

RUBY DIXON

A RISEVERSE
SHORT STORY

When
**SHE'S
SHY**



WHEN SHE'S SHY

A RISDAVERSE SHORT STORY

RISDAVERSE

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Cover Design: Kati Wilde

Cover Photo: Stock from Deposit Photos www.depositphotos.com

***** Previously Published in the Pride Not Prejudice Anthology**



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WHEN SHE'S SHY

I am a bashful, dorky human woman -- your average refugee on Risda III.

Haina is tall, blue, and *magnificent*. She is effortlessly confident, and her laugh is contagious. I might hide behind the candle section at the store in Risda's port just to get a weekly glimpse at her when she makes her vendor runs.

I might be in love with her from afar. Someday I'll get the courage to talk to her. Someday.

But fate steps in, and 'someday' turns out to be a lot sooner than I expected.

(This is a wlw short story that was previously published in the Pride Not Prejudice anthology.)

For my sensitivity readers – thank you!

Sophie Hall

Kathryn Klepacz

Ali Wakerley

Lia Woods

ALI

She's in town again.

My heart thumps with excitement as I stare out the window, eyeing the space port and the ships flying in. One in particular catches my eye with its bright red body and pink racing stripes. There's a swirling logo of some kind on the side that tells me it belongs to a brand, but I don't particularly care. All I know is that the same person pilots that ship and comes in to Port with a new supply of goods every Thursday. She delivers them to the general store, chats with the male behind the counter or a few of the port custodians, and heads on her way.

And I'm completely and utterly in love with this woman.

You're an idiot, I tell myself as I smooth my hair in my tiny mirror and run a hand over my nicest tunic-dress. The fashions here aren't the most flattering for human forms, but I've gotten pretty good with a needle and I've tailored my clothing to fit my frame and emphasize my bust. It's a bland olive green, but the color looks good with my skin tone. I lotion my hands and then run them over my hair one more time, as my baby-fine brown hair goes everywhere with the slightest hint of a breeze. I should pull it back, but I have a pointy chin and that will just make me look unpleasant and bird-like and it's important that I look pretty.

Not that I have the courage to speak to the woman of my dreams, but a girl can always hope.

Like I do every Thursday, I shut the windows in my tiny farmhouse and

race out to my air-sled to head into Port. I'm close enough to town that I could walk, but I don't want to get sweaty, damn my vanity. As I cruise the short distance into town, another ship thunders onto the docks, thrusters deafening as it hovers and settles into the perfect spot. A lot of people didn't want a farm too near to the port docks because of the noise, but I don't mind it. It makes me feel less lonely to see the ships go in and out, day after day. It's something to break up the monotony of farming, and I like it, noise and all.

I zoom over the main street of Port and settle near the store itself, my sled settling and resting over one of the designated parking spaces just like the bigger ships, and I imagine what it'd be like to go traveling with my crush. To have our hands touch as we reach for the controls and share a chuckle. To have the pleasant sound of another voice in my ears, just sharing the minute events of the day. To sleep in her arms at night.

I'm so busy daydreaming that I don't notice my surroundings. No sooner do I turn my sled off than another crunches into my passenger side, slinging me against the door and setting off proximity alerts. I cringe as I stumble out of the driver's side, my head throbbing from where it smacked against the window.

"What are you keffing doing?" the man growls as he emerges from his vehicle. It's a praxiiian, one of the catlike males that works on the docks, and not a very friendly one, either. He glares furiously at me and gestures at our vehicles, now sandwiched together. "I was clearly signaling that I was parking!"

Anxiety overtakes me and I want to protest that I was paying attention, that I didn't see a signal, that I was there for a full thirty seconds before he landed. I want to tell him to get out of my face, but my fear of confrontation gets the better of me. I freeze up and my throat works, and all I can manage is a tiny squeak of distress.

"*What?*" he demands.

"S-sorry," I blurt, even though I'm not at fault. I just want him to go away.

He practically snarls at me, only to straighten, his expression calming as he stares at something over my shoulder.

"Is there a problem?" one of the port custodians asks in a friendly voice. He moves to my side and ever so slightly nudges himself in front of me.

"No problem, custodian," the praxiiian growls. "The female hit my vehicle but it doesn't look like there's damage. Just call it even."

The custodian turns toward me. He's the big solid one that looks like a wall of muscle and a thick neck. He eyes me, and then my vehicle, and then turns back to the praxiiian. "Looks like you hit her and not the other way around. Should we request a replay of footage from both vehicles to see who hit who?"

His voice is reasonable and polite, but I just want to run away. I want to hide in the store and wait for him to leave. I want to run back to my farm. Anything just to get away from this awkward, uncomfortable moment and the hate the praxiiian is glaring in my direction.

"Not necessary," the praxiiian replies. "Like you said, no damage." He turns and stalks away, heading towards the cantina across the street and leaving his vehicle pressed directly up against mine.

The custodian frowns. He eyes the vehicles again and then looks back at me. "Are you all right, colonist?"

I manage a nod.

He pulls out a data pad. "I'm going to have to record the incident just to keep the appropriate records should he bother you again." He takes a few photos of my sled and then taps on the screen, all the while I hug my arms to my chest. "Do you want me to call him back and have him move his vehicle?"

And see that angry man again? God, no. I shake my head. Even though I hate that his sled is touching mine and he's probably going to mess with it when he comes back, I don't want the confrontation. I can get in and out of it, and that's all that matters. I just want to wrap this up so I can see if my crush is still in the general store or if I've missed her already.

Maybe that makes me a coward, but I don't feel strong or powerful or safe as a human woman alone. Best to just avoid a fuss entirely. "No, it's fine. I really need to get going."

"Very well." He frowns like he disapproves, but he doesn't contradict me. "Let me get a scan of your hand so I can pull up your file."

I obediently hold my hand out, trying not to glance impatiently over at the store.

"Colonist Aliette Laurent, your complaint has been recorded," he says, and I wince at the word "complaint." "No need to worry about your friend."

"M-my friend?" I stammer, thinking of the woman inside the store. Am I so obvious? Horrifying.

"The praxiiian. I'll pull his information from his sled, and I'll also make

sure he's not around when you return. And if he ever gives you any more trouble, you just come to the custodial office and ask for Rektar, all right?" His voice is gentle and reassuring.

"Yes," I say quickly. "Great. Perfect. Thank you. I really must be going." I gesture at the store across the street and then all but race there.

"Have a nice day, Aliette," he calls after me, and I feel like the biggest, most awkward goober on the planet. A bolder person would tell him that it's Ali, that only my grandma called me Aliette, and that I'd prefer my records be updated with the correct name, but I don't want to talk to him any longer than I have to.

I want to go see *her*.

I all but race inside the general store, the door sliding open the moment I step on the hidden panel at the entrance. The moment I enter, everyone turns and stares at me.

"Hello again," the male behind the counter says. It's a younger avian male this time, with downy green feathers and a tall head-plume. I think he's the son of the owner, but I don't know his name. I never ask.

"Hi," I breathe. Part of me wants to smooth my flyaway hair down but that would just be obvious.

Because *she's* here.

The woman that I fantasize about. Not filthy fantasies—well, *mostly* not filthy fantasies—but of us spending time together. Of us holding hands, or her arms going around me. Of her just...smiling.

Like she's smiling right now. "Hello there," she says, pulling a stack of noodle packages out of a plastic container and filling the shelf in front of the counter. Her dark eyes, as pretty as a doe, seem to warm as she looks at me. She's dressed as she always is, in the red and pink-racing-striped jumpsuit that is probably a work uniform. It should clash with her deep blue skin, but she just looks vibrant and alive in it...though I'm probably biased. Her thick black hair is pulled into a loose tail at her nape, and her horns are capped with shiny silver in just a hint of a design.

