



Bright Water  
Dark Sky

Augusta Li

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## BRIGHT WATER, DARK SKY

**By Augusta Li**

### 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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# BRIGHT WATER, DARK SKY

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## Photo Description

A digital painting of a very fit, moonlit man submerged to the waist in the ocean and with tentacles emerging around him.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*We're a fun loving people, a little blood thirsty, but what race isn't? We've discovered some humans have landed on our planet, not sure what they're expecting to find or what they're looking for. We guard our treasure well and the fun loving part notwithstanding we'll fight to defend what's ours. Amidst all this I'm trying to find my mate. He has to be somewhere.*

*Please no non-con.*

*Sincerely,*

*Elci*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction/futuristic, speculative fiction

**Tags:** space travel/exploration, scientist, tentacles, mermen-ish, interspecies, opposites, underwater, action/suspense/adventure, soulmates/bonded

**Word Count:** 39,650

# **BRIGHT WATER, DARK SKY**

**By Augusta Li**

## Chapter One

Varuna appeared, at first, as a sapphire glimmer, a twinkle on Second Lieutenant Sora Wakahisa's screen, so small and flickering he worried, irrationally, it might be brushed away like a grain of sand. Stiff and restless in the chair behind his instrument panel where'd he'd spent the better part of each day for almost six weeks, Sora sat transfixed, staring at the slowly growing blue orb until his vision blurred, because nothing else existed to distract his attention from the claustrophobic bridge and the bluish light that made his teammates look like corpses. Space was nothing like he'd imagined as a boy, watching movies, reading books, or climbing to the roof of his family's shabby home and squinting skywards to see the stars through the pallid glow of the streetlights. Instead of blinding clusters of stars and brilliant, colorful celestial events, dead space surrounded them most of the time. No one who hadn't experienced the nothingness could comprehend the vast distances between bodies in space, he thought, the aching, empty loneliness that mirrored the rest of his life too closely.

But Varuna—Varuna was beautiful, like a jewel floating in the blackness with its sun behind it, backlighting the planet. Sora had never imagined a blue so bright and pure, most vibrant along the edges of the sphere where its star's light danced. No clouds of pollution hung over the planet, just a few white wisps of cloud that made the wide expanses of surface water look—impossibly—even more blue. Sora sat straighter in his chair and leaned toward the monitor, as if getting closer to the screen would hasten their arrival to the planet.

This was the mission he had waited for his entire career, the one with the potential to make the struggle through basic training and the academy worthwhile—a mission with real potential for a scientific breakthrough, a significant discovery. The thought of being part of it, of something that could alter history, made his heart flounder. He and the rest of the crew had traveled to the limits of known space, to a system only unmanned exploratory vessels and the hopelessly lost had previously visited. But that wasn't what quickened Sora's breath and made the few hours left until their landing almost impossible to bear.

Finally, the *David Glasgow Farragut* entered Varuna's atmosphere. The planet filled Sora's monitor with blinding blue, mottled, darker where the water

was deepest, but otherwise unbroken. The exploratory vessels had recorded a world of water, with few land masses large enough to register in the footage they brought back. Sora had tried to imagine what an entire world of water might look like, but the reality dwarfed his visions, and he couldn't resist grazing his fingertips along the screen.

"Establishing orbit," said their pilot, Steven Bennett, a man who made up what he lacked in stature with ego and arrogance. He had a high, nasally voice that grated along the edges of Sora's nerves. Sora usually left when Bennett came into the rec room or the mess.

Captain Kgosi unbuckled her safety harness and stood. She was a distant woman, concerned more with her duty than the happiness of her crew, but Sora didn't mind. He felt secure under her command, as she'd been a captain for almost a decade—his CO for five of those years—and certain in following her orders. That was all that mattered.

"Maintain orbit while we scan for a place to land," she said in a soft but authoritative voice, a tone that invited no argument. "Wakahisa, have you prepared a preliminary report?"

"Yes, sir." Sora stood, took a handheld tablet from the cargo pocket of his black uniform pants, and pulled up the notes he'd made based on the data from the exploratory vessels, as well as the testimony of sailors who'd found themselves in this vicinity after losing their way. The science was fascinating, but he'd done his best to distill it into terms his crewmates would understand—something he didn't usually do well. He had to remind himself not everyone onboard had three doctoral degrees and studies in a dozen extraneous disciplines.

He began reading. "Varuna. A planet about a third the size of Earth, with a gravity of about 1.267 percent higher. You may or may not notice the effects. The most likely side effects will be fatigue and muscle soreness."

The ship's physician, an older man with thinning red hair called Elliot Bonham, spoke without standing up. "I've prepared an additive for the water rations that should help, and if it's worse than that, I have medication."

"The planet is also warm," Sora continued. "The average temperature during the day is at least forty-three degrees Celsius, and the humidity is between eighty and ninety percent, but setting our suits' temperature gauges before landing should prevent our becoming uncomfortable. Varuna rotates very slowly on its axis, so the period of daylight lasts approximately 30.14786



Earth days.” He turned to his instruments and quickly ran the equations. “Based on my calculations, we have about 4.797 days of daylight remaining until night falls on the planet.”

“That hardly matters,” said Eloryn, one of several Shieferian crew members. Like her countrymen, she was small—about the size of a human twelve-year-old—pretty, and androgynous with large eyes and skin so flawless Sora still couldn’t reconcile it with reality. Silvery-gold hair reached past her hips, and a clear mask covered her mouth and nose to feed her the higher levels of oxygen and helium native to her world.

“I agree,” said Nualyin, a Shieferian science officer who had worked closely with Sora on previous assignments. Nualyin had once expressed an interest in Sora, and while Sora admired the man’s intellect, he’d been unable to get past how young he looked physically. They’d kissed, but even though Nualyin was over two hundred years old, to Sora it had felt wrong kissing someone who looked barely out of their teens. Fortunately, they’d moved beyond their disastrous attempt at intimacy and established a productive professional relationship. His cold pragmatism often tempered Sora’s excitement and wild theories, and Sora broke him out of his comfortable routine and forced him to consider other solutions. Now Nualyin said, “It isn’t as though we don’t have the capacity to produce artificial light.”

Sora held up the hand not holding his tablet, one finger extended. “The darkness is not the issue. It brings with it storms, some of which can be quite severe. Satellites have recorded hurricanes of level sixty-four and above on the Beaufort wind scale. Because of the atmospheric pressure, and the drastic imbalance of heat and cold while one side of the planet is in darkness so long, the clash of heated and cold air can produce pressure fronts—”

“Understood, Wakahisa,” Captain Kgosi said, sounding tired. “Thank you for being so thorough. We will try to get what we need and avoid these legendary storms. What other obstacles might the crew face during data collection?”

“There are large and dangerous predators,” Sora said. “They resemble the aquatic mammals of Earth in size, and some of them hunt in groups. Also, evidence indicates there may be an intelligent race inhabiting the planet. Of course, we have no idea of their disposition or culture. The planet’s weather interfered with satellite data collection. If I were to theorize—”

“We’d be here for another two hours listening to shit with no relevance to our mission, and that most of us can’t even fucking understand. I’m a pilot, and

I don't speak geek," the pilot, Bennett, said, looking to the other crew members as he flashed his teeth in a grin. A scowl replaced his smile when no one joined in on his joke.

"A hostile native population is not something we should ignore," Nualyin said. "Particularly if they are an unknown. What do we know of their technology?"

"Very little," Sora said, focusing on Nualyin's purplish-blue-gray eyes that were, if not kind, at least not hostile and the closest to familiar among those around him. "Satellites recorded sources of heat and energy, almost certainly manufactured, but the natives were elusive. Almost certainly, an advanced society occupies this planet, but we have no idea of their physiology or cultural values. Obviously, they are not as advanced as either of our societies, or we would have seen evidence of cities and structures."

"We should proceed with caution, then," Nualyin said.

"Why?" Bennett interjected. "They don't have interstellar travel. They're basically primitive spear chuckers, if they exist at all. I don't see what we have to worry about. Provided we're not tip-toeing around like a bunch of pussies."

Captain Kgosi cleared her throat. "Lieutenant Bennett, I will not tolerate your insults against other cultures or against the female gender. Kindly keep your mouth shut unless you have something useful to add to this conversation. Do I make myself clear, pilot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Wakahisa, please continue."

Sora thought the captain looked tired; an ashen cast tinted her rich dark skin and her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, but she stood with her shoulders back and her chin held high, inspiring him to do the same as he continued with his report, describing all he had learned of the conditions on Varuna. As he spoke, his gaze wandered involuntarily back to the glossy cerulean marble on the screen above his station and he sighed with longing. "There could be life-forms down there unlike anything we've ever seen, a culture unlike anything we've imagined before. It only makes sense that they live beneath the surface of the water, and that's why we have no recorded evidence of their presence. Samples indicate a salinity similar to the oceans of Earth, Lazzo, Tetracaracco, and Shiefferria, which we know are capable of supporting a great variety of organisms. As we all know, Varuna is home to elements previously

undiscovered by our people, so it stands to reason its life-forms will be vastly different from those that evolved on our worlds.”

“An excellent segue into the reason for this mission,” Nualyin said, touching Sora’s elbow in subtle apology for the interruption. He pressed some buttons on Sora’s instrument panel, and a molecular diagram replaced the glorious vision of the planet. “Previously, the scientists, physicists, and theoretical astronomers among my race surmised every basic element had been discovered, that upon the creation and expansion of the universe into our stars and the planets their gravity pulled in, the elements had been distributed, if not evenly, at least rather equitably. In short, we predicted every known element was present on every world in some degree. For centuries, nothing contradicted this notion.

“The discovery of our error was a timely one—a gift of sorts. Silica, which is used on the hulls of our ships to protect sailors and travelers from the high levels of radiation in space, is not only heavy, but not completely effective. Radiation sickness must still be treated after long voyages, hampering our ability to make long journeys. Further, while it is one of the most common substances on many of the known planets, it is not an unlimited resource. The tiling on the ships must be replaced frequently, and supplies are running dangerously low.”

Nualyin changed the image to an opalescent lump of silvery metal covered in shifting colors like the inside of an oyster shell. “When a small asteroid containing this substance was discovered on a remote moon by the human explorer and astronomer Aurore Van der Veldt, she claimed she had been handed the Holy Grail, the Philosopher’s Stone of human legend, and she dubbed the new element Francesium, after her mother. It is truly a miracle element—stronger than any known, light of weight, resistant to tarnish, flexible, and mostly importantly, impervious to radiation. It is the solution we have been searching for, a way to make safe, fast, and durable ships and protect the people inside them. This heat-resistant material would allow us to fly closer to stars and travel much longer without stopping for maintenance. Until now, the element has been elusive, found only in small quantities. Varuna”—he flipped back to the image of the planet—“possesses a molten core of Francesium. The element is so plentiful on this world, it would sustain us for centuries. Literally millions of ships could be constructed, and they would last with minimal repair for decades, at least.”

Captain Kgosi nodded as she stood next to Nualyin. “This is a fact-finding mission. Our goal is data collection. Nualyin and Wakahisa will lead the way

team, and they have a precise plan to collect the information and samples we have been sent to retrieve. Bennett will pilot the shuttle, and a team of security personnel will accompany you." She turned to the pilot. "The science officers are in command in my absence, and I expect their orders to be obeyed. Anyone who discharges a weapon, except in matters of life or death, will find himself in the brig. The same holds for insubordination. I started my career as a pilot, and I assure you, I can fly this vessel, but don't make me have to. Now, get a few hours of rest, prepare your gear and equipment, and be ready to board the shuttle at 0800 hours."

The crew members filed out while Sora stood with his back to them, staring at the planet, until a hand on the small of his back tugged him out of his musings. He turned and looked down at Nualyin. Though the other man only reached Sora's shoulders, he intimidated Sora, because while Sora couldn't discern Nualyin's desires and motivations, his gaze dissected Sora down to his spirit in seconds every time he looked at him. "As the captain said, you should try to get some rest."

Sora often had a hard time relating to others, but Nualyin was the closest thing he had to a friend; Nualyin at least respected him as a scientist, and it was more than he got from the rest of the crew. Sora shrugged. "I won't be able to sleep."

"Why? Are you afraid?"

"No," Sora answered honestly. "Well, maybe a little apprehensive, but not because of the planet. I don't do well working as part of a team. I wish just you and me were going. The others—I'm leery of depending on them. What if they're sloppy when collecting data or corrupt the samples?"

Sora wasn't certain, but Nualyin's smile might have been sympathetic, understanding. "It's too much work for the pair of us, Sora. Besides, we can't pilot the shuttle, and we may need the security officers."

"That's something else that bothers me," Sora admitted. "I don't like the idea of fighting. I'm not a soldier."

"But you were trained in basic to handle a weapon and defend yourself," Nualyin said. "You have the ability to protect yourself, at least."

"Am I naïve to think if we approach the natives—if there are any—in peace and respect, we needn't worry?"

"Yes, my friend," Nualyin said. "But it isn't a bad quality in one so young. It's something to cherish, as it's fleeting." He paused and smoothed his silvery,

almost lilac hair. “Sora, I have always understood the males of your species engage in physical intimacy without commitment, say, as a means of distraction or relieving stress. That there needn’t be an emotional element to it.” The tip of his tongue flickered out to touch the center of his pale, full lips.

“That’s not untrue,” Sora said. “But I’ve never found much comfort in it.”

“A shame.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No need for apology,” Nualyin said. “I must gather my things.”

As he departed, the automated doors swishing open and then closed, Sora slumped into his chair and continued to stare at Varuna. What worried him, what he hadn’t divulged to the other science officer, was the pull he felt toward that world, that pristine, endless ocean. He felt sure he’d find something there, almost as if it were waiting for him, and that was completely irrational. The irrational frightened Sora. He hated not being able to discover the source, follow the logical progression, and see the equation through to its inevitable and irrefutable answer. Nothing else could be quantified, considered as truth. Yet he longed for Varuna, and he couldn’t figure out why.

He supposed he’d find out soon enough.

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## Chapter Two

The storm front moving across the surface of the planet as if chasing the receding sunlight measured 47.892 kilometers across and contained three eyes of violently swirling cloud. Even hovering high above the world, Sora saw on his screen massive forks of lightning, bright against the encroaching darkness, opening neon fissures in the sky. They lit the water where they struck it until he swore he could see the structures—natural or otherwise—beneath the surface as he blinked away the jagged lines scorched into his retinas. He turned to the captain and the team assembled behind her.

“The storm is still 849.1246 kilometers from where we plan to land, but with it moving at a speed of between 36.7 and 41.43 kph—”

“I can outrun it,” Bennett said, curling up the left peak of his upper lip.

“It might be more prudent to find a different place to land,” Nualyin said, looking even younger and smaller in his dark gray uniform, black body armor, and knee-high boots, like a boy playing dress-up in his father's gear. “Or wait out the storm.”

“There are other fronts following close behind it,” Sora said. Normally he would have been the first to agree with the other scientist—he'd enlisted because it was the only way to pay for his education, not for danger or adventure—but something about Varuna made him reckless, not himself. “It's difficult to calculate with so many variables, but the weather could remain a threat for days, weeks even.”

“Holy fuck, Wakahisa, did you just side with me?”

Bennett rubbed heat across Sora's usually nonexistent temper. He turned to the short, stout pilot and met his squinted blue eyes, saying, “I'm not siding with anyone, Lieutenant. I'm simply attempting to gauge what is best for our mission and our safety.”

Bennett snorted. “Just when I thought you finally grew a pair.”

“Waiting even a week is not an option, unfortunately,” Captain Kgosì said, all her attention on the storms flashing like the lights in a nightclub across the monitor. “Our supplies won't last that long. We brought all we could carry, and we're already down to just a little more than we need to make it home. We need to get this done, and as soon as possible. Bennett, can you really outrun that storm, or is that just your ego talking?”

"I'm one hell of a pilot," Bennett answered. "You know that, sir."

"And very fond of yourself," Sora added. "Too fond to risk yourself for this or any other mission."

"Fuck me, did you just try to make a joke?" Bennett asked, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned a shoulder against the side of the shuttle.

"It's an accurate assessment," Nualyin offered without judgment or humor.

The captain stared at the three men she faced, her intense dark gaze meeting each of theirs in turn. After a few minutes, she said, "Do it," and then turned on her heel and left the docking bay.

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"Hold on tight, ladies," Bennett singsonged, shooting them a toothy grin over his shoulder. "I'm bringing her down."

Their Head of Security, Dolores Rayez, shot the pilot a look that could've extinguished a sun. "You use 'ladies' as an insult again, you little troll, and I'll file a report for harassment. Or maybe I'll just wait until we see each other in a dark corridor somewhere."

"Rayez, I'm touched. Are you finally accepting my offer of a hook-up?"

"I'd break you, little man," the security officer shot back before a spot of turbulence returned the pilot's attention to the helm and halted all conversation in the shuttle.

Sora instinctively reached to his chest to wrap his hands around the straps of his safety harness, even though he knew it would do no good. His teeth knocked together, and his ass bounced on the hard metal bench, hurting his bones. Next to him, Nualyin held his delicate mask in place over his nose and mouth, his eyes undecipherable.

Patches of minor turbulence plagued the rest of their journey to Varuna's surface, and when they finally achieved a bumpy landing, Sora's muscles ached from clenching, and he had a dull headache from gritting his teeth so they wouldn't rattle as the little craft maneuvered through the choppy air. He forgot the discomfort instantly when the door to the shuttle lifted and rosy orange light spilled in in a wide shaft. The smell of all that ocean, the taste of the salt and seaweed at the back of his throat—he knew he'd always remember his breath of the glorious, alien air. Without considering his actions, compelled, almost, Sora unbuckled his harness and stood, his feet moving toward the steps of the exit almost on their own.

A muscular arm across his chest stopped him. “Come on, Wakahisa,” Rayez said. “This isn’t your first mission. You know we have to secure the area first.”

He nodded and muttered an apology as she led her team of six out of the shuttle, but he didn’t return to his seat. He’d never be able to sit still. It seemed like hours until she returned and declared the area free of threats.

What he saw when he left the stuffy vessel made Sora forget his teammates, the mission... everything. The planet’s star had begun its slow descent toward the rounded edge of the horizon and spilled pulpy orange light in its wake, sparking the edges of the feathery pink clouds to blinding brilliance and making nets and cords of gold dance over the surface of the water. It looked like an elaborate piece of jewelry, everything cast from gemstones and precious metals, including the smooth, silvery stone he stood upon. As he wandered to the edge of the small island, barely big enough to hold the shuttle, powerful emotions—things Sora could only express in Japanese, his first language, even in his thoughts, flooded his chest and lapped against the edges of his heart and soul. Eyes stinging, he decided the only way to quantify this experience was that it made him glad to be alive, to be in this moment. It erased all thought of past or future and let him exist wholly in the present. But a moment or an hour later, the precarious state of unity with time sunk back below the surface of his mind, replaced by a throbbing melancholy as he wished he had someone special to share this with him, someone who he could turn to years later and say, “Do you remember what it was like?”

Instead of dwelling on things he’d rather not contemplate, he pushed them down and consulted the small computer on his wrist. The atmospheric makeup, barometric pressure, wind currents... all of it was as he had predicted. After a long last glance at the graceful spires rising from the water, gilded by the perishing light and in too regular a formation—it seemed to him without formal calculations—to occur naturally, he returned to the craft to help the others unload their gear.

They formed four teams led by Sora, Nualyin, Rayez, and Bennett. Each of them took a security officer along, and they left the additional two officers to guard the ship—their only means of leaving the planet. Each team member dragged his or her military-issued Personal Water Transport Vehicle into the frothy waves slapping at the edge of the islet. The water reflected the burgundy and scarlet staining the sky, reminding Sora of Homer’s wine-dark sea. Far in the distance, icy blue flashes lit the bottoms of the heavy clouds. Followed by his escort, a handsome, dark-skinned man named O’Leary, Sora straddled the



seat of his PWTV, leaned his chest down, and stretched his arms to their full range to grasp the handles. He accelerated cautiously at first as he hadn't been on a PWTV in years, and then only in training. But as the vehicle gained speed, he gained confidence and soon began to enjoy himself as the warm wind raked through his spikes of black hair. Water sprayed up around him and splashed his thighs, and even though his uniform dried quickly, the damp cloth clinging to his legs felt good for a few minutes. Daring to go faster, he left a trail of foam and churned-up ocean behind him and smiled as flecks of it dotted his neck and face. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so free—probably sometime before he'd enlisted. But he had been trapped long before then.

With his special adaptations in molecular chemistry, biochemistry, genetics, and differential biology, the life Varuna might hold fascinated Sora most. If this amazing planet had yielded an undiscovered element, he couldn't even imagine what the flora and fauna might provide: food, energy sources, treatments for incurable diseases. With Nualyin as his conspirator, he'd devised a plan to allow him to explore while the others did the mundane work of surveying, recording, and collecting rock and water samples. Of course, their main objective was confirming the presence of the vast deposits of Francesium and compiling a preliminary report about the difficulty of mining and transporting it. As much as he hated politics, Sora was hardly a fool. He knew the Andromeda-Centauri Confederation he worked for wanted to stake a claim on the priceless element, and he suddenly had a vision of massive drills marring the perfect surface of the water. Leaning hard to the left, he veered from his planned path and took off at a high speed toward something he saw rising from the sea a few kilometers away.

It looked like a torii gate with a curved lintel resting above two columns, but it was huge: probably as tall as a three-story building. He checked his wrist computer. The water here was over 2.468 kilometers deep. Could the structures possibly extend all the way to the ocean floor? How? Who had made them? After gradually coming to a stop, he took out a small camera to record what he had discovered. When he zoomed in, he couldn't believe what he saw. Not one, but at least—he counted—six, no seven structures stood in a meandering line. He thought there might very well be more beyond the limit of his lens. How had the satellites not captured them? But then he knew. From above, they'd probably appeared as just slabs of rock in the water, maybe natural. Still, how had no one recognized the regularity of the pattern?

Sora felt blood in his cheeks the way he always did when poised on the cusp of an important discovery, and this discovery might be the greatest of his life.

Chilly excitement poured through his veins as he wondered what he might find, and he gunned his PWTV's engines so hard the twin pontoons lifted off the surface of the water and landed with a loud splat before finding purchase and lurching forward. Who knew what he would find? Another new element, maybe an even more miraculous one? Something he could study and claim? Not that he wanted the glory. He had never wanted that, to be one of those celebrity scientists giving press conferences more often than working in their labs. He just wanted to *know*. It wasn't like anyone would give a new substance a stupid name like Soraium, but he didn't care. He'd had a fierce desire to understand how and why things were the way they were for as long as he could remember. Curiosity had been the one constant in his life. It was a fickle companion, though, leaving him lying awake and twisting with frustration as often as it satisfied him.

