



A SCIFI
HOLIDAY
TALE

TINZEL

HOLIDATE WITH AN ALIEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLA MAVEN

TINZEL

OUTCASTS OF CORIN

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ONE

BELLE

I wrapped the fur cloak around me tighter and shivered. I wasn't made for this weather. I wasn't made for this *planet*.

Standing on the inside steps of the old stone fortress, I peered out of the window of the east tower as large red figures marched out of the gates below. Clustered around me were a few loris, captives and servants just like me, who weren't tall enough to see out of the window. They tugged on my cloak with soft paws and blinked with their fly-like eyes. They ranged in height from three to five feet tall and were covered in a soft blue and cream striped fur. Antenna sprouted from their foreheads, which they used to clean their eyes like windshield wipers on a car.

Damn, I missed my car, even if it had been a bit of a lemon. My dad had warned me about that car dealership, but I'd rolled my eyes at him and did what I wanted anyway. My heart ached at the thought of my parents. They weren't in good health when I'd last seen them. Were they still alive? Had the mystery of my disappearance driven them to an early grave?

I'd never know. I'd spent years in this galaxy convincing myself I'd return home. But I'd lost that hope long ago. Something told me this planet was my last stop. I'd likely die here in this medieval tower. I had furry friends to keep me company, but I hated their presence at the same time. Because

it meant the lovely, kind creatures were captives just like me instead of living peacefully at their home with their families.

Loris didn't have a language I understood. They mostly communicated in soft mews with each other, but over time I'd learned to speak to them through gestures and soft grunts. It wasn't perfect, but it worked for us. They mostly understood everything I said now.

Yuo, a loris who along with her sister Yua, were the kindest to me. They'd seen a human before. In fact, one had been here before me, but she'd been taken away by one of the prisoners here when he escaped. I shuddered to think about what had happened to her. Yua and Yuo seemed to think she was still alive, but I wasn't so sure about that. I'd seen what else existed in this galaxy. None of it was good for a human female like me.

I couldn't be sure how long I'd been gone from Earth—maybe ten years? I was definitely close to forty now, and I definitely felt like it. I'd lived a thousand lifetimes in the last ten years.

The last of the red figures marched into the dense forest outside the fortress gates, and the remaining guards closed them with a loud rattle and thunk. The Joktal were a nasty species with bones like armor, upside-down triangular heads, black beady eyes, and a mouth hole filled with razor-sharp black teeth. They had eyeless hounds who could catch a scent from miles away. They were ugly, hunch-backed creatures with coarse, sparse hair and flat snouts.

I turned away from the window to face the loris. "They're gone. As far as I can tell, the only remaining Joktal in the fortress are Repper and his crew—so about twenty or twenty-four Joktal."

Yua curled her paw and bared her teeth.

I shook my head at her question. "As far as I can tell, they took all the hounds. If not, only one or two are left."

The loris blew out a collective breath. The poor creatures were terrified of the hounds. I patted Yua's head, who had her

hand in my cloak.

The Joktal had been preparing for some sort of invasion for the past two years, or at least as long as I'd been sold to here. I didn't know their enemy, but I also didn't spend a lot of time thinking about them. They were likely just as bad as the Joktal, so the two could just fight it out for all I cared. The less Joktal on this planet, the happier I'd be.

Footsteps on the stairs sent the loris scattering. Chores were to be done. Food made. Joktal clothes mended. The once full prison cells in the fortress were now empty, the former prisoners either set free or killed. It seemed the Joktal were ready to bring in new prisoners to torture. My job would be to keep them fed... if they upheld under the Joktal cruelty.

Repper and his sidekick, Grivel, appeared on the stairs, and that latter's black eyes narrowed as he found me at the window. Thanks to a translator implant installed behind my ear, I could understand the Joktal, and they could understand me. Not that any of that had been done with my consent. I tucked my cold hands inside my fur cloak and remained where I was. I could hear the loris tittering at the top of the stairs, and Grivel's gaze went toward the noise. I cleared my throat, eager to have his attention on me rather than them. I was a bit sturdier than the loris. I'd seen a loris die from one cuff of a Joktal fist. The rest of the loris had mourned for weeks. Grivel was one of the meanest of them all. I'd take his blow for my furry friends any day.

"Miss them already?" he sneered at me.

"Terribly," I said with snark, and he lashed out as I knew he would, slapping me on the side of the head so hard that my ear rang.

He lifted his hand to hit me again, but Repper put his hand up. "Enough."

Grivel snarled, and his glare promised we'd finish this another time. I couldn't wait.

"We have a lot to do before they return," Repper said to me. "So prepare to be busy."

“Where did they go?” I asked. Sometimes Repper would tell me things, but asking a question was still a risk.

He ground his teeth together, and the sound made me wince. “To take back what’s ours.” He eyed me. “And maybe get more of *you*.”

That made me pay attention. “Are there more humans on this planet?”

He made a snort sound. “No more questions. Go clean out the cells. I want them ready for new prisoners.”

I brushed past them and made my way down the stairs toward the cell block. Ironically, in my Earth life, I was terrible at cleaning. My apartment was always cluttered. I ordered a lot of takeout. I forgot to run my dishwasher. I definitely never made my bed. And now I was responsible for cooking and cleaning an alien fortress. Life was wild.

A few loris were already there, sweeping the hallway outside the cells in the dim torch light. I waved to them, and they offered me small bits of a cookie-like dessert and a jug of fermented juice that was enough like wine if I closed my eyes and pretended. Unlike me, loris were great at domesticity, which made me even more angry that the Joktal took advantage of them. Yua had described her home to me before, and it had sounded like a magical place of peace.

I entered the last cell at the end of the hallway and began to wipe down the walls with a bucket of water and sponge-like plant. While the former prisoners of varying species had terrified me, I’d felt a certain kinship with them. We’d all been here against our will. I still hadn’t wanted to get close to them. I was sure about half would have eaten me given the chance, and the others would have ripped off a limb or two just out of curiosity. I wondered what new horrors awaited me and the loris.

Would the Joktal really bring more humans? As much as I would have loved to see one of my own again, I didn’t want there to be any more humans here, because then that meant they were suffering like I was. And I didn’t wish this on anyone. The loris were the only reason I kept going and hadn’t

tossed myself off the top wall of the tower. I just couldn't leave them.

We worked the rest of the day, until the cell block no longer smelled like urine and my hands were cracked and bleeding from the work. But by then, it was time to make the last meal of the day. I dragged myself to the kitchen to find the loris had already finished cooking and had served the Joktal. I could see the red aliens out in the courtyard eating and talking. Standing on my tip toes so I could see out the kitchen window, I squinted and counted how many remained in the fortress. About two dozen. Maybe more, as guards were likely at the gates. With a sigh, I lowered on my heels. Part of me had wondered if maybe, just *maybe*, the loris and I could form an escape plan. But there were still too many Joktal left behind. We could have maybe handled a half a dozen. But twenty-four or more? No way.

And Grivel and Repper knew how to hurt me. One failed escape attempt, and they'd likely kill a loris or two. I couldn't put them in danger like that.

I saw on the floor of the kitchen with Yua, Yuo, and a few of the loris who hadn't eaten yet. The food stores were low this time of the year—the cold weather had set in and game outside the walls was hard to come by. We mostly survived on preserved food and rehydrated meat mixed in stews.

While we had dried spices, we had to use them sparingly, which meant the food was a little bland. But it was warm and filled my belly.

After washing the dishes, we retreated to our sleeping chamber, which was one massive room with a few blankets. There were no windows in this room, but the stone walls were still drafty.

The loris ran hot, and as they usually did, they crowded me into the center of the room with a bunch of blankets. When I was settled on my side, they crowded around me, their furry bodies creating a cocoon of heat. I nuzzled my cold nose into Yua's fur and patted her paw. Her fluffy tail curled around my

back. She made a small mew, and her many eyes blinked at me.

“There are too many of them,” I said softly.

Her head lowered. The loris around us tittered as the news spread that the Joktal numbers meant we didn’t have a chance at escape. Loris didn’t hide their emotions well. They showed everything on their expressive faces, and they reacted strongly to however I was feeling. I often tried to be upbeat for them to keep them encouraged, but it was getting harder and harder.

“Maybe they’ll be defeated by whoever they are leaving to fight,” I said hopefully. The loris made a few soft noises around me, but I knew they didn’t think much of that possibility. The Joktal were massive. They carried glowing whips that burned on contact. I had scars to prove it. They brandished large blades that cut through bone like butter. And their bodies had very little vulnerable points, as they were covered in bony armor. Their scent hounds could track anything.

I sighed and closed my eyes, curling my hand around Yua’s paw. “We’ll be okay,” I murmured, but didn’t quite feel it. Yua’s tail flickered and her antenna swiped at my hair.

Days later, I came awake with a jerk as a loud bang sent the loris into a frenzy. I blinked into the darkness to find the door of our sleeping chamber flung open. Repper stood in the doorway holding a torch in one hand and his glowing whip in another. “Get up,” he shouted. “Now!”

Scrambling to my feet, I immediately reached for the loris nearest to me and shoved them behind me. I wasn’t sure what had happened. Had some loris tried to escape without me? Would they be punished? My heart wouldn’t take losing any more of my furry friends. But Repper wasn’t cracking the whip over us. “Into the cell block,” he ordered, shoving us out of the room. We were herded downstairs by more Joktal whose faces were fierce. I glanced out a window in the staircase

through which the forest surrounding the fortress was visible. Heavy snowflakes dropped from the sky like white rain covering the ground and trees in at least a foot. And piling up fast. I caught movement in the trees, only visible because of the torches along the fortress walls. Some Joktal were standing just inside the gates, weapons drawn.

My heart plummeted. We were being invaded, and I didn't want to think about the kind of creature who would take on a Joktal. I'd seen all kinds of species in this galaxy, and nothing was like them.

I continued down the stairs as Repper shoved us into the cell block. By now, many of the loris had huddled into the open cells, cowering together in a furry pile. Repper didn't lock the cell doors. Once we were all inside the open cells and hallway, he called me forward and shoved a staff in my hand. One end was sharpened into a crude point. "Kill anything that's not a Joktal or a loris."

I stared at the staff, shocked he'd given me a weapon. Not that it would be effective against him, but for a moment, I imagined slamming this thing into his eyeball. But now wasn't the time. In fact, part of me was hoping they defeated whatever was invading them. At least I knew the Joktal. We had a routine. I could have it worse. I'd *had* it worse.

So I nodded, and he ran out of the cell block. The door slammed shut, and I heard him lock the bolt from the outside. I turned and did a quick head count to make sure all the loris were inside with me. I counted twenty-six, which was all the loris in the fortress. I breathed a sigh of relief, but my heart pounded against my ribs like a sledgehammer, and my stomach rolled with dread.

There was a small window at the end of the cell block, and I pushed past terrified loris to peer outside. My hands gripped the staff with white knuckles as I watched the courtyard below. Fur brushed my shoulders, and I turned to find the loris had joined me, sitting on each other's shoulders to watch with me.

Joktals filled the courtyard while Repper called out orders. Two climbed the ladders to the top of the wall near the gate,

laser guns drawn. But as soon as they reached the top, their screams pierced the air. Their bodies fell backward and they hit the ground with a thickening crunch. I flinched just as figures began to slip over the wall like blue-black liquid. I caught sight of glowing eyes, long black hair, and black blades. My heart slammed into my throat as the loris began to squeal.

And then one figure on top of the wall turned in my direction. Purple eyes met mine, black fangs bared in a blue face, and I screamed.

TWO

BELLE

A buzzing sound filled the air as large motorcycle-like vehicles poured over the walls and down into the courtyard. Laser fire filled the air. Groans of pain. Death rattles. A rallying war cry.

Fear gripped me with its claws and dug into the bone. Only the frightened mews of the loris spurred me into action. Wrenching myself away from the window, I forced myself to think. We couldn't stay in this cell block. I wasn't any sort of battle expert, but I didn't see the Joktal surviving this unless the rest of them returned and in a damn hurry. I stumbled toward the cell block door on numb feet. I wore padded fur boots which never kept my feet warm enough, and now that the blood had rushed to my head, I could barely feel my toes.

I needed to break out of this cell block and run with the loris to safety. If we could sneak out of these walls, we could flee back to their home. I knew it was on this planet somewhere.

But the damn Repper had locked it from the outside. All I had was a sharpened staff and two dozen loris at my disposal. I turned to find Yua and Yuo behind me, clutching each other in fear, but bravely standing. They gestured, asking if they could help me.

“We have to get this door open. If we get free of these walls, do you know the way home?”

They nodded eagerly, their big eyes blinking in the torchlight. Biting my lip, I turned back to the door. I'd never taken the time to look carefully at it, but I could see now that the hinges were bolted into place. If I could hammer the bolts out, I could break the door open from the inside.

I gestured for the strongest loris—Gia—to come closer. She was one of the tallest and oldest, and while the loris often looked fragile, they were strong when they needed to be. She eagerly padded forward to help.

“I'm going to put you on my shoulders. With this spear, can you hammer the top hinge bolt down?” I demonstrated for her with the middle bolt, slamming the sharpened end of the spear down. The noise was horrendous. The nearly rusted bolt barely budging until it released with a high-pitched *screak* like nails on a chalkboard.

I hammered the other bolt, but this one was even more stubborn. By now, sweat poured down my temples. Blisters had already begun to bloom on my palms. But I worked and worked until my arms ached, and a blister burst. Finally, the bolt clanked to the ground, and I exhaled roughly, leaning on the spear for balance.

Soft paws took the spear from me, and then I was pushed out of the way as the loris piled up below to lift Gia up. Yua patted my shoulders, her big eyes kind, letting me know they would take it from here. My heart hammered with affection for the sweet creatures. I was doing this for them more than me. I couldn't imagine how much they missed their families. Sure, I missed mine, but I didn't have hope of getting to Earth again. Their families were here, on the same planet. Some of them had offspring they hadn't seen since they were born. I'd get them home if it killed me.

Gia hammered the top bolt, giving out a cute little grunt with each slam of the spear. The sharpened edge was dulled now, nearly flat, and I had a thought that maybe I should have used another tool. Now I no longer had a sharp weapon.

Stealth would have to be on our side. All we had to do was avoid the fighting. The loris knew about tunnels in the fortress

that were small enough for us to hide and avoid the large predators outside.

As the third and final bolt fell to the floor, I realized that it was too late to back out now. I gripped the edge of the door and tugged. The bolt on the other side held the door firm. I tugged again with a cry, and suddenly all the loris had their little paws in the crack of the door and tugged along with me.

With a might screech, the bolt gave way, and the door flung open. We spilled out onto the ground floor of the fortress to the sound of a battle right outside in the courtyard. I glanced around at the crowd of loris. There were so many of them, and their blue striped fur was hard to hide, as the blue shone iridescent in any sort of light. There was a small storage room in the bottom floor of the tower, and I led the loris there. They seemed confused I was ushering them into another room.

I gripped Yua's paws. "You stay here and tell everyone not to make a sound. I'm going to scout what's happening in the courtyard and try to find a weapon. We will have to be very careful about when we try to escape, okay?"

She nodded, squeezing my hands, before disappearing into the darkness of the storage room. Many eyes blinked at me, and I waved at them before slowly closing the door.

