



INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY

# CRAVE

WIFE-MATES FOR THE DRCS

ELSA  
JADE

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**CRAVE**  
**WIFE-MATES FOR THE ORCS**  
**BIG SKY ALIEN MAIL ORDER BRIDES**  
**INTERGALACTIC DATING AGENCY**

**Elsa Jade**

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He's the littlest orc.  
She's the Earther girl fleeing her mistakes.  
Together, they're getting into big trouble in outer space!

*Welcome to the Intergalactic Dating Agency!*

The Omega Reclamation Crew finally found their fortune—but unfortunately, the orcs can't spend it. Sil, the DeepWander's only short orc, has an idea to save the ship and prove his place on the crew separate from his big brother the mighty apex. He just needs someone who'll believe in him, a.k.a. an accomplice...

Kinsley Sullivan meant to be good, honestly. Hacking into the Big Sky IDA dating profiles to stow away on a spaceship, escaping her problems, was supposed to be her last scam. Except now Sil the space nerd is dangling a prize she can't resist—and not just the enticing alien secrets beneath his orc kilt.

Guided by a talking pet rock, they're on a road trip across the galaxy, where the menace of mercenaries, the risk of rogue comets, and the vulnerability of the void is matched only by the threat of trusting each other—and the hazards of their own lonely hearts.

*Read all the WIFE-MATES FOR THE ORCS*

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# Chapter 1

Kinsley Sullivan had made mistakes. A lot of them. Sometimes it seemed like *all* of them. But trying to escape her mistakes was maybe her biggest mistake yet.

Unlike the Intergalactic Dating Agency transport where she'd spent many a "night" staring out a screen pretending to be a window at a simulated star scape, the Omega Reclamation Crew ship had no windows in the galley so she couldn't even pretend to focus on anything besides her own wretched thoughts.

A voice, deep and sonorous enough to be a particularly sexy demon from the pits of hell, interrupted her sulking. "You're up late. Or early, depending."

Oh great. Now she couldn't even wallow in her silent misery alone. She closed her eyes for a moment, then rallied one of her casual smiles, not too friendly. "Does it even matter in space?"

Sil stood on the other side of the galley table, mugs of something steamy in the top two of his four hands. In one other hand dangled an alien guitar. She let her gaze linger for a moment. It was too bad the orcs were such steady, literal-minded people; with all those fingers of his, she probably could have trained him up as a decent pickpocket or card shark. Not that he could hide his ill-gotten gains anywhere, since he was wearing only the short kilt and bandolier set that was the fashion on the *DeepWander*, exposing quite a lot of blue-bronze skin.

"Is the rock bothering you again?" Sil straddled the bench across from her and nudged one of the cups her way while positioning the multi-stringed synth over his knee. "Oliver said he thought now that it knew we knew it's alive it wouldn't be so desperate and lonely anymore."

Was that all it took to not feel desperate anymore? For someone—*anyone*—in the universe to acknowledge your existence? If it were that easy she wouldn't have had to flee Earth.

Of course even before she'd known there was such a thing as aliens looking for a love connection, there'd been dating agencies profiting off people's lonely desperation. While she'd never used the apps herself, she appreciated the hustle, collecting all that neediness into one place.

"It's not the rock." She refused to admit—to Sil or herself—that those

confusing moments of the rock reaching out to her had actually been sort of...sweet. At least *someone* wanted to talk to her. “Just restless, I guess.”

Unlike the other orcs who had large, black, faceted eyes that seemed exactly like the sort of eyes one would expect to find in a species adapted to caves, Sil had smooth, pearly gray eyes. If she looked too close, she knew she'd see herself reflected there, pale, like a ghost.

Definitely nothing she wanted to see there.

“Restless,” he mused. With a few fingers, he picked out a quiet little strum. “Is that why you hacked your way into the IDA Big Sky dating profiles so you could sneak on to the *DeepWander*? To soothe your restless spirit and indulge a bit of adventuring?”

She winced. His touch on the synthetar was delicate enough, but poking at *her*? Rude and unwanted.

Of course, once the orcs had found out that she'd talked to Dorn, who'd tried to steal their newfound fortune to sell to the highest bidder at the mining and salvage auction coming up soon, she'd figured they'd look more closely into her own record. Yes, she had consorted with the traitor, but only accidentally. And it wasn't fair, considering she'd also helped rescue little Oliver who Dorn had kidnapped as a communications conduit with the rock when she could've been fleeing to the raiders.

Really annoying how doing the right thing was *also* a mistake.

Dorn and a couple of the raiders who'd attacked the *DeepWander* were now sitting in a security cell, but as far as she knew they hadn't yet been tortured or murdered by the orcs. Which she supposed should be reassuring, considering she might still end up locked away with them.

Instead of answering, she sipped from the heavy mug, the warmth of the orc tea drifted through her, making her realize how chilled she'd been.

With a thunk, she set the mug down again. Sil probably thought he was being nice. But really, it felt as if the tea were dissolving what little protection she had left.

Not even glancing up at her wordless rejection, he kept playing. To her surprise, she recognized the melody half-buried in the alien tones. “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star”? Really? Ollie must've suggested it.

Mostly under his breath, Sil sang the first verse, but then he added in the same cadence,

*“When the blazing sun is gone,  
When he nothing shines upon,*



*Then you show your little light,  
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.  
Then the traveler in the dark,  
Thanks you for your tiny spark,  
He could not see which way to go,  
If you did not twinkle so.”*

So many years—and lightyears—and she’d never known there were other verses to the song.

She couldn’t hold back a long sigh or the pathetic truth, not that it mattered now. “In my defense, the IDA security was for shit. I barely know anything about computers—and I know minus nothing about alien computers—but I still managed to weasel my way in even after they denied my application.”

And hadn’t *that* been a shocker. She’d been peeved at being rejected for what, at the time, she’d believed was a long-distance, all-expense paid, “exotic” matchmaking vacation—and she’d rather desperately needed to be *very* far away at the time. So she’d crudely blundered her way into the IDA trip, only to discover that she was headed *very, very* far away, not overseas but into outer space, to hook up with fucking-kidding-me for-real aliens.

Not little green-gray men either, but huge, hulking, virile, blue-bronze monster males who—so it turned out—were secretly even more desperate than she’d been. It would’ve been laughable, really...if she hadn’t been so desperate.

She sighed again. “You only paid for a half-dozen brides, but you got an extra one free. Would’ve been a deal.” A deal if it hadn’t been her, of course.

Still idly strumming, Sil angled the mug of tea between his tusks and took a drink. Such focus. And his gaze never wavered from her. “I did a little Big Sky hacking myself. And you’re right about their security. Teq was rather disapproving.”

She snorted at the thought of the imposingly huge orc crusher being “rather” anything. Even his commitment to his new Earther wife-mate was colossal.

Sil tilted his antennae toward her and abruptly stopped playing. “Do you want to know why your IDA application was discarded?”

“No, I do not.” Oh, she was so lying. Of course she was curious. And couldn’t leave well enough alone. That had always been one of her biggest mistakes, in addition to everything else. “But tell me anyway.”

He sat back, still focused on her with those opalescent eyes and those feathery antennae. “According to the algorithm analysis, while your electrobiochemistry as an Earther meets all the prerequisites for matching with orcs, your personality profile was judged to be too closed, suspicious, and untrusting to handle the revelation of alien existence.”

As she spun her mug in a slow circle, the tea sloshed. “Not entirely wrong. Although again in my defense, I feel that way about all sentient life.”

He made a low humming noise that she’d learned to identify as orc amusement. The universal translator that he’d rigged up for her—since she hadn’t gotten one from the IDA outpost, due to her hacking and sneaking and all—handled most of the verbal communications well enough. And she’d always been pretty good with nonverbal communication, having learned her first lesson at the back of her uncle’s hand and passing every test thereafter with at least a B+ with only a point or two off for minor bruising, just to keep her on her toes.

“That explains the low score in helping others also noted in your profile.”

Unaccountably stung, she pushed the tea away from her. “I helped Oliver. I told you about Dorn’s nefarious plans and I helped stop him from stealing the rock.”

“Maybe you are more than you seem.” Sil’s pale gray gaze was both too soft and yet too sharp. “I know what that’s like.”

She snorted. “Oh yeah. Cry to me about all the ways the little brother of a king is misunderstood and maligned.”

His antennae stiffened, probably most people wouldn’t have seen it, but she was always watching. “Mag and I aren’t just brothers. We’re twins.”

She blinked in surprise, momentarily diverted by the revelation. “So why is he king and you’re not? Orcs are hatched, right? If the egg just cracks open, it’s not like he was born first or anything.”

“Hatched at the same moment, yes. But you can’t have missed the difference between us.”

She sat back to match his stance and gave him the same intense attention he’d been aiming at her.

Sil was bigger than her—even though she outclassed the other women by four inches in all directions—but he was markedly smaller than the other orcs and much smaller than his brother, the apex, right down to his shorter tusks. Where the orcs were morphologically broad and bulky, Sil was tall but lean. His torso—bared by the orc-standard uniform that was like some mutant

cargo pant/utility kilt with a dozen pockets—didn't even sport the ritual glyph that the orcs inscribed on themselves to indicate rank, and that just so happened to emphasize their heaving pecs in an interesting way.

Not that Kinsley had been interested in *that* way. But whether Mag had gotten all the food and nurturing instead of Sil or if it was some other factor, she couldn't really blame the other orcs for choosing the magnificent brother over the relatively minuscule one.

"It's not just my size and strength," he said, as if he were reading her mind. "I wasn't hatched with any of the instincts that keep the *DeepWander* functioning and flying." His antennae drooped. "No one needs a stone singer when they are starving."

She didn't need to know this any more than she needed to know why the IDA had rejected her. And still her mouth moved as if on its own, which was another of her many mistakes: "What's a stone singer?"

She'd seen him with his alien synthetar. And while she had to admit his voice was compelling—deep and echoing—she could believe that singing wasn't much use for a space salvage crew.

"Some of my people used to be able to emit ultrasonic sonorants that atomically altered microcrystalline mineral structures. Basically, they could carve crystal with their voices."

When he paused, as if expecting a response, she said, "Oh."

"But the exact techniques for sonoscrying were lost when we left our homeworld."

Losing a home and being cast adrift without any useful life hacks... Yeah, that she did understand, and she wasn't even thinking about her mistake with the IDA.

But since she had zero interest in sharing mistakes that hadn't even been hers, she just said "oh" again.

Which was apparently all the encouragement he needed, because he continued, "Speaking of stones, I'm fascinated by Roxy."

Refusing to say "oh" anymore, she just took another sip of tea, watching him over the rim. Since Roxy—as Oliver had named the strange, sentient rock—had gotten her into her current precarious predicament, she wasn't going to confess to any interest in it whatsoever.

He continued blithely, "While we still don't know exactly what the rock is, I think it's something special, something that could change my life."

Well, good for him. She'd thought she found something that could change

her life too. Look where that had gotten her.

“And if you wanted to, you could help me.”

She tapped her fingernail against the mug. “I could, could I?”

He tilted his head in the other direction, as if he couldn’t quite hone in on her sarcasm. “Only if you wanted to.”

Apparently she’d have to be more blunt with this earnest, bare-chested orc and his pretty eyes. “Why would I?”

He moved his mug sidewise, paralleling hers, as if they were playing the most utterly boring form of chess imaginable. “I had the impression you were into helping people now.” He made that amused noise again. “And also that you were not wanting to return to Earth.”

She didn’t appreciate that he had analyzed her so easily, even if he was the orc’s resident nerd type. And worse, he was all but mocking her for it. She should just walk away.

Sure, and where exactly would she go? Out into space?

Also, he wasn’t wrong.

“All right,” she drawled. “I’ll bite.”

He jerked back a little bit. “Bite?”

“It’s an Earther saying.” She bared her teeth at him in a hard smile. “It means I’m suspicious and untrusting but willing to listen to you. *If* you get to the point.”

He nodded. She’d already noticed that he made more of an attempt than some of the orcs to reflect human movements and sounds. Like he was cosplaying an Earther or something. Definitely a nerd type.

“I want you to help me talk to Roxy.”

She grimaced. “That rock is what’s getting me kicked off the *DeepWander*,” she reminded him. And even to her it sounded sad to blame a rock for her mistakes. “How is this helping?”

“Because I’m doing it for the right reasons.”

How often had she told herself that, at least in the beginning? “What do you think the rock is going to change for you?”

Leaving tea and synthetar behind, he pushed to his feet. “Come with me.”

She looked up at him. His four hands were clasped in a tidy knot, all two dozen fingers neatly laced. Nerdy types didn’t get in trouble, did they?

Anyway, it wasn’t like she had anything else to do except sit and stare and swear she’d never make another mistake again ever.

She got up and followed him.

## Chapter 2

When they left the empty galley, Sil was careful to shorten his stride to match Kinsley's. He might be the least orc on the *DeepWander*, but he was still head and upper shoulders taller than the Earther female, despite the heeled boots she favored.

He would never admit it, not even with a laser scalpel at his throat, but it was a curious feeling to not be the smallest one around.

Or the most reviled. Before Dorn had shown himself willing to betray the Omega Reclamation Crew for his own riches, Sil had been considered the biggest (smallest?) waste of space on the ship. With Dorn and the pirates locked up but still refusing to talk, Kinsley—who'd been only unwittingly involved in the attempted larceny—was the one everyone else glanced askance at, even though, as she'd pointed out, in the end she'd helped prevent the theft. The other Earther females had tried to reassure her and provide her company, but he'd noticed how she pulled away, keeping to herself.

As he knew well enough, sometimes words, no matter how well-meaning, meant nothing.

During the rest cycle, the corridors of the *DeepWander* were quiet and dimmed except for a glimmering slymusk trail marking the wall.

In the faint light, he glanced down at her. "Unless you were lying about not wanting to go back to Earth?"

She hunched her shoulders, not looking up at him. "Your brother basically said I have no choice. He doesn't trust me anymore. None of you do."

"Maybe because you lied to us from the start," he said, keeping his voice as soft as the slymusk glow. "If you opened up to us—"

That made her look at him. And the snap in her smoky blue eyes was sharper than any laser scalpel. "The way your brother and Amma were so honest about the orcs' financial situation when you filled out *your* IDA profile?"

"They were honest...at the time. We truly thought Roxy would be our fortune."

After a moment, she averted her gaze again. "Yeah. I know all about that one last big score."

His antennae quivered with the urge to ask her more. But he had no doubt she'd evade his questions at best—or lie at worst.

And she really had no reason to depend on the orcs or trust him particularly. The whole point of the Intergalactic Dating Agency was to give beings the chance to get to know each other before making any long-term promises. It wasn't either of their faults that she was going to be leaving soon and the orcs would be facing the Luster auction without the fortune they'd hoped to flaunt.

No, it wasn't their fault, but this *was* their last chance.

The main ore processing bay had been damaged badly when the pirates attacked, attempting to collect Dorn and the rock, so Roxy had been moved back to the secondary bay with additional security. Sil provided biometrics from all four limbs plus voice plus breath plus an ichor sample. He winced as the large-bore needle punched through his dermis.

Eyes wide, Kinsley backed away. "No way," she stammered. "That needle is way too big. I'm not giving up my blood and guts."

"The needle has to be big to get through orc skin," he pointed out. "But you don't have to do anything since you're with me."

"That's a change," she muttered under her breath as the portal acknowledged his legitimacy and the doorway opened.

The rock had been set to one side on a pedestal, and Sil had aligned several scanners and receivers around it to capture its emanations.

"It just doesn't look like much," Kinsley said in a diffident voice.

"I've heard the same my whole life." He went to check the readouts. "It's been quiet during the resting periods ever since Adeline told Ollie to tell it that he needs his sleep." He sidelonged a glance at her. "Guess you really can't blame Roxy for your restlessness tonight."

He turned away to program a contrasignal to dampen the energy field around the stone. "This should keep the discussion quiet enough to not bother the hatchling." He pulled a datpad toward him, queuing up a series of images to show her. "This is the rock when we brought it aboard. This is Roxy now."

After glancing at him, then the rock, then back at the picture images, she tilted her head. "It's bigger. How does a rock get bigger?"

"Many types of crystals form and grow and differentiate based on many factors, including..." As her eyes glazed over, he hurried on, "But I've never seen anything like this. And I'm hoping you can ask Roxy to explain it to me." He pulled a sample container to him and held it up to the light.

"Although the rock is growing, it has also been spalling—flaking off this residue." The powder in the vial shimmered in the light, brighter than the

slymusk's trail. "Is Roxy's growth and spalling natural? Or does this indicate a problem for it? Or for us."

She took the vial from him, tilting it back and forth so the powder flowed, glimmering. "It's pretty. But I like anything that sparkles."

He tilted his head. "Anything?"

With a huffed breath that didn't seem to translate, she handed the vial back to him. "The rock doesn't really talk," she informed him. "It's more like impressions and...feelings. So I'm not sure how nerdy you can be."

"Nerdy?"

"Scientific and stuff."

"Ah. Then let's start by asking it if it is happy. When it first spoke out, and you and Ollie heard, it said it was cold and lonely. And later it asked for some water. Is it properly hydrated and warmed now? What else does it need?"

She raked one hand over her head, making the red loops of her hair dance. Since she'd arrived on the *DeepWander*, he'd noticed that the straight smoothness of her hair had changed to these springing coils, and the brilliant red was giving way to shadowy roots at her scalp. He wondered what other artifice she'd used to adjust her appearance. He'd already assessed how she chose Earther clothing—currently a form-fitted coordination of brightly patterned tunic and trousers—to emphasize the parts of her that were least orc-like: the softness of her breasts in front, the swell of her buttocks in back, so different from the thick, hard skin of his brethren. The universe was truly a diverse and wonderful place.

"Asking a rock if it's happy," she muttered in a dire tone quite at odds with his appreciation for the universe's diverse wonders. "What the hell?"

"You said it communicates through feeling. Is it so hard to feel happiness?"

Her gaze snapped to him again, but instead of looking sharp as a scalpel, her expression froze on the broken edge of a shattered crystal. Before he could apologize for whatever had caused her such pain, she spun around to face Roxy.

She stared at it hard, then squinted, then closed her eyes. Finally, she sighed. "It seems to be fine? At the moment? I don't know. I guess it's 'happy' to 'see' us." She kept making a little gesture with hooked fingers which he didn't understand. Before he could ask, she stiffened. "It wants us to...to touch it?"

Sil contemplated the rock. “None of the sonic, radiographic, or chemical analyses Dorn ran as part of his initial assay indicated anything that might be hazardous for orcs or Earthers. And nobody’s died from it since.”

“Other than somebody shooting a giant-ass hole in the side of your ship,” Kinsley muttered.

“That wasn’t Roxy’s fault,” he reminded her. He took a step forward.

Then halted at a slight but insistent weight anchoring his lower elbow.

He looked down at her hand gripping him. “Is there a problem?”

“You shouldn’t... Just because a rock says it wants something, doesn’t mean you should hop up and do it.”

“But you said it was happy to see us.”

“Just because I say something doesn’t mean you should do it either,” she sputtered. “Maybe it wants us closer because... maybe because it’s going to eat us. Or something. Don’t you people watch horror movies?”

“I don’t know about horror movies. You’ll have to tell me about them.” He put his upper hand on hers. “But I know rocks don’t have mouths.”

“I didn’t think they had feelings either.” She slipped her hand out from under his.

But she stayed at his side.

Together they stepped up to the rock, and together they each put a hand on the rock.

Sil had already touched it a few times, when they’d first brought it aboard and he’d been curious about what they’d found. And after Ollie and Kinsley had said it was communicating with them, he’d been even more curious. But this was the first time, as far as he knew, that Kinsley had been in contact with it.

Maybe her first contact with any alien, really. Because he’d noticed that she avoided the orcs.

Now that he thought about it, he noticed far too much about her.

Before, the stone had felt like most of the space debris the *DeepWander* brought aboard during its mining and salvage work: partly rough, partly worn smooth, mostly cool. Now, with Kinsley beside him...

His fingers tingled, the sensation diffusing higher up his arm. “Do you feel that?”

When he glanced at her in wonder, she was looking at him, but she quickly returned her focus to the rock. “Maybe.”

A shimmer coruscated across the surface under his hand—a hint of light



and just the slightest warmth, according to his skin and sensory organs—and the faintest shivering vibration.

Kinsley let out a harsh breath. “What...?”

Another faint haze drifted from the surface, dusting their hands.

As she pulled away with another murmur of dismay, Sil’s recorders pinged. He glanced at the datpad. “Ah. So it *is* growing. Not much, but enough to register.”

“I think it *licked* us.” Kinsley stared at her hand, then peered at the rock. “It says it wanted to taste us. It’s using our energy to expand.” She turned that accusing glare on him. “I *told* you it was going to eat us.”