Chasing his curiosity as he'd done all his life, Sora skipped the few kilometers to the first gate, spending as much time moving through the air as across the surface of the water, until he had to turn sharply to avoid colliding with the massive column. He pattered in closer and removed his glove to press his hand to the heated stone. Electric zings moved through his palm and up his arm. Someone had made this; the concentric rings carved into it, making it resemble the swirls of a seashell, left no more doubt in his mind. He took a few more pictures before scanning the lintel with his computer, and it confirmed his suspicion. The entire structure was made of pure Francesium. If he had to guess, he'd estimate what he touched to be worth billions. He turned to call to O'Leary over his shoulder, but the man was nowhere to be seen. Sora realized he'd taken off so quickly, he had accidentally lost his partner.

He should backtrack and find O'Leary, he knew. The captain had been explicit that they were not to split up. But as he looked through the tunnel formed by the series of gates, he couldn't turn away. He had to know why they were here, how they had come to be here. The torment of wondering would plague him if he left now. Besides, his vehicle had a tracking device; he would be able to program it to lead him back to the shuttle. Setting his mouth in a determined line, Sora accelerated. This knowledge was too important to abandon, and these gates were leading him to something profound—he *knew* it. The torii gates of his ancestors marked the transition between mundane and sacred space, and Sora could think of no more appropriate description as he passed beneath the structures. He had moved into the unknown.

The sky grew dark and ominous as Sora followed his path. The world strobed in and out of existence, going from absolute black to blinding blue. He

had to slow down so he didn't risk crashing. A few hundred feet in front of him, a bolt of lightning speared the water and split off, smaller splinters crawling over the sea's surface. For a fraction of a second, Sora could see kilometers into the depths, and he saw things moving far below him—large things. Something pinkish-white and porpoise-like arced out of the water. Sora thought he saw stunted legs extending from the shoulders, but the world had grown distorted, only perceivable between blue bursts. The tide was picking up, lifting his PWTV several feet into the air on the swells. A few times, a crest broke over him and doused him. He had to steer carefully, his fists tight on the handlebars, to keep from capsizing. A strong swell hit his left side and slammed his right into one of the gate pillars. Metal screeched, and his head went fuzzy from the impact.

By the time he righted the vehicle and shook the haze from his brain, the rain had started, hard right from the beginning, like nails shot from a gun and into his flesh. Squinting, he pressed his chin to his chest, but it did no good. He'd never seen such a rain. In seconds, the fat droplets bouncing off the sea formed a silvery curtain around him. The sky seemed to melt into and become the water until he could no longer discern the boundary between the two. Sputtering, choking on the copious amounts of rain beating his face like fists, he reached for the PWTV's control panel to program it to return him to the shuttle, but he couldn't see what he was doing. After swiping at his eyes and shedding water for a brief moment, he tried to push the rescue sequence from memory. The vehicle sputtered and hopped a few feet through the tiers of water. Another wave hit Sora from the right, knocking him on his side until the machine bobbed and righted itself.

He was in serious trouble. Even if he could see through the solid wall of water and program his PWTV, he doubted it would make it through waves rising probably nine meters into the air. They towered above and around him, blood-dark walls tipped with contrasting froth. Sora remembered his life-mask and reached into the compartment between his legs, but before he could locate it, a volley of splintery lightning struck in a ring around him, frying his vehicle's computer controls. He switched to manual and threw his body hard to the left to steer the craft away from the worst of the storm. In the distance, clear, red sky teased. If he could make it, he would be all right, and so he directed all his concentration into steering the PWTV between the worst of the waves. The mask, the homing beacon, and the rescue button could wait. He had to make it to that patch of open air. He pushed the vehicle hard as the clouds seemed to chase him as though they had a personal vendetta. The rain felt like shrapnel against his back.

Trapped within the storm, Sora had no idea which way he was going. Despite his aptitude for science and mathematics, he had an abysmal sense of direction. He'd gotten lost in his tiny ghetto of a hometown almost until he'd left for good. With silver and red swirling like radio static around him, he didn't stand a chance. Before he could react, a huge wave, probably thirty meters, rose from Varuna's surface and crashed like vengeance upon his head. The force of the water knocked him back, and he didn't have the strength to maintain his grip on the handles of his craft. The curl of the breaker pushed him into the alien sea, and saltwater filled his mouth and nose. Sora coughed it out, red-tinged bubbles crowning out of his mouth, rising as he sunk. He paddled with his arms and legs, his underwater training kicking in. He fought. His lungs burned with the lust for air, but the currents pulled him deeper and deeper, somersaulting him and tossing him around like a piece of driftwood. Though he clawed for the smeared clouds he saw above him—so close—just a kick and a reach away—he dropped like lead. No. He'd found something here, maybe something he'd been seeking without even knowing it. He had answers to decipher, puzzles to put together—things to *know*. He couldn't die. Not now.

Fuzzy gray flowed in at the edges of Sora's vision. It didn't look so different from the rain, and for a moment, he felt content, comfortable in his fate. But only for a second. He wasn't finished, and with a hard kick and a downward push of his arms, he broke the surface and gulped in air even as he puked up ocean water. Slowly, he began to swim, a slow crawl through the driving rain toward the brighter sky. He would make it. He had work to do.

Sora made it a good distance—or so he'd thought—when a fresh fan of rain flicked him back as if he were an insect, and another wave lifted him, carrying his body atop its frothy crest, until it slammed the back of his head into one of the gates. For a second he was angry, felt cheated, and then the velvet darkness wrapped him up and took it all away.

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## Chapter Three

Sora woke from a dream about his mother and three older sisters making rice balls, to the worst headache he'd ever had. He couldn't remember where he was, and for a terrifying moment he thought he'd had too much to drink and put himself in danger of missing his Comparative Astrophysics final. Tines of panic poked through his chest, and he sat up with a gasp, already trying to formulate an excuse his professor hadn't heard a hundred times before. It didn't take him long to realize he wasn't in his bed at the academy; his uniform hung in tatters, and it was drenched. He was hot, which meant the suit's temperature regulation system had been damaged, in . . . in his accident. In the storm. Slowly, disjointed memories of huge waves and rain like artillery fire returned to explain why he hurt from the tips of his toes to his eyelashes. But he was alive. He didn't expect to be, and honestly, it made no sense. He'd been sinking, drowning in the open ocean with no land for kilometers. Maybe he'd been lucky enough to wash up on whatever surface he now occupied, but as a scientist, he didn't believe in luck—or coincidences. No, his mind told him there was a logical explanation for why he was here and not dead at the bottom of the ocean.

After his vision adjusted to the sanguine gloom as much as it likely would, Sora tried to survey his surroundings. He didn't stand up; the silver glimmers circling his sight like electrons told him that could end badly. The rain had stopped at his location, but he could see staccato bursts of light in the distance—far in the distance. The thick, reddish fog prevented him from discerning much about the immediate vicinity. He was on a smooth slab of rock—likely more Francesium—dotted with water-filled pockets. Carefully, he half crawled, half dragged himself to the edge of one about the size of a bathtub, but rounder. Along the edge, some lime-green moss or lichen grew, glowing with bioluminescence. Inside, tubular lavender organisms wavered lazily, the fringe around their bulbous crowns fluttering in the water lit up by their natural glow. Brilliant white fish only the size of Sora's fingertip swam in schools, and snakelike creatures shining neon pink curlicued among them. It was beautiful, and Sora wished he had his camera, or better yet, some specimen jars. But along with his PWTv, they'd probably been dashed to bits and scattered on the tide.

Which begged the question: How would he get back to his crew, the shuttle, and the ship? But in that moment, looking out over the sea of Varuna and seeing patches of glowing water in every imaginable color, understanding the hows and whys of the bright water and what waited beneath it seemed a more

immediate conundrum to Sora. Getting home he could worry about later. This opportunity might never come again. Casting his gaze around, Sora hoped to find a branch or a stick he could use as a crutch. But on a planet without enough dry land to support trees, he was unlikely to find one. There was nothing for it. He rocked onto his knees and stood slowly, waiting for the vertigo to pass before daring a few steps.

This land mass seemed larger than the one where they'd landed the shuttle, and the place where he stood looked like a narrow beach surrounding higher ground. The mist made it hard to be sure, but it looked like a single peak rose steeply into the darkening sky.

*Are there birds on this world? Sora wondered. Is there enough land to support birds, or am I projecting what I'm familiar with onto this place? Maybe the life forms are like nothing we've imagined. Maybe they're all marine. But then, something or someone built those gates, and they're above the surface of the ocean. Maybe they're very old, built by an extinct civilization, built at a time before water covered everything. Maybe it was climate change. Earth lost over 30.772 percent of its habitable land due to planetary warming a few centuries back. Maybe the same happened here, and maybe it destroyed the people who built those gates.*

There was so much to study here. In his head, Sora was already drafting a proposal to be funded to come here, set up some sort of floating base and laboratory, and learn all Varuna's secrets. In addition to a team to assist him in studying the chemistry and biochemistry of the world, he'd need an archeologist, a forensic anthropologist, and a zoologist, bare minimum. All of them would need research assistants, but using doctoral-level interns could reduce the budget. He'd have to crunch numbers and get someone better with words to help him express how much the Confederation could benefit from his expedition, but the heat of excitement already pinched at his cheeks as he explored as best his aching body and throbbing head would allow.

Up ahead was a larger lagoon being fed by a stream tumbling lazily over the steep rocks abutting it on one side. Sora wondered if that water was fresh as he was thirsty. It was hard to gauge how long he'd been unconscious, but based on Varuna's long periods of light and darkness and the slow shift between them, it might have been as much as ten to twelve hours. Above him, the stars looked like smears against the rusty, dark sky, while the water glowed with all the colors of the spectrum, as if the world had inverted—bright water, dark sky. Yet somehow, he felt he was where he needed to be. He had never bowed so

much to instinct or fleeting whimsy before in his life. He'd always had a plan, a series of steps—to escape poverty, to get out of the ghetto, to get an education, and maneuver himself into a career where he could explore the mysteries of life and the universe and feed himself while doing so. Right now, he was just wandering, and he needed something to drink.

Reaching down, Sora tried to turn on his wrist computer. At first it didn't come to life, so he tapped the screen a few times—very scientifically—and it blipped twice before powering up. He touched the icon for the flashlight, and a beam of light appeared above the back of his hand. It reflected off the mist and hampered his vision as much as it helped, but it comforted him in the irrational way light did for all humans, and so he left it on.

When he reached the edge of the pool, Sora knelt down in the curly, blue-and-green striped rushes and cupped his hand. Before he could scoop up water to drink, movement at his left caught his eye. His training kicked in, and he reached for the weapon the ACC required him to wear at his hip, but of course, it was gone. Sora crouched down as he regarded the form halfway submersed in the water. It looked like a man.

A wind coming in off the sea herded most of the fog off the lagoon and uphill, and the newly risen moon illuminated the area like a spotlight. There, occupying the brightest beam of light like the star of all of Sora's fantasies, was a man reclining in the water, his elbows angled behind himself to support him on the rocky lip of the pool. He was a big man, beautifully proportioned and muscular without being bulky, more definition than size. Sora's gaze wandered down the languid curve of his torso, between his defined pectorals and along the gully between his abdominal muscles, then over to the defined V above his hips. Sora loved that part of the male anatomy. Right now, it, along with the kilometers of bronzed skin, the shiny dark hair, the high cheekbones, squared chin, intense dark eyes—the color impossible to determine in the rubicund gloaming—and the lips that looked evolved for the express purpose of kissing, dragging along flesh, and suckling skin, made Sora dizzy.

Or maybe it was something else.

His head pounding and his vision regressing to a swarm of colliding comets, Sora dropped to his knees and covered his eyes with his hand. As he moved his fingers through his hair to the back of his head, he winced at the pain and felt the large lump on the base of his skull. He was suddenly tired, and he realized he was probably concussed, maybe even hallucinating. Obviously hallucinating. What else could explain the man of his dreams lounging,

surrounded by a menagerie of bioluminescent creatures in every color, on an alien world?

But when Sora dropped his hand and opened his eyes, the man remained. He'd moved closer, and he looked concerned.

"Is this your home?" Sora asked, his own voice sounding distant and distorted. "Are you a native of this world?" Then Nualyin's warning returned to him. "Are you going to hurt me? I'm not a soldier; I'm a scientist, and I'm unarmed. I don't mean you any harm."

The man spoke in a low baritone, the unknown language growly and guttural but the tone non-threatening. Though Sora didn't understand his words, he couldn't misinterpret the swipe of his hand, offering Sora a seat next to him in the lagoon. At least it wasn't an attack, and there was no hostility in the man's expression. Sora needed to sit down somewhere before he fell over and earned himself another bump on the head, so he dropped his bum to the ground to unlace his heavy, steel-reinforced boots. When he got them off, he unbuckled his armored vest, shrugged it off his shoulders, and let it fall. The rest of his uniform was in tatters, and it practically fell from Sora's body. The look on the other man's face as Sora climbed over the rocks and lowered himself into the water in nothing but his snug underpants was unmistakable appreciation.

The warm water smelled of salt, sulfur, and minerals. It felt good on Sora's battered body as he sunk into it, giving it his weight, letting it take some of the burden of Varuna's heightened gravity from his bones. It enticed him dangerously toward sleep, and if sleep seemed more imperative than the gorgeous creature only a few feet away, Sora certainly had a head injury and had to stay awake. He had to hydrate himself, so he brought some water to his mouth and sipped. It was too salty; it would do him more harm than good, and against his fierce desire to swallow it anyway, he spit it onto the ground.

After carefully positioning himself on the rocky ledge next to his host, he turned to the stranger. "Do you live here?"

The other man responded in that low, rumbling purr that tumbled down Sora's spine to his belly, tumbling around there and stirring all kinds of things in Sora. He still couldn't understand a word, but he liked listening. The cadence lilted, reminding him of an Asian language—Cantonese, maybe, if he had to assign a parallel.

Sora's head was a mess, his thoughts jumping and touching down as erratically as the lightning on the water. That, though, could be predicted



mathematically—it had a pattern even if not an immediately obvious one—but a rattled brain...? Sora shook his head. His companion regarded him with one brow arched in a very human expression. Why had Sora thought he wasn't human? He certainly looked it. Sora decided to start the interaction over. He met the other man's eyes as he touched the center of his bare chest. "Wakahisa Sora," he said, carefully enunciating each syllable as he bent his waist in a small bow.

The other man understood, and he touched between the subtle mounds of his chest muscles. Sora noted their mutual absence of body hair. "Ch'Marsam-muk."

The sounds weren't so alien, and Sora repeated them easily as he laid his hand over the other man's. Then he wrapped his fingers around Ch'Marsam-muk's and brought his hand to his own chest. "Sora."

"Soo-rah."

"Soar-rah," he corrected.

"Soar-rah." He touched the corner of Sora's mouth with a finger as Sora smiled. Sora couldn't follow the words he said afterward, but he looked happy.

"I'm happy too. Happy to meet you." Sora set his computer to record both audio and visual, and then he drew his finger along the upturn of his mouth. "Happy."

"Happy, Sora." The other man ran his finger along Sora's lips, and Sora shuddered beneath his touch. "Happy, Ch'Marsam-muk."

"Ch'Marsam-muk, I know you can't understand me, but I have to talk. I have a concussion, and I have to remain conscious, so please forgive me if I just babble. Help me learn your words. Tell me happy." He traced the other man's lips with his pinky. They were slick, hot, and supple beneath his touch. Springy. "Happy?"

"Phi-ket," he said, grinning wider, his lips stretching taut beneath Sora's fingers. "Phi-ket, Sora?"

"Phi-ket, Sora," Sora replied. "Remarkably, under the circumstances."

For the next hour or so, they engaged in a game. Sora touched things—his eyes, a rock, the water—and said his word for them, and Ch'Marsam-muk followed suit. He ran his fingers over the gem and shell-studded Francesium jewelry Ch'Marsam-muk wore and named: "ring, bracelet, pendant." They stretched their arms up to indicate the moon, stars, and clouds. Their play

descended to silliness soon, with them mimicking laughter or tears, stomach aches and the annoyance that made one throw up his arms, all the while trading language.

And touching each other. At one point, Sora realized only half a foot of space separated their bellies, and Ch'Marsam-muk's hand furled around his neck while his own hand wrapped across the other's elbow. Though they could barely communicate, it felt like they had been friends for years. Sora pointed to his belly button and said, "Navel." He was running out of things in the vicinity to name. Ch'Marsam-muk looked perplexed, grasped Sora's wrist, and guided Sora's hand over his own smooth, taut stomach—one with no belly button present.

"Ch'Marsam-muk. Navel. No, Sora."

"No, I can see that," Sora said, distracted by the firm sinew he touched, the soft skin, the smoldering dark eyes boring into his gaze. No naval meant no umbilical cord, which led him to wonder how these people reproduced. Did Ch'Marsam-muk have the same organs as a human male? Emboldened, maybe because of his injury, he let his hand drop lower, tracing the glorious Apollo's Girdle he's seen and then circling around to the man's hip. The peak of bone and the muscles cradling it were familiar but then, when he dropped his fingers a few inches lower, he felt something smoother than skin, undulating, more fluid than flesh, and he drew back. His companion canted his head, reached out, grasped Sora's wrist, and guided it back to his hip as their gazes locked. Sora moved through the water until their bellies grazed, and he slid his hand down, compelled as much by lust as curiosity.

When he got past the muscular belly and prominent hip to where the thigh should have begun, the texture changed from the subtle catch of wet skin and pores to something smoother, something that felt like glass under his fingertips, but softer, thick with muscle and warm and alive. Sora slid his touch lower until he could wrap his fingers around a boneless appendage as wide as his forearm. It pulsed with strength and flexibility as he found the spongy suction cups on the back side with his fingers. *Amazing*, he thought. Ch'Marsam-muk, a gorgeous man on top, had lower limbs resembling a cephalopod—an octopus or cuttlefish. Even more amazingly, Sora didn't find it bizarre, and it didn't douse the warmth he felt when he looked into the man's orangish-brown eyes and saw his full lips curling into a smile. He did wonder how much he could explore without risking impropriety or violating some culture more, but then Ch'Marsam-muk reached for him and dragged his hand down Sora's thigh until he could cup the bony globe of Sora's knee.

“Do I seem strange to you?” Sora asked. “We’re very different, and yet...” Ch’Marsam-muk had been, from the beginning, open and friendly. Sora got on with him better than he did with most. He hadn’t once been afraid. Despite his throbbing head and the sporadic waves of nausea he battled, he’d had a good time, enjoyed himself more than he had in recent memory. He took a chance and reached out with his foot, grasping Ch’Marsam-muk’s shoulder when he stumbled and drawing a chuckle from the other man. Yes, to Sora, he was still a man—his humor, intelligence, hospitality, and charm made him so.

With his toes, Sora felt out the tentacles coiled on the floor of the lagoon, lying in lazy loops and twists, powerful muscle temporarily relaxed. He estimated those tentacles to be twelve to fourteen meters in length, maybe more. Ch’Marsam-muk would be a strong swimmer, and fast. Sora held to him with one hand and reached down with the other. He wrapped one of his tentacles around Sora’s wrist and twined it up his arm, while another curled up his leg, wrapping it completely and squeezing like a constrictor. With one of his own species, it might have been pleasant, but the pressure hurt Sora and he hissed. His companion muttered what was certainly an apology and loosened his grip as he wound another of his smooth appendages around Sora’s waist, encircling it twice and drawing Sora closer, almost into his lap. A few inches below the water, the tentacle looked like wet silk, opalescent silvery-blue with shifting lavender hues. Where it pressed to Sora’s belly, it took on a golden-brown cast, reflecting his own complexion. When he reached to touch the place where their bodies met, Ch’Marsam-muk exhaled a puff of air into Sora’s fringe, and goose flesh broke out over Sora’s skin.

When another shaft of moonlight broke through the thinning clouds, Sora saw a mottled pattern on the limb holding him so intimately. It resembled fine marble. He ran his finger up its graceful curve until he reached the web of skin connecting it to the next tentacle. That skin, while tough, was an almost translucent soft heather-gray, like thin mist at twilight. The underside of the limb was white and pearlescent, dotted with pinkish suction cups that distended slightly before affixing to Sora’s flesh and pulling it up, suckling it and imparting a sensation like nothing he had ever felt. With his eyes rolling back, his lids fluttering, and his body quickly turning to gelatin, Sora went limp and let Ch’Marsam-muk hold him up in the water, wrap him with his strong appendages that almost completely covered Sora’s flesh, but without making him feel restrained. It was a meeting, an embrace—not a prison. Feeling the strength around him, the gentle caresses of fingers and slippery enticing appendages, Sora thrust his hips involuntarily. The suckers pulled at his skin,

producing a pleasant sting and tearing a ragged moan from Sora's throat. Some cephalopods, he recalled, through chemoreceptors, could taste what they touched with their suction cups. Sora trembled at the thought that Ch'Marsam-muk was kissing him, sampling his flavor, with a dozen hungry little mouths.

Opening his eyes, Sora moved his hand over the other man's shoulder and up his neck to cup his cheek and chin. His stared at Ch'Marsam-muk's angular face, and his dark eyes sucked Sora in like black holes not even light could escape. "Can"—Sora sucked in a breath and tried to quiet the buzzing in his head—"can you taste me?"

Ch'Marsam-muk asked a short question as the silky, blunted tip of one of his tentacles moved up and down Sora's spine, soothing the tension in Sora's muscles and making Sora feel even more like an invertebrate.

"Taste," Sora said. He extended his tongue and touched the tip with his finger, licking along the pad as he stared into the other man's eyes.

"Taste Sora." As Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's face in both hands, a tentacle draped over Sora's shoulder, and the end bumped against his nipple until one of the suckers found it and drew it in. Sora gave a sharp cry and pressed his lips against the other man's, tasting, drinking in his flavor until his mouth opened to allow Sora's tongue entry. Winding his fingers in Ch'Marsam-muk's dark hair, Sora lapped at his teeth, his long, sharp bicuspid, and suckled his bottom lip. Finally their tongues met, and Ch'Marsam-muk's twisted around Sora's and held it until Sora broke free. He pulled away and swallowed air until the stars in his vision dimmed, and then he crashed their mouths together again, cresting his tongue into the other man's mouth and taking control. Ch'Marsam-muk played along for a little while, but he didn't submit. The bumping and thrusting of their tongues as they grasped with their hands was more of an elaborate dance than a battle.

Breaking contact, Ch'Marsam-muk growled out Sora's name followed by a string of slurred words in his own tongue.

Sora raked his nails down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, leaving eight darker lines against his bronzed skin. "Sora is what? Receptive? Aroused? Can you taste that? I bet you can, the pheromones pouring off me. You're not wrong. I don't know if this is a good idea, and I can't ponder the implications.... But you, you're good. Kind. You could overpower me, but you don't want to. That's obvious, and I... I think too much sometimes. Talk too damned much." He grabbed Ch'Marsam-muk's hair in both hands and brought their faces together again.

Though they could barely communicate verbally, Ch'Marsam-muk seemed to read Sora's body. He released Sora's leg from his tentacle when Sora wanted to lift it and wrap it around his hip, and cupped Sora's ass to support him as they kissed hard and rocked against each other. Ch'Marsam-muk loosed his hold at the exact moment Sora shifted to straddle his lap "I want you," Sora panted. "Want. Need. That's a critical concept. Please understand."

