so. There will be punishment for infractions. Any questions?”

“W-what about y-you, M-M-Mentor?” Mel asked him.

Illythe stopped his pacing and offered his attention to Mel. “What about me?”

“W-will we be h-having s-s-sex with you?”

Illythe’s eyes traveled past each man’s face, lingering on none of them. “I touch you to teach only. The house rules apply.” Illythe turned away from the small group.

“Teach? What sorts of things will you be teaching us?” Bryant finally asked, having come down a few notches in attitude—at least temporarily.

Illythe stopped a few feet from the open doorway, but he did not turn. “Whatever I feel you need to learn, Bryant. It’s nearly dinnertime. Please go to the dining room and wait for me when you are finished eating.”

“A-all of us, M-Mentor I-ill-Illythe?” Mel stammered.

“All of you,” Illythe confirmed, then left them in the room.

Bryant leaned closer to Alex, his breath and hair still smelled like semen, and his lips brushed unwelcome against Alex’s ear. “I still owe you a fuck up the ass, Alley-cat.”

So much for a change of attitude. Alex shouldered him away. “In your dreams.” He moved to put some distance between them, glaring at the maniacally grinning man.

“I’ll bet you’ll be dreaming about that alien—he give you a good suck, kitty?”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Yes, he gave me an incredible suck. Maybe you should pay more attention next time—I’m sure you could use some technique.” Me-ow. *Christ*, he was beginning to sound like those street corner drama boys. It was a great persona for his undercover status, but he wanted to take himself outside and smack the shit out of his own head. He left before Bryant decided the same thing.

After dinner, Illythe came to collect them to start their “training”. He took them back to the room they had been in earlier and lined them up—stripped down to the most minimal form of underwear that could be called such. Alex had once gone undercover as a stripper and had felt less exposed.

Illythe was pacing slowly, smoking from a long, thin pipe. The smoke that came out was purple, and intoxicating to humans, judging by the way his head was starting to float. Illythe showed no obvious effects, but then, he wasn’t human.

“Willow House is the only house that the Scion honors regularly, and part of this honor is that one of you may be chosen to service him.”

So, it seemed the Scion was an individual, and getting to see him could be as easy as being the best fuck. *That* Alex could manage. Once he got inside, however, it was anyone’s guess what he’d encounter. Judging by the number of house guards, likely all Alex could do would be to pray there was a way to get out a signal for backup.

When the time came to take the Scion down, Illythe would fall as well. It seemed a shame, because he truly was lovely, but his involvement made it likely that his heart was as black as his skin. If Illythe was in charge of the most exclusive house, then it was unlikely he was in a position of innocent bystander in any way. He ran the house, chose the workers, and served the Scion.

Alex would have to be careful around him, while at the same time doing his best to impress Illythe, so that he could be the one chosen to serve the Scion.

This new information sounded like just what Alex was looking for. Unfortunately, his brain was turning to mush, and Illythe was slowly evolving into lights and tracers as Alex began to hallucinate.

“You will, in the meantime, service others. Some may be more difficult to accommodate with your human bodies. You will be prepared.”

“How?” Alex heard the voice and it took him a moment to realize it was his own.

“By whatever means necessary, Alex. If you are too tight, you will be stretched. If you are too resistant, you will be made compliant through drugs or punishment. Does that sound unreasonable?”

Hell yes. It was unreasonable, but not entirely unexpected. Working the sex crimes detail had put Alex in some very dangerous and compromising situations, but never so far from backup. This was the first time he hadn't had a direct link to the OFS, and the first time he'd been taken off-world.

It was then that Alex realized Illythe was right in front of him. Illythe placed his hand under Alex's chin, tipping it up to peer down into his face. “How do you feel, Alex?”

“S-strange.” It was the only word Alex could come up with, and still it had been a struggle to get it out. He could feel his brain and body trying to play catch-up as sensations moved faster than he could register them.

“This is a very special intoxicant. In small doses, you'll find that it numbs you just enough that pain and pleasure have no edge.”

Alex felt pressure on his lower lip, then a trickle down his chin. He dropped his head as something dripped down and left a spot on his thigh. Blood.

Illythe again lifted Alex's chin and leaned close, flicking his tongue over Alex's bloody lip. It was like being touched through cotton batting; the sensation was neither pleasurable nor painful, and was forgotten immediately after.

“Fuck it. I don't like this,” came Bryant's voice from somewhere in the periphery, and Illythe moved away from Alex.

Alex forced his head to turn in that direction, watching and waiting with less trepidation than was warranted as Illythe closed in on Bryant.

“What you like is of no concern and should present no consequence to our guests,” Illythe said. His voice changed in neither pitch nor volume. He took a deep draw of his pipe and exhaled it directly into Bryant's face.

Bryant coughed, and his coughing made him wobble until he lost his balance and landed on his ass on the rug. Before he could move, Illythe pressed his foot against Bryant's genitals, pinning him in place like an insect. Bryant began to giggle and cry at the same time.

“This intoxicant becomes stronger the longer and more directly one is exposed,” Illythe explained. He hadn’t let Bryant up yet. “Greater exposure tends to have the opposite effect on some people. They feel pleasure and pain acutely, but cannot tell the difference.”

Bryant was sobbing now. His face was a mess of snot and tears, yet he hiccupped out the occasional laugh. Watching it was making Alex sick, even if Illythe felt that Bryant needed to learn a lesson.

“Stop it,” Alex said.

Illythe turned his face towards him, raising a slender white eyebrow.

“He doesn’t deserve that,” Alex added, as if it was something Illythe didn’t already know.

“And what would you suggest, Alex?” Illythe finally released Bryant from beneath his foot and approached Alex.

Christ, he was tall, and even though he was thin, Alex suspected that Illythe would have little trouble snapping him in two.

“M-make him s-s-suck my cock!” Mel stammered almost gleefully.

Illythe didn’t behave as if he’d heard Mel as he continued to look down at Alex.

Alex was fighting the urge to fidget; worried he might have overstepped an invisible boundary.

“Mel, take Bryant back to his room, leave him there, then return to your own room,” Illythe instructed without looking away.

A little squeak slipped from Mel that might have been a protest, but he did as Illythe had instructed, nevertheless.

Bryant had stopped blubbering, but his eyes were glassy and he seemed dazed as Mel helped him to his feet. They staggered together out of the room. Alex watched them go just to keep from meeting those disapproving silver eyes in front of him.

When they had gone, Alex felt Illythe’s cool hand under his chin again, bidding him to look up. His gaze started at those plum-tinted lips, then up to the narrow nose, and finally to the large, slanted eyes that reflected Alex’s own face back at him like twin mirrors.

“You protect him, Alex. Why, I wonder?”

Just about the time Alex had decided the question was not rhetorical and opened his mouth to answer, Illythe continued.

“You do not like him. You owe him nothing... but these are not things which you do not already know.” He paced slightly, then turned on his heel and considered Alex for several moments as he sucked on his long pipe.

Finally, he came forward, and although Alex knew he'd exhale the intoxicating purple smoke into his face, he was curious to see what Illythe had planned for him, so he didn't hold his breath. If Illythe was going to remove any of them from the house, Alex was certain that Bryant would be the first one to go.

Illythe leaned very close to him, their lips so close that a tremble would move them into a kiss. He parted his lips just enough to let the smoke billow from between them, and Alex breathed it in.

It took on a fragrance like lavender, and made Alex's head fill up with cotton, while at the same time his hair stood on end—just the movement of air in the room was enough to wake up every nerve on his skin.

“Large doses,” Illythe was saying from somewhere deep in Alex's foggy brain, “cause the lack of sensation to become painful...”

Alex closed his eyes as something gentle slipped over his head, then he felt his arms being caressed all the way to his elbows, and a moment later, the same with his legs. And then he was surrounded by touch—lifted, cradled, and caressed over nearly every inch of his skin.

More smoke worked its way into his system, pillowing his mind in lavender-scented bliss.

“...Sensory deprivation can weaken even the most stubborn mind.”

Something tickled at Alex's lips and he opened his mouth, only to have it filled with a rubber ball-gag. Alarm registered too late. Muffling earphones blocked out any sound but that of his beating heart, and suddenly, he couldn't even feel the floor beneath his feet.

Illythe sat on the sofa, smoking his pipe, and watched the human twist and struggle as he dangled from a cable a few feet above the rug. The room was becoming blanketed in a lavender haze, and Illythe realized that the drug was actually beginning to affect him as well.

The Scion didn't like Illythe to be drugged when he came for a visit; he wanted Illythe to feel every inch of him crawling around inside.

Illythe shuddered. Sometimes there was physical pleasure, or once had been. As Illythe had grown older, his body had betrayed him and he'd begun to look forward to the touch beyond the pain, or sometimes, even the pain itself was enough. But these days, he was mostly numb to his own suffering. He envied the humans for their fear and passion. He envied them for their imminent death.

This one—Alex—was exquisite in his contortions. Illythe had wrapped him in a material that became as tight as a second skin, binding him in a clear, shiny trap that looked like oil against Alex's flesh. His muscles flexed and rolled as he fought his imprisonment. The need for touch would soon become excruciating for him.

Illythe stood and moved slowly around the human art object. Alex was beautiful, but he still had too much power. It would cause him to suffer when the Scion requested his body. Bryant pretended to have power by speaking in a manner he believed sounded brave, Mel's only power was to rise above those who had fallen ahead of him, but Alex...

Illythe held up his palm and hovered it barely an inch above the surface of Alex's heaving, sweating chest. No, it would take far more to break him than this. Even after days, Illythe suspected that Alex would maintain the will to fight. He would have to spend more time ensuring that Alex's spirit was gone before the Scion came to take him.

Illythe gasped, surprised when Alex arched his neck, straining towards the heat of Illythe's hand above his chest. When Illythe moved it down lower over Alex's belly, he again responded. His body bowed, yet despite the physical effort, Alex had begun to relax. *So sensitive*. When Illythe pulled his hand away, after a few moments, Alex whimpered and began to struggle anew.

It seemed a shame to damage this, to take this passion away.

Illythe had been held in a similar trap many times over the years. At first, he fought with the strength and fury of his warrior's blood... so the Scion bled him until he was nearly empty, then caressed and soothed him as his body slowly refilled. Once or twice—maybe even a dozen times of this wouldn't have broken him had he not already been so badly fractured.

Illythe swallowed back his rising nausea. The intoxication of the pipe-smoke was making him feel those needs again. Not purely sexual, although that

was almost always the outcome. No, he needed to be held; to feel cherished and... *safe*. Illythe coughed out a puff of smoke as a laugh escaped him. Safety in the many arms of the monster who'd taken his family—his very soul—was his ironic reality.

It didn't matter anymore—that was what Illythe struggled to believe. Once broken, he'd been rebuilt *by* and *for* the Scion, and every part would only ever belong to him. The Scion was his everything, and this was the only comfort Illythe would ever know.

Alex's brain was still foggy when he felt the sensation of the rug beneath his feet. The contact was both blissful and painful from his body's need to be touched.

As soon as he was freed, his eyes focused on the pitch-skinned angel who'd saved him, and he began to whimper in gratitude, his mind still held in the remnants of the drug's twisted embrace.

"Thank you..." Alex pressed himself into the angel's narrow, strong body and kissed those soft, violet lips, clutching at Illythe's snowy hair. For one nearly imperceptible moment, Alex felt Illythe yield to the contact. That velvet mouth slid against his, Illythe's fingers splayed wide and curled into Alex's chest, and he sighed.

A heartbeat later, Illythe quickly drew back and smacked Alex's face, shoving him away.

Alex stumbled and dropped onto his rear end, his body realizing its overexertion ahead of his brain. When he squinted up at Illythe, he saw something that resembled terror in that normally expressionless face and it made his own heart catch in his throat.

"I'll forgive you that." Illythe's voice trembled, and he squeezed his fist tightly against his chest, as if trying to keep something contained. He then turned and strode quickly from the room, leaving Alex sitting dumbfounded on the rug.

Illythe swayed, leaning against the doorframe of his room, his hand pressed firmly over his mouth as nausea welled up within him.

It hadn't hit him until now—the reason he'd found Alex so captivating.

Neil.

Alex looked—he practically *tasted* like Neil.

“Fine,” Illythe told a curious guard pre-emptively, as the Brecchian samurai peered around the corner.

But Illythe wasn't fine.

He stumbled into his room, sliding the door closed behind him, and dropped down onto his small sofa as his knees gave out beneath him. *No. Not again.* He couldn't go through it ever, ever, ever again.

Illythe squeezed his eyes shut tightly, biting his lip and covering his face to quiet the sobs escaping him. The Scion would know—probably already knew before Illythe had put it together, and he would use this to test Illythe.

Had the Scion specifically sought out this man to ensure Illythe would choose him? It was more than in the realm of possibility. The Scion knew Illythe down to the cellular level. He knew him better than Illythe knew himself, because the Scion had spent so much time dissecting and reconstructing him.

Through tears, Illythe locked his gaze on a camera and understood that the Scion was looking back.

“Are you happy now?” Illythe muttered under his breath.

The Scion enjoyed watching him cry. The monster used to masturbate to it when Illythe had been a child. But over the years, Illythe had become desensitized to the pain and cruelty. He hadn't provided this form of emotional pornography for the Scion again until Neil. After that, the Scion had been careful not to overindulge this trigger, in order to keep it fresh, though deep in his most nightmarish imaginings, Illythe had worried that at any time the Scion would again seek this form of titillation.

Illythe was determined not to let his tears be the vehicle for the Scion's arousal. The only way around that was not to let Alex discover those parts of Illythe that Neil had found and made raw.

It would undoubtedly be easier said than done.

Chapter Seven

Over the course of the next several days, it became obvious that the humans at Willow House were expected to contribute to the house more like servants than prisoners. They did daily chores that included laundry and maintaining the cleanliness of the rooms where guests were entertained. They also cleaned the common areas, as well as took turns cooking meals at least three times a week.

The remainder of their time was spent watching video feeds about the sexual customs and anatomy of some of the species they might encounter, learning how to mix and serve drinks, how to converse appropriately, and other things that reinforced that this was an exclusive house of pleasure.

The most interesting thing Alex learned in this regard was that there were distinct personality traits each man was expected to cultivate. Mel was taught to be demure, submissive, and coy in flirtations. Bryant remained big, dumb, and slightly more dominant. Alex, on the other hand, spent the most time learning how to charm and seduce like a gentleman. From the way he was to present himself, it seemed as though the brothel's understanding of what this meant came from very old Earth films.

It would make sense. Outside of Federation territory, humans and their culture were largely unavailable. However, older forms of entertainment sometimes made it off-world and so bootlegged Cary Grant films might be the only educational material many species had.

Were it not for the fact that what was happening here was illegal in the eyes of Federation Allied Law, Alex might have thought that the kidnapped prostitutes had life much better here than on the streets. But the reality remained that humans were taken against their will and never heard from again.

Alex and the other men had not had any physical contact with guests yet, although several came by throughout different times of the day—never at the same time—and used Willow House as a sort of speakeasy.

From the few glimpses Alex had caught of the patrons, none of them were human, and they all arrived with an entourage, just as would be expected when organized crime was involved. He didn't believe that Illythe ever entertained the clients beyond serving them drinks, and while he carried on conversations, he never really seemed to be a part of them. Alex filed this information in the back of his mind. Any time he'd been involved undercover in a brothel

situation, the managers were often just as much for sale as their staff. And even when they weren't, they gave the illusion of seduction.

The communication between Illythe and the three humans in his care beyond the few hours he came to teach was minimal. He spoke only when it was necessary to guide them, and Alex might have accepted it in Illythe's role of mentor, had it not been for the furtive looks aimed his way when they did meet, and the knowledge that *something* had happened between them.

While Alex had chalked their brief encounter up to the drugs and his physical attraction to the dark-skinned alien, Illythe was acting as if he was much more affected by the situation. It was making Alex curious as to why. Was it that Illythe just found him that much more attractive than Bryant or Mel?

Illythe seemed to have little problem guiding those two through some physical pose or brief punishment—a smack on the hand or shoulder, for instance—and keeping it clinical in nature. But with Alex he seemed hesitant, and when he did touch him, his hands lingered, his lips parted, and his body moved unnecessarily close, only to draw back and become rigid a moment later.

It made sense that favoritism would be prohibited if it interfered with a manager's ability to run the business. With such a small number of workers, it wouldn't do to want to keep one to himself. At the same time, however, the manager shouldn't be deprived to the point of coveting a whore. From Illythe's reaction, it was clear to Alex that their kiss had been prohibited, yet it had been something that Illythe had responded to like a parched man to water, and he apparently harbored a continued thirst for Alex.

Maybe there was another angle; something that Alex could exploit in order to get the information he needed to take the Scion down. Provided that the mystery of this dark angel didn't captivate him beyond the scope of duty.

It was just before dinner one evening when Alex rounded the corner and saw Mentor Illythe talking with three men. At first Alex thought they were human, then he realized they were Jowan, and they were dressed in military uniforms.

A raid? Some kind of official inspection? And then he heard one of them laugh—something loud, deliberately refined—and considered that they might

be customers. He tried to move past the open parlor, but one of the uniformed men noticed him and called out.

“Illythe, is that one of your new boys?”

Illythe was stooped over, pouring from a jug of wine into the Jowan's glass. He looked over his shoulder at Alex, a hostess' smile painted on his face.

“Yes, that is Alex, one of Willow House's newest *kagema*. My apologies. He's not quite ready to be entertaining customers yet, gentlemen.”

“Come here, Alex,” the Jowan with the wine glass said, gesturing to Alex like he was a child.

Alex flashed a glance at Illythe, who offered him a discreet nod. He approached the alien, careful to add just enough apprehension to his gait to be convincing. When he got closer to the Jowan, Alex noted that his uniform had considerably more *garnish* than the others. So this one was in charge, and obviously held enough sway that Illythe hadn't rejected his request outright.

The Jowan did not rise from his comfortable chair. He placed his hands on Alex's hips, the hooded, dog-brown eyes scrutinizing him. Alex always thought of Jowan eyes as a dog's eyes. They were nearly round and filled with more iris than anything, and they had a look to them that made Jowan seem much more submissive than they were. Their military, such as it was, was made up of mercenaries and individuals who fought to pay off loans made to them by their government. Anyone who was fooled by their appearance would suffer their true nature.

The Jowan's hand strayed to Alex's thigh—framing, but not touching—Alex's genitals. The officer made a throaty hum before turning him around. Alex gritted his teeth when he squeezed his buttocks. “I want his first appointment, Illythe. When will that be?”

Alex saw Illythe's eyelids flutter as his smile faded for a heartbeat, then he carefully put it back together.

“Tomorrow.”

“Then make me his only appointment for the entire day—I'm sure you can train him up right by tomorrow evening, Illythe?”

One corner of Illythe's full mouth tilted down, and Alex saw the telltale flex of his jaw as he gritted his teeth.

