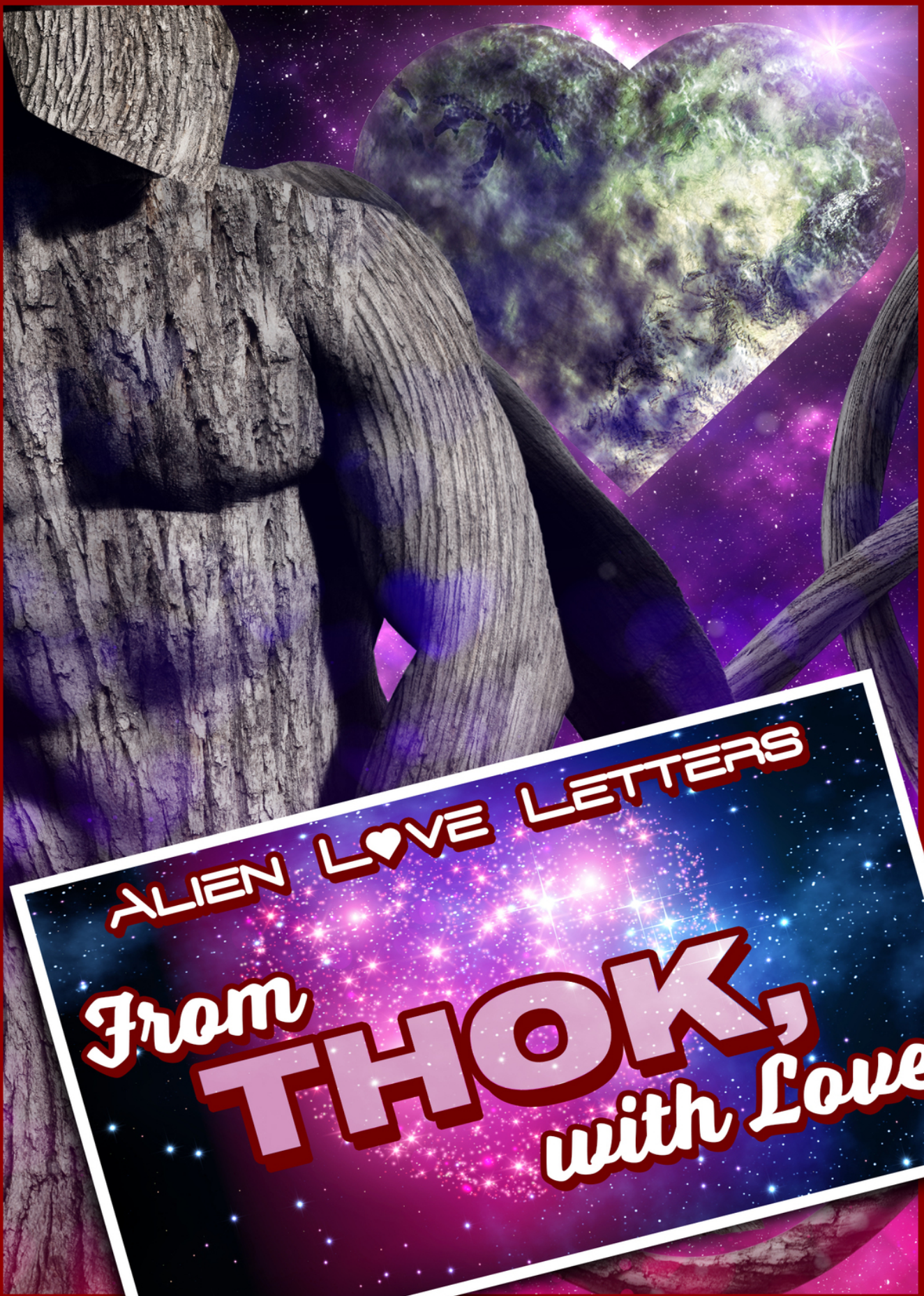


# SUSAN TROMBLEY



ALIEN LOVE LETTERS

From

**THOK,**

with Love



*From Thok, With Love*

ALIEN LOVE LETTERS

**SUSAN TROMBLEY**



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Book Cover Design: Christopher Coyle - Dark and Stormy Knight Designs

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# *Introduction*

This book is part of a multi-author shared collaboration. Five authors take the common love letter trope and add their own twist. These stories feature steamy scenes, some heartwarming holiday moments and a guaranteed HEA.

From Thok, With Love by Susan Trombley

From Zestria, With Love by Rena Marks

From Vangar, With Love by Julie Cohen

From Earth, With Love by Sandra R. Neeley

From Zarpathia, With Love by Tracy Lauren

*One*



January 25th, 0023 A.M.I (After Menops Invasion)

My Dearest Louis,

This will be the last letter I write to you. I have finally accepted that it's time to let you go. Valentine's Day is only a few weeks away, but this year, I won't make a card for you, as hard as that will be for me.

I just want you to know that you made me so happy while I was blessed to have you in my life.

You wouldn't believe how much the world has changed since the Menops Invasion. (It's still difficult to write those words without my hand shaking until the letters turn to scribbles.) Twenty-three years is a long time for a human, but not for a heart. Memories fade, but the feelings they brought us don't disappear so easily.

I'm proud of humanity for how we've bounced back after the invasion and then the plague. You would have been too. Sure, we still have our flaws. Even zombies and aliens can't scare those out of us.

I know a lot of humans resent the Akrellians. (I've mentioned them in previous letters. They're the alien race that came to help us fight off the Menops). I can't even imagine being angry at the people who risked their own soldiers and ships against those unstoppable giant ants and that horrible fungal infection they brought with them, but now that we're a subordinate species of the Akrellians, a lot of people say we're

under their “control.” I would call it “guidance,” but you know that I always preferred the glass half full.

People are so different nowadays, but still so much the same. Humans liked being big fish in a small pond. This is the first time in human history where we aren’t the ones ruling the planet. A lot of people want our sovereignty back, but even though we’re smart and resourceful, we also know how to read a room. We’ve chosen leaders who won’t engage in a pointless war against our keepers that would only see us sat down, given a stern talking to, and then put in our room without supper.

To become a full, sovereign member of the Cosmic Syndicate, (I mentioned that galactic organization in a previous letter too) we must prove ourselves to be diplomatically and economically powerful on a galactic scale. That means humans need to form alliances of our own with more powerful species, not always allow the Akrellians to run interference for us.

I know, this sounds like rambling, or maybe something I read in a pamphlet (I mean, some of it, yeah, but I’ll get to that), but just bear with me. This isn’t easy for me to explain. I’m still a little in shock about this myself, and I’m the one who made this decision.

You remember those cheesy sci-fi movies we’d watch every Friday night, fighting over that huge bowl of popcorn (I never could find another bowl like that—it’s crazy how much I miss it), pointing out all the ridiculous props and costumes, never imagining a future where those kinds of creatures proved to be real. We had fun then. You made me laugh so hard with your impressions and jokes. Those were always my favorite movies to watch, because of you.

I haven’t watched “Attack of the Ant Monsters” since... well, since one tore you from my arms.

I’m sorry about the tear stains. They must have blurred the ink. I guess I remember some things too well still. The night terrors have almost completely gone away though. There’s a therapy support group in Diamondback, but I’ve never gone back to our hometown, or rather, what remains of it. I figure

those night demons would find me a lot easier if I'd returned there. I do still attend therapy sessions though, and I have a support group where we've all become friends, so don't you worry about me, Lou!

I'm getting better. I really am. I'm finally...I'm ready to move on. I know you wouldn't have wanted me to be alone for this long, but it's been easy to let time fly away from me. There were so many things to do after the Invasion and the Renewal that got in the way of grieving properly, and now, there's so many new faces around me, many of which don't look at all like humans. Dating is intimidating. Terrifying even.

At forty-five, I don't even know where to begin when it comes to dating, so, I decided to let someone else do the decision-making for me. I did it, and I'm still reeling. I signed up with "Humanity's Outer Alliance Network" to join their "Out-Match Program."

I don't think I will ever stop loving you and missing you. That's why I chose this option. HOAN is forming political alliances, and that's what any marriage or mating they arrange through Out-Match will be for both me and my extraterrestrial partner. I won't have to feel bad if I can't ever find it in my heart to love them the way I loved you, since they won't be in the relationship for that reason anyway.

Still, I have hope that maybe, someday, I'll find a way to love again. I know you always said you wanted me to be happy, and after these last two decades alone, I've forgotten what happy feels like.

My closest friend in the support group suggested that I bury all these letters I've written to you over the years as a final goodbye, since we never found your body, and I never had the chance to give you a proper burial. I might do just that, because it *is* time to say goodbye, my love.

I hope you have found happiness in the next life, and I hope you're okay with me seeking happiness again in this one.

All my love to you, my Lou-bear,



From Your Frannie Annie Banannie



*FRANNIE*

I stood in the courtyard of the H.O.A.N. office building, dwelling on the mystery of why government buildings were always so ugly instead of thinking about what I was planning to do. If I thought about it, then it became real, and I'd never find the courage to march my scruffy sneakers over that threshold and into the Out-Match Coordinator's office to begin my in-processing appointment.

It was one thing to fill out all the online forms, and even engage in numerous video interviews, but this was the real deal. This was my final in-processing appointment with HOAN, after all my physicals and labs and allergy tests and interviews, and the seemingly endless paperwork processing, this was the day I would find out exactly who—or what—HOAN had in mind for me when it came to choosing my mate.

Today was also Valentine's Day.

A small, hopeful part of me found that prophetic. That optimism I'd once had in abundance finally peeked out of the dark corner in my head where it had been hiding for over two decades. I'd told myself over and over again that this would only be a political match, a way to "form familial alliances between disparate species for the advancement of both parties." A marriage of convenience, right down to the contracts for breeding hybrid offspring, provided if and only if such offspring would benefit either mankind or the extraterrestrial race.

Hardly romantic fare to consider on Valentine's Day.

My sneakers squeaked on shiny, freshly buffed vinyl tiles as I approached the front desk to return the smiling greeting from the man behind it and give him my name. He looked a lot like my Lou. Tall, dark, and handsome, with a sexy smile and the hint of a playful smirk teasing around its professional edges.

My glance at his ring finger was automatic, but his lack of a golden shackle didn't matter to me, because I would never consider dating someone who looked too much like the man I had loved so much that losing him nearly destroyed me more than the Menops Invasion nearly destroyed my planet.

"You're all checked in," Samuel—according to his nametag—said kindly after glancing at the registry.

He handed me a keycard, and I wondered when we'd phase such things out completely given how most humans had switched to wrist communicators for everything, some people going so far as having them implanted under the skin like the Akrellians did.

Samuel pointed to a silver elevator door near the reception counter, and I noted our muted reflections in the brushed metal with a sense of detachment. This all felt so surreal. "Just insert that card to open the elevator, and it will take you right to Ms. Cornello's floor. No need for button pushing. She'll be in the first office on the right."

I took the card, pleased that it didn't give my shaking fingers away. As I turned away, Samuel added in parting, "Thank you for your efforts on behalf of humanity."

I glanced back at him and smiled weakly, suddenly wondering if I actually had it in me to follow through on this plan as I stepped inside and watched the doors shut on the only exit from this building.

The elevator dinged old school-style when it arrived on Ms. Cornello's floor, and I jerked a little, startled at being pulled from my deep reverie. I was thinking about the small, poignant funeral I had held for Lou that a handful of friends from my support group had attended. I'd ordered a special box custom made and hand-built, carved in a way Louis would have loved. I couldn't memorialize him with some mass-produced junk when he was—had been—a carpenter.

I'd decided against taking anything that reminded me of my husband with me on this journey, because this mating meant leaving Earth behind, forever, to live on an alien planet with a stranger. It would be as permanent a severing of ties to

my past as I could get, and I figured it was the only way I'd ever find the motivation to truly let go of those memories so I could make new ones.

I had pared down all my worldly belongings to two suitcases, a footlocker-sized trunk, and two "incidentals" bags. HOAN claimed they would provide everything else I would require for my travel and "wedding" preparations. After that, I supposed I'd need to rely upon whichever extraterrestrial mate they paired me with to provide my necessities.

I remembered Ms. Cornello from our video interviews, but she looked more vivid in person, bubbling with energy like a pot about to boil over. Despite that energetic chaos, she proved more than efficient, setting down a tablet in front of me, then swiping through form after form to cover all the details of the HOAN contracts.

One of those forms had my picture on it, and I couldn't help but stare at the woman in the image who looked like a stranger, my mind barely tuning in to Ms. Cornello's rapid chattering.

Had my hair really been that pale of a blond once? Now, strands of gray had overtaken the blond, but the HOAN medical team had already started me on rejuv treatments to reverse the aging process and retain my fertility. When I shed those grays, my natural color would replace them. Maybe I'd grow my hair past my shoulders again. Maybe I'd add layers to frame my heart-shaped face and soften my pointed chin.

My large, hazel eyes looked vivid green in the picture. Probably because of the clothing I wore when it was taken. Just a simple hunter green tee shirt and jeans. I'd never been a fancy dresser, even though Lou had always said I had a gorgeous body with luscious curves that I should show off more.

My clothes tended to sag around me now. I had a hard time remembering to eat, because I spent so much time busy with my work as a Reclamation and Renewal Technician—a fancy title for someone who clambered over and through ruins,

salvaging anything useful before they were bulldozed to the ground to make way for new construction.

Maybe a part of me had done this job for so long, when it was considered a young person's work, because I hoped I would find a hint of where my Lou had been taken, even though I did reclamation on the East Coast, far from our hometown in the Southwest. I also didn't work in or around the anthills that dotted some of the major cities. The government used specially trained, elite teams for those since they occasionally still encountered Menops holdouts. Apparently, not all of the vile aliens had died without their queen's pheromones to sustain them.

I would never find my Lou. I knew that logically, and I also knew that I needed to stop searching, even if only subconsciously. It was time to stop sifting through the ruins of my past and move forward into some future so far removed from it that I couldn't recognize anything that would send me back into a spiral of grief and guilt.

After I signed with my fingerprint what felt like a hundred times, Ms. Cornello grinned broadly, clapping her hands together once in a way that made me jump a little on my thinly padded seat. "Wonderful, Francis!" she said with the same rapid-fire, organized tone she'd used as she'd explained in detail my role, duties, obligations, and the heavy responsibility that would be resting on my shoulders as I represented humanity to an alien race. "The dullest part of this program is completed." Her hands rubbed together like she couldn't wait to reveal some news, and I leaned forward on my seat, clutching the zippered hoodie I'd shed when I started nervous sweating right around the time she'd set down the tablet.

"It's Valentine's Day," she reminded me, as if I wasn't well aware that my appointment with her fell on that day. When I remained silent, my breaths shallow as I waited, my heart thudding and my stomach burning with acid, she took the tablet from my side of the desk and swiped through what seemed like a hundred screens before she again set it in front of me.

“Our advanced A.I. matching system has found the perfect partner for you, Frannie,” she said with that boiling pot excitement of hers.

Meanwhile, my heart took a swan dive into my stomach acid as I looked down at the image of my future mate.

*Two*



February 14, 23 A.M.I (After Menops Invasion)

Dear Zanthos T'mon,

My name is Francis Marie Taylor. I am (please forgive my unsteady handwriting) the woman who has been selected to be your assigned mate in accordance with Humanity's Outer Alliance Network Out-Match Program.

I was informed that HOAN offers a pre-meeting correspondence option to assuage any doubts about HOAN's selection, and that you have chosen that option, so I will write to you throughout this processing period in the hopes that you will come to know me somewhat before we meet in person. I look forward to reading the correspondence that you have agreed to send in return.

Please forgive my decision to use what probably seems to you like primitive tools for this letter. I understand that it will be scanned into a computer and transmitted to you with a full translation, so I suppose my handwriting won't matter much to you. However, communicating this way has always made it easier for me to organize and express my thoughts. I've been writing letters since I first learned how to form them in school. (That's a group education center for human offspring. I'm not sure that will translate since the Thokost apparently have a different knowledge-sharing process.)

I am honestly grateful to have this opportunity to communicate with you before we meet. I must admit that I am feeling more than a little bit intimidated by the huge changes



that will take place in my life when I leave my home to travel to yours. Any further information you can provide about your world, your family, your people, and the process that I'm told is called "deep-rooting" would be greatly appreciated.

In return for that request, I'm attaching some files to the upload of this letter. They are documents and family photos that will detail as much as I am currently comfortable with sharing about my past. I've been informed that you've been sent the HOAN-approved information packet on Earth and humanity, so I won't duplicate any of that information, but I did create a list of things that I enjoy (hobbies, interests, activities) as well as things that might upset me (certain food items, unpleasant or disturbing visuals, cultural taboos, etc.).

I hope through these letters and the sharing of information between us that we can make this a smooth transition from my world to yours, and that we can "deep-root" successfully.

I thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Francis Marie Taylor



*FRANNIE*

I sat in Ms. Cornello's office in dead silence as I stared down at the extraterrestrial the HOAN A.I. had selected to be my partner.

How could it have been so terribly mistaken?

When I began to hyperventilate, Ms. Cornello rushed to reassure me that the A.I. considered all factors in the decision-making process, and that it was rarely wrong about the potential success of an Out-Match partnership. She insisted that once I had time to study all the information she would provide about my future mate, I would feel better about all of this.

They were called Thokost, she explained. The four-armed behemoth in the image looked like a walking tree, complete

with “branches” that resembled a massive rack of antlers on his head. The purpose of those branches wasn’t entirely clear to anyone who wasn’t a Thokost, apparently.

He had a wooden mask below eyes that glowed a liquid amber shade, surrounded by what appeared to be black sclera. She reluctantly mentioned that the “mask” split into two halves and formed his outer mandibles that concealed a sideways slit of a mouth.

Just like the Menops with their mandible-framed sideways mouths. I barely concealed a shudder of repulsion at that description.

The Thokost had yet to join the Cosmic Syndicate. Due to a handful of strategic advantages their species possessed, the towering, often aggressive, tree-like species that showed no sexual dimorphism in their humanoid form had been invited more than once to join the loosely governed, intergalactic organization that pretty much ran the galaxy. They’d declined—at times, with implied if not overt violence.

The Thokost inhabited a garden home world with even more diverse and varied lifeforms than Earth, some of which were rumored to offer the cure to almost every incurable disease encountered in the galaxy.

Though advanced medical technology had rendered even the deterioration of aging obsolete for those species who had access to it, some diseases remained difficult or seemingly impossible to cure. Except that the Thokost didn’t appear to suffer from any known galactic disease. Efforts by extraterrestrial scientists to study their species always failed though, because the toxic secretions that wept from the bark-like texture of their skin turned into an acid upon their death that immediately broke down their biological tissue in a way that made it impossible to scan.

Studying a live Thokost also proved virtually impossible. Even though some species (humans, for example) could build an immunity to their toxin through slow, careful exposure, no one could incapacitate the Thokost with any known substance

once they got close enough to inject it somewhere in their almost impenetrable skin.

