



**ALIEN
HUNTER'S**
Captive

FATED MATES OF THE XAATHIAN BARBARIANS

PRESLEY HALL

ALIEN HUNTER'S CAPTIVE

Fated Mates of the Xaathian Barbarians #2

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Abigail

“COME ON! All of you, out! Stay together now!”

The sharp voices of the alien warriors bark in my ears as I and the other women are hustled out of the hut we've been kept in for the past weeks, all of us herded in a tight group through the village.

I can understand their words now—we all can, for better or for worse—thanks to the translator chips that were implanted in us. I'm not particularly happy about having a bit of alien tech embedded in the base of my skull, but a part of me thinks it's at least better than not knowing at all what they're saying.

We still might not have much of an idea what's going to happen to us, since they haven't let any plans slip out, but hearing them talk and not being able to understand a word was far more anxiety-inducing.

For me, anyway. I'm not sure if all the others feel the same.

We're brought to a watering hole near the village. The water is mostly fresh and clean, fed by what looks like a faintly bubbling spring in the center, and I make note to stay away from there, as it's likely to be quite deep. It's muddy around the edges, churned up from traffic of animals and aliens stopping by to drink and wash, but in the increasing heat and after days of sitting in the hut, only leaving to relieve myself, I'm eager to clean off the grime.

“Strip,” one of the warriors barks, gesturing at us. “Wash.”

Oh thank god, they really do want us to bathe.

I feel relieved, until I and Naomi both start to walk into the water still clothed, and the warrior waves angrily at us, glaring.

“Strip,” he repeats, and I flinch.

I don't want to get naked in front of these aliens, all of whom are watching us eagerly as if they can't wait to see us bare in the watering pool. But from the way the alien in charge of the group is glaring at us, it looks as if we're not going to get much of a choice.

Suddenly I'm not sure if having the chip in *is* an improvement, because as we turn away from the aliens and start to strip out of the clothing we were given, I can hear the comments from the guards.

“Look at the breasts on that one!” one of them calls out as Faith unwinds the woven strip of cloth tied around her neck and chest to form a top, and another comments on the roundness of Bianca's ass as she pushes her leather skirt down.

“They come in many colors,” one warrior comments offhandedly, and I turn to snap at him, but bite the words back when I realize that he probably wouldn't grasp why that's such a shitty thing to say anyway. It would just get me in trouble, punished even, and for what?

“Don't worry about it,” Bianca murmurs, grasping my elbow to tug me into the water, but one of the warriors comes closer to me, pointing at the birthmarks scattered across my very pale skin, now reddened from the harsh alien sun. I've always been a bit self-conscious about them, but having this alien ogle them is worse than having the mean girls make fun of me in the locker room back in high school.

“This one is spotted like a *pursin*,” he jokes, jabbing at the slender flesh of my arm, only for the warrior in charge to pull him back.

“Don't touch,” he snaps, but his eyes rake over me, his mouth twitching at the joke anyway.

“I’d still keep her in my furs all night long,” one of the other warriors calls out, making a lewd gesture with his hips, his loincloth swinging in a way that nearly gives me a glimpse of something I definitely don’t want to see.

“So long as you spill your seed on the furs and not in her,” another jibes. “You don’t want a spotted youngling, do you?”

I cross my arms over my small breasts, backing into the water as I look away, feeling humiliated. I don’t want to let their jokes get to me, but I’ve always felt a bit embarrassed by the small dark spots and tiny purplish patches that mark my body in places—one on my inner thigh, so high up that I’ve always wanted the lights off if anyone went down on me.

“Ignore them,” Naomi chimes in, as she, Bianca, and some of the other girls move in front of me, shielding me from the joking warriors. Faith stays a little ways off, splashing water quickly over herself as she looks back at the hut anxiously.

The warriors forced her to leave her son there when they hustled us out, and I know she doesn’t like to be away from him for long. He hasn’t looked well lately. The alien food and climate don’t seem to be agreeing with him, and I’m sure he needs to wash too. But a part of me thinks that the aliens are hoping he doesn’t make it, so they won’t have to deal with a male human child.

I’m careful not to let Faith get any inkling of those thoughts though.

“What do you think they have planned for us?” Bianca asks in a low voice as we wade deeper into the water, crouching as we wash to try to hide as much of our bodies from the leering guards as possible.

Naomi shrugs. “Well, they haven’t forced themselves on us, at least,” she says dryly. “Or eaten us, in any sense of the word. So maybe it’s nothing bad. But I still don’t trust them.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about it,” Penelope whispers. “They’re keeping us for some reason, and it’s not just to shove us into a hut forever.”

I have the same nervous feeling that she does, although I haven't wanted to vocalize it, hoping it's just a product of my overactive imagination and reading too many books back on Earth. *There's something bad coming, I can just feel it.* I've thought that over and over the past days, although I've tried to be cheerful for the others. Morale is low enough, even with us all trying to buoy one another's spirits.

"There are very few women, from what I've seen," Naomi remarks bluntly. "And a lot of fucking men. That doesn't seem like good odds for us."

"That makes us valuable," Bianca says softly. "And not in a good way."

It means that they're not saving us for an appetizer, at least. One big feast has already come and gone, and no one was served up as the exotic delicacies course. But that only leaves two options. Either they're keeping us for themselves to make up for the lack of women, or they're going to sell us to someone else feeling the same lack.

Neither one is a good option.

My skin chills a little thinking about it, and not just from the sharp contrast of the cold spring-fed pool and the blazing sun above us.

I grab for one of the bars of soap that the warriors tossed in after us, milky squares that smell vaguely sweet and nutty, although it's a distinctly alien smell. I hate the idea of washing with them, since I don't want to smell *alien*, I want to smell like myself. But I hate the idea of continuing to live with a fine film of grime on me more, so I start to scrub vigorously, trying to make up a story in my head as I go to make this all more palatable and ease the frantic racing of my heart.

As a child, I used to do something similar. When I lost my parents, when the relatives who took me in neglected me, when I felt wholly alone and unloved, I made up stories that matched ones in the books that I lost myself in, bringing them home from the school library by the stack. I was a fairy changeling left behind with cruel relatives who didn't believe in magic, and one day I would find the fairy kingdom again,

when I was old enough to escape. I was a princess locked in a tower, an orphan whose rich uncle would discover his niece any day and sweep her off to far and exotic lands, unlike the small and boring suburban house I grew up in.

I left that house eventually, of course, and went to college—got my own place and my own job as a librarian, turning that love of reading and escapism into a career. But when things were difficult—when there wasn't enough money, or another boy ghosted me, or I felt particularly lonely and friendless, I made up those stories again. It saved me, more often than not. And now, it just might save me again.

I'm a warrior princess on a barbarian planet, I tell myself as I sluice water over my arms, washing away the creamy soap. Like Dejah Thoris, or Red Sonja. I'm beautiful and desirable and I was stolen away because the evil prince of another kingdom wanted me for himself. But someone will come for me. And if they don't, I'm smart enough to save myself. I'm only waiting to make sure we can all escape together, not because I'm trapped here. Because I won't abandon my sisters.

I imagine that there's clothing of silk and jewels waiting for me on the grass by the watering pool, the kind of thing a barbarian princess would wear, a long red silk skirt split to the hip on both sides like Princess Leia, with gold plates and rubies and shining gold coins hanging from it, a metal bra with scales hammered into it, soft shoes instead of bare feet. Not the rough-woven cloth and leather that still smells of the animal it was taken from that's actually waiting for me to put it back on.

“It's time to go. Get out. Put your clothes back on, let's go!” The snappish voice of the warrior in charge drags me out of my fantasy, and I grit my teeth, forcing myself not to retort that they made us take off the clothing in the first place. Some of the other women haven't lost their smart mouths even with retaliation from the guards, but I never had one to begin with. I've never been the type to talk back, even when I wished I could, and admired others who did. I've always been the one who gave in, who ran instead of fighting.

We scramble back into our clothes as quickly as we can, still dripping from the pool. It's an awful feeling, putting the dirty leather and cloth back on over our wet, clean skin. But it's better than being naked in front of the still-leering guards, so I wrap my top around my breasts, tying it under my long auburn hair and shimmying back into my leather skirt. The grass feels stiff between my toes, and I curl my feet against it as we wait for the guards to herd us back into a group and start to lead us back to the hut.

We all try to walk as slowly as they'll let us, not wanting to go back in there any sooner than we have to. It's nothing but four thatched walls, a mound of blankets and a dirt floor. They don't even let us have firewood or the means to make a fire when it gets chilly at night, for fear we might use it against them somehow to escape I suppose.

As we re-enter the village, we pass what appears to be a hunting party. The group of younger-looking warriors have paint streaked across their faces and bodies in addition to the dark marks on their skin, and they're all holding spears and bows.

To my surprise, I think I recognize one of the warriors.

He looks like one that I've seen around a few times, and I could swear that he always seems to glance my way when I'm near. All the Uleki are what could be considered handsome—tall, muscled, tattooed and pleasing to the eye—but I've always found him particularly nice to look at. He seems quieter than the others, although he's impressively ripped, with eight-pack abs so defined I can count them.

I catch another glimpse of him as they pass, taking in the dark marks spiraling across his chest and accented with blue paint. Like all of the warriors I've seen so far, he has bronze skin and horns. Six of them protrude from his head, jutting a few inches upward through his thick black hair.

I thought maybe I was imagining it before when I thought that I caught him looking at me, but as my gaze follows him, I see him do it again. His blue-streaked gray eyes turn toward

me as the party strides by, chanting some kind of battle cry as they head off to hunt.

He's at the very back, and his gait slows a little as our gazes lock.

For a second, it almost feels as if the world around me narrows down, my heart in my throat as my heart beats loudly in my ears.

Then he stumbles the slightest bit, letting out a curse as his spear end jabs into the ground and nearly throws him further off balance, and whatever that was—a spell, or some foolish moment of distraction—breaks.

I jerk back, flushing at my own reaction, and watch as he rights himself. No one else seems to notice, but I saw and I look away quickly before he has a chance to glance back and see that I was watching him. That I saw him falter.

It doesn't really make sense *why* he stumbled.

There was nothing in his way, not even a tree root or uneven ground to trip him up. But I don't say anything about it to the others, tucking that tiny, curious bit of information away in my mind as we're hustled forward back to our hut.

More than that, it's the thought of his gray eyes, flecked and swirled with blue like the sky piercing through a cloudy day back on Earth, that lingers with me, long past when it should have been forgotten.

Zaid

SHOLA!

I curse under my breath as I recover myself, feeling the old injuries in my legs twinge and throb even as I push it away, refusing to give in to the lingering pain and stiffness. *No one saw, luckily, so far as I can tell.* I do my best to hide the fact that sometimes I have moments of weakness in my limbs—the result of an injury when I was young that has never healed properly. I’ve trained hard to prevent it from stopping me entirely and making me all but useless to the tribe for anything but gathering or herding livestock, but I can’t stop the lingering effects altogether. The best I can do is hide it from those who might judge me for it, and push through the pain.

As we reach the edge of the village, I glance back over my shoulder. I’m hoping for another glimpse of the female prisoner with the strange hair and sparkling eyes the color of the seaweed in the deep lakes, but the group of prisoners are already out of sight.

“Warriors, form up!” the leader of the hunting party calls out, distracting me from my thoughts before they can focus much more on the alien female. I force my attention back to him—it takes all of it, to make sure I execute our orders properly without allowing my injuries to get in the way.

I always have to stay sharp, focused. I have to prove myself, every day, always. I’m weaker than the others and well aware of it, plagued by old injuries, pushing myself harder and farther than all the others to prove my value to the village. My

muscular body is not a result of vanity, or the desire for a female to look my way, but the driving need to be better than all of them—the best, in any respect that I can manage.

Determined, I fall in with my fellow warriors as we fan out through the grasses, tracking a *zaxan*. The animal's droppings were seen near the watering pool. No doubt it wandered away from its herd into our lands instead of the Bekaru, and now we will track it down. The meat will feed our village for months, the bones will create new weapons, and the hides will help clothe us against the oncoming winter.

The females might need better clothing. The thought leaps into my head as we stride forward, and I push it away. The female prisoners are not my concern, even if I've often seen the one with the strange hair the color of blood looking at me. I wonder if it means something among her people, to have hair like blood. We have no such coloring among us.

You're doing it again. Gritting my teeth, I focus on something different—the way the exercise as we move out far past the village is loosening up the tight muscles in my legs, making my gait smoother, easing the pain.

That lifts my spirits—ease of movement always does, the sensation that I might be able to run, leap, hunt as swiftly as the other warriors do.

“Zaxan!” One of the warriors shouts as he spies the prey, and our leader motions to us.

“Flank it,” he hisses, low enough not to startle the animal. “Half-moon. Strike inwards.”

Few words are needed; we all know the hunting formations well. We circle, forming a crescent shape around the grazing animal, flanking it from three sides. It can only go forward, toward the cliffside, and it won't throw itself over.

It won't do that—but this *zaxan* won't be so easily taken either. As we close in on it, it wheels toward us, lunging forward to fight back as it lowers its large, horned head.

I feel a flash of fear that I quickly extinguish. My memories of being trampled, although it happened as a child

and by a varhell, are still clear. I can feel the weight of the zaxan on my body, the crushing of my bones under its weight, and I have to swallow back a sick sensation as I lunge with my fellow warriors, holding hunting formation as the creature lowers its head and bellows out a warning.

Our hunting parties are well-oiled teams, we practice often, and are prepared for something like this. The warriors work together, all of us, some backing down as others strike out, then retreating as those who backed down take their place, keeping the animal off-balance. The warriors part, giving me my opening to go for the soft place behind the creature's foreleg for the first blow, but the zaxan turns, charging forward as it spies me.

It's as if it knows that I'm the weakest of us. The thought burns in my gut as I pivot, striking out as I move out of the zaxan's way, but the abrupt turn makes my leg seize, and my spear tip glances off its shoulder, cutting the animal shallowly and nothing more.

Frustration and shame fill me as I shudder with pain, gathering myself as the other warriors regroup and rush forward, diverting the animal before it can take its path to escape. I leap forward the instant my muscle releases, my spear once again at the ready as we all attack as one.

This time, we all bring the zaxan down together. It falls, bleeding out as it slumps heavily to one side, letting out a dying groan as we circle around and pull our spears and arrows free.

"That was well done." Azal, the leader of the hunt, looks pleased as he surveys the group. I can feel a few of them looking my way though, glancing covertly as the others ready the carcass to drag back to camp, and my jaw clenches.

The return to the village is slower than the journey out, and I spend it trapped in my own thoughts, running over the moment where I failed again and again. The memory of the day I was trampled comes back vividly. I can still recall the loud cry of a young varhell as it got loose and charged toward

me, and the searing pain of the injuries as I lay broken in the dirt.

Perhaps it would be better if he died, if he will never be a warrior.

I've never forgotten the sound of my father saying those words either, when I lay in what he thought was a deep and unhearing sleep. Those words have driven me every day since, and yet I still fall short.

My limbs ache all over again, the pain radiating through me in a maddeningly familiar way, and I grit my teeth against it as we stride through the grasses, the village finally coming back into view.

Drael and several other Uleki are waiting for us as we drag the zaxan carcass into the center of the village to be taken away for butchering, as is tradition. But today his gaze looks especially keen, as if he has something in particular on his mind beyond the successful hunt.

"You have done well," he says, glancing over us. "Now, I have another mission, if any of you might be interested in volunteering and proving yourselves further."

"I will." I step forward, the words spilling from my lips without a moment's thought. *Prove myself.* All I can think of is my earlier failure, my volunteering an instinctive response to it. I can feel eyes on my back, my fellow hunters and tribesmen doubting me, but I tilt my chin up, looking firmly at Drael.

I'm determined that I will prove myself worthy to my tribesmen and my leader, that I won't always live my life with whispers and doubts following me. That I won't always be a son whose father would have rather seen him dead than a failure.

"Very well." Drael looks pleased by my eagerness. "You then, and—you, Valek, Iriv, and Azuld. The four of you will be sufficient."

Pride fills me, hot and eager. *I will not fail this time,* I tell myself firmly. *Whatever the mission, I will complete it, and*

earn respect in doing so. “What is our mission?” I ask eagerly as the other three warriors come to stand beside me, and as I direct the question at Drael, something else catches my attention out of the corner of my eye.

It’s the female prisoner with the blood-red hair, being led toward us with a guard at either side of her.

Drael glances carelessly toward her, and then back at us. “You are to take her to the mountains,” he says clearly, each word enunciated carefully, so there can be no mistake. “And you are to trade her to the Jakk tribe.”

Abigail

MY HEART IS POUNDING SO hard that it hurts. I feel like it should almost be visible, beating against the walls of my chest, and no matter how much I tell myself it's going to be okay, I don't think I actually believe it anymore. Making up a story about it can't help me now.

I was just in the hut with the other women when two warriors pushed their way in, grabbed me, and unceremoniously hauled me out without a word to me or anyone about what was going on—not that we really expected an explanation. I have no idea if they picked me at random or chose me in particular, but all the other women were left in the hut. It's just me who was brought out here in front of these four men, including the one who looks at me that I saw stumble earlier, and heard their—king? Chief? Leader?—announce that I'm going to be traded.

I glance at those four aliens, all of whom look proud to be selected for this mission, and see surprise on the face of the gray-eyed one. *Maybe he wasn't expecting what was just announced?*

I have no idea who the *Jakk* tribe are. Fear fills me at the thought of going to another unknown place, with these strange alien warriors, to be given over to another unknown tribe of more aliens. The part of me that is endlessly optimistic wants to believe that maybe it's a better tribe than the Uleki, aliens who might even be open to hearing my pleas to go home, but I can't let myself get my hopes up. I remember the alien from

the Bekaru tribe who came and made a trade to keep Nicole, but this seems different.

Nicole *wanted* to stay with him. Clearly something happened between them to make it seem at least palatable to her, even desirable.

I'm going to be *traded*. Sold, basically.

The leader is speaking again, and I listen as carefully as I can past the beating of my pulse, trying to get a better grasp of what's happening.

"I want her traded for a goodly sum of *relk stone*," he says firmly. "The Jakk hold all the territory where it is found, and as a result, no weapons can match theirs for sharpness or accuracy. If they see her and are pleased and willing to trade, you should make them aware that there are more women who can be traded as well." He scans the group of warriors, glancing at me before looking back at them. "This is to whet their appetites. Take a measure of their willingness to trade for females. There is possibility here, if they are open to it."

My stomach clenches, and I'm momentarily afraid that I might be sick. Nothing about that sounds good, and while I'd love to think that they might just want "females" to patch up their leathers and cook their meals, I know deep down it's almost certainly going to be much, much more than that, especially if they're as short on women as the Uleki seem to be.

I hate the sound of that. I hate all of it. Suddenly the hut, which a little while ago seemed like the worst place in the world, is the place I most want to be. At least there I was with women who felt very much like friends, suffering through the same thing, able to commiserate and plan for the day when we might escape or be freed. At least there, we felt relatively safe from harm.

Now I'm alone with these four male alien warriors—or at least, I will be very soon—and who knows what danger or harm I'm heading into? The possibilities are too extensive to list—and I can't bring myself to, or I'm afraid I might start

screaming with terror or simply melt into a puddle, unable to move.

“Zaid, Valek, Iriv, Azuld.”

The leader addresses them each by name, and I realize the gray-eyed one who notices me, who stumbled, is *Zaid*. It’s a pleasant enough name, and I roll it over in my head, watching him as the leader finishes giving instructions.

“You may prepare to leave,” the leader continues. “Leave now, as soon as your supplies are gathered, so that you can make some progress before nightfall. It will be a journey of several days.”

All four men step forward at once toward me, and I shrink back, although the two warriors guarding me aren’t much better. Zaid reaches me first though, and his broad hand wraps around my upper arm, pulling me closer to him before the other three men can touch me.

Something about his touch heats my skin. I can feel a flush spreading through me, my heartbeat quickening even more as his hand closes around my flesh, but it’s not exactly the fear I felt before, although there’s a pulse of adrenaline. It’s something else, something strange and foreign like the sensation I had when his eyes met mine earlier, and it makes me shrink back away from his touch.

He loosens his grip as the three men move past us, but tugs me along gently. “Come,” he says simply, urging me to follow the others, and I do. I don’t know what other option I have *but* to follow and go along with this—I’m not bound in any way, but I might as well be. I’ve seen a glimpse of what lies beyond the village—wide grasslands as far as I can see, no doubt filled with creatures who would be happy to make a meal of me. Even if I made a break for it, and made it out of the village without being caught, I have no supplies. No food, no water, no way of knowing which way would lead me to another village. My best hope would be finding the Bekaru and Nicole, but I have no idea where they are. It would be like searching for a needle in a very dangerous haystack, and I’m not foolish enough to think that I would have a fighting chance out there.

Any option is bad, but I definitely don't want to die clawed to death by an alien beast or captured by some even worse aliens. I need to bide my time and consider my options—which are admittedly few right now—and maybe on the journey to this Jakk tribe some better possibility will present itself to me.

My mind is racing with all of this as the men stop to gather supplies at a central hut, talking among themselves about what they'll need. How many waterskins, how much food, how many bedrolls. I tune them out as I glance back toward the hut where the other human women are, my chest aching.

I wonder if anyone will tell them what's happened to me, or if they'll be left in the dark, speculating. I wonder if it's better for them not to know, so they don't have to fear the same fate, or if it would be better for them to know the truth, so they don't imagine something far worse.

If there *is* something worse than being sold to these Jakk. I still don't know what they'll want with me.

One of the warriors is filling up a second pack with rations and other items, although I notice there's no knife buckled to the side of it like the other packs, and then thrusts it out to me.

"Take it," he says gruffly, and I reach out for it weakly, hoping he doesn't see how my hands shake.

It's heavy, and I wince at the idea of marching who knows how many miles with it on my back. I've never been someone who really liked to exercise. I've gone to a hot yoga class every now and then or walked around my neighborhood back on Earth, but long hikes over unfamiliar and probably difficult terrain burdened by essentially a heavy backpack isn't something I'm prepared for.

I grit my teeth as I start to shoulder it, refusing to complain, but before I can the pack is plucked out of my hand.

To my surprise, it's Zaid who has taken it from me, setting both it and his own pack down on the ground as he starts to quickly transfer the items from mine to his, tying both bedrolls onto his. The other warriors chuckle at him as he does so,

elbowing each other lightly and grunting with obvious amusement, but they don't tell him to stop. As for me, all I can do is stare at him, shocked speechless.

Why should he care about making things easier for me?

It doesn't make any sense, and I look down at him in confusion as he briskly repacks his own bag, shouldering it effortlessly.

"Thank you," I whisper, hating the tremor in my voice.

I want to be tough and strong and brave, someone who could face any of this fearlessly, but I'm just a librarian from a smallish town back on Earth, who loved reading fantastical stories and who never in her wildest dreams would have thought anything like this would actually happen to her.

I'm not a fighter like some of the other women, or stubborn, or brave, or even particularly fit. I'm just—a person, and I don't think that's going to be very helpful in this situation.

But I don't really have any choice other than to *pretend* to be brave, because if I do what I want to and break down crying in front of these alien warriors, it won't help me. It will only humiliate me, and they'll laugh, and drag me off to trade me to these Jakk anyway.

So I lift my chin as defiantly as I can manage, pressing my lips together to hide their trembling as Zaid nods wordlessly at me in response, evidently not all that impressed by my thanks.

The other warriors set off, putting me in the center—no doubt to make sure I can't make a break for it in any direction. One leads us, another is to my right, Zaid to my left, and one more behind. I feel slightly claustrophobic as we walk through the village toward the lands beyond, with so many large and forbidding aliens surrounding me, but I don't protest.

It's not as if they'd listen to me anyway.

As we walk, leaving the boundaries of the village—and the other women, the closest thing I have to friends here—behind, my mind races. The only thing I know for certain is that I *don't* want to reach our intended destination. I don't want to know

what these Jakk will do with me, if I'm traded to them. It occurs to me that I could try to make myself unpalatable to them for trade in some way—attack them, cry excessively, refuse to bathe for the entire journey—but I don't think the Uleki leader will treat me kindly if I'm proven worthless for trade either.

My only real hope is escape, and though I don't know how I can possibly achieve that, I'm determined to find a way.

Before we reach the Jakk tribe.

Zaid

THE BEGINNING of our journey is relatively uneventful. I and the other warriors keep a lookout for threats as we travel. We're not passing through any other tribes' territory directly on our way, but that doesn't mean we don't need to be aware and alert.

There are plenty of other threats, and the woman with us is valuable. We can't allow any harm to come to her that might devalue her in the eyes of the Jakk, not when Drael wants such a hefty price for her.

I feel slightly uncomfortable thinking about her in that way, especially as I glance at her while we walk. I can't help but be aware of her as she strides beside me, surrounded by the four of us without complaint or hesitation now that we're on our way.

She's delicate in appearance, very fragile-looking and pale with small dark flecks across her nearly translucent skin, her blood-red hair all the more vibrant for how pale she is. It's clear her skin doesn't like our sun, she's flushed and reddened in places, but she doesn't complain about that either. She keeps up with our quick, steady pace, and I'm impressed. As small as she is, without any visible muscle, I worried about her ability to make the trip.

We're all silent for a long while, but at some point, the woman speaks up.

"Who are these *Jakk* that you're taking me to?" she asks, her voice only slightly halting, as if she's pushing the words

out. “What are they like? Are they like you? Like the other warriors who came for the feast?”

“You shouldn’t be asking questions,” Azuld grunts before I can even think of answering, glancing sideways at the woman with a grim look on his face. “You’ll find out all you need to know when we get there, female.”

“Abigail,” she whispers in a low voice, almost defiantly, and I force my lips not to twitch up in a grin. She seems more delicate than some of the other women that were captured, but there’s at least a small bit of fire in her too, and I like that. Azuld has always been a bit of a bully.

Abigail. I turn the name over in my mind as we walk, still stealing glances at her occasionally. It’s not a name I’ve ever heard, but it makes sense that it would be strange, she’s Terran after all. It’s a pretty name, and I fight the urge to say it aloud, to hear how it would sound in my own voice and accent.

You shouldn’t think of her so much, I warn myself, noticing how she’s fallen silent since Azuld’s reprimand.

She isn’t asking any more questions, and though I don’t care much for Azuld’s tone, I have to admit that it probably is better if she doesn’t know. The Jakk tribe is known for their brutality and savage ways. Cannibalism, sometimes torturous sacrifices at their festivals and feasts, forcible public breeding of their few women and any females they can get their hands on, and many other things that the other tribes on Xaath both cringe at and fear them for.

If we frighten her, I can only imagine what a description of the brutal ways of the Jakk would do to her mental state. She’s going to be traded to them in a matter of days, and it’s best if she doesn’t know what she’s in for. It would only hurt her, to think of and fear it in the interim.

Some things are better left unknown.

A twinge of guilt pierces me at the thought of her being left with the Jakk tribe, the ways they’ll no doubt savage her and use her up until she’s given them as many offspring as they can wring from her. After that? I shudder to think of what

will come next. But by then, she'll likely be glad for the peace of death.

All for some stone to improve our weapons.

But relk stone *is* valuable, and the fact that the Jakk have so much of it and the other tribes so little means that we're at a disadvantage if they ever were to decide to leave their mountain village and encroach on our territory for *our* women, supplies, and resources. One Terran woman, even a few, is a small price to pay for safeguarding our own people.

I know that's what Drael would say, if I voiced my concerns aloud.

I need to prove my worth and my loyalty to Drael. The zaxan hunt was salvaged in the end, but I know the story of what happened is currently making its way around the village even in my absence, and it's neither the first time that's happened nor will it be the last. My legs, no matter how hard I train, can't be counted on. I have to prove I can be counted on in other ways. That my commitment and loyalty to my people outshine any physical impairment I might have. That my willingness to obey Drael makes up for other shortcomings.

It's not for me to question my leader. He was chosen by the goddess for a reason, his title earned in combat. If the best thing for our tribe is to use this strange woman who is not one of us for currency, then that's what we must do. I must go along with it.

Still, when I look over at her—at *Abigail*—I can't help but notice the fear on her face.

Since Azuld told her to be silent, she's gone even paler than I would have thought possible, the small marks on her face standing out in stark contrast. Her lips are thin, pressed tightly together, and her dark green eyes are round and wide in her face, clearly deep in thought. I know what she's doing—imagining the worst—and I want to ease her fear slightly, even if I can't answer her questions.

“Are there landscapes like this, where you come from?” I ask, gesturing to the sea of long yellowed grasses around us.

Abigail looks at me, startled. Azuld looks my way too, grunting under his breath, but he doesn't tell me to be silent. It's just as well. He's not higher than me in rank or much more of an accomplished hunter despite his physical perfection, and I wouldn't take such an order from him.

"In some places," she answers, and from the quickness of it I think she's as eager to get her mind off her inner thoughts as I am to help dispel them for her. "Where I come from is very big. The whole planet is beyond anything most people could ever see in a lifetime, and it's divided into many different continents—landmasses—and countries within those. My own country has a huge variety of landscapes and climates and animals, just within it."

I look at her curiously, imagining such a vast place. "And you say there are grasslands, like these?"

She nods. "There are states within the country, and a few of those have something much like this. I haven't really seen them though. Only in pictures."

I furrow my brow. "Drawn pictures?"