Her face is wide for a mesakkah, with her features broad enough to not be pretty. Her cheekbones are too prominent, her face too square and her mouth too wide. She's tall, but all the mesakkah aliens are tall. She's broader built than most, too, with strong arms from lifting freight.

And maybe she's not anyone's idea of a gorgeous woman, but...I love the sight of her. I love the smile she always wears. I love how strong and capable

and self-assured she seems to be. Most of all, I love her bright laughter that rings out in the store every time she's here. I'm addicted to that laughter. It sounds so full of joy.

I don't know who she is—I don't even know her name—but I'm pretty sure I could watch her forever.

She gives me a warm, friendly smile as I take a step into the store and gestures at the noodles she's stocking on the counter by the register. "Let me know if I'm in your way."

I gulp and nod, ducking my head and retreating to the far side of the store. She always greets me, but I never have the courage to say anything back. What could I possibly say that wouldn't come across as completely weird anyhow? *Hi, I think I'm in love with you because I love your laugh?*

Just like I do every week, I stay on the opposite end of the store and pretend to shop. All the while, I watch her talk cheerfully to the guy behind the counter. Someone else comes in—another woman—and my crush pauses to talk to her, too. They joke about the weather, and how everyone's buying up a particular flavor of noodle that must be popular with humans, and she just seems like she's having the best time.

I watch her mouth as she smiles. I watch the play of her ponytail at the nape of her neck. And I thrill with quietly shared joy every time she laughs. I hug a candle to my chest and pretend to sniff the other ones, even though I already have a dozen extra candles back home. It's just that this particular spot in the store allows me to watch her without interruption, and so when she glances my way, I add another to my basket. I don't want to make her uncomfortable.

"Well," my crush eventually says, folding down the last container and tucking it under her arm. "That's all from me this week. I'll be back next Thursday. Let me know if you have any particular requests between now and then."

She looks over at me meaningfully.

Oh. A request? A chance to talk to her? God, I would love that. I lick my lips, full of yearning...and then the shopkeeper glances over at me. The door opens, and another woman walks in, and my shyness gets the better of me. I duck my head again and add yet another candle to my growing purchases.

"See you, Brttaa," she calls out, and then the doors to the store slide open and she's gone.

I could kick myself. I had a perfect opportunity to speak to her. She

looked at me. Made eye contact.

And I clammed up like an idiot. I'm devastated. Now I have to wait a whole other week before I can even look at her, much less talk to her. My shoulders slump and I feel completely deflated.

"You going to buy that crap or what?" the shopkeeper asks me. He crosses his feathered arms over his chest and glares in my direction, all sense of politeness gone now that the mesakkah female has left.

Right. I put back all the heavy candles except for one, take it up to the counter, and then carefully set a credit down to pay for it. "Thank you."

He grunts and palms my credit, not offering any change. I guess I bought an expensive one. Ah well. Maybe the scent will remind me of her. I lift it to my nose, sniffing...and choke on the cloying herbal scent of it. Okay, maybe it *won't* remind me of her. That is definitely not a human-influenced scent.

I step out of the store with my purchase, and immediately, a shadow steps in front of me. "Fancy running into you again, human."

The voice is menacing, with a hint of a rumble in it that sounds like a purr. Terrified, I stare up into the face of the praxiian that hit my sled.

ALI

The alien grins down at me, all terrifying fangs. "Aren't you just the sweetest little bite of meat."

I shrink back when he reaches out to touch a loose lock of my hair with a clawed hand. Terror flares through me, and I'm reminded of terrible days in the past, when I was first kidnapped from Earth and sold into slavery. There were so many reaching hands back then, and I thought I'd forgotten all of them. But when he reaches for me, the memories come flooding back and I break into a cold sweat, a choked sound of fear escaping me.

He gives me a scrutinizing look, rubbing my hair, and I feel like a pinned bug.

"Hey," calls a familiar voice. A moment later, a warm arm loops around my shoulders. "Get your own piece, praxiiian. This human's mine."

It's the mesakkah woman from the store. My crush.

"Funny," the praxiiian says, not backing down. "She doesn't smell like you."

"It's called showering, you keffing idiot. Look into it." And she leans in and gives my cold cheek a nuzzle. "Is this fool bothering you, Ali?"

Ali. She knows my name. It's like everything inside me slides into place. I feel calmer with her arm around me, her warmth and her scent enveloping me. I love the press of her nose against my skin, and even her breath is pleasant.

I burrow into her embrace, letting my body language speak for itself.

"Thought so," the woman says confidently. "Maybe you leave my sweet human alone and go find someone else to harass, Pendar."

He bares his teeth in a horrifying show, his tail swishing back and forth as he points at me. "She's a keffing shit driver, Haina."

"You would be, too, if you were having to learn how to drive another civilization's sleds. Give her a break." She presses another kiss to my temple, her arm tightening around my shoulders. "Come on, Ali. It's my turn to buy lunch. I'm sure when we come back out our friend Pendar will be gone. Right, Pendar? I'd hate for Ali to have to file another report with the custodians. You know they hate it when vendors mess with the locals."

"You're a vendor, too, Haina. I could just as easily complain about your interfering."

"Nice try," she says, and kisses my cheek again. "Ready, love?"

Somehow, I manage to nod. I take the hand draped over my shoulder and hold it as we walk toward the only cantina in Port, acting as if this is normal.

"Don't say anything just yet," Haina murmurs in my ear, and then nuzzles it again. "Praxiians have good hearing and we want to make sure he buys what we're selling."

If *he* buys it? Heck, I've bought it, too. There's nothing I want more than for her to nuzzle my cheek again. I slide my other arm around her waist and we walk slowly toward the cantina, my head spinning from the closeness of her.

She's just being friendly, I remind myself. Don't read too much into this. She's just helping a colonist in need avoid a big pushy jerk.

We head inside the cantina and Haina—I've already memorized her name—pulls a seat out for me at a table in the corner, and then heads for the bar. She speaks quietly to the bartender and then returns to my side, sliding into the seat next to mine. "I hope you like the local brew and avaashi," she tells me, leaning in. "I didn't know what to order and the bartender pushes his nasty fried leaves on everyone. If you want something else, let me know and I can get it."

I nod, feeling self-conscious now that it's just the two of us. My hair is probably a mess and she likely thinks I'm an idiot.

Haina leans in closer at the table. "Do you ever plan on talking to me or are you just going to stare with those big eyes of yours?"

"Sorry," I say meekly, my face heating. "I-I'm—not good. With people, that is. Shy." The words jerk out of me as if pulled. "Sorry."

Haina grins at me, and I can see one of her front teeth is slightly twisted, giving her an impish look. It's so *cute*, but everything about her just makes me happy. "Well, that explains a lot."

"Explains...?" I ask, trying to carry a conversation if she wants to have one. It's the least I can do.

"Why you always show up when I'm here on my route, and yet you never say anything to me. I even take my time stocking in the hopes you'll open up and say something, but you never have. I thought maybe you didn't like aliens."

Oh.

Oh. She wanted to talk to me? Haina noticed me watching her? I'm partially horrified that I've been so obvious and partially thrilled that she's seen me. "I like aliens."

"So many of your kind don't, and I don't blame you." She gives a little grimace. "It's one reason I have this route, you know. Lord va'Rin requested more pleasant personalities from his vendors. No idea how someone like Pendar slipped through the cracks."

"Maybe he's pleasant for a praxiiian." They're a rather vicious, warlike people.

