



A SCI-FI SHARING
ROMANCE

Aliens'
VICE

SHARDS OF INFINITY 2

ALEXANDRA NORTON

ALIENS' VICE

A SCI-FI SHARING ROMANCE

SHARDS OF INFINITY

BOOK TWO

ALEXANDRA NORTON

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CONTENTS

Foreword

December 13

1. Layla
2. Kak
3. Layla

December 14

4. Layla

December 15

5. Layla
6. Kuthil Ash Kharn
7. Layla
8. Kuthil Ash Kharn
9. Layla

December 16

10. Layla
11. Kuthil Ash Kharn
12. Layla
13. Kak
14. Layla
15. Layla
16. Kak

December 17

17. Layla
18. Layla
19. Layla
20. Kuthil Ash Kharn

December 18

21. Layla
22. Kuthil Ash Kharn
23. Layla

December 19

Chapter 24

December 21

25. Layla
26. Kuthil Ash Kharn
27. Layla
28. Kak
29. Layla
30. Kuthil Ash Kharn

December 22

31. Layla

Chapter 32

December 23

33. Layla
34. Layla
35. Layla
36. Kuthil Ash Kharn
37. Layla

December 24

38. Layla
39. Kuthil Ash Kharn
40. Layla
41. Kuthil Ash Kharn
42. Layla
43. Layla

December 25

44. Layla
45. Kuthil Ash Kharn
46. Layla
47. Layla

December 27

48. Kak
49. Layla
50. Layla

January 1

51. Layla
52. Layla

53. Layla

January 2

54. Layla

55. Layla

56. Kuthil Ash Kharn

57. Layla

January 3

58. Layla

59. Kuthil Ash Kharn

January 10

60. Layla

61. Kuthil Ash Kharn

62. Layla

63. Kuthil Ash Kharn

64. Layla

65. Kak

66. Layla

January 11

67. Layla

Epilogue

FOREWORD

If you haven't read *Alien's Host* yet, please put this book down and do that first! The novel you are about to read is an interconnected sequel, *not* a standalone. Don't worry, I'll wait.

All done? Welcome! So, because you *have* read *Alien's Host*, you've already learned of the dangerous act of *molding* between humans and aliens, and how close Layla came to throwing herself over that precipice. You've also gotten a glimpse of the darkness and greed that Kuthil Ash Kharn is capable of as he familiarizes himself with his human host.

Now it gets worse.

If you're looking for a light alien romance read, *please* turn back now. As much as I'd love to have you here, this book is rougher and darker than the first. It features explicit, aggressive scenes, violence, and forced "molding" with aliens.

If that's not for you, no worries—there will be other books!

Otherwise, welcome aboard, and remember, you have been warned.

Alexandra

DECEMBER 13

LAYLA

The winter air was crisp in my lungs as I jogged to my personal finish line: a lamppost next to a familiar green bench in Central Park. My thighs and calves were on fire as I sprinted the last hundred feet or so, stumbling to a stop.

I pressed my gloved hand against the lamppost and panted, steam billowing from my mouth in the cold. Catching my breath, I tilted my head up to the clear sky; it was a sunny winter morning. A thick wreath of needles and baubles swayed above me, strung between the posts on either side of the path. Crimson bows decorated each post, glistening faintly with overnight frost. Central Park was only beginning to see its first walkers. I smiled at a couple walking a grinning Golden past me as I bent over to touch my toes, enjoying the satisfying pull in my hamstrings. Wollmann Rink on my right was empty save for a looming Christmas tree towering in its center, a polished sheet of ice ready for blades to carve swooping patterns in its virgin surface.

After a quick cooldown stretch, I finally allowed myself to settle on the green bench. I reclined sideways, leaning against the black metal handle, stretching my legs.

I looked up toward the peaks of Manhattan. I could make out my little office from there. It was a window high up in one of the concrete mammoths reaching for the clouds. A small smile played on my lips.

Kak? You there?

He wouldn't actually *hear* my thoughts. Aliens weren't telepathic unless mid-mold or mid-dream, apparently. But he'd sense that I was thinking about him. As if on cue, a tentative tendril coiled out from my sternum.

Kak despised cardio, but he'd gotten much better at putting up with it over the years. I smirked.

I looked up in the direction of my office, a window winking in the early sun.

"Oberman Finance." The name rolled sweetly off my tongue. Nobody actually knew the "Finance" part was bullshit. It was strange to think I was about to let it all go, but something told me it was time.

I wondered where Bob Rosey was now. I hadn't kept up with my old colleagues since leaving Rosey Financial just a year after my "adventure" in Alabama.

There had been no good explanation for my sudden departure, so I made up some story about wanting to strike out on my own as a financial advisor. My old boss and coworkers were, of course, shocked and skeptical. I was a green amateur fresh out of college with no proper experience.

They probably thought consulting an alien went straight to my head.

Fortunately, it went to some other heads as well. When my second alien client contacted me weeks after my time at the ranch with Kuthil Ash Kharn, it was in the form of an ambush at my gym.

"You have seen us, Mrs. Layla Oberman," the tall blonde female with golden eyes and marble-patterned skin had said. "More than any other human has."

"It's Miss," I corrected her.

The female, who I would come to know as Rexa Ash Ak, would explain that aliens needed certain... guidance in our world. It turned out the aloof alien rancher, a piece of whom took up residence within me, wasn't the only one who found it difficult to adjust to life among humans.

Soon more extraterrestrial clients came, and the kinds of services they requested evolved. My work could range from explaining different cuisine—I had a lot of learning to do—to serving as an alien’s human proxy for dealings that they didn’t want to be outwardly involved in.

The creatures were no longer just “aliens”, either. They offered no species name or label of their own, nor a planet that we could tie them back to. On the contrary, they seemed completely indifferent about what we called them. But the term soon felt like too much of a placeholder for our long-term visitors, so we humans began calling them that: Visitors.

There I was, running a Visitor concierge service and consulting business under the guise of a financial agency.

Were some of their asks questionable? Yes.

But was the work immensely rewarding in every sense, including financially? Also yes.

Plus... it got me closer to that feeling of belonging in the glimpse of their world I’d seen through Kuthil Ash Kharn.

Kak flooded my body with heat, and I batted him away.

“Not now,” I quipped.

I reached into the turtleneck collar of my running jacket to pull out a pendant on a brass chain. It was warm, sitting against my chest all morning. To anyone else, it looked like a piece of glass or a rough-cut shard of quartz, but not me. When I watched it in the light, I saw a glimpse of the place I almost lost myself to all those years ago. I clasped it tight in my black glove, bringing it to my lips before tucking it back under my shirt.

I took one last glance up at the view of my little office window and swung my feet to the pavement. It was seven in the morning, but Jessica would be in the office already. The woman never stopped, no matter how hard I tried to convince her to take a damn holiday.

My white padded sneakers were silent against the sidewalk as I walked the few blocks to the office on my last commute.

NOBODY REALLY KNEW what I did, except for the small, exclusive team I'd assembled. Now it was time for my very competent second-in-command, Jessica Choi, to take over. Having come on as my first ever staff member nearly a decade prior, Jessica had the skills and temperament to deal with a confused Visitors. She'd been my assistant originally and soon grew into an integral part of the operation.

"But why? I thought your business was doing well?" Mom had asked when I told her my plans to hand over day-to-day operations. Omar had put me through the same interrogation hours ago over lunch.

"Is this really your decision?" he'd asked.

"Whose decision would it be, Omar?"

His eyes had narrowed. "*You* know."

Now I was getting the third degree from Mom. I never told her about the Visitor I hosted in my body, but she knew my character well enough to question the sudden about-face from my job.

"Why not? I don't need to be a slave to my work. Jessica can handle it."

I had no good explanation. Not that I *needed* one, but the abrupt change of heart worried even me. I prided myself on being an ambitious woman at the peak of her career. Was I having a quarter-life-crisis? Or is thirty-four years old enough to count as "mid?"

Something just told me it was time. I'd been feeling it for the past year, thinking at first that it would pass.

It wasn't Kak influencing me, that much I knew. Or thought I knew. In fact, Kak seemed wary of the idea when I told him. He questioned me along the same lines my family did, in his own Kak way.

"Are you certain this is what you want, Layla Oberman?"

It had been ten years. He still refused to call me Layla. Just Layla. I'd given up on trying, just as he'd given up on protesting when I called him Kak instead of the mouthful that was Kuthil Ash Kharn. The diminutive suited him. It was cute.

He traced circles around my breast as we lay in bed the night I told him, in the afterglow of passionate lucidity.

“Not *certain* certain. But something tells me I need to do this, Kak,” I said, flipping over to rest my chin on his chest. “I just don't know what it is. I'm... I don't know. Restless?”

He grunted, noncommittal.

Spending a decade with the shard of an alien inside you isn't easy. You're trapped together—forever. Wherever you go, there he is. Over time, I learned it wasn't smooth sailing for him either. Being jostled around on a morning jog through Central Park was just one example of things he had to put up with from his bull-headed host.

But the passion hadn't died, even if we managed to calm our lust after a point. It just wasn't realistic to spend every single night fucking each other's brains out in our—my—dreams. Yet every time it seemed we'd explored every nook and cranny of each other, there was something new for both of us to discover.

In my dreams, I could be anything. Kak vibrated pleasantly as my mind drifted back to that time I'd sprouted a pair of feathered wings as we made love. I'd yanked us through my apartment window and into the star-studded sky, our bodies intertwined, his liquid tendrils bound tight around my limbs as we fucked each other into oblivion above the city.

The office elevator chimed, interrupting my sweet recollections as I arrived at the thirty-third floor of Carron House. Takeout coffee in one hand, I scanned my security card at the first of three doors on the left. We'd rented the entire floor—my clientele required discretion—but only used the one office space.

“Oh, thank God you're here.”

Jessica Choi's head popped up over the reception counter. I looked over the angled stone desk at her. She was kneeling on the floor, documents strewn about in haphazard piles around her.

“What’s going on?” We hadn’t used the paper system ever since I hired our IT guy—Mose—to implement some proper security and data encryption protocols. This allowed us to use go digital without worrying too much about cybersecurity threats.

“Someone called. Said he was an old client, so I’ve been trying to find his file, but there’s no record of him. Sounded really weird, said it was urgent,” Jessica said, leafing through pages.

“Oh? Did this mysterious client give a name?”

“Yeah. Do you know a Kuthil Ash Kharn’?”

I SAT in my corner office and stared out into space.

Jessica obviously realized something was wrong when I froze after she gave me the name of this new mysteriously “urgent” client. She let it go, a mercy for which I’d be eternally grateful.

I rocked back and forth in my brown leather chair, thinking.

I had to talk to Kak. I could try to take a nap. He’d take it from there, triggering lucidity. I was too wired to fall asleep anyway, and maybe I *didn’t* want to speak to him just yet.

When Kuthil Ash Kharn’s name left Jessica’s mouth, Kak had seared white hot inside me even as the rest of me felt like a bucket of cold water had been dumped over my head. He was a flurry of activity under my skin, a pang of nausea stronger than I’d experienced in a while, when he wasn’t careful enough to emerge gently. I couldn’t tell what it meant: was he excited that the physical version of him was back, or was this his protest?

I stifled him, hard, tensing my body until he felt like a rock I'd swallowed, trapped deep in my chest.

We would talk later.

I thought back to the ranch. That fucking ranch where I managed to almost break my foot and then not-almost break my head. I'd have been dead if it weren't for that first ever alien client imbuing a piece of himself into my body—implanting me with a healing tendril that kept me alive and made him so sick that he had to leave the planet. At least that's what I'd put together over the years, with Kak's help.

He had held me that night, pressed tight against his chest, watching over me as I fell asleep and as the shard within me awoke in its new host. *His* new host.

I shook my head, confusing myself in the terminology.

That shard, Kak, had been with me for a decade. He *was* Kuthil Ash Kharn as far as I was concerned. The embodied version of him was gone. But that physical version was the one who started it all. The original. He had showed me his world through his eyes as he lay naked, pressed against my frail, injured body.

“Fuck,” I whispered to myself.

I forced myself to look at the scrap of paper with a number written in Jessica's neat handwriting.

He said it was urgent.

I picked at the edge of the note with a manicured oval nail, deciding whether I wanted to call or hide. If I ignored him, would he just go away? It would make things so much simpler.

KAK

She hadn't relaxed all day, and so kept me trapped in my prison in her sternum: her favorite place to coop me up.

Just wait until you fall asleep, little girl.

But she resisted. She sat at the barstool next to her kitchen island in her Manhattan apartment, espresso cup in hand. I once more threw myself against her ribs, and once more she shot me down.

She was avoiding me. I recognized this by now. It happened rarely, but it happened.

I was pleased to see she had not picked up the phone to call the number given to her. The scrap of paper was still folded in her purse.

Surely, *surely* she wouldn't dare reach out to him without consulting me.

I curled in on myself, disappointed with my reaction.

My kind was designed to share. Why shouldn't she initiate contact with my physical form?

Because she must ask!

I growled to myself, eliciting a sharp beating of her fist against her chest as she tried to shut me up.

I seethed.

She could not stay awake forever. Humans were horribly delicate creatures. I would sit, and I would wait.

LAYLA

*A*fter squaring away my final tasks, I came out of my office to a stumbled cheer. Balloons, streamers, and a small Christmas tree sparkled in the office lights, and shiny letters strung in an arc on the ceiling read “HAPPY RETIREMENT, BOSS!”

Mose came up and handed me a wooden cane with a red bow on top.

“Thought you might need this,” he winked.

I laughed, batting sudden tears from my eyes at the sight of my team gathered to send me off.

Soon, a champagne flute was in my hand, Christmas music was blaring, and the Karaoke machine was out. The party was in full swing.

Jessica and I perched on the edge of the reception desk.

“It’ll be all right, you know,” Jessica said, sharp eyes scanning what was soon to be her new domain. “I got this.”

“I’m not worried.”

She was nervous. I could tell. But I wasn’t.

“Why’d you hire me, boss?” she asked.

I twirled the neck of the flute, watching the tiny bubbles fizz up to the golden surface of my drink. Jessica already knew why I hired her. I could tell she just needed to hear it again.

“Remember when we met at the range?” I asked.

A curt nod. Jessica and I had both been taking our first handgun training course.

“You were way too fucking good for your first lesson,” she rolled her eyes.

“It was your first, too.”

“Yeah, and I sucked!”

I bit my lip through a wide grin, nudging her shoulder with my own. Jessica didn’t know I had an advantage.

“Well, that’s the point. You fucking sucked. No talent.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“And you worked your ass off and became the best shot in that course.”

Jessica tried to suppress a sly smile through pursed lips and failed. “Best shot after *you*.”

“I don’t count.” I looked back at my drink. “Trust me.”

Jessica’s questioning look was conveniently interrupted by Mose, who ambled over with two paper plates.

“Hey, Jessica,” his deep voice rumbled over the music. “Can I steal you for a sec?”

I tilted my head, urging her to go, accepting the plate Mose was shoving toward me even as his eyes never stopped following Jessica. Now *there* was a not-so-secret office romance that’d been years in the making.

For the next half an hour, I distract myself from the growing pressure in my sternum by taking turns singing badly into the karaoke machine.

The faint chime of the door barely reached my ears over Oonah, one of my consulting specialists, who was serenading us with her rendition of “I Will Always Love You.”

I padded to the office door in my stockings, having long kicked off my heels by then, and opened it mid-sip of wine—we’d moved on to wine.

My eyebrows shot up at the sight in the doorway. I glanced across the room at Jessica.

“I called Raa,” she mouthed, referring to Rexa Ash Ak by the abbreviations we often used for our clientele. Never to their faces, of course. Aliens were big on proper naming.

“Rexa Ash Ak!” I exclaimed, scanning the aliens on either side of her. “And Orin Ash Bran, Tithi Ash Shto, and Mornu Ash Arthen! And... someone new.”

Rexa Ash Ak was already glaring between Jessica and me. “You call us by acronyms when we’re not around?”

“What? Oh no, of course not. Jessica was talking about someone else,” I told Raa with a reassuring smile. She thrust a bottle of some sort of alcohol toward me. I took it in one hand by the neck, cognizant of the glass in the other, and stepped aside for them to pass.

“Thank you. Please, come.”

I felt a pang of pride at the sight of Visitors following a human custom: bringing a gift to a party. My eyes followed the newcomer, a taller-than-average male with disheveled crimson hair that flashed in the light—a common Visitor characteristic.

“Zorin Ash Rhaz,” Rexa Ash Ak introduced us. I hid my surprise well as he stepped toward me and held out a hand. Visitors did not enjoy physical contact with humans and did not, by nature, understand our greeting customs. I insisted on greeting all of my clients with a handshake, but a newcomer to my company would not normally initiate the gesture.

We shook hands in a firm grip, and I smiled. “I see you’re already used to our greeting customs. When did you arrive on Earth?”

“Recently.” His voice was raspy and held the telltale intonation of a new arrival; all alien voices had a sort of deep tonal quality that seemed to emerge from their chests instead of their throats. They could learn to speak more like humans, but rarely bothered. What was the point if their alien

appearance would always prevent them from fitting in, anyway? Besides, fitting in was seldom their priority.

The karaoke petered out as my team noticed the four statuesque creatures enter the office and tried their best not to gape. Despite working with Visitors for the better part of a decade, you never really got used to their presence. These four were some of my most valued and familiar clients. I wouldn't say we had developed a *friendship* over the years. The aliens were incapable of that, at least not with humans. But if nothing else, we had developed a certain rapport.

My employees were just tipsy enough to get relatively comfortable around the clients. A few minutes later, I sat at a rectangular table with a martini in my hand, feet propped up on the rungs of a tall round stool, and watched them interacting, albeit a little stiffly.

I glanced across at Rexa Ash Ak. She winced as she took a sip of her own martini, the olive swirling at the bottom of the glass.

"You don't have to drink it, you know," I smiled. One of her jobs for me had been informing her about different alcoholic beverages, which was at one point very important for the circles she was attempting to blend into. Not that an alien could ever "blend." But we both learned enough to survive a business meeting at a Japanese sake bar that month.

"I like it," she said. "The effect."

I nodded. Aliens, I had learned, were not immune to alcohol, but metabolized it at will.

"In a way, it's a little like..." She glanced at me. "Well, you know."

I looked at the contents of my glass, squinting to see if I could make out something like technicolor tendrils swirling in its contents. She was wrong. It was nothing like that. I had only experienced molding once, but I knew it was nothing like that. I brushed my fingers across the pendant around my neck. Raa's gaze followed the movement.

“Why did you come here?” I propped my elbows on the table and looked into her large, cat-shaped eyes. Over the years, I had learned to maintain eye contact with aliens, but it was never easy. But now, with Rexa Ash Ak, I felt oddly at ease. Was it because our business relationship was ending, or had I had enough to drink?

My question did not surprise her, and she knew I wasn't asking about their presence at my goodbye party. She took the stem of the martini glass between her thumb and middle finger and swirled it a little, admiring the flowing contents. I waited.

“In your words, you might call it... purgatory,” she said, taking another sip of the cocktail.

“Purgatory?”

She nodded slowly, turning her angled face toward the window, where city lights below illuminated the night. She glanced at the sky. The city's assault of lights on the sky made it impossible to see the stars. She'd have to drag the telescope I helped her purchase out of the city to see anything interesting tonight.

“Sometimes we are sent away from our homeworld to learn. It's something we have to go through, experience that isolation, completely alone.”

“But you're not alone. There are many of you.”

“In this body, everyone is alone.” Rexa Ash Ak smiled wryly.

I understood what she meant, having been granted a glimpse of the connection which was possible all those years ago.

“What did you do to get sent here?” I asked and regretted it immediately.

How tactless can you get, Layla?

She frowned and straightened. “It's not important, and it's not something you would understand. There were reasons. Eventually, we can go Home. We yearn for it. Which is why I didn't believe it when...”

She paused, looked at me with a knowing gaze. She downed the rest of her martini, popping the olive between perfect white teeth.

“When what?” I pressed.

“When Kuthil Ash Kharn chose to return.”

It was my turn to look out the window, avoiding her unwavering gaze. Kak stirred.

“I don’t...”

“You don’t know if you want to meet him,” she finished for me.

I nodded.

“Is it you who doesn’t want that? Or him?”

I glanced at her. She knew what had happened. All the aliens knew somehow. I knew when she said “him,” she meant the shard of him within me.

“I don’t need his permission,” I said, more to *him* than to Rexa Ash Ak.

With a knowing smile, she placed her palms on the table and rose, her posture clarifying that the conversation was finished. The other Visitors appeared to gravitate toward her, somehow aware that their time at the event was at an end.

“Good luck, Layla,” Rexa Ash Ak addressed me by my first name for the first time. Not waiting for my response, the aliens took their leave. All eyes were on them, unable to resist following their unearthly beauty.

DECEMBER 14

LAYLA

*K*ak didn't come to me that night. Part of me enjoyed the heavy, dreamless sleep after a long night of goodbyes and martinis. Another part worried. I'd been avoiding him, but he wasn't supposed to be avoiding *me*.

I pushed myself out of bed with an aching head, a dry tongue, and a rock in my sternum. The heated floor was pleasant under my bare feet as I shuffled to the kitchen, holding the wall for support against my pounding headache.

Normally, Kak would be there after an especially "fun" night. He would spread through my body like syrup, coating all the parts that ached, helping the hangover dissipate faster than any on-demand IV.

That morning, he stubbornly holed himself up under my ribs, heavy and unpleasant.

I pressed a glass to the carbonated water dispenser next to my tap, rubbing the polished granite countertop with restless fingers. I took small sips as I eyed the bright kitchen-living room combo of my apartment. It was small, but almost brand new when I bought it, and already equipped with modern furnishings and equipment.

My gaze fell to the front door, then to the floorboards underneath the mail slot, usually used only for internal announcements and occasional advertising by building management and neighbors.

I padded to the door, groaning as I bent to pick up the envelope that had been pushed through it.

Sinking heavily into my couch, I lifted the unsealed flap and extracted a gold-foiled rectangle of heavy cardboard.

Equine Society New Year's Masquerade Gala

An evening of cheer, friends, and celebration

White Tie, mask required

I flipped the invitation over a few times, running my thumb along the textured golden border. There was no name, but I knew who it was from.

Kuthil Ash Kharn loved his horses.

I realized, looking at that envelope, how stupid I'd been. Why had I been avoiding talking to Kak about the situation? We'd been together for ten years, through thick and thin. Literally inseparable. Not talking to him when his long-lost ancestor—or something—reappeared in the flesh was senseless. I didn't even know why Kuthil Ash Kharn was back, much less feeling any lingering attachment to *that* version of the alien. I spent two days with that version of him before he disappeared literally off the face of the Earth. Kak did not disappear. Kak was there, always. I needed Kak to know there was no threat to his standing in my life.

“Kak.” I stretched out on the couch, head against the firm fabric armrest. “We need to talk. Please.”

I closed my eyes, mind restless, but the hangover and lack of sufficient sleep the previous night helped me drift off.

I DIDN'T KNOW how long I'd been asleep before he arrived. Lucidity never came without his presence. So when I woke up in the dream, sitting on the same couch on which I'd fallen asleep, I knew he was there.

The room was not my own. A wide panoramic window looking out at spanning fields, dark wooden flooring, and a comically large Christmas tree in the middle of the space gave

it away as Kuthil Ash Kharn's sitting room at his ranch house—the room in which I first met the alien a decade ago.

The fabric couch on which I sat was the only remnant of my own apartment.

I blinked, and then he was seated on the couch across from mine. Forest green fabric shifted under his weight.

I had to take a beat and get a hold of myself because for a moment everything in me saw *him*. The other one. The one from back then.

The man in front of me cocked his head and looked me in the eye, unflinching.

“I *am* the Kuthil Ash Kharn from back then, Layla Oberman,” he said. “I am more him than the version who came back to Earth.”

I wanted to tell him it didn't matter. I didn't care. Kak was the one who mattered, not which one of them had more resemblance to the original.

“It does matter,” he said. He beckoned, and I slid off the couch, closing the short distance between us to sit on the warm floor between his long legs clad in black jeans. I put my cheek on his knee.

“Explain it to me again then.” I looked up at him as he put a heavy hand on my head, stroking my hair, which had adopted the same light brown tips I'd had when I first met Kuthil Ash Kharn, remnants of worn out balayage. I've been wearing it in its natural black since then.

Each time the topic came up, I had to gather my thoughts and arrange them neatly to understand the words. The duality, the concept of “sharding,” was still difficult for me to comprehend. It was hard to accept that the man holding me at this ranch ten years ago was the same one who'd been inside me for the past decade. The same one stroking my head now.

His thermal presence filled me with a satisfying buzz. I wrapped an arm around his calf and shifted closer against him.

“When I shared from my original host body, you took much of my essence. You were greedy.” He smiled, but his eyes looked far away as he tracked his thumb down my cheek and rested it at the corner of my mouth. “The amount of me you took... was most of me. The version of me that was left was a husk. He retreated to our homeworld to recover. But recovering means molding with others of my kind—being filled with shards of them and giving them shards of himself in return. He is not the same entity you met anymore. He never can be. He is millions of us.”

“But he remembers me.” I frowned.

“That may be all he retained: his fixation.”

Was that what I was? A *fixation*?

“I wanted to tell you I have no desire to see him. *You* are the one—”

“I know,” he cut me off. I looked up at him, and he cupped my face. “But I believe you must meet him.”

“What?” I frowned. This was the opposite of what I was intending.

“We both need to find out for ourselves who he is and why he’s back.”

“But why? Why can’t we just ignore him?” I shook my head against his palm.

“Because if he came back for *you*, Layla Oberman, ignoring him is not an option. He’s come too far. My kind don’t *choose* to leave Home. Ever. And we need to know.”

“What if I don’t want to know? And... what if he’s himself?”

A shadow came over Kak’s eyes, but passed quickly. “Then you will have some decisions to make.”

I steeled my gaze on him. There was nothing to decide. Kak was part of me. An irrevocable part. It would be Kak, only and always. I had no choice, and didn’t want one.

I sucked in a breath, preparing to protest, but he put a finger to my lips. He bent down, face inches from mine.

“There is always a choice,” he repeated in a deep, resonant murmur, an ocean tide crashing against stone shores.

He closed the distance between us, lips on mine as he pulled me into his lap. His tongue nudged against willing lips. His hands enveloped me as I straddled his waist, breaths mingling with hints of spice and mint. Fireflies came to life around us, filling the dreamscape of the room, sparkling in the warm light as we removed each other’s clothing—as easy as willing it in our practiced dreams.

Hard hands came behind me, squeezing, pulling, guiding me against him and onto him. I let myself fall back. I could always count on him to catch me.

DECEMBER 15

LAYLA

The next evening, I stood in front of the full-length mirror in my bedroom, examining for the last time my outfit for the masquerade.

The dress I'd chosen was one I never had the occasion to wear, having bought it for a gala that I didn't end up attending. Flying to Toronto at the last minute with a lawyer on speed dial to assist a Visitor with a property dispute was more important than a financial awards ceremony. They had invited me because of my firm's "impressive revenue." Seems financial awards juries didn't care about anything except the finances to double check that the company did what it proclaimed to.

The sequined shells sewn onto the floor-length gown caught the light from the ceiling lamp as I turned to the left, then right, flashing like falling stars in the night. A black-heeled toe peeked from the thigh-high slit that revealed the flash of my leg. I had painted my toes black, matching my gel manicure tipped with a subtle line of gold.

The shimmering dress hugged my hips, then tapered up into a form-fitting waist. The fabric loosened just under my breasts, forming a ruffled bosom that was enhanced by a wide neckline that exposed my shoulders. Weightless puffy sleeves defied gravity on my arms.

Warmth flooded from my chest and coated my ribs, then traveled lower. I bit my glossed nude lip and shifted my hips to wave the feeling off.

“Stop it.” My smoky eyes in the mirror flashed mischievously. Sometimes I thought I could see Kak through them.

I applied the dangly gold earring I’d been holding in one hand into my left ear.

Ready.

I had gone all out. The dress code called for it, that was why.

I donned my camel wool coat and, with a last glance in the mirror, left the apartment.

As I got into the idling the cab downstairs, I smoothed my black clutch with a nervous palm over and over, as though I were petting a cat.

THE MASQUERADE WAS BEING HELD on the outskirts of the city, at a gated private mansion I hadn’t had the occasion of visiting before. I extracted the golden half-mask from my clutch and put it on with care. A delicate headpiece secured it on my face while also adorning the braided bun I’d chosen for my hairstyle.

I hesitated at the stone steps of the manor, pulling my coat tighter around myself. I looked down at my feet. Other guests walked past, teetering heels and shiny men’s dress shoes sliding past my line of sight. I followed a crack in the stone. Rain water had frozen over within it, molding the concrete with ice.

Kak’s presence within me had stilled, withdrawing, giving me space.

I took a heavy breath, held it for several seconds, and exhaled slowly through pursed lips.

Then, heels clicking against stone, I entered the manor.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I sensed her—them—outside. She stood there for a while. *He* was quiet.

I scanned the crowd of laughing, masked humans loitering on the large space of the floor. Their eyes shifted to me occasionally, heads cocked, eyes curious through slits in their masks. They looked away when I met their gaze, unnerved. Felt *something*, but not what I was. Saw not my whorled skin under the high-collared black suit. Black gloves covered my hands. Only a sliver of my jaw was exposed under my black mask, studded with onyx rhinestones.

I focused on the entrance when I felt her approaching. A sip of whiskey, a block of ice cooling my lips. I set the glass on the empty bar. I licked a droplet from my mouth and, as the gold of her gown shimmered in my eye, watched her slink into the space.

She differed from my memory. Better. I followed her as she smiled at a few curious male guests who came to her in greeting. She brushed them off easily, yet left them smiling and staring. Like me.

She glanced in my direction for a brief moment, but not *at* me. Her lips parted, inhaling. Did she feel me too?

No. She walked in the other direction, circling the edges of the room before disappearing into an arched doorway. I followed.

LAYLA

I felt him immediately, knew it was him in my bones. There was something off about him—something bitter, like the bite of the darkest chocolate laced with too much rum. I felt for Kak, but only got the tiniest hint of his presence. He had resolved to leave me alone for the event, choosing not to exert undue influence over my state of mind. It only made me want him more.

I picked up a champagne flute from a waiter's tray and made my way around the space, pointedly avoiding the corner in which I felt that presence loom.

How did I sense him so? How could I? I glanced toward that sensation despite myself, quickly lowering my gaze. I didn't spot him in the crowd, and I wasn't about to search.

I smiled and murmured polite acknowledgments to the men greeting me, flashes of masks hiding curious eyes. Some of them looked interesting enough.

Extracurricular activities with the opposite sex hadn't worked out well in my position. Oh sure, I'd tried dating in those first few years. I'd even gone through spells of resentment at not being able to be with someone in the "real" world.

And every time, Kak showed me how wrong I was. How real he was.

Sometimes I wanted novelty. I let my gaze rest for a few extra seconds on a black-haired man who observed me with impassive eyes. But what's novelty in the physical space,

when in my dreams Kak could turn into any form, man, creature, *thing* I could desire?

I walked through a doorway and found myself in a dim hallway. Musk, old books, and older money assaulted my nose. A few masked patrons loitered. A woman leaned against the wall, a man looming over her, glittering masks close together, whispering into her ear. They paid me no mind as I walked past, heels clicking along the stone floor now that I had left the crowd and orchestral music behind.

After several doors, I entered a glassed-in balcony, infrared lamps heating the space. Hard cushions and chairs coated with fur rugs were sprinkled about. I came to the glass and peered into the darkness, making out shadowed silhouettes of a garden. Bushes pocked with ice glinting in street lamps positioned at large intervals within it. I took a first sip of the champagne, rolling my bare shoulders. I didn't realize how tense I'd been.

The hairs on my neck rose. I did not turn around, instead feeling another sip coat my tongue.

He stood beside me, and I looked to him reluctantly. He was already facing me. I felt for Kak, but he didn't come. I could have used his reassurance.

I craned my neck, studying the intricate patterns of marble in his skin. Looking anywhere but the gold eyes underneath.

"Miss Layla Oberman." An inhuman voice, rumbling deep from within. A metallic rush.

"Please," I said. "Call me Layla."

His hand was outstretched, and I willed my own to not tremble as I placed it in his palm. My breath caught in my throat as he delivered the kiss, a flare of *something* sparking in my belly. I wavered, taking a step back, then worked up my resolve.

"Why are you here, Kuthil Ash Kharn?"

His form was unmoving as he watched me. Finally, a familiar tilt of the head.

I knew those movements. I knew him. Over the last ten years, I had observed the same habits in his shard. However, many others he may have absorbed, this... it was *him*. In the flesh. I fought to stifle the excitement rising in my chest.

I forced myself to meet his eyes, waiting for his answer.

“Because—”

A burst of giggling cut him off as two women stumbled onto the balcony. Their masks, one crimson, the other blue, turned toward us in unison. Mostly toward him.

“Oh, hello,” the red one said. “Sorry. Are we interrupting?”

“Not at all,” I said at the same time that the alien emitted a resolute yes.

The women looked at each other, incredulity obvious even with covered faces.

I gasped as a large gloved hand grabbed my upper arm and wheeled me from the balcony. Kak emerged then, rearing himself from deep inside. I groaned, feeling sick from the sharpness with which he rose in my chest.

“There he is.” Kuthil Ash Kharn’s mouth was at my ear as he steered me into a dark corner farther up the hall.

My mind reeled. I didn’t know what to think. I had the Kuthil Ash Kharn within me, boiling over with anger that made my head spin, and the Kuthil Ash Kharn out here, looming over me in the darkness. He maintained a firm grip on my arm as he pressed me into the wall.

I rubbed my throat with my hand, fighting down the nausea. Kak settled reluctantly, restraining himself. It took me a moment to realize I was shaking. Was it the pang of fear as he cornered me, or the anger that he was insisting on complicating my perfect life?

“What do you want from us?” I ripped my mask off. Its hard shell made my face feel hot and scratchy, only making the sick feeling worse.

His eyes widened under his own mask. I recognized a familiar hint of blue in the whites of them, a faint, pure glow around the golden iris. He released me like he'd touched a hot stove, taking a step back.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

She went on the offensive, taking advantage of my surprise with the revelation of her face. She was perfect. Sharp dark eyes lined with kohl and blue shadow flashed fury. High cheeks, sharper than before. A strong nose flared in displeasure while her lips twisted in a scowl. She looked wiser. Her aura, confident and new, prickled against me. This was an evolved version of the human female I met long ago.

She pushed me back with each stab of her finger against my chest, her anger cutting through me. The barrage of questions she threw were inaudible to me at first. I was busy studying every aspect of her face.

Finally, I stopped the next thrust by seizing her wrist. I held it in front of me and ripped off my mask. It clattered when it fell. Her eyes widened, and I pinned her with my own. She stuttered as her breath caught. I couldn't resist.

I pulled her forward by her wrist and crushed my mouth to hers, and then our lips were locked in fire.

We stood skin to skin for several seconds—too short. As her body started softening against me, she remembered herself. She twisted her hand from my grip and pushed away from my chest, stumbling on her very tall shoes. They were not practical.

She spun sideways and pressed the back of her wrist to her parted lips, shoulders shaking. She breathed hard.

LAYLA

“*I* can’t do this again, Kak—I mean, Ku—”

“My name is Kuthil Ash Kharn,” he breathed.

I nodded to the floor. “Kuthil Ash Kharn.”

It was him. It was all him. As much of him as mattered, anyway.

I only knew *that* him for two days, but I could feel the link between us, drawing me toward him. Kak was that link. I suddenly realized it would never stop. I was connected to all of him, wherever he was, whatever form he took.

But it didn’t mean I couldn’t fight it.

“Look,” he stepped forward, hand outstretched, and I backed away. He paused. “We have many things to talk about.”

Do we?

“Come back to my residence and I will explain. It is not far,” he said.