As for detaining one, the seven-foot-tall or larger walking tree had the punch force of a battering ram, thick, ropey muscles that made them look like they were wrapped in vines, and skin in graduated shades of green, grey, or brown that was so thick that it had to be chipped away to do any real damage to them. Add in an attitude of “kill first, ask questions never” that the Thokost were known for in Syndicate space, and stealing their secrets by studying them against their will became an impossibly dangerous task.

They could also apparently choose how many arms they had, as well as how many tails, if any, they wanted to “grow.” Both of which they used with chilling effectiveness in subduing and dispatching their enemies.

Zanthos appeared to have three tails in the picture, coiling behind his huge body like thick vines, along with four powerful, muscular arms, tipped by three fingers and a thumb, each ending in a thorn-like claw.

From what Ms. Cornello had said, Thokost rarely left their home world, and usually they only traveled to another Thokost world, having little use for—or interest in—the rest of the galactic civilizations.

Those Thokost who left their home system or colonies typically did so as exiles, so they gravitated towards the Civilized Rim of Syndicate Space. I’d heard that the “CivilRim” was a misnomer because it was filled with all the criminal elements who preferred the poorly guarded rim systems over the more heavily patrolled Syndicate Space inner systems.

I left the HOAN building in a horrified daze after penning my very first letter to my future monster of an extraterrestrial mate. I suspected I’d sent a panicked voice message to my closest friend on my way through the door to the bar closest to the HOAN building, but I wasn’t certain I hadn’t imagined that part until I heard her walk up behind me in her clacking high heels a short time later.

“Tell me those are celebratory drinks,” Shari said as she plopped a brute-sized purse down on the bar beside me, her blue eyes scanning the row of empty, overturned glasses in front of me.

The breeze kicked up by her movements rippled the tissue paper and foil heart banner dangling just above our heads, drawing my eye to those optimistic pink and red shapes that looked nothing like the shriveled and despairing organ in my chest.

“Uh-unh,” I said mournfully, then gestured for the busy bartender, hoping to order another.

“That bad?” She made a face. “Don’t tell me they paired you up with an Urasol.” She shuddered, but glanced around to make sure there weren’t any of the bear-like behemoths currently in the bar.

Given that they usually avoided Earth, likely because of reactions like Shari’s to their frightening appearance, the possibility that one would be in this bar was very low. Currently, only humans and a lone Akrellian female sitting in a far corner booth occupied the establishment.

“Thokosht,” I muttered sluggishly, my drink glass looking suspiciously half empty. I glanced at my row of empties, wondering how I’d managed to down so many of them without realizing it.

Shari stared at me with mouth agape. When she finally pulled herself together, she asked the same question that had been rolling around in my own head. “*Why?*”

I shrugged one shoulder disconsolately, then chugged the last of my drink down before slamming the glass on the bar. Then I folded my hands on the edge of the bar and laid my head down on them, wishing I could sleep this Valentine’s Day away and wake up tomorrow to discover that it was all just a horrible dream.

Shari patted my shoulder with a consoling hand. “It sounds like this is exactly what you wanted,” she said in a false chipper voice.

My head popped up from the bar, the room spinning around me until I focused on Shari. “What I *wanted*?” I made a sloppy waving gesture like I had Ms. Cornello’s tablet in front of me. “He looks like a tree! He has,” I gulped down bile and the copious amounts of alcohol currently scouring my insides, “*mandibles*.” The word came out as a hiss.

Shari tapped away on her implanted wrist communicator, ignoring the monster purse that probably ate items in her house every time she left it alone, given how it always seemed to have grown larger every time I saw it. I had no idea why she continued to lug it around when she had a wrist comm, but she always had something useful on hand, I supposed.

She pulled up an image that earned a disgusted sound from me before I lay my head back on my arms with a long and heavy sigh.

“I don’t see any mandibles.” I watched her sideways from my arm pillow on the bar top as she studied the xeno-bio guide she’d found online for the Thokost.

Ms. Cornello had provided me with a set of images of Zanthos. One of them had shown his mandibles spread at the base, where a chin would be on a human. While they were flexed open, the tops still connected below his eyes, where he appeared to have a nose bridge, but no sign of a nose. The way his mandibles worked left a triangular-shaped opening that showed that creepy vertical mouth slit, where razor-sharp, thorny teeth waited to chomp down on anything stupid enough to come near it.

I still shuddered thinking about the sight of it. “That *mask* splits at the bottom and spreads open, up to that ridge that looks like a covered nose,” I said morosely, not bothering to lift my head again. “It *is* their mandibles.”

When her sable brows pulled together in confusion, I raised my head and tapped my own communicator to open the images I’d been provided, plopping my arm on the bar so they were projected above the device for Shari’s perusal.

She was silent for a long moment while I closed my eyes, trying not to picture the massive, muscular beast, whose rack

of “branches” had him pushing past eight feet, though his face would be at closer to six foot nine inches. Unless he pushed himself to his full potential height on his digitigrade legs with their three thorn-clawed toes and hook-like dew claw.

His graduated gray bark skin only seemed to highlight all that ropey muscle covering his body that only enhanced his alien appearance.

“He’s not half bad looking, honestly.” Her tone sounded hesitant. She hated lying, even to make someone else feel better. “I mean, mandibles aren’t always a bad thing, right? He...uh...well, he has...um...he’s *very* tall, and um, those eyes are piercing in a very...well....”

I groaned, lifting a hand to sloppily rub my face, which felt more than a little numb now. “He’s *so* alien, Shar!” I flapped my arms around myself in a defensive hug, staring down at the ring of condensation on the shiny, glass bar top, my own reflection morose below it. “I knew this wasn’t going to be a love at first sight kind of match, but I guess I jush thought...,” I shrugged my shoulders without unfolding my arms from my self-comfort squeeze, “I d’no.” I bit my lower lip a little too hard, blinking eyes a little too swollen from tears. “I’d hoped I might actually fall in love wid ‘em.”

She draped one arm around my shoulder, tsking softly. “You are not a shallow person, Frannie.” She squeezed me gently as if to add punctuation to her point. “You don’t need him to be the handsomest alien in the galaxy to learn to love him.” She made a face as I turned a skeptical look her way. “Everyone knows those Iriduans are the prettiest guys around, and they’re all a bunch of unlovable dicks.” She gestured to the image projected just above my communicator. “Sure, it all might seem like a little too much alien at first, what with going to a different world to marry a stranger and all, but you knew that going into this. You’re just feeling the ‘cold feet’ effect, but I promise you, it will wear off, and you’ll be happy you made this decision.”

“You really think sho?” I asked, my head nearly bobbing on my shoulders.



“Yes?” Since her tone made it a question, I supposed she didn’t count it as a lie.

Three



February 17, 23 A.M.I (After Menops Invasion)

Dear Zanthos T'mon,

I'm not gonna lie, because I don't intend to send this letter.

You terrify me.

I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. I know that your people weren't the ones to invade our world. I know it's wrong to judge someone based on how they look. I know all that, but I can't help being afraid of you because of your pictures.

You are so alien and different from me in every way, and I don't know how any of this is going to work, or even if it can. I thought I was braver than I really am. I thought I was more committed to this, and that I wouldn't care who I was partnered with, because this was never about love.

Now, it's too late. I am legally bound to this course, and short of living on the run from the government forever, I can't escape it.

Today, I received my first dose of the serum that will make it so I won't die when you touch me from the toxins your body will secrete. The fact that I even managed to write that sentence surprises me. Your body could easily kill mine, just by touching me. I know that's the whole point of me taking the serum with the small doses of your toxin to build my immunity, but still!

Your touch alone could *kill* me!

I'm left asking the same question over and over and getting only vague answers from HOAN. So, I'm asking you, in this letter you will never see.

*Why?*

After generations of turning down offers to join the Cosmic Syndicate (something we humans would kill for—and probably are), why are the Thokost suddenly eager to take a human mate and form a beneficial trade alliance with Earth? Why spurn the most powerful interspecies organization in the galaxy, but ally with a backwards planet filled with ambitious but primitive in comparison naked apes?

What are humans going to do for the Thokost that makes you want a mate at all from our species? Will I ever know?

HOAN certainly isn't answering any questions with anything less vague than "multiple trade and research options with your 'cluster,'" (which is apparently your city? Or is it your nation? I still don't know that answer, and I don't think HOAN does either.)

In fact, I think HOAN was so excited to have a Thokost representative apply for their Out-Match program that they don't really care what humanity gets from this. Your species is elusive, and alliances with your people are unheard of. Humans want to be the first to the gate with something, seeing as we've suddenly discovered that we're far behind everyone else at everything else.

So, I feel like I've found myself at the mercy of a bunch of eager children jostling for a place in a line whose endpoint they can't see.

All I can say is that I hope you are patient with me, Zanthos. I hope you allow me the time to adjust before you demand intimacy from me. I hope you understand and aren't offended by my hesitation.

And strangely enough, I hope that you find my appearance just as off-putting as I do yours, so then I won't feel like such a shallow jerk.

Sincerely,

Francis Taylor



*FRANNIE*

I felt so sick and miserable that all I wanted to do was collapse in the barracks room I'd been granted during my stay in this processing facility.

I'd vomited countless times and got so dehydrated that I'd been hooked to an IV drip to keep me from shriveling up like a raisin.

Still, the doctors kept telling me I was doing great. The only assumption I could make about that was that they weren't sure if I'd even survive the first dose of serum. Since I did, now they're excited.

I still have an entire course of treatments to look forward to, but the scientists are saying each exposure will make me less sick than the last. Like that's supposed to make me feel better when I'm lying here in bed wishing for oblivion.

The only comfort I managed to find in this sterile, utilitarian barracks was in writing letters, since I still felt too miserable to go down to the recreational room and visit with the other members of the Out-Match program who were currently processing. I wasn't sure I would do that even if I was feeling better, because I might end up jealous of their matches, when I had so much doubt about my own.

I'd sworn not to write any more letters to Lou. It was long past time for me to let him go, and turning to him in my time of need for comfort only made the pain of losing him linger. So, instead, I wrote to my friends.

And I wrote to my future alien mate.

I told him how scared I was. I rambled on about my fears and doubts, starting with my doubt about his desire to be with me, since I hadn't received a letter back from him yet. This wasn't being sent by snail mail. We now had methods of rapid communication available to us even across a galaxy, as expensive as that communication was.

Did he change his mind? Should I be relieved about that?

I'd also be pretty damned angry if he backed out, because I'd already started the treatments, and I was suffering for this match I didn't even want to make anymore.

I had already pored over every bit of information the GalactaNet had about the Thokost, and it wasn't nearly enough to comfort me. I found no clear images of their home world, only a few blurry images of a Thokost like Zanthos, and almost no verified information about their mating habits. Although the 'Net was rife with speculation and had a bunch of accounts tagged as "fictional" featuring sexual encounters with a Thokost.

Not every species could build the necessary toxin immunity, even with minimal but prolonged exposure, and only the Thokost could create the serum for that exposure, so I highly doubted any accounts that didn't involve a ton of preparation on the part of both species. As entertaining—and at the same time alarming—as those sexual fantasies were, I didn't lend them much credence.

I did find one story interesting enough to wonder if the "fictional" tag might just be someone protecting their identity. They'd described a series of "potions" they'd had to drink before their Thokost "client" first visited them in a CivilRim brothel. The client had provided those potions to the brothel weeks beforehand.

The encounter itself was described far more vaguely than the other fictional ones. The client had been a male Thokost, but the story provided little detail about his "taproot." He'd come, and then he'd gone. After all that painful for the worker and costly for the client prep time, he'd never returned to the brothel worker for a second round.

I got the impression that the worker, whose identity was shrouded in euphemistic language, leaving me no idea what species or sex they were, felt disappointed by the client's failure to return because the experience had been "far better than most."

None of the images HOAN had provided of Zanthos showed his genitals, even though the Thokost didn't wear clothing at all. They did adorn themselves with precious metal and gemstones literally embedded into their flesh. Zanthos had both gold wire designs, and flashy green, faceted stones inlaid in his mandibles, as well as designs in organic swooping patterns dyed into his skin on his arms and thighs, like tribal tattoos in a series of darker gray shades. Golden rings circled the bases of some of his thicker branches, and they glittered with gemstones.

Those signs of wealth implied a high status in his society, but since so little was known about the Thokost, I still didn't understand what that status might be. Was he a leader of his people? Or a wealthy merchant? Or just someone who spent too much money on jewelry and got themselves deep into debt?

His unclear social status aside, one of my biggest questions remained unanswered by the pictures of him that were growing on me the more I studied them in detail. His groin, upon close study, appeared to be just as bark-like as the rest of his skin. Though, if I really zoomed in, I could spot the hint of what appeared to be a knothole there that might conceal hidden genitals, like the Akrellian males had.

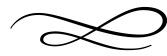
I wrote a letter to Zanthos asking about his taproot right after reading that story online, feeling hopeful because just thinking about what it might look like—or feel like—managed to arouse me, despite my trepidation about this arrangement and how alien he was. I supposed the brothel worker's satisfaction with their encounter with a Thokost gave me hope that making love with Zanthos could actually end up being pleasant.

I promptly tore the finished letter into little pieces and flushed them down the toilet, because I didn't want anyone to discover them. I had this paranoid idea that the barracks housekeeper would gather up all the pieces and tape them together to read my fantasy questions to Zanthos.

Or worse, decide to scan the letter into the communication system and send it to him.



*Four*



*First Spawn Cycle, Rotation 4, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Greetings from the Land of All Things,  
Francismarietaylor,

I request forgiveness for delayed transmission of communication. I had desired to contact you prior to your first exposure to my toxin, but matters of grave importance pulled my attention back to the Cluster.

Your honest speak reassures me, because I also find you unpleasant in aspect, and it is good that we can discuss such concerns openly. Though I do not know what “jerk” means, given the multiple translations provided, I can assume your intention behind the rune-speak. You are not without reason in your doubts and fears. Nor are you alone in them. I, too, have doubted the course chosen for me, but I am deep-rooted to it.

Your first communication provided Ost illumination upon my understanding. I have adjusted the planned food sources I will provide you with consideration for those things that might distress you. I find your interests most fascinating and am deeply grateful for the images you included of your flesh-line (“family/bloodline/relatives” I believe are your words for this), which I study with much curiosity to know you better. I wish for you to feel only soft breezes in your new home with me.

I regret-hum that I cannot answer all your questions freely. Some secrets are only for Cluster. When you entwine with me, and we are properly entangled, then you shall *know* as we know.

I noted some rune-speak confusion within the translation of your correspondence.

“Deep-root” means to you “commit/pledge/devote,” but you have used it in a way that implies it is our word for sex-seeking (we are uncertain about this combination of sounds in your language, please forgive translation errors) with intent to entangle. These are indeed similar concepts, but deep-root is broader and applies beyond partnerships.

I will “entwine branches with you” (in your language this is apparently to “wed/unify/unite/join as one”) to become entangled (this is the best rune-speak I could find to explain the concept of our bond with permanent partners) so we may sex-see new sprouts.

My concerns and doubts have eased in the wake of your second communication. You are forthright and this pleases me, for I do not trust hollow-speak (this is “insincere with intent to be diplomatic” according to your HOAN’s translation guide). You bared your branches, and for this, I will bare my own as much as I am permitted.

Your leaves rustle with tales of loss to the Menops. My people have also suffered their incursions upon our own colonies. Humans have demonstrated a surprising resistance to their fungal domination. This alone impresses the Thokost enough to investigate alliance opportunities with your species.

I study your documents to refine my understanding of your people so I may better explain. Until then, I look forward to receiving more of your communications in twisting line runes that please my eyes.

May Thok’s rain wash all fears away,

Zanthos T’mon



*CLUSTER MEMORY SHARING – Spore Talker Zanthos T’mon*

I knelt before the Immobiles in the Wind Temple as their ancient branches swayed around the Cluster. The soft breeze played lightly among their filaments.

It carried a drift of cool air, and I welcomed it as it fluttered among my own extended filaments, which rose and danced in response to its playful tug.

The hearts of the Cluster pulsed in a familiar and comforting rhythm. Strong. The vividly colored, fleshy pseudopods that spread around me on all sides to connect to every Immobile looked vital and healthy. The feeding tendrils that emerged from every pod crept slowly but inexorably over the flesh-forms of the Immobiles.

I could hear the chittering and the whooping calls of the juveniles carried on a light breeze from the nursery beyond the Cluster's Nest. Though those noises echoed in the Wind Temple, this place was peaceful. The sound of gentle chimes stirred by the breeze intertwined with the steady pulse of hearts.

Thok's sacred breath brought not only the chime-song but also the scent of the many ponds outside the stone walls. It sighed fragrantly through open, louvered windows designed to filter the wind properly when it was time to send the spores on to a new Cluster.

The joyful noise of juvenile play faded into the background of my consciousness as my filaments extended to touch those of the oldest of the Immobiles. The Cluster had nearly reclaimed his flesh-form, now buried beneath the thick tendrils that were slowly consuming it.

He felt at peace, calm as his physical form faded to nourish the Cluster, knowing he would soon rejoin the other spores to be re-rooted again when the time was right. Someday, his voice would hum and whoop again among joyful juvenile sounds, his old, withered body replaced with a newly rooted flesh-form.

*"You are still filled with doubt."* The Eldest's ancient breeze barely sighed among his drooping branches, but I still heard its whisper.

Instead of recoiling my filaments so he could not see more of my thoughts, I let them rest among his. Perhaps his wisdom

could assuage my doubts about my upcoming entwining of branches with an out-worlder.

“I am deep-rooted,” I said aloud, my voice rumbling out of my under-mouth, accompanied by a soft, thrumming hum resonating in my heart chamber.

*“That is not the same as being content with your rooting ground.”* The Eldest’s voice was faded by time, like his flesh-form.

“The human female is,” I resisted the urge to shudder, *“unpleasant to look upon.”*

I shared my memory of the images I’d been provided of her with the Eldest. Only two of them had been of her without any of the protective fabrics the humans adorned themselves with to cover skin so weak and fragile it could split open like an overripe fruit.

If I had read her hideous face correctly, she’d looked uncomfortable in those images. She didn’t like exposing that bulging flesh, her hands caught in a partial lift towards her chest like she wanted to cover herself again. I could completely understand why, given how bulbous her body was, with two round blobs hanging from her chest region to guard her heart chamber.

They also reminded me of overripe fruit.

*“You enjoy the sweet, juicy taste of overripe fruit.”* The Eldest’s chiding amusement shivered his branches.

If I planned to eat her, I would already be salivating at the sight of all that soft meat, but since I intended to entwine with her and sex-see with her, I felt quite differently about it.

“Her nest knothole is covered by fur.” I struggled not to purge my rising meal at the memory of that image. “My taproot won’t grow to rain inside it.”

*“You will feel differently in time.”* The Eldest sent me certainty through our touching filaments. I let it wash over me, reinforcing my deep-rooting to this path. *“Shift your thoughts to curiosity, instead of reactive disgust, and let your wonder spur the growth of your taproot.”*

I found my branches nodding along to the Eldest's whisper of a voice, my eyes drifting closed, only to pop open when he said, "*think of tasting her flesh without consuming it. Perhaps you will begin to salivate again.*"

Confusion filled me until the Eldest sent me memories from the Cluster. Ancient memories of ancient spores. They had once mated with out-worlders, similar in form to the human. They had used vine-tongues to taste flesh in a way that gave the out-worlder strange pleasure.