“Of course, Admiral Kah. And as is customary, I will be present. Now if you'll please excuse Alex, he must get down to the dining room for dinner.”

Admiral Kah patted Alex on the hip, and Alex willed his legs to propel him forward and out of the room. The sound of the men laughing as they shared a joke between them was muffled by his heart pounding in his ears as Alex moved on autopilot towards the general direction of the dining room.

There was no way he could say no or feign sudden illness; he was too new for that and a sick whore was an unprofitable one. While Alex had never said no to sex in the course of an assignment—and rarely said no otherwise—the thought of having sex with the Jowan was causing him considerable anxiety. By the same token, however, the thought of Illythe there and watching was weirdly arousing. *Great. More kink rising to the surface.*

When he arrived for dinner, Mel and Bryant were already there; their conversation coming to an abrupt end as they noticed him in the open doorway. Alex ignored them and sat down at the table with them as the cook was setting out the last of the dishes.

The food looked and smelled appetizing, although Alex wasn't certain what it was or if it actually had an Earth equivalent. Once he started eating, he suspected it tasted good, but he could barely taste a morsel, and if Bryant and Mel were speaking to him, he couldn't hear a word. He was trying too hard to wrap his head around this entire situation, and more than that, figure out Illythe's role in it all.

“You gonna eat that, kitty?”

Alex hadn't realized that he'd stopped picking at his food until Bryant leaned over, jabbing his finger at the protein patty on his plate.

“It's yours.” Alex sighed, and scooted his chair back from the table.

Chapter Eight

After dinner and washing the dishes, Alex went to his room. He lay on his back in bed, staring up at the pristine, gray ceiling, as he tried to sort through what he knew of the case already. He knew that this prostitution ring targeted humans, and that the perpetrators were assisted by humans. He knew that the center of the skin-trade was in the Pleasure District of the Omanai Space Station in the Biers Quadrant, a few clicks from the edge of allied space. He knew that Illythe managed the top house, but Illythe was not at the top of the organization—it was an individual called the Scion.

Despite all that Alex knew, what he had yet to learn assured him that this investigation was far from over. He just wasn't certain he wanted to finish it. Nothing about this case had gone without a hitch, and now he was finding himself more interested in what was essentially an accessory to the crime than the actual victims. So far, it seemed, there was nothing very negative about this situation. For all Alex knew, the kidnapped men had decided they were better off and just never wanted to return to a life on the streets back home.

This wasn't the first time the OFS had tried to break up this prostitution ring. Several years ago another field agent, Detective Neil Bradshaw, had infiltrated this group when they were using a hotel on the Verenza space station. Had Neil Bradshaw encountered Illythe? Alex wondered just how deeply Bradshaw had gotten into this investigation before he'd vanished. Had he had sex with customers? With Illythe?

Alex hadn't been able to get much information about Bradshaw's investigation. His CO had said that Bradshaw went missing in the line of duty and reiterated that this mission would put Alex into a very dangerous situation.

Maybe Alex's predecessor on the case had also found a better future elsewhere. As far as Alex was concerned, he himself had left nothing behind that he would miss.

There was a light knock on the door before the panel slid open and Illythe's obsidian face appeared. His long, white hair made a shimmering cowl around his head.

"I guessed you might still be awake."

Alex looked up at the clock and saw that three hours had passed since he'd

come to his room. He leaned up on his elbows as Illythe came in, sliding the door closed behind him.

He remembered then that he had seen Illythe with his hair down only one other time; the night Illythe had rescued him from Bryant's mauling in the wrestling ring. Alex had thought then that he was a beautiful demon, or the angel of death come to take his soul. Perhaps he was both.

"I brought you something to help you sleep." Illythe turned over his hand and showed Alex a Somnus patch.

That would be a good idea; it wasn't illegal, and the hangover the next day was minimal.

"What? No wine?" Alex smirked and accepted the patch, then he became more serious. "Mentor Illythe, I'm sorry. It's been a while since I've had sex with strangers... I was trying to get out of the lifestyle." It wasn't a lie; Illythe just didn't know what lifestyle Alex was talking about.

"Yes, I assumed as much." Illythe looked like he wanted to say more, but refrained.

Alex shrugged, and then asked innocently, "What about you? How did you end up here?"

He could practically see the iron gates slam closed behind Illythe's eyes.

Yes, he'd been pushing his luck with that one, and he was surprised when he got any answer at all.

"It's a step up for me." Illythe was wearing that same smile that could have been serene or hopeless, depending on who was looking.

Alex was looking, and noticed how Illythe's gaze would not focus on his.

If the Scion trusted Illythe enough to manage his human assets, there might be a lot more to their relationship than just business. Perhaps Illythe had once been an earner at the house and he'd worked his way up the ladder somehow. He *had* said it was a step up.

"Oh," Alex said. It was all he could say, considering the situation.

On a professional level, the information Illythe might offer him likely was not at all crucial to the investigation, but Alex didn't care. He wanted to know about Illythe on a personal level, but at this point, he understood that tonight Illythe had said all that he would about the matter.

Illythe finally looked at him again with his mercury-colored eyes. "After breakfast tomorrow, come to the north hall. We'll spend some time learning about the admiral. Sleep well, Alex."

Alex watched Illythe drift from his room and slide the door silently closed behind him.

Maybe Alex was reading a little too much into things, but he believed that Illythe treated him differently than he treated Mel and Bryant. He wasn't certain if that was a good thing, a bad thing, or just a thing.

Sighing, Alex temporarily set the sleeping aid aside and got up out of the bed to undress. He folded the clothing neatly and set it on top of the small chest of drawers, glancing at his reflection in the square mirror above it. He looked at his face for the first time in what felt like ages, and wasn't certain he liked what he saw staring back at him.

He was losing sight of the mission and where he fit into it all. None of this felt like justice.

Pulling open the top drawer, Alex found some undershorts and slipped them on, then returned to the bed and peeled the woven Somnus patch from its clear plastic backing, exposing the adhesive. He pressed it to the side of his neck, then laid back in his bed, his gaze returning to the ceiling until he finally fell asleep.

In the morning, Alex hurried through breakfast, hoping to avoid spending so much time with Bryant and Mel, but it was not to be.

He nearly spit out his mouthful of food when Bryant came in and elbowed him in the back.

"Hey, Alley-cat, you in some kind of rush?"

"H-h-he's m-meeting with Mentor Illythe," Mel stuttered.

"And good morning to each of you as well." Alex was seriously not in the mood for this. He glared at Mel, wondering how he'd found out. Either he'd been told by Illythe or he'd been eavesdropping last night. If Alex was a gambling man, he'd bet everything he had on the latter.

He was liking Mel less and less. The man reminded him of a rodent—something small and sneaky with a rabid bite. He certainly had cozied up to Bryant, who had terrified him a few days earlier, and Alex didn't think the forced blow job he'd received had turned Mel's fear to love just like that.

Bryant, on the other hand, was an easy read. Big, dumb, and violent. He wouldn't be surprised to see him try to walk out at some point. It wouldn't be pretty.

Bryant slid into the chair beside him, so close that when he rested his forearm on the table, the dark hairs brushed against Alex's knuckle.

Alex gritted his teeth, tightening his grip on his beverage glass, despite his instinct to recoil.

Bryant was grinning again; his big teeth like a wall hiding his true intentions, and that's why Alex kept focus on his eyes, without looking directly enough to provoke a challenge.

"Meeting Mentor Illythe, huh? You got something for that black and white freak? He suck your cock good?"

Alex fought the twinge of memory that threatened to germinate at his crotch. There were a million possible responses to Bryant's questions—most of which would provoke fists and a delay in meeting Illythe, so Alex answered them all as simply as possible.

"Yes."

That seemed to stump Bryant, and allowed Alex to get up and walk out of the dining room before the big man could finish turning it over in his muscle-bound brain.

Mentor Illythe was waiting in the room for him when Alex arrived. He was wearing a simpler style of robe; gray, but with the same exotic cut as his kimono. His long white hair was pulled into a topknot, the remainder spilling down around his waist. Alex felt something stirring in his chest and groin when Illythe turned his silver eyes to him. *No... not good.* Instead of making things less interesting, the brevity of their interactions had increased Alex's fascination with the mentor.

"Close the door, Alex."

Alex slid the paneled door closed, then turned to face Illythe again.

"Come," Illythe said as he gestured.

Alex hadn't realized he'd been frozen in place, awaiting such a command. He moved towards Illythe, who turned and picked something up off of a red lacquered cabinet behind him. Alex looked down at the items he held in either hand.

“A cock ring and a condom?” Alex raised an eyebrow.

“Although he is a powerful leader in the field, Admiral Kah is a bottom in the bedroom.”

“And you’re so sure I am a top?”

A little smile quirked one corner of Illythe’s mouth. Alex felt his heart stutter at the rare genuineness of it.

“You don’t remember? I was the one who felt you up before the match.”

“I was sort of trying to forget a lot of that experience,” Alex admitted with a wry grin.

“Hm,” Illythe said, very nearly smiling. Then a haze crossed over his expression, and what little hint of levity Alex had seen was gone once more. Illythe placed the items in Alex’s hands, his eyes downcast.

“The core body temperature of a Jowan is roughly ten degrees less than that of a human. Sexual relations with them can be... unpleasant.”

“That’s the reason for the cock ring.” Alex pinched the clear plastic ring between his fingers.

Illythe nodded. “And the condom contains a chemical that will keep you a bit warmer.”

Alex frowned, looking down at the little blue cellophane square. “It’s not going to burn, is it?”

“No.” Illythe moved and sat on the sofa, giving Alex a flash of bare thigh when the robe fell open. Illythe didn’t seem to notice, or otherwise didn’t care.

“Tell me about yourself, Alex,” he said conversationally.

Alex chuckled. “Is this a job interview? I thought I already had the job.” His eyes followed the length of smooth ebony skin. He’d never seen flesh that color—he’d met a lot of different species, but never one like Illythe. What was he, anyway?

Illythe said nothing, his patience was plain on his serene face, yet Alex remembered how patient he’d looked before delivering a fist to Bryant’s gut.

Alex worried his lower lip, trying to arrange his thoughts to answer Illythe’s request. Fortunately, the truth of his childhood was as extraordinary as any lie and easier to remember.

“Well, I didn’t start life on the street, and it wasn’t a trauma that sent me to it... just rebellion and stupidity.” Alex shrugged. “My mom was a model-slash-actress... or she wanted to be. She hadn’t wanted a child and found herself pregnant after some casting party. Her agent told her that children were a hot accessory, so I was born and dumped off on whoever was on the set at the time.” It was nothing like the stories he’d usually heard from sex workers, which in a way, probably made it a little more believable as to the reason why he might have become one.

Illythe was silent while he listened to Alex’s story. Alex felt the desire to hear his voice; to learn something more about him. “May I ask a question, Mentor Illythe?” Alex focused on the items he still held in his hands, and went on before Illythe gave consent. “Do you ever service the customers?”

The answer was simple and direct. “Never.”

There was some edge to Illythe’s tone that made Alex think there was a little more to it than that.

There were a few moments of silence, during which Alex could hear the faint rumble of a large ship coming in for a landing. They must be situated fairly near to the docks; it would make sense. Public figures would want to keep these kinds of things private, and the key to that was getting from their transport vessels to Willow House as quickly and discreetly as possible. That meant communications kiosks were nearby. Figuring out how to reach them, however, would be another matter.

“I’m certain that I can trust you to be discreet, yes?” At Alex’s nod, Illythe went on, “All of our clients at Willow House are very important people. Beyond that, some of these people are enemies of one another. It would do no good to have secrets that are whispered in the bedroom shared between beds.”

Alex’s brain was ticking away with this new information. Secrets like that would put the leader of this operation at a very big advantage. It was more than likely that everything that went on in those rooms was recorded, and the man who kept that information could produce it at any time.

“Alex,” Illythe said softly, bringing Alex’s mind back to the current situation.

“Yes, Mentor Illythe?”

“We’re going to role-play now so you know what to expect of the admiral. You will be the admiral. Remember what I do, as you shall repeat it. Hands and knees.”

“I—what?” Illythe had given the command so casually that Alex thought he hadn't heard him right.

Illythe sat up, straightening his spine, and placed his hands, palms down, on his thighs. “Crawl to me.”

Alex turned his head, glancing back at the door he knew was closed, if only to look away from Illythe's smoldering gaze. He felt his body heating from the center; the warmth spreading through his chest, sideways along his ribs, and down to his groin.

“Why do I have to be the admiral?” Alex tried to sound disappointed, though was anything but.

Again, that patience, and Illythe spoke softly to him as one might a confused child. “You need to try and understand what he is seeing and feeling to a degree, so you can understand and offer him the respect he deserves.”

That last bit was doubtful. If an admiral was coming here to play out fantasies he couldn't fulfill elsewhere, it meant that he was very likely in the Scion's pocket. It was pretty difficult to respect anyone who paid to have an illegal, captive prostitute forced into pleasuring them.

Alex wiped his sweaty palms on his thighs and got onto his hands and knees. After a moment, he began a slow crawl towards Illythe.

“You shouldn't be looking me in the eye,” Illythe said, his hands tensing on his thighs.

Alex dropped his eyes briefly, then deliberately focused on Illythe's silver orbs. He saw the almost imperceptible movement of Illythe's lips parting.

Alex didn't feel submissive, he felt predatory, like a big cat stalking game. The closer he got, the more he could see Illythe's body tense. He crawled between Illythe's legs, their gazes still locked, and he placed his hands on Illythe's thighs.

“Will he want to give me a blow job?” Alex asked in a voice that almost didn't seem like his own, and without waiting for a reply, he moved one hand up under the robes, gliding along Illythe's smooth inner thigh; following the rising heat to its source.

Alex barely brushed against the softer skin of Illythe's sac and the hardening flesh of his cock, when Illythe smacked him away and got up from the sofa, moving away from him. Alex knew the smack hadn't been to hurt

him. It was fear that raised Illythe's hand—just like the time before; he could see it plainly on his face.

Alex touched his cheek lightly where it barely stung. “Sorry, I thought we were role-playing.”

“You were playing the wrong role.” Illythe's tone was firm, but Alex detected a small waver to his voice.

Illythe's eyes occasionally flicked to something across the room. When Alex turned his head to see what was there, he saw nothing save for the orchids that Bryant had been contemplating the last time they were here.

“There is a camera there,” Alex murmured softly, returning his attention to Illythe. “The Scion. He's watching you, isn't he?”

Surprise widened Illythe's eyes briefly, then Illythe swallowed hard and squared his shoulders. “Always. You should continue your regular routine today. Gym, then clean yourself up. Do not worry about shaving your face too closely—the admiral seems to be captivated by your scruff.” Illythe's demeanor was back to business, but Alex could see how he shifted his weight slightly from foot to foot, obviously wanting to get out of this room and away from him. “I'll come to your chambers when it is time.”

Chapter Nine

Illythe paced in his room, trying to fight back the rising flood of panic. Alex was too much like Neil. He had the same little smirk, similar mannerisms, and if they had looked any more alike, Illythe would have thought he'd found Neil's brother. But Neil had been a cop, and Illythe prayed to the Divines that Alex was not.

In his bedroom, there were only a few small corners where Illythe could go and remain out of the cameras' lenses. The Scion even liked to watch him sleeping, and learning this had kept him awake too many nights to count.

He sat in the east corner of the room, between a red lacquer cabinet and the wall, and gripped himself between the legs, biting his lip from the tension building there. He shifted his eyes up to where he knew one of the cameras was—a little black bump on a crossbeam, confirming that he was out of range. Wrestling up the skirting on his *yukata*, he held it in his teeth and gripped his swollen cock. He couldn't remember the last time he'd touched himself when it wasn't by the Scion's direction, but then he hadn't met anyone who'd stirred him since Neil, and he'd believed—until now—he never would.

Illythe knew that Alex's touch had been deliberate, and he suspected if he'd let him, Alex would have wrapped his hot mouth around him and sucked him to orgasm.

Illythe gripped his cock harder as he imagined Alex bending him over the sofa, lifting his robes and fucking him with long, smooth strokes. He imagined those human hands wrapping around his chest and tugging at the rings in his nipples. Alex would pull on his hair and arch his neck for a kiss that would be wet and hot and uncomfortably executed, but so completely erotic that none of that would matter.

He muffled his sounds of pleasure against the fabric in his mouth, and was careful to catch every drop of ejaculate with his hand. But when he came, he had a flash of Neil's face. It drew the final pulses of orgasm out of him painfully, leaving him feeling raw and ashamed of himself. *He should have more control than this.*

Releasing the fabric from between his teeth, he realized he had bitten through and the panic nearly started anew. *But this was casual attire, nothing the customers would ever see, and nothing the Scion would even notice.*

With his free hand, Illythe felt around underneath the cabinet until he found the box of wipes he'd stashed there, and he used one to clean the cooling ejaculate off of his hand. The Scion likely wouldn't have punished him for touching himself without permission, but old scars never fully healed, and Illythe was trying hard to keep from earning any more.

He hadn't realized he'd been crying until a few teardrops fell onto his lap, darkening the gray material to charcoal. What a pathetic creature he was... aching for the love of a dead man, and beginning to desire another attractive human. *Would he never learn?*

Neil had been gone for almost three years now. Since that time, only a handful of humans had come through Willow House—six in total—and all had moved on; either bought out by wealthy patrons, or dead from servicing the Scion. Some toys the Scion enjoyed breaking. Rarely, one of the humans would survive his ordeal, but he would have to be put down. They were always broken beyond all repair, regardless of technology; if not physically, then mentally so.

Illythe did not want that to happen to Alex. Hair as black as Illythe's skin, fair complected, with eyes as blue as an Earthen summer sky. He had beautiful lips as well—not too thin, and not so plump that they looked artificially swollen. He wanted Alex—wanted to keep him safe, which meant he'd have to think of a way to get him off of Omanai.

Illythe bit his tongue until he tasted blood. He did not want to desire another human the way he'd desired Neil. It was too dangerous for both of them. And yet, he could not deny his mind and body's reaction to Alex.

Illythe smoothed down his robes, then took a deep breath before rising. He moved around carefully to remain out of view of the cameras for as long as possible before stepping back into their field of vision. The Scion never asked about Illythe's strange disappearances, if, in fact, he even noticed. Illythe knew the Scion had more important things to do than watching him all day and night; at least he had when Illythe was chained to his chair.

Illythe shuddered. Those memories were best left unstirred, right along with those of Neil.

The gym was below the main level. Alex was alone down here now, uncertain of where Bryant and Mel were, but unconcerned as long as they stayed away from him.

He avoided turning on the overhead lights, preferring the false daylight leaking in through the panes of the high windows, to the artificial brightness.

He pulled off his shirt.