"Taken with a small machine," she tries to explain. "You lift it to your eye, press a button, and you can see it frozen. Whatever you took a picture of. You can also use—oh god, I don't even know how to explain phones," she adds with a small laugh.

Phones. Abigail does come from a very strange place indeed.

"Well, what about those?" I ask, pointing at the tall blue flowers that grow intermittently within the grasses. They're thicker stalks, with blue blooms that, when opened, show a variety of hues ribboning their way down the petals. "We call them *lalsh*."

Abigail's eyes brighten a little at the sight of the flowers, but she shakes her head.

"We have flowers," she explains. "But none of them look like that. There are blue ones though."

We keep talking as we walk for a little while, about various plants that we see and other things that Abigail notices about the landscape, keeping our voices low so the others don't complain.

"What about those odd cat-horse creatures?" she asks. "I saw the warriors who came to the feast ride in on them. They look like several different animals we have on Earth smashed into one."

I laugh at her description, even though the mention of a varhell makes my stomach clench.

"Those are varhells," I tell her. "Some of the other tribes, like the Bekaru you mentioned, tame, train, and ride them frequently. We capture and train them occasionally for labor, but we don't ride often. The Uleki prefer to hunt and travel on foot whenever possible."

"They look fun to ride," she says absently, but she doesn't ask any other questions, falling silent after that. I have the urge to keep talking to her, strangely wanting to hear more of her sweet-sounding voice, but she's starting to look more tired, and I let her be.

As the sun sets, we find a spot to camp for the night, one without any signs of animals having passed through. Azuld watches Abigail as I and the other two warriors clear out a ring of grass for our bedrolls, tramping down the long grasses so that there's a large, thick, soft cushion to lie our mats down on, the tall grass all around it shielding us somewhat from view. As we sit down, Abigail between Azuld and I, I dig through my pack for the dried meat and fruit that was rationed for her, handing her the portion for tonight.

She eats it hungrily, reminding me that it's been hours since we ate the same thing at midday as we walked. Something in me rebels at the thought of her being hungry, and though I can't give her another portion as the food is carefully rationed to last the journey, I extend a strip of my own meat toward her.

Abigail hesitates, popping the last of the dried fruit into her mouth, and then shakes her head.

“Thank you, but no,” she says quickly. “You need it more than I do,” she adds, gesturing with her hand to imply the difference in our sizes.

Something in me tightens at the thought of that, of how small and delicate she is compared to my height and muscle. It’s both a protective feeling and an oddly desirous one, and neither are feelings I’m accustomed to having.

No one needs my protection. There are few women among us, and those who do live in the Uleki tribe have the option of far better males than I for their protection, whether they are mated or not. And as for desire?

Just as there are better males for protection, there are more desirable males for pleasure and mating too. I’ve never been given the option to seek pleasure with one of our women, never even been glanced at. It’s well known that I am the least of the warriors, despite all I’ve done to make up for it physically, and so I simply do not think of it.

Releasing my need is something I do as a matter of course, like eating or drinking or relieving myself, and outside of that I force myself not to think of what it might be like to desire a woman or have her desire me in return.

Is that what this is?

I take my portion of meat and eat it, forcing myself not to look at Abigail again. If so, that would be beyond foolish. Not only is she Terran and a prisoner, she’s now bound for the Jakk. She never could be mine, nor should she be. She is not for any of us.

But that knowledge, clear as it is, doesn’t stop me from feeling a hot anger at the thought of any of the other males here trying to touch her. I have to force myself not to protest when Azuld binds her hands and feet with a coarse rope and leather strips to keep her from running during the night. I want to tell him that she’s not foolish enough to run out here, where she’d be eaten by predators before she could reach anyone else, and that we’d easily catch her even if she did, but I know he wouldn’t understand my concern.

Abigail is a prisoner, and it is normal for prisoners to be bound.

She doesn't protest as he ties her, but I can see the glistening of unshed tears in her eyes, her lips pressed tightly together in a way that I'm now certain is her means of holding back words she knows better than to say. Neither does she respond when he takes her arm and muscles her to the mat rolled out for her bed, setting her down none too gently as the rest of us prepare to sleep.

My mat is next to Abigail's. She's rolled onto her side, facing away from me, and it gives me an opportunity to look at her unhindered in the darkness, the moons and starlight shining down on us and illuminating her faintly. Her hair is a dark flood in the night, soft-looking, and I have to physically stop myself from reaching out to touch it.

As I lie there looking at her, I can see that she's starting to shiver. In her woven top and leather skirt, she's actually more covered than any of us are, but she's not used to how sharply the temperature drops here at night. She's smaller than us too, without much on her bones to keep her warm.

Without letting myself think too closely about what I'm doing, I move closer to her, wrapping my body around hers and draping my arm over her waist to pull her against me. I feel her stiffen as I do, her entire body going rigid against me. Beneath my hand against her ribcage, I can feel her heart fluttering wildly like a small trapped bird.

"It's just for warmth," I murmur in a low voice, realizing with a start that she's afraid I might force her. "Nothing else. You're shivering, Abigail."

Her name on my tongue feels right. It sounds good, whispered in my voice, and I want to say it again. But I just hold her close, careful not to let my hands wander as my body heat seeps into hers, and I feel her stay rigid in my arms for a long time.

She doesn't fight or protest though, and at long last, I feel her relax against me, falling asleep in my arms.

Abigail

I WAKE up slowly to the warmth of the sun on my cheek and a springy, cushiony feeling below me, comfortable for the first time since I arrived on this planet.

My legs feel sore and stiff, and I have the urge to sink back into sleep, exhaustion still just below the surface. I feel oddly safe, a sensation that seems unfamiliar after weeks of fear, but there's a strong arm around me and a warm body pressed to mine, sheltering me.

My body responds to that, softening and relaxing further back into half-sleep, and I feel the sensation of a huge, hard cock pressed against my ass, the ridge of it moving slightly as its owner moves in his sleep too. It's not an unpleasant feeling, that proof of desire pressed to my spine, and I can feel a sleepy heat gathering low in my belly, flooding through me with a slowly growing arousal.

I don't have much experience with it, but I think I like the idea of morning sex.

Sleepy, half-awake, warm, slow intimacy, sliding and moving together in a lazy intimacy to start the day. I nestle closer to the body behind me, wanting more of that warmth and hardness pressed to me, and as I do, I feel the cock harden even more, throbbing insistently as the man behind me goes rigid.

Instantly, I'm fully awake and once again aware of where I am, all of the memories of the previous day rushing back in.

Being dragged out of the hut, presented to the four warriors, told I'm being traded to the Jakk tribe. The long, arduous walk, nothing but dried food for meals, sleeping on the ground. Zaid curling next to me for warmth—

I stiffen too, going tense in his arms as all of my walls come flying up and I realize that it was an alien cock nestled against me, *Zaid's* cock, his body responding to mine with desire that I *definitely* don't want. I flush pink at the memory of the sleepy desire that was aroused in me too, and I pull away from him, scrambling awkwardly to the other side of my mat as I push all of those thoughts down, refusing to look at him.

Besides, it wouldn't even fit.

The memory of how big it felt pressed against me comes back too, and it makes sense now. Of course a seven-foot-tall alien would have a cock bigger than a human man's—but not one that could possibly be compatible with *me*.

What about Nicole? She seemed to want to stay with the warrior who stole her. Did she...? Did they...?

Zaid is moving away from me now too, adjusting his erection so it stays hidden beneath his loincloth and avoiding my gaze as studiously as I'm avoiding meeting his blue-streaked gray eyes. He reaches out to touch me and I flinch, but he's only undoing my bindings, and I feel a little guilty for being so mistrustful after he's been nothing but kind to me.

But only him. The other aliens haven't hurt me, but they've treated me like an object at best, like goods to be sold. Something cold and terrifying clenches in my gut as I think about Zaid pressed against me and his size, and the aliens they're planning to sell me to—aliens with a “lack of females” and no doubt equal desire for them.

I shiver, goosebumps rising on my skin despite the quickly heating temperature of the day, and Zaid looks at me curiously.

“Are you cold?” he asks as he undoes my ankles, and I shake my head.

“No,” I say flatly, and he pauses, looking a little uncertain.

“Did you sleep well?” It’s clear he’s trying to make conversation, as awkward as it is, but I can’t meet his eyes.

“Okay enough, I guess,” I mumble. “Better than in the hut.”

“I suppose you’re not used to sleeping on the ground. We often do on hunts, so it’s not unusual for me.” Zaid finishes untying my hands, and backs away.

I want to retort that I wouldn’t have to sleep on the ground at all if they hadn’t stolen us from that ship, but I don’t. After all, I don’t necessarily know that for a fact. The Uleki weren’t the ones who abducted us from Earth. That dubious honor belongs to the alien pirates who stole me from my home world and then made a pit stop on Xaath with the plan of stealing even more resources. Who knows what those pirates had in store for us? Something worse than this, maybe, or something that might have ended with us sleeping on the ground anyway.

The other warriors getting up distracts Zaid anyway, so I don’t have to answer. One of them, the one who was curt with me yesterday, grabs me by the arm and escorts me a little ways away so I can relieve myself. He’s polite enough to turn his back, at least, but I feel awkward and ashamed anyway, like an animal. It feels awful, and I’m almost eager to get to the Jakk no matter what they have planned for me, just to have this over with.

After another quick meal of dried meat and fruit, this time with a chunk of bread added to it, we start walking again.

I glance over at Zaid as we make our way through the grasses, watching him covertly from time to time. I’m surprised that he offered to keep me warm last night—and truly seemed to only want to do that. He didn’t try to grope me in any way or force me sexually, or try to achieve any pleasure from it. He really seemed to just want to make me more comfortable.

I’m equally surprised by my own reaction to waking up in his arms. I wasn’t fully conscious, of course, but I felt comfortable, safe... even turned on. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt that kind of warm, eager desire for a man, and even if

I didn't realize who it was when I felt it, I can't help but enjoy the memory of it.

I can't help playing it over in my head as we walk either. It's better than the crowding, fearful thoughts of what awaits me when we get to the mountains. Even though Zaid was oddly respectful of me, more than I think any of the others would have been, he was clearly aroused too. I suppress a shiver of pleasure at the memory of him, hard and thick and firm, pressed against me in his sleep.

There's some kind of strange chemistry between us, an attraction that I can't deny. As strange and scary as the idea of being with an alien is, when it comes to Zaid, my body doesn't seem to have the same fears or reservations. And as I turn it over and over in my head, an idea comes to me.

Maybe I can use it.

I need to find a way to escape before we reach the Jakk village. Maybe Zaid can be my means of getting free. I can use the attraction between us, seduce him to get his guard down, and either escape then or convince him to help me.

With that in mind, I move closer to him as we walk, shifting so that there's a small but intimate space between us.

"Thank you for keeping me warm last night," I say softly, glancing over at him with what I hope is a soft and open expression, but Zaid just nods, not looking at me.

I frown momentarily. Despite our conversation yesterday and our closeness last night, he's clearly gone back to being more quiet and closed off this morning. It frustrates me for a moment, because I've never even tried to actively seduce a human man before, let alone an alien whose job is to guard and then sell me. I don't really have any idea how to make this plan work—how to get close enough to him to successfully seduce him, and maybe even make him want to help me.

All I can think of is to talk. It worked yesterday, but all I can think of is books. That's all I've *ever* thought of, really, and I just start talking, hoping whatever comes out makes some kind of sense, or at least intrigues him.

“I used to be a librarian, on Earth,” I tell him, in that same low voice we used yesterday, presumably so as not to irritate the other warriors with our conversation, especially the grumpy one. “I always loved to read, since I was a child—as many books as I could get my hands on, any kind. I used to think about writing a book one day. The biggest problem I had was not being able to settle on one idea—I had *so* many, and I started so many stories just to get distracted by a different idea.” I pause, hesitating. “Now I probably won’t ever get a chance, and I wish I had. So there would be something left of me there, you know? And because that was really my only dream—”

“Books.” Zaid interrupts me, looking at me curiously. “Writings on paper?”

I nod. “Yes. Do you have books?”

He shakes his head. “Not really. We keep some records, but most of our stories are oral. We *tell* stories with our voices, not write them down.”

“If you write them down, they last longer.” I shrug. “And besides, not everyone likes the same stories.”

“We do.” His gaze is still open and curious as he looks at me though. “What is a librarian?”

“Someone who works in a big building full of books. You sign up, and get a card, and you can come and borrow a few of the books at a time to read and bring back. Not everyone has the money to buy a lot of books,” I explain. “Or they don’t know if they’ll like a story or not. So they come and borrow it. It’s our job to take care of the books, and the building, help people choose, make sure they’re brought back—things like that.”

Zaid’s eyes light up with understanding. “So you are a hunter too. You hunt down those who do not bring back your books.”

I laugh out loud, clapping my hand over my mouth instantly to muffle the sound. I can’t help it. The idea of me tracking down someone to take back overdue library books—a

whole guild of librarian bounty hunters even—is so hilarious that for a minute I can't stop laughing, even though Zaid looks wholly confused as to what he's said that was so funny.

“No,” I tell him finally when I catch my breath. “I don't hunt them down.”

“So how do you get your books back?”

“Most people are good about bringing them back on time,” I inform him. “But if they don't, we send them a strongly worded note and a fine.”

“Hunting them down seems more efficient,” Zaid tells me frankly, and I laugh again, unable to help it.

“Tell me more about how you pass down stories,” I say when my amusement has passed. “What's that like?”

Zaid's eyes take on a faraway look for a moment as he considers.

“It's... comforting,” he says finally. “There are the familiar tales, the ones we've all heard since we were children. Probably all false, or with so many additions and changes that they don't really resemble the real things that happened anymore. And then there's the more recent stories—hunts, battles, arguments between tribes—that are very real. Those are shared among the adults.” He pauses. “It is the one thing I miss about childhood, how the stories were so much more exciting and hopeful.”

I listen to him eagerly, enjoying his descriptions. Despite the fact that he's technically one of my captors, I have an urge to know more about him. There seems to be a depth in him that I haven't seen in the others, and it sparks my curiosity beyond just my plan to get closer to him to gain my own freedom.

“I'm too shy to be a storyteller that way,” I admit. “Telling stories out loud. I had a friend in college who wanted to be a voice actor, but I'd rather sit at home and write—”

My voice cuts off abruptly as Zaid stumbles forward. It looks like what happened the day I saw him as the other women and I were coming back from the pool. Like he tripped

over nothing. I thought that day it was because he was distracted by me, but this time, closer to him, I can see that it's as if his leg gave out, making him miss a step.

Without thinking, I reach out, grabbing his arm and supporting him as he stumbles, dislodging rocks in the path. The other warriors look over, startled and looking as if they're ready to jump in if this has anything to do with me trying to escape.

"What happened?" Azuld asks sharply, and I look over at him, trying to hide my dislike.

I saw a flash of fear in Zaid's eyes as he stumbled. Something tells me that this is something he tries to hide, that he doesn't want the others knowing about it.

"I tripped over the rocks," I say hastily, covering for him. "Good thing Zaid was here for me to grab on to."

"Be more careful, female," Azuld snaps. "You are valuable. Don't walk so closely to him either." He reaches out, grabbing my elbow and pulling me away from Zaid so that I'm walking in the center of the four again, and then turns his attention back to the path ahead.

The others keep walking, the entire incident already forgotten and my excuse taken without question. But as I glance sideways at Zaid, I see him looking down at me as if he's never seen me before, surprise etched over his face.

He doesn't know why I helped him. And if I'm being honest—I don't entirely know either.

Zaid

I KEEP my distance from Abigail as we continue walking so that we're not touching any longer, but I can still feel the way her skin felt pressed against mine as she helped me recover my footing. She was warm, soft, the scent of her filling my nostrils as she brushed against me, grabbing my arm with surprising strength as she helped keep me from stumbling further. It sends a throb of heat through me, remembering it, and it's all I can do not to keep staring at her as we walk.

Once again, the little Terran has surprised me. I have no idea how she would have grasped that I wouldn't want the others to know about my leg giving out briefly—I've never spoken to her of my injuries or talked about how the aftermath makes me feel, or how I occasionally lose strength in my limbs even now. But she clearly understood despite that—and she lied to the other warriors to preserve my dignity. Azuld especially wouldn't appreciate this small woman lying to him, but she chose to help me, despite the risks.

“Thank you,” I murmur, quietly enough that no one else will be able to hear, and Abigail nods. Her covert gaze looking sideways at me changes to her turning to look at me fully, her eyes the color of deep spring grass meeting mine, and I feel my chest constrict for a moment as I realize how beautiful she truly is. Not just her features, which are perfect in every way, her milky skin or her vibrant coloring, but her inner self as well—who she *is*. I'm certain then that I've never met anyone like her before—and I have a sudden, strong sense that I never will again.

We keep walking, but the ache in my chest doesn't ease, or my newfound discomfort with the situation. *This is wrong*, I hear in my head as we walk, just as I thought before, but I do my best to ignore it. I can't defy my brothers and my leader over a Terran female, no matter how kind or beautiful. It would be suicide—perhaps literally.

I intend to walk in silence, but Abigail is too easy to talk to.

“What did you mean by preferring to sit at home and write?” I ask without meaning to, and she flashes me a shy grin, shrugging lightly.

“I'm not very extroverted,” she says, and when I raise an eyebrow to indicate that word doesn't make sense to me, she bites her lower lip in a way that makes me instantly think of what it might be like to pull that soft flesh between my teeth instead.

I've kissed a woman, once or twice when I was much younger. Fumbling, awkward caresses, quickly ended before it could go further. I've imagined much, much more, and now all of those imaginings turn toward the soft, rosy flesh between Abigail's teeth as she considers how to explain her choice of words.

“Extroverted means a lot of energy for spending time around others,” she explains haltingly. “Being around other people, meeting new people, talking and going to parties? It makes people like that feel energized. More alive. But I've never been like that.”

“What makes you feel... energized?”

I don't know why I'm so eager to learn more about her. Everything she says fascinates me. I know other Uleki, other Xaathians who are curious about the planets beyond ours and throughout the universe, who wish to know more about other beings and their cultures. I've never much cared. All of my focus, all of my life, has been on being good enough for *here*, for the people I already live among. I haven't had time for wondering about other planets and peoples.

But for the first time, I find myself craving information, longing to learn more about Abigail and this strange place that she came from.

She brightens slightly, her cheeks pinkening in a way that makes me think my question pleased her.

“I like being at home,” she confesses. “My apartment is tiny, but I’ve made it cozy. Furniture that I like, art that I like, books and my favorite tea and snacks. It’s not expensive, but it’s—”

Her face crumples suddenly, and she bites her lip again, harder this time.

“It’s home,” she whispers in a tiny, cracking voice, and that ache in my chest intensifies.

Home is what makes Abigail happy. Not exploring, adventuring, meeting new people and discovering new things. Her home, the small things she finds comfort in is what makes her feel renewed, restored—and those things are a universe away now. Farther than she will ever go again, if this deal between us and the Jakk is struck.

“Tell me more about your home,” I say quickly. “Where you live.”

I’m trying to distract her, to keep her talking so that her more painful emotions can’t find purchase, and I can see that she’s struggling to push past them as well, not to crumple. She’s stronger than I thought she would be.

Yet another way that she’s surprised me.

So many small things about her are surprising. How much I enjoy the sound of her voice, the stories she tells, always willingly pausing to explain when I don’t understand something. She’s easy to talk to, sweet and funny and smart in a way that is completely unexpected, and I think again about where we’re taking her.

I’m going to take her to the Jakk, and leave her there. Leave her with savage, cruel males desperate to rut with a female, desperate to pass on their seed and hope that at least one of them takes root. The thought of how Abigail will be

passed around makes my stomach clench with a burning anger, like the embers of a fire in my gut, and that unfamiliar rush of possessiveness washes over me again.

When they have wrung all the pleasure and offspring that they can from her, they will make a meal of her. That could be years from now, but it will be her end all the same, like all Jakk whose usefulness to the tribe is finished. They call it *the circle of life*, say that it is their way, that it is foolish to give their tribespeople to the earth when they can be of use one final time. The blood and flesh of an elder warrior nurtures the younger ones, passing on their spirit and courage, and when there were females, the matrons passed on their nurturing to the next generation of mates and mothers through their consumption.

It makes sense perhaps, from a certain point of view, but it makes my skin crawl nonetheless. It is not our way. And what they will do to Abigail will not be nurturing or kind or even pleasurable. They will not treat her as a warrior should treat his mate. They will use her until she has nothing left to give, and then—

My stomach twists at the thought, anger and nausea boiling in my belly as I look over at her. She's fallen silent again, as if she can sense the change in my mood, and I feel helpless. *That*, above all else, is a feeling that angers me even more, because I've spent all my life training and working to overcome the helplessness that was forced on me as a youngling. If there is one thing I have tried above all else in my short life not to be, it is *helpless*.

But for Abigail, I am that. I cannot help her. I cannot save her.

I try to push the thoughts out of my head, but it's harder than before. I'm here because I volunteered, which feels worst of all. Drael would not have chosen me. I'm the youngest and weakest of the warriors, and everyone knows it. This is my chance to prove that I am more than that.

But I can't shake the feeling that this is wrong. That we are giving a female up, handing her over to be used and tortured,

all for relk stone. For better weapons.

To protect our own, Drael would say. But I'm having a harder and harder time believing that this is right, just because Drael says so. That Abigail's life is worth even the chance to better arm and protect our own tribe.

Valek, the one leading us, comes to a sudden and abrupt halt, so quickly that the three of us nearly run into him. He holds up a hand, his posture stiff, and all thoughts of the Jakk and Abigail's future rush out of my head as I see what's on the path a few yards away, blocking our way forward.

It's a *lurshen*, a furred creature the size of three of our warriors, with two fangs the size of my forearm and a mouthful of teeth besides and claws just as long. It could rend any one of us to pieces in a second, especially if enraged, but with four warriors to fight it, we might be able to take it down.

It's a shame we're so far from the village. A *lurshen* hide would be much prized for the winter, and the thick greasy meat would make excellent roasts and stews.

"Get back," Azuld orders Abigail, waving his hand at her as he speaks in low, harsh tones. She does so without argument, her green eyes wide as she catches sight of the creature. She pales even further, which I wouldn't have thought possible, backing up slowly as we form a half circle in front of her, facing down the creature.

It won't simply move on if we wait. Its cave is likely nearby, and the beast is probably out hunting for food. It will have already caught our scent.

Valek starts to creep forward, Azuld at his side. Normally, in any other hunt, I would stay back with the second wave of hunters, waiting for the first wave to weaken the creature. I've always known I would only shame myself if I tried to be one of the first.

But today, I don't hold back, and not only because there are only four of us to fight the *lurshen* and not a full hunting party. Deep down, I know the true reason.

Abigail has seen me stumble, and even if she doesn't know the true reason, I don't want her to think me weak. I don't want to give her an opportunity to think less of me. So I charge forward with the others, spear and long knife at the ready, attacking the lurshen from all sides.

I know it's foolish of me to fight harder than usual because she is watching. I know it makes no sense. She's not my mate, she never could be, even if she were not bound for the Jakk tribe. I am already the least of us, and taking a mate from another species would only prove further that I am not even good enough for an Uleki female.

Would that matter, if I were good enough for her?

The thought sears through my mind as my spear sinks into the lurshen's flesh, unbidden, and I try to force it away the same way I force my speartip deeper into the beast's side, slashing at it with my dagger as I do so. It roars, rising up on hind legs, gnashing and clawing at us as we pull our weapons free and attack again. Its fur is torn, bleeding already from a dozen wounds, but it's not down yet.

I hear a small cry of fear that I know is Abigail's, and it only makes me redouble my efforts. I want her to see that despite my old injury, I am strong and capable. I want to show off for her, to impress her, in ways that I've never thought of impressing a woman before. I've often tried to prove my worth to the other warriors, but I've always known that I would never be the one the goddess chose to bestow one of the few remaining unmated females upon.

And yet...

I can feel her eyes on me as I fight. The four of us work in perfect unison, falling into the old trained patterns of the hunt. The lurshen snarls and strikes out, clawing, biting, but it doesn't land a blow, which is a lucky thing, because all four of us are needed to bring it down. When we do, the beast's weight crashing to the grasses with a reverberation that shakes the ground beneath our feet, Azuld lets out the ululating cry that says his was the killing blow.

My face burns, because I wanted to be the one who struck the final time. But when I look at Abigail, her eyes are on me, and me alone, even if it was Azuld who felled the beast at last.

That's enough for me, I think, and I know those thoughts are dangerous. I know I am inexperienced with women, and her attention is distracting me in a way that it shouldn't. But in this moment, with Abigail looking at me as if I'm her savior, I can't bring myself to care.

Until my chest clenches with the reminder that I'm anything but, that I'm helping to deliver her to a fate worse than death.

The others are already carving chunks of the meat free, wrapping them in cloth and spearing them on a long stick to carry. We'll eat well when we stop for the night—we've avoided lighting fires for the most part, relying on dried rations to avoid drawing any attention from nocturnal creatures who might see the flames, but none of us can pass up the opportunity to feast on freshly killed lurshen meat.

Abigail doesn't speak as we continue on down the now-cleared path. She's still pale, her lips pressed tightly together again, and this time I don't ask her questions or urge her to talk. I've run out of things to say for now, and besides, deep down I know it's not wise to keep getting closer to her. In the space of two days, I've developed more of a connection with her than any Uleki female I've ever known. Shame burns in my gut at the thought of what lies ahead, and I can't bring myself to speak to her.

When we stop for the night, clearing out a space for the fire and tramping down grasses to make cushions for our mats, Abigail sits down where I spread hers out. She watches silently as Azuld roasts the lurshen meat, handing her a chunk wordlessly along with bread and fruit when it's finished cooking. She looks at it a bit suspiciously, but takes a bite, wrinkling her nose.

"Do you not eat meat on Terra?" I ask, unable to stop myself from voicing my curiosity, my need to know more about her.

“Not—like this,” she says with a small laugh. “Not freshly killed and unseasoned. Well—some people do. But not me. I lived in the city.”

City. I’ve heard of cities, although we don’t have such places on Xaath. “Do you like it?” I venture, and she shrugs.

“It’s different,” she says, and then falls silent, sandwiching a strip of the meat between chunks of bread.

I watch her as she eats, enjoying my own fresh meat. I enjoy looking at her, studying her, even if I know I shouldn’t. Even though I know I should keep my distance.

Azuld binds her hands and feet again as we prepare to lie down to sleep. Abigail lies on her side on her mat, away from me, curling into herself against the dropping temperature as Irv puts out the fire. Valek pushes past him, going to lie down behind her as I did last night. He has a lascivious look in his eyes that makes my gut burn with anger again, my hands curling into protective fists as I fight the urge to physically pull him away from her. I know it’s an unnatural reaction, that I have no reason to feel this way about Abigail, as if I could kill him just for looking at her with lust and moving with purpose to touch her. But it feels like an almost primal urge, and I have to fight everything within myself to stop from reaching for him.

Abigail speaks up before I can move though, as if she can sense how my muscles are shuddering, rigid with the effort not to harm Valek. “Zaid, will you come keep me warm, like you did last night?”

Her voice is sweet, plaintive, and I know she’s asking for more than my warmth. She’s asking for my protection, for me to keep her safe from Valek or others who might want to lie with her, touch her, force her, use her. I shudder, both from relief that she’s asked for me, and shame that I can’t do what she wants, not completely.

I can give her my warmth. I can protect her from my warrior brothers, even from my own nascent desires, but I can’t protect her from anyone who would wish to harm or use her.

Very soon, I will be handing her over for exactly that.

I can't ignore the pleasure that flushes through me as well though, mingling with the shame in a flood of mixed heat that has me trembling inwardly with the effort to hide it all as I move closer to her, curling around her from behind in Valek's stead.

Valek grunts, moving away and standing. "I am bigger than he is, female," he growls. "My warmth would have been better."

"Ah, forget it," Iriv says, clapping Valek on the shoulder as he rises from where the fire was. "Zaid is our little prisoner's favorite. He had to be someone's, eh? Someone had to listen to his chattering. Let him keep her warm. His furs will be cold enough when we return, whereas yours were warmed with Alaya's sweet heat just last moon."

"Watch how you speak," Valek growls, but he shrugs Iriv off, going to his own mat.

In other circumstances, their words might have stung, but tonight I don't care. If I am Abigail's favorite, that only pleases me more. I push away all thoughts of how I will have to betray her, of what lies ahead, and tell myself that for tonight, I will simply enjoy this. I will savor how her small body feels curled against me, the warmth and scent of her seeping into my skin, and I will accept her favor.

I will protect her for as long as I can. Tomorrow we will be in the forest, and after that, we will reach the Jakk.

But for tonight, Abigail is in my arms, and I want to think of nothing else.

Abigail

I LEAN BACK into Zaid's arms as all the warriors settle in for the night, my heart still beating rapidly in my chest. I don't know what exactly the other warrior wanted from me, but it's not hard to imagine that it was probably more than just keeping me warm. Although now that I'm curled against Zaid, feeling his strong arms around me and his hard chest at my back, my heart is beating for more than just that reason.

He feels good, and it's hard not to think about it.

We're quiet for a long time, but I don't fall asleep. I can't. It's not just being outside on a strange planet, sleeping out in the open, or the relative discomfort of being on a mat in the grass. It's the weight and heat of Zaid's body behind mine, his musky, warm, masculine scent in my nostrils, the fact that I can tell he's not asleep either. I'm hyper aware of him, every tiny shift and flex of his muscles, the rhythm of his breathing, and I'm equally aware that this is an opportunity to move forward with my plan. I need to get closer to him so I can find a way to use it to my benefit to escape.

