



ACCIDENTAL ALIEN BRIDES BOOK SEVEN

WED TO THE ALIEN HUNTER

JANUARY BELL

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BOOK 7

JANUARY BELL

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CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Also by January Bell](#)

[About the Author](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book contains adult themes and languages. For a full list of content warnings, please visit www.januarybellromance.com.

CHAPTER ONE

CARMEN

SUNLIGHT STREAMS through the window of the room I sleep in. Not my room. A random room that I live in, in a Suevan tree house called a myza, in a house that used to be full of women and is now quiet and lonely.

I sigh.

Technically, Jules lives here too, but she's been off planet with her husband for ages now. The husband she was upset about marrying.

The husbands ALL the other women I came here with were upset about marrying, up until the point they happily fell in love and made babies and moved out of this goddamn tree house... leaving me all alone.

“ARRRRRGHHHHH,” I scream, punching my pillow, or at least, what passes for one here on Sueva.

It doesn't help. Now I'm just slightly sweaty from the effort. I sigh again, wondering if it's physically possible to sprain something if I keep sighing like that.

Whatever.

Privacy to yell and punch the pillows might be the only nice thing about having a whole alien tree house to yourself—no one can hear you lose your mind at daybreak because you're lonely and tired and sick of it all.

And because your husband doesn't seem to give a rat's ass about you.

Nope. None of the dotting obsession of the other Suevan warlords. Nah, my husband, and I use the term loosely, and really only in the legal sense of the word, acts like I don't even exist.

“I would settle for mild interest!” I yell at the dust motes sparkling in the air.

“Carmen?” A sleepy voice startles the hell out of me.

Leaping to my feet, I brandish a pillow in front of me like a weapon. Considering they're jelly-like and filled with plant matter, it could maybe do some damage.

Gen stands in my doorway, a weird root-like arch, rubbing her eyes with one hand and her belly with the other.

Embarrassment creeps through me. I put the pillow/weapon down.

“When's the last time you brushed your hair? You look like garbage. And

you're talking to yourself? Yelling to yourself? What, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, the fuck?"

Flopping to the bed, I sigh yet again, letting my arm dangle.

"What brings you to the house of single ladies—lady?" It's a shitty attempt to divert her attention from me slowly losing my mind, but it's better than answering her question.

"Oh yeah, Gen, you know, just mad as hell that I got accidentally married off to an alien warlord and the alien warlord in question has the audacity to not even TRY to get to know me!"

"Shouldn't you be snuggled up to the Prince of Sueva, all pregnant and glowing?" I regret the last word as soon as I say it, because even though Gen's weird bioluminescence is starting to fade, she still literally glows after drinking some sacred (contaminated) Suevan water.

"Well, I was mildly concerned, but now I'm officially worried." Gen rubs her stomach, then joins me on the bed, groaning. "And for your information, I couldn't sleep. Kanuz kept making this noise and it pissed me off, so I took a walk and ended up here and fell asleep on the couch. Until I heard you screaming."

"Sorry," I mutter. Fresh guilt rushes through me. "I'm sorry." Raking a hand over my face, I turn to face her.

Gen's blonde hair is knotted on top of her head, and I swear, Bex has it completely right. She looks like Tinkerbell, just a life-sized version. She hates when Bex teases her about the fact she glows, though, so I tamp it down.

I've already chosen violence enough for today.

"What's going on with you, Carmen? You've been... really unpleasant lately. You're usually so sweet and caring, and frankly, the only nice one out of all of us."

"That's not true." I wrinkle my nose. "Everyone is nice. Just in different ways."

"See? That's what I mean." She slugs my arm for emphasis, and I wince. "You are always positive. Always!"

I bite my tongue.

"We need you to be your sunshine self so we can all—"

"Did you ever think that's not helping?" It explodes out of me, and Gen's eyes widen. I should stop, but it's too late. "Did you ever think, oh, hmm, maybe Carmen pretends to be happy because she doesn't want to let anyone

down? Hmm? Did you think maybe I'm not happy here on Sueva, like everyone else, but I don't want to be Debbie Downer when you're all out living it up with your husbands who LOVE YOU?! While mine acts like I don't even EXIST?!"

I've gotten progressively louder, and by the time I hit the last word, my eye starts to twitch.

"Oh," Gen says, but to my surprise she doesn't leave or tell me off for yelling at her. Which, as both a human female warlord and my Federation commanding officer, she would be well within her rights to do.

Nope, instead she loops an arm around my shoulders and I melt into her, surprised by the salty taste in my mouth.

"Hey, hey, it's going to be okay," Gen says, squeezing my upper arm.

"What's wrong with me?" I ask, suddenly crying in earnest. "Does he not want me because I'm not a warlord like some of you? We have things in common, you know? We're both scientists at heart, but he doesn't seem to care about me at all. He hasn't ever even spoken to me outside of the marriage ceremony, and that was before I had a translator."

"I know, I know," Gen tells me.

"I mean, I know I'm not as pretty as you or Jules or Abby, but I'm not hideous. At least, I don't think I'm hideous."

Gen lets out a small laugh, and I snuggle into her shoulder. God, how long has it been since someone gave me a hug? How long has it been since someone held me?

"You're not hideous at all, Carmen. You know you're not. Please. Cut the shit." She snorts in disbelief, and yep, there she is.

There's the hard-edged Gen we all know and love.

"I'm just so damn lonely, Gen. It's so lonely here. I'm all by myself, and I honestly would probably try to date one of the other Suevans, or whatever they call it here, but I'm already MARRIED to one who doesn't give a rat's ass about me!" A sob hiccups out of me, the most pathetic punctuation mark of my life.

"You know..." she draws out the word and I sit back up, staring at her with narrowed eyes. "I outrank him. Xade, I mean."

"You're a princess," I grumble. "You outrank just about everyone."

Gen rubs her stomach, still giving me a strange look. "What if I told you Xade is about to leave again? To find out why the western Crigomar populations are suddenly less responsive to light lures?"

“They are?” That surprises me. The Crigomar are massive reptilian beasts who, frankly, look nearly exactly like artist’s renderings of Tyrannosaurus rexes back on Earth—except they’re red and black striped and more terrifying than anything I’ve ever seen.

Gen just happens to have one as a pet. Of course she does.

“Mm-hmm,” Gen answers, the sound thoughtful. “There’s been talk that something is happening in their uh, what’s the word, their living space—”

“Habitat,” I interrupt. “Biome?”

“Right, their habitat that’s thrown them off. We can’t have Crigomar stampeding all over, they’re too dangerous. Obviously.”

“And you don’t want to disrupt the Suevan ecosystem,” I say on an exhale, my tears suddenly drying up in the face of this new problem. “Why would they be unresponsive all of a sudden?”

“We don’t know,” Gen shrugs. “I certainly don’t have a clue. I’m not a freaking biologist like you, though. Or like... Xade.”

I wince at his name. My husband’s name. The Hunter, the other Suevans call him, which is a slight translation misnomer because he’s not a hunter, not really. Oh sure, he kills and eats animals when he has to, but that’s not the source of his nickname.

He’s more like the protector of the Suevan wilds, of all the different flora and fauna that make up this alien planet.

When I realized what his title and position entailed, I squealed, because could we be more perfect for each other?

No, we could not!

Except he doesn’t want anything to do with me.

“He might need help.”

“Why?” I ask, flummoxed. “He knows what he’s doing.”

Gen sighs, then kicks me in the ankle.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“For being oblivious. Sheesh. Of course he doesn’t really need help, duh. But as the princess of Sueva, I could say we want an additional perspective on the problem. Another trained biologist’s take on it.”

“Oh? Maybe Cedri from the clinic, he does good work,” I suggest, still confused.

“Oh my god, I swear, Carmen, sometimes I wonder how the hell you’re still alive. I meant YOU, you dense piece of cinnamon toast.”

“That’s not nice,” I tell her, but I give a watery laugh all the same. Until I

draw up short, my eyes widening at what Gen actually means. “You want me to go with him. To figure out why the Crigomar aren’t behaving normally.”

“Finally,” Gen drawls, rolling her eyes, but her lips curve into a faint smile. “Would you want to go?”

“Yes,” I scream, wrapping her in a hug. An awkward hug, considering the size of her belly, but a hug nonetheless.

She pats my back and I take a shaky breath, feeling absurdly relieved.

Yes. This is my chance.

I’ll show Xade exactly what he’s missing, and I’ll get to leave Edrobaz for the first time since I got here. Oh, and I have no doubt Xade and I will figure out why the Crigomar are acting weird. Hell, I’ll solve it on my own.

That should get his attention.

“Gen?” My nose scrunches. “Do you think Xez could make me like... sexy jungle adventure clothes?”

Gen sighs, skewering me with a meaningful look. “You really want to be worried about looking sexy while you’re out in the Suevan wilderness trying to figure out why overgrown lizards that should be extinct are terrorizing the countryside?”

“When you put it like that...” I blow out a breath and stare at the ceiling. Gen nudges me with her elbow.

“I think he would, though.”

I scramble out of bed, and Gen laughs as my foot gets tangled in the blanket.

“At least keep your tits safe out there.”

Pausing, I stare at her for long moment. “You think Xade would like—”

“KEEP YOUR TITS SAFE IN THE ALIEN JUNGLE,” Gen yells at me.

I pout and continue getting dressed. She’s probably right.

CHAPTER TWO

XADE

I HATE BEING in the city. Edrobaz is beautiful, of course, like all Suevan cities, but even out in the streets, it's unnatural, closed off. Too many Suevans, too many structures, too many voices and scents. There's one scent that especially stands out from the others, a delectable fragrance that makes my mouth water as much as it repels me.

An impossibly loud noise fills my ears, and I crouch instinctively, ducking in the shadows of the towering myza before realizing it's simply one of the warlords' ships taking off.

I cannot imagine what it was like in these cities before the virus. Too much. Too much everything, and we are not even close to the numbers we once were.

Running a finger around my neckline, I swallow hard, trying to calm my too-rapid heartbeat.

I hate it here.

My comms tablet dings, and I pull it out to see a summons from Prince Kanuz and Draz, the First Warlord.

Thank the mother goddess. Perhaps they are going to assign me to another location.

The sooner I leave this place, the better.

I inhale deeply, gathering my irritated thoughts and pushing them down, deep inside, where they belong. Where my anger and frustration cannot hurt anyone. My feet take me down the streets of Edrobaz as I lock that mental darkness away, and before I know it, I'm in the warlord headquarters, opening the door to the location Draz and Kanuz sent me.

"Xade," Draz says, grasping my elbow in the customary Suevan greeting.

"First Warlord," I answer, trying not to flinch away. Most Suevans welcome touch, physical affection.

I'm not most Suevans.

"Prince Kanuz," I add, taking in the prince lounging in one of the chairs, his tail flicking behind him.

He inclines his head at me, a small smile playing on his lips. A smile that unnerves me.

In the wild, the biggest predators show their teeth before they attack. Kanuz has the same look about him, like I am prey he's interested in.

What in the mother's name do these two have planned?

Tension rockets through me, my tail going stiff as a familiar scent accosts my nostrils. Wonderful and terrible all at once.

"Sorry I'm late," a breathless voice says from behind me, and I do not have to turn around to know who speaks.

"Why is she here?" I growl.

"Because you're going with her on this mission." The warlord and princess Gen steps out from around me, grinning as she pauses to drop a kiss on her mate's head. She is thick with their young, and glowing from drinking the sacred waters of the goddess' lost temple many months ago. Like all the human females, her features are soft and strange, her skin pale as an iced belly and so smooth it makes me wonder what it feels like to touch one of them.

My eyes drop down, and her belly full of child is a knife to my gut.

A human-Suevan hybrid. I've seen cross-species young in the wilds. They are unpredictable, as are their parents. Some parents abandon them altogether, not recognizing them as their own. Will the human women want scaled young with tails? What will they do?

How will the other warlords react if their young are as soft and fragile as the females who birth them?

I'm so distracted by the females' mere presence that it takes me far too long to realize that they are waiting on my response.

"Why would I take the human female with me?" I address Draz because looking at Gen makes me uncomfortable.

I try not to look at Carmen, who sits next to Gen. An expectant expression plays along her pretty features, her skin as smooth as the other human's. Her skin is a warmer, more beautiful color, though—like the sun playing off morning dew on a tree trunk.

She frowns at me, clear displeasure dancing in her dark eyes.

Good. It is better if she does not care for me, better if she decides to give up this foolish plan to join me in the wilderness.

"Because, other than the fact that Carmen is your wife, she is also a trained xenobiologist," a new voice says. Warlord Ni-kee, the fiercest of the human females, brushes by me to join her husband at the table, causing me to flinch away at the unexpected contact. "In addition to her stellar career as one

of our medics. She will be an asset in the field and might help you... see things differently.”

Carmen tosses her silken hair behind one shoulder, pinning me with an unexpectedly fiery gaze.

For a Suevan who can read animal tracks from a mile away, interpret and identify hundreds of different bird calls, and pinpoint nearly all the fauna on Sueva, I have no idea what the human female’s expression means.

I swallow hard. “I do not need to see differently. I see much better than your weak human eyes can.”

Gen snorts, an unbecoming sound, and Kanuz flashes a grin at her before rubbing a protective hand over her stomach. “That’s not what that expression means—”

“This is another reason why having such a frail human with me makes no sense. You speak in riddles. There is no time for games out there, in the Suevan wild places. I do not have time or energy to decipher human nonsense, especially not with one as weak as *her*.”

“Excuse me?” Carmen slaps her palms on the table separating us, then stands.

There is no mistaking the slant to her soft brow now. Carmen is angry, her fists balled up at her sides, as though she is preparing to fight.

That, I admit, surprises me.

“*Excuse me?*” she repeats, drawing out the word and advancing around the table towards me.

“This oughta be good,” Princess Gen says, but Warlord Ni-Kee shoots her a quelling look.

A small hand slams against my bare chest, and my brows rocket up in surprise as all my attention refocuses on the weak human female in front of me.

“You, you... YOU are insufferable,” she announces.

I blink slowly, my third eyelid retracting in surprise. “I am looking out for your welfare, female.”

“Oh, is *that* what you’re doing? Is *that* what this is?” Her lips curl in a snarl, and I cannot bring myself to look away from her in this moment.

My wife might not be the soft, weak creature I thought she was.

Her hands go to her hips, and my tail swishes behind me, curiosity spiking through me with each angry puff of her breath.

“I am a Federation officer, and I am well prepared to take care of myself

in the wilderness. What's more, I am trained both for medical emergencies and as a xenobiologist. I might not have Suevan eyesight, that's true, but I will bring a different perspective than you, which means I will see things as important that you might dismiss as being insignificant or weak, Xade."

I take a step back.

No one has ever said my name like that—like it is a curse uttered, the syllable full of disrespect.

Not so weak after all, then.

I harrumph, narrowing my eyes and watching her carefully, like the prey she is. The prey she will be, should she continue attempting to join me.

"What is the mission?" I ask instead, still observing my human wife. The way I have for months, except this time, she's right in front of me. I could reach out and grab her, and she would not be able to do anything about it, not be able to move as I tested out how soft her skin is, how soft her hair.

"The Crigomar in the east have been more destructive than usual, and are unresponsive to light lure training. We need you to find out why they've suddenly changed their pattern of behavior and correct it."

I frown. It's unusual, but Crigomar are unpredictable creatures, even with light lure training. Huge and dangerous, the Crigomar are used for hunting and protection, and in some rare cases, as mounts.

"This is concerning."

"No kidding," Carmen says, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow at me, as though this development is somehow my fault.

A glimmer of amusement goes through me at her attitude. When I watched her in the past few months, she seemed sweet and gentle to a worrisome point, allowing her female companions to take advantage of her.

She would not be a fit wife for me, I decided.

But this female? This one is all fire and stubbornness, and it ignites more than amusement in me.

It ignites interest.

"You cannot be serious," I say, turning back to Draz. "Surely you would not send your wife out into the wilds."

"His wife is right here, and he wouldn't get the chance to tell me what to do because I can decide for myself what I am and am not willing to do." Ni-Kee is smiling at me, but it is not the gentle kind. No, this one is predatory, and full of warning. "I am not asking you to take Carmen. I am telling you she is going with you, and the two of you will figure out why the Crigomar

are behaving dangerously and report back.”

“First Warlord,” I say, addressing Draz again, real fear creeping through me. “I do not want to risk the health and welfare of the human female Carmen.”

I may not treat her like a treasured mate, because the mother goddess knows I am incapable of that.

But I do not want her to be hurt, either.

“It is not safe,” I plead.

“I can take care of myself,” Carmen hisses, and my eyes widen at her tone, my tail slashing back and forth in a true fervor now.

I like this side of her. I like it too much.

“No,” I tell her, putting all my disgust with this idea into the syllable.

“Prince Kanuz and I have decided that Carmen goes with you. We outrank everyone in this room, and this is no longer up for discussion. Carmen is an asset, and we want a human perspective on the problem.”

Gen is no longer sitting but standing with her hands braced on the table, a table which is too tall for the slight and small humans, but she manages to look ferocious anyway.

My tail slaps against a chair as I turn to face her more fully.

The effort it takes to rip my gaze away from Carmen catches me off-guard.

“I am your princess,” she says evenly, not backing down an inch, “and I am telling you Carmen goes with you. You will do as we command.”

A snarl rises in my throat and Kanuz stands next to his wife, a disgruntled expression on his face. “Do not growl at the mother of my child,” he says, his tone almost unrecognizable.

“We leave at dawn,” I manage. “Meet me at the gates of Edrobaz before the sun is past the horizon line, or I leave you behind.” I leave the too-small room as fast as I can.

Before I act on the idiotically stubborn idea to abandon my post completely.

Or worse, haul my wife over my shoulder and hide her away where I can keep her safe.

CHAPTER THREE

CARMEN

THE EDROBAZ MARKET always seems strangely empty. Booths with no Suevans inside, not enough Suevans or humans to fill out a crowd, and we're always, always the only females. At first, that meant we drew so much attention that coming to this open-air market made me incredibly uncomfortable, but over the past few months, the Suevans at Edrobaz have become more acclimated to our presence.

Other than a few curious stares, Gen and I hardly draw any attention.

"What is wrong with him? Why does he act like being married to me is the worst thing ever?" I repeat for the thirtieth time since I made her come with me, and she sighs for the thirtieth time, right on cue.

"You didn't call him a monster or something, did you?"

"No, what? Why would I do that? I want him to like me." I glance at her sidelong, stepping around a Suevan tugging some kind of creature on a leash.

"Bex," she says simply.

"Ah. Okay, well, I'm not Bex. And no, I haven't been mean or rude or anything but nice, and that's when I see him, which is never."

"Maybe he's just a jerk."

"He's not a jerk," I say quickly, then wrinkle my nose, unsure why I'm bothering to defend him.

"Sure seems like he's a jerk," Gen says. "Can we get some chelda?"

"Clothes first." I'm a woman on a mission.

"Maybe you can trade him in. Divorce him, whatever they call it here." She points to a crowd of Suevans who are staring at us like we're angels. "One of them might be nicer. In fact, I think everyone might be nicer. I hate it when men don't listen to women," she grumbles.

"I'm not divorcing him. Or whatever," I say. "Besides, we don't even know if that's an option on Sueva...not to mention, weren't you just telling me I should do this?"

She condescends to give me a scathing look. "Sometimes I think pickles and ice cream sounds delicious. Doesn't mean I'm always right."

"I barely even know him. Shouldn't I give him a shot?" I want to like him. I want him to be the male that fed me morsels delicately at the wedding

ceremony. I want him to be the one that looked at me with open fascination and wonder.

I like that he takes care of Sueva. I like that we, at least on paper, have so much in common.

“Nah, I think you just have a lemon of a husband. Let’s trade him in.”

“Jesus! He’s not a car!”

“So? I don’t like his attitude.”

We stop in front of Xez’s stall, and I stare at her for a minute. “I’m not trading him in. He... I don’t know, Gen! He was different at the wedding.”

It feels stupid to say it, because it’s certainly not science or research based, but I felt... something for him right away. Maybe chemical, maybe pheromones, but I felt like we had a connection.

I would always regret not at least trying to figure out the weird thing between us.

“I’m just saying if remarriage is an option, and you want to be married, then you should explore that.”

“Hello, my beautiful humans, my favorite clients, the loveliest flowers of femininity,” Xez says, finally appearing from behind a set of curtains with a flourish.

“Hi Xez,” Gen says, batting her eyelashes outrageously.

“Did I hear this correctly? The stunning Carmen seeks to replace her husband with a new one?” Xez beams at me, and I snort.

“Maybe,” Gen says, leaning on the table in front of his stall. “Why, are you interested?”

“Making love to sweet Carmen would be the greatest honor of my life,” Xez says instantly, staring at me with a narrow-minded focus that momentarily makes me lose track of what the hell I’m even doing here.

Why can’t Xade look at me like that?

“No,” I say immediately. “I need some clothes for a trip. By tonight.”

“For my future mate, I would do that.”

“I’m not your future mate,” I tell him, shooting Gen a death glare. “I need clothes that are practical and pretty... and sexy... to wear on a trip with my current husband.”

“Current? Does that mean you are planning to replace him after all?” Xez asks, his diamond pupils expanding.

“No, I was just—” I rake a hand through my hair, exasperated. “No. I’m not replacing my husband. I need some clothes.”

“She’s not looking to replace him at the moment,” Gen concedes, and I barely resist stepping on her foot out of spite.

“How many items?” he asks, clearly put off by this news.

“Three outfits,” I say. “Lightweight, protective...”

“And sexy,” Gen says. “No boobs out though.”

“Boobs?” Xez asks, staring at us.

Gen grabs my breasts. “Keep these covered.”

I swat her hands away. “Can you not?” Glaring, I cross my arms over my boobs, all too aware of them now.

He swings his attention between us, clearly confused. “Do you want them covered or not?”

“She wants them covered,” a deep voice says, and I nearly jump out of my skin as Xade appears out of nowhere.

How long was he standing there?

Oh god.

How much did he hear?

“And she is not your future mate,” Xade continues, his teeth gnashing, fangs on full display. His tail lashes behind him, fury rolling off of him in nearly tangible waves.

Well. I guess that’s how much he heard.

“Why shouldn’t he be?” I ask, the question popping out of my mouth before I can shut the hell up. “It’s not like you care.”

His tail lashes behind him so furiously it causes a wind to buffet my legs, and a muscle twitches in his temple as he stares at me.

“Carmen,” Gen cautions, placing a light hand on my wrist. “What are you —”

“Uh-uh, Gen. No. I’m sick of being nice. I’m sick of it!” I’m yelling now, and several Suevans stop, watching me carefully. “Just another feral human female,” I call out. “Go ahead and look, I’m going to put on a real show. Because I’m tired. Of. Being. Nice!”

They blink, darting glances at one another before continuing about their business.

“Enough of this,” Xade says. “This is not your way.”

I rip my arm out of Gen’s grip, my chest heaving. “How would you know what my way is? You don’t care about me.”

“We are leaving—”

“Yeah, yeah, tomorrow at first light, whatever,” I say, embarrassment

starting to creep through me after my outburst.

“No, Carmen of Earth,” Xade says slowly, stepping towards me, taking up all the air between us. “No. We will not be leaving tomorrow. I find myself anxious to begin our journey. We leave now.”

“Does this mean you do not want the garments to bare your breasts?” Xez asks, disappointment clear in his question.

“It means you will not make her any clothes because we are leaving *now*.”

A thrill goes through me at the possessive tone of his voice, even though his bossiness grates on me.

“You don’t get to change the plan,” I tell him, putting my hands on my hips. “We’re leaving tomorrow morning, at first light, according to YOUR orders, and if I want new clothes, I am buying new clothes.”

“She is helping the local economy,” Xez says, spreading his hands.

“Shut up,” Gen and I tell him at the same time.

“If my future wife would like to buy clothes from me, than that is her decision,” Xez continues.

“She is not your future wife, and if you say that again, you will not have a future *anything*.”

“Well, I guess he’s not as disinterested as you thought,” Gen stage-whispers.

“He’s got a real interesting way of showing it,” I say, still glaring at him. Despite my irritation at his sudden heavy-handedness, I can’t deny that I... might like this.

“I am *very* interesting.”

I stifle a laugh at his misunderstanding.

“Wear your normal Federation clothes,” he snarls at me, and that feeling dissolves instantly. “We meet at dawn.”

With that, he stalks away like his tail is on fire, his shoulders tense.

Aliens and sarcasm just don’t mix.

“What the hell?” I ask Gen. “Did you just get whiplash too?”

“He’s totally into you,” Gen says.

“In what world is he into me? Because none of that,” I flap my hand around in exasperation, “made any sense.”

“He is an odd one,” Xez says sagely, nodding his head. “Too much time alone in the wilderness.”

“What is that supposed to mean? All of the warlords spend time alone in

the wilderness.” Gen scoffs, and Xez wears a wounded expression.

“Everyone knows about the Hunter,” Xez continues. “I thought his wife would surely know.”

I bite my tongue, blood rushing to my face.