“Interesting,” he mused. “Scanners aren’t showing any physical effect on us. It’s almost as if the rock is photosynthesizing—or the crystallographical equivalent, I suppose—from our presence.”

She backed away, rubbing her hands down her thighs and muttering. He found himself focusing on the nervous gesture almost as closely as he’d looked at the scanners. With a hard shake, he broke himself from his trance and bent to brush the dust into another vial.

From one knee, he looked up at her. “What were you saying?”

She scowled down at him. “I *said*, I’m not a sun. I didn’t agree to be anybody’s light.” Before he could answer, she winced. “Great. Now it feels bad because I’m yelling. But here’s the thing, rock: you can’t just take someone’s stuff, even if they aren’t using it. That’ll get you in more trouble than it’s worth, whatever it is, believe me.”

Her distress bothered him too. Rising, he took her elbow to steer her away from the rock. “Kinsley, I apologize. I should not have asked you to touch Roxy.”

She wavered a little, as if she weren’t quite sure she wanted her feet going the same direction as his, but she didn’t pull away. “I suppose you didn’t know it would do that.” She glowered over her shoulder. “It could have *told* me it was hungry.” She hesitated. “Not hungry, it says. Lonely.”

He glanced at his datpad. “It does not seem to be taking anything from us now. Maybe because we aren’t touching it anymore.”

She shook her head. “No. It seems to be saying it won’t make that mistake again.” She let out a harsh laugh. “Hard to believe that a rock has more empathy than most of the people I’ve ever met.”

He guessed she was more rattled by the rock than she’d let on if she was voluntarily interacting with him. “Is that one of the reasons you left Earth?”

“I left Earth because I made too many mistakes.” She lifted her chin. “Somehow I had this idea—clearly another mistake I’ve made—that things couldn’t get worse out here.”

“Is it so awful to be someone’s light?”

From the corner of her eye, he watched as she swayed from one high-heeled boot to the other. “What do cave-dwelling orcs care about light?”

He busied himself with the instruments he’d set up around the rock, but for once he wasn’t paying attention to the readings. “Didn’t Adeline tell you? The i’lva has ignited between her and Teq.”

“I heard her talking with June. But I didn’t know what it meant.”

“The i’lva,” he repeated. “It means the light in the darkness. Although perhaps light isn’t quite the closest translation. Guide, perhaps, or a path through dark and lonely ways.” He forced himself to stop tinkering, turning to face her. “That is what we need.”

Kinsley stopped moving, wasn’t even breathing as far as his antennae could tell. “We? Need... Who’s we?” Her voice pitched higher with each word.

He gestured over his shoulder at the rock. “I think Roxy could be a way for us.”

“The rock? Oh. For a second I thought you were talking about...” She exhaled a gusting breath, as if a micrometeor had punched a hole through her, letting out the air.

He tilted his head. “About what?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Doesn’t matter.” Her voice descended again with each word. “You think the rock can guide us to what, exactly?”

“Another fortune. One we can actually offer at the auction.” He hesitated. “And maybe something I can use for myself—you too.”

He couldn’t quite understand the way her eyes closed for a moment, as if trying to hold back some of that escaping life.

“Kinsley?” He started to reach for her again.

Her eyes snapped open and she took a step back. “So you want me to translate for the rock while you find this fortune?” Though he nodded, she kept staring at him with an air of incredulity. “And you’d trust me to tell you?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” He wafted his antennae through the tension between them, as if he could sieve the recycled atmosphere for her disbelief.

She let out another hard breath with what sounded like annoyance.

“Because in case you hadn’t noticed, no one trusts me.”

“Then this is your chance to prove them wrong.”

She drew herself up as tall as she could, which almost reached his chin. But he did not think it was intended as a moment of pride, more like some outrage. “You don’t even know what you’re asking.”

“True. That’s why I need Roxy—and you.”

“You want to make a pact when you don’t even know the prize?” Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him, which seemed an oddly hostile way to seal a deal. “Fine. I’ll want my cut in galactic credits.”

“The orcs share all profits, and of course you can use yours however you wish.” Some strange impulse tugged at him, and he had to squelch the urge to demand she tell them what exactly she wished. “You could buy more Earther coffee or more colorants for your hair or—”

“Leave the *DeepWander*?” She drew herself up even taller, and yet somehow in this moment she seemed smaller.

“If that is your wish.” The words felt wrenched from some hidden place within him. “The contract with the IDA is for dating only, and you could leave at any time. That was always the agreement. Of course, since you sneaked onboard, you aren’t really part of that contract. And you haven’t really dated anyone yet... Have you?”

She looked away. “This just isn’t what I thought it would be.”

“You mean launching yourself into outer space didn’t solve your problems?”

She flashed her small, square teeth at him, but it seemed more like a threat than a bid to share amusement. “At least I’m farther away from some of them.”

He’d noticed that too, how she was always pushing away, like a walking, talking personification of the repulsor beam the *DeepWander* used to deflect their way through asteroid fields.

But since Kinsley hadn’t actually signed on to date—much less mate—any of the orcs, and he wouldn’t have ever been a contender anyway, why should it matter to him that she would leave the first chance she got?

## Chapter 3

If only she could ditch this place immediately. But she didn't have her own spaceship. Not to mention, she hadn't exactly aced her time on Earth where she knew all the rules even if she didn't always obey them. Plus, she had to admit, she was kinda intrigued by Sil's semi-secretive scheme.

So she perched on a too-tall orc stool that Sil pulled up for her while he asked questions and she tried to translate the rock's responses. It was bizarre. Via the universal translator that he'd cobbled together for her, she technically understood what he was saying, but it might as well have been another language because it was mostly math. And not even the AP math where she'd noped out in shame after one semester, but, like, NASA-level math, yikes.

"I know the coordinates where we retrieved the rock, and I'm trying to figure out where else it's been," he explained to her. "Based on its expansion rate, I think there's more—potentially much more—of this discarded material."

Since the vial of dust didn't seem very impressive besides some sparkly glitter, she wrinkled her nose. "Why do you want more?"

"Because it includes some rare and precious molecules, including several isotopes not previously known," he said. "Exactly the sort of thing that brings in good credit at the Luster. If we can find its origins and everything it left behind..."

Kinsley swayed, gripping the stool underneath her. "Oh. That made it sad." She'd been trying to not look at the rock, preferring to just sit and impassively relay the impressions like she was listening to a particularly weird podcast. "It's saying..." She closed her eyes, reluctant to give voice to the feelings seeping through her mind, as if saying it aloud would make it any weirder. "It was left behind somehow. Or maybe lost? It stayed in the cold and dark, barely aware, shrinking from the cold. Until you found it."

She opened her eyes wide, scowling away the prickle. She was *not* going to cry at the abandonment issues of a pet rock. "It seems to like the idea of sharing what it left behind, if you want it—and can find it. It wants to help you."

Damn, that sounded pathetic, even from a rock. She wanted to tell it to have some shred of personal dignity, but...it was a rock.

Slipping off the stool, she edged up beside Sil, peering down at his various

screens. “Do you have a map of where you found it? It doesn’t remember and wants to see.”

He pulled up a star chart. “I don’t know how we can show this to a being that doesn’t have eyes.” Then he clacked his tusks with what sounded like excitement. “Let’s try this.”

He fiddled with the datpad, and from another machine a spray of light lifted. The amorphous glow coalesced into little shimmering points of light: a 3D holographic map of space. Sil adjusted the machine so that the glow moved to encompass the rock.

“Since it can emit and apparently absorb various sorts of electromagnetic and apparently acoustic radiation, it should be able to understand this,” he said nerdily.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then a twinkle of light burst across the surface of the rock. The lights expanded in concentric rings until the glow encircled the two of them with the rock at the center.

From within the much bigger map, Sil turned a slow circle. The glinting points of light turned his pearly eyes into a pastel rainbow. “Oh, that was so long ago and so far away,” he murmured. “Poor Roxy, so alone.”

The compassion in his tone didn’t need any translation. And even though she understood it technically, his gentleness was even more confusing than algebraic geometry—and more alien than a sentient rock. And somehow, such sympathy hurt more than slicing open her brain and installing the translator technology.

She looked away from him but couldn’t stop herself from adding, “The rock—Roxy—says it’s happy it is here now.”

Sil did something with the datpad, muttering to himself. “If we compensate for speed of light and stellar drift from what Roxy recalls... Ah. I think this should do it.” As the map spun and then came to a stop with a blinking light centered between them, he looked across at her, and this time the lights glinted with triumph in his eyes. “Here. I think it’s saying it came from here.”

The glow from the rock went disco-ball wild.

“It says yes,” she told him. “In case you couldn’t tell.”

“If you say it’s yes, it is yes.”

For all her determination to keep her emotions out of this mess, she found herself gazing at him again. Had anyone ever taken her at her word, at face value?

He was a fool, the absolute worst sort of mark—one she couldn't even feel good about hustling since he *believed* her before she'd even had a chance to lie to him.

"If you find this fortune, you should keep it instead of sharing it," she said, watching him closely. "Well, keep half of it, anyway. That seems fair since you are doing all this work, figuring it all out. And since your brother doesn't even share the apex position with you, his twin."

He recoiled, actually jerked back. "No. That's not right. I haven't always been able to pull my weight on the *DeepWander*—I'm too weak compared to the others. But after we were out of the egg, Mag always made sure I got my portion of resources. This is just my chance to show them I can do my share."

He put all four hands over the upper quadrant of his torso, where the other orcs carried the glyph scar of their standing on the ship. She'd noticed Sil's nicely squared chest was bare (wait, when exactly had she started noticing his bare chest was actually quite nice?) although she'd never quite understood what that meant.

"Roxy was adrift a long time," he continued. "But those coordinates are deep in the Forbidden Zone of Heartless Villainy."

Kinsley pursed her lips. "You are kidding me."

"Technically, the Transgalactic Security Forces mapped it as the Zarnox Zone, but it translates as the Forbidden Zone of Heartless Villainy."

"Maybe I'll find a new ship there after your brother kicks me out."

Sil reached out one hand to touch her elbow. "My brother would not do that. I wouldn't let him. Such a terrible place is not for you."

Oh, he really was the absolute worst! Given half a chance, he would fall for her lies—once she started telling them—because he thought he was doing it for someone else. Dammit, he didn't even ask who would get the other half of the fortune she was so magnanimously suggesting he take for himself.

She scowled. If that was how he was going to be—compassionate and innocent and sweet—then she couldn't be blamed for what happened next.

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What happened next was that she had breakfast with June and half spilled her guts. Ugh.

June was even more compassionate and innocent and sweet than Sil. The two of them, Sil and June, had probably been secretly matched by the IDA from the instant those metrics touched in some perfect algorithmic fate.

So why did this unsought jealousy feel like the ugliest ugh ever?

It wasn't like she'd wanted a match for herself. She'd just needed to leave Earth, and the IDA had been too good a chance to miss.

*Too closed, suspicious, and untrusting.* Okay, yeah, that was her. She would probably be right at home in the Forbidden Zone of Heartless Villainy.

"So you do like him?" June gazed at her over a cup of coffee.

Kinsley jerked up straighter. "What?"

"You like Sil. As you were telling me about Roxy, whenever you said his name, your eyes lit up."

"That was rage," Kinsley corrected. "Because he's so clueless and annoying and..." She took a gulp of the coffee, even knowing she should be appreciating it since who knew how long it would be until they got more. Unless she went back to Earth. "Tall. Just really unacceptable."

June giggled. "I'm used to being the short one, but yeah, I bet that's odd for you." She served some of the burrito-like orc breakfast that had become a favorite among the Earther women.

"Too bad being tall wasn't enough," Kinsley muttered. She took a bite of the burrito. Since she hadn't been an official member of the IDA Earther/orc exchange, she hadn't gotten a universal translator or access to the instructional guides. She'd been scrambling to catch up ever since, just like most of her life, but luckily breakfast burritos seemed to be a universal pleasure.

As for the other pleasures of the universe that the Intergalactic Dating Agency had dangled in front of them, the Zarnox Zone aside...

Once again, that wasn't why she was out here.

She took another fierce bite, and June made some small noise, snagging her attention. "What?" she muttered again around the mouthful.

June shook her head. "That's why we're all here, right? Because we couldn't get what we needed on Earth."

The word "get" was doing a lot of work in that sentence, Kinsley mused. Never mind "get". Take, cheat, scam. Those had been her words.

She swallowed hard, the mouthful a bigger lump in her throat than it should've been. "Thanks for letting me come eat with you. Actually, thanks for everything you've done since we got here. You are a really nice person." She made sure to modulate her tone so those last words didn't sound like condemnation.

June reached over to pat her hand. "No one blames you, you know. Not any more than we blame Ollie. The rock was just calling out to anyone who

might hear it. Which happened to be you.”

That wasn't why the orcs were suspicious of her, Kinsley knew. But she was grateful enough for June's gullible kindness that she wasn't going to argue. “I haven't always been as nice as you,” she confessed. “I think everyone senses that, whether they have antennae and glow-in-the-dark eyes or not.”

June shrugged. “Kinda like being tall, nice isn't necessarily a winning strategy by itself,” she noted. “After all, I'm here too.” Kinsley would've given her the chance to say more—anything to turn the focus away from her own failings—when a ping from the door interrupted. June called permission to enter. “I asked Adeline if she wanted to come over too.”

Kinsley kept her expression neutrally pleasant, and Adeline did the same when they locked gazes.

June peered past the new arrival. “Is Oliver not with you?”

Adeline chuckled. “Teq offered to let him run some extra special crushing machines, and I could offer absolutely nothing that compares to smashing apart chunks of space rock.” She helped herself to some burrito and coffee and settled at the table with them. “But that makes this a good time to discuss the future of the Omega Reclamation Crew and us.”

June stiffened. “Wait. You're not leaving, are you?”

Adeline shook her head. “Not me.” Her eyes glimmered in a way that made Kinsley think of the giant mollusks that spread their shiny paths around the ship. “Teq and I...” A smile even more mysterious than those lights flickered around her lips. “Anyway, I'm staying. But the situation isn't quite what we were told it would be, and per our contract, anyone who wants to leave, can. With the IDA transport inbound, Mag asked me to check in with you all, find out what everyone else wants to do.” Her gaze flicked first to Kinsley, the warm light in her eyes cooling and sharpening. “Since Dorn's betrayal challenged his standing as apex, Mag has been...well, not humbled—not sure he knows the meaning of the word in any language—but made painfully aware that he can't deliver on everything he offered.”

Kinsley knew that was partly her fault. Not her fault that Dorn had tried to steal the orcs' fortune, but she'd almost abetted the thievery and exposed the apex's mistakes. Of course Mag couldn't forgive her. And why should he?

June let out a sigh much bigger than she was. “Does anyone ever get the life they are promised?” She squinched her face, which she probably believed made her look older and wiser but mostly looked like she'd stepped barefoot



on a slymusk. “Well, probably somebody. And I probably wouldn’t like them anyway.”

Kinsley snorted. “I find it hard to believe there’s anyone you wouldn’t like. After all, you invited *me* to brunch.”

June scowled with a really nice person’s attempt at ferocity. “Mag,” she said abruptly. “I stay far away from him. He’s too big and scary for me. See? There’s somebody.”

“Well, you don’t have to date or mate any of the orcs, June,” Adeline said. “Maybe you’ll meet someone at the Luster instead.”

Kinsley looked down at her burrito which suddenly tasted like nothing more than one of the many frozen meals she’d eaten as a kid. “So you’re still going to the Luster, even though the rock isn’t the fortune they thought it was?”

“Not what they thought,” Adeline said, with another one of those irritatingly serene smiles. “But we’re figuring out a way to make it work, together.”

For a woman born and married into wealth, not work—even if she’d fled from it all—she seemed very confident. Kinsley felt equally assured that the opposite was every bit as possible, even if she’d never worked an honest day in her life either.

At least Sil was doing more than inspo-ing. Kinsley frowned. “From what I’ve heard, Luster Station sounds like a dangerous place. More like a gathering of scavengers and outlaws than respectable people.”

Adeline lifted one eyebrow; she hadn’t left behind such better-than-you mannerisms when she’d left Earth. “Respectable like...people who sneak onto spaceships?”

June glanced uneasily between them. “Kinsley didn’t try to sneak onto the pirates’ ship when they came for Dorn. In fact, she helped...” Her voice trailed off when Kinsley held up one hand.

“I did trick my way onto the *DeepWander*,” she admitted. “Because I followed you here.”

Adeline jerked straighter. “Followed *me*? How? I didn’t know you before.”

“I knew you, sort of. I was scamming your late ex-husband’s company.” Kinsley shrugged when the other two women boggled at her. “He was a bad guy, working for a bad business that did bad business with other bad people.”

Sitting back with a thump, Adeline stared at her. “I almost like you better

now.”

Kinsley smirked. “Yeah, I don’t feel bad about it either. Or I didn’t, until they figured out what I was doing. When you disappeared, I decided I better do the same. I never would’ve guessed about...” She waved her hand.

Adeline huffed out a breath, but June nodded. “Like I said, we’re all here trying to get something we couldn’t find on Earth, so I don’t think anyone will choose to leave. If any of us were the sort to give up, we would’ve stayed where we were. We all wanted to change, and this is definitely a change, even if it’s not quite the change we thought.”

Kinsley took another gulp of coffee, tasting only the bitterness. So what did it say about her that she was being sent back to the scene of her various crimes, discarded under a cloud of suspicion and shame?

Maybe it said that things didn’t change at all.

## Chapter 4

“No,” Mag boomed. The power of his rejection jostled the datapad Sil had balanced on the command dais, and the projected holographic map flickered uneasily, as if the apex could extinguish a galaxy at his command.

“Absolutely not. You aren’t leaving. And you are absolutely not leaving for the Zarnox Zone.”

Sil paced a few strides around his brother in the gather-hall where he’d asked for an audience. “But—”

“You are not running off in pursuit of the lies of a stowaway probably mistranslating the ravings of a rock.”

Sil grimaced. He hadn’t deluded himself that convincing the apex of this mission would be simple, but he hadn’t thought he’d have to fight his brother this hard.

He squinted into the guttering light. “Teq. We may have lost our assay team leader, but as crusher, you must understand the potential here. Possibly centuries of the rock’s spalled material, waiting to be found and retrieved. At the Luster, the rare isotopes alone would be worth...” He shrugged all four arms in an elaborate Earther gesture. “Maybe enough that we’d never have to worry again.”

The big crusher crossed all his arms—another Earther gesture, one that Sil didn’t particularly appreciate right now—and mused, “Or it’s possible you’ll find nothing at all. From what you’ve said, Roxy was semi-dormant, without the resources it needed to synthesize, so likely not growing much at all and thus not leaving much behind. Also, from what Oliver indicates, it had very little awareness while it was cold. So it might not be relating accurately where it came from.”

Squaring off to the two males, Sil fought to keep his carapace from flaring. Not that Mag or Teq would attack him for such an atavistic threat display, but they’d think even less of his reasoned and rational arguments. “Isn’t it worth the chance? How is what I propose riskier than gambling on the Luster?”

Mag let out a frustrated rumble. “Even if the rock remembers and the Earther female is truthfully relaying its conversation, going after the remnants is too hazardous. We’ve already had trouble with pirates, and we don’t have the credits or connections for more firepower or friends. The Zarnox Zone is

beyond patrolled space lanes, deep in uncontrolled territory, harboring worse than pirates. We'd be not just on our own but completely exposed, and the *DeepWander* would make too tempting a target."

Sil straightened. "I would never risk the ship."

"Because it's not yours," Mag agreed. "The Luster is *my* gamble."

The needless reminder stabbed through Sil with laser precision, the truth of it cauterizing as it went—and yet still brutally painful.

Teq let out a deeper rumble of his own. "Our apex has spoken." Though his tone was unyielding, as was the way of crushers, somehow it softened when he added, "And it's no longer just a solitary ship and crew at stake; we have made promises to others—vows we cannot break."

He meant Adeline and her hatchling, and the other Earther females who'd signed their IDA contracts in good faith.

Not Kinsley, though, since she'd sneaked aboard.

As Sil shut down the lighted map, his own hope winked out. "But this could be my contribution to the crew. I could finally earn a glyph and claim my place." The empty spot on his torso ached, even though he'd never felt the scald of the insignia iron.

Mag growled. "Your place has always been here and will always be, brother. Who has made you believe otherwise?"

Sil shot him an exasperated look. "Mag, if you hadn't been marked apex, I likely would've been slagged lightyears ago." In a decidedly un-orcish pitch, he squeaked, "'Not worth his weight in hydrogen—not that he weighs anything.' 'Eyes like slymusk guts.' 'Stone singer? More like mud hummer.'"