Beyond that, I'm curious too. I'm curious about *him*.

I roll over in his arms, still fitted against him, just facing him now. He's not even pretending to be asleep, his gaze instantly meeting mine as our eyes find each other's. His are lovely, the gray of a cloudy day, streaked with blue like the first glimmers of the sky when a storm passes. I can just faintly see them in the light of the twin moons, along with the

sharp contours of his face, even more handsome in the gleaming light.

I should be trying to seduce him. Getting him to lower his guard. But the first thing that comes to mind is a question, one that I've been wondering since this afternoon.

“What happened today?” I whisper. “When you stumbled? I've seen you do it before. Is it your leg?”

Zaid's lips press together, and for a moment he doesn't respond. I think at first that he won't answer, that it's too personal. But then he swallows hard, and speaks.

“It's an old injury from when I was a child,” he says haltingly. “The tribe captured some varhells, part of a herd, and were attempting to train them the way the Bekaru do, not for riding, but for labor and hauling supplies. They succeeded with a few eventually—we have a handful in our village now, and are better at handling and training them. But back then—years ago—we knew very little. One broke out—”

Zaid clears his throat quietly, but I can still hear the pain in his voice. “It rampaged through the village. I was young, playing outside—and it came straight for me. My mother couldn't get to me in time, and I was frozen with fear. It—it trampled me. Broke every bone in my right leg, and some others in my body besides.”

“Oh,” I whisper, feeling his words like a blow. “Oh Zaid, I'm so sorry. I never would have guessed—”

“While I lay half-unconscious, sick from fever and pain, I heard my father say it would be better if I died, if I would never grow to be a warrior after that.” Zaid's voice tightens, thickening with remembered pain. “He didn't know I heard him, but I did. He never saw or treated me the same after that. Even when I was well enough to walk again, to try to run, to start training, he saw me as weak. Useless. He never believed I would overcome the injuries.”

“But you have.” I look at him, confused as to how anyone could think he's weak. “I saw you today, fighting that sabretooth... bear... thing. You're anything but weak.”

Zaid gives me a small, sad smile. “I do not know what a sabretooth bear is, but if it is anything like that creature, I can assure you that our warriors would still believe deep down that they hunted it successfully in spite of me, not on account of my being there to help.” He lets out a sigh. “It is how things are. I have always been the weakest among us, no matter how hard I train. My leg still fails me at times. Worse than what you have seen, even. It will always be so.”

I can hear shame in his voice too, besides the pain, and my heart aches for him. I feel as if with just a few words, this one story, I understand him so much more. I admired how fiercely he fought the beast today, how he threw himself into the fight even more violently than the others, but now I see he was compensating for what he believes to be his weakness. That he’s trying to prove his strength, always.

It makes me sad to think that he believes he’ll always have to. That he’ll never be good enough.

“Thank you for not telling the others what happened today,” he says quietly. “They already see me as weak. Knowing that I could not keep my footing on an even trail would only make it worse.”

His thanks, his acknowledgement of my help, touches me in a way that I wouldn’t have imagined before. I’ve known men who thought it was weakness to admit they needed help, but at least with me, Zaid doesn’t seem to feel that way, as ashamed as he is of what he perceives as his own physical shortcomings.

“My body isn’t perfect either,” I whisper. “It’s—”

I trail off, because a handful of discoloring marks can’t compare to what Zaid’s endured, even if I’m often afraid of what others will think too. But I feel drawn to him nonetheless, closer to him than I’ve felt to anyone in a long time, and I shift closer toward him, closing what little space there is between our bodies.

Tilting my chin up, without giving myself time to think about what I’m doing, I brush my lips over his in a soft kiss.

His mouth is full, and warm, and soft. I feel an instant tugging deep in my belly, a heated tension that makes me squirm closer, my hands against his muscled chest. He's so impressively ripped that it's hard to imagine anyone thinking him weak, and I press my fingertips into that hard muscle as I kiss him, trailing the tip of my tongue over his full lower lip.

Zaid stiffens against me instantly with surprise, his arms tensing around my body. For a moment he hesitates, and I think he might pull back, but then one hand slides up my back, stroking my hair as he returns the kiss.

His lips press against mine, parting, seeking. The warmth of his tongue brushes against mine, and I hear the rumble of a sound deep in his throat, feel him hardening against me beneath his loincloth. I can feel both of our bodies straining to be closer, an almost primal urge awakening in us both, but before the kiss can deepen beyond the press of lips and the light brush of tongues, Zaid pulls back.

I can see even in the dim moonlight that his pupils have expanded, his eyes more black than gray or blue now, and I can feel how hard he is. From the heat against my thigh, warm and velvet and iron all at once, I have a feeling he's so fully erect that his loincloth has dislodged. The thought sends a shimmer of heat through me, but Zaid doesn't kiss me again or try to push things any further. He doesn't even touch me in any other way than to slide his hand down my back, gently turning me in his arms so that I'm facing away from him again as he tucks me against his hard, heated body.

"You should get some rest," he says quietly. "We both should."

I close my eyes, but sleep is far away. My mind is racing, and my heart is racing too. As much as I want to pretend that this was all for my escape plan, I can't deny the truth that I'm all too aware of now.

Part of the reason I kissed him was... simply because I wanted to.

Abigail

WHEN I WAKE the next morning in Zaid's arms, feeling him stir and wake behind me too, we both relax against each other. I don't stiffen and leap away the way I did before when I realized who held me, and Zaid doesn't push away from me in shame at his arousal. I feel him, hard and nestled against me as his warm breath stirs the hairs on the nape of my neck, and while I don't squirm against him or tease him, I don't pull away either. The heat, the hardness of his body, strong and protective, feels good.

Especially since he's the only one who seems to care about me outside of my "value" for trading.

I turn to look at him over my shoulder, twisting slightly in his arms. I don't kiss him again, but I'm very aware of how close his lips are to mine, how handsome he is in the light. I don't know how Uleki men age, but he looks like he's close to my age, maybe a little older. He's young, and I can understand how he would feel as if he has something to prove, even without the injury.

His gray and blue eyes meet mine, and I can feel the tension shimmering between us. For a moment, I think he might kiss *me*, but then I catch the sounds of the others beginning to stir. Zaid hears it too and pulls back, adjusting himself as he sits up and moves away from me.

"The two of you were awfully quiet last night," Valek jeers as Zaid unties my wrists and ankles. "Can't get a woman's attention even with her tied up and asking for you?"

It's on the tip of my tongue to retort, but Zaid seems intent on ignoring the taunts, so I do the same. It won't help anyone to start problems or increase tension among the group, and Zaid is already up, discarding my bindings and reaching for rations to hand me.

When we continue on, toward the forest that's now in view, I focus entirely on Zaid. I ignore the three other warriors to the best of my ability, and since they don't seem to have any interest in conversing with me, it's easy enough.

I'm not good at flirting, even with human men, let alone an alien whose customs and ways and desires I don't know or understand. I rarely dated back on Earth. The fantasies and romances in my books were much better than anything I could find in real life, and the few times I had sex I found it mostly pointless—for my pleasure, anyway. It seemed like the kind of rote thing I had to do in order to play the dating game, but I didn't opt to play very often, anyway. I couldn't find a man who could give me the kind of pleasure and romance that I read about, and I found the idea of opening my heart, truly, to anyone terrifying after how much love and affection was withheld from me my entire life growing up.

It's clear from the nights Zaid has spent curled against me that he responds physically the way human men do though, so I start with that. Even though the flirtation doesn't come naturally and I feel dizzy with nervousness every time, I make sure to brush against him from time to time, and finding other ways to touch him as we walk. I always make it seem accidental, but I can feel Zaid tense every time and hear his soft intake of breath, and I know it's affecting him.

If I'm being honest, touching him is affecting me too, but I do my best to ignore it. I need all of my wits about me if I'm going to execute my plan. Being actually distracted by Zaid isn't going to help that.

The forest terrain is trickier, full of narrow paths that require us to walk single file at times and paths that aren't always clear. There are branches, large rocks, and other forest debris in the way, and I pick my way across it as carefully as I can, ready to help Zaid disguise it if he stumbles again. He's

walking behind me anyway, the other three in front, and knowing what I do now I understand why he always seems to be in the rear. It's easier to recover before anyone notices if his leg fails him.

As the afternoon wanes, we reach a large outcropping of rocks blocking the path. The other three warriors climb over it easily, and I do my best to do the same, not wanting to seem weak either. Truthfully, after three days of near-constant travel, I'm exhausted. I'm not used to this much exercise, on relatively small rations, and all I want to do is take a hot bath, swallow a handful of painkillers, and sleep, in that order.

I've thought often that it would serve them right if I collapsed and they had to carry me the rest of the way, but my pride won't allow me to do that. In that, Zaid and I are alike. I might have been dragged out here against my will, but I'm determined to hold my own.

The rocks are slippery though, without enough notches to easily grab on to and haul myself up. I'm flailing and about to slip when I feel Zaid's hands on my waist, firm and solid, boosting me up and over the pile. He follows me over, halting only a second when I assume his leg gives him trouble, but he conceals his pain easily.

He must be used to a lifetime of concealing it, and that thought makes me ache for him all over again.

Don't get close to him. Don't care about him too much. Your purpose is to escape.

I wouldn't have thought it would be so hard to remember that. I'm not used to being so distracted by a man, feeling so much curiosity and desire and fluttering new feelings that almost make me think of having a crush. *A crush on an alien.* If I were back on Earth, I'd think I need to get my head examined.

But I'm not, and I have to hold my own here. Even with a crush.

His hands on my waist felt good, strong and supportive and warm. It leaves me wanting him to touch me again, and

when my eyes meet Zaid's as he lands on the other side of the rocks, I can see a similar heat reflected in his gray-blue eyes. So close to him, the memory of his touch still burning against my bare waist, it's all too easy to notice how little he's wearing, all of his bronzed and muscular skin bare except for the heavy loincloth tied around his hips, covering the one part of him I have yet to actually see.

I remember how big he felt against me, hard and eager, and my cheeks flush. He notices, his gaze still holding mine, and the air between us feels so charged that a wave of dizziness washes over me.

It could be the light rations or three days of walking too, but as Zaid gently urges me forward after the other, more impatient warriors, his hand brushing against the bare skin of my waist again, I don't think it is.

I think it's him. And part of me wishes I had the leisure to explore that feeling, rather than needing to quickly exploit it for an escape.

It doesn't pass as we walk either. Zaid is always just behind me, steadying me when the path gets uneven, his hands brushing mine or my waist or back, his grunts as the path grows more treacherous stoking the warmth in my belly, imagining him making similar grunts of exertion for an entirely different reason. Desire pools between my thighs at that thought, embarrassing me, and I wonder if he knows—if he can sense it somehow. I'm inexperienced with human men at best, but completely at a loss when it comes to Zaid. I don't even know what he would expect from sex, or if he's made like a normal man.

He certainly kisses like one.

By the time we finally stop for the night, this time in a wooded clearing instead of the grassy plain of the last two nights, my heart is beating fast, my mind racing with thoughts and imaginings that I would have been embarrassed by only a few days ago. I still am, a little bit, but I don't feel as ashamed of it now. Zaid has made me feel at ease even in this strange, terrifying situation. He hasn't taken advantage of me. He's

gorgeous. Yes, he's technically my captor, but he doesn't seem to take any joy in that. He even seems irritated when the other warriors tie me up at night. I suspect he's here to prove something, like he was proving something when he fought that bear-like creature head on with the others, not because he actually believes in what they're doing.

Still, I know I shouldn't view him as a friend or even an object of desire—and yet, I can't help it. He's kind, smart, a little broken, and gorgeous. It's hard not to feel something.

"We'll reach the Jakk village tomorrow," one of the warriors says as the evening rations are handed out, and my heart skips a beat in my chest for an entirely different reason. "Not long now. And then we can start heading back home."

No mention of what will happen to me. I get the distinct feeling that, aside from Zaid, they don't much care as long as they get the materials in trade that their leader demanded. My imaginings switch from images of Zaid divested of his loincloth and curled against me to frightening thoughts of what might be in store for me with this new tribe, and all my desire cools, the tension dissipating and replaced by icy fear.

This is it. This has to be the night I try. By the time we reach the Jakk tomorrow, it will be too late. If I'm going to escape, it will have to be tonight.

The grumpy warrior who barked at me the first day goes to tie my hands and feet once the sleeping mats are laid out, as usual. I never thought I'd miss sleeping out in the open of the grassy plain, but I also didn't realize how much cushion the flattened grasses offered. Here, on hard rocky ground, the mats offer little comfort.

I can only imagine how much less comfortable I'm likely to be once I'm traded to the Jakk.

You can avoid that, if you just get away.

I feel Zaid curl around me as usual, his chest and belly against my back as his heavy arm drapes over me. I lie there fully awake, waiting to be sure the others are asleep so that I can move forward with my plan.

For the briefest of moments, feeling the solid weight of Zaid behind and around me, his warm breath on my neck and his now-familiar scent filling my nostrils, I consider whether there might be another way. *I could ask Zaid to help me.* I think of the way he protected me from the other warriors who wanted to share my mat, the way he's talked and laughed with me over the past days, the interest he's shown in my past and where I come from. I think of his lips on mine last night, his hands on my waist today as he helped me over the rocks.

I consider what could happen, if Zaid were willing to aid me in escaping. No doubt he knows where the Bekaru are. He could help get me to Nicole. Together, I'd have better odds of survival than alone.

If he would agree.

No matter how much the thought makes my heart race, briefly lifting my spirits at the idea, I know it's not a risk I can take. I want to believe Zaid would help, but I can't be sure. I know now from what he's told me how much he wants to prove himself to the others, how hard he's always fighting against how they perceive him. He's spent his whole life trying to be enough for them—strong enough, brave enough, loyal enough.

I can't be sure that he would betray his own people to help me, a strange woman he just met. As much as I want to believe he would do the "right" thing if asked, I know it's more complicated than that. It's not as simple as just asking, and him seeing that trading me to another alien tribe is wrong. I think he might help me if I asked—pleaded with him to, even—but if I go that route and I've guessed wrong, I could blow my one chance to escape.

I don't want to think about what happens after that.

I need to go ahead with my original plan, even if part of me rebels at the idea of using Zaid, hurting him to get what I want. What I *need*.

My freedom.

When I'm sure that all the other warriors are asleep, their breathing low and even, I wriggle back against Zaid, feeling the hard solidness of him against my back. I think he was half-asleep, lulled into quiet by the warm comfort of our bodies touching and far more comfortable sleeping outside than I am. But the instant I shift against him, I feel him respond, his cock hardening instantly. I can feel it pressing against me, hot and rigid, and I bite back an involuntary moan as I turn in his arms, seeking out his lips with mine.

Kissing him feels good. Right, even. The unfamiliar shapes of his bone piercings rub against my lips, adding to the sensation as he kisses me back, his tongue tracing my lower lip before pushing eagerly into my mouth. My hands rest against his muscled chest, and I find myself wishing they were unbound so that I could explore him further, touch him, learn the contours of his body.

Easy there, Abigail. Eyes on the ball.

As if I ever played sports.

The kiss heats, his tongue tangling with mine as his low, unheard growl vibrates against my lips, and I roll toward him. He grabs my thigh with one hand, pulling me tighter against him, and I feel from the heat against my belly that his loincloth has lost the battle and that he's pressed against me, huge and hot against my skin.

I moan, the sound swallowed up in his kiss, and once again I'm on the verge of losing myself in desire. He shifts as he kisses me, his hand sliding up toward my breast as his other tangles in my hair, the kiss deepening, and I feel his cock slide between my thighs.

My skirt is hitched up, barely covering my ass, and he rubs against my bare, wet flesh. I'm aroused, embarrassingly so, but Zaid doesn't seem to find it shameful. He bites my lip lightly as I feel his shaft rubbing against my most intimate flesh, not inside me, but sliding over my sensitive, swollen folds. He's pierced there too, I realize with a start, including one at the base that bumps against my clit with each rock of his hips.

Zaid pulls me closer, both of us breathless from kissing but unable to stop. He doesn't seem to *want* to stop, and I'm not sure I do either, the building pleasure making my plan seem farther and farther away by the moment. I grind against him, the small noises that I make lost in our hungry mouths pressed together, and to my shock, I can feel the pleasure rising to a crescendo.

I'm going to—oh god, am I really going to—

I was trying to arouse him to the point of distraction, but in doing so I've managed to bring myself there as well—and past it. I'm lost in a sea of sensation—Zaid's full, pierced lips on mine, his hand on my breast, fingers teasing my nipple, his pierced cock rubbing against me where there hasn't been a cock, or tongue, or fingers other than mine in so long. Even then, it never made me feel like this. I can tell he's painfully aroused, harder than any cock I've ever felt, but he doesn't try to push inside me, even though I know this must be as torturous for him as it is pleasurable for me.

And it's so, *so* pleasurable. I rock and grind against him, wanting more of it, the rough slide of his slick hot flesh and the knobby piercing over my throbbing, sensitive clit—and then just as I'm about to force myself to pull away, the sensations peak and come crashing over me in a wave of pleasure so unexpected that I nearly scream.

Zaid crushes my mouth to his, swallowing the sounds with his hand knotted in my hair, his body rocking against mine as if he understands what's happening and seeks to draw it out. It feels so good that I can't think for a moment, shuddering with ripples of pleasure like nothing I've experienced before.

Remember why you're doing this.

It's hard to remember. He pulls back to look at me as I arch against him, feeling flushed and boneless in the aftermath of the unexpected orgasm, and I press my fingertips into his chest.

"I want to touch you," I whisper, the words floating out and hovering between us.

It's not a lie. I *do* want to touch him, desperately, for reasons that have nothing to do with my plan, or escaping. I don't *want* to run away right now. If anything, I want to be closer to him, as close as I possibly can be.

But my plan involves getting him to untie my wrists and ankles, so it works anyway.

Zaid nods, almost dazedly, and I feel him throbbing against my thigh. There's dampness on my skin where his cock slides over my flesh as he moves, his arousal and mine, and it spikes my desire again. He breathes in, shuddering, and I know then that he can smell it. That he's breathing in *me*.

I hope the others can't.

His fingers work quickly, undoing the ties at my wrists and ankles. The moment they're free, he rolls me onto my back, hovering over me as his mouth claims mine again. This time it's hotter, more urgent than before, and I know by saying I want to touch him I've given tacit consent to what he wants most—me.

I want him too. I give myself a moment to run my hands down the marks on his chest, over his rippling abs, wanting to touch and grope every inch of his magnificent body. The fact that anyone could think he's physically lacking in any way is mindboggling to me.

Zaid's weight presses into me, his cock slipping between my thighs again, his hands seeking out my breasts. He doesn't make a move to thrust into me yet, but one of his hands slides down my hip, tugging up my skirt.

"I want to taste you," he groans, and my entire body clenches with a near-painful lust.

I want you to, I'm on the verge of saying, but I bite the words back. My hands are everywhere on him, as his are on me, both of us hungrily groping, seeking, wanting to learn the contours of each other as we lose ourselves in desire. He feels so good, all of him, and he seems to have forgotten everything but me. His every groan and breath and movement is for me, and I'm on the verge of it too. I want to disappear into him, to

let myself feel every bit of pleasure he has to offer me. If his cock felt so good rubbing against me, I can only imagine how it would feel inside, filling me more completely than I've ever been filled in my entire life—

But he won't be the last one. Who do you think will be inside you after they hand you over to the Jakk?

It's that horrifying thought that brings me back to my senses. I grope to one side as he kisses me hungrily, his cock between my thighs now, rubbing against me as his hand seeks out the spot that gave me so much pleasure before, and I whisper in my head *I'm so sorry*.

I grab the first fist-sized rock I find, and swing it into the side of his head, hard. Not as hard as I can—I don't want to seriously injure or kill him. I just want to get away.

Zaid lurches back, groaning and dazed as he slumps away from me, his blue-gray eyes widening.

I catch one glimpse of the pained shock in them, the look on his face going straight to my heart, before I scramble to my feet and take my chance to run.

Zaid

MY EARS ARE RINGING, my head is spinning, and I'm in shock.

Not just from the impact of the hit, but from how quickly things changed. From the fact that it was *Abigail* who hit me. One moment, she was on her back, arching toward me, and I was on the verge of experiencing the pleasure of taking a woman for the first time.

And then, out of nowhere, she slammed a rock into my head and ran.

Was she using me all along?

The thought hurts, that it was all faked, these past days we've spent together and what I thought we shared. The idea that I wasn't enough for her makes pain twist in my chest, even though I know that's foolish. Of course I could never be what she wanted. I'm one of her captors, an alien male taking her to be sold.

But it didn't feel like that tonight.

Her scent is still on me. My cock is still wet with her arousal. I shudder at the memory of her grinding against me, taking her pleasure on my body, using me to satisfy her need. My cock throbs, leaking seed at the memory, but my chest tightens. It was fiercely erotic when it was happening, but now I'm not so certain.

Now that I think that might not be the only thing she used me for.

I push myself up, struggling to stand. The others are waking too, my grunt of pain from the blow rousing them, and the instant they see that Abigail is gone they're on their feet.

“*Voskiret!*” Azuld hisses. “What the *drak* were you thinking, letting her get away from you? *Drakking* idiot.”

“He was thinking he'd finally get his cock wet,” Valek taunts, but it's clear Azuld is in no mood to joke.

“We have to go after her,” he growls. “Let's go, before she gets too far.”

I don't dare stay behind, although I'm still reeling from the blow, my head aching and vision blurred. I curse myself inwardly as I follow for being so foolish. *They already think I'm weak. This will only make it worse.* I can hear the jokes and stories now, of how Zaid was so weakened by desire that he let a small Terran woman overcome him. Of how desperate I was, since no Uleki woman will have me.

It burns in my gut, my hands fisting as I follow them. I wanted Abigail for herself, not because she was the only one who would take me. I started to feel for her over these past days. Foolish as it is, I even hope that she eludes us, as we search the forest for her.

Even if she tricked me, she doesn't deserve the fate in store for her. I know suddenly, in the deepest parts of my soul, that I don't want her to go to the Jakk. It's wrong. I know it is. And yet, if we find her, I will have to carry on with the mission we've been given.

There's a rustling, the sound of footsteps, and my gut clenches.

Be silent, I think to myself. Hide. Wait for us to circle back to camp, and then run.

I wish I were with her, to help her, and for a moment I wonder why she didn't ask. But I know the answer already, and what mine would have been, although it shames me to think of it.

I'm not strong enough to betray my people and defy Drael. I would not have helped her run.

And I hate myself for it.

“Got you!” Azuld crows a few feet ahead, his voice carrying and snapping me out of my thoughts, and my heart sinks as I see him pulling a struggling Abigail out of the bushes. With her recapture, her meek acquiescence of before is gone. She kicks, scratches, bites and yells as Azuld hauls her back to the three of us, his hands in an iron grip on her arms. She’s spitting and fighting like a *keki*, and it arouses me even as it hurts to see her like that, a flailing prisoner, bound for a horrible fate.

This is my fault. I made it worse by giving in to her.

“How did you get free?” Azuld demands, and Abigail’s gaze slides away from him.

He shakes her, hard, her teeth clacking with the force of it. I have to physically restrain myself from rushing at him, that possessive, protective anger flaring in me again. I want his hands off her. I want the only hands on her to be mine. I want to roll back time, and go back to the two of us on her mat in the clearing, her body arching under mine, her hands and her lips—

“Was it Zaid who untied you?” Azuld demands, and Abigail clamps her lips shut, but it’s impossible to miss the way her eyes flick toward me, as if she can’t help it. There’s something unreadable in her gaze, pained and almost regretful, but she doesn’t say a word.

“Well?” Azuld turns toward me, still holding Abigail in an iron grip. “Did you untie her, Zaid?”

Until now, I hoped they would merely think Abigail distracted me and slipped loose. But with Azuld’s eyes fiercely on me, I can’t lie. If I do, and the truth comes out later, it will be much worse.

I’ve never been much of a liar anyway. A strength, some would say. Others would say how easily I can be read is a weakness. Yet another in a long list of them.

Valek and Iriv turn sharply toward me, their expressions shocked. “How did you convince him to untie you?” Valek

demands. “Did you promise him pleasure?”

Abigail refuses to speak. Other than the insults she hurled at Azuld as he dragged her out, she hasn’t said a word. But as they pelt her with questions, prying as to how she convinced me to do something so foolish, even her silence speaks loudly.

Azuld waves a hand.

“She seduced him,” he says, disgust plain in his tone. “You can smell it on her. Arousal—hers and his. She tricked him and took pleasure in it. Isn’t that right, Zaid? She used her body to get your guard down, and convinced you to untie her so the two of you could rut.”

He snorts, his face plainly saying exactly what he thinks of that.

“I knew it,” Valek crows, sneering at me. “No Uleki woman will touch you, so you turn to a desperate prisoner. You might as well take a varhell to your bed.”

“She’s prettier than a varhell,” Iriv argues, but I barely hear him.

“Is that true?” I ask her, moving closer as my voice darkens, an unsettling feeling draping over me like a heavy cloud. It’s sinking in that she used me—I realized that from the moment she struck me—but now it’s clearer than ever that perhaps she didn’t want me at all. That she’s only been tolerating me this entire time, waiting for the right moment to strike. “Was it all lies?”

Abigail blinks at me, and I have a moment to see the sadness in her dark green eyes, to take in the near-translucent beauty of her features and the way her hair glimmers in the moonlight before her face hardens, and she nearly spits her next words at me with as much venom as she aimed at Azuld.

“Of course it was,” she says harshly. “Of course it was all a lie. I *hate* you. I hate all of you! You’re nothing but filthy slavers, selling me to horrible strange aliens, and for what? Some fucking rocks.”

She spits at my feet, wrenching in Azuld’s grip again, and he jerks her backward, one hand fisting in her hair as he hisses

at her to be silent.

“I always knew you were the least of us,” Valek says, his lips curling in a cruel smirk. “But I didn’t realize you were stupid as well as weak, to fall for the lies and tricks of an alien female.”

Iriv says nothing, but he’s smirking as well next to Valek, and I can see that he’s thinking something much the same. That I’m weak in mind and well as body, stupid enough to let a woman take advantage of my inexperience. It makes me feel sick, and I look away.

My jaw clenches as Valek jeers at me again, his words barely reaching my ears. The blood is rushing in my head, my heart pounding, shame and anger and hurt raging inside me. Over the past few days, I came to think that Abigail saw me in a way that no one else did, that she understood me. That she saw past my physical limitations to the man I try to be, someone strong and worthy of respect and trust. I thought she saw me as whole, when no one else does.

I felt *something* between us. I know I did—or at least, I thought so. I even began trying to think of ways to avoid delivering her to the Jakk, to convince the others that Drael is wrong in this. That we shouldn’t trade in living flesh.

But now I realize it was all deceit. She lied to me to keep me from uncovering her true motives: to use my weakness against me to escape. She singled me out both as the one she’d be most likely to be able to physically overcome, and also the one that would be most susceptible to her wiles. She took the things I shared, the things I told her, and wove them into a trap to ensnare me.

Only a few moments ago, I was wishing she might elude us and get free. But now, as I watch her still fighting against Azuld even as we head back to camp, I can feel my heart hardening, my commitment to my duty unwavering once again.

She used me, I think, over and over as I trudge at the back of our group, trying to ignore the jeering whispers between Valek and Iriv. *She thinks I’m weak too.*

She doesn't feel anything like what I felt for her, and that hurts most of all. I opened my heart at last only to have my trust crushed beneath her small heel. My anger and shame turn to bitterness, an acid feeling in my gut as I watch Azuld find new bindings for her. I won't be sleeping next to her tonight, and I try to push the churning in my gut aside as I refocus on my duty, the reason I volunteered in the first place.

I lost sight of it when faced with a pair of gleaming green eyes, a perfect feminine body and masses of blood-red hair. But now I remember what I'm here for. To serve my leader and do what's best for my tribe, to prove my worth.

This has been a test in the truest of ways. I let my own feelings get in the way, but I see the error of that now, and I turn away from Abigail. I ignore the hint of pleading in her eyes that makes me wonder if perhaps her anger and hatred was the lie and not her feelings for me, and go back to my mat, lying down facing away from her.

The morning will come early, and we have one last push to reach the Jakk tribe.

Abigail

ONCE WE'RE BACK at the small campsite, Azuld binds me again, hands and feet. I know better than to think he'll let me anywhere near Zaid again, and indeed, he moves my mat so that it's between him and Valek. Valek leers at me, moving his hips in a lewd gesture, and for a moment I think that he's going to try to join me on my mat. My stomach turns over at the thought, threatening to rebel, but instead he turns back to Azuld as I curl up on my side, facing away from Zaid. I can't bear to look at him now.

"I can't wait to be home," Valek grumbles, biting off an extra chunk of ration. "This business of trading a captive is the worst assignment we've had in a long time. I'd rather be on a hunt."

"When we return with a surplus of relk stone, we'll be sent on the best hunts," Azuld says confidently. "Drael will be pleased with us."

"I hope so," the other alien mutters. "The sooner we can leave her with the Jakk, finish the trade and go home, the better. They make my skin crawl. I don't entirely trust them not to take her and kill us anyway."

