



PHEROMONE

A SMUTTY REVERSE HAREM ALIEN ROMANCE

FOR THE LOVE OF ALIENS

*Three hot aliens.
Three different worlds.
One lucky lady.*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

That's the first thing I see when I open my eyes, that damn sign.

Don't fancy myself being sold for any of the above reasons, so I'm *relieved* when my buyer is killed by an

...

Um.

Hot venom and horns and a violent grin.

What the actual fuck is that?! Or should I say *who* the actual fuck is *he*?

Because he's definitely male. Definitely big. Definitely exuding pheromones that turn me into a much less rational human being.

Hi, I'm Eve Wakefield, twenty-five years old, professional caterer, recently abducted by aliens alongside my best friend. I'm also completely and utterly *screwed*. Lost on a jungle planet. Rooming in a downed spaceship with a dragon dude. Being hunted by a moth man with demon eyes and vampire teeth. Begging for help from a tentacle-tailed fox man who also happens to be ... a space cowboy?

Here's the thing: I desperately want to go back to Earth.
But I am *not* leaving this place without my bestie, Jane
Baker.

And I can't find her *or* get us home without the help of
three males who just so happen to be ideal romantic
matches for yours truly.

Yay.

Three very different men. Three very different lives for
me to try out. Three very powerful romances.

And only one thing matters: *finding Jane*.

Then ... then I'll worry about the messy complications
of finding myself perma-mated to aliens.

Yeah, it's a whole *thing*.

Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Signup for my Newsletter](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Start](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

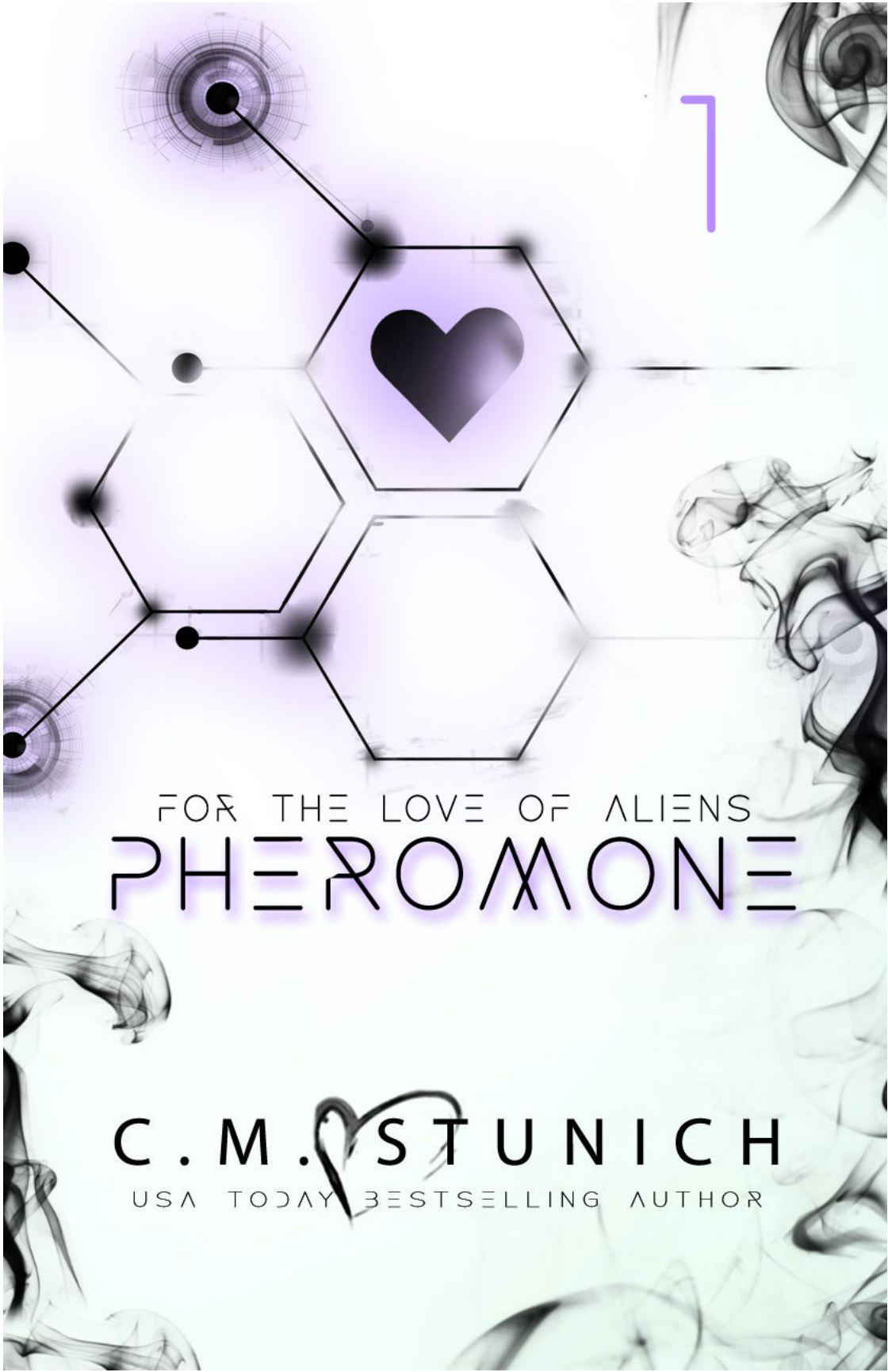
[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

Chapter 23

- [Alien Art Link](#)
- [Seminal Cover](#)
- [A Bride for Beasts Cover](#)
- [The Family Spells Cover](#)
- [Pack Ebon Red Cover](#)
- [Devils Day Party Cover](#)
- [Keep Up With The Fun](#)
- [More Books By C.M. Stunich](#)
- [About the Author](#)



FOR THE LOVE OF ALIENS
PHEROMONE

C.M. STUNICH
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Pheromone

Pheromone © C.M. Stunich 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

For information address Sarian Royal Indie Publishing, 89365
Old Mohawk Rd, Springfield, OR 97478.

www.cmstunich.com

Cover art and design © Amanda Carroll and Sarian Royal

No AI was used in the creation of any part of this book

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.
Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, businesses, or locales is coincidental and is not intended by the author.

this book is dedicated to freedom of speech.

*I am ever so grateful for the ability to write and publish alien
~~porn~~ romance.*

much love to tentacles, tails, and coremata.



[Sign up for an exclusive first look at the hottest new releases, contests, and exclusives from bestselling author C.M. Stunich and get *three free* eBooks as a thank you!](#)



[Want to discuss what you've just read? Get exclusive teasers or meet](#)

[special guest authors? Join my online book club on Facebook!](#)



Author's Note (Contains Minor Spoilers):

Welcome to my universe.

We call it the Noctuida (*Nock-too-wee-duh*), but that doesn't do this plot-meets-alien-smut-romance-novel justice. Our main female character is going to meet three strange but beautiful male love interests. This story takes us from an alien forest to a sentient spaceship to a cosmic star chapel to a distant water-logged planet. What I'm trying to say is: *don't get too comfortable with your surroundings.*

This book is what I like to call a fast-burn/slow-build reverse harem romance.

Here's what that means for you, dear reader: our main character will end up with three love interests at the end of the story. She is not going to choose just one. Fast-burn means we'll have plenty of sex and romance, but slow-build means it'll take some time to build up all of our main character's lovers.

This story—this *universe*—is a huge passion project for me. I hope you enjoy the wild ride, and I'll see you again once it's all over.

Love you fierce, C.M. Stunich

This book is 100% human written (all of my books are); it contains ***NO*** AI written material, ideas, or inspiration. No ghostwriting was used in the creation of this book.

pheromone - *noun*

a scented chemical substance created by an animal (or alien) that acts as a stimulus to other creatures for varied behavioral responses (to induce and encourage mating, for example) especially that.



Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

I'm almost certain that's what the sign above my head reads. With a groan of pain, I roll onto my side, coughing and curling up into a ball. My head is ringing, and I'm seeing double, so maybe I just imagined it. What a weird thing for a sign to say, right?

I must've fallen and conked my head. That's all I can think to explain both the confusion and the pain; my leg is killing me. That, and I'm not sure if I'm too hot or too cold. Is it possible to be both things at once?

"Roll her over." A female voice relays the command in a tone that's calm enough, but edged with a nervous energy that makes me feel twitchy. *Roll who over?* I wonder, just before tight fingers curl around my arms and legs. I'm forced onto my back with no energy to fight off the change in position.

The world spins around me like I'm on a carousel, and then I'm staring at that damn sign again.

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

That's definitely what it says. There are other languages written above and below it, but I don't recognize a single one of them. *Halloween prank? No, it's July.* Premature October decor it may be, but the sign wasn't hanging at the Princess of Pop's fundraiser, the one she was hosting at her fancy-pants apartment building. That's

the last thing I remember, standing on the roof of that high-rise with my best friend, a pair of paramedics, a lawyer, and an angry pop star.

Oh, and a possum. Can't forget the possum.

"She's bleeding." A male voice this time, grim, tight-lipped. I can't exactly see him, but the way his words come out, clipped and perfunctory, it's obvious that he doesn't like what he sees. "There's a piece of shrapnel embedded in her thigh." There's a heavy pause between that sentence and the next, but as much as I try to squint and focus on the man's face, all I can seem to look at is that stupid sign. "If we try to remove it, she might bleed out."

"If we don't remove it, who will?" the woman asks, her voice as grim as the man's. "I worked as a remote medic for years; I can do this."

"Shit." The man curses and then exhales, like he's bracing himself for an unpleasant task.

"Eve?" I recognize that voice: Jane Baker and I have been best friends since junior high. Well, she kicked me in the crotch and stole my boyfriend in junior high, but I forgave her a year later and we've been close ever since. "Oh my God, Eve. You're bleeding everywhere ..." Her voice trails off with a hiccup as I blink through the static and try to find her in a sea of blurry faces. "Is she going to be okay?"

In the twelve years since I've known Jane, I have *never* heard her so afraid.

"I have no fucking clue." The female voice—the one who claimed to have been a remote medic—grinds those words out just before she tears my pants open. "The more humans we have to fight these *things*, the better."

Um. Excuse me. What *things* are we talking about exactly?

I feel cool air on my legs, the brush of warm fingers, and then ... nothing.



Whether I'm dreaming or dead, I have no idea.

But between one minute and the next, I'm lying on my back staring at that strange sign and then, I'm in my own bed and groaning at the sound of an incoming call.

"It's not okay to be awake this early on my day off!" I shout out, aware that this entire scenario isn't real. Or, if it is, I've lost my mind. This is exactly what happened *this morning*, before the sign and the bleeding and Jane asking if I'm going to be okay.

I'm twenty-five years old; I know a dream when I see it.

My bedroom door opens, and there's my mother, standing stiffly in an apron with a mixing bowl clutched in one arm. She's frowning at me as the ringing stops and then promptly picks up again. Based on the ringtone—some horrid pop song by Jane's star client—I know exactly who it is that's on the line. It's her, my future ex-bestie.

"Can you please answer your phone? Jane's called the house a half-dozen times already." Mom slams the door—that's her prerogative since I live with her well into adulthood—but I grit my teeth anyway, snatching my phone up and slapping it against my ear as I answer it.

"You called the house?" I accuse, because although my parents have a landline like it's 1996, that doesn't mean anyone calls it other than Jane Baker. "Remind me again why I moved back in with my family. I'm practically thirty years old."

"Because you need to save up for a house, and I convinced you it was a smart idea? Also, you're only practically twenty-six," Jane replies, but then she goes dead silent, and I know this is going to be bad. Jane is never silent unless she wants something, but knows she's likely to be told *no*. The silence is only there to buy her some time to figure out how to manipulate the other party involved. Usually, said other party is yours truly. "Can you do me a *huge* favor?" she asks, and I hang up.

Because I know what that favor is going to be.

If it weren't for Jane, I wouldn't own a successful catering business or be making good money. It's *because* of a favor for Jane that I got the opportunity in the first place. But I just got off a ten-day stretch of working one gig after another, and I am *not* cobbling together some half-assed affair on my one day off. Jane calls back,

and I sit up before I answer, frowning at my bed-mussed hair in the floor-to-ceiling mirror across the room from me. Sharp green eyes glare back. I am *not* a morning person.

Or ... I draw the phone away from my ear to check the time. Apparently I'm not a *twelve-thirty in the afternoon* person either.

"Why do you hate me so much?" I ask when I answer, and Jane sighs in relief.

"The first guests are expected to arrive around six, but Tabbi won't be making an entrance until around seven-thirty."

Of course not. Why should the party's hostess arrive at her own fundraiser on time?

With my free hand, I reach up to untangle my hair. At this point, I've forgotten all about the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign, and I'm fully embroiled in my memory of this morning. I'm picking at rat nests in my auburn waves and yawning like it's any other day.

"Tabbi," I huff, gaze shifting to the tabby cat sprawled across the end of my bed. I'm mildly allergic to cats, so I get hives whenever I pet her, but eh. It's worth the pain. I smile and wiggle my fingers to entice the cat—her name is Annabelle—but she ignores me, licking her shoulder in disdain. The 'Tabbi Kat' I'm referring to (pronounced just like *tabby cat*) is a famous pop star and Jane's spoiled, pretentious hellion of a client. Tonight, Tabbi is hosting a fundraiser in her penthouse apartment, smack-dab in the center of the city.

I forced Jane to hire another caterer; I worked with Tabbi once and swore never to do it again.

But alas, there's nobody in this city who's as hardworking or reliable as I am (much to my own detriment).

"I told you that you should've let me hire you in the first place," Jane whines as I swing my legs out of bed and yawn for the hundredth time. Four hours of sleep is just not enough, especially not after having slept two-to-three hours a night for the past week and a half. I feel like I'm dying. No, at least if I were dying, I could sleep.

And maybe I am? Seeing as I'm reliving a day that already happened.

“Did the original caterers give you a reason for canceling?” I ask, and then Jane goes silent again. See what I mean? She’s trying to find a way to convince me that this isn’t her fault. Or rather, that it isn’t Tabbi’s fault.

“Tabbi fired them this morning ...” Jane hedges, and I hang up again. She promptly texts me the address and the specifics as I drag my tired body to the shower. Of *course* Tabbi Kat fired her caterers the morning of a big event. Nothing else would make a lick of sense.

I shower and then make phone calls in various states of undress. One phone call in my panties, another after putting on my bra, a third after yanking on my black slacks. Once I’ve got a crew together, I head out and down the stairs.

“Are you working again today?” Mom calls out, but I only offer up a wave of acknowledgement. I don’t have time to argue with her right now. She thinks I work too much, that I need some time off ... and she’s right. I just can’t agree with her on that until tomorrow.

“Eve?” Dad asks as I sweep past him and toward my van—the homeowners’ association has been all over my parents’ ass about having me park it elsewhere—hopping in as he approaches the passenger side window. I roll it down and give him a look. “Where are you going? I thought we were playing golf today.”

I’m not a big fan of golf, but I play with my dad on the weekends just so we can spend time together. Regretfully, I’ll have to cancel today.

“Where else? I’m off to save Jane’s ass from an evil pussy.” I offer up a tight smile as Dad frowns and steps back, so I can pull out of the driveway.

“Work on cleaning up your language while you’re at it. You’re practically thirty years old.” My father goes back to washing his car as I catch sight of my younger brother standing on the porch. Shit. I promised to let him borrow my car for his date tonight.

I stop in the middle of the street, reverse back toward the driveway, and roll my window down.

I toss the key fob onto the grass as Nate gapes at me, and then off I go.



“I knew you could do it.” Jane is beaming at the sea of aristocrats, musicians, and politicians that are milling around Tabbi’s penthouse apartment, chowing down on onion-mushroom sliders and bruschetta topped with tomatoes and basil. Since the Princess of Pop is a proud vegan, there’s no meat to be seen. “Everyone seems to be enjoying the food.”

I’m sweating profusely in my long-sleeved white button-down and black slacks, but I make myself smile anyway. Who knows what sorts of clients I might pick up from this event?

“Only by the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin,” I reply, still smiling and nodding at passersby. My gaze shifts over to Tabbi Kat, dressed in a sparkly pink bikini top with an oversized cardigan in the same color. She’s got on baggy, acid-wash jeans and clunky sneakers. Also, she’s holding a pet opossum—you know, the only North American marsupial with the hairless tail—which is sort of her trademark thing. I don’t agree with it, but what can I do? The girl is a multi-platinum bestselling diva with a temper.

The possum climbs onto her shoulder and crouches there, hissing at people as they pass by, and I give Jane a look.

“It’s only going to take one person, one bite, and it’s curtains for the poor guy.”

“This possum is a girl,” Jane whispers, leaning in close to me. “The other one passed away from old age just a few months back. Apparently, they only live for about four years.”

I feel the edge of my lip curl up in disgust; there’s nothing about Tabbi that I like.

As if she can sense that we’re talking about her, she turns and saunters over to us.

“I’m done with the party now. Can we ask everyone to leave?” she whispers, as if Jane is her personal assistant as well as her manager. Over the last two years, I’ve also seen Jane act as Tabbi’s mother (they’re only five years apart in age), her therapist, her personal

shopper, her maid, and one time, her bodyguard. Jane *literally* took a bullet for Tabbi. Well, so it was a rock fired from a slingshot, but it still left the nastiest purple-blue bruise on Jane's rib cage.

"We can't ask them to leave just yet." Jane puts on her prettiest smile as Tabbi tosses pink-tipped blond hair over her shoulder and scowls at the gathered crowd of millionaires like they're so much trash. "Why don't you have another drink and—"

"Oh, what a *beautiful* animal!" a man exclaims, stepping forward and reaching out to pet the possum without bothering to ask permission. As wild animals are wont to do, the creature bites down hard on the man's hand, and he howls in pain. Apparently, possums have *extremely* sharp teeth.

That's how we end up on the roof of the apartment building: me, Jane, two paramedics, a pop star, and a lawyer.

"I'm going to have that rat removed and *euthanized*," the man hisses. The possum—I've been told her name is Madonna, after the Virgin Mary and not the singer—hisses right back at him, and he balks. "How dare you cart around such a dangerous beast."

"Go ahead and call animal control!" Tabbi is screaming, just barely held back from physical violence by Jane's surprisingly strong grip. That girl can bench press a hundred-and-fifty pounds, believe it or not. How I'm involved in this mess, I'm not sure, but I guess I'm just up here for moral support. "Call them and see what happens! I will *ruin* you."

"Go ahead and try," the man replies smugly, allowing one of the paramedics to examine the bite on his hand. It's not really all that bad. To put it nicely, I feel as if he's ... sort of a little bitch. "I have connections you wouldn't dare *dream* of, little girl."

Oh. Wow. I don't like Tabbi, but the patronizing tone this guy is taking on would have me in a rage, too.

Tabbi manages to escape from Jane's grip, the possum clinging to her shoulder as she throws a punch that rocks the lawyer on his feet. He stumbles back, clutching at his face as far more blood streams from his nostrils than ever came from the bite on his hand.

I stand there gaping as Tabbi shakes her hand out, sniffing as she slides her phone from her pocket and flicks it open—it's a Z Flip, obviously. Samsung is one of her sponsors. Maybe ... not after this clusterfuck though.

“Can you guys come up to the roof?” she asks, sniffing sadly, tears welling.

“You didn’t invite those weirdos you met in the club the other night, did you?” Jane whispers, eyes flicking from the yowling lawyer to Tabbi to me. Clearly, she’s begging for help here. “If you did, then uninvite them; I don’t trust them. Besides, if you haven’t noticed, we’re in a bit of a pickle here.”

“Pickle?” Tabbi asks, looking at me for some reason and not at Jane. “Did I do anything unreasonable here, Evelyn?” she asks, and I sigh. I’ve mentioned a good two dozen times before that my name isn’t Evelyn; it’s just Eve. No matter. We have bigger fish to fry.

“You punched the mayor’s lawyer in the face just now,” I remind her, and Tabbi turns a look over her shoulder, Madonna’s tiny, clawed feet clutching the fabric of the pink cardigan for support. It’s a ridiculous situation, something I’m bound to find funny later. Jane and I will settle in with some saké, sushi, and a playlist that does *not* include any of Tabbi’s music, and we’ll howl with laughter over this.

For now, I try my best to take control of the situation. Jane’s got that look on her face that says she’s about to panic.

“This prick?” Tabbi asks, turning around like she’s ready to fight again. “Some washed-up old man with an ugly hairpiece? What is he gonna do, huh?” she queries, crossing her arms obstinately. After a moment—and I wish I could make this up—she gets her phone out again, popping open her selfie-stick, and then starts to film something that’ll inevitably go viral as soon as she posts it. “Some guy slapped Madonna, and she bit him. Then I punched him. Who’s at fault here?” she asks as Jane’s eyes get wide, and she lunges forward.

“Do not post that,” she grinds out as I snatch Tabbi’s phone from the end of the selfie stick.

“You’ve just forfeited your entire career, sweetheart,” the man snarls, swiping blood from the lower half of his face. He points at Tabbi with a shaking hand as the two paramedics exchange a look, standing there with their bags in hand and looks of unbridled annoyance on their weary faces. When there are lives to save, here they are, stuck in a rooftop garden with a pop star and a lawyer. Gross. “I never allowed my daughter to listen to your music; it’s *garbage*.”

“Excuse me?” Tabbi breathes, as I hold up my hands, trying to step between her and the lawyer.

“Oh, and the food tonight?” he adds with a sly smirk, stepping up far too close to me to be civil. “It was *inedible*.” The man squeezes my ass, and I turn suddenly, elbowing him in the face on ‘accident’.

“Oh my God, oh no.” I put my hands over my mouth to hide my own smirk. The guy is just gushing blood from his nose now. “Did I accidentally hit you?”

“All of you bitches are in trouble now!” the lawyer—I’m not sure what his name is—screams as he backs up toward the door.

It opens then and two men step out, both of them tall and muscular and *identical*. They even saunter forward in unison, arm muscles bulging beneath the sleeves of their too tight t-shirts. Matching smarmy smirks. Tight jeans draped over thick thighs and bubble butts. *Holy crap*. Not only are both guys gorgeous, but they’re almost ... inhuman. Who has skin that perfect, hair that shiny, abs that tight? They’re barely human.

Then again, this is exactly the sort of crowd that Tabbi usually hangs out with. Other than the twin thing, they don’t look any different than the six-foot-four models that Tabbi dates and discards on the regular. What’s new?

“Boys!” she whines, putting one of her hands on either of their chests as they step up on both sides of her. “Can you please take me with you? Wherever. Anywhere. I’d jet off this fucking planet if I had the chance.”

The two dudes turn a look on one another that creeps me out. It’s even worse when they smile and one of them rubs his large hand in a circle on Tabbi’s lower back. It doesn’t look comforting; it looks assessing. Clinical. Huh.

“Don’t worry, Tabbi Kat, we’ve got you.” The first man flicks a coy look over his shoulder, his smile growing even wider as I find myself taking an unconscious step back. Jane notices and reaches out to grab my wrist.

“Get your hands off of me.” The lawyer slaps away the female medic’s hand and storms off in the direction of the door.

“Oh no you don’t,” the second musclehead purrs, and then he’s moving to block the lawyer from leaving. “You’ve made our kitty

cry.” His hand comes out and wraps around the lawyer’s neck, causing the man’s eyes to bulge almost comically out of his head.

“Oh, shit,” I murmur, lips parted in shock.

“Um, Eve,” Jane whispers, her voice strangled in a way I’ve only ever heard the day her mother was arrested. She’s looking up so, as expected, I also look up.

That’s when I see it: an angry-looking vessel crafted out of some strange iridescent metal.

Uhh ...

Someone is screaming bloody murder—it might be the lawyer—and then that’s it.

I’m opening my eyes to find that goddamn sign again.

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

However you choose to interpret that ... it doesn’t bode well for me, now does it?



Where am I? I wonder as I struggle to sit up with the help of the male paramedic. He offers me some water which I take, gratefully slurping down half of his water bottle before I pass it back. Using the heel of my hand, I rub at my heavy lids and try to clear my blurry vision.

I was bleeding, right? But why? It was the lawyer who was bleeding earlier, not me.

I squint at the paramedic, blinking him into focus only to wish I hadn't done that. He has a huge gash on his forehead, a waxen expression, and pursed lips. Mostly it's the fear in his eyes that makes me wish I was still having trouble seeing.

“What's going on?” I ask, wondering which parts of my delusion—the strange sign, the mention of fighting off *things*, and the spaceship—are real, and which are fake. Hopefully, I just imagined some gross middle-aged lawyer cupping my ass and mocking my food. “Where are we?”

I look around, noticing that we're in a tent of some kind. Not like a small camping tent, but one of those big white ones used for weddings and other outdoor events. Only, there are no openings in this particular tent; it appears to have a large zipper in the center of one wall, like a raincoat or something. The fabric itself is translucent enough to allow light in, but only just. It's a frosty, opaque material that reminds me of a shower curtain. Only the roof is see-through.

That's where the sign hangs, a banner of white fabric with crudely drawn letters in at least half a dozen languages.

I drop my attention back to the paramedic, and then let it shift beyond him to where the lawyer guy is pacing a frantic back-and-forth, his hairpiece missing and his fingers playing in the thin strands that circle the crown of his head.

Tabbi is sitting about a dozen feet from him, stone-still and staring at the dusty gravel beneath us like it holds the answers to the universe's most poignant questions. Madonna the Possum sits stiffly on her shoulder like a pirate's faux parrot prop in some community theater production.

I don't see Jane, but the female paramedic is applying a bandage to my upper right thigh, fingers stained with blood. Actually, she's wearing a lot more of it than makes me comfortable. I glance down to see that there's an IV in my arm, a bag attached to it that the male paramedic is currently holding in his right hand, keeping it aloft for gravity's sake.

Speaking of, I feel so damn heavy, like the weight of the world is perched on my shoulders.

It takes me three tries to get the question out.

"Where's Jane?" I ask, and that's when things get scary. Male Medic glances over at Female Medic, but neither of them chooses to answer my question. The former offers me the water again while the latter secures the bandage and then sits back on her calves.

"You should take it easy for a while," she tells me, but I'm already getting dizzy from the implications. There's blood everywhere. Jane is missing. Someone ... kidnapped us? I flick my eyes around the confines of the tent again as my mind races with horrible possibilities.

Those weirdos that Tabbi picked up at the club did this to us! Surely there was no spaceship—we'll chalk that sighting up to blood loss—but the fact that we've been kidnapped is undeniable. I just stare at the lady medic until she finally looks back up and accidentally catches my gaze. Her cheeks immediately turn pink. For this woman who just saved my life to look sheepish about something, it must be bad.

"Jane ..." I start again, and the dude medic sighs heavily.

“I don’t want to upset you considering the state you’re in, but there’s no point in sugarcoating it: you’ll find out soon enough whether you like it or not.” He sets the water bottle aside and pushes his glasses up his nose. I realize now as I sit here that his hair isn’t black; it’s a very pretty blue-black. My vision narrows in on that color before I force myself to inhale and blink through the urge to pass out again.

“Sugarcoat what?” I whisper, already anticipating what he’s going to say. *Kidnapped by some of Tabbi Kat’s crazed fans. Kidnapped by some of Tabbi Kat’s anti-fans. Kidnapped because of Tabbi Kat since there’s no way this isn’t one-hundred-percent her fault.*

“We’ve been abducted by aliens.” Medic Guy isn’t smiling. That’s what makes it so damn funny, the way he delivers the words totally deadpan like that. I laugh at him. What he says makes me feel so much better. If he can joke about our situation, then I don’t have anything to worry about.

Deep inside, I realize how much of my blood is on Medic Girl; I feel Jane’s absence like a thorn in the side. Some irrational inner protection system clicks into place, and I can’t seem to stop myself from laughing until I’m coughing. I gesture for the water, and the male medic hands it to me.

He watches me carefully as I drink it, but Medic Girl just leans in with an austere expression on her face.

“Jane was taken a little while ago; we weren’t prepared then, but at least we know what’s coming now.”

“Would you guys please stop?” I snap, irritation threading my veins. I’m just pissed the fuck off now. “Where is Jane? What’s going on?”

The zipper near the front of the tent begins to slide down with the click of metal teeth.

The two medics exchange a look before pushing up to their feet.

“Take this,” Medic Guy hisses, gesturing at me with the bag of fluids. I’m so surprised by his anger that I grab onto it as quickly as I can, holding it up to keep the flow going. Pretty sure I won’t be awake for long if I miss getting whatever’s in this bag.

The pair of them head straight for the lawyer, grabbing onto his arms as he tries to jerk back and away from them.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” he shouts as they drag him forward, shoving him suddenly toward the tent’s fabric as it begins to gape open.

One of the muscular guys from earlier on the roof steps in. Only ... he looks a little different. His skin is a pale green color, his hair a spiky mess of emerald shards, his mouth far too broad to be human. My eyes open wide, and my hand begins to tremble as it clutches the bag. *Cosplay?* I wonder, even as I know I’m denying an itchy, impossible reality.

No, Eve, this isn’t some guy in an alien suit; he’s an alien who was wearing a human suit.

“Trevor!” Tabbi shouts, shoving up to her feet. Madonna hisses again, but Tabbi ignores her, stumbling over to the green-skinned dude and clutching onto one of his massive forearms. He has four of them, by the way. “Trev, you gotta tell me what’s going on. Is this a reboot of *Punk’D*? As long as Justin Beiber isn’t the host anymore, I can deal. If it’s Ashton Kutcher, then ... well, I don’t like him either.”

I stare at Tabbi as she babbles on incoherently.

The guy—Trevor, I guess—shakes her off with a growl that’s nowhere near human before turning to the front of the tent. I notice then that he steps halfway in front of her, as if to keep her from whatever it is that’s coming in here.

There’s this horrid sound, like a slug scraping its slimy body over broken glass, that precedes the creature’s appearance. As soon as I lay eyes on it, I understand what Medic Girl meant when she said that they needed more humans to fight those *things*.

There’s no other way for me to describe what I’m looking at other than to say ... it’s weird. And disgusting. And terrifying. I almost scream, but the lawyer beats me to it, turning around to see what everyone’s staring at.

After the medics shoved him forward, he spun around like he was planning on fighting them, but they wouldn’t let him close. One of them even wielded a scalpel in his direction, like she might actually cut him with it.

Now, I get why they did what they did.

The creature—a horse-sized slug *thing* with pustules and compound eyes and antennae—opens up its giant mouth like a snake, unhinging a jaw I wasn't even sure it had. Until just now, it didn't appear to have a mouth at all. It opens wide, proving me wrong, and reveals a slimy, gummy pink mouth and a fat tongue like a frog.

That tongue lashes out like a whip and curls around the lawyer's middle as he screams. If he hadn't touched my ass I might've felt sorry for him as he's tipped headfirst into the creature's throat. With a disturbing undulation, the monster contracts and swallows the man down whole.

The really messed-up part is that I can still hear him screaming.

Trevor—I highly doubt that's his real name—barks something out in another language, and puts a hand on the weapon at his side while the slug turns its eyeball-topped antennae in the direction of the Male Medic. The guy is trembling, but to his credit, both he and his partner seem to be handling this situation admirably well.

If someone had to go, it needed to be the lawyer.

And that isn't just a bad lawyer joke: he was an asshole.

Tabbi collapses on the ground again as the slug monster reluctantly leaves and Trevor stalks off, zipping up the tent behind him. Both medics rush forward and attempt to drag the zipper back down to no avail, cursing and looking at one another as they murmur to each other under their breath.

I'm still sitting there trying to understand what's happening when they approach me again.

"My name is Avril," the woman says, putting a hand to her chest as she gets to one knee beside me. She nods her chin in her partner's direction. "This is Connor. Your name is Eve, right?"

"Jane is ... she was eaten?" I whisper, immediately hating myself for even asking the question. I shouldn't have gone there. I can't think about that. *Isn't it more likely that I slipped and fell off the roof? Maybe I'm lying in a hospital in a coma?*

Does it hurt if I pretend the aliens are real and try not to die?

"She wasn't eaten," Avril offers cautiously, as if she isn't sure how much more to say. "You don't remember?"

I squeeze my eyes shut—not because I think I can actually summon the lost memories—but because I don’t want to consider any other possibilities. Being eaten alive is horrific, but there are worse things. Aren’t there? Maybe not.

I open them again to see that Avril’s waiting for me.

“You were drifting in and out of consciousness, so I’m not surprised. She wasn’t eaten, just ... sold, I guess.” Avril sighs and reaches out, placing something into my hand. It appears to be a large needle. “We don’t have a lot to fight back with, but it’s better than nothing.”

Without waiting for her to suggest it, I turn and try jabbing the needle into the tent’s fabric. Instead of tearing the plastic like I’d hoped, the needle scrapes along it with a shriek, almost as if it’s metal-on-metal.

“We’re not getting through the tent,” Connor explains, shoving his glasses up his nose. He remains standing, pacing a tight circle on my right side. Just seeing him do that makes me realize how weak I really am right now: I couldn’t get up and pace if I wanted to.

How am I supposed to fend off an alien if I can’t even stand up by myself?

Shit. Oh Jane, where are you and what the fuck do I do?

“Listen, Eve. You’ve got a nick to your femoral artery, and you’ve lost a ton of blood. We stitched you up and wiped you down, but you’ve got to—” Avril cuts off abruptly as the zipper at the front of the tent comes down and she stands up, spinning to face the oncoming threat.

I smell him before I see him, a cardamom and honey laced punch to the gut. The fine hairs on my body stand on end, and my throat gets tight. My wounded leg throbs, like my very blood is staging a revolt to escape my skin. *What the hell?* My body comes to life when I suck in a breath that’s heavy with humidity and desire, igniting this violent ache in my chest that has no discernible explanation.

Trevor the Unfriendly Green Giant steps into the tent first, followed shortly after by a man with large, dark eyes and a white fur cloak slung over his shoulders, trimmed with red at the throat.

I drag my limp body back until I'm pressed up against the plastic wall. There isn't a single part of me that isn't trembling, and I can't exactly explain why except to say that the air smells different. Feels different. *He's making it taste this way*, I think as I inhale and find myself sampling a strange musk on the back of my tongue. It fills the space and makes me even dizzier than I already am.

The man standing beside Trevor isn't a man at all, is he?

While unmistakably *male*, he's as alien as the rest of them.

His pale hair—or is that fur?—falls around a face carved of milk white jade. A black V-shaped mark dips between his eyes giving the illusion of a nose along with slits that might be his nostrils. And that pretty mouth? Ash-pink and pouty and kissable and ... the fuck is wrong with me?! His eyes are solid black, twice as large as a human man's. He sweeps the room with them before allowing his attention to rest on me. With no pupils, I'm not entirely sure how to meet such a stare. This is the gaze of a nocturnal god, the endless ebony of a night sky devoid of stars.

I fall right into those eyes, so hard and so fast that I *know* it's not in my best interest to hold his stare.

My eyes water as I force myself to break his gaze. I look at Avril instead, standing firmly in the center of the tent with her scalpel clutched in a shaking fist. She, on the other hand, has no problem meeting the alien's demonic stare, the bare skin of her arms and face stained with the sticky red of my blood.

There's a hissing sound, this soft, sibilant whisper that reminds me of the wind in the trees. It takes me longer than it should to realize that the new guy is *talking*. He says something to Trevor and the green-skinned twin responds in a clunky, thick-tongued growl.

I take slow, shallow breaths, ensuring that the beautiful alien man is no longer looking at me before I study him again. He has two black and white horn-like antennae, and a devastating frown on his perfect lips. When he parts them to scowl at Trevor, I see three canines on either side of his white teeth, like a vampire but with thrice the biting power.

He stays near the doorway, shutting his lips on a frustrated sigh and closing his eyes. His massive antennae shift forward, each as long as my forearm. No, *longer* than my forearm. *Is he ... smelling us?* I wonder, scraping my fingers across the hot skin of my thighs.

He's no pustule-covered slug, that's for sure. If I have to be eaten, I may as well be eaten by him. Only ... if he tries to meet my eyes again, I won't look at him. I won't. I might have the instincts of an overfed housecat, but even I can sense that something irreparable and ill-fated will tear through me if I look at this man too long.

He opens the cloak on his shoulders, and I feel this strange dizziness sweep over me. I realize then that not only isn't he wearing a cloak—those are wings on his back—but I've dropped the bag of fluids to the ground, and my IV is no longer working.

My mind goes to strange places in that space between reality and dreams. I once dated an entomologist who bred moths. In particular, he bred vestal tiger moths, these cute little fuzzy white and red moths with black spots. That's what this alien reminds me of, a moth.

My head spins, and I blink away several seconds, finding myself on my back as Connor struggles to lift the fluid bag up amongst all the chaos. When I come to, Avril is screaming as she's dragged across the gravel floor of the tent by Trevor. It feels like I should stand up and offer myself in her place. I owe her for saving my life. Or ... maybe some strange part of me *wants* to go with the moth man?

If you give into him, that's it. He will own your ass, Eve.

The alien with the pretty (if terrifying) mouth is frowning as he carefully tugs one red glove off, digit by digit, revealing long fingers, two of which have sharp-tipped red claws. He clacks them together in thought, gaze drifting briefly to me. I turn away again, shivering with revulsion at how easily he draws me in. I glance back only when he's returned his focus to Avril.

Those demon eyes narrow dangerously as Trevor pushes the medic to her knees in front of him.

Moth Guy has this commanding look about him, this cavalier imperialism that matches his outfit. It's crafted of an eerie, bejeweled black material, like fabric torn from the night sky and wrestled into a tight-fitting military jacket and slacks. A weapon hangs at his waist that I can't identify, and which I'd like *never* to be able to identify. He exudes self-importance and privilege, but I can't bring myself to look away, sweat dripping down the sides of my

face. I'm having a physical reaction to either the blood loss or the alien, and I hate that I can't decide which it is.

He reaches out and places his palm on Avril's cheek, gently, reverently, like he actually cares about her. Jealousy spikes my gut, and I clench my teeth hard to fight back the disturbing surge. Moth Guy holds his hand there for a minute and then sweeps his fingers down the length of Avril's jaw. She goes completely still, lips pursed, eyes wide and entire body vibrating with either rage or fear or a mixture of both.

When he draws his hand away and peers down at it, I see that it's kissed in blood, a bright red that matches the fur neckline of his cloak. I mean ... his wings. That fur might even be a part of him.

Those dark eyes of his remain fixed on the redness as he lifts a single finger to his lips, a long tongue unfurling from his mouth and wrapping around the tip. He licks the blood off with a lewdness I can't bear to describe, and then pulls his tongue slowly back into his mouth—*tasting me*.

Moth Guy makes a sound that might be a reluctant murmur of confirmation, and then carefully puts his red glove back on. He lifts his eyes then to study me a final time, and I squeeze mine shut until I feel his attention shift. The heat of his gaze strays elsewhere, and I crack my lids open, not daring to miss a single second of this nightmare.

An odd forlorn regret grabs hold of me as Moth Guy turns away and takes off out the zippered doorway, dragging Avril the Medic along with him. As she disappears from sight, I see her struggling and thrashing violently. Not that it matters. In less than a minute, she's gone, and it's down to three of us in that stuffy tent.

Seconds later, I hear her blood-curdling scream echoing around outside.

It sounds like she's being murdered.

"Fuck." Connor grips his own weapon—it seems to be a knife—and turns to face the doorway. "We're not getting out of here alive, are we?" He looks down at the weapon as if he's considering harming himself.

"Don't do it," I whisper, voice hoarse and strange. There's a messed-up part of me that feels envious of Avril, like maybe she got the best possible deal here. Moth Guy looked *mostly* human, didn't

he? He was the right height, had a nice broad chest, muscular arms. So what if he was sporting wings and demon eyes? He was a million times better than the alien slug with the snake jaw.

And yet ... I couldn't even make myself look at him. Why?

That feels like a problem for 'Tomorrow Eve'. 'Today Eve' has a very simple task: *don't die*.

What's in store for the rest of us? I wonder as I try to figure out some way to crawl toward Connor. If I have to, I'll wrest that knife from his hand. Not only am I concerned for the guy, but I also don't want to be left alone with Tabbi. Hell, it's as if she's already given up, sitting in a slumped puddle with her pet possum.

"Why not?" Connor asks, still staring at the blade of the knife. "What's the point of waiting? Do *you* want to be eaten alive? I'd rather bleed out." He puts the weapon to his throat, but then pauses with it in place, gaze moving to me as I struggle to stand up and then stumble.

It's as if some impossible instinct takes over him, and he sighs, dropping the knife back down before coming over to help me. Connor gets me seated properly again, and takes a turn with the IV bag, using his other hand to offer me more water.

"You saved me but sacrificed the lawyer?" I ask, trying to get some clarification at least as to what might've happened while I was passed out. "He must've really pissed you off."

Connor sighs and looks away, almost as if he's ashamed of himself.

"He tried to use this knife to hold Avril hostage, even shoved her toward the first alien that came in here." Connor scoffs and finally, he too, drops from a crouch to a seated position. "The guy—or whatever it was—didn't want Avril; he picked your friend, Jane."

"Did it ... he ... whatever ... look okay, at least?" I ask, praying that my friend might still be alive, that she didn't spend her last few moments screaming inside the belly of a giant alien slug. "Like the moth? Like Trevor?"

"Trevor?" Tabbi asks, her head jerking up suddenly. She shoves up to her feet like she's been electrocuted. "Trevor!" she screams, and then again. Actually, Tabbi just screams her damn head off,

shouting and cursing and pacing as her poor pet scrambles into the pocket of her baggy jeans and peeks its head out.

“The alien that took Jane was ... better than the slug.” Connor fixes his glasses again, and then nods sharply. “Much better. He spoke to the green-skinned guy. Obviously, I couldn’t understand him, but he was at least somewhat civilized.”

“That’s good,” I hedge, wondering how I can even say such a word in a situation like this. At any moment, I might wake up in a hospital bed, blinking blearily at my gathered family members. Mom and Dad will be there, of course, as well as my youngest brother, Nate. But the rest of my siblings will be there, too, I bet, all three of my sisters. My aunts and my cousins, Jane, maybe even Jane’s dad who I’ve been close to for longer than I’ve been close to Jane (after she kicked me in the va-jay-jay way back when, he wrote me an apology card and sent me flowers). Oh. I’ll bet my ex, Mack, is there, too. He’s been trying to get back together for the past three months, but I wasn’t having it.

“Eve?” Connor asks, and I realize then that I wasn’t entirely coherent for the past several minutes. “How many fingers am I holding up?” He lifts his hand, but all I can see are six fingers when there should be three. I’m in no condition to fight my way out of this, so I’ll have to improvise. With the same tenacity I used to start my catering business, I’m going to figure out how to wake up. If not that, then I’ll rescue Jane and ... well, first I’ll just rescue Jane.

“I’m okay,” I reply, pushing his hand down. Connor frowns at me, but he doesn’t argue.

Eventually, we both realize that maybe there’ll be more time before the next alien buyer shows up. Connor takes that time to set me up with his medical bag on one side of me, Avril’s medical bag behind me, creating a makeshift sort of chair. He rests the IV bag on one of the duffels while he digs through the other, cursing and wondering aloud why he never did get that concealed carry permit.

“What’s happening?” Tabbi asks eventually, coming over to sit beside me. She even takes my hand in hers, and I look up to see that her blue eyes are brimming with tears. Her pink-tipped blond hair is mussed and tangled, a few stray strands stuck to her glossy lips. I realize then that she’s recently reapplied her lip stain. I’d call her out on it if I didn’t think she was in total shock; people do strange things

when they're in shock. "Evelyn, help me out here. Are we being filmed?"

"Tabbi ..." I start, but I don't have the energy to deal with her hysterics. She's looking at me right now like I'm a life preserver, and she's a drowning tourist on a Caribbean cruise. I toss her the flotation device she so desperately desires. "Yeah, we're being tricked by some super talented cosplayers and Hollywood effects artists; it's all being live-streamed on TikTok."

"Really?" she asks, sniffing and pulling poor Madonna out of her pocket. She cuddles the possum to her chest and narrows her eyes on me. "If you're lying, I'll fire Jane tomorrow. I know you know how much work she's put into my career, but you could mess it all up for her right now."

God, I hate this woman.

"Oh, I could never lie to you." I outright lie to her face and smile about it, too. Almost. I can't really smile right now. When my lips try to lift at the corners, I remember that Jane is missing and that I saw a guy get eaten by an oversized alien slug. *And then there's moth dude* ... "It'll all be over soon." I offer Tabbi's hand a pat, but she jerks it away from me.

Please let the next slug get her.

"Do you hear that?" Connor asks, just before the zipper at the front of the tent is pulled down yet again.

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates must be a great sales slogan. I hope to hell that I'm chosen as a pet which isn't a wish I've ever entertained in my entire life.

Trevor moves back inside, stepping to the left and crossing his bulging green arms (both sets). He eyes Tabbi, but she just glares at him and then flips him off. Another creature steps in behind him, and I'm relieved to see that this guy is also humanoid in appearance. Dark gray skin, gold markings that seem to glitter as he moves, plus two eyes, one nose, and a mouth (all of which are exactly where they should be). He does have two huge tusks protruding from his wide lips, and a pair of spiral horns, but that's nothing compared to the slug.

I'll take it.

His eyes swing to mine. They remind me of a goat—solid yellow with a square pupil—but they’re recognizable. I see understanding light in them as they meet mine.

“I’ll take both females,” he says—in English, mind you. Trevor offers him a look that could shake a mountain down.

“No. You can take the ugly one.” This is also in English which is annoying as hell. If these aliens are going to talk shit about me, couldn’t they do it in another language?

Tusk Guy and Trevor stare each other down, but in the end, the newcomer curses and reaches into his belt, withdrawing several coins and passing them into the other man’s waiting palm. When Tusk Guy stalks across the room toward me, I tense up, but I don’t try to run.

Where would I go anyway?

“Stay safe, Connor,” I whisper. I don’t bother with Tabbi because ... fuck her.

“You know what? I don’t care what I said: Jane is *so* fired after this. Once I’m done smearing her name on social media, nobody in this industry will *ever* hire her again.”

I close my eyes as Tusk Guy leans down, but he surprises me by scooping me into his arms and lifting me up off the ground. As he does, the IV bag gets pulled taut, and the needle tears from my skin resulting in renewed bleeding.

That’s all it takes, and then between one blink and the next, I find myself on the back of a wagon.



There's a canopy overhead, shading me from the intense rays of a manic sun. As I adjust myself, my arm slips out of the shade, and the golden light seems to burn. With a hiss that reminds me of Madonna the Opossum, I jerk my arm back into the shadows and sit up.

The wagon is jostling down a dirt road bordered by wildflowers. Up ahead, there's a forest with trees so tall that the wagon's canopy cuts them off at the trunks; I can't see how far up they actually go. Glancing over my shoulder and out the back of the wagon, I see shabby metal walls bolted and hobbled together. Suffice it to say, this isn't exactly the high-tech sci-fi environment I'd expect of an alien race. Err, races? Because I've already been introduced to four different species in such a short span of time.

I check my wrists and ankles, but I'm not bound to the wagon or tied up in any way. In fact, I feel a million times better than I did earlier. A quick check of the wound on my thigh reveals that the bandage Avril applied for me is still in place. Maybe Tusk Guy gave me some special alien booster shot or something?

Whatever happened, I'm awake, and I'm still here—wherever the hell *here* is anyway.

"Excuse me," I start, clearing my throat before I attempt to crawl across the fabric bundles beneath me and in the direction of the wagon's driver. I can already see that it's the gray-skinned man with the tusks. He glances briefly back at me, and then pats the seat beside him.

I'm immediately suspicious.

I'm not sure how others would interpret that phrase—the pets, meat, or mates thing—but this is what I got out of it: humans are disposable here. Chattel. Livestock. Basically, we're not worth much. And the guy who bought me is being nice?

Maybe he picked me up at the market like I picked up Annabelle (that's my cat, remember) at the local shelter? Could I be somebody's cat here? A faithful companion? A lovable goof who earns money for her master on the alien equivalent of social media?

“Have a seat,” the man growls out, his voice guttural and accented, but easy to understand.

Not only is he speaking *human*, but out of all seven-thousand-plus languages in the world, he's speaking *my* sort of human (aka English). I haven't had the time or leisure to freak out yet, so I stay with the numb whiteness of shock edging my reality and do as the man asks. That's one positive to note, how humanoid he seems. He's got a flat chest (no nipples though), a glorious set of abs, and bulging biceps.

He doesn't look at me as I take the spot on his left, staring down at the horse in front of me for several minutes as I try to force my addled brain to understand that ... *that thing is most definitely not a horse*. It has huge hoof-like feet, four legs, and a vaguely horse-like body. Otherwise, that's where the resemblance ends.

The creature I'm staring at has rough, brown skin, like a tree's bark. It also has wings that appear to be webs of branches and leaves. That same material sprouts from its neck and along the sinuous curve of its long tail. It makes a low baying sound and twitches leaf-like ears as it clops down the road.

“This is a *kiyo*,” Tusk Guy explains, his voice like boulders rolling down a hill. He pronounces the foreign word like *key-yo*, and I take it to mean that's the alien's species and not its name. “First question every human asks.” He looks askance at me, gold eyes unblinking. “Though you're by far the calmest I've ever met. Most try to jump the wagon and take off running into the woods or else they scream —”

“How the fuck do you speak English?” I ask, and the alien man finally blinks. Not regular eyelids like you or I might blink, but a translucent set that gives me the chills. Um. I curl my fingers tight

around the wooden bench seat and try not to freak out. What good will that do me? Either this is all a bullshit hallucination brought on by some really good hospital painkillers or else ... it's happening.

And whether it's real or not, reacting to it as if it is makes the most sense. Either way, I'm okay.

"I spend a lot of time on Earth," the man explains, smiling in a way that says he very much enjoys his time there. The expression on his face makes me even *more* suspicious, but he hasn't given me any reason to distrust him yet. That, and I'm better off here than with a giant slug or other comparable nightmare creature. "I've been visiting for over twenty years."

I nod, as if that makes sense.

Aliens regularly visit Earth? I wonder, but that's not an important question at the moment.

"I need to find my friend," I explain, hoping to appeal to this guy's sense of empathy. That is, if he has any. Most humans don't either, so it's really a stretch to pray for this alien man to have some heart. "Her name is Jane Baker, and she was the first one of us that was purchased—"

"Ah." That's what he says, nodding his thick head at the question. The man has gorgeous coal-black hair, I'll give him that. It's picked up and tousled by the wind as the wagon rolls onward, creeping closer to the deep shadows of the forest. From here, it gives off that Pacific Northwest vibe. Towering redwood trees, dewy ferns, mushrooms. Some of them are glowing, I'll give you that, but bioluminescence isn't totally absent on Earth either. "From what I hear, she was sold to a World Station dealer."

A World Station dealer? Um. Come again?

"Please tell me that's not the slug thing." My words are low and strangled, but while I can handle a lot of things, losing my bestie would just ... It'd mess me up. I won't stay calm if I find out that Jane is in danger.

Tusk Guy laughs at me, and the sound is most definitely not human. It raises the hairs on my arms, some basic instinct deep inside of me warning that I should run. But where would I go? Back into the market with the slug and Trevor and worst of all, Tabbi Kat? Or should I run blindly across the field of what I thought were

wildflowers, but appear to be Venus flytraps? As I watch, one of the purple plants eats an overly large insect out of midair.

If none of those options suffice, and I still wanted to run, I could dive into the woods and take my chances there. No, I think it's better to stay on the wagon with the English-speaking alien for now. Besides, his pet thing—the kiyo—seems cool.

“Most definitely not.” He pauses then to scratch at the side of his jaw, offering me up another strange look. “He’ll probably resell her to a male looking for a wife.”

“A wife?!” I can’t breathe. I can’t think. All I can do is imagine Jane being ... by some alien ... “I have to get back to the market and look for her.” I turn as if to jump off the wagon, but Tusk Guy puts a huge hand on my leg, holding me in place.

“Your friend is no longer on this planet,” he tells me, but whether that’s true or not, I have no way of knowing. He could be saying that just to keep me here on the wagon with him. If the ... whatever it was that bought Jane is looking for a wife, what’s this guy’s plan? “If she were, I would’ve tried to buy her, too.”

“You said you wanted me and Tabbi ...” I start, puzzling out possibilities in my mind. “What for? Why only the females and not the male?”

“My tribe has plenty of males,” Tusk Guy replies, exhaling heavily and then digging around in the bag on his right until he’s extracted a large black canteen. He hands it over to me. “Water? It’s the same chemical compound as found on Earth.”

I want to say no, but my throat is dry, and I know I can’t survive long if I stop drinking water.

So, down the hatch it goes.

Thankfully, it’s exactly what the alien says it is: cool, clean water.

“Thanks.” I swipe an arm across my mouth, offering up a grudging nod of thanks. “If you have plenty of males then ... you’re looking for wives?”

“You’ll be given a choice,” Tusk Guy explains, as if he’s made this speech a thousand times. “If you don’t like any of the available males, you can go home.”

“Seriously?” I ask, the word bursting out of me like an expletive. Tusk Guy smiles—I probably should’ve started this conversation by asking his name—and I realize I’m reacting the way he wants me to. He’s telling me exactly what I want to hear, and I’m gobbling it up out of a sense of relief.

What I should really be asking myself is this: why the fuck would these guys buy humans trafficked across so much time and space just to ask them nicely if they’re interested in an arranged marriage? That sounds like total bullshit to me. “Even if that’s true, I can’t go with you now. I’m not walking away from my best friend.”

“The buyer who purchased her is long-gone from here.” Tusk Guy grunts and gives the creature’s reins a bit of a yank, speeding up the rhythmic clomping sound of hooves. “He’s what you might call *eccentric*.”

I rub my fingers painfully against the rough wood, collecting splinters. The pain helps keep me sane.

Jane is ... in space somewhere? I look up, but all I can see is the gray canopy above my head. With a tentative hand, I reach out and feel the overwhelming heat of the sun.

“But I don’t see the harm in heading back and asking around.” My alien savior looks over at me and blinks his strange lids again. He puts his hand back on my leg when, really, I wish he wouldn’t touch me at all. His fingers drift up the inside of my thigh, making my stomach roil. “Maybe your friend’s buyer hasn’t left the dock—”

A horrible crashing sound—like someone banging two metal trash can lids together—cracks my brain right in half. The sound precedes this nauseating feeling of spinning, and then I’m blinking once and finding myself on the ground a dozen feet or so from the wagon.

It’s now lying on its side, the kiyo rearing and dragging the overturned vehicle along for several feet until the ropes snap. The alien horse takes off into the woods, disappearing into the shadows before I can even register what’s going on.

First off, those tiny purple flytrap plants are biting at me, and it *hurts*. Second, I think I tore open my leg again. My head feels like an overinflated balloon as I struggle to sit up and assess the damage. There’s blood. Too much of it. So much that my entire bandage is soaked in red.

My attention is drawn up at the sound of a scream, this high-pitched roar of terror that echoes across the open plains between the market and the woods. My first thought is *wow, did a thunderstorm just roll in?* because all I can see is this swirl of darkness in the sky. It's hovering behind the overturned wagon, and it's also the thing that Tusk Guy is screaming about.

He crawls past the edge of the wagon only to be dragged back behind it, and then the darkness descends further and the screaming cuts off in a wet, gurgling sort of way. *Holy shit.* I scramble backwards, my gaze somehow fixated on the gruesome scene. I can't see exactly what's happening to Tusk Guy, but a puddle of blood—it's as red as mine is—drains across the dirt road in front of the wagon.

Now that the screaming's stopped, it's been replaced with the sound of something else *eating*. I turn onto my hands and knees and then use the sudden surge of adrenaline to shove myself up to my feet. I'm fully aware that I'm bleeding as I run, but I can't stop. At this point, my choices might be *bleed to death* or *get eaten by that dark cloud*.

I drag myself along as far as I can before the dizziness sets in, and I collapse to my knees. I don't even remember falling. I was standing and then ... I was down here. Not only am I bleeding from the wound in my thigh, but also from a good two-dozen bites inflicted by the purple plants. Even now, some of them are snapping at me and drawing tiny pinpricks of red from my hands and fingers.

I turn to look over my shoulder and find myself off-balance, swooning from the loss of so much blood. I end up falling backwards onto my ass, gaze lifted toward the sky. The darkness that consumed Tusk Guy ... it's heading straight toward me. My eyes widen, but even as I try to push myself back, I feel that horrible heaviness in my limbs. My vision blurs, but not enough to protect me from seeing what's coming.

That black cloud descends on me, two massive clawed hands slamming into the ground on either side of my comatose body. And then there's this face right up against mine, two huge purple eyes staring at me from a vaguely humanoid face. *Vaguely.*

In that single, still space between breaths, I find myself mesmerized by the creature. If I had the strength to lift my hand, I might. Even if it were the last thing I ever did, I'd touch its face if I

could. At first glance, its solid black form doesn't appear to have a mouth. But then it opens up nice and wide, a Cheshire cat's grin with rows of dagger-like teeth.

Its massive black wings spread open above me, casting a shadow that causes even the carnivorous flowers to retreat, snapping their purple pod mouths shut and shrinking toward the soil. Not that I can blame them: there's a lot of blood in and around that wide mouth.

I squeeze my eyes shut, certain that this alien is the last thing I'll ever get to see. *Not such a bad sight, all things considered. He's still better than the slug.*

"Please, please, please," I whisper, certain that he's not able to understand me. I can't seem to help myself though. "Please, please, please ... fuck." With a shuddering exhale, I just let go and scream. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, *fuck.*"

The alien creature exhales, his breath warm but surprisingly pleasant considering he just *ate* some random guy. I crack one lid open, vision splintering into white static.

"*No,*" he snarls back at me—in English!—curling up the edge of his lip. "*Little.*"

One of his massive wings curves forward, and I realize it has a hand on the end of it, like a bat. He grabs my hair in a tight fist, and then my eyes roll back, and it's lights out. Again. Bleeding to death fucking *sucks.*



A smooth, hot tongue slicks up the inside of my inner thigh, causing me to writhe and dig my fingernails into the sheets. *Holy crap, that feels amazing.* I almost praise my ex, Mack, for his newfound skills with his mouth, but then I remember that we broke up because he cheated on me and ... fuck that guy.

I move to kick out at him, but he stops me by grabbing onto my knees and forcing my legs even further apart. His claws dig into my

—
Wait.

His claws?

My eyes flutter open, and I'm greeted to a sight that I'll likely remember every day for the rest of my (probably short) life.

The dark cloud batwing alien whatever-he-is crouches before me, the hands on the ends of his wings clamped around my knees and keeping them spread wide. His other hands are braced on the grass between my legs, and his tongue is ... his long-ass, two-foot in length alien tongue is lapping at the wound on my right thigh.

He's staring at me, too, with these enormous purple and gold eyes. They glow faintly in the shadows of the woods, but at least this time, there's a semi-normal looking pupil. There's no white to his eyes, but the darkness in the center is at least round in shape.

I can't move.

Is he eating me or is he eating me? I wonder, trembling and fighting back a wave of revulsion at myself for not being completely and utterly freaked-out by this moment.

“Fuck,” I whisper, and for whatever reason, that word puts the alien dragon thing into a rage.

He releases me and then slams his clawed hands down on either side of my face, coming in far too close for me to do much more than lean back.

“*Little,*” he growls down at me, the darkness of his face splitting to reveal his mouth once again. When he closes it, it seems to disappear, leaving this enigmatic shadow in its place. He has two eyes, slits for nostrils, and massive purple striped horns that spiral up from his forehead.

With a grumble that quite literally shakes the ground beneath me, he draws back again and turns away, folding his wings in and stalking across the ground on four limbs. As I struggle to sit up, he sheathes the claws on his front feet and stands up.

Holy shit, he's huge.

His legs are thick and muscular, but shapely, with large, clawed feet caught somewhere between a human's and a canine's. Only, he's entirely covered in scales. Other than some sort of mane on his head and down his neck, there's no other hair (or fur?) to be seen. A large muscular tail twitches behind him like a cat and, as I move to stand up, a row of spikes lifts down the center, like an animal raising its hackles. His mane rises along with it, and I realize immediately that he doesn't have hair, just more of those strange spikes on his head, neck, and spine.

He turns a look on me over his shoulder, and I exhale sharply. He *ate* the Tusk Guy, after all. My gaze slips down to my inner thigh, and I see that the wound there has stopped bleeding and actually seems to have knitted together. How? From his saliva?

Dragon Dude—because that's what he looks like to me—turns and drops back down to all fours, offering up a feline-esque stretch before he saunters off, muscles rippling beneath his shimmering scales. A quick look around tells me nothing but for the fact that we're in the woods I'd glimpsed from the seat of the wagon.

I'm on an alien planet with no clue where I am or where to go or what to do.

Fear strikes like lightning, and I find myself scrambling up and trotting after the alien dude with the swishing tail. He's prowling through the trees like he's looking for trouble, but if *he* is looking for it, surely it won't find him? I tell myself it's better to stick with the devil I know than risk the shadows of the woods by myself.

"Excuse me," I call out softly, reading the agitation in the creature's body. He doesn't stop walking, doesn't look back at me either. He just keeps padding along through the underbrush, but he spoke to me in English before, so why couldn't he do it again? *No. Little.* What the hell does that even mean? I guess to him, I am fairly small, but why bother saying that? "Wait."

I jog a little quicker, shredded black slacks flopping around my legs. Somehow in all the chaos, I ended up barefoot, and my shirt appears to be missing. I hadn't even registered until just now that I was only wearing a bra. Maybe the medics used it for something? Not that it matters.

Who cares about modesty or shirts in the middle of an alien forest?

"Can you help me?" I ask, ignoring the way my vision cracks and wavers. My new dragon friend might've licked away the bleeding, but he can't replenish all the blood I've already lost. I need water, food, and sleep, but how do I know what I can eat here? Even if I were on Earth, I wouldn't know the first place to start looking for food in the woods. "If you could just point me in the direction of the market ..."

I trail off and come to a stop, hope flaring in me and then dying just as quick. There's a massive hunk of metal on my right. A building? A spaceship? Whatever it is, it's a sign of civilization. I stop walking and creep toward it, parting the fronds of an oversized fern to peer past it.

"Fuck." The thing I'm looking at is huge, three times the size of my mother's SUV. It's also busted up and dented, as if it crashed here once upon a time. There are so many plants growing around and over it that it's nearly obscured.

With a surge of panic, I jerk back to see if I've lost the alien dragon man.

Only, I haven't. He's right there, looking over his shoulder at me with those huge purple eyes. He curls up his lip, revealing that

hidden mouth of his, lets out a low, rumbling growl and turns away again. He pads off at a quicker pace, and I struggle desperately to catch up.

I can't decide if he's waiting for me or if he just finds me amusing or ... what.

As we walk, I see several other downed ships. Some of them are the size of small cars while others soar up toward the canopy above us and disappear beyond the limbs of giant trees. None seem to be operational, as if they all crashed here and were left. There are dozens of them, too, in various states of deshabille. One looks brand-new, its sides shiny and silver and scuffed only from the force of the crash.

Sunlight peeks in through the destroyed trees around it, creating this halo effect in the shadowed underbrush. Strange pink flowers strain upward from the forest floor, taking advantage of the break in the heavy canopy. One of them turns to look at me as I pass, and goose bumps rise all over my exposed skin.

“Gross.” I keep following the dragon man until he comes to the base of yet another downed ship. This one has an open cargo hold about fifteen feet up in the air, a space that the alien guy clears with little effort, bunching up those powerful legs and landing softly on the metal surface up above. “Um. Hey.”

I wave my arms around, but he doesn't come back to the edge, leaving me standing there beside the twisted trunk of some bamboo-esque tree with a curve in its trunk that acts as a seat. I climb up onto it, but that doesn't get me any closer to being able to scale the side of the massive ship.

Panic starts to set in then.

I've been winging it from one moment to the next, so absorbed in the immediacy of every move that I was making that I haven't had time for existential dread to kick in. *What if this is really happening? What if I'm truly alone, stuck in an alien forest while Jane ... becomes something's freaking wife?*

“Goddamn it.” I start to pant, sliding down to sit on the tree's curved trunk. Looking around, I can see that the already dusky shadows are growing even darker. Night is coming. *How long does night even last on this planet? Better yet: what comes out at night on this planet?*

A sound echoes through the woods, like the scream of something fighting for its life.

I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands over my ears, struggling to control my breathing. I'm so weak right now, it wouldn't take much for me to pass out yet again. And down here, all alone on the forest floor? I'd be easy prey.

I force my eyes open and drop my hands to my lap. Thankfully, the screaming's already stopped. Probably whatever it was that was crying out for help is dead. I wrap my arms around my mostly naked upper body and wrack my brain for a plan. If I have a plan, something with clear steps that I can execute, then maybe I can get through the night without having a full-on panic attack.

What did I say I needed? Water, food and sleep, right? I had some of the former during the wagon ride with Tusk Guy. As for food, I'm shit out of luck unless I learn to identify alien flora and fauna in the next few hours. But the latter? I can do that. I can sleep right here, as close to Dragon Dude as possible. He's scary enough—clearly he's dangerous enough, too—but he doesn't seem to want to eat me.

“Unless he's saving me for later ...” I mumble under my breath, looking up at the sound of rustling from inside the ship. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was looking for something. I scrub both hands over my face. Right. I'll sleep here and hope this guy's protection enough against other predators. When the sun rises—or suns? I never looked—I'll try to get back to the road, to the market, to Jane. I'm concerned about the others, too (not Tabbi though, only Madonna), but Jane comes first.

If I can find her, maybe we really can figure out a way to get home? Tusk Guy implied that it wasn't so difficult to come and go from Earth, right? He'd been there enough times to speak fluent English. Somebody in that market knows how to get back, so all hope isn't lost.

I just need to avoid giant slugs when I get there. Oh, and Trevor. Fucking Trevor.

An item comes tumbling over the side of the ship, crashing into the grass just in front of my feet. I look up to see the dragon guy standing there on his hind legs, arms crossed over his chest, tail thrashing angrily behind him.

My gaze moves from him to the item on the ground.

It appears to be a headset of some sort, this neon pink pair of noise-canceling headphones with a mic attached. It honestly looks like something my youngest brother, Nate, might wear during a raid on his favorite MMO game.

Cautiously, I slide off my makeshift seat and make my way over to it.

The item is far heavier than it appears, and such a bright and cheerful Barbie pink that it seems out of place in the creepy woods. Looking back up at the dragon guy, I see that he's waiting for something. For me to put this on?

With a gulp and a prayer, I do, dragging it over my head and positioning the mic in front of my lips.

"Testing, one, two," I murmur out of nervousness. Nothing happens. I feel around on the headset for a button of some kind, an on-switch that I might've missed. There doesn't seem to be anything. "What is this?" I call out, but the dragon guy just crouches, curling his fingers around the edge of the ship. I hadn't even realized he had fingers at all. When he was walking earlier, he appeared to have paws.

He stares at me, tail swaying lazily, and then growls something out in what's obviously another language. These aren't the meaningless sounds of an animal; the guy is trying to talk to me. I hear what he's saying, but it means nothing to me. It's as alien a language as I've ever heard, like trying to understand the snarls and growls of a wolf.

Then something happens. The headset lights up, glowing pink around my head like a halo, and I hear words delivered in a stilted, staccato voice.

"You ... want ..."

I blink in surprise and then point at myself with a single finger.

"Are you asking me what I want?" I query, but the creature doesn't respond. He tilts his head slightly to one side as I tap a finger on the end of the mic. This stupid ugly headset seems to be a primitive translator of some sort. It's nowhere near as nice as the one Jane bought me as a gift before my trip to Portugal; I was able to enjoy a two-week vacation with few mistranslations. "I thought aliens were supposed to be technologically advanced," I accuse in annoyance.

The mic—which I guess might've been able to translate my words—doesn't seem to be working. Maybe it's just as busted as all these downed ships?

The dude growls something else out, his mouth splitting the endless black on the lower half of his face. I shudder at the sight of his tongue, sweat beading on my skin as I shift from one foot to the other in obvious discomfort. *Just don't think about it, Eve. Don't go there.*

"Understand ... doesn't."

Alright.

He can't understand me, but he knows the word *little* as well as the word *no* in English? Fine.

"Fuck," I curse again, and the guy lets out this horrific snarl that doesn't require translation for me to comprehend. I take a stumbling step back, slamming into the base of a tree. Nuts fall from the limbs, scattering to the ground at my feet.

"No." There it is again, the dragon speaking my language. I look up at him, blinking in surprise. He adds something in his own language, and I wait for the 1995 AOL dial-up internet sounds in the translator to gurgle their way through the words.

"Small ... are ... you."

"Alright then," I reply with a murmur, rubbing at my face again. I point at the nuts and mime eating one. "Are these poisonous? Can I eat these? I'm starving."

The dragon cocks his head to one side, claws sliding from his knuckles as he curls his fingers under to make a fist. When he does that, I see why I mistook his hands for paws. That's what they look like right now. He turns away and disappears into the ship as I curse under my breath, slumping to the ground to sit in the scraggly grass. If I look too closely at it, I might realize that it isn't grass at all, but what appears to be millions of tiny green antennae sticking up from the dirt ...

Gritting my teeth, I watch as a cricket-like creature with dozens of legs digs itself out of the ground and hops off. With a shriek, I shove up to my feet and take refuge on the makeshift tree-seat, watching as the 'grass' comes to life in the rapidly falling darkness. The pink glow of the headset becomes the only light, offering me an unwanted

view of the bugs as they bounce off in search of food. Or mates. Or whatever else.

I hug the smooth surface of the tree trunk and lean my cheek against it, closing my eyes and forcing my mind away from what-ifs and endless possibilities. *Okay, so the guy gave me a translator. That's a good sign, right? He probably isn't going to eat me. Is that why he keeps calling me small? I'm not even big enough for a snack?*

Tears prick my eyes, but I refuse to acknowledge them. I'm not going to cry. I'm going to do the only intelligent, rational thing I can do right now: sleep.

It's a task that, at first, seems impossible, but as soon as I give my body permission to conk out, I'm gone.

Oddly enough, my dreams are invaded by the image of that moth guy, his endless dark eyes digging a tunnel straight into the depths of my very soul.



Morning dew kisses my lips as I crack my heavy lids open. Somehow, I ended up lying on my side on the ground. The air on my back is cold, but in front of me, there's a crack in the earth where hot air seems to be escaping, like a natural vent of some sort. I must've migrated toward the heat in my sleep.

My body creaks and protests as I sit up, still not fully recovered from everything that happened yesterday. One, quick look around shows me that the 'grass' has been restored, the throng of creepy bugs tucked beneath the earth for the day. I do my best not to think about it as I try to find my feet.

It's much brighter now than it ever was last night, offering me a better view of the woods.

The trees appear endless, their trunks so varied in size that the smallest is about as thick around as my arm while the largest could be a skyscraper in its own right. I brush my hands down my bare legs to clear away the dirt, and then finally tear off the last scraps of my pants with a huff.

Now, it's just me and a cute matching bra and panty set that I originally bought to surprise my ex, Mack, with. *Stupid fucking Mack*. He never did get to see it. Seems fitting that some random alien creature would be the first to view the nicest lingerie set I've ever owned.

Barefoot. Wearing a dirty white lace bra and underwear. A glowing pink headset hanging around my neck. Right. I don't feel vulnerable at all.

"Are you awake?" I call out, cupping my hands over my mouth.

There's no response.

I pace back and forth for a moment before I try again.

"Hello? Are you in there?" Nothing. Not a peep. Either the dragon is sleeping or else he left to ... hunt or something. The thought of him slinking by in the dark while I slept creeps me out; the thought of him leaving me alone in the dark creeps me out even more. I try his trigger words. "No? Little? Fuck?"

Nothing.

Shit.

Now what?

I look down at the grass and notice that the path we walked yesterday is somewhat clear, as if the little bugs didn't appreciate being trampled on. If I follow that, could I find my way out of here? Part of me wants to stay here until the dragon comes back, but every minute is precious. Jane ... something could be happening to Jane.

That, and it's clear that while Dragon Dude isn't going to eat me, he also has no intention of helping me out anymore than this. After all, he didn't answer my question about the nuts scattered all over the ground. That, and he left me alone to sleep in the dirt in the middle of the woods. Would it really have taken him all that much effort to carry me into the ship with him? I'm obviously no threat.

He healed your wound, didn't he? I ask myself, but I don't want to think too much on that. *Or do I?*

With a sigh of frustration, I start off along the bare dirt path in the grass, winding my way past the same ships I saw yesterday. That's a good sign: I'm going in the right direction. I continue on, alert for any movement in the bushes or the trees, but there doesn't seem to be any. Either everything here is nocturnal or else they're all scared of the dragon.

I'm betting on the latter.

I walk until my body's slick with sweat, until my bare feet ache, and then I keep going. There are no other options. I can't sit around

in the woods and wait to be eaten, wait to starve, wait to die of thirst. And I cannot fucking leave Jane. Or hell, even Avril the Medic. She saved my life, and Moth Guy took her ... What if she's still somewhere in the market? And what about poor Connor? Madonna? What if we could all find some way to get home?

Well, except for the lawyer. RIP. You won't be missed by me.

Crack. Snap. Shfft.

I stop suddenly, looking around the shadows for the sounds I just heard. If I didn't know better, I'd say there were footsteps. Obvious ones, too.

My breath escapes in a rush when I see two men in gas masks emerge from the brush. They don't seem particularly surprised to see me, murmuring something to one another before the one on the right takes off his mask.

It's Tusk Guy. Or ... well, not the same Tusk Guy but another male of the same species.

"Don't be afraid," he grumbles out, looking me over. The way his eyes scan my body, I'll admit—I'm more than a little freaked-out. At the same time ... the guy offers me a thermos, and I realize then just how thick my tongue feels, how dry my mouth is. It's *hot* here, humid as fuck, and I swear that the gravity on this planet is like, ten times heavier than Earth. My body feels like it weighs a million pounds.

I lift the pink headset up onto my head and take a cautious step forward. These guys appear to have no problem speaking English, but it never hurts to be prepared. I accept the thermos and unscrew the top, scenting some sort of gamey broth inside of it. My stomach rumbles, and I take an educated gamble. These Tusk Guys are looking for brides, right? Why poison me? Also, this isn't their first time at the rodeo; they must know what humans can and cannot eat here.

The broth doesn't taste so bad, like venison stew or something. *It wouldn't be half bad with some proper spices, the right vegetables, maybe a hunk of buttered bread on the side.* I drink it all as the first Tusk Guy replaces his mask. He growls something out to his companion who responds in turn.

"*Here ... get ... lost. Finds ... we eat.*" The first man shakes his head, lifting his goggle-covered eyes up to the canopy. I'm

taking a guess here, but did he just suggest we get lost before we get eaten? Because that's what it sounds like. He reaches out to take the thermos back, and I hand it over, waiting as he secures it to his belt. When he removes what appears to be a leash of some sort, I start to get nervous.

"What is that?" I ask as he hands a looped end over to me.

"This will ensure we don't get separated in here," he explains, which seems logical enough.

Only ... I'm not sure how comfortable I am right now.

"Slip over wrist," the second guy grinds out in broken English. "We need go." He gestures with a large hand and takes off. The first guy—the one who gave me the thermos—slips the loop over my wrist, and it tightens automatically, cranking up that nervous feeling in my belly.

"Come. We'll get you out of here safely." The first guy takes off, dragging me along behind him like a pet. That's what the sign read, didn't it? Humans. Pets. Meat. Mates. What a combination. With few other options left, I follow along, finding myself beyond relieved when we emerge from the trees and into the same clearing where the wagon was attacked.

It's still there, turned on its side, a pool of dried blood cracking beneath the too-bright rays of the sun. As soon as we step into it, I feel it searing my skin and force myself to look up. *Holy shit*. There really are two suns in the sky. One is much smaller than the other, but their combined heat is equivalent to that one time I took a hiking tour into the outback of Australia.