He fell silent as Teq put a hand on his carapace, and he realized he'd again been about to flash his wings. That would've made this botched moment even worse.

"The glyph of the stone singers may have been forgotten," Teq said quietly. "But you are valued here, Sil. More than any hold-ful of ore."

That was a nice sentiment—and not very orc *or* crusher. The i'lva had marked Teq deeper than any insignia iron.

"The only orc who will pay the price of ruin is me," Mag said, not just unyielding but harder than diamond. "That is my place as apex."

When he left—because his word as apex was indeed last—Sil stayed behind in the gather-hall, not trusting himself not to fight with his brother. Except, being smaller and weaker, he would lose. Which left him what

options? To beg, to break down and...

And what? He'd been forbidden.

He heard the chirping sound of the little Earther hatchling before Ollie raced into the gather-hall, his mother right behind him. "Teq!" Ollie called. "You're it!"

Sil glanced at the other male. "You are what?"

"I'm it," Teq said, as if that explained everything. "I promised to play ghost in the graveyard with Oliver if he aced his safety drills. It is a game where a ghost attempts to capture a victim." A deep rumble echoed through his thorax. "I always try to catch Adeline first."

Sil slicked back his antennae. "Why do I suspect she doesn't try very hard to escape?"

"She likes that I have extra arms to hold her."

With a decidedly uncrusher-like grin, Teq strode toward the Earther female. He reached only one hand to touch her cheek, but when she angled her face into the curve of his six fingers, smiling up at him, Sil swore he could see the i'lva—the light in the darkness—shimmering between them. That ineffable force seemed to bend the energy of the universe around them, pooling stillness and deep joy into a singular moment, not a black hole where a star had died and existence ended, but a point of contact where infinite belonging began.

Sil slipped away before he had to say anything to Adeline and Ollie. The Earthers had come so far to make new lives for themselves. Yet somehow he—the spacefaring alien—was stuck right where he'd always been.

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In the quietest part of the next uroondu rest cycle, when even the slymusks had gone to sleep and their illuminated trceries through the halls had faded, Sil made his way to the Earthers' quarters. He stood outside Kinsley's door.

He was probably making a mistake.

The door opened.

"Hey." She leaned in the doorway, a satchel slung over her shoulder. In a dark tunic and tight black leggings, she was a shadowed silhouette against the low light behind her. "Was wondering when you'd come."

"I..." He swallowed. "Come for..."

"Me?" She tilted her head. She'd piled her two-toned hair high with a colorful elastic binding the mass, making her even taller, but a few soft coils dangled past her rounded ears and rippled over her shoulders. "To go after

the rock dust? I'm ready." When he stood there, hesitating, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Oh, did you suddenly change your mind? If you decided you don't need me—"

"No!" He modulated his tone. "I need you. Let's go."

Side by side—he didn't have to slow his steps as much as Teq did with Adeline—they went to the shuttle bay. The shuttle was bigger than the life pods that had been part of the safety drills for Ollie and the other Earthers, but it looked very small when he thought of the Zarnox Zone.

And it looked even smaller inside with Roxy crammed into the cargo bay.

Kinsley paused. "We're taking it with us? I thought you figured out the location."

"Just in case it was confused." He hustled toward the cockpit. "This way you can steer us right."

"That'd be a first," she muttered as she followed him.

As he settled into the pilot's position, he didn't have time to ask her what she meant. Not when he had to quickly cue up the launch. Teq had tightened security after the pirates had tried to take Dorn and Roxy. But the often overlooked little brother of the apex still had some tricks.

Choking out an oath as the shuttle jerked into motion, Kinsley quickly took the seat beside him. She'd left her bag in back next to Roxy. "What's the hurry?"

"Oh, no hurry at all. Just trying to save the ship and its crew and our future before the Luster exposes our failed fortune hunting and we are doomed to the void of space—"

"Okay, okay, I get your point." She latched the safety harness around herself; obviously she'd been paying attention during the safety drills too. "I just didn't realize we were going in this little bucket. I thought we'd all be going together in the *DeepWander*."

He clacked his tusks once before stifling the giveaway emotion. "This will be faster and less obtrusive." He gunned the shuttle toward the hatch.

Kinsley pressed back in her seat. "Um. Not that I know anything about flying a spaceship of any size, but doesn't the door need to be open?"

"It will open, in just a second," he reassured her, wishing he could reassure himself. "There is a scheduled duty cycle that runs through a sequence with an option to vent the bay in case of emergency."

She whipped her head around to stare at him. "Emergency? Why doesn't the door just open on command?"

Before he could answer—and he really should've thought of a better answer—the comm crackled.

“Sil,” Teq growled. “Why is your brother’s security signature on the shuttle bay emergency override sequence?”

Refusing to meet Kinsley’s accusing glare, Sil cleared his throat. “Because otherwise the hatch wouldn’t open?”

“Because you are not authorized to leave,” Teq said, as if they hadn’t just had this conversation. “Because your brother, your apex, who apparently did not hide his codes from you, specifically forbade you from leaving.”

Sil clamped all four hands around the shuttle controls. “This is our best option, Teq. Why won’t you all believe me?”

“Because you’ve stolen a fortune and abducted an alien?” Teq’s growl was so deep, the words almost vibrated the comm panel.

“He’s not stealing the rock,” Kinsley said. “He’s just borrowing it. And I’m not abducted. I’m...borrowed too.”

Unable to stop himself, Sil glanced at her. She was watching him, her smoky blue gaze steady; if there was more nuance to the look, he didn’t know enough Earther expressions to interpret it.

“Kinsley, is everything all right?” Adeline’s voice was softer than the crusher’s, but no less stern.

Kinsley snorted. “I’m not going to use the IDA safe word. Really, everything is fine. Or maybe not fine exactly.” She rolled her eyes at Sil. “Sil says this is what we need to do to save the ship. And I believe him.”

The hatch opened, and Sil gunned the shuttle toward the expanding square of darkness. Within him, something else leaped forward, energized by Kinsley’s words.

Some murmured conversation between Teq and Adeline didn’t quite come through the comm until the crusher’s voice cleared. “I’ll cover for you as best I can.”

“Kinsley, this is your chance,” Adeline said. “Make it count.”

The comm blanked with a soft chime, and Sil punched the acceleration, hurtling them out into space.

## Chapter 5

Kinsley kept her hands wrapped tight around the lower armrests until the G forces pulling on her eased. By G forces, of course she meant guilt.

“I should’ve told you,” Sil said softly.

Apparently she wasn’t the only one feeling guilty, for a change. She rolled her head against the seat back, the headrest sized for an orc and thus too high for her. There’d been many times she felt out of place—usually because she’d sneaked into some place she wasn’t supposed to be—but for some odd reason, despite the fact she was in a purloined spaceship in a too-big seat next to an apologetic alien, this was not one of those times.

Probably because this was a mistake. Yeah, that felt very familiar. But for once, she wasn’t in it alone: they were *both* in trouble.

“Tell me which part?” she drawled. “Disobeying, thieving, or abducting?”

“But you told them I didn’t...” He ducked his head. “Ah. This is a moment of witty banter. So interesting to encounter it outside of a text book.”

“Outside of a...” She lifted one eyebrow. “Oh, so you study witty banter now?”

“Since Teq has proved that the i’lva isn’t just a legend or wishful thinking from our lost homeworld, I became curious about Earther courtship and bonding rituals.”

She snorted out a laugh. “I don’t remember reading anything about witty banter in the IDA handbook.”

“I’ve been doing extra credit studies,” he hedged.

Intrigued, she angled toward him. “Oh, do tell. Are there worksheets or quizzes?”

“No. I wanted something from the source, raw and uncut, so I’m reading contemporary literature of Earth.”

The orcs had thicker hides than humans so she’d had more trouble learning their micro expressions. But from the way he ducked and mumbled, she knew she had to keep pressing. “What sort of literature? Book about what?”

“Stories of emotion and connection, especially love.” He glanced away.

“Romance novels.”

“Oh. Romances.” She settled back. “I thought you were going to say porn. Or worse, poetry.”



“Not porn,” he said in earnest. “That was covered fairly extensively in the IDA handbook. And translators, despite being allegedly universal, sometimes struggle with poetry. Romance novels have it all. Porn *and* poetry.” He trailed off. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Just wondering which of the Earth gals will benefit from your nerdy nature. Not Adeline, obviously. She and Teq are locked in. June might be a good match for you. I don’t know how much she’s into contemporary Earth literature, but I suspect she’s a romantic at heart.”

She’d meant to be needling, just a little, since he had made her an accessory to at least a few more orc crimes, probably. But for some reason the joking seemed to ricochet off his blue-bronze hide, piercing her. “Or maybe—”

But he had all four hands up as if warding her off. “I would never seek to claim one of you. It is not my right, not until I earn my glyph.”

How horrible a person was she that the envious knot inside her eased at his protest. Was she so heartless that she wanted other people to be unhappy too?

“Why does that mark matter so much to orcs?”

Sil was fiddling with the controls, but she suspected that was as much to give all his hands something to do as actually fly the ship since the shuttle beeped once in an aggrieved tone and he finally sat back with a grunt.

“The glyph is the proof of our rank among the crew.” He touched the empty spot on his chest. “It means they know who you are. And *you* know who you are.”

She pursed her lips to one side. “But crusher is just Teq’s job, not his whole identity. And even your brother, he might be apex now, but I know the fear is that he could lose it. Meanwhile, the mark is burned into you.” She shuddered. “What happens to him then?”

Sil’s antennae flattened. “The mark would be erased, of course. Whether my brother would survive the loss...” He thrummed a low, disturbing note. “That is partly why I need to find the rock’s remnants, to make a treasure we can trade at the Luster. Not just for my own sake, but his. For all of us.”

Not that she wanted him to fly off into the void with her, but... “Why do you even want to be part of that? Why do you want to be stuck in one job, one place, when you have the whole universe around you? Why stay with people who don’t believe in you?”

He stared out at the starscape ahead of them. “Not everyone can just run away and start again like you did. This is where I want to be.”

It was not his intention, she knew, but the words struck her like a bowling ball to the chest. She might have escaped Earth's orbit, but she hadn't left behind her troubles. And here she was once again fleeing the scene of her own mistakes, hoping that some miraculous next score would fix all her problems.

"There was a time, when there were more orcs, back on our homeworld, when hatchlings would have a chance to try all the different roles, to see what moved them. Now there aren't enough of us, and we take whatever we can get from what's needed most." He looked at her. "I wasn't convinced about this idea Mag and Amma had to date aliens to prove that this ship is a real, lasting home, forever. But seeing Teq with Adeline, finding out that the i'lva isn't just a myth—that hope will keep us going in a way that even fuel and credits can't."

She gave him a flat look. "So why go after the fortune if love is all you need?"

"Sadly, the *DeepWander* does not run on love."

"And this mission is going to make the difference? Or were you lying about that too?"

All four of his shoulders hunched. "Not lying, no."

She perked up. "I sense evasion," she challenged in a lilting voice. "Are you lying to me about not lying to me?"

"I'm not," he protested. "I admit, I wasn't sure at first. I wondered if Roxy's spalling was a reproductive strategy, which would of course mean we couldn't sell it at the Luster. But the dust is inert, not procreative. According to the initial mass spectrometry findings from Dorn and what I've confirmed, some of the isotopes are valuable enough in raw form. But I also believe there are fragments that could be...something else."

When he paused again, bending himself even smaller, her impulse to needle him waned. Dammit, she remembered that yearning for "something else" too well, those long, lonely nights when she'd secretly known even the promise of a big score wouldn't be enough. "You want to"—she wiggled the fingers of one hand—"chant at the cosmic dust, or whatever."

"If I could make it more than just dust, coax it into..."

She waited a heartbeat, but he seemed lost. "Into what?"

"A chance," he said finally. "There haven't been any stone singers since the loss of our homeworld. So all I know is what I've read. But it calls to me sometimes."

She swallowed. “Like I heard Roxy?”

“Except I *wanted* to hear it. Once, when I was only a little taller than Oliver, I tried singing to my corner of the hatchery that Amma had set me to dusting.”

Intrigued, she sat up straighter. “What did you make?”

“A whirlwind of pebbles that got everywhere that wasn’t already a mess. Since then, I’ve tried a few more times.” He trailed off again.

“What do your friends think of your art? Your brother?” When he glanced away, she shook her head. “You haven’t shown any of them anything?”

“I already told you, none of us have ever known a stone singer. And we don’t have spare raw materials for me to waste, so I stopped trying. But meeting you and the other Earther brides inspired me again.”

She shook her head. “Oh no. Don’t you dare put this on me. I’m nobody’s muse, not for anything, ever.”

He just blinked at her, shadows shifting in his opalescent eyes. “It seems your IDA profile was right about pushing people away. But if you do that in space, you’ll just float off in the other direction.”

He fiddled some more with the shuttle controls—whether for real or just as an excuse to end the conversation, she wasn’t sure. Not that it mattered. As Ollie had told them all on the transport, gravity was actually the weakest of the fundamental forces of nature. Maybe everything was doomed to drift apart.

Probably no one mentioned *that* in Sil’s romance novels.

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Kinsley woke to a cold whisper down the back of her neck.

Considering she was on a climate-controlled spaceship, that probably wasn’t good news.

But when she sat up and looked around, nothing seemed amiss. No screaming, not from the ship’s alarms or Sil—

“What’s wrong?”

A pair of glowing silver eyes popped down from the bunk above her. When they’d settled in for the night (did it count as night in space?) Sil had taken the top sleep slot since he was taller, and she hadn’t argued.

Belatedly recalling his presence above her didn’t stop her from screaming in surprise—although she cut off the sound as soon as her sleepy brain caught up with their hurtling speed across the universe.

Sil rolled off the upper bunk, landing in a crouch beside her. “Kinsley?”

She swallowed back another inappropriate sound, a curse this time. “Nothing’s wrong. I was just... You startled me.”

“You were restless. I felt your breath change.”

Ugh. She did not want him to be feeling her breath.

It had been too long since she’d had a satisfying sleepover, but she’d always snuck out before morning breath became a problem.

Well, they weren’t sleeping anymore. “Why would I be restless? I’m just really thrilled about this delightfully whimsical threesome with an alien and a rock with separation anxiety on a semi-stolen spaceship.”

His antennae quivered. “From what I understand, threesomes are often sexual in nature. And I’m not certain that Roxy could satisfy if you would request such a relationship.”

“Oh, but *you* could? Because you read romance novels?” She lifted one eyebrow, then the other.

Yes, she was being provocative—or maybe just bitchy. Because it had been a long time since she’d had any “somes” besides her own damn self.

But to her surprise, he did not beat a hasty retreat.

“Of course I understand that contemporary literature is not an analog of all your species’ behavioral norms,” he said in that studious tone of his.

“Fantasy, satire, even horror all contribute levels of nuance to my analysis that deepened but has not yet perfected my interpretations. But I believe, based on my extensive reading, that I am beginning to come to a fairly comprehensive awareness of the potential range of Earther drives and desires. Furthermore—”

“Oh, just kiss me already,” she said.

He blinked, the pearly silver glow of his eyes flickering. “Just... What? Why would I do that?”

Was it too late to eject herself out the airlock? She glared at him. “With your encyclopedic knowledge of Earther lust, I figured you were trying to seduce me with your nerdiness.”

His eyes flared wide, antennae fluttering even wider. “Oh. Would that work?”

“No!” She made sure to roll her eyes good and hard so that he didn’t mistake her meaning. Certainly he’d read enough romance novels to understand *that* Earther expression. “You’re supposed to grip me by one arm and haul me into your strong embrace,” she informed him with extra snark. “And *then* kiss me. I thought you said you did the reading.”

He tilted his head, his antennae quivering and flattened and then perking again. “Is this true? I wouldn’t want to alien-splain your Earther ways, but... Have *you* read any romance novels recently?”

She considered scoffing again, but what was the point of lying way out here, so far from everything? “My grandmother loved them,” she admitted. “I read a few of hers when I was living with her. There were just *so many* of them, it was kind of overwhelming. When she died, I bagged them all up and put them out on the curb. And they just disappeared. Kind of a metaphor, don’t you think, since you know so much about Earth literature?”

“I mostly skimmed the other books since I prefer the romances,” he admitted. “Some of your literature feels like what I believe is called a bummer.”

“Oh really? So you like happy endings?” She waggled her eyebrows, although she wasn’t sure if he would understand that gesture. To her surprise and delight, his skin brightened; not just his face like a human blush, but his entire body.

Which, as she’d noted already, was half bare.

“While of course I have not read every romance novel, I have read many, and it seems to me they suggest many ways to a happy ending,” he said in that seriously nerdy way of his, as if he wasn’t practically glowing with awkwardness, not to mention totally evading her question. “As many as there are stars in the universe.”

She smirked. Teasing him was almost as much fun as masturbating. “Well, that *would* be a lot of happy endings.”

His pearly gaze fixed on her. And suddenly she was reminded of the glowing lights from the fairytales she’d read when she’d been too young for romance, the dangerous flickers in the dark, like promises that would lead travelers off into adventures from whence they might never return.

“If I were to kiss you,” he said, “I would wish to kiss you as you wish to be kissed. I would touch you so that you believed in romance. I would bring you to the edge of orgasm and hang you there like the most precious jewel, and when you could take no more, Kinsley, I would command you to find your release, and you would sing your pleasure to all those stars.”

The silence beat between them like a pulse for an eternity, and then he added, “If I were to kiss you.”

She let out the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding... Oh no, he *had* been reading romance novels.

“Is that what you want?” There was an edge to his tone, not cruel or mocking, but some sort of sharp divide, and somehow she knew whichever way she fell, the choice she was making would have a deeper impact than any world-ending meteor.

But what was a life without chances—or mistakes even?

Breathless, she nodded. “Kiss me.”

He been crouched beside her bunk for his whole little speech, so he didn’t have far to go. He just reached one hand across the meaningless distance between them and wrapped all six fingers behind her neck.

She shivered at the flex of his big hand. She’d joked that he’d grip her arm, not her neck. This was too much, too intimate.

“Your heartbeat is flying,” he murmured. “If I let go, will you flee?”

“I’ve never run away,” she shot back. But then she instantly had to backtrack. “Except once.”

“To come here.”

She’d originally thought the IDA was some sort of scam connecting clueless women with eastern oligarchs and/or midwestern widowers. Either way, she could’ve made herself scarce. Which wasn’t the same as running away.

She gazed up at him defiantly. “Maybe it’s you just now realizing you’ve got your hands full and not sure what to do about it—about me.”

“Ah no, little Earther female. I’ve been dreaming about exactly what I’d do with you.”

## Chapter 6

He had no idea what to do with her. The books were clear enough—very clear, sometimes—but his dreams had been hazy, chaotic.

*This is your chance. Make it count.*

He angled his fingers up into her hair, the color and texture partly imposed, partly her own. Who was she, really?

But finding out was the point of dating, wasn't it?

Gently, inexorably, he tipped her head back. "Open your mouth, Kinsley. I want to taste you."

That was how it was done in the last book he'd read. The female protagonists who'd become lovers had been so different he hadn't been sure they'd be happy ever after, and he'd had to put the book down, worried they wouldn't find their way together, but two at once had seemed like an efficient way to learn more about Earther women.

Maybe he would try opening a small-town vegan bakery if the orcs lost their spaceship and interstellar salvage was no longer an option.

"Why haven't you kissed me yet?" From so close, her breath teased his lips.

"Because this is my first time, and I want to savor it."

"Sil..." His name in her mouth was like the background whisper of cosmic wind, filling the universe, filling him.

Though he let his mouth descend with the inevitability of gravity, the first contact was a silent shockwave. He managed to hold back a groan, but only because he lacked the air in his chest.

By the light everlasting and the dark that embraced it... This was the meaning that had eluded him in all his research. A kiss took the infinity of space, the distance between all souls, inevitable and eternal, and coalesced into this gentle, inexorable compression of her lips under his.

And, vug, it felt so good.

Her soft sigh this time filled him with life-giving air, expanding his lungs and the ecstatic pulse of his ichor, expanding his awareness, achingly, infinitely, to the perfect, scintillating knowledge that this was what he'd always wanted—this moment, this sensation, with her.

Her tongue swirled gently, tracing his mouth, and the kiss turned to fire and shadow, all leaping within him. Reflexively, his fingers tightened,

angling her farther back, so that he boosted over her to keep that hungry contact, leaving him half sprawled above her in her bunk, holding himself away from her only with the dubious strength of his other three arms.

For a wild heartbeat, he almost longed for his strength to fail him, after a lifetime of wanting to be stronger, so he could fall upon her, take the kiss to the ends of the universe.

