

THEIRS TO MATE

AN ALIEN OVERLORDS NOVEL

TAYLOR VAUGHN

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ALIEN OVERLORDS SERIES

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PART 1

HUNTER AND PREY

ONE

ELLE

“Leader Hank! Leader Hank! Hey, Leader Hank! What are you doing out here?”

The surprised voices of the families assigned to the rows all around us rise up all around me. So I know Henry Huang is headed my way, even before I stand up from the trowel work to see our colony’s High Leader huffing and puffing his way across the west field.

My mother is about to throw a handful of seeds into the hole I’d made in the red dirt. But she stops mid-toss with a worried frown when she sees Henry walking toward us. “Oh no, poor thing. I hope he doesn’t have a heart attack.”

She has legitimate cause to worry. The late-day sun is cutting a brutal swath across the rust-colored fields, and Henry—or Leader Hank, as the colonists affectionately call him—isn’t in the best of shape. Like most of the Leaders and their families, he’s used to working in the temperature-modulated confines of the colony ship.

Sweat rolls down his forehead in rivulets, and his face is only a few shades lighter than the red soil the colonists dubbed “concrete rust”—not nearly as affectionately as they called Henry Leader Hank.

Mom’s right to worry that he’s inviting a heart attack. I’d feel sorry for the exertion he’s having to put forth to reach me—if I didn’t know exactly why he’d decided to come out to the field.

My little sister, Kira, rises to a stand, her hand tightening around her own trowel. “Should’ve known he’d show up right

before the day was done to take all the credit for Elle's hard work."

She squints at Leader Hank, and not just because she suffers from severe myopia, an unfortunate vision condition that was eradicated on the old planet but is impossible to cure on the one where her family crash-landed when she was still in our mother's womb.

"Kira, hush," our father warns before pasting on a smile so bright no one would ever suspect he'd been rubbing his aching back since our midday lunch break.

Mom also pastes on a smile.

"Leader Hank, to what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?" she asks when he comes to a stop in front of us, acting just as surprised as the rest of the Field Workers.

"Hiya, Gloria!" Despite his labored breathing, Leader Hank manages to project loudly enough for everyone around us to hear as he tells Mom, "I had a few minutes, and I thought to myself, why not spend them helping one of our Founding Field Families finish planting their row of *my new bioengineered crop*."

Kira snorts, and Dad shoots her a warning look.

Meanwhile, Mom, projecting even louder than Leader Hank, says, "How *thoughtful*! Isn't that just *incredibly thoughtful* of you?"

Mom unstraps the seed apron from around her waist and hands it to him—so hastily I can tell she's afraid if she doesn't give Leader Hank her easy job first, Kira will hand him her wooden trowel and happily watch him struggle with it in the red concrete.

It has taken me years to bioengineer a version of an old planet crop called corn that would actually grow on the aggressively hot planet we dubbed New Terrhan after our colony ship crash-landed here. But if the corn crop took, my next order of business would be finding a way to soften up the red soil.

I have to agree with Mom's executive job assignment, though. If Leader Hank is breathing this hard after just walking across

the field, he'll pass out if he actually tries to dig seed holes like Kira, Dad, and me.

Also, for Dad's sake, we need to finish our row as quickly as possible so he can go home and lie down while the rest of us handle dinner.

No time for resentment. I ignore Kira's prodding look and return to digging holes for the new corn crop while Leader Hank drops in seeds behind me.

"Careful not to dig the hole too shallow, Lizzie," Leader Hank tells me about five minutes into our combined effort. His voice booms with the instruction so loudly I'm sure even the workers at the edge of the field can hear him. "I worked too hard on *bioengineering* this *new corn crop* to have the pigeons come along and peck it right on out of the ground!"

First of all, I was the one who briefed him about the pigeon threat a couple of weeks ago, when I convinced him to let us have the west field to try out my corn crop.

And, second of all, yes, my full name is Elizabeth, but everyone calls me Elle. Not even my family—the only other people who know who really spent months in a colony ship lab to come up with this experimental corn seed crop—calls me Lizzie.

I grit my teeth, biting down hard to keep myself from snapping at him. But my hotheaded sister screws up her face and opens her mouth to answer on my behalf.

"Thanks for the reminder, Leader Hank," my father says before she can.

His voice creaks with pain. Even talking is an effort for him when his back locks up on him. But despite his unspoken agony, Dad lifts an arm to give my shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I gotta feeling these seeds are going to grow real good in this concrete rust."

Dad throws me a secret wink beneath Leader Hank's clueless gaze, and his heavily laced words remind me why I'm happy to let someone else take all the credit for my work.

“Yeah, I think they’re going to take, too,” Pedro Chual calls out from the next row. “It looks just like what my grandma used to plant on the old planet, but hardier, y’know. Good job, Leader Hank! Maybe, next May, we won’t be damn-near starving before the Xals come through.”

Pedro Chual’s declaration sets off a wave of “good job” from the rest of the Field Workers, then a round of applause.

Of course, Leader Hank forgets all about seeding the rest of the row as he straightens up to wave at the clapping crowd like a Harvest Pageant Queen.

“Thank you! Thank you!” he calls out. “But I can’t take all the credit for this feat of bioengineering....”

Kira stills beside me, and I widen my eyes. Did Henry change his mind? Is he really going to give me the credit he told me I couldn’t possibly have when we struck the deal to let me plant my experimental crop in the west field?

No. No, he isn’t.

“I wouldn’t have been able to put all of my mental efforts toward this project if not for our Agriculture Team, working so hard in the fields,” High Leader Henry continues, erasing all notions of credit from my silly head. “Who would have believed after we crash-landed here that we would transform ourselves from a soft, pampered ragtag group of stranded colonists into a team of industrious workers?”

With an affectionate look, he stretches a hand out to indicate the entire crowd, instead of just me. More applause, until he flaps his hands to quiet his field audience down so he can make the rest of his impromptu speech. “Sure, the Settlement Leaders struck the deal we had to with the Xals. Our people had to make *great sacrifices* to survive in this harsh new world. But I never gave up hope that, one day, we might start to find ways out of that Accord. No, I never gave up hope. And because of you...”

Leader Hank cuts off and swallows hard, as if he’s fighting back tears. “I’m realizing my secret dream of bringing old planet crops to New Terrhan so that maybe, one day, we’ll be

able to pull ourselves from underneath the tyranny of our alien overloads.”

Wow. That last line was pulled nearly word-for-word from the speech I gave him when I presented my corn crop idea. Though, I’ll admit, my version of the pitch didn’t have nearly as much patriotic flair.

Leader Hank’s version draws a loud round of applause. Even my parents, who know the real deal, happily clap along.

But, no, I don’t need credit for taking the first steps toward solving our inability to feed ourselves. I just need my solution to work.

Before our alien overlords come for my sister.

It’s alright, I tell myself as everyone, except Kira, claps for our “brilliant” High Leader.



“THAT WAS SO NOT ALRIGHT!” Kira yells later after we’ve helped Dad lie down on a straw mat. We’re at the town’s well, grabbing the couple of buckets of water our family is allotted per week. “In fact, do you know what that was? Pigeon shit. Total pigeon shit!”

Yes, it is pigeon shit. But...

“A deal’s a deal.” I hand the first redwood bucket of water to Kira. “Keep it down before somebody hears you.”

“Oh, you mean like Leader Hank kept it down when he made an *entire speech* out of taking credit for *your work*?” She rolls her neck like the sassy girlfriend character in an old planet comedy. “And, oh my moons, what was all that stuff about sacrifice? They bartered their daughters’ fertility for scraps that barely keep us alive. And now the older gens are patting themselves on the back, like they’re the noble ones? Notice how the people clapping the loudest for that pigeon-shit speech were all too old to ever have to take part in a Breeding Ceremony with those disgusting—”

“Kira, just stop!” I lug the second bucket of well water up and detach it from the latch. “Seriously, someone might hear you. C’mon, let’s go home.”

I make a big show of leading the way back to our house with my water bucket, but it’s an effort to keep up the strong front. My arms are noodles after a day of digging seed holes in the rust concrete, and my right shoulder burns with the effort it takes to walk with purposeful strides down the main red-dirt road of our settlement.

But I know Kira will follow. She’s as prideful as she is hotheaded and won’t even carry a guiding stick like the colony doctor suggested when her eyesight rapidly deteriorated after puberty. There’s no way she’s asking some other colonist to help her find her way home.

She runs to catch up with me, sloshing water from her bucket. But her dependence on my guidance doesn’t keep her from continuing on with her rant after she loops a hand around my bucket-free arm. “Good! I want them to hear me! I want everyone to know that our High Leader is a piece of pigeon shit. It’s so unfair.”

I sigh. “It is what it is. And I made a deal.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, and you can’t ever go back on your promises,” Kira says in a nasally voice. Like having integrity is something to be mocked.

I don’t answer. Sometimes, that’s the only thing you can do when Kira gets like this.

Our leather moccasins kick up red dust, scraping the dirt road, and thanks to my reserve, I get to walk along with her for a few minutes in blessed silence.

Until we reach the row of two-story Leader houses in the middle of town. Kira squints at the structures as we walk past them. She might not be able to see them as clearly as she used to before her sight deteriorated. But I’m sure she remembers how much larger and statelier they are than the red-mud houses issued to Field Workers. “Zinnia says she’s thinking

about becoming a teacher after we graduate from colony school.”

“I see.” *So this is the real reason why my baby sister is so angry.*

Field Workers kids and Leader kids don’t associate that much outside of colony school, much less become best friends. But Zinnia was born with a deformed leg, and Kira has always treasured and steadfastly defended the only other girl her age on New Terrhan with a disability.

But it sounds like the soft common ground of their unfixable conditions has run into a hard, impenetrable class wall.

“And how do you feel about that?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

“I mean, she’s my best friend. Of course, I’m happy for her.” Kira averts her eyes from the houses back to the red-dirt road. “I just wish...”

She lets the sentence trail off, but I can hear everything she’s not saying.

Zinnia’s one of the Leader’s daughters. That means she might get a teaching assignment when she graduates in June. Kira is a whiz at computer science. Her electrical engineering skills are second to none. But she’s the daughter of Field Workers. So, like me three years ago, she’ll be assigned to the fields full-time as soon as she graduates.

No choice, no consideration.

That’s just the way our society was set up. But I’d be lying if I said that I didn’t struggle with my lot in life after receiving my first full-time Field Work slot. That had been one of the less altruistic reasons I’d thrown myself into my bioengineered corn project after I graduated. It had been imperative to find a way for me to direct my underutilized talents. I couldn’t let my brain rot underneath New Terrhan’s blazing-hot sun.

But I didn’t even have a best friend who happened to be a Leader’s kid to compare myself to back then. My heart pangs for my little sister as we approach our humble mud hut, which is way smaller than her best friend’s house. I can only imagine

the wrestling match going on inside her mind as she transitions from an ace student into a full-time Field Worker.

“I’m fine with the deal I made,” I assure her, just to give her one less thing to be angry about.

“You shouldn’t be.” Kira’s voice takes on that mutinous tone again. “If it were me, I would’ve negotiated for a better job—and getting out of the Breeding Ceremony.”

I did negotiate for a better job, just not for me. Dad needed to be assigned to less strenuous Field Work, and Leader Hank had the power to make sure that happened. But there was no reason to burden Kira with that truth.

And as for the Breeding Ceremony...

I set my bucket down and raised my hand to rub Kira’s shoulder. “Listen, if the High Leader had that kind of power, he’d be using it to get his own daughter out of the ceremony. It’s her turn this year, too, you know.”

From the way she shifts her eyes to the side, I can tell Kira does know that. This isn’t new information. But instead of backing down, she says, “It’s May.”

“I know.”

“That means they’ll be coming any day now.”

“I know,” I answer. Again.

“It’s just so unfair.” Kira’s eyes well with angry tears. “You put all this work into getting us corn. You shouldn’t have to —”

Fear slices through my chest, and I stop her there. “Kira, it’s okay,” I say. Not because it is. But because I’ve just spent three years’ worth of off hours in a lab, figuring out how to genetically engineer corn, so as not to think about that any-day-now Breeding Ceremony.

Kira opens her mouth. I’m sure to tell me all the reasons my compulsory participation in the Breeding Ceremony totally isn’t okay. But before she can, I say, “Listen, Mom’s making a special dessert to celebrate, so let’s do that. Let’s just celebrate tonight.”

Ignoring my aching shoulder, I cup my little sister's cheek and wiped away her tears with my thumbs. "Don't be mad. Don't be sad. Just be happy that I'm on my way to figuring out how to finally get us from underneath the Xals—both literally and figuratively. Hopefully, before they come for you."

Kira tries to keep her angry expression, but then it dissolves with a laugh. "Okay, I do have an impression of Leader Hank that I'm dying to show the fam."

"Yay! I can't wait!" I pick back up my bucket, happy that Kira can't see me grimace with the effort. "Hopefully, it's as excellent as the one you did last week of Dan flirting with that orphan girl."

Kira loves Zinnia but absolutely despises her bestie's older brother, Dan, so that's a tall order.

Kira flares her eyes and taps the side of her fist against her heart. "I assure you. This one's even excellenter."

I laugh as I open the door. "Pretty sure that's not a word. Systematic class discrimination might not be the *only* reason Zinnia's got a better chance of becoming a teacher than you."

Kira shoves me in my shoulder, making it ache even worse. Not to mention sloshing a bunch of the water out of my bucket.

But I laugh as we file into the house.

And I laugh even harder at Kira's impression of Leader Hank acting like he actually knows what he's doing as he spills seeds everywhere but inside the holes we've dug for them.

Then I gasp with delighted surprise when Mom brings out a pan of something she made with a couple of the ears of corn I grew in the lab. A special old planet dish she calls *cornbread*.

"It smells..." I take a huge sniff of the cakey bread, and I'm surprised to find it has an aroma that's somehow both savory and sweet at the same time. "It smells delicious!"

Dad beams up at Mom. "I bet it tastes good, too, if it's anything like I remember from the old planet."

“Ooohhh! Gimme! Gimme!” Kira reaches out to grab one of the slices. But Mom slaps her hand away before she can.

“Let your sister pick first. She’s the one we’re celebrating tonight. Good job creating bionic corn, honey!”

And suddenly, I’m the one fighting back tears, like Kira was earlier.

Because it really is okay.

No, this cornbread isn’t a formal acknowledgment of my hard work from the High Leader. But it’s enough. Kira, my parents, we’re all together, safe inside our little house. And that’s enough for me.

“Thank you,” I whisper as I reach out to grab the smallest slice of cornbread.

Only to freeze when a piercing electronic screech cuts through the night air.

The unmistakable sound of a spaceship’s klaxon. What did Kira call it the last time the Xals came for their annual Breeding Ceremony and Reaping? *Knocking on our door.*

Her words from earlier float through my head as I realize the Xals are back for this year’s Breeding Ceremony with any and every New Terrhan female the age of twenty-one.

And New Terrhan has fourteen months, not twelve, like on the old planet. But here’s the thing. No matter how you count those months, I turned twenty-one right around the new year.

As happy as I was just moments ago, fear fists my heart.

Another electronic screech rends the air.

Then comes an unearthly silence, pulsing with dread.

Then comes my sister’s urgent voice. “Hide, Elle! You’ve got to hide!”

TWO

ELLE

“Stay hidden! Okay, Elle?” Kira spits out the words between ragged breaths as she and our parents pile the straw they tore out of our sleeping mats onto my legs and feet. “And whatever you do, don’t come out. Promise me!”

I blankly stare up at Kira from the prone position she pressed me into after that terrible klaxon let us know our alien overlords had returned. I think I might be in a state of....*Shock?*

Yes, I believe that’s what they called it during the short unit on psychology in our Grade 9 Colonist Survival First Aid course.

Shock...an acute medical condition brought on by such causes as loss of blood, severe burns, infections, allergic reactions, and sudden emotional distress. Symptoms to look out for include cold, pallid skin, irregular breathing, dilated pupils, and lack of response to questions.

I have no idea what my pupils look like at the moment. But I can barely breathe, and I lie there frozen in place with the same thought running around my mind again and again.

We were happy. We were happy. We were happy.

Just a few moments ago, we were laughing at Kira’s impression of High Leader Henry. My parents and I were wiping tears from our eyes because it was that damn funny. Dad’s back was obviously feeling better after some much-needed pre-dinner rest, and he looked so excited to try Mom’s cornbread. It had been such a nice evening.

Just a few moments ago.

We were happy. We were happy. We were happy.

But not anymore.

The straw is almost up to my neck.

Yes, shock. That might explain my disorientation and my sudden inability to protest or even respond to Kira's frantic last-minute tactic to save me from our alien overlords.

"Is this a good idea?" Mama asks Kira. "I know you love your sister and want to protect her. But..."

She trails off, and Dad picks up the point, like the stick we use as a baton in colony relay races. "I heard the Xals do bad things to the girls who run. Real bad things. Sometimes they don't survive."

"We have to try!" Kira insists.

But then, she abruptly stops piling on the straw and stares down at me, her brown eyes intense with panic.

Not because she's having second thoughts, though. The opposite, in fact.

"Promise me, Elle!" she demands again. Her voice has taken on a desperate note. "No matter what happens, you'll stay hidden. Not a word! *Promise.*"

Kira's plan is...not even a plan. More like an insane Hail Mary, and I pride myself on being a person of reason. Like Plato, Da Vinci, Grandin, Winfrey, and all the other great minds we learned about in our old planet history classes.

But Kira's my little sister, and I can't be reasonable when it comes to her. Can't bear to see the fear in her eyes.

"I promise." I squeeze the two words she wants from me past all my misgivings and the lump of dread in my throat.

Kira breathes, her ample chest sagging with relief. Then she immediately returns to covering me with straw. Soon, I'm encased in a darkness so thorough I have to burrow a hole through the dead grain stalks with my pointer finger to see what's happening in the world outside my hastily constructed hiding space.

By the time I'm done making a peephole, Kira and my parents are seated back at the table.

My father made that table himself, using wood from the red forest on the far side of our village, and it tilts at a slight angle due to one of the legs failing to reach all the way to the ground like its three counterparts.

Dad was nearly thirty-six when the colony ship crashed, but this table was the first piece of furniture he'd ever fashioned with his hands.

“We had furniture stores on the old planet,” Dad told me after he finished making a fourth chair so that a growing Kira could sit with us at the table. “Never would have occurred to me to actually create furniture from scratch. Nah, I didn't have a clue about how to make anything by hand before we came here. Truth talk, I had to study colony ship how-to vids for weeks to figure out how to put together that lopsided table of ours. That's how manufactured my world was before the colony ship's algorithm chose this red planet for our crash-landing.”

As always, when he told me stories about the person he'd been before crash-landing on New Terrhan, it felt like he was talking about another man. Some stranger I'd never met. Not the person I knew as my father.

I was only three when a stray asteroid forced the colony ship to divert us to this harsh planet—as opposed to the lush, verdant one we were originally meant to colonize. For me, there was no life before the crash. No old planet filled with conveniences, like cars and agriculture we couldn't both smell and see.

I don't remember a time when my parents didn't labor in the fields. I can't visualize the version of my mother, who used appliances and water that flowed from taps to cook, as opposed to an open fire and water her daughters hauled in from the colony well. And I can barely fathom my father as someone who bought everything at large boxy buildings called *stores*—or, even more fantastically, had it delivered right to his doorstep.

My parents claimed we were incredibly poor before boarding the colony ship. Otherwise, they would never have signed up to relocate to another planet that promised plenty of well-paid, non-agricultural job opportunities. But it sounds like we used to live in complete luxury.

There had even been opportunities for what my parents called the “school smart.” Girls like Kira and me.

On the old planet, we could have gotten something called a scholarship and continued on with our education.

On the old planet, the only thing that came with turning twenty-one was permission to drink alcohol.

On the old planet, there were no Xals. Aliens were a hypothetical—the exclusive domain of entertainments, designed to thrill audiences.

Not anymore.

For girls like Kira and me, starving has always been the only other option to working hard in the fields. And even our labor wasn't enough to keep the colony alive.

“If not for the Accord the Leaders made with the Xals, we all would have died for certain within the year,” the Grade Six Health teacher told us when she pulled us girls aside to formally explain why our participation in the Breeding Ceremony at age twenty-one was mandatory for all colony females, without exception. “The Leaders had no other choice.”

No other choice....

A muffled boom in the distance draws my thoughts back to the present crisis. It's followed by a gigantic hiss of escaping air.

The Xal ship setting down.

My heart pounds, and everyone at the table stiffens.

“All eligible girlsss of twenty-one, report to the animal penssss for your mandatory Breeding Csssereemony,” an amplified voice calls out just a few minutes later. It's speaking New Terrhan, but with a distinct hiss, so it must belong to one of the Xals.

An involuntary shudder runs the length of my spine at the thought of those overgrown lizards putting a baby inside of me.

“Don’t move,” Kira says without turning to face me. “Don’t say anything. No matter what happens. You promised.”

Yes, I did, and I always keep my promises, no matter what. That was probably why Kira insisted I make one before she finished covering me up.

I do my best to stay still but can’t bring myself to undo the hole I’ve made in the straw. I have to see what happens next.

The stamp on my neck can’t be felt or seen by the naked human eye. You’d have to run a UV light over it to even know it’s there.

But it burns like a sear on my skin as I watch my parents and sister at the lopsided dinner table.

They’re all but whistling as they pretend to be a simple family of three, eating their simple family-of-three dinner.

Nothing to see here—whistle whistle whistle—definitely no women of breeding ages on these premises. No, siree! Whistle whistle whistle!

The unsteady trill of fake, desperate laughter rips through the air as Kira pretends that someone has told her the funniest joke she’s ever heard. And they all make a show of folding the now-cold pigeon meat inside the sour, fermented flat-grain cakes Mama made for tonight’s meal. They bring the food to their mouths with shaky hands.

But then the door explodes open, and Mama screams, dropping her food when an enormous Xal comes crashing into our hut, wearing nothing but a loin cloth.

I’m not supposed to curse. Despite being stranded on this desolate rock, my parents still pray to an old planet sky god whose name we’re never supposed to take in vain.

But...

Holy shitstars!

The sight of the Xal through the tiny peephole I've made confirms my fears. Every single one.

All the Xals are big. I don't think I've ever seen one smaller than seven feet tall.

But inside our tiny hut, this one appears especially humongous. He wears his platinum-white hair in a top knot. And his body is covered in heavy muscles and scales the color of... I can barely describe it. Deep red with a jeweled overtone.

Blood ruby... The two-word description for his distinct shade drops into my mind, violent and beautiful at the same time.

The Xal has a long-ridged nose, which he uses to give the air a tremendous, audible sniff as he looks around our mud hut, his eyes intent and searching.

He reminds me of the apex predators from the old planet wildlife documentaries they show on Sunday mornings in the colony ship's theater. He's something wild and savage, a terrible beast that's invaded our home.

And my stomach squeezes with dread when that beast narrows his eyes on Kira. *Oh no. Oh no, oh no, oh no.*

Before I can even think of begging my parent's sky god to keep my sister safe, the Xal closes the space between them. So fast it feels like I'm watching a blur.

Hissing and clicking in that weird language of the Xals, he grabs my sister around the neck and yanks her forward out of her chair for a quick scan of her neck.

Kira! I promised to stay hidden, but my entire body tightens with the primal need to protect her. No, I can't be a woman of reason, not when it comes to my baby sister!

Before I can go back on my word, though, he tosses Kira to the side, sending her sprawling to the floor when he sees she's three years too young for the Breeding Ceremony.

Oh, thank the moons! I let out a quiet-as-possible breath, relief flooding into my chest. The Xal appears so feral that I'm not sure if he will respect the agreement set down between our two

peoples. But apparently, our alien overlords aren't completely without honor.

A new hope rises in my heart. Maybe this plan of Kira's isn't so crazy after all. Maybe he'll leave, and I won't have to—

He abruptly stands up straight, almost like an animal who's caught a scent.

Actually, exactly like an animal who's caught a scent.

My stomach drops when he swivels toward me, his eyes intent on what should look to him like a simple straw pile.

Please, I beg my parent's sky god. *Please don't let him—*

The straw explodes around me, and the Xal's clawed hand wraps around my throat.

The next thing I know, I'm hanging off the end of his arm, his talons cold against the back of my neck.

I'm a person of reason. I am. I really, really am. I could have been a scientist on the old planet. My mom's always saying that. But terror blanks out my mind, threatening to consume me.

The world no longer exists. It's him. And only him. The scary red monster fills up every inch of my eye space.

But then...

Then our eyes meet.

Families without Breeding-Ceremony-eligible daughters are strongly advised to stay in their homes until the ceremony ends. And though I'm not nearly as docile as my parents, I've never had any good reason to defy that rule.

So, I've never really seen a Xal. Not up close. Not like this.

His eyes aren't what I was expecting.

Instead of two evil black orbs, a set of diamond-shaped silver eyes stare back at me, the same color as the two moons above New Terrhan. And they're not filled with malice, but something else. Something that matches the sudden loosening of his vice grip from around my neck.

I try to breathe. I want to breathe. I should be able to breathe now that his hand is no longer choking me. But I can't. Staring into his moon eyes...It's like staring into an abyss, one I could drown in without ever realizing I'd slipped under.

But then he uses his thumb to tilt my head to the side. Easy, like he's tapping on a button.

He exposes the stamp on my neck. Yes, humans need a UV light to see the date written there. But we learned during that Grade Six lesson that Xals do not.

He reads my neck.

Then his gaze flattens with intent, and he bares his teeth in a way that I would almost describe as a smile.

I stare back at him, my heart thundering above a flock of pigeons flapping their wings inside my stomach. But the feeling isn't quite the terror I felt before when he crashed through the door.

No, it's not that...

It's something else, heated and swirling as I continue to dry drown in the humongous Xal's diamond-moons stare.

But then, a flash of movement catches my eye.

My sister.

My hotheaded sister has the sharp piece of metal we use to cut things around the house in her right hand, and her myopic gaze is narrowed on the red blur dangling me in the air.

"Kira, no!" I scream.

But it's too late. My baby sister plunges the metal blade into the Xal's shoulder.

And all hell breaks loose.

THREE

L'GON

One Lunar Cycle Earlier

“I HAVE UNFORTUNATE NEWS, MY SON.”

I had just finished touching my talons to both hearts, the start of a traditional greeting. But my father's announcement caused me to pause in the middle of concluding the deferential salutation with a press of my entire palm to my ridges.

“Unfortunate news?” I repeated, frowning.

When my younger sister had informed me upon my arrival at our family home that my father wanted to see me in his office. I had assumed he wished to congratulate me for surviving my first rotation in the Generations War.

The somber set of his ridges told me I was mistaken. Also, his next words, delivered without any further preamble: “I have arranged for you to participate in this solar's Breeding Ceremony at the end of your leave.”

I clapped my nose ridges up, then down, then back up again before finally taking a seat in the k'vani hide chair in front of his steel desk.

Why would my father, one of the few Council Members who had voted nay on the New Terrhan Accord, suddenly wish for his only son to take part in a Breeding Ceremony he'd argued against eighteen solars ago?

“Diplomacy,” my father explained from behind his desk, as if I’d asked the question out loud. “If you do not take part in at least one ceremony, it will appear that our line does not support our Kel. And I have received an unexpected opportunity.”

Father smoothed his hand over his diplomatic robes, careful not to tear the fine silk with his talons. “An opportunity that requires the support of the most powerful male in Xalthuria, if I wish to seize it.”

An opportunity. I should have guessed.

Even after inheriting his seat on the Council Board, my father prioritized being a merchant above everything else. I could only assume this Breeding Ceremony order had something to do with getting paid more for the many tons of dried fruits and seeds we provided to that wretched red planet every solar.

If that was the case, signing me up for the Breeding Ceremony might be a valid negotiation sweetener.

Still, I had to ask my father, “Is my hybrid cousin’s existence not enough to show the Louxos Line’s support of our Kel? Also, my willing participation in the Warrior Program?”

I could have remained on Xalthuria as a doctor, as many of my colleagues from the Elite did after completing their medical training. Instead, I had undergone the genetic modifications necessary to take part in our Warrior Program as a medic.

I even served on the same ship as our Tel, the Kel’s son, and the future Leader of Xalthuria.

“Have I not already done everything necessary to ensure our family’s good standing in Xalthurian society?” I asked my father, trying but failing to keep an irritated hiss from escaping at the end of the question.

I had no wish to address my father in a disrespectful manner. But...

“The thought of actually breeding with one of those contemptible aliens we found unlawfully occupying the planet we used as a mining outpost for hiddite—*essh!*” My stomach turned in my chest. “You cannot ask this of me.”

My father placed his hands on the steel desk's top and braced his long, thin arms to come to a full stand. "This is not a request, my son. It is a command. You must participate in the Breeding Ceremony."

I stared at him from my seat. His scaled skin was the same red-jewel tone as mine, and he stood almost as tall as me. We even shared the same luminous gray eye color.

But our outward similarities ended there. He had been born toward the middle of our Generations War with the Kaidorians and decades before the Extinction Virus that wiped out many of our females and rendered the rest unable to reproduce.

He'd stood much taller than my Xalthurian mother had before the Extinction Virus took her life, but he was only slightly wider than my slender Xalthurian sister.

He looked the way I would have if not for the genetic reprogramming I had undergone to serve in the Xalthurian military.

I'd been happy to do that. Happy to serve my planet at my father's bequest.

But breeding a hu'man? I had to stand myself to demand, "What opportunity would possibly warrant introducing another hybrid into our family line?"

My father flapped back his ridges to answer, "The kind of opportunity that might finally bring this Generations War to an end."

"An end?" My own ridges clapped back with shock.

Of all the answers I had been expecting, a possible end to the war that had been raging for three generations had not been one of them.

"Yes, an end." Unlike me, my father managed to keep his nose ridges neutral as he explained, "If I can convince our Kel to accept a proposal brought to me by a Kaidorian merchant on their emperor's behalf, this war could be over within the solar—in a few more turns of the moon. But unfortunately, your uncle's increasingly vociferous protests against the New Terrhan Accord have erased any goodwill of him having

agreed to participate in the first Breeding Ceremony in order to heir. A new gesture of goodwill must be made.”

His nose remained neutral, but his words took on a sorrowful hiss as he regarded me across the desk. “That is why I cannot make this mission I am sending you on a request. But after you do this for me—for our entire race—you will be rewarded. You may have your grandfather’s East House as your own residence, along with a contingent of servants. And as soon as the war ends, I will also cede my Council Seat to you. You will represent the Louxos Line upon your return to Xalthuria, and I will never command such a thing of you again.”

My own residence and a Council Seat! The Council Seat alone would make me the official head of our family line. And after so many solars of warfare, the prospect of settling down with a Xalthurian female of worth in the East House piqued my interest.

Would my father truly be willing to cede that much power to me?

As the son of a merchant, I knew it was imperative to clarify our deal’s terms. “If I complete this Breeding Ceremony mission, do you promise me the East House and the Council Seat, no matter the outcome? Xalling or no?”

Without hesitation, my father touched his hand to his nose ridge, flattening his palm to show the utmost deference. “You have my vow, if I have yours, that you will participate in the Breeding Ceremony and lie with at least one hu’man female.”

Lie with a hu’man female? The thought of it made me regret breaking my fast before our military ship landed on Xalthuria, as my stomach filled with nausea.

But what other reply could I give?

An end to the war. The war that had raged since my grandfather’s youth and taken so many of our males before unleashing the Extinction Virus, which cut my mother’s life tragically short and rendered my sister, along with every other surviving Xalthurian female, unable to procreate.

Of course, I said yes.

And this was why, later that day, I could be found sitting underneath a buli tree in the Louxos family orchard's picnic meadow, angrily swiping through holopages worth of research.

“*Essh*, this is what you decided to do instead of visiting a pleasure station with your shipmates?” a voice asked above me.

I looked up to find N'Thn, the only son of our Prime Minister. He was also a member of the Xalthurian Elite and had become my best friend after we were assigned to the same ship under his cousin, Xar T'Kan.

“I have never been one for pleasure stations,” I replied with an annoyed hiss before returning my gaze to the screen.

“I am aware, and this is why I came to find you.” N'Thn let out an amused hiss in direct opposition to my annoyed one. “My father has informed me that I am not allowed to visit any pleasure stations during my leave. He says I must save myself for the Breeding Ceremony. So, I thought to myself, who else will not be having any fun tonight?”

I refused to answer his teasing question with so much as a hiss this time. But unfortunately, my lack of response did not deter him from further questions.

“Whatever are you looking at so fervently?” N'Thn dropped down next to me in the black grass and craned his neck to peek at the words on my floating holoscreen.

“You are researching the hu'mans?” He let out a series of surprised clicks. “Does this mean you get to represent your family line in this solar's Breeding Ceremony, too?”

I gritted my nose ridges. “Get to is not how I would term my participation.”

“Why not?” N'Thn asked with an infuriatingly jovial click. “I hear hu'man females feel better on your diijo than anything you could imagine. *Sweet hot*—that is how other warriors who have participated in the ceremonies before us refer to their breeding slits. They say the sensations are better than any you could buy for a time in the pleasure stations.”

“Truly, you believe these rumors?” I shook my head at my friend.

He was a great warrior. I owed him congratulations as he had recently been named Roq, second in command, just below T’Kan. This was a well-deserved promotion for a warrior with his skill and kill count.

However, his claims showed me he was quite naive when it came to the race we had been doomed to breed. I indicated the report on the holoscreen that he had espied but apparently not bothered to actually read.

“According to this actual data, these hu’mans are the opposite of us. A craven species, completely devoid of merit or integrity. In fact, there are many accounts of our males having to hunt their females down like animals in order to make them honor their commitment to the Accord between our races.”

N’Thn grinned, his ridges flapping with glee. “In truth, the promise of a good hunt only makes me more excited to participate in this solar’s ceremony. L’Gon, I have an idea!”

He clapped his ridges back and grabbed onto my arm. “You should come with me and T’Kan to his cabin on the cold side of the planet next week. It will be good practice for the ceremony.”

I took N’Thn up on his offer. Not because I wished to practice, but because his cousin T’Kan was our commanding officer, a member of the powerful Neixal Line, and our Tel’s closest friend.

My father had not raised me to turn down invitations to spend time with influential members of Xalthurian society.

Also, the hunting of real animals distracted me from the distasteful mission I would have to undertake at my father’s behest.



THE NIGHT of the Breeding Ceremony

We land on the planet the hu'mans have dubbed New Terrhan, and the honorable Xalthurians follow the Breeding Ceremony protocol exactly as stated in the Accord.

An announcement goes out in the hu'man language that we have landed as Xar T'Kan marshals a culling force to collect all of the male progeny from last year's ceremony from their hu'man birth vessels. And Roq N'Thn leads us to an animal pen made out of wood, of all things. There we wait for the arrival of...

Significantly fewer females than the expected seventy-two that are stated to be twenty-one solars of age on the Breeding Ceremony manifest.

"Even accounting for unexpected death, fifty is too low," Br'In—a purple warrior, who failed to seed a male at last solar's breeding ceremony—points out with a confused click.

Meanwhile, the hu'man males and non-eligible females hover around the large containers of food supplies that have been offloaded from the ship. We provide them with plenty of provisions every solar, yet they lick their lips and cry out. A few of them even lunge desperately at the boxes.

If not for the line of hu'man males standing between the waiting crowd and the boxes, I have no doubt they would probably swarm the new supplies like insects upon plants that have not been genetically altered to repel parasites.

None of the craven hu'mans appear to care that many of their colony's breeding-age females have failed to report to fulfill their part of the Accord.

I click in disgust as Roq N'Thn raises a fist in the air to declare, "Let the hunt begin!"

However, I am not surprised that quite a few of the eligible females of breeding age attempt to hide and even fight their agreed-upon duty to take part in the Breeding Ceremony.

Unlike Xalthurians, hu'mans lack moral values, the reports I had read prior to this explained. Their females were raised without honor or any sense of duty whatsoever, and because of

this inferiority in their upbringing, they thought nothing of reneging on their contracts.

Disgusting.

In truth, I only volunteered for the force to round up the rest of the stray Breeding Ceremony females to delay my necessary mating with them.

And I am not surprised again when I find one sniveling inside a pile of husks from the grain crops Xalthurians gifted her pathetic race.

But I am surprised by my reaction to her when I pull her up by her neck.

I have spent my leave studying much about this race, but this is the first hu'man I have taken time to observe live and up close.

She wears a crude dress—not pretty like the long, silken sheaths favored by Xalthurian females. But even underneath the shapeless red shift, I can see that she is small and round in many places as opposed to tall and narrowly built. Her skin is mud brown, not jeweled toned like the fortunate female I will marry when the Generations War is over.

And yet...

When I look into her round eyes, everything inside of me stills. The world ceases turning, as if the small red planet has given up spinning on its axis.

An impossible stoppage of time and life itself. And then...my diijo gives instant rise.

I stare at the female hanging at the end of my arm. And I find myself...the only word I can think of to describe the sensation is *lost*. Lost in the hu'man female's gaze.

Her eyes are two shining jewels on either side of her wide, unridged nose. Soft brown pools that make me struggle to make words or sense for how long?

Too long. I suddenly realize that when my nose ridges clap down to expel the breath I was unaware I had been holding.

Remembering myself, remembering my duty, I check her neck, even though I already know the answer. If she were not of age, she would not have hidden.

So no, I am not surprised a third time when I find the evidence of her duplicity stamped clearly upon her neck.

However, I am not ready for the way the ridged flesh below my waist throbs underneath the ceremonial cloth. Pulsing with the realization that she is mine to take.

And once again, I find myself lost in the brown pools of her eyes.

Yes, her skin is the color of mud, but it does not feel like mud to the touch. Not at all. The flesh underneath the pads of my fingers is supple, almost silken, like the expensive fabrics used to fashion my robes back home. Just a bit of pressure from my talon, and no doubt, I could rend it.

A poor design feature of her race, for certain. It leaves her ridiculously vulnerable. No wonder her people cannot properly fend for themselves as we can.

I should be repulsed. My hearts should be filling with disgust.

However, they do not fill with disgust.

Beautiful.

Despite her rudely fashioned shift and complete lack of honor, the word floats into my conscience.

She is ugly, yet she is not. She cannot be beautiful, yet she somehow is.

I find it impossible to tear my gaze away from her fascinating features. Duty is the furthest thing from my mind as we stare at each other, my hearts pulsing faster than the engines of our warships.

She suddenly looks away, and I give her eyes helpless chase, wanting them back. Wanting to stare into them forever.

What is this? How is it even possible to feel such sensations for such a contemptible animal? *What has come over m—*

“Keerahnooo!” she yells out in that inefficient throatbox language the hu’mans use.

A small, but surprising, pain flashes across my shoulder, causing me to drop the hu’man female whose brown gaze had held me completely in thrall.

Stabbed. I have been stabbed.

A new comprehension dawns. I have fallen victim to one of the despicable acts of violence this dishonorable species is known for throughout its own reported history.

The hu’man female was not mesmerized by me as I was mesmerized by her. She was entrancing me, distracting me so that her family member could give attack.

I let out a great roar. Not for the prick of pain from the piece of metal I pull out of my back.

No, I am enraged with my hu’man, and even more with myself for falling for her duplicitous trick.

I turn to confront the attacker—the young female whose neck I checked when I first charged into this squalid red house. I can only assume, given her age, that she is my female’s sister.

But unlike the female she helped get away, this sister is ugly, with an overly large chest, squinting eyes, and a vile face sneering in anger.

She also has her hand wrapped around a shard of red clay. The broken plate at her feet lets me know how she secured another rude weapon in the time it took me to turn around.

The older hu’mans are shouting something at her, their eyes rounded wide with fear. But the small female glares up at me, her own eyes narrowed in defiance.

What a foolish little hu’man.

“Perhaps you did not read over the Accord, as I did,” I hiss at her. “Impeding a Xalthurian from carrying out his Breeding Ceremony duties is a Level 1 offense with a sentence of death.”

I am aware she lacks the cognitive function to understand our superior language. But unlike her, I am a person of honor.

Thus, I feel compelled to explain to her exactly why she is about to die before I snap her fragile neck.

This is a quicker death than she deserves for her actions, but I am eager to hunt down the duplicitous hu'man she helped escape from my grip.

In answer to my pronouncement, the reckless sister only raises her shard of clay higher in the air, an unmistakable invitation to engage her in a fight she will surely lose.

Essh. I reach forward to end this silly standoff.

“Nohnohnoh! Pleezdohnthurther! Pleez!”

The hu'man I assumed had run away suddenly appears in front of me, blocking my view of her accomplice.

“Dohnthurther! Dohnt!” She waves her arms and yells out words I cannot comprehend in her throatbox language. “Sheewaztriingtooprohtectmee! Dohntudahrtuhchher!”

My hu'man now wears the same defiant look as her sister, and she balls her talon-less little hands into fists, as if she will actually engage in physical combat with me.

“Do you not understand?” I crook my head at her, my ridges rippling with a most unexpected emotion. Amusement.

I place a talon under her delicate jaw and prick the soft flesh underneath just enough to make her raise her round brown eyes to look at me.

But this time, I hold myself steady. I refuse to fall into the pools of her beautiful gaze as I inform her, “I am your overlord. You cannot command me. I command you. And this eve, you are mine. Mine to take. Mine to breed. Mine to do with whatever I please.”

No, she does not comprehend me, but the way her gaze widens tells me she understands every word.

I can and will kill her sister for this Level 1 offense. And then I will drag my hu'man back to the Xalthurian ship this eve to

take her. Nothing she says or does can stop me.

Yet, she does not give up.

She uncurls her fists, and her entire demeanor changes. Instead of attempting to fight me, she clasps her hands in obvious supplication.

“Illgohwitu. Okay? Kwietlee!” She yells out in her throatbox language words I cannot comprehend. “Illgohwitu. Illfuku. Wahteveruwahnt. Okay? Jusspleezdohnthurtherr! Pleez!”

To my shock, she lowers to her knees, clasping her hands above her head. “Illdoonytheeng. Pleez!”

Pleez.

I do not know this word or any of the others she spouted from her throat. Yet I understand what she is offering me.

Submission.

Full submission in exchange for her sister’s life.

I look from my supplicant to the metal I pulled out of my back and tossed upon the floor. It is only a short distance away from her hand. If she wished to, she could attempt to attack me again.

But she does not move to grab the metal.

She raises her brown gaze to mine and stares up at me with wet eyes.

Waiting.

Waiting for my answer.

FOUR

L'GON

My answer is not voiced.

Without another look in the dishonorable sibling's direction, I grab my hu'man by the arm and drag her out of the tiny red house.

I cannot begin to comprehend my completely unmerited mercy and agreement to her terms. Much less explain my actions to her. So, I settle for hauling my hu'man without care through the red dirt toward the ship.

"You found one!" N'Thn cheers with an approving click when he sees me.

He is emerging from one of the squalid mud houses empty-handed. "You are doing better at this hunt than me."

Instead of answering him, I grumble at the hu'man, whose feet kick up red dust as she struggles to keep up with me. "I should whip you for not presenting yourself properly in the gathering place."

An empty threat. Punishments are reserved for the hu'mans who run, not for the ones who merely hide...and valiantly defend their siblings...before offering their submission with impossibly wide, pleading eyes.

Instead of sickening me, the memory of her kneeled before my diijo makes the ridged flesh tenting my loin cloth throb with a hunger so raw, it borders on pain.

Truly, this hu'man is a nuisance, just as the literature warned.

I throw her over my shoulder. To make certain she does not go back on her word and attempt to escape, I assure myself, not because I want to get her back to the ship that much faster.

That cannot be the case after the unnecessary trouble she has put me through to ensure she honors the Accord.

Yet, by the time we make it to the circular cargo bay, which has been redesignated for the Breeding Ceremony, I am rushing to find an empty space for our necessary coupling. Urgency burns like a fire beneath my waist.

I barely note the many other Xalthurians mating with the less scurrilous hu'man females, who reported to the pens as they were commanded. Nor do I take the time to consider that one of those dutiful females should be my choice. If I have to suffer a hybrid heir, I would rather him be docile, and docile is not the word I would use to describe the hu'man slung over my shoulder.

Yet, I do not pause to trade her for another.

I cannot think that clearly.

A strange mental affliction has overtaken me, and my diijo is hard as Xalthurian steel. It truly feels as if I will explode if I do not mate with this female, and this female alone.

I set her on her feet and rip off her rough dress, revealing a body riddled with unnecessary curves at her hips and chest.

Luscious.

Why does this word float into my mind as I behold her?

My diijo is not just hard at this point. It leaks seed, a carnivorous beast between my legs, mouth watering for its prey.

And it does not matter that she cannot understand my language any more than I can understand hers.

“You are the one I will claim,” I inform my naked conquest, tearing the remains of her dress from her body. “You are mine, and I will mate you now.”

With a furious click, I forcibly turn her away from me and bend her over to receive my diijo. Her hand shoots out to brace against the wall after I kick her legs apart, but fragile balance appears to be yet another failing of the hu'man race.

I catch her around her flared waist to prevent her fall.

*Stars in the sky....*I inhale sharply at the feel of her smooth brown skin. It makes me wonder again about this species' designer. Why would that being make this female in such a manner? So fragile, yet unbearably pleasant to the touch?

The sight of that silken brown skin stretched over her shockingly round buttocks makes my leaking diijo bounce with need.

I must have her! I must have her now!

I hitch her hips to my ridged length with the intention of burying myself inside her breeding hole.

Her body shakes in a strange way. And though I did not end her sibling's life, that strange water that hu'mans produce trails in two long rivulets over her cheeks.

"Be still! I will have you, female!" I reach around to grasp her by the neck and squeeze just enough to briefly cut off her air supply. This is my warning to her. She will not stop me from completing my duty.

But she continues to shake. To tremble, like one of the newborn fauns at our family stables. And an acrid smell gives rise from her scale-less pores.

Is she...?

Resisting is not the correct term. She is not taking any physical action against me. Not yelling out in her throatbox language as her parents did when they pleaded with her sibling.

Scared, I realize, sniffing at the tender skin. She is scared.

Of me. Of our necessary copulation.

The hu'mans and the Xalthurians have an Accord. I am fully within my rights.

There is no reason for me to care about her fear.

And yet...

Instead of plunging into her, I stroke her silken skin as I would the pelt of a newborn faun.

“Do not be scared,” I click in her ear with a soothing hiss. With my hand wrapped around her neck to keep her still, I glide my other hand up and down her impossibly soft torso and over the mounds on her chest. “We must abide by the Accord, but I have no desire to hurt you. You are mine. And I will not hurt you.”

Like the newborn faun, she does not understand my language. But I stroke her and whisper the words over and over until her trembling subsides.

She makes a sound low in her throat and unexpectedly pushes her round bottom back. I am so surprised by her action that my hand slips from her waist.

I draw in a sharp breath when my fingers make contact with the flesh between her legs.

She is wet down there! The heat emitting from her breeding slit is like nothing I have ever experienced before.

Completely mesmerized by the wet, hot feel of her, I rub between her legs with the pads of my fingers.

Essh! The more I rub, the damper she becomes.

The *louder* she becomes. Throaty moans replace the silent tears from before, and then suddenly, she cries out, her entire body quaking underneath my hands.

A new smell emits from her. Not animal fear like before, but something dark and smoky.

Curiosity overwhelms me, and I bring my fingers covered with her wetness to my nostrils.

The smell...My perfect vision blurs with a desire, unlike anything I have ever felt before.

I bring my hand down to my mouth. How can I resist the urge to taste the wet on my fingers...taste *her*?

Stars in the sky... Her essence explodes on my tongue, more intoxicating than any wine served on Xalthuria. Soon, the substance is gone in a flash of mindless greed.