He had to be joking. I already crossed a line, my own, and now he wanted me to... He had no idea of the implication...

“No,” I said flatly. “You come with me. To my place. There, we can talk. *Only* talk.”

Was that relief on his face?

“As you want, Layla Oberman.”

He spoke differently than I remembered. Did his decade on his homeworld result in him forgetting common English colloquialisms? Or have I gotten so used to the way Kak and I speak to one another?

I led him back through the main hall toward the exit. I hadn't bothered re-fitting my mask, which drew disapproving looks from the guests. Displeased stares grew wide as attention fell to the now recognizable Visitor behind me, his golden eyes and marble-patterned face no longer concealing his true identity.

They parted, stumbling out of the way as I took brisk steps toward the exit. An usher swooped in with my coat and draped it over my shoulders. He turned to Kuthil Ash Kharn and hesitated.

"I don't... I don't believe you had a coat, sir," he stammered.

"I did not." Kuthil Ash Kharn didn't look at him as he followed me from the house into the chill of winter midnight.

DECEMBER 16

LAYLA

*B*y the time we were back at my apartment, seated on the beige couch, it was almost two in the morning. I was tired. So tired.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said. The faster I got the answers Kak and I needed, the sooner he could leave. That was what I wanted. Most definitely *nothing* else.

He watched me from the other end of the couch. He had folded one long leg on the cushion, ankle underneath the knee of the other, which stretched along the warm rug on the floor.

“It is difficult to comprehend that you are real,” he spoke plainly.

“Why are you here, Kuthil Ash Kharn?”

“Is it not obvious to your kind?” He raised an eyebrow.

There it is. The condescension.

“No,” I snapped, voice rising to a familiar, old pitch. The pitch I’d dropped after meeting him. I was once again a young girl straight out of college, trying to restrain her annoyance and mask her uncertainty about her place in the world.

I’m different now. I know my place well.

“I don’t understand why an alien would decide to return to what I’ve learned is apparently some kind of *punishment planet* after a decade away.”

“Has he told you then? Why I was first sent here?”

I blinked. “N... no.”

“Did you ask?”

I felt the presence stirring within me. Kak wasn't happy.

“I don't need to ask,” I countered.

All the times I asked Kak why his kind had come to Earth over the years, I didn't get a straightforward answer. Eventually, I decided I didn't care. We were stuck with each other now. He was good. And kind. And *mine*. There was no use drudging up his alien past.

Kuthil Ash Kharn nodded. “You appear to mesh adequately together.”

“We ‘mesh’ *very* adequately, Kuthil Ash Kharn. And we don't need complications.”

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

There was new maturity in her dark eyes. New confidence that wavered only briefly. A sudden urge to dismantle it—dismantle *her*—rose in me. She tensed. Could she tell? It pleased me, though I could not say why, to sense her tremble for only a moment.

She recovered quickly.

Her back straight, her hands folded in her lap, she waited for my explanation for my presence.

“It took too much time to recover after our molding.”

“Why?”

“I resisted molding with others of my kind, as much as I could. This would have healed me faster.”

Reddish splotches crept onto her cheeks, and I hardened. In an urge which my kind did not evolve to feel, part of me wanted to make all of her red like that. That part wanted her to beg and to break when I touched her. To destroy and reconstruct her as something *other*, the way she had to me.

“Molding with my kind is not like what happened with us, Layla Oberman.” I knew why she flushed. “We do not feel the same physical urges with each other. I did not know what they were until we—”

She coughed, cutting me off, but her cheeks yet burned.

“Why did you avoid it?”

“I suspect my shard told you I would be different. I would not be me. I would be something new.”

She did not answer, and I knew I was right.

“On our world, we mold all the time—many times per Gaia... Earth, to you... second. I wanted to keep myself, and what I remembered of you, and not lose more of us with each brush against one of my own kind.”

“So how many *did* you... mold... with?” Her voice had a strange, hushed tone.

“Enough. They know you now too,” I said. “After we molded, I felt myself in you. It was a tendril all its own between us. I expected the distance to break that link. The shard inside you would remain, but the rest was a phantom. It would weaken. Phantom links don’t stay.”

I paused, not sure how much I should say. How much was worth saying?

“It did not weaken,” I continued. “I saw you. Smelled you. Felt you for all that time. It is as persistent as my shard inside you. It is something I cannot fix.”

“Well, I didn’t feel anything. After you left, I... I was upset. After what you showed me... But then Kak...”

“It’s Kuthil—”

“I call *him* Kak.” She glared. “It isn’t up to you.”

I clenched my jaw. Why were humans incompetent with names?

“As you wish, Layla Oberman,” I muttered, “but you will know I am disappointed.”

She rolled her eyes. I drew a breath, exhaled before continuing.

“Your... phantom link,” I continued. “You did not need it. You had me. But I had no shard of you. Only the vision and the memory burned into me.”

“Only when I sleep. Only in dreams.” The accusation in her voice betrayed an old wound.

“But now you have my flesh, the way your kind was made for.” I leaned forward, brushing her cheek. Her gaze followed my wrist. She bit her lip, a line creasing her brow.

“Why do you fight it?”

We both knew the truth.

LAYLA

The taste of his kiss still lingered on my lips. The first kiss I'd had in years, ever since I'd given up. I was bound to an alien. And now the same alien in another form might be my undoing.

I turned my cheek away and rose from the touch, digging desperately for Kak within me. He stirred, but then retreated once more.

“Damn your stoicism,” I growled under my breath.

“What?”

“Nothing. I'm not talking to you.” I paced. I glanced at the clock sitting on my kitchen island. “It's late. Early. You should go.”

It took all my effort not to stare at him—this man, here, with me—as he unfolded his long limbs from the couch and rose, his unbuttoned suit jacket revealing a white shirt stretched across a broad chest.

“Yes, Layla Oberman,” he said.

He paused in the doorway of my flat. “I have told you why I am here. It is for you. If there is the smallest part of you that is curious, you will know where I can be found.”

I shut the door on the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen in the flesh.

KAK

She ran to me across the meadow of purple stalks brushing against her bare knees, arms outstretched, checkered skirt billowing behind her in the warm wind. Her loose black hair twisted behind and around her face.

She collided with me, and we fell in slow motion into the tall grass. It cushioned the blow as she landed atop my chest. Her hair was a weightless halo over her head, illuminated by the sky burning bright orange behind her.

I propped myself up on my elbows and she bent down, planting a rough, quick kiss on my lips.

“You are happy,” I said.

She nodded with a childlike, exaggerated movement.

“I love you,” she said.

It took me a long time to learn what that word meant, and what it meant for my kind might not at all be what it meant to her. But to both of us, it meant a lot.

“I love you too, Layla Oberman.”

I waited for her to bring up the topic on both our minds. I knew how her body had reacted to him. I was there. Love for one and desire for another were not mutually exclusive, of course, but it irritated me.

“I met him,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“I know.”

“I don’t plan on seeing him again.” She slid off of me and propped herself up on her elbow in the grass, her cheek on her hand.

“You were attracted,” I said.

She shrugged. “I was attracted to *you*. To *you* in the flesh. And I already have that.”

She sounded convincing, and it surprised me to feel a knot unbind in my chest. Had I become that humanized, to have been *worried* about sharing Layla Oberman with another? My kind shared. It was how we survived. Nevertheless, as I looked at her, the relief was palpable. She was mine only. She had chosen me.

I drew down to kiss her, longer this time.

LAYLA

The banging on my door launched me out of bed the next morning. A persistent drumming, continuous, pausing for only a second at a time between flurries of fists.

I glanced at myself in the mirror long enough to wipe off the black eyeliner that had smudged on my eyes from the night before. I adjusted the bosom of my gold dress to not be *completely* indecent before running to the door in bare feet, swearing under my breath as I stumbled over the heels I'd kicked off.

I unlatched the three locks on my door after seeing a familiar badge in the eye-hole.

“Yes?” I queried the two clean-shaven men wearing suits standing in my doorway.

“Ms. Layla Oberman?” the taller one asked, handing me his badge. I looked.

“Uh-huh,” I confirmed, twisting the brass and leather in my hand.

“Special Agents Ford and Daniels. May we come in?”

I paused for a minute, disoriented.

“Yeah, uh, I mean, what is this about?” I glanced from one stern face to the next.

“Your companion last night. That’s all we can say here.” Agent Ford glanced around the empty hallway. “May we come in?”

I hesitated, then nodded, allowing the men to step through.

The Extraterrestrial Task Force did not make a habit of coming to my house. They'd at least had that decency in our past run-ins together.

"Shoes off, please," I said as I went to the kitchen alcove and turned on the coffee pot, leaning my elbows against the island. I waited as they removed their shoes, at which point I removed three coffee cups from the cupboard.

"I need a quick shower while the coffee brews. I'm sure you understand." I looked down at my crooked golden dress. Sequins flickered in the cold light streaming through the window, comical in juxtaposition with the rest of me. "You can wait on the couch."

I did not wait for their response and retreated to the bathroom. I grimaced at the sorry state of my face and hair in the mirror and stripped out of my dress with less care than it deserved.

AFTER A REGRETTABLY QUICK HOT SHOWER, I emerged in leggings and a silk white button-down shirt, hair still dripping in the barely towel-dried bun I pulled it into. I poured the coffee. The men accepted the cups, and I sat across from them in my reading chair.

"What is this about, gentlemen?"

"We would like to know why the alien Kuthil Ash Kharn contacted you last night. And why he was in your apartment."

There was nothing about Agent Ford's demeanor that looked hostile or anxious. Yet the sharpness of his eyes pierced the stillness of his expression.

I smiled.

"There are several Visitors living in this city. Are you following up on their human contact as well?"

I looked at Agent Daniels, who had leaned back on the couch, seemingly content to observe.

“Ms. Oberman.” Agent Ford set his cup on the glass coffee table between us with a controlled clink. “First, as I am sure you know, ‘human contact’ when it comes to Visitors is rare as they are content to keep to themselves. Second, no Visitor who leaves Earth comes back. Ever. To have one who departed years ago return is irregular. It is our jurisdiction to follow up on deviations of behavior.”

I took a sip of my coffee, stalling for time to think. I had told no one except my brother Omar about what happened ten years ago with Kuthil Ash Kharn, and I intended to keep it that way.

“You are old acquaintances, Ms. Oberman, no?” Agent Daniels suddenly spoke.

“He was a client. A decade ago. You know this.”

“You have many similar clients now, do you not?”

I crossed one leg over the other and leaned back in my seat. “I have worked with and against the ETF on behalf of my clients in the past, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“That’s why we’re here, Ms. Oberman,” Agent Ford said.

“I’ve just retired and handed over operations. Regardless, my company is doing nothing illegal, just like the first time you got on my ass. Or do I need a lawyer?” I asked.

What is going on?

“Not at all.” Agent Ford raised his hands in a placating gesture. “We are here only to investigate why an alien returned to Earth for the first time.”

“You didn’t ask him on the way in?”

“We’re not at liberty to say.”

“Of course you’re not.”

The men waited as I tried to imagine the potential outcomes of this meeting and of their questioning. The ETF was familiar with the services I provided to Visitors. After

their initial suspicions about my “suspicious” operation, we had learned to live together—largely because the Visitors who had come to Earth never actually caused much trouble or wanted anything more than the resources allotted to them. Human politics was the major problem in the relationship, not my clients.

They knew I knew Kuthil Ash Kharn. They didn’t know about Kak, or about what exactly happened when I met my first alien... Did I have anything to hide here? To fear? Could I tell them the truth about last night without divulging my deepest secret?

“I think he just missed Earth,” I said, easing back into my chair. Having decided on being as honest as possible, the tension in my spine faded. I was a competent but reluctant liar. And it wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Why? The aliens typically take no interest in humans,” Agent Ford said.

I shrugged. “He likes horses. He has a farm. We were stranded together in that Alabama blizzard a decade ago. He associated his last night on Earth with the incident, and I suppose it made him nostalgic for an old friend.”

“That must have been quite a stranding.” The agents exchanged looks. “What does he want from you?”

“He just wanted to talk,” I said. “Why are you looking at me like that? Do you find it hard to believe? You said yourself they couldn’t care less about us. Why would they want anything more?”

Agent Daniels stroked the handle of his mug with a deliberating thumb. “We would have thought so as well. Until one of them travels all the way back here and makes a beeline for his human... friend.”

“Well, that’s all I know. And it doesn’t matter. We caught up, he left.”

“Did Kuthil Ash Kharn attempt to touch you in *any* way last night?”

My mind flashed back to his arm on mine, steering me into the darkness of the manor. Of him pulling me toward him with a flick of the wrist. Of... I realized my hand had moved to my mouth, and turned the gesture into a thoughtful rubbing of the chin.

“No,” I said after thinking for a convincing few seconds. “As I said, they don’t like touching people.”

“This is more than empty curiosity on our parts, Ms. Oberman. Kuthil Ash Kharn was not alone when he arrived. And extremely suspicious reports followed one of the other arrivals.”

“Oh?”

Now things are getting interesting.

“This new alien, one who arrived with him, doesn’t share the usual aversion to touching humans.” Agent Daniels’ eyes narrowed. “We have credible reports of him attempting to engage in physical encounters with humans on arrival.”

“Encounters?” I said coldly. “You mean sex?”

“Not exactly. We aren’t at liberty to say more.”

“Well, there was no such thing with Kuthil Ash Kharn. He came to talk. Catch up on old times. He left. That’s it. I have no intention of seeing him again,” I repeated.

That exchange of looks again. Ford leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “We would highly recommend that you do.”

What?

“What?”

“This alien seems... attached to you. Friendly. Nonthreatening. We suspect you’re our best shot at learning more about his questionable, more dangerous companion. And even apart from your long-standing personal relationship, considering your line of business, you appear to be the best qualified person for monitoring him.”

I fought back a swelling of pride, focusing on the practicalities of the situation.

“Are you offering me a job, Agent Ford?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Would you like one, Ms. Oberman?”

I ignored the question.

“More dangerous?” I prodded. “What exactly are we talking about here? You might as well tell me, or I won’t help you with anything.”

Agent Daniels sighed and nodded at Ford. It was clear who was in charge here.

“One of the two humans that Kuthil Ash Kharn’s rogue companion made contact with soon after arrival is dead.”

“Wait... what?”

LAYLA

*A*fter they left, I made another pot of coffee. I hesitated before drinking it, tempted to try to sleep so that I could talk to Kak.

No, I thought as he stirred within me. I nudged him down gently. I had to think through this myself. We were in this together, but the physical reality of what was happening was mine. I needed time to process it myself before I took it to him.

The agents told me next to nothing about the situation, other than someone was dead and they thought an alien did it... or was at least involved somehow. An alien who arrived on Earth with Kuthil Ash Kharn, who they feared may also have a part.

And now they wanted me to rekindle my “old friendship” with Kuthil Ash Kharn and report his movements to the Extraterrestrial Task Force.

Could he be involved? Didn't I sense something dark from him as soon as I entered the gala? The feeling abated mostly after that first jolt, as the familiarity of him set in. Was I blinded by my memories of him, or had that initial prickle of danger been paranoia in my head?

I logged into the Oberman Finance electronic system from my encrypted work laptop, which I had stashed away in a secure drawer in my small home office. I had fully intended to not meddle in company business after my “retirement,” letting Jessica handle things. Yet there I was, scrolling through our

customer events database, checking for new requests or messages. My bare foot twitched, tucked under my leg in the cashmere-upholstered swivel chair.

All was quiet at Oberman Finance. More quiet than usual, even. Since I left, there has been no client contact. It wasn't like Visitors were beating down our door all day, every day, but *some* request should have come in by now.

Were the aliens celebrating Christmas now?

I drummed my gold-tipped black nails on the desk and stashed the laptop away once more.

The agents had given me a card with a number to call if I got any new information. I hadn't even *agreed* to anything yet.

After Kuthil Ash Kharn left last night, I had decided one of him was enough in my life. As much as I was drawn to the physical manifestation of my lover, Kak and my unspoken commitment to him was all I needed. All I wanted.

It hadn't even been a day, and I was already questioning my decision. Not because of any *desire*, though. Not because I *wanted* to see him. A human was dead, possibly linked to Kuthil Ash Kharn's return. The agents were right—I was the person to investigate this. The best person. It was my duty.

Wasn't it?

I didn't believe Kuthil Ash Kharn could be involved in the incident. I had no idea about the mechanics of Visitor travel, but I was pretty sure being on the same ship was not some kind of implication of guilt. For all I knew, it was some kind of "charter spaceship" where passengers mingled on the ride. The agents simply linked the novelty of an alien coming back to Earth to the incident, when it could very well be nothing more than coincidence.

But wasn't it pretty damn suspicious? I hadn't heard of a single report of Visitor aggression toward a human in the years they'd been on Earth, and now someone connected with them was dead.

What about the other person?

The agents mentioned the Visitor had contact with *two* humans, and that only one of them died. Who was the other? Could I talk to them?

Was the new arrival a rogue agent of some sort? What did this mean for all the other Visitors here?

And what made them so sure a Visitor was involved in the death, anyway? If their only point of suspicion was his friendliness with the humans, it wouldn't be sufficient.

But they must be sure enough to come all the way here and tell a civilian about it. Ask me for help, even.

I kept the TV on throughout the day, on alert for news about the incident. It never came. What Visitor activities were reported had to do with regular morning talk show speculation about the never-ending mysteries of their day-to-day lives. Gossip.

I lay sprawled on my couch, observing the baubles glinting in my Christmas tree as I rubbed the crystal of Kuthil Ash Kharn's homeworld in my hand. This didn't have to be my problem. I just retired, for fuck's sake. Now forces outside of my control were trying to pull me back in. I was supposed to be relaxing. Traveling. Gardening, or whatever the fuck retired people do. There were plenty of professional resources around the globe for handling aliens, making policies, keeping track of who came and went. What did they expect *me* to do?

It's not my fight.

I would keep my nose out of it and enjoy my well-earned free time.

KAK

“*Y*ou must go.” The difficulty I had in saying those words surprised me.

We sat on a sprawling lily petal floating on the dark waters of a still lake. The mirror water reflected a carpet of stars burning above and below us. Warm wind caressed our skins, swaying a thin strand of loose hair that had fallen from Layla Oberman’s face.

“I *must* do nothing,” she protested. “This is not our fight.”

“It pains me to say this, but I fear it is. There is... something wrong. I felt it. And I think you did too. The two humans were right. You are suited for this task.”

The way she looked at me confirmed my suspicion. There was a shadow in Kuthil Ash Kharn, and she felt it too.

“You seem to be very keen on putting me in Kuthil Ash Kharn’s path.” She snapped. “Why can’t you just let us be?”

“I know,” I sighed. “I am sorry. But if what they are saying is true, this could become very bad for all of us. The death my shard brought with him—”

“I thought *you* were the shard,” she muttered in my ear. She put a hand on my bare shoulder. The glowing moon overhead traced the oiled lines of her naked body, highlighting the curve of her breast, the dip of her waist, the swoop of her shapely runner’s calf. I hated the experience of running, but I enjoyed what it did to her.

I grunted noncommittally. “I am the purest instance of Kuthil Ash Kharn as you met him. The one out there is mixed with—”

“He remembered everything,” she said. “And I have to admit to you, Kak, it was hard not to be a little drawn to him. I’d rather not be put in that position again.”

I sat up, propping my hands on the wavy, meaty flesh of the green petal. My eyes searched hers. She was worried. About me. About us. I stroked my thumb along her smooth, flushed cheek. “I know, Layla Oberman. I was not expecting this.”

“I wasn’t expecting this either. This could be something *bad*, Kak. For both of us. What could trigger dangerous behavior in a Visitor? Aggression?”

I shook my head. “My kind do not know violence. This is new, if that’s what it was.”

“What about why you’re all here? As some sort of punishment. Punishment for what?”

I sat up, disturbing a cloud of purple dust that lifted from the lily petal. I leaned forward, propping my arms on my bent knees. “Nothing like that. No violence.”

“Why... why were *you* sent here?”

I looked back at her. Her expression was carefully neutral, her voice a higher pitch. I wanted to brush her off like I always had and change the topic. I didn’t even know why.

Because I’m ashamed.

The Kuthil Ash Kharn that had returned came from the same seed, with the same flaws, and the same reasons for being here in the first place. And I would venture those reasons drew him back again. She had a right to know them.

“I was greedy.” My shoulders tightened as I finally admitted it.

“What? That’s it?”

That’s it... I scraped an agitated thumb against my brow.

“You do not understand. I was greedy with my consumption, my absorption of others of my kind. I wanted to take more than to give... It is an awful an act as you can think of in your world. We must be consumed as much as we consume another. It’s how we evolve.”

She didn’t look like she understood the gravity of my transgression. She couldn’t. Layla Oberman knew my kind better than any other human, but in the end, nothing would fully bridge the gap between our species; not even living under each other’s skin.

“The point is, Layla Oberman,” I tried to explain in plain terms. “We both have a tendency to be hungry, he and I. And now I fear he’s hungry for *you*.”

Just like me, wanting her all to myself. Wanting her to run.

“If that’s true, you should want me as far away from him as possible.”

“I want nothing more, Layla Oberman.” I raked a hand through my hair and she moved to me, sliding along the petal to press her palm on my bare arm. Her breath fanned my neck as she rested her chin on the tense muscle of my shoulder. “But there is something happening. Something important. I feel it, and he can help to root it out before it ruins us all.”

“Is it dangerous? This greed of yours?”

“No,” I said flatly. “I would not hurt you. Neither version of me would. My kind do not know—”

“Violence, yes, I get it. But a person is apparently dead.”

“Not at my hands, or his. I would have known last night.” I turned to her and ran my finger down her jaw, tilting her chin up to face me. “Trust me, Layla Oberman.”

She released me and pitched herself back smoothly on the shifting petal, hands folded behind her head.

“I’ll think about it.”

DECEMBER 17

LAYLA

It didn't take me long to come to a decision. Kak was right, as much as I hated to accept it. Kak had felt that same undercurrent of *something* in Kuthil Ash Kharn, so I knew it wasn't just in my head.

Something was happening: something big coming at us, dragging me into its orbit. Ignoring the situation would only put me in the path of its circumstances—a helpless boat tossing in the storm.

I thought about running. Getting a plane ticket to Mexico. Buying a little house on the beach. Changing my name. I could hide, and neither the Extraterrestrial Task Force, nor Kuthil Ash Kharn, nor *anyone* could ever find me. I could John McAfee that shit and disappear, and live with Kak in peace.

The prospect of escaping was fleeting. I wouldn't be able to run from my family. If missing them didn't kill me, Omar would.

"I thought you were retired," he said, taking a long drag of his cigarette and then turning away for a moment to exhale. We stood in the frozen street outside our favorite diner, having just gorged on pancakes and too much coffee.

"Me too." I coughed out a wry laugh. "This came up at the last minute, and it's important."

"And it's in Alabama."

I didn't look at him, but knew he was watching me from the side of his eye as he took another puff. As far as Omar was concerned, I was a normal financial advisor. But he also knew

about Kak. I'd told him all about my inner cohabitant ten years ago, and how it happened on a work trip just like this one. My brother wasn't stupid.

I nodded. I suddenly wanted to distract myself with a smoke of my own.

Omar never grew to *like* Kak. How could he? He didn't know him. To Omar, the only consequence of Kak's presence was my inability to have any proper romantic relationship and my keeping this giant secret from the rest of my family. To him, Kak was nothing more than a big complication with no upside. No matter how much I tried to explain that I loved my life with Kak, Omar didn't get it.

Kak said that no other human could. Understand it, that is. It made me feel terribly lonely at the time.

"And you might miss Christmas. When are you gonna tell Mom?"

"When I know for sure. I doubt it'll even happen. I'm just not sure how long I'll have to be there."

He turned to face me, and I did the same.

"You know you can always call me, right? I'll go to Alabama and kick some alien ass if I need to," he said.

I smirked. "That won't be necessary, Omar. But thanks."

We walked to the end of the block, where my cab was waiting.

"Hey." I punched his bicep. "If I do miss Christmas, I'm still expecting my present when I get back."

"Yeah, yeah." Omar grinned, closing the car door behind me.

MOBILE, Alabama, was warmer than I remembered. Hopefully, no surprise blizzards this time. I caught a cab from Mobile International Airport to the ranch. The place felt like a dream

and a nightmare all at once. Déjà vu overwhelmed me as the taxi's tires crunched against gravel, hissing as it stopped at the cul-de-sac abutting the house.

I carried my hardshell suitcase to the front steps, adjusting the backpack strap on my shoulder. I'd decided to get the first contact over with before checking into my hotel, but as I approached the house, I was beginning to wish I hadn't.

My heart raced as long-lost scents and sounds assailed my senses. The horses were there, pawing the hard ground in the adjoining fields.

I took a beat before grabbing the heavy brass knocker and gave it three determined strikes.

The door opened, and he was there. In the flesh. Just like I remembered: worn jeans and a white T-shirt, arms bulging from the sleeves.

"Hi..." I croaked and immediately kicked myself, clearing my throat.

"Layla Oberman," he smiled, and his deep voice definitely was *not* croaking. "I felt you coming."

"Well, that's a little creepy..."

He stood aside for me to pass. I steeled myself as I stepped inside, but as soon as I crossed that threshold, it hit me: the take-no-shit Layla Oberman business owner caved in on herself and imploded, and the girl straight out of college was back. My shoulders slumped, my fingers moving up to fidget with my hair, my collar, *something*. Every nerve in my body burned with the awareness of the towering alien with olive skin whorled like marble, chin dipped low to watch me with those eyes that pinned any human in place.

But it wasn't just that... I wasn't only pinned, frozen with nerves and awe. No, it was nothing that forgivable. When Kuthil Ash Kharn stepped closer behind me, heat and otherworldly musk assaulting my senses, my first instinct was to submit. It was completely fucked up.

"Layla Oberman."

I fought back a whimper at his voice, an octave lower than before, reverberating through me. I locked my knees and dug my nails into my palms, trying to claw myself out of the total control with which his aura engulfed me.

And then my mind cleared. My back straightened. My chin rose. My eyes refocused. I did none of these things myself. They happened *despite* me as Kak did that thing he does, that I hate. He got into my brain, releasing just the right chemicals to flush away the insecure awkwardness and drag the real Layla to the surface: the bad bitch who'd been dealing with aliens for a decade and wasn't about to fall to her knees in front of one.

God, I love you.

I wished he could read my mind then, but it was fine—I'd tell him later that night.

I found Kuthil Ash Kharn's eyes and held them. Did he see the change in me? Without a word, I made my way to the sitting room in which we met a decade ago. There were those same green couches. And... I shook my head with a grin. A comically large Christmas tree with a pile of lights and boxes of decorations at its base.

"I did not want to ruin another Christmas," he said behind me and put a hand on my arm.

I closed my eyes and took a beat, waiting for the trail of sparks that shot down my spine to abate. I swallowed and stepped away, turning to face him.

"I am here for business," I said.

"As before," he nodded.

"No... Well, yes. But more important."

"Come." He motioned to one of the two couches, two steaming mugs of *something* already sitting on the table between them. He was prepared. "Tell me over egg knock."

I failed to stifle a chuckle and chose not to correct him.

I TOLD him as much as I thought wise in the moment, because I wasn't an idiot. I felt safe with Kuthil Ash Kharn—well, physically, anyway—but this was a delicate situation.

He regarded me from the couch across from mine and I blinked away a flashback of my earlier dream. My alien version of an attempt at eggnog was finished with great reluctance, though I appreciated the effort.

“I came with two others,” he finally said. “I do not know why they were sent. I could have felt it by molding before taking human form. But as explained, I avoided molding.”

“And you didn't ask?”

“We do not communicate verbally on the journey. We are not in your form yet.”

I pictured a bunch of blobs swirling around a spaceship. “Do you have any theories?”

He frowned, rubbing his jaw. “None yet. But I want to help.”

“Why?” I narrowed my eyes. Was he just looking for excuses to keep me in his orbit?

“If something is happening with my kind's presence on your planet, we may be at risk. I can have no conflict with Earth. Not when it could mean being separated from you again.”

Kak roiled within me, and I coughed, cleared him from my throat.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn... I'm not here to be with you. I'm here ___”

“For business. I know. To resolve this,” he said. “Will you stay here?”

“Here?”

“In the house.”

I looked around, as though taking in the massive house for the first time. I flashed back to that moment, to the insane,

entirely unacceptable effect he had on me when I walked through the door.

“Definitely not.”

LAYLA

I hated hotels, and the Sweetwater Hotel hadn't kept up its charm over the last decade. The gaunt man at the front desk sucked his cheeks in as he took a long drag of the cigarette between tattooed fingers. The smoke in my nostrils made me want to ask him for one. I still indulged once in a while.

His eyes glanced me over as he handed me a metal key with a wooden dongle, hovering briefly at my face, chest, and wrist, where I covered my gold watch with the sleeve of my blouse. Kak stirred.

“Will you be needing another key for your husband, ma'am?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Thank you.”

I grabbed the second key from him and turned to leave. I felt his stare on my back. I sensed these things. Not because of Kak—because of good old woman's intuition.

I hurried across the concrete pavement along the row of rooms on the ground floor, yellow LED lamps overhead buzzing with an occasional uncertain flicker. Those things looked much brighter and more pleasant the last time I stayed here. With each step I took, my paranoia grew. I was Orpheus, resisting glancing over my shoulder for fear of manifesting some nightmare.

I reached my room and jammed in the key. Only when I slammed the door behind me and locked it, along with the deadbolt, did my panic subside.

“Shit,” I exhaled. I’d worked myself up over nothing. No one was following me. I had no reason to think anyone had. It was just one of those things you do sometimes—get a stupid thought in your head. Like something was coming, something *bad*. And then it grows into a senseless panic that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

A long shower was all I needed. The bathroom was run down, and the tile cracked, but the water was gloriously hot and the bathrobe, though not as fluffy as I’d have liked, warm. I padded back into the room in my silk thigh-length nightgown and a pair of disposable cotton slippers. Next time, I’d forego the nostalgia and book a better hotel. I remembered Sweetwater Hotel having more coziness and fewer creepy receptionists ten years ago. I should’ve just booked the Marriott a few blocks away.

But now I was there and the bed was beckoning, and the digital clock on the chipped bedside table read 11:00 p. m. I got under the covers, turned off the bedside lamp, and finally fell asleep.

KAK gently nudged me into lucidity, and I gained awareness wrapped in the fluffiest robe I’d ever had against my skin. Kak’s hands were underneath it, and I peeled open the edge to reveal his head on my stomach, mouth trailing lazy kisses across my belly. I put the robe down and leaned back.

“So...” His muffled voice slurred in in the slow motion of the dream. “What have you learned?”

“Didn’t you hear?” My eyes fluttered open, head lifting a little to look down at the form of his head under the robe.

“I was busy.”

What could he be busy with?

“I do have my own matters to attend to, Layla Oberman.”

I chastised myself for thinking his whole existence revolved around me. An easy mistake, considering his whole

physical existence was solely within the confines of my body. But didn't he care enough to listen?

"Kuthil Ash Kharn does not know what's happening," I tried to focus.

Kak's face emerged from the robe, a faint, spicy scent following his movements. It was the same musk that had nearly brought me to my knees mere hours ago, but calmer, subtler.

"Want me to ratchet it up for you?" He narrowed his eyes, and I gasped as he sank his teeth into the flesh of my breast.

"No," I exhaled, wriggling a little underneath him as the hot tip of his tongue began tracing circles on my skin. "That was fucking terrible. Scary."

Kak stroked my cheek with a thumb that radiated heat and chill all at once. I tilted my head into his touch.

I didn't want to talk about Kuthil Ash Kharn anymore.

"Me neither," he snarled in my ear, then took my earlobe between his teeth, tugging. I bent my neck, exposing it to his lips, and his breath and mouth trailed down the curve to my shoulder, nipping more than kissing, claiming more than seducing. His hand slid down my side, then lower. Rough squeezes made me arch against him.

He was already hard beneath me. I needed this normalcy of our connection. Things were too complicated out there. Here, they were simple.

The fluffy cotton of the robe surrounding us shifted like so many tickling white tendrils. They swayed against me, massaging my skin with varying pressure. I knew what this was, and let them mold against me, brush over my skin with delicate strokes.

Kuthil Ash Kharn—fuck, no, *Kak*—dragged his mouth back down my stomach. By the time he came low, my legs were already parted for him. His tongue flicked between my thighs, teasing me before delving into my slickness. I clenched his golden hair as he pressed his lips against my clit. Rough cotton vines emerged from the shifting material around us,

caressing my body—soft at first, then constricting themselves against my limbs as he worked.

I arched against their taut compression, gasping as energy fluttered in my belly underneath his ministrations. I dug my fingers into his scalp, pulling myself tighter against him as the heat built inside me. It was going to be soon, and I held my breath, shifting my hips so that his hot tongue would hit just the right spot.

“Yes,” I hissed as I found it, knees trembling. “Don’t stop.”

But he moved with a wicked glance up at my eyes that told me it was on purpose, halting the approach of the precipice I craved.

“Fuck,” I swore as I raked my teeth against my bottom lip. The vines tightened around me, and I knew they weren’t vines anymore when I felt the skittering suction on my skin. They nipped my neck and latched to my sensitized nipples, sending sparks shooting behind my eyes. The tentacles held me firmly in place so that I couldn’t shift my hips into that perfect spot, and their owner was giving me that fucking grin he reserved for when he really wanted to torture me. Frustration boiled under my ribs as my impending orgasm slipped out of reach.

“Do not stop what exactly?” Kak’s voice resonated from deep within, ringing through me and sending a spike of electricity through my pussy. I shuddered under his cold golden stare, the whites of his eyes flashing blue from between my legs.

It was hard to look into those eyes. My first instinct was always to avert my gaze. But I looked.

“Do not stop what?” he repeated.

“Fuck you,” I smirked. I was walking a fine line in my stubborn resistance, but one that I knew would pay off if I won... Or hell, if I held out for long enough, it would pay off even if I lost.

The tentacles around my limbs, which had now converged to extend from Kak’s back, tightened. I sucked in a breath to

keep from giving him the satisfaction of hearing me yelp as they yanked my wrists apart and down against the swaying white tendrils beneath me. They lashed around my upper thighs, my knees, ankles, and breasts, the suckers latching bruises into my flesh.

My gasp hitched as Kak dipped back down and pressed his tongue flat against my folds, running it up slowly, withdrawing just before it touched my clit.

“What do you want, Layla Oberman?” Kak cocked his head, watching me motionless and spread open before him. A hot cord thrummed from my center and reverberated up my spine as he slipped a finger into my pussy, eliciting another angry whimper.

“You’re fucking soaking.” He held his finger before him, then turned it around with a raised brow as if to show me. I didn’t need to see it to know how wet I was at that moment.

My moan turned into a frustrated whine I failed to control, and all I got was a bemused hum in response as he licked me off his digit and tightened his restraints. They stung as they pressed harder into my skin, my breasts bulging from the ropes wrapped around them; the pain shot straight to my gut, mixing with the oscillating heat churning in my stomach, going lower to make my desperate pussy twitch.

He didn’t need my words to see how desperately aroused I was, or that I would come for him if only given half a chance. He only wanted to hear me admit it. He only wanted me to beg.

Oh, fuck it.

“I want you to make me come,” I broke. “Please. Please make me come, Kak.”

“Good girl. My little human wants to come, huh?” He smiled, infuriating victory in his eyes.

I swallowed and nodded, squeezing my eyes shut. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Fuck—yes, *please*.” I jerked against my restraints.

Just like that, his tongue was back in that spot on my aching clit. All it took was a few moments. When his teeth grazed the sensitized flesh, a column of fire shot from my clit through my core. He lapped hungrily as I writhed beneath him, sucking on me as if wanting to extract every drop of my heat into his mouth.