Ch'Marsam-muk growled out a few short syllables as he cradled Sora's face and inclined Sora's head to lick and suckle up the side of his neck. Sora's head lolled to the side as he opened his legs in offering, pushing the erection his wet cotton briefs barely contained against the other man's ridged belly. Sex had never been like this for him before, never been a frenzy of need and animal passion. Before, it had been a compromise—ten minutes of doing something another man liked in exchange for his own release. It had been something men expected after he'd dated them a while, and he didn't dislike the act, but he never burned for it until he could think of nothing else. It never brought him to that place where future and past ceased to exist, and there was only the moment. This—this was mutual, and it stole his reason. Being wrapped up in miles of cool, satiny flesh over dense, flexible muscle that wanted nothing but to touch, discover, and pleasure him, being touched everywhere at once, his whole body stimulated—he thought he'd implode.

And he trusted. That was rare for him, even after months in a relationship. He'd been hurt too many times before, been judged too much trouble, too married to his work. None of that mattered now; they'd made friends, and they wanted each other. Sora didn't care about the rest. Ch'Marsam-muk's chest was hard against him, his lips and tongue savage and gentle at the same time, his tentacles liquid, surrounding Sora, drawing him in until he drowned, erasing everything else. Sora lapped at the roof of his mouth. He couldn't get his fill of the other man's taste. But then a beeping distracted him, followed by a trio of bright lights growing larger as they sliced through the wispy remains of the mist.

The two of them broke apart as Nualyin's crackly voice sounded from Sora's wrist. "Lieutenant Wakahisa, we have located your position and are coming to extract you. ETA five minutes. Be strong, Sora."

He'd forgotten all about getting home, forgotten home was anywhere but here. With panic like icy poison in his veins, he turned to Ch'Marsam-muk. "You should get out of here. Hide. I don't know what the others will do. I do not trust most of them. Go now." He pointed to the open sea as the three lights

grew bright enough to blind them. "I have to consider what to tell them. Go!" he shouted.

The other man took the hint, climbed from the pool, and moved gracefully across the beach, raised up a few feet on his muscular limbs, pulling himself with the ones in the front and pushing with his back tentacles. He shot Sora a wistful glance over his shoulder and touched the center of his lips before diving into the water. Soon the cascade of bubbles dispersed, and nothing remained as evidence of Ch'Marsam-muk's presence. Sora had just enough time to dress and lay on his back at the edge of the water before a PWTV sputtered to a stop, feet slogged through the surf, and Nualyin crouched beside him. "Sora, are you hurt?"

"Yeah, head injury," he said. "Concussion."

"We'll get you to the medical bay," Nualyin said. Then he leaned down and whispered near Sora's ear. "Don't say anything until we have a chance to talk. You're in a lot of trouble, but we'll come up with a way to get you out of it. Just don't talk to anyone until we can make plans. Pretend you don't remember anything. Act disoriented if you have to."

Security officers loaded Sora onto a gurney and strapped him down, and as their vehicles dragged it across the water, he let his eyes close. He was too exhausted and too hurt to contemplate what had just happened or what would happen when they returned to the station. He let his arm drop off the side of the stretcher so his fingertips skimmed the warm surface of the water. Stars streamed by above him until he couldn't hang on to consciousness any longer.

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## Chapter Four

Sora didn't remember most of the journey home, as he'd spent it sedated in the ship's sick bay. To his surprise, he'd been released when they'd reached the space station instead of locked in the brig. Captain Kgosì made it clear there would be a formal investigation of his actions on Varuna, and likely disciplinary action. Nualyin assured Sora such proceedings usually took months, and that they'd have ample time to formulate a defense. He also told Sora they could likely avoid any permanent reprimand since Sora hadn't intended to cause any harm or hamper the mission.

Sora spent most of his time in his laboratory, analyzing the molecular structure and genetics of the few samples his team had been able to secure. Daily messages reinforced his fear that all his superiors cared about was the Francesium, though. So far, Sora hadn't shared his experience with Ch'Marsam-muk with anyone—not even Nualyin. But as the time to report to the council drew nearer, he knew he would have to say something. Taking the element from a dead, uninhabited planet was one thing, but he knew it belonged to Ch'Marsam-muk and his people. They were a sovereign race, intelligent and at least somewhat civilized, and the tenets of the ACC forbid plundering resources from an evolved people. As much as he hated politics, the maneuvering of the privileged, and the useless power struggles between people who called each other allies, Sora might be the only voice defending Ch'Marsam-muk and his countrymen. He had to make sure he was heard, and he knew it wouldn't be easy. Not only the Alliance wanted its hands on the miracle element; several wealthy and powerful corporations had already put in bids to mine and process it.

He flopped on the narrow cot in his quarters and laced his fingers behind his head. In the medical bay, Sora had transferred all the data from his wrist computer to a small storage device he could conceal easily. That information was his secret weapon, but more than that, it was... special to him. Intimate.

"Lock the door," Sora said. A series of beeps confirmed his command had been carried out. "Play footage Wakahisa 925. Password Bright Water 8888."

The monitor on the ceiling glowed blue for a few seconds before it began playing the footage Sora had recorded on Varuna. The visuals were practically worthless, blurry, and showing mostly wet stone and water. Now and then, they caught a flash of bronzed skin, and once, toward the end, they'd captured

Sora's hand touching the end of one of Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles. It wrapped around his wrist and twined over his arm, but Sora still thought he could call it a handshake and be believed. The audio was crystal clear though, and Sora had listened to it until he'd memorized it. He'd also fed all the data he'd collected into a sophisticated program. Using the words they'd spoken in common, the program worked to decipher some of the other things Ch'Marsam-muk had spoken. It would be another secret weapon if Sora needed it. When it came time to plan the next expedition to Varuna, his superiors would surely include him as the only one who could speak the language of the natives.

And Sora wanted to go back. He'd dissected his motives so many times he could barely find a place to make a fresh cut that wasn't covered in scar tissue. Was it wrong what he had done, somehow unnatural? Why had he enjoyed it so much more with an alien creature than he ever had with a man of his own species? Statistically, even if he returned to the planet, he'd likely never find Ch'Marsam-muk. Why did that hurt? Eight months ago, when Sora's long-term lover, David, had screamed and stomped around their quarters, packing his things and saying Sora would never have any passion except for science, Sora thought he was probably right. It had smarted, and their suite had seemed quiet afterward, at least for a few days. Sora had chalked it up to a failed experiment, and when experiments failed, scientists changed the variables and tried again. So why did the thought of never seeing Ch'Marsam-muk seem so much more devastating than losing David? Had he fallen into the old cliché of lusting after someone he could never have—for dozens of reasons if not hundreds—so he wouldn't actually have to do the work? Take the risk? Was he so afraid of exposing his heart, loving and being loved, that his subconscious had chosen someone impossible?

He didn't want to lie here, watching the footage he'd recorded over and over again while his thoughts moved in circles that got him nowhere. Sora got up, went to his closet, and selected some civilian clothes, something understated but a little provocative. After showering and toweling his black hair dry into irregular spikes and leaving them messy and erratic—Nualyin had been the one to convince him to stop gelling it back—he shaved, brushed his teeth, and splashed on some cologne, even optimistically dabbing a few drops above his sparse pubic patch. Then he pulled on snug burgundy trousers—no pants underneath, for the first time—with a slight sheen to the fabric and a tight black shirt with a zipper running diagonally down from the armpit and a sheer panel over the belly. The dark colors flattered his lithe musculature and golden complexion, and the heeled boots he chose made him a little taller. A silver belt



slung over his hips echoed the heavy chain around his neck. He decided against mascara; he didn't want to look like he was trying too hard, and lots of fellows complimented the almond shape of his eyes. He didn't need cosmetics to try to make them look larger or rounder. Sora wasn't vain, but he was objective, and he knew he wouldn't spend the night alone if he didn't want to.

Sora took the shuttle to a section of the station frequented by the gay crewmen and civilians. It was a Saturday, and men and some women filled the arcade and the open clubs and cafés. Supported by steel beams and glass, the curved top of the arcade stood open to space and the stars. Sora wove among the revelers, his hands in his pockets, assessing the men leaning against the outside walls of buildings, or on the posts providing muted amber light. He appreciated many of them and most returned his attention, but the night was young, and he would weigh his options. So far, no one drew him as the lights from the clubs flashed in neon colors around him and music pounded in conflicting beats.

Sora chose a club and went beneath the polished steel arch and inside. Men in various degrees of undress bounced and undulated to the loud music—the kind of generic, quick-tempo electronic stuff all these places played. Sora ordered a drink at the bar and leaned his elbows and back against it as he watched the men. Before long, a tall, broad man with speckled porcelain skin and buzzed red hair came to lounge beside Sora, smiling over the frothy head on his ale. “Buy you a drink?” he shouted, leaning in.

Sora smiled back. The man was attractive—his type, with his wide shoulders and impressive biceps—but Sora's attention already wandered. He lifted his glowing chartreuse beverage. “Just got a fresh one, thanks.”

“Do you want to get out of here?” the redhead asked, his beer-scented breath ruffling Sora's air. “Go into the bathroom?”

“I don't think so,” Sora said. “I appreciate the offer.”

With another grin, the man raised his glass in salute. “No problem. Maybe another time.”

The redhead disappeared back into the throng. That was how these places operated. The other man would try again until someone accepted. It probably didn't much matter to him who it was; it didn't to most of the men who came to these clubs. It did to Sora. He didn't expect to find his soul mate here, but he wanted a man who wanted *him*—not one who would accept any accommodating body. None of the men who came up to him with offers of

drinks or more fit those requirements. Sora turned away six more men who happily moved to their next attempts and forgot him.

Soon someone tapped his elbow, and Sora turned. A smaller, slender man, closer to Sora's size, flashed him a grin full of white teeth. "You're cute," the shirtless blond said with an overdone lisp. "You have really nice lips." He traced Sora's mouth with his finger, and Sora recoiled. "What's wrong, baby?" The man's face flashed orange, then purple, then blue, the light reflecting off the rows of rings in his ears and making the sweat coating his chest and torso sparkle.

"I don't know," Sora said. It had something to do with the colored light bursting in the darkness, and with this man touching his lips. It made his gut clench. "Excuse me, I need to get out of here."

Sora abandoned his drink, pushed his way through the crowd, and dragged a breath in when he made it back out to the arcade. What had he been thinking, coming here? He wasn't into casual sex, never had been. But what had happened with Ch'Marsam-muk had been casual, hadn't it? They'd barely been able to speak to each other. For all Sora knew, physical affection meant nothing to Ch'Marsam-muk's people. A few more men came up to Sora as he wandered toward the archway leading out of the arcade, but they seemed increasingly desperate, and they just made him want to be alone. Maybe he should just forget about the whole thing, lead a life of celibacy, masturbate when he needed to, and keep to his lab. It was where he was happiest, where he found the fulfilment the arms of anonymous men failed to give him.

It was where he would go now. It would take him about an hour, but he would walk. After he passed the larger arcade where the straight inhabitants of the station wiled their evenings away, he was on his own, moving past gated-up shops, his heels echoing through empty corridors until he reached the research wing. He stood on the circle in front of the double doors so the beams could scan his height, weight, body temperature, and DNA. Within seconds, the doors opened with a soft brush, and lights turned on as Sora entered the hallway. He moved past dozens of numbered doors toward his laboratory: number eighty-eight. He had some simulations running based on the DNA collected on Varuna. Various algorithms would predict what each life form might evolve into based on various scenarios. Sora also wanted some insight into the geological history of the world, and so he had programs running to analyze some of the fossils and minerals they'd found. The simple act of wondering what had developed in his few hours of absence distracted and soothed him.

Then he heard voices up ahead, around the corner. Surprised, he froze and muttered, "Dim lights." Responding to his voice signature, the lights blipped out. Only the reflective orange strip along the bottom of the wall let him see his way as he crept closer, cursing his silly boots and the clacking of their heels on the tiled floor.

No one should be here. Station security didn't patrol this area since it was practically impenetrable, and few, if any, of the other scientists worked this late. Beyond that, the tone of the two men talking gave Sora the sense of something below the board, illegitimate. There were a lot of valuable secrets in this part of the station; Sora kept plenty of his own in his lab, and he doubted any of the scientists reported all their findings to their superiors. As he crept closer, he wondered if he was in danger. He had no way to communicate with security and nothing to defend himself. He'd been trained as a soldier, but some people made violence their careers and relished it while Sora found it a necessary evil. It would be better to remain undetected, so Sora hugged the corner and kept his breathing shallow as he listened.

He recognized the first voice right away—smarmy, unctuous, high, and nasally—as the pilot, Steven Bennett. Why would he be in the research wing of the station? The other man sounded cold and manipulative; his flat voice chilled Sora's blood as he squinted, as if that would help him hear better. It was the voice of a man who could read a weather report from his wrist computer while he slowly crushed a kitten under his heel. Sora cursed himself for not bringing his own wrist computer so he could record the conversation, but most people looking for a night of anonymous sex didn't want a reminder in the morning.

"It would be in our best interest to convince the Alliance to see things our way," said the unknown man. "Securing their backing will cut our expenditure and increase our profits, which will mean a larger payoff for everyone involved in our cause."

"We might have a hard time with that," Bennett said. "I saw the people living on that world. They're advanced, a sovereign race. The ACC will have a problem with that. And the pretentious fucking Shieferians are worse."

"Lieutenant Bennett, do you have any idea of the fortune that stands to be made for whoever secures the mining rights to that insignificant rock?"

"Of course I do. I'm just saying it won't be easy. What are you suggesting, Rourke?"

“As I said, our best option is swaying the ACC leaders to our way of thinking. We can do that best by convincing credible scientists to speak in our favor. You are acquainted with some of the top ACC researchers, are you not?”

Bennett snorted. “I guess. That little fairy Nualyin and that awkward fuck, Wakahisa. They’re both faggots. Nualyin is old and smart, but Sora... I might be able to pretend I’m interested in him and bring him over to our side.”

The idea made Sora want to throw up, but if it made him privy to their plans, he would try to pretend, because whatever they were planning wasn’t good. Something that had to be discussed in secret, in the middle of the night, never was—especially something that involved huge amounts of money.

“Good,” the man called Rourke said. “We’ll try that first. Wakahisa is highly respected. His voice would mean a lot for our efforts.”

“I’m not sucking his dick,” Bennett bit off. “I’m not a queer. I have a line I won’t cross.”

Rourke grunted. “News to me. Just remember the sums we’re considering as you... interact with Wakahisa.”

“And if Sora doesn’t take the bait?” Bennett asked.

“So you doubt your appeal?” Rourke blew air through his teeth. “I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

“Pfft. I’ll handle Sora. He’s a clueless prick. A lab geek. The pilot thing will totally get his dick hard. He’ll wallow in my attention, but I still like having a back-up plan. I don’t want to go into this with no way out. I won’t be happy being left with nothing if this falls through.”

“We have a Plan B, Lieutenant, but it isn’t a pretty one. P.L.C. Enterprises will secure that Francesium. If you aid us, you’ll be compensated. Just be sure you’re one of the pilots on the returning mission to Varuna, in case...”

“I’ll do that,” Bennett said. “I’ll do what I have to do. Just make sure you do your part, Rourke.”

“Oh, we have. We’ve bought off several high-ranking officials of the ACC. At least some of the advocates we need are assured. Do what I have requested, Lieutenant Bennett. Don’t get creative. Get us our scientist, and make sure you’re on the next expedition to Varuna, in case we have to default to Plan B.”

“I’ll do that. Sir,” Bennett said.

Their footsteps approached Sora's hiding place. Scurrying, he made his way to the closest door and pressed his fingerprint to the lock to open it. The door swished, and Sora hurried in to camouflage himself beneath the broad leaves of the ferns. The air was heavy and hot, and the smell of the plants and soil dominated. Two sets of boots moved past the lab, and after a wait of a quarter hour or so, Sora felt safe to leave. Sweat coated his face and darkened his club clothes, but the heat was only a partial perpetrator.

He should have known something like this would happen. Whenever something held value, people would fight over it. He wondered how far they would go, how many people were involved in this plot. What was Plan B? Sora could imagine it had something to do with taking the Francesium from the natives of Varuna without trading for it fairly—or even securing their permission. Sora would have thought violating a core value of the ACC would be impossible, but with the right amount of money behind them, they might succeed.

Sora walked back toward the shuttle that would take him to his rooms, rubbing his arms even though he wasn't cold, thinking. He wondered how deep this ran, who he could trust. Nualyin? No, he wouldn't share what he had heard with anyone yet, and he would respond when Bennett tried to recruit him. Playing along was his best option for finding out what they were up to. A pseudo-friendship with Bennett would give him access to the man's communication devices and private records. The idea of feigning a romance made him shudder and want to retch, but Sora knew he had to do it. For whatever reason, this had landed on him, and he couldn't stand to the side while greed potentially destroyed an entire world and race of people—and all they stood to learn there.

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## Chapter Five

They were close to bringing the tchallit down. A river of blood followed the huge predator as Ch'Marsam-muk and his companions on the dangerous ritual hunt swam after it. Ch'Marsam-muk spun in the water and dived to avoid a tail three times the length of his body and covered in spikes as long and sharp as the trident he held. One of them nicked the end of his tentacle, and his blood mingled with all the rest flavoring the water. It stung but would result in no lasting damage, so he turned to his back and pushed with his tentacles, shooting himself through the fouled water and beneath the massive creature. A cloud of blood bloomed when he drove his trident into its belly, and the animal thrashed, beating with its tail and paddling with its clawed front legs to escape.

Ch'Marsam-muk darted to the side and away from the tchallit's desperate, erratic movements. Two other hunters swam to cut it off and then drove their weapons into opposite sides of its elongated snout. It opened a mouth large enough to swallow one of them whole, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth and expelling more blood. Another of their party of six struck the creature in the shoulder, immobilizing its leg on that side and making it list to the left. The tchallit landed hard on the ocean floor and slid, tearing up plants and raising a cloud of sandy soil. Four men converged over it and drove their tridents down into its pallid, whitish-green flesh. The hunt would end in victory, which would mean feasting and festivities, as well as an auspicious start to the meeting of their council.

Just when it looked like they'd vanquished their prey—one of the most lethal animals in the ocean—the tchallit drew a final burst of strength, raising its tail, swatting one of the men away, and sending him somersaulting through the rust-tinged water. One of the others narrowly avoided the snap of its jaw. Amazingly, the creature managed to hoist itself off the sea floor. It lurched and swam a few hundred yards, faltering and zigzagging, dragging its useless claw beneath it. The men scattered to avoid the flailing. Two of them threw their spears through the water, and found their marks. Ch'Marsam-muk knew the best way to avoid anyone else getting hurt would be to finish this thing as quickly as they could. Taking a chance, he brought his tentacles together hard and shot himself up through the water, to a clear patch above the smear of blood. At the last minute, he twisted his waist and swam above the tchallit. The others continued their relentless assault, keeping the creature's attention focused on them. Ch'Marsam-muk gripped his heavy spear, almost the length

of his body, in both hands. With all the strength he could muster, he drove it down into the top of the tchallit's head. He felt the vertebrae between the skull and the spine break beneath the tines of his weapon, and he gave another push and twist, his muscles screaming.

Though he tried to keep his hold on his weapon, the death throes of the creature tossed him off as if he were a guppy, and he cartwheeled through the water until his back struck a spire of rock. He slid down it until his tentacles touched the ground. He held tight with his suction cups and waited for the spinning in his head to subside. In the distance, the tchallit had finally fallen still. Ch'Marsam-muk swam in that direction. The tides had started to push the blood away from them, making it easier for him to see. He pulled his trident from the creature's head and secured it onto his back. With the exception of the man who'd been struck by its tail and injured, they took the hooks and tough hide ropes from their waists. After driving the serrated hooks into the creature's thick, meaty muscle, they began their arduous journey back to their village.

It was a long, difficult swim, and by the time they reached the city of stone, metal, and coral structures, deep below the surface of the sea, Ch'Marsam-muk's body trembled, and he couldn't drag himself any farther. He let his cramped fingers unfurl from the hide rope and sunk down, arranging his tired tentacles around him and leaning against a slab of reddish rock sculpted into a porpoise. Lacy purple leaves surrounded the statue's base and meandered off beneath the arch marking a garden's boundary. Hungry, Ch'Marsam-muk broke a few off and enjoyed their crunch and salty, bitter flavor. People came out of the irregular, round structures made to resemble the natural formations of rock and coral in their part of the sea to congratulate the hunters by rubbing their faces against them and stroking their tentacles. Some started to clean the tchallit carcass while others brought seaweed to wrap and season the meat.

After he recovered enough of his energy, Ch'Marsam-muk swam slowly through the village and beneath the arch to his living area. He took a fish from the string hanging from the ceiling and bit into it as he moved into the small alcove where he slept. Lined in soft, fragrant plants, lit by glowing blue pods, and warmed by channels directing the heat of the planet's core, the room was barely large enough to contain him. But that was how his people liked to sleep: close and cozy. Ch'Marsam-muk pushed away his longing to have someone to wrap up with him, someone to hold him and twist his tentacles around him until they tangled up so neither could tell where he ended and the other began. They would take on each other's colors, and their tentacles would produce soft light from their contentment. But that only happened with mates, and Ch'Marsam-

muk hadn't found his yet, so he curled his tentacles around himself and rested his cheek on his tucked-up arm.

Alone or not, he needed to get some rest before the council met. As a warrior, he was expected to be there, and warriors from some of the other tribes would be attending as well. Things would likely get heated. He knew what they would be discussing, and he had to be ready to make the others see reason before they made a terrible mistake.

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"We must defend what is ours," growled one of the warriors from a nearby tribe. Nearly all the other men and women who had come to the spit of land and reclined on the carved benches with their tentacles dangling into the channel that brought water from the sea agreed—and loudly.

Ch'Marsam-muk waited for them to quiet down before raising the large shell that indicated he wanted to speak. "We are jumping to conclusions. The sky people have left, and we don't even know if they are planning to return."

"We must be ready to protect ourselves if they do," a woman with emerald-green tentacles and yellow hair said.

"Defend ourselves against what?" said Qu'Eltektan, a friend and supporter of Ch'Marsam-muk. "The sky people have only been here a few times, and those that did not die have left and taken nothing with them. It's premature to plan to attack them without knowing what they want—if anything."

"Besides," Ch'Marsam-muk said, "these people have machines far beyond anything we possess. Not only might we face defeat if we attack them, we would be losing the chance to learn from them. Perhaps we can make friends with these people. If they share their secrets with us, we could have machines that would carry us into the sky."

"No, I do not believe they would come here if they wanted nothing," said the woman. An important leader and warrior from a distant village, she'd introduced herself as T'Maarla-deem, Ch'Marsam-muk thought he recalled. Her opinion would be respected; others would follow what she said next. "If we kill them, we can take their sky machines for ourselves. Why should we allow them to come here? They have not asked our permission or introduced themselves. Who here would enter another village without being invited? That's an act of war. These people from the sky have no decency."