I almost lower my hand back down to her breeding slit—wanting, needing to taste her again. But then the word “duty” appears in my head, reminding me of why I am here.

What is wrong with me? Have I gone as mad as the rutting warriors who actually seem eager to participate in this repugnant ceremony?

Remembering who I am and who she is, I draw back my hand and grip my diijo, positioning it against her slit.

Trying to ignore that intoxicating scent, I thrust into her—only to have my vision blur again.

Her breeding slit...it is so wet...so hot. Yet it grips me so tightly I nearly lose my seed and all sense of myself upon entry.

I tighten my hold on her throat in a bid for self-control and begin to move my diijo in and out of her—slowly at first, in an attempt to calm the madness roiling within me.

For a few moments, that works. I set my gaze to the wall above her head and concentrate on my duty.

That is all this is, I remind myself. Duty.

But then she whimpers, and one hand finds my thigh.

One sound from the little hu'man. One touch of her clawless hand. That is all it takes.

I become a primal beast, rutting inside of her.

I cannot stop myself. Cannot get enough.

My body stiffens and begins to shake as my seed readies to shoot.

This is the purpose of the ceremony, my one and only reason for visiting this miserable planet.

But I find myself sorrowful that it will soon be over. Being inside of her is like nothing else I have experienced in my

solars of existence, and I want to stay. I want more...more!

But there is no holding back. An explosion like the volcanos on the D'manthian Islands erupts within me.

Before I am ready, I dig the pads of my fingers into her hips and release with a mighty hiss, shooting my seed so deep...so deep inside of her that I have no doubt in those blinding moments I am fathering an heir within her womb.

Her body slumps against the wall, but I hold her to me, my semi-erect diijo still inside of her.

For several moments, there is only bliss.

I do not care that she is from a different, much lower species. I only know the feelings she has produced inside of me, and I revel in the strange pleasure and contentment that comes with holding her soft body in my arms.

“My turn!”

I look up from my soft, dark beauty to see an orange warrior approaching. His diijo stands erect and eager for his opportunity to mate with her.

“My turn!” he clicks at me again, his purple eyes bright with lust as he looks upon my hu'man.

The blissful feeling disappears in an instant.

My mind blanks as I look upon the orange warrior who wishes to take my hu'man from me.

And then...

PART 2

CEREMONIAL MIND ROT

FIVE

L'GON

And then...

“He is waking up,” a voice says somewhere above me.
“Should I disc him again?”

“No, wait to see how he responds,” another voice answers.
“Perhaps he is past the madness and will not...”

I open my eyes to sunlight, warm and nearly as soft as the brown of my hu'man's gaze.

Xalthuria....I am back on my home planet. But not upright, and unable to move anything below my neck.

I lift my head to find my red body still dressed in the ceremonial cloth and strapped to a medical anti-gravity backboard, guided by my warship mate Br'In and his orange husband. S'Ru, I believe he is called. He was one of the doctors I underwent medical training with, but while I joined the Warrior Program, he took an assignment with the Ministry of Health that allowed him to avoid his compulsory service.

What has come to pass here?

I have oft commanded my team to use such floating boards to ferry unconscious or grievously wounded soldiers from the field of battle so that we might attend to their wounds. But I have never traveled upon one myself. Nor would I have used the restraints meant to keep patients from hurting themselves on someone who was passed out.

Yet, the sun creates a sparkling effect upon the three golden immobilization bands that have been drawn across my chest,

hips, and legs, along with the two cuffs securing my wrist. All ten of the right cuff's indicator lights are lit up, letting me know they have been set to use the utmost force to keep me pinned to the backboard.

What is the meaning of this?

“Why...what...?” My throat feels like I have drunk large measures of sand from the beach in front of East House. I work my saliva glands to ask Br’In and his mate, “Why am I here? Why have you bound me? Am I hurt?”

Br’In and S’Ru exchange looks over my unnecessarily restrained body.

“Not hurt, exactly,” S’Ru answers for the both of them. “Your father thought it best if we...”

The rest of his explanation fades away as memories flash through my head.

Father.

Duty.

Brown eyes.

Supplication!

The Breeding Ceremony.

The orange warrior...

My hu’man!

“Where is she?” I demand of Br’In. Then, an uglier thought occurs to me. One that makes me strain against the bands holding me down. “Did you attempt to mate her, too?”

“With what opportunity?” Br’In flaps back his ridges and lets out an insulted click. “I had to restrain you after you nearly killed Mg’In when he tried to take his turn after you with the hu’man female you brought back to the ship. I barely had time to copulate with one female before that, much less yours.”

Yes, yes, I remember now. I thrash against the restraints as more memories flood my mind. The feel of her sweet hot.

Mg'Irn...the warrior who tried to take her from me even though she is mine. *MINE!*

"Where is she?" I demand again. "Take me back to New Terrhan! I must find her. Have her again!"

The ravenous hunger I felt before spilling my seed inside her returns tenfold. If she has been taken by others, I must reclaim her.

"She belongs to me!" I tell Br'In with several enraged clicks.

"*Essh!* His father will have me dismissed from my assignment if I let others see him like this." S'Ru directs a fearful click at his mate. "We must disc him again."

"No! No! Take me to her!" I struggle with all my might against the immobilization bands. But I can do nothing to escape the prick at the side of my neck. "I must be with her. I must *bewithher*—"

My words turn into a slurred hiss of air as darkness encases me once again.

And then...

The violent glare of artificial light greets me when I crack open my eyelids next, and I bring up my hand to shield my orbs from their bright sting.

"You have wakened finally," a voice says to the side of me. "I thought perhaps the shame you have brought down upon our family name might cause you to sleep forever."

Father?

Gritting my teeth against the light, I drop my hand—only to feel even more confused when I find myself in some manner of medical room. I am sitting upon the same kind of table we use to perform examinations and surgeries on the warship. And, yes, it was my father who spoke.

He is looking down at me, his ridges vibrating. With worry or reproach? Perhaps both.

My head throbs with pain. And questions. Then, my medical training takes over.

“Am I hurt?” I thrust up into a seated position, patting my body down to find the injury. “Why have you brought me to this place?”

“Be at ease!” my father says with a sharp click. “You are fine.”

“Yes. Perfectly healthy in the physical sense. No need to worry about that.” Another male steps into my eyeline, one I immediately recognize as the Health Minister who pinned my credential on my robes during the ceremony to celebrate my ascension from a medical trainee to a doctor.

He is decades older than my father, and his hair is the dull white that comes with age, as opposed to the shining silver born of genetics like mine and our Tel’s.

The elderly male greets me with a kindly click before explaining, “After the incident, your father quite wisely had you escorted to my private examination room so that I might attend to you myself.”

I stop my frantic search for the wound and look from him to my sire. Their calm states tell me that the Health Minister’s assurances are true.

I am back on Xalthuria after having been rendered unconscious somehow. Yet, I have no memory of how I had come to be this way.

A sudden image enters my mind. The dark hu’man beauty with the bright brown eyes slightly lighter than her skin. She had riotous curls upon her hair, chaotic but somehow inviting. And though I was loathe to admit it, I found the look of her quite pleasing. But then, I was somehow attacked by...by...

I reach for the memory, but...nothing.

There is only a faint ache behind my ribs, where my hearts are located. I rub at them as I ask, “Did I not complete my duty, then? Did I fail to take part in the Breeding Ceremony?”

My father’s ridges shoot up. “You truly do not remember?”

I can only stare at him, my mind a blank past the moment I was stabbed.

“Of course, he does not remember.” The Health Minister answers my father in my stead. “I warned you that the millo serum could take up to a full day cycle of his memory.”

Millo? That serum was only issued to warriors who had been psychologically compromised on the battlefield.

I only ever administered it when I feared a warrior’s mind might not mend if we did not effectively blank out everything they had witnessed in the day cycle before arriving in our medical bay. Usually, these special cases involved either the deaths of close friends or the torturous cutting off of limbs that could not be grown back—thanks to a spiteful, poisonous wound-grafting technique the Kaidorians used on their enemies.

But I am fully intact, with no signs of torture I can see. *Why would such a strong drug be used on me?*

Again, I reach for the clarity I seek. But all I can remember is the hu’man. Her brown eyes. The flash of pain.

And then...nothing.

“What happened?” I ask the Health Minister. “Why did you make me forget what took place over the last day cycle?”

The Health Minister opens his mouth. Then he stops and looks at my powerful father, obviously seeking permission to answer my question.

Irritation spikes in my chest, but I am not surprised.

There is a reason my father ordered me to enter the medical field when I came of age to join the workforce. Our thriving business and two seats on the Council Board were not enough. He wanted branches of the Louxos Line in every area of government.

And his bid for influence had worked. Of course, the Health Minister did not wish to cross one of the most powerful Council Members in the kingdom.

My father draws himself up to his full height and looks much like a red version of our Kel when he nods his assent to the Health Minister. “Tell him.”

“According to your warship mate Br’In, you were taken over by some manner of mating madness,” the Health Minister explains to me with a sympathetic click. “He says that when one of your Breeding Ceremony counterparts wished to take his turn with the sole hu’man female you mated, you attacked him.”

What? The logical side of my brain sputters, unable to compute this information.

Could it be true that I was overtaken by some kind of mating frenzy? For that weak and dishonorable female I found cowering from her duty underneath a pile of straw? Could it be true that my rigid self-discipline was tested by a mere hu’man, and I crumbled?

Disgust washes over me, even as the memories of what happened refuse to emerge from behind the wall of fog.

“That cannot be. I would never...” I cannot even finish the denial, can barely fathom what he is telling me I did. “Copulating with an inferior hu’man female was simply a matter of duty to me. Surely, I did not take the violent actions Br’In says I did.”

The Health Minister bows his head—in deference or to avoid my eyes, I cannot tell.

However, my father crosses his arms across his narrow chest and asks, “Are you calling your comrade Br’In a liar?”

Contrition rolls back my ridges. I have always respected Br’In, who serves on the piloting team for our warship. He might not be an Elite member of Xalthurian society, but he possesses great skill and integrity.

“I would not accuse an honorable warrior of duplicity,” I answer with a shake of my head. “But I find it extremely hard to believe that any sort of mating madness would take hold of me. Why should I wish to mate an inferior savage who does not have the honor to uphold her pledge?”

My father emits a disbelieving click. “You broke several bone plates in the waiting warrior’s face and every ridge in his nose. It took Br’In and three others to pull you off of him. It was

necessary to disc you two times. Once to keep you from inflicting further harm upon your comrades, and again when you woke up during transport to this office.”

So that is why it feels like a faun kicked me in the head. I was forcibly sedated—twice!—before the millo was even administered.

No wonder my father resorted to such a drug. I grip my head and attempt to shake away the fog still hovering in my mind.

But there is nothing.

Nothing but...

The dark beauty.

Her brown pool eyes.

The rise of my diijo.

A sharp stab of pain...

Then nothing. Nothing but the ache in my hearts that refuses to wear away, no matter how much I rub.

“There is no shame in your actions.” The Health Minister lays a hand on my shoulder. “You are not our first case of Breeding Ceremony madness, just the most advanced. We even have a name for it. Ceremonial Mind Rot.”

He lets out a couple of amused clicks, as if he is telling me a funny story we should all be laughing over. “You are lucky that your warship mate was there to attend to you and knew what to do, thanks to his own mate, who has seen many such cases of Ceremonial Mind Rot. We have several instances of Breeding Ceremony participants not admitting their sufferance until it was too late, and we could do nothing to alleviate their mental pain. Can you believe that the Mind Rot has so addled the brains of some males that they have left their Xalthurian wives and petitioned to immigrate to New Terrhan?”

The Health Minister shakes his head. “Trust me when I tell you, you are among the luckiest victims of Ceremonial Mind Rot. We were able to administer millo before your case advanced. There is no reason to harbor shame now that we have healed you.”

The luckiest victim...

“You are wrong. There is every reason to feel shame,” I inform the Health Minister while looking upon my father.

I say aloud what he most certainly is thinking after having been forced to use his influence to cover up my dishonorable actions. “I behaved in a way unbecoming of my station. These hu’mans—particularly that brown-eyed female—should have been nothing more than vessels to continue our bloodlines.”

I swing my sorrowful gaze from my father back to the Health Minister and finally cease rubbing at my aching hearts. “My rotation in our great military will soon come to an end, I believe.”

I keep my gaze on the Minister of Health. But it feels as if I am talking—*apologizing*—directly to my father when I pronounce, “After my service is done, I will take a position in your office—specifically as head of the team investigating our females’ lack of fertility. After the war, I will do everything in my power to ensure that no male has to lie with one of those disgusting creatures again to procreate. Ceremonial Mind Rot will become a thing of the past.”

“Oh, we do need more research help in that department, but this is a most unexpected offer indeed!” the Health Minister exclaims, his ridges raising in shock. “Especially so soon after your first Breeding Ceremony.”

The much older male glances from me to my father, who regards me for a long, solemn moment before making his own pronouncement. “My son’s first Breeding Ceremony and his last.”

He then turns his gaze directly to me. “You have done your duty. After this war is done, I will cede my seat on the Council to you, and you will lead our family into a glorious new day.”

The Health Minister nods along with my father’s words. “Your son is forward-thinking and wishes to save our race from being overrun by a bunch of hybrids. That is a commendable goal.”

He gives my father, then me, a deferential nod. “I only hope your desire to cure our females of their infertility comes to fruition. Alas, we are no closer to finding a solution than we were when the Extinction Virus first took away their ability to procreate.”

Good, the Health Minister is a purist, like myself. I am grateful we are of the same mind. But I do not like his defeatist attitude.

“I will succeed where others have not,” I assure him. “And then I will marry an appropriate Xalthurian female, who will bear me a full-blood male to carry on our family line.”

My father claps me on the shoulder, his ridges raised in approval. “Yes, my son. You will save the Line of Louxos after this war is done.”

However, the Health Minister cast his eyes to the side, letting me know has his doubts about my ability to solve this two-decade-long problem.

No matter. I do not need him to have faith in me.

I know I cannot afford to fail. For myself. Or for my people.

I am a man of science and medicine. But I close my eyes and wish upon Xalthuria’s three moons, as if I am a child once again.

Help me accomplish my commendable goals, I silently hiss.

Then, even more fervently...

Help me to repent my shameful actions, and most of all... forget that hu'man female.

SIX

ELLE

You can't fall in love with it.

That's my second thought after I feel the first flutter inside of me three months after the breeding ceremony.

My very first thought isn't something to acknowledge. It's too close to joy. And nothing good can come of it.

Everyone knows the rules. Our Grade Six teacher listed them out, cruel and ruthlessly clear:

Rule #1: Every human female the age of twenty-one must participate in the Breeding Ceremony.

Rule #2: If the issue of the ceremony is a girl, the human female may either keep her or send her to the orphanage to be raised.

Rule #3: If the issue is a boy, then the hybrid will be culled by its father's race during the next solar's Breeding Ceremony.

Never to be seen by his mother again.

That part isn't officially in the rules, but it's implied.

I know better than to honor any part of that first thought.

The new sensation of the growing life inside of me, this attachment...I don't want it. I've been numb since the Breeding Ceremony. And I want to stay that way.

You can't fall in love with it, I tell myself—warn myself after that first flutter. Don't feel. Don't feel. Don't...

But a few months after the first flutter, while fetching water with Kira, the thing inside of me kicks so hard I have no choice but to feel it.

“Are you okay, sis?” Kira rushes to my side when I drop one of the two buckets of well water we’re allowed per week.

I curse as I watch most of the precious liquid puddle into the red dirt. Then I receive a harsh physics lesson in pregnancy belly when I nearly topple over while trying to retrieve what’s left of our weekly allotment of water.

“Careful!” Kira reaches both hands out to my large stomach to steady me. Then gasps. “Oh, my moons, it’s moving! I can feel it squirming underneath your skin! Feel it!”

Feel it. Without thinking, I lay a hand on the stomach I’ve been carefully avoiding ever since it started to pooch out. Then I gasp myself. Even through the bark cloth, I can feel the hybrid inside of me twisting and turning like something that’s...

Alive. The word pops into my mind before I can stop it. There’s an actual being wriggling and kicking inside of me.

Kira gives me a wondrous look, then bursts into giggles. “Oh, my moons, it really wants out. Now I can’t wait to meet this kid.”

Her excited tone sends a chill down my spine.

And, as much as I love my sister, I have to push her hands away. “Let’s get home and explain the water situation to Mom.”

This time, I squat to pick up the bucket. “This spill is really going to mess up her menu planning. So, c’mon. Stop dilly-dallying.”

Kira rushes to pick her bucket back up with one hand and takes hold of my arm with the other.

And we continue home in somber silence for the water we lost.

But the following Sunday, when we’re sleeping on the mat we share while Mom and Dad attend their church service on the colony ship, she turns over to face me.

“Was it really so bad?” she asks, her eyes wide and hopeful. “Was it as terrible as they say?”

I know she's referring to the Breeding Ceremony, even though her use of "it" makes the question vague. In less than six months, the Xals will return for the next one. And in two more years after that, it will be her turn.

Was it really so bad?

Images and sensations from that night flash across my mind.

The way the huge red alien threw me against the wall.

The unexpected petting. First of my body, then between my legs.

My skin heats with the memory of him.

Why had he touched me like that? Given me sensations I'd never felt before? Made it pleasurable when he knew what would come next?

I shouldn't have let Kira convince me to touch my belly. Emotions I've been refusing to feel slip past the numb wall I erected around myself after they finally let me off that horrible ship.

"Yes, it really was that bad," I answer Kira. I've just woken up, but suddenly, I'm too tired and angry to answer with anything but the harsh and un-sanitized truth. "That big red one dragged me back to the ship, and then, when he was done with me, they let everyone else take their turn."

Yes, there was pleasure. At first. But no more after the first one was dragged away. I tell my little sister the truth of it. I tell her how much it hurt. I tell her that the breeding girls who passed out during the Breeding Ceremony were the lucky ones.

"I don't think I'll ever get married. I don't think I'll ever have sex again," I tell her, my voice flat and angry. "It was just a few hours, but it was the most terrible night of my life. I won't ever forget it. I know I won't."

All the hope has disappeared from Kira's eyes by the time I'm done with my answer.

Good. Before that night, I'd hoped I could save her from my fate by using my brain. But I haven't set foot in a lab since the

Breeding Ceremony. Haven't solved one problem. For me or anyone else.

I can't offer her salvation in this state. All I can do is prepare her for the worst.

"I shouldn't be telling you this. But I don't want you to be shocked, like me. Maybe it will help if you know what's going to happen beforehand."

More feelings leak through the cracks in my numb, and a whisper confession escapes from my quavering heart. "Moons...I hope this baby is a girl. I don't know what I'll do if it's a boy."

At this point, Kira's face is so tight with rage, I wouldn't put it past her to somehow fix the colony ship and fly to Xalthuria to kick everybody's ass.

"It's not our fault their women can't have babies. Why should we have to suffer just to receive a little bit of their stingy charity?" she asks, her voice as bitter as under-ripe corn. "I mean, it's not like they're keeping up their side of the bargain. These days, they're barely giving us enough to make it through the year."

I completely agree, but before I can say that, the thing inside of me stirs, this time bumping against Kira's arm in its effort to turn.

And just like that, a big, goofy smile replaces the rage on my sister's face. "Look who's awake!"

She lays a hand on my belly and says, "Hi-hi, baby! Hi-hi! Wow, you really want to get in on this conversation we're having."

She laughs and looks at me, her expression set back to hopeful. "It's *chatty*. Maybe it will be a girl."

And I guess I do still care about my little sister's feelings more than my own. I manage to paste on a smile and answer, "Maybe."

But I have a bad feeling it will be a boy.

Don't feel. Don't feel. You can't fall in love with it. Those lines become my silent mantra.

But the bigger the thing inside of me grows, the more it stirs. Eventually, the only way it lets me sleep at night is if I lay a hand on my belly and murmur soothing words. So, I do. But I don't love it. I *make myself* not love it.

And I am right to hold back.

"It's a boy," my mother declares after all the pushing is done to get him out. She sounds disappointed. Despite my warnings, she and my sister fell into the silly habit of wondering out loud what life would be like with a new baby girl to raise.

"Ah, well." Mom wipes the thing down with a wet bark cloth, then tries to hand him to me.

I wave her off. "I don't want to hold him. Or see him."

My mother's eyes shutter. "You don't have any choice. On the old planet, they had special formulas you could use if you didn't want to breastfeed your baby. But we're not on the old planet. You gotta feed him. He'll die otherwise. And who knows what those Xals will do to you if they find out you let one of their precious boys starve to death."

I reluctantly take the baby, planning to do nothing more than smash his mouth into one of my breasts for an indifferent feeding. But before I can get him to latch on, he makes a hissing sound, drawing my attention.

Despite only being a few minutes old, his silver moon eyes lift to find mine. And when our gazes connect, he clicks loud and happy, as if he has just found the prize he was looking for.

Don't... The rest of my mantra never manages to surface.

Months. I've been telling myself not to grow too attached for months, but in the end, it takes only a moment for me to fall head over heels in love with my baby boy.

"It isn't advisable to name the male babies," the Grade Six teacher told Jin-Hu, Leader Hank's daughter, when she asked if we get to name our babies the same way she got to name the dolly her father had made for her birthday.

And we're definitely not Grade Sixers anymore. Every mother of a hybrid boy from last year's ceremony knows we'll never see our sons again once the Xals come to reap them.

But when no one else is around to hear, I call him Jack, after a favorite character from an entertainment I used to watch when I still believed in love.

The days pass quietly after Jack's birth. He is an easy baby. I take him with me everywhere in a sling that allows me to carry him on my back or close to my heart—a position we both prefer when I'm not working in the fields.

He never cries. He only clicks happily at me and the rest of my family and occasionally hisses when he wants food. I get so used to secretly loving him that it begins to feel like no big deal.

But then one day, five months after his birth, a klaxon pierces the sky.

Our alien overlords are back.

I don't remember making the decision to run after the Xals land; it just happens. One moment, they are coming toward me—toward Jack—and the next, I'm taking off.

Of course, they chase after me. I run and run until I can't run anymore. But they keep following until, eventually, I come to the edge of a cliff. And there's nowhere left to go.

I spin around and find myself surrounded by Xalthurian soldiers. They come in all colors: blue, purple, yellow, and red, like the one who dragged me out of my house a year ago. Except he wore a loincloth, and most of these soldiers wear sleek chrome suits.

These are the Xals we call Reapers. Because when they land on our planet, they scavenge our babies away.

And now these big and terrifying Reapers want Jack!

All but one of them point their weapon at me.

"No! Noooooo! Don't take my baby!" I plead. "Please...I'll do anything!"

They reply in a strange click-hissed language I don't understand, yet their answer is clear.

Request denied.

They're here for Jack; they want me to hand him over, to surrender him.

"Elizabeth, just give them the baby! Don't make it any harder than it has to be, girl," an anguished voice calls from the crowd of villagers behind the Reapers.

It's my mother, using my real name. I glance past the line of Reapers and see my family. My parents look terrified, and Kira screams, "Elle! Elle!"

She strains against my father's firm grip, but he won't let her rush to me—knows my hotheaded sister can only make this situation worse.

"Give back the baby," my mother screams. "It's the only way!"

She's right. If I want to live, I have to hand Jack over.

As if reading my mind, a hissing voice starts speaking to me in New Terrhan. "Hand over the xalling. Hand him over now, and our Tel promises you will not suffer for what you have done here today."

I spot the alien speaking the offer at the far right of the arc. He is green, slightly shorter and much thinner than the Reapers.

A diplomat. That's what we call the skinny green ones who can speak our language. But from what I've seen, there is never much diplomacy involved when they start talking.

But this one is offering me a reprieve. A way to survive this. All I have to do is give them Jack.

But I can't.

I am no longer a woman of science and reason. Not when it comes to my baby.

I weep uncontrollably and pull Jack out of the sling to hold him even tighter to my chest. *No, no, I can't give him up.*

“Somebody help me, please!” I cry out to my fellow villagers. All the people I have helped with the corn crop they don’t know I bioengineered. “Please don’t let them do this. Please don’t let them take my baby!”

But they answer like my mother. Calls of “Just give them the baby!” and “You knew you weren’t going to be able to keep him!” rise up in the air as Kira screams my name.

Then the Reapers start advancing on me. They’re done talking. I can see their plan to snatch Jack out of my arms in the set of their diamond-shaped eyes.

My mind races desperately for solutions as I take several steps backward to get away from the advancing force—

Suddenly, I’m falling, clinging to Jack with one hand and grasping for something to stop our descent with the other. Helplessly. Uselessly.

There’s nothing but sky above us. Nothing to grab onto but air. Terror clogs my throat. I can’t even scream. Only hold on to my precious baby as we plunge toward the red rocks below the cliff.

We’re doomed.

That’s my last thought. The last thing I remember.

SEVEN

L'THAN

LINE LOUXOS: No Recorded Progeny.

“Son, whyever are you standing in this corner all alone?”

I purposefully relax my short set of ridges before turning from the floor-to-ceiling holoscreen with the Breeding Ceremony Cull report upon it to face my mother.

Her green coloring announces even more loudly than the light brown swirls in my otherwise red skin that she is not the original birth vessel of the male she calls son. But the worried set of her much longer ridge plate shows me how much she truly cares about me.

She darts her blue diamond eyes to the report I was staring at before her arrival. “Are you so sad about not getting a hybrid cousin that you would ignore all our guests?”

Yes, my mother cares about me. She also knows me too well.

I avert my gaze even farther from the holoscreen to take in the party swirling all around us. Elite families from all over the planet have gathered in the largest room of our residence to dine on the rarest cuisines from ocean fisheries, imbibe the finest wines from our orchards, and to fete the end of the Three Generation War, which my Uncle L'Thr helped end.

The Three Generation War is what the Council has redubbed the Generations War, now that it is finally over. The end of the war means no more fighting. And no more fighting means that, though I underwent all of the genetic body modifications

and training to join the warrior program, I will not be called upon to fight.

I should be overjoyed, too. Yet, I stand apart from the crowd, consuming my third goblet of goji berry wine, staring at one line of text from the Breeding Ceremony Cull Report.

LINE LOUXOS: No Recorded Progeny.

A line of text that refuses to change, no matter how many times I read it.

Guilt ripples down my ridges, and I confess to my mother, “In truth, I did not realize how much I wished to be joined by a hybrid cousin until this report erased all hope. It appears I remain the sole hybrid in the Line of Louxos.”

My mother’s ridges clap back in shock. “Oh, L’Than, can you not see this is the best possible outcome?”

She lays her green-taloned hand on my arm. “L’Gon has become nearly as anti-hu’man as your father since taking part in that Breeding Ceremony. Surely, you do not want another hybrid to suffer as you have.”

“No, of course, I do not want that.” I clench my jaw. “But if a hybrid had been delivered to the East House this day, I would have found a way to assist L’Gon with his new son, even if my cousin wished nothing to do with him. I would have seen to it that the xalling grew up feeling wanted, ensure that he had another hybrid male to tell him his worth. I would have...”

I stop speaking. The fall of my mother’s ridges tells me I have gone too far.

“L’Than, are you having trouble controlling your hu’man emotions?” she asks, pitching her clicks at a much lower volume.

Her question makes me avert my eyes again. In truth, I have been struggling with my emotions since the Council declared my class of new conscripts would not be required to fight in the war effort against the Kaidorians.

Before that announcement, I had assumed I would prove my worth upon a warship, as my cousin had. But after the end of the conscription program, a new, unsettled feeling has lodged in my chest.

Actually, I would not describe it as a feeling. It is more like a gaping lack. A hole exists inside of me that I wish to fill. But I do not know how or with what. Only that the hole—this *lack*—grew bigger upon seeing there would be no hybrid cousin for me to guide into adulthood.

But I can barely explain this strange empty feeling to myself, much less my mother, who prefers for me to be laughing and happy, without any of the other unnecessary emotions that apparently come from my hu'man side.

For her, I carefully rearrange my ridge plate back into the ever-relaxed state I am known for in our social circle and curve my lips into a rueful smile. “In truth, this is a good place to hide from the many females who would seek out my company. My next lunar cycle is already full with picnic invitations. I fear I will have no time to attend to my fauns.”

My mother chitters, her own ridges relaxing. “That is no one’s fault but your own, L’Than. Perhaps if you were not quite so charming, you would not be inundated with so much attention. Consider L’Gon over there.”

She tips her own glass of goji berry wine toward my cousin, who is standing by himself in front of our home’s orchard-facing windows. His hair is partially tied back in the manner of high-ranking Council Members, and he wears official silk robes over a finely spun shirt. He has either not kept up with fashion or chosen not to go along with the current trend among genetically modified males of going bare-chested underneath one’s robe jacket.

Knowing my cousin, it is the latter.

“He is one of the most eligible bachelors in Xalthuria, he has a Council Seat, and your father tells me that the Prime Minister himself will be announcing his promotion to the Minister of Health later in the eve,” Mother points out. “Yet, there the most eligible member of our family line stands, without

having to suffer any unwanted feminine attention. Of course, he is not nearly as handsome as you, but if you truly wish for less female bother and admiration, you might follow his example of maintaining a cold exterior that invites little conversation.”

Yes, consider L’Gon.

I inwardly frown. Not because I agree with my mother, but because it is not just the females staying away from one of the most eligible males in Xalthuria. L’Gon himself seems not to care about the bevy of beautiful Elites in attendance at our end-of-war fete.

He absently rubs at the place above his right heart in a way that strikes me as sad, even though that is not an emotion I would ever associate with a stalwart former warrior like my cousin.

Could it be he is equally upset about his lack of progeny? Perhaps even more so than me? He has always called me his favorite cousin, despite my being a hybrid.

“You are right. I should speak with L’Gon,” I say to my mother, grabbing another glass of goji berry wine from a floating tray.

“That is not what I meant....” she starts to say.

But her words fade into party noise as I enter the melee of guests.

“Did you hear what our Tel did to the insane hu’man who attempted to attack him at the cull?” a voice asks somewhere in the distance as I wend my way through the crowd. “Apparently, he grabbed her by the neck and—Stars in the sky, is that L’Than Louxos? L’Than! L’Than, come converse with us! We were hoping you might join us for a picnic!”

I pretend I do not hear the gossipy female calling after me as I join L’Gon at the orchard-facing window wall.

“This is meant to be a celebration, Cousin,” I say with a disapproving click. “Your future wife is probably somewhere amongst this dazzling display of beauty. So why do you stand at the window all alone?”

As if just realizing he is at a party, L’Gon jerks and looks up from his empty crystal challis. He quickly drops his hand from his right heart. Too quickly. I am struck by the idea that I have caught him in a seditious act.

“Has something upset you?” I ask, keeping my short ridge relaxed.

Or some news? I direct my eyes to the holoscreen on the other side of the gathering chamber before handing him the goblet of wine.

He stills.

“Nothing has upset me.” He pours the wine into his crystal challis before depositing the goblet onto a passing tray of empties. “I simply wished for a moment of privacy before the Prime Minister arrives.”

I have always worshiped my cousin. From the time I was a boy to the moment he walked onto a warship for his first rotation, I kept a habit of trailing behind him.

He was and remains the only male in our family line who paid me any attention, and often, during the grueling military training, I inspired myself to keep up with my full Xalthurian counterparts by imagining what he would do if he were in my place.

Of course, L’Gon is merchant-trained to lie smoothly, and any other person would have believed his completely valid-sounding excuse. However, he has a tell only I know after years of reverential observation.

There is always a slight stilling... Before he took the blame for a family heirloom broken by his younger sister L’Nel... Or claimed he was happy to pursue a medical career at his father’s behest... Or told me he was not upset, simply composing himself before the arrival of the third most powerful person on Xalthuria.

I keep my ridges pleasant but demand to know. “L’Gon, you will tell me what is troubling you.”

He stills again. Then says, “Nothing troubles me.”

“Is this about what happened on New Terrhan?” I press. “With the hu’man you mated?”

His ridges snap back. “Why would you think that?”

I lift a shoulder in an instinctive gesture my mother says I must have inherited from my hu’man birth vessel. “Every time I have asked you about the Breeding Ceremony, you change the subject to other topics I do not care nearly so much about.”

My cousin’s ridge plate remains neutral. “It went as to be expected. I did my duty.”

“They say the hu’man females have breeding slits that get very wet.” I run my finger down my own shortened ridge plate and watch him closely to see how he will respond to my next question. “Is it true they release a scent that is nearly intoxicating?”

He bears his teeth in a way that reminds me of the grimace on a sparring partner’s face when I landed a painful blow in training camp. “If you have already received information about the Breeding Ceremony from other warriors, why do you bother me with such inane questions?”

“I would like to hear your perspective,” I insist, still studying him closely. “It is unlikely Father will allow me to attend a Breeding Ceremony, so I must experience it vicariously through you.”

I speak truth. I have been afforded many benefits as the son of an Elite, but my father does not hold me in the same regard most families hold their hybrid offspring. While a few other fathers have been petitioning the Council to allow their hybrid sons to take part in the Breeding Ceremony, mine has actively lobbied against letting any Xalthurian male—much less a hybrid—do so since my birth.

“That is probably for the best, as your progeny would be mostly hu’man,” L’Gon answers with a testy click. “Perhaps instead of listening to idle chatter and dreaming of ceremonies in which you will never be allowed to participate, you should apply yourself to a worthy endeavor. Something other than

frivolous pursuits like faun racing and picnicking with any Elite female who bats her ridges at you.”

Is that truly what he thinks of me? That I am only interested in faun racing and the too many females who wish to spend time with me?

Fortunately, I am a better liar than L’Gon.

Inside, I flinch at his assessment of my character, but outside, I act as if I do not care. Smoothing the back of a talon over the lapel of my open-chest robe, I say, “If you do not wish to tell me what transpired during your mating ceremony, you should state that plainly, and I will cease asking.”

My cousin’s ridges clap back, then vibrate. With irritation or embarrassment? Most likely both.

But I am no longer the sycophantic boy he knew before he joined the military. I hold his gaze, challenging him to either admit I have made him uncomfortable or tell me the truth.

Perhaps it should not surprise me that he chooses neither option.

He stills again before insisting, “It was a horrible experience. All I could feel was disgust when I touched that hu’man female. I could only stomach to copulate with one of them. It was mere duty. Nothing more, nothing less. Be grateful you will never have to endure such an ordeal.”

“Interesting. That is not how the other warriors I have conversed with described it.” I tilt my head to the side and let a knowing smile curve my lips. “They speak of the hu’mans they mate most passionately, almost obsessively. My hybrid friends tell me a few of their fathers have even begged for permission to breed a certain hu’man female again—even after receiving their sons!”

L’Gon throws back the contents of his challis in one gulp. “Yes, your friends’ fathers suffer from a condition we call Ceremonial Mind Rot. It is a disease of the psyche that occasionally occurs after one copulates with a hu’man. Some males who mate with that species become so unable to

reconcile what duty has forced them to do that their minds break.”

L’Gon shakes his head, and his gaze becomes unfocused, as if he is looking not at me but somewhere far in the distance. “They tell themselves lies—insist to others that the hu’man females have attractive qualities they do not, in fact, possess. And they cling to that lie in order to explain to themselves what they did to extend their family line. Sadly, this inability to deal with reality has made fools of many otherwise honorable Xalthurian males.”

“But not you, Cousin?” I draw myself up to my full height, partially to show him I have grown nearly as tall as him since we last spoke together one-on-one and partially to let him know that I am to be taken seriously. “You would not lie? To yourself or your favorite cousin?”

L’Gon stares back at me, his ridges still vibrating. Then he says, “L’Than, I am only trying to pro—”

“There you are, Nephew! Your father and I have been looking everywhere for you.”

We both turn to see our thin, red fathers approaching. Uncle L’Thr has silver hair, and my father’s hair is a matte black, just a few shades lighter than my shiny ebony mane. But other than that, the two brothers look almost like twins, despite the near decade between their ages.

Without a word of greeting for me, my father reaches out to clap L’Gon on the shoulder. “Great news from the Breeding Ceremony Cull report. You were fortunate to have no heirs among this solar’s cull of hybrids. You will not experience the shame of a half-breed calling you Father.”

I grind on my teeth, a secret habit that I also suspect might hail from my hu’man side.

This is not the first time my father has disparaged the hu’man blood that runs through my veins. But he rarely does it in front of anyone besides my mother.

Though I am a better liar than L’Gon and have received full warrior training on top of that, I have trouble maintaining a

relaxed ridge plate when my father continues to speak to L’Gon as if I am not in the vicinity.

“It is more important than ever that you understand hu’mans are simply a means to an end until we can find a solution to our female infertility issue. When that is resolved, we will finally be able to do away with that despicable Accord, and we will no longer have dealings with those filthy beasts. Let them starve, I say!”

The strange eye-rolling urge that has afflicted me since my teens threatens to erupt. Mother once told me there was a time when my father was so eager to procreate, he actually voted against my uncle to approve the Accord with New Terrhan. But I find that story hard to believe.

L’Rmie Louxos is known throughout Xalthuria as the most vehemently anti-hu’man Council Member. He never misses an opportunity to say what he thinks about the Accord between the Xalthurians and New Terrhans—or the hu’mans themselves.

Silence is my usual response when he speaks on this subject, but tonight, after that cloaked conversation with L’Gon and three goblets of goji berry wine, I find myself unable to stay quiet.

“Not all hu’mans are bad,” I click from between clenched teeth.

My father narrows his green gaze at me. “Do you truly believe that? Without our help, those animals would starve. They are not intelligent enough to survive on their own. Yet we are expected to breed with them.”

“I am half hu’man!” I point out, fury burning up my ridges.

“I am aware.” My father looks at me from head to toe, his own ridges bristling with disgust.

My uncle—ever the diplomat, even when he is not serving on the Council—points out, “You have a very fine son, Brother. Shall we talk about the Prime Minister’s announcement with L’Gon now, as we planned?”

“He is only here because of necessity.” My father turns back to L’Gon, ignoring his brother’s attempt to change the subject. “My choices were limited for an heir back then, and my actions were borne out of desperation. You have no idea how many gamma showers it took to wash the stink of the hu’man I was duty bound to mate with from my body.”

My ridges clap back, and the words burst from me before I can stop them.

“That is enough, Father!” I hiss. “You are drunk!”

His ridges flatten, and he steps toward me with the back of his hand raised, as he used to when I was a xalling.

But I stand my ground with my shoulders squared. I would never hurt my sire, but I also refuse to be intimidated by him—especially while he is in this state.

The formerly boisterous party has come to a complete standstill. A hush falls over the crowd, and I can see from the side of my eye that many of our guests are now staring at us. However, I stand strong against my smaller father’s threat of violence.

Too strong, apparently. Father flattens his ridges even tighter into his face and raises the back of his taloned hand higher. “You ungrateful, over-indulged—”

“Let us stop this bickering.” My uncle steps forward and pulls his brother’s arm down before he can strike. “There is no need for harsh words tonight. This is a celebration!”

I said the exact same thing to L’Gon earlier, but now it is he who steps forward to keep me from ruining the party mood.

“Step back, Cousin,” he instructs in my ear. “Do not bring shame upon our family name.”

At the same time, his father circles an arm that is one part amiable and one part restraining around my father’s shoulders. “Yes! Yes, let us be merry! We are celebrating the end of the war.”

“Come, my son,” my uncle says to L’Gon over his shoulder. “The Prime Minister will make the big announcement, and

then I have a special audience planned for you with his daughter, N'Maryah, who has recently come of marrying age."

Immediately, the partygoers go from staring to clicking excitedly about what Uncle L'Thr said.

"What is this big announcement?"

"Oh, N'Maryah is gorgeous. Will she truly partner with L'Gon Louxos?"

L'Gon squeezes my shoulder and claps his nose ridges twice in apology to me before stepping away to follow his father. This should be the best night of his life, but as he follows in his father's wake, he looks much less enthusiastic about meeting this N'Maryah than the crowd clicking behind their hands.

Still, jealousy burns in my chest, churning the food we ate at the sumptuous evening meal earlier.

I cannot remember a time my father offered to introduce me to any of his important friends—much less their eligible daughters.

I watch my father's face light up with approval when L'Gon falls into step beside him. Of course, it does.

He would rather spend time with his full-Xalthurian nephew than his half hu'man son....

I hiss and fight a strange urge to punch the air. *No, I cannot do that.*

Allowing my hu'man emotions would be a disaster with a party full of onlookers staring at me.

"L'Than, I have been looking for you! It is too unkind of you to disappear when you promised we could talk about having a picnic later in the lunar cycle!"

I turn to see A'Na Xiachon, a second daughter of the Anox Line. They do not rank as highly as the Louxos, but it is a respectable line.

Tall and slender, a shimmering sheath of pink waterfalls down her purple body, and her green hair hangs to her waist, signifying that she is eligible for proposal.

I once again relax my ridges. “I am here now, beauty.”

She simpers and traces a talon over the tan swirls on my chest. Something females seemed to be fond of doing to me. “Perhaps you owe me two picnics then.”

“Not before I have mine,” Ni’Xa Beirouxos declares, sidling up to join us.

I welcome her, too, with a tilt of my head as I fall into the familiar role of party charmer. This is the one thing I know I am good at—attracting the attention of females.

Before long, I am surrounded by several of them. All from good families. All dazzling in their silk sheaths.

But none of them compare to the beauty who walks in, hand placed primly on the Prime Minister’s arm, shortly before he climbs the steps of the stage to announce my cousin’s appointment to the position of interim Minister of Health.

Her silver hair is braided and styled into several intricate twists on top of her head, and her pearlescent skin glows like the moons over Xalthuria.

So this is the most eligible female that my uncle wishes to introduce L’Gon to this eve.

After the Prime Minister announces that my cousin shall henceforth be addressed as Mal L’Gon, I raise another glass of goji berry wine and cheer...while scanning the party until I find my target. N’Maryah, the Prime Minister’s daughter.

How will my father respond if I manage to woo the most eligible female on Xalthuria? Will he finally admit my worth if the Prime Minister himself officiates our wedding?

I finish the rest of my wine and hand my empty goblet to one of the lesser beauties surrounding me.

“Excuse me,” I say, parting through the sea of simpering females before any of them can protest.

Then I head in a straight line toward the female I am certain will change my life for the better.

PART 3

THE PRISONER AND THE GIFT

EIGHT

L'THAN

Four Solars Later

I am somewhere I should not be.

A place I would not even have been able to envision a day cycle ago.

But here I sit, watching the Kel play with the mammary glands of Ki'Ra, the hu'man N'Maryah convinced me to have a picnic with... was it truly earlier in this same day cycle?

That lighthearted outing, which was cut short by the Kel's arrival back on Xalthuria, seems as if it took place solars ago.

It was another male who had laughingly escorted the hu'man the Kel had brought back with him from New Terrhan to a field for what was supposed to be a secret picnic while our Leader was away on a diplomatic trip.

But then the Kel's private ship set down right in front of us before we could so much as open the container of food I had brought for the outing.

Several hours of being interrogated with punches and kicks by the Kel himself had followed his unexpected arrival. Then he ordered my battered and broken body dragged into this never-imagined place: his personal sleeping chamber.

For another type of torture, as it turned out.

The Kel broke several bones with his extended beating, including a few of the important ones required to walk.

So, now I lie slumped against the wall with no other choice but to look anywhere but at the large, sumptuous sleeping mat where the Kel is punishing the hu'man who has spent the last few day cycles teaching me the throatbox language of my birth vessel.

Ki'Ra lies facing me in a helpless recline. The golden immobilization cuffs around her wrists glint under the room's dimmed lights.

She breathes unevenly. The mounds upon her chest have become impossibly swollen under the Kel's blue hands, and the friendly facial expression I had become used to over the past six day cycles has completely disappeared. Replaced by one of agony and strain.

"Pleez! Pleez fuk mee! It hurts!" she cries out when he rolls her nipples under the taloned pads of his index finger and thumb.

At the beginning of this part of my punishment for daring to associate with the Kel's hu'man, I could not quite understand her words.

Now I do.

She is begging him to mate her, to end her torture.

Even after the gamma ray shower our Kel administered a bit earlier, her breeding slit leaks, and the distinct smell of her wanting once again fills the room.

The Kel answers his hu'man with a cruel series of clicks. "I will have the words I want from you."

"Noh, I kant..." the poor hu'man answers. Her eyes become wet with tears of defiance and reproach, even as her breeding slit leaks more wanting.

Yet, even in my broken state, my diijo once again rises to life, helpless to do anything else, even as the abject shame of my debased reaction to this scene washes over me.

"You can, Ki'Ra. You can and you will," the Kel answers his defiant hu'man. "Do I have your permission?"

"Yehs, moons damm uuu. Yehs! Fuk me. I juss need to bee fuked—"

The hu'man cuts off with a relieved cry when the Kel shoves into her breeding slit from behind.

The dark hu'man's face takes on a blissful look, even though he has put her through this torture cycle several times this eve. Surely, she knows he will not give her true relief.

As if to confirm my assessment of her hopeless situation, the Kel hisses in her ear, “You will beg me to fuck you. Let me in any hole I please. Yet you will not give me the words. How many times must I spill in you and leave you frustrated?”

Yes, how many times?

It is a terrible torture loop I am being made to watch. Yet craven desire lights up the spine I am fairly sure the Kel has broken.

Then the dark hu'man looks at me and asks in perfect Xalthurian, “L'Than, do you wish to join us?”

I awaken, as I always do after this part of the dream, whole and unbroken.

Physically, at least. My body was mended by one of the palace med-units the following morn, when the Kel decided to show me mercy.

But my mind remains a fragile thing.

They must have dosed my food with sleeping powder after dragging the last female out of my cell after her third bleed. I only have this dream—this nightmare—when they wish for me to stay in an unconscious state while they reset the ever-fruitless experiment.

“L'Than, do you wish to join us?”

Every part of the recurring nightmare is true, save for that one. The Kel's hu'man never invited me to take part. She did not look at me directly again after realizing I was brought in as a broken witness to her punishment.

Why do I keep on adding those words to the nightmare?

I am awake now. Numb has replaced the heat of the dream.

But I refuse to open my eyes. What is the point when I know what I will find?

Three walls of black space-grade steel and one of impenetrable glass. A new female, who will also be dragged away at the end of the three bleeding cycles when my seed does not take.

Yet another day cycle since P'rm N'Ure, N'Maryah's father, offered me safe harbor at an amnesty station after I was released from the Kel's palace hold.

I had foolishly accepted his supposed aid after deciding any fate was better than facing my father after the shame I had brought down on the Louxos name.

Over the past two solars, before the first hu'man's arrival on Xalthuria, the Prime Minister had become somewhat of a mentor to me. He had even encouraged my pursuit of N'Maryah in the beginning—at least he had appeared to be willing to extend his approval of a possible union between his daughter and me.

Now, I know better. His approval had been a cleverly disguised setup to bring a hybrid to his prison lab.

What amount of time has passed in the world outside my prison? I no longer bother to count the day cycles. Just as I no longer bother to make sense of my plight.

No, I will not open my eyes yet. I will lie here in my misery until—

My ridges twitch when a new smell suddenly hits my nose.

New smells I am used to after what could only be solars in this prison lab. They always eventually murder and replace the females who bleed three times or more with new ones of different shapes, sizes, and dull tones. They are always hu'man.

But none of them smelled like this one. Strange...yet slightly familiar.

I pop open my eyes and rise from the mat, opening my ridges to take in more of her scent.

Then I stiffen when I see the naked, unconscious female lying upon my cell's floor.

She is not the Kel's hu'man, but she...

My hearts pound against my ribs, and I scramble to my feet and close the distance between us. Then I blink several times before my mind accepts what my eyes see.

