



THE *Lily* & THE  
CROWN

ROSLYN SINCLAIR



# CHAPTER 1

Ariana Geiker was delighted with how *Barmensis nobu* was coming along. Her petals were brilliant, lustrous, and evenly shaped; her leaves a full, flourishing, healthy green. She'd come a long way from being the skinny, scraggly, little thing she'd been when Ari had acquired her.

Should Ari put her away? No. No, she'd leave her on the table. Doctor Phylyxas was bound to see her when he arrived to inspect Ari's collection, and while *Barmensis* might just be a simple little plant, Ari was proud of her.

Dr. Phylyxas's latest book had said that oftentimes the simplest victories were the most rewarding, at least on an everyday basis. Sure, it was immensely satisfying to keep up an enormous garden, discover new plant species, all that, but what did you wind up seeing the most, day in and day out? The flower on your kitchen table. So, you might as well do a good job tending to it. Ari hoped Dr. Phylyxas would notice *Barmensis* and would realize she'd taken his lessons to heart. Coming face-to-face with her idol was more nerve-racking than she'd ever thought it would be.

It really was very kind of him to come—the Senior Royal Botanist. Ari's father might be the most important official in this sector, but surely Dr. Phylyxas had many urgent demands on his time. They were opening a whole new wing of the Imperial Arboretum on Homeworld in less than a month. It was to be the most impressive wing yet. Ari thought it might be nice to see it someday.

Not, she had to admit dolefully, that this seemed likely in the immediate future, with all the pirates marauding around. It had been a huge relief to learn that Dr. Phylyxas's ship had landed safely in the space station's hangar bay a few minutes ago.

She looked again at *Barmensis*. Yes, that was good, but something was missing. She'd meant to put out something else. What had it been—oh! Thank goodness she'd remembered it just in time.

Ari hurried out of her kitchen and back into her living room. Maybe calling it a “living room” was pushing it—as the stationmaster's only daughter, she had been given quarters with more room than one person could possibly need. She'd been delighted anyway, because surely it was a sign that her father must care for her, if he'd arranged for her to have rooms that accommodated her...unusual requirements. Specifically, her requirement to maintain an enormous, flourishing garden, including trees, in the dead of space. He'd never told her how he'd managed it, but then, he never told her a lot of things.

Anyway, she'd have to remember not to call it her “living room” when Dr. Phylyxas finally arrived. Although, he might think it was an endearing quirk; if anybody could understand how she did, in fact, *live* with her plants, it must be the Senior Royal Botanist.

Ari rushed through her garden toward her goal, brushing aside various leaves and branches as she went. On fleet feet, she reached her shelves and peered at her dozens of specimen jars. “A woman does not live by plants alone,” she muttered. Then she smiled to herself. Maybe that'd be an okay joke to trot out for Dr. Phylyxas?

Yeah, maybe. She had to pick a specimen first, to show him that she was about more than flowers and shrubs. Yes, Cranli might do. The praying mantis waved his front legs as she took down the jar, no doubt eager to get back to his favorite plant. Well, he and *Mustopher illis* would have to endure their separation for a few hours longer.

“I'm just going to show you to a very important gentleman,” Ari said soothingly to him. “You're such a pretty little guy. And you do such incredible work in the garden.” Cranli did not look appeased. Then again, Ari supposed it was hard to tell with a praying mantis.

Maybe she should take a few deep breaths. It was obvious that her nerves were making her act even weirder than usual. *Come on. Get out of your shell for once in your life. When is this going to happen again?*

Okay, that thought wasn't very soothing. Deep breaths were a better idea.

Just then, she heard the bleep that announced someone requesting entry to her quarters. Without further ado, the door to her suite hissed open. Ari gasped and almost fumbled the jar. He was here already? That was fast. Too fast. Was she really prepared for this?

Then she heard the voice of a sentry saying—jeeringly!—"All right, you. In you go. Enjoy yourself."

Ari's jaw dropped. Was that any way to talk to the Senior Royal Botanist? Gripping her jar, she hurried back through the trees, vowing to have a very stern word with the sentry. But then the door hissed shut again, and Ari realized she was too late. She winced and emerged past the last tall bush that separated her from her kitchen and living area.

Then she blinked in surprise. Apparently, someone had...misinformed her about Dr. Phylyxas.

For one thing, he was a she. For another, she looked nothing like Ari had always imagined a Senior Royal Botanist would look. Not that she'd ever really thought about it. If she had, she guessed she would have imagined a portly, balding man with holo-spectacles, wearing tweedy robes.

But apparently Dr. Phylyxas was a tall, regal-looking female, her short black hair going silver at the temples, matched by a silver forelock. She appeared to be about Ari's own height, though her bare arms were far more muscled.

She was looking around Ari's quarters with an expression that was two parts wary and one part disgusted. She was no doubt horrified by the sentry's behavior in welcoming her.

"Oh, gosh," Ari said, and Dr. Phylyxas nearly jumped as she turned to regard Ari with wide eyes. "I am so sorry," Ari added, clutching Cranli's jar to her chest.

The woman looked at it briefly before her gaze flickered back to Ari's face. Her own sharp-featured face was closed, cold, reserved. The look in her eyes made Ari quake in her shoes.

Ari's feeling had to be fear, right? Intimidation? How odd—it didn't seem like any fear Ari had ever experienced before. More like an electric shock that was making her fingers and her toes tingle.

This wasn't the time to figure it out. "I'll speak to that sentry," Ari said. "I can't believe he was so rude to you."

Now Dr. Phylyxas looked surprised. "You can't?"

Ari frowned. Had their outpost gotten a bad reputation for hospitality somewhere? She hoped not. It would be dreadful if Dr. Phylyxas had come all the way here expecting to be treated that way.

"Um," she said hesitantly, "w-won't you sit down?" She gestured toward the kitchen table. The sight of *Barmensis nobu* quickly revived her, and she beamed at Dr. Phylyxas. "I hope you'll like it." She pointed at the plant. "It took me a long time to perk her up, but I've been working hard at it."

Dr. Phylyxas looked at her, and then at the plant, with an utterly blank expression on her face.

Ari gulped and then gasped. Bad hospitality, indeed. She set down Cranli's jar on the kitchen table. Dr. Phylyxas looked at that, too.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated. "I... Do you want something to drink? I've got coffee. And tea."

"Do I..." Dr. Phylyxas shook her head quickly. It really was an elegant head. She was, in fact, an exceedingly elegant woman, even though she was dressed a little...simply...for a royal official, in a plain white tunic that looked remarkably like what servants and slaves wore. Then again, it wasn't at all practical for a botanist to wear fine clothing—you spent so much time mucking around in the dirt and getting scratched by branches and thorns.

Maybe Dr. Phylyxas had come to Ari's quarters in readiness to do actual work. The thought made Ari's breath catch in anticipation.

"Coffee," Dr. Phylyxas said, seating herself at Ari's kitchen table and giving Ari another, even warier look.

Well, that was sort of weird. "I-I grow and roast the beans myself," Ari offered. "The coffee beans. And the tea." She smiled again. "It's

much better than what you'd get in the mess hall. I mean, if I do say so myself."

"Oh." Dr. Phylyxas looked back and forth between Ari and *Barmensis* as if she had no idea where she was. "Well. That's..." She looked Ari up and down, taking in Ari's dress which, Ari was only now realizing, was covered in dirt.

She felt her face turning its most brilliant red and gave a feeble laugh as she brushed down her skirt with one hand. "I guess I don't look very formal right now," she said. "I mean...not that I ever do, really..."

"I'm getting that impression," Dr. Phylyxas said.

"Well," Ari said helplessly, "I've been so excited about your visit, so I've been working all morning, trying to get everything—"

"My visit?" Dr. Phylyxas looked astonished.

Ari stared at her. Then Dr. Phylyxas added, "I think you've mistaken me for somebody else."

"Huh? You..." Ari blinked. "You're not Dr. Phylyxas?"

"I'm afraid not," not-Dr.-Phylyxas said, resting her elbows on the table and crossing her ankles, looking almost amused.

"Oh, no." Ari gasped, knowing that she was even redder now. "I'm so—you must have thought... I'll go get your coffee." Face burning, she plunged back into her garden, cutting branches from *Coffea maliksika* with a trembling hand. Then, when she had the red beans in her hand, something occurred to her.

She poked her head back into the kitchen, where not-Dr.-Phylyxas was still sitting at the table, ankles still crossed, but looking positively boggled now.

"Excuse me," Ari said, "but who are you, then?"

The woman began to say something, but just then the door chime beeped again. The woman darted a swift, wary glance at the door. Ari had just enough time to see her posture grow stiff before it opened.