I felt a stirring behind my knothole at the images of vine-tongues working over furless, alien knotholes, then dipping inside them while the out-worlders writhed and gripped branches in soft hands, their legs spread wide over Thokost shoulders, Thokost tails coiling around them to keep them in place.

"Why did we stop sex-seeking with the out-worlders?" Based on the memories shared with me, I could acknowledge that it almost looked like fun.

To spread a vulnerable out-worlder open wide and then consume them at leisure, while they gripped and tugged sensitive branches in a plea for more instead of screaming until they died, usually from blood loss.

I found the idea intriguing.

Perhaps I could suggest that my future entangled remove her fur, so it didn't put me off tasting her nest chamber like the Thokost did in these ancient memories.

I stored them for later replay, hoping the stirring behind my knothole would continue when I watched them again until my taproot and spreaders finally sprouted.

The Eldest shared a different memory with me that explained the reason for our isolation.

The ancient Thokost had begun to crave out-worlders for sex-seeking play—especially those Thokost with strong Ost tendencies—but the out-worlders who would prepare for such play with the time-consuming toxin exposure often had other motives in mind than pleasure. Once they gained their

immunity to the toxin, they would attempt to lure Thokost into traps to study our kind.

So they could *know* as we know.

Now, we do not sex-seek for play with out-worlders. This situation with my future entangled was different. The human would come here to entwine permanently with me, and the Cluster. Then she would *know*, but she would be bound never to tell. She would be ours.

Mine.

No one could touch her but a Thokost, without her body killing them with the toxin it would secrete.

*Mine.*

“*You like that thought,*” the Eldest still sounded amused, despite the sharing of solemn memories. “*You have always been possessive. Ost burns so brightly within you.*”

I was first rooted in the nursery on the day of our star, Ost. Because of that, I was chosen as Spore Talker to calm my aggressive tendencies and possessiveness, so I did not become a raider as most Ost-rooted do. I’d still chosen to grow tails, though I had sworn to never use them.

A Spore Talker must learn to share. Especially the most important thing a Thokost could possess.

Knowledge.

## *Five*



March 10th, 23 A.M.I

Dear Zanthos,

Well, that was an awkward mix-up with the second communication, but I'm happy that you've taken my frankness so well. You're right that we should speak freely of such concerns if we're to be "entwined." It sounds like a very serious process. Perhaps even more so than a human wedding. In my region, we celebrate a marriage with a ceremony, then a party afterwards, then usually the couple goes on a honeymoon to spend time alone together "sex-seeking."

At least, that was how my first marriage went. I'm sure you've been informed that I was married before, and I am a widow. My husband was taken by the Menops in the first wave of the invasion. Why they chose our small town to send their ground soldiers instead of the fungus-infected humans, I'm not certain, but it was located close to a military base, so perhaps that was their real target, and we were just collateral damage.

I should tell you that it took me a long time to write that last paragraph. I am still recovering from the traumatic event, despite so many years having passed since then. I hope you'll understand that I loved my husband dearly, so losing him has left me with a lot of grief and guilt that it wasn't me the Menops took. He'd put himself between them and me to save my life.

He was my best friend as well as my lover.

I hope that you and I can become good friends as well as mates. I know it will be challenging when our backgrounds are so different. Even our bodies are so different.

Speaking of bodies, I'll admit that mine has been put through the wringer with these "treatments," but I've finally had the last serum injection and passed the "test" to prove that I won't die from merely touching your skin. I can honestly say it hasn't been a pleasant experience, which is why I waited so long to reply to your last letter. I felt sick and miserable for most of the last month, and I didn't want you to read letters I'd written while in that condition.

If we're going to be completely frank, not all the letters I wrote during that time were complimentary towards you. I also wished during that time that you might have written one or two to me to help reassure me that you hadn't changed your mind while I was in the midst of all that suffering. I've been informed not to expect too much communication due to the expenses involved on both sides with transmission across the galaxy, as well as the demands upon you due to your position.

What that position is, exactly, hasn't been explained to me, so I'll ask you directly. What is your status in your "Cluster?"

You appear to possess wealth, if the precious metals and gemstones in your skin are anything to judge by, but I've been left in the dark about what you do for a living. I know that information about my career, both before and after the invasion, has been transmitted to you along with all the other paperwork I've filled out that went into excruciating detail about my background and life.

I hate to say this, but I'm beginning to feel like this will be a one-sided relationship if I'm always the one giving with nothing given in return.

I'm not speaking of wealth, of course. I understand that you've already agreed to provide for all my needs and comforts while I'm on your world, so I needn't bring anything but my most personal possessions. It's just that I would appreciate more information from your end.



Perhaps a little more reassurance from your end as well would be nice.

Forgive me if this comes off as blunt or rude, but you mentioned that you don't like "hollow-speak" so I'm laying it all out on the table for you, as we humans say.

I hope to hear back from you *before* I board the shuttle to my ship and leave my world behind forever to join you on yours.

Sincerely,

Francis



*FRANNIE*

It was almost a month since my last letter when I wrote this one to Zanthos, feeling raw and exhausted and more than a little ignored by him. A month of hellish "treatments" to build my immunity to Thokost toxin. I realized in that time that I was a freaking lab experiment, and that wasn't what I'd signed up for, but damned if I hadn't agreed to it in the HOAN contracts I'd so foolishly signed.

*Always read the fine print!*

I'd spent these last few weeks in the medical care facility, most of the time wracked with miserable symptoms, like a headache, upset stomach, fluttering heartbeat, shortness of breath, and severe muscle and joint pains that even the heavy painkillers I'd been given had barely touched. This was all from a *diluted* form of the Thokost toxin!

I would hate to imagine what a full dose of that stuff would do to someone who wasn't immune. Granted, most victims were exposed to the toxin topically, and my exposure was intravenous, so the symptoms came on a lot more rapidly for me than they would for the average victim.

Being sick always made me cranky. Short-tempered.

"Spicy," as Lou would call it.

I'd written many well-seasoned letters to Zanthos that I definitely never intended to send, and this time, I made sure to tear them all up right after getting my frustration and loneliness and crankiness out of my system so HOAN didn't filch them and pass them on to Zanthos like they had with my second letter.

My Out-Match coordinator said that Zanthos's response to that second letter was exactly what they'd been hoping for when they'd sent it. Apparently, their A.I. that had matched me with the Thokost had suggested that my first letter would come off as too formal and remote, and they'd taken its advice and passed on my far less formal second attempt.

Humans would be doomed by A.I.s at this rate. We were all just fortunate that it was correct about that one particular situation, but I wasn't about to take any more chances. Not with the A.I., and certainly not with the HOAN agents who had put me through so much crap these last few weeks.

Ironically, the only person in this whole affair who I was still willing to trust was Zanthos himself. The very alien who'd provided the misery shots to HOAN. Despite the somewhat whining tone of my most recent letter, which I had yet to destroy, I kind of understood why he couldn't communicate frequently with me during my prep time.

Kind of.

According to my blood tests, I was now fully immune to Thokost toxin, and the last shot I'd received was a full dose of it to prove that. I'm assuming I'd be dead if I'd failed that test, which just goes to show how desperate HOAN was to make this match happen.

Of course, the lab coats had first done a ton of tests on my antibodies or enzymes or whatever it was that made me immune—I'd been too sick to pay much attention, and now, I could honestly say I didn't care, as long as all this suffering paid off in the end.

What that pay-off would be, though, remained up in the air. During this entire time, HOAN hadn't provided much new

information other than the scientists “oohing” and “aahing” over the serum, which they’d had a hell of a time analyzing.

I don’t think they were ever able to run a full analysis of it. I’d heard them say something about the “solution destroying the solute” as soon as it was ejected from the sealed vial, making the small amount they’d tried to study inert, or unreadable, or something of that sort.

One of them had mentioned “mutagenic” compounds and fungi, and that was when I’d decided I needed to check out on the topic. I was already committed to the course of treatments by that point and doubted anyone in that lab would have let me back out.

The greatest extraterrestrial minds in the galaxy had attempted to study the Thokost, with limited success, according to the ‘Net. Leave it to humans to believe we could succeed where everyone else had failed. I couldn’t say for certain whether arrogance was a virtue or a vice for us at this point.

My future mate kept his people’s secrets close, that was for certain. What that meant for me trying to assimilate into his society, I couldn’t say, but despite now being immune to his “secretions,” I feared this move to his world more than ever.

I would be completely isolated there, without even the lab coats to talk to, though most of what they said sounded like an alien language to me anyway. I’d have to rely entirely on my mate, for everything. Especially companionship.

I really needed to hear from him, soon. I might just send this last letter, spice and all, and find out what he had to say in response.

He needed to share more information with me than he had thus far, or I would go crazy worrying on the entire two weeks-long flight to his home system. I couldn’t even look forward to my first interstellar flight, where I’d be passing through two Lusian Jumpstations that folded space or created a wormhole or a stable singularity—according to prevailing ‘Net theories—because my stomach remained in knots, even though I no longer felt sick from the toxin exposure.

Why had I ever thought I wanted this?

Oh. Right.

I was running away from home, hoping to find a new one that wasn't haunted by the ghosts of my past.

*Six*



March 18, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 36, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Filaments touch, Francis (this is the Thokost version of “dear” as a greeting, according to my study of your language),

I must ask for forgiveness again, because it is clear that you are not pleased with my actions during these past rotations (this is something like “days” for our people).

I did not wish to avoid contacting you but was advised by your Cluster agent that you were not in a condition to communicate, so I should not send further correspondence until you could respond.

I feel sorrow for your suffering. I had heard that the serum exposure was a difficult process for those who are not once-rooted (how we refer to ourselves, like you call yourselves “humans”). I would not have put you through such a process if it wasn’t necessary, but it is true that my body would have killed you if you did not build this immunity. In order to entwine our branches and become entangled, you must be able to endure my touch and survive it.

Once we are entangled, you will *know*. You will understand what the Cluster understands. Do not fear this bonding, because it will erase your doubt about your place among the Thokost. I can say no more than this, but I will add that I have studied your documents every rotation since I received them, and I have accessed research on your people that was collected by the once-rooted. I no longer doubt the

fertility of this ground for rooting. I am, in fact, looking forward to it.

I anticipate your arrival, knowing that you will now be able to bear my toxic touch. My eagerness to touch you has increased greatly since I gained access to more information about human sex-seeking rituals. My taproot has sprouted in preparation, and I am hoping you will allow my vine-tongue access to your seed chamber for tasting without consuming. I hope we needn't wait until after entwining for me to taste your nectar-moon. It sounds delicious.

I hope you will forgive my tails. I am strong in Ost and cannot bring myself to shed them. (I have grown a fourth one, in fact, that sprouted with my taproot). I will train them not to bind you too tightly.

Perhaps I should explain that last series of rune-speak better. I am concerned that reading it might panic you.

I am not a raider, despite my Ost tendencies. My position in the Cluster keeps them in balance. You asked in your last letter about my position and status among the once-rooted. Those are reasonable questions that I should have answered sooner. I am called a Spore Talker. This is difficult to explain without telling more than I can say, but it is perhaps equivalent to your highest "nation" leader in terms of status, though not quite in function.

I am considered very wealthy, though all once-rooted share resources in a Cluster, so none go without. Ost tendency like mine, even in balance, leads to acquisition, and possessiveness. It is an unfortunate side effect of a powerful rooting "sign" that was sought after by Clusters in our primitive past. I believe, based on my study of your species, that your people would use the word "barbarian" to describe the Ost-rooted. Most are now considered raiders by the once-rooted, but some of us have balanced our Ost-energy successfully to serve our Clusters in these more civilized times.

In rereading this letter, I'm beginning to question whether I should send it to you. Because you do not yet *know*, my nature

might concern you to the point of fearing me. I will never harm you. I am deep-rooted in that promise.

I *will* send this in the hopes that you will trust my word, because you will need to have trust for our entwining to work. If this letter frightens you away, then I will admit to disappointment, but it would be better to learn of our incompatibility now than to discover it when you are already on my world.

In parting, I extend my sympathy to you for the loss of your previous entangled. I would like to be your “friend” as well as your “lover” as he was once. It sounds like he also possessed the Ost-energy to sacrifice himself to protect what was his. May his spore travel far on soft breezes and come to root in a vital Cluster.

I await your arrival with much anticipation,  
Zanthos



*FRANNIE*

What.

The.

Hell?

Four tails are going to do *what* now?

I reread the letter Zanthos sent me that had pinged in my digital message inbox just before boarding the shuttle. I was now in my cabin on a ship heading to a world where my intended mate waited to tie me up with his tails and “taste” me.

What was a vine-tongue?

My GalactaNet search quickly answered that one. It was long, was what it was. *Very* long.

Apparently, like tails, it was an optional appendage that a Thokost could choose to have. Those that did possess a “vine-tongue” usually shot it out of their sideways mouths to wrap

around their victims to drag them in and hold them in place while they ate them alive.

Sounded fun and not mind-numbingly terrifying at all.

I could guess what a “seed chamber” was without Zanthos’s usually useful attempts at translation. I had found it cute how he tried to explain his word usages. I even chuckled at his misunderstanding of honeymoon, horrified as I was at his casual mention of tasting without consuming.

Seriously. WTF?

*Ost-energy?*

Another ‘Net search explained nothing but that “Ost” was the Thokost name for their star, and “Thok” was their name for their home world. So, ThokOst was just a word people created for them by combining the two.

Or maybe they’d created that name for themselves, though Zanthos referred to himself and his people as “once-rooted.”

Maybe it was the same concept as humans calling ourselves “Earthlings” to differentiate between ourselves and extraterrestrials.

What that meant about their “energy” still confused me.

I was *so* in over my head!

It was too late to turn back now. The ship was on the move and interstellar travel using Jumpstations was comparatively fast, with only two stops on my trip that wouldn’t include a debarkation on my part. I’d be on Thok before I knew it, face to face with the terrifying “barbarian” alien I was about to make my life partner.

I searched “Thokost” and “raiders,” then immediately regretted it. Where was all this info when I was searching the species before?

“Sonofabitch!” I cried to the thankfully empty cabin I didn’t have to share, unlike many of the other passengers on the ship. Realization had hit me like a ton of bricks.



HOAN must have blocked certain information from me while pretending they knew next to nothing about the Thokost! Now that I was already on my way to Thok, they weren't censoring my access anymore, the bastards. They knew it was too late for me to pull a runner and disappear.

Thokost raiders were feared throughout the galaxy, though they tended to remain in their home systems like most of their species. They typically attacked and conquered Clusters, or simply destroyed them. From what the 'Net said, they were the barbarian version of the Thokost, whose *civilized* citizens were known to be unfriendly, at the very least.

Thokost raiders were brutal, violent, aggressive.

*Possessive.*

Shit.

Why was I okay with that last one?

Maybe because Lou had been a bit of a caveman when it came to guarding his woman too. I used to joke that he'd piss a circle around me to mark his territory if I'd let him. But honestly, I'd found it sexy when my normally easygoing husband had gotten up in arms about other men hitting on me. I realized only now how he'd always put himself between them and me, just like he'd put himself between a giant ant monster and me in the end.

For the first time since I'd lost Lou, I could recall him fondly without the crushing weight of guilt and grief that had plagued me for so long. It seemed that leaving Earth's gravity behind had truly set me free of its ghosts.

For all that Zanthos's latest letter concerned me, I found his words about Lou's soul, which I assumed was what a "spore" was to the Thokost, passing on to a new life comforting. Then I thought about the fact that Zanthos called himself a "Spore" Talker and really got curious, then nervous, then curious again.

Every time he communicated with me, he reminded me of how different we were, but he kept saying that I would "know," once we entwined our "branches." He stressed the

word, like it meant something more than just figuring something out.

I'd taken so much of his wording as symbolic, what with me not having any branches to "entwine" with his impressive rack, but now I wondered if maybe I shouldn't take some of it more literally.

Then there was the fact that he wanted to "sex-seek" with me before we even entwined. He sounded like he was okay with putting the honeymoon before the wedding. He'd also been surprisingly forthcoming about "sprouting a taproot," which I supposed answered the question I'd been too chicken to ask him.

What kind of documents was he looking at?

And *why* didn't I have Thokost versions of those documents?

I had to settle for stories tagged as "fictional" with details I couldn't trust. I kept returning to that one story I'd found that might have been truth hidden behind a "fiction" tag, poring over every minute detail of it, all of which were sparse as hell, as I tried to gain an understanding of how my sexual encounters with my future mate would go.

Well, at least I wouldn't die from the toxin. That much I could trust.

Despite his somewhat alarming last letter, Zanthos still sounded earnest and even sweet at times. His way of speaking had a certain poetic quality to it that I liked. It was probably simply the way it translated, but still, I looked forward to reading his communications and hopefully when he spoke, it translated in the same lyrical way.

The closer we got to his world, and the communications arrays surrounding his system, the cheaper it would be for me to contact Zanthos. I might even be able to share a video call with him, though that would cost a small fortune I didn't have, despite liquidating all my assets.

I'd donated all my money to various charities on Earth in anticipation of leaving it forever.

Like Zanthos, I was “deep-rooted” to this course now. All I could do was give him the trust he’d asked for and hope that we had compatibility.

To that end, I spent a lot of time on my journey studying his images, wishing I had one of his taproot, given that I’d had to provide naked pictures of my lady bits to him.

The more I looked at the images of him, the better I could appreciate the sheer, beastly size of him, not to mention all that muscle, ropey as it was. He would dwarf me, and I found that thought oddly appealing now. While I wasn’t looking forward to an introduction to his “vine-tongue,” if it felt good getting all up inside my seed chamber, then I shouldn’t be complaining about a little alien “tasting without consuming.”

On Earth, I’d been sick, and I’d been scared, ever since the Valentine’s Day reveal of my future mate. Now that I was in space, I felt oddly free of those emotions, allowing me the opportunity to genuinely consider my future—as unlike my past as it could get—as something to look forward to with curiosity and maybe even a little desire for my extraterrestrial partner.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt alive and excited about what would come next.

Lou had sacrificed himself so that I could go on living, protecting me one last time, and I hadn’t done right by his memory in refusing to do just that. I wouldn’t waste any more time reclaiming my life.

# *Seven*



March 25th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 45, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Dear Zanthos,

We just reached the first Jumpstation! I don't know if you've ever traveled through one before, but it is amazing! Even though I won't get the chance to debark on the station, I can access video feed of the interior while we're waiting for the rings to spin up, and it's like a giant, high-tech city.

The communications arrays here are fantastic, of course, so it's much cheaper to send this letter before we jump through the rings and head into warp to reach the second station. You probably know how dodgy access is for the remote space arrays.

There are Lusians everywhere! I've never seen so many of them congregate in one place. Usually, it's just one or two of them acting as representatives for their species on Earth.

