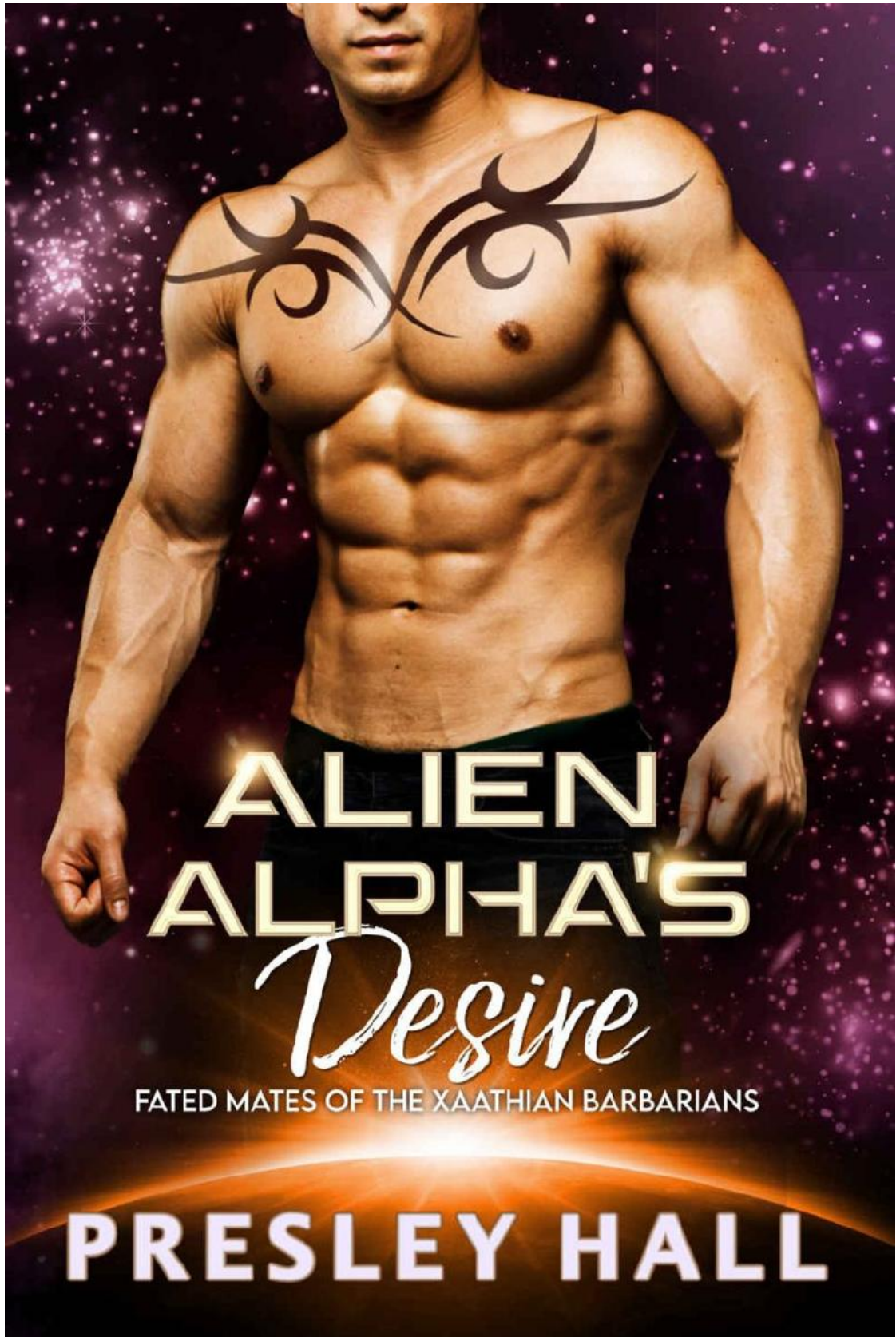
A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

**Alien Alpha's  
Desire (Fated  
Mates of the  
Xaathian**

**Presley Hall**



ALIEN ALPHA'S DESIRE

Fated Mates of the Xaathian Barbarians #3

## PRESLEY HALL

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1

Naomi

I'M WOKEN by the sounds of shouting.

We're in our sparse hut, as usual. The other women are still sleeping, and I can see from the hint

of graying sky and thin daylight coming through the hole at the top of the thatched ceiling that it's still

very early in the morning.

It still feels strange to notice things like that. It used to be that I knew it was just past dawn by the

bright numbers on my digital alarm clock as it buzzed, telling me it was time to get up and go for a run

before work. Now there are no clocks, no watches, no cell phones to check the time on. Just the light

outside, or lack of it, and my own internal senses, which feel as if they sharpen day by day. Some

primal part of me, remembering instinctively what it used to be like before we had technology to tell

us everything.

The shouting continues, and the other women wake up too, some more quickly than others, all of

them groggy.

"What's going on?" Penelope mutters, and I wave a hand to indicate she should be quiet as I creep

toward the hide that covers the door of our hut.

It's not exactly a locked door, but we'd never get past it anyway. There are always no fewer than four warriors guarding us. It used to be two, but since the loss of Nicole to that other alien that came to the tribe, they doubled the guard. It speaks to how valuable we must be to them as prisoners, which isn't exactly comforting.

"What's all the commotion?" Bianca whispers, crawling toward me as well, with the other women following. Faith stays back, shushing her son on the bedroll next to hers. He still isn't acclimating well to this new planet—not the privations, food, or climate—and he's grown more and more fussy as the days have passed.

"The warriors are back," I whisper in the same low tones, gesturing past the crack between the hide and the wall. I manage to nudge it aside a little without the guards noticing, so I can get a better view of what's happening. "The ones who took Abigail away." Since Abigail was taken, our group has been two fewer, and it really killed morale. It's been hard for anyone to stay positive. Being abducted from Earth by aliens that none of us knew existed until a few weeks ago was bad enough, and then being captured by an entirely different, seemingly barbaric alien tribe shortly after made it that much worse.

But our group slowly dwindling before our eyes has made all of us think about who is next. It could be any one of us, and we still don't really know what they want us for, what their plans are. In a lot of ways, not knowing is even worse.

The leader of the Uleki tribe, Drael, comes out of his hut. He looks barely awake and irritated, and I lean forward a little more, trying to see. I want to hear what they're saying if I can. Fortunately,

our guards seem more interested in paying attention to the returning warriors as well, rather than noticing me.

“What’s going on?” Faith calls from the back of the hut, her voice thin and worried, and Holly shakes her head.

“Shh, Naomi is listening.”

“There are only three of them,” I whisper back to Bianca, letting her pass the information down the group of women like the world’s most depressing game of telephone. “Four left with Abigail, but three came back. And Abigail isn’t with them either. Wherever they took her, she stayed... if she made it.”

I rock forward on my tiptoes, straining to hear. “And the fourth warrior, he betrayed them?”

They’re saying...” I bite my lip as Drael’s angry voice rises, allowing me to hear it better than I did

before. “He tried to rescue Abigail, apparently.”

There’s a small hum of excitement at that, but I shake my head.

“They captured them both though, and left them with some aliens called the Jakk.”

I can feel my spirits sinking as I relay the rest of it. *Of course.* I’m not one to believe in happy

endings anyway, but I felt a moment’s excitement at the thought that Abigail might have been saved. I

didn’t get to know her well, but she seemed like a sweet girl. She didn’t deserve any of that.

None of us do.

Hushed chatter rises up behind me as the other women process what I’ve told them. Several of

them seem excited, even after hearing that Abigail and the wayward Uleki ended up with the Jakk

even after the attempted rescue.

“First, Nicole got taken away by that alien who came to negotiate with Drael for her,” Penelope whispers eagerly. “And now one of the Uleki tried to rescue Abigail? That’s *good* news, overall. It means not all of the aliens here are bad. We have some hope.”

“That’s true,” Holly agrees. “Clearly, not all of them think we should just be traded or kept prisoner. It can’t be *only* those two who think like that, there must be more—”

I keep my mouth shut, backing away from the hide before the guards notice me. The other women might be hopeful, and I can accept that they might *need* that hope to keep going through this absolute disaster that we’re in, but I’m not.

“Maybe he and Abigail managed to escape again,” June whispers softly. “Maybe they’re out there somewhere, and it’s all okay.”

I make a noncommittal noise, crawling back to my bedroll. I ache all over from so many nights of sleeping on the ground, but there’s no point in thinking about how much I miss my bed, or soft clean sheets, or air conditioning.

There’s no hope in sight of getting any of that back anytime soon—if ever—so far as I can tell, and it just makes it worse to think about and long for it. The other women pass the time by talking about what they did back on Earth, reminiscing about things they miss, friends and family that they hope to see again—but it’s all foolishness.

We’re so far from home. It’s impossible to know exactly how far, how many light years or planets away from Earth we are. None of us are scientists or know much about space, and I didn’t give much thought to it at all, until the day that aliens whisked me away from everything I knew.

What good does it do to wish for something that might not even exist anymore? It's not going to make it any better to hope for rescue either. I never found men to be particularly trustworthy back on Earth, and I have no reason to think that aliens are going to be any better. In fact, they've so far proven to be every bit as bad in many ways. I'm not going to put my trust in them to get me out of this.

I catch a glimpse past the hide, of Drael and the returned warriors walking past our hut. "It doesn't matter," I hear one of them grunt. Drael, I think. "The Jakk were pleased that you returned the woman to them, and soon we'll take the rest up the mountain to trade as well."

My stomach clenches. None of the other women seem to have heard him, still talking amongst themselves about the possibility of rescue or help coming for us, and I don't relay that bit of information. I might not be prepared to put any hope in escape or rescue, but that doesn't mean I want to destroy what little bit they seem to have cultivated.

*Soon, we'll take the rest up the mountain to trade as well.*

I don't know what that means for sure, what the Jakk want with us, but it's not hard to guess. And the thought of that, of being traded away to more, different aliens for their use and pleasure, makes me feel sick. My stomach knots until it feels tight and cramping, my hands clenched into fists in my lap as I lean back against the wall of the hut.

On Earth, my whole life was about surviving. I never really got to a place of comfort or stability before it was all ripped away from me. No one ever came to my rescue—it was always me, all me, saving myself again and again.



*So I'll do the same thing here, I think to myself, gritting my teeth with resolve. I'll find some way*

*to escape on my own.*

I don't know how or when it might happen. There hasn't been any opportunity so far with how

closely they watch us, but if I see my chance to slip away, I won't hesitate. I won't waste it, not for

anyone.

I'll run, as far and as fast as I can, and I'll survive.

I've done it before, and I can do it again.

2

Luka

THE SUN BURNS hot on my face and back, sweat springing to the surface of my bare skin as I circle

Rasith.

As one of the older Bekaru warriors, he takes it upon himself to train with us younger Bekaru

often and hard, teaching us the old ways of fighting, drilling into us again and again what it takes to be

strong warriors. *As if I don't already know.*

I swerve to one side, feinting as Rasith parries my blow, holding my own against the other

warrior as I spin away. My daggers glint in the sun—I chose the two-handed style of fighting as my

primary long ago, but even with only his spear, Rasith meets my every move with a simple, casual

grace.

*Casual* has never been for me. I want to prove myself as a Bekaru warrior, to live up to the

expectations placed on me, and how can I do that if I'm not noticed? If I only fight in the old forms,

only follow the thoughtful and well-paced ways that Rasith drills me in, how will I not just blend into

the crowd of other eager young warriors?

I rush forward as Rasith moves to one side, leaping through the air to come down in a slide as I slice toward his training spear, intending to break it in half. For a moment, I think it will work—I'm faster and more nimble than Rasith... or so I thought. Instead, he lets me slide toward him, broadly crossing my daggers and jerking them apart as I near the base of his spear just below his hands—only for Rasith to casually sidestep at the last moment and use the butt of his spear to hit the knuckles of my hands... *hard*. My fingers go momentarily nerveless, and my daggers drop to the sand. I can't bite back the cry of pain that escapes my lips, my momentum lost as I stumble sideways instead, going to my knees several inches from my weapons. "*Drak!*" I curse aloud, shaking my hands to get the feeling back in them. Rasith grins as he scoops my daggers up, raising an eyebrow. "That was a flashy move, Luka," he says with a knowing grin that irks me a little, even as I feel slightly ashamed for trying so hard to show off. "But it doesn't always have to be about what makes you stand out. What matters is beating your enemy, being an asset to the other warriors. Sometimes the simplest of moves is the most effective." I let out a breath. I know he's right, though it chafes at me to admit it. I nod, accepting the hand Rasith holds out to help me up, and taking my daggers back. The older warrior is my friend, and I know he means well. He wants to train me to be a good warrior as well, but the problem is that for me, it will never be enough to just be *good*. I need to be the best.

“Again?” Rasith asks, hefting his training spear, but before we can begin again, there’s the sound

of a small commotion coming from the center of the village.

“What’s going on?” I ask, walking to the edge of the training circle.

“Oh, the hunting party is back

— *shola*.”

“What’s wrong?” Rasith joins me as we watch them walk past, only to see what I just noticed.

One of the warriors is being drawn back on a sling, pulled by two others, and even from here I can

see him wincing in pain.

“He must have been hurt on the hunt.” I frown. “Doesn’t look bad though.” The warrior is able to

meet our eyes as the party passes us, and Rasith and I nod with respect, inclining our heads to

acknowledge his efforts as a part of the tribe.

“Bad enough not to go out with the rescue party.” Rasith frowns.

“He was meant to be a part of the

group Harax chose to go and rescue the rest of those Terran women from the Uleki tribe. I was there

when Harax picked them. But he’s not going to make it in that state. It’ll take him a few days at least

to bounce back, and Harax isn’t going to wait that long. Not after what Abigail and that other Uleki

said about the plans for the women.”

Determination, hot and fierce, fills me as I listen to Rasith speak.

*This is a chance for me to*

*prove myself.* To not just be one of the Bekaru warriors, but a true warrior, one of the best. A chance

to look for an opportunity to become a legend, like my father.

All my life I’ve lived under the shadow of the tales told about him.

My father, Amaku, was one of

the most legendary warriors and hunters that the Bekaru tribe has ever known, and since I was old

enough to hear the stories, all I've wanted is to live up to his name. My father was not just a good warrior, but a good man. I loved him and looked up to him all my life, and I know he died proud of me, just as I am. But I want to not only be the son of a legendary warrior, but one in my own right, as well. To have my stories told with my father's, in the time to come.

"I'm going to go see Harax," I tell Rasith, stowing my blades before the other warrior can argue. I

stride across the village quickly, to the central hut where I know I'm likely to find Harax this time of

day, going over village matters with his advisors.

Luckily, I'm right. Those advisors are leaving just as I arrive, and I push past them into the hut.

Harax looks surprised to see me. "Luka. I didn't expect—"

"I want to take the place of the injured warrior," I blurt out. "The one who came back today from

the hunt. I want to go with the rescue party to the Uleki tribe."

Harax frowns. "I appreciate your enthusiasm," he says carefully, his tone indicating that he's

about to tell me no without really hearing me out, his mind already made up. "But you're young, Luka.

You've only been out on a handful of hunts. This is far more difficult and dangerous, and the stakes

—"

"I can do it," I insist. "You know what kind of warrior my father was. He trained me from youth,

and ever since his death, I've trained ceaselessly with Rasith. I might have only been out on a few

hunts, but you know I've performed admirably every time. I know I can be of use in this." My voice is

strident and earnest, and I can see Harax's face softening as I speak.

"Please. I want to be a part of

this mission. It's an important one, and I know my father would have gone, if he were here."

Harax opens his mouth, and I brace myself for him to say something about how my father was a

proven warrior, about how no one could match him. But then he pauses, considering. There's a long

moment where neither of us say anything, only Harax frowning in thought, my jaw clenched

determinedly.

"I can do this," I repeat. "Just give me the chance. I won't disappoint you."

"It's not a matter of disappointment—" Harax studies my face, and lets out a sigh. "All right," he

concedes. "The team heads out tonight, so make yourself ready. They won't wait."

"I'll be there and ready," I tell him eagerly, unable to stop the grin that spreads over my face as

excitement fills me.

WHEN DARK FALLS, the group of warriors that Harax selected for the rescue mission—now including

me—mount varhells and ride toward the Uleki village at a fast clip. My pulse is racing as we gallop

over the plains, excitement and adrenaline rushing through me. This is a mission unlike any I've been

on before, and I'm ready for it—I know I am. This is what I've trained for, prepared for, all this time.

The chance to prove I'm capable of more than just taking down ordinary beasts on easy hunts.

We leave our varhells a little ways outside the village, ready for our escape when we make our

way back. Once dismounted, we crouch and make our way silently through the grasses, weapons in

hand as we approach the Uleki village stealthily.

"No killing if at all possible," Cthellis, the warrior leading the mission, murmurs quietly. "We

find where the women are being kept. The Terran women in our village said it was a large hut near the back, to the left of the main gathering place as you approach from the west. Four guards, according to the red-haired one. We disable anyone we have to, but leave them alive. I won't have Drael coming to Harax with blood-debt to settle."

The rest of us nod in agreement, following the formation we planned as we fan out, moving stealthily so we don't raise an alarm. We encounter a handful of Uleki guards, following Cthellis' hand motions for who goes forward to take them down from behind, choking or knocking them out into unconsciousness and leaving them there.

The Terrans' directions were accurate. We find the hut at the back of the village, with the four guards at either side of the entrance, just as the women said. I go forward with three others at Cthellis' silent command, two on either side, sneaking up behind the guards to take them down. My heart hammers in my chest as we approach, my mind thinking of all the ways that this could go wrong, but it doesn't. My muscle memory is good, and I reach for the guards in perfect harmony with the other three warriors. We disable all four in sync, before an alarm can be raised by any of them.

"The women," Havat says in a whisper, jerking his head toward the hide covering the entrance to the hut. "One at a time, so we don't frighten them into screaming." I nod, taking point. I push the hide away, slipping into the darkened space of the hut. The air is warm and close from so many bodies, and the women come awake as I creep in, scrambling backward.

“No—” One of them, a pretty brunette, starts to cry out, but I raise a hand, shushing her.

“We’re here to rescue you,” I say quickly, as the others start to look around in startlement. “We’re from the same tribe that took your friend, the yellow-haired one. We’re going to take you all back there to her.”

“We don’t want to be anyone else’s prisoner,” one of the women says, her features pinched as she snaps out the words. “We’ve had enough—”

“No one there is a prisoner,” Havat assures her, as the other three warriors creep in behind me.

“Your friends are safe and free there, respected. But we have to go, and quickly. We’ve disabled the warriors between here and our route of escape, but they won’t stay knocked out forever. Come on, quickly!”

The women glance at each other, but one of them gets up, glancing back at the others as she walks

toward us. The others follow her lead after that, getting up one by one, including a fair-haired woman

toward the back who is holding a small child in her arms.

“I’m not leaving my son,” she says in a small voice.

“You don’t have to,” I assure her. “But we need to move quickly. All of you, please. Come with us.”

The one who stepped forward first makes a small motion with her hand, and the other women

come to join her, some more hesitantly than others. But they all follow as we start to guide them out of

the village, following the same path that we took in, the warriors we disabled still out cold.

The varhells are waiting where we left them, and as soon as we reach our mounts we start to help

the Terrans onto them, one for each that a warrior will ride behind. Once again, some of the women

look more fearful than others, but none of them try to go back.

“Wait,” one of them suddenly blurts out, her eyes widening as she looks around. “Naomi is

missing! She’s gone! We can’t leave without her.”

I glance around to see if there’s a woman hanging back, but I see no one besides the Terrans

already mounting up on the varhells. *We must have lost one in the rescue*, I realize—and in that same

moment, I see an opportunity.

“I’ll go search for her,” I tell Cthellis quickly. “I’ll bring her back to the village. You should go on

without me, get the others to safety. I’ll find my own way back as soon as I find the missing one.

Naomi.”

Cthellis frowns. “Perhaps one of the others—”

I shake my head urgently. “There’s no time. I’ll go. You need the others more.”

*This is a chance to prove myself.* I can be the warrior who finds the missing Terran woman, who

rescues her and brings her back to safety. A chance to make my own story come to life.

I slide off my varhell before Cthellis can argue further. “I won’t take a mount. You need it more

than me. I can go on foot. Hurry, before the Uleki realize the Terrans are gone.”

There’s no arguing with that. The longer we linger here and discuss, the more likely that the alarm

is raised in time for the Uleki to pursue us, putting both our warriors and the women in danger. I can

see from Cthellis’ expression that he’s not happy, but he nods tersely, motioning to the other warriors

to move out.



The sound of heavy varhell paws on grass fills the air, but I move in the opposite direction,

slinking through the grasses. I have my own mission now.

I'm going to find the missing Terran.

3

Naomi

*KEEP GOING. Don't look back. Don't stop.*

The words pound through my head rhythmically, matching the beat of my pulse and the thudding of

my footsteps as I flee away from the Uleki village, in the opposite direction from where the warriors

who came into the hut are taking the other women.

My heart is racing so hard that it hurts. Part of me thinks that I'm being stupid and reckless, that

I've passed up a chance for rescue from men who could protect us—me—in exchange for fleeing out

into an unknown wilderness. But I promised myself that I would run if I got the chance, and I saw my

chance when we were escorted out of the hut. Four warriors to keep an eye on all of us. They never

even saw me slip away.

*There's no way to know if what they said was true, I remind myself.*

I already heard Drael talking about wanting to trade us and the other women to the tribe that they

sold Abigail to, and Abigail was taken away and never came back.

We don't even know if she's

alive.

As far as I can see, there's no reason to trust any of these aliens, even the ones who insist they're

trying to "rescue" us. We have no proof they're telling the truth, no proof that they're not going to

trade us off for profit or use us themselves for their pleasure.

I'm well aware of the things that can happen to women who trust men to help them. I've been

lucky enough to not have the worst of it happen to me during my life, but I credit that to the fact that I

*haven't* trusted. I've run when I could and kept to myself and relied on only myself, and that's served me well enough.

Until I ended up here. But even now, I see no reason to deviate from what's kept me going all my life so far.

So I keep running. I don't know where I'm going, but I just need to be free, and far enough away

from the village and alien warriors to stay that way. Once I find some cover, a hiding place, I can

regroup and try to find a way off this fucking planet.

My heart is racing, my muscles screaming from weeks of disuse, but I used to be a runner back on

Earth and I'm still fast. I push myself, running through the tall grass that seems to make up most of the

plains-like landscape here, until I spy a small copse of trees a little ways off.

*I can hide there for a minute, catch my breath.*

I zero in on it, pushing myself a little harder, refusing to look back. I feel a stab of guilt for leaving

the others, but they have strength in numbers. If they're in danger, they'll find a way to band together

and get themselves out of it. I have to believe that—I just couldn't stay with them.

*They're not my family, I remind myself as I dash for the trees. Not even really my friends. I*

*barely knew them. I don't owe them anything.*

I have to look out for myself. That's how it's always been, and the change of scenery doesn't mean

anything's really changed at all.

Once I've reached the trees, I stop, catching my breath as I pant, bending down to lean my hands

on my knees. *What now?* I think back to survival shows I used to like watching back on Earth, a guilty pleasure. I always felt a little bit like it was a waste of time, but now it might actually come in handy, ironically enough.

The long grass is flattened down in places and trampled from my feet, and I can't fix that all the way back to the village. But once I've caught my breath, I do what I can, sweeping my hands through it to try to fluff it up and cover my tracks. Once I've done it enough to disguise exactly where I ran to, I double back, trying to pause and hide the marks of my passage through the grass where I can, then change direction again. My objective is to make it as confusing as possible as to where I actually went, and when I feel like I've managed that well enough, I start running again.

The nighttime crowds in around me, sweat beading on my skin despite the cool of the night as I run, and I try not to think about all the strange things that could be out in the dark, waiting for me. From time to time, I stop and try to cover the evidence of exactly where I've gone, especially once I make it out of the grassy plains and into the forest just beyond. I try to avoid rocks and breaking anything, covering my footprints in the dirt as much as I'm able, but at the pace I've been trying to keep, it's not easy. I can't hide it all, but I do my best, making my way farther and farther from the village.

I go until the sun comes up, despite being barefoot and entirely out of practice for this kind of running, but fear is a hell of a stimulant. When dawn starts to break and I hear the sound of trickling

water, I follow it to a stream, finally coming to a halt and sinking into the dirt as I allow myself a

moment to rest.

The water is clean, clear and cool, and I let out a small moan of appreciation as I gulp down

handfuls of it, splashing it over my face and neck and arms. I half-entertain the idea of getting into it

altogether, but the current looks a bit quicker than I'm entirely comfortable with, and I don't like the

idea of getting washed downstream or over a waterfall. It reminds me how little I know about where I

am, and I glance around, trying to get a grasp of my surroundings.

My stomach rumbles as I do, and I press a hand to my bare midriff, wincing.

*What am I going to do about food?*

Another reckless part of my not-plan. I don't have anything to eat, and I'm lucky I found water. I

have to be careful. I don't know what out here might be poisonous, and the last thing I want is to have

escaped my captors only to end up dying by poisonous fruit.

As I keep making my way through the forest, at a slightly slower clip this time, I see a waxy green

plant with what looks like a type of nut on it, one that looks familiar. I pause, peering at it to be sure,

but it seems to be exactly like something they fed us in the village, right down to the thin, half-parted

shells and the two black lines running down each one, the pale flesh of the nut peeking out.

It could be the same... or not. But I'm starving, especially after my headlong flight, and my hands

take over before my mind can decide, grabbing a handful of the nuts off the glossy green plant. I split

them apart, the sweet, faint smell of the inside convincing me that they're the same thing I've eaten

before in the Uleki village. I pick the flesh out of the shell, stuffing it into my mouth and ignoring the

scrape of the rough shells against my fingertips. It's hardly a filling meal, but by the time I've

devoured them all, it takes the edge off a little.

As soon as I've finished off the last of them, I'm on the move again. I can feel exhaustion creeping

up on me, slowing me down, but I can't stop yet. I want to put as much distance between me and the

Uleki as I can before daylight, when it will be easier to find me.

As the sun starts to cut through the trees, illuminating the path in front of me in pale light, I hear a

sudden noise behind me like footsteps—soft but just barely audible.

My pulse jumps. *Fuck.*

I move behind a tree as quickly as I can, flattening myself against the bark. Most of the trees here

are huge, wider around than the average human, and I think it hides me well. But I can't stop myself

from peering around it slightly, looking to see who's come after me.

It takes a moment before anyone comes into view, but when he does, I have to stifle a gasp.

The alien warrior looking for me—and I know he must be searching for me, because he's

watching the ground, kneeling briefly as if looking for tracks or examining broken twigs, any signs he

can find of my passing—is *huge*.

He must be at least seven feet tall, his bare, bronze chest broadly muscled and covered with the

curving dark marks that I've seen on the others, with shaggy dark blond hair pulled back and four

short horns evenly spaced atop his head, piercing through the soft-looking hair. When he lifts his head,

looking at the path ahead of him with an expression of frustration, I catch a glimpse of green eyes and

similar piercings to those I've seen on the other warriors.

There's a bar through his nose, piercing straight through both nostrils and the septum, and a

curving ring in the center of his lower lip. He only has the two, which surprises me. Most of the

warriors I've seen have had many more. They both look pale-colored and smooth like bone, and I

have a strange desire to touch them, even though I want nothing to do with this alien.

He stands with a grunt, his powerful thighs flexing as the leather loincloth between them sways,

and I see him look around, sniffing as if searching for me by scent as well.

*Oh god, what if he can smell me?* I flatten against the tree again, trying to calm the racing of my

heart. I can't be all that pleasant-smelling, after a night of running, and I wince. *What a way to get*

*caught.*

I peer around the tree again after a moment, and see him still standing there. I remember seeing

him last night when the warriors came into our hut, so I know he's one of the ones who claimed to

"rescue" us. He's not Uleki, but still, I don't want him to take me.

I don't want to be in the clutches of *any* of these aliens.

*But what the fuck do I do?*

I can't just run and hide. He's too close for that—if I come out from behind the tree, he'll see me.

I have no doubt that as good of a runner as I am, his long muscled legs could run me down, probably

quicker than I'm imagining. I'm hungry and tired, far from at my best. Besides, he's already picked up

my tracks. He knows I'm close by, and he's going to be looking for me.

I can't stay where I am either, though. He'll find me any minute now, if I do.

Carefully, *very* carefully, I try to slide down the trunk of the tree with my back still against it, like I might have while doing a wall-sit back home at the gym. A tree-sit. I clamp my lips together tightly so I don't laugh at the ridiculousness of it, reaching down as slowly and silently as I can, and palming a rock—the biggest one I can grab. I slither back upward, trying to breathe slowly, quietly, waiting for him. My heart is pounding as I hear his footsteps coming closer, clearly having caught some sound or scent now that has given him an idea of where I'm at. I don't dare peek out now, but I don't need to. I can hear his steps, and I see his shadow stretching out over the forest floor, very close to me now.

*It's now or never.*

I spring out from behind the tree, throwing the rock at his head as hard as I can. I never was great on the softball team at school, but he's too big to miss, and he jerks back, surprised. It's not enough to knock him out, though. He twists reflexively as the rock flies at him, so it ends up glancing off the side of his forehead and one of his horns, instead of hitting him squarely in the nose like I hoped. He staggers backward a little, more out of surprise than pain, and I don't wait to see how long it takes for him to recover.

I just turn and run.

4

Luka

“DRAK!”

I grip my throbbing head where the rock hit me, glancing off the side and cracking against one of my horns before tumbling harmlessly to the ground. I knew I was getting closer to the woman, was

able to hear her labored breathing and smell the warm, salty scent of her skin—but I didn't expect her

to throw a rock at me.

It didn't hurt me, not really, but it takes me a moment to recover. I'll have a bruise on my head

from it, and that irritates me as I shake off the blow.

