

A muscular man with long, dark hair is shown from the chest up, shirtless. He is positioned on the left side of the frame. The background is a vibrant, fiery red and orange, resembling a sunset or a nebula. A bright, glowing sun or star is visible in the upper right corner, casting a strong light across the scene. The overall mood is intense and dramatic.

*Alien
abduction?
No, he prefers
to call it a
rescue.*

LEORA GONZALES

WARRIORS OF PHAETON - BOOK FOUR

FINCH

Warriors of Phaeton: Finch

Book Four of the Warriors of Phaeton Series

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ISBN-13: 978-1984947833

ISBN-10: 1984947834

DEDICATION

Bee, thank you for the little things. I adore you and our friendship. No matter how many miles separate us, we will never be far apart.

To my CGG, you all are hilarious, smart, fierce women who inspire me daily. Keep it up, bishes.

Most importantly, I want to dedicate this (like all the others) to my husband. I was lucky enough to find a man who is super smart, loving, hilarious and also diabolical. When I said that I wanted to write but had no computer, I had no idea he was going to surprise me with a new laptop. There went my list of excuses. Touché, Richard. Touché.

PROLOGUE

Presidential address from three months ago...

“My fellow Americans, negotiations have concluded with the Phaeton Warrior race. After speaking to their council of leaders, we have learned that the Phaeton race has been surviving by using cloning. Unfortunately, the science that they have used has resulted in a low female birth rate. For their species to survive, they have been searching on other planets for potential mates.

“The State Department has decided to initiate a ‘mate match’ for single female volunteers to apply for what we are referring to as the ‘Bridal Pact.’ In exchange for these volunteers, we will be able to use the Phaetons’ medical advancements to save American lives. We will have access to a new fuel source that will all but eliminate our need for oil, both foreign and domestic. And we will also have the protection of their military from other species that may discover Earth.

“This is not a draft. It is completely voluntary. Women who apply will be compensated for filling out an application and signing the contract. We want to assure you that your safety and the safety of your sisters, daughters and friends will be our number-one concern. We are working on a profiling system with national dating sites and the Phaeton Council to make matches, similar to what many of you have used in the past to find companions. As of right now this is only open to women who fall within certain criteria but may be expanded after an initial trial period passes.

“Please keep an open mind and know that the safety of our citizens and country is our top priority. Women wishing to volunteer or get more

information can contact their local Intake Centers, which will be listed by state following this news conference or found at [bridal-pact-dot-state-department-dot-gov](#). This is an exciting time for our country and its people.”

CHAPTER ONE

Two weeks ago...

Spraying Windex on the glass in front of her, Claudia shook her hips to the music in her ears. She was in the zone now, working her way down the length of offices on her assigned floor for the night. This job was so repetitive that Claudia was able to do most of the tasks without thinking. Wipe, vacuum, trash. Every night was the same thing. With this job plus taking care of her son, an exciting evening in her house was catching up on the latest episode of her favorite zombie show.

Her second job as “cleaning lady extraordinaire”, her own made up title, was definitely one of the most interesting night jobs that she had ever had though. Sad as it may seem, the small glimpses that she had of the Phaeton warriors was something she looked forward to. She had been hesitant at first to take the shift because it took her away from Max. Realizing that she couldn’t afford to feed Max if she didn’t take a second job had quickly nipped that hesitation in the bud. Thinking of Max made her speed up her cleaning. The sooner she finished this floor the sooner she was able to check out of the building and head home.

Claudia was getting ready for one final wipe when someone tapped her shoulder. Thinking that she had been alone this whole time, Claudia did what any person that watched zombie shows would do when they were surprised. She dropped the bottle and rag and jumped what she figured was four feet in the air.

Claudia was halfway across the room before she heard a voice asking if she was okay. Shaking her head at her own stupid reaction, she made a note

to herself not to listen to DMX anymore while she was cleaning. Apparently the barking put her on edge.

Turning around, Claudia started to apologize for freaking out and instead almost swallowed her tongue. The male hotness in front of her left her literally speechless.

“Are you all right?”

“Uh? Me?” Claudia stuttered, swiping at a few strands that had escaped her ponytail away from her face.

“Yes. You were making a funny noise in your throat.”

Claudia thought for a moment before realizing what he was referring to. She must have been humming to the music.

“I was humming.” The words came out raspy as if all of the spit in her mouth decided to dry up at once.

“Humming?” the large man asked as he moved closer, his leather pants hugging his thighs like a second skin.

“Humming,” Claudia repeated. “I have music playing on my phone.” Tapping the phone tucked into the front of her bra, she closed her eyes in embarrassment. She popped the earbud out and removed it from her shirt. “It’s too big to fit into my pocket,” she explained even though he hadn’t asked.

This was NOT how she had played out her first meeting with a Phaeton. Not only was she looking ratty but her large smart phone had essentially been a giant rectangle covering her boob.

“I am Finch.” The man stuck out his hand for her to shake.

“Claudia,” she murmured taking it and holding for a moment as they went through the motions of a handshake. Dragging her gaze away from where his large tanned hand engulfed her much paler one, she looked around the room they were in. “Ummmm...no offense, but what are you doing on this floor? I was told it would be empty for an hour so I could finish up.”

“We are checking the perimeter. I heard something squeak and decided to investigate.”

Claudia hiked her thumb over her shoulder. Pointing to the cleaning cart that she hated with a passion. “It was the cart,” she added. “I’ve tried everything I can to fix the squeak but it hates me, and I think it’s now doing it out of spite.”

“Really?” Finch smiled, showing off his straight, white teeth.

Claudia smiled back, unable to help the warm rush of heat that settled in her stomach at his sexy grin. She was probably blushing like crazy by now but she didn’t care one bit as long as he kept talking to her.

“Yeah, we’re basically mortal enemies. Just the other day it decided to grab my favorite t-shirt and rip it as I was walking by,” Claudia deadpanned.

Finch threw back his head and laughed with a deep rumble. Claudia couldn’t help but clench her thighs as she watched his muscles flex during the act.

This man was hot...and obviously not in her league. As far as she knew, the only women that the warriors were interested in were the brides that were signing up for the Bridal Pact.

“Soooooooo...” Claudia drew out the word, unsure of what she wanted to say next but unwilling to end their conversation so soon.

“You work here?” Finch asked, leaning down to hand her the bottle she had dropped in her earlier haste.

“Yeah, I cover the night shift cleaning the center. Usually it’s like a ghost town in here. You’re maybe the fourth person I’ve seen tonight other than the security guards. What are you doing here so late?”

“With the security issues here at the Intake Center, our Council has decided to adjust our arrival times, hoping there would not be as many civilians around the building.” Finch explained as he glanced around the empty office space.

“Oh, well I can go to a different floor if you need me to move.” Claudia panicked slightly as she realized she probably shouldn’t be talking to Finch. Were there rules about fraternizing in her cleaning contract?

“No, no. I did not mean you, I was referring to the protesters outside the building that seem to grow in numbers every time we visit.” Finch stopped her backtracking with a hand on her arm, before removing it quickly. “Sorry, I did not mean to touch you without permission.”

“You can touch me anytime you want.”

Claudia felt her heart stop when she realized those words had come out of her mouth instead of staying in her head.

“Excuse me?” Finch’s smile widened, waiting for her to reply.

“Um...nothing,” Claudia stuttered, looking at anything but the man in front of her. “I may be having a stroke or something. Ignore the words coming out of my mouth, she quipped, trying to cover her earlier slip.

At the word stroke, Finch’s face showed concern as he moved even closer to her. Placing a hand on her arm, he held her firmly as if making sure she wouldn’t fall.

“Sweet Hell, this can’t get any worse,” she mumbled. Meeting his eyes, Claudia smiled softly. “I’m rambling because I’m nervous but I’m okay, really.” Patting the hand that was touching her, a waft of industrial cleaner rose up from her clothes. She grimaced.

“If you are sure—” Finch’s tone was soft and comforting, as if he was calming a scared animal.

“I’m fine. I promise,” Claudia reassured him. When he let go of her shoulder, the loss of contact felt as if her favorite new toy had been taken away.

“Well, I guess I should finish my check and get back to the group.”

Claudia foolishly hoped it was disappointment that she could hear in his words.

“Yeah, me too. I mean, I need to get back to cleaning.” Claudia felt her face heat for what seemed to be the millionth time that night.

“It was nice meeting you, Claudia.” Finch smiled widely as he delivered the words.

“Yeah, me too.” Closing her eyes and blowing out a breath, Claudia shook her head. “I meant it was nice meeting you too.”

“I understood you. Hopefully we will meet again.” With a short nod, he turned and strode away.

Claudia stood dumbly as Finch walked back toward the direction of the stairwell.

“I’m such an idiot sometimes,” Claudia said out loud to herself after the door closed once again leaving her in silence.

Walking back to the dreaded cleaning cart, she stowed the spray bottle and moved farther down the hall.

It just figured with her luck this was the way things would happen. She must have looked like a complete idiot. Catching sight of her reflection on one of the large glass windows lining the wall, she straightened her limp ponytail. Of course she would run into the hottest thing on two legs while

her auburn hair looked like it had been used to mop the floor. It didn't surprise her at all that she looked like death warmed over because she hadn't been outside in the sun for a great long while causing her pale skin to give her that newly dead look. Nope. It seemed par for the course for Claudia lately that the stars would align for her to look like a homeless person right when she was introduced to one of the most gorgeous men she had ever seen with her own two eyes. Eyes that even though they were a soft blueish grey were ringed with dark circles that would make a raccoon jealous. She just couldn't win.

Letting out a huge sigh, Claudia felt a pang of longing hit her chest. "Not like I have any time to date, human or alien. Max is my focus." Grabbing a roll of garbage bags off the cart, she started to empty the trashcans along with office doors. "Max is my only focus."

Reaching for her phone, she selected a different playlist this time. This called for some old-school eighties to knock her out of the disappointment she was feeling.

Now...

Claudia breathed heavily as she squirmed, trying to twist her wrist. "C'mon you fucking piece of shit rope!"

As if the rope Gods had decided to take favor on her, the frayed material finally gave way with a snap. Sitting up quickly, Claudia rubbed her raw wrists, checking the damage she had inflicted.

The large alien asshole that had kidnapped her had padded the restraints with a cloth, but the more she had tried to get free the further the soft piece of material had slipped away. An hour ago, the cotton buffer had been completely out from under the scratchy rope and she was now paying the price for it.

Wrists burning, Claudia scrambled off the bed.

"No weapons...okay...there are no weapons," she mumbled to herself. Rubbing her forehead in frustration, Claudia admitted that even if she found one she probably would have never used it.

Damn that man. Just the thought of hurting him physically made her stomach churn. What kind of alien voodoo did he have over her?

Spotting her clothes on the floor beside the bed, Claudia quickly pulled them on. As she slipped into her jeans she realized her phone was still in her pocket. Taking it out, she glanced at the screen.

No signal. Dammit. Not that she really expected to have coverage in space but there had been a slight hope that something would go her way for once.

Looking at the phone again, she cringed when she realized it had been two days since she had been taken.

She needed to get home to her son.

Poor Max. He was young enough to not really comprehend her coming home, but his sitter, Maggie, had to be freaking out right now.

Two days.

Two fucking days.

Add the explosion at the Intake Center to her being missing and she prayed Maggie hadn't assumed that she was dead and called the authorities. It was going to be hard enough to explain what happened without having to try to get Max back from CPS.

Claudia remembered calling Maggie just as she was getting out of the car at her apartment complex. Her mind had been focused on dropping off her things before walking a building over to pick up Max that she hadn't noticed she was not alone. Before she had been able to speak to her sitter, she had been grabbed from behind and told that she wasn't safe. Turning around in the arms holding her, Claudia had almost swallowed her tongue in shock. Confused and concerned as to why a Pheaton warrior was standing in front of her out in the open, she had hit "end" on the phone and stuffed it in her pocket.

With her mouth hanging open, Claudia had stared in shock at the gigantic man in front of her. She had recognized Finch from his previous visits to the Intake Center and the few conversations they had had.

"You are not safe. You have to come with me," Finch repeated, shocking Claudia out of her stupor.

"What do you mean? I just got home." Protesting, she pointed behind to her car.

"There has been a security breach. You are not safe here. Some of the workers that were off duty have been found murdered in their homes."

“What? Why?” Claudia stumbled across the words, unable to believe what was happening.

“There is no time to explain, we need to move now. We cannot be out in the open,” Finch whispered harshly as he pulled her closer to a large black SUV.

“I can’t—” Digging her feet into the ground, Claudia’s words came to an abrupt halt when Finch moved his hand and quickly injected her with something on her upper arm. “Whaaa--?” She tried to finish her question but was unable to control her mouth...or even her muscles. Feeling her body droop as if it were weighted with lead, Claudia remembered thinking about one thing.

Max.

CHAPTER TWO

Claudia quickly moved down the long corridor. She was definitely still on the ship where Finch had taken her after he snatched her.

How the hell did she get out of here? Even if she figured out how to get off the ship, how did she get back to Earth? It wasn't as if she could fly a spaceship or anything, she barely was able to operate her cable box.

Jogging past one of the gleaming doors on her left, she paused when she heard the tune to a familiar song.

Claudia moved closer to the door, making sure to keep an eye on the hallway in front of her, and pressed her ear to the metal. Yep. That was one of her favorite songs playing and she could hear women speaking. Chewing her lip for a moment, she thought of the risks of knocking. Adrenaline made her heart pound. The thumping almost as loud as the voices on the other side of the door, at least to her own ears.

Screw it.

If those were women in there, they had to be human since the Phaetons didn't have any females of their own...and if they were human women, then she was going with her gut and hoping they were on her side.

Before she could second-guess herself, Claudia banged her fist against the door.

"What the fuck?!" yelled a woman as Claudia practically fell into the room when the door slid open.

"You have to help me!" Claudia pleaded as she clutched at the woman closest to her. A woman who just so happened to be pregnant, although not as pregnant as the other one in the room.

“Whoa. What’s going on?” The one she was hanging on to asked calmly as she tried to loosen Claudia’s grip on her shirt. Realizing that she had been practically ripping the woman’s clothes, Claudia relaxed her fingers and looked around for a weapon or a way out.

“I’ve been kidnapped!” she rasped, panting for breath. Anxiety making her chest tight as if a python had managed to wrap around her torso.

“Kidnapped?” the women echoed in unison.

“By an alien! You have to help me before he finds me!” Claudia knew she must sound crazy, but crazy was her reality right now.

“Pixie...what the fuck?” asked the one that was so pregnant she looked like she was going to pop.

“I don’t—” Pixie began, only to be cut off when her shirt was pulled yet again.

“Why aren’t you doing anything? I’ve been kidnapped!” Claudia said emphatically.

“Calm down, everything is gonna be okay. Let’s get this rope off you and figure out what’s going on.” Pixie put her arm around the woman’s shoulders. In a calm voice she started giving orders, “Poppy, I brought your scissors back and put them in that drawer. Grab them.”

Poppy rushed over to the drawer and carried the scissors to Pixie. “Do you know what the name of alien was?”

“Finch! His name is Finch and he’s crazy!” Claudia blurted out, unsure how to explain the situation she had gotten herself into.

“Finch?” Pixie asked, incredulous. She stared open-mouthed while Poppy stood silent with shock.

“No...just no,” Pixie finally squeaked out.

“There has to be a mist—” Poppy started, shaking her head.

“I’m not crazy. Finch kidnapped me from my apartment two nights ago and kept me tied up in his bedroom! I was able to untie myself from the bed while he was gone but I’m not sure how long before he comes back,” Claudia pleaded, her voice breaking. “You have to help me.” Holding out her hands for Pixie to cut off the rope, she started to cry. She was at the end of her patience with this entire situation.

The woman that she now knew as Pixie tried to calm her down.

Pixie moved forward slowly and spoke softly. “We know Finch. There’s no way he would ever hurt anyone.”

“So he’s not gay?” Poppy’s question caused Claudia to jerk her head toward the other woman.

“Bad timing, Poppy,” Pixie gritted out.

Claudia watched the two women talk back and forth before Pixie snapped her fingers and pointed at her.

“I know you! You worked in the Intake Center.”

“I’m Claudia.” Reaching forward to awkwardly shake her hand, Claudia wondered if manners really mattered that much right now. “I *did* work at the Intake Center but that was before it blew up and I was kidnapped.”

“Blew up?” Pixie and Poppy both asked in unison.

“Jesus, it’s a long story.” Claudia pushed her hair back off her face and sighed. “It seems like a year’s passed and it’s only been two weeks.”

“Wait, I thought you said that you were snagged two nights ago,” Poppy asked confused.

“I was...I met Finch two weeks ago,” Claudia explained to the sisters, her mind trying to figure out where to start.

“Go on,” Poppy prodded softly.

“We met at the Intake Center. I work there on cleaning duty some nights to make extra money. Anyway, I barely talked to him...then the next thing I know, he’s grabbing me in the parking lot.”

“I just don’t understand why or even how would he have done that?” Pixie interrupted before Claudia could tell her story.

“I don’t know why. I swear I only talked to him a few times.” Claudia fiddled with the hem of her shirt. “Honestly, I have no idea why he took me, but I have to get back. As in, *right now*.”

“Let me think for a second.” Pixie held up her hand as if calling a time-out.

“I don’t have a second, dammit! I have to get back to my baby!” Claudia yelled at the sisters. Claudia heard the words crack and knew she was close to tears.

“Baby?” Poppy gasped at the same time Pixie said, “Oh fuck.”

At that moment, all three women froze when the door chimed, signaling someone was about to enter.

“Shit!” Claudia swore in a panicked whisper. “Can you help me get home?”

“My husband is a council member. If Finch kidnapped you, he’ll take care of it. I promise,” Poppy assured her.

“Promise?” Claudia asked, doubt evident in her tone.

“Do you want me to stick out my pinky or something?” Poppy asked.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get this sorted out.” Pixie plastered an unconvincing reassuring smile, obviously trying to look calm.

The three women stayed seated as the door opened and a large Phaeton walked inside.

“Little Flower, your new shoes arrived today in our shipment,” he announced as he walked through the opening without glancing up. Clicking on his tablet, he stopped when he reached the living area but kept his eyes trained on the device. “And some items for the baby that we—” He stopped as he finally noticed the woman sitting on the couch with a piece of rope dangling off her foot.

“Hey, honey, can you tell me why Finch is going around Earth and kidnapping women?” Poppy interrupted in a sugary-sweet voice.

“Wait. Finch what?” he asked, stunned.

“He kidnapped me,” Claudia stated firmly, keeping eye contact with the large man. “I need to get home to my baby. Are you going to help me?”

Wheaton’s gaze darted back and forth between all the women, obviously unsure what was happening regardless of what he had heard.

“Finch, want to explain what she is talking about?” Wheaton’s question jolted all three of the women into action. When Finch walked into the room behind Wheaton, all three started moving.

“Keep him away from me!” Claudia shouted as Pixie and Poppy shielded her with their pregnant bodies.

“Finch, you’re my friend but you need to stop right there,” Poppy ordered angrily.

“What the hell have you done?” Pixie asked, shaking her head at him.

“I saved her.” Finch moved slowly closer, hands out in surrender. Claudia felt his eyes on her as he advanced on their group.

“Really? The rope around her wrists and ankles are disagreeing with that statement,” Pixie pointed out sarcastically.

“Taking her away from her baby? What kind of monster does that?” Poppy’s voice was starting to break as tears filled her eyes.

“Baby? She doesn’t have a child,” Finch argued, locking his eyes with Claudia as she huddled behind his friends.

“What?” Pixie asked, peeking behind her.

“I have custody of my nephew. He’s only six months old,” Claudia replied hotly. “And because of that jerk he’s been at the sitter’s house for days without knowing what’s going on.”

“I was not aware you cared for a child...we will bring him here immediately,” Finch offered, moving closer.

“No, we won’t because I’m not staying, you jackass!” Claudia relinquished her place behind her human shields.

“You are staying!” Finch yelled back, ignoring the shocked looks from the rest of the group.

“And why would I do that?” Claudia asked sarcastically as she now stood toe to toe with an angry-looking Finch. A very large Finch who towered over her like an oak tree.

“Because you may be pregnant with my child as we speak.”

Finch’s words caused Pixie to suck in a breath of air and immediately start choking on her spit.

Claudia narrowed her eyes at the man who was responsible for her current predicament. Did he really need to blurt that out right now?

“Finch, we need to speak. Now.” Wheaton’s tone relayed how angry he was as his jaw was clenched and the vein bulged on his forehead.

“As soon as she agrees to stay,” Finch shot back, not taking his eyes off Claudia.

“Holy shit...Finch is more alpha than I thought.” Poppy’s words were murmured out of the corner of her mouth but everyone heard them clearly.

Wheaton, Claudia and Finch started arguing, all three of them talking at the same time.

“I can’t believe you said that!” Claudia hissed.

“It happened and you started it!” Finch ground out.

Claudia drew in a breath, ready to yell again.

“Both of you be quiet,” Wheaton spoke over the pair.

“I have a feeling this is gonna be a long story...do we have any popcorn?” Pixie asked her sister.

“Yeah, might as well get comfortable. This looks like it might take a while to untangle,” Poppy answered, still eyeing the group who took turns

yelling at each other.

“So, two bowls of popcorn?” Pixie asked, skirting her way around the group and heading to the kitchen.

“Make it three. I have a feeling we’re gonna be here a while,” Poppy shouted back as she kicked up her legs on the couch.

CHAPTER THREE

Claudia could literally feel her face burning as she stood toe to toe with Finch. Unable to believe that he just blurted out that they had slept together, she couldn't help the embarrassment that swept through her knowing everyone had heard that tidbit.

Moving to poke her finger at his chest, she was halted in her steps when Wheaton stepped in between the two of them.

"Please explain what is going on."

Even without knowing him, Claudia could tell this was his "I'm at the edge of my sanity" tone. It was something she had often heard from both her father and her brother when she was younger.

"He kidnapped me!"

"For your own safety," Finch added immediately after her accusation.

Claudia tried to draw in a calming breath but was unable to control her anger when she saw Finch give her a sexy smile.

"Don't you dare," she whispered with a glare.

"Don't what?" Finch asked innocently.

"Don't give me that smile." She folded her arms across her chest. Damn her nipples. One flash of teeth from the man in front of her and she was ready to jump him. Again.

"Enough. One of you needs to explain what is happening so I can fix this now." Wheaton pinched the bridge of his nose as if they were giving him a headache.

"It is easy to explain," Finch said with a smile that quickly dropped off of his face when his friend opened his eyes to send a glare in his direction.

“Yes, please explain why you kidnapped me...” Claudia waved her hands in a hurry up motion, wanting to hear his explanation.

“I met Claudia at the Intake Center a little over two weeks ago. We talked and I felt attraction.” Finch looked directly at her as he spoke, his words warming her insides. “I wanted to find out more about her and inquired with our human security detail. They explained that she had been screened to work in the building but was not in the pool of females for brides.”

Finch gestured to the empty table and chairs by the doorway. “This is quite a long story. Maybe it would be better if we sat down.”

“I agree. I have been in meetings all day and this sounds like it will be exhausting,” Wheaton nodded his head.

Holding out one arm and indicating that Claudia walk ahead of him, Wheaton waved off the boos coming from the pair of women on the couch. “But we can’t hear you all the way over there!”

“Poppy, you know I will tell you everything later. Eat your bowl of corn pop and let me figure this out...please,” he added when it looked like his wife was ready to pitch the large silver bowl in his direction.

“Fine,” Poppy grumped. “As long as story time is accompanied by a foot rub!”

Claudia caught the eye roll that Wheaton gave his wife before he turned his attention back to her.

“Where was I?” Finch asked as they settled down.

“The part where you kidnapped me.” Claudia sat back in her seat and crossed her legs.

“I saved you,” Finch snapped, slamming his fist on the table. “Claudia, they were killed in their homes.”

“Who was killed?” Wheaton asked.

“Two days ago I was working security for Kaine on Earth. The Intake Center went to Code Black while we were there.”

“Code Black?” Claudia interrupted.

“It is one of our safety protocols that indicates there has been a security breach that resulted in a death,” Wheaton informed her, his face giving nothing away. “We did not have any fatalities that day thankfully. I was informed in the report that we pulled our ships away before the explosion.”

“We did not have fatalities. Our earth counterparts were not so lucky.” Finch let out a tired sigh, “it is better for me to start with what happened

after we landed.”

“I was not notified of human casualties...apparently there is confusion regarding what I need to be notified of when it comes to our Earth counterparts. Tell me everything you know,” Wheaton ordered sharply with a frown.

“We landed with normal security measures in place. Our team swept the building for bombs like always and picked up a trace of explosive residue on the ground floor. The amount was so small it was almost undetectable. While our equipment was analyzing the source, we received notification that multiple human workers had not reported in for their afternoon shifts. That included three of the security guards, two of the bridal liaisons and one office secretary. Within the hour, we had dispatched human authorities to their places of residence and found them all dead inside their homes. It took us most of the evening but we began to account for all of the employees and the situation was not one that was favorable to us or the Intake Center staff.”

Claudia couldn't help the gasp that left her at that news. Dear God, those poor people. Who targeted innocent workers? What kind of world did they live in where you had to fear for your safety simply because of where you worked?

“I know. That is why I took you. I had to be sure you were safe, Claudia.” Finch reached across the table for her hand. Unable to stop herself, Claudia moved to let him grip her fingers.

“I can't believe...” she murmured, still in shock at what had happened.

“That is not all.” Finch squeezed her hand. “A security pass for one of the dead guards had been swiped that evening inside the center. His killer had been in the building just moments before we landed. The logs showed that he had been in different parts of the building. The records room had been compromised as well as our temporary docking bay. Our system shows that he was trying to access information on bridal applicants but those records had already been encrypted.”

“Thank goodness,” Wheaton breathed out.

“The employment records for everyone that worked in the building had not been protected though. Earth officials employed the staff after their security screenings and did not think to protect their information from outsiders,” Finch muttered. “The files for every worker had been opened

and copied. Home addresses, vehicle information, everything...the personal information of every human worker was compromised.”

“So that’s why you showed up at my apartment freaking out.” Claudia’s voice shook.

“I could not let anything happen to you. The logs showed that you had already left and I assumed you had gone home. I did not know what you would be going home to...if you were in danger. That is all that I could think about as I ordered our security team to retrieve a car to take me to you,” Finch admitted with a wry smile on his face. “I realize we did not know each other well...but I felt something here,” touching his chest, Finch stared into her eyes from across the small table, “and I had to make sure that you were safe.”

“Finch...” Claudia was unsure what to say.

“So you just took her?” Wheaton’s question cut through the tender moment like a hot knife.

“I felt I had no other option, Wheaton. What would you have done if Poppy had been in the same situation?”

“That is not the point, Finch. We have a strained relationship with their government as it is after the explosion. How am I supposed to explain that we managed to kidnap one of their citizens as well as take her away from her child? This could ruin the entire Pact! Why did you not tell me this earlier? We could have handled this better if you had come to me right when it happened.”

Claudia caught the disapproving glance that Wheaton gave Finch before rubbing his palms over his face.

“I did not have the chance to speak with you privately until now. I had planned on telling you earlier but was unable to do so and guarantee not being overheard. I will take whatever punishment that is due, Councilor Wheaton.” Finch gave Wheaton a short bow after his speech.

“Do not start calling me Councilor now, friend. You know that I will try to help as much as I can in this situation.”

Claudia sat for a moment, letting the silence at the table clear her head.

Did she understand why Finch had snatched her? Yes. Would she have gone with him if he had explained everything that had happened? Most likely, as long as he would have welcomed Max. Her mind snagged on something that Finch had said earlier and it gave her an idea.

“What if we pretend that I was a bride?” Claudia let the words slip out of her mouth before she could overthink the situation.

“What do you mean?” Wheaton asked, brows raised in question.

“You mentioned the records were comprised but the bridal applications were encrypted, right? Why not just pretend that I applied for the Bridal Pact?” Without waiting for an answer, Claudia kept going. “We can just let everyone think I was one of the trial brides that you were picking up the night of the explosion.” Giving the men a look, she added, “which I want to hear more about FYI.”

“What about your child?” Wheaton argued.

“What about him? You guys don’t have a problem with single moms, do you? I know that having kids goes against the qualifications but you have to admit that’s a stupid stipulation.” When the men were silent, she rolled her eyes. “Is now really the time to be picky? I mean, c’mon. The ladies aren’t lining up that much anymore with all of the protesters, and you bet your sweet ass that if news gets out about murders that the applicant pool could dry up completely. It doesn’t matter if you guys look like you could be on the cover of my dirty books...there is only so much a woman will risk before she decides it’s not worth the hassle. Possible death is major deterrent.”

“You would be willing to bring your child to our ship?” Wheaton tapped his fingers on the table.

“Why not? Finch technically saved me from someone that thinks it’s okay to go around killing people. It’s not like that’s a glowing recommendation to stay on Earth if you ask me. Plus, if the bad guy is still out there looking for me then I want to keep Max as safe as possible. Space is about as safe as I can imagine compared to my shitty apartment.”

“And there is still a chance that you could be pregnant with my child,” Finch added, causing Wheaton to clear his throat.

“Please explain how that happened again.”

“Kill me now.” Claudia leaned forward and hid her face in her hands.

“There was no force, Wheaton. Stop looking at me like that,” Finch snapped.

“If there was no force then why the ropes?” he argued, defending his reaction.

“I thought I was dreaming,” Claudia’s explanation was muffled against her palms.

“Pardon?” Wheaton’s voice sounded confused and amused at the same time.

“I. Thought. I. Was. Dreaming.” Her face burned with embarrassment. “I woke up in bed next to this guy.” She pointed at Finch. “I thought I was dreaming. I was groggy from the shot he gave me and he was naked and it just...happened.”

“You thought that you were dreaming,” Wheaton repeated.

“Yes. It wasn’t until after the fact that I realized I wasn’t dreaming and freaked out,” Claudia snapped.

“I only secured her until I could explain the situation to you. I would have done it earlier today but we have been surrounded by warriors up until now,” Finch explained to Wheaton. “With the recent threats I did not want her roaming the ship until I figured the situation out. Since nobody knew that she was aboard I was not able to call guard to watch over her...the rope was the only solution I had at the time.” Shrugging his shoulders as if he had nothing else to explain his actions, he sat quietly while Wheaton stared at him.

The silence made Claudia nervous. She had no idea how their hierarchy worked. Would Finch be arrested? Her stomach clenched at the thought of something worse happening to the big goofball. He may have made a huge mistake but his intentions had been in the right place. Now that she had calmed down enough to realize it, she didn’t want to strangle him anymore.

“I need to get Max,” she said quickly, trying to shift focus back to the more important matter.

“Max?” Wheaton asked, turning his attention back to her.

“My son. One of my friends in the apartment complex watches him when I work. She still has my son.” Claudia let out a heavy breath. “Well, at least I hope so. She has no idea if I am still even alive. There is a chance she freaked out when I disappeared. We need to get in touch with her.”

“We can call her right now,” Wheaton offered. “Let us get this over with.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Maggie?” Claudia’s voice filled with tears when she heard the phone pick up and heard Max crying in the background.

“Claudia?!” Maggie’s excitement came across loud and clear over the speaker that Wheaton had set up. “Where the hell are you? What happened? I thought you were dead! I’ve been calling your phone nonstop and it’s been going to voicemail.”

Claudia heard the pure panic in her friend’s words. “I am safe, but it’s a long story. Is Max okay?”

“He ran a little bit of a fever from his new tooth but other than that he is fine. Now are you gonna tell me what the hell happened? I went to your apartment and it was trashed. I thought you were kidnapped!”

“Well...I kind of was. But it was by the good guys so everything’s okay,” Claudia assured her.

“Her apartment was broken into?” Wheaton voiced the question at the speaker.

“Who is that?” Maggie asked.

“He’s someone keeping me safe,” Claudia answered when Wheaton shook his head. Apparently he didn’t want too many details given.

“Claudia, what the hell is going on? And don’t bullshit me. I’ve seen the news reports—I can smell a cover up when I hear one.”

“What do you mean cover up?”

“A gas explosion at the Intake Center? Some of the employees found dead in their homes in unrelated incidents. Then your apartment is torn apart and this is all just a coincidence? Fuck that! I wanted to go to the cops but I was scared to. I didn’t know what would happen to Max and couldn’t

imagine handing him over to a social worker. Honestly, as much as I hated the thought, I was going to have to file a police report soon if I hadn't heard from you." Maggie's tone relayed her obvious exhaustion.

"I know, Mags. I can't really say much other than I am coming for him as soon as I can."

"Where are you?" Maggie asked suspiciously.

"Ummmm..." Claudia stalled, unsure how to answer.

"She is being kept safe right now, I promise you. Max will be kept safe also once we are able to retrieve him," Finch answered firmly.

"Who the fuck are you?" Claudia snorted at the sassiness of her friend. One thing she loved about her friend was that she didn't take crap from anyone and didn't hold anything back.

"I am her future husband," Finch answered, causing Claudia to choke on her spit.

"Seriously? Now is the time to drop that bomb? We haven't even talked about that yet!" Claudia argued, forgetting they were surrounded by his friends as well as on the phone.

"It is going to happen. Get used to the idea of it now," Finch replied, dismissing her argument with a cross of his arms. "Maggie, I can arrange to pick him up later today. Can you meet us in a few hours?"

"Ummmm...I should be able to. Where at?" Maggie's stuttered out.

"There is an Intake Center in the town over. Can you be there this afternoon?"

Maggie snorted, the noise echoing. "You want me to drive Max to an Intake Center? Did you not hear me just say that those things are blowing up lately?"

"I know that it may seem dangerous right now, but we have installed new security measures to guarantee your safety. I will have guards advised of your arrival and be assured that everything will be fine."

"Please, Mags. Do this for me and I'll never ask another favor again," Claudia promised, knowing that it was most likely a lie.

There was a moment of silence before her friend spoke again. "I'd do anything for you and Stinkbutt and you know it, Claud."

"Stinkbutt?" Wheaton mouthed the nickname that Maggie had given Max.

"It's what she calls Max," Claudia explained with a grin.

“Maggie, I am going to have you speak to my commander now and he will give you the information you need to get Max to the Intake Center.” Finch grabbed Claudia’s arm, moving her away from the phone.

“We need to talk about our bridal papers,” Finch whispered, as Poppy and Pixie edged closer.

Claudia looked over at the two women who had been content so far to eavesdrop as they snacked.

“What do you mean?” Claudia asked.

“We need to sign them.” His answer leaving no room for argument.

“No.” Claudia followed the word up with a quick shake of her head.

“What do you mean ‘no?’” Finch’s eyes narrowed at her response.

“I’m not ready to the bridal papers *yet*... that’s what I meant to say. I’ll sign the application forms but that’s it.”

“We may have created a baby of our own, Claudia,” Finch argued.

Claudia ran her hands through her wavy hair, the trials of the last few days seeming to create a heavy weight on her shoulders. “Stop saying that! Until we are sure I think we should just...take a few deep breaths and slow down a bit. I’m getting whiplash from everything happening at the speed of light around here. Can’t we just sign the application forms and wait for the final paperwork? Isn’t that the way it works normally anyways?”

“Are you serious?” Finch asked in disbelief. “I am willing to not only accept you but also your son, is this not enough?”

“Oh, shit,” Poppy whispered.

“He didn’t just say that, did he?” Pixie asked, echoing the words that were going through Claudia’s head at that exact moment.

“You are *willing* to accept my son?” Claudia enunciated her words very carefully, wanting to make sure that Finch was aware of what he just said.

She wanted to knock him upside his head when he nodded as if he were doing her a favor. Taking a deep breath, she took a step back before she ended up causing physical harm to the jackass.

Holding up her finger she indicated she need a moment. Once she calmed down enough not to scream in frustration she let herself go.

“First off, we are a package deal. Got that? Max is not negotiable and I would NEVER even *date* anyone who thought otherwise.” As Claudia spoke, she felt every syllable of what she was saying down to her bones.

Judging by the look on Finch's face, he realized what had come out of his mouth...but it was already too late. Claudia knew she needed to get this off her chest or she would always wonder if he would treat her son differently than any other children they would potentially have. Hell. Max wasn't even a child from her own body, yet she loved him as if she had carried him for the nine months.

"Second, you aren't doing me any favors here. I'm a fucking catch, buddy. I may have a little extra padding and a son but I am *awesome*. Any man would be lucky to have me and my son in their life."

"Preach it, sister!" Pixie yelled from behind her.

Claudia turned and nodded at the sisters who were supporting her.

"Third, and this is non-negotiable...you will never, and I mean never, make me or my son feel inferior. I grew up in a house where I felt like I had no value to my parents. I wasn't the son my dad wanted and I was never skinny or pretty enough for my mom. My brother was the only thing that kept me sane until I was able to leave that house. Max will be raised knowing that he is loved no matter what." At those last words, Claudia felt her composure break.

Locking eyes with Finch, she stood her ground. It wasn't just herself she had to look out for, but also the little boy who owned part of her heart. When she decided to take custody of her nephew and raise him as if her were own she knew what she was getting into. That was part of the reason why she hadn't been on a date since she filed the custody papers. Making the right decision for herself had morphed into needing to make the right decision for her and Max. It wasn't something she took lightly.

Staring at Finch, Claudia relaxed slightly when she saw his eyes soften. When he reached for her, she didn't back away. Letting him hold her hands in his own, she watched him closely.

"I will treasure you and our son. I am sorry for the way my words sounded. I did not mean offense to you or our future family unit," Finch said sincerely.

"Will you be able to accept him as your own, Finch? If not then that's a deal breaker for me." Claudia paused for a moment knowing that his answer would make or break whatever relationship they were developing. "You would treat him just like you would any other kids we may have?"

“I believe I can accept him as my own.” Finch chose his words carefully. “Honestly, I have never had a child so I am unsure what feelings I would have regarding progeny. I admit that I already feel protective of him and I have yet to meet him. Knowing that you care for him makes me want to shelter him as well.” Nodding as if he had come to some sort of conclusion, Finch smiled. “This means that I will technically have a son before Wheaton or Dathrow. That makes me happy as well.”

“That’s cheating.” Pixie interrupted from the background.

“Yeah, no fair. I don’t think your bet will let you use that loophole,” Poppy added.

“Bet?” Claudia asked, confused.

Finch grinned and winked at her before gesturing to the women. “We had a bet on who would be the first to welcome a son into their family unit. I believe when Max arrives on the ship I would be the winner.”

“Technically he *will* be part of your family unit when Claudia signs the bridal agreement and you are married,” Wheaton stated from where he was standing at the side of the room tapping on his tablet.

“Nooooo!” Poppy booed.

“I thought you did not care about the bet, Little Flower?” Wheaton asked, his amusement obvious.

“I don’t, but what happens to you reflects on me. I refuse to let you be a loser,” Poppy explained while Pixie rolled her eyes at her sister.

“You’re an idiot, Pops.” Pixie laughed.

When it looked like Poppy was going to go after her sister, Claudia did the only thing she could think of and stepped forward. Effectively blocking the pregnant baby bellies from meeting in what Claudia could only assume would be a ridiculous but entertaining slap fight she smiled at the women.

“Can we start over?” Claudia held out her hand to Pixie. “I’m Claudia, that big guy over there in a misguided attempt to save my life kidnapped me and brought me to your lovely ship. I apologize for scaring you with the ropes, but I was in panic mode at the time. It’s nice to meet you.”

The three women grinned at each other and shook hands as if they were meeting over a cup of tea.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Claudia.” Pixie gestured to the couch that was overflowing with pillows. “Would you like to sit and tell us about your son?”

By the way, did you say he was your nephew but you have custody? How did that come about?"

"Geez, Pix. She may not want to talk about that," Poppy hissed at her sister with a look of apology at Claudia.

"No, it's okay. I get the question from a lot of people actually. He was my brother's son. Maxwell and his girlfriend died in a car accident when he was two months old. My brother was always planning ahead and he had named me guardian of Max in his will... of course I didn't know that at the time. I would have fought for him anyways even if Maxwell hadn't already made the step to make sure he was mine."

"Wow." Pixie sat staring at her. "Just wow. How old are you?"

"Twenty-six," Claudia replied, unsure why Pixie and her sister were looking at her with wide eyes.

"You seem more mature than most twenty-six-year-olds I know," Poppy blurted out.

"Hell, she seems more mature than you are sometimes." Pixie rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Bish."

"Whore."

Claudia leaned back and watched as the sisters bickered back and forth. This was what she was missing. Family. Since Maxwell had passed away there had been nobody for her to joke around with. Maxwell had been more than just her older brother, he had also been the only friend she could truly talk to other than Maggie. Most of her other friends were childless and when she gained custody of her nephew the invites from her friends had dried up quickly. It wasn't very fun to have a baby interrupting brunch or girls nights so she was pushed aside and forgotten by a majority of the girls she had mistakenly called friends. She missed the connection that siblings had, the closeness of knowing that someone would always be there for you no matter what mistakes you made.