Running at a crouch, I made my way up the stairs, snuffing out every torchlight I could find. When I reached the first window, I peered outside to find the battle slowing down. The front gates were wide open. Joktal bodies littered the ground. The invaders strode around the courtyard, killing off any injured Joktal and gathering weapons. I estimated about a dozen invaders. Maybe more. One still rode his motorcycle, and I marveled at the size of the thing as it hovered above the ground.

The invaders weren't as large as the Joktal and appeared much more humanoid. They were bipedal and wore pants, boots, and large fur cloaks. Their skin was a mottled blue-black snakeskin, and thick black hair hung around their shoulders, braids and beads mixed among the locks. Thick tails tipped with spiked armor touched the ground and their

mouths were full of black fangs. Heavy brows lined with bony nubs threw their purple, deep-set eyes into shadow, and sharp black horns corkscrewed out of the sides of their heads.

But what caught my eye the most was large black blades which ran the length of their forearms and sprung from the top of their heads all the way down their backs. The deadly spikes still dripped with blood, and I nearly gagged at the dismembered Joktal bodies.

The invaders were deadlier than the Joktals by far. They'd made mincemeat of the red aliens who I'd considered untouchable.

I slipped back down under the window, suddenly wishing I was locked back in that cell block. Instead, I ran directly for the Joktal weapons room on the first floor. The door hung open, as they'd likely raided it and ran. Most of the weapons were gone, but I found a few blades, one whip, and a laser gun with no charge. I grabbed it anyway.

As I made my way back to the storage room, a sound pricked my ears. I froze, thinking that I had to be hearing things, but then the familiar sound came again—a low growl that sent my heart racing.

I took off on a sprint down the stairs as a Joktal hound let out a loud bray. The shrieks of loris let me know my worst fear had come true. I turned the corner of hallway to find two hounds tugging at the handle of the door with their razor-sharp jaws. With every tug, the door would jerk open, but then a cluster of paws on the other side would slam it closed.

With a scream, I rushed at the hounds. They were the size of tigers, but I wasn't thinking clearly. All I saw was red. No way would I let either of these monsters touch one of my loris. The hounds smelled me immediately and turned their eyeless heads toward me. I slammed one of the blades right between the shoulder blades of the first one, and his jaws snapped dangerously closed to my soft stomach.

The other leaped at me, and I ducked as it sailed over my head. The loris, hearing my cry, opened the door and spilled out into the hallway. "No!" I screamed. "Get back inside!"

But they wouldn't listen, because as protective as I was of them, they were just as protective of me. I felt a sob rise up my throat as Yuo, armed with a broom, smacked one of the hounds, who turned its attention on her. The hound I'd stabbed was struggling to his feet, but the other one was racing toward Yuo, ready to tear her throat out.

"No!" screamed again.

Yuo shrieked as the hound leapt at her. I took off on a lurch, but I knew I wouldn't get there in time. Yuo was going to die at the jaws of this hound, and I could do nothing about it.

She went into a crouch and covered her head as the hound landed in front of her. His teeth glistened as he growled triumphantly, and my mourned wail filled the hallway.

But suddenly, a shadow passed in front of Yuo, so fast that I couldn't even make out the shape. A whistling sound filled the air, and suddenly the hound's head dropped to the floor and rolled into the storage room. The paws of the headless body twitched before it slumped over.

The injured hound leaped forward to save his friend, but I pulled the blade out from between its shoulder blades with a cry and slammed it down on the back of its neck. Again. And again. I stabbed until the hound was unmoving beneath my feet.

And only then did I look up to find the blue invader standing between me and Yuo. His arms were out at his sides, black blades slick with hound blood, and his chest heaving. I took a step forward, slipping in blood, and brandished the dripping blade in front of me. My arms ached. My feet were frozen. I had lost my cloak somewhere in the fray and wore nothing but a thin oversized shirt. But I wasn't giving up. I hadn't come this far to leave the loris alone with this creature. "Stay back," I warned him. "Or I'll kill you."

I had never seen anything like this human. She stood in a see-through piece of fabric stained with hound blood. Her lips were pulled back in a snarl, revealing blunt teeth that were nothing compared to my fangs. Or my machets, which shifted as I flexed my forearms.

The small loris banded around her, their paws up, tiny claws ready to fight even though they weren't sharp enough to pierce my thick skin.

As I faced off against this tiny band of hostiles, I wondered how the fleck I'd gotten here. My duty had been to bring a contingent of Drixonians to clear out the Joktal fortress—kill any red fleckers that remained, find the loris that we knew were kept prisoner here, and escort them home. That was it.

I had expected to discover a small group of frightened loris who looked at me like a savior. I hadn't expected to find a bloodthirsty little human and loris ready to fight me. Was that one loris hissing at me? Did they even know how to do that?

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I recognized the heavy breathing of my fellow warrior, Quarl, so I didn't bother to turn around. He came to a stop behind me. "What the fleck?" he muttered as he surveyed the scene in front of us.

The human flicked the blade at him with a shaking arm. I could tell the weight of the blade was beginning to affect her. "Don't come any closer!"

"They had another human here?" he said.

"Apparently," I muttered.

He stepped up next to me with his hands on his hips. "What are we going to do?"

Daz, the head drexel of the Drixonians, had put me in charge of this mission after we'd defeated the Joktals when they'd tried to invade our city. But I wasn't used to making decisions. I was a member of the Lone Wolf Clavas, and a son of naught at that. I'd been branded so right after birth when my father had deserted the Drixonian military. Of course, those

was the old ways, a rule from our former society before a virus swept through, killing our all females and most of our elderly males. Broken, we'd left this planet, and had been subjugated by enemies for many cycles. It was only recently we returned to once again settle on our home planet of Corin and rebuild our former city of Granit.

We were so close to peace, finally, but this was the last mission. Killing the remaining Joktals had been easy, although a few had gotten away—we still needed to search the surrounding woods. Still, that wasn't my worry. This human in front of me with her band of loris defenders were a much bigger worry. Fighting, I could handle. Calming a human intent on killing me? I had no idea what to do.

I blew out a breath. "Well, first we disarm her."

"I'm sure that'll go over well," he muttered.

I didn't have much experience with humans. Of course, some Drixonians had human mates, but I was never very interested in them other than appreciating the stability they brought to our society. I valued them, of course. Our creed was *She is All*. But fighting to defend them was a wholly different task than talking to one. And now this human was suddenly my responsibility. I could understand her language, as my translator implant had long been updated, but I doubted she could understand me. I could see an implant behind her left ear, but getting close enough to update it to Drixonian was going to be rough.

I stepped forward, and she jabbed out with the knife. "Stop!" A loris launched herself at my leg and dug her teeth into my pants. I felt nothing but a bit of pressure. When I took another step, another loris went for my other leg. I sighed heavily as they tried to scratch and claw at me, but I only continued to walk forward with two loris clinging to my legs.

The human let out a war cry and lunged at me. The blade, while deadly to the hound at our feet, was not so effective against my thick skin and with her wavering strength. It glanced off my scales and clattered to the ground. But the human was not to be deterred. She came at me with her balled

fists, bringing them down onto my chest all while screeching and flailing. Her kicks landed on my thighs and dangerously close to my crotch, which was the only reason I reached out, grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, and held her aloft in front of me. “*Enough!*” I roared.

She went very still in my grip, light eyes rounded and wild. The loris clinging to my legs relinquished their grip and immediately went to the human’s dangling legs to support her.

The human tried to claw at me, but only succeeded in slicing her finger on one of my machets. She let out a wounded cry and clutched her bleeding hand to her chest.

“Fleck me,” I murmured. I reached my hand back to Quarl. “Implant updater, please.”

He snorted but didn’t say a word as he dropped it into my open palm. As soon as I lifted it up, her eyes went right to it, and her nostrils flared. But I sensed recognition in her gaze. And maybe a little bit of relief. She knew if I planned to kill her, I would do it already, rather than waste time talking to her.

I pressed the updater at her ear and pulled the trigger. She winced at the pain of the updater doing its job, but slowly her eyes cleared of pain. Only then did I place her feet on the ground and relinquish my grip on her neck.

She stumbled back, and the furry loris crowded around her as she shook her head and pressed a trembling palm over her hear. Then she gestured to the updater and to my head. “Your turn. I speak Earth-English.”

I placed the updater in a holster on my belt. “No need.”

She jerked at the sound of my voice. “You can understand me?”

“Been around humans for several cycles now.”

At that, her face went slack, and then her lips peeled back in a snarl again as she backed away from me, the loris following her. “Get away from me.”

I rubbed the nubs on my forehead as an ache began to form.

“Told you this wasn’t going to go well,” Quarl said. “Want me to get Viper? He’s nicer than you.”

“I can handle her,” I barked at him.

He didn’t look convinced.

I stalked forward toward the human. I was usually patient, but we’d been walking in waist-high snow for many rotations. I wanted to eat and sit the fleck down. “The Joktal aren’t coming back.”

“Good,” she spat.

Based on how she handled the hound, and the whip scars I saw on her skin, I didn’t suspect she held any affection for the Joktal. “They tried to defeat us, the Drixonians, and take over our territory. They were not successful. I was sent to search this fortress and eliminate any remaining Joktal. I was also ordered to search every room for the loris and escort them home.”

Immediately, her body posture changed. Her hands gripped two of the loris, fingers dug deep into their fur. I caught their attention too. One crept toward me and made a soft mewl in her throat.

I called over my shoulder to Quarl. “Which human was the one who was held here?”

“Uh, Amber.”

The gathered loris began to titter excitedly at the sound of the name, and the human glanced around at them wide-eyed. The loris in the front continued to approach me with soft, careful steps. Her tail was poised behind her, busy and wary.

I went to a crouch to meet her gaze, and she kept coming, antennas constantly working over her many-eyed stare. Finally, she opened her mouth and made a sound in her throat that was probably the closest she could come to a name. “Mba.”

I nodded. “Amber. She’s alive, healthy, and safe. She has a mate named Vinz.”

The human made a scoffing sound. “Mate, my ass,” she muttered.

I ignored her as the loris kept her attention on me. “Amber never forgot you. She insisted we get you home, and we will do that as thanks for keeping her safe while she was held here.”

“Mba,” the loris said again. The others repeated the sound, until there was a chorus of high-pitched sounds.

The human watched me warily, but she was no longer sneering or looking for a fight. “How can we trust you?”

I rose to my feet. “How can I trust that you won’t stab me in the back in my sleep?”

She swallowed. “Since I was taken from Earth, I haven’t met anyone other than the loris who haven’t wished me harm.”

“Fleck,” Quarl muttered behind me.

I nodded. “And I believe you. I don’t trust just anyone either.”

She nibbled her lip and glanced around at the loris, who were no longer cowering against her. In fact, one was prodding at Quarl’s tail. “You’ll get them home safe?”

“I will.”

“And what about me?”

“You can come back to Granit with us. We have a lot of humans there.”

“A lot?”

I scratched my head. “A lot. Some have chits.”

“Chits?” I folded my arms together and rocked back and forth. Her eyes bugged out. “*Babies?*”

The suspicion was back in her gaze. Her body had gone tight. The loris picked up on her emotions and began to huddle together again. “They only have chits if they want to. *She is All*. We don’t force anyone.”

“*She is All?*”

“That’s our creed.”

Her chest heaved, and her gaze dropped to the furry boots on her feet. “I-I don’t know if I want to. What if I want to stay with the loris at their home?”

“You can, as long as you are safe.”

Quarl made a sound, and I smacked his ankle with my tail. Daz would be livid if I let a human female remain unguarded with the loris. But now that we eliminated the threat of the Joktal, I hoped he would understand if that was her choice.

She eyed me. “Really?”

I nodded. “Really.”

“So right now... we’re safe? None of you will hurt us?”

“None of us.”

Her body swayed. She lifted her hand to her head before sliding to the ground with her back against the wall. Her chest heaved as she leaned her head back with a thunk, her eyes closing. Only then did she let down her guard long enough to murmur in a soft voice. “Please let this be true.”

Her thin body was littered with scars. Her hair hung in uneven locks, and her color was unlike the healthy tan of the humans at Granit. This one wasn’t like the safe and healthy humans I’d come to know. This one reminded me a bit of myself—damaged. And my cora gave a small lurch. My hands curled into fists. I vowed that for this human, I would make my words come true. She would be safe as long as I was alive.

THREE

BELLE

Maybe it was a testament to how shitty my last few years had been that this gruff blue alien taking the time to talk to me was enough to make me offer him the tiniest bit of trust.

Although it was really the loris who convinced me not to pick up the blade and try to stab him again. Because not only did he update my implant to understand *him*, he updated it to understand the loris, and then for them to understand him.

Just like that, Yua and Yuo sat in front of me to tell me about Amber. “She wasn’t here for long, but she was kind like you,” Yuo said. “But more vulnerable. She had to sleep a lot...” she looked at her twin as she nibbled her lip.

I was still in shock I could understand them.

“The Drix was a prisoner here, and she freed him before the Joktal could kill him,” Yua said. “But he took her with him.”

“He never hurt her though,” Yua added. “Remember when he saved her when she fell asleep in the cell block?”

Yuo nodded eagerly.

I watched the two Drixonians, who were currently dragged the hounds’ bodies outside. Beyond, I could see a large fire pit with Joktal bodies stacked in a pile. I struggled to my feet. “Hey,” I called to the Drixonian as he threw the hounds in another pile. “Can I see the Joktal?”

He stood in the doorway leading outside with his hands on his hips. Snow had settled in his dark hair and on the fur cloak around his wide shoulders. Metal glinted, and I realized he had gold hoops pierced through his ears, and one nipple had a large bar through it. Spike rings flash on his thick fingers. “Why?”

“I know them, so I can tell you if any have managed to get away.”

His blew out a steamy breath. “It’s not pretty, human.”

“I haven’t seen pretty for long time,” I said quietly.

His jaw shifted, before he reached out a hand. “Come on, then.”

The blades which had been protruding from his forearms, head, and back were no longer there, and I blinked at him in confusion as I drew closer. “Where are your black spikes?”

He flexed his forearm, and from beneath his scales, I could see the tips of the spikes emerge before they once again sank back under his scales. “They are machets and are only used for battle.”

“Oh.” He glanced down at my feet and then outside. “I should carry you.”

“Carry me?”

“The snow is going to be up to your chest, human.”

“Belle,” I said. It was odd to say my own name.

“Belle,” he repeated, and something about hearing my name out loud made my heart stutter. I hadn’t hear my name spoken in years. His mouth formed the syllables oddly, but I was glad for a simple name.

“Yes.”

“I’m Tinzal,” he said and beckoned me with his fingers before dropping to a crouch. “Get on my back, and I’ll take you outside.”

I swallowed as I eyed his smooth back which had previously been lined with razor-sharp spikes. “But your, uh,

machets. If they come out, I'll be impaled."

"They only emerge when I want them to, hu-Belle."

"And you don't want to impale me?"

His lips twitched. "I don't want to impale you."

I glanced back at the loris. "Wait here for me, okay?"

It was wild to hear their voices respond to me for the first time. *Yes* and *We will* and *Be Safe*.