This time, a portly, well-dressed man entered, followed by a sentry. The portly man looked exactly as Ari had expected him to look, right down to the holo-spectacles. He blinked at the sight of Ari standing in

the middle of her kitchen with a coffee branch in her hand, and then looked down at the woman seated at the table.

“My goodness, Your Ladyship,” he said to the woman at the table. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Ah, please don’t get up.”

“All right,” the woman said, and indeed made no move to do so.

“Um,” Ari said.

“I have to admit, I thought you were younger,” Dr. Phylyxas added.

“My God,” the woman said. “It’s like watching a farce.”

“I beg your pardon?” Dr. Phylyxas said.

“Excuse me,” Ari blurted, “but I’m Lady Ariana. Not her.”

“I should say not,” snapped the sentry, and both Ari and Dr. Phylyxas startled. He was scowling at the woman at the table. “Get on your feet in front of your mistress or we’ll whip your back to ribbons and be happy to do it.”

“I wondered when we’d get to that,” the woman said and rose gracefully.

“I don’t...” Ari looked back and forth between all of them. What had happened to the quiet, scholarly morning she’d hoped for? “I’m sorry, but what...who’s...”

The sentry gestured in disgust at the woman. “She’s Your Ladyship’s new slave.”

Ari stared at him. “My what?”

Now the sentry looked surprised, too. “Did Your Ladyship not receive the message your father sent this morning?”

Ari’s gaze immediately went to the intercom panel by the door. Sure enough, a red light was blinking, signaling that someone had tried to contact her. As usual, she’d been off doing something else, either inspecting the garden or perhaps getting dressed before going out and messing up her clothes again. She hadn’t heard the beep of the intercom—it was a lot quieter than the door chime.

And it had been her father. Her face heated. She’d missed a message from her father, and he didn’t try to contact her often.

*Focus.* She dragged her mind back to the present. “No, I didn’t get the message.”

“She was captured off a pirate rig last night,” the sentry explained. “Tiny little scouter. All killed but her—their serving-woman. And now she’s your serving-woman, courtesy of your father.” He glared at the woman. “Too stupid to know she’s a lot better off now, if you ask me.”

Ari looked at the woman whom the sentry had just called stupid. That assessment seemed a little off, to say the least. *Impassive* would have been a better word. Maybe even a little bored, as if she couldn’t believe she was wasting her time like this. She certainly didn’t seem to care about the sentry’s poor opinion of her.

But Ari did. Ari cared about this whole situation a lot. “I don’t want a slave!” she said, horrified. “I mean...I don’t need—”

“Well, they can come in handy,” Dr. Phylyxas said. Ari turned to look at him in astonishment. He nodded toward the slave woman and shrugged, like this was no big deal to him. “Fetching and carrying and whatnot. I have four to help me maintain my personal garden alone. You’ll be amazed how much easier everything is.”

That seemed doubtful. Ari was used to doing just fine all on her own. She looked helplessly at the woman. “Um. Which pirates?”

“Had the sign of the lily on the side of the scouter,” the sentry said, sounding downright gleeful. “Mir’s own private fleet.”

Dr. Phylyxas raised his eyebrows, finally seeming impressed by something. “You don’t say?”

Ari couldn’t be nearly so cool about it. She almost dropped the coffee plant. “Mir?”

“Yes, Your Ladyship. Only a scouter, mind you. Seems like it had gotten into some trouble—it was sending out a distress signal on a frequency only the pirates are supposed to know. But your lord father’s on top of things, isn’t he?” The sentry glared at the woman. “Bet your former mistress won’t be happy about that.”

“I should say not,” the woman replied.

“Oh, my goodness,” Ari said weakly. The idea made her shudder, that a ship, even a tiny scouting vessel, from Mir’s fleet had come that close to their station. Everyone knew the queen of all the pirates had no mercy and no shame.



“It’s all right, Your Ladyship.” Dr. Phylyxas laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I’m sure you have nothing to worry about. This place seems quite well-fortified.”

“Nobody’s getting in here, Your Ladyship.” The sentry glared at the woman. “As your former masters have discovered.”

“To their cost,” the woman said, her voice mild, but with something much harder to decipher in her eyes.

“Well.” Ari laughed awkwardly. “Let’s not... I mean—”

“Indeed, indeed,” Dr. Phylyxas said heartily. “Let’s not trouble our heads about all that now. I’ve come here to see your garden.”

“Oh!” Ari had nearly forgotten in all the excitement. “Yes! Thanks,” she added to the sentry. “That’ll be all. Oh, wait.” She frowned at him. “Were you the one who showed her in here?” She tilted her head toward the woman.

“Yes, Your Ladyship.”

“Then I think you ought to apologize,” Ari said.

All three of them stared at her.

Ari squirmed under the scrutiny. This was important, though. “If she’s a slave you rescued from a pirate ship, then she’s obviously had a very hard time of it. There was no need for you to be so rude.” She raised her hand to wag her finger for emphasis and realized she was still holding a coffee branch with it.

Both the sentry and the woman looked at Ari as if she’d grown another head, but the sentry turned to the woman anyway. “I’m so very sorry,” he said, dragging out each syllable for the maximum possible sarcasm. “*My lady.*”

A smile played around the woman’s lips. “Apology accepted,” she said sweetly.

The sentry scowled at her and left.

Dr. Phylyxas clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Well! An interesting start to our visit, wasn’t it?”

“Oh, yes.” Ari smiled weakly. “Talk about strange.”

She looked hesitantly at the woman, who raised her eyebrows. “Indeed,” she said. “I’ve never been through quite so many cases of

mistaken identity in a single day.”

“Well...um...”

“My lady,” Dr. Phylyxas said to Ari, “I am most anxious to begin our tour.”

“Of course!” Ari looked down at her coffee branch and then at the woman. “Oh, goodness. I’m sorry. We’ll sort all this out later, I promise. Until then, would you, um, mind waiting for your coffee?”

The woman opened her mouth, closed it, and then spread her hands in a gesture that said, *why not?*

“Great,” Ari said, relieved. “Help yourself to anything you can find in the kitchen if you’re hungry. The bathroom’s over there.” She pointed it out. Then she beamed up at Dr. Phylyxas, vowing not to let anything else ruin her morning. “Shall we begin? Oh!” She snatched up Cranli’s jar from the kitchen table and led the way back into her garden. “I thought you might be interested in this...”

~ ~ ~

Four hours later, Dr. Phylyxas had concluded his inspection of Ari’s garden. He’d apparently enjoyed himself and had many nice things to say about Ari’s work, plus several suggestions that Ari vowed fervently she would take to heart. He also seemed to enjoy patting Ari on the shoulder a great deal, or putting his hand on her back. Well, maybe that was how they did things on Homeworld—people must be a great deal more urbane and sophisticated there. Ari certainly wouldn’t know.

When he left, Ari offered him the plant on the kitchen table. The woman wasn’t sitting there anymore, and Ari wondered where she’d gone. Maybe she was in the bathroom. Or had gone outside to stretch her legs.

Hopefully she’d reappear soon. Ari had a lot of questions for her, and it might be easier to talk to a perfect stranger about this situation than it would be to talk to her father.

Dr. Phylyxas took *Barmensis nobu* with a polite smile and told Ari to look him up if she ever made it to Homeworld. “Always a pleasure to meet a fellow enthusiast,” he proclaimed as he left.

His visit had gone so well. Better than she could have hoped for. Ari glowed.

Her glow lasted for about ten minutes, when her door hissed open again and the slave woman stumbled inside, shoved by the sentry.

“Get in there, you ungrateful bitch.” He winced when he saw Ari. “Begging Your Ladyship’s pardon for my language.”

Ari stared in horror at the woman, who had a livid bruise forming on her right cheek. “What happened?”

“Trying to run, wasn’t she?” the sentry said, glaring at the woman. “Without so much as a by-your-leave. We all thought you’d sent her on an errand until we saw her heading for the hangar bay.”

“Why did you hit her?” Ari demanded. “I’m sure she didn’t mean any harm. Did you?”

“Oh, no,” the woman said, giving Ari another one of those inscrutable looks. “Perish the thought.”

“There,” Ari snapped at the sentry, “you see? You can go now.” Her own tone of voice shocked her. How often did she snap at anybody?

*This is important*, the little voice in the back of her head reminded her, though she was still trying to figure out how important. And why it felt that way. There were slaves all over the station. It wasn’t anything Ari had ever agreed with, but she couldn’t do anything about it, and she was used to it. So why were her hackles raised now?

The door shut behind the indignant-looking sentry, who no doubt wondered why Ari didn’t share his barbarous outlook on life. The unfamiliar voice in her head growled, *Too bad*.

Gosh.