Claudia's eyes filled with moisture at the reminder of what she was no longer had when she felt a hand rub her shoulder.

Finch.

Studying his face for a moment she was still entranced at how gorgeous he was. With a dusting of hair coating his strong jaw he could easily come off as menacing, especially when you added in the shoulder-length hair,

muscles and leather pants. It hadn't taken her long to look past all of that and see the strength and determination that made him who he was.

Maybe he *was* her lifeline. Never before had she been one to go on and on about destiny and "things happening for a reason". When her brother had died, Claudia had wanted to slug anyone that used that line at his funeral. Her heart wanted to scream out that day. The pain of losing him at felt as if a hot knife had carved into her chest and removed part of her soul. Maxwell had been her rock for so long. Older than her, he had looked out for her but never smothered her independence. He was the one who taught her to ride a bike. He was the first to congratulate her when she got into the college of her dreams. He was the first she called when a boy broke her heart. He was the one who told her everything would be okay when their parents died.

Her brother hadn't died because of some grand plan. He had died because a drunk driver had run a red light. Maybe Finch was the universe's way of giving her something since it had already taken so much away.

Her parents. Her brother. Her calm life before she had the responsibility of a baby thrust upon her. All of it had been in place before little by little, the things that she loved and planned for had been crossed off some cosmic list. After Maxwell's accident, Claudia had promised herself she wasn't going to waste any more time. She was going to take advantage of every second of every day and make sure that Max knew was cherished during all of them. Of course she hadn't counted that being a single mom would be so damn hard, but she was determined to roll with the punches.

Claudia admitted that she never expected to love her nephew like a son but it happened in the span of a blink. It wasn't hard to do considering that he reminded her of her brother more and more every day. In fact, she wouldn't be surprised if Max grew up to be the spitting image of his dad, an idea that comforted and made her sad simultaneously.

Looking up at Finch, she laid her hand over his where it was resting on her arm.

"Are you well?" His voice was soft, as if not to startle her.

"Yeah, just thinking," Claudia replied.

"About?" Finch tilted his head as if he were trying to figure her out.

"Everything...mostly memories." Claudia stood up. A subject change was called for before she started crying like a baby on the firm chest in front of her.

“We need to talk.” Finch steered her to the kitchen area, away from the sisters still talking on the couch.

Claudia allowed herself to be led to a counter area. Judging by the look on Finch’s face, she had a feeling she wasn’t going to like this conversation at all.

CHAPTER FIVE

“What is it? Is it about getting Max?” Claudia felt tingles of worry spread through her body at being separated from her son for any moment longer than necessary.

“Somewhat.” Finch ran his hand down his face, his features showing his own frustration.

“Just spit it out. You’re freaking me out more with not telling me what’s going on,” Claudia snapped, twisting her fingers together with worry.

“We have arranged for his pick-up but there is something that Wheaton is wanting you to do.” Finch shot a death glare in the direction of the councilman still tapping on his tablet.

“What? I’ll do anything as long as it means I get to hold him sooner rather than later,” Claudia assured him.

“Claudia, we think that you may have seen the person responsible for the crimes against the human workers at the center...or at least the person that set the explosives.”

“Uh?” Claudia shook her head, ready to argue.

“The time logs show that you were at the center while the stolen security pass was used,” Finch explained.

“So were a few other dozen people,” she pointed out.

“The floors that you were assigned to clean were the ones that were accessed for the files. There is a high likelihood that you walked by or spoke to the saboteur,” Wheaton interrupted from behind her.

Turning, she propped her hands on her hips. “When I work, I usually keep my head down and my music on. I try to keep on track so I can get home faster.”

“I understand that. Our problem lies with the fact that the person responsible may have seen *you* even if you did not notice them.”

Claudia understood Wheaton’s point, but she still wasn’t happy about it.

“You are in danger if you go with us to Earth to retrieve Max. The killer most likely has targeted you in case you would be able to identify them.”

“What about security cameras? There were tons of those cameras watching my every move while I worked. Can’t you identify who was the one that broke in by those?” Claudia moved restlessly from one leg to the other. Her nerves making themselves apparent.

“The security feed was down...that only leaves one witness. You.” Wheaton looked back and forth between her and Finch as he delivered that statement.

“So, you just go down and get Max and bring him up here. Easy peasy.”

“It is not that simple,” Finch argued.

“We contacted the human authorities to debrief them of our plan to have your son at the pickup location and have run into some problems. According to their procedures you need to be questioned by their officers before we are able to secure him. In fact, they have demanded that we return you to Earth as soon as possible. There will be a fight if we try to get your son from Earth as of right now.” Wheaton’s voice was sharp with his anger.

“So, I’m a suspect in all this?” Claudia couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“We have been told that everyone is a suspect at this point.” Wheaton looked at Finch for help.

“Even you guys?” Claudia asked.

“Even us, however according to our agreement with your government they are not able to detain any Phaeton. Even if they were to try, there would be a fight on their hands that they would not want,” Finch admitted.

“What about if I sign the forms making me his official bride? Not just the application? I would be considered one of you guys, right? Does that give me an out?” Claudia suggested the option that she had been wanting to avoid.

“Possibly...” Wheaton started.

“What about Max though? Will that be enough for them to allow us to remove him from the planet?” Finch asked Wheaton, as if somehow

knowing that was the main concern that Claudia had.

“If he is legally her son and she is his guardian I do not see how they can stop us. The bridal agreement technically reads that any children of the bride would be required to live within our society. It does not say that the child needs to be born of the bride herself,” Wheaton mumbled, half to himself. “I will have to check with the rest of the council but I think we may have found our loophole.”

As Wheaton moved away from the pair to grab his tablet, Claudia stepped closer to Finch.

“Do they really think that I had something to do with the bomb and those poor people being killed?” Claudia whispered.

“I do not believe so, but they have no one else to blame. You are an easy target to take the blame.” Finch reached forward to grab her hips. Pulling her closer to his body, he surrounded her with his strength. “I know it sounds awful but I am not unhappy with the turn of events. I have wanted you to sign the paperwork the entire time. This just gives me the excuse to have my own way.”

“This is happening so fast,” Claudia complained in a small, tired voice. “All of it. The way we met, you saving me, it’s overwhelming. I think I’ve reached my whiplash limit for a while.”

Leaning back to look into her eyes, Finch stroked one finger down her cheek. “I knew that I wanted you the minute I saw you.”

“Pfft,” Claudia huffed out, breaking away from his intense gaze.

“I had seen you before, I actually spoke to you,” he admitted. “I was there the first day you started.”

“Really?” Raising her eyebrows, Claudia looked back at him.

“Really. I had hoped that you were there to apply for the bridal pact. I wanted to know more about the beautiful redhead I had seen. I questioned some of the human workers and they informed me that you were simply there to clean. The disappointment was heavy in my chest that day.” Finch looked slightly uncomfortable telling her that. “I made sure that I knew when you were scheduled and watched you when I was able to. The moment that I was finally able to meet you, I already felt as if I knew you.”

“Wow, I had my own alien stalker and never even knew it,” Claudia teased, charmed by the way he blushed when he was embarrassed.

“I did not stalk!” Finch said in an offended voice that he softened with a shrug. “I just, watched you...and knew your schedule...and that you weren’t married.”

“Uh huh. Not a stalker at all,” Claudia snickered, her words overflowing with amused sarcasm. “How was it that you didn’t know about Max? From the sounds of it, you read my file. I listed him as my dependent.”

“Once I saw that your marital status was single I stopped reading your file. I had the information I needed at that point. I did not want to pry into your personal life more than necessary.”

“Of course.” Claudia gave in to the impulse to roll her eyes before she got serious and to the point. “Do you think this will really work? Me signing the forms saying we are married?”

“I hope so. It is what I wanted to happen regardless of this whole situation.” Finch shot her a small smile.

“I’ll do anything to make sure Max is safe.” Claudia whispered, mostly to herself.

Finch reached out and lifted her chin so she was looking directly at him. “I will do whatever I can as well. Never doubt that. He will be my son now also.”

Claudia felt her stomach warm at his words. The sincerity in his eyes managed to wipe away some of the doubt she may have felt about signing the papers tying her to him.

Please don’t let this come back and bite me in the ass.

“I wouldn’t mind nibbling your backside but I would never hurt you,” Finch replied.

“Dear God, I’m losing my mind and talking out loud again,” Claudia whispered, embarrassed although the thought of his mouth on her skin caused goosebumps.

The moment of intimacy that they were sharing was cut short when Wheaton cleared his throat beside them.

“Good news is that the council agreed that signing the forms would solve the issue with your son, Claudia.” Wheaton smiled.

“Bad news?” Claudia tried to dispel the knots that had taken over the warm fuzzies she had in her stomach a few moments ago. She felt Finch tense at her side, waiting for the shoe to drop as well.

“The council believes that you would be able to identify the person responsible for the bombing.”

“What does that mean?” Finch asked, sharp with suspicion.

Wheaton’s demeanor changed quickly as if he were donning his official title of Councilor instead of the friendly mode that he had been in up until now. “The council will decide how Claudia can help us further with this situation. We are unsure how to proceed but we will most likely need her help in flushing out the one responsible.”

“So what you’re saying is that I could be used as bait. Right?” She wasn’t stupid, she watched a lot of crime shows on TV. She knew she couldn’t identify anyone specific but if the Phaetons wanted to “flush” someone out then the only other option would be using her as a lure.

“Bait?” Finch asked with a growl.

“I admit it is not ideal, but we may have no other option. The human authorities have been no help and their security failed us. We have to make sure that these deaths will not happen again. We were very close to losing some of our own councilors in that explosion, Finch.” Wheaton tried to reason with Finch.

“What if we were discussing Poppy?” Finch snapped.

“I would be in the same position that we are right now...with no other options. We will keep her safe, you have my word on that.” Wheaton held out his arm to Finch.

The men stared at each other for a moment before Finch reached forward and gripped Wheaton’s arm in an elbow-to-wrist clasp.

“Now that we have that settled, when am I getting my son?” Claudia asked, her tone firm.

“We will speak with our contacts on Earth and let them know of your new status as a bride. Once the papers are signed and given to the proper officials, we should be able to set up the retrieval.”

“Retrieval?” Poppy mocked in an amused way from the couch where she had been eavesdropping. “You are picking up her kid, Wheaton, not catching a Frisbee.”

“What is a Frisbee?” Wheaton asked, furrowing his brow in confusion.

“Sweet baby Jesus, we still have so much to teach you.” Pixie shook her head.

Wheaton walked over to the couch and leaned over his wife. Poppy looped her arms over his shoulders as he bent in front of her. “Don’t worry, honey. I don’t mind teaching you most things.”

“That is good.” Wheaton kissed her quickly before helping her stand. “Would you help Claudia with ordering items for her son while I get everything prepared? She will need to learn how to use the computer system but until she gets a bridal band she will be unable to access it.”

“No problemo.” Poppy leaned into him for a moment before nudging Pixie’s leg with her foot. “Get up, bish. We have some virtual shopping to do and not a whole lot of time to do it in.” Turning back to her husband, Poppy asked, “I’m assuming you want everything ordered and ready for pickup when you go down for Max?”

“Yes, make sure to note on the order it will be later today,” Wheaton answered, walking toward the door he motioned for Finch.

“We need to meet with the council and prepare the paperwork for your bride.” Wheaton nodded at Claudia. “My wife and sister will help you get anything you need for his arrival. We should be back soon with the forms for everything to proceed.”

Claudia took a deep breath. The overwhelming feeling that she had earlier was coming back. “Thank you, Wheaton.”

“Claudia, there are no thanks necessary. Finch is my friend and brother, you are now an extension of that bond.”

“I will be back soon.” Finch gave her a quick kiss on the forehead before walking swiftly out the open space.

The women stood for a moment in silence.

“Well, that was an interesting morning,” Pixie quipped.

“No shit. We went from a kidnapping to a marriage. Just another normal day on Squadron One,” Poppy mused.

CHAPTER SIX

“Explain to me how she could be carrying your child.” Wheaton’s voice was low but firm.

Finch’s steps faltered for a moment before he regained his previous pace next to his friend and councilman. “I would rather not.”

“That was not a request for information, Finch. It was an order.” Wheaton argued abruptly, telling Finch he was on edge.

Finch stopped in the corridor, his boots no longer clomping down the deserted metal hallway. Wheaton walked for a few more paces before realizing that he was continuing alone. Turning toward his friend, he watched Finch closely. The bright white light looking almost blue as it illuminated his features.

“Wheaton...I need to talk to Claudia about what happened before I try to explain it to the council.”

“The council is not asking. I am.” Wheaton’s probing look made Finch uncomfortable. “Did you force her?”

“No! I swear on my life there was no force,” Finch replied, clenching his fists at his sides at the mere thought of possibly hurting his female.

“I knew that you would not force yourself on a female, Finch. You will need to explain some things though. What led up to her running to my wife and sister with rope around her? She was truly panicked when I first saw her.”

“I had to sedate her when I took her from Earth. She was going to fight me... I knew she was in danger but did not have the time to explain why she needed to come with me. I did not know when the next attack would happen or if they would strike at her out in the open. I only knew that she

was on a list of those in danger and I could not let anything happen to her. She needed to be protected. Now that I know she has a child on Earth, it makes sense as to why she did not want to leave.” Finch paced the width of the hall, the narrow enclosure not giving him much space to do it in. “The sedative that I gave her made her lose consciousness immediately, and I boarded the shuttle and took her to my quarters until I could figure out what needed to happen next. Once she was in my cabin, I laid down next to her and listened to her sleep for the next few hours.” At Wheaton’s curious look, Finch continued, “I did not know if the sedation would affect her differently than expected and wanted to make sure she was monitored in case something happened. She isn’t banded.” Gesturing to the band around his own wrist, Finch explained, “If she had been banded then I could monitor her vitals from anywhere in the ship but that was not an option so I improvised. I admit, part of me wanted to be close to her as well. She seemed so helpless while she slept.”

Wheaton nodded at him in understanding. “And then what?”

“I fell asleep,” Finch admitted with embarrassment. “I was supposed to be watching her and making sure she was safe and I fell asleep.” His words heavy with disgust. “With everything that had happened, I was exhausted and drifted off.”

“How did the sex come about?”

Finch looked up at his friend and tried to keep the heat from his face. “I woke to her...” He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “When I woke she was...and then I...I assumed that she was awake. She had slipped off her clothes and it was over before I realized it even began.”

“Over?” Wheaton’s amusement caused Finch to glare at him. What had happened was not Finch’s proudest moment, but in his defense he had not been aware of what had been happening at the time.

“I thought I was dreaming!” Finch growled out. “If I had known that it was real, I would have shown more care in my actions. I would have done everything that I had imagined doing from the first moment that I had seen her. Instead, it was over before I knew it. She rolled off of me and was snoring while I was still trying to catch my breath.”

“Was she harmed? Do I need to alert the med center?” Wheaton was already reaching for his tablet when Finch stopped him.

“No, she wasn’t harmed. She was in control of...our encounter...the whole time. It was not until we woke up again that I realized she had thought it was all a dream too,” Finch blurted out quickly, not wanting to cause further embarrassment by having Claudia subjected to the medical center just yet. “When she realized that we did in fact have sexual relations, she panicked and yelled at me. I believe she hit me with a pillow...I was too busy trying to calm her down to see what it was that smacked into my face.”

“So you tied her up?”

“I needed to talk to the council and figure out what to do next. She threatened to kick my ass and scream her head off. I simply needed her detained until I spoke with you. I made sure that the rope was padded. The last thing I wanted to do was cause her harm.” Giving his friend a helpless look, Finch threw his hands up in the air. “I knew that I wanted her for my own, but after our encounter I realized she could also be pregnant. Honestly, it was not my plan to pursue her so quickly. I had planned on giving her time to come to terms with my intentions to court her and move on from there. My original plan was to go to the council and apply to court her for my own, not explain that I kidnapped a human and possibly got her pregnant.”

“Finch, as long as there was no force in your union, I do not see an issue other than when you first took her off planet. That was not sanctioned by the council. You have put us into a situation with their government I would rather not be in. You do realize that there will be repercussions for the actions that you have taken, correct?”

“I understand.” Finch stared his friend in the eyes, standing his ground. “I did what I thought was best in the situation that was presented to me. I admit that I would do the same again if I had to, only this time I would make sure to take her son also.” Finch paused raising his eyebrow at his friend. “You would have done the same if Poppy had been in danger. I did not have time to think of another option that would guarantee her safety at that moment.”

Wheaton nodded. “I know that I would not allow her to be in danger if I could help it. There is more to consider in this situation. How do you feel knowing that you have gained a family instead of just a bride?”

“I am still coming to terms with it. I admit...it is an odd feeling. I care about Claudia already. This small person is a piece of her so I will care for him as well, correct?” Finch asked the question out loud that he had been thinking for the past hour.

“This is her child, Finch. He may not be a part of her body but he is a part of her heart. You need to make sure that you can accept him before the papers are signed. If we need to, we can figure out another way to protect them both. There might be another warrior...”

Finch cut his friend off before he could finish his sentence. The thought of another claiming his Claudia made him feel instant rage. “There will be no other for Claudia. I will work this out.”

Wheaton studied him for a moment before gesturing ahead of them. “Then let us get the paperwork so we can get your son.”

Finch took a deep breath and braced himself for the things to come. He had known that his life was about to change from moment he had met Claudia. He simply hadn’t counted on it changing so quickly or with the addition of another person.

He had been honest when he told Claudia and Wheaton that he would accept her son as if he were his own. Before all of this had happened, he had pictured that any children he claimed would have been ones from his own bloodline. Getting into a situation where not only was he tied to Claudia, but now responsible for her child, had not been planned for.

It was not an unwelcome situation just one that he had not anticipated. The possessiveness that he felt for the woman he had met just a short time ago was already more than he had ever felt for anyone else. Even his previous favored Pleasure Sector workers had never stirred the feelings that he had for Claudia.

Thinking back on all that had happened the last few days, Finch had trouble understanding his emotions. He had been intimate with women before so his encounter with Claudia, as short lived as it was, should not have evoked the feelings it did.

Was he in love with this woman already?

The feelings that he had rolling through him reminded Finch of the movies Pixie and Poppy forced him to watch some days. Since they had become pregnant, the “chick flicks” had been the films they chose to watch. Before meeting Claudia, he would have had rolled his eyes at Moulin

Rouge, not understanding how someone could feel so intensely for another after simply seeing her...now it was starting to make sense.

He was not going to let anything happen to his new bride, or her son for that matter. Their care would not fall to another warrior. They were his and his alone. His chest puffed up in pride as he walked with Wheaton down the corridor. He had a bride. He had a bride and a son.

While Finch was lost in thought, he didn't realize that they had approached the council meeting room. When Wheaton turned to him, placing his hand on Finch's arm to stop him from walking, he jolted him back to reality.

"Let me do the talking. I have already appraised Kaine of the situation and believe he will be sympathetic to your situation. I hope that he will be lenient in the punishment put forth by the council."

Finch nodded. "I will follow your lead."

Rubbing his palms on the front of his leathers, he tried to dry off the moisture that had taken residence on his hands. They simply slipped on the waterproof material.

"They will not take her from you." Wheaton assured him.

Finch's attention snapped back to his friend from the door he had been staring at. "How can you be sure?"

"Well...even though you had not planned to get her pregnant, she may already be carrying a Phaeton child. That is more important to our race than dealing with whatever fallout you have caused with their government by kidnapping her. Since she has agreed to be your bride so that will help placate the Earth authorities. Your relationship did not follow our normal channels but it may be to your advantage in this situation. Be grateful you were too drowsy to stop from being intimate with Claudia. It may very well have been the one thing that guaranteed you your bride."

Wheaton patted Finch on the back before moving to open the door with a swish.

"Let us 'get on with it' as Poppy would say. I want to get back home to my wife."

"Wait...how did you know you loved your wife?" Finch asked quickly, feeling stupid for voicing the question, but needing guidance in this unfamiliar territory.

“It was simple. I realized that I could not live without her and she made me better by simply being in my life. Poppy may drive me crazy sometimes but I would do anything for her and I know she feels the same way.” Wheaton shrugged as if that made sense.

“How do you know she feels the same way?”

“It is in her actions and words every single day.” Wheaton gestured toward the door, indicating they needed to get moving.

“The other day she called you a dickhead,” Finch pointed out.

Wheaton turned to glare at him, then laughed. “True, but she made up for it later that night.” He slid the door open but before walking through it he added, “And I was being a dickhead. Here is some advice, never eat the last cookie when your wife is pregnant with your child. That is a serious mistake.”

Finch had relaxed in the last few minutes talking to his friend. If the look of happiness on Wheaton’s face was anything to go by, Finch was more than ready to take on the council for his right to keep Claudia.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Finch tried not to show the nervousness that he was unable to quell as he followed Wheaton into the council room. The large room had one single large table at the front where the councilmembers had started to gather, obviously waiting for them to show up. As they turned around to face him, Finch struggled to read the looks on the men's faces. These were men that he had known since he was a young warrior in the training houses and yet he was having a hard time figuring out who was on his side in this situation. The one man that Finch was able to make eye contact, Kaine, gave him a small smile and nod. If Finch had not been paying attention, it was an action that he would have normally missed.

The quick motion relieved some of the fear that had built up in his chest. Kaine was a powerful member of the council and it helped that Finch had been his personal guard for a few cycles prior to being assigned to Wheaton more recently. Kaine had once praised Finch for his good instincts when it came to avoiding a possible assassination attempt. Hopefully his old friend would take those instincts into consideration when passing judgment on him today.

Finch knew that he would be punished for his action. He had known that before he had ever touched Claudia. Deep down, he admitted that he would make the same decision again and again if needed. At the time, he had a short time to act and involving the council in a mission to guarantee her safety would have taken too long in the end. He was sure that after he explained himself a few members would see the truth to his words.

Looking around the room, Finch was unable to recognize two of the men staring back at him. Had there been new council members appointed that he

was unaware of?

“Finch, step forward please. There are a few men I would like you to meet.” Kaine motioned to the men that Finch had been studying.

“This is Paine and Rowe,” nodding to the men in turn. Kaine stepped aside so they could link arms in greeting.

“I would have preferred to meet you under different circumstances, Finch.” Paine’s face was expressionless.

“They have arrived to take over security duties for Wheaton and Dathrow. Each man will be assigned to a family and provide safety for their wives when the men are needed in council matters,” Kaine explained.

“I have been providing security for—” Finch shook his head, the denial at his position being revoked causing him to speak out of turn.

“You will now have a wife of your own.” Kaine raised his eyebrow at Finch, reminding him why they were here. “It does not make sense to assign you as guard to a female belonging to another when you have one of your own.”

“So will I be taken off of security missions to Earth?” Finch asked, unsure what was happening.

Did their trust in him diminish completely after his actions regarding Claudia? It was like a stab to the chest to think that he was unable to perform his job...a job that he had been groomed for since he was a warrior of only eight years old. It was literally all he had ever known.

“You will continue to run security missions, but they will most likely be to the Pleasure Sector for the next few months. That leads in to what we need to discuss next. Please take a seat and we will go over your punishment.” Kaine walked to the center chair grouped among a long line in the front of the room.

Finch walked the few steps needed to take his own seat, facing the council members in a row staring at him. He looked at each and every one of them. Holding eye contact with those that he knew from missions and those he had considered friends. Wheaton was sitting to the right of Kaine and leaned over to whisper something to the other council member.

“Councilor Wheaton has expressed his desire to keep you on Squadron One for the time being. His wife is set to give birth at any time and we feel it would be beneficial to all for her to have another human woman as a

companion when that happens.” Kaine tapped the papers in his hands against the table. The sound echoes in the quiet room.

Finch cleared his throat. “What had been the original plan?”

“There had been discussion of moving you and your new bride to Squadron Two. There are frequent shuttles to the Pleasure Sector that have been under strict guard to ensure the safety of our shipments. It has been harder lately for us to find officers that would not be distracted by...other things while running shuttle operations to that particular destination. They could use the help. Would you object to being assigned to that port after Wheaton’s child arrives?” another member asked.

“I would not object to that assignment.” Finch couldn’t help but wonder if this was going to be their version of punishment.

“You will have a formal mark on your record for your actions,” Kaine added. “You will be unable to lead a security team for one whole Earth cycle and be taking orders from either Paine or Rowe while you are still on Squadron One.” Kaine spoke while signing papers in front of him and looked up at the end of his speech. “Any questions?”

“No, sir.” This was a much better situation than he had ever imagined. There had been worry that he would be imprisoned for what he had done. It had been a small worry, but still in the back of his mind when he had walked into the room.

“Finch, you have proven to be one of our best warriors when assigned to security details. Your previous record on missions is what has saved you from a much harsher punishment. Many of us trust your judgment when it comes to our own safety and therefore have to trust your instincts when it guided you to act without prior authorization to save the human. Especially one that may be our only clue as to who may have set the bomb on Earth.”

“Try not to let it happen again though,” another member chuckled.

“Exactly,” Wheaton seconded.

“The council is dismissed. I will speak to Finch of our plan regarding his newly acquired family from here,” Kaine announced to the room causing the men surrounding him to get up and leave one by one. A few of them that passed where Finch was seated took a moment and patted his shoulder.

Finch smiled at each of them and thanked them. Paine and Rowe followed the group out, leaving Finch with just Wheaton and Kaine in the room.

“We needed to discuss a few things...” Kaine looked at Wheaton who waved his hand gesturing for him to continue.

“What things?” Finch inquired, not liking the look on his friend’s faces.

“We still need to devise a plan to trap the culprit of the murders on Earth. Their government has no idea who could have acted and after further investigation we have come across some unsettling information.” Kaine rubbed his hand over his forehead, the action one of someone fighting a headache.

“What has been found?” Finch leaned forward, his elbows braced on his knees.

“The bomb that was used was not of Earth.” Wheaton answered when Kaine stayed silent.

“What?” Finch asked, his breath coming out in a hiss.

“When your shuttle landed, human security did the normal sweep for threats. They used bomb tracking equipment that was supplied by the officials at the Intake Center. No alarms sounded. Nothing was picked up by their machines showing any danger. It was not until we ran a second sweep with our own equipment that something showed up on the readings. At first we assumed that the humans did not perform the security sweep as thoroughly as we expected.” Kaine answered.

“After the explosion we sent another security group down with our own equipment. Our initial findings were enough to warn us of the explosion but our concern was getting everyone to safety, not tracking the source of the bomb. Once the area was cleared, the site was rubble. There was nothing left of the building but our equipment is far more advanced than that of Earth’s. After further scanning the area, we found evidence of Trenorium,” Wheaton said.

“How did a human get Trenorium? It is only mined in Sector Twelve and as far as I am aware there have been no trade agreements with Earth for them to have access to it.” Finch spoke as his mind was trying to process the implications of their words.

Trenorium was a highly volatile stone that could be used as an energy source. The trade agreement with Earth had not included the mineral due to its incredible and dangerous instability in even quantities. Shuttles to and from Sector Twelve were heavily guarded and monitored because the

impact of even a small amount falling into the wrong hands could be detrimental.

“At first we thought there had been a mistake so we reran our tests. Taking samples from the rubble we have found not only that it was correct in identifying Trenorium, but there were two sets of DNA as well. One from the Phaeton race and one human were gathered as evidence.”

“So that means—” Kaine was interrupted when Finch spoke.

“That we have a traitor and he is working with a human,” Finch said in disbelief.

“Yes,” Wheaton said. “This is new information to me, but it is undeniable that we have evidence pointing to that exact situation.”

“It also means we have some questions for Claudia.” Kaine’s words broke through the thoughts whirling through Finch’s mind.

“What does that mean?” he asked, his tone sharp.

“She may have seen a human and Phaeton together during her time in the Intake Center. We need to find out if she noticed anything out of the ordinary while she was working her shift. Even the smallest details may help at this point.” Wheaton’s explanation soothed the tensions somewhat.

“There is also something else.” Kaine stared directly at Finch as he delivered his next words. “The human DNA was female. We are looking for a female and as of right now the council is focusing on your new bride as the person we are looking at.”

“What?” Finch was up and out of his seat before he knew he was even moving. Striding toward the table separating him from Kaine and Wheaton, he leaned down and met their gazes. “There is no way that Claudia was involved in the plot to murder those people and set that bomb.”

“How can you be so sure, Finch? She had access to the floors that the Trenorium was planted. She was not murdered in her home unlike her unlucky coworkers, and she is one of the only females left alive after the incident,” Kaine pointed out.

“Only because I took her off of Earth! The woman who is watching our son stated that Claudia’s dwelling was ransacked. I know she did not do this. Test her against the DNA sample if you need to, but do not accuse my bride of being a traitor!”

“The sample is too damaged to get a full DNA match. We were only able to pull the gender before it was destroyed.” Wheaton read from the report in

front of him.

“So what do we do from here?” Finch paced in front of the men, the strain of this situation causing him to move.

“That is easy to answer...you question your new bride.” Kaine’s order broke through the fog that Finch was in. “You question her and find out any information you can regarding what happened. I believe that your security training will benefit us in this situation.”

“Question her?” Finch’s voice broke with the words. His previous experience with security details had taught him that “questioning” someone often referred to torture when information was needed.

“For now just simple questions. It is in both of your best interests to find out who the conspirators are.” Kaine moved his chair back to stand.

“I thought we were friends, Kaine. She had nothing to do with what happened. I know that with every breath of my body. How can you not trust me on this?” Finch voiced the question softly.

“We are friends, but I am also a leader and protector to my people and also our Earth partners. If that means that I upset my ‘friends’ then I deal with it. The safety of this alliance is more important to me than anything, Finch.”

Finch stared at Kaine until the man turned away and walked toward the door. “What about you, Wheaton? Do you think she is a killer as well?” he asked as the door closed behind the other man.

Wheaton shook his head and stood. “Do you think I would have left her with what was most precious to me if I thought that she was responsible for the killings?”

“No.”

“Then there is your answer.” Walking around the table, Wheaton handed Finch the papers he had in his hand. “Here are the bridal forms that you need to have her sign.”

“I imagined when I took a bride it would be a joyous moment.” Finch murmured.

“Right now, one of the few things saving her from full council questioning is the fact that she is a bride.”

“What is the other thing?” Finch asked sarcastically.

“The fact that almost every man in this room has worked with and trusted you.” Wheaton slapped Finch on the back. “Do not take the lenience that

they have shown you for granted. They are trusting you and your new bride quite a bit considering the circumstances.”

Finch nodded. “I understand.”

“Let us get you back to your new bride.”

“So I can start questioning her apparently.” Finch let out a huge breath.

“This is going to be interesting.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I can’t remember the last time I went shopping and didn’t have to worry about the price tags. Let me think...it might have been back...oh yeah, never.” Claudia snorted as they skimmed through the screens on the tablet. Ordering the staples for little Max had been quick and easy. Now Poppy and Pixie had her picking out items that would help make her stay with Finch “tolerable” according to them. Pillows, a soft chenille throw, and a tufted footstool were quickly added to her cart on the screen.

“Anything else you might need can always be picked up from the Pleasure Sector.” Poppy exited the program.

“Pleasure Sector?” Claudia echoed.

“Oh...oops.” Poppy looked at Pixie who simply shrugged. “Well, it’s not like you wouldn’t hear about it sooner or later.” Poppy settled back into the couch, shifting her large belly slightly. “The Pleasure Sector is essentially exactly what it sounds like. It’s basically a big planet that has anything you want. They have food, fabrics, spices, art— “

“And whorehouses,” Pixie added before her sister could finish talking.

“As in prostitutes?” Claudia asked quietly.

Why the hell was she whispering?

“Yep. The Phaetons visit the planet for trade agreements and when they are there they have time to visit the houses and ‘relax.’” When Claudia grimaced, Poppy nodded her head. “I had the exact same reaction. Believe me. But after I thought about it a little while longer, I remembered that they have absolutely no women. I mean, c’mon, they need comfort some way. They just happen to use prostitutes for those needs. According to Wheaton,

they schedule time when they know they will be on a supply mission and the men have appointments.”

“Well, that sounds uber romantic,” Claudia said sarcastically.

“I had my own issues with that planet but it really does make sense,” Pixie added, rubbing her belly in circular motions. “The men rotate shuttle missions to the planet so everyone gets a turn eventually. From what I hear, the missions are fought over sometimes. The men only get a few hours every six months. So, the more missions they get, the happier they are.”

“Do Wheaton or Dathrow take missions there?” Claudia asked without thinking.

“Sometimes,” Poppy answered with a smile. “He doesn’t visit the brothels though if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply—” Claudia grimaced when she realized how it must have sounded after it left her mouth.

“Don’t worry about it, seriously.” Poppy patted Claudia on the shoulder. “The missions they go on are normally to finalize trade agreements or handle disputes. The Phaetons pretty much police the galaxy from what I can tell. They settle arguments between other races and make sure that the black market is being monitored.”

“Black market?”

“Just like any society, they have items that are monitored and not allowed to be traded openly. The Phaetons keep their ears and eyes open to shut down illegal auctions,” Pixie explained.

“Like what type of things?” Claudia had to admit, this conversation was fascinating.

“Drugs, animals, people—”

“People?” Claudia exclaimed.

“That’s another story for another time.” Pixie shot a sharp glance to her sister.

“Ooops, sorry.” Poppy grimaced at Pixie and started to scoot off of the couch.

“You can’t just leave me hanging like that!” Claudia argued, standing to help Poppy get off of the couch.

“I’m just not sure how much I’m allowed to say about that and my mouth got ahead of my brain. I’m blaming the baby.” Poppy pointed down at her

stomach. “Anyways, the guys will be back soon and I am sure that Finch will explain what I meant if he is allowed to.”

“Let’s change the subject, shall we?” Pixie interrupted. “Pops, do you want to buzz Val and see if she wants to come over? It may be best for her to explain the bridal paperwork to Claudia since that used to be her job.”

“Good idea. Hang on a second and let me see if she is home.” Poppy waddled to the large screen mounted by the front door. Tapping on it a few times, she navigated through a couple screens before the face of a woman appeared on the monitor.

“Hey, lady!” Poppy smiled at the image.

“Is the baby coming? Do you need me? Where is your sister?” Val’s rapid questioning came across panicked and she leaned closer to the camera.

“Calm down, weirdo. The baby isn’t coming, but we do have a new guest. I was wondering if you could come over here and help out for a bit.”

“Guest?” Val asked, relaxed back slightly.

“Yeah, Finch is getting a bride and we may need your assistance going over the paperwork with her.” Pixie shouted from her place still seated on the couch.

“Finch? I thought he was gay.” She mumbled to herself. “Wait, why didn’t her liaison on Earth get the papers done? Did everything go to hell in handbasket when I left or what?” Val snorted.

“Well...it’s actually kind of a long story.” Poppy turned to Claudia and made a face. “You know, it’s better for you to meet Claudia and talk about it when you get here. Can you come over now?”

“Sure. Let me find my shoes and I can be there in a jiffy.”

Val was already moving away from the camera when Poppy signed off. “See ya in a few.”

“So Val was a liaison?” Claudia walked over to assist Pixie who was struggling getting off the low couch by herself.

“Thanks. These couches are a joke when it comes to being pregnant. I’d probably be just as good sitting on the floor.” Pixie panted.

“Why is everything white here? It gives off the vibe that I’m in a psycho ward.” Claudia gestured around the room.

“Thank you! I’ve been saying that since I got here. But does Wheaton listen? Nope. He just shakes his head at me and tells me to order ‘color.’ How do you even order ‘color?’” Poppy scoffed.

Claudia adjusted the pillows on the couch, some of the only colorful patterned items in the room. “It looks like you’ve gotten some of it taken care of.”

“Yeah, but the walls are awful. I can’t get anything to hang. I even used that gross tacky stuff that I used to hang my posters in college and it falls within an hour.” Poppy grumped as she centered a colorful bowl on a table at the end of the couch.

“Maybe if we changed out the furniture and brought in some pretty chairs,” Pixie suggested with her hands on her hips as she looked around the space.

“That’s a good idea if it means I can replace these torture devices.” Poppy kicked lightly at the leg of the couch.

“Don’t get me started on my apartment.” Pixie rolled her eyes. “Dathrow complains that I have too many pillows on our bed. How can there ever be too many pillows on a bed?!”

“Men are stupid.” Poppy nodded her head in agreement with Pixie.

“So, other than the Pleasure Sector, is there anything else I need to be made aware of?” Claudia leaned against the kitchen counter where the sisters were standing.

“Well...eventually you will need to visit the med center and get your translator implanted. You’ll also need to get your band sized and fitted.” Poppy tapped her fingers on the white counter top as she listed off Claudia’s to-do list.

“And the docs will most likely want to have an exam scheduled since you’re a new bride.” At Claudia’s quizzical look, Poppy waved her hand as if it were not a big deal. “They just want to make sure that you are healthy and get all the baseline info in the system before you get pregnant.”

When Poppy stopped talking, Pixie’s widened her eyes and clapped her hands. “You aren’t getting off the hook either about that one. We all heard Finch earlier when he let it slip you could be carrying his baby.” Pixie rubbed her belly and gave Claudia a pointed look. “Spill it.”

“It’s actually really embarrassing.” Claudia put her hands over her face, not wanting to be the center of attention.

“C’mon, you have to be able to tell us what happened for you to go from scared kidnapping victim to an angry and possibly pregnant woman in the span of five minutes.”

“The suspense is killing me!” Poppy said, nodding her head emphatically.

Claudia looked at both women quickly before fiddling with a piece of paper on the counter in front of her.

“Well, when he snatched me, he used some sort of shot to knock me out. It really knocked me on my ass. I’m not a big drinker but I was woozy to the point where I felt I had been on a bender. I don’t remember the trip to the shuttle, getting on this ship, nothing...I was completely out of it. When I woke up, I was laying on a bed and my brain was trying to play catch up,” Claudia explained as best she could. “I felt like I was a more than a little drunk. You know the feeling where you feel really good and happy before feeling like dog shit?” When the women nodded in agreement, she nodded back. “That was me.”

Claudia shrugged, trying to think of a way to explain the next part without sounding like a sex starved weirdo.

“And then what happened?” Poppy asked obviously ready for her to stop stalling.

Claudia cleared her throat and tried not to blush as she continued. “Well, when I woke up Finch was sleeping next to me and I kind of...molested him.”

Claudia glanced back and forth between her two new friends, waiting for them to say something. Poppy let out a snort, biting her lip. She tried not to smile. Pixie covered her mouth with her hand and stayed silent.

“Molested?” Poppy repeated, trying to keep a straight face.

“I wasn’t wearing my pants. I hate sleeping in clothes and I must have wiggled out of them when I was sleeping.” Claudia put her palms on her cheeks, and she felt the heat from her blush on her hands. “I don’t know what was in that shot but it was as if I was dreaming. I didn’t think about him taking me off Earth, I wasn’t thinking about Max...nothing. The only thing that I wanted to do was climb Finch like a spider monkey.”

The sisters stared at her for a moment. Neither one of them speaking and their expressions blank. Poppy opened her mouth to speak and then closed it with a snap. Pixie nudged her sister before asking, “So, then what happened?”

“I kind of got on top of him and it went from there,” Claudia rushed out.

“Was he even awake?” Poppy asked incredulously before getting nudged again by her sister. “It’s a valid question,” she hissed.

“We were both kind of awake but not really...awake. Does that make any sense?”

Claudia watched as the sisters nodded in unison.

“It was like I knew what was happening but I didn’t care. I mean, I thought Finch was hot when we met, but other than a few conversations we didn’t really know each other.”

Pixie reached for a glass of tea on the counter. “But you thought he was hot, right?”

“Of course, that man is hot as hell. I usually require a date or two first before climbing on top of the men I think are hot and risk getting pregnant though,” Claudia added dryly.

“What did he say when it was over?” Pixie asked after sipping from her cup.

“I don’t remember him speaking at all. It’s all kind of one big blur. I know I fell asleep almost right after we...finished.” Claudia could feel her face burning at the admission.

“It’s when I woke up that the shit hit the fan.”

“What happened?” Poppy asked, taking the cup from her sister to steal a drink.

“I was stone cold sober is what happened. I remembered what happened, how he kidnapped me and drugged me and took me away from Max and I pretty much lost my mind.” Claudia twisted her hands in front of her. “I also remembered that I didn’t have pants on and what had happened when I woke up earlier.”

“What did you do?” Pixie asked as both women leaned forward.

“I lost my mind. I grabbed the closest thing to me, which Finch was lucky was a pillow, and started smacking him with it. I think I yelled a few cuss words in between hits.”