She is beautiful, like the one I knew as Ki’Ra, but more so. Rich brown skin, like a decadent Xalthurian dessert. Big curly black hair and soft curves. And she smells...

I take a large inhale of her scent through my ridges. Yes, she smells similar, but even better than that hu’man I knew on Xalthuria.

She is...she is...

Gift.

The New Terrhan word Ki’Ra taught me for “present” appears in my mind, even though there are no *gifts* given in this place. Only terrible commands and enough food to sustain us while we fulfill them.

Gift!

Hearts racing, I scoop the female up and carry her back to my sleeping mat with that word echoing in my mind. *Gift! Gift! Gift!*

I carefully lay her down and gaze upon her form.

My chest thrums at the sight of her. *Gift!*

I curve my body against hers with an unprecedented need to feel her skin against mine.

It has been so long since I have had a bodily response that was not commanded that I do not realize I wish to rut with her until my diijo rises against her back and my body tightens with need.

This is...new.

Gift...

I nuzzle her with my ridges and inhale deeply, and her scent makes me pull her closer.

My diijo is now impossibly hard. It rests against the curve of her rear, and I hiss at the wondrous sensation. I want more. Much more. I slide my hands over the curve of her mammary glands, and her nipples pucker beneath my touch. Just like... but better. So much better!

She is here and real and not a confusing nightmare.

I cannot stop petting her. She is so soft. So small. So perfect.
So *gift*.

She wiggles against me and slowly stretches, making an almost purring sound, like a satisfied *mil'sak*.

I shift my hand away. I do not wish to scare her.

But I keep my arms wrapped tight around her as I wait for my gift to wake and give me her first words.

ELLE

WE'RE DOOMED.

That is my last thought. The last thing I remember.

And then...pleasure. Sensuous and warm.

I wake up with a gasp inside a heavy blanket. *Where am I?*

My eyes flutter open.

And what I see freezes my heart.

It's an alien surrounding me. Not a heavy blanket, but a Xal. A *Xal* has me wrapped up in his arms!

What the...?

I shove away from him and scramble to my feet to look around.

I'm in some sort of cage with three black steel walls and a gleaming pane of cold, unforgiving glass where a wall with a door should be.

I've only ever seen glass in the old planet entertainments they show on the colony ship. But I doubt this is the kind that easily breaks when you kick it—

Something strange tingles over my skin, interrupting my assessment of my latest problem.

Air. Cool air touches all parts of me, despite the absence of windows. Every single inch of my skin. *But how is that even possible?*

Dread washes over me as I look down to confirm what I suspect.

Sure enough, I'm naked. Completely naked! Just like at the Breeding Ceremony after the big red monster ripped my dress off my body like it was made of paper, not bark cloth.

I look back toward the alien who was holding me when I woke up. Am I back on the alien ship? Is this my punishment for running away with Jack?

I'm pretty sure the Xal who dragged me out of my home was Jack's father. Had he returned to punish me before taking my baby away?

But no...

The alien, who's also jumped to his feet, has the same diamond-shaped moon-colored eyes. But he's not the big red monster.

I squint at him, like I'm Kira, and realize... *Oh, my moons, he's a hybrid!* A full-grown hybrid male, swirled red and brown like Jack. However, this guy's brown swirls are much lighter than my son's.

For a few moments, I can't help but take him in. I've never seen an adult hybrid male before. He's... handsome, actually. Really, really handsome. Like one of the impossibly good-looking actors from an old planet entertainment. If that actor was crazy tall and covered in muscles and red scales with tan swirls.

However, my surprisingly favorable scan of him comes to an immediate stop when I see what's below his waistline. There's no loincloth this time. Actually, there's not one stitch of clothing. He's naked. Completely naked, just like me.

But unlike me, there's a heavy piece of flesh between his legs. It's large, covered in ridges, and—oh my moons—*visibly pulsing*.

Another wave of panic crests over me.

“Who are you? Where am I?” I demand. And then I yell even louder, “Where is my baby?!”

L'THAN

MY GIFT'S round eyes widen with horror when she sees the state of my diijo.

She looks around our cage with a wildness in her round eyes, then demands, “WEHR IZ MY BAYBEE?”

I urgently scramble to remember the words of New Terrhan that Ki’Ra taught me during our short time as teacher and student.

I lay a hand against my chest. “I am L’Than. U r... I doo not noh. Maybee u r familiee, too...”

I do my best to make the strange blended tongue-up throatbox hiss and teeth-barring click, followed by a rolled cheering sound that Ki’Ra taught me to pronounce her name correctly in New Terrhan. “*Kee-rah?*”

She lowers her hands and balls them into fists at her sides. “Yes, sheizmysister. Izsheehere? WeewereworkinginthefeeldIthink. Thassthe lassting Ireemember. DidthozfukingZalstaykherto?”

I rub my ridges, frustration quickly mounting. I have heard the New Terrhan language from many females since being brought here, but my deep gloom kept me from engaging. And my gift pushes out her words much faster than I can comprehend.

“You muss talk...sloh,” I explain to her. “I cannot understand fast.”

Her eyes widen, as if she is angry at me for not understanding her throatbox language.

But then she lets out an exhale through her mouth in the hu’man way and slows down enough for me to understand. “Wehr...iz...my...sister? Wehr...iz...my...baybee?”

“I do not noh where Kee-rah iz.” Xalthurians do not use tone in our language, but I do my best to adopt Ki’Ra’s gentle teaching one as I explain to her. “We r in *kayg* heer. This is *prizon*.”

I did not think it possible for her eyes to get bigger. But they do. “Whatdo umeenweerinaprizon? Ohmoons! Wahthelizoengon? Imsoconfoozed...” Her voice trails off, and she abruptly shifts her attention to the cell directly across from ours. “Waytizthatwohnovthefanudggirrls?”

The other cell contains the space lab’s latest prisoners, a green Xalthurian with warrior modifications and a light-brown hu’man female with wavy black hair. The only thing I know about these strange new lab subjects is that they copulate much, even when it is not commanded.

But my gift steps toward the glass with a surprised look of recognition upon her face. “*Nova!* Izthatu—”

Her words are cut off by an announcement from overhead. One I have been expecting.

And dreading.

“Attention, Prisoners, attention! This is your master. It is time for you to mate. Any hu’man woman who does not submit to her breeding will be eliminated. Any male who does not do his duty will be punished.”

NINE

ELLE

The announcement intones overhead in clear New Terrhan, ominous and hissed: *“Attention, prisoners, attention! This is your master. It is time for you to mate. Any hu’man female who does not submit to her breeding will be eliminated. Any male who does not do his duty will be punished.”*

What the...? I gawk up at the ceiling as the announcement repeats two more times: In Xalthurian and in a rough, growly language I’ve never heard before.

“Gift... we must... make sex.” My naked hybrid cage mate informs me in that super-halting New Terrhan of his. “Or you die.”

“I’ve already died!” I shout back as confusion and panic wrestle for dominance inside my chest. “We were falling! And now I’m here. But Jack is...”

I trail off, unable to say what I suspect.

“Where is my baby?” I ask again instead. “I just need him to be all right! Please tell me he’s all right.”

The hybrid’s determined expression softens for a moment. But then he glances to the side and resets his strangely handsome face with a stern look. “Your baby no mother if Kaidorian kill.”

Okay, well, he has a point there. But new question: “What the hell is a Kaidorian?”

As if in answer to my latest query, a huge beastly alien suddenly appears on the other side of the glass. He has a

shaggy black mane with nubs sticking out of it, and he's carrying an ugly metal rod, which he uses to pound on the window wall before barking something at me in that same low, growly language I heard in the announcement.

But the translation is obvious: *"I'm a Kaidorian. And the red, swirled dude is right. I will fuck you up if you don't get to banging!"*

This is so crazy, and I can't catch up. I was falling with Jack a few moments ago, and now I've somehow been delivered into this new fresh take on hell. A storm of anger swells inside of me.

"Fuck you!" I shout at the barking guard. Then flip him the bird like Kira would have if she were in this situation.

"Gift must care." The hybrid grabs my hand—with the middle finger shooting straight into the air—and pulls it to his chest. "No choice."

No choice...

There are those two words I've been hearing my whole life.

"I'm not going to submit to you," I warn him, my voice as jagged as the piece of metal Kira sunk into the Xalthurian's back. "I'll die fighting before I ever agree to submit ag—"

He slams me into one of the black steel walls, and I barely have time to gasp in surprise before his lips come crashing down on mine.

Wait a minute. Is he... is he kissing me?

What the moons is this?

The Xals are a horror film, not a romance novel. They don't kiss. They only take. Everybody knows that!

I'm so shocked, I actually melt under his aggressive lip press for a little bit before I remember who I am. Who he is. And what I vowed I'd never let happen to me again.

There is no way I could ever win a physical fight against him, but I struggle anyway. I fight. I have to fight. I can't let him take me!

My fists bounce off his large chest in my desperate attempt to free myself. And his ridged dick presses into my stomach. Hard and threatening.

Oh moons! Raw terror threatens to consume me.

“No fight! No fight! I no hurt you, Gift.” A voice breaks through all my anguish.

It’s the hybrid, I realize after a few more impotent moments of struggle. The voice belongs to the hybrid who’s about to force me to have sex with him like the overhead announcement said.

But as if to counter my silent assumption, he says, “Sorry... must pretend.... you stay alive. Like hu’man *entertainment*. Not real. No hurt you. Please trust me.”

Wait... what?

I technically understand all the words coming out of his mouth, but they make no sense.

What does he mean by *pretend*? How does he know what an entertainment is? And how could he ever expect me to trust a Xalthurian, even if he only has half of that foul alien race in his DNA?

Before my brain can fully process enough to ask those questions out loud, he claims my mouth again and lifts his hips.

Oh moons, oh moons, here it comes. I squeeze my eyes closed, bracing for the intense pain. But when his hips come back down, the only place I feel his ridged dick is against my stomach.

What the...?

His hips lift again, but when his cock comes down, it once again only presses into my stomach. *He’s... he’s pretending*, I realize. He’s only pretending to have sex with me.

And, okay, well... I’m not actually sure what to do with myself as he dry humps my stomach. So, I just hold as still as possible.

At first, it's awkward. I mean, crazy awkward. But then, it's something else somehow....

My breasts have been sensitive ever since Jack's birth. But they start to tingle more than usual against his scaled chest.

Oh moons...

All the rubbing as he simulates sex with me... It's creating this weird friction against my breasts and um... other lower-down sensations I can't quite explain.

It feels like something is brewing below my waist. A weird, heavy ache.

I'm not doing anything, just standing here. But my breaths become shallower and shallower. As if I'm running a race.

The hybrid kisses me even harder, his hips moving faster. Then, suddenly, he goes rigid. His heavy body seizes up against mine, and in the next instant, "dry humping" stops being the way to describe what he's doing to me.

Hot liquid splashes across my stomach.

After that comes a few moments of silence. Really, really intense silence. Then I feel his hands on me again.

"Must make look true," he explains before scooping up what he squirted on my stomach and moving it down to my...

A flash of memory from the Breeding Ceremony blinks into my head. The way the huge Xal stroked me....

Oh, moons, not there! I nearly say. But it's already too late.

My eyes roll, and my strangely aching sex convulses when his fingers rub his alien sperm into my folds. The back of his hand grazes my throbbing button, and the heat inside of me intensifies, blazing like a hearth fire with too much wood.

I'm going to... I'm going to...

He removes his hand just as I'm about to reach that unexpected peak. "It is okay. It is done."

With an apologetic look, he takes a few steps backward.

Just like that, I'm free. But it feels like I've lost something. Something I shouldn't have wanted.

I rub at my arm, confused and ashamed. Not to mention all sorts of messy.

The hybrid's shortened ridge visibly claps up when he sees the front of me. And my cheeks heat again. This time with acute embarrassment. Without the hot press of his body, I can clearly feel the alien sperm now covering my lower half.

But instead of giving me a disgusted look, his spent cock hardens all over again.

Our eyes lock. Apparently, the sight of me does things to him. And the sight of him, hanging so long and thick and wanting me...

The unsated ache between my legs grows even heavier. And I feel a different kind of wetness dripping out from my vagina.

What in the moons is wrong with me?

I quickly look away. My throat clogs with so much shame I can't speak.

"I sorry. I no control it." The hybrid sounds miserable and contrite. "You too beautiful, Gift."

He thinks I can't look at him because I'm angry he got hard.

I swallow, but that's not enough to unstick my mouth. I don't think there's enough spit in the world to open up my throat enough to explain that I'm upset with myself for feeling things I have no business feeling. Especially after having woken up in a prison cell. With weird compulsory sex rules. That I have to comply to with someone who half belongs to a race I abhor.

"Room clean you soon," he explains in his broken version of New Terrhan.

I don't understand what he means. But then I suddenly do.

A buzzing pane of light appears at the opposite end of the cell and scrapes across the room. And by the time it's done, all the bodily fluids are gone from our bodies—his jizz and whatever that was coming out of me when I saw him at full mast.

Everything is clean now. At least on the outside. My mind feels like it's about to explode with confusion and shame.

"Where's my son?" I ask him again. The question comes out broken this time. "I need to know what happened to my baby. Is he alive, too?"

"I no know." A new look crosses over the hybrid's face. He's only half human, but I recognize that look well. So many of my fellow New Terrhans gave it to me. First when I started showing, then after word got around that I had given birth to a boy.

Pity. He's looking at me with such pity.

"Sleep." He extends a hand toward a flat pallet at the back wall of the glassed-in cage. "Please."

I think about arguing. I want to demand that he take me to Jack. Right fucking now. But who am I kidding?

Wherever this is, it's clear we're both prisoners here. He has as much power as I do. And probably as many questions. He might be half Xal, but I believe him when he says he doesn't know where my son is.

I think about what I told Kira that one night she got overly agitated because some kids at the colony school had teased her about being "blind as a bat"—an animal she had to look up at the highest magnification setting on a colony ship computer to figure out what it was.

"Go to sleep, lil' sis," I'd advised when she started grumbling about finding those kids who made fun of her and kicking their asses after dinner. "You'll feel better with sleep. Be able to think more clearly."

That was good advice, I realize. Now. And with a careful swallow, I lie down on the pallet to take it.

To my surprise, the half-Xal lies down beside me as soon as I settle into place. His huge form takes up most of the mat. I stiffen. Lying this close to him does weird things to my body.

Sometimes, instead of rain, we get these weird electrical storms on New Terrhan. No water drops. No thunder. Just

lightning. That's what it feels like lying next to him. Like I'm touching an electrical storm, and everything inside of me is going haywire.

I edge away, trying to put some space between us on the mat.

"Sorry," he says, once again mistaking my actions. "Only one bed."

I don't answer. I can't answer.

What is wrong with me? That question keeps repeating over and over again in my mind as I slowly, fitfully fall asleep.

Suddenly, I'm in the fields again, trying to convince Kira to knock off work early and go back to the house for a nap with Jack and me.

"I'm not on full rations like you," Kira points out. "I'm starving, and I don't want to risk getting an even smaller portion tonight because some Leader decides we didn't do enough work."

Guilt twists my stomach. Leader Hank has asked me a few times about new bioengineering projects. But I haven't been able to muster up the motivation to return to a colony ship lab.

"I'll share my full rations with you after we take our nap," I promise. "And we'll most likely get more work done tomorrow if we work on clearing our sleep debt today."

Kira stills with a weird grin on her face, her unfocused eyes twinkling under the late-day sun.

"What?" I ask her.

"Nothing, you just sound like my know-it-all sister from before the Breeding Ceremony. I missed her."

My heart melts, a few more bricks crumbling away from the wall of numb I'd constructed around myself. I missed the old me, too.

I open my mouth to apologize to Kira for being so closed-off over the last year.

But before I can, the sound of a klaxon pierces the air.

And then I'm suddenly at the edge of a cliff. I'm surrounded by Xalthurian Reapers with guns pointed at me.

"Give us your baby!" they hiss in New Terrhan.

When did they all learn to speak our language? I thought only diplomats could do that.

"Give us your baby! Give us your baby!" They're advancing on me. But they're no longer multicolored. Every one of them is a deep, jeweled red, like the Xal who dragged me from my house. "Give us your baby!

No, I can't let them have Jack. I take a step back to get away.

And then I'm falling, falling through the air with Jack in my arms. I scream and scream.

"Female! Female! Stop sleep now. Stop sleep now."

I wake up to the hybrid shaking me.

He kneels back after I sit up on the mat. But he still looks a little worried.

My throat is raw. *Was I screaming in both the dream and real life?*

"You make bad sleep," the hybrid informs me, answering my unspoken question.

I shake my head. "That's an understatement. I dreamed that the Xalthurians came back and tried to take Jack from me again. I dreamed that I fell off a cliff, and I was falling through the air."

The hybrid seems to be listening intently. But then he says, "Sorry. I no understand, Gift."

A lump clogs my throat. Of course, he doesn't understand. I don't understand either.

Yet, here we are, confused and completely naked.

A sad wave of helplessness washes over me.

Then, just when I thought this day couldn't get any worse, a piercing electric buzz sounds overhead.

“Attention, prisoners, attention! This is your master. It is time for you to mate. Any hu'man female who does not submit to her breeding will be eliminated. Any male who does not do his duty will be punished.

Crap.

TEN

L'THAN

Her face fills with dread as the overhead voice announces we must copulate again. How often had I felt the same during the solars before this prison turned me into an unthinking animal? Someone who performed on command as he had been conditioned?

But things are different now. I feel anything but detached when I extend my hand out to the mate I have been gifted. “We muss preetend. Mak sex. Do lik beefor.”

She shakes her head and clutches her mammary glands. “Mybresstrsore. Ithurtswenuruhbuhganstmeethewayudid.”

Her words have once again become too rapid to comprehend. But the shake of her head is clear. She is denying even the pretend version of mating with me.

My stomach clenches inside my chest.

“Muss preetend!” I say slowly. At the same time, I try to pitch my tone to convey the urgency of our situation since she does not understand Xalthurian emotion clicks. “R u dy. Will not let u dy. Muss preetend sex.”

She pats the pronounced mammary glands again and talks more slowly this time. “I hurt. Maybee wee can try uhnother way.”

I understand her words, but I do not fully comprehend their meaning.

“Uhnother way?” I repeat, tilting my head to the side.

“Yehs. Layonurback.”

She presses her talon-less hands against my chest, pushing me down until my back touches the floor. Then she straddles my stomach!

“Gift, waht r u dooing?” I have rutted many females during my time in this prison, but this position is new to me. And extremely unusual.

Confusion crashes over me like the hostile waves of the ocean when the three moons are full. It is never for females to rut males. It is always the other way around.

I open my mouth in an attempt to tell her this, but then she shifts her rounded hips backward, effectively pinning my *diijo* to my lower torso.

With her breeding slit.

My *diijo* speaks before I can form the words in my poor New Terrhan, becoming hard as steel underneath her warm sex. Apparently, it likes this unorthodox position.

“Soree! Inohthisizweerd,” my gift says with an apologetic glance. “Butlhavtoo...”

She places both hands upon my chest, carefully averts her eyes, and begins to bounce her bare breeding slit upon my *diijo* like some manner of a ball.

I frown up at her. The efforts are not entirely unpleasant, but they are also not entirely convincing.

A pounding on the glass corroborates my assessment of her bizarre pantomime of a sex act.

The Kaidorian guard clearly does not believe that we are actually rutting.

I refocus on my gift. “Muss mak preetend luhk reel.”

She pauses mid-bounce, uncertainty flaring in her round, brown eyes. “I dont noh wuht u mean.”

I grip her hips and move her just enough for her breeding slit to slide—not bounce—along the ridges of my *diijo*. But not enough for insertion.

I want that. I need to penetrate this female more than I need my next nose breath. But I push my own rutting desire down. Her continued survival matters most of all.

“Moov body. With mee,” I instruct.

She bites her lower lip and glances uncertainly at the Kaidorian guard. “R u sur this wil werk—”

Essh! I am more concerned about whether I will be able to hold myself back than the veracity of her pantomime. Her wet heat against my skin is a temptation so large, I am not certain I can resist taking her as I wish.

“No mor talk. Moov,” I hiss.

I gyrate my hips beneath her, encouraging her to move so I do not have to take control of the performance back from her.

“Okay! Okay!” Thankfully, my gift begins to grind her breeding slit against me, instinctively wriggling her hips into my gyrations without bouncing.

We move together. Slowly at first. Her eyes flutter closed, and she tilts her head back to reveal a graceful neck as our hips work in tandem.

I try to think of unpleasant things so I will not lose control. Rotten goji berries. Huge, steaming piles of faun waste. My father.

But, *essh!* All of those thoughts are soon dashed from my head. The incredible heat my gift emits from her breeding slit erases my ability to think upon anything else.

I lose all grasp of space and time. The beautiful brown female with the dark eyes and black cloud hair, moving back and forth on top of my *diijo*, is all that exists. I must keep her forever. I must protect her at all costs.

I must save her from her death. That last thought hits me like a blast of wind from the cold side of the planet before her throaty voice plunges me back into the here and now.

“Ohmymoos, what is happening too mee?” Breathly moans produce spaces between her words as she digs her nails into my chest. “I dont want it to feel so good!”

I understand what she is saying this time. And her exclamations break me.

She is *mine*. Everything about this female inflames me. Her beauty. Her scent. The juices leaking from her breeding slit. I need to feel more of her, and I can no longer hold myself back.

I sit up and wrap my arms around her, then release a sharp hiss when the ridges of my *diijo* sink even deeper into her slit.

“Do you understand how much you affect me?” I hiss into her ear, unable to care that she does not comprehend Xalthurian. I hold her against me, grinding in earnest, as I tell her, “You are my gift. My obsession. And I will find a way for us to truly mate together. One day, we will not pretend.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” She grips my shoulders.

I have rutted with countless females, but none have made me experience anything close to this. I hold her closer and grind.

Perhaps this is the Ceremonial Mind Rot my cousin warned me about. If so, I welcome the disease after so many solars of detachment. I let myself get lost in the sensations of our movements, never wanting this moment to end.

“Mine,” I hiss.

“Oh moons!” she yells out, digging her nails into my shoulders.

This is the opposite of anything that has come before. Often to make myself release my worthless seed, I must imagine... terrible things. Terrible things I will never confess to my gift. Ever.

But those terrible things stay far from my mind as currents of pleasure race up my ridged shaft. It does not matter that it is not fully embedded inside her. I squeeze her body into mine and release against her stomach. Just like our first time together, without need of further mental stimulation.

Then, to my shock, a gush of wet spills from her breeding slit and drenches my lap.

“Ohmymoos!” In the next moment, she goes from pantomiming the sex act with me to trying to pull away. “Im

sorree! Im sorree!”

But I am reluctant to let her go, even though I have spilled my seed. This female has awakened something within me. Something I wish to hold on to and never let go. Something I cannot even begin to explain in New Terrhan.

“No, do not apologize,” I answer in Xalthurian. “Stay here with me. Remind me of what I have to lose if I do not free you—free *us* from this place.”

Of course, she does not understand my clicks and hisses.

But she also does not continue to fight against my hold. To my relief, she relaxes into my arms, pressing in so close to me that I can feel the rapid beat of her solitary heart against my chest.

Perhaps she feels the same way I do. Excited and born anew.

No, I do not know how long I have been kept prisoner in this place. But I do know it is not lunar cycles that have passed but solars. The other male prisoners are mostly Kaidorians and a very few Xalthurians. I am the only hybrid.

But we all are kept in our same cages, without hope of escape.

The females are the only ones who leave our cells in one of two ways.

One: They are impregnated and removed from the cage, never to be seen again.

Two: They bleed three times and are removed from the cage, never to be seen again.

I have never had a female removed for the former, only for the latter. Countless females dragged away by laughing Kaidorian guards.

Unfortunately, I understand their language, thanks to the translators that were inserted as part of my warrior modifications.

So I am aware that the guards consider the ones who could not be impregnated part of their compensation package. Know with a sickening clarity what they do to the hu'man females when their time in the cages is done.

That means I only have three lunar cycles—three lunar cycles
to figure out how to save my gift.

My hearts thunder with a new resolve.

She is my gift. *Mine*.

I will not let them have her.

ELEVEN

L'THAN

I am not sure how much time passes as we remain locked together, but we are still lying this way long after the gamma light cleanses the mess we made together from our bodies.

Until, suddenly, she pushes out of my hold and scrambles away.

“Ohnoh...” She grabs onto her bare mammary glands with talon-less hands, her face contorting with pain.

I immediately think back to the way I touched them earlier while waiting for her to wake, and my hearts accelerate. *Have I caused her harm?*

“Im sorree,” I say, mimicking her tone and words from earlier. “Did not meen too hurt u, Gift.”

She shakes her head, and despite her obvious discomfort, she remembers to talk slowly. “Not ur fawlt. Need to nurs. Need too find my baybee.”

I frown at her, my ridges flapping with confusion. “Nurs? Explayn.”

She pauses.

“Need too feed my baybee,” she repeats before taking a full seat against the black steel wall and slowly removing her hands from her mammary glands.

I still at the sight. *Stars in the sky...*

The mounds upon her chest have become severely swollen, engorged to the point that her dark-brown nipples are dribbling

milk.

She carefully averts her eyes from me to the ceiling. “Bress hurt beecuz I need releef.”

Releef.

I nod, finally understanding her plight.

“I help,” I promise her, touching both sides of my ridge to give her my vow.

Then I slide over to where she is sitting and take hold of her mammary glands carefully, so as not to rend her silken skin with my talons.

Her mounds feel much heavier than when I touched them before, and they have become so distended with her milk they appear to be near bursting. *I must help her!*

“Wahtrudooeng?” She inhales in that sharp hu’man way through her mouth when I gently begin massaging her engorged mammary glands. “Ohwow. This... this... isnt... this isn’t... riyt.”

Her body stiffens. Yet her breaths become shorter and much shallower, as if she is expending much effort.

“I help,” I explain again. Perhaps she does not understand my poor New Terrhan. I do my best to replicate her earlier word. “Releef.”

“NohthatsnotwahtIment!” she answers in a rush of words I cannot understand.

But she does not push me away.

Nor does she look at me as I continue to massage her mammary glands.

Eventually, several droplets fall from her nipples. The sweet scent causes my *diijo* to stiffen.

But I do not wish to upset her as I did earlier with my obvious return to arousal so soon after my spew caused her great offense.

“Better?” I ask the side of her face in a tone as neutral as the set of my ridges.

She bites her lip before answering. “Aylittel.”

I do not understand her reply. But I sense a few dribbles of milk have not provided her with enough relief.

“I help mohr,” I vow before leaning forward to capture one dripping tip into my mouth.

“Ohmymoos!” she gasps out. “Wahtrudooeng?”

She places her hands on either side of my head. But again, she does not shove me away.

Not even when my suckle deepens. Her milk tastes so sweet, better than any delicacy I have ever had at the Elite parties on Xalthuria. I wish to free her from her pain, but I also want this nectar she has unexpectedly provided me.

“Moons... Waht is happineng?” She digs her fingers through my hair and pulls me away from her dripping nipple.

I have gone too far. I swallow and open my mouth to apologize in her throatbox language.

But then she guides me to her other nipple.

My hearts thrum in my lower torso as I hungrily suckle. I am happy to free this mammary gland of its oversupply of milk, too, while massaging the other in my palm.

I rotate between each dripping nipple. Suckle. Massage. Suckle. Massage.

However, another hunger below intensifies, even as I drink from her. My *diijo* pulses painfully, letting me know that I am dangerously close to spilling my seed again, even though it is nowhere near her breeding slit.

Do not spill—not yet, not yet, I instruct the hard set of ridges below my waist. *You must calm. You cannot—*

“Ohmoons! Ohmoons! Oh *moooooons!*” Her sudden scream cuts off my stern internal warnings.

She grips my hair tightly, then cries out. Not in pain, though, I realize when she releases the same scent she did earlier, even though our mating parts are not touching.

So, she suffered as I did, and my *releef* produced feelings of helpless want and need within her as it did me. The realization fills my hearts with a strange pride... right before my *diijo* loses the fight.

I barely have time to finally unlatch from my gift and aim so my jet of blue spend hits the back wall instead of our sleeping mat.

“Waht waz that?” She blinks, as if coming out of a trance, and looks down. “Wy did I... Wy am I...?”

I follow her gaze to her glistening breeding slit.

Did I say my *diijo* was spent? It thickens again in an instant, and the urge to lick her breeding slit overpowers every other thought in my head.

I drop to my knees. She is mine. I must drink her. Eat her. Claim her in every way as mine.

A small resisting sensation breaks through my mad need to consume her whole. Her small hands are pushing against my shoulders, I realize dimly, and her voice is telling me no.

Every cell in my body vibrates with need, but I cannot deny my gift anything. Even her wish to reject me.

I rise to my feet and use several warrior breathing techniques to return my body and mind to a calm state.

It is... incredibly difficult.

The scent of our separate releases hangs heavy in the cell, and the gamma cleanse will not trigger until after the next time it is necessary for us to pantomime the breeding act.

Perhaps sensing the battle I am having to restrain myself, she slides out of the space between the wall and me.

“I shouldnt hav don that. I dont noh waht iz rong with mee. And Im sorree. Soh sorree.”

She says this so slowly, I can tell it is important to her that I comprehend what she is saying.

And I do understand her words. But I cannot fathom why she would say them. Nothing is wrong with her. She is perfect. She is...

“Noh,” I grunt with my hu’man voicebox. “U. Me. Mayt.”

“What?” she asks, shaking her head.

“Mine,” I tell her. I pass a hand between the two of us and inform her again, “U my gift.”

Her eyes widen with horror. “Noh. Noh. Im not ay gift for u. Weer nuhtheeng too eech uhther. Weere juss prizoners trapped in thuh saym cayg....”

She is correct, I realize. We are nothing to each other. We cannot be anything—not until we are free of this prison.

Mine.

I was so despondent before she showed up in my cage. So weak.

But as I gaze upon my gift, determination washes over me.

“I fiyt,” I tell her. “I fiyt for uhs. Mak uhs free. Mak u uherstand. U my gift. Me ur mayt.”

My gift does not answer this time.

Just eyes me warily until our nighttime rations are delivered through the back wall.

And after we have eaten, she refuses to come to the mat.

“I go ther,” she says, pointing to a corner near the glass wall. “No mor misuhderstandeng.”

My hearts sink with sadness. So she is now too scared to join me on the mat.

“Noh, Gift. U sleep mat.” I rise and move to the corner of the cell she pointed out before she can move there herself.

“Noh! This iz my fawlt,” she insists. “Iyll sleep on thuh flohr.”

“No, you are too good for this place,” I answer in Xalthurian. My emotions have become too big for my limited New Terrhan. “I would rather sleep upon the cold floor than cause you another moment of discomfort.”

“Buht...” she starts to say.

I give my head a stern shake. *You command me in every way, but my mind will not be changed when it comes to your comfort. Ever.*

Perhaps she understands my unspoken words much easier than the ones I gave her in Xalthurian.

Eventually, she gives in and curls up on the mat.

But she sends several glances my way before she falls back asleep.

I cannot tell if she is truly frightened of me or worried I will arouse her again.

It matters not, either way.

She is my gift, and I am her mate. We will be together and free. That is the only thought in my head as I watch her sleep. And then, for the first time since her arrival, I allow my eyes to close.

Sleeping without a mat is not as difficult as I thought it would be. I do not wake up until what feels like a full night-cycle later.

But that is not a good thing, I discover as soon as I wake.

I did not have the dream about the Kel and his hu'man again. But I know my food has been dosed as soon as I smell the air.

The completely sterile air, without a trace of the hu'man whose scent filled the cell as I finally let myself sleep.

The mat is empty. *She is gone!* But where? Why?

I fight through the grogginess of the sleeping drug and leap to my feet.

Then go completely still.

My gift...

My gift is in the cell across from mine.

With the new green Xalthurian. The one who has warrior modifications and razor-sharp teeth.

She has scrunched herself down into one corner of the cell between the glass and steel wall. But for some unknown reason, the green Xalthurian sits upon the cell's floor with his eyes closed, his mouth moving with words I cannot hear.

My gift has not bled three times. Yet she has been transferred to the cell of another. She is close enough to see, but too far to touch. And worst of all, she is scared.

My mind goes completely blank.

Then erupts.

“Gift!” I rage.

I must get to her! I must save her from the green Xalthurian before the next announcement sounds overhead.

All rational thought disappears. I beat my fists against the glass wall, no longer able to accept the fact that it is impenetrable.

And the green Xalthurian abruptly opens his eyes.

With a start, I realize I recognize this male.

It is N'Thn, the son of the Prime Minister, who put me in this place.

He is also a good friend of my cousin, L'Gon, and a fellow warrior—one whose name was listed among those lost in the last great battle with the Kaidorians.

But what is he doing here? Why would his own father imprison him and make him take part in this ongoing breeding experiment?

The answers to those questions matters not, I realize in the next instant when he, too, jumps to his feet.

And turns to my gift.

“She is mine!” I yell across the aisle at him. “If you hurt her. If you touch her, I will kill you! I promise you, I will find a

way!”

The Prime Minister’s green son only spares me a glance before saying something to my gift.

Something that immediately makes her start shaking her head.

To which he pantomimes the action of breaking her arm. His eyes gleam with madness.

“Leave her be, or I will kill you!” I yell at him. It feels like my blood has turned to ice in my veins. “I will kill you! If you hurt her, I will—”

I cut off when the lights suddenly blink out.

And then, the impenetrable glass doors to both our cages suddenly slide open!

“L’Than?” my gift calls out, looking all around her sightlessly.

Another human weakness registers as I bound out of my cage for the first time ever. *She cannot see in the dark.*

But that is fine. I see enough for the both of us. And I will not let her come to harm. I close the distance between us and shove her behind me before raising both hands to confront the Prime Minister’s son.

Only to lower them when I see my new enemy has already stepped out of his cell and into the aisle.

“We are somehow free,” he says to me in Xalthurian.

“Yes,” I agree while carefully keeping my gift safe behind me.

Several Kaidorians come out to the aisle, speaking over one another in their growling language. My old translator powers up behind my ear to decipher their questions: “*How can this be? Is it a trick? Is it another experiment?*”

Maybe it is a trick or some kind of cruel experiment. But I stay silent and move to block my gift from their view, even though it leaves her exposed to the green Xalthurian.

N’Thn has warrior modifications and teeth that were obviously filed into sharp points by his former captors. But the Kaidorians’ teeth are naturally even sharper, as are the points

of the long white horns sticking out of their shaggy manes. And only a few of them have hu'man cellmates with them.

I tense, ready to defend my gift against this new threat.

But then N'Thn says, "Yes, maybe it is a trick. Or maybe this is our opportunity to overpower our guards and finally escape this place."

We all turn to him. And even though he stands completely naked, he no longer appears crazed. In fact, he looks much like the uniformed male in the graphic that accompanied the name Roq N'Thn on the death holo-roll.

"What do you say?" Roq N'Thn asks all of us—Kaidorian, Xalthurian, and hybrid alike. "Will you fight with me?"

TWELVE

L'GON

“Are you aware of the *nickname* our Qel has given to you?”

The Kel is standing in a set of long golden robes at the east-facing part of a 360-degree window wall when I enter his throne room. He does not turn to greet me. Just asks me this strange question about that undeserving hu'man he has chosen to marry and give the title of Qel.

“I do not, my Kel,” I answer with a touch of my hand to my ridges, despite the fact that his back is to me and his own lack of formality.

I walk past the golden throne to stand next to him at the window and take in the impressive view.

Despite much postwar new construction, the palace remains the tallest building on the planet. So our supreme leader appears to be surveying a kingdom laid out at his feet.

Further proof that we are long past the days when we both served as warriors under Xar T'Kan and I called him D'Rek.

It has been several contentious solars between us since then, but I keep my ridges neutral as I admit, “Nor am I aware of this hu'man word you have used, my Kel.”

“You still have not upgraded your translation chip to include New Terrhan?” The Kel finally turns to regard me with a hardened expression upon his blue face. “Your father requested one for himself within a lunar cycle of our Qel's ascension as my wife.”

Yes, and my father also never fails to address that hu'man of yours as "our Qel."

Unlike me, my father remains a business male above all other things—especially now that the war is done and he can charge the kingdom full price for the fruit rations the Louxos company continues to send to New Terrhan.

Of course, I keep those cynical thoughts to myself.

“Please enlighten me about this...” I refuse to form words in my throat as the Kel did to repeat the hu'man word, so I settle for “unknown term.”

“A *nickname* is an alternate way of referring to someone. It can be a friendly reference or one that refers to something noticeable about their appearance. For example, she calls T'Kan ‘Kel Gold.’ She calls N'Maryah N'Vaise ‘That Evil Moonstone’—I will not repeat the word as it is a rather non-sensical reference to the female version of an old planet companion animal.”

The Kel's robes make a quiet swish as he turns fully to face me. “Her nickname for you is ‘The Big Red Obstacle’ due to your habit of blocking our most valued initiatives.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” I answer while somehow managing to contain the pleased ripple threatening to break out along my ridge plate.

Hearing that the Kel's wife resents my interference fills me with pride. She convinced our Kel to heavily amend the Accord in the hu'man's favor and triple the amount of provisions Louxos orchards are required to provide them each solar before my uncle managed to negotiate a majority voting bloc on the Council.

If the Kel's wife had her way, any member of her dishonorable species would be able to live here with us on Xalthuria. But thanks to my considerable efforts and two Council votes, not only have I thwarted her liberal immigration policies, I have also ensured that fewer of our males will be exposed to Ceremonial Mind Rot.

“Is this the reason you have called me to your throne room, my Kel?” I ask with an obsequious click. “To tell me of your wife’s alternative name for your Minister of Health?”

A ripple of irritation runs up the Kel’s ridges. Most likely because he senses my lack of respect for his wife and his choice to marry her but cannot point to—or punish me for—a specific insult.

“No,” he answers after giving me a long assessing stare. “I have called you here for a difficult conversation.”

He moves to take a seat upon his throne, leaving me to follow.

“We have a situation,” he announces after I come to stand before him. “N’Maryah is pregnant from the seed of the hu’man male she took as a mate when we banished her to New Terrhan.”

I do not bother to hide my response this time. There is no controlling the wave of shock that claps back my ridges.

N’Maryah, the female responsible for my cousin’s humiliation and his subsequent decision to run away to some unknown Amnesty Station, is now the first Xalthurian female to fall pregnant since the Extinction Virus devastated our population?

“Are you certain, my Kel?” I ask. “N’Maryah has more than proven she can be as duplicitous as her father.”

“No, I am not certain at all,” the Kel answers. “So, you can see why this situation is something that must be handled. Discreetly. And preferably without our Qel’s knowledge until it is absolutely necessary.”

“Or anyone else’s.” For once, the Kel and I are in agreement.

“I will send a team down to investigate the claim,” I tell him. “My most loyal employees. They will perform the necessary examinations in private. I am sure this is a misunderstanding. A false bid for attention that will soon be disproven.”

“I am sure, also.” The Kel punctuates his agreement with an approving click. “However...”

He pauses, and I sense I will not like his next words.

“If it is not a misunderstanding, and this pregnancy does result in a live birth,” he says, “then you must go to New Terrhan yourself to examine her.”

I sensed right.

The memory of the brown hu'man suddenly fills up my vision. She hangs off the end of my arm, her eyes two dark pools, inviting me to drown.

“I cannot...” I forcibly blink away the memory. “I will not set foot on that planet again.”

“I am aware of how you feel about the Breeding Ceremony and New Terrhan.” The Kel tightens and untightens his ridges. “I am also aware that while I cannot remove you from your Council seat, I can revisit my decision to make you our permanent Minister of Health during the next bequeathal cycle.”

I stiffen. Then remind him, “All ministerial roles are lifetime appointments.”

“So many solars with nothing to show for your efforts to solve the Xalthurian female infertility crisis.” The Kel lets out a disapproving click. “Perhaps there is someone else who will have an easier time with this assignment.”

Rage and indignation surge inside of me. But somehow, I manage to keep both emotions off my ridges. “You will fail to find another who will work harder than I do toward this goal.”

“Yes, yes, you are incredibly dedicated to this particular cause.” The Kel answers my defense with a dismissive wave of his blue claw. “That is why I made your title permanent after my father’s death. You were a trusted friend, and I could not imagine anyone else as qualified for the role as you. Otherwise, I would never have put you in the position to have, not one, but two Council votes.”

I open my mouth to answer, but Kel D'Rek holds his hand up for silence before I can. “And yes, most ministerial roles are lifetime appointments. However, you will note that there is no one serving in the role of Prime Minister at this time, and N'Maryah’s father remains at large. Not only do I have to deal

with that so far fruitless male hunt, but I also find myself in the alarming position of having my orders circumvented and questioned often at Council meetings. By the former friend I appointed to this role.”

He lets out an aggrieved click and steeples his talons in front of his chest before finally bringing his bored gaze up to meet mine. “Though my wife has urged me toward a more equal form of governance, she has also wisely pointed out that devotion to a cause does not equal aptitude. Especially when it comes to big red obstacles. Do you understand my meaning?”

Unfortunately, I do. Solars have passed since I made the declaration to find the cure to the female fertility issue. I am now head of the Health Ministry. The pride of the Louxos Line.

Yet my greatest ambition alludes me. None of my proposed solutions have worked. Insemination never resulted in a xalling. Nor did our attempts to remove eggs from Xalthurian female volunteers and inseminate them inside an artificial womb—one we spent several solars and much treasury building to mimic the pre-mutated ones of Xalthurian females.

But alas, the sperm we injected into it failed to fertilize either real or cloned Xalthurian eggs.

And these failures have played directly into the Kel’s hu’man-loving claws. My now former friend has grown impatient with my department’s lack of progress.

Yes, my non-compliance with his outrageous order could become the excuse he needs to remove a minister from his position, which would take away one of my Council votes at a time when quite a few agenda items are so contentious they are only being decided by one or two votes.

This is not about my job performance. This is about the fact I refuse to condone his pro-hu’man agenda!

But I remain calm and manage not to outwardly seethe as I point out, “I have done more in the mere handful of solars I have been in charge of the Fertility Project than my predecessor did in the decades before my appointment.”

“Yet only one of our females have gotten pregnant in all that time—the one we exiled to the hu’man planet on which you are refusing to step foot.” Kel D’Rek lets out a derisive click. “After she used a member of your line to put my mate in a compromising position, then kidnapped her and left her to die by Kaidorian hands.”

A bit of my indignation subsides at the reminder of the personal stake he holds in this “situation.”

The Kel does not wish to be in this position, either. If I despise N’Maryah for humiliating L’Than to the point he felt compelled to live a life of exile on an Amnesty Station he refused to name in his last holo to us, I can only imagine how D’Rek feels about her claim to be the first Xalthurian pregnancy in two decades.

“This is yet another trick. That duplicitous female is not pregnant. My team will prove that,” I assure the Kel. And myself. “But if she does manage to deliver a viable xalling, of course...”

I have to expel a breath through my nose ridges in order to push the next click through my teeth. “Of course, I will interview and examine her myself.”

“Let us hope you are correct,” the Kel answers with a weary hiss. “You are dismissed.”

I take my leave, but the memory of that hu’man follows me. I wish I could say this is the first time I have thought of her in the solars since that infernal Breeding Ceremony.

It is not.

I cannot remember what happened after I found her. But I cannot stop thinking upon the few memories I do possess.

I cannot return to that planet.

THIRTEEN

L'GON

I cannot return to that planet.

I walk out of the throne room, assuring myself I will not be obligated to keep this promise...

...and fifteen months later, I find myself on board the travel ship of the Kel and Qel Regent, heading to New Terrhan to do just that.

"We will be setting down on New Terrhan soon," a digital voice announces overhead. *"Please report to the landing doors."*

I am already at the landing doors. I have been standing at the ship's exit since the beginning of the trip. My plan is to do my duty and reboard as soon as possible within the confines of the vow I made to the Kel.

However, the small space outside the landing doors soon fills with the other passengers, who chose to sit on the observation deck for most of the journey. Other than the T'Kan and his hu'man wife and a few Xalthurian nannies, most of the other travelers are males like me.

But not like me.

"Do you wish to see a holo of the daughter I told you about?" one of the males asks another beside me. "Perhaps our ceremony partners will be open to my girl meeting your boy."

Ceremony partners. That is what many males have taken to calling their birthing vessels now that the Breeding Ceremony

is a lottery for Xalthurian males and an incentivized volunteer opportunity for hu'man females.

I inwardly scoff and glance sideways at the two conversing beside me, a purple with warrior modifications and a thin young green carrying a little green boy with light-pink swirls.

“Perhaps,” the hybrid’s father agrees. “But, be forewarned, this might be the only time they meet. I extended a marriage offer to my ceremony partner upon our last custodial visit, and she said she would think about it. If her intellection exercise ends with her choosing to honor my proposal with a yes, then hopefully, she will be returning to Xalthuria with me.”

“You are fortunate, indeed.” The former warrior closes a floating holoscreen with an image of his smiling hybrid daughter. She looks to be at least six solars, which means she must have been born before the many changes to the Accord. “I would request the same from my daughter’s mother, but she is already married to a hu'man male.”

His words send an unexpected jolt through me. Could the female with the mesmerizing brown eyes be married to another?

There were no recorded births with my DNA, even among the girls. I double-checked when my Department of Ministry was put in charge of the genetic records for all hybrids residing on both planets.

So, I know I have not fathered a child—for which I am, of course, glad. As I should be.

Yet, the thought of the hu'man female having pledged herself to another makes me rub at my left heart.

“You... possess... stomach... ickiness, Mal L’Gon?” a voice asks with halting clicks and hisses.

I turn to see that T’Kan’s wife is addressing me in broken Xalthurian. She apparently knows of my refusal to update my translator chip.

“My darling bird, he is rubbing at one of his hearts, not his stomach,” T’Kan says with a chiding click. “Remember our

lesson on the differences between Xalthurian and hu'man anatomy?"

His wife laughs and says something I do not understand in New Terrhan.

Meanwhile, I quickly drop my hand. My real stomach fills up with shame as the ship sets down with a gentle bump on the planet I swore to never return to after I woke up in the former Health Minister's private office.

T'Kan claps me on the shoulder. "You are worried about seeing her again."

I blink up at him. *How does he know about the female?* My father had all reports of the incident erased from my official file. But T'Kan was on the same ship, leading that solar's Culling Force. I do not remember my shameful behavior, but perhaps he does.

T'Kan lets out a sympathetic click. "Given the history between my cousin and your cousin, I can understand how hard it will be to control your emotions when you perform your interview and exam."

Oh, he is talking about his cousin, N'Maryah N'Vaise.

My hearts fill with relief, even as my stomach takes on more shame for my secret thoughts.

Thankfully, I am saved from answering him by the depressurizing hiss of the exit doors. They open to reveal a landing strip and, beyond that, a small crowd of hu'mans and a few Xalthurian males who will be making the trip back to our home planet after their custodial visits.

N'Maryah, wearing the same kind of rough cloth dress as the natives, stands toward the front of the crowd, along with a short male and the team of medical technicians I put in place to monitor her gestation.

No, she was most certainly not lying about her pregnant state fourteen lunar cycles ago. After a full year of gestation, her arms are wrapped around a moonstone-colored baby with swirls that match the skin color of the short male at her side.

The first xalling to be born to a Xalthurian female in over two decades.

Yet, I only glance at the swirled moonstone xalling before turning my attention to the rest of the crowd.

My hearts clench with an unexpected anticipation as I scan the waiting hu'mans.

