

A SCIENCE FICTION ROMANCE

BAD



GUYY

RUBY DIXON

# **BAD GUY**

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## BAD GUY

Crudden the Ruiner is the name of a fierce gladiator who's broken the rules...and broken anyone that approaches.

It's *\*my\** name.

It's a name that strikes fear into the hearts of all....all except the small human female who comes to clean my cell and glares at me the entire time.

My new owners want things from me. They want me to play in their games. They want me to win battles for them.

Well, I know what I want in return.

I want her.

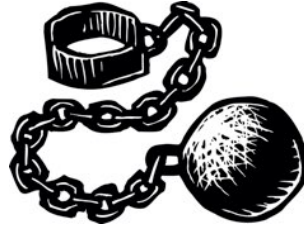
And I don't care who I have to destroy to get her.

But Mina doesn't want to be owned...and certainly not by one as terrible as me. How does a bad guy woo the girl when all he knows is death and destruction?

\*\*\* Want to read other stories featuring a villainous (but not too villainous) character? Check out Ella Goode's Bad Girl (B0917YZ483) and Kati Wilde's Evil Twin (B0912S1CL6). Both are coming soon. \*\*\*

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## A NOTE FOR SENSITIVE READERS



Just in case it wasn't clear by the title, the hero of this book is not a knight in shining armor. I've had some readers express concern that I was writing a book about Crudden the Ruiner, so I wanted to give you a heads-up of what to expect in this particular book.

Skip everything below the graphic if you don't want minor spoilers.



Because of the hero and heroine's situation, there's a lot of discussion of bad situations. The heroine discusses rape and sexual violence and she has a lack of power in a lot of the book because she's a slave. Please let me reassure you that there is no threat of rape if you're worried about that. The hero never threatens the heroine sexually in any way and the heroine's owner is also uninterested in her sexually.

The heroine does, however, watch a vid of some pretty terrible, violent stuff, but I tried to avoid being graphic about that.

There is a fair amount of violence in this book, too. Crudden is not nice, and has been trained to be not nice, so

there are a lot of not nice responses on his behalf. Again, I tried not to get super graphic and go into great, gushing detail, but I felt it would be doing a disservice to the story if I didn't include some violence, if that makes sense.

There are also numerous mentions of drugging the hero without consent (as Crudden is a slave).

If you're concerned about something and want more spoilers before you give it a read, please DM me on my Facebook page and I'm happy to spoil for you! I want you to enjoy the read without too much worry, but I also don't want to spoil everything up front. <3



**END OF SPOILERS. Enjoy!**

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## CRULDEN

**T**he new owners talk in front of me. Constantly.

Either they think I can't understand...or they just don't care if I do. Latter's more likely.

"Have you decided what to do with him yet?" one asks.

"Not yet," says the other.

I lift my head. Try to, anyhow. It feels as if it's full of lead. My movements are slow and sluggish, and my fingertips tingle. Drugged, I think. I flex one hand, noting that my claws have all been shorn short. That's new...isn't it?

With great effort, I roll onto my back and look around my cell. The bed I'm on feels like a flat, hard cot. The ceiling of my room is a plain, uniform gray, smooth and untextured. I turn my head, and my vision swims. Definitely drugged. When it straightens, I make note of my surroundings. More smooth walls. A lavatory recess in the wall, along with a water fountain. A sink. Across from this, one wall is nothing but glass. Unbreakable, probably. It leads out into an equally

austere hallway so they can observe me safely in its gray depths.

Gray. Everything gray. I close my eyes again.

All the while, the voices are talking about me as if I'm not here. They sound as if they're coming from just above my bunk, but I'm too exhausted to tilt my head and look at them.

"We can't release him with the rest of the school population," the first voice says. "He'll tear through them and cost me good credits. He has to be kept separate and prepared for the roster."

"Separate," the second voice agrees. He sounds disgusted. "You and your toys."

"One does what one must for entertainment," says the first one. "His acquisition is exciting, don't you think?"

"It remains to be seen if you can harness him or not," replies the sour one. "If you can't, you've wasted your credits. You'll have to put him down."

"That won't happen. The right mix of meds, a firm hand with stun-cuffs, and some psychological training, and I think he can be quite controllable. We just need to find the things that push his buttons."