Gen’s hand squeezes my wrist, and I swallow the meanness threatening to spill out. If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all, my mom always said.

“He was raised in the jungle.”

“You mean his parents raised him in the jungle?” Gen narrows her eyes at him.

“No, the jungle raised him. Draz found him out there, he went through warlord training, and then he went right back.”

“Right back?” I echo.

“To the wilds,” Xez repeats, like it couldn’t be more obvious. “He is not comfortable with others. We were shocked when he was chosen to take a human wife, considering how unfriendly he is.” He grins at me, showing fang, his tail thrashing into the table behind him. “Thus, you would be better off marrying me, forgetting about Xade, and we—”

“That’s enough of that,” Gen barks, and he jumps. “She changed her mind, she doesn’t need new clothes.”

With that, Gen grabs my upper arm and hauls me off, leaving Xez stammering in our wake.

“I want a chelda, and I want it now.” Her voice has a decidedly grumpy note to it, and I swallow hard, staring not back at Xez but at where Xade disappeared in between the stalls. “We’re getting a chelda.”

The frozen Suevan drink is one of Gen’s favorites, and tastes vaguely like a watermelon and a cucumber had an ice-cold baby.

She buys us each one, staring at me unhappily as she sips.

“What?” I finally ask. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Are you sure going off with him is the best idea? Solving the Crigomar problem?”

I bristle, drawing myself up to my full height, which, despite Gen’s resemblance to Tinkerbell, is much shorter than her. “You don’t think I can handle it.”

It’s not a question.

Guilt slides across her face. “It’s not that.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, clenching my drink so hard my knuckles crack. “Sure.”

“Fine, okay? Yes. It is that. I know this was my idea, but he... doesn’t seem as stable as the rest of the warlords, and I don’t want a repeat of what happened to Abby to happen to you.”

“He isn’t kidnapping me!” I snap. “I’m going with him. And I’m not Abby. He’s not the Beast, either.”

Gen’s eyes narrow, and I swallow a nasty retort because I know what that look means.

“I may not be as fast or as dangerous as Abby, and I may not be as smart as Michelle, but I am a Federation officer, too, Gen.”

She mutters something under her breath, something that sounds suspiciously like “science officer.”

“What’s that?” I ask, my voice a dangerous hiss I hardly recognize.

That is it. I have had *enough*.

“You know what? I am *tired* of being nice. I am tired of letting all of you walk all over me, and I am tired of my stupid alien husband ignoring me. If he wants to leave tonight, then we will leave tonight. No more Mrs. Nice Girl!”

Gen’s blue eyes go wide, and I shove my chelda at her. “Drink the rest of this, please!” I yell.

She takes it and I stalk away from her, my heart pounding.

When I glance over my shoulder, though, she’s sipping out of both straws, a strange expression in her eyes.

Not that I care.

Nope. I’m going on my adventure, and I am winning my alien hunter over, and I am going to start saying no when I don’t want to do something, or... or *else*.

My mouth twists to the side.

I’m not sure just yet what “or else” entails, but I’m damned sure I’m going to find out.

CHAPTER FOUR

XADE

MY PACK IS NEARLY full for tomorrow's mission when a light female voice calls out my name. The sound rings through my mostly empty myza, echoing across the bare space.

A thrill goes through me, chased by fear.

It must be Carmen.

She is the only one who would show up here at night, and I would recognize her voice even if I couldn't hear it, the vibrations of it seared on my very soul from the moment she stepped off the human ship and said hello in her strange language.

I would recognize it on the darkest night, the only star I'd need to navigate by.

I only wish I were worthy of her.

And now?

Now the warlords are forcing me to take her into dangerous territory, even though she is too soft and sweet to say no to them, just as she is too soft and sweet to tell any of her "friends" no, or me no.

"Xade?"

I grit my teeth as Carmen calls out my name again. I should leave without her. She will not follow me, I doubt she has the resources or grit to do so—

"I swear on my first dog's life, if you don't answer the door!" She bangs on the door, making the loose shelf on the wall of the myza rattle.

My eyes widen. Why, in the name of the mother goddess, is she acting so strangely?

"Open the door or I will break it down, *XADE*," she shouts.

I hustle to the door, fear for her surprising me. "What is wrong?"

Behind me, my tail sweeps across the floor at the sight of her. Flushed cheeks and bright eyes, her brow set with determination... not looking at all like the sweet, soft, breakable human she truly is.

I swallow hard.

"What's *wrong*?" she repeats, and I blink slowly, digesting her question.

"Nothing is wrong with me," I manage.

Carmen pushes across the threshold, throwing the door back and scowling

at me like I am the worst thing she has ever seen in her life.

I swallow hard. Good.

That is how she should feel about me. We are completely wrong for each other, the worst match of all the terrible forced marriages made that fateful day.

A lump forms in my throat, and I swallow hard against it.

“I wasn’t *asking* what was wrong with you,” she seethes, her eyes narrow, angry slits.

She’s still beautiful, even clearly furious. In fact, maybe even more so.

Maybe I misjudged her.

I shake my head, both at her and at the thought.

“I am coming with you, and we are leaving tonight, and furthermore,” she pauses, biting her lip, her little blunt teeth so unthreatening and at odds with her demeanor that I marvel at them. “Furthermore! How dare you act like that at the market?”

Fresh envy roars through me at the familiar way Xez spoke to her, the way he even considered making her a garment that would expose her breasts to any interested male.

She is mine.

“You are my *wife*,” I grit out.

She blanches, then her cheeks flush even brighter red at the words.

I immediately regret them, opening my mouth to reel them back in, to say something else that will erase them from her memory.

When she steps even closer, though, my brain short-circuits like a faulty Kel-valve on a ship. All thoughts jerk to a halt, and all I am capable of is inhaling her intoxicating scent, memorizing the flecks of color in her strange round-pupiled eyes, and savoring the heat emanating from her deliciously curved body.

I want to touch her.

“If I am your wife, then why do you act like I’m the most incapable, disgusting creature you have ever seen in your damn life? Huh?” She steps even closer, and I fight the urge to pull her against me, to sample the taste of her neck with my tongue.

Feral. Unhealthy. The thoughts are dangerous, and proof of how wrong I am for her.

I step back.

“Why do you treat me like garbage? Why do you ignore me or act like

I'm an inconvenience? If you don't want to be married to me, then say it out loud, to my face, and you can be rid of me. But don't—do not—think for an instant that I am okay with the way you treat me, because I'm not. You don't get to be all weird and possessive and treat me like dirt."

She sniffs, and my eyes widen at the sound. Is she ill?

When she tilts her chin up, staring at me like I have plunged a sword into her heart, I am troubled to see water in her eyes.

"You are leaking?" I ask. I think the other warlords mentioned this about their own wives, though I cannot remember why the humans do it.

"It's called crying! And yes! I am crying! Because you made me upset! Because you make me upset!" She stamps her little foot against the floor of my temporary myza, and I stare down at where she stands, wondering why she did that.

Perhaps she is like the quarn, and stamps to alert others to danger.

When I look around, though, it is just her and me in the myza.

Puzzling.

"I am not surprised to hear that I upset you," I finally say stiffly. "That is why you should not come with me to find the reason the Crigomar are unsettled. I am not the right male for you."

A strange choked sound emanates from her, and a second later she's laughing.

"Nope. You're not getting rid of me that easily. No." She laughs again, her eyes wide and brimming with that strange human water. "No! I said NO!"

She screams it at me, and I take a wary step back.

This side of her... it surprises me. I have watched her from afar for many days, whenever I am in Edrobaz, and my wife has never once told another no. I have certainly never heard her scream it at someone, the way she does now to me.

I blink, my third eyelid closing slowly as my tail stands straight out in shock.

"And," she continues, her gaze slightly unfocused, as though she is as taken aback by herself as I am. "And we're leaving right now." She points out the still-open door of the myza, and fresh surprise rushes through me.

There's a pack outside the door.

I was so preoccupied with being alone with my wife for the first time ever that I had not even noticed it was there.

"As you wish," I say slowly.

“I won’t take no for an answer,” she yells, all aggression in her tiny human body. Just as quickly, she deflates, her eyebrows raising. “Oh.”

“Let me finish packing, and we will leave on my ship for the Terga region, where the Crigomar problems are.”

“Terga,” she repeats. “Yes. Okay. We’re leaving. Tonight.”

“Do you have your comms tablet?”

“Of course.”

“You are ready?”

“Yes,” she says, then frowns.

I nearly laugh at the quick change in her expression, as well as the tumultuous shift in her demeanor. I squelch it though, some long-latent instinct telling me laughing right now would be the wrong move.

Besides, I do not know if I remember how to laugh.

“Actually, I need to pee.”

“Oh.”

“Is the bathroom... Do you mind if I— You know what? No. I am peeing, and I don’t need your permission to pee.” Her chest puffs out distractingly, her chin jutting out, as though she’s defying some order I would not even dream of giving.

A moment of silence passes, then another.

She still has not moved.

“The bathroom is right there,” I finally tell her, pointing at another door, at a loss.

“I knew that!” She stomps towards the door, and when it shuts behind her, I stare at it, utterly confused.

I may have made a life out of understanding wild species all over Sueva, of cataloguing and caring for them and trying to make sure they have everything they need for our ecosystems to remain stable.

But humans?

Human females?

I do not have the first clue about them.

CHAPTER FIVE

CARMEN

THE HUNTER. Xade.

My husband.

My mind reels, and I try not to stare at him as he navigates the small aircraft in the dead of Suevan night. Stars and asteroids twinkle overhead, and the ship is silent save for the hum of the engine and our breathing.

I can't believe he said yes.

I can't believe I said no.

I can't believe I'm on a ship with my grumpy butt of a husband, ready to finally, actually do some xenobiology instead of just studying it on Earth and in Edrobaz.

I'm thrilled.

I am also terrified.

I sit in the co-pilot's chair, not co-piloting at all, my thoughts ping-ponging around my brain as I vacillate quickly between excitement and pure fear.

I did it. I did the thing.

Oh shit, I did it. Now I have to actually *do it*.

I gnaw my lip because what if I can't? What if we get out there and I make a complete disaster out of it? I'm not the best at field work, I never have really been the best at anything, I've always just been able to do everything... sort of good enough.

Just average.

God. No wonder he didn't want me to come with him. No wonder he's been avoiding me. I am a mess.

An annoyingly nice, average mess, who can't seem to say no except when I completely lose my mind and decide to find out why the alien equivalent of dinosaurs have decided to rampage.

Yep. Brilliant plan.

"Why are you nervous?"

I yelp, taken completely aback by Xade's sudden question.

Great, wonderful, perfect.

"I'm not nervous."

“Your human tongue tells one story, but your human body and scent tell another.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” I squint at him, that unfamiliar fury reigniting.

“No. That word never left my lips.”

“Your Suevan tongue says that, but your face says another,” I tell him, slightly nastily, then recoil at my own vitriolic tone.

To my surprise, he chuckles.

Chuckles!

A deep, rasping sound that sends shivers down my spine and, for some inexplicable reason, sets me more at ease.

“I have not seen you like this,” he says, glancing sidelong at me, his hands still gripping the ship’s controls as we glide through the Suevan night.

“You haven’t seen me at all,” I scoff. “The only time we’ve spent together was at our so-called wedding.”

He is silent at my rebuke, but it doesn’t make me feel better. It makes me feel like shit.

I sigh.

“Sorry. That was rude.”

“Do not apologize,” he says, his tail rustling behind his chair. “You spoke your truth. That is not cause for apology.”

I wince. How dare he be nice now, when I’m still mad? Ugh. So obnoxious.

“I... I must admit something, though.” Xade, for the first time ever, sounds unsure. His voice is soft, deep, and entirely lacking his normal sharpness.

I squint at him. “What?”

I don’t like the sound of it. It doesn’t sound good.

“I have been watching you for some time. So, you are wrong. I have spent many hours with you, trying to understand you. And still, you are a mystery to me.”

My eyebrows nearly shoot straight off my face in surprise. “What? You’ve been doing what now?”

He shifts as though he’s uncomfortable with my question, and maybe I should be uncomfortable with his admission that he’s been watching me—what the hell does that mean, anyway?

I’m not uncomfortable with it, though.

That might shock me the most.

Instead, a warm, fuzzy feeling explodes through my chest and stomach, and I bite back a grin.

“It is not seemly,” he grates. “That I watched you. The other warlords disapproved. But... I am not like the other warlords.”

His mouth snaps shut with a click, one fang sticking out slightly and pressing into his lip, turning it a paler green.

I don't know what to say.

What do I say to the admission that my husband, who I thought couldn't stand me, has been... for all intents and purposes... stalking me?

“Why?”

“I was not raised in a family unit.”

I blink, surprised at his comment, confused about why he said that, until I realize that he didn't understand my question at all.

That, or he's avoiding it.

“No.” I shake my head at him, wondering at his tight-lipped and tense expression, at the way his tail twitches behind him. “I meant, why did you watch me? Why?”

“You are my wife,” he says simply. Xade angles his body away from me, his body language clearly indicating that our conversation is over.

I go quiet, wringing my hands and staring out at the dark, star-dappled sky. At night, I can almost believe I'm back on Earth, were it not for the odd glow of the asteroid belt illuminating a path across the cosmos.

Were it also not for the strange topography of Sueva, so different than any place on Earth. Maybe the Amazon jungle is like this, or was, before the Roth came.

But I never flew over it, never flew over anything except desert dirt and scrub out in West Texas when training for the Federation. A pang goes through me.

“You know I had a guy I was seeing back on Earth,” I tell him, not sure why I'm bothering to talk at all. “I broke it off with him before the mission, but we both thought we would get back together once I made it back to Earth.”

A low growl emanates from Xade's chest and I know I should stop, I know I'm baiting him, but I don't. My pulse picks up from the thrill of it, the novelty of saying something I never would have dared to even yesterday.

“I thought I could love him. I didn't yet, of course, but I thought maybe I

could, with time. And now I'll never get that time because I'm here, married to a Suevan who doesn't so much as deign to talk to me, but does stalk me."

"It was not stalking."

I turn fully toward him, a surprising amount of wrath coursing through me as all my suppressed anger at... at Xade, at the Federation, at *everything* boils over.

"Oh? You weren't stalking me? Is that word not translating correctly? You watched me for... what, months now? You didn't speak to me? You left me wondering why my *husband* hated me, couldn't even be bothered to talk to me, for months, while the whole time you were what, *not* stalking me?"

"I am a hunter." He places such an emphasis on the title that it completely throws me off track.

"What?"

"I am a warlord, and a hunter, and I am not used to... Suevans."

I inhale slowly, calming down, shame winding through me at my uncharacteristic outburst. I told Gen I was tired of being nice, but I didn't expect being honest to be so exhausting.

"I am not used to Suevans," he repeats, "and I am certainly not used to human females."

I narrow my eyes, starting to get where he's going with this.

"I do not trust others. Not easily, and not well. I do not know how to make conversation, or do any of the social niceties that come so easily to the other warlords and to you humans. You always seemed too sweet. I was afraid—"

He breaks off his speech, glancing sidelong at me.

Hope blossoms deep in my chest at that look.

"Afraid of what?" I ask quietly.

"I would trample someone like you. Like the very Crigomar we go to help. You are... sweet, and kind, and you let your people walk all over you. I do not know how to take care of someone like you."

Hope dies, skewered by his words.

The worst part is, he's not wrong. I do let people walk all over me. I say yes when I want to say no, and then I grind my teeth while I lose sleep over everything I need to do for everyone else.

I have no one to blame for that but myself.

Discomfort settles over me like a wet blanket, suffocating and heavy.

"I wasn't always like that," I say softly. He stiffens, as though my words

surprise him. Maybe hearing someone speak at all surprises him, if he's as much of a loner as he says he is.

"You... were not always like that?" The question is stilted. A muscle twitches in his jaw, and I'm not entirely sure he meant to echo my statement.

For some reason, though, I need to get to the bottom of my mixed up feelings, and what better place to do it than the cockpit of my alien husband's ship while we're en route to uncover the mysterious behavior of the local dinosaurs?

I clear my throat.

"Everything changed after... after..." God, I still have trouble talking about it. I change tacks, knowing I should talk about it, knowing discussing things like... that are part of healing, but unable to.

"After the Roth invaded Earth?"

I can't answer, so I stare blankly ahead, refusing to acknowledge him. That is, until the familiar pressure of wanting to be nice clamps down on my jaw and makes me answer.

"Yes." It's so quiet I wonder if he's heard me at all.

"Why?"

The single word is the most earnest thing I've heard from him, and I glance sidelong at him, curious as to why he cares at all, if he's already made up his mind about me.

"I don't know." I shrug one shoulder. How do you unpack the trauma of living through something like that? The survivor's guilt? "Maybe because I'm not as strong as the others here, you know? Maybe because the things I'm good at mean that if it were to happen again, I'd need to rely on someone else to survive, and I don't want to piss off someone who might help me survive. I don't know."

"Why do you say you do not know when you have the answer?"

"It's embarrassing." I sigh, resting my head against the back of the chair, which is too tall for my human frame to really be comfortable.

"Wanting to live is embarrassing to humans?" His eyes widen in disbelief, his tail slashing a disturbed arc behind him.

"Not being able to do it on my own. Needing other people to help me. That's embarrassing."

He shakes his head slowly, considering me. "I do not understand humans. Another reason why I have been watching you from afar. And yet, I still do not understand."

Honestly, me neither.

But I don't say anything at all, preferring to lapse into silence while Xade puzzles over me.

Frankly, same.

Before long, Xade begins taking the ship lower, and my ears pop as we skim over treetops.

"Wow," I say on an exhale. "This looks nothing like Edrobaz."

The look he gives me, despite his Suevan features, is full of recognizable disdain. My stomach falls. "Of course it doesn't. We are at higher altitude. The same jungle plants would not grow here. Does your Earth consist of all the same landscape?"

I prickle, annoyed at his tone. I *hate* when people think I'm stupid. It always makes me mad, and maybe that means I *am* stupid, but god, I hate it all the same. Just because I'm nice, or try to be, doesn't mean I don't know basic things. Frustration boils through me.

"Of course it doesn't. You know, humans do simply say things to make conversation sometimes. Like, to socialize?"

Xade grunts, and I try not to roll my eyes.

The trees stretch towards the crystalline sky, the shapes of their needle-like leaves familiar, recalling the conifers of Earth, but the limbs all seem to weep, though we're flying by so quickly I can't quite be sure. They're bluer than most Earth trees too, the tint a deep sea blue-green that gives the impression that we're soaring over an ocean of trees.

I lean forward in my seat, trying to catalog everything I'm seeing all at once.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Xade glancing at me, his lip twitching like he's holding back a smile.

Like I'm making him smile.

The thought shouldn't warm me as much as it does, especially when he's been so cold to me.

I guess my people-pleasing doormat tendencies aren't going anywhere anytime soon.

CHAPTER SIX

XADE

CARMEN'S EYES are so wide and unblinking that I keep stealing glances at her, worried that something is wrong with my small human.

I shake my head.

No, not mine. Not *my* human.

Ridiculous obsessive tendencies.

Despite my time away from other Suevans, the urge to protect this tiny, soft female is... it's more than an urge. It's a relentless compulsion, animalistic and obnoxious.

I grit my teeth, unstrapping quickly, trying to put space between me and the delicate scent emanating from her lush body.

"Kioveset is a dangerous town," I growl at her, still refusing to even look at her. Every new glimpse of her delicate face makes me feel more out of control. Even after all these months, I do not understand her.

I do not understand my response to her. Mother goddess help me.

None of it makes sense.

"Kioveset?" The word rolls off her human tongue, the foreign way she pronounces it distractingly charming.

"This is an outlaw town," I continue, shoving down the desire her voice ignites and unlatching the weapons rack. The wall rattles as it opens up and I pull out my favorite, a long bow. I strap it to my back, fastening it around my waist with practiced ease. Several different energy-tipped arrows follow, and I strap them to my hips, running my talons over the various specialty charges, cataloguing each mentally.

Each is as second-nature to me as breathing, but I always like to refamiliarize myself with their feel and weight before heading out into the wilds.

And Kioveset is as wild as they come.

And I am bringing an untrained female with me.

A muscle twitches in my neck.

Sheer lunacy.

Normally, the bow and arrows would be enough, alongside my reputation as the Hunter, of course, but with a tempting morsel like Carmen at my side?

I add two energy blades to my thighs, then raise an eyebrow as I consider the short sword.

“I’ll take that,” she says cheerily from behind me.

She’s always cheery, except for a few intriguing moments on the flight here when I thought I saw behind her sunshine-and-rainbows mask.

“The sword?” I ask, unsure if I heard her correctly. Perhaps she meant one of the remaining daggers, or the small plas pistol.

“Yep. I like the weight of it.”

“Do you know how to use it?”

“Why would I want it if I didn’t know how to use it?” she asks lightly, but the question is laced with a bitter acid that’s unlike her. Unlike the sweetness she normally shows, at least.

I like that acid. I like it better than the sweet.

It feels real.

The sword is heavy, at least I imagine it will be to one like Carmen, and I pass it to her by the hilt, my eyes narrowed.

She holds it outright, tip towards me, her arm stronger than I imagined as she stares down the edge of it. “Nicely balanced,” Carmen says.

She swings it right, then left, making careful arcs that speak to some skill.

“I did not know you could use a sword,” I tell her, scratching my chin.

“You don’t really know much about me at all,” she responds. “I might be rusty, but this was my weapon of choice in the Federation Academy. That and a plas rifle, which was standard issue.”

I grunt. What am I supposed to say to that?

She is not wrong.

I do not know her well at all, for all my... research.

“I never saw you swing a sword.”

“I didn’t see the point in training with it when I didn’t want to be a warlord and there was so much to do as far as researching Suevan medicinal herbs and the human body.” She shrugs one shoulder and I am grateful, for the first time, that humans are not as attuned to bodily changes as Suevans are. She will not be able to scent my desire.

Triggered by the mere use of her words “human body.”

Idiotic possessive urges.

“I still think it’s weird that you’ve been watching me.”

“I—” A reply will not come. I tilt my head, studying her. I do not know how to respond to that. “That is my... job. Watching. Observing. All the

species of Sueva are under my purview, and I... I was trying to—”

“Understand me,” she finishes softly, her eyes kind and full of something I can’t find a word for.

I grunt again, but it comes out less aggressive. She’s right. I wanted to understand her. I wanted to understand how to act around her.

All I’ve earned for my hard work is more confusion about who she is. The human female who does not take no for an answer, who always gives more to her companions than she gets in return, seems to not be at all the quiet stream in the jungle. No, she is a surprise waterfall, carving the stones around her to fit, only reduced to a slow trickle when the needs of others sap her strength.

I am starting to see her now.

I should have tried to speak to her sooner.

I was afraid.

“So, what’s the plan?” She takes several of the energy daggers, strapping the bandolier full of knives around her hips.

I bite back a chuckle as it slips down, too large even buckled at the tightest loop.

“Here,” I say, stepping close to assist her in fastening it around her form. My hands brush the soft curve of her hips, and my xof begins to vibrate between my legs, stirred by the merest contact.

Swallowing nervously, I growl, trying to make more noise than my xof does, singing away in embarrassing fashion like some untried youngling.

“Are you okay?” Her hair falls across her face, her eyes narrowed as she tilts her head, staring up at me in concern as my growl grows louder.

“I am not used to females,” I manage, then pull the bandolier off completely, too distracted to finish the task at hand.

Putting distance between us, I back up, and up, until my tail hits the weapons drawer behind us.

She arches an eyebrow at me, hands on those luscious hips, hips that I will not be able to resist thinking about at all hours of the night.

Goddess, we are supposed to sleep in the same tent. How will I be able to sleep with the fresh knowledge of how her hips felt against my fingertips?

I snarl and she startles, taking a step back, her fear scent clouding the air.

Good. Better for her to keep her distance.

“This trip will be dangerous enough without distraction.” I did not mean to say it out loud.

Both of Carmen's eyebrows rise this time. "Is that what I am? A distraction?"

I pierce my talon through the hard strap of the bandolier, once, twice, creating a custom fit for her human hips.

Without a word, I pass it back to her.

She stares at me for a long moment and I sigh in exasperation, gesturing to the Crigomar hide belt.

"It will fit you now."

"Yeah, I figured that out, actually." A hint of a smile plays around her lips. "I was still wondering if you were going to tell me the plan."

"You should know the plan." I shrug. What is there to say?

"Are you always like this?" There's both amusement and irritation in her voice, but the former brings me up cold. Why is she amused?

Human females are confusing.

"We are going to gather information. Then we will act on that information."

"That's the whole plan?" Her brow wrinkles with skepticism. "How do you plan on gathering the information?" She clicks the buckle into place, the bandolier still slipping low on one hip.

It looks delicious like that and I swallow hard, trying to refocus.

"Are we setting Crigomar traps? Following trails?"

"I am asking the local outlaws. You should stay here."

Her mouth drops open, her hands balling up on her hips. Goddess, those hips.

I tear my gaze away, staring at her eyes instead.

"What the heck do you mean, I should stay here?"