Her eyes widen and Haina grunts. "Come to think of it, you might be right." She falls silent as the bartender arrives with two drinks and food, and her hand casually covers mine. It's like...we're holding hands. Like we really are a couple. I know it's just pretend, but this isn't helping my crush in the slightest. We continue to hold hands as he tosses down two baskets of food in front of us and then sets down two strong-smelling beers. Or rather, "brews" as the aliens call them.

"Service with a smile," she teases, grinning up at the bartender.

He huffs with amusement and shakes his head at us. Even this curmudgeon likes Haina. I think it'd be impossible not to like her.

He walks away and she continues to watch me. I stare back, memorizing her features. Her brow is covered with the thick plating that skims up to her horns, and this close her cheekbones are almost sharp. It gives her a pixie-like look...if pixies were seven-foot-tall blue aliens with massive biceps.

"You can eat now," she says gently.

Oh. Oh lord, I'm just sitting here beaming at her and holding her hand and she's waiting for me to let go. I feel like an idiot. Snatching my hand away, I scoop up one of the *avaashi*—a doughy sort of ball made with a vegetable

paste—and nibble on it. The texture is weird, but I've had worse.

Haina pops one entire *avaashi* into her mouth and licks her thumb. "So, what's the rest of your name? I only heard it once and I didn't remember all of it. Just the "Ali" part because it's pretty."

My face heats again. She remembered my name? Or at least, most of it? "I like Ali better."

"Are you just saying that because I called you Ali?" She gives me a knowing look, her mouth quirking in another smile.

"No, I actually prefer Ali. My full name is Aliette but I hate it. It feels... fussy."

"And you're not fussy?"

"I'm easy." Another blush scalds my face as I realize what I've said. "I mean, I like things when they're easy. I like simple. Not that *I'm* easy."

Haina keeps smiling at me and I wait for her to make a joke at my expense, but she only puts her hand on the table again and extends a pinky over to me. I know without her saying anything that it's for me to lace my finger with hers, and I do so, my heart thrumming with an excited pitter-patter.

"So, I was right with Ali. Good to know. My name is Haina Haal Ui." Her last name sounds familiar. Before I can ask about it, she continues. "Haal Ui's a station. When you're an abandoned bastard, the only surname you get is that of the station itself."

"Oh...I'm sorry."

"I'm not. It's just life." She shrugs. "It made me independent and maybe a little bit pushy." Her mouth quirks in another one of those charming smiles. "Which I should also be apologizing for. I all but mauled you in front of that *praxii*, and I hope it wasn't too offensive. The only thing I could think of to get him off your case without causing a scene was to pretend that you were mine."

"You didn't offend me." I want to say more. Gosh, I want to say so much more, but that awkward shyness hits me again. Someone as confident and appealing as Haina wouldn't want a goofy confession from someone like me. Maybe she doesn't even like women.

But as we stare at each other, she slowly pulls her hand back. "I'm not so sure I didn't bother you," Haina says carefully. She watches my face and then shakes her head. "I swear I won't bother you again."

With a sinking feeling, I realize that my reticence is making Haina

suspect the worst. That I secretly am offended by her touch. That she did push too far, and my silence isn't helping. That if I don't say something, this might be the last time I ever talk to her. I have to speak. I have to say something. *Anything.*

"I love you," I blurt out.

Her eyes widen.

I gasp, clapping my hands over my mouth. "Oh my god. I'm so sorry—"

She raises a hand in the air. "Only apologize if you didn't mean it, Ali. Otherwise, you haven't hurt my feelings." Her smile returns, flashing and charming. "I'm flattered, actually."

My face feels like an inferno. "I have a hard t-time saying what I'm t-thinking," I stammer. "Too many years a slave." When I was stolen away from Earth, I was never the bravest creature, and years of cruel masters and being treated like less than a person taught me to keep my head down and my mouth closed. Haina's expression turns to one of worry, and I feel the need to keep speaking. So I spill everything. "I like you. I want you to know that. I like everything about you. I like your laugh and your smile and the way you're nice to everyone. I like that you seem strong and capable but kind, too. I like that your eyes light up when you're happy. You're right that I keep coming by the store. I just like being around you. I want to be near you, even if it's only watching you from afar."

Haina says nothing. She leans in, and instinctively, I lean in closer to her as well. Her smile disappears and she brushes her thumb over one side of my forehead. "You hit your head."

"Sled crash," I remind her.

Her mouth flattens and she scowls. "I need to go beat the fur off of that praxiiian."

"Please don't," I say, panicked. I love hearing her fierce protective words, but I have to live here alone and the last thing I want is to anger an already angry alien. "I'm fine."

She tilts her head, studying me, and her horns catch the sunlight, making her dazzling. "Are these lovely things you're saying all because you hit your head?"

"No. I really do like you. And I like that I feel safe around you," I confess in a near-whisper. "Even if it's just being in the same room together. Being near you makes me think everything is all right in the universe. That probably seems silly."

"Not silly." She leans in and brushes her lips lightly over mine. "Did I do that right?"

I want to melt into my seat out of sheer happiness. "It was perfect."



I FEEL like I'm living a dream when Haina walks me back to my sled. The praxiiian and his sled are gone, and mine is made of rather sturdy materials, as it doesn't seem to be damaged in the slightest. That's good. Better than that is Haina's hand, warm in mine. This time, when she smiles, it's aimed right at me. Those smiles are the best smiles.

"I can't stay for much longer," Haina admits as we stand next to my sled. "I've got another location on my route that I have to be at. But maybe I could see you again next Thursday? I'll buy lunch again."

"I'd like that," I say softly. "So much."

"Until next week, then." She pauses. "Can I kiss you again?"

"Please." Even though I feel awkward, I move toward her, tilting my face up. She's so tall that I can't just walk up to her and claim a kiss—I have to ask, with my face turned toward her like a flower toward the sun.

Haina caresses my cheek with her warm hand, gazing down at me with those bright, lovely eyes. She smiles, and before I can smile back, she's kissing me again. It's soft and sweet, hesitant and gentle, but it's the best kiss I've ever had.

"See you next week, Ali," she whispers.

I can hardly wait.

ALI

Two Months Later

I live for Thursdays.

Haina comes in today, and everything in the universe seems a little brighter with that knowledge. I wake up and fling the curtains back from my windows, beaming at the ships moving in and out of Port. It'll be a few hours before Haina's petite freighter lands. She has a shipment at a nearby satellite and won't be here until this afternoon. That gives me plenty of time to get ready for our date.

Our *date*. I wriggle with excitement at the thought.

It's been two months since we officially “met,” and the happiest two months of my life so far. Every Thursday, Haina comes into Port, re-stocks the store, and then we go to lunch together and talk for hours. A few weeks ago, she changed her schedule so she could stay a bit longer, and now after we have dinner, she comes over to my farm and we spend time together. Sometimes we cook together, or I read a story from a human book aloud to her (the library in Port has a few prized volumes that I've read a dozen times over). Sometimes we lie on the couch together and kiss for hours on end.

Last time Haina was here, she told me that her route was changing again, and this time she'd be able to spend the night.

It took every ounce of my (almost nonexistent) courage to ask her to stay

with me. Which means that tonight, we're having sex. Tonight, we're going to sleep together. I'll get to go to sleep with the woman I love in my arms, and wake up to find her there.

It's weird, but that's the part I'm looking forward to most. Not that I don't think sex will be great with Haina—I do. Kissing Haina is life-changing. Haina's hands on my breasts makes me yearn for more. My hands on Haina's tail drives her crazy. When she buries her hands in my hair, I feel like the most beautiful woman in the galaxy, even though I know I'm rather plain. She likes the way I look, and that's all that matters. But we've never done anything except touch over clothing. She's aware of my past as a slave and doesn't want to rush me. So, I'm definitely looking forward to sex, and I know with her it'll be special and perfect.