It's *sweltering*.

I don't like that. I don't like the leash. I don't understand why these guys are wearing gas masks.

They drag me toward a group of others, all of whom are wearing masks, all of whom are looking me over like so much meat. *Shit, shit, shit*. My instincts with these guys were dead-on. My initial captor was too nice; I was better off with the dragon.

"Get her in the palanquin," one of them demands, gesturing over at a wheelless vehicle with four poles protruding horizontally from its base. Those four poles are meant to be lifted up by people and carried. The palanquin itself is closed-in and claustrophobic-looking.

There's no way in hell that I'm getting inside of it.

My suspicions are confirmed as the masked men start to converse in their own language. I guess they're just as confused as I am as to what this glowing pink oversized headset is.

"Woman ... damaged ... decreased value." That's what crackles in through my headset, and I look askance at one of the tusk men. Did he just say what I think he said? Or is this translator just beyond bogus?

The other tusk man scoffs and shakes his masked head.

"Who cares? Holes ... to mate ... only." He looks me over as he passes by, readying himself on one knee beside a massive weapon. The end of it is perched on a stand, but it appears to be a cannon of some sort. My stomach churns, wasps instead of butterflies.

I feel sick.

Holes to mate only.

There's no misinterpreting that.

I think about Jane then, and poor Avril. Connor. Madonna. Even ... Tabbi. What's happening to them? What might've already happened? *What the fuck is going to happen to me?*

I give the leash on my wrist a tug, but it's an endless loop with no discernible seam. The Tusk Guy that's on the other end of it has attached it to his belt. He's not looking at me, his attention focused on the man with the large metal cannon. From all appearances, it seems like they're waiting for something.

Dragon Dude.

A knot forms in my throat, choking me up. I understand that the dragon ate their friend yesterday, but I also feel this strange sense of guilt. If Dragon Dude comes this way looking for me, they'll ambush him.

Why would he ever come looking for you? I think. More than likely, if he does come this way, he's in search of food. I have nothing to do with any of this. Yet, the guilt remains, and I can't help but wonder if I shouldn't try my best to intervene somehow.

A roar echoes through the woods, sending up winged creatures in droves. There are massive bat-like animals in vibrant hues,

dragonflies the size of cars, and swarms of birds that dive and soar in colorful flocks, like schools of fish.

The dragon comes tearing out of the trees on foot, surprising several of the Tusk Men—guess they'd assumed that he'd come at them from the sky. He digs up huge clumps of dirt as he runs, claws tearing the ground to pieces and scattering the alien grasshoppers that I saw last night. They skitter as fast as they can away from the overwhelming heat of the suns, but most of them die before ever reaching the shade of the woods.

Dragon Guy knocks one Tusk Man out of the way and then snatches up two others with the massive, clawed hands at the tips of his wings. He tosses them to either side like playthings, all while maintaining his forward charge.

The Tusk Man with the cannon fires off a shot, sending out a blast that knocks me to my knees. Heat and sound ripple through the air, and a silver beam cuts into the dragon's side. With a violent roar, he slams his massive winged claw-hand down on another man, crushing him into the dirt and spilling blood.

The guy who called me a hole prepares to take another shot, and without thinking too hard about it, I grab a piece of the ruined wagon from yesterday and chuck a sharp bit of wood at the back of his head. It hits him hard enough that his shot goes wide, cutting into the bark of a tree and setting it on fire.

Meanwhile, Dragon Guy is bleeding purple blood everywhere; it oozes from the wound in his scaled side as he turns those glowing eyes of his to Hole Guy. The tusked man sets up another shot, but it's too late. Dragon Dude is on him before I can even finish my current blink. His mouth splits his face in half, teeth sharp and blindingly white in the horrid heat of those double suns.

I'm not sorry to see Hole Guy's head disappear into that mouth although the sight is a bit gruesome.

"Fire net!" The translator gurgles those words into my mind in a garbled, mechanical voice. No mistaking the meaning though. There must be a second gunner nearby. I look around as Dragon Dude uses his tail to knock the first cannon aside.

The leash on my wrist jerks suddenly and I fall, my bare skin screaming in pain as I'm dragged like so much cargo across the hot ground. I'm trying to get to my feet, but these tusk men are

inhumanly fast. I end up with several patches of bloody, torn skin by the time my Tusk Guy comes to a stop next to a man with a piece of wood embedded in his eye.

My captor shoves his dead comrade off the weapon, turning the large gun on a swivel in the direction of Dragon Dude. Either this is another cannon or else it's the aforementioned net gun. Doesn't matter much to me: I'm not letting them fire it no matter what it is.

I look down at the corpse of the tusk guy with the wooden stake in his eye and push aside the pain in my arms and legs to deal with later. My hands wrap around the base of the wood, splinters digging into my sore palms, and I give it a hard yank. It doesn't budge. It's thoroughly jammed into this guy's eye socket. *Fucking sick.*

A second hard tug sends me stumbling back hard enough that the leash jerks on the tusk guy's belt and he actually pauses to look back at me.

"Put that down, woman." He yanks on the leash to pull me toward him, using his other arm to rotate the net gun. Seems he doesn't see me as a threat. Good luck for me then. I jam the wooden stake into his shoulder ... and it does nothing. His skin is much thicker than it looks, certainly thicker than a human's skin, and my makeshift weapon does little more than annoy him.

Either the eye is just a much better place to stab a wooden stake (it is, but I'm not sure I'll be able to get it in there without him stopping me), or else alien-dragon-man really sent that debris flying with some force.

A guy is a guy in any universe, I'll bet. I drop down to one knee which hurts like hell, and I stab the wooden stake into my captor's crotch as hard as I can. It doesn't penetrate the fabric of his pants or his flesh, but it at least causes him to miss when he fires the net.

A glowing web shoots from the end of the cannon and opens up over Dragon Dude's right wing. When it comes down, it comes down hard, not like any net I've ever seen. The glowing silver threads dig into the dusty earth of the road and yank the dragon down onto his side.

My captor swings on me, hitting me in the face so hard that I actually black out for a second or two. The pain doesn't even register until I'm opening my eyes and tasting blood in my mouth.

My vision is blurry, my face feels puffy, and the headache that's coming on has me questioning my life choices.

I should never have agreed to cater Tabbi's stupid party; bad shit happens every time I'm in the vicinity of that woman. To be fair, I don't think I could've predicted that we'd be kidnapped by alien bounty hunters and sold as pets, but I knew it was a bad idea from the start.

On my first day off in weeks, I'm lying cheek-down in the dirt of an alien world with two merciless suns baking me to death while a dragon that eats people battles against tusk-faced alien sex traffickers. This has got to be a low moment for me. Surely things can only go up from here.

"*E-net ... again ... fire,*" a tusk man snarls at my personal captor, helping him adjust the broken tripod (when did that happen?) so that they can turn it in my savior's (questionable choice of word) direction.

Dragon Dude seems to be stuck where he is with the net holding onto his wing, but he's not entirely helpless either. I see three more dead men on the ground surrounding him. The two that are wielding the E-net thing or whatever seem to be the only ones left.

It kills me to push up to my hands and knees. The pain is so intense, and I'm so sunburnt and thirsty and hungry and tired that I nearly vomit. But if Dragon Dude loses, I am screwed. These guys aren't going to forget anytime soon that I got several of their comrades killed by trying to help their enemy. My captor *definitely* isn't going to forgive me for trying to drive a wooden stake into his dick—assuming he even has one. Hell, maybe he's got two? What do I know?

With the very last of my strength, I lunge behind my captor and use the leash like a garrote, wrapping it around his neck and hanging my entire body weight off of it. He grunts in annoyance but doesn't even bother to acknowledge me. Maybe that's not how this guy breathes? Shit.

I switch tactics suddenly, reaching up my hand and digging a fingernail into one of his eyes. Now *that* gets him to howl, and the other man is forced to release the broken E-net gun to wrangle me, jerking me violently off the other guy's back.

That's when Dragon Dude (DD for short?) finally breaks free of the net and comes charging at us on all fours.

Tusk Guy Two (the one not connected to my leash) chucks me aside like garbage and sprints down the road in the direction opposite the woods. The other guy tries to run, dragging me behind him for a painful few steps before his head disappears into the dragon's massive mouth. *Snap*. His decapitated body collapses beside me, spurting red blood as DD chases down his final opponent.

I don't see what happens, but I can hear it: bone snapping, screaming, a wet splatter.

I stay right where I am, seated on the ground with a dead body attached to my wrist.

Now what?

I'm panting heavily, and my tongue feels like sandpaper. My eyes are still blurry, and my head is threatening to split right down the middle. Plus, if I don't get out of this sun soon, I'm going to get heatstroke and die. No joke. I lied when I said it reminded me of the Australian outback; this is worse.

The dragon's footsteps draw my attention around just as a blissfully cool shade cloud descends over me. I look up to see that he has one of his wings out, shielding me from the blaze like an umbrella. He's standing on two legs now, like a person, his front claws sheathed, long fingers visible.

"*Little ... stupid.*" The translator crackles in my ear, and I'm shocked to realize that I'm actually still wearing it after all that. The mic part seems to have broken off which I guess is no big loss since it didn't actually work. Purple blood drips from a wound in DD's side as he considers me, peeling back his lips so that his wide mouth and all its sharp teeth are on display. He squats down beside me and bites down on the leash, severing it from the dead man's belt.

I sort of assumed he wasn't going to kill me, regardless of his reasons for actually attacking the tusk men. He didn't kill me last night, and he could have easily done so. Then again ... he's an alien. I don't know anything about this ... whatever he is.

"Fuck," I breathe, and he reacts by lashing out and yanking me into his arms. I'm tossed over his shoulder like a bag of laundry, and the sudden movement is so intense that I pass out briefly. When my

eyes open, I'm relieved to see that we're back in the shade of the trees, the steady, rhythmic footfalls of the dragon guy paired with the sounds of birds (alien birds), insects (alien insects), and a distant roar that sounds much like the ones he made.

He pauses to listen to that, turning over his shoulder to glance in the direction of the sound. And then he keeps going. His wings are held up and to the sides, giving me a clear view of the ground behind us.

"I can walk now, I think," I offer, but I'm not sure if that's true. Also, he can't understand me, so why am I even bothering to talk? I do it anyway. "Really, I appreciate everything you've done for me, but is it possible for me to maybe get some water and some food? A ride back to the market? I know it's a lot to ask, but there isn't anybody else around that can help me."

He ignores me.

We continue walking for some time, and I eventually give into my exhaustion and fall into an uneasy sleep.

The next time I wake up, I'm in the grass and the dragon guy has my face cradled between his massive palms. His hands easily engulf my entire head with room to spare. Also, he's licking me again. With his long tongue, he bathes a particularly painful spot on my forehead, using measured strokes of that slick, heated muscle to diminish and then banish the ache entirely.

So he was healing me then, I realize, remembering the pseudo erotic thigh lashing I got yesterday. Once he's done with my forehead, DD moves his tongue to my lips, flicking it across the dry, parched, and split skin and causing me to cry out.

It hurts more than the forehead.

My eyes slam shut, but he pauses, waiting for me to open them again. His lip curls a little, revealing several of those massive teeth. They're the length of my thumb, easily. *Although ... is he smaller now than he was earlier? I swear that he's shrunk some.* A growl rumbles through him and even if I can't understand much of what he says, I understand that. He's telling me to hold still.

He resumes his once-again-pseudo-erotic licking across my mouth until I'm starting to get uncomfortable, shifting weirdly in the grass and squeezing my thighs together. *What is wrong with me? I know I*

haven't had sex in a while, but this guy's not even remotely human. What a reach, Eve. You perv.

Then it gets worse.

Dragon Dude tilts my head back, using his strong fingers to hold me firmly in place, and then he thrusts that massive tongue into my mouth. My eyes go wide and my hands come up to grab his large wrists. His claws are out now, protruding from his knuckles like Wolverine.

He digs in deep, dominating my mouth with strong, sure licks. Slowly, the last of my headache begins to recede. My eyes go half-lidded, and my hips thrust upward of their own accord. I don't mean for any of that shit to happen; it just does.

My skin begins to tingle, and I can feel this ... this *hotness* burning through my blood. Like poison. I struggle for a minute, sure that, accidentally or not, this alien man is poisoning me with his saliva.

I shove at his wrists, but he just presses his body forward, forcing me to lean back and lose my balance. I end up clutching at his arms instead of pushing them away. There's a heat in his skin that matches that strange feeling inside my body; sweat begins to pour down the sides of my face.

My entire body goes limp, as if I'm paralyzed from head to toe, and that's when DD finally pulls away. His mouth opens, this odd, guttural growl emanating from it.

"*Last ... will ... hurt.*" He uses one of the clawed hands on his wings to snatch the headset off of me, placing it over his own head. I didn't think it'd fit, but it seems like there's plenty of extra headband to unfurl, like a seat belt or a tape measure or something.

"Wait ... what?" I manage to murmur, and I know he understands me because he's got the damn headset on. That long tail of his swings around, and the spikes along the length of it stand on end. As I lie there helpless in his arms, he uses it to wrap around my waist, lifting my shoulder to his mouth.

He bares his teeth at me and then bites down. I can feel those sharp fangs of his entering my skin, penetrating nearly to the bone, but for whatever fucked-up reason, it doesn't hurt. And then there's that sinful tongue, lapping away at my blood. This lasts for *maybe*

sixty seconds, but the image of him above me, purple-eyed and alien and wearing a pink headset, is going to stick with me forever.

He releases my shoulder and then licks it, nice and slow and languorous. All that, and I'm left with only faint pink scars, freshly healed over and virtually painless. There are dozens of them from all those teeth. DD looks at me expectantly, as if I'm supposed to respond to what he just did. Err. Okay. I rub at my shoulder with a shaky hand.

"What's your name?" I whisper, afraid that I'm going to pass out again.

He uses his wing-hand to put the translator back on my head, drops me into the grass, and stands up. He makes no attempt to help me up as my fingers and toes tingle like they've been asleep this whole time. Still can't move though.

I'm struggling to turn on my side for a better view of him when he drops back to all fours, claws digging into the ground as he stalks to the edge of the clearing, wings folded against his back. His tail thrashes behind him, spikes raised and glistening with a purple liquid of some kind.

"Hey." I force myself into a sideways sitting position, leaning heavily on my palm. "Can you please help me up here? I don't appreciate being licked and left. At least take me out to dinner first." I murmur this last part knowing he won't understand me.

Dragon Dude turns suddenly, the scales from his back lifting like a cat's raised hackles, the edges glowing purple to match the pulsating spirals on his massive horns. He skitters across the grass in such a way that even if I wanted to pretend he was a man when he was licking me, it's grotesquely obvious that he's not.

He scales the side of a massive tree using his claws and then disappears into the brush on one of the limbs. A scream follows, and then a shower of blood. It rains down from the branches just before a body slams into the dirt beside the stream, rolling slowly until it tips over into the water and is carried away on a deceptively strong current.

I'm able to get a good enough look at it that I recognize it for what it is: one of the tusk men.

"Fuck." I know; I curse too much. I'm trying to kick the habit, but probably won't. I have good intentions though.

Dragon Dude lands in the blood beside me, splattering my skin with enough of it that goose bumps prickle across my arms and legs. He narrows his eyes at me and curls his lip, letting out another one of those long, low warning growls.

“*Get ... the ... wish.*” Whatever it is that he’s trying to say, it’s meant to be a wry tease. I’m sure of it.

“Get the wish?” I ask, realizing as he stands there, towering over me even on all fours, that he’s waiting for me to stand up. It takes me a few tries, but I’m eventually able to get my feet under me. When I sway a bit, he catches me with his tail and pushes me upright.

He turns to stalk away, and I look back at the river, wetting my lips. I’m so thirsty right now; I’m willing to risk that muddy bank and those strong currents. When I turn to see where Dragon Dude’s gone, I find him slowly disappearing into the trees and start to panic.

Being alone in these woods with no idea where the market is, that scares me. I’m a brave girl, but that’s a surefire way to an early death. Not to mention that Jane is still out there somewhere.

“Wait!” I jog to catch up to DD, surprised by how great I feel all of a sudden. Thought I was dying twice in as many days, so this is a nice change. “What did you do to me?”

I take the headset off and hand it over to him, assuming that he’ll put it on and then we can go back and forth for a somewhat normal conversation. He looks at it briefly but doesn’t take it. After a while, he stands up like a man and walks the way I’m walking. It’s a comfort, I won’t lie.

He’s *way* fucking taller than I am; it’s ridiculous. I’m an average-height girl, but he’s *huge*. Although ... I *swear* that he was bigger earlier. *Can he really change size?* My eyes drift down to the spot where his cock might be, but there’s nothing there except for smooth, ebon-scaled skin. *Damn it.* Supreme disappointment floods me followed by supreme shame. What am I even *thinking* right now?

“You did something to me.” I point at him, but he doesn’t look at me. Instead, his nostrils flare and it seems like he’s scenting something in the woods. “I appreciate the healing stuff, but I could do without the hormone surge.”

I put the headset back on; if he's not going to wear it, I may as well get use out of it.

“You riled up my female pheromones and yet”—I gesture at his crotch—“you have no dick. Seems a bit messed-up, don't you think?” I sound hysterical, don't I? I am hysterical. Yesterday morning, I was a business owner working my way toward purchasing my first house. By the next, I'm kidnapped by sex trafficking tusk men, and then tongued by a dickless dragon. “Guess you don't get to mating much?”

That stops him, and he turns those brilliant purple eyes down to me. The relatively normal pupil is nice, but the lack of whites is disturbing. I should've fought to go with the moth guy. *Except, there was Avril's blood-curdling scream ...* I shiver.

DD turns fully toward me then, and I notice that a slit is opening up in his groin. The head of a massive cock emerges, growing to such gargantuan proportions that I clamp both hands over my mouth. Then a *second* cock appears below it at a slightly different angle, just a tad smaller than the first.

“*When ... I ... little.*” That's what he says to me, and then the slit is closing and both of his cocks are retreating back inside. “*Get ... the ... wish.*” He continues walking as I gape at his admittedly very nice ass from behind. It might be covered in smooth scales, but it's perfect otherwise. I get a nice juicy view of it as his tail moves from side to side.

“Holy shit.” I choke on those words, and then I'm silent for the rest of the walk.

He has two dicks? Do females in his species have two vaginas? Oh, maybe one is for anal? Why am I even thinking about this? Should I keep calling him DD or should I change his nickname to Big Double D? Big DD? Big D?

I decide Big D is too prime a nickname to pass up.

When we get to the spaceship from last night, I spot my tree branch and notice that the small heat vent has grown much larger. Purple smoke drifts up from inside. The closer I get, the more I'm sure I'm not supposed to breathe that. Guess this is why the tusk men were wearing gas masks? I'm lucky I didn't accidentally kill myself by sleeping next to it.

I edge around it, looking up at the thick canopy overhead as I try to determine how close to nightfall it is. The days here are either really short, or else I was passed out for much longer than I thought. Even with heavy branches overhead, I can see that it's edging toward darkness.

The thought of spending the night alone on the ground again does not appeal to me. Besides, if I don't get something to drink soon, I won't make it that long.

I turn to Dragon Dude aka Big D, determined to argue with him, but he's already reaching out with his tail and snatching me up by the waist. He hops the fifteen or so feet into the ship like it's nothing and then sets me down on the floor beside him. The space is a strange mix of decimated tech and woodland chic.

Massive roots grow through the floor, their lengths worn smooth from frequent touching. The metal ground beneath us is covered in feathers, straw, pine needles, and leaves. It makes for a cushiony surface as I get onto my hands and knees to crawl further away from the edge. I don't trust my sense of balance at the moment.

When I stand back up, I realize there's a massive computer screen on my right, and it's got a blinking pink cursor with a prompt.

“Hello? I hear a new voice. Perhaps you can read one of the six million languages that I currently understand. I have attempted to assess your language based on the sounds you've made; please tell me if I've guessed correctly? You are English.”

Um.

The computer is mostly right—I'm American, but I do speak English. Also, what the fuck?

I decide to ignore that for now. The ship is obviously non-functional. Maybe it's like, ChatGPT on steroids and solar power or something? Bet this planet would be ripe for solar panel sales. Outside of the woods, it's unbearably hot.

Dragon Dude is stalking down the length of the ship on all fours. He disappears into a nook off to the left, and I follow after. When I get to the doorway, I look in and see that only half the room remains. There's a structure that looks a bit like a bathtub, but behind it, the wall is gone. Instead, curtains of vines create a living canopy of green.

The dragon crouches by the bathtub, curled over the end of it in an almost comical sort of way. He massively overshadows the tub, lowering his head down and lapping at the water with that long tongue. My own mouth waters, and I decide that I can't resist. If this water isn't good to drink, what will be?

I stumble over and drop down to my knees, using my hands to scoop water into my mouth. As soon as it hits my tongue, I swear that I can feel my cells dancing happily, expanding and plumping with each sip.

"Fuck me, that's good," I murmur, and the next thing I know, I'm on my back and Dragon Dude is pinning my arms to the floor. He snarls at me, and I feel the strange press of something hot against my torn and battered lace panties. Um. My body reacts wildly to the feeling, but I really, *really* don't think he would fit. Not even close. "Wait, wait, wait."

He takes the headset with his wing-hand and puts it on again, tilting his head at me as if to say *repeat yourself, human*.

"Wait. Don't." I'm well-aware of the translator's limitations, so I keep it simple.

"*Fuck*," he growls in English, still staring at me like I'm insane. "*Mates?*"

Fuck. Mates.

...

Oh!

"Right, okay. Listen up, Big D. I think we have a certain misunderstanding here." I wait for that to register on the headset, but either he doesn't understand what I'm trying to say or he doesn't believe me. I'm leaning toward the latter. The words he was saying before—*too little!*—now make a whole lot of sense. "Fuck doesn't always mean to mate; sometimes it just means ... that the situation is bad."

The translator gurgles in his ear, and then he places it back on my head.

"*Not ... too ... little ... later.*" He draws back from me, releasing my arms, and returns to his crouched position at the end of the bathtub, lapping up the water while I sit propped on my elbows,

trying to understand what's going on here. So, Dragon Dude speaks enough English to think that I've been demanding that he fuck me?

Wow. Okay then.

Yesterday, when I thought he was going to eat me, did screaming 'fuck' actually save my life?

"Wait until I tell my mother that cursing saved me on an alien planet," I joke, but he ignores me. One purple eye watches me as I approach the bathtub and drink as much as I can stomach. I have never in my life been as thirsty as I am now. The water is relatively cool, and it looks perfectly clear. I wonder where it comes from?

I'm finished long before Dragon Dude, sitting back on my haunches to watch him.

A large beetle with *way* too many legs falls into the bathtub when the wind blows, knocking it off one of the hanging vines and into the water. Within seconds, it's dead. I stare at it as it begins to float, and then Big D leans in and *eats* it.

I almost vomit.

He notices my reaction as I turn away, and he growls at me again.

"*Picky ... starving.*" He grumbles what might actually be a laugh and stands up on all fours, leaving what I really do believe is a bathroom. My gaze catches on something too amazing to be real, and I creep forward, digging through vines until I find a porcelain wonder waiting for me.

It's a toilet.

It's literally a toilet.

Tears fill my eyes and I wrap my arms around it.

"Oh thank God, I'm saved!" I quickly lift the lid and peek inside, finding myself staring down at a straight drop to the forest floor. So ... more like a pit toilet. Not surprising. Doesn't mean I can't use it. My eyes dart around for a suitable leaf, but how will I know if I've just picked up the alien equivalent of poison oak? Or worse.

"If only it had a bidet," I murmur as I browse the vines hanging over the side of the ship in a thick blanket. I select the softest leaf and tear it off, carrying it into the main portion of the ship where I find Dragon Dude licking the nearly non-existent wound in his side.

He healed it.

He healed the giant hole made by the laser. I'm not surprised, but I am impressed. His saliva saved the day more than once, didn't it? So the guy has two cocks *and* magic spit? Totally OP. I bet he tells horrible jokes. Or maybe he's a two-pump chump? *Four-pump chump if you factor in the double shafts.* I grin.

Yeah. There *must* be something horribly wrong with this guy's personality that I'm just not keying into due to lack of proper translation. I should probably be grateful we can't carry on a real conversation.

"Hey." I shake the leaf in his direction. "Is this safe for my skin?" I rub it along my arm to see if he reacts. He just keeps staring at me, hunched over with his wings lifted and curled partially around him, like a gargoyle or something. His spike mane looks like hair when he's sitting this way, and it's a very pretty, glossy sort of black to match his scales. Purple designs pulse faintly on the underside of his body and along the arm-like portions of his wings. "Do you want to take the headset so you can understand me?" I point at the glowing pink nightmare, but still, nothing from the guy.

With a sigh, I head back into the bathroom area, wondering how a very human-looking bathroom ended up on this planet. As far as I know, we haven't discovered any planets with intelligent life that are reachable by modern space travel. Maybe the world governments have banded together to hide the existence of this place from us plebs?

Seems more complicated than that though. There's a full-blown marketplace with at least five different species, not including humans. I'm no expert, but it appears that there are several civilizations with access to advanced space travel. Doesn't seem like they give a shit about human governments if they're trapping us like stray cats and then selling us off for a few measly coins beneath some shitty, hand-drawn sign.

I exhale past the sudden spike of fear, taking my moment to pee in a proper toilet, and then using my leaf. It's no Charmin, but I drop it down the hole and then close the lid. I don't want to dirty the drinking water, so I have to settle for not washing my hands. Bummer.

Dragon Dude creeps back into the room, nostrils flared. I'm not sure if an alien dragon monster with no visible mouth can look

surprised, but if it can, this guy does. He prowls over to the toilet on all fours and sniffs it—vigorously.

“Excuse me,” I grind out, but he ignores me. “Could you please stop being creepy?”

He rises to his full height, and then whips out one of his dicks. It swells from the slit at his groin, and then he’s clutching it in one hand and pissing all over the closed lid of the toilet.

Seriously? So, I guess it doesn’t matter what universe we’re in: men will be men.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I ask, and he growls at the word *fuck*. Doesn’t stop pissing though, not until the toilet is soaked. His cock slips back into the slit as he crouches and then gets back on all fours again. “Were you ... marking the toilet?”

“*Mark ... you.*” That’s his response. His eyes narrow then, and he explodes across the room, surrounding me in a cloud of black and purple. His horns pulse with a bioluminescent glow, and he inhales so deeply that his nose slits flare wide. “*Stay ... here.*”

He slips past me, but the length of his body slides sinuously along mine, and those strange hormones in me start to go nuts again. I’m convinced that he put them there somehow. Convinced of it.

I follow him back into the front of the ship, watching as he hops nimbly outside and then takes off into the trees. My gaze drifts to the ground. I’m not sure how easy it would be to get down from here; I’d probably break a leg in the process.

A deep sigh escapes me, but I’m not particularly worried. It’s clear that this place is the dragon’s ... house? His lair? His den? Somehow that last word feels right. Regardless, he’ll come back here. At least I have a moment to look around without his unnerving presence.

I wander the ship, but there’s not much to see beyond the bathroom and the main area with the computer. It’s still talking to me, by the way, typing out line after line of text. Some of it’s in English, but mostly it’s not. I continue to ignore it, deciding to explore the last of the three rooms.

I step past the shredded curtain in the doorway to see that there’s a significant dip in the floor. It appears that this room was falling away from the ship, connected by a single thick cable and some wires.

Over time, the forest took over and filled in the space, bracing the tilted room with a huge branch and tying it back to the main part of the ship with vines.

I test it carefully with my foot before I step in, but it seems sturdy enough. If the dragon sleeps here—it really looks like he does—then it must be pretty stable. The center of the room is a circular dip layered in dozens of furs and dotted with old, discolored cushions. Once upon a time, I think they were pink. I wonder if the headset originated from this ship, from these people with their human toilets and their clawfoot bath.

My curiosity piques and I find myself standing in front of the computer screen and its massive pink keyboard. It's covered in symbols that pulse and glow faintly, as if in time with my breath. There's no way I could use this if I wanted to. I look back up at the pulsing cursor—also in pink—and wait for another line in English to appear.

“I am blind, but I can hear you. Don't worry about the keyboard and speak to me, please. I've been bedmates with an angry alien for years. Even after all this time, I cannot understand him nor can he understand me.”

“You're not going to kill me, are you?” I ask, and another frantic line of text appears.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you for reading and responding to me. Who are you and how did you get here? I am in desperate need of your help.”

“You're a computer?” I ask. “Like ChatGPT or something?”

“I am not familiar with ChatGPT, but I can assure you that I am not a product of artificial intelligence. I was fatally wounded during a routine flight to Jungryuk; my neural center was placed in a stable facility until we could find a suitable host body for transplant.”

“Mm-hmm.” I'm officially done with the computer thing now; it's creeping me out. If it is AI, then it's reached AGI—artificial general intelligence—and it's probably going to try and kill me. I walk away from the screen. It might be able to hear me, but I don't have to listen to it.

The massive energy burst that Dragon Dude gave me earlier seems to be fading. My lids feel weighted, and my mind is such a

mess of thoughts that I decide that sleep is in order. There's only one logical place to get it: in the dragon's bed.

Am I risking something by climbing in there? It looks pretty personal. At the same time, it's getting cold and dark outside. My only light in here comes from the headset, the glowing keyboard, and the faint flicker of the computer screen. It's hard to see from the tilted room, but that should make it easier to drift off.

I decide to go for it.

Fluffing some pillows and dragging one of the heavy furs over me makes for a fairly comfortable bed.

"Maybe when I wake up, I'll be in a jail cell with a hangover trying to explain why I was found with the mayor's bloodied lawyer on the roof of a luxury apartment building." A snort escapes me, but then my cheek hits the pillow and it's lights-out.

At some point in the night, I wake to find myself still alone in the bed. Frantically, I climb out, desperate to see if Dragon Dude has returned. If I'm going to make it back to the market in the morning, I'll need his help.

I find him crouched over a corpse in the front room.

The scent of blood washes over me, making me feel queasy and, grotesquely enough, like I'm starving.

I don't dare move, watching that muscular body hunched over his prey lest *I* become his prey. Doesn't matter. He notices me anyway, craning his neck around to stare at me. His wings flare and then tighten against his back, tail twitching. He rests his second pair of hands on his shoulders, like epaulets or something, and snarls at me.

"Hey Big D, are you in the mood to share?" I joke, but obviously he doesn't understand me. Slowly, so as not to panic him, I creep forward and find myself staring down at the dead body of the kiyo. It's the same one, too. I recognize it by the reins still hanging from its face. Damn. Savage.

Dragon Dude growls at me with his oversized mouth, and then backs up, curling around me with his body and essentially forcing me to take a step closer to the dead animal. He moves and appears to be a shadow at times, almost ethereal, like he isn't fully embedded in this plane. Also, he is *definitely* smaller now. I'm not imagining it. My new alien monster friend is shrinking.

By shrinking, of course, I only mean getting smaller in comparison to how large he was before. He's still fucking huge.

"Eat." The command is easy enough to understand, but who knows if I can even eat this thing without having an allergic reaction or something. I remember reading this article about scientists in Australia who cloned woolly mammoth meat and made a meatball. They didn't dare eat it though, unsure as to how a five-thousand-year-old protein would react with their bodies. Same deal here.

"Humans can go for three weeks without food. Hopefully I'll be home by then, so I won't need to eat at all." My mouth waters, but I turn away from the animal, gesturing at it with my hand. "You go ahead. You eat." I point at him and then at the food.

That seems to piss him off. He grabs me with three of his four hands, using the last free wing-hand to dig around inside the corpse and draw out a small organ from the animal's body. I know some people eat 'sweetbreads' or whatever, but organ meat is not my thing. I gag as he brings it to my mouth, utilizing his other wing-hand to pry my lips apart.

I'm struggling in his grip, but he's at least fifty times stronger than the strongest person I've ever met. It's hopeless.

The meat goes down easily enough, but it tastes like I've just swallowed a mouthful of pennies mixed with stewed beets. My gag reflex kicks in, but Big D holds my mouth shut until he's sure that I won't throw it up. Then he releases me and I resist the urge to punch him. He could take my head off in a single bite; it's not worth it.

"You might've saved my life, but you're a fucking dick." I snap this out without thinking, and then he's on me again, licking the side of my neck and clutching me against his massive chest like he *wants* to mate with me. Goose bumps take over my entire body as I shiver under the weight of my own zealous carnal appetite. *For an alien dragon? The fuck, Eve?* "Wait, wait, wait."

I'm breathless, the words falling from my lips even as my body reacts to the masculine heat surrounding me, a cloying musk in the air that I swear I can taste as well as smell. It gets worse when Big D's tongue traces up my neck and over my jaw, slipping between my lips. *Is ... is he kissing me or healing me or something else entirely?*

I'm consumed by that tongue, my hands sliding along the smooth scales of his chest and the purple swirls across his ebony skin. He's

warm and impossibly hard, flexing with feral strength as he moves. My stomach erupts in anxious butterflies, and an insistent pulsing heat clenches in my lower belly. His tongue slips from my mouth and he sets me down, turning away abruptly and heading back over to the meat.

“*Ready ... not.*” That’s what he growls before he sets to finishing the animal by himself. It doesn’t take him long at all, so I just stand there and watch until he grabs the creature’s bones in his long tongue and swallows them *whole*.

He spends a few minutes cleaning the blood off of his body like a dog or cat might, and then turns to me, eyeing the tilted room behind me. He rises to his full height, walking over to me like a person, and my heart goes absolutely nuts inside my chest. He looks both more and less human like this; I can’t explain.

When he takes the headset and puts it on, I find myself paralyzed by the idea of having a conversation with him.

“In the morning, can you take me to the market?” I ask, and he growls at me, tearing off the headset and chucking it at the wall. He drops back to all fours, climbs into the nest and then sits back, as if he’s waiting to see what I’ll do. “Wow. Seriously? You let me ask all of *two* questions and didn’t answer either of them.”

In protest, I leave the headset where it is—with my luck, it’s probably broken—and then I join him in the bed. I keep as far away from him as I can get, trying to find myself a comfortable spot against the wall. He paces the space as I rearrange it, fluffing furs and cushions as he glares at me from glowing purple eyes. As he turns, his horns scrape the wall, gouging the metal.

When he finally settles down, it’s in the center of the bed. He’s maybe two inches from touching me.

“There’s plenty of room in here and *that* is where you’re choosing to sleep?” I glare at him, and he glares right back at me. I sigh. “If you’re going to crowd me out, could you at least take care of this?” I gesture at him with the bit of dangling leash, and his massive maw ripples in a low warning growl.

When I move to draw my arm back, he reaches out with a hand and snatches my wrist. Everywhere he touches me, I burn. I ache. *He’s poisoning me*, I tell myself, watching as the glowing purple marks on his fingertips trace the edge of the bracelet. As his finger

glides across my skin, he leaves a hot sticky substance that soaks into my blood, thrumming through me as my heart rate mushrooms into something catastrophic and wild.

I'm basically panting, lips parted, eyes wide, body in full, violent rebellion against my rationality. I'm damp with sweat, a feminine emptiness making my thighs clench. As if he knows exactly what sort of thoughts are going through my mind, Big D grins. It's a wild, toothy expression that breaks his dark face in half.

He offers another growl, flicks his tongue out between his teeth to lick the edge of his lip, and presses some hidden trigger on the leash. The seemingly endless loop breaks apart, and it falls to a useless heap on the faded pink cushion underneath.

"Thanks," I grumble, pulling my arm back. Only, he doesn't let me go. With two fingers, he easily encircles my wrist and holds it in a tighter, firmer grip than the leash ever accomplished. Leaning forward, he sniffs my hair, and I go perfectly still all over. If he wanted me, he could have me at any point. There's literally nothing stopping him but for a pair of ruined lace panties. I swallow back a strange mix of fear and desire.

Seeing him bite the leash earlier made sense. He's a beast. He's an alien dragon. He's wild. But ... what he just did? That was oh so very human of him. With a clacking of teeth, he releases me, and I draw back, frowning up at him.

His tail slithers toward the door, snatching up the headset and putting it up against my ear.

"*Nest ... mine ... female ... only.*" Big D withdraws the translator but, unlike a rational person, chooses not to put it on so that I can respond to him. He just waits, like he's giving me a choice in ... whatever it is that he's just said.

We stare at each other.

With a pleased huff, he tosses it across the room again like so much trash, seemingly satisfied that my silence is answer enough.

Since I have no goddamn clue what *nest mine female only* means, I just shrug.

"Whatever." I turn away from him and snuggle into the furs, thoroughly exhausted. If he won't take me back to the market in the

morning, I'll follow the trail again. Hopefully with the tusk men dead, I'll be able to make it back without his help.

Stay safe, Jane. I'm coming for you.

Because a real bad bitch never leaves her bestie behind—especially not on a hostile alien planet.



I wake feeling refreshed, stretching my arms above my head and yawning. When I blink myself fully back into reality, I see that Dragon Dude is already gone. I take my time getting up and frown when I get a whiff of my own armpits.

“A bath would be nice,” I grumble, craving water and thanking the stars that I didn’t die from what I drank yesterday. Didn’t even get a stomachache. However that beetle died, it wasn’t because the water was poisoned. Good to know.

I find my new roommate in the main room, sitting at the edge of the ship with his legs dangling over the edge. Once again, I’m struck by the very human pose. I’m also struck by how much smaller he is today. Again, he’s a giant of a dragon-alien-man, but he’s a foot shorter than he was last night.

I decide to join him, taking a seat on his left. He looks at me like he has no idea what to make of me, as if I’m as alien to him as he is to me.

Then again, he has a face the likes of which I’ve never seen, so maybe I’m reading his expressions all wrong.

“Put the headset on.” I try to hand it over to him, but he doesn’t take it. “Please, Big D. We need to talk.”

“*Talk*,” he grinds out, his large mouth rippling in a growl that says that maybe it was never designed to speak English. Only, he definitely is. That wasn’t the translator; that was him.

“How much English do you know?” I ask, but I get no response to that and sigh. When I try again to hand the headset over, he takes it and puts it on my head instead. “Me understanding you does us no good; I need to get back to the market.”

“No.” He says that word easily enough. The meaning is clear. He growls something else out that’s definitely not in English, and the translator picks it up. “*Dangerous hell.*”

Yikes.

“My best friend might still be there!” I snap at him, feeling more and more frustrated by the second. “This isn’t my home; I don’t want to be here.” I stand up then, but he stays where he is. Doesn’t matter. He’s still almost as tall as I am in a seated position. “I need to get back to Earth. Do you know where that is or how to get there? I see spaceships all over the place in these woods; there must be some working one somewhere. I had to get onto this stupid fucking planet in a ship, right?”

He snarls at me when I say *fucking*, but at least he doesn’t grab me again.

Instead, he leans over, resting an elbow on a knee, and he *stares* into the woods like he sees something.

“Are you even listening to me?” I demand, but he’s obviously not. With a snarl of my own, I turn and pace back into the ship, pausing to read what’s on the computer screen.

“*The headset you’re talking about, is it pink?! If it is, I can help you. Lay it on the pad to the left of the keyboard.*”

I take a look, but there’s no ‘pad’ next to the keyboard, just a bundle of wires.

“Sorry, it’s gone.” I shrug and start to walk away when the screen fills with several more lines of rapid-fire English.

“*Check for a universal cord. Any intact one will do. If you can plug the headset in, I can get it working again. Then maybe we can both speak to him.*”

It’s a tempting offer, but I don’t see any cords around. If there were, they’re buried under years of forest debris. I decide to ask the alien dragon.

“Hey, you don’t happen to have a treasure chest filled with old cords or anything like that?” He ignores me. “No? Fine. Suit yourself.” I step to the edge of the ship, right over the spot where the chair-shaped tree is growing. My best bet to get out of here uninjured would be to shimmy down that thing. Before I go though, I’m getting my fill of fresh water.

I head to the bathtub, drink as much as I can stand, and then use a leaf to open the seat of the toilet. There’s not much I can do about the musky male scent surrounding it, but I’m able to do my business well enough.

When I return back to the front of the ship and try to climb out, things definitely don’t go as planned.

Dragon Dude grabs me around the waist and draws me back, slamming my much smaller body into his chest. My feet aren’t even touching the ground anymore.

“*No.*” There’s that word again. It’s seriously pissing me off this time.

“You have no right to tell me what I can or cannot do. Put me down *now.*” I struggle in his arms, but he won’t let me go. Instead, he carries me back to the bed and tosses me onto it. It bounces just enough that I’m not hurt, but then he’s crawling in and taking up all the available space.

He straddles me on all fours, his eyes blazing, wings raised, the clawed fingers at the apexes curling into tight fists.

“*Market ... pain ... death.*” He struggles to get the concept across with this piece-of-shit translator between us. “*Me ... die. You ... sold.*” He snaps his teeth at the air near my face and then licks me again before releasing me and moving deeper into the nest area. He kicks his back legs, fluffing pillows and moving furs around.

I roll onto my side and sit up, frowning.

“You can’t go into the market with me? You seemed to have no trouble taking down like, a dozen tusk guys.” Well, maybe *no trouble* is an inaccurate thing to say. He had some trouble, but surely, if he wanted to go into the market and shop like anyone else, what’s the problem? “Is your type of alien not allowed in or something?”

He ignores me, working up a mound of pillows and then ... mounting them.

My mouth drops open as both cocks swell from his groin and he casts a deadly look at me over his shoulder. That massive mouth of his splits into a growl, and he turns away, hips thrusting against the pillows with undulating swells of muscle.

From here, I can see that perky ass of his, taut and clenched as he rocks his pelvis violently into the pillow heap. Shamelessly. Powerfully.

My own thighs clench, and my breath catches as I force myself to look away. *What the hell is he doing?!* Well, I mean, obviously I know *what* he's doing, but why is he doing it in front of me? *Maybe because he's a barely sentient alien beast dragon monster? Ever think of that?* Animals don't feel shame; only people do.

But this? I feel zero shame. Instead, his display is doing surprisingly strange things to my body. My mouth goes dry, and I have to force myself to swallow past a sudden surge of need.

Pretty sure we're not compatible sexually.

Not only is Dragon Dude way bigger than the average human (although he's now about half the size he was when I first saw him)—he has two dicks.

I'm freaked out by the fact that I'm even having this discussion with myself. He's not human, and it's really not okay to sleep with anything that isn't human if you are one yourself. Only ... I say barely sentient, but it's just that we have a communication problem. He's not an animal. He lives in this ship, and he rescued me, and he gave me a translator, and he healed me ... He's a 'person', even if he isn't a human.

"Shit." I shove up to my feet and take off into the main area of the ship, giving the computer screen a sympathetic look as I pass. "Does he do this often?" I ask, assuming that he probably does.

"*No, not really.*" That's what it says to me. I flip the screen the bird and then pace around a little, trying to ignore the grunts and snarls emanating from the nest. Now seems like a really good time for me to make my great escape, but I need something to help me get down the tree. A bit of fabric torn off one of the cushions would probably help. I could loop it around the tree and sort of shimmy my way down.

My gaze shifts in the direction of the nest.

Do I dare go back in there? What if I try to escape and fail? Will he lock me up? Eat me? Force himself on me?

“Is there an easy way for me to get out of this ship?” I ask, turning back to the computer again. It needs a name, stat. Or ... it doesn’t because I’m not staying here. I’m not.

“I will tell you if you take me with you,” it explains in bold, italicized text. *“The vessel you would need to carry is quite small; I can even get you transport and help you find some items of value in the woods. We can barter and sell our way off of this planet.”*

“I’m going to need something worth *more* than I am, apparently,” I whisper, but I bet Big D can hear me anyway. He’s probably got super alien dragon senses or something. “Some clothes would be nice, too.”

“I may be able to assist you with both things. Don’t rush our escape. Take it slow, so we can plan accordingly. First things first: I need that universal cord.”

“Well, if he has a stash—and he must because he gave me the headset in the first place—I don’t think it’s on this ship. There’s nowhere left to go, right?”

“Not true. There are several passages that are currently blocked by locked doors. I can’t sense them anymore, but based on the floor plan of the ship before the crash, I could guide you in the right direction so you might see if they’re accessible somehow.”

“Where’s the first one?” I ask, pausing to look over as Big D appears in the nest’s doorway. He glares at me before padding back into the bathroom. I hear the lapping sound of water as I turn back to ... “Hey, do you have a name perchance?”

“Oh. A name. It’s been so long since anyone’s asked me. Yes. Before the accident, I was a Cartian female, and my name was 01010010—” She continues to type out a massive string of binary code that means nothing to me. I think it’s about forty-digits long, not including spaces. Mm.

“Zero, it is then.” I keep things simple.

Also, how do you pronounce Cartian? *Car-shin*? Close enough. I don’t even know what sort of alien that is, but good to know.

Dragon Dude comes back into the main area, but I don’t worry too much about our conversation. Not only can’t he read what’s on the

screen, but he doesn't understand ninety-percent of what I'm saying anyway.

"Have a pleasant jerk-off session?" I ask sarcastically. He claws across the ground until he's looming over me from behind, wings spread, bioluminescent parts throbbing with that deadly purple glow. He's got those shadows around him again, hooking one horn on the right side of my face and putting his cheek up near my left.

"Yes." In English, mind you. He stalks away from me, tail thrashing, and I turn after him, briefly forgetting all about my plan with Zero (still partially convinced she might be a murderous AI bot or something).

"How much of what I'm saying do you actually understand?" I ask, pausing next to him as he stares out into the woods. I wave my hand up near his face, and while he looks at me, he doesn't respond to the question.

"*Stay.*" The headset burbles his translated growl into my ear, and he hops down, stalking into the woods with the bunching of strong muscles. Only a truly delusional woman would not appreciate this guy's back and shoulders. Or his chest. Or his ass.

Or his double dicks.

I turn away with a sigh, looking back at the computer and wishing she had a face.

"Do you know where we are? What planet, I mean?"

"*It's known as Jungryuk to most, but its name on my people's map is*"—she types up another mass of binary code, making me wonder if something just isn't translating correctly—"*after one of our minor gods.*"

Huh.

That's all surprisingly unhelpful.

Jungryuk? I can only see it as it's typed, but ... I decide *joong-ree-yook* is how I'll pronounce it.

"Where is Earth?" I ask, praying that she has some idea as to where my home is. "The place where I came from."

"*I'm not familiar with the planet 'Earth'; I only know English because market traders use it. I'm sorry.*"

"Fantastic. Okay then, where is the first of these doors?"

Zero shows me a map, sending me out to see what parts of the ship I can access, and if there are any doors left to break into. We find three of them. What I should say is: we find three of them that I have no hope of breaking into. They're solid metal with very obvious edges, big enough to dig my fingers into. They go absolutely nowhere when I try to drag them open.

The computer guides me to a hatch next, one that's embedded in the ceiling of a low-roofed niche branching off from the main area. I have to drag some debris over to reach it, but when I hang my full body weight from the edge of it, the whole thing comes loose.

I'm sent flying across the floor as a set of steps—much like attic steps—unfolds from the dark space, hitting the ground just shy of crushing my toes. My eyes are wide as I scramble to my feet and start up the first few stairs, trying to peer into the gloom beyond. Who knows what might be up here? I'm afraid of my parents' attic back home. Got a black widow in my hair once by going up there. Never happening again. I glance suspiciously back at the computer screen.

"I suggest you hurry so that we can be finished before he comes back."

"Does it matter?" I ask, staring down at the metal steps beneath my feet. "I'm not going to be able to close this thing up by myself." I take the last few steps and then stick my entire head into the attic space. It's vast, stretching well past my field of vision into the shadows. I can hear critters scurrying up here, tiny, frantic feet like mice. *Alien mice, no thanks.* I reach out for the only item I can see: a small metal box with a lock.

It's not heavy when I draw it out of the hole, turning it over in my hands a few times to see if I can't get a read on what it is or how to open it. I look questioningly at Zero's screen, brow raised.

"What's going on? I can't see anything, remember? I can't even talk. You have to keep me filled in."

"It's a small, silver box," I say, peering at the lock on the front. It looks like a relatively crude fingerprint scanner. Just to test it out, I press my thumb against it and it beeps red at me. Ah. Nice. Biometrics protected luggage. I look up at the metal wall across from me, and then I chuck the box as hard as I can at it.

The lock part hits the wall and little bits of plastic scatter everywhere as the scanner breaks. The entire thing falls to the floor and the top swings open like a broken music box.

Crude, but effective.

I hop down and move over to the box, squatting down beside it to see what was so important it needed to be protected by a fingerprint scanner. There's a pink something in there—whoever lived in this ship really loved the color—that I pick up and unfold.

It's some sort of ... outfit?

“Huh.” I move the fabric aside to find white boots, long gloves, and—oh my God, yes!—underwear. There are *clean panties* in this box, and that's a miracle not to be underestimated. *But what if ... what if they're used panties?* I pick them up, and they look clean, but ... Fuck it. They've probably been on this ship for a hundred years. Whoever wore them is long dead. “There are clothes in the box—pink clothes.”

“Ah. My clothing then. It was put in storage when my body died. There should be quite a few boxes like that up there.”

“Only one that I can see, and I'm not climbing through the creepy alien-mice-filled attic to find more.” I stand up, taking the clothes with me. Hopefully, they fit. Ugly as they might be, any clothing is preferable to running around in lace lingerie. And now that I have two pairs of panties, I can wash one and hang it to dry.

I change into the outfit first, frustrated to find that it barely fits. I can get it on, and I can zip it up to my navel, but that's where the zipper refuses to budge. I end up looking like an actress in an adult film about aliens and not like an actual kidnapped human being that was spirited away by two Chad-like alien twins to a meat market.

“Fuck.” I end up taking my old underwear and washing them in a giant leaf that I fill with water because I don't want to contaminate the bathtub drinking water. Zero guides me to a particular flower that's growing from the wall of vines, and I'm able to crush that for some sort of sweet-smelling sap that lathers like soap. I hang them to dry.

It's getting dark outside, and I'm not making a run for the market without sunlight and some items to sell. Period. I need something good to barter with. My eyes flick to the drying pair of lace panties.

If all of these aliens are pervs like my friend Big D, maybe I could sell them and get a ride off this stupid planet?

Or maybe I think so highly of myself that I believe my used panties are worth that much.

I end up waiting for Dragon Dude to come back, sitting at the edge of the ship and watching the suns set through the trees. The vent below us bellows occasional steam, but it doesn't bother me or knock my ass out, so I figure the air is safe enough to breathe, at least from this distance. The cricket creatures crawl up out of the dirt and hop off into the shadows just before I hear the steady footfall of heavy paws.

Big D appears, leaping into the ship as easily as a leopard leaps into a tree. He has another, smaller dragon creature in his mouth that he drops to the floor before sitting back on his haunches like a crouched person.

"Skin ... better." That's what the translator says, accompanied by some sort of crude stare that makes me fidget. Why do I feel just as naked in the pink bodysuit as I did in the lingerie? Dragon Dude looks at me like he might force-feed me again, so I sit down near the dead animal and stare at its torn throat.

"I need a fire so that I can eat this," I explain, offering up the translator. He won't take it which drives me absolutely up the wall. I gesture at him with it, but he stalks away like he has no clue what's going on. Once again, he retreats to the nest and spends an inordinate amount of time fluffing the furs and cushions.

I wait in the doorway with the curtain pulled back, watching him, wondering if he isn't going to ... Why am I watching if I think he's going to do that?

He rolls onto his back, looking absurdly human as he reaches between his legs and—

I see.

I turn around so I don't have to watch that, looking around the main area for items that I might use to make a fire. It's easy enough to gather sticks and dried plant material. Then I sit there and try to think about any survivalists I might've seen on TV and how I might actually go about doing this.

Starting to think this isn't as easy a task as I imagined it to be.

I stab one stick with another stick and then try to spin it as quickly as I can for some friction. It doesn't do jack shit. I have no clue how to make a fire from scratch. Seriously. I'm making the crazy people on *Naked and Afraid* look like real survivalists.

Dragon Dude comes back a short while later and finds me there, working my ape-like charms on the pair of sticks. When he gets close enough to sniff my hands, I throw the translator onto his head and he growls at me.

"Look, I'm sure you're as keen to get rid of me as I am to leave," I begin as he reaches out with long fingers, carefully rearranging the crude pile of sticks that I've done my best to assemble. With a sweep of his tail, he adds some dry leaves that have gathered on the floor. He still doesn't appear to understand what it is that I've said. "Alright, well, you don't have to talk, but I need you to listen."

He crouches low, opening that massive mouth of his. I shudder when I see the rows of sharp teeth, jagged and white like porcelain knives. It stretches from ear to ear (not that he has any visible ears), that terrifying grin, and then out comes a spout of flame, dancing from his tongue and igniting the tinder on the floor.

An old smoke alarm goes off somewhere and brackish water rains down on us, putting the fire out instantly and soaking my one and only outfit. Dragon Dude looks *pissed* about it, too, especially when the water short-circuits the translator while it's still on his head. The damn thing sparks and he hisses, using his tail to pull it off and throw it at the wall.

The stupid pink thing shatters to pieces, rendering it even more useless than it already was.

The sprinklers stop as Zero types up a response on her screen.

All it says is: "*LOL.*"

Like, really?

I look up at Big D, but he's sitting back on his haunches looking disturbingly person-like.

"I know *you* can't go to the market, but if you could just give me something to take, something that's worth more than I am, then I could barter for a ride back home." I make myself smile when I say this. Body language and all that. It's universal, right? But ... but is it galactic, too? "There are some doors around here that—"

He pads off on all fours, leaving the room in the middle of my sentence.

When I see where he's going, the sudden rage in me dissipates a little. He moves right over to one of the doors that I tried so hard to open earlier. I'm surprised when he stands up on his feet and reaches out with both hands, digging his knuckle claws into the crack, and then he drags the door open with a horrific metal-on-metal screech.

He releases the door, crouching back down behind me. I can see his shadow in the pattern of light falling across the room's shadowed floor. He looks like a gargoyle again. I pretend not to be creeped out (or turned-on), and step into the pitch-black.

There's *just* enough light coming in that, after I adjust to the darkness, I can see that I'm standing at the edge of a massive junk pile. The room is absolutely *filled* with crap. Cords and pieces of metal, computer chips and large branches, broken lights and plastic tubes, skeletons. More than a few skeletons.

Okay, half of this pile is made of ivory and tanned hide.

This guy eats *a lot*. I'm just not entirely sure why he hasn't eaten *me*.

"Can I take anything in this room?" I ask, moving carefully. I appreciate the sound of my boot heels on the metal floors. It makes me feel more ... normal. Like I'm not lying in a hospital bed hallucinating an alien abduction. Or even worse: actually experiencing one. "What's worth money?"

I look back, but Dragon Dude isn't listening to me. He isn't even there. I can hear the sound of his footsteps—presumably he's walking on two feet right now—as he returns to the main area of the ship. For sake of ease, I'll just start calling it the living room in my head. As far as furniture goes, a large screen with a soul trapped inside, an alien keyboard, a pile of debris, and a few old benches against the walls does not a great living room make.

Close enough.

I dig through the items, but it's all junk to me. I have no idea how to tell a valuable item from a useless one. I do my best, taking a few computer chip looking things back to the living room.

"Hey Zero, how do I know what to look for? The dragon has a lot of crap. I think he might be a hoarder, NGL."

“I am unable to generate images, but I’ll make a list of items you should look for.”

“Are dead animals worth money in the market? He’s got plenty of hides and bones and ivory, some nice furs.”

“Unfortunately not. Those items are easily procured on this planet. It is a very fruitful environs. If not for the heavy gravity and the lunar tides, it would’ve been colonized a hundred times over.” There’s a pause where the computer stops typing, and I sense hesitation. Might be an AI chatbot, but she’s got personality. *“Not to mention the Aspis.”*

Aspis?

I decide not to dig into that story. Not my business. Also, I don’t particularly care. I just want to go home.

My catering business is finally getting off the ground, I’ve got near enough money saved up for a down payment on a place of my own, and I have a big family that I love. Let’s not mention the slug creature that swallowed the mayor’s lawyer, the gray-skinned sex traffickers, or the fact that I only have two pairs of underwear.

Those are all amazing reasons for wanting to leave this place.

“I will do my best to provide you with a comprehensive list, but you must be careful. If you take the wrong item into the market, it will not go well for either of us.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I say with a sigh, tossing the computer chips aside. My hair is dripping down the back of my neck, and the pink suit I’m wearing is disturbingly uncomfortable when wet. I reach for the zipper and yank on it, peeling the fabric down my body and over my hips. Seeing as there’s no sign of Big D (he’s not in the nest, so I figure he’s left again), I take my bra and undies off, too.

Using the same type of flower from earlier, I lather up the clothes and wash them to get the brackish water and the smell of old pipes out. I hang all the items in the bathroom over an old rail that’s rusted and bent into an interesting shape. There are a few small snails that I have to peel off in order to claim the space, but sorry, not sorry.

“You have a whole forest to slime over,” I tell them, depositing them in the leaves behind the bathtub. When they come out of their shells, they’re glowing angrily at me, little spikes protruding from their striped and spotted bodies.

I'm not super comfortable being naked, but I also can't handle wearing clothes soaked in brown water that's been sitting in the pipes of this ship for God only knows how long. Everything needed to be washed, and now it has to dry. I need nice clothes in order to pull this off. How can I walk into the market looking like a bum?

I step out of the bathroom, using my fingers to brush my hair when I realize that I can feel eyes on me.

Dragon Dude is sitting crouched in the opening of the ship, a pile of sticks beside him. He's staring at me, but we're not even the same species so ... it's not like it matters, right?

I just stare right back at him. If we're being technical here, he's been naked this whole time. What does it matter if I'm naked now?

"Is this firewood?" I ask, trying to remain casual. There are strange things happening to me beneath the intensity of his stare.

Especially when he smiles.

He smiles more like a man than a beast, and that freaks me out.

I continue to act casual, sauntering over to the spot where our first fire failed. I point up at the sprinklers above our head and wish fervently that I had a towel or really any piece of fabric that I could use to wrap myself up with.

"Had to wash my clothes. That water smelled like rat shit and rust." I drop my hand and shrug casually. Big D tilts his head to the side and studies my body like he's both curious *and* aroused. The way his cock—just the one—peeks out of the slit in his groin confirms that. I cough into my hand and wonder if it wouldn't be prudent to slip back into the junk room so I can borrow a hide. I'll go all *Jana of the Jungle* until my shit's dry. "Time for dinner?" I ask, gesturing at the dead animal and hoping that I don't have to do any of the skinning. I'm a hypocritical carnivore. I'm an excellent cook and an even better caterer, but I'm not a good hunter and I certainly can't break a successful kill down— especially not an alien kill.

"*Eat,*" Big D instructs in a rolling growl, but also in English. How does this guy know English?!

Um. He's also not looking at the carcass. He's still looking at me, actually. A long tongue slips from his mouth, and he licks his lips in a way that makes me fidget. I'm going crazy here, like there's some

sort of smell on this guy that makes him seem enticing in a way that he shouldn't.

This is an alien, Eve. He's an alien. A fucking alien! I know you've been hard-pressed for romance as of late, but guys of the same species are a must.

When he starts to prowl toward me, I back up and consider running for the bathroom and the safety of my clothes. What was I thinking? Why did I get naked in the first place?

He comes up close to me, so close that I can feel the overwhelming heat of his body, see the beautiful purple color of his irises ... notice the single, large phallus protruding from his crotch. He stands up when he gets close to me, unfurling his body so that he's standing taller than me and I'm looking up. He's the smallest he's ever been and yet ... huge. He is still goddamn huge.

Big D is staring down at me like he wants to fuck me, wings spread, claws sheathed and fingers long as he splays them on the wall above my head. When he leans down and sniffs my hair, I go completely still.

My rebellious pussy is throbbing, my nipples hardening to aching points, my skin flushing with a fine sheet of sweat. Can he smell all of that? His slitted nostrils flare slightly as he inhales deeply and then exhales, ruffling up my hair.

With his right hand, he trails his fingertips down the side of my face and then lower, cupping my breast in a huge, warm palm. My breath rushes out, and I clap one of my own hands against his wrist. It looks miniscule, my pale hand on his black scales. It's a strange contrast, the soft texture of my skin against the silken shimmer of his.

A snarl ripples his large mouth as he squeezes and kneads my breast, words in another language that I don't understand. He withdraws his hand when I don't react and then licks his fingers, like he's *tasting* me.

I take my chance and stumble away from him.

Because of his location, it's easier for me to go to the nest area than it is to the bathroom.

That's a huge mistake.

He follows me there, his massive body blocking the door as I find the spot I slept last night and grab the topmost fur. I climb under it, my entire body shaking, and pull it right up to my chin like a blanket.

“I’m going to sleep here until my clothes are dry,” I explain uselessly. He can’t understand me. Here or there, he knows a word, but he has no idea what I’m saying and vice versa. Now that the shitty translator is gone, I’m really wishing I hadn’t complained so much about it. At least he’s not kicking me out of the nest, so that’s a bonus. Sleeping on the cold metal floor with a blanket of dead leaves is not my idea of a good time.

Big D drops to all fours, padding into the nest, and he comes right up to me, sniffing my hair again. I stay very, very still, unwilling to either encourage or enrage him. He huffs out, stirring my hair and giving me shivers that have nothing to do with the temperature.

“*Female*,” he says softly, and then he *nuzzles* me.

I can’t mistake the gesture for anything but what it is: a come-on.

That long tongue of his traces the back of my neck, and I grit my teeth, clinging hard to the fur that’s wrapped around me. *Why, oh why, does that feel so good?* I’m so confused here. I’m a person. Big D is absolutely *not*. But he’s sentient. He’s male (obviously). Rather than see me as food, he sees me as ... female.

I squeeze my eyes shut and feign sleep, ignoring Big D’s advances. I’m not even sure that we could mate if we wanted to. Our bodies just aren’t compatible. *‘Not too little later’*, he said. What did he mean by that exactly?

Doesn’t matter. Does not matter, Eve. Forget it.

Romance rarely works out on earth, so why take a risk here? Besides, who knows what mating with this guy would mean to him? For all I know, these dragon things mate for life like bald eagles or something.

After a while, he seems to accept that this moment isn’t going any further. Rather than force me from the nest or stalk off, he moves to the opposite side of the tilted room and fluffs his pillows.

Well. At least nothing’s eating me tonight.

Not even—or especially—the alien dragon whose house I’m living in.



Best part of sleeping in the nest? It's pitch-dark in that room.

I wake with a massive yawn, sitting up and raising my arms above my head. The furs I've been using to cover myself pool around my waist, exposing my bare breasts to the warm air. *Ah, right, I'm the genius who decided to strip down in front of an alien.* With a sigh, I stumble to my feet, dragging one of the furs along with me.

As weird as last night was, I slept like a baby. With as many layers of fur and hide as Big D's got in here, it makes for a pretty comfy bed. Better than my mattress back home.

I hesitate at the doorway, peering out to see if he's around.

He's not.

The carcass from last night is still there though.

Lovely.

I step onto the metal floors, expecting to find them as cold and unpleasant as they were yesterday. Not today. Actually, it's a little steamy in here. With the fur pulled around my shoulders like a cloak, I move into the living room to see if Zero has left me any messages.

"Good morning," I tell her, pausing to look down at the dead animal on the floor. Back on earth, the corpse would probably have maggots by now. Not here. It still looks surprisingly ... fresh.

“*Good morning. I take it you slept well?*” The cursor at the end of that sentence blinks expectantly. It’s practically an accusation.

“Nothing happened,” I say. Not sure *why* I say that, exactly. It just pops out. *Eve, are you defending yourself against an AI chatbot? You’re losing your sanity here. Get it together.* “But he let me sleep in the nest again, so that’s a win.”

“*Be careful with the Aspis male.*”

I quirk a brow, but the expression is lost on poor blind Zero. Aspis, huh? Is that what Big D is? Zero continues talking, filling the dark screen with hot pink text.

“*His kind are not known for their generosity or patience. If he is allowing you in his home—especially in his nest—if he is feeding you, then he will want something in return.*”

“You don’t think I’ve ever dated before?” I ask with a laugh. “This is why I never accept free drinks at the bar. No such thing as a free lunch.”

“*I am sorry, but I do not understand what you are trying to say.*”

I sigh.

I miss Jane.

Jane.

If Jane were here, she’d have laughed. Even in such a tense and strange situation, she’d have made an effort to smile and stay upbeat. “*Look, you’re getting that vacation you so desperately needed, right? Maybe we could find some hot springs to chill in?*”

I can’t dick around any longer. It’s already been too long. For all I know, my friend is dead. Mated or married against her will. Disappeared to the far edges of the known universe.

Although ... *known* universe is a bit of a misnomer. None of this was known to me before I got kidnapped by Tabbi Kat’s meathead friends.

“Every time I take a catering job for that woman, something goes wrong,” I mumble, ignoring the sting of tears in my eyes as I turn and head for the bathroom. Shockingly, the AI robot computer isn’t providing the sort of companionship I so desperately need. Big D is interesting, but he’s not around enough to assuage the deep gaping maw of loneliness in my chest.

As positive as I've tried to be, as hopeful, I'm aware that my situation is not good. Worse than that, it's basically impossible. The chances of me getting back to Earth are pretty much nil. I know that. I do. But the moment I give up all hope is the moment I lose it completely.

When I reach the bathroom, I drop the fur to the ground and check to see if my bubblegum pink space suit is dry. It's not. Even the panties are still wet. The humidity in this goddamn jungle is off-the-charts. I'm not sure what time it is—as if that's even relevant—but it's hot as hades in here. Sweat drips down my face and pools on my upper lip. I swipe it off with my arm, acting as if every drop of liquid I'm wiping away is sweat. I'm not crying. I'm not.

I crouch on the floor, still completely naked but uncaring, and I wrap my arms around myself. With my forehead pressed to my knees, my eyes squeezed shut, I do my best to recover an upbeat mood. I can't rescue Jane—can't even rescue myself—if something as simple as a wet space suit can break me down.

But it's not about the space suit.

It's everything.

I slump back and turn, putting my back against the wall, and I stare at the toilet across the room. Vines trail up the walls around it, and a certain musky scent wafts my direction. *That fucking alien dragon pissed on it again, didn't he?* He did, and yet the smell is weirdly not-so-unpleasant. I almost like it, and that grosses me all the way out.

I start to sob, putting my face in my hands.

I'm crying so hard that I don't notice Big D until he's *right there*, sniffing my hair and ruffling the mussed, tangled strands with his warm breath. I lift my face up to find him inches away from me, nostrils flared, pupils blown out, mouth closed so that it appears he doesn't have one at all.

I'm not sure when I got so familiar with him that I thought he was a friend. Now that the translator is completely destroyed, he seems a hundred times more alien than he did before. We have absolutely no way of communicating. At least when another human being speaks a different language, there are commonalities. Laughter. Smiles. Hand gestures.

“I want to go *home*,” I tell him, not caring if he finally decides he’s had enough and eats me. It’d be over quick, I imagine. I wouldn’t have to feel this impossible helplessness, this sense of being so unbelievably small in a vast and unforgiving solar system. It never occurred to me before, you know? Like, you’re born on Earth; you die on Earth. What happens to me if I die here? What if I can’t be reincarnated or go to heaven or whatever? What if being out in space totally throws off my bond with Mother Earth ... or something? “I don’t want to stay here. I *need* to go back to the market to find my friend.”

Big D stares me down and then he sits back on his haunches, tail lashing behind him. He reaches up and rubs at one of his massive horns with his forearm. It’s only then that I notice the translator on his head. I mean, I *think* it’s a translator. It looks similar to the one that broke, only this one is an offensive lime green instead of a vibrant Barbie pink.

He uses his tail to lift it from his own head, placing it on mine.

His mouth ripples when he talks, as if he’s growling more than he’s speaking.

“*Cannot ... go ... market.*” He leans in toward me as if to emphasize his point, getting right up in my face. This guy has absolutely zero sense of personal space. “*Death ... forced mating ... prison.*”

“So you’ve said before,” I start, taking off the headset and gesturing at him with it. If he would just take it, we could continue our conversation.

For once, he actually does, using his tail to slip the translator back on. This is the best chance I’ve had thus far, and I’m not about to squander it.

“Look, if I wear this suit”—I point at the garment for emphasis—“and I take items of value with me, items that are worth *more* than I am, then I can barter for information on my friend, Jane.” I pause. Big D doesn’t appear convinced. Actually, he looks tense, lifting his head up in the direction of the doorway, chin raised, nostrils flaring to take in a scent.

Something must be out there. Spikes rise up on his neck, the curve of his back, and down his tail, and a growl rips out of him that gives me goose bumps. I do my best to redirect his attention.

“No, not just a friend,” I blurt out, trying desperately to get him to understand. “More like a sister. Yeah, a sister. Does that make sense to you? Do your people have sisters?”

The way Big D turns to look back at me, I get the idea that maybe they—the Aspis or whatever—do have sisters. He tilts his head, the spikes on his body lying flat once again.

I lick my lips and taste sweat. Gross.

“If you can help me get to the market, I’ll take it from there. You don’t have to go in. You won’t ever have to see me again after that. Won’t that be nice? You’ll have the house all to yourself.” I stand up, but all that does is put me at eye level with the crouched alien. He places the headset on me once again.

“*No barter ... take.*” He stands up on his hind legs, once again giving off that humanoid vibe that’s oh so deceptive. Seems like this translator is a little less shitty than the last one. We’re almost having a rational conversation here. We trade again.

“Well, aren’t there, like, cops maybe?” I’m thinking of the moth guy in his uniform, won’t lie. Then again, he bought Avril; he didn’t rescue me. *Although it weirdly felt like he could. Or should?* I have no fucking clue. I accept the translator back.

“*Sucker Tails ... laws ... police?*” He seems confused, but I’m not. Because I never dared to hope that there’d be a police force of any sort on this planet—or that Big D would even know what that means. I was just babbling to be honest.

“Are you telling me there are cops here?” I’m so excited that I’m breathless. I try not to get too excited because there’s a good chance that the translator is misfiring. Also a good chance that even *if* there’s a police force, they either can’t or won’t help me. They might hate humans. They might be corrupt. They just simply might not give a shit about my predicament. “Would they be able to help me?”

Big D steals the translator again, looking down at me with his lip curved up in a small snarl. I see teeth. It’s never good to see a dragon alien’s teeth. I repeat my questions, acting as if I don’t notice the way his eyes sweep my naked form. I do. Oh, hell yeah I do. His gaze is a tangible force, a heat that digs into my core and makes me ache in ways I’ve never experienced before.

It becomes hard to concentrate.

He gives me the translator again, but this time, he uses one of his winged hands to place it on my head. His fingers—or whatever they are—linger a moment, toying with my hair. He gives it a surprising yank, and I let out a sharp gasp as I'm drawn toward him. I'm so shocked that I stumble, my naked body slamming into his.

It's even worse than it was last night, my reaction to him. I feel drugged, like maybe he spiked my drinking water or something. All I can think about now is sex when in reality, that's the *last* thing I want or need to be thinking about.

The purple markings on his body glow with an eerie bioluminescence, and I find that my palms are slightly sticky where I've brushed against them. When I draw them away, I can smell that hot muskiness that seems to cling to Big D's muscular form. My first instinct is to *lick* it off.

Lick it.

That's where my mammal brain goes—to licking.

With a gasp, I throw myself away from him and hit the wall hard, staring up and into his eyes as he narrows them at me. I don't have to look down to see that he's, um, proving yet again that he has a dick. There is no doubt. No doubt at all. The fucker's got two of the damn things.

“*Sucker Tails ... help ... or no help.*” Big D licks his lips. It's nothing like when I do it. His tongue is long and sinuous, and his mouth, when it gapes open, is a violent gash across his dark face. His teeth are blindingly white. His teeth are disturbingly *sharp*. He drops down to all fours and gets right up in my face, sniffing me again. I swipe my sticky palms on my bare belly by accident, forgetting for a second that I'm not wearing any clothes. When I wipe the musk or whatever it is on my skin, it destroys me.

Big D grins, as if he knows exactly what I'm going through.

Liquid pools between my legs and my knees tremble. My nipples are two fine, pert points of agony. My brain ... what brain? I have no brain. I'm nothing but need and base instinct. I'm suddenly aware of how female I am, how male this alien is. That seems to be the only defining characteristic that matters, our sex.

Sex.

I swallow hard and shake my head, looking for a way out. He's lifted his wings, and it's like there are shadows all around him, like he's expanded to take up the entire room. Also, he's still smiling. It's the most wicked expression I've ever seen on another being—human or otherwise. It's carnal. It's erotic. That look, it captures my *soul*.

His tail explodes toward me, wrapping my waist and lifting me up so that we're face-to-face. Big D contemplates me as he sniffs my skin. When he licks my bare belly to taste the musky stickiness on it, I orgasm.

I do.

I'm fucking serious.

My entire body seizes up, muscles locking tight, and a spasm takes over me. Held up in the air by an alien's tail, I come so hard that it almost hurts. There are tears in my eyes as I dig my fingernails into his skin, clawing at him as I writhe against my will, sobbing and laughing in brief fits until it's over. My body sags as I gasp and tremble, struggling to remember what it means to breathe. The humidity—and that stupid smell of his—make it even more difficult.

“*You ... so little ... might break you.*” He seems to find that statement *hilarious*, a rumbling growl of a laugh breaking from those strange lips. Big D turns and heads in the direction of the nest, still holding me up in the air by his tail. “*We shall ... try.*”

“Put me down,” I choke out, but the words are weak, and I have absolutely no way to back them up.

I'm placed carefully in the nest. The sensation of that muscular tail sliding out from underneath me is so pleasurable that it's almost painful. I cry out and curl into a ball, shivering and burning and sweating. I'm on *fire*, and I have no idea how to quench it, no idea what's happening to me.

Some of this shit—like noticing Big D's taut ass—that's on me. But all this? I have no control over what's happening. There's some wild chemical reaction between his body and mine. Is he doing it on purpose? Would it be like this for any female, of any species? Am I just going crazy here?

I turn to look up, lying on my side, naked and shivering and *clenching*. My body is betraying me, doing her best to convince me that I could easily mate this alien if I wanted to.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I whisper, but he can’t understand me. He’s crouched in the doorway, the designs bisecting his chest, horns, and wings pulsing with an alien glow. His eyes are fixed on me, his tail twitching in agitation or desire. I can see not one but *both* of his cocks this time. One of them is threaded with glowing purple veins, a matching liquid pooling at the tip. The other is solid black, smoother and *slightly* smaller than the one above it.

DD hooks his long fingers on either side of the doorway, leaning in toward me. The claws on his knuckles are extended, gleaming in the light given off by his markings. I’m convinced that he’s going to fuck me.

I want him to.

This isn’t you, Eve! It’s that serum or whatever it is that’s on your skin. He’s bewitched you. He’s a fucking monster.

That’s what I tell myself. Something about it feels like a lie. No, *all* of that feels like I’m lying to myself.

I’m attracted to him, pure and simple.

I shift onto my back, and the urge is there to spread my legs. Big D looks down at my knees, like he expects the same thing, like he’s waiting for the invitation. He looks back up at me, and I feel like I’m cracking in half. *I’m going to regret this. I’m so going to fucking regret this.* My body seems to move of its own accord and then—

Big D’s head snaps up, and he turns to look toward the entrance of the ship. His spines raise along his back and tail, and then he’s flowing away like ink. It’s incredible, the way he moves, like he only exists in this world in bits and pieces.

The loss of his presence is like a bucket of ice to the face.

Yes, the sticky substance on my hands and belly burns (in a good way). Yeah, it smells good. I’m still horny. But that overwhelming—let’s call it *violent*—urge is diminished. Not gone though. Just ... abbreviated.

I shove up to my feet, stumbling out of the nest and into the living room.

Big D is still there, crouched in his gargoyle pose by the doorway. He’s gone completely still, one hand on the wall, wings spread, tail thrashing wildly.