But this was what she had asked for, only this one kiss.

He lifted his head, just enough that her gusting breath was outside of him again, and gazed down at her.

Her smoky gaze was glassy, reflecting back the glitter of his own pale eyes.

She took a deep breath, the softness of her pressing up into him. Orcs had evolved tough hides to protect them from the twists and turns of rough caverns, but the honed senses that allowed them to thrive in the darkness left him achingly aware of her every breath and shiver. Even as he forced himself to release the strands of her hair, all his other hands flexed with the deep urge to hold on to the rest of her.

She still had one hand braced on his torso, where his glyph would've been, and the other curved over his shoulder, half embracing him, half holding distance. "Sil," she whispered. "That was..."

But before she could continue—and he wasn't sure he wanted to hear what she might say—a warning alarm blared through the shuttle.

"Route hazard ahead. Obstruction of composition and density beyond recommended parameters. Taking immediate evasive action."

Sil jolted backward, thunking his head on the underside of his bunk. With a hand that had just moments ago been filled with the softness of her hair cradling the back of his aching skull, he raced for the cockpit.

"This wasn't on the chart," Kinsley said she slipped into the seat next to him.

He didn't have time to ask how she knew that; maybe she was paying more attention to the ways of space living than he'd realized. "We are outside of regular travel areas. Not everything is accurate and verified."

The shuttle's scanners had traced out an approximation of the hazard. He quickly reviewed the data.

"Vug," he swore. "This isn't just cosmic dust or jetsam. Looks like debris from a destroyed ship. There is still the potential of live ordnance which is why the shuttle can't just auto deflect."



“Destroyed?” She sucked in a breath. “It’s not...not the *DeepWander*, is it? Tell me they didn’t follow us.”

“Almost certainly no, based on the scans.” But for once, the science brought no comfort to him. “There aren’t a lot of reasons to be fighting over this region of space,” he murmured, mostly to himself.

“Except we’re on the way to the location of a possible fortune,” she noted. “I assume we can get around it since we’re, like, in space?”

He hesitated. “Yes. But there is a danger—”

“There was a danger when we left,” she said tightly. “There’s always a danger.”

She wasn’t wrong. But that had been theoretical, before. The ship components and lingering radiation—and worse, the dispersed organic molecules—left adrift in the void were very, very real.

He’d always been smaller and weaker, and the other orcs had always looked askance at him, leaving him to wonder if they were mentally calculating the drain on resources he represented. Because he’d certainly done the math. He should be used to such wondering by now.

They didn’t have time or resources to make this perfectly safe, and they never had. Why would he hesitate now? Because of Kinsley?

But she had her own reasons for risking.

Gnashing his tusks, he programmed a path—as Kinsley just moments ago had traced his mouth with her tongue—through the wreckage. “This will avoid the worst of it and hopefully get us clear faster,” he said. “But the density of the debris field makes it hard to get an accurate scan of the vicinity.” It also meant the destruction had happened fairly recently, with insufficient time to dissipate. As to whether the fragments represented the aggressor or the victim, there was no way to know.

“Override recommended reversal?” the shuttle asked him sweetly. As if he needed the reminder he might be making a mistake going forward.

“Override.”

Their little ship plunged into the dust.

At first, the faint hiss was almost imperceptible, even to him. Then a few metallic pings retorted through the shuttle.

“Kinsley,” he said. “Go put on a suit.”

“What about you? You need—”

“To fly the ship,” he finished. “If we’re hulled, I can hold my breath, and my hide will protect me long enough to grab a suit if needed.”

She glared at him for an instant, then hustled away. Since the *DeepWander's* shuttle was intended and outfitted for brief periods of work, it offered no particular comfort or privacy. So he couldn't help but hear her struggling into the exo-suit. Even the ghastly reverberation of impacts couldn't distract him from the whisper of fabric descending over her skin, the soft huff of her breath as she shimmied into the protective suit.

And the annoyed grunt as she settled beside him again, fluffing her hair out from underneath the attached helmet. Fortunately, the stowed exo-suits came standard with flexible sizing and a customizable number of limbs, so she'd configured the frame and drape to mostly fit her shape.

"If we die, I take full responsibility," he told her. "Mag always complains that I am too much of the dreamer, seeing only what *might* be and not what is. And this time, he might be too right."

"If we die, I take no responsibility," she countered. "Because we'll be dead."

He winced. "Kinsley—"

"Sil, stop," she told him. "According to my grandmother, if there's an unread book on the bedside table, that means we can't die yet."

"Your grandmother who read romance novels," he said.

"Yeah. I admit, I believed her for a while. She did have a lot of books and she was really old. Speaking of making it, how much longer in this debris field?"

Though he was unnecessarily curious about her past, he'd been tracking their progress the whole time she spoke, so he answered immediately. "Too long. I think this may be the remnants of more than one ship."

She sighed, as if he just said someone else had eaten the last dewdrop whorl. "If there's a way things can be worse..."

"Or better? Maybe the aggressors destroyed each other."

She gave him a long look and then burst out with the noise of Earther amusement. "Why, Sil, you are positively bloodthirsty."

"That does sometimes seem to be a point of pride in romance novels," he noted.

"Don't trust everything you read."

"What do you trust, Kinsley?" He held his antennae very still to capture the nuance of her movement or inflection.

But she didn't react, her expressive Earther face utterly still. "That's kind of personal, isn't it?"

“We kissed,” he reminded her. “Is that not personal?”

“That’s just bodies. You’re asking about...deeper stuff.”

“It’s like singing stone. Adjusting the harmonics of atoms is one thing, just raw material—like a body—but coaxing it into what it might become...that’s different.”

“You said you’ve never really had the chance to try stone singing.”

“Maybe like you’ve never really had the chance to try trusting.”

The silence that seeped through the shuttle was almost more terrifying than the sound of bombardments.

Kinsley jolted up from her seat. “Sounds like we’re out of the worst of it \_\_\_”

The floor dropped out from beneath her, and a deafening clang rattled the shuttle.

Only Sil’s long reach kept her from knocking herself into a concussion. He thumped her back into the chair and held her in place as she fumbled her safety harness into place.

Meanwhile, his other three hands were busy on the controls. “We’re almost out of the debris, but we hit something. We’ve sustained some damage, nothing catastrophic.”

“Nothing catastrophic,” she muttered. “Since we’re still breathing. Yay.”

Her composure steadied him. According to his research reading, no romance hero would be screaming if his heroine wasn’t. Not that they were hero and heroine, of course. “Avoided collision with crucial systems, and the AI-assisted patchwork is already underway,” he reported. “But we’ll have to slow to half speed and reduce energy expenditures until repairs are done.”

“How long?”

“We’ll know more after the ship finishes its diagnostic. There’s still time in the rest cycle for you to sleep.”

“After that wake-up, I’m not sure I’ll ever sleep again.”

A beep from the scans indicated an all-clear, and the lights dimmed as power redirected to repairs.

“Or,” Kinsley drawled, “I’ll just sit here in the dark as if I were sleeping, but my eyes are wide open.”

“The shuttle’s systems are optimized for orcs,” he said apologetically. “I can reroute some power to light and heat.”

“No. Better to get back on track as soon as possible.”

He stood. “Come to your bunk. We can seal it well enough to keep you

snug.”

“Snug as a bug in a rug,” she muttered as she followed him.

“I hear the recurrent sounds in your language. That is poetry, yes?”

“Not really. It’s just a saying. Although I never understood it since no one would want to snuggle a bug.”

“You Earthers see orcs as bug-like. Why would the IDA offer orcs to Earthers if you would not snuggle with bugs?”

Despite the low light—not so low for an orc—her sharp inhalation revealed her surprise. “You’re not exactly... Well, anyway, the IDA made it clear how you are different and how we are...compatible.”

At the bunk, he paused. “So you *would* kiss me again?”

Another one of those breaths—slower this time. “I thought you weren’t looking for a wife-mate, Sil.”

“And I know you weren’t truly seeking an alien mate.” He hadn’t actually answered her, had he? And he usually prided himself on his focus and attention to detail when that was the only thing he had to offer his crew.

Judging by her third, softest huff, she noted his avoidance. “At least we both know what we want.”

The click and rasp of the exo-suit fasteners distracted him from musing on the way she’d emphasized “want”.

“What are you doing?”

“If we’re hiding in the bunk while we wait to see if we survived, might as well get comfortable.”

To his orc eyes, the low light couldn’t conceal her stripping, and as she peeled down the sleeves to just the skimpy Earther underlayer called a camisole, the reveal of her skin was...a revelation. All his fingers twitched with the sudden, tingling desire to hold her, to feel that expanse of yielding softness, so unlike his own hide. Everything about her was so unlike him: she wasn’t beholden to anyone and had no desperation to prove herself. What would it be like to be so...free?

He could take control of the shuttle, claim the rock, and go anywhere.

“What are you waiting for?” she murmured.

For a moment, he froze, even though the dropping temperature shouldn’t have affected him yet.

“What...am I waiting? For what?”

“It’s getting cold. I can almost see my breath. And there’s only one bunk.”

He tilted his antennae in confusion. “What? No, there are two bunks. I was

just sleeping in one when the alarms—oh.” He gulped when she wiggled her lower half, and the exo-suit slipped past her hips to puddle on the floor.

Suddenly, he wasn't frozen; he was on fire. Just like the emptiness of space was too cold when beyond the reach of a sun and also too hot when exposed to that solar light, he was overwhelmed by her, vulnerable to a force that might destroy him.

But he might still revel in the discovery.

He took a step toward her, bracing one arm on the edge of the bunk support over her head and leaning closer. “Probably best if we huddle together for warmth.”

She smiled at him, eyes half closed, in a strange Earther expression that made his pulse race with something like terror. “It's our only chance.”

She was teasing—but she wasn't wrong. They would find where Roxy had been, and they would return to the *DeepWander*, and then she would be leaving. This *was* his only chance.

Canting his body another few degrees, he paused, staring down at her. “Maybe another kiss would warm you.”

“Just one? It's too cold and there's too much of me bare for just one kiss. Unless it was a very good kiss, I suppose.”

He lowered his head to capture her smirking lips with his. And since he was using only one arm to lean, he had three other arms to wrap around her and reel her up against him. Her body—most of it bare, yes—pressed full-length against his, also mostly bare, her soft curves yielding to his hard planes. She let out a sound, a moan that rushed through him, threatening to decimate his control. It was like watching the silent explosions of a mining mission ripping through the crevasses of a deep-space asteroid, through he'd never actually been this close to those dangerous expeditions.

Now he wanted to be even closer.

He was small for an orc and she was bigger than the other Earther females, but that only seemed to bring them more closely into alignment. Her arm around his torso held him fast, and her mouth under his...ah, she could probably shift entire orbits with the power of her tongue.

Certainly his body swayed helplessly to her touch.

She tilted backward, guiding him with her into the enclosing shelter of the bunk. Reaching behind him, he pulled the privacy screen into place, sealing them together in the dark. Although it wasn't completely black.

“Your eyes are glowing,” she whispered.

“Not truly glowing. My eyes have specialized cells that capture and magnify light. It’s a throwback adaptation in orcs, but there are enough diodes in here to amplify the effect.”

“Capturing light,” she purred, arching up beneath him. “Like you’ve captured me?”

“Have I? Maybe it was due to the momentary loss of gravity, but seems to me that you’ve all but thrown yourself at me.”

“Mmm. You like that idea?” With a sinuous twist of her hips, she somehow brushed almost every part of her against almost every part of him, some impossible mobius of intimate entanglement, not quantum but even more elemental. “Being seduced?”

He cupped a hand under her jaw, levering her face up so that the reflection of his eyes bounced back from her widened black pupils. “In space, no one is on top or bottom. At least not all the time.”

The rest of her eyes widened even more as he rolled deftly in the narrow space, holding her close with one arm and framing the confines with his other hands so she didn’t strike the boundaries.

From her new place above him, she smiled again. “Isn’t there some sort of rule about relativity? I seem to be on top at the moment.”

“What will you do from up there, Kinsley?”

As she stared down at him, her smile faded into something else, both more intent and more uncertain. “You’d just give me that? When you barely know me?”

He spread all four hands. “Haven’t I already? And I know that you are bare. Do we need more for now?”

## Chapter 7

Did she need more? Kinsley bit her lip, tasting something cool and sharp, like mineral water. The lingering flavor of Sil's mouth.

She'd always wanted more, even as it eluded her, like a hunger she could never assuage. But she wanted this now, and that could be enough, couldn't it?

When Sil had rolled, she'd sprawled atop him, too surprised by his graceful strength to strike a distractingly sexy pose as she usually did. Now, gathering her scrambled thoughts, she drew up her knees alongside his hips, both hands curling around behind his neck so she could hold him for another kiss, angling between his imposing tusks.

She wanted that moment to gather herself too, but instead, she got lost in the sensations: his mouth wide and generous under hers, those tusks glinting in her peripheral view, his hands... Oh, those hands of his, holding her, stroking her, protecting her from the walls around them.

Wait, she didn't want to be held and protected; no one could rely on someone else—no matter how many hands they had—to carry them. But the stroking...

Tracing one hand up the side of his face, she delicately feathered one antenna. She'd overheard Adeline mentioning to June that the orcs' antennae were sensitive, erotically so. And from the way Sil shuddered, apparently it was true.

He let out a rough breath, breaking their kiss as he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. "Kinsley, wait. Since you didn't complete the IDA initiation, you don't have the necessary inoculations and implants recommended for intimate contact."

Impatience ratcheted through her. As if she'd leave those things to chance. "I have the Earth versions. I'd never risk having a kid I didn't want." She swallowed back more angry words; this wasn't the time or place or mood for such a discussion. She angled her hips more aggressively into his. "You can trust me on that."

"I do," he said softly. "Everyone on the *DeepWander* receives appropriate health updates, and of course I could not pass you my seed-token without preparation and your approval. So you can trust me too."

Though Kinsley was behind on the IDA readings since she'd never really

intended to become an orc wife-mate, she'd heard enough from the other hopeful Earther brides to learn that the orcs suspended their fertility until they bonded with their special somebodies at which point they would produce their seed-token like a pre-baby shower gift. Not that such consensual conscientiousness had helped his people, considering the orcs hadn't been able to find enough dates or mates among their own kind.

And as much as she didn't want to continue the discussion of their birth control options, even less did she want to contemplate trusting each other. They were just having sex, dammit!

She didn't want to picture how Sil would look, solemnly down on one knee in front of his chosen wife-mate with the gift of the future in one of his four hands. How he would sound when he sang to his offspring in the *DeepWander* creche, which had been empty for a generation. The way he would cradle his dependents in every arm and never let them down...

As if she had to steal him away from that amorphous, anonymous future, Kinsley kissed him again with a ferocity that sucked a groan from him.

Trust him—or, more to the point, have him trust her? No. She couldn't do that. Fuck him? Yeah. That was what she wanted, what they both wanted.

She reached down between them to unhook his kilt, splaying it open so Sil lay naked beneath her. The light of his eyes wasn't enough to let her see more than shadows and deeper shadows, but she'd always had clever fingers. Also, he helped with one hand, still protecting the back of her head from the bunk above when she fumbled off her cami and panties.

Midnight blue and deepest bronze, his tough hide had a subtle texture, making her skin tingle as she rubbed herself against him, until she felt as if she were glowing with an electrical newness. His approving growl filled her with a different kind of excitement.

Just sex, she told herself harshly. For fun, for curiosity—and okay, maybe just a bit to believe that someone cared, just for a little while, just long enough to get through another night.

“You are precisely as I imagined,” he said. “But even more so.”

What the hell did that mean? “You were imagining me? With me on top?”

“Ah, maybe not quite like this. But from the moment you stepped through the *DeepWander* hatch, I wondered...”

She stared down at him. “Wondered what?”

“As we came to know each other—orcs and Earthers—how we would change. Beyond adding more corridor lighting or updating our translators.



Would we become truer, like your hair?” He wrapped a fading red-dyed lock around one finger, winding his way up to a gentle tug. “What else would we discover?”

“Under the covers? Underneath my clothes?” She dredged up a leer, but the tension on her hair brought her even closer to him until her bare breasts brushed his torso. At the contact, the friction lightened through her tight nipples, igniting a hot ache in her core.

“That too. I’d already seen diagrams of Earth females, but I wanted to know how you’d feel, how I’d feel with you.”

She’d always been a selfish lover. She’d told herself it was only fair, considering the orgasm gap between Earth’s cis men and women. Also, what did it matter when she’d likely never see her partners again? But now, to know that she was responsible for representing all Earth hookups... No pressure or anything.

“So feel me.” She could tough this out, pretend she was fine with his experimentation and judgment, whatever that might be.

The pressure wave of his echolocation breezed along her skin like the caress of satin, shivery but warm. As the sensation sank deeper, reverberating through her, it ratcheted up a tension that could only end one way.

With hands and mouth and that secret pressure, he explored her and shaped her in ways that should’ve scared her—but felt too good. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so dismissive of nerdy types back on Earth.

And his pure curiosity freed her to show him what she truly wanted: those hands in her hair, his mouth mapping her curves while the sleek, dangerous tusks skimmed her skin alongside like an echo, his agile tongue stroking her in places that weren’t just performative and pornastic but pleasurable.

Since he didn’t really know any better, she could do what she wanted with him—and with her own needs.

Not good, not good at all. Doing what she wanted had only ever gotten her in trouble.

But all the while, it felt too good.

As he aroused her toward the edge of release, she tensed against her usual inclination to just grab her own orgasm and run. Not that she was returning the favor, she told herself. She didn’t care about fair, but she didn’t want to be overcome and vulnerable if he would still be watching her with those inquisitive pearly eyes. On the other, other, other hand, it was gonna feel soooo good...

He paused, hanging her on the brink. Aw hell no, if he was going to fuck around by not fucking around, she would take everything she could from this encounter and scam.

Not actually scam, of course, considering the lost in space thing, but still. “Kinsley,” he murmured.

The sound of her name—not babe or sexy or hey you—sent another strange thrill through her. He’d said he’d wondered about her from the first, but to think he was thinking about her was a sort of intimacy beyond even this moment of nakedness.

“Sil,” she replied with a touch more asperity that he was making her wait.

“I want to use my sonoscry on you.”

“What?” She angled into him, grinding her hips. “If you want to do some finger painting, I have another suggestion...”

“May I sonoscry you?”

“If that’s what you need,” she said half-heartedly. This was what she deserved for having sex with an alien starving artist.

“I think you will like it.”

“Whatever. But I just need—” An intoxicating rush flooded through her veins, hot and heady, and she gasped. “What are you...?”

“Stone singing,” he said. “Not that you are stone, but our bodies are made up of many of the same elements. And I can make them dance for you.”

Another rush zinged around her body, and she moaned from the force of it. “Sil...” His name was barely a hissing sigh, and he smirked at her.

A smirk looked even more smug with tusks.

“Do you like?”

“Do it again.”

Like she was drowning in chocolate lava cake with the best vanilla ice cream, her whole body was suffused in decadent, melting pleasure. She writhed against him, not caring if he was rearranging her atoms or whatever—or if he knew how much she liked it.

The sonoscry was a strum of her nerve endings, as if invisible fingers and tongues caressed her clit and her aching nipples from the inside and all around. But it was more than that too, like the sonoscry had somehow changed her awareness, tuning her senses to frequencies beyond her old human limitations. She’d never felt anything like it, not just because he was an alien or even because he was Sil, but because she’d let him come this close, to offer her his body and his singular focus and the chance to be

someone new, someone different...

The orgasm seized her in a powerful wave that carried her along through some timeless cosmic journey and washed her up on his torso, her cheek pressed damply against the empty spot where his glyph would've been.

It was a long while before her ragged breathing eased, and she was almost afraid to open her eyes. What if he'd rearranged her atoms wrongly and she had too many arms now or was gluten intolerant or ended up needing him forever to have another orgasm as good? What if she accidentally cried on him a little more?

She swallowed hard when he smoothed a hand over her nape, cradling her. It wasn't even like she was going to bump her head, not when she was slumped over him, wet blanket style. She racked her brain for something pithy to say, something to prove he hadn't just blown her mind and her defenses wide open.

"Kinsley," he said.

Oh, the way he said her name...

But a good orgasm and a bit of selflessness shouldn't have the power to change her.

"Your turn," she said briskly—because a good orgasm did at least deserve turnabout. She reached down between them with the deft dexterity that had always kept her alive.

Except nothing met her questing fingers. His smooth torso, unmarked by the glyph, continued downward in a mysterious blank.

"Maybe you didn't have a chance to read the IDA handbook on orcs," he said. "We keep our genitalia contained. A useful evolutionary trait when one is twisting through tight caves. I thought it safer to stay closed since we are not bonded."