*Did she really think she could take me down with a rock ?*

Harax mentioned that the Terran women seemed to be stubborn to a fault, at least his mate, but I

didn't expect one of them to actually think a rock smaller than my fist could level me.

Frustrated, I take off after her again as she disappears into the trees. My plan from the beginning

was to follow her tracks, assuming she ran headlong without much care as to the evidence she left

behind, like a frightened animal. But she's better at covering them than I thought.

Or at least, she was at the beginning of the night.

She's less careful now, running with me close behind, but she does it well enough that I lose the

trail once. It takes me a bit of time circling and poking along the path, which can barely be called that.

Finally, I pick up her trail again thanks to a crushed plant and some smeared mud, but the loss of time

slows me down considerably.

*Shola!* I grit my teeth, beyond annoyed now.

I wanted to come after the woman and bring her back to prove to Harax and the others that they

weren't wrong to let me come along on the rescue mission. I wanted to show that I'm a capable

warrior, just as skilled and worthy as my father, able to bring back a valuable part of our mission

with ease.



I didn't expect the woman to be so averse to coming with me. I thought I'd catch her easily and

explain things, and then we'd head back.

*Doesn't she understand at all what we're trying to do here?* I think with rising frustration,

watching for her tracks as I slip through the forest.

She's hoping I'll give up, I know that much. But I'm not going to back down. I briefly considered

just leaving her here in the woods earlier, when I lost her trail, but all thoughts of that are gone now.

Besides the fact that I refuse to go back to the village empty-handed and ashamed of my failure, it's

too dangerous out here for her. She's clearly strong and tough enough to withstand a night of running

on an alien, unforgiving planet, but at some point she'll come up against something that's too big or

too dangerous for her to run from or fight off, and it will kill her.

So I keep going, even though I'm inwardly cursing myself now for volunteering. I could be back at

the village by now with the other warriors, celebrating our return with the Terran women, being

feasted and enjoying the revelry that would follow.

Instead I'm sweaty, dirty, and hungry, trailing this woman to goddess-knows-where.

After a while, I scent the air and pick up her unique smell again, that warm and salty scent that

means I must be close. I don't want to risk another attack from her that could lead to another chase

through the woods, so instead I pause, reaching down for a rock of my own. Not to hit her with, but to

distract her.

I sneak slowly around, looking at the trees, waiting for a glimpse of her. And I see it, the flash of

her tanned skin and black hair, pressed behind the trunk of one of the widest trees. I see something

else too. Another huge rock clenched in her fist.

She's persistent, I'll give her that.

I rear back, throwing the rock to the right on the other side of her in an effort to draw her attention

that way. It works. I see her head turn sharply toward the sound, and I move in quickly from the other

side to grab her while she's distracted.

I'm startled by how warm she is, how soft when I put my arms around her waist and haul her

backward, how tiny and delicate she feels in my grasp. I'm struck by an urge to pull her close to me,

to run my hands over her body and find where she's the softest, but what she does next isn't soft or

delicate in the least.

"Get your hands off me!" she screeches, throwing her head back to try to slam her skull into my

nose. I jerk my chin up so that the back of her head merely bounces off my jaw, and she lets out a grunt

as she twists in my arms.

"I'm trying to help you!" My voice rises too, frustrated as I try to keep my grasp on the squirming,

struggling female in my arms. "If you'd calm down—"

"Don't fucking tell me to calm down!" Her voice reaches the highest pitch I've ever heard, and

she flails against me furiously. "I don't want to go with you!"

"You'll die out here alone—"

Whatever else I was about to say to try to convince her is abruptly cut off as she kicks upward,

clearly trying to knee me between the legs in another attempt to get free. I manage to get out of the

way, arching back and swinging my hips to avoid her strikes, but my grip loosens as a result and the

woman manages to wriggle out of my grasp.

“Drak!” I curse aloud, my shout sending winged creatures flying out of the trees as I take off after

her. No point in trying to be stealthy this time; she already knows I’m after her now. I run at full tilt,

long strides eating up the ground between us. She’s swift, but she’s tired, and I catch up to her in

almost no time at all, curling one broad arm around her waist as I sweep her directly off her feet and

take her down to the ground, my knee between her thighs as I pin her with a heavy arm across her

chest.

“What now?” she taunts breathlessly, her silky black hair tangled in the dirt and leaves. “Are you

going to take what you’ve chased me down for, *warrior*?”

“If by that, you mean take you back to the Bekaru village where the rest of your friends are, yes,” I

say evenly.

“Why should I trust you?” The woman nearly spits the words, hissing them between her teeth as

she bucks underneath me, but I’m too heavy for her to get free. I’m careful not to crush her with my

weight, but I’ve managed to pin her, and she’s not going to escape.

I let out a long-suffering sigh. “You can not trust me all you like, Terran. The simple truth is this:

we came to rescue you and the other women. As long as you come back with me, you’ll be free and

safe. Out here, you’re nothing but meat for the first large creature that spies or smells you.”

“Like you did?” Her eyes are flashing darkly, clearly angry, but I’m not taking the bait.

I can smell her all the more clearly now though, and her scent is more intoxicating than I expected.

I recognize the warm, salty smell of her sweat that I scented before, but now that I have her pinned

beneath me, there's something sweeter too. Sweet and hot, and I grit my teeth, trying to ignore the feeling of her body molded to mine.

"I followed you to bring you back to safety and your friends," I repeat. "They're at the Bekaru village by now, warm in soft furs, full of good food from feasting, and free to move about the village as they please. Not out here in the dirt, hungry and exhausted and filthy." I give her a pointed look.

"There are all sorts of creatures in the woods, Terran, of which I know you've never seen the like.

You're not safe out here, and you weren't safe with the Uleki. Harax only wants to see that you and the other Terrans are safe, like his mate."

She blinks up at me at the mention of Harax's mate, her body softening under mine ever so slightly.

"You mean... Nicole," she says quietly, something dawning on her face, and I feel her slacken in my grip.

*Goddess, she's so soft.*

So much smaller than me, so fragile, but stubborn as a *vaxith* for all of that. I can feel her chest

heaving beneath the weight of my arm, the softness of her small breasts pushed up against it, and a

wave of that sweet scent hits me again, stiffening my cock.

I haven't yet been with a woman. There are so few of them now, and only the best of the warriors

are favored by the unmated ones. My cock was pierced when I reached maturity, as all of our men

are, but I'm still waiting for the favor of piercing the sweet core of a female with it, something that

I've ached to do for a long time now. I've been content to wait, still, knowing it will be all the better

when one of the women finally welcomes me to her furs, but now, so close to this Terran...

“Fine!” she grunts out, bucking against me, and I feel her hips jerk upward as she struggles under

me again. I have one jolt of imagery—her pulling me down atop her instead, opening her slender

thighs wide for my throbbing cock and me rutting her here in the dirt—before the rest of her words cut

through the sudden fog of lust.

“I’ll come back with you,” she finishes. “Just let me up off the fucking ground, will you?”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you going to run again?”

“Are you going to chase me if I do?”

Another hot jolt of imagining—me chasing her through the forest, catching her, swinging her up

and back against a tree only to lift her and lock her legs around my waist, impaling her on my cock so

I can drive myself into her again and again—

“Yes,” I say flatly through gritted teeth, trying to force the images away so that my cock will

soften. My loincloth is on the verge of slipping, and I don’t want to frighten her. Chasing her has been

difficult enough. “And I’ll catch you. But you can make this easy on both of us.”

She lets out a huff. “I said fine. Now let me *up*.”

I pull away from her reluctantly, both because I’m still wary of her running and because I don’t

want to lose the sweet, warm press of her flesh against mine. But I stand up, angling away from her so

that my erection isn’t so obvious, and I watch her. I’m ready to grab her at any moment if she makes a

break for it, and I think she realizes that. She doesn’t move, frozen in place, and as her eyes rake

down my body, she inhales sharply.

I know what she's seeing: broad muscles built from training and hunting, the sharp piercings in my nose, lip and nipples, the deep cuts of muscle just above my loincloth. Things I've heard the Bekaru females talking about, and surely Terran women are not so different. When her eyes flick lower, to where my loincloth is still pushed outwards by my stubborn cock, I see her suck in a deeper breath, and the air between us thickens.

*This is not why you're here, I remind myself. You're out here to rescue her and bring her back*

*to the village, not seduce her. Besides, she's as likely to taunt you into making a move and then*

*slap you for it as she is to let you inside her. More likely to do so, in fact.*

"Let's get back to the village," I say gruffly, turning away from her. "Your friends will be worried about you."

"Fine. After you," she says curtly, her eyes still wary as she starts to follow me. I keep glancing

back at her, making sure that she's following, but she seems to be agreeable for now.

*Let's hope it stays that way.*

As annoyed as I am with her, I can't help but be a little curious too. Most of the women had

seemed a little suspicious of us, but this Terran was the only one who'd run. She's brave, if foolish,

and something must have made her that way—stubborn and foolishly brave enough to run into an alien

forest.

"Look," I say finally. "It's going to be a long walk back if we don't even know each other's

names."

She shrugs, but doesn't offer hers up first.

*Fine.* I grit my teeth, forcing my voice to stay pleasant. “I’m Luka.”

She blinks at me, startled. “That’s—not so different from a name that’s popular on Earth,” she

says. “There’s a famous character from space—never mind.” She cuts off abruptly, clearly irritated

with herself for saying so much. “I’m Naomi,” she adds as an afterthought.

I know. I heard her fellow Terrans refer to her by that name.

“Naomi,” I murmur.

Her eyes widen a little at the sound of it on my tongue, but she says nothing else, trudging along

after me in silence.

I start to ask her something about herself—where she comes from, where she’d go back to if she

could—but before the words can leave my mouth, the air in front of us is torn by a screeching hiss that

leaves the hairs standing up on my neck.

I whirl, daggers instantly at the ready, only to see a *lathil* coming out of the trees. The six-legged

scaled beast has long, sharp, curling horns and fangs that could tear someone of my size in half.

*And it has our scent.*

It hisses again, long tongue snaking out, and behind me, the Terran woman screams.

5

Naomi

I HATE THAT I SCREAMED. I’m not the kind of girl who screams at anything. But whatever just came out

of the trees—it looks like a Komodo dragon blown up to the size of a dinosaur, with an extra set of

legs and crossed with a snake that has sabertooth-sized fangs, and *horns* to fucking top it all off. And

it’s coming for us.

Luka leaps in front of me, daggers drawn as I jerk backward, heart hammering in my chest. I want

to run again, but I'm afraid it'll chase me down, and being eaten by a horned lizard-snake was not on

my list of ways to go.

*You're not safe out here.* Luka's words come back to me, making me feel like a fucking idiot for

trying to run on my own, and that just pisses me off even more, a choking mix of fear and anger

swirling in my gut and making me feel sick.

*What the fuck is he going to do with those daggers?* Luka lets out a roar from deep in his chest,

slashing at the beast, but it doesn't drive it off. It holds its ground, that long pink forked tongue lashing

back and forth as if tasting us in the air, and I shudder.

It licks again, pawing at the dirt with clawed feet as saliva drips from the too-big fangs—and then

it rears back, leaping at us.

Luka doesn't miss a beat, though. It's as if he's been training his whole life for this—and what the

hell do I know, maybe he has? He charges at the creature fearlessly, meeting it head-on as it swipes at

him with those massive fangs. Luka is huge, bigger than anyone on Earth except maybe that guy who

played Chewbacca and some extra-tall basketball players—and even then, he's far more muscular.

But one of those fangs, if it got into him, could tear a limb open, or even rip it clean off.

I scramble backward, wanting to stay out of his way, as he ducks the lizard-snake's attempts to

bite and claw him. It swipes out with one foot, razor-sharp claws glinting in the sun, and Luka feints

to one side, scoring a hit down its shoulder with one of his blades. Sickly green blood spills out,



spattering the ground, and Luka dodges it as it bubbles and hisses, eating through the leaves.

*Great. Fucking acidic blood. Next thing I know, it'll spit poison too.*

It doesn't seem to do that, but it also doesn't really seem fazed by Luka's hit. The thing is huge,

bigger than anything I would have imagined, and I don't know if Luka will be able to hold it off.

*When in doubt, do what you know.*

"Fucking stupid—thing!" I shriek, words failing me in the face of something I truly never

imagined, and I grab rock after rock, hurling them at the creature as Luka doubles down on his attacks.

The rocks seem to annoy the beast but not really hurt it, and I don't know what else to do. This isn't

exactly my realm of expertise.

I huddle back, watching the fight continue. Luka is clearly skilled—and brave, I'll grudgingly

admit, to fight it like that—but the beast is fierce, more so than anything I've ever seen on Earth.

It swings to one side, the snake-like head ducking and then coming up. Luka rushes at the same

moment, too quickly to fully dodge, and the horn catches him in the hip, raking up his side and

abdomen all the way to his chest in a bloody furrow that sends his blood splattering to mingle with

the green, bubbling blood of the beast.

"Luka!" I shriek his name without thinking, leaping up from where I huddled by the nearest tree.

It's not *just* the realization that if the lizard-thing takes him down, I'm next, that sends me flying

toward them both, grabbing the nearest fallen pointy branch and brandishing it as if it could actually

do something.

"Fuck off!" I scream again, stabbing at it, and while it doesn't really do any fucking harm, it does

distract the creature long enough for Luka to lunge at it again, slicing its chest as it wheels toward me.

“Naomi, back off!” he shouts, but I wasn’t great at listening to him before and I’m not about to

start now. There’s a decent five feet of branch between me and the lizard-snake, which I’m glad of as

I jab it toward the creature’s eyes, trying anything I can to keep its attention off Luka. Blood is

streaming down his side and leg, and I have a feeling that one more good hit could do him in.

He slashes again, digging deep, and the creature lets out a sickening hiss, shaking its head as

venom goes flying. I dodge the thick drops, jabbing the branch deeply into its mouth and shoving

toward the back of its throat in one more attempt to do some actual fucking damage.

It doesn’t like that one bit. I manage to get one good shove in, forcing the branch partway down its

throat, and the lizard-thing rears up on its hind legs with its thick tail swishing, almost hitting Luka as

he darts backward. It goes up, and he rushes forward, letting out a ululating war cry as he drops,

sliding across the forest floor beneath the creature as he jabs upward, piercing the soft pale belly and

dragging the daggers downwards in a truly disgusting, but satisfying spray of blood and guts.

For one brief moment, I think the lizard-thing is going to come crashing down on Luka as it lets

out a dying, rattling hiss, but he rolls to one side, just barely getting out from under it in time.

I look at the beast in awe and horror as it goes limp, that bubbling blood spreading out around it. I

have to walk around it to get a glimpse of Luka slumped in the dirt, and before he comes into view, I

have a horrible vision his skin being eaten away by the acidic blood.

To my relief, the blood only seems to react to flora, not flesh. I would be worried if any of the beast's blood got into Luka's wound, but it doesn't appear that he's being eaten away by it, and he's not screaming in pain... although he doesn't look *good*.

A surprising rush of worry fills me as I get a good look at him, his face screwed up in pain as he struggles to get to his feet and fails, a groan slipping out. He's bleeding a *lot*, I can see it streaming past the congealing green streaks, and I can tell he's hurt badly.

*I could run again.*

In this condition, he probably couldn't follow me. I could get well away, and figure out what to do next once I've put enough distance between us that he couldn't find me again.

My feet don't seem to want to move, though. He looks at me warily, as if he's expecting me to run too, but I don't.

*It's just because there might be more of these creatures out there, or worse, I tell myself, but I*

know deep down that's not all it is.

Luka might be an irritating, probably arrogant pest who came after me even though I clearly don't want to go to yet another alien village, but I can't leave him to bleed out. He could have left me as bait for the monster and run, but he didn't. He fought, and he saved me.

Everything in me screams for me to save my own ass instead of worrying about his—finely formed as it appears to be—but apparently today is the day that I can't bring myself to *only* look out for me.

I step closer, still unsure about him and his motives and not wanting to be closer to the beast even

with it dead, but I do anyway. I kneel down, fumbling with my top, and Luka raises an eyebrow.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the view,” he wheezes, “but I don’t know if this is the time—”

“Shut up, or I’m leaving,” I tell him crossly. “We need to stop the bleeding.”

My “shirt” is nothing but a long length of woven cloth wrapped around my neck, over my breasts

and around my midsection multiple times, and I unwind it just far enough to tear off two long strips

from the end before reknitting it and turning back to Luka.

He’s leaning back on his elbows now, panting with his daggers discarded at his sides, and I move

a little closer, taking the shorter of the two lengths of cloth and tying it around his muscled thigh in a

makeshift tourniquet to try to stop the blood. It doesn’t *stop* it, exactly, but it does slow the flow of

blood considerably, and I fold the other piece over and over to make a pad, pressing it against Luka’s

wound.

He grunts, hissing through his teeth in pain, as I hold it there to soak up what’s still trickling from

his gash and trying to wipe some of the residual blood away so that I can see just how bad it is. He

has what looks like a waterskin on his belt, and I pull it free, glancing at him to see if he protests

before pouring about half of it over his torso, using the pad to mop up both his and the creature’s

blood and clean it away.

His skin is pink and irritated where the green blood hit, but not raw or bubbling. The gash though,

looks bad. He’s not bleeding as badly since the tourniquet, but I can see a glimpse of bone in a few

spots, and fresh blood wells as soon as I wipe away what’s there.

I look up at his taut, drawn face, and feel a discomfiting sense of defeat. My solution in a crisis is

to put as much distance between me and the problem as I possibly can—but this is one that I can't

seem to run away from, and I'm not sure what else to do. I don't even have so much as a first-aid kit.

"We can't stay here," Luka wheezes, his voice thick with obvious pain. "The carcass will draw

other creatures. Not as dangerous as the *lathil*, maybe, but I cannot fight them off." He goes to push

himself up on one arm and lets out a groan, slumping back as the blood wells faster. "*Drak*. We need

to get out of here."

A small bubble of panic wells up inside me. I hate that feeling. It makes me want to run, but once

again, I can't seem to reconcile the idea of leaving him here to fend for himself. If that thing that he

calls a "lathil" had come out of the trees while I was alone, I'd be slowly digesting right now instead

of staving off a panic attack next to a hunky alien in danger of bleeding out.

The latter is preferable, but still not ideal.

"What else can I do?" I ask, hating the note of desperation in my voice as I press the cloth pad

against his wound again. "What do you need—how can we fix this so we can get out of here?" *Just*

*my luck, I end up on the barbaric alien planet without any advanced technology in sight, instead of*

*whichever one has the cutting-edge medical tech.*

Luka grimaces, pushing himself up with obvious effort again as I hold the cloth in place. "The

wound is severe," he grunts, as if I couldn't tell that just by looking at it. "I need more medicines and

healing skill than any of the simple herbs here, or you and I, can manage."

“So?” I stare at him. “What does that *mean*? What do we do?”

He lets out a pained sigh. “Help me to stand, Naomi. I know where we can go for help.”

That should be good news. But the look on his face when he says it doesn't *look* good—and that

worries me even more.

*Where are we going? And how could this possibly get worse?*

6

Luka

I WOULDN'T HAVE THOUGHT the small Terran woman could be of much assistance in helping me up, but

she proves to be remarkably strong. I can see the flex of muscle in her arms as she allows me to lean

on her, providing leverage as I try to get to my feet without losing too much more blood. I can feel that

I've already lost more than I should.

Frustration, stronger than before, fills me with a fresh wave. This isn't how the mission was

meant to go. I should be back at the village by now with Naomi, enjoying my success, training with

Rasith, returning to my normal day with the missions to rescue the Terrans concluded. But instead, I'm

dangerously wounded, still in the company of this woman who seems determined to try me at every

turn, and now forced to make an unpleasant choice of whom to go to for help out of sheer necessity.

*At least I kept her safe.* I look at the *lathil* with distaste, thinking of what could have happened if

I wasn't here. She's alive, and that means that even if my mission is still ongoing, at least so far it's a

success.

“Where do we need to go?” Naomi asks urgently as I stand fully, grimacing in pain. The wound in

my side feels like it's on fire, my skin raw and irritated around it from the *lathil*'s blood, as well as inside the wound where some of it mingled with mine. It feels like a thousand small, hot spear points digging into me, and I know that if I'm not treated soon, infection will set in.

It will be so much worse, then.

I glance around, forcing back the fog of pain so that I can think. We've managed to get a good distance from the Uleki tribe, which is good. "We're no longer in danger of pursuit from the Uleki," I tell Naomi, the words coming with some difficulty. "But from what I can tell, we're now near the territory of a very small, wild clan called the Peskiit."

"And they'll help us?" There's a slight tremor in Naomi's voice that I know she doesn't want me to hear.

"They may." I shift my weight, testing my ability to stand on my own, and bite back a grunt of pain. "They keep mostly to themselves, and they're known to be unpredictable. They avoid contact with other tribes unless necessary. But from what I know of them, they are skilled with medicines. They should have something that can help me, before infection from the *lathil*'s blood starts to set in."

"Great." She sounds as if she's speaking from behind gritted teeth too. "Yet another alien tribe. Let's go. Which way, exactly?"

I take one more moment to get my bearings, then nod toward where the sun is beginning to shift in the sky. "That way."

Naomi gives me a look laced with suspicion, but she nods, taking my arm so that I have something to brace against as we begin to walk. Her touch makes me instantly aware of her—her warmth and

softness, the brush of her small breast against my arm as she holds on to me. She is strong despite her delicacy, and that intrigues me—and arouses me. Despite the considerable pain I’m in, her touch and the closeness of her makes my cock swell, brushing against my loincloth and stiffening my spine. I bite back another groan of pain—my blood loss is too significant for my cock to rouse fully, but the arousal is there nonetheless, and my body is too injured for the reaction to not hurt.

I need a distraction, and getting to know the strange Terran woman is as good as anything. I don’t want to focus on the pain, or how my mind feels foggy as I walk, as if I’m swimming through murky water rather than striding through familiar woods. “How did you know how to cover your tracks so well?” I ask Naomi curiously, glancing sideways at her as we make our way slowly forward.

She shrugs. “We have these TV shows back home—um—” Naomi pauses, as if thinking how to explain. “Pictures—that move. People make up stories and act them out in these shows. Sometimes they’re about people who do bad things, or are running away, and they have to hide. Or they’re about other civilizations—anyway, sometimes they have to cover their tracks. I just remembered what I saw on tv.” She snorts. “I never thought it would be so helpful in real life.”

“Why did you run?” I look at her curiously. “Surely you knew there must be things out there that would be dangerous. This is an unfamiliar world.”

Naomi bites her lip. “Why did your people decide to rescue us?” she fires back, ignoring my question. “What’s in it for you? It’s not like the Uleki are going to thank you for stealing us.”



I let out a sigh. “Our leader, Harax, is mated to one of you. The yellow-haired one called Nicole.”

“Mated?” There’s a confused note in her voice when she says it, that suspicion I saw in her face lacing her words.

“In our tribe, the women choose who they wish to share their furs with, for a night, or for longer,”

I explain to her. “But in some cases, the goddess blesses a pair with a true mate bond. This can be...

sensed. It is said to be an undeniable feeling, a pull within one’s very soul, a bond that cannot be broken.”

“And these bonds are common?” The suspicion is more obvious now. She doesn’t believe me, I can tell.

*Well, why would I care? She can believe me or not. She’s not my mate, it’s just my job to get her to safety.*

I shake my head. “Far from it. We have seen only one goddess-blessed mate bond in a generation.

Our people have chosen to pair off at times, to continue the tribe, bonds formed in affection and

desire. But they have not had the same effect as a bond from the goddess. Children are few, and

sometimes those bonds break apart. We have only a few women, and they have sent our warriors from their furs at times, to try another bond.”

“What if that happens with Nicole and... Harax?” She pronounces his name a bit oddly, her voice

straining at the words, as if she’s having trouble accepting all of this. “What if she sends him away?

Will you send all the Terran women away?”

“They will not part,” I tell her firmly. “To attempt to break a true mate bond is like carving out

one's own heart. It is not possible. Their mating proves that the goddess is pleased with us once again."

When I look at Naomi, she's still frowning, as if my answer doesn't please her. I let out a sigh.

"But to answer your question, no. Even if Nicole were to send Harax away from her furs, he would

not turn all of the Terran women out to fend for themselves. Our leader is a good man. A good warrior."

She looks slightly more satisfied with that answer, and I continue. I oddly want to see her happy,

and I tell myself it's because I don't want to have to worry that she'll run again. I can't catch her in

this condition, and the idea of returning to Harax and the others empty handed is unbearable.

"We have very few of our own women left, but they are greatly valued," I tell her firmly. "The

Bekaru revere *all* women, not only our own. How could we worship a goddess and yet treat flesh-

and-blood women as less? But not all tribes see it this way. The Bekaru alone see the worship of all

women as a tribute to our goddess. Others treat only their own women in this way, others view them

as things to be used, their bodies a sacrifice to the goddess through use of them for pleasure and

offspring. We do not believe this to be true."

A shiver goes through Naomi at that, and I think I feel her move closer to me, her body brushing

against mine in a way that sends an answering pulse through my own flesh.

We walk in silence for a time, my own ability to speak exhausted by the continuing trickle of

blood from my wound. We stop occasionally for me to catch my breath and for Naomi to adjust the

length of cloth stanching the flow, but I don't wish to take too long.  
We need to be among others  
before nightfall.

By the time we reach the outskirts of the Peskiit village, the sun is  
low in the sky, and I'm feeling

faint. My wound is throbbing, and I know I've lost a dangerous  
amount of blood. My only hope—and

Naomi's—is that the Peskiit will be willing to help us.

The moment warriors emerge, looking at us with clear hostility, I  
drop my daggers and raise my

hands. "I am not here for violence," I call out, nudging Naomi  
behind me as I force myself to step

forward, feeling wobbly and weak as a youngling. "I am in need of  
healing. We are no threat."

My vision swims, blackness threatening dazedly at the edges, but I  
force myself to stay upright. I

have to be certain that the Peskiit understand why we're here, or  
Naomi will be in danger, and all of

this will be for nothing. I can't protect her if I'm unconscious.

"We were attacked by a *lathil* in the woods," I continue, each word  
forced out with effort from

between my lips. "I'm grievously injured and in need of a healer. I  
will repay the debt, if you can help  
me."

Another warrior pushes forward in front of the three who came out  
at first, his brow furrowed. "I

am Troyvl, the leader here," he says curtly. "If you are willing to  
repay the debt of healing, our

village may be open to you, Bekaru."

My spirits lift a bit, a sense of relief filling me, but it's short-lived.  
Troyvl peers around me, to

where Naomi is standing, and my stomach clenches with  
apprehension.

His gaze draws others, and soon all of the warriors gathered—the  
three who originally greeted us

and others coming to see what's going on—are looking at Naomi curiously.

*Drak.* I have no idea how many women the Peskiit have among them, but they are likely to be few, and Naomi is strange to them. My ability to protect her is limited, and my mind races as I try to come up with a solution.

“Who is this woman?” Troyvl asks, gesturing to Naomi. “Perhaps the debt—”

I cut him off before he can finish his statement, already aware of where this is headed. I don't have time to think about what I'm saying, only what is most likely to protect Naomi, with me unable to fight in her defense.

“This is Naomi,” I say sharply. “A Terran woman—and my mate.”

7

Naomi

*MY MATE.*

The words reverberate through me like a shockwave. Not a few hours ago, Luka was explaining to me the alien—quite literally—concept of *mates*, and now here he is claiming I'm his. Which, based on his description, is absolutely ludicrous. I certainly haven't felt any deep pull toward him, and from his behavior toward me, he doesn't either. I seem more like an annoyance to him than anything else, something he's saddled with.

*I didn't leave him though, did I? When I could have run again?*

*That was just because you realized just how fucking dangerous this place is. Not because you*

*felt drawn to him. He certainly isn't drawn to you.*

My first impulse is to snappishly deny it. Of course I'm not his mate. But some deep-seated

instinct makes me look at him as I open my mouth, and the words die on my lips as I see the

expression on his face. There's a warning look in his eyes that tells me he's very aware I'm not his

mate, but to keep my mouth shut.

*What the fuck is going on here?*

I have no idea, but at the end of the day, if I have to choose between trusting Luka and trusting

these new aliens, I'm going to pick Luka. I don't trust him much, but I don't know this new tribe at *all*.

At least I know Luka is willing to fight to keep me safe.

But if we don't get him to the alien version of a doctor soon, he won't even be able to do that.

The apparent leader of the tribe, this alien called Troyvl, nods. "Ah. A blessed mate. She will

remain at your side, then."

There's a clear look of disappointment on the faces of several of the other warriors that Troyvl

accepted Luka's claim, and that makes me all the more glad that I didn't protest. Troyvl motions to us

both, and Luka staggers forward in a way that makes me immediately reach for him. He looks like

he's about to tip over, and we make our way carefully forward as Troyvl leads us toward a small

wooden cabin-like structure near the center of the village.

I stay close to Luka, looking around suspiciously. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, for them

to ignore Luka's supposed claim to me, or come up with some reason to turn us away. I'm still not so

sure that I like the idea of going back with Luka, either, but at least he's familiar. He mentioned that

these Peskiit are loners, that they don't mix well with others, and that sets off even more alarms for

me than anything else.

We're escorted into the cabin, where an alien woman with leathery-bronzed skin and faded dark marks on her upper chest greets us. She's wearing a long tunic, her silvery hair braided around her head, and she has a row of small nubby horns peeking through in pairs of two from her forehead to the top of her skull, like the horns of a baby goat. Her eyes are a cloudy green, and she peers at us, her thin lips downturned.

"This Bekaru came to us in need of medicine," Troyvl tells her, his voice slightly gentler than it was with us, tinged with respect. *This woman must be the healer, some kind of elder.* "His mate is with him."