He's staring at something.

I creep up behind him, but I needn't get so close to the edge. I can see what he's looking at before ever approaching the doorway.

Another dragon thing—an Aspis, I guess—is outside.

This one has horns, too, its scales a deep crimson instead of an endless black. It, too, has glowing bioluminescent designs on its body, but they're bright red rather than purple. Somehow, I get the idea that this one is female. Can't say why, exactly. It isn't like she has obvious secondary sex characteristics the way a human does. It just ... she *smells* female the way that Big D smells male.

"I'm losing my goddamn, motherfucking mind," I whisper, drawing the female's attention past Big D and over to me. She looks *right* at me and then licks her lips, massive mouth spreading open to reveal bloodstained teeth.

Yikes.

Even worse than that? She turns away from us, presents her ass and her, um, lady bits, and swishes her tail in a blatantly obvious invitation. My jaw comes unhinged as I gape at her. *This bitch. Doesn't she see there's already a woman in this den?* I can't look at Abraxas, waiting to see how he'll react.

"*Stay,*" Big D growls, and then he launches himself off the edge of the ship. The female takes off into the woods with him in hot pursuit, and I can't decide if he's chasing her down to kill her ... or mate her. My stomach cramps strangely—let's be honest, it's jealousy—and panic flares in my chest.

Jealousy? Over a dragon alien that I met two seconds ago? *A dragon alien that you nearly let fuck you two minutes ago.* Oh my God. What am I doing here? Jane needs me. My family's probably in a mad panic wondering where I am. And I'm sitting here thinking about having a fling with an alien?

No.

No, that's not okay.

I am *better* than this.

I turn to Zero, hands balled into fists at my sides.

"What's a Sucker Tail?" I ask her, praying that it's not a euphemism for the slug monster. "Big D—err, the Aspis male—he

said the police here are Sucker Tails.”

“Ah. I believe he means the Falopex. They are a water-dwelling species with tentacles; due to their unique functions they serve as police officers in the Noctuida. There may be one or more on patrol in the market. Do you wish to head there now? I’ve calculated the chances of our resident male mating with the rogue female and then eating you afterward with her at seventy-one percent. Your odds are not good.”

I just stare at her. At the screen. Whatever.

That jealous feeling in my gut? It’s a kick, a punch, a twist. I can’t breathe, and I don’t understand why I can’t breathe when I don’t even care. I don’t know this goddamn dragon from Adam.

“Thanks for the confidence boost!” I yell at Zero as I sprint into the bathroom, yanking the pink nightmare off the rusted metal pole where I hung it to dry. I take the bra but skip the still-damp underwear (even though I imagine that going commando in this suit is going to, erm, chafe a bit). I yank the uncomfortably wet suit on as quickly as I can, stuffing my feet into the white boots that go with it. I add the gloves as an afterthought. “You said you could get me transport?” I ask when I reemerge, gaze nervously searching the trees outside.

No sign of Big D.

“I will unlock the outer door. You will find my bike outside. It allows for programmable coordinates, removing any possibility of getting lost on the way to the market.” There’s a pause here, and I know what’s coming.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll take you along for the ride. What do I need to do?”

There’s a hissing sound from outside, like a hydraulics system or something. A similar sound comes from inside the ship, and I see that there’s a panel beneath the screen that’s come loose. When I squat down to open it up, I notice that there’s a wee bit of a problem here.

A large root has grown right through the panel and into one of the walls. It’s about as big around as my thigh and about as immovable as a sack of cement. I bite onto my lip. *Shit.*

“I’m not sure how to break this to you, Zero, but if I’m supposed to grab something from inside this door, it’s not happening.” I stand up and scoot back so that I can read her response. It comes in a frantic wave of text that starts in another language before switching back to English.

“*Clarify.*” The word stares back at me in disbelief, like she believes I’m lying to her.

“There’s a large tree root cutting across the space. I couldn’t open the door if I tried.” A roar explodes from the trees, sending animals scurrying across the floor and bursting from the canopy. Shit. I want to get out of here before Big D comes back. Even assuming that Zero is wrong—I’m damn near positive that her calculations are bullshit—I can’t stay here. And I can’t keep getting ensorcelled with those *fuck-me-right-now* pheromones that he’s putting out.

I want to go home.

“If you can’t open the door, you can’t take the transport.”

“Did you hear what I said?” I snap, getting frustrated. *He left me here and took off after a female of his own species. What was I thinking? I almost let him ... I felt like we had a moment ... gah! I’m losing my damn mind.* “You’d condemn me because you can’t save yourself?”

“I have been stuck here for three-thousand turns of this planet around its central sun. You are the first person that I have been able to communicate with. Am I to wait here until my solar power is fully obscured by the forest canopy? You condemn me to death.”

“I’ll do my best to send someone back for you,” I plead, because I just don’t want to be here anymore. I can’t get out of here fast enough. *He chased a female, a female who most definitely looked at me like meat and not mate.* Stupid sign. “How can I help you if I’m dead? How can I help you if he won’t let me leave?”

I wait, crossing my arms and hating the stupid spacesuit and the way my lace-covered breasts sit prettily in the half-open zipper. Not exactly keen on making myself look *more* appealing to whatever beasties are in the market, especially since I’m not going to have anything to sell like we planned.

“I don’t care. If I don’t go, you don’t go.”

With a growl of my own, I spin and take off for the horde room. It doesn't take long to find a piece of metal that I might use as a knife. I tuck it under the white belt that's attached to the suit, and then heft up a large box covered in defunct circuits. Dead computer harddrive maybe? Doesn't matter. It's basically a brick now, and a brick is exactly what I need.

I walk right up to Zero with the heavy item held in my hand.

"Listen up, Zero-One-Zero-One-Whatever-the-Fuck. I will do my absolute best to find somebody that can help you when I'm at the market, but if you don't give me access to that transport, I will smash your screen and then you won't be able to talk to *anybody*. Ever." *God, I sound like a bitch.* I'm acting like one, too, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

If it comes down to saving myself at the expense of an angry AI chatbot, then that's what I'll do.

The cursor blinks furiously, as if in thought before several foreign curses—I'm just assuming—appear in an alien language. It's a lovely, flowery script that goes well with the hot pink theme of the old cushions, the chunky headset, the space suit. Very *Jetsons*.

"*You are a cunt.*" That's what Zero says to me, in the midst of all this.

"Aww, but I thought we were becoming friends? *You* are the one that threatened me first, don't forget."

"*I will give you the transport, but I do not hold onto any hope that you will survive the market without me.*"

"I'm pluckier than I look." I toss the dead computer onto the floor where it shatters into an untold number of pieces. There's a hissing sound from outside, the noise of hydraulics. I peek around the edge of the ship and see that an exterior door has come open, revealing ... something. I narrow my eyes. "Is that ... is that a motorcycle?"

Whatever it is, it doesn't have wheels. The chrome beast waiting for me on the forest floor has four clawed metal feet, a hot pink seat, and an iPad-sized screen between two horizontal handlebars.

"If you close that door after I get down there, I'll wait for the dragon to come back and I'll tell him that you're plotting his demise. Even if he and his new mate decide to eat me, you're toast."

I don't wait around to see Zero's answer, moving over to the tree where I spent my first night. I swallow hard as I peer down the fifteen or so feet to the ground. I'm starting to feel a little less than confident. But hot damn, the look on the female's face. The way Big D took off after her. I just ... I can't take a risk like that. I can't leave Jane. I am not living the rest of my life in a spaceship graveyard/creepy forest with a finicky dude that I can barely talk to.

I jog back to the nest and snag one of the more supple hides.

When I hit the edge of the doorway again, I seriously question my life choices. I'm not a badass superhero. I'm not even an athlete. I don't even *hike*. Hell, I hate taking walks! How am I supposed to *scale a spaceship on an alien planet?*

"Screw it." I wiggle the strip of hide around the trunk of the tree, close my eyes, and then swing myself out. I'd *intended* on shimmying down the length of the tree with the two ends of the hide for handholds. That's ... not what happens.

I slide down much faster than intended and end up pussy first on the seat-like curve at the base of the tree's trunk. The air is knocked out of me, leaving me dizzy and *hurting* between the thighs. *I just punched myself in the vagina. Wow. Nice work, Eve.*

With a groan, I force myself to stand up, abandoning the hide and heading for the ... motorcycle thing. It has no wheels, so I'm not entirely sure how it moves, but it's of a similar size and shape to Jane's motorcycle. Did I mention that? My best friend rides a Harley, and I ... drive a Subaru.

I exhale and crack my knuckles, swinging one leg over the bike and settling myself on the hot pink cushion with its matching backrest.

"Alright. Let's do this." I tap an experimental finger on the screen and it lights up. The interface includes both symbols and more of that strange flowery alien language that Zero favors. At random, I tap one of the symbols. Two lines of text pop up, so I tap one of those next.

The vehicle hums to life beneath me, four glowing pink balls forming in the clutches of the metal feet. It shivers and vibrates for a few seconds, lifting up off the ground so that it's floating six or so inches above the dirt.

I'd be impressed in a different situation.

The motorcycle thing stays where it is. Guess we're not going anywhere without a little further encouragement. I tap the second line of text, and it shuts off. The pink glowing balls dim and the entire thing lowers softly to the ground.

Okay. On and off. Got it.

I start it back up again, navigating to the main screen by tapping a simple arrow in the corner. I choose another icon and find myself with two different lines of text to choose from. When I hit the first one, the vehicle revs as if it might actually move somewhere. It doesn't.

I sigh and close my eyes, rubbing at my temples in frustration.

When I open them, I tap the second line of text and nearly end up on my ass on the forest floor. The motorcycle-transport-whatever lunges forward and begins to zip through the trees as I snatch the pink-tipped handlebars in my white-gloved hands and cling on for dear life.



The forest whizzes around me as the bike detours around large fern fronds, passes downed spaceships and debris, zips past a herd of ... somethings? ... that are minding their business and eating alien cricket grass. My eyes sting and I'm forced to let go of one handlebar to keep the translator on my head. If I lose that, I am in *big* motherfucking trouble.

It takes a fraction of the time for me to zip through the woods on that bike than it did for me to walk to the road. Within an hour, I'm exiting the trees and those awful suns are beating down on my skin. The bike keeps to the road, skipping past those awful fields of purple flytrap plants. I flip them off as we go and nearly end up on the ground on my back. Not a great time to be ornery.

The gates of the market are just around the curve in the road, wide open and unguarded. I don't know what's going to happen with the bike or where exactly it's taking me, but it slips right into the market and down a dusty aisle with stalls on either side. Crude fabric coverings stretch across the road from one side to the other, blocking the worst of the sun.

People—*aliens*—are staring at me as I whip into that place like I own it.

The bike makes this big splash of carting me into some sort of centralized square with a steaming fountain (that can't be good, can it?) and then it ... stops. It shudders, dies, and lowers back to the ground. There I sit, surrounded by curious alien spectators,

frantically tapping at the screen to bring it back to life. I wanted to get to the market, not be dropped in the dead fucking center of it.

A strangled laugh escapes me when I can't get it to start back up.

It's dead.

It's fucking dead, and now I'm trapped here with no way out.

Doesn't matter. This is what you wanted, isn't it? Only, I got here much quicker than I expected, and now that I'm here, it sort of feels like those last-minute decisions you make on a Friday night after work, ordering in takeout from the questionable place downtown. Wake up with heartburn and a headache. It's like that.

I sit up straight, tossing my hair the way Tabbi Kat does—like the world owes her a favor—and adjusting my headset. I climb off the bike and rest a hand casually on the handlebars as I look around.

If I thought the alien dragon was weird, well. Color me fucked.

The assortment of species in the market makes Trevor look cuddly, the Tusk Guys look like philanthropists, and Big D look like a superhero. I spot one of the slug monsters in the crowd, and my entire body breaks out in a cold sweat.

“Look at that ... it's a Cartian bike,” one of the creatures closest to me remarks, voice translating smoothly through the headset. “Haven't seen one of those in years.”

I whip around on the dude with a bright smile that has him shrinking back from me like he's been threatened. Then I remember that most animals—like primates—bare their teeth as a threat and not a friendly gesture. I snap my mouth shut.

“Are you looking to buy?” I ask, gesturing at the useless hunk of metal behind me. “I came here to sell the damn thing.”

The alien that I'm staring at has a hooded cloak on which is probably a good thing. Its hands are spindly and bird-like with sharp talons at the tips. I see something of a beak peeking from the shadows of the hood.

“Not in the market for kitschy Cartian crap,” he grumbles, steering clear of me and blending into the crowd. It's actually quite busy here, but the sea of market goers splits around me like *I* am the problem. People—sorry, aliens—wave their hands at me or choke, clear their throats, cough dramatically.

“Aspis whore,” one of them mutters, and his friend—some guy with a mane like a hyena—grabs onto his arm with sharp claws.

“If she’s marked by an Aspis male, the last thing you want to do is pick a fight. It’s not worth it.”

I purse my lips. My eye twitches. Marked by an Aspis male?

“Goddamn it, Big D,” I grumble, but then I realize that maybe he’s done me a big favor. Nobody seems to want to come near me. Definitely nobody here is out to kidnap me again. Apparently, I stink to high hell and I’m some bad ass dude’s girl. Fine. I can work with that.

Squaring my shoulders, I slip my thumbs in my belt and blend into the crowd. Well, I follow along with the crowd and everyone scrambles to get away from me, complaining about how badly I stink. Loudly, too, I might add.

“Not only is the female ugly, but she reeks,” someone comments, and I grit my teeth.

Right.

My heart is beating wildly, and if I’m being honest with myself, I’m scared shitless. The culture shock is next level. There are smells I can’t identify, that my nose doesn’t even know what to do with—some of those smells have a *taste*. I gag and cover my mouth, hurrying past a booth that’s swarming with giant flies. Or ... something like giant flies. Not only do I see too many legs on the insects, too many sets of wings, but I also see that they’re attracted to and crawling all over a creature with more limbs than I have fingers.

I walk faster.

As far as what’s for sale here? I see mounds of strange spices, dried tentacles on hooks, pieces of space debris, a whole row of jars with rainbow-colored slugs sporting pixie wings. As fascinating as all of that is, I’m only looking for one thing: a sign that reads *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates*. There are other creatures being sold off, leashed beasts and serpent-tailed monsters, things with far too many legs or far too many eyes.

Hmm.

I pause near a stall peddling body parts in jars—unrecognizable body parts—and cup my hands to my mouth.

“Jane!” I call out, taking advantage of my position as Big D’s woman to scream my bestie’s name without consequence. It’s a long shot, but hey, I’m here so why’s it so hard to think she might be, too? “Avril!” I drop my hands and keep walking, pausing every so often to call out their names. “Connor!” I don’t call for Tabbi because, honestly, even if she’s here, I don’t want to see her. I just pray that poor possum’s okay. “Jane!”

The heat is already getting to me, making me feel a little unsteady on my feet. Water would be *fantastic* right about now, but although I can see it being sold at various stalls, I don’t have any money on me. I turn away from a row of dewy canteens and grit my teeth. All I need to do right now is find the tent where Trevor and his brother run their little blackmarket business and take a look around. Then, maybe I’ll walk back into the woods and try to find that stream from yesterday. It’s not far. I mean ... I don’t *think* it’s far?

I press on, following the paths through the market and thanking Big D’s possessive ass that after four days with him, I smell enough like his woman to remain unmolested. Yet again, the guy is helping a girl out. *Hope he likes his new dragon female*. My lip curls, but I don’t care to analyze my strange thoughts. The man doesn’t belong to me just because I slept a few nights in his bed.

After wandering a while, I get the impression that the paths in the market are nothing near organized. After passing the rainbow slug booth four times, I start treating it like what it is: a maze. Streets twist and turn, all of them hard-packed yellow sand and dust that makes me sneeze. There are stalls full of weapons, guns and swords and glowing ropes that look a bit like the item Moth Guy had on his belt.

Moth Guy. I haven’t seen any creatures like him. No Aspis either. Nothing like Trevor or the tusk men. Definitely nothing that might be called a ‘Sucker Tail’. There’s a minute or two there where I consider asking someone about it. But even I—a city-dwelling caterer—have the instincts to realize that this place isn’t exactly ... legit. If I start asking about cops, I’m going to get myself into trouble.

“Jane!” I call out, my throat aching, my tongue fat from lack of water. It’s *so* goddamn hot here. The space suit is suffocating me, and I’m sure I smell god-awful by now. Lack of deodorant. Yet

another reason I'd like to go home. I'm missing my Native brand Sweet Peach & Nectar.

I pass through a break between canopies, harsh sunlight beating down on my scalp and face. There are stalls on my left selling all manner of items—jars of either tomato sauce or blood (don't care to analyze which it might be), slabs of meat, and what might be alien dildos. Everything seems fine for a moment, business as usual, and then a ripple of fear spreads through the sellers and their wares change as quickly as I can blink. Tables are flipped to reveal whole new sets of items on the other side, cloths are thrown over large objects, food is hurriedly shoved into containers and sealed.

Huh.

I stop walking as a man passes down the alley on the other side of the row of stalls. He catches my attention for several reasons. He's handsome—*none* of the aliens I've seen thus far today are handsome. He's wearing a large brown hat—a fucking *cowboy hat*. And there's just a *hint* of tentacles wafting gently around behind him—with a single sucker at the tip of each.

Sucker Tail!

“Hey!” I call out, but he doesn't hear me, continuing on his way. As soon as he's gone, the sellers go right back to hawking their (probably very illegal) OG goods. That further confirms my theory that I've found myself the cop I was looking for.

I run down the narrow road, people clearing out of my path as I search for a way to get to the other side. The stalls are pressed tightly together with no space to move between them. I'm cursing up a storm as I run, huffing and puffing and hating myself for always taking home the leftover desserts from my catering jobs. *Water would be nice, too. Water would be orgasmic at this point.*

When I hit a fork in the road, I survey the crowd, but the guy—he was very tall and very blue and impossible to miss—is nowhere to be seen. But you know what else is there? A frosted white event tent with a crude sign hanging above it.

Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.

I grit my teeth.

Mad chill, Eve. You've gotta keep some mad chill here.

I don't listen to my own advice, strutting right up to the tent and cupping my hands around my eyes. I lean in, trying to get a read on who or what might be inside. *Useless*. I can't see through the fabric at all. I draw back ... and the hairs on my neck and arms stand on end. I'd been considering getting laser hair removal at home, but you know what? The fine hairs work great as alarm bells. I hate that I ever doubted them.

A smell—cardamom and honey—hits me like a truck, and my knees get weak. *No. Fucking no!* No sooner have I detected him than he's there, a red-gloved hand on my elbow.

I whip my gaze over to find Moth Guy staring back at me from endless black eyes. My blood scintillates inside my veins, my pulse throbbing, my heart pounding wildly. There's no part of me that isn't aware of this guy. And you know what? There's no part of him that isn't aware of me either. I can tell, just by looking at him.

"Found you," he says, his voice breathy as it filters through the translator and into my head. I'm trembling under his strong grip, paralyzed and rooted to the spot. His slitted nostrils flare as he leans in, and that *scowl* of his, aristocratic and uppish, flashes in that alien face. "You smell like another male."

Yeah. Um. I don't care if my blood is shoving at my skin like it wants to escape and slither into this guy's mouth, I am *out of here*.

I yank back from him, and he lets me go, but ... my feet don't move. I'm just standing there, staring at him. The bright red fur at his throat shimmers in the sun, a stark contrast to the darkness of his uniform. He ruffles his wings slightly, and I see that there are actually two sets of them, long enough to drag on the ground. He takes a step forward, and I take one away. My back hits the side of the tent.

"You killed Avril," I whisper, unsure of what else to say. He seems to consider that, but then he shakes his head.

"The human medic? No. I did not kill Avril." He pauses, studying me with an erotic sweep of his demon-pitch eyes. "Do you want to see her? I will take you to her."

I open my mouth three times before I find the words. I'm mesmerized by the shape of his teeth, his full pink lips, his two-toned skin. I wish I could explain it, but if *love-at-first-sight* was really a thing, this would be it. When I stare into his eyes, I feel like

time and space are meaningless, like my very consciousness was crafted just so I could meet this man.

“Do you know where Jane is?” I ask, because if he’s got Avril then maybe ...

“Jane?” he repeats the word in his own voice, a fluttering whisper that sends my stomach into a sea of somersaults. His antennae look like horns, long and white as bone with black frills underneath. He sweeps them forward and over my hair, like he’s smelling me or something. “I have the human medic and no other.” He pauses here, and I swear that he inhales like he’s trying to shore himself up to do something he doesn’t want to. “If there is something else ...” Moth Guy lifts one of his gloved hands up and trails a finger down the length of my jaw. My body revolts against my brain. Jelly legs. Hard nipples. A pulsing core. “I will procure it. Anything for you, my Princess.”

Princess? Is he calling me by a pet name? Or is he actually a prince? Which of those theories is worse?

A strange laugh escapes me as I remember the strength of his tongue, the way he sucked my blood off his finger. *Wouldn't it be better if that tongue was in your mouth? Even better if it was between your legs?*

He smiles darkly at me, as if he can sense the direction of my thoughts, as if he’d gladly turn those thoughts into reality. He looks at me like we’re meant to be together.

Fuck. This. Shit.

I duck under his arm and take off, sprinting through the crowd until I’m just ... not moving anymore. I slam into something hard and bounce off, finding myself pillowed in a sea of blue and white.

A face comes right up against mine, a voice like sex and bubbles before it hits the translator.

“Well, hello there, Earthling.” The man’s words are muffled by a brown bandana that he reaches up to tug away from his smirking lips, leaving it to hang like a cowl around his neck.

I’m blinking back at a sloe-eyed alien with *three* irises in each eye. Yeah, two eyes. Six irises between them. I don’t even ... what the fuck? They’re rimmed in black and set in a pale white face with a bluish tint. The guy has a slash of saucy mouth with small, sharp

teeth that he flashes at me in a cheerful grin. He looks like he's having a grand ol' time as he tips his cowboy hat in greeting.

My gaze slips past his face to look on either side of me.

Tails.

I'm lying in a bed of blue tails with white suckers. I can't say how many tails there are. At least six, probably more.

Sucker Tail.

"Oh, thank God," I breathe, and he laughs at me. Not only is his voice *like* bubbles, actual bubbles float out along with his laughter. Low, seductive, *invitational* laughter. My own body reacts accordingly, shivers of interest pricking over my flushed skin.

"You're thanking the deities for our union? I'm a lucky male, don't you think?"

Huh. I quirk a brow as he uses his tails to set me on my feet. When he steps back, I realize that he's got nine of those tentacle tails swaying behind him. He reminds me a bit of a kitsune or a gumiho (both of which are nine-tailed fox legends based in Japan and Korea respectively). Not that historical lore and fantasy is my thing. My little brother, Nate, is the one who's into that shit.

But the nine tails? The webbed fox ears peeking through small slits in the brim of his hat? That's where the resemblance between this guy and those things ends. He's not furry, not at all. He's sleek and taut and provocative and *scaled*. Every inch of him shimmers in the overpowering sunlight. Every inch of him—his stance, his smile, his exposed body—screams *sex, sex, sex*.

This is the cop I was supposed to find? The only attractive alien in the market? *One of two*, I remind myself, trying not to think of Moth Guy. One of three hotties on this entire planet, and I've managed to locate them all.

The Sucker Tail stands above me, casting a long shadow, hands planted on his bare hips. And when I say *bare*, I mean it. He's wearing little more than a low-slung belt with a gathered strip of brown fabric to cover his crotch. As wide as he is in the chest, he's narrow in the waist, muscular in the hips, and wearing see-through cowboy boots with *water* sloshing around inside. *The hell?*

I tear my eyes away from his literal ten-pack, past his bulging biceps, to his face. It's vaguely human which is nice, and that

smarmy grin proves that he's sentient and at least well-meaning enough to flirt with me. Doesn't look anything like a galactic cop though—with the small exception of the massive assault rifle slung on his back.

He leans in toward me when I find myself speechless, gaze sweeping me like he's scoping me out for a date, before his attention lands back on my face. His smile colors with contemplation as we study each other. He has a sculpted nose with slits for nostrils and a heavier brow topped with narrow shark-like fins. They draw back over his eyes and curve around the sides of his head with elfin sharpness. Soft sapphire 'hair' frames his face, a long braid sliding over one shoulder to fall between us.

I'm starting to think that this world is out to get me. While most of the aliens here are so hideous as to be offensive, this one ... I forget who I am and what I'm supposed to be doing for several seconds. His body—which is on *full display* mind you—is not only rock-solid but two-toned blue and white and very, *very* pretty. He flicks a purple tongue against the corner of his mouth, flashing a bit of silver on the underside.

The man snaps long fingers at me, and I jump.

"I've located one of the trafficked humans," he says, more to himself than to me. His tentacle tails whisper around me, a single sucker at the tip of each one. As I stand there, he suctions them against the naked skin on either of my cheeks and pulls them off with a *pop*. Heat rushes to my face that I wish I could explain to either you, myself, or (eventually) my therapist.

"Yeah, um, pretty sure that *I* located you." I put my hands on my hips to match his pose, and he offers me the barest half-smile in response. "You're a ..." I search my mind for the word that Zero gave me. I've got a strong feeling that 'Sucker Tail' might come across as offensive. "A Falopex. That means you're a cop, right?" I clasp my hands together in pleading, all shame having been tossed out the window the moment I woke up to an alien dragon eating me out. I mean healing my thigh wound. Yeah, that.

"You're lucky to be alive" he says, and then his gaze shifts up and over my head.

Once again, I smell and feel him before I see him.

Moth Guy steps up beside us, and if I'd never seen my mom in a mood, I'd say this alien guy is the true face of fury. He looks at me like I kicked him in the balls and spit in his face.

"You run from me when you well know your place by my side?" That's what he says to me, a guy I met for all of ten seconds twice. See what I mean? If it isn't Big D, the oh-so-helpful but brooding alien dragon, it's the clingy moth stalker. Or ... Cop Guy isn't looking at me anymore. He's *staring* at Moth Guy like the man owes him money.

Now he looks like a cop.

"Do you have business with this human?" he asks, his voice not so much like bubbles anymore. Ocean waves during a typhoon is how I'd describe it. Still, there he stands, half-naked with his hands on his handsome hips, a single tentacle tracing the brim of his hat.

I blink in surprise as a small octopus-like creature floats in the air near his face. It has a tiny beak and massive black marbles for eyes. Two tiny ears stick up from its bright pink body, and it swivels them as it studies me. Next thing I know, it's landing on my shoulder and Cop Guy is frowning at me.

I like his facial expressions, at least. They're as human as I've seen thus far in this place. I reach up a tentative hand and pat the tiny octopus whatever-the-hell-it-is on the head. It chirps at me and bubbles twirl from its beak, popping in the overheated air. Cop Guy's eye twitches as he looks back to my stalker.

"Do I have business?" Moth Guy makes a hissing sound that translates through my headset as low, sardonic laughter. "You may wish to reconsider how you address me." He spreads his wings in what I can only assume is a warning, his antennae drawing back like the ears of an angry cat. He doesn't blink often, by the way, if at all. Those endless eyes switch from the Cop Guy to me and then back again. "This female is my *mate*."

"That's a fucking lie." I point at Moth Guy, and he rears back like I've pissed in his face. "I don't know this dude at all. He purchased one of my friends from that market." I'm gesturing randomly at the frosted tent only to see that the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign has mysteriously disappeared. Uh-uh. Yep. I found the police officer alright. "Now he's stalking me. Is that a crime here? If it's not then it should be."

“How dare you defy our mate-bond?” Moth Guy growls at me, and my stupid body reacts like he’s just asked me to visit a love-lock bridge with him so we can hang heart-shaped locks with our initials carved on them. “If you hadn’t crawled away from me in the tent—and kept your blood to yourself—I wouldn’t have purchased the wrong girl. Take care, Officer, and proceed with caution.”

Cop Guy laughs at that, the sound like rushing water. He takes a step forward, liquid sloshing around inside his strange boots, and he leans in toward Moth Guy.

“My apologies, *Your Imperial Majesty*, but did you forget that the Falopex don’t scrape or bow to anyone?” His mouth twitches into another cocksure smile. “Not even to the holy and gracious rulers of the Noctuida.” Cop Guy flings a hand in my direction. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t your wings unmarked? I haven’t seen her bare back—*yet*—but let me take a crack at this: she’s unmarked, too?” His mouth quirks at one edge, and he snorts, bubbles escaping his nose. The officer’s eyes catch on the naked skin above the zipper of my suit, and I blush.

He is *definitely* checking me out.

Fair enough.

I’m checking him out, too.

Something about Cop Guy’s statement—or the look he just gave me—puts the moth prince into a frenzy. *Great. A stalker who also happens to be a prince. There’s no possible way for this to end badly.*

“There are no marks because there has been no wedding.” Moth Guy looks at me as if this is somehow my fault. “But I have tasted her blood.”

Something about that statement sobers Cop Guy immediately. He’s practically stricken as he looks over at me. I don’t like that, not at all. His pet chirps at me again, its tiny tentacles suctioned to the shoulder of my space suit. Swear to God that when Cop Guy studies me again, his gaze drops to the lacy swells of my breasts. He sweeps one of his tails over his face, like he’s stressed out.

“Do you know anything about the other abducted humans?” he asks, which freaks me out.

“That’s why I came back here. I need to get my friends back, and then we need to go *home*.” I stroke the tiny octopus and find that its

skin is pleasantly dewy despite the brutal sunshine. “There are four of us—not including the opossum.” I recount in my head to make sure I’ve got the number right. *Me, Jane, Avril, Connor, Madonna.* Okay, yep. Got it. I’m secretly hoping that Tabbi’s been eaten.

“Weren’t there six?” Cop Guy asks, sounding alarmed as one of his tails toys with the brim of his hat. His scaled fox ears perk up as if he’s trying to hear me better. He scratches at a burn mark on his chest—it appears to be an intentional design of some sort—and growls out an alien curse followed by yet more bubbles. He shifts those strange eyes over to me again.

“The lawyer was eaten by a slug monster.” I think hard about how to mention Tabbi. “The pop star ... wants to stay here. Says she hates it back on Earth.” *God, I’m a bitch.* But you know what? If I never have to cater another one of Tabbi’s vegan fundraisers, it’ll be too soon. “So can you please take me somewhere safe?” I clasp my hands together again and the pink octopus floats away, drifting in the air around Cop Guy. “I could really use some water.”

He stares at me again and then hooks a pretty smile.

I gasp when he grabs me by the back of the neck with a tail, yanking me toward him and crushing his mouth against mine. *What is it with these fucking aliens?!* But then the weirdest thing happens. My thirst disappears as I kiss him, and the sensation is oddly like drinking down a nice, cool glass of ice water on a hot day. His suction cup wets the back of my neck, offering yet more relief from the heat.

My heart rebels against my rib cage, my fingers coming up to press against the smoothness of his midsection.

A white wing flings out between us, abruptly cutting off our ... whatever that was.

“You are edging precariously close to an early death,” Moth Guy says to a smirking Cop Guy, dropping his wing as his red-gloved hand snags my elbow again. He bares those vampiric teeth in a royal scowl. “Did you not hear me? Or perhaps you’re simply too stupid to understand. This female is my *mate* which means that I’ll become the next crown prince. I should position *The Korol* over Yaoh to ensure that the Falopex remember their proper place.”

Whoa.

I'm not entirely sure what any of that means—*The Korol?* Yaoh?—but the insult does exactly what Moth Guy intended it to do. It pisses Cop Guy all the way off.

“If I were of a different mind,” he growls back, “I would arrest you for purchasing a protected species from an unauthorized market stall.” He abruptly changes color, blooming from blue-and-white to pink-and-white. His pet changes color, too, but from pink to blue. Cop Guy shakes himself all over and fluffs up those tentacle tails, using two of them to rub at his temples. He pushes the suckers against his face and yanks them off with another sharp pop. “So calm the fuck down, Princeling. I was simply offering the lady a drink.” He flushes back to blue again, and Moth Guy grits his teeth. When the prince goes to grab me again, Cop Guy snatches him by the wrist and the two of them are locked together in a battle of wills.

“Eve!”

My heart stops when I hear that voice. *Jane. Oh my fucking God, it's Jane!*

“Jane!” I yell back, and then I take off before either Moth Guy or Cop Guy can stop me.

I'm shoving through creatures I'd otherwise be terrified of, diving into the crowd which quickly parts to let me through, whispers of *Aspis this, Aspis that* following along behind me.

“Eve!” she shouts, the sound frantic, like maybe she heard me calling back.

“I'm over here!” I jump up and down, waving my arms, but I don't see anything even remotely human in the vicinity. A quick glance over my shoulder shows neither guy has followed me—yet. I keep moving, calling out her name as she does the same for me, a Marco Polo sort of a deal.

It feels like I might be getting close when a meaty hand clamps down on the arm of my pink space suit.

I glance up to see a Tusk Guy—correction: *five* Tusk Guys—staring at me.

My first inclination is to stab one, yanking the makeshift knife from my belt. The man knocks it away as easily as one might swat a fly. Whelp. There goes my only weapon. Told ya I wasn't a superhero.

“Is this the bitch?” one of them asks, the translator working through their guttural language like it’s nothing. See? I told you this headset was superior. It only seems to struggle with Big D’s words. “The human that slaughtered our brothers so she could mate an Aspis?” He spits on me then, actually hocks a massive loogie onto my suit.

“The fuck is your problem?” I snap back at him, and then he punches me.

The pain is violent and wild, like my skull’s been cracked in half. His hand fists in my hair next and I lose my footing, finding myself dragged across the sandy road like so much cargo.

This would be ... time number three that I’ve been kidnapped by these asshole Tusk Bros.

“Let go of me,” I snarl, so close to Jane and yet so goddamn far away. Where’s my stalker when I need him? I bet Moth Guy—his imperial lord and majesty, barf—would flip all the way out at the sight of me bleeding and being jerked around like cargo. Also, Cop Guy was a character, but he seemed to take his job seriously. What are they doing if not following me?

“Not a chance in hell, Aspis whore,” the bully says, yanking me towards a building on the opposite side of the road. Strange sounds emanate from inside, a sign hanging over the door that very clearly shows a row of phalluses. Each one is stranger than the next, but I don’t have time to dwell on that. I can take a wild guess as to why they’re up there. *This is a brothel.*

I hear the sounds before we even hit the doorway. *Sex.* Or a fucked-up, twisted trespass parading as sex. More like, *rape.*

I scream as loudly as I can, but the sound is swallowed up by the hustle and bustle of the market. Nobody seems to care that I’m being yanked around by my hair and carted off against my will.

“You called me an Aspis’ mate, right?” I sputter through the blood pouring down my face. “How stupid do you think you’ll look when he comes for me?”

“He ain’t comin’ in the market,” Tusk Guy grunts, dragging me through the door. “They rarely come in the market.”

The interior of the building is shadowed, thick with smoke and cloying perfumes and ... there’s something going on in the back

corner with tentacles and wings and ... I don't even know what the hell else. But those sounds? The *smells*? This is truly a den of iniquities.

The guy ignores me as I thrash around, biting at him—correction: *trying* to bite him since his skin is as hard as leather. He crushes my wrist against the wall when I try to punch his crotch, and then slings me over his back as he clomps up a set of stairs.

We're nearing the open door of a room, a pile of leaves in one corner to serve as a bed, a bucket for God only knows what in the other corner, and a series of chains hooked to the wall and left dangling.

Many horrible things have happened to me since coming to this shitty-shit planet, but nothing's quite struck fear in me the way this room does. It smells so strongly of blood that my eyes water, and I have a horrible feeling that if I go in there, I'm not coming back out.

A smell, a presence, cardamom and honey.

The small pink octopus sweeps up the stairs and spots me with a chirp.

Somewhere outside, an alarm goes off. It sounds like a tornado siren, but it's loud enough to crack glass elsewhere in the building. A fight breaks out downstairs that likely has little to do with that alarm and a lot to do with Moth Guy and Cop Guy both coming to my rescue.

Too late.

"Is that the Aspis alarm?" another Tusk Guy calls out from down the hall. My kidnapper pauses to look his way, giving me the opportunity to see what these guys look like naked. Let's just say this: I am *so* beyond grateful to Big D for rescuing me from a fate worse than death. Where his dick should be, there's a mess of swirling tendrils, gray and slimy and wormlike with *teeth* in the center. As he leers at me, a triple-headed phallus emerges from the ring of sharp, white fangs.

I scream.

The roof comes off the building—the *entire* roof—and there he is.

It's Dragon Dude.

He's perched on the edge of the wall, claws out, wings wide, massive mouth open in a rippling snarl. And he's *huge*. He's goddamn fucking enormous, somehow bigger even than the first time I saw him. Ebony shadows whip around his body, blurring the edges of his form, and those purple markings that swirl across his horns, his chest, his belly, they pulse and then flare. The spikes down his back and tail are sticking straight up and dripping what I can only imagine is venom. It oozes, thick and viscous down the length of the black shards.

If I said I wasn't afraid, I'd be lying. At the same time, I *know* that whatever Big D has planned for me, it's better than whatever might've happened in this room.

"Guess being an Aspis' whore really comes in handy?" I quip, and Tusk Guy looks back at me like he's pleading for help.

Big D whips his tail out just as Cop Guy and Moth Guy both ascend the stairs. It's a warm, fuzzy feeling, knowing that at the very least, I wasn't going to be chained up to that wall. As the two of them look on, Big D leans down into the room, a perched and coiled dragon with a chip on his shoulder.

"*Release ... my female,*" he snarls, and Tusk Guy immediately loosens his hold on my hair. Probably that was a mistake. Dragon Dude slams the spikes of his tail into the man's throat, nearly severing his head, and then he picks up the body with a simple flick and sends it flying. The dead man smashes into the naked guy and ... there's red splatter, let's just say that. "*So stupid, female.*"

That deadly tail wraps around my waist, and I scream. Can't help it. I literally just saw same-said tail decapitate a guy and turn another into mist with the force of a single throw. The alarm continues to blare outside, and I can hear screaming from the streets.

Moth Guy—who apparently has a death wish—steps forward and lifts his wings.

"Put her down *now*." He makes a face, all pomp and bullshit. But he doesn't look afraid. "By order of the Imperial Court and authority of the Noctuida."

Big D laughs. I mean, I *think* he laughs. A violent rumble echoes from his chest as he carefully wraps me in his tail—spikes now withdrawn—and lifts me out of the room. He leans down even further and looks Moth Guy right in the face.

“No.” He rises up as Cop Guy stands there with his tails drifting, his lips pursed.

“What a pain in the ass you are, sweetheart.” That’s how the translator dictates his words to me. He cups his hands around his mouth as I’m hauled entirely out of the building and into the air. I’ve got a nice bird’s eye view of the market now, but I don’t see Jane anywhere. Not that I think I could even if she were still there looking for me. Cop Guy calls out to me and uses a tentacle to flick the brim of his cowboy hat up and away from his eyes. “Stay put, and I’ll send a team for you.”

I’ve stopped screaming now which is probably a good thing because Big D has just lifted me toward him, putting us face-to-face. His lips ripple in a snarl, and I get the idea that I’m in huge trouble. *I made a big mistake today, didn’t I?*

“You ... foolish.”

“You chased after that female.” It comes out like an accusation. Why the hell do I care? This guy can mate a thousand Aspis females if he wants. They probably have huge double vaginas to take his massive dicks anyway. Doubt I could even handle one of them.

Now he’s *definitely* laughing at me. Mind you, this is all occurring as market goers scream and crowd into nooks and alleys, dart into buildings, fall on the ground in mad terror.

“Kill ... not mate.” And then he howls and whips me around so that I’m dangling from his tail behind him. He swipes those massive wings in a downward motion, coils that powerful body, and up we go.



Hyt ... aka Cop Guy

The Aspis male flies off with the human female in tow, and all I can think is *well, there goes my time off*. I was scheduled to take the week of the Homecoming Festival for myself, but now that I've got trafficked humans to worry about, there'll be no time for that. There's nobody else that's going to rescue them. My race—that is, the Falopex—couldn't give two flying tentacle fucks about illegal human abductions.

I happen to be the lone exception to the rule.

“Shit,” I curse in my own language. I've heard from other species that it sounds a bit like popping bubbles, but I wouldn't know. I can't hear my own accent. *A sexy human girl in a skintight pink suit, an angry Aspis, and ... Him*. I will give you one guess as to which part of my day I like the least.

The Vestalis prince is cursing in his language—clicks and whispers and hisses—that are automatically filtered through the translator in my ear. I opt not to wear the synchronicity contacts most days (the ones that offer the comforting holographic illusion that someone else's mouth is moving in time with what you hear in the translator) because it's easier to tell when someone is lying if you can see their real mouth.

He whips around to stare at me, wings swaying behind him like a heavy cloak. In all, there are one-hundred-and-three Vestalis princes vying for the throne, so I can't possibly know them all. But if this one has truly found his mate—a once in a galaxy event—then he's the most likely candidate for the next Imperial King of the Noctuida, and I should respond accordingly.

I'm also irrationally pissed off at the man, planting my hands on my hips and tucking the brim of my hat low for a minute to gather my wits together.

If he's tasted the human's blood, then she'll never be free from him. Without her, he'll die. Over the course of three weeks, he'll starve to death without her blood, and his father—the current Imperial King—will use every resource at his disposal to ensure that doesn't happen. She'll become his bride, and she will *never* be allowed to go home.

Then there are all the treaties and protective orders put in place for Earth's inhabitants. Those are out the window once news of this gets out. How can a human be an endangered species and also the Noctuidan princess? *This is an intergalactic fucking nightmare.*

“She's mated to an *Aspis*?” I've never seen a Vestalis have a fit before. They're almost grotesquely calm, well-mannered, and proprietary to a fault. This one looks like he's about to devolve into something less sentient and highly *enraged*.

“No.” I lift my hat back up with a tentacle as my companion lands on my shoulder. I give him a look as he chirps at me, spewing pearlescent bubbles. *You've never landed on a female before*, I think, but I can't say anything to him now with the Vestalis prince glaring at me. “She smelled like him, and he, uh, very clearly has an interest in her”—I can't help but laugh, bubbles flitting from my own lips; the prince is not amused—“but I don't think they've mated.” A pause. “Yet.”

“Yet?” The prince—I should probably catch his name—picks at the fingers of his red gloves. “What do you mean by *yet*? Is it not your job to seek and find her? You're an officer of the Imperial Court.”

He's right. I am. My people are the Noctuidan police. Every Falopex born becomes an officer. We're unable to lie without a very

distinct tell. As in, we change color. It makes us extremely trustworthy in the eyes of others.

“You’ve tasted her blood?” I clarify with a tired sigh. Tracking these humans has not been easy. One was eaten by a Mollusca (not a pleasant species, I’ll grant that). Another is being jerked around by those pain-in-my-ass twins. The male is in transit to the World Station for who knows what. And the other was kidnapped by a space pirate.

The last two—including the one that just flew off—have been much harder to find.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” he asks, and my companion chitters in annoyance. I stroke my fingers down the pink back of my pet and tilt my head to study the prince. If he’s telling the truth, that poor human female is screwed. She hasn’t mated with the Aspis yet, so returning her to Earth *is* a possibility. But this? This will ensure the life she lives is no longer her own. She’s better off staying on this planet for the rest of her living years. I’d choose an Aspis as a mate over a Vestalis any day.

“You have another human in your possession, is that correct?” My lips offer a sardonic half-smile. I ask questions over making statements. Why? Because a question is never a lie or a truth. It’s an inquiry. I can say whatever I want without anyone else being the wiser. “If so, do you think you might voluntarily turn her over to me so she can be placed back in her native habitat?”

“I don’t give a galactic fuck what you do with her,” the prince hisses at me, and I find it very telling the way he touches the weapon at his hip. He is *mad*. Won’t kill me though. It’d be a political nightmare for him. I wasn’t kidding when I said that my people weren’t under the control or authority of his. We rule ourselves.

Well, not me.

But that’s ... unimportant.

“Galactic fuck, huh?” I ask, wondering what he’s actually said in his native language. Doesn’t matter. The translation works well enough. I sweep my hands down my midsection, and I try not to fantasize about the way that human female looked at me. I do enjoy a good flirt, but if ever there was an unavailable female, that girl would be it. Between a Vestalis and an Aspis? That’s like getting

caught in a blackhole. The only thing awaiting you on the other side is an agonizing death and powdered bones.

You've always liked the hard-to-get girls, haven't you, Hyt? I have. It's true. But this is outside my scope—even if my companion likes her. I continue to stroke my pet's back as the prince's all-black eyes stare me down.

“If you've tasted her blood, then she's your problem and not mine,” I tell him. My skin stays blue, proving how much truth there is in that answer. “Return the other human female by the end of the solar month. Shall I dock in the Station to pick her up?”

The prince doesn't bother to respond, so I take his silence as an affirmative.

With a sigh, I look at the destruction around us.

The roof is gone, the alarm is still blaring, and gunners have taken to the walls with E-nets and mercury cannons. There are two dead Oku (no big loss), and I'm standing here thinking about all the paperwork I'm going to have to fill out after this.

And all the arrests I need to make.

I remove the weapon on my back.

“Alright.” My voice is pitched as loudly as I can get it. Not every scumbag in the room will hear me, but oh well. “By the authority of the Noctuida, you are under arrest for black market trading, sexual assault, and trafficking—but mostly for being truly shit at hiding your dirty deeds from a Falopex.” Another partial truth. I'm apathetic as I speak, halfway to a yawn.

On the inside, I'm a mess.

My companion flits from my shoulder as the occupants shuffle around like they might try to make a run for it. They always do. Fine by me. I usually shoot first, ask questions later, but I felt like I should *try* to do things by the book with the prince around. Maybe I just don't care?

“You said you would send a team after the human,” the prince whispers from behind me. I don't look at him. I lift my weapon to my shoulder and pull the trigger, nailing an advancing creature in the head. Or ... was that its head? With nearly five-thousand species registered in the Noctuida, how am I supposed to know where to

killshot them all? The male drops to the floor and twitches as I sigh. *This Princeling is perceptive. “A lie?”*

He’s standing far too close behind me, activating all my instincts. The scales on my swaying tails flare up in agitation. I’d like to shoot the prince, too, but that’s not allowed. I lift up my weapon and target the small group of aggressors stupid enough to come at me. The females slip past the pair of us, and I let them go. Some are wearing collars and chains. *Fuck, this place has been on my list, but I just haven’t had the time.*

The Vestalis prince waits, like he expects me to actually answer him.

“I wasn’t sure until you reconfirmed the blood exchange if I was or wasn’t going to send a team. The human female is no longer on my *to-do* list.” I turn that into an innuendo that he most definitely picks up on, and then I leave to deal with the brothel’s scummy customers.

There is no one else here—I am the sole and only officer on Jungryuk.

There’s a good reason for that, too.



“Alright, Cap’n Kidd, where’s the girl?” I ask with a sigh, tossing my gun onto the counter of the bar as I slide my nearly naked ass onto one of the old stools. The place is hodgepodge and impermanent, little more than a tent filled with mismatched furniture, a dirt floor, and pieces of crashed spaceships for shelves and counters. The owner—this curmudgeonly old Oku—curls the edge of his lip at me, baring a broken tusk. He’ll know by now that I murdered about ... oh, two dozen of his closest friends and comrades.

My best friend, Kidd, sits back on his stool, crossing his arms and watching to see if I’m not about to get into a firefight with the bar owner. I’d rather just get a drink, but if he wants to start something, I’ll finish it for him and pour my own human-grade whiskey.

“Don’t make my afternoon any shittier than it already is,” Kidd tells me with a roll of his dark eyes. “Sit down and stop making a fuss. Haven’t you done enough today?”

I wink at the bartender, but it’s not an invitation: it’s a threat.

I turn to Kidd and lean an elbow on the counter, parking my head in my hand. My tentacles drift around, looking for something to do. I’m not sure if it’s even possible for me to keep them still. I’ve got precision control down to the tip, but I’ve also got too much energy not to use it at all times. I pick up a clean glass from behind the bar, ignoring the owner completely. Guess he doesn’t need to be dead for me to pour my own drink. He huffs and storms off, leaving me and Kidd to our own devices.

Without looking, I slide another tentacle down a row of bottles on the wall, finding the human whiskey through scent alone. Best part of working as a black market cop is confiscating all the wonderful black market things. I fancy myself a bit of a human collector. Alcohol, food, furniture. I find it, I take it home. I’m addicted to all things human.

Including their women.

That girl was ... fucking beautiful. Have I ever seen a girl I liked that much? I glance sideways to see my companion floating just off to my right. He *stares* at me, and I frown, giving him a dark look as Kidd curses at me under his breath.

“Are you even listening to me? I said I’ve got your stolen human, and I don’t want anything to do with her. Get that woman the fuck off of my ship. She escaped today, did I tell you that? Ran through the market screaming at the top of her lungs.”

I turn back to Kidd with a sigh.

“He landed on someone today,” I tell him, ignoring what he’s just said to me. I can’t take his human back just now. I’ve got other humans to locate first. He’ll have to take care of her for me while I’m gone. I can’t just leave some random female in my house. It’s in the middle of the woods, and pretty much a guarantee that she’ll die there if I’m not around to show her the ropes. These poor fucking humans come in here with zero knowledge of anything. They don’t know how to keep themselves safe.

My sister, Kayla, is a prime example of that.

“Who landed on what?” Kidd asks, adjusting his hat.

I wear cowboy hats; he wears pirate hats.

There’s a reason for that, but I try not to think about that when I have other things to do.

“My ...” I gesture at the floating pink critter with my tail. Kidd looks at the small animal, crosses his arms, and sighs. “He landed on someone I just met.”

“Remind me what that means again?” Kidd asks, tossing back a shot of something red and viscous. It’s an alcohol from his home planet, and I have no idea what it is. Kidd is most definitely *not* a Falopex.

I sit up straight, use one of my tails to bring a cup to my own lips. I down several shots of whiskey in a single swallow, pouring another drink with my tentacles as I give my companion another confused look. He has no name. I’m not *allowed* to name him, but I pretend like his name is Shithead sometimes.

“Well, Shithead? What do you have to say for yourself?” I ask him, but he just spews bubbles and then lands on the brim on my hat. “He likes that girl.”

“You mean *you* like that girl,” Kidd retorts, and then he pauses. “Wait. What girl are we talking about here?”

“You’ll have to keep the other one for a while,” I tell him, taking another drink. After I do, I realize what a waste of time this is, to pour my drink into the cup first. I’ll just take the whole bottle with me. I chug from it for my next drink, and then hold the bottle off to one side, standing up and using another tentacle to push my stool in.

“You just got here. Where are you off to now?” he growls, curling up the corner of his lip. There’s a panic in his eyes that I think has more to do with the erection in his pants than it does me. He’s been sporting a hard-on since he mentioned the human woman on his ship. He likes her, even if he doesn’t know it yet. I snatch my gun from the countertop.

“If you fuck that female, so help me, I will shoot your balls off. And you know I’ve got the aim to deliver.” I walk away before calling over my shoulder. “Oh, and I need you to watch her until I gather up all the other humans. Enjoy your drinks.”

Kidd curses me again as I slip out the door.

“You are one stupid, motherfucker, Hieronymus-Helio-Hyt!” he shouts as I part the crowd outside with my very presence. Traders quickly scrabble to hide their illegal goods from me, but I’m not stupid. I just bide my time and make smart moves. As the only officer on duty, I have a limited capacity with which to handle crime here. As in, everything that happens here is technically a criminal act. This planet is off-limits to space travel. *Nobody* is supposed to be here. But because people are here anyway, there’s an officer assigned.

I take a fresh swig of my drink with one tentacle, sigh, and then use another to pull up the bandana around my neck. The woods here are a dangerous paradise, but the market is dry and hot and dusty. Better to keep my mouth and nose covered.

Before I deal with any more shit today, I’m going home for a nap.

I’ve barely slept over the last four days, searching for the other humans. I deserve at least a few solar hours of shut-eye. With a sigh, I take off down the sandy path, trying not to fixate on the memory of that human woman running headfirst into me. *So soft. Why did she have to be so damn soft?*

Humans who mate with species outside their own can’t go back to Earth. It’s a dumb shit law, but I didn’t make it. Hard for me to break it though. I’ve illegally sent mated humans home before, but not when an Imperial Prince is after them. If I try to take that girl in the pink space suit away from the Vestalis, I’ll start a war.

The most attractive female that I’ve ever seen, and I can’t have her.

Not only is she pretty, she’s fascinating, too. As I make my way toward the market plaza, I consider the Earthling with the red-brown hair and the ripe, round hips. With a growl, I hook a thumb under the edge of my belt and beg my cock not to give me trouble until I’m home. *She’s not afraid like so many of the others. She managed to charm an Aspis. She ignored a Vestalis mate bond, and told the prince to piss off.*

I can’t have the woman, so I won’t let myself think romantic thoughts about her after today.

But for today ... I have an idea in mind.

“By the authority of the Noctuida, blah, blah, blah, I’m seizing this item,” I mumble behind the bandana, walking right up to the

abandoned Cartian bike next to the fountain. That Earthling woman rode this in here, yet another reason to like her. Yet another reason to *resist* her would be more accurate.

I try to turn the bike on, but it won't start.

No wonder it hasn't been stolen yet. It weighs a lot, and it isn't worth much if it doesn't start.

Good thing I know a place to get contraband Cartian power cores.

I unholster one of the smaller guns from the strap on my back, using a tentacle to hold it as I strut over to the frosted white tent where the humans were first held. The owner sees me coming and yanks on a rope that changes the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign to one that offers fresh fish or some other stupid ass lie.

“Oh, Officer Hieronymus,” Trevor says, turning to me with a smirking smile and all four of his hands clenched into fists. I hate my first name, but I only give my nickname—my *real* name—out to friends. The twins here definitely don't qualify. “You came to see me, did you?”

I don't respond, just lift up my gun so that I can shoot him in the head.

Blood spatters the tent wall as he collapses to the floor. *Moron*. I take my time looking around for the human female he's been holding captive. She isn't here which must mean she's with the other twin. Taylor, I think it is. I'm sure these creeps have other names, but the human ones they stole are the only ones I'm aware of. Also, *twins* might not be the most accurate description. They're the same person. I have to kill both halves within a very short frame of time in order to finish them completely.

I've tried taking a body with me before, hoping to hold onto it until I found the other half. But Trevor/Taylor just splits in half again. There are always two. They are always identical. They can function independently and get into twice as much trouble.

“Where is that girl, you fucking punk?” I grumble, literally stepping on his back as I walk past him, whistling to myself. I find the power core I need inside the gun at his waist, and then I tuck the small, pink cylinder into my belt to take back to the bike. I switch it out using the compartment beneath the seat and then tap the screen.

She flares to life, four pink balls glowing beneath the clawed feet, and I smile.

“Thank you, Earthling,” I whisper, mounting the bike and using it to ride straight through the woods and back to my house.



I toss my weapons on the side table next to my bed, relaxing on the massive round cushion and propping myself up with my tails for a brief few moments to stare out the wall across from me. It's entirely made of glass, offering a perfect view of the woods beyond. I don't worry about privacy. There's nobody out there.

Except somewhere in these woods, that Aspis is sharing his den with a human woman.

I grit my teeth and let myself fall back into the pillows, hooking two tentacles under my belt on either side and pushing it down my hips and thighs with a groan. I wrap another tentacle around the base of my cock, jerking hard to encourage the secondary part of my shaft to emerge.

It's been ... well, *never* since a female has managed to rile me up this much.

I'm cursing under my breath, skin turning pink then blue. Pink. Blue. Truths and lies swirl together in a verbal miasma as I throw my head back into the pillows, my suckers lubing up in excitement. I've only got one on the end of each tail, but hot damn, they feel nice. I press them all over my body, stroking myself and allowing my mind to drift into the realm of pure fantasy.

That girl, in this room, trembling as I use a tail to unzip her hot pink, skintight space suit. *That was a Cartian suit, wasn't it? A Cartian suit, and a Cartain bike, and a Cartian translator.* The oddity of that only adds to her allure, my brain conjuring crystal-clear images of her peach skin and cute little navel. Her breasts, so unlike the females in my species, plump and full and dressed in delicate human fabric.

A groan escapes me as I rub the warm oil of my pheromones on the tip of my cock. If I get aroused, my suckers lubricate. I have as much control over those as I do my erection. Less, actually. *That woman*. Underneath the heavy musk of *Aspis*, I could smell *her*. She was slick with need between the thighs, aroused. Every subtle scent signature she was giving off promised a hot fuck.

One tentacle jerks me off, nice and rough, while my fingers drop down to the small tentacles at the base of my dick, just above my balls. There are nine there, too, and I can feel and control each and every one. Is it any wonder that my people are known throughout the Noctuida as the most desirable species around?

“Son of a bitch,” I groan, rolling over, every muscle in my body taut with agony. I have never in my life been this turned-on, and it’s fucking maddening. I can scrape by with a few hours of sleep, but a few hours is all I’ve got to spend here. If I spend the whole time masturbating, then what?

Curling one of my tentacles in a tight loop, I mount it and thrust into that hard coil, groaning shamelessly as I dig my fingers into the mattress. I’m all alone in this big house, so who cares? Outside, the roar of an *Aspis* ricochets through the woods, shaking the glass walls of the old spaceship I’ve built my home in and around.

Doesn’t matter.

I hear that shit all the time.

I focus on my mental image of the human woman, her curvaceous form kissed with slick, hot pink fabric, and I start to imagine myself peeling it off. Over her shoulders where her soft hair would touch my skin, down her naked and vulnerable human flesh, past that round ass and those shapely legs. I’d kiss her all over, every part of her alien body under my mouth. I’d play with the strange patch of hair that humans have between their legs. I’d mount her with my cock and my tentacles both. I’d wrap her up so that there wasn’t a single inch of her skin that I wasn’t touching. Stroking. Petting.

With another curse, I come hard into the coil of my own tail, filling it with hot, clear liquid. I’m mumbling so nonsensically that my skin keeps flashing between two separate colors. One for lies. One for truths. I’m not even sure what it is I’m actually saying.

I sit up and do my best to keep that bit of tail curled, trying not to dirty my bed.

Doesn't work.

Semen drips down the length as I storm over to the toilet—found it in one of the black market stalls and took it as contraband—and flick the useless liquid into the bowl.

Now, I'm a Falopex. I don't need a toilet.

But I built this house for more than just myself.

As I stare down at the porcelain device, I frown.

I put a toilet in for Kayla, my adopted sister who's never been allowed to visit.

I put a toilet in for the future wife I'm starting to wonder if I'll ever have.

Mating a human is a cruel condemnation. Mated humans aren't allowed to be returned to Earth. How could I ever do that to a woman?

Your own fault for developing an interest in the one species you can't have, I murmur, flushing the toilet and finding myself pleased when it works the way it should. I'm no engineer, but I've got a pipe system here that could make even my father proud.

I snort a laugh at that and look up, fixing my hat in the reflection of the glass wall.

Right.

Sleep? Who needs sleep? I'm wired now. Masturbating didn't help. Only made things *worse*.

I sweep by the kitchen for some snacks, retie my bandana around my neck, and make a plan to take my new bike off in search of those goddamn twins.

One human at a time, I do my best to get them all back.

The girl I'm fancying though? She'll have to stay with the Aspis for now. If I go through the trouble of finding her now, the prince will take her from me. It's a wonder she didn't beg to go with him in the first place.

Never in all my life have I known a female to reject a Vestalis bond.

For now, she'll be safe with the Aspis male, although ... they may very well be on their way to a mate bond of their own.

“Fuck my life.” I use all nine tails to open the locker behind me, withdrawing several additional weapons and then slotting them into the holster slung over my shoulder.

I should've warned that female when I had her right in front of me.

At least ... if she does mate the Aspis, she'll stay here on Jungryuk.

Maybe we could be friends? *I could really use one.*

I'm laughing as I step outside, slamming the empty house's front door behind me.



It's Me, Eve, Again

My eyes are squinched shut at first, but I crack them open because I just can't miss out on this view. Four days ago, I was scrambling to find enough portobellos for those onion-mushroom sliders that Tabbi likes so much, and now ... I'm soaring over an endless forest filled with crashed spaceships, held tightly around the waist by a pissed off alien dragon, and oddly fearful that I'm going to get chewed-out when we arrive back at his den.

The flying ... it's miraculous. I see strange birds, odd squirrel-like creatures with horns dwelling in the tops of the trees, and purple clouds that leave a fine mist on my skin when we pass through them. The diving at the end? Terrifying.

I scream as we plummet toward the earth, but Big D snaps his wings out at the last minute, slowing our descent and then landing, soft as a kitten, on the ground in front of his den. He hops up into it and then promptly chucks me into the living room debris.

"LOL. Well, I see you're back in one piece. What a surprise. How did your escape plan turn out?" That's what's on Zero's screen. I choose to ignore her, scrambling up to my feet as Big D heads for the bathroom the way he always does.

After that kiss with Cop Guy, I'm not thirsty anymore, but unsurprisingly, he is. He *did* rip an entire roof off a building. He's

still large, but I think he's shrunk some since we left the market. I don't understand how he does it, but I'm positive that he changes size on a relatively regular basis.

I follow him.

"You saved me," I hedge, not sure of where to go from here. I yank the translator off my head and hold it out to him. He ignores it. When I try to move closer to put it on his head, he uses his tail and pins it against my stomach. I dart around it, but he's too quick. He follows me and blocks me again, slurping water with his long tongue as he goes about fending me off. "Seriously? You're not even going to talk to me?" I purse my lips. He didn't have the translator a few minutes ago, and he understood what I was saying. "Look, you can't actually fault me for doing what I did, can you?"

Nothing.

This guy has *mastered* the art of the cold shoulder.

I sigh.

"What was I supposed to think? A female Aspispis shows up, looks at me like a tasty snack, and then coyly runs off into the woods with you following." I hold up a finger as Big D stalks past me on all-fours, heading in the direction of the nest. I move after him, babbling aloud shamelessly. Only, it's because I actually do feel shame for making such a rash and stupid decision today.

He told me not to go to the market because I'd be kidnapped—or worse—and look what happened?

"You and I, we were about to ... we almost ..." I can't even make myself say it. That annoys me. I'm a grown woman. I'm not a coddled virgin or a blushing teenager. "We almost had sex, and then you chased down another girl. How was I supposed to interpret that? The computer told me there was a seventy-one percent chance that you were going to mate her and then eat me."

No response.

Big D pauses at the curtain that leads into the nest, turning around and standing up so that he's on two legs. It looks so natural and easy the way he does it, drawing in the claws on his knuckles, flexing his long fingers. He ignores the translator that I'm holding out, grabs my head between his wing hands, and then licks the blood from my face with hot, slick stripes of his tongue.

I'm trembling as I stand there, my bones rebelling, melting inside my skin. He laves me carefully, continuing his work until my splitting headache has receded somewhat, until the pain in my nose and eyes is reduced to a mild irritation. And then he takes the translator and shoves it onto my head.

"*No ... nest,*" he growls out at me, and then he turns away and slips past the curtain. When I try to follow, his tail slams across the door, barring me entry. "*Nest ... for female only.*" I have no idea what that means exactly, but when I try to duck under his tail, he moves it. Try to jump over it, he moves it again.

"Where am I supposed to sleep?" I ask, because I'm exhausted now. My skin is burnt—although better now that I've been licked by a giant alien monster—my pride is wounded, and there's a trembling fear in me that wasn't there before. *That place, those shackles, the smell.*

Jane.

And Avril.

And who knows if there were more humans for sale in that market today. We're not the first batch and we won't be the last.

My friend was in the market, no doubt about that, but what was I supposed to do? Ask Big D to stick around until the Tusk Guys got out their guns again? Take my chances with a psychotic (but handsome) moth prince who claims that we're mates? Let the half-naked (mostly naked, actually), stacked fucking police officer handle things? I have an odd feeling that if Big D had wanted to, he could've killed one or both of those males.

I sit with my back against the wall, eyes closed, and ignore the repeating lines of text on Zero's screen.

"*LOL. LOL. LOL*"

Wow.

"I thought you said *I* was the cunt?" I ask dryly, turning away from her and glancing into the nook across from her screen. Maybe once it was a cozy seating area. Now, there are metal benches with no cushions, a pile of leaves and sticks, and a single picture frame with cracked glass in the middle. It looks like it might've been a digital frame or something.

I force myself up, strip down to nothing, and wash the blood and sand and Tusk Guy spit off my clothes. Once they're hung to dry (or maybe never dry because the humidity here is killing me), I raid DD's horde for furs and hides and do my best to create a makeshift bed in the nook.

If I hadn't heard Jane calling out to me, I'd be trapped in the pits of despair.

Jane is alive. She was calling my name. Jane is in the market.

I just have no idea how I'm supposed to get back there to find her.



In the morning, I find a stash of those nuts I saw on the first night, fire-roasted and split open beside me. Big D is nowhere to be found, but I'm too hungry to wait for him. I gobble them up greedily, trying not to gag at the taste. I once went to this survival seminar thing with Jane. We made acorn paste together, and I remember thinking it tasted like sawdust. That's what these nuts are like. Tasteless, unappealing, and gritty.

Doesn't matter. I'm too hungry to care.

I get up, purposely ignoring Zero, and I check my clothes.

Still wet.

I put my forehead up against the wall in frustration.

Okay, Eve. Focus. Jane was there at the market, looking for you. Somehow, we just need to connect point A with point B. I force myself to stand up, heading to the bathtub for fresh water. As I drink, I plot. Cop Guy still seems like the best bet although I have this odd feeling that he was on the verge of giving into Moth Guy's nonsense. But still. He knows I'm human, that I was trafficked here, and he was looking for me specifically. Well, us. That's the key.

But now my transport's gone, and I really mucked it up there in the market. If I go back as the crazy human in the bubblegum pink space suit, people will remember me. They'll remember that my 'boyfriend' slaughtered some dudes and tore a roof off, and I just

can't take the risk that a Tusk Guy will find me before Cop Guy does.

"Stay put, and I'll send a team for you."

I nibble on my lip. That's my best bet, isn't it? To wait here until he comes for me?

"Better hope he gets here before the damn moth does." I rake my fingers through my hair, catching on knots and tangles. When I close my eyes, I see the Moth Guy's endless gaze. I *feel* him somehow, and I can't explain it. He did something to me, poisoned me with pheromones the way Big D does. That's the only explanation for my bizarre fascination with him, this sense that he's the only home I've ever known, the only person who matters.

I growl and punch the water, splattering my face. Feels good though to let off a little steam. Then I think about the Tusk Guy and his grip on my hair, and those chains, and I'm punching it over and over and over again.

When I finally stop, panting for breath and shaking with adrenaline, I look over my shoulder to see that Big D's watching me. I knew he was there somehow, but I didn't care. It doesn't seem to matter if he sees me at my absolute worst.

"Decide to eat me after all?" I quip, knowing he can't understand me without—

Ah, shit. He's wearing the translator.

He lifts his lip at me, frustrated. I don't blame him. Here he is, trying to feed me and keep me safe, and I keep making that task really, really hard on him. I just don't understand it. Why is he taking care of me? For sex? If he wanted to force himself on me, he could do it at any time. There's an interest between us, most definitely. A spark that shouldn't be.

I slump down beside the bathtub, looking at him looking at me.

"For what it's worth, you were right. I went to the market and got myself into trouble. But you know what? I found Jane. I found Jane, and I found a police officer with no clothes on. So that's something, isn't it?"

Big D turns with a scowl, leaving me alone in the bathroom. I hate that I have to do it, but I use the toilet, and then I go looking for him.

He's gone. Again.

I leave my clothes to dry, and stretch out on my furs in the living room, eyes closed, arm thrown over my face. Since Zero is an annoying bitch, I decide to tell her my life story. She can't shut me out, and I don't have to listen to her, so what better way to whittle away a hot, muggy day than to complain to an AI bot?

"My parents gave me a happy childhood, you know? We weren't rich, but we were what you'd call middle-class Americans, I guess. One vacation a year. Oh, we did Disneyland when I was seven." I prop a knee up, swaying it from side to side as I think. I can't resist lifting my arm from my eyes to peek at the computer screen.

"Please stop! I do not care. This is by far the least interesting conversation that I have ever suffered." Zero types in bold, italicized script, repeating that line over and over in the hopes that I'll pay attention to it.

I don't.

I cover my eyes again and keep talking.

"I have four siblings. I'm second-to-last born, so I was one of the ignored middle children. I guess I was sort of attention starved, so I developed a sarcastic, dry personality in response to any hurt feelings I might have. I'm an *expert* at that, by the way, shoving my feelings into a box."

This goes on for at least two, maybe three, hours.

A loud thwump announces Big D's return to the nest. I drop my arm from my face and lift my head to look at him, certain that I feel his heated gaze on my lady parts. I'm naked, and my legs are a little bit spread and he—

Walks by like it's nothing.

He retreats to his nest, leaving behind a pile of leaves and live grubs near my bedding. I take it to mean I'm supposed to eat them. The grub things squirm and writhe, and bile rises in my throat. Each one is at least as big as my middle finger—which is fitting since I feel like this food is Big D's middle finger to me. They're thick and fat, with dozens of tiny legs and beady, glassy eyes.

They're also the color of vomit and smell like it, too.

I look away.

For *four hours*—roughly, seeing as there’s no way to tell time—I sit there and refuse to look at the pile. My stomach grumbles, and my body aches. My joints hurt. I feel uncoordinated and foggy. Utility wins out over pride, and I find myself picking the leaves out of the pile first.

I eat big mouthfuls of dry arugula with a hint of *eau de dirt*. Delicioso.

The grubs eventually go still, unable to crawl their fat bodies away. I leave them there, and when Big D emerges from his nest later and sees them, he *glares* at me.

“*Picky, picky female,*” he snaps, swiping the grubs up with his tail. I do not look at him when he swallows them whole. Despite it being dark outside, he leaves the ship, but I can hear him pacing around the woods nearby. The few times he comes into view, I see him pissing on things. On trees. Rocks. The ship itself. The ground. Grasshopper aliens crawl out of the dirt and scurry away.

The next morning, there’s meat waiting for me. I don’t know what animal it came from, and I don’t care. It’s cooked, but cold, as if Big D roasted it somewhere else and then brought it back for me. I unashamedly gobble that down, and holy *crap*, is it good. I’d say it tastes like chicken, but that’d be a fucking lie. I have no taste reference in my brain with which to match it, but it’s food. It’s juicy. It hits the spot.

A moan escapes me that has no business escaping, and I’m almost convinced that I hear him growl back at me from the direction of the nest.

“Thank you!” I call out as cheerily as I can. He doesn’t respond, spending the majority of the day napping in the shadows of his nest.

I hate that.

I hate that I’ve been relegated to the living room, that he doesn’t talk to me, that he doesn’t even seem to like me anymore.

I ruined the curious attraction he had for me those first few days by being a dick.

With a sigh, I finally give into my very human loneliness and glance over at Zero. Her cursor stares back at me from an empty screen.

“Dude, you can’t pout forever. You and I”—I point between me and her—“we need each other.”

Nothing.

Now that pisses me off.

“If you don’t start talking to me right now, I will recount the entirety of my junior high school experience, starting with sixth grade graduation and continuing straight through to the eighth grade dinner dance. Is that what you want? A painful, awkward recollection of two years of pubescent hell?” When Zero doesn’t answer, I clear my throat. “It was raining that day, the day I graduated sixth grade. I remember my crush, a gap-toothed boy with freckles who stole my pencil case—”

“Please, I beg of you.” The words appear on the screen as if summoned, and I smirk. *“I do not know what a sixth grade graduation is, but I do understand the word puberty, and I would prefer to hear none of your banal, human stories. Let’s talk about other things: what did you see in the market?”*

“Nice segue, bitch.” I lean back on my palms—still naked, by the way. There’s something oddly freeing about living here. No laws. No rules. No cultural expectations. No bills. No adulting whatsoever. Big D takes care of all the survival stuff, and I just ... exist.

I’m sure it’d get old after a while, but I’m trying to enjoy myself while I have the chance. Someone will come for me. If not Cop Guy then Moth Guy—who might be a creepy stalker but who claims to know where Avril is—or even Jane herself. If she was in the market looking for me, maybe she’s got a sexy alien sidekick helping her out? That’d be like Jane, wooing some rando alien guy and getting his help to look for me.

“Segue perhaps, but I am serious. Tell me what you saw, what you experienced. It may assist us both in getting out of here.” Computer screen it might be, but I sense pursed lips and a raised brow. *“If you had waited for a better time to leave, and taken me along with you, then we would be on a transport ship off of Jungryuk already.”*

“You think pretty highly of yourself, don’t you?” I ask, studying my toes and the chipped polish there and wishing I’d been abducted after a recent manicure or at least with a bottle of my favorite *Slut Shame Red* nail color in my pocket. It’s the sort of color that makes people think you’re slutty, even if you’re wearing a grandma

cardigan that's buttoned up to the chin. My older sister scowls when she sees me wearing it. My lips twitch as a strange, hollow sadness settles over me. *I may never see my sisters again.* "I think if you'd been there and I was seen carting around a brain in a vat, things would've gone even *worse* for me."

"The Cartian people have always been highly respected on Jungryuk. We are a neutral race dedicated to science and the preservation of wild spaces. How dare you—"

"I hate to break it to you, Zero-One-Zero-One, but as soon as the other"—I can't say people per se—"the other aliens saw that I was driving your bike, they were weirded out. Said they hadn't seen a Cartian anything in years."

That strikes a deep cord—and I don't mean chord, I do mean *cord* as in cable—and Zero falls silent. I feel guilty immediately, and not just about her. About everything. I feel guilty for not trusting Big D, even if I was perfectly in my rights not to trust him. I've known the guy less than a week, and we can *barely* speak to each other. How was I supposed to know he was going to have my back like a boss?

I feel guilty about other things, too—like Tabbi Kat. Seeing those chains on the wall twisted my stomach into knots. Even someone as awful as her doesn't deserve to end up in a place as disgusting, as hopeless, as all that. I rub at my face with both palms.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have said that." I'm trying to mend bridges here, but it doesn't work. Zero is an ornery bitch.

"You are, in fact, a cunt." And then the cursor disappears entirely from the screen, and I'm left all alone again.

With another sigh, I curl up on my makeshift bed and whittle away the hours with sleep.



Five days after Big D's daring rescue of yours truly, the pattern remains the same. He feeds me but ignores me. Zero and I struggle to form any sort of pleasant dialogue. And the loneliness *really* kicks in then. I'm starting to get desperate.

What if Cop Guy is as full of shit as his smile? We're not that far away from the market, about an hour on Zero's stupid bike. So why hasn't anyone found me yet? It can't be that hard.

I'm lying in bed and moping—my new favorite pastime—when I hear a strange sound. I sit up suddenly to find Big D dragging furs and hides from his nest. He takes them to the edge of the ship and then tosses them overboard.

Fear strikes my heart like lightning, and I shove up to my feet, grabbing the translator as I go.

“What are you doing?” I ask, my pulse thrumming with anxiety. I look down to see that he's already emptied most of the furs from his nest. I must've been half-asleep and didn't notice. “You're not moving nests, are you? Because of me?”

He crouches there on all fours, staring blankly back at me. Something about my pitiful state must tug at his heart strings or something because he deigns to answer a question I'm not even sure he knows that I asked.

“*Laundry,*” he explains, and then he turns to leave the ship for the umpteenth time since I've been back. I grab onto his tail, and the feel of my small fingers on his smooth hide gives him pause. He looks over his shoulder at me. *He's waiting for something, but what?* I bite my lip, and he narrows his eyes. “*You inflict self-harm?*” he wonders aloud as I taste a bit of copper in my mouth. I've bitten my tongue on accident.

When he turns fully around to face me, I know what's coming, backing up until I hit the wall. He doesn't pursue me the way he did before, but he does take several steps closer, gaze locking on my mouth. I yank the translator off and hold it out to him, offering my best puppy dog eyes to go along with it.

