

# Bad Love Formed

*She's changed*, is Celeste's first thought. Incremental changes, like the gap on Solaine's waist where a tattoo once was or the new, replaced, ring on her left hand. Changes that matter to no one but Celeste. They watch Solaine head toward CosmiCoffee, smiling as she makes way for two astroport security droids. A dull ache pulses against Celeste's chest and they struggle to suppress it. The Solaine they knew would never have made way for security droids, let alone smile at them. Then again, Solaine hasn't been the being Celeste knew for a long time. They shake their head, willing the thought to fall out. They're not here to dwell on that. They're here to change that. Solaine spots them sitting by a table out front, where she can still being-watch, and waves in greeting. Celeste springs from their seat, ready to pull Solaine's chair out moments too soon. Every being in the astroport blurs until it's only Solaine they can see, clear through the narrow aperture of their vision. Her skin is a deeper shade of mahogany now, enriched by seasons spent on a planet with twin suns. The pair sit down simultaneously, merge into their familiar rhythm. Solaine launches into an anecdote. Celeste listens, laughs. Solaine smiles tenderly. *You make me feel alive*, she says. *Safe*. The amount of times Celeste has heard those words. It used to be followed by a kiss. Now Celeste must fight the urge to say, *that's because I'm yours. We're supposed to be together, you and me*. But Celeste has made that mistake before, and the wrong combination of words, delivered too suddenly and too soon will only make Solaine cover her ears. So Celeste forces herself to be patient. They've been gradually convincing Solaine to stray a little further from home. First, it was a park close to her, now it's the astroport. If they could just persuade her to buy a ship ticket. There's a Drukvak living on Polian 795 that

can bring her memory back, so she'll remember what her "husband" has done to her. Solaine leans in closer. As she bends her head, Celeste's attention is arrested by two droids they recognise in the dense crowd. Alux's personal guards. They've been discovered. Celeste's heart plummets. *What perfume are you wearing?* Solaine asks. *Does Alux know you see me?* Celeste replies. *No. Why not? Because...* *Say it,* Celeste thinks. *Say it's because you know you cannot trust him.* Celeste takes a risk. *It's not perfume, it's the ixoras I grow back on Za'arix. You recognise it, don't you?* Solaine nods cautiously. *That's because you lived there.* Celeste pauses. *With me.* A silence as Solaine rubs her temples. Then, a delicate, whispered, *yes. I can take you there,* Celeste presses. They glance at the droids scanning the area, knowing if they're caught, it's Solaine who'll suffer the consequences. *Come with me.* Solaine's expression remains pained. She's unable to look at Celeste as she finally parts her lips to answer.