But no... none of them are the female who supposedly threw me into the most severe case of Ceremonial Mind Rot my predecessor had ever seen.

I should be relieved. I *am* relieved. I have no wish to see that female again.

But something sours in my stomach. And the memory of those brown eyes staring back at me fills my mind. As if the events before the Breeding Ceremony took place yesterday, not solars ago.

“Mal L’Gon! Mal L’Gon!” my team of medical technicians call out to me, wiping away the memory I should not be indulging.

Right. Interview N’Maryah. Get off this infernal planet. These are my only two points of business here.

I wipe all thoughts of that hu'man from my mind and march over to where my team is standing with N’Maryah.

“You can give me your report as you take me to wherever I am meant to perform my interview and examination,” I tell them without bothering to acknowledge N’Maryah, her xalling, or the small hu'man who somehow managed to impregnate one of our Xalthurian females. “I do not wish to be subjected to this substandard planet any longer than necessary.”

“Yes, Mal L’Gon,” they answer right away before escorting me to the base ship T’Kan had retrofitted to serve as his permanent place of governance.

I will admit, the planet has undergone much improvement since T’Kan was put in charge.

Houses made of stone and thatch instead of mud line the widened dirt road. And all the fields that sat fallow and dry

when I visited the last time are full of fruits and vegetables. All of which I recognize, save one.

“What is that?” I ask W’Rn, the special medical team lead. I point to a crop with white tufts peeking out from the top of tall green stalks.

“It is actually a New Terrhan delicacy that the father of N’Maryah’s mate retro-bioengineered himself before his death,” W’Rn answers. “Apparently, not every hu’man is completely useless.”

“It is quite tasty,” another technician adds. “A botanical fruit that is eaten as both a vegetable and grain. Our Qel’s mother makes a delicious side dish with it called *cornbread*. It has become a favorite among the warriors assigned to the planet.”

“If you would like,” W’Rn offers, “I can have someone ask her to make some and send over a piece to the medical bay.”

So, this is a hu’man delicacy. I forcibly squash down the spark of curiosity and ask W’Rn, “Whyever would I wish to waste the time of any of my staff with such an endeavor?”

“Of course, you would not.” W’Rn flaps his ridges in obvious embarrassment. “I am sorry I suggested it, Mal L’Gon.”

“Yes, you should be sorry,” I answer... even as my eyes drift to the place where the hu’man female’s mud house once stood. It has been replaced with one of the much sturdier stone and wood structures.

Does she still live there? Perhaps with a husband and a full-hu’man child?

That sour feeling once again appears in my stomach.

“Prepare both subjects in separate rooms and download their latest test results onto a holoscreen,” I command W’Rn. “I want everything ready for me when I conduct my exams.”

“Yes, right away, Mal L’Gon,” W’Rn answers before issuing a set of orders to the rest of the team.

After that, I am given a wholly unnecessary tour of a medical bay that does not compare whatsoever to even the most rural clinic on Xalthuria.

Thankfully, I am soon told N'Maryah awaits me in Examination Room 3, along with a holo of her latest scans.

I have to contain a disgusted click when I enter what turns out to be a tiny gray space with a fold-out table, upon which N'Maryah sits. *This is what they refer to as an examination room?*

I can only wonder what the New Terrhans made do with before the Kel's hu'man enamored him into sending his most decorated warrior to rule over them, along with a base ship.

"Hello, L'Gon." N'Maryah greets me with a familiar click. As if we are longtime friends. Even though I despise her. "I doubt you imagined these would be the circumstances upon which we would meet again. How is L'Than, by the way? I occasionally think of him. He was so eager. Like my husband, but not nearly as charming."

I stare at the moonstone-colored female, unable to keep the ripple of rage from traveling up my ridges.

To think, L'Than had been so determined to have her. If he could see her now, speaking of a puny hu'man like he could ever be my cousin's equal.

"I will charm her into marrying me, and then Father will finally see I am a man of worth."

My hearts twist, remembering one of the last things my cousin said to me before his betrayal by this female.

I still cannot fathom that he ran away to an Amnesty Station with nothing but a holo, instructing us not to search for him.

Did he really believe he had no other choice but to flee? I would have protected him from his father's wrath, given him refuge in East House. If only he had consulted me first.

"So, you do not wish to update me on your cousin's well-being, then?" N'Maryah asks, interrupting my thoughts of bitter regret.

And I set my ridges back to neutral. I will not give her the satisfaction of knowing just how much damage she left in her wake.

Instead, I swipe a holoscreen into the air between us and circle a finger around its record button to commence the interview. “When did you realize that you carried the hu’man’s spawn?”

She tosses a strand of silver hair over her shoulder—a hu’man gesture she must have picked up since moving to this planet. “I am not certain. At first, I believed myself to be dying. I was constantly nauseous, and I could not keep any food down. I experienced a gassiness that would make me expel a sulfur-scented wind. It is Wang-Lei who suggested that I may be pregnant. My husband is incredibly smart, you see. Also understanding and patient with me.”

She lets out a happy click and looks off into the distance, as if thinking of him fondly.

“You are much different from the Elite I once knew,” I observe. “That you can click so happily when speaking of your inferior mate. There was a time when you were just as anti-hu’man as I am.”

She gives me another hu’man gesture—one of my cousin’s favorites. A raise of the shoulder to indicate her lack of concern. “My views have changed. I once believed they were lazy and inferior. But now I can see they are hard workers. And if the men are all excellent lovers, like my husband, then I understand why the females on this planet occasionally sing and smile as they go about their lowly survival work.”

“Note: The subject claims to have suffered from the pregnancy symptoms of hu’mans,” I say into the holoscreen’s recorder. “Xalthurian females have not reported any such symptoms in the annals of our history.”

Having noted that, I ignore the rest of her idiotic declarations and return my focus back to my list of interview questions. “How many times did you copulate with your hu’man before you discovered you had conceived?”

“I admit that, at first, I did not wish for him to touch me. He is so different from Xalthurian males. So fragile and small.” N’Maryah flaps her ridges, as if she is embarrassed by her completely correct assessment of her inferior mate. “But then Wang-Lei easily changed my mind after a few sessions of

what hu'mans refer to as *kissing*. We have no word for this act in our language. Basically, it is the pressing together of lips to show affection and intimacy, and I liked this *kissing*. I liked it very much.”

She lets out another happy click, followed by two of excitement. “Our sexual relations progressed rather thrillingly from there. His body composition differs much from Xalthurian males, but he makes up for it in other ways. You see, he uses his hands and mouth upon my mammary glands and genitalia in ways I would not have dared to imagine. And his special tactics call forth most pleasurable sensations. For example, he does this thing with his tongue that goes up and down, like this.”

She sticks out her tongue and flicks it in a rapid motion.

Is she serious? My ridges clap back with utter horror.

Yes, apparently, she is.

“Then he began to put his male organ in my female genitalia. And that produced the most amazing commotions inside of me—an excitement I can only describe as a quickening.” N’Maryah continues on, like she does not see or care about my abject disgust. “The first time this quickening happened, I was frightened by the trembling of my thighs and the way my breeding slit contracted around his—”

I can take no more. “How you copulate with that hu'man has no bearing on my research. I do not require those inconsequential details. You will answer my question about the timing of your impregnation as concisely as possible.”

N’Maryah rolls her eyes dramatically in yet another infuriating hu'man gesture. “Yes, I was impregnated within a few moons of our marriage ceremony, and then fourteen moons after that, Wang-Lei Junior arrived.”

Her gaze softens. “I never thought I would carry a xalling of my own, but Wang-Lei Junior is perfect. My hu'man husband has truly given me a gift beyond measure.”

I cannot form words. I can only stare at her, speechless.

“I am confused.” Her ridges flatten at my reaction to her obviously exaggerated—if not completely made-up—story. “Is this not what you wanted to hear, Mal L’Gon? The whole reason you came all the way to New Terrhan to interview me?”

“Yes, but nothing you have said has been of any help in my ongoing investigation,” I answer. “This interview has been a waste of my time.”

“I will forgive your rude treatment of me because I know you must be frustrated by your failures to find a cure.” N’Maryah lifts her chin in the air, looking much more like the haughty Elite I once knew. “Perhaps if you allow more Xalthurian females to come to New Terrhan and take mates of their own, then they, too, will also be impregnated.”

Her face lights up with an idea. “In fact, my husband has a friend who I would happily introduce to your sister, L’Nel. You see, he is very grouchy. And your sister is very sweet. And according to the many entertainments I have studied at the colony ship’s rom-com nights, that means they are secretly a perfect match—”

“You have gone too far. Stop recording!” I instruct into the holoscreen.

Then I turn back to the convict sitting in front of me.

“You will cease speaking of my sister,” I tell her. “Or my cousin. Or this idiotic notion of bringing any of our innocent Xalthurian females to this miserable planet ever again.”

“My notion is not idiotic,” N’Maryah answers, her ridges bristling with indignation. “You males have been coming down here and breeding for decades, while us females have been made to feel like there is something wrong with us because we were never given the chance to do the same. It is only fair that—”

“Do not speak to me of fair,” I hiss. “If you knew how many of us males suffered for our actions—how many of us continue to suffer—you would never invite my sister or any other Xalthurian female to share in your miserable fate.”

“But I am happy here,” she insists. “Happier than I ever could have imagined being on Xalthuria.”

“You are deranged,” I inform her. “How could you possibly say you are better off on this miserable planet?”

“You only believe that because you are a sad and arrogant male, who knows nothing of the power of hu’man love,” N’Maryah answers, proving my words about her mental state are true. “I feel pity for you.”

She feels pity for me?

I am a man of science and reason. But I cannot abide another moment of talking to this female.

I must get off this planet.

I swipe the holoscreen off and quit the tiny room. Obviously, if I am to find any good answers to my questions, they will come from the other two examination subjects.

But my further examinations—before my hasty return to Xalthuria—of the hybrid xalling and the male do not yield any answers to the mystery of how this happened. Nor does a near lunar cycle of poring over every single data point I collected and brought back with me from New Terrhan to our superior labs at the Ministry of Health.

Which puts me in the rather unhappy position of having to seek out the Kel in his throne room. This time without him sending me a request to visit him.

He is, once again, standing with his back to me when I enter the space at the top of the palace’s tallest spiral.

“My Kel, I apologize for arriving without a formal request,” I say with a quick touch to my ridges.

Then I get straight to the abhorrent reason for my visit. “The equipment on New Terrhan is simply not powerful enough to provide the level of examination I need to run on N’Maryah N’Vaise and her hybrid.”

“What is this?” he says, turning around as if I have caught him completely by surprise.

“Yes, I am afraid we must bring her here to my lab at the Ministry of Health for proper scans—”

I stop short when I see the male whose narrow form was hidden behind the Kel’s much more muscular one when I first entered the throne room.

My uncle stares at me, his ridges vibrating with rage.

“Uncle L’Rme?” I ask. “Why are you here?”

The Kel answers before he can. “Mal L’Gon, we have extraordinary news. N’Thn N’Vaise has been found. Along with our Qel’s sister.”

I frown, still confused.

Yes, I was aware that my old friend N’Thn had been discovered in a near-feral state on a Kaidorian prison ship, only to disappear again shortly after my return to Xalthuria from New Terrhan. And I am happy to hear he has been found.

But had not his wife’s dead sister been the subject of so many speeches about why the Xalthurians had to amend our Accord with the New Terrhans?

Also... “That does not explain my uncle’s presence. Or his obvious upset.”

“Oh yes. I forgot to mention L’Than Louxos.” The Kel lets a consternated ripple travel up his ridges. “Your cousin has also been found, along with N’Thn and the sister we all presumed dead.”

PART 4

RETURNS AND DISCOVERIES

FOURTEEN

ELLE

Kira and I are arguing again.

She and my parents cried like babies when I walked down the gangplank of the space lab prison ship the cross-species crew of former captives managed to land on Xalthuria.

“We thought you were gone forever!” my mom kept saying over and over again as the four of us held each other tight for the first time in what turned out to be nearly five years after my death.

They were so glad to see me, and I them.

But less than a month later, Kira and I are back to squabbling like we used to when we lived with our parents in a one-room mud house on New Terrhan.

“Can I please not go? *Please?*” I ask Kira on the morning of Nova’s wedding. “You can call it a welcome back from the dead gift!”

“Pretty sure being alive is the gift when it comes to the complicated process of bringing somebody out of stasis,” Kira shoots back. She’s standing above me on a sleek black dais where two yellow Xalthurians are dressing my little sister like a human doll in the low-cut gossamer dress she picked out for the ceremony. “Ask your newly revived son.”

Good point. I look down at the adorable baby, sleeping with his head propped on my shoulder, and drop a kiss into his cloud of black curls.

Mending stasis, as it turned out, wasn't actually a thing on Xalthuria. Jack's and my broken bodies had been collected from the bottom of the cliff I fell off, and we'd unwittingly taken part in yet another one of the brilliant-but-crazy evil Prime Minister's unsanctioned experiments in his space lab.

It took weeks for the scientists Kira called in to figure out how to safely bring Jack out of stasis. That's the only reason I didn't return to New Terrhan on the first ship I could get out of here, like our parents did soon after my arrival.

That's also the only reason I'm still here on Xalthuria. Begging my little sister for permission to not go to today's huge event.

No... my *older sister* now.

I fell off the cliff in New Terrhan, and thanks to what turned out to be nearly half a decade in stasis, I stepped off that ship into a whole new world where my now older sister has become the queen of our alien overlords.

"I'm so grateful for everything you've done for Jack and me," I tell her—before begging, "Can you please, please, please do me one more solid and let me skip this thing?"

"No! You cannot skip out on Nova and N'Thn's wedding!" Queen Kira—or *Qel Ki'Ra* as the Xals call her in their weird hiss and click language—throws me a disapproving look over the heads of her royal servants. Like I'm the hothead. Not her. "And why would you want to, anyway? This is basically a big party to celebrate all of you making it out of that evil space lab alive."

I roll my eyes.

Of course, she would try to spin it that way.

My formerly little sister now presides over me and the little red and brown-swirled hybrid I just got back out of stasis a few days ago. And unfortunately, she keeps seeming to forget that our whole lives had been literally stopped for years—all because of the nefarious race she's married into.

So yeah, maybe there's more hostility than necessary in my voice when I point out, "Nova is about to voluntarily marry a

huge green monster with razor-sharp teeth. She's basically lost her mind and thinks she's actually in love with a *Xal*. That's not anything I want to celebrate."

Kira pauses and then speaks a series of clicks and hisses that send the servants scurrying away.

I shift from foot to foot as they leave. Not just because Jack is three times heavier than a human five-month-old would weigh, but also because I already know why Kira told them to skedaddle.

In this new dynamic of ours, she can clear a room whenever she wants to scold me in private.

"We've talked about this, Elle," she says when we're alone.

"I know, I know," I answer. "I shouldn't have said that in front of your servants or handmaids—or whatever they are."

"They're my *people*," Kira says. "I'm their Qel, and don't forget, I married their Kel. For love. Just like Nova. Do you think I'm deranged too?"

I shift my eyes to the side.

Kira *does not* want to know my thoughts on her relationship with the Xalthurian king. Or her decision to dedicate the rest of her life to the race that bred our people like animals for years.

"I just want to go home with Jack," I answer instead. "We've already lost nearly five years of our lives. Going to a wedding feels like a waste of even more time."

Kira's expression becomes slightly more sympathetic. But then she asks, "Is that the *only* reason you don't want to go to Nova's wedding? Are you sure this doesn't have anything to do with a certain hybrid who keeps risking my husband's wrath with his many, many requests for an audience with you?"

I have no idea why requests to see me would make Kira's husband angry. And it's been weeks since we managed to overpower our captors and land that prison ship on Xalthuria.

But my heart speeds up at the thought of the hybrid I've been avoiding for nearly a month.

I am... I should be... your mate.

That's what he'd said to me in his stilted version of New Terrhan shortly before we landed. And as halting as his words had been, they'd somehow come off sounding like both a promise and a threat.

We'd only done what we had done out of desperation. Because we were prisoners in a sick experiment. It hadn't meant anything. I'd told him that—well, as best I could, considering the major language barrier between us.

Nonetheless, his last words to me have been tossing around in my head ever since. Along with flashes of the things we did in that cage. *Nasty*, terrible things that shouldn't still be causing my body to heat up every time I think of them. Or him.

Which was why I felt some kind of way when Nova told me she'd invited the hybrid to her wedding as well as her combined bridal and baby shower.

I'd managed to skip the baby/bridal shower thing, along with Kira, who noped out as soon as she discovered her archnemesis, N'Maryah, would be there. But even my sister planned to be at the wedding. After ensuring Xalthuria's first pregnant female in over two decades would not be in attendance, of course.

No, I don't want to face the grown hybrid again for more reasons than Kira knew.

Still, I insist, "This isn't about him. This is about getting Jack home, where he belongs, as soon as possible. Listen, Zinnia told me she and T'Kan are going back to New Terrhan after the ceremony. Let me go with them! Instead of attending this crazy wedding, I'll use that time to pack. There, all solved."

Kira raises an eyebrow at me. "Wow, Elle. Only been out of stasis for a month, and you're already back to coming up with solutions before anyone can say no to you."

I bat my eyes at her over Jack's shoulder. "Is it working?"

Kira laughs, but then shakes her head. “Your plan would be perfect if not for L’Than’s cousin, The Big Red Obstacle.”

I roll my eyes. *Not this guy again.*

The Big Red Obstacle is what Kira calls this one alien supremacist Council Member who’s been making her life miserable for years by arguing against every human-advancing proposal Kira presented to the planet’s Council. “What does he have to do with this?”

“What does he have to do with this? He watches our every move and takes any opportunity he can to undermine us!” Kira answers. “And, you know, I’m still not convinced he wasn’t the Big Bad giving our former Prime Minister orders on that prison ship, no matter how much D’Rek insists he’s too honorable to have done that.”

“Okay, well, having his own cousin locked up in a space prison lab is seriously fucked up, if that turns out to be the case,” I agree. “But again, what does The Big Red Obstacle have to do with Jack and me returning to New Terrhan after the ceremony?”

Kira frets her hands. Like she used to when we were kids and she’d done something she didn’t want to confess.

“What?” I ask, suddenly feeling like the big sister again for the first time since we landed back on Xalthuria. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Kira steps down from the dais, her face already scrunched up with apology. “Look, there were only a few people we could consult with about bringing Jack out of hyper-stasis, and they all work for the Health Ministry. We asked them to keep quiet, but apparently, one of them squealed.”

She lets out a regretful sigh before rushing out with, “The Big Red Obstacle knows my sister is here with a male baby, and he’s already asking why Jack hasn’t been handed over to the Health Ministry for genetic testing.”

My heart stops. And I’m hit with the sensation of falling through the air with Jack, even though I’m standing on solid

ground. “No! No testing! I’m not letting them take him from me again.”

I cling to Jack, my mind buzzing with panic at the thought of actually handing him over to the Xals this time.

“I know, I know, sis!” Kira grabs onto one of my forearms with a sympathetic look. “You’ve been through a lot, and I’m trying to be sensitive. But I can’t just pretend you don’t have a half-Xalthurian baby. The Big Red Obstacle will label it a royal overreach if I—”

“Oh, my fucking moons!” I shake her hands off my arm. “What good is being queen of this foul race if you can’t overreach for your sister?”

Kira draws back and gives me a censoring look. “It’s my *honor* to guide my people into a new age of peace with New Terrhan. And I didn’t accept this position to abuse my power. Even for you.”

I stare at her in disbelief.

Okay, Kira’s no longer the hotheaded little sister I remember. She’s a queen, and apparently, she takes her job seriously.

I’m torn between grudging respect and wanting to scream at her for being a traitor.

But in the end, I’m still a woman of science and reason. And I can tell when negotiation is the only option I have left.

“Fine, how about this?” I shift my heavy baby to my other shoulder. “I’ll go down to the Ministry of Health right now with Jack to get him tested. He stays in my arms the entire time—no taking him from me. And immediately after that, I get on the ship back to New Terrhan with Zinnia.”

Kira considers my words and nods. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. Jack was conceived before the end of the war, during a mostly soldier Breeding Ceremony. And many of those soldiers were sent into the last and bloodiest battle of the war with the Kaidorians. So, there’s a good chance the father isn’t even alive. And if that’s the case, we’ll just tell The Big Red Obstacle that we did our due diligence, and he’ll have to sue to

bring you back—in an interplanetary court system that’s already solars backed up with cases.”

She throws me an impressed grin. “Elle solves it for the win!”

Yep, nearly half a decade in stasis, but I’ve still got it, I begin to think.

“On one condition.” Kira holds up a finger, cutting off my self-congratulatory thought. “You have to go to Nova’s wedding with me and act like you’re happy for her. If you do that, I’ll make sure Zinnia and T’Kan hold off on leaving for New Terrhan for as long as it takes to get Jack tested afterward. But this way, if The Big Red Obstacle asks what’s up with your unregistered kid at the wedding, we can let him know we’re heading to the Ministry of Health right after the ceremony’s over.”

I shake my head. “Why is he going to be at Nova’s wedding if he hates humans so much?”

“Because he’s one of the groom’s best friends,” Kira answers, her voice flat and annoyed. “Believe me, I tried to get him uninvited, but I’d already used the queen card to get N’Maryah off the guest list.”

I let out an irritated huff and open my mouth to argue.

But then Jack chooses that moment to come awake.

His entire face lights up when he sees me, and he immediately begins babbling at me with clicks and hisses.

“Yes, I was just pretending like your mother actually had a choice about attending our friend Nova’s wedding this afternoon,” my sister answers Jack in that same baby tone she uses with her kids.

She has two of them now and another on the way, according to the alarming toilet in her sleeping suite, which not only flushes, but also analyzes your waste and flashes full health reports of its findings in both Xalthurian and New Terrhan on its top screen.

“Nova’s not my friend,” I grumble. “She’s my former prison mate.”

“You know, pointing out that you two were locked up together only makes me more adamant about you going to her wedding, right?”

Kira squints at me, even though her vision is now better than 20/20 thanks to some magical mending machine her husband put her in when he dragged her to Xalthuria.

And Jack pats my cheek with his tiny taloned hand, giving me a look that reads a lot like, *C'mon, stop fighting it, Mommy. You know she's going to make you go, whether you like it or not.*

“Okay, fine!” I give in with a noisy sigh. “One wedding. A few tests. And then I get to return to New Terrhan with Jack at the end of the day.”

“It's a deal,” Kira answers with a huge smile.

And Jack lets out a cheerful baby squeal, like he understood every word we said.

Seriously, could he be any more adorable? Or worth protecting?

“Soon,” I whisper, hugging him to me tight. “Soon, we'll be home, and this nightmare will finally be over.”

FIFTEEN

L'GON

“Why do you look so glum, Cousin?” L'Than asks as we walk toward the part of the palace gardens where my old friend N'Thn will, unfortunately, be swearing his fealty to a hu'man at midday. “We are attending a wedding, not a funeral pyre.”

L'Than and I are about to fall into another argument. I can already tell.

L'Nel, my aunt, and I greeted his return to West House with relieved hearts. And I even spoke with Uncle L'Rme before he and my father went to collect his son to ensure that L'Than would feel welcomed back in his own home.

“Solars have passed, and he has learned many lessons,” I assured my uncle. “He will return much chastened. There is no reason for you to add to his bitter regret with more admonishment.”

When I received the news of my cousin's return after his wretched solars of imprisonment in N'Ure's breeding program, I'd expected to find him a shadow of his former self—perhaps even as crazed as N'Thn had been for a while after his time in the Kaidorian fighting pens.

To some extent, I was correct.

L'Than has been much quieter since his return. His smile is no longer ever-present.

However, when he does speak, the words that come out of his mouth are so outrageous they incite my uncle into fits of umbrage. And *that* is often when my hybrid cousin chooses to flash his increasingly rare smile.

L'Than is still charming, attends many Elite parties, and spends much time with his fauns. However, as I discovered a few day cycles ago, this is not necessarily because he has returned to his old self.

The last time I went to check on him at East House, I found L'Than in the stables, making what turned out to be a large transaction with a well-known faun racer from the northern provinces.

“Are you in the business of selling your fauns instead of racing them now?” I asked him after the famous rider left with the son of a mare on which L'Than had won several races before his untimely departure from Xalthuria.

“Of course I am,” he answered, an amused ripple traveling up his half-ridge. “Why do you think I have been so adamant about attending parties as of late?”

“Because you wish to carry on with your life as you did before your unfortunate imprisonment,” I guessed, quite reasonably.

Only to receive a look from L'Than that insinuated my supposition was nowhere close to the truth.

“No, L'Gon. I am making connections for my faun breeding business because I require funds to become a male of worth for my future mate,” L'Than replied. “I do not imagine Father allowing her to move into West House, do you?”

This was the most disturbing change of all in my cousin.

Before he left, L'Than had been obsessed with proving himself to his father by convincing N'Maryah to marry him.

But that was before he caught a severe case of Ceremonial Mind Rot during his time aboard N'Ure's space lab. Since his return, he has become obsessed with proving his worth—not to his father, but to the sister of the Kel's hu'man. Some female named Elle.

There was a time when L'Than was so enamored with N'Maryah, a then perfect example of full Xalthurian femininity, he inadvertently got himself mixed up in her machinations to win the Kel for herself. One would think his subsequent imprisonment in a secret hu'man breeding lab

would have been enough to turn him off of females—hu'man or Xalthurian—forever, but no.

A lunar cycle after his return, I find myself having to endure my cousin's cheerfulness over yet another Xalthurian-hu'man wedding.

“And behold our beautiful surroundings!” L'Than insists, spreading his arms to indicate the tall, purple-leaved palm trees and well-manicured ebony bushes. Multicolored flowers line the path and emit a sweet scent as we walk by them.

I grudgingly concede his point about the extraordinary beauty of the palace garden. Marital celebrations rarely take place here—mainly because weddings are traditionally meant to be a private indoor contract signing, with only the bride's and groom's families in attendance.

However, ceremonies with parties to follow are becoming more common these days in the kingdom city. For some reason, hu'mans love to hold these unorthodox affairs outside.

It has only been a few solars since the signing of the updated Accord with New Terrhan, but the number of marriages has already climbed into the hundreds. Our only recently established Ministry of Immigration has been inundated with application forms. And so many hu'mans have moved into our kingdom city, one can no longer go anywhere without seeing those ridgeless, sub-standard females.

For those reasons and more, I answer my cousin most frankly. “It is the same as attending a funeral pyre. Yet another one of my comrades has fallen victim to Ceremonial Mind Rot, and in the throes of this disease has decided to marry a reprehensible hu'man.”

“Careful, L'Gon. I am half hu'man,” L'Than says, the affable smile falling away from his face. “And do not forget, my future mate will also be in attendance at this wedding.”

Another ripple of disgust goes up my nose.

“Are you referring to a Xalthurian female you have not introduced me to yet?” I ask with a testy click. “Or are you

referring to that delinquent hu'man who has neither accepted your holos nor presented her male xalling for genetic testing?"

L'Than flattens his ridges but then seems to decide. "Even if she is purposefully ignoring my calls, I understand. She has suffered greatly, and it does not help that the only Xalthurian she knows intimately happens to be related to someone our Qel and her many supporters call The Big Red Obstacle."

I purse my lips. Only L'Than would dare to reference that *nickname* to my face.

But I let it go. I have several problems on my mind right now. There is still an investigation undergoing about W'Rn, a trusted member of my staff, who turned out to have abetted in the kidnappings of both N'Thn and No'Va.

I can still hardly believe it. He was the lead on the N'Maryah study, the second in an Elite family line, and he had a bright future in front of him.

But shortly after the former Prime Minister's space lab landed, he vaporized himself, leaving nothing behind but a note lamenting how far Xalthuria had fallen since the signing of the New Accord.

It is obvious he did not work alone, but so far, we cannot figure out who, other than N'Ure, was giving him his orders.

I do not like the feeling that there was a silent mastermind fueling N'Ure's lab. Perhaps one who, unlike N'Ure, is still residing here on Xalthuria.

There is also the matter of N'Maryah.

That convicted criminal was invited back to Xalthuria at my behest in hopes of finding a cure for our females' infertility. But her medical visit has been a complete disaster.

In fact, her appearance back on our home planet has spurred an event I could not have predicted. Several Council Members with daughters have told me that she has shown up at their private residences to lobby this insane idea of letting Xalthurian females start crossbreeding with the hu'mans, too.

Stars in the sky. I should have assigned a guard to that duplicitous female before letting her off that wretched red dirt planet.

“There she is with her xalling!” L’Than says, pulling me from my work thoughts just as we arrive at a small field in the garden, where several blankets have been laid upon the ground. “I am going to go talk to her.”

“Who?” I ask him with an irritable hiss.

I only see N’Maryah standing with my sister, L’Nel.

Most likely filling her head up with more nonsense about how attentive and wonderful hu’man men are. Apparently, the Ceremonial Mind Rot can infect both genders.

And yes, N’Maryah has her hybrid xalling on her hip. But why would L’Than want to talk to the female who used and betrayed him?

“Elle,” L’Than answers, correcting my original supposition. “She’s right over there, standing with our Qel.”

Elle, again. The fact that this hu’man is in possession of a male xalling, whose father is surely another Xalthurian, seems not to bother L’Than nearly as much as it does me. My ridges ripple with more irritation as I turn to look at the hu’man who has put my cousin in such a state of Ceremonial Mind—

My ridges do not merely stop rippling but freeze in place at the sight of the female with a red and brown swirled xalling perched on her hip, talking to Qel Ki’Ra.

This Elle...it is *her*. The female whose brown eyes I have been drowning in for solars. Again and again, even after the millo cut out the rest.

The beautiful garden and the other wedding guests fall away, leaving only her. Her and the xalling in her arms. A red hybrid with brown swirls that match her skin.

My hearts thunder in my ears, louder than any storm. For even without a genetic sample, I already know.

The male xalling in her arms is *mine*.

SIXTEEN

L'THAN

“Marriage is a symbol of unification on both of our planets. This pledge of fidelity between a former prisoner of war and the hu'man mother of his girl child is a promise, not just between the bride and groom, but also between our worlds....”

From a raised platform above the blankets, the Kel officiates the wedding ceremony of N'Thn, the green Xalthurian prisoner who turned out to be my cousin's good friend, and his hu'man mate, who is called No'Va.

Meanwhile, I stare at the back of Elle's head, willing her to turn around.

Look at me, Gift. Look at me.

But she ignores my silent order now, just as she ignored me earlier when I called her name before the ceremony, eager to show off my New Terrhan language package download. Also, I wanted to meet the xalling, who had still been in hyper-stasis when we landed.

But after a quick glance my way, she turned her back to me, appearing to be overly invested in the orders the Qel was giving the palace guard.

Though that might have been a legitimate conflict of attention. Afterward came a big scene, where N'Maryah and her moonstone xalling were escorted out of the palace gardens on the Qel's order.

Apparently, she had shown up, despite not being invited.

“This is not fair!” she shouted as a palace guard tugged her from the space with a hand around her xalling-free arm. “I am the First Mother of Xalthuria, and No’Va is my second bestie!”

First Mother of Xalthuria? L’Gon would not like that bit of self-rebranding from the convict who was only here because he had allowed her to return to her home planet for further testing.

I turned back to where I left my cousin, expecting to see L’Gon standing there with his ridges set in a furious bunch.

But he had disappeared, and just as I was about to go look for him, his sister, L’Nel, came over to grab me.

“Come sit with me,” she insisted, pulling me toward the spot where I had seen her standing earlier with N’Maryah. “I have spread out a couple of blankets for us.”

I frowned down at her, and the tongue I had been finding it hard to quell since my return to Xalthuria once again lashed out.

“For us?” I asked, raising my half-ridge. “Or for you and N’Maryah?”

Her own ridges fell. “L’Than, I know she is your enemy, but you must understand. She is the first Xalthurian female my age to fall pregnant. Of course, I had to speak to her. She fills me with such hope after so long without it. And you know, L’Gon is not any closer to solving this issue. Perhaps he should consider—”

L’Nel was cut off by the Kel announcing the start of the ceremony.

L’Gon never reappeared, even after his good friend N’Thn and his hu’man walked onto the platform.

And now my mate is pretending she is not aware of my presence, even though I sit only a few blankets behind her.

On the platform, N’Thn stares down at his bride with adoring eyes, and No’Va smiles up at him as they clasp hands.

I blink and see myself and Elle standing on the same platform in front of the crowd. Then, I blink again, and N’Thn and

No'Va reappear.

Stars in the sky. My wish for this future with Elle rings so fervent in my hearts that I have begun to hallucinate.

I return my attention to the back of her head and try again.
Look at me, my gift.

But she continues to stare straight ahead at the platform. In a way that feels like defiance.

Essh! It has been nearly an entire lunar cycle since my return to Xalthuria, and we have not seen each other once. *How can she bear it? Does she truly not suffer as I do?*

To use an idiom I learned from Qel Ki'Ra, those questions *eat away at me* as I watch N'Thn and No'Va connect pinkies and press lips in some strange hu'man wedding custom.

Afterward, the newly married couple turns to the crowd of guests and waves as Zinnia, the New Terrhan Qel Regent, launches into a melodic throatbox song about wanting to be with someone everywhere.

I have never before heard this type of singing. But it strikes me as the perfect background piece as I launch myself off the blanket to go to the female I wish to be with everywhere.

Unfortunately, my only female cousin has other ideas.

“You cannot rush away yet!” L'Nel says, jumping to her feet to block my way. “Many of my friends have asked to speak with you during the hu'man *reception*. They wish to hear your story about escaping from the former Prime Minister's evil space lab.”

I inwardly sigh. L'Nel remains a very sweet female. I can tell she is trying to make up for the betrayal of talking to the daughter of the male who imprisoned me for solars. And I appreciate her effort to make amends.

Just not at this particular moment.

“You can relay the story to them yourself, dear cousin,” I reply in a rush before trying to sidestep her. “I do not mind.”

“But you tell it so well,” L’Nel insists, stepping back in front of me.

Then, as if on command, I am swarmed by several of her maiden friends.

“Yes, L’Than, you must tell us the story.” A purple female I vaguely recognize from one of the Elite families brushes her talon over my bare chest.

I flinch away from her touch.

“Whatever is wrong with you?” she asks. “You never minded my intimacies before.”

“Yes, I did not mind your bold intimacies before,” I answer with a cold click. “Before my capture, when I had intimacies I did not want or ask for forced upon me.”

She and the other females stare back at me blankly. Reminding me of why I was so eager to find Elle. She would understand. She is the only female in this universe who truly understands me.

I look over the vapid heads of my audience to seek her out, and my hearts stop.

Elle stands with her sister, who is congratulating the bride and groom. But Elle... *my gift*... she is staring directly at me.

My hearts leap inside my lower torso.

But then her eyes flash with some bright emotion and she looks away, angrily crossing her arms over her xalling’s back.

Hold on...

Is she...?

I search my language download for the list of inflammatory emotions in New Terrhan. *Anger*... Not quite... *Fear*... No, I do not believe so... *Jealousy*?

Yes, that is the word I am searching for! Is she *jealous*? Does she truly believe any of these females compare to her?

Yes, in the past, I have enjoyed their attention. However, now my hearts are set on only one. My gift, who is standing with

the hybrid who will become my son.

I cannot take my eyes off of her. So, I do not.

Look at me, I mentally instruct again, trusting that my unspoken words will somehow meet her ears this time.

“L’Than! L’Than!” a voice asks somewhere near to me. “Are you listening to anything I just said?”

No, I am not. The hu’man who will be my mate has become my entire universe.

I only see her. I only listen to her. I wish to be everywhere with only her.

As if in reward for my faith, her jealous gaze lifts back to mine.

And this time, I do not let it go.

Look at me, I instruct again. *Stop pretending you do not see your future mate.*

I move forward, and the sea of females surrounding me parts.
Look at me.

She glances away, sinking my hearts.

But then they rise again when her eyes come right back to mine. As if we are magnetized. Fated. Meant to be.

“Where is he going?” someone asks behind me. “Why is he staring at the Qel’s sister like that?”

The words fade as I move forward.

Do you really believe any of those females could hold my attention the way you do? I silently ask her.

Of course, I receive no response from her, but her expression has changed, I notice.

She now looks the way I feel—have felt since the moment she appeared in my cage. Helpless. Like she cannot stop staring at me, the way I cannot stop staring at her as I close the space between us.

But then her expression changes again. To one of utter horror.

She clutches her xalling closer, and I realize she plans to run.

“Do not run, Elle!” I call out to her, in perfect New Terrhan this time, thanks to the language download I received just a few days after my return to Xalthuria.

I rush forward to stop her from running away from me. From us. From the family we could be if she just agreed to talk to me.

But then a strong hand catches my shoulder, staying my forward progress.

I hiss in frustration and turn on the person holding me back. Who would dare to—

“*Essh*,” I say when see it is L’Gon, surrounded by a contingent of Council Guards.

My ridges flap with confusion. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Stand aside, Cousin.”

He pushes me out of the way with a firm hand. His movement catches me by surprise, and I nearly lose my footing.

My cousin’s eyes are focused on the xalling in Elle’s arms.

I do not understand what is happening.

Until, suddenly, I do.

My gaze switches from Elle to her hybrid xalling, who is red underneath his swirls of hu’man skin. Like me.

Too much like me. My hearts drop. There are millions of red Xalthurians on this planet, but could it be possible?

Is my cousin the father of Elle’s xalling?

“Make sure he does not interfere,” L’Gon says to two of the Council Guards, as if in answer to my question.

My shock turns to horror when the Council Guards grab me by both arms, and I realize what he plans to do.

“*WHERE IS MY BABY???*”

The memory of my gift’s anguished scream fills my mind as I yell after him, “No! L’Gon, do not! You cannot do this to her!”

My words have no effect. L'Gon keeps moving forward.
Toward Elle. Toward my future bride.

“No!” I fight to break free, but the guards shove me to the ground, pinning me there with their staffs and armored knees.

Every vision, every dream I had for Elle and me is suddenly shattering like glass.

And in the end, I find myself yelling the opposite of my earlier command. “Run, Gift! *You must run!*”

SEVENTEEN

ELLE

The huge red alien who hauled me out of the straw—the one I'm pretty sure is the father of my hybrid baby—he has returned. And this time, he has Reapers with him.

For moments on end, I stare at the ghost, completely dumbfounded.

Then I squeeze the baby I only just got back to me and take off.

“What’s wrong? What’s going on?” my sister asks, just like she did that fateful day when the Reapers came charging at us through the field.

“Run, Gift, run!” L’Than yells at the same time.

Then, suddenly, I’m back on that cliff and falling, falling...

I wake up with a jerk. Inside another nightmare. The worst one yet. Because it’s actually happening, and there’s no waking up from this stone-cold reality.

I’m in a black steel cage. Again.

This one isn’t located on a spaceship, though. It has bars instead of a glass wall, and it sits beneath the Ministry of Health’s otherwise non-descript government building.

Why do the Xals keep holding cells underneath the place meant to oversee its people’s well-being? I have no idea. And I don’t care. Now or yesterday, when those Reapers threw me in here after ripping Jack out of my arms.

Scrambling to my feet, I immediately resume what I was doing yesterday before I apparently passed out.

“Where is my baby?” I demand, fisting my hands around the bars and shaking them as hard as I can. My throat still feels raw from all the yelling I did yesterday. But I can think of nothing—*nothing* but getting my son back.

“Let me out of here!” I scream. “Give me back my baby! Give me back my son!”

Yesterday, nobody answered my demands and pleas. Not even Kira, the new queen of this foul race, appeared to make the latest version of this cruel nightmare stop.

But, to my surprise, a door at the other side of the holding cells slides open, and the huge red alien walks in, followed by one of the green scientists who worked on bringing Jack out of stasis.

I crane my neck to stare up at the Xal Kira calls The Big Red Obstacle. His ceremonial cloth has been replaced by a white, floor-length, sleeveless shift. And unlike me, he’s actually aged.

But other than that, he’s just as I remember him—extremely tall and muscular with scaled skin the color of rubies. He stares down at me with the same silver, diamond-shaped eyes. Only his silky white hair has changed.

He wore it in a top knot back when he hauled me to his ship for the Breeding Ceremony. Maybe it wasn’t as long back then. Now, it hangs to his waist, draped over both shoulders in the style favored by the pro-human Council Members who occasionally drop by Kira’s suite of rooms to talk with her in private.

The Big Red Obstacle is probably considered handsome among his people, I grudgingly admit. But to me, he is a monster. And he has Jack.

“Where is he?” I demand, balling my fists at my side. “Where is my baby?”

The red Xal stares back at me for a hard, blank moment. Then turns to the green scientist standing beside him with an impatient look.

“I will translate,” the green scientist quickly tells me in perfect New Terrhan. Using the language download Kira ordered for him when she conscripted him to get Jack out of stasis, no doubt.

Traitor:

But it’s not like I have any other choice. I open my mouth to once again ask after my son, but The Big Red Obstacle says something in the Xal’s click-hiss language before I can.

The green scientist nods and says, “Mal L’Gon would like you to know we originally built these cages to keep younger women safe from the Extinction Virus.”

What? I ask, “What does this have to do with—”

The Big Red Obstacle cuts me off with another huge dump of clicks and hisses.

Which the green scientist quickly translates. “At that time, the predecessor of Mal L’Gon believed that the young females’ survival meant they had not been affected by that terrible virus. But of course, we soon discovered the damage to our female population had already been done. Alas, even the last generation of female xallings born after the virus tore through our galaxy could not bear children when they grew up. The sister of Mal L’Gon is one of those females.”

“Okay, sorry to hear that. But why are you telling me all of this when my son—”

I’m once again cut off by more clicks and hisses from The Big Red Obstacle before I can finish asking my question.

Then the green traitor says, “Mal L’Gon knows that your planet teaches you little of our species’s history. He wonders if you are aware that this is why both the Xalthurians and Kaidorians call the malady that rendered our females unable to procreate the Extinction Virus.”

They both look at me, and it takes me a few ticks of silence to realize they actually want me to answer this time.

“Yes, of course, I’m *aware*,” I reply through gritted teeth. “Every female from my generation on New Terrhan grows up

hyper-aware that our deal with the Xalthurians was made because your females can't bear children, and you fear the extinction of your race. But I don't care about that. Not even a little bit. *Where is Jack?*"

The green scientist nods and turns to hopefully repeat what I said word for word to his horrible boss.

After he's done, The Big Red Obstacle slits his eyes at me and replies with a short bit of Xalthurian.

"Who is Jack?" the green scientist translates.

Rage boils my blood.

"Jack is my son, you fucking monster," I reply, looking straight at the red Xal. "The *baby* you ripped out of my arms at your best friend's wedding."

"Oh, you speak of the xalling," the scientist says before translating my words to his boss.

Who answers with a heavy frown.

"From what Mal L'Gon understands, your people were under strict orders not to name our progeny before the New Accord was signed. But he supposes that is yet another rule you have decided to break. And he has graciously agreed to let me tell you that he has been installed at his father's place of residence now that a DNA test has confirmed that the xalling belongs to Mal L'Gon."

I understand that the Xal's click and hiss language doesn't allow for tonal variety. So often everything they say, even with a language download pack, sounds monotone.

But still, I can't believe they're being so cold and callous about taking my baby from me.

I want to spit—to *scream* and throw myself at the prison bars.

But no... I have to stay calm. I can't let this bastard make me lose my mind.

Even though everything inside of me is vibrating with anger, I force myself to appear just as cold and removed as the red Xal on the other side of the bars.

“You hate humans,” I point out, directing a forcibly calmed gaze at The Big Red Obstacle. “That’s all Kira talks about. Surely, you don’t want to keep him. He’s probably crying up a storm right now, making your life all sorts of miserable. You should return him to me. Let me take him back to New Terrhan.”

The green scientist nods, as if he understands my argument, and translates for the guy he keeps calling Mal L’Gon. I can only assume that’s some kind of title, like the Kel I’m supposed to add to D’Rek whenever I speak my sister’s husband’s name out loud.

Mal L’Gon tilts his head and regards me like a bug as he answers.

The scientist’s expression becomes somewhat sheepish as he translates. “He would like me to point out that you are taking this much better than your sister. She had to be held back by our Kel when Mal L’Gon informed her you would be kept in our facility on charges of kidnapping and failure to register your xalling, pending further judgment.”

Wait, not only had Mal L’Gon taken Jack from me, he was planning to keep me in this jail and try me for not one, but two crimes?

Fear grips my heart. “I was going to do that after the ceremony. I was planning to come straight to the Ministry of Health with Jack. Did Kira tell you that?”

Another translation back and forth, and the green scientist’s expression becomes even more reluctant. “Yes, that is what your sister claimed. She also refuted the declaration that Mal L’Gon could claim exclusive custody of his xalling since your copulation happened before the signing of the new agreement between our races. It is all very messy now, and he suspects you will be here for quite a while as we untangle it.”

My stomach lurches. It feels like I’m going to throw up. “You don’t care about Jack. You just want an excuse to go against Kira. You’re using a baby—*my* baby—as a pawn in your senseless political games!”

The Big Red Obstacle speaks without waiting for his underling to translate what I said.

“We have updated you,” the green scientist informs me when he’s done. “Mal L’Gon will leave you to your screaming protest now.”

They turn to go, and my righteous indignation gives way to panic.

“No, no,” I call after them. “What do you want me to do to let me see Jack? I’ll do anything. Please. *Anything.*”

I can’t hear the green scientist over my pleas, but he must translate at least some of what I said because his boss stops short. And turns back to face me.

The years fall away, and suddenly it feels like we’re back in my red mud house on New Terrhan with me pleading for Kira’s life.

“Do you want me to beg again?” I ask him.

I’m so desperate, so very wild to see my son, I get down on my knees without waiting for an answer. I have no pride—not when it comes to Jack. “Okay, I’m begging you, *begging* you.”

The Big Red Obstacle stares down at me. His expression is unreadable, but he holds himself so still it almost feels like he’s vibrating.

And he doesn’t switch his gaze to the translator when he speaks this time.

The green scientist gapes at Mal L’Gon for a second. But then he snaps his mouth closed and tells me, “On Xalthuria, supplicants lower their heads all the way to the floor when making a significant request,” he says, cutting me off. “Mal L’Gon has observed that your hu’man chin remains rather high in the air.”

Wow.

Okay...

My bones scream with outrage, but I do it. I lower the entire front half of my body. Bow my head until it touches the cold

floor. “Please, let me see Jack. I’m begging you.”

A click-hiss exchange. Then the green scientist says, “Better. Now apologize.”

I snap my lowered head right back up. “Apologize? Apologize for what?”

Mal L’Gon glares down at me and speaks without waiting for my question to be translated.

Then the green scientist says, “On Xalthuria, looking someone directly in the eye is considered an invitation to battle. Mal L’Gon wonders if that is your intention?”

I grit my teeth. I’d love to battle, actually. I’d love to disappear the bars between us and smash my fist into his arrogant face—

Jack, I remind myself, cutting off those violent thoughts. *Jack*.

I bite down on my back teeth and bow my head back to the hard floor.

“What would you like me to apologize for?” I ask again in the sweetest tone I can manage.

The answers come after another click-hiss exchange.

“Mal L’Gon says you will apologize for ignoring the original Accord and hiding from him on that pile of red dirt you call a planet,” the green scientist answers. “You will apologize for running from the Xalthurian collection force with his xalling. Mal L’Gon rightly points out that if you had not done either of those things, you would not currently be in this situation.”

Hot, angry tears gather in the corners of my eyes, but I choke down my pride. “Okay, I apologize. I apologize for hiding. I apologize for running. I apologize for anything you want me to feel sorry about.”

Silence.