But it's sleeping with Haina that I'm most eager for, because it means that we're making room for each other in our lives. We're one step closer to being married—or mated, as they call it in the mesakkah culture. It's not something I'd considered before, but now, I'm thinking about what the future might hold for both of us...and I'm hopeful.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I no longer feel completely alone. I feel like I have someone special. I feel like there's a reason to be excited for the future.

That's everything, as far as I'm concerned.

So, I clean the house even more deeply than I normally do, dusting every corner and making sure that every single dish is put away instead of carelessly on the counter like I normally do. I put a pretty blanket on my weathered couch and change the sheets on the bed, all the while blushing as I think about being in it tonight with Haina at my side, my hands on her velvet skin and touching her sensitive neck. I make a fresh veg casserole out of the local roots that Haina likes, because she doesn't eat meat and gets a little unnerved when I do. I make sure her favorite tea is on hand and ready to be brewed.

I fluff the pillows on the bed, twice, even though I know she doesn't use a pillow. She saw mine and seemed amused at the sight of them and that the bed wasn't soft enough for a squishy, delicate human and that we had to pad even more of our bodies before going to sleep. Then, I can't stop thinking about her and I hug the closest pillow dreamily.

I can't wait for tonight.



WHEN I GET to the store, Haina is already there, talking to the owner behind the counter. They both nod as I enter, but I don't approach Haina just yet. She's working and I don't want to be a bother. I retreat back to my regular spot at the far end of the store and watch her as I pretend to sniff candles. If anything, I feel as if she's gotten prettier since the day I met her, but maybe it's because now I know how kind her heart is, how warm her hand is when she touches me, and how soft her lips are against mine.

She finishes her stocking and glances over at me. "Ready, Ali?"

I move quickly to her side with a little smile, delighted at the hand that goes to my waist. I love when she touches me in public, even though those moments are few and far between. It's like she's claiming me as hers and it makes me feel so lovely inside.

We go to our usual lunch in Port, and I swear, I don't know what we talk about or what we eat. I'm distracted, noticing her long fingers and the way she licks her thumb as she takes a bite of *avaashi*. I'm too busy thinking about tonight, and how she's going to be staying with me. How we're going to be in bed together for the first time. Should I get *plas-film*? Haina has never seemed offended by my hygiene in the past, and we kiss regularly, but I don't want her to feel uncomfortable. If she needs *plas-film*—the slippery, ultra-thin film that clings to skin and acts as birth control and skin protection depending on your needs—then I want to have some for her. I should have thought of that earlier.

"You listening?" Haina asks, brushing my finger with hers.

"Do you need *plas-film*?"

"For...lunch?" She tilts her heads, her regal horns glinting. "No?"

My face feels like it's on fire. "For...you know. Tonight."

"Oh. No. I can't make you pregnant. And if I thought your hygiene was questionable, I'd have never kissed you." She grins at me, taking my hand in hers and lifting my fingertips to her mouth. She nips at the tip of one, sending a shockwave of heat through my body. "Are you stressing about tonight?"

Stressing? Stressing is one of the things I do best. "Of course. It needs to be perfect."

Haina chuckles. "It doesn't need to be perfect. It just needs to be...us." She kisses my fingertip again and her tongue brushes against my skin this time. "We don't have to do anything if you're uncomfortable, Ali."

"I'm not uncomfortable." I'm also not going to tell her I've been obsessing over this day for a week now, ever since she casually suggested it. "I'm... excited."

She bites her lip, showing a hint of fang, and I wonder if she's just as obsessed as I am. When she kisses my fingertips again, I whisper, "Want to go home now?"

Her eyes gleam. "I thought you'd never ask."

We all but rush out of the cantina back to my sled. Sometimes I walk when the weather's nice, but today it's blustery, the wind biting. My carefully smoothed hair is a mess, but Haina's gaze is bright as we close the doors on my sled and she turns toward me.

I can't resist any longer. I stare at her, practically quivering with longing. "Can I kiss you now? Or do you want to wait until we get to my farm?"

"Of course, you can kiss me. I'm your—what do you call it? Female friend?"

"Girlfriend." I slide over on my seat. I've been trying to teach Haina the term because there's not one for "exclusive partner but not mated." In their culture, you're either mated or you're not. And while I would be thrilled to call Haina mine permanently, I'm probably moving way too fast for her. "That's like we belong to each other in a temporary sort of way. Testing the waters, so to speak."

"Girlfriend," she repeats, cupping the back of my head as I lean in. "I'll never remember that because you're not a girl in my eyes. You're a full-grown female. Can't I just call you 'mine'?"

"I would love it if you did," I confess, and then close the distance between us, kissing her. I'm addicted to kissing Haina. It always starts slow and soft, as if we're feeling each other out. Her lips are like pillows, and I nip at one before teasing my tongue into her mouth. Hers has ridges, which I find thrilling, and she finds my smooth one equally exotic. Burying my hands in her thick hair, I kiss her deeper, until it feels as if we're one, with no separation between one body and the next. Her mouth tastes sweet, her tongue as hungry as mine, and when we pull apart, we're both panting.

I kiss her again, just because I could kiss her for hours. "I wanted to do that before we got to the farm. Every time you're gone, I miss you so much. I can't think about anything but seeing you again. Touching you again."

"I feel the same." Haina rubs the back of my neck. "But I don't mind waiting if you feel like I'm rushing you."

"You're not rushing me—not at all. I want this more than anything." Sometimes I feel like I want it even more than her and that scares me a little bit. I know my affection is a little intense, and I worry that I'm going to scare her off.

"Then let's go back to your place."

I'm nervous for the rest of the short trip back to my farm. It's the first time Haina's going to visit, and I imagine it looks rustic and pathetic to someone that pilots a spaceship and spends her days traveling through the stars. My little farmhouse is simple, with a few windows and a main domed living area with an attached secondary dome for private quarters. Some women love gardening and have flower beds in front of their houses, but mine is bare and lackluster. It's as uninteresting as, well, me.

"Do you like farming?" is all that Haina asks as I set the sled down.

"I'm not sure. No one's ever asked me if I like it or not." I gaze around at my house, noticing the shabby cushions on my secondhand couch and the lack of furnishings I have. I'm not much of a homemaker. Never had a reason to think of this place as a "home." To me, home is where family is, and it's just me here. "I guess I don't mind it. I get to breathe fresh air every day and I'm in charge of myself. You can't ask for more than that." I turn to her. "Do you like deliveries?"

She seems startled by my question. "No one's ever asked me that, either." Haina smiles, considering. "I suppose it's a job. It gives me enough credits to be comfortable and I get to see new places and meet people. It could be a lot worse."

"What would you do if you could do anything you wanted?" I ask, eager to learn more about her. "Anything at all?"

Haina takes a step inside my house, shaking her head. "Didn't really consider it much."

"No? How come?"

She runs her hand along the counter in my small kitchen. "I grew up an orphan in the station slums. To me, success was not turning into a criminal or ending up addicted to something. Success was being able to support myself and breathe in clean air every once in a while." She steps toward the small window overlooking my land. "Didn't dream bigger than that. So I guess I'm happy with my job. But if you're asking what I'd do if I found myself suddenly flush with credits and never having to work again?" She smiles out at the sight of my garden. "I like vegetables. Maybe I'd try growing some."

"I could help you with that," I tell her shyly.

"You don't think it's silly?"