LAYLA

We lay in the endless robe that cocooned us, his heavy bulk on top of me, his head on my breast. My fingers played with glowing strands of his hair, his traced up and down my side.

He lifted his chin to look at me then, and I was about to bend down to kiss him when the ephemeral glow in his eyes dimmed like a light going out.

“What’s wrong?” I frowned.

“You have to wake up.”

I shook my head a little, snuggling deeper into the weighted fluff of the robe.

“You have to wake *up*.”

I was falling, and crashed into my bed with a jerk, sitting up just as the scraping near the door reached my ears. Eyes flung open, all I saw was a vertical stripe of light from the lamps outside, peeking in the parting of the curtains. The stripe disappeared, then returned. Movement. Someone was out there, walking past my window.

I held my breath, but my heart was pounding so hard in my ears that I couldn’t hear anything, anyway.

Just a hotel guest out for a smoke, I told myself. That’s all.

I turned to the side and stared at the sliver of light. An eternity passed in silence, save for an occasional barking of boots against concrete.

Fucking hell, do they have to chain smoke outside my fucking door?

I jumped a little when a car door slammed. Low voices, and then more sounds. My mind went into overdrive when I heard *something* bump against my door.

Muffled conversation carried through the walls. I recognized one voice as the gruff, cigarette-hoarse timbre of the man at the check-in counter.

I grabbed my phone off the bedside table and pre-dialed the emergency number. Nervous sweat itched at my armpits and my thumb trembled over the screen.

Had I locked the deadbolt? I couldn't remember. Blood pounded in my ears as I slid out of bed. I held my breath and tiptoed to the door.

I barely choked back a scream when something rattled outside my door. Keys. It sounded like keys. I shook, clammy cold coursing through me, making me numb.

He'll have a master key.

I pressed the call button on my phone.

Then everything sharpened. The room grew brighter, outlines visible in the darkness. My trembling stilled. The rush of blood dissipated—at that moment I could have heard a pin drop.

The deadbolt.

I took a smooth step to the door, calm, controlled. It produced a quiet click as I tested it, making sure it was engaged. The sounds outside stopped. Did they hear me? Did they know I was up?

“The fuck is that?” More voices, and this time I heard it loud and clear. “Fuck, I'm out, man.”

There was a heavy silence, then heavy footsteps on the concrete walkway, retreating.

I stared at the door, remaining perfectly still, hand clutching my phone. It clicked, and the 911 operator's muffled

voice gurgled in my hand.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

A buzzing sound edged into my hearing, growing louder with each controlled breath. I shook my head to clear it, but every cell in my body was wound tight, and every cell hummed. My vision burned at the corners, black splotches popping into my eyes.

“Hello? This is 911. Do you need help?”

Slowly, the sharpness in my senses dissipated. I clutched for it, not ready to let go just yet. What if they came back? But I realized I was swaying on my feet, and Kak was spreading through me like a sheen of syrup. I think he was bringing me down, unwinding the bottleneck of adrenaline.

He shouldn’t have done that.

Three sharp bangs on the door sent me jumping back with a shriek. I crouched, ready to run or fight or *something*, and slapped the phone to my ear, trying to find my voice.

“Layla Oberman.” The familiar inhuman voice sent vibrations through the door.

Kak?

I froze. Was I still asleep?

More banging. “Layla Oberman. Open.”

“Hello? Are you in trouble? Can you speak?” The little voice in my hand continued to prompt.

I brought my phone to my ear. “Sorry. False alarm.”

I hung up.

There was no way this could be anyone but him—no human sounded like that. I rushed to the door and peered through the peephole. My hands were steadier than they had any right to be when I unlatched the deadbolt and flung it open, letting Kuthil Ash Kharn invade the space as I stumbled backward into the room.

Whatever energy remained in me drained like water exploding from a cracked tank. My mind crumpled. I looked up at the alien vacantly, taking shallow, shuddering breaths, gulping for air that did not satiate my lungs. A fish out of water.

He hesitated, a strange look in his eyes, and then he was upon me. He crushed me into his chest. My legs buckled, and I slumped against him.

“How... did you... know?” My words were breathless whispers through bouts of dry, heaving sobs. Kak was treating my body, suppressing the panic attack as best he could. Coupled with Kuthil Ash Kharn’s hand rubbing up and down the length of my back, I was regaining shreds of control over my senses.

“I felt it,” he muttered, mouth pressed to the top of my head. “I feel you, Layla Oberman.”

I swallowed through a dry throat. Glancing over his shoulder, I noticed people milling outside the open door. The man I feared was not in sight, but I heard doors and shoes as guests came to see the commotion. Seeing a Visitor hugging a human would draw the kind of attention neither of us would want.

It was as if he read my mind.

“Pack your items,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said, though his arms remained locked around me. “You are sleeping at the ranch.”

“No, I can get another—” I shifted to push away.

He held me at arm’s length, hands hard on my shoulders, and the resolve on his face shut down whatever arguments were forming on my tongue. “You are staying at the ranch.”

I nodded and began to grab my things as he closed the door to prying eyes.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN had tried to offer me the master bedroom. It held too many confusing memories, and I refused, opting for the smaller adjacent room instead.

“Smaller” was relative. The guest room was still larger than my bedroom back home, and had its own bathroom, as well as a pleasant view out to the rear fields of the ranch. The familiar barn stood the same as before, barely visible in the darkness save for the faint glow of a solar light at the door.

I was glad when Kuthil Ash Kharn, having looked me over five times to make sure I was undamaged, left me alone in the room. I sat on the bed, hands on my knees, and let myself slouch as any remaining energy bled from my body. Kak nudged gently at my mind; I knew it was because of him that a sense of calm washed over me like a blanket. He didn’t manipulate my emotions like that often—he knew I didn’t like it. But today, I was so fucking relieved he was there to do it.

I crawled under the covers, turned off the orange glow of the bedside lamp, and let him pull me down into a dreamless sleep.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I lay in bed, feeling her heavy presence in the next room.

I was harder than rock.

It took all of my restraint not to rip her apart in the dirty old room of the hotel. She was so small, limp against me, gasping to breathe. The smell of her sweat and her fear overpowered everything in the room. All I'd have to do is take it. Lower her on the bed. Pry open her legs. Maybe not even that. I could have crushed her into the wall, dragged the slip of fabric she wore up her waist. I could have made her look at me while I split her open and marked her with my cock. Or maybe I would drag her atop me and slam her down where she belonged.

I already smelled traces of her arousal there, under the terror, still fresh. She had been with my shard. What did he do to her? Did he hold her down and destroy her too, or did he take her slowly? Did he make her orgasm the way humans do? Could I make her do that for me too?

Neither of us had known what it was to possess a thing like Layla Oberman until we molded with her. Did he figure it out? I scowled. He had her to himself all these years, and I was only beginning.

I had fought my hunger in that room. Instead of forcing my tongue into her mouth and my cock into her slit, I rubbed her back furiously, rough with my "comfort." I felt my shard work on her from the inside. Did he feel that same desire to make

her shatter beneath him, too, or was it just me? Did she let him?

The humans hovering at her door had noticed the faint glow of my shuttle in the distance. There was no time to be subtle, and no time to call Bruce Welljoy, the elder female who had worked as my driver since my first arrival on Gaia.

I must learn to drive.

What would they have done to her? The same things I was imagining? The cords in my neck tensed, teeth clenched. She was *mine*. No pathetic human had the right to touch her.

I had calmed my impulses by the time Bruce Welljoy arrived to pick us up and take us to the ranch. I had intended to return in the shuttle, but she was much too frail. Would not survive boarding.

I'd watched her in the rectangular mirror from the passenger seat of Bruce Welljoy's car. Limp shoulders bowed in on themselves, teary lashes touching pale cheeks as she stared at her hands in her lap.

Yes, part of me had wanted to pick at that fragility, pull at its fraying edges. But as I watched her stare into her lap, that urge was overshadowed by the wave of protectiveness welling in my rushing heart.

Humans are monsters.

But now she was a single brick wall away. And my cock was throbbing. And my hand was reaching for it. I slid it up and down my shaft, getting used to the strange sensation.

I'd only done this once before—the night after I saw her at the Equine Society New Year's Masquerade Gala. Driven by pure instinct, I was surprised at how naturally the act came to my human form. Images and scents flashed behind my closed lids as I squeezed my shaft, sliding my hand up and down, then across the tender head.

Tonight was even more intense because she had been so damn close, and still was. I imagined the things I almost did to her earlier that night. Pumping into her, driving her against the wall. I imagined squeezing the pebbles on top of the full

mounds atop her chest. Her breasts. Her tits. The many crude words I had learned, but never came naturally to my tongue, hissed through me now as I pictured plunging into her cunt again and again until she broke apart around me.

My jaw clenched. My knees locked, striated muscle of my quads rippling through the skin. Bursts of hot, sticky fluid roped from my cock and spilled over my hand, but in my mind they were splattering all over her flushed, enraptured face.

DECEMBER 18

LAYLA

The next morning, I stood with a cigarette on the back porch of the house, blowing smoke from the corner of my mouth as the phone rang.

I'd been out like a log and woke up with a start. I remained perfectly still under my heavy blanket as I took stock of the room. The scent of old oak and wood oil made the place feel so different from the clean, modern aura of my New York apartment. It should have felt stale or oppressive, this big old house. Instead, it just felt... safe.

I'd shuddered as the memory of the previous night seeped back into my head. What would've happened to me if Kuthil Ash Kharn hadn't been there? Hadn't felt my panic? It'd only been a day back in Mobile, and once again I was getting rescued by the same alien.

But the vision of him in the flesh when I came downstairs jarred me. I shook my head quickly, reminding myself that this was *not* the same man I'd met ten years ago. Like Kak said, this was an amalgamation of everyone he molded with to recover on his homeworld. So why did he *feel* the same?

Mercifully, Kuthil Ash Kharn was already on his way to the barn and didn't insist on making awkward morning conversation. I went for a run, resolving to work off some pent-up nerves. The scenic, empty road on which the property sat was perfect. I ran through the morning silence on freshly paved asphalt, accompanied by bare trees breaking the gray sky on either side of the road. Fluffy cotton clouds drifted like migrating giants overhead.

The run helped, but only so much. I dug out a barely touched pack of cigarettes from the bottom of my bag upstairs and tapped on the bottom to slide one out. I lit it out on the back porch, leaning against the side of the wooden railing in my workout leggings and a light puffer jacket. I'd pulled my rusty orange beanie over my ears against the chill and sucked another draw of the cigarette as the phone continued to ring against my ear. I persisted.

"Ford," the answer finally came.

"Hi. It's Layla Oberman."

"I know. We were hoping to hear from you."

"Well, here I am. I'm on site with Kuthil Ash Kharn now." My eyes followed the trail to the barn, where Kuthil Ash Kharn was feeding and watering the horses.

"You... Already?"

"Are you surprised?"

"We didn't expect you to take action this soon. You should have called."

"I'll need some information about this death. Anything to go off of. He doesn't have any clues, but he wants to help."

"Help? How much have you told him?"

"Mr. Ford, I am a professional. As you said yourself, I know what I'm doing. I haven't said anything that might jeopardize your investigation, despite my full confidence that Kuthil Ash Kharn cannot be involved."

"Why are you so confident, Ms. Oberman?"

"I know him. Look. You came to me. You said you wanted help. Give me *something*."

"We don't need that kind of help, Ms. Oberman. For now, just watch the Visitor you've been assigned. If you think it's safe to remain in proximity, that is. If he takes any unexpected trips, or guests, or calls, text me at this number."

I flicked the cigarette into the dirt, grinding it in with the toe of my leather boot.

“What, that’s it? Just sit here? For how long?”

“Let’s start with a week. Try to remain on his good side. See if new information emerges.”

“Spy.”

“Are you comfortable with that, Ms. Oberman?”

“We’re gonna find out.”

I FELT deep in my bones that Kuthil Ash Kharn could not be involved with whatever happened. Still, I had to wonder—was it my bias toward Kak that made me so certain? Was it safe to follow that instinct? I hadn’t seen Kuthil Ash Kharn in a decade. He’d managed to retain his memories and mannerisms, but that didn’t mean he didn’t pick up something new.

I was not really worried about spying on Kuthil Ash Kharn. After all, if there was nothing to find, as I suspected, there’d be nothing to report. And if there *was* something to report, then I should feel no guilt for spying.

Having reasoned through my conscience, I trudged to the barn with my hands in my jacket pockets, feeling Kak whisk away the heaviness in my lungs after the smoke.

Good as new.

Life with an alien inside you had its benefits beyond the crazy sex dreams.

“Would you like to help clean their wooden enclosures, Layla Oberman?” Kuthil Ash Kharn paused his feeding when he saw me lean against the barn door.

“Stalls. Don’t you have people to do that for you?”

“I wanted to be more involved. The hands only come sometimes.”

“Sure, I’ll help.”

Maybe this would be good. I had thought about getting away from the city for a while after handing the reins over to Jessica. A few days on a ranch, in the open air, taking care of animals might do the trick.

I sniffed and stepped back a little as Kuthil Ash Kharn stood before me. His sense of personal space was severely lacking, but the earthy musk that radiated from him made me linger for just a second.

He handed me a set of oversized leather gloves and a pitchfork.

“I’ll take them out to pasture, and you shovel,” he instructed.

“Oh, sure, leave me to do the dirty work,” I joked as he clipped a lead rope to the bottom metal hook of the halter that a chestnut mare already wore in her stall. He paused, thinking.

“Come then,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said. “I will show you, and you can release the next one.”

“I was just joking.”

“Come.”

For someone with no experience with horses, leading an excited two-ton animal by the halter toward a pasture was no easy feat. The mare fidgeted and increased her pace as we approached the gate, which Kuthil Ash Kharn swung open for us. By the time we walked through it, the horse was prancing, scanning the wide field.

“Unclip her and step back,” Kuthil Ash Kharn instructed from the gate.

The mare’s ears perked up at the sound of the clip being undone. She bounced lightly on excited hooves, emitting a little kick of the rear leg as she twisted, raised her head high, nostrils flaring, and broke off in a broken canter toward the middle of the field.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

*H*er laugh carried sweetly. The excitement in her eyes at watching the animal run matched mine.

She understood, in this small glimpse, what I enjoyed about these animals. The carefree wisdom that lived in their chests, and pure joy at the running.

If it were my choice, this planet would have no pastures. No fences. Beasts would run anywhere. All things would. Everyone that is alive would be the same—free and together.

I leaned my elbows on the wooden fence, watching her watch the mare. Wind caught the small black hairs sticking from her braid.

I knew she was here to get more information. She would not have come if not for the accident one of my kind caused. For me, for now, that was enough. I could help her figure this out, and I wanted to. If I helped her, maybe she would trust me; maybe she would stay.

At least we are on the same planet.

Layla Oberman adjusted the orange wool hat and finally gazed away from the horse. And then she leveled those eyes on me instead. For a brief glimpse, there was only unguarded joy there. Then she remembered herself and shoved her hands into her pockets, expression shuttering.

“Let’s go clean then?” she asked. She was so close I could feel the warmth of her cheek as I held the gate open, just wide enough for her to slip past me. I followed close behind her.

“Yes, Layla Oberman. Let us scoop poop.”

LAYLA

We spent the day outside, cleaning the barn, rotating the horses in the pasture, feeding, and treading delicately around each other's space. The crisp wild air brought an alertness and purity that I rarely experienced in the concrete jungle—something I didn't even realize I'd been missing.

Things seemed somehow smaller and bigger here at the same time. That evening, leaning against the pasture fence after feeding the horses, one foot propped up on the lower rung and my arms stretched over the top, I watched the sky and felt small. What were my problems, all Earthly problems, in the grand scheme of things but snowflakes melting as they fell?

Kuthil Ash Kharn was looking up too.

“Are you thinking about Home?” I asked him.

His eyes crinkled at the corners.

“No, Layla Oberman. Not that.”

I let my gaze linger on him for a second. Part of me still found it hard to believe he was *real*. There, in the flesh. The man in the form of the one I'd been with in dreams for the last ten years.

I knew it wasn't Kak. But it wasn't *not* him either. The sense of familiarity was jarring, knowing the two of them came from the same being. Protective affection welled up inside me—my own, I could tell, not Kak moving within my flesh.

Who was Ford to assume Kuthil Ash Kharn had anything to do with what happened?

It was clear he was some sort of Visitor of interest, if not a suspect. The sooner the ETF got their truth, the sooner they'd leave Kuthil Ash Kharn alone. Whatever happened between us—which would be nothing—he deserved that peace.

But when he turned his head to glance at me from the side of his eye, there was something sharp there. The corner of his mouth twitched as he flicked his eyes to my lips. When he looked back out at the pasture, I saw the knot working in the back of his jaw. When I met him ten years ago, he was aloof and controlled, completely indifferent to human affairs. Now his presence was anything but aloof. It was imposing, if not borderline angry sometimes. Was I exaggerating?

“You'd never hurt me, right?” The words came out before I really thought about whether it was a good idea.

Did I imagine his shoulders tensing for a split second? He dragged his teeth over his bottom lip, a gesture that made me swallow harder than I'd like. He caught my gaze and held it—whatever rough edges I saw in his eyes before smoothed over by something deeper, softer.

“Never, Layla Oberman.”

I tucked a strand of hair under my hat and nodded, turning away to focus intently on the fence underneath me.

“It's broken,” I muttered, jerking on the post that had bent underneath my weight. It was coming undone from the horizontal bar that lay across it, revealing rusty old nails holding the railing together. Kuthil Ash Kharn leaned in to examine the failure, jerking on the wood a few times to see it wobble.

“Can we fix it?” I asked.

“We will, later. Come. I will make you more egg knock.”

I laughed as I jogged after him back to the house. “Let me do it this time. I'll show you.”

AFTER A DINNER hastily thrown together by me, Kuthil Ash Kharn asked me what I wanted to breakfast.

“Oh. Umm... I was going to find another hotel.”

His nostrils flared, his lip curling in a flash of what I could only describe as exasperation. Since when did aliens feel *exasperated*?

“You should stay here, Layla Oberman. It is safer.”

I'm sure not every hotel has a fucking creep waiting to break into guests' rooms.

But Ford *did* ask me to keep a close eye on Kuthil Ash Kharn, and it *would* be easier to do that from the same house. Plus I liked it here, in this house. The wood, the brick, the warmth of the place—it felt comfortable, and was maybe exactly the getaway I needed. None of it had anything to do with Kuthil Ash Kharn's presence, which permeated every room; none of it was at all related to the buzz of him in the air as I lay in the darkness of the guest bedroom, squeezing my eyes shut, willing Kak to come.

K. FORD, DEC 18

Anything to report today?

L. OBERMAN

we scooped poop.

DECEMBER 19

K. FORD, DEC 19

Anything to report?

L. OBERMAN

breaking news: he keeps chickens. fresh eggs!

This is not a joke, Ms. Oberman.

DECEMBER 21

LAYLA

I was in trouble.

I knew this as I stood in the rustic kitchen, flipping eggs in a sizzling frying pan. They crinkled and browned at the edges, yolks soft just the way I liked them. I had some time while Kuthil Ash Kharn fed and took out the horses for the day.

Time alone to think about what a dipshit I was and how stupid it was to come here.

Kak should have known. I should have known.

We did, really—we knew of the risk, even if I didn't want to admit it.

Being attracted to Kuthil Ash Kharn was a given. Not only was he an alien with a body designed to make the most unflappable of human knees weak. With his gold-flecked hair and eyes, the whites of which glowed with an inner blue. With his whorled, smooth skin. With the full muscles of his arms and shoulders, and the hard expanse of his chest.

No, it wasn't just that.

He was also so much like Kak. A physical manifestation of the man prowling my dreams. There was a familiarity there. Kak knew me intimately, and although their histories diverged ten years ago, I still couldn't disconnect Kuthil Ash Kharn from that identity.

I saw him shirtless the previous night, after we spent the day fixing the fence. Sometime within his rather short stints on

Earth, the man had learned how to use a hammer. Aliens, it turned out, could sweat. And the sweat clung to that set of washboard abs in all the worst ways—at least the worst if you were trying to *avoid* picturing things you shouldn't be picturing.

I was so glad at that moment that Kak could not read my thoughts when I was awake. Even though he could sense the excitement in my body, at least he didn't know the image flashing through my mind as I averted my eyes. I would not look.

“Fuck.” The eggs were burning. I transferred them to the two plates next to the stove.

I was better at cooking than mucking stalls, but it had taken conscious effort for me not to follow Kuthil Ash Kharn to the barn to help that day. And that was perhaps the worst sign of all, because I knew damn well what it meant when someone finds excuses to hang around another person.

It means someone has a crush.

Kuthil Ash Kharn entered the kitchen just as I finished plopping hollandaise on each of the eggs and positioning them on pieces of browned toast. I adjusted and readjusted their placement, the tip of my tongue protruding from my mouth as I hovered over the delicate operation that was Kuthil Ash Kharn's breakfast plate.

I brought the plates to the table, then set the coffee pot and juice pitcher in the middle. The table was small, with a collapsible wing to one side. We sat across from each other. I didn't meet Kuthil Ash Kharn's gaze, tucking straight into my food.

We ate in silence, and the awkward tension grew, stretching thick between us.

“I didn't find any bacon in your fridge,” I attempted.

“I do not customarily consume flesh.”

“Oh! You're a vegetarian? You don't like the taste, or is it an animal welfare thing?”

His brows knotted as he processed my question, and I realized an alien would have no greater context around common reasons for being vegetarian.

“Why do you not eat meat is what I’m asking.” I tried again.

“Killing to eat flesh when I can consume other things is unnecessary, no?”

I peered at the remnants of fried egg on his plate. “But you eat eggs? I don’t mean to make your life more difficult, but baby chicks are treated horribly on factory farms.”

“Our yard is not a factory farm.”

I bit my lip, squirming internally at both forgetting that he had his own chicken coop and at that word: *our*. I took a few busy sips of orange juice. The next minutes passed in silence.

“I will leave for several hours this afternoon.” His voice caught me by surprise after all that time of nothing but the scraping of cutlery against the plates.

“Oh? Anything special?”

“No.”

I looked at him, brows raised, waiting. But he was already back in his food, dipping a corner of toast into the remaining runny yolk on his plate.

“Farm errands?” I prodded.

He glanced at me, the bread pausing mid-way to his mouth.

“Yes.”

I wanted to ask more, but Kuthil Ash Kharn’s demeanor made it clear that he wasn’t interested in divulging further information.

“I must ask a great favor of you, Layla Oberman.” Kuthil Ash Kharn put his silverware down and looked me straight in the eye.

He looked like he was working himself up for something big. Was that why the conversation had been so awkward? He'd been thinking of how to ask me for something? Was he going to ask me to come with him on his errands? That would make perfect sense—he wanted me to come with him, and didn't know how to say it.

“What is it, Kuthil Ash Kharn?” I asked softly.

“Would you feed the horses and chickens in my absence?”

That's it?

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you, Layla Oberman.”

“You can just call me Layla,” I snapped, then immediately chastised myself for the reaction. “Sorry. Yeah. I'll feed the animals. Have a good trip.”

This would be exactly the kind of thing Ford would have wanted me to report. But why would I? I was so stupid—why *would* Kuthil Ash Kharn tell me where he was going? Why would he want me to come? We weren't attached at the hip. He was going out, and that was all I needed to know. Besides, it's not like I didn't have a life of my own. I had things to do too.

That was what I told myself when he left several hours later, as I made a cup of tea and retreated to my bedroom to browse cat videos and soothe my damaged ego.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

As tempted as I was to spend every moment with Layla Oberman, I had to tear myself from her at a point. I had not much time—the situation was escalating, and I had to resolve it before she learned of the extent of the problem.

Bruce Welljoy was the one I had called on for help.

When I saw her again upon my second arrival on Gaia, I barely recognized her. The new lines I noticed on her face struck me: deep folds etched into the sides of her nose, and trails curving from the outer corners of her eyes. A soft fleshiness around the jaw where in the past it had been firm.

When I asked her about the lines, she said she had them because she laughed a lot. I gathered that the faces of happy humans became engraved with such things, a way to display having lived a good life. Did they choose mates based on how many lines they had, opting for evidence of a well-adjusted existence?

Layla Oberman had the beginnings of such marks also, but they were barely perceptible. She was younger than Bruce Welljoy, so perhaps she had not had the time to smile as much yet. Or was my shard preventing her from being happy?

The drive to Prentiss, Mississippi, took several hours. Finally, Bruce Welljoy pulled into an empty parking lot abutting a tilted building with a spire jutting up from the roof.

“Place looks shut down.” Bruce Welljoy frowned as she stopped the car on cracked asphalt framed by two fading white lines demarcating a parking spot. She jerked her soft chin to

the broken stone steps, and a boarded-up window missing glass.

“But there is light,” I commented.

“Seems that way. I’ll wait for you here, dear.” She reached up to turn on the small lamp overhead, cranked her seat back, and pulled a paperback book with a nude male torso on it from the space between the seats. “Have a nice time now.”

I hesitated before leaving the truck. “Bruce Welljoy. Lock the doors. If one of my kind approaches the car and it is not me, do not open.”

Her forehead lines deepened as she watched me over her glasses. “I don’t make it a habit to open my doors for strangers, dear.”

I nodded and stepped outside.

DISCOVERING the location of Ronin Ash Ep had not been easy. Bruce Welljoy monitored regional news and collated rumors for many days before a trail appeared.

A local news piece in the small town of Prentiss had caught her attention. It talked of a “social media” community where religious citizens gathered.

“Social media,” Bruce Welljoy explained, was where people could congregate without having to do so in person. The description jogged my memory of networks where people could argue and fake-mate amongst themselves in real-time over their internet. I understood it not then and not now—humans already had such impaired contact capabilities, yet separated themselves from each other even further.

Apparently, there had been an increase in posts expressing “suicidal ideation” for several weeks, until the users disappeared. Even though I had provided her with limited information only, this captured Bruce Welljoy’s nose. She had said that “folk like this wouldn’t normally touch that kind of

thing with a ten-foot pole, and won't let anyone else touch it, either, if they can help it."

Upon further sleuthing, we suspected Ronin Ash Ep's primary location to be at or near the abandoned building before me: a "church," according to Bruce Welljoy. A place, she said, where people came to venerate higher powers. Did that mean us, for from their perspective we were "above" them if they looked at the sky?

"No," Bruce Welljoy said. "The creator. God. You must've heard of Heaven in your time on Earth?"

Now that she reminded me, I did remember learning about heaven ten years ago. It had taken time to regain some of my prior memories, as well as to re-adopt the humans' language mannerisms. When I first came across their very thick book called *Bible*, I thought it was one of their works of creative fiction—they had many.

Some people preferred no book, and others had a book in a different language. Bruce Welljoy explained that humans chose which book to believe, but the idea was mostly the same: a higher power, sometimes several, which they will meet after they die.

I did not understand it, for after humans expire, their bodies decompose back into the planet and their consciousness dissipates into the world around them, along with their flesh.

The wooden door of the building was unlocked. It opened with a jarring creak to reveal a large, long room. There was one wide pathway to the end of the room, and on either side of it were long horizontal benches positioned in rows. Freshly burned candles were scattered among some seats. Their wax had hardened, but the smell of them was still faint in the air. I followed the path between the benches, my eyes on the raised area there. There stood a vertical stand, and just behind it and to the side sat Ronin Ash Ep on what I recognized as a large bean bag surrounded by many pillows.

"Kuthil Ash Kharn."

Ronin Ash Ep was holding a platter of bread, oil dripping from his fingers as he paused with a soaked piece of it in front of his mouth. He placed the morsel back onto the copper platter and set the platter aside. His legs parted, and he leaned his elbows on his knees as I approached, grinning a young grin, that of one for whom Gaia was still completely new. He brushed a loose lock of brown hair from his eyes and licked his fingers.

“Ronin Ash Ep,” I said. “What are you doing?”

A childlike confusion crossed his face. “What do you mean?”

As I stood before him, I detected a strange smell. A faint, unique flavor.

“Is there a human here with you?” I asked.

“There are many,” he smiled. “They are within.”

I clenched my jaw and my fists. Ronin Ash Ep picked up his bread and placed it in his mouth, fingers dipping between his teeth. His lips glistened with oil that slipped slowly to his chin.

“You cannot do this.” I glanced around the room for the source of that smell. It was so subtle, but there was someone with us.

“This conversation should be between us,” I said. “Whoever is here, direct them to leave.”

“Oh,” Ronin Ash Ep exclaimed, back straightening with realization. “That! Don’t worry. It won’t cause us trouble.”

Suspicion tugged at me with the recognition that the smell was wrong—not a normal human. It was then that I noticed a glimpse of pale flesh peeking from behind the raised platform on which Ronin Ash Ep sat, nestled just against the far wall in the corner. With a deepening frown and gritted teeth, I approached, and the lifeless body came into full view.

“What possessed you to do this, Ronin Ash Ep?” I growled. “Have you no control? You kill them!”

The boy—that was what he was, a boy in a man’s form—rose from his seat, coming to stand beside me, long arms crossed on his chest.

“What possessed me to do this, Kuthil Ash Kharn? You pretend you do not know?” His voice held genuine curiosity.

I did not answer him, because he was right. I knew exactly what this was, and why, and how.

“You cannot do this,” I growled. “You kill them. Do you know what this will do to us all?”

“Oh, I do not *kill* them! I help them live. They beg for it. They are within me now. I think.”

“They are not. Our kind is incapable of molding with humans. At best, we can give them a piece of ourselves... not the other way around. Never the other way. They cannot survive in us.”

He shrugged, as though it was an unimportant detail. “They are ecstatic when we mold nevertheless. I feel them merging into me.”

I shook my head. “You feel them *dying*. They fade. I would know, Ronin Ash Ep. I almost committed this atrocity myself ten years ago.”

“And look what you’ve created.” He stepped back, spreading his arms wide.

I squeezed my eyes shut, nostrils flaring as I sought to rein in my reaction—I had to make Ronin Ash Ep see reason.

“You must stop.”

Ronin Ash Ep cocked his head, brow curved, lip twitching.

“I *must* do nothing.” His voice lowered, lacking its previous boyish lightness.

“Human authorities have already learned about this. They are looking for you, but they don’t know the extent of it yet. The consequences will be dire. Not just for you, for all of us.”

“Especially for *you*, as Kuthil Ash Kharn? You don’t want to be sent away because you want to stay near *her*.” His lip

protruded as he sliced his tongue along his teeth, watching me. “I intend to give them exactly what they want. What they come and beg me for. And if they catch me, so be it.”

“What if they kill you?”

“I am not worried about the humans, Kuthil Ash Kharn,” Ronin Ash Ep laughed.

I did not know what more to do. My kind had never prepared for self-destructive dissidence like this. What was I to do? *I could kill him before it went any further...*

I jerked as something stabbed deep within me, a sharp ache twisting in my core that nearly made me double over, and a dread that chilled my human bones, coating them in ice.

I abandoned the prospect, stumbling back. How foolish of me. The fact that the reaction was so severe indicated it had been more than a passing musing. I would collapse sooner than I could lift a finger to commit the act. My kind were incapable of murdering our own.

Yet murdering our host species seems to involve no such scruples, I thought, as I eyed the lifeless body frozen in the throes of ecstatic laughter.

There was nothing more to do but to leave and puzzle how to handle the situation, which had already spun out of control. Should I go to the human authorities myself, tell them what was going on?

That would result in a surefire one-way passage Home for me and every other alien on the planet... or worse.

I turned as the door creaked behind me. Bruce Welljoy’s gray curls appeared.

“Y’all all right in there?” she called.

Ronin Ash Ep stepped forward, and his eyes sparked with a wicked hunger. It was worse than I thought—the sight of a human, any human, elicited an immediate reaction in him. He was going to get worse.

“Yes.” I took long strides toward the door, nudging Bruce Welljoy outside. “We go home now.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay?” Ronin Ash Ep’s voice followed, muffled as I rushed us along the parking lot to the car.

“We go home now,” I repeated darkly. The car’s headlights flashed twice just as I reached for the handle and ushered Bruce Welljoy into the driver’s seat.

LAYLA

In my bedroom, I mused over the fact that this mysterious outing was exactly the kind of thing Ford would have wanted me to report on. But they had divulged no information about whatever that was going on. Did I want to raise their suspicions about Kuthil Ash Kharn with no evidence he was involved in anything at all? An afternoon errand was not evidence.

On the other hand, as much as I wanted to put his strange behavior down to Visitor tendencies, the way he refused to elaborate on where he was heading or invite me along *was* weird. He came back for *me*, or so he said. For days, he had been involving me in daily chores and trying to be around me.

Brushing me off so casually as he went for a field trip wasn't consistent with his behavior thus far.

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and sent an SMS to Jessica Choi.

L. OBERMAN, DEC 22

Pls find & send any information on incoming flight of alien Kuthil Ash Kharn. Esp who was with him. Would have been early December, arrival likely in US

J. CHOI

Ok. What's up?

Tell you later, when back in NY

Whenever that's going to be.

THE SUN WAS ALREADY low when I went to feed the animals. Despite having hoped for an invitation to wherever Kuthil Ash Kharn was going earlier, I enjoyed being alone. There was a deep, calm satisfaction in solitude. It had taken me many years to come to terms with the fact that I would never again have *true* alone time; Kak would always be there. But Kak, for his part, learned to settle within me and make himself imperceptible in the times that it mattered. I could dig hard and feel him there, but only if I looked. After feeding the birds and horses, I leaned against our freshly repaired fence. I picked at the grain of the fresh wood with my fingernails, enjoying having the world to myself. For a few minutes, I didn't care to look for Kak.

Then the beauty of the red sky dotted with small flat clouds and the crisp wind against my face inspired a desire to share the moment with the man from whom I'd become inseparable. I reached for him, a sort of meditation in which I followed my breathing from my nostrils deep into my belly. My attention turned to my fingertips and joints, introspecting into my very bones until I felt his stillness.

He shifted then, sensing that I was calling him.

“Look with me.” The wind carried my murmur into the pasture and to the line of trees ahead. I smiled as he slipped to the surface within me. He worked up my chest, brushing through my neck and up my cheeks. I might not see him or touch him when I'm awake, but he was so palpably *there* with me. The sensation tore a burst of laughter from my lungs and welling tears that I didn't bother flicking away. The wind dried them before they spilled. We stayed out there for a while, enjoying the world together.

BACK INSIDE, I went up to my bedroom. I peeled off my socks, jeans, and shirt, wrinkling my nose. I'd almost gotten used to the smell of moist hay and muck over the last few days, the stench not as shocking as it had in the beginning. Part of me had even been finding it kind of... homey? Now it was back in full force. I could be at home in my nice, clean apartment, surrounded by that cotton and vanilla room spray I liked. Instead, I'd been left alone on a fucking farm, smelling like an animal.

I climbed into the shower right away, scrubbing the scent of horse and feathers from myself in scalding water. I massaged my muscles—they'd ached so badly after that first day of helping Kuthil Ash Kharn clean out stalls. My lower body was fine from years of running, but my arms threatened to detach from my torso. I was surprised Kak let me suffer through it.

That initial pain had dulled into an enduring, almost satisfying ache of manual labor. I rolled my shoulders, biting my lip as achy knots loosened under the hot water. Yes, a little muscle pain could definitely be satisfying.

Out of the shower, I wriggled into a pair of black cotton panties and a comfortable wire-free bra. I moved to pull on my linen house pants, but paused as I realized there *was* an advantage to having the place to myself for once. As disappointingly tolerable as spending these days with Kuthil Ash Kharn had been, one thing I missed was the freedom to walk around my apartment in my underwear.

I paused in front of the full-length mirror mounted on the door of the oak wardrobe, running my hands over the fleshy and bony bits of my body. Before I knew it, I was analyzing: pinching my thighs, my upper arms; tensing my stomach to reveal the faint lines of muscle there, then letting it go. If Kuthil Ash Kharn ever saw me like this, a decade after we'd met, would he find new flaws that weren't there before?