A warm weight settled on my shoulders, and I grasped the cloak Tintel had placed on my shoulders. It hung down to my knees, thick and soft. I glanced up into his purple eyes. "Thank you."

He nodded. "On my back."

I climbed on, and immediately wanted to sink into the heat radiating from his body. I hadn't been actually warm in so long. I usually only had my thin cloak and loris bodies to keep me from freezing.

He rose to his feet, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. He strode outside, traipsing through the snow easily, which came up to his knees. A cluster of Drixonians stood around the fire warming their hands and chattering. They fell silent when we drew closer. One whistled. "Quarl was right. There really is a human here. Any more?"

I shook my head. "Just me and the loris."

Tintel walked over to the Joktal bodies, and I peered over his shoulder. "Put me down."

"But—"

"Please, just for a moment so I can see."

With a huff, he let me slide down his back until I landed on the ground. Here, the snow had been trampled and flattened, so it was a bit easier for me to crunch my way around the pile.

Tintel was right. This wasn't pretty. The bodies were in various stages of dismemberment, and so I saw first-hand just

what the Drixonian machets could do. I shivered thinking how they could easily shred me, but so far, Tinzal had been gentle.

I tried not to look at the goriest of the fatal wounds and began to count the bodies. Fifteen. And two bodies I didn't see, even among the severed heads, was Repper and Grivel.

"A few are missing," I said.

"How many?" Tinzal stood with his arms crossed.

"Five to ten. I can't be sure because I don't know how many were here. The leader, Repper isn't among the bodies as well as his second-in-command, Grivel."

Tinzal turned and relayed that to the rest of the gathered Drixonians. "We'll make camp here for the night and set up guard schedule. I doubt they'll return tonight. Tomorrow, we'll hunt them down. Everyone all right with that plan?"

They all murmured their assent. Tinzal turned to me. "Will you feel safe for the rest of the night if we wait to find them tomorrow?"

My breath stuttered out in white puffs. He asked me if I felt *safe*. I hadn't felt that way in years, and he... just asked me. Like that. And the crazy thing was, for the first time since I was taken from Earth, I *did* feel safe. Because of these big blue bodies in front of me. How crazy was that? I'd known them for all of five minutes. I was losing my edge. Letting my guard drop. But damn, I was too tired to do much of anything else. So I just nodded with a swallow around the lump in my throat.

Tinzal hauled me in his arms, this time in a fireman's carry as he trekked back into the fortress. There, the loris remained huddled together.

"Where do you sleep?" he asked.

"You can put me down," I said. "I can show you."

I led him up the winding stairs and then pointed to the open door of our sleeping chamber. He stepped inside, and immediately his features twisted into a grimace as he spotted

the few blankets scattered on the ground. “Where’s your bedding?”

I cleared my throat. “We, uh, have none.”

“Those fleckers,” he hissed under his breath. “Is there a bigger room in this place?”

I pointed down the hall. “The main dining room off the kitchens.”

Gesturing with a brusque swipe of his hand, he barked. “All of you, grab your blankets and show me this room.”

The loris and I hurried to do so, and then we made our way to the dining room as Tinsel huffed angrily among us. As we passed a window, I peered out into the courtyard. Despite the falling snow, the fire in the middle of the courtyard raged as the Drixonians piled the Joktal and hound bodies among the flames. I shivered and kept walking.

When we got the dining room, Tinsel surveyed the room with its crude wooden tables and branches before he strode to a window and hollered outside for some of his men.

They stomped into the room moments later, armed with torches and holding armfuls of furs and other supplies. With their massive fists, they broke the furniture until it was nothing but kindling before piling it a few feet from the open window. They lit the pile of broken furniture on fire, and immediately the room filled with heat as the smoke billowed out of the window. They left one table intact, and on it the Drixonians set out fresh water and food. One Drixonian opened a jar of some sort of soup and began warming it over the fire. I nearly wept at someone making a meal for me.

The massive males laid out piles of cushioned pelts and directed me and the loris to sit and eat. We did, huddled together around the fire while Tinsel gave everyone orders. Half of the Drixonians returned to the courtyard to stand guard should the Joktal return. The rest sat around the fire with us, including Tinsel and the other Drixonian I’d first met, who I learned was named Quarl.

The Drixonians ate too, and some immediately nodded off to sleep, slumped against the wall without their blankets since they'd given them to us. I asked Tinzal about them, worried they'd be cold, and he scoffed. "Drixonians run hot."

Seeing as none of them wore shirts, only fur cloaks, I had to take his word for it.

The loris began to drift off around me, and despite my fatigue, I found myself staying awake to observe the Drixonians. Tinzal fascinated me the most. I still remembered how it had felt to ride on his back. His warm body was strong and safe. I'd felt *protected*. Eventually, the rest of the Drixonians began to snore and we were the only ones still awake. He glanced at me often as we sat in silence, until finally his eyes narrowed. "You need to sleep."

"I know."

"So sleep." The flames flickered in his eyes.

My body was exhausted, but my mind raced. "I'm having trouble believing this is all real."

He turned to face me. "What's real?"

"The food I ate. The fire that's keeping me warm. The safety I feel." I swallowed. "You."

He studied me for a while. "How long have you been away from Earth?"

"A long time," I whispered.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. "I'm sorry. We know of the abductions, and while we don't have the means to return you to Earth, we will keep you safe as long as you live."

"And that's hard to believe, based on my experiences in this galaxy." His gaze dipped to my legs, which I knew were scarred along with my wrists from the bindings of my previous captor. "I've been a tourist attraction, a slave, an experiment." I felt a shudder run down my spine. "And none of it was kind. But you... you have been so kind that it feels like a trap."

"I understand that. Because kindness can be a trap."

Something in his tone pricked my interest. I took a sip of water, suddenly feeling more awake. “You sound like you have experience.”

He snorted. “This galaxy hasn’t been kind to most of us.”

“You sound like you have a story.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Sure. But tell me yours.” I knew my own story. I didn’t want to talk about it, not here in this warm room surrounded by my furry friends and a dozen alien guards with arm spikes. Machets. Whatever.

He stared into the fire for a moment and seemed to be gathering his thoughts. His friend closest to him let out a raucous snore and rolled over, throwing an arm over Tinsel. He rolled his eyes and shoved his friend back, who fell over onto his stomach and resumed sleeping quietly.

“About two hundred cycles ago, something like that, we lived here on Corin. We had a city named Granit. Our females were our pride. They ruled the society while the males were our defensive army. But we couldn’t defend against sickness. Our enemies unleashed a virus on us, killing all our females and most of our elderly males.”

I sucked in a harsh breath. “I’m so sorry.”

“We were broken, and our allies, the Uldani, invited us to our sister planet Torin to work for them. We uprooted every remaining living male and flew to Torin to work for the Uldani as their defense.” He scratched the back of his neck. “Most were given relatively decent positions, but I’m a son of naught. I was young, as most of us were, and so I was considered disposable.”

“What’s a son of naught?” I dreaded the answer.

“If a male deserted the military, his offspring were punished and branded sons of naught.” He pushed his hair to the side to reveal a brand on the back of his neck—a circle with a line through it. The brand was old, the scales underneath melted and reformed. I felt my hackles rise, anger heating my blood thinking about a small blue and black body

being held down under a hot iron. “All of us are sons of naught.” He gestured to the sleeping Drixonians around him. “So the Uldani used us as target practice. We were sent into dangerous territory first to determine it was safe. The Uldani used kindness as a cover. We later learned they were selling Drixonians around the galaxy or using them for experiments. We revolted and broke free of them. It was only much later that we learned they were the ones who unleashed the virus.”

“Those assholes.” I clenched my fists. “Where are they now?”

“We defeated and killed the elite who were responsible and made peace with the remaining Uldani. We haven’t had any trouble with them since. But Torin was never home. We returned to Corin as soon as we could. But that wasn’t easy either. The Joktal had settled here in our absence and weren’t content to share.”

That seemed irrational. “It’s a huge planet.”

He shrugged. “We would have respected their borders. But they did not respect ours.”

“I’m sorry for what you’ve been through.”

His head tilted as he eyed me. “I have survived with far more resources than you were given. You’re a fierce human.”

That made me smile. “Even though I threatened to kill you?”

He scoffed. “You wouldn’t have been able to.”

“I usually don’t fight. Not in this galaxy. I learned quick that fighting only meant more pain. But I would do anything for the loris.” I rested a hand on the head of one near me. She made a contented mew in her sleep and burrowed deeper into the thick blankets.

“They are a kind species. The Joktals taking advantage of them has long angered us, but we weren’t able to free them until we defeated the Joktals and raided the fortress. How did you come to be here?”

“I was sold to some warthog-looking aliens who I was pretty sure planned to sacrifice me off a cliff, but the Joktals bought me from them and brought me here.”

“Were they cruel?” His gruff voice was the softest I’d heard it yet.

“Not as much as others. I wasn’t chained twenty-four-seven.”

“Twenty-four... seven?” He queried, his voice rising at the end.

A laugh bubbled up my throat, surprising me. I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed. “On Earth, a day is twenty-four hours and week is seven days. So twenty-four-seven is a way to say... all the time.”

“All the time,” he echoed. “Chained.”

I rubbed at my wrists. “That was one of the worst places I was held. I was made to work in a factory making this stinky medicine. The smell alone made me nauseous every day. They sold me when I nearly died.”

He growled low in his throat. “I’ll tell them to never make you work in Granit. Ever.”

I smiled. “I can’t just sit around all day.”

“You’ll sit,” he grouched. “You’ll sit and heal and get fat and happy.”

“Well that sounds boring,” I teased. “You have to come visit me, at least.”

He prodded at the fire with a stick. “I’ll visit.”

“Deal.”

“Deal?”

“It means... we have an agreement.”

He nodded. “You fat. Me visit.”

This time, I laughed so loudly that Quarl awoke with a start. “What’s that sound?” he murmured with bleary eyes.

And that only made me laugh harder.

FOUR

TINZEL

The fortress was full of supplies that the Joktal had raided from various species and others. The next day, the snow had stopped falling, so we were able to get around the fortress walls easier. We found a massive building full of weapons, clothes, jewelry, and other personal items.

While the loris were content with food and warmth, Belle needed *things*. Her thin skin was paler than the other humans I'd seen. When I'd questioned her about it, she explained she hadn't been allowed outside so she didn't have a *tan*. Little bumps rose all over her skin, which she called goosebumps, and said it meant she was cold. Her skin was cool to the touch, much to my dislike. So she needed thick clothes. Better shoes. Something to cover her head and hands.

The supply shed was a treasure trove. She walked inside, her eyes big and round, murmuring, "*This feels almost like Christmas.*" She found a thick fur cap, furry mittens that stretched back to her elbows. Her boots were too big, but she covered her feet in three layers of socks and called it good.

By the time she was done with the shed, she had a whole pack of items that I tied on the back of my bike—more clothes, blankets, and food.

We'd had to dig paths in the snow for the loris to get around, as it had been up to their necks. They skipped down the paths with Belle, tossing balls of snow at each other. I had

never seen this snow game. Compared to the fear of the previous night, the mood this rotation was a complete shift. Most of the Drixonians were checking their bikes to make sure they were in working order before we set out.

I stood with Quarl, watching the loris and Belle. I couldn't quite comprehend all she'd been through. Her body was a roadmap of her captivity, and yet she still found it in her cora to protect her loris friends and to give a fleck about what happened to me. Were the other females this brave and resilient?

Quarl stepped next to me with his hands on his hips. "The Joktals didn't attempt to return to the fortress last night. The snow covered most of their tracks, but we found a few promising trails. What do you want to do?"

I picked my teeth with a claw. Belle's laughter rang out in the courtyard. Every Drixonian head turned toward her, and I felt a surprisingly stab of annoyance. "Are the bikes in working order?" I barked.

Several jumped at my tone and gave me a weird look before returning to their duties. Quarl stared at me like I had two heads. I cleared my throat. "Let's take the loris home before we track the remaining warriors down. It's not like the Joktals can gather in strength. The ones who fled are the only warriors left, and I don't want to make Belle or the loris stay here any longer than they have to." I eyed him. "What do you think?"

"I agree. And we could get another snowstorm tonight. Then we're stuck here for longer."

I shivered as I surveyed the courtyard. "I hate being stuck inside these walls." I wasn't comfortable in Granit either. I preferred the peace of our small village, Sari, which was a settlement right outside Granit. And even then, I was often out scouting.

"Each warrior can probably take three to four loris on their bikes," I said. "I'll take Belle."

Quarl nodded. "She's comfortable with you."

I thought back to our talk last night. How her light eyes had sparkled in the flames of the fire, how her whole look had changed once she'd been warm, fed, and clean. I'd never thought a human beautiful. But last night, I hadn't been able to take my eyes off her.

Someone shouted, and then a blast of something hard and cold slammed me in the back. I whirled around at the threat on instinct, teeth bared, machets lifting, to find Belle standing nearby. Her big mittens were clasped over her face, and her wide, round eyes bulged out of her head over top. Her long dark hair swayed in the breeze. "I'm sorry," I heard her muffled squeak from behind her mittens. I glanced down to find the remnants of a snowball at my feet. Icy water trickled down my stomach. Belle's gaze was on the dripping ice crystals as they collided with the top of my pants.

Her hands dropped to her sides. She swallowed. And I could have sworn her breathing sped up.

I immediately lowered my machets, realizing there was no threat. Bending down, I picked up a handful of snow and squeezed it into my fist. I tossed it in my palm, testing its weight.

Belle immediately put her palms out. "Wait, wait!" But a giggle was erupting from her throat, and when I reared back my arm, she let out a delighted screech and took off down a shoveled path. The loris around her scattered with feigned fright.

I chased after her, feeling my lips curled into a smile, and lobbed the snowball at her. The ball smacked her in the back of the head, and her hat went sailing as she immediately tipped over and hit the ground on her stomach with a loud *oomph*.

"Oh *fleck*." All humor gone, I dove to her side and hauled her up, terrified I'd split her skull. Her face was covered in snow, and I used my cloak to clean her as she sputtered. "I'm sorry, Belle. I didn't mean to—"

Her hand came down and smacked me in the shoulder. She let out an odd sound, and I froze. Had I broken her? But then the sound dissolved into peals of laughter. Her flushed face

beamed up at me with a wide smile. “Damn, that was a good hit.”

I still studied her for any injuries. “I didn’t hurt you?”

She reached for her hat and smashed it back on her head. “No way. This snow is fluffy. Although you did cheat a little and pack it.”

“Pack it?”

She reached for a handful of snow and cupped her mittens around it until it formed a ball. When she tossed it at my chest, it immediately fell apart in a rain of white. “See? I didn’t pack it.” She grabbed another handful and cupped her hands around it again, this time squeezing with small grunts. When she hit me with the snowball, it didn’t hurt, but it also fell to the ground in a somewhat solid ball. “That’s packing it.”

“And this... balling up snow. Is this a human thing?”

She smiled. “Oh yeah. I remember my sophomore year of college, we had a big snow storm. They had to cancel classes and everything. I was in an all-girls’ dorm, and across a small strip of grass was an all boys’ dorm. We made huge snow forts and had a massive snowball fight.” Her eyes went a little wistful. “The girls won, of course.”