“What happened next?” Poppy asked with wide eyes.

“He stayed fairly calm, actually. Apparently, when I swing a pillow, I do it with the strength of a gnat,” Claudia remembered out loud. “He said he needed to figure out what to do and he needed to talk to some council.”

“That makes sense.” Pixie admitted.

“Do not worry, you are safe.” Claudia imitated Finch’s deep voice. “I wasn’t worried about being safe. I kept thinking about my son and how the hell to get home. When I get angry or anxious, I get tongue-tied and I

wasn't able to get out *why* I needed to go home. I kept trying to tell him why I needed to go home, but I'm pretty sure it got lost in translation."

"So then what happened?"

"He got the pillow away from me and pinned me down. Next thing I know, I am tied up and gagged. I have no idea where the hell the rope came from, but he had it in his hands within a few seconds."

"Finch keeps rope in his bedroom?" Pixie raised her eyebrows at her sister.

Poppy shook her head. "Man, we were way off base with him."

Claudia then remembered what the pair had said when she mentioned who her kidnapper was. "You two actually thought he was gay?"

Pixie held out her hands in defense. "In our defense, he is a wonderful hair stylist and has never once mentioned wanting a bride.... We thought maybe it was because he wanted a groom."

"Hairstylist?" Claudia asked, confused.

"Yeah, he cuts our hair along with a couple other of the warriors. I know it's an outdated stereotype, but look at these layers!" Pixie fluffed her curls.

"I don't know what you two are babbling about but that man is not gay," Claudia argued. "Not even close."

"Thank you." Finch interrupted the women huddled in the kitchenette.

"Sweet baby Jesus, you guys scared the shit out of me," Poppy snapped when she spotted Wheaton behind Finch.

Finch looked startled at her words and looked down to the floor.

"She didn't actually shit, Finch. It's an expression," Pixie explained with a giggle, bumping Claudia's shoulder with her own.

"Thank goodness," Finch murmured. "Are you ready to sign the forms? We were able to get them signed and approved by the council before they went back to their duties."

"Val is on her way to explain them to her right now," Poppy chimed in.

"Why does Val need to explain anything?" Wheaton leaned back from her hold around his neck so he could look at his wife. "I could have done that."

"For one, Val knows those forms front and back. Two, it's a good idea for her to meet another bride so she can make friends and three because I said so," Poppy quipped.

Wheaton hugged her tight, rubbing her back. "As you wish, Little Flower."

"Have you seen Dathrow?" Pixie asked as she shifted her weight from one leg to another.

"Not since this morning, when we met regarding his next assignment. Why? Are you not feeling well?" Wheaton asked as he moved out of his wife's embrace and walked toward his sister-in-law.

"My back is hurting a little and I was wanting to go home to nap, but I didn't want to miss seeing him if he was planning on coming here." Pixie grumped.

"I can have an escort walk you to your apartment and guard the domicile until he returns, but I do not believe he will be able to finish early today." Wheaton patted her on the shoulder. "Are you sure you are just tired?"

"Yeah, all the excitement has worn me out. I guess you can go ahead and call me an escort. I might as well get a little nap in before Dath gets off duty." Pixie reassured everyone as she sank down onto the couch.

Making sure she was settled before he moved away, Wheaton looked over at Finch who was standing close to Claudia. "Did you want Val to go over the paperwork here, or would you prefer to have it done in your own quarters?"

Claudia felt her heart beat faster at the thought of being alone with Finch sooner rather than later. Knowing that they needed to get the paperwork done before they talked about what had happened earlier, she shook her head.

"You want to wait here?" Finch asked her directly.

Claudia nodded, "Do you mind? I think she is already on her way and it would be easier just to get it done before we move onto...other things."

Seeing a spark light up his blue eyes, Claudia realized how that must have sounded. "You still need to fill me in on when we are getting Max," she added quickly.

"Of course." Finch placed his palm on her lower back to lead her across the room to a small chair. "The council would like for us to send a small group down to Earth to retrieve him."

"And me of course, right?" Claudia interrupted.

"Claudia, the council would prefer that you not be on the shuttle," Wheaton stated, his tone firm.

“But...he doesn’t know you. He’ll be scared.” Claudia felt her nose burn at the thought, an indication that she would be crying soon.

“It will be a fast trip and I will make sure that he is cared for.” Finch knelt in front of her. Reaching out, he touched her hands that were balled together in front of her. “Know that I will not allow anything to happen to our son. The council simply wants to make sure you are safe on the ship in case there is another security breach.”

“Paine and Rowe will also be accompanying you on the mission,” Wheaton added from his place next to his wife.

“They will?” Finch asked.

“Yes, Kaine would like them to become familiar with the shuttle missions to Earth now they are residing on Squadron One.”

“Wait, who are Paine and Rowe?” Poppy rubbed her belly while the rest of the group waited for Wheaton to answer.

“They are elite security warriors that will now be in charge of both your and Pixie’s security.” Wheaton placed his hand over hers, rubbing her belly in circles.

Poppy smacked at his hands, “What about Finch? He’s been our guard for months...why do we need more?”

“That is something I was going to explain to you soon,” Wheaton said quickly. “Finch will be reassigned to Squadron Two after the baby is born.”

There was silence in the room for a moment before Pixie asked, “But why? Squadron Two doesn’t have any married couples on it. Claudia will be all alone.”

“She will not be alone. She will have me.” Finch defended.

“It’s not the same.” Poppy turned her attention to her husband. “Wheaton, you know how lonely I was when I first got here. Why can’t they stay on this ship?”

“The council has made its decision, Little Flower. Finch will run security missions to the Pleasure Sector for his new assignment. The trade has increased recently and with Verge attacks we need to ensure the safety of shipments.”

Claudia was listening to it all with an open mind until she heard the words “Pleasure Sector.” Her brain instantly went to the fact that the relationship she had with Finch was new and, in her mind, still somewhat unresolved. Yeah, they were essentially going to be married with the bride

forms completed, but they had skipped all of the wooing, dating, and normal courtship that she had come to expect in a normal relationship's lifespan. This was essentially a man that she had a few conversations with, was kidnapped by and then accidentally jumped his bones in a sleep-induced horny state.

They had a lot to talk about. Clearing her throat to interrupt the women complaining to the men about their new guards, Claudia locked eyes with Finch.

“Can I speak to you alone?”

Even to her own ears, the words sounded higher pitched than normal. Without waiting for Finch to answer her question, Claudia walked away from the group.

CHAPTER NINE

Keeping her back away from her soon-to-be husband, Claudia took a few deep breaths. It was hard to come up with the words to encompass all of the feelings that were running through her body on a loop. She knew that the minute she turned around she was going to forget everything she needed to say. It had happened multiple times since she had been on the ship. Looking at him scrambled her brain while simultaneously waking up her lady parts.

“Claudia, is everything okay?” Finch’s deep voice rumbled behind her, causing the tiny hairs on the base of her neck to prickle.

Turning around, Claudia sucked in a breath. Yep, there went her lady parts. Maybe if she didn’t look directly at him she wouldn’t be so affected?

Focusing on his shoulder, Claudia straightened her spine and decided to just start speaking.

“We need to talk,” she blurted out.

“All right.”

Moving her eyes to his other shoulder, she added, “I’m not too sure about living on a different ship than the other brides. I mean, I don’t know how much control you have over your assignments, but Max would benefit from being around other kids. From what I’ve heard, all of the brides are on this ship, which means this is where he will be around other kids. Plus, Poppy has a point. What if I get lonely? Why can’t we stay here? Wouldn’t it just be easier to stay here and find another job?”

“Can you look at me please?” Finch’s tone was soft as he stopped her rambling.

“Sorry,” she mumbled as she met his gaze.

“I understand your concern for Max and the socialization he may require. It is something that I can ask the council to reconsider but for now this is the assignment that has been handed down. I am lucky that the demotion of my position on Squadron One was the only punishment received.”

“Punishment? This was your punishment?” Claudia asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

“For taking you off Earth without the council’s permission,” Finch answered with a small smile, as if having to remind her of their circumstances amused him.

“You saved my life. Not only that, but you saved Max’s life. I have been thinking about this since you told me about the murders. It’s one of the things that I keep running through in my head. What if you hadn’t grabbed me in the parking lot? I would have gotten my son and gone home like normal. Maggie said my apartment was trashed. On any regular night, I would have been there. It would have been just me, Max, and a baseball bat I keep under my bed. I would like to think that everything would have been fine, but I’m not stupid. I’m realistic enough to know what would have happened if you hadn’t kidnapped me. It’s a scary thought, but it’s the truth. We would have died.” The last sentence was whispered. The seriousness of what could have happened caused her stomach to hurt.

Just the thought of not being able to protect her son caused Claudia’s eyes to water. There was no greater fear than the fear of not being able to keep her child safe. It was a mother’s greatest concern.

“You saved our lives, Finch. That’s not something you should be punished for.”

Finch stared at her for a moment before he nodded shortly. “I would not change my actions, Claudia. I would not change anything about that night except to get Max as well.”

“You didn’t know I had a son,” Claudia admitted. “If you had, I’m sure you would have made sure he was safe with me as well. Right?”

“Of course. It is a mistake I plan to rectify just as soon as I am able.” Finch looked down at the band glowing on his wrist. “The shuttle will notify us when it is ready to leave for Earth.”

“I saw that Poppy and Pixie have one of those also. I will be getting one too?” Claudia reached for his wrist and inspected the silver bracelet.

“Yes, as soon as we are able to get the paperwork signed, they will send you down to the med center. The doctors will fit the band on you and seal it once it syncs with your vitals.”

“So it’s like a fitness band? It will track my steps and heartrate? I’ve always wanted one of those, but they were kind of expensive.” Claudia turned his wrist over, looking for a clasp to open and close it. “How do you get it off?”

“It does not come off. That is why the doctors seal it in medical. They make sure the fit is comfortable and the band is working correctly before it is closed.” He twirled it around slightly so she could see a small line in the metal where it looked like it had been soldered closed. “What is a fitness band?”

“Something people wear that lets them know how much exercise they have gotten and their heartrate and stuff. They are all over the market now on Earth. This takes your vitals?”

“Yes, it also has a tracking program in it so we are able to pinpoint the location of the person wearing the band. Our engineers have updated the technology so we can be aware of the health of the wearer.”

“Wow. So it’s like a shiny Life Alert bracelet for aliens.” Claudia smiled to herself, remembering the overly dramatic commercials that were played on late-night TV.

“When Poppy was kidnapped and held hostage, Wheaton had no idea if she was alive or not. The bracelet was updated shortly after the brides were rescued so we can monitor their health if a situation like that happens again.”

“Shit.” The reason behind their nifty invention seemed less amusing now. “Was everyone okay?”

“A few of the brides lost the fetuses they were carrying at the time,” Finch answered honestly.

“Double shit,” Claudia murmured. “I didn’t see anything on the news about that. What happened?”

“It is not my story to tell,” Finch nodded toward Poppy, who was snuggled on Wheaton’s lap. “I am sure she will tell you about it. She loves to talk.”

Claudia giggled. “She and Pixie are a riot.”

“They are...interesting,” Finch admitted grudgingly.

“Did you know they thought you were gay?” Claudia laughed at the look his face at her question. His grimace gave her the answer.

“Unfortunately, yes. You know that is not the case, though. Let us get back to what you needed to talk to me about earlier,” Finch reminded her.

Claudia made a face at him. She would much rather not talk about serious stuff but realized she wasn’t going to be able to avoid it much longer. “Spoilsport. Okay, I am not too keen on the fact that you will be running missions to the Pleasure Place. There, I said it.” Crossing her arms over her chest she tried not to give into the bite of jealousy at mentioning a planet full of brothels.

“It is called the Pleasure Sector not the Pleasure Place,” Finch corrected with a smile.

Claudia simply arched one eyebrow in response to his response.

“Also, there is no need for you to worry about those missions. I will simply be assigned as a guard to the shipments that are scheduled. I will not be partaking of the other ‘services’ offered on the planet. In fact, it is against our bridal contract for me to use the brothels as long as we are married.”

“It is?” Claudia uncrossed her arms.

“Yes.” Finch nodded, causing a lock of hair to sweep across his cheek.

Claudia reached up to tuck the straight, silky hair behind his ear. The more Claudia looked at him the closer she was to figuring out who he reminded her of. There was an actor that he resembled, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. It was going to slowly drive her crazy if she didn’t make the connection soon.

Claudia shook her head. Enough letting her mind wander. She needed to get some answers while they had some moments to themselves.

“So there is no way to keep your assignment here? I admit, I am not overly excited about going to another ship if it means there aren’t any other humans.”

Finch rubbed the back of his neck. “My transfer will not happen until Poppy and Pixie have their babies so we have a little bit of time to see what can be done. I believe that they will not allow me to turn it down, though. The council has already transferred two of their elite guards to take over the security of the brides. If I were to stay here then I would need to find an assignment on this ship.”

“We have a bit of time, right? Maybe we can convince them that you are better off here,” Claudia suggested.

“I will ask around and see if another is willing to take my assignment on Squadron Two and let me take over their position here. It is a long shot that the council will approve the switch but it doesn’t hurt to ask,” Finch offered.

“From what the girls have said, the missions to the Pleasure Sector are coveted. I would think you would have guys fighting over it.”

“Most likely, but it is the approval of the council that worries me.” Finch reached forward and cradled her hips in his big hands.

The feel of his palms holding onto her caused Claudia’s heart to speed up.

“That’s another thing we need to talk about,” she said nervously, her gaze darting down to his hands holding her.

“What is it, Claudia?” Finch leaned forward so she would meet his eyes.

“We need to talk about what happened in your room.” Saying the words quickly, Claudia closed her eyes so she didn’t have to look at him while she said them.

“Yes we do.” Finch squeezed her hips to emphasize his words.

“I wanted to apologize.”

“You wanted to apologize?” Finch raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Yes.” Claudia swallowed hard. “I basically attacked you when you were sleeping.”

“I admit I was surprised to be woken the way that I was. Can you explain what exactly happened?”

Claudia moved her palms up to cover her face. “Oh god, I can’t believe we’re talking about this.”

Taking her hands in his, he moved them away from her face. “It is better to have everything out in the open. Is it not?”

“Yeah but when it’s me explaining that I woke up next to a man that is built like a fucking male stripper and couldn’t control myself it’s hard to talk about.”

“You could not control yourself?”

Looking up at Finch, she wrinkled her nose at the smug look on his face. Great, now he knew how much he affected her.

“Okay, here it is. I haven’t had a date in seven months. I haven’t had sex in even longer.”

“Until you had intercourse with me.”

Tapping her fist on his chest, she glared up at him. “Right. I was sleeping better than I have in a long while. When I woke up I saw you there, I thought that I was still sleeping. It was all very surreal. I just kind of... started touching and things escalated.” Claudia leaned her forehead against the leather in front of her. Taking a deep breath, she smelled leather and man. His scent was a fragrance she could quickly become addicted to.

Finch wrapped his arms around her, cuddling her close to his chest he rocked from side to side. “Did I hurt you at all?”

Claudia shook her head without looking up. “No, you didn’t hurt me. Did I hurt you?”

Claudia smiled when he laughed, causing his chest to bounce her head up and down. “You are not capable of hurting me.” Finch chuckled.

“I am pretty sure I could take you if I tried,” Claudia teased, finally looking up into his face.

“I doubt it. Do you remember trying to hit me before I tied you up?” He teased her with a small smile.

“Is this gonna work, Finch?” Claudia asked, turning serious.

“We will make this work, Claudia. There are many things we need to learn about each other. But, I am confident that this will not only be a strong union, but also a loving one.” Finch stared into her eyes. Leaning down to touch her lips softly with his own, he added, “I vow it.”

CHAPTER TEN

We need to go.” Wheaton’s words broke through the small bubble that had encompassed the space around Finch and Claudia. “Change of plans, I will be coming with you to Earth, and Paine and Rowe will stay here and guard the women.”

“I will be back shortly with our son,” Finch said, looking down at the indicator on his wrist.

“So, that blinking is telling you it’s time to get Max?” Claudia asked, running her finger over the blinking light.

“Yes, the shuttle bay is ready for us.” Finch tipped her chin up when she continued looking down at his band. “Everything will be fine. I promise.”

Claudia gave him a small smile. “I trust you.”

Finch felt his chest tighten at her words. Her statement meant more to him that she would ever know. “Thank you. We will hurry back.”

Leaning down for a quick kiss, Finch tried to memorize every moment of the time that his lips touched hers. Stepping back he let his fingers run over her cheek before dropping his hand. It was much harder to break contact with her than he had thought it would be. His body wanted to keep touching her even though there was nothing sexually stimulating about the contact. It was an interesting urge. An urge he would need to dissect later when he had time to think on the situation. Glancing at Wheaton, who was kissing his wife goodbye, Finch wondered if his fellow warrior felt the same connection to his wife. Taking in the fact that Wheaton kept stroking her swollen belly, he believed that was probably the case.

“Wheaton?” Finch interrupted the pair when it looked like his friend had forgotten they needed to leave.

“I am coming,” Wheaton’s answered, even though he made no move to leave Poppy.

“Time to go get her son, babe.” Poppy hugged Wheaton before giving him a nudge to get going.

Finch caught the wink that Poppy sent toward Claudia over her mate’s shoulder. The fact that his new bride had made friends gave him reason to smile. One concern he now had regarding her life on the ship was that she was right—there were no brides on Squadron Two. How was she going to handle the isolation away from other humans?

He knew that one of the reasons for the transfer was that if Claudia were guilty in helping destroy the Intake Center, which he knew was not the case, the council wanted her away from being able to cause harm to the other brides. Unfortunately, the actions of the council would do more harm than good if they took her away from whatever support system she created on this ship.

Hearing the tone of the door alerted the group that they had a visitor.

“That must be Val to finish up the paperwork. Finch, you signed where you were supposed to. Right?” Poppy asked while she walked toward the door to check the screen.

“Yes, my portion is complete,” he answered. “The council is waiting for the completed paperwork, but otherwise the bridal pact is complete.”

Poppy stepped back from the door with a frown on her face. “That’s not Val.”

“Who is it then, Little Flower?” Wheaton moved closer to his bride and checked the screen himself. “Ah, it is Paine and Rowe. They are here to guard you while we are on this mission. Kaine asked for you to be nice to them since they will be your new guards. Can you do that for me please?” he teased, barely moving away in time to avoid Poppy swatting at him.

Finch reached for Claudia to walk her toward the door, his arm resting comfortable around her waist. “These men will keep you safe,” he whispered to the top of her head.

“I thought I was safe here. Why do we need guards?” Claudia whispered back.

“It is just a precaution. No need to worry,” Wheaton interrupted the pair. He nodded to the man on his right. “This is Rowe.” After the guard gave her a swift hard nod, which Claudia returned, Wheaton turned to the other

male. "This is Paine. They will be your guards while we are Earth-side. Please behave for them." His last statement was directed at his wife who stuck her tongue out at him playfully.

"Is there anyone we should be expecting?" Rowe asked the group.

Wheaton nodded at the new guard, "The ladies are expecting another bride this afternoon. The women are not confined to this area. They have free movement on the ship as long as they have an escort. Please remember that."

When it looked like the guards were going to argue with Wheaton, he held up his hand to stop them before they could speak. "My wife and Finch's new bride are allowed to go where they wish. No argument."

Poppy frowned at her husband. "Why is that even an issue, Wheaton? I normally come and go as I please."

Finch had a feeling that the council did not want his bride wandering around the ship since she was still under suspicion for the bombing on Earth. Wheaton must have argued against confining her and gotten his way. Finch let a small smile grace his mouth. It grew bigger when he noticed Paine glaring at him.

"No reason, Little Flower. You can take her to the med center later if you have time. I am sure she would love to meet Andi, and the doctors mentioned their wife has been restless lately," Wheaton said, distracting his wife.

"Will do, babe." Giving him one last kiss, she added, "Please be careful."

"I will." He turned and nodded to the guards who were still glaring at Finch. "Keep them safe."

Finch hugged Claudia one last time. With a reassuring smile, he brushed her hair behind her ear. "I will soon be back with our son."

"Thank you, Finch." Claudia felt her eyes well with tears, the idea of reuniting with her son slightly overwhelming.

As the men moved toward the door, the guards stood at attention. Giving them small nods, Finch followed Wheaton out of the apartment.

"Why are you coming with me now instead of the other two?" Finch didn't hold back. The question had been bothering him since he found out that Wheaton would be going to Earth with him to get his son.

"Kaine wanted to give Paine a chance to speak with Claudia before she was distracted by her son arriving," Wheaton answered, his voice showing

his weariness.

“So they are using this time to question my bride?” Finch bristled at the idea of Claudia undergoing an interrogation while he wasn’t there.

“He will simply speak to her, Finch. Calm down,” Wheaton warned. “He will not make her uncomfortable in any way, but it is necessary for us to find out as much as we can. Especially while it is still fresh in her memories. He will talk to her, ask questions, get a feel for her personality. That is all. We were very clear on how he will approach her while searching for answers. None of it will be invasive. I promise.”

“How long do you anticipate this mission will take?” Finch asked, keeping stride with Wheaton, already anxious to be back at his bride’s side. He didn’t like the idea of Claudia being questioned while he wasn’t there to run interference, but he trusted Wheaton and Kaine. That trust was the only thing keeping him calm right now.

“Only a few hours. I requested that the items our wives ordered be prepared and on the shuttle arriving before our own. Our ride would have been slightly crowded otherwise.”

Finch smirked at his friend. “Did Poppy go overboard with shopping?”

“I have a feeling that she not only ordered what was required for your new son but also some items for our baby as well.” Shaking his head, he let a grin take over his face. “She does love to shop, so I will not argue with her about it.”

“Can you schedule warriors to deliver the items for Max directly to my apartment? I am sure that she will want to see him as soon as possible, and it is better if I do not have to take care of the items after we arrive.”

Wheaton patted Finch on the shoulder “Already done. They will be delivered and assembled before you even get home with your new family.”

Entering the shuttle bay, Finch looked around at the other warriors moving swiftly from shuttle to shuttle running diagnostics and doing maintenance. A few of the warriors stopped and bowed shortly to Wheaton as they walked past. As a senior councilman, Wheaton deserved and received the respect that was designated to that title.

“Councilor Wheaton, your shuttle is in bay twelve. The pilot is ready to leave once you are,” one man with a tablet in his hands informed them as they walked toward the shuttles.

“Thank you, Felix,” Wheaton replied as they continued past the worker.

“How is he doing?” Finch asked quietly once they moved away from the man.

“Felix?” Wheaton shot Finch a glance. “He is still struggling with losing the warriors under his care but has been able to complete his job tasks. I was impressed with how quickly he has gotten the bay running smoothly again. His men took a hit when they realized how easily they were attacked. They also lost some of their brothers... it was a pain many of them had not had to deal with before.”

“I had heard that he had taken Zane’s death hard...as if it was his fault that he died during the attack. I am surprised he has not requested a post change,” Finch said as he climbed the ramp up to their shuttle.

“The council offered to assign him to another area, but he turned it down. His job performance is still highly rated so for the time being we will let him continue to manage the bay. If that changes, we will most likely assign him to the home planet for a small break. We did increase his staff numbers. He is now directing twenty more workers at the bay than before. The shift load was too heavy for the men that were scheduled before the attack. Adding more staff has allowed the men to get more rest when needed and give Felix the opportunity to implement a consistent schedule for the maintenance shifts. There has been a decline in the number of errors the shuttles are experiencing already.”

“That is good. I remember Andi mentioning that Zane had been working overtime the day of the attack.” Finch buckled into the seat while the pilot started his flight check at the helm of the shuttle.

“Yes, most of the men had been working extra shifts with only small breaks for sleeping. Felix was running the bay with the bare minimum of workers on shift.” Wheaton leaned his head back against the seat before letting out a loud sigh. “It was no fault of his, simply lack of warriors available to assign to the bay. We did not realize how tight the schedule was or the council would have stepped in earlier. One idea that has bothered me is that our brothers were not vigilant that day due to exhaustion. What if we had been more alert in the docking bay before the attack? Could someone have spotted the bomb on the shuttle before the explosion? Would we have been able to fight harder and avoid the loss of Zane and the others?” Wheaton asked aloud.

Finch shook his head at his friend and councilman. "There is no way to answer those questions. The only thing we can do is try to make sure it does not happen again."

"True," Wheaton admitted, relaxing somewhat. "Zane's intended bride asked to be reentered into the bridal pool."

"Do you think she will be matched again?"

"They have already pulled a match, now we just need to inform the warrior he has been selected." Wheaton let out a sigh. "She was in an abusive relationship on Earth and their law enforcement officers are unable to ensure her safety. She has a piece of paper saying that the man responsible for physical abuse is not allowed near her but he disregards the order from their court system."

"So she would be safer here," Finch agreed.

As the men spoke for a few more moments, the ramp to the shuttle started to lift. The instruments and engines humming with life as they prepared to leave the bay.

"I appreciate everything that you have done for Claudia and myself," Finch tightened his safety harness as they started to lift off.

"You are welcome. Pay me back by finding out if she knows anything that may be useful in locating the traitor. Deal?"

Nodding, Finch focused on the mission in front of them.

He would soon have his son in his arms.

His son.

His chest felt tight at the thought of finally having everything that he had wanted for so long. He had watched Claudia for weeks before finally talking to her at the Intake Center. When he had first spotted her at her job he had wanted her. He couldn't control his physical reaction to her tall curvy body. His cock had a mind of its own when she was near. The first time he had spoken with her he knew that he somehow needed to make her his. There was no way he was going to allow the council to terminate their bond, even if she was guilty of helping another set the bomb. Deep down, he knew that there was no possibility that she had been part of the attack. He did, however, believe she may have seen something she may not know was important. His new goal was to help her recall all of the small details of her last day at the center.

She had to have seen something. Now he just needed to figure out what it was she had witnessed.

Before it was too late.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So tell me about yourself.”

Claudia tried to hide her smile with her hand as she watched Poppy grill Paine. Rowe had excused himself to guard the door not long after the men had left for the shuttle bay, but Paine had taken up guard duty inside the apartment.

“What is it that you need to know?” Paine’s voice was curious as he sat stiffly on the couch.

“Everything,” Poppy answered with a shrug.

Claudia couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped from her as Paine gave her a panicked glance.

“Have you always been a guard?” Claudia asked, trying to help make him more comfortable by giving him a place to start the conversation.

“Yes.” Paine’s answer was short and abrupt.

Poppy glanced toward the door where Rowe was standing outside at his post. “Do you always work with Rowe?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like your job?” Poppy asked, folding her hands across her belly.

“Yes.”

“Do you know any other words other than yes?” Poppy asked making a face at the warrior while she drummed her fingers against her bump.

“Yes.” With that answer, Paine allowed a small smile to grace his lips. The result was nothing but swoon-worthy. Dimples. The man had dimples.

“Sweet hell,” Poppy breathed, staring at Paine.

“Are you feeling well?” he asked, the dimples disappearing instantly.

“Ummm...you should smile more often.” Poppy glanced at Claudia and mouthed *oh my god*.

“I do not have much to smile at.” Paine automatically dismissed her suggestion.

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve heard in a while.” Poppy tilted her head, studying the man in front of her. “My new goal is to make you smile as much as I possibly can. What makes you happy?”

Paine shrugged his shoulders at the women staring at him, “Rowe and I are trying to find a mate through the pact. I am sure that once that happens that I will have more reasons to smile.”

“A mate? As in a singular woman?” Claudia asked, surprised.

“Yes. We plan to share a mate.” Paine looked back and forth between the pair. “We have heard that it had been done before and believe it can work for us as well.”

“So are the two of you...?” Poppy nodded toward the door where Rowe was waiting on the other side.

“We are not homosexual.” Paine grinned again, understanding what she was hinting at. “Although that would have solved some of our problems finding companionship in the past. We are paired fighters.”

“What does that mean, paired fighters?” Claudia asked the question before Poppy could.

“We have been trained to anticipate each other since a young age, both mentally and physically.”

“So you’re like creepy twins?” Poppy asked, curious.

“I do not understand the question.”

“Oh, I forgot that you don’t have twins here,” Poppy replied before she spoke again. “You do everything as a pair?”

“Yes. All of our missions, our quarters, our training...it has always been as a pair,” Paine explained.

“But you’re not...?” Claudia asked again, this time adding a finger wiggle to the question.

“No, we are not lovers. We often take women together but that is because we work...and play better as a pair.” Paine winked at the women that he had managed to stun into silence.

“Holy shit,” Poppy whispered, her cheeks turning red. Her thoughts obviously turning toward the X-rated possibilities his words provoked.

Claudia cleared her throat. “Why take a single wife though? Wouldn’t it be better to have something of your own?”

“Not necessarily. I trust Rowe with my life. There have been many times that he has saved it and vice versa. When I take a mate, I know that he would protect her with his own life if needed, and the same goes for any mate that he takes. We have talked about this in depth and decided it would be beneficial for that woman to be one and the same. I honestly would trust no other with my mate’s safety more than my other half.”

“What about jealousy?” Claudia asked candidly.

Poppy interrupted before Paine could answer her question, “That may be something that Andi can answer. She is married to both Tamin and Rodin, and they don’t seem to have any problems. In fact, she seems so happy all the time you kinda want to strangle her every now and then.”

“Tamin and Rodin are the doctors posted here, correct?” Paine asked, relaxing against the seat.

“Yep, they are great guys too.” Poppy rubbed her belly. “They are crazy protective of the pregnant brides now since Andi is pregnant too.”

“I would like to speak to them regarding their mating. Rowe and I were aware that a trio was recorded in the pact records but we would like to talk to them regarding the logistics.”

“I don’t think they would mind talking to you as long as they aren’t too busy. Lately there has been a steady flow of warriors visiting medical from the sparring rooms,” Poppy relayed with a grimace.

“The men are getting restless the longer it takes for brides to be assigned,” Paine said. “The Pleasure Sector missions have been doubled to relieve some of the strain on the men but there is still too much time between the security shifts for some of the males. I have heard that the council has been working to assign more brides but there have been some problems on Earth.”

“The explosion hasn’t helped the situation with women signing up on Earth either. The single friends that I did have back home were scared of the backlash of applying, and that was before the possibility of blowing up was an issue,” Claudia pointed out.

Paine narrowed his eyes at her before asking, “You never applied either, correct?”

“I thought about it before I had Max, but once he was mine it wasn’t an option.”

Poppy shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable. “They still aren’t allowing women with kids to apply?”

“Nope. The requirements specifically listed that it’s not allowed.” Claudia shrugged. “I thought about applying after I met Finch...I mean, c’mon, the man is gorgeous.” Claudia smiled. “I may or may not have checked into it after our first meeting.”

“You would have applied if it allowed you to?” Paine inquired.

“I don’t see why not...it wasn’t like we were homeless but it was a struggle. The temptation of not having to work two jobs and actually be home with him while he grows up, it would have been nice. I didn’t really have a ‘career’ either. I worked two crappy jobs to make the amount that I would have at one good job and I didn’t qualify for benefits because they were both part-time. I was lucky that Maggie watched him for free.” Claudia rubbed her hands together nervously. “We were living paycheck to paycheck and it was doable, but not something I wanted to become my ‘normal.’ Ya know what I mean? I would have never married just to stay home with him and have someone take care of me, but it’s almost as if things are happening for a reason. Do I sound crazy or what?”

“You don’t sound crazy and I totally understand.” Poppy nodded and patted Claudia on the knee. “I had a fairly decent job before I applied but if I had added a kiddo to the mix it would have been a struggle. I can’t even imagine working two jobs and not being home with a little one. In fact it makes me want to cry just thinking about it.” Poppy’s eyes started to tear up while she spoke.

Claudia raised her glass of tea. “Props to the single mothers out there.”

“Cheers,” Poppy toasted in a watery voice.

Paine reached toward the table and picked up one of the magazines in a pile. “Who is this Deadpool person and why is he wearing a mask?” he asked, distracting them from their conversation.

“Sweet Jesus, I have so much to teach you.” Poppy shook her head at Paine, distracted from her tears.

Claudia relaxed back against the couch and smiled as she half listened to Poppy explain who Deadpool was and why it was necessary to respect the entire Marvel Universe.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Letting her mind wander from the voices in the room, Claudia pictured her new husband in her mind.

Husband.

Just thinking the word still made her stomach clench. No matter how she had gotten into this situation, Claudia sincerely felt deep down that this was something that was meant to happen. Their meeting. The kidnapping. Their sleepy sexcapade. All of it. Just thinking about what had happened while she had been partially dreaming still heated her insides. How had that one encounter managed to overshadow any of her other experiences, she didn't know, but it did. The play by play of what happened was still slightly fuzzy. Her mind was still trying to piece together what had been her fantasy versus reality.

Dreaming of Finch had been something that was not uncommon for her since she had met him weeks before. Most of the nightly sandman visits had been X-rated to say the least. Her sex drive had paid the price when she became an instant mom, and meeting Finch had made for prime wet dream fodder.

The nightly scenarios had always been slightly different regarding location and set up, but they always ended in images of sweaty bodies straining together. More often than not, Claudia's living alarm clock, otherwise known as Max, would wake her up while her hand was still between her legs. The first time that happened had been embarrassing, especially when she had seen him that evening at the Intake Center. Some small part of her worried that he would be able to tell she fantasized about him...the other part of her didn't care if he knew how much she was

attracted to him. Not in her wildest dreams had she ever thought her nightly fantasies would become reality.

Their frantic coupling had been almost too good to be real. Claudia had pictured them in a hotel room. Her dream had included a huge bed piled high with pillows as he relaxed back, letting her explore his body at her leisure. Stroking his chest she recalled fumbling with the fastening on his pants, trying to get closer to the hard length that she could feel through the soft leather.

Her top and pants had been wiggled out of, the details of how were still vague but the feel of his hands on her skin had been more than real. Feeling his callused palms running up and down her back had made her nipples clench so tightly that the pinch had made her palm them herself, seeking relief from the sweet torture. Grabbing his hands, she had moved them to her breasts, showing him what she needed. Holding his hands where she wanted them, Claudia had swirled her hips over his. The feeling of his leather-protected cock had teased her bare pussy before she became impatient to feel him skin to skin.

Thinking back, she realized her moment of clarity regarding dreaming versus reality had come around that point. Her body knew the feeling of solid man beneath her was real and not a mirage her imagination was teasing her with. By that point she didn't care how she got into a bed with him but instead was intent on finishing what she had started so many times before.

She had let go of one of his hands so he could open the placket on the front of his pants. Once she had freed his cock from its confines, Claudia hadn't wasted any time in sliding over it. Wetting it with her juices, she raised herself to hover over the tip. Hands had gripped her hips, helping her steady her body as she lowered herself down onto what she craved.

Once she had fully settled at the base, she had opened her eyes. Unsure of when she had closed them, she tried to memorize the look on his face as she reveled in the feeling of fullness he created within her. Finch's eyes had been closed tight as he arched his head back on the pillow behind him. His mouth had been open, as if he was trying to catch his breath.

Her sleepy mind had been working hard to catalogue every bit of the experience. From the smell of his skin to the feel of his leather pants under her bottom. The fabric had been a sharp contrast against the hot skin of her

body. Feeling the slight ripple in his clothes she had shifted her hips back and forth, rocking her clit against the base of his dick. A hard grip on her hips had stopped the movement. Looking at her dream lover, she had met his eyes as he started to move her up and down. His shaft going deep as she settled again and again against his hard hips. Every once in a while she would swirl her hips before raising again, causing him to groan. Her body had felt like it was on fire as she worked toward her release. A culmination of pleasure that her dreams had never been able to give her.

Claudia remembered running her hands up and down his abs, feeling the distinct ridges while she rode him. Changing the rhythm of her hips over and over to savor the feeling of his cock's impact had been deliciously wicked. The sound of sex had been profound in the quiet room. The sound of his groans combined with her whimpers created a soundtrack in her memory that she would never forget.

Those precious moments had seemed to last forever...and yet not long enough.

All too soon she had felt the tightening of her pussy on the hardness she was riding. Her grip on his abdomen had sharpened, her nails scratching at the surface she was using to keep her grounded. Coming harder than she had ever remembered coming before, Claudia had watched Finch strain beneath her. His own hands had tightened on her hips to the point of pain, not like she would complain. The squeeze of his fingers had made everything seem more *real*. Subconsciously, she knew that he had been coming inside of her as he arched, his hips thrusting up, almost lifting her completely off of the bed they were sprawled upon. The hot wetness of his release registered in her sated body and yet she didn't care. The only thing that she could focus on was the shivering aftershocks that rocked through her limbs.

Claudia remembered catching her breath while leaning against a sweaty chest, Finch's hands brushing hair out of her face. The strands had clung to the wetness that had dotted her own brow.

The soothing motion of his strokes against her locks had been what lulled her back into an exhausted sleep.

It was when she had woken up that all hell had broken loose.

At first she was confused as to who was cuddled beneath her. Then flashes of what she had done started shooting through her mind. The

memories of her actions exploding like fireworks in her foggy mind, lightening up her body as they played over again. His cock had slipped from her body at some point during her nap but the feel of his previous presence was still obvious. The wetness between her thighs felt so real that she couldn't deny what had happened any longer.

It was at that point when panic had taken over.

Where the hell was she? Why was she clinging to Finch as if she were drowning and he were a life raft? Had she really had sex with a man that she barely knew?

While smacking him with a pillow, he had explained as much as he could between swats of feather-filled cotton.

She was on a spaceship.

She had climbed on him while he was sleeping beside her.

And yes, they had had 'sexual relations' that he didn't regret one bit, using his own words.

The situation had only deteriorated from there. Finch had tried to explain what happened and had mentioned explosions and protecting her but none of it had made sense to her at the time. She had been in pure panic mode, something that happened when she became extremely anxious. Her speech would get higher pitched as she talked really fast and became twitchy. Normally she paced to relieve the tension that was overwhelming but during this particular instance, she had taken to whopping Finch with a pillow that was handy. Finch obviously had no idea how to handle her losing her mind. That much was obvious when he decided the best course of action was to pull a rope from under the bed, something she would need to talk to him about later, and secure her while he left the apartment.

His actions had only made her anxiety rise.

The feeling of complete helplessness was the opposite of what she needed at the moment. Her brother had always been the best at talking her down when she started to have a panic attack. In truth, it had been a good long while since she had one. Not since his funeral had she felt such an overwhelming weight of her emotions. It was the scariest feeling in the world, mostly because it was uncontrollable. In the entire time she had been trying to figure out the wheres and whys of what happened, she didn't have a chance to voice her real concern before Finch had left. Well...voice it to where he understood her at least.

Max.

He was literally the only thing on Earth that was important to her.

Once she had calmed enough to breathe through her nose again and not pant in pure panic, Claudia had focused on the task at hand. Getting out of the rope binding her and find help to get back home.

While she had been hatching her escape plan she had conveniently pushed what had previously happened on that bed to the back of her mind.

Dealing with one crisis at a time was her limit and the one at hand was figuring out how to escape rope.

Claudia was startled when she felt a touch on her arm, the contact jarring her from her foray into her memories. Coming back to reality, Claudia realized she was rubbing her wrists where they were still slightly scratched from the restraints she had managed to get off.

“You okay? You looked pretty far away.” Poppy was staring at her as if she had sprouted two heads. Poppy quickly glanced down to where Claudia was fiddling with her hands.

Blinking a few times, Claudia brought herself back to the present. “Sorry, I drifted away for a second.”

Paine was looking at her as if he were studying a virus under a microscope. “It lasted longer than a second.”

“No joke,” Poppy added. “You were off in your own little world there for a bit. Are you sure you’re feeling okay? We can visit the med center if you need to.” She shot a pointed glance at the abrasions on Claudia’s arms and raised her eyebrow.

Claudia shook her head at Poppy. She didn’t want to explain that while Poppy had been droning on about comic book characters, she had taken a brief leave from reality and replayed her sexy time with Finch followed by what happened afterward. Claudia didn’t even want to imagine Paine’s reaction to that explanation. She wasn’t quite sure how much he was told of what happened and how she managed to become a bride.

“I was just daydreaming,” she quickly explained.

“If you’re sure—”

Cutting her new friend off before she could push any harder, Claudia tried to flash what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “Really, everything is fine.”

A welcome distraction came when the front door slid open.

“Val!” Poppy scrambled awkwardly up from her position on the couch to greet the pregnant woman waddling into the apartment. “Have you gotten bigger in the last few days or do I need my eyes checked?”

“Gee, thanks, Pops. Nothing like hearing you’re as big as a whale the minute you walk in the door.” The woman grudgingly accepted a hug from Poppy.

“You know I love you” Poppy replied, moving back to the group in the living room. “This is Claudia and the scary-looking guard is Paine. You met his counterpart outside the door already.”