"Sit here," the woman says in a creaky voice, gesturing for Luka to sit on the edge of a wide wooden bench. The room looks nothing like anything approximating a doctor's office. There's no tech, no instruments, just a table with a variety of things that look like a mortar and pestle, bowls, vials of liquid, some sharp instruments, and bundles of herbs and plants hanging from the ceiling above it. There's a fire burning in a small hearth on the other wall despite the heat, a clay-type pot hanging over it, and a slightly raised bed covered in furs and woven cloths nearby.

In short, it's definitely not what I was hoping for, but pretty much what I expected, given what I've seen of this planet so far.

"Drink this," she continues, handing him a vial with a murky liquid in it. "For the pain."

Luka frowns. He tips it up slightly, taking a sip as if to mollify her, but he doesn't drink it down, palming the rest instead.

“It’s a painkiller,” I hiss. “Drink it. I don’t know what she’s going to do, but you probably don’t want to feel all of it.”

“I do not want to blur my senses more than they already are, either,” Luka shoots back in an equally low tone. “I wish to keep my mind sharp, even if that means pain.”

*Cool. He’s gonna be tough about this.*

I grit my teeth, staying by his side as I watch the healer putter around her table. I don’t want to be left on my own here, and if Luka passes out from the pain, that’s exactly what’s going to happen. But I also know better than to argue with him.

The healer returns after a moment with what look like strips of bandages slung over her arm, and three stone pots of goo. One is opaque and green, with a sticky consistency, one is dark green and looks like a thin liquid, and the other has a pinkish tinge, and looks like more of a paste. She sets them down next to Luka, who is sitting stiffly in place with his jaw set, and reaches for the dark green liquid first.

“Drink this. It will stave off infection.” She hands him the pot, and Luka narrows his eyes at her, but this one he drinks without question. From the way his lips pucker, it doesn’t look as if it tastes *good*, but he doesn’t complain.

“This will constrict your blood flow and slow the blood loss,” she goes on to explain as she reaches for the paste, in that same slow, creaky voice as I watch her scoop it out with two fingers. No gloves, no sanitation, just her long sun-browned fingers working the pinkish paste over Luka’s wound as he stares straight ahead, clenching his teeth. When her fingers delve *into* the wound, rubbing it into

the raw flesh, Luka sucks in a hissing breath between them as the amber swirls in his leaf-green eyes seem to move, darkening and filling the green until they almost look more amber than anything else.

*Interesting.*

He has beautiful eyes, and I try to focus on that instead of the healer digging around inside his

wound, which is making me feel more than a little nauseous. The amber swirls seem to spread and

contract as the muscles in his jaw work, until the healer has finally run out of the paste and made her

way down to his hip.

“And that?” I blurt out, feeling restless and anxious as she reaches for the opaque green goo.

“What will that do?”

“It will bind the edges of the wound together,” the healer says patiently. “When I have applied it, I

will need your help bandaging him.”

*Oh.* That feels too intimate for a man I just met this morning, but it also feels wrong to abandon

Luka to only the ministrations of this strange woman, if she’s asking for my help. He didn’t abandon

me. So I just nod as she starts to spread the goo over his wound, and to my absolute fascination, I

begin to *see* the wound contracting.

It doesn’t close completely, but the paste has clearly worked already to stop the bleeding, and I

can see the wound growing smaller as she spreads the goo around and into the edges of the wound

from his chest down to his hip.

*These aliens might not have medical technology, but what they do have really seems to work.*

I haven’t given these plants enough of a chance, clearly.



Once she's finished, she reaches for one of the long strips of cloth bandage.

"We will wind these around him and secure them until his wound is fully covered," the healer

explains, handing me the end of one. "Keep it secure to his skin, just here." She gestures to his back,

and I bite my lip.

I feel weird about touching Luka. There's so much of him, and so little of it is covered. He's over

seven feet of mostly bare, muscled flesh, and as irritated as I've been by his pursuit of me, I'm not

blind. He's gorgeous, and my mouth feels slightly dry as I press my hand against the smooth, muscled

skin of his back. He feels warm to the touch—maybe a little too warm—and his skin is soft. The

small jolt that I feel when I touch him doesn't help either, the way he seems to stiffen when my palm

meets his back, as if it was unexpected despite the healer telling me to do so literally seconds ago.

I feel him jerk with each brush of my fingers against his skin as I help the healer wind the

bandages around him, from the markings on his chest all the way down to his hips, and I can't help but

be intensely aware of him. I'm too close to him, so close that I can smell the warm, masculine musk of

his body even with the herbal scents of the healing pastes filling my nose. I bite my lip harder, trying

to ignore it, but it's made that much more difficult when the healer unceremoniously moves his

loincloth lower on his hips so that we can get the bandages to cover all of the wound. I could swear I

see a flash of the base of his cock, and if it was, it's thicker than any human man's I've ever seen,

even flaccid.

I'm also pretty sure I saw another piercing there.

I shake my head, trying to clear thoughts of Luka's dick and what size it might be out of my head,  
as the healer hands him another vial with a clear liquid in it. "This will help your body compensate for the blood loss," she says, nodding to him. "Drink it all, unlike the one for pain. You will need it to heal."

*She caught him.* I can't help but laugh a little at that inwardly. Clearly, this woman is keener than she lets on.

The door opens, and Troyvl and two warriors step inside. "They will take you to the hut you can stay in," the healer says to Luka, nodding toward the three aliens. "until the debt of healing is paid to the tribe. I will continue to tend to your wounds as they mend."

*Fuck.* I don't like the sound of that at all. Troyvl mentioned a debt when we first arrived, but I hoped it was a monetary sort of situation, not that I'm even sure if the aliens here have a currency besides apparently trading human women back and forth. But it sounds like they plan to make Luka work off his debt.

That means we're stuck in this village not only until Luka is well enough to travel, but until he's well enough to fulfill whatever the terms of that debt are, and while he does whatever it is they're going to want.

I know better than to even try to argue about it, though. Luka's in no shape to go anywhere anyway, and Troyvl doesn't look like the type that will appreciate me fighting back. I don't want to draw his interest any more than I already have either.

It's early evening out as we're led to one of the huts, more like the Uleki ones I'm familiar with than the healer's structure. Luka is slow to walk, and I hang back with him, but I quickly realize he's moving slowly for more than just the obvious pain he's still in. "The Peskiit have no currency but labor," Luka says in a low, hushed voice. "They are a communal tribe, and they rarely allow outsiders in. Since they have given us assistance, I am now bound to pay off my debt through working for the tribe until they are satisfied. Once they feel I have paid it, we will be allowed to leave."

"Once they *feel* you have?" I ask incredulously. "There's not, like, an hourly wage system for this?"

"Wage?" Luka looks at me with obvious confusion, and I huff out a breath.

While I can appreciate the lack of capitalism on this planet, I'm also not entirely on board with the idea of Troyvl and his warriors getting to decide for themselves when Luka has done enough.

"What's to keep them from just making you work here for months, or years, paying off the 'debt' even if that's not proportional to how much healing you needed, just because they *feel* like it?"

"Honor," Luka says stiffly, and I stare at him.

"That would never work on Earth," I tell him bluntly.

"Perhaps not." He glances at me as Troyvl pushes back the hide door of our hut, gesturing for us to go inside. "But it is the way of the Peskiit, and we must respect it."

I frown, but I follow him inside.

The hut smells faintly stale, and it's clear that it hasn't been used in some time. The furs for our

bed are piled up near the lumpy “mattress”, which looks like quickly  
sewn-together woven cloth

stuffed with something textured. Probably grass. It looks dusty, and I  
make a mental note to put a fur

down over it before Luka lies down to rest.

“We will give you time to heal,” Troyvl says stiffly as a thin alien  
woman with four nubby horns

and loose black hair sets down a clay-like plate and cup with some  
bread, odd-looking fruit, and

what appears to be cheese. “But once you are able, Bekaru, we  
expect you to begin working off what

you owe without delay. There is food here, we do not expect you to  
join us for the communal meal

while you are healing. But in the future, you will be expected to  
partake.”

“Well, he’s friendly,” I mutter irritably as Troyvl strides out with the  
woman following him,

leaving us alone. As the hide falls back into place, I glance around  
the hut, my stomach clenching

apprehensively.

The hut is tiny, smaller than a studio apartment back on Earth, and  
feels even more cramped when

sharing the space with a seven-foot-plus alien.

And to top all of that off, there’s only the one bed.

Which, of course, Luka needs. He’s the one who’s injured.

*Great. Just fucking great.*

8

Naomi

THAT REALIZATION MAKES me step away from Luka, wanting  
some space. The air feels hot, close and

tight, and I’d give anything for some air-conditioning. It cools off at  
night here, but the hut has been

closed up all day clearly, and it’s stuffy inside. I want fresh air—but  
I’m not about to go outside

alone. Not with all those strange aliens out there, feeling like they're owed something for helping us.

Luka grunts as he spreads a fur over the bed, clearly thinking the same thing I was. He sits down

with another muted groan of pain, still clearly stiff and hurting, and I feel a little bad for wanting to

put space between us now that we're alone, and I don't have to pretend to be his mate.

"How are you feeling?" I ask tentatively, and he half-shrugs with his good side, glancing at me.

"I'm all right," he manages, although his tone suggests otherwise. "I should return to my full

strength before much time passes."

Luka reaches for the bread, tearing a chunk off before handing me the rest. I take it, feeling my

fingers tremble a little as I do. I hate how skittish I still feel around him, as if I might jump out of my

skin at any quick movement—but he's hardly going to move quickly right now. Besides, the aliens

outside the hut are probably more of a threat than Luka could be.

We eat in silence for a few moments, and I reach for one of the dried fruits, glancing nervously at

him. "Why did you say I was your mate?" I ask finally, trying to keep a tremor out of my voice. I don't

think he has any plans of continuing that pretense when we're alone, but I want to hear him say it

aloud just to be sure—and know for certain why he did it.

Luka glances at me keenly. "The Peskiit were fascinated by you. This place is as unfamiliar to

both of us as you are to them, but there is one thing that remains the same across all tribes. You will

be safer if they think you have already been claimed as a mate."

*Claimed.* The word both irritates me and sends an odd shiver down my spine, one that feels less

like fear and more like something I don't want to think too closely about. "I see," I say quietly—and I do, but I don't like it. I can understand it though, and it makes me feel the tiniest bit better that Luka is concerned enough for my safety to do such a thing. Of course, it's all so that he can take me back to *his* tribe, rather than leaving me here with the Peskiit, and I'm not sure if that's any better. "Are we safe here?" I ask, taking another piece of the fruit. Luka shrugs. "Not much is known about the Peskiit," he says quietly, keeping his voice low, and I'm suddenly aware that we might not be as alone as I thought I was. "They're not as violent or as brutal as the Jakk, we know that." I shudder, remembering that the Jakk are the ones that we were meant to be traded to. *Anything is better than that, I think to myself. Even the Uleki, and almost certainly Luka's tribe.* "They keep to themselves," he continues. "They have their own customs and rules of honor. We're safe for the moment, but we'll want to leave as soon as I pay off the debt I've incurred. It will be best to finish it as quickly as possible, and not stick around." A shiver goes down my spine at that, all of me instantly tensing at the feeling of being trapped. We can't leave until Luka pays off this debt, and the thought of that makes my stomach clench uncomfortably. Being trapped anywhere has never been my strong suit. I try to shove that feeling down though, before it can overflow into panic. If I try to run and I'm caught, Luka is in no shape to help me. They won't believe we're mates, either, if I run and am caught. If what Luka said about mates was true, no real mate would ever leave the other under any

circumstances.

I clear my throat. “Thank you for protecting me,” I manage to say, but the words come out stilted,

awkward. “For pretending, I mean. We’re not really mates, of course. It’s just for show.”

Luka looks at me blankly. “Of course.” He sets the empty plate aside, glancing back at the bed.

“We should get some rest,” he continues. “It’s been a long day, and they won’t get easier for some time.”

“You can take the bed,” I tell him hurriedly. “I’ll be fine on the floor.”

Luka gives me a piercing look. “My honor would not allow a female, especially one as fragile as

yourself, to sleep on the floor when a bed is available.”

The *fragile* comment stings.

“I’m not fragile,” I insist. “I’m as tough as anyone else. The floor is *fine*, and I don’t mind. You’re

hurt. You need a good rest in order to heal.”

“I will not allow it.” Luka stands with some effort, moving as if to get down on the one remaining

fur on the floor, and I let out an exasperated sigh.

“Are you serious? You almost got split in half by that lizard-thing, and you’re really going to sleep

on the floor because of some dumb masculine bullshit?”

“Most of these words do not make sense.” Luka looks at me flatly.

“But my wounds are nothing

compared to the shame I would feel if I took advantage of the comfort of a bed while you did not.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I run my hand through my hair, eyeing him.

*He’s so fucking stubborn.*

I’m almost tempted to let him do it, feeling like he deserves every uncomfortable, restless minute

if he's going to be like this, but I stop myself. The longer it takes for him to heal, the longer before he can pay off the debt and get us out of here, and the longer we have to playact at being mates. It's to my benefit to play nice and get Luka well as soon as possible, and part of that is a good night's sleep.

"Fine." I glare at him. "We can share the bed. But you're not sleeping on the floor."

"That is acceptable." Luka returns to the furs, reaching for another to pull over him, discarding his weapon belt. He reaches for the ties of his loincloth, and then catches my eye and stops.

*Of course they sleep naked.*

I feel too awkward to ask him to leave it on, because then it might seem like it matters to me, like

I'd notice if he *was* naked.

*As if anyone could not notice.*

Thankfully, he seems to pick up on my discomfort, leaning back instead.

He might as well have taken it off. The minute I slip beneath the fur, also still fully dressed, I'm

all too aware of the heat of his body, of how near he is. His muscled bulk takes up a good portion of

the bed, leaving me very little space to put between us, and I'm very aware of how little he's

wearing. Just that loincloth covering the only part of him I haven't seen—and it makes my skin heat

too in an uncomfortable way.

It disarms me enough to make the one question I was holding back slip out before I can stop it.

"Why did *you* come after me?" I ask softly in the gathering darkness, the last of the light snuffed

out by Luka once I was in bed. "Why not any of the others? Did someone send you?"



He's quiet for a moment, his breathing even, and I wonder if he's already asleep.

"My father was a great man," he says finally. "A great warrior. Songs are sung about his deeds.

The tales of his hunts are legendary. I've tried all my life so far to live up to that." Luka pauses, the quiet between his words hanging heavily between us. "The moment I found out you'd run, I knew I needed to go after you."

The conviction in his voice startles me, and I blink at him, wondering if he can see my face in the darkness at all. I don't know what else to say, and the silence stretches out until at last, I'm sure there's nothing else that I can.

This time, when his breathing evens out, I know he's asleep. I FALL ASLEEP TOO, for a while, but when I wake it's still dark. There's a sturdy warmth against my back, over the curve of my waist, and I realize that Luka has rolled over in his sleep. His chest and belly are pressed against me, his arm draped over me, holding me there. Against my ass and thigh, I can feel the hot, hard length of his cock, aroused by my closeness in his sleep.

For a brief moment, before I realize he's turned on, it feels nice. I feel safe, held in the hard strength of his embrace, as if nothing could hurt me while Luka holds me so close. But then, as that thought registers, so does the heat of his cock against me, and I panic.

*Mate.*

That's what he called me, in front of Troyvl. He agreed when I said that it was only for show, but this doesn't feel like it. He's holding me like a lover, aroused by the feeling of me close to him like one. It makes me wonder if subconsciously, this is what he wants.

I slip out from under his arm as slowly as I can with my heart racing in my chest, trying to keep the panic from overflowing and becoming unmanageable. I can feel my impulse to run rising, close to taking over my logical side, and I need space between us. I need to clear the strange fog that the press of his body and the hot touch of his skin seems to have created.

I need to get away.

My hand is on the hide when I hear Luka's voice from behind me, thick with sleep. "Naomi?"

*Fuck.* I can't run now. I go very still, heart fluttering in my chest, and I hear the sound of rustling

as Luka gets out of bed.

I have a sudden vision of him scooping me up and carrying me back there, depositing me next to

him in the furs, and the heat in my belly at that thought doesn't match the fearful leap of my pulse.

The solid presence of him at my back makes me try to slip past him, away from the door toward

the wall, but Luka blocks me. He presses forward, and when I turn, he's so very close that I have to

crane my head upward to look at him, my back nearly against the wall.

It makes my pulse race, but not with fear.

Luka reaches out, brushing strands of hair away from my face gently. "Why do you always run?"

he asks in a deep, low voice that sends that heat flushing through me, filling my veins and crawling up

my neck, until my body feels like it's on fire for what should be no reason at all.

I open my mouth, but no words come. I can't think; he's too close. His almost-naked body is

nearly touching mine, the heat and earthy scent of him filling my senses, and I feel almost dizzy.

I can't think of what to say, and I don't want to end up telling him my entire messed-up life story.

He doesn't want to hear about my past as a foster kid, being passed from house to house, hands to

hands, some kinder and others crueler, but none of them really wanting me. Never having a place to

settle, never having anyone to trust.

He doesn't know how that feels. He has a home, a village, a father who is a legend in their tribe.

A *family*. He couldn't possibly understand, and more than anything else, I don't want his pity.

"We should go back to bed," I whisper, the words choked as they slip out, and I feel as if my body

is nothing but a pulse, the space between us way too small.

Luka breathes in deeply, those amber-green eyes swirling in the darkness as they catch mine, but

he nods.

We both go back to the bed, and this time, it's him who puts more distance between us, moving to

the very edge.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep again.

9

Luka

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake slowly. Almost instinctively, I roll over as if seeking the heat of the other

person in bed with me, and jerk fully awake when I realize that Naomi isn't there.

A sharp panic fills me, remembering last night.

*She's run again, and this time she made it.*

Fear fills me at the thought of her out in the wilds alone, or worse still, caught by the Peskiit, who

would then know I lied about her being my mate.

I push myself out of bed faster than I should, ignoring the pain, ready to go after her. But just as

I'm reaching for my daggers, I hear the rustling sound of the hide being pushed back, Naomi's familiar scent filling the hut.

A sigh of relief leaves me as I turn to see her standing there, a plate of fresh food held awkwardly in her hands.

"A warrior named Vordu gave me breakfast," she says, eyeing me as she walks toward the bed.

"You shouldn't be up."

Seeing her calms me a little, realizing that she didn't run. Still, I don't like that I didn't wake up

when she got out of bed, as I did last night. It speaks volumes about my physical state, how exhausted

and pained I am, still recovering from my injuries. It makes me feel useless to protect her. I *can't*

protect her if I'm not by her side—and protecting her is my only goal at this present moment, my only

mission.

"Thank you," I say stiffly as she sets the plate on the furs between us. "But next time wait for me

to wake. I'll get the food for us." I can hear the worry creeping into my tone, and I can tell she does

too, from the way she glances at me. But she doesn't say anything.

"How are you feeling?" Naomi asks finally, after we eat in silence for a little while.

I shrug. "Better than before the healer, much the same as after. I need to bathe and clean my

wound," I add. "And I'm sure you'd like to wash too."

Naomi nods, flushing a little. "I feel pretty grimy after the run through the woods and then the walk

here," she admits. "Is there somewhere we can bathe?"

"I'll find out." I set the plate aside, and begin to unwind my bandage.

“Let me.” Naomi is on her feet in an instant, circling around the bed to come stand beside me.

“The healer gave me instructions. You shouldn’t move too much.”

The sensation of her touching me, checking the wound for bleeding and rebandaging it, is more

pleasant than it should be. I find myself wanting to sit still, enjoying the brush of her delicate fingers

against my skin, and I remind myself that we’re only pretending to be mates. Naomi has made it clear

that she wants nothing to do with me—and for my part, I’m merely doing my duty as a warrior of the

Bekaru tribe.

But for some reason, when she secures my bandages and steps away, the lack of her touch feels

like a loss.

“Come,” I tell her stiffly, standing more quickly than I should and stifling a grunt of pain. “We’ll

find a place to bathe.”

There are eyes everywhere on us as we leave the hut and venture out into the village. I’m aware

of how many of the Peskiit are watching, and I put my arm around Naomi, pulling her close on my

uninjured side. I feel her stiffen under my embrace, and I look down at her quickly.

“Remember we are mates,” I tell her in a low, gruff tone, and her cheeks pinken. She leans closer

to me, relaxing under the pressure of my arm, and I feel my body instantly react.

Last night, it was difficult to remember that we’re only pretending.

The way she ended up pinned to the wall, so close to me, roused some primal instinct that I’d

never felt before. I had a sharp, visceral vision of what it would have been like to close her in with

the strength of my body, lifting her and tearing away her fragile clothing so that I could impale her on

the aching, pierced length of my cock.

A woman's body filled with mine, for the first time.

The thought came so swiftly it nearly took my breath away, and it took everything in me not to

touch her. Only her voice, telling me that we should return to bed, broke the spell of need that I felt

had been cast over me.

Now, with the warmth of her body curved against mine as we walk, my cock stiffens again. She's

so small, so delicate, and that only inflames that strange feral instinct more—a feeling of needing to

protect and ravish her all at once.

*You're losing your mind from illness*, I tell myself as we walk, nearing a rocky outcropping

surrounding a pool with a fresh, bubbling spring. *She wouldn't welcome your touch, and you'd be a*

*fool to think so. She's made her opinion of Xaathians clear. All of them.*

"I'll undo the bandages," Naomi says as we stand at the edge of the pool, startling me. "Like I said—"

"I shouldn't move too much." I echo her words from earlier, glancing down at her, and she shoots

me a look of irritation, but there's nothing really behind it. It seems more reflexive than anything else,

and I step down into the shallow water as Naomi undoes the bandages, standing in front of me with

the water up to the edge of her leather skirt. She doesn't move to disrobe and so neither do I, although

I'd like nothing better than to stand naked in the fresh spring.

"We need to clean it first," Naomi says, cupping water in her hands and splashing it over my

wound before using a piece of cloth the healer left her with to clean away the dried blood and

leftover healing gel that clings to the edges. They're not entirely sealed yet, but the gel has begun to

do its work, and the wound already looks markedly better.

Her fingers trail down my side, to the edge of my hip, and my cock stiffens beneath my loincloth.

The wound curves nearly down to my groin, where the horn of the *lathil* nearly punctured me deeply,

and the grazing of Naomi's fingers so close to my aching shaft makes me suck in a hissing breath.

"Did I hurt you?" She looks up at me, pausing, and the lingering of her fingers only makes me

harden more.

"No," I grit out. "It's just—sensitive."

The way her cheeks turn pink as she begins to apply the healing gel over my clean skin tells me

that she's aware of my reaction. She seems as determined to ignore it as I am though, the set of her

jaw tightening as she brusquely applies the gel, making sure to coat every inch of the wound.

By the time she's finished, I can feel my loincloth starting to shift from the force of my erection. I

grit my teeth, willing it to subside as Naomi begins to wind the bandages around me. "The wound is

healing well," I manage, looking straight ahead. "I should be able to begin my work for the Peskiit

sooner than I hoped."

"That's good," Naomi murmurs, tightening the bandage. "I don't want to be here any longer than

we have to."

Something about that stings, but it's on the tip of my tongue to agree with her—until I look up, and

see one of the Peskiit tribesmen standing several yards away. It's not entirely apparent if he's

watching us, but I wouldn't be surprised if he were. In fact, from the way he's standing, I'm almost

certain that he is—and just as certain that the Peskiit watching us is Vordu, one of the warriors who

appeared to be close with Troyvl, and the one who gave Naomi food this morning.

A strange possessiveness fills me all over again, much like last night. But this time, instead of

being laced with desire, it's an angry feeling. I want to stride over to him, to grab him and tell him to

keep his eyes off my mate, but instead I turn to Naomi, keeping my voice low.

“Someone is watching us. We need to be convincing.” I touch her hand, and she looks up at me

sharply, her dark eyes meeting mine.

She glances over in Vordu's direction, then back at me, sucking in a nervous breath.

“What do we do?” she whispers. “What would mates do?”

The trembling in her voice tells me just how off-balance she is here, and I have a sudden wave of

sympathy for her. She's a stranger here, on a strange planet, being expected to behave according to

customs she clearly doesn't understand. I reach out, that protective urge sweeping over me again as I

cup her cheek in my broad palm.

I feel her stiffen, hear her indrawn breath, but this time I think it's for a different reason. I feel the

way she leans into my touch, ever so slightly, and it makes me think that Naomi likes the feeling of my

hand on her too, despite herself.

“They do this,” I say simply, drawing her toward me—and then as my other hand rests on her

waist, I bend my head to kiss her.

Her lips are taut at first, hard and unyielding, her body stiff against me. We're barely touching, a

breath of space still between us, my hands on her face and waist our only contact. Her hands are



hanging at her sides, and all I can think about is how long we need to do this for Vordu to believe us, rather than going back into the village to spread rumors.

I can feel her pulling away, resisting the touch of my mouth. For a moment, I think all is lost—and then Naomi's hands come up suddenly, brushing against my chest on the other side of my bandages where my flesh is unhurt, bracing herself there as her mouth softens under mine.

I can feel myself reacting instantly, softening too. Her lips yield to my kiss, parting, warmer and softer than before, and a surge of desire passes through me. My cock had started to go limp, but now it stiffens with a rush of blood that makes me dizzy, my loincloth quickly losing the battle. I pull her toward me, my cock slapping against my abs as it presses between us, but she hardly seems to notice.

And then, just as I think to let her go and fix myself, her tongue slides into my mouth as she deepens the kiss.

10

Naomi

I CAN FEEL myself getting lost in the kiss.

His mouth feels good—firm and hungry, encouraging me to respond but not forcing me. His hand is strong on my waist, pulling me into him, and this time when I feel the hot, aroused press of his cock between us, I don't feel panic.

All I feel is... desire. And a little bit of pride too, that I seem to turn him on so fiercely despite himself. Most men wouldn't be able to get so hard after such a terrible injury, but Luka is more aroused than any man I've ever been with—and huge.

*Not that it matters*, I remind myself.

I'm not going to let it get that far. I'm not going to touch him intimately, or let him touch me that way, let alone fuck him. But I could enjoy the kiss, just a little. It's been a long time since I dated back on Earth. I've had strings of meaningless hookups, short-lived relationships that were usually more pleasurable for the guys than for me, but I never let them become more. I cut them loose way before that. And even before my abduction, I'd stopped letting anyone get even that close for a while.

This is just a ruse. It means nothing, and so I don't need to hold myself back. There's no danger of Luka thinking he might get more out of me. We need to sell this, because Vordu is watching, and I use that excuse to let myself kiss him the way I wanted to from the moment his lips touched mine. To take that pleasure, that feeling of connection, of much-needed touch, for just a moment.

I kiss him like he's my whole fucking world. I press my hands against his chest, the part of it that wasn't hurt and lean into the warmth of him. Cold water splashes at my thighs, soaking the hem of my skirt, but I couldn't care less. Luka is holding me almost tenderly, his hand at my waist steadying me and his other cupping my cheek, and when I slide my tongue into his mouth, his groan of pleasure almost makes me forget that this can't go on forever—and definitely can't go any farther.

The weight of his erection against my belly startles me. He's incredibly hard, so big that I'm not sure I could fit him inside me, and I'm pretty sure I feel the smooth, cool brush of a piercing against my bare midriff. That's intriguing, but I don't let myself dwell on it. I focus on just kissing him, twining my tongue with his, enjoying the earthy taste of him, almost like a dry wine.

His hand tightens on my waist, pulling me closer, and my breath catches in my throat. My hand flexes against his chest, almost wanting to reach down and caress the hard length pressed against me...

But then Luka pulls back, breaking the kiss as he glances to one side. Then he looks down at me.

“He’s moved on,” he says gruffly, and it almost startles me. I got so lost in the kiss that I nearly forgot why we were kissing in the first place, so into it that I lost track of what we were doing.

I can feel myself flushing with embarrassment, and I clear my throat, stepping back as Luka turns to adjust himself.

We linger at the pool just long enough for me to finish securing Luka’s bandages and splashing some water over myself, enough to refresh me, before heading back. We walk at a companionable pace, Luka not touching me, and I realize that I miss the solid, safe pressure of his arm against me.

*Don’t be stupid. It’s just a show.*

“I’m impressed by how well what the healer gave you works,” I tell him as we walk, feeling

almost desperate to break the uncomfortable silence. “Nothing we have on Earth would work that

quickly. You’re recovering really well, considering how badly you were wounded.”

Luka nods. “Soon I will be able to begin repaying my debt. I’ll do it as quickly as I can,” he adds.

“I don’t wish to stay here any more than you do. The sooner we can leave, the better.”

We go straight back to our hut, Luka clearly as unwilling to hang around the Peskiit as I am, and

after our encounter at the pool it feels even smaller. Now that I know what Luka’s lips feel like on

mine, how well he kisses, I'm even more aware of his presence. It makes being alone with him feel

more awkward than ever, as if I'm waiting to see if he'll make another move, even though I have no idea how I'd respond if he did.

There's no reason for us to touch in private. But I can't deny that I feel a small flutter of

anticipation at the idea of him touching me again, kissing me.

"What will we do when we leave here?" I ask, toying with the edge of the fur on the bed. I don't

really feel as if I can look at him, and I wonder if he knows that.

"I'll take you back to my village, as I planned," Luka says simply.

"From there, you can decide

what you wish to do, but you will be safe. If you wish to leave Xaath and return to Terra, our leader

has vowed to do all he can to make that possible. You may not wish to go to our village, but from

there you can make those plans in a place of safety."

His tone is flat, as if he doesn't care either way. It shouldn't bother me, and I can't explain why it

does, just a little.

"What about the other women?" I ask, ignoring the feeling. "What's the plan for them?"

Luka shrugs. "I don't know. The same, I expect. If they wish to leave, Harax will try to help them.

But I doubt that either the yellow-haired one who has mated with Harax or the one with the hair like

blood will leave. Their mates are here. They would not wish to go."

I blink at him. "Are you talking about Nicole and Abigail?"

He pauses. "Yes. Harax's mate, and Zaid's."