“You sit down.” Ari nodded at the kitchen table. She winced at the woman’s bruise. “Oh dear, that looks bad. Hold on, I’ve got some slave. Salve!” she corrected with a little gasp when the woman raised an eyebrow. “Uh, I’ll be right back. I make it myself. I mean the salve,” she added over her shoulder as she rushed back into the garden.

She re-emerged a few minutes later holding a tiny pot. She unscrewed the lid and dipped her fingers into the salve before reaching

out to the woman's face. The woman looked back at her with such a stony expression that Ari gulped and offered her the pot. "Uh, m-maybe you'd rather do it yourself." She wiped her sticky fingers on her skirt.

"Thank you," the woman said neutrally and took the pot. She dabbed the ointment over the bruise on her face like a pro.

She probably was. Ari swallowed hard when she thought of what this woman must have endured at the hands of the sort of people who worked for Mir. No wonder she was so untrusting. She'd undoubtedly been traumatized.

"It's not so bad here," Ari blurted.

The woman looked at her and said nothing.

Perhaps more was called for. "It won't be like what you're used to. I won't let anybody hurt you." The bruise made Ari wince again. "I mean, I won't let it happen again. I promise."

"Oh," the woman said. "Good." She dropped the pot of salve on the table, where it landed with a *clunk*. "I'm sure it will be most pleasant, being your slave."

Ari gasped. "I didn't mean it like that. Please don't think of it that way." She clasped her hands. "Really, I wouldn't..." She frowned. "I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Slave."

"Oh, come on. Please. Really. What is it?"

"What else could it be? That is what the pirates do. Their slaves have no name but 'Slave.'"

Well, *that* sure sounded horrible. "I'm not a pirate," Ari snapped. "Nobody here is. We're not like that."

The woman snorted derisively. "Aren't you? You will have a hard time convincing me of that."

"I won't have to," Ari said stubbornly. "You'll see it for yourself." If her father wanted Ari to have a slave, well, then she didn't have much choice. She didn't really have any. But at least she'd be better to this woman than Mir's marauders had been, surely.

"If you say so."

“But what’s your name?” Ari pressed. Then a horrible thought occurred to her. “You do have one, don’t you?”

“No.”

“Oh, my goodness.” Righteous indignation swelled inside Ari. “That’s terrible!”

“Is it?”

“Of course it is! Everybody’s got the right to have a name!” Ari thumped her hand on the table. “We’ll just have to give you one.” She glanced at the spot on the kitchen table where the flower had been resting. “Barmensis!” she said. “That’s the flower I had sitting here. She was really pretty.”

As soon as she said it, her face flamed again. *Pretty?* She hadn’t meant anything by that, but once the word was out of her mouth, somehow it sounded inappropriate. This woman wasn’t pretty. She was...compelling. Arresting. Dominant. Nothing like what you’d expect a slave to be, and Ari couldn’t say any of that. Ari added quickly, “Would you like that name?”

The woman looked utterly appalled. “You are not,” she said, “calling me ‘Barmensis.’”

“Oh.” Ari bit her lip. “Sorry. I should let you pick it, shouldn’t I?” How thoughtless could she get? You didn’t name people like they were pets. No wonder the woman expected no better out of life, if that was how she’d been treated. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I’m, I’m not around slaves too much.” She wasn’t around a lot of people. What was it going to be like, having another person always here, in her space, in her home?

“I would never have guessed,” the woman said.

“I don’t want a slave, either,” Ari added. “I think it’s awful.” She wrung her hands together before she could stop herself. “You...you don’t have to stay with me, if you don’t want to.”

The woman glared at her. “And where else would I go? If not you, they’ll pack me off to somebody else. I belong to your father, not to you.”

“Oh,” Ari said, blushing. That was true. They’d barely spoken for two minutes, but the woman already had good reason to think she was an idiot. How could this ever work? “I guess that’s right.”

“I have no name here. I want none.”

“Well, I am not calling you ‘Slave,’” Ari said, trying to sound firm. Somehow it was a lot harder to do that with this woman than it had been with the sentry. “So...um...how about...” Her face lit up. “Assistant!”

The woman blinked. “Assistant?”

“Sure,” Ari said, suddenly excited. “Dr. Phylyxas was right. You can help me in the garden.” She clasped her hands together. Maybe there was a way for this not to be a total disaster. She had to think of something, anyway. “Oh, I’d really appreciate that. I mean, since you have to be here, and if you wouldn’t mind. I’m working on this big new project, and it would be really nice to have another set of hands.”

The woman looked down at her own hands. Ari could see they were slender and elegant, like all the rest of her, but also roughened from work—in a few places, anyway, like she was used to holding one thing in particular all the time. Like Ari was, with trowels.

“I’m working on developing a cross-strain between two different pea plants,” Ari added. “Dr. Phylyxas said it sounded really interesting. It’s never been done before, either. I’m hoping to come up with a totally different kind of pea.”

“Really.”

“Yes. Hardier than the other two. If it can thrive in harsher climates, then maybe people in rougher environments can have a new crop to...” Ari’s voice trailed off, and she flushed. “And you don’t care.” Like everybody else, except Dr. Phylyxas. “Right. I didn’t mean to rattle on. Sorry.” She took a deep breath and tried to smile. There were probably a lot more fake smiles in her future from now on. Just the thought was exhausting, but she certainly couldn’t let the woman know how uncomfortable her presence here was, especially when neither of them could do anything about it.

The woman kept looking at her, her own face expressionless.

“So,” Ari managed, “if you don’t want a name...is ‘Assistant’ okay with you?”

“I don’t see why not,” the woman—Assistant—said dryly.

“Good.” Ari gulped. “I guess—oh. Did you want your coffee? And oh, gosh. Did you get anything to eat?” When the woman shook her head, Ari added, “Then let’s do that right away.” She stood quickly and then swayed as the room spun around her.

“Are you all right?” Assistant asked, although she made no move to help.

“Oh, yeah.” Ari waved her hand. “I guess I’m hungry, too. I forgot to eat this morning.” She raised her eyebrows as she remembered something. “And this afternoon. And last night, too, I think. I was really busy. Sometimes I don’t even think about stuff like that when I’m into a project.” She gave Assistant a quick look. “But you won’t let me forget, will you? I mean, if you get hungry, don’t hesitate to say something. I’ve probably just forgotten all about it.”

“I see,” Assistant said. “Don’t worry. I will not forget to remind you if my stomach is on the line.”

“Oh, good.” Ari gestured at the kitchen cabinets. “I think I’ve got some ration bars in there.”

Assistant’s eyes widened. “Ration bars?” she said. “Aren’t you the stationmaster’s daughter?”

“Yes,” Ari said, nonplussed.

“And you’re eating ration bars?”

“They’re fast,” Ari protested. “I told you, I’m in the middle of something important.”

“You don’t cook?”

“No,” Ari said. “I mean, I try sometimes, but I’m no good at it.” She tended to get distracted when she had a project on her mind, and her food burned to a crisp if it didn’t catch fire outright. “Um...we can call for something from the mess, if you prefer.”

“I prefer,” Assistant said flatly.

“Oh,” Ari said, feeling very foolish.

“That’s the intercom?” Assistant rose to her feet and headed for the box on the wall. The red light from Ari’s father’s message was still blinking.

“Yes,” Ari said. “You—uh—why don’t you call for two plates? I don’t know what they’re making today.”

“I’ll take my chances, if the alternative is ration bars,” Assistant said.

“Okay.” Ari looked longingly back at her garden, where the plants never tried to talk down to her, or made her feel dumb like people did. “I’ll...I’ll just be working back there. I can show you everything later, after you’ve—we’ve had something to eat. Oh,” she added quickly, “I don’t think you should try to leave again. The sentries aren’t very nice, and they might be looking for you.”

“I’ve worked that out for myself,” Assistant said. Her eyes were flat and cold.

Ari shivered.

Assistant glanced back at the intercom box. “Looks like you’ve got a message. Do you have a passcode?”

Ari blinked as Assistant’s fingertip hovered over the intercom’s touchpad. “Well, yes, obviously.”

“What is it?” Assistant asked, sounding remarkably patient this time. When Ari bit her lip, she said, “Don’t tell me that slaves don’t listen to messages around here.”

“Right, right,” Ari mumbled. That sounded okay. Her father’s personal slaves did that. He had a reputation for being a good master, so it must be all right. “It’s 0243545AG.” Assistant stared at her. “What? It’s easy to remember. It’s—”

“Your birthday and your initials,” Assistant said. When Ari gaped, she added, “Wild guess.”

Ari raised her chin. There was being nice, and then there was accepting open ridicule, and she’d grown tired of the second long ago. Keeping to herself was one way of dealing with it, but since that wasn’t an option anymore...