I keep my head down and my voice as deferential as possible to ask, “Can I see Jack now? I really...”

Tears clog my throat, and I have to swallow them down to finish. “I really need to see him. He must feel so alone. So scared.”

More silence.

I wait. And wait. Wait as long as I can.

But eventually, I dare to look up—only to find the space they occupied outside of my cage completely empty.

The Big Red Obstacle and his traitorous green scientist are gone. Just gone.

No....

No!

I jump to my feet and shake the bars, screaming, “You have to let me see Jack. I begged. I apologized. Now let me see my son. He needs me! Please, *please*, let me out of here!”

No one answers. No one comes.

And eventually, I can’t scream anymore. I collapse back onto the hard cell floor. Sobbing so hard it feels like my chest bones will shatter along with my heart.

“*Gift...*”

A whisper in the dark.

I wonder if I’m hallucinating. *Another dream, maybe?*

But then I look up to see the last person I expected to come find me in this hell hole.

L’Than... Yes, it’s really him. He stands above me, looking much like an angel, in robes of white, intricately embroidered with golden thread.

EIGHTEEN

L'GON

I can count this day as a win.

Despite my *diijo's* odd reaction to the hybrid's birth vessel kneeling in front of me, I managed to walk away and leave that duplicitous hu'man to fester in her many crimes against the Old Accord.

"This proves, without a doubt, that I am no longer under the influence of Ceremonial Mind Rot," I tell my father as we climb the stairs to the ocean-facing sleeping suite where my household staff set up a care pod for the seized xalling.

When we enter his new quarters, we find the hybrid snoozing quite peacefully underneath the pod's window. In direct contrast to the drama his discovery has incited.

"He was given a sedative after we removed him from the illegal custody of his birth vessel, so there is no need to worry about waking him," I tell my father as we come to stand on either side of the hybrid's pod. "And, speaking of things we do not need to worry about further, after I left the errant birth vessel to await her criminal trial, I ordered the Council Guards to seize N'Maryah and deposit her and her xalling on a cargo ship headed directly to New Terrhan tomorrow morning. No longer will she be able to spread her unfounded claims among the Elite daughters."

I wait, expecting my father to relay his admiration for how well I have managed this shocking turn of events. However, instead of flapping with approval, his ridges remain neutral.

“You must be closer than reported to solving the infertility issue, then,” he says, running his hand over the windowed lid of the hybrid’s care pod. “You have perhaps given our Kel justification for any decision he makes in regard to our family line at the next bequeathal cycle.”

Oh. I understand his lack of reaction now. This is my father’s diplomatic way of saying I have crossed the Kel, and if I do not justify my appointment with a cure for infertility, I will most definitely be removed from my position as Minister of Health.

I, too, look down to regard the xalling. My xalling.

Even though I took immediate action as soon as I discovered his existence, I continue to feel a jolt of shock whenever I gaze upon him.

I must admit, he is quite... engrossing. He dozes with a melodic trill I have never heard before. And his deposits of unnecessary human fat are not as off-putting as one might assume. In truth, one might even go as far as to call the round-cheeked look of him appealing.

I only have a vague xallinghood memory of going to visit my new cousin, L’Than, after he was delivered to West House. Was he also this engrossing and easy to look upon back then? If so, it is easy to reconcile why I have always enjoyed his presence in my family, despite him only being half Xalthurian.

Perhaps, with time, I will come to feel in a similar way about the hybrid I was certain I did not want when I traveled to New Terrhan for The Breeding Ceremony.

“The comprehensive physical exam and genetic sequencing we performed on N’Maryah N’Vaise will most certainly yield the answers we seek,” I assure my father and myself. I forcibly remove my gaze from the sleeping hybrid. “Then we will shut down the crossbreeding program, and I will procure a wife so the Louxos Line will have a true heir.”

My father looks up from the xalling’s care pod, his ridges clapping back with surprise. “The discovery of this hybrid does not change your resolve? I thought perhaps it would.”

“No, Father,” I answer. “Unlike you, I have not gentled my views on this topic. The hybrid is a necessary component in the hopefully precedent-setting case Uncle L’Rmie and I will bring against the New Accord. But other than that, the discovery of this hybrid only makes it more important than ever that I secure a true heir for our family’s future.”

“You are already under tremendous pressure as the head of our family line, a Member of Council, the Minister of Health, and now this...” Father cast a worried look toward the hybrid. “Perhaps the loss of the Council seat would not be so terrible. I am concerned about how you will fare under all of these burdens.”

“There is no need for concern,” I assure him with a chiding click. “Look upon this hybrid. He is at peace. His birth vessel is contained. N’Maryah is on the ship that will return her to New Terrhan. And I am on the brink of undoing the compulsory custody agreement the Kel forced through the Council. Everything is working in my favor. I will win these battles. Not just for Louxos, but for all of Xalthuria.”

Father looks to both sides, his ridges conflicted. But in the end, he draws himself up to his full height and says, “You are my son. And it is my fault you have been put in this position. Whatever you decide, know that you have my support and my pride.”

I nod, hearts moved by his words. “Thank you, Father. And cease your worry. The situation is under my complete control, and I will not fail you and the Louxos Line this time.”



CAN *nothing be done to soothe this xalling?*

The situation is no longer under my complete control.

Whatever pride I felt during that moment with my father has completely evaporated—along with the hybrid’s sedative—early the next morn.

I click with alarm as the red and brown-swirled hybrid screams inside his care pod. At decibels that can be heard throughout my house.

He has balled his tiny, clawed hands into fists. And instead of clicking and hissing as a full xalling would, he kicks his chubby legs in the air while water runs down the sides of his face. *This cannot be normal!*

“Hello, Brother, I have come to share a morning meal with you. And to visit my new nephew, of cour—Stars in the sky, is Nephew the source of all that clamor I heard from the time I arrived?”

My sister, L’Nel, joins me at the side of the xalling’s care pod. “Why is so much liquid coming out of his eyes?”

“I do not know,” I answer. “And the servants’ shift does not begin until after I leave for work.”

Preferring not to interact with my household staff, I thought it a wise idea to schedule their shift to begin after I had left for the day and end by the time I arrived home.

I deeply regret that decision now. “Obviously, they did not put the care pod on the correct settings before they left.”

“No, that is not the issue,” L’Nel says, pressing several buttons on the care pod’s monitor. “According to this readout, the pod has fed him, disposed of his waste, and dispensed soothing womb sounds. There is no reason he should still be awake—or so upset.”

“No reason, indeed,” I agree, glancing around the nursery, which overlooks the ocean, yet another source of soothing noise. “Yet the xalling will not stop screaming and leaking water from his eyes.”

“Have you tried communicating with him?” With a gentle hand, L’Nel moves me out of the way so she can stand directly over the hybrid. “Please stop crying, Nephew!” she instructs, raising the level of her voice to match his.

This only makes the xalling scream louder.

L'Nel quickly backs away with a shocked hiss. "I thought for certain that would work."

"*Essh*, he was kept among the hu'mans too long." I glare down at the being carrying on inside the pod. "You will cease this screaming. This is beneath you, xalling."

He stops momentarily and stares up at me, his overly round hu'man eye holes suddenly widening.

"Good," I say to L'Nel. "At least he understands my commands. Perhaps his time with the hu'mans has not completely corrupted him—"

The xalling emits a strange popping sound from another part of his body—like air releasing from one of my ground vehicle's tires. And stars above...

My ridges flap as a sulfurous scent reaches my nostrils. Even the pod's clear composite material is not enough to contain the wretched smell.

Then the xalling has the temerity to screw up his face and recommence with his squalling!

I desperately push at the pod's monitor buttons. "Perhaps he needs further feeding after disposing of so much waste."

L'Nel, too, turns her attention to the pod's monitor. Her nose ripples with consternation as she looks over the readout. "According to this, he has made quite a few of these wretched-smelling air deposits following his feedings. Perhaps the machine's formula does not agree with him after being exclusively fed with his hu'man vessel's milk."

In seeming agreement with my sister, the xalling wails even louder. And the memory of his birth vessel's translated words fill my mind.

You must let me see Jack. He needs me! He will go mad without me. You fail to understand.

"This is all her fault!" I snap. "If that dishonorable savage had turned over the hybrid in the first place, none of this would be happening. This xalling would have transitioned smoothly

with a nanny—several nannies, to give him proper instruction on the ways of our people.”

“I am sorry, Brother, but I do not know how to help you in this matter.” L’Nel turns to fully face me and carefully sets her ridges at a respectful angle before suggesting with an urgent click, “I believe you should secure a nanny—a hybrid xalling specialist. Right now.”

I am not surprised by her respectful but urgent suggestion. L’Nel lives with our parents, as all Xalthurian females do until they marry. So, of course, securing the proper member of household staff is her sole answer to every domestic issue.

I sigh and impart what I was shocked to discover shortly after assuring our father that I would not fail the Louxos Line. “The demand for nannies is greater than ever, thanks to the new Xalthurian-hu’man agreement. Even those of my status are forced to wait.”

“I do not understand. Many hu’man mothers have immigrated here. Nannies should be less in demand.”

I rub my ridges and hiss. “*Essh*. That would be a reasonable thought, but there has been a rise in pregnancies—even for those who did not participate in the official mating ceremony. And those hu’mans have become so audacious that even *they* are hiring nannies to help with their newborns. Thus, it has become incredibly hard to find females who have experience caring for these hybrid xallings.”

I think darkly of the female who inspired this mess—the sister of my xalling’s birth vessel. “Perhaps, this is exactly what the Kel’s wife wished for when she enthralled him into creating that New Accord with the hu’mans. That our world would become so overwhelmed with hybrids that we have to invite more hu’mans to work in Xalthuria.”

“That seems like a very odd wish for our Qel to make.” L’Nel tilts her head to the side, her ridges lowered in consideration. “If you feel too many hybrids are being born here, perhaps it is time to extend the Accord to Xalthurian females so they, like N’Maryah, might start families on New—”

“Never!” I answer, cutting her off. “The only being less honorable than a hu’man female is her male counterpart.”

“If that is true, why are we females not allowed to embitter ourselves against hu’man males as you have done against their females?” L’Nel asks. Her ridges are not placed in such a respectful position now.

“For the same reason I would not send you into battle so you could experience the horrors of war for yourself,” I answer loudly—not only because this conversation is making me quite irate, but also to be heard over the screeching xalling.

“N’Maryah says that hu’man males are patient and kind,” L’Nel insists. “She says they have something on New Terrhan called rom-com nights. And the hu’man males in these entertainments often—”

“Do not be misled by N’Maryah as L’Than was,” I advise, cutting off her silly prattle. “She is a scheming female, who wields her unfounded opinions as a weapon.”

“N’Maryah is also the sole Xalthurian female to birth a child since the Extinction Virus,” L’Nel counters, flapping her ridges up into a stubborn expression. “Yet our females have not been allowed to go to New Terrhan to make similar matches.”

“She was not *allowed* to go anywhere,” I remind my sister. “She was exiled to that desolate red planet as a punishment for her crimes against our Kel.”

“Then I wish to be punished, too!” L’Nel stamps her foot. “I do not care if it makes me foolish. I wish to go down to the planet myself.”

I stare down at her. First L’Than and now L’Nel. I will not allow my sister to spout such treason.

“You will cease with this nonsense.” I hiss loudly at her. “My team is working on a cure for the infertility disease, and eventually, there will be no need to co-mingle with these base beings. Until then, I will hear no more of your pro-hu’man propaganda!”

The xalling continues to squall. And though L'Nel does not leak water from her eyes, she regards me as if she, too, is on the verge of screeching.

L'Nel glances at the hybrid in seeming commiseration. "I understand why your son is so unhappy to live here with you. I would spill water from my eyes, too, if I were he."

How dare she be so insubordinate?! Toward me, her brother, the head of her family line.

I open my mouth to remind her who can have her allowance cut off with just one holo to our father. But before I can, she flounces out of the nursery with angry strides.

Just as L'Than arrives.

L'Nel does not bother to bid me a proper goodbye, and my cousin does not bother to give me any greeting.

"I must speak with you," he declares, his expression hard and his ridges resolute. "About Elle."

NINETEEN

L'GON

“I must speak with you,” L’Than insists, barging into the nursery. “About Elle.”

“Cousin...” I rub at my tired ridges.

Yesterday, I found out I had a hybrid son. Then, after getting him installed in my household and making certain his mother was confined to a holding cell where she belonged, I stayed up late into the eve, checking and rechecking N’Maryah N’Vaise’s unbelievable interior scans.

Only to wake up to the sound of the hybrid screaming for no reason at all. Followed by an argument with my normally well-mannered and complacent sister.

I let out a hissing sigh before informing the cousin, whose holo hails I have been ignoring since yesterday, “I am due at work to go over N’Maryah’s test results with my team, and I must figure out how to calm the xalling before I go. Obviously, I have neither time nor energy to entertain a round of complaints about the imprisonment of your obsession.”

“You will make the time.” L’Than folds his arms across his chest. For once, it is covered, I notice.

In fact, the embroidered white robes and the matching white shirt and pants he wears underneath make him look less like a dashing faun rider and more like—well, me, an actual professional.

“Why are you wearing formal robes to meet with me?” I ask, suspicion curling back my ridges.

He glances down, and his own ridges fall, as if he has been caught in some illegal act. “I did not don these robes for you. That is why I need to speak to—”

“YizJackkryeeing?” Before L’Than can finish, the birth vessel herself comes crashing through the door, babbling loudly in her unintelligible throatbox language.

“Wahthavuduntoohim?” she yells, running past me to the xalling’s care pod.

“What are you doing here?” I demand. “Why are you not in your cell?”

Rage boils inside of me as I turn to keep her from interfering with the sleeping pod.

However, L’Than steps in front of me before I can reach her.

“Cousin, please remain calm. I used my legal counsel credential to have her released into my custody,” he quickly explains.

Yet, this is no explanation at all.

“When did you upload a legal counsel credential?” I demand, alarm coursing through me.

A New Terrhan language upload is one thing. That only took a night-cycle or three with our Knowledge Expansion Educational System, which uploads enlightenment into our brainwaves while we sleep.

The only reason Uncle L’Rmie acquired a legal credential was to put the Louxos Line in a better position when we negotiated our business contracts.

And yes, it has served our cause well when drafting law-based arguments against the Kel’s edicts. But he still complains about the time it took to gain his legal expertise. A full lunar cycle worth of uploads.

Which means that L’Than would have had to start working on his credential soon after he returned to Xalthuria. Even though he has no involvement in our family business nor any chance of inheriting his father’s Council seat.

“Why would you do such a thing?” I demand. “And how were you able to get the birth vessel remanded to your custody when the Kel and his wife could not?”

“Wahtizthis?” The birth vessel screeches again before L’Than can explain the knowledge credential he failed to tell me about until this very moment.

She scrapes at the care pod’s window with her weak, clawless hands. “Yizmybaybeeinaycayg? Gethimowtovheer!”

I do not know who has more temerity. L’Than for getting her released into his custody or the birth vessel for screaming at me in a language I do not understand.

Then the xalling decides to compete for the Most Contemptuous award by doing something I did not think possible—squalling even louder. He pounds his little fists into the sleeping pod’s window so noisily the thumps can be heard even over his flood-siren-level wails.

“Cousin, your xalling is clearly in distress,” L’Than says beside me. “Let him out so that Elle may soothe him.”

My first instinct is to say no. Then holo the Council Guard to re-arrest the audacious birth vessel for trespass.

I pride myself on my logic and reason. The xalling should be fine in the care pod. He should not have want of his birth vessel, considering he has already been fed. And he most definitely should not have started pounding on his pod window as soon as he spied the dishonorable female who kept him from me.

But then the hybrid lets out a particularly loud howl.

I am not at all familiar with the inefficient language notion that hu’mans call *tone*. However, his cry has an anguished quality to it that makes my hearts stir uncomfortably.

No, I do not speak the New Terrhan throatbox language. But it is clear he has want of his despicable birth vessel.

Access to her might possibly be the only way to stay his noisy lament.

Against my better judgment, I walk over to the xalling's sleeping pod and test my hypothesis by pressing a button on its side.

The birth vessel immediately reaches into the pod when the window slides open and lifts the squalling hybrid into her arms.

"Itssohkay. Mommeeizheer. Itsohkaysweetee." She holds the xalling against her and gently strokes his back.

The xalling quiets in an instant. He sniffs and proceeds to make a sound somewhere between a relieved hiss and hu'man laughter before clicking happily into the birth vessel's shoulder.

As I observe their reunion, my hearts twinge with a new emotion. One I cannot identify. But I know I do not like it.

She smiles down at him gently for a few moments—then glares at me before unleashing several paragraphs of her throatbox language.

The only word I understand is "Jack." That horrible hu'man name she chose for him in complete defiance of the Old Accord.

I flip my ridges back and tell L'Than, "You will inform her of the proper Xalthurian name I have bestowed upon him. L'Eondris Louxos."

With a reluctant click, L'Than relays my message in her throatbox language.

And her expression goes from angry to murderous. "Hissnaymiz*Jack!*"

This female infuriates me like no other. I move to take the xalling from her arms and have her forcibly removed from my home.

But L'Than places his hand upon my shoulder, once again halting my steps before I can reach her.

"Perhaps you and I should continue this discussion in your office. I have a beneficial proposal that will enable you to leave for work without worry for your xalling."

I frown. I do like the notion of a proposal that allows me to quit this situation and proceed with my workday. But, “The birth vessel cannot be trusted alone with the xalling. She will attempt to run away with him. Again.”

“*She* has a name,” L’Than counters. “And Elle was given an ankle bracelet before they released her to me. Even if she did try to run, she would be caught. Easily.”

A reluctant memory infiltrates my mind of how I easily found her on that red dirt planet, cowering inside a pile of straw. Yet something about the female had stirred something inside of me. A low hiss passes from my lips as I remember drowning in her eyes.

Essh. I rub at my ridges.

Leaving her alone with L’Eondris is not a good idea, but neither is remaining too long in the birth vessel’s presence. The scent I thought I had long forgotten drifts to my nostrils, and my *diijo* threatens to rise.

But, *no*....

This hu’man means nothing to you, I remind myself. *Less than nothing.*

Had she not just calmed the screaming xalling, I would have already had her personally escorted back to her cell on valid trespassing charges.

But the fact remains that she and only she has calmed the hybrid. With secret tactics I have no knowledge of.

And L’Than is saying he might have a solution for my current woe.

I rub my ridges. “Very well. We will continue this conversation in private.”



“COUSIN, it would appear that you have been presented with a fortuitous opportunity.”

L'Than smooths back his short ridge plate and flashes a winning smile as he takes a seat in front of the desk I was given by my father after he ceded his Council seat.

“You are in need of a nanny for Jack, and Elle is eager to take care of him. As a Council Member, you are most certainly aware that such an arrangement would fall under the Caretaker Act, and that is why I have come to your residence to speak on my future mate’s behalf.”

His future mate? He is still calling her that, despite her current status as the most duplicitous hu'man birth vessel that has ever inefficiently breathed air?

A surge of anger twists my stomach. Along with a wish to dig my claws through L'Than’s torso and rip out at least one of his hearts.

“Elle would be the perfect solution for your nanny issue,” L'Than continues, oblivious to the feelings he has produced inside of me.

“And just how did you come to learn so much about this female?” I ask, pacing, instead of sitting down behind my desk.

“I found her distraught over Ja—L'Eondris. She told me about your conversation and how she had offered to do anything to be reunited with him before you rejected her pleas to visit with him. So, you must see how hiring her as your hybrid’s caretaker would solve both of your problems.”

L'Than and Elle have talked about me. *Commiserated over me.* The thought of it makes an ugly heat burn in my chest.

“Tell me, Cousin, are you pushing so hard for her to join my household because you care about our problems or because that will keep her from leaving the planet behind—and you?”

L'Than click laughs and dips his brow in a conceding manner. “I will not deny that it would be to my benefit as well if she remains on our planet. As my future mate—”

“Cease calling her that!” The words hiss out of my mouth before I can stop them. “She is nothing to you. Nothing but the birth vessel of my hybrid son.”

L'Than stiffens. Then regards me in silence. For so long, I find myself snapping, "Why are you staring at me in that manner?"

"I am wondering where my ever-logical cousin has gone," he answers, his short ridges remaining in a calm, neutral position. "I understand you are not fond of hu'mans, but you pride yourself on your reason. Elle is good for your xalling. She makes him happy and knows how to soothe him when he leaks water from his eyes. You, in contrast, are an ever-busy male with no nanny and little time to attend to a xalling. The logical thing to do in this situation would be to put aside your dislike of Elle and provide Jack with the caretaker you lack."

His logic is sound, and that makes my ridges thrum with irritation.

L'Than has always had a talent for clever arguments. Perhaps I should not have been so surprised about his decision to upload a legal credential, after all.

But I do not like that he is using his natural talent in unexpected ways. To somehow secure the release of the birth vessel from her holding cell, and now to rationalize my hiring of that infuriating hu'man under the Caretaker Act.

Even worse, I can think of no good rebuttal save for "L'Eondris. His name is L'Eondris."

L'Than lifts his shoulder in that lazy hu'man shrug his father despises. "No matter what you call him, you cannot deny that you have need of his mother at this time."

Yet another irritatingly sound point.

"*Essh.*" I give in with a downward flap of my ridges. "She can stay—temporarily. At least until I find another suitable caretaker for the xalling."

A large, triumphant smile breaks out across my cousin's face.

Until I say, "But I have conditions for her temporary employment. And I will not allow her continued presence at my residence unless you both sign contracts, vowing that you both will abide by them."

“Conditions? For both of us, you say?” L’Than’s ridges fall, and his triumphant smile disappears.

“What kind of conditions?” he asks with a wary click.

PART 5

TERM AND CONDITIONS

TWENTY

L'GON

One Lunar Cycle Later

“Please take me again, as you did at the ceremony,” Elle begs in Xalthurian. “I will do anything. Anything. Do you wish me to beg?”

Elle does not wait for my answer before kneeling upon the floor of my office, just a few lengths from my chair.

As always, when she does this, my *diijo* springs to life. For reasons I cannot fathom. I rub at my left heart. *This female offers me more temptation than I have the will to resist.*

“Please?” Her eyes drop to my hardened *diijo*, and her pink tongue snakes out to slowly circle her plush lips. “I can see you want this, too.”

She is correct in her assessment. *Essh!* My willpower snaps like a berry twig.

“Come here,” I command. She starts to get up, but I shake my head. “Stay on your knees, hu’man. Crawl to me.”

Slowly, she advances on her hands and knees until she is in front of me. She then raises into a kneeling position and looks up at me with an expectant gleam in her dark, round eyes.

“The latest reportage on Ceremonial Mind Rot includes tales of how hu’man females place their mouths upon the *diijo* of their males and suckle on it until he spills his seed into her mouth.” My gaze remains fixed on her full lips as I command, “You will attend to me in this manner.”

She pulls my *diijo* from underneath my pants without a moment of hesitation or protest, gripping my long, hard length in both of her small, clawless hands—just like the males reported during our last Ceremonial Mind Rot study. My breath catches in my throat, and my shoulders shake. I fight to remain still and ball my fists at my side.

Essh! I may spill my seed before she can take me into her mouth.

But then Elle looks up at me and says, “Your father is calling.”

“Incoming Holo from L’Thr Louxos. Incoming Holo from L’Thr Louxos. Please signal appropriately to accept or decline the holo.”

I wake with a start, with my head resting upon a cold, hard surface. Blinking, I rise to a sitting position and take in my surroundings. My heirloom desk... two empty guest chairs... digitized walls with floor-to-ceiling images of both the interior and exterior comprehensive, multi-dimensional holo scans of N’Maryah N’Vaise, along with the alarming footage of what the medical nanites found inside her ovulatory glands.

I must have fallen asleep in my office again.

A dream, I realize. It was only a dream. The latest iteration of the nightmare that has terrorized me since allowing the hybrid’s birth vessel to move into East House.

“Incoming Holo from L’Thr Louxos. Incoming Holo from L’Thr Louxos. Please signal appropriately to accept or decline the holo.”

The repeated lab announcement draws me away from my frustrated thoughts. I swipe a hand across the air to answer.

“Father.” I bow my head and place a hand over my left heart in due reverence.

“You have fallen asleep in your office again.” On the holo screen, my father takes in my background with several clicks of disapproval. “It is time for you to take a bride. You need a wife to ensure that you pass the eve in your sleeping suite—not obsessing over the test results of that N’Vaise female.”

“Father, wife or no, the survival of our race depends upon my work,” I remind him. While leaving out that I now prefer to pass my eves in my office, which is on the orchard-facing side of East House. Unlike my sleeping suite, which is on the ocean-facing side of the residence, right next door to the nursery the birthing vessel shares with the hybrid.

Above the holo screen, a readout of the holotexts I missed while I slept appears. Most of them are from my team, reporting back on various additional tests I asked them to run on the N’Vaise ovulatory genetic samples. But one is from

T'Kan, who was still under my contacts as Xar, even though he is now posted to New Terrhan as their Kel Regent.

XAR T'KAN: Qel Ki'Ra says that her sister, Elle Garrett, is now under your employ without holo access. It is very important that I talk to her. You will arrange a holo conference as soon as possible.

I frown. Why would my former commander need to speak with the lowly birth vessel?

Most likely a trick to relay a message from his hu'man wife, who is the best friend of the Kel's hu'man wife, I decide before air-typing back.

That will not be possible until I secure a caretaker to replace her. Perhaps you should confer with her sister to see if there is anything she can do to expedite that process.

“Son? Son? Are you listening to me?”

My father's voice draws my eyes back to the live video part of the holoscreen.

“I am sorry, Father.” I swipe down to disappear the missed holotexts. “I was distracted by an annoying message. What were you saying?”

He regards me with a worried look. “Your work is admirable, but it seems you spend all your spare time in the lab. I am aware of the urgency to find a cure. But do not forget, now that you have a hybrid xalling, you also have a duty to find a suitable Xalthurian wife. L'Nel tells me you are having trouble with finding a nanny. And would that not solve your current problem?”

Yes, actually, it might.

Unfortunately, the search for an alternate caretaker has not gone well. I thought that a lunar cycle would provide plenty of time for me to find a suitable replacement caretaker for the hybrid's birth vessel. However, I have yet to find anyone willing to even interview for the position.

“I have no wish to anger our Qel,” one early candidate admitted when she turned down the opportunity over holo. And she was not the only one.

I thought the Kel’s wife would be vehemently against my employment of her sister. In truth, that assumption factored into my decision to allow the birth vessel to serve as my temporary nanny.

On the contrary, it would seem that even though zero contact with anyone at the palace had been written into the birth vessel’s employment contract, the Kel’s wife was working behind the scenes to ensure I would not find a replacement nanny.

Essh! At this rate, I will not be able to find anyone to replace the birth vessel until the xalling no longer has need of care.

However, with only two more lunar cycles to go until the next bequeathal ceremony, that did not mean I was ready to divert my attention to finding a Xalthurian bride.

“I must dedicate every day and night cycle of my free time to finding the cure,” I explain to my father. “When I do, I will be able to preserve not only our line but those of the other Elite. L’Nel will benefit, too, and that will erase these ludicrous ideas about New Terrhan from her head.”

I expel an annoyed click. “Do you know, at the beginning of the lunar cycle, I was forced to deny an extra allowance request from her? She wished to secure a full New Terrhan language download, even though she already has a completely unnecessary translator chip.”

I think darkly of N’Maryah. I sent her back to the red planet to which she had been exiled. However, the irritating aftereffects of the outrageous propaganda campaign she waged continue to linger. “Apparently, many of the Elite daughters with whom the N’Vaise traitor managed to converse during her short time on Xalthuria are now acquiring these language downloads the same manner they would the latest fashion.”

My father waves his hand dismissively and says, “I doubt L’Nel would give up her comforts here for a desolate planet.

Your sister will eventually lose interest in this topic, as she does with most trendy things.”

I am not as certain about that as he is. According to the household report, L’Nel has stopped by often to take her morning meal with the hybrid and his birth vessel. I suspect she is spending more time with them than is advisable.

She covets a xalling of her own, and thanks to that N’Maryah N’Vaise, she truly believes having a hybrid is the only way to get what she wants.

Foolish sister. Even more reason to find a solution to Xalthurian female infertility. And soon.

But there is no need to distress my father with these worries now that I am the head of our family line.

“I hope you are right, Father,” I say, letting the subject drop. “Now, if there is nothing else.”

I raise my hand to swipe away the live holo.

“Actually, I was calling on behalf of your Uncle L’Rmie,” my father says before I can. “He is upset about L’Than again. And this time he might have good reason to be. Your cousin is using his new legal credential in some rather alarming ways.”

I frown at the mention of the male I have not seen since making him sign a contract stating that he would not step foot in East House while the birth vessel was in residence or attempt to communicate with her on the estate’s holo system.

Yes, I effectively banned my favorite cousin from my residence when, only a few lunar cycles ago, I was lamenting not giving him safe harbor from his father’s wrath.

“Is this because you want her for yourself?” L’Than accused when I named my conditions for his “client’s” employment.

“No, I am banning you from East House because I wish to protect you from yourself,” I insisted.

L’Than agreed to sign the contract without further protest that morn. But one lunar cycle later, what Father tells me over his early holo leads me to suspect my cousin had agreed to but had not abided by the terms of our contract.

As soon as I end the holo with my father, I swipe the air for a new screen.

“Yes, Mal L’Gon?” A’Rhon, the loyal green scientist, who defied the Kel’s wife to tell me about the unregistered hybrid, greets me with an eager click, despite the early hour.

“I see from your background that you are already at the office. Good.” I make a mental note to promote him to the position that W’Rn held before he vaporized himself. Then I tell A’Rhon, “You will pick up something I require from the Hu’man Services Division and bring it to me at East House...”

TWENTY-ONE

ELLE

I'm falling... falling...

I wake with a start, grabbing at the air until I realize...

I'm not falling from a cliff on New Terrhan. No, I'm lying on the plush mat a couple of servants dragged into Jack's insanely large room for me to sleep on after I signed my employment contract and had my prison ankle bracelet removed.

The modulated air smells crisp, not ripe with fertilizer. Instead of the rustling sounds of various crops, the steady crash of the waves fills my ears.

I sit up on my forearms and blink at the sun rising over the majestic ocean on the other side of the enormous windows of my son's new nursery. And let out a sigh of relief.

If not for the circumstances of our residency in this place, I might actually be grateful to wake to this gorgeous sunrise on a cozy mat that I don't have to share with my cover hog of a sister.

But how can I be grateful when my access to Jack is totally at his BRO's whim?

BRO is what I've started calling The Big Red Obstacle behind his back. Which is easy to do since neither of us has a translator, and he's never around.

He's always gone by the time we wake up, and he never returns to what L'Nel calls East House until after Jack and I have already gone to bed.

Well, almost never...

Once, when I couldn't fall asleep right away, I headed downstairs to see if I could find something warm to drink. But I might have waited a minute or two longer to start my quest if I'd known I'd run into BRO on his way up the stairs.

He looked me up and down, like maybe he'd forgotten I lived there, then said something in his weird click-and-hiss language. It sounded angry, and once again, I was happy I didn't comprehend a word of Xalthurian.

"I don't understand you," I reminded him loudly in New Terrhan, even though I knew he didn't have a translator either. "If you want to yell at me, you're going to have to get a language download pack."

I was definitely baiting him. But instead of answering in his click-hiss language, he just stood there and stared at me. Kind of like before. On New Terrhan.

I swallowed hard.

Except this wasn't like before. We were on Xalthuria now, fully clothed. Me in one of the gauzy household shifts I'd been issued the first morning of my employment. Him also in a shift.

But his was sleeveless and appeared to be fashioned out of some kind of stark-white leather that cut across his heavily muscled torso in a way that made my eyes linger. Was it really leather? And if so, would it feel exactly like his skin?

My body stirred with the memory of how it had felt to put my hands on L'Than when I pushed him down to the mat in our cell. His skin had been shockingly warm and tough to the touch. Not cold and scaly, like I imagined. Had that been because he was a hybrid?

Maybe L'Gon would feel different.

And the way he was staring at me. No, we weren't on New Terrhan. But a heavy tension pulsed below my waist as I raised my hand to find out if my hypothesis was right...

Only to drop it when his ridges rippled. I could only assume with disgust. Kira mentioned something about Xals "feeling their emotions in their noses."

Anyway, he took a huge step back from me. Like I was threatening him with a weapon.

Maybe I was.

Your boss is a huge old alien supremacist, remember? He probably had all sorts of messed up ideas about being touched by a human. Just like I should be repulsed by the idea of touching the guy who'd try to steal Jack.

What is wrong with me?

Now, it was my turn to take a step back.

“Go right on ahead,” I said with a mocking sweep of my hand toward the landing. “I’m sure you’re dying to say good night to the son you just had to claim as your own for your political games.”

Of course, he didn’t understand a word I said. But he proved my sarcastic point when he strode past me—not toward Jack’s nursery, but straight to a room on the opposite side of the landing from where his son and I slept. It was the only door, other than the one to his ocean-facing bedroom, that didn’t respond when I pushed its open button.

An office, maybe? Purple light temporarily brightened the dim landing before the door slid closed behind him.

Whatever the room was to him, I found it re-locked the following morning. And, of course, he was gone again before Jack and I woke up. Per ushe.

That had been the one and only time I’d seen him since signing on to “provide caretaking services” for our son.

Speaking of Jack...

I glance over at the care pod that Jack actually prefers to sleeping on the mat with me. Will he even be able to tolerate it when we return to New Terrhan?

I throw that worry on top of the huge pile of things to be anxious-bordering-on-terrified about before pasting on a happy voice for Jack’s sake. “Okay, not-so-little guy. Time to get up and go downstairs for breakfast.”

Yet another reason to be grateful that Jack’s father is never around. Technically, I am here because BRO believes Jack is still breastfeeding.

But Jack noped out on breast milk the moment he discovered solid food.

And he meant it. My supply dried out a few days ago. But, of course, I’m keeping that secret from The Big Red Obstacle.

Yet another big ol’ secret for me to carry, I think darkly as I rise to my feet with a stretch and a yawn. And yet another reason I have to figure out how to get Jack and me off of this lovely tropical planet.

But first, breakfast.

“So what do you want for morning meal—as your aunt calls it?” I ask as I walk over to the care pod. “Fruit, meat, and cheese? Cheese, fruit, and meat? Or meat, cheese, and fruit?”

I chuckle at my own joke about the Xalthurians’ severely limited meal options, but my laughter dies an instant death when I look inside the pod.

It’s empty. *Jack. He’s gone!*



“HELLO, *BESTIE!*” L’Nel whispers in New Terrhan when I come running into the entire room that’s been dedicated to food preparation in the East House. “Why do you look so upset?”

I let out a huge sigh of relief when I see that she and Jack are at one of the food preparation tables, enjoying a morning meal of—yeah, I called it—fruit, meat, and cheese.

Jack, who’s grown so big I can barely carry him up the stairs without taking a break to regain my breath, is sitting up all by himself on the table. He temporarily stops shoving pieces of meat and cheese in his mouth to greet me with a high-pitched baby squeal, followed by a series of clicks.

“Hi, baby, hi!” I say, waving at him happily. Before glaring at his aunt. “What the heck, L’Nel?”

Her ridges fall.

“Am I not supposed to call you *bestie*, then?” she whispers. “That is what N’Maryah calls her special human, Zinnia. Is one lunar cycle not long enough to use this term of friendship? You are, after all, the best human friend I have.”

“I’m your *only* human friend,” I point out. “And friends don’t run off with friend’s babies while they’re sleeping without telling them. You nearly gave me a heart attack. Why didn’t you wake me up? Or just wait down here, like you usually do?”

L’Nel shakes her head, her nose ridge rippling with what I can easily recognize as confusion after a solid month of taking morning meals together so she can practice with her secret New Terrhan language download. Also, to occasionally relay messages from Kira and L’Than, both of whom aren’t allowed to step foot inside East House under the shitty terms of my employment contract with BRO.

“I thought when my brother asked me early this morn to mind Jack while he spoke with you in his office that you would go directly there upon waking,” she whispered. “Jack and I were just talking about what we would do until you finished your meeting.”

I raise a hand. “Wait, BRO asked you to *babysit* because he wants to meet with me in his office? How am I supposed to do that when I’m not allowed to leave the grounds of East House?”

A dark thought occurs to me. “Wait, is this a trick to get me to violate my employment contract so he has an excuse to fire me?”

L’Than negotiated a “without cause” bit into our agreement that would make it nearly impossible to fire me from my position unless L’Gon found another nanny—which Kira assured me, through L’Nel, he would not. Or I violated my side of the employment contract, which I most definitely

wouldn't—at least not until I figured out a way to get Jack and me back to New Terrhan without huge repercussions.

“No, no, no, bestie.” L'Nel quickly dispels my suspicion with a wave of her clawed hands. “He is waiting for you upstairs in his home office. Why do you think I am whispering? I will be in much trouble if he finds out about my download.”

I blink. “BRO wants to meet with me? Upstairs in his office?”

“Yes,” L'Nel whispers back. “And I highly suggest you do not call him BRO to his face. Trust me, my brother will not find it as humorous as I do.”

I do trust L'Nel, and I know she'll be fine with Jack.

But my heart pounds in my ears as I go back up the stairs. To think, I was so curious about the room behind that locked door a couple of weeks ago.

And now, I have an invitation to see what lies behind it. But why?

That's the question that makes me catch and hold my breath when I reach the closed door to his office. *What should I do here? Just palm the door or knock, like they do in old planet entertainments?*

Before I can decide, the door slides open without me having to do anything, revealing The Big Red Obstacle on the other side.

“Hi,” I say with an awkward wave. I'm not sure how else to greet him, considering he doesn't speak New Terrhan. “L'Nel said you wanted to see m—”

My words cut off with a gasp when he reaches out and grabs me around the neck. Just like he did on New Terrhan!

TWENTY-TWO

ELLE

My hypothesis was wrong. The Big Red Obstacle's skin is just as thick as his cousin's—if not thicker.

I bang my fists against his tough, scaled forearm after he curled his taloned hand around my neck. Suddenly, I'm a kid again in the New Terrhan version of Physical Education, throwing ineffectual punches into the unyielding leather of the punching bag in the colony ship's tilted gym.

The Big Red Obstacle's face holds even less emotion than that old punching bag as he yanks me into his office.

But... but this wasn't in the contract! I think nonsensically as the door I'd been afraid to knock on slides closed. With me on the wrong side of it.

Scream! Maybe L'Nel will prove she really is my bestie and come running.

But when I try, I can't find enough breath. He's applying too much pressure to my windpipe as he lifts me off the ground.

And his arm is so long, I can't even aim my punches into his face. I dangle like a ragdoll as my feet kick in the air, instinctively trying to find purchase.

I'm helpless. Panic fists my heart like his hand is fisting my neck.

Still, I keep pummeling his heavily muscled forearm. Jack needs me. I won't go down without a fi—

Something small punches into the side of my head, right below my ear, where my jaw meets my neck. A sharp pain blooms,

and then suddenly, I'm falling.

I don't realize he's let me go until I hit the ground with a heavy *umph!*

Conscious-state-wise, I've technically only been away from underneath my parents' roof for a few months. But the cuss words I was taught never to use come streaming out with a vicious ferocity.

"What. The. Hell?" I ask him, staggering to my feet. "You utter shithead! Why did you do that?"

"Our sexual relations progressed rather thrillingly from there. His body composition differs much from Xalthurian males, but he makes up for it in other ways." A monotone voice clicks and hisses behind me.

A voice I somehow understand, thanks to something I can only describe as an auditory overlay. It's like there's a voice inside my head talking in New Terrhan while the other voice speaks in Xalthurian. Wait, did The Big Red Obstacle just insert a translator into my neck?

What in the moons?

I turn around toward the voice and blink when I find a floor-to-ceiling photo series of N'Maryah—not just her naked exterior, but several X-rays and huge blow-ups of an interior biological structure I don't recognize.

I tilt my head to the side. Her womb, maybe? It doesn't look quite like ours—more like a rectangle than an inverted triangle. But tubes run from each side of the rectangle's upper half to two ovular structures that I would bet a day of food rations are ovaries. Except, if that's the case, what's up with all of those circular structures inside of it?

"...then he began to put his male organ in my female genitalia. And that produced the most amazing commotions inside of me—an excitement I can only describe as a quickening." The voice I'm assuming belongs to N'Maryah continues speaking from the digitized window wall. *"The first time this quickening happened, I was frightened by the trembling of my thighs and the way my breeding slit contracted around his—"*

“How you copulate with that human has no bearing on my research. I do not require those inconsequential details,” another click-hiss voice interrupts. It’s just as monotone but has a deeper pitch. *“You will answer my questions about the timing of your impregnation as concisely as possible.”*

“Yes, I was impregnated within a few moons of our marriage ceremony,” the voice I’m now sure belongs to N’Maryah answers. *“And then fourteen moons after that, Wang-Lei Junior arrived. I never thought I would carry a xalling of my own, but Wang-Lei Junior is perfect. My hu’man husband has —”*

The higher-pitched voice abruptly cuts off, and another voice says, “You will turn around and give me your full attention.”

This time, the voice is live in the same room as me. And even though Kira has complained endlessly about how impossible it is to distinguish the Xals’ voices from each other, I know exactly who’s speaking, even before I turn around to face The Big Red Obstacle.

Not because he commanded it, but because I want to know, “What was that recording? Was that you interviewing N’Maryah?”

BRO jerks his head back, like he often does when I try to speak to him in New Terrhan.

“Oh, my fucking moons.” I throw up my hands. “Do not tell me you had the freaking nerve to punch one of those weird voiceover translators into my neck without making sure you could understand me, too.”

A long beat. Then: “I will not tell you that because I, too, have installed a temporary translator so that I might interview you.”

“Like you did N’Maryah?” I ask. “Because you did a bang-up job with that.”

He squints at me. “The translator is unable to give me the meaning of the idiom ‘bang-up.’”

“How about sarcasm?” I ask, flaring my eyes at him. “Because I’m gonna need you to know the meaning of that word before I

can tell you what I meant by congratulating you on doing a bang-up job with your interview.”

He tilts his head in a confused way that would be comical if I were dealing with anyone but this red monster. “You are not serious in your congratulations? You believe I did a poor job in my initial medical interview of the subject?”

“So that *was* a medical interview!” I’m weirdly happy about guessing right. It almost feels like my first breakthrough with bioengineering corn. “You were trying to figure out how N’Maryah managed to get pregnant. And I bet I’m correct about this rectangular organ being her womb, too, which would make these ovals her ovaries. But wait...”

I turn back around to point to the blown-up images. “If those are her ovaries, what’s up with all of these circular structures inside each of them?”

A long beat. Then, BRO answers, “After extensive testing, we have determined that those circular structures, as you called them, must be the Xalthurian female’s unfertilized eggs.”

“Her unfertilized eggs?” I repeat, furrowing my brow. “The Xalthurian females are only born with two eggs, tops. That’s why your population wasn’t that big even before the Extinction Virus. But I’m counting at least four eggs in each of her ovaries, despite N’Maryah already giving birth. Are you saying her egg supply actually *increased* after mating with a human?”

No answer. And I turn back around to find BRO glaring at me. “How do you know the details of Xalthurian female anatomy?”

“Um...” I search for an answer that won’t get L’Nel in trouble for her secret New Terrhan language download. “Believe it or not, solving Xalthurian infertility is high up on my sister’s agenda. She doesn’t like your race being dependent on ours for babies any more than you. Okay, she likes it a lot more than you do since she’s married to a Xal. But you get my point. She feels bad for you all, and she’s truly committed to solving the issue.”

He dips his head, as if he's reviewing every word I just said with his own translator, then declares, "You will sit as commanded and submit to my questions, whether you believe I am a good interviewer or not."

Without waiting for my reply, he clicks out a command that my voiceover translator interprets as "Off."

In a blink, all the N'Maryah images disappear, and the room is filled with natural morning light from the new day happening outside the office's floor-to-ceiling windows.

The Big Red Obstacle takes a seat behind his gigantic desk, leaving me to sit in one of the chairs, which were obviously made for a Xalthurian.

The chair is so tall, I have to do a little run-hop just to climb up on the cushioned seat.

"So you forced a translator on me to get the exact details of how I became pregnant?" I ask when I'm finally settled. "I'm not sure why, though. According to the DNA test, you were obviously there."

Another long beat. And even though BRO's expression doesn't change, I get the weird sense that I've upset him.

Good.

I rub at the newly sore spot on my neck, where he inserted the translator. "By the way, you Xals, need to work on wrapping your head around the whole concept of *consent*."

"And you humans need to become better at abiding by your contracts," he answers. "This clearly falls under the communication section of your employment agreement."

"What?" I jut my chin forward in total disbelief. "Nowhere in my employment contract does it say I have to talk with you about how our baby was conceived."

"No, but it clearly states that you are not allowed to visit with L'Than in East House or leave the grounds of my residence. I have reason to believe you are in violation of that agreement."

My stomach drops. *Oh, no.* Did he somehow find out about the messages L'Nel was passing back and forth for us now that

she has her secret language download?

But technically, that was within the bounds of the agreement. I open my mouth to point that out.

“Did you mate with my cousin while there was no household staff here to observe you?” BRO asks before I can.

“What? No!” I answer. “I would never jeopardize my access to Jack like that.”

“L’Eondris,” he corrects before continuing. “Then why has L’Than moved into my aunt’s ancestral property and applied for a Council Seat on the grounds of starting his own family line under her name? But he cannot start a new family under another name unless he takes a wife.”

“Maybe he’s planning to get a wife?”

I shrug my shoulders, but my answer comes out a lot less nonchalantly than I want it to. My voice cracks, and my heart lurches at the memory of all those pretty, jewel-toned Xalthurian females who surrounded him at the wedding.

“You know that is not true.” BRO’s voice crashes me back to the present moment. “Why is he so singularly obsessed with you? What did you do to him?”

“What did I...?” I shake my head. “I didn’t do anything. He helped me while we were *both* imprisoned. And, obviously, he helped me negotiate our caretaker contract. But other than that...”

A painful lump forms in my throat without warning, and I have to swallow it down to inform BRO, “We’re only friends.”

“Friends,” The Big Red Obstacle repeats. His voice remains a translated monotone, but the tight set of his ridges makes it plain as the daylight outside that he doesn’t believe me. “Friends do not apply for Council Seats in anticipation of gaining a wife.”

“I had no idea he did that.”

“I have a plan. Do not worry. I have a plan, and all will be well.”

That was the direct quote message L'Nel delivered to me from L'Than after swearing me to secrecy over her New Terrhan download.

I thought he meant a plan for getting me full custody of Jack. But apparently, I thought wrong. He meant a plan for power.

All would be well—for him, at least after he took a wife. A pretty full-Xalthurian, who would allow him to get his Council Seat.

Another lump forms. This one is even bigger and takes even more effort to swallow down.

“It doesn't matter,” I tell both The Big Red Obstacle and myself. “Whatever he's doing, it doesn't have anything to do with me. I'm not leaving Jack. I would *never* leave my baby alone with you.”

My large, red Xalthurian boss rises to a full stand on the other side of the desk.

“L'Eondris,” he says again, his eyes two burning diamonds. “You will refer to the xalling by his proper name.”

I jump to my own feet to answer, “That is not in the contract.”

“You will call him by his proper name because I command it as his father.” His ridge plate isn't just tight anymore. It's vibrating.

I should probably be scared right about now, but all I can feel is pissed off.

About getting stabbed with the translator.

About this “interview.”

About L'Than, a voice whispers inside of me, pitiful and sad.