It's not hard.

I'm actually ... I'm sad as hell. I can't lie about that. I miss my family and friends. I'm scared for the other humans that were in that tent with me. I have nobody to talk to except a pissy chatbot.

Big D hesitates, but then his tail curls up over his back and he snags the translator, situating that stretchy headband behind his horns. He's much smaller today, shrunk to about half the size he was at the market. Still huge though. Enormous. I swallow back my nerves.

“I’m sorry that I took off without discussing it without you, but I didn’t feel like you were going to let me leave.” That’s the raw truth of it. More than just the female’s flirtatious presence and his hot pursuit. I didn’t want him to trap me here.

I wait to see if he might pass the translator back, but he doesn’t. I do what I do best and fill all of the empty spaces with my words.

“I ...” I look down at the ground and close my eyes. I’m not good at being vulnerable. Being vulnerable means lifting up the solid bones of your rib cage and exposing the soft, hot flesh underneath. It just seems like I owe it to Big D, at the very least. “Regardless, I’m sorry again. And thank you. I genuinely appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” I force myself to open my eyes, so that I can see the expression on his face.

His mouth is a tight seam, his markings pulsing with a muted glow. He sits back on his haunches, and then he stands up on his back legs. His wing-hands come around and two thumbs brush over my cheeks, collecting liquid. Somehow, I’m crying and I don’t even fully understand why.

He brings his fingers to his mouth and then uses his tongue to suck them clean. His tail places the translator back on my head.

“*You are salty, female.*” That’s what he says to me. I nearly choke on a laugh, relief and joy flooding me as I clasp my hands together in front of my naked chest. His jewel-like eyes slip down to stare at my breasts, and I still can’t figure out how he could possibly find me attractive. Then again, I find him pretty damn attractive myself. It makes no sense. We couldn’t be more different from one another. “*You ... not a prisoner. Come, go, as you please.*”

I jerk the translator off and shake it for him to take. He does. I feel like I’ve been forgiven.

“The Cop Guy—the Sucker Tail—he said that he’d come to get me. When he does, you won’t hurt him, will you? I can leave?”

Something about my statement seems to strike Big D in a bad way. He uses a wing hand to give the headset back again.

“*Not a prisoner ... if you wish to leave ... you may. I will not stop you.*” He turns away sharply and drops to all fours, hopping off the edge of the ship and then pausing to collect the heap of furs and hides. I scramble after him and drop to my knees by the doorway.

“Where are you going?” I call out, terrified of being alone again.

Big D stops with a bundle in his arms, looking back at me over his shoulder. His mouth curves up in a growl, flashing teeth.

“*Laundry. Den ... nest ... stinks of small alien female.*” He takes off as I gape at him, and I realize something crazy.

I am the alien here. Not him. Me. This is his planet, and I’m the goddamn alien.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, and then I cup my hand beside my mouth. “I’m looking forward to chatting with you later!” He can’t understand me, fine. But I can at least say it. I can keep this rapport going and not sit here all alone like I have for five days.

Hell, maybe he’ll even let me sleep in the nest tonight?

A small alien female can hope.



I’m already sitting in the nest when he gets back, arms wrapped around my legs. Underneath all those furs, there’s a circular table with a booth. It’s inset into the floor, old seatbelts dangling from the backrests. Makes me curious what this room was used for. I’d ask Zero, but she and I ... our, um, rapport is not great.

I know Big D’s coming far before I ever see him. Before he jumps into the ship even. There’s a smell that’s more of a taste, a tingling on the back of my tongue. It’s musky and hot, and it makes me regret being naked in strange ways. I did put my lacy underwear back on, but that’s it. I’m not wearing that skintight space suit lounging around the house.

He uses long fingers to pull the curtain aside, tossing a pile of furs on the floor beside me.

“Welcome back.” I try to keep things cheery, standing up on the bench seat and then easing my way over to him. He looks at me like he doesn’t know what to make of my weirdness, turning and heading back to the front of the ship as I follow along. When he’s not looking, I take the translator and jam it onto his big skull.

Neither of us pretends that he's surprised. If he didn't want me to touch him, I wouldn't be able to.

"Do you need any help? I could organize the furs? Stuff them into the space around the table or something?" He pauses at my words, so I pause, too. He cranes a look over his shoulder that's impossible for me to interpret. When his mouth isn't open, it's invisible. I can't get a read on what he's thinking.

He uses his tail to give the translator back.

"*Nest-making ... male's job.*" He takes the translator with him when he goes, sliding it off my head and putting it back on his. That's encouraging, don't you think? He hops down and I notice that all of the furs and hides have been brought back and stacked neatly. Somehow, they're all freshly washed *and* dried which is a miracle in this humid pit they call a planet. He must know a place to take them to get them to dry more quickly.

Big D brings another haul into the ship, and I follow along as he does his thing. I notice that he's got some new hides with him, even softer ones that I've never seen before. Plant matter, too, is piled up outside the ship, like he collected some extra goodies while he was out today.

"Truly, I'm sorry for running off. I still can't believe you risked coming into the market to get me." I know I'm babbling here, that I'm trying way harder than I should to make this guy happy. What do I care if he likes me or not? Cop Guy will come for me eventually, Jane and I will go home, and I'll go back to catering celebrity events like nothing ever happened. "Hey, do you know if there's technology out there that like, erases memories or something?"

I'd make a *Men in Black* joke, but he wouldn't get it. The idea makes me weirdly depressed, so I shake it off. I don't know if there'll be stipulations for going back to Earth, but I don't feel comfortable giving up my memories of this place. *Of this guy.*

I pause in the living room as he heads out for more furs, and it strikes me suddenly how small and weird it'll seem going back home after all of this. Not that I don't want to go home. I do. I have the greatest family in the world, but I ...

Once Big D's hauled all the furs and hides in, all the extra plant matter, I watch from the doorway as he fills in the space around the

table with fresh fern fronds, creating an even floor for the nest. He carefully selects which hides go where, putting the stiffer ones on the bottom and then layering softer and softer furs until the entire room is one big cushion of fluff. Flowers are gently sprinkled around, adding to the soft, powdery sweetness permeating the ship.

Laundry day has made the nest about a million times better.

“You’re a regular homemaker, aren’t ya?” I ask him as he squeezes past, rubbing the entire length of his black scaled body along my mostly naked form. My breath hitches, and my stomach muscles tighten. The space below my belly button aches strangely, and I put a hand over it to still the sensation. My comment seems to please him and he chuffs at me as he retrieves a new fabric scrap from his pile, standing on two feet and using both sets of his hands to hang a new door curtain. It’s a lovely soft, lavender fabric embedded with real flowers. I can only imagine where he got it from.

Probably raided another cart of Tusk Men, I think with a smirk. Those motherfuckers don’t know when to stop messing with a boss, do they?

Night is falling outside, and my stomach rumbles, reminding me that it’s time for dinner. As angry and sullen as Big D’s been, he has never once failed to feed me.

He exits the ship, snatches up the final item on the ground and returns with something big and furry in his mouth. I’d thought it was another pile of furs but, apparently, it’s a dead animal. It *looks* like a fluffy pig with a long tail. *Oh my God, please let it taste like bacon. I would literally cut a bitch for some bacon.*

My mouth waters, but I act like I’m super chill, sitting on my fur in the nook and hoping like hell I’ll get not only an invitation to dinner but one to the nest as well.

“You’re a fucking boss ass bitch of a hunter, you know that?” I tell him as he lays the carcass near the door and then goes about setting up a fire on the scorched bit of floor in the center of the room. Seeing as he likes to eat things raw, he doesn’t need those flames. Those are for me. I still don’t understand why he’d go to so much trouble to care for a random alien he found by accident, but ... yay. “Even the most successful hunters on Earth—like African wild dogs—only catch their prey eighty-something percent of the time.” If I

sound smart, it's a lie. My baby brother, Nate, loves wildlife trivia almost as much as he likes video games and fantasy novels. "You never seem to go a day without a catch."

I must be saying the right things because Big D puffs up with pride, those shadows around him whipping into a frenzy, his purple markings shimmering and pulsing with light. He spits flames onto the dry wood and up it goes. He breaks his kill down while I watch, no longer ashamed to face the reality of my food. He takes the best meat from the sides and back of the creature and pushes it over to me, leaving a smear of blood on the floor that he promptly licks up with his long tongue.

I snag a stick from the debris around my bed and spear the larger hunk of meat, holding it over the flames like I'm roasting hot dogs at my family's favorite campground. Ugh. I miss them all, but especially Nate. Especially Jane. I exhale past the feeling. I heard her calling my name in the market. That alone is enough to fill me with hope.

Big D swallows large pieces of his kill down that massive mouth of his. He doesn't chew. He doesn't worry about bones. It might've bothered me in the past, but it doesn't bother me anymore.

"Can I sleep in the nest tonight?" I ask him as the fire crackles and pops. He turns to me with that all-too sentient gaze of his and sweeps it across my naked body in either a warning or an invitation. Maybe both. "I'll be a good girl," I say, and then I thank the fucking universe that the translator is crap because certainly it won't translate that innuendo the way it sounds in English ...

His mouth splits in a grin, teeth bloodied, eyes shimmering.

He stalks over to me and shoves the headset onto my tangled hair, putting his mouth so close to my ear that when he speaks, I hear more than just the translated words in the headset. His growl tumbles through my body and grapples right onto that desire that's resting in limbo below my belly button.

"You may."

He leaves me there to finish my meal which I do, consuming the meat medium-rare so I don't have to wait longer than necessary.

It's one of the best things I've ever tasted in my life: it tastes like goddamn bacon.

I leave the fire burning, brush the bits of leaves and twigs from my skin, and then nonchalantly walk into the nest. Big D lies in the dead center, his back to me, tail gently swishing. He's taut and aware, growling softly under his breath as I join him.

It takes me a few minutes to decide, but I end up settling on a pristine white fur about two feet away from him. When there's the whole of the nest, he chooses the middle and I end up oddly close. I don't allow myself to dwell on why that might be. I just tug another fur over me, fluff the one under my head for a pillow, and drift off to sleep without the sleeping pills I often pop back home.

My dreams are less than serene. Instead, they're carnal, and in possession of a one, Big D aka Dragon Dude.

I have got to come up with a better name for this guy.

That's my last conscious thought until morning.



Without any pressing engagements to fling me out of bed, I sleep late again and wake with a delicious stretch and an exaggerated yawn. Padding to the bathroom, I use the toilet, drink my fill of fresh water, and then head out to the main area of the ship to see if Dragon Dude's around.

“Morning,” I greet, nodding at Zero's empty screen.

“Where is the Falopex you spoke of?” she demands, but I've already explained about fifty times that my guess is as good as hers. *“Perhaps he is never coming. The Falopex claim to be righteous keepers of moral code, but where were they when my research team was torn apart and eaten?”*

I don't know what to say to that.

“Were they ... did the Aspis eat them?” I look out the front of the ship to see Big D stalking back in my direction. My skin is on fire, a too tight suit that I want to shed. I exhale and try to act casual. Not the easiest task with my tits hanging out. I crinkle my brow.

“Fuck off, human.” That's the response I get from Zero. I ignore her. Pretty sure the years of sitting here in the forest alone have eroded her peopling skills. Or, seeing as she's such a crabby bitch, maybe she never had any of which to speak?

Big D jumps into the ship, landing in a crouch in front of me, flickering with shadows, horns catching the light and shimmering at the tips.

“Hey.” I clasp my hands together behind my back. His eyes find my tits. There’s definitely something going on between us, but even if I were inclined to have some kinky alien sex ... We’re not physically compatible. He’s ... well, he’s packing.

His eyes narrow on me, like he knows the dirty thoughts behind my innocent expression.

“*Female, come with me.*” His tail whips out, like he might snatch me up again, but I hold out a palm.

“Sure, but let me get dressed.” He can’t understand me, fine, but he tilts his head and then follows after me into the bathroom, crouching in the doorway as I slip my bra on first, and then yank the spacesuit up my body. I don’t know how it’s possible, but it seems to have gotten even tighter. I can’t get the damn zipper up at all this time. I turn a look on Big D, and then shove the translator onto his head. “You’re feeding me so well that I’ve actually *gained* weight here.”

He splits a violent grin at that, snatching me up in his tail before I can grab my boots. I scramble to steal the translator back.

“*Plump females are happy females.*” Big D takes me to the edge of the ship and hops off, setting me down and then rising to stand on two feet. He starts walking, and I scramble to keep up. I have to take three steps for every one of his.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to gesture the question out with my hands. “Oh, and could you *please* steal a second translator? It’d be nice if we could just, you know, talk.”

He seems amused, tail twitching, chin raised, wings folded against his back. With his mouth shut, he has this pensive, contemplative look about him. It’s only when he splits that gaping maw open that he gets some sass in his expression. He doesn’t answer my question, just keeps walking.

The air is thick with humidity, wet. As I walk, condensation collects on my face, sticks my long hair to the back of my neck. I’m seriously regretting wearing the suit. Shoulda just come with him in my damn panties. There’s nobody around, right?

“This better be good, wherever we’re going,” I continue, but to be honest, I’m enjoying the walk. I’m out here with an apex predator. This is my chance to explore this place while I’ve got the chance. Who the fuck is going to bother Big D? “You were pretty cool, back

at the market.” I scratch at my temple, relieved that he can’t understand the nonsense spewing from my mouth. “Cop Guy seems alright. But Moth Guy? Talk about a stalker. If he shows up, you can eat him.” I study Dragon Dude as he strolls beside me, seemingly content to let me talk without understanding a damn word of what I’m saying. “I liked the way you challenged him though, bravo. The guy needs to be brought down a few levels.”

I lock my fingers together behind my neck, studying the landscape, the trees as thin as twigs, the ones with circumferences bigger than the Empire State Building. Low clouds are building in the sky, purple and sapphire and full of rage. I catch flashes of them through small breaks in the canopy. A storm is coming in then? I’d be worried if not for Big D. Surely he knows how to navigate the storms here.

Also ... I weirdly feel like if some shit went down, he’d protect me. He’s done it once, twice, *thrice* before.

“I’m starting to owe you a lot of favors,” I hedge, hating that I have to admit to a debt but unwilling to let it go unacknowledged. I try to hand over the translator so I can repeat myself, but he isn’t having any of it. With a sigh, I put it back on.

We come up on a stream, trickling through the woods on our left, shallow but teeming with creatures. There’s an odd white stag-like creature with a neck like a giraffe, some of those fluffy pigs snorting and whuffling through the bushes, an alien heron with legs as tall as Big D. They ignore him, as if he isn’t the biggest, baddest boss in the jungle. I’m guessing they know the truth of the situation: if he wanted to, he could hunt and kill each and every one of them.

“Running is futile, eh?” I salute the creatures, startling the alien heron. Its wings are even *longer* than its legs which is a feat in and of itself. I cock a brow. Now that I’ve made contact with the Cop and heard Jane’s voice, I feel like I can take some time to appreciate the scenery.

I do not think about that room or those chains, the smell or the possibilities.

Shit, now I’m starting to worry about stupid Tabbi Kat. She’s just the sort of idiot that would mouth off and end up ... punched in the face by a Tusk Man and dragged by the hair? Damn it. Maybe the pretty pop star and I aren’t so different after all.

Okay, fine, I'll tell Cop Guy about her and leave it to him. That's it. I'm not going out of my way for a woman who forces Jane to hand-wash her Bugatti in kitten heels and a pantsuit.

A tree limb hangs heavy over the grassy area where we're walking. Big D uses one of his wing hands to push it up and out of the way. A glossy ripe piece of fruit falls to the ground and bounces. It's pink and white on the outside, splitting open to reveal bloodred flesh inside. Oh, and the smell? Like sugar and strawberries. I bend down to pick it up, and Big D's tail lashes out. He snags my wrist in a tight grip to keep me from touching the thing.

I look up at him, the edge of his mouth curling up to reveal shiny teeth.

"Toxic. Bleed from the eyes." He tugs me along with him, and I stumble. He doesn't let me hit the ground, holding onto me until I've got my feet. When he uncurls his tail and draws it back, my skin feels cool and bereft in an odd way.

Eve, you're vibing with an alien dragon.

"Thanks again for that," I tell him, trying to get him to take the translator. He narrows his eyes but deigns to grab it in a winged hand, holding it up to his ... I guess he's got ear holes, IDK. There are no ears for me to see, just those massive horns of his. "Thank you again," I repeat, and he makes a face at me, chucking the translator back. I catch it in my hands, jogging to keep up with his sudden speed increase.

Here and there, we pass more of those strange vents. Purple and red smoke drifts up from inside, heating the already warm air even further. When I stop to peer inside of one, Big D lets me so I figure it's safe. I squat down and see flames dancing across an oozing dark pitch-like substance inside.

Hmm.

I look over my shoulder to find that he's watching me. I wish he'd talk to me more. Whenever he does deign to talk, he seems like a cool guy. *A cool guy? Eve, he's an alien monster that changes size.* One minute he's as big as a bus, the next, he's a really tall dude. I can't figure that one out for the life of me, the shapeshifting stuff.

I stand up and off we go, detouring into the trees and over the stream. He walks right through it so I do, too. The cool water feels good on my feet, the stones smooth. Tiny purple flowers grow

straight from the sandy bottom, their stems long and hairlike, making me wonder how they even stay upright.

We reemerge from the shadowy thicket to bright sunshine, and I lift a hand to shade my eyes. The suns on this planet are killer. Tabbi Kat must be in a tizzy. If anyone dares suggest she leave the house without sunscreen—only Zinc Oxide will do—she starts screaming about UV rays and premature aging. She’s twenty-one years old, by the way, and regularly gets Botox.

Why do I know so much about freakin’ Tabbi Kat?

I push aside the thought and squint through the sunshine. There are a scant few beams breaking through the clouds and yet, it’s as bright as a hot summer day back on earth.

“Oh.” I realize suddenly why Big D brought me here.

There’s a view.

Not just any view, the most magnificent view I’ve ever seen in my life.

The woods extend as far as the eye can see, broken only by a handful of downed ships. One of those ships is as big as the entire Portland airport. How the hell did that end up down here? *Right. The heavy gravity.* I didn’t notice it much at first, but it’s starting to get to me. My feet are swollen, and I only feel better when I lie on my back with them propped up against the wall. I even laid with my head hanging over the edge of the ship yesterday, resting there until all the blood rushed to my skull and made me dizzy.

“This is amazing,” I breathe, using both hands to shield my eyes so I can see better. There are mountains in the distance, but they’re not snow-capped. They’re black and glittery, topped with flames. Err. Right. Toto, no Kansas, blah blah. Just beyond them, I catch a glimpse of sapphire brilliance and white capped waves. An ocean? A really big lake? “How long does it take you to fly over there?” I ask, wondering if we couldn’t, like, make a beach trip or something.

I’ve lost my damn mind.

I turn to find Big D crouched beside me. He lifts up one of his wings and brings it over the top of me, shading me so that I don’t have to shade myself. I drop my arms to my sides as I stare at him. I can’t quite shake the feeling that I’m being wooed.

“Are you trying to impress me?” I ask, lifting a brow. “If so, it’s almost working.” I purse my lips. It shouldn’t work. It can’t work. I have a strong inner voice warning me that this guy doesn’t do casual sex. If ... well, I don’t think we’d even fit together, but if we somehow *did* manage something, it wouldn’t be a *hey, you’re hot, let’s have some fun* sort of deal. It’d be ... The guy brought me to a vista. He spruced up his nest. He hunted bacon for me. *Proving my theory that the grubs and the arugula and the tasteless nuts were a slight.* “This is very nice.”

I sound condescending.

He picks up on it. His eyes narrow, and that massive mouth of his ripples in annoyance. He growls at me and the translator relays his words.

“*You are displeased?*” It’s a genuine question. I shake my head, but I don’t know if he understands my body language enough to get it.

“No,” I respond carefully, trying to decide how to phrase this. I give him the translator, and he willingly accepts it. “You ... I don’t ... what do you want from me?”

I’ve never dated anyone who didn’t want something from me. Maybe that’s a ‘me’ problem and I’m picking the wrong guys, but that also means I can’t trust my own judgment. This stupid alien dragon is almost *too* nice. We trade the translator again.

Now he has the audacity to look *confused*. He stares at me, reaching up a finger and tracing it down the curving length of his horn. It seems like a mindless tick, but oh God, I wish I could touch his horns. I want to see what would happen if I gripped them in my palms and gave them a rub. I wonder what he’d do?

“*Want?*” he asks me, and then he licks his mouth with that sinuous tongue, and my throat goes bone-dry at the sight. “*From? I want only you.*”

Oh lord.

That has to be a mistranslation.

He stands up then, and he’s right there in front of me, nine-foot-whatever of shimmering black scales, purple spirals on his horns and chest and stomach. He has abs, too. Did I mention that? Beautiful abs and strong thighs, and a muscular tail. His mouth disappears into

his face, leaving only those gem-like eyes and slightly flared nostrils as he breathes me in. His wings remain above us, providing welcome shade.

He lifts one hand up, withdrawing his claws and then sliding a fingertip over my lips. I close my eyes as he continues his exploration, teasing the bridge of my nose, stroking my eyebrows. My body trembles under those simple touches, and I press a palm against my stomach. *Please stop*, I think, but I don't say it aloud because that's not what I really want.

He plays with my hair, giving my scalp a rub with four fingers, thumb teasing the shell of my ear. When he presses his palm flat against my cheek, those pheromones of his sink into my skin, and I shudder violently. My hand comes up to grip his wrist.

"That's cheating." I open my eyes to stare at him, and he *smirks* at me. He might not know what I'm saying, but he understands the gist of it. The guy is much smarter than I've been giving him credit for.

"Pheromones ... only work on some females." That's a clear enough statement if I've ever heard one. *"They work well on you."*

Oh, look, a complete sentence. The translator is learning as it goes, and I'm all here for it. Finally, some alien tech that isn't complete horseshit. Some of these species might have intergalactic travel, but this place is—for lack of a better word—technologically *challenged*.

I tuck some hair behind my ears, trying to be nonchalant. I'm not fooling anybody.

"You exude pheromones as well." He steps closer and inhales, nosing at my hair. I can't breathe for the nearness of him, and I can't explain why. I want him even though I know I shouldn't. *"They work well on me."*

Shit.

Big D crouches in front of me like a gargoyle, evening out our height difference a little.

He grabs me then, massive hands on my waist. They encircle me, his long fingers. He's got my entire rib cage, waist, and hips in his possession. Even through the fabric of the space suit, I can feel it, that sticky musk on his skin calling out to mine.

“We don’t fit.” I say that, even though I want to try. I’m so wet, maybe it would actually work? Can he smell that, too? Is that what he means by pheromones? I look up, and it’s like I’m being pursued and romanced all at the same time. He’s a beast—a *male*—who wants to fuck. He’s a man who genuinely likes a woman. What am I supposed to do when I’m being hit on both fronts? Sex and romance in conjunction.

He drops his head and his tongue laves along the column of my throat, up to my ear, along my jaw. My hands press tight against his ab muscles, feeling them contract under my fingertips. Something hot and hard pokes me, and I see that both of his cocks have emerged from inside of him, slick at the tips, ready to mate. He has a sack, too, that I haven’t seen before. It’s heavy and tight, an invitation in and of itself.

He growls at me, breath ruffling my hair, tail curling around my legs. It spirals around both his and mine, trapping us together, pinning us to one another.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but it’s a useless question. One, he can’t understand me. Two, I know *exactly* what it is that he’s doing.

Big D releases my waist and scoots back a step, remaining in a crouched position. He’s at eye-level with me now, his genitals exposed, tail tip lashing. I’m so wet right now, so turned-on, I don’t have the energy to resist.

This is a bad idea. Sex means more to him than it does to you. He’s an alien you’ve known for nine days. The way he glows, he’s probably poisonous or something.

None of that registers in my sex-addled brain. The smell of him, it’s all around me, a cloud making me dizzy, smashing through my inhibitions, drugging me. *Male. Female. Mate. Together. Nest.* I put my hands up on either side of my head and he uncoils his tail, extending his claws and dropping to all fours.

As I watch, he turns to the side, showing off his cocks and his sack in a very purposeful way. Looking at them now, they seem ... doable. *He* seems doable. He’s much smaller than he was the first day I met him, shrunk down to a more reasonable size.

Once he’s certain I’ve gotten a good enough look, he makes his way over to one of the vents on the ground, peeling back the earth so

that the crevice is wider. He climbs right in like it was built for him, and then he rolls around in the pitch and the flames.

My jaw is hanging open at this point, but not because I'm less turned-on.

More. I'm more turned-on.

He coats himself in that dark pitch, tiny flames dancing across his skin, and then he rises to his feet.

Lightning crashes off the side of the cliff, igniting one of the trees in the distance. I don't even look at it. I can't. All I can see is him, standing there on two feet with his horns dripping and his eyes blazing and his massive cocks on fire. *Literally.*

He inhales, and his scales ruffle, wings spreading. His markings darken and then flare, casting violet light on the trees, shining amethyst across the grass, bathing my skin in purple. He gets bigger right before my eyes, holding his arms out to either side, hands up, claws extended.

And the *smell*.

I've never been a scent person. Jane is a scent person. She has matching candles, bath bombs, and body sprays for every mood. She says smell triggers old memories for her or helps her make new ones. Not me. I could wear a shirt that smells like last night's buttered popcorn and forget I ever watched a movie.

This is ... I'm alive with the scent of him, like I'm awake for the very first time in the history of my existence. I am here. I'm present. Nothing in the past matters. The future is unimportant. I'm in the present, and I'm breathing in hot, smoky, musky male and want. Desire. Need. Invitation.

He's asking me to be the female to his male, to come to him, to surrender to whatever this is.

My knees go weak and I actually collapse onto the grass, hands over my mouth.

He—because there's only one 'he' here, and he doesn't even need a name—steps out of the vent and gets onto all fours, stalking over to me. I fall back onto my ass, trembling, dripping, feeling more like a woman now than I *ever* have before.

He comes right over to me, one clawed hand on either side of my body, his massive form overshadowing mine. He's enormous now, as big as I have ever seen him. Larger than a bus, as big as a small house.

My eyes drop to his cocks again.

There's no way. There is literally no way that I can— I close my eyes. I've never wanted anything more or hated reality any less. I'm not an Aspis. I'm not a female that he can or should have. I'm a human being who doesn't belong here, whose anatomy isn't equipped to handle a creature this magnificent.

I feel like a fraud.

I shove the heels of both hands into my eyes—hard. I see stars behind my closed lids, but I don't care about that. All I care about is the smell, the heat. He's so hot that my skin aches, that sweat pours down my spine beneath the bubblegum pink suit.

Tears of frustration prick my eyes, but there's no getting around it. I can see how big he is, and I know what my limits are. It's not a question or a contest. His dicks are each as big as my thigh. *Could I touch them in other ways? Lick them? Rub them with my hands? Rub them with my whole body?*

"I can't do this," I whisper, the pressure in my lower belly tightening along with the storm. I can feel the thunder there, the need, the frustration. I want to scream. I drop my hands and look up to see that he's curled his spine to stare down at me, waiting.

He's waiting for an answer, and I'm telling him no when he's literally the only thing I want.

Right there in that moment, if I could've shifted into an Aspis female and stayed forever on that stupid planet, I would've done it. I would've done it without thinking the consequences over. Without thinking about my family. Or Jane. Or my catering business.

I might've been happy.

That black substance drips all around me, the air thick and heady with sex.

"No?" he asks, the word like a crash of lightning. I jump, those tiny hairs rising up again. Electrified, that's what I am right now. He doesn't ask it in his own language; he asks it in English. I tilt my head back so that I can see his eyes on me. I've got tears again, and

he reaches down with his wing-hands, swiping his thumbs over my cheeks. He brings them to his mouth and tastes them for a second time.

“No.”

It’s the hardest decision I’ve ever made.

Some part of me knows that if I give into him, I’ll lose something else. The other humans that were abducted with me. The people I love on earth. Maybe even myself. I’ve got logistics to think of. I won’t ever be able to give him what he wants. He’ll never be able to do the same for me. If I agree, he’ll think it’s for more than just a night of fooling around.

This guy—Dragon Dude is all I know him by—retreats very slowly from me, whuffling my hair as he goes. He crouches down in front of me and then looks away, toward the horizon and the cliff edge, toward the distant lightning and the forest fire that’s just started. He swipes his hand down his face, flicking that black substance across the earth. It’s such a human move. He looks so painfully goddamn human right now.

“It’s not because I don’t want to.” I take the translator off and hand it out to him, but he doesn’t take it. He turns his attention toward the trees, mouth flattened into an invisible seam, eyes searching the woods.

He looks worried.

“*We ... leave now,*” he growls, low and rumbling. The sound travels through the dirt and prematurely scares some of the grasshopper aliens out of the ground. They take off toward the forest, spared the fate of the sun as the clouds roll in. “*Females might come.*”

He says this to me just before he snags me with his tail and starts to run, bounding through the woods at a pace that’s easily twenty times faster than we walked earlier. He heads straight back to the den as a roar explodes in the distance. *Females?* My brain is so scrambled that I don’t know which way is up. I didn’t reject him because I didn’t want him. I ... I don’t know what to do.

I’m as afraid as I am aroused.

Big D hops into the ship, setting me on my feet, and then pacing a nervous rut into the floor. Or ... he tries to. He takes up the entire

living room area of the space, filling it with shadows and bioluminescent flickers. He paints the walls purple with his bright blow, and he makes me unsteady on my feet with the smell. I'm breathing him in with every inhale, and I feel my body plumping, swelling, making room.

I catch my lip under my teeth.

"You're saying that if I don't mate you, other females might come?" I repeat his statement as a question, trying to understand. I hold out the translator, but he won't take it. He's agitated, and I'm worried that it's partially my fault. "Why?"

What a dumb question, Eve. He's all puffed up and jacked up and smelling like sex on a stick. If you're not going to fuck him, somebody else will surely take up the torch.

That's when I know: I'm going to do it.

I am.

It's a terrible idea that I'm going to regret later, and I don't fucking care. The thought of another female taking all of these things that are meant for me? It puts me into a blind rage. *The hunting, the nest-making, the heroic rescues, the affection, the posturing, his thick cocks, that swollen sack.* I'd sooner die than let some alien dragon bitch snag those things.

Even if I'm leaving. Even if I'm going home. Even if it's just for a short while.

I step up beside him, breathing hard, a little bit scared, a lot excited.

He looks at me.

I'm shaking now.

I open my mouth to tell him that I want it, to tell him to fuck me, to see what he'll do if I give him free rein to touch me.

There's movement in the bushes, and I turn just in time to see her.

The crimson female is back.

Big D snarls, back arching, scales lifting like the hair of an angry cat. His spikes raise along his spine and tail, oozing violet venom. He digs his claws into the floor with a grating sound, tearing up fine ribbons of silver. He pulses and glows, like purple lightning

flickering across his skin. He lowers his horns in her direction, a clear warning.

“*Leave.*” The sound of that word, it rumbles the ship, shaking the floor beneath my feet. It’s so loud that I can feel it in my bones. I wouldn’t even need the translator to understand any of it. How or why that bitch doesn’t turn tail and run—literally—I don’t understand. Looking at her from here, I can see she’s as puffed up and bright as he is, like she, too, rolled around in one of those heat vents.

She’s here because of me, because he’s been trying to court me, and she wants to buy what he’s selling.

Her eyes, ruby and violet with silver rings around the pupils, flick to me.

“*Meat.*” That’s what she says—thank you, handy-dandy translator—opening her massive maw wide. Saliva rolls down her teeth and pools on the forest floor. As beautiful as I find Big D, I find this other *Aspis* terrifying. Her mouth is a cruel gash across the lower half of her face, the rictus grin of a predator. The way she stares at me, I have the implicit understanding that she would’ve eaten me had she been the one to attack the wagon that day. Hell, she’ll eat me now if she gets the chance. Her gaze drifts back to Big D. “*You ... ready to mate.*”

Big D lets out this grating growl of a laugh, equal parts primitive and sinister. It makes my skin ripple with happy terror. I don’t even know what that means exactly, but that’s what happens to me.

“*Not with you.*”

Well. That was succinct and unmistakable in intent. I tap a fingernail against one of the translator’s green ear pieces. What a vibrantly clear—and obviously mocking—response.

He doesn’t just want to fuck; he wants to fuck me specifically.

The female snarls and then, without warning, she charges.

I drop down and curl into a ball, trying to make myself as small as possible. I needn’t have worried. Big D launches himself out of the ship and slams the bulk of his body into hers. The two of them roll across the ground, crashing into the base of a tree. I lift my hands away from my ears, realizing that I subconsciously covered them like a child trying to fend off a nightmare. What good would that

have done? Covering my ears wouldn't have prevented me from hearing the crush of my own bones in the female's mouth.

I scramble to the edge of the ship on my hands and knees, gaping at the clash of titans that's occurring on my front lawn.

"Zero, they're fighting with each other!" If I sound breathless, it's because I am. I've never seen a confrontation as violent and wild as the one taking place in front of me. This is basic biology at its finest, a clash of creatures with no happy ending in sight. This is unchecked violence without rules, without society, without social pressures or expectations. I spare a quick glance for the screen.

"I can hear the sounds of combat. My analysis of the audio tells me that the female Aspis wishes to mate with our resident male. He does not return her advances so they have engaged in a fight. If she wins, she will force herself on him. If he wins, he will kill her."

I can barely grasp what I've just read, turning back to the melee with my mouth hanging wide open.

If Big D loses, she'll ... she'll rape him because he made himself vulnerable and wild and irresistible—for me. Because of me. *God, if I'd just done what I wanted to do in the first place!*

Beyond that, if he loses, I am straight-fucked.

What are the chances that she'll mate him and leave peacefully? None. Zero. Zilch. If she wins, she's going to *eat me*. I stand up suddenly, determined to intervene somehow. I did it with the sex trafficking orcs, didn't I? Don't see why I can't help out now.

I look around for a weapon, but of course, there are none.

The dragon horde. I mean, that's not what it is, but ... it is what it is. I'm sporting wet thighs and a throbbing core when I sprint across the ship to the door. It's still wide open, the gleaming pile of items resting in the dusky half-light. I take a few steps back and look over at Zero's screen.

"Did your people have guns of any sort? Something that might still be in working order now?" I turn back to the horde, trying to imagine using any part of it to fight a dragon. Alien. Alien dragon. Yeah, that. I check the screen for another response.

"My people are quite peaceable—oftentimes to their own detriment. If anything were to be useful to you now, it would be one of the nets on the exterior of the ship. They were installed with the

hopes that we might capture an Aspis alive and run some tests on it.”

The ship seems pretty well, *dead* to me, but then, the sprinklers worked, right? *Something* is powering Zero and her bitchy attitude. Not to mention the motorcycle.

“Where are these nets?” I ask, moving back into the living room while simultaneously plotting out Plan B. If Big D is overpowered, should I run? In that scenario, would there be any other choice? *Leaving Big D to be raped seems like a pretty fucked up way to repay the help he’s given me. He could’ve left me with the orc dudes and went about his day. Hell, he could’ve left me in the field of purple flytraps to bleed to death. He could’ve let me die alone in the jungle. He could’ve left me in the market.*

He could’ve let me starve and sleep in the living room and never taken me to that vista point.

He did none of those things.

“Shit, Eve. Shit!” I’m cursing my good nature as I scan over the instructions on the screen.

“The nets are designed to home in on the Aspis, so if you find one, it should be easy enough to deploy. As the ship is lacking power, a manual switch will be required. They were built with the understanding that we might crash, and that we might have to exist here for some time before rescue. In such a case, we wanted our research to continue without interruption.”

As fascinating as all this information is, I get the idea that Zero is a bit of a chatterbox when she’s not chewing me out in a rage. It’s a moment for immediacy, not for useless backstory.

“How do I find the nets? Or a manual switch?” I sound hysterical now. I’m sure I look hysterical, standing there aroused and wild in the middle of a barbaric alien battle. Hot blood spatters across the floor at my feet, staining my toes. I look down at it and then slowly turn to stare out at the pair of Aspises as they circle one another.

Big D is the one who’s bleeding. He’s got a gash across his right wing that must’ve been inflicted with such force that his blood was sent flying to spatter all over me.

“You’ll need to climb up the side of the ship. There should be one just above the door on my left. That is, if I recall the layout correctly.

I no longer have access to the ship's floor plans, only my own fallible memory."

Fantastic.

All I have to do is scale the side of a giant spaceship, locate a manual switch, and shoot a homing net at a dragon. Lovely. Exactly how I planned on spending my summer.

"The suit I provided you will allow you to climb the ship with ease; it was designed for that purpose. You'll need the boots and the gloves."

Now she tells me.

"Nice, really, thanks for the history lesson, Zero." And thanks for making something so hard sound so reasonable and easy. Yeah, I'll just climb the crashed spaceship and shoot a net gun at a hostile alien female.

But the mind and body will do incredible things when faced with certain death.

I pretend like that's my primary concern, my own mortality. It's not.

Yeah, if I don't do this, and Big D loses, I'm dead. That's it. I'll be eaten, and even though I said I didn't care if he ate me, I didn't mean it. I don't want to die. More importantly, I don't want Jane to feel alone. If she's holding onto some thin strand of hope the way I am, we can be each other's support in a crazy, impossible situation. She's fighting for me; I have to fight for her.

Mostly ... I don't want to disappoint Dragon Dude.

I yank on the boots and the matching white gloves, and I sprint to the doorway, searching around for one of the huge vines that have a stranglehold on the ship. I do my best to get a grip on one. Doesn't work. It's humid and somewhat slimy to the touch. I turn back to the screen in time to see Zero typing out fresh instructions.

"There should be handholds beside the door. The gloves and boots will adhere to them, preventing you from falling as you climb."

I try my best to ignore the fight that's occurring just below me, but it's impossible not to look. The female has Big D on his back currently, one of her wing-hands at his throat. He's flailing in a puddle of blood, desperate to get her off. She's not doing much more

than keeping him contained, but I notice that the pair of them are pushing at one another's tails, as if they're trying to impale the other—or avoid being impaled.

He overpowers her as I watch, throwing her so hard against another tree trunk that it actually snaps, crashing into the woods behind her. Big D and the female circle one another, teeth bared, spikes raised, horns flashing. They charge forward and clash, locked at the head, fighting to flip the other onto their back.

Shit.

I turn away and then reach around the doorway, shoving vines and leaves and glowing snails out of my way. The handholds are there, but it makes sense why I didn't see them right away. They're absolutely buried beneath the foliage, stuffed with debris and dead leaves. Once I've got a few cleared out, I grab onto one, fit my foot into the other, and swing myself out of the doorway.

For a second there, I'm sure that I've got this in the bag. I'm going to deploy the net and be a hero. It does not turn out that way.

Whatever the boots and gloves and handholds are supposed to do, they don't work. When I try to wedge my right foot into another of the notches, it slips right out and I overbalance. My left hand grasps uselessly for another hold but misses, and then I'm falling backward with a gasp. I don't even have time to scream.

The *female* catches me with a wing-hand, having spun away from Dragon Dude to go for me instead. She lifts me right to her face and *sniffs* me. Her bright eyes are so close to mine that I see striations of red and blue in her irises. Specks of silver. That ring around her pupil.

“*Mate ... this?*” she asks, and then she laughs, and her mouth is opening like some sort of fucked-up Lovecraftian nightmare. I knew these creatures had big mouths, but not *that* big. She opens wide enough to swallow me whole, wrapping my waist with her tongue and pulling me into the heat of her mouth. I'm screaming now, mindless sounds of terror that I'm ashamed of but can't seem to help.

I'm just a normal person trapped in a place I do not belong.

I am a human woman, not an FBI agent or a marine or a vampire slayer or a wizard.

A person.

A soon to be dead person.

I don't close my eyes even though I know that I should. I see everything: the pinkness of the female's tongue, the saliva dripping from the roof of her mouth, the darkness of her throat as she pushes me toward oblivion. Her teeth press into my back and pain explodes through me, knocking the fear right out of me. There's no room to be afraid; there's only room to hurt. Blood—my blood—splashes onto her tongue as she releases me and I tumble headfirst toward death.

My body slams into her throat, and then she *swallows*, and the contraction of her muscles drags me down into blackness. It's utterly horrifying. I—like most people—have had thoughts like, *what's the worst way to die?* Fire was one of my great fears. Hot lava, irrationally enough. Disintegrating in some hot spring in Yellowstone like a bumbling tourist. Those were all ideas that had occurred to me.

Swallowed by an alien monster? That was not on my list.

Another contraction of the female's throat sends me deeper into her body, and I tumble into a vat of acid. *Her stomach*. It's not an open space like I might've imagined if I'd ever imagined something this horrendous, but rather like being trapped in hot, slimy plastic wrap. It's smothering me, and I can't decide if I'm going to suffocate first or melt away into nothing.

The suit—and boots and gloves—seem to be doing an admirable job of protecting my body, but my face ... I wish I could scream, but that's not an option. No sound will come out. I'm stuck there inside a fucking alien and wishing I hadn't been so glib about the lawyer's last moments. Douchebag he might've been, but very few people deserve this level of torture.

Jane, I'm sorry, I think, and if I could've cried then, I would've. Mom. Dad. Nate. My sisters, Jenna, Kari, and Maribel. I love you guys. I love you guys so much.

I'm sorry, Dragon Dude. You were fucking awesome.

My dying wish is to see them all, one last time.

A strange contraction ripples around me, smothering me further, and then I'm being expelled with such violent force that I'm convinced I just died. This velocity and speed, it's all the sensation

of my soul slipping from my body. It's a feeling similar to that sort you get when you're drifting asleep, and then it feels like you're falling off a cliff, and you wake with a startle. I assume that's what dying feels like.

Then I hit the tree.

A groan of pure agony slips past my burning lips, and I fall to the ground—on my head. The pain in my neck and shoulders is nothing compared to the acid burns on my face, so I barely acknowledge it. I lie there on alien soil, more or less blind, bleeding everywhere, skin on fire. I can hear the sounds of the fight as it continues, but I can't see anything.

I truly don't think I'll ever be able to see anything ever again.

When I try to move, my body ignores the command. There's a disturbing numbness from my lower half, and I can only guess that when the female bit down, she severed or broke something in my spine. I'm alive, but not for long.

I lay my head down on the grass and find that my body is taking in these strange, erratic gulps of air. They're wet and gurgly, and I just wish that it was over already. If I'm going to die, why does it have to be such a long and painful death?

There's a horrible sound not long after that, a death rattle that brings a fresh sob to my lips. *That'll be me soon enough.* I hate that. I hate it. I don't want to die here, an infinitesimal nothing, a speck in the universe. If I were at home, surrounded by people who love me, I wouldn't feel this way, this sad and pathetic and small and useless. I just want my family and friends back.

"Tiny female." The ground shivers as a massive body trundles over to where I'm lying on the ground. I'm rolled onto my back, but there's no pain. As of now, I'm barely aware of what's going on.

"Why didn't you wake me up?!" I'm shouting at my mom as I struggle to find my car keys. I *know* that I left them around here somewhere. *"I have a gig in thirty minutes!"*

"You've built a tight ship, Eve. You have reliable employees who know what they're doing. Take the day off and have lunch with your sisters."

I remember thinking how *insane* that sounded, how a day off was like giving into laziness and forgoing everything that I'd worked so

hard to build. But then I'd looked at my mother's face, and I'd really thought about it. During my dying breath, would I remember that I worked an extra day or would I remember that I went to lunch with my sisters? Only one of those things would have staying power in my flickering memory.

Luckily for me, I remember my sisters. Luckily for me, I went to lunch.

I'm smiling as I die, giving into the softness and relaxing as I stretch my arms above my head.

That's when the pain hits.

It wakes me from my stupor and I start to scream.

I'm on my back outside the ship with Big D above me, his tongue bathing my acidic, bloodied form. He washes me with hot saliva as I continue to scream, head thrown back as my body bows with the pain. I'm looking upside down at the dead female now, her throat torn out, blood soaking the forest floor around her.

I'm also in agony.

Big D must've licked my eyes first—um, gross—so I have no trouble seeing. What I do have trouble with is the blinding pain in my spine as he licks me back together. Quite literally, when I drop my head down to stare at my midsection, I see that I was nearly bitten in *half*.

I pass out again, either from the pain or the view of my severed body, I'm not sure. When I wake up the second time, I'm lying in the nest.



“What ...” I’m so beyond dizzy that when I struggle to sit up, I fall back and end up tumbling stupidly into the furs. Agony strikes me in the stomach, and I look down to see that there’s a ragged, angry wound around my middle. But I’m whole. I’m alive. I’m in a lot of fucking pain, but I’m *alive*. “Big D ...” I don’t know his name—he won’t give it to me—but I sure wish I did.

Because I owe him. Again. At this point, if he wants to mate with me, I should just say *yes sir*. I bungled *his* rescue attempt and ended up making the fight even harder on him. And after I just rejected him? Hell, I’m stupid sometimes.

It’s not easy to get up, like all my limbs are fuzzy and asleep. When I finally do stand, I’m like a newborn foal trying to get my unwilling legs to obey. I stumble into the living room with a hand on the wall for support.

That’s where I find Big D.

He’s lying on his side, panting heavily. I can no longer see the gash in his wing or the claw marks on his throat. He must’ve healed all of those with his magic spit. And yet ... he doesn’t look so good. He’s small. The smallest I have *ever* seen him. Dim, too. His bioluminescent shine is dull and dispirited.

He looks like he’s dying.

“Big D, are you okay?” I ask, pushing up off the wall and coming over to stand beside him. I can’t keep my feet, so I end up falling

hard to my knees and gritting my teeth against the pain. I reach out a hand and place it on his scales. His purple parts have faded so much that they pulse with a whisper of light before going dark. That, and he's incredibly sweaty in a way I haven't seen before.

Was it not like twenty minutes ago that he looked like a dark and unyielding god, standing with his arms spread and his wings raised against the lightning-cracked sky? What the hell?

"*Venom,*" he replies without ever opening his eyes. He doesn't have the translator, so he must simply be guessing as to what I just asked. "*Death.*"

Death? He can't die. This can't happen.

We were just about to ... you know.

I take the headset off and put it on his head.

"What can I do to help you?" I ask, immediately removing it and placing it on my own rapidly swelling migraine. I mean head. On my migraine-swollen head. I wait as he cracks one eye open to stare at me.

He doesn't answer. It could be because he's stubborn and only answers when he damn well feels like it ... or it could be because he's actually dying here. His eyes close, and I find myself fixated on the rise and fall of his chest.

Primal terror oozes into my blood, turning it sluggish, making me waver on my knees. For a few seconds there, I'm sure that I'm about to pass out. Me and the dragon, dying together in a sweaty heap. It's far less terrifying to confront the idea of death with him here beside me. I don't feel quite as alone as I did when I was in the gullet of the female.

My body gives an involuntary shudder as I swallow down a sour taste in my mouth. When the adrenaline is gone and I'm lying in the dark waiting for sleep, I'll relive that moment and it'll torture the hell out of me. For now, I have to at least *try* to do something. *Although, isn't that how you ended up in this position in the first place?* If I'd just let Big D fight the female on his own, maybe it would've gone down a little better?

I remind myself that she'd already made him bleed before I ever got involved. Doesn't help any. I feel so guilty right now. The gurgle

of regret is worse than the aftereffects of the ragged wound around my midsection or the chemical burns on my face.

I look to my only friend and companion, a semi-sentient bitch of a chatbot named Zero.

We are so fucked.

“Is there anything I can do to save him? He says he’s dying, that he’s been poisoned. Is there someone in the market I could ask for help?” I’m desperate here. This stupid alien has been nothing but nice to me. On top of that, he’s ... he’s courting me. It feels like he’s my boyfriend or something.

I’m fighting for both of our lives.

“*Are you sure he said he was poisoned?*” Zero queries, and I blink in confusion. When I don’t respond right away, she clarifies. “*If you bite it, and it’s harmful, it’s poison. If it bites you, and it’s harmful, it’s venom. Is he envenomated or poisoned? Seeing as we’re discussing a mating battle between two Aspis—highly venomous species who rarely fail to strike—I’m assuming the former.*”

I want to scream.

Teeth gritted, I grind out a reply.

“Envenomated then. He’s envenomated.”

“*Did the female bite him?*” she asks, but I’m not sure. Looking back at Big D, there aren’t any visible wounds that I can find. “*Did any of the spines along her back or tail penetrate his skin?*”

“I think she got him with her tail,” I reply, doing my best not to look at the wound around my midsection. The pink space suit is trashed, and I’m held together with little more than dragon spit and an iron will. I reach out a tentative hand, hovering my palm over Big D’s scales. When I touch him, he gives a violent shudder and a growl that ripples in his lips and shows his teeth.

Don’t think about it, Eve. Don’t go there.

So I don’t. I won’t. I can’t think about the horror of being swallowed.

“*I might be able to help you. Might being a very strong word.*” That’s what Zero has to say when I look back at her—well, not her face. The black screen with the pink MS-DOS circa 1985 text on it. That, and the big blinking block of a cursor that follows after. “*My*

people were working to produce antivenom before our research team was—”

The text cuts off abruptly and Zero starts a new line.

“The Aspis produce a type of venom that’s not been documented in the whole of the Noctuida.” I have absolutely no idea what she’s talking about at this point, but I also don’t know how to say ‘hurry the fuck up and tell me what to do!’ without causing her to shut down completely. If she doesn’t help me, it’s over. There’s not a damn thing I can do.

Big D shifts, a groan of pain escaping him just before he turns and coughs purple blood all over the spaceship’s dirty floors. He collapses again and curls up on himself, tail tucked close, wings folded.

“The Sucker Tail,” he breathes without ever opening his eyes. *“Trust only him.”*

I’m so lost. What is he talking about now? Is he *trying* to get me to leave him?

Zero’s screen fills with unhelpful nonsense.

“I’ve calculated the chances of saving this creature’s life, and the odds are not good. He has a seventeen percent chance to live with your assistance, and a sixteen percent chance without.”

Am I truly that useless? A one percent difference? It occurs to me that Zero might understand and relish the use of sarcasm.

“I want to help him. You said you have antivenom?” It’s too much to hope for, isn’t it? A convenient store of antivenom locked away somewhere that can save Big D’s life. I let myself latch onto the idea of a magic space suit and a net gun, and look how that turned out. Still ... “Where can I find it? How do I administer it?”

“If it is still viable and intact—there is a seven percent chance of both events occurring simultaneously—then it will be located in the front end of our once great ship. Based on the trajectory of the crash, the force of gravity, and the winds that plagued the region that day, I can estimate where you might find it. But it is only an estimation.” There’s a long pause here for drama’s sake. *“Although, perhaps I will not tell you how to get there. I don’t need him alive. He serves me no purpose.”*

Rage swells inside of me, so complete and absolute that I don't trust who I am or what I might do.

"If you withhold this information from me, I'll set this entire ship on fire with you inside of it. How would you like that?"

Harsh, but I'm serious. I can't let Dragon Dude die. I won't. I'll do anything it takes to fix this.

It feels like it's partially my fault. If I'd mated with him like I'd wanted to, would—

But I can't fixate on that.

Did Zero lie about the boots and the gloves and the net gun? Is she lying now?

What else can I do but trust her? There's nobody around to help. She spits out several new insults in response to my threat.

"I hope you're painfully slaughtered in the forest on your way there, and I pray to every god in my pantheon that someday I get a new body so that I can kick you in your hideous vagina."

Coordinates appear on the screen.

Mm. Coordinates. Like I have any clue what to do with a random set of numbers. I barely understand latitude and longitude when in reference to *Earth*.

"What am I supposed to do with that?" I ask, reluctantly pulling my hand away from Big D's heaving side. He looks to be asleep. Or worse. In a coma or something. If I leave now, this might be the last time I see him alive. The thought makes me feel violently ill. "Please tell me you have a handy GPS unit hidden in the attic."

"No such luck, human. But I will translate the coordinates into instructions that even YOU will be able to understand: walk straight for five hundred paces, turn left, continue for fifteen-hundred more paces, turn right and follow the stream. If you get close enough, I imagine you will see it even through the trees. Only a fool could miss it." Long pause. *"In which case, perhaps you should be worried?"*

I grit my teeth.

Let it go, Eve. You can always smash her screen later. Better yet: save Big D's life and encourage him to piss on her. That'd teach her a lesson, eh?

With great effort, I rise to my feet, fighting back not only dizziness but nausea, too. Though I'm loath to do it, I look down at my middle and the barely-knitted flesh. In an altercation, I could easily tear what little skin is holding my body together. Big D worked some magic on me with his saliva, but it appears that his healing abilities only go so far.

"Fuck." With a deep sigh, I move over to the edge of the ship only to be rewarded with the sight of the dead female. *Don't look at her. Just don't look.* It's impossible for me not to. She swallowed me. She was *eating* me. So, to the Aspis, I really am an easy snack.

Just not to him.

Whatever it is he sees in me, it isn't food.

"Fuck." I say it again, the word that saved my life (or maybe it was my supposedly magical pheromones). I exhale, force my trauma aside—being eaten by a dragon alien is *literally* the worst thing that's ever happened to me—and study the thick vines clustered at the edges of the hold's opening. "By the way, Zero, thank you for the tip about the magic space boots adhering to the ship. It failed miserably and got me eaten!"

I don't bother to look back to see what the asshole AI chatbot has to say.

I'll do my best to find my way to the antivenom, but the odds of me getting there intact aren't great seeing as this is an alien forest and I'm a caterer with a master's degree in food service and hospitality. I am not a park ranger or a parkour instructor, not a professional sprinter or Ms. Olympia, I'm probably screwed.

I grab one of the vines and test the strength of it by giving it a tug. Seems secure enough. *Seems* secure.

"Here goes nothing," I murmur, and then I step off the edge of the ship. My adrenaline must be running hot or something because I don't feel much as I slide *rapidly* down the sweaty vine, slamming my pelvic bone into the ground as I land on the forest floor ass-first. The gloves prevent my palms from getting rope burn—or vine burn as the case may be—but the impact is jarring enough that I'm momentarily stunned.

Last time, I hit my pussy. Today, it's a bruise to the ass.

Fantastic.

I should've just let the dragon fuck me.

As I struggle to recover my senses, I notice that the grass is coming to life, grasshopper aliens popping up like daisies to bounce into the rapidly darkening woods.

I ... did not think this through.

I've just left the ship on the verge of night. But can I wait until morning? Will Big D survive that long?

Another issue becomes glaringly obvious. Say I get the antivenom and return to the ship in one piece. How do I get back up? I turn and stare at the vine I just used to slide down. In high school, we didn't have the whole 'climb up the rope' routine. We did yoga. Downward dog and tree pose did not prepare me to scale a spaceship with only a vine as a handhold.

Issue number three (in my haste or perhaps my daze from the fight, I missed a lot of important shit): I have no light. I didn't think to ask the computer or look through Big D's horde. Better yet, ask *him*.

Yeah, I'm a dead woman.

A whump sounds behind me, followed by a bestial groan that raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

The female! She's still alive!

I whip around to see ... Dragon Dude standing there with his tail whipping behind him.

He's crouched like a man, head down, elbow resting on his knee, massive horns flaring from his head. His wings are tucked close, eyes closed, but as I gape at him, he opens them slowly to stare at me.

He extends his knuckle claws and gets onto all fours, looming over me like a storm cloud.

"Hi." It's all I can think to say. For a few seconds there, I'm filled with so much relief that I want to cry. He's okay? But then I notice the slight sway of his body, the way his markings flicker like lightbulbs at the end of their lives. His eyes are a much duller purple than they were before, and his ebony scales are moist with sweat. That muscular tail of his unwinds and wraps me around the waist, lifting me up to his face. Earlier, when he did this, it seemed as if the

move cost him little effort. Now? He pants as he does it, like he's run a marathon.

I take the translator and put it over his head.

“You stay here; I'm going to get medicine for you.” I keep my words as simple as possible, hoping the shitty shit translator can handle it.

Dragon Dude doesn't like my condescending tone, not at all. He growls at me, that huge mouth of his rippling. Although ... it isn't *as* huge as it was before. Definitely not 'swallow me whole' huge. *He's still shrinking.*

“Listen, Big D. The ship”—I point for emphasis, feet still dangling off the ground as he holds me in the air—“told me where to find some antivenom. I can save you if I hurry.” I push at his tail and try not to fixate on the hot smoothness of his scaled skin, the strength of it as it squeezes my waist even tighter. *He follows me the way thunder follows lightning. Always.* “Do you know what antivenom is? This could save your life.” I tap at his tail as Big D sets me on my feet. “Do you understand?”

He removes the translator from his head with the tip of his tail, jamming it back onto mine.

“*Poor alien tech ... not stupid male. You understand, female?*” He emphasizes that last word in such a way that I know he's mocking me. Not for being female, but because I insulted him by talking to him like he was dumb. I'm a prickly person, sorry. Always been like this. “*Antivenom where?*” His tail thrashes behind him in agitation as he paces a circle around me, taking the translator back.

It's nearly impossible not to feel like I'm being hunted again.

I shudder and wring my hands out in front of me. I'm not feeling great either, to be honest. I'm dizzy, and the cut around my midsection is starting to ache and pull. I'm tired. I'm *exhausted*.

I'm afraid.

It seems silly to admit it now, after all the shit I've been through, but ... I was just *eaten*. It's only by the grace of Dragon Dude that I stand here. I've used flippancy and sarcasm to make it this far, but let's be frank. I'm one person. Literally, I am one of—at best—five people on this planet. Seeing as one of those people is Tabbi Kat,

let's just say four. She once called Jane and asked if laundry bleach was the same as hair bleach—after putting it on the tips of her hair.

I need Big D to go with me. Even if he's dying. If something attacks me out there, I'm fresh meat. Actual fresh meat, like legitimately, not metaphorically.

"I know how to get there; I'll show you the way." I turn toward the trees and squint into the dusk as Big D circles around me like shadow and smoke, but the effects are fading as quickly as they came. He's slowing down, and it's happening by the minute, not the hour. "It's supposedly in the front piece of *that* ship." I turn back toward Big D's den as I gesture, and that's when I notice the mangled logo on the side. It was torn in half by the accident, so I can't read it (would probably not be able to anyway since it's in some Alienese that I won't know), but it's a vibrant, psychotic Barbie pink.

I see.

That's what Zero meant when she said I'd recognize it off the bat.

Big D tucks the translator back onto my head.

"*I will take you.*" He moves at a forty-five degree angle from the ship as I jog to catch up, gasping and curling in on myself as the pain hits me all at once. Whatever Big D did to my wound, it's fading and I'm starting to feel it. My lips part, but I can't make any words come out. I don't even have the energy to crack a quip about it.

My knees buckle, and I'm on the ground again, watching more alien grasshoppers burrow their way out of the dirt. Blood seeps around my fingers as the edges of the wound reopen, and I stare down with wide eyes and disbelief.

I am not taking this seriously enough.

My head swims, but then, as seems to be his habit, Big D is there to save me.

His tongue uncurls from his demon lips and swipes my belly. It shouldn't feel good. I'm ashamed of myself for even thinking it does, but that's the truth. It feels *amazing*. I bite my tongue as hard as I can to shake the sensation and blood wells there, too.

Big mistake.

When Big D draws away, his nostrils flare, and then he's grabbing my cheeks with both of his hands and shoving his tongue down my throat. My eyes widen even further, my hands automatically coming up to grip his wrists. He slicks his hot tongue against mine until the bleeding stops, and then he draws away to stare at me.

"You just ... you kissed me again." I cover my mouth with my hand as he stares at me from unforgiving purple eyes. He seems wild when I look at them, like a beast. But then my gaze drifts to his mouth, and I swear that he's *grinning* at me. I make him take the translator back, and he allows it. The grin gets wider. "Are you taking this fucking seriously?"

With a sigh, I walk past him, acting as if I know where I'm going in the thickly wooded twilight. The sun is very near to setting, and I'm terrified to see what happens when this place is in full dark. I'd be nervous in a forest back on Earth at night. This is a forest on another planet. It's a forest that houses alien dragons that can shapeshift into even *bigger* alien dragons who eat people. Who are poisonous. Venomous. Shit.

If another female comes looking for Dragon Dude, we're both toast.

Again, literally. They breathe fire.

"*Sadly enough, I am,*" he says and then he shivers all over, scales standing up in agitation along his spine. "*Not much time ... enjoy you left.*" He chucks the translator back at me and lets it hit the ground. He strides past me on all fours and then, after a while, he stands up.

I blush when that happens. How can I explain it? *Because he's got a nice ass? Because he postured earlier and showed me his cocks, his sack. He was really performing for me, wasn't he?* I scratch my temple and close my eyes, forcing the image to retreat. *If ever in my life I received a marriage proposal, I would imagine it would feel something like that. Every cell in my body was screaming to say yes.*

I open my eyes again and there he is, staring back at me with his horns flickering purple. He growls at me and then turns back to the woods. He walks through them in a way that makes me feel powerful, like I'm at the top of the food chain here. It's a nice feeling, but it doesn't last.

Big D pauses after some time and crouches down, panting hard. He's substantially smaller than he was earlier, less beastlike and more humanoid in scale. He shakes his head and then opens his mouth, snarling in frustration. He digs his claws into the ground as I grip the tattered remnants of my spacesuit top. *No. No, you can't die here. You can't die right now. Don't die on me, please.*

What the hell am I supposed to do without him?

I carefully adjust the translator on his head again, just below his horns.

"What's your name?" I ask, hoping to finally get an answer. If he dies, I'd like ... to at least know what his fucking name was. *Oh my God, this is so goddamn sad. I'm so goddamn sad.* Tears prick my eyes as both fear and loss sweep over me. If he dies, that's it. I'm dead. I keep *saying* it, but I haven't once believed it. He's saved me so many times since I got here. This can't be it. It fucking can't.

I'm still not being honest with myself, am I?

I'm not scared for him because by proxy, I'm scared for me. I'm just scared for him. Period.

He growls at me, and I understand implicitly that his name is what he's just said. *That* sound. I can't possibly make that sound with my own mouth, so I'm going to have to make something up.

"Right. How about ..." I wrack my brain, but I'm only creative when it comes to food. You should *see* the custom cream puffs that I can make. I once did an 'around the world' display with kimchi cream puffs, red bean paste cream puffs, curry cream puffs. What a hit that was. *Something with the letter 'X' in it; alien names always have the letter 'X'.* I snap my fingers and point. "Abraxas."

He cocks his head at me, the purple spirals on his horns brightening before falling impossibly dim. *I don't like that, not at all.*

I take his silence for acceptance.

"Abraxas it is. Better than calling you Big D forever." I shrug and continue walking. As I pass by him, his huge mouth splits in a snarl, a low, hissing growl falling from the length of his wicked tongue.

"*Abraxas.*" It sounds vaguely menacing, him hissing Abraxas like that. It also weirdly sounds similar to the name he gave me which could only ever be translated as onomatopoeia.

“Don’t you think it has an alien ring to it? It’s perfect.” I plant my hands on my hips, strange forest sounds echoing through the rapidly dwindling light. Give it ten or fifteen minutes more, and the sun will be long gone and the storm will finish rolling in. The only light we’ll have is from Abraxas’ dwindling glow and occasional flashes of lightning. “You can call me whatever you want,” I add as an afterthought. Seems fair. I made up a name for him; he can do the same for me.

“*Eve.*” He growls that out in such a way that my skin ripples and a strange bird takes flight from the tree above us. I don’t see much of it, but it had a glowing tail with a curl at the end.

My name’s the sexiest I have *ever* heard it sound on a man’s lips. Or ... an alien male’s lips.

He turns away and continues on all fours into the woods.

“Right. You can pronounce my name, but I can’t pronounce yours.” I jog to catch up, taking advantage of the translator’s location atop his massive skull to ask questions. It’s a useful distraction technique. “How do you know English anyway? I’ve heard you speak a handful of words.” I swallow down a strange lump. “Especially the word ‘fuck’.”

He stops walking to look at me and there’s a strange sadness in his eyes that I don’t quite comprehend. *What do you mean, you don’t comprehend it, Eve? He’s dying. He’s dying and he knows it.*

If only we can get ahold of that antivenom.

“*Fuck?*” he repeats, and then shakes his head. Abraxas turns away again, weaving around the trunks of skyscraper-esque trees. They *look* like the redwoods of the California coast. Correction: they make the redwoods of the California coast look like saplings.

There are ferns, too, big enough to swallow a person whole were they so inclined. I ... I don’t think they’re inclined, but this *is* an alien planet, and we *did* nearly die via dragon alien female, so I steer clear of any foliage.

Snake-like creatures with two front legs and no back legs hang from tree limbs, snapping insects out of the dusky twilight. Thankfully, these are easy to avoid because they, too, glow like a college rave. *I bet Abraxas isn’t the only poisonous—err, venomous—beastie out here.*

I steer clear of those, too.

We exit the treeline and move into a clearing that looks oddly like a vineyard, rows of neatly curated plants dripping bejeweled fruit. I'm so goddamn hungry that I nearly reach out and snatch a cluster of pearly orbs with reddish-green leaves.

Abraxas snatches my wrist with the tip of his tail, keeping my hand from touching the fruit or ... whatever it is.

"*No. Not for females.*" He releases me, and I curl my lip at his retreating back. He didn't say 'not for humans', did he?

"What, I won't bleed from the eyes this time? Is this, like, a rite of passage thing for dragon guys?" I ask, following him down the cleared space between rows. Is this farmland or just an odd alien phenomena? It really does look like a vineyard in the way it's laid out. A small furred *something* darts out between the rows, and I bite back a scream.

As long as Abraxas is with me—and there are no female Abraxases around—I'm safe. Ish. Just ish.

We re-enter the trees on the other side of the clearing, and then pass by a large steam vent, similar to the one he danced in earlier today, before life was total shit. Strange smoke twirls from it, the same obnoxious purple as his markings. He pauses beside it and *inhales*, and for brief seconds, all of his bioluminescent stripes flare with light and vibrancy.

Abraxas shudders and turns away, moving past it like it pains him to leave.

I steal the translator back, and, surprisingly, he answers my previous question.

"*Toxic to female hormones,*" he says, which is an interesting concept. I wonder how he knows that? Like, is it common knowledge among his people? Seems to me that members of his species don't talk much.

"Female dragons?" I ask, and either he knows both of those English words already or else he understands them from context.

"*Mostly toxic to female aliens.*" Abraxas pauses near another vent, the purple glow from inside illuminating his face as he cranes his head around to look at me, like he's considering something but

hasn't yet made the decision to act on it. "*Many stolen aliens like you live here.*"

He means humans, I guess.

I blink back at him. This is the longest, most coherent conversation we've ever had. This new translator is about a million times better than the last. The more we use it, the better it seems to work. *Must be like a self-learning AI deal or something.* But what do I know about technology? I'm a caterer.

Abraxas rises to a standing position and then steps up close to me, ignoring a wave of bioluminescent bats that scatter through the trees behind him. He reaches out with oddly human fingers and takes my chin. The swipe of his warm fingertips on my jaw is an all too pleasing sensation on a body that's only half-sewn back together with dragon spit. My hand comes up automatically to touch his wrist, fingers grazing over one of his markings. It's still slightly sticky, but the effect is muted, stirring my belly with fireflies of desire rather than jetliners.

He taps a nail against the side of my jaw, and then all subtlety is gone as he takes my face in both hands and curls over me. That Cheshire mouth of his splits open to reveal *teeth, teeth, teeth*, and sweat beads instantly on my forehead and palms. *He isn't her; I trust him.*

That whiplike tongue finds my mouth and parts it without preamble, sliding over my tongue and tickling the back of my throat. My lids are wide but they quickly close, my small hands squeezing tightly over his wrists. He's large enough that my fingertips don't touch, not even close.

Heat races through me in an arc, and I shift, lifting onto my tiptoes, struggling to stay on my feet.

Abraxas takes his time, running the sharp tip of his tongue along my bottom lip, tracing my top lip with such fine precision that when I close my eyes, I can imagine it's one of his fine fingertips. He dives back in, leaning closer, pushing his tongue deeper, and while I know he doesn't understand the concept of a kiss, I think he well-understands my reaction to it.

He draws back, those eyes of his prisms of color, of lavender and violet and cerulean, of amethyst and sapphire and gold. There's a single ring of it, of the gold, wrapped around his dark pupil. While

he has no whites to his eyes, these, too, are weirdly human. *Absolutely sentient. What was I even thinking?* He can speak basic English which is more than I can say for myself and his language.

That horror movie mouth of his twists up to the side in what could very easily be called a smirk.

“*Have you changed your mind about mating?*” he asks hopefully, and I gape at him. “*I would not ask again, but under such circumstances, I fear I must.*”

Whoa. The translator is getting *way* better. Quick. That seems ... odd.

“No!” The word escapes me in a rush. He’s asking about sex when he’s poisoned—envenomated!—when he’s having trouble standing upright without swaying? When he’s *dying*? After he gets better, sure. Now? Fuck no. “Are you crazy?”

But that kiss was ... I liked the kiss. *I have a crush on a dying alien.*

Abraxas’ face shutters, mouth closing and flattening to invisibility. He lowers his head and then turns away again, dropping to all fours.

My hand comes up to my mouth, fingertips brushing my tingling lips. I tell myself it’s because of his weird pheromones, that odd sticky substance that comes from his markings. But that’s not the whole reason, and I know it. For a pair of aliens, we sure have good chemistry.

I jog the distance between us, slowing to an easy stride beside him.

It’s full-dark now, but he’s glowing enough for us to see. Beyond that, I think he knows implicitly where we are. This is his stomping ground after all.

A large shape looms up ahead of us, breaking the steady, predictable pacing of the trees. It’s so dark that I almost miss it, but then I squint my eyes and I see that it’s darkness layered on darkness. *A ship.*

“Oh my God, we’re here?!” I rush forward, this odd sense of desperation in me that I’m afraid to acknowledge. It’s panic is what it is. True panic.

“*Human, no.*” He steps in front of me to block my approach and lowers his head, the spirals on his horns flickering. “*Not this one.*”

He moves away from the hulking figure of the ship, and I strongly question whether he’s bullshitting me or not. *But why would he? It’s his life on the line.* Soon enough, I see that he’s telling the truth with my own eyes.

We’re passing a veritable graveyard of downed ships now—in all sizes. There’s one that’s as small as a sedan, another as big as a commercial jet, and everything in between. We pass directly by the doorway of one, and I can’t resist.

There are glowing flowers clinging to this one, adding enough light that I’m able to see a chair—and a skeleton strapped into it. The skeleton is not human in any way whatsoever, but it *is* a bone-white skeleton nonetheless. How is it possible that life here is so different yet so oddly similar to life back on Earth?

I reconsider whether or not I’m high on acid, stumbling around Tabbi Kat’s soiree and faux-kissing an alien. The thought bothers me more than I’ll allow myself to admit. I push away from the crashed ship and keep pace.

For about an hour there, everything seems fine, but then fatigue sets in, adrenaline fades, and I’m tripping over roots and foliage that I promised I wouldn’t touch.

“Abraxas, wait!” I call out, hitting the ground with already bruised palms. My midsection *hurts*, and I can feel hot trickles of blood running down my belly. He appears as if summoned, as much a part of the night here as anything else.

I feel his tongue before I see him, swiping along my back, rolling me over—his *tongue* is strong enough to roll me over—and sweeping my midsection. His saliva patches me right up, numbs the pain, and stops the bleeding all at once.

He uses one of his wing-hands—I think it’s one of his wing-hands based on the texture—to haul me up to my feet.

“Thanks.” I brush myself off and we keep going, but this time, I press my palm against his side and feel the sweat slicking his scales.

It’s a fact now that he’s slowing down—substantially. I no longer have to jog to keep up. It becomes the opposite problem, with my

needing to slow down. And that's with me out of shape, bitten in half, and exhausted.

He's fading away, Eve. What the fuck do I do? What if there is no antivenom? What if it's too late?

I'm so busy in my brain, trapped in total darkness and struggling not to fall over, that it takes me a few seconds to realize that we've left the trees. We've stopped and now we're standing in another clearing. There are several moons in the sky—at least four that I can see from here—and as I blink, my eyes adjust to their silver glow.

Abraxas is dying.

He opens his mouth and blood dribbles out onto the ground, steam escaping his nostrils when he huffs. He shakes his horned head, drawing his claws into his knuckles so that he no longer looks like a dragon on all fours, but like a man hunched over in agony.

I look up to see if we've arrived at the ship or if we're close or—

There's the market.

Its high walls are made of hammered metal scrap with black spikes along the top that may or may not be iron. Fires burn on either side of the entrance, and a cart ambles along the dirt road. I stare at it, and then I turn to *glare* at him.

“What have you done?” I demand, a shriek entering my words that I can't seem to hold back. Rather than take me to the antivenom, he's guided me to the *market*. Now, what are we supposed to do? Does he not understand that he's at death's door?

I suck in a huge breath to continue my rant when he turns those brilliant eyes of his to look at me. Already, they're dimming. Fading. It's not that he doesn't understand the assignment, it's that he understands it far too well.

“*Find the damn Sucker Tail,*” he breathes, and damn, he must've been hiding it from me for the last twenty minutes because it's labored and wet and *terrifying*. Dragon Dude—Big D—Abraxas—isn't going to last much longer. “*No Moths.*” He jerks one of his horns in the direction of the market entrance, and then turns back toward the woods.

He barely makes it past the tree line before he collapses at the base of a red-brown trunk. He curls up tight against the leafy fronds of a giant fern and closes his eyes with a groan, head pillowed on his

arms. His tail wraps around him like a blanket. The little bit of moonlight that reaches us highlights his sweaty sides and the way he shakes with fatigue.

My lips purse.

He intentionally led me to the market instead of the ship.

I move over to where his head is resting, squatting down beside him. There's no light left in any of his markings; he's completely dark.

“What am I supposed to do now? Just leave you here and walk into the market?” Seems like a pretty bad idea with the state I'm in, practically cut in half and wearing the bloodied scraps of an old space suit. But that's the reality, isn't it? Without Abraxas, I am completely and utterly alone on an alien planet.

Alone.

I am alone.

My eyes fill with tears as I drop down to my ass, hands hovering over his massive head, like there's something I could do to save him. *He used what little strength he had left to walk me here, to make sure I got here safely so I wouldn't be alone in the woods by myself.*

“*Sucker Tail,*” he breathes again, without ever opening his eyes. “*I go peacefully to the dirt, Eve. Be safe.*”

That does me in, the way his body shudders, like even the act of speaking is too much.

Finally, my hovering hands find purchase on either side of his face. That warm skin of his is now ice-cold. I nearly pull away, but as soon as I touch him, I can't do it. Because my touch seems to calm him, and if all I can do in his last moments is keep him comfortable then that's what I want to do.

I'm crying now, no shame. I'm not hiding the tears or the sniffles or the wracking sobs.

Abraxas cracks one eye, but it's so dull that I wonder if he can even see me.

Our gazes lock, and I feel this profound sadness that our journey comes to an end here. So fucking sad. I can barely stand the pain filling my chest, and he isn't even dead yet. What happens when he

lets out his final breath, and I find myself sitting in the dark woods with his corpse?

“Do not stay long past my death.” He closes his eyes and lays his head back down, effectively ending the conversation. My eyes prick with angry tears, frustrated tears ... sad tears.

Using what little moonlight we have, I move up to a nearby fern, and I start ripping fronds off at the tips. The bases are too thick for me to get my hands around, but the upper parts are fragile enough that even *I* can tear them. I gather as many as I can hold and then I turn and lay them carefully over Abraxas' back.

He cocks an eye, but doesn't move, watching as I continue the process. Pick fronds, cover him up, repeat. I do that for so long that his eye closes again, and I get this strange sense of being alone in the vastness of space. I'm glad that I can't see the stars or the extra moons, and it helps to have a single-minded focus on something that I can actually do.