"You should be a good little human and stay here, where you will be safe."

Indecision crosses her face, and it makes my mind up. If she cannot even tell me no on this, then she has no place stepping foot into Kioveset. She will be an easy target for these Suevans.

I should be satisfied that she does as I say, but as I walk towards the back of the ship,

"Why isn't it safe?" she calls out from behind me. "What do you mean, outlaws?"

"Poachers. Thieves. Brigands. They will eat a human female like you for breakfast."

“It’s not breakfast time yet.”

I pause, glancing over my shoulder at her. Her jaw is set, a fiery look in her eyes.

“You’re underestimating me,” she adds. “Why would you give me all this,” she shakes the bandolier at me, “just to leave me on the ship?”

“You will be safer that way, in case one of the outlaws decides to steal the ship.”

She snorts, crossing her arms over her chest. Her breasts smoosh together under her tight shirt and I stifle a groan.

“So what, you’re going to leave me out here, vulnerable, where outlaws might kidnap me, steal your ship, while you go and hunt for the reason the Crigomar are rampaging? Great plan.”

I cock my head at her, my tail swishing behind me.

“This is why I do not understand humans. You say it is a great plan, but your body tells me you think it is a terrible plan.”

“The power of sarcasm,” she says lightly. “So what’ll it be, are you leaving me here? All alone, where the bad Suevans can get me, or are you taking me with you?”

“They are still dangerous, even if I take you with me.”

She snorts, the sound full of disbelief. “Please. I’ve seen the warlords in action. I’ll be way safer with you than if you leave me here.”

Pride rustles through me, and I stand a little straighter at her praise. She thinks I can protect her.

Of course I can protect her, I never truly doubted that.

“You may not like the Suevans that live out here. This might be uncomfortable for you,” I growl.

“Then all the better for me to be at your side, so they know I’m yours.” She flutters her eyelashes, joining me on the ship’s cargo ramp.

At my side.

Mine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CARMEN

I GOT MY WAY. I'm practically preening as I follow Xade down what appears to be an overgrown game trail, pleased with myself.

Sure, I didn't outright tell him no, but I got what I wanted, and that's almost the same thing. Almost.

It's chillier here than in the climate-controlled jungle city of Edrobaz, and I step quickly, both in an attempt to keep up with the much taller Xade and to stay warm. The forest is pitch-black save the light from the stars overhead.

"Who is going to be awake at this hour?" I ask, feeling foolish for not realizing this when we were back in the relative safety and comfort of the ship.

"You will see," he grunts, not pausing as he continues up the winding path. Wind blows through the strange weeping fir-like trees, and large round eyes glow down at me from the upper branches. Not the monkey-like iquids of the jungle, but something different.

"What are those?" I ask, pointing to a group of large eyes.

"Firrels," he answers. "If you talk this much, we might never find out why the Crigomar are rampaging."

The corner of my mouth kicks up in a smile. I shouldn't like getting under his skin, but it's better than the icy nothingness I've been getting for the past several months.

"You know, this might be news to you," I pause as I step over a root jutting out of the ground, "but usually married couples talk to each other. Before they're married, usually, but..." I drift off, shrugging. "Our circumstances are different."

He grunts.

Of course he does.

I stifle a laugh.

"I mean, after a while, I think a lot of married couples stop talking. My parents did. But that doesn't mean communication isn't important, in fact, it's the most important thing in the world. Well, the universe, even."

He turns around and I know he can see me, even though it's super dark out.

I beam at him and I'm pretty sure he scowls back, but my eyes aren't as good as his, so I can't be sure.

Either way, it makes me laugh.

"Do you always talk this much?" he asks, his voice gruff.

"Are you asking that because you're so used to being alone and only hearing the sound of your own voice? Does only grunting get old?" I ask it cheerily enough, holding back my laughter at the thought of him grunting at himself.

He stops and I nearly run straight into his back.

A heavy sigh rolls out of him, and my laughter finally barks out of me.

"Is that a female?" a heavy voice asks.

Xade's arm wraps around my waist and I exhale as he jerks me against him. God, his skin is so hot.

"Mmm," I say, nestling in.

"It is a female."

The sound of a plas rifle clicking into safety mode sounds, and the Suevan who had us, apparently, at gunpoint steps onto the path, directly in front of us.

"Xamet." Xade's voice holds the hint of a growl, his tail wrapping possessively around my calf.

"You are here about the Crigomar, I expect. Is that right, Hunter?" There's a note of derision in the other Suevan's voice, and he leans heavily on the plas rifle. "Come on then. Kioveset is as feral as always. If you want information, you came to the right place." He leans closer to me, inhaling deeply.

Xade pushes me further behind him.

"Guard the female closely. The bastards here have been without females too long."

I gulp, the noise so loud in my ears I'm surprised it didn't send the local wildlife running.

Xamet leads us further up the narrow path until the trees clear out, floating orbs casting sparkling light all around. The buildings here aren't part of the tree trunks themselves, like in Edrobaz, but are built into the sides of them, their flat, curved roofs reminiscent of some kind of fungi. Rope ladders criss-cross from mushroom hut to mushroom hut, and the sound of loud laughter and music spills out into the crisp mountain air.

Xade hasn't let me go, and as much as I'm grateful for his body heat,

being squished up against a nearly seven-foot-tall Suevan doesn't make for the most comfortable of walking situations. When I try to scramble out of his grip, though, he just pulls me even closer.

"Hunter." A Suevan steps out onto a balcony, and Xamet casts us both a long look before lumbering off into one of the little tree huts. It takes me a moment to realize why he walks less gracefully than the other Suevans.

He's missing most of his tail.

"Crigomar attack," Xade mutters in my ear, causing goosebumps to pebble all over my arms. "It ate his tail."

"Do not think just because you saved Xamet from that wild beast we will all welcome you to Kioveset with open arms, Warlord," the Suevan on the balcony continues, baring his teeth. Light from an orb flickers off of them, highlighting just how different his fangs are from Xade's.

I blanch.

The other Suevan's teeth have been filed into serrated edges.

"Good god, how does he chew with that?" I ask, scrunching my nose. "Serrated teeth are great for ripping, yeah, but eating normal food? Not so much—"

The Suevan leaps down from the balcony, and Xade pushes me behind him. Or tries to.

I didn't train at the Federation Academy for four years for nothing, after all.

I shove out of his grip, pulling out the short sword and flicking on the energy blade with a flurry of my fingers.

"You brought a female? And she thinks to speak of my mouth?" The Suevan circles us and I realize belatedly that a whole host of them ring around us, watching in ominous silence. "Are you offering to find out firsthand how I can use my mouth and teeth, little witchling?"

A hissing noise rips out of Xade, so like an overheated teapot that I stand upright in surprise.

Awesome. My hunter husband sounds like a steaming teapot when he's pissed.

I laugh, and the Suevan closing in on me stops, staring down at me in apparent surprise.

"Why is she laughing?" he asks Xade, who's drawn his bow, aiming down it.

"She does that," Xade answers.

“Why did you call me a witch?” I ask, keeping my short sword firmly between me and the still-circling Suevan.

“Because you’re a human,” Xade explains.

I snort. “Are you just going to answer for everyone? Man, I couldn’t get you to say one word to me, and now you’re speaking for everyone else.” I chuckle, shaking my head.

Fear climbs my spine with frigid fingers because deep down, underneath the years of training and even ranking in the top ten at swordsmanship in my class, this is freaking me the fuck out.

I take a teensy step closer to Xade.

“You are a human,” the Suevan sneers at me. “And you are a warlord. We raised you, Xade, as one of us, and you show up here with one of them? Thinking we will be happy to see you?”

Oh god, this is going to get ugly. I shift my weight between my feet. If Xade’s going to loose an arrow, now is the time, when the huge Suevan who seems to be the leader of Kioveset is addressing the ring of aliens around us.

“You think we will be pleased to see your scales?” he roars. “WELL, WE ARE!”

With that, Xade and the other Suevan drop their weapons, running at each other full tilt.

I make a wordless roar, starting to launch myself at the huge lizard alien.

Until I realize they’re not wrestling, they’re not fighting...

They’re hugging.

“Brother,” the arrogant Suevan says. “It is good to see you. And good to see the warlords haven’t forgotten about us here in Kioveset.”

“Brother?” I repeat, feeling lost. Slowly, I sheath the short sword. “He’s your brother?”

“Not technically,” Xade answers. “Carmen, this is Redax. We were partners, of a sort, for a long while.”

“Carmen,” Redax says, smiling with his serrated shark teeth on full display. “Did you bring her for me, Xade?”

“I’m his wife,” I tell him shortly, beyond annoyed at all this weird masculine showboating. “And you are both assholes.”

With that, I stride into the nearest hut, ready to get out of the cold and away from the two green, scaley idiots outside.

CHAPTER EIGHT

XADE

“I LIKE HER,” Redax tells me, clapping me on the shoulder. “I cannot believe you took a mate. And a human witch at that.”

“She is not a witch.” The words come out of my mouth, but I wonder at them all the same. She has me ensorcelled, does she not?

“Of course not. It was a little joke. She has fire, though.”

“I am finding this out,” I say grudgingly. I did not want the wife I thought Carmen was: shy and soft and eager to please. I knew I would steamroll a female like that.

But this Carmen? Who roars at those she thinks are my enemies and attempts to defend me with her energy blade? Who calls me an asshole and stomps off?

Bewitched, indeed.

“How long have you been married?”

“You did not have news of the humans’ arrival?”

“You know better than most we do not receive news out here. Our reputation as outlaws keeps all away but you, Hunter.” He tugs me to him, pulling me along and into the criope huts that sprout from the tall trees, so many more than I remember there being.

“The city looks different.”

“Of course it does. It has been years since you last visited.” He gestures to the rope bridges criss-crossing the sky above. “We made some improvements.”

His expression shutters, a grim set changing the slant of his mouth. Redax jerks his head towards a shambles of wood and construction materials. “We’ve also had some problems.”

I let out a low noise. “Did the Crigomar do this?”

He nods his head. “Come on. We will tell you everything we know... over some drinks.”

“I am here for work,” I tell him stiffly, even though I know Redax will not be dissuaded. To him, drinking is part of every deal he makes. I will have to go easy, though.

As much I trust Redax, I distrust nearly every other male in this camp.

There is a reason they call them outlaws, after all.

One sneers down at me from a balcony, a jagged scar across his face distorting his eye, and my sense of discomfort only increases.

I brought my *wife* into this camp.

I pick up my pace, matching Redax's strides into the ground-level crioie that's long served as the local bar and, if a Suevan was feeling adventurous, the only place to eat for hundreds of miles that did not involve cooking your food yourself.

Memories crash into me as I step into the low-ceilinged building, the scent of bubbling chyerdan stew and the alcoholic chelda hitting me just as hard. My initials are carved just there, on that beam over the bar. And there—

I pull up short.

There, my wife sits cross-legged on a table, a too-large mug of Redax's famous chelda in one hand, surrounded by scarred and burly Suevans. One tips back his head, roaring with laughter at something she's said, and possessive ire rises in me, volcanic and dangerous.

"There he is," she crows, pointing at me. She tips her glass back, drinking long before swiping a wrist across her wet lips.

"How much have you had of that?" It comes out a growl, and the Suevans sitting around Carmen all stand at once.

"The chelda?" She frowns at me. "About half. It tastes different than the one at Edrobaz, but it's still so good."

"You are getting her drunk," I accuse, and one of the standing Suevans crosses his arms, looking down at me with clear derision.

"No one is doing anything, Xaaaade," she says, drawing my name out long.

I glare at her.

"They told me what was in the drink, okay? Chill the fuck out."

Chill the fuck out?

"How does one chill a fuck?" one of the outlaws asks, clearly enamored with her.

I want to kill him for even looking at her. She is *mine*.

Carmen laughs, a delicious noise more refreshing than a babbling brook on a hot day. "It's an expression. It means calm down."

"There is nothing calm about fucking," another pipes up, the suggestion clear in his voice.

I step towards him, ready to throw a punch, only to be pulled up short by

Redax's firm grip on my bicep. "Not a good idea, brother."

"She is my *wife*," I snarl. "And I do not like the way they look at her."

To my dismay, Carmen stands up, stretching her arms out, the remnants of the chelda sloshing over the side of her mug. All eyes in the room follow her, conversation stopping.

"It's funny," she finally says, jutting a hip out.

Those hips are going to be the death of me.

"What is funny, pretty human?" an outlaw asks.

I growl.

"He is mad about the way you're looking at me, but he can't be bothered to pay me any attention."

That garners another rough round of laughs from the Suevans all too thrilled to stare at my wife, standing on the table of a bar.

She cocks an eyebrow at me, sipping from the drink.

"You will regret that in the morning," I say.

"What, speaking my mind?"

"The chelda."

"Aw, you care about me feeling sick. Isn't that cute, boys? Now he cares."

"He should always care," one grumbles, shooting me a murderous glare. My fangs prick my lower lip, my mouth curled in a snarl.

"I would care about you always," another pipes up.

"Enough," Redax booms.

Carmen pouts, that hand still on her hip, still accentuating her generous curves. I want to squeeze every inch of her perfect body.

My tail lashes back and forth at a furious tempo, and several of the Suevans she'd been sitting with bump into me as they walk past.

"We have more important things to do than entertain the locals," I hiss at her.

"Lucky for you, they told me everything I wanted to know already." If my tone's fazed her at all, she does not show it. Maybe the chelda is already working its too-potent magic.

"Right," Redax says slowly, pulling up one of the newly empty seats. "They told you that the Crigomar—"

"Aren't responding to light stimuli," she finishes with a little shimmy.

"We already knew that," I tell her, getting more put out with every sexy little move she makes.

“But did you know the light stimuli seem to be making them worse?” she asks in a sing-song voice. “A few days ago, Bex told me I should sing ‘Mary Had A Little Lamb’ to you, but I don’t really see the appeal.”

Redax gapes at me, but I have had enough.

“Get down from there or I will get you down from there,” I growl.

“Oooh, is that a threat? Or a promise?” She shakes her shoulders, her breasts bobbing enticingly under her shirt.

“Enough,” I snarl, gripping her hips—goddess help me, but they’re so soft. So round. I want to spread her legs and see if she’s this soft everywhere.

She squeals as my hands make contact, and my cock immediately grows hard. “You’re spilling my drink,” she says in protest.

“You should not be drinking that,” I retort. “You are making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Well, maybe if you paid attention to me, I wouldn’t need to make a spectacle. You’re the only one I care about watching me.”

“Is it attention you want?” I growl, unable to take my hands from her, even though I’ve safely retrieved her from the table.

“That’s all I’ve wanted, you big lump of scales.” She grins up at me like I am somehow funny. Like there is something funny about this.

“Then you will sit in my lap while we talk to Redax, and you will not move!” This female is infuriating, and the worst part is... *I like it.*

“No,” she says. “Boop.” She taps her index finger on my nose.

My nostrils flare.

Fire races through my veins.

“Boopity-boop-boop,” she sings, tapping my nose.

“Infuriating female,” I growl at her.

Carmen does not shrink away, though, she simply grins even wider.

“You will sit on my lap, where you cannot start any more dangerous problems for us.”

A slim brown eyebrow arches, and her lips curve with it. “The thing is,” she drawls, “sitting on your lap might start a whole new problem.”

I snort. “Please. You are drunk. You sitting in my lap while we listen to Redax can only help.”

“Oh, is that right?” There’s a challenge in her eyes that does not make sense to me, but I have never been one to back down from a challenge. The Hunter does not back down from a challenge!

“Correct.”

Without warning, I pull her into my arms, then sit at the table, the top of her head nestling under my chin.

I am ready to get to the bottom of this problem with the Crigomar.

“Speak, Redax,” I snarl.

“Mmm,” Carmen says, and I suddenly realize her head is not the only thing nestled into my body.

My xof starts vibrating in earnest, and Carmen dares to grind her hips up and down as it begins to sing. “All kinds of problems,” she says, the scent of her desire blanketing the air.

Redax stares. “I—”

“Ignore the drunk female,” I growl at him. Carmen has gone still on my lap, my cock rising to meet the thick curve of her ass, but I refuse to be bested by whatever game it is she’s playing.

I can ignore her.

She squirms, and I bite back a groan.

“The Crigomar have been coming down in packs from the mountaintop. The animals no longer respond to light lures, and in fact, as your female said, they seem to be more crazed when exposed to them. They have created a dangerous situation.”

“And?” I prompt, my voice husky and hoarse. My attempt to focus is not as successful as it would usually be, thanks to Carmen.

Redax leans closer, the table creaking as he puts more weight on his forearms. “There have been reports of odd lights.”

“Odd lights?” I repeat, my focus hazier with every small breath Carmen takes.

“By the witch cave.”

“The witch cave?”

Redax leans back, crossing his arms and shaking his head. “Are you listening?”

“Of course I am listening. Odd lights at the witch cave.”

“He’s not listening,” Carmen sings, snaking an arm up around my neck.

I glance down at her, the soft part of her lips, the way her breasts heave. “Yes, I am. The witch cave. Except there is no witch, and never has been.”

“Yes, I do remember we spent a night or two up there ourselves, on a bet, no less.” Redax cracks a smile, showing off the serrated teeth that, if I remember correctly, are also the result of a bet... that he lost. “We found no witch.”

“So where are the lights coming from?” Carmen asks, surprisingly focused on the conversation, despite the aroma of liquor on her breath.

“We do not know,” Redax tells her, then wags a finger at us both. “But I would bet that once you figure that out? You figure out what it is that’s driving the Crigomar mad.”

A lone roar sounds, shaking the walls of the criope around us.

Carmen goes still on my lap.

“Fuck,” Redax says, swiping a hand through his short black hair. Unlike most Suevans, Redax and the others here keep their hair no longer than shoulder-length. I had forgotten that.

I have forgotten much of my time here in Kioveset.

“How far is it?” I ask.

“The cave?” Redax asks.

“The dinosaur, you shark-toothed weirdo,” Carmen says.

We both stare at her. “Did that make any sense to you?” Redax asks me.

“Not at all,” I say, shrugging.

“What a charming female.”

“The Crigomar. How far is the Crigomar? Damn, and you two thought I was drunk.” Carmen stands, immediately leaving my lap cold without her in it, and proceeds to pour the rest of the drink onto the floor.

Redax winces. “That is rude behavior.”

“Where is the dinosaur, and how long before we are in danger?”

“You are not in danger, fierce little human,” Redax tells her, admiration gleaming in his eyes.

I stop myself from grabbing her and settling her back against me.

“That is one of our Crigomar. His mate was driven mad and he mourns her every night like that, at the same time.”

“Oh.” Carmen’s face crumples, and wetness shines in her eyes. “That’s so sad.”

“It is,” Redax says gravely. “But that is why you are here, is it not, Hunter? You are going to solve our Crigomar problem.”

I nod, but unease has settled around me. A strange light from the witch cave... It stirs something in the deepest recesses of my memory, but what, exactly, I cannot put my talons on.

“You can stay here,” Redax says. “In one of the criopes.”

“No,” I bark out, just as Carmen starts to say yes. “We will return to our ship, gather supplies and set out at first light.”

“You would turn down my hospitality? You offend me, Xade.” Redax splay a hand across his chest, his tail twitching behind him.

“My wife will sleep better on the ship.” It is not quite a lie, not the way humans do it. The truth, though, is that I fear for our safety after her little bout of tabletop dancing. The last thing I want is to be caught unawares in my sleep by ten Suevan males who have taken a liking to her.

“You remember the way?”

“Well enough.”

“Things have changed since you were last here.”

“They always do,” I reply. It is true.

Nothing ever stays the same.

And whatever in the goddess’ name is going on with the Crigomar is proof enough of that.

“I will walk you back to your ship.”

“That’s not necessary.” I pull Carmen, who is leaning sideways, into my arm.

“I did not say it was. I said I was going to. It is very dark tonight, and there are... things in the forest. Things that do not belong.”

“Fine,” I grumble. “Suit yourself.”

“I’m tired,” Carmen says, blinking blearily up at me.

“I know,” I tell her. She leans heavily against me, and I pull her up into my arms before we set out from the crioep and back toward the ship.

“Why’re you carrying me?”

“Because you are tired.”

True... but also because I am sick with need for her. She started something at that table, sitting on my thighs, something that I will not ever be able to forget.

CHAPTER NINE

CARMEN

THE WHOLE TRIP back to the ship is fuzzy. I didn't drink that much.

"I know," Xade tells me.

"Did I say that out loud?"

"Only ten times."

"I only had like four sips." I shake my head, then let out a little moan, because good god, that did not help. "I need water."

"I know."

"I'm sorry."

"Do not be sorry."

"Is she always like this?"

Oh. I forgot shark boy was here. I squint at him, but there must be clouds overhead now because I can't see shit.

"I didn't drink that much."

"She is going to be a handful tomorrow," Redax-of-the-shark-teeth says.

"Bite me," I tell him.

"Do not even think it," Xade growls at him.

"It's just an expression. A figure of speech. You guys are so serious all the time, did you know that?"

I close my eyes, just for a second, and when I open them, it's bright.

"Is it morning already?"

"You fell asleep. We just got inside the ship. You are safe, Carmen."

"Gonna be sick." Oh god. Oh god. I'm hot all over, then cold, then hot, icy sweat beading all over my skin.

A soft laugh surprises me, and I'm barely aware of being carried through the ship until something cool presses against my forehead and the back of my neck.

"You are very stubborn." Xade's wiping the sweat from my brow and neck, and the next thing I know, there's a sharp pinch in the crease of my elbow.

"Ouch, what the hell was that for?"

"That is for the nausea. And the headache. And all the unsavory sensations that are going to grip you after foolishly drinking that goddess-

damned chelda.”

“Ugh. Don’t talk about it.” I shiver, my stomach lurching.

He laughs again, still wiping my brow. Cold spreads out from my arm, up my shoulder, and my tense muscles slowly relax as whatever he injected me with works its magic.

“Better?” he asks, his voice pitched low and soothing.

“Too soon to tell,” I say dramatically. “I could die at any minute.” A yawn cracks my jaw, though, and I lean heavily against him.

“You should sleep,” he says, starting to disentangle me.

“No,” I tell him, even though my eyes are already ridiculously heavy. “I don’t want to sleep. I’m tired of waking up alone.”

His arms grip me tighter, and the next thing I know, he’s holding me close, spooning me. I haven’t been held like this in months and months.

I sigh, content, despite the lingering nausea and slight pounding of my head.

“When the rest of the girls—women,” I correct myself after a slight pause, “were with me in the myza, it wasn’t so bad. I wasn’t lonely. I had them to wake up with, chat with over breakfast, but with Jules gone on mission and everyone else happily married...” I drift off, slurring slightly.

“Sleep,” he says.

“I don’t want to,” I tell him, but it’s fuzzy.

“The medicine I give you will not give you much of a choice.” The words are laced with dry amusement. He tightens his hold on me, his skin so warm that he’s cozy despite his hard scales and even harder muscles.

“No,” I say.

“Fine. Speak if you must.”

“Don’t sound so excited.”

“I like your words,” he says, so quietly that at first, I’m not sure if he really said it or if I dreamed it in my drugged, drunk, half-dozing state.

“I thought I was lonely after the Roth invasion. I thought I knew what loneliness was, even at the Academy when I was surrounded by other orphaned humans who wanted to make something of themselves with the Federation. Who needed a place to stay and a full stomach.”

I touch my own stomach, like mentioning those days of hunger before the Academy will somehow summon the hollow ache of near starvation.

“It has nothing on how lonely I feel now.”

I struggle to stay awake, but it’s like a warm blanket’s been pulled over

my mind and the lights dim slowly, tracking the lack of movement in the cabin. I yawn again, unable to resist the allure of sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

XADE

CARMEN'S BREATHING is heavy and even, and the trembling of her limbs, thanks to the chelda, ceases after a few long minutes.

Thank the goddess I had some of the electrolyte and anti-nausea packed syringe capsules stowed in the med kit in case of emergencies. Typically, I would use it in case of a poisonous animal bite or other less likely occurrence, but it seems to have worked well to soothe Carmen's reaction to Redax's infamous alcohol.

Holding her like this, feeling her sink into sleep, limbs loose and easy, her human skin smoothing back out as the medicine takes hold... it is the closest to paradise I have ever come.

Her scent is even better up close, and I let my own eyes close, inhaling it deeply.

I memorized it months ago, the day she walked off the human ship and into my life. The day that changed everything, when we married the human females.

To find out they were unwitting? That they did not know to say no to us?
It had soured her appeal immediately.

Then, when I watched her, unable to say no to her companions, over and over again, I thought she would never be right for me.

This female, though, who curls up in my arms and smells of flowers and rain, she is not who I thought she was.

She is stubborn, and smart, and resourceful, and fully capable of saying no—to me, at least.

Which is what I need most of all.

The last thing I ever, ever want to do is crush who she is—which is why I've kept my distance for so long.

But now, with her in my arms, sleeping off alcohol that I told her not to drink... I realize I sorely miscalculated who she is.

I realize that watching her from afar was no substitute for actually getting to know who she is, what makes her... Carmen.