I didn’t understand half of what she said, but it didn’t matter. She was recalling a happy memory that made her smile and softened her features. I brushed a bit of snow from her hair. “Of course you won.”

The buzzing of a bike turning on drew her attention. Her eyebrows dipped, and she glanced back at me. “Are you leaving?”

“Yes, and you’re coming with us.”

“Today?”

I nodded. “We don’t want to delay getting the loris home. We’ll set out today, and once they are safe, we’ll hunt the Joktals.”

“It won’t hurt to wait that long?”

I shook my head. “All of us are trackers. If they’re on this planet, we’ll find them. And even if they find a way off planet, we’d still track them down.”

She blinked at me. “And somehow, I believe it.”

“You should.”

She glanced back at the loris. “Think your Drixonians will join in one little snowball fight with the loris and me?”

“Packing or no packing?”

“No packing.”

I grinned at her. “Deal.”

Belle

Freedom.

I rode in front of Tinsel on his hover bike, my hands between his on the wide handlebars. The wind blew through my hair and stung my eyes, and I didn’t care, not one bit. I couldn’t stop smiling. My chest rumbled with barely concealed laughter. I was *flying* through the air with a hard, strong body behind me and my furry friends in sight. I couldn’t get over how cute they looked, gathered in groups of two and three on the bikes, looking tiny next to their Drixonian drivers.

I had never ridden motorcycles, but my friend had dated a guy who’d been in an MC club. She’d told me there was nothing like riding on his bike, and I’d been happy for her, but never saw the appeal myself. I was too worried about other drivers to ever feel safe on one.

But here on this alien planet with zero traffic and road rage, I could understand what was so great about a bike. This one had no wheels, just two round disks that projected strong jets of air that made us *soar*.

A few times, I looked to my right or left at the ground, and Tinsel must have been concerned I was falling off, as he'd wrap an arm around my stomach to hold me in place. His grip was strong but gentle, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I could actually exhale. Relax. Not have to watch my back.

But this scared me a little too. I couldn't get used to this. I wasn't home. This wasn't Earth. Tinsel was a temporary guard, not a long-term solution to the absolute chaos that was my life.

We rode until the sun began to dip below the horizon, my eyes began to grow heavy, and the loris began to nod off. Tinsel made the call that he didn't think it was safe anymore to ride with them, so we stopped for the night to sleep.

The Drixonians moved like a unit, parking the bikes the bikes, setting up shelter, and rolling out sleeping mats. We ate a rehydrated soup around the fire, and now that I could finally communicate with the loris, I peppered them with questions.

One of the oldest of the loris was named Cira, and she took the lead to tell us more about their village called Trilia. "We were attacked many cycles ago by the Joktal, probably about five or six cycles by now," Cira said. "I remember I had been sleeping with my sister Poroa in our tree trunk burrow when they invaded, snatching up any of us they could grab and tossing us in cages pulled by their hounds." She shook her head with sorrow. "We had no defenses, because we'd never been attacked before. Every species on this planet before this kept to themselves."

"How many times did the Joktal raid Trilia?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." Cira rubbed her paws together and held them out to the fire. "I was the first group taken, and there might have been a few more raids after that. Eventually, they stopped. I'd always look for my sister every time the Joktal arrived with more of us. No matter how much I missed her, I longed for her to stay free. The last loris who joined us said Poroa was still alive, and she had vowed no more loris would be taken." Cira smiled. "And although I don't know what

happened, her words came true. The Joktal never brought more loris to the fortress after that.” She glanced around the fire at the listening Drixonian. “I do fear... I fear we will reach Trilia, and it will be empty.”

Tinzel cleared his throat. “Relk, one of our warriors, visited Trilia within the last few cycles. The loris are still there and have learned how to defend themselves.”

The loris around the fire began to whisper amongst each other in excited tones. Cira’s many eyes shone. “You speak the truth?”

Tinzel nodded gravely. “Drixonians don’t lie.”

I grabbed her paws and held them. “I can’t wait to see your home, Cira. You’ll be reunited with your sister. I know it.”

She nuzzled against me. “Thank you, Belle. I hope so.”

The loris made quick work of their meal before retreating to the blankets to curl up. Small snores rose from the furry pile as I remained by the fire with the Drixonians.

The Joktal always bickered with each other, often breaking out into fistfights that drew blood and broke bones. The leaders punished any insubordination with humiliation and beatings. But the Drixonians had camaraderie. They respected each other. Their laughter rang out in the still of the night as they made jokes, teased each other, and told stories of battles. I sat next to Tinzel on a fallen log, and while he listened intently and laughed softly a few times, he didn’t talk much. In fact, the most I’d ever heard him talk was when he was alone with me.

He had tied back the top half of his hair, and the gold hoops in his ears sparkled in the firelight. His nose was prominent, with a rounded ridge that fit his strong features. Handsome. He was *handsome*.

I shook myself, wondering if the fatigue was getting to me. Since when had I thought anything in this galaxy was attractive? The loris were cute, of course. But attractive? This blue alien? I had to be delirious.

They passed around a wooden jug, and after Tinzal took a swig, he wiped the back of his mouth. He made to pass the jug to me and then paused. “This is a bottle of spirits.”

“Spirits?” A part of me hoped the drink was what I thought it was. Based on the increasing decibel level of the Drixonian voices, I could guess. And seeing as I was already losing my mind over this alien being hot, I might as well get toasted.

“A fermented drink.” He tapped his head. “Makes you feel a little funny—”

I snatched it from him. “I can’t wait to feel funny.” I upended the jug and let the liquid pour into my mouth. I sputtered immediately as the alcohol burned a path down my throat. “Sweet Jesus,” I muttered as I coughed. My eyes watered, and I sniffed. “I’m either out of practice or that is going to eat the lining of my stomach.”

The Drixonians around the fire let out a raucous bout of laughter as I tried not to throw up the spirits.

“That’s a prime bottle of Xavy’s brew,” Tinzal smiled. “Strong, right?”

“Strong?” I squeaked. “I’m seeing two of you after one sip.”

Quarl roared in laughter and nearly fell off the log. I got myself under control as the burn began to give way to a pleasant, heady warmth that made my head swim in a pleasant way. “Oh,” I said softly as I eyed the jug. “Okay, this is *good*.” I lifted the jug and took another gulp.

“Whoa, whoa, okay there.” Tinzal wrestled the bottle out of my hands. “I think that’s enough for your first time.”

I hiccuped and pouted. “I’ve had alcohol before.”

“Alcohol?”

“Spirits.”

Quarl took the bottle and took a swallow. “You haven’t had *Xavy’s* spirits.”

I prodded at my nose, because it felt funny. “Point taken.” I stood up, and the ground tipped. I stumbled and glared at the ground. “Quit moving.”

“By the might of Fatas,” Tinzal cursed under his breath. He stood up next to me and grabbed my arm. “I’ll help you to your sleeping area.”

I shook my head. “Gotta pee first.”

He blinked at me. “You have to—?” He let out a sigh and rubbed his forehead. “Right, of course.”

I gestured toward a bush outside the clearing. “I’m fine, I’ll just nip over behind there and do my business.”

“I’ll come with you.”

I pushed his chest, but he didn’t budge. “Uh, no, rude. Privacy, Mr. Alien Man.”

“Yeah, quit being rude, Tinzal,” Quarl bellowed with a laugh.

Tinzal rolled his eyes. “Come on, Belle.” With a firm grip on my biceps, he pulled me toward the bush. I trotted next to him barely able to keep up. He led me to a clear area behind the bush, and then walked around to the other side. He stood with his back to me and cleared his throat loudly. “I’ll keep watch. You can... do your business.”

I frowned at the back of his head. “Don’t look.”

“I will not.”

I bent to lower my pants but lost my balance. I fell onto my hip with a small cry.

“Belle?” Tinzal called out in a panicked voice.

But I was already laughing with a snort. “I’m fine. The ground tripped me.” I glanced up quickly. “Don’t look!”

And he hadn’t. He remained with his back to me, although I could see he was tense. I really needed to focus and get this done so I didn’t give him a stroke. Could Drixonians have strokes? So I managed to get myself under control—what the hell was in that drink?—pee, and then make myself decent

again. I stumbled out from behind the bush right into his arms. He caught me before I hit the ground again. “Okay?”

I nodded. “Peachy keen and with an empty bladder.”

He stared at me for a moment before shaking his head. “Right, okay.” He led me toward the sleeping loris, who looked incredible cozy.

But as soon as his hand left my arm to leave me there, I immediately reached out for him again. Why? I wasn’t sure. It didn’t matter. The spirits were making me forget my earlier resolve to keep my guard up. “Where are you sleeping?”

He went very still, and slowly swiveled his head to study my face. His arm went up and he pointed to shelter draped over a branch. “There.”

Oh damn, that looked nice. Through a slit in the shelter, I saw he had a huge furry pelt, a tarp-like cover, and a jug of water. “That looks nice. I want to go to there.”

“Belle—”

I marched toward his bed, eyes set on the massive furry blanket, and dove in headfirst. I swore the blanket was so plush that I bounced as if on a mattress. As soon as my head hit a soft pillow-like padding, I groaned with happiness. “This is *nice*.”

Leaves crunched under booted footsteps. Two feet came into view, and I blinked up at a dark figure. “Hello.”

“Belle, what are you doing?”

“Sleeping with you.”

He made a choking sound and dropped to a crouch next to me. “Belle—”

“As much as I like hearing my name, you need to shut it and get into bed. It’s chilly, and I need your body heat.”

His head dropped between his shoulders with a defeated slump. I grinned. “Come on, you know you want to. I’m pretty soft.” I sniffed my armpit. “I smell okay too.”

He didn't move for a long time, and then finally he rose to his feet. He kicked his boots off, revealing surprisingly humanoid feet. Excited that I was getting what I wanted, I disrobed too, getting rid of my shoes and my heavy fur cloak. I remained in my pants and shirt.

He lay down beside me, and I immediately snuggled into his side. His body heat was *amazing*, better than a heated blanket. And he smelled like a campfire. He remained stiff, flat on his back, staring up at the shelter.

I patted his chest. "Hey, relax."

He hesitated before talking. "I'm worried that tomorrow morning, you will think I took advantage of you after you had spirits."

I was about to dismiss his worry when the reality of his words hit me. He was very worried about my *consent*. I hadn't consented to anything that had happened to my body since I left Earth, and now this alien male was concerned about the act of simply sleeping next to each other.

My thoughts weren't the spirits talking. I wasn't that far gone. I knew in my heart of hearts that my attraction to Tinzal was maybe a little bit about his looks, but ninety-five percent was about *him*. His gruff demeanor with a marshmallow center. An alien of his size and strength who gave a shit about my *consent*. Who could throw snowballs with me in some *Beauty and the Beast* alien planet fantasy.

Tears pricked eyes, and I ducked my head so he wouldn't see them. "I haven't had that much spirits. I promise, Tinzal, I want to sleep here." The spirits only made me ask for what I really wanted. Which was to be next to him, to feel a body on mine that didn't mean me harm. To sleep with someone other than the furry loris.

Only at my words did his body relax next to mine. His hand rose to cup the back of my head, and he said in a soft voice. "Then sleep well, Belle. See you in the morning."

I fell asleep, warm and smiling.

FIVE

TINZEL

I woke up in pain. My cock was a hard spike pressing against the front of my pants. My cora thundered in my chest. Yet Belle slept on, laying draped across my chest, drooling on my scales, ignorant to my situation.

I only ever slept next to Quarl before, and he kicked and snored in his sleep. Belle pressed her breasts against me, made some sighs that drew my balls tight, and fluttered her lips near my nipple. I was going to lose my mind.

I tried to shift out from under her, but she murmured something and moved. Her eyes blinked open slowly, and she lifted her head. Our gazes met.

I tensed. Despite her assurance that she wouldn't be upset with me this morning, I was fearful she would be angry at me. But instead, her full lips stretched into a wide grin. She dropped her chin onto her folded hands, still on my chest, and said in a raspy voice, "Good morning."

It *was* a good morning. And it was also the worst morning ever. Any minute now, she was going to look down and scream at the bulge in my pants which felt monstrous.

All I could do was nod, and that must have been okay, because her smile stayed as she slowly sat up at my side and stretched her arms above her head. Her shirt rode up, revealing a strip of skin that made my mouth water.

What was with these human females? I had never expected to be captivated by one, but Belle held my full attention. And that strip of skin was why I temporarily forgot about my cock, until Belle's gaze dropped to my pants, and she started.

I sat up quickly and pulled a fur over my lap. "It's nothing."

Her eyes bulged. "Uh, that's *not* nothing."

"Belle—"

"Are you attracted to me?"

That was the last question I expected her to ask me. And I wasn't sure how to answer. I knew the truth, but I wasn't sure how she would take it. But Drixonians didn't lie...

I prodded my fangs with the tip of my tongue. "I am."

"So that's not just morning wood?"

"What?"

She fluttered a hand in exasperation. "Do you always wake up... like that?"

"Never." I answered quickly. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been hard.

She blinked. "Never?"

"Never. Your... proximity is causing this."

For some reason, that seemed to make her happy. She pressed a palm to her chest. "Little ol' me?" With a coy smile, she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

I didn't understand her. "You're not angry?"

She slid closer, and I tried to back away, but a tree trunk stopped my retreat. She kept coming, until our chests were pressed together, and our faces were close. I felt her warm breath on my lips. "Do you know what kissing is?"

I'd seen the other Drixonians touch mouths with their mates. I nodded.

"Would you kiss me?"

This entire morning felt like I woke up in another galaxy.
“You want that?”

She came even closer, swinging her leg over my thighs until she straddled my lap. Her heated core hovered dangerously close to my now weeping cock. Her expression was no longer coy though. Now she was earnest. Serious. She wanted me to listen, and so I did.

“It’s been a long time since I felt like a woman. Like a human woman with sexual desires. But around you, I feel...” Her eyes went a little misty. “I feel wanted. And I...I want too.”

I had to be sure I understood. “You want... a kiss?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks flushed a deep red, and she rubbed at them with her palms. “I feel crazy saying this, but it’s true. You fascinate me, and soon you’ll go back home, and I’ll stay with the loris. So maybe... before I commit to a lifetime of celibacy... can I have a kiss from you?”

There had to be another warrior better for her than me, but then the thought of any warrior touching her made me want to rage.

“It’s because it’s *you*,” she said softly, as if she understood my hesitation. “And the way you’ve treated me since we met. Your presence calms me. I feel safe with you. And that means more to me than you could ever know.”

Hesitation evaporated, I leaned forward and touched our lips together. I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but some sort of instinct kicked in, and I swept my tongue inside of her mouth. The piercings on my tongue must have surprised her, because she jolted when one clicked against her teeth. But then she let out the slightest sound, a soft little moan that right went to my cock.

She slid closer, her hot cunt brushing my sensitive head, and I lost my mind for a bit. My hips surged upward, and her body bucked before she groaned and ground down on my hard shaft. The kiss was forgotten as I licked down her neck to the top of her shirt. Her hips worked against me, making me dizzy,

and I could barely think with her scent in my nose and her flavor on my tongue. I told myself to stop as I lowered one shoulder of her shirt, but as her right breast appeared, every voice in my head told me to keep going. I sucked her nipple into my mouth, and she dug her nails into my scalp. “Yes,” she whispered into my hair. “Yes, Tinsel.”