I shove that voice away in favor of shouting at the huge red alien on the other side of the desk. “Why do you care what I call him, anyway? The only thing that you're worse at than your job is being any kind of father to the son you just had to claim! The son I actually love dearly, by the way. The son I'd do anything for and most definitely wouldn't risk losing for

your cousin, who has obviously moved on from whatever infatuation you think he had with me.”

It’s just words. I’m not strong, like him. Or powerful. Words are all I have.

But BRO reels back like I punched him, and his ridges stop vibrating so abruptly, I don’t have to have a degree in Xalthurian biology to know I’ve hit a nerve.

I’m not sure how to feel about that. Part of me relishes finally getting to tell him off. The other part of me braces because there’s no telling what this petty Big Red Obstacle will do to punish me for insulting him. Even if every word is true.

I wait for his retaliation. Probably another rant about how I’m such a crappy person for actually caring about my child and running in the first place.

But instead, he re-tightens his ridges and says, “The next time we talk, I will most likely have uninstalled this translator. You are dismissed.”

That’s it? No threats or further humiliations?

Confusion twists my stomach. But I don’t argue with him.

No, I run out of there as fast as I can, and though it’s only a short distance, my legs feel like jelly by the time I make it downstairs.

“Oh no, bestie, whatever is wrong?” L’Nel whispers when I find her and Jack in the orchard picking *ruchi*—the deep-pink tomato-like fruit vegetable that the Xals apparently eat raw and sliced, as opposed to dicing and boiling them to pour over pasta, like we did back on New Terrhan.

Not did. *Do*. Like we *do* on New Terrhan, I remind myself as I lug my insanely heavy baby out of his Xalthurian aunt’s arms into mine.

“Is everything okay?” L’Nel asks again.

No, nothing is okay, I silently answer as I hug Jack tighter than tight.

I don't know what that "interview" was all about up there. But a heavy foreboding sits like a rock in my stomach.

My moment of truth will have consequences. I just don't know what they'll be.

Yet.

TWENTY-THREE

ELLE

“Keep walking straight now, bestie. Do not trip or uncover your eyes.”

With Jack tucked into one arm and her clawed hand wrapped around mine, L’Nel leads me through the orchard a few days after my odd—not to mention super-intense—“interview” with The Big Red Obstacle.

I keep my right palm plastered over my eyes. But following her instructions feels weirdly decadent. Like I’m playing a game with time I should be using to plot my and Jack’s escape.

“Are we almost there?” I fret my lip underneath my eye-covering hand. “The sun will be setting soon, and I still have to feed Jack before I put him down to sleep.”

“Do not worry. There will be plenty of time for food and drink. And we are almost there.” L’Nel comes to an abrupt stop, withdrawing her leading hand from mine. “We are here. You may uncover your eyes now for the big reveal.”

Gotta admit, I’m a little more excited than I thought I would be after all that walking.

We must have traveled deeper into the orchard than I ever have by myself. The agricultural pride and joy of the Louxos business empire stretches as far as my eyes can see from the upstairs windows at East House, with the kingdom city providing a backdrop above all the fruit-bearing trees.

But it smells different here, not like the woody vines in front of East House, where *ruchis* grow, along with several other small fruits that go into the popular Louxos wines.

The air in this part of the orchard is more fragrant. But there's also a crisp aroma I can't quite place.

I eagerly drop my hand to find myself inside a little meadow, arced on one side by tall trees, dotted with a hardy-looking purple fruit I've never seen before, and several bushes on the other, covered with berries I also can't identify.

"Oh, my moons!" I gasp. Not because of the many new fruits—though I'm dying to try all of them.

It's the sight of the large structure looming above the berry bushes that makes my mouth drop open.

"Look at what I have built!" L'Nel says beside me.

I don't just look. I stare. There are no other words to describe the house but *absolutely perfect*.

East House feels like a fishbowl, thanks to its circular shape and its floor-to-ceiling, 360-degree windows in every room. And the palace where my sister lives looks like some kind of crystal fortress straight out of an old planet sci-fi entertainment.

But the house in front of me gleams white in the dusky hour between sunset and moonrise, despite having no paint applied to it that I can discern. It's made of some material that appears cool to the touch—like stone, yet light enough that it probably doesn't trap heat. There's just something so familiar and inviting about the house, even with all the scaffolding surrounding it.

If not for the color and its massive size, it would put me in mind of the red mud huts on New Terrhan.

This house basically has everything my family home had, but better.

So much better.

"Oh, wow, L'Nel, this house is beyond amazing!" I excitedly squeeze her shoulder, bouncing up and down on my toes. "It's perfect. I absolutely love it. Do you think I'll be allowed to come visit you here?"

“What?” L’Nel follows the direction of my gaze, her ridges rippling with confusion. “No, that house is not mine. It is the one L’Than commissioned for his new family line—much to my uncle’s upset.”

My congratulatory mood dies a sudden death. “So, this is the house L’Than is building for his new bride?”

Suddenly, the lump is back in my throat. And I must be some kind of masochist because I swallow it down to ask, “What—what material is it made of?”

“I have no idea,” L’Nel answers, frowning up at the house. “Something unusual. It looks nothing like any of the other houses in the kingdom. Another reason why my uncle is so upset.”

Maybe packed sand from the beach? That would explain the way it seems to sparkle under the setting sun.

I swallow yet another lump. “Whoever L’Than is planning to marry, she is very lucky.”

“Yes, yes, so lucky.” L’Nel waves a dismissive claw, then moves in front of me to block my view of the house. “But this odd house is not the surprise I wish to show you. This is what I have been working on all day.”

She waves both of her taloned hands to another part of the meadow.

And I look all around for the surprise she told me I just had to see before I put Jack down for the night. But there’s only a set of four metal poles lodged in the ground with a piece of flimsy silk fabric draped over them.

“*Ta-daas*, you humans say!” L’Nel once again thrusts her arms, this time right at the sad little structure. She has an eager, expectant look on her face.

“Oh... *oh*, so this was what you were out here working on all afternoon. It’s very, very interesting.” I enthuse like my mother used to when Kira brought us all outside to show us a dirt drawing none of us could decipher.

“First of all, great intonation on that ta-da,” I say, stalling for time to compose my next question. “And don’t think I didn’t notice how great your esses have been sounding lately. Barely a hiss.”

I turn back to the poles and fabric. “What exactly was your intention with this... ah... structure?”

“My intention?” L’Nel repeats. Her ridges collapse in a way that reminds me of Jack when he thinks he’s about to get fed but gets treated to a gamma ray shower instead. “It is obviously a *tent*. The kind of temporary home I will need if I am to spend time on New Terrhan. N’Maryah spoke of these as a must-have during her visit.”

I tilt my head to the side and squint at the makeshift structure, which wouldn’t hold up to a strong wind on New Terrhan.

“Okay, I see it now...” *If I use a whole lot of imagination.* “Maybe a different fabric—like something double-woven that could actually withstand the rain.”

L’Nel nods eagerly. “I understand. Something as strong as the folding sheets of metal our workers use to shore up saplings during the annual new planting.”

“Yes, yes, something like that!” I snap my fingers and point at her. “But if I were you and had access to actual folding *metal*, I would take it with me to New Terrhan and build a structure out of that—you know, with holes cut out for ventilation. But if you’re married to this tent, it should be a fabric thick enough to withstand the elements, but thin enough to punch holes in so you can actually tie it to the poles.”

L’Nel frowns, her ridge rippling with confusion. “Why would I marry a tent when my wish is to travel to New Terrhan and marry a human?”

I smother a laugh. Even with the New Terrhan download, L’Nel still gets confused by my idioms sometimes. “I mean, if you really *want* to use a tent over building a temporary home out of metal, then you’ll have to work to make your tent way more sound.”

L'Nel considers the two options, then asks, "Which material would *you* choose if *you* were going to New Terrhan to acquire a mate?"

"Great intonation, Nellie," I say with a chuckle. "But you should probably ask a human who has actually dated and didn't, you know, just wake up from a multi-year stasis a few months ago. Anyone else—I mean, anyone else at all would have much better mate-nabbing advice."

L'Nel frets her ridges. "But you are the only human I know. Who else would I ask?"

True, and in the interest of maintaining the one female friendship I have on this planet, I answer, "Okay, I'd go with metal, for sure. It's hard to come by on New Terrhan. So, it would hypothetically make you more—I guess you could call it 'eligible' down there."

"Eligible? Do you mean I will stand out from the many other Xalthurian females planning to go to New Terrhan and be seen as more desirable than them?"

"Yes, possibly." I wince. "Again, I'm really not the person to ask about these things."

"Why not? You are *very eligible*. My cousin has taken *extreme* actions to come to your aid. And my brother chose you from the *many other females* he could have *seeded*."

"Okay, too far with the intonation," I grumble. My face heats with the memories of how L'Gon "seeded" me on the ship.

"And I'm very grateful to your L'Than, but..." I glance at the gorgeous house he's building for someone else and remind both L'Nel and myself, "We're just friends. He was only being kind to me after what we went through in space prison. And as for your brother..."

I glance over my shoulder at the tree-lined path leading back to East House. "Well, it's obvious your brother full-on hates me."

"Yes, but that is only because he hates *all* humans," L'Nel answers, as if explaining why the sky is red—or, in Xalthuria's case, a lovely pale purple. "But L'Gon was able to overcome

his repulsion enough to seed you. My father was not sure if that would be possible when he ordered him to take part in the Breeding Ceremony.”

Now, it’s my turn to frown. “Your dad had to order him to take part in the Breeding Ceremony? He didn’t want to go, like D’Rek and N’Thn?”

“No, L’Gon did not, and we would not have this adorable xalling if my father did not command him to make the trip to New Terrhan.” L’Nel jiggles Jack in her arms and nuzzles her nose ridge against his soft cloud of black curls. “You should feel very honored to have served as the birth vessel for the future head of House Louxos.”

“Yet, I don’t...” My stomach clamps down over all the secrets I’m keeping. The secrets I’m praying don’t explode in my face before I can figure a way off this planet.

“Well, you *should*,” L’Nel says, as if that is the final answer. Then she claps her clawed hands together. “Oh, I have an *idea*. Since I am no longer in need of this structure, when L’Than comes for the moonlight picnic he has planned, you can sit inside my tent as you eat. It will be the same as in the rom-coms N’Maryah advised me to watch to learn more about human males.”

I screw up my face. “As credible a source as the Xal who tried to kill my sister might seem, I don’t think rom-coms are any kind of true depiction of human males—wait, a minute.”

The other thing L’Nel said finally catches up with me, stopping my heart. “What picnic with L’Than?”

“Cousin, you have ruined my surprise,” a smooth and resonant voice says behind me in perfect New Terrhan.

I turn around to see the male I haven’t laid eyes on since I signed my draconian employment contract at East House.

“Hello, Gift,” L’Than says, a wicked smile curving his lips. “It has been too long a time.”

TWENTY-FOUR

ELLE

L'Than.

L'Than is here, gazing down at me in the twilight of the setting sun. My heart jumps into my throat to replace all the lumps I've been swallowing down lately when it comes to him.

He's dressed in the same robe he wore when he broke me out of jail, this time paired over an outfit of silken white pants and a loose, filmy shirt. But he no longer strikes me as an angel, with his hair down and cascading around his shoulders. More like a groom in one of the entertainments my mother loved from the southeastern region of the old planet.

Someone else's groom, I remind myself. Moons, why does he have to be so incredibly handsome?

I should answer his greeting. But I can't. I just can't. So, I stand there, awkwardly staring up at him. Not knowing what to do with my hands. Or my heart, which is now pinging around my chest.

If L'Than registers how weird I'm being, he doesn't let it show on his face.

"Hello, xalling," he says in Xalthurian, transferring his charming smile to Jack. "How do you fare today?"

To my shock, Jack answers back in Xalthurian. "I big happy, and I little hungry!"

L'Than makes a weird chest-chortling sound that may or might not be a laugh.

“Then you must eat your last meal, as planned. But may I hold you as your aunt does before you go?” L’Than reaches out a long arm.

“Yes! Yes! You nice! I like you hold me now.” Jack twists and strains toward L’Than as any excited, fully human baby would.

But he’s not like a fully human baby at all. My mind is about to explode as I watch L’Than easily pluck Jack out of his aunt’s arms with one hand.

“Wait, he can *talk*?” I choke out when I finally regain my voice.

“Yes, of course,” L’Than answers in New Terrhan over my hybrid baby’s head, as if this is common knowledge. He bounces Jack in a way that makes him both squeal and click with laughter. “Only a few words in Xalthurian at first. But many more will come soon. Did L’Nel not tell you?”

“I assumed she knew this already!” L’Nel answers in New Terrhan, with several untranslatable emotion clicks that I’m guessing signal indignation. “How could she not? I have been conversing with him for weeks!”

“Jack and I were just talking about what we would do until you got done with your meeting.”

“Jack and I were debating which berry is the best in our orchard.”

“I know it upsets your stomach, but Jack truly desires nardvhar cheese with his evening meal.”

I thought L’Nel had been joking, as humans do, when we pretend that babies can talk—or tell us their preferred choice of dinner cheeses. But apparently not.

“Have you not been talking to your mother?” L’Than asks Jack in Xalthurian.

“I try and try before. She no understand!” Jack answers back. “She no answer. She only understand cry and touch.”

My upset over getting tagged with a translator like an animal dies an instant death. All those clicks and hisses when we were

on New Terrhan and right after he woke up? That was Jack trying to talk to me? How much communication had I missed with him because of my refusal to get a translator when my sister first offered it to me?

I lift a hand to touch the small, raised lump behind my ear. Thank goodness BRO forced it on me as part of my employment contract—*oh no, the employment contract!*

“Wait, what are you doing here?” I ask, turning on L’Than. As crazy as finding out my baby can actually talk is, a new panic overtakes me when I realize that I violated my employment contract without even realizing it.

“As my cousin told you before I could...” L’Than pauses to glare at L’Nel before finishing with, “I am here for a moonlight picnic.”

He raises a picnic basket I didn’t notice he was carrying before with the hand he isn’t using to hold Jack. It looks exactly like a replica of the wicker one from the rom-com entertainments L’Nel mentioned earlier.

I also can’t help but notice that his New Terrhan is even better than it was a month ago. Unlike L’Nel, he doesn’t sound monotone at all, and he doesn’t add emotion hisses and clicks where intonation should go.

No, his voice is completely smooth, with a resonance that makes my belly flutter—even as I protest, “You shouldn’t be here. How about—”

“By presenting myself on orchard grounds, which belong to the entirety of our family, I stay within the bounds of your employee contract,” he answers before I can finish. “You need not worry. I have thought of everything.”

Seriously, has he been practicing his New Terrhan nonstop? His tone sounds just as reassuring as a prosecutor in one of those old planet lawyer entertainments.

My heart stops racing. But the worry is replaced by a much uglier emotion. One that makes me wonder why it took him so long to arrange an in-person visit with me if he always had this workaround in his back pocket.

My mind flashes back to all those females who'd surrounded him at the wedding. Which one of them will be living with him in his new, completely perfect house?

"You do not appear happy to see me," L'Than says when I don't immediately answer.

I wish that was true.

Everything with L'Than would be easier if my heart hadn't started pinging around my chest as soon as he strolled into the meadow, looking and talking like an old planet romance hero.

I mean, most old planet romance heroes don't have red, scaled skin or stand nearly seven feet tall. But other than that, he has the hot main character vibe down, including what old planet literature often referred to as a "roguish smile."

Xalthuria's three moons had risen during the time we'd been out here, casting him in dreamy shadow and light. He looks just as, if not more, swoony than any guy I'd seen on the colony ship's screen.

"It is well past Jack's last mealtime. I will take my nephew back to the house to eat now so that you two can picnic," L'Nel announces, breaking my trance.

Oh wow, how long have I been staring? I look around, my cheeks heating.

And why do I keep forgetting about my motherly duties whenever L'Than comes around?

"No, I'll take him. That's my job," I say to L'Nel, who's already pulled Jack back into her arms."

I take Jack's hand. "And I understand you now. There's so much I want to say to you."

Jack just looks back at me blankly. Until L'Nel explains to him that I can understand what he is saying now that I've been given a translator. In Xalthurian. Then his entire face lights up.

"Happy! Happy! Mother understand me now!" Jack waves one chubby hand in the air.

Right before he abruptly takes the other hand back from me. “But Aunt L’Nel promise me eat lots of nardvhar cheese you no can eat! Goodbye now!”

Just like that, our heartfelt moment of understanding each other for the first time comes to a screeching halt. Was Jack really choosing cheese over our first real mother-son dinner conversation? I mean, L’Nel would have to translate everything I said for my part of it, but still...

L’Nel casts a glance at L’Than, then says to me, “I do not want for Jack to miss his bedtime, so do not be alarmed, but I will rush away with him instead of indulging you in argument.”

That’s all the warning I get before L’Nel scurries off. Moving away so much faster than you’d think a female as thin as her could go with a baby as heavy as Jack.

“Wait!” I call out to her back.

I start to run after them, but L’Than catches me by the arm before I can.

“Do not run away from me again.” His palm moves down my arm, and he wraps his taloned hand around mine, large and warm. And I shiver when he turns me back around to face him.

“This picnic is not simply a matter of fun and leisure,” he says with a grave look. “There is a matter I must talk with you about. An *important matter*. Please, you must stay.”

TWENTY-FIVE

ELLE

“There is no need to worry about L’Nel and the xalling.” L’Than comes to stand beside me as I watch L’Nel disappear with Jack down the path leading back to East House.

He’s standing so close. My heart flutters like pigeon wings. *Moons, why does he have to smell so good?* Like a smoky hearth fire mixed with some kind of tropical plant I can’t name.

“She has become quite adept at caring for hybrids under your tutelage,” he continues on, with no idea of the havoc he’s reeking inside of me. “Also, much more forthright. She defends her actions and refuses to back down in an argument unless directly commanded. I believe her extreme character transformation is directly owed to you.”

I nod, accepting the credit. Or maybe the blame. I’m not quite getting a read on how L’Than feels about her “character transformation.” But his words make me flash back to the last conversation she and I had after my big interview-fight with BRO.



“YOU CAN TAKE solace in not being a Xalthurian female at least,” L’Nel said while we picked berries off the vine together. “I spend much time in my rooms as of late, lamenting my current misery.”

As rich as L’Nel is, I couldn’t deny her point.

I'd learned a lot about Xalthurian females during my breakfasts with her—at least *Elite* Xalthurian females.

They were a little bit like the women in entertainments set in the ancient European Regency era of our old planet's history. They grew up extremely sheltered from the world outside, inside a small inner circle of rich Xalthurian families that only ever seemed to interact with each other.

They didn't even have online access to secondary education like we did back on New Terrhan, thanks to the colony ship. Around the age of eighteen, they were just given several downloads worth of schooling in a subject called Entertainment Sciences. From the way L'Nel had described it, it had been a mix of etiquette lessons, decorating tutorials, and management training in anticipation of a household staff.

Whatever their education, Elite females most definitely did not have to take part in any kind of Breeding Ceremony when they turned twenty-one, even before the war. Apparently, that ritual was a non-traditional hell, custom-created for us humans.

No, when Elite Xalthurian females turned twenty-one, they were launched into what that ancient Regency era might have called society.

There was no official "season"—mainly because, from what I could see, this part of the planet only had temperate weather. So, the Elite threw parties and other special gatherings throughout the year, and Elite females were expected to attend as many of these events as possible until they found a husband.

At least, that was how it was supposed to go—the way it had gone for the millennia before the Extinction Virus. L'Nel had been put on the marriage market over ten years ago, and so far, no dice.

"Many men do not want to commit until they have a hybrid male who will continue the line," she told me as we picked *brupas*, a dark green vine berry that had become a particular favorite of Jack's since he decided he was all done with breast milk. "But the ones who successfully take part in a Breeding Ceremony come back...quite changed."

L'Nel stopped picking *brupas*, a vacant look coming over her face. "My mated friends have told me terrible things about their marriages. Their husbands compare them to the females they bred on New Terrhan. After the new treaty was signed, one of my friend's husbands even went as far as to petition the council to divorce his wife and move to New Terrhan to marry the mother of his female child! The court said no, but of course, my friend was very upset. My brother calls this affliction that many of the hybrid fathers seem to have caught 'Ceremonial Mind Rot.' It does not give me much faith in marrying a Xalthurian male."

"Yeah, I bet it doesn't." I picked a few more of the dark green berries from a nearby vine and tossed them into the basket of fruit L'Nel and Jack had started collecting before I'd come running down. "It's a terrible system, all around. I can see why your brother is working so hard to come up with a solution, even though he definitely doesn't suffer from Ceremonial Mind Rot."

A fearful thought had occurred to me then.

The Big Red Obstacle doesn't suffer from it, but do I? That would explain the way my body reacted in his presence. Why I hated him but couldn't stop thinking about how he touched me on that ship....

No, no. I do not have Ceremonial Mind Rot. The Big Red Obstacle is nothing to me, I decided—just a sperm donor I needed to circumvent and escape, before it's too late.

"Where is your brother with coming up with a solution to the infertility issue, anyway?" I asked L'Nel, shoving the worry about Ceremonial Mind Rot out of my mind.

"Stars in the sky, do you think he would discuss such matters with me?" L'Nel made that growling chest-chortle sound that Xals called a laugh. "L'Gon is like most Xalthurian males. He thinks our only worth is in entertaining and raising children. He will not even consider letting us females travel to New Terrhan."

"Why does he have to agree?" I asked.

L'Nel paused just as she was about to reach for another green berry. "What do you mean?" Her ridges rippled with confusion.

"Why does he have to agree?" I asked again. "He doesn't hold any real power over *you*."

I cast a bitter thought to the employment contract I was forced to sign in order to stay close to Jack. "You're a grown woman with access to interstellar space rovers. Who says you or any other Elite female needs The Big Red Obstacle to agree to let you go anywhere?"

"You are suggesting we just leave, against our families' wishes?" L'Nel flapped her ridges, as if she could get in trouble just for having this conversation with me. "The council would be quite upset if we went without asking them."

I shrugged. "There's an Old Terrhan saying: *It's better to ask forgiveness than beg for permission.*"

There had been a few idioms I'd had to break all the way down for L'Nel to understand. But her eyes lit up with instant comprehension for that one. "You are right. I could *do* what I want *now* and *apologize* for any rules I violate *later*. We could *all* apologize *later*."

L'Nel regarded me with a happy flap of her ridges. "Thank you for your guidance, bestie. I will speak with the other Elite females about this on our next group holo."



"YES, L'Nel has changed a lot in the month since she dared to download a full New Terrhan language package," I acknowledge, coming back to the present moment with L'Than. "But I feel like she keeps tricking me into meetings like these."

L'Than's expression darkens. "You have had another moonlight picnic with another male?"

"No, BRO had her babysit so that he could grill me about..." I stop myself just short of telling L'Than about his cousin's

insane accusations. “Some stuff about Jack.”

L’Than relaxes his shoulders. “I am glad to hear he is showing an interest in his son. From what L’Nel tells me, he is so busy at work, he has only been able to spend small amounts of time with the xalling.”

Try zero time. And I’m not sure his lack of fatherly hours has anything to do with his busy work schedule. But I am the one who white-lied myself into this corner, so I make a non-committal sound and throw L’Than a tight smile.

He pulls a small cube out of the picnic basket. “Have you ever seen one of these?”

“No.” My usual scientific curiosity perks up at the sight of the unknown device. “What is it?”

Instead of answering, L’Than presses it between his index finger and thumb.

There comes a slight popping sound, and I gasp when the small cube suddenly expands into a blanket even larger than the humongous mat I was given to sleep on.

“Oh, wow!” I laugh and clap my hands together. “No, I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“I am happy to have delighted you.” L’Than steps onto the blanket, flicks back his robed jacket, and lowers himself down with surprising grace, folding his legs in what the colony schoolteachers used to call “crisscross applesauce” when I was a little girl.

But I’m not a little girl anymore. And L’Than is definitely not a little boy.

His white pants appeared gauzy under the bright moonlight, but the thin material bunches at the waist when he sits, ensuring full coverage of what lies beneath.

Not that I need to see what he’s carrying to know.

Memories of our time together in that prison cage flash across my mind. His erection resting on his stomach like a heavy, ridged snake. Pulsing and alive.

A warm shiver runs up my spine, and suddenly, I'm back in the space lab prison. Naked in the glass cage, sliding myself up and down on his ridged dick, his talons pressing into my ass as he guides my hips.

Everything inside of me is somehow melting and tightening at the same time, and I can feel something beating on either side of his waist, drumming into the soft flesh of my inner thighs. His heart—hearts? Maybe he has more than one? I don't know anything about Xalthurian anatomy. But the drumming pressure sends an electric thrill through my core. Slickens me with helpless need. Makes me slide faster over the ridged erection wedged between my folds.

That secret button the full Xal found on the Breeding Ceremony ship... I shift my hips down, then up, sliding it along the hybrid's ridges. And my mind nearly blanks with pleasure.

Nearly... nearly... it's not enough. *More. I need more.*

"Put it in," I whisper. "I want to know how you feel inside of me, too."

"Elle? Elle? Are you alright?"

I blink, and I'm back in the orchard meadow.

With L'Than. Who's not underneath me, pantomiming sex, but sitting on a picnic blanket, regarding me with a strange look. As he waits to break the news of his impending marriage.

"You will sit." He indicates the empty space on the other side of his perfect rom-com wicker basket. "Enjoy this picnic while we make our important conversation."

Oh moons. Shame crashes over me like the cold ocean waves outside the nursery.

What is wrong with me?

I didn't even say that last bit about wanting him to put his dick inside of me, like BRO had.

But you thought it, a sick and twisted voice reminds me inside my head.

I've eaten nothing since lunch, but my stomach rolls, threatening to evacuate. Why had I agreed to this conversation? What was I even doing, daring to meet alone with L'Than?

"I'm sorry," I say instead of sitting down with him on the picnic blanket. "This was a mistake!"

Then, I run blindly back toward East House. Away from L'Than. Away from that perfect house he built for someone else.

TWENTY-SIX

L'THAN

Essh! She is running again.

All this work. All this preparation. All of the time spent practicing *intonation* so that my New Terrhan would be perfect.

All those efforts dissolve like ocean froth when she dashes away after suddenly announcing that her agreement to picnic with me was a mistake.

Fortunately, I am much stronger, larger, and faster than she.

Even with the time I take to hiss out an aggrieved sigh, I spring to my feet and catch up with Elle before she reaches the trees lining the path back to East House.

“No, Gift. No running.” I easily get in front of her and gently grab hold of her arms.

“Don’t touch me!” Despite my gentle hold, she swipes at me with her weak, transparent talons like a k’vani. “We’re not in space prison anymore. You can’t just grab me whenever you want.”

I immediately release her, raising my hands in the air. “I am sorry, Gift. I did not mean to bring about memories of that terrible time with my holding action. I would never do anything to hurt you. You must understand this.”

I gaze down at her, desperate for her to see that I mean every word I say.

However, she refuses to meet my eyes. In truth, she appears to direct her gaze everywhere in the meadow but at me—right

before she abruptly cuts left to run again.

I once again easily block her path, this time without touching her. Then, I block it again when she attempts to cut right.

Her actions make me admire the human spirit. Even when an effort is futile, they still give it their best attempt.

“Move!” Her high-pitched yell is what the New Terrhan intonation guide would have described as a *screech*.

I am truly confused. This is not the way I saw our moonlight picnic going at all. “Gift...”

“Don’t call me that! Just...” Several emotions flit across her face, and then she folds her arms over her pale-orange shift. “Just let me go home.”

“You think of Easst House as home now?” I am so surprised, I cannot keep the disturbed hiss out of my pronunciation of East.

“It’s where I work,” she answers, still refusing to look at me. “That’s the contract I signed. The one you arranged before you decided it would be a good idea to ambush me tonight.”

“It was not an ambush. It was a *surprise*.” Despite my best intentions, an irritated ripple makes its way up my ridges. “One you seem to be purposefully misinterpreting.”

“Well, thank you for inviting me out here to inform me that you’ve decided to formally hook up with one of your groupies so that you get a Council Seat or whatever. I’m so happy for you.” Despite her emphatic words, she spreads her arms with a look upon her face that appears the opposite of happy for me. “Now, can you get out of my way? I’d like to get back to my son.”

A confused set of ridge ripples cut off the ones of irritation. “Groupies?”

“Okay, I refuse to do this with you.”

With a great expulsion of air from her mouth, she once again cuts left. And I once again easily get in front of her.

“*Groupies...*” I lower my ridges and cast my eyes to the side to access the “Special Slang” section of my language download.

A passionate fan, I conclude after slotting the definition into my working memory. “I see.”

My confusion is replaced by a slow smile of smug comprehension. “Tell me, *Gift*, are you jealous of my many ardent admirers?”

She jolts, her mouth falling open. But then she snaps it shut and glares up at me. “No. *No!* I don’t give a pigeon shit about your groupies, which is why you don’t have to explain the details of you marrying one of them to me. We’re not anything to each other, so that’s not...”

She refolds her arms, then unfolds them, then refolds them to insist, “That’s not necessary.”

“I see.” It requires everything I have learned about both hu’man and Xalthurian composure to keep my ridges neutral and mouth in a straight line. “I only address the *groupies* matter because you have gone out of your way to name my admirers as such. But I agree that we are not anything to each other.”

A sad look crosses her face. However, I am only rewarded with a mere flash of her true emotion before she suppresses it with a cold nod of agreement. “Exactly, so I’ll just be going —”

“*Yet,*” I finish. Before she can attempt another dash toward East House, I close the space between us and dip my head to speak perfectly toned New Terrhan directly into her ear. “We are not anything to each other *yet.*”

“We’re not...” She trails off, and her breath becomes audible, as if she does not have enough oxygen left to make her silly denial.

Good. Perhaps she is beginning to understand.

“I have come to remedy that situation,” I inform her quietly. “We will take the last meal together so that we may gain more knowledge of each other, per your old planet’s courting

customs. In this way, we will become *something* to each other.”

She stills, then moves back.

“Wow, seriously?” Her face twists with disgust. “You’re stepping to me with ‘old planet courting customs’ when you have a groupie waiting to move into that house you’re building for her?”

Frustration mounts like ocean steam, undoing the smooth set of my ridges before I can stop it.

“That house is for you, Gift!” I yell at her. “Of course, I have no interest in those groupies. Do you truly believe any other female compares to you in my hearts? I am building a house, establishing a new family line, and seeking a Council Seat so that I will be worthy. Worthy of *you*! Worthy of you saying yes to my marriage proposal.”

“Worthy of...?” Her expression morphs from anger to a wide-eyed terror I have not seen since our time in the former Prime Minister’s space prison. “No. *No*, you can’t have built that house for me.”

She looks to the home I commissioned to be the perfect blend of Xalthurian technology and New Terrhan architecture. Then back to me, as if I have lost my mind. “I’m not the one for you.”

I shake my head at her.

For most of my adult life, charming females have come as easy to me as breathing. But my gift challenges what I thought to be my expertise of the female mind. She is so full of contradictions, I cannot keep the angry clicks out of my next words.

“So you were *jealous* of my *groupies* and the wife you truly thought could be anyone other than you. But now that I say the person with whom I spend the rest of my life could only be you, you have no wish to accept my proposal?”

She purses her lips. I can nearly see her mind scrambling for an excuse for her contradictory behavior.

“I can’t leave J—” she starts to say when she finds one.

“I am aware you cannot leave the xalling, and I would not ask that of you,” I answer before she can finish. I cover my hearts with both hands to make my vow. “I will wait, Gift. We will marry so that I might gain a Council Seat. But you can continue to live at East House until I counter my cousin’s attempt to void the new custody laws. I have a plan, Gift. The house. This picnic. It is all part of my plan.”

My vows are sincere. My logic is sound. Yet, she continues to shake her head.

“You should pick one of the many females vying for your attention,” she insists. “Forget about me.”

“Do you truly think that is possible?” I gaze at her achingly beautiful face. She has asked not to be touched, but it takes considerable exertions of self-control not to draw her into my arms. “Do you truly think that I can or will ever forget what we shared?”

She visibly swallows. Then takes another step back. “We were in a desperate situation. That shouldn’t have happened. None of it should have happened.”

“But it did. And I am glad for it.” With one decisive step, I reclose the space she is attempting to put between us. Each time she pulls away from me only strengthens my determination to get closer. “You were there for a few days. I was there for entire *solars*, awash in misery and death. If I had the means, I would have ended myself to escape what I was forced to do. But all my anguish went away when I woke up to the sight of you. You gave me a reason to hope. A reason to live.”

Her gaze softens. But again, it is only for a fleeting moment before she averts her eyes. “I appreciate what you did for me in the station. I would be dead or worse if not for you. But things happened to me during the Breeding Ceremony. Things that made me vow I would never... could never be with a man again like that. Human or Xalthurian. I can’t trust you like that. I can’t ...”

Her voice cracks, and her next words come out in a whisper. “I’m broken. I can’t do the whole family thing with you. You should find a Xalthurian female who can.”

My ridges clap all the way back. “You think you are broken?”

“I *know* I am,” she answers. “Kira and everyone else seem to be over it. But I’m so angry and bitter about what they did to me. I don’t want to be touched like that—taken like that—ever again.”

“I understand. Of course, I understand what it is like to have all your choices taken away from you. To endure something you did not agree to.”

I meet her gaze with a somber nod, and she lets out a small breath of relief. As if my understanding has provided her a means of escape.

It has not.

I dip my head to inform her, “I will touch you in other ways. Ways that you like. Ways that will cause you to whimper again, as you did inside our cage, and make you wet from your breeding slit.”

Goosebumps rise on her skin. Fear or anticipation? It matters not.

I give up on controlling my emotions and let my words hiss. “I can still feel your wet heat when I close my eyes. Just the thought of you, when I am alone upon my mats, makes my *diijo* ache and leak seed. Do you think of me as I think of you? Can you feel me between your breeding slit? Do you wish, as I do, that we could be together like that again? Always? Outside of the cage?”

She opens her mouth. Then closes it again.

Silence.

So I answer for her. “*Yes, you do.* I can smell that you do. Smell that, despite your broken state, you want me as I want you. I will fix you. You will fix me. We will fix each other.”

Again, she does not answer. But no answer is better than the silly denials she attempted before. And the small slice of air

between us fills with the beautiful scent I remember from our time in the cage.

“I can smell you.” I do not touch her. I will never go against her wishes in that regard. But I bring my mouth down to hover over hers. “I could smell how much you desired me earlier, too, right before you attempted to run.”

“L’Than?” She raises her face. To deny me again or to receive my kiss?

Before I can find out which, a voice hisses out in Xalthurian, “Cousin! What are you doing?”

We both whip around to find L’Gon standing there, and all of his ridges are clapped back with absolute fury.

TWENTY-SEVEN

L'GON

“I am voluntarily caretaking for Elle,” my sister answered with an uncharacteristic angry click when I came home early from work to find her downstairs with L'Eondris and demanded to know where the hybrid's birth vessel was. “She is given no days off under your terrible employment contract, so I am aiding her in taking what the hu'mans call *me time* in the orchard.”

I believed my sister and was, in fact, grateful to encounter her instead of the birthing vessel when I returned home a bit earlier than usual to ensure I got a full night's rest before my scheduled appointment to remove the translator in my neck.

Sadly, while installing the repellent biological hardware was easily done with a handheld device, removing it required surgery that I could not safely perform on myself. The following morning was the earliest I could schedule an appointment, so I happily took the opportunity to escape up the stairs to my office without risking another confrontation with the birth vessel. One I would unfortunately be able to understand this time.

I had made it halfway up the stairs toward my office when the holo from T'Kan came through, flashing bright blue.

URGENT: I must speak with Elle Garrett concerning a highly classified matter of extreme importance. This is a message to inform you that I will come to your residence to interview your caretaker on my next diplomatic trip. You will be required to grant me access to her under Article 23A of the New Terrhan Accord and Amendment 5163 of the Xalthurian Charter.

I did not have to look up the article T'Kan cited, as my uncle had referred to it oft when negotiating the terms of our shipping contracts for New Terrhan.

Article 23A involved our responsibility to provide seeds for sustainable crops that the colony could maintain on their own. But I swiped the air to pull up the abstract for Amendment 5163, which, judging from its high number, had been added during the Generations War.

However, reading the abridged explanation of how civilians could be conscripted for any job that would aid in Xalthuria's technological advancement provided no answer to any of my confused questions. And the word "conscription" made my ridges agitate with alarm.

Surely, this was a trick, a workaround to allow Elle to take L'Eondris back to New Terrhan under the guise of national security.

However, I had never known T'Kan to be anything but a male of the utmost integrity. Even his severe case of Ceremonial Mind Rot could not have changed that. Could it have?

With a frown, I closed the message without answering it and headed back down the stairs and out a nearby side door without saying anything to L'Nel.

I needed more information, and this eve was the last time I could get it. The birth vessel's so-called *me time* was of no matter. I would find out why T'Kan was so insistent upon talking with her.

This was how I came to seek the birth vessel in what our family oft referred to as the picnic meadow, believing I would find her out here alone.

I am wrong.

I slow but do not attempt to temper my steps as I approach them. Still, they do not notice me. L'Than is hunched over the female, standing as close to her as two people can without physically touching, murmuring words I cannot hear into her ear.

He raises his hand to almost but not quite stroke her cheek with the back of his talons, and she looks up at him with a soft gaze.

I have only seen the hu'man custom of touching lips at the interspecies marriage ceremonies I have been forced to attend for diplomatic reasons. Yet, I know in an instant that they are about to share a *kiss*.

And the world becomes red.

Wrath and fury clap back my ridges so tight I can barely breathe. The primal urge to spit fire as our ancient dragon ancestors did fills my throat the same as a biological imperative, like waste excrement and hissing when I am in pain.

“Cousin! What are you doing?” I hiss, rushing forward.

They jump apart.

Her eyes widen with fear upon seeing me. As they should.

But L'Than straightens to his full height. Then dares to place himself in between the birth vessel and me.

“We are having a moonlight picnic in the Louxos orchard,” he answers my question with a defiant click. “That is allowed under Elle’s employment contract.”

The primal fire inside of me surges at his words, threatening to overtake my mind with fury.

I curl my talons, and my eyes fall to my cousin’s throat. The urge to claw it open pulses like heartbeats in my ears.

But I... I cannot. My sense of reason finally reappears.

He is correct, I realize, looking all around.

And killing my own hybrid cousin would not reflect well upon my standing in the custody case I plan to present to the Council.

I unfurl my talons.

“What are you doing home so early?” the birth vessel asks from behind my cousin’s shoulder. “Is Jack—”

“L’Eondris fares well,” I answer before she can once again inquire after the hybrid. “L’Nel was sharing last meal with him when I came home.”

I look between her and L’Than, and my hearts tighten with the realization that L’Than—not “me time”—was her actual reason for leaving her post... “It is not like you to leave him alone. For any reason.”

She guiltily averts her eyes.

And that primal spit fire urge gives new rise.

How far would she have gone with my cousin if not for my arrival? The hu’man act of kissing? Would she have lowered to her knees and done for him what she had only done for me in my dreams?

“Is there a reason you interrupted our time together?” L’Than asks. His ridges are set to their usual amused neutral. As if my presence here is somehow humorous.

I ignore his question and keep my eyes on the birth vessel peeking out from behind him.

Something inside of me needs to hurt her, make her feel as ugly as I do inside. “When I agreed to host your employment inside my home, it was to take care of the xalling, not for you to seduce my cousin, then cower behind him when I confront you about it, like the craven hu’man you are.”

The amused set of my cousin’s ridges is replaced by an indignant backward clap.

“You go too far, L’Gon!” He steps forward with a violent ripple traveling up his half ridge. “You have no right to speak to Elle in this manner.”

“No right?” I bear my teeth at him. “She is mine—”

I stop myself before the Ceremonial Mind Rot can fully overtake my tongue. “She is my employee.”

“Your employee.” L’Than crooks his head to the side and squints his eyes. “Is your employee not allowed to eat?”

My ridges bristle at his condescending question. “Of course she is. I am not without reason.”

“No, you are not without reason. But you are completely without cause to bother Elle during her mealtime.” L’Than folds his arms. “Your wonderful xalling is being attended to by your helpful sister. And as you have said, Elle is allowed to eat. So, you may return to your home and allow her to finish her evening meal. With me.”

I have no rebuttal for this. At least none that does not begin and end with physical violence.

I am a man of medicine and science, a retired warrior no longer required to fight.

But that is all I wish to do as I stare down at the male who has dared to dismiss me. Me, the head of his family line.

The red threatens to overtake my restraint again, and for several moments, I am not sure whether I can control the savage thirst for blood inside of me.

But then a better idea occurs to me.

“You are correct, Cousin. It is time for the evening meal.” I step back to paste on a mocking imitation of the smooth smile L’Than has all but weaponized.

“And I am starving. So, since you have already prepared one of your infamous picnics, I will join you for last meal.”

PART 6

MOONSLIGHT PICNIC

TWENTY-EIGHT

ELLE

So... that's how I end up sitting on the large picnic blanket after all, sharing a moonlight picnic with not just L'Than, but also my boss/baby daddy, The Big Red Obstacle.

Could the mood as we silently stuff meat, cheese, and berries in our mouths be any more awkward?

I glance at BRO, stiffly pouring himself a second glass of bright red wine, and decide the answer to that question is no. No, it definitely could not.

Especially considering this picnic is taking place right after L'Than dropped that bomb about building the perfect house, not for one of his Xalthurian groupies, but for me. *Me*. As if there weren't a hundred—possibly thousands—of reasons why we could never be together.

“Upon what are you thinking, Gift?” L'Than asks, interrupting my churning thoughts.

Thank goodness, I purposefully sat with my back to that dream house. The urge to cast my gaze toward it tugs at me like someone pulling on a well rope. But...

The number-one reason we can't be together keeps my eyes pinned on my small saucer of meat, cheeses, and berries as I answer. “Actually, I was wondering about those golden berry bushes and those purple apple-looking fruits on the trees. I've never seen either of them in the New Terrhan shipments.”

BRO answers instead of L'Than. “This is the part of the orchard where we grow the produce that is only shipped domestically.”

I bristle. “So, you decided we weren’t good enough for whatever kind of fruit that is?” I indicate the black-leafed tree with the purple apples growing from its green branches. I’ve never technically eaten an apple before, but my mom campaigned hard to get them on the list of other crops I could try my hand at bioengineering for New Terrhan. She said they were both delicious and hardy.

BRO glances over his shoulder. “The *buli* tree takes at least a decade to fruit, which would not have made it an ideal candidate to fulfill the crop cultivation part of our shipping contract.”

“Why not? Those trees look hardy enough to survive on New Terrhan, and they don’t require huge amounts of farm work to thrive. That would make them the perfect crop for cultivation. Or did it not occur to your anti-human family that we were capable of planting with the future in mind?”

BRO regards me with an irritated raise of his ridges. “Your leaders are the ones that negotiate the food contracts. If you are upset about the choices they made, then you should perhaps return to your home planet and confront them about failing to think with the future in mind, as you claim your race is capable of doing.”

Dangit, he’s right. High Leader Henry died a few years back, according to Kira. But since he didn’t have to do the physical work, I could totally see him choosing seeds that sprouted seasonally over low-effort saplings that would yield plenty of fruit if we just gave it ten years.

“Speaking of things that you have not tried before.” L’Than glances between us. “You really should reconsider taking a few sips of this goji berry wine. I believe it is also not on the list of delicacies that we ship to New Terrhan.”

My face heats. I’d actually love to try the wine. But I mumble, “I don’t want to pass on the alcohol to Jack” simply because BRO, who believes I’m still breastfeeding, is sitting right there.

“Goji berry wine is on the list of exports to New Terrhan,” BRO tells L’Than.

I shake my head. “No, we definitely don’t have goji berry wine on New Terrhan. We make our own alcohol with overripe fruit from the harvest. I’ve never even seen a wine that looks like that.”

“Yet another question you should ask your improvident and apparently extremely corrupt leadership about,” BRO answers with a superior smirk. “The utter selfishness of humans never fails to disgust me, even if it no longer surprises me.”

Frustrated rage bubbles in my veins. “Just because our leaders failed to make the best decisions doesn’t give you the right to lump us all together. I mean, if that were the case, I’d assume all Xals were piles of shit willing to kidnap humans and run eugenics experiments on them, based on what your former Prime Minister did.”

BRO’s superior smirk is replaced by an angry hiss. “I do not base my low opinion of your species simply on your horrible leadership, but also on your general failures of honor. After all, we would not be in this situation if you had abided by the original Accord between our races.”

“L’Gon, let us not—” L’Than starts to say.

“I didn’t sign that Accord!” I shoot back before L’Than can finish. “Our leaders—*none of whom* would actually have to fulfill it with *their* bodies, by the way—did.”

“That does not matter,” BRO insists. “I had no wish to mate with a human either. But it was my duty to my family. You should have done your duty as I did mine.”

What?

I open my mouth to respond, but L’Than speaks in Xalthurian before I can. “You only say that because you have never been truly forced to do something you did not want to do.”

The “let us be reasonable” look has disappeared from his face, and his ridges agitate as he tells The Big Red Obstacle, “You speak of duty, but this is not the same thing at all, Cousin. No matter your sense of fidelity, you could have said no when your father ordered you to take part in the Breeding Ceremony. Other Elite Males who did not wish to mate with humans said

no, I am sure. However, Elle was not given that choice. Neither was I in our former Prime Minister's space prison."

A thick silence falls over the conversation, and BRO stiffens, no doubt coming up with a cold insult to counter his cousin's argument.

I brace myself for another attack.

But then The Big Red Obstacle says, "N'Ure is a despicable villain. I am sorry for the pain he caused you, Cousin. To both of you."

He glances at me, then quickly looks away.

I blink at him and have to turn to L'Than. "So, seriously, is no one immune to your charms? Not one Xalthurian female? Not even The Big Red Obstacle?"

"You will not insult me with that alternative name." BRO's ridges flatten. Then he frowns. "And you will explain your words."

That slightly amused look that I've come to think of as L'Than's default expression since our prison break slides back into place as he answers before I can. "She does not understand that you are much more logical than you are given credit for and, therefore, is attributing your reasonable response to my ability to attract admirers. Much as you attribute everything I am willing to do to make Elle my future mate to Ceremonial Mind Rot. You two are very much alike."

BRO glares at L'Than, and I rear back like he punched me.

"We are nothing alike," I insist. At the same time, BRO says, "In no manner are we alike."

Which, I'll admit, doesn't exactly disprove L'Than's thesis point. I irritably side-eye BRO. *Seriously, this is the one time he chooses to actually agree with me out loud?*

L'Than smirks and switches back to New Terrhan. "Since you truly appear to believe that lie, I will enumerate the ways in which you are similar."

He counts out on his talons. "One, you are both overly stubborn and full of moral pride."

“Having values she does not possess does not make me stubborn,” BRO answers.

At the same time, I say, “I wouldn’t call knowing for certain that his opinions of humans are effed up *stubborn*.”

“Two,” L’Than continues. “You both always think you are right and have to be convinced you are wrong.”

“That is because I am usually—” BRO and I both begin to say. We cut off and glance away self-consciously before we get to “right,” though.

Leaving L’Than free to extend a third talon. “Three, you both hate the other’s species, but consider me an exception to the rule.”

“You’re only half Xal. You’re still a human,” I start to point out but stop because BRO is already saying, “You have been raised as a Xalthurian. You are mostly that.”

“Four, I derive much pleasure from the both of you when I prove that I am right and you are wrong.” L’Than grins at us both. “Now, shall we prove my fifth point, in which you both cling overlong to your versions of the truth? Or have we successfully achieved point number two?”