"But...that doesn't seem fair." She couldn't believe she of all people was arguing about fairness. Only because he got to keep himself safely contained while she let it all hang out, she told herself.

He gazed at her. "Did you not enjoy our encounter?"

Close encounters were only supposed to be of the physical kind, not this awkward post-coital chitchat where she questioned her own capacity for reciprocity or whatever. She'd never felt like she had enough to share.

"You know I did," she growled. "I basically screamed it at you."

His smile was smug, satisfied, and much too sexy considering the alien tusks. "And that is where I take my pleasure. The sonoscry echoes back at me

with your delight.”

What did it say about her that her past “encounters” had been more about stealing than sharing? She didn’t want to think about that. He was *not* going to change her with one sex song, no way.

“Initial repairs complete and internal systems recalibrated,” the shuttle informed them, saving their lives and, more importantly, saving her from having to respond to his ridiculous assertion (but no insertion?!) that he was happy just because he’d made her happy. “All working parameters reset to baseline.”

Kinsley couldn’t abandon the bunk fast enough.

## Chapter 8

With the shuttle's assistance, Sil replotted their course accounting for the unexpected problems. He also pinned the wreckage location for possible salvage or at least removal; leaving such debris might impact another ship with more lethal consequences.

More lethal than merely indulging his fascination with the Earther female. With Kinsley.

Hers was a seething, secretive energy, dimmed and wary, nothing like the quiet, steady stones that called to him, yearning to shine.

She was not his project, he reminded himself. She was not a rock to be remade beneath his hands and his sonoscry, to reveal some inherent beauty and truth.

Also, despite the confines of the shuttle, somehow she'd found a way to hide from him.

Or maybe he just wasn't looking for her. Their moments together had rattled him harder than the fragment field, piercing him. He was supposed to be searching for a way to save his ship and his people. Instead he wanted to lose himself in her passionate pleasure.

She was dangerous in ways black holes and void-vipers and catastrophic depressurizations could only dream of.

But when he went to look at Roxy in the cargo hold—a reminder to shore up his purpose—somehow he wasn't surprised when he felt Kinsley behind him.

He tilted his antennae her way without turning. "I was going to make some food," he offered by way of regaining some distance.

"I was going to tell you that us fucking was a mistake."

Ah. Apparently she'd had the same impulse to pull back. That hurt like a micrometeor going through his chest, but he forced himself to face her. "Would you like a shot of yezo with lunch? Amma's fermented algae makes you forget all your cares—makes you forget everything, actually."

Her jaw jutted a collision course with his heartfelt wish to ignore this conflict. "I don't want anything from you except my share of the fortune. That's why fucking was a mistake."

For a moment, he hesitated. "I promised I wouldn't give you anything. And I kept my word."

“But you...” This time, she looked away. “It doesn’t matter. Yeah, let’s just forget it all.” But she didn’t immediately vanish again. Instead, she gestured at Roxy. “The rock was afraid when the power dimmed. It thought we might have left it.”

So she’d come to reassure it? Despite her declaration that she wanted nothing from anyone except her portion of the plunder.

Sil put his hand on the rock, sending a soft, questing ping toward it. “We’re sorry, Roxy,” he murmured. “We’re almost to the coordinates you gave us, and then we’ll go back to the *DeepWander* where there is more life.”

When he gave the rock a gentle pat, Kinsley made a sound his translator couldn’t parse. And when he looked over at her, she was striding away at top speed for her Earther legs, as if there were room on the shuttle for such an escape.

*But you...what?* What had she been about to say? He *hadn’t* given her anything besides a moment of blissful release. She couldn’t be mad about that. His readings had been very clear on the importance of providing generous orgasms upon request. Had he missed some crucial element of the interaction? Despite his research, he didn’t have the same knowledge or experiences as her other lovers—or the same body parts, for that matter.

And who had those others been exactly? He had no right to wonder, of course, much less ask—much, *much* less seethe about it—but whoever they were, they certainly hadn’t smoothed any of the prickles from this abrasive Earther female. She’d stripped naked in front of him but then shared barely a glimpse of her inner glow before battening down like he was some sort of storm on her horizon.

Perturbed—he’d never been any sort of storm, had never wanted to be a force of destruction—he busied himself at the small galley unit. The shuttle didn’t have much beyond basic bulk nutrition for a work party or emergency run, but it would suffice.

He carried the makeshift meal up to the cockpit where Kinsley hunched in the too-large copilot chair. She was dressed again—sadly, because even if she wouldn’t share her glow, he appreciated the shape of her, all curves and dips—but with her feet drawn up onto the seat, her arms wrapped around her knees, she looked even smaller than little Oliver.

Setting the tray between them, he checked their coordinates. “Still on course,” he announced.

“Then why do I feel like I’m drifting?”

Pausing with his tea halfway to his mouth—he'd decided to forgo Amma's inebriating yezo—Sil double-checked the star map again. "No. We are right where we're supposed to be... Ah. You do not mean our actual speed and bearing."

When she rolled her eyes at him, the arch disdain lacked some of its usual vigor, he felt.

She grabbed the second mug. "Here's the thing, Sil. I never meant to be here. Not *here*-here, but also not *just* here. I didn't really believe the IDA was sending us off on a spaceship to date aliens, even if fleeing the world was a scam I could get on board with." She let out a harsh laugh. "Onboard? Yeah. Anyway, turns out, I was wrong—which is kinda my life—and spaceships and aliens are for real. Who could've known, right?"

"Me," he muttered. "I knew. Anybody who looks up at the stars and dreams..."

She ignored his interruption. "Except this spaceship and these aliens, they have their own problems. Which, okay, I've always had to deal with crap that isn't mine coming my way. But now..." Despite its heat, she gulped down the tea as if it were something much stronger. "Now, I *deliberately*, of my own free will, *chose* to get on this little ship with you—"

"A little alien," he grumbled.

"With *huge* problems," she said over him. "And then I *slept* with a problem!"

He sat back. "I am not a problem. I am not *your* problem."

"But you *would* be. And we just... Sil, we can't have that."

He wanted to be angry. No, he wanted to be dramatically furious, maybe even brooding, like a romance hero should be. Because they *could* have that. But the way she bit her lip, her brow furrowed, her gray-blue gaze of smoke and alien skies fixed on him like his response was her guiding star.

She was actually being sincere, he realized. As wary and evasive as she was, she truly thought he was a problem, that they were a worse problem together.

And he couldn't argue with her, not if she felt that way.

"I see," he said quietly.

She blinked. "You...do?"

"I do not agree," he clarified. "I do not believe we are a problem now or waiting to happen. But I understand your words and your feelings. And that is what matters."

She blinked a few more times, the fluttering of her lashes wafting the most diminutive wind his way, as if signaling some infinitesimal shift. “I... It’s not you, it’s me—”

Reaching across the space between them, he unfurled one hand. She fell silent, staring at his empty palm—as if there should be something there? Very slowly, she put her hand in his, barely settling skin to skin.

“I’ve read those Earther words,” he said as he closed his fingers gently. “It’s not you either. Maybe the stars just don’t align for us.”

The glow of space reflected in her eyes. “Sil, you are so nice. And that’s why I’d be terrible for you.”

“I can be not nice.” He narrowed his eyes at her by way of demonstration.

And was gratified when she giggled, a little shakily. “Terrifying.” Squeezing his hand, she let out a little sigh. “Thank you for understanding.”

He did not bother repeating that he didn’t agree. Because that *was* a him problem.

As they ate, he tracked their route past the debris field, but the interference, both physical and electromagnetic, didn’t entirely abate.

When Kinsley returned from clearing the tray, she asked, “What does that aggravated clicking mean?”

“That’s the shuttle guidance system.”

“I meant *your* aggravated clicking.” She nudged his shoulder with her hip before settling into her seat again.

“You said you felt like you were drifting—which we are not—but neither am I quite certain about this route.” He grumbled as he recalculated the coordinates. “Sensors can’t see anything through the mess out there. But Roxy seemed so clear.”

“I guess this is just one of those times where we have to believe in ourselves—and in a rock.”

He slanted a glance at her. “This is also one of those times where I’m not entirely sure I am interpreting your words correctly. Was that sarcasm?”

“Yes.” She hesitated. “But also no.”

“Just in case I wanted *less* clarity in the moment.”

She nudged his arm again, and somehow, even as she jostled him, the contact settled something within him. “Well, you’re the one who gave me the translator,” she reminded him. “So maybe it’s your fault. Or maybe you’re the only one who can really understand me.”

“That’s not how a universal translator works, at all.” And yet, as much as



her contact, her teasing felt good to him. “But that does make me wonder...”

She tagged along behind him when he returned to Roxy in the hold. “Do you want me to ask it again?”

She’d been so doubtful before, yet now she was volunteering. If he could win over the skeptical Kinsley, he might just start believing in himself. “Get it talking, about anything,” he said. “While I make some changes to the sensors.”

Fiddling with his datpad—he hadn’t brought along any of the *DeepWander*’s more refined sensors—he half listened as Kinsley spoke to Roxy softly.

“No, it’s okay if you’re not sure either,” she was saying. “Even if you can’t find your way back to wherever you came from, it’s all right.” She paused. “Well, the people of the *DeepWander* will keep you, if you want. You said you like it there, right?” She paused again. “I think that’s a yes? Well, Sil here is a good person, and he’ll make sure you are warm and, er, moist, since you say you like that kind of thing too.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway. You won’t be lost or alone again, so you don’t have to be afraid, not anymore.” When she patted the rock, little lights flickered out from beneath her hand, playing through the crystalline structures within.

Sil gazed at her a moment. The captured starlight in the stone shimmered across her skin and twinkled in her eyes, illuminating her as if she too were a numinous creature of the cosmos.

As were they all, he supposed, even if that was hard to remember when he was lost and alone.

Alone only because Kinsley might finally believe in aliens, but she didn’t believe in *them*.

Wedging the datpad in the cargo webbing that stabilized the rock, he stood beside Kinsley and put his hand next to hers. “Let us try this again. Greetings, Roxy.”

“Glitter and glory!” The words boomed through the datpad, decibels louder than the small speaker should’ve been able to cast. “Splendorous serenity to you!”

Kinsley squeaked in alarm, jolting against Sil’s side.

Curling two arms around her protectively, he reached for the volume control. “Gentle,” he admonished. “You are pushing too hard through the datpad. It can’t contain that much energy.”

“Soft and sweet,” the voice whispered. “Like distant suns.”

“That’s better.” He patted the rock, triggering another scintillation of lights through the crystal.

Kinsley’s fist tightened against his torso. “Is that...uh, Roxy talking?”

“With words!” The voice was still soft but exuberant. “Words like light like feelings. Distant but connected. Like close now!”

Sil vibrated his amusement. “I think I understand why you reached out to Ollie first.”

“A rock with the enthusiasm of a seven-year-old, just great,” Kinsley grumbled. “But why me?”

“I modified the datpad for Roxy the same way I patched a translator for you. I suppose that’s why you were able to hear Roxy too.”

“Words along trajectories,” Roxy said, seemingly in agreement. “Now silence unless sought.”

Sil gave Kinsley a light squeeze. “I think it means it won’t bother you and Oliver anymore now that it has another voice.”

After a moment, she shrugged. “It’s fine. Once I figured out I wasn’t losing my mind.”

“Roxy, I’ll see what I can do about getting a sturdier emitter. Might be able to rig up a carrier too, to run on your signals so you can move on your own.”

“Not into the black?” Anxiousness permeated the electronic signal, which shouldn’t have been possible. “Not to tumble, forgotten and forgetting? Not alone? Say not alone.”

“Not alone,” Kinsley murmured.

“I didn’t mean we’d eject you,” Sil reassured the rock. “Just some sort of mobility device inside the *DeepWander*.”

“A pet rock with its own scooter.” Kinsley sighed as she extricated herself from beneath his arm and took a step away. “Why not?”

He watched her. “Even a rock might want to seize its destiny. Which is tricky without adequate appendages or accessibility adaptations.”

She glanced back him, eyes half closed. “I suppose that’s true.”

“The way is clear,” Roxy announced through the datpad.

With effort—noticing things about Kinsley had become something of a problem for him, Sil mused—he turned his attention back to the alien stone. “A way through the interference?”

“Also too.”

Whatever other path the rock might be contemplating, it seemed a mistake

to get distracted. “Can you project a map as you did before? Now that we’re closer, perhaps you can reckon more precisely.”

“Pet rock?” Roxy’s cajoling tone was even more strange than the anxiety and volume. “Me pet, pet me.”

Kinsley scowled. “Is it some sort of pervert rock?”

Sil contemplated the datapad scanner. “Roxy, do you need another source of energy? We have electrical, thermal, some chemical—”

“Pet me.”

“Kinetic energy, perhaps,” he murmured. “Which, in an optimized molecular lattice could indeed—”

“Oh, fuck it.” Kinsley grabbed one of his hands. Fingers interlaced, they touched the rock.

The sensations sleeted over him, so fast and hard he could barely suck in a startled breath, Kinsley’s hand clenched hard in his.

*Cold, dark, lonely.* Everything Ollie and Kinsley had already relayed. But to feel it...

Except it wasn’t Roxy he was feeling.

Light bloomed around them, the star chart recalibrating. And in his mind, he experienced too the hazy recollection of a vast, interconnected consciousness, basking in a web of light. But then a collision—a great shock splintering the wholeness. Tumbling—*cold, dark, lonely*, the lights winking out one by one.

Calling out into the void, but receiving no answer. Shrinking, fading. Dying.

And then, finally, a light. A touch...

“The way is clear,” Roxy said.

Kinsley let out a shaky breath. “Did you...?”

“I felt it.” Sil kept hold of her hand, equally unsteady. “Roxy was part of a larger matrix, a brain of light. So much was lost.”

“Find,” Roxy whispered. “Gather. And share.”

Kinsley stiffened. “Do you mean you could...put yourself back together?”

“No. Gone forever.”

“A memorial,” Sil said. “A memory of the light.” Sometimes an echo was all that remained. Like what he’d have of Kinsley once she left.

“Yes.” Glimmers danced through the crystal. “Sing into the dark.”

## Chapter 9

Following Roxy's updated route, they made their way to the center of the interference field. Kinsley watched Sil closely. After the rock had revealed its intent to them, he'd been almost silent, withdrawn.

*Cold, dark, lonely.*

She pushed away the memory that wasn't her own. Except it wasn't *not* her own, was it?

No, she wasn't going to think about that at all.

"Why is it bothering you?"

He didn't look over at her. "Nothing's bothering me." He huffed out a breath. "Other than having stolen a shuttle and bringing it through the remains of a space battle of unknown origin and conclusion, not to mention —"

"Yeah. It's bothering you," she said. "Roxy is only asking you to do something you already intended to try."

"I was just going to collect some interesting molecules," he countered. "Mining some space dust, which is what the *DeepWander* has always done to stay alive. And yes, maybe I was going to show that I had something special to offer, to add something no other orc could. But preserving a memory..." He shuddered. "I felt it fall apart, the light going out."

His distress revived the memories she was trying to repress. And every impulse within her demanded she return to that silence and distance.

*Cold, dark, lonely.*

The shuttle made slow progress, navigating around huge obstacles many times larger than their ship while dust hissed around them.

"The *DeepWander* usually works in asteroid fields, planetesimal disks, and circumstellar belts around solar systems," Sil said. "This appears to be the remains of an interstellar object, perhaps a wandering exocomet."

Kinsley peered at the screens in front of him. "Does it matter?"

"Just that extrasolar bodies and trajectories often correlate with rare materials." He glanced back. "Like Roxy itself. Maybe its origin was cometary, or perhaps the collision that broke apart its original mass became a comet."

Though the temperature in the cabin never fluctuated, Kinsley wrapped her arms around herself. "Poor Roxy. I suppose there's a scientifically

measurable correlation between rare and lonely too.”

He was still fiddling with his screens, but his antennae angled toward her. “I thought Roxy was able to communicate with you and Oliver because of anomalies in your universal translators: Ollie’s because he is a hatchling and yours because I had to rig up a nonstandard device. But I think now that’s not the only reason.”

When he paused, as if letting her fill in the blank, she wanted to let the expectation hang, unanswered. But why? What was she hiding anymore that mattered to anyone?

Still, she tightened her grip on herself. “I might have some experience with being alone, yeah.” Looking out at the starscape somehow made it easier to speak. “But maybe compared to all that nothingness, my wandering path isn’t so fucked up after all.”

He sat back, his opalescent gaze steady on her. “Maybe you just haven’t yet fixed upon your destination.”

The silence stretching between them wasn’t cosmic, and they both had translators. But she didn’t answer.

The ping of the shuttle’s proximity alarm startled them both.

“We’re here,” Sil said.

But was this really her destination—or just another mistake?

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“Just breathe normally.”

“Sure. Because hyperventilating is the part that’s not normal in this situation.”

Sil’s soft rumble of orc laughter reached her, not through the exo-suit comm but in vibrations of all his hands that were checking the fit and seal of her suit.

Because she was about to walk out into space, despite several times thinking how that would be a mistake.

Okay, maybe she wasn’t breathing normally at all.

Sil gave her shoulder a pat, not so dissimilar to how he’d touched Roxy: friendly enough, even kind. But that was all.

She’d rejected anything else, hadn’t she? So he was only doing as she’d asked because anything more would be yet another mistake. And now she was choking on all her choices, like carbon dioxide from too many frantic breaths.

They just needed to collect a fortune in space dust, let Sil prove his worth

to his people, resolve a rock's abandonment issues, and pay off the *DeepWander's* dues to the Luster. Then she'd take her cut and go.

But first, a spacewalk.

And somehow that suddenly didn't seem as scary as leaving on her own again.

Because Sil was with her.

In his exo-suit, he looked more like the alien he'd seemed when she first saw the orcs. The inhuman silhouette emphasized the bulk, the extra arms, even the movement—smooth but articulated. But him being an alien didn't matter because at least she had someone with her for this colossal mistake.

A low bar, yeah, and of course clearing low bars was even easier in zero gravity, but...

"Ready?"

"For anything," she lied.

He'd already siphoned the atmosphere in the small sally port compartment alongside the main cargo bay, equalizing to the nothing outside. So he simply opened the hatch, revealing the blackness beyond.

"Don't be afraid," he said, his voice in her ear a reassuring rumble. "You are tethered to me, and your suit has an auto recall to the shuttle, just as I showed you. Nothing can go wrong."

She winced. "Never say that. There's no need to tempt fate."

"Not when there are so many other temptations, eh?" Gripping her arm, he reeled her up against him with the tethering cable a taut line between them. He stared down at her. Through the visor, his eyes were especially bright and intense, more diamond than pearl. "I have you."

She gazed up at him. "No need to play the romance hero right now," she muttered, even though the unsteady hitch of her breath had gone from worry to something more enticing.

"Who's playing?" Tightening his grip, he launched them out of the shuttle.

She gasped and clung to him with all her might, eyes clenched absolutely shut even as her belly spun. Being in tight spots, that she could do. But to be completely exposed? Of course she was terrified.

But also of course she wanted to see what was going on, so she could be properly terrified.

Cracking one eye, she craned her neck as they coasted clear of the shuttle. And the universe expanded all the way around them, utterly empty and yet filled with pinpricks of light.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh no...”

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s so beautiful.” Too much, all at once. Now she would never be able to forget this moment with Sil, hanging in an endless night of stars.

“Yes, beautiful.”

But when she twisted back to smile wildly at him, he wasn’t looking at the vast, glimmering space.

Fear and wonder fell away, and a realization went through her like a distant wandering comet, far away and fuzzy at its center but leaving a faint, shining trail she might follow if she knew where to focus.

He was looking at her.

He let out a breath she wouldn’t have heard except for the comm linking them. “Let’s see what we find.”

He kept her snug against him as he directed the shuttle to scan the dust around them, sending the findings to his datpad. The screen flashed with a dotted line. Not quite X marks the spot, but good enough.

With puffs of compressed gas from his suit, Sil propelled them slowly through the floating fragments.

“There’s this ancient Earth video game called Frogger,” she muttered.

“Sounds intriguing.”

“It involves not getting smashed to bits.”

“A worthy goal.” He angled the illuminated datpad. “Almost there.”

Working through the interference, the shuttle’s scanners had identified the highest concentration of likely components. Angling between the larger bits of rubble, they came to what reminded Kinsley of the country church where her uncle had taken her once a year on Easter because that was when it counted most to apologize for sins committed during the rest of the liturgical year. Even as a kid she’d been fairly certain begging forgiveness didn’t work that way. Out here in the middle of some nowhere galaxy, it seemed as if that old church had become a space ghost: chunks of stone like broken walls interspersed with hazy clouds of dust as if muted stained glass windows floated without sashes, still refracting the delicate light.