Val moved close to shake hands with both of them, “Yeah, Rowe was nice enough to only ask me a million questions before letting me in the door. It’s like Defcon 1 around here. I’m amazed I wasn’t patted down.”

“Oh god, Thorne would have lost his mind if that had happened.” Poppy giggled.

“I know. Shame was the one that escorted me here and even he got the third degree from that guard.” Val sank slowly down into a chair, groaning in relief as she was able rest her body.

“I haven’t seen Shame forever, I thought he had been transferred...” Poppy trailed off as she reclaimed her own spot on the couch.

“From what I’ve heard he was on Two but then got matched with a bride so they moved him back here to get ready for the paperwork and all that jazz,” Val explained, huffing and puffing at the exertion of her trip to the apartment along with her extra baby cargo.

At the mention of another warrior being assigned a bride, Paine perked up in his chair. His attention focused solely on the conversation now taking place between the two women.

“There was a recent match?” Paine’s question cut into the women’s gab fest.

“Yeah, she was already in the bridal pool and matched but it fell through. Apparently her match to Shame was almost as highly ranked as her first one so the council approved it almost immediately.” Val shrugged.

“Interesting,” Paine murmured.

“Maybe you’ll get a match sooner rather than later, Paine.” Poppy pointed out as she kicked her feet up onto the table in front of them.

“Oooohhhh, are you looking for a lady love also?” Val asked, eyeing the warrior in front of her.

Claudia smiled at the group now talking about Paine's love life, or possibility of one, and was grateful for the distraction away from herself.

She had come to terms with everything that happened with Finch up until this point. Now, she needed to focus on where they went from here.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Why is it taking so long to get my son?” Finch growled at the security guards standing in front of him.

“Sir, his caretaker arrived in a vehicle that was smoking. Safety protocol dictates that we inspect it thoroughly before she is allowed further onto the property.”

Finch stepped forward, tempted to grab onto the soldier in front of him. None of the men in the room were Phaeton which set both Wheaton and him on edge. Humans, at least those of the male gender, tended to annoy him.

After their shuttle had been secured on the temporary landing pad at the back of the center, the men had been greeted by the security team in full military gear. The face masks and fatigues had not been what had upset him. Finch had been told that he would have to wait to meet Max until they had cleared Maggie’s vehicle at the security station. They were holding both her and his son in a small guard shack at the entrance after searching their clothing and Max’s bag.

“If both the boy and his companion have been cleared, why can they not join us here while the vehicle is inspected further?” Wheaton’s tone had changed to one that he used often in meetings when negotiating. The calming tone doing little to settle Finch’s nerves.

“That goes against orders, sir,” one guard stated as he gestured to the shack through the window. “We have been instructed to keep the occupants secured. It is for everyone’s safety that we follow protocol.”

Finch walked toward the window where he had a clear view of the shack. He could vaguely see a female figure walking back and forth while

bouncing a small child in her arms. His stomach clenched at the small glimpse of his new son.

Seeing the boy made everything more real. His son.

“You all right?” Wheaton’s tone was low but clear as he stood at Finch’s side.

Finch nodded, not trusting his voice at the moment. Feeling his friend roughly pat him on the shoulder helped calm him to a degree.

“Yes, he is so close and yet they will not let me meet him. It is a feeling I do not like,” Finch admitted.

“You sound like a father already.” Finch glanced over at Wheaton and caught the small smile that the man allowed to wash over his face.

“I need to smile,” Finch blurted out. “All of those videos with children and parents show many of them smiling at each other. Shame once told me that I looked frightening when I smiled.”

Wheaton chuckled. “Only Behr looks frightening when he smiles. It is those fangs of his...although Poppy seems obsessed with them. Don’t worry about your smile. It will come naturally. Just let it happen.”

“But what if I scare him? I am much bigger than his mother—”

“We are bigger than everyone. He will become accustomed to the size of warriors over time once he gets used to us. Poppy instructed that babies need soft noises so they are not startled. Just make sure that you do not yell while around the young one and it should be fine.”

“What if I break him? He looks much smaller than I expected.” Finch squinted through the glass, trying to get a clearer image of his son.

“On that, I have no advice. I voiced that same question to Poppy and she said it was a baby and not china. I am assuming she was trying to tell me that they are stronger than they look.” Wheaton shrugged his wide shoulders as if he had no further advice on that matter.

“When are they going to let them pass?” Finch raised his voice as he asked the question, directing it at the guards who he was not bothering to look at.

“We have been given information that the smoke coming from her car was because of a mechanical issue and they will allow her to pass in a moment.”

The explanation came from the doorway behind the warriors, neither one of them turning around to acknowledge the answer.

Finch kept his gaze trained on the guard shack as he watched a soldier walk the female he presumed was Maggie with his son back to the vehicle. When they were once again secured in the car, he turned away from his lookout to nod at Wheaton.

“We will be taking off as soon as possible. Please alert the guards that the area will need to be cleared as the shuttle is prepared,” Wheaton ordered the man closest to him.

Finch was rubbing his hands together nervously. The anticipation of holding his new son made them dampen with nerves.

“Sir, the woman and child are being escorted to the briefing room down the hall. Please follow me.”

Finch didn’t wait to see if Wheaton was walking behind him as he shot out of the door. “Does he have many belongings that we will need to secure?” Finch wanted to leave as soon as possible and wanted to make sure that they weren’t delayed by waiting on someone to load items at the last minute.

“Just his car seat and one bag.” The soldier walking beside him looked down at his clipboard. “There is also a grocery bag with some food items but they haven’t been checked yet for explosive materials so you will have to wait while that is done.”

“We have our own scanners that can do that much faster. Just make sure that the bag is taken to the shuttle and I will message the pilot now with instructions,” Wheaton interrupted from behind them.

“Thank you, Wheaton.” Finch slowed his steps when he realized that he was almost leaving the man behind in his rush to get to the next room.

“I can see how anxious you are, Finch. I want to make this as easy and quick as possible. Let us get your new son home to his mother.”

Coming up to a closed door, Finch paused. He could hear a female singing nonsense to his child. Before he could hear what McDonald had on his farm, the soldier in front of him opened the door wide to let him enter.

“Holy crap, you guys are gigantic.” The woman holding the little boy shook her head. “Well, I always told Claud to go big or go home. It looks like she took me literally.”

His first look at Maggie up close caught him off guard. Her husky voice had given him the indication that she was an older female but looking at her now he did not think she could be much older than Claudia. Blonde curls

were gathered on the top of her head in a sloppy bun and she wore what Poppy referred to as comfort clothes. The soft cotton top and shorts doing little to disguise her appealing figure. The appraising male in him could see that Maggie was a beautiful woman by anyone's standards.

Bouncing the boy up and down softly, Maggie cradled him on her hip. "Which one of you is Finch?"

Finch stepped forward slowly, trying not to startle either the child or the woman holding him. "I am."

Maggie stared at him for a second before smiling. "You look scared out of your mind. I take it that you haven't been around babies before?"

"I have never been around a child. Ever," Finch admitted, staring at the small boy she was holding.

From what he could see, Finch thought Max was perfect. His head was covered with shiny brown curls that were short enough to still be fuzzy. His arms and legs had creases where soft rolls of baby fat padded his body in excess. As he watched, the boy's small feet kicked up and down, his toes curling and stretching.

"Does he not wear boots yet?" Finch asked the first question that popped into his mind.

"Boots? You mean shoes, right?" Maggie reached one hand into the bag sitting on the table at her side. "He hates shoes and kicks them off as soon as I put them on. He kicked one off in the car and I couldn't find it before the guards moved me away from it, so I just took the other one off. Normally Claudia will put socks on him but he pulls those off too and chews on them. He's teething right now so everything goes into his mouth. His hands, his feet, anything that can fit in his mouth ends up there eventually."

"Do his feet not get cold?" Finch walked closer. His gaze never leaving the child that was his new son. Reaching out his finger, he ran it down the soft pale skin of the arm waving around.

"It's so hot outside that his feet getting cold isn't really a problem. And since he isn't walking yet, wearing shoes isn't a big priority." Maggie's words sounded amused even to his own ears.

"May I hold him?" Finch asked. As he reached toward the baby, Max's arms reached out to him. Taking him from Maggie, Finch held the boy with

his hands under his arms. Holding him away from his body, he stared at the small human for a moment.

Max seemed to study him as well. His brown eyes staring at him as his mouth opened in a wet drooling smile. As he grinned, a shiny stream of spit escaped his mouth and rolled down his chin and onto the front of his outfit. Finch grimaced. It felt as if the material was already soaked with the liquid that seemed endlessly coming out of the tiny body.

“You’ll want to keep this on your shoulder, he’s been drooling like crazy lately. I haven’t felt a tooth yet but I’m sure there is one going to break through any day now.” Reaching up to sling a damp piece of cotton over his shoulder, Finch tried not to grimace from the slightly sour smell on the fabric.

Finch shifted Max to his side, mimicking the hold that he had seen Maggie using when they walked in. “Is this correct?”

Maggie stepped back, her hands on her hips as she looked at the pair. “You’re a little stiff but I think you’ll do fine.” She turned and moved items around in a bag that seemed to be overflowing. “He finished his bottle while we were waiting for them to look at my car and spit up a little. I was able to get most of it wiped up but he needs to be cleaned a little better under his neck. There are two more bibs in here if you need them. I wasn’t able to get much from Claudia’s apartment before the police locked the place up so I just had to pack what I could. She has enough diapers and wipes to last maybe another day or two and I packed the cans of formula that I had at my place as well as the jars of food, but the guards took those from me when they searched my stuff.”

Wheaton stepped forward at her words and put his hand out. “I am Councilor Wheaton. I would like to thank you for taking care of the boy while we worked out everything with his mother.”

Finch nodded at Maggie as well as he tried to keep his hair out of Max’s grip. The little boy had a strong hold for one so small.

“I didn’t even know Claudia was joining up until she called. I’m just grateful she wasn’t home with the baby when her place was trashed.” Maggie gave Wheaton a suspicious glance. “Claudia trusts you guys with Max so I do too. I’m sure there is more to the story also, but I’ll let Claudia tell me it when she can. I know a cover-up when I see one.”

Wheaton raised his eyebrow at the woman in front of them. "Indeed there is but we cannot go into it at this time. I will let Claudia explain what happened once everything is resolved."

Maggie zipped up the bag she had been shuffling inside of. Passing it to Wheaton, she let out a sigh as her gaze went back and forth between him and Finch. "If I had the guts, I would have signed up myself."

"Thank you." Finch winked at her. "And thank you again for taking such good care of Max."

"I love him like he was family...same goes for Claudia. You take care of them and we'll call it even." Maggie's eyes teared up as she stroked Max's head where he leaned against Finch. "Be a good boy for your momma and new daddy. I love you."

"I will watch over them both. You have my word," Finch promised softly, not wanting to startle the baby against his chest.

"Make sure you do." Wiping a tear from her eye, she sniffed before stepping back and looking at the soldier guarding the door. "Where did you guys park my car?"

"Councilor Wheaton requested we have our base mechanic see if it could be fixed before you left. He is working on it now," the man replied.

When Maggie shot a surprised look at Wheaton, he simply shrugged. "It is the least we could do. I know the drive back to your dwelling is a long one and would not want anything to happen on your return trip."

"Thanks. I guess I'll just wait here then until it's ready to go."

Wheaton bowed shortly to her before turning toward him, "Finch, we need to go. The shuttle is ready to leave and the soldiers need access to that portion of the base again."

Finch lowered his head to look at Max. "He seems to have fallen asleep. I do not see a reason to delay our departure."

"It's his nap time. You might get another hour or so as long as he isn't woken up. Be prepared to deal with the devil though if he doesn't get in a full nap. He may look sweet, but that baby gets riled when his routine is messed with," Maggie warned from where she had sat down on a small office couch.

"Anything else I should know?" Finch asked, tempted in that moment to take Maggie back to Squadron One with them just so she could help watch over the child she obviously cared about.

“Yeah, he hates peas and can spit a good foot if you don’t distract him while shoveling it in. Other than that, he’s an easy baby. Claudia is a good mom and it shows with Max. He’s a happy little boy.”

“Your pilot is cleared for departure,” the soldier in the room interrupted after hanging up a phone on the wall.

“Good. It is time to go, Finch.” Wheaton gestured toward the door.

Finch hesitated and turned back to Maggie, who was fiddling with what looked like a cell phone. “Let us know if you ever need anything.”

Maggie studied him for a moment. She must have seen the sincerity in his eyes before nodding to him. “I will.”

Walking out of the room, Finch leaned down and smelled the soft hair that was sprouting on top of Max’s head. The scent was fresh and clean, it was a smell that Finch could easily become addicted to.

“What are you doing?” Wheaton interrupted his musings as they walked.

“His hair smells nice,” Finch said somewhat defensively.

Wheaton rolled his eyes at him but Finch caught the small grin that he tried to hide.

Patting the little boy on the back, Finch held him securely against his chest as they met up with the other guards to be escorted to their ship.

“The pilot cleared the food stuffs that his sitter brought,” one soldier told them as the doors were held open for them.

“Good. We will be taking off as soon as we are strapped in so be prepared to clear the area as soon as we are on board,” Wheaton instructed.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied.

Finch followed Wheaton up the ramp and sat down with Max on his lap. Shifting the sleeping baby around on his lap, he managed to strap in before settling the boy back into the curve of his arms.

“Should we somehow secure him?” Wheaton asked as he took his own place in his seat.

“I don’t think he is big enough to fit into a seat.” Finch looked at the empty spot beside him before shaking his head. “No, he will be safer in my arms than sitting by himself.”

“We are ready for takeoff.” Their shuttle pilot raised the ramp and started the shuttle engine as the men relaxed back against the seat.

“Time to go home, little man,” Finch whispered to the baby he was holding.

“How does it feel?” Wheaton raised his voice to be heard over the rumble of the engine.

“How does what feel?” Finch asked, his brow furrowing.

“Being a father.”

Finch took in a deep breath, inhaling more of that soapy smell from the little boy in his grip. “Right. It feels right.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Landing on Squadron One, Finch tried to calm the now squirming bundle in his arms. Regardless of the soft rolls of fat surrounding Max's body, he was really strong for his size. His grip itself was something that stunned Finch. Once Max had woken up, disturbed by the sound of the engines preparing to land, he had started moving what seemed like every single part of his body. All at once. Trying to hold him, and yet not hurt him, was a struggle that Finch was experiencing in what seemed like the longest landing in the history of shuttle landings. Now he knew why humans chose to secure small children into those contraptions with all of the straps. Even then, he wasn't sure how they kept their little bodies contained.

As the engines started to rumble to a quiet purr and the ramp began to lower, Finch untangled small fingers from his hair...yet again. So far, his new son had a fascination with tasting it and pulling it out of his head in tiny sticky handfuls.

"That does not feel nice, little man." Finch pulled a newly liberated strand of hair out of Max's grip, and almost got his finger sucked into the vortex that was his new son's mouth before he pulled back.

Maggie had been right. He really liked to put things in his mouth. Max had already tried to chew on his knuckles, the collar of his leather tunic, his band, and was currently mouthing the damp rag that Maggie had thrust over his shoulder earlier. The sour smell had intensified the more wet the cloth became. From the slightly tan stain on the fabric, Finch had assumed that the color was from the formula that he had eaten recently.

"Are you ready?" Wheaton's question distracted him from the mess he was trying to juggle.

“Yes, I just need to get the buckle. Can you hold him for a moment?” Finch didn’t wait for an answer before holding Max out for Wheaton to take.

“Sure,” Wheaton mumbled even though he had no choice but to take the body that Finch was holding out. “He is lighter than I imagined.”

“But still solid. I had the same thoughts when Maggie first handed him over. He is going to be a strong warrior one day.” Finch smiled as he stood up and wiped uselessly at the wet stains on the tan leather of his shirt. The dark patches had already left discolored rings on the material.

“I received a message from Poppy that your bride finished her paperwork with Val and is now back in your apartment resting.” Wheaton passed Max back as soon as Finch had his hands free.

“Is she feeling well?” Finch asked, unable to hide his concern. His bride had gone through a lot today. Including breaking free from what she believed was a “kidnapping,” which he guessed she was right except for the reasons behind it. He preferred to refer to the whole debacle as a slight misunderstanding. That sounded like a much better story to tell Max and their future children when they were asked how their parents met.

“She is fine, just sounds tired from what was relayed,” Wheaton added. “Poppy likes her.”

“I can imagine it would be hard not to like Claudia.” Finch was pleased to hear that she was making friends. He now needed to concentrate on not separating them by being assigned to Squadron Two. “If we can figure out who set the bomb at her Intake Center, is there a chance that I can be assigned a new shift here? I would rather have Claudia around other brides than all alone on Two.”

“Poppy mentioned the same concern to me as well.” Letting out a deep sigh as they walked down the ramp, Wheaton ran his hand through his hair. “Honestly, I do not know if the council will allow it. Depending on the investigation we can request a vote on your transfer, but they believe that there should be a punishment. It could have been much worse...you are aware of that as well.”

Finch hugged Max’s body closer to him as they walked. He knew that he could have been denied what he was now holding close to him. The council had only approved of his match because of what happened after the kidnapping. He was grateful for the way things had worked out but also did

not want to separate Claudia from having contact with someone familiar as well.

“I am aware,” Finch admitted. Looking around the docking bay, he noticed that a majority of the workers were stopped and staring at the trio as they trekked toward the doors leading into the ship.

“They have never seen a fully human baby except for the broadcasts on our system.” Wheaton nodded to some of the men as they passed.

“I can tell.” Finch shifted Max slightly in his arms. The boy’s short legs were unable to hug his side as they had Maggie’s, mostly because Finch was much larger than his previous caregiver. Finch worried that he would hurt his hips if he held him much longer this way and adjusted his son so he was facing forward as they walked. Cradling him with one hand over his torso and another under his bottom, the boy waved his fists at the men they passed. Max let out happy squeals at his new vantage point and babbled. The sounds of the engines around them and the large warriors watching him did little to dampen his energetic greeting.

As they walked farther through the bay, almost every warrior in their vicinity stopped what they were doing and watched the group. Some of the men smiled back at the baby, while others looked simply curious. Max’s excited squeals effectively stopped everyone from working as they passed.

“The items that Claudia ordered have already been delivered to your apartment. Do you need help carrying the bags and carrier there as well?” Wheaton tapped on his ever-present electronic pad as they walked.

“I do not believe I would be able to carry all of it as well as manage him. Can one of the guards deliver it?” Finch startled when he felt wetness drip onto the hand he had secured under Max’s arms. The boy must be drooling again, by the feel of it. Grimacing, he realized it was something he was going to just need to get used to.

“Of course, I will assign someone now to the task.” Wheaton used his band to open the dock doors into the ship. “Get back to your new bride and enjoy your family.”

“How much time will I be allowed before I will be called back to the council?” Finch asked the question already knowing that they were not going to let time go by without answers regarding the possibility of Claudia’s involvement in the bombing.

Turning to look at him, Wheaton gave him an honest answer. “Kaine said that he would give you two days to find out any information you can before calling for a hearing. He noted in Claudia’s file that Paine did not detect any malicious intentions during his time with our wives today. I am unsure what Paine did find out but that is good news at least.” Wheaton frowned down at Max. “He is leaking again.”

“I can feel it.” Finch watched as Wheaton made a disgusted face and wanted to laugh. “You realize that you will have one of these leaking all over you soon, right?”

“I am just now realizing that.” Shaking his head, Wheaton laughed softly. “Poppy never told me how much liquid they held...”

Finch chuckled, the vibration and movement of his chest causing Max to kick his legs and babble even more. “Go home to Poppy. I will let you know what I find out from Claudia.”

“I must take care of some work before heading home, but I do have some advice for you.... Be cautious, Finch. The men know what happened on Earth and they know who your bride is. She has been assigned a guard full-time but be prepared for some friction. There have been grumblings from some of the warriors placing blame on her for the bridal matching having slowed down due to what happened at the Intake Center.”

“I will be vigilant.” Finch understood the warning and vowed to protect Claudia, even if it was just from unkind words or accusations. Nobody would make his bride feel unwelcome.

As the men parted ways in the corridor, Finch walked with a purpose. His family was now partially complete. It was a lot to take in considering he was not aware of even the possibility of a child so soon twenty-four hours ago.

“You will be patient while I learn how to care for you, right, little man?” Smiling to himself when he felt another glob of spit hit his hand he was content with the turn out of the previous events. Carrying on a conversation as if Max would talk back, Finch continued to speak. “Your mom is beautiful, little man. I knew the moment that I saw her that I must have her.” At the boy’s gurgle, he bounced him slightly, “She is smart and kind and obviously a loving mother, is she not?”

“Who are you talking to?”

Finch startled at the deep voice coming from behind him. He had been so preoccupied with Max and getting to Claudia that he had not been paying attention to the occupants of the corridor. Stopping in his tracks, he turned so Shame could see Max cuddle against his front.

“What is that?” Shame took a step back, obviously startled.

“It is not a what, it is a who...and his name is Max. He is my new son.” Finch introduced the baby proudly.

“There is something wrong with him.” Shame looked concerned at the wetness oozing down the baby and onto an uncaring Finch.

“He is teething and I have been told the drool is a common problem during this stage of growth.” Finch grimaced when he felt another droplet hit his already soaked hand.

“Where did you get him? Are we trading for young humans now?” Shame poked his finger against Max’s stomach, as if inspecting an animal he had never seen before.

“Of course not. He is the son of my new bride.” Finch couldn’t help but feel offended at the idea that he had somehow managed to purchase a child. Moving him away from the prodding digit poking his midsection, Finch leveled a glare at his friend.

Shame held his hands up in apology, “I am sorry. I did not realize your bride had a child.”

“You knew I was matched?” Even though Wheaton had warned Finch that the news was spreading quickly, Finch was still surprised that everyone was talking about it.

“Everyone knows you have a bride. It came across the alert system that there was another human on the ship that we are to make sure was secure and protected. A few of the men were curious and asked around to see who had been matched. I also escorted Val to Poppy’s apartment earlier, and she relayed her reason for the visit. Is it true that she is the only survivor of the explosion?” Shame took a moment to touch the tiny foot kicking in his direction. “His skin is so soft. Do they not put boots on their young?”

“I know it is. I believe it is because he is a new human and has not yet worked to toughen up. I asked about the boots as well, but apparently when they are this small they like to remove whatever is put on their feet,” Finch replied offhandedly before looking closely at Shame. “They are saying she was the only survivor?”

Shame's statement had cause for some alarm. That information was not at all correct. There had been a handful of survivors that were being questioned on Earth. Some of them had worked different shifts and had not been scheduled at the time of the explosion. The only truth to Shame's statement was that Claudia was the only one that had obviously escaped an attempt on her life if the state of her dwelling on Earth was anything to go by.

"She is not the only one that survived. Where did you hear that?" Finch would need to make sure that whatever speculation was going around was corrected before assumptions were made.

"In the sparring room. A couple of the warriors were talking about her luck at escaping and becoming a bride before the center was closed."

"Anything else?"

"Blaise was angry that his bridal request came back denied. He is frustrated that circumstances of that center impacted his chances to be matched. The ship broadcast informed us that no new applicants would be pulled until their safety could be better guarded." Shame let a large grin spread over his face. "Of course I did not tell him that I received my match before the incident on Earth. Blaise would have certainly taken that and used it against me in the sparring ring."

"You have a bride? How did that happen?" Finch asked the question right before he heard Max grunt and scrunch up his body. "What is the matter, little man?"

"I think he may be defecating, Finch." Both of the men stared at the baby before Shame's eyes widened. He stepped back and covered his nose. "That smell is atrocious! What does he consume to make it smell that awful?"

Finch turned quickly and started walking to his apartment at a faster pace than before. "I need to get him to Claudia. I have no idea how to deal with what is happening in his pants right now."

"Wait for me—I was tasked with bringing these to your quarters." Shame held up the baby carrier and bag that Finch had not noticed during their conversation. "I wondered what this was exactly." Shame looked down at the car seat he was holding. "You strap him into this contraption?"

"I believe so but I am not sure how exactly it works." Finch decided to breathe through his mouth as the smell of Max's diaper started to drift toward his face. "Distract me from this smell and tell me about your new

bride.” Finch tried to hold Max as still as possible while they moved to avoid wafting the stench up and into his face.

“She was already in the system and matched to another warrior so it was not a new applicant. I was told the council is letting her prepare before retrieving her from a place called Kansas.” Shame moved as far to the side of the corridor hallway as he was able. “That smell—”

“Do not talk about it and maybe we can ignore it the rest of the walk. Who was she matched to? Were they not compatible?” Finch blinked a few times before realizing that his eyes were indeed watering. What *had* Max been fed? The scent was something that could be used as a weapon if needed.

“She was matched to Zane,” Shame admitted quietly.

“Oh.”

“I know what you are thinking and I agree. It will be hard to forget that piece of information when I meet her.”

Finch nodded, understanding Shame’s position. Zane had been one of his close friends and died in the last attack on the ship. Shame and Zane had been housed in the same barracks together when younger and had always been close like true blood siblings. When the news of Zane’s death had reached Shame, the man had let tears fall in front of some of the other warriors. A weakness that many had never seen before.

“He would be happy that you are going to take care of what had been his intended match, Shame. He trusted you with his life when you worked together. It is only right that he would trust you with what would have been his wife as well.”

Shame shook his head sadly, “It is something that I never expected but hope I can get past. Honestly, my first instinct was to deny the match.”

“What changed your mind?” Finch sighed in relief as they reached his apartment door. Moving his hand out from under Max, he scanned his band on the pad next to the entry.

“Kaine told me that she was in danger if she stayed on Earth. Her previous mate is dangerous and has not been kind to her. The human authorities are not able to keep her safe and I cannot let her become harmed...Zane would not want that.”

The men walked into the apartment as Finch let Shame’s words sink in.

“Max!” Finch looked up with a smile as Claudia rushed toward them as they entered. “Come here, baby. I missed you so much.” Reaching out and practically snatching the baby from him, Claudia did not even acknowledge the smell permeating from her son.

“You may not want to—” Shame started.

“What?” Claudia asked, confused, before looking down at Max. “Oh, do you have a poopy diaper?”

“How did you not smell that the minute we entered?” Shame shook his head at her, moving as far away from the baby that the entry way would allow.

“Don’t be such a baby.” Claudia smacked kisses all over Max as he squirmed and giggled. Taking the bag from Shame, she moved to the center of the living room and prepared to change his diaper on his floor.

“Are you going to do that on the floor?” Shame asked, horrified. “Right here? In front of us?”

“Ummm...yeah.” Claudia looked around, her confusion at his reaction almost comical.

“Claudia, this is Shame.” Finch introduced them as he watched Claudia quickly undoing snaps and something that sounded like Velcro. “You move too fast for me to learn how to do this in the future.”

“You actually want to do that?” Shame had covered his nose with the crook of his arm, so the words were muffled.

“I am his father, so yes, I will need to learn how to take care of him.”

Finch noticed that at his words, Claudia stilled for a moment before smiling down at the baby and continuing to change him.

“You’re such a good boy, aren’t you?” She cooed before snapping his outfit back up. “I want to give him a bath after he eats and get him changed. There is no point putting on a clean outfit before he eats.”

“That makes sense,” Finch admitted. He wanted to hold Max again but it looked like Claudia was going to keep him a little while longer.

“I need to report back to the bay. Here are the items that I was told to deliver.” Shame handed the seat to Finch and started backing toward the door.

“Thank you for assisting me today.”

Shame bowed shortly to them before leaving.

Finch turned around to see Claudia standing in the middle of the room, a contented Max cuddled against her breast.

“Now what?” Claudia asked the very question that Finch had been thinking.

“I do not know,” he answered with an awkward smile.

“Well, I guess the two of you have met.” Claudia nodded down at the baby.

“Yes, he is a strong boy.” Finch met Claudia in the center of the room. “He is also happy and he leaks quite a bit.”

Claudia chuckled and her eyes seemed to sparkle as she looked up at him. “He is and he totally does. What do you think?”

It wasn’t until Finch saw that Claudia was biting her lip that he realized how nervous she must be.

“He is wonderful but I have quite a bit to learn,” Finch admitted with a reassuring smile.

“We both do.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Finch watched closely while Claudia explained all of the items in the Max's bag. As he listened to her carefully, he watched her multitask with Max in one arm. Her attention was not only on the task at hand but also somehow on her son. Every once in a while she would reach up and grip his small hand or pat his back as she held him to her. It was interesting to watch her be able to manage caring for him as well as running through what he should know with what seemed like little effort.

Finch was not too proud to admit that he would need more practice before he would be able to handle the baby as well as another task simultaneously. Max seemed as if he needed every bit of his attention when Finch had been caring for him. The only time that he had relaxed slightly had been when the boy had been sleeping on his lap during their shuttle ride. And even then, Finch had been keenly aware of what he was doing... even if it had simply been dozing in his arms. Every movement that Finch had made was calculated so he did not wake up his son. Claudia moved and managed the boy as if it was second nature to her.

"What is that?" Finch frowned at the device that Claudia moved to the side of the bag.

"It's his nose sucker." Claudia held it out for Finch to take from her hand.

Waving her offering off, he tucked his hands behind his back so she did not try to pass him the object again. "Why would you suck his nose?" Finch could hear the horror in his voice as he asked the question.

"Because he can't blow it yet." Claudia tried to hide a smile, but Finch saw her amusement.

“That is...interesting.” Finch started to look for another item to ask a question about. Hopefully if he did not allow Claudia to explain how it worked he would not have to learn how to use it.

Before he could ask about another item, the sound of the ship's alarm blared loudly.

“What is that?” Claudia jumped where she was standing, and covered Max's ears so the noise was muffled.

Finch rushed to the screen by the front door. “It is the ship alarm.” He quickly clicked through the screens, “There has been a breach in the docking bay.”

“Weren't you just in the docking bay? What does that mean?” Claudia shushed Max as he started to fuss.

“I need to go...” Finch started out the door but stopped suddenly. “What am I doing? I cannot leave you unprotected.”

Finch closed the door and hit the red button next to the screen.

“What did you just do?” Claudia asked, moving closer to him.

“I secured the door. Normally it would allow entry to anyone that I had given clearance to as long as they use their band to enter, the secure setting does not allow any entry unless it is cleared from the inside. It is a new precaution that has been put in place since our last attack,” Finch explained. Touching the pad, he hit a button that brought up a screen.

“Is that the hallway?” Claudia asked, squinting at the image.

“Yes, we do not have those holes that Poppy said humans have on their doors so we installed video cameras to monitor the corridors.” Finch pointed out which buttons he used to bring up the live feed. “These are the symbols you need to push to view the entry. Can you remember that?”

“I think so, why?”

“If I am ever gone from the apartment and you hear that alarm, I want you to secure the door and do not open it for anyone but myself. Understand?” Finch wanted to make sure that Claudia agreed before leaving the keypad.

“Yes, I understand.”

Finch nodded at her. “Good, let me check the security broadcast and see if there is an explanation as to what is happening. Go ahead and try to calm Max down.” Finch gestured toward the still fussing baby with a reassuring smile.

“Are we safe?” Claudia’s voice relayed her concern. A concern that Finch never wanted her to feel.

“You will always be safe with me. I promise.” As she moved away from the door, Finch started scanning the emergency codes listed on the ship’s status.

His eyes widened as he read the last line. “That cannot be.”

“What’s going on?” Claudia’s question carried from the living area where she was rocking Max on her lap. The end of her sentence came out loud and clear and the alarm was silenced over the speakers.

“I am not sure, but the broadcast says that a Phaeton has been recovered.” Finch was stunned at the news.

“What does that mean?” Claudia’s curiosity broke through Finch’s disbelief.

“Taron...we saw his shuttle explode. The ship alert is relaying that he has landed a shuttle in the docking bay.”

“But you saw him die?”

“It is a long story, but his shuttle was targeted recently as it was leaving to deliver prisoners to the mining colony. It was attacked and witnesses reported it exploded, killing all on board...we were not able to recover any survivors.”

“Well then how is he landing right now?”

That is the question Finch had as well.

“I do not know.” Finch watched the camera outside the door as Paine approached the entry. Pressing the button to allow voice interaction, Finch addressed the warrior, “Yes?”

Paine made eye contact with the camera that Finch was watching. His gaze unflinching, he nodded in greeting. “The council requires your presence. I am here to keep your bride company.”

Finch looked behind him to Claudia sitting on the couch with his son cuddled on her lap. He did not like the idea of leaving her alone with Paine, but also did not see an alternative if the council was ordering him to appear. It wasn’t as if he didn’t trust Paine. He trusted the warrior as much as any of his other brothers. If he could describe what he felt...honestly, it felt like extreme possessiveness.

Paine was a single male who was assigned a much higher position than him on the ship.

Finch had been stripped of his duties on the ship as punishment for his actions.

Right now, Paine was definitely a more appealing candidate for a mate than he was. Finch had been hoping to have some time alone with Claudia to get her used to their new family unit. Leaving her alone with a higher ranked warrior who happened to be on the hunt for a bride...well, it was not pleasant to say the least.

Knowing that he would not be able to protest Paine's assignment, Finch unlocked the door for it to open.

"Finch." Paine bowed shortly before entering the apartment.

"Any idea on the status of Taron?" Finch asked, hoping for some good news.

"None so far. The council had a heavy guard meet the ship in the bay after it was evacuated. The shuttle was checked for explosives but none were found. They are now going over it to look for listening devices. Taron is healthy but looks as though he has gone through hell to get back here. You will be briefed as soon as they have more information." Paine moved farther into the apartment, only stopping when he noticed Max on Claudia's lap.

"Is that the child spoke of earlier?" Paine kept his distance while asking the question.

"Yes, this is Max." Claudia bounced her knee, causing the boy to babble. "Max this is Paine. He's a nice warrior and it looks like he will be keeping us company for a bit."

Claudia made the statement with her eyes on Finch. Giving her a sad smile, Finch nodded his head at her words. "I am sorry. It looks like my presence is requested in the council chambers. I will be back as soon as possible."

Claudia leaned down and kissed Max's head. "I understand. When you get back, we will go over how to use the nose sucker."

It took Finch a second to realize that Claudia was teasing him. Chuckling softly, he shook his head at her. "That is one item that I would be grateful to never use."

"Nose sucker?" Paine's broke into the moment that the couple was having.

“Do not ask.” Finch grimaced, trying to hold back a gag at the thought of the item. What humans do for their babies goes a little too far.

“I will stay with Claudia until you get back.” Paine sat down on the chair opposite his bride and folded his arms across his chest as if he were a statue.

“I will try to be back quickly.” Finch walked to where his family was sitting and leaned down to kiss the top of Claudia’s head. It was a move that he had seen on many of the videos that Poppy and her sister had made him watch. It was also an action that seemed to come naturally to him...at least in regard to Claudia. Finch was quickly coming to realize that he felt the need to be touching her as often as possible. Even if the contact was as innocent as a kiss to the top of her head, it comforted him to perform the action.

“We will be waiting.” Claudia raised Max’s baby fist and gave him a slight wave as he walked out the door.

Claudia sat with Max on her lap quietly for a few moments before he started squirming that he wanted down.

Lowering him to floor in front of her, she grabbed one of his toys from the diaper bag and set it in front of him. Hoping to keep his attention on his toy rather than him exploring, she shook the ball until the bell jangled inside.

“He cannot walk yet?”

“Not yet, his legs are strong, but he has no balance. He still tips over sometimes just sitting down.” Max started to tip to one side. Scooting off the couch, Claudia adjusted the boy until he was in the circle of her legs.

“He is much smaller than I had thought he would be.” Paine leaned forward so his elbows were on his knees as he observed Max from his position on the chair.

“Well, keep in mind that humans aren’t as big as you guys and it makes sense. His dad was just under six feet tall and his mom was shorter than me.” Claudia pointed out. Looking up she studied Paine for a moment.

“What’s your deal?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, startled.

“Wheaton told me that you are one of the higher ranked guards, right?” At his nod, Claudia continued, “So why are you assigned to me and not to one of the other brides? I figure that Poppy is more important than I am, especially since she is pregnant. Why are you here instead of with her?”

Claudia kept a hold of his gaze as he watched her. Raising her eyebrow, she waited for him to answer her.

“I was assigned to you by the council.” Paine’s answer was short and did little to placate her.

“Why?” Claudia wasn’t going to let him off that easy.

“Why so many questions?” Paine fired back. His expression gave nothing away.

Claudia shrugged, picking up the ball in front of Max and shaking it again. “I don’t like being kept in the dark and I have a feeling there is something going on that has to do with me.”

“The council wants to make sure you are safe. You barely escaped with your life on Earth and there may be a threat to you depending on what you may know about the explosion.”

“I’ve already told Wheaton that I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.... I wasn’t lying,” Claudia let out a deep sigh. The situation was overwhelming.

“It is better not to take chances with your safety. Like you said, I am a high-ranked guard. Your safety is guaranteed with my presence and that is their concern right now. But, that is good.”

“What is good?” Claudia asked confused.

“That you were not lying. The council does not take kindly to liars.” The warning was clear in Paine’s words.

Claudia let silence fall over the room. What Paine had told her was spoken without any emotion, but still held the hint of a threat. There was definitely more to his guarding her than he was letting on. Hopefully, when Finch got back, he would be able to fill her in on what was going on. This cloak and dagger shit was getting real old real quick.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Shushing Max as she laid him down in the travel bassinet, Claudia held her breath as he shifted to get comfortable. His small mouth was open slightly as he slept on. Pulling a light blanket over him, she waited for a moment before moving away.

Paine was still sitting in the living room, most likely watching the door and waiting for her to reappear. His presence seemed more like guarding a prisoner than guarding someone for their own safety. Claudia was definitely going to talk to Finch about it to see if she could weasel any information from her new hubs.

Pushing her hair out of her face, Claudia paced quietly for a few moments. She would kill for a cigarette right now, or a drink. Hell, give her a smoke *and* a drink and she would be the happiest woman in the world. She wasn't a regular smoker by any means, but there were times in life when you had that one vice that helped you cope and this was one of those times. She didn't even smoke enough to keep a pack around, but her neighbor did. Every so often, she would bum one off her to relax at night, generally after working on bills on payday. It was either that or lose her mind.

Figuring that she might as well make good use of her time, Claudia moved to the packages on the floor of the bedroom. She had ordered some clothes as well as items that they would need for Max. Might as well take this time to go through what had arrived, she thought. Picking up one box, she hefted the weight in her arms until she had a good grip on it before moving to the door.

“I can help with that.” The loud whisper almost caused her to drop the box then and there.

“Thanks, but I got it,” Claudia stage whispered back. Gesturing with her chin to where Max was sleeping she said quietly, “I was going to go through this in the living room and start organizing stuff. Want to grab another box for me?”

“Of course.” Paine moved quietly as he picked up one of the larger boxes.

Claudia set the box down on top of the coffee table in front of the couch. “I think this one is baby supplies.”

“I did not realize they needed so many items to survive.” Paine set his down on the floor before looking back at the bedroom door. “I can get the others as well.”

“Let’s do this a couple at a time. No need to drag all of them out here, especially if they are clothes that I’ll just need to put away in there later.” Claudia opened the top and gasped before quickly closing it.

“Is everything all right?” Paine moved close to the box as if he were going to open it himself.

“Ummm...yeah. This must be something Finch ordered.” Tucking the top closed so it did not open again, she moved the box out of her way and into a corner of the living room.

From what she had glimpsed in Finch’s order, she was going to have quite a few questions for her new “husband”. In the few seconds that she had to absorb what she had seen, Claudia had recognized a length of rope that looked suspiciously similar to what she had been tied up with previously. A few of the other items that were on the top of the stash included dildos and plugs that she had always been curious about, but never confident enough to buy herself.

Claudia felt her face heat at the thought of her new spouse using those items on her...apparently the rope that he had bound her with earlier was not something he was unfamiliar with.

Pointing to the box that Paine had moved for her earlier, she asked him, “Hopefully that one has the food in it. Max is going to want to eat when he wakes up from his nap.” Claudia gave an inner sigh of relief when Paine was distracted from her previous reaction. That would have been an embarrassing conversation if he had pushed to find out what was in the box

that Finch had delivered. Fingers crossed, there weren't any more surprises hiding in the rest of the packages.

Paine opened the larger box that he had carried, pulling out different package he started reading off labels. "Wipes, bibs, and something called baby puffs?"

"Awesome." She opened the smaller box nestled within the larger cardboard bin. Claudia shook the canister at him. "Max loves these things. His favorite is apples and cinnamon, but I try to sneak in the garden vegetable also."

"Why not just feed him vegetables?" Paine's voice was genuinely curious.

