



STAR-CHILD  
by Laurie

art by mella68

# Star-child

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Homestead, Jim Ellison had learned the hard way, was a backwater planet, mainly useful to the rest of the quadrant as a jumping off point to other star systems.

It was the smallest base Jim had ever been assigned to, a perfect circle, but it was all the land the Maven had agreed to concede to Outlanders.

He was restricted to a radius of four turns. It only took him two hours to walk the diameter past the ship lots in the center of the base, ending at the force field that surrounded the compound. Most of the staff were there to handle the incoming and outgoing space liners and cargo ships, but some, like Jim, were assigned to handle the Maven. Protect them, yes, but also to oversee the trade agreement between them and Outlanders. Anyone who wasn't one of the Maven.

Jim couldn't wait for this six month punishment detail to end.

He still didn't regret bringing Oliver down. And if he never left Space Center Compound 75334 with its population of eight hundred souls before his time was up, then so be it.

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## Chapter One

"Ellison, you're on the exchange tonight. Mitchell's sick," Captain Banks barked out when Jim opened the door to the Captain's office. Shoving the floating screen in front of his face to the side, Banks pointed at one of the two chairs in front of his desk.

"Have a seat, Sub-lieutenant." Jim lowered himself stiffly into the chair. Other than attending mandatory briefings, he hadn't talked with his captain since he'd arrived at the compound a month ago.

"Sir?" Jim glanced around the office, noting several pictures of Banks and a boy. He'd heard the Captain had a son, but that the boy was grown now and lived off planet.

Banks rolled his chair back and reached for a bottle. He opened it, the delicate, delicious scent filling the room. "Can I offer you some pretty damn good home-brew, Ellison?"

Jim knew what it was. "Yes, sir. Thank you. That's made from the Sweet Fire tree, isn't it?"

"Yes. It only grows here on Homestead and the nuts are one of the staples the Maven trade to Outlanders."

Banks poured the bright green drink into two glasses, pushed one towards Jim. "Back to why I called you in here.

This is your first time dealing with the Maven, and they're a touchy lot."

"Sir."

"Nothing to it, really. Don't look the High Maven in the eye, use the translator rather than Common Tongue, and throw in plenty of 'yes, ma'ams.' They'll turn over their trade goods, you'll sign and seal the transaction, and give them a copy."

"Yes, sir. I've been briefed on Maven culture." Jim took a sip and savored it. The stuff was really good, but this version wasn't an intoxicant, unlike what he'd had in the compound's bars.

Banks leaned back in his chair and steepled his hands. "They're a peaceful bunch, but they keep to themselves. Afraid of cultural contamination from the other worlds. Except for the Seeking, of course." Banks finished off his home-brew while Jim thought longingly of the card game he'd been planning on attending this evening. He was a soldier, not a merchant, although he came from merchant stock. His father would have loved the opportunity to haggle with the Maven. Jim just wished it was already over.

"So should I expect any Maidens wanting passage off world?"

Banks shook his head. "No. That's a once in a five-year deal. The next departure isn't for four months. We don't have any Mothers and Star-children on any incoming star-liners for today. Of course, there's no schedule to the Mothers returning. Once a Maven citizen disembarks, we contact the High Maven's office and they'll send a welcome home escort to take them to their people."

"Anything else I should know about the transfer, Captain?"

Banks let out a long aggravated sigh. "Don't let Blair persuade you to let him past the meeting house. He's got the High Maven's permission to stay for a day and a night, but not to leave the compound's recreation rooms."

"Blair?" Jim finished off his drink and set the glass down carefully on Bank's desk.

"Blair Star-child. And Sub-lieutenant, it'll be your responsibility to watch over him while he's in the meeting house. He's a friendly sort, easy with his affections. That's made things... interesting sometimes. He's restricted to men only, though. The Maven are not willing to risk a child of their lineage growing up anyplace but here, on Homestead."

"Yes, sir." Jim schooled his expression so it didn't reflect his distaste. So one of the Maven liked to bed Outlanders. Blair Star-child sounded like trouble to him.

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On the security video, Jim watched the High Maven's lips purse into a discontented expression as she and her entourage scanned in their bio-metrics at the gate. Once cleared, they walked into the meeting-house. The High Maven spotted Jim standing at parade rest directly in front of the entrance and she quickly plastered on an insincere smile. Jim touched the translator on his collar, activating the earpiece.

She said, opening her arms wide, palms up, "Sub-lieutenant Ellison, welcome to Homestead. It pleases me that we will walk the same path today."

She would have fooled most people into believing that she truly was happy to be dealing with Jim in place of Lieutenant Marta Mitchell. Jim knew the truth. His senses noted the change in her scent signaling annoyance and disdain and the way her body tightened.

He nodded his head respectfully. Protocol would have been to bow before her, but Jim wasn't willing to make that concession. He was a soldier, not a diplomat toady.

The leader of the Maven was a sharp-eyed, tall, firmly muscled woman with dark, straight hair and olive-toned skin. She was not young, but she moved as gracefully as a Shinto dancer. She said, "Captain Banks did let me know of Marta's illness, and that you would be taking her place today. Please, tell her the Maven will light candles for her recovery."

Well, the High Maven was being honest about wishing for Mitchell's recovery. Maybe the two of them, Maven and Outlander, had become friends of a sort.

"I'll see to it personally, Ma'am."

"Our gratitude be with you..." She flicked her eyes to the side, and the young man standing there amidst the small group of women nodded his head.

"Sentinel," she said.

Since she had just included the guy standing slightly behind her and to the side, Jim focused his senses on him. Looked to be in his mid-twenties. Short, but then so were most Maven males. Selected genes, according to the briefing. Hair tightly restrained. Another custom for the Maven males. Having their hair free was supposed to only happen within their homes. The tattoo on the kid's face, the large outline of a star shaded with turquoise blue on his cheek proclaimed his status as a Star-child. More relevant to Jim, though, was that unique feel, a tickle in his brain. Ah. This Star-child was a guide. Oh, joy. Jim wasn't fond of dealing with guides. Luckily, he barely qualified as a sentinel and a symbiotic joining with one of them wasn't required.

Mitchell was a high level sentinel, and her training was in communications and negotiating. It would have been part of her job to inform Banks of any deceptions the Maven tried to spin during the back and forth of arranging trade.

Sentinels didn't make mistakes when it came to reading body language. A person's mouth might spout lies, but the scent of those lies would always expose them.

The Rangers had rarely asked Jim to function as a sentinel, though. He preferred it that way. He'd made his rank based on his actions, not on his senses.

"We may begin, Sub-lieutenant Ellison," the High Maven said gently, as if to a child come bewildered into a new classroom.

"This way, Ma'am," and he led the group into a conference room. Everyone found their seats after the High Maven had done so, settling into her chair like it was a throne.

Everyone but the young man. He remained standing behind the High Maven, a little to the side. His eyes were downcast.

Jim looked straight at him and decided to push the High Maven, just a little. "Have a seat, Chief," he said. The guy looked up, startled.

There were looks of indignation over Jim's request, but Jim focused on the young man's eyes. They were blue, a deeper blue than was common, and his lashes were dark as brownwood and as thick as marshgrass. As the surprise at being directly addressed faded from his face, a small grin began tugging at the kid's mouth and blossomed into an attractive smile.

The kid stopped smiling as soon as the High Maven reached behind her and caught his wrist. She tugged him forward until he was standing beside her and his eyes were back on his shoes.

The High Maven turned to Jim. "You are untrained, Sub-lieutenant. Let me educate you this once, so that such an insult to our ways will not happen twice."

"As you wish, Ma'am." Jim said, plastering on the expression he used when dealing with superior officers who were full of themselves.

"Our males know their place among the Maven. It is symbolic of this understanding for even a male Star-child, such as Blair, to stand behind his betters. Males do not eat with their lovers, wives, sisters, daughters, or mothers. They may serve, but then they will stand quietly until the women have finished a meal. Then and only then, while they are alone with their kind, may they seat themselves."

Jim looked pointedly down at himself and cocked an eyebrow.

The High Maven looked amused. "Yes, we are aware that you are male, Sub-lieutenant. We make allowances for Outlanders. But Blair belongs with the Maven, and he has learned he must follow our ways. Although he may not engage in shameless forwardness by being seated at this table, he, as is the custom with our males, can be indulged. If it suits us."

The kid was the one Banks had warned him about. Blair Star-child. Jim's babysitting assignment.

The High Maven patted her lap, and Blair, expression closed off, lowered himself till he was sitting gingerly on her thigh. He wasn't a big man, and the woman was tall, but still he was a lapful. She laughed a little, sounding merry. Shifting Blair, who gave a small squeak of surprise, she arranged him so that his arm was around her neck and he lay across her lap.

The table was round, and Jim was seated two empty seats down from the High Maven. He could see that the kid's feet didn't reach the floor, not the way the High Maven was holding him. The sight did something to Jim's gut, twisted it. He felt a thrum of desire begin, a low beat that wanted to grow louder at seeing Blair Star-child lying so submissively across the woman's lap.

"We may begin, Sub-lieutenant. Besides the standard list of trade goods, we can offer fifty weight of Blissful pods for the next exchange. The harvest was very good this season. Emilie-du-chatelet, please update the Sub-lieutenant."

The silver-haired woman on the other side of the High Maven took the tablet that was lying on the table and Jim nodded at her. She touched the tablet and the list appeared on Jim's own tablet screen.

He looked it over, but a movement from the High Maven caught his attention. With one hand she was unhurriedly unbuttoning the loose green shirt Blair was wearing. Jim glanced at Blair, then pretended to

study his tablet, aware that at least half of the other women were also watching the High Maven's actions. She let Blair's shirt partly fall open so that his chest was exposed.

Jim nudged his tablet into a better angle and touched the record button. A small corner of the tablet showed the High Maven stroking her fingers through Blair's chest hair. She stopped and began pinching Blair's nipples, and they pebbled up at the attention. He was quiet, though. If Jim was the one touching those dusky nubs, he'd have Blair sobbing at the touch.

Blair closed his eyes as the High Maven let her hand trail slowly down over Blair's chest, lifting her ring covered hand over the shirt that still covered his groin. She let it hover over Blair's crotch and then nudged his legs open a little further.

"Sub-lieutenant?"

Jim cleared his throat. "Yes, High Maven." The woman had dropped her hand onto Blair's crotch, but made no further movement.

"Do you wonder why I allow Blair to accompany me here today? Why I will reward him – oh, not just the honor of my hand on his body – but also why I grant his request to stay for a day and a night with Outlanders?"

"No, Ma'am. Think I've got that one covered."

"Allow me to hear your thoughts, Sub-lieutenant," the High Maven ordered, her expression stern as she stared at Jim. She let one finger trace the outline of Blair's dick and then she flicked her finger against him, sharp and forceful. Blair hardened, and Jim heard the soft, "Oh," that escaped him.

Jim turned his attention away from the unfolding pornography scene. He made his voice sound careless, bored. "He's a guide. Sentinels are assigned as ambassadors between the Maven and the Outlanders. He's here to sense if the sentinels in charge are being straight with the Maven about the trade arrangements. The rest of that, well, that's a deal you made with him, so he'll be a good boy for you."

"Star-child, is this male honoring the trust?" The High Maven kept stroking her plaything's dick, but stopped when Blair didn't answer right away. He blinked several times, then glanced up at the High Maven, looking a little dazed.

When Blair's eyes had lost some of the haze that had clouded them, the High Maven repeated her question.

He said softly, "Yes, High Maven. I can feel no intent to cheat."