And then there was no fleeing way I was stopping. I pitched forward, placing her on her back in my shelter, glad we were hidden from view from the rest of the camp, and slipped my hand down the front of her pants. There, I cupped her cunt, my fingers sliding through her slick. “Let me taste you,” I pleaded.

Her eyes were glassy and wild, and she writhed beneath me in the soft furs. “Yes, please.”

I slid down her body, tugging her pants down as I went. She was bare underneath, covered in dark curly hair that glistened with her wetness. I slid my tongue among her folds, gathering her essence on my tongue and drinking it down in gulps. Every time I touched the hardened nub at the top of her cunt, her body shook, and she cried out, so I focused there, working it over with my teeth and tongue until she shuddered and trembled. Her hands grasped the air before landing on my horns. I growled into her cunt, and she climaxed with a high-pitched whine, tugging my face against her flesh until I could barely breathe.

Only then did she slump onto the furs, her hands fluttered to her sides, as her chest heaved. I rose above her, licking her taste from my mouth. My tongue curled under my chin as a delicious drop nearly escaped.

“My God,” she muttered, body still trembling. Her gaze dropped to my pants, to my cock which I’d told myself to ignore. And in a determined voice, she said, “Get on your back.”

“My back?”

“Yeah,” her tongue ran along the edge of her top teeth. “Ever had a blow job?”

I had no idea what that was. I shook my head.

Her grin was huge. “Well it’s your lucky day.”

Belle

Only after I offered to give this alien a blow job did I realize I had no idea what was in his pants. A penis? A tentacle? A third leg? No idea. I couldn’t fully understand what had come over me to offer in the first place, but I also didn’t want to question it. I just had an orgasm for the first time in... I didn’t want to count how long. It wasn’t like I’d been masturbating at night surrounded by loris. And even if I had been alone, nothing about my situation had made me feel like a sexual being. I’d nearly forgotten I could orgasm.

But then Tinzal came along with his muscles and purple eyes and wicked tongue, and I’d lost all reason. And I loved being able to lose all reason. This was fantastic, and damnit I was going to do this for *me*.

He lay on his back, his pants loose after he’d unhooked his belt that had been clasped over top of his tail. I tugged down, slowly, a little worried what I’d find but also curious as hell.

The first thing that came into view was a hairless groin and the base of what looked like the shaft of a dick. A curious bump sat at the top base of his shaft, but it looked innocuous enough that I didn’t worry about it and kept lowering his pants. Slowly, a thick, veiny shaft came into view, and with one last tug, his cock sprang free. A large ring was pierced through the tip, and my mouth went dry. Good Lord, what a dick. Thick and light blue with a bulbous mushroom head that was spongy to the touch. I squeezed the tip, and Tinzal jerked below me with a soft groan.

His mouth was open, eyes nearly rolled back in his head, and he fisted big handfuls of the blanket below. His body trembled, and when I lowered my head to lick a stripe up the

underside of his shaft, he made a choking gasp. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought he was dying.

I stared at his cock a moment, unsure how I was going to fit the mushroom head in my mouth, but when in Rome... or in an alien's bed.

I lowered my head, closed my lips around the head, and sucked. His cock piercing tickled the back of my tongue. Tinzal seemed to levitate off the bed. His hips surged up, nearly choking me, but luckily I had quick reflexes and worked with his movements. He murmured some sort of apology, but his words were slurred as his body shook. With one hand, I worked his shaft in time to the bob of my head, and he bit down hard on his forearm until I could smell the tang of his blood in the air.

He didn't last long, which was probably a good thing because I wasn't sure how long my jaw could take the size of him. His shaft pulsed in my hand, and he came in strong spurts on my tongue. I drank down as much as I could, but his release was too much, and I had to pull off quickly as the rest of his cum trickled down his shaft.

He eventually slumped, his hips going still as he stared dazedly at me. I took a sip of water and braced myself over top of him. "Are you all right?"

He blinked. His mouth flopped open and closed. Had I killed him? Death by blow job? But then he seemed to get himself under control. His hand came up to touch my cheek ever so gently, the gesture so affectionate that I felt my heart skip a beat before pounding loudly.

"Belle," he whispered. Just my name. And the way he uttered it in a reverent tone made my eyes prickle with tears. I felt... like *someone*. Not a human who'd been bought and sold like property. Not just a female to be saved. But a *person*.

"Tinzal," I answered him.

His lips turned up into a smile that made his eyes crinkle. By God, he *was* handsome. I barely saw his alien features anymore, like his horns and tail. He just *was* Tinzal, and I

couldn't believe how quickly my feelings were mounting for him.

"Tinzl?" A voice called from outside our shelter. Quarl. And soon the tittering and mewling of the waking loris filtered through our private space.

"Fleck," Tinzl muttered, quickly righting my clothing before tending to his own. Right before he flung open the flap of his tarp, he turned to me with his brow furrowed. "Are you okay?"

I was and I wasn't. But for him, I gave a watery smile. "Yes. I'm fine. Go and see what Quarl needs."

He studied me a moment before opening the tarp and stepping out. I took a moment to gather myself. I felt flushed and warm. Happy and confused. After all I'd been through, I was surprised I even wanted to be touched, but yet it had felt so good when everything had been my choice.

But I wasn't even sure what it meant. Tinzl surely wasn't ready to commit to some strange human he'd just met. And I was crazy to want him too... right? "Relax, Belle," I muttered to myself. "You've had hookups. Quit being weird." Of course, I'd had hookups on Earth, when I'd been a whole other person, a person I didn't even recognize anymore.

I smacked my cheeks to force myself out of my thoughts and crawled out of the shelter. The camp was in tear down mode. All the loris were folding their blankets, and Yua immediately ran over to me. "We were worried about you. We woke up and you were gone."

"I, uh, had to talk with Tinzl," I told her, even as she looked at me funny as if she didn't believe me.

The Drixonians were sitting around the dying fire eating a morning meal. I joined them, sitting across the fire from Tinzl who was in a discussion with Quarl. As I gnawed on some meat jerky and sipped a warm, tea-like drink, my eyes kept straying to Tinzl, who watched me carefully even as Quarl talked in his ear.

This was weird. Why had I slept with him? Why had I let him get me naked? What did this mean?

Luckily I was given a brief respite from my anxiety as everyone got to work dismantling the camp. I helped put away shelters, fold blankets, and discard food waste. By the time the sun was fully over the horizon, we were once again mounting the bikes to continue the rest of the way to Trilia.

Tinzel was careful with me when I mounted the bike, keeping his pelvis back and maintaining a few inches distance between us. However, I found it awkward and before he started the bike, I turned around and shot him a look. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

I pointed to him. “Avoid touching me.”

I swore he looked guilty. “I didn’t want to... I didn’t want you to think I assumed I could touch you again at my whim.”

Jesus, this guy. He was killing me. “I appreciate that. But it’s okay, Tinzel. Really.”

Immediately, as if he’d been waiting for my word, the tension in his body eased, and he slid forward until his chest warmed my back. As I faced forward, I could hear the smile in his voice. “Good, because you are soft, and you smell good.”

I chuckled to myself as he turned on the bike. The entire procession of bikes rose into the air like a giant bee swarm, and we took off across a grassy plain. All the while, Tinzel kept one hand on the handlebars and the other wrapped around my waist. In his deep voice, he talked in my ear, telling me about the scenery we passed. He pointed out a few grazing deer-like creatures he called antella. He let me know the direction of his village and the Drixonian city of Granit. And he even spoke of his own hut, although he admitted he wasn’t there much, preferring to scout the borders and hunt.

I could tell when we drew close to Trilia, because the loris began to chatter excitedly. Two craned their necks so far that they nearly fell off their bike, and the Drixonian driver had to wrangle them back into place with an exasperated look.

I watched Cira from her spot on the front of a bike, and her many eyes took in the scenery with a wistful familiarity that made my heart ache. I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if I got to see the old oak that towered over the sign leading in my apartment complex, or once again step on the cracked sidewalk in the parking lot.

Soon, a weathered stone gate covered in vines came into view, and as we rode closer, the gate creaked open. The Drixonians lowered the bikes to the ground just as a group of loris ran from the gates. Many of them carried spears, and while none wore clothes—just like our loris—the one in front wore a beaded belt that made her appear regal. And as the sound of the bikes faded to a still silence, Cira's voice could be heard in a mewling wail. "Sister!"

A cry tore from the leader's throat. She tossed her spear to the side as Cira leaped off the bike. She stumbled in the tall grass, but quickly regained her footing as she ran toward her sister. As the two loris met in a tight embrace, I felt tears track down my cheeks. Soon, the clearing was alive with loris cries as they were reunited with their family and friends. With a quiet honor that I respected, the Drixonians remained quiet on their bikes, including Tinzal and me, until the leader—Cira's sister, Poroa—walked toward us. Cira walked with her, their paws clasped together.

Poroa resembled her sister, but where Cira was slightly stooped from many cycles of back-breaking work and not enough food, Poroa was muscled and healthy. Her antenna worked overtime to clean her eyes as she addressed Tinzal. "I never thought I'd see my sister again. Do we need to be worried about Joktal retaliation?" Her chin tilted up. "Because we will be ready."

"The Joktal are defeated," Tinzal assured her. "We fought most of them when they tried to take over Granit. We killed the rest at the fortress. Only a few remain alive, and we plan to hunt them down. We wanted to bring the loris home first."

"You... you defeated them?" She looked at her sister. "Cira, is this true?"

Cira nodded. “I saw the bodies myself, sister. We are free.”

Poroa reached for Tinzal with her other hand. “Thank you. Words aren’t enough to express what this means to us. What can we do to repay you?”

Tinzal’s arm tightened around my stomach for a moment, before he released me. “Will you please take in Belle? She was held with the loris, and they are all fond of each other.”

“She protected us often,” Cira said to her sister. “Belle deserves a peaceful life with us.”

Poroa smiled at me. “There is no need for an explanation. You are welcome, human Belle. This is your home now.” She beckoned us with her paws. “Please, all of you come in. We will celebrate with a feast.”

“There is no need—” Tinzal began.

Poroa cut him off. “We insist. Please let us feed you before you go on your way.”

Quarl was craning his neck to peer inside the gates, and he lifted his nose in the air with a few sniffs. “Something smells flecking good, Tinzal.”

Tinzal studied his warriors, most of whom seemed more than eager to eat before tracking down the rest of the Joktal. But then his gaze fell to me. “Would you like us to stay for a meal?”

“Absolutely,” I responded. The thought of me walking through those gates right now while Tinzal rode away made my stomach cramp. I wasn’t ready for good-byes yet. And I also wanted to see where my furry friends lived.

I didn’t even have to say please. Tinzal was already dismounting the bike and picking me off to settle me on my feet. “Then let’s go eat,” he said. His hand brushed mine. Somehow our fingers twined together, and that’s how we walked into Trilia. Hand in hand.

SIX

TINZEL

Trilia was not made for Drixonians. Everything was... small. We couldn't quite fit into the tree trunk burrows. The tables that were hastily set up for the feast were nearly too low for us.

Loris were everywhere—males stirred massive cauldrons of steaming stew while the females hurried around to provide comforts for the returning loris. And they were so loud, constantly chattering and squealing as more family were reunited.

Belle walked around with wide eyes, clearly happy to see her friends home. Within moments, they had prepared her own room, a cozy burrow with an opening just large enough for me to squeeze into.

I entered with Belle, wanting to make sure she was comfortable. She ran her hands over the soft blankets on a bed pallet and swished her fingers in a wash basin. Her head turned, and she smiled at me. "I haven't had a private room since I was taken from Earth. What do you think of it?"

I thought it was perfect for her. She deserved this. But I couldn't bring myself to say words. I'd known her for all of two rotations, and already I was bracing myself to miss her. So I only nodded, and her smile dimmed slightly. I cleared my throat and forced myself to talk. "It's very nice."

“A place all my own,” she said softly as she looked around. “I can’t believe it.”

I hoped she lived a long, happy, peaceful life with the loris. I hoped she could sleep all day, eat in bed until she could barely move, and laughed a lot. I was learning the loris were a funny bunch when they weren’t under Joktal rule.

From outside, I heard Quarl yell my name to let me know the meal was about to start. And fleck, but I didn’t want to go. I wanted to stay in this burrow with Belle and never leave. I would waste away, but I’d do it happily. Our gazes met, and she didn’t make a move to leave any more than I did. Maybe she was feeling guilty, like she owed me something. I had to make sure she knew that I didn’t expect anything from her. “You’ll be happy here.” The words felt bitter on my tongue. “It doesn’t snow much in this valley. The loris are good cooks.”

“I’ll be happy here,” she echoed.

More Drixonians shouted from outside, wondering where I was. I couldn’t delay any longer. I turned to leave but felt a hand on my arm. Belle watched me carefully. “You’re happy too, right? You will live peacefully now that the Joktal are defeated.”

I told myself not to touch her, but my hand had a mind of its own. I hooked a lock of her hair behind her small ear. “I’ll be happy knowing you are happy.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“I know.” This time I did turn to leave, forcing myself to place one foot in front of the other as Belle trotted behind me. We entered the main part of the village, where tables were piled high with food. The loris were better hunters than I thought. Steaming antella steaks sat on platters, freshly steamed vegetables were mixed into bowls, and sweet cakes dripped with a glaze.

Quarl was already eating, steak juice dripping from his jaw. I took a seat next to him with a laugh. “You’re enjoying yourself.”

He pointed to a pretty loris sitting across from him. “I wanna take this one home with me. She can cook, and she likes me.”

I smacked him before reaching for a steak. “You can’t just *take one*, you flecker.”

Belle laughed as she sat down across from us. “None of you look like you’re hurting for food.”

“We have good cooks in the village too.” I bit into a steak and groaned with pleasure as the flavors exploded on my tongue. How the fleck had they cooked this? “Okay, I changed my mind,” I said to Quarl. “You can take that one with us.”

“Really?” he perked up.

“No, not really.” I spooned some vegetables on my plate.

Belle giggled at our interactions as she chatted with the loris. Poroa soon joined us. “How is your room?” she asked Belle. “We had it set up for the other human when she was here several cycles ago.”

“It’s perfect,” Belle said. “Thank you. And please let me know what I can do around here. I plan to earn my keep. I can cook, clean—”

“Ah, enough of that,” Poroa fussed, loading Belle’s plate with cakes. “Focus on eating and sleeping.”

“Those aren’t jobs.”

“They are jobs here,” Poroa insisted. “Right, Cira?”

Cira licked a sweet glaze from her paws, nodded. “Right, sister.”

Belle looked like she was going to protest, but then Poroa shoved a cake in her mouth, and all Belle could do was chew. I grinned at her, eager to see her enjoying her fresh food rather than the quick rehydrated meals we had fed her. And eat she did, until she rubbed her swollen belly, and her eyelids began to droop. The time was only a little past midday, but we’d been riding hard all morning. Most of the loris we’d rescued were beginning to nod off at the tables.

Which meant we couldn't delay our departure any longer. The loris would want to close their gates, and we were taken up precious room in their small village. When I made to stand, all my warriors rose with me. Suddenly Belle's eyes went wide, and she jerked to her feet. "Wait, where are you going?"