I was mistaken.

I pull her closer, wanting to be one with her, wanting it so badly it hurts.

Wanting to redo the last few wasted months where I brushed her off, the nights and days I beat myself up for not knowing that the humans could not have possibly chosen to marry us that fateful day.

Hating that it happened at all, disgusted with their commanding officers back on Earth for sending them here.

Maybe it makes me a bad male, but I would do it all again, just for this moment, right now: with my nose pressed to her hair, her soft skin under my hands, and the music of her sleeping breaths.

I have been a fool.

But it is not too late to make it right, not too late at all.

Heartened, I trace small circles on her wrist with my thumb before her breathing lulls me to sleep, too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CARMEN

WARM AND TOASTY. I haven't been this comfortably warm in ages. My head pounds slightly and my mouth feels like an ash tray, but other than that, I slept amazing.

Yawning, I stretch my arms overhead—

Or, at least, I try to.

Oh god.

My eyes fly open.

Xade is curled around me, one heavy leg tossed over mine, his arms laced around my waist, his head buried in the curve of my neck and shoulder.

Oh my god.

I squint at the ship's wall, trying to recall last night.

I drank chelda. Alcoholic chelda. Fell asleep on the walk back to the ship. Got sick. Xade injected me.

My breath stops.

And I told him to I hate being alone, told him I wanted him to stay.

Embarrassment creeps through me, because how in the world did I convince him to say yes to me?

I muffle a groan, my eyes widening as I remember sitting in his lap.

And how he vibrated.

Desire, embarrassingly strong, rushes through me.

He vibrated!

Bex said something about that, but frankly, her talking about sex is about the most uncomfortable thing in the whole world to me, and I tuned her out.

The last thing I wanted to know about was the other women's sex lives with their alien husbands when mine wouldn't even give me the time of day.

But now? With him curled around me like the warmest, most possessive duvet ever made?

I swallow hard.

I should have listened to what Bex said, because now I want to know. I want to know exactly what the hell it was that was vibrating so deliciously against my ass last night.

Does this mean he's into me, too?

Something's shifted, that's for sure.

"Carmen," he says softly, and I stiffen in surprise. "How are you feeling?"

I expect him to move away from me, to immediately put distance between us, physical and emotional.

But he doesn't.

He doesn't!

Xade pulls me closer, and I moan lightly because my god, all that hot, hard muscle is... doing things to me.

"You smell delicious... and like you are thinking about my cock."

I make a strangled noise, feeling shy and uncertain and incredibly, undeniably turned on. He's got that damned right.

"You can smell that? Biologically, that is really fascinating. Were your females less fertile? Evolutionarily speaking, it would make sense that you would develop a stronger sense of smell in order to fulfill the mating imperative—" I'm babbling, but he cuts me off when he licks—*licks*—the side of my neck.

I stop breathing momentarily, then shiver in delicious anticipation.

"You taste as sweet as you smell." God, his voice is deep and husky and my core clenches.

The... whatever it is, the alien dingaling, the Suevan equivalent of a personal massager, starts up again.

"Um, are you... vibrating?" I can't quite contain both my excitement and my disbelief at the prospect.

"My xof sings for you, little human." He snuggles me even closer, and that vibration gets faster, jiggling my butt cheeks... and sending a zing of sensation straight to my clit.

"I..."

"Tell me," he demands.

I roll over to face him, and his diamond pupils are blown, desire clear in his face.

"Kiss me," I say, breathless and excited by this sudden turn of events.

He licks his lips, his right fang barely visible. Confusion crosses over his face, and my eyes widen in sudden understanding.

"Do you know how to kiss?" I ask quietly. "I can show you."

"I have mated with females in the Suevan colonies," he says stiffly. "This is not my first time. I am not an untried youth."

“Did you kiss them?” I press gently because it’s clear he doesn’t know what I’m asking. “Put your mouth on theirs?”

“I put my mouth on their wet cunts.” His voice is gruff.

I bite my cheeks because I’m tempted to just tell him to go ahead, be my guest, make himself at home there between my legs.

But this moment... feels important. Too important to go straight to oral, as delicious as that sounds.

Besides, I want to kiss him.

I’ve always preferred just making out. Something about the level of intimacy when it comes to sex or oral usually makes me feel uncomfortable, like what if I taste bad? What if it looks weird down there? What if they’re just pretending to like it and they actually hate it?

Kissing is easier.

“I would taste you now, Carmen,” he repeats. When he grinds against my thigh, vibrating, I nearly tell him sure thing, go ahead, get down with your bad self.

“Kiss me.” I lock eyes with him, breathless and wanting.

Shame flickers through his gaze, and he glances down at my lips while he hesitates.

Usually, I’m the one who waits for initiation.

But with Xade? I’m fucking sick of waiting.

“Like this,” I say, then push him to his back. I grunt as I throw a leg over him, sore from the very little sword play I did yesterday.

“This is kissing?” he asks, and I try not to laugh at his confusion.

“No, this is me climbing you like a tree so I can kiss you.” I lower my face over his, his hands spasming on my lower back. Behind me, his xof is singing up a whole damn opera, and I want to sit straight on it, but then I wouldn’t be able to reach his mouth... so I settle for sitting spread-eagle on his chest.

His breath fans across my lips, his eyes heavy-lidded with lust.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I confess.

“You do not know how to kiss?”

“No,” I say on a laugh, grinning down at him. He smiles too, and it makes my heart squeeze. “I don’t know how to teach you to kiss.”

“I want you to try,” he says, and the note of desperation I hear in the words softens the smile.

“Tell me if you don’t like it,” I say, still hesitating. “I’m going to go

slow.”

I lower my face even more, my heart stampeding in my chest. Gently, I brush my lips against his, and he groans against my mouth as I do it again, a featherlight touch. His mouth isn't scaled like the rest of his body, but it has a slight texture that makes me wonder what the rest of him will feel like.

“The scent of your arousal is making me wild, Carmen. I can feel how wet and hot your cunt is for me.”

Fuck slow. I bite his lower lip, then slick my tongue against the rough texture.

“Carmen,” he whispers, and my name in his mouth ravages me. I press my body against his, and his talons bite into my hips, rough, almost to the point of pain, but it's not enough.

His tongue tangles with mine, meeting me stroke for stroke, until it's not me that's leading the kissing lesson but him proving that he didn't need any help in the first place.

His hands travel up my sides, pulling at my shirt, and I help him take it off, breaking off the kiss and coming up for air as he pulls it over my head.

I lean down, or try to, but he holds me fast, staring up at me with reverence in his eyes.

“Let me look at you,” he pleads.

My chest heaves, my pussy aches for him, and I want more kissing, but I nod, holding still so he can look at me... until his hot perusal makes me slightly uncomfortable.

What if he thinks I'm ugly? What if he hates the pooch in my lower stomach, or the fact that my breasts are slightly different sizes... not to mention that my arms aren't as toned as they were a few months ago when I was training regularly. I am jiggly and soft everywhere, and he couldn't be more muscled.

I cross my arms over my body, suddenly self-conscious.

“No,” he growls, pulling my arms away from my chest. “Do not look like that. You are... stunning. Magnificent.”

I gasp as he twists with me in his arms, pulling me beneath him, his tongue on my lips, until I open my mouth on a moan.

It feels so good, oh my god.

I tug at his shirt, trying to pull it off him. “I want to look, too,” I finally plead.

A hint of a smile crosses his face, and then he's tugging it up.

He sits back up, letting me drink in the whole spectacular view.

“Your abs have abs.” They do, too. It would be physically impossible for a human to have this kind of musculature, and I run my fingertips over the sharp planes of his abs... all eight of them. When I glance back up, his eyes are squeezed shut, and I know what I have to do.

I pull my bra off, slinging it behind me.

“There,” I breathe, “now we’re even.”

When he opens his eyes, his whole body rumbles as his gaze dips to my breasts.

“Beautiful,” he says.

I expect him to palm them immediately, or go straight for the nipples, like most dudes did back on Earth once they caught sight of them, but he doesn’t.

He kisses me again, slow, sensuous, and in a way that leaves me absolutely at his mercy.

“Can I touch them?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow.

“Please.” I wrap my fingers around his wrist, guiding him to my breast, and we both make a wordless noise as he brushes his talon against my already peaked nipple.

“Is it sensitive?” he asks, repeating the motion as I arch into him.

“Yes, oh yes.”

“You are so beautiful,” he says, and to my surprise, he’s not staring at my boobs but into my eyes.

I reach for his face and he leans down, granting me access I so desperately want.

I kiss him hard as he teases my nipple, desire continuing to build, his xof vibrating up a storm between us. I smooth a hand down his abs—ALL EIGHT OF THEM—and between the deep muscled vee of his hips until I find it.

It’s right above his cock, and my eyes fly open at the realization. “Oh my god, that’s going to feel amazing.”

“It already does,” he says, kissing down my neck. I writhe, and when he sucks a nipple into his mouth, his rough tongue rasping deliciously across it, I give in to all my urges and wrap my hand around his cock through his pants.

“Fuck, Carmen.” It’s a hoarse moan, and I love it. Holding him like this, in my hand, while he lavishes attention on my breasts, this is what I’ve been freaking wanting for weeks and weeks now. Why didn’t I try to get him alone sooner?

When he bites my nipple, gently, so gently, all thoughts fly from my head.

"I want you to make me come," I say desperately, tugging at my own pants. "Please, please."

"With my xof? With my cock deep inside you?" He holds himself up on his elbows, careful not to put his weight on me. The care he's taking with me... it melts any remaining inhibitions.

"I want it all."

His eyes go wide, and a slow, sensuous smirk kicks one side of his cheek up, displaying his fangs. Xade is so otherworldly, but that look, that look is about as human as it gets.

And it's promising a damn good time.

"They you will have to be patient, wife, because I'm going to take my time with you."

"Ugh." I arch my back, nearly reduced to whining for an orgasm, and manage to kick my pants the rest of the way off. All that separates us now are my ugly underwear and his pants, and frankly, that's too fucking much, so I pull my underwear off and spread my legs wide.

I don't wait for him, I'm too ready, too wet. Instead, I watch him watch me stroke down my pussy, finding my clit and beginning to rub.

"Carmen," he growls. "You play a dangerous game."

"It... isn't... a game," I manage, my breath coming in short huffs. "I need this."

"Fuck," he growls, and before I can say anything else, he's biting a talon off his finger and shoving my hand out of the way. "This is mine now, do you understand?"

I lift my hips, trying to help him find the way to my clit, chasing the orgasm that's just out of reach.

"Here," I whisper, guiding his hand to where I need it.

"You are so soft everywhere," he grunts, and I didn't ever really think I would take that as a compliment, but he makes it sound like the best thing ever. "Every inch of you is perfect. Made for me."

With each word, he circles my clit with long, tantalizing strokes.

"You like the way that feels? You like my hands on you, on this pretty pink cunt?"

"Mm-hmm," I moan, about out of my mind with need. "More."

"I want to sink my cock into you," he growls. I tug at his pants, pulling

them down as fast as I can, wanting exactly that.

He's even bigger than I thought, and his dick is covered in a raised scale pattern. Oh my god. More texture.

Yes, please.

"Tell me you want me," he growls. "Tell me yes."

"Yes," I breathe, slightly stunned at how quickly we're moving but even more shocked at how right it feels. I want him inside me; I need this release so badly.

When he grips my hips in both hands and drives into me, eyes locked with mine, I can't help crying out his name.

His xof feels even better than I imagined, but I wasn't anywhere near prepared for his cock. It's huge, and those scaled bumps? They feel unfreakingbelievably good.

Stop, drop, and roll good.

Cartoon character melting good.

Between the feel of him inside me, his xof vibrating, and his mouth on the curve of my ear, it takes no time at all before my orgasm crests.

I lie there, holding onto his shoulders, feeling blissed out and perfect—and he's still pounding into me, vibrating all over me... it feels good still.

"Carmen," he says. "You are so perfect."

Am I, though? Or was this a bad idea? Was this a mistake? Holy shit, I wanted him to want me, yes, but I wasn't planning on spreading my legs and having sex with him our first morning together.

What if he looks down on me? What if this was the worst idea I've ever had?

He's still thrusting, and I push at his shoulders, my chest tight with worry. Suddenly, he's too much. It's too much.

"What is it?" he asks, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Stop," I whisper, afraid he's going to hate me, afraid he won't listen.

He does though, his face contorting with rapid expressions: shock, anger, frustration. Xade is mad.

"It's too much, I can't get off again, I can't, I'm sorry, I've only ever been able to come once, it doesn't feel good." The words trip over themselves in their hurry to leave my mouth.

He kisses the side of my forehead and I try not to flinch as he pulls out, his cock glistening with the proof of my orgasm.

Mine, while he didn't have one at all.

“I’m sorry; I’m so sorry,” I whisper, drawing my knees up close to my chest, like that will be enough to shield my inadequate body from him.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he snarls. “I am the one who has failed you. I will never be able to make this right.”

I blink, caught off-guard by that response. “What?”

“I should have stayed away from you,” he retorts, storming out of the small bed chamber.

“What about your clothes?” I call out as the door slides shut behind him.

He should have stayed away from me?

Shit.

His rejection hurts more than I thought it would. It hurts more than him ignoring me.

I stare at the ceiling for a long time, trying to figure out how the hell I’ve managed to screw this up so badly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

XADE

I HATE MYSELF FOR THIS. She said yes because I told her to, not because she wanted to. This is exactly what I knew would happen the moment we were alone together. Carmen is not good at saying what she wants. I have never, not once before our time together, seen her stand up for herself, and perhaps I have taken advantage of her sweetness.

Again.

First, I married her when she did not even understand what was happening.

Now? Now I told her to say yes, I told her to have sex with me, and I thought she enjoyed it, too—until she told me no.

Now I realize the depths of my depravity. Now I realize how she and I will never be a good fit for one another.

I throw on clean pants after wiping myself down, ridding myself of her perfect, delicious scent, even though it is tattooed upon my soul itself. Even though I could never be tired of it.

It only reminds me of my failure.

There is no sound from the small bedchamber where we spent the night, and I can only imagine how devastated my Carmen must be with me, how disappointed and distraught.

It sickens me.

I sicken myself.

Aggression rages through me, and I slam the pack I will wear to the witch cave to the ship's floor, rattling the crates full of supplies and equipment. If I were a less selfish male, I would insist she stay on the ship.

But with my luck, she will find herself back in Kioveset, with males who would be only too happy to please her properly. Or worse, who would take advantage of her sweetness in ways I daren't even dwell on.

Cool water spills over my arm, and I glance down to see the water flask cracked in my hand.

I ruin *everything*.

I lob the leaking flask against the hull of the ship, letting out a roar. Anger. Frustration. I am *sick* with it.

“Are you done having your temper tantrum?” a soft voice calls out, and I turn to find Carmen standing in the doorway to the cargo bay, watching me with careful eyes.

“Temper tantrum?” I ask, rolling the words around in my mouth. My translator refuses to provide an alternative, and I want to know what it is she means, but shame grips me too tight in its coils to let me say anything else.

The pack is still waiting, so I continue filling it, adding the shelter and food we will need for our journey.

“Yeah, you know,” her footsteps punctuate each word, reverberating loudly against the metal floor. “When you get angry and lose your cool?”

“I am warm-blooded,” I tell her, irritated all over again at how little she knows about Suevans.

She loses an exasperated sigh. Her hand reaches for me but I flinch, and she lets it drop.

“Do you want to talk about what just happened?”

I go completely still, unable to process her question.

“I broke a flask,” I finally answer. “There is nothing to discuss.”

“Is that how you want to be now?” Her voice is so quiet, so hurt, and a pang goes through me.

I should apologize again, I should try again... but I do not wish to hurt her further. I do not wish for her mouth to say yes when her body and mind are saying no.

It is better for her to hate me. It is better this way.

So I do not answer.

I load my pack with efficient, practiced speed, then sling my bow through the custom attachment to hold it.

Part of me wants Carmen to push back, to argue, to demand we talk.

The rest of me is glad when she watches me in silence before filling her own pack. She does so carefully, like each ration of food and piece of equipment is a puzzle piece she’s slotting into perfect position.

I like that about her, I decide.

I like that she takes her time with tasks and does them well. I like her focus.

And I ruined the fragile thing between us by trying to claim her as my own before she was ready.

A low growl rips out of me, and she glances sidelong at me, her perusal putting me ill at ease.

“We should hurry,” I tell her.

“We should.” Her voice is infuriatingly calm. “To be clear, are you angry with me because I told you to stop?”

My tail lashes behind me, smacking a crate so hard it topples onto its side, spilling rations across the cargo bay.

“Never,” I say vehemently, closing the distance between us in two steps, trying to ignore the delectable scent of her skin. “I would never be angry about that.” I cannot seem to settle on which of her beautiful eyes to look at, so my gaze flicks between them.

“Okay... Here’s the thing, though—you were fine until I told you to stop. So if you’re pissed at me because you didn’t have the chance to get off, there are other ways to finish besides inside my vagina.”

My jaw drops. This is why she thinks I am upset? Because I did not cum inside her?

“I cannot believe I have to explain this to you,” I seethe. “Have you truly been so misused by human men?”

She gapes at me, and for a moment we stare at each other, the weight of unsaid things growing heavier between us.

“Is it because you don’t like my body?” Her voice quavers, and it hits me then, the reason she thinks I am angry.

She thinks she has displeased me.

“Oh, Carmen,” I say, shaking my head, wanting to touch her, needing it. I don’t, though. I will not give in to temptation with her again. “No. You are... perfect. You are a sweet berry, and I am the forest creature who tears the fruit from the bush.”

She blinks. “What?”

“You did not want to have sex with me. But you told me yes because you did not want to tell me no.” I make the words as plain as possible, so there can be no more miscommunication between us.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Her brow creases, and she mutters several words I do not understand under her breath. Words for animal fecal matter, according to my translator.

“I am not joking. Why would I joke about this? You did not want to have ___”

“Shut up, will you? God. I cannot with you.” One hand is on her hip, and the other pokes me in the chest. “I did want to have sex.”

A red flush covers her cheeks, charming and so very human. I stare at her,

making myself be patient.

“You did?” I ask, unable to stop the question.

“Hell yeah I did! And it was good, sooooo good. Until... it wasn’t.” The red on her cheeks deepens. “Then it was too much.”

I let out a low growl, but she holds up a hand before I can turn away in disgust.

“You do not have to try to make me feel better. This is my fault, for taking what you did not intend to give.”

“Please. Just listen, okay?” Her eyes are wide and pleading, and I nod because how could I refuse that request? I cannot.

“I *wanted* to have sex. Believe me. I absolutely wanted to—I’m not *that* much of a doormat that I would tell you yes if I didn’t want to! It just... I can’t... I’ve never been able to have more than one orgasm, and it stopped... it stopped feeling good.”

The fire’s gone from her voice, and she will not look up at me.

Embarrassed, I realize. Not upset with me, but with... herself?

Relief cascades through me, so fierce it brings me to my knees before her. I loop my arms around her hips, drawing her to me and resting my cheek against her chest.

“You really thought I wouldn’t tell you no? I only asked you to stop because,” she pauses, staring down at me with those huge, soft eyes fringed with even softer lashes, “it didn’t feel good. It felt like too much. I would have helped you... finish another way, but I thought you were mad because I told you I couldn’t... you know... anymore—”

“Be fucked,” I finish for her gravely.

She snorts a laugh, a charming noise. I rub my cheek across the swell of her breast, reveling in this knowledge, in the relief that I did not take what was not freely given. She did want me.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” she adds.

“I should apologize,” I say at the same time. “I... am sorry. I told you I am not good with... others.”

“You know how you get better?” Carmen purses her pretty pink lips at me and I wait, hoping she will tell me. “You talk to people. You talk to me. I’m not alone in wanting this to work out between us, right?”

“You are not,” I rasp, knowing I do not deserve her, but so very willing for another chance. “I want to be with you in all ways.”

“Then you have to talk to me. You can’t just storm out because I get

overstimulated and need a breather. I know that makes me... different than other women, but it doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other."

"I would like to enjoy you again." My xof begins to vibrate, excited by this turn of events.

A quiet chuckle escapes her lips, and I hold onto the sound the same way I hold onto her.

Like she is my salvation.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CARMEN

WELL, that went better than I thought it would.

My hands are clammy from stress as I finish organizing the pack I'll wear up the mountain to whatever the fuck the witch cave is, and I'm still trembling slightly from my nervousness over a possible confrontation with Xade. In retrospect, since he's now casting me adoring glances as he fills several flasks and canteens with potable water, it feels a little silly that I got so worked up about it, but... I really didn't know what to expect.

I guess we both have a lot to learn about how to communicate with each other... and I don't just mean the language barrier. He may have had a point about our personalities being in conflict. But I can stand up for myself.

It's not easy and it's not fun, but I can do it.

Despite his fire and ice demeanor, I like Xade. He's grumpy and not very talkative, but I like the way he looks at me. I like that I can make him smile, even if it's just a little bit.

I like what we might grow to have.

"Ready?" Xade asks, and when I nod, he slides a finger across the biometric pad, allowing the cargo ramp to open.

Early morning sunshine pours inside the ship and I blink against it, shielding my eyes with a hand.

"Who is ready to find some crazed Crigomar?" Redax booms, hoisting an ax in one hand. At least it isn't red, I guess. I raise an eyebrow.

"I didn't know he was coming." I swing my gaze back to Xade, who looks like he just bit into a sour lemon.

"I told you we did not need help last night," Xade says, scowling. "We will be fine on our own."

"And I have never taken no for an answer, have I, Xade?" Redax says, then winks at me.

I didn't know Suevans winked.

"You two smell well-fucked," he adds, his green nostrils flaring.

"That's it!" I yell, about done with male drama for the morning. "You aren't coming with us, and you *are* taking no for an answer, and that's that! And, for the record, you can't just tell people they smell well-fucked!" I

stomp my foot for emphasis, one hand on the pommel of the short energy sword on my hip.

Redax blinks in surprise.

Xade stares at me, open-mouthed.

“Why not?” Redax asks plaintively.

“Because it’s rude! Keep your nose to yourself, you weirdo.”

“I meant, why can I not come with you two to the witch cave? I see no reason three would be more trouble than two.”

“Because we want to be *alone*,” Xade says, a bit of menace in the phrase.

“Yeah,” I agree, nodding my head. “It’s our honeymoon.”

“Your... insect nectar lunar object?” Redax scratches his chin with the blade of his ax.

“It’s a human tradition,” I say, filling my voice with enough derision that he goes slackjawed. Obviously he wouldn’t know what a honeymoon is, but if I don’t act serious, I’m going to burst out laughing at ‘insect nectar lunar object.’

“To celebrate a wedding. The couple goes off alone on a trip. It’s romantic.”

“Taking a dangerous trip to a witch cave to find out why the Crigomar are biting legs and tails off of Suevans is considered romantic to humans?” Xade asks, clearly intrigued at the concept.

Maybe it’s the slight hangover headache I have, maybe it’s the post-orgasm exhaustion, or maybe it’s the remnants of my stress over having a hard conversation with Xade, but I don’t have it in me to explain anything else.

“Yep. That’s right. Very romantic. A quest for the married couple to go on.”

“To celebrate your union!” Redax roars, raising his weapon again.

I wince. It’s a bit loud.

“Yeah. That’s right,” I lie. I do not want Redax with us, nope. That would put a huge, serrated-tooth wrinkle in my plans. “We have to do it alone.”

“You have your comms tablets, though, right? If you get in trouble, I am only a comm away.”

“Can you hear me now?” I mime, holding up a cell phone, and laugh. Half a second later, they’re both staring at me like I’ve grown a second head. I loose a sigh.

“Yes? You are standing right next to me?” Xade frowns, confused.

“Why is she asking that?” Redax whispers to him.

“It was a joke... you know what? Forget it. We’ll comm you if we get in a tight spot.”

“Not just a tight spot,” Redax begins expansively. “If you get half-eaten or mauled by a Crigomar, or if you eat the wrong plant and are poisoned, or if the witch traps you and eats you, those are all excellent reasons to comm me.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. Good grief.

“There is no witch,” Xade insists.

“Have it your way.” Redax shrugs, then does the odd Suevan fist salute before wandering back off into the mountain forests.

“Watch out for the witch,” he calls, his voice echoing strangely around the ship’s interior before fading entirely.

“Humans go on a quest with their mate after marriage?” Xade turns to me, frowning.

“Ah, well—”

“This is very fortuitous then. Perhaps the other males had it right when they kidnapped their wives for their insect nectar quests.”

“Oh, so, you see—”

“And I did not even have to kidnap you. You came willingly.” He beams at me, his tail swishing behind him like he’s never been prouder.

My eye twitches. “I did that.”

“The let us begin our insect nectar lunar object,” he gestures for me to walk down the cargo ramp.

I don’t know if I should laugh or not, so I just shake my head and tighten the straps of my pack. Translation issues take our communication problems to the next level.

Insect nectar lunar object. I can’t help the smile that pulls the corners of my mouth up, and once I step in the needle-covered dirt, I grin back at Xade.