I shake my head and move to her side, gazing out at the greenery growing in its neat, tidy rows. Bots handle most everything but there are certain things that need human—or mesakkah—intervention. "I can see the appeal of being in the sun and fresh air and making your own food, especially after growing up on a station."

"It might be...nice." Haina glances over at me. "What about you? What did you want to be when you became an adult, if not a farmer?"

I want to lean closer to her. To rest my head on her shoulder. To let her encircle me in her arms and burrow against her warmth and protective embrace. But...I also want her to reach for me, first. I need that. "It's strange, because back on Earth, you're expected to know what you want to do for the rest of your life when you turn eighteen. You're still practically a kid, though, and you're supposed to have your mind made up. When I was eighteen, I didn't know what I wanted...and then I got taken by aliens and it didn't matter."

"And now?" She watches me closely.

"Fifteen years later?" I shrug. "I still haven't really given it much thought. It's not what I want to do with my life. It's what I want to *be*, if that makes sense."

"And what do you want to be?" Haina prompts.

I pause, feeling vulnerable. "Loved."

She's silent, and I swallow hard. I'm not good at exposing my emotions. At being raw and honest. Everything in me that's learned to protect myself screams to retreat, but I know that if I want Haina—and happiness—I have to come out of my shell, just a little.

"It's a good thing we met, then," Haina says, her voice soft. She turns toward me and reaches for my hand, lacing my fingers with hers.

My heart floods with warmth, and I gaze up at her, full of yearning and adoration. I've been so in love with her from the moment I heard her laughter. If she never left my side for the rest of my life, I'd be the happiest woman in existence. Hearing her return my feelings is overwhelming, but in the best way. "I love you, too, Haina."

She squeezes my fingers and with her other hand, brushes her knuckles along my jaw. The gentle caress is like a balm for my anxiety, and I relax under her touch. She wants me as much as I want her.

"Can I kiss you?" she asks, and I nod. She leans in and brushes her lips gently over mine, and her hand trails from my jaw down my neck. "Can I take your clothes off and keep kissing you? Everywhere?"

I shiver with anticipation. "Only if you get undressed, too."

ALI

“**Y**ou can undress me.” She releases my hand and takes a step back so I can see all of her. “I’m all yours.”

With a little smile, I reach for the auto-fastener at the collar of her pink and red bodysuit. “Should we move away from the window?”

“Why? No one’s going to see but your vegetables.” She grins at me. “Unless you think they’re shy.”

I giggle at the absurdity of shy vegetables, and activate the auto-fastener. It slithers down the front of her bodysuit, the material gaping, and she reaches for the neck of my tunic at the same time. My clothes are simpler than hers, with no activated fasteners. Humans get plain, boring cloth and laces to tie things, nothing fancy. But I feel pretty enough in Haina’s eyes, and when she indicates I should lift my arms so she can pull my tunic over my head, I do. I remove the cloth breast-band I’m wearing before she can ask, because my cleavage is a lot more bountiful than hers. She doesn’t wear anything of the sort, but I like her lean, strong form.

Where Haina’s breasts are small and perky, mine are heavy and sway with their weight. Our bodies are very different, but she’s touched my breasts before and told me that she likes how responsive I am. I just hope that she likes me as much naked. I steel my courage and brush aside her gaping clothing, exposing her breasts and caressing one.

She touches my cheek again, her gaze on me. “Am I your first mesakkah, Ali?”

I nod. The aliens I had experience with weren't her people. I'm not afraid of her and there are no bad memories when it comes to her kind.

"First female?"

"First in a long time," I offer, caressing her hardened nipple. The tip isn't like mine, but tough and ridged like the ridges that cover her shoulders and portions of her chest. I suspect they're not as sensitive as mine are and I've never asked if she likes breast touches as much as I do, or if she'd just rather I focus on her tail. "I've always liked women, though."

"Do you...want to talk about your past? I know it hasn't been easy." Haina's voice is gentle, her fingers light and caressing as she brushes a lock of hair behind my ear. "Is there anything you feel I should know? Any boundaries you don't want crossed?"

It's an unspoken given that everyone on Risda III has suffered some sort of trauma in their past. The horror of being kidnapped by aliens is bad enough, but so many of us were sold into slavery, and most of the aliens that populate this end of the galaxy are primarily interested in humans as playthings. Some are lucky enough to escape such things.

I wasn't lucky, though.

I shake my head. "I've been here for three years now, and maybe I'll talk about it someday. But not now. It's the past, and I just want to focus on now. With you." And because that sounds firm, I quiver a little bit. "If that's all right."

"Of course it's all right, Ali. I just want things to be comfortable with us." She cups my face in her hands. "If we get off on the wrong foot, it makes our future dates really awkward, and I want there to be more of them."

I cover her hands with mine. "Thank you, Haina. I promise I'll say something if it gets to be too much."

She leans in, smiling that lovely, warm smile of hers, and kisses me again. I try to arch my back so my breasts can brush against hers, but our heights are too dissimilar. She senses what I need, though, and Haina makes a soft sound of pleasure as she kisses me, and moves one hand to cup my heavy breast.

I bite my lip, choking back a whimper as she strokes my nipple. After a few weeks of gentle touching, she knows just what I like on my breasts, and how to make me crazy with need. Luckily I know how to do the same for her, too. I reach around to her back and grip the base of her tail, loving the hiss that she makes.

"Let's go to bed," I tell her softly.

She shudders, and there's a glazed look in her eyes that I love so much, as if she's completely lost in this moment. I want to keep that look on her face. I want to make her feel out of control and as addicted to me as I am to her. With my hand on her tail, I gently tug her toward the bedroom.

We make it a few steps between kisses, only to pause and taste each other once more. Her hands knead my breasts with gentle touches, toying with the tips, and I free the auto-fastener on her belt, making her uniform sag even more. By the time we make it to my bed, my lips feel swollen with kisses, Haina is panting, and her uniform falls to her boots, pooling around her ankles.

I'm feeling bolder by the minute, because I'm able to make Haina turned on like this. I put a hand to her shoulder and give her a nudge. "Sit on the bed."

"Who knew you had this bossy side, Ali?" she says, breathless. "You're cute when you're demanding."

I want to fire back with something sassy and playful. *You're cute, too. Or you like me bossy. Or I'll show you demanding.* But they all feel wrong in my mouth, because at heart, I'm an awkward person. I'm no conversationalist. I'm good at being silent and getting lost in the shadows. Except I can't when I'm around Haina, because she's the only person in the universe that sees me.

And for some reason, I want to reward that. So maybe I'm a bit bossy with her. "Give me your boots."

She lifts one foot and I rest it on my belly, just below my breasts, and undo the auto-fasteners there. I repeat the motion for the other side, and then I pull the last of her uniform off. Now that she's naked in front of me, I get to feast on the sight of her, all velvety blue skin that feels like joy to touch, her long, graceful legs and serpent-like tail. She's bare between her thighs, like all of her people, and when I push them apart, I can see the gleam of wetness through her folds. I stroke a finger through her pussy, learning her body...and I can't find her clit.

That makes me pause. I know aliens have some physiological differences with their genitalia. Moden have stubby cocks that elongate from a pouch inside their bodies, and praxiians are born with barbs on their dicks. Male mesakkah have a spur and ridges on their cocks, but no one's ever told me that a female mesakkah won't have the same equipment I do. I'm momentarily at a loss. "No clitoris?" I ask, kneeling between her legs to make sure I didn't

miss it. I run a finger through her wet cleft again. "Humans have a bundle of nerves right here that makes it easy to get off."

Haina shakes her head. "We have a pleasure spot, but it's deeper inside the body." Her hand goes to my hair, stroking it as I press more kisses between her thighs. "Some lovers prefer an artificial cock, but I didn't bring one with me..."