I didn't think so. I hadn't changed that much since my early twenties. Another benefit of having an alien entity capable of slipping through all my nooks and crannies to repair things that were breaking.

There had been *some* changes. Two fine lines began to carve a gentle slope to the sides of my eyes. My body had filled out, become harder from the lanky thinness of my early twenties. Lean, subtle muscle dipped down my arms. Modest breasts curved down into a narrow waist and smooth stomach with only the slightest bit of excess when I pinched it. Hips sloped into slender thighs that, if tensed as I did now, protruded with a line of satisfying muscle down to my knee. From there, runner's calves swooped into bony ankles.

My body was just not my own, but a product of a stringent running schedule coupled with Kak's "maintenance." The maintenance came first. I noticed these changes happening years ago, and did not welcome them. I wanted *me* to shape myself, not the foreign entity within me; at that time I had still not accepted our oneness. So, defiant, I started to run until I was sore, bruised, breathless, determined to claim full responsibility for any improvement. My own tiny rebellion.

In fact, the shooting range was the only place where I welcomed Kak's "aid." Feeling my breath slow, my heart calm, my mind still as I took aim at the paper target. We were perfectly attuned to each other in those brief moments. It was like he was right there behind me, steadying my hands in his own, helping me squeeze the trigger.

Our private meditation.

I'd lightened up since then, but the running never stopped, and neither did Kak. We each did our part to maintain the body that hosted us both.

Sometimes I wondered if the alien presence would affect my longevity. I had asked him once, and we concluded that this was likely. I then wondered what would happen to him when I died, but he didn't have an answer. We were a walking, talking experiment.

The chill against my feet prompted me to stop ruminating on my body and pull on a pair of fluffy socks. I went downstairs to the kitchen in my bra and panties to take care of my empty stomach.

Then I rummaged. The fridge was full of fresh eggs and vegetables, and the pantry had a selection of pasta, but I was lazy, damn it.

Do they have any good pizzerias that deliver out here?

I paused as I opened a sliding drawer on the far end of the kitchen counter, revealing a stocked wine rack. I bit my lip and ran a fingernail along the curved horizontal bottles. Would Kuthil Ash Kharn mind if I drank his booze? The rack looked full and untouched; he probably wouldn't even notice.

“Fuck it.”

I extracted a heavy bottle by the neck.

If you leave me alone in your ranch house, I'm going to drink your wine.

I dusted off a wine glass from the cupboard overhanging the rack and poured a generous serving, then went about sipping the full red while deciding what to eat. Having spotted a white apron on a hook near the door, I tied it around my bare waist and got to work throwing together a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich, humming under my breath between sips and tastes.

After calming my stomach with the snack, I explored the house, sliding from room to room along the hard floor in my socks. I entered the office, where the oversized Christmas tree blinked. The panoramic window spanning the wall afforded a serene view of the black night. I sat on one of the green couches facing each other next to the window, opting for the one that Kuthil Ash Kharn had occupied both days and years ago. I stroked the fabric, leaning back against the firm cushion and closing my eyes. My gut tightened as I imagined him sitting where I was, watching me with that intent stare from the seat across from me. With that hint of danger behind his hooded eyes.

A twisting in my gut that was not my own brought me out of the daydream, and I cleared my throat. Kak couldn't read my thoughts when I was awake, but he remained perceptive to

every reaction in my body. I uncrossed my legs and went upstairs.

When passing the slightly ajar door of the master bedroom, I paused. I looked over the banister at the ground floor, where the front entrance was visible. I watched it for a few seconds, waiting for Kuthil Ash Kharn to stroll in at any moment. Would he mind me checking out his room? Finally, I turned and gave the bedroom door a tentative nudge.

A torrent of emotions washed through me as the door revealed the king-size oak bed—dread at first glimpse, the memory of lying in that very spot, hurt. Finding out that an alien had implanted a part of himself within me without my consent, to heal my injured leg... Running, only to wake up back in that same bed, this time with a much more serious injury. Reconciling the fact that I'd have to let him do it again. Cold, alone, scared, watching the creature remove his clothes in haste, his enormous bulk positioning itself over me. Warmth when his marble skin touched mine, and then a ripple that blurred the lines between us until I was poised on the precipice of infinity itself. Lying underneath him, a veil lifting to reveal a river of pure energy rushing through that endless void. Wanting to submerge myself in it, and taking step after step until the alien on top of me wrenched me away, severing our link, my link with the beautiful abyss.

I had cried at the loss, curled up next to him, feeling *something* awaken under my skin.

I realized I'd approached the bed without thinking as I played back memories, and was now sitting on the plush mattress.

“This was the last place I got to touch you outside of my dreams, Kak.”

In this bed, Kuthil Ash Kharn's self sharded into two: the man who remained in the bed with me, and the one under my skin, created as our bodies molded and rippled in unison at that precipice.

I set the empty wineglass on the floor. Red always made me tired. I leaned back, flopping my arms wide, my toes

dangling off the side of the bed. I closed my eyes and willed myself to nap—just for a little while, just long enough to see him.

“Come lie with me, Kak,” I whispered as I calmed my mind in the way I’d learned over the years.

KAK

S flowed like a blanket over Layla Oberman, relaxing her muscles from head to toe, releasing tension in each tiny joint and tendon. We worked in unison, Layla Oberman calming her racing thoughts as I calmed her body. She settled into sleep, and I tried not to rush as I nudged her into lucidity.

I was on top of her, legs intertwined, my elbows digging into the bed on her sides. I took her face in my hands and lowered my mouth to hers, nudging my tongue against the line of her lips. She smiled against me, lifting to kiss me in small, uncertain pecks. Was it this familiar bed that made her shy?

Sometimes I liked when she put her cards on the table and splayed open for me, all of her hunger on display.

But sometimes I like a challenge.

I grinned against her cheek, looking down to find that nervous, stuttering vein pulsing in her tense throat. My mouth against her face, I skated my hand up her neck, along her jawline. I watched something in her eye spark as I pressed my thumb against her bottom lip, disturbing the plump flesh as I slid it down to her chin, revealing a momentary glimpse of white teeth. My other fingers were spread in a firm grip across the side of her jaw.

“Are you shy?” I murmured against her skin, my cock pulsing at the feeling of her shudder against me. Her gaze flew around the room, stuttering as they paused at memories.

“I...”

“Look at me.” Her jaw and chin still in my hand, I pressed until her wide eyes raked to mine and stayed there. “Look at me while I take you in my bed.”

She was shaking, arousal oozing from each pore, and I wondered how Kuthil Ash Kharn must feel when we made love each night in that next room. Surely he felt the delicious heat of her from here as he lay here, in what used to be *my* bedroom.

My stare was glued to the column of her throat as she took a hard swallow. I ground my hips into her, and she responded, lifting herself against me.

“That’s my girl.” I grinned when she gasped, pupils dilating as a drop of precum trailed over her thigh, lips parting in a small gasp.

My lip curled in a satisfied snarl as I took the win, crushing my mouth against her parted lips. Our teeth clashed, but I didn’t care and neither did she. Her pert nipples shoved against my chest as she arched, opening for me, her tongue meeting mine in hungry surrender.

I grunted as her foot trailed heat up the back of my calf. I moved my hand down her cheek, chin, neck, mapping the planes of her with my palm. The top tie of her apron came undone easily with a tug, and I nudged it aside, leaving her with just the portion tied around the waist. My hand drifted along the thin strip of fabric between her breasts and down her stomach, which rose and fell quickly as she took quick breaths through her kiss-swollen lips.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn...” she muttered, and hearing my complete name from her lips sent heat through my chest. This was my name before I settled inside her and became *Kak* to her. The truest, oldest form of me was the one she saw now. Not the Kuthil Ash Kharn who came back, and not the shard I formed, but *me*, the original.

I pushed up and rose to my knees, looking down at her tender body: hard with toned muscle, yet curved and supple in all the wonderful places, covered partially in the apron that was bunched around her waist. The juxtaposition of white

fabric against olive flesh induced a predatory flash of hunger that made me want to pump my load into her right then.

There was nothing between me and her wet warmth except the thin line of underwear on her hips. She lifted a little to help me yank them off, but her eyes widened, thighs quivering as they tensed against my sides.

“Are you afraid?”

“No,” she whimpered the lie.

“Uh-huh.” I suppressed a smile and dipped down to kiss her belly. I pried her legs open gently with my hands on her knees until they parted for me to lean between them, and I moved lower. Her hands slid through my hair, shy at first, then gripping, clenching. As my breath washed over her heat, the glistening I saw there made me groan. I paused, relishing the anticipatory hitch in her breathing, the fisting of her fingers in my hair. I watched her eyes as I leaned in, pressing my tongue against her sweet center.

LAYLA

I let out a guttural moan as he ran his tongue up the length of my folds, grazing his teeth gently against my swollen clit for an infuriating moment before turning his attention elsewhere. My hands clenched in his hair, and my hips jerked toward his face as he licked and kissed one inner thigh, then the other, and then up. When his lips finally pressed against my clit, I released the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

The lights in the room glowed, burning brighter than anything I'd seen. There were lights in me too, scurrying up my spine as he sucked, licked, caressed me with his mouth. My breaths turned shallow and my hands moved to clench the bedspread with escalating urgency.

"Don't you dare come, Layla Oberman." My stomach clenched at the instruction and twisted when he pulled away. "I'm not done with you yet."

I propped myself on my elbows and looked down at him to find him gazing back at me through narrowed eyes, lips glistening with my arousal.

It was... weird before. Finding myself here, in the bed where the physical form of Kuthil Ash Kharn embraced me, our bodies melting into one. I was hurt, scared, and awed, and so, so fucking wet all at the same time. Now I was brought right back into that frightened, injured little girl, with the big, scary alien looming over her. Pressing his hunger against her. Searing her skin with ravenous fingers.

If anything, though, my trepidation only turned Kak on more.

Sometimes he likes it when I'm like this. Delicate, weak.

But it never lasts. I always remember I'm not that girl anymore.

I set my jaw and smirked, shoving my fingers into his hair once again. Maintaining eye contact, I guided his head to its destination once more. I kept my hand there firmly as he resumed his work. My head rolled back as my legs parted wider and I bent my knees, toes curling into the textured sheets.

He worked with renewed vigor that sent warm shockwaves from head to toe, until I could no longer keep myself propped up and fell back into the bed. The knots of anticipation had burst, exploding through me in a writhing climax. My muscles betrayed me as they tensed and loosened of their own accord, riding the trail of lightning pulsing through my center.

My hips bucked in agony when he released me too soon.

I'm not fucking done.

But he was already on top of me, flipping me over and shoving my face down into the bedding. Rough, sloppy breaths left tingling moisture on the back of my neck. Heat radiated into my back from his muscled torso, my hips grinding out my orgasm between him and the sheets.

He wasted no time, dragging his length up my inner thigh. He pressed against my clenching, swollen pussy and sank inside with a fullness that made me cry and jerk forward, only to be raked back against him. His hard abdomen pressed against my rear with each pounding, practiced thrust. We melted together in sync, lovers riding a well-tested wave that rolled and crashed against itself.

The sheets were in my gaping mouth, eyes scrunched up against the blackness as another dam within me exploded.

“Fuck, I'm coming.” I gripped the fabric in fists as the second orgasm rocked through me, my walls clenching around the hard shaft buried deep inside. His thrusts grew haphazard,

an animal impaling its catch with abandon. Huge hands raked up to grab my own in the sheets, white-knuckled fingers intertwining.

He kept me pinned in a steely grip as his hips drove against me. Then his hulking body shuttered into a tense bundle against me. After a few more rough, quick jerks of his hips against my asscheeks, he exhaled an inhuman, gravelly groan from that alien part of him, shooting his release into my core.

A dark amber glow illuminated the blackness of my eyelids as I shifted weakly under his weight. He released my hands, and I flexed the numbed fingers. He placed a single brushing kiss behind my ear and then lazily rolled over to sprawl next to me.

I turned to my side, pressing my back against his chest, and lifted my face up just enough to accept another kiss. Then I nestled my head on the arm he curled beneath me. I reached for his forearm with both hands and pressed it against my chest, squeezing it flat between my breasts. The rushing of his heart against me, not a beat but a whirlpool, carried me to sleep within sleep.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I returned later than I'd hoped. Losing time with Layla Oberman: yet another thing to resent Ronin Ash Ep for.

She would be asleep by now. Her bedroom door was closed, and I would not disturb her.

I needed time to consider options, anyway. Killing Ronin Ash Ep would resolve the immediate issue. I paused, gripping the banister on the second floor for balance as my body again protested at the thought.

But would that even be enough? It would not stop the decay at its root: me. How many others developed the same cravings he did after molding with me on our Home world? I tried to isolate myself over the years, but molding was necessary to recover after sharding; I had to mold to fill myself back up. How many had there been?

Thousands. Tens of thousands.

And how many of them got *those* pieces of my memories? Ones which triggered desires to mold with humans? How many were on their way to Gaia to fulfill them?

I worried about this as I slicked my hair back in the shower, hoping the heat of the water would kill the cold paranoia in my bones. It did not.

But when I entered my bedroom, the sight of Layla Oberman sprawled on my bed surely did. It stopped me and my worries in my tracks.

Her limbs were stretched on the bedspread, her body barely covered in a white piece of fabric tied around her neck and waist. Bare thighs and arms protruded from underneath. Her loosened hair was a black halo around her head.

Her long neck stretched in a way that couldn't be comfortable, cheek squished against the sheet. But her lips were parted in a hint of a smile. There was a small stain of saliva which had escaped the corner of her mouth on the sheet. Was she dreaming now? With him?

I swiped the back of my wrist against my mouth, digging my teeth into my lip, then reached down to adjust the swelling hardness under the towel wrapped around my waist. I continued to drink her in, stock-still in the doorway.

I recalled our last night together, when she slept in my arms in that same bed. I was drained then, tired and sick after she greedily absorbed most of me. If I hadn't ripped away, she would have gone deeper, and she would have died. My only choice was to break myself off, bailing at the expense of leaving a large shard of myself within her.

Her uncontrollable selfishness exhausted me, and at the time, right after, an angry part of me wished I had just taken all of her. Consumed her in her entirety. That was what she'd wanted. Yet the feeling of her breathing against me that night was the happiest memory I possessed.

I could take her now. Not in that way, but the way I really wanted. Would she even wake up? Would my shard wake her, or would he understand what I had to do? Did he know how hard it was to leave her alone these past nights, feeling her hunger through that fucking wall?

I took a step forward and bent over her. I held my breath so as not to tip her off. My eyes flicked from her pouty lips down to where the cloying scent of her wetness pooled between her legs. She was ready for it. She wanted it. I narrowed my eyes as I lifted the edge of the white fabric from her thigh with a hooked finger.

I swallowed hard at the sight of her glistening cunt and reached down to adjust myself again.

“You’d never hurt me, right?”

Her words from a few days ago at the pasture were an icypick piercing my hunger.

Fuck.

I said I wouldn’t, but oh how I fucking wanted to. I slumped against the wall, staring at the wall behind the bed for several long minutes, forcing myself to come down as my heart rushed through my chest.

When I thought it was safe, I lowered myself into the bed with slow movements. I pulled the bedspread aside just enough to extract the heavier cover underneath and spread it over both of us. I feared touching her; if she woke, she would try to leave, and I didn’t think I could let her.

But after what felt like hours lying in the darkness, refusing to sleep in favor of savoring her presence, her body shifted in the bed. Was she waking up?

Please, no.

A small hand reached for me in the darkness, and my chest twisted with something I hadn’t learned the words for yet.

DECEMBER 22

LAYLA

I forced myself to wake a few minutes later, not wanting to waste any more of my nap time with Kak on sleeping in a dream. I wanted to be awake and appreciate his presence in what I now realized was a sacred place for both of us: a shrine to our past and our creation.

I nuzzled into his warmth against my face. It was hard and laddered against me and I opened my eyes with a small hum, getting my bearings. I'd slid down on the bed and was lying on top of him with my cheek against his firm stomach. I had one leg stretched between his own and the other bent, pressed up against his side. My arms were spread up over his chest, and against my belly was a warm, semi-soft bulge. With a small sound, I squeezed myself closer against him.

He seemed a little tense as I adjusted against him. I realized my underwear and apron had reappeared between us. Dreams, while gloriously flexible, could be annoying. I began to pull the fabric aside, reaching back to untie the string around the neck. I wanted his bare skin against me. No barrier.

I frowned. There was something off about the texture of the knot of apron strings behind my waist. Lucidity could seem deceptively realistic, but over the years I'd learned to distinguish the subtle ethereal undercurrent that ran through all sleep senses. Things could feel *real*. Oh, yes, more real than real, even. You taste no sweeter fruit than the apple you pick in a dream. But *something* felt wrong against the pads of my fingers as I stroked them along the length of fabric, and in my heart of hearts I knew what that was.

I'm not asleep.

Heartbeat rabbiting against my ribcage, I slid my eyes up to the face of the alien beneath me.

“Layla Oberman.” His mutter came from deep in his chest, rumbling like the roll of a tide. A warm hand brushed up my arm.

Swallowing, my tongue was dry. It hadn't been minutes since I fell asleep in the bed—I realized from the dim light on my periphery that it was morning, or close to it.

But there were bigger things to worry about than time lost.

He grunted as I scrambled, haphazard hands and knees and elbows digging into his body as I pushed away to clamber off the bed. I stood flat against the door, arms crossed on my apron-concealed chest and legs pressed together.

“Why didn't you wake me?!”

“You didn't seem to want waking.” Kuthil Ash Kharn propped himself up on an elbow. I kept my eyes firmly on his, for his hard, marble-patterned chest was bare and headed into nothing but a flap of blanket positioned precariously low on his groin, revealing the V-taper that led from his hips to...

“Not you,” I snapped. “I mean, you too. Both of you. *Fuck.*” I raked my hand through my hair, unsure of what the fuck I meant anymore.

Kak could have woken me up when he sensed Kuthil Ash Kharn's presence in the bed. He's done it before, forcing me from my dreams. He did it just a few days ago in the hotel. Why did he let me sleep through that? What had I done?

Kak rose in my chest, and I took a deep, slow exhale to quell a wave of nausea. I seethed, stifling him as he attempted to flood me with some sort of... reassurance? Acknowledgement? Alarm? I didn't need that now. I needed it hours ago!

I couldn't help myself—my eyes strayed to Kuthil Ash Kharn as he sat up in the bed, shoulders rippling with striated muscle. He, thank fucking God, adjusted the blanket more

securely over his nether region, but the knowing glint in his eye made me want to punch him. “Your sleep betrays you, Layla Oberman.”

I had nothing to say to either of them. I stood in my underwear covered by a rumpled thigh-length apron, staring at the naked alien before me like an idiot, unsure whether to be very angry or very aroused.

“I have to go feed the chickens,” I blurted out. He raised an eyebrow, presumably at my sudden claiming of responsibility for the chicken coop.

A smirk played on his lips as I felt for the doorknob and backed myself out of the room, refusing to turn around and give him a glimpse of my nearly bare ass—as if I didn’t just spend the night pressing it against his naked body. I willed my face to stop burning.

K. FORD, DEC 22

Anything to report?

L. OBERMAN

No.

DECEMBER 23

LAYLA

I spent the rest of the previous day avoiding both of them, but it wasn't enough to get over my conflicted emotions about what had happened. I felt a mix of shame, betrayal, and—worst of all—something I didn't want to admit to just yet.

Kak hadn't come to me the night before. Was he mad? Disappointed? Why hadn't he woken me in that bed? Was he testing me, gauging the strength of my attraction to his twin rival? If he was, I had clearly failed the test. When would he forgive me?

I needed to get this rogue alien thing figured out and go home, away from the drama of a fucking Visitor love triangle. One Kuthil Ash Kharn was enough to deal with.

My morning coffee had just finished brewing when Kuthil Ash Kharn entered the kitchen in a black sweater and his usual work jeans. The abused fabric of them had thinned and frayed at the thighs and knees that strained underneath it.

Good. Time to get down to business.

"I need some information to investigate whatever happened with the death of that person," I said, keeping my tone clipped and impersonal.

After a brief pause in the doorway, Kuthil Ash Kharn gave me a curt nod and sat at the kitchen table, wooden chair creaking under his weight.

"We can start with getting the identity of the two Visitors who accompanied you, as well as where you landed," I

continued.

“The landing was close to here. About one hour,” he said. “There is a base maintained by your government.”

“And then you... what, flew to New York?”

“I took a shuttle,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said.

How else would an alien get around Earth? A shuttle, of course!

I resisted rolling my eyes.

“What was the name of the base?”

“I am not sure. It is closed to visitors, but the adjoining town is not. Iron Creek. That is where the incident would have occurred.”

“How do you know that?”

“It is a suspicion,” he intoned. “My kind are not murderers. If one of us did this, he would be warped at the core. Someone that broken will express their proclivities at the earliest opportunity. He could not wait.”

That made sense. I trusted Kuthil Ash Kharn to have some insight into the mind of his kind, even if they were nothing alike.

“I will take you there,” he said.

“No. If a local was just killed, having another Visitor show up and ask questions is hardly going to be an inspiration to talk. I’ll go, and you can try to find the identity of whoever landed with you. We’ll meet back here this afternoon.”

“I think it would be better if we—”

“I think I said no,” I snapped. The last thing I needed was more time around him, more opportunity to find myself in a dangerous situation.

“Then I will call Bruce Welljoy to take you,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said. “Going alone is not wise.”

“Please.” I placed a hand on his as he started to rise. He froze. “I can drive. I don’t want to bring more people into this

than necessary. And I'll be careful. Promise. Got a car I could borrow?"

Kuthil Ash Kharn didn't look like he heard me; he was looking at our hands. I told myself I was just using the gesture to distract him, to make him stop arguing. But I was not in the habit of appeasing men by touching them, and I was a bad liar, especially to myself.

He conceded, so I guess my plan worked. "In the garage."

THE CAR in the garage was a decade-old red Dodge Ram. It had been there a while. I was relieved to have it roar to life as I turned the key.

"Workers maintained the farm during my absence," Kuthil Ash Kharn explained.

"You ended up buying it, right? The ranch?" I asked him once I pulled out into the driveway. I had just been assuming that he wasn't still renting the place. He leaned on my rolled-down window, arms comically large against the frame.

"Yes. I purchased it with strict instructions for its care shortly before I left."

I had no idea how he managed to do it all at the last minute. Ten years ago, Kuthil Ash Kharn left Earth the day I left Alabama. How could he have gotten everything organized so fast?

Kuthil Ash Kharn looked toward the fields with what I could only describe as a *loving* expression: not one I was used to seeing on any alien who was not Kak. As he admired his land, jawline in sharp relief in the morning sun, I forced myself to stop staring. I'd seen it a hundred times in my dreams.

"All right," I said. "I'm off."

He turned to me, a strand of glowing gold falling in his eyes as he leaned closer.

“Be careful, Layla Oberman.”

The concern was cute. “Don’t worry. Compared to my usual work, walking around a town asking questions will be a piece of cake.”

Was I trying to reassure him, or myself?

LAYLA

I was in Iron Creek by ten-thirty that morning, having endured an hour-long drive in which my brain would not stop racing until I cranked up the stereo and belted out the chorus of “Rock Me Like a Hurricane.”

I parked the Dodge in a spot on the side of the town square, abutting a green park encircled by shops radiating out into streets of residential houses. Iron Creek seemed to be built radially, expanding out from the park. The buildings grew progressively less dilapidated as I got to the middle, morphing from run-down wooden homes to neat little stores with stone walls.

I was deciding where to start my investigation when my phone rang with Mom’s ringtone.

“Hi, Mom,” I was throwing my wallet and notepad into my purse, getting ready to leave the car.

“Do you want to bring the mashed potatoes or the salad tomorrow?” She got down to business, and I realized what “tomorrow” was.

Shit.

“Uh... crap. Sorry, I forgot to call you.”

“It’s all right. You’re always busy. So which is it?”

“I can’t make it this year.”

I held my breath through the pause at the other end of the line.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not in New York.”

“Where are you? Why?”

“In Alabama. Look... I can’t explain this right now. I’m really sorry, Mom. I just won’t be able to make it. It’s work stuff...”

““Work stuff” never stopped you from spending time with your family on Christmas before, Layla. How—”

“I know,” I cut her off. “I am sorry. I’ll make it up to you. Send my love to everyone. Gotta go. Bye.”

It looks like Kuthil Ash Kharn would make me miss Christmas with my family after all.

Don’t be stupid, Layla. He’s not making you do anything.

I threw my purse over my shoulder and hopped out of the truck.

THE FIRST PLACE I went to, of course, was the local diner. In the evening, I’d have headed straight for the bar. During the day, a proper Southern diner was the place to be.

All right, maybe I was selfish—I just really craved some burnt coffee, eggs over easy, and hash browns.

I sat at the bar and worked through the laminated menu. A matronly woman in an apron came out the back with a cup and pitcher of steaming hot coffee. Not bothering to ask if I wanted any, she poured.

“What’ll it be?” She put her hands on broad hips.

“Yes. Hi. I’ll have the eggs, a couple slices of buttered toast, hash browns, and a serving of pancakes. And... oh, man, a slice of that cherry pie, but for after. Please.” I had to be careful or I’d start salivating before the food even came.

She bellowed my order to the kitchen window and busied herself with something at the cash register.

“Passin’ through?” she asked.

“*Kind* of,” I drew out my words, sounding noncommittal. That got her attention. Her big gray eyes looked at me, and I made a show of embattled hesitation.

“Oh, all right.” I sighed, giving up, and leaned forward on the counter. “I heard there was an alien base around here.”

Like a switch, the woman’s expression went blank, turning back to the cash register. “Uh-huh.”

“I just... They’re so mysterious, you know? I thought maybe I could learn more about them here, you know. Or,” I shifted on the barstool, “maybe even meet one.”

“You won’t meet an alien here, honey. And I dare say you don’t want to these days.”

“Oh?” I arched a brow for effect. “Why’s that?”

The woman shrugged. “Not all they’re cracked up to be.”

“I can’t believe that. They’re so handsome!”

Her eyes sharpened, nostrils flaring a little.

“But...” I rushed to course-correct, “I do hear they can be a bit scary.”

She watched me for several seconds, a withering, knowing look in her eyes.

“Your food’ll be right out,” she said flatly, and retreated to the kitchen, leaving the big metal door swinging on its hinges behind her.

Fuck.

I came on too strong. People here were likely used to dealing with tourists hunting aliens. She probably saw people like me passing through all the time.

I considered Agent Ford’s business card in my purse. Would it be worth contacting him? Could he get me more

access around here? They were the ones who asked for my help, after all.

I shook my head. I had to get as far as I could on my own. Who knew what the ETF even had in mind for the information I was collecting? No... I would do this myself, for as long as I could.

STOMACH STUFFED with food that was almost too delicious to be real, I wobbled to the little shops in the vicinity of the square and on branching side streets. I was more subtle than in the diner, reassessing my approach and determined not to come on too strong. How much time did I have before word got around of a crazy alien-obsessed tourist asking questions? Or worse—maybe they thought I was a journalist.

By one o'clock, I'd gotten nothing. I trudged through side streets, deeper into the town. Old, worn signs swayed over cracked windows, and dogs on chains watched me with beady eyes.

I glanced at a store with a battered sign of a crystal hanging on rusted cables out front. The peeling lettering read "Gem Emporium."

I paused as the curtain was parted in the dusty window, then dropped. Moments later, the chipped blue door opened just a crack. Then wider. I couldn't see inside, but it was clear the occupant was waiting.

Keeping my chilly hands shoved in the pocket of my leather jacket, I trudged up the crooked wooden porch.

"Hello?" I asked when I was out front.

The crack widened and a woman, about my age or a little younger, made herself seen. She stepped aside for me. A blank tank top with frayed shoulder straps was tucked into green cargo pants, revealing bare feet on dusty carpet. "Come, let me read your fortune."

"Oh." My face fell. "I'm all right, thanks."

“No!” she barked with enough urgency to make me pause. “I think you won’t regret it.”

I gnawed my lip, considering the situation as I looked up and down the empty street. I squinted at the corner where a dark car had pulled up to the intersection.

“Now,” she said, looking toward the same vehicle.

I entered the store.

The place smelled of incense and dust. It had been a residential house with its living room converted into multiple glass-covered displays of gem stones. Real or not, I wasn’t sure. The displays didn’t look maintained, crystals scattered haphazardly on black velvet. I reached up to feel the stone around my neck, tucked against my chest under my wool sweater. The girl didn’t miss the movement.

“What’s that you’re wearing?” she asked.

“What?”

“You got a crystal under there, right? Show me.”

“Oh.” I felt a pang of irritation. Who was she to demand seeing it? Wasn’t it a little rude?

But I pulled the crystal out from under my sweater. She pursed her lips and squinted as I pinched it between my fingers, ready to tuck it back out of sight. “I don’t recognize that one.”

“I think it’s some kind of quartz, maybe.”

Her skeptical eyes met mine. “That ain’t a quartz.”

My shoulders twitched up in a nervous shrug, and I slipped it back under my sweater. Luckily, she let it go.

“This way.” I followed her into a side-room covered by strings of clinking beads.

We sat on cushions on the floor, a low table between us. She was cross-legged, bony ankles flashing dark as they protruded from baggy cargo pants.

Her black eyes were striking, large and almond-shaped, bare of makeup but with a natural tint where shadow would be.

“You’re here about what happened,” she said.

“You heard?”

“You’ve been pokin’ around the town all morning. Not exactly subtle,” her deep voice grew serious. “You need to be careful.”

“What is your name? Do you know something about what happened here?”

She tucked a braid behind her ear, a golden conch earring flashing in the candlelight.

“Shani. And yeah. My cousin was a victim.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry won’t bring Jesse back,” she snapped.

I shut up. She called me in there for a reason. I waited.

“The Army covered it up real quick,” she finally spoke, chewing her top lip. “Said it was some sort of coincidence. An accident. Heart attack or somethin’. We’re waiting for tests, not gettin’ our hopes up.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Yeah, I know what happened. I was there.”

“Can you tell me?”

“What’s it to you, huh?”

“I want to help. I have... connections.”

“More *connections* than the military?” She scoffed. Then she held up her palms in surrender. “Sorry. I feel you can help, or ‘least want to.”

“I’ve... been doing this for a long time. Working with the Visitors.”

“*Working* with them? Then I want nothin’ at all to do with you.”

“They want to find out what happened just as much as you do,” I blurted out. “They’re horrified. This... this was not them. They don’t know violence. Have you ever heard of a thing like this happening in the fifteen years they’ve been on Earth?”

Shani clenched her hand, brass bangles clinking. “Suppose not.”

“Then let me help. Tell me what you saw.”

“I was at the bar with my cousin that night. Billy’s, you know, a couple blocks away. It was still early, so not many folks in there.”

I nodded. I passed by that bar earlier. It had been closed, probably not opening until after the daily work shift.

“So we’re grabbin’ a few drinks after work, you know. Jesse works... worked at the base as a receptionist. Jesse suggested they got a few strange ones coming through that day. All big fellas. Well, they all are, I suppose. Overheard some of the border guards saying one was a *return*, which he said was weird since they don’t make a habit of comin’ back.”

“And then?”

“Then these two aliens come in. Beautiful. I mean, you know how they are.”

“I know.”

“So they come in and all eyes go to them, right? Because that never happens. Aliens don’t just... come here. They arrive through the base and are outta here. You don’t really see ‘em around save for passing through. This one makes a line straight for us. Says hello. He’s awkward, you know, but friendly. Talks straight. Said his name was... Ro-somethin’. The way he smiled, he just...

“Anyway, he starts talking to Jesse, and Jesse waves me off. I get it. I mean, you get a chance to talk to one of them, you take it, and the alien wanted to talk. I sit off to the side and watch ‘em out the corner of my eye, you know?”

Shani blinked fast. She brushed a finger along her bottom lashes and turned back to me, resolute.

“Then they make for the door. I... I had half a mind to follow. We came together and all. But Jesse kinda gave me a look and waved me off. A while later, the alien comes back.”

“And Jesse?” I asked.

“So yeah, I left to go look for Jesse and get the whole story. By that time, the alien was already talkin’ to Leah Westhouse, and I hear that’s who he left with after I’d gone.”

“And...”

“*And* I couldn’t find Jesse. Wasn’t at home. At a friend’s house, I figured, bragging about gettin’ to talk to an alien. I just went home. Was gonna give Jesse shit for leaving me, ‘til the next morning when Aaron Sommers stops by to tell me they found Jesse not two blocks from the bar.”

“Dead...”

Shani balked. “What? No. That’s Leah. Jesse ain’t dead.”

“She’s *alive*? Can I talk to her?”

Shani stared at me then. “You really don’t know nothin’, do you?”

LAYLA

It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust when Shani led me through the house into an unlit bedroom.

“He doesn’t like the light. That’s why the curtains are closed,” she explained.

Jesse sat in an old wheelchair next to the bed, facing the window drawn with black curtains. The remnants of sunlight peeked through the thin fabric, making small spots on the walls.

“You got a visitor, Jesse.” Shani’s voice softened, and she stood behind the chair to turn Jesse toward me. I pulled up the stool sitting next to the window and sat on it, facing the man.

His eyes were empty, face unlined with any expression. He stared through me, unseeing.

“Hi, Jesse. My name is Layla,” I said in what I hoped would be a calm tone, but the shaking in my voice betrayed me. Jesse remained impassive, looking right through me. I glanced up at Shani, who didn’t look hopeful.

“He wasn’t like this before?”

“What do *you* think?” She snapped. “You think the Army would hire someone like this?”

I felt stupid for asking. I looked into the young man’s eyes and imagined the alert, sharp, handsome man he would be if he had only been in there. But he was gone.

“Was he hit? What caused this?”

“They did a bunch of testing, but we don’t know yet. Didn’t find anything in the hospital, no swelling or bruising or nothin’. It’s like he saw a ghost that sucked the life out of him.”

“Why do you think it was the Visitor? Could he have been attacked after they left together?”

“Well, Leah ended up dead right after leavin’ with the same alien. And all the hushing and testing and the fact the Army took Leah’s body and won’t give it back... Whole town thinks it’s pretty obvious.”

I nodded, still staring into Jesse’s eyes, willing for *some* semblance of acknowledgment that he saw me, but none came.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I rose from the stool and followed Shani out.

The Army had told residents that Leah Westhouse’s body was taken for a routine autopsy. Nobody was told it had a thing to do with a Visitor, but people weren’t stupid.

I rubbed my thumb into the palm of my other hand, trying to put the pieces together in my head as I walked back to the center of town, where the Dodge was waiting. The Dodge wasn’t the only one.

“Agent Ford,” I said coolly as I approached the truck. The man leaned against the truck bed, a black parka flapping in the wind.

“Ms. Oberman,” he nodded. “We heard you were here, making waves.”

“Not making waves. Investigating.”

“That’s our job, Ms. Oberman. All we asked you to do is keep an eye on Kuthil Ash Kharn and call us if you had any news.”

“And I didn’t. Have any news.”

“And now?”

The truck headlights flashed twice as I unlocked it. I dug the heel of my boot into the dirt a few times as I thought of the

best way to answer his question.

“No news worth sharing.”

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?”

“What happened to Leah’s autopsy? Has it come back yet? And what about Jesse? You tested him. What did you find?”

“I’m not at liberty to share, Ms. Oberman.”

“Then neither am I, Mr. Ford.” I pulled out my wallet and extracted my business card, holding it out to him. “In case you change your mind.”

“This isn’t a joke, Ms. Oberman—” Agent Ford ignored my outstretched hand.

“I agree.”

He stuffed the card into his pocket. I slammed the door of the truck behind me.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I sat cross-legged on the floor of the oblong shuttle. The transparent walls faded into a black floor and ceiling as they curved underneath me and over me. They gave me a wide view of the sky and planet below.