"Very well, then. Let us share bread and fruit together, as is the custom, and bargain." She reached up and tugged on Blair's nipples again, and Jim watched the haze return to those gorgeous eyes. He told himself to not get distracted. He had a job to do here, not get off on watching this kid submit so sweetly. He could do that later, in his quarters, thanks to the video he was filming of Blair and the leader of the Maven.

Jim had read Mitchell's briefing about the importance of sharing a meal together. He sent a message from his tablet to the kitchen staff to bring in the platters of food they'd readied.

"I've sent for refreshments, Ma'am."

"Then let us each turn to our own thoughts till the meal is placed on the table." She nodded at him, dismissing him. She turned her attention to the woman next to her, the High Maven's hand slowly and idly caressing Blair's penis. Jim, still watching through the lens of his tablet, saw him blush. He looked straight at Jim, though, and licked his lips, even as pre-come dampened his trousers, the scent wafting from him to Jim's nose.

Servers started bringing out plates and silverware, and pitchers of water and drinks. One woman, as she started to set down her tray of fruit and cheese next to Jim, almost dropped it instead when she caught sight of the High Maven rubbing her hand hard against Blair's dick. The woman blushed and averted her eyes and retreated to the kitchen.

Jim watched Blair's eyes go wider, more dazed, before he closed them and his body began arching a little. Kid was going to come right there, in full view of everyone at the table.

Having no intention to cheat wasn't the only thing Blair Star-child had picked up from Jim's traitorous emotions. Damn guides and their ability to suss out even the most hidden of desires. Blair probably even knew that Jim wanted to see Blair submit to him, after watching the High Maven's little show.

Damn it. He'd had a hunch Blair Star-child was going to be trouble.

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Jim felt the tension leave his neck and shoulders once the High Maven and her entourage had left, the exit to Homestead blocked to him or any of the other Outlanders. The biometric lock only required a drop of blood from any of the Maven for the force shield to form a doorway back out into the frond forest.

A similar method was used on the compound side of the meeting complex. If anyone attempted to enter the restricted area from the neutral grounds of the meeting complex, and their bio-sign was not registered and approved, a force shield would prevent them from moving into the compound.

It had taken some time to transfer goods between them, but overall, Jim thought things had gone well.

Blair Star-child approached him, a worn satchel slung over one shoulder. Jim had watched a woman hand it to Blair, retrieving it from the Homestead side of the barrier.

Jim could smell the semen that stained Blair's loose trousers from ten feet away. He frowned, because that level of sensory awareness was something new.

Blair was poking at the braided knot of his hair as he maneuvered around tables and chairs in the relaxation hall. He ended up standing right in front of Jim. Crossing his arms, Jim said "Chief."

Blair huffed a little in frustration as the tightly coiled braid at the nape of his neck refused to loosen. He dropped his satchel, stained but decorative with a vine design at the seams, on the floor next to him. Using two hands he finally freed his hair and quickly unbraided it. Using his fingers, he loosened the tight waves until his hair was a shining mass of curls tumbling over his shoulder.

Unwillingly, Jim found he was losing himself to the various shades of brown and red and even gold in those riotous curls. His sight zoomed in on the way one golden strand wove its way in and out among the reddish-brown curls.

A hand on his arm brought him out of it. "Whoa there, big man. Stay centered, okay?" The words were in the Common Tongue, and Jim recognized the voice. Blair Star-child spoke with a lilt borrowed from the Maven.

Jim shook himself and his eyesight returned to normal. "What in the Nine Worlds? What'd you do to me, Chief? That's never happened before."

Blair looked intrigued. "I didn't do anything to you except exist. Are you seriously telling me, that you, a sentinel, have never zoned out before?"

Jim snorted. "I'm barely considered a sentinel. And no. I've never zoned before. And it was your hair that triggered it, so it must be something about you, Guide."

"But you've been around guides before, haven't you? Did anything weird happen then?" Blair let go of Jim's arm.

"Sure. Nothing ever happened before."

"Oh. Well, maybe you're a late bloomer." Blair shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, I was told that since Marta's sick, you have to stick around and make sure I behave myself. Is she going to be okay?"

It was Jim's turn to shrug. "I wasn't told, didn't ask. Hopefully she'll be back on duty before the next meeting with your people."

"The Maven. I wouldn't go so far as to call them my people."

"Yeah, okay. Look, kid, do whatever the hell you usually do when you stay here. You couldn't get out of here if you tried, but just to make it clear, you can't come into the compound."

Blair's mouth set into a stubborn line. "I know the rules. At least until tomorrow afternoon, I can really be me." He dragged a hand through his hair, as if emphasizing his respite from Maven conventions.

Jim didn't want to ask. He didn't want to be dragged into whatever melodrama this kid had going on in his life. He was still trying to forget the image of Blair coming in the High Maven's lap, his face turned into her neck. Well, forget it for now, while he was on duty. It was all recorded in his tablet, and he planned on having a very special viewing of it once he was alone in his quarters.

Remembering the low grunt Blair had made as the fabric of his tan trousers had darkened at the crotch, Jim looked pointedly at the kid's groin. This should get him out of Jim's way.

"You remember where the showers are, don't you, Chief?"

Blair's face tightened. He said, "What's the matter? Don't like the smell of dried semen? You liked it well enough when I had to come for the High Maven."

"Had to come? Oh, I don't think so, Blair Star-child. You wanted to come. I think you got off on the fact that every person at the table was watching you get fondled and seeing you have public sex." Jim crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow, eliciting a huff of annoyance from the man in front of him.



Blair crossed his own arms, in imitation of Jim. "And that included you, Sub-lieutenant Ellison. I'm a guide; I picked up on your emotions, Sentinel. I submitted, yes. I went down into my head and I let her arouse me and touch me until I had an orgasm."

"Uh-huh. That was kind of hard to miss." Jim looked again at Blair's groin.

Blair flushed and let his arms drop to his side. "She was using me to make a point to you. Thank you so very much for that."

"You're welcome. Like I said, I could tell you wanted what she was doing to you."

Blair's fists tightened. "I made myself want it. Because refusing a High Maven's wishes isn't a smart thing to do, get me? But I didn't ask for her to do that to me. I didn't want to put on a show for them or you. But the consequences for not playing along with her would be worse."

The kid's eyes were stormy, and he lifted his chin, daring Jim to do... what? So Blair went along with what she wanted and didn't pipe up and tell her no, thanks. It was a cultural thing, wasn't it? It for sure wasn't any of his business.

Still, no need for him to be hard on the kid now. "Hey. Truce, okay. I guess you can tell I'm not thrilled to be stuck here on monitoring duty, but I don't have a problem with you personally."

The kid took a deep breath, and then another, and relaxed his hands. "All right, Ranger. Sorry. I don't usually..." He trailed off and looked a little ashamed.

Jim said, "Hey. You need something, come to me. Otherwise, I won't bother you. What are you here for, anyway? The High Maven said it was a reward."

Blair let out a sigh. "A reward for not killing myself. They don't want to lose the gift of my DNA. Of course, the High Maven and the Council of Elders think I'm shamefully spoiled. Star-children are indulged, especially boy Star-children. We can spread our genes around more than the girl Star-children."

Jim frowned. He didn't want to know all of this, but instead, he kept asking questions. What had gotten into him? "So, the rec center isn't exactly Delta Ten. Just the bar and privacy rooms, and the relaxation hall."

Blair sighed again. "Mostly I talk to people. Ask them about the places they've traveled, their home worlds."

"And sleep with men." Jim couldn't stop himself from throwing that in.

Blair narrowed his eyes. "Yes. I'm not allowed to share my genes with Outlander women, but the Maven don't care if I have sex with Outlander men."

"Ah. I get why I'm stuck here now. If I see you getting too cozy with a woman, I have to break it up."

Blair looked speculatively at him before he bent down and picked up his satchel; without a word he walked away, towards the public shower rooms.

Jim shrugged and decided that being on Star-child duty didn't mean he couldn't enjoy a beer. Or some of that doctored up Sweet Fire home-brew.

Turning in front of a shower room door on the other side of the relaxation hall, Blair looked straight at Jim and whispered, "There's one surefire way to keep me from sharing a blanket with an Outlander woman, Sentinel Ellison. You could have sex with me instead."

Jim shouldn't have been able to hear a single syllable.

Blair went into the shower room, and Jim decided that he definitely wanted that beer. Sex with a guide, with Blair Star-child? Jim remembered Blair in the High Maven's lap, and her hand on his nipples. He had thought he could make Blair sob with want, if Blair had been spread out in his lap.

Maybe he'd indulge himself, and find out.

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## Chapter Two

Mitchell didn't recover. She couldn't, not here on Homestead. That was the problem with being a high level sentinel; you died if you didn't find a compatible guide. And there was only one guide on Homestead, she informed Jim when he commed her to arrange a meeting, per the captain's orders.

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Mitchell motioned for Jim to sit down at the table, and she dropped into a fleece covered chair.

She was a dark-haired woman in her late forties with good muscle tone and clear, tan skin. Jim figured she was selected to be the High Maven's counterpart because of her physical appearance. She was as tall and as strong-looking as the other Maven he'd met last week.

Her smile made her look attractive, despite the signs of pain on her face. She was wearing a sheer fabric that didn't irritate her skin, and they met in a room equipped with a white noise generator. Jim had showered with fragrance free soap before meeting with her at Medical. He didn't want to add to her sensory problems.

Jim decided to skip the small talk. "So, no available guides in the compound?"

Mitchell shook her head. "No. And it isn't practical to check out the passengers landing here."

Jim frowned. "I don't really want to take over your job."

"Tough luck, Ranger. I have to leave and get myself sorted out."

"You're sure you can't just bond with Blair?"

She looked like he'd just asked her to swallow vomit. "Won't work. It'd be like fucking your baby brother. He isn't compatible with me, even if the High Maven relented and allowed him to have sex with an Outlander woman."

Jim, scrambling to find a solution that wouldn't entail him meeting with the Maven for the next five months, said, "What about a temporary bond? That doesn't have to be sexual. Might hold you over till a real replacement for you arrives."

She said, deadpan, "Even the thought of a platonic bond with Blair makes me want to hurl."

"You repel each other." All sentinel and guide kids who'd been through the standard bonding seminar remembered the demonstrations with magnets with similar poles. If a sentinel and guide resonated with each other, the bond couldn't be made.

"Yes." Mitchell eyed him. "What about you? Are you looking to bond? He's a powerful guide, but he can't leave the planet."

"I don't have to bond."

She frowned. "Ellison, I'm reading you as at least an eight or nine. What's your official level designation?"

"1.5. Barely enough to even be a sentinel."

"Maybe that was true before you met with Blair. He's powerful. She looked at him suspiciously. "Did anything happen between you that might have dialed your sentinel switches up to a much higher level."

Jim crossed his arms, cursing himself in his head.

Mitchell sighed. "You had sex with him, didn't you? Well, it's too late to moan and groan about it. What's done is done. Damn, this is my fault. There are things you need to know that aren't in the official reports. If I hadn't been under such a bad sensory attack..."

Jim frowned and straightened in his seat. "You left out critical information? What the fuck, Mitchell?"

"It was nothing that would have threatened the security of the compound." She shrugged. "It might have resulted in Blair being banned from coming in with the traders, and I didn't want to take that from him. He's a good kid. Without some hope to sustain him, he might succeed in killing himself."

Jim had seen the ugly scars on Blair's wrists. They were years old, he'd thought, and he'd kissed those scars before tying Blair to the cheap bed and fucking him.