She said, “It’s no big deal. It’s not like I have access to anything classified or important.” Just because she was the stationmaster’s daughter didn’t mean she was trusted with state secrets. She crossed



her arms. “And you don’t have to ferry messages for me, or do anything else. I was getting by just fine without having anybody here.”

Instead of replying, Assistant sighed and keyed in Ari’s code. When she’d pushed the last key, Ari’s father’s voice spoke, a little flat from the recording.

*“Ariana, this is your father. I suppose you’re off gardening somewhere.”*

Was that an affectionate note in his voice? Ari wanted so much to believe.

*“I don’t have long to speak, but I wanted to alert you that you’re getting a present.”*

A present? Ari couldn’t look Assistant in the eye.

*“We’ve captured a slave from a pirate scouter. I’m sending her to you as a helper. She seems physically capable and reasonably well-spoken, if a little...standoffish.”*

Now Ari couldn’t even look anywhere in Assistant’s general vicinity. She gulped and studied the wall instead.

*“But that might suit you, since you’re accustomed to solitude.”*

Her father’s bland tone gave no indication of whether he thought this was a good thing or not.

*“I’m sure you’ll find a use for her in your garden. If she doesn’t please you, let me know, but give her a chance first. Let’s say a week-long trial period before you insist yet again that your plants are all you need. That is”—and her father’s voice grew firmer—“unless she proves dangerous or disobedient. Then I’ll find another use for her immediately. Geiker out.”*

The intercom grew silent. Ari’s father could only have embarrassed her more if he’d decided to talk about the time she’d fallen on her face while accepting an award for scholastic excellence during her final year at school. Why not just come right out and say, “I’m forcing someone to live with you so you’ll have to talk to another human being”?

Like other human beings had ever done a lot for Ari.

“Another use for me,” Assistant mused, making Ari glance at her with a nervous twitch. She was still facing the intercom box. “What do

you think? Sewage duty? Or just throwing me on a shuttle and sending me planetside to work in the ore mines?”

“Neither!” Ari shifted from foot to foot. The truth was, her father would probably do exactly that. “Sorry. I don’t think you were supposed to hear that. But you don’t have to worry about it.” She assayed another smile. Maybe it’d get easier with lots of practice. “I’m sure we’ll get along fine. And it’s not like you’re dangerous, are you?” She wasn’t going near the *disobedient* part.

“Me, dangerous?” Assistant looked away from the intercom and back at Ari, who nearly jumped. “What would ever make you think a thing like that?”

Her blue eyes seemed to skewer Ari, but somehow, this time Ari couldn’t look away. They were really blue eyes. And Assistant’s bearing was so grand, so proud—no wonder Dr. Phylyxas had mistaken her for the lady of the house.

Ari’s father had said *dangerous*. What a ridiculous idea. Ari would be kind to Assistant and would treat her as an equal. Assistant plainly wasn’t stupid, and even if she wasn’t very friendly, either, she’d know better than to try to harm the stationmaster’s daughter.

Ari wasn’t in danger from anything at all. And yet, somehow her knees felt shaky as she mumbled, “Anyway, you can go ahead and get some food, just call me when it’s here.” She ducked back into the refuge of her garden.

No. This day had not turned out at all like she’d expected it would.

## CHAPTER 2

It was not until four days later that Ari found the courage to ask Assistant a question.

They were hard at work in the garden. The past four days hadn't been that bad, really—strange, yes, but not bad. It was odd, but kind of nice to have someone else to help. It turned out that Assistant was a natural at taking charge of things, and everything went much more quickly and smoothly with her there.

It felt less lonely, too, to have another person around. That had been really unexpected. Ari spent so much time in her quarters that sometimes it was easy to forget that anything existed beyond them. Not that she really needed anything out there. Her rooms were enough for her. The kitchen area was right by the door, and her bedroom and en suite bathroom lay at the end of a tile path, one of the few reminders of what her rooms had looked like before her plants had invaded.

Now she lived in a forest out of a fairy tale—a weird one, where the adventure started in a kitchen and then led down a magical path into trees and ferns and flowers. Behind the trees lay a cleared patch of earth for the peas, and the walls were lined with shelves and her specimen jars, but other than that, the illusion was convincing. In fact, Ari was sure she'd caught Assistant looking around a few times with an expression that was almost like wonder.

Who could blame her? When you lived with space pirates, you probably didn't see a lot of gardens.

For her part, Ari didn't see much of anything else. Her experience of Nahtal Station was fairly limited. She'd never explored much—even

though a population of four thousand people wasn't much compared to other stations, much less planetside cities, she felt crowded when she ventured into the corridors or the mess hall. She didn't like the attention she got as the stationmaster's daughter, either, especially since they all probably laughed at her awkwardness when her back was turned. Much better to stay with her plants. And with her new slave.

It had been such an awful prospect at first, having somebody *there* all the time. But Assistant's presence was nowhere near as intrusive as Ari would have imagined, if she'd ever imagined such a thing, which she hadn't. She had feared the invasion of her space, the creeping awareness that someone was always looking over her shoulder, but Assistant seemed to have no interest in doing that. Sometimes she didn't seem to have much interest in Ari at all.

Ari was eating more now, though. Neither was Assistant shy about saying when it was time to give up work and get some rest. She didn't eat or sleep until Ari did, so Ari was trying very hard to be more thoughtful about such things, but it was nice to be reminded. Assistant slept on a small bed in an alcove away from the garden. Ari had her own bed, of course, a bigger one, but more often than not she slept on a cot near her beloved plants. They were her home, her dearest friends. Why shouldn't she be near them?

Assistant didn't get Ari's love for her plants. Well, nobody did. But she worked without protest, although Ari could tell that she wasn't really content. Restless, that was the word. Like she was waiting for something. Wanting something.

Whenever the thought of what Assistant wanted crossed Ari's mind, it made her shiver, for some strange reason. Not in a bad way, either. Beyond just having company around, a pair of helping hands, there was something kind of exciting about Assistant in a way Ari couldn't quite pinpoint. Four days after Assistant had arrived, the sight of her black hair and sharp blue eyes every morning was starting to make Ari's heart beat just a little bit faster.

Maybe there was more than one kind of danger.

Mercifully, Assistant never seemed to guess at Ari's thoughts. Thank goodness for that. No doubt she'd find them ridiculous. But she didn't seem to resent Ari; in fact, she seemed more bewildered by her than anything else. Sometimes even amused. Ari got the feeling not a lot of things amused Assistant, so she wondered if it might not be a kind of compliment.

Therefore, on the fourth day, Ari felt marginally confident enough to ask, "Assistant? What was it like? Living with pirates, I mean."

Assistant gave her a sharp look. The bruise on her cheek had nearly faded completely. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are pirates like? What do they do all day? When they're not..." Ari gestured vaguely with her trowel and threw dirt on her own chin. "You know. Marauding and stuff." She wiped her chin.

"Chiefly they're going between places where they maraud," Assistant said. "I understand there is also drinking and whoring involved. For some of them." She dug her own trowel forcefully into the dirt. "Not the ones I lived with, however."

"Whor..." Ari gulped and blushed. She wasn't used to that kind of language, but even more than that, it sounded strange coming from Assistant's usually refined mou...vocabulary. The base of her spine tingled. Grasping frantically for a different subject, she said, "Did you ever see *her*?"

"Her?"

"You know. *Mír*." Ari kept her voice low, out of reflex. It was silly, but for two decades *Mír* had been used as a story to frighten children. Be good, or the ruthless pirate queen will snatch you away in the dead of night. Ari herself had gotten various versions of the tale when she'd been young.

"What about her?" Assistant inquired, lifting an eyebrow.

"Did you ever see her?" Ari repeated. "They say nobody has. No free person. She's never on the holos. Nobody even has a voice recording."

"Yes," Assistant said. "From what I understand, she takes great care that this should be the case."

“Well, some people even say she’s not real. Because nobody’s seen her, you see. They say she’s just a story to frighten children and somebody else is in charge of the pirates. Or several somebodies. Pirates-by-committee,” she added, inspired.

“Oh, she’s real enough,” Assistant said, turning back to the dirt.

“So, you have seen her?” Ari gasped. What would she do with this information if Assistant had? Would she be obliged to tell her father about it?

“No,” Assistant said, rendering the possibility moot.

“Oh.” Ari deflated. “Then how do you know she’s real?”

“I know. You pick things up out there.”

“Is she as bad as people say?” That didn’t even seem possible. How could one person be as vicious as all those stories painted her? And even though she was a grown woman now, memories of those stories from her childhood suddenly sent a chill through her. “They say she never lets anyone go.”

“True enough.” Assistant looked Ari dead in the eye. “She wouldn’t spare your pretty face, I’ll tell you that.”