I mean, I want to tell him he’s wrong about us. About all of it. But I don’t know how to do that without proving him right. *Dang it!*

BRO must be feeling the same way. His ridges are still flat, but he doesn’t say anything, either.

L’Than grins, and I get the sense he’s one of those people who really likes to crow about it when he’s right.

But before he can say anything, he cuts his eyes to the side in a way that I recognize from my time with Kira as having received an urgent holo that breaks through any “Do Not Disturb” that has been put in place.

He swipes the air, and his easy smile disappears. “I must engage with this communication. I will return anon.”

Without giving either of us the chance to protest, he jumps to his feet and heads off to disappear behind a thick grove of *buli*

trees, too far away for either of us to hear or see him.

Which leaves me alone with The Big Red Obstacle.

For the first time since our interview-fight.

“You know what?” I jump to my own feet and grab the wicker basket. “As long as we’re here, I’m going to sample some of those berries and see what I’ve been missing.”

Taking a note from L’Than, I don’t wait for BRO to answer. Just head off toward a bush filled with golden berries.

“I will talk with you now about the Breeding Ceremony.”

BRO appears beside me, and I nearly jump out of my skin. “Oh, my moons, you scared the bejeezus out of me.”

“You would think your designer would have bestowed such a fragile species with better hearing and awareness of their surroundings.” BRO gives me one of his distasteful up-and-down looks. But then his expression softens. “I had no idea you were conscripted into the Breeding Ceremony by your Leaders. We were told by N’Ure that you all willingly agreed to the terms of our Accord, accepted our crops, then refused to honor your part of the deal.”

“Yeah, well...” I throw him a snarky look. “Sounds like my race isn’t the only one with a corrupt leader problem.”

I brace myself for a cold rejoinder, but he just stands there, staring down at me with the same pitying look L’Than wore when I showed up in his cage, demanding to know where my baby was.

“I am the one who hurt you in my quest to fulfill my duty,” he says again. “Our Leaders do not matter. I take full responsibility for my actions. And I am sorry.”

Oh wow, this is an apology. Like, a real apology.

My stomach twists. Blatant rudeness, cold distaste, obvious superiority. That was what I was used to from The Big Red Obstacle. I had no idea what to do with this contrite version of him.

Maybe that's why I muttered, "You didn't hurt me. You made it worse. You shouldn't have stroked me like that. Made me..."

The memory of that mind-blowing orgasm shudders through my body. "You shouldn't have given me something to compare it to when the other Xals—"

I break off at his stricken look.

What in the moons am I even saying? Am I really about to confess to The Big Red Obstacle that I liked the way he touched me during that barbaric ritual?

Okay, time to change the subject.

"Tell me about these." I abruptly turn back to the bushes full of plump golden berries. "They look delicious."

A long beat of silence. Then The Big Red Obstacle seems to decide to answer. "They are delicious. When fermented, they make for a fine sparkling wine that is often served at celebrations."

"Ooh, like champagne?"

Without waiting for his answer, I eagerly sample a few.

"Oh, my moons!" My eyes roll. "I've never tasted anything like them. They're sweet and crisp, with just a hint of tang. I've got to take some home to Jack for his breakfast. They're..."

Perfect.

The word drops down into my mind, and I glance up at the house overlooking the bushes. The house L'Than built for me.

No, don't think about the house.

I hastily stuff another handful of berries into my mouth before turning my fingers and my thoughts back to picking some berries for Jack's breakfast.

"If we are changing the subject, then you will tell me what you meant when you said I was a terrible scientist."

I pause mid-reach, then shake my head. *Not your circus. Not your monkeys. You have way bigger problems on your plate, girl.*

But BRO counters my silent decision with, “You will cease shaking your head and tell me what you meant by this insult. Perhaps you have mistaken my focus on one issue to be to the detriment of my position as Health Minister, as others have argued. If so—”

“Oh, my moons. It’s not because of your focus,” I answer before I can stop myself. “Singular focus is great, and you’re right. Solving the infertility issue should be your number-one priority as the Minister of Health. Having your race solely dependent on ours for fertility doesn’t bode well for your planet’s future. Any decent scientist can see that it’s unwise to put all your eggs in one infertility solution basket—pun, totally intended.”

A stiff moment of silence. Then: “Except for your confusing pun, that is almost exactly what I have said to my detractors. So then, why would you accuse me of being a terrible scientist?”

I sigh. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Yet, you did. For a reason you are refusing to give me now.”

I clamp my lips and concentrate on the berries. Maybe if I ignore him...

“Ignoring me will not cause me to stop waiting for your answer to my question.”

“Okay, fine,” I huff, throwing another handful of berries into the basket. “Focus is great, but *curiosity* is way more important when it comes to science. For example, you obviously want us human women for our fertility. Still, I bet you don’t even understand our fertility—like most people on Xalthuria enjoy the tropical weather without realizing that your planet has been terraformed.”

BRO jerks back his head.

And I frown. “Am I wrong about the planet being terraformed? I figured that’s the only way to explain half the

planet being temperate and warm year-round and half the planet always being crazy-cold. It could only have been planned that way—especially with three moons.”

“No, you are correct.” BRO ripples his ridges in a way that I can only describe as consternated. “The planet was terraformed many millennia ago. We are an offshoot of a long-lost dragon race, and we made this snowy planet over to fit our agricultural needs. But most Xalthurians go their whole life without realizing our planet has been terraformed, unless they choose to receive an ancient history download.”

For the first time tonight, it’s my turn to smirk. “Because they’re incurious about the basic foundations of their life. Like you are about why human women are so fertile in comparison to your race.”

“Of course, I understand why you are more fertile,” BRO insists while dropping more berries in the basket. “Your species is born with many more eggs than you will need. You are comparable to litter animals in that regard.”

“See, those kinds of systematic assumptions predicated on our race is probably why you’re having so many problems coming up with solutions for your Xalthurian fertility problem.” I drop a few more of the golden berries into the basket. “When I was running my experiments, I couldn’t just assume or dismiss. I had to consider everything. Every possibility in order to achieve my goal.”

He stops cold. “What experiments? What goal?”

A wave of heat washes over me. “Is it hot? I’ve never been outside this late at night. Does it heat up here as opposed to becoming cooler? Is that part of the terraforming?”

“No, temperatures are rigidly regulated to become slightly cooler in the eve,” he answers. “You will explain about these experiments you conducted.”

How long have I been waiting for someone to ask about my scientific efforts? Kira had been way more interested in tech than food biology.

High Leader Henry had only wanted to know just enough to pass my idea off as his own.

And after I gifted my mom with my first successful attempts at corn, she quoted some old planet saying about not wanting to know how the sausage was made when I tried to explain my scientific process.

“But you literally make pigeon sausage every year for the cold season,” I pointed out.

“Exactly! See why I don’t want to know anything about your corn?” she shot back.

Now, finally, for the first time in my adult life, someone actually wants to talk with me about science. But I can’t form a good answer.

According to BRO, no one’s messing with the global thermometer, but the heat inside my body keeps on increasing. And I feel... weird all over.

My head buzzes, and my skin tingles—like I’m coming down with something. *What is wrong with me?*

“Do these experiments of yours have something to do with why T’Kan is demanding an audience with you?” The Big Red Obstacle asks out of the blue.

I struggle past the weird feelings to ask, “What? What do you mean that...?”

I trail off. Not because I’ve run out of words but because the fever has completely taken over my body. My uniform shift is so light and flimsy, perfect for tropical weather. But now the fabric scratches at my sensitive skin, constricting me....

The tingling suddenly stops. But what replaces it is even worse.

My entire body throbs... but not with pain. At least not the kind that hurts. It’s more an ache. A deep ache echoing from between my legs.

“What is this aroma you are emitting?” BRO asks somewhere in the distance. “Are you—?”

He breaks off. Most likely because I've dropped the basket of berries and started stripping off my uniform, along with my underthings. Urgently, like they're on fire.

I *am* on fire. There's a heartbeat between my legs now, demanding relief. *What... What is wrong with me?*

"What is wrong with you?" BRO demands at the same time.

I stare up at him... naked and breathing hard.

Good question. And the answer hits me like the Great Flood waters that killed a fourth of our colony in one fell swoop many years ago.

This feeling... it isn't sickness. It's desire. Raw and unfettered.

I take a step closer to The Big Red Obstacle... BRO... L'Gon...

Then, suddenly, I'm climbing the Xalthurian I hate the most, like a tree.

Before he can ask what's wrong with me again, I wrap my legs around his waist and smash my lips into his.

TWENTY-NINE

ELLE

I'm kissing The Big Red Obstacle.

Not cussing him out.

Not avoiding him at any cost.

Not hating him worse than I hate anyone else.

The opposite, in fact.

I grind myself against his large, ridged dick.

He doesn't respond. Just stands there, stiff as a board until the shock of my attack suddenly wears off.

"Stop this, female," he protests. "Stop it now!"

He hates you, a dim voice reminds me from the back recess of my mind, where the tiniest bit of reason still exists.

His complete antipathy didn't bother me before. But suddenly, I can't take his rejection. Hot tears spring to my eyes. I'm almost sure I'll die if he doesn't touch me. Take me...

"Please!" I whisper against his alien lips.

"No! I cannot engage in sexual relations with you again! I will not!"

He peels me off his body and all but shoves me to the ground. Like I'm an octopus trying to kill him.

I'm not an octopus, though. I wish I could be that cold and remote. But my body burns, and my sex clenches with the need to be filled.

“No, no, don’t leave!” I scramble to my feet and run after him when he turns to walk away.

Then I lower my head and, without a single ounce of pride, throw my full bodyweight at his legs.

Oh my moons, I tackle him. I tackle him into the dark-green grass right beside the picnic blanket.

He’s so much taller than me. I have no doubt he wouldn’t have fallen if not for the fact he was completely unprepared to be taken down like a football player in an old planet sports entertainment.

“What are you doing?” He flips onto his back to return to his feet.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I cry out, even as I pounce on top of him to keep him from getting up.

“Have you gone mad?” he demands underneath me.

“I think, maybe yes.” The thin slice of scientific reasoning left in my brain tries to come up with some sort of hypothesis for my irrational behavior and this sudden explosion of sexual need. “I believe I’ve been overcome with a terrible case of Ceremonial Mind Rot. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

But not even my abject shame can keep me from undulating my hips into the thick ridge underneath his pants. I have no pride. My entire world has been reduced to the aching need radiating from between my legs.

“I can’t stop myself,” I explain as I helplessly grind my naked mound into his ridge. “I need you. I need you. *Please....*”

BRO stares up at me for several beats—his diamond-shaped eyes glowing bright in the moonlight.

Then he flips me over, rolling me onto the big picnic blanket with a hissing sound.

My heart explodes with joy when his pointed tongue invades my mouth.

It’s thinner and longer than expected. Not like L’Than’s.

He's full Xal, the shrinking voice of reason reminds me. *So, so not human.*

But I can't bring myself to care. I grind my hips underneath his, searching for the same feelings I found with L'Than. And thank the moons, he grinds back, his hips undulating and matching my rhythm as he takes my mouth.

Soon sparks of pleasure bursts beneath my waist, just like before.

But not just like before.

Shame and reason don't break through to take back my mind as soon as I come this time. There's only the wild, hollow ache of my body screaming that those few sparks of grinding pleasure aren't enough.

Why isn't it enough?

I don't know, and I can't care.

"More!" I beg, "More! Please, I need more."

He pulls away, sitting up as far as he can with my legs still desperately wrapped around him. "I cannot... I cannot take you as I did before."

"Why not?" The hot tears come back to match my frustrated and needy whine.

Did you forget the part about him hating humans? the now teeny voice of reason asks in the back of my mind. *Hating you most of all?*

But then BRO casts his eyes away and says, "I do not wish to hurt you or make you cry as you did at the ceremony."

Oh... *Oh*. It takes my brain several moments to register what he's saying. That he doesn't want a repeat of the Breeding Ceremony.

"This isn't the Breeding Ceremony," I tell him. "I want this. I want more with you. I *need* it."

The Big Red Obstacle stares back at me. "You..."

I'm not sure who moves first, but suddenly we're kissing again, undulating against each other. Building pleasure.

I can feel his ridged cock, hard as a beam against my leg, but he's not giving me what I need.

"Please... please," I beg.

"Cannot hurt you. Cannot hurt you again," he hisses against my lips.

His words bring tears to my eyes. My sense of reason has shrunk down to a tiny dot, and I have half a notion to push him onto his back and take him without permission, like the worst hypocrite.

But then a voice above us says in Xalthurian, "You will not hurt her, Cousin. She is ready. I can smell it."

L'Than... I dimly register him in the shadows just beyond the blanket.

"When she emits that scent, that means she is ready for you," he says to BRO. "Take out your *diijo* and insert it inside of her. However, go slow. Human females are more sensitive in this area—not like ours. You can give her both pleasure and pain. Ensure that you inflict only pleasure upon her by decelerating your entrance into her sweet hot. And Elle, you must ease your muscles, welcome him inside of you so that he is not afraid to proceed."

Seriously, what is happening?

It feels so crazy to have L'Than here, instructing us what to do. Nonetheless, I relax the muscles I didn't realize I was holding tight as BRO carefully reaches between us. There's a hard pressure at my entrance, and then, *oh moons*... He's entering me.

And L'Than was right. It doesn't hurt! I let out a strangled moan, I'm so relieved.

BRO immediately stiffens on top of me.

"It is okay, L'Gon," L'Than assures him from the shadows. "Sometimes human females moan. It is a sound of both pleasure and pain. Concentrate on how she clenches around

you... how her breeding slit welcomes you with a heated swallow.”

“Please, more...” I beg, co-signing on what L’Than is telling BRO. “I want all of you.”

BRO regards me with a helpless look—then drives his huge body forward, burying himself all the way to the hilt inside of me.

Forget sparks. A tidal wave of pleasure crests over me as I immediately orgasm.

I scream out. And somewhere in the distance I hear L’Than once again assuring BRO that he’s not hurting me, that I’m screaming because of the pleasure. That I’m blubbing tears because I want more.

“He’s right,” I gasp out as the unexpected orgasm starts to peter away. “I need more. It hurts. Please take the pain away. Fuck me... I need you.”

My words snap something inside of him. No more careful inching inside of me, no more holding still. BRO’s scaled chest flexes hard against my naked breasts as he flattens me to the ground and begins rutting me, his ridges scraping into the walls of my overstretched sex. He fucks me so hard, I have to hold onto him for fear of falling, even though we’re both on the ground. But I love the feel of him inside of me.

“Yes! Yes! This is what I need!” Pleasure twists through my belly as I sob, “Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Maybe there was an itchy bit of reason before.

But it’s gone now, replaced by several new sensations as another climax builds inside of me.

I think I’m ready. But I’m not.

When the orgasm hits, it wipes me out like the Great Flood. My mind breaks, and I can no longer hear L’Than.

There are only my screams as BRO rides me, making me come so hard my body convulses like a million fireworks exploding at the same time. Colors dance before my eyes in a rainbow of lights. Heat licks along every single nerve in my

body, and I just know I will burst into tiny pieces at any second.

Then there's the hot spill of BRO releasing inside of me. Filling me up with his alien seed.

The Big Red Obstacle has become a heavy, hissing animal on top of me. But he's the only thing I can hold onto—the only reality in my entire universe. He drives forward one last time, impaling me on his large dick as he jets out one last load of his alien cum. And his ridged cock hits a new spot somewhere deep, deep inside of me.

Someplace that makes another, way more fatal orgasm flood through me.

I scream again, not sure how I'm surviving this. I'm dying... I'm dying... but I can't bring myself to care. I just cling to the huge alien and wait for the inevitable, unable to do anything but stare into nothing in a complete daze.

Eventually, my senses fade back in, and I can feel The Big Red Obstacle expanding inside of me again... hear him and L'Than talking.

“She clenches on to me so tightly. I cannot stop my *diijo* from rising again, but I do not wish to hurt her...”

“It is okay, Cousin. See how she writhes beneath you? This is her invitation to you to take her again.”

I have no idea that I'm undulating my hips beneath his until L'Than points it out. And I whimper and moan when, instead of holding himself still, BRO begins to ride me again.

No more undulating for me. His hips power me into the ground. He's so heavy and consuming on top of me, I couldn't move if I wanted to. It's almost hard to breathe, but I only care about how good it feels to have him inside of me, filling me up, stretching my walls to their limit.

“How is this possible, that you can reduce me to such a state?” he demands as he savagely plows into me. “You have turned me into an animal. I can have no pride with you. I cannot...”

For once, I can't blame him for being mad at me. I scratch at his scaled back so violently—it's possible I'm hurting him. But I can't control myself. My sex milks his cock as if he's medicine she needs to gulp down to get better. And, with some animal instinct I didn't know I had, I bite down on his shoulder.

The bite ends his punishing thrusts. He slams into me with an enraged hiss, and another orgasm rockets through us.

This one tears me apart, but it's also the most exquisite thing I've ever experienced.

The folds of my sex finally stop clenching, and The Big Red Obstacle falls away from me, completely drained.

"You have satisfied her, and she can rest now," L'Than observes in the shadows as my eyes drift closed. "Congratulations, L'Gon."

Yes... I'm finally satisfied. As BRO's weight lifts off me, a deep, black sleep claims me. Like a reward for a job well done.

But what only feels like a few moments later, I awaken again to find myself lying next to a dozing Big Red Obstacle on the picnic blanket.

He's asleep, his chest moving up and down steadily in the moonlight. But my need is back. Even hungrier than before.

Ravenous.

I'm ravenous for more.

"You have need again," a voice says in New Terrhan.

A statement, not a question—one so accurate, it could be coming from my head. But it's not.

I sit up on my elbows to find the hybrid who correctly assessed my current state, sitting fully clothed on the other side of the picnic blanket.

As if he's been watching us sleep.

"L'Than?" I whisper.

“Yes, I’m still here.”

We stare at each other for several beats underneath the bright moonlight.

Then I say, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Again. This time to L’Than.

Because I already know what I’m about to do.

THIRTY

L'THAN

“I shouldn’t want to have sex again,” Elle says, even as the scent of her strong arousal fills the air with a potent fragrance. “I’m sick. There’s something wrong with me. Something that goes way beyond Ceremonial Mind Rot.”

“There is nothing wrong with you,” I assure her with firm throatbox intonation, even though I am almost as confused as she is.

I did not lie to Elle. I had a plan. A plan I remained firmly committed to, even as I returned to the picnic meadow after being informed by one of my fellow hybrid Elites about my father’s latest political salvo.

But my plan, along with my anger over my father’s vicious answer to my bid for a Council Seat, dissolved when I saw the two figures writhing upon the picnic blanket.

Along with my resolve to keep the past in the past.

I am the male lying against the wall, broken and beaten, as I watch the Kel cruelly discipline his future Qel over and over again until she screams out in defeat.

I am also the male telling my gift, “You simply ate the wrong thing.”

I nod at the golden berries scattered on the ground next to the bushes. “Unlike the buli fruit, ju’li berries are on the no-send list for a specific reason. They affect humans in a way they do not Xalthurians—as an extremely potent aphrodisiac. Your desire is not due to so-called Ceremonial Mind Rot. Nor is it your fault.”

Elle nods. “That explains it. I’ve essentially been poisoned.”

Her face darkens with another question. “Did The Big Red Obstacle know? Is that why he apologized for what happened at the Breeding Ceremony? To trick me into—”

“Of course, he did not know.” I defend L’Gon before she can finish with her accusation. “L’Gon is a warrior with a strong sense of integrity. If he apologized to you, he meant it. And he would never take such dishonorable action. Very few people know about the ju’li berries effect on humans.”

“Oh.” She scrunches her face up in a way I recognize as confusion, even though she has no emotion-conveying ridges upon her nose.

I brace myself for the next obvious question.

“If ju’li berries are such a big secret, how do you know—ohhh!”

Her eyes roll, and her entire body visibly stiffens underneath the moonlight as she clamps her lips with a pained whimper. “Oh moons, oh moons! Is sexual desire supposed to hurt like this?”

She has no idea how much desire can hurt. The way my wanting of her has kept me up until the darkest of eve and driven me from bed. How many moonlit faun rides around the kingdom city has it taken to tire myself out enough to fall into a fitful sleep.

But I do not tell her that.

“I sensed you would have need again, and so I remained here so that I might ease your burden when you awoke,” I answer instead. Then I hold out my hand. “Will you come to me?”

I keep my nose ridges flat, not breathing as I await her reply. There is no guarantee she will answer yes.

Elle is broken. But not broken in the same way as me.

She might choose to wake L’Gon rather than take a second male underneath the moonlight. This could be my palace punishment all over again.

I have imagined such carnal things passing between us since I awoke to find my gift in my breeding cell, but she might never allow me to have her—

“Yes.” Her acquiescence comes on a choked breath, and her gaze locks on to mine as she crawls toward me across the picnic blanket on her hands and knees. “Please help me!”

Her voice has taken on the same desperate note as the Qel’s did that night of my punishment. But the three moons hang high in the sky, and my eyes are not nearly swollen shut this time. I can clearly see the fear and confusion in her brown gaze.

“I—I’m burning up,” she tells me, as if I am a medical practitioner she has come to see about some ailment. “All over... especially here.”

She places a hand over her breeding slit.

Essh. My hearts beat aggressively against my chest.

I want to toss my gift on her back and take her in a frenzy.

But she is scared and confused. I must go slowly.

Instead of rutting with her until her sweet hot is filled with my seed, I carefully pull her onto my lap. Placing her legs on either side of me, I hug her close and gently stroke her back.

Elle writhes against my still-covered *diijo*, moaning, “Pleasepleaseplease” in such a rush that even with my New Terrhan download, her words come out garbled.

And it does not matter that I have not pulled myself out. Her movements send my straining *diijo* near to bursting. “Gift, if you continue to gyrate your hips, I may not be able to control myself.”

“Don’tcarejustfuckme.” She places her hands on the sides of my face and presses her pillowy lips against mine.

How can I resist wrapping my arms around her and returning her ardent passion? I capture her tongue in my mouth, savoring the taste of her. Though I did not imagine our first true kiss would be a ju’li berry induced one, it does not matter.

She is giving me her mouth—the *kiss* that hu'man females only bestow upon males they wish to mate. Truly, she tastes sweeter and more intoxicating than my favorite goji berry wine.

The scent of her arousal teases my nostrils, and the softness of her lips against mine sets my blood racing. The warm flow of her juices pools in my lap, wetting the material of my pants, causing my *diijo* to throb.

With threadbare willpower, I reluctantly break our kiss.

Gift shakes her head vigorously and reaches for me. “No! Want you now! So hot! Need it!”

She attempts to press her soft mouth to mine again, but I lean out of her reach. “I will dishonor myself and spill outside of your body if we continue on like that. But worry not, my gift. I have wanted this from the moment I first saw you. Turn around and make the things I have only desired in my mind come true this night.”

I grip her slender waist and turn her until her back is flush to my chest.

L’Gon continues to sleep. But some dark part of me wants him to wake up and see us like this. I want him to appreciate the way she spreads her lush brown thighs for me, her head falling back onto my shoulder as she thrusts into my hand.

“Yes, Gift, open to me.” My hearts speed up, and my breath catches in my throat. I have never wanted anything or anyone as much as I want—*need*—

this precious beauty.

With one hand, I gently cup her mammary gland, grazing her puckered nipple with the pad of my thumb.

“More!” she demands.

“Easy, sweet Gift.” I pepper her neck with kisses as I slowly move my other hand up her leg until I reach her core. “I have wanted to do this to you for so long.”

Careful not to scratch her with my talons, I use the pads of two fingers to massage the nub of flesh protruding from her

breeding slit.

She arches her back, and her head falls back on my chest. “Yes, more! Harder! Faster.”

I apply more pressure to the nubbin, rubbing it in earnest now as words I did not plan to say hiss out of my mouth. The story of us. “I was in that cage for so long, rutting like an animal with faceless females I cared nothing about. I fucked for survival. Theirs and my own. But one day I woke up and saw you, and I knew in an instant you were mine. Yet you were the one I could not fuck. Not because I did not want to—no, I wanted to take you like this more than I wanted to breathe. I did not take you as I took them because I knew you were special. Knew you were *mine*. The best gift I have ever received.”

“Oh, moons! Oh, moons!” My gift writhes against my chest, gyrating her hips while I squeeze one of her mammary glands and rub her leaking breeding slit. I am not entirely sure she is even registering my words at this point. “Mmm, soclose.”

I know her mind is focused on easing the sexual frustration the ju’li berries have inflicted upon her, but I need to finish my confession. Let her know how I felt then and now—even outside of a cage.

“Yes, you were mine.” I kiss her neck. “I was nearly driven mad with want of you. Each day when we pretended to fuck, you have no idea how much I wanted to slip my diijo into your wetness and make you orgasm until your screams filled that whole wretched ship. I wished to feast on your sweet hot and slide my tongue so deep inside of you your only thought would be of me.”

I lick her sweat-slickened neck, savoring the intoxicating taste of her.

“I was jealous when I saw you with L’Gon. But then something happened. I grew aroused, watching the pleasure on your face. Watching him stretch out your beautiful hole. Watching you moan. You are so beautiful when you find your female joy, and I intend to help you find it again. And again. And again.”

“Oh, my moons, L’Than. What are you saying to me... doing to me?” she moans.

“I am making you *understand*,” I answer, my throatbox words coarse as sand. “The ju’li berries are not fully to blame for our arrival at this moment. It was predestined, much like your arrival in my cage when all hope was lost. Now come as you did in that cage for me, sweet Gift,” I softly command.

“Yesyesyes!” A gush of warm liquid spills from her slit as I continue to rub her button. The juices coat my hand.

And I do what I did not dare when we were imprisoned together. I raise my fingers to my mouth and lap up the intoxicating liquid. Her scent could not have prepared me for this. I had thought the sweetness of her lips was my new favorite flavor. But this is beyond anything that has ever touched my tongue.

Gift wiggles on my lap again, and the last bit of my reserve snaps. I place Elle on her back as L’Gon did and position myself on top of her.

“Yes! Yes!” she cries out beneath me. “Fuck me, L’Than.”

“This is more than fucking,” I inform her. “When I take you, I will never let you go again. You belong to me. Do you understand?”

“Yes! Just, please... oh, moons... please!” She lifts her hips underneath me, all but begging me to claim her.

That is not necessary. The only reason for my existence at this moment is to claim her, as predestined in the stars. I grip my *diijo* and slide the head along her wet slit. I am large, and she looks so tiny. I do not wish to hurt her, but I must have her.

I surge forward, burying myself so deep inside her wet heat I am unsure where she ends and where I begin. I grit my teeth as I force myself to still, not only to give her a moment to adjust to my size. But to savor the mind-blowing pleasure that courses through my entire body.

My deepest imagining of my first taking of her does not come close to this moment of perfect copulation. My hearts call out for my exquisite gift because, finally, we are one.

“Oh, my moons!” My gift drags her weak nails down my torso, scraping them over my hearts. “I feel... so full... stuffed.”

She looks up at me, her eyes wondrous. “I love this feeling, L’Than. It feels good. So very good. It’s much better than what I imagined when we were in that cage.”

She imagined us like this, too? I suspected it. I boldly proclaimed it to break past the walls she attempted to erect between us. But to hear the words from her pretty mouth.

Everything inside me melts as I slant my lips over hers and begin moving inside of her.

To my surprise, she wraps her legs around my waist, pulling me deeper still. My *diijo* is even further engulfed.

Essh. Her sweet hot grips me in a vise so tight, I can barely hold on to the little restraint I have. My *diijo* spasms, threatening to spill after only a few pumps.

But no, I will not lose control. I will continue to take care as I claim her. With an aching hiss, I slowly thrust in and out of her. She feels unbelievable.

So good. So wet. So... mine.

At first, my gift writhes beneath me, making mewling sounds in the back of her throat like a happy k’vani kitten.

But then her breaths become quicker and quicker.

“Yesyesyes...” She rakes her nails down my chest and releases a high-pitched scream. Something primal.

My senses tingle. Someone is watching. I glance up from my gift to find L’Gon sitting up on the other side of the picnic blanket.

And staring straight at us.

THIRTY-ONE

L'GON

I have awakened. Yet, I cannot move.

My hearts thunder in my ears, as they did when I had to restrain myself from clawing out my hybrid cousin's throat. But something—some emotion I cannot name—roots me to the spot.

I sit, still as a statue, unable to look away from the sight of L'Than and the birth vessel copulating upon the picnic blanket, the same as I did with her earlier in the eve. But not quite the same.

Her legs are wrapped around his waist, and he kisses her as he drives into her with controlled strokes that I would have been incapable of while inside her sweet hot.

L'Than suddenly stills, as if he can sense my eyes upon him.

He looks up, and the bright light of the three moons gives me a clear view of his face. The fire in his silver gaze matches the thunderous beating of my hearts.

“Please.” The birth vessel—no Elle. Her name is Elle. The naming convention I have been clinging to feels silly in light of what has passed between us this eve.

Elle grips his shoulders, pulling at them with her fragile arms. “Please, don't stop. I'm so close.”

The admirable control L'Than exhibited before he realized I was watching disappears in an instant.

He becomes an animal on top of Elle, thrusting into her with wild jerks of his hips. He speaks to her in Xalthurian,

emotional clicks punctuating each word. “You. Are. Mine.”

“Yes, yours!” She grips his arms and chants his name. “L’Than, L’Than, L’Than. Oh, moons, I’m going to come again. Yeeeeessss!”

Stars in the sky. Memories of our time together somehow give me a visceral effect as I watch her orgasm with another male.

I can practically feel the grip of her sweet hot around me, even as L’Than drives into her with one final thrust of his hips and releases his seed deep into her core, causing her to scream out once again.

Essh! Though I sit on the other side of the picnic blanket from them, my *diijo* begins to spasm—so violently, my back caves as I helplessly release a jet of blue seed onto the blanket.

What is happening to me?

My ears ring with the intensity of my spontaneous release, and though I have exerted no energy, I am left panting in the aftermath.

“Do you see what you have done to L’Gon, Gift?” L’Than says in New Terrhan.

I jerk my head up to find L’Than observing me with one of those hu’man smirks upon his lips.

The insolence of him!

“How dare you?” The freeze upon my body lifts, and I begin to animate with rage.

But then, Elle cranes her neck to look at me, as L’Than directed.

My hearts stutter when her eyes widen, and she sees the blue seed I have spilled. “Are... are you alright?” she asks in a hesitant tone that I do not understand. But also do not like.

Blood pounds in my ears. I should be the one inside of her. Wildly thrusting into her. Claiming her as *mine*.

I do not realize I am hissing until L’Than asks her, “Do you hear that jealous hiss? You must kiss L’Gon again and assure

him that he has no need to be upset. Make him understand that you are mine, but this eve...”

He looks at me, then back to her, seeming to make a decision.

L’Than presses a gentle kiss into her forehead. “This eve, you are also his. This eve, you will belong to the both of us. Show him.”

The both of us?

It is on the tip of my tongue to demand his meaning. But the words freeze in my throat when he pulls out of her, drenched and glistening with her juices. “Go to him, Gift.”

The female focuses her gaze on me and slowly crawls in my direction, like a k’vani on the hunt.

She is coming to me. My jealousy fades and is somehow replaced by dark desire. The tightness in my chest and the tension in my shoulders eases.

L’Than no longer matters.

Only the k’vani crawling toward me. All I can see, hear, and smell is *her*. I want—I need to taste her again and slide inside her welcoming heat.

Essh! What am I thinking?

This is Ceremonial Mind Rot. That is for certain. And I cannot succumb to it yet again. I try to tamp down the arousal, to harden my mind against the ache I should not feel for this hu’man.

But Elle is relentless in her desire to satisfy her lust. She climbs on my lap and straddles my thighs. She grips my face, and though she is so much weaker than I am, for some reason, I cannot jerk my head away.

To my surprise, she pushes me on my back and starts to gyrate her hips. She slides her breeding slit along my *diijo* as she throws her head back and moans.

What in the...?

“Relax, Cousin.” L’Than sits beside us now, his gaze lazy as he watches the hu’man female slide her sex up and down the

shaft of my *diijo* in this unorthodox arrangement of our bodies. “This is the position she prefers. See how happy you are making her with your acquiescence.”

I raise my eyes to the female on top of me. Indeed, she appears to be in a trance-like state.

Until her eyes find mine with an intensity that drops my stomach.

“Please, please...” she begs in the low hiss that hu’mans call a *whisper*. Her round brown eyes glisten with frustrated tears. And those eyes... Those lovely eyes are my undoing.

Though my mind was resolved to not giving in a second time to the Ceremonial Mind Rot, my body cannot hold the line.

Instead of pushing her off me as I ought, I pull her down and capture her mouth, swallowing her next plea. Her lips taste of sweet berries, and having her back in my arms hardens my *diijo* to the point of pain.

I need.

I need to bury myself deep within her again. I must hear her cry out my name as she did my cousin’s. Why am I behaving in this manner? Why is she when she claimed to hate me just a few day cycles ago?

As if hearing my silent question, L’Than explains in Xalthurian, “It is the effects of the ju’li berries. To us, they are simply a sweet delicacy. But to hu’mans, they are a powerful aphrodisiac. I have seen this once before.”

So, she has been induced into a mindless lust state. I wield this information as a mental weapon against myself.

She does not want you truly. It is only the ju’li berries. It is the same as the aphrodisiac you prescribed Br’In so he could participate in the Breeding Ceremony, even though he only desires other males.

But this fact does nothing to quell my own disgusting lust. I run my fingertips along her arms. Her skin is soft and smooth, like silk. She trembles beneath my touch, making me want to

explore the rest of her. I cup her full mammary glands and graze her nipples with the pads of my thumbs.

She releases the same mewling sound she did underneath L'Than. But this time, that sound is for me. The want within me deepens, and I thrust my tongue into her mouth once again—only to immediately draw it back.

It is too dangerous to keep indulging myself in this hu'man custom. The taste of her is too sweet. It drives me closer to the edge of madness, and even though I am still not fully embedded inside her, my diijo starts to spasm again. How long can I take this strange grinding action before I spill?

I must... I grit my teeth in an effort to regain my self-control. I must push her off me.

“Enough of that, Gift. Can you not see how you are torturing him?” L'Than chides. “It is time to give him what he wants, to take what you need.”

I barely have time to process the other male's words before L'Than clasps the female by the waist. He raises her just enough to release my diijo, which springs into the air like a jak'ari standing on its hind legs in high alert. Her glistening breeding slit hovers over my *diijo*.

I stiffen. *I must stop this. Stop myself!* Yet the words to call a cease to this madness will not come.

“I will have your spoken permission, L'Gon.” L'Than holds Elle's hips still above my *diijo*, even though the rest of her is squirming. “She is a patient who needs our help. It is our responsibility to alleviate her suffering. But if you do not wish to do your part, I will make her wait until I am once again ready to satisfy her overpowering desire.”

“No, don't make me wait! Need it.” The female mews like a starving *k'vani* kitten, and her desperate gaze once again finds mine in the moonlight. “Please help me.”

She is in need, and that is the only excuse I have for what I say next. “Set her down. You have my permission.”

Without hesitation, L'Than pushes the female down on my *diijo*, engulfing it in her sweet, gripping heat.

Essh! Amazing. I am held so tightly within her breeding slit my eyes roll, and I fear I may lose myself to something much more powerful than Ceremonial Mind Rot.

My hold on sanity slips even further when she presses her large round mammary glands against my chest and slams her lips into my mouth, entangling her tongue with mine as her sweet hot leaks fluid that both teases my nostrils and inflames my blood.

In an instant, all morals, all decisions, all reserve are lost.

I grip her waist and flip the female on her back. She whimpers and writhes, reaching out to me. I hiss, inserting myself back into her hot sheath. My last shred of self-control disappears as I claim her with a monstrous thrust, going deeper, harder, and faster with each stroke.

This female is my enemy. Yet she is all that currently exists to me.

I break the tight seal of our lips. But only to possessively click “Mine.”

“Yesyesyes.” She grips my shoulders and opens her legs wider to receive my *diijo*. “Yours.”

My hearts clench, and for reasons I cannot explain, I glance over to L’Than.

He sits on his haunches with his hands on his knees, an intense gleam burning in his silver eyes as he watches me rut with Elle.

His gaze is not entirely unwelcome.

A strange content takes hold of me, and the primal jealousy falls away. Suddenly, he is no longer my rival. In fact, I have never felt closer to another male—not even my best friend, N’Thn, with whom I fought in battle.

“Oh, moons, I’m...!” Elle claws the plates of my skin, her breeding slit contracting around me so hard, I can tell she is close to another peak.

A small sorrow fills my heart. Her heat is so incredible, I do not wish to ever leave her. Or this moment.

“I’m... I’m...!” She trails off with a scream right before warm liquid gushes from her breeding slit.

And despite not wishing this moment to end, my hips involuntarily rock forward, heedless of what I want as my *diijo* floods into her sweet hot.

I am spent. Yet, I cannot bring myself to part from her. Not yet. So as not to crush her with my much greater weight, I roll us back into the position she likes.

But instead of unseating her, I bring her talon-less hand to my lips. Kissing her palm, sucking her fingers into my mouth just to taste the sodium upon them. It is as if I have been drugged right along with her.

I have gone completely mad.

“How long?” I somehow manage to ask L’Than between my helpless licks of her flesh. “How long will this last?”

“All night, until the morn. But do not worry, Cousin,” L’Than answers. His bright gaze burns with a lust even more mad than my own. “The three of us will get through this night. Together.”

“It hurts. Oh, moons, it still hurts.” Elle collapses against my chest, panting heavily. But she continues to wiggle her hips against my spent *diijo*. “Need more.”

“She still has need,” L’Than observes in Xalthurian.

Then his eyes darken, and he holds out his hand.

“Give her to me.”

THIRTY-TWO

L'GON

“Give her to me,” L’Than says.

His command scrambles my senses. As a male of great reason, I am aware that I should do something to take hold of this out-of-control situation. Perhaps command L’Than to return to his newly built house and make Elle wait until I rise again. I suspect my refractory period will not take long, considering the way she is moving her hips into the deflated *diijo* still embedded inside of her.

Surely, banishing L’Than is the action I should take. The action I must take.

Must you?

A desire rises within me. A dark desire I would not have guessed existed prior to this eve.

What would it be like to honor my cousin’s request? To willingly return to my prior audience state. To watch L’Than take the “patient” who needs our help, from start to finish.

My spent *diijo* sparks at the thought of actually giving in to the dark desire brewing inside of me.

And Elle moans, “Again, please. Want more.”

She wants more.

What am I thinking?

I am inside my own body. Of course I am. But...

What am I doing?

It feels like I am watching a stranger. A stranger who stills Elle's undulating hips, despite the new rise of his erection.

"No. Don't!" Elle grasps at my chest when I lift her off my *diijo*. As if I have hurt her. Her voice returns to its hungry k'vani kitten state, and water drips from the corner of her eyes. "Need more. Please, don't push me away again!"

My hearts pang with guilt. *Is that how she saw it?*

"My earlier rejection was for your own good," I explain with a soothing click. Even as I transfer her into my cousin's waiting arms.

"It is okay, Gift. I have you. I will ease your ache." L'Than pulls Elle into his lap and gently strokes her back. "There, there. Do not let water fall from your eyes."

L'Than handles Elle with such a tender touch. She sighs into his bizarre arm hold, laying her head upon his shoulder much like the squalling xalling did when she pulled him from his care pod.

It is obvious they share a connection—one I will never have with her.

My hearts stutter, and another kind of ache rises inside of me as I watch them. Not quite jealousy. Not quite desire.

A wish.

A wish for something I cannot have. Something I should not want. Especially with a hu'man.

Yet, I cannot look away from them.

This goes on for several moments. But soon, the smell of Elle's heightened arousal refills the air, and she becomes restless upon his lap.

"L'Than, I need it again," she says, practically crawling up my cousin's chest. "Please help me."

"You will wait, my beautiful gift." Her whining was enough to make L'Than set her upon my *diijo* earlier. But now his expression goes from soothing to teasing as he stills her hips in his taloned grip. "First, tell me how much you want me."

“No games. Just fuck me.” She claws at him and spreads impatient kisses on his face. “Fuck me *now!*”

L’Than merely laughs.

“So impatient,” he chides. He then throws me a conspiratorial look. Like he is again the never serious young male I once knew, scheming to filch goji berry wine behind the household servants’ backs.

“I have an idea.” L’Than turns her in his arms until she is facing me. “You may give L’Gon some relief while I attend to yours.”

I do not understand his meaning. Or why he would turn her to face me.

But my *diijo* rises like a wave during high tide when L’Than positions Elle between my legs on her hands and knees.

“See how he drips blue at the sight of you.” L’Than reaches a swirled hand down to guide his *diijo* into her dripping slit, then places his other hand on her shoulder, pressing down as he softly commands, “Take him in your mouth.”

It is just like—yet nothing like—the dreams that have plagued me since Elle took up residency at East House.

My nose ridges fold back, cutting off all breath. Surely, she will not...

Elle grips my *diijo* and places her mouth over it.

Nothing, not even my dreams and reading through several reports of this hu’man sexual practice, could have prepared me for this sensation. Every nerve within me awakens, and fire licks throughout my body as I release my held breath with a great expulsion of excited clicks.

Essh! What is this madness? This sweet, intoxicating madness!

An urge to close my eyes and lose myself in the new sensations tugs at me. But I cannot look away as she glides her tongue along my *diijo* like a much-savored treat, then once again swallows me down while stroking the base of my erection in tandem with her sucking action.

I revel at both the feel and sight of her soft hand fisting my ridges as her hot mouth bobs up and down on the top half, taking me as deep as possible into her throat.

For once, I cannot disparage her lack of talons—or the strange hu'man custom of using one's throat for actions other than swallowing.

And the pleasure is somehow heightened when L'Than begins to smoothly thrust in and out of her from behind.

Elle groans as he takes her, sending an electrifying vibration down my shaft.

“Aaahhh!” My body jerks in reaction, and I pant with the exertion it takes not to thrust myself even deeper into her small mouth. I do not wish to harm her, but the sight of her lips stretched wide over my *diijo* is more than I can bear.

In more ways than one.

The pounding of my hearts increases. And soon I am also fighting hard to keep myself from releasing again.

I do not want this to end, but the shudders wracking my body let me know my seed will not be stopped.

“You must cease,” I tell her. “If you do not, I will spend into your mouth.”

Her answer to that command comes in the form of a wicked laugh, which sends more thrilling vibrations down my shaft—right before she sucks me even deeper into her throat.

There is no more holding myself back then. I erupt like the volcanoes that feed into the hot springs on the cold side of the planet.

And to my shock, instead of pulling away from me in disgust, she swallows my seed, then eagerly begins licking and slurping at the blue that escapes. She bathes me with her tongue, lapping up every single drop until she finally releases my spent *diijo* from her mouth with a sigh.

Again, I am no expert in hu'man *tones*. But it strikes me as happy. And triumphant.

“Did that satisfy you, Elle?” I stroke her soft curls, an uncharacteristic humor warming my hearts. “Taking my seed in your mouth as my cousin takes you from behind?”

As if in answer to my teasing question, she stiffens and cries out.

“Ohmymoos!” She convulses as L’Than loudly clicks out his own release.

“My gift!” he hisses in Xalthurian as he empties himself into her. Despite our positions, his eyes burn with possessiveness as he yells out, “My female!”

When L’Than finally releases her hips, Elle collapses into a puddle between us. A soft sigh escapes her lips, and her eyes close as she immediately falls into a deep sleep. The only sign of life is her chest’s gentle rise and fall.

“She is resting now.” L’Than lies down behind her and scoops her protectively into his arms before peering at me over her dark cloud of hair. “I suggest you do the same.”

Rest? Is he jesting?

“There is much we must speak of,” I start to insist—only to stop when his eyes fall closed nearly as fast as Elle’s.

No, L’Than is in no condition to speak of what we have just done with Elle. Together. And it seems I am not either.

The need to rest drags at my eyes, and I find myself lying down on the other side of the hu’man we shared as I allow a black, dreamless sleep to overtake me.

When I awake again, the sounds of Elle’s soft moans fill the air.

I open my eyes to find L’Than and her in the same place they were when I fell asleep. Except now, she lies on her side with her leg cocked over my cousin’s swirled thigh. L’Than has one hand between her legs. He rubs at her slit in circular motions while his other hand massages the mammary gland upon her chest.

I have spent myself so many times this eve. Yet the sight of them returns me to a hardened state in less than a click.

L'Than raises his gaze from the female's neck to spot me awake.

He moves his hand from her mammary gland, his black talons wrapping around her neck. Alarm grips my hearts when he squeezes her fragile throat.

But then he uses his thumb to turn her face toward me. "You will look at him directly, Gift."

I realize then that his intention was not to choke her but to make Elle watch me as I watched them.

Elle stares at me with lust-glazed eyes. "You're awake. Hi."

"Hello," I answer, staring back. My entire body tightens with the need to be inside of her again. To rut her until I release yet another load of my blue seed into her sweet hot.

But it is not my turn.

L'Than continues to make Elle watch me as his hand rubs between her legs—circling, lazy and slow, as if he wishes to aggravate both Elle and me.

It works. I let out a jealous hiss at the same time that Elle whines, "More, please. You know just your hand won't be enough. Even after I come."

"Yes, I am aware, Gift." He kisses Elle at the space where her neck and shoulder meet, then dips his head to speak in her ear at too low a volume for my translator to pick up.

Elle's eyes widen. "Do you really think that will work?"

Her voice is shaking. With lust or confusion? I cannot tell.

L'Than once again raises his gaze to meet mine. And this time, he speaks loudly enough for me to hear him. "I believe it is worth a try. Perhaps this will finally sate your ju'li berries thrall."

"Maybe—" Elle abruptly cuts off, shaking under his hand with another orgasm.

However, she was right about it not being enough. Her arousal smell remains heavy in the air, like a thick fog that refuses to

lift. And I can see how desperately her glistening sex continues to clench under the moonlight.

More. She needs more. Still.

“O-okay. Anything. Anything to make it stop,” she cries out when the orgasm has ceased wracking her body. “It feels like I’m starving. Like I’m being torn apart.”

L’Than is no longer smiling. And there are no more teasing clicks.

He simply turns his gaze back to me and says, “You will join us now, Cousin. She is ready to receive us both. At the same time.”

At the same...?

My mind... my good sense—it refuses to process what he is saying to me. But it turns out not to matter what I think about any of this. I am an animal separated from all reason, and I do not hesitate to close the space between Elle and me.

The female reaches out and captures my hand as soon as I arrive by her side.

“Thank you,” she says in that soft hu’man hiss.

My hearts light up with a strange flipping sensation at her gratitude. But I have to ask, “Is this what you want, Elle? For me to take you together with L’Than?”

She nods her head.

“You must say this desire out loud,” L’Than commands. Not to tease, I sense, but to reassure me.

“I want you, L’Gon.” She says my name for the first time, and it feels like my hearts are melting inside of me. “I want you and L’Than inside of me.”

I should deny her. This act is monstrous. Even more immoral than letting her take me in her mouth while my cousin took his claim.

But apparently, L’Than is wrong about me. I am not full of moral pride.

She stares at me with her big brown eyes, and once again, I lose all reason. There is no resistance, only surrender to the fires of lust blazing between us.

“Then you will have us,” I decree, easing onto my side in front of her.

Our lips join, hot and heavy, until she breaks our kiss... and turns her head to do the same with L'Than. Jealousy once again flares up within me when I watch their tender exchange. But the violence that accompanied this feeling earlier in the eve has disappeared.