I can't hide my surprise. Nicole, I knew about. Or at least, I realized that there was some kind of

connection between her and the warrior who had stolen her away.

But I didn't know Abigail was

even still alive, or that she was mated too.

“What happened?” I ask him curiously. “How did Abigail end up with a mate?”

“One of the Uleki warriors who was tasked with delivering her to the Jakk defected,” Luka says, glancing at me.

*Right.* I remember overhearing that one of the warriors tried to rescue her instead of bringing her to the Jakk tribe. I thought he failed though.

“They never returned to the Uleki tribe,” I say. “We thought they were being held captive by the Jakk.”

“The two of them worked together to escape,” Luka tells me. “And when they got free, he took her to the Bekaru tribe lands instead of returning to the Uleki. A warrior would do anything for his mate.”

*A warrior would do anything for his mate.*

The words reverberate in my head, and my stomach flutters despite myself. Back on Earth, that kind of devotion is next to impossible to find. It’s something completely unfamiliar to me, something I’ve never had. I didn’t even have *family* that would do anything for me, let alone a partner. And I had no idea that *two* of the women I was once held captive with have found it.

When Luka first talked about the concept of fated mates, I barely believed him. It sounded too fantastical to be true, something out of a strange fairy tale. Definitely not something to be found on a barbaric planet in the middle of nowhere, with aliens who seem light years behind even humans.

But now? It’s harder to deny that it’s a real thing. Luka could have made it up, I suppose, to try to convince me to go back with him, but I don’t think that’s the case. It feels like he’s being genuine, like

he's really explaining what he's seen. The way he said it was so matter of fact, not as if he was trying to convince me of something, but like he was explaining something he thought I should already understand.

Fated mates could be real.

And I'm in the position of pretending that the gorgeous, powerful warrior in front of me is mine.

11

Luka

I WATCH as Naomi gazes up at me, emotions I can't read in her eyes. She looks as if she's thinking

hard about something, trying to parse out my words, as if the concept is so foreign to her that she

doesn't know how to feel about it.

And then she clears her throat, backing away from me. The moment between us, where her eyes

locked with mine and I saw something in her face almost like longing, is broken.

"I'll help pay off the debt you incurred by having the Peskiit tribe help you," she says quickly. "I

can be useful."

I'm shaking my head before the words are even fully out of her mouth. "Absolutely not," I tell her

firmly. "The debt is mine. No warrior of honor would allow another to do such a thing. And I don't

want you out in the village without me. The Peskiit are curious about you. It's not safe."

"You wouldn't have been injured if you weren't protecting me," Naomi insists, her jaw tensing

stubbornly as she crosses her arms over her chest. "The debt is mine too. Besides," she adds, clearly

trying to soften her voice to sound more reasonable. "You agreed with me that we want to leave as

quickly as possible. Both of us working will speed up that timeline.  
We can be out of here before you  
know it.”

Some of her phrasing sounds odd to me, but I push my curiosity  
aside in favor of the bigger  
argument. “We won’t be leaving if the Peskiit steal you away from  
me and try to trade you. Then we  
will have more problems.”

“You said as long as they think I’m your mate, we won’t have issues.  
Isn’t that right?” Naomi

challenges, looking annoyed. “What are we doing this for then?  
Were we not convincing enough back  
there at the lake?”

My blood heats at the thought of just how convincing we *were*.

Just the press of her lips on mine was enough to make me stop  
thinking about how this ruse of ours

is a means to an end—and that the end isn’t meant to take place in  
my bed. I’ve never been so

powerfully, almost painfully, aroused as I was just from the touch of  
her lips and the hot slide of her

tongue. My shaft throbs against her belly with the need to be inside  
her.

I’ve never thought of claiming a woman for my first time in the  
muck of a lakeshore, but I nearly

ended up there anyway, wanting Naomi on her back beneath me,  
small and whimpering, as I slid my

pierced length inside her.

It took everything in me to return to the present and see that Vordu  
was gone, and there was no

need to continue what we were doing. It took everything in me to  
stop.

“We were convincing,” I say hoarsely. “But I don’t wish to tempt  
fate.”

*Fate*. What if fate brought this woman to me? What if it led me to  
make the decision to chase her

into the woods, and brought us here, in such close proximity to one another that we can't seem to stop

being pushed closer and closer despite our obvious differences? It's an intriguing idea, but one that I

push hastily away.

Naomi and I aren't well-suited to one another. We're too much alike in many ways: stubborn,

eager to prove ourselves, unwilling to allow another to take control, bad at taking orders. I'm aware

of my flaws, and I wonder if she's as aware of hers. She's like me in other ways too. Brave, fearless,

determined. All the best qualities of a warrior and some of the worst. But I won't allow her to

endanger herself for me.

"Now you don't want to involve fate." Naomi throws her hands up in the air. "The Peskiit won't

hurt me, Luka. They think I'm your mate, and that would bring the wrath of your tribe down on them.

You said as long as we abide by their rules, we're safe. So do their rules allow a mate to help work

off a partner's debt?"

Something in me flares, hot and possessive, hearing her call herself my mate. "I know little of

their ways," I grit out from between my teeth. "But as far as I'm aware, yes."

"Then let me *help*," Naomi says plaintively. "They might even be impressed at my devotion to

you, volunteering to do so instead of staying in this hut while you do all the work. Who knows, it

might even sell our story more."

I frown. Try as I might, I'm finding it hard to argue with her logic, and I'm both impressed and

infuriated by her stubbornness. She's difficult to live with, that's for certain, but there's a strength of



spirit to her too that makes me want to give in. I want to know what has made her this way, so fearless

in such a strange place, so willing to push herself.

“Fine,” I tell her flatly, trying not to be pleased at the way her face lights up at that. “We’ll speak

with Troyvl.”

We head out of the hut, Naomi kept close by my side as I go in search of the Peskiit leader. We

find him in the gathering hut, and he looks mildly suspicious when he catches sight of us.

“Bekaru, I see you’re healing nicely. And you’ve brought your mate. I hope you don’t intend to try

to leave before your debt is paid.”

His eyes flick to Naomi as he says it, as if he’s considering her as payment for the debt, and that

hot, possessive feeling flares within me again. I feel myself stiffen next to her, glaring at the Peskiit

leader as I do. “We have no intentions of leaving before my debt is paid,” I tell him tersely. “I am a

warrior of honor. But my mate has expressed a wish to help work off my debt as well, in conjunction

with me.”

Troyvl’s eyebrows raise, as if in surprise. “That is—unusual, but not against our rules.” He

considers, looking at us both, but his attention shifts quickly to Naomi. “I can have you help with tasks

around the village that we’re in need of extra hands for,” he tells her.

“Your mate will help with tasks

requiring more strength.”

His attention turns back to me, his eyes narrowed in consideration.

“We have a sort of mining

camp, near the outskirts of the village. You will help the tribesmen in breaking and carrying rocks.”

*Meaning I’ll be away from Naomi, all day. While she mingles with the tribe. I chafe instantly at*

that, sensing that something is wrong. That they have a reason for separating us.

“That’s fine,” Naomi says, before I can protest. “I’m happy to help around the village if it will help pay Luka’s debt.”

*This is a bad idea.* But it’s too late now. It would be worse to undermine my mate, to tell Troyvl

she misspoke. It would hint at division between us. So instead I nod in agreement, unable to force

polite words from between my teeth.

As we leave, I pull her to one side of the hut, turning to her with a fiercely serious expression on

my face. “I need you to listen, Naomi,” I tell her urgently, keeping my voice low. “You don’t have to

do this. I’ll go in and tell Troyvl that I changed my mind, that I can pay my own debt. We can pretend

that you’re sick in the morning, and I will agree to work it off myself. We can—”

“I want to,” Naomi insists, shaking her head. “It’s my fault we’re here too. I want to help.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “We’ll be separated all day. You must be careful, here on your own.

They are not to be trusted.”

Naomi blinks up at me, almost as if in surprise, her expression softening just a little. “I will be,”

she tells me firmly. “Everyone thinks you’re my mate. That will protect me. And besides, I can hold

my own just fine.”

I think back to the forest, how she wriggled out of my grasp, how she flung rocks at me, how she

nearly kicked me in the balls in an effort to run again after I tracked her down. She’s fierce and strong,

and she’s right. She is capable. That doesn’t make me resist leaving her any less.

“I have no doubt of that,” I tell her, chuckling as I look down into her dark eyes. Without thinking

about it, I reach up, gently pushing a loose strand of black hair behind her ear. “It doesn’t mean that I

won’t worry while I’m gone.”

I feel her quick intake of breath as I push her hair back, my fingers grazing the pinkening shell of

her ear, feel the twitch of her body even though we’re barely touching. There’s no one here to see us,

no reason for me to touch her other than the fact that I simply wanted to, that I felt the urge to comfort

her, and she knows that as well as I do.

But she says nothing, and so I ignore it too. If neither of us acknowledge it, we can pretend that it

didn’t happen. That we’re only pretending to feel things for one another.

Naomi steps back, putting distance between us as we start to head back to our hut. I can feel her

making an effort not to be too close to me, and I know we should be putting on more of a show for the

village, but I let her be. She deserves her space, now and again.

Still, that moment sticks in my mind, just as the softness of her beautiful black hair lingers on my

fingers.

I want to feel it again.

I want to feel *more*.

12

Naomi

WE SPEND the rest of the day in our hut, lying low and trying to avoid the other villagers for the most

part, as well as resting. Luka will need all the rest he can get if he’s going to be doing such hard labor

soon, and I’m exhausted too. The last weeks have taken a toll on me, mentally as well as physically.

I'm truly amazed by how well Luka is healing, and every time I check his wounds, I feel a sense of relief at the work the healer's herbs are doing. I try not to admit it to myself, but being here with the Peskiit has made me think of Luka and myself as a team instead of adversaries. He's the only person here I can really trust, and even though I know it doesn't make sense that I trust him so much already, I try not to think too deeply about it.

Just a few days ago, Luka was chasing me through the woods and *I* was the one attacking *him* to get away, but that doesn't seem to matter as much anymore. I feel confident he won't hurt me, and I can't say the same about the Peskiit.

So we're allies.

Allies, but not friends, not yet, and definitely not anything more. Or at least, that's what I tell myself. I lost myself too easily to that fake kiss in the lake, and so while we let the hours pass in our hut, I try to find ways to occupy myself that keeps some physical distance between us. The way he made me feel when his hand touched my hair earlier, the way it's hard not to look at him and feel my breath catch in my throat—I need to put a stop to that. I need some space.

Of course, when it comes time to sleep, all of that is for nothing. There's only the one bed, and I'm not going to go back on having convinced Luka to sleep in it with me, especially not when he's about to be hauling rocks all day. As we slip under the furs though, I can't help but be hyper-aware of him. He keeps his loincloth on, as if in concession to my modesty, but it's not as if that scrap of leather makes that much of a difference. He's still seven feet or more of smooth, broad, hot alien

muscle, and it's hard not to pay attention to that.

I close my eyes in the darkness, trying to ignore it anyway, but desire burns low in my belly. I can

smell his earthy, grassy scent, like lying in a hay field in summer, and it only makes things worse.

The bed is just big enough for two people, and we can't help touching in places—the graze of our

shoulders against one another, hips brushing. I feel like sparks are flying off me in every spot that we

touch, my belly tightening with need, and I squeeze my thighs together in an effort to get some relief. I

can feel myself aching there, throbbing just a little, wanting to be touched.

“Are you all right? Is the bed uncomfortable?” Luka's deep voice drifts through the darkness, and

I flush hotly, realizing he picked up on my movements.

“No, I'm fine,” I whisper hurriedly, not wanting him to realize that I'm squirming with arousal,

not discomfort. That's the *last* thing he needs to know. “I'm just anxious for tomorrow to get here, for

us to start working off the debt so we can leave.”

“Me too,” Luka agrees, but the quiet hum of his voice, the way he says it, makes me wonder if he

knows I'm lying. I clench my right hand, the side he's not touching, in an effort to stave off the desire

to reach between my thighs and rub myself. I know what I'd find if I slipped my hand between my

legs: wet heat and a slick, pulsing clit aching to be touched. And I know how good that release would

feel after weeks without it. I haven't had that kind of privacy in such a long time, and my body aches

with deprivation.

It would feel even better if Luka were to do it instead, with a broad finger or his soft wet tongue,

or even his—

*Dear god, get a grip, Naomi!* I shout at myself in my head, gritting my teeth as I try to focus on a different subject, anything.

“Troyvl said he was going to have you help with mining efforts. What do you think he’ll have me doing?”

Luka makes a *hm* noise deep in his throat, as if considering.

“Probably some simple village tasks, to be honest,” he says with a low chuckle. “Helping with

washing maybe, tanning hides, gathering crops. Something along those lines.” He pauses, and I can

feel him turning to look at me. “What sort of work did you do back on Terra? Is it anything like that?”

His curiosity startles me, as always. It shouldn’t. I’m curious enough about how they do things

here, and I and my home planet are just as alien to him as he and his are to me. Maybe it’s a lifetime

of having men not really listen when I spoke, preferring the sound of their own voices, but it still

surprises me every time Luka asks me questions about myself.

“I was a server,” I tell him, glad for the distraction from my pesky desire. Thinking about my days

as a waitress in chain restaurants is enough to kill the strongest of arousal. “We have places called

restaurants, where people come and pay to eat, while someone else makes their food. There are all

kinds of different ones, different types of food from different cultures. Some of them are more

authentic than others. There are fast food places, where you can take it and go, and it’s not that great,

but it’s cheap. Or there are places like where I used to work, where the food is pretty mediocre, but

people come anyway just to get out of cooking it themselves.”

Luka makes a noise in his throat. “Terrans do not like to cook?”

I laugh softly. “Some of us do. Some of us are terrible at it. I certainly was. But the thing is, everyone has to work long hours just to afford to live, at jobs that keep them away from their homes. They don’t see their family or friends for eight, ten, even twelve hours a day. So restaurants are a place to rest so you don’t have to do the task of cooking, or even a way to socialize with family instead of spending that time cooking. If you have a big house, of course, you could socialize and cook, but most people have tiny kitchens in small apartments.”

Luka’s frown is almost palpable. “There are different sizes of houses for different Terrans?”

This time, my laugh is more of a snort. “Oh god, yes. But that’s a whole other story. Anyway, there are also super high end, fancy, delicacy restaurants, way too expensive for me to ever get to eat at and not the sort of place that hires someone like me. So I worked at one of the mid-range ones. I moved around a lot, and those places are everywhere. I could transfer or get a new job pretty easily.”

“Why were you not the sort those other places would hire? What does that mean?” Luka sounds almost offended on my behalf, and I feel myself soften, almost feeling badly for trying to keep my distance earlier. It really does seem, a lot of the time, like he’s trying to make this easier for me. Like he wants me to be okay, regardless of what’s happening.

“I—” I have the sudden urge to tell him more about myself, an urge so strange that it brings me up short. I never want to share with anyone. I’ve kept my life, my trauma, my past, so close to my chest for so long that I was sure I could never talk about it. The men I dated didn’t care enough to know, and I didn’t keep friends for long, not with moving around so much.

The urge is there, but I push it back, like I'm used to doing. *He doesn't want to hear all of that, I tell myself. He doesn't want to hear about the foster families, the mistreatment, the way no one really cared. How I learned to just depend on myself. And if you tell him about being a runaway, it'll just cement how he sees you now. As someone who always runs away.*

"I just moved around a lot," I say lamely. "Those places are super picky about who they hire. And I just didn't fit the look. It was fine. I didn't want to work there anyway. I made enough to get by at my jobs."

"Things are different here," Luka says quietly. "Everyone lives in the same sort of huts. Their work is not for currency, but to help the village. There is always enough to eat, furs to keep you warm, family and friends close by." He pauses, as if thinking. "I wondered sometimes, about what other places must be like. But this Terra does not sound as if it is better."

He falls quiet, his breathing even, but I lie awake for a little while longer, thinking about what he said. I was so sure I wanted to get off this planet and back to Earth, but I feel a little shaken now.

*What if he's right?*

What if Nicole and Abigail were happy to have mates here—to stay—because as backward as this place seems, it *is* better in many ways? I imagine a life in which I didn't have to keep moving, in which I had a support system, in which I never had to think about which utility bills to pay first while hoping others didn't get shut off, or stare longingly at the steak behind the butcher counter and then go



off to buy more packets of ramen. A place where everyone has enough, even if it's simple.

It sounds like a fairy tale, too good to be true. But as I fall asleep, my dreams are more peaceful than usual.

THE NEXT MORNING THOUGH, those peaceful feelings are gone. As we make our way through the village,

I feel more determined than ever to work off the debt as quickly as possible so that we can get out of

here soon. I feel like the lines between Luka and me are getting far too blurred.

When I woke up next to him this morning, we ended up spooning again throughout the course of

the night, and the weight of his arm over my waist and his warm breath on the back of my neck felt

way too comfortable. Even the hard press of his cock against me in his sleep had felt natural instead

of terrifying, and it made that warm desire spread through me again, making me ache for him instead

of wanting to squirm away.

That, as far as I'm concerned, is a problem.

And there's one definite way to remedy it. Once we're out of here, we can go back to Luka's

village, where he'll have his own hut and I'll have space to decide how I really feel about all of this.

Clearly, having him so close by all the time is muddling my head.

Before he heads out, Luka leaves me with one of the Peskiit women, an elder I think, from the

respectful way the others seem to behave around her and her clearly advanced age. She's tall, with

bronzed skin wrinkled at her eyes and around her mouth, and long dark brown hair woven into dozens

of plaits and bound back with a leather cord. She's dressed simply, in loose woven trousers and a

woven knit top similar to mine, and she seems friendly enough as  
Luka leaves to join the Peskiit men  
heading out of the village. She looks at me keenly with dark eyes,  
and I meet her gaze right back, not  
wanting to seem frightened or offput by any of this.  
“It’s clear you and your Bekaru mate are a good match,” the woman  
says thoughtfully, glancing at  
him as he leaves and then back at me. “The way he looks at you  
proves it.”  
My stomach flips, and I try not to look as startled as I feel. *How does  
he look at me?* I think to  
myself as I follow the woman, trying to stifle the emotion that rouses  
in me. *It’s the act that she’s  
talking about, right? Luka’s just very good at putting on an act.*  
Even as I think that though, I can’t help remembering the way he  
touched my face yesterday,  
pushing my hair back where no one could see. There was no reason  
for that, no reason at all—other  
than him simply wanting to.  
I try to push it out of my mind as I join the elder and the other  
villagers in their work. It’s all  
mundane daily tasks, as Luka had suggested—carrying baskets of  
clothing down to the river to wash,  
picking berries and crops, hanging those same clothes up to dry on  
long lines beneath the warm sun.  
It’s nothing like the work I’m used to back on Earth, and I spend  
more time outside in the course of  
one day than I probably would have in a week back home, but it  
feels oddly good. There’s a rhythm  
and a sense of accomplishment that comes with it, like I’m really  
contributing to something that  
matters. Every berry I pick and piece of clothing that I hang up is a  
little bit more knocked off Luka’s  
debt, but it’s not just that. I feel alive in a way, and waiting tables  
back home definitely never made

me feel like that. If anything, I felt like a little more of my soul was being sucked out with every shift.

As we finish picking the last of the berries, sorting them into baskets for storage and for the

evening meal, several of the other villagers drift away. It's clear we're all done for the day, just as the

sun is beginning to make its way into sunset, and there's a nice rhythm to that too. Back home, it felt

like there was always something more to do, another chore to complete, another errand to run, another

shift to pick up for some extra cash. It's true that there's not much to *do* with my time—no books, or tv

shows to catch up on, or video games to play, but it's not like I had much time to do that back then

anyway. And at least here, my time is my own now, until tomorrow. There's nothing else I need to do.

I'm so busy sorting the last of my berries that I don't realize I'm entirely alone now. I look up to

see a Peskiit man standing at the end of the row of bushes I was harvesting, and he approaches me as I

catch his eye, smiling in an affable way.

"I don't know if you remember me," he says as he draws close. "We have met once. I am called

Vordu."

*Vordu*. I do remember him. I recognize him from the riverbank, when he was watching us and

caused the kiss between Luka and me, to sell our "mate bond." I'm instantly on edge, alert, even

though he seems friendly enough. I can't *not* think there's a reason he keeps popping up, and I have a

feeling that it's anything but good.

"You are from Terra, aren't you?" he asks, picking up one of my baskets to carry even though I

didn't ask him to. "How did you happen to arrive on Xaath?"

“Not by choice,” I tell him curtly. “But I found Luka, so I suppose things happened the way they were meant to. Fate, I think he called it.” I say it as confidently as possible, but a small shiver runs through me at the words. I have an odd longing in my chest, as if I wish those words were true, which makes no sense. The whole point of working off this debt faster is to get out of here, so we can drop the act.

“Hm.” Vordu looks at me curiously as I take my other basket, walking with me as we head back to the huts. “I’ve never heard of a mate bond between a Xaathian and a Terran. It seems very strange to me.”

“Well, Luka tells me Xaathians don’t get out much,” I retort, glancing sideways at him. “So not really a surprise, right?”

“What isn’t a surprise to me is that it’s possible,” he says smoothly, smiling at me as we arrive at the cooking hut, where the other berries have been left. “You’re so very beautiful. No Xaathian could wish for anything more than for you to be his mate. Luka is a lucky male indeed, to have you in his furs every night.”

The way he says it, almost silkily, sets every nerve I have on edge. Like every woman, I have a lifetime’s worth of experience in watching out for creepy men, and Vordu is raising every alarm. I back away, feeling the cold pit of anxiety like a rock in my gut, warning me to put some space between us.

But Vordu moves closer, closing the space between us. I see a hunger in his eyes as his gaze sweeps down me, and I know exactly what he’s been doing—trying to catch me slipping up in my

story about the mate bond. Trying to find out if he has a shot.

The alarm bells ringing in my head tell me that he might not wait to see if his suspicions are true.

Just as I'm about to turn tail and flee though, back to the hopeful safety of my and Luka's hut, I feel

a strong arm go around me from behind. My nose fills with a sweet, grassy scent as I turn toward my

rescuer, already knowing who it's going to be.

Luka is standing there behind me, his shoulders squared—and the look on his face as he glares

down Vordu tells me he's not happy.

13

Luka

A PROTECTIVENESS, a *possessiveness* like I've never felt before fills me. It's more intense than

previous moments where I've felt this way about Naomi. It feels like it seeps through my very veins

as I see Vordu moving toward her, a clear hunger in his eyes, mingled with suspicion.

I should be worried that he's on to us. I should be worried about being caught in our deception,

but all I feel is a thick, building rage, flooding me with heat as I stalk toward him and Naomi.

I can tell from the tension in her shoulders that she's upset too.

Smoothly I reach out, pulling her to

me and tucking her neatly under my arm, up against my side. She leans into me, and the press of her

smaller body against mine feels distinctly satisfying.

*Mine.*

The word rips through my mind, startling me with the force of it.

She's not, of course—this is all a

pretense—but my body and instinct reacts to her and to the situation as if she truly is my mate. I can

feel my gaze harden as I stare Vordu down, flinty with rage. “What are you doing with my mate?” I

grind out between gritted teeth, holding myself back with the greatest of effort. I need to give him a

chance to back down, to accept that Naomi is mine, rather than starting a fight in the middle of the

village. But everything inside me screams for violence.

Vordu smiles thinly. “Nothing, Bekaru,” he says, his voice silky. “Just saying hello. I did not mean

anything by it, other than politeness. We want to make you feel welcome, of course.”

I don’t believe him. I could see the way he was leaning toward her, testing the waters to see if

she’d admit to our ruse and go with him, or if he could intimidate her into doing so. I know *exactly*

what was happening, but I know better than to call him out on it.

“Next time, put some distance between the two of you when you greet her,” I bite out curtly,

pulling Naomi away.

It’s all I can manage without cursing at him, or calling him out, and I know I need to get away. I

want to fight him, to see him bleed for daring to approach my mate like that, even if she’s not truly

mine. But I know I can’t risk upsetting the other villagers. I still have a debt to pay so that I can get

Naomi out of here, and her safety to consider.

But the way he was flirting with her made me furious—more than it should have.

*I thought of her as my mate. I reacted to it as if she were my mate.*

*It’s only a matter of principle,* I tell myself as I escort Naomi hurriedly back to our hut. As far as

Vordu knows, Naomi is spoken for, so he had no right to approach her like that. It was disrespectful

and out of line, and I tell myself that’s why I’m angry—that he dared to treat me, a Bekaru warrior,

with so little respect.

But I know, deep down, that it's more than that.

It wasn't because Vordu was behaving dishonorably. It wasn't because of the clear offense.

It was because I couldn't stand to see another man touching Naomi.

For days I've felt what's been building between us. I've laid in bed with her at night, scenting her

arousal. I felt the way she kissed me back in the lake, the way she lost herself in it as easily as I did.

I've felt my desire for her build along with it, the longing not only to finally claim a woman, but to

claim *Naomi*. To have her be the first one I sink into, the first body I feel wrapped around mine. I've

wanted the small, defiant Terran in a way that defies explanation, and today only solidified what I've

been trying to ignore and explain away.

What I feel for Naomi is more than duty—and our ruse has become much more than that.

I pull her inside the hut, my heart thundering wildly in my chest as I look down at her. She hasn't

resisted me since we left Vordu, seemingly in a stunned sort of daze, but the moment we're inside

with the hide covering the entrance she pulls free of my grasp. She turns toward me, her brow

furrowed and eyes full of confusion.

“What was that all about?” she demands, throwing her hands up.

“Are you trying to piss off the

Peskiit before we can get out of here?”

“No, I—” I can't finish the sentence. I don't know what to say—how to articulate what I'm

feeling, the strength of my desire. This is all a game, an act for the benefit of our reluctant hosts in

order to keep Naomi safe—to keep them from demanding *her* as payment—and yet I seem to have

fallen prey to my own ruse.

At least, my body has. I can't deny how much I want her, with a ferocity that I've never felt

before. I don't know if it's her strange exoticness, the fact that she's Terran rather than a Xaathian

woman, as strange and novel to me as I am to her, or if it's that she is something of a warrior herself.

The fire in her, the *fight*, even her stubbornness has aroused me beyond belief, even as it frustrates

me. She's a match for me anywhere, in wit and stubbornness, and I want to find out what it would be

like to take that to our furs.

There's nothing in Xaathian culture that demands I wait for my mate to claim my first woman. And

right now, every part of me is demanding Naomi, with a primal urgency that muddles my brain and

compels me to act.

I've been fighting it for days. But at last, spurred on by my rage over Vordu's advances, I give in

to the impulse raging through me.

I reach for Naomi, answering her with an action rather than words, as I pull her into my arms. I

cup the back of her head with one broad hand, the other arm wrapped around her waist and pulling

her flush against me, my fingers sifting through her silky black hair as my lips crash against hers.

It's different from the kiss in the lake. I kiss her hotly, fiercely, demanding her mouth submit to

mine. My tongue slides over her full, soft lower lip, wanting entrance to her mouth, to taste her. My

cock stiffens instantly beneath my loincloth, the delicate, warm press of her flesh against mine setting

my body on fire, and I want to consume her.

But I feel her stiffen in my arms, her hands planting against my chest, and I force myself to stop.



I would never take any woman without her consent. My desire doesn't matter, if she doesn't feel it too—if I've been wrong somehow about her arousal building over the past days as well. It occurs to me that the desire I've scented from her could come from thoughts of someone she's missing back on Terra, rather than me, and that primal, possessive urge grips me again.

*No other man can touch her.*

It's irrational, reprehensible to think of pushing her further if that's the case, and I break away from her sharply, breathing hard. My entire body is rigid with need, every muscle tensed, and my cock throbs beneath my loincloth, threatening to push it aside. I stare helplessly at Naomi, caught in her thrall as I reach down, pressing hard on my shaft in an effort to ease my hardness and keep my cock contained.

Naomi's eyes flit down to my hand, to the thick bulge beneath the leather, and then back up to my face. I see a moment's hesitation in her eyes, then something decisive flickers through them as she steps forward, closing the small gap between us. Her hands press against my broad, muscled chest again, but this time gently, rather than pushing me away. She leans up on her tiptoes, her chin tilted up as she strains to reach my mouth, and I feel her lips brush against mine.

Heat flares through me, wild and burning. It's a gentle, tentative kiss, but it's everything I craved, and I want more. I reach for her again, my hands gripping her waist, spanning it as I pull her against me again. I hear her small gasp as my rigid cock presses against her through my loincloth, a tiny moan

escaping her, and for one brief moment I'm afraid I'll spill my seed before I can even begin. My cock

throbs madly, my sac tight and aching to release, but I grit my teeth, holding myself back.

I intend to make this last—and I intend to discover how to pleasure her before I take my own.

Naomi's moan parts her lips, and my tongue slides into her mouth, eager and heated as I slant my

lips over hers. She tastes sweet, like berries, and it fills my senses as I cup the back of her head with

my hand again, savoring the feeling of her silky hair running over my skin as I deepen the kiss.

She moans again, deeper and louder this time, and my cock lurches beneath my loincloth, pressing

against her with a desperate need that floods through me. I want to take this slowly, to savor every

touch and taste for the first time, like a feast spread out before me—but I'm a starving man, and

Naomi's hands are sliding over my body with the same eagerness.

I stumble backward toward the bed, bringing her with me, my mouth devouring hers. She tastes

sweeter than I imagined, and her body, delicate as it is under my hands, feels unimaginably perfect.

I've fantasized about the thick curves and strong muscle of the Bekaru women, warriors in their own

right once, but Naomi's fragility feels like a sweet perfection that I didn't even know I wanted.

*The bond, it's said, makes you want things you never knew you desired, if your mate possesses*

*them—*

I shove the nonsensical thought out of my head, and a moment later I can't think at all. Naomi's

hands have made their way over my abdomen down to my loincloth, her fingers tugging at the leather

strings holding it onto my hips, and as she yanks it free I do the same to her. I've been hungering to see her unclothed body, to discover her breasts and the sweet space between her thighs without any covering, and I yank her top free, shoving her skirt down her hips as we tumble onto the bed together, naked at last.