After a couple of weeks without regular eating or working out, his body was starting to feel soft—well, not all of it. *What the hell...* He'd hoped that he might have been able to seduce Illythe, but again, Illythe had pushed him away. Was he loyal to the leader of this ring, or was he terrified? Alex suspected he knew the answer.

Alex worked his muscles until they were aching, and then found the entrance to a large shower room. There were towels folded in a shelving unit and he grabbed one before heading in.

Inside, he found Bryant and Mel, screwing in one of the shower stalls, and considering that Mel was on top, riding Bryant, Alex had every reason to believe it was consensual.

"There are cameras around, you know," Alex said casually, as he turned on the spray of a nearby shower and pumped some lather from the dispenser into his hand.

"F-fuck!" Mel squeaked, but didn't get off of Bryant, who was pinning his hips in place.

"Wait—I'm almost—!" Bryant's body tensed and his eyes rolled back as he came. Judging by the glaze on Bryant's chest, Mel already had. As soon as Bryant was finished, Mel jumped off of him and turned on the shower.

"Seriously? No condom?" Alex frowned at Bryant as he got up off the tiled floor.

"Like it matters if we're clean. Probably die from some fucking alien germs," Bryant grumbled, and shouldered Mel out of the way so he could lather up.

"Hey!" Mel protested. He moved into Alex's stall. "Y-you'll l-let me s-share, right?" He gave Alex a coy smile and brushed up against him like a cat begging for cream. He'd already had more than enough in Alex's estimation.

Alex rinsed off quickly and moved aside. "I'm done. It's all yours." He took his towel from the tiled ledge and dried off as he headed out of the shower room.

Mel made him uncomfortable. He was having a difficult time figuring out Mel's motivations. Maybe it was just habit—maybe he'd had a pimp on the street or had tried to find some safety with men who looked like they could protect him. Regardless, Alex didn't trust either man, but of the two, he trusted Mel less.

Alex swore softly, realizing that he'd forgotten to bring a change of clothing, so he wrapped the towel around his waist and left to head back to his room. Considering the fact that this was a brothel, the sight of a half-naked man was probably nothing out of the ordinary.

As he rounded the corner of an unfamiliar hallway, he nearly smacked into one of the Brecchian guards. The alien curled its fleshy upper lip in a snarl and moved its big body to block a short corridor that terminated with solid double doors.

"Sorry... what's down there?" he asked, trying his best to sound only mildly interested. Alex hadn't thought that the house was that large, but he'd rarely taken a path beyond his regular route between dining room, bedroom, and gym.

The samurai shook its big head and gave him a little shove backwards.

"Ow—hey, watch it—don't bruise the merchandise!" No doubt about it—this was an important location. Alex was just turning to leave when the double doors at the end of the corridor opened and Illythe came out, looking distracted as he smoothed a piece of loose hair back behind one tapered ear. He was carrying a bundle in his hand and he stopped when he saw Alex.

"Oh, Alex, I was just about to find you."

Alex glanced at the samurai, then at Illythe as he handed him the bundle. "What's this?"

"Clothing for your appointment with Admiral Kah. Something very simple but traditional."

It looked like black satin pajamas from what Alex could tell. He nodded and walked with Illythe down the hallway.

"What were you doing down here—undressed as you are?" Illythe asked, brushing against his shoulder lightly.

Alex felt an odd flutter in his stomach from the contact, which he wasn't certain had been entirely accidental. It was impossible not to remember their

recent role-play, and as much as he hated to admit that he'd been turned on by seeing Mel and Bryant in the shower, he couldn't deny that fact. He'd hoped that the workout in the gym would have helped manage his libido a little, and it had—but after witnessing sex so up-close and personal, whatever good it had done was not going to last much longer.

“This house is bigger than I thought. I got a little turned around,” Alex lied. He smelled the warm, spicy-sweet scent of some fragrance clinging to Illythe. Something like cinnamon. He wanted to press his face to Illythe's neck and breathe him in.

Illythe's voice brought Alex out of his daydreaming. “Are you concerned about this evening?”

“I'd be lying if I said I wasn't... I've never done anything with a non-human. You were kind of a first.” Alex let a grin slide across his face. “I only wish we could have gone a little farther.”

He heard Illythe take an uneven breath, but just when he was about to turn and look at him, Illythe said, “We're here.” And Alex saw that they were at his room.

“You missed lunch, but dinner will be served in an hour. After which, you should take another shower, then dress and wait for me in your chambers.” Illythe turned, and Alex glanced down when he felt a small brush of skin against his wrist—or thought he did. Instinctively, he responded by catching hold of Illythe's hand. He was certain now of Illythe's attraction to him, so he wasn't going to let him get away so easily this time.

“I'd like to go farther...” Alex pressed Illythe's palm against the hardness growing underneath his towel.

Illythe did not move for a few heartbeats, and Alex saw a distinctive paling of his cheeks, followed by a flush of tiny red freckles. Illythe's eyes were downcast.

“No,” he finally said, although it was unclear if the message was for himself or for Alex. “You'd better get down to the dining room.”

He turned quickly away and Alex let him slip from his grasp, watching his back as he moved quickly down the hallway.

Damn it. Alex was certain that despite the fact that Illythe was a different species, he hadn't misinterpreted his interest.

Fear. It had to be. There was no other explanation for Illythe's contradictory behavior.

Chapter Ten

Barely a minute after Alex closed his door, someone started knocking. Had Illythe had a change of heart?

When he opened it, Mel and Bryant were there.

Cold concern began to bleed through the pit of his stomach. Something didn't feel right, and he'd been a cop long enough to know that his instincts were rarely off.

"Can I help you *gentlemen*?"

Bryant said nothing, and pushed his way into Alex's room with Mel on his heels.

"Look, I'd like to get dressed in peace if you don't mind." Alex had considered shoving back, but it would only bring him within striking distance of Bryant. It would be like pissing off a brick wall—one with arms and fists.

Bryant's tongue showed between his lips as he wet them, and he looked Alex up and down. Mel was wearing underwear, but Bryant only wore a towel, and Alex could see his cock beginning to tent the material.

"Shorty," Bryant said to Mel, his eyes still glued to Alex's face, "watch the door."

It took less than a second for Alex to register what was going on as Mel posted himself outside the room.

"Fuck off, Bryant—I'm not doing this," Alex growled, trying to move past him and out the door. Although the room wasn't large, it suddenly seemed that the gap between him and the exit was immeasurably wide.

Alex managed to avoid the first swing and tried to respond with a kick to the midsection, but Bryant took the blow and bent over, trapping Alex's foot between his ribs and stomach long enough to grab him above the knee.

Alex hopped forward on one foot and brought down his elbow on the top of Bryant's head. Any other man, it would have knocked out, but Bryant's skull was especially thick around his pea-sized brain. Alex's funny bone sent a flash of tingling, numbing pain all the way to his fingertips.

Bryant reached out and snatched Alex's other leg, jerking it forward and

pulling it right out from under him. The pain was like lightning exploding upwards from the base of his spine as Alex went down hard on his tailbone. *Surely, he must have shaken the floor enough that someone would come investigate?*

Alex tried to yell out, but Bryant pulled off the towel he was wearing and shoved the corner of it into Alex's open mouth, then pinned him to the floor, holding his arms above his head.

Fuck! No! This wasn't happening! Alex struggled under Bryant's weight, knowing that in this position it was entirely useless—the guy had at least fifty pounds of muscle on him—but he refused to submit without a fight. He could feel Bryant's cockhead drooling along his thigh. Alex's muscles burned and cramped as he tried to squeeze his legs closed while Bryant used his knees to force them open. He rubbed his crotch against Alex's cock, and, although Alex didn't want this, he started to get hard.

“Oooh, little Alley-cat likes playing rough. That right, pussy? You like that?”

Bryant's face was too close; Alex could smell his sour breath and it burned hot on his cheek. His stomach churned as if everything he'd eaten today had been host to maggots. The thought made him gag, but it did nothing to alleviate the situation.

Fucking Mel! What was in it for him? For a half-second, Alex's one hand was free as Bryant used the other to grab the towel Alex had been wearing. He did his best to pummel the man's face, managing to give Bryant a nosebleed, but a head-butt with that rock-like skull of his made Alex see stars. The pain started sharp and spread out around the outside of his brain and added to his nausea. Every time Alex blinked, it was like a flash of light going off behind his eyelids that distorted his vision when they were open.

While Alex was dazed, Bryant used Alex's towel to bind his wrists above his head.

Alex sucked in a sharp breath as he felt a wet finger trying to force itself inside of him down below. His body jerked on its own accord, trying to inhibit the invasion.

Bryant was on his knees, grinding them against the straining muscles of Alex's inner thighs hard enough that he'd probably end up with bruises. One hand was between Alex's legs, frigging him with his spit-slicked middle finger,

and his other hand was making its way down Alex's leg to hook behind his knee and force his leg up. He was grinning down at Alex, his eyes wide and glazed-over like a lunatic's.

Alex tried to scream out through the terrycloth. The dry fibers stuck to the inside of his mouth, making his teeth ache. His heart was pumping blood and adrenaline to muscles that were already strained well beyond their capacity, feeling burned and bruised. He continued to see static at the edges of his vision from the blow to the head.

Alex bowed his spine, trying to tilt his pelvis low enough to keep Bryant from having an easy target, but the man was using his upper body against the back of one of Alex's legs, pushing Alex's knee up towards his chest. He had too much leverage and power for Alex to continue to struggle, yet he couldn't lie complacent, regardless of the fact that there was no way he was getting out of this. Bryant was going to hurt him, and from the grin on his face, he was going to love every minute of it.

“Gonna split you wide open, pussy.”

Numb. Alex was starting to feel faint and his limbs were tingling as oxygen only briefly filled his lungs. He clenched his ass as the first painful attempts of Bryant's uninvited entry assaulted him below. Inside his skull, Alex could only hear the roaring white noise of panic, so he didn't hear the door being slammed aside, or the strangled cry before Bryant's body weight dropped full and limp upon him.

Alex forced open his eyes, gasping for breath and focused on the cold silver eyes of Mentor Illythe. Beside him was one of the guards holding a stun baton, the end still dancing with tiny purple sparks.

“Unlock the room in the south chamber,” Illythe said to the guard, as he rolled Bryant's limp body from on top of Alex. Bryant landed on his back against the dresser, rattling the mirror and letting out a moan.

Alex should have been comforted by the fact that the man was still alive—for now—but currently he was imagining the many ways he'd kill him if he got the chance.

Before Alex could consider it further, without removing the gag, Illythe pulled Alex up by the towel binding his wrists, and began heading down the hallway.

Alex stumbled, half-crawling to try and keep from being dragged. As they

passed an open hallway, Alex saw Mel peeking around a corner. *Had he gone to get Illythe, or simply run when he'd seen him coming?*

There was a black "S" painted above an archway just as Alex had seen for the north hall. At the end of the empty corridor was a lone door, solid and black.

The heavy door opened inward, and Mentor Illythe rolled Alex in like a bowling ball until he landed in a tangle against the wall. Alex thought he saw Illythe's silver eyes flash briefly red.

The door closed with a slam that sent a shock wave through the air, leaving Alex tied up, confused, and still with a mouth full of terrycloth.

Just about the time that Alex was regaining his right mind enough to get the towel out of his mouth, the door opened again, and Alex had to scoot out of the way to keep from being hit by Bryant's huge body.

The bigger man groaned as he slammed into the wall, then flopped down onto his belly.

Alex blinked up at Illythe, his mouth too dry to speak.

The mentor glanced at Alex briefly, as if just noticing he was there. His features softened. Illythe crouched beside Alex, gently unwrapping the towel that held his arms. His eyes shot to a corner of the room and he looked back at Alex, his gaze imploring and apologetic.

Cameras. Alex understood completely.

This room was a place used for punishment.

There were chains hanging from the ceiling in the center of the square room, and a thick, raised bar bolted to the floor. Along the dark, gray walls were a series of tall cabinets. The room was dimly lit by a single cold, white beam aimed directly downward.

"Alex. You are all right?" Illythe murmured, so low, Alex barely heard him.

Alex bobbed his head, still incapable of speech. For the first time, he was beginning to understand just how much power was hidden beneath those robes. It was frightening, and yet it turned Alex on knowing that he had any sort of influence. Illythe was protective of him, something Alex had never experienced, always being the one to protect others in the line of duty.

Illythe rose and gathered up the heap that was Bryant, and dragged him to

the center of the room, draping his hulking, limp mass over the bar. Holding Bryant in place with his hip, Illythe pulled down the chains. Bryant moaned as Illythe sealed the shackles around his wrists.

Illythe moved to a control box on the wall, and the chains began to move up into the ceiling with a grinding sound that set Alex's teeth on edge. When the mechanism stopped, the chains had been shortened just enough to keep Bryant in a position of being partially bent over the bar.

Illythe then went to a cabinet and pulled down a long, thin black rod. He turned, presenting it to Alex.

"You have earned the right to punish Bryant, Alex." Again, his eyes darted to the corner, telling Alex that he had no choice but to comply.

Alex got unsteadily to his feet and found that his hand was shaking as he reached for the rod. He jerked his hand back, flexing and releasing his fist a few times until he was certain he could accept the switch without trembling.

The wrapped handle warmed against his palm as though it was a living thing.

"Ten," Illythe said. He turned and walked across the room, leaning against the wall.

"Ten," Alex repeated, and moved up closer to Bryant.

Bryant was staring at him from over his shoulder, and Alex relished darkly the fear he saw in the giant's brown eyes.

The first swat was clumsy, barely landing on Bryant's ass, but by the third swat, Alex was beginning to see the fruits of his labor in the deep, red welts crisscrossing Bryant's backside.

Bryant was gritting his teeth. His body dripped with sweat, and his muscles trembled as he braced for every strike. It made Alex feel powerful to see this man reduced to such weakness... and he hated himself for it.

"That's ten, Alex," Mentor Illythe said softly, after Alex's final strike. "You may fuck him now if you wish."

The exhilaration Alex had been feeling instantly spiraled down into dread. "What?"

"After all," Illythe was coming towards him, his body gliding smoothly like a panther stalking his prey, "he would have done the same to you."

Alex looked at the big man hanging from the chains. His face had gone slack with resignation, and it made Alex's skin crawl to imagine how much he'd enjoyed reducing him to that. He squared his jaw and handed back the rod to Illythe.

"No. I won't do that."

Illythe sighed, but his features remained too impassive to tell if it was out of disappointment, acceptance, or relief. "You may go then. Get dressed."

"What's going to happen to him?" Alex asked, glancing briefly at Bryant.

"He'll have a few minutes alone to think about what he's done, and how lucky he is that you are so merciful." With that, Illythe nodded to Alex, sending him on his way.

Chapter Eleven

Illythe sat in a chair, completely in shadow except for his eyes that occasionally caught the light like a cat's; two glowing silver disks suspended in midair. The Jowan, Admiral Kah, seemed to be paying Illythe no mind, but Alex was extremely aware of him.

The day had gone by so quickly that it had left Alex feeling like he'd lost some hours, even though he knew he could account for every one. As if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place, right after dinner, Illythe came for him in his room. Alex had showered again in the gym under the watchful yellow eyes of a house samurai, then he'd dressed in the outfit that Illythe had given him. It was similar to the one he wore regularly, only this one was made of black silk, embroidered with blue, vaguely Oriental-style motifs.

"Relax, young man." Kah chuckled, handing Alex a drink.

Alex accepted it with a nod and tried to focus on his Jowan client.

It was difficult to tell if Admiral Kah was considered handsome by Jowan standards. By human standards he looked a little like a basset hound. Thick curtains of skin hung down on each side of his face and puckered around his thin lips. His eyes were not red and watery like the Earth canine's, but they had that same mopey tilt. He was apparently in his early fifties by human reckoning, but Alex knew each race had their own ways to keep track of each year's passing, because most of them outlived humans by decades.

Alex took a long, slow sip of the beverage he'd been given. It was a little too sweet, a little thick, and left a mild burn behind like menthol. Mentor Illythe had suggested that it contained a mild aphrodisiac, and Alex hoped that it did. He could fake a lot of things, but acting as though he was attracted to someone was not enough to create a physical response. He glanced around the room, trying to determine where the cameras were, but even if they were out in the open, the room lights were too dim for Alex to see them.

The Jowan admiral began to undress. He was still wearing his uniform when he'd arrived, and now he folded each piece carefully and hung it over a bar on the wall that was there for that purpose. Alex tried not to look away as more and more of Kah's body was revealed. Jowan's had a ribcage that was twice the size of a human's, and its increased length gave their torso a barrel shape. The males had no nipples, but both sexes had rippling layers of flesh that

draped at an angle from their sternums, and attached to long, thin tendons from their shoulders. As Kah stripped off his underwear, Alex took a large gulp of his beverage. Male Jowan sex organs were especially unattractive. The scrotum hung very low and the penis was somewhere near the middle—a thick stumpy thing, only about two inches long at full-erection. It was because the females had a sort of vacuum appendage that extended out and wrapped around a male's miniature cock during mating. As long as they could get hold of the thing, it didn't matter the size. Jowan was one race where perceived masculinity and penis size apparently were not interrelated.

Alex felt warmth beginning at his stomach and spreading out slowly with his heated blood as something in the drink took effect. He curled his lips under, making a tight line of his mouth, and he tasted the salt of fresh sweat. When the burn finally hit his cock, Alex swore he could feel every capillary become engorged with a molten river. He spread his knees, sinking low enough in his chair to loosen the material pulled tightly across his groin. He sent a smoldering look in Illythe's direction, then gave a little thrust of his hips. In his twenties, Alex had a boyfriend who wanted to watch while he fucked another guy. Alex protested at first, but he did it anyway. It was weird and hot and ultimately the end of their relationship, though the idea of being observed by someone he knew was getting off on it was very sexy.

He'd done it in the course of duty before, and it was just another part of the job, but this was different—more like that original feeling he'd had. He wanted to use his own body to seduce Illythe, even if it meant fucking another body in front of him.

He glanced at Kah as the man stood in an unsteady half-crouch a few feet in front of him.

“Crawl.” Alex gave him the order he understood that Kah had been waiting for.

Alex's eyes followed the Jowan as he got to his hands and knees and began to crawl towards him. Then he returned his attention to the darkness, catching the flicker of Illythe's silver eyes. He licked his lips, trying to imagine Illythe getting aroused by the scene playing out before him.

“M-may I undress you?”

The surprisingly timid voice from between his legs drew Alex's attention downward. Kah was looking up at him with those pleading, doggy eyes.

“Do it,” Alex ordered him, and watched the flicker of excitement move across the Jowan’s face. Alex looked again towards Illythe, and slid his hand down the front of his pants, adjusting his rigid length as Kah worked to free him.

“Touch it,” Alex said.

Kah let out a soft gasp when Alex’s cock came into full view, and immediately began worshipping it with his hands, rubbing it against his face as if it were some beloved thing.