"We have to leave." I hated the panicked look in her eyes. "We've already stayed too long."

"But—" she glanced at Poroa helplessly, but she was tending to her sister. "Can't you stay a little longer?"

"Why should we?" I wasn't sure why I asked her that. Maybe I wanted her to tell me that she needed more time to decide if she wanted to come back to my village with me. Maybe I wanted her to tell me that she needed me.

But she didn't do any of those things. She swallowed as she wrung her hands together, until finally she seemed to make a decision in her head. Her shoulders slumped. Her eyes went downcast. And she said in a soft voice. "You're right. You should probably leave now."

Each word felt like a smack, and I had to force myself not to flinch. The rest of the warriors were already mounting their bikes. The loris were waiting to say farewell. It was time to go, and yet my body felt rooted to the ground. Belle remained with her head bent, eyes on the ground.

"Look at me," I heard myself say. "Look at me, Belle."

Her eyes closed, and I thought she was going to ignore me, until her chin tilted up, her eyes opened, and she held my stare.

"You'll forget about me in a rotation or two. And you'll be happy here."

Her lips curled into a sad smile. "I'll be happy here."

"And forget about me."

She shook her head. "No. I won't do that. Will you forget about me?"

That answer was easy. "Never. You'll be on my mind every rotation, and Fatas willing, you'll be my last thought the day I die."

Her lips parted as a small gasp escaped. And I thought that was a good time to turn and walk away. I waited for her voice to call after me. To hear her say my name one more time. But as I mounted my bike, she remained standing where she was staring after me. Poroa thanked me again and handed me a pack of food. “You’re welcome here anytime. I’m sure Belle would love for you to visit.”

I nodded stiffly, knowing I would never be able to see her again. I wouldn’t be able to take leaving her a second time.

I waved to the loris as I called for my warriors to start their bikes. We rose into the air and soared through the gates. When I heard them shut behind me, my cora cracked in half. I felt like I was leaving half of it behind. I hoped Belle took care of it for me.

Belle

When I’d been a prisoner of the Joktals, I’d dreamed of a day the loris and I were rescued. I’d imagined their peaceful home with good food, laughter, warmth, and happiness. Even in my best fantasies, I couldn’t have thought up a better place than the reality of Trilia.

There was a stream that ran through the village full of fresh water and fish-like animals that the loris caught and ate. The leaves on the trees smelled like roses. Everywhere I looked, blue and cream striped fur greeted me, eager to hand me food or beaded hand-made jewelry.

But as the end of my first day at Trilia drew to a close, I couldn’t stop feeling like I was missing something. Like this wasn’t where I was meant to be. When it was time to retreat to

the privacy of my own room, something I'd craved for *years*, I didn't want to do it.

I sat with Poroa near a small fire in the center of the village while her sister slept on her lap. Most of the village was asleep now other than the guards who remained on lookout for threats.

Poroa watched them parole the gates. "I think it'll be a while before we feel comfortable enough to ease up on our defenses. For so long, we've lived in fear of Joktal attacks."

"That's understandable," I said. "Besides, some are still out there for now." The thought of Tinzal out there hunting the enemies made my stomach cramp. I stared into the fire, willing myself to act normal.

"You know," Poroa said in a kind tone. "You don't have to stay here if you don't want to."

I jerked at her words. "What? Of course I want to. This is all I dreamed of for so long." But even as I said the words, they rang false in my ears.

"I know, but dreams change." Poroa smiled. "I felt the affection between you and Tinzal. It's okay to want him and the future he promises."

"He didn't promise me any future."

Poroa laughed. "Belle, you say the word and that male will drop everything for you. He'll kiss your feet."

I shook my head. "It's too late. He's gone."

She patted my hand. "I just want you to know, you can change your mind. The loris will accept your decision."

When I was alone in my room, laying in my bed, her words tumbled around in my head. I had slept with Tinzal for one night, one stinking night, and already I missed his warmth. I longed for his strong arms and his deep voice. Something about his presence grounded me. I rolled onto my side, huffing to myself in annoyance. I just needed a good night's sleep. In the morning, I'd be myself again.

But in the morning, I was not. I only ached for Tinzel's presence more fiercely. And once I made the decision to see him again, suddenly my stomach settled. My mind cleared. I approached Poroa as she worked on a garden near the gates. She took one look at me and smiled. Standing, she brushed the dirt from her paws. "You wish to go to the Drixonian lands and see Tinzel?"

I nodded, feeling like I might cry, but she only hugged me. "I'll send word later this rotation. Tinzel will return for you."

I spent the rest of the morning with Yua and Yuo, feeling lighter than I had in days. When a familiar buzzing sound outside the walls pricked my ears, I caught Poroa's eyes from across the village. But she was frowning as she walked toward me. "I haven't sent word yet. I'm not sure who that is."

The guards called down, announcing the return of a Drixonian. And as the gates opened, a familiar figure raced inside. Tinzel stopped abruptly as soon as he saw me. His chest heaved, his hands flexed, and for the first time since I'd met him, he seemed nervous. "Belle," he approached me, his stride cautious. "I—"

"Take me with you," I cut him off, eager to put him out of his misery. "I love it here, but it's not where you are. And I don't care if the decision seems hasty. I want to be where you are, Tinzel. That's where I'll be happy."

His breath blew out in a rush, and he lunged at me. His arms wrapped around my middle, and he hauled me in the air, crushing me to his chest. His body trembled as he shoved his face into my neck. "Oh thank Fatas, Belle. I want you at my side. I'll make you happy every day. I promise."

I hugged his neck. "I know you will."

Saying goodbye to my loris friends was not as hard as I thought it would be, mostly because Tinzal promised we would return often to visit. So our farewells were temporary. And they all seemed so excited for me, chattering away as they gave me parting gifts to take back to the humans I'd soon meet.

And while I looked forward to seeing humans again, the main draw to leave was Tinzal. I wanted to be with him. And as we left the gates, me waving back to the loris as they flailed their little paws in goodbye, I knew I'd made the right decision. The wind streamed through my air, and I felt a lightness in my chest that I had never experienced. *Ever*.

We stopped around dusk. The speed of our ride had made it difficult to hold a full conversation, but now as we sat around the fire in a clearing surrounded by trees and sweet-smelling moss, we could talk.

"I regretted not coming with you right after you left." I leaned my head on his shoulder and stared into the fire he'd hastily made. We sat on a plush fur blanket, me with my knees to my chest, and Tinzal with his long legs stretched and crossed at the ankle, his arms braced behind him.

"Apparently I was unbearable to be around. Quarl told me if I didn't go back for you, he was going to smother me in my sleep."

I laughed. "Really?"

He nodded. "He and the other warriors are tracking the Joktals. We were already close. I'll take you back to my village and return to help them finish. Will that be okay?"

The thought of him leaving me alone didn't sit well, but I knew I had to adapt to a new way of life. I couldn't start off this new relationship clinging to him. "I won't be alone, right?"

He shook his head. "The females will take care of you. The village is full of warriors and guards. It's the safest place for you now that the Joktals have been defeated."

"Okay, and you won't be gone long?"

He smiled. “Fatas willing, the Joktals are already dead. Maybe by the time we get home, Quarl and the warriors will already be there.”

I slipped my hand into his. “That would be great.”

“So this is what you want?” He asked with slight trepidation.

“Yes.” I felt it in my heart. I was where I was meant to be. I hadn’t been able to trust much for many years, but I could trust my gut.

The sun was setting, and colors streaked the sky. Corin had a golden hour just like Earth, and a warm glow settled over our surroundings. My belly was full of food, Tinsel’s warm body was next to mine, and a crackling fire heated my face.

I turned my head up toward him, just as his chin lowered to mine, and the urge to kiss his full lips came over me like a crash. I didn’t resist, pressing upward until our mouths met. At first, Tinsel remained still while I licked at the seam of his lips. As soon as his mouth opened and his tongue swept inside, I moaned, relieved to feel him again.

With a low rumble in his throat, he slid me into his lap. I draped my legs over his hips as his hard cock pressed against my core. Immediately, my belly warmed, and I felt a gush of wetness between my legs. The attraction I felt to this alien was heady and insane, but also so damn *good*. His big hands cupped my ass, tugging me against him as I rubbed against his hard shaft.

Breaking our kiss, I reached down and pulled off my shirt before unwrapping the band from around my breasts. They weren’t as plump as they once were, due to age and low weight, but Tinsel’s eyes hungrily swept over me as if I was the hottest thing he’d ever seen in his life.

My pants were gone next, as well as his, until I straddled him naked on the fur, the fire at my back, while his cock hung heavy and thick between us. His mushroom head leaked with a slick fluid that dripped down his shaft, coating it in a slippery liquid that I knew I’d need to take him inside of me. He was

huge, and I was out of practice. My pussy probably had cobwebs. Hell, maybe it had grown closed.

But God, I wanted him. The ring piercing the head of his cock glinted in the setting sun. What would that feel like inside me? I was dying to know.

He gripped the shaft, and the sight of his thick fingers wrapped around that meaty dick did things to my insides. I lifted up on my knees and shifted toward. His cock piercing brushed my clit, making me gasp. Then his head was there, pressing at my entrance, the slick liquid of his cock mixing with my own wet arousal.

“Belle?” he whispered in a strained voice. “Let me claim you.”

I nodded and lowered my body until the head of his cock pushed inside of me. I threw my head back as I continued to drop myself down on his shaft, which felt as long as a foot. I felt each inch enter my body until I swore I could feel him in my throat. He let out a strangled gasp as I finally seated myself to the hilt.

My lungs stalled in my chest, my inner walls clamped around the thick invasion. His fingers dug into my hips until his knuckles went white. And suddenly I was out of strength. My legs shook, and my stomach cramped. “Tinsel,” I choked out. “Claim me.”

With a rumbling roar he surged up, and suddenly I was on my back, the colorful sky above me, and Tinsel’s beautiful body surging into mine, over and over again, with powerful thrusts of his muscled hips. His shoulders flexed as he held himself above me, and his lips peeled back away from his fangs. All I could do was hang on as he fucked into me, and my body lit up with pleasure until my skin prickled all the way to the tips of my fingers.

I met his thrusts with grunts of my own, until I felt a strange sensation on my clit. Glancing down between our bodies, I found the strange node at the base of his cock had extended. I latched onto my clit and began to *suck*. My body bucked. I cried out. Tinsel hiked one of my legs over his hip,

changing the angle of his cock inside of me, and I saw stars. I arched my back, keening wildly, while babbling words erupting from my throat as my body began to shudder and shake with the beginning of my orgasm.

Distantly, I heard him shout, and felt his shaft pulse inside of me, but I was lost to the surge of pleasure blinding me. We came together like a tsunami, and all I could do was hold on and hope I didn't get swept away.

But of course I didn't, because Tinzal was there, holding me together, his strong arms wrapped around me as his cock pulsed weakly inside of me with the last vestiges of his release. Only when my body stopped bucking, and I was left a trembling mess did I open my eyes to see him brushing my sweaty hair from my forehead, wiping my tear-stained cheeks, and rubbing out the aches in my muscles.

I could do nothing but lie there like a jellied mass as he gently pulled out from my body and slowly dropped down until his head rested between my legs. I felt his tongue there, cleaning me carefully of our mess. I shuddered, thinking in my past life on Earth I would have been embarrassed about this. But in this life? This seemed right for my alien mate to take care of me.

He crawled back up my body, his long tongue cleaning his face, to gaze down at me with soft, warm eyes, and a sated smile. There was no smugness to his expression, just a blissful peace that I felt echoed in my own soul.

His hands cupped my jaw, he touched our foreheads, and there he whispered. "Was that a good start to making you happy?"

And all I could do was laugh as I pressed soft kisses to his nubbed brow.

SEVEN

TINZEL

We slept that night wrapped around each other. She clung to me with all her limbs, her face nuzzled into my chest. Her breath puffed warm air across my scales. I hadn't bothered to set up a shelter as she wanted to sleep under the stars. But she hadn't stayed awake long enough to look at them. As soon as I'd laid down next to her on the furs, she'd settled into me and fell asleep with soft snores.

The embers of the dying fire smoldered next to us. I could still taste her on my tongue and feel the clamp of her tight heat around my cock. I'd never even touched a female before, but now I knew the taste and feel of Belle. I was addicted.

And I knew when I returned to our village, Sari, that I couldn't leave her. I'd tell our drexel Kutzal to send more warriors to help Quarl track down the Joktals. He would understand. Belle came first. *She is All.*

Belle's leg was pressed right against the bottom of my stomach, and my bladder protested the weight. Needing to relieve myself, I carefully extricated myself from the clutches of my mate. *My mate.* I never thought I'd say those words. With one last kiss dropped onto her cheek, I stood up and retreated to a nearby bush. Naked, with my back to her, I held my cock as I relieved myself. The pain in my bladder eased, and I released a heavy sigh.

And maybe that sound was why I missed the presence of another. Why I waited too long to turn around.

Why I flecked up.

Because as I turned on my heel to return to Belle's side, a figure was there in the dark crouched over her. I lunged for her immediately, but the figure snatched her and hauled her off her feet. She came awake with a cry, immediately struggling as she was held in a strong grip that wasn't mine. Her eyes went wide just as a blade was pressed to the thin skin of her neck. The dying fire highlighted a red bony face with black eyes hovering over her.

A Joktal held her in a deadly grip, his claws digging into her soft, naked flesh. This Joktal wasn't healthy though. As he slid backward toward a nearby tree, I noticed he favored his right leg. Blood dripped from a wound on his cheek. A gash split the skin on his side. I suspected my warriors had gotten to his crew. Somehow, he'd gotten away.

"You're the last one, right?" I stood with my machets out, tail braced in front of me. "There is no point in hurting her. Drop her and I'll make your death quick."

His short, pointed tongue poked at her cheek, and she shivered in his grip. "I never liked this human. Disrespectful little bitch."

"Fuck off, Grivel," she spat, not helping to diffuse the situation.

"I promised Repper I'd make you suffer before the Drix cut off his head." Grivel shook with anger, and I watched as the knife at her neck drew blood. A bright red drop slid down her chest. My scales pricked. My focus narrowed to a single point. *Kill this Joktal.*

He took another step back and just then, a sound in the distance caught my attention. A chorus of buzzing which grew in strength until I knew exactly who was coming. Quarl and the rest of my warriors.

"Time is running out," I told Grivel.

“Guess I don’t have time to make you suffer,” Grivel growled in Belle’s ear. “But I can still take your life.”

Two things happened at once. Quarl’s bike burst through the trees, laser gun aimed at Grivel, and the Joktal began to slice his blade across Belle’s neck. With a roar, I surged at him. I brought my arm down on his own, and with strength I hadn’t known I had, I sliced his arm at the elbow.

The knife hit the ground with a clunk. Laser fire kicked up dirt. Grivel screamed. Belle slumped to the ground, blood pulsing from her neck. Grivel flailed back, clutching his amputated arm. But I was done. With a leap, I landed on his stomach, and he fell to his back, my weight caving in his chest. His eyes bulged, and I planted a fist in his face, the bones giving way to my punch. I felt the bones in my hand snap, but I kept punching, turning him into a lifeless mush.