He said, "Might as well spill your secret now. Looks like the damage has already been done."

"He doesn't fit in with the Maven. He'll never really belong, and he wants off this planet so badly he'll do anything to achieve it," she said, sounding tired.

Jim drummed his fingers on the table. "So what's he tried? And I assume you've just slapped his hand yourself and not reported him to the Maven or Banks?"

"Banks knows. As long as Blair's kept in line, Banks won't upset the Maven. And what they don't know won't hurt them."

"And that is what, exactly?"

"That Blair offers bribes to anyone who can get his bio-metrics into the system so he can enter the compound and finagle his way onto an outbound liner." She took a sip of water from the glass on the table, and Jim deciphered what she'd just said.

"Bribes." Jim drawled out the word. "Let me guess. He lets them have his mouth or his ass."

Mitchell nodded. "And he sometimes smuggles in small exotics. On the black market, they're worth a soldier risking helping him."

"Banks offers to transfer anyone caught helping the kid, but he keeps it off their records in return," he guessed. He raised his eyebrows. "Well, am I right?"

"Yes. Banks is gruff with Blair, but he's got a soft spot for him. And Blair didn't even have to sleep with him."

Jim was quiet for a moment, remembering being with Blair. "He didn't try to bribe me into helping him."

"Really. That's odd. Maybe he sensed you couldn't be bribed."

"Then why sleep with me?"

Mitchell laughed, and Jim felt himself flushing.

"Blair's got eyes, Sub-lieutenant. And don't be judgmental about his promiscuity. Within Maven culture, sex can be very casual. It's interesting, actually, since the males are repressed in so many other ways, but they're allowed to bestow their favors as they please."

"You said he barter his body."

"Yes. He's managed a few times to talk a gullible sort into helping him that way." She sounded a little impressed, a little admiring. "Except for one time, though, I've caught him before he could reach the ship lots, despite some interesting diversions he'd set up to keep me busy."

"He doesn't look that devious."

"I know," she said ruefully. "He's lucky that I stopped him before he could get hurt the time he almost got away."

"What happened?"

"He boarded a liner, was preparing to sell himself for seven years into indentured service to a citizen. The soldier who'd acted as a middle man for the transaction was set to make a hefty commission for acting as Blair's pimp." Jim could smell the protective, bitter scent her body produced from remembering what had happened with Blair. "The citizen was a Talalhe. That woman would have made his life hell, if his plan had worked. There would be nothing left of Blair Star-child after she'd been through with him."

"Bet he wasn't grateful."

"He was, once I showed him what exactly she would have expected him to do for seven years." Her expression hardened, remembering. Jim suppressed a shudder. In bed, Blair was like Challa fruit. A slightly bitter rind protected the most delicious sweetness inside. A Talalhe would have left him a withered husk.

"What would the Maven do, if he left?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "The trade arrangements would be set back a hundred years. I may bend the rules for Blair, but I won't break them." She waved a hand at Jim. "Watch yourself, Ellison. He's easy to like, maybe even to love."

Jim snorted. "I'm here on punishment duty for six months, Mitchell. I'm not eager to add to it. I'll follow my orders."

"Are you going to keep sleeping with him?" She cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Not really your business, is it?" Jim said mildly.

She looked hard at him. "I can't bond with Blair, but that doesn't mean I'm not protective about him. If you make a habit of sleeping with him, then he's going to get his heart broken when you ship out. I've seen it happen a couple of times over the last few years."

Jim shook his head. "If he offers again, I'll make it clear that nothing, no accepting bribes, no bonding, no relationship, is going to come from it. But, he's a great fuck. And it's going to be five months before I'm transferred back to the Rangers. Five very long months."

"So you will."

"I won't force him." Actually Jim had been ambivalent about fucking Blair again. But now, Blair was very much on his mind. He'd take him again, if Blair said yes. Because Jim was going to ask, and then he'd keep the kid so busy with him that there was no chance of his offering bribes of any sort to any of the other compound's personnel.

Mitchell sighed. "Tell him I said goodbye, and that I wish him well. I'm shipping out tomorrow, and the next exchange is in two weeks. I won't see him."

"No video calls?"

"One of the many things that are proscribed by the Maven elders. Information from other worlds is tightly monitored. I could make a video call to the Maven council or even the High Maven, but not to anyone in the general population. Definitely not to a male."

"I'll pass along your message. Good luck, Mitchell, on finding a guide. But better you than me. Bonding is the last thing I ever want to do."

She gave him an enigmatic smile and Jim left her room, feeling unsettled.

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## Chapter Three

Jim traced the star on Blair's cheek, Blair asleep next to him on the wide bed in the small private chamber. Jim didn't consider himself a soft man, but with Blair lost to dreaming he could indulge himself. For a little while, anyway. Touching Blair like this was a guilty pleasure. He would never do this while Blair was awake and could read him.

Blair didn't ask for much from Jim. Not after Jim had set some boundaries with him.

After the second time Jim had met with the Maven traders, Blair had stayed afterwards again. He'd talked to a number of men and women, always asking about their homes. He made notes. He asked for stories they'd learned as children.

Jim sat a good ways away, out of Blair's eyesight, but he had no difficulty listening to his conversations. Finally, as it got close to evening, Blair approached a man. Just as Mitchell had warned Jim, Blair quietly asked the guy if he'd like to make some credits. Jim sighed. Time to put an end to Blair's maneuverings.

Blair and the short, thin man had moved to a back booth, in a corner of the relaxation hall that was empty of customers. The man was downing a bottle of Hassini beer and was leering at Blair, who was sitting across the table from him. Blair wasn't drinking anything. Jim had listened as Blair quietly entered negotiations for escaping.

"I can bring jewel rock," Blair had said, his voice wheedling. He was sitting next to the man, whose body language and scent was letting Jim know just how aroused the guy was by Blair.

"Keep talking, pretty." Then he'd grabbed Blair's hand and placed it on the zipper of the one piece work suit which identified him as one of the techs who serviced the space liners. "I've heard about you. Give me a blow job first."

Blair hadn't hesitated. "Rent a privacy chamber, and I'll do just that."

The man had laughed. "I don't feel like spending my hard-earned credits on you. If you don't have the credits, then you can go to your knees here under the table. Or, I'm a nice guy. You want to suck me off in a bathroom stall, we'll do it that way."

"I don't have credits," Blair said.

The man licked his lips. "You know, I've changed my mind. I don't feel like moving, so slide under the table. I'm gonna take some pictures, too, prove that one of the Star-children whores swallowed down my come."

Jim found himself moving, stopping at their table before Blair had gotten the man's zipper down more than a few inches.

The man had looked sharply at Jim and then had held his hands out.

"Sorry, Ranger. Didn't realize I was poaching." He turned to Blair and gave him a filthy grin. "We can take this back up after the Sub-lieutenant ships out."

Blair crossed his arms. "What if I prefer you tonight?"

The tech just laughed. "I heard you're a nice bit of ass, Blair, but I'll wait. I'm not going to tangle with a Ranger. Plus, rumor has it he's a sentinel, and I've heard you don't get in the way of a sentinel if he wants a guide. Everyone in this compound knows that's what you are, Star-child."

The tech slid out of the booth and stepped back until he was out of Jim's immediate reach. He blew Blair a kiss and then slouched off to the bar on the other side of the relaxation hall.

Blair's arms were still crossed. He looked up at Jim. "He's right, you know. You don't like him poaching on your turf. You don't like it that you even consider me as being your turf. You're suspicious that I've lured you to me with my guide wiles."

"Have you?" Jim sat down next to Blair, crowding him.

Blair scowled. "No. I don't know what's going on with you. You told me last time we tangled in the sheets that you weren't even a two on the sentinel scale. I've never had formal training, just what I've taught myself with what information I could get my hands on, but I think you're more like an eight or a nine. You weren't close enough to hear me and Timmy talking. But you heard us anyway."

"Yeah. I think it's because of you. Probably when I leave I'll drop back down to normal. Look, Blair. Why didn't you try to bribe me last time?"

Blair laughed hollowly. "You aren't... flexible. That's the best way I can think of to describe it. So I didn't bother. You talked to Marta, didn't you? So you know I want to leave and I'm not real choosy about what I have to do."

"Sorry, Chief. Not going to happen while I'm on duty. And I'll be on duty till another sentinel is assigned. So, why did you agree to sleep with me last time?"

"Because I wanted to?"

"You don't sound that sure." Jim could read Blair now like a novel. The guy was confused about his own behavior.

"I..."

"Look, you want to have sex with half of the compound, as long as it's not part of corrupting someone into helping you escape, that's your business. I won't cramp your style. But I'll toss my cards on the table. I liked what we did. I want you again. You interested?"

Blair scrubbed his hands over his face. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. You'd know, too. Just like I know you're being upfront. You won't blackmail or force me. But if I agree, you'll take a dominant role. You like me being submissive."

Jim gentled his voice. He suddenly wanted to touch Blair's loose cloud of hair. "That's how I see this working, Chief. You see a different way?"

Blair bit his lip. "No. I know what I am. Maybe it was bred in me, or trained in me, or it's just me. But I get off on being dominated regardless of who's doing it. The Maven Elders know that. Well, you saw it for yourself last trade. But that doesn't mean I want just anybody to take me down."

"I'll take you down so deep you won't be able to think about anything else except me and you and how hard I'll make you come. That's a promise, Blair Star-child."

"I'm going to let you, Jim. It helps me to forget, for a while, anyway, what I can't have." Blair smelled sad, and Jim tried to ignore that scent. Blair's problems weren't his problems. He just wanted to fuck Blair.

Jim kissed him. It wasn't sweet or gentle. He held Blair's face firmly between his palms and Blair's warm lips opened to him. He could feel Blair's body relax. He knew he could order Blair to slide under the table just like he'd been willing to do for Timmy the tech. Tell him to unzip Jim's pants and lick and suck Jim's balls. Jim could thrust his dick into Blair's open mouth. Anyone could walk by and watch him servicing Jim. Blair would do it, but he'd feel bad about it later, once he came out of his daze. He felt ashamed about what the High Maven had done to him last trade. Jim could tell.

No. Blair might open himself to Jim, but Jim would shield him. It would be a simple trade. As long as Blair trusted him to be his dominant, then he would protect him to the best of his ability.

He ended the kiss, and tilted Blair's chin up. "I'm getting us a room. Let's go." He stood up and pulled Blair out of the booth, slung an arm around his shoulder, and walked with him to the barkeep to get a key.

From the looks he got from people drinking and eating or losing their pay at the gaming tables, it was clear that they knew Blair was taken, at least for this night.

Jim tucked away his memories and returned his thoughts to the present. It had been three months since the second time he'd slept with Blair, and Blair had chosen to stay with him each time the Maven had a trade meeting. Blair didn't talk to other Outlanders about their travels anymore. Instead, he talked to Jim, as curious as a frond tree peeper, about the places he'd been and how he'd grown up.

Jim was firm with Blair, fair, and he took care of him. He loved seeing Blair's eyes darken, loved hearing him whimper with soft pleasure sounds, the first steps toward shattering him with a climax so intense that Blair sometimes passed out afterwards. Like he had this time. Jim teased out one of Blair's curls and twirled it around his finger, playing with it like he wouldn't allow himself to do when Blair was awake.

He couldn't treat Blair gently. Jim was going to leave the day his six months was up, and it wouldn't be fair to Blair to leave him heart-broken, thinking that Jim cared for him more than just the sex they shared.