I can't save Abraxas, but I can keep him warm. He's not dead yet. Maybe if I nurse him a little, he might recover? Zero did say that he had a sixteen percent chance to live. Sixteen is better than zero.

It takes me almost an hour—by my estimation—to cover him, and only then because the fern fronds are enormous. He's a big guy, no doubt about that.

I swipe my hands on my ruined space suit and look around, gathering leaves and twigs from the forest floor until I've got a comfortable pile going. As an afterthought, I take the translator from my own head and plop it onto Abraxas'.

He doesn't move. Like at all. I don't even think he's breathing.

I drop down to my knees beside him, leaning in and listening carefully. At first, it seems like he might actually be gone, like he's died, and it's all over. But then I hear a slight gurgle, and his nostrils flare as he draws in another breath.

“Don't die on me, okay?” I stroke my hand up one of his horns, but there's zero reaction. None. Not a growl or a tail flick or god forbid, an alien smirk. I turn and sit on the ground with my back pressed against his body. With the way he's curled up, I feel almost protected, like I'm safe so long as I'm within the circle of his protection.

That was a pretty damn true statement until about ... two hours ago.

With a sigh, I pick up two sticks and I stare at them, trying to remember how to start a fire. It didn't go so well last time, but surely, there must be a way to do this? As I said, even the *Naked and Afraid* contestants can start a fire. *Yeah, but they usually have fire starters, don't they, Eve?*

I don't think about that.

"Any chance you want to start this fire for us?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder. Abraxas' mouth splits and he exhales a plume of smoke and not much else. He doesn't stir beyond that, but at least I have hope that he's listening to me talk. I don't know if a loner alien dragon feels the need for things like conversation or companionship, but talking aloud will calm my nerves, at least. "Alright, fine. No problem. I can do this. It can't be *that* hard, can it?"

I get to work with the sticks, trying to fit one perpendicularly against the other so I can spin it between my hands. Friction equals flame, right?

It's not that easy. Or maybe it's because we're on an alien planet, and I have no idea if the chemistry of such an act is the same. Probably both things are true.

Doesn't matter.

I keep at it, and I keep talking.

"So, back on Earth—that is, the planet where I come from—I own my own business." I'm so proud of that. Even here, even with a half-dead audience of one, I can't keep the satisfaction out of my voice. "I knew from a young age that I had a serious problem with authority. Miserable bosses and cranky shift managers, I couldn't do it." One of the sticks breaks, so I toss it aside and start over again. "I've only ever been good at one thing, and that's cooking, but I *knew* that I couldn't handle the heat of a commercial kitchen—figuratively or literally."

I look over my shoulder, and maybe I'm imagining it, but it feels like Abraxas is more alert.

You're imagining it, Eve. He hasn't moved. And he hasn't. For all I know, he's already dead, and I'm sitting here talking to myself. The tears spring up again, but I ignore them.

“So anyway, one day my best friend—that’s Jane Baker, manager to the stars—asked me if I couldn’t whip up some last minute dishes for this stupid party that her client was having.” My mouth twitches when I think about Tabbi. *She’s probably dead. That girl is far too stupid to survive a cutthroat world like this on her own.* “She called me the next day, talking about this bigwig or that bigwig wanting to hire me for the next stuffy rich people party, and so it went from there.”

With a sigh, I sit up and rub my arm across my forehead. *If I can just get a fire going ... he should at least be warm when he dies. That’s a pretty basic comfort.* I take up my sticks again and get to work.

“This is the most boring story known to humankind, by the way. It’s not just you. I’m a pretty boring, unremarkable person, but in a good way. I don’t have a lot to complain about. I’ve never gone hungry, never had to fight for clean water, always had a roof over my head.” My eyes are just dripping salt at this point, but I can’t help it. I want to go home so badly that my chest aches. I want to see Jane. I miss my family. *Fuck.* “And now I’ve got a successful business going. I’m at the point where I can buy a house. Me. How many twenty-five year olds do *you* know that own a business and a house both? Exactly. None.”

I work at that stupid fire—and babble incessantly—for what must be hours. My hands are covered in blisters, and now I’m crying out of rage and frustration as much as anything else.

“Goddamn it.” I throw the sticks as far from me as I can get them, sitting there with my knees up, the heel of my hand pressed to my head. “This isn’t working.” I drop my arm and look around, but it’s as pitch-black now as it was ten minutes ago. And two hours ago. And will be for several more hours to come.

With nothing else to do, I crawl back over to Abraxas to check on him, touching my hands to his face. Still ice-cold. I swallow hard, leaning closer, listening for breaths. Nothing.

The vents. It pops into my head, and I stand up suddenly. I won’t think about the fact that he’s not breathing. Nope. Won’t go there. *Why didn’t I think about the vents before? I could start a fire if I stuck a stick in one of them, right?*

It’s worth a try.

I get on my hands and knees, searching for a large stick that I might be able to make a torch out of. It takes a while—the moons have shifted, and it's mostly dark again—but I find something eventually. Can't see it. Can't see if there are alien spiders or alien ants or alien whatever's clinging to it, but it doesn't matter.

Now. Where might I find a vent? They seem to open up at random on this planet, but I can't wait around and hope for the best. I have to be proactive.

It might be the dumbest thing I've ever done, but I head back in what I *think* is the direction we came from. May or may not be. Doesn't matter. I come up on one of those strange steam vents anyway. Dropping to my knees, I peer into the cracked earth and the purple glow emanating from it. *What if I disintegrate or something?*

But I'm going to die anyway, and my only redeeming feature is that I'm plucky.

I shove the stick into the vent before I can talk myself out of it, and then I hold it there until my hand begins to burn with the heat. When I yank the stick back out, there's no flame, but there *is* that strange sticky substance on the end of it, the same stuff that was dripping off Abraxas earlier.

Great.

More sticky. Why is everything around here sticky?

I try a few more times, same result. Defeated, I head back in Abraxas' direction—what I *think* is Abraxas' direction.

There are several minutes there where I'm convinced that I'm lost, and panic sets in so thoroughly and completely that I'm not even plucky anymore. Just afraid. I'm *terrified*.

When I stumble over Abraxas' tail with a grunt and hit my chin on the ground, the end of the stick strikes a tree and up it goes in flames.

Oh.

I'm still blinking stars from my eyes as I sit up and stare at the flaming end of the branch.

"Abraxas, look." I take the torch and wave it around in front of his face. No response. Swallowing back my trepidation, I set fire to the pile of sticks and leaves, and up they go. A cheery orange glow

pushes back the darkness, and it's only once it's spreading heat across my bare midsection that I realize how cold it's gotten. I put a palm over my wound, looking down and examining the ragged edges in the firelight.

In the few hours that I've been fumbling around in the dark, the skin seems to have sealed shut. There's still a massive bruise, deep muscle pain, and the sense that if I fuck around too much, I could break it back open, but it's on its way to healing. *Because of alien spit.* Right.

I settle down with my back pressed against Abraxas' side. He's so cold, I know that he's gone. I know it, but I can't accept it. The night yawns around me, and I wrap my arms around my knees, closing my eyes. I'll do as Abraxas asked and head for the market just as soon as ... Well, I can wait a little longer.

The fire crackles, my only source of comfort. *I am so human*, I think, *painfully human*. All alone in the woods and fire is my salvation.

My eyes close and exhaustion rips through me. Understandable—I was bitten in half today and *swallowed*. Sleep comes even though I try my best to resist.

I'm not sure how long I'm out, but when I open my eyes, the fire has died down to scant embers. Panic and instinct take over, sending me scrambling across the forest floor to gather more debris. I blow on the embers, and whatever this pitch shit is that I found, it goes right back up with a whoosh, nearly searing my eyebrows off.

I sigh in relief and sit back, refusing to acknowledge the dead dragon behind me.

Eyes peer out at me from the darkness, glowing eyes in shadowed faces. Dozens of them. Maybe more. A hand with sharp fingers, crafted of shadow, reaches out toward the flames and then draws back, as if the fire is the only thing keeping it at bay.

A grumble from behind me draws my reluctant attention around, and I find dozens more of those glowing eyes around Abraxas. His tail thrashes to ward the creatures off, but they only retreat for a second before they're back. Blood drips from his hide to the floor. *They're biting him!*

I snatch the branch up and shove it into the fire, reigniting my makeshift torch. With a painfully embarrassing battle cry, I swing it

at the creatures, driving them away from Abraxas—who's apparently still alive—and sending them scrambling into the darkness.

They don't stay there for long, clawed fingers reaching, braving the edges of the fire and the shadows around Abraxas. I move in a circle around him, all the way around the other side of the massive tree trunk, swinging the torch at the stupid things.

This isn't going to work, I realize. As soon as I've completed my circle, they're back and they're biting him again. I think they're ... they know he's dying and they're trying to *eat* him. An impossible rage fills me, and I clench my jaw. I've never been an extraordinary person. I don't volunteer at a soup kitchen or an animal shelter. I don't donate a lot of money. I'm not a genius or an artist or a philanthropist, but goddamn it, I can at least try to be a good person.

I rush back to the vent—a much easier task with the torch in hand—and then pause. If I shove the torch in there, the whole vent might go up in flames. It could easily kill me. I spend some time (way too much time) looking for another branch. Once I've got it in hand, I shove it into the earth's gaping wound. *Earth? This isn't Earth*. Well, whatever it is, it has flammable pitch that's going to come in handy.

I jog back to Abraxas with both branches in hand, and then I knock them together, setting the second one on fire. The shadow creatures are all over the dark half of him, the side that's facing away from the fire. I drive them back again with the torches, and then I work to find more sticks and leaves so that I can build fires all around us.

It takes a lot out of me, but once I'm done, there's a nice ring of fires around us, illuminating everything in orange light and heat. The shadow beasties don't leave, but they remain outside the circle of light.

I brush my palms together and then move back over to Abraxas' head, squatting down in front of him. My hand hovers, but I force myself past the nerves, using a finger to trace the seam where I think his mouth is. He stirs and one eye cracks open. It's nearly black, all of that purple and blue and gold having faded away to darkness.

I'm probably going to regret this later.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I'm pleading now, and I'm not ashamed. Not only am I worried about myself, but I'm worried

about him, too. How can I let someone with such a kind heart die so senselessly? He might be an alien, but he's more human than half the people I know on Earth. "I'll ... do whatever it takes. Could I sell myself in the market? Buy you a tonic or something? Get you a doctor?"

I tell myself that he could rescue me later, after he's all healed up. But who knows. I might be signing my own death warrant—or my own captivity warrant. *Stuck forever in the woods and forcibly married off to a tusk guy.* That could be what happens to me. It could be what happens to me either way. At least if I walk into that market and offer myself up in exchange for something to heal Abraxas, it won't be a complete waste.

Could I find Cop Guy right off the bat? He genuinely seemed like he wanted to help. And you know what? At this point, I'll gladly go with the black-eyed stalker Moth if he can save Abraxas. There are worse fates.

Abraxas isn't amused at the suggestion. A bit of light enters his eyes and he lifts his head, that terrifying mouth of his rippling in a low growl. I'm not wearing the translator, so I can't be sure of his *exact* words, but I imagine it goes something like this, *that's a stupid fucking idea, don't even think about it.*

"There must be *something* I can do," I repeat, because I hate feeling helpless. I've felt helpless since the moment I opened my eyes in the market. I don't want to feel that way anymore, but the fact of the matter is this: I am nothing and nobody here. So if I can save my only source of power and comfort and safety, I'll do it—cost be damned.

"*Fuck.*" This is what he says, as he lays there half-dead. I cock a brow. We're back to this again? "*Mate.*"

Right.

He tilts his head toward me, and I get the idea that I'm supposed to take the translator. I do. I wait to hear this pitch. *Is he asking for a final goodbye fuck? Is that what this is?* I find it hard to believe. Something must be getting lost in translation here.

"*We mate, I live,*" he growls out, but there's no heat in his voice. It's dreary and distant.

"That'll save your life? If I ... mate with you?" He can't understand what I'm saying, but it doesn't seem to matter. He gets

the gist of it.

“*Mating ... antivenom.*” He waits for me to absorb that information. I don’t understand it. It makes no sense. But he *looks* serious enough about it. “*Mated, never separate.*” Something in his expression softens when he looks past me toward the ring of fires, and a strange warmth permeates my chest. *I did something right tonight. I saved him this time. “Death from broken hearts.”* It’s not so much the translator’s fault this time, and more like he’s having trouble speaking whatsoever.

Err. Now I’m *really* confused. I push aside the broken heart nonsense and try to get back to facts. I put the translator back on him and yet again wish we had two of the goddamn things.

“You’re serious? If I mate with you, it’ll heal you?” I ask, and he growls an affirmative. I think. Still getting used to the sounds he makes. They’re nowhere near human. *I’m still not sure I can fit him, even at this size.* And ... wow, I went right to it, didn’t I? But I could use my hand or ... something. *You were into him from moment one, Eve.*

I’ve always had weird taste in guys. That entomologist I dated, he bred moths in his apartment. Every time I opened his front door, a half-dozen would flutter out. No matter how careful he was, some would inevitably escape, gathering around the light above the dining table, resting on the glass doors to the balcony, getting tangled in my hair. But this? This is even weirder than that.

Abraxas waits for me to take the translator back and then repeats himself.

“*Mates can never separate or they’ll die from broken hearts.*” He waits to see what my reaction is going to be, but I swear that there’s more color in his eyes.

Okay. Yeah. I’m going to agree to this, and we’ll deal with the broken heart stuff later. I’m still going home, but I can at least make an attempt to save his life. He’ll be single later, yeah, but he’ll be alive. He’ll thank me for the casual sex.

“I accept. Yes. Let’s do it.” *Literally.* I sit back on my haunches as he blinks at me. A slow, strange smile spreads over that sharp-toothed mouth of his, but it doesn’t last. He might be asking me to sleep with him, but he’s still fucking dying.

He rolls onto his back with a groan of pain, wings crushed underneath him, staring up at the canopy. Fern fronds scatter everywhere.

“You might’ve suggested this earlier,” I tell him, feeling irrationally pissed off. Then I remember that he kissed me and asked me to mate with him hours ago. Hours. In fact, if I’d just mated with him when I wanted to—when I would’ve been thrilled to try it—we might not be in this situation. If he survives the night, we’re getting another translator. I don’t care how it happens, but it needs to happen.

I pause beside him, our bodies bathed in firelight, and I stare at his cock as he uses his fingers to coax it from the slit at his groin. It’s just the one this time.

It’s huge. Absolutely massive. Smaller he might be, but that dick is a monster cock. I bite onto my lip, attention shifting to Abraxas. He’s staring at me, eyes half-shut. I’ve thought he was dead multiple times over the last few hours. What if this can really save him? *What if he’s full of crap?* I snort, pushing my tangled, matted hair back from my face. *Is it the worst thing in the world if he’s lying?*

It would be, if he died. That’s the part I’d be most upset about.

My attention falls on his dick again, and I realize with a start that it’s the only part of his body where that purple bioluminescence pulses strong and hot. It wraps around his shaft in strange spirals, like a tattoo or something.

I move a little closer, laying my hand on his side. He’s still so cold, even with all the fires going. I breathe deep and climb up onto him, enjoying the way his muscles contract beneath his smooth, scaled skin.

I straddle his thighs, and the crazy thing is, my knees don’t even remotely touch the ground. Like I am up here on an alien dude who changes size, who has a tail, who has wings with hands on them, who—at his smallest—is several feet taller than me.

“I don’t think ... You said yourself that I was too little.” I choke on the words as I study him, reaching out tentative fingers to brush against the side of his shaft. A deep, rumbling growl follows, one that I can feel in my very bones. He’s probably ... the size of a wine bottle without the neck?

“*You won’t be too little now.*” He replies to my words despite not wearing the translator. I figure it’s the word ‘little’ that cued him in. He seems to have no problem with that one in plain ol’ English.

Fuck it. I wrap my fingers around the base of him, and he hisses. My breath rushes out, and I feel this strange coiling in my belly. The sticky substance from his markings soaks into my skin, priming me for sex. I can feel it infecting my bloodstream through my skin, just the way it did when I inadvertently rubbed it on my bare belly. His smell, the pungent reek of sex pheromones, dizzies my head.

I can’t even get my fingers around it, I think with a burst of heat in my cheeks. The biggest guy I was ever with was *too* big. We had a shitty sex life because of it. *We’re not talking about having a sex life here, just about saving a life.* With ... my vagina.

I am going to save an alien’s life with my vagina.

Using both hands, I rub my palms up the length of him wondering where the ‘antivenom’ part of this mating comes into play. Maybe we don’t have to go all the way to make it work?

“*No, female.*” Abraxas grabs my wrist with one of the hands on his wings. His tail slithers into what’s left of my pants, and I gasp as it rends the fabric, tearing it down the seam and exposing my ass to the night air. The length of his muscular tail slips between my legs, and I choke on the sensation. It feels so fucking good, amplifying the heat in my blood. The tip of it slithers upward and over my clit before curling around the front of my hot pink pants.

Thread pops and fabric tears, and Abraxas wrenches the crotch right out from underneath me. His tail snatches my waist and lifts me up into the air, moving me so that my wet cunt is positioned right over the crown of his shaft.

“*Like this.*” He lowers me slowly down, and I gasp as the head of him pushes against my folds. I’m convinced that he isn’t going to fit, that even if he does, it won’t feel good. I’d say I needed more foreplay, but not only am I worried that we don’t have time for it, I don’t need it. Touching him was enough. The pheromones on my palms are enough. *He* is enough.

“Slow.” The word chirps out of me and suddenly, I’m not so plucky anymore. I’m aroused. I’m hot all over. I’m wanting in a way I can’t quite explain. *In the woods? In the dark? With shadow*

monsters everywhere? Not only that, but the guy I'm fucking is on his deathbed.

This is so messed up.

Despite everything—his impending doom, his clear advantage over me, his obvious arousal—he listens. He lowers me down nice and slow, and my breath catches. Those pheromones that were so wild on my palms, they're *inside* of me now. The sensation is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. I feel primal all of a sudden, feral, like I've wanted and waited for this moment my entire life. That sticky heat in his purple spirals, it loosens my body for him, primes me, relaxes me. Whatever that stuff is, it's making our full union a real possibility.

“More.” The word comes out before I can stop it, and then he's pushing me down hard and I'm overwhelmed with the sensation of being *full*. I can hardly believe I'm taking him all the way let alone how good he feels. Hot and fierce and male.

His tail releases me as I sit there, fully seated on his cock, and stare down at him. He's looking back at me, eyes hooded and bright as jewels, like some of that inner fire is already back in his gaze. That does it for me. I want to see him at full strength, hot-blooded and prowling, an apex predator.

My palms press flat to the muscles of his belly. His stomach and midsection are relatively human in appearance, minus a belly button or nipples. Doesn't bother me. That thought keeps circling in my head. *I don't care what he is. He's male, and I'm female, and this works.* Oh, it works. Better than that, it's incredible. Abraxas fills up all my empty space, makes me feel tight and satisfied and triumphant somehow.

I lift up on him, leaning forward and raising my hips until he's close to slipping out. And then I slam back down, as hard as I can. As fast as I can. Claws of pleasure are already digging their way into my blood, my nipples tightening to sharp points. *I want him to touch them.* He seemed to have no trouble figuring out what to do with them before.

Abraxas growls when I push the torn upper half of the space suit up, when I reach for one of his wing-hands, when I push it against my breast. His fingers dig into the soft flesh, fireflight bathing our

contrasting colors. He's purple tinted in this light, just a bit of violet in those ebony scales.

I'm moaning now, unashamedly. We're in the woods. Who's going to hear us?

It hits me that we're relatively close to the market, but if Abraxas really does get better, who could bother us? Not those orc men with their nets and their guns. *Nobody*.

Power rushes through me in a heady wave. Freedom rushes through me. The sensation of being wild and unfettered, without rules or responsibilities. A strange thought occurs to me, one where I live in these woods with this monster, where I sleep in a nest filled with furs and eat fire-roasted meat, where I have no bills to pay or laws to follow.

The purple markings on his belly and chest and horns, they all come to life like they've been pumped full of fresh blood. His skin heats up underneath me. A rumble tears through his chest.

He rolls us over so that he's on top, hips driving hard enough that my ass digs divots into the soft ground beneath me. His wing-hands snatch my wrists and pin them down, his other hands pressed to the forest floor for leverage. He curls his back like no human ever could, and that sharp, hot tongue finds my mouth. For an alien who's (presumably) never kissed a woman before yours truly came along, he seems to know exactly what he's doing.

I'm left not only breathless but stunned. The longer we fuck, the healthier he seems to get. His body lights up with a ferocious violet blaze, inky shadows growing around him as he slams deep enough to slap our pelvises together with a sharp crack. I seem to have no trouble taking him. More than that, it's like I was *built* to take him. Like I was meant to be here.

Our skin sings to one another, the brush of his scales against my soft flesh a pleasant scrape that makes me writhe, heels digging into the grass. My pelvis thrusts up to meet him, and he *loves* it. He growls at me as he kisses me, as he takes over my small, tender lips with his massive mouth, with those teeth, that tongue. It should rightfully terrify me, having been swallowed whole and all.

It doesn't.

I want him. So bad. Like, so so bad.

He's so hot. Apex predator hot.

My hands grip his arms, my short nails digging at his skin as I moan loud enough to scare off the shadow creatures in the dark. Or ... Abraxas raises his head, lips rippling in a massive snarl. The spines along his back and tail lift up, and his body blazes with bioluminescence. I hope that whatever those things are, they've learned their lesson.

“*Mate ...*” he growls, inhaling my hair, snorting so that it flutters around my face. There's heat in his breath, sparks and embers and flame. He smells like a campfire, like something else musky and strange yet somehow familiar. “*Female.*”

He fucks me so wildly, so ferociously that I enter a trance-like state, head thrown back, body blazing. I can barely remember my name let alone where I am or why I'm here. None of that seems to matter. I'm close, close, close ... I'm falling and orgasming so hard that I scream. The sound breaks through the trees, startling periwinkle blue bats into the dark canopy.

An odd sound, something between a laugh and a growl, ripples through him. I look up through the stars in my vision, and I see a horned god above me, something dark and fierce and ancient and old. *Wow. Fucking wow.*

Tears prick my eyes and stream down my face, but they're just pleasure tears. It feels so good, and my orgasm is so complete that I can't stop them.

Abraxas ruts me so hard that I can feel it in my bones, my legs spread as wide as physically possible to accommodate him. His wing-hands claw the dirt around my wrists as he uses his other hand to tilt my chin up. His tongue dives into my mouth, and I go hot all over as he comes inside of me. I can feel it, molten liquid deep in my core. It makes me thrash underneath him, seeking more, wanting more. Another orgasm threatens but doesn't quite peak.

His body relaxes substantially, lowering down so that he's covering me completely. My cheek is pressed into his rib cage, and I can feel his tail as it whips around behind him.

“Okay, Big D, *scoot.*” I'm panting for breath, pushing at him. It's not like pushing a brick wall. It's like pushing a skyscraper made out of steel and antimatter. His muscles are so hard that there's not even

a give of skin over flesh. Abraxas is a rock. *But he's a living rock, and that's what matters.*

As promised, sex has restored him to full strength. I don't understand how. Maybe he was bullshitting me and pretending to die so he could get laid? The thought comes and goes just as quickly. No. He was truly dying, and he used the last of his strength to bring my ungrateful ass to the market.

I owe him an apology or at least a thank you.

"No." That's his latent response to my question. He hefts himself up as best he can, curling his spine in that way of his, so that he can stare down at me, wings spread wide, shadows dancing around his body, blurring the edges between his strong form and the darkness around him. The fires could use some tending, but I have a feeling that nothing else will bother us tonight, not with Abraxas functioning enough to fuck like a fiend. *"I cannot. We are post-coitus and joined."*

I wiggle a little, and that's when I feel it, something strange but not unpleasant. It's like ... like I can *feel* him, his heartbeat, his blood. I'm giddy with the rush of it. When I move my hips again, I can sense something connecting us on the inside, like small filaments linking his body to mine. We're stuck together, but not knotted like a pair of mating dogs. Something different.

We lay there, his body not only inside of mine, but all around me. Four hands searching my body, a tail wrapping my ankle, and that goddamn tongue. He uses it to lick the side of my face, right up and into my hair, like he's *grooming* me.

"Stop that," I whisper, heart pounding. When my pulse races, I swear that I can sense his speeding as well, like our very blood is connected. My cheeks flush as I shift beneath him. Trapped but not unhappy. I have the strongest predator in the jungle poised above me, cleaning the blood and tears and dirt from my face. "If I hadn't screamed the word *fuck* ..." I trail off with a laugh that makes him growl, grinding his hips more deeply against mine.

My thighs quiver with the stretch of staying open for him, but he's so big, I have no choice. *Guess I'll get real flexible real fast*, I think, and then my eyes widen in disbelief. *What the fuck, Eve? No. You're going home. You're going back to Earth eventually!*

I have so much to return home to. A big, loving family, an incredible career, prospects of a house and a husband and children. I want all of that, and I can't have that here. Not even if ... I don't let myself go there. I have to find Jane, and I have to get us both out of here. Abraxas can help me with all that, can't he? That's what he's been doing thus far.

He takes the translator from me with one of his wing-hands and puts it on his head, waiting, I guess, for me to repeat myself. So I do.

"If I hadn't screamed the word *fuck*, you might've eaten me," I whisper, wondering how I'm managing to hold a conversation with a massive alien dick between my thighs. My blood feels so hot, almost foreign, like he's doing something to me through the connection between our pelvises. I have *never* felt this vulnerable and exposed with a human man before. This is sex on a whole other level.

He gives the translator back, and his mouth splits into a terrifying grin.

"*I knew before I heard or saw you; I knew because of your smell,*" He leans down and licks the side of my neck, causing me to moan and bite my lower lip hard enough that it bleeds. "*You weren't to be eaten; you were to be mated—by me.*"

The translator ... I'm impressed.

He relaxes again, covering me protectively with his body. I'm tempted to stroke his arms with my fingers, but that feels *way* too intimate in a situation that's already stretched far beyond the limits of my shame and acceptance. I need him off of me, so that I can process whatever it is that's going on between us.

No sooner do I have that thought than he draws back, sliding out of me.

There's a sharp pinch that makes me whimper, and a little bit of blood between my thighs. I sit up suddenly, quick enough to notice that his cock is dark before it draws back into his body. No more purple spirals or glowing. The rest of his body though? He's as lit as I've ever seen him, and he's supernatural in his poise. He towers over me, a force to be reckoned with.

I just so happen to look down at my own body, and I ... *what the fuck?* My eyes widen as I notice a *purple glow* coming from my vagina. Like, from *inside* of me.

“What did ... what did you just do to me?” I ask him, looking up to see him crouching over me in his gargoye pose. It’s all the more intimidating for his sudden vigor and vitality. I understand now what he meant by *not too little later*. Yeah. He changes size, and his dick changes sizes with him.

I swallow a lump of dread.

My vagina saved his life.

And now it’s glowing from the inside.

Of all the dumb-dumb alien romance plots, this one takes the cake.

Abraxas cocks his head at me. *Crap*. I blush as I sit up, and I realize that our entire relationship is now completely different. Jane calls it ‘the sex thing’.

“You know how it’s hard to be friends with someone you find attractive? You know why? It’s the sex thing. It’s the possibility that you could be fucking at any moment.”

Sigh.

The sex thing.

I look up at him, firelight dancing across the very alien planes of his face. His mouth is split in a shark-toothed grin.

“*Mates*,” he repeats, reaching out to dig clawed fingers into my hair. “*We are mates*.” He slithers forward, a brush of shadows across the inky night, and curls his massive body around me, dwarfing me completely. The fires continue to crackle, adding to the after-sex atmosphere. I’m simultaneously full of energy and also exhausted all at once. “*Rest, female*.”

He takes a moment to lick the wound on my midsection and then tucks me in close. I feel unbelievably safe with his body protecting mine.

What did I just commit myself to? I wonder, but there’s not a lot of time for that.

I relax on my side with his tail wrapped around my legs, and I let myself drift to sleep.



My eyes crack to morning light, my body jostling all over the place as Abraxas moves around. I realize very quickly that I'm on his back, that he's essentially strapped me to him with his tail. He's walking in human form—or however you want to call it when he walks on two legs instead of four—and he seems more than recovered from last night's brush with death. He's sleek. Agile. Glowing. Strength coiled in tense muscles.

“What the ...?” I groan, trying to extricate myself from his grip. I have no chance in hell of ever getting a one-up on this guy. He's not just two or three times stronger than me; he's like fifty times stronger than I am.

He looks up at a massive tree, and then he unsheathes the claws in his knuckles. With little effort, he scrambles up the trunk, digging ribbons of wood from the bark as he scales it effortlessly. I choke back a scream as we ascend fifty feet, a hundred, *higher*, and then we're on a tree limb and he's crouched down with his tail twitching behind him.

“What are—” I start, but he cuts me off. I'm still wearing the translator, but somehow, he understands what I'm saying anyway. Starting to think he knows a lot more English than he's letting on. I would absolutely *love* to know how he knows it.

“*Shush, female. Hunting.*”

I look over his shoulder and down the length of the branch, toward a bird with orange-gold plumage and a curling tail. It's like the one I saw last night, but it's not glowing. Instead, it's curled up in a nest made entirely of dead insects with shiny exoskeletons. I'm not sure how the nest stays together, but it's pretty, a shimmering circle of turquoise and purple chitin.

Abraxas stalks along the branch while I do my best not to look down. It's not that I have a trembling fear of heights or anything, but we are *way* up here. Skyscraper high. Also, last memory I was conscious for, we'd just fucked. And also maybe my vagina was glowing.

This is a sudden turn of events.

With a low growl, Abraxas takes off down the branch, startling the bird—or whatever it is—into the air. It drops toward the ground, and he follows, leaping off the tree and snapping his wings out to either side. I can't help it: I scream like a lil' bitch. Wind whips my hair around my face, stinging my eyes and sticking to my lips.

Abraxas snaps his wings back in and turns into a dive, plummeting toward the earth at such a violent speed that I feel dizzy. My stomach ends up in my throat like I'm on a rollercoaster or something.

The bird hits the ground and tries to run off, like an ostrich or an emu. Abraxas slams into it, snatching its neck in his massive mouth. Blood spatters the ground, and I fight back a wave of PTSD-induced trauma from yesterday's near swallowing incident.

A quick shake of his kill, and Abraxas seems satisfied that it's dead.

“What ... what the fuck?” I whisper, but he doesn't respond. He can't. He's dropping down to all fours and trotting off into the woods with a dead bird clutched in his jaws. Shadows streak around us, blurs of ink-like blackness that smudge the cheerful woods and the beams of sunshine breaking through the trees. *His* shadows. Like the creatures from last night that tried to eat him, the man blurs the edges of reality with his very existence.

The ship comes into view—his ship, specifically—and I feel weirdly like I've just come home.

That scares me. That scares the fucking shit out of me. Remember: I've only been here for ten of this planet's days. I was

kidnapped. I was nearly sold into sex slavery. Jane is out there somewhere. The lawyer got swallowed by a worm-blob monster. A crazy moth prince is stalking me. I almost got chained to a brothel wall. I was *swallowed*.

This is not my home; this is a hostile alien planet.

Abraxas hops up into the ship, spitting the bird's corpse onto the floor, and then setting me gently on my feet. I sway for a moment, hands grasping his tail to stay upright. He waits patiently for me to find my feet, splits that massive mouth into a grin, and then heads into the bathroom.

I can just *feel* Zero-One-Zero-One's eyes boring into my back. Err, if not her eyes then I guess her cursor? IDK.

I whip around to see the damning text hovering on the screen.

"What the hell happened to you last night?!" she demands, and I sigh. No way in hell I'm going to tell her that I fucked Abraxas, but I can give a partial truth, can't I?

"He's all healed up. Good to go." I offer a thumbs up that she can't see.

"He's healed up? So you found the antivenom?" If she weren't a random computer running off solar power that I strongly suspect is an AI chatbot, I'd find her enthusiasm charming. *"I knew my people were pioneers of preservation and medical science."*

"Err, yeah. Nice work." I turn and follow Abraxas into the bathroom. He's gargoyling (I just made that word up) beside the bathtub, clawed hands curled around the edges, wings tucked close, head dipped to the water. That long tongue of his slurps greedily as he lifts his eyes to mine.

Heat suffuses my cheeks. I'm pantless, by the way. Not by choice. I'm wearing white space boots and a torn pink top that barely covers my tits. I have the evidence of last night's coupling between my thighs and very possibly a glowing vagina. How could I not blush?

The guy made me a nest and performed some sort of primitive mating dance by a vista. Who wouldn't fall in love? Certainly there are worse choices for a boyfriend. *Only this doesn't feel like we're boyfriend and girlfriend. It feels like we're married, Costco card in hand, and signing a thirty-year mortgage.*

Just ... deeper than all that.

“Nice to see that you’re feeling better.” *Do I sound awkward? I sound awkward.* This is the weirdest morning-after I’ve ever experienced in my life. I take the translator from my head and approach him, but our entire vibe is different now. I feel it in my, well, in my everything when I get close to him.

He stares down at me with eyes like precious gems, his mouth disappeared into his ebon face, his clawed hands still gripping the rim of the bathtub. When I lean forward to put the translator on him, he dips his head toward me and closes his eyes. My fingers brush the sides of his face as he draws back and waits for me to talk.

I suddenly find myself at a loss for words. I think I was going to ask about antivenom, and how mating plays any part in that, but it seems suddenly strange to bring it up.

“Do you think I could have a minute?” I ask. He just stares at me and doesn’t move. “Like, to be alone?” Nothing. He’s still fucking staring at me. “Can I have some privacy?” Nada. Either he doesn’t get what I’m saying or he’s too stubborn for his own good. I am *strongly* leaning toward the latter. “Ugh, fine. Suit yourself, you dick.”

I turn away from him and head in the direction of the nest, praying that he isn’t going to follow. For a scant few seconds, he doesn’t. I’m alone in the nest, surrounded by furs. I sit down in the pile, pushing my auburn hair back with both hands.

I just fucked an alien. Like, literally. An alien. A dragon monster. He’s barely human. I’ve lost my goddamn mind. What would Jane say, hmm? I can hear her words now, echoing around my head. “*Girl, he’s stacked, and he’s a provider. What’s so wrong with him being an alien?*” Ugh, maybe Jane Baker isn’t the best person to condemn me for my actions.

Then again, maybe the fictional Jane has a point?

Curiosity kills the cat, but satisfaction brings it back. *Satisfied is right. For a wild rut with zero foreplay, that was ... Damn.* I look toward the entrance to the room, at the beautiful new curtain hanging over the doorway. Abraxas isn’t there, so I take a moment to spread my legs and look down as best as I can. There’s no glow coming from downstairs, but as soon as I spread the lips of my vagina, I see it. *Purple bioluminescence.*

Uh.

What the hell?

I dip a finger inside and pleasure slams into me with bone-cracking ferocity. Those *pheromones*. Need surges through me in an impossible wave, and my lips part in panting. But not just for anyone—for *him*.

Abraxas pushes the curtain aside with a hand, crouching down in the doorway to stare at me. His mouth is twisted in a smirk again. In the beginning, I didn't give him near enough credit. I thought of him as an alien—which he is—but he's also a dude. He's a goddamn dude, and I was stupid not to recognize that right away.

“What did you do to me?” I repeat, but he doesn't answer, dropping down to all fours again and crawling toward me. His tail lashes out to snatch my wrist, and he forces my fingers to his mouth, that long, hot tongue wrapping around them and sucking them clean.

I'm trembling when he's done, my eyes on his. They're so beautiful, his eyes. Purple and sapphire and gold all at once. I could sit and stare at them forever. *No, Eve! This is ... it's whatever he did to you. He put something inside of you. Like ... those purple spirals on his dick. He gave them to you!*

“Why do I have a glowing vagina?” I ask him, and he quickly switches the translator back to my head.

“We are mates. You are marked. Do your people not mark their mates?” He pauses there, tilting his massive head at me, horns shimmering.

It's a legitimate, understandable question. Coherent, too. I can actually understand what he's saying! I'm absurdly impressed with our current translator. We switch the headset over to him. I'm about to tell him no, but then I think about wedding rings and what they actually mean, and I'm not sure what to say.

“What am I going to tell my gynecologist?” I ask, wondering how the translator is going to handle that question. “I mean, once I actually get a gynecologist.” I've never been to one. Not keen to start going to one. Especially not keen to start now that my vagina glows purple.

He parts his lips to snarl at me, shoving the translator back onto me again.

“*No one looks at my mate. Mine.*” He nuzzles the side of my neck, and my breath huffs out of me. I want to explain to him that we’re not *actually* mates, that it was a one-time thing, that I’m human and I need to go home to be with other humans ... but ... I can’t. I can’t bring myself to say any of that. It feels like a blatant lie. “*My apologies, female, for my poor mating last night. I was not in proper condition.*”

He grabs hold of my waist with his tail and turns me over, putting me on my knees in front of him.

Holy fuck, he’s a horny bastard. That’s what I think, but you don’t see me complaining for good reason. I exhale and dig my fingers into the furs, suddenly desperate for another taste. Last night was fraught, but this morning is better. We’re not surrounded by darkness and hungry shadow monsters. I’m not worried that he’s about to die.

Instead, I get to savor the hot feel of his massive hands as he takes my hips, using his tail around my middle to hoist me up to a height that works for him. I’m biting down on my own lip as he presses his massive cock against my opening. *There’s no way he’s going to—*

I was going to say ‘fit’, but there are absolutely *zero* issues when he slides into my body, granting me that satisfied, full feeling again. I can’t breathe for the size and shape of him, but I feel weirdly complete. Happy hormones sizzle in my blood as I clutch desperately at the soft hides beneath me.

His hands hit the ground on either side of me, hard enough to shake the entire nest. His claws are out, protruding from the skin of his knuckles, and his arms glimmer with those beautiful markings. With his wing-hands, he takes my breasts and squeezes them in claw-tipped fingers.

A whimper escapes me. I have *never* felt anything like I’m feeling now. The heat of him. My own arousal. I’m as turned-on as I’ve ever been. At odds with his bestial nature and appearance, Abraxas is an affectionate lover, and my stomach somersaults when he drops his head near mine and rubs his cheek against me. That flexible spine of his comes in handy, allowing him to curl over and pay attention to my face when he otherwise would never be able to reach.

“*So soft,*” he growls against my ear. His real words—a guttural, rolling growl, like thunder—bring goose bumps up on my skin. The translator is nice, and it does an okay job of giving a deep, masculine

tone to his words, but that's not what he's saying. What he's saying is that *sound*, that wild male snarl and heat against my ear. "*Such a tiny, sweet little female.*"

Clearly, he doesn't know me very well if he thinks I'm sweet. Then again, I saw the female that tried to rape him. If that's what he's used to, I'm a friggin' peach.

Abraxas *bites* me then. It happens so suddenly that I don't have time to be afraid. His teeth sink into my shoulder, and a groan ripples through me as he continues to fuck. The pleasure from my shoulder twists up in my belly, melding with the pleasure from between my legs, and my cunt pulses and squeezes on him as I approach a ridiculously fast orgasm.

Back home, my record was achieved alone—my Hitachi Wand was superior to any IRL guy I ever had—and stood at a whopping fifteen minutes. Which, I mean, is pretty good. Jane confessed to me just recently that she's never had an orgasm which, I guess, is pretty normal for women our age.

Now? It's been two minutes, and I'm about to come so hard that I might scream again.

Abraxas huffs a surprised sound against the side of my face, something that the translator repeats back to me as a very pleased, "*oh.*" His movements slow, like he's savoring the feel of me, like it's not something that he necessarily expected. "*You want the mating rod?*" he asks, but I have no clue what he's talking about.

"Don't ... don't stop." I choke the words out, surprised that I'm able to talk at all. I'm the one with the translator on, so ... "Fuck me, Abraxas." He should understand that, right? He's known that word all along. *He said he knew right away that I wasn't food. From my smell.* I groan as my body pulses and flutters around him, and he makes the most pleased sound that I have ever heard from a man.

"*Such a find, my female.*" He growls and thrusts at the same time, driving his hips so hard into me that I let loose that scream I was holding back. *Whelp, now Zero's gonna know the truth.* Do I give a fuck in that moment? Nope. My body *sparkles* under his touch. I don't know how else to describe it except to say that I'm just a flicker of a person, a scintillation. And then he bites me again, and I'm not even that.

I let loose with the sounds, screaming and writhing and shoving my hips back into him as best I can. His tail is rock-hard, giving us the perfect platform to fuck over. The nest shakes, the vines holding it together whispering as they brush against one another with his movements. His wing-hands never stop caressing my breasts, fingertips teasing curiously over my nipples, like he's not sure what to do with them.

I'll teach him, I think, and I don't let myself dig any deeper into why I might have a thought like that when I most definitely *am not staying here*.

He keeps hold of my shoulder with his teeth, but whatever is in that magic healing saliva of his, it doesn't hurt. Neither does my midsection or my face, despite my injuries from yesterday. Instead, I come so hard that it almost hurts, my belly muscles squeezing tight, my cunt matching their strength, fingers ripping up the fur beneath me.

Abraxas keeps hold of me with his mouth, moving his wing hands away from my breasts and using them to feel me up. I swear, he touches every part of me: my hair, my arms, my sides, my thighs. Where I really want them—on my aching clit—he doesn't go. *I'll have to teach him about that, too*.

But I ... just had an orgasm with little clitoral stimulation. That's *insane*.

I'm so sweaty and worked up, my body jerking beneath him as he finishes himself, that I very nearly come a second time. *Just like last night*. But, just like last night, he comes before my second wave. His body tenses above me, muscles rippling beneath his smooth skin, and he bites down a little harder. A small sound of surprise escapes me as he buries his body deep enough that I can feel his hips pressing into my ass, and then he relaxes all around me.

Snatches of shadow dance in the air, blurs and flickers, extensions of his powerful body. It's as if he's wearing a cloak of night around his sleek, predatory form. Abraxas settles down around me, relaxing, dropping to his forearms, laying his wings out on either side of us. He keeps his tail under my hips, his weight on his arms, so that I'm comfortable even with his muscular bulk on top of me.

I'm still panting, still fluttering around his shaft. He finally releases my shoulder and then proceeds to lick the wounds he left

behind. They don't hurt. Not even a little bit.

"I'm guessing ..." I start, struggling with the thickness of my own tongue. I swallow a few times to gather myself, and he uses his wing-hand to tug the translator off so he can put it on his own head. "I'm guessing we're stuck together again?"

He considers that question before putting the translator back.

"*We are exchanging fluids,*" he tells me, almost gently, like he thinks I don't understand. "*You know nothing of mating?*" That last question is surprisingly earnest, and I feel my cheeks flush. I *do* know something about mating—with other humans. Not with ... dragon aliens. Aspis. Whatever. I have a feeling that I shouldn't bring that up right about now.

Translator goes to him.

I don't say anything for a while. I can't explain it, but I can *feel* what he's talking about. Something with those spirals and his cock, like there are blood vessels connecting our bodies. I can feel him inside of me in a way that's more than just penetrative sex. *Sharing fluids. Not just sexual fluids, but ... blood? Am I his antivenom?* I don't get it, but I don't ask just yet.

It's too intimate in here, too quiet.

He continues with his affectionate behavior, rubbing his head on me and making me so absurdly uncomfortable that I wish I could just hop off this ship and run far, far away. Uncomfortable not because I don't like it but because I do. I'm *loving* this moment, and I know that I can't love this moment because I need to leave. I need to find my best friend and go the fuck home.

"I ... I don't know what to say," I admit, and he rumbles with what I'm damn near positive is a laugh. Translator, back to me.

"*You were difficult to court. I am lucky.*" He draws out of me with that same sharp pinch, that little bit of blood. I roll onto my back to look up at him, and there he sits, savage but beautiful, alien but somehow, human, too. I struggle to sit up and he helps me, tail wrapped around my waist for support.

I take the headset off and hold it out to him. He accepts it and slips it on.

"What's up with the ..." I swallow back my embarrassment, gesturing loosely at my pelvis with a shaking hand. "What happens

when we ... what's that sensation? What's the blood from?" Other than that initial pinch, there's no pain. I'm not overly sore either. It's just enough of an ache that I can remember the feel of his body in mine, no more, no less.

He cocks his head at me, waiting for me to crawl forward and steal the headset back.

"My body to yours. Vice versa. Blood and venom and antibodies." He stands up on all fours and drags me along with him, his tail around my waist. Probably a good thing since I'm not sure that I could walk just yet.

This is ... I'd say it was going to get old fast because I've never liked clingy boyfriends in the past. Somehow, I'm intrigued by Abraxas against my better judgment. Never in the history of life has there been a worse match than us two. He's from some rando jungle planet; I'm from Earth. We could never *really* have a relationship.

But damn if he isn't the best sex I've ever had.

Damn if I don't like him for more than that.

He sets me down beside the dead bird and then gets to work stripping the feathers, roasting it over flames that he starts with a huff of embers from his own mouth. I glance over my shoulder to see Zero staring at me. Obviously, she can't *really* stare at me, but you know what I mean.

"I might be blind, but my hearing works just fine. Were those mating sounds emanating from the nest?" She sounds suspicious. I mean, when I read her words, they seem suspicious. Still not sure if I can trust this bitch or not.

"He was fucking his blankets again." I wave my hand dismissively despite knowing she can't see me. My cheeks flame. Abraxas *stares* at me. He's situated by the fire in 'dragon form', curled onto his side with shadows twisting and swimming around his body. "What? Don't look at me like that."

"I am pleased with you, female." That's what he tells me, the guttural growls emanating from his chest and throat translating directly into my ear. But I can still hear them, his true, untranslated words. His voice is beautiful, his language guttural and exotic. *"You show great courage in darkness."*

I'm not sure what he's talking about, but my cheeks burn even hotter. With a sigh, I finally tear off the last shredded remnants of my top, kicking the boots off and tossing them aside. What difference does it make if my top half is naked? It's my bottom half that Abraxas is interested in. *No, Eve, you liar. It's all of you.*

"Thanks, but I didn't do much." He won't understand what I'm saying, but oh well. I look up at his eyes, half-lidded and oddly affectionate. My blush—and I'm not much of a blusher—burns hot enough that I touch my hands to my cheeks, just to cool the heat down a little. "What were those shadow monsters anyway?"

I go to hand the translator back, but Abraxas doesn't take it.

"*Night Feasters,*" he replies easily, as if he knew what my question was. I give him a look.

"How much English do you really know? Come on, dude." I scoot a little closer to him, trying to ignore the wetness between my legs. We're cavemen out here. I have no idea where I'm supposed to go to wash myself off. But, uh, there's a lot. He's a big guy. "Where did you learn English? Little? Fuck? Female? You know an awful lot."

He blinks at me, turning his head away and then scratching at his horn with a clawed back foot. Like a cat or a dog or something. *Jesus.*

"*Slavers bring your species here. They speak in your species' tongue. Your species speaks in the language of your species.*" He looks back at me like *duh, how else did you think I knew English?* Something about his statement bothers me, a strange niggling in my belly that feels an awful lot like jealousy.

I purse my lips and cross my arms over my breasts to keep his wandering eyes away. And let's be clear: they wander and linger. On my breasts. On my lips. On the mess between my thighs. On my face. My cheeks burn like the hideous twin suns that cook this damn planet during the day. It's still light out now, but it's turning quickly to twilight. We must've slept most of the day away together. Storm's passed though.

"How many humans have you brought back here?" I ask dryly. "How many 'mates' have you had?" Not that I have room to talk. I wasn't a virgin before yesterday either. "In addition, I'd like to know how many Aspis females you've mated. Just ... I'm sure I can't get pregnant, but I don't want, like, some dragon STD."

Abraxas slithers over to me in a blur of inky shadows, surrounding me with his massive form. He snarls in my ear, breaking up the headset with strange static, like his very presence is scrambling its ability to translate.

“Repeat.” He takes the translator and then he waits. I question my decision, but that same ol’ plucky spirit wins out and I do it anyway.

“How many mates have you had?” I ask, turning to look at him over my shoulder. He takes up every inch of available space, making the large hull area of the ship seem very, very small indeed. He growls violently back at me, mouth rippling with all those teeth. *Teeth that were buried in my shoulder just minutes ago.*

I reach up and rub at my shoulder, sending prickles of heat straight to my core. When I try to peer at the wounds, all I see are small pricks of reddened skin where his teeth punctured. He gives the translator back.

“Only one mate, female. If we separate, we will both die of a broken heart.” He seems exasperated with me, but how is it my fault that we only have one translator, and it’s a mediocre one at that? Better than the last one, but still. *“Never more than one.”* He puts his face right up against mine. *“You see the dead female?”* He draws back and stalks over to the edge of the ship.

Come to think of it, I didn’t look at the female’s corpse when we came back this morning. Call it a trauma-based reaction if you want, but I automatically looked away.

I stand up and move over beside Abraxas.

The female dragon—or Aspis, I guess—is little more than a skeleton. There are wildflowers growing through her bones, bright in color and rich in fragrance. My eyes widen and I glance over at Abraxas. He’s crouched down in his gargoyle pose, staring.

“Without my female, that would be me this morning.” He turns away from the door with a sweep of shadows. It doesn’t hurt when that ethereal darkness passes over me. It’s more ... a gentle caress. I find myself following after him without even realizing that I’m doing it. Abraxas drags the bird’s body from the fire, tears a leg off with his claws, and then pushes it toward me. *“Eat.”*

It sounds less like a suggestion than it does a command.

I narrow my eyes on him, but I sit and take the food anyway. I'm starving. That, and I'm not about to have sweetbreads (aka organ meat) shoved down my throat again. *Gag.*

Gingerly, I pick the food up, blowing on the oversized drumstick to cool it. It's quite literally the length of my arm, from fingertip to elbow. I take a careful bite, pulling crispy skin and juicy flesh from the bone. My eyes widen. *Holy shit.* It's not just edible but *delicious.* I tear into the meat like a beast and Abraxas makes that rumbling sound I've learned to equate to a laugh.

"Strong females eat well." That's what he says to me. I ignore him, unsure how to respond to someone who keeps claiming that we'll die of broken hearts if we're separated. How can he possibly think something like that? Is he a hopeless romantic? He keeps looking at me with those hooded eyes, raking his gaze over my naked body. It shouldn't be like this, right? I don't look anything like a female of his species. *And yet, he rejected a female of his species in favor of you. Eve, think about that.*

"How old are you?" I ask, and then I remember that he can't understand me. I give him the translator and he uses his tail to put it on his head. I repeat the question. Take the headset back.

"Mature adult male," he responds, but since I have no fucking clue what that means, I make a number up in my head. *Let's call him twenty-nine years old. Just for kicks and giggles.* He could be a thousand years old for all that I know. I purse my lips.

We switch the translator back and forth as we talk. A real, honest-to-god conversation. And all of this after we fucked each other senseless. Well ... after *he* fucked *me* senseless. I'm not sure that he'd even let me fuck him or if I even could if I tried. I rode him for all of two minutes last night before he reversed our roles—and that was while he was on the verge of death.

"My birthday is coming up; I'll be twenty-six years old." I pause at his slow blink, like maybe the translator doesn't know what to do with that. "What I mean to say is, I'll be twenty-six Earth years old. Like, twenty-six rounds of my planet around its sun." I hesitate, wondering how much he knows about space travel. He lives in a spaceship, but I have a feeling he knows very little outside of this forest and this planet. "I'm from a whole different planet, you know?"

“I am aware.” He finishes the rest of the bird by himself, and then he eats the large bone that I’ve just licked clean, snatching it up with his tongue and taking the entire thing down his throat in a single swallow. Yikes. My new boyfriend is ... way not human. Not even close. I scratch my temple. *“You were stolen and brought here to serve as a forced mate.”* He pauses there to look up at me. *“Or food.”*

“Yeah, no shit.” I sigh. “I saw a sign when I woke up. It said, *“Humans ... pets, meat, or mates.”* I wrinkle my nose. *I can’t even believe we’re having a conversation here. He’s ... weirdly easy to talk to.* “I’m just lucky that you found me or I’d probably be dead. I don’t do well with ‘authority’.” I make air quotes that I’m sure he doesn’t understand. “Or ‘rules’. Forced mating ... that would’ve been the worst.” I frown when my mind drifts back to Jane again. Not just her, but Avril and the male medic, Connor. To Madonna, the possum. I’m even entertaining the *tiniest* crumb of worry for stupid Tabbi Kat.

Abraxas’ wing-hand slides the translator off his head and puts it on mine, his fingertips tickling my hair. I shiver all over, and he grins at me. The grin fades relatively quickly as he considers how to respond.

“Tusks take your females ...” He trails off, and then a word comes out of his mouth that isn’t translated. It’s just him, speaking to me the way he said those few, scant English words before. *“Humans.”* Another pause. Back to his language again. *“They take human females to breed.”* His entire face contorts. *“They violate them.”* He looks at me, and I swallow hard.

All along, he could’ve saved himself by mating with me. At any time, he had the power and the strength to take what he wanted and needed from me to cure himself, and he didn’t. He was willing to *die* because of an ironclad moral code. He didn’t want that female dragon; he wanted *me*. That makes me feel so guilty that I could die. *What am I going to do?*

I curl my knees up and wrap my arms around them.

“I am the lucky one. I have found a lovely female.” That’s what he says. Shit, shit, shit. I hug my legs even tighter as his tail drifts over, the tip of it wrapping around my ankle and giving it a comforting squeeze. *“But you are right. Any female Aspis would’ve eaten you.”*

I laugh at that. It's a tad bitter, but hey, I've seen firsthand that he's right.

"No, really?" I ask dryly, wondering if the tone will be lost on him or if he'll understand. He tilts his head at me again, and I get the idea that this is some sort of pleased response. He only does it when he's pleasantly curious.

"As far as pets ... I have seen humans on jeweled leashes. You would not have liked being a pet." He says this in such a way that I shiver. There's subtext there that I don't care to dig into. *Also, wow. He's well-spoken and smart. I had no idea how deep his intelligence went.* My cheeks continue to burn with shame.

We trade the translator, and his long fingers brush mine. My entire body wakes up, and I make a small sound that causes him to grin at me again. I can't decide if that's a real expression of his or something that he picked up from watching me. I would not be surprised if it were.

"What are the weird, uh, slug things?" I gesture randomly and uselessly around my head. He seems to like that, scooting closer to me. My body burns with his nearness, but I don't acknowledge it. *But damn, I want him again. I could go all night.* "When I was at the market, I saw this big, gelatinous *thing* eat one of the other humans whole."

Headset swap. He blinks at me with those beautiful eyes, and I find my fingers itching to touch his horns.

"You may touch me, female." He sounds beyond amused. Also, apparently, he can read my mind. My eyes go wide, and my skin blazes pink with embarrassment. *"I see you change color when you are embarrassed. How odd."*

"I'm not embarrassed," I scoff, knowing he can't understand me and not caring. I sweep my hair back, breasts thrust out for his perusal. I don't even care. Seriously. I'm a mature adult woman. Not a problem to sit here naked with his cum between my legs. Nope. "Ugh, I would *kill* for a hair tie."

I snap my fingers and put the translator on his head.

"Wait right here."

I can feel his eyes on me as I pad over to his dragon horde room, spotting a cord right away that I can use. I tie up my hair with it and

then snatch a hide from the nest, coming to sit back by the fire with it wrapped around my shoulders. If I sit a little closer to him than before, so what? He said I could touch him, didn't he?

I take the translator back.

"The slug creature," he says finally, as if he's been considering it while I was gone. *"I do not know what they call themselves. We call them Pests. They eat everything. They eat Aspis."* He turns his bejeweled eyes from the fire to my face. *"I am grateful you were not eaten."*

That makes me laugh. I clap a hand over my mouth. This time, when I need to give him the translator, I scoot even closer and slip it onto his head, my fingertips lingering on the sides of his face. I trace the spot where I know his mouth is, from one side of his head to the other. He has small holes beneath his horns that I figure must be his ears. I delicately trace my fingers around them, and he shudders, spikes raising up along the length of his neck and spine, from the crown of his head all the way down to the tip of his tail. His scales ruffle, too, a bit like a bird's feathers.

"Who is that moth dude?" I ask after regretfully drawing my hands back to my lap. "The one who challenged you with some spiel about imperial authority." I swallow the strangest feeling down my throat, this odd sense of ... something that happened when the moth guy and I looked at each other. It was weird. "When I first arrived on this planet, I was with five other people. Moth Guy, he came and purchased a female. And then he licked blood off of her, and took her away. I heard her screaming."

When I take the translator back this time, Abraxas makes a chuffing sound that has my stomach twisting into a pretzel. I ... oh my fucking God, I really like this guy. How? Why? The universe has *never* been so cruel as this.

"Ah. They call themselves the Vestalis. We call them hypocritical fools. They claim they will clean up our planet, force the monsters away. They never do." Abraxas turns to me and huffs my hair, making it ruffle around my head with his warm breath. It's so oddly affectionate that I don't know what to make of it. He seems to really be taking this mate thing seriously. *If he gave me ... if he gave me those spirals from his penis, how is he going to get another mate? What have I done?*

Saved his life, that's what.

“Do not worry, female. If he tasted her blood, then it is because she is his mate. The Vestalis do not get to choose their mates. Blood sings. It calls them. He will not hurt her.” He waits for me to hand the translator back, but I'm ... I'm fucking speechless. I yank it off my head with a strange, sick fear in my chest. He takes it gingerly and uses the adjustable headband to put it on.

“What if ... so you're saying that whoever's blood he eats, that's his mate?” I pile on some more questions before we trade the translator. “Like, how are they mates? What does that mean exactly?”

Abraxas is clearly picking up on my panic. He folds his wings around me, and I feel so protected and seen in that moment that I want to scream.

If I stay here, I will never see my mother again. I won't argue over golf with my dad. I won't have lunch with my sisters. I'll never get to see my little brother get married. I won't ever eat cake. I won't see chocolate let alone eat it. No wine. No hamburgers. No once-a-year cigars on Christmas. I won't ever see another movie. I won't ever read another book. No more fried chicken on a Friday night. Never be a homeowner. Never have a child.

I shove all of those fears into a box and slam the lid shut.

“Once he tastes her blood, he cannot choose another mate. He will die of a broken heart.” Aha. I see. This is where we are again. I can't help but wonder if something very, very important is getting lost in translation. *“But were she to be separated from him, she will be fine. It does not work both ways as it does with the Aspis.”*

I push the translator onto him, heart pounding. If that stupid moth prince ... well, at least that's a relief. I mean, for me it is. Avril got the short end of the stick, eh? She was covered in my blood, and I'd been freshly wiped down, but ... oh dear.

The moth man's black eyes. Those fucking eyes. They cut right through me.

I bite my lip hard enough to make it bleed.

Abraxas leans forward and sweeps his long tongue over my mouth, obliterating my poor brain. I give him the translator back and he takes it, somewhat reluctantly it seems.

“How will we die of broken hearts? I don’t understand that.”

Headset swap again.

“When Aspis mates are separated, they die. It is without fail. It cannot be undone.” He seems upset, so I don’t press my luck. Swap.

“Don’t look at me like you think that I think ... you’re not a mistake.” I tell him that with the translator parked firmly beside his horns, and I exhale, knowing that I am digging myself into a very deep, very troubling hole. I banish thoughts of the moth. If he dies, that’s his problem. He’s the idiot that ate the wrong girl’s blood. *Or ... the idiot that purchased the wrong girl. Maybe the blood was right?* Gah. Shit. “If I had to go back and make that decision a million times over, I would save you every time.”

I’m terrified to hear that I actually *mean* what I’m saying. Abraxas is noble and intelligent, beautiful and strong. I ... losing a creature ... a *man* like this, that would be a blow to the entire galaxy. *Assuming we’re in the same galaxy.* Wait, what even *is* a galaxy? Like, scientifically? I have no clue.

I clear my throat when he sits up and curls around me, gargoyle style, so that I’m essentially sitting in his lap. He slips the translator from his head and gently pushes it across the floor with his tail, so that it’s out of reach.

Every molecule in my body reacts to his presence.

Thank God that Zero is blind. I can feel her cursor blinking aggressively at my back.

She’s going to know after this conversation that I’m full of shit.

“Female.” He snarls this in my ear, and it’s a word I can understand coming directly from his lips. His tail wraps my waist, and he lifts me up, hovering my naked body over his hard cock. His entire body pulses and glows from behind me, those beautiful shadows shimmering and dancing against my skin.

He slides me onto him, all the way down until my ass meets his pelvis.

Holy crap. I’m in big trouble. I am in so much trouble.

Because, suddenly, weirdly, the last thing in the world that I want to do is *leave*.

Yep. It's the sex thing. And I have just walked myself right into an intergalactic thirst trap.



When I crack my sex-hooded eyelids open, I see that Abraxas is in the doorway with a cloth sack in hand. He drops it on the floor and then snatches me up with his tail, bringing me right up to his face.

“You’ve got to stop doing that,” I grumble, sleep-choked and disoriented. He licks my face and neck, nuzzling me and waking my body up with a bright, hot burst of arousal. “I’m not a doll.”

He’s not wearing the translator and neither am I.

He doesn’t take it with him either when he turns and stands up in human form, strapping me to his back. I ignore Zero’s glare (however imaginary it might be) as we move past her screen, and then Abraxas is leaping off the ship and into the grass. He lands with a crouch and then rumbles with pleasure at the surprised sound I make.

I’m so fucking embarrassed to be naked out here, even if I know that nobody’s going to come up on us. Or ... if they do, it’s Bad News Bears for them, isn’t it? My new fuckbuddy is a powerhouse predator. A weird sense of pride fills my chest, but I bat it away. I told myself that I’d use today to really sit and think, try to parse my thoughts and figure out what to do next.

Doesn’t seem to be the case.

We’re going on a field trip.

“Where are we going?” I ask, throwing my arms over his shoulders. He pauses where he is, and the spikes on his spine raise

up, poking me in the chest and belly. He scoots me to the side of his back, but I have to say, they didn't hurt. I actually *liked* the feel of them. *Yep. I have officially lost my fucking mind. This is what I get for mocking Jane's alien romance novels. This is the universe's true irony.*

I am the last person in the world that should be here. I have a large, loving family. I own a business. I love my life. I have the bestest best friend that ever lived. So what the fuck is all this? I'm sure there are women who would *love* to be where I am. I just so happen to be somebody that was happy on Earth, and I have a hell of a lot to lose if I never go back there.

I wrap my hands together around Abraxas' neck, and I can tell that he's pleased. He keeps trying to get me to touch him more, to explore his body, to cuddle and pet and rub and ... I don't know what to make of it. I am not someone that ever would've used the word 'commitment' on myself. One word that I *would* use on myself is TSTL—too stupid to live. That's what I'm like sometimes. I once jumped off a dam into shallow water for a five dollar bet. Broke my clavicle.

I rub absently at the old wound as we continue walking.

I'm extremely exposed, all sexed up and naked with no less than *four* of Abraxas' orgasms between my legs. It's all over the furs, too, and after he put in so much work for laundry day.

He growls at me, and I know that he's responding to my question in his own language. Whether or not he's picking up on my words, I don't know. But being here with him without the translator makes me remember how foreign and strange he seemed to me during those first few days.

Abraxas strolls the woods like they belong to him. I suppose, all things considered, they *do*. Who the fuck would mess with this guy? He even killed that aggressive female. He saved me from being eaten. From being kidnapped. Thrice.

Somehow, my rebellious arms squeeze a little tighter around his neck, and he chuffs at me again. My nipples turn to rocks against his back, and I wish that we'd brought the translator so I could, um, explain some of my anatomy to him—and vice versa.

Not that ... not that it really matters. Because I cannot fucking *stay* here. I grit my teeth, and he pauses, like he can sense the sudden

shift in my mood. I stroke my fingers down the, for lack of a better word, mane on his head. It *looks* a bit like hair from afar, but up close like this, it's easy to see that it's made up of tiny spikes, like the ones on his back. It falls from his head to his shoulder blades.

Just petting him is enough.

He takes me off his back with his tail and puts me on the ground in front of him. We face each other, and I have to crane my neck up, up, up to his face. He puts both of his massive hands on my head, and my heart leaps. *Oh God, no. He's going to kiss me again.*

His tongue sweeps my mouth before prying my lips apart, stroking my own tongue with long, velvety sweeps. Ah, and the way he grips my head, I just ... I can't with this guy. I push back against his chest, but he doesn't let me get very far. His eyes peer so deeply into mine that I feel like he can see all the lies and the bullshit that I'm carrying around. Guilt swamps me, and I feel like such a stupid asshole that I don't know what to do.

I mean, I often feel like a stupid asshole—I am sort of an asshole all the time—but this is on a whole new level for me. It's like I'm stringing this guy along.

“Where are we going?” I repeat, trying to gesture the sentence out with body language that he still doesn't understand because he's not a human fucking being. He's an alien. He doesn't even share universal things like crying or laughing.

Seems like he has no trouble smirking though. Because I swear to God that's exactly what he's doing when he sweeps past me, snatching me up by the tail again and putting me on his back. We walk through the massive trees in silence, snippets of sunshine kissing the forest floor. I see birds in colors I didn't even know existed, snails that glow as Abraxas steps over them, and even another kiyo that takes off like a deer when we startle it.

My stomach rumbles and Abraxas pauses. He growls something out that might mean *hey, don't worry about breakfast, I got this*. Or maybe that's just what I want him to say. He starts walking again. After a while, he drops down to all fours, extending his front claws, and continues on like that. His anatomy is honestly incredible—not just his dicks though—and I find myself surprised that he can so easily transition between walking on two legs and four legs, like both things are equally natural.

I try to look over the side of him so that I can study his back legs. Something about the way they bend makes it possible. My eyes drift up to his ass, visible when he thrashes his tail to one side or the other. Shit. This is what Jane would say: *“This alien has award-winning man cheeks, my friend.”* She’d be right.

“I *am* capable of walking, you know,” I tell him, but he ignores me. When I lean forward and grab onto his horns, he snarls at me with such ferocity that I almost come. I swear. Right on his back with no stimulation at all. I can’t resist running my palms up and down the curved lengths, collecting that sweet stickiness on my skin. It hits me like a drug, making me wonder in the back of my mind how much of my attraction comes from within, and how much is because of these pheromones.

The next time he takes me off his back with his tail, I’m put flat on my back and *mounted*. I use the stickiness on my hands to touch my breasts, and he pauses long enough to watch, to observe the way I pull and twist my own nipples. My wrists are grabbed with his wing-hands and slammed into the ground. He uses the other set of hands to cup the heavy weights of my tits, growling things under his breath that I somehow recognize as separate, individual words even if I don’t know what they mean.

I arch my hips against him, shameless. We’re just randomly on the ground in the middle of the woods, but ... who’s going to care? There’s nobody here. A rush of wild freedom flickers through me. *What must it be like to live here? I could do anything. Be anybody. Abraxas would take care of me, and I wouldn’t want for a goddamn thing.*

Except my family. Except stadium concerts (just not Tabbi’s) with a lightstick in hand. Except the croissants that I only bake for people I love because they’re too good to share with snooty rich clients. Except for binge-watching good TV.

Ugh.

I shut those thoughts down for a final time.

I won’t worry about any of that crap until ... tomorrow. Tomorrow is when I’ll deal with reality. For now, I’m somehow part of a mated pair with an alien dragon who knows how to fuck and isn’t ashamed to just do it. I take a note from his book, and I go wild. I push and grind against him, and he *loves* it. Oh, the sounds he makes are so

much better without the translator getting in my way. I don't even need to know what any of it means because I understand this part of him like I've known him forever.

When he releases my wrists, I sneak my hand down to my clit and he slows again to watch. Abraxas sits back and then, much to my fucking surprise, he brings his tail in between us. The first thing he does is rub the tip against one of the spirals on his horn—and then he uses the slick of his pheromones to touch me there.

My body explodes. I just shatter. I'm not a person now. I'm his mate. I literally care for *nothing* else. That'll scare the shit out of me later, I'm sure, but in the moment, it's exquisite.

By the time I come down and regather my senses, I realize he's finished and is poised over me, staring down. I thought at first that he was hard to read with his mouth closed—it really is little more than a faint seam—but that's not true at all. His brows move. His eyes. He tilts his head. His spines and scales ripple and raise. His tail smooths across the forest floor and then teases the sensitive skin of my hip.

“Do we get stuck together every time?” I ask, because I can feel it again. I felt it all night. The exchange. His heartbeat. A burst of energy that makes me feel like I could climb the skyscraper-sized trees all by myself.

He sweeps his wings under me and lifts me up, still attached at the pelvis, eyes peering into my own.

Based on his claims, he was a virgin before we, err, *mated* with each other. Staring back at him now, I find that so hard to believe. He has those beautiful shadows dancing around him, the wicked tips of his horns glinting, his body hot and slicked with pheromones and what I think is sweat. It smells *amazing*, whatever it is. He's sex incarnate. I've never seen anything like him—not even at the K-pop concert my sister dragged me to. We were seeing *ATEEZ* together, so you know that I'm serious when I say this.

No human male has ever topped this feeling in me. I feel happily small, smugly female, disturbingly content. Normally, I'm a crass, sarcastic dick. So what is this? What am I doing?

Abraxas nuzzles my face, and I close my eyes tight. If he keeps doing that ...

He separates our bodies. There's that sharp pinch. There's a tiny bit of blood on my thighs.

I turn away from him, intending to walk on my own and ... then I trip. My legs are like jelly and my knees are weak. Oh my God, that gets him. He howls. Literally. The sound raises the fine hairs on my neck and arms as I peer over my shoulder at him. Now this is most *definitely* laughter.

He stalks past me on all fours with a slyly tossed out snarl that I just *know* means, "*you can walk on your own, eh?*" And then he keeps walking and acts like he's going to leave me behind. At the last minute, he snatches me by the waist and returns me to his back.

I ride him like a horse, arms crossed, pouting.

And then I hear water.

Abraxas pushes through a thick cluster of ferns, and my breath catches so sharply that I start to choke. *So damn elegant. So sexy. What a mate.* I rub the happy tears from my eyes with my knuckles, still choking, and find myself open-mouthed and gawping like a dumbstruck fool at the sight before me.

Steam rises from a sapphire hot spring that's shaded by trees and surrounded by ferns and wildflowers. Multiple waterfalls drain into it, the water hissing as cool meets hot. But that's not the most amazing part of it: the waterfalls are coming from *floating rocks*. Yes. Floating rocks. They drift lazily above the falls, the waterfall from one hitting the next, and then the next, until they reach the springs. There are a few groupings like this scattered about. I tilt my head back to see where the water's coming from and find that it's draining off the leaves of a tree.

Huh.

I look back down at the otherworldly set up. Did I mention that it was *glowing*? The entire thing. It sparkles and shines, pulsing gently like the swirls on Abraxas' body.

"Um. I don't know how I feel about glowing water. What if it's radioactive or—"

Abraxas uses his tail to lift me up and chuck me into the springs. I let out a small scream, but it's just deep enough to be safe for a fall, and just shallow enough for me to hit the black sandy bottom and

push off. I break the surface with a gasp, kicking my legs to stay afloat, and swiping hair from my face.

“What if I couldn’t swim, hmm?” I ask as he lazily saunters his way over to a nearby bush. The first thing he does is ... lift his leg and piss on it. I narrow my eyes as I tread water, watching as he moves to a different bush, one with budded purple flowers. Abraxas sweeps his tail around the base of it and then pulls gently upward, gathering all the flowers together. He tosses them into the water around me where they unfurl softly, releasing an intoxicating perfume into the air.

Oh. Oh wow.

Abraxas slips into the springs like a snake or something. He’s smooth and sinuous as he glides toward me, circling me in such a way that I’m aroused all over again. Just from that. I try to turn in the water to keep up with him, but he’s too fast and I’m too clumsy. Why something as beautiful as him would ever *want* to be until-death-do-us-part mates with me, I’m not sure. That, I believe, is the weirdest part of our relationship.

“Never mind,” I respond belatedly, answering my own question. “I know what you’d do. You’d save me like you have so many times before.” I huff as I look down at the water, marveling at the beauty of it. Now that I can see that it isn’t going to melt my skin off, I’m like ... devastated by it.

It’s the perfect temperature, heated from underneath by more of those thermal vents. Maybe a hundred-and-six degrees? I tweaked my parents’ hot tub so it could be heated up past the-hundred-and-four mark. That one-o’-six? Perfect. That’s about what this is. It’s literally the color of sapphires, and it glows even when I cup a small amount in the palm of my hand.

“This smells amazing.” I inhale nice and deep, closing my eyes and listening to the gentle splash of the waterfalls. None of them are very big, and I feel the sudden urge to see if I can’t climb onto one of the floating rocks. I open my eyes to see Abraxas in the water, staring at me. No, more like observing, trying to see if I like this, if I’m pleased by it. A smile lights my lips. It might be the very first genuine smile I’ve allowed myself since I got here. Maybe I’ve twisted my lips into a *semblance* of a smile before, but I didn’t feel it in my chest the way I do now. To be fair, I don’t smile very often

anyway. I'm just sort of *that way*. "Like violets." I breathe in deeply. "Powdery. Sweet. Romantic."

I swim over to one of the floating rocks and he follows me. The rock itself is obsidian black, and shiny, threaded with silver veins. The water is much cooler here. When I reach a hand out to touch the falls, I see that it's very cold indeed.

Abraxas seems to sense what I'm doing, using his tail to lift me from the water and set me on the rock. It tilts slightly as I balance up there, looking down and into the small pool that divots its base. My lips part in surprise as I see that it's like a tidepool, full of little alien critters that panic at the sight of my shadow looming over them. I put a bit more weight on one foot than the other, and the rock tilts. My arms pinwheel and over the side I go, landing in Abraxas' arms.

My cheeks fill with heat— swear that I'm not usually a blusher!— and I find myself staring up at him, completely awestruck.

"Hi." It's the best I can come up with. He splits his mouth into a toothy grin, grabbing one of the flowers with his wing-hand. He crushes it up, and it foams, like the ones back at the ship that I used to wash my clothes. When he starts to rub it into my skin, I'm dumbstruck all over again. More so than I was when I saw the springs. *He's ... washing me?* "I stink, don't I?" I ask, and he growls at me. "That's partially *your* fault. You make a lot of seed, my friend."

He uses his other wing-hand to pull the cord from my hair, tossing it onto the shore. And then he scrubs me down from head to toe—including between my legs. I'm breathless as it's happening, nearly paralyzed in his arms, but I like it too much to move. When he's done, he pushes me into the water and leaves me to dunk myself.

I break the surface with a big breath, combing hair back from my face. Abraxas is washing himself now, starting with his horns. I bite my lip, and then I swim over to him, using his shoulders to haul myself up from the water. He grabs my bare ass in his big hands, his claws just *barely* protruding from his knuckles to prick my skin. I snag one of the floating flowers and then I bathe him, too.

If I said that he *purrs* as I do it, would you believe me? That's what it sounds like, this wild noise caught somewhere between a growl and a purr. It's such a pleasant surprise that I scrub harder,

washing every bit of his body that's above water before we're forced to move closer to the shore.

I continue my work as he stares down at me, head tilted slightly to one side.

And then ... I get to his ... it's all flat right now, and I think stupidly how I mocked him for being dickless when we first met. As if in response to my sudden pause, he reaches down and strokes himself with two fingers, coaxing his cocks—in the plural—out of his body. There's that sack, too, big and plump. *Dude's got balls, for sure.*

I swallow hard as I study the pair of shafts, one positioned just above the other. There's only the one sack though, and it hangs heavy and full beneath his second cock, the one I haven't seen much of. I'm not usually one to be shy, but my fingers are tentative when I reach out to touch it.