The aphrodisiac had Alex so hard that his glans was almost purple, and shiny from the skin being pulled taut. Still, he wouldn’t risk losing his erection by watching Kah fawn over his cock like a magic rod. So he turned his face towards Illythe and imagined the ebony-skinned angel stroking himself as he watched Alex being touched.

Alex wondered what Illythe’s cock would look like. From the brief contact he’d had during role-play, it had felt very similar to a human’s. Alex imagined it as such, except as black as space, with a head the same deep violet tint as his lips. He let his mind wander, becoming less aroused by Kah’s touching, and more so by fantasizing about Illythe masturbating to him in the dark.

“Please, will you fuck me?” Kah asked in that odd servile tone. Alex blinked back to reality.

“On the bed, I want your ass in the air, lubed up and ready.”

Alex stood up, stripping off the rest of his clothing.

When he flexed, Alex’s muscles still twinged from his earlier workout, and the beating he’d given Bryant, but he wanted to give Illythe a show. Apparently, Kah appreciated his efforts too, as a soft moan emanated from the bed to his right.

Alex nearly glanced over at the bed, but he remembered the cock ring. He retrieved it from the pocket of his pants and slipped it around, squeezing it at the base of his cock to trap the blood inside. It would come off with a simple flick of a tiny plastic latch. Judging by what he saw when he finally looked at the admiral; he was going to need all the help he could get.

The man had his shoulders down and his skinny, droopy ass high in the air, as he stuck two fingers—shiny with lubricant—into his fleshy pink hole. *Oh yeah, thank god for the cock ring.*

“Turn around—head at the side of the bed,” Alex told him. He wanted Illythe to see what he could have if he was willing to break the rules.

Alex put on the special condom, making a show of slowly rolling the material down over his engorged member. He felt the chemical reaction immediately. As Illythe had promised, it didn't burn, but it did add an extra layer of warmth that his already-heated body could do without. That is, until he lined up and pushed inside the Jowan's pink hole. The temperature of the condom regulated itself against the alien's cool insides.

From the very few times Alex had sex with women, he thought it felt a lot like that. It wasn't terrible, but it wasn't anything like the feeling of pushing through the resistance of tight muscle, and the hot grip and suck of a man's body around him. If it hadn't been for the low sounds of pleasure that Kah was making in his throat, Alex might have thought he was fucking a girl.

He thought he heard Illythe gasp when he drew out all the way, then slammed in deep, grinding his pelvis against Kah's ass. Alex kept his face turned to the shadows, letting Illythe read the determination and desire on his features—making it clear that he was using this man as an object of release, but what he really wanted was to be doing this to the man watching.

He smacked Kah's ass, bringing out a trill of surprise, followed by some grunted, breathy words that were not a human language, but that sounded very dirty. Alex delivered another smack, which felt like hitting a steak wrapped in plastic—cool, artificial, barely yielding. Then he dug his fingers into Kah's fleshy hips and began pumping hard, looking for some friction so he could come and get this over with.

“Touch yourself,” Alex murmured to Kah, but he was looking towards Illythe. “Make yourself come for me.”

“Yes, yes!” Kah whimpered, and soon Alex felt the spasmodic jerking of the other man's hips and a clenching around his cock as Kah achieved some sort of orgasm. Alex worked hard to reach his own, but found it was fruitless. Instead, he faked it—tensing his body and grunting as he ground into Kah's ass, driving him to the mattress at the same time he released the ring around his cock.

He pulled out slowly, holding the condom on to the base of his penis, then he pulled it off quickly and got up to flush it down the toilet.

As he was washing his hands at the bathroom sink, he felt the heat of a body

moving up behind him, and he met Illythe's silver eyes in the mirror over his shoulder.

"You did not climax," Illythe said simply.

"Was it that obvious?" Alex frowned. He saw Illythe offer a tiny shake of his head.

"Not to the admiral. He's sleeping now. Jowan do that after orgasm."

Alex chuckled softly. "Sounds like at least a few of the partners I've had."

"You are troubled about earlier... about Bryant's attack on you..."

Alex shook his head. "I am more troubled by the fact that I enjoyed punishing him for it." During the hours following, Alex had turned it over in his mind several times, trying to sort it out. He wasn't like that, but from day one, this situation had begun to change him, and not necessarily for the better.

"I was impressed that you refused to take him while he was so helpless. You were kinder to him than others would have been."

Alex sucked in a sharp breath when Illythe's hand came around and cupped him.

"I am allowed to relieve you in these kinds of situations... unless you prefer to handle it by yourself."

"Hell no." Alex turned, feeling the brush of fabric against his backside. Was Illythe hard? Before he could find out, Illythe had dropped to his knees in front of him, pulling and twisting gently on Alex's growing cock. Alex braced himself against the counter.

His balls felt a little bruised, and as soon as Alex thought that, Illythe's mouth had closed around one, turning the ache into something else.

"Fuck, you're good at this..." Alex panted, one hand gripping the sink top behind him while the other worked itself through Illythe's feather-soft hair. Alex didn't push or thrust, but simply let Illythe do as he pleased, because all of it was pleasing him.

Illythe hummed around him in response, then used his forked and studded tongue to lave the skin behind his scrotum as he gently pressed Alex's balls upwards using the three fingers of his hand. He raised his silvery gaze to Alex.

The eye contact sent a jolt of electricity all the way from Alex's cock to his brain, and then back again. He curled his toes on the woven bathroom mat,

trying to stave off his orgasm for just a little longer... *for god's sake, Illythe hadn't even licked his cock yet and he was already this close to blowing!*

Alex let out what felt like a full-body groan when those velvety violet-black lips wrapped around his shaft. Alex wasn't small—he proudly filled out at a little over eight inches—but Illythe sucked him in completely, rasping the line of studs (*Four? Were there four of them?*) along the length of his cock until Alex could no longer hold back.

His hips jerked forward and he spurting down Illythe's throat, feeling like he might never stop coming. Then his knees buckled, and he felt his cock flop out of Illythe's mouth. Strong hands caught him around the waist, keeping him from hitting the floor. Alex clutched Illythe, feeling the flex of powerful muscle beneath the silky cloth of his robes.

"It's the drink you had," Illythe said quietly.

Alex wondered which one of them he was trying to convince.

The next morning the routine began again. Wake—breakfast in the dining room—gym—shower—and on to work.

Illythe was with them in the dining room this morning, and Alex felt a twinge of something dark and jealous when he saw that Mel was sitting beside him.

Bryant was there as well, glaring at the food on his plate, but looking no worse for wear.

"Good morning, Alex," Illythe said impassively, as he sliced into whatever protein-based product they were eating and took a bite from his fork.

"Good morning, Mentor Illythe," Alex said, trying to echo the lack of sentiment as he sat across from him and reached for the salt. He was aware of Bryant sneering at him, and looked at him with an exasperated grimace. "What?"

"How was it?" Bryant asked. "Get some gnarly alien ass last night?"

Alex opened his mouth to reply, but Illythe spoke first.

"We do not discuss clients, Bryant. Your first one is this afternoon, by the way."

"W-when is m-my first one, M-M-Mentor Illythe?"

"This evening, Mel. I need to space your first times so that I can be in attendance."

"You're going to watch us have sex?" Bryant blurted.

"I am there to be certain that the rules are being observed."

An ugly grin stretched across Bryant's face, and Alex gripped his fork tighter, waiting for the inevitable stupidity to spew from his mouth.

"That turn you on? Or do you join in?"

Illythe paused, holding his knife and fork above his plate as he turned his full attention to Bryant. "No."

Alex let a little smile slip. Bryant apparently wasn't used to being shut down without a fight and Alex could see that it was wreaking havoc with his ego. That, and the fact that he'd had his ass striped by them both maybe eighteen hours earlier.

Illythe got up from the table. "Finish your breakfasts, start your daily routines. Bryant, I will find you when it is time."

Alex hastily followed Illythe out of the room. "Mentor Illythe... what about me?"

Illythe stopped and turned, glancing back at the dining room.

Alex was aware that the two men still there would be listening, and apparently, Illythe understood this fact as well. He turned away from the room. "Follow me."

Alex felt tension rising along his spine and settling heavy in his loins. Again, he was being singled out from the group. He wasn't certain if he should feel concerned or aroused, so he felt a little of both.

They went to Alex's room, and Illythe turned to face him once they were inside.

"You impressed Admiral Kah very much last night," he said.

Alex scanned Illythe's features for some sort of emotional response. There was nothing, but again, Illythe seemed to be avoiding his eyes. "And this means..."

"This means that he has paid for your exclusivity. You will only be serving him."

“Oh.” Alex wasn’t certain how to react. He didn’t find the Jowan admiral at all arousing, and hated that he had to serve him at all just to maintain his cover. But at the same time, serving him meant not having to serve anyone else, who could potentially be worse. Unfortunately, the man he would have gladly serviced and the one who turned him on was standing right in front of him, and he couldn’t say a word for fear that, again, Illythe would flee.

Illythe cocked his head. “Alex? You are not happy about this?”

“Will you be there every time?”

Illythe looked down at the floor. “Of course not.”

Something burning and greasy filled Alex’s belly. “Will you be with them? With Bryant and Mel?”

“Yes, it is standard practice...”

Alex took a step forward, his body too close to Illythe’s, and he knew this as Illythe stepped back against the wall.

“Will you relieve them like you did me?”

Illythe blinked as if momentarily dazed. Alex could feel the heat rising between them and wanted desperately to close that gap.

“Why do you ask, Alex?” Illythe’s voice was softer than he’d ever heard it.

“Because I don’t want them to know you like I do... I want to be... special.” Alex sounded ridiculous and he knew it. The burn he felt was jealousy; possessiveness of someone who would never—could never be his in any way. It didn’t stop him from wanting.

“You are.” Illythe finally met his eyes, and Alex had the sensation of a mental slap in the face. He took a step back, suddenly breathless, as he realized the gravity of the statement.

“And that is why I can’t be so close to you... in any sense.”

Illythe pressed his hand against Alex’s chest to push him away, except he didn’t push. Alex saw Illythe’s features contort as fleeting pain drifted across his face. He held Illythe’s hand against his sternum, looking into his face and willing him to look back. But he didn’t. Alex sighed, and stepped away when Illythe closed his eyes.

“Cameras here, too?” Alex asked quietly.

“Everywhere,” Illythe mumbled, but he hadn’t moved.

“What has you so afraid of him? What are you to the Scion?”

Illythe jerked his head up with the word, and his rigid shell slipped back into place.

“You are off for the evening. You will be expected to serve drinks and provide light conversation when the guests arrive later, but you will not be going with anyone to a room.”

“Understood.”

“In the meantime, rest up.”

Alex watched Illythe leave his room. He sat down on his bed, resignation weighing heavily upon him. This was crazy. As a cop, he should be caring about the two innocent men trapped here with him, but he had a feeling that Illythe's imprisonment was far worse.

Chapter Twelve

Things did not go well with Bryant.

Illythe had tried to counsel him on what to expect and what would be expected of him, as the reason Bryant was selected for Willow House was because of this particular race of alien. But Bryant apparently wasn't listening. His eyes were busy scanning the room and the exits.

The client who had requested his services was Vedrian, a race of hairy, hulking bipeds that Bryant rudely made known he did not find enticing as Illythe introduced them.

"Chieftain Mur T'surra, this is Bryant, the man whom you requested be at your service this afternoon."

"No fucking way." Bryant curled his upper lip at the alien mercenary.

Instead of insulting the chieftain, it aroused him more, and he glanced at Illythe with a razory, yellow grin.

Illythe smiled tightly, knowing that this could turn out to be very ugly. The chieftain took special delight in humiliating things that believed they had some power or pride. He killed children just to watch their parents suffer. Mur T'surra was one of the Scion's closest allies, as well as his nearest enemy. Fortunately, the chieftain lacked the level of intellect possessed by the Scion, and cruelty without intelligence was short-lived in times of war.

Illythe took Bryant aside, excusing himself as he led Bryant to the hallway.

"Bryant, as I told you earlier—if you are complacent, he will have his time with you and get bored. You are the one he requested. I will be present to supervise. I promise he will not injure you if you do as I say."

"What part of 'no fucking way' don't you understand? I'm not letting anyone—or thing—fuck me in the ass."

The samurai guard in the hallway shifted his hand towards his gun, but dropped it when Illythe offered a little shake of his head.

"You are not here voluntarily, Bryant, but I will make certain that you are not injured. I will not place any of the house residents in harm's way..."

"Damn right you won't," Bryant growled.

He moved too quickly for Illythe to block the unanticipated punch in the face.

White exploded behind Illythe's eyes when Bryant's fist slammed hard against his nose. Illythe dropped his head forward, catching a gout of blood with this hand as he staggered back a step. Bryant shoved him against the wall and ran towards the exit door.

"No—!" Illythe cried out, but it was too late.

He heard the pulse gun, smelled the sickly-sweet stench of burning human flesh, and then came the heavy thud as Bryant's body hit the floor.

He glanced at the samurai whom, he noticed, had not drawn its gun.

The Vedrian chieftain barked something in his harsh language, putting his pistol away. "Want another," he demanded of Illythe.

Illythe stared down at the blood on his hand. *Damn the Scion and his tenuous alliances.*

"You are banned from this house." Illythe stood up straight, glaring at the chieftain.

The brute laughed, his bulging eyes following the path of blood running down Illythe's face. He began to reach threateningly towards his pistol again, but Illythe anticipated as much this time.

Illythe used his body's memory and moved with the fluid grace of a warrior-by-birth. Grabbing the chieftain's wrist with both hands, Illythe let the brute's own responses lead their violent dance.

Twirling, he used the momentum of the alien's movements to pull his hand past the desired goal of his weapon. Illythe brought up his knee as he straightened the creature's arm, ramming it into the chieftain's elbow, and spinning until he felt the shift and pop of the bone being rent from its rightful place.

The Vedrian roared in pain, and Illythe completed his circle and released him, letting four of the house guards move into place, each one with a gun pointed at the chieftain's head.

"There is a reason why I was made master of this house," Illythe said to him. "You will not return here."

Apparently, the chieftain found it difficult to argue with several guns

pointed at his thick skull, but that didn't stop the insults. "You are a whore and you will always be his slave."

Insults were one thing, but as dumb as he was, the Vedrian chieftain knew better than to threaten Illythe—they all did. The insult was a statement of fact. Only the Scion was allowed to discipline his own pet.

Illythe watched the beast being escorted roughly from the house. Dabbing at his bloody nose, he sighed and looked over at Bryant's body on the floor.

There was no doubt he was dead. The pulse had been set high enough to burn a hole through his body and singe a dark spot on the artificial wood of the door.

"Please get something to cover him with..." Illythe said to a nearby samurai, as he crouched near Bryant. He ran his fingertips across the spikes of blond hair, looking down into the face of what had actually been a frightened boy hiding in a man's body.

It wasn't that he especially cared for Bryant. It was that he was just sick of all of the death that came to this house. True, many of these men would have died on the streets, at the hands of a violent customer, in jail, or by their own will, but that fact didn't make what happened here any less cruel.

"I'm sorry," Illythe said to him. He frowned as a few drops of blood dripped from his nose and landed on Bryant's arm. When he wiped them off, the skin was already cooling, and it made something curl uncomfortably inside him.

He should have paid more attention. He should have been able to see this coming, and stop it.

"Mentor Illythe?"

Alex's stunned voice preceded his arrival just ahead of the samurai bearing a special tarp to cover the body. He looked with horror at Bryant's body, then at Illythe's face as he rose.

"What happened?"

Illythe was not fast enough to draw away when Alex moved in on him, gently touching his face. He exchanged a quick glance with the samurai and pushed Alex's hand aside.

"It's not broken," Illythe said, too consciously aware of how such things as a broken nose could lower the value of certain merchandise. It was a foolish

thing to say. He shouldn't care about his physical appeal when a man had just been murdered. It only went further to assure Illythe that he was far too jaded.

"Come with me, please." Illythe turned and led Alex down to the room at the end of the north hall. "Close the door."

He watched Alex do as he was told, noticing the tension through his shoulders before the man took a deep breath and turned to face him once more. When he did, Illythe found himself unable to meet Alex's eyes. "I am sorry you had to see that, Alex. That should never have happened."

"What exactly did happen? Who killed Bryant?"

"Chieftain—a c-customer." Illythe swallowed down the bitter taste of blood that ran down the back of his throat. "He'll be punished. The Scion will put a contract on him... pay his own men to kill him, most likely."

It was a common practice among mercenaries. Whoever offered the most money earned their loyalty at any given time, and the title of Chieftain among the Vedrian was granted to whoever killed the previous titleholder. Mur T'surra wouldn't even make it off of Omanai.

"Let me see." Alex came to Illythe, dabbing at the clotting blood with the cuff of his shirt. He tipped Illythe's chin gently up to get a good look at him in the light. "Did the chieftain hit you as well?" Alex continued to gently dab and inspect Illythe's face, even wetting the fabric with his tongue to clean off some of the dried blood.

Illythe shook his head. "Bryant... He was... upset... he tried to run..." Illythe closed his eyes as the touches began to remind him painfully of Neil. That was when he should have called a halt to it. Illythe had been punished—one of the few actual beatings he had received in years at the hands of the Scion. Illythe had been unaware of a conflict between customers. Scheduling them too close together had caused a fight, which resulted in them both having been banned from the house. Neil had found Illythe in the hallway outside of his chambers where he'd wandered after he'd been beaten—too dazed from pain to realize where he was. Neil had touched him carefully, getting him to his bath to rinse the blood from his wounds... changing the pain to gentle pleasure...

"No—" Illythe pushed Alex away, then turned his back on him to keep his features from betraying his memories. He put his hand over his mouth, leaning heavily on a cabinet as his stomach tried to come up his throat. Nausea coiled like an icy worm inside of him.

“Illythe...”

Illythe scowled at the camera hidden in the artificial orchid, unable to look at Alex for fear he'd break down.

“Please... Alex, would you break the news to Mel?”

After a tense silence that seemed to go on for too long, Alex said, “Sure.”

Illythe did not trust himself to turn around until he was certain that Alex had left the room.

Alex found Mel in his room, napping and apparently unconcerned about his upcoming evening.

“Mel, it's Alex,” Alex announced himself as he tapped lightly on the hard doorframe.

“Oh, w-why are y-you here?” Mel was dressed in only his underwear when he answered the door. He was scratching at his chest, making red lines on his skin.

“I... uh...” Alex always hated this, regardless of who the victim was. And although Mel wasn't related to Bryant by blood in any way, because of their situation here, they had all become some sort of de facto family. “Bryant... he's dead...”

Mel blinked, and his hand stopped its movement across his chest. For a moment, Alex wondered if Mel would cry as he moved forward into his arms. He held the smaller man uncomfortably, something tugging at the tail of his intuition. A moment later, hands tugging at the drawstring on his pants confirmed his apprehension.