Rexa Ash Ak was across from me, long white-painted fingernails trailing up her bare forearm.

“There’s something nice about the physicality of this body, isn’t there, Kuthil Ash Kharn?” she said. “The ability to have an itch grants the satisfaction of scratching it.”

She closed her eyes as she scratched up the length of her arm slowly.

“And even with that,” she looked at me, “I still would not choose to return to Earth after going Home.”

I looked at the cover of clouds below and around us.

“I am afraid if we do not solve this problem now, you will be in the minority. I do not know how many others are presently striving to come and exploit the native species the way Ronin Ash Ep is,” I said.

“This appears to be a poison of your own making, Kuthil Ash Kharn.” Rexa Ash Ak looked at me blankly, giving nothing away by way of human expression.

“One I had not considered in my selfishness. I do not know what to do. I contemplated killing him...” My gut cramped. I shoved a fist into my stomach, gritting my teeth.

“I can see how that went.” Rexa Ash Ak was unmoved.

“I must tell either Layla Oberman or the human authorities. I am not sure which is to come first.”

“If you tell her now,” Rexa Ash Ak leaned forward, features softening with practiced ease, “she will never forgive you for keeping it from her. Humans do not forget. And she is not the naïve young girl you met ten years ago. She’s harder now.”

I felt sick again, and this time it wasn’t from the thought of murder.

“The authorities then.”

Rexa Ash Ak pursed her lips, mulling. “Once you tell them, you will unleash havoc. Perhaps there is another way.”

She bit her upper lip and closed her eyes. Her nails clicked as they twitched against each other. She opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. Finally, she spoke, and I understood her sudden discomfort. “A human to dispatch Ronin Ash Ep, but no one connected to a government organization. Someone to do it quietly.”

“An assassin.”

We shifted in our seats, fighting down our bodies’ revulsion. We weren’t supposed to do this. We evolved explicitly to *not* do this. To not even think about it.

“Give me three days,” she said, placing an open palm on her chest, tips of her nails leaving red marks on her skin.

“You know someone?”

“No.” She threw me an angry look for forcing us to keep thinking about this. “But I know someone who can find someone.”

“Why do you care, Rexa Ash Ak?”

“About?” She raised her brows.

“About preserving my connection to Layla Oberman. Not having her despise me.”

Rexa Ash Ak looked out at the world, her silhouette barely visible in the darkness.

“As bored as I am by humanity at large, I’ve had too much occasion to work with Layla Oberman not to develop some... empathy. I know what happened to her and to you. We all do. You’re all shards of one creature now, the three of you. There is no way back from that. Not one that leaves all of you intact.”

I smiled at my friend—a concept we did not have on our homeworld, but one I was beginning to understand.

“Thank you, Rexa Ash Ak.”

“Three days,” she repeated as the shuttle began its descent to the planet’s surface.

LAYLA

When I got back to the house, Kuthil Ash Kharn was in the kitchen in the very same apron he found me wearing in his bed. It was comically small for his massive frame.

“I am cooking.” His chest puffed out a little as he turned to face me, holding a wooden spoon that looked more like a chopstick in his big hand.

“Oh?”

“It will be ready shortly. Would you like appetizers while you wait?” He motioned to a platter of sliced cheese.

I glanced from the platter to him, clenching my hands together as I figured out how to turn him down.

“I’m actually really tired, Kuthil Ash Kharn. I need to go take a nap,” I said. “But I’ll come back down soon for whatever it is you’re making.”

The look that pierced me told me he knew.

Shit.

I shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for a response.

“I understand.” His baritone purred through me as his voice dropped an octave. I had taken for granted that he’d been speaking more like a human for my sake since I’d gotten here, and the sudden switch had a disquieting effect that made me want to run—I just wasn’t sure in which direction.

I backed away when he released me by turning back to the stove, heart stuttering in my chest all the way up to my bedroom. Once there, I wriggled out of my jeans and ducked under the covers in my underwear.

“Kak,” I whispered, knowing he would hear me. “I need to talk to you. Please.”

I closed my eyes and tried to clear my mind, waiting for him to take over. I had to be relaxed, but he could flood my brain with the right chemicals to send me to sleep, and then nudge me into lucidity. He’d done it before. I focused on my breathing and waited.

KAK DID NOT COME. When I woke up an hour later, my head had that characteristic heaviness from oversleeping during the day, and I had to force myself out of bed and downstairs.

He hadn’t spoken to me since I fell asleep in Kuthil Ash Kharn’s bed and then fucking *cuddled*. I cringed at the memory, wracking my brain for how one might redeem themselves to an alien. What could I possibly do that he’d understand? Some grand gesture of my commitment to him? Wasn’t permanently having him inside me commitment enough?

No, because that wasn’t a choice.

I entered the kitchen to find Kuthil Ash Kharn pouring wine from the bottle I’d opened the night before into two glasses.

“I’m sorry. I overslept.” I glanced at the stove as burned rice wafted to my nose.

“I have made risotto for us,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said, handing me a glass. “You enjoy grains, no?”

That did not smell like risotto. But the pride with which he said it made me smile and compliment him appropriately for his efforts.

I didn't have the heart to stop him as he piled "risotto" onto my plate, garnishing it with baby spinach and a generous helping of olive oil.

"How does it taste?" he asked me as we sat across the table from each other, eating. I tried to gauge his own opinion about his creation, but found no clues on his face.

"It's good! How do you like it?"

Kuthil Ash Kharn frowned for a minute, holding his bite of charred rice in his mouth.

"I think you are better at cooking."

I wheezed, dabbing my lips with the cotton napkin in my lap and then taking a small sip of the wine. "You'll get better. I'll show you."

He looked very serious when he said, "I hope that you will."

I stared at my plate, a smile that I did my best to stifle for Kak's sake tugging at my lips. But my mind soon returned to more important matters. I had to talk to Kak about what I learned at Iron Creek, but Kak wasn't talking. And I was sitting across from the next best thing.

"I need to speak with you about what I found in Iron Creek today," I said, twirling the empty fork in my hand.

He waited.

"There's more than one victim. One person died—a woman. But there was also a man. He wasn't killed, but left unresponsive. They found no obvious injuries. Do you know what could cause that? And why a Visitor would do such a thing? Could it have been an accident?"

He frowned, thinking.

"I too have something to discuss with you, Layla Oberman. I have enlisted help for this issue. From a trusted source."

"Oh?" What source *could* be trusted? The only one I trusted was him. "A Visitor source?"

He nodded. “I believe you know Rexa Ash Ak?”

“Oh. Yeah, of course. How can she help?”

“Rexa Ash Ak has been on your planet for years and has many connections. She has assured me she will have news for me within the next three days. We are to wait.”

This was getting way too complicated, the web only becoming more tangled. This wasn't about me, so why did I feel like a fly caught in its center? I had the Extraterrestrial Task Force on my ass for updates on my “spy” mission, and now Kuthil Ash Kharn decided to involve more aliens.

I had a bad feeling that this had a very real risk of blowing up in all our faces. But what more could I do? Besides... If he had to bring *someone* new into all this, I was glad it was Rexa Ash Ak. I knew her well enough to know her to be competent, with plenty of internal knowledge about her kind's presence on Earth.

“All right,” I said noncommittally.

K. FORD, DEC 23

Anything to report?

L. OBERMAN

Making progress

What progress?

Will update in 3 days

DECEMBER 24

LAYLA

“Merry Christmas, Layla Oberman,” Kuthil Ash Kharn stood tall as he delivered his greetings from the bottom of the stairs that morning.

“That’s technically tomorrow,” I said as I maneuvered past him and toward the kitchen. He followed.

“Oh... but tonight is the important dinner.”

“Yes, but we say ‘Merry Christmas’ tomorrow,” I smiled. He was trying, and admittedly, my family was extra picky about when the greetings were due. “I need coffee.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn nodded. “I will make it.”

“Please, let me.” I took over the coffeemaker before he got a chance, avoiding touching him as I squeezed past. I did not trust his barista abilities after the eggnog and risotto experience. And with caffeine, I was a bit of a control freak.

“You do not think me capable?”

I placed the filter into the coffee machine and scooped a few heaped spoonfuls of ground beans inside. “Oh no, you’re great. I just have a way.”

I set the laptop I brought down with me on the kitchen table, preparing to get down to business.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m going to look for local news about suspicious incidents. Something to give me a clue whether our rogue has moved on to other victims.”

“Layla Oberman, Rexa Ash Ak will, in a few days—”

“Yeah, I know. But in the meantime, I can do my own research. I can’t just sit here and do nothing. Not after I saw what he did to that man. And if there are more casualties, all Visitors will be in danger too. You’ll be in danger. I’m going to figure this out.”

“I understand,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said. “I planned to finish the fence for the new pasture today. But I will stay and assist —”

“No,” I waved him off. “Please, go. There’s nothing you can help with here. Google is the only assistant I’ll be needing.”

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile, letting him know I wasn’t *trying* to get rid of him... even though I was.

I didn’t tell him I was planning on continuing my investigation from a hotel. Kak wasn’t talking to me, and I knew why: he felt my increasing attraction to the physical manifestation of him. I don’t know if it scared him, but it sure as hell scared me.

Getting a safe distance away from Kuthil Ash Kharn was the closest to a grand gesture I could think of. Somewhere far enough to not think about him in the next room at night, or flash back to waking up on top of him the other morning, or that fucking smirk... Catching myself staring at the muscle rippling through his white shirt as he left only endorsed my decision.

When I had a hot cup of coffee to nudge my brain into action, I opened my laptop.

I SAT for hours perusing online copies of local newsletters, but found no useful information aside from just enough to tell me that *something* was happening. Too many times, a search result snippet about a death in a nearby town would lead to a “page

not found” error. Sometimes the articles redirected me to the newspaper’s home page. Other times the contents would be completely replaced by some irrelevant gibberish.

Either our rogue managed to control human media, or the ETF was putting in a lot of effort to keep this secret.

I knew enough to look for archived versions of articles, but nothing hit, which was suspicious in itself. I sent some of the pages to Jessica, asking her to see if she could get Mose to track down a historical archive or even just something useful in the metadata.

Then I booked a night at the Marriott and prepared to tell Kuthil Ash Kharn.

By the time I went outside, the sun was low over the fields. The barn door was open, warm light glowing in the large doorway. I walked in that direction, pulling my wool cap tighter over my head against the biting wind. I didn’t know why I was so nervous about telling him I didn’t want to stay at the house anymore. Over the years, I’d learned to be okay with saying no.

Stop lying to yourself, Layla.

I was nervous because I *did* want to stay. With each step, I stifled the temptation to just go back on my decision and cancel the hotel booking.

Because while I had no intention of getting into his bed again, knowing Kuthil Ash Kharn slept one wall away in the next room was a strange, fulfilling comfort. Being in his presence conjured more than just an unwanted, dangerous attraction. It was worse: it invoked a sense of quiet belonging I hadn’t felt before. That was the actual cause of my shame: realizing that Kak alone was not enough to induce that feeling.

Yet even if Kak and I weren’t physically stuck together, he’d always be my choice. We’d been fine without Kuthil Ash Kharn for ten years—I wasn’t about to get greedy.

I pictured what my family must be doing then, gathered at Mom’s house in Long Island as usual, having Christmas dinner. A pang of loneliness hit me. I hadn’t missed Christmas

once in the last decade, not even for my volatile work schedule. And Kak was still giving me the silent treatment. Would he ever trust me again? I hoped he would, when it was just the two of us again. Would going to a hotel convince him to come, or would I be spending the night of Christmas Eve alone?

I paused on the threshold of the barn, watching Kuthil Ash Kharn carry a plastic bucket to the feed stall. Alma's familiar head popped up from the stall on the far right.

The mare's big black muzzle bent over, nuzzling Kuthil Ash Kharn's thick jacket. He scratched both cheeks with giant hands, grinning as the mare's ears flopped limply to the sides.

She was older now, her nose speckled with heavy gray.

Kuthil Ash Kharn hadn't seen me approach, but when I cleared my throat, he didn't seem surprised.

"Did you find anything interesting?" he asked.

"Sort of... And I decided I need more information about whatever Rexa Ash Ak is up to. I also decided to—"

"Please. Wait." Kuthil Ash Kharn stopped me. I fidgeted as he stacked empty feed buckets against the wall and approached me. He ushered me outside and slid the barn door shut behind us, lowering the heavy plank into its place to secure it.

"We will talk about this tomorrow, Layla Oberman. For tonight, I have other plans."

I frowned. I had no time for this.

"What plans? I need to tell you I'm going—"

"Christmas plans."

Oh no.

"Are you going to make eggnog again?"

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I convinced her to follow me on foot toward the edge of the forest at the far end of the property. There, we walked a few hundred feet through the trees until we came upon a bare dirt clearing.

She trailed me with endless questions, but grew quiet when I threw her a glare over my shoulder.

“I thought humans enjoyed surprises.” I grumbled, stalking to the middle of the clearing.

“It kind of depends.” She rubbed her arm with her other hand next to me, eyes darting around the shadows on the edges of the empty space.

“Do you trust me, Layla Oberman?”

She shook her head. “No... I mean yes. I mean... I don't *know* you.”

I wanted to make her know me; to convince her. And I would.

“Do you trust I will not let you come to harm?”

She thought for several moments. I appreciated her taking my questions seriously. Humans had a tendency to blurt the first pacifying response that came to mind, or whatever they assumed I wanted to hear. Not so with Layla Oberman. She took each question in hand, gave it proper scrutiny.

“Yes,” she said it through narrowed eyes.

“Then look up.”

The shuttle swooped in silently. It lowered to a few hundred feet above our heads. She watched it, and I watched her, gauging her reaction. I looked down as her small hand tugged at my sleeve, gripping tight. I smiled.

“Do not be scared.”

Her laugh was nervous. A puff of steam blew from her mouth toward the blue light emitted from the shuttle’s transporter. “Easy for you to say.”

“Ready?”

“Wait, for what?” She turned to me, incredulous.

“To get in.”

Wide eyes widened more.

“In that?” she stuttered.

“You will like it. Trust me.”

She swallowed, turning in place slowly three times, her head craned up at the black hull beaming blue above.

“Fuck it. Okay, I’m ready.”

LAYLA

*M*y heart raced, and I searched for Kak within me.

Please, please be there.

He came fast, flooding me with a feather-light touch. If there were danger, he would have made it known, even if he was mad at me. He would ball up, get heavy, make me feel sticky and sick in my throat.

But he did no such thing, coating me instead with comfort, rushing to my head and my extremities, and I knew it was safe. The fact that he emerged at all only compounded my relief.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Okay, I’m ready.”

The blue-washed world around me spun all at once. For a brief second, I felt *that* feeling—that sensation of blurring between me, the being beside me, and the universe. Instinct drew me to him, and I sensed in that moment the pull I had on him as well. We faced each other. He looked down at me, fingers coming up under my chin, nudging me to face him. My hands reached for his shoulders of their own accord as his silhouette dissipated before me. I wasn’t in my body anymore, watching myself from the outside, pressed against him in a jumble of blurry lines and colors.

In the next moment, we were aboard the shuttle, tangible reality returning.

My hands hovered over Kuthil Ash Kharn’s shoulders, his own not an inch from my waist. I panted, swaying a little under his watchful gaze as my dissociation abated and I found

myself again. I was still struggling to come down from the rush I'd just experienced when the walls of the shuttle opened up to reveal the perfect blackness of space.

The shuttle tilted, and I instinctively splayed out my arms and legs against its surface. But there was no destabilizing jolt, nor the pull of gravity to bring me down. I remained upright as the curvature of Earth came into view below me, at which point I gasped and took a step back. Kuthil Ash Kharn's hand closed around mine, keeping me in place.

"Don't worry," he said. "It is safe."

He stepped forward, pulling me with him, and I followed him to the wide-spanning viewport. Kak bubbled with something light, like curiosity or... joy? Was that what it was, even though this other form of him was presently grasping my hand, thumb tracing calming little circles on my wrist?

I swallowed.

"Where are we going?"

"To have Christmas."

"When will we get there?"

"We're landing now." And the planet rushed closer, flashing straight toward me. I sucked in air and scrambled backward. Kuthil Ash Kharn was already behind me, gripping my arms, keeping me balanced as my heart pounded up my throat.

"Safe," he muttered in my ear. Solid arms wrapped around my chest, constricting me in a calming embrace even as we careened directly toward the blurry ground at breakneck speed.

Finally, the viewport flickered into blackness again and I winced, cringing back against Kuthil Ash Kharn, momentarily fearing an imminent, invisible collision. But when I finally peeked out from the arm covering my face, we were intact, surrounded once more by faint blue light.

"Brace yourself." I heard the grin in his voice behind me, the rumble of it against my back, and the curve of his smile against my ear. I shuddered.

In a perfect instant, the physical world faded once again. This time, the alien behind me and I shifted into each other in a seamless transition. And not just that—this time, I felt Kak within me too, with us. My head rolled back as my body melted with them both. I was blissfully full, their presence expanding through me. I reached for them both in equal measure, brimming with them.

And with guilt.

The thought hit me as soon as we were back in the physical present, on a beach. I jerked out of Kuthil Ash Kharn's arms even though my head still spun. It took me a few long moments to orient myself. Finally, I realized where we were.

The black water hissing against wet sand. The house in the distance on the other side of the street.

We had landed on the beach across from Mom's house, the same one where I learned of Kuthil Ash Kharn's departure from Earth ten years ago. I was still getting used to my new inhabitant then—it had only been a day. I mourned for the physical alien who lifted the veil from infinity and feared the thing inside me. The thing making me feel sick, making me dream. The thing I would come to love.

"Will your family allow another guest, or is this against Christmas tradition?"

"Technically, I'm the extra guest," I muttered, shoving the hair that the freezing wind whipped into my face aside. I'd already told Mom five times that I was most definitely not coming this year.

I looked up at him, melting a little at the concerned expression in his eyes. The Kuthil Ash Kharn I first met on the ranch, before we molded during dire circumstances, would never have seemed so *human*. Maybe I'd rubbed off on him after all.

"I'm sure they will, Kuthil Ash Kharn," I said.

“LAYLA!”

Mom opened the door and if I worried about her being annoyed at my dropping in unannounced, I shouldn't have been. Her first action was to pull me into the tightest hug of my life. Her grip loosened as she noticed the towering alien hovering behind me.

“Oh...”

She released me. Omar's head popped around the corner with a broad grin that quickly faded when his eyes flicked over my shoulder.

“Hi, Mom, Omar,” I said, stepping back to stand next to him. “This is Kuthil Ash Kharn. Kuthil Ash Kharn, this is my mom Priya and my brother Omar.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Kharn.” Mom held out a hand.

“It is Kuthil Ash Kharn,” we piped up in unison, and I would have laughed if I hadn't known it would offend Kuthil Ash Kharn even further.

“Well. Please, come in!” Mom stood aside.

“We were hoping there's space for two more...” I said as she led us to the packed dining room, where conversation immediately stopped and bulging eyes fell on the Visitor. Uncle Bob's fork fell and clattered on his plate.

“Of course, of course! Omar, grab some chairs. Nat, if you could shift over a little.”

“*An alien!*” a high-pitched voice squealed.

“Roger, be polite!”

“It is okay, Mrs. Priya Oberman. I am an alien.”

“Oh, please, call me Priya,” she bustled, making another plate.

“He won’t,” I said as I made my way to a free spot at the table.

We sat with a heaping bowl of mashed potatoes and roasted chicken drumsticks piled before us. Kuthil Ash Kharn looked at the meat skeptically, and I groaned as I remembered...

“He’s a vegetarian!” I blurted out, looking at him apologetically.

“I do not categorize myself dietarily.”

“Yes, but you said you don’t eat meat, which is what a vegetarian is.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn sniffed a drumstick. “This chicken is already dead. I will eat it.”

I shrugged, choosing not to point out the fact that technically *any* chicken he’d eat would already be dead. The table watched as he picked up the drumstick with long fingers and, after a moment of hesitation, sank his teeth into the meat.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

Layla Oberman's family were normal humans. They stared either openly or from the sides of their eyes, watching me eat their dead animals. I stifled my objection to eating the murdered bird and consumed it, sensing that there was a certain human "tradition" in the food on the table.

I found the taste satisfactory, and I understood why humans enjoyed it. But they were a moderately technological species—could they not reproduce the flavor in their laboratories? I would ask Layla Oberman later.

I made an effort to study the most important of the characters. My only real interest was in Layla Oberman, sitting next to me. But I sensed that the others were significant to her in some way. From Layla Oberman's attention, I gathered them to be the ones closest to her by blood relation.

Priya Oberman was a mildly plump female. She projected a musk of human femininity and a confidence that reminded me of Layla Oberman. Her hair must have been black like her daughter's before, but was now salted with speckles of gray that framed her face. Her eyes had similar marks of age to Bruce Welljoy, but the padding of fat under her skin smoothed their appearance. Yellow metal bands decorated soft wrists.

Would that be what Layla Oberman would look like as she continued to age? I would not object. I glanced between them several more times, developing my comparison. Layla Oberman directed a pointed stare at me from the side of her eye. What did she want? Could she not see I was studying?

Omar Oberman looked very similar to Layla Oberman. Almost a male replica of her. He sat next to what appeared to be his human mate, a yellow-haired female who occasionally put a hand on his. She did this especially when she noticed him looking my way.

The women at the table, as always, were the friendliest. They asked me how I met Layla Oberman, and how I liked Earth. They leaned in, twining the fingers of their hands before their faces as they directed banal questions toward me, the same ones all humans asked, answered automatically.

The men were quite welcoming as well, except for Omar Oberman—I sensed a tension in how he regarded me. The hunch of his back, the way he gripped his fork with firm fingers, and his propensity to stare at me but never meet my eye expressed hostility.

“Do I threaten you, Omar Oberman?” I asked over the quiet murmur of hesitant conversation at the table.

“What?” the male asked.

“Your body language indicates you are very tense in my presence.”

“Kuthil Ash Kharn...” Layla Oberman placed a hand on my thigh under the table that made me pause. But Omar Oberman continued to stare at me, waiting.

“Your face is reddening, indicating either embarrassment or anger,” I continued. The contradiction in his words and demeanor confused me.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn...” Layla Oberman said a little more sharply, squeezing.

Omar Oberman opened his mouth to speak, but Layla Oberman gave him a pointed look.

“Don’t. I’ll take care of it,” she directed the words at him. Then she shoved her chair back with an unpleasant scrape and stood. She grabbed my hand. I dropped my fork and threaded my fingers through hers instinctively as she pulled me up.

“Now you are reddening too,” I observed as she dragged me away.

LAYLA

“*W*hat the fuck are you doing?” I confronted Kuthil Ash Kharn in a hushed growl. I had dragged him to the kitchen, where only a thin wooden door kept us from the prying ears of family in the dining area.

“I am trying to understand why Omar Oberman does not like me.” He cocked his head. He had not let go of my hand even as I tried to detangle my fingers from his, and eventually I decided my words were more important than my freedom.

“He doesn’t ‘not like you,’ he doesn’t know you!”

“Why do you lie? I can tell you lie by the way your eyes shift when you do it.”

I growled and yanked my hand away from him at last to spin on my heel and pace to the other side of the kitchen. Finally, I turned back to face him.

“He knows. Almost everything,” I said. “I told him what happened with Kak. I mean, with that other version of you. He saw how Kak—*you*, as far as he’s concerned, and what you did—affected me for the last decade. I haven’t had a relationship. I’m a social recluse. The rest of my family just thinks I’m weird, but *he* knows.”

“And he blames me.”

I nodded.

“I will now apologize to him.” Kuthil Ash Kharn made for the door. “Humans enjoy apologies.”

“No!” I pounced and ducked around him before he could push the door open and make a horrible mistake. “I mean, that’s very kind. You can. But in private. Not in front of everyone. No one else knows.”

“It is a secret. I am a secret.” Kuthil Ash Kharn’s mouth was a thin line. Did he care? “Humans are not good with secrets, I think.”

“Yeah, well, I’m used to it. Besides, you wouldn’t actually like word to spread that aliens can leave chunks of themselves inside us and then make us have crazy alien sex dreams about them, do you?”

“Hmm.” The sparkle in his eye made me want to punch him. Was he *visualizing*? I looked down, finding an extremely interesting spot on the floor to scrutinize.

THE REST of the dinner went fine, some of the awkwardness fading away by the time everyone had a few drinks. I was spent and bloated with plate after plate of potatoes, meat, then finally Mom’s famous tiramisu and tea. My body was a limp blob of Christmas food, and I leaned against Kuthil Ash Kharn casually, face red from laughing at one of Mom’s stories about Omar bringing a snake for the school show and tell and then releasing it in the library.

Mom’s eyes frequently jumped to Kuthil Ash Kharn beside me; everyone’s did, even Omar’s after a while. Kuthil Ash Kharn, for his part, kept his mouth relatively shut for the rest of the evening, apparently content with observing family interactions. Was he judging us? Was he judging me? Were our silly jokes and stories stupid to him?

I shifted my hand away as he brushed mine on the table. Subtle enough to be an accident, but not one that I wanted to condone.

Inside me, Kak bubbled up intermittently. I was happy and anxious to finally sense him again. He didn’t *feel* angry. I had learned to differentiate his moods better by how he moved

within my body. Tonight, he was warm and content, and I was grateful for his existence and companionship.

I hoped he would come to me that night. So much had happened—the investigation, the shuttle, this whole evening—that I wanted to talk to him.

A few hours later, it was finally that time when the extended family and family friends exchanged knowing looks and small prompting nudges.

“Well, we’d better get going,” said our elderly neighbor, who had been part of the festivities for the last seven years.

As if on cue, half the table began rising and saying their goodbyes.

AFTER THE BUSTLE of the guests died down, Omar and I were standing on the front porch of the house, leaning against the wooden banister with cool wind brushing our faces.

“How did this happen? I thought he was gone.” Omar sucked on his cigarette. I did the same, blowing smoke away from us. He pulled his lip through his teeth, giving the stub between my fingers a disparaging glance.

“He came back.” I tapped on the stub, sending ashes down into the blackness over the banister.

“And the one inside you? He’s still there?”

I nodded.

“What does he want from you?”

I coughed out a wry laugh, looking up at the clouded black sky. “Everything, I think.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Layla?”

“Nothing that she does not wish for also,” Kuthil Ash Kharn’s whitewater voice made us both turn around.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn—”

Omar tensed beside me as the alien stalked toward us in the shadowed, unlit area of the porch. He stretched out a hand to Omar. Was he trying to make some kind of peace offering? Omar wasn't buying it.

"Can't you just leave her alone?" Omar ignored the handshake.

"Omar, please—" I started.

"No, Layla Oberman. He is right. I have involved you in things you never asked for, and altered the trajectory of your short human life. For that, I am sorry."

"Short human life?!" I balked.

"You're sorry, yet you're here," Omar spat.

"Please, stop this." I moved to get between them, but Omar sidestepped me to point a finger toward the alien towering over him. "Why don't you just leave her alone and take that *thing* with you?"

"The thing was necessary to save her life," Kuthil Ash Kharn's voice darkened.

"Shut the hell up already, both of you!" I shouted. "Ever considered letting me have a say in any of this before you go at each other's fucking throats?"

I flicked my cigarette over the edge of the railing and stomped toward the door, slamming it behind me with a bang that would have gotten me a good talking-to from Mom as a kid.

Mom was in the kitchen, stacking the dishwasher. I stood next to her and began scraping leftovers into the bin, fork jarring against ceramic. She said nothing for a few minutes while I worked in short, angry flicks of the hands.

"It's complicated, huh, dear?" She finally asked.

"A bit."

"Something's been off with you for a long time, Layla. Is this it? You've gotten involved with an alien?"

I didn't know what to tell her. I couldn't explain the full story to her now, maybe never. At least it was clear that Omar had kept my secret. I was grateful for that much.

"Something like that," I conceded.

"Well, do you like him?"

Trust Mom to ask just the questions I didn't want to think about. Kak shifted inside me. I could lie to her, or even to myself, but I couldn't lie to him. He's observed me around Kuthil Ash Kharn enough to detect how my heart quickened when I saw him, or how the hairs on the back of my neck rose when he brushed his hand against mine, or how ready I was to fall into him on that shuttle...

"I think so." That was the closest I could let myself get to the truth. My head spun then, and I had to grip the counter to stay upright as heat radiated from my chest through to the tips of my fingertips. Kak was trying to reassure me, and I wished we were together now so that I could kiss him.

She put a soapy hand on mine as Omar and Kuthil Ash Kharn re-entered the house. Hunching, I pretended not to notice them.

"Layla Oberman. May we speak?"

I ignored the voice for a few minutes, concentrating very hard on the teacup I was scrubbing. But I felt eyes boring into me and knew I couldn't disappear right now, no matter how much I wanted to.

I straightened and turned around, giving my mom a small nod to let her know it was all right. I led Kuthil Ash Kharn to the guest room down the hall and closed the door beside us.

"I apologize for my burstout," Kuthil Ash Kharn started. "Your brother wants what is best for you. I see that he loves you."

I nodded, arms crossed over my chest. "He does. But Omar also tends to think he *knows* what's best for me. You saved me all those years ago. Yes, it fucked my life up in some ways, but it gave me..."

I trailed off, suddenly feeling self-conscious about bringing up the other version of Kuthil Ash Kharn to his face. No—Kak’s presence was a non-negotiable fact. “It gave me Kak.”

“You love him too.”

“Omar? Yes, of course.”

“No. I did not mean Omar Oberman.”

“Oh. Yes,” I stammered, struggling to meet Kuthil Ash Kharn’s watchful eyes, but doing it anyway. “I love him.”

“I do not wish to take this away, Layla Oberman. He is part of you in a way I never can be. He can meet you in any universe you imagine. And I—” He took my hand and brought it to his chest. The roar of his alien heart vibrated against my palm. “I am just another side of the same shard. One you can have here, in this dimension of your world. Humans, in your culture, have an inherent self-imposed limitation. You feel you must choose. You need not choose, Layla Oberman.”

For a moment, I was lost in the possibilities of what he was telling me, fantasies of not having to lose either of them. How selfish I was, picturing having Kak in my dream life and Kuthil Ash Kharn in the outside world. Having access to both of them in all dimensions of reality. It would be a love affair more complete in its senses than any human had ever experienced. Was that really an option? Could I have my cake and eat it too?

Selfish, I repeated to myself. Kak told me *he* was greedy, but he should get a look at me. This was not my decision to make alone, and it all sounded too fantastic to be true. Just another dream, less real than the ones I inhabited with Kak.

I shook my head, letting my hand linger on the expanse of his chest for a moment longer before pulling away. “I cannot do this with you, Kuthil Ash Kharn. Not now, and not without Kak. I’m sorry.”

Back in the kitchen, Mom was drying the last of the glasses.

“I’ll go make up your bed, Layla. But we don’t have another spare...” She glanced at Kuthil Ash Kharn. “I’ll bring up the cot from the garage.”

I hoped no one noticed me shiver when Kuthil Ash Kharn stepped up too close behind me, his heat against my neck.

“We will return to Alabama, Mrs. Priya Oberman,” he said.

“Alabama?” Mom’s brows shot up. “You’re heading to the airport *now*?”

“We will not be taking your airplane.”

Mom looked from the alien to me, waiting for an explanation.

“Actually, I think I’ll stay—” I began to mutter, but a forceful wave rolled through my stomach and up my chest. It curled down my arms, constricting around them like tight under-skin ribbons. Mom waited for me to speak, but my mouth was open mid-sentence, trying to figure out what exactly Kak was communicating.

Whatever it was, it seemed like he *didn’t* want me to tell Mom that I was going to stay at her place. Did that mean he wanted me to return to the ranch? It was times like these that I wished we could just speak normally in real time.

“Yeah, we’d better go, Mom,” I said, hoping I’d interpreted Kak’s meaning correctly.

“You’re not going back to your apartment?” The wheels were turning in her head. Mom was fairly open-minded, but the thought of me, or any human, going home with an *alien* was beyond her. And who could blame her?

“We’re working together on something, Mom. There are spare rooms at Kuthil Ash Kharn’s ranch,” I said, making it clear that there would be *no* funny business.

“I’ll see you off,” Omar said.

“No, it’s okay,” I blurted out. The act of the shuttle beaming us up and down had been so wholly intimate... I

didn't know what it looked like from the outside, but I did not want an audience. Especially not my brother.

“Thanks, Omar.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll be fine.”

He looked past me, up at the Visitor behind me.

“I hope we will meet to discuss your reservations more at another time, Omar Oberman.” Kuthil Ash Kharn held out his hand. Omar accepted it begrudgingly only after I elbowed his ribs.

After a series of parting lung-crushing hugs, I led Kuthil Ash Kharn down the beach, away from prying eyes, where I knew a semi-circle of rock and reeds shielded a cove. There, we could board privately. I took a deep breath as the shuttle blacked out what little light there was above us, and prepared to plunge into the flood that was Kuthil Ash Kharn once more.

LAYLA

*B*ack at the ranch, in my guest bed, I tossed for hours before finally falling asleep with the Home world crystal in my hand. I'd never had a more stressful or more magical Christmas.

The enormity of Kuthil Ash Kharn's gift—taking me to my family on my favorite holiday—was not lost on me. It showed an understanding that was beyond most Visitors, who floated through their life on Earth unconcerned with human sensitivities.

Nor was it lost on Kak, who stroked the nape of my neck as he lay beside me in the darkness.

“Where were you?” I asked him, cringing at how girlish my voice sounded. My leg was draped across him under the covers, my fingers tracing the lines of the stone patterns in his skin.

He looked up at the ceiling. “I was coming to terms with our new reality.”

“What new reality?” I whispered. So many things had happened. I needed him to be more specific.

“I am happy that you had a Christmas,” he said. “It would have been shameful if I had been responsible for ruining it for you twice.”

“Well, you actually didn't ruin it last time either. You made sure I made it back, remember?”

He grunted noncommittally.

“About Kuthil Ash Kharn... What he suggested to me tonight. You are the most important—”

Kak ceased his stroking, prompting me to pause. The rush inside his chest intensified, his own kind of heartbeat racing along with mine.

“I was going to ask you to leave this place.” He released the breath he’d been holding as the admission cascaded from his lips.

My heart dropped, and I hoped he couldn’t tell, but I knew he could. I kissed his shoulder, his neck, distracting him from my dejection. Why was I upset? I was already planning to leave anyway.

“Let’s go. I’ll go now.” I propped my elbows on his chest and looked at him. “Tonight.”

Kak shook his head and shifted to hold me in front of him even as I tried to get closer, to close my eyes and kiss him so that he couldn’t see the stupid fucking threatening to spill. I should be able to wish them away, in a dream, but my self-control wasn’t there right now.

“I was going to ask us to run somewhere far.” His voice was rough gravel, forced sharp from his throat. “But then I felt you mold with him, in the shuttle’s beam. You merged so intuitively. I was surprised. And I felt you both.”

He looked straight at the infinite blackness above us. I dipped my head against the crook of his neck and racked my brain for what to say next. How much could I say?

“You can say everything,” Kak told me. “But you don’t have to. I already know.”

“I enjoyed it,” I blurted out. I didn’t care if he knew already. I *had* to say it out loud. Admit it. “I like touching him. He feels like you. Like what I imagine you would feel like in the real—no, sorry, *physical* world. I don’t know how to turn it off. How to not want it... him. So I’ll cut him off. I’ll—”

“I don’t want you to do that,” he interrupted.

“What?” I looked up at him, and all I saw were his golden eyes glowing in the darkness, shifting from one side of my face to the other.

“For a while, I got lost in the human part of me. It has become stronger over the years with you. And not just that. I lost control of the greed that sent me here in the first place,” he said. “All these years, you were all I knew and all I wanted. I came to expect the same from you. But when you touch him, I can feel how it makes you feel. I feel all three of us through you. I feel him wanting you as I do, and as you want us both. You’re the link holding us all together. A new design.”