I roll her onto her back, chest heaving as I spread her legs apart, looking down at her beauty in its entirety for the first time. Her tanned skin is perfection, smooth and taut, her legs and arms lightly muscled—or at least, what must pass for muscle for her species. I imagine them wrapped around me, pulling me in closer, and my gaze sweeps over her again as my cock hardens further, slapping against my abdomen with the ferocity of my need.

Naomi sucks in a breath, her eyes widening as she takes in the sight of me, her full breasts swaying with her movement. I find them entrancing, and I reach down, cupping her breasts in my hands and groaning at their softness.

“Your cock, ” she breathes, and I feel another jolt of lust go through me at the sound of it. “It’s *huge*. Will it...?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” I tease her, squeezing her breasts and rubbing the tips of my fingers over the hard, dusky peaks. She sucks in another breath, letting out a small moan at the touch.

“Does that feel good?”

“Y—yes.” Naomi’s back arches, her eyes fluttering closed as I pinch her lightly there, rolling the stiff flesh between my fingers. “Oh god, it’s like I can feel it in my fucking *clit*, oh my god.”

“Clit?” I tilt my head sideways, looking down at her. She looks devastatingly gorgeous, writhing

beneath me as I play with her breasts. It feels as if all the attraction that we've been denying has

spilled over, flowing between us, and I feel almost feral with need. My cock throbs again, smearing

seed against my skin as it drips down my shaft, hungry for her warmth.

*I cannot spill as soon as I am inside her, if I am to please her.*

I didn't expect it would be this difficult, but I already want to release, to see my seed mark

Naomi's skin.

"Down there..." She moans, her hand reaching between her legs. I watch with fascination, still

playing with her breasts as she spreads the delicate slit between her thighs, showing me the pink, wet

flesh. She's drenched with arousal, sticky and soaked with it, and my mouth waters at the sight of her

so ready for me. I want to taste her, but I know I won't last if I do.

Her finger circles a small, hard nub at the top of her slit, her breath quickening and her hips

jerking as she does.

"My clit," she murmurs on a gasp, another moan slipping from her lips. "It feels good when you

touch it."

"Does this?" I bend my head, unable to resist brushing my lips over the soft, plush flesh of her

breasts. I bury my face between them, dragging my tongue upward between the mounds as I squeeze

them in my hands, and as she arches again, pressing herself against my face, I draw my tongue down

beneath them, tracing her curves as I pinch her stiffening peaks, laving upward to suck them between

my lips.

“Luka!” She gasps my name, her hands fisting in my hair as I devour her breasts, sucking and

biting lightly. Her skin tastes as warm and sweet as her mouth, and I want to run my tongue over her

endlessly, tasting every bit of her.

My cock throbs warningly, dragging me out of my fervor. I want—no, I desperately *need* to be

inside her, but I want to see her pleasure first.

I pull back, kneeling between her slender, spread legs as I look down at Naomi. The nagging ache

of my healing wound is completely forgotten in this moment, as if nothing else exists in the entire

universe but her.

Her eyes are begging for me, her hands reaching out to stroke the muscled flesh of my thighs as I

grip my cock, giving myself one long, hard stroke as I angle it downwards toward her slit. Her eyes

go wide as she takes in the sight of me again, and I think of what she said about my size.

“Are Terran men not made like this?” I ask roughly, another pang of jealousy flaring through me at

the idea of Naomi seeing, or touching, or being claimed by any other male’s cock.

Naomi swallows hard, shaking her head as she stares at me.

“No. I mean, the shape is similar, but

they’re not so... so... *big*.” She licks her lips nervously. “And I’ve never seen one with *ridges*, or

one that’s pierced.”

“Terran men do not pierce their cocks?” I rub my thumb over the swollen, aching head, feeling the

slick spread of my seed over the heated flesh, the bone ring  
there flicking beneath my finger as I suck  
in a hiss of pleasure.

“Some do, but I’ve never seen one. Your cock is—”

“Our cocks are pierced once at maturity, and again when we  
take a female for the first time. And

then we may add to it, as we please.” I tilt my head, stroking  
my cock again, squeezing the shaft in an

effort to keep my desire at bay. “What about my cock?”

I push my hips forward, sliding the tip upward between the  
folds of her slit, drenching my

cockhead in her wetness. The slick heat of it sends a ripple of  
sensation down my spine, making my

back arch and my hips jut forward, a guttural groan spilling  
from me.

“It’s *incredible*. So fucking good, I—wait. You’ve never... ?”

Naomi’s question is cut off as my cockhead slides over the  
small nub that she called her clit, her

slick arousal and my leaking seed mingling to create a slippery  
wetness that makes me groan and her

cry out in pleasure as I rub my cockhead over her. Her thighs  
splay open, her hands bunching in the

furs as her back arches and her hips snap upward, grinding  
against my cock as she gasps.

“I, oh my *god*, that feels—so—good—”

She gasps out the words, and the flood of arousal that comes  
from her slit as I tease her, rubbing

my cockhead up and down, drives me wild. I slide it upward  
again, rubbing it against her clit, and

Naomi throws her head back with a fervent cry, her body  
bucking and thrashing on the bed as her

thighs tremble.

“Luka!” She shrieks my name, twisting beneath me. “Oh *fuck*, Luka.”

“Yes,” I tell her, my voice rasping as I slide my cock downwards, feeling how much wetter she is

now as I press my cockhead against her entrance. Even as aroused as she is, it will be a tight fit. “You

are the first female I will claim, Naomi. But before I do so, you need to tell me...”

I reach out, holding my cock steady with one hand as I cup her face, my thumb stroking over her

cheekbone. It takes everything in me to hold back, to keep from claiming her in this instant, with my

cock so close to her tight heat. But I have to know for certain that she wants this as much as I do.

“Open your eyes, Naomi.”

Her dark, gold-flecked eyes open, gazing up into mine.

“What?” she asks breathlessly, her full

lips parted.

“Tell me you want this,” I demand, my voice low and rough with need. “If you want my cock

inside you, Naomi, if you want me to fill you with it, then ask me for it. Let me know that this is what

you desire too.”

A shiver ripples through her, and she moans, her gaze still fixed on mine. “Oh god, Luka.” A tiny

smile tilts the corners of her mouth, and her hips arch upward, pushing herself against me. “*Please.*”

“Say it.” My jaw tenses, my hand flexing on my shaft. “Say that you want my cock, Naomi.”

She lets out a huff of frustration, her body squirming under mine.

“*Yes, Luka,*” she gasps. “I want your cock. I want your huge fucking alien cock inside me. *Please,*

for god's sake, *fuck* me!"

Her hips arch up again, a sobbing, laughing moan coming from her. She doesn't need to say

anything else. My entire body tenses with the nearness of satisfaction, and I let go of my cock,

grabbing her thighs instead to spread her wide. I want to see her open for me as I spear her, driving

my hips forward, pushing the swollen head inside her tight slit as Naomi lets out a strangled scream

of pleasure.

I thrust into her, hard, feeling her fluttering, grasping channel tighten around me as I sink every

inch of my cock into her warm, wet, welcoming body. The feeling is beyond anything I ever imagined,

the heat searing through me as she tightens around me, stretched to her limit by the size of my cock.

The feeling of it—of *her*—almost undoes me.

14

Naomi

I'VE NEVER FELT anything like this.

I wasn't sure he would fit. I've never seen a cock the size of Luka's, not even in porn—but it

excited me as much as it scared me. I've found human men's cocks to be mostly disappointing—but

Luka's was not only thick and long, but *ridged*, slightly tapered as if it were made to drive into me,

and *pierced* on top of it?

I wanted to find out what it felt like. This entire experience has been terrifying and confusing and

infuriating by turns, from my captivity, to my escape, to Luka finding me in the woods. But it started to



feel ridiculous that I was denying how much I wanted him.  
Night after night, squirming in bed ignoring  
my arousal, for what?

Because I felt vaguely guilty for wanting to fuck an alien?  
Because the intensity of how *much* I  
wanted it scared me?

His kiss when he dragged me into the hut made it clear that he  
wants me just as badly. I was ready

to fight back, to run, but then I thought, *I've been through hell.*  
*Don't I deserve some pleasure?*

Don't I deserve to at least get some wild sex with a gorgeous  
alien, who has a cock that looks like

it came from a sex toy website, out of this?

His eagerness to please me was intoxicating. Even showing  
him where my clit was seemed sexy

instead of frustrating, just another part of the novel experience  
of being with an alien for the first time.

And honestly, the idea of being *his* first seemed a little sexy  
too. Deflowering a gorgeous alien

virgin isn't something that happens every day.

Until he thrust into me, sending a wave of pleasure through me  
that made me nearly scream with

the intensity of it, and I found myself wondering if this was a  
good idea after all.

I planned to find my way back to Earth, but nothing, *nothing*  
there will ever be able to compare to

this, I realize, as Luka drives his thick, ridged cock into me.

I can feel him stretching me to my limit, a heated burn almost  
comparable to losing my own

virginity, but a thousand times more pleasurable. I can feel him  
filling me more completely than any

human man ever could, can feel every ridge and vein on his thick shaft, the bone ring pierced through

the tip rubbing over my G-spot as Luka lets out a helpless, strangled groan and his hips slam into

mine.

I'm overwhelmed with how good it feels.

The pleasure as he draws out and thrusts in again, hard, is incredible. My hands ball up in the

furs, clinging for dear life. I'm afraid to grab on to him, to touch him, afraid I'd shred his skin with my

nails out of the desperate urge to clutch and claw and rend my way through the nearly unbearable

pleasure of his massive cock. My eyes are tightly shut as he thrusts into me again, his hands gripping

my thighs as he holds me open, and when I let them flutter open and see him watching his cock slide

in and out of me with a heated fascination, I feel the beginnings of another orgasm start to unfurl

inside me.

*He made me come just by rubbing my clit with the tip of his cock. What the hell? No one has*

ever done that. But Luka had felt thick and hot and slippery with our mingled desire, the piercing

rubbing perfectly over my most sensitive spot, and I was so turned on—

*I'm going to come again if he—*

He thrusts again, his eyes coming up to meet mine, and a different kind of intensity sweeps through

me, distracting me from my oncoming orgasm.

I shut my eyes quickly again, turning my head to the side, trying not to think about what I just felt,

trying to focus on the physical pleasure. *It's just sex*, I tell myself. *It's just wild, passionate sex with an alien. A new experience to make up for all the bullshit you've endured since you got picked up.*

The problem is, it doesn't *feel* like just sex.

Which makes no sense.

I've had sex before. Okay sex, disappointing sex, sex that was good enough to come back for

round two and three. I even thought I was in love once, a terrifying prospect that predictably sent me running for the hills.

It didn't feel like *this*.

When I open my eyes again, not wanting to deprive myself of the sight of the gorgeous alien man

thrusting into me, all rippling muscle and tousled blond hair and that *massive* cock sliding in and out

of me, stretching me wide, I feel it again. That flood of connection, a euphoric flush of endorphins

beyond just pleasure, a feeling that I'm *meant* to be here, being fucked by this alien, in this bed. A

feeling that this is *right*.

I feel an overwhelming desire that I've never felt before, that I don't understand, and when I

finally realize what it is, it fucking terrifies me.

I want to *stay*.

I don't want him to leave.

I'm not sure if I want to leave *him*.

Luka's broad fingers spread my pussy open, his finger stroking my clit, and the burst of pleasure

brings me back to the present in a way I desperately needed.

His gaze is glassy with desire as he rubs

me, his full lips parted as his eyes flick up to mine. “Watch,” he growls, holding me open and tilting my hips up. “Watch me claim you, Naomi.”

It feels possessive and rough and savage, and I give in to it. The feeling of him fucking me, touching me, *claiming* me, is sating my needs in a way no one-night-stand with a man on Earth ever did. He drives his cock into me again and again, leaving me gasping and shaking and on the precipice of an orgasm, his fingers teasing my clit as I clench around him, and I let myself hurtle over the edge, screaming his name as I spasm and flutter around his cock. I can feel every ridge, every inch as he makes me come, and I’m still gasping and moaning when Luka grabs my hips, rolling onto his back and flipping us over with an ease that takes my breath away all over again.

I squeeze my thighs around his hips as he holds on to mine, and I start to ride him.

It feels even more exquisite than before, impaling myself on his long thick cock over and over. I plant my hands against the marks on his chest, bracing myself, my nails digging into his flesh, but he seems to love it. His face is a mask of bliss, eyes fixed on mine when they’re not roving over my body hungrily, his muscled forearms flexing as his grip tightens.

I lean back, spreading my legs to give him the best view, letting him see my bouncing breasts and clenched abs and spread open, stretched pussy, and the look in his eyes as he takes it all in is almost too much for me to take.

Luka looks at me as if I'm some kind of goddess, as if I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen,

like he wants to savor and devour me all at once. I like it—and I want to run from it at the same time.

I also want to come on his huge cock again.

I ride him harder, faster, chasing the pleasure. His hand snakes between my thighs again, his

fingers rubbing my clit as I bounce on his cock, taking every inch of it again and again as he groans. I

slide down, rolling my hips, grinding down on him. It feels as if he's inside me deeper than anyone

could or should be able to go, but it feels incredible, and I know I'm going to come again.

“Yes!” I gasp, grinding on him as he rubs my clit fiercely, sliding up and enjoying the heated look

in his eyes as he watches me take every inch of his cock. “I'm going to come again, Luka, make me

come, make me come on your cock, *yes*.”

“By the goddess, Naomi!” Luka snarls, his voice taut with pleasure as I pitch over the edge,

reaching back to clutch his thighs as I ride his cock hard. I feel myself clench around him, coming atop

him, hips jerking lewdly as I feel my arousal gush out over his shaft and his belly, drenching him. He

lets out another guttural moan, his hands digging into my flesh as he grabs my hips and rolls us over

again.

His eyes are full of a savage need as he pushes my legs backward, pinning my knees to my chest

as he pounds into me. “I will fill you with my seed,” he growls, his eyes bright green and amber with

heated lust, his cock slamming into me until I scream with the pleasure of it. “Oh goddess, Naomi.”

I *feel* it when he comes, in a way I've never been able to feel a man finish inside me before.

There's always been the barrier of a condom—something I never even considered, as if they would have such a thing here or even make one in Luka's size—and beyond that, no one has ever filled me like Luka does.

I feel his cock harden and swell with his oncoming release, his swollen, taut balls slapping against my ass as he drives into me once more, gripping the furs on either side of my head as his face contorts with pleasure.

He lets out a roar as he comes, the hot flood of his cum rushing into me, and it *does* fill me. It fills me in spurt after spurt until I can feel it spilling out of me around his cock, dripping down my thighs and ass, and I think about it just long enough to reassure myself that there's no way we're reproductively compatible before losing myself in the intense pleasure of it.

I've never felt a man come in me the way Luka does. I've never felt anything like the searing sensation, sending me over the edge into another, smaller orgasm, a series of rippling aftershocks that makes him groan as my pussy clenches along his throbbing length, milking every drop out of him until he collapses half atop me, panting.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. I feel equal parts exhausted, sated, and stunned by the intensity of what just happened. I've never had sex like that before, and I tell myself that's the reason for what I'm feeling now, the urge to curl into Luka's arms in a way I've never wanted to before.

*Snap out of it*, I tell myself harshly, pushing ineffectively at his chest as I struggle to draw a full breath.

Luka gets the hint, rolling limply onto his back on the furs with his eyes closed and beatific

expression on his face, his softened cock lying against his thigh. It's still impressive even in this state,

bigger than the average hard human cock, and I shift experimentally, wondering if I'll be able to walk tomorrow.

Slowly, I push myself up off the bed, looking for something to clean up with. The best I can find is

a soft knit cloth used to carry some berries earlier today, and I gingerly dab it between my thighs,

feeling the gush of Luka's cum as I do so.

When I glance up, I see that he's looking at me, heat in his eyes as he watches me clean up the

mess between my legs, and somehow my body responds to that despite my utter exhaustion and the

deep tenderness that I can already feel. My pussy clenches on nothing, and I have a wild vision of

going back to the furs, kneeling between Luka's legs and sucking him back to hardness before letting

him pound into me from behind.

*You're going to kill yourself with alien cock*, I tell myself reprovingly, finishing up my

ministrations and discarding the cloth. I do my best to push away the lingering thoughts of desire,

trying not to look below Luka's waist lest I lose what little progress I've made.

"Are you all right?" Luka asks in his deep, rumbling voice, and my clit throbs.

“Y-yes.” I lick my lips, straightening and looking at him with a firmness and surety that I don’t feel

in the slightest. “That was—incredible. Better than I could have possibly imagined. Definitely better

than anything I’ve had before, but—”

I can see Luka preening a little, his lips twitching in a smile, and I can tell he likes the idea of

being the best I’ve ever had in bed. Unfortunately, we need to leave it at that.

“We shouldn’t do it again,” I tell him firmly, doing my best to ignore the flicker of disappointment

that I both see in his face and feel between my thighs. “We just—we got too caught up in our roles,

pretending to be mates. We need to remember this is just a lie for the villagers.”

Luka’s brow furrows, an expression that I can’t read passing over his face, but a moment later he

nods slowly. “Of course,” he says, looking at me with sudden concern in his eyes. “I would never

take advantage of you, or force you.”

“I know. I—”

I can’t stand the look on his face, can’t stand the thought that he might think I wasn’t as fully on

board with what we just did as he was, and so I step forward quickly to kneel on the edge of the furs,

leaning down to kiss him lightly on the mouth. I pull back just as quickly, reminding myself to keep

some distance. Even that light brush of lips was enough to make my stomach tighten with the memory

of how Luka felt inside me.

“It wasn’t like that at all. I promise. It was good—*really* good—and I wanted it. I just—”



I chew on my bottom lip, forcing the words out. “I think with everything happening, the wisest thing would be for us to just keep up the act for the others, and leave it at that. So we don’t... get lost in it.”

Luka nods again, his brow still furrowed. He’s looking at me as if he’s trying to figure me out, and it makes my skin prickle. No one has ever looked at me that way before, as if they really want to understand what I’m thinking, and it makes my heart stutter a little in my chest.

He gets up slowly, unfolding his long muscled body from the bed. He steps closer to me, towering over me, and my pulse goes from a stutter to racing in my throat, choking me as Luka looks down at me. He doesn’t touch me, but I can feel his body heat, so close that he might as well be touching.

“It was amazing for me, too,” he says quietly, his green and amber eyes shining down at me. “I’ve never felt pleasure like that before.”

The words hover between us for a moment, the air thick and tense, and then Luka clears his throat, stepping back. “We’ll be expected at the communal meal tonight,” he says finally. “We should probably go.”

I nod mutely, unable to think of anything to say. We dress in silence, then step outside into the cool night, once again falling back into our roles as we go to join the others.

15

Luka

AS WE WALK toward the center of the village where the communal meal will be held, my body still

feels as if it's buzzing from the inside out—from the very marrow of my bones. What I told Naomi

before we left was only a fraction of the truth—what I just experienced with her was unlike anything

I've ever felt in my life.

I've pleased myself plenty of times, imagining the moment when I'd finally spend my seed in the

heated depths of a partner instead of spilling over my own fist and belly, but Naomi was the first

woman I've ever claimed.

*That could be why it felt so incredible*, I tell myself logically as we walk, turning the memory of

it over and over in my head. *Of course the first experience would be mind-shattering.*

But even as I think it, I'm not entirely sure that's the truth.

What I feel for her confuses me. This is meant to be a lie, a ruse to fool the Peskiit into thinking

that Naomi is off limits, but it feels more and more real by the day. The anger and possessiveness I

felt at the way Vordu had approached her had *felt* real. The warmth that I feel in my chest when

Naomi is near, the comfort of having her in my arms at night, the easy way we've started to talk to

each other now that we know each other better—and of course, the intense pleasure I felt as I claimed

her—all feel very real.

*It doesn't matter*, I tell myself as we approach the communal table, shaking the thoughts away. *She*

*said that we shouldn't do it again. So that's that.*

I force myself to shift my focus to keeping Naomi safe as we join in the meal.

I'm very aware of others watching us, particularly Vordu, and I make a point of staying close to

Naomi as we take our portions and settle in to eat. I stick close to her side, occasionally touching her

or leaning down to murmur something about the food, little actions that will reaffirm that she is mine.

A shudder goes through me at that thought, as if it takes root all over again in my very soul. *Mine*.

I can feel Naomi shifting awkwardly next to me, unable to quite look me in the eyes, and I know it

has something to do with what happened between us earlier. I can tell that she, too, can feel the focus

on her from the other curious villagers, watching a Terran share a meal with them, and it's only

adding to her nervousness. It makes her stand out, which is the exact opposite of what we want, and I

lean close to her ear.

"Just focus on me," I murmur softly against the shell of it, savoring the light shiver that runs

through her. "Don't worry about anything else."

I sit very close to her on the leather mats, knee pressed against hers as we eat from the wooden

plates. Naomi seems to like the food well enough, which is good. It's heartier than what has been left

in our hut for us prior to this. She gulps down a bite of stewed meat, licking her lips, then flushes as

she looks up at me.

"It's not that I'm not used to working hard," she says with a small laugh. "But working all day

*outside* is something else. I'm starving."

“Once everyone in the tribe has finished, it’s fine to go and refill your dish,” I tell her, and Naomi laughs.

“Well, that’s good to know, because I was definitely planning on it.”

We eat in companionable silence for a few more moments before she looks at me sideways, her cheeks pinkening again.

“What is it?” I ask curiously, and her flush deepens.

“I was just thinking about your...”

She gestures discreetly to my loincloth, and I chuckle.

“Oh?” I raise an eyebrow, and Naomi blushes so deeply that she matches the color of the stewed vegetables mixed in with the meat.

“Do all of you really have pierced dicks?” she mumbles, unable to quite look me in the eye, and I

laugh again. It amuses me that it’s so unusual to her, and pleases me that she liked it. I wondered, in

the nights before when I wanted her, if she’d be afraid of my cock—either its size or the piercings—

or if she’d be able to take it all. I was more than pleasantly surprised on all fronts.

I nod, scooping a bite of bread into my mouth.

“We do,” I confirm, although I feel a heated flicker of jealousy at the idea of Naomi having any

curiosity about another man’s cock, let alone seeing one. “It’s a rite of passage, like I said. All of the

piercings are, although some of us have more than others.

They’re marks of age, victories, stages of

life.” I tap the piercing through the bottom of my lip. “This one was for when I made my first kill in

the hunt.”

“And now that you’ve...” She hesitates. “*Claimed* me, you’ll go back to the tribe and get another piercing in your dick?”

I nod, chuckling again at her phrasing. “Yes.”

Naomi seems to consider for a moment. “I used to have a tongue piercing back on Earth. Right in the middle.” She sticks her tongue out, letting me see where it would have been, and I have a moment to consider what that might have felt like rubbing against the sensitive underside of my cock before she continues. “And a belly-button piercing.” She taps her navel.

I look at her, intrigued.

“Why did you get them?” I ask curiously. “And what made you take them out? A Xaathian male would never remove his piercings.”

Naomi shrugs. “I got them when I was a teenager, a good bit younger than I am now, as a way of rebelling against the adults in my life. It wasn’t really any marker of anything, except maybe just being a teenager.” She snorts. “And I got rid of them later on, when I was trying to move on from who I was before.”

She pauses, pressing her lips into a thin line. “If only changing who I am was as easy as taking out a piercing.”

I look down at her, my brow knitting together in confusion. “I’m not certain why you would need to change who you are, Naomi. To me, you are perfect as you are now.”

Her eyes widen, her cheeks turning pink again, but I notice the way she smiles at that, even if she

ducks her head shyly and tries to hide it.

“Tell me more about these hunts,” Naomi says, quickly changing the subject, and I grin.

“I have many of those to tell you about,” I tell her with a laugh. “I’m a very great hunter, after all.”

Naomi rolls her eyes. “After the way you chased me down in the forest, I’d say I’m not surprised, but I *did* evade you for a while.”

“I was giving you a head start, little Terran.”

She swats me on the arm, but she’s laughing, and I start to tell her about the hunts, riding varhells

through the grasses in pursuit of prey, the utter freedom that I enjoy more than anything else in the

universe. She listens as I talk, teasing me here and there, and I realize as the conversation shifts back

to her own life that I truly enjoy her company.

I like how spirited she is, as wild and full of life as Xaath, with the fierceness of a warrior in her

own way. I like *her*, and I meant it when I said that I see nothing about her that needs to change.

More than ever, I’m determined to protect her.

Even if I’m more than a little confused about what that feeling means.

16

Naomi

A FEW MORE DAYS PASS, and it feels like every moment that I’m awake, I can’t stop thinking about

what happened between Luka and me.

Just as I suggested, nothing else has happened between us. Luka has carefully kept his distance,

even when I’ve known that he hasn’t wanted to, and it both makes me feel safe and torments me all at

once. A part of me wishes that something *would* happen, that one of us would break and give in, even though I know it's a terrible idea.

We need to get out of here. I need to get home. I'm smart enough to know that even without all this 'mates' nonsense, the line between us will get more and more blurred every time we fuck. Luka has a debt to pay, and he's promised me that his leader will help me find a way back to Earth. I can't risk feeling like I did before, that momentary lapse in judgement where I'd wondered why I'd go back to Earth when there's a perfectly exquisite alien cock here for me, attached to a more than exquisite man.

I can't risk losing my better judgement.

Sleeping next to him every night is torture, especially now that I know what else we could be

doing. Waking up in his arms only makes me think of what it was like to be held in them as he kissed

me, hovering over me as he fucked me. My dreams are full of it—that long, thick cock rubbing over

my clit, making me come harder than I ever had in my life with just that.

He wakes up hard every morning, his cock pressed thickly against my ass, and I wake up soaking

wet from my dreams, but we both ignore it. Luka goes off every day to work off his debt, I stay behind

to do my part in the village, and we both keep up the appearance of being mates whenever there's the

slightest chance of anyone being around to see. We eat together at the communal meal every night, and

sometimes he pulls me down into his lap to sit, or kisses me in front of the others.

I tell myself that the way we both so easily slip into that role, touching like lovers, is because we're committed to the ruse we've created—that it's for the benefit of the Peskiit, not us. But I know, deep down, that I'm indulging in the opportunity to touch and kiss him in public, to feel his hard, hot body against mine, his arms around me as he holds me close, since I can't allow myself to have it in private. In public, where we're performing our ruse for others to see, there's a stopping point.

If I let Luka kiss and touch me like that in the privacy of our hut, I know we wouldn't be able to stop. I'd never want him to, and that terrifies me.

I've finally found something that I'm not sure I *want* to run from, and it spurs the urge that much more.

It's started to drive me a little crazy, if I'm being honest, setting me on edge even more so than usual. I'm eager to get out of the village, to get away from having to keep up the act. I need to get my head on straight, and it's becoming harder and harder. I want Luka in a way that makes me feel a little insane, as if something in the water here has made me consider things I would have laughed at on Earth, and I wonder sometimes if this is how Nicole and Abigail felt too.

I want to get to the Bekaru village for that reason, too—to talk to them. I want to know what happened to them, what convinced them to stay with their aliens, why they've decided not to go back to Earth—or if Luka is delusional, and they're really just waiting for their chance. I want to hear what



they have to say, so that maybe I can feel a little less like I've lost my fucking mind.

About a week after we arrived in the Peskiit village, by my loose calculations, Luka and I are

lucky enough to be given the same task for the day by Troyvl. I don't know if he just thinks he's being

cute, giving the mates a chance to have some time alone, or if the part of the forest we're being sent to

is dangerous enough that he doesn't think we should forage alone, but I find myself with mixed

feelings. I'm thrilled to get the news that I'll get to spend the day alone with Luka— *too* thrilled, and

that's the part that worries me.

It's a beautiful day, warm and sunny with a fresh breeze blowing, and as we head out, I can feel

the tension between us springing up instantly. I'm painfully aware of how alone we are as we walk

through the wooded path, of how easily Luka could have me up against any of the trees, memories of

him chasing me upon our first meeting coming back with an entirely new flavor to them.

"You think Troyvl did this on purpose?" Luka asks, waggling his eyebrows at me as we forage for

the mushrooms and herbs we've been told to look for. "We must be doing a good job. Maybe he's

pleased with my work, and wanted to reward me."

"Or he thinks *I've* been doing a good job, and it's a reward for *me*," I fling back teasingly, and he

laughs.

"Or both?" He plucks a long-stemmed herb, dropping it into the basket, and when he straightens

up he's standing very close to me. My pulse throbs quickly in my throat, my breath catching along

with it, and it takes everything in me not to drop the basket and go up onto my tiptoes to kiss him.

The hardest part about all of this—and the part that keeps me from falling back into bed with him

—is that I *like* him. There's more than just sexual desire here; we've gotten closer too, and I can tell

that Luka has come to enjoy my company as much as I enjoy his. The trek out to the woods, and the

walk as we pull apart and go back to foraging, is full of laughing and joking, and I find that I don't

want the day to end.

It's not even a date, and it's the best one I've ever been on.

I'm plucking one of the soft, mushroom-like things that we were told to look for, when I glance up

and see Luka looking off in the distance, his eyes suddenly alight. "Come with me," he says quickly,

striding down the path, and I grab the basket and hurry after him, my strides half the length of his. I try

to see what he's so intent on as we make our way through the woods—off the path now, and picking

our way over branches and bushes and rocks—but I can't see anything particularly of note.

Until we stop, and Luka points.

"See?" He looks excitedly down at me, and I peer in the direction of where he's gesturing. It's

then that I *do* see it—something silvery and glinting, strung between two huge rocks.

"It's looks like a spiderweb." I wrinkle my nose, feeling a small shiver go down my spine at the

idea. I'm not terrified of them, exactly, but I'm also not a huge fan.