“Mel—” Alex moved the other man's hands away, taking a step back.

Mel's eyes were rimmed red. “P-please... I-I'm s-scared... j-just hold m-me...”

Although it was against his better judgment, Alex again enfolded Mel in his arms, and Mel leaned up, pulling him down into a kiss.

Alex turned his head, breaking the contact of their lips and holding up his hands to keep them apart. “Mel, I... no, I can't. Not like that.”

“W-why—because y-you w-want h-him?” Mel's cheeks flushed and his eyes filled with tears.

“What? Mel, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” *Illythe? Was that what Mel was getting at?*

“M-M-Mentor Illythe! I-I’ve s-seen how you l-l-look at him! H-how he lo-looks at y-you!”

“Mel,” Alex started calmly, “there is nothing between us... I don’t understand where this is coming from... I think you’re just in shock about Bryant...” *That had to be it, right?* Everyone dealt with things like this in different ways; maybe Mel’s way was to seek comfort through sex. Even if the situation had been different, and sex between workers wasn’t forbidden, Alex didn’t think he could soothe him in that way.

“Y-you don’t k-know what I f-feel! Y-you d-don’t know a t-thing about m-me!” Mel turned his back on Alex and stormed to his bed, flopping down on his stomach. “I-if you’re n-not going to d-do anything, th-then ge-get the f-f-fuck out!”

Part of Alex wanted to go to Mel, but he understood that to do so would open up an entirely new set of complications—and right now he had more than enough to deal with.

“For what it’s worth, Mel, I’m sorry.” Alex slid the door closed and left him alone. Things were already way beyond the scope of his control. He needed to try to get a handle on the situation before anything else fell apart. Part of him had a sick feeling that if he did have sex with Mel—which was something he really didn’t desire—Mel would run to Illythe crying rape. He was nearly certain that Mel had betrayed Bryant, and his reasons hadn’t been based on a sudden concern for Alex’s well-being.

Chapter Thirteen

Alex was almost relieved to see the admiral come through the front doors of Willow House.

He'd been pouring drinks for the small entourage that had entered, watching Mel flirting shamelessly with his client for the evening. Some muscle-bound species with large black eyes, a slit for a mouth, and a tiny nose set into a bald head. As alien species went, it wasn't so bad—especially if one focused on the body and not the face, which Mel seemed to have no trouble doing.

Mel was straddling one of the man's meaty thighs. His face was flushed as he rocked his hips and pressed his cheek against his client's bared chest. Mel kept staring at Alex—maybe trying to see if his performance was getting to him at all. But Alex was too preoccupied between thoughts of earlier in the day with Bryant's death, and later this evening when Illythe would be in a room with Mel and his client.

"Alex." Illythe's voice from close behind him startled him, and he barely avoided one of the guest's hands grabbing at his crotch. The men laughed as he jumped back.

"Alex," Illythe said again as Alex turned around to him. "The admiral wondered if you might see him—it's not standard procedure, but he'll be gone for a few days and wanted to see you before he left."

"Yeah, sure." Alex shrugged. Frankly, he was getting tired of being pawed, pinched, and propositioned here.

"He's in the same room as last time. Your supplies are in the bedside table." Illythe looked as though he wanted to say more, but didn't. He took the pitcher of wine that Alex had been pouring, and Alex headed down the dim hallway, hoping he could get through this without Illythe looking on.

Admiral Kah taught Alex some obscene words in his own language and insisted that Alex call him by those words as much as he liked while Kah, again, fawned over his cock, then rode him as Alex lay back on the bed.

It turned out that Kah actually enjoyed it when Alex was unable to come for some time. Apparently, the respect he earned in real life could only be tolerated if tempered by these sorts of humiliation games. So Alex insulted Kah,

smacked his ass and pinched his sorry excuse for a penis, then finally achieved an orgasm after Kah's third, and went into the en suite bathroom to clean up.

When he returned, Kah was dozing again. The admiral seemed to blink out for a period of time right after sex. That was pretty much the only reason Alex thought he'd been able to come—during those times that Kah was sleeping, he'd masturbate and try to bring himself a little closer each time. It was especially difficult because thoughts of Illythe kept intruding. He wondered if he was taking care of Mel in the same way he'd taken care of him, despite Illythe's claims that Alex was special.

Alex laid down on his stomach on the bed, gathering the pillow up under his chin. He forced himself not to shiver when Kah's lukewarm hand grazed his spine all the way to his ass.

"Alex. You are such a treasure. Illythe has a keen eye for such fine things as you. I am glad he talked me into having an exclusive contract with you."

It took Alex a moment to process what the admiral had said. "Mentor Illythe suggested it?"

"Oh yes." Kah's finger was connecting the dots of a few moles on Alex's back. "Illythe knows my schedule is hectic. He also thought that you and I would get along very well. As usual, he is correct. It's no wonder the Scion trusts him enough to let him off leash."

Alex rolled onto his back, and Kah began fingering the dark wash of hair across Alex's chest, snuggling closer.

"Off leash?" Alex asked, trying to sound casual about it, as if only making conversation; although inside he was pleading for knowledge.

"The Scion owns him—he's... a spoils of war, I guess you could say. Illythe was a child when the Scion picked him up. He's the only one of his kind. Imagine, being the slave of a merciless warlord—knowing that you are the only one who has survived the attack that obliterated your planet... bound, frightened... Oh! Can we do that next time, Alex? We can pretend that you are the powerful human emperor and I am your captive! I know Illythe can teach you rope-binding..." Kah leaned up on his arms, his grin so wide that his face looked as though it might split in half.

"Uh, sure..." Alex said. He was trying to let everything sink in. "So Illythe was a slave?"

“He still is, but the Scion trusts him after so much time. It’s been several decades by Earth reckoning.”

“And there was a war between Illythe’s planet and the Scion’s?”

Kah dropped back down, and Alex let him lay against his chest, pretending that he welcomed the Jowan as a lover as he wrapped an arm across his shoulders. “Not really. The Scion saw something of value in their planet with which they refused to part... some ore or precious metal, I suppose... so the big lug took it. He really can be quite demanding.”

“It sounds like you know him well. Are you friends?”

“Oh no. Business associates at best. The Gengein prefer not to have friends... they only end up killing them, you know. Illythe is his everything.”

Alex forced his hand to keep moving as every muscle in his body locked up. *Gengein*.

Gengein were not, and would never be, a Federation race. They were largely nomadic, drifting between galaxies to gather technologies and valuable natural resources. They never asked, they just took. It was one of the few races humans had encountered that forced retreat as a matter of survival.

Alex had never seen one up-close and personal—few humans ever had and lived to tell—but it was widely believed that they were enormous creatures that resembled something out of a Lovecraftian nightmare. *And Illythe belonged to such a nightmare.*

Alex had been a cop long enough to realize that even murderers held something dear to them, something or someone that they might even die to protect. It was difficult to imagine that someone who might think nothing of blowing up a space station full of innocent people might become suicidal with grief if his pet parrot died, or that men who ran with the black-market drug trade had their own precious children at home. It was human nature to make monsters out of those who did monstrous things. Alex felt ill when he wondered what sort of monstrous things Illythe had witnessed while being the Scion’s slave.

“The Scion is very possessive,” Kah continued to babble. “In fact, there was another human... oh it’s been a few years now, whom Illythe began to especially favor... I’m not certain what became of the young man... you remind me of him, actually... Hmmm, what was his name... Nip? Nine? Some odd human name.”

“Neil?” Alex asked absently. He felt completely displaced from his own body. *Christ. Gengein.* Things really couldn't get a whole lot worse.

“Maybe.” Kah shrugged. “He became too attached to Illythe, so he was killed. Illythe took it very badly. Still, it's nice to see that Illythe has been able to return and manage Willow House.”

Something beeped from the vicinity of Admiral Kah's coat and Kah uttered a foreign curse. He struggled out of the bed and reached into the pocket, pulling out his comm device. “I can't believe it's already time to leave,” he grumbled. “Alex, thank you for spending time with me. I'll return as soon as I can... I hope to have a big surprise for you when I do.” He grinned again.

Alex forced a smile. “You be careful out there, Admiral.”

Kah paused with one leg in his pants and offered Alex an unnervingly dreamy gaze. “You're perfect for me Alex. Just perfect.”

Alex held his smile until his jaw cramped from the effort. By that time, Kah had gotten fully dressed and left the room. Alex sighed, feeling foul inside and out.

He stared up at the filmy fabric canopy that draped over the bed, raking his fingers across his scalp. There was no doubt in his mind now that Detective Neil Bradshaw was dead, and it had likely not been quick or painless. Alex had no idea if his cover had been blown before he was killed, or if he was killed out of principal by the Scion for showing an interest in Illythe.

Alex's stomach knotted as he considered that he might be following in Neil's path.

Chapter Fourteen

It was just after artificial sunset that the Scion came to pay Illythe a visit. He'd brought Illythe flowers and an ornate clip for his hair. Something bejeweled and feminine that Illythe would be certain to leave out to be stolen. He despised being decorated, but it never mattered what he wanted; it never had and it never would.

They went quietly over the house's books, briefly discussed Bryant's unfortunate death, then the large monster cuddled Illythe in his many arms as they lay together on the bed. Once upon a time, this might have soothed him. It might have convinced his warped mind that, without a doubt, everything that the Scion did was out of love for his precious pet. This pet, who was often ungrateful and misbehaved, deserved the punishments the Scion visited upon his body and mind.

When Neil had been killed, Illythe had no warning, and afterwards, his mind was so damaged that he could barely think, much less realize that the soothing hands that stroked him day and night were the same ones that had demanded his lover be put to death. By the time Illythe was at the point where he could consider revenge, he realized that to kill the Scion would absolutely mean his own death. Illythe, at that time, was not ready to die.

Perhaps it had been selfish of him, but dying for the sake of a dead man seemed a waste. It wouldn't bring Neil back, and Illythe was already too used to the pain of losing anyone he'd ever been close to.

But Alex wasn't dead, and he wouldn't be if Illythe had anything to say about it. Illythe rose from the bed to add more sweet crystals to the censer. Tonight he needed to lose himself in the calming vapors as much as he could.

"The Alex human..."

"He's not ready," Illythe said as he returned to stand next to the bed. Without prompting, Illythe understood that the explanation required a bit more to satisfy the master. "I need him to learn to submit a little more before I am satisfied with his progress."

"And the other?"

"Soon."

The Scion chuckled and tugged at Illythe's wrist, pulling him onto the bed.

“I think you are just being greedy. Keeping those playthings to yourself.”

“Or perhaps I am jealous, Scion.”

Four yellow eyes raised up to Illythe's face, while two watched stubby brown fingers working at the sash around his waist. “Jealous?”

“That your desires will not all be visited upon me.” Illythe's eyes rolled back, and he moaned softly as his kimono was spread open and the undulating fringes that lined the Scion's mouth tickled against his cock.

The Scion responded by sucking him deeper into the fleshy cavern, rolling the botryose salivary sacks against his skin. The sharp tongue searched out his slit, dipping inside like a hummingbird seeking sweet nectar.

Illythe groaned, closing his eyes as his hands splayed across the Scion's head. The fleshy appendages encircled his wrists, and two arms curled around his waist, the others slipped lower behind him, one wiggling underneath to tease at his hole. He'd healed up quickly since their last encounter, although it would still be a few days before he was right as rain. He was not as young as he used to be.

The muscled rings in the Scion's throat began to squeeze Illythe at the same time a thick finger slipped inside his ass and pressed against the gland there.

Illythe cried out and his hips jerked spasmodically. He bit down into his lower lip as the Scion's tongue slipped in deeper, stretching him in a place not meant to be stretched, which burned as much as it tingled with pleasure. He whimpered and shuddered as the slick appendage pulled out slowly and the Scion raised his head.

“You are selfish, my little warrior. Your spirit never ceases to amaze me.”

Illythe held his breath, not daring to make a sound, and he forced his heart to maintain a regular rhythm. The Scion's yellow eyes demanded Illythe's full attention, and he gave it, although wished he could close them against that semblance of a smile twisting the creature's face.

Smiles—such as they were—on Gengein were frightening and horrible things. They were rarely the sign of happiness or innocent enjoyment, and the Scion's was likely the least reassuring because it was never easy to read. He'd observed humans so much that he'd learned to simulate certain moods and reactions. The last time Illythe had seen such a smile, he'd ended up vomiting blood for days.

Illythe carefully steeled himself, preparing for the worst, as the Scion curled one hand around Illythe's cock and weighed his balls with another. He gritted his teeth when his testicles were given an uncomfortable twist.

"You believe me a cruel master... or perhaps a heartless lover who demands your loyalty while not offering my own?" The finger up Illythe's ass thrust lightly in and out.

Illythe shook his head, but knew his denial would do him no good. And yet it was expected, so Illythe had to maintain those expectations, lest his true feelings ever come to light.

"I have always protected you, Illythe. I have cared for you like the priceless thing of beauty that you are. I have even given you power in this place—allowed you to represent my will and exert it upon others..."

Illythe gasped as a third hand squeezed his throat.

"I have even removed your collar. But my precious thing, you must not forget your place."

Although his collar had been removed years ago, the same could not be said for his leash. Illythe gripped the thick forearm attached to the hand clamped around his neck, and he gasped for what little breath he was allowed to take. Black spots sparkled at the edge of his vision to be bleached out by the blinding white of pain as the Scion twisted his scrotum a little harder.

"The human, Neil, was an unfortunate weakness. I did you a kindness by eliminating it, did I not?"

Illythe swallowed the nausea that tried to rise up into his mouth, and he nodded as best as he was able. *Yes, Scion. Thank you, Scion, for making me watch my weakness being destroyed. Thank you for murdering the only thing I had ever loved.*

"He lied to you, Illythe. I saved you from making a horrible mistake. Does that not make me a benevolent master?"

Illythe couldn't keep his eyes open, despite fighting not to drop his gaze. His head ached like it had been driven through with metal spikes, and blood pounded in his ears. Each little movement between his legs sent a rush of dizzying nausea through his core. He focused on this physical pain so that he would not betray his heart, which still leaked out his life every time he heard Neil's name.

Neil had come to Willow House with the story of a young man from the streets who had, more or less, chosen to live a life by his own rules. He was strong-willed and passionate, and Illythe was captivated by him. No matter how much he tried to break him, Neil continued to flourish.

Illythe's own breaking had been long and painful, and hadn't let up until the warrior inside of him withered and went dormant. Illythe sought to know the secret of this talent that Neil possessed. He realized, too late, that it was Neil's desire for him that caused him to misbehave just so he could be punished by his hand.

They began a clandestine affair that evolved into love... and Illythe learned that Neil was a Federation agent. They made plans to escape together, but the Scion found out. Illythe was forced to watch as his lover was raped and beaten to death before his eyes, then Illythe had been locked in a room with his ravaged body until it had been consumed by rot. The Scion wanted him to come to hate the thing that stank so badly while it decomposed—to hate Neil.

And he nearly did. He'd begged to be free of this putrid thing that had once been the human he loved.

The Scion's deep voice pulled Illythe up from the depths of his despair by replacing it with terror. "If such weakness continues within you, Illythe, a more permanent solution must be sought. Just like the *jaaro* that the humans call dogs, those who are too difficult to control, become quite placid when the source of their aggression is eliminated."

Illythe tasted blood and realized he had bitten into his lip, as crippling agony flared through his groin when the Scion added a squeeze to his twisting.

"I see, my pet, that you understand, yes?"

Despite the sickening pain, Illythe nodded his head. The Scion would have no problem castrating him, and it would not be painless. He remained frozen in place and silent as the Scion's mouth brushed against his cheek, leaving behind a sticky smear of salivary fluid.

"Humans are fragile, fleeting pleasures. Even with medical attention, they can't be repaired. Like a burst of sweetness on the tongue, they are temporarily enjoyed and quickly forgotten. But you, Illythe, you are a refined and perfected delicacy. Your flavor will outlast them all. You are my permanent, the one who brings me the most joy. It would make me happy to know that you would not let anyone lie to you again."

And then the Scion pinned him, bending him in half on his back on the bed, and fucked him hard. There was no preparation and no antitoxin delivered before the orgasm, and Illythe screamed into the pillows, his body on fire. Billions of searing, microscopic spikes raced through his bloodstream until he knew nothing but pain through every cell.

The Scion watched him suffer, and Illythe knew that his master felt no pleasure in inflicting so much pain. He knew the Scion saw it as necessary and unfortunate. How often he had held him as a child after systematically pulling him apart, and then slowly, agonizingly, *lovingly* stitched him back together. He knew nothing of a world without his master. He knew of no other way to live, and that made him want for death.

Finally, as Illythe's body went into convulsions, and his skin became icy despite the acid burning within, the Scion administered the antitoxin. He injected it along with a sedative, through a needle in the vibrating artery of Illythe's neck. Illythe lay still, too raw and broken to move, until the darkness crept in and embraced him along with the warm arms of his master.

Chapter Fifteen

Alex woke up suddenly to a noise outside of his door, either real or imagined. It was too dark to see the clock hanging in his room, which meant that the lights outside were still off, maintaining the illusion of nighttime. Alex had paid attention to the timing and luminescence through the hours. The lighting mimicked the human circadian cycles perfectly—something else that made it apparent that the humans kept here were meant to be kept healthy; on a physical level, at least.

Another sound, like something sliding across the floor, came from the hallway, and Alex got quietly out of bed. He paused at the doorway to listen, and distinctly heard someone breathing as though each intake of air was as excruciating as it was necessary.

Sliding open the panel just a crack, he first noticed the guard posted outside. Below him, reflected by the shimmer of one lone lamp outside simulating moonlight, Alex could see Illythe's long, white hair as he crawled, and dropped down onto the floor. The guard seemed to barely notice him, and certainly appeared unconcerned. Despite the fact that Alex believed it was expected that he'd close the door and return to bed, he found the situation too strange to ignore.

"Mentor Illythe?" Alex moved forward, but caught himself, remembering the Brecchian guard.

The guard glanced at him briefly, then stared at the wall, but made no move towards its weapon.

Alex crouched as Illythe turned his face towards him.

Illythe's expression was slack, dazed. Alex wasn't certain if it was from whatever injury had caused blood to run from his nose and mouth, or some kind of drug in his system. It seemed that he didn't recognize Alex, and flinched when he raised his hand to examine him.

"Shhh, it's okay." Alex tried to reassure Illythe, but was confounded himself as to the nature of his appearance, as well as the apathy of the house guards. Regardless of where Illythe had come from within the house, he had to have passed at least two guards, yet still he'd been offered no aid.

"You're hurt," Alex said softly, and he grimaced when he noticed how

Illythe's rumpled, pale robes glistened with dark patches under the contrived moonlight.