I kiss her again, this time atop her pretty bare mound. "Can I touch you? Inside? To try and find it?"

She laughs, the sound like sunlight. "As if I'd tell you no? I've been dreaming about your touch for days now, Ali."

Her response sends a thrill up my spine, and I gently scrape my teeth over her soft suede skin, then dip my tongue through the cleft of her pussy, licking her anyhow. She tastes sweetly musky, and I nip at her skin as she tangles a hand in my hair, her eyes closed with pleasure. Her long legs are sprawled apart on each side of me, and she's so beautiful I could cry. I want to make this amazing for her.

"I like your taste," I tell her shyly. "And the way that you feel against my lips."

Haina lets out a breathy whimper, falling back on my bed.

Her reaction is encouraging, and I stroke my finger through her folds, seeking the entrance to her body. She's slick and heated here, and I dip a careful finger inside her. Her legs twitch, and her tail slides over to my arm, stroking against me like a cat begging to be petted.

I nip at the top of her pussy again, using my lips to "bite" and tease as I stroke my finger carefully in and out of her, observing her reactions. I add a second finger to the first to increase the pressure, and then scissor them inside her, seeking that perfect spot. I know the human G-spot is directly below the clitoris but inside the body. Maybe Haina's is in the same sort of area. I drag my fingertip lightly against the inside of her channel, but I don't get an excited response until I brush against something that feels a bit like a knot just out of reach.

Her shuddering gasp is *everything*, though.

Her hand clenches in my hair, her tail flicking with agitation.

"I'm here," I whisper against her skin. "I have you." And I stretch my fingers, brushing against that spot once more. My hands are small and it's tricky to touch it, but I want to give her the best orgasm I can. I push deeper, twisting a little each time I brush against it, until I've got practically my entire

hand inside her warm, welcoming body. She's so slick that her pussy is making these incredibly wet sounds every time my hand moves inside her. I don't stop, though. I want her to come for me. So I whisper encouragements as I stroke her pleasure spot, my hand cradled by her tight channel, and when she comes, she comes hard, and I feel every bit of it. I feel her quivering as her climax arrives, I feel the clenching of her pussy around my fingers, I feel it all.

And I love it, so very much.

As she comes down, I press more kisses on the insides of her thighs and on her folds, easing my hand out of her body. I'm drenched in her juices, and I lick them off of my fingers, feeling self-satisfied and absolutely flagrant in my pride at making her come so hard.

"You," Haina breathes, her hand resting between her breasts as she comes down from her climax. "Are. Amazing."

I chuckle at that, because I'm just an average human with a gorgeous alien girlfriend. Who wouldn't want to make her come and see the look of sheer bliss on her face as she falls apart? I kiss my way up her belly and then lie down on the bed next to her, almost as breathless as she is. I can't stop kissing her, though. I press my lips to her skin in light caresses, kissing her shoulder, her breast, everywhere. I just love touching her. Breathing in her scent. Being with her.

"Mmm." Haina rolls onto her side, facing me. She props up on one arm. "Here I had all these grand visions of us coming at the same time, face to face. And then the moment you touch me, I fling my legs apart and let you take control."

I bite back a giggle at that mental image. "Does that make me greedy?"

"No, it makes you incredible." She leans in and kisses me, cupping the back of my head. I moan against her mouth, my body singing with my own arousal as she rolls me back onto the bed. "But now it's your turn, Ali."

"Oh no," I tease, deadpan. "Help. Stop."

She lifts her head, blinking at me. "Did you just make a joke?"

I shrug, feeling awkward and a little foolish.

"Oh kef, that was so *adorable*." Haina taps a finger on the tip of my nose. "That deserves a reward." She reaches for the ties at my waist. "I'm going to make you come so hard your toes curl."

"Help," I joke again, still deadpan. I prop up on my elbows so I can watch her. "Stop."

Haina laughs again, easing my pants off of my legs and then tossing them aside, along with my slip-on shoes. She hitches one of my legs over her shoulder and gives me a wicked grin. "If you tell me to stop again, I really will."

I snap my mouth shut.

She smiles and slinks down between my thighs, and then all I can see is dark hair and silver-capped horns. Her mouth, however... God almighty. My toes immediately curl as she tongues a circle around my clit and then sucks on it. It's clear she's done this before, and as she slips a finger into my cunt and hunts for my G-spot, I know I'm going to be an absolute puddle in the space of a few minutes.

It doesn't even take that long. Haina's finger finds the spot inside me just as she sucks on my clit again, and then I'm lost, riding the waves to a hard, fast orgasm. I cry out as I come, quivering, and then she laps at my clit with tiny, kittenish licks that feel absolutely lascivious thanks to the ridges on her tongue.

"You come so pretty," she tells me, then rolls my clit against the tip of her tongue. I nearly come again, my entire body clenching up in response. She chuckles at my actions, murmuring soft sounds of pleasure as she kisses my thighs and waits for me to come down. When I can breathe again, she lays her head on my thigh and gazes up at me. "Want to do that again?"

"In a bit. I need to catch my breath." As I lie there, panting, some of the awkwardness returns. I came a lot faster than she did, and I wonder if I didn't please her enough. Or if I was a shitty lover. My throat locks up and anxiety rises. "So...um...what now? With you and me?"

"Well..." She traces a lazy circle on my hip. "I thought we'd take a break, maybe have a snack, and then get back into bed again and see if we can make each other come at the same time. And then, I don't know. Dinner? You feel like going to the cantina or want to stay in?"

"Are you going to stay the night?"

She sits up. "I said I would. Do you not want me to?" A worried look crosses her face. "Did you not enjoy yourself, Ali?"

"I did," I blurt out. "It was amazing—"

"Then why all the doubt?" It's clear Haina's concern remains. "Do we need a safe word—"

"I love you," I say quickly. The moment it crosses my lips I feel like a damn idiot again. I'm always squawking about how much I love her. She's

going to think I'm losing my mind. But she only grins and presses another kiss to my thigh. "I just want this to work," I add. "And I'm afraid of messing it up. Or of disappointing you."

"You don't disappoint me in the slightest," Haina says with a soft smile. She reaches up and cups my cheek, and I want her to hold me forever.

But she doesn't tell me she loves me back, either. I tell myself that it doesn't matter...but I also know I'm lying. Two months ago, I wanted nothing more than to have Haina smile at me. Now that I've had a taste of more, I'm not going to be satisfied with things being casual. I'm just not sure what she wants out of this.



AFTER SPENDING all night in each other's arms, morning comes far too quickly. I hop into the shower with Haina, scrubbing her back and looping my arms around her waist as she soaps her hair.

"I can't make it back sooner than next Thursday," she tells me, turning to wash the suds out of her hair.

I wrap my arms around her again and rest my chin between her breasts, gazing up at her. Next Thursday seems so far away. "I understand. You have to work. When's your next day off? Maybe you can come by and spend some time then?"

"I wish." She wrings her hair out and then puts a dollop of shampoo in my hair and begins to wash it for me. "They're letting some of the staff go. Budget cuts. It means I'm picking up some extra routes, unfortunately. The scheduling is a little wild right now so I don't get any time off for the foreseeable future."

I frown. "No time off at all? That's not fair."

"Like they care about fair?" She runs her fingers over my scalp, tilting her head as she focuses on washing my hair for me. "They're just interested in profits. And since I'm interested in staying employed, I can't really complain. I'll still be here Thursday, but I don't know if I'll be able to stay all night again."

"Oh." I try not to be crushed at that, and fail.