"That's foolish," Azuld rumbles. "They don't wish war any more than any of the other tribes do—and that's what they'd be starting. They'll take the female for relk stone, or we'll return with her."

"*Drak*, we'll trade her for something else," Valek groans. "Anything to keep from carting her back."

“If the Jakk think she’s useless, maybe we can make use of her,” the other alien says eagerly, and there’s a resounding chuckle that makes my skin crawl and the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

The only voice I don’t hear is Zaid’s. I have the urge to look over my shoulder and see what he’s doing, if he’s gone to sleep or if he’s just listening to the conversation, but I can’t bear to see the hurt and betrayal in his eyes. Instead I curl tighter in onto myself, trying to tune them out and block out everything they’re saying. Their talk of the Jakk just reaffirms my fear that the Jakk are something horrible, and I feel sick as I lie there, knowing I’m not far away from whatever fate they have in store for me.

I can’t sleep though. I feel terrified and distraught, sick one moment and cold with fear the next, my heart racing so rapidly that my chest hurts with a pain I’ve never felt before. *My plan failed. My only plan, and it’s over. I don’t have anything else. I’m fucked.*

I’m not going to be able to escape. I’m out of time, and tomorrow I’ll be delivered to the Jakk tribe. After that—the options are too horrible to think on for very long.

I can’t stop replaying the moment that Zaid realized I was using him either. A small, selfish part of me hoped I’d get away without ever having to see his realization. I ran as fast as I could after I hit him with the rock, not just because I wanted to get away as quickly as possible, but because I didn’t want to see that flash of pain in his blue-streaked gray eyes. I didn’t want to see him figure out the betrayal.

The hurt and anguish on his face when he realized it, when I told him that I hated him in order to protect him from any culpability in all of this, carved something out of my heart, made me feel a pain for him that I’ve never felt before. I can’t stop seeing that look on his face, as if I’d ripped out his heart and stepped on it, right in front of him.

It doesn’t matter, I tell myself as I curl into a ball, resisting the urge to clap my hands over my ears so I can’t hear the

conversation of the other warriors any longer. *I don't owe him anything. I shouldn't even care.*

Zaid is one of the men holding me captive, an alien warrior who is complicit in taking me to, and soon, delivering me to aliens even worse than the Uleki. I shouldn't feel bad about trying to escape. For all I know, he's been playing me these past few days as well, trying to make me think he cared so I'd let him fuck me.

That thought makes me feel sad, but I don't really believe it. His hurt at discovering my lie was too genuine. Still, he wouldn't have saved me, if he'd known my plan. I do believe that. And that should be enough to salve any crisis of conscience I might have about lying.

Except... it wasn't all a lie. I *had* started to feel something for him. I wasn't just faking it.

Or was I really? Did I just convince myself that I cared so I wouldn't feel so bad? I'm not exactly the kind of person who goes about deceiving others regularly.

I would have been a fool, truly, to think any of it was real. My feelings and reactions or his. We're different species, from different planets, on opposite sides in this situation. How could we have ever truly cared for each other? It would never have made sense.

Finally, exhausted and broken down, my hopeless thoughts start to fuzz at the edges, blurring and running into each other until I fall asleep at last despite myself.

My last sleep before we reach the Jakk.

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm woken not by the solid heat of Zaid at my back, his arm wrapped snugly around me and his cock hard against my spine, rousing me to a dreamy, heated wakefulness... but rather by Azuld's foot in my back instead, jabbing me awake.

"Get up," he growls. "We need to get moving."

There's no breakfast around the fire this morning. I roll up my mat and Azuld snatches it, handing it to Zaid instead of letting me do it. It's clear they're more than happy to let him keep carrying double the load after his perceived fuck-up last night, but they're also going to keep me away from him. I suppose I can't blame them—and I don't know what I would say to Zaid anyway, but it hurts nonetheless.

I'm handed a dry chunk of bread and a thick hunk of dried meat, and pushed forward. This time, Azuld only unties my ankles, leaving my wrists bound in front of me as we go. I'm put just behind Azuld in the line-up as we make our way toward the forest path, but I catch a glimpse of Zaid as we leave camp. I can see the bump on the side of his forehead where I hit him with the rock last night, swollen and bruised, and I feel a wave of conflicting emotion. I feel horrible for hurting him, guilt gnawing at me, but at the same time I feel hurt by him too, and angry.

If he wants to be strong, and brave, why wouldn't he help me? Why would he just go along with something so awful? I can't stop anxiously worrying over the idea that his feelings might not have been real, that it might all have been a ruse to get me to sleep with him, since as Valek said, he hasn't gotten the attention of any of the female members of their tribe. The idea makes me feel sick and sad, and I'm almost glad of the distance between us. I try to keep away from him even when the path widens and the warriors fan out again, keeping me in the center, but I can feel him looking at me. I can feel the weight of his gaze, heavy and sad and angry all at once, and it makes me feel like falling to my knees in the dirt and giving up, refusing to go any farther.

But I know by now they wouldn't allow it, and I can only imagine how Azuld would react to that. So I keep trudging, my emotions a painful, messy tangle, with nothing to disrupt the awful thoughts floating in my head or make them any better.

Finally, after what feels like an interminable walk through the forest, up rocky hills and through terrain that we had to creep through single file, the ground growing more and more

rocky and forbidding and the air growing colder and more damp, we reach the outskirts of a new village.

I feel my skin grow clammy, my heart stuttering in my chest, because I know we're here.

The Jakk village.

"Keep moving," Valek snaps from behind me as my steps falter, and I clench my bound hands in front of me, looking around with breathless fear as we walk down the rocky path into the village.

It's different from the Uleki village. Their huts are made of stone and wood, with hide roofs stretched over the tops and holes cut in the center to let out smoke from fires. They're built against larger rocks that jut up to form parts of the village walls, almost as if the houses are part of the mountain itself, and the doors are wood instead of furs or hide.

There's a long wooden structure at the far end of the village that I can only just see, like some kind of gathering hall. Outside of the smaller buildings in the village, there are structures made of thick sticks with dead animals in varying stages of skinning or butchering slung across them, and the smell of roasting meat fills the air. As several aliens who must be the Jakk start to walk toward us, I shrink back in horror.

They're not handsome like the Uleki are, not really. A couple of them have more favorable features, but they're all more terrifying than attractive. They're as tall as the Uleki or Bekaru, but muscle-bound beyond belief, like barbarian creatures carved from stone. Even their skin has a paler, more grayish cast than the other aliens I've seen, as if they're meant to exist here in this land of rocks and trees.

They have broader, more ridged foreheads, wider and flatter noses, and squared jaws. They're all heavily armed with weapons and clubs, and when a few of them open their mouths to leer at me, I see that at least two of them have filed their teeth to sharp and jagged points, like living sharks.

These are the aliens I'm going to be traded to, and my skin crawls with horror, bile rising up in my throat. I flinch

backward, toward Zaid, automatically seeking him out for help and comfort before I realize what I'm doing. The instant that I do, I pull away, hating myself for wanting him in my moment of fear—and at the same time wishing for any scrap of comfort I might be able to find.

Azuld says something to the largest of the Jakk standing in front of us, in a low and rumbling voice that I can't make out. He motions us forward, and we're taken farther into the village.

I struggle for breath, a wave of dizziness washing over me. We're high up in the mountains, and fear has stolen most of the air from my lungs, leaving me sucking in gulps of the thin air as I stumble forward. I want to burst into tears, but I don't want to give them that satisfaction, so instead I bite my lip hard, my nails biting into my palms until I'm almost certain they'll come away bloody.

With every step we take, the terror inside me grows.

Zaid

I FEEL a sick sensation in my stomach as we enter the village, but I do my best to ignore it. I can feel Abigail's fear, can *smell* it, a bitter stench on the air. But there's nothing I can do, and I remind myself that I have a reason for being here. It's not to save her, it's to hand her over, and go home—where I belong. She is not for me, and she never could be.

No matter what I might feel or want. My duty is to master those feelings, and move on. *There is strength in that*, I remind myself, but it feels physically painful to ignore her quick, gasping breathing, and the way she stumbles forward as we go.

We're brought immediately to see the leader of the Jakk, a brutal warlord called Narool. He's even more massive than the Jakk who "greeted" us, hulking even in comparison to Azuld and the other warriors with me. He looks dangerous and forbidding, with a deep blackened scar cutting across his face diagonally from forehead to the corner of his jaw, a part of his right ear jaggedly missing, and his right eye gone entirely. He hasn't bothered with a patch or stitching the lid closed, so there's only a vacant, desiccated hole where the eye once was.

It's unsettling even to me, and I can see Abigail shrinking back out of the corner of my eye. It's all I can do not to go to her, even remembering the hissing of her voice as she spat out that she hated me, or the sickening feeling of betrayal when I realized that she'd used me.

“Why are you here?” Narool growls, his distaste for us clear in his tone. “Why do the grass-dwellers come to the mountains?”

“We offer trade,” Azuld says pleasantly, and Narool purses his blackish lips, narrowing his eye at Azuld.

“What could you have that we would be interested in? And for what price?”

“This female.” Azuld grabs Abigail’s elbow, pulling her forward. I see how she lets him, all the fight gone out of her, her head bowed as her hair falls around her face. It hurts to see. “She is Terran, a rare jewel fallen from the skies. Beautiful, *delectable* in all ways.” His emphasis on the last word makes me want to vomit.

“And what do you want for this female?” It’s clear that Narool’s interest is piqued, but he doesn’t move. “What is your price?”

“Relk stone,” Azuld says confidently. “Four sacks, filled to the brim, one for each of us to carry home. In exchange, the female is yours to do with as you please.”

“Hmm.” Narool grunts, pushing himself up from the stone chair where he was seated. He looks at Abigail with a keen hunger in his expression, and I’m not entirely certain whether it’s lust or a different kind of hunger. He walks toward her, sizing her up with his dark eyes, a predator checking out its prey.

The impulse to step between them, to pull Abigail away from Narool and protect her, is so strong that it’s nearly unbearable. I have to restrain myself, to fight against the urge, reminding myself that she doesn’t want my help. She didn’t ask for it even when she planned to try to escape.

She hates me, I remind myself, letting the keen edge of pain at the memory of hearing those words push back the need to fight for her. *She hates me. She used me. She thinks I’m weak.*

Weak enough to trick. Weak enough to overpower. I touch the lump on my head gingerly, trying to keep my emotions at

bay, to remember what really happened and not just what I feel.

Azuld looks only pleased by Narool's reaction and interest. He smiles at the Jakk leader encouragingly. "If she does, in fact, please, we have more females like her. Terran, beautiful, luscious. All could be yours, for your tribe to enjoy, for as much relk stone as we can carry."

I have to fight the urge to hit him.

"She's very valuable," Azuld continues. "Throughout the universe, I hear, Terran women are valued for their rarity and their compatibility with many other alien species. I hear they can easily bear offspring with over a hundred different alien races."

That's a new one to me. But then again, Azuld has traveled and traded more than I have. I don't want to think about the idea of Abigail bearing children for anyone against her will—but especially not the Jakk.

"She is beautiful." Narool returns to his chair, leaning back in it as he surveys us and Abigail. "I would enjoy sampling her. Two sacks of relk stone, for the female."

"Three," Azuld insists. "I could take her to the Engari, and they would offer all sorts of tech for a Terran female."

"The Uleki have no need for tech, but they do have a need for relk stone." Narool purses his thick lips, and I can see him considering, weighing his desire for Abigail against his desire not to give too much away. "Three sacks is agreeable," he says finally. "And the female will be ours."

"And more, if she pleases you," Azuld adds. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement."

Next to me, I feel Abigail stiffen. I can smell that bitter scent of terror on her once more, and my stomach churns. Around me, I can feel the tension go out of my fellow warriors, all of them relieved that the trade was easily done and terms agreed upon. We all fear the Jakk to some extent, but this was a peaceful transaction.

“Wait here,” Narool says gruffly. “Aked, go and get their payment. Three sacks full of relk stone.”

Azuld holds out three woven sacks, and the burly Jakk who Narool spoke to takes them, lumbering out of the hut. Next to me, I can feel Abigail starting to tremble, and when I glance sideways, I can see that her eyes are fixed firmly on the dirt, her hands laced together in front of her. She looks terrified, and I can’t blame her. I know what is going to happen to her, and I can only imagine that she’s beginning to grasp some measure of it too.

The wait feels worse than the trip here. We stand there in silence, the other warriors relaxing, but my tension and anxiety worsening with every moment. I can’t stop picturing what will happen to Abigail, these huge and barbaric Jakk forcing themselves on her, until my gut is cramped with nausea and I feel as if I might explode with anger and possessive rage. I remember her in the forest, the sweet way she arched against me, her breathless gasps of pleasure, the softness of her lips and body. I try to remember that it was all a lie, a trap, but all I can see or think of now is how that softness and sweetness will be abused relentlessly by the Jakk.

When Aked finally returns with the sacks of Relk stone, Azuld shoulders one, Valek and Iriv taking the others. There’s no question of one being handed to me, and I let that shame settle over me as well, reminding me what they think of me. I came on this mission to prove myself, and instead I’ve shown myself to be easily seduced, too weak to even carry a part of our bounty.

“A party will be sent soon, with the remainder of the women we’re willing to trade for more stone,” Azuld tells Narool. “You will be able to look over them at your leisure.”

Narool nods, looking pleased, and Aked reaches for Abigail, his thick fingers closing around her delicate arm and pulling her away from us. My stomach clenches as I start to lose my battle of wills, almost leaning forward to reach for her and pull her back, but my leg twinges as I do, the muscle cramping painfully.

Abigail lets out a small, muffled cry from between her tightly pressed lips as he takes her away, but I focus on the pain in my leg, letting it ground me. It's a reminder that I cannot go against my leader or my tribe, that I have to finish this task. With any luck, Azuld and the others will keep the detail of how I nearly let her escape to themselves, and Drael will be pleased with me. I will have succeeded in proving myself worthy to others in our tribe.

But as we turn to go, leaving Abigail with the Jakk as we're ushered out of the village, I catch one last glimpse of the utter, frozen terror on her face.

In this moment, I feel anything but worthy.

Abigail

AS I WATCH ZAID GO, some part of me wants to beg him to stay. I see him turning away with the others, leaving me alone with these terrifying new aliens, and I almost speak. I almost lunge forward, almost call after him—but I don't.

I can't, and most of all, I *won't*. I won't beg him to help me in front of my new captors, making me seem even weaker than I'm sure I already do. And being rebuffed by him in the end, as I'm sure he would do—especially after everything I said to him—would only make it worse.

It's not as if I can be surprised that he's leaving me here like he planned to, anyway, I think sadly as I sag back in the stony hands of the alien holding me captive. I told him I hated him.

A sudden flare of regret grips me.

I could have done it differently. I should have tried.

I could have asked him for help, at least given it a shot, instead of attacking him. He'd seemed so genuinely kind and interested in me. I saw how betrayed he was, after they found me—surely that could only have come from real feeling.

Maybe I could have gotten him to help me.

But as he finally steps out of sight with the others, disappearing into the rocky distance, I realize it's too late. Zaid is gone.

I'm left alone with the Jakk tribesmen.

The big leader, the one Azuld called Narool, gets up from his stone chair and walks to where his henchman is holding me. He lifts my chin, touching me with thick fingers that feel chilly, and it's all I can do not to shrink away from or fight his touch. I'm sure that would only make things worse, but I feel sick as he probes at my skin, pushing his fingers between my lips to look at my teeth.

I want to bite him, but that would *definitely* make things worse.

"You will be a valuable addition to our tribe," Narool grunts, as if that's supposed to make me feel better about being sold.

My skin chills as I wonder what I'll be "*adding*." I know already women are scarce, and I didn't see any of them on the walk to Narool's hut. There's the matter of how Azuld pitched me as compatible for having children too, something that made me want to spit in his face.

"We have no women left," he adds, his hand still holding my chin, and in that instant, I feel my heart stop beating for a second.

No women at all?

I can guess exactly what he has planned for me, then. I can't help but wonder if I'll be given to him or to someone else, my stomach roiling at the thought, but he doesn't give me long to wonder.

He leans down, his wide flat nose brushing against my neck as he breathes in my scent. I catch a glimpse of his loincloth shifting as he becomes aroused, and I clench my teeth against the wave of nausea that boils up, acid bile burning the back of my throat.

Narool takes a step back, his eyes raking up and down my body.

"You have a ripe body and a pleasant scent," he grunts. "You would be acceptable even if you were only female and fertile, but your beauty made you worth all the more reik

stone. You will bear my warriors many sons.” He grins. “They will all be eager for the honor of giving you their seed.”

I shudder, looking at him in abject horror as it dawns on me what he’s saying. I’m not going to belong to him, or be handed over to any *one* of his warriors. I’m going to be given to them all—maybe in turns, maybe all at once, in some kind of gross race to see who can impregnate me first.

May the best dick win.

It’s all I can do not to burst out into horrified, hysterical laughter as I tremble in the alien’s grasp, looking at Narool as I wonder wildly what he means to do next.

Will he take me here, now, to get started? Or just drag me out into the middle of the village and toss me like a piece of meat to the dogs?

“Come,” he says instead, his voice harsh, and the alien holding me drags me along, following Narool as he leads me through the village. As we walk, my arm cramping painfully in the grasp of the other alien’s vise-like hand, I see the Jakk men gathering, looking at me hungrily.

I’m not going to survive it to give them sons, I think to myself, cold terror rippling through me. Not if he gives me to them all at once.

They’re all huge, bigger than any aliens I’ve seen thus far, hulking beasts that will undoubtedly destroy me—especially if I’m the first woman they’ve had in some time. The horror of it is almost unthinkable, and I feel hot tears starting to spill down my cheeks in spite of my best efforts, streaking through the dirt on my face. I can’t fathom what’s going to happen next, even as I’m dragged into one of the stone huts, the door shutting heavily behind both aliens as I’m released to stumble back into the dim light, the dirt floor coarse under my feet.

“There are full moons rising soon,” Narool says gruffly. “Our mid-season festival approaches. Your arrival is our good fortune, Terran. This season is ripe for breeding. We will hold a ceremony, and our males will fight for the right to seed you. Those who win will claim you for all to see, and you will ripen

with the first of many sons. This will be the first of many such ceremonies,” he adds, his eyes raking over my body hungrily. “The men will be pleased to know that there are more females like you coming, as well.”

I stare at him, my mind grinding to a halt. I can’t fathom everything he’s telling me. A contest to win the right to my body, multiple males, a ceremony to publicly *breed* me? Just the words make my skin crawl until I feel like I might shiver out of my own body. I fight back the tears that won’t seem to stop flowing, but Narool doesn’t seem to notice, or he just doesn’t care.

Hope. There’s still hope. It hasn’t happened yet, I tell myself as Narool leaves, the other hulking Jakk following him.

He said the ceremony would be at the full moons, and though I’m hardly someone who knows much about stars and moon cycles and all of that, I’ve been sleeping under them the past few nights. From my estimation, I have a little time left. Two or three nights, maybe less.

The minute the door closes behind them, I scramble to one side of the hut, digging at the dirt to see if there might be some way I could hollow out a space to crawl through. But it very quickly becomes clear that won’t work. The ground is hard packed and rocky, far beyond what I could burrow through.

Anyway, they’d see when they came to feed me.

There’s nothing in the hut to hide an escape route, just a clay pot in a far corner—I assume for relieving myself—and a blanket made of some wool-like material. I could cover it with the blanket, I suppose, but it would look strange and obvious that I was hiding something.

It doesn’t matter anyway, because I wouldn’t be able to dig through.

Through the cracks in the walls of the hut, I can see the sun setting, darkness beginning to fall over the village. I slump in the dirt, tears coming again as fear overtakes me.

There’s no way out of this.

Zaid

AS I AND the other warriors head back down the mountain, the others are cheery, talking of home and the welcome we'll receive. Even the heavy sacks of reik stone don't seem to weigh them down, and they move at a quick, merry pace.

My feet drag, however. I can't get Abigail out of my mind—the fear on her face, the way Narool talked to her, the things Azuld said when he pitched her sale. The fact that this will happen again, to other women, when Drael sees the bounty we're bringing back.

With every step I take, it feels as if a part of my soul withers and dies. Shame, hot and thick, overtakes me, that horrible feeling that's haunted me for so much of my life. *Weak. A failure. Worthless.* But now, my weakness will have cost someone else essentially their life. My failure is leaving an innocent woman behind to suffer. It's no longer shame only in my own capabilities.

I've proven myself to be the worst kind of coward.

A single word repeats in my head as we walk, over and over, battering at the inside my skull. *No, no, no. No, I can't let this happen. I can't leave her there.*

I should *never* have left her there.

Finally, as the incessant hammering inside my skull grows unbearable, my head aching with it, the shame of my inaction bowing my shoulders and ripping at me from the inside, I stop in my tracks. I can't go any farther.

I can't. I have to make this right.

It's dark by now, the sun having set an hour or so ago, and the others stop without complaint. "Good idea," Azuld says offhandedly, slinging his pack over his shoulder. "It's a good time to stop for the night."

"We could push on a bit farther though," Valek suggests. "Get off this blasted mountain and put some space between us and the Jakk. The sooner we get home too."

Azuld and Irv nod, clearly thinking the same thing. Home means a fire, fresh food, warm furs. Perhaps even a woman in those furs, one of the unmated ones, eager to welcome a victorious warrior home.

I shake my head fiercely. "No," I say, my voice coming out strangled, as if my throat is closing over. "We have to go back."

"Back?" Azuld looks at me in confusion. "Back *where*?"

"To the Jakk village." I feel my heart hammering in my chest, my own fear rising in me. Fear for Abigail, fear of what the other warriors will say, what they'll do. "We have to go get Abigail."

"Have you lost your *drakking* mind?" Irv asks, blinking at me. "We can't take her back now, even if we wanted to. Narool would kill us for going back on a deal. Plus, we wouldn't get to keep the stone." He picks up one sack, dropping it again to emphasize its weight. "You're an idiot to think that we could even get to her."

"We can't just trade away an innocent woman like that!" I exclaim, the words bursting out of me. "We *can't*. It's wrong —"

"None of this matters," Azuld snaps, cutting me off. "Think about what you're saying. You're suggesting we directly disobey an order from our leader. Over a *Terran* woman?"

"Stop thinking with your cock," Valek adds. "She was pretty enough, but Drael told us what to do. Anyway, there are

always the varhells if you need something other than your hand. One of them ought to stand still for you.”

Azuld casts a glare at both of them before leveling the same glare back at me. “The whole village will benefit from the goods we received from the Jakk in exchange for the Terran woman,” he says flatly. “The Terran is not one of us. I am not concerned with her well-being, only that of our tribe and our leader’s orders. As you should be, Zaid. Or have you forgotten how much you have to prove?”

I see red at that, burning at the edges of my vision.

“So just because she’s not ‘one of us’, not Uleki or Xaathian, she doesn’t deserve to be treated like an actual being, with respect? She deserves to be treated like a sack of *relk stone*, a *thing*, an object to be bought and sold?” I shake my head, my teeth grinding together. “Fine. If you won’t come with me, I’ll go back alone.”

“She’s lucky she was even considered that valuable.” Azuld’s heavy hand lands on my shoulder as I start to turn, keeping me from going any farther. “You’ll stay here. And when we get back to the village, you and I will have a word with Drael about your insolence.”

I don’t know if it’s his refusal to help Abigail, his threat, or the restraining hand on me, but I feel something inside myself snap in that instant. I feel like I’m not even myself as I whirl, knocking his hand away from my shoulder, teeth grinding together as I grab for my dagger.

“What the—”

Azuld doesn’t even manage to finish his sentence before I’m on him, tackling him to the rocky ground as I slam the hilt of my dagger into the side of his head.

I have to get back to Abigail. I have to get her, before they hurt her.

It’s all I can think, a blinding, senseless rage and need overwhelming me as I knock Azuld out cold.

“*Voskiret!*” I hear Valek curse behind me, feel the movement of him and Iriv coming for me, but I’m already on

my feet, my injury forgotten, moving as if I can navigate the rocky terrain with ease. I don't know what's come over me, how I was able to take down Azuld, how I'm able to take on both Valek and Iriv at once. All I can hear is the blood rushing in my ears, the hammering of my heartbeat, and I feel driven mad with the urgency that's welled up within me since Azuld tried to stop me from going back on my own.

I manage to take them both down, knocking Valek out with the hilt of my dagger like I did with Azuld. When Iriv tries to tackle me from the side, I grab a rock, throwing it at his temple hard enough to send him crumpling, but not kill him.

Panting, I stand up slowly, looking at the results of what I've done. They're all alive, but they'll wake up with sore heads and worse tempers. I need to be out of here before that happens.

And before anything can happen to Abigail.

A cold, icy fear fills me as I turn away from my unconscious companions, heading back up the mountain first at a hurried clip and then at nearly a run, tripping as the muscles in my leg seize and cramp from the fight. I ignore it, gritting my teeth through the pain, forcing myself to keep going. I *need* to keep going. I might already be too late.

Visions of what the Jakk might be doing to her fill my head, spurring me on. I feel crazed, and somehow I manage to cover the distance between where I stopped and the Jakk village in half the time it took to leave, breathless and in considerable pain by the time I get there.

I stop at the edge, chest heaving, the muscles in my leg twisted with cramp. It's full dark, the moons hanging heavily overhead, and I know it's not wise to go rushing in. I can't think clearly though. It feels impossible to strategize, to come up with a plan, when I know Abigail is close and in danger. I can *feel* her—her fear, her loneliness, coming in waves—and it makes me feel unhinged.

Staying close to the walls surrounding the entrance to the village, I do my best to sneak through the gate. The moment I slip in, however, I hear a rough voice coming from my left.

“You there! Stop! What are you doing?”

Drak. If I don't take care of this quickly, he'll sound the alarm and the entire village will come down on me. I can't fight all the Jakk—after my fight with Azuld and the others and my headlong rush back up the mountain, I'll be lucky if I can fight this one. But I can't turn back now.

Abigail needs me.

I yank my dagger free, lunging at the scout who sighted me. The Jakk are vicious and strong, bigger than most Uleki, and this one is no different. He's taller and broader than I am, with more muscle, but I don't let that stop me.

I'll die here before I turn back. But if I die, I can't help Abigail.

I have to win this fight.

I slash out with my dagger, lunging at the other warrior before he can have the presence of mind to call for the others. Only one thought is in my head—bringing him down before he can make things worse.

The fight is quick and brutal. My opponent has size on his side, and strength, but what I feel as I strike and dodge is like nothing I've ever felt in a fight before. I feel as if I'd do anything, kill anyone, destroy anything I had to in order to get to Abigail, and my relentless fury seems to catch the scout off guard. He clearly wasn't expecting someone to come along at all, let alone fight him with this kind of vigor, and he lashes out wildly as I back him into a rocky corner, his dagger slicing the side of my arm.

Somewhere in my mind, I register pain, the skin-crawling sensation of warm blood sliding down my hand and dripping off my fingers, but it doesn't slow me down. I lunge forward instead of recoiling as I'm sure the other warrior expected me to do, and as his eyes go wide with startlement, I use the edge of my blade to open his throat.

His mouth gapes wide just as the opening in his throat does, blood pouring from his neck as he makes one more

feeble strike toward me, one guttural attempt to call out as he chokes on his own blood before falling to the rocky ground.

Don't rush. Don't waste this. I have to force myself to move slowly, dagger still clenched in my hand as I move through the shadows at the back of the village wall. I breathe in—and scent Abigail.

My entire body tightens, my cock hardening instantly as I respond to the scent of her. I know it's her—would know that smell anywhere, the warm musk of her skin and the nutty sweetness of Uleki soap that somehow changes to fit her distinctly. I feel almost feral with need, every muscle wound tight, my fist and teeth clenched and my cock throbbing as I follow the scent—straight to a hut near the back of the village.

I catch sight of her through the cracks in the wood slats, and my chest tightens. She's curled up in a tight ball on a blanket spread over the rocky ground, much like the night she tried to escape me and the other Uleki warriors. The sight of her like that breaks my heart, makes me feel rage and fear and sorrow all at once, and all I can think about is that I have to get her free. Now, quickly, before anyone catches me here.

“Abigail!”

I hiss her name, and she snaps awake instantly, scrabbling upward as cold fear blazes in her eyes. Her hands come up to shield herself, but a heartbeat later, her vision focuses.

Her expression turns to pure shock as she realizes that it's me.

Abigail

IT CAN'T BE. I'm dreaming. It can't be real.

I'm staring at Zaid from my makeshift "bed," unable to believe what I'm seeing. That he came *back* for me. I don't know how to feel—all I *can* feel is numb shock, my hands clenched in my lap as I stare at him through the small space in the wall.

"I'm going to get you out," he says quickly, almost reassuringly, and I nod. But I can't let myself hope. I nurtured hope all the way here, even as Narool threw me into this hut, and where has that gotten me? *What* has it gotten me? Nothing more than disappointment and heartache, and a bitter sense of betrayal.

I sit there huddled in the center of the floor as Zaid studies the door of the hut, his lips pursed.

"It's locked from the outside," he says gruffly. "I'm going to have to find a way to break the lock. There's no other way to get you out." He pauses, as if considering. "It's going to be loud. Get ready to run as soon as it opens."