"If you say so."

Footsteps. One leaves. The other hovers over my cot, probably still watching me.

I'm angry.

I'm thirsty, and angry, and they're leaving me here on this hard cot, in this cell. It's a prison, I think. Either that or a gladiator barracks. Might as well be a prison if it is. He wants to see the prisoner? I'll give him something to look at. I reach

out with a surge of anger-fueled strength and grab at the air. My hand clasps around a tail and I yank.

Hard.

Bones snap under my grasp. There's a gurgled sound of pain and I haul my captor back against me. My hands find his throat and I try to dig my claws in—but my claws are gone. Kef it. I'll just crush it, then. Growling low in my throat, I give in to the urge to destroy this male. Make him pay. Make him suffer.

There's a hot sizzle at my wrists and throat—ankles, too. Stun-cuffs. I ignore the pain, just as I ignore the alarm that blares to life around me. I focus on squeezing the life out of the male I have in my grasp. I make a note of his face. He's mesakkah, with a tattoo along his nose and brow. A piercing in one nostril.

I lean forward and bite it out, satisfied at the splash of blood.

He gurgles again, blood erupting from his mouth. I squeeze harder, and—

A shockwave sends me onto my back. My body goes completely stiff and I can't move. Hot, painful electricity flows through my veins, and still I try to grasp onto my prey. I want him to suffer.

“I thought you said he was stun cuffed!” cries someone, and then there are running footsteps everywhere as more people approach.

“He was! He is!” says the one I just bit. His tone is wet, as if blood is pouring down his throat. Maybe it is. Good.

“Turn them up!”

“They’re at maximum! He’s an investment—you can’t kill him!”

“You should!”

I agree. They should. Because as long as they keep me, I’m going to make them regret it. As dark pain washes over me, I vow that I’m going to make them suffer.



I FADE IN AND OUT.

There’s pain, but there’s always pain. A few glimpses of my surroundings, only to quickly go under again.

“Change the dosage,” someone says at some point. “He’s no good to anyone like this.”

Sleeping? No, I guess I’m no good to anyone sleeping. I’m a monster. A killer. I’m only useful when I attack what they point at.

Days pass, maybe. A week? It’s hard to say when I exist in a drugged stupor. Whenever I wake up, they’re watching me. From afar, now. They’ve learned not to get too close. That even if I’m drugged, I’m still dangerous.

They ask what my name is. They ask if I know who I am.

I don’t know the answer to either, and that makes me angry, too. Shouldn’t I know who I am? I should. If nothing else, I should have a name. But when I rack my brains, trying to recall what it is, nothing is there.

There are no memories, no names, no nothing. I am a big keffing blank. A big *angry* keffing blank.

When my captor leaves, I drag myself from the bed. The rage is pulsing through my veins, giving me strength. It overrides the drugging effect of whatever they've put in me. I pace around my cell, simmering with fury and unable to vent it. I memorize the few features of my cell. The sink. The flat metal bar at the top of the back wall. The front wall made entirely of glass so I can be observed. The uncomfortable cot that's attached to the wall itself. The entrance into my cell is a pair of sliding doors with no way to activate it on this side, and they won't open no matter how much I try to force it. The doors just lead to a locked antechamber anyhow. I'd have to get through two sets of doors before I make it into the hall. It's all deliberate. They know I'm dangerous and they're doing their best to keep me imprisoned.

It just makes me angrier. I look around for something to destroy. There's a plant in the corner, of all things.

*He might respond to a bit of greenery. It might have a calming effect on him. Bring in a non-toxic plant and see if there's a response.*

With a snarl, I grab the plant and fling it against the glass. The window out to the hall doesn't shatter—of course not. They know how to trap me in here. But the plant's plastic container bursts like a bubble and spills dirt all over the floors. I pick up the plant and shred it with the stubs of my claws, and when that's not effective, I use my teeth. By the time the plant is destroyed, I don't feel better. I'm only more enraged. I grab the bed and shred the mattress, sending bits of plas-fabric flying everywhere.

Anything that's not bolted down, I destroy and fling about my cell. And when I run out of unbolted objects, I rip the

fountain from the wall and slam it to the floor. Water sprays in my room, and I stand under it and let it spatter on my face.