"He doesn't have teeth yet. He just sucks on the puffs until they dissolve. I guess if I had time I could puree veggies and feed them to him, but this is more of a snack that he can have on the go versus a meal." Claudia took the cans out and moved to the kitchen.

"Is there a reason that you are not using the food generator for his meals? Is the technology not able to synthesize these items?" Paine asked, looking at all of the jars and cans she was unpacking.

There were a few cabinets that were around the area. Opening some of the doors she saw that a majority of them were empty. Stacking them up, she grinned when she saw Paine studying the small box of baby food jars. "When the girls were showing me around earlier it was something we were wondering about too. Poppy wanted to make sure we covered our bases and had food on hand in case the machine wasn't able to make the baby food I needed. Max is pretty picky, and I didn't want to take the chance of him having a meltdown if we couldn't get him his puffs or little yogurt melts."

Paine looked over at the food generator as if he were thinking. "I guess that makes sense. I assume it can handle replicating anything you ask it for but it has never been programmed with these options before so that is something that should be brought to the attention of the engineers responsible for updating its software. I will make a note to get that taken care of."

"I appreciate it, Poppy mentioned it also but didn't know who we needed to talk to about it," Claudia said gratefully.

"I am assuming you want these as well." Handing them over, Claudia arranged them, the task of organizing helping to distract her from what the

other items Finch had ordered.

She was going to have quite an interesting conversation with her hubby when he got back.

Turning around, she bumped into Paine as he stood behind her with the rest of the food from the box.

“Sorry.” She counted the jars to make sure she had enough until she was able to order again.

“Can I ask you a few questions while we work?” Paine passed her a smaller package containing the baby cereal.

“Sure.” Claudia looked over her shoulder at him as she stacked the items.

“Walk me through your last day at work,” Paine requested.

“It was like any normal day. I got there as everyone was starting to go home and clocked in before grabbing my cart,” Claudia explained, not knowing what he wanted her to say.

“From the reports, you normally arrived after a majority of the workers at the Intake Center had already left. Was that day different?” Paine opened another box and started moving items around.

“I guess I got there maybe fifteen minutes earlier than normal.” Claudia frowned, trying to remember even the small details. It seemed like forever ago when it had actually only been a few days.

“Why did you arrive early?”

Claudia took the items he was holding out and turned back around to the cabinet. “I left earlier than normal so I could get gas on the way and traffic was light so I ended up getting there early. I remember looking at the timeclock when I swiped my badge and noticed that it wasn’t time for me to clock in that day but figured I could just leave a few minutes early so I didn’t go over my time.”

“Why do you arrive when everyone is leaving?” Paine’s questions were not digging, merely curious.

“Because I clean, and the company doesn’t want the vacuum going when everyone is working. Plus, it’s easier to move around the cleaning cart when the place is empty and I don’t have to worry about running over anyone’s toes.” Claudia turned and leaned against the counter behind her.

“Did you say hello to anyone that day before they left? Have any conversations or interact with any of the workers?” Paine folded his arms over his chest, watching her carefully.

Claudia thought for a few moments, closing her eyes to try to picture the time and place he was asking her about.

“I said hello to the guard at the gate and asked him how he was. I think his name is Phil.” Claudia started to go through everything that she could recall from the moment she pulled past the security shack. “I swiped my card and security checked my bag.”

“They checked your bag? Is that normal?”

“Yeah, they have everyone go through a metal detector at the front entrance and then search your bag or purse. I normally carry a backpack. It’s easier when you have a baby to just carry a gigantic bag that holds all the crap you need than carrying both a tiny purse and a baby bag.” Claudia shrugged.

“What else?” Paine moved away slightly before nodding his head toward the living area. “Do you want to sit while we go through your day? It might be better if you were relaxed.”

Claudia agreed and moved out of the kitchen and into the living room. Leaning her head back against the couch, she closed her eyes and tried to remember every single step of her shift at the Intake Center. “Okay, guard shack and Phil...metal detector with bag search.” Claudia realized she probably sounded crazy, but it was the same method she used when trying to find her keys when she misplaced them. An out loud step-by-step recall of what she had done was the only way to find something missing, even if what was missing was a memory and not her keys or phone.

“I grabbed my headphones and phone so I could listen to my music while I cleaned.”

“So you do not pay attention to what is around you while you work?” Paine’s voice sounded incredulous, as if he had never been unaware of his surroundings before.

“Listen, buddy. I clean toilets and vacuum a pretty much empty building at night to pay my bills. There isn’t much I need to pay attention to while I work, and honestly the music makes everything go by faster. It’s not normal for things to go boom at my place of employment,” Claudia snapped. The line of questioning from Paine was starting to piss her off even though she knew that it was something he was probably supposed to do. Hell, if she was able to help find out who had killed those poor people, she would do it

gladly. She just didn't need any snarkiness coming from her big bad guard while she did it.

"Sorry, I forget sometimes that the human world is different from our own. Please continue," Paine apologized, his posture relaxing as he sat back in his chair.

"Okay. Music and headphones on, and then I walked to get my cart out of the supply closet."

Paine interrupted her before she could continue, "What floor is that on?"

"It was on the fifth floor. Why?" Claudia raised her eyebrows in question.

"Just want to make sure that I am following along. Was there anyone working on that floor when you retrieved your supplies?"

"There were a couple of office workers." Claudia bit her lip, trying to remember who exactly she had seen. "There was an older lady. I think she is a bride liaison and then a couple of clerks that do the paperwork and data entry. Most of them were turning off their computers and getting their stuff gathered up as I walked down the hallway."

"Is that normal?"

"The clerks yes, I normally get there as they are still getting their stuff together. The liaison lady is normally gone and her office door closed before I ever get there. The one time I ran into her she was kind of bitchy, so I try to avoid her if possible."

"Why?"

"I cleaned her office once and apparently the trash bag split right up the side. It created a mess and she flipped out before I could tell her it was an accident." Claudia shook her head at the memory. "The other ladies on that floor didn't like her much either. They had a few pretty interesting nicknames for her that I overheard."

"Anyone else? Any guards or someone you didn't recognize?" Paine's asked using a tone she would expect a therapist to use when asking a patient questions.

"No, not that I remember." Claudia chewed on her nail as she tried to wrack her brain. "I refilled my paper towels and started cleaning the office closest to the elevator."

"And then what?"

Claudia sat up straight in her seat, "Wait a minute, my cart!"

"What about your cart?" Paine asked, his tone sharp.

“My cart was missing a bunch of supplies. All of the paper products were gone. My towels, toilet paper, even the trash bags were gone.”

“Could another cleaning person have moved them?”

“I don’t see why. The day custodian has a cart, but it is smaller and he keeps it on the first floor by the guard station so he wouldn’t have needed to get anything from mine.” Claudia shook her head at Paine. “Anyways, I am responsible for all of the items I stock and use. The cleaning company checks off all of my supplies to make sure that the staff isn’t stealing toilet paper and stuff so I always make sure that everything is accounted for and noted before I leave. I jotted down what was missing on the supply sheet in the closet and texted my boss what was gone also so they didn’t think I was skimming stuff off their dime.”

“Anything else missing?” Paine’s voice was contemplative as he digested the information she had just given him.

“Some of the bottles had been moved around but nothing else was gone. I made sure to check everything before I started because I didn’t want to be docked pay for stuff that someone else had taken.” Claudia continued to recount her normal cleaning schedule, and then remembered one more thing. “The older lady that was working didn’t leave until I was almost done on that floor. I remember asking her if I could change out her trash, and she told me she was on the phone and just get it the next day.”

“Was her office open?”

“No, I had seen her go in earlier, but she closed the door and didn’t come back out until I was finishing up. I thought she had already left and tried to open the door, but it had been locked from the inside. I just figured she had closed it so she didn’t hear me running the vacuum. When I realized it was locked, I knocked and she answered through the door, ‘just get the trash tomorrow—I still have work to finish up,’” Claudia recalled, amazed she hadn’t remembered that tidbit before now.

“And that was not normal for her?”

“Oh no. Don’t get me wrong. I’m sure she is a great worker. Her office is always organized, and I don’t ever see even so much as a paperclip littering the floor. She just seems like the type of person to be the first one out of the door at the end of the day. She isn’t too chipper when she is there and from what I’ve heard she complains about anything and everyone she can.”

“What is this worker’s name?” Paine was tapping on an electronic tablet that he had picked up from the table.

“Ummm...I don’t really remember. If it helps I think it began with an ‘E.’ Maybe Ellen or Eve or something like that.” Claudia flinched at the look of disappointment that Paine shot her. “I can try to think on it. I seriously never interacted with her other than switching out the trash, and after she reamed me that one time for the bag incident, I tried to avoid her whenever possible.”

“If you were to look at employee photos would you be able to identify her?”

“Yeah, you don’t really forget the face of someone who screamed at you to the point that spit flew out of their mouth.” Claudia explained as she recalled that incident.

Paine started to say something else, but his words were stopped when they both heard the tone at the door beep. Before either one of them could stand, Finch was striding through the door.

Paine stood instantly, his stance formal with his hands tucked behind his back. “What did you find out?”

Finch let out a long sigh before rubbing his palm down his face, “Taron was rushed to medical before I could talk to him. The docs think he may have internal injuries and he is being treating in a med bed.”

“Injuries from what?” Paine asked the question that Claudia had been thinking.

“We are not sure. The council had barely asked him anything before he collapsed in the meeting chambers. It looks as if we will be waiting for our answers after all. Rodin believes that he may be in the med center for a few cycles.” Finch sat down on the couch next to Claudia before looking around the room. “Where is the baby?”

Claudia felt her heart warm at the fact that he noticed Max was missing. “He’s napping for a bit before dinner. He had a busy day so he crashed pretty quickly after you left.”

Paine walked toward the door, “I will leave the two of you alone now.” Pausing for a moment, he turned back toward Claudia, “I will organize a list of employee photos for you to look over as soon as I am able.” He didn’t wait for a reply before stepping through the door.

“What was he talking about?” Finch leaned his head back against the headrest on the couch to ask the question, his posture relaxed even though his voice was not.

“I went through my last day at work again and remembered one of the employees acting weird, I told Paine about it and he wants me to try to identify her,” Claudia explained, sounding tired.

“What else did the two of you do while I was gone?”

Claudia hiked her thumb over her shoulder to point out the empty boxes stacked by the counter in the kitchen. “Unpacked baby stuff and stocked the cabinets.”

Remembering what she had found in the first box, Claudia felt her face heat.

“Finch?” Her voice cracked on his name.

“Yes?”

“One of the boxes I opened had some stuff in it that I didn’t order.” Claudia knew that her cheeks had to be red but there was no way in hell she was going to look at him while she brought up his box of sex toys.

“What was in it, Claudia?”

Claudia picked up on the amusement immediately. Apparently, he thought her imitation of a beet was funny.

“I think you know what was in it,” Claudia answered back, sneaking a look at him from the corner of her eye.

Finch met her gaze with unflinching heat. The look of desire she saw in his eyes transported her back to the dirty memories she had relived earlier that day.

Claudia braced herself when Finch sat up straighter on the couch.

“We probably need to have a talk.” His words low as he continued to stare at her.

“Yeahhhhhh...I think we do.”

Standing up slowly, Finch walked toward the box that she had sat in the corner of the room. Picking it up, he moved until he could place it on the table in front of the couch. Claudia eyed it as if Finch had placed a container filled with poisonous snakes in her lap.

Finch moved to crouch in front of her, moving her focus from the package to him. Meeting his gaze, she bit her lip at his next words.

“I promise you that the items in this box will only bring you pleasure. They are for your sake as well as my own. Do you trust me?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Do I trust you?” Claudia’s voice cracked at the end of her question. “I barely know you—”

“But do you trust me?” Finch repeated, never breaking eye contact.

Claudia sat silent for a moment. For some reason she did trust him... which was totally crazy. The trust she had in him was almost instinctual when normally someone needed to show they had earned her trust. Claudia knew in this instance she needed to go with what her gut was telling her.

“Yes, I trust you.”

At her words, Finch let out a satisfied sound. “I vow that I will never break that trust.” Nodding to the box with a tip of his head he kept his gaze on her. “Explain to me what you felt when you saw the items I ordered.”

Claudia felt her eyes involuntarily skitter away from him before being pulled back when he squeezed her hands in his own. “Eyes on me, sweetheart.”

“I saw the rope and it made me nervous.” Her answer was the bare minimum of what she saw during her quick peek in the box.

“Anything else?” Finch probed gently.

“Just some glimpses of a couple things.”

“And how did they make you feel?” Finch let go of her hands to reach back and open the box. The sound of the cardboard sliding open making her shiver.

“I was embarrassed...Paine was standing next to me and I thought I was opening up a box of baby stuff. I almost swallowed my own tongue when I saw what was in that box.” With a tip of her chin, she gestured to the box that he was rooting through. “So, you’re into rope and...stuff?”

Pulling out the items one by one, Finch laid them on the table. He watched her as he lined up each of the toys. "I prefer to be in control, if that is what you are asking."

"I don't want to be hit," Claudia said quickly, slightly panicked when she saw what he was reaching for.

"I would never hit you," Finch answered steadily. Picking up a suede-covered paddle, he held it out to her. "Feel this."

When Claudia reached out to run her fingers over the soft material, he turned it so the paddle handle was facing her. "Go on, hold it."

Taking the paddle from him, she watched his face. "This is for hitting, isn't it? You just said that you would never hit me," she stuttered.

"Spanking is not hitting." Folding his fingers over hers, he tightened her grip on the handle. "I would like to use this to spank you sometimes...it would make the skin on that gorgeous ass of yours warm, red, and more sensitive to my touch. Does that appeal to you?"

Claudia swallowed loudly. She wasn't a prude by any means. A previous boyfriend had spanked her, but it had been in the heat of the moment and with a bare hand. Comparing that instance to this one was vastly different. The previous one had been spontaneous...what Finch was suggesting was so far out her norm that the thought thrilled but also scared her.

"Yes, but it also makes me nervous," she answered honestly.

"What about it makes you nervous?" Finch took the paddle from her and placed it on the table next to the rope.

"All of it," Claudia said, unable to pinpoint one reason.

"Being out of control?" Finch's voice was soft and understanding as he offered her excuses.

"Yes. What if I don't like it?"

"If you do not like it then we will not do it again. Simple as that," Finch answered without pause. "Everything that we do will be at your pace."

Claudia closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. "Is this something you...need?" she asked. Even though she had never dabbled in kink before, she had read enough to know that some people needed it to be fulfilled in their sex lives.

"Claudia, look at me." Finch waited for her to meet his eyes before continuing. "The only thing that I am finding I need is you. I am sure that if you decide to indulge me then it is something that you would enjoy. My

goal is not to cause pain, but instead heighten the pleasure that we experience. I do not need ropes and paddles to feel pleasure, but I believe that it is something we would both enjoy immensely if you would give it a chance.”

When Claudia started to speak, Finch held up his hand. “We can start with whatever you want and I will respect the boundaries you set. I would never break your trust or cause you intentional distress.”

“I know that,” Claudia said truthfully. She somehow knew that he would never willingly hurt her. And the idea of him spanking her did cause her insides to warm.

“So, I ask again...Do you trust me?”

“Yes.” The word came out as a whisper but had the effect of a shout.

Finch tilted the side of his mouth in a relieved smile. “Do you have any questions before we talk about some of these items?”

“Actually, I do.” Pointing to the coil of rope that was sitting to the far right, Claudia asked, “So, I guess the rope you had in your room wasn’t there by coincidence, am I right?”

Finch chuckled under his breath, “Nothing I do is ever a coincidence, and you are correct. I had picked up some items in the bazaar at the Pleasure Sector on my last visit. The rope that I used to secure you with had been one of those things. You have to admit that it came in handy.”

Claudia smiled when she realized he was teasing her. “Hardy har.”

“Does the rope worry you?” Finch asked point-blank.

Claudia thought for a minute, wanting to give him the most honest answer possible. “Not really, it does make me a tiny bit nervous but nothing I can’t handle. I guess understanding why you tied me up has helped. Everything that you have done so far has been to protect me...it took me a little while to see it that way, but we’re on the same page.”

Claudia watched a look of relief come over Finch’s face. Reading his expressions was becoming easier and easier the more time they spent together. “How I got here isn’t something I’m going to hold against you, I promise. That’s not the type of person I am. It just took me a bit to come to terms with everything that happened. I figure we should start this relationship how we mean to go on, with complete honesty.”

Finch sat next to her and picked up her hands again, “I need to tell you what the council has asked of me—”

“They want you to find out answers, right? I’m not stupid, Finch.” Claudia watched him closely.

Without blinking, Finch nodded. “I would never think that... and yes, there are still some that have suspicions that you were involved in the bombing.”

“And you? What do you think?” Claudia held her breath as she waited for him to answer.

“I believe you when you say that you did not have any idea of what was happening.” When she let out a sigh of relief, Finch continued. “But you may have information in your memories that you may not even be aware of.”

“That’s why Paine was here asking me questions.”

“Yes, he has been used before in interrogation and deemed successful in most cases. The council needs to know what you may have seen...for your safety as well as others.”

“For my safety?” Claudia’s voice came out frightened even to herself.

“I do not mean to alarm you but the fact that your dwelling was compromised on Earth means that they tried to strike at you and failed. If they believe you know information about the traitors, then there is nothing they will not do to keep you silent. Having Paine guard you is not only to gather information, but also for your safety. His fighting partner, Rowe, is also an extremely skilled warrior. Neither of the men have ever failed on a protection mission.... I admit if I had to choose guards for you, then those two warriors would have been the men I assigned.”

“Well, this conversation has officially turned into a downer,” Claudia mumbled.

“Then let me distract you.” Finch reached out and pulled her up from her seat on the couch.

Claudia couldn’t stop the smile that she felt creep across her face. Following his lead, she allowed him to pull her close and into his arms. His hands resting on her hips as he tugged her into the curve of his body.

Letting out a tired sigh, Claudia rested her cheek against the leather front of his tunic. Breathing in his smell, she relaxed into his embrace. Instant comfort swept through her being as well as the slow burn of desire. If her hazy memories of their time together were as hot as she recalled, she was

anxious to find out if having her wits about her would make it even that much better.

“What is that smell?” Finch had stooped down slightly to nuzzle her neck.

“Probably baby lotion.” Claudia made a face, “Sorry, that’s not very sexy, is it?”

“It is a nice smell.” Finch chuckled and moved to rest his chin on the top of her head. “I much prefer this smell over the other ones that I have experienced emanating from his tiny body.”

“Ummmm, yeah. You have a point.” Leaning back to look at his face as they swayed to imaginary music, Claudia raised her eyebrows at Finch. “You know, I haven’t dated in a while. Even before I got custody of Max I was busy with school, so dating was pushed to the backburner. After my brother died, I decided to make him my main focus. I became a single mom overnight.”

When Finch just stared at her without saying anything, she continued, “I just wanted to warn you that I’m out of practice with the whole dating bit.”

The last thing Claudia expected was to hear the rumbling laugh come from the big body she was snuggled against.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asked, offended by the sound.

“Do you realize that you just said you have not had a chance to date to someone whose race completely lacks females?” Finch asked, obviously trying to keep a straight face. “I have never been in a relationship. The sexual encounters that I have experienced have been scheduled automatically to coincide with my shifts to the Pleasure Sector. Believe me, if there is anyone behind in experience regarding relationships then it would be me and not you.”

“Oh. Well when you put it that way...” Claudia couldn’t help the giggle that bubbled up and out of her. “My god, it’s like the blind leading the blind.”

Pulling her close once again, Finch nestled her into his arms. “Do not worry, we will figure this out.”

Claudia moved her cheek until it was flat against Finch’s chest. Listening to the steady thump of his heartbeat, she relaxed as they swayed back and forth.

“This is nice.” Her words sounded somewhat muffled from her position against him.

“It is,” Finch answered back as his hands crept up and down her back in a soothing motion.

“Finch?” Claudia arched to rub her breasts against the hard torso in front of her. The massage on her back not so soothing any longer.

“Yes.” Finch stopped moving and simply held her as he met her eyes.

“Will you kiss me?” Holding her breath for a moment, Claudia couldn’t believe those words had left her mouth.

“That is something you will never have to ask for.” Eyes darkening, Finch moved his head lower until their breath mingled. Darting out his tongue, Finch swiped it quickly across her lower lip. Tickling the skin, he smiled at her gasp of air.

Without waiting for his next move, Claudia moved her hands to cradle the sides of his face. Pulling him down at the same time as she stood on her tip toes, Claudia locked her lips onto his. Not managing to be as graceful as she would have liked, she felt herself start to lose balance as she tried to maintain contact with his mouth. Before she could step back and regain her footing, Finch crushed her in his arms. Lifting her up against the front of his body, Claudia felt her toes completely leave the floor.

“Oooooomph.” The noise left Claudia’s body as she was squeezed in Finch’s arms. Fitting her mouth against his, Claudia nibbled against the full lips of her new husband. The teasing kisses turning more heated as she became tempted to wrap her legs around his waist.

“Open your mouth,” Finch ordered when he pulled away from her lips for a moment.

Without needing more instruction, Claudia met his open mouth with her own. The intensity of the kiss reminding her of something she had seen before in movies but never experienced for herself until now.

She was *thiiiiis* close to climbing Finch like a spider monkey when a familiar sound interrupted their lip-lock.

Max.

“Noooooooooooo,” Claudia groaned out quietly.

“I take it that means he is finished with his sleep cycle?” Finch asked, his hands still kneading her butt where they had come to rest.

“Yeah, he’s up.” Tilting her head to the side, she listening closely, “and it sounds like he’s hungry.”

Finch lowered her slowly, her body skimming the front of his own until her toes were finally touching the ground again. Claudia felt her face heat at the feel of his erection filling out his leather pants.

“Do not worry, we have all night to finish this,” Finch assured her.

“Only if Max cooperates,” Claudia grumbled. “I really hope you’re ready to be a family man because you’ve just been tossed from the frying pan into the fire.”

Finch followed her into the bedroom. Keeping ahold of her hand, they walked up to the bassinet where Max was lying on his back playing with his feet.

“We got this,” he reassured her with a grin.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I am going crazy, Wheaton,” Finch complained two days later.

“You are not going crazy,” Wheaton answered dryly.

“I am.” Finch ran his hands through his hair as he paced back and forth. “I sleep next to my wife every single night and yet have not had a chance to consummate our marriage.”

Wheaton stopped tying on the tablet on his lap and looked up at his friend. His brows raised in surprise. “Why not?”

“Because we have a son!” Finch snapped, his patience worn completely thin from the strain of the past few days. “Claudia is exhausted by the time we get Max to sleep and when she is rested he is awake again...he has cried almost nonstop the past few nights. I do not understand how his small body can only take small cycles for sleep and keep functioning. It is as if he is running on three hours of sleep before he wakes again and then we start the vicious cycle all over again.”

“Maybe Claudia should take him to the med center—“ Wheaton barely had spoken before he was interrupted by Finch shaking his head. “Why not?”

“Claudia says that he is teething and that is why he is fussy. She gives him some liquid for the pain, but I do not believe it helps much.” Finch flopped down into the leather chair across from his friend. “I did not realize that having a son would be so...disruptive.”

“What did you expect?” Wheaton folded his hands in his lap as he listened to Finch vent.

“I expected a child that would sleep when he was told to, not a child that cried every few hours and needed to be fed in the middle of the night.”

Finch rubbed his knuckles over his eyes, feeling the fatigue of the past few days as well. "I do not understand how Claudia functions. She wakes up more with him than I do, and she still is able to do everything else. Do you know she has been talking about the safety improvements needed on the ship with Poppy and talking to the engineering sector? I do not understand how she does it. I literally almost walked out of our domicile this morning without my breeches on!"

Wheaton sat his tablet to the side and leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "Women are amazing. There is not a day that goes by that Poppy does not stun me with her presence. She is going to be giving birth to our first child soon and I still find her organizing items in my apartment. That woman is a force of nature. Nothing can stop her."

Finch fingered the crease on his leather breeches. "I do not understand how Claudia survived on Earth for so long. She was working two jobs and also taking care of Max. I know that she had help from her friend, Maggie, but I still am not able to comprehend how she was able to manage with so many responsibilities and so little sleep. Is it going to be like this every time we add a child to our family?"

Wheaton nodded, "From what Poppy has explained it is a game changer. Having a child means putting all other needs aside and focusing on loving and caring for your spawn first and foremost."

"Did I just hear you refer to our baby as spawn again?" Poppy's question surprised both of the men.

"I thought you were resting, Little Flower?" Wheaton turned and held out his hand to his wife as she glared at him.

"I was until Finch started whining like a baby and you called our baby something that I have told you before sounds like a monster from a scary movie," Poppy said dryly, not pulling any punches.

"I was not whining," Finch argued.

Poppy rolled her eyes and walked around Wheaton's chair to plop down into her husband's lap. Smiling when his hand automatically cradled her round belly, she repeated herself, "You were totally whining."

"Was not," Finch mumbled, grumpy at both the lack of sleep and sexual frustration he was feeling.

"Were too and you're still doing it." Poppy giggled. "It would be funny if I didn't know that Claudia was feeling the same way."

“She is? What did she say?” Leaning forward, Finch focused his attention on someone who maybe could give him an idea of what his new wife was thinking. He hadn’t been able to pin her down long enough to share a meal with her much less talk.

“She is tired,” Poppy said plainly, telling him something that he already knew firsthand. “Claudia thinks that Max is not only teething but since coming to ship he is out of routine and not sleeping like he should be. Think about it, he’s sleeping in a smaller basinet instead of his own crib and he doesn’t have his normal surroundings. Claudia had always kept everything as routine as she could and then they come here, and it’s a complete switch from everything he had known.”

“What do we need to do?” Finch asked the question aloud although it wasn’t directed at anyone in the room.

“Claudia has actually been working on a solution with Val.” Poppy grinned at the look of surprise on the men’s faces.

“What do you mean?” her husband asked, rubbing over her stomach in a continual motion.

“You remember when we were working on building family apartments on the ship?” Poppy waited for the men to nod. “Well, we have a few that have been finished. They have three bedrooms and have been baby proofed as much as possible. Claudia was going to talk to you later today about moving into one of those that way Max can have his own room and a full-size crib.”

“Thank goodness!” Finch groaned to the ceiling. Leaning forward, he grabbed Poppy’s hand and squeezed it, ignoring the growl that Wheaton released at the physical contact. “You do not know how grateful I am that you started the work on those apartments months ago.”

“Oh, believe me, I know how grateful you are. Remember how I just listened to you bitch and moan while I was trying to nap for the last thirty minutes? Plus, Claudia has already told me thank you more times that I can count. She is about to snap and not only because she is tired. Apparently, you get her worked up and then don’t deliver on the goods. That can only happen so many times before a woman starts watching the forensic channels and imagines killing someone.”

“Wait? What?” Finch asked, confused.

“Let me just say that your wife will be very happy to have a room to sleep in that doesn’t contain her son as well as her husband.” Poppy wiggled her eyebrows at Finch, her eyes dancing with laughter.

“Ohhhh...” Finch finally understood what Poppy was hinting at. “When can we move in, Wheaton?”

“Considering I did not even know that the apartments were available, I will need to check on the status forms and overlook the quarters. I have to make sure that the council approves the new dwelling assignment before it can happen.” Wheaton looked up at the ceiling as if he were figuring out a timeline in his head. “Considering the emotional distress that you are... experiencing as well as Claudia needing a separate sleeping area for her son, I will talk to the council today and see if the approval can be made as soon as possible. Most likely later this afternoon. Does that sound acceptable to you?”

Finch was nodding even before Wheaton had finished speaking, causing Poppy to giggle.

“Let me know as soon as you get approval. I would like to spend the night in our new apartments tonight if possible,” Finch added.

Nodding at the couple snuggled on the chair, Finch stood up to leave. “Wheaton?”

“Yes?” Wheaton asked distractedly while he kissed his wife’s neck, Poppy’s sigh clearly heard all the way to the door where Finch was standing.

“Could you not delay?” Finch interrupted what he was sure would lead to another “nap” for Poppy.

Wheaton rumbled low in his chest before smacking Poppy’s hip. “I have to take care of some things, Little Flower. How about you go and rest for a little while so you are awake when I get back?”

Poppy scooted off his lap, smoothing her long tunic back down over her hips she winked at her husband before waving at Finch. “Bye, Finch.”

“Thank you, Poppy. I appreciate it. I truly do,” Finch repeated as she walked back into the other room.

“It is only because Poppy is good friends with your wife that I am willing to get this done now instead of waiting until after I enjoy my wife.” Wheaton frowned, apparently not at all happy with Finch pushing him to speak to the council immediately.

“I am very grateful. Imagine yourself in my place, sleeping next to your wife for several nights and yet not able to touch her or make noise because you are worried about waking a small screaming human who may or may not have messed his pants so bad that it makes your eyes water and your nose burn.” Finch walked with Wheaton down the hall.

“Now you are exaggerating,” Wheaton huffed, obviously still upset over his time with Poppy cut short.

“I wish I was. Just ask Shame if you doubt what I say. He still has yet to answer my summons to spar. I think he believes I will bring my son and he will have to smell a bad diaper again.” Shaking his head, Finch tapped his band. “Have you heard anything more about Taron’s condition? I am waiting on medical to message me regarding when he will be released, but so far I am still waiting.”

“The council is waiting as well.” Turning the corner, Wheaton turned his tablet toward Finch allowing him to see the status report on Taron.

“He is still requiring a med bed? I thought the damage was supposed to be healed within one to two cycles?” Finch asked, confused as to why their friend was still needing healing time within the medical pod.

“Physically he is healed. However, there is some damage to his brain that the doctors believe was done using electroshock,” Wheaton answered quietly to keep from being overheard by the other warriors passing in the hall.

“As part of the torture he endured?” Finch paused at his own question trying to add up the clues from the information given.

“He will not wake for us to ask him what happened. The scan picked up the damage after it addressed the immediate concern of internal bleeding. What we do know is that whatever happened to Taron was inhumane. Honestly, I am not sure how he was even able to pilot a ship back to us.... He must have used every bit of his focus and strength to come home. We are assuming the shuttle autopilot did a majority of the work, but are surprised he was even to get it on course and engaged to head here.”

“This is a mess,” Finch mumbled, concern for his friend distracting him from his earlier problems.

“It is.” Wheaton nodded at a council member that passed them in the hallway. “By the way, have you had a chance to find out any more information from Claudia about the explosion?”

“Nothing other than what she told Paine regarding the liaison at the office later than usual and her car’s missing items. He is trying to get a roster with employee photos for her to review, but our contacts on Earth are causing problems.”

Wheaton stopped walking and propped his hands on his hips. “What now? I am getting tired of running into problems with the security team on Earth. It is as if they are standing in our way on purpose during this investigation, and I do not know why.”

Finch rubbed his chin. “From what I have heard, they believe they still need to question Claudia and do not want to turn over information until we allow it. Of course, I have been assured that she will be safe during the interrogation, but I do not trust the human security team. Claudia believes it is simply posturing on their part. She said we have stepped on their toes and they are pissed. Whatever that means.”

“I will have Kaine speak to the security team and get the photo identification of the employees. The delay is not doing us any good and I am sure the traitor has used this time to go underground by now.” Wheaton’s tone conveyed his frustration.

“I thought the same thing.” Finch stopped at the door to the council chambers knowing that the council members inside would not welcome him. “Will you be able to request a stay on the change in my assignment to Squadron Two?”

Wheaton shook his head, “We still have no information to help us find the traitor. It is for the best that we wait to negotiate your previous punishment until after that is resolved. At least you are off the hook when it comes to getting information from your wife for the time being. Paine reported that he detected nothing but honesty during his informal interrogation and that has been filed with the council. They are not considering her a threat for the time being, and that is as much as we can do at the moment. Let me work on getting a transfer to the larger apartment approved, and we will revisit your assignment to Two after we know more. Is that acceptable?”

Finch looked around the hall, frustrated by the situation but understanding the position his friend was in. “I have no choice in the matter so I will follow your lead. I just hoped that this change would be the last one we make. I cannot imagine moving Max again and taking him from his new home.”

“For the stability of your family, I will fight for you. Just give me time and be patient.” Wheaton reached out and clasped his hand roughly on Finch’s shoulder.

“I understand and am grateful.” Patting Wheaton on the back, Finch turned to walk away.

“Finch?” Wheaton’s voice rang out over the quiet corridor. “Poppy asked if you would like for us to watch Max during the day sometime soon. That would give me a chance to experience the presence of a small human before my own spawn arrives. Poppy believes that Claudia would benefit from a break as well.”

Finch walked back to Wheaton and surprised the man by pulling him into a hug. Wheaton’s stiff body jarred Finch back into what he was actually doing. Stepping back quickly, he nodded in apology. “I would very much appreciate that.”

Wheaton gave him an amused look and held out his arms as if to ward off another hug. “I can see that. From now on, please keep your displays of appreciation to words and not actions,” he teased.

“Shut up,” Finch mumbled.

“I see you’ve picked up some phrases from my wife and her sister.” Wheaton laughed as Finch stomped away and down the hall. Before he disappeared though Wheaton was awarded with an action he had seen his wife display toward Pixie on more than one occasion. Finch was holding one arm up in the air with his middle finger up. “My wife is not a good influence on you!” Wheaton yelled down the corridor, chuckling when Finch raised his other arm and flipped him off again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Are you sure that we don’t need to move any of the dishes?” Claudia asked as she moved back into the kitchen.

“Positive. Our new quarters will already contain the essentials. We will leave those items here for the next occupant.” Finch carried his box toward the door. “Some warriors will be up with a transport cart to move these to our new apartment soon. Is this all you wanted from the bathroom?”

“Yeah. I already packed my toiletries into the bag. So as long as we grab that, we are golden.” Claudia sat down onto the couch with a groan. “I had hoped to use Poppy’s offer to babysit for something like a date night... instead I have her watching Max so he doesn’t try to dismantle the boxes,” she grumped.

“It would have taken much longer if we had to watch him while we packed. I am sure that she will offer to watch him again,” Finch pointed out as he moved the last box to the front entry.

“I know. I just feel like we haven’t had a chance to...” Claudia trailed off, unsure how to put it delicately.

“I understand what you mean,” Finch took his place beside her on the couch, throwing his arm over her shoulders.

“Once he’s back into a routine, it will calm down. I promise,” Claudia said even though she knew that things would never be calm. Hell, right now she was shooting for things simply being *calmer*.

“It has not been that bad,” Finch lied and then ruined the statement by yawning.

“We are both exhausted. Don’t lie to me.” Teasing him had become something that Claudia loved doing, whether it was joking about their lack

of sleep or walking around in her bra and panties.

"I may be a little tired," Finch admitted. "It reminds me of when I first started guard duty."

"How so?" Claudia rolled her head to the side so she could watch him as they relaxed side-by-side.

"When I was first assigned, I was too afraid to sleep lest I miss a threat. I slept lightly, never really getting the rest that I needed. It was not until more warriors were added to that protection detail that I was able to relax." Finch hugged her close, snuggling into her side.

"I can almost drift off right now," Claudia said softly. The small cocoon they had created on the couch was tempting her into sleep.

"Same here, but the men should be here within a few minutes. It is best to be ready when they arrive so we can get things unpacked before Poppy returns Max to us." Patting her on the shoulder, Finch moved to stand up. Leaving her side cold and bereft feeling, Claudia frowned at her husband.

"Ugh," she grunted, standing up and moving around to keep herself awake.

The tone at the entry chimed. "Here they are now." Finch moved to open the door while Claudia did one last walk through of their small apartment. Finding one box on the bed, she picked it up to carry into the living room.

"This was still in the bedroom." Claudia handed it to Finch when he moved forward to take it from her.

Finch winked at her as he took the weight of the cardboard cube. "I wanted to carry this one myself since it contains some personal items."

Claudia looked at him with confusion before understanding what he was deeming personal items. "Oohhhhhh..."

"We may have time to go through this box before Max gets home later today if we hurry." Finch obviously enjoyed the way her cheeks reddened.

Raising her eyebrow at him, and trying to calm the heat on her face, Claudia hummed a simple, "Uh huh."

"Finch, we have loaded the cart and will move it down to level four as requested. Do you need any assistance in unpacking?" one of the men interrupted from his place at the entry.

Finch kept his eyes on Claudia as he answered the warriors helping them, "I believe that we can unpack on our own. Right, Claudia?"

“Ummm...ye...yeah. We got it,” she stuttered, knowing that if Finch had his way the unpacking would wait and he would take advantage of having a Max-free afternoon.

As the men moved out of the doorway, she heard the hum of the electric cart being used to transport all the boxes to their new apartment.

“Is that floating?” she whispered after staring at the metal slab hauling their possessions down the corridor.

Finch, walking beside her, nodded. “It is better than your squeaky-wheeled cart. Is it not?”

“Holy shit. That’s amazing.” Claudia wanted to go up and inspect the cart but held herself back. The men accompanying them were already amused by her whispered questions. She didn’t want to make more of a spectacle of herself by going up and poking at the thing.

“Before I forget, I need you to go to the med center tomorrow.” Finch interrupted the visions she had running through her head of her surfing down the halls on the floating cart.

Shaking the comical image out of her head, Claudia repeated what he had said in her head. “Why tomorrow?”

“Because you were supposed to go after the paperwork had been signed days ago to get your band and you are stalling for some reason. Want to share why?” Finch stopped in the hallway, causing her to stop walking as well.

“Don’t we need to—” Claudia pointed at the men and her belongings still moving.

“This needs to be done, Claudia. Tell me what problem you have with going to medical.” Finch stared hard at her. His face showed how serious he was.

Damn. She didn’t have a problem with it per say. She was just nervous of what they may find out during her exam.

“Well,” she started and stopped.

“Yes?” Finch asked patiently.

“I was talking to Poppy and she explained how they can tell if I’m pregnant pretty much right away.” Claudia blurted out.

“And?” Finch probed.

“Doesn’t that thought scare the crap out of you? No offense, but if we were pregnant right now I would flip out! I mean Max is not even seven

months old and we haven't been sleeping. Add another baby into the mix and I may need to be medicated." Claudia felt her voice rising along with tension in her body at the thought of a baby on board. "No, I take that back. I will definitely need to be medicated."

"That is your worry?" Finch asked, confused. "But if you are already pregnant then there is nothing that can be done about it now. Why worry over something that may not have happened? Would you not rather know than stay in a constant state of questioning if it has already happened?"

"Well, when you say it like that it makes sense that I should go to medical, but for some reason the thought of keeping my head buried in the sand for now appealed to me a bit more. If I don't know about a baby yet then it hasn't really happened." Claudia argued, stomping her foot.

"That makes no sense."

"Don't look at me like I'm crazy! It makes perfect sense," she snapped.

"Listen, even if you do not *want* to go to medical you still have to. They have your band prepared and you need to wear it on the ship. The sooner the better. Right now, I am not able to check on you throughout the day and it drives me crazy with worry. Especially since there is still a threat to your safety. The band will comfort me with knowing I can see where you are at and that you are healthy."

Claudia stared at Finch, knowing he was right. She had put off the medical center long enough. She still didn't want to know if they had made a baby yet, but understood the need for a band. There had been more than one time that she had needed to move around on the ship and had to wait for her escort to open doors. It wasn't something that was hard but more annoying than anything. Nodding, she rolled her eyes at the look of relief on his face.

"Fine." Her voice curt, not happy that he had won but conceded he had valid points.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Finch asked as they moved down the corridor after their cart.

"Do you want to go with me?" Claudia asked, surprised.

"Yes, I believe so. If you are not pregnant then we can talk to the doctors about a birth control option you are comfortable with," Finch said steadily, not noticing when Claudia stopped in her tracks until he looked over to find her missing. Turning around, he saw her several paces behind him. "Is everything all right?"

“You just said birth control.” Claudia was stunned. “I thought that wasn’t allowed. In fact, the paperwork I read specifically listed it wasn’t allowed.”

Finch walked back to her, still holding that damn box filled with sex toys to his chest.

“We have a young son already. Unless you believe that adding another child right now would be a good idea, then birth control is something we need to discuss with the doctors. Plus, the birth control clause has been modified since it was originally written. I am assuming that you had read the original application and not the most recent changes that were made. The council has decided to let the new couples have some time to adjust before adding to their family. That is the only change they made to the procreation portion of the forms, if you were to get pregnant we would still require the baby to stay within our society. Which brings me back to the question at hand...” He jiggled the box he had in his arms, the items thumping around inside. “I have some condoms in here for when engage in intercourse again, but you may want something more long term until Max is older.”

“You have condoms?” Claudia knew she sounded like a dumb parrot by repeating everything he was saying, but she was stunned by the words coming out of his mouth.

“Of course.” Finch stared at her for a moment, his expression not giving anything away. “Do you want another baby right away?”

Before he even finished his question, Claudia was shaking her head no. “No.”