My hands come up to cover my mouth, as if stifling my fear. Not just for myself, but Zaid too. I can't imagine how the Jakk will react if they catch him here, trying to break me out. I don't believe they'll hurt me yet—not in a way that would injure or disable me, anyway. They want me to bear children for them, and I need to be healthy for that. Healthy enough to take several Jakk warriors, and still carry a pregnancy to term. The thought makes me feel panicked and nauseous, but oddly

calm at the same time. It at least ensures that they won't maim or kill me for now. But Zaid—

“Just hurry,” I whisper, biting my lip until I can taste blood.

I watch Zaid pick up a heavy rock, his brow creased with concentration and his jaw clenched. He braces against the door, to keep it from making more noise than necessary, and I stand up as he does, ready to flee the second he breaks it open.

My heart is racing, and as he bashes at the lock the first time, the noise makes me wince. It doesn't give way, and I feel the flutter of hope in my chest start to fade away, replaced with the bitter sinking of disappointment.

Zaid isn't about to give up though. He smashes the rock against it, again and again, two more times and then a third. The noise echoes through the darkness, and I can hear voices in the distance, my stomach curdling with fear at the sound. “Someone heard,” I whisper in a tremulous, watery voice, and Zaid grunts in response.

He rears back, smashing the stone down against the lock with all his might. It takes a second for me to hear the crack of it breaking open, to register the door swinging outwards, but then Zaid darts in and grabs my hand.

“Abigail, we have to go!”

My fingers clench around his hand, my heart in my throat as we flee the hut, racing toward the gate. Some of the Jakk warriors are spilling out of their own huts now, bleary-eyed with weapons in hand, and they snarl their anger as a few of them rush toward us to grab me.

Zaid nearly lifts me off my feet, dodging the grabbing hands of the warrior closest as we run. There are more in pursuit now, and I feel thick fingers pluck at the back of my skirt, as if to drag me backward. But I won't stop. I *can't*, not with freedom potentially so close.

Fortunately, not everyone is awake yet. Not enough to overwhelm us as we run for the gate, hand in hand, terror overwhelming me until all I can see is a narrow tunnel right in

front of me. I can barely keep up with Zaid as we race over the rocky terrain past the village, and every moment I'm afraid that I'll fall and go tumbling down the side of the mountain or break something. But I push myself to my limit, further than I ever have, determined to get free. This is my last, unexpected chance, and I can't squander it. I can't go back.

I'd truly rather die.

"This way!" Zaid shouts, tugging me to the right. I hear the rushing of a stream, the tumbling sound of water over rocks, and then Zaid is flinging himself headlong into the rushing river, taking me with him. "It will carry us farther, faster!" he yells over the crashing of the falls behind us. "Without leaving tracks!"

I barely comprehend what he's saying. I've never been a strong swimmer under the best of circumstances, and these are far from that. I'm barely keeping my head above the water, and I splutter wildly, waving my arms as I try to keep from going head over feet under the rushing, choppy water.

Zaid grabs me, lifting me up, his arms strong and secure around me as he holds me to his muscled chest. I don't want his touch to be comforting, or to feel safe or reassured by his grip, but it is. My fear ebbs as I cling to him, and I push the conundrum of it out of my head for now. I can sort through my complicated feelings about Zaid later—but for now, I need to focus on surviving. As much as I hate it, I know I can't do that alone.

He keeps me close to him as we ride the stream farther down, until the flow of it slows down to a rippling ebb. Zaid helps me to the shore, both of us dripping and exhausted, flopping down into the grass as we both hold still and listen.

"I don't hear them," I murmur.

Zaid holds still a moment longer, and then nods. "I think we've gotten a good ways away, but we should keep moving. It's not far enough."

I glance sideways at him, only to freeze as I catch sight of his arm. It's cut fairly deeply, a jagged slash down his forearm,

and it's starting to bleed again—probably from the exertion and the chafing water. “You're hurt,” I gasp, and Zaid glances down.

“It's fine,” he says quickly. “Nothing major. We should keep going.”

“Nothing major! It's deep!” I shake my head, grabbing his hand as he starts to push himself up from the grass. “You're not going to be any good to me if you drop from blood loss while we're trying to make it down the mountain.”

I bite my lip, trying to figure out something I can wrap it with.

“Turn around,” I say finally, reaching behind me to untie the knot that holds my wrapped top in place.

There's no one else out here, and Zaid respectfully turns his head as I've asked, but I'm suddenly all too aware of the breeze on my bare skin as I rip a portion of the end off, the way his breathing increases as he no doubt realizes what I'm doing.

I manage to get my top rewrapped, enough fabric mercifully left to cover my breasts and tie behind my back, and turn back toward Zaid.

“You can look now,” I tell him, reaching for his arm, but I can see a faint flush on his cheekbones, and he can't quite seem to meet my eyes.

I don't dare look lower down. I have a feeling I know what I'd see.

Zaid holds still as I rinse out his wound with more water from the stream, quiet except for the occasional hiss of pain between his teeth, and as I start to bind his arm with the strip of cloth. The forest around us is quiet and still, and it gives me a moment to finally process what happened in the last several minutes.

He came back for me.

He was part of the reason I was with those awful men in the first place.

But he came back.

He came back.

My feelings and emotions are a mess. I don't know what any of it means, how I'm *supposed* to feel about it. Neither of us are supposed to care for the other. I used him to try to escape, lured him into a trap—and he was prepared to put the orders of his leader over what's right, above me and my well-being. Just as I was willing to put a chance at freedom over his.

But in the end, he tried to fix that. He didn't just leave me there.

“Why did you come back?” I whisper, glancing up at him as my heart skips a beat in my chest. He looks so handsome, his profile silhouetted against the sky, his sharp features as beautiful as ever. “Why did you help me? I used you to escape. I said horrible things to you. Why would you risk so much to save me after all of that?”

It doesn't make sense. None of it does.

Zaid looks down at me, his expression taut and serious.

“It doesn't matter if you don't care for me,” he says slowly, swallowing hard as I wrap the bandage around his arm again. “It doesn't matter if all—all that passed between us on the path here was a lie. In the end, I couldn't bear the knowledge of what they would do to you. I couldn't let you be hurt.”

Zaid exhales, his gaze meeting mine, stormy in color as well as emotion, blue swirling inside gray. “You can hate me,” he says, his voice thickening as he speaks. “I don't blame you for it, after what I was willing to hand you over to at first. But I couldn't let that stop me from saving you. It was the right thing to do, no matter how you feel about me. It won't stop me from trying to protect you now either.”

My traitorous heart skips a beat at that. Zaid is giving me exactly what I wondered if I could have, back before I decided to go ahead with my plan to trick him.

His protection, his help.

It might have come too late, but it still means something to me, even if just a few moments ago I was convinced I could never forgive him for what he did. My heart and my mind are at war with each other, and there's another feeling too—a hot, heavy core of need settling deep in my stomach at how close he is, the scent of him, the feeling of his skin under my fingertips. At how just the knowledge that I was undoing my top was enough to arouse him.

Quickly, I finish bandaging his arm, pushing myself to my feet and taking a step back. Putting a little space between us, while I can still think at all.

“We should keep moving,” I manage, glancing behind Zaid the way we came, and he nods.

As we move forward, I try not to touch him, try not to be too close. My feelings are nothing but a confusing mess, and right now, I need to push that all aside.

All I need to be focusing on right now is how to survive.

Zaid

THE DAY PASSES QUICKLY as we make our way farther down the mountain away from the Jakk village, and I can't stop myself from stealing glances at Abigail again and again, even though I know I have no right to. The touch of her delicate fingers on my skin lingers under the bandage, hot and light and arousing despite the pain of my arm.

Her closeness is tormenting me, but I can't do any of the things running through my head. I haven't earned them.

I meant what I said to her on the riverbank.

No matter what happens from here on out, even if she hates me forever, I wouldn't take back what I did by going to rescue her. I know to the very depths of my soul that it was the right thing to do, even if it meant betraying my leader and my tribe—the people I've tried my whole life to measure up to and prove my worth to.

I might have proved my loyalty and worth to them by following through with the bargain, but I would have never felt anything but shame for myself, ever again. I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd allowed Abigail to remain with the Jakk, permitted her to be used and bred and eventually, quite literally consumed by them.

None of it was right. And I can only try to make up for my failure to protect her in the first place from here on out.

The walk down the mountain seems to take forever. Abigail stumbles a little after a while, her posture slumping,

and I catch her. I can tell that she's exhausted. We've been traveling as fast as possible since our escape last night, only stopping for brief moments today, and the sun is close to setting. My arms go around her, pulling her closer to my chest instinctively. "We should rest," I tell her. "You can't go on forever."

Abigail nods wordlessly, but I can tell she's relieved.

"Okay," she says softly, and I help her to a rocky outcropping not too far off, secluded enough that we're sheltered and hidden from most things—including any Jakk who might be looking for us, or my fellow Uleki warriors. We won't be hidden completely, but we'll hear anyone coming before they see us.

There are no sleeping mats now, since my pack is long since gone, but I manage to arrange some leaves so that the ground is slightly covered.

"I can keep you warm, if you like," I offer hesitantly, my body tightening at the memory of all the times Abigail curled into me as we slept on the way to the mountains.

Abigail hesitates for a fraction of a second, and then shakes her head.

"Thank you, but no," she says carefully. "It's not that cold. I'll be fine."

My chest tightens as I nod, moving slightly away from her. Her words hurt, carving their way into my heart, but mostly because I know *she's* hurt. I've lost her trust, and as Abigail lies down, careful to put space between us, I know I'll do anything I have to in order to win it back.

"I'll keep watch for a bit," I tell her, leaning back against the rocks. "You get some rest. I'll wake you if anything disturbs us."

She falls asleep faster than I thought she would, but I know she must be exhausted after the emotional and physical wringer she's been through today. I'm beyond exhausted too, and I find my eyelids drooping occasionally as I keep watch, catching a few moments of sleep in between jerking awake at

the slightest sound. No one comes. There's only the sound of animals and the wind in the trees, but I'm on high alert, ready to grab Abigail and run again at the first sign of danger.

I'm not sure how long I doze just before the sun rises, until I'm woken by a small cry. I jerk awake as Abigail moans in her sleep again, a frightened sound, and suddenly she jerks awake, gasping with her hand to her chest as she looks around wide-eyed, clearly still half-asleep and unaware of where she is.

I go to her instantly, kneeling next to her.

"Abigail!" I whisper her name urgently, reaching for her hand.

She pulls me close, still half-asleep, the action more instinct than anything else. That tears at my heart, the knowledge that she wants my protection when she's not thinking clearly, that she reaches for *me*. Her arms go around me, her face pressed to my bare chest as she chokes back small, gulping sobs of fear, shuddering as I wrap my own arms around her and pull her into my lap.

Drak.

My entire body responds to the feeling of her small warm figure curled against my chest, her cheek pillowing against hard muscle, her pert backside nestling down onto my cock with only her skirt and my loincloth separating us.

The near-feral need to protect her wars with the driving need for her that I've felt for days now, and I fight hard to keep my cock from getting erect, not wanting to frighten her. Even so, I can't stop the swell of it, thickening uncomfortably between my legs in preparation for going rock-hard the instant I lose my concentration.

"Shh," I murmur, stroking her hair as she tries to catch her breath, still shaking against me. "Nothing is going to hurt you. You're safe now. I won't allow anyone to take you again."

"It was a nightmare," Abigail whispers, her voice shaky. "I—I get them sometimes."

I don't say anything, just continue stroking her hair gently, running my fingers through the thick blood-red mass of it. I know she'll tell me more when she's ready, and I'm in no hurry to have this stop, for her to not be in my lap as I comfort her.

I could do this forever, and never want it to end.

"It was the day my parents died," she whispers. "They called me out of class, and left me in this room, waiting for the police and the principal to come and talk to me. I wasn't there for long before my aunt came to get me, but for just that short bit of time..." Abigail draws in a shaky breath, her fingers clenching together against my chest. "I felt so alone. So completely alone."

Her breath catches on another sob, and I feel my heart crack open all over again for her.

"The nightmare turned into being alone in that hut, after I was left with the Jakk, and then..."

Abigail starts to cry, a muffled sound behind lips pressed tightly together, and I close my eyes as it all starts to come together. What we did to her was horrible enough in and of itself, but it was made all the worse by her past, by having been left alone once before, torn from the people who should have been her protectors. Abandoned and left alone, even if they never meant to leave her.

I didn't *want* to, but I did it anyway, and I've never regretted anything more in my life. I can't think of anything I want more than to take it back, and since I can't do that, I would do anything in my power to make it up to her. To show Abigail how sorry I am.

"After I was trampled by the varhell as a child..." I hesitate, still running my fingers through her hair. "My father thought it was better to have a dead son than a crippled one. I fought hard to be able to walk again, to prove that I was still worth something, still a son he could be proud of. But he and my mother both died not long after my accident, my mother of illness, and him in a skirmish with another tribe. I lost them

both in a matter of months, and I never got a chance to show my father that I could still succeed, still prove myself.”

I take a deep breath as Abigail lies against my chest, her sobs slowing as she listens to me talk.

“I could have slowed down then, maybe, with my father gone. Let myself move at a more natural healing pace. But if anything, it just drove me more. I wanted to show everyone that I was a worthy heir to my family, that my father had no reason to die ashamed of his son, that I belonged in the tribe. That I could make a place there, and be worthy of it.”

“I’m sure he would be proud of you if he’d lived,” Abigail starts to say tentatively, but I shake my head.

“After today? He wouldn’t. I know that for sure. But I know something else for certain too. I *don’t* belong there. Not anymore, and maybe I never have. Not because my injury makes me unworthy of having a tribe, but because that tribe... those people, they don’t match who I want to be. I don’t want to be the kind of warrior who would abandon an innocent woman to suffering, just because the price of it could serve the greater good. I don’t want to be a warrior who looks down on those who are not one of us. That might be who I’ve been in the past, but starting now, I’m going to do everything in my power to be sure that I’m true to myself, not the values of a leader I don’t agree with. I don’t want to follow *anyone* blindly.”

I look down at Abigail, hoping she hears the truth in my words. “I’m not going back, Abigail. I renounce them and everything they’ve done, everything they believe. I want to make my own way forward, whether that means finding a new tribe or simply being on my own.”

For a moment, I wonder if she believes me. But then she slowly lifts her head, her eyes shining as she pushes back slightly from my chest, her gaze searching mine. Her hand lifts, fingers sliding over my jaw as she traces the line of it, and I lean into her caress.

Her touch is everything I’ve longed for. Everything I’ve craved. I moan as she presses her hand to my cheek, unable to

stop myself, my cock hardening as I lose my strength of will.

I'm afraid she'll be revolted, that she'll move away, but instead, she surprises me yet again.

Abigail leans up, and before I can fully realize what's happening, her mouth presses softly against mine.

Abigail

KISSING ZAID IS unlike anything I've ever felt before. I've never kissed a man with piercings, and his rub against my lips, pricking slightly when the sharp bone tip of one catches me, but for the most part it just feels *good*, like an added layer of sensation that I've never imagined.

It's not just that though. His mouth is warm and eager and soft, and I remember him telling me how he was considered the weakest of the warriors, one that none of the few women would consider taking to their furs.

I think I was his first kiss, I realize, startled.

I don't want to ask and ruin the moment, but it just makes me want that much more to make this good for him—as good as it can possibly be. I can feel how much he wants this, his warm, broad hands splaying against the cool skin of my back, pulling me close to him as his mouth eagerly slants over mine, his cock hardening beneath me as I shift a little on his lap.

He's so much bigger than me, but the size difference feels good, *comforting* even, rather than frightening like with others. His arms wrap around me, holding me close, and I place my hands on the side of his face, enjoying the feeling of his smooth, heated skin under my hands as I deepen the kiss.

Zaid groans as my tongue slips into his mouth, and I feel his cock throb underneath me, pressing upward against my ass. I'm a little unsure of how I would even take it, if I *could* go that far with someone of his size, but I decide it doesn't matter right now.

I'm still unsure of my feelings for him, unsure of how far I want this to go, but I *do* know that I feel a strong kinship with him in this moment.

I was vulnerable with him, trusting him with things I haven't talked about with anyone in a long time, and he did the same for me. He was wrong to help keep me a captive and deliver me to the Jakk, and it's hard to let go of that entirely, but knowing the history of his need for validation from his tribe helps. It frames his actions in a light that I can understand.

And his wholehearted rejection of them, the way he chose me over that validation that he's been struggling for so long, speaks volumes.

More than anything, after all the fear and pain of the past days, I want to lose myself in something better.

And so I do.

I let the kiss build, from the soft press of our lips and the feeling of his piercings rubbing against my mouth to my tongue sliding against his, and when I hear his groan of pleasure at the deepened kiss, heat flares inside me.

His hands slide down, tightening on my waist as he pulls me against him, my breasts pressing hard against his marking-covered chest. He reaches up, burying one hand in my hair to clutch the back of my head, holding my mouth tighter against his, and my heart leaps into my throat. My pulse is racing, my skin tingling, my blood turning molten as his other hand slides down to my hip, fists in the makeshift material of my skirt.

No one has ever made me feel like this from just a kiss, as if I'm melting from the inside out, all of me on fire. I want to be closer, *need* to be closer to him, so I turn in his lap, straddling him as I brace my hands against his hard, muscled chest and kiss him back with equal fervor.

“Abigail...”

Zaid moans my name, his hips bucking upward as he grips my ass with one hand, dragging me down hard against his cock. There's only his loincloth between us, and I flush bright

red as I feel myself getting more and more aroused. His leather is going to be drenched with it, I realize as I squirm in his lap, knowing I'm only turning him on more, but unable to stop.

I *want* to turn him on. I want him to feel the same crazed, desperate desire that I'm feeling, and I know from the thick, heavy hardness between my legs that he is. But to my surprise, he doesn't try to push it further. He holds me there in his lap, against the covered weight of his cock, moaning with pleasure as we kiss wildly, his hand in my hair keeping my mouth pressed to his—as if I would want to be anywhere else.

He doesn't force, doesn't push, although I know his arousal must be overwhelming. His hand comes up to touch my breast, gently at first through the soft, thin fabric of my top. I moan when his fingers brush over my nipple, arching against him, and Zaid's hips jerk beneath me, thrusting upward as his hand squeezes my breast, taking my encouragement.

If not for his loincloth, he'd slip inside me, I know it. I'm soaked with arousal, my thighs sticky with it from grinding atop him, and he's iron hard. It's only that small strip of leather keeping him from nudging against my bare, drenched flesh, and I feverishly wish it away, so close to reaching down and yanking it aside myself. It feels as if everything is bubbling up at once—all the emotions and tension, our near-death and everything that passed between us before, and what we're doing makes me feel so wonderfully, incredibly *alive* that I want to take it as far as I possibly can.

But before I can reach down, Zaid suddenly spills me backward onto the makeshift mattress of leaves he built, leaning over me.

For a moment, as I look up at him silhouetted in the moonlight, huge and muscular and gorgeous and wanting *me*, I think he's reading my mind. He kisses me again, his hand slowly cupping and massaging my breast, thumb flicking over my nipple in the way that made me moan before, and I reach up to run my fingers through his hair, kissing him back with equally wild abandon.

Just as I think he's going to push forward between my legs, Zaid surprises me. He leans down, brushing his lips down the column of my throat, and then moves lower still. He explores me slowly as I lie there gasping. His teeth graze my collarbone before he pushes up the fabric of my top so that he can run his lips along the curves of my breasts, his tongue flicking out over my stiff nipples until my fingers claw at his scalp and cry out.

He looks up at me, a wicked gleam in his gray-blue eyes—and then he keeps going.

His lips skim down the concave expanse of my stomach, teeth grazing along my lower ribs, his tongue circling my navel, nipping at my hipbones, before he finally lets out a groan that sounds like sheer need and fists my skirt in his hands, shoving it up to my hips.

“Zaid!” I gasp his name as he pushes my skirt up, using one broad hand to spread my legs wide, and I realize just as he dips his head between my thighs what he's about to do.

I've been eaten out before, but never like this. The men I knew always treated it like a chore, but Zaid begins as if he's eager to explore me. His tongue trails up my inner thighs, and I hear him moan as he licks away the sticky arousal there, his hands tightening on my flesh.

“You taste sweet,” he moans, pushing my legs wider, my knees up, so that I'm fully and entirely exposed to him, my lips parting so that he can see every inch of my pussy, dripping for him. “I want more.”

I cry out as his tongue swipes over me, lapping up the flowing arousal, licking me from my entrance to my clit and back down again.

For a moment, I remember the birthmark on my thigh, afraid that he'll be able to see it in the dim light of the moonlit dark. I start to close my thighs, but then Zaid swirls his tongue over my clit, a groan emanating from him, and I forget everything other than the wet, pleasurable heat of it. He pushes his tongue inside briefly, as he holds my legs apart and back, exposing me to his hungry, seeking tongue. I moan as he rolls

it inside me, licking, pushing it deeper, and then I realize that what I thought I felt earlier I can feel inside me.

His tongue is pierced with a thick, rounded barb through the center of it, and I feel it press against my G-spot as he thrusts his tongue into me, curling it and pulling it backward as my moans of pleasure turn to high-pitched cries, my body hovering on the edge of climax.

Just as I'm about to spill over the edge, Zaid's tongue slides out of me, and I cry out again, this time out of sheer frustration.

"Oh god, Zaid—*please*—" I whimper, my hips arching up against his mouth, and he groans, the sound so low that it's very nearly a growl.

"This feels good?" he asks, as his tongue flicks upward to my clit again. "Here?"

His tongue rubs over my clit, back and forth, and I claw at the leaves under me, grinding against his face.

"*God, yes!*" I manage finally, my hips bucking.

I'm close, so fucking close, and I just need...

Zaid figures out very quickly what I need. I don't know if Xaathian women have clits, but he picks up immediately how I like him to flick and rub his tongue over mine. Every time he does, his tongue piercing bumps against it, and I feel the muscles in my thighs tightening, my entire body poised to go over the edge into the most intense pleasure I've ever felt.

When it comes, I nearly lose my mind. I forget that we're supposed to be quiet, that we're on the run, everything except the delicious wet heat of Zaid's tongue rubbing over my clit again and again, his hands hard on my thighs, his hungry groans as he licks me. The shudders start somewhere in the depths of my core and spread outwards, intense and mind-blowing, and I scream with pleasure as I grab two of Zaid's horns, holding his mouth against my pussy as my hips jerk upward, riding his tongue to the most incredible climax I've ever experienced.

He must like the feel of me using his horns as anchors, because an almost feral growl rumbles in his chest as he continues. I can feel myself drenching his face, this *alien* that I'm allowing to eat me out, and I don't care. Out here, under the open night sky on this strange planet where I've been kept captive, I somehow feel freer than I ever have before.

I come and come, the orgasm spilling over me in waves, and to my shock, even as the shudders turn to faint ripples of aftershocks, Zaid doesn't seem like he wants to come up for air.

His mouth leaves my pussy for a moment, his lips dragging over my inner thigh, and a fresh wave of nerves breaks through the pleasure flowing through me. He's definitely going to notice my birthmarks now, and I feel self-conscious about them all over again.

"So beautiful," he murmurs, surprising me as he swipes his tongue over my skin, right where I know the marks are. "*Shola*, you're perfect."

I blink, my toes curling as he nips at me with his teeth this time. I've had people tell me my birthmarks are 'not that bad' or 'hardly noticeable,' but I've never heard someone call them beautiful before. I've never had someone look at what feels like my most obvious physical flaw and tell me I'm perfect... not in spite of those marks, but because of them.

"God, Zaid, what are you doing to me?" I whimper, arousal and something even more potent than simple desire welling up in my chest. "You make me feel so..."

"Me too." His voice is thick. "Drak, I can't get enough. Can you take more?"

My eyes flare wide, my heart racing, and I nod.

"Good," he growls, pulling me tighter against his mouth as he yanks on my thighs, and I let my head drop back as I give myself over to the pleasure of his tongue. My grip on his horns loosens, my fingers delving into his dark, silky hair instead.

This time, he's more experimental. He circles my sensitive, twitching clit, laps at it, sucks it into his mouth. I scream when

he does that, a full-body shudder rippling through me, and he groans, doing it again and again as he rubs his tongue against the stiff nub, suckling at it like my nipple as his lips move over my sensitive flesh.

“I’m—I’m going to—” I feel my entire body tensing again, primed for a second orgasm, and Zaid moans in response, the sound vibrating over my skin as he laps and sucks at my clit, driving me headlong over the edge into another earth-shattering climax.

The pleasure is overwhelming, better than anything I’ve ever felt, but it’s somehow also not enough. I want more, I *need* more, and I know he must want and need it just as badly. I’m on the verge of begging for him to fuck me, to give me what we’re both dying for, but just as my lips part, there’s a sudden noise like the cracking of branches under feet.

Zaid’s eyes flare as we both freeze.

“Someone’s coming,” I mouth, trying to wriggle my skirt down without making more noise, and Zaid reaches for me, helping me to my feet.

“We need to go,” he whispers, and we both duck out from under the overhang, starting to run in the opposite direction of where the noise is coming from.

Zaid grips my hand, both of us navigating through the low shrubs—only to be cut off a moment later by all three of the other Uleki warriors.

“Too stupid to know a thrown rock from footsteps,” Valek jeers, his gaze firmly fixed on Zaid, burning with anger. Azuld and Iriv both look equally pissed, closing in around us with clear intent.

“Or maybe I was just looking for another excuse to knock you the *drak* out,” Zaid growls, putting himself in front of me. He draws his dagger, ready to fight, but the other three are armed too, and clearly spoiling for a fight.

Zaid strikes out, but the three Uleki have prepared for this, and they’re working as a team. Azuld parries his blows while

Iriv strikes from the side and Valek pushes past me, kicking out to sweep Zaid's bad leg out from under him.

I let out a screech of protest, helpless fury filling me that they'd use Zaid's weaknesses against him like this. It's clear that they've thought it out, planned how to take him down quickly, and I fling myself toward Valek, scratching at his face with my nails.

"Filthy little *laksha!*" He snarls, grabbing my wrist, and wrenches it behind my back with no small amount of pain, grabbing me and dragging me away from Zaid as Azuld and Iriv overpower him. Iriv circles behind Zaid as Azuld holds a blade to his throat.

"Traitor," Iriv sneers as he binds Zaid's wrists. "All for a bit of Terran slit. Well, I hope it was worth it."

"Didn't you see?" Valek jeers as he binds my wrists too. "He was all tongue and no cock. All of that, and he's still a *drakking* virgin."

"He'll die one too," Azuld grunts, hauling Zaid to his feet, and my heart drops as cold terror fills me.

They're going to kill him. My pulse beats wildly as I try to think of some way out of this, my eyes searching Zaid's face, but he refuses to look at me. All I can see in his expression is shame, and my heart aches for him. *He can't die like this. Not now. Not without—*

"We'll see what the Jakk think he's worth," Azuld finishes with a victorious grin. "A traitorous Uleki warrior for their games and their pot. We'll see how high we stand with them too, once we return their property that ran off." He shoves Zaid forward, his dagger blade pricking the base of Zaid's spine. "Get moving."

Valek shoves me forward, behind Zaid and Azuld, Iriv bringing up the rear.

Slowly, as hopelessness fills me once more, we start walking back up the mountain.

Zaid

THE SUN RISES as we're marched up the mountain, and my chest aches to see it. I hoped to wake to the new day with Abigail at my side, continuing down the mountain toward her freedom and a new start for me, but it was all for nothing. I'm headed to a certain death, and Abigail to the same fate I'd delivered her to before, only to try to rescue her.

She deserves better than me, I think grimly, my head hanging as I move forward at the tip of Azuld's dagger. A better warrior would have defended her from the start. Would have taken down Azuld and the others.

But along with the shame, there's anger too. It burns in my gut, bitter and acidic, the resentment at my tribesmen for doing this to me and to Abigail searing through my veins. It only serves to reinforce my realization that the Uleki tribe and Drael's leadership are cruel and self-serving, thinking only of the good of themselves under the guise of "what's best for the tribe."

It underscores what I realized last night as I held Abigail in my arms and comforted her: that I no longer belong to that tribe.

It feels like so much wasted time. I spent so long trying to prove that I deserved to be one of them, fighting to prove myself to a dead father and to tribesmen that I would never be enough for—when in fact I shouldn't have been trying to do so at all. All my life, I've felt "other," on the outside looking in,

and chafed against it when instead I should have been proud of my differences.

My “weakness” made me more tenacious, more compassionate, and more appreciative than I might have been otherwise. I’ve spent my whole life overlooking those traits, seeing them as not enough, when I should have been doing the exact opposite. I should have seen that I was enough for those who would matter all along.

I was enough for Abigail—and I didn’t see it in time.

Now I don’t know what else I can do to save her—but I’m not going to give up yet.

I glance over at Abigail, knowing better than to speak and rile up Azuld, but wanting to meet her eyes so I can reassure her with a look. *I got you away from the Jakk once, I want to say. I don’t know how I’ll do it again, but I’m going to find a way.*

The trip back up the mountain is agonizing, not least of which because my arm throbs and aches and my leg won’t stop cramping since Valek kicked me down. Worse than that is the pain of knowing that I might have failed Abigail for good—that I might die and not be able to save her.

When we return to the Jakk tribe, Abigail and I are hauled directly in front of Narool, whose brow is creased and lips are pursed with anger.

“Your tribesman killed one of mine,” he growls angrily at Azuld. “I require recompense.”

“We’ve brought you just that,” Azuld assures him, pushing Abigail and me forward. “Not just our wayward tribesman, but also the Terran who escaped. Yours to do with as you wish, mighty Narool.”