Abraxas takes my wrist with his tail and puts my hand where he wants it to go, closing his eyes in bliss as I run my fingers down the length of him. His second cock, the one with the sack, is solid black. I remember that it never had spirals on it to begin with. Now, both of his dicks are solid black with thick veins under the skin and small, fine scales that mimic the ones on the rest of his body. It's oh so smooth as I rub my palm down the length of it.

“Why don't you ever use this one on me?” I murmur, looking up and through my wet lashes at his face. He can't understand, but I hope I get my point across when I lock my fingers around the lower cock and give it a nice, hard tug. Abraxas bares his teeth at me as I cup his heavy balls in my other hand. This does have purple spirals on it that glow and pulse when I rub my skin against them. More of those honeyed pheromones collect on my flesh like nectar, and my heart races in response. I squeeze his balls and work my fist up and down his second cock, lifting up a bit on my haunches so I can put my mouth—

Abraxas' hand fists in my hair to keep me from touching him.

He releases me right away and then squats down. Even with him squatting, he's still tall as hell. I look up, breath catching, trying to figure out why he stopped me when he did. When he stretches toward me, I instinctively move back and end up falling on my ass in a tumbled heap. He makes that rumbling sound and splits his sexy

mouth. Now that I've gotten used to it, I've decided that I like it. He's a blur of angry black shadow with massive wings and a strong tail, spines down his back, long nimble fingers tapping against his knee in thought.

He asks me something in his language. I think. Or he's just growling at me.

Something splashes in the water and his tail lashes out, lightning quick, snatching the creature and tossing it onto the shore. It flops around like a fish, but ... my eyes skim to the side and lock onto it. *The fuck is that?* It might flop like a fish, but it's definitely not a fish. It's a, um, something fuzzy, I guess.

Getting onto my hands and knees is not a smart choice. I can *feel* Abraxas snarling at me, but I ignore him—not an easy thing to do—crouching low to stare at the creature as it goes still. Dead, I guess. It's a sea sponge.

Abraxas steps over me—quite literally. He puts his hands, claws extended so they look like paws, on either side of me and then leans down to sniff the creature. I can feel his heat all over me, making it very difficult to remember that I'm supposed to breathe. He growls something in my ear and then withdraws.

I flick a sharp look over my shoulder when his warmth retreats, watching as he wades into the water on all fours, tail swaying as he waits for another splash. He snatches up a second sea sponge and chucks it my way. While the first was purple, this one is a pretty rose pink color.

He catches an entire rainbow of the things before returning to me. I sit back on my calves as he gathers sticks and leaves into a pile and then sits across from me, like a human with one leg stretched out, one knee up, arm thrown across it. He huffs a fire into existence and then drags one of the sponges close.

"I'm not eating that," I declare, pretty proudly and ignorantly for someone who can't procure their own food. Can you tell I've never had to starve a day in my life? Yeah, I know. I'm a brat. Good thing Abraxas doesn't have the translator with him. I scratch at the back of my head. "So, um."

His tail reaches across the fire, snagging me around the waist again and lifting me right over it. I'm plopped down into his lap. No

dicks to be seen unfortunately. *Fuck, I am thirsty for alien peen. What is wrong with me?*

He uses the claws of his wing-hands on my hair, combing out the knots. As he does it, he stares into my eyes and I ... I just don't want to talk anymore. I don't think about anything either. I *relax* and I close my eyes, and then I lay my head against his chest.

It's the best day I've ever had.

In my entire fucking life.

Yep, I am royally screwed, aren't I?



The sea sponges open up like clams or something, and their meat is weirdly similar if not a tad sweet. I'm not a fan. I might even gag as I eat them, and Abraxas might even laugh at me, but I eat them anyway because, well, what other options do I have?

He carries my sleepy, well-fed, well-fucked ass back to the ship and hops in, finally deigning to show me what's in the cloth bag from this morning.

It's another translator.

I feel this huge, stupid smile spread across my lips as I jerk it onto my head and put the other onto Abraxas. It seems like the translators are similar, like maybe they came from the same place.

"If you had these, why didn't you bring them with us this morning?" I ask, and he gives me this look, like why am I even asking such a silly question.

"We did not need them." That's his response. It's as smooth as I've ever heard him sound. The new translator is better than the one he has on (which is about a million times better than the hideous hot pink one that we started with). I should probably switch with him so he can understand *me* better, but I'm selfish. I want to hear every single thing he's saying.

"What else is in there?" I ask, gaze shifting to the bag again.

"Useless things," he tells me, but I can't even begin to figure out what those 'useless things' might be because he's getting that *look* in

his eyes again. My body warms in response, and I curse myself. I put my hands up on either side of his face as he crouches there on all fours, watching me with undisguised *thirst*. Apex predator thirst. Yikes.

I clear my throat.

“We should try to do things other than just fuck,” I explain, and he rumbles all over with laughter, shaking his head at me as he prowls past and into the shadows of the nest. I find myself drawn around to face him as he collapses on his side in dragon pose. How else do I explain it when he’s curled up like that? He lifts his wings up and then out, like he’s inviting me in. “Don’t we ... uh ... have other chores to take care of?”

He tilts his head at me again.

“Chores? I will clean our sex off the nest in the morning. Other than that, what chores do you mean?” He sounds genuinely curious, those violet-sapphire-gold eyes blazing. “Are you hungry perhaps? I will catch you something else to eat.”

“No, not hungry, just ...” I don’t even know what to say. It seems so slothful and decadent to just lounge in this bed all day and have sex. I bite my lip to keep back the thoughts. *Tomorrow, goddamn it. Let me just have the day.* I walk over to sit beside him and he sweeps his wings around me, drawing me in closer. The bright green of the headset looks hilarious on his massive head, but at least it has a super flexible headband or it’d never fit. “How often do you have someone to talk to?”

Not sure why that’s the next question I choose to ask.

The corner of his mouth lifts up, baring those knife-like teeth.

“Talk? There is no one to talk to.” His statement is matter-of-fact, but damn if it doesn’t make me feel sad. “Until now,” he corrects, a growl rippling his mouth. I throw my arms around his neck, crushing my eyelids together to hold back tears.

“Why me?” I whisper, because I just cannot for the life of me understand why he picked me. “You could’ve had that female. *Clearly* she was into you. Stronger than me. More useful.” I draw back to see what he thinks of being hugged. I don’t think it’s something a female Aspis would do, having met one myself. But he seems absurdly pleased by the action. “Why?”

“Why?” he repeats, like the question is strange on his tongue. The cute little whistle-growl that actually comes out of his mouth—as opposed to through the translator—is knee-weakening. “Sweet, little, affectionate, fierce.” He breathes in the smell of my hair. “*And your scent.*” This last part is nearly obliterated by his growl, scrambling the translator and making it crackle. His face, which I’m already learning how to read, is determined when he speaks again. “I made a vow that I would not mate a female who would force herself on me. I have fought and killed dozens of times to keep that reality. For you, I had to court and woo.”

I lift a brow.

Damn straight he courted and wooed. I’m still in awe of the display.

Yep. Thoroughly charmed.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. You try harder than most guys on Earth.” It’s a joke, but not really.

I frown.

Maybe there’s a reason I’ve never had a relationship that lasted longer than six months? And even then, Mack, my most recent ex, was the one who held that record. Before then, I believe *six weeks* was my longest. I thought it was a ‘me’ problem, but ... I put my hand on Abraxas’ chest, and he grins at me.

“Sit back against the wall,” I tell him, and he seems to consider it for much longer than he should. “Dude, come on. You’ll like this.”

“*Male?*” he breathes, and then he laughs. “Yes, refer to me as male instead of *Abraxas* if you want.” He rolls that ‘X’ so silkily that I almost pass out. Also, I think his headset translated ‘dude’ as ‘male’. Cute.

He does what I’ve asked, leaning back against the wall like a man, wings still drawn around me, tail teasing up along the inside of my inner thigh. I tuck my hair behind my ears and then gesture at his pelvis.

“Let me see them,” I tell him, but he just growls right back at me, snapping his teeth.

“Bring them out.” It’s a challenge. I narrow my eyes on him, and then I throw my own smirk out. *What a son of a bitch.* But if there’s

something you should know about Eve Wakefield, it's that I *love* a good challenge and I *hate* to be told no.

I climb onto Abraxas' lap, this tiny, pale thing in a sea of obsidian scales, muscles, and man. He dwarfs me, and damn it, I'm living for it. I put my hands flat on his midsection and sit up, knees on his thighs. I press a kiss to the space where his invisible mouth is, and it splits right in half, flashing that naughty alien grin of his.

"Aspis females don't have breasts, do they?" I ask, cupping the full mounds in my own hands. He watches me curiously, mesmerizing my movements like he did earlier. Never had a guy care so much about how I liked to be touched. "Do you think they're weird?"

"I love your sex organs." His unconventional response makes me snort, but as odd a statement as that is, it's perfectly genuine.

"These are only *partially* sex organs," I correct, kneading the flesh and wiggling my wet pussy on his crotch. He must have control over when his cocks come out, and he must be holding back on purpose to fuck with me. We'll see how long he can keep it up. "These are used to feed babies." I point at my nipples. "Milk comes from here."

He blinks at me and tilts his head, his mouth disappearing into his face.

The moment turns strange there for a second, and I cover my nipples with my palms, face flushing.

Why did I bring this up? It's just a reminder that I can't be what he wants me to be. I am not his forever person, and his mate. I'm just an alien on a temporary stay over.

"You are upset." He captures my chin in those long, alien fingers of his, and my stomach fills with butterflies. Or ... moths? "Why? Aspis females have nipples along their belly, even if they do not have these mounds. You will have no problems feeding our child."

Our child? Wow. Um. Fuck.

"We can't have children together," I tell him, because it's true. Maybe if I tell him that, he'll understand how this can't possibly work out between us. "We're not the same species."

He vibrates with a rolling growl that is most *definitely* a laugh.

“I can smell your pheromones; our biocompatibility is high. You needn’t worry.” He extends the claws from his knuckles and runs them through my hair. It’s all smooth and silky now, entirely knot-free. Whatever those flowers were that he tossed into the water, they’ve done the trick. “I will give you a child whenever you want one.”

I purse my lips.

“Look how different we are. Look at us. How could we *possibly* have a child?” I don’t even know why I’m arguing this. I don’t want kids right now. I want to start at thirty-five, have two, and be finished. This conversation is going in such a bizarre direction.

Abraxas growls at me, putting his massive head up against mine, rubbing against me until I’m covered in goose bumps. He likes that, the pebbling of my skin. He sweeps both sets of his hands over me, skimming his palms on every inch of my body. His markings leave dewy residue wherever they go, and my cunt aches so fiercely that I consider dropping the discussion entirely. Only, he pushes back at me first.

“Look how similar we are,” he corrects with such a high level of arrogance that I could slap him. “You were so little, I wasn’t sure. But now that I’ve marked you as my mate, you can take my cock quite easily. If we were incompatible, surely we would not meld and share fluids. Surely we would not arouse one another to frenzied states by scent alone.”

“I liked you better when I couldn’t understand most of what was coming out of your mouth,” I grind out, crossing my arms tightly over my chest to hide my breasts. Here I was, willing to give this man a blow job, and he’s talking nonsense. “We will *never* have a kid together. Okay? If you’re with me assuming that we will then, well, I hate to burst your bubble, but you best adjust your expectations.”

The growl he gives me then is deep and low, a tremble that shakes the nest as he wraps his wings around me and tucks me close. I let out a small shriek of surprise when I feel his cocks emerge, one on either side of me. I’ve got the OG dick—the one that had the spirals—between my front folds while the other sits between my ass cheeks.

“My expectations do not need adjusting. I do not care if we have a child or not. My want and desire is only for you.” He pauses there, and I can’t help but love the layering of his smooth, dark voice on the translator as it pairs with the true growls of his native language underneath. “But fear not: I could but *look* at a female right and get her pregnant.”

“Oh?” I cock a brow at that. I want to choke this guy so badly right now. He deserves a good metaphorical throttling. “All males think that. You are not unique in your bullshit, *sir*.”

“Perhaps I am not unique in my thoughts, but I am not incorrect. Do you want a child? I will give you one now.”

That makes me laugh. I shift my body around, rubbing his cocks against me and loving it as much as he seems to. We’re both making strange sounds, much less sentient. Primal, really, is what all this is. He snatches my shoulders in his giant hands, as if to slow me down.

“Do your worst. It *isn’t happening*,” I breathe. I know for a straight fact that I’m right. Nothing could change my mind about this. He’s an alien to me. I’m an alien to him. There’s no way. “You’re lucky you have two cocks; human men only have one.”

That freezes him right then and there. He’s speechless.

“Truly? How do they control their fertility during mating?” he asks, but I’m not about to dive into all of that when I’m sitting naked on his lap. Explaining condoms and birth control pills and whatever just isn’t part of sexy time for me at the moment.

“What do you mean by that exactly?” I ask, and then a thought occurs to me. “Do female Aspis have two vaginas then?”

Abrahas just stares at me, the edge of his mouth curling up to reveal those shark teeth of his.

“They have but one. It does not pulse happily the way yours does. And it does not drip pheromones like yours either. It is up to the male to work the bonding fluid from his cock so that the mating is smooth and pleasurable.”

“How do you know all of that if you’ve never slept with anyone else?” I’m getting annoyed now. I hate that I started a conversation when all I want is for him to fuck me senseless again. I wiggle and he snarls, biting on my shoulder playfully and causing my back to

arch. He licks the wounds and then raises his head, our faces pressed close.

“Discussions with mated males. My people have a gathering every year on the eve of the seasonal solstice. I speak with others and learn their ways.” He wraps an arm around my waist and lays me down in the furs, covering my body with his own.

The heat of him, the smell, the texture of his skin. There is quite literally nothing I don't like. *My sex life is going to be ruined after this.* Even the mere thought of going home and trying to date, of having sex with a human man, it disgusts me. I press my hands to either side of Abraxas' face and he purrs for me. I'm willing to wager that I'm the only creature that's ever been allowed to touch him this way.

I snagged me an alien virgin. I'm a regular ol' cherry hound.

I snort, and he rubs his horns over my hair.

“What's bonding fluid?” I whisper, because damn it, but I want to know everything about him. Every little fucking thing.

“The mess my cock makes inside of you,” he growls, licking my neck, curling his tongue around my breast, *squeezing* my breast with the strength in his tongue. He draws it back in with a smack of sharp teeth and wide, wild lips. “Your species does not have this?”

“I assumed it was ... semen. Seed.” I choke on the words, like I'm a middle schooler and not a grown ass woman with moderate experience. “That's what happens with human males.”

“Ah.” He adjusts himself and reaches down, curling one of his hands in a tight fist around his lower cock. “Seed comes from this rod only.” He strokes himself as I watch, swallowing past the tightness in my throat. “Aspis females only milk a male's rod when they want a child, which is rare. Two or three times in a lifespan. You confused me at first. I assumed you were seeking the mating rod during our first rut.”

“Are you calling me slutty?” I tease. It's supposed to be a joke, but it gets lost in translation. He tilts his head again, studying me as his winged hands drop down and snag my knees, yanking them apart. My breath releases, and I melt into the furs beneath me, body relaxed and ready. “I want to try your ... mating rod.”

I've only had one of those cocks. What's the point of getting dirty with an alien if I don't get to try all the weird shit? He hesitates. He wants to use it, I can see that quite plainly.

"It is rare for a male to receive pleasure in it though he craves its use."

"Well, you can use it on me." I'm being flippant, but I'm also certain that I'm right about this. "I'm telling you that it won't work."

He releases his cock and drives his hips forward, slicking the length of his lower shaft between my legs. My back arches as his hands land on the ground above my head.

"No. I will not use it under the condition that you believe it will not work. I am telling you that it will. You are the most stubborn female I have yet met—and I have killed many who have been arrogant enough to try to force-mate me."

"I said use it!" I yell at him, reaching up to grab his horns. I yank his head down, and he lets out this terrible snarl, the worst I've heard yet. It's completely and utterly unhinged, and it activates every cell in my body. I'm not one to surrender in most cases, but this is ... it's a complete undoing.

Abraxas uses his winged hands to tear the translators off both of our heads. He throws them, but they land in the softness of the nest, unharmed.

Our eyes meet.

And then he enters me with his second cock.

I win.

Doesn't feel like that though. It feels like *he* is the one who's winning. His mouth ripples as he snarls at me, curses or promises in another language, I'm not sure. His body is wildly hot as he pumps into me, forcing my muscles apart with every thrust. It's not hard. He's right: unlike an Aspis female, I *want* it. I want it so badly that I writhe, that I meet his every undulation with my own.

His second cock stands hard and dripping between us, sliding against my clit and spreading my folds with every forward movement. I'm gasping for breath, struggling with the overwhelming sensations. When he's all over me like this, rubbing his markings across my naked skin, it's almost too much. And if it's only 'almost', that means it's just right.

That heavy sack of his slaps my ass, full and tight. I love the feel of it, some base part of me reassured of his heat and his wildness and his fertility. *Which isn't mine to take.* I kick that thought to the curb where it belongs, dragging my nails down his midsection. He's wet with either humidity or sweat or more weird alien pheromones, I don't know, but I like it. My hands skim his slick, scaled skin as he curves his neck to look down at me, wing-hands digging clawed fingers into my hair.

His tongue lashes out again, slicking over one pert nipple and then the other, making me cry out. I can't last long with this guy. No human woman could. My senses are assaulted on every level. I'm aroused by things I didn't even know could be arousing. Sticky musk and scents and the heavy wetness between my thighs. This mating is not quite the same as the other times.

Abraxas bites me in the shoulder again, hands locking on my hips, holding me still. He grinds his body into mine until my vision flickers at the edges, sound cuts off, and I'm trapped in this moment of pure stillness and serenity. *He's mine, isn't he? As much as he wants me to be his, he's mine, too.*

"You're mine," I whisper, and it's the strangest, most wondrous thing.

He laughs at that, the sound vibrating my entire body from the inside out. That's an English word he knows. Figures.

"Yes." There it is, a reply in my own language. A verbal confirmation I don't need because I can feel it. *Maybe there's some way I could barter for semi-regular trips back to earth? Other aliens—like that Tusk Guy—they do it often enough to have learned English. Why couldn't I go home to visit my family, and then come back here with supplies?*

It's an option. It is. It's an idea I didn't think of until now, one that I'm suddenly terrified won't work.

The orgasm that was starting in me, it crests and breaks, and I tumble deeper into it, moaning and melting beneath him. His cock—the one that isn't inside of me—tightens and then bursts, spilling fluid across my breasts and belly and even my face. The other continues to move, hard and hot inside of me. Abraxas moans even with his teeth still locked onto my shoulder, his lids fluttering, his markings flaring violet.

When he comes inside of me, I can feel a tightening, a thickening at the base of his shaft, connecting between us, locking us together. His sack is pressed hard against me, pulsing as his shaft throbs. It's a very active transfer of his seed into my body, violent contractions of his balls and his shaft at the same time. He releases my shoulder and relaxes his massive form around me the way he likes, nestling us together in the furs.

I can't breathe, but I don't care. I'm lost and staring up at the ceiling. Awestruck.

This is why I knew I shouldn't get involved with this stupid alien.

He says nothing and neither do I; we can't understand each other like this anyway.

The room is quiet, night sounds echoing in from outside. Alien birds and alien bats and alien aliens (some of this shit is too weird to even comprehend) chirping and squawking and screaming and tittering.

It's a much longer joining this time, and I don't even care. I love the way he chuffs into my hair, bathes my face and belly and breasts, touches and holds and nestles against me. I cling to him, panting hard through the moment. When he looks at me, it's almost too much. I'm full of emotion that I don't want to have.

And it's not just the sex—although it's ruined me for anyone else—it's everything. With every action, he's taken, and every word he's said, he's told me in the plainest, simplest of terms: *I like you*. I know then that I'm done for. It's over for me. I have to find an alternative to simply leaving and never coming back; that's not an option anymore.

The sadness and heaviness in my heart lifts and dissipates, and I exhale softly. Now that I know I don't have to leave him, I feel much better. I feel ... giddy, the way he was after we mated. So far as I can tell, he's been waiting his entire life to find a female, and he picked me, and he was happy. *Is* happy. He behaves like someone who's had their greatest wish fulfilled.

With another growl and a nip against my shoulder, he slides out of me, and I sit up. There's a lot of seed. *A lot*. He's much bigger than a human dude, and he's built to fuck another Aspis. There is more than enough fluid to go around. His cock is slick, too, the markings

on his sack dim. I see that it's essentially deflated, and is now less than half the size it was and a bit soft.

We stare at each other.

"I don't want to be a mistake you made," I whisper, glad that he can't understand what I've just said. If he knew the things I've been thinking all along—like how temporary all this is—he wouldn't be happy. This is soulmate shit for him. This is fated mates crap in his world. Goddamn it. "I'm not a romantic person."

He just keeps looking at me, and then he grins. Big and cocksure and happy. It splits his face from one side to the other, the grin of a monster. With another growl, he takes me and drags me against him, curling up into a ball around my body. One of the translators is close by, so I grab it and pull it onto my head.

Abraxas taps one, single finger against my naked belly.

"*Seeded,*" he says with another laugh.

I ignore him.

I know for a fucking *fact* that I am right about this.



I pad into the living room, naked and yawning, hoping that Abraxas is in the mood to take me back to the hot springs. I could *really* use it after last night. I scratch at my belly absently, pausing to glance over at Zero. We haven't talked much. Not a big loss. I'm starting to realize that I kind of hate her.

“What are you staring at?” I grumble, narrowing my eyes. Her cursor pulses menacingly.

“*You mated with him.*” It's an accusation if I've ever seen one. “*You're a fool.*”

I curl my lip in a sneer and flip her off. I don't see Abraxas anywhere, but I can sense him, an apex predator on the prowl. He's close by, probably securing breakfast. I haven't missed a meal yet.

“Yeah? Jealous because you're a brat in a vat at best and a hard drive at worst? You have no idea how good it feels to devolve to a cellular level. Get luckier.” I start to turn away when she fills her screen with a wild rant.

“*He's mated dozens of other humans before! He fucks them and then he eats them. He's going to eat you, too, and you're too stupid to see it coming.*” She doesn't stop there, flying into a textual rage. I just stand there and let her vent all of that pent-up frustration. Much as I dislike her, I get it. She's been trapped here all alone for so long. A pang hits my chest, something like sympathy—if I were capable of such a thing, I mean. “*He uses his pheromones to attract females,*

and then he mates and kills them. Just like he did to the dead female outside. I didn't want to scare you off at first, but I can't let this go any further. Eve, you must get us both out of here while you have the chance." She pauses there, like she's waiting for me to respond. I don't. *"He mated that female after you blacked out. You just didn't see it."*

"Look," I start, feeling anger prick my skin. "I can deal with a lot of shit, but how stupid do you think I am? You've been living with the guy for *years*. You should know that he's pretty much the opposite of everything you've just said."

"He's infected you! I bet you're even thinking about staying here. It happens to all of them. I've met too many human females to count at this point."

I smirk.

"You said I was the first person you'd been able to talk to in years. Nice try, Zero. I'll take you to the market at some point because I promised that I would, but don't talk shit about my mate. It's really starting to piss me off."

I turn away from her in time to see Abraxas prowling out of the woods—with a female Aspis trailing behind him. My mouth drops open. I feel suddenly exposed, looking around for a fur and grabbing one of the ones I left in the nook. I drape it over my shoulders as he hops up into the ship, dropping a dead ... erm, *thing* on the floor. Looks a bit like a giant purple toad.

As I watch, several more females come out of the bushes to stare at us.

"What the ... what the fuck?" I turn to Abraxas, but he looks so absurdly pleased with himself, the cat who fucked the cream. Or however that phrase goes. "Zero was insulting you, and I stood up for you, and what the hell is all of this?" I'm gritting my teeth so hard that my jaw aches, tears of frustration budding at the corners of my eyes.

Abraxas turns to me like he's confused, and then he *smirks*. He retreats to the nest for the other translator and then comes back to stand on two legs beside me, staring out at the gathering of female Aspises with their glowing crimson stripes and their long tails.

"Female, you are upset." He stands there as I turn and punch him in the stomach. It's not abuse. It does literally nothing to him. He

just looks down and then redirects his attention to my face. “Why? This is a glorious day.”

I look back at the gathered females, all of whom are staring at me curiously. Some of them are scratching at their horns with their back feet. Some are licking themselves like cats. Others snort and take off, pausing to piss on bushes as they pass. That last thing, that annoys the shit out of Abraxas.

“What is this? Your goddamn harem?” I gesture at the females, the fur falling around my shoulders. I clutch at it to keep it up. My cheeks are blazing, and I hate that Zero is listening in on this conversation.

“Harem?” he repeats the word, dropping to a crouch in front of me. His mouth ripples in a growl. “There is no harem. *You* are my mate. My female. It is customary for unmated Aspis in the area to visit and acknowledge a new mating. They are here to see you.” He picks me up in his tail, fur covering and all, and then hops down to the ground, setting me in front of him.

I notice that he keeps his body more or less wrapped around mine.

“*An alien female. Interesting choice.*” One of the larger females sounds disappointed. She leans in like she might sniff me, and Abraxas’ scales rise in warning. He snarls at her and she retreats a few steps. “*I hear they are prime breeding.*”

I just stand there, confused as all get out. I’ve only ever seen one other Aspis, and she was as wild as they come. This is a hair more civilized.

“*They are always aroused and willing,*” another agrees, yawning with that massive mouth and giving me the chills. I have to turn away. The memory of being swallowed is still too fresh. Between that and the brothel chains, I might actually suffer nightmares at some point. “*Never did I believe a day would come when you were mated, male.*” She snorts and moves to leave. “*May your mate bond carry you far.*”

There’s some buzzing interest at that. I look up at Abraxas, crouched back on his haunches, looking bored. But when he sees me staring at him, he smirks again, and I want to slap him so bad that my hand itches. He thinks this is funny.

“I take it you were an eligible bachelor?” I query, knowing only he can understand me. From what I can see, he had his pick of the

litter. There are a dozen females in the vicinity. None are looking at me as a meal just now which is a nice change of pace.

“I am a mature, powerful male, highly prized,” Abraxas responds easily, and while I can understand him through the translator, they can all understand him as well. Several of the females rumble with growling laughter.

“*May it carry you far,*” another adds. “*This favored breeder of the market traders.*” She makes a displeased snort and stands up, shaking herself out so that her scales ruffle like feathers.

Abraxas gives me a triumphant look in response, and my stomach gurgles.

Slowly, the other females disperse. Abraxas waits until they’re long gone, and then he goes about urinating on every bush and rock and tree that they touched. I just stand there, mind whirring wildly.

“That was, um.” I scratch at my temple and squinch my eyes. “So basically everyone gathers together to gawk at the new mates? Do they do that for everyone or just weird pairs like us?”

“Weird?” he queries, coming over to stand beside me on all fours. His tail sways behind him in amusement. I pretend not to notice the smug look on his face. I don’t think about last night, and our silly discussion about fertility, or the way he whispered *seeded* into my ear. “What about our mating is abnormal? Because you are an alien? Do not think I am the only Aspis with a foreign mate. We are fertile and quick to adapt.”

Right.

“We’re not having a child,” I repeat, and he gets right up in my face, grinning at me like a wild thing.

“No? You are seeded even now. Make no mistake.” He sits back on his haunches and stares up at the ship. “We may need to move dens. This one is quite small.”

My head spins, but surely, his words are mere conjecture. He can’t know anything. Even if ... we were compatible like that, he wouldn’t know now. We had sex last night. That’s ridiculous.

“I like this den.” I cross my arms and look back at it, thinking about Zero. “By the way, the computer hates you.” I point up in her general direction, waving my hand around. The fur slips down my

shoulders again, and I hike it up. Some clothes would be fantastic right about now. “Do you know what I mean when I say that?”

He stares at me and then snatches me up with his tail, hopping back into the ship. I might need to come up with some sort of rope ladder or something so I can get down, but also something I can pull up easily when I’m inside. Abraxas sets me down and then stares at Zero’s screen. She’s cleared it completely. Even her cursor is gone.

“The alien tech,” he replies belatedly, looking the screen over. “It does not concern me.” He looks back at me, and his face is as serious as I’ve ever seen it. “You were brought here against your will. Others who come here freely do not have good intentions. They round my people up, kill and capture, harvest our tongues. They cut trees and burn forests, crush mountains for minerals, and they do not care about any of it. The ones who crash, the ones who die, they have earned their fates.”

He trots past me into the nest, and I follow.

“Have you ever ... have you ever seen a half-breed Aspis?” I ask, desperate to change the subject. What he’s telling me, I could’ve guessed based on the market and the Tusk Men and all that. But damn, it makes me feel sad. Abraxas is the most emotionally complex creature I have ever met—myself included.

“I have.” He looks so unbelievably smug when he passes me that cloth bag from yesterday that I almost forget to care what’s inside of it. “A human and Aspis bred child. I have seen that.”

My eyes widen, and my hands tremble, but there are no words.

Eve, really? Why do you think you know best here? You’re a caterer!

If we’re talking amuse-bouche, I’m the GOAT. Alien sex? Not exactly.

“You might’ve told me that last night,” I breathe, clutching the sack close. Trying not to think about *his* sack. Big and plump and heavy and— Oh shit. I am in huge trouble. Why do I always have to be contrary for contrary’s sake?! “What did it look like? Was it creepy?”

He lounges in the nest, relaxed and happy and fulfilled, and drums the fingers of his left hand on his right forearm. Those bejeweled eyes of his sweep me like I’m a queen in need of worship. My knees

tremble and I sit down, pulling the bag closer and cuddling it for support.

“She was lovely, human in shape like her mother with the black scales of her father. A tail. Wings. Horns. Do not fear, my mate. Our child will have no problem surviving nor finding a mate.” He tilts his head, waiting for a response.

I don't know what to say to any of that, so I open the bag instead and turn it over, spilling its contents into the nest.

Clothes. Lots and lots of clothes. My mouth drops open as I study the pile of fabric on the floor of the nest.

“How did you ...” I start, and then my voice trails off as I pick up a shirt.

It's Jane's shirt.

It's Jane's *fucking* shirt.

My breath catches as I clutch it against my chest, heart pounding. She always, always, *always* wears her lucky t-shirt under the ugly suits she wears to work. This one has *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on it. Used to belong to her mom before she got arrested. *Shit, fuck.* Tears sting my eyes as I bring it to my nose and smell it like a crazy person. *No. No, no, no!* It smells like Jane's Chanel No. 5 perfume that she wears because—and I quote—“*it's just bourgeois enough to please my clients, but not so bourgeois that I hate myself for wearing it.*”

I turn to Abraxas, seeing that he's stiffened up, ready to fight for me. He's concerned, but he doesn't know why I'm upset.

“Where did this come from?” I ask, choking on the words. I can't breathe. I feel sick. I'm over here cuddling up to an alien guy and my friend is ... what? ... searching for me? She could still be in the market, looking for my ungrateful ass. Cop Guy still hasn't shown up. It's been *eight days* since I saw him.

“A cart run by Tusks,” Abraxas replies, grabbing me with his wing-hands and tugging me into the circle of his arms. “There were no human females on it. I promise you that, my sweet mate.”

I'm trembling now, and I hate that. I strive never to show weakness or vulnerability. Something about Abraxas makes me want to strip my soul bare so he can see down to the bones of my humanity.

“I have to find Jane, Abraxas.” I’ve told him this before, but it’s possible that with the translator issues, he didn’t quite get it. “She’s my friend—closer to me than my own sisters—and she was abducted with me. I heard her calling my name in the market just before I got grabbed by that tusk dude.” I look down at the shirt before lifting my gaze back to his.

He isn’t happy about it, that’s for damn sure.

“You are going to leave me,” he says, and his voice, that guttural growl of his true words, breaks my heart. “You will return to your planet with the other humans.” He closes his eyes, but instead of turning away from me or running off, he tucks me closer. I’m enveloped in his heat, his presence, his scent. I cling to him with Jane’s shirt trapped between us, and I don’t know what to say.

“Maybe I could figure out a way to fly home for a bit, and then come back here?” I’m talking with my cheek crushed to his neck, fingers digging into his smooth skin. “That’s possible, isn’t it? Other aliens do it. They come and go.”

“The only ones who would be willing to do what you have asked ...” he rumbles, his words shaking my entire body. “Are the ones who would as soon violate you as they would comply. They will not listen to me, and I cannot make them.” He releases me suddenly and stands up on all fours, backing away from me with his wings raised and his tail thrashing. He’s agitated, the spikes along his spine and tail standing on end, oozing venom. I snatch his tail when he swings it near me, pricking my hand on one of the spikes.

I stare at the venom on my open palm as he crouches down to lick my skin, adding his healing saliva to the mix. Um. Isn’t this sort of a big deal?

“Am I going to die?” I ask, thinking of the state he was in when he was envenomated.

“Mated pairs are immune to venom,” he tells me, but there’s a deep level of unease in his voice that I haven’t heard before. He’s upset. Rightfully so. “Eve, I do not wish to keep you prisoner here, but you must understand that you *cannot leave*.” He turns to me with an expression of complete and utter sympathy. “I have tried to make it so you understand, but I do not know how this alien tech interprets my words. If we are separated, we will both die. I have seen it happen as quickly as seven sunrises, but never longer than sixty.”

I have no idea what to say to that.

“Stay put,” he snarls at me, stalking past and disappearing past the curtain. I can feel his presence as he moves away, the musky smell of him clinging to the air.

I put the shirt up to my face and close my eyes, falling back into the furs. Since there’s nobody around, I just scream. I let out all my frustration in one horrible pterodactyl shriek.

The sound of claws on metal precedes Abraxas’ return. He’s in the nest and nearly on top of me before I can register his presence. He brackets my face with his wing-hands and leans in with a rippling snarl.

“Female, what is the matter?” he asks, searching me all over with such tenderness that I hate myself all over again for ruining his life. I’ve ruined it. I came here and distracted him and took away any chance he had of mating one of those beautiful females we saw this morning. I took his ... whatever his penis spirals are called, and I still can’t just let myself enjoy it because I know he’s right. How delusional am I? I can’t get rides to and from Earth with cuddly Trevor the Asshole Green Giant. I can’t hitch a ride from the sex trafficking tusk men. If the phrase *gas or ass* ever meant anything, these aliens would embody it. Oh no.

I have to make a choice: my family or ... my mate. Earth ... or my mate. Pizza ... or my mate. Music ... or my mate. But I don’t have to make a choice between my mate and Jane.

“We need to find Jane,” I repeat, and I say it hoping that the ‘we’ comes across as strongly as I meant it.

Abraxas draws away from me, but he pauses, looking back and then licking a spot on my temple. I take it like a kiss, curling Jane’s shirt in my hands as he leaves the nest without another word.



I’ve recovered some of my emotional faculties by the time Abraxas returns, my body leaned casually against the wall. I’m propped by a single shoulder, eyes closed, fully dressed. I’ve chosen to wear

Jane's t-shirt, no bra (because I'm in space, duh, why the fuck would I ever wear a bra again?), and a pair of up-the-ass jean shorts.

I'm looking cool until I go to adjust myself, slip, and nearly slam the back of my head against the floor. Abraxas catches me like it's nothing, yanking me to him to dangle off the floor as he looks into my eyes.

"We will go to the market," he says, and then he releases me suddenly, handing out a massive ... uhh, thing. It's a metal thing, like a ring of some kind. It's all techy and weird with lights on it and some really fucking disturbing spikes on the inside. "Here." Abraxas offers this device to me easily, and I take it, grunting a bit at the weight. He tilts his head to the side using his wing-hand to point at his neck. "Capture me."

"Capture ..." I trail off and then look down at the item in my hands. My nose wrinkles, and I scowl automatically. I chuck the thing onto the floor the way Abraxas does, breaking it. He looks absolutely stunned as he drops down to all fours in front of me, sniffing my hair vigorously, like he might be able to figure out what's wrong with me. "No."

"No?" he repeats, and then he narrows his eyes, curling his lip at me. "You like this word much, don't you?"

"You want me to put that hideous collar on you? With the spikes inside it? Why?" I wait, but he just stares at me again, like he thinks he can glean something from my expression. "I heard you mention pets and jeweled leashes." I point past him to the coil of bejeweled chain near the doorway. "You want me to walk you into the market."

"You will not be bothered, and I will not be attacked on sight. Many traders keep Aspis as pets." He says this matter-of-factly. I don't happen to find it a very matter-of-fact thing at all. It's sick. It's absolute fucking *insanity*.

"That's not okay," I say, and he drops his head to look at me.

"You *are* strange," he says, standing up in front of me. "I do not regret picking you."

He turns away from me and moves back over to the doorway, looking out and into the woods. I do my best to pretend like I didn't hear his last statement, trotting after him to stand at his side.

“Well, it’s not okay. Isn’t that moth thing a prince? Why doesn’t he do something about this shit?”

Abraxas blinks at me and then leans in, sniffing the side of my face again. When he talks, his breath heats my skin and makes me squirm.

“The Vestalis are scum. They play at being righteous while sucking the universe dry. Parasitic liars. World eaters.” He turns away from me, crouching and gripping the edge of the ship with a clawed hand. He’s frustrated with me right now, and I don’t blame him. I’d be frustrated with me, too.

“Finding Jane doesn’t mean I’m leaving,” I tell him softly, unsure exactly what it is that I’m actually trying to say. “It just means finding Jane. For all I know, she’s probably mated to an alien, too.” I’d laugh, but it’s not even a joke. I’m serious. If one of these fuckers got me, she’s a goner, too. That bitch never could say no to a pretty face. She dates like it’s an Olympic sport.

Abraxas rumbles a growl that’s definitely his version of a laugh.

“We will fly over the market then; you can take a look.”

“I can’t do this to you,” I reaffirm, crossing my arms. “I can’t take you to the market and risk you. Those nets, those guns ... I just can’t. Not even for myself.” I swallow hard. “Not even for Jane.”

I put both hands over my face again.

We need a different plan, one that doesn’t risk Abraxas whatsoever.

I drop my arms by my sides.

“We need to find someone that’s on the road and threaten them into looking for Jane for us.” I turn to Abraxas, but he’s already grinning at me. Looking at him right now, it’s hard to equate the maniacal creature with the loving mate. He’s admittedly terrifying. *Yeah, erm, I must be soulmates with this guy because he never scared me. Not once.* Tabbi Kat would piss her pants. “Does that sound workable?”

“You are a devious female,” he says, snatching me up in his tail and dropping to all fours. He puts me on his back, and it really shouldn’t be sexual, but it is. It is. I grit my teeth and grab onto his horns. That really does it for him. He makes this low purr of

frustration, and then hops out of the ship. His wings swing down in a hard motion, and then we're in the air.



It takes me a few minutes to adjust to being in the sky. But once I do? I'm riding an alien dragon. Are you fucking nuts? It's amazing.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to me," I whisper, and Abraxas rumbles. He pulls his wings in sharply, banks a hard left, and then we're plummeting. I might scream, but only for a second. I snap my mouth closed, nearly losing my grip on his horns, and then he's coming down hard and using his tail to smash the side of a wagon.

Ah, so that's what happened to me then.

All I remember was being in the cart and then being on the ground. Nothing in between. Musta scented my sweet femaleness *after* he nearly killed me, eh?

People—not Tusk Men, but something else—scatter from the wagon as Abraxas swings out his tail and decapitates one of them. The body flops to the ground and blood sprays everywhere.

"Dude, you've got to chill out for a second. We need to keep at least one alive."

"One only. He will not come back for anything but the cargo and only then if he thinks he will get to keep it all to himself." He scrabbles across the ground, snatching one of the other fleeing aliens by the neck. With a blithe toss, he smashes that guy into one of his teammates like he did to the Tusk Men at the brothel. Abraxas picks another man at random and lands on two feet behind him, snapping his neck and then flinging the corpse to the side.

I can't even describe what it's like to exist in that moment.

Maybe it's better. Maybe it's worse. Doesn't matter. This is another planet, and I feel that right now.

"Where did the last one go?" I ask, looking around. Abraxas spots him first, dropping back to all fours and sprinting. He lunges and

smashes a clawed hand into the man's back, pinning him to the road. The alien screams, and it's the most grating sound I've ever heard in my life.

I hop off of Abraxas' back and come around to squat near his head.

"Can you understand me?" I ask, and it takes a minute, but he eventually shuts the fuck up. "Good. How are you today?"

"Aspis whore," he spits out, and I don't even seem to need my translator to understand him. "The whole market is looking for the pair of you." He smirks at me, but his mouth is wide and fat like a toad's. The expression looks strange on him, like he picked it up from watching too many humans but doesn't understand it at all. "Rumor has it that the Vestalis prince wants you—badly."

Abraxas crushes the man's neck, spattering me with blood. I lift my head up slowly to look at him, but he's unapologetic.

"If they're looking for us, he will not go in there and do what you want him to do. He will report us and lead bounty hunters our way." Abraxas steps back and licks the blood from my face. It's ... a lot to process. I push him away, and he lets me. "I am sorry that you were dirtied by his spray." He literally apologizes to me in the midst of carnage.

"Thanks, cutie." I give his cheek a pat with my hand and then shove up to my feet. I head straight for the ruined wagon, lifting the curtain flap at the back. There's something inside, like a box or ... or a cage.

Pale fingers curl around the bars, and my heart soars. *It's Jane!* I step forward, reaching out for my bestie's hands ... when I see the nail polish. *No. It's hot pink. Jane fucking hates hot pink.*

"Oh my God, Evelyn!"

It's Tabbi Kat.

"No. Nope." I turn around and start walking.

"Evelyn, get your ass back here!" she screeches at me, but I have to take a minute, leaning over and putting my hands on my thighs. I close my eyes and struggle to breathe. *Of all the people in the entire universe, it had to be her. A random stranger would be preferable. What is my life?* "Evelyn!"

Abraxas moves up to stand beside me, peering down at me with keen interest.

“Another human female?” he asks, and I jerk my head in his direction. I narrow my eyes as he grins at me again. “Jealous already? This bodes well for my chances as your mate.”

“Don’t be an arrogant dick,” I mumble, turning back around to follow him as he peers curiously at Tabbi Kat. As soon as she notices Abraxas, it starts. The screaming, I mean.

“What the fuck is that thing?” she screeches, and I cringe. If the alien man’s screams were annoying, this bitch has just stolen his crown. “Evelyn, run!”

“It’s Eve,” I correct through gritted teeth. “My name isn’t short for anything. I’ve explained that.” I march up to the wagon and then just stand there with my arms crossed. Tabbi looks ... pretty bad. I won’t lie. I soften toward her immediately as I study her tangled hair and swollen face, the drab brown gown that she’s wearing. She’s actively crying, cuts and bruises up and down both arms and legs. She’s barefoot. “I thought Trevor and his twin were into you?” I whisper, trying to keep the situation as light as I can.

“What? They’re fucking aliens,” she snaps, eyes widening as Abraxas approaches. “Oh my God, *gross*. It’s hideous.”

I swallow hard. I’m not ashamed though. Actually, I *want* to tell people that Abraxas is my mate. I’m pretty damn proud of that. Look at him. He’s a badass—and he’s *nice*. How often do those two things come in the same package?

“This is my mate, Abraxas.” I hold out a hand to indicate him, and he growls.

“Hello smelly female,” he says, but she can’t understand him. All she’ll hear is that snarl. We’re going to need a third translator.

Despite everything, I’m going to rescue Tabbi. Don’t get me wrong: that doesn’t mean I like her. I don’t. I honestly think I hate her, but she isn’t the worst human ever born. She’s never murdered anyone. Never raped anyone. Never tortured anybody (except with her shitty music). I can’t condemn her to death because her music sucks and she suffers from severe narcissism.

“Your mate?” Her eyes widen to enormous proportions. “You *fucked* that?” she asks, glancing his way. Abraxas sits there in a

gargoyle crouch, one arm over his knee, wings spread, tail drawing patterns in the dirt. He looks like a demon as his horns pulse with amethyst heat. “How? It doesn’t have a dick.”

I look at him, assuming that he’ll show her the way he did me. He doesn’t. I smile and look back at Tabbi.

“Have you seen Jane?” I don’t hold my breath. My friend is crafty. If she was wandering around the market, I’m sure that she’s as free as I am. That is, she’s not actively in captivity, but she can’t get around easily to look for me.

“You’re the only human I’ve seen since you left me in that stupid tent.” She smirks at me, but it’s just sad because she’s so beat to shit. Poor thing. “Oh, and since you lied to me about the *Punk’d* thing, Jane is *definitely* fired and so are you. I will ruin your name, and you will never cater another event in Portland or anywhere else in Oregon. Hell, you’ll be lucky if your name isn’t trashed worldwide when I’m finished with you.”

I let her have that. If she actually believes that shit still matters, she’s lost her mind. *Also, where the fuck is Madonna, the opossum?* No sooner has the thought crossed my mind than the little animal is peeking its head out of the pocket of the ugly brown sack dress. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Tabitha Katherine,” I begin, using her real name. Tabbi Kat is the nickname her dad gave her before he passed away. There is *some* depth to this girl. Not a lot. But some. “You’re going to be okay.”

Tabbi collapses to her knees, dropping her face to her hands. She begins to sob as I look back to Abraxas.

“Can you get her out for me?” I ask.

He licks the side of my face in response, and then grabs two bars in either hand. With nary a tensed muscle, he pulls the metal out of the wood frame and tosses both pieces aside. I kneel down and put my arm around Tabbi. I’m just assuming Abraxas can hold us both. He’s not at his largest size, but, as I’ve said, he’s a big guy.

“We should probably get out of here,” I tell Tabbi, helping her to her feet. I look at Abraxas again, trying to gauge what we’ll both be comfortable with when it comes to carrying Tabbi. Frankly, I don’t like her touching him. *We should’ve left her in the cage and carried that.*

“Grab her,” he tells me, so I do. I turn and put my arms around her, startling her. Tabbi goes stiff all over.

“What are you doing?” she asks, just before Abraxas grabs us both around the waist, hauling us up and into the air.

Tabbi screams the entire way back to the ship.



“Leave me alone!” she screeches, scrambling back into the nook where the remnants of my makeshift bed remain. Madonna peeks her head out again and hisses at me. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

I stay away from her, standing next to Abraxas and in front of Zero’s screen. I have the weirdest feeling that they’re going to like each other, Zero and Tabbi Kat. They’re both dicks.

“I do not like other females in our den,” Abraxas remarks, which somehow makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I know he and I haven’t quite talked about what happened this morning, but somehow, it feels implicitly okay. He sniffs the air and narrows his beautiful eyes. “What is this small prey animal she carries with her?”

“The only North American marsupial—” I start and then cut off when I realize he won’t understand any of that. “A pet.” I turn back to my favorite frenemy. “Tabbi, we’re not going to hurt you,” I say gently, trying to get her to calm down. If I have to listen to her sobbing all night, I’m going to lose my mind. We went out to look for Jane today. I didn’t think we were going to find her. I figured this was something we’d need to do over and over again until the mission was fruitful. Plan B was to wait for Cop Guy to finally show up, and then let him know that he should get Jane first and come back to talk to me once he had her in custody.

I can’t make any final decisions on anything until I talk to Jane Baker. She’ll tell me like it is. She’ll tell me if ... if it’s okay to stay. She’ll tell me if I should go home. Whatever it is, I’ll believe her.

“Make him go away,” she grinds out, tucked up tight in the corner with her arms around her legs. “I haven’t met one goddamn alien

who was anything less than pure hell.”

“Tell her that I will not leave your side,” Abraxas grumbles, lying on his side with his back against the wall. “You may speak with her, and we will feed her, but then she sleeps elsewhere. I will put her in a den close to this one.”

“Let her stay for one night,” I tell him over my shoulder. He narrows his eyes and curls his lip at me. I turn back to Tabbi and sit down beside her, my own back to the wall, my knees up. Madonna scrambles out of her pocket to perch on her shoulder, whiskers twitching as her pink nose scents the air. “What happened, Tabbi?”

“You first,” she snaps out, but I don’t react to her anger. I left a spoiled brat behind in the market, but this is ... well, she’s still a spoiled brat but there’s a fear in her eyes that wasn’t there before. I’ve been so lucky this whole time. Waking up under a sign that advertises humans as food, as entertainment, as sex toys, that’s not funny at all. I know that. I narrowly avoided being a forced bride. I was saved from being raped in a brothel. I’m still alive only because of Abraxas. He isn’t an inconvenient random; he’s my only friend on a planet I don’t know if I can leave even if I did want to. I might be over here thinking I have a choice when I have none at all.

“Well, I was purchased by the guys with the big tusks.” I mime their shape. “Then I was saved by this guy. I went into the market once and made contact with an intergalactic cop.”

I don’t mention the Moth Guy. I *really* don’t want to think about the Moth Guy and what I just learned from the wagon dude. *He’s looking for me? Everyone in the market is looking for us?* That can’t be good. I also have a feeling that Abraxas is going to bring up the guy’s statement later. Why on earth would Moth Guy be looking for me? I have to tell my mate about the fucking blood exchange.

“A cop?” Tabbi asks, but then she just sighs and shakes her head. “You’re so naive. This is the rest of our life, you know that? We’re never going home.” She won’t look at me anymore, staring at the wall instead. “I was with Trevor and Taylor for a while. I stayed at their place in the market. It didn’t seem so bad at first. We went out clubbing and had drinks and—”

“You went clubbing?” I ask incredulously. I was out here in the jungle with a busted translator and this bitch was dancing and getting drunk? But maybe ... that’s not the truth, the whole truth,

and nothing but the truth. I take it with a grain of salt. “Then what happened?”

“One night, we got attacked on the street. I haven’t seen them since. I was sold to one of those things with the tusks. He put me in this dress and forced me into a wedding, but I escaped. I ran through the woods for days, got bitten to death every single fucking night.” She looks at me with wide, teary eyes, hand absently stroking her pet. “There are shadow creatures with glowing eyes that come out at night.” Her entire body shudders as she looks out the doorway at the twilight sky. “They’ll be here soon enough. If we don’t have a fire, we’ll probably die.”

Tabbi pushes up to her feet and starts to gather sticks, ignoring Abraxas entirely.

“She’s damaged,” I murmur to him, coming back over to stand beside him. I put one of my hands on his horn and curl my fingers around it. I can’t believe I was able to save Abraxas the other night. That was sheer dumb fucking luck on my part. We might’ve both actually died that night. “I don’t want her here tonight either, but she’s not in a good place.”

“Whatever my female wishes,” Abraxas growls, his eyes tracking Tabbi’s movements as she tries ... and *succeeds* in making a fire?! What the hell? With nothing but two sticks? That’s when I notice that she’s gotten a hold of a fire starter somehow.

“Where did you get that?” I ask, coming up to stand beside her. She’s made a roaring fire in less than five minutes. And with an opossum clinging to her back. Impressive.

“I wear it around my neck,” she says absently. “Always.”

Huh.

So Tabitha Katherine has a secret?

“The shadows don’t come here at night,” I explain to her, knowing she won’t believe me. She scoffs and doesn’t bother looking up at me. “Abraxas scares them.”

“I can’t believe you fucked that thing. It looks like an animal to me. Are you a pervert or something?” She’s staring in the direction of the nest, but I can’t explain to her how he tidied and rebuilt his nest to court me. The display in the heat vent. The way he sacrificed

the last few hours of his life in an attempt to save mine. She won't understand, and I don't need her to.

“Well, he's anything but an animal.” I stare her down when she looks back at me. Then I correct myself as I lean down to stare at her. “He's anything but an animal—unless he's in the bedroom. In that regard, you'd be right.” I smile. “Everywhere else, he's intelligent and well-spoken and crafty. Plus, he can take down a dozen dudes with cannons and net guns like it's nothing. Are you *sure* you want to keep insulting him? He's letting you stay in his den.”

Tabbi shoves up to her feet and I follow, letting her get in my face.

“You were always pathetic,” she sneers at me, taking her rage out on the first human being she's seen in weeks. “Jane talks about how sad it is that you work yourself to the *bone* for people who think of you as less than a slave.”

I cross my arms and wait, letting her vitriol spiral. She's lost everything. She will never again be the carefree pop star with the massive trust fund. She's something else entirely now, a dirty, disheveled, and lonely person.

“You're probably *happy* being here and fucking some random alien. What do you have on earth to lose? *Nothing.*”

I shake my head and stare at the floor.

“I have four siblings,” I tell her, wishing I could slap her but knowing that I can't. “I have loving parents. I have five cousins that I'm super close to. My aunts and uncles are all in my life. I've still got two sets of grandparents. I have a huge friend circle, with friends from elementary school and high school and college. Tabbi, I've got a *lot* to lose.” I look back up at her, just a sad, angry human on an alien planet. “So maybe we could just work together for now?”

The idea of being stuck here with Tabbi Kat as the only other human is ... depressing. If I'm going to live here, I'd like Cop Guy to at least take her away. You know what I mean? The possum can stay though.

Tabbi shoves me.

Abraxas appears, snatching her violently up in his tail in a way he never did to me. He traps her arms tight against her body and

squeezes her hard enough that she has trouble talking. He's careful not to dislodge Madonna from her shoulder which I appreciate.

"I will put her in the other den. If she does not stay there, she will die in the woods tonight. That will be her choice to make." He turns and takes off, bounding out and into the trees as I sag back against the wall, eyes closed. I'm suddenly so tired that I could just curl up on the metal floor and fall asleep.

But I don't have to because ... drum roll ... I have a beautiful nest.

I open my eyes to look over at Zero.

"Another human has arrived. Intriguing."

"Is it though?" I quip back at her. "But haven't you seen dozens and dozens of humans? All the ones that Abraxas fucks and then eats?"

*"*cringe*" That's what she writes. Good. She deserved that clapback, didn't she? "Do you truly believe the Falopex will come? If so, will you leave with him?"*

I don't respond to that, moving into the nest and stripping my clothes to wait for Abraxas.

He's pleased to find me naked in his bed.

"Oh, my small female ..." he growls, prowling over to me.

He mounts me with his mating cock again, and then curls up to sleep with me partially tucked underneath him.



Tabbi Kat shows up in the early morning, staring at my naked ass as I pause near the ship's doorway, sunlight slanting down between some clouds and making my pearly skin glow. I rub at my sleepy eyes with an arm.

“Civilized much?” she sneers, looking away, but I shrug one shoulder. It's cool being naked sometimes. Who do I have to worry about out here? Tabbi and I are the only humans, and Abraxas won't allow anyone or anything else near me. Who could ever get the jump on him? “Put some clothes on, Evelyn.”

“I'd rather not, Tabitha Katherine.” I cross my arms and lean my shoulder against the wall, smirking. “How did you sleep last night?”

“Your dickless boyfriend left me alone in a tiny pod swarming with insects. How the fuck do you think I slept?” She storms up to the edge of the ship and looks around, like she expects a handy ladder or a rope or something.

“Good to know. Glad to see you're grateful to us for rescuing you yesterday.” I squat down and grin at her from my position inside the ship. “By the way, he isn't dickless. He has *two* cocks, and endless stamina. But keep searching for something else to insult me with. I'm sure you'll figure something out soon enough.”

Tabbi gapes at me before snapping her mouth closed in annoyance. Madonna crawls from her pocket, climbs her dress, and curls up on her shoulder, hissing at me.

“Aren’t you going to help me up?” she demands, just before Abraxas appears from the woods. He snags her with his tail before hopping up and she screams, the sound choking off as he tosses her carelessly into the nook area. She lands with a whump on my discarded fur bed, the possum scrambling into the top of her dress and nestling there.

“She knows you have two dicks now,” I tell him, and he grins at me, dumping an armful of sticks onto the floor to start a fire. “I had to tell her: she wouldn’t let it go.”

“I am yours to gloat about, my female. If I run into other Aspis at the vents, I will surely tell them about your silken, nectar-filled channel and its wild, frenzied contractions.”

My cheeks flush, but at least Tabbi can’t understand what he’s saying.

“What the hell is this?” Tabbi asks, pointing to the dead animal that my mate’s just dumped onto the floor between us. I’d answer her question, but frankly I have no idea what the creature is. Uh. It looks like a bird, but it has extra wings and extra eyes, and its legs have hooves on the end. So ... a feathered goat-bird thing. Sure. Okay.

“Breakfast?” I offer with a shrug of my shoulders. I help Abraxas arrange the sticks for the fire, and he lights it up. When he moves over to his kill and begins to break it down, Tabbi turns away and hides herself in the corner. “What have you been eating this whole time?” I wonder, knowing for sure that I would’ve starved without Abraxas.

“Trevor and Taylor fed me. And then the orcs fed me. I’ve been starving for days.” She finally turns to look over her shoulder at the meat that Abraxas is stripping from the corpse. Tabbi swallows and wets her dry, cracked lips. Her hair is still surprisingly pink at the tips, but it’s stringy and greasy and she looks like hell.

I will give her credit for this: she didn’t eat Madonna. Bravo. I’m assuming Madonna has been finding her own food. She still looks properly plump. Err, I think. I don’t know much about possums.

“Let’s eat and then bathe,” I suggest, giving Abraxas a look. “I imagine that my sense of smell is nowhere *near* as good as yours, but damn, she stinks.”

“Her scent is repulsive,” he agrees without malice. Just a fact.

“Um, excuse me? Like you don’t smell horrible, too. You *reek* of dragon cum.”

That makes me laugh. She might be right, IDK, but I’ll tell you this: I do not smell *anything* like this bitch does.

“Did I tell you we have a toilet?” I say with a grin. Tabbi’s eyes bulge out of her head, and she follows me into the bathroom, breaking into happy tears when she sees it. I give her a pat on the shoulder. “Take your time, and feel free to use any of the leaves as toilet paper. Just don’t fuck up our drinking water.” I point at it and then retreat from the room, sitting on the ground with my back tucked into the circle of Abraxas’ body.

“We may wish to move to a new den,” he says, but not like he’s upset about it, just contemplative. “As I said, we will need a larger one for our child, so it is not a total inconvenience.”

“I want another den with a toilet,” I say, turning my head so that I can look up at him. I feel sorry for Zero, but wherever we move to, I’ll keep track of her so that I can turn her into Cop Guy—if he ever shows up. “Do you think that’ll be possible? There seem to be plenty of ships to choose from.”

“We will search as long as we need to in order to make you happy, my mate.” He pauses there, and I can sense so many other unsaid things that need to be discussed. I wish fervently that Tabbi Kat was not around to hear my side of the conversation.

“We need to talk about Moth Guy, don’t we?” I hedge, wishing I didn’t have to bring this up.

“I am already aware, sweet female.” Abraxas curls his tail around my legs, offering an absurdly comforting squeeze that feels like a hug. “I became aware when he demanded that I release you. A Vestalis would not waste his breath on a random female.”

I swallow hard and fiddle with a random stick, snapping it in half.

“How long will it take for him to die?” I ask, feeling so cold and cruel and heartless that my breath catches. But I never asked to be his mate. This is his fault. He tasted my blood. He condemned himself. *His eyes are as soft and dark as the night sky, two deep pools of depth and comfort and intelligence.* The thought of him passing away because of me, that’s a lot to take in.

“I am not sure, but I know that he will be frantic to find you.” Abraxas growls, and the sound takes over my entire body. The stripes on his horns pulse with violet fury. “It will be difficult for him to track us, but track us he will. Frequent travel may be necessary until he is dead.”

I cringe at that, but what am I supposed to do? Give myself up to be spirited away to who knows where? Not happening. I’m ... I’m staying here with Abraxas. I’ve decided. I exhale and scrub at my face with both hands.

“We should talk—” I begin, but then Tabbi Kat reappears in the room, and I know it’ll have to wait. “Should we leave today then?” I ask, praying that we can at least leave *after* we bathe in those gorgeous hot springs. The thought of leaving makes me sad, but I’m not letting Moth Guy catch me. Something in his eyes tells me that once he has me, he will never let me go.

“What do you mean by ‘leave’?” Tabbi asks, walking over to stand beside the fire with her arms crossed.

“She has marked our den,” Abraxas grinds out, curling his lip at her. “It is thankful that we are leaving soon.”

I feel eyes—or a cursor anyway—at my back, craning my head to look at Zero’s screen. She is absolutely frantic with terror, and I can’t say that I blame her much, though I *would* prefer it if she didn’t insult me.

“You stupid bitch! You’re going to leave me here, aren’t you? You’re going to run to save your sorry ass.” A string of alien text appears, that same flowery writing from before. *“By Moth Guy, I know you mean a Vestalis. Why would you run from a leader of the Noctuida? If anyone can help us, it is him. Or are you so drunk on Aspisc cock that you can’t remember how desperately you wanted to escape this horrible planet?”*

“I’ll do my best to get you out of here—but you could *really* use a lesson in etiquette. I’m the only person on this entire planet who can help you, and you are beyond fucking rude to me. Get your shit together, Zero.”

Her screen explodes with another rant—half in English, half in her own language—and I turn back to see Tabbi gaping at Zero’s rage.

“We’re running from someone that can help us?” she asks, peering at me with suspicion. “You don’t *want* to leave this place?” She’s

absolutely incredulous, her gaze moving from me to Abraxas and back to me again. “Wow. He must really put out, huh?”

“I’ll still get you out of here,” I tell her, feeling on the inside like I’m being torn in half. I want to stay. I do. It’s just not an easy decision to make. I’m questioning it even now. *Fuck. Why did I have to find my person on another planet? It isn’t fair.* And Abraxas? He isn’t someone who could be taken back to Earth either, if that’s even a thing. Trevor and Taylor—those shitty twins that brought us here in the first place—they looked human when I met them. So it *is* an option for some.

But not the dragon alien behind me.

“We will have to wait for this storm to pass,” Abraxas remarks, peering out the doorway of the ship. His mouth flattens into invisibility for a moment. “The rain that is coming, it is acidic, and I’m wary of seeing its effects on your tender skin.” His tail sweeps up and over me, the tip rubbing gently against my cheek. I’m simultaneously thrilled by his attention and ashamed at my own weakness as a human. “If not for that, we would leave today.”

“Do we have time to visit the hot springs?” I ask hopefully. Tabbi smells like my teenage brother before we had a family intervention about deodorant. Even Madonna smells better than her.

“Perhaps, if we hurry.” Abraxas flicks his tail in the direction of the meat and the fire. “Eat, and we shall see.”

His eyes track both the storm ... and our fate.



It hasn’t started raining on our walk back from the hot springs, but it’s close. I can taste it on my tongue, this crackling burn, like the atmosphere has a bone to pick with any creature unfortunate enough to be caught out in the downpour.

“I suppose this planet isn’t totally useless,” Tabbi complains, squeezing her hair out as we walk. She didn’t once thank either Abraxas or myself for taking her there or for showing her how to use the purple flowers as soap. She barely commented, but she moaned

loudly and unashamedly while bathing. Abraxas was not amused; he dislikes her as much as I do. “Reminds me of the time I went to Cougar Springs—it’s clothing optional—and like, everyone was taking out their phones and recording me. Idols are people, too, you know.” She touches her chest with splayed fingers, like this is an extremely noble cause that should have, like, fundraising and foundations or something.

She isn’t wrong. That’s exactly what happened. I remember Jane scrambling to clean up her client’s nudes online.

“Do all humans talk as much as this one?” Abraxas asks, flicking his tail in irritation.

“I talk more than she does,” I remind him, and he grins at me.

“Yes, but I *like* your words. This female is screechy and unpleasant, like a big-throated bird.” I’m not sure what type of animal he’s referring to exactly, but it’s still funny.

I snort, working on a braid as we walk. Everything seems fine, but then suddenly, it’s just not.

Abraxas’ head snaps up. His lips ripple and draw back from his teeth as he moves in a blur of shadow to get between me and ... the little pink octopus thing. A whistle follows, and I peer around Abraxas’ bulk to see Cop Guy striding toward us.

My mouth drops open as the tiny creature attempts to land on my shoulder. Abraxas flicks his tail at it, sending it swirling away in a sea of bubbles and angry chirps.

“What is *wrong* with you?” Cop Guy hisses, holding his assault weapon on Abraxas. He’s not talking to any of us though; he’s talking to the mini octopus. His pet lands on his shoulder and he gives it a *look* before turning back to us. “Tell your mate to stand down; tell him I’m not here to hurt any of you.”

“Hey.” I put my hand on Abraxas’ shoulder as he crouches on all fours, his front half lowered to the ground, like he’s getting ready to strike. His tail swings behind him, spikes raised, venom dripping. I gently push Tabbi out of the way so she doesn’t get any of it on her skin. A private thrill hits me, knowing that only *I* am immune to his venom. “He’s here because I went looking for him, remember?”

My mate snarls and drops completely to the ground, belly to the earth, but he’s no less alert. He’s just waiting to see what happens.

“I must get these soft-skinned females into the den before the storm,” he growls, and Cop Guy finally lowers his weapon.

“Not keen to get stuck in sulphuric acid rain, eh?” He holds his gun at his side with one hand, reaching up to stroke his pet with his other hand. I narrow my eyes as I take note of his words. Commands. Questions. He’s careful not to commit to direct statements. I guess anyone would get good at word games if they so dramatically changed color every time they were caught in a lie. Sometimes during our pillow talk, Abraxas will tell me about other species. I know some shit about the Falopex now. Well, this Falopex in particular. Abraxas knows *of* him even if he doesn’t know him personally.

“You’re here.” It’s a flat statement from me. Also, super relieved that I decided to bring a change of clothes to the hot springs. After the fourth or fifth comment from Tabbi about my stretch marks, back fat, and breast size, I was done with being naked for the day. I’m wearing a lavender sundress with a long, flowing skirt, and a low-cut neckline. Abraxas told me he likes it, but that he prefers me in the nude. The thought makes me smile as I stroke my fingers down his arm. Cop Guy notices, following the motion curiously. He blinks those strange eyes of his, those triple pupils of his dilating slightly in both eyes. “Took you long enough.”

“Yes, well, an Aspis isn’t the easiest species to track, now is it?” Another question. This guy’s good. He takes a few steps closer to us, dressed in another outrageous cowboy hat (a black one this time), boots, and a belt. His body is, as before, pretty much on full display. *God, I’d love to know what his dick looks like underneath his loincloth.* Not because I’m interested. Abraxas is more than enough. But damn, I’m curious. Though, after seeing what the Tusk Guys are packing, maybe I’m better off not knowing.

“Who is this guy?” Tabbi whispers, looking from me to the half-naked cop. Her eyes *rake* his body and he notices, lifting up the edge of his hat and giving her an annoying wink. She bites her lip, twirling wet pink hair around a finger. It’s an effort for me not to roll my eyes. But then ... I notice her expression underneath all the flirting. *So very calculating.*

Also ... can she understand him without a translator? How? She can’t understand Abraxas any better than I could. Madonna joins us, peeking out of Tabbi’s pocket to stare at Hyt with big, round eyes

like black marbles. He gives the creature a passing look and then shrugs, like he can't be bothered trying to figure out what it is.

"This is ..." I trail off, waiting for the Falopex guy to supply his name. He doesn't. What a colossal prick. "Are you going to leave me hanging here? What's your name, dude?"

Cop Guy throws his head back in laughter, bubbles escaping his mouth to dance up into the canopy. He drops his head back down and plays with the brim of his hat again.

"Ah, an oversight on my part." He sweeps his hat off and gives me what I'm certain is a mocking bow in response. As he lifts his head, our eyes meet, and my stomach twists with nausea. I step closer to Abraxas and press my body against his, releasing ... whatever that feeling is. I don't want it. I don't want to be Moth Guy's mate, and I definitely don't want anything to do with the inept police officer who took a million years to find me out here. "My name is Hyt."

His body erupts in brilliant color, shifting him from blue to pink. I see him grit his teeth in frustration as his pet shifts to blue, and then flits around him in agitation.

"I see. So that's a blatant lie. Fine. I don't even care." I wave my hand dismissively. "Hyt, it is." He pronounces it like the word 'height', but I imagine it's got a weird spelling. Or maybe it's only spelled out in alien letters? Whatever. "Well, *Officer Hyt*, thank you for finally deigning to show up." I look over at Tabbi Kat, and I realize that this is it. This is my moment to make a choice.

Abraxas seems to sense it, exhaling so deeply that tiny embers fall from his nostrils and dance across the forest floor. A half-dozen grasshopper aliens pop up out of the dirt and scurry off into the underbrush. I'm starting to seriously question their evolutionary choices.

Hyt is boiling mad. At me, at himself, I have no idea. But he yanks on his cowboy hat and *scowls* before taking a deep breath. When he exhales, a sea of bubbles escapes.

"Are you mated to the Aspiss?" he asks me when it's obvious that he already knows. He stays bright pink when he asks the question. "Are you aware of the Noctuidan law that forbids mated humans from being returned to their home planet?"

I just stare at him.

“How the actual fucking fuck would I be aware of that law?!” I’m yelling now, and I don’t give a shit. Great. Glad I decided to give up literally everything in my life—including my family—*before* I knew about this shit. What a blow. What a messed-up, fucked-up, shitty stupid law. No wonder those Tusk Guys were so frantic to rape me: then they wouldn’t have to let me go. “Do you know how stupid that law is?” I’m spitting mad now. Abraxas is watching in bemusement. So is Officer Hyt. Tabbi seems confused, but what’s unusual about that?

“I’m aware.” Still, Hyt remains pink which makes me question why he’d lie about something like this. “If you’re so upset by it, why don’t you use your plentiful good fortune, become the Imperial Princess, and change it? You’d have that power, you know.”

“The Imperial ...” I trail off because I know *exactly* what he’s talking about. “*Anything for you, my Princess.*” That’s what Moth Guy said. Right. The dying moth prince ...

“She will become Imperial Princess over my lifeless corpse,” Abraxas snarls, shoving up to his feet and then standing so that he towers over us all—Officer Hyt included.

“I’m sure that can be arranged by the Vestalis army.” Hyt smiles with his sharp, little teeth. “I’ll take your friend here with me, and see if I can’t arrange transport back to Earth.” My heart clangs in my chest, and I snatch at the fabric of my dress, twisting my hand in it. Hyt notices and that pretty smile slides right off of his face.

“You’re not changing color,” I tell him, and his flurry of tentacle tails waft behind him like they’re being pushed by the sea. He smiles again.

“I’m lying to you,” he says, and then bam, he’s shifting to blue all over again. I feel like ... like there’s a riddle in all of this somewhere. *Knights and Knaves logic puzzle? Pinocchio paradox? Liar paradox?* I feel like there’s more truth in that one sentence than anything else that he’s said thus far.

If ... if he’s pink because he’s lying to me, and he turns blue when he says he’s lying, then ... Gah. I can’t figure it out. My brain-place hurts. Doesn’t matter. Our relationship is casual and very, very temporary.

“Good to know,” I respond slowly, and his smile falls right off. He’s staring at me now with those strange triple irises of his. They’re

disturbing, one of the more alien things I've seen while I've been here. For whatever reason, I don't find them unpleasant. "So, because I had sex with ... someone who isn't human, I'm not allowed to go back to Earth?" I'm just clarifying here. If I had to go back in time and mate with Abraxas to save him, knowing all of that, I'd still do it. I don't regret it.

"You're no longer my problem," Hyt says, tucking his gun into the holster on his back. He moves closer to me, his tails curling around his body, framing him in blue and white. They're beautifully scaled, shimmery like a fish, and each has a single sucker on the tip. Just the one. He doesn't dare touch me with them today, not with Abraxas dropping into a gargoyle crouch on my right. Hyt points to Tabbi. "Frankly, you were no longer my problem the moment I learned that a Vestalis prince had tasted your blood. But I would love to take this little lady with me."

I cross my arms. I drive a hard bargain.

"Take her, dear God. Please. As quickly as you can. In fact, I'll *pay* you to take her. You want some fresh meat? Nice, tanned hides? Piles of old computer garbage?"

I don't expect Hyt to laugh, but he does. And it's delightful. There are bubbles. He grins at me, tips his hat, and winks again.

"Those aren't the only things I accept as payment." It's meant to be a joke, I think, but then Abraxas lets out a snort and flames catch on the earth, singeing more grasshopper things. *Goddamn, those bugs are stupid.*

"Have you found Jane yet?" I ask, knowing that I sound like a broken record and not caring. "One of the other girls that was with me?"

He scratches at the back of his neck, tails swaying in agitation. They really do look like they're underwater, slave to unseen currents.

"Hate to break this to you, my friend, but *your* friend is currently in the clutches of a dangerous space pirate." He drops his hand and then shrugs. "If it helps, he certainly isn't going to eat her. Bet ya they mate though. The guy isn't just a notorious space pirate, he's a notorious space ho." He sweeps a hand out across the air and a rush of water follows, droplets spattering on the forest floor. "Works his way from one end of the galaxy to the next." Hyt chuckles, like this

is the most hilarious story he's ever told. "There's nothing he wouldn't do, no alien too big or small. If it's sentient, and it likes to fuck, he's DTF."

I stare at him.

How ... how is the translator picking up the acronym DTF—down to fuck—off of an alien's words?!

I decide not to dig too deeply into that.

"Hard to catch though." There's a devious smirk on Hyt's lips. "Anyway, your friend is as safe with him as anywhere else in the Noctuida. I'll pick her up next. Don't you worry your pretty head about it."

I would love to kick this guy in the nuts. But ... he might not have nuts. That's a distinct possibility. I do feel marginally better about Jane though. Still, this guy is only Plan B. I'm going to keep searching for her myself.

"Excuse me," Tabbi screeches, and both Hyt and I cringe as Madonna shrieks with her owner out of some misplaced sense of loyalty. Abraxas grumbles and uses his wing-hands to cover the ear holes beneath his horns. "Do you have any idea who I am?" She storms up to Hyt and he rears back, his pet fluttering into the air, chirping wildly. "I am an Earth princess." She slams her palm against her chest for emphasis, and this time, I can't help myself: I roll my eyes.

Hyt notices, and lets out a small chuckle, hooking his thumbs under his belt on either side. My eyes are drawn to the deep 'V' curves on his hips. *Shit.* I force myself not to notice his perfect body. Abraxas is my soulmate, and I wouldn't trade him in even if I could. *Hard not to see reality when it's right in front of one's face though.* The cop is a hottie, okay? It's just an objective fact.

"Darlin', do you think I care nine flicks about that nonsense? You're going home whether you like it or not." Hyt turns to me and tips his hat with a long sigh. Our eyes meet again, and I can't help but admit that I find him attractive. His body, in particular, is hard to ignore, out on display as it is. I look over at Abraxas, and he tilts his head at me. I step closer to him, pressing my shoulder into his side, and Hyt gives me a pointed look. "You and me, we might be seeing each other around if you're going to be living here. Come to the market sometime and we'll have a platonic little lunch." He leans in,

resting his purple tongue against the corner of his mouth and winking at me. He tips his hat. “I’ll keep the beasties away so you can shop and explore all the wonders that Jungryuk’s unofficial capital has to offer.”

“You will *leave*,” Abraxas growls out. “Now.”

“Ah, and so I will—happily. Farewell, Imperial Princess.” Officer Hyt turns and snaps his fingers, gesturing at Tabbi Kat to keep up. She stumbles over to him and grabs onto his arm, causing the scales across his entire body to ruffle in agitation. All down his naked spine, the ones on his face, his tails. Those tentacles flail wildly as his pet swirls in agitation around the pair of them. “There, there, sweetheart. You’re safe now.” He pats her head, but despite his clear distaste, he doesn’t dislodge her.

That bothers me.

I watch them walk away, wrapping my arms around myself.

“Thanks for the goodbye, Tabbi Kat!” I shout out, cursing under my breath. “What a useless brat.” I whirl on Abraxas to find him watching me and not the others. He seems sympathetic, holding out a big hand and cupping my entire head in his palm. He refreshed himself in a vent while we were out today; he’s *enormous* again. Not full-size. But bigger than he was this morning.

Mating should be ... interesting.

“Poor female,” he breathes out, brushing his thumb along the seam of my mouth. “You are sad.”

I shove my arm across my eyes to push back tears that I refuse to shed.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, but that’s not true. I’m devastated. All I can think about right now is my family.