"I don't know what a *spider* is," Luka says thoughtfully, walking closer. "But it is a web. It's

made by a *lichnith*, and it's very valuable."

I have a distinct feeling that whatever a *lichnith* is, it's probably spider-like—and based on my

experience here so far, probably much bigger and scarier. I look around quickly, feeling that cold

creeping sensation intensify, and Luka chuckles next to me.

"It's gone by now," he says reassuringly. "They move from place to place fairly quickly."

"How is it valuable?" I peer at it. "Where I'm from, webs like these are just an annoyance."

It *does* look thicker and more metallic than a typical spiderweb, like glistening spun silver. It's

actually quite pretty, if I'm not thinking about what likely made it.

"It's very strong," Luka explains. "Most tribes use it for many things—stringing weapons

primarily. If we can harvest it carefully, and return it to Troyvl, it should be worth enough to clear the

debt that I owe him. It's rare to find one undamaged like this—other animals like the scent, and often

tear through it."

"Wait, are you serious?" I turn toward him, my eyes suddenly as alight as his. "This web is worth

enough to pay off your debt? Without anything left over?"

Luka nods. "If Troyvl is the honorable man that I believe him to be, then yes."

"What are we waiting for then?" I feel as giddy as Luka now, and I reach out for the edge of the

web.

"Careful!" Luka exclaims, touching my hand. "It's strong, but it has to be carefully removed so

that it doesn't tangle. We'll do it together, slowly."

Just the touch of his hand against mine was enough to send my heart racing, but I tell myself it's

just the idea that we could mess this up somehow, when we're suddenly so close to the possibility of

early freedom from the debt.

It really only takes a few minutes to carefully remove it from the rocks, stretching it out flat in the

basket, but it feels like an eternity. I feel as if I don't even breathe until we lay it across the cloth

we've covered up the herbs and mushrooms with, and then I let all the air out in a rush, my heart still

racing.

We start to make our way back to the village, and I feel lighter than I have in a long time. It's not

that I've minded the work that the Peskiit have had me doing. It's been much better than anything I did

on Earth, actually, but I don't like the feeling of not being free. Luka looks equally pleased, and it's a

reminder that if not for his willingness to work off the debt, I might have gone from a captive of the

Uleki to a captive of the Peskiit.

"Thank you," I say suddenly on an excited, relieved breath, stopping in the middle of the path to

look up at Luka. "Thank you for everything you've done for me."

He stops, turning to face me, and an odd expression crosses his face.

"Of course," he says slowly, his green and amber eyes meeting mine.

I feel that flare of heat again as Luka looks at me, the tension between us growing as I remember

what else this means. Leaving the Peskiit means the end of our ruse, the end of the need to pretend that

we're mates, the end of excuses to touch and kiss Luka without admitting that it's because I want to.

It's the beginning of the end of *us*, and I'm almost certain that he's thinking the same thing.

Very slowly, as if I'm being pulled by something outside of myself, I sway toward Luka. My hands

brush over the smooth, heated flesh of his chest, my mouth going dry as I feel the hard muscle under

my palms, the way it twitches at my touch.

"If you keep touching me like that," Luka says in a low, roughened voice. "I may lose control and

kiss you, Naomi."

My heart skips a beat, nearly shuddering to a stop before starting up again, racing faster now.

"Okay," I whisper softly, going up on my toes as I lean toward him, my fingertips splaying over

the marks on his chest.

Luka sets the basket down, carefully, on the other side of a rock. And then, before I can suck in

another breath, he captures my face in both of his hands as his mouth crashes down onto mine.

His lips are hard, hot, ferocious against mine. He backs me up as he kisses me, his tongue

sweeping over my lower lip, begging for entry as my mouth falls open for him to thrust it inside.

Every part of my body is crying out for him, the brief touch a spark that started an entire fucking

wildfire of need between us.

We could burn the whole forest down and I don't know if I'd notice.

My back hits a tree, the bark scraping against the small of my back, but I hardly feel it. I can't feel

anything other than Luka's lips on mine, his hands leaving my face to skim down my body, grazing my

breasts and gripping my waist with a hunger that makes me feel like I'm losing my mind.

I want him too much to remain logical about this, to hold on to my self-control. Every touch and

kiss for the benefit of the tribespeople has been slowly building the tension between us, stretching the

tether of my fragile self-control further and further until it's felt hardly bearable sometimes. And now,

out here alone with Luka's lips and hands showing me how clearly he feels the same, it seems

impossible to stop.

I grab his arms, fingers sinking into the heavy muscle as I tug at him, showing him without words

that I want to swap places. Luka picks up on it easily, turning us so that his back is against the tree, his

hands still clutching me against the front of him as his mouth eagerly slants over mine.

Before I can tell myself to stop, I drop to my knees on the grass in front of him, giving in to the

desire to see more of his pierced cock up close. I've wanted it for days, and I push his loincloth

aside, my hand wrapping around the rigid shaft that greets me as Luka lets out a low groan above me.

He looks even bigger up close, thick and hard, the ring through the tip of his cock inviting me to

play with it. I flick my tongue out, teasing it, rolling it back and forth as Luka lets out a strangled

noise, his hand suddenly tangling in my hair.

"By the *goddess*, Naomi," he pants, and I realize with a start that if the other day was his first time

having sex, this is probably his first blowjob as well.

*It's going to be the best blowjob he has for the rest of his life, I*  
decide, stroking him gently as I

brush my lips over his cockhead.

He's already dripping for me, his slightly sweet pre-cum  
gathering at the tip as he pulses in my

fist, his cock jerking with the eagerness to be in my mouth.

I don't make him wait long. I wrap my lips around the tip, still  
toying with his piercing as I flick

my tongue over and around it, rubbing the soft flesh beneath  
the head before returning to the piercing.

It's more fun than I've ever had with a cock, and I determine,  
as I slowly sink down and take more of

Luka in my mouth, that more men should really think about  
piercing their dicks.

*Maybe we'd all stay down there longer if we had more to play*  
*with.*

It's a struggle to fit him in my mouth, my lips stretching  
around the width of his cock, and I can

only slide down halfway before his tip rubs against the back of  
my throat. *There's no way I'm getting*

*him deeper,* I think as I slide my hand down his shaft, but  
looking up, I realize I don't need to worry.

Luka's head is tipped back against the tree, an expression of  
absolute bliss plastered across his

handsome face as he grips the bark with one hand, the other  
firmly buried in my hair.

I've never seen a man this lost in pleasure before from my  
mouth on him, and it sparks a wildfire

of need in me too. Luka's appreciative groans, the way his hips  
jerk and his body shudders as I slide

my hand along the pulsing length of him, the way he drips pre-  
cum onto my tongue eagerly, it all

makes me want him just as badly. I've never been turned on by blowjobs before, but I can feel how

wet I am, slick and aching, sticky on the inner flesh of my thighs as I suck Luka's cock with every

ounce of effort I can put into it.

"Oh *goddess*, I—" Luka's hips jerk again, convulsively, his free hand clinging to the tree bark as

his other tightens in my hair. "I'm going to—"

The words break off in a strangled groan of pleasure, but it was all the warning I needed. I reach

between his legs, cupping his heavy balls in my hand as I stroke him with the other, lashing my tongue

over the swollen head as I feel him harden and throb—and the first hot jet of his cum fills my mouth.

There's so *much*. Luka's sounds of pleasure surround me as I struggle to swallow it all, gulping

down cum as his cock spasms and jerks in my mouth. He's moaning my name above me, his entire

body shuddering, his tone one of absolute wonder as I swallow every last drop that he has to give me

—or try to, anyway. Some of it slips out from between my lips, coating my mouth and chin, and when

I open my eyes I see Luka looking down at me with an expression of limp reverence as his cock

slowly slips out of my mouth.

Normally I'd just wipe the remaining cum off, but he's looking at me like I'm some kind of

*goddess* myself, and something comes over me. Holding his green and amber gaze, I lazily run my

tongue over my lips, collecting the remainder of his cum as I swallow it down.

Luka makes a strangled sound of lust, and his cock jerks with renewed arousal.



“Naomi.”

He breathes my name again, and as I stand up shakily, he reaches for me. With one swift

movement, he spins me so that our places are switched again, my back landing heavily against the tree

as, before I can even catch my breath, my leg is up over his shoulder.

There’s no teasing, no slow licks and kisses. Luka is *ravenous* for me, and it’s evident in the way

he shoves up my skirt roughly with one hand, holding my leg hooked over his shoulder with the other

as his face shoves between my thighs, his tongue running a long, hot line up my pussy before I can so

much as fully comprehend what’s happening.

He eats me out like a starving man, and it’s completely unexpected. The last thing I thought Luka

would do after his orgasm is focus on *my* pleasure, and yet he’s devouring me, his tongue working its

way between my folds and lashing over my clit as if all he was thinking about while I sucked his cock

was getting to taste me.

And it feels *incredible*.

Luka’s tongue is hot and wet and finds every spot that makes me shudder and cry out with absolute

ease, driving me wild. He pushes it inside me, filling me like a smaller version of his cock, stroking

and curling until he finds a spot that turns my knees to water and makes my fingers latch around his

horns, dragging his mouth harder against my aching pussy.

He thrusts and thrusts, licking inside me until I feel on the verge of coming just from that—and

then he pulls his tongue free, replacing it with two long, dexterous fingers as he slides it back up to

my clit. He flutters it across the swollen, throbbing spot, pushing back the hood with the tip as he

slides his tongue over me again and again, and I feel the pleasure building in a sudden rush that lets

me know I'm about to come.

"I—I—" I gasp out, suddenly unable to form words as Luka's fingers curl against my most

sensitive inner spot, his tongue still rolling over my clit.

"Luka!"

My legs are shaking so hard I'm almost worried they'll give out.

He jerks away just long enough to look up at me with those hypnotic eyes, a wicked smile curving

his damp mouth.

"Don't worry, Naomi," he growls, his hand tightening on my leg. "I won't let you fall."

And then his mouth presses between my thighs again, *sucking* my clit into his mouth as his tongue

slides over it, and I'm lost.

I'm sure anyone within a number of miles can hear my scream as I come. It's a strangled cry, half

Luka's name and half unintelligible, the sound filling the air as I ride his tongue to a shattering climax.

I can feel it through every part of my body, turning me boneless and liquid as Luka holds my

collapsing body up, still sucking and licking through my orgasm as I come hard on his face.

The force of it should slake every drop of lust in me, but as Luka slowly pulls away, leaving me

shuddering against the tree, I can still feel the hunger for him blazing in me—and from the look in his

eyes, he feels it too. His loincloth is still dislodged, his cock hard all over again, stiff against his

belly. I stare at it—at *him*, tall and muscled and gorgeous, burning with desire for *me*, and it sends a

fresh wave of lust rippling through me.

Luka leans toward me, his body brushing against mine, his hard cock touching my belly as he

plants a hand on the tree above my head, his eyes burning with need. He reaches for me, his fingers

slipping between my thighs, and as he strokes my still-twitching clit, I know where this is going next.

He's going to fuck me up against this tree, out in the open in the woods, and *holy fuck* do I want

him to.

I want it so badly it hurts.

But I also know better.

Every touch, every kiss, every time we've done this, has only brought us closer together. I can feel

that I'm losing my inner battle against whatever this is—and now that we're going to be able to leave

the Peskiit... *especially* because of that, I need to have a clear head.

I need to be able to think logically about whatever comes next.

Luka's hands are on my hips, urging me to turn and face the tree, and a blaze of desire tears

through me at the thought of him fucking me like that, thrusting into me from behind and taking me up

against it.

Instead, I summon my last shred of self-control, and grab his hands as I push them away from my

hips.

"We can't," I whisper, shaking my head. "We *shouldn't*."

Luka

BOTH NAOMI and I are breathing hard as we break apart. I stumble back, her hands slipping away

from mine as she pushes me away. I feel like I can barely think, my cock throbbing with a near-painful

need even after the exquisite experience of filling Naomi's mouth with my seed. I came harder even

than I did before with her, pent-up from days of teasing and pretending, but the sweet taste of her on

my tongue drove me into a maddening arousal again.

Still, I won't touch her without her permission. Even through the fog of lust, the pain that tears

through me at backing away, the insistent throbbing of my stone-hard cock, I step back, looking down

at her as I swallow hard.

"You do not want this?" The words rasp out of my throat, and Naomi winces.

"We just—" Naomi licks her lips nervously. "We slipped up, that's all. I do—I did—I just—" She

swallows hard, moving away from the tree, as if she's worried that we might "slip up" again if she

stays pressed up against it. She's not wrong to think so—it takes every shred of self-control I possess

to keep from pushing her against it again, lifting her into my arms and sinking myself into her wet,

heated depths.

I remember the pleasure of it all too well, and I crave it— *her*—again. Even her mouth was not

enough to slake that need.

"The pretending, it—" Naomi waves a hand, and I grimace, trying to adjust my loincloth so that it

covers my stubborn erection. My cock refuses to accept that this is over, and the leather garment does very little to hide that. Still, this isn't a conversation I want to have with my cock out.

"It's a good thing we'll be able to leave soon." Naomi says it in a rush, reaching for the basket and clinging to it as she holds it in front of herself like a shield. "It's getting too confusing—lying about being mates. It's too hard to keep things straight."

Something about her words strikes a pain in my chest. *It's not that simple*, I want to say, forcing myself not to reach out for her. *She makes it seem as if there is nothing between us.*

I know that's not true. I have little experience with women and with mates, but I know that even the pleasure of claiming a woman in one's furs is not what I experienced with Naomi. No matter how often I've tried to tell myself that it's only the novelty of it—of *her*—every day that I've spent in her presence has told me that's not true.

I want Naomi for more than just the pleasure of her body. I crave time with her, closeness, even just the simple pleasure of sleeping with her in my arms. I desire to be away from the Peskiit as much as anyone, but the knowledge that when we return to the Bekaru, Naomi will go to her own hut and I to mine, has been weighing on me.

I don't want to let her go. I don't want her to leave. Some days, recently, it's barely felt as if we were lying to the Peskiit villagers at all. The moments that I spend with Naomi, the desires to talk to her, to touch her, to kiss her as she passes—it all feels real. I cannot imagine how such a desire could

exist and be purely a lie, and I not know.

I've never wanted anyone or anything the way I desire Naomi,  
day and night, both her body and

her mind, all of her, at all times. She has consumed me.

But she thinks it's all a lie.

Frustration fills me, burning like a coal in my gut. *If this is  
what she wants—space—then there's*

*no point in trying to explain it to her.* If she's determined that  
this is only a ruse until we're free of

the Peskiit, I don't see how I can change her mind.

And even if I could, I want her to desire me with the same all-  
consuming force that I feel. I want

to be needed too.

"We should get back to the village," I tell her, hearing the  
flatness in my voice. I can't help it—as

I force down the confusion and frustration that I feel, not  
wanting to burden her with it. "Once Troyvl

has the web, our debt should be cleared."

We walk in silence back to the village, side by side, and it  
feels heavier than before. I think of

Harax's promise to find a way to send the women back to  
Terra if they wish, and the thought of Naomi

leaving is like a dagger in my chest.

If that's what she wishes, I can't stop her—nor should I.

As we reach the outskirts of the village, I lean toward her,  
sliding my arm around her waist. I feel

the way she momentarily stiffens before leaning into me, as if  
she's fighting her desires, and it sends

another mingled ripple of confusion and need painfully  
through me.

"Remember," I whisper in her ear, angling so that it looks to  
anyone who's watching like two

lovers murmuring together, “until the debt is paid and we have left, we need to keep up the ruse that

we’re mates. We are not free until we are out of sight of the villagers for good.”

The words feel strange as I say them. It feels as if saying that it’s all a lie *is* the lie, as if keeping

up this façade is me lying to myself and to Naomi. It’s a bitter, confusing feeling, and I hate it.

I hate how it makes me feel.

Naomi nods silently, and I feel her leaning into me a little.

That feeling of her trusting me, staying

close to me, makes me yearn for her more than ever.

It’s not hard to find Troyvl. It’s nearing the end of the workday, the villagers coming back together

in the central part of the village, getting ready for the evening meal. Naomi hangs back a little as we

approach him, handing me the basket, and I proffer it to him.

“In addition to what we gathered today as requested, my mate and I found this.” I indicate the web

carefully arranged in the basket, ignoring the throb in my chest at calling Naomi my mate aloud. “I

hope that it may pay off what remains of my debt to you. I am aware of how valuable it is to our

tribes.”

There’s a hint there in my carefully chosen words that if Troyvl refuses to accept it as payment, I

can keep it for myself, and take it back to my own people when the debt is paid. If he wants the web,

he’ll have to accept that it’s worth the remainder of my debt.

I see Troyvl’s jaw clench as he looks down at the web, but finally after a long moment, he nods.

“I’m sorry to lose your hard work,” he says finally. “You make a fine addition to the Peskiit. I can’t

deny, however, that this is worth your debt.” He glances between Naomi and me, then nods. “Your

debt is cleared. You may leave. Of course, if you wish to remain for the evening meal and a night’s

rest before setting out, it will not incur any further debt with us. The web is more than enough.”

As tempting as a hot meal and another night in soft furs with Naomi sounds, I shake my head

firmly, lacing my fingers with hers.

“There’s still a good distance between here and the Bekaru village,” I tell Troyvl with a careful

hint of reluctance in my tone, not wanting to sound too eager to leave. “We should be on our way, so

we can arrive home sooner.”

“Of course.” Troyvl steps back, allowing us to pass, and my heart thumps in my chest.

Naomi is clinging to my hand, and I can feel her tension in her grip, the nerves running through

her. Neither of us will feel entirely safe until we’re out of the village, and we walk as quickly as we

can without appearing to be hurrying.

It’s not fast enough.

Before we can get too far out of the central part of the village, Vordu steps into our path, barring

us from going any farther.

His eyes narrow, a wicked grin curving his mouth. “I heard you in the woods,” he says casually,

his voice loud enough for all to hear. “I heard you say that you are not really mates. That it has all

been a lie to keep a Peskiit from claiming her.”



There's a hum behind us, a collective noise of shock and a few hints of anger as the chatter of the

villagers rises like a miasma behind us. Vordu keeps speaking, his voice raised over it all.

"*You* can leave," he says coldly, confidently, pointing at me.

"But she stays." His gaze turns to

Naomi, the wicked smile turning lewd. "She is not your mate," he adds, his eyes flicking back to me.

"And you have no claim to her."

The rage that I felt before when I saw him with Naomi rises up instantly, hot and furious, boiling

my blood as every muscle in my body tenses. "No," I growl, instinctively stepping in front of Naomi.

"She's leaving with me."

Vordu laughs. "So a challenge, then. You won't leave with her unless you prove your claim to her,

Bekaru."

He raises his fists, a gleam in his eye, the challenge thrown down.

18

Naomi

*SOMEONE IS GOING to stop this. Surely they'll stop it.*

I look around, horrified as Vordu first calls out our lie in front of the villagers, telling Luka that I

won't be allowed to leave the village—as if he or anyone else should have any right to me, mate or

not—and then challenges Luka for that same right. It's archaic, ridiculous, and completely

nonsensical. There's no way that Vordu is going to get away with starting a fight over a strange

woman.

Someone is going to stop it.

But no one does.

Troyvl starts to gesture for the villagers who have gathered around us to back up, clearing space, and I realize that this is deadly serious.

This is *real*. It's really going to happen. Vordu and Luka are going to fight—because of me, over the right to claim me, essentially.

Luka is going to fight another warrior rather than letting him claim me or touch me. Once again, he's putting himself in danger for me, without hesitation.

A flood of emotion washes over me, clenching in my chest. I've had so many doubts, worried

about whether the things I've felt with and for Luka meant I was losing my mind in some way, but it

all seems so pointless to worry about now. I see Luka, what he's done for me and what he's doing,

with perfect clarity—and it might be too late.

I'm terrified of what will happen next. I have faith in Luka's ability to fight—I've seen it—but it

hasn't been all that long since he was injured. Vordu is a strong warrior in his own right from what I

can see, and as Luka and Vordu step into the open space that's been created, staring each other down,

my heart hammers wildly in my chest.

I stumble back, away from the warriors, unable to tear my gaze away. Luka is glaring fiercely at

Vordu, rigid and poised to fight, and the primal savagery of it stirs something in me despite myself.

“By the laws of our village,” Troyvl calls out, his voice rising above the chatter, “Vordu has a

right to challenge the Bekaru warrior, Luka! The winner will claim the Terran woman.”

At those last words, my blood chills, a new kind of fear filling me. Even as Luka and I pretended

to be mates to prevent exactly this from happening, I never fully fathomed what it might mean if we

failed. The way Troyvl speaks, the gleam in Vordu's eyes as he hears it, confirms all my worst fears.

If Luka loses, Vordu will be able to take me as his, and I won't be able to do anything about it.

I'll belong to an alien that I don't even want.

*An alien who will have killed the man that I...*

Before that thought can go any further, Luka roars, a sound like I've never heard before. I see him

unsheathe twin daggers as Vordu raises a spear, and the two lunge at each other, hurling themselves

into the fight like titans.

Fear spreads through me, a creeping poison that fills my blood as I watch the two aliens fight.

They circle each other, lashing, lunging, Luka dodging Vordu's spear as he ducks under and weaves

around, slashing at Vordu with his blades. Even with my untrained, inexperienced eye, I can see that

Luka is good. Not just in technique—but in the way he throws himself into the fight, giving it

everything he has.

His strikes and slashes are skilled, measured, hitting with precision. He draws blood first,

spattering it across the dirt, but Vordu moves as if he was barely struck. His spear grazes Luka's

shoulder, then his side, hitting the mostly-healed wound from before, and I see the shudder of pain that

ripples through Luka.

Luka is mostly healed from it, the treatment he received excellent, rivaling medical care back on

Earth—as strange as that seems. But he’s not back to his full strength, and it’s not an entirely fair fight.

Neither does Vordu fight fair. He hammers at Luka, driving him back, striking blows with his fist

when Luka falters from another strike with the spear. Luka lunges forward, slashing at Vordu’s chest

with his blades, but Vordu sidesteps it, punching Luka in the ribs with a short, hard blow in the old

wound.

Luka grunts, stumbling a little, and Vordu spins, lowering his spear to trip Luka. I stifle a scream

as Luka comes up short, trying to avoid it—but fails in the last second.

His feet tangle with the shaft of it, bringing him down, and Vordu is on him in an instant. His foot

lands in the small of Luka’s back, pushing the other warrior down into the dirt as he lifts his spear, the

point poised to drive through the back of Luka’s neck.

I don’t think as I act. A rush of wild emotion floods through me, and I fling myself forward into the

makeshift ring, throwing myself down into the dirt over Luka, between him and Vordu’s spear.

“Stop!” I scream, throwing out a hand, heedless of my own safety as I look up at Vordu’s face.

He’s already wearing an expression of satisfied victory, and it makes me hate him all the more.

“Luka is my mate!” I cry out, still shielding him with my body as I look around wildly. “He didn’t

lie. It’s true—it’s all real. He’s claimed me as his—and I am. I’m his mate.”

I repeat it again, as if it can drive the words home, and I can see the shock in everyone's faces. I feel Luka tense beneath me, his head twisting as he looks up at me with visible surprise, and even Vordu backs off slightly, his expression one of momentary confusion.

There's a split second of hesitation, and Luka uses it to his full advantage, sliding out from under me and pushing himself up. "She speaks the truth," he growls. "And now, we will take our leave."

Vordu laughs, his upper lip curling in a sneer. "You know," he says conversationally, his voice a low rasp. "I don't think I care if she is or not."

He levels his spear, and lunges for Luka. I dodge backward, gasping, but that moment of hesitation was all that Luka needed to recover. He lurches upward, leaping to his feet as he raises a dagger and blocks the blow of Vordu's spear, swinging to look at me.

"Naomi, *run!*" he shouts, as Vordu advances.

"I'm not leaving you—"

"I'm not asking you to!" He parries Vordu's spear again, shoving the other warrior back for a moment. "Just run, and I'll be behind you!"

I spin on my heel, turning toward a path through the huts to the outskirts of the village. I hear, dimly, the sound of Troyvl's voice shouting for someone to grab me, that the fight wasn't ended fairly, but I don't care. I rush forward, grabbing Luka's abandoned second dagger from the dirt, swinging it wildly as I race for escape.

I don't look back to see if Luka is behind me. I can hear his and Vordu's shouts and roars, close enough that I think Luka must still be near as I run, and I trust Luka to do as he said. I realize that, as I run, slashing out with the dagger at others who try to grab and stop me.

I've never trusted anyone. I've never believed their word, or been given a reason to. I've never had anyone care for or fight for me. It's why I've always run, always kept to myself, always found ways and reasons to start over somewhere fresh.

But I *trust* Luka. I believe that if he's able, he'll be on the other side of the village with me when I escape.

When *we* escape.

"I'm here!" I hear him shout as I dart around the huts. Another warrior springs out, trying to grab me, and I slash out with the dagger, feeling hot blood on my fingertips and hearing a cry of pain.

"Naomi, I'm right behind you!"

"I know!" I call out, and I do. I don't falter or stop. I run headlong toward the edge of the village, out into the waving grass beyond, and I know without a doubt that when I come to a stop, Luka will be with me.

I want him to be.

What's more, I'm beginning to think I want him to be with me always.

19

Luka

IT'S NOT easy to get out of the Peskiit village.

Once they realized that Naomi wasn't going to accept the outcome of the fight, that she was going to insist that the story we told was true, all ideas of rules and honor fled. The villagers went for her, and Vordu kept at me, intending to bring me down. It was never entirely about Naomi. It was— *is*—personal. But I don't *drakking* care.

I'm getting out of here with Naomi.

The way she fights as we run is impressive. I can feel my blood heat at the sight as I race after her, fighting off Vordu and others, keeping back the flood of villagers so that Naomi at the very least will be able to escape. But she holds her own, slashing out fearlessly with the dagger she took as she runs.

We race to the edge, past the outskirts of the village and then even farther out. Arrows whiz past, the shouts of the Peskiit following us, but neither Naomi nor I stop. She doesn't look back to see if I'm following, and it warms something in my chest, because I know the meaning of it for her.

She trusts me. She believes that I will keep my word to her. And that means more than anything she could have said aloud, or anything else that she could have done.

The villagers keep chasing us, out into the grasses, but they fall back fairly quickly. Both Naomi and I are swift runners, and after the ferocity of that fight, I can't imagine that Troyvl thinks that we're worth the possible losses to his tribe.

Even so, I push myself harder, racing through the grasses to the tree line of the woods and beyond.

I make certain not to leave Naomi behind, but she keeps pace with me regardless. For a Terran, she is swift and strong, and that coupled with the way I saw her fight in the village impresses me even more. She is a warrior too, in her own way. I've seen hints of it in her before, but never as much as I do now. As we run, I see her doing the same things I pause to do on occasion—covering our tracks in the dirt, running off the path a little ways to break off branches or crash over brush to create false trails, only to rejoin each other on the path.

*She could survive here, I think to myself as we run. Even without a warrior as a mate for protection, this place suits Naomi.*

But even after her declaration that the ruse of us playing at being mates was true, I don't allow myself to hope that she'll stay—or that she meant it. All I can think is that it was another lie, this time to save my life.

I'm appreciative of it, but it hurts all the same.

Finally, once I'm sure that no one is chasing us, I slow to a stop. Naomi stops too, next to me, breathing hard.

She turns toward me, reaching out as her fingers brush against my flesh, inches away from my old wound.

“Are you all right?” she asks breathlessly, her gaze sliding over the wound, the other grazes and

cuts from Vordu's blows. My skin is streaked with dirt and blood, and I ache in every part, but I know

I'm not badly injured.



“I’ll be fine,” I tell her firmly, my hands going to her hips as I turn her toward me. I don’t mean it as a gesture of desire—though I want her more than ever—but I hear her soft, indrawn breath at my touch. “What about you? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine,” Naomi says quickly. “A little bruised and scratched, but nothing permanent. I’ll be totally fine soon enough.”

I look her over, unwilling to take her word for it, but from what I can see at least, she is uninjured.

My gaze flicks upward, and I see that she’s already looking at me, her eyes meeting mine with an unreadable expression in them.

Something rises up in me, a feeling that I wasn’t able to look too closely at or put a name to in the chaos of the fight. All that had mattered was making sure that she was safe and away from the village.

But now, it fills me, pushing everything else out, demanding that I put a voice to it.

I want to know if she meant what she said. If the game that we played meant more to her, after all.

If what had started as a lie has turned out to be truth, in the end.

I reach out, slowly, my fingers tracing the edge of her delicate jaw. She looks so small, so fragile—and yet she’s shown a strength over and over again that rivals that of our best warriors.

“Did you really mean what you said back there?” My voice is low and quiet, my gaze holding hers.

*It wasn’t a lie. He’s claimed me. I’m his... his mate.*

I can see her gathering herself to deny it, to brush it off as something said in the heat of the moment, and my gut clenches with dread. If she can't tell me now, here, then something in me says that the chance will be lost forever. That she'll never be able to accept the truth of what we are to each other.

And then, before she can say a word, she stops herself. Her gaze flitted away from mine for a moment, but now it comes back, her eyes meeting mine fully. "Yes," she says simply, her voice sweet and sincere, and I know in my soul that it's the truth.

That one word, spoken so simply, breaks the fragile thread of control holding me back. All of the feelings I was forcing down come rushing forward in a gale of emotion, and I reach for Naomi, hauling her into my arms against my chest as my mouth comes crashing down onto hers.

Her lips sear into mine, the heat of it like all of the kisses that have come before this one, but there's more now to it too. It's an acknowledgement that what we felt was real. That the tugging of the bond wasn't just my imagination... or hers.

Everything that I sensed between us was true.

I can't get enough of her, of the taste of her mouth, the heat of her slender body against mine, the feeling of her hands reaching up to trace the shape of my face. I stumble forward, still devouring her as I press her backward against a tree, the rough bark beneath one palm as I slide my tongue into her mouth.