It...it feels like rain. When did it rain?

Where are my memories? I hate that I can't remember.

An alarm goes off. The sound is a dull roar in my ears, and far too familiar already. I close my eyes and remain under the spray until I hear the hated voices of the main captor and his... friend? No, not friends. They seem angry with each other when they speak, as if they barely tolerate each other's presence. A peer, then, or two males forced to work together on a common project. Doesn't matter. I will kill them both equally dead when I'm free.

A shock sizzles at my neck, at my wrists, at my ankles. It's the shock-collar, but I'm so buzzed with adrenaline that I ignore it. Instead, I open my eyes and turn to the window. The two men are there, wearing plain gray. So much gray. One is in a uniform and the other a heavy, ornate robe of some kind. I make note of that, because it's wise to learn your opponent. We make eye contact.

Both flinch.

It's enough to send my hunting instincts roaring. I throw myself at the window, snarling. It doesn't break, but there's the tiniest bit of give, and that's enough for me. Maybe the glass itself won't break but the metal moorings holding it in place might bend. I fling myself at the window again, and the adrenaline rushes through me, pulsing until I'm in a mindless rage. Nothing exists outside of this window and getting to my prey.

Because they ARE my prey. They're scared of me. It doesn't matter that I'm stun-cuffed and behind glass. They're

afraid, and that's all I need to rile me up.

Shockwaves course up my arms and legs. I grit my teeth, determined to ignore the sensations, but eventually they grow overpowering. Black soaks into my vision, everything growing faint before my eyes. My last glimpse is of my captor, frantically hammering at controls, screaming for guards.

I must be getting closer to freedom than he expected, and the thought pleases me.

Next time.

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## CRULDEN

**W**e'll have to increase the voltage on the cuffs. Did you see that? It did nothing to him. He completely ignored it.

*He's been bred to have an adrenaline reserve on hand. Somehow he tapped into that, and it allowed him to focus enough that he cut the pain out. It's fascinating...but it's also problematic. What makes him an excellent pit fighter is also part of what makes him difficult to control.*

*Increase the dosage? Double his cuffs?*

*That, but we need to start looking at alternatives. We want him working with us, not against us. We can't keep him drugged forever. He's an athlete and a hunter. He needs exercise and stimulation.*

*You're the scientist. It's your responsibility to come up with solutions.*

*It's not that simple. Splices never are. If I could just handle him like any other slave, don't you think I would?*



Their hated voices drift through my mind. I crack open my eyes, but everything around me is wobbly again. More drugs. They slide through my veins, hot and syrupy, and they make me mellow. A different kind of drug, then. A happy one. Either that, or this is the aftermath of the adrenaline rush. The two captors keep arguing, and I want to listen in, but something new is coming into focus.

A scent.

A fascinating one.

My nostrils flare, and I struggle to open my eyes wider, to focus on the spinning room. To my surprise, there's the loud hum of something coming online, and then I'm dragged off the bed.

I lift into the air and fly backward. My limbs slam into the wall behind me, my hands over my head, my feet clasped together. Magnetized cuffs, then. I'm familiar with this... somehow. It's happened before. That whenever someone enters my room, a panel behind the wall activates and I stick to it like a bug. I can't lift an arm or a leg. I'm helpless this way, and it usually means more experiments, more needles jabbing me.

More drugs.

I clench my jaw, waiting for the rush of drugs to roar through my system, but nothing happens. The scent—the good one—grows stronger and stronger.

Footsteps.

Dazed, I drag my eyes open and look around.

It's...a female.

The scent is a female.

I lift my head, even though the effort feels greater than anything I've ever done before. I stare down at her, trying to determine what race she is.

She's ugly, this female.

She's small, for starters. I don't think she would even come to the top of my chest. Her limbs are small and a pale yellowish-white with traces of blue veins underneath. Her hair is an odd golden-brown color and held back from a pointy little face. She's impossibly fine-boned, this female, and everything about her is small and delicate—except for her eyebrows. They are two dark slashes that dominate that pointy little face and frame a pair of gray eyes that glare up at me with irritation.

Whatever this ugly female is, she's not scared of me.