“Oh,” Ari squeaked.

Assistant stabbed her trowel into the ground as she dug. “So you should be very, very glad that you are in such a sheltered”—stab—“protected”—stab—“*well-guarded* place.”

“Hey, be careful.” Ari reached out to still her hand. “You’ll damage the bulbs.” Then she realized that Assistant had gone stiff beneath her touch and pulled her hand away.

They worked in silence for a few moments. Then: “You think I’m pretty?” Ari said timidly.

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

“Sorry.” Ari looked into the nearest packet of seeds, her face burning. “I, um, is it time for lunch?”

“Past time.” Assistant stood and stomped toward the intercom, trailing sods as she went.

~ ~ ~

Assistant seemed rather miffed after that. Her replies to Ari's instructions were clipped and short. But she did as good a job as she always did, and they had all the bulbs planted.

"I think they look good," Ari said happily and glanced over at Assistant, who was looking right back at her instead of the plants. "Don't you? I, I think we did a good job."

Assistant only looked back at her stonily.

"Look, I'm sorry," Ari said. "About asking you yesterday. About the pirates. I know you probably don't want to remember it." She glanced away. Obviously, she still had a lot of work to do when it came to making a stranger feel welcome.

"Why do you never leave your quarters?"

Ari looked up at her, startled. "Huh?" she said. "I mean, I do, sometimes."

"I've been here nearly a week. Not once have you left these rooms."

Ari blinked. "Well, I get busy," she said. Hadn't Assistant noticed? "I've always got something going on in here. Oh." Her eyes widened. "You've been going stir-crazy, haven't you?"

Assistant raised a sardonic eyebrow. "Just a bit."

"Oh!" Yes, Ari needed serious improvement here. "I didn't realize. Come on, let's get out of here. Let's go for a walk. I know! The Observatory." She brushed down her dirty apron. Assistant had been making her put on aprons instead of crawling around the garden in her clothes. "We've got some great telescopes. I like astronomy, you know, when I'm not working with the plants."

"Head in the stars, hmm?" Assistant asked, with a gleam of actual amusement in her eyes.

Ari smiled. "I guess so. Do you like stars?"

"Love them," Assistant said, and for once she sounded sincere. "Especially star charts."

"Oh." Ari blinked. "Really?"

"Really," Assistant said firmly. "Are there any in the Observatory?"

“Of course!” Ari was delighted to stumble on something Assistant enjoyed. She’d started to wonder if that would ever happen. “Dozens of them. I’ll show you.”

“How kind of you,” Assistant said.

Ari looked away again so Assistant wouldn’t see her blush. “I should have thought of it before,” she murmured. “That you’d want to get out, I mean. Let me just change my clothes.”

She brushed down her apron again and glanced back over at Assistant, who was watching her with one side of her mouth quirked up. It was as close as Ari had ever seen her come to a smile. Ari’s heart stuttered, nearly stopped, and she no longer knew what to do with her hands.

“I’ll be right back,” she mumbled, and for some reason, now she was really worried about what she should wear.

~ ~ ~

She went with red. A dark, rich red that was more like ruby. Growing up, she’d been told that it flattered her pale skin tone and the long chestnut hair she usually kept pulled back in a ponytail. Though why wearing a “flattering” color should matter when she was just walking to the Observatory with Assistant, she had no idea. But it did matter, so she put on her red dress with its long flowing skirt, brushed her hair, made sure her fingernails were free of dirt, and even added a bracelet.

Her surge of pleasure when Assistant laid eyes on her was almost embarrassing. Assistant’s eyes widened for just a moment, and—had her breath caught? That couldn’t be right.

All Assistant said was, “That’s...quite a difference. And to think I believed I’d show you up in all this magnificence.” She touched the skirt of her plain slave’s tunic.

“You probably will,” Ari heard herself say, like an idiot. It was true, though. Assistant didn’t need nice clothes to look like a queen.



Wouldn't she look amazing in them, though? In a red dress like Ari's? No—a blue one. Blue would complement her black hair and bring out her eyes. She shouldn't wear sleeves, though, not with those muscled arms. A necklace could grace her long, elegant neck.

They'd been staring at each other without saying a word for several seconds. Ari didn't figure this out until Assistant suddenly cleared her throat and looked at the door. "Shall we, *mistress*?"

"Don't call me that," Ari whispered, "please."

"As you wish." Without looking back, Assistant marched to the door and keyed it open.

It took a little longer for Ari to find her own footing, even after Assistant's incredible eyes were no longer trained on her. Was the ground buckling? No, that wasn't possible. Ari's knees were shaking. Thank goodness for her long skirt.

*Dangerous*, the little voice said in the back of Ari's head, and she shushed it at once.

~ ~ ~

On the rare occasions when Ari left her rooms, it was always a little shocking to see how expansive the space station was, even after she'd been here for three years.

In fact, all things considered, the station's size was unexpected. On her second day here, Assistant had referred to the Nahtal Sector as "a grubby little imperial outpost." True, it was on the outskirts of the Empire, and Ari's father was of a high enough rank that it seemed strange for him to be stationed somewhere so remote. But he had requested the position himself, claiming he could be "of more use" all the way out here instead of at a more prestigious station, guarding a more prestigious planet that was much closer to Homeworld and the seat of power.

Before his arrival, he'd commissioned extensive additions and modifications to Nahtal Station, insisting on more docking room to accommodate space-faring ships instead of the usual shuttles that went to

and from the planet below. There were also more barracks for an increased number of troops, and he'd upgraded all the weapons systems. Ari didn't know much about the specifics—he'd never volunteered the information, and it wasn't exactly her area of expertise—but based on what little gossip she'd overheard, the station had undergone quite a change before he'd shown up to take command of it officially. By then, everyone had already known he was a man not to be crossed. Ari had been so proud of him.

It might be wishful thinking on Ari's part, but Assistant seemed a little impressed, too, as they headed down the corridors together, taking elevators up multiple levels to the station's top floor, where the Observatory provided a magnificent view. One side looked over the planet below, orange with the rich minerals mined from it, and the other looked out into the endless expanse of stars. These days, you saw a lot more ships coming and going, too, blinking out of hyperspace as they headed for the station's docks.

During their journey, Ari and Assistant passed by many of the station's inhabitants: mostly workers, troops, and slaves, but some families, too, spouses and children of imperial personnel. Ari's father wasn't thrilled about having them here. He said the outpost was no place for "a village in space." He'd even been reluctant to let Ari come with him at first. However, very few stations could justify having no civilian quarters, and Nahtal was one of them.

So, Ari tried to smile and make eye contact with civilians when their paths crossed. Like it or not, she was Lady Ariana, even if she'd never felt like a noblewoman in her life. She was the only daughter of the stationmaster and ought to do her father proud. At least the civilians didn't have to salute her like military personnel did. They usually bobbed their heads respectfully if they recognized her, though.

The deference didn't seem to bother Assistant. She looked at everyone with a cool eye, whether they were her fellow slaves or ranking officers. Once, when an ensign saluted Ari, Ari could have sworn Assistant nodded as if in approval. Could pirates really have the same kind of discipline as imperial soldiers?

Ari timidly broached the question when they reached the top floor. She hadn't dared to speak until now, because something hot had been clogging up her throat, even hotter than the ball of warmth in her lower belly that had begun from the moment Assistant had seen her in the red dress.

Assistant replied, "Mír's fleet is run with as much structure and discipline as any imperial force. More, from what I've seen."

Though Assistant's voice was cool, Ari could have sworn she detected a trace of pride in it. How strange, to be *proud* of people who had captured and enslaved you. There was something even stranger about that statement, too. "Have you seen a lot of imperial forces? I guess you must have, if you can make the comparison."

Assistant blinked, as if the question surprised her. She sounded a little evasive when she replied, "Here and there." When Ari opened her mouth to follow up, her shoulders stiffened. The clearest way possible to say, *Don't push it*.

Ari wouldn't push it, then. She tried to take a deep breath without it being noticeable. As she did, in the confines of the lift, she caught a whiff of Assistant's scent: earth from the garden, a trace of sweat, and something else Ari couldn't identify. Her hair, maybe? Hair always seemed to have its own smell, different from person to person. What did Assistant's hair smell like?

Ari looked away before Assistant could catch her staring.

They arrived in the Observatory. Thankfully, it wasn't very crowded, with just a few people sitting on the couches in the middle of the lounge, or studying at the carrels that lined one side of the room. Nothing impeded Ari's view of the stars, which always took her breath away. It was so different from her garden, where every few feet the view was blocked by a tree or bush. Space stretched out into an infinity of loneliness without even plants to keep you company. "Living among the stars" sounded poetic, but it never came close to capturing the immensity of floating in orbit.