Ch'Marsam-muk had to reveal what he'd been keeping secret ever since it happened the previous night. He hated to do it, and he wouldn't tell them



everything, but if it would prevent hostilities between his people and Sora's, he could not be silent. Besides, he saw much possibility in learning to build and use the machines Sora's people possessed. "I met one of these sky people, the last time it was dark. I found him sinking into the water, and I knew from those that had been here before that he would die if I didn't take him back into the air, so I carried him to a small island, and I spoke with him. He tried to teach me his words, and I taught him some of ours. It was clear he wanted to be friends. He was a delicate and gentle man, and he smiled often. He never even raised his voice to me. The sky people are not so different from us. Their words may be different, but their feelings are the same."

"They are nothing like us," snarled a big warrior with a deep, puckered scar across his chest and bones knotted into his hair. "I for one don't want them here. They are strange, they're ugly, and I don't want them around my mate. And if we ever choose a hatchling from the breeding grounds, I don't want them around my children. Many of us feel the same way. We should drive these people off and make sure they never return."

"You assume we can do that," Qu'Eltektan said calmly. "I have swum close to the crafts that brought the sky people here. They're thick and metallic. A trident or a sling won't penetrate them. They have machines that can carry them across the surface of the water far faster than any of us can swim. To repeat, these people can fly!"

Ch'Marsam-muk listened as the council continued to argue. He had said all he knew to say, and he couldn't understand the hatred some of the warriors felt. Among his people, it was common for fighters to demonstrate their prowess by defeating dangerous enemies—like the tchallit. Ch'Marsam-muk also knew that at the conclusion of the meeting, even though they all agreed they would prepare to fight but that they wouldn't attack the sky people unless provoked, that many of the warriors had other plans. He could see in some of their faces that if they had the chance, they'd kill the visitors, for boasting rights if nothing else. He could do nothing but try to warn Sora. But he didn't know if Sora would return. His people might send someone else. He'd already reconciled himself to never again seeing the small, beautiful man with the amazing lips and sparkling eyes, and the two strange, bony tentacles. At least he'd tried to.

Qu'Eltektan rubbed his forehead against Ch'Marsam-muk's cheek. "I am glad that's over, but I don't think we got anywhere. We'll have to keep trying and hope the others will see reason. Why didn't you tell me you met one of them?"

“It really didn’t seem important until now,” Ch’Marsam-muk lied. He had thought about it, recreated the events in his mind, every day since it had happened. And his friend knew him well.

“Well then. Keep your secrets, Ch’Marsam-muk. They’re yours to keep. Do you want to go to the Pho?”

He thought about going to the large reef where they held wrestling matches and other contests of strength and skill, and where, in the waters beyond the pitted islets, unmated men and women could find as many anonymous partners as they wanted and writhe in the surf wrapped in each other’s tentacles. Now, with a new night slowly falling, both the reef and shore would be lit with glass orbs powered by the planet’s heat and a variety of bioluminescent plants and animals. Lichen would be glowing on the rocks. Ch’Marsam-muk had been there many times, often pairing with four men or more before he exhausted himself. But for the last several nights and days, he’d been unable to muster the motive to go. Maybe he was getting old, but he was ready to find a special man, one who meant more than lips, tentacles, fingers, a mouth, a cock, and an ass. He wanted to find his mate, and he’d been trying, but he hadn’t felt that sense of instant connection with another man. He hadn’t found anyone he’d known, right away, anyone he could spend the rest of his life with. Well, just...

“Not tonight,” he said, twining one of his tentacles around his friend’s and tasting Qu’Eltektan’s saline and shellfish flavor. The musk told him Qu’Eltektan was very eager to go to the Pho and find a female or two. “I think I want to be alone. To think. You go on. We’ll see each other soon.”

With a nod, Qu’Eltektan dove into the channel between the benches and slapped his tentacles together to propel himself back toward the open sea. Against the darkening sky, the foam he churned up stood out bright and white, and below him, teal, purple, and chartreuse shifted and overlapped as the flora began to glow.

Ch’Marsam-muk pushed off with his tentacles and arced his body into the water with barely a splash. Returning to the water and the ease of movement it allowed always felt like a great relief. The flaps at the back of his throat and beyond his nostrils shut and sealed. The gills on the sides of his neck opened and pulled water in, providing him a burst of energy as he swam through a patch of high, bright magenta grass. It tickled his chest, belly, and groin and released a school of bright yellow fish. Next he moved through a rocky trench filled with tapered pods larger than his head. His movement caused them to open their six petals and spill lights across him, and he swam through rippling

pools of gold, turquoise, and lavender light. If he stayed, his tentacles would absorb and reflect the colors of the blooms, his skin take on a subtle cast, and his eyes would change to match. But he didn't linger. He wanted to reach his destination, not that he thought it would do much good.

It took hours of hard swimming, but he finally reached the hilly island where he'd brought his man from the sky. He came back here from time to time, thinking that if Sora did return, he might come back here too. Maybe it was silly; maybe Sora's people didn't seek mates the way his did. Maybe Sora had already forgotten Ch'Marsam-muk. He went ashore, settled his tentacles around him, and looked up at the first stars glimmering against the burgundy sky. For a while, he tried to imagine what it was like where Sora came from. Sora wasn't designed for swimming, and his people died if they stayed under water too long. Maybe they had no ocean. Maybe everything was made from the same dull metal as the machines that had carried them here. Maybe they had no world and just lived up there in the sky, among the stars. Maybe they had come in search of a home.

But if they returned, some of his people would try to kill them. They might succeed. Somehow, Ch'Marsam-muk had to make sure that didn't happen, for the sake of both civilizations.

He sat a while longer and contemplated the stars and constellations, how many different kinds of people and things might be out there among them. He, none of his people, had imagined anything existed beyond their world until ten cycles of dark and light past. Now, he wondered if they—if he—might one day get to travel into the stars, if he could be more than a simple warrior and craftsman. That took his thoughts to places he didn't want them to go, and he dove back into the water, which was lit with every imaginable color now. He fanned his arms and swam hard, going deeper and deeper, as if he could escape the memory of that little man with the pair of thin, bony tentacles. He disagreed with the others. Sora's appendages had been unfamiliar, different from his own, but hardly ugly.

In a deep, narrow trench, among some pale green, triangular ferns and fat orange tubes topped with long fringe, he found a bed of flat ylon shells. Normally he collected them in a net and brought them back to his house where he could harvest both the meat and the gems they sometimes held. He had a tool for prying them open, but if he really worked at it, he could part the ribbed, pinkish-gold shells with his hands. It made a nice distraction.

The first two shells contained no jewels, but he was hungry, and ate the slimy but flavorful animals living within them. He found a small cloudy gem—

blue, the most common color—and then some irregular greenish ones, nothing special, but he could polish them and make them into small rings or necklaces good enough for trade. He discovered some pearly white gems, but then the next several shells were empty. He hadn't brought his belt or hide pouch, and he had almost as much as he could carry in one hand, so he considered giving up and making the long journey home. Then he noticed probably the largest shell he'd ever seen, partially buried in sand and gravel. It took him a while to dig it out, and even longer to force the stubborn thing to give up its treasure.

And what a treasure it was, like nothing he had ever seen: a red rare gem, perfectly round, of flawless clarity, and big enough to occupy his entire palm. It pulsed with its own light, much like the vegetation around it. Ch'Marsam-muk had heard of such a thing, but he'd never been fortunate enough to find one. He knew exactly what he would make from it, even if he never got to deliver it.

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## Chapter Six

Sweat dripped down Sora's forehead as he stood to give his report. Hundreds of people, all important scientists and high-ranking officers of the ACC, as well as CEOs from influential multi-system corporations sat on the rows of padded chairs in the semicircular room, looking down at him. He had to walk a fine line. While he had to convince his superiors not to send mining excursions to Varuna tomorrow, he had to at least pretend to further the agenda of his new "friends" Bennett and Mr. Rourke of P.L.C. They wanted him to claim the planet held no intelligent life and that operations to retrieve the Francesium should begin as soon as possible. Sora was to convince them with as much scientific language as possible that the life forms picked up on their satellites were merely fish and porpoises, and that the evidence of civilization had been left by a long-extinct race.

Uncomfortably hot in his dress uniform, Sora delivered a banal account consisting mostly of chemical compositions and figures. After twenty minutes of speaking, he felt like he'd run a marathon and gratefully collapsed into his chair next to Nualyin. Nualyin touched the paper-thin screen in front of him and slid it in front of Sora. *What was that, Wakahisa? You told them nothing we discussed.*

Sora just shook his head.

*I'm not letting this go.*

Sora ignored him. What else could he do?

An admiral, a redheaded woman Sora hadn't met, stood and said, "We'll now open the floor to questions for the research team."

Rourke approached one of the podiums with a microphone. "My question is a simple one, Lieutenant Wakahisa. Based on your findings on the planet and your analyses after returning, what is your proposal? My company is prepared to leave for Varuna and begin mining operations immediately. To get the Francesium to the ACC, where it can start doing good. For all the people of the Alliance. Can you give the go-ahead?"

Sora stood and spread his hands over the table's cool surface. He knew it might come to this, and that he'd have to break the illusion of conspiracy he had shakily maintained with this snake. He'd endured Bennett's assumptions that touching Sora's hand once in a while gave him the right to put Sora down and tell him what to do, all in the hopes of discovering their Plan B. He

couldn't do it any longer, not in front of all these people who needed to hear the truth. "I cannot, in good conscience, advise going ahead with mining. Instead, I propose another excursion to Varuna, a fact-finding mission—"

"But you've already been on a fact-finding mission," Rourke said, his frustration oozing through the cracks in his false sweetness like an infection. "You have confirmed the presence of the element. What more do you need to investigate?"

"The people living on the planet," Sora said. A collective gasp rose from the assembly like a cliché out of a bad movie. Sora waited for the mumbled conversation to fade.

"There's no evidence of that," Rourke said, sputtering. "Nothing concrete. It's all speculation based on some structures that could have been built by a dead civilization. I mean, there's no real evidence..."

"Actually, there is." Sora used his computer to dim the lights and pull up the footage he'd recorded to the screen behind him. "One of these men saved my life the night I was separated from my team and caught in the storm. I spoke with him. He was wearing jewelry, probably made of Francesium, which indicates use of tools, metallurgy. These people are evolved, a sovereign race, which means we cannot simply plunder their resources. Which means, we must make contact with them and negotiate terms of trade. Please, esteemed colleagues, decide for yourselves."

He played the hour's worth of footage, and when it ended, the assembly sat in stunned silence. Rourke, still at the mic, pointed at Sora and said, "This proves nothing! You could have filmed this nonsense in the pool here on the station and falsified the time stamp."

Sora couldn't believe even Rourke would sink so low. "Are you honestly calling me a fraud?"

"It's a little suspicious that you waited until now, over a month later, to share this momentous discovery. Why is that?"

"Why indeed?" Captain Kgosì said. Sora swore he could see steam rising from her close-cropped curls.

"I wanted to have a chance to study the file before reporting," Sora said. "I wanted to make sure I wasn't presenting any false conclusions."

"What false conclusions could we draw?" the captain almost shouted. "You made contact with an alien being and you didn't report it. That's a serious violation, and you know it."

"You may discipline your crewman another time, Captain Kgosi," the admiral said. "Whether it was withheld or not, this footage clearly shows we cannot go to Varuna and begin mining."

"If it's even authentic," Rourke protested.

"There's one way to find out, isn't there?" Sora leveled his gaze at the man. Rourke was about to find out Sora wasn't the awkward and callow man he'd pretended to be. "By going to the planet and making contact with these people! If you want to get your hands on what they possess, you'll have to trade fairly with them. I'm sorry if that will cut into your company's profits, but it's one of the core tenets of the ACC."

"The lieutenant is right," said another of the admirals. "We need to organize a fact-finding mission, and as soon as possible. We need to learn much more about this world—and its people—before we can consider obtaining the Francesium. Everyone but the senior officers are dismissed. We'll meet again tomorrow at 0730 to discuss the excursion."

Sora gathered his tablet with shaking hands. He had something else he needed to say, because he had to make sure that mission included him. "Sirs. I have studied this footage. I-I can speak the language of these people, at least on a rudimentary level. I'm the best person to negotiate with them."

"You are hardly in a position to demand anything," the captain said. "I want you out of my sight, and in your quarters until your disciplinary hearing this afternoon. Go, before you make me really angry. I'm very disappointed in you, Lieutenant."

"Even me," Nualyin said as he walked beside Sora down the long aisle. "You even lied to me about what happened."

"I didn't lie," Sora protested feebly.

"A lie of omission, then." Nualyin was angry, angrier than Sora had ever seen him. His breath misted the inside of his delicate mask. "Which means you don't trust me."

"I couldn't trust anyone." Sora looked over his shoulder. He half expected Bennett to approach him, maybe even hit him. He'd just cost the pilot millions, maybe billions, not to mention what he had done to Rourke's bottom line. "This goes deep, Nualyin. I-I need help. Your help. But we shouldn't talk here. I don't even know where we'll be safe. I suspect my lab's been broken into, and some of my communication channels hacked. My quarters might be bugged. Yours might be too."

“You’re sounding paranoid, Sora.”

“Believe me, I have reason. Come with me, and I’ll tell you what I can. I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner. I was afraid, but I’m really in trouble now.”

They left the administrative wing of the station and took the shuttle to the large botanical garden at the center. After wandering a good distance into it, only grass, trees, and beds of flowers surrounded them. They could have been in a park on Earth. Nualyin went to a tree and sat in the grass. Being near plants and soil gave his people great pleasure, and he looked uncharacteristically enrapt as he lifted his mask and took a deep sniff of the air. Sora sat down beside him and took a pad of paper and an old-fashioned lead pencil from the cargo pocket of his uniform pants. Quickly, but careful to include all the relevant details, Sora wrote about what had happened on Varuna, what he’d overheard in his lab, and all the interactions he’d had with Bennett and Rourke since. He told Nualyin how they’d wanted him to lend scientific credibility to their plans to strip-mine Varuna bare, how he’d played along as best he could.

*Plan B is something very bad. It’s their alternative to just taking the Francesium and getting around trading for it fairly. I don’t know what it is. I wasn’t able to find out, and now I never will.*

*Oh, we might, Nualyin wrote. But you have to trust me. Sora, I am your friend. I thought you knew that.*

*I was just confused. I regret it. What do we do?*

*I am very old by your standards. There is little I have not seen before, and these men are not likely to fool me. I will find out what they’re planning. But for now, we must destroy this piece of fiber. Then, you need to get to your disciplinary hearing. It’s imperative that you are on that mission, and I plan to see that you are.*

“Nualyin, thank you,” Sora said in a voice soft with shame. “I thought... I worried that you resented me because you were interested and I wasn’t... and I didn’t trust you for that reason.”

Nualyin just shook his head. “Sora, my people assign no emotional relevance to the act of intercourse. It’s just a pleasant way to pass the time for us. With our long lifespans, most of us never reproduce, and we certainly don’t build lives around sexual partners. I suggested we might have fun, but I wasn’t offended when you weren’t interested. We are very different, physically, and I know that can be hard for some people to reconcile. Forgive me, but my people are not as petty as some of yours. I don’t hold you assigning your experiences



with men of your species to me and my motives against you, but it simply isn't that way. You must always remember not to project your experiences onto others, especially those of other races. Now, we need to get to that hearing. Showing up late won't aid your cause."

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In contrast to the cavernous room where he'd delivered his report, the room where Sora's hearing would be held was small, too warm, windowless, and paneled with dark wood. Captain Kgosi sat between two admirals, a silver-haired woman and a dark-skinned mountain of a man with drooping jowls that made him resemble a bulldog. His eyes, though, were as sharp as a feral cat's.

Sora felt strangely calm and detached as the admiral with the silver hair read the charges against him: violating a direct order, compromising a mission, insubordination, and withholding pertinent information.

"Wakahisa, I cannot express how disappointed I am," Captain Kgosi said. "Until this mission, you were solid, a team player, and someone I could depend on. Now I just don't know. What do you have to say for yourself? Can you justify your actions?"

Nualyin consulted his tablet. "Sir, we have no way of knowing how the gravity on Varuna affected Lieutenant Wakahisa. It might have caused disorientation, possibly even hallucinations. Further, we can't rule out an unknown catalyst having an impact on his mental state, even before the head injury. Quite possibly, a toxin, or an allergen native to the planet—"

The captain held up her hand, and while he looked offended, Nualyin fell silent. "I want to hear from the Lieutenant, Nualyin. Sora, to use the vernacular, what the hell?"

Sora met her gaze. He had nothing but respect for the captain. "Sir, part of this was a mistake. I didn't mean to separate from my partner. I noticed a phenomenon I felt I should investigate, and I suppose scientific curiosity compelled me. It wasn't until much later that I noticed I had separated from Officer O'Leary. I turned back to try to find him, but I was caught in the storm. I never intended to cause difficulty, disobey an order, or compromise our mission. My actions might have been rash, and for that I can only apologize, but they weren't malicious."

"And how do you address the charges of withholding information, Lieutenant?" the bulldog asked. "Certainly not a rash moment of scientific curiosity there."

“No,” Sora admitted. “A poor decision in retrospect, but one that seemed the best choice at the time. We all know this planet—and the element it contains in such abundance—is polarizing people. Some see Varuna as nothing but a cash cow, sir. I could not let it be exploited, and I had to think how best to avoid it.”

“And you couldn’t trust your CO, Wakahisa?” asked the silver-haired admiral.

“With all due respect to the captain,” Sora said, “I wasn’t sure. Look to history. Our species has done terrible things to gain wealth.”

“We’re not clueless, Sora,” Kgosi said. “We all know the vultures are circling Varuna, and before you mention it, we know they’ve infiltrated our ranks. But not in this room. That I can assure you, Lieutenant.”

“Yes sir,” Sora said. “But our enemies are powerful.”

“Don’t we know it,” the captain said, shaking her head. “But the matter that brings us here is not the corporations looking to exploit Varuna. It’s your misconduct.”

“Sir, Lieutenant Wakahisa may have been under the influence of an alien substance,” Nualyin said again. “We have no proof to the contrary.”

The captain smiled. “Your loyalty to your friend is admirable, Nualyin. But again, I want to hear from Sora.”

Sora shook his head. “Sir, I did what I thought best at every turn. In hindsight I could have done better, and I’ll accept whatever punishment you hand down.” He looked up and met her gaze. It seemed to have softened, or maybe that was wishful thinking. “Strip me of rank, give me a formal reprimand, anything. But please, let me go back to Varuna. My interest is scientific, altruistic. I am the best person to liaise with the natives. I’m the only one who’s actually spoken to one of these people. Throw me in the brig when the mission is over if that’s what you feel I deserve, but let me do this.”

“Duly noted.” Kgosi conferred with the admirals in whispers for an agonizing quarter of an hour or so while Sora held Nualyin’s hand beneath the table. Damn it, if they wouldn’t put him on this mission, he’d stow away. Anything. He had to get back to that planet; he might be its only advocate. Finally Kgosi lifted her head. Sora and Nualyin stood at attention. “We are in agreement. Lieutenant Wakahisa, your actions, while ill-advised, held no malice against the ACC. In fact, we agree you acted in the Alliance’s interests.

You will maintain your current rank with a verbal warning. You will lead the mission to Varuna, but Sora, you listen to me. You put even a toe out of line again, and you'll be cooling your heels in the brig. Now get out of my sight and go do something useful."

"Thank you, sir." Out of an old, ingrained habit, he pressed his palms to the outsides of his thighs and bowed to his captain. "Thank you."

"Get out of here," Kgosi repeated.

Nualyin grasped Sora's elbow and led him from the room. "I'd call that a victory."

"I appreciate your support," Sora said. They made their way down the deserted hallway. "I'm sorry I underestimated you, and your friendship. Want to get some dinner?"

Nualyin opened his mouth to speak as they turned the corner, but three men, their faces covered in black masks, intersected them and raised their weapons. The implications were clear: one of the admirals was a traitor. It couldn't be Captain Kgosi. Nothing else explained the hit team arriving so quickly. Nualyin leapt in front of Sora and spread his arms, but it did no good. The next thing he knew, Sora lay on his back with Nualyin sprawled across his chest while the assassins surrounded them. He tried to lift his head, say something, but a boot heel connected with his nose. His eyes streamed, he tasted blood, and then everything went black.

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## Chapter Seven

Sora woke to a headache and horrible cramps in his triceps and shoulder sockets. He opened his eyes to Nualyin looking down at him. “Where”—he coughed to clear his throat—“where are we? What happened?”

“We’re on the lowest level of the station, in a storage closet.” Nualyin canted his head toward some buckets, buffers, and cleaning supplies. “When they knocked you out, I feigned unconsciousness, hoping they wouldn’t restrain us.”

“A good idea,” Sora said in a thick voice. Something filled his sinuses and clotted in his nose—probably blood. He wiggled the bridge of his nose. It wasn’t broken, but it hurt like crazy. “What now?”

“The men who attacked us will probably be returning to kill us any minute now.”

“Why haven’t they already?”

“What, in the middle of the hall of the administrative wing?” Nualyin looked at him, as he often did, like an indulgent parent. But Nualyin had protected him, jumped in front of weapons to shield him, so Sora couldn’t be annoyed.

“What do we do? We don’t have any way to defend ourselves.”

“That isn’t true,” Nualyin said with a little smile. “We’re scientists. We have our minds, our creativity. Do exactly what I say.”

“And we’ll live?” Sora didn’t want to die in a closet, without getting to look at the glowing water of Varuna again. He wondered what it said about him that discovery, exploration was the loss he felt, rather than family, friends, or any human relationship. Suddenly he wished he’d communicated with his mother and sisters. He hadn’t spoken to them since he’d left for basic training. It hadn’t seemed that important.

Nualyin winked. “We might.”

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Sora lay on the floor, writhing, moaning, and clutching his stomach as the door to the closet opened. He didn’t look up, but watched in his peripheral vision as the silver-haired admiral entered, flanked by two armed men, and Nualyin leapt to his feet and spread his arms. “Get back!”

“What’s going on here?” the admiral said. “What’s that horrible stench?”

Sora had made himself throw up, and in the tiny space, it reeked.

“Wakahisa was keeping more secrets than any of us knew,” Nualyin said. “He caught an alien disease on Varuna, and he chose not to tell anyone. He thought he could find the cure himself, and now he’s bleeding internally. His organs are basically disintegrating inside him.” He gave Sora’s backside a nudge with his small foot. “He is also highly contagious, at least to humans. He confessed to me that some men he associated with in the station’s clubs are already sick. My people may or may not be resistant, but quite frankly, I’d rather you shoot me than be subjected to such a long and agonizing death. I—”

Nualyin retched and threw up over his chest. Sora didn’t know how he made it seem so natural; he’d had to crouch in the corner with his fingers jammed down his throat to manage anything. Nualyin swore in his language as he dropped to his knees and howled with pain. “The whole station is at risk. This is going to kill us all!”