He kissed Blair on the temple and slid down in the bed, pulling Blair to him. Blair made a grumbling sound but never woke up. Jim drifted off to sleep, his breath in synch with Blair's.

\* \* \*

## Chapter Four

Jim scanned the forest road as it stretched out in a straight line, the frond forest dense on either side. "Captain," Jim said. "I can see the first of the escort approaching."

"It's something to see. The Maven only do this every five years. It's the third time I've witnessed the Exodus." Banks peered down the road, too, squinting. "I can't see them at all, yet. It'll be a while till they arrive."

"You've been stationed here a long time, sir," Jim said carefully.

"I have. Raised my son from a boy to a man in this compound. This is my last year, though. I'm retiring, going into private life about the time you're leaving, Ellison."

"You were here when Blair was brought back, weren't you?" Jim shifted a little on his feet.

Banks eyed him. "I was. Why the interest, Sub-lieutenant?"

"He hasn't told me about it. I want to know what happened." Jim wasn't even sure why he wanted to know, but it was safer asking Banks about it than talking to Blair.

Banks rubbed his chin. "Have you asked him? Blair will talk about anything and everything, usually."



Jim shrugged. "I haven't asked or ordered him to tell me. I could. And he would do it. But I'm..."

"You're what? Not sure how to handle him without more intel?" Banks said sharply.

"Something like that, sir."

Banks gave him a thoughtful look. "Blair was eleven years old when Children's Services escorted him to this planet after his mother's death. They turned him over to me, until the Maven could come for him."

"You notified them immediately?"

Banks shook his head slowly. "No. The boy was grieving, confused. He knew very little about the Maven. In all good conscience, I couldn't send him through the perimeter without some idea of what to expect. Not that it did that much good. When they did come for him, after we gave Blair a week of respite and education about his mother's people, the first thing they did was strip him of the clothes he was wearing. In full view of a room full of Elders and a fair amount of Outlanders, I might add." Banks rubbed his hand through his short hair.

"Because they were Outlander clothes, I suppose."

"Yes. But they could have just given them to him and let him step into the bathroom to change."

"So there was more to it," Jim said.

Banks frowned. "They are a very, very ritualistic people. Stripping him like that in front of the Outlanders and the Maven Elders was designed to humble him. A kid, an orphan, and that was their first concern upon meeting him. Putting him in his place. They didn't let him dress himself either. They did it, moving his body like he was a doll."

"He was a Star-child. I thought the Maven honored their Star-children." Jim said, feeling confused. Maybe honoring meant something different to the Maven than it meant to him. He'd yet to see Blair being honored by his definition.

Putting his hands behind his back, Banks said, "Ah. Well, I think that Blair was considered contaminated by Outlanders. The Elders seemed less tense after they'd made him look like one of their boys. They braided that curly mop of his – Blair has always had long hair-- and coiled it up tightly into a bun. Then two Elders took him by the hands and the other Elders and Mothers formed a line on either side of the forest road. Blair turned and looked at me before he was pulled out the doorway. That kid hadn't said a word so far. The Maven hadn't asked him anything, not if he was okay, or what his name was, or even to say they were sorry that he'd lost his mother. He didn't cry, either. You know what he said to me, Ellison?"

Jim had an idea, but he said, "No, sir."

"He said, 'I'm coming back someday, Simon. Save me a seat on a liner.'" Banks chuckled. "Never could get Blair to call me Captain Banks."

"What happened then?"

"Then? He was walked down that road past every Elder and Mother that had come to welcome their lost Star-child son back into the fold and I didn't see him again for eight years."

Jim said, tightly, "I've seen the scars on his arms. He said his visits are allowed so he won't try to kill himself anymore."

"I know. And I sympathize with him, but I can't let him have that seat. We can't jeopardize the Maven and Outlander agreement."

"Yes, sir." Jim clenched his fists. "You should be able to see the Maven in a few minutes." Why couldn't Blair leave? What harm would it do to let one person abandon their planet, especially one who didn't even fit in very well?

Banks straightened up and projected authority at him. "You had better get yourself under better control by the time they arrive at the perimeter, Sub-lieutenant. You won't do Blair any favors by scowling at the Maidens and the Mothers."

"Yes, sir." Jim swallowed down the feelings of outrage that had ambushed him. Blair Star-child was not his problem. He needed to remember that.

\* \* \*

It was a solemn ceremony, the procession of young woman who walked towards the perimeter gate, their progress viewed on huge screens within the meeting room and recorded for posterity. Two hundred and fifty of the Maven women, and Jim knew from his briefing that they were no younger than twenty and no older than twenty-five.

At the head of the line was the High Maven herself, long dark hair worn loose, as was the hair of each of the Maidens. They were visions in white, wearing tunics and leggings, and each wore a green jewel on a headband.

Jim's sharp eyesight saw the signs of excitement, of stress, an occasional tear sliding down a youthful cheek. The Mothers, the ones who had once journeyed far from their homeplanet and returned with precious babes in their arms, formed an honor guard on both sides of the road. They smiled encouragingly at the Maidens, but Jim saw no hugs or quick touches to arms.

Banks re-joined him, both of them in their dress uniforms, as were fifty other men and women waiting to escort the Maidens into the compound.

"Everything set up on our end, Sir?" Jim asked. The Maven had transmitted the bio-signs of the Maidens in preparation for their departure onto the different vessels that were currently in orbit or, if small enough, sitting on the lots. Banks had been called away to deal with a minor problem about the departure.

"I'm sure something else will screw up, wouldn't be an Exodus if there wasn't at least one Maiden who refuses to get on board or a ship's captain who claims to not have received the passage credits. Oh, and Blair will be allowed to stay here for a week, after the ceremony."

"Why?" Blair hadn't mentioned that to Jim.

"As the High Maven explained it to me on her com call, he agreed to meet with the Maidens and teach them a little about what to expect with Outlanders, sort of a basic tourist type of deal. The week here is his reward. You'll be in charge of him, as usual. I trust that's not a hardship, Sub-lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

Banks smiled, and it reminded him of pictures he'd seen of sharks, from Ancient Earth. "I also trust that you're being... careful with him."

"With all due respect, sir, how is this your business?"

"I've made Blair my business. You transfer out in a month. I don't want to see any new scars on Blair's wrists after you leave."

Banks and Blair had talked together a few times on Blair's visits. Blair barely came up to Bank's shoulders, and Banks could be an intimidating man. Thanks to his new hearing abilities, Jim had heard Banks reduce argumentative ship captains and incompetent compound staff to silence. Chastised and compliant, they would slink out of Bank's office, not meeting anyone's eyes as they left the admin level. Blair, though, called Banks by his first name and would hug him when they met. Banks let him, and Jim found that interesting.

Banks acted like he found Blair a pain in the ass, but his scent didn't back up that observation. Blair would just keep talking to Banks about the hundred and one things that interested only Blair, despite the occasional growl from Banks that some Star-children chattered more than the noisy ricka birds that filled the frond forest with racket from daylight to dusk.

Jim decided to come clean with Banks. It was good that Blair would have a friend looking out for him after Jim left. At least until Banks retired and shipped out.

"He knows I'm leaving. We've just kept things on the physical side. No happily ever after. No bonding. No smuggling him off planet. He didn't even ask about that, sir. Said he could tell I wasn't... flexible. I've tried to look out for him, give him what he needs in--"

"That's enough, Ellison. I don't need or want to know about what you two do in the sack."

Banks sighed, though. "No, happily ever after isn't in Blair Star-child's future. Someday he'll lose this dream of leaving, and he'll finally submit. He'll give the Maven the children they want from him and stop resisting being molded into the ideal Maven male."

"It can't be as harsh for the males as it sounds, Captain. If it was, why haven't they revolted against the way they're treated?"

"There's been times in past centuries when the men had more rights, could vote, and wore what they liked. The pendulum has swung back to being more conservative right now. And the trouble makers, well, they're drugged until they're willing to toe the line. And then there's the sex."

"Sir?"

"Blair can explain that better than I can. Ask him." Banks jerked his chin up at the screen. "It's showtime."

They watched as the High Maven instructed the Maidens on their duty to widen the Maven gene pool. They were to disperse to their assigned worlds before gathering Outlander genes. Within three years time, they were to return, pregnant or carrying their babes.

The High Maven turned to the first Maiden in the line, touched the green jewel on the young woman's forehead and blessed the Maiden. With her right hand, the High Maven reached into a small pot and smeared something in a slanted line on the Maiden's cheeks."

"It's sacred earth. It contains a pinch of the ashes of the first female settlers to this world," Banks said.

The Maiden bowed to the High Maven and placed her thumb into the blood scanner, a single drop of blood verifying by mitochondria analysis that she was a daughter of the first Maven to settle Homestead.

The shield doorway formed and the Maiden stepped inside the meeting room, carrying a travel bag. Jim knew the Maiden would receive a hefty amount of credits once she arrived at her destination. New clothes, furnishings, a residence were waiting for her, paid for by the trade arrangements Jim had been overseeing.

"We're up," Banks murmured. Jim nodded and they walked to the Maiden. She was maybe twenty-two, Jim thought, and her auburn hair was as curly as Blair's.

Banks said, his voice loud enough to ensure the other escorts heard him. "Maiden, by what name are you called?"

"Amina. I bear the name of an ancient earth queen."

"Welcome, Maiden. May your journey be safe and fruitful. We're here to escort you to your ship."

Banks moved to Amina's right, and Jim stepped to her left. The three of them walked through the meeting room upon the ceremonial frond rug that led to the exit to the compound. Banks went through the archway first, the light overhead changing from red to green. The force field shaped itself into a doorway and Banks stepped through. When it had resumed its former configuration, Amina looked hesitantly at Jim and he smiled at her. He waved her to step through the archway, and with a tremulous smile, she did. Her bio-metrics were accepted and she joined Banks in the compound.

Jim shook his head as he waited for his turn. Funny. Amina didn't much look or act like an oppressor. Well, he thought to himself cynically. Give her time.

\* \* \*

Jim had waited in the meeting room, his eyes on the screen watching the Mothers walk away, two by two, the final part to the ceremony's conclusion. When the last pair had left, he made his way to the bar.

Two beers later, Jim was rewarded for his patience by the sound of an air skate swooshing up to the perimeter. He paid his tab and walked swiftly to the perimeter doorway, watching as Blair hopped out, followed by a tall woman. Well, she seemed tall to him and she towered over Blair. For the Maven, though, she was only average height. Within twenty-eight generations, gene manipulation and natural selection had ensured that Maven females would almost certainly be taller and stronger than Maven males.

The woman was Rachelcarson. Jim had met her months ago during negotiations. Blair waited until she took the lead, and then followed her, several paces behind and a bit to the left.

A better man would have been disturbed at seeing this kind of submissive gesture from Blair, as if he was a well-trained Maven male. Jim wasn't a better man. His erection swelled in proof of that.

He couldn't wait to fuck Blair. His fingers itched with the need to tie him to the bed, naked and spread out. Blair would let him. Blair would always let him. Blair wanted to be tied down, held, made to yield his body to Jim.

His body, but not his mind.

Out of curiosity, Jim had tried ordering Blair to accept Jim's beliefs on topics ranging from politics to sports. Blair stubbornly argued his own viewpoints. Even when Jim tried sabotage by pulling Blair into Jim's lap, Blair wouldn't yield. Well, not his well-thought-out positions, backed by quotes of this research and that longitudinal study. Even when Jim put Blair in the exact position in his lap as the High Maven had done, imagining that this increased Blair's feelings of helplessness since not even his feet were allowed to touch the floor, Blair hadn't agreed with Jim. Well, he had lost the ability to talk, but after he'd come out of the fog of his orgasm and Jim had let him stand back up, he'd gone right back to arguing with him.