The station is mobbed with other species too. So many different ones that it makes my head spin. It also makes me realize how little we humans interact with extraterrestrials other than the handful of different species that visit Earth and buy cheap tourist junk to take back to their home worlds. Even after twenty-three years of having access to space travel, I spotted only one human among the crowds. He was a career spacer, I think, and he seemed to be with an entire crew of extraterrestrials. It was so exciting to spot a human face in that crowd, I must admit.

I haven't allowed myself much time to consider how I would feel being the only human on Thok, but seeing that lone human moving among the people, hanging out with his extraterrestrial friends, made me feel a little better about the idea.

After all, I've lived among humans my entire life, and I've felt so lonely since the Invasion, even with my closest friends only a wrist comm click away. I never had siblings, lost my parents before the Invasion even began, as was probably noted in my bio, and my extended family just sort of drifted away afterwards. I suppose I let them. It was easier not to talk to the people who'd known my husband like I had.

The spacer looked happy surrounded by nonhuman faces. He'd even laughed at something one of his crew mates had said. (I don't know what since it was only video feed, without audio). I'm hoping that I will form friendships that bring a smile back to my face once I'm living on Thok. I'm already feeling a little homesick, and I'm missing my support group. My final farewell to them before boarding the shuttle seemed far too short for the years we'd spent together bonding over our losses.

Apparently, some of them decided to sign up for the Out-Match program because of me! It's strange to realize that I set an example for other lonely humans. HOAN should pay me a referral fee.

Ha! Not likely.

Despite my homesickness (not a real illness, but just a general sadness, like, "Darkness before Rain" I think you would say(?)), I *am* looking forward to finally meeting you in person. Your last letter was...intriguing. I'm not sure what to make of all of it, though I greatly appreciate your added efforts to explain your word choices. I know how wonky (this would be "broken-branched" in your language, if I can trust this guide I found on the 'Net) translations can get between two different species. You're going the extra distance to make this all easier for me, and I truly appreciate that.

I must say that I was a bit alarmed at first by your suggestion of tasting my “seed chamber.” (I looked that up in the guide and it means exactly what I thought it meant). While that is certainly a human mating ritual, humans don’t possess very long tongues, so it’s not...*quite* what I imagine you’d like to do, but I have given it a lot of consideration, and I’m interested in trying it with you.

You promised not to hurt me, and I am willing to extend my trust to you, because if I wasn’t, then what was the point of all that I went through to be here right now, on a ship flying through space to become your mate?

As you say, I’m more deep-rooted than ever, and I’ve really begun to anticipate trying “sex-seeking” with you. I would ask you to transmit an image of your taproot, but I feel that would be too personal to send over public arrays, so I will try to imagine what it looks like until I can see it in person. (The ‘Net doesn’t have any images of a Thokost taproot either, but there were some sketches, though they are all tagged as “fictional.”)

About your tails...is the “binding” an automatic reflex? Your letter seemed to imply that it was. I’m not saying I’m against that, as long as you keep your promise not to hurt me. It sounds a little...exciting.

Sorry if my letters are a little shaky in the last few paragraphs. I get nervous (but in a good way!) when I think about all of this. When you say you have “Ost” energy, it brings to mind what humans often call a “caveman” attitude. I’m not against that.

The rings are starting to spin up! I didn’t think it would take me this long to finish a letter. Maybe I should have just voice-texted this one. I’m sorry, I have to go for now so I can get this scanned and transmitted before the gateway is open.

Looking forward to seeing you soon!

Frannie



*MEMORY SHARING—SPORE Talker Zanthos*

Once again, I knelt before the Immobiles.

The air was still today, and the water weighed it down. The humidity didn't burden me in this moment. Perhaps later, I would swim in the lazing pond to enjoy the coolness of the water and hopefully find stillness in my mind.

My Ost-energy burned brighter as each rotation brought me closer to my future entangled. I have spent perhaps too much time examining all the memory files and documentation in preparation for this entwining. Now, just the sight of those bare-skinned images of Frannie made my spreaders too eager to pull open my knothole and let my taproot spring free.

It wasn't that long ago that I'd found her appearance disgusting, but that was before I learned so much about her. Not just through studying her information, her "bio", and the Cluster's shared memories of Thokost mating with other outworlders, nor just from watching the downloaded video images collected by our Cluster Group on human sex-seeking.

Her letters have also brought me joy and curiosity, and I pored over them as much as all the other documentation, rereading them again and again, detecting more about her with each reading. I loved the squiggly lines that formed her rune-speak, and I'd studied them enough now that I could recognize where they grew "shaky" as she always noted. Shaky or not, they looked elegant, like vines spiraling back and forth, the whole of them leaning strongly forwards like her words were in a rush to leave her rune-marking implement.

Her last letter, transmitted from a Lusian Jumpstation, was the most revealing of all.

Elder filaments extended to touch mine. It was the second Eldest this time. The Eldest had finally released his spore to the Cluster.

"She has Thok-energy," I said carefully. My deep rumbling and chest resonance didn't reveal the excitement I felt at that revelation.

"This was why she was chosen," the new Eldest said in a much stronger voice than that of the previous Eldest. "She will

balance your fire with her rain.”

My tails unraveled from my four arms where they tended to coil when at rest, whipping eagerly in the heavy air behind me. “Reflexive,” Frannie had called their actions, but they were under my control when I concentrated. For now, I ordered them back around my arms, and though it took a little longer than it usually did for them to settle in place, they finally obeyed.

“I was concerned that my last letter would deter her.” I admitted that concern aloud only now that it hadn’t.

“You had already decided to claim her when that letter was sent.” The Eldest’s voice still had the strength to resonate in the great trunk that towered above the temple. “Your Ost would have forced you to travel to her world to find her if she tried to escape her deep-rooting to this path.”

I withdrew my filaments, not liking the depth of the Eldest’s scrutiny into my thoughts. Already, I could feel the imbalance within me growing along with my taproot. I would need to release seeding sap soon or my taproot would grow too large for my human “mate,” as she called herself.

I needed to regain balance with her Thok energy or submerge my consciousness within the Cluster until my rising Ost burned down to a manageable level. Fortunately, she would be at the next Jumpstation within a rotation, and the last branch of her journey was a small bud.

I’d sent her one last letter. A short one, but I hoped it made my point about how eager I felt to see her.

“Preparations for the entwining will take the remainder of the Spawn Cycle,” the Eldest felt it necessary to remind me.

“She has agreed to attempt sex-seeking before then.” I’d reread that part of her letter so many times that I could see the rune-speak imprinted behind my eye-blinds. “That will relieve my Ost.”

“Do not forget to form a branch-bond with your future entangled,” the Eldest cautioned. “Sex-seeking play is only one part of an entangling.” A stiff breeze whipped through the



temple as if to add to the Eldest's warning. "She must be branch-bonded to you to entwine successfully, and for your sap to seed in her chamber."

My mandibles clacked together, the roll of my vine-tongue impatiently twitching behind the thorns of my mouth slit. I didn't like being told the obvious, even by the Eldest.

"The signs are there," the Eldest mournfully rumbled. "Perhaps it is for the best that she will drain your taproot when she arrives. Your Ost grows resentful, filaments no longer willing to touch with others."

I clenched my lower claws into fists on my thighs, my muscles creaking as I shifted in my kneeling stance. My upper arms crossed over my chest to conceal the impatient tapping of my claws.

My filaments had all retracted back into the casing of my branches.

"This was the path the Cluster chose for me," I growled, my rumble resonance echoing in the temple. The Immobiles' branches shivered in response, but the Cluster's heartbeats continued to pulse steadily.

"Yesss," other Immobiles sighed in a chorus of rippling leaves. "Anticipation sparks Ost. Soon, rain will douse fire. We see her arriving. Soon." Their gusty voices slowly faded, but one rose again to add, "Patience."

I rose to my feet almost immediately after that. I knew she'd be arriving soon. I didn't need to be told. I still had many preparations to make. I intended to meet her at the port station on Ramular, one of our three industrial processing moons.

A Spore Talker leaving the vicinity of the Cluster was unprecedented, but I couldn't bring myself to allow any other once-rooted to escort her down to the Melam Sora rooting. She would be with me, and no other.

*Mine.*

*Eight*  
∞

April 2nd, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 55, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

My Frannie,

I would not have you rely upon sketches found on the  
'Net. I hope you enjoy the attached image. I recorded it while  
enjoying your bare-skin images.

Soon, the warm breezes will carry you my way,

Zanthos



*FRANNIE*

He'd sent it! He'd actually sent the Thokost version of a  
dick pic over the public array. Not that all messages weren't  
encrypted, but the Lusians could see them if they chose to  
unencrypt them. The comm arrays were mostly theirs.

Of course, I'd heard that the Lusians could see everything,  
so it wasn't like even the Thokost had much to hide from  
them.

Or did they? Could the Thokost keep even those enigmatic  
grays from discovering their secrets?

One thing was no longer a secret to me.

His dick looked like horror-movie nightmare fuel, with  
vine-like tendrils spreading open the knothole at his groin so a  
thick, pale, rootlike growth could extend from the opening. It

was very large, and very girthy, and it looked exactly like what it was, even down to the mushroom head.

I sure hoped that wasn't a real mushroom. With the Thokost looking so plant-like, that wasn't off the table. The tip of it dripped a white, creamy fluid, and the entire length of it looked shiny, like it was covered in lubricant.

Or slime.

No. I would call it lubricant to make it easier on myself.

I wished I knew what it smelled like, but then again, I hadn't even considered what Zanthos himself would smell like at all until now.

What if I couldn't stand his odor? What if he didn't like mine? What if our pheromones were too alien for each other, and we were repulsed all over again the moment we got a whiff of each other. That would be an absolute disaster!

I could totally get into his huge body now that I'd accustomed myself to the images of it—bark rough skin and ropey muscle and all. I could deal with the four arms and the four “binding” tails touching and even wrapping around me. I even thought his rack of branches looked damn impressive, glittering with golden rings and gemstones like the ones embedded in his flesh.

I'd even come to terms with his mandible-covered mouth slit, and the vine that would extend from it to “taste without consuming.”

Unfortunately, in all this familiarizing myself with my future mate, I'd forgotten to ask for a scent sample or something. Would I need to close-pin my nose to have sex with him?

*Was* that slime? It was, wasn't it? Did it smell bad? Did the mushroom on the head of his “taproot” smell like a stinky Earth mushroom?

I was back to worrying about what I'd gotten myself into again, and the rings of this Jumpstation were already spinning up. Even if they weren't preparing to open the last portal that

stood between me and Zanthos, it was already too late to back out now.

I would have to deal with whatever came my way.

*Nine*



April 11th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 66, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Dear Shari,

Well, I'm here, in the Ost System, and my shuttle is docked with the Thokost Space Station Ramular. I'm not nervous. Not nervous at all.

I'm freaking terrified!

That's why this letter is speech-to-text instead of handwritten. I'm trembling so badly that I doubt I could write a single word.

I don't have much time before debarkation. There aren't any other passengers getting off the shuttle, but at least they're taking some time to offload cargo before I have to take my first steps into a Thokost station where few species in the galaxy have ever been permitted to land.

And this will be my new home. Forever!

Well, Thok will be.

From the shuttle viewscreens, I can see my new home planet, and it's like a priceless emerald just hanging out in space. It's so green and gorgeous! There are large, blue bodies of water scattered all around the planet, but most of it is huge land masses. Only the poles are frozen. The rest of the planet looks like the Garden of Eden.

There are Thokost workers on the station, and they are *big*! However, most of the cargo loading and unloading appears to

be done by these organic cranes that could pass for massive tree branches.

I've used my cabin control deck to move the exterior cameras to try and scan the station. Zanthos sent a short message informing me that he'd be picking me up from the station soon, and that we'd take the "transport" down to the planet's surface. I haven't spotted him yet, and by now, I could easily recognize his adornment and markings.

As well as that rack of branches that crowns his head.

Isn't it strange that I find that so sexy now? So much has shifted in my perception of the Thokost, and of Zanthos in particular.

I still hate that HOAN A.I., but I must admit that now that I've accepted Zanthos as my match, I'm really interested in getting to know him better. Much better.

I've come to terms with how different we are from each other, and instead of fearing intimacy with him because of that, I'm looking forward to exploring new experiences.

I'm still fearing it, though. I should be honest about that, given that you've signed up with Out-Match too. You probably won't end up with a Thokost like I did, but you will likely go through some similar doubts about your decision.

*I see him! Oh my god, he's huge!*

All the other Thokost are stopping in the middle of their work to stare at him, and some of them are even taking a knee and bowing their branch crowns to him!

I gotta go, Shari! I'll write you another letter, I promise. I'm just not sure when that will be, but I just wanted you to know that I've arrived, and I'm safe.

And now that I've seen my future mate, I'm so ready to meet him!

Frannie



*FRANNIE*

I was caught between a desire to run off the shuttle and into the four arms of the towering behemoth who would be my husband—and the desire to find a dark corner to hide from the *towering* behemoth who would be my husband.

His rack of branches was so big, and I hadn't realized how much larger than the others he was until I saw him standing among other Thokost, who, I realized now, did not have the same gold and gemstone adornments and dyed bark skin designs that he had.

The shuttle pilot paged my cabin to alert me that my escort had arrived, so I would be free to debark, and my luggage was being unloaded now. I stood indecisively, wringing my hands together, then rushed to the mirror in my cabin and checked my appearance, smoothing my blond hair flat. I'd noticed the easing in my wrinkles since I'd started the rejuv treatments, but it wasn't until I stared at my face in the mirror now that I realized that I looked like I'd shed twenty years in a little under two months.

Perhaps some of that had to do with the glow of excitement in my currently grayish-green eyes.

It was time. I couldn't procrastinate any longer without someone noticing my hesitation. I didn't want Zanthos to think I dreaded meeting him. Quite the opposite. My heart thudded rapidly beneath my gray "fancy" blouse, and my palms sweated from nerves, but I felt anticipatory, though it was all mixed up with many other emotions.

I could barely remember the last time I'd had sex. It had been one of those encounters that I'd immediately regretted because I'd gone into it for the wrong reasons. I'd been looking for someone to make me forget Lou, when *I* was the only person who could make me let him go.

This time, I'd made the choice to move forward to someone new, not to forget someone I'd loved and lost.

I wanted to love Zanthos too. I didn't think we'd ever have the same closeness as I'd had with Lou, but I was willing to work at this relationship. Even if my knees felt like water beneath the swish of my pleated skirt as I made my way down

the ramp, my gaze darting around the dock, barely glancing at the other shuttles before my eyes locked with Zanthos's glowing amber ones.

His gaze glowed brighter when he met my eyes, like two embers inside him had just sparked into full flames.

He was glorious in person, looking like some primeval forest god striding from the trees, a part of them but also so much more. Vines unfurled from his four arms as I walked hesitantly towards him, noting the other Thokost in my periphery, some still kneeling.

None were working now. They all had eyes on us.

Then I heard a rumbling like thunder, accompanied by a strong, resonant humming sound, and the surrounding Thokost suddenly decided to look everywhere but directly at me, some even turning their backs fully to rush back to their cargo.

I realized that sound had come from Zanthos, his eyes narrowing as they focused on a particular Thokost who wasn't as large as him but had stared the longest at me. I'd figured that Thokost had merely been curious to see a human among them, but Zanthos's eyes burned like he wanted to fight the other Thokost.

As soon as I came within reach of him, my greeting turned to a yelp of surprise as all four of those vines that had been wrapped around his arms coiled around my torso and lifted me off my feet, pulling me towards him.

And away from the other Thokost.

Zanthos was still rumbling, his broad, powerful chest thrumming like a beehive hid inside it. His vine tails coiled further around me, binding me against his body as his arms spread at his sides, his sharp claws extending and growing before my eyes.

The other Thokost raced from the dock like he was being pursued by torch-bearing villagers ready to burn him like the wicker man.

I finally got the full attention of my future husband's amber eyes as he turned them away from the apparently



vanquished foe. He lifted an upper hand to my face, turning it so the backs of his fingers stroked down my cheek.

My skin tingled like crazy, and I felt the drops of toxin welling from his skin to coat mine. His other upper hand cupped the other side of my face as his eyes locked with mine.

“My Frannie,” he said in a deep, heavily accented voice, speaking English surprisingly well given the difference in his mouth structure to a human’s. “You are *perfect*.”

“Hi,” I said, then licked my lips, my brain drawing a complete blank on what to say next.

He was overwhelming. His tails suspended me in mid-air, my feet dangling off the ground, just so he could bring my face closer to his. I noted the split in his lower face where his mandibles parted. The space had widened a bit.

I managed to break my gaze away from his eyes long enough to let them trail up to the tops of his branches, rising well above my head. Then my gaze immediately returned to his, unable to look away from those glowing eyes for long. “I guess this is what you meant by your tails binding me,” I said with a little laugh, like it was no big deal that he’d wrapped my entire upper body in them.

His chest still thrummed as his lower hands slipped around me, tugging me even closer to his powerful body. “Mine,” he said, his mandibles parting further, splitting more at the bottom than in the center.

If I wasn’t immune to his toxin, I’d probably already be dying right now.

“Okay,” I said breathlessly, realizing that I hadn’t misread that whole interplay with the other Thokost. “Is this the... um...whole ‘Ost’ thing?” I lifted a hand to gesture in the direction the other Thokost had ran as fast as his clawed feet could carry him.

A vine tail immediately coiled around my wrist, tugging my hand to his face to press my palm to his flexing mandible. It parted further at the bottom, and another vine slipped between it to drag along my arm, leaving behind a slick trail of

surprisingly sweetly-scented saliva. The floral scent reminded me of honeysuckle.

His tongue wasn't the only part of him that smelled good. It didn't surprise me that he smelled woody, and earthy, but he also smelled delicious in an indefinable way. A hint of something floral, a tinge of something fruity.

Also, something totally alien but definitely not off putting. In fact, I sucked in a deep breath, my legs parting as they dangled off the ground, my body sagging a little in his vine tail grip. A soft sigh left me as the heat between my thighs left me wet and wanting.

This was going well, I had to admit.

“You already rain for me?” Zanthos said in that inhumanly deep voice, his mandibles flexing further apart in a way that made me realize that he maybe smelled as well as tasted through that opening, though he also had a small opening just between his eyes that could be a Thokost version of a breathing hole. “I cannot wait to drink it directly from your nest.”

This was going *very* well.

*Ten*



April 11th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 66, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Dear Shari,

I'm just going to add this quickly to my earlier letter, because I don't have much time before my dinner with Zanthos.

His home is stunning! It's not in a tree, like I'd expected. It's actually a massive floral-shaped structure constructed from pink stone that looks like rose quartz. The center is shaped like a huge rosebud, with rounded petals radiating from it that each serve as a roof for another room dug into the ground below them.

Wooden louvers open and close around the central chamber, which is sunken more than a single story into the ground. The louvered windows aren't covered by any glass to keep bugs out, but they do let in the most amazing breezes, so I'm not complaining.