All of it untethered in the void.

The scanner on Sil’s datpad kept cycling, clearly searching but not locking.

Because there was nothing to be found here, no forgiveness and no fortune either.

“Roxy came from here, no question,” Sil said quietly. “All the markers are present. Judging from what remains, the collision was with another interstellar object, mostly heavy metals and ice.”

Kinsley sighed. “What are the chances? So much nothing out here, but they ran into each other anyway.”

“The force of impact was so immense, almost everything was obliterated. And the electromagnetic energy wave cracked through even atomic structures.”

Through the exo-suit comm, the sorrow in his voice was just too close. She glanced away, looking into the darkness.

Yeah, she felt that: floating through a mostly empty universe—not happy, maybe, but existing—only to run smack into something else, hard enough to blow apart that little existence, exposing some sad little lump of loneliness.

Nope. Better to be the cold, hard chunk that spun off into the void, never to be seen again.

She cleared her throat. Gotta focus on what was left. “You said before that there would be at least some valuable molecules. Enough here for the Luster?”

“There are trace amounts similar to the spalling Roxy left on the *DeepWander*. But it’s mostly decayed from radiation exposure, and it will be hard to separate from the impact residue. And there’s just...not much left.”

Not *enough*, he meant.

While he adjusted his devices to set up a search grid, she drifted a little away from him, clutching the tether between them. The shuttle searchlights and the distant starlight shimmered through the chunks and dust that remained, making strange, dreamlike shapes in the waste, not even as well-defined as clouds, but whispering to that drifting part of her.

“It’s all dust,” she murmured.

Sil didn’t answer for a moment, but he stopped looking at his devices and just hung there in space beside her. “The collision was just too catastrophic, and it’s been too long. All that’s left are a few basic elements. But there’s nothing to save or even salvage.”

The biggest mistake of her life had been thinking that if she hustled enough, scammed enough she would eventually feel like she had enough. Instead, everything she’d ever grasped had just sifted through her greedy fingers, less than dust, less than starlight, less than the fleeting moments of pleasure she’d found with a romantic alien.



Though Sil took a few more samples of the shimmering dust, shattered disappointment evident even through the visor of his exo-suit, she knew they had failed. Memories couldn't be gathered and hoarded. Remembering wasn't enough.

When they returned to the shuttle and stripped out of their suits, he didn't even try to subtly ogle her as she knew he'd done before. Yeah, that feeling of missing a score kinda drained all the fun out of risking their lives.

As he fed the samples into an assay test he'd brought from the *DeepWander*, she scrounged up the flask of Amma's yezo he'd mentioned. How nice to have the alien analog of cheap whiskey to really underscore the pain of their failure.

She found him sitting in the cargo hold next to Roxy, his hand on one facet. No lights moved in its depths.

She angled the flask over the top of the rock, letting a few drops fall. "I don't know if you taste things like we do, but..."

"Sad," Roxy said through its speaker. On the darkened surface, the droplets streaked like slow tears.

"Sad," Kinsley agreed as she hunkered down next to Sil. She took a swig—and sputtered, pressing her knuckles to her lips to keep the rest down. Knowing yezo was fermented algae should've been her first hint. Chalk that up in the ever-lengthening mistake column.

"Not alone," Roxy added as Kinsley passed the flask.

Clutching the bottle, Sil scrubbed his two free hands down his face with a heavy sigh. "I was so convinced," he said, his voice muffled by his big hands. "Now we have to go back with nothing. My brother will be furious with me. Maybe alone would be better."

She glared. "It's not."

"Lights together," Roxy said.

Sil tossed back a few glugs of the yezo. At least he sputtered too, Kinsley was gratified to note.

Voice ragged with algae and regret, he said, "I will tell Mag this was my idea, my fault. He won't hold you responsible for the unauthorized departure."

"Together," Kinsley repeated firmly just as Roxy said the same. Great, her criminal codefendant was a pet rock.

They drank—or absorbed—the yezo in silence. Then she rose and held her hand out to Sil. "C'mon."

“Come where? There’s nowhere else to go, nothing else to try.”

“There’s an empty bunk. But if we go there, it won’t be empty anymore.”

His pearly eyes seemed too soft, a jewel that couldn’t withstand rough handling, scratched even by the silk string holding the strand together. “I thought you said it was a mistake.”

“Honestly, that’s never stopped me before.”

She guided him, like a particularly heavy alien balloon, to the bed they’d shared once before. Surely one more time wouldn’t count any heavier against her many mistakes and/or sins.

When she reached for the fastening on his utility kilt, he held her back, his fingers loosely manacled her wrists. “Kinsley, this isn’t necessary. According to the literature, we got that annoying all-consuming lust out of our systems already.”

“Annoying? That’s not how...” She tilted her head to look up at him. “Did you actually *finish* any of those romances you say you’ve read?”

He shook his head. “The books said they could never be together. I wanted to pretend they would find a way, so I would stop reading right before the end.”

She let out a breath, not quite a laugh. “My guy, do I have some good news for you.”

“Oh?”

“Later. First though, you gave me an orgasm, and I want to be fair.”

“Is the universe suddenly fair?”

“Definitely not. Today being proof. But maybe this is my way to fight back.” Or maybe it was the nasty yezo burning through her like a bad idea. She’d never pretended to fight fair or for fairness, not even equitable orgasms. But for this sweet, kind, hopeful alien, she would make an exception.

## Chapter 10

Sil tightened his grip on Kinsley's wrists, his muscles quivering. Not with fear or weakness, but uncertain which way he should move her.

But maybe uncertainty was just another kind of fear and weakness.

He wanted this—wanted her. And she wanted him, for now at least.

That *was* enough.

With his third hand, he cupped her jaw, lifting her face to his, his fourth hand circling behind to bring her closer. Her lips parted under his, her body making contact only a heartbeat behind—her legs parting too.

She reached for him. "I wish I had more hands."

"Just you," he murmured. "I just want you."

"Will you take pleasure if I touch you like you touched me? Even with half the hands."

She didn't have his sonoscry either. But maybe she had her own version of it, some innate energy that seemed to rearrange him from the inside, making him feel bigger, stronger, ready in a way he hadn't been before she had stowed away on the IDA transport to join the Big Sky brides.

Who was he if he wasn't merely the small, useless, unwanted twin of the apex?

The question was quieter than an explosion in a vacuum—but rattled him worse.

"Pet me?" He gave her a crooked grin, hiding the fear, the weakness, and the uncertainty.

She let out an orc-worthy growl and grabbed his tusks, one in each of her hands, and anchored him for a ferocious kiss.

The hot press of her mouth and the hotter gust of her breath, inflamed by the dire intoxication of the yezo, swept through him like a refining fire, leaving only one shining truth: He didn't just want her—he needed her.

And then he was empty of everything except sensation.

Vug, she was all over him. She sucked his tongue into her mouth, showing him how to kiss so deep he thought they'd split the last atom of oxygen between them. Her fingers feathered over his antennae, as delicate as distant starshine, and still the jolt would've sent him to his knees if he hadn't already been sprawled on her bottom bunk. Even though he'd meant to hold back his erection again, when she reached down between their tangled bodies, the

tenderest part of him was already out, begging for her touch.

Her throaty sound of pleasure as his flesh filled her hand nearly ended him. “All for me?”

“Only you,” he said through gritted teeth, wishing he didn’t sound quite so much like the barely verbal rock. At least romance heroes were allowed to grit.

“Right. Since you haven’t had significant others on the *DeepWander*.”

That wasn’t the reason, at least not his reason, but for once he didn’t need to explain his lesser status among the orcs. “Maybe I was saving myself for you.”

He meant it to be teasing—or wait, was it the romance females who kept themselves pure?—but this was significant to him.

He angled his hips, stroking himself in her hand. “What do *you* want?”

“All this,” she purred.

With quick hands, he stripped her bare. He’d always felt one step back from her hard eyes and sharp words, but her body was soft and warm, yielding to his when he positioned himself above her. Though her legs were strong, wrapping around his lower body with an insistence that made his heart pound, the flesh of her inner thighs was as giving as the cushions that orcs favored. Evolving in caverns and living on a utilitarian space mining vessel gave one a longing for a gentle place.

He yanked himself up harshly. Kinsley wasn’t a gentle place to rest his... anything.

Clasping both her wrists in one of his hands, he stretched her arms above her head. She arched up into him, her breasts so plush except for the hard points of her nipples. Her smoky eyes glittered.

Hard and soft, wary but welcoming. If she could be all those things, he didn’t have to be just the *DeepWander*’s unwanted one. He could be... whatever came next.

*He would be coming next, if she didn’t slow the sultry caresses.* “May I sonoscry you?”

“Do,” she said. “And may I fuck you?”

“Do.” He barely got the syllable out before she was easing him into her. He groaned, his whole body going hard, and her eyes flared wide.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. “That’s perfect.”

He had never been perfect before.

Slowly, he began to move, relevant portions of his romance research

flashing before his eyes. Which only made him harder.

“Sil,” she moaned.

Each gasp and slide tightened the pulse between them, his sonoscry resonating through her, returning to him like a dream barely remembered—or a promise urging him onward. He pushed harder, faster, and when he released her hands, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding on tight, even tighter than when they’d launched out the airlock into space.

His own heart beat with equal exhilaration, every muscle rocked with the echoed sensation of her approaching orgasm—a collision course that might end him. Deeper, his ichor pulsed and burned, as if it would ignite, destroying him before he could reach for his own pleasure.

“Shh.” Kinsley clamped her hands on his backside, easing him away, and he realized he’d been panting and growling like an orc who’d never left the caves. “Take it slow, mister. We’ve got all night.”

Before he could protest, she lifted her hips again, clenching around him. He groaned. “Kinsley.” The threatening overwhelm of her impending release, reverberating through him, was going to pull him over the edge, his body flying apart with shattering pleasure, nothing left to hold him together.

Nothing except the tight clasp of her arms around him, her mouth under his a suction of yearning, those amazing muscles within her.

Orcs weren’t built for orgasm. Their world was too hard, too sharp-edged, their hides too thick.

Vug, who was he kidding? From the moment the doors had opened between the *DeepWander* and the IDA transport, wondering about Kinsley had set him on a collision course to destroy his belief in what an orc had to be.

The truth rolled through him like something out of a romance novel, rippling through his muscles and near stopping his heart. The ichor blazed in his veins like some strange map guiding him out of the space he’d known before.

“Come with me,” he rasped, barely holding on. “As they do in the books.”

Eyes dazed, she blew back some wayward strands of her two-toned hair. “This one was for you.”

“Together, remember?”

But the melting in her gaze destroyed him, and he burst into his own constellation of ecstatic stars. Luckily, that sturdy orc hide let him thrust into her a few more times until she too found her release.

Her rapture expanded through him into another galaxy of stars, all the feelings colliding until he could hold no more. His vision went dark, darker than space, and he collapsed over her. Some small remnant of awareness kept him from crushing her, barely.

For a small eternity, the only sensation left was the sound and movement of their ragged breaths, slowly easing into a peaceful rhythm.

This was why those unromantic males fell asleep, he decided groggily.

He might be the least among orcs, but he rallied some inner strength to raise himself enough to roll over, still holding her close, while he drew the coverlet around them. He bonked his head on the back of the bunk, but he didn't even care, not with Kinsley sprawled warm in his arms, the scent of her perfuming the air until his antennae felt stained with her bliss.

To his delight, she held onto him with matching ferocity, even with only half the hands.

"Now that I know they end happily, I will reread my books all the way to the end," he murmured. "And I will probably re-reread the good parts too, though they can't quite compare to...that."

With a faint hum, she tipped her head up to blink at him. "*That* wasn't in my grandmother's books. If it had been, maybe I would've..." She let her head fall back to his chest with a sigh.

It wasn't quite a happy sigh, which made him tighten the arm he had around her shoulders. "Would've what?"

When she shrugged, he thought she was protesting his grip, and he reluctantly loosened his hold. But then she tucked herself more tightly against him, so he wasn't sure.

"Not that I think any book has all the answers," she said. "But...maybe I would've just thought more about what I really wanted."

When she didn't continue, he kept his careful clasp on her and also stroked her hair gently with a free hand, wishing he had more hands to hold and comfort her. "I've thought a lot about it," he admitted. "Because in case you hadn't noticed, I think about things a lot. But it didn't get me as far as I hoped either."

She laughed a snuffling breath against his naked chest. "About this far?"

"I knew I wanted to show that I could be a valuable member of the crew," he said. "Now I've instead shown that I can't—plus stolen a shuttle, endangered lives, and abducted an alien."

"That was what I wanted too. Except kind of the opposite."

He peered down at her. “You wanted to *be* abducted by an alien?”

She snuffle-laughed again. “No. I meant about showing I was worth keeping around.” She sighed. “That’s how I got in trouble and had to leave Earth. Not that I *knew* I was leaving Earth, of course. But why I had to get out of town quick. I was *done* trying to prove to my uncle I deserved a place with his crew.”

“You haven’t really mentioned your family, other than your grandmother.” Sil felt his way carefully, as if he were piloting through an asteroid field—one riddled with ambushing explosives. “Your uncle had a crew? Like the orcs?”

“Except not at all hard working and loyal. Again, kind of the opposite.” She tucked one fist under her chin. “He’s a small-time con man. After my grandmother died, I went to live with him. He taught me...well, nothing good. He ended up stealing from some businessmen—Adeline’s ex-husband’s business, actually. Except Adeline’s ex was stealing too, and he was better at it. Anyway, it all went bad, really bad.” Her laugh this time was harsher. “Afterward, when my uncle wanted to ‘not work so hard’ by scamming senior citizens, people like Grams, I’d had enough. I caught wind that Adeline was leaving...and I followed her.”

When Sil folded his hand over hers, he felt her throat ripple against his knuckles when she swallowed hard. “You made mistakes. But at least you didn’t keep making them.”

“By running away?” She shook her head, ruffling her hair under his chin. “I’d been trying to buy my uncle’s love—or at least a place to stay with his crew. Turns out, I was worth exactly nothing. Even the IDA knew it.”

“They were wrong.” Putting one finger under her chin, he lifted her face to his. Not for a kiss but a searching look. “You mean so much more than what you could take for them, with however many hands.”

Her lashes fluttered a moment, as if seeking to evade him, but then she met his gaze. “Maybe you’ve read a lot, studied a lot, and yeah, you’ve literally sonogrammed me, but you don’t know *that* about me. Not when I don’t know that about me.”

“But you *do* know,” he countered. “Or you would go running back to Earth.”

She stilled against him, even her breath stopping. “Maybe that’s exactly what I was—am—going to do.”

“If that were so, you had only to wait for the IDA transport,” he reminded

her. “Instead, you are here, with me.”

“Just to find the fortune you were looking for,” she protested. “Except we were wrong. Roxy tricked us.” She snorted. “Scammed by a rock.”

“Roxy didn’t know, just like we didn’t. But we didn’t let that stop us.”

She peered at him. “Why are you so desperate to convince me?”

Why was he? Just because she made his ichor flow along new pathways? Because being with her, even when he didn’t find what he was looking for, didn’t feel like a failure—it felt like another chance?

Just because the i’lva had kindled within him?

Not that he could tell her that. It wouldn’t mean anything to her. And why should it? But if this doubtful Earther female was to be his light in the darkness, he would do his best to help her find her way too.

Even if that path took her away again.



## Chapter 11

Something had changed between them. Kinsley wasn't quite sure what it was.

Besides the amazing sex.

And other than the near catastrophe of the shuttle damage and the failure of their quest and revealing her mistakes and...

Yeah, something else.

Usually her restless brain and even more restless nighttime tossing around would've made sleeping alone a better choice. Not that she usually gave her bed partners *any* choice. But Sil's various limbs were the perfect weighted blanket, heavy enough to feel like a cocoon but shifting at her every twitch to give her a little more room, a little more air, a little more cuddling.

She slept like the night would never end.

When a quiet ping from the shuttle comm roused her, her fingers clenched once on Sil's hide, as if that still drowsy part of her wanted to stay where they were. But there wasn't really anything to hold onto, no chest hair, not even an overworked cock.

"Good morning," he murmured.

"Is it?" She heard the edge in her voice, soured from the yezo, and quickly backtracked. "Morning, I mean." Whether it could be good...

Like everything else, that was too hard to hold.

"The final repairs are complete," he said, maybe responding to her unvoiced question. Although she hadn't been talking about emergency overhauls. "We can return to the *DeepWander* when we are ready."

Oh god. Was that a question in *his* tone? Why wouldn't they be ready to flee this disappointing fiasco?

She snuggled into his side. "It's cold out there."

"Increase ambient temp," he told the ship.

She lifted her head to smirk down at him. "We could do that."

He squeezed her but then said, "We should get back. I don't want to get anyone else into more trouble than I already have."

She was *not* going to be disappointed or annoyed or...or anything else. This had just been a little side jaunt in her extraterrestrial adventures. And it was over.

She rolled toward the edge of the bunk so fast, Sil had to grab at her head before she brained herself.

Well, maybe she *needed* to knock some sense into herself.

By the time she'd cleaned up, he had an orcish breakfast ready, plus Earth coffee.

"It's not my favorite, but I know you like it," he said before slipping away to the shuttle's small hygiene unit.

Why was it so hard to ignore him when he wasn't even around?

She gulped the coffee, brooding. Brooding like a silly hero in one of her grandmother's romances. Why had she told Sil about all that, about her uncle, about her mistakes? He already knew she was trouble, and she'd just went and told him it was in her blood, that she was just foolishness coming and going? Ugh.

Running away from another mistake had never looked so good.

But when he returned, she found herself saying, "We can't leave yet."

He didn't try any Earther expressions or curiosity, or orc ones for that matter, just stood there, still as carved stone himself. Like he'd given up.

She shifted from foot to foot, like part of her still wanted to flee even though there was nowhere to go. "You haven't even tried singing the stones."

After a long moment of silence, he said, "Because there are no stones, not even pebbles. Just dust."

"So, sing that instead." More silence that was worse than explosions, and she wanted to grab him and shake him. "It might not work. I'm full of bad ideas. But..." She shrugged. "There's nothing left of Roxy's home except atoms and memories. Since you said stone singers carve molecules of minerals into other ways of being, do that to the dust."

"It doesn't work like that."

She jutted her jaw. "Why not? You said the orcs haven't had a stone singer in forever. It can be whatever you want."

"I'm not being coy," he said. "The stone singers of legend had masses of precious material and gemstones to work with."

"Well, you don't have mountains. You have dust."

He straightened. "That's not enough."

"I believe you."

His eyes narrowed. "You believe in me?"

"No, I believe it's not enough. But you could go for it anyway."

He walked away from her.

For a moment, she almost laughed. So much for her inspirational prowess. But the impulse to mock even herself withered. How could she inspire him to

make something out of nothing? She'd never been able to scrape together any sort of dream either.

He'd retreated to the cockpit, so she went the other direction.

In the cargo hold, Roxy waited—of course it waited; it wasn't going anywhere of its own volition—in the dim lighting, so she sat next to it.

Since she wasn't going anywhere either.

The datapad blinked. "Lonely?"

She started to agree because she must be lonely to talk to a rock, but then she shook her head. "Just thinking." Being lonely and desperate had led her down some wrong paths, but that wasn't the case at the moment.

She patted the rock, imagining herself giving it some mineral version of photosynthesis, as Sil had explained it. "How are you doing?" She'd left behind her planet and most of her people, but at least they still existed behind her.

"Too long. Too far. Last."

"I'm sorry. Maybe somewhere else out there, there are others. It's a big universe. Or so I've heard."

"Together."

Sighing, Kinsley closed her eyes as she tilted her head back against the wall. Talking to an actual pet rock that couldn't talk back probably would've been more therapeutic—or at least less weird. But apparently she was starting to think of this as real life, who woulda guessed? "Sure, yeah. Maybe."

With her eyes closed, she *felt* his presence before he said a word.

"Kinsley, I am afraid. What if I fail?"

The cracked edge to his tone sliced through her, and she wanted to flinch away from a reality she knew much too well.

Instead, she opened her eyes to look up at him. Though he considered himself small for an orc, now he looked small even to her Earther eyes, reduced by his fear. Heart aching, she gave him a sympathetic smile. "Sil. Sweetie, I don't know what to tell you. You *already* failed."

Oh, there was the flinch she'd restrained. She hadn't meant to pass that to him, that hurt, not from her own mouth.

But then he straightened, as if the body blow of that reality had knocked him loose. "You're right. If I was ever going to have anything to show for myself, I would've had it by now."

"Except maybe you do." She jerked her chin. "Out there."

She held her breath. He'd probably walk away again, angry at her

prodding, aware of her hypocrisy. And she wouldn't blame him at all. Hell, she hadn't even believed there was an "out there" until, like, five minutes ago.