Jim grinned fondly at the memory, but wiped his face clean of his smile as Rachelcarson and Blair entered the meeting room.

Rachelcarson nodded to Jim as he approached, and then bent down and wrapped her arms around Blair, pulling him up on his toes. She kissed him, long and slow, and left Blair panting when she stopped. He stumbled a little as he regained his footing.

Jim noted sourly that Blair's body had liked what she had done. It didn't take sentinel eyes to see the soft frond fabric at Blair's crotch shaping around his erection.

Rachelcarson smiled at Blair and flicked him on the nose, and then casually cupped his erection. Blair bit his lip, and she tsked at him. She traced his lips with one hand, and Jim smelled the precome before he saw Blair's trousers becoming stained.

Jim crossed his arms and plastered a bored expression on his face. He knew what this was about. Another message. Blair would have his week here and could choose to do as he pleased within the limits of the meeting room, with the exception of being intimate with women, but he belonged to the Maven. Rachelcarson was marking Maven territory in front of the Outlander. He supposed Blair was lucky that she didn't pee on him.

Blair had shut his eyes, but obediently opened his mouth when his molester pushed an index finger against his lips. He sucked on her finger and she quickened her touch on his penis, rubbing against him hard now.

He came with her finger in his mouth, sucking on it like a hungry babe on a breast, like he was sucking Jim's dick.

Rachelcarson wasn't watching Blair though. She looked triumphantly at Jim as Blair came, her hand continuing to stroke Blair as his body shuddered. She raised the hand that was damp with his semen and wiped it on Blair's face, and then on his shirt.

She kissed Blair and traced the blue star on his face. "I shall see you when you return, Star-child. I have wonderful news. The High Maven has granted my request. Instead of wasting your seed into your trousers like an infant wets their swaddle cloth, perhaps you'll agree to give me a child. My mother's house has not had a Star-child's Blessing in four generations."

Blair just looked dazed and she slid her arm around his waist, holding him against her.

Jim grunted. "Are you done? Want a bigger audience?" He hoped he sounded unimpressed. He glanced at his timepiece on his wrist.

Rachelcarson looked him up and down. "Good eve to you, Sub-lieutenant. I shall return for Blair in one week, as agreed."

"So I've heard. See you around the negotiating table, Rachelcarson."

"Elder Rachelcarson, Sub-lieutenant Ellison. I have gained that honor since we were first introduced.

Jim got it then. "So, Blair's part of your promotion, isn't he? Going to fuck him in front of your mother's household?"

She smiled at him, and eyed his own erection. "Perhaps. And I don't think the idea displeases you, Outlander."

Jim drawled, "Consensual sex is fine with me. In any shape or form."

She laughed. "Blair did not forbid my touch. He cannot turn against his nature."

Jim looked at Blair. "So you wanted this, Chief?"

Blair looked ashamed, but he nodded.

"See, Outlander. And he enjoyed himself, as you can see." She waved a hand at the stain on Blair's trousers. "Really, it is no concern of yours, but the Maven know of your fascination with Blair, so I will ease your mind if you like."

"Go ahead," Jim said, wishing he hadn't engaged in this conversation, but his mouth had overridden his brain once again.

She said, in the manner of a teacher, "Our customs forbid that any Star-child be forced to beget a child, or bear one. Blair will yield his body to me or to those others who wish to enjoy him, as he has done since he outgrew childhood. But I hope to convince him to give my mother's house a Blessing. The High Maven has sent him to us for six months. We are honored to have him and pledge to ensure he is... relaxed during his visit."

"Relaxed." Jim snorted. "As in you and your house members will make him come a lot, right?"

"But of course. You really know nothing of the Maven, do you? Blair? Teach him our ways, so that he does not fret so about you."

She pushed Blair towards Jim. Blair stumbled and Jim caught him and slung an arm around his shoulder.

"Yes, Elder." Blair said quietly.

"And since you can speak again, have you forgotten your manners?"

"No, Elder. Thank you for my release." Jim could feel how Blair's muscles had tensed with every polite word from his mouth.

"I look forward to your next release by my hand, Star-child. Now enjoy your time with the Outlanders, and reflect upon how honored my mother's house would be to raise a babe of yours."

She smiled like she was shooing a couple of kids outside to play and it annoyed Jim to no end.

After she'd exited, Jim tilted Blair's head up.

"So you liked that? I don't think you told her the whole truth, Blair."

He sighed. "Can we go to a room, Jim? One where I don't have to walk past all those people?" He pointed to the recreation side of the meeting room.

"Sure you don't want to show all of them what you look like right now and get off on it? Because being made to come in public does do the trick for you, Chief."

Blair's eyes blazed and he pulled away from Jim. "I know it does. I don't want it to, but I'm wired to enjoy it when it happens. Afterwards, no, it's not any fun. Are you going to be an asshole about this? Because I don't have to spend this week with you."

Not be able to touch Blair, watch his red, red mouth utter such broken words as Jim took him down deep? Jim assessed the situation and made a change in his strategy.

"I was being an asshole. Sorry. You're wired to enjoy being dominated during sex; I guess I'm wired to enjoy watching you submit, whether to me or to someone else. I kind of forgot my promise to take care of you while you were with me. I apologize to you, Blair Star-child."

Blair slumped a little, and started to pull his hair free from the tightly braided coil at his neck.

"Okay. Maybe I should do what she said and tell you more about my mother's people. There's a purpose to the sex customs, Jim. And you know what? I have to say, it's worked pretty well for seven hundred years. The Maven have never warred with each other."

Jim stepped in front of Blair, hiding him from the sight of the six men and women who were chattering to each other as they ambled past the two of them, apparently intent on playing cards at one of the tables nearby.

"Here, let me." He gently loosened Blair's hair, enjoying the feel of the silky curls. He felt himself start to focus too much on his sense of touch.

Blair kicked him in the shin. "Don't you zone on me, Jim. Not now." Blair still sounded upset.

"What guide technique was that, Chief? Kick your sentinel in the pants when he needs it, subsection 8.5?" It had worked, though. He decided not to mention that to Blair.

"Do I need to go to subsection 9? Jimmm! C'mon, man, I want to change my clothes."

"Hey, don't get tensed up. I've already booked a room for us for the week. It's right over there. C'mon, I'll walk you to it and then go get your rucksack. Nobody's gonna see you right now."

Blair sighed in relief. "Okay. Umm. Sorry."

Jim unlocked the door and Blair hurried inside. When Jim returned with the rucksack Blair had dropped by the wall upon entering the meeting room, Blair had stripped off his clothes.

Jim eyed him, and his erection became harder. He wanted to walk around Blair, make him hold absolutely still while he touched him, examined him. Feel the weight of Blair's balls in Jim's hands.

Make him suck on Jim's finger. Watch Blair's penis fill again, harden, become wet at the tip.

He looked at Blair and saw Blair was biting his lip. He looked tense, not happy.

Jim said ruefully, "Raincheck, eh?" Because of course Blair knew what Jim was feeling and instead of wanting to have sex, it was making him feel anxious. Jim wasn't a total bastard. He liked Blair for himself, aside from being such a great fuck. He wouldn't make him submit to him, not now, not when Blair didn't want to let himself go like that.

Blair swallowed. "I will if you want me to. Once you start touching me and telling me... things, I'll forget everything else. Until later, that is."

"I've got that kind of power over you?"

"Yes. But don't think it's only you. There's been a lot of women and men who've found my submit button and pushed it."

"Even when you didn't want them to?"

"Every time."

"Well, I won't. You want sex with me, I'll be there pushing that button so hard you'll pass out when you come. You say no, or not now, or get lost, Ellison, I won't play your body against you, Chief. I swear on my father's name I'm not going to do that to you."

Blair was silent for a time, a searching expression on his face. Finally, he said, "Okay, you really believe what you're saying. So, uh, I'm gonna take a shower. And um, sorry about leaving you hanging?"

"Don't sweat it, Chief. But I'm not a saint, okay. And I'll be upfront with you. While you're in the shower, I'm gonna watch the video I made of you coming in the High Maven's lap. I'll be all... relaxed, when you get out of the shower."

Blair snorted. "Knock yourself out, Jim."

"You don't care?"

"No. You have my permission."

"Wasn't asking for it, Chief."

Blair swallowed. "Okay, I'm just. I'm going to, uh. Before I think too hard about what you just said and I. Okay, going now." He scurried into the bathroom and Jim heard the sound of water rushing through pipes in the building. He thought about Blair standing naked in the shower, warm water running down his skin. He dropped down on the bed. Maybe he wouldn't need to watch the video after all.

\* \* \*



## Chapter Five

"You been with a lot of lovers, Blair?" Jim was comfortably entwined with Blair on the bed in the little chamber. He started twirling one of Blair's curls, inhaling the sharp herbal scent of the soap Blair used to wash his long hair.

"More than some, less than others." Blair sounded sleepy. It was their last night before Elder Rachelcarson returned to take Blair to her mother's household.

"By your choice?" Blair tensed and rolled away from Jim's side. He sat up, placed his feet on the floor, before glancing at Jim.

"It's... complicated."

"Complicated." Jim stared at Blair. He really liked seeing Blair naked. Naked Blair was a good thing. But he wanted Blair to be able to choose who got to see him like this. "See, I don't get that. I don't care who your people are or what their customs are, you should be able to say no to sex you don't want. That includes you having to touch other people so they get all 'relaxed' or somebody wanting to do the same to you when you don't want them to."

"Jim..."

"Why is that complicated? Seems pretty easy to understand to me." Jim moved off the bed and crossed his arms, looking down at Blair.

"Well, it's not, not with the Maven."

"So, explain it to me. Explain their sexual customs. I'm not going to like them, that I already know."

Blair sighed. "I'm an anthropologist, you know. I study cultures, and since I'm grounded to this one culture, this one planet, I've studied my own people. Except, I've never totally accepted the Maven or their culture as mine. So I've got some outsider perspective, which speaking as an anthropologist, it's wise to keep some distance between yourself and the people you study."

"So what have you learned from keeping your distance?"

"That I don't feel that I have to defend this culture. It is what it is, and it's a fascinating example of a directed colony. For seven hundred years, the Elders have kept the Maven intact, despite the very natural growth and development of new towns and ecologically sound industry and trade."

"Why don't they let Outlanders into the towns?" Jim had seen plenty of pictures of the small cities that dotted Maven territory. They seemed neat and well-organized, attractive with parks and residential neighborhoods and community gardens. Even the industrial areas were based on sound ecological practices, from what Blair had told him.

"The Elders think Outlanders and the change they might bring would be too disruptive. They want to control it. Every Mother will eventually become an Elder, although a woman doesn't have to be a Maiden and travel off planet to become an Elder. But the Mothers have had enough contact with Outlanders to help guide the Maven, but not so much that they've lost their loyalty to their people."

"But not every Maiden comes back."

"No." Blair kept his eyes on Jim's. Pretty eyes, Blair Star-child had. Right now, they looked thoughtful. "But that's very rare. And me being returned to the Maven, well, that was incredibly symbolic to my mother's people."

"Do you wish you hadn't been sent to Homestead?"

Blair got up from the bed and put his arms around Jim's waist. "Yes. Because I can't leave. I, I don't hate it here. There's a lot of very nice people that I'm friends with, and I enjoy my work."

Jim let one hand run up and down Blair's naked back, aware that he was again breaking his own rules about just how affectionate he should be with Blair. "That's not enough for you, is it?"