Illythe's eyelids fluttered briefly, and he dropped from his hands and knees to his side with a whimper. Without considering the possible consequences, Alex gathered Illythe into his arms, holding him gently against his chest, as he felt at the blood on Illythe's robes.

Thankfully, it was cool to the touch, so it wasn't very fresh. Still, there was a considerable amount—enough that whatever injuries he'd suffered must be extreme.

“Why won't you help him?” Alex hissed at the guard. The guard fixed him briefly with his bulbous eyes full of boredom, then stared at the opposite wall.

Infirmary? There had to be some kind of place here where they had at least a first aid kit, right?

Illythe was moaning softly and Alex pressed his lips to his forehead. It felt too warm. He doubted that he could carry Illythe, and that compounded the frustration.

“It'll be all right. I'll be right back.” Alex reassured Illythe as he gently lay him down. He meant to head to the washroom at the end of the hallway, but another guard moved past him, shoulder-checking him hard into the wall.

“Ow—hey—!” Alex caught himself, and turned to see the guard bending down and hoisting Illythe over his shoulder like he was a sack of grain.

“Be careful!” Alex protested in Illythe's defense, as the samurai turned back around.

Illythe retched and coughed, and the wet sound of liquid splattering across the floor echoed in the corridor as he vomited. The guard carrying him did not pause, but shuttled him down the corridor and out of sight. It somewhat reminded Alex of an aggravated owner being sent to retrieve a wayward pet.

Alex stared after them, then his gaze dropped to the fresh, dark puddle on the floor. More blood?

The first guard gave him a shove, and pointed to the puddle.

Rubbing his shoulder, which would surely bruise, Alex glanced back down the dark hallway one last time, then went to get some towels to clean up the mess.

Chapter Sixteen

The next morning, Alex didn't feel like eating, and he certainly didn't feel like dealing with Mel, so he skipped breakfast. He'd tried to get close enough to Illythe's room to see if he was even there—or still alive for that matter, but he was threatened again by Illythe's guard.

Alex went to the gym to try and burn off some of the anxiousness he was feeling rather than succumb to his sense of dread.

He had to get them out of here. He had to get Illythe out of here. If there was a way, he would find it. He would do whatever he could to help Illythe acclimate to a new society where he could be free. It was a selfish fantasy where Alex was the hero, but he had to do his best to try and believe it was possible, or else they were all doomed. Learning that the Scion was Gengein stacked the odds very firmly against Alex completing this mission. Should he manage to get a signal out, even if half the Federation fleet showed up—depending on the number of Gengein—they could be coming into a massacre.

No. He couldn't think about that. Think about Bradshaw and what he might have done wrong. Identifying the mistakes was a way to avoid making them all over again. Even as Alex rationalized this logic, he realized he was about to ignore it when the biggest mistake showed up behind him in the room.

“Here you are. Is everything all right, Alex?”

Illythe.

“I was concerned when you weren't at breakfast.”

“What?” Alex balked. Then he remembered that Illythe hadn't been at all aware of him last night. Perhaps it was better not to say anything for fear of saying too much.

Illythe came around to stand off to his right. Alex could see him out of the corner of his eye. Today he was wearing blue, and the color made his skin seem cool; like black stone. Alex had the overwhelming urge to touch it, and make him warm.

When Alex got up and approached quickly, he realized that Illythe could easily avoid him just as he noted that he didn't. They moved until Illythe's back was against the wall. His gaze was downcast, but Alex understood he was not being coy.

"I'm not him." Alex pushed his hands against the cool composite of the wall, trapping Illythe between his arms, but Illythe still wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I don't know what you—"

"Goddamn it, Illythe—look at me!"

Illythe's mirror-like eyes finally focused on Alex's face. Alex felt his chest tighten to see the fear and the longing there. *Was Illythe even seeing him?* Alex touched Illythe's cheek gently. He brushed away a blue-tinted tear with his thumb as it escaped to run down Illythe's cheek.

"I'm not Neil."

Illythe's eyes widened. His mouth opened without sound for a few tense moments before he asked, "How did you know—?"

"Kah likes to talk after a light nap." Seeing Illythe's reaction confirmed that Alex had struck a nerve that was still very raw. "Where are the cameras?"

Illythe glanced high up to the left and then lower to the right. Alex did a quick calculation. "We're not in range, are we?"

Illythe answered with a tiny shake of his head.

"Neil. He's who you see when you look at me," Alex said softly. He leaned closer to Illythe; so close, that he felt his ribs press against him with every nervous breath.

"Alex—it's too dangerous..." Illythe's voice was a pleading whisper, but he did not deny Alex's accusation.

"You loved him. The Scion saw him as a threat." Alex could see it all written in Illythe's expression. The confirmation was like a smack to the face. Alex was jealous of a dead man.

"Is that why the Scion beat you last night?"

Alex saw Illythe's dark skin turn nearly the color of ash as he paled. He caught Illythe as his knees buckled, then pulled him into an embrace.

"Illythe... I'm so sorry... please let me help you."

Illythe clung onto him, his solid body trembling. "Alex... I don't want you hurt."

"Denying me won't help... The longer I can't have you—the more I want you." The words slipped through Alex's lips before he'd realized he was

speaking. He heard Illythe's breath catch. Alex pressed forward with his hips, letting Illythe feel that he was hard, and understanding that Illythe wanted him too.

"We can't..." Even as Illythe said the words, his hands moved to Alex's hips, not pushing or pulling, just resting.

Alex brought his lips to Illythe's ear, having to rise up slightly on his toes to reach it. "Would you if we could?"

"Yes," Illythe said it so quietly, that Alex was only certain he'd heard it when he felt him nod.

At this point, Alex told himself he wouldn't care if Illythe saw Neil instead of him when they made love.

Alex slid one hand down and found Illythe's erection buried beneath his robes. He rubbed him through the smooth material and tipped his head up, brushing across Illythe's lips with his own.

Illythe uttered a small gasp, but he did not push him away this time. "Please," he whispered.

"Please what? Please, more? Please stop?"

"I... I don't know..."

Alex felt a drop of moisture form between their lips and realized it was another tear.

This was torture for Illythe. This was cruel. As soon as Alex realized it, he felt ill. Although he was reluctant, he stepped back, setting Illythe free, and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry. This wasn't fair of me."

"None of this has been fair... for any of us," Illythe said, but did not move.

"Will you tell me about Neil? What happened to him?"

In a way, Alex was relieved to see Illythe shake his head.

"No. Never."

Alex sighed and nodded, raking his fingers across his scalp. "I'm sorry, Illythe. I wish I could keep myself from putting you in this position. I'm going to take a shower." He turned, pulling his shirt off over his head.

Although Illythe hadn't fled this time, he had every reason to.

Alex took off his pants once inside the shower room, and stepped into the third stall, waving his hand in front of the sensor to get the water running. Although he should really be taking a cold shower, Alex cranked up the heat, maybe hoping to burn off some of the tension—sexual and otherwise.

The steam settled in a cloud between the tiled dividing walls, and Alex closed his eyes. Slicking his black hair back over his head, he let the mist from the shower wet his face. His cock was almost aching when he reached down to soap himself up. It took everything he had not to react in surprise when he felt a hand meet his from below.

Illythe. He was naked, his long white hair cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He looked up at Alex and raised a finger to his lips, gesturing silence. Alex didn't nod, but pretended to be going about his normal bathing routine, despite the fact that his heart was trying to punch its way out of his chest.

He swallowed hard and bit his cheek when one hand curled around his cock. It was going to be impossible to hide his reactions for long.

Alex crouched down, meeting Illythe face to face on the floor under the spray.

“Can the cameras see us here?”

Illythe shook his head.

Alex leaned forward on his arms, which forced Illythe to sit back, and he brushed a kiss to his neck. Illythe had a beautiful body—just as he'd guessed. He was thin, but sculpted by lean muscle under skin the color of night. Through his nipples were a set of silver rings that caught the dim light of the high frosted windows. His abs rippled down to the vee of his groin where he was hairless, but had an impressive cock. The deep violet head was also pierced; a silver loop that went down through the slit and came out through the skin on the underside of his head. It was very erotic, and Alex wondered if it had been attached for sexual purposes like those in Illythe's tongue, as decoration, or for control.

Illythe gasped and his cock twitched in Alex's hand when he touched it. A bead of pearly bluish precome formed at the tip, and Alex dipped his head to capture it with his tongue. It was very warm and slightly sweet. Even Illythe's skin had a different flavor. Smoky and rich, it reminded Alex of good coffee;

something he hadn't had since this undercover operation began. Definitely, it was a flavor he could get addicted to.

Illythe was clutching at Alex's shoulders, squeezing just shy of hard enough to bruise. He let out a small choking gasp when Alex took his cock into his mouth.

While his talent was nowhere near the skill level of Illythe's, with his forked and studded tongue, Alex knew he gave incredible head. He liked it, and especially liked to perform it on someone that he knew would never ask for it themselves; someone responsive like Illythe, who was now laying back on the smooth white floor, his hands over his mouth to stifle any sounds.

Alex took him deep, to the back of his throat, then pulled back, rolling the ring along his tongue. He tugged at it with his teeth, and Illythe's hips jerked up, the muscles of his thighs and abs tightening to steel.

With one hand still stroking him, Alex slid up Illythe's body. He relished the feeling of smooth, wet skin against his own, and how their colors looked together. Illythe's thighs and chest had developed a paler flush of red freckles, and it reminded Alex of the patterns of an exotic, rare animal. He could almost understand why someone would want to lock Illythe up and keep him all to himself. He wanted to see Illythe laid out for him, his hair mussed and body taut with need. He wanted to slide inside of him and hear all of the sounds he made when he came. And then, he wanted to hold him and make him feel cherished, rather than possessed.

Alex wanted all of these things—selfishness and benevolence—and he had to believe that there was a chance that he could have it all, even if it was only for one stolen moment at a time.

He pressed their cocks together, spanning them with one hand as he supported his weight with the other and began to move his hips.

One of Illythe's hands spread across his back as Illythe curled an arm around him, and the other moved down to join Alex's below. He met Alex's eyes, and Alex read the longing and disappointment in them.

This was it. All that they could spare, because someone was watching—waiting for Alex to rise after bending to lather up, waiting for Illythe to return to his room. Alex had wanted to make Illythe feel good. He'd wanted them to feel good together, but time was up.

With one last brush of his lips against Illythe's mouth, Alex released the

grasp that held them together, and slowly stood up. Illythe looked guiltily up at him and crawled out of the stall in order to avoid the camera's lens.

Chapter Seventeen

Two days later, when Illythe announced that he'd be taking Alex with him to the market district, Alex was surprised.

"What about Mel?"

"His client from last night asked for an extension," Illythe answered, putting up a parasol as he nodded to the Brecchian guards in escort.

Alex hoped that the extension was indefinite. Knowing that Mel saw him as competition had Alex looking around every corner, waiting for the little freak to stab him in the back. But from the way Illythe was hinting, Mel would be bought out before he got his chance to meet the Scion. Frankly, the little prick didn't have a clue how much better off he'd be if that was indeed the case.

Alex had been fortunate to have a reprieve from the admiral for a while, so he'd been doing more of the chores around the house, although thankfully, those chores did not include washing the sheets from the customer rooms. In that time, he and Illythe communicated through fleeting glances, or touches that seemed accidental to anyone who might be looking on. And Alex knew that someone was most definitely looking on. The nape of his neck prickled almost constantly, and he found himself turning often, only to realize the eyes upon him were the cameras'. Getting out beyond the wall would do him some good. Should he be lucky enough to stumble upon an active communications kiosk, there was the potential that it might do a lot of good.

Alex had not been to Omanai Station before his entrance to Willow House. Although it was a hotbed of criminal activity, it was outside the jurisdiction of the Federation, so their laws simply did not apply.

Aside from the occasional smuggler, it seemed that Alex was the only human here, and the locals were definitely taking an interest in him. It was hard not to, especially when he was wearing a collar and a leash and being led around by a jet-skinned geisha with snow-white hair. Illythe's eyes were lined with gold, and his lips painted to match. His hair was done up in some elaborate style and pinned with gold combs. The kimono he wore was bright red, stitched through with gold-colored threads in the shapes of cherry blossoms and willow branches.

Alex was also dressed in red, though in loose pants and a long-sleeved

tunic. On his feet he wore black thong sandals, which was better than the *geta* that Illythe seemed forced to wear. They were accompanied by four of the toad-faced samurai who growled, raising their guns at anyone who ventured too close.

In a way, this section of Omanai looked like any market street on any other planet. Shops and carts ran parallel to the wide strip of walkway down the center. Above them, instead of sky, were the black metal beams and girders of the ceiling, and at the end was a high graffiti-covered wall and an elevator to the floors above.

The air was filled with the combined cacophony of a multitude of alien languages and accents, and the low whir and steady rumble of ships arriving and departing. Every once in a while, Alex got a peek through the clear composite wall that ran behind the row of shops, and could see the landing bays.

The smells here were overwhelming too. The sharp whiff of fuel from some of the older spacecraft, the scent of sweat and food from alien cultures... all of it had the potential to be overwhelming, but Alex had already dealt with some overwhelming things lately.

"Just once," Illythe was muttering under his breath, "I would like to be able to walk outside without being the center of attention."

"Impossible." Alex smiled up at him. "You are too attractive to ever be inconspicuous."

"I find that unfortunate, Alex," Illythe answered with a weary sigh.

"Does the Scion make you dress up like that?"

Illythe looked around, apparently trying to find a particular shop. "Indeed. I am to represent and maintain the fantasy of Willow House when in the public eye."

"But you don't like it..." Alex filled in the words that Illythe hadn't said.

"No. My father was a warrior king. I am dressed like a woman to remind me that I am not."

He'd said it so casually that Alex had nearly missed the content of his words. "Warrior *king*?"

"Mm." Illythe nodded, and his gaze rested on a particular stall. "He's dead. They're all dead. Everyone but me."

Illythe had said it as though commenting on the unfortunate price of dry goods, or the weather. According to Kah, it had been thirty years ago. Still, Alex wondered what it must be like to go through life knowing that Illythe would never see another person like himself, or being literally chained to the one who had been responsible for that event.

There were a lot of unimaginable things Illythe must have dealt with during his lifetime. Alex felt it was best not to dig too many of them up. At least not until Illythe was somewhere far away, and safe from the Scion.

Illythe's pace picked up a little, forcing Alex to jog a few steps so he wouldn't be strangled by his collar. Although it looked like red satin, underneath, it was a metal band.

They arrived at a stall that was a hodgepodge of both items and individuals. One little Drusian man seemed to be running the thing, waving his stumpy arms around and using his long, prehensile tail to grab items off the high shelves behind him. Among the multitude of strange weapons, knickknacks, and appliances scattered on the counter was a very wicked-looking dagger. It had a long, curving silver-black blade that was partially serrated and set with barbs. Alex didn't get a good look at it because suddenly the crowd was surging, separating him from Illythe and making their samurai guards nervous. Three of the Breccian escorts were trying to keep people from getting too close to Illythe, who seemed determined to enter the fray, while one stood outside, now holding Alex's leash.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alex noticed a communications kiosk. He'd almost missed it. It was half-plastered over with fliers, and appeared to be in a state of disrepair. He inched a little closer to it, getting as far as he could until the leash kept him rooted. Twenty feet. If he could just get within twenty feet. Of course, by the look of the thing, it might not matter, but he had to try. This may be his only chance to get a signal out.

There was a commotion at the stall suddenly, and someone came running towards them. Alex stepped close enough to get his leash hung up in the runner's path, which resulted in the samurai's hold being broken, but not before Alex was nearly strangled. His throat felt bruised, and black spots danced at the edges of his vision. Alex let the guy shove him and he did his best to stumble and dive in the direction of the kiosk, skinning his knees and hands as he went down on the hard composite flooring. He prayed that he'd gotten close enough to activate a beacon somewhere in allied space.

“Alex, are you all right?”

It was Illythe, his eyes wide as he crouched beside him.

“Uh, yeah... what happened? Who was that guy?” Alex blinked a few times, glancing at the kiosk behind Illythe.

“Thief. Pretty common here.”

Illythe helped Alex to his feet. He held his wrists gently, frowning down at the palms of his hands. “You’ve been hurt...” Illythe’s long fingers furtively caressed the backs of Alex’s hands.

“It’s nothing.” Alex’s eyes darted to their escorts and he frowned, realizing there was no way for him to touch Illythe back without notice.

Illythe’s hand on his cheek startled him and Alex met Illythe’s eyes.

“It’s good that you didn’t hurt your face,” Illythe said, as he ran his thumb over Alex’s lips.

Alex flicked at it with his tongue, and saw how Illythe wet his own lips in response. Too soon, they were again surrounded by their guards, and Illythe took Alex’s leash, turning away.

“Did you get what you came for?” Alex glanced back at the stall. It seemed that the chaos had died down a little.

“They didn’t have it,” Illythe said, averting his eyes. “Let’s go.”

How utterly appropriate. Illythe couldn’t have asked for a more obvious sign.

The rare junk dealer was not a stall he visited often. It was normally the apothecary that took up his few coveted trips off the house grounds—purchasing condoms, lubrication, medicines... But he’d heard a rumor—one of the clients had mentioned a strange blade that the junk dealer had acquired recently. No one used blades for protection anymore; it was pointless when there were such a prevalence of guns.

Whether it was authentic or just a copy didn’t matter. The blade was a ritual knife from his own people. He recognized the rare metal immediately, and the mark on the blade... was that his family’s symbol? It was familiar, but it had been so long since he’d seen his written language or heard his native tongue, that he couldn’t know for certain.

The price being asked was exorbitant, though even if he could have afforded the cost, Illythe would have had to steal it. The guards would not let him have such an item. Even the decorative katanas found around Willow House were too dull to draw lines in the dirt.

Illythe expected that he'd be caught, but another thief had chosen just the right moment to make his own move, and had made off with something far more valuable than an overpriced, decorative dagger.

Illythe sat in his hidden spot in his room and removed the blade from the deep sleeve of his kimono. He was fortunate that it hadn't cut through. The weapon gleamed in the red glow of the room, coloring the metal like blood, and Illythe's own heart pounded in response. The Scion's blood was not red. It was ichorous black. Illythe only remembered this from his few rebellions as a youth—when he'd bitten, punched, or kicked the creature that had explored his body without permission. And in return, he was touched more—harder—painfully until he was nothing but a whimpering lump of clay to be molded around the Scion's cock.

Illythe drew his finger down the edge of the blade, raising a line of blood. He watched it bead deep crimson for a moment, before he sucked on the cut. Then, he stashed the weapon away under his cabinet, turning the handle so it would be easy to grab when the time came. That time would be soon. But first, he had something very important to do.

Chapter Eighteen

The atmosphere around Willow House had been growing steadily heavier since Bryant's death. Except for the few clients that already had appointments, there were no more groups coming in. After Mel's contract was indeed bought out, Illythe closed the house temporarily. It was probably a good idea, and Alex wondered if it was standard practice. The guards were jumpy, and it would be bad for business if a customer were shot.