“Well then why are you surprised?” Finch looked honestly confused.

“I just thought the whole point of the bride thing was so you guys could make a bajillion little Phaeton babies. It’s a complete turnaround from the application that clearly had a specific section on reproduction and how long some birth control options disqualified you from applying. Yet, you’re standing here with a box of sex toys and condoms and telling me that we can wait until *I* decided that another baby is okay and the council is approving it... it blows my mind a little.”

Finch sat the box down on the floor next to where they were standing. “Listen to me very carefully.” Tipping her chin up with his knuckles, Finch moved close enough that she could feel the solid wall of his chest against her front. “Forget anything that you may have read or heard about brides

and what is supposed to happen. Our situation is not the normal one that many of the brides signed up for. We have a son. A baby actually. There is no need for you to feel as if you do not have choice in when we add to our family unit. In fact, you are the one that needs to tell me when you would like to try for more children. That is never a choice that will be taken away from you, do you understand me?"

Finch kept his eyes on hers as she allowed the words to sink in. Nodding, she felt a tear slip down her cheek. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm crying. I guess I'm just relieved. I thought you were going to want a baby right away and I am already so tired with Max and...well, with everything else going on that it worried me more than I realized."

Finch hugged her tight, his arms making her breath squeak from her chest. "Any more questions?"

"No." Looking down to their feet, Claudia giggled at what she saw. The box he had been carrying had popped open, showing a familiar coil of rope sitting right on top. "You may want to close that box before someone sneaks a peek and thinks you're about to kidnap another bride," she teased.

Tucking the box under one arm, Finch moved to hug her close with his free one. "That would never happen, you are already more than a handful."

Claudia bumped her hip into his, enjoying his teasing. "That didn't sound very flattering."

Finch looked down at her and winked, dropping his arm from her shoulder he smacked her on the ass sharply. "Believe me, this is definitely a handful."

"Did you just hint that my ass is big?" Claudia asked, trying to keep the laughter out of her voice.

"Not at all, although I may need to inspect it further just to check on how much of my hand it will fill out." Finch rubbed the spot on her bottom that he had smacked smartly earlier. "Let us hurry, I am wanting to get everything settled before our alone time is over."

Claudia couldn't help the giggles that erupted from her as he grabbed her hand and tugged her down the hallway at a jog.

How had she gotten so lucky?

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I could kiss you!” Claudia was smiling so hard it felt like her face would crack. Leaning toward the screen, she thanked Poppy again. “I mean it. You’re a lifesaver.”

“It’s just one night and you can repay the favor when Poppy Jr. shows up.” Poppy held Max up to the screen so he could wave at Claudia.

“We would have been ready to pick him up earlier, but the crib arrived with the rocking chair and the men thought they knew what they were doing...” Claudia trailed off when she remembered what seemed like hundreds of little wooden dowels spread across the rug on the floor. “I have a feeling that we will need to order an entirely new crib since they mixed up the pieces between the chair and the crib. Since the wood is matching it’s a toss-up what parts go to each.”

“Yikes.” Poppy grimaced at the screen. “That doesn’t sound like fun at all.”

“No joke.” Claudia sighed and her shoulders slumped. “I had such high hopes for today.”

“I know you did, sweetie.” Poppy turned her head and talked to Wheaton for a second. “Wheaton can have someone order duplicates of the furniture and assemble them before they are delivered. Will that help?”

Claudia was nodding her head even before Poppy stopped speaking. “Yes please. It’s not as if I don’t think that Finch can put it together...who am I kidding? That man is a menace when it comes to assembling stuff, do you know he ripped the instructions in half because he said they were lying to him?” Claudia wasn’t able to get through the story without laughing.

Covering her mouth, she tried to muffle the giggles that erupted when she pictured Finch tearing the paper as if it had just personally insulted him.

“He ripped them up? Well, no wonder he hasn’t been able to finish that crib.” Poppy chuckled. “Max has his pajamas in his bag, right?”

“He should have everything he needs but call me if you can’t find something.” Claudia blew kisses at the screen. “Give him lots of kisses for me.”

“I will.” Poppy nodded. “Now go and distract that hunk from destroying any more perfectly good furniture.”

“I will.” After signing off, Claudia pushed her hair back from her face. She could still hear Finch grunting in the other room. Walking toward the Max’s new nursery, she bit her lips to stop the grin that threatened when she saw him in the middle of random pieces of wood.

“Everything okay?” Claudia tried to sound serious and not amused, obviously it didn’t come across that way from the glare that Finch shot her way.

“It is fine. I should be finished soon.” Finch counted out the screws in his hand.

Claudia walked to the rug where he was crouching and took the pieces from him. There was no way he would have this project done soon if at all. “Wheaton is going to order us a new crib and rocker and have it assembled before it is delivered.”

“We need a place for Max to sleep tonight. I do not think I can handle him back in his small cradle for another cycle.” Finch’s weary voice made Claudia want to hug him.

“Don’t worry about that. Poppy is keeping him overnight. They already have the travel bassinet anyway and it’s close to his bedtime. She’s going to feed him dinner, read him a story and put him to bed.”

Finch let out a relieved sigh and relaxed on his haunches. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, she wanted to give us a break. I told her the move was a little... more intense than we expected and she offered to help us out. We will watch their little one overnight to make up for it when the time comes.” Claudia patted Finch on the back when he yawned. “It’s what friends do.”

“That is very nice of her and we will make sure to pay back the favor when needed.”

“Are you hungry? I can get some food ready before we clean up this mess.” Gesturing toward the bits and pieces scattered about, Claudia waited for an answer.

“Go ahead and prepare some food. I will make sure all of the pieces are picked up and disposed of,” Finch murmured, already running his fingers over the rug to check for small parts.

“Don’t be too long.” Claudia moved out of the room and into the kitchen, humming to herself.

The food generator was something that she had a problem getting used to at first but after experimenting with it she realized it was a piece of technology that was a must from now on. Feeling as if it were a breakfast-for-dinner type of day, Claudia put in her request for pancakes and all of the fixings. The smell of bacon soon lured Finch out of the nursery.

“Did you get it all cleaned up?”

“Every piece.” Finch nodded, carrying the packaging filled with all of the parts. “I still believe that this was defective.”

“Sure it was,” Claudia agreed as she scooted a plate across the counter.

He gave her a look that said he didn’t appreciate the sarcasm and snagged a piece of bacon off of the plate.

“I like this meat,” Finch said between crunches. “However, I am actually not that hungry.”

“Really, I would have thought with all of the yelling at the furniture that you would have worked up an appetite.” Claudia smiled innocently when he glared at her.

“That is not funny.” Finch tossed the small bit of bacon he had left down and moved around the counter.

“What are you doing?” Claudia asked nervously, biting her lip at the serious look in his eyes.

“I have decided we have waited long enough.” Finch moved close to her side and scooted her plate away from her on the counter. “Now that I know our son will be taken care of for the night, we have time.”

“For what?” Claudia widened her eyes at the breathy quality her voice had taken on. Since when did she sound like a Marilyn Monroe impersonator?

“It has been too long since I have touched you.” Finch stepped up behind her, trapping Claudia’s body against the waist high counter. “And the last

time it happened I was not able to savor the moment. In fact, I can only recall glimpses of this beautiful body.”

“Well, you missed quite a bit then.” Claudia hissed when Finch scraped his teeth against her arched neck. Thrusting her butt out, she rubbed against the front of his body in a catlike arch.

Finch gripped the hips that were pushed against him and squeezed the soft flesh. Claudia moaned when his fingertips teased the front of her pants. The sensation of being finally touched was almost overwhelming.

“Finch?” Claudia half moaned.

“Yes,” Finch asked with a breathy sound against her ear. His tongue taking a moment to tease the sensitive skin of her lobe.

“Do you want to move into the bedroom?” Claudia tried to turn in his arms as she asked the question. Strong hands halted the movement though, making her feel vulnerable.

“Sweetheart, do not tell me that our times together will be restricted to the bedroom.” Finch’s tone indicated that he would have no problem pulling her pants down right then and there.

“Ummm...what was the question?” Claudia’s words broke off when his lips skimmed her neck in a sucking kiss.

“Exactly.” Chuckling against the skin behind her ear, Finch moved them back from the counter but still keeping Claudia in his grip.

“We need to discuss how you misbehaved today.”

Claudia followed his steps, only half listening to the words coming from the mouth teasing her nape.

Shuffling them toward the couch in the living room, Finch let go of her hips to turn her to face him as he sat down on the cushion. “In fact, I believe it is a behavior that needs to be corrected immediately. I would not want you to think that it is acceptable.”

The words finally broke through the fog of desire that had clouded her senses. Shaking her head as if to clear it, Claudia’s eyes widened at his words. “What are you talking about?”

Calming slightly at the teasing look in his eyes, she relaxed against the hands kneading her hips. With him sitting down in front of her, it allowed her to look down into his handsome face. Raising her hands she shuffled them through the silky strands of his hair, jealous at the smooth texture that he came by naturally.

“We are talking about punishment.” Finch’s voice was low with desire, the sound almost rumbling from his chest. “Punishment for making fun of your husband when he was trying to accomplish something.”

“You mean when you broke the crib?” Claudia couldn’t stop the words that tumbled from her mouth. She had always been a bit of a smart ass and she had a feeling that was about to come back and bite her in the butt. Literally.

“I did not break that crib.” Finch raised an eyebrow at her, as if daring her to argue.

“Sure ya didn’t,” Claudia nodded, trying not to smile.

Without warning, a large palm came down in a stinging slap on her left butt cheek. Keeping her steady with his other hand on her hip, Finch watched her reaction to his punishment. Claudia knew her eyes had widened at the contact but other than that she hadn’t moved a muscle.

Finch moved his hand around and around in a calming circle on the padded area he had spanked. “You feel divine.” He leaned his head forward, nuzzling into her stomach as both hands now gripped and fondled her ass. The movement of his hands lifting and separating the globes caused Claudia to step up onto her tip toes and lean into his face.

“You feel pretty amazing yourself,” Claudia murmured. Her hands tangled in his hair as if to guide his mouth where she wanted it. And she wanted it on her nipples. Strike that. Not wanted, needed...she needed his mouth on her breasts. Sucking and biting or even licking. She didn’t care as long as it happened.

Finch leaned back as much as her grip would allow. Reaching up, he untangled her fingers from his shoulder-length hair and moved her hands behind her. Holding both wrists in one of his large hands he cuffed her arms at the base of her spine. The sensation of being controlled caused Claudia to moan.

“Jesus,” she whispered.

“Actually, my name is Finch although part of our course on understanding humans did go over your obsession with religious deities. I am assuming you are referring to me as god-like?” He chuckled as he leaned forward to nip at her breasts through her t-shirt. “You like that?”

“Hell yes.” Claudia had closed her eyes and tipped her head back to the ceiling as she swayed slightly on her feet.

“Keep your hands here,” Finch squeezed her wrists slightly before letting go of her arms.

Following his instructions and not moving her arms as he moved his own hands to the front of her pants was harder than she expected. When he fiddled with the button and zipper on her jeans she had an overwhelming need to help him...to make him move faster. Watching his face, Claudia quickly realized that Finch knew exactly what he was doing. He knew he was driving her crazy and apparently liked it if the smug smile that graced his beautiful lips was anything to go by.

Hands at her waist, he paused before pulling the material down. “You trust me?”

The only thing that she could do was nod, her mouth deciding not to work as she watched the strong fingers grab the denim and move it down.

“This all has to go,” Finch pulled her panties down at the same time as her jeans, not waiting for her to respond.

“Sweet hell,” Claudia squeaked. The temptation to move her hands almost too much to bear, she made fists behind her back.

Finch leaned forward, his eyes never breaking contact with her own, and softly kissed the bare skin of her lower stomach that he had bared. “Your skin is so soft.” The breath of his words tickling the area he had just pecked.

“Ummm...thanks?” Claudia made a move to adjust her arms. Finch must have thought that she was going to reach forward because he shot her a warning glance.

“Do I need to get the rope?”

Claudia sucked in a quick breath. The thought of the coil of rope being used now versus days ago when she was subdued caused her blood to heat. Part of her wanted to scream hell yes, while the other part wanted to go at a slower pace.

Reading the uncertainty on her face, Finch took the choice out of her hands and gripped her wrists again in one large hand.

“For your punishment I believe five swats will suffice.” Turning her to face the side, he motioned for her to bend over his lap. With her pants and underwear around her knees, Claudia took in a few deep breaths as her heart raced in her chest.

Claudia stood still for a moment. This was one of those instances in time that would affect everything. Finch wasn't just asking her to bend over for a spanking. He was asking her again, this time with his actions, if she trusted him. In this second, here and now, she needed to show him that she not only trusted him but desired him as well. That she wanted to make this work with him. This wasn't just about hot sex.

Some couples had a wedding night.

They had *this* moment.

Without any words, Claudia leaned facedown over his lap and settled her stomach against his legs. Bracing her hands against the floor in front of her, she spread herself out, hoping that she had taken the position he wanted. The feel of his erection pushing against his leather pants and into her belly making her anticipate what it would finally feel like to touch the body underneath her.

"Like this?" Claudia whispered the question in a voice strained not only by nerves but also the fact that her lungs were working on overtime to adjust to the position against his solid thighs.

"Perfect." The softly spoken word came from Finch and was accompanied by the feel of his fingertips lightly tracing the curve of her buttocks. Curves that were not only completely exposed but also entirely at his mercy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Stay still.” Finch’s fingers tickled her sensitive skin.

Claudia had no idea how she managed to stay still. Normally, when she was tickled, she became a squirming mass of limbs. Maybe part of it was that she wasn’t being tickled but instead teased by his hands. Claudia could feel the goosebumps as they spread over her skin. Her exposed flesh quickly breaking out in a wave of tingles that reached all the way down to the hands she had placed on the floor in front of her.

Reaching one hand up, Claudia pushed her hair behind her ear.

“You are moving again.” Finch’s amusement broke the silence that Claudia was struggling to maintain.

“Sorry, my hair was tickling my cheek.” She raised her other hand to tuck hair back on the other side of her face.

“I can help with that.” Finch gathered all of the strands at the nape of her neck and held them in his fist. The grip on her hair was snug enough to be able to control her head movement but comfortable enough not to pull single wisps and cause discomfort.

Claudia raised one of her hands off the floor and offered him the hair tie she had on her wrist.

“That is convenient,” Finch murmured as he transferred it from her arm to her hair.

“Well, when you have a baby that likes to pull hair it’s a good idea to have a hair tie at all times.” Claudia babbled, catching her breath when Finch smacked her smartly on the ass. “What was that for?” Turning her head to look back at him, she caught the small smile on his lips before he smoothed his expression.

“Rule one, when we are alone and naked there will be no talk of Max.” Finch’s tone was firm as he rubbed the offended area of her ass gently. The motions of his palm soothing the still stinging skin.

“Rule one?” Claudia raised her eyebrows at his statement even though with her facing away he was unable to see her.

“Rule two will be no talking when you are being punished unless you are feeling too overwhelmed to continue.” Finch popped the opposite cheek with his warm hand to emphasize his point.

Claudia had to literally press her lips together to not give into the urge to ask if there was a rule three. After a few moments of neither one of them moving and Claudia trying to control her breathing, she gave up. The tension was driving her crazy.

“Is there a rule—” Her bottom burned with another sharp tap. “Damnit!”

“I knew that you would not be able to help yourself.” Finch chuckled darkly, obviously enjoying the fact that she had given him an excuse to spank her yet again.

Claudia giggled at the sound of triumph in his voice, causing yet another smack to her ass.

“Rule number three is no laughing.” Finch paused for a moment before moving his free hand to the sensitive skin on her side. Raising her T-shirt up slightly, he let his fingers skim over the bare curve of her waist. “Unless I tickle you, of course.”

Claudia instantly tensed. “I don’t do well with tickling.” Turning her head so she could look at him, she grimaced. “I’m not sure you would like the fallout of tickling me.”

“Why not?” Finch watched her carefully as if to make sure she was telling the truth.

“I don’t laugh and giggle. I gasp and panic,” Claudia said plainly, not really sure if he would understand since she had never really understood her own aversion to tickling.

“Noted,” Finch nodded moving his hand away from her side.

“Sorry,” Claudia felt as if she had disappointed him somehow.

Finch kept his gaze on her face when he lowered his palm down to spank her again, “Never be sorry about something you feel. I want complete honesty in both words and actions.” Rubbing his hand on her reddened skin he raised his eyebrow, “How does this make you feel?”

Claudia looked back down at the floor she was facing. Some conversations were easier to have while not staring into eyes that could make her melt. "I like it. The spanking is sharp and it gets my attention. Then when you rub it...it makes it warm and tingly."

"Good." Finch continued to rub the offended area.

"Good?" Claudia felt like a parrot repeating everything he said.

"I want you to be aware of everything that I do. Everything you feel. If the spans make you pay attention then it is accomplishing one of my goals."

Claudia stayed silent for a moment. "Goals?"

Finch sighed loudly before pulling her up from her supine position across his lap. Cradling her in his arms, he took her chin in his fingers, making her meet his eyes. "My goal is to make sure you are in the moment. Not thinking about Max or anything other than the two of us and the pleasure we give each other. I love the sight of my handprint on your pale skin. It is as if I am marking my territory."

When Claudia narrowed her eyes at him and started to speak, he laid a finger over her lips. "You are mine just as I am yours."

Claudia smiled behind the finger touching her mouth. "So I can spank you too?" she mumbled behind the digit.

Finch tilted his head to the side as if mulling over her question. "I have never been spanked myself but I would not be opposed to experimenting if that is something you would like to try."

Shock. There was no other word that described what she felt right then. Finch would let her turn the tables around and dominate him? It wasn't something that she expected an alpha male, which Finch most definitely was, to let her try. Shaking her head before she even realized she was going to turn down the offer she was honest. "I don't think that's something that would do anything for me...although I have had a fantasy or two about taking a bite of your ass."

"You want to bite my ass?" Finch's question was both shocked and amused at her confession.

"It's so nice and round that I may have imagined testing my teeth out on it." Claudia laughed out loud at the look on his face. She hadn't been sure that anything would make Finch blush and yet here he was, turning pink at her words.

“It would just be a nibble,” she teased.

Finch narrowed his eyes, “Are you trying to distract me?”

“No, sir.” Claudia shook her head solemnly. “The last thing I want to do while we are alone, and my pants are literally around my ankles is distract you.” Claudia wiggled her trapped legs for emphasis.

“Good.” Finch nodded and reached down to pull her pants completely away. “Because I have many things I want to do and we do not have nearly enough time to do them all.”

Claudia swallowed loudly. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Finch stood up with Claudia cradled in his arms. His strides to their new bedroom were purposeful and quick.

“I placed the condoms next to the bed so they are ready when needed. You may need to assist me when it is time to apply one,” Finch rumbled.

The thought of helping roll a rubber down the length that she felt earlier made her stomach heat. “Sure thing,” Claudia stuttered, her mouth suddenly devoid of spit.

Finch set her onto her feet next to the bed clothed in only her T-shirt and bra from earlier. Luckily, her shirt fell slightly long and covered her tidbits or she would feel uncomfortably exposed, especially since Finch was still completely dressed.

“You look nervous.” Finch ran his hands up and down her arms.

“I am...a little bit. I know we have done this before, but it feels like the first time because I’m awake now. Ya know?” Claudia rambled, twisting her hands together in front of her.

“I understand. What would make you more comfortable?” Finch asked the question as he untangled her fingers that were fisted at her waist.

“Can you take off your clothes? My undercarriage feels a little breezy right now and you are completely dressed. I’m an equal opportunity type of gal,” she joked, something that she always did when nervous.

Finch gave her a short nod and a sexy smile before stripping the tunic he was wearing up and over his head. Without stepping back from her, he proceeded to undress. The proximity allowing her to feel the heat of his body as he got naked for her. Along with the warmth of his bare skin becoming exposed, Claudia was allowed close glimpses of the muscles she longed to run her hands over.

Finch finished pushing his pants down while Claudia noted the lack of underwear beneath the leather. Without looking up at her, he stepped out of the pool of his trousers and picked them up to place them over a chair in the corner of the room. The globes of his ass tightening with each step he took away from her.

Yep. She was definitely going to bite that ass.

Licking her lips, Claudia laughed out loud when he turned and looked over his shoulder at her to wink.

“Can I turn around now or do you want to inspect me some more?” Finch teased.

“You can turn around. I didn’t get to see much of the front earlier,” Claudia shot back, becoming more at ease the more he teased.

Finch turned around, still a few feet away. Propping his hands on her hips, he let her take in his complete form. Unashamed of the large erection that was pointing up, he stepped toward her. The heavy shaft bobbed with each step. He moved closer and closer until he was within touching distance.

While he was moving, Claudia had swept her gaze up and down his body, stopping when her eyes fell onto his cock. She felt her breath catch as she glimpsed the pearly drop of pre-come that graced the tip of his member. Watching as he took himself in hand, she couldn’t help but lick her lips as she witnessed him rub the moisture into the hardness he cradled in his fist.

“Not tonight.” Finch growled, the low pitch startling Claudia from the vision in front of her.

“Not tonight?” she asked dumbly.

“I want to come while deep inside of you. If you place your mouth on me that will not happen...so not tonight.” He watched her hungrily.

“Oh, yeah. Not tonight then,” Claudia said, her voice not sounding like her own anymore.

“This needs to go.” Without any further words, Finch proceeded to strip her of her remaining clothes. The t-shirt and bra that she was using for cover quickly became a small pile of cotton and lace on the floor beside her.

Claudia sucked in a huge breath, causing her breasts to rise and fall. She wasn’t ashamed of her body, just a little shy. Her previous sexual experience was limited and the men had been more along the lines of ‘boys’ when it came to ensuring she enjoyed herself. To her disappointment, it had

been a mixture of them grabbing her boobs and grunting a few times before rolling off of her and passing out. If she was honest with herself, she had better luck with her trusty vibrator than she did with a real man.

“These are bigger than I remember,” Finch murmured while rubbing his knuckle against one of her tight nipples. The peak contracted even further at the contact of his hand against it. “Let us make new memories.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” Claudia smiled at him as he cupped her breasts, his body not touching hers except for his hands. She stepped forward slightly and felt his cockhead swipe against her stomach. The contact leaving a wet trail against the skin as it dragged across the roundness.

“You are so beautiful,” Finch whispered, his fingers squeezing and plumping the globes he fondled.

“So are you,” Claudia whispered back, her response honest. She had never seen a body like his in person before. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on his tall, ripped, form. It made her fingers itch to explore the more she looked at it. All of this was hers. Every single muscled inch. From his wide shoulders to his solid thighs and legs. There wasn’t a spot on his body that she was able to look at without drooling. Even the random scars on his chest did little to detract from his beauty.

And it was truly beauty that she was seeing.

Beauty in its most masculine form.

“Touch me.” The command was low and guttural.

Claudia didn’t protest as he reached out and grabbed her hand. Placing it on his chest, Finch waited for her to make the next move.

Claudia licked her lips again, barely noticing the moan that Finch let out. Running her hand down the center of his chest, she let her fingers caress the hills and valleys of his abs. His skin was soft and smooth yet hot and hard.

As she reached his waist, she opened her palm to grab his cock but was stopped when he moved her hand back up. “It may be best to avoid that area until we join one...or two times. I have no control with you. I do not want our time to be over before you have finished at least once.” Staring at her breasts and then darting his gaze down to the apex of her thighs he nodded quickly. “Or three or four times.”

“Three or four?” Claudia stuttered out, her eyes widening.

“Possibly five,” Finch added as he kept his eyes trained on the area between her legs. Stepping forward until there was no space between their bodies, Finch trapped his hardness between them. Placing his hands on her hips, he guided her back to the bed.

As she sat down, Finch leaned over and scooted her back so she was positioned against the pillows. Crawling up her body, he parted her legs with one of his own and lay down half on top of her. Lining up their bodies so they fit together like perfect puzzle pieces, he propped himself up on one arm beside her head. Pushing his hips into her own, he rubbed the tip of his shaft against the soft pad of her pussy causing Claudia to gasp. The sensation was almost too much as the pressure of his body applied stimulation to her clit.

Claudia couldn't help but moan at the feeling. “That feels so good.”

Finch placed wet kisses along the side of neck before moving to her collarbone, “you feel amazing.”

Nodding her head in agreement, Claudia ran her hands up down the side of his torso. He felt amazing under her hands.

“Now might be a good time to open that box.” Finch's tone showed how much on edge he was. Not only that, but his cock was leaving a pretty heavy trail of wetness along the trimmed hair of her mound.

Shifting until he could reach the box beside the bed, he made quick work of opening it and removing a foil packet. Handing it over to her, Claudia hoped her shaking hands wouldn't drop it. Rolling the rubber down his length was one of the most sensual things that she had ever done. Smoothing it down his long rod, she allowed her fingers to trace the large vein that started at the tip and ran to the base. Making sure that it was on securely, she gave into temptation and wrapped her hand around it. His thickness was greater than any vibrator that she had ever owned.

If she was being honest to herself, she would admit that he was wider than any vibrator she *would* have bought. Not one to back away from a challenge though, Claudia moved his hardness to rub it against her slit. Legs splayed wide to accommodate his hips, she watched as her own wetness made the already lubed rubber shine in the dim light of the bedroom.

“You may kill me,” Finch groaned out as he tossed his head back. Holding his body up and away from her own, he moved his hips in a

rhythm as he teased her opening. “Are you ready for me?”

Claudia realized that though their foreplay had been somewhat limited, she was dripping in anticipation. Unsure if it was a buildup of all of their days together that had been unfulfilled sexually or a reminder of his spanking, she knew she was ready. Without speaking, she nodded and signaled the okay for him to proceed by tucking the head of his covered dick into the opening of her body.

“Tell me if I cause you pain.” His voice was uneven as he pushed forward. Easing the head inside her small opening, he waited a moment before letting gravity take over. Sinking into her in a solid thrust, Finch closed his eyes and let a rumble echo through his chest.

The completely full feeling of his initial entry followed by being impaled on his solid length was almost too much for Claudia to take. Digging her nails into his smooth back Claudia tried to breathe through the penetration. It was hard to describe what she was feeling.

It burned and yet felt good.

It was almost too much yet not enough.

His possession of her body was overwhelming, yet she needed more.

Finch dropped his forehead down to rest against her own. Allowing their breathing to mix, he kept his face close to hers. Not kissing her. Not moving. Just *feeling* the joining of their bodies.

“I need more,” Claudia whispered in the silence of the room, sounding needy but not caring at this point.

Finch took her cue and shifted until he was using one arm braced beside her face to hold his weight. His other palm skimmed down until he could grip her hip. Squeezing the roundness, he paused for a split second before sliding his hand down to her bent knee. Pulling it up, he moved it to wrap around his waist. The slight adjustment of her hips causing him to sink even deeper into her body. The base of his cock and pubic bone now resting flush against her own.

Claudia couldn't help what happened next. Circling her hips against the solid man hovering over her, she felt her body splinter at the solid contact of her clit against his pelvis combined with his cock rooting deep into her body.

Arching her back, Claudia dug her head into the pillow behind her as she climaxed. Her pussy gripping at the hard muscle inside her in rhythmic

pulses. Her body released a flood of fluid around him. The additional moisture allowed her to slide up and down on him as she flexed her legs. Throughout it all, Finch stayed rigid, his only participation, was the tightening of his hand on her leg and the firmness of his hips as she thrashed against him.

Gasping for air, Claudia came back to reality as her legs started to cramp where they had tightened to hold her up against his hips.

“Are you finished?” Finch asked in a rumble.

Realizing what she had done, Claudia nodded. Embarrassment was not the right word to describe what had happened. She was mortified and slightly ashamed at her actions. Claudia basically had used his body to get off as if he were some supersized male doll. Not even thinking about the man she was bouncing up and down on, Claudia had not given the smallest thought of his feelings or desires while she grinded on him.

Seeing her nod, Finch released her leg and shifted so he was sitting back, crouched on his heels. Keeping himself high inside of her, Finch gripped her hips to tug her into the cradle of his lap.

“Good, now it is my turn.” Without another word, Finch adjusted her somewhat limp body until she was where he wanted.

His first thrust into her was long and drawn out. Swiveling his hips back, he pulled all of the way out until only the rubber-covered tip of his body was at her opening. Moving his hands slightly upward, he squeezed her hips before pushing heavily back inside. Using his grip on her waist to maneuver her as close as possible, he only stopped his advance when his balls were touching her ass. Thrusting heavily, he started a rhythm that soon had her breasts shaking with the impact of their hips.

Sweat beaded her body, the additional slickness making her slide against his body as Finch plundered what she offered. Claudia could feel a trickle of liquid roll down her forehead and into her hairline she was so sensitized. Every hard grind that Finch pushed into her caused the breath to billow from her lungs, only able to pull more air back in when he retreated. Sweaty palms gripped equally sweaty thighs as he tried to maintain his grip on her.

Knowing that her body was too sensitive to come again, Claudia focused on him. Lifting weak arms, she stroked his chest before giving a quick pinch to the hard nipples in front of her. Scratching her nails down his chest, she stopped only when she was unable to reach down his abs. The

action leaving red lines the length of his stomach. The small bite of pain must have pushed him over the edge. As soon as her fingers drifted away, Claudia was bouncing even harder and faster on his length. With a few grunts from his rigid frame, Finch squeezed her waist with more force than before. Using his hold to pull her into his body, she grunted at the rough impact of his pelvis. In a flash, she could feel the pulsing of his dick as he released into the condom, the thin lining holding back a full load of hot come as he jerked back and forth in sharp digs.

Finch rumbled loud and low in his chest as she stared up at him. This time on the opposite end of the climax she wondered briefly if he had watched her when she had her own turn earlier.

Leaning back, Finch was gasping for air while Claudia slithered back onto the pillow feeling almost boneless. As she adjusted herself to get more comfortable she felt his cock slide out of her body, the wet trail of her own come following the thick muscle. Claudia gave a sigh of relief when she noticed that the condom was intact and secure on his dick. At the feeling of so much fluid, she had the scary thought of a broken condom flash into her head. Nope, not broken. Apparently her body decided to welcome Finch into it by throwing a party including as much natural lube as she could produce.

Claudia couldn't stop herself from staring at his body. The length of his dick, still impressive regardless of its recent release, fell against his thigh and rested there. When it seemed to jump slightly, Claudia looked up at Finch startled.

"If you keep looking at it like that, we will get no rest this night," Finch panted, his voice satisfied yet promising more pleasure.

"I may need a longer break than that. It's been a while and my body is reminding me." Claudia grimaced when she shifted her hips and felt a wet spot beneath her on the bed.

Laying there, she took an account of her body and how she felt. Her hair was sticking to her forehead and she could only imagine what it looked like on the back where she had rubbed it back and forth on the pillow. Her legs felt like noodles, her stomach and thigh muscles were protesting as if she had spent hours at the gym, and she may have broken her vagina.

Did she have any regrets?

Not a damn one.

Well maybe just one.

Next time, she would see if they could put down a towel first.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Claudia woke to a puff of air hitting her neck followed by the sound of a deep snore. Blinking a few times, she realized two things.

One, after her work out last night she was in desperate need of a shower.

And two, Max hadn't woken her up with his babble yet. Which was strange since he was normally up and ready to play at five. It wasn't until she laid there a few more minutes that she remembered Max had spent the night elsewhere which explained the blessed silence.

Rolling onto her back, Claudia nudged Finch until he let her go enough to adjust her position. Letting out an oomph when his heavy forearm landed on her stomach, Claudia froze. If Finch woke up it would be a long while before they would be getting out of bed and she was already feeling the burn after last night. Her legs and thighs were protesting more than they had when she had stupidly tried a level two spin class at her local gym. Claudia was smart enough to realize that indulging in a hot shower would loosen her aching muscles up enough for to move without feeling like she was ninety years old

Sneaking out from under his arm, Claudia tiptoed quickly toward the bathroom. When Finch grumbled sleepily behind her, she kicked it into gear and moved even faster. Her feet barely skimming the floor as she hurried.

The door swished closed behind her, the mechanical noise seeming overly loud in the quiet room. Claudia looked around the space. The bathroom was larger than the one in their first apartment. Poppy had mentioned that the new quarters were designed to be more of a family-sized space...well, at least that's what they tried to do. There was a limit to the

amount of square footage that was available on the ship. So far, Claudia was surprised and happy with the new set up. Max would have his own room and the engineers had designed speakers built into the wall so that she had a baby monitor with video as well as sound ready to use.

She quickly used the bathroom and washed her hands. When she heard Finch moving around in the other room, she moved even faster with her morning rituals. There was no way she wanted to greet him with morning breath. Deciding that she might try to tempt him into a shower, she placed a few towels on the bench next to the weird-looking enclosure.

Claudia opened the shower pod and adjusted the dial until the water started up at her preferred heat setting. She jumped when hands snaked around her waist.

“I was just going to see if you wanted to join me.” Leaning back into his body, she shivered when her bare buttocks brushed against the cooler leather of his pants.

“I believe I may have enough time to shower,” Finch whispered against the skin of her neck.

“Just shower?” Claudia wiggled her rear into the hardness behind her.

“Unfortunately, just shower. I received a call from Wheaton, and Max is awake and eating breakfast. Poppy has an appointment at the med center and they are unable to watch him for much longer.”

“Well, damn.” Claudia sighed and stepped into the shower pod. Tipping her head back, she let the water slick her hair away from her face. When she opened her eyes, Finch was watching her.

“Don’t dawdle. Get in here with me.” Claudia gestured to the empty space in front of her.

Finch shook his head, “It is better that we take turns or else we will be late in picking up our son.”

Every single time that Finch referred to Max as his son, Claudia’s heart opened up even more to him. She was falling hard and fast...if she hadn’t already fallen. Amazingly enough the idea that she was in deeper than expected didn’t concern her. Normally, she would hold back a little until more time had passed. Infatuation had taught her some hard lessons when she was twenty-one and in college thinking that true love was more like a fairy tale than reality. There is nothing worse than falling in love and then realizing that you were nothing more than a convenience for someone who

was bored. Those lessons were painful and not quickly forgotten. Since those days she had learned to hold herself back a little and tried to listen to her inner voice, which tended to be a tiny bit more conservative when it came to feelings.

Who was she kidding? Finch was nothing like her first college boyfriend. The feelings that he stirred within her were significantly magnified and more deeply seated than anything she had ever felt.

Feelings that had been brewing for a few days...partially due to the fact that she witnessed firsthand what type of loving father Finch would be to Max. There was nothing sexier than a man taking care of a baby.

Nothing.

Finch, so far, had acted like the ideal father despite the fact he had been thrust into the dad role before he had a chance to really think about it. He cuddled Max, offered to help care for him when Claudia was tired, and she had heard him talking to him about what a big warrior he would be when he grew up. Eavesdropping on that particular conversation had brought tears to Claudia's eyes. This was a man that her brother would be proud to raise his son.

That is all she had ever wanted. A loving family for her nephew turned son that taught him the value of what was important in life.

Claudia washed her hair while Finch stood by the shower watching her. After a while, she started to feel like a bug under a microscope.

"What?" she asked when it looked like he was about to speak and then stopped himself.

"I have a question." Finch folded his arms across his bare chest, leaning one shoulder against the wall.

"Go ahead." Claudia rinsed her hair before reaching for the conditioner.

"Why have you stopped covering up in front of me?" The question startled her, causing her to drop the bottle she had picked up.

"Not that I want you to cover! I simply noticed that you do not seem to care any longer when earlier you shied away from me." The words poured out of Finch so quickly that Claudia could only blink at him for a moment while she processed them.

Leaning down, she reached for it while trying to think of a way the best explanation for the amount of trust that she had in him. "At first, I was nervous. Most of the relationships I have been in have all started out that

way actually. Usually it takes a bit for me to feel confident enough to just let it all hang out. Especially since there seems to be a lot to hang out if you know what I mean.” Shooting him a look, Claudia shrugged.

“I just feel comfortable in front of you naked now. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not going to be doing jumping jacks or anything crazy while in the buff, but I also don’t feel like I have to hide. Normally, I would feel self-conscious around someone that I’m intimate with...especially because we haven’t been together all that long. When I’m naked I feel vulnerable...I can count on one hand the number of people that have seen me naked and that includes my close friends who I’ve changed in front of. With you it’s...different. That’s a good thing though.”

“I believe I understand now. Just so you are aware, there is no need for you to ever feel vulnerable around me. I am here to protect and cherish you for the rest of my life. There is nothing that would make me feel differently. No part of your body that I do not desire.” Finch was sincere as he watched her, his eyes soft.

“Thank you.” Claudia ducked her head and reached for her toiletry caddy feeling Finch walk her like a hawk.

“What is that stuff?”

“Shaving gel. If I don’t use it on my legs I break out in a rash.” Claudia slid the razor up and over her legs. Making sure the skin was smooth before moving to the other leg.

“Why not just have the hair removed in the med center?”

Turning her head to stare at Finch, she shook her razor at him, “Do you mean that I can get special space hair removal in the med center and never have to shave again?”

“If that is what you would like to do for your legs then yes, but I would ask you a favor...”

Finishing up, Claudia reached for the towel that he was holding out for her. “What’s the favor?”

Finch passed her the towel but shifted it out of his way to reach down between her legs. Softly petting her pussy, he tickled the trimmed hair that guarded her privates.

“Do not remove the hair from here.” Finch’s voice was husky as he stroked her.

Claudia closed her eyes and let out a moan at the feel of his finger tracing her cleft. “You don’t want me bare?”

“No, you are not a child. You are a woman. My woman.” Finch moved his hand away from forbidden territory and helped wrap the towel around her.

“Well, then it’s a good thing that I don’t like a Brazilian either or you may have had a fight on your hands,” Claudia teased, trying to lighten the sexual tension that had thickened the air in the bathroom.

“Will you stay while I shower?” Finch pushed his leathers down, the snap having never been done up.

“Uh, yeah.” Claudia almost choked on her own tongue at the sight of his semi-hard penis pointing straight at her.

“Good, I like the fact that we have reached a level of comfort with each other’s bodies.”

Stepping into the pod, Finch acted as if Claudia wasn’t in the room as he started to wash his body. As the soap dribbled down the individual ripples of his abs she stared transfixed.

This was like her own porno. The only that was missing was the cheesy music.

As his hands followed the trail of suds, one cupped his balls, getting them slick with bubbles as he cleaned himself.

“Frak,” she breathed.

“Is something wrong?” Finch asked as his hands worked the meat between his thighs, not even trying to disguise the fact that he was masturbating now.

“I guess you are *real* comfortable with me, huh?” Claudia licked her lips at the sight of him stroking up and down the ridged length.

“This is natural. There is no shame in something natural,” Finch answered with a shrug.

Before he could finish what he was doing, the band on his wrist started blinking. Stopping his movements, he let out a frustrated sigh.

“Wheaton said he would message when we needed to leave. It looks like he is ready for us to pick up Max.”

Eyeing the erection that was still hard and pointing up, Claudia grimaced. “Ouch.”

“Yes...ouch is a good description.” Finch made a face before turning the knob on the pod to a cooler setting. “Let me rinse while you get ready and we can leave as soon as I am done.”

“Sounds good,” Claudia answered, backing away from the temptation in front of her.

Getting ready was easy when you didn’t have a baby that wanted to tear apart everything in the joint. What seemed like a record time for her was halted when she noticed that Finch was not only dried and dressed but also had done his hair.

Claudia stared at him for a moment before moving in front of the mirror to put up her own hair.

“You remind me of someone...I just can’t put my finger on it.” Meeting his eyes in the mirror, Claudia squinted at him. As if that would help.

“Someone you know?” Finch asked as he watched her pull her hair up.

“No, someone from a movie...every now and then you do something and I get a flash of the character but I can’t remember which one it is before it’s gone.” Smoothing her auburn hair back she eyed her pony tail. “Maybe I should just cut it all off.”

Claudia felt a tug on the back of her hair, “But it is so beautiful,” Finch whispered, and he leaned close to smell the strands he had captured.

“It’s always up. Max pulls it too much if I leave it down and when I’m around him that’s all he wants to do. I can’t remember the last time I didn’t have it up honestly.”

“I can trim it for you if you want. Maybe if it is shorter it would not be as tempting to him,” Finch offered, obviously not keen on her chopping it all off.

“I forgot the girls said you cut their hair.” Claudia couldn’t help the appraising glance she gave him. “Their hair looks really good, too. According to Poppy you are a layering master.” When she finished the sentence, she giggled at the look on his face. “That’s a good thing, in case you were worried. It means that she liked what you did. She said she normally paid close to a hundred dollars for what you managed to do in a few minutes.”

Finch shrugged before leading her out of the bathroom and to their front door. “It is simply something that comes easy to me.”