When the three of them backed away, Sora slid an aluminum mop handle across the floor to Nualyin. The Shieferian used their enemies’ distraction to attack. Rising, Nualyin swung the metal bar and struck the nearest merc in the belly, then the head, knocking him to his back and sending his gun sliding across the floor. Nualyin crouched behind a stack of buckets to avoid the other merc’s fire while Sora dove to reach the discarded gun. He hated wielding the weapon, but he had been trained to use one, and he did. With his back pressed against the wall, Sora fired at the second merc and hit him in the shoulder, making him drop his weapon. Leaping from his cover and over the body of the man he’d beaten unconscious, Nualyin drove the mop handle into the second soldier’s thigh, piercing his flesh and dropping him. The other scientist struck the merc’s head with a sickly thud, and the hired warrior fell facedown.

The admiral pulled a small gun from inside her blazer and trained it on Nualyin. The red dot against his forehead glowed brightly in the darkness, and Sora dropped his gun and held his hands out.

“You boys are pretty clever,” the woman said, “but I’m afraid I can’t let you stand in the way of me making enough money to buy my own continent.”

“You betrayed everything you swore to defend for money?” Sora shouted. “You’re a disgrace! How are you going to look at yourself in the mirror?”

She sneered, her wrinkles deep and shadowed as the lamps in the hall shined at her back. “I’ll look in it and see a very rich woman, Lieutenant. But it won’t matter to you. You’ll be dead.”

Sora crossed his forearms over his head as the admiral raised her weapon. He had no idea how to escape. It was over. “Let Nualyin go. He’s a brilliant scientist, and he’ll aid your cause. His voice will add legitimacy to your side.”

“Our side won’t need legitimacy soon enough.” The admiral stepped forward and pressed the barrel of her weapon to Sora’s temple. “You fool. You had your chance. You could have been one of the elite, but you had to grow a conscience for a bunch of squids slithering along the floor of Varuna’s ocean. You’d deny your own people needed resources for a bunch of hideous monsters.”

Swearing in Japanese, Sora drove his fist into her crotch—his last act of defiance. The admiral expelled a grunt, doubled over, and staggered back. She raised her weapon, and Sora raised his chin. “Remember the honest man you killed as you spend your money, you filthy traitor.” His last thoughts were of Ch’Marsam-muk moving gracefully through the pure waters of his world, and that he hoped Nualyin had the good sense to run through the open door and escape. Then he closed his eyes, balled his hands into fists, and waited.

A pop and whoosh sounded as the weapon discharged. Sora expected pain, but it didn’t come. Cautiously, he opened his eyes. Smoke poured from a hole in the admiral’s chest, and she looked somewhere between constipated and stunned before she collapsed. Behind her, Captain Kgosi replaced her weapon in the holster by her hip. Sora dropped his face into his hands and struggled to breathe, thankful he’d already thrown up everything in his stomach.

“Captain—how... Why are you here?”

She offered him a hand up, and he stood on watery legs until he could lean against the wall. He was cold, and it was hard to breathe.

“I needed your signature on some forms,” Kgosi said. “I tried calling you on your comm but you didn’t answer. When I went to your quarters, a shady-looking son of a bitch told me you had packed up to move out. All your things were in boxes. Well, I’m a lot of things, but a damned fool isn’t one of them. I knew how much the mission to Varuna meant to you, and that you’d never go AWOL and risk missing being a part of it. Not after the way you fought for it in your disciplinary hearing. First time I ever saw that side of you—the warrior. When I found Nualyin missing too, I traced your biosignals to this closet.”

“Good timing, sir,” Nualyin said. “Come into the closet with us.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because we can trust you, and we need all the allies we can get. And, if the traitors brought me and Sora here to kill us, they obviously aren't recording this area. We can tell you what we know without the risk of being overheard.”

Captain Kgosì stepped into the supply room, and they related the information they had.

“Damn,” she said.

“We can't trust anyone,” Nualyin said. “We should dispose of these bodies and pretend we don't know about the conspiracy. Let the traitors think their people simply disappeared, the same as they wanted to do to Sora and me. Feigning ignorance is our best chance at learning more. Though I think the time has come to search more aggressively. What did the admiral mean when she said they wouldn't need the illusion of legitimacy?”

“We have to find out what Plan B is,” Sora said. “If they'd go to these lengths to keep us off the mission...”

“Understood,” Kgosì said. “I'll see to this mess. I have at least a few people on my crew I can trust. You two, get ready to depart. Do what you can to gather intelligence, but don't risk your lives.”

“Yes sir,” Nualyin said.

“Thank you, sir,” Sora said. “It's good to have you in our corner.”

“It's the right corner to be in, Wakahisa. Get going. Double time. I'm tasking you two brilliant minds with finding out what our enemies are planning while I get ready to stop them. Watch your backs, boys.”

“That we will do,” Nualyin said as he looked at Sora. “We'll be watching every shadow.”

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## Chapter Eight

Walking up the ramp to board the ship and knowing he was surrounded by traitors was the hardest thing Sora had ever done. He couldn't seem to summon the unexpected courage he'd found at the meeting, and he didn't know if he, Nualyin, and the captain would be enough to save a world from a threat they hadn't even uncovered yet.

He and Nualyin had volunteered to share quarters even though their rank afforded them private rooms. They'd had the captain switch their room assignments at the last possible moment under the pretense of setting up a mutual workstation and sharing equipment. As soon as the door closed behind them, they took out scanners to check for listening devices. For the next several hours, they tore apart the tiles in the ceiling, the wall panels, and the metallic tiles on the floor until they were absolutely certain they weren't being watched. By the time they finished, they were both covered in sweat and dust. Nualyin collapsed cross-legged on the floor, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "It seems our ruse was successful."

Sora crouched down to face his friend and chuckled, more to release the tension he'd been storing than because he found the situation especially funny. "They probably bugged the wrong room. I hoped they're treated to a pair of horny ensigns who make a lot of noise."

Nualyin tilted his head to the side. "You're funny. I didn't notice your sense of humor much before, or your bravery. What you're doing takes a lot of courage, Sora. I'm honored you finally included me. And before you say anything, that is not my clever way of reminding you that you didn't trust me. I understand why you did it, and I don't hold it against you. I just want you to know I admire you. There's a bit of a warrior in you."

"We should get to work," Sora said, his cheeks warm and a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He'd dismissed the comment when the captain had made it, because he'd always considered himself the furthest thing from a warrior. It surprised him that the person who knew him best would see him that way, and even more that he took it as a compliment. "Bennett is the only confirmed conspirator. We should monitor all his communications."

"It will be simple enough to hack into his ACC comm, but if he's doing something below the board, he'll have a secure line, a separate comm device,



probably in his quarters. As the main pilot, he'll be occupied for at least a few hours with takeoff and plotting our course."

"Then we should hurry," Sora said.

As mechanics finished the preparations to the ship, crewmen boarded, and workers loaded cargo and equipment, Sora and Nualyin blended with the throng and tried to go unnoticed, which wasn't hard in a sea of people all wearing the same gray uniforms. On their way, they saw Bennett on the bridge, wearing a cocky smile as he leaned one hip against his control panel. They made their way to the lower deck and Bennett's private room. Neither of them would have a problem overriding his voice-activated lock, but the four men standing in front of his door were another matter.

"The lab's two decks up, boys," one of them said.

Sora and Nualyin looked at each other, and Sora swore Nualyin knew what he was thinking: these men, while they wore ACC uniforms, had an air of hired muscle. They turned and went back the way they'd come. What else could they do?

Back in their quarters, Sora dropped to the edge of the narrow bed, and Nualyin sat on the one facing it, his elbows on his spindly thighs. "We could ask the captain to order a search of his room," Sora said.

Nualyin shook his head. "Even if we find something, he'll stop using it."

"I'm a chemist. I can fabricate a gas containing a sedative and pump it into the hall. We can get into the room after the guards are unconscious."

"Same problem, Sora. He can't know we know. Don't you think attacking four men outside his quarters will rouse his suspicions?"

"Damn." Sora gripped the edge of the stiff mattress as the ship shimmied and rumbled into takeoff. He scooted to lean his back against the wall and braced for the inertia, closing his eyes against the pressure building in his head. He was frustrated; he almost wanted to cry. He'd run out of ideas, and if they didn't figure out what their enemies had planned, they wouldn't be able to stop them. "I never wanted this. I didn't want to be a soldier. I'm not cut out for fighting, or for all this deception."

Stumbling a little, Nualyin crossed the few feet of space and joined Sora on the bed. He draped his hand over Sora's knee. "Why did you enlist?"

"I grew up poor," Sora said. "Not just a little underprivileged. We lived on a quartz and silica mining colony barely the size of Earth's moon. My father

worked in a quarry; Mom made a little extra by doing laundry out of our little hovel. Everything extra we had went for a small computer so me and my three sisters could go to school. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know. I needed it, to know why things are the way they are. Enlisting was my only option for an education. ACC accepted me at fifteen, and I had my first degree by eighteen. I wanted to study for another—and that meant signing a twenty year contract. I've served eleven years, and it hasn't been so bad. Now... now I don't know if it was worth it. I don't want to fight."

"Sora, it's worth it," Nualyin said. "If you hadn't enlisted, think of all the experiences you wouldn't have had. You never would have set foot on Varuna. The people on that planet are lucky they got you—an honorable man—and not someone else. Remember that. And remember that fighting for something worth fighting for isn't the same as seeking out violence for baser reasons, or to prove something."

Sora took a deep breath and held it in his lungs for a second as the flight pattern of the ship smoothed out. His little meltdown dissipated, and he felt slightly ashamed. He turned to Nualyin and looked into his big eyes. "You've been a good friend to me. Thank you. You're... one of the few people who means anything to me."

"I appreciate that. Now tell me. After we're on course and our esteemed pilot doesn't have much to occupy his attention on the bridge, what will he do?"

Sora snorted. "Put the ship on auto, assign one of the junior officers to monitor it, and go get drunk in the rec room. He does it on every mission. That and harass the female officers and crew."

"And if one of the female officers took him up on his offer, she could get into his quarters."

"She'd have to be in there alone to search for his comm device," Sora said. "Besides, I don't think I could ask anyone to... Wait. I'm a chemist..."

"Yes, you are," Nualyin coached.

"She could inject him with a sedative..."

"And if he'd been drinking, he'd never know he didn't just pass out," Nualyin said. "I can make a small device that she can place on his communicator to piggyback his signal back to my wrist computer. Now the question is, who can we trust to help us? The captain?"

“No,” Sora said. “Not even Bennett is arrogant enough to think Kgosi would give him the time of day. What about Rayez?”

“Same problem. What about one of my people? They’re loyal.”

“No,” Sora said. “Bennett’s a boob man. I heard about it at length when he pretended to want to date me.”

“Then Rayez is all we have,” Nualyin said. “You’re human, so you’ll have a better understanding of this than I will. How can she convince him she’s willing to... attempt breeding?”

“She could pretend to be drunk,” Sora said. “Bennett is too self-absorbed to know she doesn’t usually indulge on missions. He only has to believe there’s enough of a chance for her to get into his room. We have to try. Get started on your device, and I’ll go find her.”

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“Stop pacing, Sora. It isn’t doing any good.”

“What time is it?”

Nualyin sighed. “2217. Nineteen minutes from the last time you asked me. Sit down. Maybe you should have a drink.”

“I’m just worried. I won’t forgive myself if something happened to Lieutenant Rayez.”

“Do you honestly think Rayez has anything to worry about from Bennett?”

The door chimed, sparing Sora from thinking about what might happen if Bennett asked his four guards to join in the fun. He hurried to give voice authorization, and Lieutenant Rayez stomped into the room looking very displeased. She was wearing her uniform pants and a snug white tank top that showed off both her muscular figure and the colorful tattoos covering both her arms. She’d swept her caramel-colored hair into a bun and applied mascara and a little reddish lip-gloss, something Sora had never seen her do. He could certainly see how a man who liked the company of women would appreciate her. “You bastards owe me a drink. Or twenty.” She flopped down on Nualyin’s bed and folded her hands behind her head.

“Were you successful?” Nualyin asked.

She shot him a look so full of daggers Sora expected to see blood. “After an hour of enduring that little troll trying to feel me up, yes. I found his comm device attached to the frame of his bed, and I attached your gadget just the way you told me to.”

“And Lieutenant Bennett?” Sora asked.

“Left him facedown in his lav. He, uh, may have had an accident. He wasn't smelling so good.”

Sora met her gaze and grinned. “That makes sense. I put a laxative into the sedative you injected him with. I thought if he... ah, soiled himself, he'd be less likely to talk about the incident with someone who might get suspicious. Believe me, he won't be mentioning tonight if he wakes up tomorrow with diarrhea in his pants.”

“Can I get out of here?” Rayez asked, sitting up. “I could use a drink and a real man. But first, a long shower.”

“Sure. Thank you, Lieutenant Rayez,” Sora said.

“I'm not letting you welsh on those drinks, Wakahisa,” she said over her shoulder as she left the room.

Nualyin hooked his wrist computer into the monitor on their wall. “Get comfortable, Sora. This will have recorded everything since Bennett established the link. We have a few hours of footage to go through.”

Six hours later, they lay on Sora's bed, nursing paper cups of terrible coffee and sharing a pillow. In all that time, they'd heard only a few snippets that made any sense at all:

“Can you confirm the payload is onboard?”

“Affirmative,” Bennett had responded.

“You know what to do upon arrival,” a gravelly female voice responded.

“We need to find out what the payload is.” An involuntary yawn punctuated Sora's words. “It must be weapons. Missiles? Why?”

“That would be exceptionally difficult to hide, even with the aid of several coconspirators,” Nualyin said. “What's the weight of the ship?”

The current weight of the *Tempest* is 7,350.39218 metric yonnes,” the computer voice responded.

Nualyin sat up in bed, looking much more alert. “We're about 3,600 kilograms too heavy.”

“3,602.735, give or take,” Sora said. “That's not enough weight to account for many missiles. What else could it be? What could they have smuggled

onboard that would further their agenda? I mean, they want to mine the Francesium from Varuna without trading for it fairly. What could they have brought that would make that possible?"

"I don't know," Nualyin said. "3,600 kilos. Clever. It isn't enough to be noticed. Well, I guess we should pull up a schematic of the ship and check it over, centimeter by centimeter."

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"Oh my god," Sora said. "I found it, or some of it. The extra weight." Over the past five weeks, their duties had cut into the time they had to search for the mysterious payload. Captain Kgosi had accommodated them as much as possible, and any more would have put up red flags, so they sacrificed their sleep.

"Where?" Nualyin asked.

"The last place we would have thought to look. The food banks. 3,200 kilos of extra weight. We need to get down there and find it."

"Let's go."

They had no trouble getting into the coolers; no one needed a security clearance to access the bags of rice, blocks of cheese, frozen meat, and long stretches of freeze-dried vegetables. Using the lights on their wrists, their breath freezing in clouds around them, they searched for anything abnormal—for hours. Finally Sora pushed his way past a curtain of cattle carcasses. "I found something!"

Nualyin joined him. "What?"

Sora pulled a plastic sheet away to reveal a row of metal canisters. "This doesn't look like food. Should we open one up?"

"Absolutely not," Nualyin said. "Get a hand truck, and call the captain. We'll analyze this in the lab, while it's isolated and we're safe."

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Nualyin swore in his native language as he sat with Sora and Captain Kgosi behind a protective pane of glass as a robotic arm opened the canister and the computers analyzed its contents.

Sora looked at the figures and molecular diagrams flashing neon green across the glass. He couldn't believe what he saw; it made it hard for him to breathe.

“What is HC-I91?” Captain Kgosì asked.

The two scientists looked at each other. Nualyin spoke. “It’s... a biological weapon developed by my people about a hundred years ago. It isn’t something we’re proud of. When we realized how devastating it was, how contagious, we banned it almost immediately. This is probably the most deadly disease we have ever encountered.”

Sora shivered and swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. “What would happen if all the HC-I91 onboard were deposited into the waters of Varuna?”

Nualyin met his eyes. “It would kill every living thing on the planet... but it would look like a native disease. A plague, unless someone knew to test for it.” He swore again. “We need to get everyone off this ship. If even one person was exposed, a kitchen worker or a janitor, they could kill us all. We need to quarantine anyone who could have come in contact with this, screen them for symptoms, test their DNA for possible corruption, and then take the escape pods to the planet.”

“That’s rather reactionary,” the captain said. “Are you honestly asking me to abandon this ship?”

“I assure you, it isn’t reactionary. I was alive when this weapon was in development. In six months, it swept across an entire planet and killed everything—almost a billion of my people. It attacks at a genetic level and breaks down the DNA of any organism exposed to it. That world is dead; we won’t go anywhere near it. Get these people off this ship now. The escape pods will take us to Varuna. In the meantime, we should—”

There was a deafening boom, and the ship shook and pitched to the left, knocking all three of them off their feet. They landed in a pile—Sora sprawled across the captain and Nualyin against his chest. The ship continued to lurch as the lights changed from innocuous fluorescent to angry, blinking red. High-pitched sirens wailed at rhythmic intervals. Kgosì got to her feet, pressing her hand to the wall as she shouted, “What the hell?”

“Hull breach,” the computerized voice announced.

“Where?” Kgosì asked, swiping at the blood coming from her hairline.

“Deck fourteen,” the computer answered. “Food storage.”

“Seal it off!” Nualyin screamed, his voice cracking. “Computer, seal that area!”

“Left thruster inoperable,” the computer said. “Life support at forty-seven percent.”

“Seal decks twelve through fifteen!” Nualyin shouted. “Now! Emergency override Nualyin 18642.”

“Decks twelve through fifteen sealed.”

“Jettison all contents of decks twelve through fifteen into space,” he said through clenched teeth, a single tear running from each of his eyes.

“Lieutenant!” Kgosi shouted. “What about the people on those decks?”

“I will mourn their spirits,” he said, “but if any of us are going to survive, it must be done. I have seen what this plague can do firsthand. Believe me, if they’ve been exposed, we’ll be doing them a favor. I do not do this lightly, Captain. We have no choice.”

“Do it.” She said her security override.

Sora pictured all those people, going about their day one moment, losing their life support and being pulled out to die alone in space the next. He doubled over and threw up. “If there’s any justice, Bennett and the rest of the traitors are dead.”

Nualyin grasped Sora’s elbow and helped him to stand, a hard, dangerous look in his eyes. “Sora, the traitors certainly fled the ship before they blew up the food storage area, probably remotely from the safety of a shuttle. They wouldn’t risk their own lives, even if they are willing to sacrifice their own people to cover up what they were trying to do. Clearly, they had no choice but to destroy the evidence. But shuttles can’t make the journey home, which means they went to the planet. We’ll see them again. Right now, we need to stay alive so we can bring them to justice—for everyone who just died because of their greed.”

Sora wiped his nose and lifted his chin. No more crying. It was time to fight, and he wanted it. He wanted to bring Bennett down with his own hands. “We need to get to the escape pods. Get to Varuna.”

“Where there’s no fresh water or shelter,” Kgosi said. “How will we survive?”

“Radio for a ship to retrieve us,” Nualyin said. “But do it quickly before we lose power. I need to get some equipment. I have to screen everyone before they leave the ship. One infected person could destroy Varuna—and all of us. We need to get everyone viable to the planet to await extraction.”

“That’ll take six weeks!” the captain protested.

“Our chances are better than if we stay here,” Nualyin said. “Sir, we have to get off this ship. We have to set it to self-destruct before it is within range of the atmosphere of any life-sustaining planet. Whether you agree or not, I’m taking Sora and abandoning ship, because we’ll die if we don’t. You won’t be here to level charges of insubordination.”

Sweat sparkled on Kgosi’s angular face. “Fine. Do it. If you boys are the praying type, it wouldn’t go amiss. We’re fucked no matter what we do, aren’t we?”

“Bennett and P.L.C. did this,” Sora said. “If Varuna is a dead world, they can mine the Francesium to their heart’s content. This is their Plan B.”

“It doesn’t matter, Wakahisa,” the captain said. “We’ve got a snowball’s chance in hell of living long enough to tell anybody, and if we die, they’ll just try again.”

“That means we can’t die,” Sora said. “I—I’m ready to fight. This is worth fighting for.”

Nualyin reached up to pat Sora’s shoulder. “Let’s get going. We’ll save as many as we can.”

“And hope it’s enough,” Kgosi said. “Just, just do the best you can.”

“We will. We’ll see you on Varuna, sir,” Sora said. “The natives, they’re good. Ask them for help if you need it.”

She shook her head. “I hope you’re right.”

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## Chapter Nine

The stars were falling from the sky, little specks of light fountaining out from a spot near the edge of the crescent moon. Ch'Marsam-muk thought the phenomenon must have something to do with the sky people. Some of his countrymen—the water people—wouldn't be happy they had returned, but Ch'Marsam-muk felt a thrill he didn't want to acknowledge, a hope he didn't dare trust. Then, as he watched, something bloomed in a series of red and orange explosions, something like the luminous flowers opening at motion, but more violent—destructive even if it was beautiful. He dived from the spit of rock he'd been curled upon, cut the surface of the water, and swam in the direction of the descending stars.

Others had come to investigate the occurrence. Hundreds of people gathered, their chests and heads poking out of the sea while their tentacles churned beneath it to keep them afloat. A bright star, bleeding a trail of purple and magenta, arced down and hit the water with a magnificent splash. Ch'Marsam-muk swam toward it, joined by many others, as more stars, streaming prismatic tails against the dark sky, fell into the water.

By the time he reached it, the others had drawn a sleek metallic pod from the water to a strip of rock. Using their tridents, they pried it open. Probably twenty sky people were inside, shoulder to shoulder, restrained to the walls by bizarre harnesses. One of them, a female, held her hands up, palms out, and spoke quickly. Ch'Marsam-muk recognized only two of the words she said: Wakahisa Sora. These people had something to do with Sora, and that was enough for him to turn and defend them against those who had raised their tridents or readied their hooks or slings.

"These people need our help." Ch'Marsam-muk said. "They are defenseless. Only a coward would attack them."

"They do not belong here," one of the warriors shouted. "We should kill them."

"You will have to go through me," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "It is not the way of a warrior to kill innocents asking for hospitality. They're not threatening us. They couldn't if they wanted to."

One of the female warriors swam up beside him. "Get the sky people to the rocks, where they can breathe the sky. They'll die if we take them beneath the

water. I have seen it before. The first time I encountered a sky person, I tried to take her to my home, but she died after a few moments in the sea.”

Maybe a few kilometers away, another of the sky people's pods hit the water. Ch'Marsam-muk swam toward it as fast as he could go. Since he beat everyone else to it, he had to drag it ashore on his own. It wasn't easy, and left him perspiring and heaving for breath, but he managed. The door to the metallic bud unfurled, and he scanned the faces of the people within. His attention caught on one of them, a beautiful man, gold edged in black, the most magnificent lips he had ever seen. Sora. He remembered trading words, learning to pronounce his name. *Sora*. Ch'Marsam-muk touched his cheek, and he opened his eyes. He smiled. “Sora.”