Narool licks his lips, looking at Abigail greedily. My blood burns hotly in my veins at that, and I’m itching to get my hands around his throat—but nothing is as bad as what comes out of his mouth next.

“I’ll add another sack of *relk stone*, as a bounty for bringing back this *voskiret*,” Narool tells Azuld. “If you will

indeed leave him here with us.” His gaze rakes over me, taking the measure of me. “Strong enough to put up a fight, but not strong enough to win it.” He smirks. “He’ll be an excellent blood sport for the ceremony. He’ll get my warriors riled up, hot with the scent of blood and the thrill of victory, ready to claim the woman and seed her. An excellent outcome, now that I think about it.”

The fury rises up in me again, feral and angry, my pulse beating wildly in my veins as I bare my teeth at Narool, snarling. I jerk against my bonds, ready to throw myself at him and cause a distraction, if only so Abigail can try to escape. But it’s no use. Azuld has a strong hand on me, and he nods, a pleased look on his face that’s echoed by Valek and Iriv.

“He’s a traitor,” Azuld says flatly. “More interested in what’s between that woman’s legs than in loyalty to his tribe. He deserves death. We’ll accept your bounty, and happily.” He pauses. “There will still be more women coming, as well. We’ll bring them back up the mountain soon.”

“I will be pleased to trade with you again,” Narool grunts, reaching for the leather binding my wrists to pull me away from Azuld. As he drags me forward, I lock eyes with my once-fellow tribesman, and I see the smallest glint of regret in his gaze—only for it to harden a second later.

“You picked a side,” Azuld says simply. “Now you can die with the Terran woman that you picked over your own tribe.”

Valek and Iriv both spit on the rocky dirt, turning to follow Azuld out of the hut. As they do, Narool and two of his warriors drag Abigail and me across the village. Warriors come out to watch as we pass, jeering at me and making lewd gestures at Abigail that make her tremble and look away, tears welling in her eyes. I feel more helpless than I ever have, and it infuriates me, to the point of yanking and twisting in the grasp of the Jakk warrior who holds me despite the utter futility of it.

We’re shoved into a different hut than the one Abigail was kept in before, with rock walls and a sturdier door. It doesn’t

matter anyway—I can't bash the lock off this one, since I'm locked inside with her.

Abigail is shaking as the door is slammed and locked behind us, and I reach for her instantly, seeing the terrified look in her eyes as I gather her into my arms. I hold her closer instinctively, cradling her against my chest—and as she turns in my arms, her chin tilting up as she looks into my eyes, I feel an almost electric sensation washing through me, a magnetic pull that can only be one thing.

Abigail is my mate.

I've never known anything so clearly in my life. It all falls into place—my almost unbearable need for her, the jealous protectiveness on the first trip to the mountain and the fury I feel at anyone touching her or threatening her, above and beyond the normal need to protect someone in danger. I understand it all and a flood of emotions wash over me at the realization, including a fresh wave of guilt.

I was almost responsible for delivering my mate to the Jakk. The realization hits me hard, but not as hard as the deep determination that fills me, overwhelming all else.

A determination to keep her safe.

Abigail

“I’LL FIND a way to protect you.”

Something burns in Zaid’s eyes as he says it, his arms tightening around me as he holds me closer, his strong arms encircling me. “I’ll give my life to keep you safe, if I have to.” His gaze is intense, serious, and I can tell that he means it. I don’t *want* him to have to do that, but the knowledge that he’s willing calms me somehow, making me feel safer than before.

I hold on to him for a little bit longer, leaning against his chest as we sink down to the ground, against the central pillar of the hut. I let myself take comfort in his closeness. I held myself back from him at first, unsure if I should allow myself to trust him again, if he deserved it after what he did.

But I haven’t been blameless in this either, and we’re on the same side now. I don’t feel as conflicted about my feelings for him as I did before. Unlike pretty much everyone else in my life up until this point, he came back for me.

He didn’t abandon me, even though he could have. He risked everything for me, and if this goes wrong, he’ll pay the price for it too.

Zaid is my only ally, my only comfort. I don’t see any reason to waste time or emotional energy trying to push him away and question my feelings for him. It doesn’t matter anymore what happened in the past. We have to look ahead to the future now—and hope that there will be one.

I press my forehead to his chest, breathing him in, the warm comforting scent of him. I try to pull myself together, to think rationally. If I'm so upset that I can't think straight, we'll never make it out of here.

"I want to help you get me out of here," I tell Zaid firmly. "And I want to get you out too. I don't want either of us to die here. That can't be the way this ends, I—I won't accept it. So how do we do this?"

"If what I know of the Jakk is correct, the ceremony will happen on the next full moons," Zaid says quietly, his fingers still stroking my hair. "We have a few days before then. We'll watch their comings and goings through these." He points to the slats in the door. "That will give us a better idea of what we're up against. Then we can make a plan."

"We'll work together and find a way out."

Against all odds, I can hear the tiniest thread of hope in my voice. It's not much, but it makes me feel better to have an ally. To not be alone.

The sun is fully up by now, and the village is stirring, the Jakk warriors beginning to go about their day. We spend the day watching them, getting a rough count of how big the village is, noting the warriors and making tallies in the dirt. Zaid especially keeps watch for who appears to be the strongest, and at one point I see him wince.

"What is it?" I ask softly, and he points. Four of the warriors are hauling a huge crate into the village, one that's rocking wildly as the contents snarl and scratch. It's as big as they are, containing two furry, clawed and fanged creatures who look very much like a cross between a bear and the largest ferret I've ever seen. Like a bear, but long—and I think I might have burst out in hysterical laughter if the situation weren't so serious.

"Remember Narool mentioned I'd be fighting beasts as a part of the ceremony blood sport?" Zaid's mouth twists down humorlessly. "I'm pretty sure those are the beasts."

I wince, shrinking back. It's not that I doubt Zaid's fighting prowess, but we have no idea if he'll even be armed, and the claws on those look as if they could open him up on one slash. My stomach twists at the idea of him fighting them, but Zaid pulls me closer, comforting me.

"We'll worry about that when we get there," Zaid says quietly. "I'm not even certain that's what they plan to have me fight." His mouth twitches. "It could be something much worse," he adds dryly, and this time a few gasps of laughter do escape my lips.

The day passes, and I try to keep my mind focused on our goal so that panic won't overtake me. I can't let myself think too far ahead, or worry about what will happen tomorrow or the next day. If I do, I know I'll start to spiral, and I force myself to go minute by minute, hour by hour. I'm grateful I'm not alone, and I cling to that, to the last shred of hope that we'll get out of here.

We're brought food later in the day, and Zaid is instantly protective of me, putting himself between me and the Jakk who brings it to us. The warrior smirks as if he knows what Zaid's doing, but he doesn't press the point, just leaving the simple meal of bread, meat and water and locking the door behind him as he goes.

When evening falls and the villagers eventually go back into their huts to sleep, the fires dulled to embers and a few guards on watch, we start looking for a way out of the hut. It's unlikely we'll find one, we both know that from the first attempt, but we can't bear to just sit and wait for sleep to come without trying. Zaid looks along the walls and door, searching for any flaw he can exploit, while I skim along the edges, looking for any soft dirt or gaps where we might be able to dig our way out. The chances are slim, but we try anyway. It's better than doing nothing.

We find nothing, though. Not a single weak point or spot where we might be able to dig. Zaid lets out a frustrated groan, running his hands through his hair and over one of his horns as his jaw works anxiously, and I can tell that something is weighing on him—more even than what's already happening. I

don't know *how* I know exactly, but it's a feeling so strong that I can't shake it.

"What's going on?" I ask him softly as we sink back down by the central pillar, and Zaid leans his head back against it, closing his eyes briefly. I can tell that he's thinking, and I push a little more, wanting him to open up to me. To trust me, the way I'm working on trusting him again. "You can tell me," I insist. "Whatever it is. I want us to talk to each other."

Zaid turns slowly, his blue-gray gaze locking with mine. "Do you mean that, Abigail?" he asks quietly. "Anything?"

I nod, my stomach tightening with anxiety as I wonder what's on his mind. "Of course," I whisper. "What's wrong, Zaid?"

His lips press together for a brief moment.

"It's not what's *wrong*, exactly. Abigail, you're my mate." The words come out quickly, tumbling over each other, and there's an odd pain in his eyes and voice as he says the words. "But I don't... I don't deserve you."

I blink at him. "I don't understand what that means. *Mate*? We don't have mates on Earth. We have boyfriends or girlfriends or husbands or wives. Is it like that? What do you mean?"

My heart is racing, beating hard in my chest, and it feels as if my skin is electrified as I wait for his answer. We got off to a rough start, and things haven't always been easy between us. Our path has been rocky, full of deception and fear and uncertainty, but in that, we've found something else too. Zaid is a good man at his core, I know it.

A man shaped by hardship and mockery and parents who treated him as less than for something out of his control, and I know he's not entirely to blame for choices shaped by how he was taught the world should be. What matters is that he's learned differently, that he's risked everything to *be* different, and I know in this moment that I don't want to lose him.

I don't want to leave him behind, no matter what it takes to get us both out of here.

And I know what answer I want him to give, as insane as it seems. As fast as this all has moved, I want to be with him.

“A mate is...” Zaid sucks in a breath, his gaze sharp and intense as it focuses on mine. “A perfect match, the other half of my soul. The person I should cherish and protect above all others. And I was responsible for bringing you here, Abigail.” His voice is pained now, his eyes dark with guilt. “How could I ever possibly deserve you?”

His words strike me hard, burrowing into my chest and tearing at my heart. Everything that’s happened, from the moment of my abduction from Earth until now, has been so entirely surreal, but the one thing I’ve become more certain of than anything is that Zaid came back for me when no one else ever has.

He put me above *everything* else in the end—his tribe, his future, even his life—and no matter what happened before that, it means a lot that he did.

It means *everything*.

I lean forward, grasping his face in my hands, moving toward him as I stroke his cheekbones, his jaw, threading my fingers into his dark hair and teasing the base of his horns. He’s so beautifully handsome, his eyes like swirled paint, gray and blue like storm clouds in a sky, and I want nothing more than to look into them forever.

“I’ll be the judge of what you deserve,” I whisper.

And then I lean up, kissing him full on the mouth.

This time, I know I don’t want to stop. I feel him hesitate for a moment, the tension still strumming through his body, his resistance, but it only takes a moment for him to soften and give in, his mouth pressing into mine.

When he does, the kiss is hard, hot and hungry, his lip ring digging into the soft flesh of my mouth, his hands tangling in my hair. I know we have to be quiet, that any noise will bring the guards and end this in a moment, and it feels impossibly difficult. The pleasure coursing through me feels too good, the

sensations of his mouth too much, and I know more than anything that I don't want us to stop this time.

I'm terrified for the future. I don't know what will happen next, only that horrors await us here, and I have no idea if we'll be able to escape them. I don't want the entirety of my life's sexual experience to be a handful of clumsy, fumbling times on Earth with human men who didn't know what they're doing—and then the assault and violation that awaits me at the Jakk breeding ceremony. Just once, at least, I want to experience something *more*.

I don't want any of my old hang-ups or fears to hold me back. I might not live long, and what I want right now is to feel pleasure and excitement instead of fear and pain.

I want to feel the connection I have with this man—this *alien*, who is so different from all the others.

I want Zaid.

Zaid

I CAN'T GET ENOUGH of her.

I don't deserve her, I still believe that. But with her mouth on mine, my *mate's* mouth, I can't stop myself. I don't want to—and it's clear that she doesn't either. I have no idea if I'll truly be able to save her, and I want whatever time we have left.

More than anything else, by the goddess, I want to know what it feels like to bury myself inside a woman for the first time—to be inside *Abigail*. Not just any woman, but my mate, a pleasure like none other. A *connection* like none other.

I've craved this my entire life, and never believed I would have it. And now, on the precipice of my life's end, I've been given this gift.

I don't intend to squander it.

Abigail reaches out as she kisses me, her hand slipping under my loincloth. For the first time, a hand other than mine wraps itself around my cock, and it takes all the effort I possess to hold back the groan of pleasure that threatens to erupt from me—and not just that. I can tell in an instant that it will be difficult to hold back my seed, but I want to make this last as long as possible.

She slides her hand upward, soft and warm, stroking up the length of my cock as she gasps. "You're *huge*," she whispers, her voice stunned and a little afraid, and when her thumb passes over my swollen tip, brushing against the ring there, the

only piercing I have on my cock so far, I can't hold back my groan. "Is this the only piercing you have—there?"

I nod, finding it hard to speak. "All Xaathian males get this one when they reach maturity. We get another when we take a woman to our furs for the first time—and then we add more after, as we wish."

Abigail laughs softly as she kisses me again. "Well, when we get out of here, you'll have to look into getting that second one, then."

My heart leaps at the idea of an *after*, a life beyond this, a chance for Abigail and I to have everything that the mate bond could promise us.

It's all I want. All I could ever want.

I reach for her, pulling her into my lap, nudging my loincloth aside so that I'm seated between her thighs, her wet warmth sliding over me instantly.

"I want you," I groan from between gritted teeth, feeling the slick heat of her sinking into the flesh of my stiff cock, the most excruciating pleasure I've ever known. "I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life."

"I want you too," she gasps, her hands on my face as she leans forward to kiss me again, rocking against my cock as her lips brush over mine. "Oh god, please..."

She moaned the same thing when I tasted her, out in the forest, and I know what she's begging for, this time.

I reach down, pushing the fabric of her wound top away from her delicate breasts, wanting them in my mouth again. They're small, especially in my large hands, but I love the feel of them, taut and firm as I squeeze the tender flesh in my palm, and then bend down, pressing them together as I run my tongue over the curves of her, flicking my tongue over the stiff, rosy peaks as Abigail throws her head back and shudders. When I look up, her eyes are tightly closed, her teeth sunk into her lower lip to keep quiet, and her hips grind against me again, my cock now slick with her arousal.

"Now," she whispers. "Now, please, Zaid."

If we were anywhere else, I would take my time. I would run my tongue over every inch of her until she were screaming my name, lick her to her climax again, and take my time worshipping every part of her body. But there's no telling when a guard might come, if someone might hear us, and we don't have long. Both of us are consumed with the urgency, and while I hope there will be a chance in the future for me to savor Abigail the way she deserves, there's no waiting now.

I lift her with my arm around her waist, angling my cock so that the tip presses against her tight, slick entrance. I hear her gasp as I press into her, her teeth still sunk in her lower lip.

"Stop me if it hurts, my *corva*," I whisper into her ear as I pull her close, my entire body shuddering with the effort that it takes not to thrust into her immediately, hard and deep. But she's small and delicate, and I don't want to hurt her with my size.

"Please," Abigail murmurs, her cheek pressed against mine as her hips roll against me, and the tip of my cock pushes inside her. "I *need* you."

I hiss with the sudden, intense pleasure of it, her tight heat squeezing my cockhead as I slip inside. It's a pleasure like nothing I've ever felt, rippling down my spine and bowing my back, my hips jerking with the primal need to sink into her, to thrust, to rut, to *mate*. But I force myself to go slowly, sliding her down my cock inch by inch as I fill her for the first time, feeling her squeeze and flutter around me, her small gasps of pleasure driving me wild as I stretch her to take me.

All of me.

"It's so good," she breathes out, her voice a small whisper in the darkness. "Oh god, Zaid."

Hearing her moan my name makes me feel as if I could lose my mind with pleasure. With my cock buried fully inside her, and I bury my face in her neck to muffle my groan of need.

And then I start to move.

I hold her against me, my arm wrapped around her back, her soft breasts pressed against my chest as she rocks in my lap, my cock shallowly thrusting inside her.

Every stroke makes us both shudder, trembling with pleasure, and I tip her chin up to kiss her again as I reach between us with my other hand, stroking that small, slick bud that gave her so much pleasure before. Feeling her come on my tongue, tasting her, was the most incredible experience of my life—and now I want to know what that feels like on my cock.

Her hands clutch the back of my head, her fingers threading into my hair as she spreads her thighs wider, finding leverage on the ground as she moves with my every thrust.

I feel her tense and shudder every time the pierced tip of my cock rubs over a certain spot inside her, and I try to do it again and again, measuring my thrusts so that I keep the friction there. At the same time, I rub my finger over her stiff, swelling bud, feeling her throb and pulse beneath me as her thighs tighten around my hips.

“Oh god,” Abigail moans against my mouth, the sound swallowed up in our kiss. “I’m—I—”

I would have known she was close even if she didn’t say anything. I can feel her starting to pulse and flutter around my cock, her body trembling with the force of her oncoming climax, and when it comes, it’s all I can do not to release my seed.

Her entire body clamps around me, her teeth biting at my lower lip as she clings to me, trying not to cry out with the force of the pleasure rushing through her. She spasms along the length of my cock, feeling as if she might milk the seed out of me before I even release. It’s the most exquisite sensation, and if we get out of here, I want to spend every waking moment left in my life buried inside Abigail.

Truly, I don’t know how the warriors and their women ever leave the furs.

The moment I feel her climax ease, her body shuddering against me as she gasps for breath, I lean forward, spilling her back onto the ground. Her body is softer around me now, drenched with arousal and more accustomed to me, and as I lean over her, claiming her mouth with mine again, I start to drive into her hard and fast.

My groan of pleasure is lost in our kiss, the sudden pleasure of thrusting into her freely sending me hurtling toward the edge of my own release. I can feel my shaft throbbing, my entire body shuddering with the need to let go, and I plunge my tongue into her mouth as I plunge my cock into her once more, as deeply as I can go, and let the roar of my climax be lost in the press of our mouths as my cock erupts.

I come hard, harder than I ever have with my hand, my seed filling her as I rut into her as deeply as I can go. I'm overcome with the primal need to thrust, to mate, to bury myself in her. It feels more incredible than I could have imagined. Not just the physical pleasure of it, but the connection I feel to her, a soul-deep bond that feels deeper and more intense than I'd expected.

With my cock still half-hard inside her, too full of need for her still to let myself slide out and break the connection, I pull Abigail close to me.

I feel complete in a way that I never have before, the scent and feel of her enveloping me, bringing me a peace that I've never experienced. And yet at the same time, it makes me ache, hating that this moment of completeness came while we're captive—me facing death, and Abigail facing a fate even worse.

I'm glad that I told her, that we claimed each other as mates before the end could come, but I wish more than anything that it had never gotten this far at all. I wish I had taken her when I first felt misgivings, and run far away.

It feels as if we're staring into an abyss, and I hold on to Abigail tighter, loathe to let her go even a little.

“Tell me more about you,” I whisper, when she curls tighter against me, her fingers stroking my cheek as she looks into my eyes. “I want to know everything.”

Abigail laughs softly. “It’s not a happy story,” she admits. “My parents died when I was young, and my aunt and uncle took me in. They weren’t well-off by any means, and they already had children of their own. My parents didn’t leave much behind in the way of money, just a small amount in the bank, no house deed or assets or anything. My relatives always made it very clear that I was a burden. They reminded me constantly of it, in fact. I was taking up space, money, food, opportunities that belonged to their children. Keeping them from going on vacations because of having an extra mouth to feed. I always wore my older cousins’ hand-me-downs and got their old toys rewrapped as gifts on holidays.”

She pauses, biting her lower lip.

“It wasn’t about the *things* either, you know? I didn’t need fancy new clothes or the coolest toys. I just wanted to feel like I mattered. Like they cared about me and my happiness. But I *never* felt that way, and they never put my needs above theirs. Not ever.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say quietly, running my fingers along Abigail’s cheek. “No one should ever make their children feel less than.”

I’ll make sure ours never will, I nearly say, but I can’t bear to let the words leave my lips.

It hurts too much to imagine children we may never have, to picture Abigail growing round with my offspring, creating a family with her. A goddess-blessed bond. Nothing in our world is more precious, and yet we may never have the chance for it.

But I can’t keep blaming myself. Abigail forgives me, and I have to find the strength to forgive myself as well, or else what little time we have together will be wasted in guilt and self-doubt.

“I gave up on ever having anything more for a long time,” she says softly, her fingertips skimming lightly over my chest. “I knew I deserved more than that kind of apathy, but I didn’t know how to look for it. Where it might be able to be found. So I lost myself in school and work and books—and I built my own little world. I didn’t let myself expect more, and I figured then I couldn’t be hurt.”

Abigail looks up at me, green eyes soft and round, and I know what she’s saying without words.

Don’t hurt me.

“You can *always* expect more from me than that,” I tell her quietly as I look down at her, every bit of sincerity I can muster in my voice. “I’ll do everything I can to protect you, cherish you, and take care of you for the rest of my life. You will always mean everything to me.”

Without hesitation, Abigail kisses me again, clinging to me. Her hands slide into my hair, pulling my mouth recklessly against hers, hard and fierce and passionate. I return the kiss in kind, hungry for her mouth, for more of her, rolling her onto her back on the blanket so I can claim her again. I drape my body over hers protectively, wanting to have her as close to me as I can, to sink into her so deeply that we can never be separated.

But even as I hold her as intimately as possible, a part of me can’t be completely lost in the rising, gasping pleasure. I can’t stop fearing that *for the rest of my life* won’t be long enough—not when death is so close on the horizon that I can feel the cold breath on the back of my neck.

If I die, what happens to Abigail then? I know the answer—and it makes my blood run as cold as if I’m already buried in the ground.

Abigail

IT TAKES a long time for sleep to come to either of us. With the possibility of there being so few hours left, it feels wasteful to sleep through any of them, but we need our strength too. It takes twice more before the hunger between us is sated enough for him to pull me into his arms, holding me close on the blanket as we try to fall into a restless, exhausted sleep.

I feel boneless and satisfied, my body wrung out with pleasure and orgasms, but even that's not enough to keep the nightmares away.

They come, fast and horrific, searing my brain with images of the past both real and imagined, and I thrash in my sleep, moaning with fear.

My parents' funeral, the twin coffins laid out, covered so that I can't see their faces. My aunt tells me it's better that way, that I should remember them the way they were when they were alive, but it feels so much worse somehow. Like I can't believe it's real until I see them. Like I'm being lied to, and no one will tell me the truth.

She tries to hold me back, my uncle too, but I manage to break free of their grasping hands, running toward the coffins. I trip when I'm nearly there, the toe of my stiff flats catching on a wrinkle in the carpet, and I pitch forward, hands shooting out to grab something, anything.

They land on the coffin in front of me, and the lid pushes back, revealing—one of the corpses. I don't know which one, the bodies are too mangled. The coffin tips over, the leering,

twisted face looking up at me, and the body tumbles out, coming alive to reach for me.

I run down the aisle, screaming for help, for my aunt, for my uncle, but everyone turns away.

She wouldn't listen, they whisper in echoes, refusing to look at me. It's her fault anyway. She must have been a bad daughter, for them to leave her like this.

I can't look behind me, and see the corpse crawling toward me, or around and see the backs turned away. I just keep running, screaming until my throat feels raw. This is where the nightmare always changes, twisting into something else. Sometimes it's worse, sometimes it's just different. But this time...

A pair of strong arms grabs me, pulling me against a broad chest. A heavy hand presses my face against smooth skin, a deep voice growling from above me.

"It's all right, Abigail. It's not real. It's not your fault. And I'll never leave you. I'll never let anything hurt you again."

Around me, the relatives fade, the leering corpse, the funeral home. It all turns into something else, a wide-open and silent grassland, with a black starry sky above me, and nothing but peace all around. Strong arms are still holding me, a familiar scent, and I look up to see blue-gray eyes swirling as they look into mine. Eyes that I know.

Eyes I love.

"Zaid," I whisper.

I jerk awake, stiff and panting, but those arms are still holding me. Zaid is curled against me, one broad arm slung across my waist, and he wakes too, looking at me with half-lidded eyes that quickly widen in alarm.

"Abigail? Are you all right?" He looks at my face, reaching up to cup my cheek as he turns it toward his. "Did you have another bad dream?"

I nod, swallowing hard as I try to speak. "It was at first," I whisper. "But then... it changed. Into something good."

Zaid blinks confusedly. “Why? How?”

I turn in his arms, reaching up to touch his face in a mirror of how he’s touching me as I meet his eyes, the blue-gray swirl of them. They remind me of home, and my heart aches to think that I might not have much longer to stare into them.

“Because you showed up,” I whisper softly.

His face softens, an emotion I can’t quite read glimmering in eyes, making the blue streaks within the gray of his irises seem to shimmer. He slides his hand into my hair, cupping the back of my head gently, and his lips descend onto mine without hesitation. It’s a sweet, gentle, lingering kiss, and I lean into him, savoring the taste of his mouth and the feeling of his body against mine, his cock hardening for me all over again as he pulls me closer.

Zaid breaks the kiss after a moment, his breathing quickened, his pulse fluttering in his throat. He looks down at me seriously though, worry clear in his eyes. “Do you regret any of it?” he asks quietly. “What we did—”

“No,” I tell him firmly, not wanting there to be the slightest bit of doubt between us. “I’ll admit it all happened—really fast,” I say with a small laugh. “I went from being your prisoner to being rescued by you to sleeping with you in a whirlwind. But honestly—”

I pause for a moment, wanting to find the right words to reassure him, to make sure that he has no reason to wonder. I don’t want there to be any regrets between us with what little time we have left, or any questions. There’s been too much deception and miscommunication—from here on out, all I want is honesty.

And comfort.

“I’m so far away from the life I once knew,” I tell him softly. “Things that would have seemed insane on Earth don’t really feel like that anymore. Aliens are real, spaceships, other galaxies... there’s so much that I never thought was out there. For where I am now, the things I know now, this all makes sense to me. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from this, it’s that

life is too damn short and unpredictable to fight things that feel right. All of that is real. Why not cosmically fated mates, too? And if you're right about us being meant for each other, then that means there's a *reason* I ended up on Xaath. It means there's a reason for why you ended up being one of the warriors who was chosen to take me up the mountain."

I take a deep breath, looking into his eyes, willing him to believe everything I'm saying. To *feel* it. "If we're meant to be, it means the bad things that have happened to us, the scary things, those happened for a reason. Everything happened because we were meant to be brought together, and if that's true? Well, I can't believe that fate would bring us together only to tear us apart again."

I kiss him softly, tenderly, pouring every ounce of feeling I have into it. "I'm holding on to that hope. And I'm not letting go."

Zaid sucks in a breath, his hands tangling in my hair as he crushes my mouth to his, kissing me with a fervor that makes my heart race in my chest.

"You're the most amazing woman I've ever known," he murmurs against my mouth, his voice deep and rumbling. "True strength is forging ahead even when things are frightening or difficult, even when it feels hopeless. And you, Abigail?" His hands stroke my face, cupping it, his eyes full of adoration as he looks down at me. "You're the strongest person I've ever met."

It's immeasurably tempting to arch into him, wrap my legs around his waist and crush my lips to his so that he won't be able to resist claiming me again. But the sun is rising quickly, and someone will be bringing us food soon.

Reluctantly, we both rouse ourselves, although there's not much to do. We both straighten our clothes and dust them off out of habit, but we hardly need to look presentable, and I resist the urge to fold up the blanket out of sheer stubbornness. I'm not going to do chores when I'm staring death in the face.

The only thing we can do is resume our surveillance of the village. The Jakk warriors bring food to us, and Zaid is even

more protective than before, shielding me as completely from the warrior's sight as he can. We eat the bread and meat, nibbling aimlessly at it as we watch the Jakk tribesmen go about their day, looking for a weak spot. Some way out of this.

But try as we might, no clear plan presents itself. None of the Jakk are inclined to help us, that's for sure, and the gates are well-guarded.

When they come to bring food, there are always several of them, too many for Zaid to fight with only me for help. We're no better off than we were before—worse even, weakened from poor sleep and not much food—and time is running out. It's harder and harder to quell the sense of panic I feel.

The thread of hope I've been clinging to is wavering. But a glimmer of an idea comes to me as the afternoon wanes, and I bite my lip, trying to think it through. It's terrifying—but it might also be the only way.

“What are you thinking about?” Zaid asks quietly. “I can tell it's something.”

Somehow, the idea that he can read me so thoroughly and accurately strengthens my resolve.

We can do this, if we're brave enough to take the chance. If we work together. There's still hope.

“We can't escape this hut,” I say slowly. “There's no way out, we're sure of that. Our only chance might be when food is brought, but we've already determined that won't work. Too many Jakk come to bring the food for exactly that reason. So that leaves only one other option: we try to fight our way free and escape the night of the mating ceremony.”

Zaid shakes his head instantly. “I don't like it. It's too risky. Too close to the wire. We'll only have the one shot, and if we fail, I'll be dead, and you'll be... theirs.”

He doesn't have to elaborate what *theirs* means. I have a very clear, very frightening picture in my head of it, of what will happen if I'm handed over to the Jakk warriors to be used and bred by as many of them as prove themselves “worthy” by whatever standards the Jakk use for something so foul.

“We’ll only get one shot anyway,” I tell Zaid desperately. “If we try some other way and fail, they’ll hurt us both. You know they will. I don’t know how badly—but I only have to be able to be mated and give birth. You just have to serve as entertainment for them. They’ll do something to keep us from running again—and we’ll have lost our only chance.”

“Don’t use the word *mated* for the foul things they have planned,” Zaid growls, but I can tell he’s listening.