Slowly, he unfurled a hand to her. When she put her fingers in his, a spark jolted through her, sending prickles all the way to her toes as he levered her to her feet. Another of his arms came around her, and then the other two when he reeled her all the way into his embrace.

He gazed down at her, his opalescent eyes bright with that same spark. "What if I believe you?"

"Only one way to find out."

Taking her to the very back of the shuttle, he showed her the mobile mining rig. "This is how we survey and sample before we bring the *DeepWander* in closer," he explained. "I might be able to gather and refine enough of the dust..." He shook his head. "No point is saying more right now."

"I think maybe it's okay to wish just a little."

He seemed focused on the machines as he initiated the collection process. "What would you wish for, Kinsley? If you were wishing just a little."

"I..." She swallowed, thoughts colliding like untethered rubble. "I wish I could help more."

That was true enough, and she hoped he appreciated how rarely she said it. But it wasn't anywhere near everything she wanted to say.

He just nodded. "It'll take a little while for the agglomerator to amass enough material. In the meantime, I should review the automated repairs. But after that, we need to leave."

She nodded, but he had already turned away.

He hadn't even asked if she had any other suggestions for spending the spare time...

There was essentially nothing for her to do on the shuttle, nothing she knew how to do anyway. She went back to sit with Roxy.

The datpad winked on. But instead of the rock speaking through the device, a familiar looking image was illuminated there: the front page of the Intergalactic Dating Agency handbook.

"Greeting, lonely lady of Earth," it said when she touched the datpad.

"Still lonely," Roxy agreed.

Kinsley lifted one eyebrow. "You want to submit your profile to the IDA?"

“You.”

“I already did.” Except she’d been rejected. Ouch.

Not that she’d ever let something like rejection or rules stop her. So why was she starting now?

Because losing this time meant losing Sil.

She shied away from the thought. They were partners in petty crime, and they had enjoyed their time together. That was it.

It couldn’t be more. Because wanting more was always her mistake.

“Not risking that again,” she muttered.

The image on the datapad flickered. She didn’t recognize the new picture, not exactly, although the flexing pecs were familiar enough. She snorted.

“Are you going through Sil’s romance novels?”

She’d have to warn him not to connect Roxy to anything important. Who knew what a lonely pet rock would do at the controls of the *DeepWander*.

What, like, sign them all up for a cosmic love fest and seek their fate among the infinite stars?

Oops, too late.

She made herself comfortable next to Roxy and settled down to read.

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Grams had tutted when she discovered Kinsley sneaking away with her romance novels. “You’re too young to read these,” she fretted as she collected them up against the bosom of her housecoat. “Interpersonal communication. Personal growth. Love as the practice of freedom, as bell hooks would say. It’s just not realistic.”

“Then why do you read them?”

Grams sighed. “Because they’re not realistic.”

She’d made Kinsley promise not to read the good parts.

Kinsley had, of course, ignored her grandmother’s rule, but as she read from cover to cover—twice on the good parts—she wondered about those unrealistic moments: the multiple orgasms, never needing to pee or brush teeth, everything turning out okay in the end. Not that it mattered, since she’d basically forgotten all books when she’d gone to work for her uncle.

Finding such stories again out here in deep space seemed about as improbable as the number of couples who randomly wandered into each other again after one-night stands.

Although maybe in space where night was longer...

It must’ve been late—although she’d lost track of time, embroiled in a

why-choose sensual adventure—Sil had proved gratifyingly egalitarian in his research choices—when Sil returned with a half-filled tray. “Thank you for preparing the meal.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “Got hungry, but I didn’t want to bother you.”

He echoed her gesture, and she wondered if he was being as cagey as her. “I’ve confirmed all the repairs. And the agglomerator has collected as much of the debris as possible, given the shuttle’s limited tools.” He continued to stand there.

“Eat,” she said gently. “And then we’ll go do your thing.”

He looked down at the tray his hands. “I don’t know if I can.”

“You just open your mouth—”

With one hand he set the tray aside and with another hauled her to her feet up against his chest for a long, searching kiss.

She was gasping when he lifted his head.

“Open like that?” His pearly eyes were half closed and darkened with some emotion as unclear to her as the programming of a universal translator.

She gazed up at him. “Maybe,” she drawled. “Better try again.”

She met him with a ferocious kiss of her own, knowing it all might be a mistake—or, for once, it might work, she might finally make the score of a lifetime—claim an alien fortune and then...

“Lights together,” Roxy interrupted.

Maybe it was just her imagination, or maybe he still wasn’t quite ready to do his thing, but she thought Sil was slow to release her. Her own hands should’ve fallen away twice as fast since she only had half as many, but she too clung for an extra heartbeat.

Together, they went into the small working bay at the back at the shuttle. The agglomerator was basically an elaborate vacuum, sucking material from space, and then sorting roughly by size, weight, and composition into various transparent collection tubes. Or so Sil had explained earlier. To her, it all looked like the same chunks of pebbles and dust in various shades of gray.

But Sil chose one of the cylinders and took it to the cramped workbench.

“The stone singers of legend didn’t just make diamonds and osmium and mimeticphyre. Anyone can grow gemstones.”

“Guess my uncle was doing it the hard way,” she muttered.

Sil shook his head. “Their work wasn’t just pretty or expensive. It was... more than that. And somehow less. It was precious in a way beyond galactic credits.”

Kinsley gazed up at him. *More...and less.* The words almost throbbed in the space between them. He'd always been the serious, nerdy type. But this mysticism was something else, a hidden facet of him that seemed to align with some secret place in her. Not the suspicious, shady part of her that her uncle had taught to identify an easy mark. But the part of her that had always wanted something to believe.

Her heartbeat skittered with a kind of fear somehow worse than when the debris had buffeted the shuttle. At least that danger was obvious.

What was the threat to Sil finding his destiny and living out his dream?

Ignoring the ugly roil of her own feelings, she took one of Sil's free hands in hers and laced their fingers tight, as if by doing so she could make herself drop her own doubts. She swallowed hard. "Tell me. Why was it so precious?"

He looked away. "I only ever read about it."

"Well, you only ever read Earth romance novels, and you're pretty damn good at romancing, so..." She squeezed his hand. "Who were the stone singers to the orcs, to you?"

He let out a slow breath. "In stone they sang the stories we told ourselves. Not just histories, in the same way their carvings were not just sculpture. It was more a hope for the future as our homeworld began to fail. Those that were left took to the stars, but by then, only the biggest and toughest, marked with the most essential glyphs, remained, the ones necessary for manning the ships."

"Emphasis on man," she said.

"Our version of male, yes. For generations, there had been fewer hatchlings, almost no wife-mates. Such lack made stone singers even less wanted."

"That's so wrong. Your glyph should've had a place with the rest."

He tilted his head. "I think it wasn't truly about dwindling resources, but about fading hope. The songs couldn't keep that alive."

"But now you can."

"With Adeline and Ollie choosing Teq, with the other Earthers deciding to remain, no matter what happens at the Luster, maybe the orcs have reason to hope again."

She glanced away. "For you too."

"Perhaps." He unsealed the cylinder and poured the contents onto the counter.

She managed to not make a disappointed sound. But it looked mostly like the contents of a shop vac, with the same dusty smell. There wasn't even the hint of a quartz-like sparkle. Not a fortune, not a dream come true.

"What do you do next?" She found herself whispering, which was silly but seemed respectful.

"I sing. As I did when I sonoscryed you."

A hectic flush raced through her skin, the remembered intimacy sinking deeper. "Um. Is it something you'd rather be alone for?"

"Together," he said, sounding like Roxy.

He hadn't burst into power tunes while he'd been powering into her, and it wasn't a ballad now. But the low vibration emitting from him like faraway thunder struck her with some kind of music, as if her heart had become a tympani drum and her nerves the strings of the growliest base guitar. The pebbles danced on the counter, dust rising in a fog.

Which was an interesting party trick but wouldn't impress the orcs, much less potential buyers at the Luster.

Though the sound continued, Sil let out a shaky breath. "It's not working."

Kinsley brushed a consoling hand against his elbow—and almost rattled out of her skin at the strength of the harmonics moving through him, generated by the almost invisibly rapid thrum of his carapace.

Her muscles tightened in sympathy—and a strange desire. Not sexual, or at least not only sexual, but just to be part of the hopeful dream he was trying to make out of dust and long-ago loss.

She wrapped her fingers more firmly around his arm. "You can do it. Not for the Luster or the orcs or anyone else, just for you."

The deep vibration from him never ceased but it took on another tone that seemed to squeeze her ears and her chest. The shuddering pebbles and dust swirled closer together.

Another pitch joined in.

It was Roxy.

The new resonance didn't come from the datapad speaker but from the rock itself. Light shimmered within the crystal matrix, and like a prism of sound, refractions of the tones rippled outward to bathe the haze of collected molecules.

Striations separated within the slowly churning dust, the pebbles rearranging within that. Larger flecks spun and collided, converging then breaking apart, finding their place as smaller specks followed their dance—a



miniature galaxy forming, all dusty and drab but unifying.

Kinsley clutched at Sil in amazement. "It's coming together."

"Into what? I don't know how to control it."

"Why do you have to? Just let it be."

"What if... What if it's nothing?"

"Well, it was nothing before too."

The vibration from the orc beside her and Roxy's energy was a pressure wave building around them. Sil's hand tightened on hers, hard enough to hurt, but she just squeezed him back. He flared his carapace, unfurling the delicate wings hidden within.

Kinsley held back a gasp. In the aftermath of the pirate attack on the *DeepWander*, she'd seen the security replay showing Teq's wings when he'd glided Adeline out of danger, but Adeline had only laughed about it later, saying Teq was a little shy about his wings being "too pretty for a crusher."

On Sil, they were perfect, with threads of silvery veins pulsing through the rainbow glints. The inner membranes seemed too expansive for the hard outer shell, and the translucent colors twinkled like dragonfly wings. When he vibrated them too, the reverberation shimmered at the base of her skull, sending a delicious quiver down her spine and outward along every bone, flowing to each nerve ending—a symphony of longing.

But would it hold together? Or, when he and Roxy fell silent, would the dust fall to the floor, just another failure and memory lost?

"It's not just hope," she whispered. "It's all the work you put into it too, studying and trying, even when you fail. You kept going, like the *DeepWander* salvaging scrap into life."

"Not much of a life." When he said it, the song wavered.

And so did the dust.

"But it got you here," she reminded him. "And from here, there's a universe, right?"

That had never been enough for her before, but suddenly she believed it, with her whole heart. Every moment was a new moment.

Another moment she had with Sil.

She boosted up to her tiptoes to kiss him.

The echoing sensation of the stone song was all around them, but the kiss was even more, a moment and a universe becoming one.

He held her against his torso, his mouth slanting fiercely over hers. And it didn't matter what happened next because this, for now, was enough.

## Chapter 12

As the sonoscry faded, breathless and dazed, Sil lifted his head, gazing down at Kinsley. Her mouth was bright and swollen. Even his own tusks felt bruised from the intensity of their kiss. And the i'lva pulsed in him, most tender of all.

The story she had told of her past—and the parts she hadn't said that he'd somehow heard anyway—hinted at all she'd taken and lost. But this he could give her, freely and with a joyful heart.

Still holding her, he reached one free hand for the small cloud of cosmic dust. Beneath his tough orc hide, it was soft, almost insubstantial. He held it out to her.

Her brows furrowed, her smoky eyes shadowing, she matched his gesture with an open palm. “Oh. Oh no. Did it not...”

As he poured the handful of dust toward her half-curved fingers, the remnants congealed and separated, as if tearing apart one last time...

And fell into her palm in a delicate filigreed ring.

She blinked, then darted a glance up at him, the first hint of a delighted smile flickering on the lips he'd kissed to a high gloss. “Sil. Is this...?”

“For you. We did it.”

“*You* did it.” She flung her arms around him, and he felt the embrace as if she had an infinity of arms, holding him everywhere, outside and in. “With some help from Roxy.” She held the ring up between her fingers, rotating it. Even in the shuttle's artificial illumination, it gleamed with a scintillating inner fire. “It's beautiful.”

“It's more than that. May I?” When she nodded, he took the ring back from her and held out his other hand.

Her wide gaze flashed to his again, her breath stuttering. “Sil?”

He hesitated. “I do not mean to imply more than...more than an initial payment on your cut of the fortune.”

“Oh. Right. Of course.” She held out her hand.

He faltered again, trying to remember the importance of Earther fingers, and finally slipped the ring onto the short, stubby one. “It may not be appropriate for trade on your Earth, but at the Luster, you'll be able to sell it...” He froze. “Kinsley?”

She was staring at the ring. “I feel it.”

“Yes. The song imbues the minerals with mood and emotion. That was why stone singers were once legendary among orcs: we might not feel as much through our tough hides and carapaces, but through a sung stone, we could feel everything and even share that with the universe.”

When she looked up at him, her eyes glistened brighter than the stone. “You put yourself in this ring. I feel the loss of your homeworld and the fear of failure, but it’s the dream of tomorrow that comes through most clearly.” She clenched her hand against her chest, the ring pressing into her body. “You made me feel...hope.”

“You let me feel it,” he said quietly. “I just gave it back to you.”

Slowly, almost reluctantly, she tilted her hand away from her protective stance to look down at the ring. “That is an amazing gift. I can see how it would be worth a fortune.”

As with any gift, once he’d given it, of course he couldn’t dictate what she did with it. If she sold it at the Luster, along with the rest of her portion once he’d sung what he could, that was her choice. After all, the reason they’d come here was to find a fortune.

He just hadn’t realized he wouldn’t want to give it up.

He forced himself to look away. “Now that I understand the technique—and with Roxy’s resonance—I’ll be able to start trying something more. We’ll have to get the word out before the Luster, and the Omega Reclamation Crew is known for mining and salvage, not self-promotion, but galactic collectors are always looking for something new and will pay top credit.” He slanted a quick look at her. “I’ll make sure you get yours.”

But she wasn’t looking at him. She was still looking down at the ring on her thumb, stroking the stone with her other finger. Little sparks leaped from the ring, and she murmured in surprise as they fluttered away.

She clamped her hand over the ring. “What’s happening? Is it dissolving?”

“Just like Roxy, the ring transfigures the wearer’s energy. If you touch it, it will share. But it will never leave you.”

Warily, she stroked it again, letting out a little laugh when the sparks shimmered around her. “That is what hope feels like.”

To him, it felt like her laugh. “It might be different for others, but a sung stone will know—”

The shuttle alarm chimed. “Proximity alert.”

Sil straightened. “What is it?”

“Identification delayed due to continuing interference. Hold please.” They

waited a tense heartbeat. “Vessel detected. Identification delayed due to continuing interference.”

He hastened back to the cockpit, conscious of Kinsley behind him.

“Maybe it’s the *DeepWander*. We’ve been gone long enough that Teq probably couldn’t delay anymore. And your brother would’ve been worried.”

“Furious,” Sil corrected. “But in case it’s not the *DeepWander*, I’d prefer to not be sitting here waiting.”

He’d done that for too long, just sat and waited, wishing he could do more, be more. Knowing Kinsley had finally made him act.

With parsimonious puffs from their engines as scant momentum, he tucked the shuttle alongside a slowly rolling boulder. The obstruction of the dust would keep them somewhat disguised. They would just stay quiet and unseen, unless it was the *DeepWander*. Although he wasn’t sure if he wanted to call out to his brother either.

Maybe it would be easier to become a pirate in truth, stealing the fortune and the shuttle and apexing his own way through the Zarnox Zone—a rogue stone singer of yore, spreading his message in molecules summoned from the void. If he was a singing space bandit, abducting an alien as his bunkmate would be not just unsurprising but practically expected.

“Identity confirmed,” the shuttle announced. A ship ident flashed on the forward screen.

Kinsley traced one fingertip over the distinctive silhouette of the other ship. “Oh shit. That’s the ship that came for Dorn,” she whispered, as if the other ship might hear them. “The pirates that attacked the *DeepWander*.”

“So it is.” Taking a calculated risk, he pushed more energy into the shuttle’s scanners. “They were covering their ident when they hit the *DeepWander*, but they are projecting publicly now, in accordance with intergalactic treaty. Which suggests they don’t know we’re here.”

It might also suggest the other ship intended to eliminate anyone who saw them skulking in the general vicinity of a recent battle scene, but he didn’t say that aloud.

“Or they plan to blow up anyone they find,” Kinsley noted.

He grunted. Why did he try to hide anything from her?

Other than the i’lva, of course.

“They are listed as the *Pratorim*, a third-tier member of the Luster with aspirations.”

“Oh, so with Dorn’s help, they were shooting for first place,” she

muttered, then added, “I wish I hadn’t said shoot.”

He hesitated. “As members of the Luster, even third tier, they could sponsor the *DeepWander* as an affiliate.”

“They punched a hole in the *DeepWander*,” she reminded him. “They weren’t going to give you a hand up. They wanted to knock you out of the sky and take Roxy.”

“Well, as the IDA has noted, first encounters can be tricky.”

When he slanted a glance at her, she snorted.

She was not fearless, or even bold in defiance of her fears. She just acted anyway, even when she wasn’t sure. Even when she was wrong. She had been more his guide since the Earthers arrived than all his studies and experiments before.

“The downside of hope,” he murmured. “Unfulfilled wishful thinking.”

Much like becoming a singing brigand with an abducted alien lover.

“How do they even know about this place?” Kinsley mused. “Dorn was already in the brig when you came up with this idea and asked Roxy to make a map. Is there another spy on the *DeepWander*? Or did they follow us?”

“How would they follow us, unless...” All his hands flew across the shuttle controls as he reversed the shuttle’s scanner upon themselves. He’d been looking inward so much lately, but he’d never meant it literally. “Vug. There is an anomalous tracker on the shuttle. Which means—”

The shuttle’s comm crackled. “*DeepWander* shuttle,” came the sharp voice through the speaker. “Our transponder indicates your presence in the vicinity. Respond.”

Kinsley shook her head. “They’re guessing.” But her voice wavered.

“With all the interference, they can’t know exactly where we are—or who we are,” Sil said. “Dorn must’ve planted one of their transponders so that when he made his getaway with Roxy they could retrieve him. They can’t know if we captured or killed their people. They might even be wondering if we *are* their people. And since the shuttle is out here alone, without the *DeepWander*, they must be wondering if this is their second chance.”

“I know I was just losing my cool over sharing hope,” she said. “Let’s not give them a second chance.”

“Definitely together on that,” Sil confirmed.

A flare of plasma cannon burned across the scanners, igniting denser pockets of dust an alarming preview of the weapon’s likely effect on the shuttle.

“Respond,” the *Pratorim* repeated in an even sharper voice. “This is your last chance.”

“They’ll keep firing until they flush us out,” Sil said through an angry clack of his tusks. He turned to Kinsley, urgency beating alongside the i’lva. “Put on the exo-suit. You know how to use the controls now, you’ve had practice. I will put you out into the scanner shadow of this boulder. The interference and your small size will keep you hidden. If I surrender to the *Pratorim*, they will be too preoccupied retrieving me to notice you. Just wait here. As you said, the *DeepWander* will be coming soon—”

“Oh hell no,” she exclaimed.

Her ferocity was gratifying, he supposed, if ill-advised. “It’s your best chance. They only truly want Roxy. The suit will sustain you if you keep life support at low. You will be all right until my brother comes.”

“For once, I’m not thinking about myself,” she snapped. “I’m not hiding behind a rock to save my own skin.”

“Kinsley—”

“Don’t. We’re not giving them Roxy.” The crack of her voice sent a stab of pain through his antennae, not from the volume but from her intensity—more than that, an unwavering truth. She said it aloud: “And I’m not leaving you.”

Though the i’lva within him burned to be with her forever—following her through the deepest of lightless ways, his guiding light—he knew they had no more time. But even as he steeled himself to lay hands on her, to stuff her into an exo-suit to toss her out the airlock, another blaze of plasma seared across the darkness.

“*DeepWander* shuttle, last chance,”

“We’ll see about that,” Kinsley drawled. She reached out one hand past his for the comm. “May I?”

The ring on her thumb winked at him, and when he glanced up at her, she did the same. He lifted all four hands in an Earther gesture of surrender.

She toggled the comm switch to outgoing. “*Pratorim*, this is Kinsley, Dorn’s accomplice. I have the rock.”

Sil raised his gaze to hers again. She was watching him, her smoky gaze steady, and the silent acknowledgment passed between them that this was exactly what she’d been accused of before.

With solemn deliberation, he gave her an Earther nod and a flick of one of his many fingers at the comm.

The smile she gave him was as tremulous as the first moment when he'd tried to sing to stone.