“Well, damn. I wish something like that came easy to me,” Claudia mumbled.

“There has to be something you are good at.”

Following Finch out the door and down the hall, Claudia thought for a second. “I am a hard worker, but I don’t have a particular skill that I’m proud of. Math has never been a strong point, I don’t have a trade that I learned in school and I dropped out of college before I finished getting my degree. Honestly I am happy I stopped wasting the money on tuition when I really didn’t know what I wanted to do.”

“What were you going for? Poppy explained that in college you pick the job you want to do forever and then take the classes to get certified. Pixie, Dathrow’s wife, was a business manager before she arrived.” Finch reached out to link his fingers with hers as they walked.

Soaking in the connection she felt from his fingers, Claudia felt a wave of contentment flow over her.

“I was going for Elementary Education. I really didn’t want to be a teacher but in high school everyone always told me how good I was at helping people. I remember the councilor giving us these surveys, and it guided you to what your ideal job would be.” Claudia snorted at the memory. “Mine came back with a strong favor in either education or social work. I knew that I couldn’t hack being a social worker. Don’t get me wrong, that job is done by amazing people. I just knew that I wouldn’t be able to handle the particulars of it and stay detached...so I decided to go with the flow and become a teacher. About a year and a half into it, I realized that the thought of going to school the rest of my life, even as a teacher, was enough to make me want to go into hiding. So, long story short, I pulled out of the program I was in and tried to find my niche.”

Finch was watching her as they walked, “then what happened?”

“My niche didn’t want to be found. I took another year of classes to try to give it some more time, but I still couldn’t settle. That’s what it felt like, you know? Settling.” Claudia squeezed his hand when he nodded at her. “So, I withdrew from the university and started working. I had a few jobs here and there but none offered benefits or really seemed to fit me. It wasn’t until I got Max that I realized I needed to get my shit together.”

“Did you?” Finch asked.

“As much as I could. I got two jobs that could pay for the insurance coverage I needed and make enough to feed us. It wasn’t the most ideal situation, but it worked. I had just signed up to take some creative writing courses at the community college before everything happened. Since I’ve had Max there have been some children’s books ideas that have been tumbling around in my head. Maggie, the friend that was watching Max, is an artist and we talked about her illustrating for me.”

Finch stopped her from continuing down the hall. Placing his palms on her shoulders, he pulled her close into a hug.

“I am sorry.”

Now it was time for Claudia to ask the questions. “For what?”

“For interrupting your plans...for taking you away from your home. I went about this the entirely wrong way,” Finch explained.

Before he could say any more, Claudia reached up to hold his face in her hands. “You listen here. You saved us. I’ve said it once already, but I really need you to understand that. We would have died if I had been home with Max. I would be dead. Max would be dead. None of the plans that I had would have mattered.”

“I just—” Finch started.

“Do you regret kidnapping me?” Claudia asked the question she had never thought to voice before now. Maybe Finch was wishing he had never signed up for the Max and Claudia express train to parenting.

“No!” He tried to shake his head, which she still cupped in her hands.

“Then don’t apologize again. It’s not needed. I have no regrets except that I didn’t have Max with me when I first arrived. That’s the extent of the regret I feel. I am happy where I am, where we are. It feels like this is where we are supposed to be. Do you feel the same way?” Claudia probed.

“Yes, I feel as though you are meant to be mine. Max was meant to be mine,” Finch answered, his voice unwavering.

“Then I don’t want to hear any more about it. What’s done is done, don’t keep harping on it. Got it?” Claudia let his face go so he could nod at her. “Good, now let’s go get our baby.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t call me ma’am again unless you want me to find a walker and hit you with it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“What do you mean we have a situation?” Claudia asked warily as she bounced Max up and down to ease her own anxiety.

Wheaton rubbed his chin for a second trying to figure out what to say. “I will explain what is happening but first I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Shoot,” Claudia said, wanting to find out what was going on.

Finch looked at her, startled, but Wheaton must have heard the slang because he didn’t pause at all.

“Tell me what you know about Maggie.”

The question both startled and confused Claudia. Maggie? Why did he want to know about Maggie?

“Why?” she couldn’t help but ask.

“Claudia, I will answer your questions after you answer mine. Please... what do you know about her? Family connections? Anything will help right now.” Wheaton rubbed his hand through his hair.

“Maggie has been my neighbor since I moved into the apartments, but I knew her before that. She was the older sister of a friend I went to high school with.” Claudia was confused, unsure where this was going.

“So you know her family?” Poppy asked from where she was sitting on the couch cradling her large belly.

“I do, yes, but they don’t live near us though. When Lizzy decided to go to school in Michigan, her parents packed up and followed her there. She was the baby and spoiled so it didn’t surprise me when they moved to stay close to her. Maggie was two years older than us so I knew her in high school, but we didn’t really become good friends until we ran into each other a year ago when I was out with friends.”

Claudia moved to sit next to Poppy on the couch. Max was starting to get heavy enough to cause her back to hurt if she stood still for too long with him on her hip.

“What else?” Wheaton probed, obviously looking for more information.

“Well...we started hanging out after that and when I got custody of Max and needed a cheap place to live, Maggie is the one that helped me move into her complex. She offered to watch him while I worked. She watches him during my shifts since she works from home.”

Claudia paused and looked up at Finch. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Finch shook his head and held his hands out for Max. “No, but I owe Maggie a debt for caring for Max. If it is something that I can help with then I will.”

“Finch, do not make promises that you may not be able to keep.” Wheaton warned.

At those words Claudia’s patience was gone.

“What the hell is going on?” she snapped before she could stop herself.

“Claudia—” Poppy calmly interrupted. “He will explain, give him a chance.” Nodding at her husband, Poppy smiled softly.

“Claudia, we have been working with your government to get information regarding the bombing. They have been less than forthcoming regarding releasing any that they have come across.”

“What does that have to do with Maggie?” Claudia asked, confused by the line of questioning.

“We sent a security detail to her apartment to question her regarding the break in that she had witnessed at your apartment. Our hope had been that she would be able to describe the scene and let us know if anything had seemed out of the ordinary.”

“And?” Claudia asked, her confusion growing the more he tried to explain.

Wheaton looked at Finch as if preparing himself for a reaction he was not going to like.

“Finch, you may want to sit down,” Wheaton instructed.

Finch sat without argument on the chair opposite of the women. Max babbled in his lap completely content with being cuddled by his father, oblivious to the tension in the room.

Wheaton cleared his throat, “When we arrived at her apartment we immediately had our bomb sensors alert us that there were explosive materials present. Our equipment analyzed the trace and it was Trenorium.”

Finch sucked in a breath and shot Wheaton a look of surprise. Claudia still had no idea what they were talking about and she was starting to get annoyed with being left out of the loop.

Raising her hand sarcastically she asked, “What does that mean?” As the men stared at each other without answering her, she rolled her eyes. “Guys! What does that mean?”

When she finally had gotten their attention, Finch looked at her with concern in his gaze. “Trenorium is an explosive material that we found at the Intake Center. It is not of Earth, Claudia.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Why would it be at Maggie’s apartment if it’s a space bomb?” Claudia’s mind tried to connect the dots on the crazy jumble that had become her life.

“That is what we need to know. Did Maggie have any connection to anyone other than you at the center?” Wheaton questioned.

“No, she just knew that they were hiring from an ad in the paper. She is the one that got me to apply,” Claudia answered weakly. The words coming out of her mouth did not sound good even to her own ears.

“She got you the job?” Poppy wrinkled her brow as she asked the question beside her.

“No, she didn’t get me the job. She just brought me the classifieds when I mentioned that I needed a second shift job,” Claudia defended her friend. “She was trying to help.”

“What does Maggie do for a living? You said she worked from home.” Wheaton sat down across the room and folded his hands in his lap.

“She makes jewelry and sells it online on an artist site that features homemade products...she’s been doing it for a couple years and actually has some of her stuff in the local tourist stores downtown.” Claudia thought for a moment. “She works with all types of stones. Is there any way that your equipment could be reading the sample wrong and gave a false positive for your space stuff?”

Wheaton shook his head looking defeated. “I asked the same question. After the sensor went off, our men entered her dwelling. They found a dusting around her entryway but no further into the apartment. There was a

locked room with stones stored in containers but none of them triggered our sensors.”

“That would be her work room, she keeps it locked because it has sharp tools and small stones in there. She didn’t want Max to accidentally crawl into there and get hurt.” Claudia’s voice broke as she explained. “Why would there be dust around her door? I just don’t understand.”

Wheaton leaned forward to draw her attention back to him. “Claudia, my men were not able to locate Maggie. She has not been home since we began monitoring her quarters and it looked as though she left quickly. The men reported food had been set out at the table but uneaten.”

Claudia held her hands up, “This doesn’t make sense. I refuse to believe that Maggie set me up.” When Wheaton looked as though he was going to argue, she shook her head emphatically. “No, she didn’t have anything to do with the bombing. There has to be another explanation.”

“So she never mentioned being against the Pact during your conversations? Did she ever say anything that was anti-Phaeton?”

Claudia scanned her memories, still denying the idea that her friend...the woman who she trusted her son with...would be able to kill people in cold blood.

“No, she never said anything against it.” Rubbing her fingers against her temples, she tried to alleviate the pressure that decided to strike when they first started questioning her. “Hell, she even thought about applying once upon a time!”

“Wait, she was going to apply?” Poppy jumped in the conversation again with her question.

“Yeah, part of me thinks it was just a way to fuck with her parents though. They hated the Pact and the volunteer requests from the government. Maggie doesn’t have a very good relationship with her folks. I mean, c’mon they literally packed up, sold their house, and followed Lizzy to Michigan, but don’t even call Maggie on her birthday. She had said that the only way to get their attention would be to be an alien bride. It was a running joke we had because she knew she would never have the balls to follow through with it.” Claudia snorted.

“Do you know where she would have gone?” Finch looked just as concerned as she felt.

“No, I mean, Maggie travels for work sometimes when she is trying to get a new boutique to sell her stuff but other than that she doesn’t take vacations. She sure as hell doesn’t leave food out when she takes her trips.” Claudia sat up straighter when a thought popped into her head. “Wait, where is her dog?”

“She has a pet?” Poppy asked. “Wheaton, the report didn’t say anything about finding a pet at home, did it?”

“No, it did not. Would she have taken the dog with her if she left on a trip?” he asked, tapping on his tablet.

“No, Bohdi is a rescue dog and doesn’t travel well. When she left for a few days, I normally watched him at my place because it was cheaper than boarding him at the kennel.” Claudia grabbed the diaper bag off of the floor that she had left for Poppy to care for Max with. “I have the number for the kennel she used if I was unable to watching him in my planner. We can check and see if he’s there now.”

“I can connect you with a voice call in a few moments once we receive permission from the ship,” Wheaton answered without looking up from his typing.

“If he isn’t there what do you think happened?” Poppy asked the question to Claudia.

“I have no idea. If he isn’t at the kennel and he isn’t at home then he’s obviously with Maggie. The question is, where is Maggie?”

“Our men cleaned all traces of the Trenorium out of her dwelling. During the search they did not find anything else to incriminate your friend.”

At Wheaton’s statement, Claudia tried to feel hopeful that this was all a big mistake. Maggie couldn’t be responsible for this mess. There was just no way.

Wheaton tossed his tablet down onto the table in front of him, the action startling Claudia.

“There is more bad news, I am afraid.”

“Great, what now?” Claudia blew out a huff of air.

“You are under suspicion again for the crimes at the Intake Center and the murder of the human workers.”

Finch sat up straighter, shooting a glare in his direction he cuddled Max closer to him. “What are you talking about? Paine’s interrogation was accepted by the council and Claudia was cleared.”

“She was cleared...until traces of explosives were found at the apartment of her friend Maggie. The same friend that we had meet us at the Intake Center to get Max. Security protocols have been implemented at the center until it can be cleared of sabotage we are going to halt the call for bridal matches. Security wants to make sure that Maggie did not use the meeting to plant explosives.”

Finch shook his head, “Wheaton, she was cleared by the guards. Her car was searched. There is no way that she used that meeting to plant anything. We are assuming that she is guilty before even questioning her. Is that how this is going to be handled from here on out?”

Wheaton stood up and paced back and forth in the empty space, “Finch, do not speak like that to me. I am doing the best I can. Right now, the council is wanting to detain your wife! Give me a little slack here, I am working with the information we have to make sure that everyone is protected. Everyone.”

Poppy struggled to stand up from her place on the couch. Rubbing her palm up and down her husband’s arm when he walked over to assist her she whispered something to him before looking at Finch. “Don’t question his loyalty, you know better than anyone that he will do what he can to help but he also has to please the council. Earlier, they were here demanding that he issue an arrest order for Claudia. He is the only thing standing in their way right now. Why do you think he wants to find Maggie so bad? She can clear all of this up.”

Finch sighed and nodded at Poppy, “You are right. I know Wheaton will try to figure out a solution. I am just so frustrated with what is happening. Let me know what the plan is. How can we help?”

Wheaton propped his hands on his hips, his eyes full of apology as he spoke, “Your family will guarded by Rowe and Paine until we have answers. We need to figure out if there is anywhere that Maggie would have gone. Our only hope is to try to find the one that can give us the answers we need.”

Claudia felt her eyes fill with tears as the situation sunk in. What if they couldn’t find Maggie? Where could she have gone?

As a tear slid down her cheek, Claudia looked up at the supportive gaze of Poppy. “We will figure this out.”

The only thing Claudia could do was nod and pray that Poppy was right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“What have we found out?” Finch asked as soon as he was able to corner Wheaton.

“It has only been one day, Finch,” Wheaton said dryly.

“It has been one day of my woman being worried that she will be taken away from not only me but her son as well,” he argued, already to the point of wanting to punch something.

Yesterday and all through the night, Finch could see the tension of the situation wearing on Claudia. She didn’t try to show it around Max, but he saw it in her smile and in her eyes. She had held him tight while they slept, not even relaxing to rest her body during the long night. She was worried. Not only about her own situation, but also for her friend.

“The security team is questioning the tenants that lived next to Maggie. One of them has been fairly helpful so far.”

“What does that mean?” Finch snapped, his patience completely depleted.

“The older man next door witnessed a group of three men enter her apartment the morning before we arrived. He observed them entering without permission and he heard yelling before it became quiet. He was going to call the authorities, but she walked out with them a few moments later with her pet on a string. She did not seem to be struggling although the neighbor reported she had appeared as though she had been crying.” Wheaton handed the tablet he was carrying over to Finch allowing him to read the latest witness statement.

“This description sounds like they are warriors...did we send down a security detail that arrived earlier?” Finch asked confused.

“No, I double-checked the movements of the security team that morning. They arrived in the afternoon and no other squad was dispatched to her dwelling.” Wheaton was silent for a moment before he added quietly, “I believe they were a team of Verge warriors.”

“But how did the Verge land on Earth? We have all of the landing pads monitored. They would not have the security codes to land safely at any of our locations,” Finch argued.

“That is what I would like to know as well. According to the logs, there was one unscheduled shuttle landing that occurred the evening before. It was after hours at the Intake Center that was destroyed. The center is under guard for obvious safety reasons but the landing pad was not patrolled since we had no plans to land there until it is rebuilt.”

Finch thought for a moment, “So the Verge is using our abandoned landing pad to get onto Earth?”

“That is what I believe,” he whispered as they walked to the med center.

“How did they know it was unattended?” Finch asked solemnly.

“That is a good question. I believe we may have traitors feeding information to the Verge from Squadron One.” When Finch looked at him questioningly, Wheaton continued, “How would they know they could land there safely? We had orders to visit Maggie the next afternoon, yet somehow a group of warriors arrived before we did. It is all too convenient for my liking.”

“I agree.” Finch handed him back the tablet.

“There is something else that I need to let you know but did not want to say in front of your wife,” Wheaton said softly.

Finch stopped walking and look at Wheaton with his brow raised. “I do not want to keep secrets from my wife.”

“I did not want to alarm her but there was a small amount of blood found inside Maggie’s dwelling.”

“So, she did not cooperate after all. Why did you not say something earlier?” Finch clenched his jaw, his anger apparent.

“We are unsure what exactly had happened. Nothing is making sense in this entire situation,” Wheaton said angrily. “Finch, the council is not happy with me right now. If they had their way, Claudia would be chained in the brig for what they believe she did. Do you have any idea how hard I am

fighting for the two of you right now? Especially after what was found in her own apartment.”

Wheaton’s last words fell with the heaviness of a great weight.

“What do you mean?” Finch asked, his jaw clenching with his anger.

“I did not mean to say anything yet but they found Trenomium dust on the floor of her apartment as well. The amount was miniscule. It was the similar to the amount found in Maggie’s dwelling.” Wheaton took a few steps in the direction where their wives were waiting before turning around. “And that is confidential information.”

“I—” Finch stopped. Unsure what he was going to say.

“I know she did not have anything to do with it, Finch. Do not worry. I will not let them send her to the mining planet. I just need time to unravel this entire thing. I feel like I am missing something.”

“Because we *are* missing something. There has to be an explanation for this that does not include Claudia or Maggie being guilty. Did they find anything else during their search?” Finch followed Wheaton as he started walking again.

“No, the area was secured with police tape and still a mess. Most of her possessions were broken and strewn about.” Wheaton tilted the tablet he was holding and showed Finch the pictures he had brought up with the security report.

“We need to find Maggie.” Finch knew that he was repeating himself, but he could not shake the feeling that she would be able to answer all of the questions that they had.

“We are working on it. Our computers are trying to track the shuttle, which was not one of ours. So far we know that it was a Verge shuttle and nothing else. From the neighbor, we know that it was a small group of warriors that took Maggie and her animal, but where they went we do not know. We also have not been given the information regarding the worker that Claudia said was acting odd the day of the attack. We requested personnel files so we could have photo identification for her to look through and the police denied it. The only response we received was that they will not be assisting us in our investigation any further. Kaine believes that they are angry at our answer when they requested that we return Claudia for questioning. As of right now, we have limited resources on Earth that are willing to help us solve this riddle. Currently we have one missing friend, a

small amount of Trenomium that was found at the two apartments and no information regarding anyone tampering with Claudia's work cart as well as the woman she is unable to identify. None of it is promising...I am doing the best I can, I promise." Wheaton patted Finch on the shoulder as he passed him to enter the med center door.

Finch let out a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. Now was not the time to show his worry. He had a wife and family to protect. Showing them how scared he actually was would do them no good.

"How was your visit, Little Flower?" Wheaton walked to his wife and rubbed her belly.

For a single moment, Finch was jealous that Wheaton was able to participate in this part of having a child. He knew that Claudia did not carry Max within her body so that option had not even been a possibility; however, he felt as if he had missed a crucial part of the bonding process. When they added to their family unit, Finch would make sure that they would not be separated during the growth of their child. He wanted to be able to feel every kick and satisfy every craving that Claudia would have.

"What are you grinning about?" Claudia snuck her free arm around his waist as he had been distracted watching the other couple.

"Just imagining you pregnant and how beautiful you will be." Finch reached for Max who was clinging to her side.

"Well, we don't have to worry about that right now." Claudia frowned.

"What is wrong?" Finch asked seeing her expression. Going by the look on her face, she was upset about something.

"I'm not pregnant. The docs checked me over and it came back negative." Claudia's voice was soft.

"I thought that is what you wanted?" Finch asked, his confusion obvious.

Claudia made a face at him that he couldn't quite read before speaking, "It is. I mean...I guess I don't know really. I would love to have another baby but right now wouldn't be the best time because Max is so young and with everything going on—"

"But part of you wants a baby?" Finch interrupted.

"Yeah," Claudia said on a gust of air. "It's stupid, I know."

"I feel the same way," Finch admitted.

"You do?"

Finch raised Max's tiny fist and kissed his baby-soft knuckles. "I would love to have a baby with you. Then, there are the times that Max wakes us up during our sleep cycle and I know the thought of adding another baby to our lives right now is not a smart one. We need to make sure that our family unit is safe and secure before I plant my seed to grow."

"Seed to grow?" Claudia giggled. "That sounded like it came straight from a cheesy romance novel."

"I do not understand." He frowned. What was a romance novel?

Claudia waved him off, smiling at Wheaton and Poppy as they walked over to join them by the door.

Finch studied Poppy's face as the couple approached. "You have been crying. Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm just a little emotional. Every single time I see the baby on that screen it gets to me." Poppy sniffed but gave him a watery smile.

"Is the growth still going as expected?" Finch asked, wanting to know more now about human pregnancies since he had a bride for himself.

"Yeah, big and strong is what the docs are saying." Poppy nodded and rubbed the hump in front of her. She wrinkled her brow in concern which made Finch worry for what she was going to say next. "I am worried about Andi though. The twins are getting so big and she's having a hard time with it."

"Andi will be fine. There is not a better bride to be pregnant with twins than the doctor's wife. She is monitored almost every minute of the day and I am sure she is already sick of it," Wheaton reassured her. "Where is she at now?"

Looking around the room, Finch realized that Andi was missing from her normal spot at the desk.

"Her husbands are having her take a nap in the last patient room," Claudia told them with a smile.

"And where are the doctors at?" Finch had not seen them when he entered, and he had some questions for them.

Poppy cleared her throat and tried to hide a smile behind her hand. "Ummm...they are in the room with her."

Claudia piped in, "Have been for a while now too."

"Let's not interrupt them while she's *resting*." Poppy tickled the tiny foot that Max kept kicking back and forth as Finch balanced him in his arms.

“They checked out Max while we were here today,” Claudia informed him.

“Why? Is there a problem?” Finch asked the two questions without pause. Squeezing the tiny body closer to his side, he felt a moment of panic.

“Calm down, he’s totally fine. I just wanted to make sure that he was healthy and since your crazy space machines can look at every bit it was nice to have the peace of mind that he’s perfectly healthy. Plus, I wasn’t able to get my band fitted today because one of their machines was not working so they had time.” Claudia took his free hand in her own and squeezed it.

“Good. You scared me.” Finch sent a mock glare in her direction, to which she stuck out her tongue at him.

Finch leaned close to her ear, allowing the barest touch of his lips to grace the lobe. “Do not tempt me to use that tongue in ways that I have not shown you yet.”

At his teasing, Claudia’s face turned bright red and she slapped at his leather-covered abs with her free hand.

“When will they be able to fix their issues with the bridal band equipment? Did they tell you?” Wheaton questioned.

Poppy rubbed her belly in soothing motions. “They mentioned that it could be a day or two depending on when they are able to have an engineer come and look at the sealing machine. Apparently it is heating up to a dangerous temperature and they didn’t want Claudia to stick her wrist in there and pull back a singed stump.”

At those words, Finch made a horrified face. “Well then it is good to wait, I just wish we knew when it would be taken care of,” Finch admitted, kissing Claudia on the knuckles.

“Where are your guards?” Wheaton asked, obviously just now realizing they were alone in the main med center room.

“Paine and Rowe had lights start blinking like crazy on their bands and took off,” Claudia said with a shrug.

Finch and Wheaton looked at each other for a few moments before Wheaton nodded to him that he would find out what pulled the security detail away from their women. No words were needed. Yes, they were safe in the med center but the council had been firm on having Claudia guarded at all times. That included the time when she and Finch were home alone by

themselves. There was never a period of time when they were without guards at their door.

“Ladies, let us leave the doctors and their wife alone and head back home,” Wheaton suggested when a moan floated from the closed exam room on the opposite end of the hall.

“Yep!” Claudia agreed quickly as her face started to turn pink again.

“Should we tell them we are going?” Poppy made a move as if she was going to walk down the hall to let them know they were leaving. Wheaton grabbed her around the waist and kissed her neck while she giggled. “I was joking! Even I’m not that dense.”

Finch rolled his eyes at the pair in front of them. Pulling his own wife close with an arm around her shoulders, they started to leave the med center when Max decided to start grunting at that particular moment.

“We better get back to the apartment. I ran out of diapers the last time I changed him.” Claudia grimaced.

“I am fairly certain everyone within smelling distance would appreciate us going back to our domicile now,” Finch agreed, his eyes starting to water from the smell emanating from Max’s diaper.

“Will we see you later today?” Finch noticed that Poppy didn’t move any closer to them when she asked the question.

“It depends on if we survive whatever is found when he gets changed. From what I can tell, it might be touch and go,” Claudia joked.

Finch did not know how she managed to be unaffected by what their son produced in his pants daily. She changed him without gagging, which was one thing that Finch had yet to master. While she cleaned him up she smiled and chatted with him as if she wasn’t seeing and smelling the most awful thing that Finch had ever witnessed. Did she not have a sense of smell? How did she manage to be so cavalier when wiping him clean?

Once they had said goodbye to their friends and finished walking back to the apartment, Finch happily handed Max over to Claudia. Ignoring her when she whispered, “You big baby” under her breath at him with a wink and a smile.

Picking up some toys from the floor, Finch quickly cleaned up the common room space. Hearing Max’s door close behind him he turned around, ready to take a clean baby, when he noticed she didn’t have their son in her arms.

“Where is Max?” Finch frowned. He had wanted to play with him while they had these moments to themselves. It seemed as if every time they had free time that one of the other wives managed to sneak off with Max.

“He’s tuckered out. I changed him and noticed him yawning so I rocked him until he fell asleep. I laid him down and he didn’t wake up so I’m going to see how long he will nap.” Claudia stretched her hands up to the ceiling, obviously slightly tired herself.

“But I wanted to play with him,” Finch grumbled, not happy with the way things were turning out.

At least until he noticed the twinkle in Claudia’s eyes as she looked at him.

“Maybe we can take advantage of his nap time?” Claudia suggested, moving across the room with a seductive grace he was enraptured by.

“How?” Finch’s voice broke as he watched her breasts jiggle with every step.

Claudia was finally close enough that he could reach out and touch her. She raised her arm and walked her fingers down his leather tunic. As she reached the waistband of his breeches, he groaned. His eyes focused on her mouth as she licked her lips.

“We should catch up on laundry while we have the free time.” Claudia twirled and walked to their bedroom.

Stunned by the turn of events, he could only stand there with his mouth open in shock. Right before going through the door, Claudia turned around and giggled at the look on his face.

“Just kidding!” She laughed before reaching down and lifting her shirt off with one smooth motion. “Get in here and love on me before he wakes up.”

At those words, Finch shot across the room. Catching her in his arms he nipped at her neck while palming her ass in his large hands.

“You think you are funny?” Finch growled.

“If you would have seen your face you would *know* I am funny.” Claudia squealed, trying to get away from the teasing mouth at her neck.

“It seems like forever since I touched you last.” He groaned, unable to stop himself from grinding his pelvis into her softness.

“I know,” Claudia murmured, searching for his mouth with her own.

As their lips found each other, he didn’t hesitate to open her mouth with his own. Sweeping his tongue inside, he tangled it with hers and groaned at

the sensation of finally kissing his wife again.

Not to say he didn't try to kiss her often throughout the day, he did. Max had other plans for them though and often thought a good game to play was one that included him putting his pudgy hand in between their faces when Finch got close enough to touch his wife. Poppy had been correct earlier when she said that Max was "a cockblocker, a cute one but a cockblocker nonetheless."

Brushing her hair back from her face, Finch took a moment and soaked in the beauty of his bride before him. Her lashes were thick and curled, framing her gorgeous expressive eyes as they watched him. Her cheeks had a few freckles that dotted them randomly, each speck begging to be kissed by his lips. Her mouth, with its perfect Cupid's bow puckered as they waited for his next kiss.

"I love you." Finch's admission broke the spell that had settled over their embrace.

When Claudia blinked a few times as if she had not heard him, he repeated himself. Partly to hear himself say the words again and also so she didn't miss what he had said.

"I love you, Claudia." His voice was loud and clear. Not a single word tumbling from his mouth sounded hesitant or unsure.

Finch watched as Claudia's eyes filled with tears as she watched him. Closing them for a moment she breathed, keeping her grip on his tunic as tight as ever.

"Oh, Finch." She breathed, "I love you too."

Finch smiled at her reaction, "I know." Laughing when she swatted at him again he pulled her close, content to hug her hard to him and savor the fact that he not only had a bride, and a son but one he loved and that loved him back as well.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Finch undressed not only himself but also Claudia, quickly. He had learned that having a small child meant that nothing was ever on his timeline. Max had a habit of interrupting them right when Finch was preparing to make a move on his wife.

“Why don’t you sit down on the bed,” Claudia whispered as she peppered kisses on the skin that he had bared on his torso.

“Did you just growl?” Finch leaned back to look at his wife who had made a noise against his flesh.

“Maybe, maybe not. I can’t help myself when I see your chest. You’re built like a gymnast.” Claudia ran her hands up and then onto his shoulders. “You have these muscled shoulders and your arms...damn. Your arms are so fucking sexy.”

Finch was not sure how arms could be sexy, but he was obsessed with her body as well, so he had no room to question Claudia. If she was attracted to his arms and chest, then he would make sure that he kept them lean and strong for her. He flexed slightly and was pleased when he heard her whimper.

“Sit down.” Claudia nudged him back toward the bed with her body.

They were both completely nude as he sat down on the mattress in front of her. He leaned forward and caught the tip of her breast in his mouth. Sucking the nipple, he felt it pucker even harder as he rubbed his tongue against it. Making sure to guard how hard he bit, he used his teeth to tease the nubbin.

“God, Finch. That feels so good.” Claudia moaned, arching her head back to the sky.

“I have heard that some women wear jewelry here,” Finch said after he let go of the nipple. Pinching it between his fingers he rolled it slightly before kissing the other one that he had neglected.

“I thought about piercing them,” she admitted with a groan.

“I would find that extremely attractive,” Finch said on a growl of his own.

Claudia looked down at him in front of her. Smiling she ran her hands through his hair, the sensation feeling incredible to him.

“I’ll think about it.” Claudia guided his head back to her breasts as she plumped them between her arms and leaned forward.

Burying his head in the mounds she presented to him, he nuzzled and licked the skin that he was offered.

Before long she was leaning back, breaking the suction he had on her nipple with the motion.

“Sit back and relax,” Claudia said before kneeling in between his legs where she had been standing.

“Are you...?” Unable to stop his voice from breaking, Finch raised his eyebrows in question.

“Yes, just warn me before you come,” Claudia requested before she took his breath away.

Without saying anything else, Claudia leaned forward and kissed the tip of his dick. He was so hard that it was practically bouncing against his abs, as if searching for a warm haven to bury itself. Finch watched as she stuck out her tongue and licked off the pearl of moisture that beaded the tip of his slit.

Grunting low, Finch couldn’t stop the flex of his hips against the bed beneath him. Leaning back onto his palms he gave her more room to maneuver around his lap. Without laying completely back, he was able to watch as she gripped his stalk in one hand and used it to guide it to her mouth.

When Claudia moaned around the plump head, he groaned in unison. “That feels incredible.”

“Enjoy,” Claudia whispered before opening her mouth wide and lowering herself down until she could take no more.

Finch closed his eyes tightly at the feel of her throat opening and closing on the tip as it reached the back of her mouth. Every time she swallowed, it

felt as if her throat was kissing the sensitive head. The pressure felt amazing and completely unique, like nothing he had ever experienced before.

As she moved up and down on his cock, Claudia used his pre-come and her own spit to lubricate a motion that her hand followed. Every time her mouth retreated, she would pump her fist up and down on the exposed length. Before long, he was unable to stop the tight thrusts of his hips up and into her mouth. Knowing that she had a good grip on his dick assured Finch that he wouldn't accidentally choke her. Without knowing it, he had wound one of his hands in her hair. He guided her motions. When she paid extra attention to the sensitive ridge underneath the tip of his head, he hissed out long and loud.

"I am almost there." He groaned, upset that this experience was almost over, yet feeling as though it had lasted much longer than it actually had. Each dip of her hot mouth over his hips had been the most exquisite torture. It had taken everything he had for him to hold back and not shoot into her mouth once she had developed a rhythm.

With one last long pull on him, Claudia lifted her now red and swollen mouth from his equally red and swollen cock.

"Scoot back, I want to be on top." Claudia rubbed her own thighs together as she stood in place waiting for him to move.

Finch moved back far enough that she could climb onto his lap without them tipping off the bed. As she straddled his hips, he hesitated slightly wondering if she was prepared enough to take him into her body. He had only sucked on her breasts for a few short moments and didn't want to hurt her if she was unprepared.

That thought quickly disappeared when he saw her arousal glistening on the inside of her thighs as she opened them above him. Her need was so copious it not only covered her mound but also the sensitive skin surrounding her pussy.

Licking his lips, he promised himself that he would taste that gorgeous area soon enough. Before she could lower herself down onto the head, Finch halted her movements with a hand on her waist.

"Condom." The word came out on a guttural growl as he reminded her of the protection they needed before continuing.

"Right." Claudia leaned over and grabbed one from the stack on the side table next to the wall. Ripping it open with her teeth, she pulled the rubber

circle out of the packet and rolled it down onto him. The path was the same as the one she had previously made with her mouth.

Once it was secure close to the base, Claudia held him in one hand as she raised up on her knees. The position allowing the tip of him to slice between her pussy lips.

Finch held his breath as she slowly started to move down, only releasing it when she was sitting flush against his lap. Sitting up enough to see where her skin parted where he skewered her, Finch dropped his head back and sucked in a calming breath. If he wasn't careful, this would be over before it started.

While he was trying to stop himself from climaxing, Claudia wiggled her hips and then started a back and forth motion that didn't pull him out of her body, but instead rocked on his cock in a rubbing motion. He could feel the hair around his cock bristle at the contact. Claudia must have liked the sensation because she started to swirl her hips around and around. The new angle and pressure causing him to arch his back, almost throwing her off of him completely.

Finch grabbed her hips roughly, having reached the point where he needed to get her moving or he would leave her behind. Lifting her up, he waited for a brief moment to appreciate the view of her wide open and waiting for him to satisfy her. His condom covered dick shining with her wetness as it stood proud and tall.

Dropping her down onto him hard, he smiled with satisfaction at her pleased moan. Keeping control of the situation, he held tight to her round hips as he lifted and dropped. The speed picking up as they moved in unison. They both reached for the pleasure that they knew awaited them. Claudia allowed him to take her weight in his strong hands and guide her motions.

Finch watched with heated eyes as Claudia cupped her bouncing breasts and pinched her own nipples. Tossing his head back, he shook the hair out of his face as he gritted his teeth at the sight.

As he thrust hard up and into her welcoming body, the room was filled with the wet sounds of sex. Every once in a while, Finch would not lift her up immediately and instead grind her down onto his pelvis. Rubbing her clit against his hard hips for good measure seemed to push her over the edge as her channel started to tighten rhythmically around him.

Before he could help himself, he lost his control to the pulsing of her pussy as it gripped and sucked at his dick.

“God! Finch!” Claudia whimpered loudly as she writhed on the tool giving her so much pleasure.

Feeling as if his eyes rolled into the back of his head, he slammed her down one final time before letting himself come. It was the most powerful release he had ever experienced. Every muscle in his body had tensed up as his body flooded the condom with his jism.

Claudia panted atop of him. Obviously exhausted, she leaned forward and rested against him trying to catch her breath. Her sweaty form settled against his as if she were the other half of a puzzle that only they could complete.

“That. Was. Amazing,” Claudia mumbled, the words somewhat slurred since she was face-first on his chest.

Petting her hair back from her face, Finch nodded. Realizing that she couldn’t see him yet still unable to speak, Finch grunted in agreement.

“Was that okay?” Her voice was barely audible.

Finch furrowed his brow. How could she doubt that every single thing she did was not spectacular? It was better than okay. He had no words for how incredible it was.

“I loved every minute of it, he rasped, his throat dry from his exertions.

“Good,” Claudia said, trying to nod with her head still sticking to his chest.

The action caused him to chuckle, bouncing her slightly against him.

“What’s so funny?” Raising herself up to look at him, Claudia glared.

“That you would question whether or not it was *okay*...from what I know of Earth slang, okay is nothing special. What we just did was more than okay—it was one of the best things I have ever felt,” Finch explained, smiling at the vision of his sweaty wife with her chin propped between his pecs. “Your eyes are leaking,” he observed, taking one finger and rubbing at the black that surrounded the area.

“Ugh, I forgot I had makeup on and I’m sure I look like a raccoon.” Claudia covered her face with her hands, hiding the black rings surrounding her eyes.

“It does not matter to me. You could look like vermin and I would still think you are the most beautiful creature alive.” Finch pulled her hands

away from her face, smiling when she wrinkled her nose at him.

“Vermin? I said raccoon, not vermin,” she griped at him.

“Regardless you are beautiful,” Finch whispered as he stroked her cheek, “and mine. You are mine.”

“Yes, I am,” Claudia said back softly. “And you are mine.”

“Very true,” he answered, pleased that she felt possessive of him.

Claudia started to say something but stopped and cocked her head to the side. Finch watched her, wondering what she was doing when he heard what distracted her. Max was up. Not only was he awake, but he sounded very angry if his yelling was an indication of how he felt.

“Duty calls.” Claudia sighed as she lifted herself up and off of him.

Finch had learned after using a condom the first time that he needed to hold the rubber in place or else it would slip as he left her body. Holding the base down, he waited until she was clear before he sat up. Walking to the bathroom together Claudia quickly used the bathroom as he stripped the used prophylactic off of his body.

While he cleaned up quickly, Claudia had already thrown on shorts and a t-shirt, moving out of the room at a speed he was surprised by. He was still having trouble feeling his legs, yet she moved as if she was ready to take on the rest of the day.

Next time, he would need to make sure he made her legs as weak as she had made him.

Walking into the living area, he smiled at the sight of his wife and son on the floor playing on a blanket. Claudia had already pulled out the large wooden blocks that Max loved to knock over after she stacked them. His baby laughter was contagious as he flailed his arms to tip the tower over the minute she had built it high enough.

“He does not let you get very high,” Finch observed as he knelt down next to the pair.

Claudia shook her head, smiling down at their boy. “No, he doesn’t, but I don’t mind. He thinks he’s hilarious.” Claudia laughed softly as Max once again giggled like a tiny maniac at the mess he made.

“If I did not know better I would say that he has already grown since he arrived,” Finch reached out and helped her stack another tower of blocks, which only reached four high before a pudgy hand swatted and toppled it.

As they sat and played, Finch tried to remember every moment of this time he had with his family. Sadly, if they were transferred to Squadron Two, it would mean that he would have to start missions to the Pleasure Sector. Those missions would take him away from this duo for maybe a day or more at a time, which was something he was not looking forward to.

True, many warriors fought for the missions scheduled to go to that sector. The difference between them and Finch was that he had a wife and child to be home with. The other men were clamoring for their chance to visit the brothels and take advantage of the female company there. To be honest, Finch had never counted down the time between his visits like many of his warrior brothers had. It was a necessary bodily function that he did indulge in on his visits, but unlike others he found the trips lacking in some way. He never had been fulfilled after the trips. It almost had made his craving for a wife of his own stronger. He wanted a female that was his very own to cherish and care for. The brothels catered to so many of his warrior brothers that they often passed each other coming out of the rooms used. It was not a pleasant feeling to know that within moments of a worker welcoming him, and she had been with his friend just minutes before. When he was younger, he had made the embarrassing mistake of offering one of the workers a chance to bond with him. His pride had taken a blow when she laughed at his offer and explained not only her desire to stay, but also warned him away from making the same offer to other workers. According to her, they were well-paid, treated like royalty and were able to give in to their most physical desires at the same time. For the majority of them it was a position of choice and not necessity that had brought them to their houses. After that visit, the appointments he made at the brothels had become more clinical and less passionate. He sated the desires of his partner and himself, but always remembered it was a business transaction. When he made future runs with newer warriors to the unit he advised them not to get attached to a particular worker without explaining the mistakes that he himself had made.

He hadn't been in love with the worker by any means. He actually could not even remember her name...he had just craved *more*.

As he watched Claudia play with Max, leaning forward to kiss his fuzzy head, he realized this is what he had been looking for that day when he was younger.

This was his more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Their family time was interrupted way too soon.

“What’s going on?” Claudia asked when she saw Wheaton’s excited face at the door.

“Can I come in first?” Wheaton asked, his eyes searching behind her for Finch.

“Shit, sorry, of course come in. Finch is changing Max, but should be done in a minute. Can I get you anything?” Claudia explained as she walked to the kitchen area.

“No thank you. I wanted to come by and give you a quick briefing, but this is something that Finch needs to hear as well.” Wheaton took seat in their living room. His large body taking up a majority of the loveseat.

“Wheaton, what brings you here?” Finch moved into the room holding Max on his hip. The sight was such a natural one that Claudia felt her heart flutter at the image.

“Now that both of you are here I can tell you that we have figured out some of what happened with Maggie,” Wheaton said quickly, nodding to them both.

“Is she okay? Where is she at?” Claudia shot the questions out lightning fast. The concern for her friend had never wavered even when they said she had the crazy space rocks in her apartment.