If we’re going to have an insect nectar quest, then I’m going to make it fun.

I hold out a hand, and Xade glances between it and my face for a long moment as the cargo ramp raises back into place.

“I want to hold your hand,” I explain.

“Why? Are your fingers cold?”

“No, not yet, anyway.” I wrinkle my nose because I didn’t think to pack gloves. “But if they were, you would keep them warm, right?”

“Of course.” An affronted expression wrinkles his brow.

“It’s a human sign of affection. Maybe Suevan, too, I don’t know.” My mouth twists to the side. I’m pretty sure I’ve seen the other women holding hands with their spouses, but I’m not one hundred percent on that. I try to avoid watching them together, as it always makes me painfully aware of my own loneliness. At least, it used to.

Maybe it won’t, not anymore. Warmth spreads through me at the idea.

Xade finally takes a step towards me, his large fingers closing over my hand, a suspicious scowl on his face.

“I like that look.”

“What look?”

“The grumpy one. I like it because when I make you smile, it feels even more real.”

A faint grin appears, gone just as quickly.

I beam up at him/ and we set off through the strange mountain forest hand in hand, blue-green needles crunching under my boots.

“Did you lock the car?” I ask.

“What?”

“It was a joke, forget it.”

“Explain.” He’s frowning, and I regret that I keep trying to make stupid jokes around him. He doesn’t have the frame of reference for it, and they wouldn’t really be funny even if he did.

“On Earth, we have land vehicles. You lock them with a button when you park and go inside somewhere so no one can steal them. They make a beep-beep noise when you lock them.”

“Beep-beep?” His voice is dubious, and I squeeze his hand.

“Sounds locked to me.”

The alien forest grows denser the further we hike up, and it’s not long before I’m positively puffing.

“When we return to Edrobaz, you will be training with me,” Xade growls. He sounds angry, but when I manage to catch my breath long enough to look at him, all he really seems is concerned.

Which is... so sweet. I tilt my head and give him a little smile, heartened

by that. “You’re worried about me?”

“Yes, your breath sounds as though you have run for miles and miles, though we have gone no further than forty-five minutes from the ship.”

My smile disappears. “That was a little rude.”

“It is true,” he tells me, unclipping one of his water canteens and handing it to me.

“It’s the altitude,” I say. “My lungs aren’t working as well up here.”

“Human bodies are not very hardy.”

“You’re not wrong,” I tell him, then wrap a self-conscious arm around my waist. I should have been training over the last dozen or so weeks. I should have at least tried to keep in shape because this hike up to whatever the hell the witch cave is?

This is going to be sheer torture.

When I glance up, he’s moved closer, a predatory glint in his eyes. “I like your human body, fragile or not.”

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow, still trying to catch my breath. This is going to be a long-ass hike.

His hand grips my hip, squeezing, and I squeak in surprise. “I find I like this very much. If this hike becomes too much for you, perhaps I can hold you in my arms and feel you all over.”

My eyebrows rocket up. “Feel me all over?”

“You might still lose your breath if I walk with you hanging from my cock.”

My jaw drops. “I, uh, that doesn’t sounds very safe.” I can just imagine my ass hanging out while he fucks me all the way up the mountain. “I don’t think I’m going to take you up on that.”

He grunts, clearly disappointed, although the teeny-tiny smile on his lips tells me maybe Xade does know how to joke, after all.

“I think perhaps you are struggling more this morning after Redax’s chelda last night.”

“Mmm, maybe.” He might be right. Either way, this is not the fun honeymoon of anyone’s dreams.

“How can we pass the time to take your mind from your discomfort? If I were a better male, I would know something we could do... but I am not...”

“It’s okay,” I tell him softly, my hand on his wrist, my heart aching at the vulnerable look on his face. “And that’s a good idea.”

“Drink,” he tells me, popping the cap off the canteen and handing it to

me.

The water is crisp and cool and tastes so freaking good. Maybe that damn drink last night did dehydrate me.

“Are you hungry yet?” he asks.

“No. In fact, the thought of eating makes me feel a little sick.”

“That’s the chelda.”

My nose wrinkles. “I figured.”

“When you are hungry, tell me and we will stop and eat, yes?”

“Okay.”

“Or—” he draws the word out long, “you could simply let me carry you while you eat.”

A small laugh bubbles out of me. “I’ll let you know if I need to be carried, I promise.”

“I like to hold you,” he says, and warmth spreads across my chest.

“That’s—”

“Don’t move,” he suddenly snarls and I freeze, glancing around as adrenaline begins pumping through my veins. “I do not want you to startle it,” he adds.

I see it then—the bright red scale pattern striped with yellow.

“Red on yellow kill a fellow!” I shriek, and then, losing my mind completely, I toss the water canteen at the snake. The snake strikes at the near-empty canteen, and I grab it by its tail, swinging it in circles over my head.

I let the snake go and it soars overhead, thumping into a tree in the distance before falling with a crunch onto the floor.

Xade gapes at me.

If I thought I was panting before, it’s nothing on what I’m doing now. I put my hands on my hips, bending over and trying to get some air into my lugs.

“You are not very good at following directions. Why did you throw that?” Xade steps close, pulling a huge bug I hadn’t even noticed off my shoulder. He squishes it between his talons, and green oozes out.

“Very poisonous,” he tells me.

“So was that snake!”

“No, it was not. You threw it very far, though.” He observes gravely. “Is it an Earth custom to fling reptiles while chanting rhymes?”

Embarrassment colors my cheeks and I nod, feeling numb in the wake of

all that pounding adrenaline. "Yep. It sure is. Big ritual. Important."

I'm going to hell for being a liar. That snake will probably be there too, just to bite me on my lying ass.

"It wasn't poisonous?" I ask. "On Earth, that color pattern means it could kill you."

"So humans throw venomous creatures instead of letting them be? You are a very strange species."

"Why did you tell me not to move if the snake wasn't poisonous?"

"Because that insect was. It would have put you in a coma." He says it so casually that it takes my brain a full minute to catch up. I'm trailing after him as he sets back off through the woods, as though he didn't just tell me that bug would have done a Snow White to me.

My skin crawls. I hate bugs. Like really, really hate them. As a biologist, I understand how important they are.

That doesn't mean I like them. Sure, I'd usher spiders out the door back on Earth and try not to kill them... but—ugh. I do a full-body shudder.

"Are you ill?" he asks. "Did it sting you?"

"Would I have felt it if it had?" My voice is tight and squeaky.

"Oh yes, it would feel like fire." He stops walking, inspecting me.

I pull my shirt up, looking for evidence of a killer insect sting, finally sighing in relief as all I see is my normal skin.

Xade watches me with a suspicious expression.

"All clear," I tell him. I don't like that look. He opens his mouth, and I think I'm not going to like what he's about to say even more.

"What kind of field training have you had?" he asks slowly.

"What do you mean?" My stomach drops because I should have known he would ask this, and the answer is really fucking embarrassing after how much I fought to get to go with him on this mission.

"Field training." He crosses his arms over his chest, his expression thunderous. He scowls at me. "You told us all you were a top xenobiologist. How much field training have you had?"

"Well," I draw the word out, then decide to just rip the Band-aid off. "None."

He blinks, then shakes his head. "I thought so." Xade mutters something under his breath, then takes back off on the path up the forest.

I blow out a breath, staring at the craggy boulders and underbrush in dismay.

“This was my first mission to an alien world,” I tell him, struggling to catch up to his long-legged strides.

“Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t exactly lie,” I say, quickstepping around a fallen branch. An insect zings by my ear and I side-eye it.

“You did not tell the truth.”

I cringe. “That’s fair.”

“Why? I do not want to lead you into danger, especially if you are not adequately prepared.”

“Because I couldn’t think of a better way to get to spend time with you,” I finally manage. God, he makes walking up this trail look easy, but I’m huffing and puffing like I’m going to blow a little pig’s house down.

“Tell me about the flora and fauna here.”

He doesn’t respond, and my plan of slowing him down and distracting him from the fact I know a hell of a lot about xenobiology theory that may or may not translate to lived experience...

“Who?” he asks, interrupting my anxious flow of thoughts.

“You know, animals and plants. These trees, for example—” I gesture at the odd-shaped trees, which look like pine trees, except for the fact they’re more blue than green and have weeping branches tipped with silvery sap. “They’re really cool.”

“Those are the gluab tree,” he says. “The sap is an excellent binding agent, and many of the birds here depend on it in the cold months for food. It is also anti-microbial, and when I was on my own out here, I used it to clean any mild wounds.”

“Cold months?” I echo. “I thought it was always hot. Jungly... you know. Jungle planet?” Well, some kind of scientist I am.

“Of course we have cold months. Nothing like some of the ice planets in other universes. I cannot imagine trying to survive on one of those.”

“I feel stupid.” A red... pinecone—or at least, the Suevan boreal equivalent—crunches underfoot, and my lip curls as I stick slightly to it. “I don’t know why I assumed it was always hot here.” I tilt my head, trying to parse my thoughts. I’m never drinking chelda again. At least, not alcoholic chelda. “No, that’s not true. I never really assumed it was always hot. I just hadn’t thought far enough ahead about the seasons on Sueva, I guess.”

“You have kept yourself very busy. I am not surprised to hear that you have concerned yourself more with the present than the future.”

He might not be surprised, but I am.

Before Sueva, before the Roth and even after, I was always planning. Making to-do lists, checking things off to give myself a sense of accomplishment. Slight discomfort settles over me as I realize that lately, my biggest to-do was catching up with the rest of the women and making some headway with my stubborn husband.

“Do you like me?” I wince as the question leaves my mouth.

“You are my wife,” he answers.

Oof. “That’s not really an answer,” I make myself say.

He stops, turning around and drinking in the sight of me. The fervor in his gaze pulls me up short, and for a moment, we just stand there, staring at each other.

“I like everything about you. I like your softness, your curves, all the kindness you wear around you every second of the day. I was so afraid to steal that from you, that I was too opposite you and that I would trample all your gentle parts, that I kept myself at a distance.”

He takes a deep breath and I blink, emotions rising like a sea-salt tide inside me.

“I am nothing like you—I do not have the right words to make people feel better, like you do. I would rather be alone than give up my time to assist someone making sweets, especially when that someone is as tart as Bex.”

I snort a laugh through the tears welling up in my eyes. Bex is definitely an acquired taste.

“You are sweet, and kind, and thoughtful, and happy, and everything that I am not.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the words die in my throat as he advances, cupping my cheeks in his hand.

“And I am no longer scared of trampling you because you are not underfoot. You are sunshine itself, and my own storm clouds might dull you, but you will still shine through. I see that now. Yes, Carmen, I like you. I like everything about you. You are my wife, and I will do my best to live up to your sunshine for the rest of my days.”

My gaze darts between his eyes, my heart swelling with affection for this grumpy, curt Suevan who just said the most romantic words I’ve ever heard.

“Kiss me,” I finally demand.

He does, too, fully and well, his mouth closing over mine like he’s sealing a promise. Whew. I swear, how he learned to kiss so perfectly well is

a mystery and a miracle. His hands still lightly hold my face, his tail curving around my calf, his lips brushing gently against mine, then more insistently.

Xade slowly pulls away, his thumbs caressing my cheekbones, stooping so his forehead rests against mine.

Our breath mingles, the connection between us growing taut and thick, and I can't resist wrapping my arms around his muscled waist.

"Thank you," I finally say into his chest.

He runs a hand through my hair, a soft chuckle vibrating against my face. "No, Carmen, thank you. Thank you for being patient—and for being impatient and stubborn enough to insist on coming with me for this trip... even if it is dangerous."

I grin, tilting my chin up to look him in the eye. "Thank you for finally realizing what you were missing."

He barks out a laugh, and then silence falls once again on the forest.

"I like you too," I tell him. "A lot, actually. Even if you are stubborn."

Suddenly, when I stop talking, I realize what it is that feels so off about this place. It's the quiet.

The silence.

We resume walking, Xade keeping just ahead of me.

The silence grows more oppressive with every step.

"Are there no birds? No animals up here?" I ask, as quietly as I can muster.

"There should be," Xade answers just as quietly, then signals that we keep walking.

The hair stands up on the back of my neck.

Nothing is making noise, but that doesn't mean there isn't something out there.

Some primitive, primal part of me screams that we're being watched. The further we hike up the path, the more intense the sensation gets. I pull my sword from the sheath at my hip, just in case.

That strange, animal instinct to fight is probably what saves my life.

**CHAPTER
FOURTEEN**

XADE

I TURN AS QUICKLY as I sense something's wrong, lashing out with talon and fang, launching myself at the... thing that's grabbed Carmen.

It is not from Sueva, that much I know for certain. Neon-colored slime drips from it, sizzling where it hits the ground, then disappearing. A bird-like head sits at an improbable angle on bone-thin shoulders, and its ankles and elbows bend the wrong way. My stomach turns as I realize the monster's arms reach all the way to the ground.

The thing has her.

My wife. My sunshine.

She's slashing at it, not making a noise beyond her grunts of exertion.

My heart is a drum in my ears, the bitter taste of fear coating my tongue.

"Carmen," I scream, trying to get close. The thing, whatever it is, has coated her with foul-smelling slime, and every arrow I manage to pepper its hide with simply slides off after a moment. Whatever is in the slime keeps the specialty tips from working.

I toss the bow aside, a now-useless limb, and pull out the plas rifle strapped to the side of my pack. It is not as precise as the bow, though, and the creature is moving so rapidly I'm afraid to further injure Carmen if I take a shot.

Her shoulders slump, her head lolling as the fight goes out of her. Blood drips from several abrasions on her forehead and arms, and a roar of pure rage and helplessness rips from my chest.

When I try to get close, though, trying to fight my way to her, the air turns hazy, light shimmering oddly around the monster.

I blink, trying to right myself, fighting through whatever it is the creature's attempting.

Light flashes, overwhelming and unnaturally bright.

Pain sears through my entire body.

When I wake, the fading afternoon sun is my only company.

"CARMEN," I scream, ignoring the throbbing pain in my head, blood trickling in a steady stream from my nose.

My voice echoing around the mountaintop is the only response I get.

**CHAPTER
FIFTEEN**

CARMEN

EVERYTHING HURTS. My skin's on fire, my throat and nose feel singed and chalky, and my head is pounding. The stench of rotten food coats every olfactory receptor in my nose and mouth, and I sit up, gagging on nothing at all.

"Shit, shit, shit," I mutter, each word making my headache worse. Pain lances all the way up my jaw and I gingerly press all over my head, checking for any major contusions. I kinda hope the rotten smell is due to a concussion and not something... actually rotten.

I move my foot slightly, blinking into the darkness, and something squelches against my boot.

The horrible odor intensifies, and I have my answer.

Good news? I'm not concussed.

Bad news? I'm ankle-deep in some kind of alien carcass.

Worst news? Judging by the nightmarish shape of the flickering light at the darkest end of the cave, I'm in the monster's lair.

Yay.

The light grows closer, the shape taking on the form of the same creature that attacked and kidnapped me.

My skin crawls, and the urge to get up and run is overpowering. Unfortunately, so is the urge to remain as still as possible.

I now fully understand how a deer in headlights feels.

It's not great!

Tremors shake my body, so fast and furious I'm not sure I could get very far even if my legs cooperated.

"Please don't eat me," I whimper, then snap my mouth shut. I blink against the bright light it's emitting, only to see my half-melted energy sword dangling from its chest. Or, where a chest would be if it were human. While the monster is slightly anthropomorphic, it is anything but human. It's definitely not Suevan, either.

I don't think Xade had a clue what it was.

Xade.

I press my hand against my mouth to keep from crying out. Is he okay?

What if this thing killed him? Oh god.

The creature cuts off any further thoughts by making some kind of whistling chirrup sound, its weird triangular head darting back and forth. One bony hand lifts from the floor in front of me, and I shrink away from its touch, fearing I'm about to be monster meat.

But it doesn't touch me, just keeps making that plaintive whistling noise.

"You're trying to communicate," I say on an exhale, my eyes wide.

It chirrups again, tilting its head, hand still outstretched.

Does it want me to follow it? I have no idea. Seconds slide by like molasses, turning into minutes, the creature just standing there and waiting.

Finally, I carefully stand up, trying to avoid whatever it is that's decaying next to me. The creepy monster doesn't eat me.

"If you're taking me to a cauldron, I'm going to be real pissed," I tell it.

My heart beats wildly, and the last time I remember being this scared and out of options was the night the Roth attacked. My odds of survival were terrible back then, and while they're not great now, from the slow, labored pace the bird-monster's setting, I'd say we're not unevenly matched.

It's hurt. Because of me. That's my short sword, half-melted and sticking from its body.

Clearly, it's sentient, too, because it's trying to communicate with me, leading me through the cave.

Maybe it hadn't planned on attacking me. Maybe it just needs help.

Or, maybe, I'm being a dumbass and projecting motivation on a truly disturbing alien who might be about to crack my lungs open and eat my heart. Whichever!

"You're not going to eat me, right?" I ask, cringing as I crunch on something dry on the floor. I'm not sure whether I'm grateful for the lack of light or not.

The bird-monster chirrups again, still slowly shambling towards the rear of the cave.

Is this the witch cave Xade and Redax were talking about?

It stumbles, then halts, its communication attempts growing more frantic as it gestures at the wall.

I blink, stepping closer, trying to figure out what it wants from me. Not a meal, god, please, I hope this thing doesn't eat me. So not in the mood to be monster mash.

"Oh, oh shit," I say, squinting into the gloom. "I can't quite see it—"

There's something on the wall. Something written on it, carved into it, maybe a mural? A relief? I can't remember the term for it, not with a maybe human-eating monster breathing down my neck.

It doesn't matter.

"You thought I could figure out what this is, huh? I hope that's not wishful thinking, you know."

It chirrups again, and then chitters, and maybe it's my imagination playing tricks on me, but I swear, it sounds sad. Really sad.

"It's too dark," I tell it softly. "I can't see it."

The monster glows. Not the incandescent fireworks that must have knocked me out earlier, but a soft glow that illuminates the art thingiemabob on the wall.

I blink because even that low-wattage glow is enough to be near blinding in the darkness of the cave.

Slowly, the images on the wall come into focus. The world tilts sideways as I gape at them.

I was expecting Suevan writing, some pictographs maybe, or some of the mosaic-style art that Michelle told me about seeing in one of the temples. From Gen's stories about her time stuck in a temple with Kanuz, I know better than to touch the wall at all, and I take a quick step away from it just in case there's some kind of trigger mechanism, still staring in disbelief.

It's not Suevan.

There are Suevans pictured in the ancient carving, yes, but they're not the focus.

Nope. The focus is a group of females.

Human females.

What the *fuck*?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

XADE

DETERMINATION IS the only thing I will allow myself now. There is no room for the acidic fear threatening to overwhelm me.

My Carmen, my sunshine mate, gone. Out of reach.

Up on some goddess-damned mountain, taken by... a monstrosity I have never seen before. Never even heard whispers of.

The comms tablet.

With any luck, it's undamaged. The pack is well-structured, so if it did its job—

I rummage through it, finally finding it safely nestled between several rations packs, in one piece. I run my finger over the glyphs on the side, but it stays dark.

“Fuck,” I swear. My fangs pierce the softer underside of my lower lip, and I tuck the comms tablet back inside.

Whatever light blasted out of the monster that stole Carmen must have overheated its plas core.

“Impossible,” I mutter, even though it is clearly not impossible.

The odds look grimmer every moment. I could go back down to Kioveset, pull together a band of outlaws to take the witch cave... and then lose valuable time that could mean the difference between recovering Carmen whole or—

No. I will not even allow that possible to take root in my mind.

I strap my bow back to my pack, holding my rifle aloft and ignoring the steady trickle of blood at my temple and hip. My tail is bruised too, but none of it matters.

None of it even begins to compare to my need to find Carmen, to make sure she is safe, and to kill whatever the thing is that ripped her from me.

I have lost much time.

It cannot be too much, though.

I grit my teeth and begin to jog up the mountainside, ignoring the clattering shale and setting a brutal pace that my sunny Carmen would not have been able to maintain.

My stomach growls, hungry and empty, but I ignore it.

The only thing I need to sustain me is the face of the female I love and the hope of seeing the light in her warm eyes again.

That, and the desire to murder the beast responsible for taking her from me.

**CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN**

CARMEN

MY STOMACH ACHES WITH HUNGER, and I'm pretty sure the raging headache I have is part hangover, part hunger, and part whatever this alien hit me with to knock me out.

I am getting used to the absolutely disgusting smell of the cave, though.

Hooray.

"Makes me think you might need to look into an air freshener, you know?" I say to the monster conversationally. "Don't want to go nose blind to all the rotting carcasses around here."

I don't know what they are, either, same as I can't make heads or tails of the crazy mural-carving-ancient art thingie on the wall.

There are Suevans.

There are also humans. At least, they look like humans.

Which means, at some point, humanoid creatures were on this planet... and from the looks of this wall, thousands of years ago.

The monster makes the same soothing, sad noise it keeps making, and I decide I can't keep thinking of it as a monster.

Yeah, it hasn't let me leave the cave, but it also hasn't hurt me, and most importantly, it hasn't tried to eat me.

I'm gonna call that a win.

"And I'm going to call you Kyle," I tell it. "I thought about naming you Oozey, but that just seems disrespectful."

Kyle coos mournfully, tapping its too-long fingers on the ground.

"Oh, shit." I stare at Kyle's bony hands and it hits me. They're not hands at all. His arms look fucked up because they aren't arms. His knees are inverted because he's not structured like a human, obviously.

He's structured like a bird. His arms are wings.

It clicks, and suddenly, Kyle isn't half as scary.

A huge, featherless, oozing bird, but a bird nonetheless. Or close to it, at least. His neck isn't as long as bird skeletons I've studied, but the basic structure is similar.

Although, a lot of birds are omnivores, so maybe I shouldn't get too comfy with my guy Kyle.

Kyle shuffles closer, then raises a bony wing-arm and taps the wall. I shudder. I thought nails on a chalkboard was bad, until I heard that.

He taps again, and I make myself look at where he's pointing instead of staring at his... mouth structure and wondering if I'm still on the dinner menu.

One of the human—or human-like—women in the mural stands on a raised dais, her hands pressed to a large circular structure. There's some color flaking off the wall, so it must have been painted at one point.

I start to rub a fingertip across the surface, trying to figure out what the hell is going on in this image, then remember how Gen trapped herself in a temple when she let her curiosity get the best of her.

I don't want to be any more trapped than I already am.

Kyle squawks when I drop my hand and I jump, squealing a little.

He squawks at my squeal, flapping his arms, the half-melted sword still protruding from his weird gooey chest.

“Do you want me to help you with that?” I ask him, unable to tear my gaze away. “It looks pretty rough.”

Kyle just tilts his head, studying me with one red-black eye.

Then he points again, further back into the cave.

“You want me to go back there with you?” I ask dubiously. Not so sure I want to keep walking through this damn cave. But it seems like most of the carcasses are up front, so... what else am I going to do?

Sighing, pinching the bridge of my nose and generally feeling like an all-around goober, I follow my bird friend/captor to the back of the cave, where his glow turns brighter by the minute.

“Kyle, you're glowing. It's freaking me out,” I mutter, holding my arms around my chest. I'm tired and trembling and positive this mission has completely spun out of control.

I will never skip training again, I swear to god.

Kyle chirps, raising his bony arm and pointing.

I squint, but it's like even the weird-ass light he's emitting is swallowed up by the darkness.

I step closer, and then I see it.

“Holy fucking shit, Kyle.”

He coos, chirping excitedly, even flapping his wings a little bit. I wince when he stops, clearly pained by my sword still stuck in his body.

A real downer, that.

“You know, I’m a trained nurse. A medic. I can help you. It would help me, too, considering it’s making me feel slightly nauseated to look at, and that’s not even beginning to touch how guilty I feel about it.”

He squawks, the noise so birdlike that I’m slightly shocked I didn’t realize what his weird-ass arms were immediately.

Then again, I guess I was distracted by the fact he was glowing and trying to carry me off, but eh.

He points a wing-hand at the circular structure again.

“Alright, alright. But here’s the thing, Kyle, I know that picture on the wall showed a human, or, at least, something that looked like a human—”

I wince as he screams, clearly perturbed that I’m not getting down to business with the...

I don’t know what it is.

“I don’t have the first clue what to do with this,” I mutter.

My muscles protest as I step up onto the dais. It’s not rough or dirty or even dusty, like the rest of the cave, but so slick my boot skims across the surface. I windmill both arms, trying to keep my balance so I don’t end up breaking my tailbone.

Finally, I stop sliding, right before I make it through the arch.

Every nerve in my body is screaming that I do not want to go through that arch. My chest aches, and I’m slightly stunned as I realize I’m holding my breath.

All my hairs are standing on end.

This... whatever this structure is... it feels alive. It feels like it’s awake.

Goosebumps ripple across my skin, and Kyle chirrup again.

“Yeah, thanks for the encouragement. I see why you wanted me up here with it,” I grumble. Slowly, I sink to my hands and knees, trying to avoid slip-sliding through the archway.