Assistant didn't seem to notice that any more than she'd noticed Ari staring at her. The look she turned on the stars seemed more analytical

than awed. Her gaze skimmed across both windows as her brow furrowed. Then she walked to the window that looked over the planet below, a tiny sphere that hadn't even merited a proper name—its imperial designation was XR-43. Everyone on the station called it “Exer.”

Exer provided invaluable ore to the Empire, ore that could be used in fuel and construction, but no question that it wasn't the prettiest planet. No blue oceans or great landmasses crossed it like they did Homeworld. It had no sparkling rings of asteroids, no glowing moons.

When Ari joined Assistant—standing so close that their shoulders were just a few inches apart—Assistant said, “I remember when the mineral deposits on this planet were discovered.”

Ari blinked. “Really?” That had happened before she was born. How long ago was it, exactly? “That must have been...”

“Forty years ago, or thereabouts. Back when your Empire knew how to move fast. They had an operating mine out here within ten years.” Assistant glanced at Ari, and if she was surprised at how close together they were standing, she didn't protest. “I was a child then.”

It would be rude to do the math with Assistant standing right in front of her, so Ari simply tacked on “less than fifty years old” to the tiny list of things she knew about her gardening partner. “Oh.”

“It's an invaluable resource.” Assistant looked down at Exer again, and for a second, something like hunger flashed across her face. How long ago had lunch been? They'd have to order dinner as soon as they returned to Ari's quarters. Or maybe they could even eat in the mess hall, if Assistant wanted to keep going with their...their night on the town, or whatever this was.

Ari fidgeted. “I'm sure it is.”

Suddenly, Assistant shook her head and blinked, as if coming out of a reverie. She gave Ari a quick look. Was that caution in her gaze? But why?

“So,” she said, “the star charts?”

“Oh!” Ari twitched, yanked from a reverie of her own, a brief fantasy of staring into Assistant's blue eyes for a long, long time and not having

to be embarrassed about it. “Right. They’re by this wall over here. Just tell me which ones you want me to pull for you.”

Assistant definitely liked the star charts. Sitting next to her on one of the couches, Ari watched how she flipped through them, missing no detail. She realized for the first time just how smart Assistant really was. Oh, she’d never thought she was dumb: she was much too well-spoken. Sharp-tongued, even. But this woman bent over the star charts obviously had a keen and fine mind.

“We can come back here again,” Ari offered. “As often as you like.”

Assistant gave her a long, considering look. “Thank you,” she said neutrally. Then she added, “You are very generous in how you treat a slave.”

Ari squirmed. Why did Assistant keep reminding her of that? It wasn’t like Ari wanted things to be this way. “Really,” she said, “don’t say things like that.”

“But you are,” Assistant persisted. She tapped a star chart with her finger, though her gaze never left Ari’s face. “You are far kinder to me than Mír would have been to you. For example.”

“Well.” Ari laughed awkwardly, “I’m not exactly a pirate queen.” She looked down and fiddled with her sleeve. “I mean, why shouldn’t I be nice to you?”

“Why not, indeed.” Ari looked up and saw that Assistant was smiling. A real smile. It seemed to change her whole face, softening its hawkish lines, bringing light to those blue eyes. Ari’s heart nearly stopped at the sight of it, and she almost didn’t hear Assistant add, “I’m trying to imagine the sort of pirate queen you’d make.”

“A lousy one,” Ari said at once. “Just awful.”

Assistant chuckled.

That was even better—no, worse—no, *more* than the smile. Her head spinning, Ari kept talking, willing to follow this conversation as far as it could go just to keep that look on Assistant’s face. “I don’t think pirate queens get much chance to grow plants or do experiments. And they probably have to be, you know.” She swallowed. “Harsh.”

“That they do,” Assistant acknowledged. Then, to Ari’s surprise, she added, “But not always.” She tilted her head to the side. “Even Mir can be gentle, or so I’ve heard. When she wishes.”

“Well, of course.” Ari tucked a strand of hair behind one ear. “Everybody can. That is, I hope everybody can. Nobody can be horrible all the time.”

“As you say.” Assistant looked back down at the star chart.

Ari glanced at a clock on the wall and gasped. “Oh, no!” It was nearly time to— “We’ve got to go turn the lamps on, or the *dellinses* won’t bloom!”

How could she have forgotten? Her plants had never slipped her mind before. There was certainly no time to go to the mess hall. Making a mental promise to take Assistant there another time, she snatched the book of star charts from Assistant’s hands and closed it with a thump.

“But—” Assistant began.

“No time! Come on! We’ll come back later, I promise!” Ari grabbed Assistant’s arm and hauled her to her feet, hurrying toward the door. Now Assistant wasn’t smiling. She had the same look on her face that she often got when dealing with Ari: plain and simple bafflement.

Ari had no idea why. It wasn’t like she was that complicated.

## CHAPTER 3

Two nights later, Ari was obliged to leave her quarters again. She wasn't nearly as excited about it this time. Assistant had to accompany her. Ari got the feeling she wasn't happy, either.

It was a banquet, of the kind her father occasionally threw for visiting dignitaries. Ari hated them. She had to get all dressed up and be awkward in front of dozens of people and try to remember which spoon to use. And when she tried to explain this to Assistant, it didn't go over very well.

"Surely you were taught basic etiquette," Assistant said in obvious disbelief, her voice carrying through the bedroom door as Ari struggled with her dress—a much more formal gown than the one she'd put on to go to the Observatory.

"Not really," Ari called back. "My mother died almost thirteen years ago, and ever since then my father hasn't had much to do with me." She swallowed hard. "Which is fine. I keep really busy, as you can see."

"Yes, I see," Assistant said.

Assistant probably did. She saw everything. Ari ran her palms over the skirt of her dress as she looked in the mirror. Maybe Assistant would like this outfit, too—not that she'd say so. She'd never mentioned the red dress again. Why would there be a reason to?

Tonight's dress was a pale green, like leaves in spring on Homeworld, which was why Ari had chosen it even though the shop assistant had warned the color washed her out. It was covered in lace the same color as the silk blend beneath. She'd had it fitted, but she'd lost weight since then while being isolated and forgetting to take regular meals, so it was a little baggy in places. And it covered her up from

throat to toe, with long sleeves, a high collar, and a skirt that touched the tops of her shoes.

When Ari emerged from her room, her hopes of Assistant being impressed by her attire were dashed. Assistant's eyes went wide, like they had for the red dress, but this time she said, "Is it the latest imperial trend to look three times your age?"

Ari's cheeks flamed. "Hey. It's my only formal dress." Wonderful. Assistant thought she looked awful—though why that should hurt so much was a mystery—and now Ari was already off-balance for the rest of the evening. She needed more confidence than this to deal with all the important people her father was hosting tonight. She couldn't make him look bad.

"Then you must wear it, I'm sure." Assistant looked over at the clock on the wall. If they didn't leave now, they'd be late.

And yet Ari blurted, "Well, do *you* have any ideas?"

Then she shuffled her feet. What a silly question. Assistant wore a slave's tunic, day in and day out. Not that it made a difference; here Ari was, the stationmaster's daughter, practically unable to dress herself. And Assistant looked like an empress from the moment she got out of bed to the moment she retired back to it at night, no matter how much dirt she'd knelt in. She wasn't exactly in a position to be a fashion maven, and she didn't need to be.

To Ari's surprise, though, Assistant said, "Let me in your closet."

When Assistant talked like that, there was no choice but to obey, so Ari sat in befuddlement on the side of her bed while Assistant strode into her walk-in closet, looked around, and sighed heavily.

Maybe this was a chance to learn more about her. Ari cleared her throat. "Did you, um, work for a woman before, too?" she tried. "Helping her get dressed and stuff?"

Assistant snorted. "Was I a maid to some pirate's spoiled mistress? I think not." She pulled open a chest of drawers and peeped inside. "Hmm."

So, pirates had mistresses. Maybe they had families, too. People they cared about. That didn't make any sense in Ari's head, not with



the way her father talked about pirates as little better than animals. But just two nights ago, Assistant had told Ari that even Mir could be... What word had she used? *Gentle*. Pirates were human beings, too.

Assistant whipped out a silk sash from the chest of drawers. “Stand up. And straighten your shoulders.”

More instructions followed, and Ari stood, turned, held out her arms, and straightened up some more until Assistant was satisfied. By the time she was done, Ari had a white silk sash tied around her middle. Assistant had told her to put on a gold pendant—one of the few pieces of jewelry she had, something that had belonged to her mother. She didn’t have pierced ears, so no earrings, but Assistant scavenged her jewelry box and found the bracelet Ari had worn when they’d gone to the Observatory.