The man coughed. “Ch'Marsam-muk.” Sora didn't seem hurt as he unbuckled his harness and took a small pack from beneath his seat, but there was a darkness behind his eyes that hadn't been there before. He reached out with his small, graceful hand, and Ch'Marsam-muk didn't hesitate to help him from his pod. Sora leaned in and said, “Can we go somewhere and talk alone, where others won't hear us?”

“You have learned my words?” He liked hearing them coming from Sora's lips, the growl they made in his throat and the rumble in his chest.

“Some of them. Can your people help mine? We had an”—he paused as if he didn't know the word for what he wanted to express—“our”—he squinted his eyes in frustration, and Ch'Marsam-muk rubbed his face against Sora's. His skin was cool and smooth, and Ch'Marsam-muk wanted to taste him again.

“Many of us will help you, Sora, but...”

“What is it?”

“We should talk alone, as you said.”

“Give me a chance to explain to my leader, or I'll find myself in trouble again.” Sora went to speak to a formidable-looking female and a creature who barely reached her chest. A few moments later he returned, smiling, and said, “Let's go.”

“Can you swim?”

Sora laughed, a sound as bright as the sunlight on the water. It drove some of the shadows from his expression. “I'll never keep up with you.”

“I can help, then.” He slid across the rock and came to stand behind Sora so he could cross his arms over Sora's narrow chest. Sora felt small and fragile in

his arms, but the way he curved against him, fit with him, his back against Ch'Marsam-muk's belly and his lean backside pressed to his groin, made Ch'Marsam-muk feel like he glowed. He leaned his face down next to Sora's ear and couldn't resist letting his tongue dart out to taste the moisture on his skin. He tasted of fear and excitement, purpose, courage, and regret—not so different from a water person: salty and male. “Do you trust me, Sora?”

The question seemed to surprise Sora, and his scent changed, grew muskier, as he said, “I do.”

Holding him tight with Sora's back against his chest, Ch'Marsam-muk lowered them into the water and started swimming. Sora's bony tentacles dangled and fluttered against him, grazing his tentacles and making him curse the coarse material coating Sora's body and denying him the taste of Sora's skin through his suction cups. But maybe soon—Sora had been receptive to him before, and Ch'Marsam-muk could still taste Sora's arousal on his lips. He swam faster, eager for them to be alone and away from the eyes of others. At first, Sora clung tightly to Ch'Marsam-muk's arms, but gradually he seemed to become more comfortable. Then he laughed, spread his arms wide, and threw his head back as his chest cut through the water and the spray splattered his face.

“I feel like I'm flying!” Sora shouted. “You're fast!”

Since Sora was enjoying himself so much, Ch'Marsam-muk passed a few islets on which they could have stopped to talk and swam as fast as he could, leaving a thick wake of froth behind them and making their hair stream in the breeze. He didn't stop until he grew too tired, and then he brought them ashore on a crescent-shaped spit of land covered in glowing pink ferns and fat, striped rushes. It bathed them in rosy light as they found a place to sit down facing each other.

“I hope you'll be able to stay until the sun rises on our world,” Ch'Marsam-muk said. “It's very beautiful, and I'm sure you are beautiful in the light.”

Even in the low light, he could see Sora's cheeks darken, and he lifted up his tentacles and pressed a suction cup to Sora's cheek to taste his pleasure. It was sweet and addictive, almost intoxicating, and Ch'Marsam-muk let two more of his cups affix to Sora's neck.

“Do I taste good to you?”

“You taste amazing, Sora. I have thought about you often since I saw you last.”

"I have thought about you too. I hoped I might see you again. I'm glad I had the chance. I just wish it was under better—" He said a word Ch'Marsam-muk didn't understand. His flavor conveyed fear, maybe even dread, and Ch'Marsam-muk left off his flirting. "I really need to talk to you, and then I need to get back and make sure my people are all right."

"Yes. Please tell me what you need me to know." Ch'Marsam-muk started to move his tentacle from Sora's face and neck, but Sora grasped it with his little hand and held it in place.

"Leave it there, if you don't mind. It makes me feel safe, reminds me that I'm doing the right thing."

Ch'Marsam-muk was happy to agree.

Sora touched a ledge of silvery rock. "This is very valuable to my people. It's why we came to your world. Most of us hoped we might have something we could trade you for it, but some of us, and I am ashamed to have to tell you this, wanted to take what belongs to your people without giving anything in exchange. I have been fighting for you, Ch'Marsam-muk. Fighting as hard as I know how to make sure you are treated fairly. On our journey here, me and my friend, Nualyin, learned some of these people had brought a terrible sickness onboard. They planned to use it to kill your people so they could take what you had. We stopped them, but at the cost of a great many of my people's lives."

"You did this for us?"

Sora nodded, and a tear traced a silvery path down his cheek. "Yes. And I would not change a thing, but the people who want to hurt you may still be here. I wanted to tell you this when no one else could hear because I truly hope our people can be friends. If your people think mine are here to kill and steal from them, that will never happen. I promise you, most of us don't feel that way."

"Some of my people don't want yours here," Ch'Marsam-muk admitted. "Most of us, like me, see your flying machines and all you can do, and we hope we might learn from you. Your people must be careful as well."

Sora reached out and grasped both of Ch'Marsam-muk's hands. His eyes were different when their gazes met—hard as gems and burning like stars. Determined. The eyes of a warrior. "Ch'Marsam-muk, we must both work to make sure our people don't start a war. We—you and me—can do this. We must."

“We will, Sora, because I do not want to be your enemy. I want very different things from you. Do you want them from me?”

Sora stroked his face, let his fingertips graze down Ch'Marsam-muk's neck, over his shoulder, and along his arm. The brush of his skin felt like lightning against Ch'Marsam-muk's flesh, and he wanted to tear that silly material from Sora's body, drag him into the water, and take him again and again.

But Sora voiced the same concern Ch'Marsam-muk felt. “I don't know what they are. We're very different. I don't know what physical intimacy means to your people, if it's the same as what it means to mine. I don't know if it's even possible for us to connect in that way, but... I'm willing to explore it. I want to.”

Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's face in both hands and brought their mouths together. He pressed his tongue past Sora's small blunt teeth and into the warm, sweet recesses of his mouth. He thrust his tongue against Sora's, and Sora thrust back. Their tongues crested and crashed together like tidal waves, and Ch'Marsam-muk growled. This man, even with his weak, bony pair of tentacles, was everything. Perfect. Ch'Marsam-muk didn't want a passive partner, one who would submit to his strength, and Sora gave no hint of submission as their tongues wrestled and gradually found a rhythm. They abandoned the contest and left it at a draw to taste and explore, licking and nibbling at each other's lips, roaming their hands over each other's bodies. Sora definitely had the advantage there, as nothing covered Ch'Marsam-muk's flesh but a necklace and the cuffs he wore below his shoulders, and Sora took full advantage. He ran his hands down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, over the bumps of his belly, to the sides of his waist, and up his back. His nails dragged pleasantly across Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder blades as his arousal poured from his skin into Ch'Marsam-muk's suction cups.

Eventually they broke apart, Sora's breath gusting over Ch'Marsam-muk's swollen, tingling lips. “We need to get back,” Sora said. “As pleasant as this is, we might be all that stands between our people and war.”

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Ten or so hours later, with the help of the water people, Sora and his crewmates got all his people to land and set up with the scant shelter they could build by cannibalizing the escape pods. The packs installed in the shuttles for each passenger would provide them with two weeks worth of dehydrated food and fresh water, as well as basic medical supplies and a weapon.

"It's not going to be a picnic waiting out six weeks here," Captain Kgosi said.

"But we will survive," Nualyin said. "We're in the dark phase of this hemisphere of the planet. We can rest assured it will rain. We can collect enough water to keep ourselves alive. In the meantime, let's accomplish what we can. Sora, can you arrange for the leaders of these people to come here and meet with the captain?"

"I can try." Sora looked over his shoulder, at Ch'Marsam-muk treading water and waiting amongst a group of his people. "I'm not sure how their government, if they have one, is structured."

"I'll settle for a lack of open hostility for now," Kgosi said. "We're at a disadvantage, and they could wipe us out if they wanted to. Negotiate for the opposite outcome, Wakahisa. And if you can score us some food that doesn't come out of a tube, I'll remember to send you a card on your birthday. Fuck, what a mess."

"I'll do what I can, sir," Sora said. "We need to be alert, though. Bennett and the other traitors are somewhere on this planet."

"Well maybe your friend can help us find them," the captain said. "Sora, you're all we have. None of us can talk to them, and you seem to have made at least one friend. Use that. Tell them if they see any human in a shuttle to be careful and report back to us."

"Yes, sir." Sora turned toward the white foam gathering at the edge of the island. He wanted to be alone with Ch'Marsam-muk, wanted to feel safe and apart from this horrible conflict the way he did when they were together. He waded into the strong tide until it slapped against his chest and tried to push him back. He wanted to go forward, so he fought it, kicking and fanning his arms. A large wave crashed over him, dousing him, but he swam through it. When he reached the open ocean, the water grew calmer, though the swell of the waves lifted him up and down as easily as if he were a speck of foam. He let it carry him until Ch'Marsam-muk swam up to him and took his hands. "Sora, can you come with me? Do we need to talk more?"

Sora gripped his waist so he wouldn't have to kick to keep himself afloat, and Ch'Marsam-muk twined a tentacle up his leg, squeezing hard. "Are you mine now?"

"We have things we must do," Sora said, "but for a while, for a few hours, yeah. Yours."

As he followed Ch'Marsam-muk onto a beautiful island, Sora didn't know if fear or excitement made his hands shake and his legs feel like pudding. He took a deep breath. He could still say no, but he found he didn't want to. While he didn't know what was going to happen to him, he knew it wouldn't be anything he didn't desire. Ch'Marsam-muk wouldn't force him; he had no doubt of that.

A few feet ahead, the other man glided slowly across the rock, his tentacles moving in a roiling mass beneath him and putting off a soft purplish-blue glow that accentuated their mottled pattern. Sora thought it looked magical. Ch'Marsam-muk looked over his shoulder as if checking to see if Sora still followed. When their eyes met, he grinned shyly and averted his eyes, clearly as nervous as Sora. It whisked away the last of Sora's apprehension and he chuckled under his breath.

They came to a kidney-shaped pool fed by some silvery rivulets tumbling over lavender rock shot through with glimmering veins of Francesium. Bioluminescent pink lichen carpeted the rocks and reflected off the rippling surface of the water. Turquoise-hued ferns, striped rushes, and flat, yellow mushrooms the size of dinner plates surrounded the tarn, all of them adding soft pastel light. Ch'Marsam-muk swung his tentacles over the rocky ledge and eased himself into the water. The multicolored lights reflected off his skin, accentuating the definition of his musculature.

Sora sat down on the rocks to unlace his boots, his back to the water. Then he kicked them off and turned. Ch'Marsam-muk watched him, his eyes glittering with the colors of the exotic life around him, as Sora slowly took off his clothes. He left his emergency pack and weapon on a rock, got to his boxer briefs, and hooked his thumbs in the waistband to drag them down his thighs. Ch'Marsam-muk licked his lips as Sora lowered himself into the water. They looked at each other for a few seconds, and then they came together as if compelled by gravity. Their lips met, then their tongues. Ch'Marsam-muk wound a tentacle around each of Sora's legs, gently urging them apart, lifting his feet from the floor of the pool and suspending him. Another pair stretched over his back, looped over his shoulders, and trailed down his chest. Their suckers affixed to his skin, pulling the flesh up. Sora moaned into Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth at the feeling of being kissed all over by dozens of adept little mouths.

He burrowed his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair and inclined his head to kiss and nibble up and down his neck. He, too, wanted to taste, and he did:

salt, arousal, skin, and male musk. Sora ran his tongue from one side of Ch'Marsam-muk's jaw to the other, then down his neck, where he sank his teeth into the dense muscle at the base. All the while, he circled his hips and ground against the other man. He had never been so aroused, so willing to test his boundaries with a lover he trusted. He realized he'd never trusted a lover before, not fully, not to the point where he didn't try to analyze their motives as well as his own, but he let it go. He didn't need his mind for this. This—it came from somewhere deeper.

A tentacle wrapped around Sora's neck, and the suckers plucked at the skin of his throat as he worked his legs, trying to get one around Ch'Marsam-muk. The other man intuited his needs, just as he had before they could even share language, and released the hold on Sora's right leg. Sora draped it over the other man's hip and squeezed, pulling them tighter together so he could feel the swell at Ch'Marsam-muk's groin. He reached down, searching for a cock, but finding only smooth, slick flesh. "How do you..."

"I'll show you," Ch'Marsam-muk said, "just not yet. You taste so sweet, Sora. Like sunlight and the sky."

With his tentacles, Ch'Marsam-muk lifted Sora out of the water and over the rocks along the perimeter. He lowered Sora back gently into a patch of ferns and then surged on top of him, kissing him again, wrapping him in his tentacles, covering his limbs and torso almost completely. The suckers pulled at Sora's skin, drawing his blood to the surface. As much as he tried to return the attention, the reverence Ch'Marsam-muk showered on his body, his hands and fingers couldn't cover as much ground. Sora found it difficult to do much but lie there, draped in the wet appendages, wrapped in them, his skin sucked into them. Suckers tugged at every inch of his body. Sora wished he could taste his lover like that, so he closed his lips over the flesh below the corner of Ch'Marsam-muk's jaw and sucked it into his mouth, lapping at it, biting the skin, drawing it between his teeth.

Sora stretched his arms over his head and arched his back off the ground as the taste of the other man burst across his tongue. He shifted his other leg so Ch'Marsam-muk could settle between them. His weight and the embrace of his tentacles felt amazing. Sora dragged his lips back up Ch'Marsam-muk's neck and brought their mouths back together, teeth scraping and tongues bumping and twisting furiously. Sora's lips, slick with saliva, swelled and throbbed, but he wanted so much more, to taste and experience the other man the way Ch'Marsam-muk could know his flavor, the changes in mood leaking from his



pores. He furled his fingers around the tapered tip of a tentacle and brought it to his lips.

Ch'Marsam-muk pushed himself up on his hands and withdrew his mouth from Sora's, though his suction cups continued working against Sora's skin, feasting on his body wherever they came into contact with it. He watched as Sora held his glowing tentacle to his lips and flicked his tongue out for a tentative lick. It tasted as he'd expected—saline and slightly fishy, a unique and unfamiliar flavor, but not an unpleasant one. Ch'Marsam-muk's appendages tightened around Sora as Sora swirled his tongue around the end of the tentacle, licking up and down and around the circumference of the blunted tip. When the pressure became too much, too restrictive, Ch'Marsam-muk knew before Sora even had time to gasp. Loosening his grip, he watched Sora lapping at and suckling the end of his tentacle with its lavender glow reflected in his eyes.

Sora flipped the tentacle in his hand so he could get access to the underside. He found one of the small suction cups about six inches up and pressed his tongue against it. It constricted around his tongue in an answering kiss and Ch'Marsam-muk's light increased. He repeated Sora's name in a harsh whisper as his tentacles roamed over Sora's belly, finally grazing his erection. Sora groaned and circled the suction cup with his tongue while one lower down attached to his skin where his inner thigh met his pelvis. He tried to open his legs a little wider, but he was too tangled in tentacles to do much more than let himself be positioned. Since his partner seemed to intuit what he wanted and needed as soon as the desires formed in his mind, Sora didn't object.

"You taste good," Sora said, swirling his tongue around the tip of the tentacle. "I wondered how you would taste." He reached up and circled Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth with two of his fingers before pressing them gently past the seam of his lips, along the hot velvet of his tongue and up to explore the ridges of his palate. Ch'Marsam-muk sucked and licked at them, his lips puckered and cheeks hollowing. Their eye contact never broke as Sora drew the tip of the tentacle into his mouth and sucked it hard. Ch'Marsam-muk pressed deeper, into his throat, and Sora pinched his eyes shut against the sting as he waited for his gag reflex to relax. Ch'Marsam-muk seemed to know when he could proceed without hurting Sora, and he waited until Sora acclimated to the sensation before pressing in further, letting his tentacle wriggle into Sora's throat. At the point where Sora couldn't spread his lips to accept the increasing girth, Ch'Marsam-muk stopped. Sora felt one of his suction cups, and he massaged it with his tongue as the other man swirled his tongue along Sora's fingertips. Sora swallowed around the tentacle lodged so deep in his throat. It

was an odd sensation, but the idea of Ch'Marsam-muk tasting and experiencing him in ways and places no one ever had was the most intimate and arousing thing he'd ever known.

Sora circled his hips as they sucked on each other, but he didn't have much range of motion. He tried to imagine how amazing it would be to have tentacles himself, to twine them along and weave them into Ch'Marsam-muk's. His throat was starting to feel raw and stretched, and the corners of his mouth stung. But where the tentacle met his lips, it had taken on their dusty dark pink color, and the luminous hue moved in shifting tendrils up the rest of the appendage like glowing dye dispersing in water. The tentacles, draped over his torso or wound around his limbs, took on the golden color of Sora's skin, the brightness increasing until ochre and pink swirled and blended all through Ch'Marsam-muk's limbs, surrounding them in a cloud of soft light. Sora's heart beat hard. His belly fluttered and his ass contracted as he ran his fingers over the marble pattern of the tentacle in his mouth. The tension at the root of his body was becoming unbearable, and his ravaged throat had reached its limit as well. With a slight tug, he encouraged Ch'Marsam-muk to remove it. Sora removed his fingers from the other man's mouth, and Ch'Marsam-muk leaned over him, dropped light, impossibly gentle kisses on Sora's eyelids, nose, cheeks, chin, and lips. The heat of happiness and contentment combined with lust and want filled Sora's chest, and as if fueled by his emotions, the light brightened.

"Beautiful," Sora breathed, grazing his hand over one of the tentacles while wrapping the other around Ch'Marsam-muk's back to hold him where he wanted him. "The light. Does this always happen when your people make love?"

Ch'Marsam-muk petted Sora's cheek with the back of his hand, his face looking soft in the glow. "No, not always. It takes both of us to make it—two sets of very strong feelings to alight it. It's made of me and you and our joining. This is special to my people. To me."

"To me too," Sora said. "I want more of it. More of you."

"I want that too," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "To know you in every way I can."

"I have to prepare myself," Sora said. Ch'Marsam-muk released him, and he felt incomplete and wrong, as if he'd lost his own limbs and not just the contact of the other man's. He went to his emergency pack, found the first aid kit, and took out a tube of ointment. He wasn't sure exactly what might happen between them, but he knew what he wanted, and he wanted to be ready. With one hand, he pulled his cheek aside so he could insert the tube's slender nozzle

into his anus. He was glad he stood outside the limit of Ch'Marsam-muk's light, as this was a little personal. But that was silly, considering the ways he hoped the other man would touch him. He looked at the man, watching him from the pool, a few of his tentacles dangling into the water, his glow fading with the distance between them. Sora squeezed, and the surgical-grade lubricant filled his cavity, thick and cold. He removed the nozzle and smeared some more of the lubricant around his tight bud.

At the edge of the pool, Sora knelt down facing Ch'Marsam-muk, wrapping his hand around Ch'Marsam-muk's cheek. He stretched his neck for a slow, reverent kiss that quickly devolved into desperate nips, grunts, and slurps. Sora burrowed his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair as Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped a tentacle around Sora's waist and pulled them together so their chests pressed close and Sora straddled the undulating limbs beneath him. One of them wrapped around his balls, twisting and squeezing, stretching his sack, and another wrapped around his erection, one of the suction cups affixing to the head and milking his slit. A third tentacle slithered between cheeks and along his crevice, the tapered end circling his rim, just barely pressing against his opening. Sora threw his head back and growled with need.

"Ch'Marsam-muk, I need to touch you too." Pressing hard, he dragged his hands over the firm planes of the other man's pectorals and down the ridges of his belly. Continuing down, he found the peaks of hipbones, the mound of a pelvic bone, and a swollen mass just below it. He massaged it and watched Ch'Marsam-muk's eyes darken and his lips go slack. His peach-pink glow brightened everywhere their skin made contact. Sora plucked at his nipple with his other hand, squeezing the hard bead between his thumb and finger and making the other man's glow flare. He liked being able to have that effect on Ch'Marsam-muk, see how the other man reacted to his touch. He wanted more of it. His cock bounced, and Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed it hard, just at the razor's edge of pain. "We're different. You have to guide me a little, show me what to do. I want touch you, give you pleasure."

"We're not so different." Ch'Marsam-muk took Sora's wrist and guided his hand. His swollen flesh pulsed, and Sora felt a slit at the center of the bulge. He teased it with his fingers, dipping inside, fascinated. Soon he found a familiar hard length and eased it out of its protective pouch. It was much larger than a human penis, the same mottled purplish-gray as his tentacles, and thicker at the center, though the tapered head was almost as big as Sora's fist. Sora just managed to wrap his fingers around it and stroke. Ch'Marsam-muk reciprocated, and they wriggled closer to kiss sloppily as they fondled and

discovered each other. His tentacle pressed against Sora's opening more insistently. "Sora, I want to touch inside you. Taste you and feel you inside."

"Yes." Sora bore down to open and relax. Even with the lubricant and the thin layer of slick coating Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles, he cried out at the penetration. The burn and stretch were more intense than anything he had ever felt, and he began to tremble even though the other man paused. "Put me on my back," he panted against his partner's lips. "It's... too much. I can't do it this way."

Ch'Marsam-muk carefully lowered him into the ferns again without letting their bodies separate. Sora spread his legs wide and held his knees up alongside his ribs until Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped his thighs in his tentacles and took over, holding Sora in place, keeping him splayed and exposed. Breathing hard, Sora gripped the tentacles wrapping his legs and held on tight. In this position, the intrusion was more bearable, and he started to relax as Ch'Marsam-muk knelt and settled between his legs. Watching Sora's face, caressing Sora's chest with his hand, he pushed in a few more inches, and then a few more. Sora let out a long, low groan, sweat springing from his pores as the tentacle moved within him, far deeper than a human could ever accomplish. Reaching up, caressing Sora's neck and face, Ch'Marsam-muk pressed in deeper and deeper still, the increasing girth of his limb stretching Sora to the limits of what he could endure, but he continued, petting Sora and saying soothing words as he snaked the appendage far into Sora's insides. Sora felt it in his belly, rippling as it coiled farther and farther into his guts. There was pain, but it surprised Sora how intimate it felt, how much it aroused him, to be filled in a way he had never imagined. He had never been so open to or joined with another man as he was now, sprawled out beneath the alien stars with Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacle looped deep inside him and his brilliant light bathing them both.

Sora didn't dare move, afraid he might hurt himself, but he gave the limb invading his body a small squeeze. Ch'Marsam-muk growled and said, "Sora, I can't believe how it feels to join with you like this, for you to give me your body, your everything. You are everything. Everything." He dipped down to kiss Sora savagely, using one tentacle to stroke Sora's cock back to stiffness as he withdrew the one inside him partially. It was still buried deeper than a human could accomplish, but at a depth where he could move it in and out without risking injuring Sora.