"Don't look so sad, Ali." She turns us and then I'm under the spray, the water running through my hair. She's careful with me, though, using her hand

to shield my face from water and suds. "I'll make time for you. And if there's not a lot of time, we'll just have to make out on my lunch break. How do you feel about cantina sex?"

"I feel very negative about it," I tell her sourly. "The cantina is kinda gross."

"It is," she agrees, grinning. "But if you wear a skirt, I can make you come under the table."

"What about you?"

"I'll let you do me in the sled."

"So generous."

"Didn't you know? I'm the queen of generosity," Haina teases. She locks her arms around my wet body and presses me against the tile. "Want me to show you?"

And she nudges my nose with hers, then kisses me, slow and utterly thorough.

ALI

Next Thursday

There's no sign of Haina's ship at the regular time. She always comes by in late mornings, but by the time the afternoon sun is high in the sky, there's still no garish pink and red ship. I check my comm board, but Haina never sends me a comm. I'm bad about figuring out the tech and she laughs at my fumbling efforts. She's always said that whatever we have that needs saying can wait for Thursday...

But it's Thursday and she's not here.

A sick feeling unfurls in my gut. Something's happened to her. Space pirates? Equipment malfunction? Haina's always joking about how her ship is a piece of junk and woefully out of date. Maybe she's stranded even now, drifting somewhere in space. Does her ship even have a distress beacon? I don't know the answer, and it's making me anxious.

I don't want to overreact, though. She did mention schedule changes. And she mentioned she was having to take on additional routes. She's probably just running behind.

So I sit at the window of my house, with its perfect view of the spaceport, and I wait to see a red and pink-striped freighter lower itself towards Port.

And I wait.

And wait.

When it's close to sunset and there's no Haina, my mind is full of catastrophes that have somehow befallen her. She's been held up on her route. Robbed. Vandalized. Stranded. Something awful. I just know Haina would be here for our Thursday dates if she could.

Especially after last week and what we shared. It was...magical. Perfect. I wanted that day to go on forever. I wanted to spend another night—or twenty, or two hundred—waking up in Haina's arms.

No, after last week, she wouldn't blow me off. She said it was special. She wouldn't lie.

Something must have happened, then. That's the only explanation. I need to tell someone, though I'm not certain who. Do I send a message to Lord va'Rin? Would he even care if one of his vendors showed up missing? Maybe I need to talk to the shopkeeper at the General Store.

Biting my lip, I pull on my shoes and race out to my air-sled. I drive it into Port at top speed, keeping an eye on the spaceport at all times in case Haina's ship arrives in the middle of my panic-fest. The skies remain empty, though, and I'm full of worry when I park directly in front of the shop and leap out, racing past the alien man standing near the doors. He can wait a moment. Nothing's more important than telling someone about Haina's disappearance.

I skid across the floor of the shop, nearly crashing into the counter at the front and the avian behind it. He gives me a disgusted look, moving a tray of wrapped snacks out of the way so I don't breathe on them.

"Haina," I gasp. "Not here. Didn't...come by today."

He narrows his eyes at me, his feathers fluffing just a bit. "Excuse me, colonist?"

The door chimes open behind me and I quickly turn, but it's a praxiiian man and not Haina. I turn back to the avian behind the counter, the shopkeeper whose name I can never remember. "Haina—the mesakkah vendor that brings noodles on Thursday? She didn't come in today." I try to keep my voice from trembling. "Something's happened."

"Oh. That." He waves a wingtip dismissively. "Yes. That route was canceled."

"*Canceled?*"

"Canceled," he agrees. "The company went under. Didn't even give anyone a chance to buy off their goods. Just sold them off to another company that's going to charge higher prices. I hope you're ready to pay

double for those candles you like so much." He sniffs haughtily. "Is there something else I can help you with?"

"I-I don't understand," I say quickly. "Haina's not coming?"

"The company is no longer *running*," the avian says, trilling each word to emphasize them. "There is no route for her to take. She has no noodles to deliver. Do you understand now, human? Is your translation chip malfunctioning?"

"No, it's fine." I touch the spot behind my ear absently. He sounds rude, but I've watched enough interactions between the avian shopkeepers and Haina to know that they're just a stuffy sort of people overall.

"Then are you going to buy something?"

I hesitate. "You're certain it went under? The company?"

He makes a squawk-like noise that might be a derisive sound. "Everyone's known that for a while, colonist. It's no big secret."

Oh.

Everyone apparently knew it but me.

I'm suddenly re-thinking every conversation I've had with Haina. How she never tells me she loves me. How she's been mentioning that her schedule is changing and she doesn't know when she'll be around. That she can't spend the night. Is she...toying with me?

Am I just a convenient side-piece to her?

I'm starting to feel used and very, very foolish. Maybe it was too much to hope that someone as vibrant and wonderful as Haina would be interested in a shy mouse like me. I'm such an idiot.

Blinking back tears, I pick up one of the candles and sniff it, trying to hide that I came here specifically to meet Haina. If I buy a few things, I can play this off, and then maybe I won't feel quite so foolish.

"We meet again, human," a voice purrs in my ear.

Ugh. It's the praxiian, the one that got so damned mad when he crashed his sled into mine. "Go away," I tell him, my voice wavering. "Today is not the day."

"Is that so?" he asks, amused. He immediately gets into my space, standing so close that his body is practically touching mine. His tail swats my leg and he touches my hair with one of those big, nasty claws of his. "Because—"

I clamp my hand around the heavy candle in my hand and swing it as hard as I can, aiming for his face. To my surprise, it hits, and the candle jar

breaks into a million pieces of glass. "I said fuck off," I bellow. "No means no!"

It's utterly silent in the store. The avian behind the counter stares at me. The praxiiian—now dripping blood all over his orangey fur—stares at me. One of the local women who's buying baking goods stares at me.

But I'm tired of apologizing for breathing the same air as everyone else. "I'm not paying for that," I snarl at the shopkeeper. "Because it should be safe for humans to fucking shop here." I whirl on the praxiiian. "And you. You might think that you can push and push until no means yes, but you are fucking wrong. Besides the fact that I'm gay, I'm not interested. I've made that very clear. If you can't get that into your head, I'm going to march right over to the port authorities and file the nastiest report I possibly can about how you are harassing the locals and you'll be kicked off of this planet so fast your whiskers will spin. Got it?"

The silence continues.

After a long moment, the praxiiian picks a piece of glass out of his whiskers, flicks it aside, and then walks away.

I want to collapse. But that's the wrong thing to do to show everyone I have a newfound spine, so I keep my chin up and march out of the shop, feeling as broken and in as many pieces as the candle I broke. Once I'm outside, I sag against the wall, my heart pounding so loud in my chest I swear aliens on distant planets will be able to hear it.

"So, uh, did you want to file that report or not?"

I open my eyes and another one of the mesakkah custodians is standing there in his uniform, an awkward expression on his face. Sinath, I think his name is. He's the shorter one, the one that tries to crack jokes to make everyone comfortable (and usually fails). He gives me a sheepish grin and nods his head towards the shop. "Couldn't help but overhear. You were shouting loud enough that I heard it down the street."

I shake my head, feeling as deflated as a balloon. "I'm fine. It's fine. Everything's fine. I just want to go home now."

Because there's no Haina coming here today. Or ever. I don't have a girlfriend. I don't have a lover. I'm just as alone as I ever was, and it makes me ache so deeply inside that I wonder if I'll ever feel normal again.

"Okay, well, if you need anything, Colonist Aliette, I'll be inside for the next few minutes, buying some yarn for my mate." He gives me a crooked grin.

"Ali," I correct. "My name is actually Ali. Not Aliette."