I want to possess her in every way. To claim her thoroughly as mine, now that there's no question that she is. My cock aches beneath my loincloth, already hard and throbbing for her, and my other hand slides down her soft curves, wanting more. I want the wet heat of her on my tongue, my fingers, my cock—I want her scent and her pleasure surrounding me. The fog of lust fills me, the mate bond fully unleashed, and I feel a driving, desperate need to rut, to claim my mate.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

My hand trembles at her hip. Every instinct in me screams to lift her up, lock her legs around my hips and drive into her wet, clenching depths. To pour my seed into her in a series of quick, rough thrusts. She came for me, I know it. Her sweet moans are already filling the air, vibrating against my lips, her body arching into mine. Her nails scratch down my chest, and I feel as if I might go mad with need.

Somehow, I force myself to draw back. I look down at her, her dark hair tousled around her face, her lips swollen from my kisses, and my cock throbs painfully. *Take her.*

I reach for her again but gently this time, swinging her into my arms as I cradle her against my chest. Naomi's eyes widen, startled, as I start to carry her deeper into the woods, toward a secluded overhang farther off. The rocky outcropping juts out over a soft patch of grass, and I carry Naomi toward it, my heart thumping in my chest with anticipation. "What—" Naomi's voice trails off as I sink down to the grass, lowering her below me. I stretch

out over her, my hard cock brushing against her thigh as my fingers brush over her cheek, and my voice is low and hoarse in my throat.

I *need* her, in a way I've never needed anything in all my life.

"I want to take my time," I tell her softly, but firmly. "The first time I claim my mate."

20

Naomi

*I WANT to take my time, the first time I claim my mate.*

The lustful promise in those words sends a shiver down my spine. I feel small beneath Luka's

muscled body, stretched over me in the shadow of the cliff, but safer than I've ever felt in my life.

Even here, out in the open wild, I don't fear anything.

Luka is here with me, and that's all that matters.

I came so close to denying it again. Brought right up to the precipice of a decision, of admitting

that everything I shouted to save his life in the Peskiit village was true, or continuing to pretend that it

all meant nothing to me, I almost ran away again.

Not physically, but from my feelings.

What I feel for Luka is huge. Terrifying. All-consuming. And the truth is that I meant every word

of what I said.

This huge, stubborn, sometimes-infuriating, gorgeous alien man is my mate. I don't fully

understand what that means yet, but I know how it makes me *feel*.

Right now, that's all that matters.

His mouth comes down on mine again, this time softer, gentler. His hands are on the grass on

either side of my head, bracing him as his lips explore mine. I can feel the barely restrained need, the

way he wants me so desperately, and yet he takes his time.

I meant what I said, and he did too.

Reaching up, I thread my hands through his hair, feeling the short silky strands rub between my

fingertips as I explore the horns that protrude from his thick mane.

I want to learn him too, this alien man who is now my mate, and something thrills inside me at the

idea that we have so much more time to do that now. Endless days ahead of us, days filled with

sunlight and happiness, work that feels good and natural and productive, without worry about a roof

over our heads or food on our table. A life that I can enjoy with Luka, free of everything that shackled

me on Earth.

The kisses go on for a long time, slow and sweet, deep and full of emotions that we haven't yet

put words to. Luka's hands stroke down my body, tugging at my clothing and his, until we're both

lying bare on the grass with him between my thighs. The hot, straining flesh of his cock presses

against my belly as he kisses me, but he still doesn't rush.

When he's devoured every inch of my lips, he goes lower. His mouth trails down my throat,

nipping and sucking, seeking out the spots that make me whimper and the ones that make me moan, his

hands caressing my waist and hips. The way he kisses me, *explores* me, makes me feel worshiped in

a way that I've never experienced before. When his mouth reaches my collarbone, his tongue flicking

into the small divot there, I expect him to trail his lips down to my breasts.

Instead, his mouth finds my shoulder, the soft flesh of my inner arm, his tongue tasting the crook of my elbow, his lips kissing my wrist. I can feel how hard he is, how desperate, the sticky leak of his pre-cum dripping onto my belly with an urgent heat, but nothing about his caresses feels rushed. It's as if all he cares about is my pleasure, my desire.

Liquid heat spreads through me as Luka kisses and caresses my skin, every inch of me aching and sensitized, wanting more. I can feel how wet I am, drenched with the promise of the pleasure still to come, and I arch up against him, wanting to feel all of that hard muscle against me.

“Did you ever—”

The question sticks in my throat as he kisses just above my breasts, his tongue dipping into the valley between them. I think I know the answer, but I want to hear him say it aloud.

“Was there ever anyone... before me? That you were with... like this?”

Luka pauses, looking up at me, his green and amber eyes meeting mine. “If I had,” he says slowly, his voice deep and hoarse with desire. “It still would never have been like this. But no. There's been no one but you, Naomi. And now there never will be.”

If anyone had asked me before this, I would have said that I didn't want to sleep with a virgin. I would have laughed off the idea.

The thought, back on Earth, would have conjured up sticky fumbling and sex that was over in a

matter of seconds, a man with no knowledge of how to please me and not enough self-control yet to

try. But Luka was none of those things.

He was fierce and hungry, desperate for my pleasure and his own, passionate and thorough. A

strange, possessive pride fills me at the thought that it's only ever been me, that it *will* only ever be

me, that I'm his first and only. I like the idea, and it startles me.

"*Mine*," he's said before, about me. And now I can say that too. I reach down, running my fingers

through his hair, my lips making the shape of the word.

*Mine. Mine, and only mine.*

Luka hesitates, a hint of worry in his eyes. "Was it... good?" he asks slowly, as if he has some

idea that it might not have been. That his frantic hunger might not have been enough to satisfy me.

I laugh softly, remembering that night and the things he made me feel: a pleasure so deep and all-

consuming that it frightened me, changed me, even back then.

"Yes," I whisper, my fingers still teasing through his hair, coming down to stroke along his jaw.

"It was so much more than *good*. It was incredible."

I see a look of bright, eager pride in his face, and then something else. That same hunger, that

*need*, and it twists something low in my belly, sending a fresh wave of desire through me.

"That was nothing," Luka says slowly, "compared to what I want to do to you now."

A thrill of anticipation rushes through me as his hands slide up my waist, cupping my breasts

between them, molding them together for him to run his tongue between. His lips drag over first one nipple and then the other, licking, sucking, his teeth nipping at the sensitive flesh until my back arches and I moan, my thighs spreading wider for him.

“Luka, *please.*”

“Patience,” he croons, his teeth tugging at my sensitive nipple, sucking it deeply into his mouth

until I writhe against him. His cock rubs against my belly, hot and hard, and I want him inside me

desperately. I want to feel him fill me up, stretch me wide, take me hard and deep. I want all of him,

and I don’t know how much longer I can wait.

His hands slide downwards again, over the soft curve of my waist, his lips peppering kisses

between my breasts, down the flat expanse of my belly, all the way to my hips. His teeth scrape over

my hipbones, his tongue drawing a hot line between them as his hands slide down, smoothing over my

inner thighs as he pushes my legs open wide.

He bends them backward, opening me up for him like a feast, my drenched pussy on full display

for his hungry, eager eyes.

When he bends his head toward me, there’s a wicked gleam of anticipation in his eyes, and it

sends a thrill through me, tensing every muscle and sending shivers over my skin. I feel his lips

against me, his tongue tracing my outer folds, and my head falls back as Luka begins the same slow

exploration of my pussy that he gave the rest of my body.

He takes his time, tasting every inch. I feel his tongue flutter along my folds, lapping up the taste



of me, teasing my entrance as I arch upward, wanting more.  
My fingers claw at the grass, my body

tensed as I moan, gasping Luka's name as he pushes his  
tongue inside me.

"Luka!" I cry out as he thrusts, fucking me with his tongue  
like a small cock, curling the tip so that

it presses against the most sensitive spot inside me.

It feels incredible, and my hand tangles in his hair, holding his  
mouth against me as I rock back

and forth on his face. I can feel the orgasm building, quick and  
steady now, the slow pleasure that

Luka built before compounding. The trembling spreads  
through me, my other hand clawing in the dirt,

and I feel his nose brush against my clit as his tongue pushes  
deeper.

It sends me hurtling over the edge. I grip his horns and scream  
his name as I arch upward, riding

his face to an explosive climax, writhing beneath him. I feel  
myself come on his tongue, arousal

gushing into his mouth, and he groans with pleasure as he  
drinks me down, his hands still squeezing

my thighs. It feels incredible, better than anything I've ever  
felt, and I'm lost in a torrent of sensation.

When the spasms start to ebb, I expect Luka to slide up my  
body, to feel the thick head of his cock

pressing into me. His tongue pulls free, still licking, lapping up  
the last of my release, but he doesn't

stop.

His tongue slides upward, dragging through my swollen,  
sensitive folds, as he still holds me

pinned in place beneath his hungry mouth. He circles my clit,  
avoiding licking directly as I shudder

beneath him, testing my responses.

“Luka... what... oh my god,” I moan aloud, thrashing beneath him as his tongue teases the edges

of my clit, driving me wild. It’s too much and not enough all at once, building another climax when I

haven’t yet entirely come down from the first, and I can hardly stand it.

It feels almost too good. He keeps teasing me, pushing the pleasure higher and higher until his

tongue finally centers on my clit, and I see stars. I feel lost in the sensations washing over me.

No one has ever gone down on me like *this*, made me feel things that I didn’t even know were

possible to feel. His tongue is soft, pushing, rubbing against my clit, and I hear myself faintly gasp out

that I’m going to come again just as Luka pushes two thick fingers into my clenching depths at the

same moment that he sucks my clit between his lips.

I explode. There’s no other word for it. I can feel the force it takes for him to keep me pinned

down, the thigh that he released to slide his fingers inside me pressing against his head as I twist and

writhe with the bolts of pleasure lancing through me. I come hard on his face for a second time,

shuddering, screaming his name to the sky above us, with no thought of who might hear. There’s no

one *to* hear, only us and the vast woods, and the feeling is something magical. It feels freeing in a way

that I’ve never experienced before.

I feel lost in a fog as Luka slides up my body, his gaze fixed on mine with a new kind of hunger. I

feel his cock rub against my belly as his fingers lace through mine, stretching my hands over my head,

and his lips come down onto mine.

The sweet tang of my arousal is slick on his mouth, but it doesn't make me want to kiss him less.

If anything, it makes me want him more, the evidence of how well he pleased me on my lips and

tongue now too. I feel him angle himself between my thighs, his swollen tip pressed against my slick

entrance, and Luka groans as he pushes himself into me.

Even after two explosive orgasms, even as wet and aroused as I am, he's thick enough that he has

to go slowly. I feel the piercing at the head of his cock rub against my inner flesh, his cock stretching

me as he pushes deeper, and the sensation makes my eyes roll back in my head with pleasure.

"Does that feel good, Naomi?" Luka murmurs my name, the sound of it on his tongue as erotic as

the feelings coursing through me, and I nod, breathless.

"Yes," I manage to gasp. "Oh god, yes."

Satisfaction glints in his eyes, and he thrusts deeper in response, filling me entirely with one last

heated slide that makes me cry out. I arch against him so that my breasts are pressed tightly against his

hard, muscled chest, and the feeling of my nipples rubbing against him is exquisite. When he grinds

against me, I feel him against my clit, sending sparks through me.

He holds himself there for a moment, as deeply as he can go. I feel the shudder that ripples

through him, hear the deep groan of his pleasure, and I wrap my legs around his hips, urging him

closer to me, even though there's no closer that he could be.

Luka's mouth brushes against mine again,

and I hear him murmur my name.

“Naomi, *goddess*, you feel so *drakking* good.”

I’m lost as he starts to move, thrusting into me hard and deep.  
I can feel every inch of him, hard

and ridged and perfect, and I know that there could never be  
anyone else for me. Luka is everything,

my perfect match, my mate, and the only thing left to wonder  
is how it took me so long to accept it.

My fingers twine with his, locking our hands together, holding  
on to him as he thrusts. Every hard

plunge of his cock into me jolts another cry from my lips,  
some of them muffled by his mouth on mine

as he kisses me. His hips meet mine, again and again, and I  
can feel a third orgasm building as he

grinds against me, my swollen clit so sensitive that the  
slightest touch sends sensation bursting through

me.

“I’m so close. Naomi...” Luka groans between gritted teeth,  
and I can feel how hard he’s

struggling to hold back. He’s been fighting for control this  
entire time, denying himself for my benefit,

and now I want him to let go.

I let go of his hands, sliding mine up his arms, over his  
shoulders, down his back to grip his

muscled ass firmly in my hands, pulling him deeper. “Come  
for me,” I moan in his ear, my lips

brushing against the hot shell. “I want to feel it. Fill me up  
with your cum, Luka. Give it to me,

please.”

I can tell that’s his undoing. He throws his head back with a  
primal roar of pleasure, his hips

shuddering as they snap against me in hard, jerky thrusts, and I  
cry out as I feel his piercing rubbing

against me, his ridges sliding back and forth, stimulating every inch of me. Nothing else could ever be

this good, and I squeeze my thighs around his hips as I hold him inside me.

“I’m close too,” I whisper. “Come with me, Luka.”

He lets his head fall back, a primal roar of pleasure tearing loose from his lips as I hear him

groan my name. His fingers clutch at the grass, his entire body shuddering as I feel the hot rush of his

cum inside me, filling me, and that undoes me too.

My orgasm bursts through me, arching my back and clenching around him, squeezing the seed from

his cock as he thrusts and grinds inside me. We come together, his cum filling me until I can feel it

dripping out between us, hot against my thighs, and Luka collapses against me, groaning.

“Naomi...”

He breathes my name, gasping. His hands lock with mine again, and then, still buried inside me,

he rolls onto his back so that I’m atop him. His cock is half-hard still, deep within me, and I want to

stay like this forever, locked together.

He looks up at me, and the emotions that I see on his face make my heart stutter in my chest. No

man has ever looked at me like this, with such love and longing, such *awe*. It makes me wonder how I

could have ever considered anything other than staying, how it could have taken me so long to see

what was always right in front of me.

My mate. My Luka.

He looks at me for a long time, wordlessly, and I blink down at him.

“What?” I ask curiously, and he hesitates, his hands dropping to my hips, as if he wants to hold me there atop him.

“I was wondering if you might run again,” he says softly, and something about the tone of his words tears at my heart.

I chuckle softly, shaking my head. I can’t be angry or hurt with him for thinking that—it makes sense why he would. Over and over again, for so much of our time together, that’s what I did. It’s how we began.

I can see why he thinks that’s how we would end.

But for the first time in a very, very long time, I have no desire to run.

“No,” I say softly. “I’m not going to run away.”

I swallow hard, dragging my fingers down his smooth chest. There’s so much of it, so much

broad, hard muscle, and I want to explore him the way he did with me, slowly and at great length.

“I’ve always been like this,” I whisper. “Ever since I was a kid. I had so much weighing down on me, even back then. My parents—my *real* parents, weren’t good ones. They weren’t kind or loving. I

ended up in other homes—we call them foster homes, on Earth. People who take care of kids who

don’t have families of their own.”

Luka’s face is calm, curious, and it’s clear he’s listening. It feels *good* to be listened to, I realize.

It feels like being seen and heard, for the first time in my life.

“They tried to help, but I couldn’t see past how it all made me feel. I ran away from the homes,

again and again. They didn't do anything to make me run— they didn't do anything wrong at all, really.

But I assumed they would. I assumed it would all go bad, and I wanted to be gone before it did. I

didn't want to depend on anyone other than myself. They tried to offer me love and support, but I

couldn't trust it. I couldn't accept it then.”

I half expect Luka to interrupt, or interject something, but he doesn't. His hands rest on my hips,

holding me, keeping me grounded with his touch even as he listens to everything I have to say, for as

long as I want to talk. It gives me the courage to admit the thing I've never been able to say out loud

before.

“I regret it,” I say softly. “I regret all the running, all the hurt I caused them, when they were only

trying to help. I regret not letting anyone in, being so alone. I thought it made me stronger, but it just

made me lonely. But even though I felt that way—it's been hard to change my nature. It's been a part

of me for so long. It's like—”

I wrestle for the right word. “It's like instinct,” I say finally.

“Running away from things that feel

like too much for me. And now—” a long breath rushes out of me. “Now you'll think differently of

me, just like everyone else. I've wanted to run away from that too. The fear of you looking down on

me, or judging me, seeing me as weak or cowardly—”

The look of astonishment that crosses Luka's face is enough to shake that fear. His eyes widen,

and he reaches up, caressing my cheek gently. “Naomi,” he says gently. “You're one of the bravest,

strongest women I've ever known, even in a tribe of warriors. There's nothing cowardly in you. You

ran from alien captors, into an unknown wilderness, and *fought* me when I came for you. You held

your own among the Peskiit. You fought for me and yourself, against Vordu. There is no one in this

galaxy that I would think is less cowardly than you."

My chest tightens at his words, my breath catching in my throat, and it feels hard to speak. I stare

down at him wordlessly as he continues, his hand still gently caressing my face.

"I might not have spent my life running from things," he says carefully, "but in some ways, what

I've done has had similar consequences. I've run *toward* things, often recklessly and thoughtlessly,

sometimes putting others in danger. I've spent my life trying to live up to my father's legacy, and it's

consumed me."

His palm presses against my cheek, and I lean into the caress.

"We've both let the past define us," Luka murmurs. "But it doesn't have to any longer. We don't

need any of that. We don't need to run away or toward anything, when everything we need is right

here."

I feel something come loose inside me at that, some lingering fear or instinct to flee, and I feel

free in a way I never have before. I lean forward, cupping his face in my hands, and there's nothing in

my thoughts right then but him.

"I like the sound of that," I whisper softly, and then I kiss him.

Luka's arms go around me, holding me close to him. We lie like that in the grass, tangled together,



kissing under the sky. As we break apart slowly, lips brushing as I pull back, I feel my mouth tilt in a wry smile.

“I tried to deny it,” I tell him quietly. “But I felt something for you for a long time. Long before this.”

Luka nods, his hand running through my hair. “I did too,” he admits. “From the first moment I saw you, a part of me knew. You were always meant to be mine, Naomi—and I yours.”

He brings me down for another kiss, our lips hovering against each other’s. “The story we told in the village was never a lie,” he murmurs. “It was the truth all along.”

I kiss him again, long and slow and deep, reveling in how good it feels to want to stay firmly in place at last, to be right where I should be.

Luka hardens again, swelling within me, stiff and rigid, and I feel his hips twitch beneath mine. I

start to move as I kiss him, feeling his hands squeeze my hips, and we begin again, under the wide-

open sky, tangled together now for an eternity. The pleasure builds slowly, deeply, and I lean back,

watching his gaze rake over me as he takes in the sight of me riding him, slow and deliberate.

There’s no one and nothing else for me any longer.

I never want to be apart from him again.

21

Luka

I COULD EASILY HAVE SPENT ALL the rest of the afternoon and the evening claiming Naomi, over and

over again. Even after she rides me to a hard, shuddering climax, my cock filling her with my seed

again for the second time in a brief span, I stay half-hard and swollen, ready to take her again as soon

as she's ready.

I'm insatiable for her. I've heard stories of what it was like to claim a goddess-blessed mate, to

experience this kind of true bond, but I never imagined it could be so all-consuming. It's not just my

cock that constantly craves her; my entire body aches for her touch, to be as close to her as possible.

We can't remain in the woods forever, though. When we've caught our breath again, getting our

clothes rearranged, I glance over at Naomi.

"We should look for food," I tell her reluctantly, even as my cock stirs to life all over again at the

sight of her tousled and flushed, cross-legged next to me. I can smell my seed on her, still on her

thighs, and it makes me ravenous with lust.

I want to fill her over and over again. The primal need knots in my belly, making me feel almost

feral with it, but I force myself to my feet, reaching out a hand to help her up too. "We can make it a

bit farther before it's too dark. We should try to put some more distance between us and the Peskiit."

Naomi nods, smoothing down her skirt as we head a little farther into the woods to look for

something to eat. I don't want to spend the time it would take to hunt, so instead I look for something

quicker, berries and mushrooms that I know are safe, gathering them in handfuls and sharing them with

Naomi as we walk.

It crossed my mind that she might not be able to travel much farther today, after how vigorously I

claimed her in the grass— *twice*—but she gamely keeps up, her quick strides attempting to match

mine. We travel as far as we can with what remains of the daylight, until dusk starts to fall and I look

for a clearing in the woods where we can rest.

“Have we gone far enough?” Naomi looks around worriedly, as if she expects a Peskiit to jump

out of the shadows at any moment. “Do you think it’s safe to stop?”

I’m worried too, wary of the possibility that we’re still being followed, but so far I’ve seen no

sign of it, and I want to reassure Naomi. She needs rest, and I feel a deep urge to make sure she feels

safe and protected.

“I don’t think Troyvl would waste the energy of his warriors, sending them after us,” I tell her

honestly. “He had his debt repaid. It was Vordu’s personal vendetta that tried to keep us back, and

nothing else. He has no claim to you or me. In fact, what we gave him more than paid the debt—he

lost nothing in this and gained a great deal. He has no reason to put so much effort into finding us.”

I step closer to her, touching her face reassuringly. “They might have looked for us for a little

while, but they would have given up quickly. I think we’re in the clear.”

Naomi nods. “I think you’re right. And we need the rest.”

The day has been taxing on us both, in more ways than one, and it doesn’t take long for us to

stretch out, eager for sleep. Even as my body craves the pleasure of claiming her again, I crave rest as

well, and I pull her into my arms. It feels natural, as if she's always belonged there, and I'm taken back to the comfortable nights in the Peskiit hut, sleeping next to her in the bed barely big enough for the two of us.

Except now, there's no pretending that we don't both want this. Naomi curls into me willingly, her warm body pressed against mine, and nothing has ever felt better. I know now how strongly she's felt the urge to run in the past, to run from something so strong and overwhelming, and the fact that she trusts me means everything.

The fact that she wants to *stay*.

Even as tired as I am, I can't fall into a deep sleep. I doze for brief periods, waking alert for any threats, as Naomi quietly snores against me. I try not to move, not wanting to disturb her, and a part of me is content to lie awake for most of the night, luxuriating in the pleasure of her so close to me, held in the circle of my arms.

It means I'm already awake when she wakes up, and she rolls over in my arms, sleepy and warm with a soft smile on her face.

"I had the most amazing dream," she murmurs, shifting against me, and a bolt of pure arousal lances through me.

"It wasn't a dream," I growl hungrily, my arms tightening around her. Her lips are close, her body arched against mine, and my cock is aching, desperate to be inside her again.

She tilts her chin up, kissing me slow and deep, and visions of rolling her onto her back in the soft

grass and driving myself into her wet heat fill my mind. It's impossible for my cock to be any stiffer

than it is already, but it throbs against my thigh, the urge quaking through me.

My hands slide over her, enjoying the softness of her, the delicacy. My hips grind against hers as I

squeeze the curve of her ass, pulling her tighter against me. The sound of her soft moan ripples

through me, and the urge to take her here and now grows stronger.

A rustle farther off jolts me, and I break the kiss, forcing myself to pull away. "We need to keep

moving," I murmur reluctantly, enjoying Naomi's small pout of distress. It feels good to know that she

wants me as much as I want her. This surety about her feelings, *knowing* that we have a future

together, is still so new that it feels like a constant surprise.

"You're right," she relents, getting to her feet and dusting herself off. It takes me a moment to

rearrange myself in a way that ensures my loincloth will cover my throbbing cock, but we manage to

get back on the path before too much more time passes, eating more berries on the way.

"Are you sure we're headed toward your village?" Naomi asks, and I nod.

"I'm more of a fighter and hunter than a tracker—but we all learn to some extent. I'm sure we're

on the right path."

She nods, accepting the answer, and I feel a warmth fill my chest. I hadn't realized fully how

much her trust meant to me, but there's no question about it now.

Things are so different between us now than we were before.  
All of the feelings we tried to keep

hidden before are out in the open now, acknowledged and  
enthusiastically accepted, and it feels

amazing. I feel as if I've been given a fresh start, a new  
beginning.

"Slow down a little," Naomi pants as we head farther down  
the path. "Your legs are *long*, Luka.

It's hard to keep up."

I glance at her, a smile toying with the corners of my mouth. "I  
thought you liked how *long* I was?"

I grin as her eyes widen, a spark of mischief in them.

"That length is why I'm walking a little more slowly," she  
gripes, though there's humor in her

voice too. "Not to mention the thickness—"

"We can stop if you'd like." I raise an eyebrow at her.

"Although that rest might be a bit more...

vigorous than you were expecting."

She flushes with obvious desire, and it feels good to see the  
evidence of how much she wants me.

The banter shows me a side of her that I knew existed, but  
only got hints of before—a sunnier

personality than I've ever seen, warm and full of life and love.

It's as if Naomi's shell has split open,

revealing the woman that I only caught a glimpse of before  
this.

"Tell me more about Xaath," she says when she's recovered  
and we're walking at a comfortable

pace. "If I'm going to be staying here, I should know more  
about it, right?"

The strength of the feeling that washes over me at the sound of  
those words is unexpected. The

thought of Naomi embracing my planet as her home, eager to learn more about it, makes me feel

warm, grounded. It feels like a gift that I didn't expect to be given.

"There are several different tribes," I explain as we walk.

"There's the Uleki, of course, who

held you captive, and the Peskiit, who you already know. But there are several others, as well.

There's the Bekaru, my tribe, who live in the grasslands. The Jakk live in the mountains. They are the

most vicious of the tribes, and to be avoided. Although..." I glance over at her. "I hear that your

friend Abigail and her Uleki defector have altered the situation with the Jakk considerably, when he

rescued her."

"Stay out of the mountains. Got it." Naomi grins at me. "I was never really a fan of them anyway,

on Earth. Anything else?"

I nod. "The Hollat live in the forests, dwelling in caves, and their status among the tribes is a bit

uncertain. Things have changed recently with them as well. They are not as feared as others, however.

There are the Engari, who are traders. If a tribe needs something that cannot be found or hunted here

on Xaath, they go to the Engari. And there is the Ashera, who are healers and mystics."

"It's not really so different from Earth," Naomi observes.

"Grasslands, forests, caves, mountains?"

We have all of that. It's just more spread out, I think. And of course, a lot of it is developed now.

There are cities, not just wild space. But what's left that's wild is very beautiful. Just like Xaath."

I stop briefly, turning toward her. The sun glints off her dark hair, and I mean every word as I step closer, brushing my fingers over the softness of it. “None of it could ever be as beautiful as you.”

She flushes, even deeper than before. “You’ve never seen Earth,” she says softly, and I smile at her.

“I don’t need to.”

We start down the path again, and a little while later, my stomach rumbles. Naomi laughs, reaching out and plucking some berries off a bush that we pass. She holds them up to my lips, feeding them to me, and I glance over at her wickedly as I take them, sucking the juice off her fingers as we walk. I see the shiver that goes through her at that, and it sends the same sensation through me.

It makes me more eager than ever to get back to the village, to the home awaiting us, a hut to sleep in and furs in which to claim my mate. *My* home, my furs, not the temporary resting place given to us by the Peskiit.

A home that, very soon, will be *ours*.

It’s easier than ever for us to talk, to share. I mention the warm shade that the sun seems to be turning her shoulders, which causes Naomi to retort that she’s surprised I’m not burnt to a crisp, considering how much flesh is on display.

“I haven’t heard you complain yet,” I tease her, and she rolls her eyes. “Do human men on Terra not walk around like this? What do they wear?”

“Clothes,” Naomi says dryly. “Unless they’re specifically choosing to be out in the sun, by a



beach, for instance. In which case—”

She launches into a description of various creams and sprays that humans need in order to protect their delicate skin from the sun, and I frown.

“Will you be all right? I don’t have a means to get a cream like that for you—”

Naomi smirks, her eyes skimming down my body, and this time it’s my turn to feel my cheeks heat under the hungry appraisal.

She tells me more about Terra, about how huge it is, how diverse, and about all the different types of humans and where they live. The planet sounds very advanced, but the more she tells me about it, the less appealing I find it.

“I’m glad that it was you who came to my world, and not the other way around,” I tell her frankly, and Naomi laughs.

“Not that long ago, I don’t think I would have agreed with you. But now...” She looks around at the landscape around and beyond us, then back at me. “I think I’ve changed my mind. There’s a lot that Xaath has that Earth doesn’t. There’s so much more freedom here.” She steps a little closer. “And it has you.”

We shouldn’t linger on the path to kiss, but I can’t resist her lips. I bend down, savoring the taste of berries on her mouth, before we continue on.

I feel a happiness I’ve never felt before. There’s nothing that I can compare it to, no feeling that I can recall that comes close to this. No achievement or victory could match it.

I, too, feel a freedom that I’ve never felt before.

We reach the edge of the woods, and I can see the plains starting to stretch out before us, wide swaths of open grass. My heart lifts at the sight, a feeling almost like what I imagine soaring must be filling me.

We're very close to home.

Just as we're about to step out of the tree line, I hear a cracking noise behind us, the sound of footsteps rushing forward. I turn just in time to see a familiar sight.

Vordu springs from the trees, rushing toward us.

Toward *Naomi*.

I lunge for him, but I don't have enough time. Naomi fell a few paces back to look at a patch of flowers growing along the edge of the trail, and Vordu goes straight for her. Before I can reach him, he grabs Naomi's arm, spinning her against his chest with a heavy arm trapping her against him.

His other hand snaps up, pressing a sharp blade to her throat as her eyes go wide.

"Come get your mate now, *Bekaru*."

22

Naomi

I CAN SEE the fear filling Luka's eyes as Vordu pins me against his body. He understands the same thing that I do in this moment: that whether Troyvl wanted us pursued or not, Vordu was always going to come after us. After *me*. He's become obsessed with me, and now that he believes I'm not Luka's mate, he wants me for himself.