“It’s the only time we’ll be out of our cell together. That will take care of one barrier to our escape. Then we just need to plan a way to get free before they get us to whatever location the ceremony is going to be held at and have a chance to put it in motion.” I tilt my chin up at him, looking into his eyes with as much bravery as I can muster. “We’ll only get one shot no matter what. We should make it the best one we possibly can.”

Zaid pulls me close to him, his hand on my waist as he leans down, kissing the top of my head lightly. When his eyes meet mine, I see something almost like awe in them.

“You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever known,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my forehead, my nose, and then finally my mouth, lightly. “I’m the luckiest man in the universe, to have you as my mate.”

We sit there like that for a long moment, clinging to each other, and then Zaid finally nods.

“We’ll try your plan, then,” he says, and even though I can tell he’s clearly reluctant to go ahead with it, it feels good knowing that he respects me enough to listen to me.

No one in my life has ever valued my input like that before, or treated me like an equal. And no matter what happens in the end, I feel better knowing that he’s on my side.

We’re going to need each other if we’re going to get out of this alive.

Zaid

WE SPEND the next two days planning out our strategy for how to escape, all the while knowing that time is running thin. The days are spent observing and quietly discussing, and the nights

At night, when the village goes silent, we put aside any talk of the uncertain future and lose ourselves in each other. I often thought about what finally claiming a woman might be like, but Abigail has surpassed every hope and imagining I've ever had about the act.

She's eager and passionate every time, her body so responsive to my urge to pleasure her that I could spend the whole night only focused on her orgasms, on bringing her to climax again and again with my fingers and tongue and finally, my cock.

I want to explore every part of her, hungry for her with a deep and primal need that can't be sated, but Abigail is eager to do the same things to me. Finding out that she was my first seemed to light a fire in her, an urge to show me as many pleasurable experiences as she can in the time we have. I quickly find that she wants to explore me as much as I do her, and even though I know I'm alien to her in many ways, she doesn't balk or hesitate.

She seems to find everything about me arousing, including my piercings—which, I find, can be incredibly erotic when Abigail teases the bars in my lips as she kisses me, or plays

with the one on my cock as she explores me with her hands and mouth.

I want an eternity of this, of discovering everything with her, about her. The thought that we might nearly be out of time when we've only just found each other feels cruelly unfair, and I force myself to cling to that same hope that Abigail does—that the universe wouldn't have fated us to be together for so short a time.

These are the circumstances that have brought us together, but they won't be our end. I have to believe that.

The ceremony is drawing closer and closer, and the villagers are just as aware of it. We can tell that the Jakk are getting excited for it as we watch them during the day.

The men are more wild and violent than ever before—which would almost be impressive if it weren't so dangerous, considering the nature of the Jakk—and the air feels charged with violence and need.

Several times over the course of two days, Abigail and I see brutal fights break out between the warriors, as if they're so riled up that they'll fight anyone, even their own kind. Blood stains the rocks as the hours pass, and it's almost ironic, considering Narool said they needed me for blood sport to rile up the men.

I think they're getting riled just fine on their own.

I hate this idea of Abigail's, but I have to acknowledge that it might be our only chance to escape. No matter how hard I've wracked my brain, I can't come up with anything else. It's most likely our best shot, and so I throw myself into making it work, dedicating myself mind and soul to plotting the perfect escape.

If anything, it only serves to confirm how perfect Abigail is as my mate, how well we work together even under such terrible pressure. We plot out every move, think of every way our plan could go wrong, all the circumstances under which the Jakk could prevent us from getting away. As hard as it is to

talk about the possibility of failure, with so much on the line, it's the only way to see a path forward to success.

We anticipate everything we can, spending hours going over and over our plan until we know it by heart. And every night, I claim her again as my mate with my body, holding her close in my arms, dedicating myself to her in every way. Neither of us ever say out loud that this might be the only time we have, but we both know it in our hearts.

I memorize her body, inch by inch, the shape of her in my hands, the sound of her moans and cries and whispers. The way it sounds when she says my name, the sweet pressure of her arching against me and clenching around me when she comes.

I remember all of it, imprinting it in my mind and on my skin, down to my very bones, to my *soul*. If this goes wrong, all I want to remember at the end is her.

When the sun rises on the day of the ceremony, I don't need to know the fullness of the moons to know the time is here, that it'll be tonight. There's an excited, restless energy over the entire village, and neither Abigail nor I can focus very well. We spend most of the day holding each other, telling each other stories of our past, carefully not thinking about how close we are to not having a future. As the afternoon wanes, we go over our plan again, and in the early evening, the door to our hut opens.

Narool is standing there. "It's time," he says with a pleased look on his face, as two Jakk warriors stride forward to grab Abigail and pull her to her feet, four more restraining me. The hut is filled with them, the brutal, stinking presence of Jakk, and my heart begins to thud in my chest as I feel doubt fill me.

Narool steps toward Abigail, lifting her chin with one thick finger. "As the leader of this tribe," he grunts, his gaze looking over her lasciviously, "I don't need to fight for the honor of breeding you. I will be the first to fill you with my seed as the others look on, paving the way for the other warriors." He grins down at her, his thick lips parting to show jagged teeth. "I have no doubt it is my seed that will take hold as well."

“You *drakking voskiret*, I’ll—”

I snarl, jerking in the grip of the warriors holding me, trying to lunge for Narool. But it’s no use. He anticipated my reaction, and he’s enjoying baiting me.

“And you.” He turns toward me, grinning that sick, jagged smile. “I will enjoy watching you be torn apart, scenting the air with your blood as my men use the woman you’ve thrown away your life for.”

He steps out of the hut, and the other warriors push us forward.

We turn toward each other for a brief moment as if we’re both seeking the sun, and I catch the glint of fear in her eyes, the panic that this won’t work.

“You’ll be fine,” I whisper as I lean close to her, my forehead dipping against hers for the brief moment we’re able to grab. “We both will. We’ll make it out of this, I swear to the goddess.”

“I love you,” she blurts out, a quiet, terrified, desperate whisper.

It tears at my heart, and though I wish more than anything that I could have heard her say it under different circumstances, it means everything to me just the same.

“And I love you,” I whisper back, breathing in the scent of her, holding it with me. Holding on to hope, because she is mine and I am hers, and we were always fated to be so. I know that, down to my very soul.

The Jakk guards push us forward, the ones holding me dragging me to the right, as Abigail’s drag her to the left. I get one more look at her, her chin held up defiantly through it all, before I’m shoved forward, and I can’t see her any longer.

But she never leaves my thoughts. Not even for a moment.

I’ll save you, somehow.

As that thought resonates through me, I could almost swear I hear her sweet voice in my mind as if she’s answering back, even though I know that can’t possibly be true.

We'll save each other.

Abigail

MY HEART IS POUNDING with fear and adrenaline as Zaid and I are dragged from the hut. That growing sense of panic only increases as we're separated, and I want to grab for him, to cling to him and never let go—but I know that's not possible. Fighting this now will only decrease our chances of succeeding later, and so I force myself to keep going forward, pushed in the direction the Jakk warriors are taking me. I catch his gaze one last time as I'm taken away, and all I can see in his face is a focus and a determination to succeed. To get us out of this.

I hold on to that, since I can't hold on to him. I use that as my focus, believing with everything in me that as long as we're both trying, we can escape this awful fate.

I'm shoved into another dark hut, this one empty except for two low stone tables on either side of the center of it. Instead of a pillar, this one has a circular hole cut in the roof, like a skylight, and the moonlight is shining down through it. It casts a glow on the space in the center of the hut, and the Jakk warrior pushes me forward, grunting as he indicates the moonlit spot.

"You stand there," he says sharply. "Strip."

A rush of fear passes through me again, prickling my skin and making my stomach feel hollow. He doesn't move to touch me, at least, and I'm taken back suddenly to that morning at the spring outside the Uleki village, when we were told to strip and bathe.

“Water.” He indicates one of the pitchers on the low stone table to my left. “Oil. Use them, then dress.” The warrior jerks his head toward the table on my right, where an outfit is laid out for me.

I can’t look at it too closely, not yet, or the panic will overtake me. I remember how I got through that day in the bathing pool, imagining I was a warrior princess far from home, captured by evil barbarians, fighting to get free.

Aside from the warrior princess part, it’s all more apt now than I would have thought, and yet as I start to undo my top with trembling fingers, I strangely don’t feel the need to pretend. I don’t want to escape to another world in my mind, because what I want most is *here*, in this world, on the other side of this village. And as that thought springs into my mind, I realize something else too.

I don’t need to pretend to be someone else. I always escaped to other places in my mind because I felt too weak, too shy, too afraid to face things head on as myself. I felt my entire life that I wasn’t enough, that I needed to be someone else.

But since I’ve been here on Xaath, and especially in the last few days with Zaid, I’ve come to realize that I *am* enough. All the things I’ve told him, that his injury doesn’t define him, that he doesn’t need to feel less than or ashamed, that he’s deserving of love and respect, are true for me too. It’s not just that Zaid *sees* me as strong and brave, I *am*. I’ve survived something terrifying, kept going despite how easy it would be to fall to pieces and give up, and that means something.

I don’t have to be someone else to survive this. I can do it as myself. As Abigail.

Meeting the Jakk warrior’s gaze defiantly, I strip out of my clothing, letting the woven wrapped top and leather skirt fall to the floor. I can see the naked hunger in his gaze as he looks at my bared body, his tongue running along his lower lip as he rakes his eyes over me, but he doesn’t move to touch me. It’s clear that he’s been told to “save it” for the ceremony, and that’s a small relief. I won’t be assaulted by any of them yet.

My stomach knots in a cold ball of ice as I think of what they have planned for me, what will happen if I don't succeed, but I push the thought away.

All I can do is focus on now, and the plan Zaid and I have crafted together.

I reach for the pitcher of water, seeing a hard bar of soap next to it. "All of you," the Jakk warrior says, gesturing to my hair, and then making a lewd gesture between his legs that I force myself to ignore. "Clean, for the goddess."

I grit my teeth, pouring half the water in the pitcher over my head. It splashes over my hair and down my body, and as much as I hate all of this—particularly the show I'm unwillingly putting on for this warrior, who probably thinks he lucked out getting the duty of guarding me while I "prepare"—the cold water feels incredible. I haven't bathed in days, and I bite back a sigh of pleasure. I don't want the Jakk warrior to enjoy this any more than I'm sure he already is.

The urge to linger is strong, to push off the inevitable as long as possible, but I also want to get the fuck out of here. I quickly scrub with the soap, lathering my hair and cleaning myself thoroughly, unable to resist the temptation to feel clean for the first time in what feels like forever, even if it means doing it in front of this asshole. When I've lathered every part of me I can manage, I pour the rest of the water over me, sluicing away the soap and feeling a little of the tension leave my body just by virtue of being clean.

"Now oil," the warrior grunts, and I flinch.

The bathing I could tolerate, since I wanted one so badly. But my cheeks heat with humiliation at the idea of rubbing myself down with oil in front of the warrior, who is looking at me now with an anticipatory gleam in his eye.

"Do it, or I help," he grunts, and I swallow hard. But I refuse to be cowed, to show fear. I've gotten this far, and I'm not going to let him make me fall apart now.

"You're not allowed to touch me," I tell him flatly. "I know you're not. Not until you prove yourself worthy. Which makes

me wonder—did Narool tell you that you could watch, while I made my preparations? Or did he tell you to turn your back, until you'd fought and shown that you were worthy to lay eyes on a naked female sacrifice given to you by the gods?"

Thank god for all those books I read, I think ruefully as his grayish face pales slightly, his eyes widening.

I'm pretty sure that speech was mostly straight out of some fantasy novel I read, but it fucking *worked*. The Jakk warrior mumbles something that might have almost been an apology, turning his back as I reach for the pitcher of oil.

"Don't *drakking* try anything," he warns.

If it hadn't been for Zaid and our plan, I might have. I might have grabbed my one opportunity to run, naked or not, and tried to dart past him and flee. But that's not part of the plan Zaid and I have so carefully crafted over the past days, and so instead I just scoop handfuls of oil out of the pitcher, rubbing down every inch of my skin until I'm slick and gleaming with it.

It smells rich and herbal, and if it weren't for this specific purpose, I might have enjoyed it too. It feels luxurious, sinking into my skin, and I'm tempted to sweep myself away in some imagining, pretending I'm at some rich mountain spa instead of the captive of a barbaric alien tribe, about to be sacrificed.

I shake my head, setting the pitcher aside. I need to be *here*, now, present. I need to fight for Zaid and myself the way he's going to fight for us, not take the easy way out.

The outfit that was left out for me isn't all that different than the one I imagined waiting in the grass for me after that bath, when I fantasized about being a captive princess.

The skirt portion is made of a thin silky, dark gray cloth that splits up to the sides, held together by the thinnest of beaten metal clasps that look like pewter or tarnished silver. The belt that goes over it is about the width of my index finger all the way around and has a similar clasp in the back, but it's made out of a glassy stone.

The *relk stone* that was traded for me.

Unsurprisingly, there are no underwear, and I force myself not to think about why that is. I'll throw up if I do, or just start screaming.

The top is exquisite. Objectively the entire outfit is beautiful, and it's impossible not to take note of that, no matter the purpose. It's made entirely of gemstones strung together, amber and golden and deep brown and gray and black.

They form a collar that goes around my neck, cascading down over my bare breasts, so that when I move my nipples peek through. I shudder at that thought, but there's no escaping it, and I choose to focus instead on the details of the outfit, instead of the *why*. It helps to calm me, oddly enough, to keep my mind from running rampant over what comes next. I think about it as if I were going to write it in a story, all the ways I would describe it, as I take the silky tie attached beneath that's covered with the same gemstones, and tie it behind my back.

I run my oiled fingers through my loose, wet red hair, letting it fall around my face, and I turn toward the warrior.

"I'm ready," I tell him, and though I'm far from that, there's no use continuing to put it off. All that's left now is to focus on the plan, and the shred of hope that I'm clinging to.

The Jakk warrior turns, and I have to swallow down panic at the look of hungry, almost feral lust that crosses his face. His loincloth shifts, almost revealing his massively aroused cock, and I have a sudden picture of the Jakk warriors fighting for the "honor" of using me, all of them sporting ridiculous erections. I have to clap my hand over my mouth to stop from spluttering with hysterical laughter, because I know if I give in to it, I'm going to wind up on the ground, laughing and then sobbing, completely broken from terror.

Just fucking hold it together a little longer, Abigail. Just long enough. You'll be back out there with Zaid, and the two of you will pull this off. Together.

The Jakk warrior takes my arm in a firm grip, his thick fingers sliding over my oiled skin, and I think I hear him groan as he pulls me from the hut. Fear coils in my belly again.

How long has it been since any of them have been with a woman? Since they've fucked anything but their own hands? Do they do it together, when they can't stand it anymore?

Something tells me that's not the case, that this entire village is now just a roiling pit of unsatisfied, barbaric lust, and I'm about to be the centerpiece of it.

I want to collapse with fear, but I force myself forward, one foot in front of the other so I'm trotting to keep pace with the warrior, not being dragged along. He's in a hurry to get to the ceremony grounds, and I don't have to guess why. I just don't want to think about it.

The ceremony is being held in a wide-open space near the back of the village, with one of the high mountain walls serving as the backdrop. There are a wide ring of torches and a flat stone table in the center of it all, like a ceremonial altar, and a few yards from it at the head is a stone chair that Narool is seated in, overseeing it all.

To the left of the table, against the rock wall, is a huge wooden pen. Standing in the center of it is Zaid, his wrists bound to a central stake, and his blue-streaked gray eyes meet mine the instant I'm hauled to stand between the head of the altar and Narool's throne.

What I feel as our gazes lock is like nothing I've ever felt in my life, like nothing I ever thought I'd feel. It's like an electrical jolt, a thread tying us together, an inexorable magnetic pull. I want to go to him, I feel myself leaning forward, and the only thing that stops me is the knowledge that if I do, if I give in to the impulse, it will destroy our plan. Everything will be lost, and Zaid will die.

I have to close my eyes at that thought, the idea of it a physical pain in my chest, radiating through my body.

I hope like hell my idea was a good one, I think desperately, forcing myself to stay rooted to the ground. I won't be able to live with myself if my plan is the reason he gets killed.

Not that I'll want to live much longer without him, anyway—or after what the Jakk will do to me if the plan fails.

“The gods have gifted us a woman!” Narool stands from his chair, lifting his muscled arms over his head as he surveys the group of gathered warriors gathered in a half moon to my right. “A shared bride, to take the seed of those who prove themselves worthy and bring forth many strong offspring to swell the ranks of our tribe. Warriors, pay homage to the gift the goddess of the moons has blessed us with.”

The warriors all kneel as one, going down on one knee as they draw their daggers, crossing them in front of their faces as they bow their heads. There's a gathered murmur, the sound of it worshipful, and it's all directed at me. It feels stranger than anything that's happened so far, and my skin prickles uncomfortably, nausea roiling in my belly. I feel like I'm going to throw up, the entire show sickening beyond belief. They're acting as if they're worshiping me, like I'm some gift, but they're all going to assault me in a matter of minutes if Zaid's and my plan doesn't work.

They don't give a shit about me, or who I am. They only want to use me, and if we can't stop this, they're going to do just that.

Hold it together, hold it together.

I suck in even breaths through my teeth, pushing them back out, as Narool holds a spear aloft to the moons and the warriors do the same. They all rise, visibly aroused, and I choke back acid bile rising up in my throat.

Just a little longer.

“Bring out the beasts!” Narool calls out the order, and a moment later a gate opens, a small herd of squealing, snarling beasts that look very much like warthogs released into the pen as a Jakk warrior slices Zaid's bonds and runs for the fence before the “pigs” can get to him.

They look like they have longer tusks and fur than warthogs on Earth, but I don't have a chance to look too closely, as two Jakk warriors grab my arms roughly. I can see

the snarling, clawing catlike beasts that were brought in the cage a few days ago, and I realize with horror that this is a game with rounds. Either Zaid will fight those beasts if he beats the piglike ones, or if they take him down, I assume the warriors will fight the catlike animals for the right to me—and then each other.

“Make her watch,” Narool says, as I see Zaid out of the corner of my eye, diving for his daggers in the dirt as the piglike beasts converge on him. “Let her see the sport that will rouse our warriors’ lust for her.”

I don't think they need any more rousing, I think grimly, trying to avoid getting too close to either of the warriors manhandling me and their swaying erections, pushing free of their loincloths. It almost feels like some kind of evil magic, the thick heat in the air, but I know it's just the fugue of too much testosterone and unchained lust, a tribe's worth of feral men close to a woman who very soon is supposed to be forced to submit to them.

The plan. Think of the plan. I shake my head, trying to wrench away from the warriors, but their hands just tighten on my arms.

“I ordered you to watch,” Narool growls. “Obey me, little Terran, and perhaps I'll even allow you pleasure while I seed your womb.”

There's no possible fucking way you could pleasure me. I bite back the words, forcing a seductive smile onto my face instead as I wrench toward him.

“You're the leader here,” I purr silkily. “Practically a god yourself. Shouldn't you have the right to have such a precious gift perched on your lap, warming your cock while the others fight for a piece of what's already yours?” I lean toward him, letting the gemstones draped over my breasts sway so that he gets a glimpse, the jewels sparkling in the firelight.

Narool's eyes burn, his lids growing heavy as his pupils dilate with lust. I see his loincloth shift, and he palms it aside, wrapping his fist around the pillar-like cock jutting up between his thighs. “Is that what you want, little Terran?” he grunts.

“To sit here and keep my cock warm and slick until the time comes for me to fill you up?”

I don't know how I force the words from my lips. My mind is a riot, panicked thoughts slamming into the inside of my skull like frightened trapped birds, ricocheting. “I would be honored,” I whisper, tilting my chin up so that my eyes meet his, my lips parting as if on a moan.

Narool's face is slack with lust, his hand stroking lazily. “Then come to me, little one,” he grunts. “Let her go.” He waves at the two guards. “Let me see the truth of her offer.” His eyes narrow, his hand leaving his cock suddenly. “If you're lying to me, little one, you'll come to regret it by the night's end.”

If I'm lucky, I won't get the chance to.

The strong hands holding me let go. I'm pushed forward, toward Narool, and out of the corner of my eye I can hear squeals and snarls, Zaid panting, the sick sound of a blade scraping over flesh as he fights. I can hear *him*, fighting for us, and I know I have to keep it together long enough to do the same, in the only way I can.

But I'm not fucking touching Narool.

I have to be quick. I have to make him drop his guard. I force myself to let my eyes slide over him, his thick, broad bare chest, down to his cock, stiff as stone and pierced from crown to base. I let my eyes hood, as if the fugue of lust in the air were affecting me too, making me want things that I'd never actually want. And it works. His hand twitches back toward his erection, his thighs spreading, his lips parting as he looks at me eagerly. Their supposed leader, but he's just as lust-crazed and hungry as the rest of them. Just another dog slaverling over a bone.

There's a torch to my left. Between the throne and the pen. I suck in a breath, and another, the smell of sweat and musk and burning torches and blood heavy on the air. I can hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears, everything narrowing down, and then I'm five steps from Narool's throne, four, three—

He won't reach for me. He wants to see me come to him of my own accord, sit down on his cock like a good little sacrifice. His pride doesn't want to believe that he'll have to force me to take him. He *wants* to be a god.

But he's a fucking monster.

In the last possible moment, I dart away. As fast as I can, without looking back, feeling the ghost of heavy hands grasping for me the entire time, I run for the torch. I have a brief, split second where they're all too shocked to move, stunned that I'm fighting back, trying to make a break for it, and then I hear Narool shouting for them to grab me.

But the torch is already in my hand.

When I'm fighting the beasts, grab it and throw it. Zaid's voice echoes in my head, going over the plan like we did again and again. I'll use it. They'll spook, and it'll cause chaos, break open the pen. I remember that kind of madness all too well, from when I was trampled.

There'd been pain in his voice, but a wry kind of humor too, that such a terrible experience had turned out to be useful in the end.

My hand closes around it just as the warriors grab me, but it's too late. I'm already flinging the torch to Zaid as he rushes to the side of the pen, snatching it, and as I'm dragged backward by rough, grasping hands I see him start to swing the blazing torch outwards, toward the squealing animals.

Just as he said they would, the animals lose their minds with terror. They dart away from him in a fury, squealing, running, straight for the walls of the pen. As a group, they break through the walls of the pen, toward the gathered warriors.

Zaid runs toward me as chaos erupts.

Zaid

AS I SEE the beasts panicking, an unexpected fear fills me, chilling my veins and clogging my throat. I planned to cause a stampede, but I didn't realize how fiercely it would bring back that childhood terror of seeing the varhell bearing down on me, dust filling the air, the heavy animal on me before I could dart out of the way.

How it would bring back the visceral feeling of the air being crushed out of me, the burning, biting pain of broken bones, the ache as that pain sucked everything else away and filled the void. The dirt in my mouth, my lungs, my nose, the encroaching blackness and my mother's screams.

But those aren't her screams. They're Abigail's.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" she shrieks as the Jakk warriors drag her backward away from the torches, leering.

The game is up now, she has no need to pretend to be docile, and she's a feral *brisha*, clawing and spitting at them as they haul her back toward the altar.

It's enough to break apart the heavy feeling of panic, shoving those memories back and pulling me into the here and now. I focus on what I need to do, what we've planned. How we're going to break free.

As the animals scatter, rampaging and feral through the gathered warriors, I make a break for the other pens. The yowling furred creatures they brought in a few days ago are slamming at the bars of their cage, and I slam the hilt of my

dagger down on the lock, breaking it open and darting around behind the cage as they break free so that they go for the warriors and not for me.

I break out a few more cages full of smaller, fierce beasts as I make my way toward Abigail, the goal to cause as much relentless chaos as possible, but I need to get to her. The animals won't discern between the Jakk and her or I, and we're in danger too. Not just from the Jakk, but from the hungry and vicious beasts I've released.

We need to get out of here.

Two warriors move to grab me, the ones closest to the fighting pen, but my blood is boiling, my fighting rage up. I slash at them, using my smaller stature to duck and weave under their heavy blows, and I manage to drive a dagger into one's gut, slicing his belly open as I cut the tendons behind the knees of the other.

He goes down hard, the slam of his knees into the rocky ground sending a shockwave of satisfaction through me as I go for Abigail.

"Zaid!" She screams my name, and the sound pierces my soul. The sight in front of me has me almost feral with rage, my teeth grinding as I fight my way through beasts and beastly Jakk to get to her.

They've gotten her up on the altar, two warriors holding her arms down as two more spread her legs, the scrap of cloth between them all that's protecting her. I see Narool sneer as he gets down off his throne, stalking toward her, his thick lips baring his jagged teeth as he shoves his loincloth aside.

"I'm going to seed you, pretty Terran, and then once I do, I'm going to let them all have you until you bleed. And one day, when we've wrung every bit of pleasure from you and every child you can give us, we're going to finish you off. But it won't be a kind, ceremonial death for a feast like a Jakk would be given. We're going to claim you while we shred the flesh from your bones, when that day comes."

Abigail screams again, a high, reedy sound of terror, and something snaps inside me.

It's like an explosion in my head, a thunderclap of rage, and I can't see or hear anything but Narool, his words battering in my head as I let out a ululating roar of a war cry that isn't Uleki or Xaathian or anything but my own primal, black rage.

I rush forward, headlong and berserk, the noises that spill from my lips animal as I rush him, slashing with my daggers.

He turns just in time to avoid my first blow, and the Jakk come forward to stop me, but he throws up a hand, stopping them.

"This one is mine to kill," he snarls, and then he drops his spear, grabbing an axe instead.

"*Voskiret*," I hiss, circling him. "Your blood will soak this ground while your warriors fight to consume you down to your bones. Abigail is mine."

Narool sneers, swinging for me. I duck as the axe goes over my head, darting in, my blade going for his thigh. I score a blow, only to feel the heavy axe head crash against my spine, bruising me as it pitches me forward.

My knees are skinned by the rocky dirt, and my leg starts to cramp, but I won't let it stop me. I've trained my entire life to be able to fight when it matters, and it's never mattered more than this.

"I'm going to behead you as you kneel, you *drakking shola* ___"

Narool pitches forward with the weight of his axe as I roll away from the blow, springing back to my feet. The Jakk back up as we circle each other, and I move quickly, avoiding his swings. The axe could take a limb off with one blow, but I don't intend to let it hit me.

He swings again, and this time I go down on purpose, rolling and ignoring the prick and slice of the rocks as I move out of the way. I push myself up, lunging with my dagger, and this time it finds purchase.

My blade slices the tendon at the back of Narool's heel, and as I spring to my feet he goes down, the ground shuddering with his weight.

I don't pause. I don't hesitate. I lunge forward, leaping onto his back as I grab his face in my hand, jerking his head back in the same moment that I jerk my blade across his throat, a fount of blood spurting into the air as I kill him with the same blow that killed his guard.

The roar of fury from the warriors rises into the air. They rush me, but I'm already off Narool, ducking away and going for Abigail, who is scrambling off the altar in the sudden confusion. The shock of seeing me kill their leader distracted the warriors holding her, and my brave mate took full advantage. My heart swells with pride and love for her as I run toward her, my arm going around her waist and swinging her off the stone table and down to the ground as we race toward the village gate.

This is it, the last moments before our freedom. We can't stop now, can't look back to see how close the pursuing warriors are. They converge on both sides, trying to box us in, still fighting through the rampaging beasts. The air is full of screams and snarls, dirt and sweat and blood, and somewhere behind us I hear the shriek of *fire* as some of the torches are toppled.

But neither of us look back at any of it.

We're very nearly cornered as we near the gate, some of the warriors almost boxing us in. I hear Abigail's gasp of fear, her hand tightening in mine, and I push her forward toward the gates.

"Run!" I shout at her, my words almost a snarl, as I attack the warriors lurching for her. I follow her, nearly blind with rage and a protective instinct that overshadows anything I've ever felt in the past. I feel consumed, half a beast myself, my daggers and skin splattered with Jakk blood as I clear a path for Abigail and then myself to break through the gate.

"Zaid!" She screams my name again, grabbing my hand as I follow her out, and we rush down the mountain. Heedless,

we hardly see where we're going, the moonlight blocked out by the trees and the terrain rocky and unforgiving. We slip and skid, trip and stumble, my leg cramping with a pain that's only blocked out by the thrumming need to protect my mate, but we keep going.

We keep running, and running. Long past the limits of Abigail's strength or mine, we push ourselves as hard as we can until the sounds of shouts fade into the distance, but even then we don't stop. We can't. It feels like there's no amount of space between us and the Jakk village that will be enough. I can tell Abigail is exhausted, my leg is burning with pain that resonates through my entire body, but I keep pushing. I can't risk her being taken again.

We keep going farther, as far as we can, until the sky starts to gray and the chirping that signals dawn echoes through the forest. We're far from the Jakk village now, nearing the edge of the mountain, and we both come to a breathless, panting halt as I pull Abigail into my arms.

I feel her lean into me, her hands fisting against my chest, the gemstones of her top biting into my skin, but I don't care. It reminds me that we're alive, that we made it, and all I want right now is her.

The emotions spill over, everything I've held at bay—fear, love, possessiveness, need. I kiss her hard, my hands tangling in her thick hair as I claim her mouth, my tongue plunging inside so I can taste the sweetness of her. Abigail kisses me back with the same frenzied need, her nails scratching at my chest along with the gemstones, and I want to rip the garment from her. I want to tear away everything the Jakk put on her, replace the scented oil on her skin with my own scent, reclaim her as mine and give her myself as well.