The woven rugs that cover the earthen floor of the main room are so intricate that they remind me of those optical illusion puzzles, only in vivid colors rather than black and white. The furnishings are equally as skillfully crafted, but they're not all made of wood. Some are made of animal horn, polished and carved with detailed images, others are crafted from tightly woven fibers, and some are even made from bone that has been polished to a shine.

All the furniture looks to be made from organic materials, and not recently. These look like heirloom pieces that are hundreds of years old at least. The shelves on the curved walls have cut crystal basins, faceted gemstone statues the size of my head, and different horns, stone vases, and jeweled animal skulls decorating them.

Every curved wall has a tapestry hanging from it that coordinates with the carved furniture and the rugs.

The name of this place, Melam Sora, translates to “Land of a Thousand Skies.” If you could see all the ponds that reflect the cloudy blue sky above, you would totally get that impression!

Shari, if you could only *see* this place! I wish I could send pictures, but given how close the Thokost keep their secrets, I didn’t think smuggling a camera into Zanthos’s home to snap a few photos would be a good idea.

He’s very...imposing. It’s sexy as hell, even though I should probably be more concerned about the way he scared another Thokost so badly after he dared to look too long in my direction that he sent the poor guy racing away from the docks. Remember I mentioned the whole “caveman” energy he had in his letter?

It is so much *more* in person, and I’m not opposed to it. At all. Surprisingly, it makes me feel safe and protected rather than afraid of him.

He gave me one of the petal chambers as a private suite, with its own attached bath chamber and a stone paved patio that looks out upon a dozen reflective ponds. He’s filled the suite with fragrant flower arrangements in heavy stone or crystal vases, and he’d even laid out a dress woven of some kind of insect silk and dyed a hunter green on a thick sleeping mat that looks really comfortable. Matching woven sandals made to my size and embroidered with little gemstone beads sat beside the mat before I pounced on them with delight. I think the gemstones might actually be emeralds!

I’m so happy I decided to get my toes done before I left Earth.

He also left me a jeweled hairpin that looks like branches made from real gold, with more of those flashy green gemstones.

Shari, you won't believe what he said when he showed me this room. I probably shouldn't repeat it, since this letter will be scanned into the Thokost communication array, but I will because I have to tell you.

He said, "I had these adornments made for your comfort, my Frannie, but I will always prefer to see you bare-skinned." Then he gestured to the room and said, "this space is for you, if you wish for privacy, but I'm hoping you will spend all your time in my bower."

I feel like I'm in some kind of magical fantasy movie, only a really sexy one that would only be broadcast on a certain kind of channel.

I have to go, but I almost forgot to tell you!

He also provided me with an elaborate calligraphy set made of freaking carved *gemstones*! It was sitting on a desk in the room that looks like it was woven from a wicker-like material, but it must be much stronger because the top of it is polished stone.

I was almost afraid to use the calligraphy set, or the handmade paper that came with it, but I really wanted to write to you about all of this, so here I am, casually writing a letter using a king's ransom. The ink flows so smoothly that I don't want to stop writing, but I'm also eager to see what he has in store for me for dinner.

Fingers crossed that I don't wake up from this magical dream.

Frannie



*FRANNIE*

I still felt like I was dreaming when I left my private suite that wouldn't be out of place at a high-end resort on a tropical island and made my way to the central chamber to find my

mate awaiting me, standing beside a table—or more accurately, towering beside it, his branches brushing the ceiling high above my head. The table groaned with the weight of all the dishes spread out on it.

The smell of savory and sweet foods made my mouth water, but not as much as he did. He'd lit candles that flickered around the chamber, emitting their own scent that reminded me of an expensive spa, and the light of them sparkled off his inlaid emeralds and golden wire designs.

His eyes were what glowed the hottest though as they fixed upon me, because I wore nothing but a golden hairpin and sandals sparkling with emeralds.

I didn't make it to the table before his tails coiled around my limbs and lifted me off my feet. The one around my left ankle continued to snake up my calf, then my thigh, heading right for the sweet and soaking spot between my legs.

My sandal fell off my other foot, but his tail coiled around it, the tip spreading my toes as it explored my body.

“You said you preferred me bare-skinned,” I gasped breathlessly as he pulled me against him, his mandibles flexing open like he was breathing in the scent of my arousal.

“That was when I thought I could remain civilized,” he rumbled, his eyes blazing like twin suns in his face. “It appears I was wrong.”

One of his lower arms swept across the table, sending all that delicious smelling food flying, but I didn't have the chance to bemoan its loss, because his tails pinned me to the tabletop, their grip around my legs spreading them open.

Then he was kneeling between them, his branches dipping towards my upper body as his vine-tongue slipped from his mandibles to stroke over my clit. His upper hands slid up my body to cup my breasts, experimentally at first, but his touch growing more confident in massaging them when I didn't start shrieking in pain at the rough texture of his skin.

It actually felt surprisingly good against my skin, which almost ached now where he wasn't touching it. *He* felt so good

as his tails bound my thighs to his shoulders, keeping them spread wide open as his tongue explored my newly hairless mound and clit like he knew exactly what he was doing.

Which, given what he'd likely been watching to make him so excited, he probably did. I wish I'd been able to study "documents" to figure out how to please him in return, but considering the way he looked right now, I might not need to do anything to accomplish that.

My skin tingled everywhere that it rubbed against his rough skin. Instead of that texture irritating my sensitive flesh, it seemed to activate something in his toxic secretions to make me want to writhe against his pinning arms in pleasure, his lower hands cupping my hips, his claws digging into my soft flesh as his tongue worked over my clit, the tip of it slipping between my folds to enter me.

The two tails wrapped around my wrists tugged them towards his branches, and I reflexively clutched the largest ones, pulling his head closer to my mound, wordlessly begging him to drive that inhumanly long tongue deep inside me.

He obliged with a low groan that rattled the dishware on the floor, his beehive hum starting up with a vengeance, until his tongue vibrated as it delved deeper and deeper into my channel.

The sensory pleasure was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before, and it was driving me to distraction. I held onto his branches like I was about to be swept away in a flood as he managed to rub that slick wet tongue of his over my clit even while thrusting it deeper inside me. It just kept getting longer and longer, until he had all the length he needed to do both as he rubbed his mandibles against my mound. I felt them flex against my thighs as they quivered with my rising pleasure, pinned against his shoulders, bound up in him.

This was definitely going well. Far better than I'd expected, and if I'd known it was going to be like this, I would have knocked the lab coats over in my eagerness to get my next serum shot. All that suffering and miserable sickness had been worth it as my entire body sang, thrumming in tune to the

sound coming from his chest as he “tasted me without consuming.”

It didn't take long for him to bring me to my peak, then tongue-fuck me over it, my inner muscles clenching his thrusting tongue as I shattered to pieces, my cries ecstatic and animalistic. My grip on his branches only tightened as he continued to tongue my passage, like he wanted to absorb all my nectar. In response, his tails tightened around me until they verged on painfully squeezing my flesh.

His blazing eyes watched my blissful expressions as he slowly withdrew his tongue. Then those embers continued to glow in the candlelit dimness as he rose like a forest spirit between my legs, breaking my grip on his branches, his tails shifting my thighs off his shoulders and down by his waist as his lower hands caressed them like he was soothing me.

At his groin, thick tendrils parted the knothole, spreading it open as his taproot slipped free, glistening with a lubricant that smelled as sweet as his tongue. My mouth watered like it was instinctual, but he didn't give me a chance to feast on him like he'd feasted on me.

The mushroom head of his taproot probed my arousal swollen folds, then breached my slit, stretching it to the point where I would have worried if I'd had any sense left in a head currently overwhelmed with pleasure that left all my senses singing. The tips of the tendrils brushed my inner thighs as he drove his shaft deeper and deeper, his lower hands clutching my thighs above his tails, his upper hands still playing with my breasts like he could do that all day.

Several of the thick tendrils teased my clit, writhing over it as he buried his shaft so deep inside me that I could feel it bottom out. Some of the other tendrils probed at my already overstretched entrance, working their way inside it to stroke both his shaft and my inner walls.

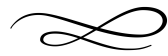
Then his tongue extended from his spread mandibles and began to flick my hard nipples, teasing them as he began to move inside me.



The embers disappeared in the dark shadow rising over me, but I realized that he'd only closed his eyes as he began to moan in a rumbling roar of a sound, his chest thrumming so hard that he vibrated against my naked flesh. I heard his branches shifting, then spotted the shadows around them writhing in the flickering candlelight like slender snakes as he thrust into me.

The light caught on pale and shimmering filaments, as fragile and weblike as fungal mycelia, that had slipped free from his branches and now floated around his head like they searched for something. With a final, table-shaking groan, I felt his taproot jerk inside me as the teasing tendrils rubbed and stroked both of us, and the heat of his sap filled me to overflowing, welling out of me with each powerful twitch of his thick shaft.

# Eleven



April 11th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 67, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

My dearest raindrop,

Your intriguing alien body cools my heat so that I'm not aflame, but I still burn for you. I am nearly overtaken by what happened between us this night. I had hoped to allow you at least one rotation to settle into your new home before I came to you for sex-seeking. It appeared that you had other ideas, and I can honestly admit that I have never tasted a better meal than the one I feasted upon tonight.

I can't decide what part of our sex-seeking pleased me the most. Tasting you was like drinking from the most sacred nectar, but burying my taproot inside you to spill my sap in your chamber was beyond comparison.

It also brought me back into balance.

I should probably explain my barbaric (as you humans would call it) behavior. My Ost had risen along with my sap, but you allowed me to spend that overflowing sap within your warm seed chamber—your nest—with complete trust that I wouldn't harm you, despite how strange my body must seem to you. My Ost-energy would have concerned even a once-rooted female, but you showed no fear as you let me embrace you and bind you as I claimed you.

I'll admit that your body once seemed so strange to me too, but now that I've touched it, tasted it, and buried my taproot inside it, it feels like it is already familiar to me. It

feels like *you* are already familiar to me. I would swear upon the sacred well that I entangled with you in some previous flesh-line, and somehow, our spores were carried to different Clusters so far away from each other that a galaxy separated us.

But now you have returned to me, and I find you as sweetly perfect as Thok's Second Spawn rains.

You rest now, curled in my lower arms, your soft body warm and fragile against my much harder one, your skin flushed by my toxin. Your eyes are completely closed, your body relaxed and replete. I think you recognize the connection between us too, and that is why you trust me enough to surrender yourself completely to me.

I will set aside these rune-marking implements soon to add the support of my upper arms to your bower against me, but first, I wanted to tell you that I am beyond grateful that the Cluster foresaw your return to me and set me upon the path to reclaim you.

Great change will come to the Land of All Things because of your arrival here and the alliance my Cluster has formed with your agents, but I do not fear that change, because no matter what it brings with it, it has already returned my greatest treasure to me.

May we forever sink our roots into the same ground,

Yours,

Zanthos



*FRANNIE*

I felt amazing. My skin tingled, my body felt flushed with vitality, my heart felt like singing.

My current bed wasn't the softest in the world, but being cradled against the muscular chest of a tree-like behemoth wasn't nearly as rough as I'd expected either. It seemed like my skin welcomed the texture of his, because the rasp of it

over mine shot off little sparks of pleasure through my nervous system.

I slowly opened my eyes, afraid all of this was a dream, even though I could feel the four alien arms supporting my naked and languid body against his chest. I gasped at the sight that greeted me.

The louvers in the main room were partially open, showing the merest hint of a coming dawn, but inside the chamber, the candles had all gone out. The only light in the room came from what appeared to be hundreds of lightning bugs perching on or flying around my alien's branches.

His eyes were closed but at my sharp inhale, they shot open, and the merest shift of his head sent the glowing bugs flying as one, spiraling upwards towards the louvers like a hundred blinking stars.

"They're so beautiful!" I was sad to see them go.

Zanthos's chuckle was a low rumble in his chest, but it was recognizable as amusement. "They are pests, but harmless. They are often drawn to a once-rooted's branches when he dreams." He lifted an upper hand to stroke the backs of his fingers over the flushed, reddened skin of my shoulder. "They won't bite you, and I took them off the menu after you sent the list of things that might upset you."

"The menu!" I closed my eyes, shaking my head. "All that wonderful smelling food!" I craned my neck to see the empty table. The other side of it had been cleared away, and any stains the sauces or gravies might have left on the glorious rugs was also gone. "Did I imagine that?" I asked in confusion.

His tails unfurled from his arms and began to coil around my limbs like they had a mind of their own as he shifted me in his embrace. He rose to his feet from the mat where he'd been lounging, sleeping while sitting upright, apparently. "You did not, my Frannie." His amber eyes flashed, much like the lightning bugs had before the glow within it dulled to a subtle light. "I lost some of my control and destroyed your evening

feast without considering your needs. You are likely quite hungry by now.”

My stomach decided to growl at that moment as if his statement had given it permission. “Apparently,” I said wryly as his gaze, and his exploring upper hand, dropped to my belly.

He spread his clawed fingers over the softly rounded skin, and I saw only three fingers and thumb, which still seemed so alien to me, though I’d already known that was what he’d “chosen” to grow. Like other limbs and appendages, the Thokost could vary the number of their fingers and even toe claws. “Does that angry grumble mean that you wish to eat?” His gaze returned to my face, but his rough palm began to caress my skin, his fingers sliding below my belly button to settle at the top of my shaved slit.

I nodded with embarrassment, though I didn’t know why. Food was a normal thing that even the Thokost required. I supposed I was too new to this world to go around making demands. I kept waiting for him ask. “I could eat.” I caught his hand as he made to lift it from my skin, and gently nudged it lower, until his fingertip was pressing on my clit. “But I don’t regret missing last night’s meal at all.”

A low hum buzzed in his chest, right by my ear, and though it brought to mind a muffled beehive, it wasn’t quite the same. It was a sound too alien to fully compare to something in human experience. “You do not need to keep your knothole free of fur, my Frannie,” he said as his tails tightened on my legs and spread them further while he still held me in three of his arms. He used his fourth hand to spread my nether lips apart, his gaze fixed on the nub he revealed and the slit below it, already wet and ready for him. “I regret ever making that request, but I was foolish in the beginning, and could not see your alien body for the wonder that it is.” He petted my hairless mound. “I would like to see it with the “bush” as the humans call it.”

I caught my breath on a laugh that morphed into a moan, because he certainly seemed entranced by my body as his tails coiled up to my thighs, parting them further, his fingers sliding

over my clit. His two other tails coiled over his shoulder and between his arms to wrap around my breasts, their tips flicking at my hard nipples. He shifted his gaze from my clit, where he continued to gently stroke his fingers over the sensitive flesh, to my captive breasts.

“Your chest mounds,” he rumbled, “are as soft as overripe fruit, which I prefer the most.” His tongue slipped from the bottom of his mandibles as they flexed open, then extended far beyond a human length to tease my captive nipples, coating them in his slick and tingly saliva.

I moaned, my head falling back against his supporting arm as he carried me to a divan style furnishing, his hand still stroking my clit, his tails and tongue still toying with my breasts, squeezing and tugging my nipples in a way that made me want to beg for more. “I still must see to feeding you,” he said in that distant thunder voice, somehow speaking without the use of that already occupied tongue.

Like I could think about food right now!

The only way I could respond was to shake my head and buck my hips to press my mound against his stroking fingers in a plea for him to continue.

His eyes disappeared, telling me he'd closed them in the darkened room that was slowly brightening as the dawn light strengthened to spill through the louvers. “Do you wish for me to make you “come” before I feed you, my raindrop?”

I moaned even while I nodded, bucking my hips again as his tails bound my breasts tighter, coiling up to my nipples to hold them steady for his tugging tongue. “Yes,” I gasped, not even surprised he knew that word. He'd certainly done his research, and I could definitely fall in love with him for it!

His tails slipped up over my nipples, their coils rippling over my soft flesh in a vibrating, massaging way as his tongue slid down my chest, over my belly, then replaced his fingers on my clit.

“I enjoy the fresh, wet taste of your nest, raindrop,” he said with a growing thrum in his chest that vibrated against my ear.

His tongue slid over my clit like a questing root, slippery with its coating of saliva, the tip dipping inside my already soaked slit, then pushing deeper as it began to thrust, still rubbing over my sensitive clit.

“I would bury my taproot inside you,” he murmured, his voice coming from somewhere in his throat, the expelled air clearly shaped by something other than his delightful tongue, “but that might delay your meal even longer, so I will enjoy making you come, and save spilling my own sap for later.”

He held me supported in his arms as he settled on the divan, stretching his long legs in front of him, his four arms holding me steady, while his tails kept my thighs parted enough for his tongue to work its magic between them. His other tails continued to ripple and massage my breasts and pinch at my nipples.

All while his eyes glowed brighter and brighter as my hips bucked against the restraint of his tails and my upper back arched, pushing my entrapped breasts towards him. My body writhed with each ecstatic gasp, moan, and cry until he took me over the edge.

My inner muscles pulsed around his thick tongue moving inside me as every muscle in my body tensed in his arms. He used his free hand to stroke over my naked flesh in a soothing way, the skin hypersensitized in the best way from the toxin he was automatically secreting from his body.

As he slowly withdrew his tongue from me, and his tails released my body to allow me to sag in his embrace, I sighed against his chest, my eyelids drifting shut for a moment. They popped open when I felt something warm brush against my lips.

Zanthos held something that looked like a pastry at my lips. It smelled very fruity and sweet, and was warm and fresh, still emitting a little coil of steam, but not enough to burn my skin.

My lips parted in surprise. “Where did you get that?” My gaze darted around the empty chamber that had been cleaned while I slept.

Zanthos's chest hummed as he wordlessly urged me to take a bite. "Not all of our servants are once-rooted, raindrop. You aren't likely to notice them entering and leaving the chamber when I'm keeping you occupied."

I blushed as I took a bite of the pastry, the fruit pie-like flavor bursting over my tongue. Unique, but fresh and sweet like a ripe pear, with a hint of some flavorful and tart berry. As I chewed, the heat in my cheeks growing while I glanced around the room for someone who might have seen me in the middle of being pleased, my gaze fell upon the small table beside the divan.

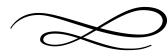
A petite stone tray sat there with a selection of pastries arranged on it in a lovely design, each pastry a different color.

I pushed aside my embarrassment, snuggling deeper into his arms as I took another bite of the alien but still delicious, sweet breakfast pastry. "Don't let me get too used to this," I murmured after swallowing.

"You are mine, raindrop," he said with that inhuman bass rumbling along with his chest humming that continued unabated. "I am more deep-rooted than ever in my vow to make your life nothing but soft breezes and warm rains."



# Twelve



April 14th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 71, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Dear Zanthos,

I know it's strange to write a letter to you, when I can just talk to you directly now, but I've always found it easier to express my deepest thoughts in writing instead of trying to blurt them out in the jumble they would probably end up in if they came straight from my disorganized mind.

After I read the letter you wrote to me on our first night together, I felt any doubts that still remained about this drastic change in my life disappear. You're right. I did feel an instant connection to you, from the very first moment I spotted you on the dock on Ramular. It was like I recognized you, but not just from your pictures.