Perhaps that's why she smells so sweet. There's no fear-scent covering her, no acrid terror tingeing her natural smell. Too bad she's so keffing ugly and small. I'd crush her the moment I got her under me.

The female has a cart with her. She parks it in the middle of my room, studies the mess I've made, and then glares up at me again.

I want to laugh, but my drugged face won't respond. She's mad that I made a mess. I could eat her up in one bite and she's glaring at me for being dirty. Meanwhile, my two captors are behind the glass and still tremble with fear when I approach.

It's fascinating.

I watch as the small female gets to work. She pulls tools out of the cart and sweeps the leaves into a pan, and then picks up the broken sink. The water's off now, and she places the

broken thing atop her cart, then starts to mop up the muddy mess on the floor from the dirt and the water. She's...cleaning up. There are bots to do this sort of thing, but for some reason, they've sent an alien into my cell. A tiny, delicate female alien that I could crush with one twist of my hand...but she's unafraid.

It's fascinating. I watch her as she works in silence, her movements efficient and crisp. When the floors are clean again, she picks up the remnants of my mattress and shoves each piece into the cart, where a compressor whirrs and pulps the trash. She bends down and pulls out a small package from the bottom of her cart, unwrapping it. The moment she does, a mattress self-inflates and unfurls. The female carefully smooths it over the bed and even adds a plas-film blanket for comfort.

Then she glares at me again, as if chiding me for making such a mess.

Her scent swirls in the air, and she nudges her cart into motion. She's back out of the cell so quickly again that I wonder if I imagined it. There's a buzz of release—and then I fall to the floor, the magnetism in my cuffs gone. I crawl to the bed, my head swimming, and sure enough, the plas-film blanket carries her scent.

Stubborn, ugly female. She should have been afraid of me. I'm a bad guy.

Now I'm going to have to make a mess again, just so she'll come back. I need to breathe her scent in again. I need to see that indignant glare on her sharp little face with the black brows.

She has no idea who I am, does she?

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## MINA

**I** greet the other female servants in the morning, moving to take my bowl and fill it with gruel.

“Mina.” One of the women comes up to me and takes the bowl out of my hand before I can take a bite. “There’s another alert for your cellblock. Can you handle it?”

I clench my jaw, nodding. There’s only one occupant in the place I call cellblock C at the moment. I can’t read the alien alphabet, so I letter them all in my head. A and B are both filled with the general roster gladiators, but I tend to never go to those blocks. As a human, I have to stay out of trouble, and I learned the hard way that the sight of a human female tends to trigger the “reward” scenario in a lot of the gladiators’ minds. I’m not allowed to go in there or else they think I’m on the menu in all ways. Cellblock C is mine to look after, because it’s usually empty, or there’s the occasional visitors to tend to.

Or at least, it was empty until *he* moved in.

I don’t know who or what he is, just that he’s messy. He tore everything apart yesterday and I got pulled from dinner.

There's a limited window for food for the slaves, so I knew I was going to miss out on my meal, and it pissed me off. Mealtime—for all its shittiness—is the only thing I have to look forward to.

And now I'm being called out again. I snatch the bowl back before the other slave can eat it. I bring it to my mouth and tip it back, downing everything in one quick gulp. It tastes a bit like eating paste, but it's food, and I'll take it. Once that's done, I hand it back to her and leave the mess hall, grab my little cart and head back toward cellblock C. I pass by two guards doing their rounds as I go, but they ignore me. I might as well be a piece of furniture for all the attention they pay to me. There are other slaves here, of course. Lord Sir figured out that bots get too expensive, and with the humid atmosphere here on V'tarr II's moon, they need a lot of maintenance. Far easier to just buy up a bunch of unwanted slaves and make them do all the grunt work.

The other females are from a frog-like race called "ooli" and they're nice enough. The gladiators tend to leave them alone, I suspect because the ooli aren't all that attractive to most eyes and have a particular smell to them. I guess they're cheap labor, though, because I'm the only human. I have to wear a collar that states I'm property of Lord Sir, and I think if I didn't have it, things would go badly for me.

Ironic, considering Lord Sir doesn't want me, either.