“Claudia, were you aware that Maggie had video surveillance in her apartment?” Wheaton asked her, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“Like a camera?” Claudia asked surprised. “No, I didn’t know that. Now that I think about it I’m not surprised. All of the stuff she used to make

pieces for her jewelry collection were pretty pricey. If someone broke in she would want to be able to hand something over to the police.” As she spoke, Wheaton nodded at her as if what she was saying meant perfect sense.

“It was one that was triggered by motion. Our team did not see it at first but after going back to her apartment one of them spotted it and retrieved the recordings. It was aimed at the front door with a wide enough view to catch video of the main living area and only exit in and out of the apartment.” Wheaton held out the tablet he had brought with him. Pulling up the screen that had been minimized, he turned up the volume and hit play.

Claudia watched as Maggie came onto the screen as she entered her apartment. She was carrying Max in the video which meant this had been right after Claudia had disappeared.

“Bodhi, Momma’s home and we have a problem.” Maggie’s words were clear as she spoke.

“I thought that was her dog’s name?” Finch whispered, looking at Claudia.

Keeping her eyes trained on the tablet, Claudia spoke out of the side of her mouth, “It is. She talks to her dog like he’s a person. She once told me not to think she was crazy unless she said he started talking back.”

“Listen to what she says next,” Wheaton interrupted their exchange.

“Holy shit! I don’t know what to do... Claudia’s apartment has been trashed and I can’t get a hold of her. Shhhh, it’s okay, sweetie,” Maggie rocked Max in her arms, obviously distraught. Pacing back and forth, Maggie hugged Max to her. “Okay, your momma is missing, her apartment has been broken into and she’s not answering her phone. What do I do now? Bodhi, any suggestions?” When the dog yipped at her, Maggie shook her head in frustration. “I can’t call the cops. If they ask me about Max, I can’t be sure they won’t take him.” Kissing the baby she was holding, she whispered against his head, “Don’t worry, stink butt. We’ll find your momma and get her home. Don’t you worry, Maggie will take care of you.”

On the video, Maggie kept pacing and rambling. Some of the words clear and the others muffled. When Max snuggled into Maggie’s shoulder she kissed the top of his head and started singing him a lullaby. The scene making tears well up in Claudia’s eyes. This was Maggie. This was the loving, adopted Aunt for Max that Claudia wanted to make sure everyone

saw. You could see the goodness in her friend from this short snippet of video. Peeking out of the corner of her eye, she watched Finch's face soften as he watched the scene.

Before long, the screen went blank only to be replaced with another video.

"Who are you?" Maggie stepped back from the door, her posture stiff. From the angle of the camera, Claudia couldn't see who was at the door but knew that whoever it was made Maggie uncomfortable based off her body language.

"We need to talk to you," a deep voice replied. The man was still a mystery.

"I already took Max to the center. Why do you need to talk to me?" Maggie reached for the door and started to close it slightly, almost as if she were putting a barrier in between herself and whoever was outside.

There as some mumbling on the other side of the door, multiple deep voices were heard but other than that the words were garbled.

"Wait, you're not Phaeton—" Before Maggie could finish her sentence, she had been pushed back and into her apartment with a yelp.

There was a group of warriors entering the room that crowded Maggie back and away from any route of escape.

"Search everything here as well. There was no evidence that the other human knew what Eva was doing but we need to make sure that this one has no trace as well. Our reports show she was close to the Finch's new bride."

Maggie had crossed her arms over her chest, as if trying to appear calm and collected, but everyone could see her shaking despite the poor video quality.

"Who the fuck is Eva?" Maggie snapped at the men as she maneuvered her body in front of Bohdi to shield him from the warriors.

The man leading the group nodded to the others around him to move. As they walked further into the room, he stepped close to Maggie with an evil smile gracing his lips.

"She worked for us, but now it seems she's developed cold feet. A little late I might add. Now, we need to make sure she hasn't talked to you or your friend about our little operation."

Another warrior spoke up then to his leader. "Sir, we did not find anything pertaining to our operations within the bride program. Our scanners are picking up a frequency though that we cannot identify." The warrior then glanced down at his tablet and tapped on the screen. "There may be surveillance on the apartment as we speak. I advise that we grab the girl and take her for questioning to avoid unexpected visitors."

Their leader nodded quickly and grabbed her arm in his large hand. The grip causing her to raise up on her toes at the pressure.

"Shut it down now. We move out in two."

One of them held up a black box that was blinking blue. Within seconds the video went blank just as Bodhi started to bark and Maggie yelled to get out.

"What happened?!" Claudia yelled, worried at what she had just witnessed.

"The men that you just saw were Verge. I was able to identify Hix, but I am not familiar with the others. He was the one with the tablet that picked up on the surveillance camera. I do not know the leader. The video quality is poor, but we have our security team running the other profiles through our system to identify them as quickly as possible," Wheaton assured her.

"Why did the video go blank like that?" Claudia felt tears in her throat as she spoke. Poor Maggie. Her friend had done nothing but try to help her, and look what happened. This was all her fault.

"The black box the warrior held up was something used to turn off surveillance equipment. We use them ourselves when we must go in areas that are monitored and we wish not to be recorded." Wheaton explained. "That is not the most important part of the video. She unknowingly recorded the disclosure of the name of the Verge operative at the Intake Center. According to our own records, there was a liaison named Eva who had been placed on temporary leave a few months ago.

"We would not have even known of her had she not been Pixie's bridal liaison. She had done such a horrible job that Pixie mentioned it to Val after she arrived and steps were taken for her to be retrained. The council contacted Earth authorities and Eva was found dead in her home the same day this video was recorded."

Claudia rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache starting in the center of it. "I can't believe this is happening... When did my life get so

complicated?” She looked over to Wheaton. “What about the traces of the explosive stuff in the apartment?”

Wheaton leaned forward and rubbed his jaw, “After speaking to the men that collected the samples, they believe it have been present on the boots of the warriors that we just witnessed on the video. The amount was small and only in the entry way so we are assuming it came from the warrior that threatened Maggie. Since they also admitted to searching your apartment then it makes sense that he is the source.”

“So Claudia has been cleared?” Finch probed, his expression hopeful.

Wheaton nodded, “As much as she can be cleared for right now. The Verge warriors mentioned multiple operatives at the center. The council is assessing the survivors right now to see if there may be others working with Eva.”

Claudia stared at Wheaton for a moment, “Wait, we still need to find Maggie though. You’re not giving up on finding her, right?”

Claudia looked to Finch when Wheaton wouldn’t meet her gaze.

“Finch, tell me that you guys are going to find her and help her.” Claudia’s tone could have cut through glass it was so sharp.

“Of course we will, right?” Finch directed his words to Wheaton, the other man still looking as if he wasn’t sure.

“We can’t leave her to those guys!” Claudia snapped when nobody spoke again.

“I know.” Wheaton sighed and leaned back against the couch. “Believe me, Poppy has already told me that I better find her or else she would never speak to me again.”

“Ditto regarding finding Maggie,” Claudia said, raising her brow at her own husband.

“The most important thing we know is that Eva had been working with the Verge as well as others. This affects the security of every single Intake Center we have open. If Eva was able to be turned and we trusted her to prepare our brides, who else could have been turned. Another problem we have run into is that Eva’s records show she assisted more than twenty brides but we can only account for thirteen of them.”

“What does that mean?” Claudia asked, unable to wrap her mind around what Wheaton was saying.

“That we are missing brides and Earth is missing women,” Finch answered her while keeping his eyes on Wheaton. “Does their government know they are unaccounted for?”

“Not yet. As far as the authorities know, we have all of the brides that were recorded into the system. We are not ready to let them know that one of their own appointed liaisons may have assisted in making some of these women disappear.”

“But why would the Verge want women? I thought that was why they left your society?” Claudia interrupted.

“They did not want them to be a part of our society as wives and mothers to our future generations... They may have found other uses for them. Right now, we can only hope that they are safe.” Wheaton was grim as he stood up and walked toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Finch stood still holding Max.

“I am going to see if I could put out a request for a location on Hix. He is the only one that has been identified so far and, if we are lucky, he may still be wearing his tracking implant from previous missions. If we want to find Maggie, then we need to locate him first. Once we interrogate him, we will know much more about the Verge’s plans.” Wheaton tucked his tablet into the pocket on the side of his tunic.

Finch passed Max off to Claudia when she stood to walk Wheaton to the door. “When did he go to the Verge? I did not know he defected.”

Claudia heard not only surprise, but also pain in Finch’s voice when he talked about the warrior on the video they watched.

“He followed Traeger when he left. Both of them turned in formal letters stating their allegiance to keeping the race pure. It was a surprise to all of us. Traeger was expected to join them, but not Hix.”

“Hix was a good warrior,” Finch murmured, obviously upset by the news.

“He is still a good warrior. The problem is that he chose the wrong side,” Wheaton said before he left.

As the door swished closed behind the council member, Claudia patted Finch on the back.

“Was he a friend?” Claudia could tell he was bothered by what he had found out.

“I believed so. He was not of my barracks, but we ran missions together not long after being assigned to Squadron Two. I trusted him to guard my

back just like he trusted me to guard his own. Traeger was never a good influence and more than once I felt the need to step in when he would have compromised a mission. I am just having a hard time understanding why Hix would have chosen to defect with him after everything we have been through.”

Finch let out a sad sigh. His face had fallen from the happy smile he had before Wheaton’s visit.

“If he’s a good guy then why would he go to the Verge? What Poppy has said about them is that they are crazy about not mixing with humans...to the point where they don’t care who they hurt.” Claudia tried not to sound like she was picking on his friend, but she truly didn’t understand how someone could be so hateful as to kidnap women and plan to sell them.

“When we first found out about humans...I do not know how to explain it. Mating with humans gave some of us hope. Others looked at it as something that would make us weak,” Finch offered up the explanation with a shrug.

“Why would it make you weak? All of the information I read said that you guys basically wouldn’t survive much longer without a way to reproduce,” Claudia argued, trying to understand.

“There was a faction of purists who would rather keep cloning as the only option for reproduction. When our scientists brought forth information regarding the problems with cloning, they fought against it. They argued that the council was manipulating the findings and that cloning was the not only the best answer for continuing our race but also the only one. It was said that any children made from a human and Phaeton pairing was an abomination and would not be able to survive in our society.”

Claudia watched as Finch cradled Max closer to his body as if trying to protect his small form.

“At first, the split off of the Verge was done peacefully, then, without provocation, they started attacking Phaeton shuttles during our scheduled runs...we lost many warrior brothers in those first days. The council received threats that if we kept with our plan to contact Earth in exchange for brides then it would be open war. War upon not only our ships and home planet, but also Earth.”

“Why would they attack Earth?” Claudia couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had thought that the Verge were just a bunch of misguided

assholes at first. Now she knew they were crazy misguided assholes.

“If the Phaeton wants to take human brides then the Verge will strike directly at the source to stop us. We have multiple battle ships that are guarding your planet in orbit right now. It is the only thing we can do to make sure that you are safe.” Finch reached out to pull her into his embrace. The hug was crowded since it also contained Max, but she clung to the connection they had.

“Do not worry. I will keep you safe. I promise...even if it is from my own people,” Finch vowed.

“I know that. It’s just that now I’m even more worried for Maggie. If they are willing to kill all of those people, then what’s to stop them from hurting her? And what about the others that are missing?” Claudia rubbed her face against Finch’s chest. Her eyes stinging with tears.

Finch had no answer for her other than a comforting embrace. Hugging her close he let out a sigh that showed he was just as concerned as she was.

Hopefully her friend was safe...wherever she was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Claudia kicked her feet up onto the table. Having the time to relax and not worry about wiping up drool was not something she was used to. Pixie and Dathrow had come by earlier and baby-napped Max. Apparently, Pixie thought that Dathrow needed a little hands-on experience with caring for a child before their own arrived.

Not that Claudia minded.

She needed a breather. With Maggie's situation constantly in the back of her mind, she wasn't getting any rest even when she was sleeping. Her dreams had become nightmares where she watched Maggie die at the hands of the Verge.

And it had been all her fault.

She was the one who had been working at the Intake Center. It was her who had gotten involved with Finch before the explosion happened.

Would she have rather never met Finch?

Of course not, but at this point there was no denying that if Maggie had not been her friend then she would still be safe somewhere instead of missing and possibly dead.

As her thoughts spiraled into what could possibly be happening to Maggie at that very second, Claudia was startled when she heard the door chime.

Walking to the door, she hit the video and intercom button. The screen showed a warrior that she had not been introduced to but had seen before when walking around the ship.

"Yes?"

“I am here to offer an escort to the Medical Center for your band to be sealed.”

“Just a second.” Claudia smiled and nodded at the camera even though it was one way and slipped on her shoes.

As the door slid open, Claudia offered a friendly smile to the large warrior outside. “Hi, I’m Claudia.”

“I know, my name is Heller.” Nodding swiftly to her in a sharp bow, he motioned for her to follow him.

“Thanks for escorting me, I know it has to be a pain for all of you guys when you are pulled away from your normal duties,” Claudia acknowledged, giving her thanks.

When her words didn’t receive a response other than a soft grunt, she followed along behind him without another word.

After several minutes had passed, Claudia looked around confused. “I don’t remember coming this way when I went to the medical center before.”

“We will be coming upon it as we enter the next corridor,” Heller said abruptly.

Claudia tried to pay attention to the multiple doors they were passing and also keep up with her guide at the same time. The swift pace combined with her trying to get her orientation proved fruitless. There was no way she would ever be able to get around on this ship on her own if it was always going to be like this. She wasn’t normally one for being able to follow directions or a map easily anyways. Claudia freely admitted that she was one of those directionally challenged people that used landmarks to figure out where she was. On a ship where everything was silver and nothing was labeled? Well...it was basically a giant maze where she was the confused rat.

“Holy smokes, I feel like I should have worn my workout gear. This will be my cardio for the day,” Claudia joked, trying to get at least a smile from the warrior she was stuck with.

“We are almost there now,” Heller snapped before turning at the end of the corridor and pointing to a set of double doors.

Claudia shrugged and walked to the opening. Didn’t the med center have a sign on the wall before? Granted, it wasn’t in any language she could read

but she had been sure that there had been some sort of plaque beside the twin doors when she had visited a few days ago.

Heller waved his own band over the scanner mounted and they swished open. Claudia swallowed hard at what was in front of her.

This wasn't the med center...and the three warriors watching her from inside the room were looking at her with hate in their eyes.

"What's going on?" Claudia said, her mouth dry.

A firm push from behind propelled her into the room where the men quickly surrounded her.

"Hey, knock it off!" Claudia yelled when one of the men reached out and squeezed the excess flesh of her thigh through her yoga pants.

"You will be quiet," Heller ordered.

"Like hell I will. What the hell do you think you're doing?" Claudia quickly glanced around, past the bodies surrounding her, to see they were in a completely empty apartment.

One of the warriors who had been standing slightly back with his arms crossed over her chest gave her a sinister smile. "We heard that you were responsible for the explosion on Earth."

"You heard wrong," Claudia said firmly, trying to back out of the circle they had created around her.

"There is no use. You cannot get away from us. Soon, there will even be more here. The odds are not in your favor," Heller taunted.

"I didn't have anything to do with the explosion. I would have been killed myself if it hadn't been for Finch."

"Ahhhh, your own personal hero," one of the warriors mocked. "Where is he now then? How is he going to save you this time?"

Claudia swallowed hard and shrugged, trying not to show how truly scared shitless she was. "I'm not sure but I know he will."

When the men started laughing at her, Claudia took the chance and tried to dart around the man closest to her. She didn't get too far before she was grabbed about the waist and pulled into a hard body in an unrelenting hold.

"Not so quickly Claudia. We have not had time yet to enjoy ourselves," he whispered next to her ear. The moisture from his breath touching the lobe of her ear and making her shiver in disgust.

"So that's your grand plan?" Claudia asked, sounding scared shitless even to her own ears.

“So far...we may have some other plans as well,” Heller said, his threat filled with lust.

At those words, the one man who had been quiet this entire time frowned and stepped forward. “I believed that this was a mission to find out who she was working with on Earth? When did this change?”

“C’mon Axis, do not act like the thought of a human woman at your disposal does not appeal to you. You were high on the list to be assigned a bride. This female here has stolen that right from you with her actions.” The warrior holding Claudia tightly, shook her for good measure.

“I was told that we were going to question her because her male was not able to do it himself,” Axis said calmly.

“Do you think Finch was not blinded by what is between her legs? He got a wife out of this entire mess and all of us were told that not only did we have to wait to get our own humans, but that it may be another year before it happens,” Heller argued. “She has to know something...and when we get the information out of her we will be rewarded.”

“Rewarded? No, Finch will kill you if you hurt me,” Claudia interrupted. “I already told them everything I knew. Paine even questioned me and agreed that I wasn’t guilty of anything.”

Claudia sucked in a breath when the arm around her tightened to the point of pain. Looking around the room she could see that the only potential ally she had in the room was Axis. He looked concerned by the turn of event and that hesitation was the only thing she had on her side right now.

“Do you think we believe you?” Heller asked, mockingly.

“It’s the truth,” Claudia gasped with the little air she had in her body.

“Let her go. I will question her from here and see if I can get any useful information from her,” Axis ordered.

When the other men hesitated, he squared his shoulders and crossed his arms again. The stance was screaming ‘come at me’.

“Fine, if you want to talk to her first then I do not care.” Heller mumbled, “but do not think that you are in charge of this operation.”

Axis snorted, “Operation? This is not the operation I believed I was signing up for.”

Once Claudia was free of Heller’s grip, she sucked in a huge breath. Bending over slightly, she tucked one of her arms over her midriff. The area

feeling sore from the squeeze that the large warrior had around her middle just seconds ago.

Axis moved closer and held out his arm to her. When she shied away from any contact, he instantly backed off and instead pointed to a chair that she had not seen before. "Please sit."

"I already told Wheaton and everyone what happened," Claudia started. "I promise I don't know anything else."

Axis crouched in front of her, watching her closely. He nodded. Claudia watched as his eyes darted to the side, tracking the movements of his partners in crime. From the assessing look that Axis had given them earlier, it seemed to Claudia as if Axis hadn't been in on the entire "plan" that they had concocted.

Speaking so quietly that even Claudia had a hard time hearing him, Axis whispered, "I did not realize the lengths that my fellow warriors would go to for revenge. That is a mistake that I have made, and I will make up for it in any way that I can." He rolled his wrist to the side and flashed his band at her. When she saw the blinking lights on his wrist, Claudia started to speak but was quickly shushed when he held out his hand to stop her. "I have sent out a distress call with my locator. Hopefully we will have some help out of this mess shortly."

"You believe me?" Claudia asked, tears pricking her eyes.

"I do not know you. So saying I believe you would be a lie...I trust Paine and Councilor Wheaton. If they have said that you are cleared of any wrongdoing, then I have faith that they were not swayed by 'what is between your legs'." At his words, Claudia let out a sigh of relief.

"Now we wait," Axis murmured.

Raising his voice, he started asking her questions about the bombing and what she did while on Earth. To anyone listening in, it sounded like a normal interrogation. Claudia however knew that he was stalling for time. Time when hopefully someone would come in with guns a-blazin'.

After a while, Claudia could tell that the others were starting to get anxious. Heller was leaning against the wall staring at her with a look she had never seen before. It was a mixture of hate and creepy lust all rolled into one.

She was thinking how lucky his potential future bride was that their meeting was delayed when he pushed away from the wall and walked

toward her.

“Enough,” he said harshly, “She is spewing the same lies that she told the others. I know she has more information that she is giving us. Let me have some time alone with her and I will get it out of her.”

At the moment when Heller got close enough, Axis turned quickly and blocked him. In an unexpected move, he spun until he was behind the other warrior and without hesitation snapped his neck. The sequence of moves was over before Claudia could blink. The only thing that accompanied his swift moves was the sharp gasp that she let loose once he was finished.

Axis nodded to her as he dropped the body of his now dead warrior friend and turned to block the others moving in on him. “Stay behind me.”

Claudia nodded quickly, her heart racing so fast it felt as if it would spring right out of her chest.

Where the hell was their back up?

As if they had heard her cursing them, the door toned and it opened to show Finch along with some other warriors flooding into the room.

“Claudia!” Finch yelled, as he tried to make his way to her.

Heller’s back up must have also arrived at the same time because there were multiple warriors now crowding the area.

“I will protect her, Finch!” Axis yelled as he moved to hit one of the original kidnappers. “Bryton, you must know that this operation is over,” Axis grunted as he tried to reason with the warrior on the losing side.

“I know that if you had not stopped Heller then we would have our answers now.” He gasped, trying to catch his breath after a solid hit to the solar plexus.

“Heller was not thinking clearly. You know that.” Axis pinned Bryton down. “Give up, brother. It is over.”

“I cannot go to the mining planet, Axis,” Bryton rasped out. “Show mercy and end me now.”

“As you wish.” Axis nodded shortly and with a quick flex of his arms, he snapped Bryton’s neck.

Claudia did not realize that tears were flowing down her cheeks until she felt the wetness hit her chest.

Looking around for another potential threat, Claudia locked eyes with Finch as he took down one of his rogue brothers.

Finch was breathing hard, his cheeks flushed and face sweating as he fought his way to her. Any warrior that looked as if he may halt Finch's forward progression was swiftly dealt with.

Claudia had never seen anything like it. The scene was almost something she would have expected straight out of an action flick. Bodies flying everywhere with random grunts and groans thrown in for good measure. It was all she could do to stay out of the way lest she accidentally get knocked over or hit.

"Claudia, get your back to the wall," Axis ordered as he was slammed into by one of the men fighting on the other side.

Claudia backed up until she was in the corner of the room. With her back to the wall, she was able to relax slightly knowing that nobody was able to sneak up on her. Her eyes took turns moving back and forth between Finch and Axis. One man trying to protect her while the other tried to get to her.

Before she could blink her two saviors met in the middle.

"Finch, I was the one—" Axis began to explain, blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth.

"You took her!" Finch barreled into Axis, the impact taking both men down in a tangle of muscled limbs.

"Finch!" Claudia screamed, "He helped me. Don't hurt him!"

Claudia started forward only to move back again when an arm came way too close to catching her in the face. As the men grappled for dominance, she looked around for help. "Wheaton! Over here!" Claudia yelled, spotting her friend.

Wheaton strode over to where Claudia was trapped in the corner and quickly checked her over. "Are you injured?"

"No, but you need to stop him," she said quickly, pointing to Finch.

"Do not concern yourself with Finch. He will finish off the warrior in no time," Wheaton said with confidence.

"Axis was helping me! He's the one that let you guys know what was happening. Don't let Finch hurt him." She grimaced when she heard Axis groan at one particular hit.

"Paine! Rowe!" Wheaton yelled over the chaos. "I need your help getting Finch off of this warrior. Apparently he is on our side but we did not know it."

Both of the men nodded before moving to the tangle on the floor. Finch and Axis were easily matched to the point that they were simply taking turns beating each other up. The men each sport black eyes and cuts to their faces.

As the paired fighters each grabbed one of the men to separate them they received a couple hits as well.

“Finch! He was protecting your wife!” Wheaton snapped when Finch landed a particularly hard hit to Paine.

Those words seemed to snap Finch out of whatever haze he had been in. He blinked a few times and looked around, his gazing darting from one person to another until they landed on her.

Claudia held her hands up to her mouth to block her sobs as the day’s events washed over her.

Finch shook off his friends and wiped his mouth on his sleeve before striding toward her. “Are you hurt?” he asked gruffly. The question came out harsh since he was still panting from the fight.

“I’m okay, Axis protected me,” Claudia said with a nod to the man that was being held up by Rowe.

As if suddenly realizing what he had almost done, Finch’s eyes widened and he nodded over to the man he had just been beating.

“I apologize,” Finch began, “You were standing between us and I just—”

Axis waved his words off, shrugging his shoulders. “It was a mistake that I put myself in the middle of.”

“What exactly happened here?” Wheaton’s words fell on a quiet room. The men having been either been killed or subdued.

“I got word from Heller and Bryton that the human female was involved in the bombing at the center. I agreed to assist in separating her from Finch to question her and find out what she may know about it,” Axis admitted. “When I realized that they information I was given was false, I triggered my band and tried to stall for time.”

Axis spit out one of his teeth on the floor, the action causing Claudia to feel light headed. “What took you so long?”

“We received the alert but did not realize that Claudia was missing until Dathrow went to return her son and was unable to find her,” Wheaton answered.

Finch hugged her close, rocking her back and forth. “And this is why I wanted you to have your bridal band,” he whispered into her neck.

“Believe it or not that’s how they tricked me into leaving the apartment.” At Finch’s curious look, Claudia explained, “Heller showed up saying he was my escort to the med center to get fitted.”

Axis grunted from where he was standing, “He is friends with the engineer that was called to fix the sealing machine. It was fixed this morning and he knew he did not have much time before you would be able to be tracked.”

“I guess he didn’t plan on me making friends with someone who had a band.” Claudia moved out of Finch’s arms and walked toward Axis. Ignoring the growl that rumbled from her husband, Claudia hugged Axis. “Thank you.”

“My intention was never to harm you, I only wanted to protect my brothers and find out if you were working against us.” Axis returned her hug somewhat stiffly.

“We have a lot to talk about, Axis,” Wheaton said grimly.

“I understand, councilor.” He nodded, crossed his hands behind his back and waited for the next command.

As Paine and Rowe started to move around the bodies littering the floor, Wheaton spoke in a deadly tone to Axis.

Finch took that opportunity to grab onto Claudia and hustle them toward the door.

“Where are we going?” Claudia asked, yelping with Finch scooped her up and into his arms.

“We are going to the med center to get you a band. I cannot do this again,” Finch said dryly.

“Ditto,” Claudia whispered as she rested her head against the hard chest under her cheek.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“Wake up, sweetheart.”

Claudia struggled to open her eyes. Hadn't she *just* closed them to sleep?

“Do not hid your face in the pillow, Claudia. We need to get going. Poppy is waiting for you and Wheaton scheduled a briefing with the council that I must attend.” Finch's voice seemed muffled as Claudia tried to bury her face even further into the soft cotton under her head.

“You leave me no choice,” was the only warning that Claudia received before the covers on top of her were whipped away.

“Eeek!” Claudia squealed. “Dammit, Finch! It's cold in here.”

Finch was standing over her with his hands on his hips. Rolling his eyes, he waved at the area round him. “I used to sleep with it at the standard temperature. You are the one that wants it to be cold before we go to bed.”

Claudia rolled onto her belly, hugging the pillow as if it were her best friend. “I like it to be cold at night so I can snuggle under the covers and not be hot.”

Smack!

“Ouch! What the hell was that for?” Claudia rubbed the offended cheek of her bottom that he had abused with his open palm.

“I have been trying to wake you for the last hour and Poppy is waiting.” Finch tossed her outfit on the bed that she had set out the night before and huffed at her. “Max has already been changed, fed, and dressed. Get moving. We have to go soon or we will both be late.”

“Fine, you big meanie. I guess the honeymoon is over.” Claudia grumbled and then smiled when she saw Finch toss a mock glare her way before leaving the room.

Quickly running through her morning routine, Claudia was glad that they had showered after their sexy time the night before. At least she didn't smell like she just rolled out of bed this morning.

Claudia hurried into the living room to find Finch and Max standing by the door. Finch had even packed up the diaper bag and was waiting with it ready to go. Jeez, she must really be running behind if he was this prepared.

"I'm sorry I was such a stinker this morning," Claudia apologized as she reached for Max to give him morning kisses. She grinned when she noticed that Finch had put him into his favorite outfit that was covered in dinosaurs.

"If you had not taken advantage of me last night then you may have gotten more sleep than you did," Finch chided with a grin. "Not that I am complaining—you can wake me up at any time."

"Oh shut it, you're the one who was laying there all sexy and naked." Claudia followed him out the door.

"I was sleeping in bed, you sex crazed female!" Finch teased, smacking her on the ass for good measure.

"I—"

"Well...I have found out more information than I intended to this morning," came a droll voice from behind them.

Claudia froze in her steps, mortified that their exchange been witnessed. Turning around, she held Max in front of her as if he were a shield that would block her from the embarrassment she felt.

"Good morning, Paine." Finch bowed shortly, causing the diaper bag over his shoulder to slip down to his elbow.

"Good morning, Finch." Copying the bow, he nodded at Claudia as well. "I am assuming from what I overheard that your bonding is going well?"

"Very well actually," Finch answered, completely unaware of how embarrassed Claudia was.

"Let's change the subject, okay?" Claudia interrupted before Finch could go into more detail. "Are you going to the briefing also?"

Paine shook his head, "No, Rowe will attend but I have been asked to guard Poppy this morning in her quarters. Are you going to be joining us?"

"Yep, do you know if Pixie will be there? I have some stuff I wanted to give her," Claudia asked as the trio started again toward their destination.

"I am not sure. She has not been feeling well lately and may be resting today." Paine tapped on the tablet he pulled out of his pocket. "Yes,

Dathrow will be missing the meeting this afternoon to stay with her at their apartment.”

“I hope she is okay,” Claudia said, concern for her new friend now in the forefront of her mind.

“I spoke with Dathrow yesterday and Pixie had fallen in the shower pod.” At Claudia’s worried gasp, he patted her on the shoulder. “She is fine and so is the baby. The doctors monitored her overnight, and she is just tired and sore today. Dathrow wants to stay with her for his own sake. He went a little crazy after the accident yesterday and needs some time to reassure himself that his family unit is unharmed.”

“I can only imagine what he is going through.” Finch said with a grimace. Turning to Claudia, he gave her a stern look. “Do not ever fall in the shower pod.”

Claudia couldn’t help the snort of laughter that escaped her mouth. “I am sure Pixie didn’t mean to fall, but okay, I will be super careful from now on. Okay?”

“Okay,” Finch said the word shortly, the slang still sounding strange coming from his mouth.

“Okay?” Paine mimicked.

“Yes, okay. It is human slang that Claudia is teaching me. It means that I agree.” Finch schooled Paine with a superior look.

“Well, okay,” Paine said with a smile.

“This is where my meeting is at, sweetheart.” Finch stopped at a set of silver gleaming double doors. Leaning forward he gave her a soft kiss on the mouth before running his lips over Max’s forehead. Passing the diaper bag to Paine who held it like it was explosives, he ordered, “Keep my family safe today.”

“It is my duty.” Bowing swiftly, Paine waited for Finch to enter the doors before he gestured for Claudia to continue in front of him down the hall.

“Do you know what the briefing is about?” Claudia probed.

“Partly, why?” Paine watched her out of the corner of his eye as they walked.

Hoping to keep her tone nonchalant, Claudia shrugged. “Just curious.”

“Claudia, it is not regarding your friend. I saw the council notes this morning and from what I can tell they are discussing the Bridal Pact and

how to calm down your governments fears about more attacks. Maggie was not mentioned at all on the meeting list.”

Claudia felt her shoulders slump. It had been two weeks since they had watched that video of her being kidnapped by Hix and the Verge. There was not one day that went by that Claudia didn’t worry about Maggie and wonder if she was okay.

“Do not worry—we will find her.” Paine tried to reassure her.

“It’s been two weeks...I just keep thinking about the people they had no problem killing on Earth. What if she is already dead?” The question brought fresh tears to Claudia’s eyes which in turn caused Paine to panic.

“Do not cry.” He gave the order as if he expected the tears in her eyes to simply vanish. “Stop it. No leaking while I am responsible for you, Finch will challenge me in the sparring room if he knows that I let you cry while you were in my care.”

Claudia sputtered out a half laugh, half cry, still upset about Maggie but distracted and amused by Paine. As she sniffed and tried to control her emotions, she smiled at him. “You’re a nutball.”

“Me?” Paine looked offended, “You are the one crying and laughing the same time.”

“Sorry, I’m just a little bit tired.” Claudia yawned at the reminder.

“Well, maybe if you did not molest Finch in his sleep then you would not be so exhausted,” Paine said completely serious before smiling wide enough to show his dimples when Claudia bumped her shoulder into his.

“Don’t ever mention what you overheard again...but FYI, he is damn sexy when he is sleeping.”

“I do not need to hear this.” Covering his ears with his hands, he jumped when Max petted him on the shoulder from his perch on Claudia’s hip.

“He wants you to carry him,” Claudia informed him, slightly enjoying the look of panic on Paine’s face. “C’mon, he won’t bite. I take that back, he may bite, but just know that it’s because he’s teething and his gums hurt.”

“I am not afraid of your tiny human,” Paine said as he reached slowly for Max. Holding the baby as if he were carrying a live bomb, Paine looked anything but comfortable.

“Relax and settle him on your hip. Max will put his legs around you and hold on so you’re not carrying his entire weight,” Claudia instructed as she watched him try to figure out how to hold her son.

“Entire weight? He is so light I feel like I could toss him with no effort at all.” Paine frowned at the baby that was now clinging to his side.

“Toss him? Well, that makes me feel awesome for letting you hold my baby,” Claudia’s voice was filled with so much sarcasm that she did not know how Paine didn’t catch it.

“You are welcome.”

She gave up. Tossing her hands in the air to show her defeat, she followed him down the hallway watching him like a hawk until they reached Poppy’s apartments.

The rest of their morning and afternoon went slowly. Watching movies and playing with Max, the women took turns yawning.

“Do you ever feel like you get enough sleep?” Poppy asked as she rubbed her back.

Claudia was shaking her head before Poppy had even finished her question. “No, but it’s worth it. I wouldn’t change one thing except for bringing my brother back.” Claudia watched Max play on the floor with Paine.

“I am so ready to not be pregnant anymore.” Poppy groaned as she sank into a chair. “I feel as big as a whale and I can’t get comfortable to save my life.”

“How much longer do you have?” Claudia nodded at Poppy’s belly.

“Maybe a couple of weeks. The timeline isn’t really hammered out yet since the growth is different for Phaetons and humans. I am getting checked every two days now, and the docs say that everything looks great, but can’t really give me a solid date. I heard Wheaton ask them about how big the baby is getting though...if I don’t go into labor they might have to take the baby sooner rather than later.”

Claudia could see the fear that was plain on Poppy’s face.

“I’m sure that won’t come to that.” Claudia tried to sound positive but felt as though her words came out lacking.

“This just isn’t what I imagined when I dreamed of having my first baby.” Poppy sounded sad as she stroked the large ball of her stomach.

“How can I help?” Claudia asked, ready to do anything she could for one of the only friends she had now.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just emotional,” Poppy leaned her head back on the chair and closed her eyes.

“What if we have a baby shower?” Claudia suggested, the idea coming to her out of nowhere.

“Why would you need to shower Poppy’s small human?” Paine asked, looking up from where Max was rolling a ball back and forth to him.

“It’s not a real shower but a party,” At the excited look on Poppy’s face, Claudia knew that she had come up with a good idea.

“This is going to be—” Claudia was interrupted when the tone sounded and the door opened on a whoosh.

“We found Hix!” Finch’s words were rushed as he walked to stand in front of Claudia. Breathing hard as if he run all the way here from his council meeting, his chest heaved.

Standing up she hugged him hard, her heart beating loudly in her ears. “Is Maggie okay?”

Finch leaned back, holding her face in his palms he gave her a look that showed the hope he felt. “We do not know. It seems as though he tried to contact the council, but the message was scrambled and we were unable to understand it. The message was sent one week ago and we just now deciphered it. More good news is that we were able to pick up his tracking code. We know where to find him and luckily it is not on a Verge ship.”

“Where is he?” Paine questioned Finch, nodding at Wheaton who had followed behind him into the apartment.

“That is the strange thing. Hix’s locator is in the Pleasure Sector.” Wheaton leaned over to kiss the top of his wife’s head.

“The Pleasure Sector?” Poppy repeated at the same time that Claudia asked, “Is Maggie with him?”

Wheaton held out his hands for everyone to stop speaking, once they had quieted down he outlined their plan. “Paine, I have talked to Rowe already and he agreed to take a mission to the Pleasure Sector to search for Hix. We would like you to go with him as backup.”

“Why only two guys? Why not send in more to get her back?” Claudia asked, not understanding why they weren’t already on their way now with guns a blazing.

“Claudia, we do not know if Maggie is with Hix. Not only that, but it could also be a trap. Honestly, it is surprising that Hix is still wearing his implanted locator. We are not sure if he had forgotten that he was tagged or if he left it on purpose so we know where to find him. Either way it is best

for us to go in with our two strongest paired fighters so we do not give the Verge a larger target than necessary.”

“Do you understand why it must be this way?” Finch asked, searching her eyes

“Yes, I’m not happy about it but I understand.” Claudia leaned forward and kissed him quickly. “I am just anxious to find out if she is okay.”

“I will do the best I can to bring your friend back safely,” Paine swore from where he was now standing holding Max.

Max quickly leaned out of his arms with his pudgy hands reaching for Finch.

“Daa-aa,” Max grunted.

“Oh my god, Finch, I think he’s trying to say daddy.” Claudia felt her eyes well with tears.

Finch smiled and cooed to the baby causing Claudia to sniff. Looking over she noticed that Poppy had tears dripping down her cheeks at the scene.

“I’m a hot mess,” Poppy blubbered.

“But you are my hot mess. Come with me, it is time for you to rest.” Wheaton helped Poppy stand and guided her to their bedroom.

“Paine, I expect you to report to the docking bay with Rowe within the next hour and be prepared to leave for your mission. We have already loaded enough credits onto your account for you to get the information needed regarding where Hix might be hiding.” Wheaton did not wait for an answer before he let the door close behind him and his wife.

“Let’s go home, babe,” Claudia whispered, leaning her husband at her side.

“Home sounds good,” Finch agreed, hugging her close.

Walking down the corridor, they were all silent, lost in their thoughts. When it was time for Paine to continue down toward the docking bay, Claudia stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Paine, bring back my friend,” Claudia ordered, her words wavering with emotion.

“I will do my best,” Nodding to her, Paine bowed swiftly toward Finch before striding quickly down the corridor.

“He will do everything he can,” Finch assured her.

“I hope so...I really hope so.” Claudia patted Max on the back as they walked into their apartment.

Maggie had to be okay. If she wasn't...it would be all her fault for getting her mixed up in this mess. And if that was the case then Claudia wasn't sure if she could forgive herself.

EPILOGUE

A warm tongue traced the small of her back as she arched and moaned. Maggie was drowsy with pleasure as she breathed in the familiar scent of the man hovering over her prone form.

“Are you going to wake up for me?” he rumbled.

“Nope, just keep doing what you’re doing, and I’ll let you know when I’m awake,” she teased, not wanting him to stop.

The bed that they were lounging on shifted slightly as he sat back. Maggie turned her head and glared at him, “I thought you were going to keep going.”

“We need to move again,” Hix said with a sad smile.

“Have they found us yet?” Maggie sat up, not bothering to cover her bare breasts.

Hix reached out and rubbed the tip of her nipple as if it were too much of a temptation to resist. “Not yet, but they will soon if we do not move.” Standing up he held out his hand to help her up. “We need to gather our things and leave now.”

“Gotcha,” Maggie heaved out a big sigh as she gathered her clothes off the floor.

“I already packed up everything else and have a place secured for us.” Hix walked to the duffle sitting on the floor and picked up something next to it. “I did not know what you wanted to do with this but thought you would want to keep it.”

Handing her the dog leash caused fresh tears to spring to her eyes.

Poor Bohdi.

He had died trying to save her life and this was all that she had left of him. She didn't even have a chance to take his collar before they had to flee. Now the only item she had to remember him by was his favorite bone patterned leash.

She vowed right then and there that if it was the last thing she did she would make sure the man responsible for his death was punished.

“Come quickly, dearling. We must hurry while it is still dark enough for us to move unnoticed in the streets.”

Maggie took a deep breath and choked back the tears she desperately wanted to let free. Now was not the time for crying, that would come later when she was safe. Right now, she had to focus on surviving and to do that she needed to pull herself together.

“I'm ready—lead the way.”

About Leora Gonzales

I am an original Kansas girl who misses the Sunflower State every day. I spend my time reading and writing making sure my two kids don't kill themselves or each other. My addictions include tattoos, cursing, good food and good company (not necessarily in that order). I believe that tough moments in life can be combated with good humor, and I find a reason to laugh or smile daily.

Find me online at: www.leoragonzales.com

Sign up for my mailing list, follow me on Facebook and Twitter, or learn more about my other works.

Other works by Leora Gonzales

Warriors of Phaeton Series (Self-Published)

Bridal Pact

Bridal Bonds

Warriors of Phaeton: Dathrow

Warriors of Phaeton: Finch

Warriors of Phaeton: Hix (coming 2018)

Braving the Heat Series (Lyrical Press)

Melting Snow

Simmering Heat (coming 2018)