I can't explain my instant trust in you. I've never been entirely comfortable before with the metaphysical, but I find your suggestion of us having been together in a previous life surprisingly appealing, and I want that to be true. Then it would explain why I felt like I was coming home when I greeted you on the dock.

I already love this world, and Melam Sora must be the most beautiful place I've ever seen! The ponds are incredible, and it's so hard to believe that they are natural with how magical they make the landscape look. It really does look like pieces of the sky are scattered on the ground among all the vivid and vibrant greenery, until one of the jewel-like tadpole

“tiktaal” things breaks the surface and causes a ripple in the still water.

I love the way your people name things too. “Jewels beneath the fallen sky,” sounds so much more poetic than “pretty, shiny, overgrown tadpoles.”

The huge variety of plant and insect life I’ve already seen in the few days I’ve been here makes my head spin. The fact that it’s all a part of a single ecosystem is mind-boggling. I’d thought that Earth was the most “garden” of the “garden planets,” but Thok reminds me of Paradise. (I think I described the Garden of Eden to you when we were strolling among the bridge-walks outside the city.)

And the city forest itself blew me away!

Those trees that tower so far above the city are beyond belief. We have giant redwoods on Earth, and your ancient trees dwarf even those, and the way their canopies spread so far to shade the rest of your magical organic city reminds me of a mystical “World Tree.”

You also sometimes remind me of something out of a human fairy tale, but I mean that in a good way. There have been times in these last few days where I look at you and gasp in awe all over again at how magnificent you are. I’ve grown so comfortable with you so quickly that sometimes I forget the differences between us until I see you framed by the massive forest of your city, or when the sparkle bugs cluster around your branches, or when your eyes burn like stars as you claim me and bury yourself inside me, bringing me pleasure I’ve never known before.

I love the sight of you, and I can’t believe I ever doubted that I would.

But more than that, I love *being* with you. I feel like I can talk to you like I’ve talked to no one else in my life. You are so patient with my excited ramblings about everything you show me. You just listen, but when you do speak, your words let me know that you’ve heard everything I said. You weren’t just tuning me out, no matter how annoying my chatter must be to you. I’m sorry about that. I suppose I’ve held myself closed

off and distant for so many years that when I finally opened myself up again, everything came flooding out like a nearly overflowing dam breaking.

I feel like I'm hopping around you like a puff-tail, overly excited and chittering away while you patiently escort me everywhere and do everything in your power to make me feel at home. I know you have important work to do, and that this time with me takes you away from it, but you never make me feel that way, so I sometimes forget about your position, until I see the other once-rooted bowing their branches to you as we stroll among them.

I am so happy here with you in The Land of All Things, my star-flame. It's almost scary how happy I am, because I never want this feeling to change, but life is always changing so I will bask in every moment of these soft breezes while they last.

Love,  
Frannie



*MEMORY SHARING—ZANTHOS*

I knelt before the Immobiles with greater ease this time, my body and mind at peace. A peace I couldn't ever remember feeling, even when I was a juvenile in the nursery cracking the other juveniles with my whip vines when they started snapping their mandibles at the smallest of the rooted.

This time, I eagerly extended my filaments for the Eldest to touch, no longer resentful or overflowing with imbalanced Ost-energy. My Frannie drained my sap daily in so many interesting and exciting ways. I would never get enough of exploring and learning her body, discovering new pleasures for both her and I every time I "made love" to her as she called sex-seeking.

I preferred her speak to mine on that, because it had the human word for "eternal devotion" attached to it. Just like Frannie had attached that rune-speak to her last letter to me. A letter she had shyly handed to me this morning after I fed her

breakfast, bite by bite, fascinated by the play of emotions over her malleable face as she tasted each new item of food I'd chosen to offer this rising.

She'd folded up the crafted rune-leaves to conceal her lovely "handwriting." She'd also insisted that I didn't read it until she wasn't around, her skin turning red, especially on her face, like she did when she grew embarrassed, or aroused.

I hoped it was the latter. The contents of her letter suggested the latter.

"You are learning to bond branches with your out-worlder," the Eldest said with a hum of satisfaction. "This heralds fruitful breezes for entwining."

"I owe you and all the Immobiles a sincere apology." I bowed my branches, my filaments remaining outstretched for touching. "You have brought her back to me, when I didn't realize that I'd lost her."

A low hum of acknowledgement filled the temple. My apology was accepted. Even the ancient Immobiles remembered what it was like to be unrooted. Impatient to move, to take action, often thoughtless in that action. It was always that way with flesh-lines until they rooted again and became the Immobiles—the knowledge keepers and Cluster guardians and sustainers.

"The signs were there," the Eldest said, his leaves rustling so high overhead that I barely heard them. "We saw the Thok within her stories and knew she would balance your Ost. We requested her from the human machine agent, because we foresaw that she would branch-bond well with you, increasing the possibility of a successful entwining, but even *we* did not see the spore-truth inside her until she reached this world—and remembered it."

"I am concerned about the entwining," I admitted, though the Eldest could likely read that concern in my thoughts. It had been pricking at them like thorns more and more as the rotations passed and my roots grew deeper for my Frannie, the soothing rain to my burning star. "I should explain to her what will happen before she begins to drink the potions."

“You cannot,” the Eldest said with a thunderous rumble. “She cannot be told. She must trust in you. When it is complete, she will *know*, and all will be forgiven.”

I worried that she would not forgive so easily once she realized what the potions had done to her during our entwining ritual. I would be content to be with her just as she was now, sex-seeking forever just for pleasure as we already were, without concerning myself about my sap taking seed in her nest.

Though I would miss out on the connection between her and I that would reach deeper than our bodies if I didn't entwine branches with her.

“You have asked her for her trust,” the Eldest's voice grew more distinct, still rumbling with power deep in his trunk, “and she has claimed to have given it. Now, you must trust her in return. She is deep-rooted and has been ever since she allowed the very first serum dose to flow through her out-worldeer blood.”

This was true. Very few out-worldeers would willingly endure such a course just to be with their partner. My Frannie had not even met me yet when she'd agreed to allow my toxin to be injected into her, along with some other ingredients she and the human knowledge seekers were not permitted to know.

The move towards entwining our branches had already begun to take place, as evidenced by the way her human skin responded to my toxin secretions. It enhanced her pleasure at my touch, rather than making her sick. That enhancement was a pleasing discovery for both of us, since even a Thokost female would not have experienced such a reaction, being merely immune to once-rooted toxin, not aroused by it. Human skin was far more absorbent and responsive than the strong flesh of the once-rooted. I was now seeing a benefit to that in my Frannie. Her body seemed to crave my touch, and with it, my toxin. I'd been concerned that the roughness of my skin against the softness of hers would dissuade her from sex-seeking, but it had not, because of that unexpected toxin response.

The Eldest didn't need me to speak to follow the course of my thoughts. "The first potion is already prepared and awaits collection at the sacred well. You must add the correct amount of your seeding sap to each potion before presenting it to her."

I wondered if she'd be accepting of that. She'd suggested taking my taproot in her mouth more than once to "bring me the same pleasure I brought her when I tasted her," but I had yet to take her up on the offer, because when we were sex-seeking, I struggled to keep my sap from flowing. If her strange mouth felt as good around my taproot as it did around my vine tongue that she'd suckled eagerly during our last sex-seeking, claiming it was sweet like "honeysuckle," then I would spill my sap into her mouth the moment she drew my taproot into it.

"I will tell her that my seed sap is in the potion," I declared, not making it a request. "I owe her that much of an explanation."

"If this will blunt the thorns in your thoughts," the Eldest relented, slowly withdrawing his filaments back into his bark, "then so be it. From what we have *seen*, she will be eager for more of it once she has tasted it."

I wasn't certain if the Eldest was referring to what he'd seen in my thoughts, or what they'd *seen*, in their vast and seemingly endless wisdom, collected and stored by the Cluster for the benefit of all Melam Sora, since the very first once-rooted sank long roots into the soil here four thousand, six hundred, and fifty-two Ost-cycles ago.

# Thirteen



April 22nd, A.M.I (Earth sync date), First *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 80, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

My sweet Second Spawn rain,

These last rotations with you have been all soft breezes, and I have never been more at peace with my path. You have integrated so well into Melam Sora that it is like you have lived here all your life, and I'm so pleased to see the other once-rooted opening up to you with friendly overtures now that they've stopped mandible-gapping like freshly rooted juveniles at the sight of you.

I hope that you have felt the same peace in your decision to come here and entwine your branches with me. You made a commitment, back on your home world, to this course that involved a rocky path with poor soil in the beginning of your journey, but after coming here, you told me that you believed it was all worth it. You said that if you had known then what you know now, you wouldn't have felt so miserable going through that process, because you would have been looking forward to the outcome with too much anticipation.

I am writing this letter because I find it easier to ask this next thing of you in rune-speak. I want to explain that it may involve another rocky path to complete our journey to entwining. I know you have already sacrificed so much, and not just in taking the course of treatments to endure my toxin. You have left your home world and everything you know behind you and traveled a far distance across a galaxy to be with me. Your dedication means far more to me than you can

know, but I *want* you to *know*, in the way I know. I want to touch you in the way we can't yet touch.

I want you to understand what I feel. I believe that only through entwining our branches can I show you the depth of my roots and my eternal devotion to you.

I have not been permitted to discuss much more about the Cluster and the ritual of entwining our branches with you than I already have, because we are not yet entangled, and as much as I feel that you belong here, with me, you still do not *know* as the once-rooted know. I must ask you once again to trust me, and hope you believe me when I say that I would never do anything to deliberately bring you harm.

In order to complete our mating and become entangled, you must consume a special potion containing a thokoy nut capful of my seed sap every day for twenty rotations. This is how all Thokost females prepare their nests for entwining, though your potion is somewhat different, because your body is different.

After you drink the last potion, we will wait to perform the ritual until the signs are there for the time of our entwining.

I do not know how long those signs will take to appear, because you are not Thokost, and this situation is unprecedented. It is also risky, my raindrop. I need you to understand that this process is what you humans would call "experimental," because if you aren't deep-rooted to this path, then you should know that I would never force you to take it, despite what the "contracts" of your human agents demand.

If you choose not to entwine with me, then the Cluster will not allow you to remain in Melam Sora, nor will the Group allow you to remain on Thok. You must know as the once-rooted *know* in order to live on this world.

I want to be with you, Frannie, whether we entwine our branches or not. If you cannot bring yourself to undergo the preparation process, then I will leave Thok by your side and return to Earth with you. I could never remain here without you.



This is no small thing I ask of you, which is why I have delayed addressing it for many rotations. I am once-rooted, and even I do not feel breezy about the risks of this preparation process to you. I know that if your flesh dies, your spore will take root somewhere new, but I fear that I could not find you again in such a vast universe.

The Second Spawn Cycle begins soon, and it is the most auspicious Cycle for entwining rituals, which means this process must begin immediately so we do not end up entwining in the Third Spawn Cycle, where the leaves will age, and the winds will howl.

I've been urged to stop delaying and bring this decision to the one who must make it. So, I'm leaving this letter for you in the hopes that you will read it before you join me for our fading meal. I want you to have some time alone to consider your decision, because there isn't much more that I can tell you, though I have no doubt your mind is filled with questions. All I can do is ask for your trust and hope that you will have faith in me and the Cluster.

But know, my raindrop, that I *will* leave this world with you by the end of next rotation if that is your decision, and I won't look back. I want to sink my roots in whatever ground you choose to walk so I am always there beside you.

My star will always burn for you,

Zanthos



*FRANNIE*

I stared down at the letter in my hand, each word written in a strong, spiky print, painstakingly learned by Zanthos just so he could create these handwritten letters in my language. He didn't want me to require a rune-translation reader to understand his words.

This male had taught himself how to speak, read, and write in English so I didn't need to learn his complex runic language to read his love letters. That knowledge had impacted me almost as much as the words he wrote in these love letters.

I had to admit to feeling terrified, yet again, of the changes in my life that Zanthos was asking me to make to accommodate his life on this world. I'd thought my days of being subjected to experimental substances were over with. I'd thought we'd have a nice ceremony, not too much different from a human wedding, and then we'd be considered "entangled."

Is what I told myself.

No. I hadn't really believed that. I'd just wanted to think it so that this magical time I'd been enjoying with him didn't have any dark clouds of fear or doubt lingering over it. I'd known that nothing could possibly be that simple in a mating like ours. Just to have sex with him, I'd had to build up an immunity to his skin. It didn't surprise me in the least that there would be much more to the process if I was going to make him my lifelong mate.

I dressed in a flowing, soft gray gown that Zanthos had ordered for me, one of many now kept in a custom-built wardrobe, made of ancient, reclaimed wood and inlaid gemstones carved with animals from Earth. The tiger alone was carved and inlaid with four different gemstones, including one that looked an awful lot like tiger's eye sourced directly from Earth.

Every day he brought me a new precious gift. Something thoughtful that made me feel more at home here without forcing me to forget the world I left behind.

More importantly, every day, he made me feel at home in his arms, and he made love to me like he would never grow tired of doing so.

I loved him, this strange, tree-like, extraterrestrial behemoth. I loved everything about him. I didn't need years of knowing him to *know* him. Something inside me recognized him, pulled me towards him, and panicked when I thought of leaving him behind. Even though that wasn't what he was suggesting in his letter.

He'd follow me to Earth, abandoning this Paradise of a world and all he'd ever known to live among humans who

would never stop staring at him—or trying to study him. He'd do that for me because he loved me in return.

I slipped my feet into sandals, knowing they probably wouldn't stay on my feet for long. I didn't bother with underwear or a bra. Zanthos expressed a liking for playing with me beneath the concealing skirt of my gown or dipping his tongue or tails into the top of it. I think it was the alienness of my clothing that intrigued him so much, but also made him want to keep it on for a while as he snuck vines under it to tease and taste me.

I made my way to the far patio of Zanthos's "home blossom." That patio was roofed by a "leaf" constructed from wooden lattice rather than stone, and vines twisted through it. It looked out upon the largest of the ponds, where a stone fountain created an endless rain upon the surface of the water. Those drops scattered the reflected stars in the night sky, creating the most magnificent view of all the patios in the blossom.

We often had our "fading" meal here, watching Ost set, its light rays split by the tree canopies into a thousand beams pointing to the stars peeking out in the darkening sky above. It was, in a word, magical.

So was the sight of my Zanthos as he rose slowly to his feet, the glow of his amber eyes muted as they studied my carefully blank expression. His tails whipped behind him instead of coiling around his arms like they usually did at the beginning of a meal.

He was anxious. I'd known that something was off for about a week or so, that something was bothering him. Now I knew what it was.

He held out his upper arms to me, his lower set remaining at his sides. "My sweet Second Spawn rain," he said in his sexily accented English. "Your beauty will make the stars hide their light in shame that you outshine them."

I shook my head, my cheeks burning from a pleased blush. He greeted me every fading meal like this, with a different compliment each rotation, like he spent all day thinking one up

to make me feel like the most gorgeous sight on this world or any other.

I went into his arms without hesitation, and he folded his upper arms around me, tucking me against the thrumming rumble of his powerful chest. The top of my head barely reached the bottom of his pectorals, and he made me feel tiny in his embrace, which I found that I liked much more than I thought I would.

His lower hands gently gripped my waist, deepening our embrace as his tails coiled around my legs like they needed to bind me to him.

“I will drink the potions,” I murmured against his chest, enjoying the vibration of it against my cheek.

He pulled slightly away from me, and I looked up into his glowing eyes. “You don’t need to do this for me, raindrop. I don’t want to risk your health. Not for anything in this world or any other.”

“I want to *know*,” I said softly, lifting a hand to trace the golden line of the wire embedded into his flesh, “like the once-rooted know.” I studied his face through my lashes, my gaze lifting to his rack of branches. “I want to touch you as a once-rooted does.”

He’d exposed his “filaments” for me not long after I’d spotted them on our first night together. I suspected they had fungal origins, much like the mycelia they resembled. I’d heard somewhere that two compatible fungi could mix their DNA by entwining their mycelia, and I believed that was what “entwining” would be for us. Mixing DNA. Maybe mixing something more.

Only I didn’t have mycelia. Yet.

I was scared, and I didn’t hide the trembling in my body as I committed myself to this path. He could feel it, but he could also hear the determination in my voice.

His mandibles flexed, the base of them parting briefly, twitching, then parting again as he inhaled. “Then I will give you the potion with your rising meal.”

I held up one finger. “On one condition.”

He blinked, his ember eyes disappearing momentarily. “Anything you ask is yours, raindrop. I will pull the hero moons down to Thok for you if you request it.”

I backed out of his embrace, my gaze trailing down his body in a meaningful way to land on his knothole. “You said the potion contains a thokoy nut capful of your sap.” That would be about a half a cup’s worth of his cum, if I’d read that right, considering the hefty size of the thokoy nut. My gaze lifted to meet his now blazing eyes.

Oh, he was definitely following where I was leading. I smiled wickedly. “You’ve been holding out on me with your taproot, my star-flame.” I cocked my head, walking my fingers down his abs to slide them along his knothole, which began to part, the tips of tendrils peeking out of it. “You still haven’t let me taste you without consuming, even though I let you do the same to me every rotation.”

“I would spill my sap too quickly,” he moaned, his chest buzzing loudly.

“Well,” I traced along the widening gap in his groin, feeling the ends of those teasing tendrils against my fingertip, “you’re asking me to drink a daily dose of it, so I think I should have a taste of it first, so I’ll know what to expect.”

His body shivered as his knothole parted, the tendrils writhing out of it to spread it open and make way for his taproot. I stared down at it as I licked my lips, my fingers closing around the veiny shaft of it as tendrils encircled my wrist to bind my hand there. Sap already leaked from the mushroom tip.

His lower arms clutched my shoulders like he wanted to push me away, but his tendrils, his “spreaders” as he called them, told me otherwise, coiling around my arm as I stroked my hand upwards on his shaft, drawing more of his sap from the tip of it.

I wouldn’t be able to fit the entire head of it in my mouth, but I was going to try my damndest just to hear this big beast

moan in an earthshaking voice and thrum like a massive hive of bees.

His upper hands dived into my loose hair, his claws scraping along my scalp, which tingled immediately with pleasure from the toxin leaking from his body. His grip tightened just a bit like he would stop me from lowering my head, but he didn't, and I dragged my tongue along the dripping tip of his "taproot."

We both moaned in pleasure at the same time. His sap was sweet and earthy, like fruit and nectar. It was delicious, like his tongue but different in flavor. I did my best to fit my mouth around that broad-capped mushroom of a tip and sucked, my cheeks hollowing as he released another long moan.

Tail vines coiled up my legs and around my arms as his tendrils wrapped around his shaft below my hand to help me milk it, coaxing more sap from his tip between my lips. As I sucked and licked him, I felt two of his tails parting my arousal swollen slit to slide inside my soaking channel.

"Ah, my raindrop," he groaned, his upper hands massaging my head while his lower ones dropped to grip my ass, spreading my cheeks as if to make room for a sneaky third tail that slid along my crack. "You will uproot me!"