She clings to me as she kisses me and my cock throbs against her, rock-hard and aching, the need for her almost unbearable. My hands tighten in her hair, sliding down her body, and it takes everything in me to break the kiss, to break away from her.

“You need rest,” I whisper raggedly. “We both do. We shouldn’t—”

Abigail laughs breathlessly, the gemstone strings swinging against my skin as she goes up onto her tiptoes and tangles her fingers in my hair. “There’s only one thing I need right now,” she whispers. “And it’s not rest.”

Her mouth lands on mine again, hot and sweet and full of the same desperate need, and every last shred of control I have is stripped away.

We’re free of the Jakk compound now, away from anyone who might hear or see us, out in the open wild. I kiss her fiercely, hungrily, and she returns it with the same fervor, the heat between us flaring out of control. It feels different than it did when we were in the cell together.

That felt almost like a goodbye, a last frenzied, bittersweet clutching at what we could have together before a possible end.

But this feels like something altogether different.

This feels like a beginning.

I clasp her face in my hands, backing her against the nearest tree as I slide my tongue into her mouth, wanting the taste and scent of her everywhere. I crave her like nothing I ever have before, like food and water and air, like I need her to survive.

My mate, my *corva*.

“Zaid.” She gasps out my name breathlessly, arching against me as I kiss her, my hands sliding down over her breasts, her waist, her hips. I can’t get enough of the feeling of her—her softness, her delicate curves, the way she fits so perfectly against me, small but strong, and all mine.

I fall to my knees, desperate for the taste of her on my lips again. Abigail gasps as I push the skirt she’s wearing aside, wrapping the offending material in my fist and snatching it away from her hips, leaving her bare to my gaze. I stroke my fingers down her hips, the inner part of her thighs, savoring the

sound of her breathless moans as I part her legs, leaning forward to draw in her scent.

Nothing has ever smelled or tasted sweeter than my mate. My cock is stiff and throbbing, leaking seed beneath my loincloth as it aches with need, but I feel an irresistible drive to taste her, to pleasure her first, before I drive myself inside her.

“Oh fuck!”

She squeaks as I lift her leg over my shoulder, holding her steady with my hands as I run my tongue up the swollen, drenched slit between her thighs, groaning at the taste of her. I know she likes it best when I tease that swollen spot at the very top that gives her so much pleasure, but I can't resist thrusting my tongue inside her first. Her hips start to jerk and undulate, riding my tongue as her pleasure starts to build.

“More,” she gasps, grinding against my mouth as her fingers tangle in my hair. “Oh god, make me come, please.”

I have every intention of making my mate release on my lips. I press my mouth tighter against her, reluctantly pulling my tongue from inside her to lick upward, sucking her swollen nub into my mouth as I flick my tongue against it, reveling in her cries.

Out here, away from anyone else, Abigail moans and shrieks her pleasure to the starry sky, the sounds growing in intensity as she grinds against my face until at last, I'm rewarded with the flood of her arousal over my lips and tongue. I keep sucking and licking as she drenches me with her climax, and only when I feel her shudder and sink back against the bark of the tree do I finally stand, gathering her in my arms and lifting her up as I push my loincloth aside.

Abigail's arms slide around my neck, and I hover at her entrance, my cock brushing against her drenched folds as I gaze into her eyes.

“I love you, my *corva*,” I murmur, my free hand threading into her hair.

And then I drive my cock into my mate, claiming her.

Abigail

ALL OF THE air is driven from my lungs by the force of the emotion in Zaid's gaze, and his cock thrusting into me. He fills me with one long, hard stroke, my body taking him gladly, stretched to the limit with his thickness. I gasp at the feeling of him buried to the hilt, his hips pressed against mine as he fills me completely, thick and hard and perfect.

"I love you too," I whisper against his mouth as he kisses me fiercely again, thrusting into me with long, hard strokes that let me feel every inch of his ridged cock, the piercing rubbing against the sensitive spot deep inside me again and again. No one has ever felt this good, made me feel as if I'm coming apart at the seams, as if I could sink into their skin and become one with them. It's not just the pleasure, but the intensity of the connection between us, like nothing I've ever felt or imagined. I know it's the mate bond, and I understand now why Nicole stayed with Harax.

Nothing could ever be worth giving this up.

Zaid presses me back against the tree, his mouth devouring mine as his cock pounds into me, his pelvis grinding against my clit with each hard thrust. His skin is slick with sweat and my arousal, sliding over my swollen clit again and again, and I tighten my legs around his hips, pulling him deeper as I feel another orgasm hovering at the precipice of my consciousness.

"Oh god, I'm—" I gasp aloud, a long moan tearing from my lips as Zaid thrusts into me again, harder than before.

“Yes, my mate,” he growls, grinding against me. “I want you to soak my cock with your release, my *corva*. Give me your pleasure. I want to be drenched in you—”

His mouth claims mine again, hard and demanding, and I tilt my head back, my moan turning to a shriek as his body slams into mine again, rubbing upward against my sensitive clit and sending me over the edge of oblivion.

I *feel* him throbbing as I clench around him, able to feel every ridge of his thick, perfect cock as my pussy spasms and ripples down the length of him, and he keeps thrusting, making me come harder still. I scream out his name, the sound swallowed in our kiss, and I’m still shuddering with pleasure as he suddenly pulls out of me, leaving me hollow and dripping, whimpering in protest.

I don’t have long to wait for him to fill me again. Zaid turns me around, and my hands brace against the tree automatically, my back arching, begging for him to fill me again. His hands grip my hips as I feel his tip pushing against my swollen entrance, and he thrusts back in again, hard.

“Zaid!” I shriek his name, arching back, meeting his thrust as my pussy clenches around him, as if my body wants him deeper still, as deep as he can go. I feel out of my mind with pleasure, lost in it, and then I feel his fist close in the jeweled top that I’m still wearing, the one I was forced to wear for the ceremony.

“Mine,” he snarls as he snatches it away from me, the gemstones shattering and spilling across the ground as he throws it aside. “I will be the only one to claim you, my *corva*. The only one who touches you.”

He drives into me, hard, as he presses his lips against my neck, his hand hard on my shoulder as he thrusts into me relentlessly, and it sends me spilling over the edge into a third climax, my nails digging into the bark of the tree as I arch backward against him, crying out his name as I come hard on his cock.

“Abigail! Oh *goddess*, Abigail!” Zaid cries out my name too, shuddering as I feel him swell inside me, the hot rush of

his cum filling me as he comes too, both of us straining and writhing together in the throes of our combined pleasure.

As I feel Zaid's chest press against my naked back, our skin clinging together with sweat, I let out a breath that I didn't realize I was holding. His lips brush against my neck, his cock softening inside me, and I feel something that I haven't felt in days.

Peace.

I feel peaceful, soft, free. Relaxed, as if all the fear and tension left me on waves of pleasure as Zaid reclaimed me for himself. We're not totally out of the woods, so to speak, not yet. But as he slips out of me and turns me around, pressing my naked body gently back against the tree as he holds me, I feel safe again. I feel whole.

He presses his lips against my neck again as he leans into me, shuddering softly with emotion, and I can feel that there's something he's holding back from me. Something that almost feels as if it's paining him.

"What is it?" I whisper his name softly, trailing my fingers through his black hair and down his jaw, tipping his face up so that he's looking at me. "What's wrong?"

There's sadness and a hint of guilt in his eyes when he looks at me, and neither of those are emotions I want to see on my mate's face after what we just did, after what we escaped together. He draws in a breath, and I lean my head back against the tree, looking into his paint-swirled eyes. "Please tell me."

"I wish I'd stood up for you from the beginning." He lets out a ragged breath, the words coming out slightly choked with emotion. "I didn't protect you, my corva. Even when I felt that what we were doing was wrong. Everything you've felt these past few days, everything you had to do tonight, everything you had to endure? It never would have happened if I'd just done the right thing from the start. You would never have been held captive by the Jakk at all if I'd just refused to take you up the mountain."

Pain fills me, hot and sharp, at the idea that he's still blaming himself. That he's still finding all the reasons he thinks he doesn't deserve me, cataloging all the ways he was wrong.

"Listen to me," I tell him fiercely, reaching out to take his face in my hands and holding his gaze with my own. "It doesn't matter."

"It does—"

"No." I cut him off. "*I'm* the one all this happened to, and I'm telling you that it doesn't." I soften my tone slightly, brushing my fingers over his cheeks. "I told you when I was back on Earth that I never really believed in fate, but it's really fucking hard not to now."

I search his face, cupping it in my hands, willing him to feel all the emotion in my words, the sincerity.

"If things hadn't played out exactly as they did, we wouldn't be *here* right now. Don't you see that? If you hadn't volunteered to be one of the guards who took me to the Jakk, Drael would have just picked someone else to be the fourth. Then *no one* would have come to rescue me. We would never have known we were mates. You'd still be back with the Uleki, fighting to prove yourself as something you were never meant to be, and I—"

I can't finish that sentence. It's too horrible. But I don't need to, because Zaid knows exactly what I'm talking about. I see some of the pain leaching from his eyes, a soft hope replacing it, but I keep pushing forward, words spilling out in a torrent.

"I knew from the first day that we traveled together that there was something different about you," I admit, the words tearing out of me. "I felt a connection between us. I didn't know what it was then, but I knew it was there. I tried to exploit it, tried to use it against you as a way to escape, and I'm so sorry for that. It was wrong of me. I should have asked you for help from the beginning, because all either of us ever needed was to embrace that connection. We're stronger

together. We always have been, it just took way too fucking much for us to see it.”

I lean in, brushing my lips over his, my heart aching with how much I love him.

“We’re right where we’re supposed to be now,” I whisper against his mouth. “However we got here, however many dangers we had to face—don’t you see? It doesn’t matter now.”

He lets out a low moan, pressing me back into the tree, his forehead against mine as his mouth claims mine again. The kiss is hot and fierce, possessive and gentle all at once, his lips and tongue moving over mine in a way that I never, ever want to end.

I can feel every ounce of emotion in that kiss, the same welling up in me, and we both cling to each other, kissing as if there’s nothing else in the world but the two of us.

“You’ll never have to face any danger alone ever again,” Zaid vows, breathing the words against my mouth. “I’ll always be there beside you.”

There’s no question in me that I believe him. That I love him. That I’ve found everything I was ever looking for, in the strangest of places.

My fated mate.

Zaid

WE REST A FEW HOURS, although the fact that we're still technically on the mountain won't let me linger for longer than that, just enough to make my body capable of moving again. I wish I could luxuriate in my mate, spending hours exploring her in the daylight, but we need to move fast. I want to get her to safety more than anything, and the Jakk won't let what we've done go lightly—stealing their chance for a woman and killing their leader. We need protection.

Abigail is naked, curled up on the leaves, and I wince. We can't go anywhere without clothing for her, but the top the Jakk gave her is destroyed, gemstones scattered everywhere after I ripped it off her last night. The skirt could be fashioned into something, but I don't want a single part of that place leaving here with us, and I know neither does she.

I sit up, looking around, and an idea comes to me.

“Wait here,” I tell Abigail as she sits up, blinking away sleep. “Don't move. I'm not going far.”

Her eyes widen slightly in alarm. “What's going on? Is something wrong?”

I shake my head quickly. “No. But you need clothes, and I'm pretty sure not far from here is where I left my pack when I knocked the others out and went to find you. If I'm right, they probably didn't take it—they had their own things, and the sacks of relk stone to carry besides. I'm going to go look for it.”

If I can find the pack, it means food for us, as well as a sleeping mat—and a blanket I can rip into strips to form something for Abigail to wear. I hurry through the trees, not wanting to stray far from her side—but I’ve hardly gone a dozen yards before I nearly trip over it in the brush.

Relief fills me. I snatch up the pack, returning to Abigail’s side, and her eyes widen.

“Shit, that’s lucky,” she breathes.

“Or fate,” I tell her with a grin. “Now we can figure out some kind of clothing for you.”

The blanket is thin, and I manage to rip one long strip down the side and then another, handing them to Abigail. She fiddles with them for a moment before figuring out a way to cross them around the back of her neck and over her breasts, tying the ends around her ribs. The other, larger portion we manage to fasten into a skirt, using some leather cords to make ties with holes I punch in the fabric with my dagger.

She stands up, laughing. “How’s this?” she asks, twirling in a circle.

“It makes me want to take you back down to the ground and claim you all over again, mate,” I growl. “But I suppose it’s decent enough for travel.”

The top does very little to conceal Abigail’s breasts, mostly covering her nipples and holding them in place, and the skirt is so short that I can nearly see the curve of her ass at the edge of it.

“And it represents freedom instead of captivity,” I add in a softer tone, pulling her toward me. “You will always be free, Abigail. Even as my mate.”

Her eyes soften and warm, her slender body arching against mine as I run my fingers over her waist.

“Thank you,” she says softly. “For everything.”

I run one hand through her hair as she tips her face up to mine, her lips finding mine sweetly as the morning breeze

rustles around us, the sounds of everything else waking up suffusing the air.

“We should go,” Abigail says softly when she breaks the kiss, and as reluctant as I am to agree, I nod.

The journey isn't easy. Even once we're off the mountain and back in the grasslands, neither of us feels safe stopping for long. We travel hard, pushing ourselves to the limit, taking few breaks. Every night we rest for a few hours, and I can't resist claiming Abigail each time. She's as eager for me as I am for her, and I only barely manage to keep the mating frenzy away, forcing myself to get up each morning and start our travel again when all I want is to stay there, taking her again and again until we've had our fill.

More than anything though, I need to get her to safety. That's what drives me each day, past exhaustion, past pain.

Keeping my mate safe.

Finally, after a few days of travel down the mountain and across the grassy plain, we reach the outskirts of the Bekaru village. We're immediately greeted by scouts, and the moment they see an Uleki warrior and a Terran woman, they're on full alert. I can see the suspicion in their faces as they draw closer, and I step protectively in front of Abigail, shielding her.

“We're not here for any ill purpose,” I tell them clearly. “I wish to speak to Harax in peace, with my mate.”

They glance at each other, and then urge us forward, spear points at our backs in case I'm not telling the truth. I can understand the suspicion, and Abigail walks calmly next to me, her hand finding mine for comfort as we're taken into the village center. If we don't find help here, I'm not sure what comes after, but I don't tell her that. I don't want to frighten her unnecessarily.

Harax comes out as we reach the center of the village, no doubt alerted by a couple of the scouts who went ahead. Two other Bekaru are at his side—his advisors probably—and someone else too.

It's the Terran woman he stole from the Uleki when he came to mate with Drael's daughter and left with one of the prisoners instead. She's standing side by side with him, and I can tell instantly that they're mates. It's not even a tangible thing, exactly. But knowing now what I have with Abigail, I can sense that thread connecting them too.

"Abigail!" The Terran woman cries out her name, stepping forward with relief plain on her features. "Oh my god! How did you get here? What happened? Who is he? Were the others freed too?"

The barrage of questions flies quickly, and at the last one I see Abigail sag slightly.

"It's a long story," she admits. "This is Zaid, one of the Uleki. And no, the others are still there. It's just me."

"Tell us," Harax says sharply, and in turns, Abigail and I do just that.

I admit fully my part in it all, but Abigail defends me staunchly, telling Harax how I fought for her. How we fought together. How we discovered at last what we were to each other.

"He's my mate," she declares, reaching for my hand and looking at Harax squarely. "Whatever happened in the beginning, I've forgiven him, and he's forgiven me. It's in the past, and that's ours to decide. Anyone else should treat it that way too."

"Drael plans to take the rest of the Terran women up the mountain to the Jakk," I interject. "He wants more *relk stone*, and after losing Abigail, the Jakk will be hungry for more women. They're in great danger."

Harax frowns. "We'll need to move faster on our plans to free the women still with the Uleki, then."

I freeze for a moment, the realization hitting me that even before we delivered our news, Harax was planning on helping the remaining Terran women.

A certainty fills me, beyond anything I've ever known.

This is where I belong.

This is a tribe that I won't have to change myself to fit into, among Xaathians who value not just their mates, not just women of their tribe, but *all* women, as the goddess intended. Without thinking twice, I drop to one knee in front of Harax, bowing my head as I cling to Abigail's hand.

"I have renounced my old tribe, the Uleki, and their ways. If you will have me, Harax, I would like to lend whatever strength and skills I have to the Bekaru tribe. I ask that you give shelter to me and my mate, and in exchange, my blades and my strength are yours."

There was a time when I would never have offered up a strength that I didn't even entirely believe that I had. Abigail has done a great deal to raise my esteem in myself, but even now, I question in the moment of silence that follows whether my request will be accepted. If Harax sees anything of value in me.

"Lift your head, Xaathian." Harax's command booms from above me, and I look up, expecting refusal. But instead he nods and smiles, offering me a hand.

"You have proved yourself, in the rescue of and your devotion to this woman. Rise as one of the Bekaru."

My chest swells with emotion as I take his hand and rise to my feet, relief and happiness and pride filling me all at once, so much so that I don't know what to do. My throat is too choked to speak, and I glance over at Abigail, whose face is shining as she smiles at me. More than anyone else, she knows what this means to me.

"You are welcome here as well, if you wish to stay," Harax tells Abigail. "Like all the Terran women, you have a place here."

She nods, accepting gratefully as her fingers tighten around mine. *We're safe*, I think, and I know she feels the same.

"We'll have questions for you, of course, as we solidify our plans to rescue the other Terran women," Harax tells me.

“Your knowledge will be of use.”

“I’ll be happy to help in any way I can.”

“Thank you.” Harax inclines his head. “Welcome to the Bekaru, Zaid and Abigail.”

Harax’s mate embraces Abigail, both of them teary-eyed, and then we’re escorted to a hut where a table is spread with food. “Eat,” Harax says, gesturing to it. “You need food after such a long journey.”

Abigail and I both thank him, and once the door closes, I look at the food with a sense of relief. I’m glad to be able to feed my mate well at last, after all of our traveling—I’m starving, and I know she must be too. “Are you hungry?” I ask her, my hand sliding around her waist to pull her closer, already knowing the answer.

“I am.” She answers quickly, but when I look down at her, she’s not looking at the food at all.

Her gaze is entirely focused on me.

Abigail

I'M STARVING for my mate, for the man I've fallen in love with. I want him more than I want any food, but Zaid laughs, a deep and rich sound that makes me shiver as he pulls me close to him.

"You have to eat," he murmurs, taking me down to sit with him next to the table. He pulls me into his lap, his fingers brushing my hair away from my face as he reaches for a piece of flat bread smeared with what looks like a kind of jam. "You haven't had a proper meal in days."

"Neither have you," I murmur, but Zaid is already holding the bite to my lips, the jam catching on my lip as he slips it into my mouth. Before I can lick the stickiness off my bottom lip, Zaid leans forward, running his tongue over it.

He lets out a low groan, his eyes full of heat as he looks at me. "You taste delicious," he murmurs, low and husky, and I feel desire pool in my belly at the sound of his voice. "Have another bite."

Another piece slips between my lips, and he repeats the action, his tongue trailing over the full edge of my lower lip. When he feeds me a third bite, he reaches out, swiping a bit of jam onto his finger and nudging my top aside, smearing it over my stiffening nipple.

"It will taste even better here," he murmurs, his tongue flicking out over my nipple, circling it as he laps up the sweet stickiness, sucking the nipple and some of the flesh of my breast into his mouth as he gently presses his teeth into me—

just hard enough to sting along with the pleasure of his tongue, not enough to hurt.

“Zaid—” I moan his name, my fingers tangling into his hair. “Please—” I feel as if I might come apart at the seams, my skin too tight for my body, and I can already feel the gathering wetness at my core, readying me for him.

I don’t think that there will ever be a time when I’m *not* ready for my mate to claim me.

“I changed my mind,” Zaid murmurs, looking up at me from where his tongue is still lazily circling my nipple. “I think I *am* hungry.”

I let out a small, breathless squeak as he tumbles me back onto the ground, his fist clenching in the waist of my skirt and dragging it down my hips, tossing it aside. He does the same with my top, his fingers nimbly undoing the knot that holds it around my breasts and leaving it with my skirt, my body naked and trembling with desire for him.

He reaches up, grabbing a fistful of berries in his large hand, and as he leans over me, I watch in fascination as he squeezes them above me.

The juice drips down onto me—over my nipples, down my stomach, onto my pubic mound and lower still. I let out a breathless gasp with each warm trickle of juice on my skin, moaning when I feel it drip over my clit, and I see the hunger in Zaid’s eyes.

“Very, *very* hungry,” he growls, and he leans forward, capturing my mouth in a single, fierce kiss before he starts to make his way down my body.

“I dreamed of doing this,” he murmurs, as his tongue runs over my nipples, around the curves of my breasts, licking up the berry juice on my skin. “Of licking every inch of your body, tasting you until you squirmed and moaned and begged for me.”

I let out a breathless cry as his tongue sweeps over my nipple again, his lips fastening around it, and I feel him smile against my skin.

“Yes, just like that,” he whispers hoarsely, licking the juice from between my breasts as he makes his way down the flat expanse of my stomach.

“Zaid.” My hips arch upward, desperate for his mouth on me. “*Please.*”

He looks up at me from between my legs, a wicked smile on his face, made all the more so by the piercings in his lips, giving him a primal look that sends another flood of arousal through me.

“Anything you want, my *corva*,” Zaid murmurs, and then his mouth presses between my thighs, his tongue swirling around my clit as the world shatters around me.

I come hard on his tongue, my thighs squeezing around his head as I arch upward, crying out so loudly I’m sure all of the village can hear me, but I can’t bring myself to care. All I want is more. More of Zaid, more of *us*, and when I finally come down breathlessly from my climax, he’s still between my thighs, licking my clit as I shudder and gasp.

Somehow, I find the strength to pull away, getting to my knees as I gently push him back with a hand on his chest.

“Now you,” I tell him, and I see his eyes widen as I kneel in front of him, reaching for a small pot of thick nectar that I saw on the table. I dip my finger into it, pushing his loincloth aside as I reach out, trailing the honey-like substance down the length of his throbbing shaft.

“Oh, *goddess*,” Zaid hisses as I drag my finger over the ridges on his cock, outlining each one with the sticky honey until I finally reach the tip. He’s leaking pre-cum already, dripping down his shaft to mingle with the nectar. “Abigail...”

“Fair’s fair,” I whisper wickedly as I lean forward, setting the nectar aside to trail my tongue slowly over his cock. I swirl it around the head, licking up the nectar and the pre-cum together. He tastes salty and sweet all at once, and I moan as I run my tongue over the tip of his cock, teasing the ring there as I do so.

The moment my tongue toys with the ring, Zaid groans, a sound that seems to come from the very depths of his soul.

“It feels so *drakking* good.” He moans, his head falling back as his hand tangles in my hair. “Goddess, I had no idea you would...”

I glance up at him, laughing softly as I swirl my tongue over his cockhead once more.

“You love eating me out,” I murmur, flicking the ring once more with the tip of my tongue. “Why wouldn’t I do the same to you?”

Any answer Zaid might have had for me is lost in his moan as I move farther down, licking every ridge of his cock as I lap up the nectar and the trickling pre-cum coating his shaft. I make sure I get every drop, teasing him endlessly as Zaid gasps and moans and writhes beneath me, his cock throbbing as a steady stream of his cum leaks from the tip into my eager mouth.

When I’m certain I’ve licked up every last drop, I come back up, taking his cockhead into my mouth. I wrap my lips around it, sucking as I tease the underside, and Zaid lets out a cry of pleasure as his hand tightens in my hair.

“Stop. *Drak*.” His breath catches in his throat as he pulls me off his cock. “If you keep doing that, I’ll spill my seed in your mouth.” His eyes darken as he grabs my waist, lifting me as if I weigh nothing and pulling me onto his lap. “And I want every drop of it as deeply inside you as it can go.”

I gasp as he sets me down onto his cock, his hands on my hips dragging me downwards as his hips thrust up, seating every inch of him inside me in one quick, hard thrust. I grab on to his shoulders, my head falling back as I start to ride him, my legs wrapped around his hips. Zaid holds me against him, his mouth seeking out mine as he sinks into me again and again, the sweetness on his tongue joining mine as he thrusts his tongue into my mouth.

“My Abigail,” he whispers, and I wrap my arms around his neck, my forehead pressed to his as I lean into him, wanting to

be as close as I possibly can.

“Yes,” I whisper against his mouth, clenching around him as he fucks me deep and hard, pleasure rippling through me with every stroke. “I’m yours. And you’re mine. My *mate*.”

The word would have seemed so strange, not all that long ago, but now it sounds *right*.

There’s no other word good enough for what Zaid and I are to each other, what I feel when we’re together. The pleasure spearing me with each of his hard thrusts is more than physical. It’s a connection that I can feel down to my very soul. I’ve never known anything so perfect, so intimate, and I cling to him as he claims me, wanting this to go on forever.

Zaid kisses me hard as he groans, his cock throbbing inside me, and I grind against him, feeling myself clench and flutter as my clit rubs against his sweat-slick skin. I’m so close, and it’s the feel of him swelling even larger inside me, his ridges and the piercing on his cock touching every sensitive spot inside me, that sends me over the edge as I feel the first hot rush of his cum fill me.

“Mine,” he growls against my mouth as he holds me down hard on his cock, sinking himself into me as deeply as he can go. “My *corva*. My *love*.”

“I love you,” I whisper against his lips as we shudder together, clinging to each other through the last throes of our climaxes. “Forever, Zaid.”

As another shudder ripples through him and I feel another hot rush of his cum, his cock throbbing with the intensity of it, his hand slips between my thighs, rubbing my clit fast and hard and sending another intense wave of pleasure over me.

I’m breathless as Zaid holds me.

“Next time, we’ll do this in furs, properly,” he whispers against my hair. “We’ve got to stop rutting on the ground like animals.”

“I don’t care where we do it,” I whisper back, my hands still stroking him, clinging to him, needing him. “As long as I

have you. Ground, mat, furs, against a tree—anywhere. It doesn't matter as long as it's you and me."

Zaid sucks in a breath, breathing me in as his arms tighten around me.

"Thank you," he whispers.

"For what?" I pull back a little, looking at him with a touch of surprise.

"All my life, I felt like I didn't quite belong," Zaid murmurs, still nuzzling into my hair. "I was always trying to prove myself, to show that I belonged as part of my tribe. But you helped me see that it wasn't that at all."

He pulls back too, looking into my eyes. All I see in his devotion and love, and my heart aches, happiness filling me that I didn't know I could feel.

"I *didn't* belong in that tribe," he says softly. "You helped me see who I want to be, and where I truly belong."

I kiss him lightly, my fingers stroking his chest. "In the Bekaru tribe?"

Zaid laughs, shaking his head as he kisses me again, pulling me down atop him as he looks into my eyes.

"No," he says, still smiling. "By your side. Always."

Epilogue

“TELL ME YOU’RE *DRAKING* LYING!”

The outburst from outside our hut has all of us crowding at the door, looking out. The hide that usually covers it has been pulled back to allow a breeze in, the afternoons getting too stuffy, and now I can see their leader Drael standing a few yards away. His face is darkened with rage, and he’s glaring at two other warriors who look as if they’re about to piss their loincloths with fear.

“Drael, we—”

“Come with me,” he snarls. “You can tell me the rest of how that *voskiret*—” his voice trails off, still echoing, and all of us cower back, not wanting to be noticed as he walks past the hut and have his wrath fall on any of us.

“What do you think is going on?” Bianca whispers, glancing worriedly around the group. “Do you have any idea?”

Penelope bites her lip. “I heard one of the guards say something last night about how the mission to take Abigail to the Jakk tribe went wrong—”

“Went wrong?” Bianca interrupts. “What do you mean? How could it have gone *wrong* for them? Did they not agree?”

Penelope blows out a frustrated breath. “If you’ll let me finish—they were saying one of the Uleki tribesmen who took her there ran off with her. They were both left with the Jakk tribe. That’s what they were saying, anyway.” She shrugs. “It might not be true.”

“What if it is?” June whispers. “Is it a good thing?”

Penelope frowns. “Maybe? That other man was trying to rescue Nicole, or so it seemed like anyway, when they came back. She seemed happy with him. Maybe that’s what this was too.”

“Or maybe he just wanted her for himself,” Faith whispers, wrapping her arms around her waist. “His own sex slave instead of the Jakk. You see how few women there are.”

“That seems more likely,” June admits. “What do you think, Naomi?”

“Honestly?” I shrug, sinking back onto the dirt. “Faith is probably right. More than likely she went out of the frying pan straight into the fire.”

I don’t like to think about sweet, shy Abigail meeting that kind of fate, but I don’t want to get any hopes up either—least of all mine. If there’s one thing my past on Earth taught me, it’s that it’s better to expect the worst of those you don’t know—and sometimes even those you do.

When you trust the wrong people, they usually end up surprising you the wrong way, in my experience. They betray you, or hurt you—physically, emotionally, sometimes both. I haven’t had any reason to think that aliens are better than humans in that regard.

“Maybe some other Xaathian will rescue us,” Holly whispers. “Like that other one did for Nicole.”

A couple of the other women agree, mostly to soothe Holly I think, but I don’t join in.

I’m not going to wait for a rescue, I think to myself as I back away from the others, my own private vow.

Just like back on Earth, I’m not going to rely on someone else to save me. I’m not going to put my trust in the kindness of strangers, or aliens I don’t even know.

I’m going to get away on my own.

Somehow.

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