"No. I don't want to live my life in a culture where my rights are curtailed. Even my schooling and work, it's seen as frivolous.

"So why do the Maven have a matriarchal society?"

Blair tightened his hold on Jim and then let go and moved over to a chair where he'd flung his clothes. He pulled on loose, sky-blue trousers. He looked back at Jim. "The Maven emigrated here with a plan. A well-thought-out one, based partly on primate research."

"Primates?"

"Mm-hm. Some ancient primate groups developed a matriarchal society, and the females figured out that they could use sex to pacify the males and that sex between the females resulted in cooperation between them. Less aggressive behavior, a more content society, even though those primate females weren't as big as the males. Banding together like they did, they kept the males in line."

"The Maven aren't a bunch of monkeys, Chief." Jim found his own clothes and started dressing. He was technically on duty, but he'd brought casual clothes with him, dark trousers and a tight short-sleeved pullover shirt that showed off his biceps. Blair appreciated Jim's arm muscles.

Blair buttoned up his white shirt, and slipped on a pair of sandals. "Of course the Maven aren't a bunch of monkeys. But they use sex as reinforcement for desirable behavior."

"Reinforcement. Bet that had something to do with why you like being dominated during sex."

Blair snorted. "I'm sure it does. I was sort of trained to respond that way."

"Do you wish you weren't like that?"

Blair said, "No. I am who I am, and I'm okay with myself. I've already been through my period of self-doubt, Jim."

"Well, I wouldn't want anything about you to be different." Except, Jim thought, that you could live without all these restrictions.

Blair smiled at him, and Jim started thinking about them having another round of sex after getting something to eat.

"All right," Blair added, "back to Maven sexual customs. So, bonding hormones are released during sex. You tend to be more tolerant of your sexual partner. Maven Elders who have different viewpoints will follow the custom of sharing sex with each other and that enhances cooperation and compromise. The Maven are

polyamorous, Jim. There's some taboos, incest for one, which is why the Maven keep such good genetic records. And it's why they send their Maidens out to other worlds, to harvest Outlander DNA to keep the gene pool healthy."

Jim grabbed his trousers and stepped into them, fastened the closure. "Guess your mother was as much of a maverick as you are."

Blair laughed. "Naomi told me she had every intention of returning with a baby to Homestead, but once she got a taste of all there was to see and learn in different worlds, she didn't want to give it up."

"What happened to her?"

"Just a stupid accident. She was killed in a vehicle crash and since she'd never designated a guardian for me, I was sent back to Homestead. But I was eleven; I'd already been exposed to lots of different societies and so I didn't slot into Maven society like Star-children who came back as infants or toddlers did. I've never assimilated, although the Maven think I mostly have."

"They let you come here, though."

Blair nodded. "They indulge me with these visits because they want to keep me pacified and not suicidal. They want me to father children. I haven't yet. I won't. I'm afraid that they'll take my DNA anyway, if I don't follow their wishes soon. There's been some hints about that which worry me a lot. But if I can I'm not going to leave a child of mine here when I escape."

Blair walked over to the door, and leaned against it. Jim halfway wished he hadn't opened up this package of trouble, had just kept quiet and kept Blair's naked body against him. They could be having sex again. It was just that it bothered him, knowing that Blair didn't get a veto when it came to his body.

Rachelcarson's words echoed in Jim's mind. "Blair did not forbid my touch. He cannot turn against his nature."

"Okay, Chief. Those two shows you put on, when you came for the High Maven and the Elder, if you had told them to stop, would they have turned you loose?" Jim grabbed his boots and sat down at the small table, yanked them on, tied the strings.

"No. Refusal is only allowed during the first touch. And I didn't refuse. So according to our custom I had given consent and you can't take that consent back. If I had fought them, they would have stopped, but then I wouldn't have been allowed to continue to come here if I had. And I would have been... retrained."

"That refusal rule just for you? Or does it apply to everybody?"

"It applies to males. The women negotiate encounters between themselves."

"It means that much to you, to be able to come inside the perimeter and talk with Outlanders, that you're willing to do things you don't really want to do sexually?"

"Stop thinking that I'm a victim, Jim."

"I didn't say that." Jim walked over to Blair, put one hand on the door above Blair's head. Blair put a hand on Jim's chest.

Blair said, tartly, "I can read you, remember? Stop feeling sorry for me. Someday I'll talk an Outlander into helping me leave this world and everything I've had to do will have been worth it."

Blair looked fiercely determined. Jim knew he'd just keep trying to escape and if the Maven found out they'd lock him down. He wouldn't have access to Outlanders anymore. Sure, Banks was covering for him, but Banks was leaving. The new commander was an unknown variable who might well inform the High Maven about any future escape attempts Blair tried.

"Why haven't you asked me to help you?"

Blair just shook his head. "I read you, man, when we first met. You aren't uh, somebody who I could persuade to go against the regs of this base."

"You were right about me, Chief. You couldn't manipulate me into breaking the rules. Now. Read me again."

"Uh, why?"

"Just do it."

Jim watched as Blair's eyes grew wide.

"You." He swallowed, his eyes intent on Jim. "You're gonna help me?"

"I don't need you to talk me into saying to hell with rules I don't agree with. I'm capable of doing that all on my own, Chief."

"You're going to help me. I know you mean it, but why? You don't love me."

"No, I don't. But I like you, Blair Star-child. I'll get you off this planet, and then you can go your own way."

"How?"

"Well, Chief. I am pretty good at missions. Especially when I think the mission is righteous. Let's eat, and we'll get planning."

\* \* \*

## Chapter Six

Blair returned to the room, carrying four bottles of the best beer the barkeep had available. He sat them down on the table and handed one to Jim, opening another for himself. He dropped into a seat and took a long swallow of beer. Jim was distracted watching the graceful line of his throat, but then he got hold of himself. He had work to do.

"I can get my hands on a flyer," Jim said.

Blair looked at him sharply. "You're not going to just smuggle me out of here," he waved a hand to indicate the perimeter meeting rooms, "to a ship?"

Jim shook his head. "Too risky. I don't want to leave a record of you entering and not returning back to the Maven. And I'd have to get your bio-metrics added to this exit. That would be the first place to look to track you down. Be better to not have that record there, even if I go back later and delete it. That's how Mitchell caught you in the past."

"So what have you got in mind?"

"I'll use a one man flyer, but they'll be room for you, Chief. And I can get Banks on board, no problem. He's due to ship out a week after I leave and he's already told me how busy he's been getting things ready for the new head guy. I'll talk to him tomorrow. Be a little off kilter if he thought I was ignoring being with you to ask for an extra assignment tonight."

"Jim, when I show up missing, the Elders will complete the logic pattern. They'll know, man."

"They won't know. Ever play Swindler's Cups, Blair?"

Blair gave him a slow, wicked grin. "Yes, I have, Sub-lieutenant James William Ellison. Yes, I have."

\* \* \*

It was a long two weeks until Jim was able to meet with Blair again, following the last trade meet that was Jim's responsibility.

Blair didn't meet any of the Mavens' eyes. That didn't concern Jim. The fact that Blair wouldn't meet his eyes did. Something was wrong. Blair was, well, he looked sick. But there wasn't any nauseating scent of infection wafting from him. He just smelled... sad.

When the Maven left, this time mercifully without molesting Blair, Jim wrapped him in his arms and hugged him hard.

"What's wrong?"

Blair laid his head against Jim's chest. He was trembling, just a little. Jim held him, the conference room their own private domain for the moment.

Finally, Jim stepped back and said, "Blair, look at me."

Blair slowly raised his eyes, and Jim felt it then, the first stirring of the bond, because Blair was a guide in distress and Jim's instinct was to protect him and make him feel safe.

Blair's eyes were wet, but he didn't let himself cry. He said quietly, despairingly, "I couldn't stop them. I couldn't talk them into waiting while I decided which House should be Blessed. Instead, they just took what they wanted."

"What happened?"

"They stole my future Blessings. They asked if I would agree and I said no, that as a Star-child I had the right to choose who would bear my babe. The High Maven agreed that was true but then she said for me not to worry, that my seed would be preserved for future generations and that I would long be in the ground before any child from my donation would be born."

"They made you give a sperm sample and they froze it for future generations to use after your death?"

Blair nodded. "I said no. They held me down and drugged me and made me ejaculate. They said I was being too slow with granting Blessings. They blamed that on my years spent with the Outlanders. They wanted my DNA added to the gene pool, even if I never chose to Bless a House during my lifetime."

"I'm sorry."

"I know, I can feel it." Blair was silent for a while, and then he sighed deeply. "I need to meditate about what the Elders did."

"How guarded is the facility where the samples are kept?"

"It's not. Why would it..." Blair looked shocked. "Jim, am I reading you right?"

"Don't know? Why don't you tell me what you think I'm feeling."

"Pity, sympathy for me, anger, but it's the feeling of... wanting to right a wrong, and competence? Feeling smug about... Okay, you've got a plan, don't you? To steal back what was taken from me?"

"Don't see why not. I can give you the tools to break in and you can take your sample and destroy it. It can be the reason that you disappear, if you leave a note saying, well, the truth about how you feel about what the Elders did. Or if you're caught on security cameras smashing up that vial."

"There aren't security cameras there because to do what you're suggesting is so far against what the Maven stand for that they can't even conceive of somebody doing what you want me to do."

"Do you want to destroy your sample? I don't have a zenox in that race, Blair. Your decision, okay? But it would work into what I was planning for your extraction out of there."

"I'll meditate before I decide. I, maybe I'm a little more in tune with what the Maven believe than I realized."

"It's okay. Like I said, your decision."

The look Blair gave him was painful to see, and that surprised Jim. He felt a wave of tenderness and protectiveness flood him again.

Blair noticed and looked puzzled. "And that, that... What is that? Do you feel something, too, Jim? Like there's something just out of reach and it's beckoning to me to come closer."

"Haven't you read descriptions of what the bond between a guide and a sentinel feels like, Chief?"

Blair's eyes went wide and he pushed against Jim's chest, stepping backward.

Jim let him go and Blair moved three feet away.

"Ah, man, I'm sorry. Me and my troubles. I triggered it, didn't I?"

"Yeah, think so, buddy."

"Sweet stars above, I know you don't want to bond. How do we stop it?"

"Maybe we can use it."

"For what? Why? You don't really want to be bonded to me, Jim. And I don't want to be bonded to you."

"Because we can use it to get you off this rock, Chief. And then we can let it break."

"Won't that hurt? Or kill us? I've read some case histories, I know it's possible?"

"Not for us. Don't worry. Those scare stories are about the very deepest bond. We're just going to have a surface bond and right now, we aren't even bonded. I've just extended an invitation to you and you haven't accepted. But I want you to because this way I'll have a lock on you where ever you are."

"A lock on me? Why not just use a tracer?"

"Because a tracer can be recorded. When you disappear, we don't want the Maven pointing to tracer records and accusing the base of helping you to escape. I want to help you, Blair Star-child. I don't want to screw up the trade arrangements."

Blair said hesitantly, "So what happens to us if we surface bond?"

Jim held a hand out and flipped it back and forth. "You'll be able to read me a little better. For me, if I was having any trouble with my senses, having you to touch or talk to would help me stay grounded. But, we can find each other. In some cases, with a strong guide – and you are very strong, Blair-- telepathy can happen."

Blair chewed on his lip, his teeth leaving small indentions and Jim wanted to kiss him, make him stop even mildly hurting himself. Blair said, "And when I leave and you're still here, will you be okay? Will I be?"