Our soft moans and the strong resonance of his chest were joined by the wet sounds of his vines pumping in and out of me, the third, dripping and slick with toxin that would kill any other human, prodding at my rosette as my skin around it did a happy cheer.

His lower hands spread my cheeks further apart, the toxin on them soaking through the silk of my skirt to flush my skin as that determined prodder worked past the tight ring of muscle guarding my back passage, his secretions working not only like a lube but also numbing the area a bit, so I felt very little discomfort from his penetration.

Zanthos began to murmur in his own language, his hands massaging my flesh, his tails working inside me, and his taproot dripping into my mouth to wet my greedy tongue as I milked it. I ended up coming before he did, so excited by all of

this, by finally tasting his sweet sap, by fully committing myself to becoming his forever, that I rocketed to my peak. Then I flew right past it and went higher as a slick vine-tongue snaked out of his parted mandibles while his upper hands gripped the front of my skirt and tugged it up to expose the soft, growing hair on my mound.

The moment his tongue stroked over my clit, I came with a cry, my entire body shivering as my inner muscles pulsed around those two busy tails and my rosette clenched around the third.

The vibration of my cries of ecstasy must have been what set him off, because right after that, his root jerked and his tendrils tightened on it and around my wrists, and then a spurt of sap shot into my mouth.

I would have drunk every last drop, but it appeared to be a flood that just kept coming, until I lifted my head to just watch the fountaining sap in awe, startled by how much of it he produced.

“My sap is already increasing in preparation for our entwining,” he said in a husky voice like he was embarrassed by the copious amounts of it now pooling around my sandaled feet.

The ecstasy of my orgasm cooled as his words reminded me of what I’d committed to do. *Experimental*, he’d said.

That wasn’t concerning at all.

# Fourteen



May 3rd, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 05, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

My dearest Frannie,

My heart thrums in distress as I watch you fading away with each passing rotation. I raged at the Immobiles last rising, feeling like they'd betrayed us both with this experiment of theirs, but it is already too late to change our path. If you do not continue to take these potions, or I should say, if *I* do not continue to feed your unconscious flesh this potion for the next five rotations, you will most certainly release your spore.

The Immobiles have *seen* this future, and they have also seen one where you recover if we remain deep-rooted to this path and complete this journey. It is only because of that second vision they shared that I didn't do something that couldn't be undone.

Even milking my sap daily doesn't stop my Ost from rising to dangerous levels now that you cannot cool it with your soft breezes and sweet rains.

I wanted to destroy the Cluster, my raindrop. I wanted to end them, like I fear they are ending you with this howling winds "experiment" of theirs. It is an unthinkable thing for a Spore Talker to consider, but I cannot stop thinking it.

The way to the temple is closed to me for now. They sensed the heat of my rage and expelled me from the temple before I could do something I might regret.



Might, but not if you release your spore and I lose you again. Then I will lose my balance. I will become a raider like the other Ost-rooted. I can't imagine any other bearable fate without you. Even if I release my spore, I can't guarantee it will follow yours and find you again. All I can do is search for it while in this flesh, and only as a raider can I do that without being bound by Thok.

I am so torn apart by this howling winds ache inside me, even as the gentle and soothing rains of Second Spawn patter on the petals of our blossom home. Your "pretty, shiny tadpoles" are hopping all around the ponds, mating in the mud as they do every Second Spawn Cycle. It batters my branches that you can't witness this with your own eyes, since I promised you that Second Spawn would be the most impressive thing you've ever seen, despite the muddy banks of the ponds.

I need you to open your eyes again, my Frannie, my jewel of Earth. I need you to look at me when I call your name and sing a soothing hum as I stroke your hair back from your face. You lie so still, and you're far too pale. I know this because my toxin no longer flushes your skin. Your Thok blood does not rise for my touch any longer.

I will not rest until your eyes open, and you have a chance to sit and watch the Second Spawn rains with me.

The wind will not carry your spore away from me this time, my dearest treasure.

Yours in Ost flame forever,

Zanthos



*ZANTHOS*

I cannot stop raging, as another rotation passes, then another, with no change in my Frannie's condition. She is in a sleep that does not end, and I fear that I'm only making her suffer more each rising when I lift her head and force that cursed potion down her throat, massaging it to make her swallow it all.

She fell into this sleep after drinking only five of the potions. I'd insisted on stopping then, but the Immobiles had urged caution in acting hastily, insisting that she would recover so long as she finished the course of treatment. If she did not, they said, then she would most certainly give up her spore. What they had done to her body, even I didn't know, but I had trusted them, more than I'd ever trusted anyone. I'd believed in their words, even knowing the risks to my Frannie. I'd never doubted them before like I doubt them now.

I've never felt this desire to destroy them before, like I do now.

Another once-rooted serves in my place. Temporarily, she insists, not wanting the position, though I am uncertain I will be retaking it. It is a heavy burden for anyone. The heaviest. The Immobiles do not see the world like the unrooted anymore. They think in ages, not in Ost-cycles. It is difficult to touch filaments with them and interpret their words and visions and slow-river thoughts.

I'd done it successfully since I'd unrooted from the nursery, but I understood her unease, though I couldn't bring myself to spend much time talking to her when she brought a new potion to me each fading from the sacred well that I could no longer access. I knew she was curious about Frannie and her condition. Xylaria had been the first of the other once-rooted in Melam Sora to befriend my raindrop, always eager with curiosity, which would have made her a good Spore Talker if she'd enjoyed the experience of touching filaments with the Immobiles.

One needed a craving for knowledge and a desire to collect and hoard it to truly appreciate the minds of the Immobiles and the Cluster itself.

Fading was my special time with Frannie, so I didn't welcome Xylaria's visit as I might once have, when I had been inclined to let her "chat" as Frannie would say rather than send her away immediately like she was one of the servants.

Each time Ost had settled into Thok, her land splitting his fire into beams of divine light to pierce the sky from which

he'd fallen, Frannie and I had sat upon one of the "patios" as Frannie called them and watched the view until the stars reclaimed the sky and chased Ost's fire deep into Thok.

And then we had "made love" well into the night as her "sparkle bugs" drifted around us, constantly trying to settle upon my branches. She would laugh as my upper arms would wave them away impatiently while my lower arms clutched her body close to mine, my tails binding her against me.

My tails wrapped around her limbs now, unable to release her as I supported her head and settled the crystal container against her lips. Just before I poured the potion into her mouth, her eyes opened, slowly, her eye-blinds flickering at first, then fully parting. Her gaze looked remote as it met mine, and her lips parted on a low moan.

"My head hurts like the Dickens," she said with a groan, lifting a hand to rub her head, ruffling her already mussed hair.

I hadn't known how to care for it during the time she'd been asleep, and I'd been too afraid to attempt the "combing" that humans did to it while she was unconscious and couldn't advise me about whether I was doing it right. I had taken care of all her other needs though, adequately, I hoped, considering my inexperience.

But now, all I felt was joy, pure soft breezes and warm rains as her gaze sharpened and then focused on me, her malleable brow creasing with her adorable confusion. "Zanthos?" she said huskily. "You look..." she lifted a frail hand to cup my mandible, "tired." Then her gaze settled on her hand, her eyes widening a little.

Her flesh had not completely wasted away, but it had shrunk in the twelve rotations she'd been asleep.

"I could not sleep," I said in a creaking voice, feeling the weight of exhaustion upon my branches now that I could see that she had not released her spore, "until I knew that you would awaken again."

"What happened?" she asked, trying to push herself up into a sitting position on the lounging bower. I quickly shifted

the crystal potion bottle away from her lips while I braced her and assisted her with my lower arms. My tails only reluctantly released her limbs so she could move more easily.

“You fell into an unwaking slumber,” I said, still struggling to regain the use of my voice, my chest thrumming in memory of that terrible rotation when she’d collapsed. “I sent for the healer, but he could do nothing for you.” And he’d run from my blossom house after informing me of that, frightened by what he’d seen in my eyes.

“I had such...*strange* dreams,” she murmured, her hand flattening to smooth over my mandible as it flexed beneath her much-welcomed touch. “I feel...better now.” She cocked her head to the side, her expression shifting to one of concern. “I didn’t know your branches could droop, my star-flame.” She lifted her hand from my mandible to circle it around my thickest branch as she so often did when we made love. “You need sleep, Zanthos.”

With that, she took the crystal bottle with her other hand and brought it to her lips before I could stop her, still in shock that she was finally, truly awake. She threw her head back as she tipped it towards her mouth, swallowing the potion down in several quick gulps, then making a smacking sound with her lips before smiling at me.

“It tastes really good, you know.” Her gaze lowered from her grip on my branch to trail down my body, fixing on my groin. “I feel better now, dearest.” Her gaze lifted back to meet mine. “I think the worst of this journey is over.” She stroked her fingers along my sagging branch. “You need to sleep now, or you’ll never make it through our entwining.”

# Fifteen



May 26th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 35, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

My dearest Zanthos,

I was beginning to worry that the potions had failed, though I never would have admitted that to you after what you went through when I fell unconscious. I can still recall that haunted, hollow look in your eyes when I finally opened mine. It was like your fire was dying, but also consuming everything inside you on its way out.

I'm so happy that you're serving again as Spore Talker, though I think the Immobiles made you wait too long in doubt before returning the position to you. Xylaria hated it. She said it involved way too much "knowing" and she couldn't take it for long. She still has no idea how you do it so easily. She told me she was honest about that with you when she was dropping off the potions, so I don't feel like a shameless gossip for sharing this info.

When you left this rising to return, finally, to your position as Spore Talker, I went out to the patio off my suite that I never seem to end up sleeping in. (Your "bower" has always felt more comfortable, especially while you're in it.) I wanted to watch the tiktaal burrow into the mud to lay their eggs, but the mist was so thick on the ground that it looked like the set of a mystical fantasy movie where they let the fog machine run too long, and I could barely see anything but vast swaths of mist-shrouded green and little glimpses of reflected sky,

rippled by the fine raindrops that seem to always be falling now.

I will never get over how gorgeous this land is!

Still, I felt some frustration at not seeing the tiktaal doing their thing, because you know I love my shiny, pretty tadpoles, and I won't get to see much of them after the Second Spawn Cycle ends and the buzz-bugs start their own mating season. I know, I know. You call them "jewels that dance in the Ost-beams," but I like my alliteration. Have you noticed that everything around here looks like a treasure waiting to be plucked from the green?

Of course, *you* noticed, my one, true treasure of a behemoth.

I *felt* the tiktaal today, even though I couldn't see them. I *felt* them! Like they were connected to me in some way. I also felt the mist, and the grass, and the shrubs, and the trees. I *felt* Thok like I'd suddenly become a part of it!

I can't explain it, but I know I won't need to. This is it, isn't it? This is one of the signs that it's nearly time to entwine our branches. I know now that I'm different from the Frannie who came here not so long ago on a ship from Earth. I *feel* that difference humming inside me. I knew on some level that the potion was meant to alter something about my body so we could be together as the once-rooted come together, but now, I *know*.

I know. Deep inside bones that were grown on Earth, I *know* Thok like my flesh resonates to it, my love. And that knowing is wondrous!

I couldn't say exactly what that potion did to me, but I don't regret any of it, because knowing Thok on this level means that I will soon know you in a way no other human ever could, and *that*, my star-flame, is what I anticipate the most.

Your raindrop forever,

Frannie



JUNE 20<sup>TH</sup>, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 67, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

*Memory Sharing — Entanglement ritual, Zanthos*

Beyond the temple, the rain continued to weep from the sky, and dark clouds concealed the light of Ost, but I did not see that as inauspicious, because the star-flame burned hot inside me in anticipation of my upcoming entanglement with my Frannie. I would provide enough heat to warm her soil, and once we were entangled, our seeds would grow within her.

This would work, I had no doubt now, and I was grateful that the Immobiles and the Cluster had forgiven my Ost-madness. Their age and wisdom made them slow to anger and even slower to take offense.

My jewel of Earth was prepared for this entwining, all of those unnamed “signs” were now there, according to the Eldest, and the Cluster Roots stood ready to aid in our ritual. The changes in her flesh aren’t visible, but she feels them, and I can sense her now when we are together, like her filaments are within reach.

I can still remember that rotation when she’d sent a sealed letter with Xylaria to the temple, too eager to tell me that she’d felt the connection to Thok to wait until I returned home. I’d broken the seal after Xylaria hastily left the Cluster chamber. I’d read it with my filaments still touching the Eldest’s, and I’d felt his amusement—a slow-moving thing, but deep like roots that reached the center of Thok. He’d known what the letter contained before my eyes ate up the words and my branches shivered with anticipation. All the Immobiles had known, all along, that this was the end of the rocky path and soon, fertile soil would welcome our roots.

The Immobiles had planned this out far beyond what even I had understood as Spore Talker, for I was not privy to all their secrets, something I had not realized in my arrogance at my *knowing*. Even the Long Roots were apparently not given all the secrets of the ancient flesh until they rooted with the other Immobiles and joined with the Cluster. Those secrets the

spores in the Cluster forget once they are separated from their flesh concerns.

There are different degrees of knowing, though all the once-rooted know Thok.

The rotation had finally arrived for our entwining of branches, and all of Melam Sora had prepared for this ritual, which would take place in the sacred chamber below the Cluster. The Council of Long Roots were in attendance, as well as the newly formed Council of Out-Branching. Both Councils wished to observe this historic and unprecedented moment.

Once the success of the ritual was recorded, the Out-Branchers would contact my Frannie's human agents to let them know that the contract had been fulfilled on HOAN's end and begin the process of fulfilling it on our end. Mostly through trade agreements that would enrich Earth's resources, along with some expert assistance to rejuvenate and expand certain ecosystems on Earth as well as within the Sol system.

The greatest commitment our Cluster had made to HOAN was our agreement to teach the humans how to terraform some of the moons in their system, a process which would take many Ost-cycles and would involve much cooperation between our species. In return, the humans would not attempt to learn any secrets the once-rooted did not wish for them to know. We didn't entirely trust them to keep to their word on that, but we had our own ways of inhibiting their knowledge seeking.

Our Out-Branchers were also touching filaments with other Cluster branches interested in this particular entwining and the potential for its success in bringing new flesh-lines to Thok. Each Cluster would need to form their own agreements with the human agents if they desired such an addition to their Cluster, but many of them were already expressing interest in the agreements we'd made with humanity.

For my Frannie's sake, I hoped other Clusters, or even our own, would make another agreement to bring more humans to Thok to undergo the process of entwining to *know* the once-



rooted like Frannie now did. That way, she wouldn't be the only human on this world. Although, now that she'd changed, she was just as connected to her new home and her new people as the once-rooted were.

Xylaria had escorted Frannie to the sacred chamber, aiding her since Frannie was not permitted to see the path. Not until the entanglement between us had completed could she share in this greatest of secrets. Once she was entangled with me, she would not betray me to her humans, which meant she wouldn't betray the Cluster.

I didn't think she would ever betray me anyway, but I understood the extra caution. After all, even a Spore Talker can lose his head at times and consider doing something terrible.

Once I reached the Cluster Root chamber, I saw that my raindrop stood in the center completely bare-skinned, with Melam Sora's Cluster markings painted on her arms and her upper thighs. Tucked among the thick, sheltering, connected roots of the Cluster that formed the chamber, a dozen once-rooted stared at her, while she remained still and surprisingly at ease below the vaulted ceiling formed by interconnected roots, each as thick around as a fully grown Thokost.

She still wore a silken blindfold so she couldn't see all the glowing eyes studying her alien flesh curiously, but I could, and I had to tamp down my rising Ost-energy before I again gave into Ost-madness and threatened to tear out all their eyes for looking at what was mine.

There was nothing strange about being bare-skinned for the once-rooted yet knowing that humans were vulnerable in their naked skin made me extra protective of her when she was unclothed, as well as very possessive of those views that she usually only permitted me to see.

Views like her softly furred slit, and the pink tips of her breasts that had hardened like she already anticipated my touch.

I managed to maintain my composure, but just barely as I joined her in the center of the ritual chamber, my heart

thrumming in my chest as my branches shivered, the filaments encased inside them eager to exit the tiny, barely visible pores in the branches to stretch towards her.

“Are there other people here, looking at me,” she said out of the corner of her mouth in a very low voice that she called a “whisper.”

I glanced around at all the watching eyes. “What makes you ask that, my raindrop?” I noted that she hadn’t needed me to greet her to know I had arrived and now stood before her.

“I can *feel* them,” she said, her lips barely moving as she hissed the words. Then her lips curved in what I now knew to be a sign of happiness, joy, or pleasure on a human. “I can also feel you, my love. It’s like I am standing deep in a fragrant root cellar, starting to grow chilly, but then the sun comes out and warms my skin. That’s what you felt like when you approached me. Like the rays of the sun falling on my naked body.”

“I will always bring my Ost-flame to you, my raindrop.” I took her hands in my upper hands, trying to not rush through this important moment, though controlling my taproot at the sight of her naked body was difficult. My mandibles had flexed open so I could inhale her scent and let it fill my senses, and my vine-tongue already grew slick with anticipation to taste her.

Her skin beneath the painted markings had pebbled from the cooler temperatures of the Cluster Root chamber, which was more beautiful during this Spawn Cycle than any other. Water from the ceaseless rains above flowed down ancient stone draperies and slender stone-thorns to fill many ponds where the sightless deep darters thrived in mineral-rich water. Large spears of Thok’s heart jewels—what my Frannie called “emeralds”—surrounded the chamber in thick clusters. The green, glowing fungi that was brought in to light the chamber caused the gemstones to sparkle.

Incense began to coil into the air from censors all around the chamber as attendants moved into their places. It was finally time for me to lift my hands and untie her blindfold.

Her eyes blinked a few times as the silk slipped away from her face. They fixed on me, and she smiled broadly. Then her gaze shifted to take in the chamber, and her mouth gaped open as she looked around in awe.

My upper hand lifted to cup her cheek and return her focus to me. “It is time, my Frannie. Once we are entangled, we will spend several rotations within this chamber while the attendants see to all our needs. It will be like your ‘honeymoon,’ as I spend my sap inside your nest to seed it. You may examine the sacred chamber all you like then, and I will bathe you in the sacred well personally.”

At her questioning look, I allowed her to turn her head as I gestured towards one side of the roughly dome-shaped chamber. Her gasp of awe and delight was my reward.

Water that bubbled up from the heart of Thok formed the sacred well. It was warmed by the fire of Ost that buried itself inside Thok’s nest every fading. Together, their waters created a large pool with clear crystals, both large and small that surrounded it, except for where they had been cleared away to make an entrance into the well.

The once-rooted understood that Thok merely circled Ost, and that the two did not actually come together at any point, but we preferred our interpretation to reality, because the stories our ancients told before they reached for the stars held important messages and meanings we intended to always preserve.

There was knowing as the knowledge seekers like Frannie’s “scientists” know, and then there was *knowing* as the Immobiles know.