He no longer breathed. His heart was still, and only then did I whirl around to gather Belle in my arms. She gurgled, eyes rolling in her head, as Quarl jumped off his bike and hit the ground on a run. “Tinzl!”

“Medis!” I hollered. “Get some medis!”

Belle’s hands flailed, and I clutched them to my chest, panic rising as my cora pounded with terror. “No,” I whispered as I tried to stop the flow of blood leaving her small body. “No, *no*.”

The pain in my hand was nearly forgotten until Quarl murmured from beside me. “Tinzl, your wrists.”

“I’m fine,” I snapped, not bothering to look at him.

“No, your *wrists*,” he insisted. “Loks, Tinzl. You’re getting *loks*.”

My gaze fell to our joined hands, and there, barely visible in the dark, were black bands being drawn on us as if by an invisible hand. Belle was no longer gurgling. Her breath sounded almost normal as the wound in her neck seemed to dry up.

Our wrists bore matching parallel lines with a pattern between them, and just as the bands finished, they glowed a

bright, nearly blinding white before dulling to a soft gold. My head throbbed, and I shook it, unsure what was happening just as a withering plant in my mind unfurled, turning its leaves up to a sunny sky.

Belle stared at her wrists before prodding gently at her neck. The wound had sealed. Blood stained her skin, but it had dulled to a dark red. She no longer bled, and when she opened her mouth and spoke, I nearly collapsed. “Tinzal, how... how am I alive?”

I stared back to my cora-eternal, my Fatas-approved mate, and relished in feeling her aura in my mind, the healthy plant with leaves soaking up the sun. “Fatas,” I said. “She has blessed us, and now we have her protection.”

“Is that what this means?” She held her wrists up. “And is that why I can feel you in here?” She pointed to her mind. “It feels crowded. You’re like the sun at the beach, bright and hot. I feel like basking in it.”

“Bask for the rest of your life,” I pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

The rest of the warriors settled around us, their bikes falling silent. Belle sat up slowly, and I wrapped a fur around her to cover her nakedness. She clutched it to her neck as she stood on shaky legs.

The warriors saw our loks, and I heard gasps among the group before they showed her the ultimate sign of respect. With wrists crossed in front of their necks, they bowed their heads. “*She is All,*” they said in a chorus. And I echoed the words, fully understanding what they meant for the first time in my life.

Belle

I had gone from bleeding out from a slit throat to feeling like I could run a marathon. As I rode on the front of Tinzal's bike to his home village of Sari, I couldn't stop looking at my wrists. They bore golden tattoos that matched his, and they appeared as if magic, filling me with a surge of strength, miraculous healing, and a mind-bond with Tinzal that I never imagined possible. We couldn't speak through our minds, but I felt him there, a shining sun that shimmered and wavered with his emotions. Right now, he was confident, content, and strong, beaming his heat down on me in a way that made me feel like I'd never be cold again.

Tinzal let me know he'd sent word home that he was returning with a human female, his mate, who he'd found at the Joktal fortress. And for some reason, that made me more nervous. Did the women in Sari have expectations on what I would be like? I hadn't socialized with women since that one place I was held on another planet. And even then, we'd been caged and starving. We weren't cracking jokes and gossiping.

I found myself sliding back farther and farther into Tinzal's body as nerves began to set in. Which was crazy. I'd been abused on an alien planet for years, but meeting other women sent me into a near panic attack? I reasoned that it was because I'd lived for so long with thick skin. I'd hardened my heart to everything around me, but within a few days of Tinzal's presence, he'd broken it down. I was now a vulnerable thing eager to love and be loved. Would they accept me?

By the next day, I was able to see the tops of tall buildings stretching into the sky, and Tinzal informed me that was their city, Granit. But we'd be traveling to a nearby village with a much smaller population of warriors, both single and mated, as well as their women.

We flew into the Drixonian territory swiftly, and soon traveled down a dirt road toward a small cluster of huts. A large leafy tree rose above the roofs in the center of the village, and as we reached the opening of the village, a cluster of figures waited there. My hand slid to Tinzal's thigh, where I clutched him with tense fingers. My heart was in my throat,

my stomach rolled, and I could barely breathe as I caught sight of female faces. Some held wrapped bundles in their arms, and a few small figures chased each other among the dirt. *Babies and children.*

This was a real village, a home, and it was most evident when we drew to a halt in the dirt. I held my breath as one woman stepped forward with a large smile on her face. Standing at her side was a Drixonian with shoulder-length hair and scars marring his handsome face.

“Welcome to Sari,” the woman with tan skin called out as Tinsel helped me dismount the bike. He knew I was nervous, as he could surely feel it in my aura in his mind. So he clasped our hands and walked at my side toward the waiting group.

“I’m Tasha,” said the woman who’d first spoken. “And we are happy to have you—”

Suddenly a petite woman with pale skin and long curly hair burst to the front of the gathering women. “The loris are safe now, right?” She held her hands together under her chin.

“Amber, I told you to wait!” A dark-skinned woman holding a baby rolled her eyes as she stepped forward.

But Amber ignored her, once again imploring me. “They are safe? Yua and Yuo are home?” Then she seemed to shake herself as she took another step toward me. Her hands reached out, and she clasped my free hand. “Sorry, I just miss those furry creatures. They kept me from losing my mind when the Joktals held me. Are you okay? Hungry?”

“You’re Amber,” I murmured rather dumbly. “I-I’m Belle.”

Amber smiled, and something about the kind curl of her lips set me at ease. My heart slowed to a reasonable rhythm. “I’m so glad you’re here, Belle.”

“I’m glad to be here. And the loris are happy. Cira was reunited with her sister, Poroa.”

“That’s her sister?” Amber gasped. “Neve, did you know that?”

A young woman stepped forward. “No! Oh, I would have loved to witness their reunion. We’ll go visit them together after you’re settled, Belle.”

And then suddenly I was caught up in a flurry of women. Names were fired at me, and I tried to remember them. There was a loud one named Lu who chased a small child. Trix was the dark-skinned woman with a baby. Then there was a petite woman with a dark bob haircut named Maisie and another named Thea. And last, a blue-skinned female stepped forward, and she introduced herself as Bazel. Her mother was a human, and her father a Drixonian. I marveled that humans had been in contact with Drixonians long enough that an adult offspring was now walking around.

As we walked into the village, a feast awaited us splayed out on tables under the tree in the center of the village which Tasha told me was called a moke tree.

Tinzel remained at my side while we ate, and the women didn’t overwhelm me with questions and didn’t force me to talk about myself. They talked about the village, shared some of their own stories, and overall made me feel less alone and vulnerable. Before I knew it, I was laughing at the antics of Lu’s child and cooing at the sweet baby in Trix’s arms.

As much as I missed the loris, I felt at home in this village, surrounded by love and friendship. When my eyelids began to droop, Tinzel noticed right away, and announced that he was taking me for some rest. The women said their goodbyes and told me we’d also talk tomorrow. I found myself already looking forward to it, despite my fatigue.

Tinzel led me to the end of the village, where a small hut, nearly covered by trees, was nestled into the surrounding forest. He seemed a little unsure as he led me inside, but immediately let out a short chuckle. “I was worried you’d think my hut was barren, but it seems the females were busy when they learned you were coming.”

The bed was covered with furry blankets and fluffy pillows. A jug of water sat on a small table along with a fresh vase of flowers. Some cookies were piled on a plate, still

warm from being baked. Tears pricked my eyes, and I didn't bother to stop them from falling.

Even my apartment on Earth hadn't always felt like home. My landlord had been strict, and I hadn't been able to do much to make it my own. And yet, as soon as I stepped into this hut on an alien planet, I felt like I was right where I was supposed to be. *Home*. Maybe it was Tinzal at my side, or the soft sounds of laughter from the village. Or maybe it was all of it.

But finally, I felt myself release a deep breath, the tension of years and years easing from my muscles. Tinzal's arms wrapped around me from behind, and his chin settled on top of my head. "Are you happy?"

"Happier than I thought possible," I said with a happy sniff. "What about you?"

"I'm home with my mate. We are at peace on our home planet. What I feel is bigger than the word happy."

And that was how we slept, happier beyond comprehension, peaceful in our solitary hut, and our future of dreams stretched before us.

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THE ALIEN'S SACRIFICE: CHAPTER ONE

TASHA

I dropped the last bite of roasted meat in my mouth and chewed contentedly. The crude wooden chair beneath me squeaked as I leaned back, admiring the twinkling stars above me.

I could barely make out a few colors in the sky from the setting sun, but I couldn't see the horizon since it was blocked with dense foliage. Sometimes I wished I could stand in the middle of a field without cover—just me, the ground, and the sky. But the purple-leafed trees here were our protection on planet Corin.

Nearby, Lu and Maisie played a game of marbles with some polished stones Amber had made. The laughter rang out above the crackling of the evening fire. On nights like these, I could almost pretend like we didn't fight every single day for survival. An actual *life* felt just within my grasp, dangling in front of me like a carrot.

Nearby, Trix sat by the fire sharpening her collection of weapons. She'd collected them from all sorts of places—blades from our former captors, arrows from the grounds of former battles, knives stuck in trees. She kept meticulous care of them, which I thought had become more of a compulsion than anything, but a compulsion which made her feel calm and safe.

After all we'd been through, I didn't begrudge her. Her auburn hair hung in two thick braids down each side of her head. Hidden inside her braids were sharp spikes to deter any enemies from pulling on her hair. One time I'd suggested she cut her hair, and she'd looked horrified.

Maisie dropped down to the ground at my side and held her hands out to the fire. I picked a fallen leaf out of her dark bangs that hung in a thick curtain down to her eyelashes.

"Who won?" I asked.

"Me," Maisie grinned.

"You cheated," Lu grumped as she sat at my other side and leaned her head against my thigh. Her blonde hair shone in the light of the fire as she yawned.

"Did not."

"Your toe was over the line."

Maisie pursed her lips. "Well, *you* took an extra turn when I wasn't looking."

Lu gasped in mock outrage. "I wouldn't *dare*."

"Quit it, you two," I nudged both of the women with my boots. The youngest of us all, Lu and Maisie were thick as thieves and fought like sisters. As they were still in their twenties, we all treated them like little sisters.

"What's on the agenda for tomorrow?" Lu stretched her arms over her head and bent from side to side. "I'm still sore from days ago."

I was sore since... forever. I couldn't really remember a time where I didn't fall asleep with my aching muscles twitching and cramping. I could kill for a freaking ibuprofen. Trix had been on the hunt for something natural to drink or smoke to numb the pain—both physical and mental—but we hadn't found anything yet. Unfortunately, stone cold sober was how we all lived life on this alien planet.

We'd spent months constructing a building for sleeping quarters, and we were in the process of putting together an outhouse now. I was so damn tired of digging, but I was also

tired of popping a squat in the woods where anything could sneak up on me with my pants down.

Corin was full of things that wanted to hurt us. Winged birds the size of emus wanted to pluck us from the ground, and fanged furred animals like tigers wanted to eat us. A few months ago, Trix had reported seeing a patrolling alien with blue skin, dark hair, and a massive, scarred build. I couldn't imagine they'd want anyone encroaching on their territory. We'd left as soon as she'd told us about them, and I could only hope we were now outside of their boundary. This was a big planet with a large population. Everywhere we went, we had to be careful.

“Gathering material for the outhouse,” Trix answered, her voice smoky and authoritative as always. Lu always joked that Trix could have made a killing working as a dominatrix phone sex worker.

Maisie sighed heavily and pulled her knees to her chest. “I never thought I'd wish so hard for what's basically a Port-O-Potty.”

Lu's shoulders shook with laughter. “Me either.”

Leaves crunched and I turned to see Amber and Neve emerge from the dense brush. Neve carried a bundle of firewood, her knife stuck between her teeth, while Amber held a jar of a sweet sap we used to sweeten our food.

Neve dropped the sticks next to the fire and swiped her hands together. Small but strong, she wore her hair short with a thick sweatband made out of a T-shirt—the last remnants of the Earth clothes she'd once had.

Amber lifted the lid of the crate we'd buried in the ground for storage. The climate here was relatively chilly, and the ground kept our food cool enough that we could even store meat for a few days. After placing the jar inside, Amber sat down near the fire cross-legged. In her lap, she fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, which she always did when something was bothering her. She bent her head, and her thick brown curls hid her face.

I leaned forward. “What’s going on?”

She stared at the fire for a little longer before turning and propping her elbow on my knee. “I found a dead antella.”

Antella were deer-like animals that roamed the planet in small packs. With one antella—which Trix killed—we could eat for many months as long as we preserved the meat. “You didn’t bring it back, so was it an old kill? Sick?”

She shook her head. “Fresh.”

I frowned. “So how did it die?”

Trix was listening now, watching us as the flames flickered in her light green pupils. “Amber, spit it out, hon.”

Neve crouched silently by the fire. Amber released a long breath. “Something killed it, and in a way that makes me really nervous. All the blood was drained from the body, and it was just... left there. All the meat still on its bones. Only the eyes taken.”

I flexed my fingers as I felt the beginning slices of fear slash at my brain. All the women around the fire were listening intently now, even Maisie and Lu. “So, what are you saying?”

“There’s something ... someone here. We might need to think about moving.”

Maisie let out a hiccup I knew would soon turn into a sob. Lu’s face scrunched in that angry look she made to cover up when she wanted to cry. Trix’s face darkened and Neve didn’t move.

I rubbed at my forehead. “Amber, but this is... our home.” We’d been on this planet for a few years, but the first few were a blur. Shell-shocked over what was done to us, we’d been nothing but nomads, constantly moving every day, learning what we could eat and what we couldn’t. Avoiding things that wanted to eat us. Some days, when my stomach had cramped with hunger and my feet covered in blisters, I wondered if gaining our freedom had been the right thing to do.

But slowly, we learned. We found this remote area that frankly was close to uninhabitable, which made it even more perfect for us. Nothing bothered us here but small game. Trix traveled farther for food occasionally. We'd built a semblance of a life here for the last year or so. I glanced around at my friends. At first, we'd been trauma-bonded, but now I couldn't imagine life without them. The thought of moving and putting them all at risk again filled me with a bone-weary dread.

She swallowed. "I know, Tash. But I don't have a good feeling." She turned to me with a hopeful expression. "You haven't smelled anything?"

I shook my head. "Nothing but us." I could smell anything in about a five-mile radius, an alteration—or my alter, as we all referred to our changes—made to my body by our former captors. It was both a blessing and a curse. A lot of times, the smells were confusing and unfamiliar. But lately, all I'd been able to detect was game, foliage, and a nearby spring along with the distinct scents of the other women—all survivors like me.

"Tonight, I have to sleep." Amber looked down at the green dirt and swirled a finger in it.

Amber only needed to sleep about once every five days, which was her alter. In theory, it was great, but when she did need to sleep, she crashed *hard* and couldn't wake easily. It was when she was most vulnerable. Any other time, she was the brain of our small group. We all had our strengths. I was sort of the de facto leader because no one else wanted to step up, but mostly my role was peacekeeper and final decision-maker.

Maisie gripped Amber's hand. "If you think we need to leave, then we trust you." She glanced over at me quickly. "Right, Tash?"

Lu dropped her head in the hands. "This is it, right? We're always going to be on the move."