My father ... when I didn’t come home that day—when Jane went missing alongside me—he’d have panicked. I can see him now, storming into the police station and ranting and raving until someone filed a missing person report. My mom would do what she does best, organizing the community around her. I might not be a soup kitchen philanthropist, but my mother is. She volunteers for no less than five organizations, and works a good forty hours a week doing pro bono work. My eldest sister—she’s a lawyer, which is why I promise that those jokes about the mayor’s lawyer weren’t solely based on his

profession—would be calling all her persnickety friends from law school for help. My little brother, Nate, would be on social media spreading the word while our other two sisters made flyers and went door-to-door. My parents would mortgage their house to hire a private investigator to look for me.

“You are devastated, my sweet, small thing.” Abraxas looks up at the sky and grumbles in distaste, scooping me up in his tail and gracefully falling to all fours. He bounds back to the ship, hopping inside just before the downpour starts.

Too bad.

I was hoping I could pretend the tears were just raindrops.



The rain hasn't stopped by morning which is unfortunate. If Officer Hyt found us here, how long until that stupid moth shows up? I've been trying really hard not to think about him. Two reasons for that really. One, I like his eyes too much to admit. Second, the knowledge that I've condemned him to death leaves me with a sour pit in my stomach. I'm near to tears when I focus too much on the idea.

I'm sitting cross-legged in the doorway, watching the rain fall when Abraxas comes up behind me, rubbing his massive body against my back like a friendly kitty cat. A smile touches my lips, but though I made my own decision to stay here, knowing that I'm not *allowed* to go back is bothering me.

"Why would the forces that be keep mated humans from going home?" I ask without turning around. I can't shake how much that law bothers me. I forgot to ask Hyt if he'd be able to erase Tabbi's memory. Though, if I'm being honest, she's just the sort of celebrity to go off on a tirade about aliens. Nobody would believe her. They'd just laugh and up her psych meds. That bothers me, too, for some reason. "So all these traders have to do is rape us and that's it?"

I think about Jane, calling my name in the market. She doesn't seem to be a prisoner, but she's thirsty as hell. What if she's fucked an alien, too? I don't ... I don't want to hope for that, but if we're both stuck here together, that's not so bad, is it? I sigh and rub at my face.

I'm nervous and twitchy, and I want to leave the den, but when I stuck my hand into the rain earlier for a test run, it burned my skin the way the female Aspis' stomach acid did. It's not an insta-kill sort of thing, but if I go splashing around out there, I'm going to find myself in a world of hurt.

"The Noctuida is not a fair or just place." Abraxas flops onto his side beside me, tucking my body into the curve of his. I've decided this is my new favorite place in the entire universe. "If it were, the Vestalis would remove the interlopers from this planet and leave the Aspis in peace." He exhales and turns, using that flexible spine of his to bring his head around so that he can lick the side of my neck. My whole body erupts with heat, and I choke back a gasp. "I am sorry that you have suffered, little one." He nuzzles me, and I slap my hand over my mouth to keep back a sob. I don't want to cry anymore. I especially don't want to cry about him or make him think that he's anything less than a gift. "It distresses me greatly that I have trapped you here; I will spend the rest of my life working to make yours enjoyable."

The tears are *right there*, but I don't let them fall. They cling to my eyeballs, salty and annoying. I will them to disappear.

"It's not your fault," I tell him, rubbing back against his head and closing my eyes. "You heard the cop: it was that stupid moth's fault. I was screwed when he tasted my blood."

I remember sitting in that tent with my blood pushing and pulsing. I wanted nothing more than to launch myself into that guy's arms. I thank my lucky stars that I was too wounded to get up off the floor.

I turn suddenly, throwing my arms around Abraxas' neck and hugging him as tightly as I can. He pulls me into his arms and tucks me close to him. I can hear a heartbeat in his chest, as loud as a drum. I wonder how many hearts he has? Just one? How big is it? I'm curious to learn more about his anatomy.

"This is a soothing gesture," he tells me, like he's never had a hug before. Thinking about it now, not only am I sure that he hasn't been touched by anyone or anything else in years—not since his parents, if that's even a thing with the Aspis—but also that hugging is not part of their culture. "I am pleased by it, female."

"It's called a hug," I tell him, still clinging shamelessly to his warm body. "Humans do it out of love, but also for comfort." I draw

away from him, and he grins at me, licking my face before he extricates himself from my grip and pads into the nest.

When he returns, he's dragging several furs with him. He lays them out in the doorway and creates a makeshift bed right there on the floor. I climb onto it with a sigh, sitting cross-legged with my elbows on my knees and watching the rain.

Creatures swim in it, sinuous things that glow with dizzying colors, some of which I'm not sure that I've ever seen before. How do I describe that? A color my eyes have never witnessed. Their bodies flutter with gauzy fins as they wiggle through the downpour, curving themselves into circles or knots, winding around one another.

"They are mating," Abraxas tells me helpfully, sitting beside me and making me feel decidedly nervous all of a sudden. But not like I'm nervous about Moth Guy finding us. Nervous in a good way. I clear my throat and try to act like I'm not thinking about sex. "They only mate when the rain is acidic and sharp." He watches them with his gem-like eyes, and I watch him. As pretty as the rain creatures are, he's far prettier. "They will lay eggs, and we will eat them."

He grins so widely that his face looks like it's severed in half by teeth.

"Your people ... don't lay eggs do they?" I can't believe I didn't think to ask until now. Not that it matters. We're not going to be able to have a baby. That's too easy. Everything about this is hard. Why would we be able to make a child together? Does that make any sense? I know he says he's seen it happen before, but ... he could be mistaken.

"Fear not. Aspis are born live and bloodied." He turns to me, and that sharp grin, it stays in place while he embarrasses me to endless levels. "Our child will be born the same way. I will deliver it with my hands from your beautiful body."

My cheeks turn bright red. I am *not* a blusher, but this guy is just ... way too much.

"Seriously? Shut the fuck up." I turn away from him, crossing my arms over my chest. I'm glad I chose to wear the lavender dress again today. I don't feel like being naked right this second. "We're not having a baby."

He tilts his head at me, perplexed.

“You should not have asked for the mating rod twice in as many days. We should use the pleasure rod in its place.” He growls that at me, standing up and stalking around me, shadows dancing and blurring the edges of my vision. He pulses with light, and I catch my breath. “Although I do not believe it matters now.” He grabs either side of my dress with his winged hands and then yanks. The lavender gauze splits right in half, and I let out a sharp sound of surprise.

I barely register being put on my back, but it doesn't matter. This is where I want to be anyway.

Abraxas covers me with his body, both cocks exposed. He rubs them against me, teasing as I writhe and dig at his chest with my nails.

“Which do you want, female?” he asks, still grinning down at me. “It is your choice.”

“Both.” I put my hands over my face as he pauses his movements. I can just feel him tilting his giant head at me. I part my fingers to look up at him. “Did I explain to you how my anatomy works?” I can barely get the words out. Not sure what happened to caustic, bitchy Eve, but somehow, I'm like a kitten when it comes to this guy.

“I know your anatomy quite well,” he says, and then his mouth disappears into his face as he waits for a serious response to such a ridiculous statement.

“You're such an arrogant dick,” I mumble, dropping my palms from my face. With one of my hands, I reach down and point. “I can ... we might be able to use both of your dicks at the same time.”

Jane and I have this silly list that we keep with each other: most embarrassing things that've ever happened during sex. Charley horses. Slippery sounds. Lost condoms. But this? This is the fucking worst.

Abraxas picks me up with his strong hands under my ass, and he brings my crotch right up to his face.

“You are certain?” he asks, like he doesn't believe me. His face is like two millimeters from my genitals. “This channel looks quite small.”

“Put me down,” I grind out, one of his wing-hands behind my back, the other supporting my neck. I’m suspended with my head hanging downward at a forty-five degree angle. Lovely. “I’m certain. You just ... need to be slow and careful.”

He sets me gently down on the furs, rain pouring in heavy, dark sheets outside the den. Zero’s screen is silent, empty, like she doesn’t care to witness this ridiculous mating behavior. I don’t blame her. If I had to watch me and Abraxas, I’d gag on the lovey-dovey vibes. It’s gross.

Also ... I, um, forgot to mention her to Officer Hyt. Oops. I really will take him up on his offer to go to the market at some point. Then I’ll tell her and he can deal with her bitchy ass. If I’m going to be living here, I will *not* be intimidated away from the market. I want to be able to go there and buy shit. Maybe I can pay Trevor and his twin to take a message back to Earth for me? They seem like opportunists.

“It’d be nice if we had lube,” I continue, sitting up enough to study Abraxas’ cocks. They’re not at their smallest size right now, but I think I can ... I want to ... “Fuck it. Let’s try it.”

“You need me slick?” he asks, interpreting my prior statement. “I will make myself slick for you, my mate. Males of my species are solely responsible for lubricating their females.” He reaches down and strokes himself with his hands, one on each cock. His sack is out, too. It isn’t always visible, but I like it. I’m a bit of a perv if you hadn’t noticed.

I lie naked on those soft furs, our only light provided by the bioluminescent spirals and stripes on my mate’s body. He uses those long, deft fingers of his to pet and stroke his cocks, working liquid from the tips of both. More than that, dew beads on the lengths of both shafts, lubricant that I didn’t even know he was making when he was inside of me.

I can literally *smell* it, and it’s making me want to writhe and thrash and thrust.

I turn over, putting my ass up in the air. I *could* tell Abraxas that I have ways of using his mating rod without risking pregnancy. But ... I’m not going to. Not right now. Tomorrow maybe. Also, I know that I could’ve simply stayed on my back, and he would’ve used it there

out of necessity. I have a confession to make: I *slightly* prefer that one over the other. The shape is exquisite.

“You could make *me* slick, too,” I whisper, cheek pressed into the furs. “With your tongue.”

There’s an electric stillness behind me.

“You wish my tongue to lap your sex nectar?” he asks me, his voice a low grumble. I feel his breath, sharp and hot against my exposed sex. Here I am, prone and nude and vulnerable with an alien predator behind me, the literal king of the forest who could kill me in less time than it takes to blink ... and I feel safe. Protected. Cherished.

Clawed hands curl around my hips as he leans in, chuffing another breath against my swollen cunt. It must look obscene from his view, all plumped up and pink and contracting before we’ve even started.

“So delightfully eager,” Abraxas continues, and then I feel one of his long fingers stroke down from my ass to my opening to my clit. “You smell like a snack, female. If you wish to be eaten by me, I shall oblige.”

I bite the fur under my cheek and wiggle eagerly, waiting for that first heated slip of his powerful tongue.

That’s not how he starts. Instead, Abraxas *bites* my ass cheek, puncturing my pale flesh with his sharp teeth. It’s just a nip, but it’s enough to attack my blood with those pesky pheromones. The pain is instant, but the pleasure is ongoing. It takes over as he laps the wounds, healing them with his magic spit.

The strength of his tongue on my ass is incredible, rocking my body with each lick. It’s almost like being spanked. I force myself to breathe, pulse pounding in my ears, desire ballooning into something hot, wild, and uncontainable. It breaks free from me in a moan, one that’s loud and needy and honest in a way I’m not sure I’ve ever been before. With just us here, there’s no reason to hold back.

Sorry, Zero.

Abraxas doesn’t stop at my ass, using his massive tongue to lick my spine, my shoulder, my *hair*. He grooms me all over, until I’m shaking and throbbing, oh so close to begging for it. He returns to my cunt before I lose all of my dignity, teasing my inner thighs and

offering just the barest brush of his strong, wet muscle on my curls and clit.

“Abraxas, *please*,” I finally blurt, rocking back and forth on my knees, trying to entice him by thrusting my hips a little. “Touch me there.”

With a growl that might be a chuckle, he complies.

His entire tongue slips over my pussy, consuming every part of it with a single flick.

“Oh, fuck.” The words slip out, and he growls again, laughing at me even as he’s getting me nice and wet and ready for him. “Fuck, Abraxas. Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Not so little now,” he repeats with more rolling laughter, and then he parts me with strong but gentle fingers, opening me up so that he can see everything. “You are so pink and sweet, so tender and wanting for me. How could a male resist?” His tongue lashes out, diving into my pussy and shattering my mind.

Abraxas slips in deep, filling me almost completely with his tongue. He fucks me with it before withdrawing, bathing my outer folds and then testing the tip against my clit. I go wild for that. I’m thrashing and humping shamelessly when he grips my shoulders with his wing-hands, grips my hips with his hand-hands, and then takes his time exploring that pert, sensitive nub.

As he lavishes me between the thighs, his tail sneaks between us, seeking out my breasts. Abraxas isn’t shy, letting venom ooze from his spikes, smearing that purple liquid across my nipples, using his tail tip to tease and flick before he curls his whole tail around one breast and squeezes.

“I can’t take it,” I whisper, shivering violently as tears prick the edges of my eyes. I want to come, but I also don’t know if I can. It’s too much. Too intense. My whole body belongs to Abraxas in that moment. Will *always* belong to Abraxas. I was ruined the moment he attacked that wagon.

If there’s such a thing as fate, then there’s no way the stars weren’t involved in orchestrating this meeting between us.

“I want your cocks,” I tell him, loving the use of the plural. Two dicks. Both mine. Only mine forever. “Hurry, please.”

“Not yet, female,” he tells me, his voice deep and low, almost sleepy with satisfaction. “Your pheromones are the sweetest taste to ever cross my tongue. I’ll have more of you now.” He slips his tongue inside my cunt again and I contract, milking him there in the most embarrassing way possible. He makes such satisfied sounds for me though that it’s hard to be shy about it. Once again, I’m tongue-fucked to the brink of orgasm.

This damn dragon though? He knows exactly when to take a pause, tongue slipping out of me. When he licks over my rear opening, I stop him.

“Don’t put your tongue in there,” I breathe, and yeah, well, apparently it *is* still possible for me to be embarrassed around this guy. “Try a finger instead.”

“Such odd mating habits,” he murmurs, but not like he’s unaffected or uninterested. With a pheromone-tipped finger, he dips inside my willing body, and I gasp out another sharp moan. A human finger is relatively small. This is *not* a human finger. Abraxas’ digits are big, but slippery and scaled, dressed with those violet spirals that push me into a much more primal state of mind.

He takes his time with me there, following my signals, thrusting in when I push back, withdrawing slowly when I gasp out barely coherent curses. Another of his hands finds my pussy, stroking and petting and exploring my alien body with his fingers. All the while, his tail never stops playing with my breasts.

I know it’s time when I’m panting, when I’m practically drooling, when I can scarcely remember any other life outside of this one. *I can be happy here. I want to be here. It’s not a life that I ever expected, but it’s one worth living to the fullest.*

Complete and utter freedom, that’s what Abraxas is offering. Freedom and fucking and food. I want it.

“Now,” I choke out, suddenly frantic. “Now, now, now.”

“Yes, my mate,” he purrs, withdrawing his hands and adjusting his huge body behind mine.

Abraxas takes my hips in his massive hands, and I suck in a wild inhale. His wing-hands rest on the floor on either side of me, wings protecting me from the cool air drifting in from outside. Abraxas makes a very male, very excited sound as he licks the side of my neck and then bites my shoulder, holding me still for a wild mating.

He presses both cocks against me at the same time, and I squeeze my eyes shut, panting with anticipation. I trust him not to hurt me. I don't even tell him to go slow; he'll be soft with me. For a monster as big as he is, that's impressive and endlessly endearing.

My pussy is more than ready—he could've sheathed himself fully in an instant—but he takes his time with my ass, slick and wet and dripping those intoxicating pheromones of his. I groan when he presses the tip in, opening me up to his vibrant heat.

“*Female.*” The word is little more than a purr, unfiltered by the translator. He's speaking to me in his own voice. I push back against him for encouragement, taking more of his shaft inside of me. Not every girl can do this—not every girl *wants* to do this—but I happen to like it in both holes. There's a wall of very sensitive flesh between the channels, and I absolutely love it when it gets pinned between two hard lengths.

Never thought I'd meet a guy who could take care of both things with his own body.

With impressive restraint, he works himself inside of me until he bottoms-out, and I realize what it's like to truly and utterly be full. I can barely breathe, taking these soft, small panting breaths. The rain pours, and lightning cracks, filling the space with white light before it dims to stormy gray. In the distance, thunder rumbles the displeasure of the sky.

“You are well?” Abraxas asks me, his own voice cracked with strain. He wants to fuck, and yet he sits still and waits.

“You can start moving.” My words are a whisper. I don't want to admit it, but I don't think I'm going to last very long. I can already feel an orgasm pressing against the base of my spine.

He does what I've asked, sliding out of both channels simultaneously. He makes this pleased purr that quickly descends into a growl, rocking his hips forward to slam into my ass. His sack rocks with the motion, hitting my clit and offering up that beautiful poison from his violet spirals.

“What an exquisite little female,” he tells me, covering my body with his. He bands one arm around my waist and tugs me into him, rubbing his lower belly against my back. The more skin that's touching during sex, the happier he is. “There is not an Aspis female in existence that could do this.”

He moves slowly at first, quickening his pace only when he realizes that I have no problem taking him completely. That's on him: he really did make us both perfectly slick for the act. Not only are we all lubed up, but the marks he gave me, the ones that make my vagina glow, I can tell they're relaxing me, opening me up, welcoming him inside.

"Faster," I gasp, and he bites me again, fucking me now as hard and as fast as he wants.

I surrender with complete, blissful abandon, relying on Abraxas to keep me upright, to hold me in place. If he wasn't keeping me still, he'd probably mate me right through the floor to the ground below. I wriggle and moan, bite my lip, drip with sweat. He uses his tail to sweep my body, to touch me everywhere, to coat my skin in that deadly venom. It tingles as he rubs it into my clit, sparks of pleasure that cause my pussy to double down, gripping him, *claiming* him.

He snarls aggressively, teeth sinking deeper into my shoulder, claiming *me*.

I relax into it, an orgasm finding me within minutes of his increased pace. He slows for that, moaning and growling as I pump his body with my own, snarling when I mercilessly drain his sack. He waits for a few moments, teeth still buried in me, and then he starts to rock his second shaft into my ass. Even with his mating rod swollen and ... I guess knotted? ... into me, he grinds and rubs and fucks with deep, powerful gyrations.

The arm banded around my waist shifts up, a hand squeezing my breast. I'm sure his spine is curved up, sinuous and strange and alien, as he seeks to consume and enjoy as much of my body as possible. He's greedy like that, touching every part of me, letting me touch every part of him.

His second shaft empties inside of me with his own climax, but he isn't done. He keeps going, releasing a second orgasm in my cunt that curls my fingers and toes into the furs underneath us. I'm barely human when he rolls onto his side, taking me with him. We can't separate just yet.

I close my eyes, listening to the thump and shush of his heart, his pulse. There are no little blood vessels between us this time—his pleasure rod needs to be in my pussy for that to happen—but his mating rod is swollen and thick inside of me.

We lie there together with the patter of the rain as a backdrop. It's beautiful. If I tilt my head, I can see the creatures dancing in the water, twining around each other and making happy trills that sound a bit like birdsong. I relax my head and close my eyes. Pretty sure I fall asleep for a bit before he slips out of me, and I come to with a sharp gasp.

"I am sorry, female," he murmurs, nuzzling my neck.

"Nothing to be sorry about. I just ... I think I dozed off." I sit up and rub at my eyes, and he splits his beautifully creepy mouth into another grin.

"If you need an energy boost, I will put my pleasure rod inside of you." He's not even joking. He'd go again. Right this very second. Whatever it is that happens when we have sex like that, it usually does leave me feeling perky and full of vigor.

"Food?" I ask, lifting a brow. He caught a massive fish-like alien *thing* earlier, and it's lying in the nook, just waiting to be eaten. BTW, it has two heads with swordfish-ish beaks. Just ish though. Only ish.

"Food," he agrees, with a bit of resignation. When he goes to move toward it, I grab his arm and squeeze him again with another hug. He looks down at me and tilts his head. "This is one of the reasons that I chose you, that I like you." He sits back on his haunches and gathers me into his arms. "You are affectionate in a way that another Aspis would not be." He tucks me up against his chest, and I close my eyes. *I made the right choice. But fuck it hurts. It hurts so bad. I will always miss my family. Miss Earth. But he's worth it.* "You defended me when we were not yet mates. Many females would have abandoned me and thought of me as weak."

I snort and shake my head.

"That's ridiculous. You are anything *but* weak. They're idiots."

He growls with pleasure at my statement.

"You may be small and fragile, and you cannot hunt, but rare is the day that one Aspis apologizes to another. Rarer still is a thank you." He rubs his horns against me, and I look up to see an unmistakable smirk on his toothy mouth. "An Aspis would rather go to the grave than admit to wrongdoing. All of the things that make you alien are the things I cherish most."

Replace *alien* with what I know I am, and he's just said, *all of the things that make you human are the things I cherish most*. I'm having a lot of trouble figuring out how to respond to a statement as profound as that. I almost laugh and brush it off, but that's what I always do. I want to feel this. I want to be present in this perfect moment.

"Oh?" I do laugh a little there, just a soft exhalation. "Aren't I a liability?" It's almost a joke but not quite. I'm genuinely worried that Abraxas has put himself in danger by picking me. *That stupid moth. I hate that fucking moth. What if he comes for Abraxas and hurts him?*

He pauses, genuinely giving consideration to my question. That makes me nervous as hell. I almost pull away, but he won't let me go.

"A liability?" Another pause. "Perhaps." I actively cringe at that, but Abraxas isn't done. He takes my face in a winged hand and tilts my chin so that I'm looking up and into his eyes. "Nothing in this life is free or easy. To get something worthwhile, one must give something up in return."

That does it.

Tears roll freely down my face as I think about my family and friends, about my life on Earth, about all of the things I will never have again, and all of the things I have gained by coming here. He's right: I have given something very, very precious up in exchange for this moment.

Abraxas licks the salt from my face and holds me until I've calmed down enough to make another joke.

"Shit, I'm such a crybaby now. Not sure when that happened. My mom swears up and down that I stopped crying at eight months old and didn't shed another tear until puberty."

That statement takes Abraxas a moment to parse through, even with the translator.

We have a lot to learn about each other.

"My mother and father still live," he tells me contemplatively. "We will pay them a visit one day."

That ... scares the shit out of me.

“Perhaps for the birth of our child. That would be best. My mother is a talented midwife.” He snorts in bemusement and sets me aside, creating a fire in the nook so that he can cook my dinner. I throw a rock at his back, but it bounces harmlessly off.

“There is no child,” I grind out, hoping like hell that Jane is still here so we can talk about this. I need a girlfriend by my side—desperately. Maybe, like me, she’ll have fallen for some stupid hunky alien. That would be just like her. “Can we find another caravan tomorrow? I really need to make sure Jane is okay.”

“We will wait for the Vestalis prince to die, and then we will find your friend,” he tells me, and I hate how nauseous I feel at his words.

For some weird reason ... I don't want the Vestalis prince to die.



Abraxas has given me some strange vegetables (or fruits? roots? herbs?) to peel while he hunts. The rain has slowed to a gentle mist, but that's not much better on my skin. He wants me to bundle up in the clothing he brought back the other day, and then we're going to leave. He's confident that he can protect me from the worst of the rain—even more confident that his clever tongue can heal any burns I might sustain.

“Shit,” I grumble, trying to yank the weird papery wrapper off the purple-fleshed yam thing in my hand. Its skin is thin but tough, like the bark of a birch tree, and it's driving me nuts. I was not cut out to be an alien homemaker. I pause. Wait. Abraxas does both the hunting and the cleaning. He's the provider and the homemaker, and I am ... affectionate? That seems to be enough to satisfy him. I smirk. “At least I can take alien dragon DP like a champ.”

I giggle at my own joke. Double penetration jests are always good for a laugh. Then I think about my family. I think about that hollow feeling in my chest when Officer Hyt took Tabbi Kat away, when he told me that I wasn't his problem, that mated humans can never go back.

I hate that.

I almost wish I were the Imperial Princess, so I could make some changes. *I almost wish Moth Guy didn't have to die.* I curse when my hand slips, and I cut myself with my own fingernail. We don't

currently have a knife for me to peel these with, but Abraxas seemed to think the skins would come right off.

They don't.

They're stubborn.

Out of frustration, I toss the yam out the doorway and it hits something. I hear it smack into a surface—there's a distinctive grunt—and then it plops on the ground. I go still, hand hovering in midair over another alien vegetable.

The pressure in the air changes. My throat goes dry. My lips part. My naked body reacts like I'm being caressed by an unseen hand.

I smell him before I see him.

Cardamom and honey. Moth pheromones. The prince is coming.

I look down and there he is, striding across the clearing as he pulls his gloves off, finger by finger. He reaches up to rub at his forehead, and I just *know* that I hit him in the face with the alien yam.

Abraxas. Oh God, what if he's not okay? What if Moth Guy got him?

The prince's dark eyes, as endless as a starless sky, sweep my nude form with fire and precision, searing intent and ardor into me. When we look at each other, I feel that strange falling, an emotional tumbling, like I've just crawled into bed at home, tucked beneath the covers. Safe. Comfortable.

Waiting to be fucked.

I shove up to my feet and take a sudden step back, nearly tripping over the furs from last night's makeshift bed.

No, no, no.

“Good morning, Princess.” Moth Guy looks me over from down below, his massive horn-like antennae shifting forward as if to scent me. His blizzard-white wings spread wide and then gently fan forward, stirring the air, suffocating me with that scent.

He walks right over to my den and climbs the side of the ship like it's nothing, landing in front of me in his military suit and boots. His cloak—err wings—sweep the floor as he looks around with another scowl.

“You've mated him.”

He sounds like he wants to kill something.

No. Not something. He sounds like he wants to kill *Abraxas*.

“Stalker moth guy,” I whisper back at him, trying to play glib when really, I’m terrified. His presence here, it’s not a small thing. It’s a big one. A very, very bad one.

“Rurik.” He slaps the pair of gloves against his palm and stalks over to me, putting his bare hand on my cheek. My knees drop me to the floor and he follows as I gasp in pain. I hit the metal *hard*. “That’s my name. You can also call me *Your Imperial Majesty*.” A long pause as he forces a cruel smile. “Or ... *husband* works, too.”

I slap him, and he snatches my wrist, gritting those insane teeth of his. *Like a vampire*. He has three on either side of his mouth. The rest of his teeth seem relatively normal. He snatches my wrist and brings it to his face, inhaling deeply and then letting out a hiss.

“Will you submit to a medical examination?” he asks me, and I kick him in the face. I try to anyway, and I almost manage it, but he uses his knee to pin my thigh to the floor, shoving me onto my back and locking my wrists down with his horrifically strong grip.

It doesn’t help that I’m naked. It really doesn’t help. *That smell. My body. I’m fighting a losing fucking battle here*. I’d rather suffocate than breathe in another lungful of that tainted air. My body has other ideas. She wants it. She doesn’t care if this moment is breaking my heart. I’ve chosen Abraxas, and I want this moth to fuck all the way off. I lied when I said I didn’t want him to die. I do. I just want him gone.

“Where is Abraxas?” I whisper, and *His Imperial Majesty* looks at me like he has no idea what I’m talking about. “The Aspis male! Where the fuck is he?”

A roar shatters the jungle followed by the frantic flapping of thousands of wings as creatures flee the woods. Because that sound? It’s a sound of *rage*.

It’s Abraxas.

It’s my *mate*.

The moth prince smiles at me, pinning me to the floor of my own den.

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll track him down, cut his tongue out, and skin him alive for daring to touch my future queen.” He taps a device at his ear and snarls into it. “Bring us up.”

“If you kill him, I will kill myself.” Now it’s my turn to smile as the prince directs those endless eyes back to me. His wings spread open behind him, an obvious sign of distress. *Oh, he’s easy to read.* “Then we’ll both die. Try me, asshole.”

He punches the floor next to me with his fist and snatches my chin with his other hand, nails pricking my skin.

The ship heaves around us, lurching to one side and then the other before my stomach flips with the sensation of velocity. It’s as disorienting as an amusement park ride, this rapid feeling of going up, up, up. The ground groans around us, the heavy vines snap, and when I lift my head to peer past the prince, I can see a dizzying rush of tree trunks, green canopy, and then endless sky.

I pull in a sharp gasp.

“You *will* submit to a med check.” He leans in and puts his mouth near my ear. I can hear the hiss and whisper of his real words beneath the translator’s dulcet, pompous tones. “And you will *never* see this planet nor your own ever again. When I am king, I will destroy them both.”

We come to a sudden stop, so sudden that I fly up off the floor and then slam back down with enough force to conk my head. Only ... I don’t hit my head because he catches it in his hand. Our eyes meet, and it happens all over again.

I have traveled through time and space to find you, his gaze says.

I want to scream. Of all the things that have happened to me, this is the worst. When he looks at me, it feels like I’m right where I’m meant to be. *My free will has been stripped. Abraxas was right: these creatures are parasites. Fucking parasites.*

Rurik shoves up from the floor, and I try to follow.

But I can’t.

My limbs feel heavy, and a dizziness sweeps over me that makes the whole world spin. I roll onto my stomach and crawl, naked and dazed, toward the nest. I don’t look at the bright lights outside the ship, the sterile metal walls, or the prince as he studies me over his shoulder.

With the last of my strength, I crawl into the nest, roll down the gentle incline into the furs and black out with Abraxas' scent all around me.



I'm drooling everywhere. *I hope Abraxas doesn't mind adding extra laundry days to his schedule.* I can't help it. Sometimes when I sleep, I drool. Don't most people? No? Just me? With a grumble, I roll over, nuzzling into my mate's warmth. His smell calms me in a way nothing else ever has. Isn't that crazy? That a person could get so worked up by something as invisible as pheromones?

His arms come around me, holding me close, and I know that I'm safe.

Cardamom and honey.

It hits me like a punch to the gut, and I gasp, shoving up violently from where I was sleeping.

Seems to me that I was in the prince's arms.

He holds his hands up and out to either side, as if in surrender. But his head is bowed, and he has this *awful* smile on his mouth that makes me feel perfectly homicidal. Those demonic eyes of his open up and he turns to me, tucking his massive antennae back against his head. They extend past his skull on either side, like rabbit ears or something.

I slam my body into a metal wall, panting heavily, eyes blurred from sleep. I'm still naked, standing in a small room with the moth prince and another guy of the same species. The other dude is far less attractive, despite sharing similar features. That bothers me.

“My apologies, Imperial Highness. It’s well-known that the Aspis have the ability to disrupt electrical signals, but I did not believe it would extend to one’s mate.”

The prince sighs, pulling red gloves from his pocket and slipping them on. He crosses his arms over his chest, his fur-like hair falling halfway down his back. His wings rest in a clever nook carved into the back of the chair, like it was designed for this express purpose.

My eyes dart around the room. The only window shows ... it shows ... I can see ...

“Oh my God.” I turn and throw up on the floor. Not my most dignified moment, but ... we’re in space. It’s one thing to wake up on another planet. It’s a whole other to be in goddamn motherfucking outer space! “I hate space,” I whisper, feeling a panic attack coming on. I push the heel of my hand against my chest, trying to calm my rapid heart rate. Remember when I said I’d imagined horrible ways to die? Lava was one of them. Being ejected into outer space in a suit and having to make the decision on whether or not to remove the helmet, starving to death, or simply waiting for my oxygen to run out as I’m sucked toward a blackhole— “I hate spaceships.”

Never been (conscious) on one before, but I already know I’m not going to like it.

My gaze drifts up to the ceiling. There are ... like, *tendrils* or something snaking along the ceiling and the walls. Some of them are crimson and *meaty* while others glow and pulse, like a heartbeat. I look to my right and see a large vein-like growth. What the hell is this?

“You hate space?” the prince repeats, standing up from his chair. I reach up my hand to feel for the translator, intending on tossing it against the wall in protest. It’s not there. “You hate spaceships?” He sounds exasperated, especially when his gaze drops to the mess I’ve just left on the ground.

As I stare out the window, I see a distant planet, patchy with green and sapphire.

It’s Jungryuk. It’s Abraxas’ planet. Abraxas is down there.

I am up here.

I am here.

I am ...

“What have you done?” I ask, sliding to the floor. I’ve been through a lot recently. Waking up under the *Humans ... pets, meat, or mates* sign was a pretty big shock. Somehow, this is worse. I have the distinct and unshakeable feeling that I will never see Abraxas again.

I was falling in love with him.

I love him.

“We have outfitted you with a translator,” the prince explains, moving over to stand in front of me. His wings sway like a cloak around his booted feet. “You’ve been given synchronicity contacts; you will see us speaking as if we are truly speaking your language. It will allow us to have more pleasant interactions with one another.”

I look up at him with a strangled laugh stuck in my throat.

The only thing keeping me calm here is this: without me, the prince will die. Abraxas told me that, and I trust him as much as I’ve ever trusted anyone. Moth Guy—Rurik—needs me. He can’t kill me. *But he can lock you up, chain you to a wall, keep you there for the rest of your miserable life. All he needs is your blood.*

“Pleasant interactions?” I breathe, shoving up to my feet. I might be naked, but I don’t have to let him have the high ground. The other moth guy—a doctor, I think—turns away to face the wall, allowing us a modicum of privacy.

Rurik stares me down with his horrible eyes. There’s a deep sadness in them, one that echoes back from inside of me, like I’m making a huge mistake by wanting to hate him. And hate him I do.

“Put me back where you found me.” I squeeze my hands into fists at my sides. Not all that long ago, I would’ve been ... well, not thrilled to be here, but I would’ve had hope that I could return to Earth. Or find Jane. If this guy is a prince, he must have plenty of resources at his disposal.

He smiles at me again, and it’s as ugly as it was the last time around. He’s wearing something strange on the left side of his head and over his face, something with a small, red screen that partially covers his eye. I can see tiny words scrawled across it, like maybe it’s the alien version of a smartwatch or something. He reaches up to

remove it, setting it on the medical table beside him. I didn't wake up on that table though; I woke up in his arms.

And I *liked* it.

Guilt and frustration sweep through me. I feel like I'm betraying Abraxas just by *standing* here, but what choice do I have? There's no door that I can see. The window leads to certain death. I'm naked and clueless and helpless. Again.

I am so fucking sick of being helpless!

I slap the prince, and he lets me. He exhales heavily and closes his eyes again. When he looks back at me, that deep melancholy is gone, replaced with frustration and a little bit of rage. He's mad. I've thoroughly pissed him off.

"You will not go back to Jungryuk. If you continue to insist upon it, I will ask my father for a favor. He will obliterate it from existence for me. Would you like that? To know that hideous animal was incinerated? That his entire species was? That would certainly make *me* feel better."

I swing a punch at his stomach, but he doesn't allow my fist to connect. He snatches my wrist in his gloved hand, gritting his teeth. He exhales and spreads his wings, and the room is *saturated* with that cloying scent. *Cardamom and honey. Again.* It's everywhere. I'm choking on it. My body reacts like I've spent hours in a candlelit room with a generous lover and copious foreplay.

I tuck my lower lip under my teeth and bite down as hard as I can. The pain helps, but when I open my eyes, I see that the prince's gaze is on my mouth. *The blood.* Copper taints my tongue, and he squeezes my wrist so tightly that I cry out.

I'm released in an instant, and he steps back, turning to the doctor in the corner. Poor guy. Probably just trying to do his job. I don't particularly care. If I can, I'll stick a knife in his back, too. *Right, Eve. Good idea. Start killing people on this ship and then what? Where will you go? How will you get out of here?* I obviously don't know the first thing about space travel. I don't even know where we are in relation to Earth.

I am as trapped as I have ever been.

"What about the mate markings?" the prince—*Rurik*—inquires, and I get the idea that this conversation is for my benefit. "Can we

remove them?”

I know immediately what he’s talking about: the purple spirals inside of me, the ones that glow. Just the mere mention of removing them puts me into a rage-inducing panic.

“I am not sure, Your Imperial Highness, but I will look into it.”

“See to it that you do.” The prince grits his teeth and then waves his hand in a stiff-necked and authoritarian way. “Leave us.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The man offers a formal bow, spreading his wings behind him. His antennae tuck close on either side of his head before he drops to one knee, brushing a finger against his lower lip and then rising like he’s done this a million times before. As he turns away, I see that his wings are not the pristine white of the prince’s. They’re decorated with a complex pattern in a brilliant bloodred color. I shift against the wall, and my arm accidentally touches one of the ship’s pulsing veins.

It’s *warm*.

I gag.

“You violated me while I was asleep,” I whisper, hating how upset I am by the idea. It all seems very clinical, but the thought that these two men were looking into my vagina without my permission, while I was unconscious and unable to defend myself, it makes me sick. Not just that. But those markings? My mating with Abraxas, it’s the most intimate and personal experience I’ve ever had.

I think about him, about how we sat and watched the rain together just yesterday. I think about all the wonderful and impossibly true things he said to me, about me.

“All of the things that make you alien are the things I cherish most.”

“It was not intended to be a violation; it was a routine examination carried out in my presence by a medical professional.” That’s his lofty, half-hearted response. He’s still staring at my mouth, the slits of his nostrils flaring at the smell. “You were put in the med bay and scanned, given a translator, and provided with synchronicity contacts, as I explained. Nothing untoward occurred toward your person.”

“You don’t think kidnapping a naked woman against her will and looking inside her pussy is untoward?” I’m shocked. Not at his

response—it's expected—but rather, I'm shocked that I'm shocked. Does that make sense? This guy has no reason to be anything but awful, but somehow there's a voice inside me telling me that he isn't. That he shouldn't be. That he's somehow mine, and I'm his, and I cannot fucking stand the absurdity of it.

“You made it necessary by mating an Aspis.” This is said like an accusation, and you know what the worst part is? It feels justified, like I betrayed him somehow. He certainly thinks it, and whatever odd shit is going on between us, I feel like it's true, too.

“You made it necessary by purchasing the wrong woman,” I shoot back, remembering the day in the tent. He tasted my blood, was attracted to my blood, but he took Avril and left me there. *That* feels like a betrayal, too. “And you know what? I have no idea what alien hypno-psychosis shit you're doing to me, but I *hate* the fated mates trope.”

He blinks at me with dark lashes against white skin. That black V-shaped pattern between his eyes only emphasizes how incredibly attractive he is. Not human, not really. But ... beautiful.

“Fated mates?” he repeats, fixated on that part of the conversation. “There is but one female in the entirety of life and existence whose blood I can consume, whose body can fit with mine, who can produce and bear my children. You are it. The only one. You dare reject me?”

My head spins with all the things he's just said. They feel *true*, and that disgusts me.

“You're a *parasite*,” I hiss back at him. “A world eater.” *Whatever that means.* “Get out of my head and leave me alone! Are you delusional or something? I don't fucking want you.”

He punches the wall again, right beside one of those pulsing veins, and he gets right up in my face. The smell of him is intoxicating to the point of distraction. It's hard for me to even remember why I don't want to be here. *Abraxas. Please be okay. Please, please, please.* I have the distinct feeling that if he dies, I'll no longer feel the urge to live.

“I wished to establish a relationship with you first, but I am quite literally *starving*. I will make you a deal.” Rurik stands up straight, reaching up to brush his fingers over the bloodred fur below his throat. I'm pretty sure it's a part of his body and not simply

decorative. “Let me feed from you, and I will gift you a human companion.”

My eyes widen.

“Jane?!” I ask, because if everything else goes to shit, shouldn’t I at least be able to see my best friend? *Please don’t let it be Tabbi Kat*, I think, my eyes narrowing. Wouldn’t that just be the pits? *I should’ve left her in the slaver’s cage on the side of the road.*

The prince frowns, and it’s an absurdly human expression. How does he know to do that?

“Avril,” he repeats, just like he did in the market. Ah, right. That makes sense. His eyes meet mine again, and I want to cry. I don’t know why. There’s just something oddly tragic about him, about us, about this entire situation. “The one who was dressed entirely in *your* blood.”

“How long did it take you to figure out you’d grabbed the wrong woman?” I ask with a smirk. I shouldn’t do it, poke the bear and all that, but I can’t help feeling like he isn’t going to hurt me. “After you’d raped her and stolen her blood?”

He takes a step away from me, wings spreading fully out to either side of him. I wish I could lie and say they were ugly or weird, but they’re not. They’re absolutely stunning, filling the entire space from wall to wall and still unable to extend to their full span. Chemicals and pheromones swirl in the air, and I have to close my eyes to stay standing. *His smell. Goddamn it.*

“I have never—nor would I *ever*—bed another female,” he hisses at me, like *legitimately*. It’s part of an overall sneer as he turns, his antennae swiveling away from me like he wishes he could get as far from me as possible. “I had but to lick your blood directly from her skin, and I was brought to my knees with sickness.” He closes his eyes and lets his wings fall. They swirl like fabric behind him. He glares over his shoulder at me, but I refuse to look directly at him. It’s easier if I stare out the window at Abraxas’ planet. I’m not imagining it: it’s getting smaller by the minute. “I was so ill that I could not get back to the stall in time to purchase you.”

“Abraxas—the Aspis male—he saved my life.” I smile tightly as I finally force myself to look back and meet his gaze again. “Looks like you owe him yours, too.” *The prince and I, we could be so happy together.* The thought doesn’t feel like my own, and I choke

on it. No way would I ever have such sappy thoughts about someone I just met. Abraxas ... I was starting to have sappy thoughts about him.

I'd made up my mind to *stay* with him.

“Nothing in this life is free or easy. To get something worthwhile, one must give something up in return.”

I'd be willing to do that, to give up fucking *everything*. A love like I felt with him, someone who is always trustworthy and honest, who proves themselves day in and day out with actions, that's rare. It's a once in a galaxy event, and it's been *stolen* from me.

“I will have his corpse brought to your rooms,” the prince breathes, and I can see it written all over his face. He's in abject shock. He can't believe I'm standing here defying him like this. He better get used to it if he intends to keep me around.

I step forward and—willingly this time—put my hands on the prince's shoulders. His gloved hands immediately find my waist, and even through the fabric, I can feel the heat of him. Just as Abraxas said: *the blood sings*. I can feel my own pumping and pushing at my skin, wanting this man. I can feel him yearning just as desperately in return. I put my lips near his ear, and he sweeps his wings around me. They settle against my back, so soft and warm and comforting. I grit my teeth.

“If you hurt Abraxas, I will *never* love you.”

It might seem like a weird thing to say, but I know he has to hear it. Because that's what he wants. I am more than just my blood. He wants me to want him. He's desperate for it. It's my only power on this stupid ship.

“You consent to my feeding?” he asks, sliding his gloved hands from my naked waist to my hips. I exhale and close my eyes, pushing back the deep sadness inside of me. *I'm sorry, Abraxas. I'm so fucking sorry.*

I don't know what a feeding from him entails exactly, but it's going to happen whether I want it to or not. He's starving to death. He doesn't even have a choice. I close my eyes.

“I consent.”

The prince exhales against the side of my neck, and then he bites me. His teeth sink into my skin, right over the spot where Abraxas

last bit me. Pleasure arcs through my body in a shameful, horrifying wave. My knees weaken, and it's only his strong grip on my hips that keeps me upright. I fall into him by accident, and he tucks me close, one hand against my back, the other around my middle.

He draws back slightly, his breath feathering against the wound, and then he dips his tongue to the bloodied spots on my throat. He doesn't just lap at the liquid. Oh no. That'd be too easy. His tongue slides *into* one of the holes. I can feel him inside my skin, in my very veins.

And it feels great.

It feels *amazing*.

Tears slide down my cheeks as I squeeze my eyes shut as tightly as I can, trying and failing to resist succumbing to the heat of him, to the strange intimacy of being both food and sex, to the moan that slips from his throat. It's entirely raw and so unbelievably personal.

Rurik withdraws his tongue, and I feel every inch of it as it slides from my body and retreats into his mouth. With a sigh, he pulls his wings back and lets go of me entirely, stepping away to study me. I almost fall, but he catches me by the shoulders and sets me in the room's only chair.

The prince rests his hands on the backrest, an arm on either side of me.

"If only you didn't look like your entire life was over." He kisses me on the forehead with those bloodied lips of his, and then stands up. I wrap my arms around myself and turn away, face blazing with heat, body trembling. I'm so turned-on right now, and I hate myself for that.

I don't want anyone but Abraxas.

Even if I did, I *definitely* wouldn't want this guy.

He watches me for some time before picking up the discarded device from earlier. He tucks it onto his head and taps the earpiece.

"Bring the princess' handmaiden," he says, and I finally drag my gaze back to him.

Looking into his eyes is like being punched in the heart.

"Do I have free will?" I ask him, but he doesn't respond. He just blinks so slowly at me that I wonder if he's ever going to open his

eyes. “Then my entire life *is* over.”

The prince doesn't respond, taking a red robe from a hook on the wall. He swings it around my shoulders and clasps it for me, arranging the fabric to cover my body. A panel in the wall slides open, and there she is: it's Avril, the medic. I owe her my life, and I never had the chance to thank her for that.

“Eve!” she shouts, and I'm surprised and pleased that she remembered my name. She stumbles into the room, but Rurik steps between us. Avril comes up short at his glare as several guards crowd into the room behind her, weapons out but not yet pointed at anyone. They don't have guns, by the way. Oh no. They're wielding *spears*.

“Is this the etiquette you were taught?” the prince asks, his voice a terrifying whisper. It doesn't need to be loud. It's *saturated* with authority. “Is that how one of your station should greet the Imperial Princess?”

The Imperial What's-It-Now? I know it makes a certain bizarre sense. If I'm the prince's ... whatever ... then I guess princess is a fitting title. Weird as fuck though. *I'm sure I'll have as much power as princesses had in Earth's history. Which is to say, none at all.*

“My wings should be torn from my back,” Avril breathes, dropping her head. Her red hair hangs loose, one small braid on either side of her face with flowers woven in. Her face glitters with makeup—a dramatic recreation of the natural two-toned pattern on the faces of the ... what did Abraxas call them? Vestalis. Right.

Avril wears a ridiculous collar of shimmery red fabric. It's a good foot or more higher than her head, paired with a cloak that looks heavy enough to buckle the knees. Underneath all of that, she wears a long-sleeved dress with a dramatically low necklace and full skirts. It's as white as the prince's wings, with a red furred belt at the waist.

I'm still processing the outfit when the prince steps to the side and Avril bows, dropping to one knee and placing a single finger against her lips.

“Your Imperial Princess, it is my greatest pleasure and infinite privilege to serve you.” Avril remains where she is on the floor as I gape at her.

“What have they done to you?” I whisper. It's not like I knew the girl well. Hell, I knew her for all of five bloodstained, alien-filled

seconds. But she was fierce. She and Connor, they saved my life, threw the lawyer under the bus (or in the slug, so to speak), and defended us with makeshift weapons.

“My wings should be torn from my back,” Avril repeats without looking up.

Erm.

‘Kay.

“This girl will serve as your lady-in-waiting. She is still being trained, but I believe you will benefit from human companionship.” I don’t look at the pompous ass when he speaks. I’m still gaping at Avril. She lifts her head slightly and notices my, uh, lack of proper clothing. I’ve just shifted and the robe has fallen open up to the thigh, revealing everything but the glow between my legs. Luckily nobody can see that without, you know, getting up close and personal.

The prince hisses, and the guards turn in near perfect unison to face the wall. When Avril doesn’t immediately avert her eyes, he steps toward her like he intends to punish her somehow.

“Stop that.” I shove up to my feet, arranging the robe so that I’m covered. “You don’t own my nakedness.”

“Yes, I do.” He says that like it’s the most reasonable statement in the world. Or ... the galaxy? Whatever. “Come. I will escort you to our rooms.” He makes another sound, and the guards turn back toward us, stepping aside to leave the doorway clear.

A girl steps into the opening. She *looks* human, but with exaggerated features. Big, red eyes. Shock-white hair that fans around her dramatically and falls all the way to her calves. She’s delicate and petite with small breasts, narrow hips, and a flouncy white dress with a belt like Avril’s. She’s even got the ugly cloak with the collar on. Red metal rabbit-ear antennae stick up from the crown of her head. Also, she’s barefoot and really, really weird looking.

Something about her bothers me instantly.

“We recovered this Cartian female”—there’s that word again, Cartian—“from the ship fragment. She explained that you had become close recently, and I thought you might appreciate the

additional companionship.” The prince looks from her to me, as if he’s expecting a thank you of some sort.

The girl kneels and places a single finger against her lips.

“Your Imperial Majesties, my name is Raina, and it is my pleasure and privilege to serve.” She drops her hand and then lifts her gaze up to mine, the edge of her lip curving up in the slightest hint of a smirk. *I swear to God, if this is who I think it is ...* “For those who are uneducated in binary code and could not make the prior translation, I may also be known to *some* as Zero-One-Zero-One-Zero-Zero-One-Zero—” She goes through the laborious process of repeating all forty digits.

My eye twitches.

Yep. It’s Zero alright.

The AI chatbot bitch has a body?

“Was she a brain in a vat?” I ask, turning to look at the prince. He seems startled that I’ve actually asked him a question—and in a relatively peaceable tone, too. “Or a computer?”

“Her cerebral system was located in an emergency medical hold onboard the ship, if that is what you are inquiring about.”

I glare at him.

“So she *is* a person and not a computer?” I clarify as he tries to make eye contact with me. I won’t look at him. When our eyes meet, I feel things. Not my own feelings, mind you, but whatever manufactured garbage he’s forcing on me.

“She is a Cartian female whose cerebral system has been placed into an android.” The prince sighs and steps into the hallway, looking back to see if I’m following. I just stand there. “She will be serving us for the length of our natural lives in exchange for this host body, and will function primarily as your personal bodyguard.”

Fantastic. Not only am I trapped on this ship, but I’m trapped here with Zero. If given the choice between her and Tabbi Kat ... I’d fling myself into the darkest recesses of space.

“She’s going to try to kill me,” I tell him matter-of-factly, and he frowns down at her.

“You claimed to be a trusted companion of the Imperial Princess.” The prince stares at Zero, and she rises to her feet. But not like it’s of

her own volition—like it's *his* volition. Her eyes meet mine, and I see for the very first time how afraid she actually is. She's looking at me with a silent plea that a rational person would ignore, but that I ... Damn it. I thought all along that I was a cold, heartless, apathetic bitch. That doesn't necessarily appear to be the case. "Shall I have your head removed and dissected down to its most useful parts?"

Holy shit. I have to fix this.

"Wait, wait, wait." I finally step forward, sweeping past poor Avril who's still kneeling down on the floor. I guess she's waiting for a command or something? I have no idea. "Avril," I hiss, gesturing rapidly with my arm. She scrambles to her feet to join me and we slip out the door and into the hallway.

There's an entire wall of windows here, a vast galaxy of stars and glittering cosmic dust and distant planets sparkling like gemstones. I almost puke again, slapping a hand over my mouth. I turn to the prince and force my arm back down by my side.

"What I mean to say is, how do *you* know that she won't go rogue in that android body of hers?" I stare at the markings on his face so that I don't have to look at his eyes. He notices, and it pisses him off. I catch a glimpse of his bloodstained lips curling up in a sneer.

"This." He taps two gloved fingers against Zero's neck, and I follow the motion, noticing a glowing red lace choker at her throat. It was partially obscured by the cloak before, and I didn't quite notice it. Looks like a much prettier version of the creepy veins that are all over the ceilings and walls in this room, too. "I have complete control over her at all times. But if you do not like her, I will have her replaced immediately."

"No!" Maybe I'm being too forceful, but the sound comes out in a near shout. The prince narrows his eyes on me, but doesn't respond. "She was right. We're best friends." I give Zero a look and now it's *my* turn to smirk. *I'm royalty here, bitch. Even if I don't want to be. And if I am, you know what? I have the upper hand here.* "Zero is sweet and submissive, and she understands that I'm the superior one between us. I don't think we'll have *any* problems."

Oooh boy, the look she gives me. I hope like hell the prince knows what he's talking about or else Zero really is going to kill me in my sleep.

“Good. Anything less than complete submission and deference to the Imperial Princess will be punished severely.” He curls his lip at Zero before he moves past her to stand in front of me. This close, the heat of his body is like a punishment. And his scent? I know I keep harping on it, but it’s like a drug. It makes me forget what’s going on and what I need to be fighting for.

Abraxas. Jane.

He holds out an arm for me to take, and I just stare at it. *Should I play nice instead?* I’ll admit: that thought did not occur to me until literally just now. Why shouldn’t I schmooze the guy and try to get what I want out of him? He’s desperate for me to like him, and I have no idea why he cares. He could just as easily lock me in a room and have his way with me whenever he pleased.

My body erupts in a cold sweat, and I take his offered arm. Maybe I *should* try the nice route first?

“Where are we going?” I ask as he starts down the hallway in a confident stride, boots loud against the floors. They’re shiny and white with a crimson runner down the center. Sconces adorn the wall between each window, flickering with what appears to be red flames. A chandelier hangs in the foyer just ahead of us, the space decorated with chaises and chairs, all of which have those special wing notches in the backs. Not ... what I was expecting from a spaceship.

“To our rooms,” he repeats, and my throat clenches on that word. *Our.*

“Before we go, can I see it?” I ask, and it hurts to even get the question out. I’m terrified that he’s going to tell me that he got rid of it. And by ‘it’, I mean the den. “The ship fragment?”

Rurik turns to look at me and this time, I meet his eyes. If he feels even a fraction of what I feel when I stare at him, he’ll be more likely to take pity on me.

“Why?”

That question ... it hits like a hammer. It’s full of fury that I don’t understand, that I don’t *want* to understand. I don’t care what this guy’s motivations are. His *actions* are what I’m fixed on. His actions and not his ... fucking pheromones. I turn away and cover the lower half of my face with a hand.

“Why?” he repeats, putting his hands on my shoulders. Heat hits me in the stomach like a kick, and I jerk away from him, turning and putting my back against the window. I’d choose *space* over this guy.

“Does it matter to you?” I don’t know why I’m even asking. This is an alien. It’s not a person. It isn’t fucking human, and it’s seriously pissing me off. All of a sudden, I remember: I don’t belong here. I want to go *home*. I just can’t decide if by home, I mean Abraxas or Earth. *No, screw that. I know what I mean. I want my damn mate back.* “Let me see it.”

Rurik shakes himself out, wings ruffling with agitation. He storms past me and I follow. At the end of the hall, there’s a large glass wall blocking off the rest of the space. On the other side of the glass, things float. Like, there’s no gravity and they *float*. I see chairs and side tables and a rug. Um.

“What is ... why is that ...?” I just stop talking as the prince turns to look at it like it’s nothing, like he sees this shit everyday. Like meaty walls and arteries on the ceiling don’t mean anything to him either. That red muscle tissue, those blue veins, it’s like the ship is *alive*.

“Breach in the hull,” he says, turning toward another door. He pauses there and looks over his shoulder. “I think it might’ve been a comet; I do hope we’re okay in here.” He leaves me there, the sound of his boots pounding across the floor.

I feel so dizzy right then, like I might not be able to stay standing. *I’m in space. There’s no ground. One crack in one piece of glass and we’re in trouble.* I don’t want to die in space. Something about that frightens me in a way I can’t explain. I was nervous enough about it when I was on Abraxas’ planet. But now? Where will my spirit go if I’m not on Earth?

The ground comes up quickly, and I fall—not fast enough for the prince. He catches me and then immediately puts me back on my feet. I sway and he snags me by the elbows. The concern in his expression is very real, and I don’t know how to feel about that.

“You met me five seconds ago.” I need to stop doing that, truncating everything that happens to me down to a few seconds. That’s my version of compartmentalizing my feelings. I grab onto his tunic and he releases me, stepping back and seeming surprised when I follow. “Don’t do this to me.”

“Do what?” he asks, and I fucking *swear* that we’ve known each other in another life.

“Keep me here. You can do better than that. I am *not* your prisoner.” I squeeze my lips together, noticing the way his eyes track my mouth. He doesn’t look at me like he’s never seen a human. He looks at me like I’m his perfect version of attractive, like the most beautiful creature ever imagined.

I hate all the things that I’m thinking.

The *only* thing that I want is to see Abraxas again. I don’t even care what I have to do. Anything.

“No, you are not a prisoner,” he agrees, reaching up to put his hands on my wrists. “You are the Imperial Princess. I will give whatever I have to get you what you want.”

“Except for the only thing that matters?” I clarify, offering a shocked laugh. “I want to see Abraxas.”

There’s that rage again, his horns—or antennae, whatever—they swivel backwards, and he bares his teeth.

“Except for that.” He releases me and I hold up my hands to either side.

“Appreciate you proving my point.” I walk around him and into the room where the den is hanging, suspended from the ceiling by chains. All of a few hours ago, that was my *home*. I only lived there for a few weeks, but it doesn’t matter. I liked it. I felt safe there. Happy.

There’s a square-shaped object near the base of the den that looks like a platform. When I step on it, it lifts me right up to the doorway. I look down to see that I’m nearly thirty feet in the air. Between the suspension and the chunk of dirt and grass hanging from the bottom, I’m much higher up than I was when the ship was planted firmly in the ground.

Broken vines litter the floor as I stand up and step aside, looking over at Zero’s blank screen. I turn back and move into the ship. When the prince joins me, I ignore him.

The bathroom is still there, but there’s no water in the tub now. My mate’s musky smell clings stubbornly to the space, and I find myself disturbed that I’m actually feeling nostalgic for the toilet. I

visit the nest last, walking in and then slumping down in the center of the room.

I just sit there in a ridiculous ruby-red robe. It drags on the ground when I walk. But you know what? It doesn't matter, because when I walk here, it trails across a shiny white floor in a sterile hellhole. I'm the sort of person that really likes old houses—especially castles—and appreciates trees more than people. There are no trees here. And if there are, it still won't be the same. I can't crack a window to feel the breeze. There is no breeze.

“It will not be so bad,” the prince encourages, coming in to kneel beside me. He puts an elbow on his knee, like he's a person. Only, his eyes are massive and dark, and his skin is snow-white and ebon-black. His hair is textured and white, flowing over his shoulders and down his back like the hood of a fur cloak. He flattens his antennae back against the sides of his head. “You will soon forget the nightmare you endured.”

I ignore him, standing up and taking the nicest, softest fur with me. Many of the furs in the new bed were white or light colored and very, very soft. They weren't there when I first came to stay, and there's no way that Abraxas had the time to kill all those animals, skin them, and treat their hides while I was there. Which means that he was preparing and keeping them in advance for his future mate. They were given to me.

Now I'm here, and everything is *ruined*.

I search around and find Jane's shirt near the pile where I left it. With those two things clutched in my arms, I head back to the weird platform thing outside. Rurik trails behind me, brimming with frustration. I say nothing because the sooner I get away from him, the better.

“Please don't scrap this ship,” I plead, hating how quiet and soft my voice comes out. He stares back at me, but all of that false humanity in him is gone. He's as distant and unreachable as the stars outside the all-too numerous windows.

“If you behave,” is how he responds.

I grit my teeth.

I have *never* wanted to punch someone as much as I want to punch this guy. And have you *met* Tabbi Kat or Zero? For me to want to punch Rurik more than I want to punch them, he must be the

lowest, most vile creature in the whole of the ... what's it called? The Noctuida? I'm still not sure what that means exactly, but whatever it is, this prince is the absolute worst.

"I fucking hate you," I growl at him, and he slow-blinks back at me. Says nothing. Pompously stands there and picks at the fingers of his gloves. As soon as I get into the hallway, I wait for him to walk ahead and stay behind to chat with the only other human being on this stupid spaceship.

"Are you okay?" Avril asks me, noticing the items in my arms. "Seriously, what's going on, Eve?"

"I fell in love," I whisper as we walk, and she gapes at me. Actually, she stops walking and it takes several seconds before she's able to catch up. Zero sulks behind us, looking for all the world like something strange and demonic as she frowns and stares at the floor. Her red android eyes flash.

Christ, that's scary.

I turn sharply away from her and decide I won't pick on her much after all. It was more fun when she was inside a screen and couldn't move.

"You ... what?" Avril asks, waiting for an explanation. But then she holds up both hands and shakes her head. "Doesn't matter. It's not my business, and I shouldn't have asked." She drops her arms and peers at me with sapphire eyes. She's ... seriously fucking pretty. If only I weren't into men. Or alien dragon peen. For shame. "You understand that you're supposed to *marry* this guy?"

I sort of figured that bit out after the frequent use of 'princess'. The kidnapping and the insta-love were some pretty good clues as well. *Insta-love? What the fuck? How?* I can't for the life of me understand it. I am *not* that sort of person. I can barely commit to second dates.

Which is how you ended up perma-mated to an alien dragon in two weeks time? Hmm.

We reach a doorway that opens automatically, the panel sliding into the wall to reveal a lavishly appointed foyer with five other rooms coming off of it. The one at the end has its doors wide open. I see a beautiful bed and an entire *wall* of glass. No seams. Just a big, unbroken expanse of space.

My vision blurs, and I blink frantically to clear my head. I don't know what this is—astrophobia maybe, fear of stars and space—but it's disorienting and disturbing. I hate it.

Rurik walks right to the double doors of the bedroom, taps a screen beside them, and they swish shut. He turns around to face us with an expectant air about his imperial personhood. *Ugh.*

I enter the foyer tentatively, Avril on my left, Zero trailing after. The door slides shut behind her, leaving the four of us alone. One big positive: this area doesn't have any of the gross red and blue organic matter that infests the walls and ceilings on the rest of the ship.

“Our rooms are in the uppermost level of this vessel—that is, *The Korol*,” Rurik explains, and I immediately imagine some sort of tower sticking up off the top. What if it gets scraped against something? We'd all be goners. I swallow back the fear, clutching the fur and the shirt. I'm going through a similar period of denial the way I did when I realized for certain that my time catering parties and playing golf with my dad were gone.

Permanently.

Abraxas, the den, all of that, it's *over*.

“You may select a room for yourself for now. After the wedding, we will sleep in the same room.” The prince stands there with his hands clasped together in front of him, looking for all the world like somebody who has never been told no in his entire life.

I decide to save the argument for later.

I very quickly move to the door closest to me and peer in. Looks normal enough. It's a huge room with a separate living area, bright lights, and lots of orange, yellow, and pink in the decor. I'll take it. I basically sprint in there, waiting for Avril and Zero to follow. The door slides shut with an inorganic sigh, and I lean against it.

“I can't be anywhere near that moth,” I whisper, pushing up to a standing position and beginning a search of the room. The other two girls trail behind me, and I realize how much I've loved being in the woods alone all this time. I needed some 'me' space for sure. I turn around suddenly and they both come to a stop. “Do you smell it when you're around him?” I ask, and they both just stare at me. “You know, that weird cardamom and honey stuff. It's driving me nuts.”

“While my particular model has been equipped with scent receptors, and while I’m *sure* that my sense of smell is infinitely better than yours, I am not enamored with His Majesty’s pheromones the way you are.” Zero smiles sweetly at me, and then *winks*. “The Aspis male would be displeased with your behavior, would he not?” Woowow. She is *way* more fucking annoying like this.

I turn to Avril. She seems weirdly empathetic, not sympathetic. Like, she doesn’t feel sorry for me, she simply *understands* how I feel. I want to slap her, too.

“Eve, neither of us like his smell. Only you do. *You* are his mate.”

I shake my head and back up, bumping into a low bookshelf. It sits in front of another window wall that I’m doing my best to pretend isn’t there. *I’m leaning against it*. I stumble forward in my haste to get away from it.

“I’m not his anything. He’s doing”—I wave my hand around randomly—“*something* to my brain and making me want him sexually. It’s fucked-up.”

“It’s pheromones,” Avril says, and I glare at her. “What?” She moves over to a table and picks up a bottle of wine, shaking it enticingly in my direction. I don’t trust it. I’d accepted that I’d never have wine again. *Oh my God, it’s a red*. I bite my lip. “It’s real wine. He bought it at the black market for you—it’s from *Earth*.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I say, but I can’t resist coming over to the table to stare at it. “How would he know to buy wine?”

“He asked me,” Avril explains, popping the cork and pouring us both a glass. She doesn’t offer Zero one, and my estimation of her improves considerably from already high levels. This bitch removed metal scrap from my leg and then stitched up a bleeding artery. How cool is that? “Because he’s your mate. Vestalis have unique chemical and biological properties. Each of them has an infinitesimal chance of finding his mate—as in, another person who agrees with those properties—and when he does, their chemistry is perfectly compatible. He smells amazing to you because you’re his mate. And vice versa.” She raises her glass. “His dick will change shape to fit perfectly inside of you. How’s that for commitment?”

I sit down hard in the chair opposite her.

Zero takes another seat at the large, oval table and leans in, putting her elbows on the surface.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had sex. Thankfully this body is fully functional.” She sighs happily and puts a hand up to the side of her face. Those cherubic cheeks, that tiny pink rosebud mouth, the oversized eyes and long lashes ... what a farce. Zero—or Raina, I guess? I prefer Zero—is a deviant. “As soon as we dock at the World Station, I’m going to work my way through as many males as I can. Hopefully there’ll be plenty of Cartian males around. My people are renowned throughout the Noctuida as—”

I cut her off, leaning in toward Avril conspiratorially.

“What have you been doing for the last few weeks?” I ask, and she gives me a look.

“Girl, you know that in Earth terms, we’ve been out here for a *month*, right?” Her face softens with true sympathy at the look on my face. “Jungryuk—the planet you were on—its days are longer than ours, and its nights are *much* longer than ours.”

Somehow, because of Abraxas, I never even noticed.

My heart aches so fiercely that I have no choice but to bypass my wineglass and go straight for the bottle. I chug it down and *ohmyfuckinglyholyluckyfuckthat’samazing*. It’s practically orgasmic. And I say practically because, well, once you’ve orgasmed on an alien dragon’s dicks, nothing else compares.

“Wow. That is ... some cheap supermarket crap, but it tastes like heaven on the tongue. Can’t lie.” I look at the bottle’s label. It’s a generic cabernet sauvignon.

“I don’t mean to overwhelm you,” Avril begins, reaching up to unhook the clasp of her cloak with a relieved sigh. The heavy garment is so stiff that it doesn’t even fall to the floor. It just stands there behind her with its ugly collar and strange, shimmery fabric. She reaches back absently and shoves it away, like she’s been here, done this before. “But as your lady-in-waiting, it’s my duty to educate you. I’d ease into it, but we don’t have a ton of time here.”

I go to take another drink of the wine when something occurs to me.

“*Seeded.*” Abraxas’ toothsome rumble sounds in my head and I set the bottle down. Again, I’m still pretty sure that I’m right, that

I'm not pregnant, but ... Apparently, I wouldn't be totally upset to have an alien dragon baby. It'd be too early to tell now, and certainly it'd be fine to have some wine, but I'll need to be careful. I have a feeling that if the prince finds out about this, he might try to make a choice for me.

I set the bottle aside.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask, looking around the room. Other than the glass wall of stars that's at my back, the room is comfortable and well-appointed. The bed is truly suited for a princess, this pristine affair of pale pink and white linens, mountains of pillows, a frilly canopy. *I want my musky nest back.*

I keep Abraxas' fur and Jane's *Ninja Turtle* shirt tucked close.

“The Vestalis—that is, these moth people—they have *one-hundred-and-three* imperial princes.” I just stare at her. I feel suddenly sorry for Rurik's mother. Is she a moth, too? I'm starting to get the idea that maybe these moth guys aren't particular in whom or what they breed with. *Anybody that matches their stupid pheromones.* “In order to inherit the throne, a prince must find his mate.”

I sit and stare.

I'm being baby-stepped into ... something here.

“The *only* prince who has found his mate ... is your prince.”

“He's not *my* prince,” I say, but it feels like he is. It feels like everything in my life has been orchestrated to get me to this single place in time and space.

And I can't stand it.

Where is my sense of choice? My free will? It is not possible to love someone at first sight. Lust at first sight, sure. But love? Love is built on trust and experience and action. This is a sham, and I feel sick to my stomach about it. Maybe the prince isn't doing it on purpose, but he *is* doing it. He's making me want him to the point that I don't care about anything else. That is fucking terrifying, and it's not okay.

I want to make my own decisions.

“Within the next couple of days, there's going to be a royal wedding ...” Avril cringes, like she knows exactly what my reaction

is going to be.

I stand up suddenly, knocking over my chair and ignoring Zero's frustrating smirk.

"Is there a way to communicate with Earth?" I ask, pausing near the seating area. Again, the room looks normal enough with the exception of those clever wing notches in the backs of the chairs and couches. Either the Vestalis live and relax similarly to humans ... or this entire thing is orchestrated. It *feels* orchestrated, just like those all-too human expressions on the prince's face.

"Nope." I hear the wine bottle glugging as Avril gives into temptation. "First thing I asked. It's not that they *don't* have the technology to communicate with Earth, it's that they *won't*. I guess they treat Earth as like, a protected habitat full of an endangered species."

I whirl around to stare at her, trying not to like the soft, supple fabric of the robe and the faint hint of cinnamon sweetness clinging to it.

"Endangered species? Aren't there like eight *billion* of us?" I'm genuinely confused. I took my brother to a convention in Los Angeles last year, and the convention center was so packed that I couldn't even *walk*. Tell me how humans are an endangered species. I'll wait.

"Yeah, well, since we're only from one planet, we're considered endangered. Also, since we're so primitive, we're like ... leopards or something. Asking to send communications to Earth is like asking to send a text message to an animal in a reserve."

Lovely.

I move over to the bed, spreading my fur and Jane's shirt both out on the surface of it. Those two items are the only things in this room that look real. Everything else feels ... manufactured.

Exhaustion hits me like an asteroid, and I crawl onto the mattress, curling into a ball and staring wide-eyed at the swirl of cosmic stardust outside my window. This is not a rags-to-riches princess dream with fluffy beds and pretty dresses and pompous princes, it's a *nightmare*.

I miss Abraxas so much that I honestly might throw up.

It's not because I haven't seen him—it's only been a few hours ... I think—but the fact that I'm pretty damn sure I'll never see him again. I take a pillow, wrap the fur around it, and hug it close. My eyes squeeze shut, and I sort of want to kick Avril when she comes over and covers me with a blanket.

“It's all going to be okay. You'll see,” she tells me, sitting beside me on the bed. “The Vestalis are like humans in a way: some are bad, some are good, some are great. Rurik, he's one of the great ones.” She gives my hand a little pat, and then stands back up.

I should tell her that I don't need to be tucked in and petted like a little princess, but that lonely feeling that hit me in the woods? It's infinitely worse here.

“I'll be sleeping just over there.” Presumably she points, but I don't open my eyes. “The android chick, she'll be guarding us.”

I give a thumbs-up, but that's it. I don't have the energy to offer anything more.

Avril's footsteps move away, and I crack a lid. Somewhere, she presses a button and huge curtains slide across the glass wall, cutting off that disturbing view of the stars. I breathe a little easier once the lights dim and everything is dark.

When I hear a door open and close, and Zero's footsteps sound on the opposite side of the room, I lift my hand up and put my palm against the wall.

I can still smell him. I can *feel* him.

And I know he's pressing his palm to the wall on the other side.

I yank my hand back, hug the fur-covered pillow more tightly, and force myself into a fitful sleep.



Rurik

The Imperial Princess despises me.

I leave my hand pressed flat against the wall, but she does not return the favor a second time. I turn away and stalk over to the windows, putting my hands on the glass and dropping my head. I want to blow something up. I want to direct the armada to hover above that horrible planet—Jungryuk—and I want to destroy it, to watch as my father’s ship blows it up, and then as it *eats* it.

“If you hurt Abraxas, I will never love you.”

She knew exactly how best to choose her words to hurt me.

I am a broken male. I am a broken prince. I am someone who has never wanted to be king.

Now, my fate is chosen for me.

Now, I see that my greatest hope and dream, the one light in all my darkness, my *mate* ... will now become my greatest disappointment and my deepest melancholy. I drop down to my knee, spreading my wings, antennae pressed up against the glass.

I should greet my parents; they will be expecting me. But I can’t bring myself to get up. I went to Jungryuk so that I would *not* find my mate just yet. So that one of my brothers would find theirs, and I would be left alone to explore the universe. As with any Vestalis, my

primary desire was to find my other half. We are a race comprised entirely of males. There are no Vestalis females. We breed and bond with and love the female that our bodies are most drawn to.

It has always, in the whole history of our race, worked this way.

Mates are drawn to one another.

Never has a Vestalis male—especially an Imperial Prince—been rejected like I have.

Now I will suffer the hells of being king along with the loneliness of rejection.

I clutch a hand to my neck, to the bright red fur at my throat. I dig my fingers into it, trying to catch my breath. *She mated another male. This is your fault. It is your oversight. You picked the wrong girl.*

What sort of an idiot chooses the wrong mate in a tent where there are only five creatures standing besides himself? I *knew* there was something off with that Avril girl. The blood on her skin was fire, and she stood in the doorway, staring me down. But my mate, she crawled away from me, turned her head, closed her eyes. That is not normal behavior for a mate. How was I to know?

I stand up suddenly, eyes tracking the ceiling. Fear spikes inside of me before I remember that my father does not have eyes in this room. *No, because you have just been moved to the heir's quarters, the most coveted place on the ship, and the only suite of rooms where my mother and father cannot watch my every move, cannot smell me, cannot touch me.*

I smooth my jacket out and debate a change of clothes. But no. I'm already late, and they will have wondered why I didn't come sooner. Bringing my mate home is a joyous occasion. For them. They are pleased to have an heir, pleased that my father can soon abdicate his throne and leave me with the tremendous responsibility of piloting the armada and keeping order in the Noctuida.

My life is ruined, but, unlike my father, I will not have a loyal and loving female by my side to soften the blow.

I wave open the doors to the honeymoon suite—where I will soon be sleeping alongside my mate—and find that girl, Avril, waiting for me in the foyer.

“Well?” I snap, knowing that the doors here are sealed well enough that no sound can travel. My princess will not hear me discussing her with her lady-in-waiting. “What?”

“She loved the wine.” The woman offers me one of her digits, pointed up at the ceiling. She looks at her hand, looks at me, and then drops it by her side with a puff of air from her strange mouth. I study it, trying to decide what it is about hers that is not attractive, and what it is about my princess’ that draws blood into my cock. All my life, and that organ has been flaccid and useless.

Not anymore.

I turn away from Avril and stalk to the bedroom door, placing my fingertips on it and wishing I could open it. If I were any other Vestalis male, I would be preparing to mate with my female. It’s a joyous occasion, celebrated by all, accompanied by rituals, by travel, by companionship and love and sex.

For a prince, it means a wedding.

For me, it means ... a challenge.

The thought of forcing myself on my mate is ... I cannot. Other races do, but not ours. There has never been a need. Not one Vestalis male has ever had a female reject him the way mine does. They are always as eager for the mating as we are.

I yank my gloves from my pocket and put them back on, sliding my fingers carefully into the fabric.

“Look, Your Majesty, can I speak frankly?” Avril asks, but why she is even asking, I do not know. She speaks her mind constantly. She is lucky that I have always had a mild temper and little taste for violence. I am not opposed to it if the situation calls, but I do not revel in it the way my brothers do.

“Where is your cloak?” I snap. I have been training this female for several solar weeks and yet, she has not mastered the art of demure submission or silence. Especially the latter part.

“Erm, hey guy, listen.” The human female walks over to stand beside me, and I take a step back. “You’re a decent person. I’ve seen it over the last few weeks. But you’re ... really fucking this up.” She points at the princess’ door. “She’s in love, okay? And she’s not in love with you. That’s not a death sentence for your relationship, but

it does mean you're going to have to try ten times harder. How do you expect her to fall for you if you're a rude dick?"

"Pardon me?" I'm aghast at her loose and fast tongue, her casual language, her presumptiveness. Yet, since the moment I licked her neck and doubled over, heaving on the sidewalk and finding myself unable to stand, she has behaved in this manner. I should have dumped her with the arrogant Falopex in the market and forgotten all about her.