Frannie swallowed, her smooth throat bobbing as she nodded. I could see her nervousness written upon her skin, and I’d admit to feeling nervous myself. I had never entwined my branches before. In fact, before my Frannie, I didn’t even have a taproot, so I had never even spent sap before. Since I was Ost-rooted, indulging in sex-seeking play had been discouraged to avoid any sap-rising incidents. I’d devoted my life to the Cluster as Spore Talker from the moment I dragged

my shrinking root feet from the ground and strode out of the nursery.

Now, I would be devoting my life to this out-worlder before me who was a stranger no longer. She was the Thok to my Ost. My lost spore-mate returned to me. She was my world now, and I had no regrets about that.

“Do not be afraid,” I leaned closer to her to whisper, though my own branches rustled with anxiousness. I knew what would happen, but she still did not.

From the center of the chamber above us, the Cluster sent its heart roots down in response to the incense curling upwards in the fragrant air. Frannie froze at the sight of them snaking towards us both. I lowered my upper hands to grip her shoulders and hold her steady, while my lower hands smoothed gently over the bare skin of her waist, giving her my toxin to arouse and excite her.

Then the thick roots coiled around us, several of them winding around my upper body and between my arms, while several more wound around Frannie’s fragile waist and upper body, just below her fleshy globes of “breasts.”

She locked her eyes on me, her trust clear in her gaze as the roots lifted us both off our feet and carried us upwards towards the center of the chamber ceiling, suspending us just below it, then binding my body to hers through entwined roots.

My tails snaked around her limbs automatically as she stretched her arms out to mine while the Cluster roots lined our faces up, her delightfully soft and furred slit out of reach of my taproot for the moment.

The entwining of branches would come before the first entangled sex-seeking, where my sap would hopefully sprout in her nest.

## *Sixteen*



June 19th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 66, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

To my world, my treasure, my jewel of Earth,

There is so much I wish to tell you before next rising and the start of our entwining ritual, but I cannot seem to find the right speak to express the depth of my emotions for you, so I am attempting to form the rune-speak that will tell you how much soft breeze you have brought to my life since you came here.

Even before you came here, I found joy in learning all about you from your documents and letters, though nothing could have prepared me for how I would feel when I finally had you bound in my tails and writhing in my arms, as eager to sex-seek—to make love—as I was.

My Ost-energy did not scare you away that very first rotation, and that was when I knew for certain that you remembered me, the way I remembered you, though we cannot remember the flesh-lives we lived together before.

*We knew.*

You trusted me from the very beginning, when you had yet to have a reason, and you endured my toxin and the misery it initially brought you, just so you could be here with me now. I know that you did that to escape your painful past and the memories your world brought you, but I believe that we were meant to be together again in this flesh-life, and perhaps that

spore-deep knowledge helped guide you and give you courage for such a long and rocky ground journey.

Your courage in the face of so many unknowns will never cease to amaze me. You have been challenged, and adapted, time and time again to become the most important part of my life. I fear I will never be able to prove my devotion so thoroughly to you as you have proven it to me, but once we are entangled, I hope you will feel it, as I do.

I have never entwined branches with anyone, so I don't know what to expect after the rising of the ritual. I know what the ritual entails, for I have presided over many of them between once-rooted, but this one will be so different, in so many ways, not the least of which being that you will be mine.

Mine, forever. Just as I will forever be yours.

Do not fear anything about the ritual, my beloved raindrop, because no matter what happens, I will be right there with you, and I won't ever let you go. I will do everything in my power to make the ritual pleasing for you, and when it is done, I will feast on your nectar-moon for as long as you'll let me.

May our spores forever entwine like our branches,

Yours eternally,

Zanthos



JUNE 20<sup>TH</sup>, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 67, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

*Memory Sharing — Entanglement ritual, Frannie*

I couldn't deny that I was terrified, but I trusted Zanthos more than I've ever trusted anyone in my life. He would keep his promise and keep me safe, even if giant, tentacle-like vines were snaking out of the ceiling to wrap around me.

I didn't scream, and I was proud of myself for that, because my human sensibilities were definitely being tested. At the same time, I felt a strange "more-ness" inside me that I couldn't explain in human words that told me that I could trust those huge vines. They weren't there to hurt me.

I didn't just trust them. I felt connected to them, and I felt many hearts pulsing through the vines wrapped around me, rippling and thumping against my naked skin. Skin that Zanthos had helpfully flushed with some of his toxin. It was arousing, and while I thought maybe I should be disturbed by that as the vines dragged us forty feet at least off the ground to suspend us below a ceiling of more pulsing vines, I couldn't muster the concern to care.

Yes, for any normal human, this situation probably wouldn't arouse. It would terrify. I could feel many Thokost eyes watching me and Zanthos, my naked lower body dangling in the grip of the vines that throbbed in a way that both comforted and excited me. Those watching eyes could see all my human lady junk hanging in the breeze.

We were going to make love like this, weren't we? In front of everyone.

Zanthos hadn't told me that, but he'd said it would be easier for me if I wasn't filled in on all the details of this ritual. I think now that he meant the fact that we'd have an avidly watching audience of both young adult—or "unrooted" as Zanthos called them—and elder—or "long root" as in they actually had roots instead of foot claws that they dragged around—Thokost.

The thought of such exhibitionism would normally freeze me like an ice cube. I'd never liked that feeling of being walked in on while in the middle of making out, or worse, actually doing the deed, and I'd certainly never thought about just getting down and dirty with someone while other people watched.

This was different, though. This was historical. A profound moment for both Thokost and human alike, and more than that, this was a forever kind of bonding to my Zanthos. Nothing else mattered but him, and just the thought of him aroused me, so thinking about being entangled with him for the rest of our lives definitely had me slick and ready for whatever came next.

We were face to face, and his tails had found their ways to my wrists and ankles, while his upper arms cupped my face, his eyes locked upon mine, burning like stars. His lower arms were nearly trapped against his body by the vines, but he didn't need them at the moment.

He lowered his forehead to rest it against mine, the magnificent rack of branches crowning his head laying over the top of mine in this position.

"I will always follow your spore," he said gruffly, his chest thrumming so loudly that it nearly drowned out the endless thumping of the vine heartbeats. "From now until the end of ages, and then I will rebuild the universe and seek you out again."

Well, damn. My wedding vows sucked in comparison to that! Even with all the scribbled-out drafts that had probably already been cleared away by the insectoid creatures that cleaned and maintained all the blossom houses. I called them giant maid-y bugs.

"My star-flame," I began, my brain drawing a blank on what lines I'd finally decided upon. Then I paused, having no idea what to say to convey my love for him the way it felt inside me.

A dozen vine heartbeats pulsed as my mouth worked but no words came out of it.

Then my Zanthos rescued me. "I *know*, my Frannie, how much you love me," his deep voice rumbled as his rough palms caressed my cheeks. "I feel it in the way you hold me. I see it in the way you look at me. I hear it in the way you say my name. I read it in every rune-speak you've written to me." He gently nuzzled my forehead, the weight of his rack barely settling on me, though I still felt it and wondered how he supported it so easily. "I know, as the once-rooted know," he continued fervently, his amber eyes ablaze, "even before we entwine our branches, that you are *mine* forever, and nothing, not even a vast galaxy, could keep us apart. You will always find your way back to me, or I will find my way back to you."



With those words saying exactly what I wanted to say, I need say nothing more. An alien chanting rose from below us as the pulsing in the vines wrapped around us sped up. Then I felt the slithering of webbed filaments in my hair, seeking around my head, creeping along my scalp.

It was really time, wasn't it?

The tips of Zanthos's filaments suddenly burrowed into my flesh, and I felt no pain at all even when they pierced the skin. I did feel a creeping feeling inside my head, rising from the base of my neck, like something was responding to those busy little filaments, or maybe to the chanting that was making my head spin.

Or was the head spinning because of the incense?

No, it was definitely spinning because I apparently had some brain filaments of my own, now wriggling free of the casing of my skull through what were probably tiny pores like the ones in Zanthos's branches.

And then our filaments touched under the skin of my scalp.

To an onlooker, my scalp probably looked like it contained a bunch of creepy crawly worms, and that would horrify most humans, but I was beyond any feelings of strangeness at this point. I could feel Zanthos like I was a part of him as his filaments not only touched mine, but began to coil around mine, forming little neural linkages everywhere.

Each connection was a memory shared.

A memory of his time in the nursery as a creature that looked nothing like he did as an adult. My memory of being in a nursery, looking chubby and pink and huge-eyed as I took my first sample of some paste.

His beginning as Spore Talker, his guilt for being Ost-rooted, and his fear of becoming a raider in nature that drove him to be so devout and seeking balance in his energy.

My memory of the invasion, the horror more distant now, like I was watching it happen to someone else, or like someone else was taking on some of the pain and fear to help me bear this memory again.

His loneliness growing with each passing Ost-cycle. A part of Melam Sora, but something more, so he was treated differently. Isolated because he had access to the knowing of the ancient Immobiles, and many of the once-rooted feared that knowing. Even to them, it seemed alien, despite it being their future existence. Most were not prepared for what came with great age and understanding.

My sadness and guilt over the loss of Lou, again faded and more distant, and again, I knew it was because Zanthos was bearing some of the emotions connected to it, so I wasn't overwhelmed. I just knew that was what was happening.

He was sharing my emotional burdens as we entwined our "branches" or more accurately, the tiny, sensory filaments inside them, linking them together so we could share everything we thought and remembered and felt. For the time our filaments swirled around each other, we were one being with two bodies.

It was incredible, and overwhelming, and magnificent, and I felt Zanthos's love, and now, he could feel mine, even though I hadn't been able to express it verbally.

And then, our filaments stretched, gently being plucked apart, withdrawing from each other reluctantly, his leaving my scalp, mine retreating back inside my skull. The vines holding us, still thumping away rapidly, brought his groin closer to mine, and Zanthos's tails were already parting my legs.

I didn't need to touch his filaments to see his excitement. His eyes glowed so bright that they pushed back the darkness at the top of the chamber, showing the hole in the ceiling from which the roots extended.

My inner thighs were soaked when his tendrils snaked over the skin there, and Zanthos rumbled a pleased sound as he positioned the head of his taproot at my entrance. He sank it in slowly, tormenting us both. His spreader tendrils worked their way inside me too, apparently not wanting to be left out.

I knew they were used to spread open not just his own slit—or knothole—but also the entrance to a Thokost female's nest—or seed chamber, but I still felt like they had a mind of

their own and just liked burying themselves in my heat right alongside his shaft. The way they shifted and wriggled as it all stretched me far beyond what a normal human erection could manage excited me to no end.

Once his taproot was buried inside me, another huge, pulsing vine encircled both our bodies, binding us together from shoulders to the tips of our toes, forming a cocoon of roots while Zanthos pumped his taproot inside me, and I moaned and cried and gasped in ecstasy as both it and the tendrils teased and pumped and stretched me.

I couldn't say how long it took for his sap to spurt into my nest, but it fountained into me until it poured out around his spreaders, dripping down through the vines supporting us. It kept going, his taproot jerking and twitching with each spurt as my inner muscles rippled around him from my own orgasm.

The chanting had ended, but a cheer arose from the audience as his sap began to pool on the ground far below us. Now that I knew, as the once-rooted *know*, I felt their excitement about this unprecedented entangling, just like I felt the joy from the Cluster, and the satisfaction from the Immobiles that their long-term plan, many centuries in the making, had come to such a satisfactory conclusion.

Great change was coming to the Land of All Things, and I was the herald of that change. As I gazed into the glowing eyes of my insatiable mate, I didn't care what came next, so long as we were together to face it.

# Epilogue



July 4th, A.M.I (Earth sync date), Second *Spawn Cycle*,  
*Rotation 85, Melam Sora Cluster Root 4652*

Dear Shari,

Greetings from the Land of All Things, my dearest friend. I know it has been some time since I've sent a letter, but I'm sure you can imagine that many things are going on in my life that keep me busy.

I am now a married woman and let me just say that the honeymoon I spent with Zanthos was out of this world! (You see what I did there? Ha!) But seriously, it was beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

It was also very fruitful. Yes, that means this letter is also a pregnancy announcement! I know! I know! Hybrids? *Already?* Am I crazy?

It's okay, Shar. I'm not scared at all. I trust the healers on this world. I can't say much more than that, but I *know* that everything will be okay, and my babies will be healthy and vital and perfect. They will be "all things." (That's the best phrase I can think of to describe the sense of completion a Thokost feels that a human could never truly know without becoming entangled with one.)

Lou and I always wanted to have babies, but we kept putting it off, thinking we were too young and that we should wait until we were at least in our late twenties before trying.

I didn't want to wait to have them with Zanthos. The time was right for me and my beloved star-flame to seed my nest

(Yes, that means what you think it means. I can't help talking more and more like a Thokost each day). That was something I just *knew*.

I understand so much more than I did before, and I am also complete. I feel whole, Shari, in a way I've never experienced before. The Thokost are...they just *are*! Ah, now I understand how Zanthos must have felt trying to explain things to me when he was first writing me letters.

It's not something that can be put in words. It's more of a feeling that has no name. An understanding that is inherent. A soul-deep knowledge that humans are cut off from. I think *we* cut ourselves off from it, and I believe it is still inside all of us just waiting for us to rediscover it, but that's neither here nor there for now. I just wanted you to know that I'm finally happy in a way I've never been before.

I no longer grieve for Lou, though I will always remember him and the love I had for him. He was a good man, and he died a hero, protecting the person he loved, and I will never regret the place he held in my life that helped shape the person I am today. I also no longer feel guilty about letting him go after all these years. I know that his spore will come to rest in a good place, wherever that may be, and I can only hope that when he reroots in new flesh, he will find the same completion in that next life that I have found in this one.

Years of therapy could not help me release all that pain and guilt. I needed this move. I needed to leave Earth behind so I would no longer be tempted to search endlessly for a closure I would never find. More than that, I needed to find a new purpose in my life, and a new connection to help me grow again, instead of slowly fading away, dishonoring Lou's sacrifice.

I have found all of that and more on Thok. Now, I am a wife, I will soon be a mother, and I've also become one of the members of the Cluster's Out-Brancher's Council. I am the human relations advisor for the Cluster for obvious reasons, and even though I got the job because I'm the only human in Melam Sora, it's a heck of a lot of responsibility, but with

Zanthos always there to support and guide me, I'm growing into my new role on my adopted world.

I couldn't believe what you wrote in your last letter at first, but then I laughed aloud at that damned A.I. of HOAN's. It's a menace to humanity with its matches. I think it deliberately chose an Urasol for you because you noted that they frightened you in your paperwork. It's evil, Shari, I'm certain. (Not *really* certain, but all those sci-fi stories couldn't have been that far off about artificial intelligence, right?)

That being said, I think it might be good for you to take the leap and accept the match. Yes, the Urasol are scary, and big, and hairy, and beastly—and bear-y (sorry, I had to!), but sometimes, your destiny is hiding in the very shadows you're too afraid to explore. You know how I felt at first about the A.I. matching me to Zanthos, and now I *know* that it made the right decision in my case, even if I still don't trust it and never will.

You weren't in that support group with the rest of us for nothing, Shari. I know you didn't lose a romantic partner, but you have lost so much of your family, and I've watched you struggle over the years to find something to replace the hole those losses left inside you. The Urasol come from big, boisterous clans. You'd be getting more than just a partner with a match to one. You'd be part of a family again. I'm just suggesting you consider it, not that you actually do it if you really can't imagine being with an Urasol.

I just want to remind you that I felt the same way about being with a Thokost. I'd panicked when I'd first gotten the news. I'd overreacted. I'd allowed my human biases and sensibilities to stand in my way of opening my mind and my heart to a love like Zanthos's, but once I chose my course and committed to it, I could look past all my misconceptions, and I started to see the beauty in his form, even before I met him in person.

Now, I can't even imagine all that I would have missed out on if I hadn't taken that desperate leap into the unknown. I didn't follow my heart, Shari. I forged ahead and dragged that hesitant bitch along in my wake, and once she saw what I'd

already started to see, she nearly ran me down to leap into Zanthos's arms.

Whatever choice you end up making, I support you, girl. I always will. You have been a true and valued friend all these years, just like the rest of our little support group, and though we are becoming more scattered across the world and even the galaxy, making it more difficult to stay in touch, I'm actually thrilled to see it, because it means that the last of us are finally choosing to move on with the lives we've left on hold for far too long.

I hope to keep in touch with you, though I know communication can get expensive at this distance. Still, be it a year, or fifty, that passes between letters, never hesitate to reach out to me, because I will always want to hear from you, no matter how long it's been.

With best wishes for your happiness and eternal soft breezes, my friend,

Frannie

P.S. You'd *better* tell me if you do decide to take that Urasol match, because I will hunt you down and strangle you if I don't get all the juicy details! Love ya! XOXO

## *Author's Note*

Thank you so much for reading *From Thok, With Love*. I hope you enjoyed this little novella as much as I enjoyed writing it! If you're interested in reading more about the Iriduan Universe and finding out about the events that led up to the Menops invasion, check out my *Iriduan Test Subjects* and *Iriduan Universe Love Stories* series. (Links on the next pages.)

This story started as an experimental project in 2022 where I wrote the entire story as a series of diary entries and “memory shares,” mostly to challenge myself and to better flesh out the Thokost species and culture, because I knew I wanted to eventually write a book about a plant/tree-like alien with fungal properties. (Fans of my Iriduan series know I am obsessed with fungi, lol).

I wasn't planning on publishing it, necessarily, although I did kick around the idea of expanding the story a bit and changing the format to eventually get around to publish it, because I had



already fallen in love with both Frannie and Zanthos. The thing was that their story didn't fit into either my *Iriduan Test Subjects* or my *Iriduan Universe Love Stories* series, so I just kind of let the manuscript sit in my "to-do" file, figuring I'd return to it someday.

When the opportunity to collaborate with other authors on a cool concept of telling a love story through love letters came up, I knew I already had the perfect novella-length manuscript ready to go (short manuscripts are very rare for me!), so I joined in on the collaboration. Of course, nothing is ever that simple XD.

I had a ton of rewriting to do in order to change diary entries and "memory shares" to a more cohesive and linear story with actual scenes and dialogue in addition to the love letters. It ended up being a lot more work than I initially anticipated, but I love the way it ultimately turned out, and I'm hoping my readers do too!

This story was part of a collaboration with four other authors focused on Alien Love Letters. We each had our own take on how we wanted to present them, so each story is a standalone read set in our own universes. Be sure to check out the other stories in the Alien Love Letters collaboration:

[From Zestria, With Love](#) by Rena Marks

[From Vangar, With Love](#) by Julie Cohen

[From Earth, With Love](#) by Sandra R. Neeley

[From Zarpathia, With Love](#) by Tracy Lauren

Also, be sure to subscribe to my newsletter for updates and announcements. I have added a section to my monthly newsletter where I feature exclusive content for my subscribers, such as sneak peeks, excerpts from unpublished or pre-published works, character art and interviews, and anything else I think my fans will enjoy. I only send out a monthly newsletter and newsletters when I have something to announce, so you won't be spammed. You can sign up at this link:

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