Jim rubbed the back of his neck. "Wellll...we'll have the mother of all headaches and some mood instability but after two weeks without physical contact to keep the surface bond going, it'll just wear off."

Jim stepped closer to Blair, and waited. "I'm willing to surface bond because it'll give us an edge. But I won't force it on you."

"Could you?" Blair's eyes were wide. He was planning on leaving one kind of bondage and he had to be wondering if he was just trading that for a different one. With Jim.

"I don't know. You are strong, so you might be able to keep me out." Jim thought it best to be totally honest. Blair would detect any sort of deception, even if it was meant kindly, to not worry him.

"It's my call?"

"Your escape, your call." And, Jim didn't say, your body.

Blair seemed to have caught that part of what Jim was trying to convey, judging from his expression. He stepped forward and put his arms around Jim's waist.

"I consent to this bond, Sentinel, and swear loyalty to you as long as the bond exists."

"Yeah, me too. How did you know the ritual, Chief?"

"Anthropologist, Jim. We love studying about rituals." He poked Jim in the ribs. "Say the words, man. Do it right, even if it's only for two weeks."

Jim shrugged. He thought for a moment, remembering the words he'd seen other sentinels say to their guides during bonding ceremonies. "I, James Ellison, consent to this bond with you, Blair Star-child, and swear loyalty to you for as long as the bond exists."

Jim kissed Blair, making it passionate and wild. He had never bonded with anyone before, and so what if this was just a surface bond and for only two weeks. He would do this right. Jim would take Blair to bed in their little hole of a rented room and when pleasure was cascading for both of them they'd let the bond settle into their bodies and minds.

\* \* \*

Jim waited in orbit for Bank's signal, and rubbed his forehead. He hadn't touched Blair for a week and the bond was starting to fray. If he closed his eyes and concentrated he could sense that Blair was alive. Worried, but not injured. He could find him once he was close enough to the planet. Right now, the dominant feeling he had about what direction to go to find Blair was down.

Banks had readily agreed with Jim's suggestion that they give the new commander a break by doing the required drill before they both shipped out. Banks said he'd been asking permission to do them once a month ever since he was promoted to Captain and placed in charge, but the Maven had restricted him to conducting them only once a year.

The Maven were as touchy about their air space as they were about the rest of their interactions with Outlanders. Still, being one of the designated raiders gave him a legitimate reason to swoop down near the Maven settlements. As a raider, he would be expected to use hit and run techniques to steal from the Maven and take their people prisoner.

As advanced as civilization had become, there was still a market in human trafficking, and the Maven could appeal to some collectors. They were considered to be exotic.

The last real raid on the Maven had been ten years ago, and Banks had put an end to it without any of the Maven being harmed or their trade goods stolen. It was one of the reasons the Maven tolerated the compound's presence, in order to benefit from the protection offered by Space Services.

Banks' deep voice boomed from the comm. "Ellison, Peterson, Garcia, Nunoy, Shining Waters, Clayton, and Belewa. The word has been given. Countdown for attack patterns in five, four, three, two, and one. Disperse."

Jim gunned his flyer, knowing that as soon as their fast airships crossed into restricted territory that he'd be chased as soon as the alarm sounded.

Except for Banks and the seven raiders, no one knew this was scheduled. Banks would announce it was just a drill after letting the adrenaline shock the officers on duty for a few minutes. The High Maven would be notified so that she could assure her people that they were safe.

If all had gone as planned, Blair would be waiting for him at the remote area they'd chosen together.

Jim flew straight for that location, dropping low and buzzing a small city on the way. The comm screens amplified the view and he saw the citizens of Homestead rushing outside from work buildings and out of



large homes into courtyards and gardens to gawk up at him. The men were dressed in earth and sky colored clothing similar to what Blair had worn, their hair tightly braided, and women in the brilliant colorful long tunics and leggings the Elders had worn. He noticed that the men stood behind the women, even during this unexpected occurrence for them.

Jim shook his head. His recommendations to the High Maven would stress that her people needed to get their asses inside into reinforced areas during raids. If he'd been a real raider, he could have shot a pulse at them that would have disabled any electronics they could have used to call for help and he could have dropped a gas bomb that would drop them unconscious. They would have been easy prey for a transport to come in behind him and snatch them.

Now that he'd made the token run at the Maven, he headed his flyer towards the river that flowed into the heart of the city and followed it upstream, the terrain becoming higher and wilder, trees and shrubs taking over instead of the fields of grain and vegetables.

He looked for the landmarks Blair had described: the waterfall on the left, then the tall spire of rock on the right.

Except the bond was telling him that Blair wasn't near here at all.

The plan had been for Blair to make it look like he'd committed suicide by jumping into the river from the top of the cliff. There was an overhang and more than one person had ended their life by doing exactly that. Blair figured it would be one of the places he would be looked for when he went missing. He was going to leave a note and a set of his clothes, making it seem like he'd undressed before jumping to his death in the cold river. Then he was going to climb down a trail and hike several miles away and wait near a clearing for Jim to pick him up. He was going to smuggle camping equipment out to the clearing and hide it away days earlier.

Blair hadn't known the exact date of the drill, but Jim had told him that it would be no earlier than four days from when they'd said goodbye and no more than a week. The raid was taking place exactly a week later.

A thousand things could have gone wrong. Blair might be held captive in one of the Houses. He could have gotten ill or hurt himself and was unable to get away or maybe he'd been hospitalized.

He could have changed his mind.

Maybe leaving Homestead and being all alone was too much for him.

Jim let his mind open, banishing away distracting thoughts about where the hell Blair was and if he was still on board with their plan. He pictured Blair's face, his upturned nose, dark blue eyes, the grin that he often wore when he was with Jim. He remembered Blair's scent, the salt taste of his skin during sex, the sound of his voice.

The bond sung to Jim and he followed its pull to the next little river city. He made a point to dive bomb some of the buildings, noting that these folks reacted just like the ones in the previous city. Civilians. His report was going to be blistering.

He continued flying upriver. Jim could feel the bond tugging him closer to Blair's position, which was a fair distance from the last city. So Blair hadn't changed his mind, just the place they were to meet. He dropped

in altitude until he was almost skimming the top of the water, but immediately he knew that wasn't right. Blair wasn't within a stone's throw of the river.

He rose in the air, and shifted to flutter-mode. Better.

He slowly idled along the cliff faces and then he heard Blair's welcome voice within his mind. Jim.

So, Blair was strong enough to project his thoughts to his bond mate. That ability would make him very attractive to any potential sentinels. He scowled at the thought of Blair giving himself to some other sentinel and then decided he needed to kick his own ass. He and Blair only had a temporary surface bond. Blair was going to get on a ship and fly space to another planet and Jim was going to keep his commitment to the space service. They'd probably never meet again.

Jim. I feel you, and am I ever glad you're here. I'm in a cave on your right. You're close. I can see the flyer."

Jim edged his craft closer to the cliff face and saw an arm leaning out, waving a brown shirt.

He hovered outside of the cave and turned the flyer so that the storage door faced Blair. He extended the ramp so that it was inside a little ways into the cave entrance.

He heard Blair walk into the flyer slowly, carefully, and when Blair was safely inside the cargo area he retracted the ramp.

There was no space for a co-pilot, but there were several pull down seats in the cargo area.

"Hey, Chief. Glad you could make it." Jim let Blair hear the relief in his voice. He could feel Blair's tumultuous mix of emotions – the relief that mirrored Jim's, sadness, joy, anxiety.

"Oh, Sweet Gaia, me too."

"Okay, we'll talk in a bit. For now, strap yourself in, I'm going to push on to the next town fast, and then head back to the compound. We've been lucky so far that we haven't been tagged by any of the responders."

Jim heard Blair comply, "Jim, man, I can't even..."

"Hold it together, Blair. You're not safe yet."

He heard Blair take several deep breaths. "Okay. But man, you are getting one grateful kiss when we land."

"I'm looking forward to it, guide of mine."

\* \* \*

That kiss had segued into quick and dirty sex against the cold wall of the flyer. Jim had yanked off his own pants and then stripped Blair naked, throwing the clothes the Maven had given Blair to the floor. He had a flash of appreciation for the symbolism of that action, but when Blair reached up to kiss him again, he could only think that this was the last time he would be with Blair.

He lifted Blair, who wrapped his legs around Jim's waist. Blair's eyes were wild, dark with desire.

Blair would probably have bruises on his back from the way Jim had pushed him against the hard metal of the flyer. Jim wished he could fuck him, but he didn't have any slick with him. He lost himself in Blair's scent, using all of his senses to know Blair. He could feel the bond renewing, glowing, strengthening.

They came just from the touch of skin on skin, and Jim just held Blair against him for several long minutes as their heartbeats slowed. Jim could hear Blair's heart synch in rhythm with his own.

Finally, though, Jim stepped back from the wall, still carrying Blair. He walked with him over to a cargo area and Blair uncrossed his legs and let himself slide down Jim's front until he was standing.

Jim reached into a bag and handed Blair a cleaning cloth, and then used it on himself to wipe away their seed. "Here, Chief. I've got you a tech's uniform and false ID, clothes. Some makeup to cover up your star. Everything you're gonna need to book passage out of here is in this satchel. Take your old clothes with you, okay? Let's not leave any evidence that you've been in this flyer."

"Thanks, Jim. So, did your buddy come through for us?" Blair stepped into the coverall and quickly braided his hair into a long, thick tail, then stuffed it all under the cap Jim handed to him. He pulled on the boots and laced them up.

"He's parked on the edge of the landing field since his ship was small enough to land. He knows to expect you. You're going to have to go through one security check, but I entered your bio-metrics and restricted it to just that gate. When you've gone through, I'll delete it. Henri Brown is a good guy, we served together for years and he's going to drop you off in Cascade. Ever been there, Blair?"

"No," Blair said and fished out the stick of makeup from the bag. Jim took it from him and twisted the lid off. He tilted Blair's face to the side and began covering up the blue star that covered most of Blair's cheek.

"It's a nice planet, lots of rainforests, waterfalls, and beautiful oceans. It's, ah, where Henri and I grew up. In that satchel I've given you a list of people you can go to for help if you need it. Just tell them I sent you."

"Okay. But I'm gonna be fine. I'm not exactly leaving Homestead empty handed." He pointed back to the small backpack he'd brought with him. "I've got that packed with sparkler stones."

Jim whistled. "Yeah, you'll be fine. Why weren't you at the original spot we picked out? It's damn lucky we did bond after all." He finished with covering up the star and stuck the makeup back in the satchel.

"I tried to go there." Blair crossed his arms and looked annoyed.

"What happened?"

"The note I left in the bedroom at Elder Rachaelcarson's household was found too soon. See, I kept thinking, what if a bird picked up my note by Death Leap Cliff or a kinga got curious about it and my clothes and carried them off? I guess I shouldn't have left it, but I wanted to make doubly sure that the Maven thought I'd killed myself. I think what happened was that I was noticed going into the Genetics Center after hours and when someone came to investigate they saw that I'd pulled my Blessing donation from the cryo-chamber and had destroyed it. I, uh, left a very strong note there about how I felt about what had happened."

"Good for you. Maybe the Elders will think twice about making some other man donate against his will."

"Maybe. Anyway, I think Elder Rachaelcarson was contacted about my vandalism and they found the note I'd left in my room prematurely. The path to the cliff was being guarded when I got there, and I was lucky

that I was able to hide and sneak away before they saw me." Blair made an exaggerated expression of relief.