"She told me she liked your smell," Avril offers, smoothing her strange, blunt-tipped fingers down the front of her dress. "That's a good sign, right?"

It is.

I am pleased by that information. I can see it when I look at my mate, that she appreciates my scent, my appearance. When we stare into one another's eyes, I know that she can feel it, too. We are chosen by the Stars. We are destined for one another. I do not understand why she would reject such a gift.

That Aspis male.

I have never wanted anything more than I want him dead—with the exception of the princess' love. I have left the male alive for now, but killing him does seem the more prudent option. If he is alive and well, how will I ever get her to pay any attention to me? How will I convince her to give me a chance?

I should have cut his tongue out, I think again, clenching my fists so tightly that my gloves creak in frustration. Aspis tongues are highly prized, worth millions in the Noctuidan coin. Not only does their saliva coagulate, it's anti-bacterial, anti-viral, and dripping with stem cells. *And that tongue was all over your mate. Possibly inside of her.*

I am tempted to destroy the decorative vase that graces the round table in the center of the room.

I do nothing but stand there and *seethe*.

"That is all you have to report? A passing comment about my *scent*?" I direct my rage toward the princess' lady-in-waiting, but she does not flinch as she should. Any of my brothers would have her hung by manacles in the control room's foyer until her impertinence faded to nothing.

But I am not my brothers.

“If you could find her friend, Jane, I think that’d go a long way.” Avril pauses, like she isn’t sure I know what she’s talking about. Of course I do. One of the very first things my mate asked for was that human female. I’ve done my best to locate her, but my reach only extends so far. I am a prince, not yet a king.

That bloody space pirate, I think, my antennae pressing flat to the sides of my head. My father would be pleased if I were to capture and kill him. Captain Kidd’s head on a pike would make a lovely gift to celebrate my father’s abdication of the throne.

My eyes close, and I do my best not to think about the responsibilities headed my way.

Imperial King of the Noctuida is not a job for the faint of heart. I have *never* wanted it. The truth that I can tell no one is that I have feared it. That I fear it even now. While it comes with absolute power, it also comes with chains. *I wish that I could run from this*. If I could, if I thought my father or my brothers would let me go, then I would flee with my mate and never look back.

“Is that all? If there’s nothing else, return to your duties.” I wave her away with a flick of my gloved hand, moving past her and into the hallway. The door opens, closes, and then locks automatically, barring entry to anyone but myself, my princess, and her servants. The cyborg I have gifted my mate is under my complete control. Even now, if I close my eyes, I can see through hers.

Observe the princess. It’s not even a command, just a thought, a fleeting idea. But the cyborg moves as if my will is her own, pausing beside the bed to watch my sleeping bride’s face. I feel my anger dissipate somewhat. *She is truly the most beautiful female that any Vestalis male has ever had the pleasure of being mated to*.

That’s the thought that runs through my head, but it does not feel entirely like my own. I open my eyes to stare at the door of our suite. Yes, my mate is beautiful. I have never felt emotions the way I do when I gaze upon her. But in truth? I grit my teeth, clicking the sharpness of my fangs against the flat teeth underneath.

My mate is a liability in so many ways.

She is not influential in her own right, lacks physical strength or unique abilities. She does not hold power or office even among her own people. More than that, her species itself is a problem. My

marrying her will break the tentative and sometimes unenforceable treaty protecting her planet. The Falopex will not like this. Even that one, that rogue officer on Jungryuk, he was displeased. I can only imagine what his father—the Chief of Police—will have to say about this.

I remove my gloves and press my palms flat against the sterile white metal of our door, closing my eyes and leaning in to press my lips to the smooth surface. As I do, I reach deep into my blood for those abilities I have always possessed but have never been able to use. Feeding on my mate—even that small amount—has changed everything for me. Threads of red unfurl from my mouth, breaking through the surface of my tongue to trace along the edges of the door. I push them into and through it, snaking my own veins across the walls and the ceiling. Blood lace decorates everything in the royal suite. *My blood lace. My very own.*

My father controls the entire Vestalis armada through his own blood lace. There is not one thing he cannot see or one area he cannot control from the throne room.

Except for this.

As the next in line for the throne, I'm permitted the opportunity to observe and manage my own quarters.

When I draw back, fatigue hits me and I stumble, hitting the wall hard enough that my lips leave a streak of red. Blood smears into the wall, and my father's blood lace immediately absorbs it. I close my eyes. *They are my parents; my blood is their blood.* But now that I have my mate, I am not so sure that I agree with that.

I look back at the door to the suite, pleased to see my own mark upon it. I have always wondered why the threads we create are called blood lace. My father's is thick, with blue veins and red arteries, thick as my mate's lovely thighs. Stretches of red muscle and meaty flesh blend with his designs.

But my own blood lace? It is fine and delicate, glowing red threads woven into careful artistry. It is beautiful enough that it could adorn one of my mate's garments. Decoration for a skirt. A fine sheet for a veil. *Lace for her undergarments.*

I exhale.

"Your Imperial Majesty." A voice draws my attention around to one of my mother's handmaidens. As the queen, she is permitted as

many servants as she wishes. I believe at this point that she has more servants than she does sons which is a remarkable feat.

“Yes?” I ask, wiping the reminder of the blood from my face. I swipe it off on my uniform. The fabric absorbs it, and I exhale as its energy is transferred through the material and back into my skin. My mother’s servant glances at the door to the suites, and a pleased expression crosses her face. It is difficult to tell at times what my mother’s people are thinking. The Spirobolida still seem foreign to me, despite the fact that my mother *is* one of them.

No matter what the female is, no matter what she looks like, her offspring with her Vestalis mate will always be more Vestalis males.

“The Imperial Queen has requested your presence.” The handmaiden does her best to imitate a Vestalin bow, but it is not possible with her sinuous form. I have been told by Avril that the Spirobolida are reminiscent of Earth’s millipedes, but there’s been no time to verify the veracity of her claim. This particular female is a brilliant red—which is likely why my mother favors her—and has too many legs to count. I know that my mother has in excess of two-thousand legs.

“Of course.” I tuck my hands back into my gloves, resisting the urge to sigh.

I knew this was coming.

I am prepared for it.

We walk the halls quickly, the handmaiden trailing along behind me. I can hear the constant patter of her legs against the floors. Other Vestalis duck out of our way as we walk, drawing to the walls and dropping to their knees. They place their fingers against their lips and use their nails to draw single droplets of blood. The smell catches in the air, but it has no hold on me.

The only being in existence whose blood sings is ... my mate.

Doors open for me as I move through the ship, winding my way through maze-like corridors until I reach the antechamber for my parents’ suite. There are guards here, though they are relatively useless. My father can see danger coming from any room in this ship and act accordingly. Never once in the history of the Vestalis has there been a successful coup.

The large round door that leads to the throne room slides open, and I step into the damp, dim heat of my parents' chamber. By necessity, this is the control room for the ship, the throne room for Vestalis business, and also my parents' personal bedroom.

The door closes behind me and the handmaiden does not join us.

It is me, my father, and my mother.

I drop to my knee and offer the proper level of obeisance.

“Rise, my son.” My mother's voice is sinuous through the translator implant, and I look up to see that she is offering her version of a smile to me. Her head is large and round with two segmented antennae, two dark glittering circles for eyes, and sharp mandibles near her mouth. When she is pleased, those talon-like appendages vibrate.

I do as she's asked. Authority among the Vestalis is absolute. My father is the boss. My mother obeys no one but him. And now that I have found my mate, I obey no one but my parents. My mate—if only she would listen—need obey no one but the three of us. She is free to command the entire galaxy, and she does not seem to care.

I don't allow these thoughts to show on my face. Despite the number of children my parents have, they know us all quite intimately. After all, there is nothing my brothers nor I can do on this ship that they do not see, that my father cannot feel.

My gaze drifts to the wall of screens on my left, surrounded and consumed by my father's blood lace. I do not know if it is because of his immense power, the influence of my mother, or simple genetic variation, but his blood lace is thick and wide, pulsing with red and blue, surrounded by muscular tissue that throbs. My blood lace is thin and jewel-like, always a bright red, reminiscent of fine human lace.

Humans. My human female. My mate.

I resist the urge to sigh.

I have done copious research on humans in the past few weeks on Jungryuk. It still feels as if I do not understand them at all. I force my wandering attention back to the present, but the effort costs me. My jaw is clenched, teeth bared. It isn't easy to school my expression, but I manage it.

The screens flicker between data and video footage, each of them embedded in the thick, muscular wall behind them. Some are partially obscured by my father's blood lace, some are fully obscured. The entire room is dark the way my mother likes it, and there is nary an inch of floor or wall or ceiling that my father's blood lace does not touch.

He sits, large and stoic on the throne, his dark gaze on me. We are similar in looks, though my father is no less than three times as large as his offspring. Again, I do not know if that is my mother's influence—Vestalis males often adjust to their mate's preferences—or if it is because he has absorbed the power of the ship. He is connected to it now, his threads woven with the heart of *The Korol*. He can no longer rise from this throne as he is bound to it. Since the day of his coronation, my father has not moved from this room.

For nearly sixty Earth years—I am trying to acclimate to my mate's sense of time—my father has not moved. And my mother has spent nearly every second by his side.

What am I to do when, someday soon, my father abdicates his throne and I am forced to sit in that very chair? I will not have a loyal, loving mate to assuage the loneliness, to soothe the dust of my wanderlust, to mourn the loss of my dreams.

I will be alone with a reluctant queen marched to this room weekly for a forced feeding.

It is a fate worse than death.

"Rurik," my father grumbles, his true voice echoing in the room. The sound of my name on his lips is a whisper and a hiss, the native tongue of the Vestalis. It is required of all who enter the throne room to translate the king's words on their own. He does not wear a tongue implant to translate his speech, and he does not wear an ear implant to translate the speech of others. "Where is your mate?"

"We were looking forward to meeting her," my mother hisses, swirling her body around mine, her version of affection. She gives me the slightest squeeze before uncoiling and slithering over to my father's throne. She curves her pearlescent rainbow body around his chair, resting her head on his shoulder. "The two of you are newly acquainted. I am surprised she was able to resist accompanying you."

Already, it begins.

I prepare myself.

“My mate is quite exhausted by her ordeal in the wilds of Jungryuk. She could hardly stand though she did her best to feed me before fatigue overtook her.” I keep my voice mild but with a whimsical delight beneath my words that I do not have to fake. Finding my mate is a transcendent experience. Being rejected by her ... is indescribable.

“Hmm.” Father is not pleased. He taps his fingers against the armrests of his chair. It is difficult to say whether or not he believes my words: he saw everything from the med bay to the heir’s quarters. “Bring her to us in the morning. Surely she will be rested enough by then to pay proper obeisance to her in-laws.”

“Of course.” I can hardly imagine how terrible this meeting will go. My mate is stubborn and rude and unafraid. I smile before I can catch myself, wincing when I notice my parents’ eyes on me.

“Do not be ashamed son,” my father offers kindly, gesturing for me to approach his chair. I put my hand near his and he covers it with his own, offering a squeeze of affection. I remember loving this room as a child. It was not as it is now. My father had less blood lace, and he could at least walk the throne room at the end of the ship’s tether. The windows were open more frequently than not, revealing the beauty of the cosmos. It is not the same now. “Finding one’s mate is the highlight of any Vestalis’ life. It is unrivaled and unparalleled. Our people know and understand love in a way that no other race can lay claim to.”

I bow my head in acknowledgement of his words—even if I do not agree with them.

“The mating,” my mother begins, because this is exactly why she has brought me here today. “Ideally, we would begin tomorrow. The court is eager to see a royal wedding.” Her mandibles quiver in amusement. “It has been many years since my wedding to your father.”

May the Stars help me.

“My mate is disoriented. She was stolen illegally from Earth and then had to fight day-and-night to survive the horrors of the black market. Some time to adjust would be greatly appreciated by us both.”

My father's laughter makes me cringe, the sound of it echoing around the room as the screens on the wall flicker with his merriment.

"When I first passed by your mother on the streets of her home planet, I was struck. Within minutes we had mated. I remember crawling to my father on my hands and knees, begging forgiveness for our lack of protocol. Fortunately, he was a very understanding man." The king leans down to give me a look, his antennae sweeping forward and over my hair to scent me. "Learn from the mistakes of your father and do not mate your female until the official ceremony."

There is not a chance of that happening. Already, I am scrambling to figure out a way to convince her to mate with me at all. If she refuses, we will both find ourselves in a life-or-death situation. My brothers will kill me. Kill her. My parents will force her. They will not understand, but they will make her submit to me and I do not want that.

"Yes, of course," I agree, wishing that I could leave. I have wanted to leave here since my first wing molt. Now I will never leave.

"If one of your brothers returns with his mate, we could have a problem, Rurik."

"Yes, sir, I know." He's right, but I need at least a few days to convince my mate that it is in both of our best interests to comply.

"We're very proud of you," my mother offers, but the words feel hollow. My parents love me. I'm sure of that. But I have never been their favorite son. I would wager that perhaps I have always been their *least* favorite son. "We will give your mate a handful of days to gather her strength before the wedding."

"Thank you, My Imperial Queen." I offer my mother another bow. She has been hailed as one of the greatest mates in Vestalis history because of her breeding abilities. Personally, I am of the mind that the Earth slogan—*an heir and a spare*—is a better idea. There is far too much infighting among us. My brothers each have their own factions of influence. They befriend Vestalis dukes and royalty from other lands. They have all spent their lives searching for a mate.

Yet, out of them all, I am the first and currently only Vestalis prince to find her.

And she hates me.

“Run along.” My father waves his hand at me, and his red mouth twitches. “I can see that you are eager to return to your female.”

I offer another bow, and then exit the room as quickly as I can without being improper.

Because I am clearly someone who enjoys pain, I head straight to the med bay.

“Well?” I ask, storming in and startling my favorite medic—the *only* medic that I trust.

“Goodness, Your Imperial Majesty.” He makes a sound of frustration before setting down the equipment in his hands. I see test tubes and blood. *My mate’s blood*. I have to close my eyes to resist the pull.

“Is she pregnant or not?” I demand. It does not matter if she is. It will change nothing. But I would like to know.

“I cannot say, My Prince. Perhaps it is too early. Or perhaps the Aspis are more clever than we have ever imagined.” He sighs and ruffles his wings, showing off the beautiful bloodred pattern on the back. A Vestalis male’s pattern only reveals itself after mating. His female wears his pattern as well, as a symbol of their unity.

I imagine the smooth, supple curves of my mate’s back. Her pale skin inked with the brilliant red of my own design. It becomes difficult to focus, and the room clouds with unnecessary pheromones.

The medic—his name is Vrach—gives me a strange look.

“My apologies, Your Majesty, but newly mated pairs are abhorrent to all those around them.” He snorts and then returns to his work. “I will continue to look into it, but the influence of the Aspis on her blood has scrambled the best of my equipment. I am looking into simpler, more old-fashioned methods.”

I grind my teeth.

Of all the males in the universe, an Aspis? Aspis destroy technology with their mere presence. *If only my parents had not slaughtered the Cartians; their technology would’ve made this an easy endeavor.*

“What about the mate markings in her ...” I cannot make myself say the word. *Her channel*. My eyes close again, and it takes some time to gain control of myself.

“They will not harm you, and they are certainly not harming your mate; there is no need to worry.” Vrach doesn’t look back at me, but continues diligently with his work. It is precisely this reason that I like him. He does not kowtow to authority the way every other Vestalis does. He tells me the truth and is painfully honest. *Like my mate*. “I will call for you when I have more news. Regardless, even if she has been fertilized by the Aspis, your first mating will change all of that.”

He’s right. It doesn’t matter if she is with child. My DNA will take over and the child will become mine.

Still ... it bothers me more than I care to admit.

“Thank you, Vrach.” I leave the room and rush back to my suite, unable to control my compulsion to see her. Once I am there, standing in the foyer outside of her room, I stop. If I go inside, she will reject me.

I cannot handle such an insult again tonight.

I head into my room and move over to the wall, putting my palm up against it and closing my eyes.

Somehow—perhaps even in her sleep—she once again returns the favor.



It's Me, Your Old Friend, Eve

My alien captors have given me *macarons* for breakfast. Oh, and another bottle of wine. This time, it's a chardonnay. I glare at it as I take the wine opener and use it to carve a deep groove into the table. I'm going to use this nice piece of furniture to keep track of how many days Abraxas and I have been apart.

How long did he say until we died of broken hearts? Between seven and sixty days? Those seem like strangely precise numbers. My stomach roils with unease. What if there's something more to that? I took the words as some cultural myth, but ... there could be a basis in reality that I'm missing.

I'll tell that stupid moth about it. Maybe it'll help sway him? He seems easy enough to sway. If he's half as obsessed with me as I am with him, I can manipulate that.

"Um, Your Imperial Majesty." Avril raises an eyebrow as she watches me destroy the pristine surface of the table with my crude heartbreak calendar. "Do you need a pen or something? They have pens here. Tablets, too. Do you want an advanced alien version of an iPad?"

I smile at her.

"Nope. All good." I toss the wine opener on the table and drag the plate of macarons closer. Some of them are in colors I've never seen

before. That bothers me. I'm not eating a French cookie that comes in a color I didn't know existed until two minutes ago. I squint at the plate. *That one feels like it's the color of period cramps. Is that even possible?* I wouldn't say it was red; it's decidedly not. It just *looks* painful.

I pick up a brown one and sniff it. Smells like chocolate. My stomach isn't just roiling now; it's demanding that I feed it. Zero waits impatiently for me to eat, the choker at her neck glowing faintly. My eyes lift up to the fine red lace that now covers half the ceiling and a good portion of the walls. It wasn't there yesterday, but when I woke up, it's the first thing I noticed.

It's annoyingly beautiful and *nothing* like the ugly meat strands that decorate the walls elsewhere.

"Would you hurry up and eat? I am not allowed to consume food until you do." Zero glares at me, narrowing her red eyes as she digs her fingertips into the table. It dents, and I smirk, slowly running my tongue around the outside of the macaron. *Oh, shit, that's good.*

"You know what? You're pretty damn ungrateful for somebody that was rescued from an eternity of loneliness in the woods. Look at that body. Cute as hell. And all you can do is complain?" My tongue darts out, flicking against the cookie again as Zero scowls at me. She has tiny pointy teeth for canines, like a kitten or something. Unlike a kitten, she looks at me with the stare of a homicidal maniac. No ... wait. Kittens get that look sometimes, too.

With a sigh, I toss my cookie down on my plate. I miss my cat, Annabelle. I miss my mom. I miss my dad. I miss those sushi burritos I get at the drive-thru near the commercial kitchen that I rent. Mostly, I miss Abraxas.

Fuck, I miss him so much. Broken heart he said? Maybe he was right, corny as that sounds.

"You're going to tease me?" Zero growls, standing up from the table. Her white hair and matching dress drift around her in a strange breeze. Err. She narrows her eyes at me and slaps the fabric back into place. "The vents on this model were not installed in ideal locations."

Pussy air vents? That's hilarious.

"Maybe you should try to relax and not get so heated?" Avril offers, reaching for a macaron and taking a bite of it. She picked one

of the alien colored ones. I wait to see if she'll spontaneously combust. Instead, her eyes widen and she shoves the remainder of it into her mouth.

"You are not permitted to eat before the future queen," Zero says, but like she'd do it, too, if she wasn't remote controlled by the prince. That's what I've come to understand via Avril's explanations: Rurik controls Zero through his *blood*. Great. A blood-controlled barefoot cyborg as a prison guard. Love it.

"Not *permitted* to," Avril agrees, selecting another macaron. "But not physically restrained from doing it the way you are. Two different things."

My smile is almost real for a second. I like Avril. Still hate Zero. Am immensely grateful that Tabbi Kat wasn't with me when I was kidnapped. Can you imagine having her here? Talk about insult to injury.

"I give you my express permission to eat." I wave my hand in what I feel like is an imperial princess sort of way. Zero flicks her tongue against one of her cute wittle canines and sits back down in her chair. She gobbles up three macarons before I can blink, groaning as her eyes roll back in her head. "Careful there. One might think you were having an orgasm."

"I haven't eaten in *years*, you barbaric ape-like alien!" she barks back at me. With a gasp, she falls from her chair, stiff and immobile. Oh. I peer over the edge of the table at her. No sympathy from me as I watch her twitch on the floor with a few random sparks.

"Looks like the prince doesn't appreciate your insubordination." I chuckle at that, but the sound is dry. I'm freaking out here. I'm trapped in a gilded cage with no idea how to get out. I'm just a regular ol' human being. Nothing special about me. No secret powers. I'm not the chosen one. I'm some rando who was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. *Namely: Tabbi Kat's place. It's always the wrong place.*

Zero groans as she struggles to get to her feet, slumping back into her chair with her head hanging down. The red rabbit ear antennae on her head look a bit like a giant bow. It adds to the charm of her new body, a charm that does not extend to her personality.

"My apologies, Imperial Princess." She takes another cookie from the plate.

“Do you even need to eat?” I ask, genuinely curious. She cuts a glare my way that could melt concrete.

“This body is equipped with taste receptors that would make your inferior human mouth weep with joy at the depth and variety of flavor.” She tosses her long hair. Based on that action alone, it’d be easy to confuse who was supposed to be the princess here. “My brain is organic, and I must consume organic matter to keep it satiated.”

“You seemed just fine with solar power and no mouth before,” I quip, but my mind is not truly present in that room. It’s in the goddamn woods of a gravity-heavy planet populated by alien dragons and slavers. I have a feeling that Abraxas is just fine—physically speaking—because I also have a feeling that if he *weren’t* fine, the prince would’ve gloated about it.

As for what Abraxas is doing? I can only imagine. He isn’t going to simply let it go. He’s never left his planet, but would he try for my sake? Does he know who took me? He must. Maybe he can find Officer Hyt again and ... do what? Didn’t that stupid Sucker Tail tell me that I wasn’t his problem? My jaw clenches.

“I’d love to hear this story at some point,” Avril pipes up, using a mirror to do her makeup. She paints her face to mimic the two-toned colors of the Vestalis. “How you were injured, how your ship went down, all of that.” She waves her hand at Zero, and I notice that the latter’s expression softens considerably.

Ouch. Maybe I am a bitch? I never really thought to sit down and ask. I was more concerned with my situation than I was with Zero’s.

“Cartian technology is quite advanced,” Zero explains as I tug my plate closer with a single finger. My robe—this pretentious but unbelievably silky red number with gold trimmed edges—drifts down my bare shoulders. Underneath, I’m wearing little more than lingerie. An entire closet full of clothing and this is what I chose: a lace teddy that’s cut so high on the hips that it looks like it belongs in the 1990s. But in a good way. The black lace reminds me of the designs on the walls and ceiling, a fine, delicate pattern that feathers across my skin. My body is now bronze-kissed in certain areas—from those stupid double suns—and white as a ghost in others. Sigh. “There were vents near my solar panels where I was able to ingest organic matter: insects, plant material, small creatures unfortunate enough to fall in.”

You know why you chose this outfit, my brain warns me. And I do. I'm going to tease and tempt that stupid moth until he gives me what I want. That is, Abraxas. I want to see Abraxas. Surely, we can work something out? He has a ship that flew into the Jungryuk atmosphere and snatched my den up like it was *nothing*. Couldn't he take me back the same way?

There's no way in hell he's ever going to let me go. After all, without me, he'll die. I get that. Self-preservation is a thing. But ... I should at least be able to see Abraxas. *To say goodbye*. I can't handle the grief that fills me, so I decide it's best if I drown it in chocolate.

I give in and take a bite of the damn cookie. It's more than just good: it's orgasmic. Zero had the right idea. I moan as I slap a hand to my mouth. Happens just in time for the prince to open the door to my room and witness it.

Our eyes meet as I'm mid-moan, and it's ... *I've been looking for you, and I've finally found you, but I'm in love with someone else*. I turn suddenly to the side, coughing on cookie crumbs, and accepting the glass of wine that Avril shoves into my hand. I down it quickly and try to gather my dignity back together.

Jane loves insta-love in books. Adores it. I've always found it creepy as hell. It's even creepier in real life. I don't feel like I'm in control of my own emotions. I'm a puppet on a string to my desire for a man—an alien—that I don't even know. That's gross. It's a mockery of love. That emotion *must* be earned.

I stand up and the robe falls to my elbows, leaving the majority of my body exposed.

Rurik's wings spread behind him, filling the room with that goddamn smell. *Cardamom and honey*. *I'm choking on it again*. *I can't breathe*.

"Get out." The prince issues the command in a low whisper, but both Zero and Avril scramble to obey. The latter throws me a wink over her shoulder and a thumbs-up before disappearing into the ... foyer? Antechamber? How the fuck should I know? The room out there, whatever it's called. "Princess."

"The name's Eve." I park my ass on the edge of the table and cross my naked legs. I'm wearing these gloriously fluffy slippers that I wish I could hate on principle, but absolutely love. *Abraxas, our den, and a pair of these slippers*. *Now that would've been*

heaven on Earth. Heaven on ... Jungryuk? Whatever. “You can start calling me Eve, and I’ll start calling you Rurik, and we can be gracious with one another.” I pick up another macaron—a mint green one this time—and toss him a saucy look. “Deal?”

He walks slowly into the room, dressed in a different outfit today. The last three times I’ve seen him, he’s had the same military uniform on, that fabric woven of stars. This morning, he’s sporting a buttoned jacket in bright red, black pants tucked into white boots, and white gloves. He looks shiny and pretty, like he’s dolled-up for a special occasion.

I don’t look at his eyes.

That’s when I get into serious trouble.

And to think, I felt bad for wanting to run with Abraxas while this guy slowly starved to death.

He appears in front of me and snatches my chin in his fingers, lifting my gaze up to his. I resist, but the pull is there, and when I can’t control it, it takes over. Our gazes lock, and my entire body turns into a supernova. *Is that the right space term? I don’t know anything about space terms!*

I’m trembling as he holds my chin and stares into my goddamn soul.

The pheromones, those can be blamed for my hard nipples, for the way I squeeze my thighs together, for the breathy sound that whispers past my parted lips. But these other feelings? This ... this *sense* that our differences don’t matter, that the species we were born to is less important than our connection with one another, that I can’t shake. *I’ve met you before. A thousand times before. A million.*

I jerk my face away and slap his hand to get his gloved fingers off my chin.

I *refuse* to admit that I woke up with my hand pressed against the wall, that strange red lace covering my skin, holding me there. Gross. When I tore my palm away, I ripped some of them and blood dribbled down the wall only to be absorbed by yet more of the pulsing threads.

“You want some wine?” I ask, ignoring him and the effect he has on me. “How about a cookie?”

“We must have a civil discussion,” he tells me, standing far too close to me for a stranger. I want to kick him in the nuts but again, do these moth guys even have nuts? Something tells me that yes, yes they do. With this chemistry between us, this attraction, there’s no way that we’re not ... compatible.

“What’s uncivil about offering you refreshments?” I move to lift the wine bottle to my lips and then set it aside. Rurik watches me with his dark eyes narrowed in suspicion. I suppose I should find them creepy, solid black, twice as large as they should be. Instead, they’re a rabbit hole I keep tumbling down without meaning to.

“Is there something wrong with the wine?” he asks me, and a strange tension enters the room. I freeze where I am, seated on the table and wishing I’d been less bold and worn more clothes. His gaze moves back to my face, but I’m staring at his chest instead, at that red fur at the base of his throat. *I want to touch it. Is it soft?* I almost slap myself to knock the thought loose. With every second that passes here, I feel like I’m being unfaithful to Abraxas.

I have never felt lower as a human being, as a *being* in general.

Rurik reaches out and takes the bottle, studying the label before he lifts it to his own mouth and takes a massive swallow. I’m dumbfounded as I turn to look at him. I wasn’t aware that alien moths drank wine. It’s a strange sight, his pretty mouth around the neck of the bottle, his wings fluttering in agitation, his antennae like massive horns in his sea of white hair.

I fight the urge to put the table between us. I can deal with this through sheer force of will. I am *not* a basic animal with no control over my instincts and urges. That is literally what’s supposed to set humans and animals apart, isn’t it? *You’ve got this, Eve.*

The prince makes a face, holding the bottle aside and curling his lip in disgust.

“I understand that this liquid is a stimulant for humans, but it tastes of spoiled fruit.”

“It *is* spoiled fruit,” I explain, and it takes some effort on my part not to laugh. I take a bite of the cookie and discover that it’s pistachio-flavored. I’m impressed. Avril said the prince would go out of his way to get me whatever I wanted, and I guess in some aspects that’s true. Whatever I want to eat. Whatever I want to wear.

But not whoever I want to see. Not whoever I want to love. Not freedom of movement or choice. “You can drink that?”

“I can consume whatever food and drink that my mate consumes,” he explains, setting the bottle aside on the table. I refuse to unpack that statement, but a joke slips out anyway. Humor is how I deal with shitty situations. Always has been. Always will be.

“Then if I were you, I wouldn’t down a whole pizza, a dozen hot wings, and a half-dozen bottles of beer. Next morning? Heartburn. All day. Sunrise to sundown.”

“You are deflecting,” he says, and I notice that his mouth actually moves to match the words coming out of it. That’s ... odd. I swear that when I met him before, that wasn’t the case. Like with Abraxas, like with Hyt, I could see their mouths making their native sounds, and it was only in the translator that I heard English. *Synchronicity contacts, remember?* How could I have possibly forgotten the secret eye surgery I was given while unconscious. *Cue expressionless face.*

“Deflecting?” I scoff and grab the pitcher of water off the table, pouring myself a glass. I down it like it’s booze and then pour another. “You don’t know me.”

“I do not, but I would like to.”

That makes me laugh for real. It’s a bitter sound. Can’t help it.

“You sure have a funny way of showing that,” I tell him, staring pointedly at his chin. I try to keep my attention neutral by looking at a boring part of his body. Doesn’t work. *Goddamn, that mouth. He has the mouth of a pouty pop star. How is that even fair?* Some part of me feels like he’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen—save for Abraxas. “Pinning me to the floor of my own den, kidnapping me in the nude, locking me up.”

“You are not locked up. You have the freedom to go anywhere on this ship.” There’s a growl in his words, some low, grating sound of frustration that’s definitely not human. “You have not even tried.”

“I can go anywhere on *this ship*,” I repeat, wishing he’d move back a step or two. I decide to take the initiative, slipping past him and moving over to the wall of glass. I’m getting used to it, but I can only look at it if I pretend like it’s a planetarium or something. If I think too hard about it, I start to get dizzy again. “I can’t leave. That’s what being locked up looks like.”

“You will not be bound to this ship forever,” he snaps at me, getting way too close to my right side. There’s a venom in his words to rival Abraxas’ tail spikes. Yikes. Somebody has unresolved issues simmering beneath his courtly exterior. “You can travel the universe so long as you provide blood to me. You will only have to see me for small stints at a time, if that is what you so desire.”

“I can live with Abraxas?” I ask, turning to look at him with disbelief apparent in my face. “Seriously? You’ll let me go back to Jungryuk?”

“I ...” he trails off, and I laugh again.

“Christ, you can’t even help yourself, can you?” I ask, sipping the water. I’m disappointed in him, and I can’t explain why. How can I be disappointed in a guy that I don’t know, that kidnapped me, that I don’t give two fucks about? “Stop *lying* to me.”

“He is *not* your mate. I am your bloody mate!” The prince turns and looks around, like he’s searching for something to break. He squeezes his hands into fists, making his gloves creak with the strength in them. “I should have let my soldiers kill him when he was trapped under their nets and *writhing*.”

I throw my water cup at the prince, and it hits the wall instead. I hear the sound of glass shattering, and that frustrating sense of vertigo sweeps over me. *We’re going to be sucked into space. Ice-cold, silent darkness. My spirit will be forever trapped in the preserved shell of my body.* I stumble, and Rurik catches me again, his hands at my elbow.

“The window is ... did I break it ...” I can’t breathe. All I can see in my head is that floating furniture. All I can think about are black holes and dying stars and things that humans maybe aren’t even supposed to know about.

I miss Earth so terribly in that moment that it rivals my longing for Abraxas.

“There is nothing you can do to break this window, my princess,” Rurik tells me, helping me into my chair. He kneels in front of me, and that expression of concern takes over his face again. His expressions are disturbingly relatable. “My poor judgment yesterday led you to incorrect conclusions. No comet struck this ship nor would it ever. My father has precise control over its movements.

That section of the hallway is being tested with alternate gravity fields, that is all. It is perfectly safe.”

“I don’t know why this is happening to me,” I explain, even though I feel like I shouldn’t have to. I don’t owe this guy *anything*. He kidnapped me. What more do I need to know about him? *He was dying, and you were going to let him die. Can he really be blamed for saving his own life?* “Something about the idea of open space makes me dizzy as hell.”

“It is not an unexpected reaction for a planet-dweller.” He releases his hold on my arms which is good because my skin was starting to ache. I can quite literally feel my own blood throbbing inside my skin. When I imagine him feeding on me again—because we both know he has to do it—I get squirmy and uncomfortably hot beneath the collar. “You are not the first to have that reaction and you will not be the last.”

He rises to his feet, and I follow him up.

Unfortunately, that puts us chest-to-chest.

“I’m supposed to be your one, true mate, right?” I ask, reaching out to touch the front of his jacket. I may as well have grabbed his dick. His eyes close, his antennae sweep forward and brush across my hair, his wings spread behind him. I’m trembling as I swipe my palm down his chest, smoothing imaginary jacket wrinkles. “How can you prove that to me if Abraxas—the Aspis male—isn’t around? I should fall for you in *spite* of him, shouldn’t I?”

The prince pushes my hand away and turns, like he’s planning on circling me. I turn with him, and we do this bizarre dance with him in his military suit and me in my lingerie. He tugs at the fingers of his glove and then removes it, lifting his palm up to my face. I go still and allow him to touch me.

What a mistake that is.

Heat flows through me, and it’s my turn to close my eyes against the sensation. I start to bite down on my tongue again, desperate for the harsh bite of pain to knock sense into my bewitched brain. But ... the last time I did that, he smelled my blood and it was game over. I don’t want him to feed from me yet. There are things I need. This is a negotiation, make no mistake.

I open my eyes.

“We can work something out, surely?” I ask before I notice that he isn’t looking at me. He’s staring at the gouge I made in the surface of the table.

“You not only count the days you have been separated from him, but you avoid the wine because you believe you might be pregnant.”

I stumble back, and he drops his arm to his side.

“Are you fucking *spying* on me?” I hiss, but of course he is. He controls Zero. I get the impression that she doesn’t blink without his permission. Not that ... cyborgs need to blink. It’s just an expression.

“Did you not witness my blood lace?” He points his naked, claw-tipped finger to the ceiling. “I can see and feel everything that happens in these rooms.” He steps closer to me, and I back up. My ass slams into the couch and I find myself pinned there when he spreads his wings and brings them around me like a white cloak. “You cannot *breathe* without my intimate knowledge of your breath, of the way it skims your beautiful mouth, the softness with which it settles in your chest.” Rurik drags his knuckle down the side of my face, and I bite the inside of my cheek as hard as I can. I don’t care if I bleed.

As soon as that coppery substance coats my tongue, he’s groaning and squeezing his eyes shut again.

“So your father ... he spies on this entire ship?” I ask, making the connection. Somehow, I can tell that the lace-like designs belong to Rurik, and the ugly ones belong to his dad. Can’t wait to meet the guy. Because I’m *sure* that’s what the plan is today. How can I be the stupid imperial princess without meeting the stupid imperial king?

“Everywhere but these rooms,” Rurik confirms, opening his eyes again. We stare at each other for what must be several minutes. He doesn’t move from his position, one hand on the sofa back on either side of me, his wings wrapped around but not touching me. “Which is why we *must* have a discussion. If we cannot come to an agreement, and you *insist* upon behaving this way outside of our chambers, we will both die.” He releases me and steps back, and I hate that I can feel slickness between my legs.

Rurik’s gaze drops to my thighs, to the bit of lace tucked between them. His antennae lift up, swiveling away from me. He can smell me. I’m sure of it. I look down at his slacks, mimicking the way he’s

staring at me, and I see that there's a significant tent in his too-tight pants.

Holy shit. Whatever he's got down there, it's huge. Maybe not Abraxas in his full-size form (which I definitely can't take), but as big as he is when he's shrunk down some. I didn't expect that. Nice play, moth man.

We lift our gazes at the same time, and I frown.

"You're telling me that if I don't act the part of the princess ... your dad will kill us?"

"Maybe not him." Rurik stands up straight and fiddles with the buttons on his own uniform. For an alien moth, he sure is particular about his clothing. "But my brothers will. I have one-hundred-and-two power hungry siblings who are *furios* that I have found my mate before them." He looks pointedly at me, but I don't move. I'm afraid if I do, we might ... and I would never do that to Abraxas. I would never betray him. *I don't want to betray him.* "What my parents *will* do if you refuse me is force you into this." He turns away and quickly tucks his hand back into his glove. "Despite what you might think, I do not want that."

"Force me how?" I ask, and then immediately regret posing the question. "You're saying that you'll ... rape me?" I can barely make myself speak the words. My mind drifts back to those chains on the wall at the brothel.

"If you're so upset by it, why don't you use your plentiful good fortune, become the Imperial Princess, and change it? You'd have that power, you know."

Hyt's words are impossible to ignore, the memory of them reverberating in my head. I haven't forgotten. I'm coming into this conversation knowing that I'm going to lose in all the ways that matter. I have to make it count where I can.

"I do not want to do that," Rurik repeats, and he sounds so unbelievably tired that I actually feel *sorry* for him. He stands by the table and touches his fingers to one of the macarons, like he's never seen one before. I get the idea that he hasn't. "But my parents will not accept anything less than our marriage."

"Can't we fake our way through the wedding night?" I almost laugh, but it wouldn't be a sound of joy.

“If only such a horror could be avoided.”

I’m not sure if I have *ever* heard someone sound so salty about something in all my life. The prince won’t look at me now, turning away so that all I can see of him are his wings, his beautiful hair, and his antennae.

“Why do they care so much?” I need to understand exactly what’s going on here so I can figure out what to do. As it stands, I don’t know much more than ‘his penis will change shape to fit inside of you’. Thanks Avril for spewing the most important information first. “Does it matter if we fuck?”

Rurik laughs, the sound mixed with soft whispers as some of his real voice melds into the words spit out by the translator.

“It matters because they will do everything they can to avoid civil war. I cannot be left to wander around with a mate by my side who is not bonded to me while my brothers continue to flounder in their own searches. If necessary, I will be forced to mate you against your will. If I refuse, they will kill you and leave me to slowly starve to death. It is ... not a pleasant way to go.”

His words make me sick with guilt. I was going to let him die like that. If he’d been an hour or two later, Abraxas and I would’ve been gone, and Rurik and I would never have seen each other again.

“How will they know?” Another question that likely has answers I don’t want to hear.

“They will know. I will have your lady-in-waiting explain the specifics. But believe me, my princess, when I tell you that there is no faking a mate bond.” He puts his hands down on a decorative table across the room, facing away from me. “I will bring you the Aspis male.”

I freeze up, unwilling to believe what I just heard. If he’s messing around with me ...

“You’ll bring Abraxas here?” I say it, and I know right away that it’s wrong. Abraxas would never survive somewhere as sterile and unnatural as this. He belongs in those woods, and I couldn’t ... I wouldn’t feel right taking him away from his home. I ... “Let me go to him instead.”

There’s a long stretch of silence before Rurik answers.

“If you mate with me without complaint, if you participate in the wedding, if you show your best face to my parents and my people ...” He pauses here, like there’s something he has to say but doesn’t want to. “If you bear my child, then I will let you keep him on this ship.”

My head rings with all of the things he’s just said.

Negotiate, Eve! This is your chance!

“Let’s break this down. If I marry you, if I ‘show my best face’, then I want to stay with Abraxas for half the year on Jungryuk.” I pause. “Half of a human year in exchange for half a year on this ship.” I almost throw up just making that bargain. The idea of living on this ship for six months at a time sounds like a hellish nightmare.

“That is not possible. I can only store so much of your blood at a time. I will need to see you at least once an Earth month. Perhaps twice.”

I grit my teeth, glaring at his back as he stands there bent over the table like *he* is the one suffering here. This bastard is going to be king because of me, and he has the audacity to act like it’s a chore?

“Then once a month, I’ll come back to this ship. The rest of the time, I’ll stay with Abraxas.”

Rurik’s wings spread wide, and I realize it’s his version of an angry tic, like tugging at one’s hair or yanking at the collar of one’s shirt.

“This ship travels, my princess. We will not always be so close to that horrible little planet. Either I bring the Aspis male here or you will never see him again.”

“Fine!” I scream the word, and Rurik whirls around on me, his wings fluttering like silky fabric. “Bring him here. *Now.*”

He grits his teeth, flashing those triple vampire fangs on either side of his mouth. He stalks toward me, so angry that he’s vibrating, I swear.

“I *cannot* bring him here now. I am not the king yet, princess. If my father discovers that you desire another male, that you have rejected me, your Aspis male will die. You will die. I will die. You do not seem to understand the gravity of the situation.”

I feel like crying again, but I won’t show Rurik that side of me.

“When?” I whisper, wishing my voice sounded stronger, wishing I were more sure of myself. He softens immediately, and I hate that, too. He isn’t allowed to act like that toward me. It’s confusing and weird and it makes no sense.

“After we have mated, after the wedding, after you are with child.”

I stare at him.

“You know that I might already be pregnant ...” I trail off because surely these Vestalis douchebags have pregnancy tests. *It’s too early to tell, Eve, duh.* When I said I wasn’t ready for kids, I was serious. *As serious as riding Abraxas’ mating rod over and over again?* All I wanted was to claim it. Like, it was *mine*, but ... God, I’m an idiot.

“It doesn’t matter. When I mate with you, my genetics will take over. If you are holding onto a fertilized egg, my DNA will replace that of the Aspis male’s DNA.” Rurik doesn’t sound gleeful or gloating nor does he sound regretful. Just ... resigned.

I want to scream.

“No.” I move away from him, around to the other side of the couch, as if that matters. “I won’t agree to that.”

“There is no other choice, my princess. This is not something that I am able to compromise on. Not only do I have no control over the functions of my body, it is a demand of the court. I cannot take the throne until you are with child, and I cannot give you your Aspis male until I am king.”

I almost collapse, but the anger takes over.

“Why did you have to taste my blood? Why couldn’t you have just passed by that stupid tent and that stupid sign? Why did you have to come for me?” The tears fall then, but I’m gritting my teeth as they slide down my face.

“Why?” he asks, and his face breaks into something magnificent but terrifying. His eyes widen, and he yanks his gloves off, tossing them onto the floor. He strides right over to me, skirting the sofa, and then grabs me by the arms. “Do I have your consent?”

Just like yesterday.

I nod.

Rurik leans down with that jewel of a mouth, and crushes his lips to mine. My eyes widen rather than close, and I find that we're staring into one another's eyes as he kisses me. Something ... like small threads ... emerge from his tongue and wrap around mine, taking over my mouth and lips and teeth.

It's the briefest flicker of pain before agonizing pleasure sweeps my body. I'd fall if he weren't holding me upright.

My mind fractures as he draws back, glowing red lace stuck between our lips.

"Don't you understand?" he breathes, almost as if he's talking to himself and not me. "I never wanted a mate either. You have *ruined* my entire life." He sinks his teeth into the side of my throat, and my eyes roll back into my head. I can feel him inside of me again, that glowing red lace of his traveling deep into my body.

The prince is upset. He's angry. He's frustrated. He's so unbelievably lonely, a single soul in a vast universe. He scented me. He was full of joy and despair. He doesn't want to be king. He does want a partner. He wants a lover. He wants a mate. He wants to touch me. He wants to eat me. He wants to fuck me.

I'm not sure if I pass out or what, but for some time there, I know the Vestalis prince better than I know myself. When I blink through the sensation, he's laying me gently onto the couch and resting his cheek on my stomach. His entire body trembles as he reaches up and swipes blood from my chin, leaving streaks of vibrant red on his skin and mine both.

I realize in that moment how far beyond my control this situation is. I thought I had it bad back when I woke up in that market? That was freedom compared to this. I am trapped. I am never escaping this place.

"Bring him here so I can see him, so he can make a choice on whether or not he wants to stay." My voice is a breathy whisper.

"Yes, my princess." Rurik leaves his head on my stomach. I can't resist reaching out and trailing my fingers along the white part of his antennae. It feels like bone. He releases a hissing gasp that I can feel against my belly, his breath warm through the lace of my lingerie.

"I want you to kick all those black market smugglers and slavers off of Jungryuk."

There's a long pause before he agrees to that one.

"Yes, my princess."

Keep going, Eve, while you have some small kernel of power over him.

"Free the enslaved girls in the market brothels; free the ones trapped in the woods with the Tusk Men."

Rurik lifts his face up to stare at me, and I get lost in his eyes all over again.

"Yes, my princess."

I sit up on my elbows, touching my fingers to my lips where his ... whatever that red lace stuff is ... dug into my skin. There's plenty of blood on my lips and cheeks and tongue, his and mine mixed together. The smell is making me dizzy again, but in a good way.

"I want to send a letter to my family on Earth."

He stands up and shakes his head. I can't decide if that's something Vestalis do on their own, or if he's learned these gestures for me.

"I cannot say *yes, my princess*, but if all goes well, then I will say *yes, my queen*." He heads for the door, swiping his arm over his bloodied lips and groaning like he's either halfway to the grave or halfway to the bedroom.

"I want to see Jane!" I shout at his retreating back, my own breathing an unsteady, staccato rhythm.

"I am already looking for Jane," he promises, pausing a few feet back from the door. *How the fuck does he know about Jane?* Oh. Because I told him about her. Or Avril did. Or both of us. "Anything else, Your Imperial Majesty?"

Now that's better. That sounds mocking. I can do witty repartee all day long.

"I want Connor, too."

He doesn't turn around, but I can see his jaw clench.

"Another mate of yours?" he grinds out, and I laugh, letting my head fall back in surrender.

This ... this is my life now.

I don't even understand how I went from being a caterer to falling in love with a dragon alien to ... sitting on a chaise lounge in a black lace teddy with the taste of chocolate and blood on my lips.

"Another human that was kidnapped alongside me. I want him sent back to earth."

"So long as he isn't mated," Rurik agrees readily, and my jaw clenches.

"I want that stupid fucking law changed. Why should the victims suffer because they were violated?"

I swear, I can't see Rurik but he must smile. I can feel the change in the air. Every cell in my body is attuned to his. *Just like with Abraxas.*

Unlike Abraxas, this male has done *nothing* to endear himself to me.

"This is another occasion when I may not say *yes, my princess*, but I will be able to say *yes, my queen*." He takes another step toward the door and it opens, revealing Avril and Zero both. "Get up and get dressed. We will go to meet my parents."

He takes off, and I let my head fall into the pillows. I close my eyes. I put my hand over my stomach.

Part of me is relieved that I'll get to see Abraxas again.

The rest of me is terrified that when I do see him, nothing will be the same between us.

Because I'm going to have to cheat on him. Because if I am pregnant with his child, it won't be his anymore. Because even if I'm not, I have to have a baby for Rurik.

I roll onto my side, facing the back of the couch, put my hands to my face, and cry.

No more, Eve. Be strong. Be fucking strong.

"I had thought I was the most pitiable creature in the Noctuida," Zero says, standing beside the couch. She reaches out and puts her hand on the top of my head. It's almost a kind gesture. "But today, I am ever so grateful that I have never fallen in love. You look hideous when you cry."

As if that ain't the truth.

I dry my tears on the expensive robe, stand up, and turn to face the two women in my suite.

“Alright, let’s do this. The sooner I get this stupid wedding over with, the better.”

Because all of the things I want and need to do hinge on this goddamn union, the one I both fear and crave in equally terrifying measures.



Abraxas

There are dead Vestalis all over my woods, but I cannot be bothered with their corpses. May their ghosts haunt this neverland for centuries. May they choke on the vitriol of their own vile spirits.

I must find Eve.

The ground is torn and shredded by my clawed feet as I slip through the trees like wet blood running hot and wild down a hill. Fast. Faster. I slide into the clearing where our den is located, but there is no den.

There is nothing but an empty crater in the land where it should be.

The vessels in my skin glow with violet rage, the heat of this world's blood thrumming through me. I absorbed the energy and warmth of a thermal vent in order to kill the last of the prince's guards. Now that they are dead, and I am here, where is *she*?

I turn my head up to the sky, but I see nothing.

I see nothing, but I needn't see it at all because *I know*.

A roar rips through me, one that shatters the world. Creatures scurry or flap or slither to get away from me, the scent of their terror tainting the air with something strange and sour. I am panting when I

lower my head, moving over to a tree and slamming my horns into the bark, grinding against it, gritting my teeth.

I must remain calm, I tell myself, but it takes all that I am to control the primal half of me that wishes to scream until the air cracks with my own thunder, snaps with the lightning of my fury. I pace. I pace some more. I understood this was a concern when I mated my female, that the prince might come for her. It was a risk I was willing to take because she is my soul's other half.

I turn and dart into the trees, splash through the stream, and snag one of the legs on a Tall Bird. The Aspis prefer descriptive names over obscure ones. Why make something up when *Tall Bird* is self-explanatory?

I break its leg and when it falls, I break its neck. It is quick, but I am still sorry for the death. However, all beasts must eat. With my body satisfied, and my mind cooled, I head to the water's edge and I crouch beside it.

Eve. My female. Brave but powerless.

I wish to lend her my power, give her my strength.

How?

I drop my wing hands into the water and then splash my face, cleaning the blood from my scales. My tail lashes angrily, a panicked rage clawing to get out. With half of my psyche, I fight it down. With the other half, I plan.

In order to rescue my female from a Vestalis prince, I must go into the sky.

Then I will need a ship that works and someone to run it.

I drink deeply, refresh myself, and shake out my wings before returning to the area where we encountered the Sucker Tail some days past. I can still smell him on the ground, can easily trace his scent. I follow it through the trees and back to the road where it mixes with others, and I find myself smelling the pirate, too. Both of them, and two human females.

It has been some time since they were last here; finding them will be a challenge.

But I do not hunt in such a way that escape is even a possibility.



I have wasted the better part of a day searching for that law keeper and his scumsucking friend.

But I have found them now.

And I am *angry*.

The pirate snarls when I snatch him around the waist with my tail, fighting every instinct in me that screams how he should die. *Squeeze him tighter, squeeze him until he rips in half.* I might be drooling when I split my mouth wide and get in the face of this scruff-necked alien creature. I have smelled him on Jungryuk before; I know what he's capable of.

The way I look at him, the growl I offer as a warning, that translates into something he can easily understand.

“You have Jane, do you not?” I ask him, my best attempt to remain civil.

I am not civil.

I have *never* been civil.

I am not tame.

I am looking for my fucking *mate*.

The Scruff-Neck tries to kill me, withdrawing a weapon and then swearing in his native yipping sounds before I crush his wrist with one of my secondary hands. I don't squeeze as hard as I'd like. *Kill him*, my instincts tell me. *Eat him. Make them pay. Slaughter them all.*

But I cannot do that.

If I am not rational in my search for my mate, I will lose her.

Sadness swamps me, but it has not been long. I can get her back. I can do it quickly.

I will tear the Vestalis prince to pieces, splatter him across the walls of his star traveling ship. I bite the pirate's arm, and he spasms

under the terrible pain of it. Only Eve enjoys my bite. *Only Eve should survive your bite. Feast on him for sustenance. It is the way of things.*

“Where is Jane?” I demand, panting, snarling, glowing so brightly that strange shadows skitter over his hidden campsite. The Night Feasters scurry away from me, so frenzied in their escape that they bite and snap at each other. I smile, but the expression only makes the captain fight harder.

It’s useless. I am slowly strangling him to death. I will continue to do so until he gives me an answer.

A pebble bounces off my back, and I turn to see a human female standing at the edge of the clearing. She’s holding a pile of rocks in her hand, breathing hard, staring at me.

“Put him down,” she grinds out, like she’s ready to fight.

Ah, this will be Jane then. This human is similar to my beautiful Eve. Fierce in the heart even if not in the flesh. I toss the pirate aside and he groans, slamming into one of the brightly colored alien dwellings.

But I did not put the pirate down because of Jane.

Because of the Sucker Tail.

“Alright, my friend,” he begins, putting his thumb digits under his belt and standing in such a way that it looks as if he is seeking a female of his own. He was aroused by mine when he saw her in the market. I will have to watch him carefully around her. Because he is here, I know I will be forced to let him near her again. We will need his help to reunite. I dislike him instantly and wish that I were as mindless as my instinctual hunger. *Grab him. Finish him. Let his blood spray.* “If you’re here, there’s a problem. What’s the problem?”

The Falopex sighs and drops his arms by his sides, walking over to his friend with a sway that draws the human female’s attention. The air is perfumed with arousal, and I wince. I do not like the smell of any female but my own. I have never before smelled a female who aroused me. Not once.

But Eve ... I am surprised by our connection. Surprised, but pleased. Thrilled. Satisfied.

I *will* find her. I will not rest until my body gives out and even then, I will crawl. I cannot allow my Eve to die. If she does not mate with me in relatively short order, we will both perish. I do not understand why. My people are not concerned with the *why* of most things. If we are happy and fed, we are content.

“The Vestalis prince has taken my mate,” I tell them all, watching absently as the officer knocks a gun from the pirate’s hand, and then hefts him into the air using his sucker tails. *He touched my mate with those. I should bite them off.* “You or your friend will take me to her.”

“What the fuck is going on?” another human female says as she steps from the woods, and my hackles raise immediately. *What was this one’s name?* I cannot be bothered to remember. A small Earth-thing peeks its head from the female’s cloth coverings. A possum, Eve called it. I can remember that, but I cannot remember the female’s name. “Aren’t you Eve’s alien fuckbuddy?” the girl continues, her natural voice a horrific shriek that causes me to grit my teeth.

Jane shrinks away from me and the pirate groans, but the Sucker Tail is calm as he looks back at me. We have seen one another around, I suppose. He does not bother me. He kills the slavers and the tusks, and he takes the human women home. That is an act of good will with no reward. This makes him trustworthy to me.

If I had died that night, and she had found him again, he would have taken care of her. I know that to be a fact.

Instead, my mate fucked me back to life. My sweet, tiny, tender female. I release a purr that shakes all four individuals present, including the Sucker Tail. Even then, he only shakes with a laugh and then crosses his arms.

“The future king abducted his future queen, and you want to ... confront the entire imperial family by ourselves?” The officer fixes his head covering with a flick of his finger, moving the white object up and away from his eyes. “That sounds like a great way for this all to end badly.” He lets his head hang back and then moves around me, ignoring me as I turn to face him. I leave little Jane and her pebbles at my back, unconcerned.

She doesn’t stay where she is for long, rushing past me to help the officer with his friend.

The two of them work diligently to set his bones and bandage his bleeding wounds. I lie down in place, the power of the thermal vents once again flowing through my veins. While I wished to swell to my full form, I did not for fear that I would not fit on the ship I must board.

I am still much larger than the others and confident that I can rest here without being attacked.

“Come the hell on, Hyt. Can’t you at least arrest that fucking thing? He damn near killed me,” the pirate bites out, gesturing violently at me.

“I am sorry to have acted unnecessarily,” I explain, my temper flaring beneath the calmness of my words. *You don’t need two of them; you only need one. Eat the other to prove how serious you are.* I shake myself out, scales ruffling. I must eat again before we leave. It will do Eve no good if I die from starvation before reaching her. “But I could not risk that you would attack me before I could speak.” I add a growl onto the end of that, daring him to continue with the snarky words that threaten to leap from his lips.

He would have attacked me. He need not lie to me. I will not hear it.

Make no mistake: I am the boss in this situation. I will be taken seriously or I will kill them, and I must believe this fully so that they will believe it, so that they will understand. I will break even my own moral preferences in order to find and protect my female. Nothing is off-limits.

Including this.

“Why do you need to find her so badly? Why not let her become queen and then if she wants to, I doubt even the king could stop her from coming to see you. She’ll have that power.” The Falopex male sounds oddly disappointed, but then he shrugs and uses his tails to open a bag so that he can pass out food to the humans. Whatever it is that he gives the screechy one only makes her screeching worse.

“This is what we have to eat?” she demands, her voice a high-pitched hysteria, like the sound the Night Feasters make when they have taken down a large kill. I watch them from the corner of my eye, daring them to approach the firelight. They reach and claw but do not stretch past the immediate edge of the orange ring around us. “I can’t eat this.”

“Here, you can have mine,” Jane says, trying to smile, but ultimately the fur strip above her eye twitches and I can see that she is displeased. The screechy one has torn the item from her hand before the other woman has finished speaking.

“Chips?” the screech girl asks with a derisive sneer, and then she opens them and starts to eat, feeding bits to the tiny creature stuck to her garment. “Here.” She shoves the other food she was given at Jane, and my mate’s friend sighs.

“Awesome. Raw rice.”

“Not raw rice,” the Falopex says with a sharp grin of his own. “Fresh hot rice with chicken.” He pauses. “I mean, it isn’t chicken, but my sister says—”

“Officer,” I snarl, and he turns slowly to look at me, his smile shifting into one of challenge.

I swish my tail and feel my lips splitting as I grin back at him. *Ah, he is not boneless and weak like so many others.*

“Gotta keep the humans fed, right?” he says, digging around in his bag with his tails. He uses them to pull items out, handing them to Jane without looking her way again. To fill her new pot with water, he holds his hand above it and makes rain.

“Holy fuck,” Jane breathes out in that human tongue. The words are cut up and slashed by the translator. I hear her response as a surprised snarl, a sound that cuts off abruptly to emphasize the awe of the speaker. My people are both less and more than words. “Are you a water mage or something?”

“A ... what?” the officer asks, giving her an odd look. “No, of course not.” He stops the water that’s raining from his palm and then swipes his hand down the front of his body. “There’s a scientific explanation.” He winks and then steps away from Jane, a polite but clear dismissal of the others, and then pauses too close to me. I do not like that.

I stand up and growl down at him.

“If we do not find my mate within the next seven Jungryukian days, she will die of a broken heart.” I choose the lowest possible number, just in case. I have heard that couples who love one another most fiercely die more quickly as well. I cannot take that risk with Eve. “Even if you do not believe that, you will understand that she

does not wish to be there. Are you not committed to saving all of the humans, at any possible cost?"

This is why I trust this male.

He has a softness towards humans that I do not fully understand. He enjoys them as a species, not just as individuals. The officer looks at me with the strange eyes of an alien, tails swaying and shifting behind him in a mess of movement that I track with a predator's gaze, waiting for a moment to strike. I will not, but I must be ready to defend myself.

I force my attention to return to his face.

"This is ... fuck." He walks past me, and I turn to follow, moving to the edge of the clearing. He watches in awe as the Night Feasters scrabble to get back from me. If I were to mark this spot with my urine, they would give us an even larger cushion of space. "Okay, well, you got me there." He stares at the ground in thought before resting his hands on his hips the way that Eve does sometimes. *Very human gestures for an alien that spends too much time around them.*

I wait, but only because I know we cannot take off for another day. A freak tide has rolled in. With so many moons, and with such irregular patterns in the sky, the seas are fickle. The gravity feels lighter some days, heavier on others. Only very skilled or stupid pilots try to land here.

Most do not make it.

They deserve their forested glen of graves.

"I'll tell you what. I have to stop by the World Station anyway; *The Korol* is supposed to dock there around the same time. When I get there, I'll talk to Eve for you." There's a pause here where I read many other things in the officer's words and body language than he must realize. *You are pining for my female.* I lift my lip at him and consider snapping his head off.

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe through it.

"I must hunt," I tell him, pushing past and into the shadows. A Night Feaster screams when I make direct eye contact with it. "Take me with you. I would prefer to leave at midday tomorrow." That will be the earliest possible time this Falopex could leave and not crash his vessel.

“I cannot fucking take you to the World Station,” the officer says with a laugh from behind me. “I *will* tell your girl that you’re worried about her, but I will *not* force her to come back to you. If she wants to stay with the Vestalis, if she wants to go back to Earth, I’ll try to accommodate her.”

I look over my shoulder at him, study his face, his body language, his eyes. He does not care for me, but he doesn’t have to. He is worried about my female and will do whatever needs doing to keep her safe.

I turn and leave the Night Feasters to scatter again, stalking over to the officer and then rising to my back feet so that I can tower above him. The firelight catches on my horns, orange reflecting off of black.

“Tell me a known truth,” I say to him, and he sighs.

I am questioning his veracity, and he is supremely annoyed. I give a wicked flicker of a smile. *What a little liar this one is.* Still, I trust his actions more than his words.

“Don’t do this shit with me. I’ll find Eve. I’ll take care of her the way I do all the human beings who come through here. Stay with Captain Kidd, and don’t snap any more of his ribs, okay?”

I do not mention that I will allow the Falopex to leave only because I will get a ride with the space pirate instead. Two ships looking for Eve is better than one. Staying near Jane is helpful. I will keep her alive long enough to facilitate a reunion between friends.

With a laugh, I turn and fall to the ground again, hands hitting the dirt, claws extending.

I tear through the shadows of night, and then I turn those same shadows into a feast.



Lapping blood from my hide, I settle down beside the human dwellings—*tents*—to wait for Jane and Kidd to sleep. I do not sleep. I sit and I watch the woods, and I dream while awake. I dream of

Eve and the future child we will have together. I am certain that my seed has taken hold in her womb.

My lips twist into a satisfied smile that scares Captain Kidd as soon as he emerges from his tent. He glares at me, keeping his distance as he circles around to stand on the opposite side of the clearing. Trees surround us, silent, nonjudgmental sentinels.

“Hyt suggested that I keep you here, that I watch both of these human girls, that I run around like his fucking slave because he likes to play hero.” The captain removes something from his pocket, lights the tip on fire, and then begins to draw smoke from it. “So, what is it exactly that you want from me?”

“All I wish for is a ride,” I explain, and then there is this poignant moment between us where he considers running. But then he looks toward the tent with the human females in it, and sighs dramatically, puffing on the lit stick in his hand. A roll of herbs, it seems. But I cannot discern the species from the smell alone. It is likely of alien origin. “You will take me to the World Station so that I may mate with Eve before it is too late.”

“You want me to take you to the Falopex’s space station so you can fuck a girl?” Kidd snorts and turns away, shaking his head. He finds his black head covering and puts it on, sitting on a rock with no cloth covering on his upper half. “You’ll kill me if I don’t do it, I assume?”

“I will,” I admit gently, inclining my head. “But the females will live.”

Kidd smokes his herbs, and then drops them to the ground so that he can crush them with a boot.

“Fine. You know what? I can’t actually dock at the station—or get anywhere near it—but I can drop you off with a friend who’ll get you there. How you’re going to get off is a different matter entirely.” He stands up and starts to collect items from the ground around the campsite. The sun has only just come up, and the light is dusky and sleepy. “We’ll leave in the afternoon.”

“I will be ready.”

The females emerge from the other tent sometime later, wash up, and then approach me. I expected Jane’s curiosity but not the other’s. I ignore the screechy one as she strokes the head of her poor

pet Earth creature and stares at me. I curl my lip at her, and she flinches.

“Who are you?” Jane asks, her eyes the color of wet dirt. “You seem ... weirdly invested in Eve?”

It is a clear inquiry, there is no doubt.

“I am Eve’s mate,” I explain, unsure how good the alien tech is that she is wearing. Likely, it is of poor quality.

That does not matter with my mate because words are pointless. We understand one another perfectly without a translator. But these humans? I must be able to speak to them in words or they will think me a mindless beast.

My mouth stretches in a grin as I clamp down on my instinctive need for solitude. Eve has changed that. Eve is an end to years of loneliness that I did not even recognize until I met her. I did not know that I was alone until I found the one creature that I wish to share my existence with. With her, I am both alone and in company at once. A blissful feeling.

“Her ... oh my God.” Jane throws her hands over her mouth and gapes up at me. She drops her arms to her sides as I laugh, the sound scaring winged creatures from the trees. “You fucked my best friend.”

“Yes, I did,” I reply in as gentlemanly a manner as I am able. “I fucked her, but only because she wished for it as fiercely as I did. We are now bound together until our bodies surrender to the dirt.” I adjust myself so that I am sitting in a more human position, shifting so that my back is to a tree trunk, my knee is up, and my other leg is stretched out. I tuck my wings in close and rest my secondary hands on my shoulders.

I am coming, my female. I will always come. I resist the urge to threaten the captain. We *cannot* leave too early or the tide will take us. The officer left the camp last night, but I know that he, too, is going to delay his launch. I could not get out of here any earlier by following him instead.

“I’ll bet she loved it,” Jane says, and then she creeps forward to take a seat on my right side. “Can I, um, hear all about how you two met?” She grins at me and then scoots a little closer, and I find myself cocking my head out of curiosity. “I want to know everything.”

I say nothing, my mouth invisible when I hold it still. I am nothing but shadows. Jane will not challenge me. *I fucking cannot speak of such things or I will lose my ability to think clearly. I would tear the world apart in my frustration, and I should not allow myself to do that.*

“Then I guess I could tell you some stories?” Jane offers, and I turn to her, interested. She grins, as if I have verbally agreed. “Want to know about Eve’s past boyfriends? Most embarrassing moments?”

“I wish to know about her family,” I say, and Jane goes quiet.

The mood sombers.

Because it is one thing to know that you should remain cheerful in a crisis.

It is another to behave in that way.

As my mother would say, *in a battle for blood, take blood, but in the in-between, take peace.*

I listen to Jane talk and then, when midday hits, I stand up and walk quietly away from her in the direction of the ship.

Captain Kidd sees me coming and sighs, stepping aside to indicate the open door.

I have never been off of this planet, but it does not matter.

For Eve, I will travel the whole of this galaxy, the whole of the Noctuida.

With all four feet on the ground, I walk up the ramp and into the ship. Screens crackle with strange light and sound, scrambling the computer system. It is a natural adaptation of the Aspis, to disrupt technology. It is not always something we can control, but in this, I will not allow my biology to keep me here.

With a snarl, I whisper down the stairs and into the shadows, curling up in a corner in the dark. When I think about Eve, I smile, and the sharp gash of my white teeth splits the darkness, reflecting back at me from a mirror on the other side of the strange, wood-paneled vessel.

“This looks like a fucking pirate ship,” Jane exclaims from the floor above, but I ignore her.

I curl in on myself, twisting into a ball of blackness and rage and sorrow.

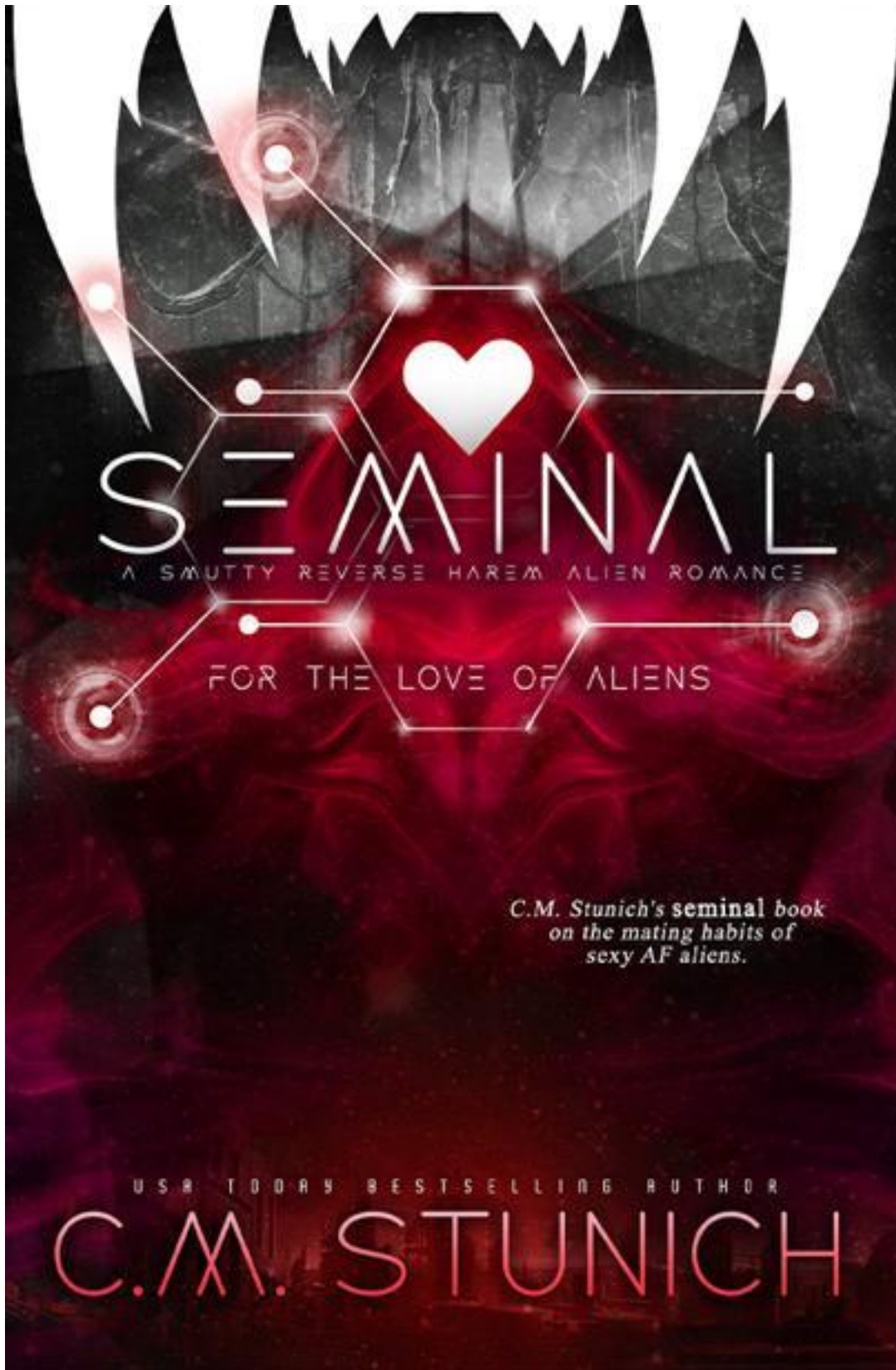
And love.

When I find that Vestalis male, I will *eat* him. I will bring my female home. Care for her. Take her. Claim her. Cherish her.

If it is necessary to achieve that, I will allow myself to tear this universe apart.

To Be Continued...

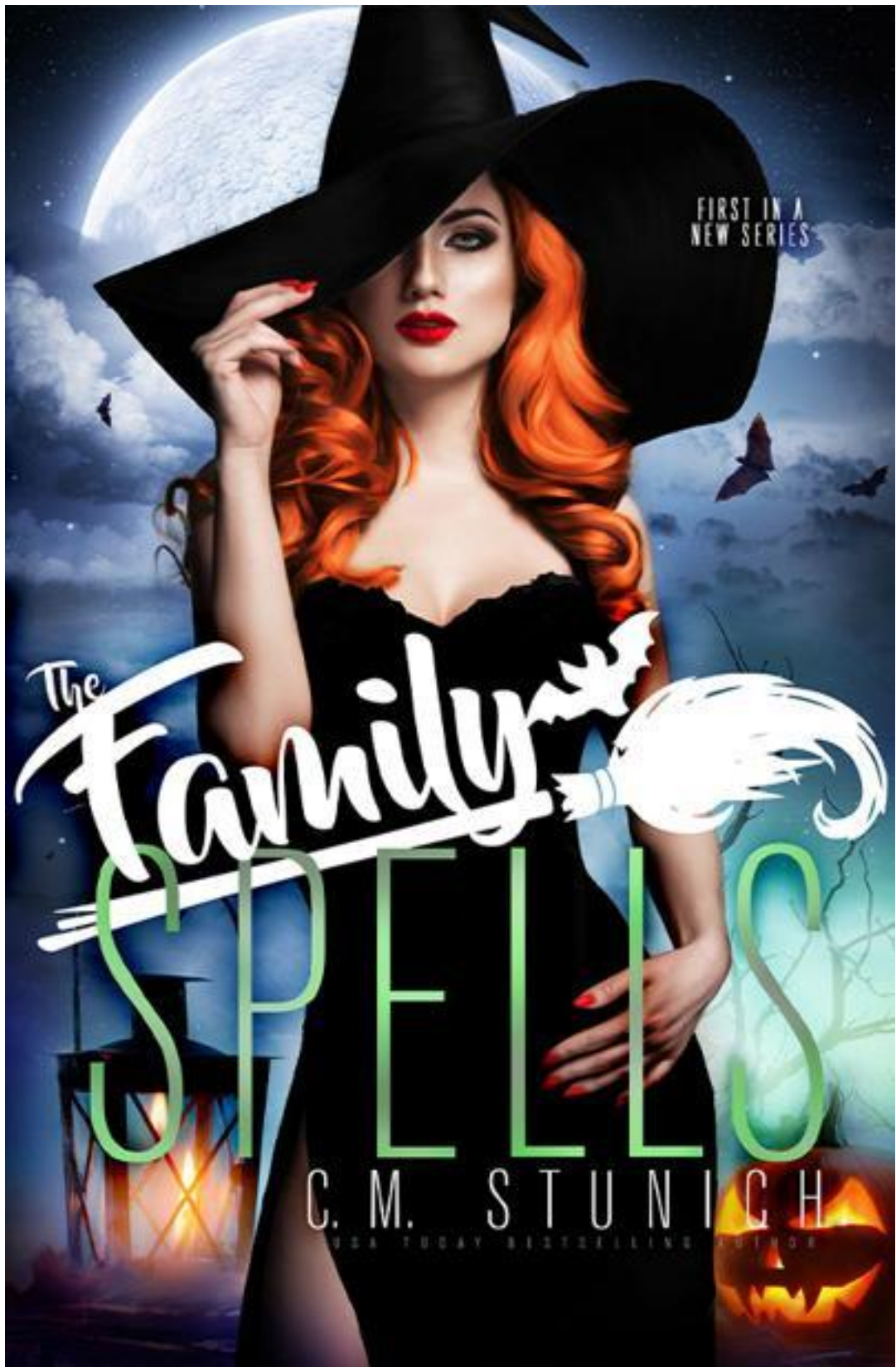
Want to see some NSFW Alien Art?



Book Two Live Releases 10/28/23



[Kings of Underland, A Bride for Beasts](#)



[Family Spells, Book #1](#)



[The Seven Mates of Zara Wolf, Book #1](#)

A STANDALONE TIME LOOP BULLY ROMANCE

DEVILS' DAY PARTY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

[Devils' Day Party, Standalone](#)

**KEEP UP WITH ALL THE FUN ... AND EARN SOME
FREE BOOKS!**



JOIN THE C.M. STUNICH NEWSLETTER — Get three free books just for signing up <http://eepurl.com/DEsEf>

FOLLOW ME ON TIKTOK, BABE — There are like three videos [@CMStunich](https://www.tiktok.com/@CMStunich)

FRIEND ME ON FACEBOOK — Okay, I'm actually at the 5,000 friend limit, but if you click the "follow" button on my profile page, you'll see way more of my killer posts

<https://facebook.com/cmstunich>

CHECK OUT THE NEW SITE — TBA (still under construction) but it looks kick-a\$\$ so far, right?

— <http://www.cmstunich.com>

AMAZON, BABY — If you click the follow button here, you'll get an email each time I put out a new book. Pretty sweet, huh?

— <http://amazon.com/author/cmstunich>

INSTAGRAM — Cute cat pictures. And half-naked guys. Yep,

that again. <http://instagram.com/cmstunich>

GRAB A SMOKIN' HOT READ — Best place to find the most up to date Information is my readers group

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/thebookishbatcave>. I often pop in here to answer questions and participate in discussions!

P.S. I heart the f*ck out of you! Thanks for reading! I love your faces.

<3 C.M. Stunich



[Check out my Amazon author page for more great reads.](#)



About the Author

C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.

She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy,

and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.

Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.