"All right. I'll get the records updated. Have a good day, Ali." He winks at me and then heads on inside, and then I'm left alone once more.

Except...I'm not really alone. There are people walking on the streets of Port, and it feels as if all of them are stopping to stare at me. I see two women paused across the way, whispering to one another. I'm sure I've met them before, and I'm sure I've forgotten their names. I suspect they're not going to forget mine, not after the show today.

And I wouldn't be surprised if one approaches me, because if there's one thing a Port resident loves, it's juicy gossip.

I take a deep, shuddering breath, closing my eyes and leaning against the wall again. "I just want to be left alone to lick my wounds," I mutter aloud. "Is that too much to ask?"

"Does that go for me, too?"

ALI

Haina. I open my eyes to see her familiar face in front of me. She looks just as good as she ever has, with her bright smile and warm eyes. She's not wearing her regular pink and red uniform, but is dressed in a plain bodysuit instead.

The sight of that just reinforces that I've been lied to all along. "You're here."

"I am." She moves forward and takes my wrist gently in her grip. She turns my hand over, revealing my palm that's covered in bits of glass and blood streaming down my skin. "If this is you licking your wounds, Ali, you're doing a terrible job of it. What happened, sweetheart?"

The term of endearment—and her concern—makes me ache inside. "Am I your sweetheart or are you using me as a convenient lay?"

She stares at me for a long moment. "You don't think there are more convenient lays than a woman on a remote farm planet?"

"You tell me." I lift my chin, determined not to cry. "I tell you I love you and you never say it back. I invite you to my place and you tell me you can't stay. We make love and you tell me that your schedule is changing and you don't know when we'll be able to get together again. Then I come into town and I hear that the company you work for folded and you're not delivering here anymore. What am I supposed to think?"

Haina's quiet for a long moment. "When you put it that way, it does sound

pretty awful." She strokes my fingertips, avoiding the wounds on my palm that I don't even feel. "I wonder why you wouldn't have more faith in me than that, though."

"Because you're so perfect," I choke out, my heart hurting. "You're bright and happy and wonderful and too good to be true, and I'm just...me."

Haina looks up from my hand and frowns. "Are you kidding me, Ali? You're the sweetest, most caring person I've ever met. You listen to everything I say, even if I'm just rattling on about my day. You go out of your way to include me in your life and make me comfortable. You're smart and funny and you can take care of yourself. You've got the prettiest hair and the softest skin and you look at me as if I'm someone incredible, not just common station trash trying to scrape a living together. Why wouldn't I fall for you?"

Oh. I blink back the tears that threaten. "Then tell me what's going on. Explain to me so I'll understand why you never tell me you love me. Explain to me why you've been hiding the news about your job."

"I haven't told you about my job because I'm ashamed. I've known it was ending for six months now, but I haven't been able to rustle up another route that comes near this planet. Station trash, remember?" She gives me a wry smile. "No one wants to hire that kind of person. And if I haven't told you I love you, it's because mesakkah don't use that kind of wording. We prefer to show how we feel to our mates."

I swallow hard. Is she calling me her mate...?

Haina reaches into her pocket and holds out a tiny box. "I'm late today because I was turning in my ship. And I'm late because this was finally ready. There's a vendor on a station a few hops away that has a human mate and she told me about human courting customs and that these things are important. So I got this for you. Open it."

I raise my hand, still covered in blood, and then grimace. "You do it for me."

"Right. Of course." For the first time, Haina looks a little flustered. She opens the box and shows me the inside. A metal band, small enough for a human finger, is nestled inside on a bit of fabric. "These are important, right?" she asks. "I spent more than I probably should have considering I don't have a job, but I wanted to get it right—"

Choking on a sob, I fling my arms around her waist. "Haina," I breathe, tucking my head against her breasts. "I love you."

"I love you too, Ali. I didn't realize you needed to hear it. And I guess I

didn't realize you meant it. You said it the moment we met, remember?" She rubs a hand over my back.

"I meant it then. I mean it now. I've always loved you. Since the moment I walked into the store and heard you laugh." I burrow against her, closing my eyes. "If you're not working, does this mean you can stay the night?"

"I actually don't have anywhere to go," she says softly. "That was another reason I didn't say anything about my job ending. I didn't want you to think I was using you to score a place to live. I wanted you to like me for me."

Her words fill me with joy. "Then stay with me. Stay as long as you like. Stay forever. We'll make a garden. You wanted to try doing something with vegetables, right? We'll make you the prettiest garden you've ever seen."

"You don't mind? I have a bit of savings, but it won't last me long," she confesses, tangling her hand in my hair. "I don't want you to feel like I'm using you."

"Use me," I say, looking up at her. "Use me all you like. Just love me."

"I do love you," she says softly, and kisses my nose. "But your hand is worrying me. Can we please go to the clinic and get it looked at?"

I've forgotten all about my hand. What does it matter when the pain in my heart has been replaced with so much joy? "Can I wear the ring?"

"I'd love nothing more," Haina says, and slips it onto my good finger as I watch. And then we're both smiling, and I don't think I've ever been so happy. To think that I've lived for Thursdays and Thursdays alone for so long...

Now I can enjoy every day with my love at my side.

EPILOGUE

ALI

Two Years Later

"Taste this," Haina says, holding a wooden spoon out to me as I work on the floor nearby. There's been a problem with one of the crop-harvesting bots and I got instructions on how to fix it from one of the custodians, and I've been taking it apart and tinkering with it all afternoon while Haina works on a new jam recipe. She waits patiently as I get to my feet and wipe my hands on my grease-covered bodysuit that I use for maintenance.

I taste the jam on the spoon and consider. "It's missing something."

"More *inaadh* spice?"

"Like I know what that is?"

She laughs, and it's like sunlight poured over my soul, every time. "It's the leaf that looks like a curlicue. Tastes kinda tangy."

"Sure, add some of that." I slide my hand down her back to her tail, watching as she adds a bit of spice to the mixture bubbling on the stove-top. I love how excited she gets about her jams. She *loves* her gardening. I can find her daily with a floppy hat tied across her horns, protecting her face from the sun as she hoes the soft dirt and fusses over her plants. Instead of vegetables, though, she settled on berries. She likes sweet things after being with me, she teases. The first season, she grew three kinds of Homeworld berries here, using the last of her savings on some pricey seeds. They've paid off, though—we had an amazing harvest and all of our neighbors wanted some of our fruits. This year, Haina's garden is three times the size it was last year, and with the extra berries, she's been making jams to sell in the general store to bring in some additional credits.

We've talked about adopting a baby in the future—maybe a mesakkah from the station slums like she was. Haina loves that idea, and I do, too. I think she'd be an amazing mom.

I taste her jam when she holds the spoon out again and nod this time. "That's perfect."

She breaks into a wide smile. "I'm going to write this recipe down! Aliette's Sweet Nectar will sell out in a week. You wait and see."

I groan at the name for our business. "Please don't call it that."

"Why not? It's so sweet it reminds me of licking you." She gives me a mischievous look and runs her tongue along the edge of the spoon. "And it makes me happy. Also like licking you."

"Who am I to take happiness from my mate?" I ask lightly, stroking my hand over her sensitive tail. "If we have to call it by my real name, can't we just call it Ali's Jams?"

"I might need some convincing," she says, moving the jam off of the burner on the stove. Her tail twitches in my grasp, and the look in her eyes grows heated.

Luckily for her, I am excellent at convincing. With a grin, I stroke her tail and tilt my face up for a kiss. "I'll get you to see things my way."

"I bet you will," Haina replies, and then neither of us speaks of jams or names for a long, long while.