“Gosh,” Ari said, looking at herself in the mirror with wonder. What a huge improvement. She had a waist and everything. “You’re good at this.”

“You sound so surprised.”

Ari met Assistant’s gaze in the mirror and fought not to blush. How was it that Assistant seemed to be able to read her every feeling? “I guess I shouldn’t be. You’re good at everything. Even fashion.” She gave a halting laugh.

“You’d be amazed at how important it is to have style, Ariana. That sets the example, the standard. No matter what you do.”

There was something a little off in that remark—since when did slaves set standards?—but that wasn’t what grabbed the bulk of Ari’s attention. Assistant had never said her name before. But then slaves never addressed anyone that way except for other slaves.

Ari wasn’t about to object. Not when her name in Assistant’s mouth sounded like *that*—so elegant, almost musical.

“S-so I look okay now?” she managed, looking at her reflection in the mirror and not really able to take it in.

“You have leaves in your hair,” Assistant said.

Well, that was just typical. Of course, Ari hadn’t noticed and Assistant had. She sighed and headed into her bathroom, picking

samples of *Barbissa noctes* out of her hair. “I wish I didn’t have to go to this stupid thing.”

“I admit I’m having a hard time seeing you chatting with ambassadors’ wives.”

“Oh, I never talk,” Ari said quickly. “I mean, unless somebody tries to talk to me. And then they never want to hear what I have to say, since I don’t want to talk about politics or anything, so it doesn’t last too long. Thank goodness.”

“Really?” Assistant seemed truly surprised. “You’re quite the little chatterbox in here.”

Ari saw herself blush in the mirror as she reached for her comb. “I don’t mind talking to you,” she said earnestly, dragging a comb through her de-leafed hair as she exited the bathroom. “I hope you don’t mind it, either. You don’t make me feel like I’m stupid. Much,” she added, in the interests of honesty.

Assistant looked even more surprised. “You’re not stupid.” She gestured at the little forest in Ari’s quarters. “Just look what you’ve done here.”

Ari shrugged. “Nobody cares about what I do in here. Maybe they will, though, when I finish work on that new pea. It might be of use to somebody.” Which was all she wanted, really—to be of use. Not just to be the weird girl who played with plants all the time.

“Perhaps it will,” Assistant said, her voice unusually kind. But when Ari gave her a quick glance, her face was as blank as ever.

~ ~ ~

It only took a few minutes for Ari to remember why she hated these dinners so much. For one thing, everything was much too noisy and out-of-order. For another, all the slaves had to kneel by their masters’ sides, which Ari had always thought was really stupid and embarrassing, only now it was even worse because she had one of her own. So, Assistant knelt by the side of her chair, and Ari could practically feel the rage emanating from her.

“We’ll leave early,” she promised. “I’ll say I have a headache. I can get away with that sometimes, if I don’t do it too often.” And she hadn’t done it the last time.

Assistant did not reply. Ari did what she usually did at these events: she kept her head down and listened to people talking around her, hoping nobody tried to talk to her.

There was no shortage of luminaries, anyway. A delegation from Homeworld was doing a perimeter tour under heavy security, and Nahtal Station was their last stop before they returned to the capital. Ari’s father wasn’t usually one for pomp and circumstance, but a quick glance around the room showed that he’d gone to unusual effort tonight. The station’s banquet hall, formerly utilitarian and plain, had been painted months ago with murals of scenes of great imperial victories over the centuries. The center table was hand-carved from the magnificent darkwoods that the planet Illiard was known for, and it was covered with candles, fine china, and savory dishes of all kinds.

And spoons and forks. Lots of them. Ari looked dolefully at the selection and tried to keep an eye out for what the other guests were doing as they ate.

A low voice came from her right side: Assistant whispered, sounding as though she was talking through her teeth, “Outside in.”

When Ari glanced quickly down at her, trying to be unobtrusive (slaves got in huge trouble if they spoke unbidden at dinner), Assistant gave the cutlery a pointed look. Ari looked at her salad and then placed an uncertain hand on the fork that was farthest to the left of her plate.

Assistant nodded, barely perceptibly.

Ari tried not to let her hand shake with relief as she picked up the fork and saw that the other guests were doing the same.

Assistant knew about clothes and etiquette. No matter what she said, surely, she must have been in some grand places. Did pirates even have grand places? Had Assistant known another life before being enslaved by them?

Given the tenor of her thoughts, perhaps it was no surprise that when someone across the table said, “Well, I’m just so grateful we haven’t needed all that extra security against pirates,” Ari snapped to attention.

“All that expensive security,” the ambassador agreed from where he sat to the right of Ari’s father at the head of the table. “And with the budget under such strain. Still, better safe than sorry, I suppose. Lord Geiker, what do you think is going on?”

Ari’s father frowned. He didn’t look well tonight—pale and kind of tired. Now that Ari looked closely at him, he seemed to have lost weight. His thick blond hair appeared grayer at the temples, and his usual upright military posture looked more relaxed. Not in a good way, though. More like he was slumping. But his dress uniform was as crisp and pressed as ever, and his hazel eyes as sharp. The tall, male slave next to him was well-groomed and attentive. Lord Geiker was the very picture of the imperial discipline Assistant had said was so sorely lacking.

“Mir’s ships have not been spotted in days.” His deep voice commanded the attention of everyone in the room. Including Assistant. From the corner of her eye, Ari saw her glance up to the head of the table. That was something else slaves weren’t supposed to do. “Anywhere. The latest scuttlebutt is that her fleet must have hidden itself in some out-of-the way, abandoned station, though nobody knows why.”

The ambassador hadn’t said Mir’s name. That didn’t matter. When it came to the pirates, one was known above all others. Everyone else at the table was nodding.

“It’s not as if she suffered a big loss recently,” the ambassador’s wife said, sipping her wine. “At least, not that I’ve heard about.”

“I don’t like it when she’s this quiet,” Ari’s father said. “I know her patterns by now. She’s planning something.”

“Do you think so, Lord Geiker?” asked a man to Ari’s left. He’d introduced himself to her, but she’d been so nervous that she’d already forgotten his name.

“Of course she is.” Her father looked surprised that anyone had needed to ask. “That’s what she does. That’s who she is. Vicious animals don’t suddenly become tame.”

“I hear your people captured a scouter of hers,” another woman said, and the excited murmurs rose all around the table.

Ari immediately bit her lip and darted a glance at Assistant, who was holding herself as still as stone. Sure enough—

“Yes, but there was only one survivor,” Ari’s father said. He pointed at Assistant. “My daughter’s new slave, right there.”

Ari winced as everyone turned to look at Assistant. But Assistant did not cringe from their stares; she met them with her own, cold and unafraid.

“Did she have anything to say?” said the ambassador’s wife, excitement in her voice. “Was she able to give you any useful information?”

“Unfortunately not.” Ari’s father shook his head. “She was a slave on their ship. We questioned her, but she said she knew nothing. And you know our lie detectors are never wrong.”

“Oh, the poor thing,” another woman said, looking sympathetically at Assistant. But it didn’t quite seem like real sympathy. It didn’t seem like what Ari felt when she thought about what Assistant must have endured—a feeling that was both sweet and painful.

Assistant’s own expression did not change one jot.

The woman looked less sympathetic then and glanced at Ari as she said, “I hope she realizes how lucky she is.” Then she turned back to talk to the woman seated next to her, and thankfully, everybody’s attention was off Ari.

Well...almost everybody’s. “Do you keep her busy?” inquired the man on Ari’s left, pointing at Assistant as though Ari might think he was talking about somebody else.

Thinking wistfully of excuses about headaches, Ari managed, “She...she helps me in my garden. She’s really good at it.”

Of course, the man didn’t ask her about her garden. He just wanted to know about her slave. Typical. “I’ve always felt that a woman of rank

should have at least one house slave,” he said. He glanced down at Assistant again. “Not bad. How old is she? She looks healthy enough.”

“More than enough,” Assistant said softly.

The man raised his eyebrows and looked displeased at this insolence. “Well, she’s in need of discipline.”

“Oh, um,” Ari said. Thank goodness her father was far enough down the table that he couldn’t hear this, especially since he was already talking to the ambassador again.

“How often does she need whipping?” the man asked, in the same tone as if he’d asked what Ari’s favorite food was.

“I don’t whip her!” Ari’s skin crawled at the thought. “I’d never do that!”

He raised his eyebrows. “Your prerogative. But she’d obviously benefit from it.” He glared down at Assistant. “I know her sort. She takes advantage of any kindness you show to her. I hope she won’t make you regret it.”