The bird-skeleton-monster cries out again, and then it’s my turn to scream as the circle overhead begins to glow, pulsing blue, glyphs I’ve never seen humming to life.

I may not know what this is, but I know I need to get the fuck off it before something happens that I can’t undo.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

XADE

I HEAR HER SCREAM, too far off in the distance for me to be able to help, at the same time I become intensely aware of being followed. Dark's fallen in earnest, much faster at this latitude than in Edrobaz.

My bow's in my hands, drawn and cocked, in the time it takes me to blink.

"Show yourself," I growl, every cell of my being needing to find Carmen, find her and save her. "I will kill you if you take up much more of my time."

The sound of the female's scream cuts off abruptly, and my tail lashes behind me in sheer frustration. I need to get to her.

I have wasted so much time, and finally now, when happiness is within reach, it's been ripped away.

"Show yourself, or I loose this arrow into your guts," I growl.

A familiar figure steps into the sliver of moonlight.

"No need to shoot," Redax says, his hands in the air. "I saw a flash earlier... and I tracked you up here. I noticed, ah, that your wife is not with you—"

"She was taken, stolen by some otherworldly being, and now you are wasting my time."

"We thought we could help," Xamet says, also stepping out of the dense forested underbrush and into the moonlight. "We want to help."

A dozen of the outlaws from Kioveset appear around me, and my chest tightens in relief.

"Why did you not show yourselves before now?" I ask, then regret it as Xamet and Redax share an annoyed look. "Never mind. The more hands to help, the better."

"She's at the witch cave," Redax announces.

"That was my thought too. What makes you think that, though?" I ask, already jogging up the steep mountainside, dodging boulders and fallen branches in my haste to get to Carmen.

"If you slowed down and looked, you would see why I think that," Redax says, keeping pace with me.

"There," Xamet adds, pointing much further up the trail.

Where there was only dark rock and forest scrub before, there is now a craggy shape, maybe an hour or so's climb above us. It's only noticeable now because of the deep cyan glow it's emitting, casting the entire area in an eldritch light.

Another scream ricochets off the mountain, and my blood runs cold.
Carmen is in trouble.

"Whatever took her is in that cave," I snarl. "It has some sort of electromagnetic ability—it fried my comms tablet and knocked me out."

"It must be what is driving the Crigomar mad."

"I have never seen anything like it," I tell them through clenched teeth. "We need to hurry. I cannot lose her. I cannot lose her... I love her."

"We will save her, friend." Redax moves effortless across the rocks, and when we reach a cliff face, he scales it easily, then reaches a hand down to help me do the same. "We will save your little human wife."

He shares a glance with Xamet, and I barely spare a second thinking of what they might ask for in return.

It does not matter, not really.

I would pay any price to have Carmen safely in my arms.

**CHAPTER
NINETEEN**

CARMEN

“SHIT, FUCK, SHIT-FUCK!” I screech. The archway is completely lit up, and I swear it’s trying to pull me through it. The once dark cave is flooded with light, and Kyle’s clawed feet click-clack on the floor as he dances around in excitement.

As for me, I’m still on all fours, doing my best not to be sucked into whatever is fucking happening behind me.

“I should have listened to Gen, I shouldn’t have touched anything in this goddamn cave, this is a nightmare, what the fuck,” I chant, trying to scooch my way off the dais and back into the cave. My hair blows behind me, and I really, truly, very much do not want to know why it’s being caught in a sudden windstorm.

Time slides by, reality wavering, the cave turning hazy. Heat scorches my back, and the urge to turn and look at the archway pulls at me.

Still, I try to make my way off the dais, too scared to look.

Kyle’s jaw is unhinged, and frankly, I should have named him devil-bird because I’m pretty sure he’s going to get me killed. He’s making noise, but I can’t hear him, can’t hear anything at all. A boundary shimmers at the edge of the dais, blurring the cave and Kyle from view.

All that exists is me and the archway, and no matter how frantically I try to crawl to the edge, I’m not making any headway. This is not good.

I’m scared.

Sweat drips from my temples, and the arch tugs at me, phantom fingers pulling me backwards every time I start to make progress. I can’t go through that arch, I cannot go through that gate.

I don’t have a clue what that mural meant, but my entire brain is screaming to get away from it.

Kyle, on the other hand, keeps trying to get onto the dais, keeps trying to get through the arch, and from the way his beak thing is open, I know he’s making bird sounds of frustration, but I can’t hear anything over the steady hum of the vortex behind me.

Because that’s what it is.

I don’t know how, or why, but that damn arch is a gate. I don’t know

where it goes, but I think Kyle does, and I think he wants to get back there.

It feels like seconds have passed since it opened, but the tips of my fingers are bleeding and I wonder if it's been more like hours. Days.

I'm tired. I'm so tired.

I look up, off the polished black surface of the gate, and Kyle's right in front of me, horrible and bright, shimmering in the haze of whatever forcefield is cutting us off from each other.

I blink.

The next moment, Xade is there. Kyle stumbles forward, and I reach for the bird monster instinctively, not wanting to see him hurt.

He isn't meant to be on Sueva any more than I was meant to be pulled through this gate.

My fingers connect with slimy bone, and then Kyle is through the barrier. My ears pop as he makes it through, and I heave a sigh of relief and exhaustion.

Then my eyes go wide.

"Oh shit," I yell, the vortex behind me pulling even harder. The knees of my pants split and I let Kyle go, scrabbling for purchase to stay here.

I have to stay here.

Kyle screams, though, and I reach for him again, finally turning to look at the whirling blue vortex behind me.

My jaw drops, my brain failing to process the shock at what I'm seeing.

Sky, cerulean sky, pink-tinged cotton candy clouds, and far, far below, framed by the gate, a glistening abalone and moonstone city.

Kyle screams, running towards the gate, his bone-wings spread wide, gold-white flashes, and I blink against the heat and the light.

When I look back, Kyle's no longer oozing or bony—he's burning red and gold and iridescent blue, shimmering flames engulfing him.

Firebird.

And he's flying. He's soaring through the clouds until he's gone, just a speck in the distance.

I'm so entranced, I don't even notice the archway anymore.

It isn't until a sharp tug at my shoulder jerks me to the floor, my head slamming against the dais, that I realize how close I was.

I almost went through.

I almost fell through the portal.

My head is splitting, and if I didn't have a concussion before, I sure as

shit do now. When gentle hands pull me off the slick stone, though, all I feel is relief.

And all I see is Xade.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY**

XADE

I CANNOT TEAR my gaze away from her. Blood crusts the side of her face, still flowing down from a cut behind her ear.

She is covered in grime and sticky with whatever the monster oozed, but she blinks up at me, and I have never seen anything as beautiful.

“Xade?” she mutters, clearly dazed from her fall as the witch-cave device powered down. “What the hell was that?”

“I tried to kill the monster for you, but it is gone now.”

“No, he didn’t hurt me, he just wanted to go home.” Her expression turns sad, and she struggles slightly against me, sitting up and looking back at the strange structure in the back of the cave. “What just happened?”

“I do not know,” I tell her, unable to follow her gaze, unable to do more than stare at her, hold her close, and listen to the sound of her steady breathing. “I do not know, and I am so very sorry that I did not kill that beast for you.”

“Kyle might not be my bestie at the moment, but he wasn’t a monster.” A look of wonder crosses her face. “He was a firebird. Did you see it?”

I stare at her, dumbfounded. “What?”

“Did you see it, when he went through the portal? He turned into a beautiful bird... we have stories about them on Earth, but they’re a myth. A legend, not real, you know? But he went through the portal and all that goop turned into flaming feathers. I wonder if there was some kind of chemical in the atmosphere of that other place that isn’t here on Sueva. It was a whole ‘nother world.”

Distress grips me, chased by potent fear.

“You have hit your head very hard,” I tell her, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I need to examine you.”

A clanging sound echoes through the foul cave, momentarily distracting me from Carmen’s crisis. Redax swings his ax again, and then swears as it shatters against the structure.

“I didn’t imagine it,” Carmen says, confusion and disappointment warring on her face. “I know what I saw. I didn’t hit my head until after he went through.”

“There was nothing for the beast to go through,” I explain slowly, gently pulling her dark hair away from her head so I can take a better look at her wound. “The monster burned up the moment he hit the energy in the middle of arch.”

“No,” she starts to shake her head, then winces, holding still. “I saw it. It was a portal to another world. His world. I saw it.”

“Yes. Of course.”

She scowls. “You’re just saying that to shut me up.”

“You are hurt,” I tell her.

“I know what I saw!”

“I am taking you outside. I will examine your wounds, clean you up, and administer some medicine. Have you eaten?”

“I haven’t.” Worry creases her face. “You really think I hallucinated?”

“I do not know what to think. All I know is that what I saw and what you saw are two different things. That, and I need to make sure that you are not grievously injured.”

She sighs, a plaintive sound, going limp against me. “Alright.”

Relief keeps me moving to the mouth of the cave, where the outlaws have begun clearing the Crigomar carcasses, setting huge fires to dispose of their bodies.

Such a waste.

Heat from the fire scorches my scales, but I barely notice it, determined to ensure Carmen is well.

“Wait.” Carmen’s voice is clear, her blunt fingernails digging into my scales as she struggles against me. Her eyes are wide, her expression slightly panicked.

“What?”

“You don’t hear that?” She moves against me like she’s trying to stand, and I hold her closer still.

“I do not hear anything—”

She squeezes my arm, finally succeeding in slipping my grasp. One of the outlaws shoots me a concerned look, and I grit my teeth as she rushes over to a clump of scrub outside the cave.

As I follow her, though, my ears perk up.

I do hear it.

A little whining noise, high-pitched and angry.

“Oh my god,” she says, crouching behind a flat-topped boulder. “It’s a

nest, look.” She glances over her shoulder at me, her eyes welling with watery tears.

She is right. There is a Crigomar nest behind the boulder, most of the eggs in ruins, but two are freshly hatched, one baby Crigomar with its eyes still closed panting as it rests its head on the outside of the shell, tired from the trial of cracking through. A second baby Crigomar nestles next to it, whining—until it catches sight of Carmen.

Then it makes a happy noise.

“Do not—” I tell her, because she is in no shape to care for one baby Crigomar, much less two.

I do not speak fast enough, though.

Carmen stumbles forward as she reaches for the baby still in its shell, coming nose-to-nose with its sibling, who coos, eyes growing wider as it takes her in. Without warning, it scampers onto her chest, up her shoulder, digging into the fabric of her shirt with tiny claws, then burrowing into her hair.

“Oh,” Carmen says, a dreamy expression on her face as she lifts the other baby from its shell. “Well, call me the mother of dinosaurs, because you’re coming home with me.”

“Carmen—” How do I tell her how much work Crigomar younglings are? How do I begin to tell her this is a bad idea?

I cannot bring myself to say a word, not as she nuzzles the still-tired baby with her cheek, causing it to crack one obsidian eye open and stare at her with clear adoration.

“Crigomar young need a lot of—”

“I can handle it,” she snaps, steel in her voice I haven’t heard before. “We can’t just leave them here. They’re coming with me.”

My eyes widen, my tail lashing behind me. “It is not a good idea.”

“They’re mine.” Her voice is a snarl, so unlike her that I take a step back. “I am taking them home, and I’ll train them, just like the rest of the Crigomar. Gen can help me. I am not leaving them here to die.”

I dip my head in acknowledgment, surprised by her fire. I decide not to mention that Gen is about to have her hands full with young of her own. If Carmen needs help raising the two Crigomar, I will be there for her. I eye the two scaled beasts. And for them too, I suppose.

“May I take you to our tent to tend your wounds now?” I ask her drily.

“I feel fine. Other than a headache.”

And her hallucination with the arch, I think, but I do not say it out loud. She is already worked up over the two baby Crigomar, and if she is anything like a mother Crigomar, I do not want to invoke her ire further.

“We will make sure,” I tell her.

She stands slowly, the Crigomar on her shoulder tangling its claws around her hair, the one in her arms making a contented sound before snuggling closer to her chest. With my hand at the small of her back, I guide her towards the main path.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE**

CARMEN

I'M HARDLY aware of Xade checking me over as I cuddle the two tiny dinosaurs, who, despite their long claws and the fact that they're freaking dinosaurs, are the most adorable little babies I've ever seen in my whole life.

It took him less than ten minutes to set up the tent he had in his pack, which normally would have fascinated me, considering the fact it's like an entire self-contained room. Alien technology is wild.

Climate-controlled conditions, I decide, are way better than dark and stinking cave conditions.

"You have a sizeable bump on your head, but the bleeding has mostly stopped."

"Head wounds always bleed more than seems necessary," I tell him absentmindedly. The littler of the two dinosaurs purrs as I scratch under its chin. "Does it need stitches?"

"Stitches?" His disgusted tone finally drags my attention to him. "What do you mean, stitches?"

"You know, to close the wound? I assume you don't have a surgical staple gun here."

His jaw drops. "Staples?"

"Yeah. They cleanly close the wound."

"Barbaric."

I snort, wincing as I try to raise an eyebrow and immediately decide that's not the best course of action. The less facial movement, the better. "What do you recommend, then?"

"Xyn'de paste." Xade turns away from me. "We need to clean the wound first."

"I need to clean every inch of me first, probably," I try to laugh, but it makes my head ache, so I stop, relaxing back into the chair as the two babies in my arms snuggle sleepily together. "It smelled so bad in that cave, and I can't smell it anymore, which means I probably smell like it too."

The mere thought of it makes me nauseated.

"If you can put the Crigomar down, I have a portable cleaning station. I can continue the examination while you clean yourself."

“Will they be warm enough? Baby chickens and ducks and birds on Earth... and lizards too, I guess... they need heat.” I have no idea what baby dinosaurs need. “What do they eat?”

“At this age? Anything that moves and is small enough for them to crunch on.”

“Right.” I can’t say I’m not relieved that I won’t be eating bugs and regurgitating them into their mouths. “That’s good, then.”

“Until they decide that your feet are an appropriate snack.”

I stare at him, then back at the slumbering babies. “They would never,” I say in a high-pitched voice. “My sweet widdle babies would never eat mama’s toes, no they wouldn’t, no they would not!”

“The egg sustains—”

“The white provides all the nutrients they need for the first few days, I assume. Birds on Earth are the same. Then they need around the clock protein while they do most of their growing.” I try to smile at him. “I might not be an amazing field xenobiologist, but I am a biologist.”

“Would you say that your hallucination had any extrasensory elements? Taste, smell?”

It takes my brain a minute to catch up to his random question, and when it does, fresh irritation courses through me.

I should be grateful, honestly, he’s just asking the same questions I would be if I were in his shoes. He’s trying to take care of me, trying to judge how bad my head wound is, trying to see what I need.

But it fucking pisses me off.

“It wasn’t a hallucination.” The dinosaurs on my lap stir at the anger in my voice, and I sigh, trying to temper my rage. “It was real. I saw the bird hit the portal, I saw a whole other world, and I saw it take flight on burning wings and disappear into it.”

I swallow, suddenly unsure.

It does sound pretty... hallucinogenic. What if I didn’t actually see it?

The thought makes me highly uncomfortable.

“Here,” Xade says gently, folding up a blanket on the floor. “Put the younglings in here. They are asleep, and we will get you cleaned up, your wounds tended, and we will get to the bottom of this mystery. Together.”

I know he’s trying to help, but the note of disbelief still in his voice, as tender as it is, sets my teeth on edge. I know what I saw.

Don’t I?

Sighing because at the end of the day, I can't find any fault with his logic, I put the two sweet carnivorous babies on the blanket—with his help because I am, in fact, extremely off balance—and follow him back out of the tent. Sure, I have to lean heavily on him to successfully walk at all, but that doesn't mean I hallucinated.

It doesn't look great for me, though.

I set my jaw, feeling grim as Xade quickly constructs a rectangular pop-up... shower? I'm too distracted to pay more than the most fleeting attention to it, but as he pours water on top of the cloth-like structure, the ingenious nature of it's clear.

I don't even care if that water is ice-cold. I am disgusting.

Xade grabs another bottle, then opens the shower door, helping me step inside. We begin the arduous task of taking my filthy clothes off. I'm too tired to be aroused, or embarrassed, or self-conscious at all. I just want to get clean, and I know Xade just wants to help.

"Head wound first," he says gently when I'm finally wearing nothing, my clothes in a pile outside, probably destined for the same fire the outlaw Suevans were starting as he carried me from the cave.

Obediently, I tilt my head to the side, then suck in a breath as the cool water from the bottle in his hands cascades over it.

Gently, so gently, Xade strokes his talons through the bloody, matted mess of my hair, and one look at the crimson spatter along my feet tells me that this head wound did, indeed, bleed a lot. No wonder he thinks I hallucinated.

I frown. I didn't, though. I'm pretty sure it was real.

A portal to another world opening in a cave on a mountain.

Yeah. Totally real.

"Does it hurt?" he asks, his voice as rough as his touch is tender. "You are making a face."

"It's fine," I say. "You're being super careful."

I lean into him slightly, shivering as the cold water trickles down my neck and spine. He's warm, and I'm grateful for both his body heat and his ministrations.

"Thank you," I say softly.

"For what?" he asks, his hands pausing in his task to untangle my bloody hair.

"For this. For rescuing me. For... letting me keep two baby dinosaurs."

“I am your husband,” he says slowly, as though this fact has escaped me. “Of course I will take care of you. Of course I will rescue you. And as far as the baby Crigomar... I do not recall having much of a say in the matter.”

I snort, then go still because damn, my head is really starting to ache. Probably thanks to the adrenaline finally receding.

“You are trembling,” he says, his voice quiet and concerned.

I stare at his abs. His pants are covered in filth and my blood and water, but he isn’t wearing a shirt, and his abs are on full display.

“Are you cold? There are other ways I can clean you, but I thought this would be the fastest.”

“Not cold... just... I think it’s the adrenaline. It’s a hormone, you know, that humans have. I had a whole bunch of it in the cave, and shivering is a side effect when it starts to recede from the blood.” I don’t mention that it could also be a side effect of shock because I don’t think I am in shock. I don’t feel in shock.

I just feel tired and hungry and achy.

I know what I saw. It wasn’t shock or a head wound.

I frown into his chest.

Was it?

Xade makes a soothing noise, then begins humming, a haunting sound I’ve never heard from him before. It’s comforting, his talons gently sifting through my wet hair. I close my eyes, leaning against him, content to be cared for and glad he’s the one doing it.

Glad he came to find me.

“Thank you,” I repeat.

“Rest,” he tells me, but I hear a hint of a smile in his voice.

Methodically, he begins scrubbing the rest of my body, taking his time, looking for wounds and tutting over bruises and scrapes.

I let him, lulled by his humming and his gentle caresses, and I’m not altogether surprised when he picks me up, waking me from a light sleep to carry me back inside the tent.

My mouth opens to thank him again, but he presses a quick kiss against my lips, effectively silencing me, then sits me in his lap, quickly prepping a ration.

He feeds it to me too as I slump against his shoulders, grateful to be cared for, letting the thick, hot soup slide down my throat, hungrier than I realized.

He sets me in bed once I’ve finished two soup rations, putting an extra-

fuzzy warm blanket over me.

One of the babies cracks open a dark eye, making a mewling noise that grips my heart.

“Can I have the babies?” I ask him, feeling stupid but also committed to being a good dinosaur mama. That hopefully won’t be eaten.

“Anything,” he tells me.

I fall asleep with two tiny dinosaurs snuggled against my chest and my husband holding me against his.

I can’t think of many better things than this.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO**

XADE

I WANT to get Carmen back to Edrobaz for a full medical eval as soon as possible. She has not conceded that her vision of the monster returning to some other world was, in fact, a hallucination, and this bullheadedness paired with the unlikely tale concerns me enormously.

Still, she becomes irritable whenever I press her for more details, which could be a result of serious trauma associated with the event.

The Crigomar, at least, appear to keep her entertained and happy, even if the details of what happened in the cave are a point of contention between us.

She claps her hands excitedly as one of them catches a large insect, crushing it in its jaws. “Oh, good job, good job, baby!”

We stopped for a break on our trip back to the ship, leaving Redax and the others to deal with the mess. Not because I need one, even carrying Carmen with the two Crigomar in her arms, but because I worry she is not drinking or eating enough.

Carmen seems content enough with our pace, but the longer we take, the more nervous I get that something is truly wrong with her.

“This is our last stop,” I finally grumble. “Drink.”

“Is something wrong?” she asks, tearing her attention away from her “babies.”

“I am ready to return to Edrobaz.”

“I told you, I feel fine. Yeah, my head is sore, but I’m fine. Seriously.”

I give her a skeptical look, but refrain from mentioning the portal.

“You still think I imagined what I saw?” Hurt laces the question, and guilt stabs me as a result. “You really don’t believe me.”

“It is a hard story to believe.” I shrug a shoulder. “I have seen the newest technology, and nothing we have or have encountered can explain a... stone arch turning into a portal into another world.”

A muscle twitches in her jaw and she swivels away from me, her shoulders stiff. Carmen holds her hands out, clucking her tongue, and the Crigomar immediately run to her. She scoops them up, even though they are already growing too large for her to do so, and holds them close.

For comfort, I realize. Not their comfort, but her own.

My disbelief in her has caused her to need comfort from Crigomar?
It astounds me.

“I am simply trying to ensure that you are safe,” I say as quietly as I can. “I do not mean to upset you.” I do not know what else to say on the matter. How do I convince her that my questioning her recollection of events is not some moralistic judgment on her, but simply concern?

I do not know. I am not good at this.

I wring my hands, and she continues to ignore me.

“Let us return to the ship,” I say gruffly.

She nods, standing, still holding her Crigomar close. They have clearly imprinted on her, which is interesting and unusual.

“There was a mural in the cave. It showed a human activating the portal,” she says slowly, a distant expression in her eyes.

Oh goddess. Worry drops like a stone in my stomach. Now she is making up more stories to justify what she believes happened.

“Kyle—that’s the bird—he showed me the picture. Carving. Mural.”

She cannot even settle on what it was she saw. My heart aches.

“I don’t know the word for it. But anyway, I think that he must have come through the portal and gotten stuck, seen an image of a human woman using the portal in the cave, and that’s why he stole me away. So I could activate it.”

I do not wish to argue with her about this. I do not wish to encourage her fantasies, either. Then again, the last time I visited that cave, we paid no note to the strange device in the back, hardly noticing it, but I certainly do not remember any painting.

My tail lashes behind me, fear for Carmen rising yet again.

I do not know what to do.

“That would explain his actions,” I say uneasily. I do not believe it, though. I do not understand what happened in that cave, and deep down, I think she does not either, and is grasping at any explanation for what she went through.

And all of it, all of it is my fault.

If only I had kept her safe.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE**

CARMEN

SOMETHING IS WEIRD WITH XADE. Weirder than normal. The whole trip back, he's been silent, stealing glances at me every so often.

Well, the silence isn't abnormal, not where he's concerned, but he definitely seems even tenser than normal.

I heave a sigh, my dino babies in my lap, rigged in a carrier I made from a blanket I found in the ship's storage panel.

It sucks.

I thought I'd finally made headway in our relationship. We had sex, and sure, the sex turned weird when I told him he'd overstimulated my lady business, but we worked up a rapport. We worked together and figured out what was driving the Crigomar crazy. Kyle. Whatever the other-worldly glow he kept flashing, it was messing them up. I'm sure of it. Of course, we'll keep an eye on wild Crigomar activity, to be sure, but it had to be Kyle and the portal.

Success.

AND I found the sweetest little schnookums on the planet, my two as yet unnamed babies.

Things are looking up!

I get the distinct feeling, though, from the way he carefully dances around talking about Kyle and my time in the cave, that he thinks I've had a mental break.

I am pretty sure I have not had a mental break, but that's the thing about mental breaks: you're not always the most self-aware when having one.

The smaller of the two dinos whimpers in its sleep, and I shush it, petting the opalescent scales between its eyes to soothe it.

Extremely sane behavior.

I close my own eyes, soothed by the two limp, warm bodies in my lap, despite my tangled thoughts. I'll talk to Tati when I get back. I'm sure that will make Xade feel better too—get a full eval done by her, make sure I don't have some kind of brain tumor or bleed or god knows what that is causing me to be so sure about the impossible thing I witnessed.

Just in case.

I don't think that's what happened, though.

I lived through an alien invasion. I've been through space only to arrive on a planet to find I accidentally married a different kind of alien.

I've done things people thought were impossible less than a decade ago.

I'm pretty sure impossible doesn't exist.

Improbable? Yes. Sure. Improbable exists.

Improbable and impossible are two very different concepts, though, and I don't think even the Suevans, with all their advanced tech, know everything. How could any one species know everything there is to know?

The universes are infinite, every world different. Even the sky here seems to know that, the huge meteors most Suevans navigate by hanging heavy just outside the atmosphere. It's something I never thought I'd see in real life, much less the two dinosaur-adjacent creatures sleeping peacefully in my lap.

Impossible is just a word for things we haven't experienced yet.