Sora shook all over, his body numb and electrified at the same time. He squirmed and moaned rhythmically in time with his partner's thrusts. He

clutched Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder and dug his nails in. His senses became acute; he felt the little undulations of each suction cup against his skin, smelled the sea in his lover's hair, swore he could taste the other man's arousal on his lips. Something inside him shifted, and emotion filled his chest until he wanted to cry. He rested his heels on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulders and kissed him until he thought his lips would bleed, but he didn't care.

The tip of another tentacle pressed at the slack rim of Sora's opening, and a shimmer of worry rippled through him, making him stiffen a little. He could say no, and he knew Ch'Marsam-muk would respect his wishes, but in his euphoric, hyper-aroused state, he didn't want to, and he even tilted his pelvis up in invitation.

"Sora, my wonderful little Sora, thank you." Ch'Marsam-muk pushed past the slight resistance of Sora's ragged opening, and Sora cried out. He couldn't help it. It hurt, felt like being torn in half, and he almost begged Ch'Marsam-muk to stop. But as his partner kissed softly across his flushed face and proceeded with careful patience, the pain ebbed to a dull edge that complemented the pleasure, intensified it. Ch'Marsam-muk began to thrust. The newly inserted tentacle rubbed Sora's prostate, and his seed drizzled his belly as he wound tighter and tighter toward what promised to be the most explosive release of his life. He felt like a star collapsing in on itself, his atoms compacting under the increasing gravity, the pressure growing, growing toward a fantastic supernova.

"Come here," Sora panted. "I need to touch you. I need to be touching you when I come, and I can't hold it much longer. I need to be touching you and tasting you, and I need you to hold on to me, because I'm going to fly apart."

"I'll hold onto you, Sora. I'll wrap you up and keep you with me as long as I can. Keep you safe. I'll hold on, so you can fall apart without worrying. Let go. Let it all go. Do that for me."

It wasn't something he'd ever been able to do, Sora realized. He hadn't felt safe, even in the moment of release, to let himself break open in front of another man, to expose his core, his naked pleasure and vulnerability, let his molecules go shooting out into the universe. He'd always kept part of himself guarded, kept close, hidden in the dark, until now. Now, he couldn't, because Ch'Marsam-muk's light was everywhere, wrapped around him, nestled inside him. He had never felt such abandon, such freedom.

Ch'Marsam-muk slid closer, pushing his tentacles deeper into Sora and lining their cocks up. He wrapped his tentacles around both of their erections,

and Sora put his hand on top. As they kissed, stroked, thrust, and rocked together, the tide came in and crested over them, cooling Sora's burning flesh. It receded and lapped against them again, matching their rhythm, until with a cry, Sora came until everything went black. Everything disappeared except the waves of pleasure crashing through his body, and the smell, taste, and weight of the man on top of him. His light. His body inside Sora's, and Sora's clenching around it as he trembled all over, fresh surges of ecstasy moving through him until he felt liquid, spent, shedding his light and energy into Ch'Marsam-muk and taking his energy in return.

"Sora!" Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed him hard in his tentacles, his restraint stolen by the release that erupted from his coiled tentacle and Sora's shuddering hand. It shot over Sora chest and hit him in the chin. Sora hurried to scoop some up with his fingers and lick it away. Ch'Marsam-muk lapped at his lips. "How do I taste?"

"Of the sea. Of light and passion and honesty. Alive. Atomic." He said the last word in his own language, because he didn't know a word to express how he felt they had touched and connected, somewhere on the molecular level. "Wonderful. So wonderful."

They slowly disengaged, and Sora feared he had made a horrible mistake. But no. He hurt and his muscles shook with exertion, but he would do it again. Ch'Marsam-muk scooped Sora's smaller body into his arms and carried him toward the pool, which was good, because Sora wouldn't be walking anywhere until he got some rest. "I have been out of the water too long," Ch'Marsam-muk said, setting Sora at the edge of the water and lowering himself in with a sigh. "You can't sleep here with me, can you?"

"No." Sora felt more regret than he expected. Before, he hadn't liked pillow talk and cuddling after sex, but had preferred to just go to sleep, left alone. Tonight, though, the thought of not sleeping next to this man, of breaking contact, made a knot form in his chest. "And you can't sleep out of the water. We can't be together." Not in any permanent way. Like light, Ch'Marsam-muk would move over and through him before continuing his journey. Only the gravity of a black hole could keep light from escaping, and Sora was just an ordinary man.

"I can't let you away from me yet," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "I can't stop touching you. Lie down here." Sora stretched on his back in the ferns, and it was surprisingly comfortable, the lacy edges of the plants soft and cool against his skin. "My people normally find a small space underwater where we can

sleep curled up, but I can't do that, not if you can't be with me." He sprawled out on his chest, perpendicular to Sora, his head on Sora's belly and his tentacles filling the pool behind him, glowing softly, illuminating the water.

As Sora absently combed his fingers through Ch'Marsam-muk's hair and toyed with the edge of his ear, he remembered something he'd wondered. "The light you make—"

"It's made from both of us, our coming together joyfully."

Sora nodded. "You told me it doesn't always happen when your people make love. What's the?"—he didn't know a word in the sea people's language for *variable*—"what's the reason why it happens sometimes and not others?"

"It happens between mates. When we find the one we want to share our life with. When that person feels the same."

"But that's not possible. We could never live together. I need the sky and you need the sea," Sora argued, as much against himself and the feelings growing in him as the other man's words.

"The sea and the sky meet," Ch'Marsam-muk said sleepily.

"But only at the edge." Sora continued brushing through his hair as he watched the stars, his thoughts carefully skirting the idea of mates and partners, of sharing lives, because what he suddenly wanted and what was possible—physically and otherwise—couldn't be reconciled and promised hurt in the near future, for both of them.

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## Chapter Ten

Ch'Marsam-muk held Sora's tiny body against his chest in the pool, carefully supporting Sora's chin so he didn't sink beneath the water as he slept. He ran his other hand through Sora's wet hair and down his slender back. His little Sora. His arms and tentacles—legs, he had said they were called—were so delicate and thin, but they held strength. Sora held more strength inside than Ch'Marsam-muk suspected Sora realized himself.

After they'd slept for a while, Ch'Marsam-muk had left him to catch some fish. They had eaten them, Ch'Marsam-muk according to his own way, biting into the flesh, and Sora using a small knife to peel the skin from his and carve off little strips of meat. Sora drank water from a clear container in his pack, and Ch'Marsam-muk drank from the sea. They made love, licking and sucking each other's cock because Sora claimed he was too sore to do more, to be entered again. The memory made Ch'Marsam-muk smile and spark with pinkish-gold light. Sora's body would adjust, and he would get used to it. As for himself, Ch'Marsam-muk would have to adjust to the idea that since Sora didn't have tentacles like his, Sora couldn't reciprocate. He would miss it, but this was the man meant for him, his mate, the one he had been waiting for. Of that he had no doubts at all.

And he would protect Sora, see to his happiness. It was a man's most important duty in life to take care of his mate. Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed the back of Sora's neck, the tight muscles between it and his shoulder.

"Feels nice," Sora muttered against his chest.

"I thought you wanted to sleep."

"I thought I did," Sora said, nuzzling Ch'Marsam-muk's collarbone with his cheek. "It was strange to go to sleep last night and wake up to more night. It threw me off a little." He sat up, stretched his lithe arms over his head, and turned to face Ch'Marsam-muk, resting his wrists on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder. Sora kissed him and smiled. "I didn't expect to feel the way I did when I woke up. I've been with other men, quite a few, to be honest. The heat of passion is one thing, but the next morning, it's usually gone for me. Sometimes I feel like I made a mistake, and at the best times, I feel detached, ready to move on. Like it was nothing special."

"It's usually the same for me," Ch'Marsam-muk admitted, stroking Sora's lower lip with his thumb. "Not anymore."



Sora blew out a warm puff of air and frowned. The downturn of his lips stabbed at a place deep in Ch'Marsam-muk's belly. "We're star-crossed lovers if ever there were any."

Ch'Marsam-muk tried to picture stars crossing, and the only image he could summon was of two falling stars streaking across each other's path. It was a beautiful picture, and he didn't know why it would make Sora look so sad. Touching Sora's cheek, he said, "I don't understand."

"It's an expression among my people. It means it's impossible for us to stay together, that we're in a terrible situation."

"You're my mate and I'm yours."

"It isn't that simple," Sora said. "I can't stay here with you. I won't survive. Even if I could, I have... duties. I have to make sure the people who tried to hurt you don't try again and stop them if they do. I have to make sure you and your world are protected, treated fairly."

"Then take me with you."

Sora shook his head. "My world is very different. There isn't enough water for you to move around in. You'd be stuck in a pool much smaller than this one. I can't stand thinking of that, of you not being free to swim. This is your home. I don't know if you would like mine."

"We'll find a way." Ch'Marsam-muk pulled him close. "I'll fight for that. For a future with you. Will you fight, Sora?"

"I'll try."

Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped his fingers around Sora's chin and tilted his face so they could kiss. The subtle brush of their lips sent tingling pleasure all through his limbs, made light pour from his tentacles until the pool glowed as bright as day. Completed, as if he found something he hadn't known had been missing. He wouldn't lose it again, no matter what. "I love you, Sora."

"How can that be?" Sora panted against his lips. "You have only known me for two days, maybe three. I can't tell with the sun not coming up."

"I knew that first night, when we traded words. The way you make me glow can't be denied. You make me light up. Look at it. It wouldn't happen if you didn't love me."

"I never thought I could love anyone," Sora said. "I'm not even sure I love my family. I haven't spoken to them in years, and I don't even miss them. Not often, at least. But I miss you the second we aren't touching. Is that love?"

“It must be.”

“It scares me,” Sora said in a shaky whisper. “I’m scared of what it will do to me if I lose this.”

“I won’t let anything hurt you, ever,” Ch’Marsam-muk said.

“The scary thing about that is I believe you,” Sora said. “And I never believe anything without concrete proof.” He smiled, and they kissed. Ch’Marsam-muk held him and spun him in the water. Joy and arousal poured off Sora; Ch’Marsam-muk tasted it where his tentacle wrapped around Sora’s ankle. He wanted Sora, wanted to mate with him properly this time, to put his cock inside him and feel Sora’s cock in his own body. He was just about to suggest it when splashing along the shore drew his attention. Six of his people came onto the island as he and Sora pulled away from each other. Sora stumbled out of the water and started dressing as Ch’Marsam-muk went to speak with the group of warriors. He could tell something was wrong. “What is it?”

“We’ve been attacked,” said a fierce-looking female with tentacles the same bright orange as her ropey tendrils of hair. “A group of sky people in a flying machine attacked us with their weapons, killed some of our people. Those among us who don’t want the sky people here needed no further excuse. They have gone to the islands where the others, the sky people who came in the falling stars, are living. They have them surrounded and are planning to kill them all. We cannot talk them out of it, and the sky people are barely holding them off.”

“We have to hurry.” Sora came up behind Ch’Marsam-muk and wrapped his arms around his neck. “I’m the only one who can speak both our languages, so I have to get there, try to negotiate. Go.”

“Hold on,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “I’ll be swimming fast. The rest of you, find as many warriors as you can who will side with us. We have to protect the sky people. They—at least most of them—want to be friends, and they have much to offer us. We can’t let a few angry and hateful people spoil that possibility.”

The warriors dove into the churning surf and disappeared, and Ch’Marsam-muk followed, swimming as hard as he could without submersing himself. Sora wrapped his legs around his waist, and Ch’Marsam-muk hated the scratchy stuff Sora used to cover his skin, the heavy things at the ends of his tentacles—legs. He couldn’t understand why a man like Sora would want to hamper himself and hide his beauty, but they had more important things to worry about.

Over a hundred people surrounded the cluster of islets where the sky people lived, waiting for their people to come and take them home. A few dozen of them stood with what Ch'Marsam-muk assumed were weapons in their hands, guarding the others, who huddled together between them, stinking of fear. Ch'Marsam-muk stopped a fair distance from them. He didn't want to put Sora in danger, but Sora leaned over and said, "Can you get us closer? Get me between them?"

"Will you be safe?"

"You'll keep me safe," Sora said. "I trust you with that. Trust me that I can talk to these people. I need that, because I'm afraid. There's a lot on my shoulders."

"I don't doubt you, Sora. You're one of the bravest men I've ever met." Ch'Marsam-muk swam to the edge of the sea warriors. When they pointed spears and tridents at him, he held up his open hands. "Let us pass. We only want to talk. This man speaks the language of both the sea and the sky. We can be allies, friends with these people."

"No we can't!" someone shouted. "They have no right to be here! This is our world."

"Their people attacked and killed ours," another warrior yelled.

"Those people are traitors and enemies." Sora's strong, clear voice rose above the din. "My people, the ones here, want to see them pay for what they've done as much as yours. Please, let us work together to make them pay for their crimes. At least hear what we have to say."

"Why should we trust you?" one of the warriors shouted.

Sora let go of Ch'Marsam-muk's back and moved slowly through the water, past the stunned warriors. He waded ashore and stood with his arms stretched out at his sides. "We don't mean you any harm," he said in the language of the sea people. "We are strangers here, but we respect you. Everything on this world belongs to you, and we won't take it from you. I won't let that happen. We want to make friends, to trade goods and ideas. We can improve each other. Please. All I want is to talk. If you attack us, those sky people in favor of taking what is yours will use it as evidence of hostility. Work with us, and they'll have no excuse to steal your resources. Please, at least let us talk."

Ch'Marsam-muk was so proud of his little mate that his heart swelled. The rest of his people lowered their spears and tridents as Sora climbed ashore. He

gestured to his comrades, and they lowered their weapons. "I invite your leaders to come ashore and speak with mine. We are a fair and equitable people, and if you treat us with respect, we'll return it. I truly hope we can help each other. We won't know if we can find common ground unless we talk. If you don't like what we have to say, you can kill us later. We all know my people won't survive without the help of yours. We just want your help, and to make friends."

Ch'Marsam-muk waited, his hands balled to fists beneath the water, as his people talked amongst themselves and Sora's people waited. Sora looked small and vulnerable, alone on the beach, the only thing standing between the two cultures clashing. Slowly, some of his people came ashore. Ch'Marsam-muk wished he had a weapon, in case he needed to defend Sora. But one by one, their people came together, reaching out tentatively, touching hands, trading words with Sora translating. Warriors from the most powerful clans met with the men and women who presumably led Sora's people. Soon, they were sitting on the ground in clusters, between the metal pods the sky people were using as shelter. They talked for hours, and soon all of them smiled, but no one as much as Sora. It made Ch'Marsam-muk feel hopeful as he stayed on the sidelines, out of the way. If their people became allies, there might be a chance for him to stay with Sora.

The meeting lasted for hours, and then some of the sea people left to catch fish. Sora came up to where Ch'Marsam-muk lounged in the shoals. He put one hand on Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulder and pushed his messy black hair out of his eyes with the other. "Your people are gathering food for us," Sora said. "Sharing this meal is a huge step, a turning point."

"You did well," Ch'Marsam-muk said, draping his hand over Sora's. "I felt proud watching you, proud of being with you."

Sora grinned and averted his eyes, adorably modest. "I hardly did this alone. I'm just happy it went so well, that no one got hurt. I almost can't believe it didn't come to violence. We—our people—are very different, but in some fundamental way, we can connect. That's important. And it's a beautiful thing."

The sea people returned a few hours later with crustaceans, fish, seaweed, and other edible plants, which they piled up at the center of the sky people's makeshift camp. They brought glowing purple and turquoise strands of vines up from the darker depths of the water, and together, the people of the water and the air strung them over and between the pods to provide light. Clouds moved in, bringing a mild drizzle, but it didn't douse their joyous feast. They sat

together, sharing food, trading words. Sora conveyed his people's desire to take away some of the silvery rock so plentiful on their world, that it was useful to them, and his leaders seemed receptive when Ch'Marsam-muk and his people expressed their wishes to trade the stone for knowledge.

"We'll relay your terms to our leaders when we return home," Sora said. "With any luck, we can set up at least one station here, a place where our people can come together to talk and teach each other. Others, people who can make those decisions, will have to come here and talk to your leaders, but I know we can work something out."

"And when this station is built, you'll return to teach us about your machines," Ch'Marsam-muk said.

He tasted Sora's uncertainty through the tentacle he had draped over Sora's wrist even before Sora turned to him with pain in his eyes. "I can ask to return, but the way our leaderships works means others will make that decision. If the mission isn't considered"—he said a word Ch'Marsam-muk didn't understand—"er, important, I might be sent where my talents are more needed."

A creature smaller than a child, one with enormous eyes and long, silvery hair, wearing a clear mask over his mouth and nose, said something to Sora, and Sora nodded. They exchanged a few words, most of which Ch'Marsam-muk didn't understand.

"What does he say?" Ch'Marsam-muk asked.

Sora forced a smile. "Nualyin says that if the situation here is stable, it's very unlikely I'll be stationed here. My skills will be needed elsewhere."

"Sora, no. That can't happen. We belong together, and you know it."

"My leaders may not agree."

"Well then, tell them you won't do it. Refuse. Come here anyway."

"It doesn't work that way in my world," Sora said, frustration creeping along both his skin and his tone. "I could be put in prison for refusing to follow my orders."

"I won't let that happen," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "I swore to protect you. I'll protect my mate."

Sora snatched his hand away, and Ch'Marsam-muk felt it like a blow to the gut. "You don't understand."

"I didn't mean to make you angry," Ch'Marsam-muk muttered. "I just don't want to lose you. We—my people—mate for life. You're it for me, the only one who can make me whole."

"I-I'm sorry too," Sora said. "But first off, I didn't know that when we agreed to... explore together. I didn't knowingly accept that responsibility. I never understood what we did would have such a profound effect on our, on your life. Your future. I feel a little deceived."

Ch'Marsam-muk's heart plummeted into his churning belly. "You don't feel the way I do."

Sora rubbed his eyes with his thumb and finger. He didn't look at Ch'Marsam-muk as he spoke. "It's different for my people. It's something we think about, decide to try, not something that just happens to us. It isn't so instant. If we want to spend our lives with someone, we make an effort. It's gradual, and it's something we choose."

"And you don't choose me." Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't look at Sora. The nausea churned inside of him like he was going to be sick, like his heart had been ripped out and shredded by a trident, then thrown into the salty water.

Sora sighed. "It isn't that, necessarily. But there are differences in us, in our worlds. I'm just trying to explain—"

Screams cut off whatever he intended to say, and a beam of light sliced through the mist and light rain. People from both worlds got to their feet and scrambled for weapons. Sora drew the small metal wand he kept in his belt and moved in front of Ch'Marsam-muk. Around them, little pops sounded and people fell, bleeding.

"Sora, get down!" Ch'Marsam-muk yelled.

Ignoring him, Sora ran through the panicked people, to the edge of the water. Ch'Marsam-muk followed. Whether Sora wanted him or not, he would protect his mate—with his life if he had to. He preferred that idea to the thought of spending the rest of his days alone.

Just as Sora splashed into the sea, a large, metallic craft touched down on a small island facing theirs. A door opened and men, light, and shouting poured out. They aimed their weapons and more people—sea and sky—fell.

"Get into the water!" Sora shouted in the language of the sea. "Get out of here! It's my people these traitors want to kill, not you!"

“But without you to tell the others what happened here, those people will go free, and they’ll try again!” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “We’ll lose everything we have built here! We should fight together.”

Sora turned, his eyes blazing. “They want to kill us to cover up what they did! I don’t want you to die. Get out of here.”

“You’re my mate,” Ch’Marsam-muk shouted. “It’s my duty to protect you.”

Sora shoved him hard in the shoulder. “I’m not your mate! Get out of here!” He turned away and ran to the center of the camp, yelling to his people, motioning for them to get to the center of the settlement, where they had the cover of their pods. Ch’Marsam-muk waited for him to turn back, to say something else. When he didn’t, he dove into the water.

“Follow me,” Ch’Marsam-muk shouted to the dozens of warriors hurrying to escape the island. He dove to escape the attack carpeting the surface and swam hard, the sounds of the battle reverberating through the water around him. When he made it a safe distance, he arced up and pushed, breaking into the sky. Heads and shoulders popped up around him, dozens of them, most of the warriors who had been at the feast.

“What’s happening?” said the female warrior with the orange hair. “Why were we attacked?”

“I don’t have time to tell you the whole story,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. In the distance, he heard screams, the sounds of the sky people’s weapons. The acrid odors of blood and smoke reached him even at this distance. “We have to help them!”

“Talking is one thing,” another warrior said, “but being killed for these strangers is asking too much.”

“These people wanted to destroy our world,” Ch’Marsam-muk argued desperately. “Sora and the others stopped them, and now they want to kill Sora so what they tried to do won’t be found out. If that happens, they’ll return. They want to take what belongs to us, and if we don’t fight, they’ll succeed. Sora and the others lost friends, risked their lives to protect us. They stood to gain nothing by treating us fairly, fighting for what was right. Can we do less? I cannot.”

“What would you have us do?” said the orange-haired warrior.

“The sky people have weapons that are superior to ours,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. “But we outnumber them, and they think we have retreated. I have an

idea. These traitors want to paint our people as savage and bloodthirsty. I say we prove them right.”

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The sea people stayed to the depths almost until they reached the edge of the island, and then they surfaced silently. All of them were hunters, and the darkness and rain aided their efforts. They used it, moving onto the island without detection. The traitors were overconfident; they hadn't even posted guards.

At the center of the camp, they found a group of about twenty people surrounding the rest. Sora and his friends knelt in a group, while the others stood with their weapons pointed. Ch'Marsam-muk raised his hand, and his people paused. As they watched, a short, stocky man who seemed to be a leader among the attackers, fired his weapon at a woman's head, and it exploded in a red cloud before her body fell. “They're executing them,” he whispered. “Killing them unarmed. We cannot wait.”

Ch'Marsam-muk hadn't brought a weapon, but that wouldn't stop him from defending people who had proven friends—from defending the person he loved. He moved behind the closest man, reached up, wrapped a tentacle around his neck, and snapped it. He held the body in front of him as a shield against the sky people's weapons. Their fire struck the body and pocked it with small wounds. Ch'Marsam-muk threw the corpse at the next man, and it knocked his enemy down, pinning him until Ch'Marsam-muk had the chance to punch him in the side of the head and knock him out. With a tentacle, he swatted the unconscious man's weapon away from his hand.

Probably six of his people had managed to sneak up on one of the traitors and bring them down, but now the enemy knew of their presence, and they were well trained. They clustered together, back to back, and aimed their weapons. Ch'Marsam-muk dodged their fire, leaping behind one of the pods, but the warrior next to him was hit and fell to the ground with a wide, smoking hole in his chest. His spear fell from his hand, and Ch'Marsam-muk picked it up. He peaked around the edge of the pod, got one of the traitors, a woman with coloring similar to Sora's, in his sights, and threw his weapon. It struck her in the chest, embedded deep. Just in time, he ducked behind the pod to avoid her companions' weapons.