My jealousy only makes me greedy for more of her kisses. As soon as she and L'Than part, I pull her face to mine and draw her tongue back into my mouth.

She tastes so good, so sweet. As rigid as my *diijo* has become, I continue to take her mouth slowly with the feeling that I could engage in this hu'man custom forever.

But eventually, she pulls back from me again. “Please take me. I need it so bad.”

L'Than chuckles. But then he confesses, “As do I. I am afraid my *diijo* will involuntarily release if I am made to wait much longer.”

I feel much the same way. My *diijo* strains so violently, I can feel it dripping seed. “But...”

I look down at her small form between our much larger bodies and hiss. “Will she be able to accommodate us both at once? I... I have no wish to break her.”

“Oh, we will break her, but not in the way you think,” L'Than answers, his diamond-shaped eyes flashing.

“Her breeding slit may be small, but as you know, it stretches to accommodate our size. And so, too, will her back hole, I believe.” I watch him slowly rub her bottom and gently part it under the moonlight. “Gift, remain calm while I probe you with a knuckle to see if you will open this last hole to me.”

“Okay,” she agrees.

To my surprise, she grabs ahold of my much larger hand. As if she believes I can provide her with some manner of comfort as L'Than makes his exploration.

One finger slowly disappears into the folds of her backside. And her big brown eyes bulge. She tightens her hold around my hand, inhaling sharply, but then her eyes fall closed with a needy whimper.

L'Than chuckles behind her. "I suspected this act would require some form of lubrication. But she is so wet from our many releases and her own essence. I believe she will accommodate my *diijo* quite nicely. Cousin, you will enter her first, then me."

Essh. This is truly happening. My *diijo* pulses painfully at the prospect. Still, I pause to ask Elle. "Are you ready?"

She grasps my shoulders and answers, "So ready."

Beautiful k'vani. I eagerly guide my *diijo* into her warm sheath and click with relief when I am once again encased by the tight, wet muscles of her sweet hot. The ecstasy of sinking inside of her has too quickly become a familiar feeling.

"Now it is my turn," L'Than announces from behind her. "Are you ready, my precious gift? To take me in your back hole?"

She clamps her lips but bravely nods.

L'Than strokes her bottom in a way that makes her head fall back with an aching moan. "I wish to hear your consent, my gift."

"Yes," she gasps out. "Please, moons, yes!!"

I lie in silence, trying hard not to move as my cousin eases his *diijo* between her back folds. But the way her heat engulfs me, I cannot help thrusting forward when he is fully seated behind her.

Elle grips my shoulders and stiffens with a loud squeak.

"Have we hurt you?" I still my movements and search her features.

She briefly bites down on her bottom lip. “No. I’m full, stuffed, too full, and it feels...” She squirms between us. But then says, “So *good*.”

“That is correct, Gift,” L’Than hisses. “It feels good to take us like this. There is no pain because your body was made for us to take you this way. To worship. To adore. To *claim*.”

A small whimper escapes her lips.

I grit my teeth as my willpower to remain still quickly disappears. “I cannot hold off much longer, Cousin.”

“Then take her, L’Gon. She is ours,” L’Than answers in Xalthurian. Then, in New Terrhan, he asks Elle. “Am I correct, sweet gift?”

“Yes! Yours!” Elle writhes in between us. “Please take me.”

There can be no denying her when she begs so sweetly. I sink further into the depths of her breeding slit, and we all move together, attempting to find the right cadence. Our movements are slow and deliberate at first, but then we finally fall into sync. We are instantly lost in the rhythmic bliss of moving together as one.

I never thought I would willingly succumb to a hu’man—particularly this one, who has caused me nothing but problems with her deceptions and relation to the Qel.

But here I am, sharing her with my cousin. My *dijjo* pulses deep inside of her sweet hot as I savor the softness of her skin, the sound of her moans, and the smell of her tangy arousal.

My pride is no longer of consequence. Elle. *This*. We are all that matters now.

Elle gives me another opened-mouth kiss, and I swallow her tongue, drinking her down as we all move together.

And this time, when she turns and kisses L’Than with similar greed, I am enflamed. I cannot understand why this arouses me so much, but it does. She goes back and forth, kissing us. And in turn, we rut into her with an increasingly frenzied passion.

Every time I think I cannot possibly be more aroused, my body surprises me over and over again. My need for this female only increases with each thrust.

Finally, she presses her head against my chest and releases a primal scream. Her body shakes, and her sweet hot once again leaks juices, enticing me toward my own completion.

“Elle!” I yell her name out loud for the first time as I flood her with my seed.

L’Than is not far behind us. He pumps in and out of her back hole, his swirled body thundering with the violence of his release.

And that somehow sends Elle into another volley of orgasm.

“Ohmymoonsohmymoons!” She scratches and wiggles between us. Her incoherent babbling transforms into a high-pitched scream. Her body violently convulses, and hot nectar gushes from her breeding slit.

Her eyes widen and roll back until only the whites appear. Then she goes completely limp.

If not for her sweet hot still milking my *diijo* like the starving k’vani kitten she has become, I would fear the pleasure killed her.

Still, I place my fingers against her neck to check her pulse, and I am relieved to find a slow and steady beat. “She appears to have passed out again.”

“Yes, she is resting again, but not for long, I suspect.” L’Than opens his half-ridge to sniff the air.

“Our attempt to finally break the ju’li berries’ hold on her brought her temporary relief and much-needed sleep. But her arousal scent is still strong. She is my mate, and I must continue on with her until she is satisfied. However...”

My previously unserious cousin regards me with a somber look. “If you wish to escape this situation and return to East House, now is your chance.”

I stare back at him, all manner of thoughts storming inside my brain.

This is insane. Beyond any sense or reason.

But only one thought makes it to my lips.

“I will stay,” I answer with a solemn click. “We will continue.
And we will not stop until she is fully satisfied.”

THIRTY-THREE

L'GON

As L'Than predicted, Elle awakes with great need just a few clicks of the moon later.

Lying on her side with her back to L'Than as she is, mine is the first face she sees.

“Hi,” she says to me with a shy smile. While emanating that heady aroma.

“You have need,” I answer. A scientific observation based on her strong arousal scent. But for some reason, I have to suppress an emotional click.

“Could you...?” she begins to ask, tentatively reaching for me.

“Yes, Gift, you have need.” I do not realize L'Than is also awake until he raises behind her, his eyes hooded with sleepy desire as he stops her forward action toward me. “Come to your prime.”

Her *prime*.

That one word stops my hearts. Is his use of it some manner of jest?

As if in answer to my unspoken question, L'Than once again places Elle upon his lap with her back to his chest. Facing me as he impales her on his *diijo*.

“Aaahhh! Yes. Thank you!” Elle arches her chest, her head falling back onto his shoulder as his knowing hand finds the front of her sweet hot. “So good. So good.”

And I get the answer to my question when, instead of offering to share her with me, he massages her mammary gland with his other hand as he slowly pumps into her from below while kissing her neck in a way that makes sweet moans spill from her mouth.

My *diijo* once again becomes a beam of ridged steel between my legs, rising so fast a series of pained clicks escape before I can stop them.

L'Than grins. "See how you torture him, Gift? Is there any need to wonder why he agreed to stay until your need was satisfied?"

His questions, delivered with deliberate thrusts into her sweet hot, confirm my suspicion. His use of the word prime, the slow way he continues to take her despite knowing I am in agony waiting my turn—this is not merely sex to satisfy Elle's need. It is a performance. One meant to provoke.

Essh! His actions are reprehensible. Designed to torment and make me lose my mind. Even worse, he gets his way.

I am in a frenzy by the time Elle begins to come—as she has called it throughout the night—and L'Than finally releases inside of her.

Contemptuous cousin! L'Than has reduced me to an animal. I lift Elle from his spent *diijo* and impale her upon mine before she is even done with her orgasm.

"L'Gon. Oh, L'Gon!" The way her sweet hot fists my *diijo* with the sound of my name upon her lips—I am lost.

My need is so great that I do not even bother to flip her onto her back. I grip her by her plump buttocks as I desperately slide her breeding slit up and down on my pulsing *diijo* until we both explode.

This time together.

And though my actions were not meant to antagonize L'Than, it would seem I have achieved my revenge.

"Give her to me!" he says, not nearly as calm as he was earlier in the eve.

He falls on top of her in a frenzy similar to mine. Which soon causes my *diijo* to once again give rise.

And so, we pass the night in this back and forth. It is nearly sunup when Elle collapses upon my chest. This time, however, her sweet hot has ceased its clenching around my *diijo*, and the constant scent of her persistent arousal finally dissipates.

L'Than pulls her sleeping form off me. But instead of attempting to take her again, he gently lays her down between us.

“She is truly sated, I believe,” L'Than says, speaking my own conclusion out loud.

I nod in agreement, but I cannot quite speak yet. Only stare upon her sleeping form in the morning light. Her entire body is splattered with our blue seed, and a satisfied smile curves her lush mouth.

Essh. What an eve.

“L’Gon? L’Gon, did you hear what I said?”

I look up to find L'Than already redressed in his fine robes. He regards me with an expectant cast to his half-ridge.

I shake my head but still cannot form words.

“You should carry her back to East House so she may get some rest before your household staff arrives,” he says. Apparently, again.

This is a good idea. But...

My chest tightens as I continue to gaze upon her sleeping form without answering him.

“It has been a long night,” L'Than says with a sympathetic click. “I will carry her if you are unable.”

He crouches down to gather her into his arms. Like treasure collected.

And I am left to quickly redress in my own robes before following behind them back to East House.

He shared her with me. Yet somehow, the connection between L'Than and this hu'man has grown deeper over this crazed night. And that makes me feel...

I cannot quite label the emotion as I catch up with L'Than and the hu'man. Irritated, but not jealous. Desirous, but not hopeful.

I glance sideways at them. Elle is not a xalling, but she sleeps like one in his arms. And L'Than holds her so tenderly. As if he truly is in charge of her care. As if he truly is her...

Prime.

The word swirls in my mind, along with many other confused thoughts and ideas—ideas that would upend my identity and undo everything I have worked toward as a Council Member with two votes.

“You will holo L'Nel and ask if she can care for your xalling this morn.” He gathers Elle closer to his chest. “Humans are fragile, and Elle will need much sleep to recover from this eve.”

He is correct. However, I cast a wary glance at the hu'man, who will need to recover in my home.

My cousin clearly experienced some kind of mind crack while he was held captive. That would neatly explain his obsession with the female.

But then, what is my excuse?

Hu'mans are a savage race, yet I could not keep my hands off her last eve.

My hearts pound as my mind races to reconcile my actions.

“Perhaps the berries have some kind of contamination effect when combined with the hu'man hormone,” I finally say to L'Than. “Perhaps we were drugged by the ju'li berries right along with her. This could be another form of Ceremonial Mind Rot.”

“You know it is not,” L'Than answers with the bored click he often uses when he believes someone has said something especially foolish.

“Neither of us knows anything,” I answer. “That is my point.”

“I know,” L’Than insists with a stubborn hiss. “Last night was not some disease you and your Health Ministry made up to explain away emotions you do not understand.”

His rebuttal cuts through me like the serrated blade of a Kaidorian bayonet laser.

The Big Red Obstacle. That is what the hu’mans and their supporters call me behind my back. But in truth, I am a male of reason, no matter how they choose to depict me in their gossip and media. I do not argue for argument’s sake.

And even I find it hard to believe my “ju’li berries enhancing Ceremonial Mind Rot” hypothesis.

I fall silent. Mostly because in my present state I can think of no sound argument to shatter my cousin’s ridiculous beliefs. But also, perhaps, because I do not wish to think upon the implications of what we have done.

Thus, we arrive at East House without another word passed between us.

There is an awkward moment at the house’s back entrance. L’Than merely stands there until I remember he is forbidden to step foot in East House. Under the contracts I made him and Elle sign what now feels like a very long time ago.

“You may take her upstairs,” I concede, my logic finally coming back to me. “But not in the xalling’s rooms. You may use your usual guest suite and see to her when she wakes up. I will call L’Nel and tell the rest of the household staff not to come in today. And then...”

The decision rises within me like the morning sun over the orchard. “We will converse. The three of us will all talk together about our next steps when she wakes up.”

“Talk together.” L’Than nods, a wide smile breaking out across his face. “Yes, I will install her in the guest suite, and you will engage L’Nel to caretake, and then all three of us will talk about our next steps. This is a wonderful idea, Cousin.”

An idea his father will not like. An idea that could bring about the end of my identity as Xalthuria's most anti-human Council Member.

But as he enters the house with Elle, I push those thoughts aside to swipe a new holo screen into the air. First things first, I must get in contact with L'Nel.

However, an imperative message lights up my communications before I can make the subvocal command to holo my sister.

It is from my father.

"You must holo me right away. It is urgent."

I nearly roll my eyes, as L'Than is wont to do. Has T'Kan been bothering him about his wish to speak with Elle, too?

I swipe the message away. I will return his holo after I complete the one to my sister.

However, my subvocal command is met with a flashing message I have never seen before.

L'Nel Louxos is out of range.

Alarm breaks through the many other thoughts racing through my head. *Out of range? What does that mean?* How could my sister ever be out of range of our planet-wide holo system?

Another message breaks through from my father. But this time, it is a holo hail, flashing red with several symbols to connote that my accepting his hail is of the highest urgency.

THIRTY-FOUR

L'THAN

I expect Elle to sleep the morn away, but she comes awake with one of those human mouth gasps just as I am about to pick her up from the bench after our gamma ray shower.

“Where am I?” She cast her gaze around the glass-encased stall she most likely does not recognize before returning her fearful gaze to me. “Are we in East House?”

“Yes. We are in my usual guest room at East House.” I keep my voice as humanly calm as possible to counter her panic. “I was giving you a gamma ray shower before lying down with you upon the mats for a much-deserved rest.”

Unfortunately, my human tone work seems to have no effect on her reaction.

“Oh no! Why are you here?” Her gaze drops to my naked form, and I instantly regret removing my clothes so I might be able to take advantage of the gamma ray shower as well.

She looks the very picture of what the idiom section of the New Terrhan download refers to as *freaked out*.

“You can’t be here!” she shouts, jumping to her feet.

At least she attempts to stand up. She plops back down with a pained groan. “Okay, ow, *ow*. Why does it feel like I’ve fallen over a cliff again?”

“I am not sure which question to answer first,” I reply, maintaining my human *calm* tone as I take a seat on the gamma shower bench opposite hers. “But L’Gon himself

wisely suggested that we put you in the East House guest suite. And as for my presence here...”

I place my right hand over my left heart. “I did not want to leave you alone. And before you ask, L’Gon also hailed L’Nel to caretake for Jack while you recover from...”

I pause to search for a less blunt statement finisher than “the copious amounts of sex you made with L’Gon and me last eve” and decide on “the events of last eve.”

Elle stares at me wide-eyed, without blinking or even seeming to breathe.

And a new fear takes hold of my hearts. Did the ju’li berries also have a memory-erasing effect? Was that why the Qel had happily accepted my holo when I hailed her with my plan to free Elle from prison?

“Do you remember the events of last eve?” I ask with what the New Terrhan download guide describes as an *empathetic* human tone.

“Yes, I remember. I remember *everything*,” she answers from her frozen position. “And now I’m fighting the urge to actually find a cliff to throw my own self off this time.”

A relieved chuckle lights up my chest. “Oh, you are merely embarrassed.”

“There is no *merely* about it.” She finally animates, but only to cover her face with her hands. “Oh, my moons, I was so out of control. I can’t believe I begged you like that. Threw myself *at the both of you*. All. Night. Long.”

“Oh, Gift. You will not cover your beautiful face in shame.” No longer able to remain on my bench, I kneel down in front of her and gently tug her hands down to her lap. “Truly, we did not mind.”

“I mind!” she shrieks. “I was so out of control. Oh, my moons! Oh, my moons!”

She attempts to cover her face again. But I exert pressure on her hands to keep them in her lap. Eventually, she gives up

fighting me with an exasperated huff. “I don’t even understand how you can look at me right now.”

“*Easily.*” I soften my voice and extend my neck so I can keep looking her in the eye, even when she attempts to turn her face from me. “It is easy to look at you because my only wish is to look upon you right now. Look upon you and take care of you and give whatever you need after last eve.”

“But I was all over you and The Big Red Obstacle.” She closes her eyes, perhaps to escape the intensity of my loving gaze.

It does not matter if she can see me, though. “And we were all over you, as well,” I remind her. “We were there, too, Gift. And, unlike you, we did not accidentally imbibe a large dose of aphrodisiac.”

She shakes her head, still refusing to open her eyes. “Can’t you see how bad this is?”

“No, I cannot.” I know no other way to answer her question than honestly. “I can only see the good. What happened last eve changes everything.”

But Elle continues to shake her head, her eyes squeezed closed, like she does not or *cannot* hear my reassurances.

“Are you worried about pregnancy?” I ask.

Finally, her eyes pop back open.

“No, that’s the one thing I’m not worried about.” A terrible look comes over her face. “It’s impossible for me to get pregnant.”

I open my mouth to ask, but then remember what she said last eve before our moonlight picnic.

“I’m broken. I can’t do the whole family thing with you. You should find a Xalthurian female who can.”

She is infertile. Is that why she rejected my proposal?

“Oh, Gift.” Instead of keeping her hands pinned down, I reverse the hold to softly clasp them in mine. “I am broken, too. I spent solars in that cage without a single one of my cellmates falling pregnant. Actually...”

My father is the last being I would wish to think about in this moment, but the shadow of his latest proposal rises inside my mind like an invasive weed.

“I was told last eve that my father is using my failure to reproduce in prison to block my bid for a new family line.” I stare down at our hands as I make the next part of my confession. “According to the files they pulled off the space lab’s encrypted database, N’Ure had reached the conclusion that I am sterile, and hypothesized that perhaps all hybrids are. My father is using that research to argue that hybrids are not viable candidates for heritable Council Seats—or starting their own family lines.”

Elle’s hands fall out of mine, and silence greets my confession.

One of disgust or confusion?

This is a lot of what the New Terrhan idiom lesson referred to as “inside baseball.” I am not sure if Elle, growing up as she has on another planet with relatively simple governance, can grasp my full meaning.

But when I look up at her, I find her face completely stricken. However, not with disgust or confusion. “I can’t believe your father is trying to use your presumed sterility against you like this! And what about all the other hybrids? How could any decent scientist conclude that an entire group is sterile with only one hybrid male in his data set?”

Her righteous indignation warms my hearts. The real question is how could I want anyone but this human by my side as I wage a war for the future of hybrid rights?

“Do not worry, I will fight him. And I will win. For all the other hybrids, and also for us.” I once again clasp her hands tight. “If you keep the promise you made to me last eve to become mine, I will keep my promise to provide a good home to you and Jack.”

“What?” Instead of falling into my arms as I wish, Elle snatches back her hands. “No! I can’t stay on Xalthuria. Jack would be under constant threat here. *Especially* after the way I acted last night. No! No! New Terrhan is the only place where

he'd be safe from another custody battle with The Big Red Obstacle. This is crazy. You need to go, run as fast as you can back to your perfect house, and sleep on your own mats."

"Yes, you are right. This is crazy." I click in frank disapproval. "I find it crazy that you would continue to refer to L'Gon as The Big Red Obstacle, even after he gave me permission to take care of you. Or that you believe my house has been outfitted with furniture yet when construction was only completed upon it yesterday."

She stares at me for a long moment. Then, for some reason, bursts out laughing.

"Why does this amuse you?" I ask when the laughter has gone on for so long, her eyes become wet.

"Oh, moons, I have no idea," she answers, wiping away her human tears. "Sometimes us humans laugh when we can't figure out what else to do with all our big emotions."

My hearts jerk. "So, you are feeling big emotions? For me?"

The question quells her laughter.

"For the *situation*," she corrects. Her voice drops to a whisper. "The truth is, I'm scared. Terrified that BR—L'Gon is going to use this as an excuse to take Jack away from me."

"No, L'Gon is an honorable male," I counter. "He proved that when he gave me permission to bring you up here and take care of you, then suggested that when you are ready, the three of us talk."

She sniffs, a bit of the misery edging out of her expression. "Seriously, he said that? That we should talk?"

I nod. "His father switched to pro-human shortly after our current Kel came into power. But my cousin remained steadfast in his reproach. I used to believe it was because of my father's influence upon him, but now I believe it was my cousin's way of coping."

"Coping with what?" she asks.

I inwardly jolt. Is this some manner of human jest? Has she truly not already guessed?

“With the loss of you,” I answer. “L’Gon refers to his feelings as Ceremonial Mind Rot, but I believe he felt the same ache I did when we were apart. I have only been unable to see you for a little over a lunar cycle, and it felt as if my mind was unraveling. Imagine how he felt over the course of five solars.”

“No.” Elle waves her hands in front of her chest in a gesture I assume signals denial. “L’Gon hates me.”

“It is obvious he does not,” I answer. “And I refuse to let you cling to your previous assumption, just as I have refused to let L’Gon cling to his anti-human notions.”

I take her hands back. “Last eve proved that he does not hate you, and I believe that is what he wishes to talk with us about when you are ready. A new path forward. For the three of us. No...”

I quickly correct myself with a smile. “The four of us, including Jack. I know you will always include him in every decision you make, and that is one of the many reasons I fell so instantly in love with you.”

Elle regards me with a soft, helpless look, even as she says, “Stop it, L’Than. You do not love me.”

“Of course I do.” I hold her gaze, needing her to see clearly the emotions burning within mine as I tell her my next truth. “My only purpose for living is to become worthy of you, Gift. That is the sole reason I have been able to resume my life in Xalthuria with my mind intact.”

I would not be surprised or blame her, really, if she pushed me away after seeing how intensely I hold my emotions.

But she nods, as if she has come to some manner of conclusion. “Okay, I get why you’re insisting you love me. Fixating on Jack is the only thing keeping me sane, too.”

I slot my eyes to the side to access the definition of this word, which has no match in Xalthurian. *Acquiring an obsessive attachment to someone or something.* I grin up at her. “Yes, I am *fixated* on you. I like this word!”

“Okay, well, you shouldn’t.” She huffs and attempts to take back her hands. “Technically, it’s a negative term.”

“Why?” I ask, honestly confused as I hold fast to her talon-less fingers.

“Okay, that’s, like, a whole psychology lesson.” She clamps her lips and looks to the side. “And you said something about L’Gon waiting to speak to us. Plus, I definitely want to check in on Jack.”

I could stay kneeled before her and talk like this all day. But I sense her curiosity about the invitation to converse from L’Gon and her duty to Jack will not allow her to give me the “psychology lesson” she mentioned. At least, not right now.

And that is fine, I decide. We have time—the rest of our lives—for psychology lessons.

“Of course. We will do whatever you want.” I rise to my feet to concede with a nod.

Then smother a laugh when Elle quickly averts her eyes from my thoroughly spent *diijo*.

“Th-thank you,” she manages to choke out, even though she is very obviously thinking about the many things she did upon that *diijo* last eve.

Do not think about last eve, I firmly instruct myself. Not if you wish to show Elle how noble and worthy a mate you can be.

“The household staff has been told not to come in today,” I inform her with what the download refers to as a *business* tone. “I will carry you to the sleeping mats, where you may rest while I inquire with L’Gon about another shift for you to wear during our talk.”

“That was, um...” Elle tries to return her gaze to mine, but then once again encounters my *diijo*, which is not quite as spent anymore as it was when she first glanced at it. She quickly re-averts her eyes. “That was really thoughtful of L’Gon, to empty out the house. But you don’t have to ask him. I keep extras in the wardrobe in Jack’s room.”

She settles her embarrassed gaze on the shower's back wall. "I can definitely walk on my own back to the guest room mats. But maybe you could pop on over to the nursery and bring me back another shift—and a full report on how Jack's doing?"

As much as I would like to stay and tease my gift, her concern for Jack supersedes my playfulness.

"Of course I can."

I back away, re-don my robes, and rush to the nursery to fulfill her request.

However, I return to the room moments later with only one of her requested items.

"Jack's pod was empty," I explain with an *apologetic* tone when I hand over the shift.

She nods. "No worries. L'Nel must have taken him to the orchard or perhaps downstairs for an early first meal. But maybe we can go look for them before we meet with L'Gon?"

She slips the shift over her head, and I immediately lament no longer being able to gaze upon her naked form.

"Of course," I answer easily. However, I grasp her around the waist to confess. "But if not for this talk with L'Gon, I would bring you straight back here to lie upon these mats with you and keep you naked all day."

It is a flirtatious joke. But she does not laugh. And though I have made my feelings clear, the confused look returns to her face.

"Speaking of L'Gon and psychology..." She lays her hands over my hearts and raises her soft brown gaze to mine. "I understand your fixation on me. Maybe. Kind of."

She curls her hands over my hearts, softly scraping the skin. "But I don't understand why you were okay with sharing me last night. More than okay, if I'm remembering right. Usually, that's not how fixation works."

No, it most likely is not. For the first time this morn, an abject shame breaks through my new relationship bliss.

“Gift... Elle, there is something I must...” I trail off.

Something I must confess? Explain? Even with my New Terrhan download, I do not have the correct words to reconcile the origins of my dark desires out loud.

“My sister told me that since the Extinction Virus, pairs of Xalthurian males have been known to take one wife without stigma,” Elle says before I can come up with the right words. “She said something about them calling themselves primes and seconds. Is that what you meant last night when you, um...”

She dips her head in obvious embarrassment. No doubt remembering our last frenzied bout of copulation. But she pushes the rest of her question out, nonetheless. “When you said, ‘Come to your prime.’ Is that kind of what you were referring to—the kind of relationship you want us to have with L’Gon?”

“Yes, it is true that many males have chosen to marry their wife in pairs,” I start to say. But then, I stop.

Elle has offered me the perfect out. But she also appears to be on the cusp of agreeing to a relationship with me. And L’Gon. Do I really want that relationship to begin with a lie?

“Elle, I—”

The sharp crack of the door interrupts what I was about to say next.

Before I can finish, L’Gon comes crashing into the room. Along with four guards with Council Guard insignias.

“L’Gon! What is the meaning of this?” I demand, instinctively moving in front of Elle.

“Oh, no! Oh, no! I knew it was too good to be true!” In an instant, Elle returns to the fearful state she was in when she woke up naked in the gamma ray shower.

“You will explain yourself,” I command my cousin, even as a similar panic rises within me.

“Don’t you see what’s happening?” Elle grabs my arm from behind to answer before L’Gon can. “He *tricked* you into

breaking the employment contract, and now, he's going to use your setting foot in East House as an excuse to send me away."

Her conclusion is understandable, given the sudden appearance of my cousin with Council Guards. But...

"No, no! I do not believe L'Gon would betray me in this manner. Betray us." I stare directly at my cousin, who stands like a cold commander with his hands behind his back. "Not after what passed between the three of us last eve."

"What passed last eve was a trick," L'Gon answers, his ridges set to an icy neutral. "A distraction so my sister and her friends could steal my interstellar rover to escape to New Terrhan without my being the wiser."

"What?" Elle gasps, her hands falling away from my arm.

At the same time, I ask, "L'Nel has left Xalthuria? For New Terrhan?"

"So, you knew nothing of this plan, L'Than?" My cousin's expression relaxes. But only a little. "I was afraid that might be the case when I discovered you were the one who provided the funds for her secret New Terrhan download. But I suspected even you would not be pulled into such a duplicitous hu'man trick."

"L'Nel told me she wanted a download so she could communicate with Elle, who did not have a translator at the time," I answer with an indignant click. "I had no idea she would do something as crazy with it as to fly to New Terrhan. And neither did Elle."

I wait for Elle to agree with me. But her silence fills my expectant pause.

"Elle?" I whip around to face her. "You knew absolutely nothing of this plan, correct?"

Elle grimaces. "*Nothing* is maybe a strong word."

"A strong and completely incorrect word," L'Gon says behind me with a derisive click. "L'Nel very clearly stated in her holo to my father that Elle instructed her to embrace the hu'man

credo of *‘It is better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission.’*”

My hearts seize. “So, you knew about this plan L’Nel had to abandon Xalthuria for a planet she is completely unprepared to inhabit?”

“I knew *of* the plan,” she admits. “But I didn’t—”

This is all L’Gon needs to hear.

“Grab her,” he commands his guard. “And hold my cousin back if he tries to interfere.”

I should not have turned my back on L’Gon. I did not realize that two of his guards were creeping closer as I confronted Elle.

Not until they each clamp an immobilizer cuff around my wrists before I can surge forward to defend her.

I am instantly frozen in place, unable to move anything but my mouth. Or to help Elle as the two other guards converge upon her.

“No! No!” The guards grab hold of her, but she directs her protest at L’Gon. “You can’t do this! You can’t take me away from Jack! You fucking bastard!”

If anything, my cousin’s face only becomes colder as she speaks. “I can, and I will.”

“L’Gon, no,” I say from my frozen position, hearts thundering. Everything I dreamt of this morning. It is all falling apart right before my eyes. “You promised we could talk.”

L’Gon glances at me, and he lowers his ridges, his expression becoming no longer wholly unsympathetic.

“We will talk,” he assures me—right before his ridges re-harden. “After the guards deposit this treasonous female back in the Health Ministry jail.”

“Do you even know the definition of treason?” Elle asks, her eyes flashing as she struggles against the guards. “Helping your poor sister get some perspective on the situation you and

the other males in her life put her in wasn't a crime against the government."

"We will see how the Council feels about that when I request a special deportation order at tomorrow's emergency meeting," L'Gon answers with another cold click. "No matter your refusal to take responsibility for your betrayal, I suspect your actions have ended this custody battle. You will be shipped back to New Terrhan. And you will never see L'Eondris again."

"No!" I yell. "L'Gon, you go too far!"

At the same time, Elle screams. "No! *No!* I'm begging you!"

Last eve, L'Gon could deny her nothing.

This morn, he simply jerks his head toward the door. "Take her," he instructs the guard. "I wish never to see this duplicitous female again."

"Do not do this, L'Gon!" My words are directed to my cousin, but I watch helplessly as Elle fights to break free from the guards.

"Wait! Wait!" Elle screams.

L'Gon does not wait. He steps aside to give the guards clear access to drag her out of the door.

But then Elle screams, "Wait! I know how to solve Xalthuria's fertility issue!"

I blink, and L'Gon visibly jolts. Then holds up a hand to halt the guards' action of dragging her from East House.

"What did you just say?" he asks. His ridges are no longer neutral, but clapped back with shock.

"You heard me," Elle answers from in between the two Council Guards. "I know how to solve Xalthurian female infertility. I figured it out days ago after seeing N'Maryah's scans. I was thinking about bringing it up at breakfast during our supposed *talk*. But then, all of this."

I stare at Elle. Is she serious? Or is this some sort of stall?

L’Gon appears to have the same question. “Do you speak the truth, or is this an attempt to stay close to L’Eondris?”

“It’s *both*.” Elle practically spits the last word out. “I will do anything to stay close to Jack. Even help your horrible red ass.”

L’Gon glares at her. “Then tell my horrible red butt what you know, if you speak truth.”

“No!” To my shock, Elle stubbornly shakes her head. “Not unless you agree that if I’m successful in getting at least a few Xalthurian females pregnant—which I will be—then you have to...”

She glances at me. And for a moment, I see indecision in her eyes.

But it is gone in a blink. “Then you have to let me return to New Terrhan with Jack. And *you* have to agree to never see your son again.”

She is negotiating. Negotiating to leave Xalthuria. And me. Forever.

I have learned several New Terrhan idioms, many of which do not make sense. But one finally reaches my understanding.

My hearts *break to pieces*. If not for the immobilization cuffs, my knees would fail to support me.

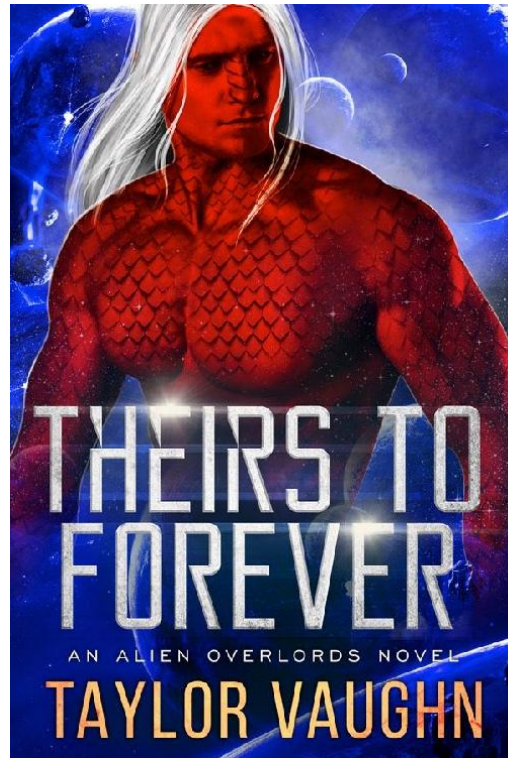
L’Gon stares at her, saying nothing. But he also does not give the order for the guards to carry her away.

“What do you say?” Elle, the smallest being in the room, asks. “Do we have a deal?”

Everyone, including me and all four of the Council Guards, turn our eyes to L’Gon to see how he will respond.



OH, *my moons!* We cannot wait to finish this epic romance in ***THEIRS TO FOREVER***. [Click here to find out how the story ends!](#)



And don't forget to read or listen
to the rest of the Alien Overlords series!

[His to Claim](#)

[His to Steal](#)

[His to Keep](#)

P. S. - Keep on reading for an excerpt of HIS TO CLAIM!

HIS TO CLAIM EXCERPT

“No! *Noooooo!* Don’t take my baby! Please...I’ll do anything!”

The anguish in the young mother’s voice tears at my soul. It’s not the first time I’ve heard a girl screaming and begging during the Xalthurians’ annual Breed and Reap. I can’t remember a time before the screams, though I’m told it exists...existed.

But this scream is different.

This time the voice belongs to my sister, Elle. With my poor eyesight and a wall of Xalthurian soldiers between us, I can’t see her. But I can clearly hear her, begging the reaping force for mercy.

We’d been working in the community potato field when the Xalthurians appeared in the sky with one short electronic blast of sound. Their way of ringing our planet’s doorbell, before landing their bright silver ship in one of our settlement’s many barren red clay fields.

The Xalthurians always came in the same way, and at the same time of year, during the month of what the New Terrhans called May, even though a year in this solar system was made up of fourteen months, not twelve like on the old planet. But the Xalthurians almost never come on the same day or even the same time of day for that matter. Last year, when Elle was twenty-one they came in the very early morning. But this year it was late in the afternoon.

Before the ship appeared, Elle and I had been debating about whether to keep pushing in the community fields until sunset or take a break. Elle was tired after working the fields all morning with the red and ebony swirled hybrid infant she hadn't been allowed to name perched on her back in a sling. She'd wanted us to go home to curl up for a nap with the baby tucked between us.

I was bone tired, too, not to mention hot—that afternoon, the sun seemed really eager to remind us that scorching season was right around the corner. But I wasn't on full rations like her, and I worried we'd both get punished with an even smaller share tonight if any of the leaders saw us cutting out early.

To nap or not to nap, that had been the question. Until the Xalthurians showed up, dressed in three distinct ways, as they came bounding out of the ship.

From experience, I knew those dressed in leather loin cloths were here to grab the twenty-one year-old females and drag them back to the ship for the Breeding Ceremony. While the ones wearing silver uniforms with a diamond-eyed insignia stamped into the back, were here for last year's crop of babies.

Breeders and Reapers, that's what we called them. And as always, they were accompanied by a few green Xals, dressed in flowing white robes. From what I could tell, these green guys were the only Xals who could actually understand and speak our language. That's why we called them Diplomats, even though they rarely try to negotiate anything with our settlement. They only instruct us in what the other Xalthurians wanted us to do.

I had given my sister a sympathetic look. Though she hadn't named the little hybrid boy, I knew it wouldn't be easy for her to let him go. Most of the mothers with baby boys went directly to their red clay houses, so that they could grab a few things to send back in the blankets of the babies they'd never see again: drawings and trinkets and sometimes little notes written in the New Terrhan language, even though they knew the babies would most likely never be able to understand it.

It's always been like this. For as long as I can remember, and maybe for as long as Elle can remember, too.

But Elle hadn't gone back to the house like the other mothers of hybrid boys when the Xalthurians set down. Instead she'd stood there frozen, her short curly black hair almost seeming to stand on end as her dark eyes darted back and forth.

At first I thought she was afraid of encountering another Xalthurian. She was still pretty traumatized by the Breeding Ceremony. However, when a group of Xalthurians in silver uniforms had approached her, she'd taken the baby out of the sling she'd made for it, and instead of handing the squalling child over, she'd hugged it close and ran. Ran and ran until she reached a cliff and couldn't run any more.

And now here she stood, surrounded by Xalthurian Reapers at the precipice of a cliff with a fifty foot drop down to a dry red clay bed that might have been a river a few millennia ago. On the other side of the Reaper wall, my parents and just about every human not getting bred or reaped had gathered to watch the scene unfold.

I still can't make out much, but I hear Elle and her half-Xal baby sobbing wildly as she begs the Reapers not to tear them apart. And I can tell they're ignoring her pleas, when all but two of the Xalthurians start advancing on her in a precise arc.

"Elle!" I scream, squinting into the blur of Xalthurian uniforms.

My gut cramps in fear. I've seen a few last minute tug of wars over baby boys before. But no one, and I mean no one has ever defied the Reapers this badly, not just by running but refusing to hand the baby over.

I can't imagine what they'll do to my sister. Maybe shoot her dead, like the hot-headed young men who futilely try to save their girlfriends from the Breeding Ceremony. I've got to help her—that's all I know. It doesn't matter if they punish me, too.

I lunge forward, but my parents grab onto my arms, holding me back with all their might. "Don't," my mother whispers on

the right side of me. “I told her not to get attached to that thing.”

I recoil at her dismissive tone. “It’s not a thing, Mama. It’s her baby!”

“A baby she knew from the start she wasn’t ever going to be able to keep.” Mama stares back at me with a bitter expression on her haggard face, which is a used-to-be-pretty version of my sister’s. “It’s like the leaders keep telling you girls. You can’t treat the boys like real babies. She knew that. We all know that!”

Then Mama yells out, “Elizabeth, just give them the baby! Don’t make it any harder than it has to be, girl.” Her voice is aggrieved, as if the only one responsible for this precipice stand-off is my sister.

My throat clogs with tears. I, too, hadn’t been able to harden my heart against the unnamed swirled baby. This very morning while Elle warmed up water to give him a bucket bath, I’d cooed at him and marveled at how his little clawed hand folded around my index finger with a stronger grip than any human baby I’d ever encountered.

They were really going to take him and never let us see him again. No, I had to help her. But my parents held strong, my father insisting in a hard voice, “If you interfere, they’ll snap your neck. Without even thinking about it. I saw them do it to folks plenty of times during the first few breedings and reapings before we learned to stay back. You can’t help her, Kira. They’ll kill you before you even get close. Look at them!”

I do ... I do look at them. And he’s right. Even in blurry vision, the Reaping Force soldiers are huger than huge. The tallest full human in our village stands a little over six feet, but I’ve never encountered a Reaper who stood shorter than seven.

I’m close enough to the wall of soldiers surrounding my sister to tell this multi-colored Reaping Force is heavily muscled on top of being tall, without even an ounce of fat that I can see underneath the sleeveless silver jumpsuits they wear.

Their uniforms gleam underneath the sun, like they're made of some kind of metal. But unlike the few metals New Terrhans have managed to make down here on our scraggly planet, the uniform material molds over their thick bodies like a second skin.

At least, most of them wear silver uniforms. One of the Xalthurians who hadn't advanced with the rest of the Reaping Force has on a gold jumpsuit. He has deep dark blue skin, white hair tied back in a top knot, and a commanding air. I sense his importance, even before he turns his head with a predatory grace to address one of the jade green diplomats in those strange clicking, back-of-throat scratching sounds that the Xalthurians called their language. Maybe he has some kind of authority here?

As if confirming my guess, the jade Xalthurian calls out to Elle in a smoky accent, "Hand over the Xalling. Hand him over now and our Tel promises, you will not be made to suffer for what you have done here today."

My blood boils with rage. Once they take away Elle's baby, that would be suffering. A lifetime of suffering that my sensitive sister will most likely never get over.

I can hear Elle weeping uncontrollably on the cliff's edge, and I easily imagine her holding her baby close, as if her dark brown arms could possibly provide any kind of defense against eight huge Xalthurians.

"Somebody help me, please!" she cries out to her fellow humans. "Please don't let them do this. Please don't let them take my baby!"

A few of the humans answer her like our mother did. Reminding her she knew this day would come. That she shouldn't be upset and should hand the hybrid over before the Xals shoot her or worse.

But I strain against my parents' hold, wanting to help her. Needing to go to her, even if that means my own death. The Xalthurians are closing in, and any second now they'll—

It happens so fast, it takes me many, many moments to process what has occurred.

Elle is screaming and sobbing and then suddenly...she's not. Her voice and the baby's crying cut off without warning.

Then the next thing I hear is my mother screaming and wailing, "Elle, no, nooooo! My girl, nooo!!!!"

My father's hands fall away from my arm, just as the soldiers step back...to reveal nothing on the cliff's edge. Nothing but an empty space where Elle was standing.

She's gone ... Elle took another step back and now she's gone. I can't even be sure if she did it on purpose or if she didn't know ... didn't know she had nothing left to step back to, except air. Either way, the result is the same.

A moment ago she was there, begging the Xalthurian Reapers not to take her baby, and now, she's just...not.

The pain.

It's like the time I broke my wrist. How I felt the snap, but somehow didn't get it. Didn't feel the pain until I raised my arm and saw the way my hand was hanging at a funny angle. Only then did I understand. Only then did I rush over to my older sister, crying out, "Libeth! Libeth! It's broken! It's broken!"

It's broken.

Libeth ... Elizabeth ... Elle ... my sister. She's gone. *She's gone.* And so is her baby. Because of the Xalthurians. Because of the Reapers who kept on advancing on a mother who didn't want to lose her baby.

The world becomes a scream.

And I can no longer be held back.

I fly forward and shove the Xalthurian in the gold uniform—the Tel who made her such a *magnanimous* offer. Up close I see that he's got to be at least seven-five. So tall, it feels like he could step on me. I don't care. I want to fight him. I have to fight him. For Elle, who never had a chance.

When he turns around to see who's shoved him, I swing on him, morphing into a hitting and slapping fury, until he pushes me back, the tips of his dark blue fingers pressing into my chest.

It's just his fingers, just the tip of his fingers, but I go flying backwards and land butt first in the red clay dirt.

I don't stay down for long. Not because I quickly leap back up. I wish. But jumping to your feet is kind of hard to do when you're wheezing from having all the breath finger shoved out of you.

No, it's the overlarge Xalthurian who quickly helps me back up...with a huge hand wrapped around my neck.

My inner rage scream cuts off abruptly and the sound of the real world comes back in. Suddenly, I can hear the crowd murmuring and my parents yelling in the background. Begging the Xalthurian with his hand around my neck for mercy on my behalf.

"Please, please..." my mother says. "Don't make me lose two daughters today!"

The dark blue Xalthurian ignores her, his gaze lasering in on me. His eyes are red where mine are white, with a pair of black diamonds where a human's pupils would be. He glares at me, the ridges on his nose bristling, but other than that... nothing. After a few moments of being almost but not quite choked, I realize he's waiting, probably expecting me to beg for my life like my mother did.

But I don't beg. I stare the huge alien in his red diamond shaped eyes. And I refuse to flinch. "She was my sister," I tell him. "She wasn't just a womb."

Then, I spit at him.

Because if I'm going to die today. Hell, if I'll go out begging this Xal for anything.

When my spitball lands square in the alien's face, the human crowd goes deathly silent. And so do the Xalthurians.

But only for a moment. Then an enormous golden yellow Xal with a long black braid, click roars and comes charging forward with the rest of the reapers right behind him.

They advance on me, the way they advanced on my sister.

Still, I'm not scared. The pain and hollowness of loss dominates my spirit. There is no room for fear. I refuse to look away from the blue alien, who still has his clawed hand wrapped around my extremely fragile neck. As it turns out, my father was pretty damned right about how easy it would be for one of the Xals to snap it. Only a matter of flicking his wrist, I suspect for a Xalthurian as large as this blue one.

But then, instead of flicking his wrist, the Xal brings his free hand up, holding it in the air. This one action stops the yellow Xalthurian and the rest of the advancing force cold, as if they're machines who've been powered down with the motion of a hand.

Then, to my total surprise, instead of snapping the fragile column that connects my head to the rest of my body, he tilts my head to the right, baring the left side of my neck, like a vampire in one of the old entertainments we still watch on our wrecked colony ship.

I only know what he's doing because of what happened during last year's Breeding Ceremony, when one of the loin cloth Xalthurians burst into our house, looking for eligible 21-year-olds to drag onto their circular ship. In accord with the agreement between our two species, each New Terrhan girl must be given a birth year stamp in the weird Xalthurian number system of dots and lines. It can only be seen under UV lights by human eyes.

But the Xals don't have human eyes. The loin cloth Xal easily checked my age before moving on to assessing Elle and dragging her out of the house. And now I can feel the golden uniformed Xal's red eyes on the side of my neck. I'm nineteen now, not eighteen like I was when they took Elle. Still not twenty-one.

However, that fact brings no relief. Looking at the huge blue alien, I have to wonder if my too young age even matters. This

Xal stopped those Silver Uniforms with just a raise of one hand. He could probably do anything he wanted to me. Right now. Right here. Including breeding me before I reached the contracted age.

His minions wouldn't stop him. And though I love my fellow New Terrhans, I had a bad feeling they wouldn't either.

We've been living on severe rations for months now. Would any of the nearly starved humans really risk the huge shipment of meat, seedstock, and supplies the Xalthurians always brought with them as a "gift" for allowing them to enact the Breeding Ceremony on one girl who dared to spit in an alien overlord's face?

His eyes still locked on mine, the Xal's other hand goes up again, this time with a beckoning motion.

A green alien comes forward. His eyes carefully lowered.

The Xal in the golden uniform says something to him, throat clicking and scratching.

The green Xal's diamond-shaped eyes raise to meet mine, his expression almost carefully neutral. "Tel D'Rek wishes for me to translate what he's saying to you. Word for word."

"Just kill me already, no speech needed," I answer hotly.

But Tel D'Rek starts speaking anyway, the jade Diplomat translating during his pauses. "I will be back ... I will make it a special point to come back for you, little hu'man ... in two solars."

My eyes shift from the Diplomat to the alien who'd been addressed as Tel D'Rek. He stares back at me, his eyes burning. Then he leans his head forward and before I can even think to jerk back, I feel his tongue on my neck, licking up my birth code in one intense swipe.

My entire body shivers with a sensation unlike anything I've ever felt. Not disgust though. Dear moons, it's definitely not disgust. A strange heat appears between my legs, burning as red as his eyes. Overshadowing the anguish seething through my bones.

But before I can even process what's happening to me...to my body...he sets me down. Then with a deliberate turn, he walks back to the ship, the rest of the uniformed Xalthurians falling in behind him. Leaving me to stand there with my heart thundering in my chest and wondering if he was serious about coming back after I turned twenty-one. *Oh moons...*

Even as my parents fall all over me, hugging me and crying, I continue to wonder at this.

And fail to convince myself the answer to that question is anything but yes.

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Theodora Taylor writes hot books with heart. When not reading, writing, or reviewing, she enjoys spending time with her amazing family, going on date nights with her wonderful husband, and attending parties thrown by others. She now lives in Los Angeles, California, and she LOVES to hear from readers. So....

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