But her voice was unwavering when she said, "Let's make a deal."

## Chapter 13

The moment of stilted silence from the *Pratorim* sent an uglier vibration through the tense atmosphere of the shuttle. “Where is Dorn?”

“Dead for all I know,” Kinsley said. She hoped her temporary translator fully rendered her sincere lack of caring. “I was trying to leave the *DeepWander* when he sought my assistance. So here I am.”

“Our deal was with Dorn.”

“Don’t feel too bad about it; everybody makes mistakes. Now you can deal with me.”

Another long silence. “Why did it take you so long to respond?” The query was all suspicion.

“As you can tell, interference out here is bad,” she reminded them. “I wasn’t sure you weren’t the *DeepWander*, and they are mad at me.”

“But you have the rock?”

“As I said.”

“Pulse a signal so we can come to you and complete the deal.”

“In a second.” Kinsley rolled her eyes. “Do you think I missed the exploded ship on the way here? Your doing, I presume?”

“Dorn had apparently made several contacts. Though we agreed on an exchange between us, the other parties were still interested.”

She chuckled. “Double crossed by a thief. How unexpected.”

“Aren’t you relieved we took care of it for you?”

“So kind,” she drawled. “And I know you won’t do the same to me because...”

“Because you have the rock?”

She laughed again. “Well, maybe we can come to a deal after all. So here’s what we’ll do.” She toggled the comm control back and forth. “First, we... And then we...” She jiggled it some more while Sil frowned at her. “Got it?”

“Interference seems to be worsening, shuttle. Say again.”

She flicked the comms again. “What? You’re breaking up. Say again—” She cut the signal and sat back.

Antennae stiff, Sil blinked at her. “What?”

“Ancient Earther trick.”

“That is not how spaceship comms work.”



She shrugged. “They haven’t shot us yet, have they?”

He inclined his head. “You are right.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Despite the arch tone, she slanted a cautious glance his way. “You don’t... You know I wasn’t really Dorn’s accomplice, right? I would never give Roxy to the pirates.”

“I believe you.” He peered at the scanners. “The real concern is whether the *Pratorim* believed you. We’re small enough to evade their scanners while we’re powered down, but if we try to run, our energy signature will become immediately apparent. Whether they shoot or only run us down, either way they’d have no trouble overpowering the shuttle and seizing Roxy.”

She growled under her breath, channeling her inner orc. “So we can’t run, can’t call for help, can’t *do* anything.”

“Sacrifice.”

The word drifted through the shuttle like cosmic dust, dry and dead. They both twisted in their seats to stare down back through the little ship.

“Give me,” Roxy said through the datapad. “For you.”

“Oh hell no,” Kinsley repeated. “Absolutely not. No one is getting sacrificed. Weren’t you the one who told us about together?”

“It’s never referred to itself in the first person before,” Sil murmured. “Is it discovering self-hood? Only to offer itself for us?”

“You, you, me,” Roxy said. “Together.”

“Together or not at all,” Kinsley said firmly. Under her breath, she added, “Can’t believe I picked a nerd and a pet rock for my accomplices.”

Sil gazed at her. “I believe it. Remember, you came all this way for something new.”

And she’d found it. Except she was going to lose it all. It just wasn’t fair. Right when she was finally ready to turn over a new rock...

But maybe her bad old ways had one last purpose.

“Sil.” She held out her hand, the ring winking on her thumb, and he reached back without hesitation. “What you sang to the dust, to give shape to hope, is so beautiful, truly a gift to the universe. But...could you sing a lie?”

His fingers tightened on hers. “A lie?”

“We have to give them something—”

“Kinsley, no.”

“But it doesn’t have to be something real.” She let out a hard breath. “That was my life, before. Fakery and fleeing. This time it’s going to save us.” She rose to her feet, staring down at him, defiance and uncertainty tangling in her

guts. “Trust me?”

“I do.”

He did. Why? Did she deserve it? Swallowing hard, she pulled him upright, tugging him back to the cargo bay.

Roxy—well, the rock didn’t do anything in particular, but she swore it glowed brighter when they approached.

“Trickery!” It pulsed a few times.

Kinsley laughed. “We’ve created a monster. Okay, so here’s the scam...”

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They had to work fast, too fast.

Launching without a ready plan was always a mistake, but... Her mistakes had brought her this far, hadn’t they? Maybe there was a place for mistakes after all.

Unless this particular mistake killed them all, in which case the feel-good philosophy was just another scam.

“*Pratorim*,” Kinsley said into the comm. “Are you receiving this?” She toggled the comm a few times for theatrical squelch, to add some realism to their not-long enough silence. “Hey, *Pratorim*, are you there still?”

The reply came back, quite clear. “Shuttle. Where have you been?”

“Had to boost the signal to our comms to reach you,” Kinsley said, slanting a glance at Sil who nodded approval. Not that it really mattered how spaceships worked; reality meant nothing to a good scam. “The interference is draining my batteries, so you’ll have to come get me. The rock is ready for transfer, but you have to take me with you since I’m dead in the water.”

Another brief silence from the other end. “Our translators indicate you are Earther.” A rough sound, possibly laughter, grated from the comm. “It took us a while to find the reference. The planet Dirt is quite remote and backward, isn’t it?”

As ridiculous as it was to feel proprietary about a planet she hadn’t even thought of as her home, she bristled anyway. But she kept her tone neutral. “Why do you think I was trying to escape?”

As if by fleeing an entire solar system she could avoid the uncomfortable truth that she was bringing the source of her troubles and mistakes along with her: herself. But as Sil had pointed out, she’d come looking for something new.

Becoming someone else.

She gave him a quick smile before she said to the comm, “Come get me.”

He gave her a nod and punched the release on the airlock.

It wasn't much, but it was all they had. And with the interference and a bit of careless greed on the other end, hopefully the lie would be enough.

On the scanner, they watched the ghostly shuttle coalesce on their starboard side.

It wasn't a real shuttle, of course, but Sil had sung all of their need into a handful of molecules, releasing a decoy of desperate desire. Now they just needed the *Pratorim* to be distracted enough for them to slip away.

Their scanners kept losing sight of the fake shuttle—since it didn't exist—but the glitching looked like more interference, adding a nice layer of authenticity. She couldn't open the comm again to distract the *Pratorim* with patter, not without risking poking holes in the illusion. A signal, even a weak one, coming from a separate location would give the game away.

She bit her lip hard enough to taste blood, and Sil reached one hand across the space between the seats to grip the back of her neck, his strong fingers taking hold of the tension. It would've worked too—except his other three hands were working frantically on the controls to ease them away from the decoy in a slow, gradual roll. Nothing to see here, folks, just another dead asteroid chunk.

She wished she hadn't thought the word dead.

Even as space opened up between the two shuttles—one real, one fake—the blinking marker for the *Pratorim* closed like a card sharp on a drunken Vegas grandma.

Too bad for them this drunken Vegas grandma had been running scams since her baby teeth came in.

"I'm so proud of you, Sil," she said. "You made a spaceship out of dust. Anything is possible."

"It's not real," he reminded her, but a bright flush across his face and all the way down his naked chest revealed his secret delight in the praise.

She lifted one shoulder. "Real enough to save our asses."

"Don't get cocky," he warned.

"Not when I got you." She smiled at him.

"Together," Roxy called.

Kinsley laughed. "Yeah, all together."

"Almost there," Sil said. "Once we're behind the dust cloud—"

The comm crackled. "Earther. We can't get an exact lock on your position. Relay coordinates now, and we will bring you in under tow."

“They sound suspicious,” Sil noted.

“Of course they do,” Kinsley replied. “Because they are lying. No one is as untrusting as a liar.”

She should know. She’d fought so long not to believe in anything because then she didn’t have to be disappointed. She let out a slow breath. “Sil, whatever happens next, I want you to know—”

Before she could finish, another beam of laser light speared across scanners and the viewport, impossibly bright against the darkness.

“Earther, this is your last warning—”

Before *they* could finish, the whole universe seemed to ignite.

The scanner control panel and the viewport blazed blinding white, and the shuttle blared an alarm that Kinsley’s translator couldn’t decipher quickly enough, as if the ship itself were freaking out. “Since when do illusions explode?”

“It appears the decoy wasn’t sufficiently compacted,” Sil reported in an aggrieved tone. “There were just enough combustible elements in the dust to act as an accelerant. Secondary explosions could catch across the entire belt.” The shuttle jolted as the pressure wave knocked them about. More alarms joined the choir of chaos.

“Definitely something to consider the next time we are fabricating a ghost to save our asses,” Kinsley said, struggling to match his composure.

“Speaking of asses, how about we get ours out of here?”

“Scanners are down, visibility zero, and the proximity of the explosion impacted thrusters and stability. We’re too close to the densest part of this rubble field. Our hull would not withstand a collision of that magnitude. One wrong move...”

Damn. After being stuck all her life, she’d fled across galaxies just to get stuck again.

Lunging across the gap between their chairs, she grabbed one of his tusks and pulled him in for a deep kiss. She had good aim so she didn’t stab herself, but somehow she felt lanced all the way through.

This was a mistake, definitely a wrong move.

She stared into his pearly eyes. “If we can’t get out of this, then I want you to know what this adventure meant to me.” Throwing all the years of calculated caution aside, she clarified, “What *you* mean to me.”

Still holding her, he loosened one hand to tuck back a wayward strand of her hair, the red dye faded like the rest of her disguising armor. “What *do* you

mean? Maybe I need to tweak your translator. Perhaps you are suffering from a knock to the head after the explosion.”

“Shall I sing it for you?” She kissed him again, right between his slyly narrowed eyes. “I mean I love you. Can’t believe it, not all the way out here, with a big nerd like you. I loooooove yooooou!”

His long arm held her tight when the shuttle rocked again. “As you have become my light in the darkness.”

She stilled, except her heart which fluttered wildly. “Wait. Do *you* mean...?”

“I mean, per my orc electrochemical biology and the cultural perspective of your particular Earther heritage, I love you too.”

She sighed. “Too bad we’re not going to make it out of here. Because loving you is the best mistake I’ve ever made.”

Though the scanners were still down, through the viewport, the burning dust flashed with tertiary explosions, like fireworks over their declaration.

The *Pratorim* fired again, trying to smoke them out, and the shuttle jolted. Too close. The plasma shine dazzled her eyes as she clung to Sil.

He clung back, except for one hand tweaking the controls. “There’s something...”

Out of the burning dust, a shadow loomed, crashing through the sullen phosphorescence in a bow wave of righteous fury.

“The *DeepWander*!” Kinsley cried.

“Signal them,” Sil said. “I’ll fire what’s left of our thrusters to intercept.”

She twisted to the comm. “*DeepWander*, this is Sil and Kinsley! And Roxy! We’re here!”

Instantly honing in on their signal, the *Pratorim* spun toward them, and the shuttle blared a warning of weapons lock. Ooh, how she wished her translator hadn’t understood *that*.

With nothing left to lose, Sil gunned the engines. The shuttle tumbled, seemingly out of control, and she bit back a shriek, her heart splintering with fear—and love.

Because Sil was vibrating with orc laughter as he aimed their headlong little ship at the *DeepWander*. The reverberations sent another shockwave through her, delight and outrage in equal measure.

“You *like* this,” she accused.

“Not as much as I love you,” he shot back. “If I’ve aimed adequately, we should crash into the large bay. Good thing we didn’t have the funds to finish

repairs after the last attack. Slamming into an intact bulkhead would be a waste of materials—and probably the end of us.”

She huffed in a desperate breath, the air feeling too thin to support her. Life support was failing.

But *she* hadn't failed. Not this time. She'd told him how she felt. And he'd said it back.

“I do love you,” she whispered.

The atmosphere was getting too thin to carry her words over the scream of alarms. But Sil smiled at her, opalescent eyes flashing with all the colors, and she knew he heard the song coming from her heart.

Roxy's energy twinkled through the haze of smoke as the shuttle started to come apart around them. “Together.”

Crash.

Explosion.

Flames.

Darkness.

No more mistakes.

## Chapter 14

“Sil. You must let go of her now.”

Despite the cajoling voice in Sil’s aching head, he would *not* let her go. He would never let her go.

“Kinsley, tell him it’s okay.”

A soft touch on his cheek. “I like him holding me.”

“Do you want to sleep in this wreckage?”

“Oh, fine.” Fingertips lightly patting. “Wake up, sleepyhead. You did it. You got us back. Just in time. The *DeepWander* took one shot at the *Pratorim* and they ran off with their tail on fire. Literally.”

He’d never felt so weak, but he clamped his hand over hers.

Never let her go. The promise was a silent song in his head, but when she tangled her fingers through his, he knew she heard it too.

It took all his strength to open his eyes. Who knew eyes could be exhausted? There’d been a time when that realization would’ve stung, to know he was so puny. But he’d found the fortune he’d sought, hadn’t he?

He smiled up at Kinsley.

The curve of her lips trembled, her smoky gray-blue eyes shining, clear and bright with the mangled rubble of the shuttle smoldering around them. “Hey there.”

“I love you.”

She pressed her forehead to his. “And you’re the light that guides me home.”

He closed his eyes again with the peace of the i’lva whispering between them.

Whatever happened next, they were together.

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A few rest cycles later, he made his way to his workroom. Kinsley paced beside him, one hand at his back. The analgesics for his broken lower arms made him a little wobbly still. But he didn’t mind the temporary infirmity, not when his unwavering hold had protected her during their crashlanding—especially when it meant she watched him and smiled at him and touched him all the time.

Roxy was back on its pedestal. Quiet sounds emerged from the datpad attached to it, musical tones tentatively moving through simple pentatonic

scales, occasionally striking chords. It was learning to sing.

Kinsley settled him on a stool near the rock, and when she started to step away, he pulled her onto his lap.

“Your arms,” she protested. “I don’t want to disrupt the bone menders.”

“But I want to hold you.” He squeezed her. “It was too close, Kinsley.”

Snuggling down, she tucked her head under his tusks. “I love being close to you.”

For a heartbeat, he rested, just feeling the i’lva pulse through them and between them while the rock sang softly.

Finally he sighed and looked at the other being. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to save more of the dust of where you came from.” There wasn’t anything left of what they’d collected since he’d burned it all on escaping with their lives.

Kinsley spun the ring on her thumb once before slowly slipping it free. “Should I... Would you like this back, Roxy?”

“Memory together forever,” the rock said. “Enough.”

Her lips trembled. “Yeah. Memories are enough.” She gazed at Sil. “This is your first song. Maybe you want to keep it.”

He took it from her. “I do.”

She blinked rapidly. “Oh. I thought, maybe...”

“I want to keep it...on your finger.” He eased the sung stone onto the off-center digit of her left hand. It was a lesser Earther finger, as far as he could tell, except it had one great meaning among those of her heritage.

Maybe putting the ring on that finger was a reminder that together they could be stronger.

Her eyes glistened. “I love you, Sil.”

A rough grunt from behind them made him swivel around on the stool. Kinsley squeaked, clinging to him.

Mag glowered in the doorway. “Why would you leave like that?”

Sil sighed. “I wanted to prove myself to my apex—and to my brother. So I sought a fortune.”

“And did you find it?”

Resisting Sil’s hold, Kinsley jolted to her feet, as if she would guard him. She faced off against the apex. “He didn’t need to. He figured out how to sing pure trash into something amazing.”

Sil gazed at her, the ichor running hot and sweet in him, simmering with the i’lva. *She* was amazing.



Mag grunted again, obviously less enamored, which was fine because Kinsley was already claimed. “You disobeyed your apex?” Now he was growling. “And risked your lives for a song?” His volume rose to an unnecessary roar. “Brother, you matter more to me than any fortune!”

Sil flattened his antennae in shock. “Since when?”

Mag recoiled. “Since...always. Since our shell cracked around us and I knew I’d always have my brother with me.”

“You knew that?”

Mag’s voice dropped to almost nothing. “Didn’t you?”

Kinsley took a step to one side. “Apparently that could’ve been a little clearer.”

Sil tugged at her hand, apexes not being known for their appreciation for questioning. But to his even greater surprise, Mag inclined his head to the much smaller Earther.

“But you showed him.” The apex went to one knee, bringing himself to Kinsley’s level. “My gratitude to you for keeping him alive and bringing him back.” He clacked his tusks lightly. “In a few more pieces than when he left, but that’s what bone menders are for.” He gestured at her ringed hand. “And that is the first orc-sung stone in almost a thousand years?”

This time, she did not offer to relinquish the ring. “It is.”

Mag stood up again to his full height, which was more than any other orc, and looked down at her. “I trust you grasp its true value, not in rare molecules or galactic credits.”

She didn’t waver. “Holding tight with all my stubby Earther fingers.”

With a huff of acknowledgment, Mag turned back to Sil. “There was never a time when you were less-than in my echoes. I will be sure to make that clearer from now on.”

“Maybe I had to prove it to myself as well.” Sil held out one of his unbroken arms.

Mag peered at him a bemused moment. “Is this an Earther thing?”

“Or a brother thing.”

Kinsley watched them embrace. “Awkward bro hug with more arms is just...more orc-ward.”

Mag grunted again. “Will you have something to share by the time we get to the Luster?”

“We’re still going?”

Though a tough orc hide should’ve hid the uncertainty that flashed across

Mag's face, Sil realized his focus on Kinsley had taught him to recognize that his mighty brother had his own weaknesses.

Not that he'd ever tell his apex that.

"We will make a place for ourselves in the Luster." Mag flattened his hand over the apex glyph carved on his torso. "I know this."

"You believe because that's what Sil always gave you, what he gave this ship and me: a glimpse of another chance at something more, something better. Even before he sang it into being." Kinsley smiled brilliantly. "I can't wait to see what he makes next."

"You'll be part of it," Sil murmured as he reeled her closer.

She pressed her hand over his heart, the sung stone glinting between them. "Together."



*The adventure continues with WIFE-MATES FOR THE ORCS #3!*

**Keep reading for an excerpt of [CLAIM...](#)**

An apex was always in charge of his ship. He kept watch over his people to safeguard their survival. When he ate, it was to taste for spoilage. If he slept, it was only to stay strong to do whatever needed to be done. An apex must never lose focus or forget his place—and his place was always at the top.

Yet still, somehow, two of the Earther females managed to vanish from Mag's awareness while he glowered at the remaining Earther female. The chime of the closing door told him they'd gone, but all his attention was on the little one.

June.

It was a strong orc name, but she was neither of those things. He knew all the Earthers, of course, since he'd read their IDA profiles before approving

their presence on the DeepWander. He would never allow the ship to be endangered by strangers.

Except a sentient rock had been brought aboard. And one of his crew had tried to steal it. And then his own brother had stolen it. So clearly not all dangers came from without.

But he'd already known that.

He prowled the edge of the room. The quarters designated for the Earthers had been downsized somewhat to better fit their parameters while still accommodating their future orc mates. But he was much too large to be comfortable here.

"Sit down."

He pivoted to face the little female. "What?"

"You stomping around is making me very nervous."

Mid-step, he froze.

"An orc would never admit such a thing."

"That must be nice for you. Sit down while I finish cleaning up."

His ichor surged at the perceived challenge. So. Nervous, perhaps, but not cowed.

As he settled on the raised cushion she indicated—much too small—it took more effort than he would've anticipated to soothe the agitated ruffle of his carapace. Maybe it was the odd scents, not unpleasant exactly but unfamiliar.

Or maybe it was just the odd little Earther.

He glowered as she straightened the room. Not only was she the smallest of them, she was also the softest. When the Earthers had first come aboard, Teq had expressed concern privately that they would be too soft for orc hands. But once in the grips of the i'lva himself, the crusher had rescinded that fear.

"They are small and soft but strong," he'd said when it had been just the two of them. "You chose well for your orcs, my apex. Once we have taken our place in the Luster, we should contact the Big Sky IDA outpost again."

The hope that his brother Sil had sung to the ship had clearly sunk into the big crusher too.

But it could not penetrate an apex's extra tough hide.

Nor should it. His place at the top required him to be cold and hard so that his people might shine, living their lives in the light.

"Glaring at me isn't really better than stomping," June said. She probably

believed she'd said it under her breath, but his antennae caught the vibrations of her little voice.

"I am not glaring," he informed her. "This is how I look."

"Resting apex face?"

Her tone tickled through his antennae in a way he couldn't quite translate, though the words were clear enough. "An apex does not rest."

"It was a joke... You know what, never mind." She perched on a cushioned stool—not the one closest to him, he noted. "Let's not make this more weird."

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Elsa Jade](#) writes sexy shapeshifting romances, fast-paced urban fantasy romance, and out-of-this-world science fiction romance. In all the subgenres, she believes in hopes, dreams, and the transformational power of love. She thrills at the chance to share her stories with like-minded readers.

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