I watch Luka go very still, anger and terror flooding his face. I can see everything he's thinking

written there, the fury that Vordu would continue to try to take his mate from him, and the fear that

what we've so recently found together is going to be snatched away from us.

But I'm not afraid.

For the first time in a long time, I'm truly not.

*Because I found Luka.*

Against all odds, against everything that should make sense in the world, I found the man I'm

supposed to be with. I found something I never knew or believed in, a soulmate, the one that I'm

*certain* is meant for me, and I found him halfway across the universe.

I'm *sure* of something for the first time in my life, and it gives me a sense of calm that I've never

experienced before.

I'm done being afraid, done running away.

I've found something that's worth staying and fighting for.

I swallow hard, feeling the blade pressing against my throat.

"It's going to be okay," I say calmly,

my gaze meeting Luka's. He's tensed for a fight, anguish written across every line of his face, and I

know I need to give him something to hold on to. Something to ground him.

"It's going to be okay," I repeat, "because we're here together, Luka. I never knew what it was to

give myself fully to someone until I met you. I never knew that anything could feel like this—like a

part of me that was missing has fallen into place."

I feel Vordu stiffen, the hand holding the blade pressing harder against my throat. *Don't make me*

*bleed until I can finish*, I think desperately, needing to say what's on my mind—on my heart—to Luka

before it's too late. If Luka sees Vordu draw blood, I know he'll lose control.

"No matter what happens," I tell Luka, "I'm lucky to have found you—lucky that you found *me* that

day in the woods. I'm lucky to have had you as my mate. I'm sure of that—more sure than I've ever

been of anything. You *are* my mate."

I can feel Vordu trembling with fury behind me, the arm across my chest crushing me hard against

him, and I choke out the last words, steeling myself for the sensation of a blade dragging across my

throat.

"I love you, Luka."

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I feel Vordu's hand twitch, pushing the blade tighter

against my throat. I feel the hot trickle of liquid down my skin, and I see a primal rage like nothing

I've ever seen before flash across Luka's face, darkening his eyes.

"Get your *drakking* hands off my mate!" he snarls, flinging himself forward, taking advantage of

Vordu's anger being focused on me for a moment.

Vordu's attention snaps toward Luka, and as he turns to react to the massive warrior rushing at

him, I take what little advantage I have.

I shove hard at the arm over my chest, throwing my hands up to try to fling both it and the hand

holding the knife to my throat away. I know I'm taking a risk, but the last thing I want is to be between

two battling alien warriors with a sharp blade against my skin.

I manage to give myself just enough space to slip out, and as I do I turn, bringing my foot up hard

into Vordu's balls. The loincloth he wears give him no protection, and my foot slams up into the soft

flesh, making him snarl in pain as he stumbles forward.

Luka takes full advantage of the opening I've given him. His blades are drawn in an instant, and

he rushes forward, slicing at Vordu. Vordu feints to one side, drawing his other long knife, but Luka

brings his sword hilt down hard on Vordu's arm as he passes by him, making him drop the dagger that

he has held to my throat.

I don't hesitate. I dive for it instantly, grabbing it and feinting to the other side. Vordu swings at

me, but his attention is divided now between Luka and me, and he didn't expect me to fight back.

Darting forward, I jab at his thigh, hard. The dagger sinks into meat and muscle, and I feel it hit

bone. Vordu lets out another pained snarl, his fist coming down hard against my back, and I sprawl

forward in the grass, the dagger still sticking out of his thigh.

Before he can snatch it free, Luka is on him again. Vordu manages to parry Luka's first blow with

his long knife, holding back the dual blades in Luka's hand, but he's at far too much of a disadvantage.

Luka drops his right hand, driving his blade deep into Vordu's gut.

The other alien stumbles forward, blood spilling from his stomach and his mouth, and Luka turns,

his other hand coming up to hold his sword blade to Vordu's throat.

"You will *never* touch her again," he snarls.

His hand jerks sideways, and Vordu's throat opens.

Luka rushes toward me the instant that the other alien falls, reaching to help me up out of the grass.

"Are you hurt?" he asks in a rush, pulling me into his arms, and I shake my head.

He stares down at me, a riot of emotions clouding his gaze. I can tell that he's about to ask me if I meant it—what I said while Vordu held me captive, and I don't want him to have even a single second to doubt that I did.

I want him to hear it without the pressure of someone holding me prisoner, without the possibility of those words being the last ones I ever say to him. I want to say it simply because it's true—and because I want to tell him, over and over again.

I reach up, cupping my hand against his jaw. "I love you," I say softly. "My mate. I love you."

The smile that spreads across Luka's face is bright as the sun, adoration shining in his eyes.

"I love you, too," he murmurs, holding me close to him. "Not only because you are my mate, my corva, but because of everything you are. Brave, and strong, and fierce. My perfect match, in every way."

His hand tangles in my hair, and his mouth descends to mine.

There, free at last from everything that wants to keep us apart, I kiss my mate under an alien sun.

23

Luka

I LOSE myself in the kiss for a long moment, drinking her in. Her lips are soft and full under mine, her

body pressed willingly against me, and I'm certain that this is all the paradise I could ever ask for.

I could kiss her forever. And now, that can actually be our fate. We'll spend the rest of our lives together now, without fear.

When we're both breathless, we break apart, hesitant to stop touching. The terror of Vordu's attack hasn't quite faded yet, that feeling of coming so close to a terrible loss, but I feel sure that we aren't in danger from the other Peskiit. It was clear that Vordu had chosen to follow us on his own, not on orders from Troyvl.

Still, I want to move on. I want to be back in my own village, to get my mate to safety, to be with the other Bekaru again. I take Naomi's hand as we set off again, leaving Vordu there in the grass, carrion to feed the animals of the forest.

It's what he deserves. He was no true warrior, and he doesn't deserve a warrior's burial.

Once again, Naomi astonishes me with her fortitude. Despite the exertion of the fight, she doesn't pause to rest or slow down. We both push hard throughout the day, trying to cover as much ground as we can before night falls again, and she keeps pace with me without complaint.

*She will do well here. This place suits her.*

I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Naomi was meant to be on Xaath. To be with *me*.

It takes us two more days of travel to reach the Bekaru village. Despite my eagerness to return, as we near it I find myself slowing a little, wanting at the same time to savor the moments of complete

aloneness that I have with Naomi, before we return to normal life. The mating lust, too, fresh as it is, can't be denied for long before we both are desperate for each other, needing the connection and release that claiming one another offers.

I take her every chance I get, willing to delay our return a little longer if it means getting to explore her body to my heart's content, without anything to interrupt us. I take my time learning every inch of her, what makes her scream and shiver, learning everything that brings her the greatest pleasure.

Most of all, I love the way she clings to me after we're finished, her arms and legs wrapped around me, holding me deeply inside her, as if she never wants to let go.

Not only is she no longer running, she's all mine. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that nothing will ever part us again.

By the end of the second day after we reach the plains, the village comes into sight, the shapes of it rising out of the grass. I stop some distance away, and Naomi stops too, looking up at me questioningly.

Gently, I touch her jaw, sliding my fingers beneath her chin as I tilt it upward so that I can lean down and kiss her. "I had no idea," I murmur softly against her mouth, "when I volunteered for that rescue mission, that it would change my life so much. I had no idea that I would find the woman who was fated for me, the other half of my soul. I'm so very grateful."



Her arms go around my neck, her lips brushing against mine as she arches into me, kissing me back. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life,” she whispers. “I closed myself off for so long, missed out on so much—”

She pulls back a little, grinning up at me. “—until a gorgeous, cocky, stubborn alien warrior opened up my heart.” Her fingers brush along my jaw. “I’m so lucky that I found you, Luka.”

I smile down at her, feeling my heart swell in my chest. “We’re both lucky.”

I kiss her again, long and slow and deep, and then we both turn, looking toward the village.

“Are you sure?” I ask her quietly. We talked about it on the walk toward the village, what life will look like once we’re home, but I want to ask her one more time. I want—I *need*—to hear her say it again. “Are you sure you want to stay here, to be a part of the village?”

Naomi laughs softly, smiling up at me. “Of course I am,” she tells me, and she sounds so certain that it makes my heart leap in my chest. “This is where my mate is. *This* is where I can imagine my life. Nowhere else.”

She goes up on her tiptoes, brushing her lips softly over mine. “You said the same thing about

Nicole and Abigail, that they felt that way about their mates. I didn’t understand it then—but I do now.”

Hand in hand, we walk toward home.

The villagers catch sight of us as we arrive, and there’s a crowd by the time we reach the center,

Harax at the forefront.

“You’ve returned!” Harax calls out, stepping forward. “And with the Terran woman. You’ve brought her back.”

“My mate,” I tell him firmly, and I see a pleased smile spread over his face.

“All the better,” he says, nodding with approval. “Tell me what happened, to delay you both?”

I see Nicole and Abigail running forward toward Naomi, calling out her name, and it makes me

glad to see the smile on Naomi’s face as she greets them. I’m glad there are others here, more of the

Terran women to make her feel at home.

As Naomi speaks with the other women, I fill Harax on all that’s happened, from the time I

followed Naomi into the woods until now. The others gather around, murmuring among themselves,

eyes wide as they take in the story.

For the first time, a crowd is gathered, listening to tales of my exploits, impressed with the tale of

all I’ve done. I can see in their eyes the same expression that was so often given to my father: the look

of others seeing a great warrior in front of them.

It’s all I’ve wanted for as long as I can remember. But as I glance over at Naomi, who is standing

at my side once more, I realize with a sudden clarity that it’s not what I needed, after all. I’ve wanted

glory and accolades for so long, but I was seeking the wrong thing.

I have all that I need right beside me, now. A true reason to fight.

I understand, at last, what drove my father to be such a great warrior.

It wasn't pride.

It was love.

24

Naomi

I STAND by Luka's side as he tells the story of our time with the Peskiit and our escape, happy to be

next to him. I feel safe, secure by his side, and hearing Nicole and Abigail's excitement over my

relationship with Luka made me feel better still. I wouldn't have understood, before, but now it makes

perfect sense. I know what they felt—what they feel for Harax and Zaid.

"This is my mate, Naomi," Luka says as he finishes, his hand on the small of my back as he

introduces me to Harax and the others. I feel a small tremor of nervousness at the idea that they might

not welcome me, but everyone in the crowd lets out a murmur of approval, some of them coming

forward to tell me how happy they are to see me here with Luka. There's no sense that any of them are

unhappy to have humans in their midst. If anything, they're more welcoming than a lot of people I met

for the first time on Earth.

Nicole and Abigail, especially, are thrilled to see me, hugging me and squealing over the fact that

there's another of our group here. I'm so happy to see them, and glad to see that they're both happy

and healthy here—and free, as Luka had promised.

*If I was more trusting, if I hadn't run from Luka, I could have been here with them so much*

*sooner*, I think as we stand there, trading stories of what's happened since the last time we were all together. *But then again, I think I had to go through all of it to get here. To realize what I could have, if I took a chance.*

Without the trials that Luka and I went through at the Peskiit village, I'm not sure I would have been able to understand what I had in front of me. Or if I had, it would have taken so much longer.

Opening my heart to trust and love was the hardest thing I've ever done. But in a way, everything we went through was worth it. I know I'm certain of Luka's feelings, and he's sure of mine. There's no doubt for either of us.

We were meant to be.

Written in the stars.

"Come on," Nicole says, taking my hand as Luka steps away with Harax. "We'll show you around the village."

I glance at Luka, feeling a little nervous to leave his side, but he smiles down at me reassuringly.

"I'll meet up with you," he says, bending down to cup my cheek in his hand as he kisses me. It's long and thorough, making my heart speed up in my chest, and I see the other women's eyes widen as Luka breaks away.

Nicole and Abigail flank me, one on either side, leading me away to show me what makes up my new home.

*Home.*

I've never really felt like I had one before. I never would have imagined that I'd find it here on an

alien planet, but in a way, it makes sense. My life has always been different, a path that I've chosen

for myself. I've chosen again—this time to take a chance on staying.

We take a tour of the village as a group, the other rescued women chiming in as Nicole and

Abigail take point, showing me the huts where everyone lives, the common area for meals, the places

where food is stored and prepared.

They explain the rhythm of the days to me, and I can tell that it's not so different from what I did

while we were staying with the Peskiit. Everyone chips in according to their strengths, helping to

gather and cook, prepare food and tan animal hides, weave baskets and make clothing. There's a

sense of freedom in it, a palpable happiness that I can feel among the women, even if I can tell that a

few of them are still adjusting to the reality of being on an alien planet.

Faith in particular is still very quiet, keeping her son close to her, although she also seems less

anxious than she was before.

"You and Luka make a good pair," Abigail tells me teasingly as we walk, elbowing me lightly in

the side. She seems to have blossomed since coming to the Bekaru village with Zaid. She's still one

of the quietest in the group, but she's not as shy and nervous as I remember. "I can see how he looks at

you. I would have taken my time coming back too."

She winks at me, smiling knowingly.

Before, I might have gotten flustered at the idea, or tried to deny it, changing the conversation. But

I feel peaceful now, settled and sure in what me and Luka are. I don't feel any need to run from it.

I grin at her. "I know. I'm very lucky. And so is he."

Luka finds me a little while later, sitting in the common area with the other women as they catch

me up on what's been happening in the village since they were rescued. Nicole and Abigail told me

the stories of how they ended up with Harax and Zaid—every thrilling detail—and I'm so enthralled

that it takes me a moment to see Luka walking in my direction.

Once I do though, I can't look anywhere else.

He looks gorgeous, relaxed and at home, striding toward me with a careless confidence. He grins

at me as he approaches, reaching for my hand and pulling me up to my feet as he draws me in close to

him.

"Sorry to steal her away," he says, glancing at the others. "But I'd like to take Naomi to see where

we'll be living. If that's all right with you," he adds, glancing down at me.

My heart leaps in my chest, and I feel a giddy smile on my lips as I nod. "I'd love that," I tell him,

trying to sound nonchalant, but from the knowing looks the other women give each other, I don't think

I was very successful.

I can't help it. Even though we stole a little time this morning before arriving in the village to

enjoy each other, I already crave him all over again. Not just for the pleasure of sex, but the intimacy

and closeness. I've never felt anything like that before, what it's like for it to be more than just

pleasure.

Being with my mate is a new experience, and one that's better than I could have ever imagined.

"What did you and Harax talk about?" I ask him as we walk, my arm looped through his as I lean

into him. "Is he happy that you're back?"

Luka nods. "Both to have you and me here, and because he needs every warrior here that he can

get. He's decided that we need to ally with one of the other tribes in order to keep the Uleki at bay."

"Because of the women being rescued?"

He grimaces. "Yes. 'Rescued' is how we see it, but they see it as theft. They're ramping up their

threats of war against the Bekaru, and our numbers are fewer than theirs. Harax knows we need to

find another tribe to bolster our strength. He hopes that the alliance will cause them to back off before

an actual war happens."

"How is he going to manage that? You said all the tribes seem to keep to their own territories—"

Luka smiles reassuringly down at me, reaching to squeeze my hand in his. "He'll find a way. He's

a good leader. You can feel safe here—he'll do all he can to protect his tribe, and you're all a part of

that now. As will I," he adds firmly. "You're everything to me, Naomi."

I can't help wondering what Harax can offer to get another tribe to join with the Bekaru—I don't

know enough about the inner workings of the tribes to understand how he might accomplish that,

especially with the threat of war looming. But then Luka points out his hut up ahead, and all other

thoughts flee from my mind. All I can think about is him as he ushers me inside, my heart leaping into

my throat.

“It’s not big,” he starts to say, motioning around the space as if to show me around, but before he

can say another word I go up on my tiptoes, reaching for his face to drag him down for a hungry kiss.

We’re alone in our own home at last, and I want him desperately.

He responds instantly, his arms going around me as he pulls me close, his mouth slanting over

mine as I part my lips for his tongue. I want all of him, and as his broad hands slide up my back,

pressing me to his chest, I can feel that he wants the same from me. He’s hard already, thick and

pressing against my thigh beneath his loincloth, and he starts to back me up slowly as he kisses me,

his hands sliding all the way up to thread through my hair and slip around to cup my face gently.

“I told you that I couldn’t wait to claim you here, in my furs,” he murmurs. Then he sweeps me up

easily with one arm, lifting me and depositing me on my back in the pool of soft fur.

He snatches his loincloth away with one swift motion, leaving his gorgeous body entirely bare for

me to see, his thick cock so hard that it’s pressed against his ridged abdomen. He leans over me,

smoothing my hair away from my face as his hand undoes the knots of my top, busily stripping away

my clothing with an eagerness that makes my heart race.

“In a perfect world,” he murmurs, his hand sliding down my hip as he pushes my skirt down, “I

would keep you bare like this for me always, right here, waiting for my cock.”



“That would never work,” I breathe against his lips, as his hand slips along my inner thigh,

seeking out the heat between my legs. “But right now, I like that idea very much. Let’s start with the

rest of today, and go from there.”

“Your wish is my command.” Luka grins down at me, capturing my mouth with his again as his

fingers slip between my thighs, brushing along my soft folds. I gasp as I feel him spread me open, his

fingertips dragging in the wet heat there, up to my aching clit, and when he brushes his fingers over

me there, I let out a low cry of pleasure.

“I love when you make that sound for me.” His lips slide over mine, stealing one more kiss as he

drags his mouth lower to run his lips over the edge of my jaw, down my throat, all the while teasing

my clit with his fingertips, drawing soft, gasping moans from me with every touch.

Every kiss, every movement of his hand, drives me wild. It feels so good, better than anyone else

ever could, and I cling to him as he slowly builds the pleasure, teasing me with slow kisses and

touches until I’m hovering on the edge of an orgasm, ready to beg him to let me come.

I don’t have to. He claims my mouth again, hot and hungry as his fingers quicken over my clit,

rubbing hard and fast to push me over the edge, and I come hard for him as I cry out, my arms

wrapped around his neck. He groans as he feels my arousal gush over his fingers, my entire body

throbbing as I arch and spasm beneath him, and just as the last tremors of the orgasm are rippling

through me, he grabs my waist and rolls us both over in one fluid motion.

His hands grab my hips as he rolls onto his back, urging me upward, onto his face. "I want to taste you," he growls. "I want you to ride my face while you come for me again."

My pulse leaps, and I feel my entire body clench at the thought, looking down at his eager

expression. "For someone who never did this before me," I breathe shakily, feeling his hands squeeze

the soft flesh of my hips. "You're very creative."

Luka grins, pulling me toward his mouth. "I've had plenty of time to think about it."

There's nothing to grab on to. The wall is too far away, and there's no headboard. As I straddle

Luka's face, there's only his hands to keep me steady. I slide my hands over his as I feel his tongue

flick out, the pleasure instantly blooming over me in a hot wave as he dips his tongue between my

folds, lapping up my arousal.

He groans at the taste of me, pushing his tongue into my entrance as I slowly move against his

face, gasping at the pleasure. It feels so fucking good, the pressure of his tongue slowly fucking me,

building me back up from my last climax, and by the time he slides his tongue upward to my sensitive

clit I'm more than ready for him to make me come again.

"You taste so *drakking* good," he murmurs, the sound muffled against my flesh, his tongue eagerly

swirling around my throbbing flesh.

I want to say something in response, something witty, but I can't find a single word. My mind is

nothing but a fog of pleasure, everything concentrated on the intense, overwhelming pleasure of

Luka's mouth between my thighs, and I can feel another climax building, ready to shatter me with the all-consuming ecstasy of it.

He pushes his mouth tighter against my flesh, sucking my clit into his mouth as he swirls his

tongue around it, and I come apart at the seams.

What begins as a moan becomes a shriek of pleasure, so loud that I'm sure the entire village must

be able to hear me screaming Luka's name, but I don't care. I can't care about anything other than how

incredible it feels, how fucking *perfect*, and my head falls back as my back arches, my hips rocking

down onto his mouth as I come hard on his face, my nails digging into the backs of his hands as I ride

his face through a wild orgasm.

I'm still panting and trembling when Luka lifts me up by my waist, as if I weighed nothing at all,

his eyes gleaming and his lips and chin glistening with my arousal. "You taste so sweet," he murmurs.

"But I can't wait another moment to have my cock inside you."

"I thought I was going to suffocate you," I gasp, and he grins.

"I can think of no better way to go," he growls.

He shifts me lower on his hips, and I feel his thick, hard cock pressing against my entrance. He

pulls me down onto his cock, his hands on my waist controlling the motion, sliding me down inch by

inch as the incredible pleasure of being filled so completely washes over me. After two orgasms,

every inch of me feels sensitive, alive, the slightest brush or movement lighting me on fire.

I cry out as I feel him slide deeper, his handsome face taut with need as he groans at the sensation.

He drags me down, all the way until I'm fully impaled on his cock, and I hear him gasp as he settles deeply inside me.

"*Goddess*, you feel so *drakking* good," he moans, his eyes hot with desire as he moves beneath

me. "Nothing else could ever be this good."

"I know," I whisper, leaning forward, my hands on his chest as my lips find his. I could lose

myself in kissing him, in the feeling of his skin sliding against mine, the unique pleasure of his

piercings rubbing against my lips, inside me, in places I never knew something like that could feel so

good.

I want him forever, and now I know I'll have just that.

He thrusts into me, hard, sending a ripple of delicious pleasure through me, making me feel

impossibly as if I'm about to come again. I gasp against his lips, my fingers digging into his chest,

back arching as I grind down onto the thick length filling me again and again.

"I—oh god, I think I'm going to—"

"*Yes*," Luka purrs, his hands wrapping in my hair as he drags my mouth down to his again. "Come

for me, Naomi. I love the way you sound when you come for me."

His other hand squeezes my ass, pulling me down hard onto him, my body pressed against his. I

feel my clit grind against him, the last burst of pleasure I needed, and I clench hard around the thick

cock inside me, my scream of pleasure lost in our kiss as I come hard for the third time. I spasm

around him, my entire body tight and arching, and I hear his groan as his hand tightens, his fingers

slipping between the cheeks of my ass.

“I want to make you come so many times for me.”

I gasp as his fingers press against my tight hole, one dipping lower, swirling in the arousal that’s

dripping from me by now, my body stretched around him. He uses it to press his finger deeper, his

lips spreading in a grin as he kisses me long and hard, swallowing my gasps and cries of pleasure.

“Would you come if I took you here?” he asks softly, his eyes flicking up to meet mine. “If I

claimed you *everywhere*, my corva?”

It’s the one thing I’ve never done before. I never thought I would want to, but looking down at

Luka’s handsome face, awash with the same pleasure I feel, knowing how much I trust and love him,

how much he loves me in return... I want it.

I want everything with him, and for him to have all of me.

“Yes,” I whisper, arching against him, feeling him throb inside me eagerly. “You can have all of

me, Luka. I want you to.”

He groans, his other hand on my hip as he thrusts up into me once more, savoring the feeling of

being inside me as he slowly moves his finger in my ass, readying me. He groans, hips shuddering

beneath me. “It’s hard to be out of you for even a moment,” he murmurs. “I want you so badly.”

With one smooth movement, he slips out of me as if with great effort, rolling me onto my stomach

as his arm goes beneath my waist, angling me upward for him. I feel a moment's nervousness as his

hands slide over my ass, spreading me for him. His cock is *huge*, and I can't help but wonder how it

might work. But I trust Luka. I know he would never hurt me.

And I want this.

"*You're so drakking perfect*," he groans, his fingers moving through my arousal, using my own

desire to ease his path forward. "I want to be inside you in every way, fill you up over and over again

with my seed."

A shudder goes through me as he grips his cock, pressing the swollen head against my tight hole,

and I've never felt anything like the sensation that washes over me as he starts to push forward,

slowly. I feel desired, aroused, as if what we're doing is deliciously filthy and intimate all at once,

and I gasp as he pushes forward, the thick tip of his cock slipping past the tight muscle in one sudden

motion that makes me cry out.

Luka goes very still, only the tip of his cock lodged inside me as he strokes my hip, looking down

at me worriedly. "Are you all right? I can stop. I can finish myself if you need—"

I shake my head, trying to regain my breath. "No, I want it. It's just... it's the first time I've—"

"No one has claimed you here?"

I shake my head, and the possessive lust that I see in Luka's eyes fills me with a desire beyond

anything I've ever felt.

“Good,” he growls, his hands tightening on my hips. “Only I will ever claim you here, my *corva*.”

My cock is the only one you will ever feel filling you. We were made for each other.”

He groans as his cock slips deeper, the pleasure of it stealing away his words. I feel impossibly full, stretched, his cock claiming me entirely, and it feels more intensely erotic than I could have

imagined. I’m trembling with desire, my body shaking with the need to come again, and as Luka slides

forward the last few inches, seating his cock fully in my ass, I let out a pleading moan.

“Is this what you need?” He slides a hand between my legs, his fingers circling my stiff, aching

clit. “Or this?”

I gasp as his thumb slides inside me, filling me where his cock no longer can, and I let out a low

wail of pleasure as he starts to move, his cock and fingers driving me past the point of pleasure into

almost more sensation than I can bear.

“Yes,” I gasp. “Yes, more, please.”

Luka groans.

“I won’t last long, my *corva*, not after this much. But I want you to come again.” His fingers find a

rhythm on my clit, his cock thrusting slowly in my ass, letting me get used to the invasion. “Can you

do that for me?” he purrs, leaning forward as he works me higher with his cock and fingers, his lips

close to my ear, his hard chest against my back. “Can you come on my cock while I fill your perfect

ass with my seed?”

I nod breathlessly, on the verge of coming apart already. I'm lost in bliss, in the knowledge that

this is my forever, this gorgeous man who is my perfect mate, who makes me feel things I never knew

I could, that the rest of my life will be spent in love and pleasure beyond my wildest imaginings.

"Yes," I gasp. "Oh god yes, Luka, I'm going to come for you again."

I clutch at the furs as I feel myself start to shudder, my entire body tightening around him, my clit

throbbing beneath his fingertips as my arousal coats his hand, and I hear his roar of pleasure as he

stiffens behind me. His cock hardens and swells in my ass, his hips jerking as I feel the hot rush of his

cum inside me, his pleasure joining mine as he slides an arm around my waist and pulls me back

against him. We arch and cling to each other, our climaxes joining as he buries himself in my ass,

filling me up entirely.

He holds on to me for a long time, his lips pressed to my shoulder, even as we both come down

from the high of our release. His hand slides up to my cheek, his body still buried within mine, and he

turns my lips to his for a soft, slow kiss.

"I love you," he murmurs against my mouth. "My Naomi. My mate. My *corva*."

I let out a soft sigh, reaching up to run my fingers through his hair, savoring the feeling of still

being tangled up with him. "I love you too, Luka. I never felt loved like this before," I whisper. "I

never knew..."

"Now you do." His arms tighten around me, and he kisses me again, his words low and soft for



only the two of us to hear, as if for just this moment, we're the only ones in the universe. "I will spend the rest of my life worshipping you, my mate."

I wouldn't have it any other way.

Epilogue

PENELOPE

THINGS ARE BETTER HERE.

I think all of the women agree, even if some are a little more suspicious than others. We stick together in groups, a bit wary after being held captive, staying close with the ones that we felt closest to during our captivity in the Uleki village. Nicole, Naomi, and Abigail tend to stay together. They're

the ones who have mates here, so they have that in common.

I've stayed with June and Faith, helping Faith with her son. He's a sweet boy, small for his age

and shy, but the alien planet doesn't seem to agree with him. I know it worries Faith, and despite how

kind Harax has been, she's uncertain of what her future looks like here.

We all are, to some extent—the ones who haven't found love here, at least. But day by day, it feels

a little safer as we settle in, and things here are inarguably different than the Uleki tribe was.

We aren't treated like possessions, something to be traded away. We have our freedom, even if

we're on an alien planet. And it's not so bad. There's a calm rhythm to our days that I didn't have

back on Earth, and sometimes I find myself enjoying it. Even wanting to stay.

As we drift apart for a little while, June to take care of some task she was asked to do, and Faith

to put her son down for a nap, I wander toward the varhell pens. I find them fascinating. I loved horses back on Earth, and these aren't so unlike horses, even if they have very cat-like traits as well.

Their fur is soft, and some of them are very sweet. It's peaceful to be around them. I can talk without wondering what they might think of me, or hearing advice that I don't really want. They simply listen.

I walk toward the pens, feeling the warm sun on the back of my neck, and as I pass by a group of warriors, I hear Harax's voice. I know I shouldn't eavesdrop, but it's hard not to. I've always been curious by nature, and in this uncertain circumstance, I want to know what's going on.

"There will be consequences for the rescue of the Terran women," I hear him say, his voice low and concerned. "The Uleki are threatening war. We *need* to make this alliance with the Hollat, to fortify our position. If we have the strength of another tribe's numbers, in addition to ours and our mounts, the Uleki may rethink attacking us."

"Their leader is new," one of the other warriors says, his voice cautious. "He won his right to lead after the old leader's death, as you did, Harax. His loyalties are unsure. The alliances are shifting. We can't be sure that he won't take the side of the Uleki if we approach him, and attack us to gain favor there."

"Oryx can be a violent man," Harax agrees. "He has been the strongest of them for a long time, and he is a forbidding leader. But he is not without honor, from what I've heard. There may be

something we can offer him. His strength would be an asset to us.”

A small shiver goes through me.

*He sounds frightening*, I think, but my pulse leaps into my throat as I try to picture this man,

another warrior like the ones I’ve seen, huge and virile, dangerous and brutal.

The thought of meeting more of these strange aliens at all, not to mention an entirely different

tribe, makes me tremble. But it’s intriguing too. I feel something strange at the thought of this man

Harax describes, a stirring of curiosity.

*You’re being foolish*, I tell myself firmly. *You’d be safer not to think of him at all—of any of them.*

But some small part of me can’t help but want to meet him.

\*\*\*

*Alien Beast’s Prize*, Penelope and Oryx’s story, is next in the series! To be notified when it releases,

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