As soon as they had returned from the market, Illythe disappeared to his own chambers, and it took everything Alex had not to follow him. That brief contact in the market had made him desperate for more, though he knew it was something he couldn't have. Before he'd fled, Illythe had promised to come talk to him this evening. He seemed as eager to leave this place as Alex, and he claimed he had a plan.

In the meantime, Alex had no clue whether or not he'd gotten a signal out. Either way, sitting around and hoping the cavalry might come was as foolish as hoping that the Scion would have a change of heart.

Alex hadn't realized he'd dozed off until he woke up to the soft reverberation of his door opening and then sliding closed along its track. He opened his eyes and leaned up on his elbows, but the room was too dark to see anything.

"Illythe?"

He heard a quick rustle of fabric, then Alex felt the bed depress. *Yes. Illythe.* He had only a moment to process the heated brush of a bare thigh against his own before Illythe was over him, on his hands and knees, his long snowy hair settling softly on the pillow when he leaned down.

"Alex." Illythe brushed his fingers over Alex's lips. "Tonight this all ends. I have a plan."

Alex's hands moved up, sliding over the smooth, firm skin of Illythe's waist. "Tell me."

"Later... first, there is something I need to do."

Alex felt the caress of heated breath a moment before Illythe's mouth slanted over his own. The kiss was hot, needy, and surprisingly unskilled. There

was a delightful innocence about it—Illythe was not a man who kissed often, and it was flattering to realize that Alex was one of the few whom he'd ever kissed.

Alex opened his mouth, inviting Illythe's tongue inside, caressing the studs with his own, and dipping into the vee of the shallow fork. He coaxed a moan from Illythe; the sound was a soft vibration through his body, thrumming through to Alex's core.

“Ungh, god...” Alex arched his neck, breaking the kiss as one of Illythe's hands burrowed beneath his underwear and gave him a gentle squeeze.

Without moving his hand, Illythe began to work his way down Alex's body; his skin sliding hot and smooth against him. Alex threaded his fingers through the silk of Illythe's white hair. The sensation of it was like the fur of some exotic animal. He imagined being bound with it, wrapped in the webbing, and sensuously devoured.

Alex shuddered as Illythe's forked tongue laved one nipple, teasing it with his line of studs. At the same time, Illythe's hand worked on Alex's cock. He moved his thumb along the groove of his glans, and gently teased the slit by inserting the pointed tip of his fingernail.

The sensation nearly caused Alex to jump out of his skin. Although not painful, it was incredibly intense; reminiscent of that raw feeling that came after orgasm. Illythe soothed the sting by replacing his nail with his tongue, moving one satin point just inside the opening before taking Alex fully into his mouth.

Alex raised his hips, tensing his buttocks to keep himself from thrusting inside that searing, wet heat. He needed to hold out—he needed more, and Illythe's skilled tongue had only ever allowed him to last for so long before pushing him fiercely over the edge.

“Want you...” Alex grunted, barely able to get out the words. He curled his body and brought Illythe's face up from his lap, tasting himself as he pushed his tongue into Illythe's mouth, taking back his control with a kiss.

Illythe responded and crawled back up; pushing Alex's shoulders gently back into the pillow.

Was this it? Were they finally going to go beyond the few stolen moments outside the camera's lens? Alex wished that their first time wasn't in such darkness. He wanted to see Illythe's body, watch pleasure flush his skin. *Next*

time, Alex told himself, and there *would be* a next time—many, if he had anything to say about it.

Illythe's erection pressed between them, leaking hot beads of precome from the tip, and searing Alex with the metal ring that absorbed the rising temperature of their bodies. He painted his arousal along Alex's belly as he rubbed against him, his kiss growing more desperate. Those long, thin fingers pressed hard into Alex's skin, clinging to him as though he was afraid he would fall.

But Alex never wanted to let him go. He slid his hands down over Illythe's back, feeling a pattern of scars that seemed too ornate to be randomly laid. Although curiosity nearly made him linger, he reminded himself that there would be time later—when they were safe on a Federation vessel, headed back to Earth.

Alex's hands continued lower, his fingertips gliding again over smooth skin. He cupped the firm globes of Illythe's ass in his palms, kneading the muscles.

Breaking off, Illythe sat up, and a small whine of frustration escaped Alex. *No—not again*. He couldn't bear Illythe running away as he usually did when things became too heated.

And then, Alex felt Illythe's long fingers encircle him, rubbing the wet tip of his cock around the tight entrance to his body.

“God... yessss...” Alex hissed as he breached the barrier, gritting his teeth to keep from thrusting upwards and impaling Illythe forcefully on his cock.

Illythe opened to him; his body gripping and sucking him into a heated embrace. Alex felt several rings of muscle circle and slide down the length of his shaft until he was seated deep inside, up to his balls.

Incredible. Although Illythe's body was alien, Alex felt as though they fit together perfectly. Alex mapped each line and curve of Illythe's body with his fingers and his mouth; drawing from him shudders and soft moans of pleasure as Illythe began a slow rocking rhythm with his hips. And Alex rose to meet him, catching occasionally the silvered outline of his graceful neck as Illythe threw his head back and began to ride him harder.

Alex felt his orgasm building, as the tension curled tighter at the front of his pelvis.

“Illythe—I'm going to come...” Alex warned through gritted teeth, as his fingers tightened around Illythe's slim hips.

“Come,” Illythe urged, breathless, and he pressed one hand on Alex’s chest for leverage. He raised himself higher, until only the head of Alex’s straining cock was inside of him, then he slammed himself down hard.

And he did it again and again; his movements becoming faster, harder, more desperate, until Alex found himself digging his short nails into Illythe’s smooth flesh and pulling him down as he thrust inside.

He felt Illythe’s orgasm a moment before his own. The heat inside his body became molten, drawing and locking Alex within, and a tremble moved through his taut body. Wet heat streaked across Alex’s belly and chest, and then he felt only the fire of his own climax ripping through him.

Alex crested; every muscle in his body locked as his orgasm traveled through his spine and burst out of him in a jolt of lightning. He thought he cried out, but currently all sensation was focused on that part of his body seated deep inside of Illythe, filling him with pulse upon pulse of wet heat.

“Illythe!”

Alex clung to him as Illythe stretched out over his body, kissing his neck and jaw through an orgasm that he thought might never end.

But it did, and just before the aftershocks set in, Alex felt the wetness of tears on his cheek, then the sting of a needle under his jaw.

Coolness flooded his veins, bringing behind it a soft cloud of oblivion.

“I love you, Alex.” Illythe’s voice was somewhere, far away. “Please always remember that you were the one who finally made me free.”

The long white curtain of Illythe’s hair settled around Alex as he was kissed with all of the passion of a man going off to war.

“No... Illythe... why...” Alex struggled to speak as his tongue turned to sand. He tried to fight the drug’s effects, but his thoughts were slowly falling away, dissolving, and becoming liquid like his muscles.

He lost consciousness with the taste of Illythe in his mouth.

Chapter Nineteen

Illythe knew that the monster would be coming for him. Although the Scion wouldn't have been due back for several days normally, Illythe had prompted his early return by disabling the cameras.

Illythe was on the small couch in the center of the room with only the red lanterns glowing. He had not primped as would have been expected of him when his master came, and he wore his *yukata* without a sash keeping it closed. The Scion would not know this until he arrived. He also would not know that four of his hired samurai guards were dead, and that Illythe had siphoned off some of the house profits to pay the rest to leave. With any luck, neither of them would live long enough for the Scion to find this out.

Nor would the Scion live to kill Alex. Illythe had taken Alex through the tunnels to the landing bays, and hidden him in plain sight. The dock where he'd placed him was the only one large enough to hold a Jowan military vessel. He'd paid the remainder of the house profits to a dockworker in exchange for him keeping an eye on Alex until Admiral Kah could arrive.

It had been so difficult to leave Alex. There was so much they hadn't shared, but what love Alex had shown him in the short time they had been together was more than Illythe had known in a lifetime. Kah would be good to Alex, take care of him. Of all of the Scion's associates, Kah was the most honorable. He would not betray this arrangement to the Scion. Alex would be safe.

This time, Illythe would not fail the man he loved.

"The cameras—who has disabled them?"

The Scion's body filled up the exterior doorway; the fleshy tendrils around his head were tipped poisonous blue and waving wildly.

More frightening than a Gengein's smile was a Gengein's rage.

Illythe swallowed back the gall burning up his throat, and tensed his muscles to keep himself from cowering—from scrambling to please his angry master.

He flinched when a tall cabinet near the door was hurled across the room. It bounced off one of the bedposts, breaking it, and landing with enough force to

make the floor tremble and the glassware nearby rattle.

“I said—”

“I believe I must have disabled them... Scion.” Two very serious infractions for a slave: interrupting the master in mid-sentence and denying him his honorific. Although Illythe had been allowed this freedom on occasion, to do so when the Scion was already angry was either impetuous or stupid. *Or performed by someone who was not afraid to die.*

Thoughts rose in his mind: of saving Alex, of what he should have done to save Neil but hadn't, and how by remaining alive, Illythe had disgraced his people. The idea of making it all right eased him into a state of punishing calm.

Behind his back, hidden by the cushions, Illythe flexed his fingers around the hilt of the ceremonial dagger. He'd initially thought of bringing it to the bed to try and kill his master while in the throes of passion—but frankly, Illythe wasn't in the mood to be willingly violated by this monster tonight. He wanted to die with Alex's taste in his mouth, and the imprint of their first, and final, lovemaking on his flesh.

The Scion narrowed his two sets of yellow eyes at Illythe. “You believe you disabled them for what reason, Illythe?” His voice was low, but edged with a serration that threatened to rip Illythe to pieces.

“I believe it is because I am tired, Scion. I am tired of being watched. I am tired of being yours.” Illythe did not lower his gaze. For this moment, he felt a sense of completion, a sense of power. He'd said the words he'd been too afraid to say out loud for many years. It was a good valediction.

Heat preceded the Scion's rapid approach. As ready as Illythe thought he'd been for it, those thick fingers around his throat sent him into a state of panic. He released the blade as he was lifted into the air, kicking and struggling to breathe.

“I should put you to your final rest then? Is that what you seek?”

The voice echoed oddly in his brain and Illythe realized that he was close to passing out. Already, his vision was distorted by the black haze filling his brain. No—he couldn't. If the Scion left this room, he would see what had been done—he would find Alex and he would tear him apart. Tears spilled from Illythe's eyes with the memory of watching Neil violated and beaten before him... how Neil had looked to Illythe for help, and how Illythe had been helpless to do anything but watch...

In his neck, Illythe felt something pop, and tasted blood.

No. He would not let Alex suffer like that. He would not let Alex die at the hands of this monster.

Illythe focused what little strength he had remaining, and delivered a kick to the Scion's midsection. The monster roared in anger and hurled Illythe's body against the sofa, sending the furniture toppling.

The blade slipped from under the cushion, but remained out of the Scion's range of sight. Illythe stared at it, trying to will any stores of power he had to his muscles.

It was difficult to breathe; the Scion had crushed something enough to damage his trachea. When he swallowed, it felt like his throat was being cut, and his respiration was reduced to quick, sharp gulps of air. Although Illythe's species could heal quickly from most injuries, he believed he would not survive any given to him tonight. As long as he could remain breathing long enough to do what he had to do, that was all that mattered.

Illythe remembered his father then. A proud warrior, he'd fought hard to save his people and his only child. He'd fought even as his body was charred and mangled by bursts from plasma rifles, even as he'd been blinded and broken beyond recognition. Illythe used to think that his father's death had been in vain, because in the end, his successor, his little prince, had been reduced to an obedient whore. But now, he thought he understood. His father had loved him enough to fight for him, and that kind of love knew no fear.

It was fear that had kept Illythe bound to obey, and despair that had sapped his will to fight. For nearly three decades, he'd groveled, and been fucked, to keep this creature content. He'd kidnapped, and all but murdered, innocent young human males for the Scion's pleasure. For the first time since becoming a slave, Illythe was not afraid to displease his master—he was not afraid to die if it meant saving the life of someone he loved.

Illythe closed his mind to the pain; he closed his mind to fear, and let his warrior's vengeance take hold.

The Scion lunged towards him, reaching out with his arms and the waving cords of flesh around his head. Illythe rolled, grabbing the hilt of the dagger as he did. Bits of pale fluff yawned from a rip in the cushion as he yanked the blade free. He squeezed his eyes shut, bringing the blade down in an arc as the Scion came within striking distance.

Blood rained down across his torso accompanied by bits of flesh and bone. He'd taken several fingers off of one of the Scion's hands, and severed a few of the Scion's waving appendages on one side of his head.

He'd done it—Illythe had hurt a creature he'd come to believe was indestructible.

His heart stuttered in his chest as he fought the dichotomy between his training to comfort, and his urge to kill. The young warrior prince howled in triumph, yet the slave pleaded forgiveness. Illythe swayed, and tears flowed from his eyes even as he licked his master's blood from where it had spattered on his lips.

There was a moment of stunned silence that seemed to stretch into countless hours. Master and slave locked eyes, and it was all Illythe could do not to drop to his belly and beg that his punishment be swift. Before he could consider it further, the Scion roared and came at him again.

Illythe anticipated the hand going towards his testicles and he smashed the hilt of the knife against the Scion's wrist, breaking through the fragile bone that stuck, jagged now, through open flesh. The Scion used his remaining hands to grab Illythe by his hair, and the appendages coiled around his arm holding the blade.

Illythe struggled against the bonds that tried to force the weapon from his hand. The ropes of flesh squeezed and twisted until his fingers went numb, as muscle and tendons were stretched beyond their range.

Illythe gave a silent cry as his wrist was snapped, and the dagger fell out of his grip, landing with a heavy thump on the rug. In the past, this would have put an end to Illythe's fighting. He would have realized that he couldn't win, and become a limp doll for the Scion to beat and rape until he felt that Illythe was effectively subdued. And then, the Scion would comfort and care for his wounds. He would take him apart, only to put him back together: being killer, doctor, lover, and father all at the same time. It was those times when Illythe lost sight of anything but relief.

But for once in his life, he was seeing things very clearly.

Illythe thrust out his other arm, fighting through the tentacles that grabbed at him and peeled the skin away from muscle and bone as he powered through. He found two of the Scion's pus-yellow eyes and, with his fingers, drilled through them like overripe fruit, digging in by hooking a nostril with the talon on his thumb.

The Scion made a horrible shrieking sound and dropped Illythe. He landed like a bag of rattling bones on the rug, limp and weak from the exertion. The secretions from the Scion's tentacles burned through his skin, and Illythe felt like his brain would explode inside of his skull from the pitch of his master's pained cries.

He had to get to him. Illythe had to cradle and comfort his master, then appreciate his recovery by letting his master take out revenge for his pain on his precious slave's body...

Illythe choked on the bile rising to his throat. Blackness was starting to close in as his brain blinked through waking nightmares and memories. He was losing his faculties, and knew that it was only a matter of time before he passed out completely. And then, the Scion would go after Alex...

Through the tunnel of waning awareness, Illythe felt around for the knife, using the elbow of his broken arm to crawl towards it, *like the worm that he was*.

He'd only just brushed the hilt with the tips of his fingers when the Scion grabbed him by one leg and dragged him away.

The shrieking had stopped. Illythe's head became clear enough for him to twist and level a kick at the bloody mess of the Scion's face. Unfortunately, the Scion was now expecting his disobedience and the tendrils of flesh curled around his calf before he could deliver the blow. They began to coil in opposite directions, peeling back his flesh and smearing the raw nerves with stinging acid.

He met the condemning gaze of one of the Scion's remaining eyes through the black streaks of blood on his face, and Illythe's own blood turned to ice. The Scion was going to kill him. It was going to be painful. He knew this without question, regardless of whether or not Illythe managed to get in a killing blow himself.

No. He *would* get a killing blow. He couldn't let this creature live another day. They would die together as they had lived—bound in battle.

Illythe arched himself back, stretching his vertebrae until his spine popped. Already numb to the pain, he felt his femur dislocate from his hip as he forced himself beyond his body's range. And then, he felt the warm rubbery grip of his blade. Curling his numbing fingers around it, Illythe focused everything he had into delivering one last blow.

With a wail that was equal parts rage and grief, Illythe rolled forward, slamming down the dagger between the Scion's blinded eyes. Driving it into his skull, he heard the sickening, yet satisfying, crack of bone.

All at once, the Scion's body went limp, and Illythe dropped to the floor on his back with the weight of the creature on his legs.

Panting, Illythe lay there frozen, feeling the dampness of their mingled blood cooling on his body. He tried to hold his breath long enough to listen for the sound of his master's breathing.

Nothing.

It was a surreal sensation; the realization that he had taken the life of this creature who'd been his entire world. The Scion had loved him in his own way, and Illythe had loved him back, but in the way a beaten animal relies on his owner for the affection of a meal. He was sad, but not sorry.

Illythe caressed his master's bloody cheek. The air moving through his lungs became thinner and more difficult to take in as he laughed and cried simultaneously. He closed his eyes, waiting to see who would receive him in the afterlife—Neil, his father, or the Scion.

Chapter Twenty

Alex woke to bright lights flashing behind his eyelids.

“Alex...”

The voice was somewhat familiar. Alex struggled to place it as he wrestled himself back to consciousness.

Alex's tongue felt too thick in his mouth, and his skull was full of mud. He vaguely remembered being naked and in his own bed, but had no idea how much time had passed since Illythe had shot him full of sedative.

Illythe. You fucking noble, stupid creature. Thinking about it pushed Alex up onto his elbows, even before he could manage to open his eyes.

“Alex, what has happened? Illythe told me you were in danger...”

“Admiral Kah?” Alex's eyes flew open and rested on the Jowan's doggy face. He swallowed back the sick that had surged up his throat as he tried to keep the room from spinning.

“Where am I?”

“You're on board my ship. You were passed out, just inside the airlock. How did you get down here?”

“Illythe... shit...” More bitter taste in his mouth. Alex struggled to sit up, his head still spinning from whatever Illythe had put into his system.

“Son, maybe you should—”

“No! Goddamn it...” Alex's short fingernails pressed crescents into the padded table. He had no idea how much time had passed, but he did know that he wasn't going to leave without trying to get to Illythe. The thought that he might already be too late coiled hard and cold in his guts, but he pushed it aside.

“Please, Admiral... you have to help him. I know that you are loyal to the Scion but...”

“*P'sheetchi!*” Kah spat out one of the swearwords he'd taught Alex... the Jowan equivalent of *bullshit*, if he remembered correctly. “I have no loyalty to that monster. I told you, it was a business arrangement. What's this about helping Illythe?”