He reached out to touch Assistant—take her by the chin, pet her hair, something like that. Ari saw Assistant take a deep breath, saw her bare her teeth—

“No!” Ari blurted, and raised her own hand, ready to slap the man’s hand away from Assistant. Then she realized what a diplomatically awful idea that was, and she turned the motion into a weak finger-wagging. “I mean, I’m sure I won’t regret it. I mean, please don’t touch her.”

The man stared at her in astonishment.

Ari stood, attracting the attention of everyone around her. “Um. I’m sorry. I have a headache. Please excuse us both.”

Then she fled her seat, hearing Assistant rising to her feet behind her. She hurried up to the head of the table as her father glanced up at her.

“Sorry, Father.” She bent to give him a gentle kiss on his cheek. “I’m not feeling very well tonight.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Again?” he asked, his voice soft enough that only she could hear. Ari gave him a guilty smile. He glanced to where

Assistant was making her way to his seat, watching them both. “How does your slave suit you?”

“Oh, she’s...” Ari’s voice trailed off. This didn’t seem like the moment to ask him why he’d given her a slave. “She’s fine.”

“Tell the kitchen slaves to send some of the feast to your room,” her father said, and patted her hand. “No need to go hungry tonight.”

Ari smiled at Assistant, who’d drawn up within hearing range. “Oh, she never lets me go hungry.”

Assistant only raised her eyebrows and did not look the slightest bit deferential in the presence of the stationmaster.

“Good,” her father said. He added to Assistant, “Don’t let her run herself into the ground.”

Assistant did not reply. Ari patted his arm awkwardly, wishing she could say as much to the slaves who cared for him. Maybe he didn’t talk to Ari or see her all that much, but he was her father. It was reassuring to know that he was out there doing his work, taking care of things like he always had. Hopefully he’d feel better soon. He worked so hard.

Ari and Assistant left the room, and Ari managed not to make eye contact with anyone, especially the man who’d tried to touch Assistant. Neither she nor Assistant spoke until they reached their quarters. Then, when the door shut behind them, Assistant exhaled a long, hissing breath.

Ari saw that she was shaking with the fury she had been containing for the past hour. Her fists were clenched and her jaw was tightly set. Worse than any of that, though, was the fire in her eyes. Just the sight of it made Ari’s stomach roll over with what little food it had inside.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered. “I’m sorry about—”

Assistant turned her look on Ari, then, and it was impossible not to cower a little bit at the sight. “Do you remember what you told me?” Assistant said softly. “That nobody here was like those horrible, nasty pirates? That you would never treat your slaves like that?”

“I...”

“How often do I need whipping, anyway?” Assistant said. “Tell me that. I’m interested to hear your opinion.”

“No!” Ari said, appalled. “You know I’d never do that. Don’t you?” she added hesitantly.

“Not you, perhaps,” Assistant said, and began to prowl the room. “You’re unusual. I’ll give you that.” She glanced at Ari. “Why?”

“What?”

“Do you know how I felt, when they told me I was a gift for the stationmaster’s only daughter?” Assistant said. “What I envisioned you to be?”

“No,” Ari said in a small voice.

“A pampered brat. Rolling around in wealth and luxury, never having known a hard day’s work, utterly ignorant of the realities of life—” She paused and looked Ari up and down. “Well. One out of three isn’t bad, I suppose.” Before Ari could offer any kind of protest, she continued, “But you are not. You’re... I don’t know what you are. I’ve never seen anything like you.”

Ari hoped that was meant in a nice way.

“How is it,” Assistant added, “how is it even possible that a girl like you has grown up in a world like your father’s...and you have no idea how to treat a slave? That you react with such surprise when a fool tells you to beat me?”

“Well, you know I don’t go out much,” Ari offered feebly. It took all of one second to see that Assistant would not be satisfied with that. So, Ari swallowed hard and continued, “My mother died when I was about seven years old. And my father never had much to do with me. Like I said.”

Assistant nodded.

“So, I was raised by, you know, servants. And slaves. They took care of me. I was used to doing what they said.”

“Not to ordering them around,” Assistant said, her eyes going wider with sudden understanding.

“Right, exactly,” Ari said, relieved that she’d caught on. “I mean, I never thought of them as, as *slaves*. They were the people who helped me grow up and told me what to do. And—it never seemed right.”



Suddenly, it was hard to meet Assistant's gaze. She looked longingly toward the shelter of her trees. "I don't know much about politics, but when I was learning about history as a kid, I kept asking questions about why we had slaves at all. If the Empire's so rich, why can't we pay them, or let them come and go when they want to? I guess I asked too many times, because later Father sat me down and told me to stop. When he found out I'd been speaking to our own slaves about it, that's..."

She shivered. "It's the only time I can remember him getting angry at me. He said it was dangerous to talk that way. I'd already started getting attention, so he pulled me out of school and put me with tutors, and I liked that better anyway." No bullies. No laughter.

"You, a rabble-rouser? Somehow I can't picture it."

Assistant's voice wasn't scornful or cruel—it held that slight edge of amusement that Ari had come to recognize as something both rare and precious. That made it a little easier to say, "I wasn't trying to cause trouble. I was little. I didn't understand."

"Stop using the past tense. You still don't understand. As you ably demonstrated tonight."

Wherever Assistant had learned about table manners, she'd learned about sarcasm, too. But this particular topic was one where Ari wasn't ashamed of her ignorance. It wasn't a bad thing that she didn't "know enough" to treat a slave—a person—cruelly. She sidestepped that and said, "We moved around a lot, and we never took anyone with us. So, when I was fifteen I told my father I didn't want any more slaves or servants. I figured I was old enough. I just wanted to be left alone and tend my garden."

"Which you've done," Assistant said. "You're not like your father. I knew that right away, when I saw him."

"My father doesn't beat his slaves, either," Ari offered.

"Oh," Assistant said. "Well, good for him."

Ari gulped and wished she could think of something helpful to say.

"Your Empire," Assistant said suddenly, "is the most useless power structure in all of creation."

Ari stared at her. “What?” Where in the stars had that come from?

“You heard me.” Assistant clasped her hands behind her back. “Perhaps it was great once. Generations ago. But what has your Emperor achieved lately, hmm? You tell me. Why has he left the defense of the Empire to the outposts—to men like your father?”

“Nothing’s wrong with my father!” Ari said at once. “Everyone respects him. He’s here because he told the Emperor he wanted the post!”

Assistant rolled her eyes. “Oh, yes. Believe me, I’ve heard all about the great Lord Geiker. I meant, why is the Emperor so disengaged, so uninterested, when it’s getting easier and easier for pirates to breach your defenses out here? Why did your father have to *request* that a capable commander protect a valuable planet? The Empire is only as strong as its weakest point. Any half-decent strategist knows that from birth.”

“Well...I guess.” That made sense, even to a non-half-decent strategist.

“And it’s rotting from the inside out. Do you think pirates are the only threat?” Assistant continued. “Or the threat of the Kazir, only a system away... Have they told you those are only children’s stories, too? Like the wicked pirate queen?”

Ari blinked. “The Kazir? But they’re not a threat. They haven’t made an attack in ages. Everybody says so. The holos—”

“The holos.” Assistant snorted. “There is one military force out there that is capable of withstanding an attack from beyond the Empire’s perimeter. And that is the pirate fleet. The rest of you are sitting ducks.”

“But they’ve been quiet lately. The pirates, I mean. Like everybody was saying at dinner.”

A muscle jumped in Assistant’s cheek. “Yes.”

“So maybe there’s nothing to worry about.” Ari hesitated. “Why are you so upset?”

Assistant stiffened.

Ari added, “It’s because of what that man said at dinner, isn’t it? I’m sorry. He was a creep.”

Assistant's shoulders remained rigid for a moment—then they relaxed, and she gave a rueful chuckle. “On that we agree.”

“We don't have to go to another banquet for a while,” Ari said. “Maybe next time you can pretend to be sick and I can leave you here.”

“Maybe so,” Assistant said. Then she frowned at the door. “Wasn't someone meant to be bringing us dinner?”

“Oh!” Ari smacked herself on the forehead. “I forgot to stop and send someone to the kitchen—”

Assistant glared at her and stalked to the intercom. “You don't need a slave,” she said. “You need a keeper.”

“You're doing a good job of that,” Ari said, suddenly shy. “I mean, I really appreciate... Not that you have a choice, and you haven't been here that long, but...”

Assistant looked at her with that flat, guarded expression.

“I can't even remember what it was like without you,” Ari finished in a rush. “That's all I wanted to... Sorry. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, I'm sure,” Assistant said. Her voice was as dry as ever, but there was something Ari couldn't read in her eyes.

TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

# THE LILY AND THE CROWN

BY ROSLYN SINCLAIR

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.  
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.  
Ylva Publishing | [www.ylva-publishing.com](http://www.ylva-publishing.com)