He shifted against me. I sensed his excitement under the inner thigh I had sprawled across him and couldn’t help but slide my leg up slightly against the hard heat.

“I want you to explore that, Layla Oberman,” he said, the hand at my neck sliding lower. My nipple pebbled as he brushed against it. I sighed as he squeezed my flesh with a gentle firmness.

“Are... are you sure, Kak?” I whispered, searching his face. Was he really giving me this?

“I’m giving *us* this. We both are,” he corrected hoarsely. “A complete unit. Created a decade ago and separated until now. I see that now, after experiencing firsthand what effect his presence has on you. On all of us.”

I twisted around to straddle him, my nails elongating to sharp points as I ran them down his muscled torso. Glowing golden scratch marks burned in their wake as I lined the striated muscle, and he shivered beneath me. His hands slid down the curve of my back as I pressed myself against him. I was wet, so wet, sliding against his rock-hard shaft.

He clasped my waist roughly and held me over him, raking his gaze over my naked, taut body, drinking me in. Then he lowered me firmly onto his erect shaft. I gasped from both the bolt of pleasure as he bottomed out inside me and the vision that flashed on the other side of the room: Kuthil Ash Kharn, in the doorway. My pussy squeezed around the alien cock pulsing against its walls. I rolled my hips against him, my

moans escalating as I watched Kuthil Ash Kharn and as he watched us.

AFTERWARD, lying in the same bed, limbs tangled and breaths having only just calmed, Kak tucked a black strand of hair behind my ear. I purred against him; in a dream, I could express my satisfaction however I wished, cheesy animal sounds included. I glanced back at the door, where the image of Kuthil Ash Kharn had stood as Kak and I made love. He was gone.

“Go.” Kuthil Ash Kharn patted my rump with his hand.

“Hmm?” I rested my chin on his chest, tracing lines on his skin.

“Wake up and go to him.”

I frowned. “Um no, I don’t—”

“Stop pretending you don’t want to,” he smiled. “It’s all right, Layla Oberman.”

I bit my lip. I did want to. In a dream, he could read my thoughts well enough to know it. There was no use in denying it anymore, if there ever was.

I blinked, and when my eyes opened I was alone in the bed, hugging the crystal to my chest. For a few minutes, I remained still and breathed deeply, enjoying the cocoon of blankets around me and savoring the memory of Kak’s touch. I wanted more of that. I rose, slipped into my linen robe, and tiptoed to the bedroom door. In the hall, I felt my way along the banister to the next room over.

Kuthil Ash Kharn’s door was unbearably loud as I turned the knob with clammy fingers. Moonlight made a rectangle on the floor as I pushed it in. I hesitated, then slipped in through the narrow opening and closed it behind me.

His presence loomed large on the room, his energy thick in the air. I felt the sudden urge to back out; to return to my bed

and forget about this stupid idea.

“Come here.”

I startled at the quiet, hoarse rumble, and his eyes opened, flashing golden in the dark. My breath caught in my throat—I’d never seen them like that before, not in the physical world. Was I still asleep? I ran the thumb of one hand down the other, feeling the distinct texture of reality.

This is real.

He remained still, waiting for me. I approached the bed step by trembling step. Anticipation crackled in the air between us, palpable. My robe whispered to the floor. I paused at the bedside next to him, hesitating.

“Oh,” I gasped as he grabbed my wrist and yanked me atop his chest. My skin was on fire, each cell feeling for his skin, buzzing for his touch.

He reached up, brushing the pads of his fingers across my cheek then running his thumb over my lips. The heat of him melted through me, all the way to my toes. My breath caught when he leaned up toward me. His mouth hovered inches from mine—the air between us was hot spice on my skin.

When his lips finally touched mine, my every nerve ending sang for him. I sighed into his breath, heart pounding as he pulled back, eyes glued to my mouth. His tongue stroked across my bottom lip. Then he pressed his lips to mine again—harder this time—and as I parted for him, our tongues met in a dance of slow, captivated exploration. The world faded around us until there were only his hands gripping my face and his hungry mouth devouring mine. My fingers curled in his hair, relishing in the physicality of each silky strand. I scratched my nails along his scalp, desperate to feel every part of him under my fingertips.

We partook in the starved exploration of each other’s bodies, stroking, kissing, scratching, pulling. I pressed my palms into his chest, scraped and rubbed down the length of him, relishing in the solid feel of his flesh. We grasped for each other like a life-raft, each pulling at the other to get

closer, skin to skin all along the lengths of our bodies. I raked my hands up his side and to his face, his to mine, and any memory of hesitation or uncertainty disappeared as we consumed one another.

After a few delicious minutes, it was all too much. My head spun, intoxicated by his taste and his closeness. I pulled back, breathing fast. Blinking, I realized he was shaking underneath me. Then I realized I was too.

“I think... I think we should slow down,” I mumbled, tempted to ignore my own words even as they croaked from my mouth.

He was twirling a strand of my hair around his fingers, and I winced as his hand jerked, pulling against my scalp for barely a moment. I felt nothing but the rise and fall of his chest and the intensity of his stare. I raked my teeth over my lip, focusing on the line of a whorled pattern on his throat because if I looked him in the eye, I wouldn't be able to resist.

“As you wish, Layla Oberman.” His voice was low, deep in the darkness, strained with the same effort that I felt at that moment. Slowly, silently, we relaxed, calming our excitement.

Kuthil Ash Kharn's arms wrapped around my back a little clumsily as I rested my cheek against his chest and closed my eyes. The steady rhythm of his heart lulled me into a deep, permeating calm. My lids grew heavy and my breath slow as I drifted into a dreamless sleep on top of him.

DECEMBER 25

LAYLA

When I woke up, I half-expected to find myself in my guest bedroom and for last night to have been a cruel dream.

But I awoke in the bed in which I found myself a decade ago, having once again fallen asleep in an alien's arms.

He must be out feeding the horses, I thought as I glanced out the window; the light looked like late morning.

Not having the desire or emotional capacity to review the events of last night just then, I went to my own room and checked my phone, scrolling through messages and missed calls from Mom, Omar, and Uncle Bob. I paused at two texts from Jessica.

J. CHOI, DEC 25, 03:00 AM

One of the Visitors on Kak's ship was named Ronin Ash Ep. Whereabouts unknown.

Raa has contacted me about him. Weird request. Have also been contacted by ETF about you. What's going on?

I called Jessica's number, to no response. I could hardly blame her for not being at the beck and call of her *retired* former boss on Christmas morning of all days.

Ronin Ash Ep.

Was that him? The "rogue?" What was he doing, and why? And when would Raa update us on the situation?

I had managed to push the whole mess with the aliens from my mind for a little while, but now it was time to get back to the real world. Once more, I thought about what I saw in Iron Creek, and what a Visitor going around incapacitating and killing humans would mean for the future of the aliens' presence here. The future of Kuthil Ash Kharn's presence.

Shani said two of the arrivals had entered the bar and, uncharacteristically for aliens, showed *interest* in them. This happened sometimes in my business dealings with Visitors, but only when they had a practical cause for it. And they would always go in with a straightforward manner that left no confusion about what they wanted. Aliens had no desire to “play human” if they could help it.

What Shani described earlier was something else. She said the Visitor talking to her cousin went so far as to *touch* Jesse. Such a display was unthinkable for any Visitor other than Kuthil Ash Kharn, and that was only because he was permanently altered by molding with...

“Shit.”

I grabbed my phone and wallet, digging out Ford's business card. I checked the window, confirming that the light was on in the barn—Kuthil Ash Kharn was still busy with the horses—and dialed the number as I hurried downstairs.

“Ford,” came the gruff voice of an agent who had no use for cordial greetings.

“This is Layla Oberman.”

“Ms. Oberman. Do you have something for me?”

“Do you have photos of the woman killed in Iron Creek?”

“I think you know the answer to that. And that it's not anything I could show you.”

“You don't have to show me, just tell me—was she smiling?”

A one second pause stretched into a long string of silence in which I heard nothing but breathing on the other line.

“Can you come to the base?”

“Yes. I can be there in an hour.”

“See you then.”

He hung up, and I stood in the empty kitchen, alone, the hollow ticking of the wall clock the only thing permeating the heavy silence.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

When I entered the house, Layla Oberman was on the way out the door. She had the car keys clenched in a fist and was tossing trinkets into her purse.

“I need to borrow the truck.” She weaved past me. I caught her by the waist and spun her back before she could duck outside.

“What is it, Layla Oberman?”

“The death...” She gnawed on her lip, and something flopped in my stomach when her fingers curled around my hand. “Will you come with me? To the base at Iron Creek. I can explain on the way.”

“Yes.”

“Wait,” she backtracked. “You’d better not. I don’t know what they’ll do...”

“I am coming, Layla Oberman,” I said in a tone not even she would question.

She didn’t talk until we were in the truck and off the property, heading toward the town in which I landed. But she was thinking—I saw it in the slight flaring of her nostrils in her profile as she drove, and in the way she’d chew her lip every few minutes or rap her fingers on the wheel. I waited.

Finally, my human spoke.

“You said when you were on your home planet, you molded with others, right? You get a piece of them, and they get a piece of you?”

I nodded. "It is how my kind lives."

"And you had to be very careful because if you weren't, they'd fill up the parts of you that you left in *me*, and you would become someone else entirely. An amalgamation of everyone you molded with."

"Yes. It was very difficult."

"And that means *they* are similarly affected by what they collect from *you*, right?"

I nodded.

"And you said... you said you were drawn back after experiencing how we molded."

"You stayed with me, seared inside, forever. I could not forget you. I did not want to," I said.

"Yes, yes, I get it, enough with the flowery talk."

"Then you can tell me what you are leading to, Layla Oberman," I said, perhaps a little colder than I should have. Mostly, I was afraid I already knew.

She thinned her lips and glanced at me, then back at the road.

"Is there a chance that those pieces of you that the *others* got also contained parts of that attachment? That experience? Not to do with me specifically, but in relation to the act of molding with a human. You developed this attraction, strong enough to come back to Earth, from that. A planet you were meant to come to for nothing but punishment. How would that shape those you molded with?"

My silence was answer enough for Layla Oberman.

LAYLA

“Well?” I glanced at him. “Is it a plausible suspicion?”

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, my patience seeping out of me. What was wrong with him? Why was he looking at me like that?

Oh.

“You knew...” I muttered, my foot sliding off the gas pedal, the truck decelerating in the empty road. “*You knew?*”

“Yes,” he said. “I knew many of my kind absorbed the same attachment to what we felt together. They understood now, and I thought it was beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” I slammed my foot on the brake, jerking the truck into the service curb. “I almost died when we molded!”

“But I stopped you. You saw the beauty of my world, and in the end we were forever connected. Our species are so different, but look what we created together.” Kuthil Ash Kharn reached a hand for mine and I jerked it away with a snarl.

“Fuck that. A woman is dead, a man’s going to spend the rest of his life staring out the fucking window. He lost *all of himself.*”

“Happily, Layla Oberman. They both did so happily.”

I couldn’t believe he was saying it so casually. This was impossible. This was alien. How could I ever have thought we could make it work? That he would ever understand me? It

had taken Kak a decade to understand me, and now I questioned whether he too would feel the same way about what had happened when he learned of it. Or did he already know too?

Now he's making me doubt Kak as well.

“Get out.” My voice was mercifully level, steady as a thick sheet of ice that not even the toughest pick could penetrate.

“Layla Ober—”

“No.”

“I want to help at the base. I can help. Rexa Ash Ak is already—”

“Get out of the fucking car!” I screamed.

Kuthil Ash Kharn's eyes were pleading. He opened his mouth for another rebuke, but stopped when he saw the determination in mine.

As soon as he was out of the truck, I put it in first gear and slammed the gas.

LAYLA

The stern guard with a pistol on his hip phoned Ford and Daniels at the security fence of the base. He watched me while muttering into the discolored, yellowed handset in his booth.

“They’ll be comin’ out shortly for you. You can park right outside the gate there in the visitor parking,” he said upon hanging up the phone.

It took a while, but eventually, the agents emerged.

“Ms. Oberman. Thank you for coming.”

I followed them into a large gray building, the doors of which were flanked by two armed guards. Agent Daniels nodded to each guard as we passed through, flashing his badge. Kak was a pit of tension in my stomach, adding to my discomfort.

They led me to a room with four chairs separated by a metal table.

Ford motioned for me to sit. The agents followed. Daniels slapped the manila folder he’d been holding onto the table and, after a moment of hesitation, slid it toward me with the tips of hairy fingers.

“The photographs.”

I swallowed, steeling myself and opening the folder.

I had ripped my eyes back up to Daniels, who looked at me evenly but with a hint of something that almost looked like sympathy. I wasn’t prepared for this. When he shifted and slid

his hand forward, I pulled the folder closer with the tips of my fingers. I took a beat, then forced myself to look back at the photo.

It was a close-up shot of a middle-aged woman, beaming, dark skin aglow with an ecstatic smile. If I hadn't known better, I'd have thought she was alive, captured amid a joyful moment. The knowledge that she was dead made the image all the more disturbing.

Behind it, there were more. Several more, I realized with a sinking heart. What a fool I'd been to think it was just one. A younger woman, eyes closed but scrunched up at the corners in a laughing expression, a wide smile on her lips. A man, gaze turned up in the throes of manic laughter. And on and on, five more in total.

"You have to stop Visitor arrivals right now," I said.

Agent Daniels crossed his arms over his barrel chest, lip curling into a smirk. "Ms. Oberman, we don't even know what's happening yet. Closing the base—"

"Not the base." I shook my head. "Everything. All alien arrivals to Earth."

His condescending smile wavered. "Explain."

"It's dangerous. You might be letting in something different from the normal Visitors. Something corrupted that's responsible for all this. Visitors aren't inherently violent, but this one's broken. I think there could be more."

"You're going to have to be far less cryptic than that if you know something." There was an ominous undercurrent in Agent Daniels' voice, a tension that belied his words. I glanced at the photographs again. I had to tell them. Or there'd be more.

"You research Visitors here, don't you?"

The agents exchanged looks, then Ford nodded. "We have research facilities across the country and international community, yes."

“Have you discovered ‘molding’ yet?” I asked, looking from one to the other for any hint of recognition.

They glanced at each other. Their confused expressions negated the need to wait for an answer, so I sighed and continued.

“The aliens, in their native forms they inhabit on their Home, *mold* with each other. It’s like... like a river of boundless energy, and each of them is a tendril within it. They connect to each other, leave a piece of their essence with each connection as they flow through that space. It’s beautiful.”

I was flashing back to that night when I saw it a decade ago as I tried to explain. Words would never do the experience justice, but I did the best I could. Ford and Daniels stared at me as I spoke, and though the memory of it never failed to make me blush, make me *yearn*, just then I had to control myself and focus.

The men were frowning. “This is not in any of our research, to my knowledge. How did you get this information? Are you sure it’s not some wild conspiracy? There are many of those...”

“I’ve *done* it,” I snapped. “I saw it. It’s real.”

Just like that, I spilled the secret I’d been holding on to for a decade. Well, most of it, anyway.

“The point is... Kuthil Ash Kharn molded with me to save my life ten years ago. It was like nothing you can imagine. I almost drowned in it. Like them.” I stabbed my finger into the manila folder on the desk. “And it apparently had an effect on him as well. Then he went Home, where he molded with others, giving him pieces of that memory, giving *them* those... cravings. I think... I think some of the other aliens he molded with felt the compulsion to do the same. One of them came here and did the same with these people. Hell, how do we even know it’s just one?”

“We are aware of one alien connected to these actions. A male,” Ford cut in quickly. I nodded, relieved. There was still time to stop this.

“They probably didn’t intend to *kill* them, but that pull...” I looked down at my hands. “That pull was so hard to resist. I only survived because Kuthil Ash Kharn forced me back. This... Ronin Ash Ep apparently did not. He let those people mold entirely with him, and drown in that abyss.”

Agent Ford’s hands were folded on the table, one thumb rubbing the other. He did not look convinced.

“Look, if I’m right, imagine how many others might be on their way to Earth now with that same compulsion.”

“And how many would you estimate that to be?”

“You’d have to ask Kuthil Ash Kharn how many he molded with. I don’t know.”

“Where is Kuthil Ash Kharn?”

“I... don’t know.”

“On his ranch?”

“I guess. I don’t know. We had a fight.”

Daniels got up promptly. Pulling his phone from the holder at his hip, he left the room.

“Do you have any proof for any of this, Ms. Oberman?”

I shook my head.

“Then why should we believe you?”

“Because five people are dead and I just gave you a fucking explanation,” I snapped.

He watched me intently.

“You’ll need to stay here a while. Undergo a medical examination.”

“What I’ll *need* is to call my lawyer.”

Ford shrugged. “Go ahead. But prepare to be disappointed in how much a lawyer can help you in matters of national security.”

I SAT in an examination room in the medical wing, feet dangling off the padded table.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It had been at least ten hours since I arrived at the base. My phone was confiscated after the call to my lawyer, and I was taken for testing.

And test me they did. After the initial poking and prodding by gloved physician's hands, they moved on to blood tests, X-rays, CT scans, EKGs.

I knew normal medical screenings wouldn't turn up anything. I'd had them over the last ten years—X-rays, mammograms. But I was still worried that they'd detect Kak's presence somehow. It was the one remaining thing I did *not* want them to know: the existence of an alien consciousness inside of me. But when that pang of fear hit me, Kak washed through me with reassurance. I chose to believe him; there was nothing else to do.

They "fed" me through a saline drip attached to a metal stand that followed me nearly everywhere.

The doctor in charge of my examination nudged black-framed glasses farther up her nose. The mouse wheel clicked softly as she scrolled down my patient notes. She clicked and a black-and-white image I could not discern appeared on the monitor.

"Have you been experiencing migraines?" she asked me, not looking away from the screen.

"No."

"Disorientation? Anything like that?"

"I'm fine."

She frowned. "You have scar tissue in your brain the size of a tangerine."

"I told you... I hit my head ten years ago."

“You should be dead.”

“I hope that’s proof that I’m telling the truth then.” I sighed. “Are we done?”

“We’ll want a biopsy of the tissue.”

I recoiled. “I’m not a fucking lab rat here.”

She looked up at me over her glasses, her expression saying, “Are you sure?”

The door opened then, and the doctor directed an irritated look at the doorway. Ford entered the room, and behind him was a slightly shorter man whose disheveled hair did not match his expensive suit.

“Lawyer’s here,” Ford said.

Ah, yes, that guy.

“I was here three hours ago.” The lawyer pushed past Ford. “Take this IV out of her. We’re done here. You’ll be hearing about this.”

“We’ll call you, Ms. Oberman,” Ford began to walk away.

“Did you at least do it?” I called after him.

He paused, tilting his head to glance back at me.

“Close the border. Did you do it?”

He answered with a curt nod. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

I sighed with relief as the doctor pulled the IV from my arm, pressing a cotton pad and tape where the needle had been. As the lawyer and I were escorted outside under armed guard, my head swam and my legs felt like bricks. Kak had been injecting energy into my veins for as long as he could throughout the day, but even he was worn out. Now he allowed himself to retreat slowly, deeper into my chest. We were both exhausted.

I ignored the lawyer as he ran through what would happen next, how we were going to handle this, what kind of compensation the firm would seek. By that point, I didn’t

actually give a shit. If they closed the border, it would all have been worth it.

DECEMBER 27

KAK

She stifled me as long as she could, but when she fell asleep, she could no longer refuse.

It had been two days since we learned of Kuthil Ash Kharn's betrayal. Two days of her hiding out in her apartment, not sleeping deeply enough to dream.

I had tried not to make it a habit of bothering her or manipulating her organism when she really did not want to see me. But it was enough—it was time to be bothered.

We sat facing each other at her kitchen table. She traced the grain of the wood with a bare fingernail.

"Did you know?" she asked.

"No."

"You didn't even *suspect*?"

"I did not."

"How? You're practically the same person! The same species! How could you not have suspected?"

"We are *not* the same," I growled, slamming my fist onto the table. One of the lightbulbs burst above us, dissipating in a cloud of yellow smoke. I put my palms flat. Losing my temper was too human an emotion for my liking. "I have been telling you this, Layla Oberman. This Kuthil Ash Kharn is *not* who I was when we sharded."

I looked away from her. Was this what shame felt like? *Should* I have known? I knew all about the mechanics of

molding between my kind. It seemed so obvious in retrospect, the risk... How could I have left Layla Oberman to figure it out all on her own?

If I had paid more attention after she woke up in his bed, or when she went to the town, instead of withdrawing to stew in my greed like a typical human.

Shame was a disgusting human emotion. I failed her far worse than he had. I should have been there to protect her, not drive her into his fucking arms.

“I’ve been immersed in your humanity and the human world for too long,” I said, voice barely above a whisper.

And yet...

She saw through my uncertainty.

“What?” she asked.

“I fear if it were me in his place, I would not have been able to tell you either,” I looked behind her as I said it, hesitant to witness the disappointment I was sure to see. “The fact that something so beautiful between us created something so rotten.”

She was staring at her hands. The old brown tips returned to her hair, the ones she had when I first met her. She looked small and scared, and I craved nothing more than to come to her and wrap my arms around her, but her posture screamed that was the last thing she wanted.

“I’m sorry. I thought he was... could be...” Her lip trembled as she tried to steady her voice. “I thought...”

I couldn’t resist. The table between us disappeared, and I slid to the floor, on my knees before her. I pulled her against me. Her tears turned to crystal, floating up from her eyes to surround us in sparkling droplets that hovered in the air, illuminating our faint shapes in the darkness. I held her hard against myself, and would have been content to remain there forever.

LAYLA

I clutched him, digging my fingers into his flesh.

We had been so close. Kuthil Ash Kharn had entirely convinced me. By the end, he even convinced Kak. How could I have been so stupid? I must have given the worst of my humanity to Kak: my naïveté.

“You’re wrong, Layla Oberman.” He stroked my cheek. “You showed me a dimension of the world I never could have imagined. The depth of pain, passion, and love.”

I didn’t open my eyes as the room around us dropped away and my skin was suddenly immersed in thousands of feathery caresses. The rumble of Kak’s heart rushed in my ears, and I floated in the cocoon of his shield.

His hard body was still there when I woke. I shifted against him, confused.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn?” My voice was hoarse. I had just woken up—he shouldn’t be there.

“The original,” Kak answered in a bittersweet sigh.

Still sleeping.

I sat up next to him and shoved the mop of salty, tear-stained hair from my face.

“What are we going to do?”

He smiled wryly. We were in my bed now, at home in my New York apartment. I snuggled against him in the familiar space. This was where I’d always belonged.

“We are going to move on. I never should have brought you into this. We can forget about it all. Go back to the way things were.”

“We can try.”

I didn't know what it was like for his kind. But for mine, forgetting sometimes wasn't that simple.

I SAT at the McDonald's a block away from my apartment in oversized sweatpants and an old wool-lined parka, twirling a fry between fidgety fingers. It didn't matter how many fancy restaurants I'd been to over the years—nothing beat McDonald's fries for comfort food.

I suspected they'd be questioning Kuthil Ash Kharn on the whereabouts of the rogue alien, Ronin Ash Ep. He said he didn't find him—was he telling the truth?

I didn't understand why he would do this. Hide like this. By the time he was trying to explain, in the car, it was too late. At first, I was tempted to contact Rexa Ash Ak, figure out how much she knew and what she was doing. But I was so sick of it all. After being lied to, then poked and prodded on Christmas Day like a lab rat, I wanted nothing more to do with any of it. Let the Extraterrestrial Task Force figure it out.

“Go back to the way things were,” I muttered Kak's plan under my breath and crunched a fry between my teeth.

How convenient it must've been; Kuthil Ash Kharn whisking me away on an alien shuttle to see my family just as I was on the cusp of breakthrough. Was it all just a distraction? A way to buy more time while Raa helped him deceive me? How didn't I see it before?

I brushed the salt from my fingertips and scrolled through missed calls and text messages, all of which I had been ignoring aside from sending my family a quick update saying I was okay a couple of days ago. I did feel a twinge of guilt; I

showed up with an alien on their doorstep and then just disappeared.

The TV mounted up on the wall caught my attention. My heart sank when I saw the chyron ticking at the bottom of the channel: “Small town deaths linked to aliens.”

The news was out, and surely my family had seen it.

The reporting flashed between interviews with distraught locals and images of pickets next to alien homes and ETF offices. I tapped out quick messages to tell everyone I was *still* okay, rejecting the flood of incoming response calls.

I got a refill of burned coffee and stepped back into the chill of winter. My phone rang. Jessica.

“Hey...” I said, steamy breath billowing into the air.

“Did you see the news?”

“Yeah...”

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” Jessica snapped. “You’ve been getting me to do all kinds of research. I know you’re mixed up in this.”

I dug around in my pocket for a phantom cigarette.

Shit.

I’d gone through my emergency pack.

“Well? Do you not think weird alien-related deaths are relevant information for the CEO of an *alien* consulting company? Or are you going to just leave me hanging to find out on the news again?”

She was right. After dumping my company on a new CEO, I left her to deal with the aftermath of what I wrought. I had to at least fill Jessica in on what was happening, as she’d been asking me for weeks. I had thought I could keep her and the company shielded from all this: resolve the issue before it affected anyone else. In retrospect, keeping this from her was nearly as fucked up as what Kuthil Ash Kharn did to me.

I had to explain myself.

“Are you at the office?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Just stay there. I’m coming over.”

LAYLA

J walked in at seven o'clock that evening.

"Thank God, Layla," Jessica exhaled when she saw me, sharp eyes scanning my disheveled appearance. "You have to tell me everything."

"How bad is it here?" I asked.

"It's chaos. Client calls all day, every day. Raa is furious."

"At me?"

"At this *Kak*."

I winced at her unknowing reference to the presence inside me. It was weird to hear someone else say his name.

"They're worried," Jessica explained. "All entries to Earth are blocked, but they blocked the exits, too. They've been calling Visitors in for questioning. Coming to their homes. Asking if they know the whereabouts of the one who went rogue."

"So you've been filled in."

"Raa told me some of it. But I have a feeling there's more to the story." Jessica watched me warily.

"What did she say?"

"She said a human committed suicide with the aid of a Visitor."

"Suicide," I scoffed.

Well, wasn't that what it was, if the experience was anything like my own? I had been so ready to disappear into that beautiful chasm myself.

"She asked for some *very* worrying services."

"What did she want?"

"She didn't say it straight out, but she was asking about some dangerous connections. People I don't know and don't plan to know." Jessica glanced behind me, then lowered her voice. "I think she may have been looking for a hitman."

So that was her seemingly failed plan: kill Ronin Ash Ep before he could do more damage. Why not just kill him themselves instead of involving humans?

I felt a punch of nausea the moment the thought crossed my mind, prompting me to lean against the counter.

"What the fuck?" I exhaled. Kak hadn't been this careless with me in years. Was he upset at the mention of hurting one of his kind?

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, looking down at the floor as I struggled to breathe. I waved at her to wait. When I finally caught my breath, I straightened with difficulty.

"And the other alien on the ship? There were three. Kuthil Ash Kharn was one. Ronin Ash Ep is our rogue. Who's the other?"

Jessica shook her head. "I haven't tracked him down yet. And then there are the cops!"

"The cops, or the ETF?"

"Both," Jessica groaned, rubbing her forehead. "They look like they've been tracking us for a while, and came in and raided the whole place early yesterday morning. Took everything."

"Did you cooperate?"

"Of course. It's a liability. Lewis said you called him?"

I nodded. “Yes.”

Lewis was our company lawyer on retainer. We hadn’t had many occasions to use him before.

“Sorry, Layla... You weren’t supposed to get dragged back into work.”

“I was dragged into it ten years ago, Jessica. This is happening *because* of me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s a long story. Don’t accept any new clients. If a new Visitor approaches you, say we’re fully booked. In fact, it might be best to avoid meeting any of them in person for a while.”

She fidgeted. “You think they’ll *turn* on us?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, rubbing that spot between my eyes. I had to tell her everything. It was my only choice.

“Let’s get some coffee.”

I WAS EXHAUSTED and sank into my couch as soon as I got home that night. Bringing Jessica up to speed reminded me of just how batshit crazy the situation was. And the look in her eye, both disbelieving and pitying, and somehow accusatory, only drove home the blame I was already feeling.

Logically, I knew it wasn’t my fault I had been hurt ten years ago, or that Kuthil Ash Kharn molded with me, or that... that I liked it. But if not for all that, we’d probably still be living in peace with the Visitors now. Maybe if I’d gone to the Extraterrestrial Task Force from the beginning and told them everything, including Kak, they’d have foreseen the situation and put a stop to it before anybody got hurt. Before Kuthil Ash Kharn could come back, bringing the rogue with him. That was their job, wasn’t it? To study the Visitors? To know these things?

At least now that Jessica knew the full story, I could finally relax. She knew about the molding, and about the rogue, and even about Kak. I owed no one else any more explanations.

I pattered around my apartment, touching utensils and cups and countertops.

When I finally got into bed, I tossed, unable to fall asleep.

Unable or unwilling?

I didn't know *what* I wanted. All I knew was that I wished this were all a bad dream I could wake up from.

A sticky ooze protested deep in my gut.

“Not you,” I muttered, stifling a pang of nausea. “I don't want to wake up from you.”

JANUARY 1

LAYLA

The calls from Agents Ford and Daniels had not stopped coming. As the phone rang against on the first morning of the year, I wished I knew how many numbers I'd have to block before they'd leave me alone.

Kak and I were on my MacBook in the kitchen, perusing the internet for warm holiday spots. Well, *I* was perusing... He was providing tactile feedback. So far, he seemed partial to palm trees. We'd decided it was time to get away. Maybe for a few weeks. Maybe for a few months.

Fuuuuuck.

I stared at the silent phone as it continued to light up with yet another incoming call. They were especially persistent this morning, and I was beginning to wonder if something had happened. I groaned and, swearing audibly, picked up.

"Yes?" I said coolly.

"Ms. Oberman." Ford sounded stressed, like he had a bigger stick up his ass than usual. "Thank you for answering."

"There's nothing more I can help you with, Mr. Ford. I've told you all I know," I said. "Will you please just leave me alone?"

"We do need your assistance. The future of humanity may depend on it," Ford said.

I rolled my eyes. He was really piling it on.

"I won't consent to any more medical examinations, Mr. Ford."

“Kuthil Ash Kharn is in custody. He has offered to help us track down the rogue arrival. But he’ll only cooperate if you speak with him.”

So it's blackmail then. Another moral line Kuthil Ash Kharn had no trouble crossing.

“No.” I hung up the phone.

LAYLA

I had tried it all. I tried paying close attention to every bit of news coming out about what was happening; then I tried shutting it all out completely. Kak and I were flying out to Bali in two weeks, intending to rough it and backpack for three months. We both needed a fucking vacation.

But two weeks felt like a lifetime and meanwhile, I roamed my flat like a caged animal, unsure what to do with myself. I ate only when my stomach made its rumbling presence known; sometimes, I suspected, with Kak's help.

Over the last days, I had been leaving my home only to take out the cartons of Chinese takeout and pizza boxes that had piled up between deliveries. It was on one such occasion, plastic trash bag in my hand, that I was met in the building lobby by an unexpected sight: Rexa Ash Ak arguing loudly with the guard at the security desk.

"I don't know her apartment number. You can call her. That is a phone, no? Are you capable of using it?" She was saying, an undertone of irritation crackling beneath the surface neutrality. I had long known that aliens had a bit of a superiority complex that tainted their interactions even with me, the woman they'd regularly called to help them with Earthly matters.

The guard was shaking his head, fingers tense on the edge of the security desk.

“Alien visitors are not permitted on these premises regardless of what Ms. Oberman, *if* she lived here, might think.” His mustache wagged as he spoke.

“I *know* she lives here. Do not fool me, human male!” The guard’s hand drifted to the pistol on his hip, trembling.

I could not allow this to go further.

“Rexa Ash Ak,” I called out, making the long walk across the lobby to where she stood, feeling more self-conscious about my yoga pants, sweatshirt, and completely unmade face with each step—even more so by the plastic bag that crinkled as it bumped against my thigh.

“Layla Oberman.” Rexa Ash Ak sighed. I never heard an alien sound *relieved* who wasn’t Kak... or Kuthil Ash Kharn.

“Ms. Oberman, this is really not allowed, considering everything happening—” The security guard bristled, but visibly relaxed as another party approached to diffuse the situation.

“I know, Jared. Sorry.”

“You’re *sorry*? For them not letting me into buildings now?” Rexa Ash Ak bristled.

“Rexa Ash Ak, I apologize. Can we speak outside? I need to take this out.” I lifted the garbage bag as evidence.

Raa glared at the guard for several moments before following me through the sliding doors out of the building, where the collection bins sat just a few meters down the street.

“Can I help you with something?” I opened the lid of a green plastic bin and tossed the bag in, letting it slam shut with a bang.

“Can you *help* me?” She looked incredulous.

“I’m sorry, Rexa Ash Ak. I thought we were on the same page when I retired. Jessica runs the agency now.”

“This isn’t about the agency, Layla Oberman. This is about you.”

I set my jaw, knowing better than to believe Raa had come to check on me. That was not how Visitors worked.

“I’m fine,” I told her. “Judging by the news, I’m likely better than your kind is right now. How are you?”

Rexa Ash Ak watched me more closely than any Visitor usually considered a human. I stood there, wilting under her gaze, suddenly very aware of the discrepancy between my disheveled appearance and her usual mystical glow.

“How am I...” She clicked her tongue, looking up as if pondering the question. “Well, I can’t leave the planet. None of us can. Yesterday, there was an attack... And Kuthil Ash Kharn, one of two people who can help us stop this madness, hasn’t been seen or heard from in a week...”

She looked at me pointedly.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Are you?” Rexa Ash Ak’s eyes narrowed. “I know about the offer Kuthil Ash Kharn made. *He* knows where Ronin Ash Ep is. I tried to help, but it was too late. You can talk to him. We all want the same thing here, humans and us.”

I sighed into the biting wind. “Yes, everyone wants the same thing, and that’s a piece of me, apparently. The ETF wants to have me examined, and you *both* want to force me to talk to the man who *lied* to me after...”

I trailed off, focusing on a flake of chipped green paint on the side of the bin.

“After seducing you. You can say it,” she said, and for the first time I saw an alien look almost ashamed. “I understand. This is all too much for a human to deal with. Don’t worry, Layla Oberman. We will figure it out ourselves.”

She turned and cast a wary glance in each direction before pulling the hood of her coat over her head, dropping her face into shadow.

She’s afraid to be recognized.

I watched her for a few seconds before going back inside.

“If she comes here again, Jared,” I told the security guard.
“Let her up.”

“Ms. Oberman, I’m afraid—”

“Just do it. Please.”

He didn’t argue as I stepped into the elevator and punched the button for my floor.

LAYLA

The situation was escalating quickly, which was obvious by the news reporting I had watched throughout the day. The New Year seemed to bring out a fresh urgency, a desire to do something about the aliens once and for all. Start fresh. People were panicking. There were talks of attacks on known Visitor residences. News channels spouted wild speculation.

The suspected death count attributed to Ronin Ash Ep was in the double digits now, all in small towns where people didn't like to talk to authorities. All were dead with a smile. The last of the international community had closed its airspace to Visitors. I had no idea what that entailed; the sky was a big place. Couldn't they just land *anywhere*?

Military pundits explained that entrance and exit gates that worked with the aliens' transit technology had to be opened on both sides to function. Close the gates on Earth's side, and you close Earth off from the aliens. The problem was, the same gates were needed for those already on Earth to leave.

An interview with the Visitor spokesperson on Earth expressed their joint concern.

“We are working with human authorities to investigate the serious incidents which have occurred. We are collaborating to the fullest extent. We understand that Earth may want to close its transport gates to us. However, arrangements for us to go home must be made. We may no longer be welcome, but we will not be trapped.”