We arrive in Edrobaz as dusk is falling, the garish colors of sunset fading to a lilac-tinged black. The dinosaurs are still asleep, probably because growing at such a rapid pace is hard work for a baby. I adjust the strap of the cloth carrier I'm holding them in and make my way down the cargo ramp.

Xade is still quiet, but it doesn't bother me.

I know he cares about me.

We have a whole mess of things to figure out between us, but we have a start. We'll get there.

Tati and Niki are waiting for us, and both look stressed out.

"Hey guys," I say casually, trying to pretend like my heart isn't beating a mile per minute.

"Hey, Carmen," Tati says carefully. One of the Suevans' med wands beeps in her hand, and I blink in surprise.

"You're just going to do the eval right here?"

"Nah, not the whole thing. Just get a sense of what's going on so we can prep the med bay."

"I really am fine," I tell her, heaving a sigh.

"You have two infant Crigomar strapped to your chest with an old Suevan military issue blanket."

“I think there could really be a market soon for baby carriers,” I tell her, trying to make light of the fact they’re both incredibly freaked out.

I glance at Xade for support, but he’s a stone wall, arms crossed and a fearsome expression on his face.

My back straightens and I take a step back from him, feeling betrayed and hurt.

“He told you I was messed up, didn’t he?”

A muscle in his temple twitches.

“You have a nasty bump on your head,” Tati says kindly, which is affirmation enough. “We need to make sure there isn’t anything else going on.”

“Like hallucinations?”

Niki winces at the word, and that’s enough to tell me what I need to know. Xade told them I hallucinated what happened in the damn cave. I know he’s worried about me, really, rationally, I would be too.

But it stings. It feels like betrayal.

I can’t believe he told them that.

“I haven’t had any hallucinations,” I say loudly.

“You’re not acting like yourself,” Niki says, frowning.

“Just because my normal self is a pushover? Someone who never says no? Well, guess what, that has nothing to do with my head and everything to do with the fact that I’m tired of being everyone’s doormat.”

Tati blinks at me. “Okay. Carmen, we’re going to do the eval. I don’t have to scan you here, but you’re coming back to the lab and med facility with us.”

“That’s fine. I don’t mind getting checked out. What I do mind, though, is everyone acting like I’m a liar. I know what happened to me.”

I glare at Xade, who wilts slightly under my gaze. It doesn’t give me the satisfaction I thought it would. The guilty look on his face just makes me feel worse.

“I understand,” Tati says in a soothing voice she reserves for the most recalcitrant patients. No wonder they always look more pissed when she uses it on them.

“I want Michelle there,” I say suddenly. If there’s anyone who can prove what I’m saying, it’s our intel officer. “And Bex.”

“Michelle... and Bex,” Niki repeats. “Okay. We can do that. Should I ask why?”

One of the Crigomar yips, a funny new peeping sound they just started making this afternoon. “I have a theory. And I need some meat.”

“Meat,” Tati says, her eyes even rounder than before.

“Not for me, for the Crigomar,” I tug the carrier open a little, showing off the two white bundles of scaly love, and Niki nods, then shrugs. “We can do that.”

“I can come,” Xade tells me, a hand on my shoulder.

“No,” I tell him. His face falls, and he nods once before that cool nothing expression settles back in place. “I want you to go move my stuff out of the empty singles pad and into your myza. Oh, and if you can figure out some kind of containment for these two,” I pat the dinosaurs, “that would be great. Not a crib, but something. A bed. I don’t know. I trust you to figure that out.”

A faint smile crosses his face, and he nods once, then sets off.

“Right then,” I say crisply. “Let’s get started.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR**

XADE

SHE IS NOT happy with me. My wife, who I have been so cold to, who did not give up on me despite my poor behavior, is upset with me.

All because I want to protect her.

Humans are strange creatures.

It takes me no time at all to gather up her belongings from the myza that belonged to all the human females. Despite being cozy and full of furniture, unlike my myza, it feels quiet and empty.

No wonder my little sunshine has been so lonely.

I scratch my chin, setting the bag full of Carmen's things down next to the door, and wonder how I can make my myza fit for her.

I love that she wants to stay with me. I love that even though I know she's unhappy with me, she still wants to be with me, wants to find a way through it... together.

It is more than I have ever had, and after what I allowed to happen to her, more than I deserve.

My myza needs to reflect how much I want to have a home with her. I need her to feel at home with me, to make her feel as welcome there as possible.

The problem is, I do not know how.

I do not have the slightest idea... but I know someone who might. He is the last Suevan I want to see at the moment, especially considering the circumstances of our last conversation, but he is the Suevan who will know best what to do.

Growling low in annoyance, I fling the pack full of Carmen's things over one shoulder and set off for the market. There is not much time left before it closes for the evening.



Xez packs up his wares, the market's streets empty save a few wandering older Suevans. I nod at one, trying my best to be sociable, even though it

goes against all my ways.

“Xez,” I finally manage, and the vendor jerks upright, wearing a startled expression. His tail flicks back and forth, his eyes shifting just as quickly.

“Ah, Warlord Xade, how can I help you?”

“I come with a warning,” I snarl, reminded of all the things he insinuated about stealing my wife.

He goes pale under his green scales.

No, that is not the way, that is not how I get him to help me. Argh.

I slam a fist on his table. “My warning is this: help me spend my credits so I can outfit my myza to be fit for my bride, or my Carmen will be very sad.”

He blinks. “Oh.”

“Exactly,” I growl, finally removing my fist from his empty table. “I know nothing of the colors or things she likes, but I know you have worked with her. Can you help me?”

“I have never encountered a Suevan who needed it more,” he says.

I narrow my eyes at him, unsure how to take that.

“Yes,” he sighs, flipping the Open sign to Closed with a flourish. “I can help. We must hurry, though, as the market is closing. I assume you meant now, that is? You need my help immediately?”

“Yes,” I rumble. I cannot say I am enjoying how pleased Xez seems to be by me crawling to him, asking for help with the wife he clearly wanted to take from me.

“Carmen loves soft things. Soft fabrics, soft colors. What she sees in you...” he trails off, and I give him a death stare as he comes around the table to me. “Is very obvious. All that muscle and all that pent-up rage, yes, very endearing indeed.”

He gestures with one hand for me to follow him, and I begrudgingly do. We end up about half-way through the market, in front of one of the largest tents, full of all kinds of items.

“Trax,” he shouts. A pale-scaled Suevan emerges from the depths of furniture and wall-hangings. My eyes widen as the two share a kiss.

“Who is this you’ve brought?” Trax asks. “Is this the Hunter?” He looks me up and down.

“He needs help,” Xez explains. The two are holding hands.

“You did not really want to marry Carmen?” I ask.

“No, of course not. Trax and I have been together for years now. But you

seemed like you needed a little push into seeing what a gem she is.”

My mouth hangs open, and Xez tips it closed with his taloned finger.

“Very good. Very well. Trax, Xade would like to purchase everything you would need to bring home a pretty human bride. Delivery?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“This is going to cost me, is it not?” I ask, somewhat amused at Xez’s plot to push me into jealously staking my claim on Carmen.

“Absolutely.” He grins at me, then at Trax. “But the cost of a happy spouse cannot truly be measured.”

“Everything, you say?” Trax asks me, his eyes narrowed. “And Carmen is the one with the sandy hair? The sweet one?”

“The sweetest,” I confirm. “I want her to feel at home with me,” I add.

Trax gives me a slow smile. “I know just the things for her. And for you, too,” he says.

Given the amount of credits I end up parting with, he better be right.

After less than an hour, though, I cannot deny that he’s transformed my myza into a home.

All that is missing is my bride. Gritting my teeth, I set off for the med bay, hoping she is not as ill as I’ve presumed.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE**

CARMEN

NIKI HOLDS a dinosaur in each arm, her expression slightly consternated as I tell them all about what happened. Michelle and Bex are there too, and they each lean forward as I talk, captivated.

Tati keeps taking blood and scanning me and doing all the things I'd be doing if I were her.

By the time I finish, they're all still silent. Unusual, for this crowd.

Niki looks between my face and Tati. "Anything show on the scans?"

I deflate. They don't believe me either.

"Dehydrated, but not to the point of having hallucinations. Blood sugar is low, but not dangerously so. Her white blood cell count is a little high, but with all the adrenaline and scrapes she has, I wouldn't be surprised if she's fighting an infection. I'll give her one of the all-purpose antibiotics and some fluids, and that and rest should fix her right up."

"And her brain?" Michelle asks, no nonsense, getting right to it. She jumps off her chair, leaning down to look into my eyes, like the answer is somehow there.

"I should have known you wouldn't believe me," I grumble. I want to cry, but I'm too tired to muster the tears. I'm just really, really disappointed. "I know what I saw. I saw that arch turn into a portal, and I saw that thing turn into a firebird. He flew away into another world. I'm not making it up."

"We don't think you're making it up," Michelle tells me, still staring at my pupils.

"And if you'd let me finish," Tati says, clearly annoyed with me, "I would tell you that you might have had a mild concussion, but your scans don't show any internal swelling or bleeding or anything else that would cause concern... or hallucinations."

"Shock could cause that, though," Michelle says.

"Great bedside manner, you jerk," Bex tells her. "Tell me about the portal again?" she asks, ignoring Michelle's eyeroll. "Theoretically, you could have triggered some kind of mechanism."

"Yeah, but she said there were murals of human women on the walls." Michelle stands abruptly, her hands on her hips. Her eyes are faraway, like

she's thinking it out. "That seems unlikely."

"But not impossible."

"The portal," Bex says again, standing too, but pacing now as she listens to my descriptions.

"I didn't want to look at it. It felt alive. Sentient, maybe. It wanted someone—or something—to go through it. I can't explain it well."

"You said time felt funny? Slippery?"

"Yeah, it seemed like no time had passed at all, but..." I glance down at my hands, which are scabbed over, my fingernails ragged and cut to the quick from holding onto the dais for more than a few seconds. "It had to have been hours. I don't know how else Xade could have shown up while it was still happening. Or how I got this." I hold my hands up.

"You could have gotten that if the creature was dragging you behind it while you were half-conscious," Niki says softly, rocking one of the tiny dinos back to sleep.

"True... but I didn't. I would remember my hands being torn up before."

Tati's narrowed eyes pin me, and she does another swipe of the med scanner over my forehead.

"Stop," I tell her, batting it away.

"You are way more prickly than you were before you left." Bex's lips pinch together, her expression still not all here.

"Yeah, you would be too if your husband thought you were making things up or hallucinating."

"It's not a bad thing." Bex focuses back on me. "You said there were glyphs on it?"

"Yeah."

"And the outside of the... portal shimmered outside of it once it was activated?"

"Right."

"And time slowed down."

"I mean, I guess."

Michelle stares at her, shaking her head back and forth. "No way."

"What?" I ask because clearly, Michelle has cottoned on to whatever it is that Bex is trying to get to the heart of.

"An Einstein-Rosen bridge. But one that occurs unnaturally, meaning someone made it." Bex blows out a breath, pushing her hair back from her forehead as she continues to pace around the room. "Someone, or

something.”

“It’s not possible,” Michelle tells her. “There was a girl in my school, not my PhD program, obviously, but she got kicked out because of her dissertation on wormholes and Einstein-Rosen bridges.”

“Is that the space-time wrinkle thing?” Niki asks. “I feel like we had to do theoretical work on those in officer training.”

“See?” Bex says, waving a hand at Niki. “If they had to study it, then it can’t be that far-fetched.”

“She got kicked out of her PhD program?” That makes me feel horrible.

“Oh god, yeah, it was this big scandal.” Michelle squints at the ceiling. “What was her name... Danika... no. Dawn? No...”

“You think it was a wormhole?” I ask Bex. “You don’t think I’m making it up.”

“I definitely think you saw something,” Bex says. “I’ve known you for years. You aren’t the type to just make shit up. What it was you saw? I don’t know. An Einstein-Rosen bridge fits—”

“Danielle!” Michelle shouts happily, clapping her hands. “That was her name. It was before the invasion. She disappeared in a desert, actually. I think a whole lot of women did.”

“Oh, I remember that,” Tati pipes up. “But then the Roth showed up and it kind of... derailed the investigation into it. I think it was like, twenty? Is that right?”

“I do remember that,” Niki agrees.

“We should go back.” Bex’s face is lit up with excitement. “If it is some sort of time/space interdimensional gate, then we need to know how it works. Hell, this could be what makes the difference in the war against the Roth Empire.”

“Or we could all get sucked through and fall to our deaths in another dimension. I don’t know about you, but I don’t sprout wings when dropped from a great height.”

“Nah, we won’t go through. Now we have an idea of what we’re dealing with. We can all go together.”

“You really think it would give us an advantage?” Niki asks slowly, fire in her eyes.

Bex gapes at her. “Are you fucking kidding me? Captain Jacks, being able to manipulate space/time would change literally everything. We could outrun the Empire’s ships. Jules and the Rogue’s mission would be irrelevant,

completely irrelevant.”

“Okay, but you’re both missing the part where we actually know how to use this technology.” Michelle sighs, rubbing her temples. “We don’t know how it works. It’s dangerous. It might only be a portal to the world Carmen saw. It might not be able to be manipulated.”

“Reverse engineering, banana-pants,” Bex yells at her.

The dinosaurs both wake up at once, screeching their dismay at Bex. Niki stands up with them, rocking one and handing the other to me.

“Are you going to name them?” Michelle asks, crowding in. “They are really pretty cute. I’ve never seen any Crigomar with that color scales.”

“Right?” I answer, beaming. “They’re gorgeous. And yeah, I am. This one,” I point to the tinier of the two, “is Petunia. And this one is Greg.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Bex asks, her lip curled in disgust. “Greg? What kind of a name is that?”

“That was my grandfather’s name,” I say, scowling.

“And he’d want you to name a big white dinosaur after him?”

“He would have loved it, as a matter of fact.” I cradle the baby dinosaurs close, trying not to grunt at their weight. Damn, they feel like they’ve doubled in the last couple hours. “He would have loved you, Greg,” I tell the Crigomar.

“Is she going to live?” a male voice booms.

My heart gives a little flutter at the sound of Xade’s voice, surprising me. I knew I liked him, of course I do, even though he’s been overprotective since pulling me off the portal—but that little flock of butterflies taking flight in my stomach?

That’s new.

“Dramatic much?” Bex asks, lips pursed and eyebrows raised, as if she’s not the most dramatic of all.

“She is fine.”

Xade’s eyes are wild, his tail thrashing into a table behind him. “And her brain? The hallucinations?”

“Dude, we just told you she’s fine. They weren’t hallucinations.” Bex narrows her eyes at him. “Why are you so sure they were?”

He glares at her.

“Carmen, are you truly well?” The question is soft, and so full of relief that it makes my heart ache.

“I am,” I tell him, avoiding the *I told you so* that threatens to trip off my

tongue.

“She’s dehydrated, she needs rest, and I’m going to get her on an antibiotic to combat any infections she might have picked up,” Tati tells him calmly.

“But the story she told about the portal...” his voice quickly drops off as he realizes every single woman in the room is glaring at him.

“While unlikely, it isn’t impossible,” Michelle tells him, clearly annoyed at his skepticism despite having been just as skeptical less than five minutes ago. “We’re going to organize a trip back to this cave and check out the technology for ourselves. Did you even follow up on her claim about the art on the wall?”

Xade stands up a little taller, his shoulders thrown back and fangs bared.

“To be fair,” I start, scooting off the exam table. “He was a bit busy with the fact my head was bleeding everywhere and I hadn’t eaten in over twenty-four hours.”

“That would do it,” Tati says kindly.

“I don’t know, if I heard about a potential interdimensional portal, I’d let Dergoz bleed a little while I looked into it. Seems important.”

“Bex,” I say, injecting a note of irritated warning into the syllable. “He was freaking out. I’d just been abducted by a horrible, slimy monster.”

“That’s hot,” Bex says automatically.

We all stare at her for a long moment.

“Right,” I manage. “I’m going to take the babies home now. When do we leave for the cave?”

We all look to Niki. Both as our former commanding officer and as the highest ranking warlord in the room, she gets to the call the shots.

When she speaks, we all listen.

“Tomorrow. If this even stands a chance of changing the tide of the war with the Roth emperor and protecting Earth and Sueva alike, then we act fast.”

The words hang in the air for a tense minute as we all digest the gravity of it.

The tech in that cave, ancient or not, could be what we need to win and secure the future of both our homes.

“Tomorrow,” Tati says. “I’ll stay here with Gen, since she’s too far along in her pregnancy to do anything risky like that.”

Bex snorts, but quickly turns her laugh into a cough as Niki spears her

with a quelling look.

“I’ll prep things you might need for another trip out,” Tati tells me. “That way if anyone gets hurt, you have everything you need on hand medically. Okay?”

“Got it,” I tell her.

“Great.” Michelle’s eyes are bright, and I can tell she’s probably going to do all the research her brain can absorb—which, knowing Michelle, is a shit ton.

“I named them Petunia and Greg,” I tell Xade, thrusting Greg into his arms. “Can you carry him home?”

Gingerly, to avoid waking him, Xade takes Greg, who yawns before sinking his claws into Xade’s shoulder as we walk out of the medical and research facility.

“Home,” Xade murmurs.

I shiver at the crisp night air, suddenly exhausted from all the excitement. Relieved, too, that I didn’t have some kind of serious brain injury that caused hallucinations.

“You do still mean my home, correct? Our... home?” His voice is so cautious that I can’t help grinning up at him.

“If you still want me there.”

“There is nowhere I would rather have you than by my side.”

“Even if I was hallucinating?”

“Especially if you were hallucinating.” Something about his serious tone makes me laugh, and Petunia stirs against my chest. He juggles Greg into his other arm, tucking me against his body.

“I am so sorry I did not believe you. I was so worried about you that I let my fear guide me instead of my logic. I am glad that you have such good friends in the other females that they will accompany us back to the caves.” He clears his throat, and my own throat tightens at his words because he’s right. I am so lucky to have these women in my life.

“You know, you gave me a lot of grief about letting them walk all over me,” I say softly, trying to keep the censure out of my voice because I don’t want to fight.

There is, however, a time for fighting, and I recognize that, and I even think I might be able to stand up for myself more than ever. But this isn’t that time.

He stays silent, his hand on my hip, tracing small circles. Our feet pad

against the streets of Edrobaz, stars twinkling overhead, past the ever-present asteroid belt.

“But they do respect me, same as I respect them. They care about me, too.”

Xade watches me silently, keeping pace with me.

I clear my throat, choosing my words carefully. “But you’re right. I have said yes too many times when I should have said no. I’m still finding my voice, and still finding the right words. And that goes for us, too, you know? I want to live with you. I have wanted to try with you since I found out we’d married. That doesn’t mean I’m a pushover.”

I shake my head, sighing, and Petunia stirs a little, giving a tiny dino yawn.

“Me wanting to be with you, at first, maybe, was because I was lonely. And then it was because I saw how happy my friends are with their husbands, and I wanted that, too. And now? Now, Xade, it’s because I really like you. You might not have believed me about the portal in the cave, but you haven’t been stubborn about it or rude. You’ve been worried, right?”

He nods, his tail swishing so hard behind him that it whips up a current of air into my calves.

“I couldn’t be mad at you for being worried about me, even if I wanted to. Besides, you were able to accept that you were wrong and apologize. That means a lot to me...”

He waits and I bite my lower lip, struggling to say the hard things.

“But I need a partner who isn’t going to run me over to get his way if he disagrees with me.”

“So you do not want to stay in my... in our home?” He sounds so disappointed that it hurts.

“No, that’s not what I said. We have already struggled with communicating, right?”

He nods, a miserable frown on his face.

I take another deep breath. “I think we need to take things slow is all. I think maybe we should meet with Tati once a week and do therapy. Do you know what that is?”

“No.” His eyes are wide again, and while he doesn’t look mad, he does look suspicious.

“It’s a place and time where we can go talk things out, our problems, and Tati will listen and give us advice on how to make things better between us.”

I close one eye, trying to figure out how to explain it. “It’s like... training. You can’t expect to be a great fighter and never practice, right? So this is practice for how to work things out.” I clear my throat.

“I see.”

“And that way, I won’t just bend to you, and you won’t steamroll me, and we can figure out a balance for each other and our relationship.”

“It means the earth and sky to me that you would train to communicate with me.” His voice rasps with emotion. “That you would continue to want to be with me even though things have not been easy or even good between us.”

“Xade,” I grin up at him. “As different as we are, we have so much in common. You love the wild places, right? So do I. I don’t know them the way you do, but you can teach me all about the different places in Sueva. You weren’t sure about wanting a partner, but I am. I have been. And you are a good partner, Xade.”

My pulse is thrumming against my throat because these kinds of talks, saying these kinds of things—in the past, the thought of bringing up any kind of confrontation with my romantic partner made me so queasy that I’d rather bite my tongue than go through with it.

But with Xade?

Xade listens, and he thinks about it, and it feels easier than ever.

Maybe it’s because the pressure is already off. We’re already married. We’re about as committed as could be.

Maybe it’s because he, for all his stubborn grumpiness, and I, for all the insecurity that can masquerade as kindness... we are well-matched, after all.

“I will do this therapy,” he says, squeezing my hip. “I would like to grow together as a couple, like the roots of our myza. I am proud to call myself yours, for all your sunshine against my clouds.”

I smile at him, slightly choked up, hardly realizing we’ve already made it to the entrance of his house.

Our house.

It might need some TLC—okay, a lot of TLC—but it’s ours.

He gives my hip another squeeze, this time sending expectant heat through me, his own soft smile turning devilish.

“I made some changes.”

“Huh?” I blink.

“To the myza,” he says expansively.

“What? When—” but my questions die on my lips as he opens the door.

“Holy shit,” I say instead.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX**

XADE

CARMEN'S MOUTH and eyes compete for roundness as she stares into the warm, glowing interior of our home.

I have not seen what Xez and Trax did yet either, but I do not care. I am living for the expressions flitting across Carmen's beautiful face. She readjusts the weight of the sleeping Crigomar in her arms, and I lift the baby from her grasp so she can better see the myza.

Carmen walks inside as though in a trance, her eyes devouring everything.

I cannot blame her.

My myza has gone from being a shell of a home to fully furnished, and the cost of all the credits I spent for Trax and Xez to do this in the past hour were well worth it, for my wife's reaction alone.

I am well pleased to find that I enjoy how it turned out as well.

Flowing fabric the color of sunrise hangs in swooping folds across the ceiling, terminating at the bottom of a wall in a golden celebration of the sun itself. Yellow metal lamps hang from the ceiling as well. Cut-outs reminiscent of the asteroid belt punched through the sides of the lamp cast warm shapes across the rest of the circular living room.

"Oh, wow. I wanted these lamps so badly, but I just couldn't bring myself to buy them." She's beaming, touching the velvety fabric of the lounge as she walks around, an expression of pleased awe on her face. "When did you have time to do this?"

"I... must confess that I told Xez and Trax to do it. They said they knew your tastes, and I told them to make it feel like home. I did it while you were being examined." My throat closes up, relief at her clean diagnosis a tangible force. "I am so happy you are well. And I am so sorry I did not believe you."

I want to touch her, to draw her close to my scales and inhale the delicious aroma of her skin, of her hair. But I stand stock still, even my tail frozen behind me, too afraid to upset her by clawing her close to me.

"I was prickly about it," she says, turning away from the new furnishings with an apologetic smile on her face. "I know I wasn't very easy to deal with after... everything."

“Your prickles please me,” I rumble, unable to stop myself from stepping closer to her.

She huffs a quiet laugh, and the Crigomar stirs against me in its sleep. “They aren’t real prickles.”

It’s my turn to smile, as if I could do anything else right now when looking at her. “I meant, I am pleased you feel safe enough to show your prickles to me. Your trust in showing me all the facets of your being... it is the greatest honor of my life.”

Tears well in her eyes and I stiffen, afraid I have upset her.

“Why do you make eye water?” I ask softly. “I have made you sad?”

“No,” she shakes her head, a low laugh bubbling from her perfect lips. She shushes the waking Crigomar back to sleep, rocking it gently.

Something in me stirs at the sight. An image of the future: of Carmen holding our young in the same way, her capacity for love so large it takes my breath away.

“I’m not sad. I’m happy. These are happy tears. That was the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“I was not trying to be romantic.” I purse my lips. “If that is the most romantic thing I have said to you, then I fear I need to study the art of romance.”

A genuine smile blooms on her face, and it warms my heart.

“I love you, my sunshine,” I tell her as a huge yawn splits her mouth. “But you are tired. Let us go to sleep so that we may accompany the mission back to the cave at Kioveset tomorrow, yes?”

“Yes,” she agrees, the words garbled by the fact her mouth is still stretched wide in a yawn. “Sleep sounds good. Help me put Petunia and Greg in their bed?”

I blink, confused for a moment, until I realize she is referring to the Crigomar.

“Petunia and Greg?” I echo, still in slight disbelief over her name choice

“Yeah. I know, it’s kind of silly, right? Naming them. I know we’ll have to get them outside and start training them soon... but what can I say? I’m attached to them.” She shrugs, her nose wrinkled sheepishly. Adorably. Perfectly.