“Please... I think he’s going to try and kill the Scion... help me...” Alex pleaded, and shoved himself off the table. His knees buckled and he caught himself against the uniformed man. Despair flooded through him, leaking from his eyes as tears, as he clutched the Jowan admiral’s arms. “Please... I’ll do anything... you have to help me get to him...”

Kah’s jaw tensed and released. He glanced over his shoulder at someone Alex couldn’t see, then he returned his attention to Alex and offered a terse nod, holding Alex to help steady him.

“All right.”

“Thank you.” Alex nodded, barely able to get out the words.

The ship’s physician gave Alex a dose of something to help clear out the effects of the sedative, while a group of Jowan soldiers were assembled to go into Willow House. Alex took a shuddering breath. Illythe had to be alive—or he had to at least convince himself that there was a chance that he was. *Damn him. Why had he gone in alone?*

“Now I understand why Illythe was so adamant about me coming for you. Alex... if Illythe finally decided to try and kill the Scion, it’s unlikely that he succeeded...”

Alex could not respond with what was on his mind. “I appreciate your help very much, Admiral. As I said before, regardless of the outcome, I will pay you back... whatever you want.”

The thought of having to have sex with Kah in any way was barely tolerable. Much less so if it turned out that he was right, and Illythe hadn’t survived. Maybe just as bad, was the thought that Illythe had changed his mind completely, and decided to stay with that monster.

Kah moved forward and cupped Alex’s cheek with his hand. “We’ll talk about it later.” His voice was surprisingly soothing, and almost disturbingly father-like.

Alex offered a slow nod, watching Kah’s expression change to the hardness of an admiral as he moved away to address his men.

As Alex had suspected, there was a tunnel that went from the docks and came out just outside the high wall that surrounded Willow House.

The front gate was ajar, and that was surprising as well as concerning. *Where were the Brecchian samurai?*

The question was at least partially answered when Alex peeked through the opening and saw a dead house guard. Who, or whatever had killed it, had apparently done so with some measure of stealth. Alex could see no blood, nor did he notice the telltale scent of flesh burned by a plasma burst.

The group moved silently through the gate, many of the soldiers flanking the house to keep watch on the doors and windows.

Alex stumbled over a datapad left on the front porch. He picked it up and nearly dropped it when it activated.

Unencrypted account data and records from Willow House, left out where he'd be sure to find them.

Alex gritted his teeth. "Fuck, Illythe..."

"Interesting," Kah said, cocking his head towards the datapad. "May I?"

"All yours." Alex handed the device over. He was fighting to keep his cool.

Even though they tread carefully, once inside, each footstep seemed to echo on the paneled walls. Alex's ears filled with white noise to compensate for the overwhelming silence. Although the air was still, it felt charged, like the atmosphere just before a storm.

The group picked their way carefully through each room, following a large cyclops drone. They had encountered three more dead Brecchian house guards—two with broken necks and one with a severed spine, but as of yet, no signs of life and no Illythe.

The killing had appeared too subtle to have been done by Gengein. Alex felt his muscles turn to ice-cold lead. *A raid? Maybe some enemies of the Scion had attacked the house... or could it possibly have been Illythe?*

Alex remembered Illythe telling him that his father was a warrior king. Holding onto this possibility tightly, Alex prayed that if Illythe had done this, he'd also managed to do the same to the Scion and, more importantly, survived.

"You're very special to him," Kah said to Alex as he rose from examining the last dead samurai they'd found.

"Uh...?" Alex thought he'd had words to reply, but couldn't seem to make them come out.

“To Illythe. You know that, right?” Kah brushed his hands off on the front of his slacks and approached Alex, his expression unreadable.

“He’s very special to me,” Alex said, meeting Kah’s gaze levelly.

“Ah well, my loss I suppose.” Kah shrugged and smiled. “I hope so, at any rate.”

The Jowan’s smile faded. “The reason that I became involved with the Scion was because my people were being threatened by an enemy we couldn’t hope to defeat. I am not just a Jowan admiral, Alex. I am the Jowan Ambassador and Head of Council. With the Scion’s assistance in the matter, we were able to hold our enemies at bay. As collateral, he accepted some of our people as staff. I am certain you realized the cook at Willow House was Jowan.” Kah paused briefly and looked at Alex, obviously awaiting some response. When Alex nodded, Kah continued.

“I wasn’t pleased with the deal, but I had no other choice. I cared about the welfare of our people under the Scion’s employ, so I came to look in on them periodically. That’s how I met Illythe... Illythe eased my mind and cared for those I’d been forced to leave behind. I owe *him*... which is why there is nothing I will take from *you*.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? I don’t understand...”

“Politics, Alex. Politics are an ugly thing. Stronger than any man or army. For years I have wanted to help Illythe, but politics kept us bound to the Scion. We are not part of the Federation... too small for their notice.”

Kah held up the datapad again. “But this is going to make me a very rich man. And I’m certain the Federation will notice the Jowan people when they find out that I have the financial information and contact lists for some pernicious enemies. Will you help me present this evidence to your Federation?”

Alex nodded. “Of course, Admiral.” He was beginning to understand more now. If the Scion should happen to be alive, by helping Alex, Admiral Kah had just put his entire species at risk.

“And you think they will accept us under their protection as a sovereign race?”

“I can’t promise anything, Admiral, but I will do whatever I need to,” Alex pledged, “even if I have to pick up a gun and fight for you myself.”

Admiral Kah sighed and nodded with an appreciative smile. “Thank you, Alex. Now let’s locate Illythe.”

Slowly, each section of the house was verified to be empty of life, until finally, they reached that dark and silent corridor which lead to Illythe’s private chamber.

Kah waved his people into place and all of them gathered along the walls, weapons aimed. The cyclops drone hovered near the ornate double doors, ready to blast them open once the command was uttered.

Even with the doors closed, Alex smelled blood, and his heart dropped into his stomach.

“Alex.” Kah placed his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “Whatever we find in there...”

Alex again swallowed the burning lump that rose to his throat. “Let’s just get in there.” Whatever he found in there, he would have to deal with. Alex just wasn’t quite so certain that he could.

On the off chance that there was someone alive and armed in there waiting for them, the element of surprise was their best bet. The admiral quietly spoke the drone’s command line, and the armored sphere shot through the door latch, then barreled through the doors, opening them before the metal had even stopped sizzling.

When Alex stepped inside, the stench and sight made him heave.

“Gods...” Alex vaguely heard Kah exclaim behind him, but no gods of man or beast could account for the demon that lay dead, partially atop his obsidian-skinned angel, on the floor. Was that the Scion? Alex prayed silently that the monster was dead.

Alex’s imaginings of what a Gengein looked like were far tamer and less frightening than the reality. Part insect and part mythical sea-monster were the only comparisons for the wounded creature whose long tentacles of flesh were still wrapped loosely around Illythe’s arms and neck. A heavy blade—the blade Alex had seen in the market—protruded from the top of the Gengein’s skull.

Illythe was on his back. His white hair was spread out around him and streaked with gore. The monster was sprawled across his lower body, slicked with black oily liquid that Alex guessed was blood.

Alex ran to Illythe, collapsing on his knees beside him. He began to try and shove the monster off of him, swallowing a sob of frustration.

“Illythe...” Alex’s voice cracked as he continued to struggle with the beast. He couldn’t tell how badly Illythe had been injured, or if he was even breathing. The Gengein was too heavy—too much for him to move by himself.

Alex appreciated the others coming to help, because he was unable to find his voice to ask them. As each section of Illythe’s body was revealed, Alex’s hope that they might still be in time to save him dwindled. One arm was badly broken, the bone and the raw red muscle exposed, garish against the black of Illythe’s skin.

Skin Alex had touched not so long ago...

“Goddamn you, Illythe...” Alex choked out a sob. Illythe’s elegant throat was covered with welts and contusions. He’d been strangled, and from the looks of things, some traumatic damage had been done. There was blood running from his nose and glistening at the corners of his lips. Alex covered his face with his hands as a few tears fell onto those lips, mingling and mixing pink with the blood.

He’d seen death before. Over the years, he’d lost a few good friends and a close coworker. It hurt. It always hurt, but nothing had ever hurt quite as badly as this.

“Goddamn you...”

Illythe’s silver eyes flickered open and they blinked up at the ceiling. Silver-blue tears streaked down his temples as Illythe gasped and then struggled to breathe. When Illythe rolled his head towards him, Alex wondered whom he saw.

“...lex...” Illythe’s voice was barely a graveled whisper, but Alex heard him.

Chapter Twenty-One

It had taken six weeks of submersion therapy to administer the proper treatments and repair Illythe's injuries, but he'd survived and insisted on keeping the scars to prove it.

Alex thought that the addition of the scars did nothing to detract from Illythe's good looks, and if anything, attracted more attention to him—as if a six-foot-five black-skinned angel with snow-white hair was not uncommon enough on Earth—or anywhere, for that matter. Especially one who now dressed in a manner that left no doubt as to his strength and sex.

As Illythe had been recuperating, Alex returned to Omanai Space Station to witness the Pleasure District—specifically Willow House—being razed. Everything was leveled to the decking and the fake trees were sent off to be recycled somewhere. The Scion deserved no monument for his cruelty.

Alex's successful mission broke open hundreds of cases all across the Federation's jurisdiction. The Scion had been involved in everything from illegal prostitution, to drug smuggling, to genocide. And his records of clients read like a most-wanted list.

Because of this, Alex had been offered some very high honors—Human Council Representative among them—but frankly, he was ready to retire. All of it felt too much like prostitution, and as he'd told Illythe, he'd been trying to get away from that lifestyle.

Illythe, too, had achieved an uncomfortable level of celebrity. He was the only one of his kind, and the one who had killed the Scion to protect the man he loved. Thankfully, Illythe shied away from the limelight as much as Alex. Let the myriad of actors cast to play his part in the movie adaptations absorb all of the fame. Not one of them, however, could ever hope to be as amazing as the real thing.

Today, all of that *amazing* was about to be Alex's for the rest of his life—not as a slave, but as a bonded mate—in a ceremony practiced by Illythe's people—the *Suujarin*.

The bond truly lasted for a lifetime. When one mate died, the other followed voluntarily. That meant that Illythe would potentially be giving up close to a century of his own life to be with Alex. When he'd first learned this, Alex had

tried to argue, but realized if the situation were reversed, he would maintain the tradition gladly.

Alex wore a more traditional human tuxedo for the ceremony; white and tailored perfectly to his physique. Illythe had found someone to make him an outfit that resembled the costume worn by the Suujarin for this occasion. His long hair was plaited into a series of tiny braids woven through with gold thread and strung with beads. His arms and legs were crisscrossed with bands of gold that made up the lacing on his high sandals and fingerless gloves. The rest of the garment was white; an open-back halter that showed off his tribal scar pattern, and a loincloth that hung to the floor in the front and the back, decorated with patterns of more gold thread. It was definitely making Alex think about the second half of the ceremony—the bit done in private.

They stood together, face to face, with a small group of witnesses watching them speak their pledges to one another, sealing them publicly by piercing a set of matched rings through the cartilage of one ear. Recognizing the human tradition, they also exchanged wedding bands; Illythe having only three fingers wore his on the center digit.

When the ceremony was finished, Alex was eager to get on with part two, but decorum—and a Jowan admiral—got in his way.

“Not so fast.” Admiral Kah held up his hand. He was fumbling with a recorder unit, trying to program it and hold a champagne flute at the same time. He was dressed in civilian clothes—Earth civilian clothes; a garish red tuxedo that he'd picked up after their visit before the Federation Representatives. Things had gone remarkably well; it hadn't hurt that the human ambassador had a soft spot for underdogs... and possibly dogs in general. The Jowan Council couldn't have asked for a more sympathetic audience.

“Let me see.” Kah's date—an attractive young human male named Josh, who'd fit Kah for his tux—took the device. As with most alien species, Kah had no clue about human fashion, what went together, or why that should matter. He wore what he liked. Apparently, what he liked in a tuxedo were ruffles, and Josh had given them to him in a Hawaiian print. For the admiral, it was true love at first sight.

Alex figured that Josh had seen Kah undressed, so he knew what he was getting into. *More power to them.*

They held the ceremony in a hotel suite, and Alex looked longingly at the

door that led to the bedroom as he slid his arm around Illythe to pose for yet another picture.

“All right,” Josh said, setting the device free.

Kah tramped over to them and wormed his way between them both, then grinned at the floating recorder.

“Don’t blink,” Alex said through his teeth to Illythe as he smiled for the camera, “I don’t know if I can hold out for another picture.”

One aspect of tradition they skipped was having their guests wait outside while they consummated their union during the second part of the ceremony. Since neither of them was a bride in the traditional sense, there was no need to prove chastity with a stained bed sheet (or whatever it was that they did). When he’d attended these ceremonies on his home planet, Illythe had been too young to be allowed to stay after part one, so he and Alex agreed it was fine to make it up as they went along. Aside from that, Alex’s experiences of having sex for an audience were now, and would remain, in the past.

“Alex... I’m wondering if you might indulge me...”

They had finally made it into bed together and had made love once. Well, they’d had a quickie with Illythe bent over the bathroom sink because Alex hadn’t been able to wait a second more.

Alex propped his head up on one hand as he watched Illythe sit up, the covers pooling around his slim hips.

“Anything. What is it?” Alex smiled when Illythe shivered from his fingers lightly stroking over one thigh.

“You should hear me out before you agree,” Illythe cautioned. He ran his long fingers through his hair with a sigh, shaking loose a few more braids. “I have never been the one inside.” Illythe said it quietly and averted his gaze as if he was embarrassed by this confession.

Alex chuckled softly and reached up, touching Illythe’s cheek. “So it seems one of us is a virgin.”

“Does that count?” Illythe raised his silver eyes once more to meet Alex’s gaze.

“I think so. It’s kind of hot to know I’ll be your first.” Alex winked, and

moved his hand down, curling it around Illythe's cock. It immediately began to stiffen in his grasp. He ran his thumb over the silver ring, moving it through the glans.

Illythe hissed, and his hips rose as he closed his eyes.

"C'mere." Alex rolled onto his back and propped his head up against the pillows, patting his chest. He smiled at the flushed red pattern that washed over Illythe's cheeks and down his torso as Illythe straddled him. Alex took him into his mouth.

It had been a while since Alex had been a bottom—by choice, anyway, and Illythe was proportionately large, so Alex reached down to prepare himself a little while he sucked Illythe's cock, inserting his own fingers. He'd almost forgotten how it felt, and nearly lost himself to the sensation when he tasted the salty tang of Illythe's precome on his tongue.

"Alex—I'm getting too close..." Illythe gasped, his fingers gripping the headboard.

Alex released Illythe from the heat of his mouth and removed his own fingers. *Damn, that was close.* "Okay. Lie down."

Illythe lay down on his back, his cock beating against his belly as Alex reached over for the bottle of lubricant and slicked them both up. He planted his feet on either side of Illythe's hips and reached back between his legs, curling his fingers around Illythe's cock.

Illythe's hands made fists on Alex's thighs.

"Ready?" Alex asked, although he was asking himself as much as Illythe.

Illythe nodded quickly, his sharp teeth pressed against his bottom lip.

Alex held the head of Illythe's cock against his lubricated hole and slowly guided him in. The stretching felt like a bruise, but the deeper Alex took Illythe inside, the more relaxed he became. Alex had refrained from anal sex mostly because he never found it anything but uncomfortable. But as before, when they had first made love, Illythe's body fit to his in a way he couldn't imagine was possible. At least it had never been possible with another human being.

"I'm going to move now," Alex said, once Illythe was seated completely. Illythe's only response was a moan and his fingers spreading out across Alex's thighs.

The piercing through Illythe's cock pressed against Alex's prostate as he raised and lowered his hips, sending jolts of ecstasy that shot tingles all the way through to his fingertips. "Oh my god—" Alex groaned and wrapped his arms around Illythe when he sat up to capture his mouth.

The height difference worked perfectly in this situation. There was no straining to maintain their kiss as Alex rode Illythe.

Illythe rubbed his back, raising his hips to meet every downward thrust until finally, Alex sensed they were both going to come. Illythe came first, crying out against Alex's lips as he filled him. The sensation of his body flooded with warm, wet heat, and the ring grinding up against that sensitive bundle of nerves inside of him, soon sent Alex over the edge as well.

His body locked around Illythe, and Alex came with a shout, slicking both of them with his orgasm and continuing to come even after he'd emptied his balls.

"H-holy hell..." Alex went limp in Illythe's arms as his bones turned to jelly.

Illythe kissed his temple and lay them both gently back onto the mattress.

Alex muttered softly in protest as Illythe's cock slipped out, leaving him feeling surprisingly empty. That position was good—too good. Too much of that and both of their lifespans would be cut short.

"Thank you, Alex." Illythe brushed his lips against Alex's cheek. "You have honored me, and I am content."

Alex chuckled. "I would have hoped you'd be more than content. Christ, Illythe... that was... incredible."

"Do you prefer it?"

Alex didn't miss the tinge of disappointment in Illythe's tone. "It's all great, but I am hoping that we can save that for special occasions... like when I don't need to use my legs the next day." He raised his head, smiling down into Illythe's face and was warmed by his smile in return.

"Thank you, Alex. I'd never expected any part of my life would be so happy." Illythe's eyes were shining in the dim lighting of the room.

"That makes two of us." Alex brushed his lips along the corner of Illythe's mouth. "I love you, Illythe."

“Alex... you too.” Illythe sighed, and Alex saw that his eyelids were starting to droop.

“Sweet dreams.” Alex kissed each closed lid and settled himself down to sleep.

Illythe felt the kiss, but was too tired to respond. For the first time since he was a child, he knew what it was to be safe, and it was all because of this beautiful human who had risked everything to come back for him.

“You’re happy now,” the dream-memory of Neil said. For once, in the dream he was alive and smiling.

“I’m happy,” Illythe confirmed, smiling in return. He watched Neil’s image begin to flicker.

“I can go then. I know you’ll be all right.”

With that, the memory of Neil faded, taking with him every part of the guilt and hurt that his dying had caused Illythe.

There would always be a place in Illythe’s heart where Neil remained, but the love now belonged to Alex.

Illythe sighed, turning towards the brightness of his future, and felt those broken pieces of himself beginning to mend.

He was finally becoming whole.

The End

Author Bio

Lia Black tends to do everything the hard way; beginning with being born backwards into the world and now raising a pre-teen by herself in upstate New York. Her career choices are no less extreme, including occupations of fine artist, computer geek, firefighter, and mortician's assistant—just to name a few.

Black's creative mind has been lovingly described as a "glorious kaleidoscope of fuckeduppery". Her characters often suffer through the worlds she creates for them, which leaves them a little cranky and sometimes less lovable than others in a romance genre. Yet Black swears that someday, "there will be comedy".

Lia currently resides in upstate New York with her daughter, a mortgage, and three obnoxious cats.

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