“Is that a threat, Ms. Loia Ash Poa?” The sharp-eyed blonde announcer scowled.

“Of course not. It is a fact.”

I groaned. This wasn't going to defuse tensions.

As much as I liked and tried Kak's idea of forgetting, with Kuthil Ash Kharn's refusal to reveal the location of the rogue, things would only get worse. Both people and Visitors were getting hurt. We were stuck with each other on a closed planet, increasingly incapable of playing nice.

It felt like our one shot to find Ronin Ash Ep and stop this was to give in to Kuthil Ash Kharn's demand. And I fucking hated him for it. But his was just another noose around the neck of my conscience. If I had come to the authorities when Kuthil Ash Kharn and I first molded, told them everything, none of this might have happened.

Or would they have discounted me as one of the alien loonies and send me away?

I should have tried.

Now I was partially responsible for killer aliens coming to Earth, the innocent ones not being able to leave, and who knew how many on their way, waiting.

I pulled out Agent Ford's business card and dialed the number for what I hoped would be the last time.

JANUARY 2

LAYLA

I had been flown back to Alabama by a military jet. My hair, pulled into a tight bun, was intended to exude an image of cold, practical confidence. I had stuffed a pocket knife into my cargo pants, just in case.

Just in case what, Layla?

I chewed the inside of my cheek, hands wedged into the pockets of my bomber jacket. I would go there, talk to him, and get out. Then he'd help the military home in on Ronin Ash Ep's location.

I didn't care what happened to the rogue from there. All I cared about was that the threat to human lives—and sanities—would end, as would the panic. I would finally be left in peace.

Strange to think that only a couple of weeks ago, I was planning out my retirement, stepping away from the world of business and Visitors. Maybe I should've just kept working.

That's what I get for trying to relax.

We landed at Mobile International Airport, and from there my military escort and I were picked up by a helicopter. I hated helicopters. They did not seem at all safe.

The flight to the base was relatively uneventful.

Whatever Kuthil Ash Kharn wanted to say, I didn't care. The deal was that I *speak* to him; nobody said I had to listen to more of his bullshit.

A black car with tinted windows drove me into town, to a park surrounded by leafless willows on the outskirts.

“He insisted you meet on neutral ground, not at the base,” Ford, who sat in the car next to me, explained. He didn’t look happy about it. We got out of the car, Ford trailing behind me as I stepped onto the wet brown grass.

I spotted him between the wiry, bare fingers of the willows, on a bench on the other side of the park. I held my chin high and met his gaze as I approached. The warmth in his eyes had no effect on me anymore—the Kuthil Ash Kharn I knew was inside me, and nowhere else. Before me was a fake, a sinister caricature.

“Well?” I called across the expanse, stretching my arms to either side of me, daring him to take a good look. “I’m here.”

The wind bit off my words. He rose. His long legs were clad in black jeans, and a black jacket accentuated his unnaturally broad shoulders. If I didn’t know any better, I might even pause to appreciate the way the fabric draped over his statuesque proportions.

“Layla Oberman.”

“Kuthil Ash Kharn.” I stopped a few steps away from him.

He approached, close enough to make me crane my neck up to meet his eyes. The spice in his scent carried a dark musk I hadn’t recognized before. I took a small step back. I waited.

“I apologize sincerely for keeping the truth from you, Layla Oberman. It—”

I held up a hand, stopping him. “Don’t bother. You wanted to talk to me to reveal the location of the rogue. Your blackmail worked. We’re talking. Where is he?”

“Blackmail?” He tilted his head.

“What else would you call this? Humans are dying and you’re content to let them, unless I see you,” I spat.

His nostrils flared, lip twisted in an uncharacteristic show of anger. I tensed, sensing once again that undercurrent of darkness underneath. I *thought* I was safe around him... But after everything that’s happened, could I be sure?

“It is not *blackmail*,” he growled. “I needed to talk to you because...”

I recoiled as he stepped closer still and leaned in, bending his head to my ear. Ford, who had been standing a few feet away, moved toward me. The glare Kuthil Ash Kharn pointed his way was withering, and he halted. The alien bent back toward me, warm, spicy breath washing over me as he spoke.

“ I needed to talk to you,” he continued in a low voice barely above a whisper, “because your ‘task force’ does not plan to do what you think once they have Ronin Ash Ep. They have had me in a cage and—”

“Rightly so, I’d say,” I said icily.

“—And if I told them his location while trapped, the situation would only be worse for all of us.”

“What is it you think they’re planning, Kuthil Ash Kharn?” I crossed my arms over my chest, wanting a protective barrier between me and the taste of him in the air.

He put his hand on my shoulders and looked me in the eye, brow furrowed, eyes sharp in their lucidity. “They want to use him, Layla Oberman. They want to study our ability to mold and replicate it. They want to use it, not prevent it.”

I stared at him, grasping for any semblance of argument or comeback to the claim. People were dead. More would die if this continued. Now, the alien who betrayed me, who started it all, was telling me the authorities wanted to take advantage of this perversion. Or was that the point? Did they want to use the aliens’ molding ability as some kind of weapon? Against whom? I realized the notion wasn’t so outlandish. Powerful people had a way of doing horrible things, abusing any loophole they could find to maintain their grip on that power. And our own government was an expert at that. Why would this be any different? And could I really trust Kuthil Ash Kharn about this again?

I faltered, glancing at Ford, who stood tense and agitated off to the side, near a moss-covered boulder a few feet away.

“You’re sure?”

He nodded slowly, still gripping my shoulders. Instinctively, I put my hand in my pocket, fingers moving to stroke the crystal there as I tried to grasp the situation.

“What do you want me to do about it?” I asked. This conversation was meant to be a quick way to disengage. Leave behind this whole mess. When would these fucking people, and these aliens, let me go?

Kuthil Ash Kharn straightened.

“The decision is yours. You know everything now. I will tell them where Ronin Ash Ep is if you wish it. I will tell *you* if you wish it. I have kept enough from you. You decide.”

Ford would have heard that. He relaxed, shoulders slumping, no doubt expecting me to demand that Kuthil Ash Kharn reveal the location to him.

The offer sat heavily between us. I turned my back to the alien and paced a few steps. I couldn't look at either of them; they'd notice my rage, and I wasn't sure I wanted to reveal that yet.

“Layla,” Ford barked behind me.

I ignored him, walking away from both of them. How could Kuthil Ash Kharn dump this on my shoulders? I was just... me. Just me. Kak rose lightly within me. I rolled my shoulder blades and nudged a wet brown leaf with the toe of my boot. Kuthil Ash Kharn seemed to have decided that atoning for his betrayal meant making me further involved. But if he thought dumping this responsibility on me was some kind of redemption arc, he couldn't be further from the truth.

I pressed my mouth into a thin line when I turned to face them both. I started to speak, then stopped. I licked my lips, which had dried and chapped in the icy wind. That same wind whipped Kuthil Ash Kharn's golden hair in his eyes as he waited. Ford's hands twitched. He looked from me to the alien.

The wet grass squelched under my boots as I approached them.

“You will take Ford to Ronin Ash Ep, Kuthil Ash Kharn,” I said.

Ford's relief was obvious in the softened lines of his face. "An escort is unnecessary. I'll take the location. Thank you."

I shot him a look. "You will take both of us."

Kuthil Ash Kharn frowned. "Layla Oberman, it is not safe to—"

"You will take both of us," I repeated.

I took a step closer, and Kuthil Ash Kharn bent toward me.

"I've made *that* decision, Kuthil Ash Kharn," I whispered, low enough for Ford not to hear. "You decide how to deal with it from here. All I know is he needs to be stopped."

That fucking pang of illness hit me again, and I wavered. Kuthil Ash Kharn grabbed my waist to hold me steady, and I could see the pain in his own face. We caught our breaths, both of us, and I saw the knowing look in his eyes. As Ford strode toward us, I stepped away.

Kuthil Ash Kharn nodded.

"Ms. Oberman," Ford barked. "This is a military operation. Civilians are prohibited from partaking. You cannot —"

Kuthil Ash Kharn tilted his head in Ford's direction, but kept his eyes firmly on me. "If you want to know where the rogue alien is, you will do as she says."

"I see." Ford scowled, grim as he watched us.

He fell into step beside me as we walked back to the car.

"What did you say to him?" he asked me.

The only answer he received was the wet squashing of our boots against the grass.

"We have much more to talk about than you let on, Ms. Oberman."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Ford."

LAYLA

I was happy when the thick headset was put over my ears. It drowned out the roar of the helicopter rotors. I was buckled in next to Kuthil Ash Kharn. There should've been enough room for three people in the row of connected seats, but his size made the space uncomfortably tight. Our knees touched, and I pressed myself close as I could to the opposite wall.

Ford sat across from us, hand occasionally drifting to his pistol as though double checking its existence. His eyes darted from me to the alien, a new alertness there that wasn't present before. A new knowing too.

I thought Kak was the one who made me sick at the thought of harming Ronin Ash Ep before—his way of objecting to the idea. Seeing Kuthil Ash Kharn exhibit the same reaction made me realize that maybe this was something bigger than Kak.

There was no time to dwell on it. The look of understanding that passed between us in the park made it clear that we had the same thought. If Kuthil Ash Kharn followed through with his commitment to fix this, maybe I wouldn't feel so dumb about losing myself in him, or for dragging myself into this mess. I could leave him behind with some closure at least.

“So where are we going, Mr. Kuthil Ash Kharn?” I heard Ford's voice in my headset.

“The place you call Chicago.”

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

We sat in the humans' flying machine, which they called a helicopter. It was too loud, and the apparatus over my ears was uncomfortable but welcome for its muting properties.

I was strapped next to Layla Oberman. At first, I did not want to clip myself into the fabric belt with metal clasps. They looked somewhat like the safety belts in human cars, but much heavier. Was this a trap to imprison me again?

But when I saw Layla Oberman strap herself in beside me, I decided it must be safe. She would not let herself be captured so casually.

Our legs touched in the narrow space. She tried to distance herself against the side of the machine. I spread my stance wider, chasing the contact.

The humans' Extraterrestrial Task Force agent sat across from us. Something ticked behind his eyes.

When Layla Oberman instructed me to determine how to stop Ronin Ash Ep, her body revolted, too, and I realized we were thinking the same thing. Her reaction was milder than mine perhaps. I hid the extent of the searing convulsions in my gut. It made sense; her body was inextricably linked with my shard. My shard would react to violence against its own like any of my kind.

This body was capable of doing the job if I could only get past the reaction instilled within me. Only now it was even more important—I would be doing it not just to solve the

problem, but to prove myself trustworthy to Layla Oberman once more. I stifled a groan through another pang of pain.

“So where are we going, Mr. Kuthil Ash Kharn?” I heard Ford’s voice in my ear, through the heavy foam cup pressed against it.

“The place you call Chicago.”

The agent pulled out his communication device and began tapping fast.

LAYLA

*K*uthil Ash Kharn had not given the driver of the car who met us at the landing in Chicago an address. Instead, he gave directions. Aliens weren't known to be familiar with our cities to the point of such easy navigation.

He's already been here.

Had he spoken to Ronin Ash Ep? Tried to convince him to stop what he was doing, or else turn himself in? Or did they exchange stories about their "conquests," about what molding with a human felt like? I scowled.

The entire time, Ford was on his phone, typing away. I had no doubt we were being tracked, with units following our every move, ready to swoop in as soon as we reached our destination. I could only hope Kuthil Ash Kharn would have the time to act before they arrived. If he was telling the truth, the agents would not allow Ronin Ash Ep to be... taken care of. I skirted the thought.

"Turn here," he pointed the driver into a narrow side street.

Once out of the car, I hugged my arms against my chest. My breath billowed into the air. I hadn't been expecting to leave the mild winter of Alabama on this little field trip, but here we were, freezing our asses off. My boots crunched on the thin layer of salt and grime on the pockmarked asphalt.

"You are to stay back," Kuthil Ash Kharn instructed Ford. "They will not let me in with you."

"But they'll let you in with her?" Ford jutted his jaw in my direction.

“She is the bait,” Kuthil Ash Kharn said blandly. I stared at him. “Follow us in five minutes.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn motioned for me to come. I jogged to keep up with his strides as he led us down the narrow street, then took a sharp left into an alley.

“Is five minutes long enough?” I muttered when Ford was out of earshot.

“It will have to be.” He pushed a rusty metal door. It creaked open, and we entered a hallway lit by a single flickering light overhead.

“No guards? I thought I was bait.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn grunted. “I had to invent an explanation. Stay behind.”

I grimaced when he clamped his hand around mine, but let him lead me as I trailed his steps. I followed the alien through the hall and down a set of concrete stairs. Our footsteps reverberated against the cracked plaster walls.

“Do you have a weapon?” I asked.

“I do not need a weapon.”

Was I about to witness Visitor hand-to-hand combat? What if he lost?

“Wait.” I stopped him with a squeeze of my hand in his. He turned. I pulled the pocket knife from my pants, extracted the blade, and shoved the hilt into his hand. “Take this.”

His eyes softened as his fingers curled around the hilt. His thick brows knotted together as he pushed open another door and led us out into a brightly lit chamber with a high ceiling. I held a hand to my face, blinking against the sudden influx of light.

“Why, Kuthil Ash Kharn.” An iron drawl reached my ears. “You brought us a snack.”

His form came into view as my eyes adjusted. The alien sat on a collection of cushions at the end of the room. An LED lamp positioned above him cast sharp shadows on his angular

face. The dip of his lip curled in a lopsided, boyish smirk. A strand of brown hair fell in front of his eyes, and he brushed it away, lips parting.

“And you brought another friend,” he said, looking behind me. I looked back to see Ford enter, hand on his belt.

Shit. He didn't wait.

There was no backup behind him yet. How long did we have? If they got there, and if Kuthil Ash Kharn had been right about the ETF, they would never let him... finish the job. I swallowed.

Kuthil Ash Kharn approached. Each step he took looked painful. By the time he stood before the other alien, his body shook.

“You don't look well, Kuthil Ash Kharn.” Ronin Ash Ep leaned forward and pushed a platter of bread and oil toward Kuthil Ash Kharn. “Here, have some.”

Ford's phone was buzzing with dull vibrations in his pocket. I walked toward the aliens, and he followed. Ronin Ash Ep's vacant eyes slid to us, but he didn't seem concerned. We stood feet away from the rogue and I stared at Kuthil Ash Kharn, whose jaw was clenched tighter than his fists. The blade glinted in his hand. I glanced at the pistol on Ford's hip, then at the doorway behind us, expecting units to arrive at any moment. Would Ford try to stop this?

“Kuthil Ash Kharn,” I snapped. There wasn't much time.

Ronin Ash Ep lifted his full brows. “Oh! Wait, are you... trying to kill me, Kuthil Ash Kharn?”

His boyish laughter rang distorted through the room, and he rose from the pile of pillows to his feet.

Ford's nostrils flared and he, too, looked at the door, then at his watch. Backup was late.

“How do you expect that to go? Haven't you told them?” Ronin Ash Ep cocked his head. “You can't kill me. You can't even *think* about it.”

Bile crawled up my throat. I swallowed and sucked in a breath as my ears rang and my skin burned, clammy and hot. The room spun as I tried to get ahold of myself.

Kuthil Ash Kharn grunted and made a step toward the rogue, but in the next moment he had doubled over, collapsing to one knee. My own legs buckled, and I came crashing down, my knees cracking against the concrete floor. I barely registered the confusion in Ronin Ash Ep's eyes as they flicked to me.

Sweat dripped from my face, my clammy hands leaving dark marks on the concrete. Ford was on me, grabbing me by the arm to pull me up. He was yelling something, but I couldn't make it out. My ears rang. The stampede of boots approaching from the hallway just outside the door rattled in my head.

We were out of time.

Then the world came into sharp focus. Adrenaline shot up my spine, into my brain, clearing the fog. I swallowed down the bile, stifled the nausea, as heat surged through my muscles. Ford, still in the process of hoisting me upright, began to turn around as the metal door behind us banged open. My vision was a tunnel zeroing in on his belt. I jerked forward, snapping the clasp of the holster with possessed fingers, the other hand reaching in to extract the gun. I was back at the shooting range, body moving instinctively with muscle memory.

In slow motion, Ford's hand reached for my wrist, but it was too late. I released the safety, gripped the pistol in both hands, and took aim just as the masked soldiers burst through the door, bodies pressing in like a wave. I turned away from their yells and the barrels raised in unison. My finger was steady, sliding off the flat metal to curl around the trigger. My chest strained as I inhaled, then let it go, squinting as I lined up the sight.

It was done in less than a second. Before the soldiers could fire a single shot. Ronin Ash Ep stumbled back, wide eyes staring at me before I even heard the thunderclap of the gunshot reverberate against the walls. He went down on his

back, hands sliding along the slick blood oozing from his chest. I tasted iron in my mouth, and all at once the newfound energy left my body.

I crashed back to my knees and retched. Kuthil Ash Kharn was on me, lifting my limp form. Ford, I saw through blurry eyes, bent to pick up the pistol I dropped to the floor. He gestured wildly to the soldiers, yelling for a medic. For whom? Me or the alien?

My head rolled back in the alien's arms, and everything went black.

JANUARY 3

LAYLA

A warm breeze grazed my face, and I sighed, inhaling traces of sap, fig, and vanilla deep into my lungs. I wriggled a little in the dry grass against my back, savoring the scratch.

I heard the rush of a familiar heart beside me and flipped on my side, resting my head on my bent elbow. Finally, I opened my eyes.

Kak was stretched out next to me, head propped on his hand. I followed the line of his neck to his jaw, his face. The lack of subtle blue glow in his eyes and the dulled marble whorls in his skin looked worryingly familiar. His golden hair had turned straw yellow, the customary flashes of inner light subdued. He was the gaunt, tired image of Kuthil Ash Kharn ten years ago. It was the last morning I saw him in the flesh, mere hours before he left Earth.

“Don’t go,” I whimpered as his arms settled me into the cloud.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he soothed. He cradled his hand over the back of my head and drew me into his chest, fingers working through my hair.

“What’s wrong with you?” I pulled back and brought my hand up to his face. Tentative fingertips traced along his chin.

“You did it, Layla Oberman.” He looked down at me and his smile was tired, but full. “The one of my kind who was killing your people is dead.”

“No, I mean...” I frowned and shifted off of him, propping myself on an elbow across his legs. “What happened? Why couldn’t Kuthil Ash Kharn do it? And why are you sick? Why did *I* feel sick?”

He closed his eyes for several moments, a muscle working in the back of his jaw. When he spoke again, it was with concerted effort.

“Violence against my kind is unthinkable when we’re in our true forms. In human form, it becomes a *physical* possibility, but an inner... aversion, of a sort. We have never harmed our own. The mere thought of such an act creates a visceral reaction in me. In all of us. That is what you saw in Kuthil Ash Kharn, and that is what you felt... My reaction to the prospect of harming another of my kind.”

“So that’s why he didn’t do it. He couldn’t.”

Kak nodded. “I almost stopped you. I had to dig into whatever humanity I drew from you over the years to suppress the reaction and instead give you what energy I could.”

“You had to connect with your human side to enable violence. I really have twisted you.” I smiled wryly.

Firm fingers tilted my chin up to face him, and dull eyes pinged between my own. He brushed a thumb over my cheek, studying me.

“We have twisted each other, Layla Oberman,” he muttered and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “But now you should wake up.”

“No,” I whined and nuzzled my nose against his chest. “I’m fine right here.”

He smiled, fingers curling against my face.

“You have to, Layla Oberman. Your family is concerned.”

I sat back with a frown. “Why?”

I recoiled as the night meadow flashed out of existence and we were in a hospital bed. My hospital bed. Was that where I was out there? I glanced at the beeping monitors all around me.

“Will you be all right?” I was worried about leaving him. He *said* he wouldn’t go anywhere, but...

“I will regain my strength as you do.” He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and brought my hand to his lips. “And for that, you can’t be in a coma.”

I sighed and nodded. It was time to wake up.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

She took a very long time to wake, and despite the rudimentary beeping tools attached to her by the doctors at the medical building monitoring her body's functioning, I was increasingly worried.

I had failed in the mission Layla Oberman set out for me, betraying her trust yet again. And now she was here, sick for having to finish my job.

I pushed myself closer to the bed when a dimple formed between her brows and her eyelashes twitched.

"Kak?" she muttered hoarsely.

"No, Layla Oberman." I forced a smile when her eyes flicked open.

"Kuthil Ash Kharn," she said. I nodded. I took the plastic cup of water from the table next to her bed. She accepted it gladly and drank, moistening her chapped lips.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

She was regaining alertness now, sitting up against the pillows. "Where am I?"

"Hospital in New York. New York in New York, I mean. Not New York in Alabama."

"Yes, I figured." There was a hint of amusement in her eyes. A good sign. Then she frowned. "They just let you... us... go?"

"For now. You have a very good lawyer and assistant."

“Jessica was here?”

“She left one of your hours ago. Layla Oberman, I failed ___”

There was movement in the semi-transparent curtain that hung over the glass wall in the room. The door swung open, and Priya Oberman and Omar Oberman rushed in.

They pressed to her bedside, swooping in with tears, smiles, and much relieved gushing. I got out of their way, and they paid me no mind, focusing their attention on their child. Layla Oberman beamed, the color returning to her face as her mother smoothed her hair. I watched her glow for several seconds before slipping out quietly. There was no room for me in their midst, not anymore.

JANUARY 10

LAYLA

I sat on a stool at the kitchen counter in my apartment in my fluffy cotton bathrobe, staring idly into the flame of the vanilla-scented candle before me. The dark red in my wineglass appeared almost black in the dim lighting. I'd gotten back from dinner just two hours ago. Now, having showered and tied my wet hair into an absorbing microfiber towel, I watched large chunks of snow blanket the sky outside my window and rolled small sips of the bitter red on my tongue.

I hadn't checked the news since the hospital. Jessica sent a couple of updates my way. Apparently, "talks" were happening; arrangements to allow Visitors to leave the planet. Entry, as far as I knew, would remain indefinitely closed. I wondered how many would choose to go Home, with the hostilities of the human population against them.

Eleven. That was how many people Ronin Ash Ep killed before we got to him.

I took another sip and tried to think about something else.

Kak had recovered, at least. The act of partaking in a murder of his kind had taken a lot out of him. Just as he healed me and gave me strength when I was ill or hurt over the years, I'd sought to do the same. Figuring that soothing energy and calm might help, I signed up for a yoga class hosted in my apartment building. I'd even made several poor attempts at meditation.

The shooting range felt like more of a meditative experience for me than sitting on the floor with my legs

crossed with an app instructing me to follow my breath, but I wasn't sure if that would just awaken a trauma inside Kak, and stayed away for the time being.

I hoped all that, along with the book club I'd joined, might be a good way to *finally* kickstart my "retirement."

I had no further contact with Kuthil Ash Kharn after the hospital. Sometimes at night, when I no longer had outings with friends, or Omar, or yoga, or the book club to keep me busy, I thought about him and what we almost shared. About the evenings watching the sky together as we leaned against the pasture fence, the satisfying ache in my muscles, and scrubbing the scent of the barn from me in a scalding hot shower. Then I'd will the thought away, which usually just made me think of it harder, and then I'd open that stupid fucking meditation app.

The crackling vanilla candle was on its last flickers when I finished the wine. My second glass, plus the one at dinner, gave me a nice, warm buzz. That helped take my mind off things, especially when I threw away the cigs.

The knocking made me startle. I set the empty glass aside and padded to the door. My phone buzzed with the chime of an SMS on the kitchen counter as I looked through the peephole. I recognized a familiar face: Zorin Ash Rhaz, whom Rexa Ash Ak had introduced me to at my retirement party weeks ago.

I opened the door as far as the chain latch would allow.

"Zorin Ash Rhaz?" I asked. "What are you doing here?"

In my buzzed state, I was perhaps a bit more informal than I normally would be with an alien and potential client.

"Layla Oberman." The worry lines between his brows softened. "I need your help."

I am fucking retired!

"I'm no longer involved in the day-to-day operations of my old firm, Zorin Ash Rhaz. I'm sure Jessica Choi would be thrilled to help you in the morning."

“Please.” There was an urgency in his plea. “It’s about Rexa Ash Ak. This is a more private matter.”

I frowned. I hadn’t heard from Raa since she came to see me at my apartment. There wasn’t really much to talk about that Jessica wouldn’t already be helping her with. Was she in trouble with the ETF for her involvement with Kuthil Ash Kharn?

“One sec.”

I closed the door to unlatch the chain, then stepped aside for him to enter, tightening my robe at the collar. I may not be “working,” but I still needed to be presentable. I pressed a hand to the towel around my head, tucking a wet strand underneath.

Zorin Ash Rhaz made straight for the living room, and I followed. He stopped at the large window, staring out at the snowfall and the dark cars inching through white roads. I stood beside him.

“What is it?” I asked. With his crimson hair slicked back, his profile was sharp and statuesque, as handsome as any and all Visitors. I’d gotten used to that by now. The slight bump in his nose added a tiny bit of novel humanity to his otherworldly masculinity, and it somehow made him look all the more enticing. Green eyes sparked in what little moonlight peeked through the snow and clouds.

“I’ve waited for so long.”

“For what, Zorin Ash Rhaz? Is Rexa Ash Ak okay?” My chest tightened. Was he afraid to tell me what was wrong? It must be bad. Why else would he be stalling?

His sharp green eyes slid to me. Aliens had a way of watching you like one might watch a zoo animal: with a trace of pity and condescension, even if their behavior contained no hints of such emotion, though often it did. Their eyes betrayed their otherness as much as the rest of them did. But these eyes were different—they didn’t look at me like an animal. Instead, they looked through me, as though pinning my soul in place

and studying it under a microscope. It reminded me of wilting that day ten years ago under Kuthil Ash Kharn's gaze.

I needed to get out from under that feeling. It was unnerving, and Kak stirred and crawled under my skin, making me ill. I remembered the text message: a perfect excuse to change tack.

"Sorry, one sec," I mumbled, and went to the kitchen counter to unlock my phone. The SMS was from Jessica. I'd been trying to avoid checking notifications so late in the evening: doom scrolling through Visitor news didn't exactly help me get my mind off things. But now I needed a reason to step away and gather myself. I opened it with fumbling fingers.

J. CHOI, JAN 10

Not sure u still need it, but finally got name of the other arrival on that ship. "Zorin Ash Rhaz"

I froze. A flare spiked up my arms and legs as Kak flooded my limbs, first with raw panic and then with a blaze of energy. The air hummed in my hyper-sensitized ears. Before I even turned around, I knew Zorin Ash Rhaz was already there. I sensed the weight of his aura against every taut nerve in my back.

I stared at his chest inches away, clad in a wrinkled white shirt with a faint red smudge on the collar. I swallowed as he reached out to pinch the edge of my robe with long, icy fingers. His gaze slid to my neck, then lower, head tilting as he nudged the fabric aside. I took a step back and tightened the cotton around myself once more.

"You need to leave, Zorin Ash Rhaz." I kept my voice steady, staring at one of the buttons on his shirt.

"Do not be afraid, Layla Oberman. I have waited so long. Years. To finally find you." His eyes burned into my skin, but I refused to meet them. They say eyes are the windows to the soul, and I wanted to cut off all access to mine. I backed away as he stepped forward, wincing when the hard edge of the counter dug into the small of my back.

“What do you want from me?” I asked. I tried to remember if I had anything useful on the counter. A knife... a bottle... something I could use to defend myself.

“I want to give you what you’ve longed for all these years, Layla Oberman. I remember your ecstasy when you saw my world. *You*, Layla Oberman. Not some stupid humans like the ones Ronin Ash Ep contented himself with. The original.” I shuddered as he took my face in his hand, the gentleness of his fingers somehow grotesque. When he brushed my chin, my gaze flicked up by instinct, but fixed it on his mouth and no higher.

“Look at me,” he said, his grip tightening on my cheeks, thumb digging into the corner of my mouth as he wrenched my face up to him. “I said look.”

My jawbone throbbed, and I did as he instructed in the vise of his hand. Something crawled up my spine when the twisted gleam in his eye declared his triumph. My gulp was too loud in the silence as he bent, green orbs holding my gaze, and drew a long breath at the taut column of my throat. I snarled, wrenching chin out of his grasp.

My attempt to sidestep him failed as he slammed his hands into the counter on either side of me, looming over me like a vulture. “I will show you what a complete molding is, Layla Oberman.”

“I don’t want to mold with you. I don’t want to die.”

“It isn’t a death and you know it. It is a joining.”

“No. Your kind can join, but my kind can only... only disappear. I almost did. You remember? I almost disappeared into Kuthil Ash Kharn.”

His smile looked distant. “I remember.”

The opportunity wasn’t lost on either me or Kak. Another burst of energy cracked through me, winding my muscles tight, and I struck out with a knee.

“Fuck,” he grunted, stumbling back when it connected with his groin.

I ducked past him and bolted for the door, hand already reaching out to turn the bolt, wrench it open. In my mind's eye, I saw the map of my next steps: making it down the hall, pulling the emergency lever, staying within sight of the security cameras as I dashed for the stairwell.

I didn't get to do any of that. My fingers had just touched the brushed metal of the door handle when a steel grip curled around my wrist and yanked me back from my escape. Something made a cracking sound in my arm, but I didn't feel it. My robe crumpled down my shoulders as the alien slammed me into the ground with a flat palm against my sternum, straddling me as he began stripping his clothes.

For a few ringing moments, I just lay there, dazed from the force of the impact, the breath knocked out of me. He moved with sharp urgency as he shucked off his shirt. Muscle rippled under whorled skin beaded with sweat above me, and that was when I snapped back into action. I clawed at his chest, landed punches to his abs, neck, jaw. But he may as well have been a rock, and realizing the futility of my fight squeezed furious tears onto my cheeks.

"Your shard's strength isn't enough to stop me, Layla Oberman," he grunted as he crashed forward on top of me, nailing my wrists to the floor with his hands. "If you relax, it will be easier for you."

"Fuck you," I spat, twisting underneath him. It was no use. He sprawled his bare torso against mine, trapping me under his weight. The rush of his heart whooshed against me, and my own pounded against my ribs.

As a last ditch effort, I twisted my neck and sank my teeth into his shoulder, hard enough to taste iron. He grunted and switched grips, pinning both of my hands with one of his over my head. He used the other to twist my neck and force my cheek against the floor. My breathing came in short, constricted gasps, but still I screamed my throat raw as the outline of his body started to vibrate and shift, losing its solidity. I squeezed my eyes shut, willing my body to obey, but it was hopeless: my skin began to give, undulate against him.

My body yelled, protested, and begged, but it wasn't me anymore. I, the real me, was falling into something bigger and deeper, a bottomless river that beckoned to me—and oh, God, I wanted it. My shell arched up toward that heat, back taut and arms grasping instead of pushing away.

“*Ooof*,” the alien on top of me released a sharp exhale, and his solid mass relaxed against me. I kept my eyes squeezed shut, willing myself to keep moving toward the eternal abyss that waited for me. I couldn't see it yet, but I was so close to its rush. So fucking close.

Something was wrong. I whimpered as the comforting weight was removed. Why did he stop? I clutched for the sensation, but it was already gone like a dream slipping through my fingers. Slowly, I peeled my eyes open. My vision was wet and blurry, and I blinked a few times to bring the world into focus.

Zorin Ash Rhaz lay face down next to me, a black pool gathering underneath him. Above me stood Kuthil Ash Kharn, gripping a pocket knife dipped in black. It clattered to the floor as he keeled over, crashing on his knees. He shuddered, fingernails digging into the wooden floorboards. I groaned and rolled to my stomach, then dragged my knees up under me. I rattled my head to clear it as I crawled to him.

“Kuthil Ash Kharn,” I muttered, and my broken voice sounded like someone else. But as I kneeled beside him, wrapping an arm around his hunched form, my body and I seemed to shift back into one cohesive entity. The first thing I felt was the blood and sandpaper of my torn throat. I winced as I swallowed against it.

The room spun, but I forced myself to my feet, and a sluggish current of energy gave me the strength to pull Kuthil Ash Kharn up with me, if only just barely. He leaned on me as I half-dragged him to my bedroom. By the time I got him into the bed, I was on the verge of exhausted collapse. Kuthil Ash Kharn was passed out, dead to the world.

I stumbled back out to ensure the door was locked, not looking at the body of my attacker, rounding it as widely as

the small space allowed. Shaking fingers latched the deadbolt and the chain, unlatched it, then latched it again, to be sure.

When I returned to the bed, I almost let myself close my eyes and crash into the softness of the mattress under my knees. But I crawled next to Kuthil Ash Kharn and put my ear against his chest, breathing a sigh of relief when I heard a subdued but undeniably present rush of life under his ribs. Alive. I collapsed against him, sprawling my arm across his trunk.

He saved my life when I was so ready to give it up yet again. What was so different about him than the others? While they craved to consume us, Kuthil Ash Kharn wanted nothing more than to keep me alive. He could have so easily taken me as well. Had he taken Zorin Ash Rhaz's place, I would have plunged into him willingly. I would have begged for it.

I groaned to myself. Once again, the alien next to me pulled me from the precipice. What's more, he overcame his innermost barrier to kill one of his own. How did he even know I needed him?

"A complete unit, one created a decade ago and separated until now," I whispered Kak's words, forcing myself to speak them aloud even through the burn in my throat.

Now, lying next to him in my own home and bed, that was what I felt even underneath the bruising and exhaustion: completeness. That wasn't all, though. There was a subtle taste of something more primal building within. I pressed my head to his chest again, checking and double-checking. The rush of life was there, stronger than before. I relaxed and remained there, drifting in and out of consciousness to the sound of his soul surging against my ear.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I felt her in the pitch blackness. She was curled against me. I stirred, and she pressed closer with a small sound. I took stock of myself. It was hours later. I was tired, but it seemed enough time had passed for the sickness to ease. The blood ran strong through my veins, clearing what poison was left. The earlier incessant rattling in my skull had dissipated.

I had found her underneath the intruder, half-gone. She was too close. My body cramped and bile rose as I thrust the knife she had given me into Zorin Ash Rhaz's back again and again. Blood pounded in my ears. She protested when I pulled his corpse off of her, desperation contorting her features. I did not know what I would walk into when I reached her residence, but I had felt that something was very wrong. I sensed it in my core, and I was right.

Now we lay in total darkness.

"Kuthil Ash Kharn," she murmured, and hearing my name uttered so softly from her lips made my insides feel like they were melting into goo. Was I dying?

Her fingers were tracing the lines of my skin, traveling from my hip and up my abs, chest, shoulder, over the shirt I still wore. She placed the heat of her small palm on my temple, and I turned my face toward the touch. The whisper of her breathing paused. Waiting. I reached up to run my shaking hand across her cheek. Her lips were too close. I grunted when she inched closer, turning away and halting her with a hand

splayed on her chest. I swallowed thickly, closing my eyes as I held her from me.

Disappointment. Embarrassment. I tasted it all around us. It shoved itself in my nose and on my tongue, coursing from her along the quivering line that had been strung between us. My voice was hoarse as I tried to get words out.

“Layla Oberman, you—”

I wavered, sucking in a sharp breath, trying to focus on anything but her nearness. Every single one of my muscles was rigid with the effort of my restraint. When I regained myself, she had already recoiled.

LAYLA

*M*y throat was dry, and I stifled a silent sob, shame burning my face. He didn't want me anymore, that much was clear. My entire being desired him in that moment, crawling out of my fucking skin to touch him, and I stupidly thought he felt the same. But he was holding me back, denial firm in his hand.

I'd woken up, and I wanted him. Wet arousal had pooled between my legs, onto my thighs. The earlier hints of primal want had built into cravings pulsing through my body. I didn't want to fight it even if I could, I'd already decided. He was already awake, and I had made my desire known.

Just to be rejected.

He made a sound, trying to get words out and failing. It didn't matter—I had my answer, and I refused to be any more pathetic by expecting an explanation. Tears that I definitely did not want him to see threatening to spill, so I jerked away and curled up on the edge of the bed with my back to him.