“We will care for them well,” I assure her. “Look,” I guide her by the elbow to the main sleeping area that branches off the central living room. There is a wooden gate system there, along with a bowl of water and a bowl

of dried insects for the babies to munch on.

“It’s perfect.” This time, a drop of water slides down her cheek. “This is so thoughtful, Xade. Thank you. I have wanted a home for so, so long now.” She seems beside herself, and were it not for her clean bill of health, I would be terrified with worry for her.

“You are tired,” I tell her quietly. “Let me put... Tunia and Zreg in their bed.”

“Petu-tu-tunia,” she says, sniffing so hard her tongue trips over the word. “And Greg.”

“Right,” I agree. She has such a soft heart, this female. For her to cry over this, the barest minimum of kindness I could give her, both warms my chest and saddens me at once. I want this, the absolute least I can do, to be so normal to her that she hardly realizes I’m doing it.

My wife has been alone and lonely for much too long.

I will simply have to spend the rest of my lifetime being the best companion, husband, and lover she could ever dream of. Greg goes down into the soft nest of warmed blankets and pillows easily, and Carmen cries as I tug the sleeping Petunia from her arms.

“The washroom is through there,” I tell her, nodding my head towards the door. “Get yourself ready for sleep and I will make sure these two younglings are comfortable.”

Petunia squawks as Carmen leaves the room, but my sunshine does not do more than cast me a weary grin over her shoulder.

She trusts me.

My chest puffs up and I pet the little Crigomar’s white head, marveling at its unique coloration and deep indigo eyes.

“There, there, little one. Sleep now, next to your brother.” I gently, so carefully, put the creature next to the other, and they immediately curl into each other, falling even more deeply asleep.

I see why my soft-hearted Carmen adores them. No one is as easy to love as my sunshine wife, but they are precious in their own right.

I watch them sleep for a long while, enamored of their little sighs and squeaks as they dream, their tails and talons twitching, and think again of what it might be like to have young of our own.

“Are they okay?” Carmen asks.

I turn and she’s wearing nothing but a flimsy night dress, her hair unbound, falling in waves around her shoulders. Her eyes are warm but

sleepy, and she is so beautiful it makes my heart hurt.

“They sleep now. As should you,” I finally manage. “Come, sleep next to me.”

I go still because what if she says no? What if she still does not want to share my bed?

Carmen, however, climbs onto the bed, stretching her arms out high above her head as she yawns again, snuggling under the covers like she is where she belongs, like she has always been there.

I crawl next to her, holding her close, loving the way she melts into me, and gratitude fills me.

She might not have always been here, but she is now.

Home.

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN**

CARMEN

A PLAINTIVE WHINING wakes me up from the deepest, most satisfying sleep of my entire friggin' life. Opening my eyes is like coming up for air, and it takes me a second to remember where I am, the beautiful room throwing me.

Xade's myza.

The first rosy fingers of dawn creep through the high, circular windows, painting ethereal colors on the dark wood walls. His arm is tucked around my waist, so heavy with sleep that I'm not sure I can move out from under it.

No wonder I slept like a rock—I basically had a heated, weighted blanket on top of me all night.

And now I can have it every night, forever.

Incredible.

I can't keep from smiling, soaking in my surroundings and the warm glow of happiness, until the whining starts up again.

"Oh crap," I murmur, trying to scoot out from under Xade's arm... and his leg? And his tail. I stop struggling, nearly out of breath from the effort. Yeah, I don't know if I'm going anywhere.

"Stay," Xade murmurs against my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "Do not get up yet. We have awhile before we must wake to journey with the rest." His voice is hoarse and deep with slumber.

"But the Crigomar," I whisper back, just in case they aren't awake, after all.

"They will settle. They've been making noises in their sleep all night. I have checked on them often."

"Wait, really? I can't believe I didn't hear them."

"You did not hear them because I did not want you to. I woke as soon as they stirred, and soothed them back to sleep so you could rest."

"That was so nice of you, thank you," I tell him, finally rolling onto my side to face him. His eyes are half-open, but as I scoot closer, throwing my own leg over his hip, I realize that the rest of him is very much awake.

"Oh." My eyes go wide in surprise, his xof gently vibrating against my inner thigh. "Oh."

His fingers grip my lower back, and he groans as he slides me closer still. “You are my favorite way to wake up.”

I bite my lip, somehow massively turned on despite the fact that there are two baby dinosaurs sleeping across the room and that it’s basically zero dark Suevan thirty.

“I scent your arousal,” he growls. “Tell me what you want. Do you wish to go back to sleep? Or do you wish for me to lick your pretty cunt until you are begging for my cock?”

My eyes fly open, any lingering sleepiness dissolving in the face of his question.

“The second one,” I whisper, kneading the scales on his shoulder, needing him to do exactly what he said.

“You will have to be silent, my little sunshine. Can you be silent? Or will you scream as I plunge deep inside you, your cunt milking my cock for all its seed?”

I whimper, then nod. “I can be quiet,” I promise.

He doesn’t waste any time, pressing his mouth against mine, plundering it like a drowning man gasping for air. I moan as his tongue tangles with mine, then gasp as his talons shred the fabric of the barely-there night dress. Goosebumps rise across my skin as cold air hits my shoulders and back, and then his mouth lowers, sucking on one nipple through the fabric.

Without warning, he rolls me to my back, still tugging on my nipple with teeth and tongue.

“Silence,” he hisses as I make a wordless noise. He flicks my other nipple for emphasis and I lean down, biting his shoulder as hard as I can, holding in the curse that threatens to scream out of me. He feels so good, so fucking good.

His mouth is hot and his tongue is textured and I’m so wet.

Smirking at me, he slowly raises his head, then blows a cold stream of air onto the wet fabric clinging to my nipple.

My head tilts back and I swallow a ragged breath as he repeats the sensual process on my other breast, licking both until they are sore and peaked and I’m dying of arousal.

Xade kisses his way back up my neck, then nibbles on my ear lobe, causing me to nearly lose it. “You smell like you are ready for me. Are you ready for me to feast on your sweet cunt, sunshine?”

“Mm-hmm,” I manage, as quiet as I can.

He grins at me, then sits back, tearing the dress all the way down the front until I'm fully exposed to him.

He doesn't say anything, just stares at me as the seconds tick by.

"Perfect," he says on an exhalation.

Without any further warning, he pulls my legs apart and sets his mouth to my pussy.

I arch off the bed as he licks around my clit, teasing it, teasing me, and I've never been so close to coming so quickly. It has to be his tongue. The texture on it is nothing like a human tongue, and it's like it was made to bring me pleasure.

His hand smooths up the round of my stomach, squeezing my breast and pinching my nipple with the tips of his fingers.

An orgasm hits me and I muffle my moan into a pillow, but it's too soon, too soon. I won't be able to come again, and I really, really wanted to have sex.

The feeling of bliss fades too fast in the wake of my anxious thoughts, a tidal wave of guilt swamping any remaining pleasure.

"Shh," Xade tells me, grinning up from between my spread legs like a male who has no idea that I'm not feeling it anymore.

Goddammit, why does this always happen?

"I have an idea," he mutters, pulling me close and rolling me on top of him. "Do not think. Feel only."

"Easier said than done," I tell him wistfully. My dress hangs off my body as I sit up and he pulls it off me, leaving me completely nude and trembling over him.

"You are going to lead the way. You are going to stay on top, in charge, yes?"

I blink down at him, surprised. Shocked, even, because like this, he's right. I do feel in control. I don't feel like my body is being forced into more, more, more.

And that?

That turns me on all over again.

"See?" he murmurs, running his big hands up and down my sides as I shiver. "I can feel your wet heat. You might not come for me again, and that is fine. But if you want to take me inside you, if you still want my seed, then you lead the way. And if you are not ready? Then we will stop."

I have never had a partner like Xade. In bed, I've always felt like I was

just... there for the other person's pleasure. Something to be gotten off on, or in, or around. I gave up thinking I could have fun once I came, and most of the time I couldn't even do that.

I bite my lip.

Xade is stretched beneath me, muscles packed on muscles, so handsome and ruggedly masculine that he takes my breath away. He slept naked, something I hadn't even realized until now, too caught up in what he was doing to my body to notice what was on his.

Now?

Now I am very, very interested.

"I like this," I whisper, cocking an eyebrow and grinning down at him mischievously.

"I like to hear that," he croaks, arching his hips so his cock teases my wet entrance, his xof vibrating so hard.

That's all it takes for me to get scared again. I want it to be good for him. I don't want him to regret being with me for any reason, especially not my weird anxieties about sex.

But I'm in control, and he's allowing me the time and space I need to figure out what I want.

I trust him.

My eyes go wide and I stare down at him like it's the first time I'm seeing his face. Strong jaw, chiseled cheekbones and insanely lean muscles all over his body.

"I love you." It comes out quiet but not nearly as shocked by it as I feel.

It sounds... right.

"I am glad I am not the only one in love, my sunshine," he says easily, like this is the most normal conversation in the world.

I don't waste any more time thinking.

I scoot down, straddle his tree trunk thighs and decide it's my turn to give him a taste of his own medicine.

It takes me a moment though, because his dick is thick and long and slightly daunting, especially with the texture all over it. Precum beads on the tip, though, and that's all the encouragement I need.

Xade groans like he's dying as I chase the salty bead on the head of his cock with my tongue, swirling my tongue around it like he's my favorite flavor of lollipop.

His hands flex in my hair, his talons pricking my scalp and sending fresh

shivers all over my sensitive body.

“Fuck my face,” I command, as quietly as possible. “I want you to fuck my mouth.”

His diamond pupils swallow his eyes, and then he closes them, a feral noise vibrating from his chest.

I don't wait for him to listen, why would I?

He said I'm in charge, and I'm going to take full advantage of that. I slip my mouth around him, taking his cock deeper, as deep as I can in my throat. His xof vibrates against my cheek and I swallow a laugh, causing his entire lower half to spasm.

Xade liked that. He likes this.

Increasing the suction, I wrap a hand around the rest of his shaft, because he's too big for me to take all of him.

He bucks his hips and my core clenches on nothing, ridiculously turned on again.

I'm driving him crazy, and it's making me wild in a way I don't remember ever being before. Well, call me Bex, because apparently I'm hornier than I've ever been in my life for alien dick.

Or maybe... just maybe, it's because Xade's the first male I've been with who cares about the way sex makes me feel. Who loves me.

I love him, too.

I release his cock, done with the blow job for now, even though I wouldn't mind if he came down my throat, because I want more.

I want to try to come again.

His eyes are wide and full of tenderness as he watches me climb up to his hips, positioning my sopping pussy over his dick, wet from my mouth.

"Beautiful," he rasps.

I line up the thick head of his cock and slam down on it, leaning forward so the tips of my nipples scrape against his scaled torso.

“More,” I whisper, trying to keep my promise to stay quiet.

Xade groans, gripping my hips, rocking me slowly back and forth on his cock. I'm impaled, breathless and tight and so close again.

“Wait,” I say, anxiety starting to kill off the orgasm.

Sitting back up, I angle my body slightly, so his xof barely touches my clit.

“Oh god,” I moan, forgetting to be silent. “Oh, Xade.”

“Fuck me, Carmen. Fill that pretty human pussy with my cock.”

“Yes,” I say.

I pick up the rhythm, and he slides in and out of me so easily, so naturally, that nothing’s ever felt better.

He comes first, his talons biting into the thick flesh of my hips.

The feel of him spasming beneath me, knowing I caused his release, that it’s for me—it sends me over the edge too.

We lie like that, holding each other, breathing hard, his cock still twitching inside me, for a minute.

Not nearly long enough, though, because we woke up the Crigomar.

I give him a slow, sated smile. “Maybe we should arrange for them to be outside sooner rather than later.”

He growls, slapping my ass and making it jiggle against his hand.

“Good. Then I will work on making you scream my name while your cunt milks my cock.”

I squeeze my walls together, and he groans in response.

“Come on,” I say, laughing. “Let’s get this day started.”

“Oh, we already started the day,” he says as I roll off him, missing the stretch of him inside me. “And I would like to start every day like that. But much, much louder.”

His grin is wicked, and I can’t help laughing at him.

“I would like that, too.”

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT**

XADE

THE TRIP to Kioveset is nothing like any mission I have ever been a part of before. The human females all talk incessantly, their musical laughter ringing out loud and clear even as they discuss some of the grimmest things I have ever heard.

Carmen shines brightest among them, and even though I have grown fond of the tiny Crigomar, I am glad she left them in Gen's care in Edrobaz. It means I get more of her attention.

If I thought I was addicted to her scent before, now I am driven wild by it. She smells of me now, too, my stamp on her so evident that every time I get close to her, I am nearly taken over by my desire to have her yet again.

I hold myself back, though.

Waiting longer for her will only serve to heighten the anticipation.

Besides, there is much to do. Draz and I work together, checking the equipment in the larger ship.

"You think it is safe?" he asks me for the hundredth time.

"I think that there are no Crigomar ranging there any longer. The threat was dealt with. The outlaws will not trouble us. The only danger remaining is that of the... technology."

"The portal, the humans call it." Draz's expression is troubled.

A yank at the harness in my hands tells me it's safe and I return it to its case, checking the next one.

"That is correct."

"You still do not think it is a... space/time portal?"

I shrug. "I do not know what to think. I think that it is unstable, whatever it is, unsafe, and an unknown. That makes it very dangerous."

"You do not sound worried."

I put another harness back in its case, checking it off on my comms tablet. "I am not worried. We are many in number. The human females are, at worst, competent, and at best, brilliant. You are the First Warlord, and we have the Brute and the Gladiator with us, too. We have brought supplies to deal with anything that may happen. It is dangerous, yes. But..."

"It is worth the risk," he finishes for me, sighing heavily. The First

Warlord wears a heavy mantle of responsibility, and he always has, it seems marriage agrees with him.

“Are you concerned because Niki is with child?”

He laughs, a rare sound from him, then gives me a sidelong gaze. “No. If I tried to tell her what was safe and unsafe during her pregnancy, I imagine she would make things unsafe for me.”

I grin at him because his joy is infectious. “We will make sure the human females remain safe.”

It takes us no time at all to finish the flight to the witch cave, this particular aircraft much faster than mine. It’s built for speed and agility, which give us the ability to fly straight to the cave.

Niki and Draz stay on board, helping the rest of us secure our harnesses and rappel down from the ship as it hovers above the mountain. The two warlords will stay in air, giving us the ability to get away quickly should the need be.

A much better situation than the one Carmen and I were in.

She is the last off the aircraft, and my heart beats wildly against my chest to see her jump from the hatch. Despite not training with the rest of the warlords, Carmen quickly proves she is an adept learner, using the small thrusters in the harness to guide her way to the clearing in front of the cave with only minimal awkwardness.

When she is close enough, I open up my arms and catch her as she descends.

“You made that look easy,” Bex says, but the strange human sounds displeased at the compliment.

“It was easy,” Michelle says, elbowing her in the ribs. “At least, it was for those of us who listen.”

“I never claimed to be a good listener.” She sticks her nose up in the air, then glances around at the forest.

“It’s weird to be back. It feels like a lifetime ago, but it was just a couple days.” Carmen wraps her arms around herself.

“This whole place is weird,” Bex says, gesturing around.

“You love weird,” Dergoz tells her, grinning. It is strange to see the Brute wear such an easy expression.

“You bet your ass I do, baby,” Bex says, and then the Brute leans down, kissing her savagely on the mouth.

Carmen clears her throat. “Can you not? We need you thinking straight.”

“Whoa, Carmen.” Bex glares at her, still holding Dergoz’s head in her hands. “What’s with the attitude?”

“Just trying out something new.” She shrugs, a little shyly, and I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

“I like it,” Bex finally announces. “Alright then, monster fuckers and gentlemen, let’s get this show on the road.”

“Why does everything on this planet have to be inside a creepy cave?” Michelle sighs, the question plaintive.

“Do you have your meds on?” Carmen asks her.

“Yes, I solemnly swear not to have a panic attack if we see a monster.”

“I will kill any monsters we find for you,” Alvez tells her, holding her hand in his.

“LESSSSGO!” Bex shouts and Carmen startles slightly, then laughs.

The chit-chat and laughter die as we walk into the cave.

“This place is... different.” Michelle sounds excited by the prospect. “I feel it.”

“What do you call these things again?” Bex asks, shaking her light

“They are called—” Dergoz starts to answer.

“Flashlights. Perfect,” Bex interrupts.

“Of course, my wife, if that is what you want.”

Carmen laughs quietly next to me, turning her light on too. “No time like the present.”

With that, my brave, sweet wife lights the way for the rest of us, into the heart of the cave where she was held prisoner..

**CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE**

CARMEN

THE CAVE IS BIGGER than I thought. Probably because Kyle dumped me somewhere in the middle, and I only had to walk the back half to get to the archway.

But walking from the entrance all the way back... it really gives you an idea of how far back it goes.

"I see now," Xade mutters.

"See what? It's still pitch black," Bex calls from behind us, her flashlight bouncing against the rocks.

"This part of the cave... this is as far as I went with Redax when we came up here as younglings together." He shines a beam of light on a rockfall. "This hole was not here many years ago. I did not even notice it when I came through for you. I was too worried to think." His face contorts with guilt and I reach up, squeezing his bicep.

"It's okay," I tell him. "You saved me. You had other problems besides thinking about the topography of the cave."

"Oh, good word," Michelle says cheerily. "Yeah, it would make sense that you wouldn't remember every bit of the cave while you were panicking."

"I was not—" I hear him swallow. "Yes. I was panicked. I was worried for you, my sunshine."

Awww. "I'm here. I'm safe. You saved me."

I take a deep breath. "Are you ready?"

I don't wait for his answer because I know he'll follow me, and I step over the rocks.

Déjà vu hits me hard and I inhale deeply, attempting to settle myself. I'm safe. Poor Kyle isn't here; he was just trying to get home.

"I have you," Xade's deep voice is a caress against my senses and I lean against him, gathering my courage.

"I have you too," I say, and hold out my hand.

He takes it and we walk slowly hand in hand into the waiting dark.

"This is some freaky-deaky shit," Bex says, her voice echoing off the walls. "Man, I might have been trapped in a Roth prison, but at least I wasn't in some smelly ass cave."

“What is an ass cave?” Dergoz asks.

Bex barks a laugh, and some of my anxiety dissolves with the noise. “Well, when two people love each other very much—”

“Can you shut up?” Michelle squeaks out, clearly more freaked out than the rest of us. “You are such a weirdo.”

“Like you’re not?” Bex snaps back. “Nothing wrong with a little ass cave.”

“I like the ass cave,” Dergoz says.

“I never said I wasn’t a weirdo,” Michelle squabbles, and the sound of the two of them arguing sets me at ease. “But I’m not going to listen to you talk about butt sex with your husband. We are at work!”

“I didn’t say anything about butt sex, I said ass cave. *You’re* the one who brought up spelunking.”

I’ve spent months with them arguing, both in the Suevan myza and before that on the ship here. Maybe it’s messed up that it puts me at ease, but it’s so inane and ridiculous that I practically sigh in relief.

I pull up short, squinting.

“There,” I call out, shining the Suevan equivalent of a flashlight on the wall. “There’s the mural.”

“Holy fucking shitballs,” Bex says, her light bouncing off the floor as she jogs towards us. “Michelle, get your smart ass cave over here and take a look at this. Do your analyzing.”

Bex clucks her tongue, falling silent as she stares at the same mural that’s puzzled me since I saw it.

“Whoa,” Michelle says softly, joining us. Alvez stands silently at her side, drinking in the mural on the wall, same as the rest of us. “This is old. Ancient. Xade, you said the hole in the rockfall at the entrance to this chamber wasn’t there the last time you were here?”

“Correct,” Xade rumbles.

“Hmm. It could have sealed off this part of the cave, which would have preserved this longer than it might have naturally. This is fascinating.” Her flashlight travels over the mural, the color flaking off in some places, but brighter than I remember in others. “They do look like human women,” she adds.

“That doesn’t mean they are from our Earth,” I say aloud. A shiver goes down my spine.

“What do you mean?” Xade asks, his arm wrapping around my waist

protectively.

“Our Earth,” Bex repeats. “You mean, like an alternate dimension?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t either,” Michelle agrees.

“Neither do I,” Alvez says.

We’re all silent for a moment, and then Bex snorts. “Glad we cleared that up. I’m guessing the portal is over there?” She shines a beam of light onto the dais, and it’s so shiny it practically gleams in the dark.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “That’s it,” I whisper, and a spasm goes through me. “Don’t touch it,” I warn. “I think it’s weight triggered or something.”

It’s the only explanation that makes sense.

“What if it’s not?” Bex says, striding over to the archway and shining her light all around it. “Doesn’t really make sense to do a weight trigger. What if you have to get on top of it to repair the tech? You wouldn’t want to get sucked through while fixing it.” With that, she heaves herself onto the dais, and two things happen at once.

Dergoz roars, causing dust to shake free of the cave ceiling.

I scream, panicking that the damned thing is going to turn on.

Bex beams down at us, shining her flashlight up onto her chin. “See? Not a weight trigger. Told you so.”

“Get down from there,” Dergoz the Brute bellows. “You are my wife and I will not allow you to injure yourself.”

Michelle and Bex ignore him, Bex giving her a hand up onto the glossy dais.

“Injure herself...” I say quietly, thinking fast.

Bex shines her flashlight into my eyes.

“Can you not?” I ask irritably. “For crying out loud.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I was hurt when I got on it... would it be possible if it were, uh, biometrically operated? The trigger, I mean?”

“Gross.” Bex sounds delighted. “You think your blood triggered it?”

“Something like that?” I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe sweat?”

“Did you piss on it?”

I glare at her and she snickers.

“I’m kidding.”

“There are the glyphs she said were glowing,” Michelle calls out, running

a finger over the arch. “Ouch, oh, shit—”

“What?” Bex asks, and Alvez, Michelle’s husband, growls low.

“No big deal, I got like a paper cut, just surprised me.”

“Get off it, get off it, get off it,” I yell out, panicking. My heart races and I feel it then—the tug of the damned portal.

“Oh rainbow-scented fucking unicorns,” Bex swears, pulling at Michelle, pushing her off the dais into Alvez’s waiting arms. Dergoz rips Bex off the platform, her hair streaming behind her..

The glyphs around the archway light up, glowing bright blue.

“You know, I’m glad I’m not stuck here by myself right now,” Michelle says, her voice quavering and falsely bright. “At least we have each other.”

“We should take our weapons out,” I say in a low voice.

“Call me a leprechaun and shit a pot of gold.” Bex’s voice is astounded. “I think it *is* an Einstein-Rosen bridge. This is incredible.”

The archway swirls, greens and blues in a vortex in the middle.

“Weapons out,” I yell, glancing around wildly. “If Kyle came through there, something else might too!” I have to scream to be heard above the noise the portal’s making, the blue light making the cave as bright as day.

An iridescent bubble forms around the entire structure and we gape at it, staring down the sights of our weapons.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the portal whirs to a stop, the light dying, leaving the cave darker than ever.

“Did anything come out?” Michelle asks.

“Just a little pee,” Bex says weakly.

I laugh, slumping against Xade. “Nothing came through.”

“I didn’t see through to the other side,” Bex says. “But shit, I believe you. I think that’s exactly what you said it was.”

She grows quiet.

“The question is, how the hell do we make it work for us?” Michelle asks. “I want a whole team up here. The best Suevan scientists. We set up a camp here, and we run tests. Extensively. We try to reverse engineer the technology, and if that fails, we figure out how to use what we have.”

Alvez stares down at her with an expression of adoration.

“This will turn the tide of the war in our favor.” There is no doubt in Michelle’s voice, and when she smiles, it’s as sharp as a razor. “Let’s get started.”

“Do you need me?” I ask her, surprising myself by not offering to help. I

always offer to help.

“No, not unless that biology and medical degree was jointly held with a PhD in astrophysics or engineering.” Michelle’s smile is soft and understanding.

“Yep, the Brute and Michelle and I will hold it down.” Bex illuminates her face with her flashlight again, then winks dramatically.

Alvez grunts.

“Oh, and Alvez will be the muscle. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget about you, Gladiator.”

“Go back to Edrobaz and rest up.” Michelle straightens her shoulders. “We’ll need you in the end, I’m sure.”

“We should send Jules and the Rogue to Roth. If we can pick up some of the good guy Roths and get them through a portal to head off their evil former emperor, that would be even better. They’re still in Roth space, right?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I was asking my husband,” Bex says tartly. “You know, because he’s a warlord?”

“Rude,” I tell her, grinning.

“That will be up to Niki and Draz, as well as the royal family. But it is not a bad idea, my love,” Dergoz tells her.

With that, we head back through the cave, all quiet and, if I had to guess, all thinking the same thing.

The end of our battle with the deposed Roth emperor is coming faster than we’d hoped.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

January Bell writes steamy sci-fi romance with a guaranteed happily ever after. Combining pure escapism, a little adventure, and a whole lotta love makes for romance that's a world apart. January spends her days writing, herding kids and ducks, and spends the nights staring at the stars.

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