Sora yelled something to his people in their language, and several of them shouted an obvious agreement. Though they'd clearly been stripped of their



weapons, the sky people rebelled against their captors, rising up to attack them with their fists and feet, tackling them and drawing them into the pool of their superior numbers. Weapon-fire sounded, and in the writhing mass of bodies, Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't tell who had the upper hand. Those traitors who hadn't been pulled into the melee yelled to each other and pointed in Ch'Marsam-muk and his warriors' direction. He had relinquished his weapon, so he picked up the only nearby object he could use to defend himself: a sharp rock made of the substance these cowards wanted badly enough to massacre their own kind and poison an entire world. Keeping to the cover of the pod, he drove the stone into the head of a yellow-haired woman as soon as she appeared around the corner. It crushed her skull with a sickly thud.

The female warrior with the red hair swung her trident, knocking the weapon from her enemy's hand. Then she struck the man in the face and stabbed him in the side. Blood spurted from his mouth and splattered her as he fell. Another of the traitors trained a weapon on her, but she threw her trident and struck him square in the face. Before she could get to cover, one of the traitors fired on her, hitting her in the chest and shoulder. She fell with a ragged cry as two men surrounded her, their weapons aimed at her head.

Ch'Marsam-muk pushed off with his tentacles and tackled the man closest to him. He didn't have a chance to see if his comrade had escaped as he scuffled with the big, dark-skinned man. Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped a tentacle around the hand that held the weapon, jerking back and snapping the man's bone. His arm hung useless. For all their knowledge and deadly machines, the sky people were frail compared to his own. But some of them knew how to fight. The man beneath Ch'Marsam-muk struck him hard in the side of the head—hard enough to rattle his teeth and send him sprawling on his back. Before he could get away, the man straddled him, a knife in his uninjured hand. Just in time to save himself from being stabbed in the face, Ch'Marsam-muk reached up and grabbed the man's arm. People shouted and scuffled at the edges of his vision as he fought to push his enemy off. The man was strong. His blade sliced through the tentacle Ch'Marsam-muk lifted to protect his head, and blood poured into his face, making him sputter. His enemy made another cut, close to overpowering Ch'Marsam-muk. Even the tentacles Ch'Marsam-muk wrapped around the man's waist and shoulders couldn't pull him off as he clamped his knees down against Ch'Marsam-muk's ribs.

Then something struck the man and he flew off Ch'Marsam-muk. Ch'Marsam-muk scooped the blood out of his eyes, rolled to his belly, and

pushed himself up in time to see Sora aim his weapon at the dark-skinned man's head, and with cold eyes, fire it. The man's skull burst, spraying Sora's legs with blood, brains, and chunks of bone. Just as Sora turned to offer Ch'Marsam-muk his hand, the short man pressed a weapon to the back of Sora's head. Sora dropped his weapons and raised his hands. The man yelled something and Sora yelled back. Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't understand them, but he recognized their anger, their hatred. He knew this man meant to kill his mate. Even if the short man couldn't escape, he would take Sora with him. Ch'Marsam-muk couldn't let that happen.

"Sora, trust me! Drop down and cover your head with your hands!" For a few agonizing heartbeats, he waited to see if Sora still believed in him. When Sora crouched, his head between his knees, Ch'Marsam-muk whipped a tentacle and hit the short man in the waist. He landed hard on his back, and his weapon flew from his hand. At the edge of his vision, Ch'Marsam-muk saw the dark-skinned woman with the short hair scramble for the gun, but he never saw if she found it. Ch'Marsam-muk moved around Sora and drove his fist into the short man's face, snapping his nose and making blood spurt into his mouth. He hit the man again, blackening his eye. "How dare you threaten my mate? I'll kill you!" He smacked the man with the back of his hand as he wound a tentacle around his neck, squeezing until the man sputtered and choked and his face turned an ugly bruise-purple. In his anger, he was barely aware of Sora grabbing his shoulder and shaking him—yelling. Upset. His mate was upset.

"Please," Sora panted, "please don't kill him, Ch'Marsam-muk. He doesn't deserve to get off that easily. He needs to face what he has done. We need him alive, as proof of what he and the others tried to do. I want to see him go to prison for the rest of his life."

Ch'Marsam-muk shook his head to dispel his instinctive rage. Around him, bodies—sea people and sky—laid on the ground, blood running in rivulets as the rain increased. He hit the man again and knocked a few teeth loose. Then he moved away. Sora's people restrained the short man and the few others who had survived the ambush. Ch'Marsam-muk stood facing Sora, watching his bruised and rain-spattered face for any indication Sora had changed his mind about their being together. Sora just knitted his brows, held his ribs, and breathed through slightly parted lips. A trickle of blood meandered down from their left corner and dripped off Sora's chin. "Sora, do you have anything to say to me?"

“I—thank you.”

Ch'Marsam-muk squeezed his eyes shut, turned, and left the camp. He had his answer, and he dove into the sea and swam away, away from all of it. He wished he had never set eyes on the sky people.

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## Chapter Eleven

An entire cycle of light passed, then a cycle of darkness, and another cycle of light. The day was dying with a soft flourish, in a wash of rosy light and purple clouds edged in gold. Arms spread, Ch'Marsam-muk let the swell of the tide lift him as he watched the sky people. They had constructed a huge metal island, bigger than any Ch'Marsam-muk had ever seen, large enough for several shuttles and a few long, rectangular buildings. The edges sloped into the water so the sea people could come ashore, and furrows had been formed and filled with water so they could move easily around the station. Even now, groups of them moved over the slick surface, talking to the sky people, learning about their machines beneath the rows of round light the sky people powered with the planet's heat. Some of their machines dug far below the ocean, mining the element they needed, which they called Francesium. There was talk of sea people joining their crews, joining them on their journeys into the stars. Once, Ch'Marsam-muk would have been the first to ask to be included on those adventures.

Once.

Now, he just skirted the edge of the station, watching the people, watching in case Sora came back. After all this time, his mind knew Sora had meant what he had said about not wanting to share Ch'Marsam-muk's life, but his heart couldn't quite let go of hope.

Sora's tiny companion had been right: Sora was too important, too intelligent, skilled, and brave to be wasted on the out of the way rock the sky people had dubbed Varuna. The more he learned of the worlds beyond the stars, the more Ch'Marsam-muk understood that his was primitive, backward, and unremarkable except for the Francesium. If not for that substance, the sky people would have likely ignored his world completely.

Maybe that would have been better.

But no, he was being selfish. His people stood to learn a lot, to advance their culture, with the help of their newfound allies. But his pain still felt so fresh; the places where part of him had been torn away still oozed and bled. Leaders of the sky people had come to negotiate terms of trade, and though he had been invited, Ch'Marsam-muk declined to sit on the council. He rarely interacted with them except to trade the jewelry he made for the useful things the sky people offered. He couldn't believe what value they placed in his work.

Swimming in a slow, lazy ellipse, he turned away from the station. He had heard rumors of plans to build others, as well as structures beneath the water where the sea and sky people could live and work together. Right now, he just wanted to forget about them. He thought about going to the Pho, finding a man and at least sating his physical desires, but in the end it seemed like more trouble than it was worth. Instead he went home, crawled into his alcove, wrapped his tentacles around himself, and slept until he could force his body to sleep no more.

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Much later, in the quietest, darkest part of the night, Ch'Marsam-muk sat on a little islet, using a coarse file to polish a bracelet he had made. Aside from the rhythmic lap of the waves and the harmonious rasp of his tool, silence surrounded him. Heavy gray clouds covered the sky, but the radiant plants and animals beneath the water gave him plenty of light to see his work. The sea all around glowed with shifting panes of cerulean, lavender, rose, and chartreuse.

A low hum sounded in the distance. He recognized it as one of the sky people's engines, and not long after, he saw the beam of light from one of the little machines they used to skim along the surface of the sea. He put his work into the tchallit-hide pouch on his belt and slithered a little farther into the water, where the pink- and gold-stained foam could break over his tentacles and soothe his drying skin. He considered diving—he had been avoiding the sky people and didn't feel like speaking with one. Besides, he had been out of the water too long already, and the skin on his lower appendages felt tight. Instead of leaping to arc below the surface, he just waded in until the water reached his chest, watching.

The white light bounced across the churning sea, and the high-pitched whine of the machine grew louder. It sped past the island without slowing down, and just as Ch'Marsam-muk was about to submerge himself and swim home, the vehicle turned sharply and doubled back, stopping a few dozen feet from the shore of the island and focusing its light directly on him. Shielding his eyes and squinting against the brilliance, he watched the rider dismount the machine, clumsy in his haste. As the small man paddled and sloshed through the water, Ch'Marsam-muk wondered if he should draw the slender dagger from its scabbard by his hip. Something made him hesitate—something familiar in the way the man moved.

When the man got a few body lengths from Ch'Marsam-muk, he stopped, probably just able to touch the ocean floor with his feet. The spume sprayed his face and wet his dark, uneven spikes of hair as he pulled the mask and goggles

from his face and threw them into the surf, forgotten. With something between a laugh and a sob, the man launched himself at Ch'Marsam-muk, taking Ch'Marsam-muk's face in both hands and kissing him so hard the bang of their teeth and the collision of their tongues actually hurt. Ch'Marsam-muk kissed back, winding Sora's small body in his arms, his tentacles, the taste and feel of him like the memory of a dream, but as comforting and familiar as if he had experienced them only hours ago. They kissed until their lips swelled almost to splitting and both of them gasped for breath. Sora wrapped a leg around Ch'Marsam-muk, and, pushing against his chest, guided him until he collapsed on his back on the island, with Sora sprawled on top of him and both of their lower limbs still in the water.

"I've been out looking for you," Sora said between nips and pecks that covered Ch'Marsam-muk's face, neck, and shoulders. "Why didn't you come to the station?"

"I didn't think you were planning to return," Ch'Marsam-muk said, moving his tentacles up and down Sora's body, desperate to feel the lean cords of his muscles and taste his soft skin. "So I had no reason to go there."

"I'm here now." Sora circled his hips, grinding his erection against Ch'Marsam-muk and making Ch'Marsam-muk's genitals swell within their pouch.

"Did you come back because of your orders, or because of me?"

Sora ran his nails down Ch'Marsam-muk's chest, using one to graze his nipple. "Do you really want to talk right now?" They kissed again, hard and desperate, before Ch'Marsam-muk broke contact and held Sora at arm's length, or as best as he could with Sora clinging to him and wrapping his legs around his waist.

"We have to talk," Ch'Marsam-muk said. "Because if we do this, it means you're mine. I don't want you to feel surprised or deceived. It will mean we're mated. If you give me your body, you're giving me everything. You and me, forever. Are you sure that's what you want?"

Sora didn't hesitate. "Yes. I have thought a great deal about this and... Yes. You're what I want. All I want."

"And what if you won't be able to stay?"

"I'll be able to stay, mostly," Sora said. "I may have to return to the space station now and then to give a report or something, but I'll come back. I'll see to it. I convinced them they need me here, and by the time that isn't true

anymore, I'll have a way to take you with me. Nualyin and I are already working on ways for your people to travel into space. We just need to devise a way to keep you wet." With a mischievous grin, Sora dragged his tongue from Ch'Marsam-muk's chin to the corner of his eye. "I have been very unhappy without you. Even with the chaos of Bennett and the investigation, and then the trial, which took forever, I have been able to think of little else."

"You took my heart with you when you left, Sora."

"I'm sorry," Sora said, flicking his gaze away. "It was necessary, and I was confused."

"But not now."

"Not now." Sora met his eyes again and smiled. "Not even remotely."

"Say it." Ch'Marsam-muk wanted to start on the closures of Sora's uniform jacket and free him from the coarse, heavy material, but he needed to hear the words first. "Tell me you want us to be together, that you'll be my mate."

"Yes, I want to be your mate. It might not be easy for us, but I want to do whatever we need to do to stay together."

"Sora, take your clothes off."

Sora unlaced his boots and then stood slowly, his feet beside Ch'Marsam-muk's hips as he toed them off and kicked each one a little way up the shore, out of reach of the water. With his gaze never leaving Ch'Marsam-muk's, he unbuckled the flexible black armored vest and tossed it on the beach, followed by his bracers and his tool belt. Slowly, a button at a time, he started on his gray jacket. Beneath him, Ch'Marsam-muk ran his hand up Sora's thigh. As alluring as it was to watch Sora tease him, his lips full and dark and his cheeks coloring, Ch'Marsam-muk wanted to hurry this along. He wanted Sora's skin, his taste. To his surprise, Sora put a bare foot at the center of his chest and pushed him back down, holding him there with the hungriest, most decadent smile Ch'Marsam-muk had ever seen. When he tried to slip a tentacle over the swell of Sora's ass and into the waistband of his trousers, Sora swatted him playfully away and wagged a finger at him.

Sora taking charge, taking what he wanted, sent a thrill through Ch'Marsam-muk, and veins of luminescence appeared along his tentacles, a purplish-blue that would change to rosy gold as soon as he touched Sora's flesh. He lay panting, writhing, licking his lips and wishing they were Sora's as Sora undressed slowly, exposing a strip of golden-brown flesh at a time, until he finally pulled his white undershirt over his head and stepped out of his snug

black briefs. Ch'Marsam-muk moved a tentacle a few inches up the back of his calf, just far enough to affix one of his suction cups and taste the need and arousal pouring off Sora like a storm. That lust flowed into Ch'Marsam-muk, increasing his own, making his glow flare, and he ground out, "Sora, come here."

Sora did, but instead of straddling Ch'Marsam-muk and lowering himself down as he expected, Sora stepped forward and wound his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's hair. His rose-brown erection curved a few inches from Ch'Marsam-muk's nose, its musk strong and alluring and its redder head peeking up from the hood of skin. Sora looked down expectantly, clear in what he wanted, and Ch'Marsam-muk was only too happy to comply.

He rubbed his cheek against the patch of thin hair framing Sora's cock, the scent intoxicating. As he ran his hands up the back of Sora's legs, he wrapped his tentacles around them. "I'll hold you up, Sora." He lapped up the underside of Sora's erection, and Sora shivered and moved his hands down to grasp Ch'Marsam-muk's shoulders. "You're going to need me to hold you up, because I'm going to make you fall apart tonight. I'm going to make you glad you're my mate, make you never want another man again, because you'll know nobody can touch you like I can, know what you want the way I can. I'm going to prove that to you."

"Go on," Sora said, curving his hips, pushing his cock to slide against Ch'Marsam-muk's face. Ch'Marsam-muk licked up and down it, tugging the skin of the hood with his lips and teasing the slit with his tongue before letting it slide into his mouth. He sucked hard on the head, and Sora cried out as his flavor speckled the back of Ch'Marsam-muk's tongue. He had never tasted anything so wonderful, richer, stronger, and more complex than the taste of his mate's skin. He wanted more of Sora, wanted Sora shooting into his throat and crying out to the stars, wanted Sora to see how much he adored him. Moving his head forward, he took Sora deeper as he slid a tentacle up and wrapped it around Sora's balls, tugging on them until he earned a soft hiss of surprise, just on the edge of pain. Sora liked that, he'd learned, but it was a fine line, and he had to be careful. "Oh, that's good. It's so good. How can you... how can you just *know*?"

Ch'Marsam-muk wouldn't pause in his task to answer. Sora would learn soon enough what it meant to be his mate; he'd learn that his happiness, his pleasure, meant everything to Ch'Marsam-muk. That he would live to make Sora tremble with pleasure like this, every day, every chance he got.



As he sucked Sora slowly, bobbing his head and running his tongue along the underside of Sora's cock, he twined one tentacle up his chest to affix a sucker to his nipple. He closed his eyes, listening to Sora's fragmented breathing and sweet little moans. He didn't need to see to know their essences mingled, producing an aura of pink-purple-gold light around them. He felt the change in his limbs as he wound them around his lover's body, tasting every shred of him that he could, tasting his abandon, the freedom he found in these moments, the joy. One of his tentacles snaked between Sora's cheeks and nestled into the heat of his cleft. Sora hadn't prepared himself, but with Ch'Marsam-muk's slick natural coating, if he took his time...

"Yes," Sora said in a draining exhalation. "Yes, I want that. Please."

Ch'Marsam-muk proceeded slowly, carefully, waiting for Sora's muscles to relax, gauging his comfort through the tension in his body and the taste of his skin. At any hint of worry or pain, he hesitated, giving Sora time to acclimate to his penetration. They read each other well, more easily with every moment they spent connected, and Sora opened to him. His back arched, pushing his cock deeper into Ch'Marsam-muk's throat as Ch'Marsam-muk pushed farther up inside him. Sora's muscles clenched down around his tentacle; his seed exploded into Ch'Marsam-muk's throat, and he screamed in a language Ch'Marsam-muk had never heard from his lips before. As he had promised, Ch'Marsam-muk held him up as Sora shook hard, his legs going slack, feet curling and lifting off the ground. Sora let himself go, vulnerability and trust spilling from his pores. "I-I have never felt so free," he panted. "I've never felt like this. Thank you for letting me feel this. I-I love you."

Ch'Marsam-muk let Sora's softening cock slip out of his mouth. He took a few moments to drink in the sight of his beloved, beautiful mate, wrapped up in tentacles mirroring the color of his flushed skin—Ch'Marsam-muk's tentacles wrapping his legs, his arms, his chest, his balls... disappearing into his ass, enveloped in the twisting heat of his rippling, clenching insides...

"Sora, I need you now. Need to mate with you. Claim you. Do you want me to put you on your back?"

"No," Sora said. "Stay right there."

Reluctantly, Ch'Marsam-muk lowered Sora's feet to the ground and slid his tentacles off of him and out of him, bringing them to rest in the water below them. Sora sat straddling him, digging his fingers into Ch'Marsam-muk's genital slit and pulling his cock free. It glowed brighter than the rest of him, pulsing pink and purple with his heartbeat. Sora wrapped his hand around its

base, leaning forward to kiss Ch'Marsam-muk as he lowered himself down. His tongue pierced Ch'Marsam-muk's mouth as Ch'Marsam-muk speared up into his slicked and willing body. They kissed softly for a few moments as Sora took him all the way in and adjusted to the sensation. Then Sora began rocking slowly, shifting to find the best angle. Ch'Marsam-muk indulged him, resting his hands over the prominent bones of Sora's hips.

"You're so beautiful," he grunted, his voice rougher than he expected. "Sora, I can't hold off much longer."

Sora fell across his chest, kissing him hard, sucking and gnawing at his lips and tongue as he thrust down with his hips, faster and more urgently. Ch'Marsam-muk pushed up to meet him, and they moved together, growling and panting into each other's gaping mouths. The radiance of Ch'Marsam-muk's body, fueled by his mate's love and pleasure, sealed them in a shimmering, opalescent bubble. They clasped and clawed at each other, Ch'Marsam-muk coiling Sora in his tentacles, as they moved faster and harder, both of them seeking completion.

Ch'Marsam-muk wriggled a tentacle between them and wrapped it around Sora's cock just as Sora's inner muscles clamped down on him. Through his suction cups, he tasted Sora's sweet release, and it made him explode.

"Sora! Sora, I love you. I love you so much." His body shimmered with light and energy, and then he let it go, giving it to Sora, to the sky and the universe, seeing bursts of color in his head, feeling nothing but Sora against him, their hearts hammering together, lips entangled, breath mingling.

After a while—he couldn't say how long—the light surrounding them dimmed to something softer than an exploding star, and Sora rolled off him with a groan.

Ch'Marsam-muk rolled to face him, stroking his cheek. "Are you hurting?"

Sora chuckled, a sweet, satisfied sound. "Not in a bad way. It's been almost four months—ah, two days and two nights—for me. And you, my friend, are a big guy." Sora kissed him, and Ch'Marsam-muk felt his smile against his lips. "I'm a lucky, lucky man. I love you."

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## Epilogue

Ch'Marsam-muk woke with his head on the padded, inclined slope of the tank where he slept, sometimes with Sora. They always fell asleep together, but the water did funny things to his mate's skin, made it swell and wrinkle up, so Sora often left the water for the bed beside it, just as Ch'Marsam-muk often left the bed if he fell asleep there and started to dry out.

This morning, Sora stood in front of the small stove in their quarters, cooking something that smelled fantastic. Ch'Marsam-muk had developed quite a fondness for the drink the sky people called coffee. Even its scent helped wake him up, but it had nothing on the sight of his mate in only his tight briefs—light sky-blue—clinging to the crescents of his taut backside. Sora had headphones in his ears, and he hummed and shook his delectable little bum as he stirred the contents of the pan. As always, Sora wore the necklace Ch'Marsam-muk had made, the one with the glowing red gem at the center and the three blue beads on either side. He never took it off, not when he donned his uniform, not even in the shower. Especially not when they made love.

Ch'Marsam-muk crawled out of the tank and let the mat around it absorb the water from his tentacles. He moved behind Sora and wrapped a tentacle around his waist, tasting the remnants of Sora's sleepy contentment along with his excitement for what awaited them. Sora flinched with surprise, but then he turned his head, smiled, kissed Ch'Marsam-muk, and pulled the buds from his ears. "Good morning, my love. I made us some breakfast."

"It smells great, and so do you. Care to come back into the water with me?"

"Sure, after we eat. I made French toast, and bacon and eggs. You'll like this. You'll like it more before it gets cold."

"All right, Sora. Thank you for cooking for me." Ch'Marsam-muk moved to the table and situated himself on one of the stools. Even after these last few years, it felt strange, perching there with his tentacles twined around the stool's base.

Sora poured coffee and sat across the small table from him. After they ate, Sora moved to the wide, flat monitor on the wall above the sofa in their small sitting room on the ship where they'd been living for two of the sky people's—two *human* years. He pushed a few buttons and an array of stars appeared on the screen. At the center, near the brightest star, was a small red glimmer.

“There she is, Ch’Marsam-muk. Patala. The farthest our people—any of them—have ventured into the cosmos. There’s life down there. What do you think it will be like?”

Ch’Marsam-muk pressed a button to bring the view of the planet closer. It looked like a polished red jewel bobbing in a black sea, very much like the gem his lover wore around his neck. Ch’Marsam-muk wondered if there was meaning in that. He’d wondered a great deal about the meaning of his existence since he had left Varuna with Sora. Before, he had never questioned his place in the universe, but before, the universe had ended at his world’s horizon. Sometimes, it made him feel lost and insignificant.

“Whatever is down there, you’ll see it’s treated fairly,” Ch’Marsam-muk said. That was one thing he could trust in, along with knowing he would never be insignificant to Sora. He wrapped a tentacle around Sora’s ankle and held him, feeling more grounded.

“I’m excited,” Sora said. “Are you?”

Ch’Marsam-muk considered. “I am. We’re going down there together. We have always done great things together, my Sora, and I trust we always will.”

Sora reached across the table and took Ch’Marsam-muk’s hand. “Together, then. Greatness, exploration, and discovery. Me and you.”

“Together.” Ch’Marsam-muk kissed the back of Sora’s hand. “No matter where we go or what we find. Always.”

*Always.*

**The End...**

...For Now

## **Author Bio**

*Augusta Li isn't terribly exciting. When not writing, drawing, or making costumes, Gus can usually be found on Xbox live, watching anime, reading, or playing with the cat.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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