She voiced my thoughts. I wanted to be positive, but despair was threatening to drown me too. "Fuck," I muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Amber whispered.

“Why are you sorry?” Lu snapped out. “This isn’t your fault. None of this is anyone’s fault but those ugly Uldani mother fuckers. They made us like this and then tossed us out like trash.” She sucked in a breath, and her eyes closed as she began to shudder.

“Shit,” I rasped out just as Neve leaped into action. She gripped Lu and held her tight as her eyes rolled into the back of her head while her body seized. Trix grabbed a nearby water skin and tossed it to Neve, who held it tightly while she waited for Lu’s seizure to pass. When Lu finally sagged in her arms, she dribbled water in her mouth. Every time Lu went through one of her episodes, it took everything in me not to break down. She was often a brat and didn’t know when to stop talking, but we put up with it all, because Lu had every right to be angry about what was done to her.

Finally, she blinked her eyes open, and her pupils were blown as she weakly clung to Neve, who brushed Lu’s hair off her damp forehead.

Lu’s lips moved, and I slid off my chair to get closer. Lu licked her lips and tried again. “Amber’s right... We need to leave... soon.”

My gaze shot to Trix, who stared at Lu with a clenched jaw. Slowly her eyes closed, and her head dropped between her shoulders. Lu’s predictions after her episodes were never wrong. If she said we needed to leave, then we needed to *leave*.

While Neve held the recovering Lu, I met Trix’s gaze over the fire. She nodded at Amber, whose movements were sluggish. She was about to crash. I swore I could hear a ticking clock in my ear.

When Lu disentangled herself from Neve’s embrace, I grasped her hand. “Honey, what did you see?”

She sniffed and gave me a weak grimace. “Something in the dark. Fire... I couldn’t tell what they were, but it was...”

bad.” Tears spilled out over her bottom lashes. “I’m sorry, Tash.”

“You just told Amber not to be sorry, so I’ll say the same to you. Never be sorry.”

“At least I can help us, right?” Lu tried for a smile.

I smoothed back her hair. Lu, despite her attitude, really just wanted to be loved, appreciated, and useful. “I would easily go without your predictions if it meant you didn’t have to go through the pain of your episodes.”

She shrugged. “It’s over now... till the next one.” She tried to smile again, but then winced. Her headaches always lasted a few hours afterward. “Shit, it hurts to use my face muscles.”

I patted her shoulder. “Just rest.” Neve helped Lu to her feet and they retreated to our one-room building where we all slept. Maisie followed them, leaving Amber, Trix and I by the fire.

Trix rose to her feet and walked around the fire to crouch next to me. “What do you think?”

Amber blinked at me with unfocused eyes, and I didn’t miss the way she pinched her leg discreetly to keep herself awake. The small movement made me grind my teeth. Back when we were constantly on the move, I hadn’t known how much she harmed herself to stay awake, not until one day when we were bathing in a stream, and I found her thigh littered with bruises and cuts. I had made her promise she wouldn’t do that ever again, and to tell us when she needed to sleep. I couldn’t make her leave now. The sun was setting, we hadn’t packed any of our supplies...

So I made a decision. “We’ll leave first thing tomorrow. Amber needs to sleep.”

Trix hesitated a moment before nodding. She stood, and I reached for her, snatching my hand back at the last minute before I made contact. Trix sucked in a breath. “What?”

“Do you think I’m making the right decision?”

Trix propped her hands on her hips. “It’s a decision.”

I snorted. “That’s reassuring.”

Her lips tilted up at my sarcasm. “You’re right. Amber needs to sleep. We have too many supplies here to abandon and traveling in the dark is going to get one of us hurt or worse.”

I waited. “But...”

She sighed. “But it could end up being the wrong decision.”

“That’s not very helpful.”

“Based on the information we have now, this is the right decision.” She jerked her head toward our hut. “Both of you go sleep. I’ll put out the fire and clean up.”

I helped Amber to her feet. She swayed as we walked toward the hut. Constructed with vine roping, mud, and crude lumber, the structure wasn’t airtight, but it helped with the wind and rain. We slept huddled together like a big wolf pack. Well, all of us except for Trix.

As soon as I lowered Amber next to a sleepy Lu, her eyes closed. Maisie smiled at me in the light of the small flickering lantern and curled into Amber.

I joined them, settling on my back and staring at the ceiling. Spinning my ring on my thumb—my last possession from Earth. I inhaled deeply, searching for any scents out of the ordinary, but nothing filtered through that raised any alarm bells.

I’d speak to Trix about a strategy. Maybe we could just stay away from camp for a few days and then circle back. We didn’t mess with Lu’s predictions. We’d learned that the hard way when Trix had nearly been trampled during an antella stampede.

Sighing, I reached under my blanket and grasped one of the best weapons we had, a long blade favored by the former soldiers of the Uldani, a bear-like armored species called Kulks. I closed my fingers around the familiar handle and sought comfort in the weapon.

In the darkness, came Lu's hoarse whisper. "Traffic. I had to commute into downtown Cincinnati for classes. The worst."

I smiled as Maisie piped up. "Vacuuming. I don't miss vacuuming all the seed my bird tossed from her cage."

Neve snorted, and Amber let out a little snore.

Remembering what we missed about Earth was too painful, so Lu had long ago come up with a game back when we were in the Uldani underground lab, cold, hungry, and in pain. What did we *not* miss about home?

"My apartment," Trix muttered as she stepped into the hut and settled herself in the corner with a threadbare blanket. "That place was a shithole. I'd rather sleep on green dirt under the stars."

"Taxes," I chimed in.

Lu groaned. "You're no fun. That doesn't count. What's something specific to you that you don't miss?"

I stuck out my tongue at her playfully. "You mentioned traffic. Is there one of us here who *does* miss traffic?"

She had that spark back in her eye as she smirked at me. "But I said *specifically* why."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. I don't miss visiting my brother's grave on his death anniversary with my mom. I don't miss that at all." Lu flinched, but I held her eyes. "Does that count?"

She swallowed and nodded solemnly.

"Great," I muttered.

We lay in silence another few minutes when I felt a soft hand brush my arm. Lu rolled into me and was nibbling her lip. "Sorry Tash."

"Don't be sorry," I said. "It kind of felt good to get that off my chest anyway." And it did. I still wore his ring, the one I'd given to him when he landed his first drumming gig at a local club. I would have given anything for the rest of his jewelry stash, but that had been in a safe in my townhome.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

I shrugged. “My mom was always a difficult person, and she made my brother’s death all about her. Visiting his grave was not about him, but about her making a big display for attention and control. I hated the whole fussiness of it, and Nathan would have hated it too. So yeah... not something I miss. But yet? I still feel guilty about it.”

Lu squeezed my hand and offered me a kind smile without her customary attitude. “We can do something for him if you’d like here. And it’d be about him.”

I clenched her fingers in mine. “I’d like that. Maybe at our next camp—”

The rest of my sentence died in my throat as a scent so strong flooded my senses, forcing me to double over in a cough.

Lu’s hand rubbed my arm. “What’s wrong?”

The women were murmuring, but I could barely concentrate through the overwhelming smell. I rolled onto my stomach, then up to all fours, the Kulk blade clutched in my hand. I lifted my head to find Trix standing at the entrance to the hut, bow and arrow poised, her gaze roaming the dark camp.

“Trix,” I gasped. “There’s something... it’s...”

Suddenly something flew past the doorway in a blur, and it moved so fast that at first, I thought it was swooping bird.

“Trix!” I called out just as she lifted her bow, aimed, and sent an arrow flying. Then her body jolted, as if she was struck, and she hit the ground hard on her hip, letting out a pained cry.

A scream rent the air, and I whirled to find Maisie being carried away by something... something massive and hairy. Panic fired in my blood and my heart dropped into my feet. “Mais!” I screeched as I lifted my blade. But it was already too late. Another blur and Lu was lifted from my side and carried away. She went feral, screaming, kicking, and punching. I

heard my name in the jumble of sounds, a terrified plea for me to save her, and the sound was worse than being flayed alive. “Lu!” I cried and stumbled to my knees as I sought to race after her. Glancing around, I couldn’t see Neve, but I caught sight of Amber being carried away, her arms and head bobbing lifelessly. Trix had regained her footing and was standing right outside the hut battling... something. Whatever these things were, they were massive. Long tusks emerged from their top jaw to curl under wart-y chins.

When one grabbed her, she screamed in pain, and I swore my heart ripped in half. I sprinted toward her, flailing my blade. “Don’t touch her. Don’t you *fucking* touch her!”

But then an arm banded around my waist and tossed me to the ground. My head slammed into something hard, and a pain streaked through my temple like a lightning bolt as my vision blacked out for a moment.

The world tipped. My stomach cramped. I gagged, woozy and unfocused. When I opened my eyes, I was upside down, carried on the shoulder of one of these giant aliens. They had to be seven-foot tall and walked on hooved feet bigger than a Clydesdale’s. Each of the three fingers on their hands was the size of my wrist. I wriggled to find my hands tied around a rope at my waist, and another lash of rope around my ankles. My muscles ached, and by the light of the moon, I could see dark liquid dripping from my head to the ground. I inhaled the iron tang of blood, which was barely detectable over the suffocating scent of these aliens—a mix of mold and decay.

I gagged again but swallowed down any bile. I couldn’t afford to lose the contents of my stomach. Who knew when they’d feed me again? *If* they fed me. Maybe that meat had been my last meal.

More liquid dripped to the ground, and I thought it was more blood until I smelled the salty scent of my tears.

I made the wrong decision.

Each word was worse than a punch to the gut. We should have left immediately and not waited.

I made the wrong decision.

I looked around, desperate to see if any of my girls were around, but I could only see about half a dozen of these aliens flanking the one who held me. They didn't talk, only made occasional grunts at each other in a language I didn't know. I had a translator implant, thanks to the Uldani, but it wasn't fitted for whatever language these aliens spoke.

Injured and in pain, I swam in and out of consciousness as I bobbed on the shoulder of my smelly abductor. I couldn't be sure how much time had passed, when a light filtered through my closed eyelids. I cracked them open to see that morning had dawned.

The terrain had changed. Instead of flat, jungle-like habitat with lush greenery, we'd entered a mountainous region and were currently scaling a large rocky hill. While the sun warmed my face, the air was cooler, and shivers raised goosebumps on my arms. I'd lost feeling in my feet and hands long ago. Lifting my head, I could finally get a good look at my abductors. Snouts like a warthog protruded from their faces, and their face tusks looked even more deadly in the daylight. Gold rings dangled from pierced ears. Barrel-chested and muscly, they carried spears and wore necklaces made of white stones that rattled on their hairy chests. Wait, they weren't stones. They were... *bones*.

"Fuck me," I whispered as my stomach cramped again.

One of the creatures looked at me with black protruding eyes and let out a snort. A few answered and I got the sense they were mocking me.

"Fuck *you*," I growled.

I doubted they knew what I was saying, but apparently my tone was clear. The one raised a hand and cuffed me on the head so hard that I swore he'd cracked my skull. I could barely look around as my head swam, and I began to worry about severe brain damage from the recent blows to the head. Through blurry vision, I took in our surroundings as we reached the crest of the incline. Stairs notched into the side of the rock below led to a settlement with huts set in a valley

surrounded by large rocky mountains. In the distance, I smelled salty sea air. Smoke rose from campfires below, and more of these tusked aliens stood in a cluster at the base of a mountain to our left.

I blinked, trying to keep my wits about me as we descended the stairs to the settlement. I saw no other humans, only these tusked aliens wearing bones like jewels and armed to the teeth as if waiting for a battle.

A voice boomed, and I twisted my body to the left to see a large figure standing at the edge of a rocky outcrop about eight stories over the valley floor. He wore a massive chest armor of bone, complete with a collarbone and ribs, and on his head was a skull of another tusked creature, similar to the tiger-like animals we'd seen once.

Standing before him was another alien—I couldn't make out what it was, but it had teal skin and stood on two legs. Standing at shoulder-height to the tusked alien, the teal one struggled, but I could smell his blood. He was injured and close to death.

The tusked leader bellowed a series of loud grunts, while he gripped the teal alien by the back of the neck and hoisted him in the air. Below, the tusked army began to shout and slam their spears on the ground while thumping their thick chests.

With one last guttural yell, the tusked leader tossed the teal alien off the cliff. The crowd hushed, and I turned away, tears burning, and talked to myself in nonsense to cover the sound of the body hitting the ground in a sickening crunch. But still, I heard the thud, a wet smacking sound I'd never forget as long as I lived.

Faint, numb, and absolutely sickened, I begged for this nightmare to end. The pounding of my heart was drowned out as the crowd erupted in a cheer.

We turned a corner on the stairs and entered a cave in the side of the cliff. Torches offered dim light, enough for me to see barred cells with various creatures inside. I caught sight of an elder male Uldani inside one. Hunch-backed and bony, he met my gaze before looking away quickly.

We came to an empty cell next to the old Uldani, and I struggled weakly as they opened the door and tossed me inside. I hit the ground on my hip, and I cried out in pain as my cramped body was wrenched into another position. Deep breathing through the agony, I fought to remain conscious as the cell door slammed shut, and I was left alone.

Sitting up took a gargantuan effort, and I might have passed out once or twice. In order to stay conscious, I recited all the things I didn't miss about Earth in a hoarse whisper. *"My shitty boss. Rent. That sink in my bathroom that always leaked."*

My cell was empty except for a small bucket in the corner and a jar of dirty water. Crawling on my elbows, I sniffed it, and decided I wasn't thirsty enough yet to drink something that could give me diarrhea, which would kill me faster than these damn tusked assholes.

Working on my bindings, I managed to untie my legs. While loosening the ropes on my wrists, I shuffled on my knees to the opening and called out in a hoarse voice. "Hello?"

No answer came, and I tried again. "Uldani? I know you're there."

What felt like an hour passed before a rustling reached my ears and a sniveling voice answered in an exhausted, defeated tone. "Human."

"Who are these aliens?"

He sighed, long and loud. "Why should I answer you?"

I gritted my teeth, almost glad that the familiar anger was still flaming inside of me. "As an Uldani, I think you know that you owe me at least a few words."

A long silence passed before he spoke again. "They are Wutarks, a warrior species who recently settled on Corin."

"And what do they want with us?"

Another long bout of silence. "Did you see what happened out there to the Nugia?"

“The teal alien?” I tore at my wrist bindings with my teeth and managed to loosen a knot. “He was thrown off the cliff. What did he do?”

“*Nothing*. He did *nothing*. Just like *I* did nothing. And just like *you* did nothing.”

Impatience spurred me on, and I yanked my wrists free of the rope. Rubbing my raw skin, I frowned. “Then why are we here?”

“The Wutarks believe in the Quoy, an old God who demands live sacrifices.” My stomach dropped as the image of the teal alien falling replayed over and over in front of my eyes. The Uldani cleared his throat on a cough. “That’s what we are, human. We’re nothing but sacrifices.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ella Maven is the pen name for a multi-published USA Today Bestselling author who decided to finally unleash the alien world that had been living in her head for years. (Is that weird? Probably). Her books feature dominant, possessive aliens who are absolutely devoted to their humans.

She lives on the East Coast with her completely normal husband and two spawn who sure seem alien some days.



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