I tried to keep myself still, hoping he couldn't see or feel my body shake in what little light there was. Squeezing my eyes shut, I willed myself to go back to sleep. My cruel mind flashed back to the weight on top of me, pulling me into the void. Bursts of terror, fury, and longing rose by turns in my chest, punctuated by flashes of that unwelcome, desperate throbbing that made me clench and rub my thighs together. I gritted my teeth against visions of Kuthil Ash Kharn atop me. Both of them, him and Kak, there with me. I gripped the sheet

against my chest, willing my brain to stop fucking with me
and go the fuck to sleep.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN

I remained awake, my body hard and coursing with animal impulse. She slept curled into a tight ball. She had been in the middle of it—I could sense the full range of emotions and her body’s physical reaction to the cruel mold she suffered hours ago. I would not have her like this, so I clutched to what threads of self-control I could muster against my instinct to grab her, fill her, and break her to pieces.

“You’d never hurt me, right?”

I reached down and gave my aching shaft a few rough tugs that only made me want to roll over and shove it into her cunt all the more. She wanted it. She would like it. She’d beg for it if I told her to.

Then she’d get past this wave and come to her senses, and question what came over her, and wonder if I knew it wasn’t real when I took her for my own.

I clamped my hands to my sides.

SHE HAD COME DOWN SOMEWHAT over the next couple of restless hours, the sparks of chaotic energy in the room calming to a slow, steady burn. Unfortunately, my own body gave no such mercies.

It had grown lighter, but barely. I could vaguely make out her silhouette in the darkness, but I saw the glint of her eyes when she rolled over and looked at me. Her skin glistened

with a sheen of perspiration. The scent of her arousal mixed with the adrenaline in her pores made my heart rush in my chest and my dick twitch—a base human reaction I’d become too familiar with in her presence, but one amplified a thousandfold that night.

I wanted to see more of her. Without thinking, I reached forward to sweep the mop of tangled black hair out of her face.

She spilled a small sigh at my touch, breath hitching in failed suppression. My eyes remained glued to her parted lips as I slid my fingertips to her mouth. I pressed my thumb against her lip, enjoying the way the supple pink skin flushed under the pressure. Human bodies were so strange and so weak, and so perfect.

I continued my exploration of her fragility by dipping my index and middle finger into her mouth, the sticky moisture there coating my skin. Every fiber of my being flared as she pressed my fingers against her tongue and curled her lips around them. She closed her eyes as she sucked the digits, and when a little satisfied hum thrummed against my skin, I couldn’t help it—I pressed deeper. Her eyes fluttered open, wide as she peered up at me through the blackness of her dilated pupils.

For a beat, the air had been sucked out of the room, and we stared at each other.

“Fuck,” I groaned from the bottom of my chest, dragged her against me, and crushed my mouth to hers.

She made a surprised keen, but her lips parted and her tongue met mine. For the next moments, there were no sounds but of our bodies against sheets and of our breathing, heavy and ragged, as we tasted each other’s skin, bit and pulled each other’s lips, assailed each other’s tongues.

She pressed her stomach against me as my hands slid to the small of her back and yanked her closer. I shifted to roll her underneath me and sat on my knees between her legs. I ripped my shirt over my head, cast it aside, her fingers immediately following the lines of my exposed skin. I did the same with my pants, dumping them with clumsy haste. Her

nails dragged over my bare torso, down to the tense muscle of my thighs. Going by feel, my mouth found the swell of her breasts in the darkness.

I had never done this before. My kind did not do this. The actions came on their own. She was a magnet, sucking me toward her in a way I didn't have to know to act on. My human body knew what it wanted, and my mind had long been impregnated with the yearning I felt during and after our molding ten years ago.

And she responded, guiding me as she snaked a hand to the back of my head, pulled her fingers through my hair, and pressed me down to her chest. My tongue worked around her nipple, teeth grazing the receptive skin. It grew tight, eliciting a heavy breath and another whimper that made my dick jerk against her thigh. Her hips rose to meet me, soles of her feet dragging up my calves. She wrapped her legs around my waist and locked them there, pulling me toward her with a surprising strength that prompted me to pause at her nipple and look up at her, raising a questioning eyebrow.

She couldn't see me in the darkness, but she must have sensed my confusion.

“He's helping.” I felt her shoulder lift in a shrug.

I groaned into her neck as she pulled me harder against her with her legs, my erect cock sliding against the soaking wet heat between her thighs.

“Fuck.” I tried to maintain some semblance of awareness. I forced myself back, holding myself over her in the bed. “Layla Oberman...”

She dragged my mouth back to hers firmly, tongue prodding against my lips, hips grinding their desperation out against me. I grunted, tempted to shove into her right then, give us both what we wanted. Or what she thought she wanted. But I pulled back again, forcing her to break the vise grip of her thighs and calves and pressing her down with the flat of my hand between her breasts.

“What do you fucking want, Kuthil Ash Kharn?” She snapped up at me from the pillow, and I didn’t need to see her face to picture the snarl there. Her chest heaved under my palm. I realized I was digging the flats of my fingers into her ribcage, the fragile bones rising and falling as she panted.

“I want to fill you and take you until you scream for me. I have wanted nothing more for ten years than to break your fucking desperate, dripping cunt around my dick.” Satisfaction flared at the small intake of air beneath me. I swallowed the knot in my throat. “But you may still be feeling the remnants of arousal from the molding. You may not be thinking clearly.”

“*That’s* why you...?”

She broke off so suddenly that I let her go. She scrambled out from underneath me, reaching for something in the darkness. Then, a lamp on the side of her bed slowly faded in, illuminating her flushed olive face, her full lips pinched red. I regretted ever stopping her in that moment. I should have just pushed her down and fucked her into oblivion. It was a wholly human craving I did not understand when first reading about their mating rituals, but one that imprisoned me in the grip of it now. We sat on our knees, facing each other. She breathed fast through parted lips as she looked up at me. Was she coming to her senses?

LAYLA

I kept his gaze as I dipped forward and pressed my lips to his sternum. When I leaned back, a strained frown played across his face, eyes flickering between my own.

“Layla Oberman...”

“Shut up.” I placed my finger to his mouth, and a jolt of pain ran up my shoulder at the movement. It must have been injured the night before. The ache dissipated when Kuthil Ash Kharn’s breath washed hot against my skin. I leaned forward to kiss him again, lower.

“Stop. Fucking. Thinking.” I mumbled as my lips trailed down the bulging ladder of his abs between each word.

Kuthil Ash Kharn’s rock-hard erection flushed in front of my face, and a droplet of precum oozed down the engorged, velvety head. Even his cock had the distinct marble coils that decorated his body. He groaned as I peeked out my tongue and traced the curved patterns down to the base. Licking back up, I took the head in my mouth and sucked, relishing in the grunt this elicited from above. His fingers brushed the back of my neck, curled into my hair. I propped my hands on his thighs as I worked around the swollen tip, maintaining suction. A thick ridge running down the underside of his cock pulsed against my lip, and another sweet drop melted on my tongue.

“Layla O...” It was no longer a warning, but a plea, and I took twisted pleasure in his inability to finish my name.

I lowered myself slowly, taking him deeper. There was no way I could fit all of him in my mouth. Not in the constraints

of this physical world, anyway. I wrapped my hand around the base and moved it in unison with my head as I began to slide up and down.

The muscles of his thigh rippled under my other hand. His shoulders slumped over me, back curling in as he relaxed into my touch. The caresses of his hands grew in urgency and pressure, roaming along my sides, neck, face. Nails raked delicious scratches up my spine. The tingling his touch induced met with the purr coming from within, Kak spreading through me like honey-sweet syrup. I moaned, my hips rocking gently as I drove my mouth around the alien's shaft. I wanted more of him—I wanted all of him. I took an experimental swallow, a little sore from screaming and yelling when fighting off Zorin Ash Rhaz last night, but Kak worked fast, coating my neck in his sweet, healing warmth.

So when Kuthil Ash Kharn's hand tightened on my head and pushed my face down onto him, I uncurled my fingers from the base of his cock, sucked in a rattling breath, and let him shove himself into the back of my throat. My eyes watered, and my throat worked around his shaft, swallowing by instinct.

“Let me see.” The grunt above me was followed by his hand jerking my face up a little and to the side so my watery eyes could meet his. And the fucking ravenous pit of hunger I saw on his face made me force myself deeper without thinking, wincing as I fought off my gag reflex at the feel of him sliding into the column of my neck. The delicious burn was tempered by the images of what I must look like to him right now, and the anticipation of him shooting his load deep into my belly.

My chest shuddered as the air I was holding depleted, but I fought the instinct to pull back because I felt it then, the swelling. The telltale sign that I'd grown extremely familiar with over the years. Would he taste as good in real life as he did in my dreams? I thrummed at the thought of finding out, hips shifting a little as I adjusted my position on my knees and looked up at him through wet lashes. I wanted to see his face when he filled my throat.

But instead of giving me what I wanted, Kuthil Ash Kharn took a fistful of my hair and pulled me away, jerking my head up to face him. I coughed and sputtered, sucking in air, tongue darting out to lick away the thread of spittle that had trailed from his cock and splattered down my chin.

“What a filthy little human you are,” he hissed against the shell of my ear, and a dollop of searing lava broiled in my belly.

My chest contracted and even as my head still spun as I gasped for breath, I rubbed my thighs together and extended my hand down, craving friction between my legs. Kuthil Ash Kharn smacked my hand away and slammed me to my back on the bed. He sat on his knees over me, bulging muscles coated rippling as he positioned himself at my soaked center, which had clenched in desperate anticipation. The head of his cock brushed against my clit, making me bite my lip and close my eyes and lift my hips up for him. He fell forward, holding himself over me on his elbows.

“I want to fuck your dreams into reality, Layla Oberman,” he snarled. His mouth dragged along my neck, all teeth and tongue, and I bared it for him. And then my body came apart from the inside.

KAK

I triggered another rush of endorphins in my host's brain as her physical mate positioned himself between her legs. Then a spike of electrical signals making her skin oscillate with warmth and chill by turns, creating a range of unpredictable sensation within her while Kuthil Ash Kharn worked on the outer layer. I sent the energy to her muscles and whisked away lactic acid as it accumulated, so she could handle the rough nonchalance with which he used her body and respond in kind. I paid extra mind to her injured arm, directing away the heat and inflammation there.

We pulsed in unison, our wavelengths combining into a single harmony that reverberated against each of us in just the ways we needed.

I slid as heat to her fingertips, which she dragged along my sides. She grabbed my obliques and pulled me toward her. I twisted and wound in carnal pleasure, burrowing deep into her most sensitive spots. Her body melted around me, and when she closed her eyes and arched her back and screamed my name, I diffused and permeated her every cell like so many infinite shards.

LAYLA

With all senses amplified, the world took on a vibrant saturation that burned at the edges. And he burned at the edges too, as he finally entered me. I gasped as he pushed against the entrance of my tight, unaccustomed pussy, then forced thickly through the resistance.

“Oh, God,” I exhaled, and his hips jerked a few times in response. When I looked up at him, his teeth were bared and his eyes were shuttered. I slid my hands up the thick, muscled columns of his arms. He was shaking. The lack of control I induced in this otherworldly statue of a man sent a fresh burst of red-hot excitement through my center, and I squeezed harder around him. The motion dragged a steely sound from his chest, eyes snapping to mine as he pitched deeper.

It hurt, the way he stretched and split me. It was too big, too full, and he wasn't even all the way inside. When I lifted up and gashed my fingernails down his arms in response, he winced and pressed a veined forearm to my neck, shoving me back down into the mattress. I snarled, sinking my teeth into the flesh of his arm, fury igniting even as my hips dragged against him. For a second we were claws and skin and elbows, moving against each other haphazardly, desperate to satisfy that burning hunger for the pleasure and the pain, dancing at our breaking point. I wanted to inhale all of him—his cock, the sweaty musk of his hard skin, that possessed look in his eyes.

I wanted to see. I propped myself up on my elbows, filled with carnal curiosity. My abdomen swelled a little with the hard mass fitting there. My glistening folds were flush, parted

by the inhumanly thick, whorled member. A vein that ran along his shaft pulsed against my clit, sending springs of pleasure curling up my belly. The sight of him finally there, physically inside me in the waking world, drove me wild, invited him to give me more, making room for him.

“Look at you,” he snarled as I watched him fuck me, my knees shaking with the effort to keep my hips up, to chase that fullness. “You’re fucking desperate for it. You always were, weren’t you?”

When I didn’t answer, he grabbed my face and jerked me up towards him, squeezing my cheeks and lips. “Answer me.”

“Y... Yes,” I cracked, eyes rolling back as he punched deeper into my cunt, eliciting a guttural whimper. “I feel...” I swallowed the burning shame that morphed into twisted decadence as it shot to my gut. “I was... Fuck.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn loosened his grip on my face and brushed a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

“You were made for this.” He finished for me, and I squirmed underneath him, bristling against the humiliation of admitting that I’m there to be taken, owned, used by this monster.

He made me this way ten years ago. It was his fault. But now, here we were. He shifted to move with deep, rolling strokes, carving out his space in my body, the way Kak had years ago. My skin was pins and needles and hot and cold.

“Do you feel us?” His voice was thick gravel, a low timbre that reverberated through my core and unfurled into something primeval in my chest.

“Yes,” I gasped, eyes closing and toes curling as I lay bare and full, the aliens’ conduit. Deep inner pressure rolled up my limbs, concentrating in my heaving breasts and groin. Every fine hair stood on end, every nerve ending a live wire as we pushed and pulled and slid slick against each other. I closed my eyes, surrendering to that pressure as it swelled within me.

When I glanced up at him again, his eyes flashed, and his jaw was set. His entire body was taut, vibrating slowly around

the edges. I licked a droplet of sweat beading on my upper lip and reached up to push a strand of wet, sweaty hair from his forehead. He watched me, head turning into my touch even as a tense muscle twitched in his jaw.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he bit out.

I swallowed hard, wondering if there was something wrong with me for the fact that in that moment all I wanted was to be destroyed.

“I can take it,” I muttered, hoarse, as Kak’s pulsing grip on my breasts made my nipples harden and my stomach clench with lecherous contractions. “I can take you.”

He crumpled before I even finished speaking. I screamed at the pain lancing my gut as he plunged into me to the hilt. I scrambled, nails digging into his biceps, drawing blood that mingled with sweat. I bent my knees up to press my feet against his rippling shoulders. Pushing against him as he pushed back. Already the ache of his assault was mixing with the thrumming, deep thrill broiling in my center. His balls slammed against my asscheeks with his indiscriminate pummeling of my hole, and the way his pelvis ground repeatedly into my clit made tingling pressure swelter in the apex of my legs.

When my slick walls tightened against him, he grabbed my legs, pushing the backs of my thighs down until my knees were by my head. He drew back, the tip of his cock covered in pearly juices. It hovered over my slit for a moment before he drilled himself back in. The vibration of his silhouette intensified. I opened my mouth in a silent cry, ecstasy radiating to the edges of my awareness. All I could do was relax, pinned underneath him, spread open for his hungry assault. He increased his pace, thrusting himself into my pussy with erratic abandon, spearing me in waves of pleasure that I could do nothing but take.

Pressure built in my stomach, churning at the inner point of my cervix. It made me squirm. It was too much, boiling over like molten gold. I clawed at his thighs, his abdomen, leaving bloody tracks as I mindlessly grabbed for *something* to

ground myself. But I was too far gone between the two of them, consuming me from inside and out. They devoured me, tearing me to pieces between them.

I cried out, salty tracks spilling over my cheeks as the orgasm crashed through me. My body coiled tight as a spring and fell limp by turns as Kuthil Ash Kharn continued pounding into me. I was a plaything in their hands, one they kept in the freefall of release. Kuthil Ash Kharn's golden hair lay flat with sweat. His teeth bared, his hungry eyes roamed my body as he fucked what was left of me.

He gripped my calves hard, veins bulging in his hands. I winced, the pain mixing with and heightening the waves of rapture and bliss. Kak worked within me, shifting, adjusting, helping my pussy stretch around Kuthil Ash Kharn's yet-growing cock until I thought even with his help I could take no more.

I rasped as the marble patterns on his body shifted. They twisted and morphed before my eyes. Was I dreaming?

No. His lips on mine when he collapsed onto his elbows just above me held the telltale texture of wakefulness. His skin against my skin was there. His swollen shaft, hilted within me, was there. We swallowed each other's moans as that cock began to jerk and pulse inside me. He filled me up with a force I could feel through my entire being. I grabbed his face and he mine, mouth to mouth, and I tightened around him, milking him until the flow of his orgasm subsided. Until I had all of him inside me.

Kuthil Ash Kharn collapsed against me, knocking the air from me with his bulk. Kak filled me with the strength to breathe beneath him, and I was grateful, for despite the crushing weight of all his muscle I didn't want him to move. I didn't want either of them to move.

We fell asleep, the three of us, our bodies resonating as one as we came down from our shared high.

JANUARY 11

LAYLA

*H*e was still there when I awoke the next morning, his arm stiff under my head. I took a few long, still minutes to get my bearings and sort through the events of the previous night. It wasn't easy, deciphering whether I dreamt some or all of the experience, especially when even thinking about it made a blush creep up my neck.

But I was definitely not dreaming now. The arm under my cheek was solid and warm. The heat of him against me radiated into my side.

"Layla Oberman," he grunted into my hair.

"Hmm?" I nestled deeper into the crook of his arm.

Just testing if I'm awake, that's all.

"I cannot feel my arm."

"Oh! Sorry," I shifted to release him, and the distraught look on his face threatened to push me back into place despite the resulting restricted blood flow.

"Don't worry, there'll be plenty of time for me to make your arm go numb later."

Stop and think before you blurt out stupid crap, Layla.

His expression gave nothing away, nor did the neutral tone with which he asked. "There will?"

"Well, not if you don't want to..."

I was making it worse. I looked down at my hands, which fiddled uselessly with the edges of the cover. What if he

changed his mind? Decided all this drama was just too much trouble? Kak stoked a comforting ember in my core. Trying to make me feel better? Shit, I blurted a stupid joke when I didn't even know what *I* wanted yet.

Kuthil Ash Kharn propped himself up against the wall. With a firm, decisive gesture, he planted a hand on my sternum and pressed me sideways into his lap. His golden eyes pierced me in place, not entirely unlike...

“Fuck,” I swore. “The body.”

After everything, the attack seemed so far away, even though it only happened last night. I slid out of his grasp and grabbed my discarded robe from the side of the bed, wrapping the belt tightly around myself like a shield that would protect me from what I was about to see.

I braced myself and walked out into the living area. I avoided looking at the critical spot at first, instead focusing on the granite countertop of my kitchen. The thought of seeing a dead body in my home, or *anywhere*, made me want to throw up.

I stilled as familiar arms wrapped around me from behind. Without thinking, I leaned back against him while working up the courage to look. When finally my gaze drifted to that spot on the far end of the room, my heart skipped a beat. I had prepared myself for a corpse, but what I saw was worse.

“He’s gone.” My voice cracked. “Did he escape? He was dead. He had to be dead.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn tightened his hold on me.

“It’s all right, Layla Oberman. Look.” He pulled me, reluctant, by the hand to the damned spot and we bent over the floor. I drew back when I saw it: a jagged black stone on the floorboards. Kuthil Ash Kharn picked it up and held it toward me.

“A crystal?” I frowned, drawing back.

“It is what is left of him.”

“The body turned into a crystal? Like...” My hand went instinctively to my throat, where my bright, luminescent shard of Kuthil Ash Kharn’s Home world dangled on its brass chain.

Kuthil Ash Kharn set the black stone on the granite counter, where it seemed to swallow the light like an evil, twisted thing that didn’t belong there. When he faced me again, he brushed a finger over the pendant. “The one you have was part of myself, willingly given when I left Earth. You already had my shard inside you. I wanted you to have one in the outside world as well, until my return to take its place.”

I squeezed the crystal, finding comfort in the pressure its jagged corners applied to the flesh of my palm. I looked up at the Visitor standing before me, seeing him once again with fresh eyes: an otherworldly being made in the image of humanoid perfection. Designed to appeal and attract, and yet so completely untouchable.

Except by me.

The blue-tinged whites of luminous eyes glowed as he fixed on me and my mind veered once again to a few hours ago, when I shattered to pieces beneath him in my bed.

I cast aside the jolt between my thighs and focused on the question that had begun gnawing at me in my attempts to gather the pieces.

“Did you know?” I leaned my elbows against the counter, staring at the remnant of the monster that attacked me. “About Zorin Ash Rhaz?”

“No!” Kuthil Ash Kharn’s denial resonated inside his chest, sounding genuine in its impulsiveness.

But I knew now that this alien knew how to lie, at least by omission. Was this another trick? Another attempt to tell me what I wanted to hear? How was I supposed to know if I could trust him?

Should’ve probably figured that out before you fucked him, Layla.

A rough finger caught me under my chin, gentle pressure urging me up. It took me a few moments to flick my eyes to his, not sure what I was afraid of seeing more: the look of a liar, or of someone telling the truth. I'd fallen for it before, and I didn't want to be fooled again.

He put a big hand over mine and squeezed.

"I promise, Layla Oberman, I predicted no possibility of my kind fixating on you specifically. I kept that part of me... the connection with you... in the deepest parts of myself. When I molded with others to recover, the act of molding with a human was exposed to them. The feeling that invoked. Desire to recreate the experience was predictable. But I didn't think they got *you*."

Throbbing pain radiated up my wrist, and I realized he had it in a death grip. He gripped my fingers with what I could only describe, in human terms, as desperation. I doubted Kuthil Ash Kharn knew that emotion. But he looked convincing.

"You're hurting me." I pried my hand from his, flexing the numbness out of my joints.

His fist remained clenched on the counter.

"My biggest fear right now, Layla Oberman, is that there may be others like Zorin Ash Rhaz. That they may come for you."

A cold pit curled in my stomach. He was right. I hadn't even thought that far. How would we even know? Could the ETF help protect me?

Shit. The ETF.

"What about the ETF?" I pressed the spot between my eyes, trying to rub out my mounting headache. "You said they were going to use Ronin Ash Ep to study molding... to use it? Now we know there may be more..."

"I hoped the end of Ronin Ash Ep would ruin their plans, but you know your people better than I, Layla Oberman."

That's what I'm afraid of.

I gnawed on my lip, trying to make everything come together in my brain. What was the right move here? I'd made so many wrong ones already. Kuthil Ash Kharn had saved my life, but did that forgive his earlier betrayal? And what did last night mean for us, if anything?

"We really fucked up," I sighed, rubbing my temples.

"No." I flinched when he grabbed my face with both hands and made me look at him. He was inches away, eyes ablaze with something bleak and pained. "You did nothing wrong. I did this to you. I let my craving spread to the others. I lied to you." The column of his throat shifted as he swallowed. "I... did not understand. I should have told you everything from the beginning."

"Yeah, you should have."

The heat of his palms abandoned my cheeks. I suppressed the instinct to lean forward and chase that touch. But something in his eyes shuttered and went dark, and I understood what it was when it was gone: it had been hope. He still hoped this would work, somehow, that he could un-break all these pieces. Until now.

I turned my back to him and stepped away. I needed space—there was no way I could think clearly while facing him, breathing him in. My nails dug divots into my palms as everything in me oscillated between what I craved and what I was so afraid of.

The soft shawl of a caress inside me came so subtly that at first I thought I might be imagining it. Kak's whisper of a presence tugged hesitantly at my senses. He was so careful, feather-light within me, rising calmly to the surface of my skin. My pounding heart calmed with his presence, but I could tell it wasn't because he was manipulating my pulse. He was just *there*, quiet and composed, not pushing or pulling me towards anything at all.

I blinked away the wave of gratitude prickling my eyes. Kak was letting me know that whatever I chose, I wouldn't have to go through it alone.

His acceptance was a strong message in itself. If Kak sensed danger or lies in Kuthil Ash Kharn's words, he'd have let me know. He wouldn't be enveloping me in this undercurrent of confident reassurance.

He was telling me it was okay.

It's not that I wasn't still scared. I still didn't know what would happen, but chewing that thought made me realize how deluded it was.

I was just a person, not a fucking fortune teller. Sometimes you just had to go with your gut. Sometimes you saw something big and beautiful and endless, and you closed your eyes and let yourself have it.

Sometimes, you jump into the abyss.

I turned back to Kuthil Ash Kharn, whose limp shoulders tensed under my sudden scrutiny. I followed the sharp lines of his face, and all the risks and possibilities and threads converged into the only thing I knew for sure in my bones—the only decision I could count on being the absolute right one at that moment. The rest of it—the ETF, finding other rogues, all of it—would wait.

My fingers worked over the familiar edges of the Home crystal around my neck.

“You said this was mine until you returned to take its place,” I said, and Kuthil Ash Kharn's eyes traveled to the crystal nestled against my breast. He nodded solemnly.

I reached behind me and, shifting my hair aside, unclasped the chain. The quartz-like stone glistened as I held it out to him. In the last ten years, I had never been without my talisman. Now I offered it back to the man it had originally belonged to.

“So will you?” My voice was shakier than I'd hoped, and I waited, hand outstretched. “Take its place? After everything?”

A divot appeared between his brows as he processed what I was asking, attention glued to the thing in my hand.

Slowly, Kuthil Ash Kharn lifted the pendant from my palm. He pressed the stone to his bare chest, where it remained even after he took his hand away, the brass chain swaying against his abdomen. I stared as its jagged edges started to vibrate and diffuse, melting into his skin. A moment later, all that was left was another curling pattern with the rough shape of the crystal's outline in the middle of Kuthil Ash Kharn's chest and the chain, which he held between his fingers.

“I would do ‘everything’ and more a thousand times for you to be mine, Layla Oberman.”

Something in me lurched, and I exhaled the breath I'd been holding. Kak, too, bubbled up within me. He flowed tenderly through my body to the tips of my fingers and toes, blanketing me in his specter. That was him, but the flutter chasing my pulse was all me.

Stop smiling like a fucking idiot, Layla.

Kuthil Ash Kharn's hands encircled my waist and he dragged me against the hardness of his pecs. The whirlpool rush in his chest mingled with the rabid beating in my own. This close, his thick, heady aura permeated my senses as I breathed in the scent of him.

I trailed my palms along the curves of muscle running up his sides and linked them at the back of his neck. My robe loosened in the movement, one shoulder slipping. Immediately, his hands slid underneath the fabric. Each nerve flared in intoxicated recognition where our bare bodies connected. I felt paper-thin, poised between the lover sparking my skin from within and the one out here, tracing the lines of my body with firm, solid hands.

You're the link holding us all together. A new design.

That's what Kak told me before, and God, I felt it now. My body felt it last night, and my mind now followed with the full acceptance of this new reality. We were puzzle pieces shifting into place as we traversed each other inside and out. And then, we were there. A current sizzled through my body as we clicked into completion.

They sensed it, too. Kuthil Ash Kharn's lips parted, jaw tense as his tongue worked at the corner of his mouth. He bored into me with heavy, greedy eyes that flared with the realization of this new possession. His fingers skittered down my ribs to splay fire at the small of my back and fuck, I recognized that dip of his neck and the way a lock of incandescent hair fell in front of his cheek as his rippling shoulders curved over me. I knew this. This was mine.

When his lips found my neck and white-hot need flared under my skin, I let myself fall back. I would always count on them to catch me.

EPILOGUE

The waiter did an excellent job of maintaining a calm demeanor as he approached our table with the dessert: ice-cream-topped crème brûlée. He set the ceramic boats onto the table before us and ran through the specific origins of the cream and vanilla in question in a hushed voice, which I didn't really hear because I was too busy appreciating the male specimen sitting across the table.

Kuthil Ash Kharn looked good in a suit; almost as good as he looked when he wore nothing at all. The three undone buttons of his white shirt revealed a strong neck dipping into broad collarbones, just a sliver of the marble swirl that stretched along his chest visible. The warm lights overhead hit his square jaw just right, highlighting the smooth, straight line.

Judging by the glances of the women at the surrounding tables, they concurred with my assessment. Their stares had become less obvious over the course of the night, but I was no fool—I saw the woman sitting a few feet away sneaking looks, and her date looked none too happy about it. Kuthil Ash Kharn, in the meantime, seemed utterly aloof to it all.

I loved seeing him in his jeans and work boots at the ranch, where we spent most of our time. I loved the smell of the pastures. I even got used to the chickens clucking around everywhere. Old mare Alma was jealous at first. The indignant snort she gave us when Kuthil Ash Kharn's hand slid a bit too low on my back for her liking during feeding time one night was enough to make Kuthil Ash Kharn give her an extra carrot in appeasement.

“Don’t I get one?” I had teased him as she lipped the carrot from his palm and crunched with enthusiasm.

“Can *you* snort like that?” he retorted.

The ranch felt like home. But taking a shuttle into New York at least every other week for a proper dinner date was a necessity. You can take the girl out of the city and all that.

I bit my red-painted lip as Kak picked up on my admiration of his “twin” and made his presence known. I swallowed and shifted in my seat as he oozed down my chest, to my belly, and settled between my legs. Kuthil Ash Kharn’s mouth twitched, a knowing glint in his eye.

“Stop it,” I chastised through the gasp caught in my throat.

A few years back, these antics would bother me, make me feel like my body wasn’t my own, make me wrestle for control. But we’d been there, and Kak knew now exactly how and when to tease me.

So he persisted, concentrating on that most sensitive spot and inducing a physical response that was definitely not restaurant appropriate. Heat spread up my chest, blooming red across the cleavage peeking over the edge of my sleeveless dress, a dress that suddenly seemed far too tight, hard to breathe in. I glared at Kuthil Ash Kharn, whose eyes had drifted to the flush of my breasts.

“Stop it,” I repeated. “Both of you.”

I focused on my dessert, the perfect distraction. I tapped my fork against the caramel crust of the crème brûlée to crack it. The mixture of ice cream and pudding melted on my tongue. I closed my eyes, savoring the merciful chill that doused the fire I felt in the rest of my body.

“Try it.” I urged the distraction dessert toward Kuthil Ash Kharn, licking a bit of cream from the corner of my mouth. “Probably the most delicious dessert you’ll ever have.”

Kuthil Ash Kharn’s lips curled into a sneaky smirk. “Not the most delicious.”

I cleared my throat again and focused on my plate. I didn't want him to see me smile; I must look stern, unsusceptible to such vulgar seduction. But I bet he could see the fresh blush on my cheeks. There'd been a lot of "dessert"-eating around here over the last three months. I thought maybe backpacking through Bali would make us focus on something else for a while, but... let's just say Kuthil Ash Kharn could be very creative in a tent.

"Do I make you shy?" Kuthil Ash Kharn's voice was low and teasing. He leaned forward and put his hand over mine on the table. I glanced up at him from under my lashes, trying and failing to meet his knowing gaze.

For all my years of practice in dealing with Visitors in my work and getting comfortable around their weird looks and mannerisms, Kuthil Ash Kharn's piercing attention was impossible to get used to. He made me squirm in my seat as he undressed my mind and body with his eyes. When he looked at me, he saw through me, my soul laid bare for his examination. And Kak, the bastard, was in on it.

"You're hard to look at sometimes," I admitted.

"Now that I have you in front of me, I never want to look away." My stomach fluttered as he brought my hand to his lips.

"Layla?"

I tore my gaze away from him, toward the voice calling my name. Jessica Choi was walking to our table from the entrance, a silver clutch under her arm. A knee-length black dress clung to her hips. She looked perfectly at ease as she approached.

"Jessica!" I stood to give her a brief hug. "You're glowing. That vacation's done you good."

"You two seem pretty good yourselves." She raised her full black brows. Oh, God, how I wanted those eyebrows. Her dangling silver earrings glinted as she glanced from me to Kuthil Ash Kharn, who rose to stand beside me.

“Things have gotten much more relaxed since the departures began,” I agreed.

“Not sure what it means for the business, though,” Jessica mused, with no hint of the usual anxiety in her voice when work matters came up.

She was right; the future of Oberman Finance was uncertain. Visitors could now arrange to leave Earth, having the gates opened for very brief periods of time for their departure. But none could return. The gates were closed to all arrivals. Earth’s governing bodies agreed that until there was a test to confirm whether a Visitor was “corrupted,” it was too dangerous to allow them in.

At least the worry about other rogue Visitors had died down once Ronin Ash Ep’s death became public knowledge. Relations with the aliens, especially those who had been on Earth for a considerable amount of time, had begun to normalize. Nobody ever heard about Zorin Ash Rhaz. Kuthil Ash Kharn and I, with Jessica’s help, tried to find any remaining Visitors who might be newly arrived and pose a danger, but no leads materialized. I had no doubt the ETF did their own hunts and investigations. After three months with no incident and no sign of trouble from authorities, I chose to believe we got lucky. It was over.

“And I see you’re just out and about. Not worried about the looks?” Jessica asked, glancing at the surrounding tables.

Kuthil Ash Kharn’s eyes narrowed, paying the kind of close attention to Jessica that he usually reserved for my family. Other humans didn’t ordinarily warrant such consideration in his eyes. I appreciated him trying. He must have sensed Jessica had become a valuable friend, not just a colleague.

“We’re not interested in hiding away anymore.” I shrugged. “It’s time for people to get used to normalized relations.”

“That’s great.” Jessica smiled. “Oh, excuse me. That’s my date. I’ll see you around?”

“I hope so! Let’s grab drinks.”

With a nod, Jessica sauntered toward a man who had risen from the bar to greet her. I’d always known I left Oberman Finance in excellent hands with Jessica Choi, but seeing her relax and grow into her own only boosted my confidence. Whatever happened with the Visitor situation going forward, Jessica could handle it.

“ARE you sure this is the place?” The cab driver looked at me, then the alien next to me in the rearview mirror. Kuthil Ash Kharn had to hunch comically low to avoid bumping his head into the roof of the car. We had directed the cab to a dark field well out of town.

“Yes,” Kuthil Ash Kharn leaned forward and handed the man several bills.

We waited until the car’s lights were out of sight before making our way down the narrow path that led into the darkness of the field.

“Ouch! Fuck.” I stumbled across a rock in my stiletto, grabbing on to the muscular arm that was already reaching out for me to keep my balance. Without bothering to ask, Kuthil Ash Kharn lifted me up and carried me the rest of the way to the center of the field. We waited in the warm April night, me content to remain in his arms, head leaning on his shoulder.

Soon after, faint blue light washed over us, and I relaxed into him as the lines between us blurred. I rolled my shoulders and sighed, feeling Kak stretch out inside me, uncurling in full as the shuttle brought us aboard as, momentarily, one entity. Once boarded, my head buzzing, I stumbled back against the shuttle’s viewport. Kuthil Ash Kharn was already upon me, hands riding up the sides of my dress, pushing it up my thighs. I grasped for his belt, buckle clinking as I worked at it with impatience. I jerked the shirt out of his pants and picked at the buttons.

Heat crawled up my neck, and I tilted my head back against the viewport with a satisfied sigh, leaning into Kak's warmth as Kuthil Ash Kharn bent forward to bite, suck, and kiss along the line to my jaw until finally our lips and tongues met. He groaned into my mouth when I ground myself against him. We filled the shuttle with the air of our arousal, the absorbent walls muffling my cries.

KUTHIL ASH KHARN carried me to the house once the shuttle debarked us in the middle of the pasture. My disheveled dress whipped around my legs in the hot wind. He set me in our bed, peeling the dress off of me while I mumbled sleepy goodnights into the pillow. I was already drifting away when he left to feed the horses.

I stepped bare-footed onto soft, mossy ground in a clearing surrounded by gently swaying willows. The trees sprouted great purple blooms that filled the air with a sweet flavor. In the distance, a familiar silhouette stood in sharp relief against the setting crimson sun behind him. I smoothed my fresh sundress and made for the picnic blanket. I had another date.

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