"Sounds like a close call, Chief."

"I thought I might have a panic attack, but I got past that."

"How'd you end up in a cave?"

"I stole a pedal bike and made my way up past Cleopatra City, ditched the pedal bike, and headed for the cliffs above the Boadicea and found the cave. I thought you might stick with the river. I left my clothes and note at another spot that hikers frequent and they were found. Rescue and Search were contacted. I watched them dragging the Boadicea for my body while I waited four days in the cave for you to come."

"You're good at thinking on your feet, Chief."

Blair gave him a small grin and then his expression sobered.

"So, I guess this is going to be it," he said.

"Yeah. I've enjoyed you, Blair Star-child. Have a good life and stay free."

"Thank you so much, Jim. You've given me my freedom. I won't ever forget you." He moved close to Jim and put his arms around Jim's neck. He whispered, "Thank you," and kissed Jim sweetly.

Jim could have aroused Blair. He knew what to do, how to play Blair's body so that he'd do anything Jim asked for. But that wasn't what this kiss was about. This was goodbye, and he wasn't going to send Blair out of this flyer with his brains scrambled from submitting to Jim. He kissed Blair back gently and ended it.

Jim said, "I'm going out first. After I'm through the gate, leave the flyer. The doors will automatically lock, so don't forget your things. Just walk like you're on your way to a job, get through the gate and head for Area M. Henri's ship is Rainier's Luck. He's going to lift off as soon as you're aboard."

Blair nodded solemnly. Jim walked out of the cargo area to the cockpit and commed Banks. Banks told Jim to report to him in his office, and congratulated him on ducking the responders.

Jim opened the flyer door and stole one last look at his temporary guide. Blair's eyes met his and Jim had the strongest urge to keep Blair right beside him, and to hell with the Maven and the Outlander's hard negotiated trade agreements. He squashed that feeling down hard, but he knew Blair had felt it and that Blair was sorely tempted to let Jim do exactly that.

That wasn't fair to Blair, and once this bond had dissolved, Jim would be glad he hadn't acted on that impulse. It was just the bond talking to both of them.

Jim winked at Blair and opened the cockpit door. He walked down the automatic steps and headed out towards the gate.

Blair told him telepathically when he made his bid for freedom, waiting until Jim was on the other side of the gate. Jim slowed his steps but didn't look back at Blair, even though he knew when Blair passed the gate.

When he was in Bank's office, he could feel Blair's anxiety lessen. After Jim gave Banks his report, he felt the strong surge of Blair's relief. He glanced up at the shipyard display over his head. Rainier's Luck had lifted off.

"Ellison, the High Maven passed along some bad news to me when I notified her of the drill. I'm sorry, Jim. Blair committed suicide. She wouldn't give me details."

Jim schooled his face to show shock and sadness. "He's a good man, Simon. I'm sorry for your loss."

"He is a good man. And I'm sure he's in a better place now." Banks raised an eyebrow at Jim and smiled that shark tooth smile again. "It's just as well that I okayed your idea about having the drill this week. The paperwork will keep both of our minds on work and not on Blair."

"Yes, sir."

Banks pointed to the display. "Looks like Rainier's Luck has left Maven airspace. I've met Henri Brown before, her captain. He's an old pal of yours, isn't he, Ellison?"

Jim swore to himself. Henri was a great friend, but he was too talkative at times. He said, "Brown and I served together for a number of years."

"I remember. He mentioned a Jim Ellison, said he was a surly son-of-spacer sometimes, but you'd never find a better man to have at your back when a mission blew up on you. I remembered that when your name came across my desk when the higher-ups wanted to send you here for taking down Oliver. No good deed goes unpunished, does it, Jim?"

"Guess not, sir."

"Well, I accepted your transfer. And you've done a good job here, Jim. You've taken care of a problem that's bothered me for a long time."

"Pointing out to the Maven that they need to train their people to react to raiders?"

"Something like that. I was notified of an anomaly with the security records with the gate you came back through. Did you notice anything wrong?"

Jim shrugged. "Electronics get fussy sometimes."

"Oh, I'm sure it was just a glitch. I've sorted it out." Banks opened a desk drawer and got out a bottle and two glasses. Jim felt his own eyebrows go up. Banks was holding Starlight Brandy. Jim watched Banks fill the two tumblers half full.

"As of this moment, we're off duty, Ellison. And my name's Simon."

Jim smiled. "Okay, Simon."

Simon held up his tumbler. "Let's drink to Blair Star-child. He's finally free."

Jim lifted his glass to Simon's. "To Blair."

## Chapter Seven

Jim kept in touch with Simon after he was deployed to his next assignment. Well, he did until everything went to hell. He spent eleven months trying to complete his mission by himself on a planet that was a pimple on the backside of space. The rest of the team had been killed when their airship crashed in the tundra.

It was sabotage. He'd examined the wreck after he'd buried his team. He'd expected a rescue mission to come as soon as they missed their check-in. When one didn't come, he figured the sabotage had been more extensive than just damaging an airship.

He met up with the people of this protected, but mostly ignored planet. They were aware of the pirates who mined their sacred grounds, and had done their best to stop them. Jim explained that a team had come to help them, but that he was the only survivor. He taught them everything he knew about guerrilla tactics.

The Na'man were fast learners and drove the pirates out. Jim was offered a place with the Na'man as long as he stayed on their world.

He was beginning to believe he'd live out the rest of his life with them, when the long-awaited rescue mission arrived.

\* \* \*

Jim's service hitch had been up three months before he left the Na'man. He'd had the option of re-enlisting but decided he was ready for something new.

He avoided going back to Cascade, though. Sure, he'd gotten through the bond dissolving without smashing his skull to stop the pain in his head. He'd just really, really wanted to do it. He'd reverted back to being a very low-level sentinel as soon as the bond frayed into nothing.

Maybe Blair wasn't on Cascade anymore, but Jim wasn't going to take a chance on running into him. When he'd been stranded, he'd thought a lot about Blair. He still wondered if he'd done the right thing by letting him go. Those useless thoughts always ended the same way by Jim reminding himself that Blair hadn't wanted a permanent bond; Blair hadn't wanted to stay with Jim. And Jim hadn't wanted anything permanent with Blair, either, as lovers or being bonded.

Blair had been grateful, sure, for Jim's help. And the sex had been great. That wasn't enough. Besides, a beautiful guy like Blair would have found a lover by now.

He could thank Simon that the Space Service had finally figured out what had happened to him. Simon had been skeptical about the official report on his demise. He made his own investigation and discovered that the records had been doctored to make it seem like Jim's ship had been busted down to atoms during the flight to the Na'man. No bodies. Oliver might have been brought down by Jim, but he'd still had allies. Jim

had been the target, the team just collateral damage. Jim didn't sleep some nights, knowing that the deaths of good men and women were on him.

At loose ends after the final briefing before his discharge, Jim had put a star chart on a wall, spun around three times and closed his eyes before throwing a dart at it. It landed on an isolated star system, with one habitable planet that Jim vaguely remembered was famous for its dried fish.

So, what the hell. He'd move to Lutana. If his plan to become a peace officer fell through, he could always hire out on a fishing boat.

He explained about his plans to Simon when they'd met up for drinks and dinner after Jim had attended the official discharge ceremony from the service.

Simon had just rolled his eyes and gotten Jim drunker. He'd dumped Jim in the hostel bed, and left him a glass of water, headache pills, and a note telling him goodbye on the bedside table. He'd fucking missed his flight and had to wait a week on the moon that housed the main headquarters for the Space Service before he could book another flight to the lut fishing capital of the galaxy.

\* \* \*

Jim trudged down the ramp into the waiting area on Lutana. This was a cold planet, not all that hospitable for human beings but ideal for lut fish. Maybe deciding to move to a planet named after a fish wasn't a good omen. Well, Jim could always emigrate if things didn't work out here.

He looked over at the exit gate and blinked. There was a guy there who kind of looked like Blair. He resolved to have a stern talk with his subconscious. Blair was history. There was no point in tormenting himself by imagining he saw him in crowds.

Still, this guy really did look like his temporary guide. He was the right height, and allowing for the bulk of his coat, about the same build. He was scanning the crowd of passengers who were flowing toward the gate. Jim couldn't see his hair because he had on a ridiculous hat with enormous ear flaps. The hat was too big for this guy, and Jim held back a laugh. Ridiculous or not, the guy looked cute in it. But there was no tattoo on his cheek of a blue star.

Jim stopped watching him then. He really didn't want to remember Blair today. Nor tomorrow, either. Actually, he couldn't think of a time that he did want to bring up his memories of Blair Star-child.

He was surprised then, when a warm voice said, "Hey, Ellison," at the same time that a gloved hand landed on his arm. And something inside of him whispered, "Guide."

He stopped walking because there was no mistaking that voice.

He turned a little sideways and Blair's dark blue eyes looked up at him.

Jim lifted the silly hat off Blair's head, and the reddish-brown curls tumbled down.

"Chief," he said, surprise making his voice sound rough and edgy.

"Hi."

"I didn't think that was you. Your star?"

"First thing I did when I got to Cascade was to go to a skin man and have it removed. I'm not a Star-child any longer, Jim."

"What's your name these days?"

"Blair Sandburg."

"Why Sandburg?"

"Carl Sandburg was my mother's favorite poet. She had a little ritual. She'd recite this old poem of his before we would step foot on a new planet. She'd say, "I'm an idealist. I don't know where I'm going, but I'm on the way."

"Isn't it a Maven custom to name female children after famous ancient earth women?"

"Yes. But not the boys. The boys don't get special names like that. I decided I wanted a special old earth name, too."

"I like your new name, Blair Sandburg. What are you doing here?"

Blair moved closer to him. "I'm taking a chance, Jim."

"What kind of a chance?" Jim felt his mouth curve up in a smile.

"That you might want to date an anthropologist."

"Dating implies not jumping straight to sex, Chief."

"I like sex. I like you. But I'm not here to be your stress relief. I'd like to know if we can really build something together. If we can't, then we'll say goodbye. But I want the chance."

"I was sure you'd be involved with somebody by now."

"I saw people. I didn't click with anybody like I clicked with you. Want to find out if we'd be good together now?"

Jim pretended to think about it. "Maybe. Let me do a little test." He pulled Blair to him and kissed him. Sweet stars above, Blair kissed him back and it fired up every one of Jim's nerves.

Jim wiped a smile off his face with a hand, and said, "I'll give it a shot if you will, Chief."

"I'm good with that. But one more thing; I'm not talking about bonding. I'm not ready for that conversation."

"I can live with that. Let's just figure out how Jim and Blair work for now, and leave the sentinel and guide stuff alone."

"Great." Blair looked around. "I don't know what it is about this planet that drew you here. All Simon would say was that it had to do with fish."

Jim grinned widely. "Ah, I might have been drunk when we talked. I just threw a dart at a star chart, Chief. I didn't want to go to Cascade because, well, just because."



"I'm in school there. I'm getting my doctorate in Anthropology."

"Good for you, Chief." Jim kissed him again and then slung an arm around Blair's shoulders. He started walking toward the baggage claim area, Blair right beside him. "You know, I think we should go out fishing in the morning, and then catch the next flight out of here and head to Cascade. It's my home planet, and this guy I'm seeing is going to school there."

"I'm down with that."

"Ah, want to go on a date tonight?" Jim asked, thinking that there must be something for sailors on leave to do here.

"Sure. And Jim?" Blair shot him a mischievous look. "I'm the kind of guy who puts out on the first date."

Jim laughed. "Me too, Chief. Me, too."



The End