The moment I push my little cart into cellblock C, I can hear noise. There's the sound of rage, of things breaking, and I inwardly wince. The new gladiator must be awake again. I know that's my destination, but even so, I swing my cart toward Lord Sir's offices. I keep them spick and span, adding

little flowers here and there and making sure that he's happy with my work. Brown-nosing, in other words.

I slide in through the side door marked for the slaves, using one of my cuffs for the keyed entrance. The moment the door opens, it feels like a mistake. Lord Sir is seated at his desk, and across from him is the other male he's been working with. I figure the other guy must be some kind of scientist, but what, I don't know. All I know is that he's got eyes as cold as a reptile and he watches me as if I'm a chess piece waiting to be moved across the board.

They both look at me briefly and then return to their conversation. It's because I'm nothing, a no one, and I quietly push my cart in and begin to clean. V'tarr's moon is a jungle planet, and it's covered in bugs. There's always a few dead ones to sweep up, plus cobwebs and cocoons. So many damn cocoons. Lord Sir likes to display a bunch of delicate-looking crystal sculptures on his shelves. I know they must be expensive, because every time someone visits him, they all pause and talk about the crystal for what feels like forever.

Lord Sir likes to be the biggest dick in the room, I'm guessing.

I get to work, delicately cleaning around the sculptures without actually picking them up. Sometimes I think the fact that I'm careful with them is the only reason I haven't been "re-gifted" to one of the other nobles that come to visit this place.

The scientist speaks. "I really must protest the constant use of drugging agents on Cruden. We're clearly not getting anywhere with him and drugging him will only exacerbate the problem. The longer he remains under the influence, the more likely he is to become dependent. Studies have shown that

splices need constant exercise in order to maintain their metabolisms—”

“You think I don’t know that?” Lord Sir says in an icy voice. His displeasure is so evident that it sends a shiver down my spine and I work even faster. “You think I wish to keep him doped up and drooling on my floors when he could be earning me credits? He’s impossible to control right now, however, and he’ll hurt himself if we lower the dosage.”

“Is he food motivated?” the scientist asks.

Lord Sir just snorts, as if the question is stupid. “Crudden is not motivated by anything but cruelty.”

Crudden. So that’s the big beast’s name. Judging from the conversation, he’s supposed to be the newest gladiator in the stable. I’m guessing Crudden doesn’t like that idea much.

“We’ll lose a fortune if we have to put him down,” Lord Sir says. “I hired you to come up with a way for me to harness his strength, to make him pliable.” He considers for a moment. “What about a female?”

I try not to visibly react.

The scientist snorts. “You’ve seen the vids of what he’s done to the other females. Perhaps rethink that line of thought.” He glances over at me as I hastily give the sculptures a cursory dust and decide I’ll go over them later, when no one’s around. “I’m surprised you keep a human out in the open.”

Lord Sir sighs, as if very aggrieved. “What am I supposed to do with it? It was a gift.”

His friend snorts. “Kef it? That’s what everyone does with humans.”



The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. I've been relatively safe so far, but that's because I do my best to make myself utterly forgettable, and Lord Sir hasn't been interested in me. But if this idiot keeps pointing that out, I'm afraid things will change. I want to grab my little cleaning cart and ram it up the scientist's heavily bandaged tail.

"It was a tasteless gift from an old friend, Lady dra'Niiron," Lord Sir says, his dry voice full of displeasure. "She asks about it every now and then, so I can't exactly get rid of it. I keep it here instead of at home, but as long as she's not too bothersome, I just ignore her and make sure she's fed."

Jesus, he makes me sound like an unwanted Christmas puppy. In his eyes, I guess I am. It could be worse—it could always be worse—but I do wish there was some sort of stability to my life. One wrong move, or if Lord Sir gets tired of me, I'm going to be sold to a stranger.

Time to discreetly get the fuck outta Dodge.

Luckily for me, another crash echoes from the gladiator's room and the two men let out another groan. Thank god for distractions. I slip out the servants' door again, heading down the hall to where the new, feral gladiator is chambered. Sure enough, he's out of his bed and attacking everything in sight, ripping the newly reinstalled sink back out of the wall. Water sprays everywhere. Today there's no plan to make a disaster on the floors, but the blanket I thoughtfully left for him is shredded into a million pieces and he's busy ripping at everything he can.

I park my cart outside the door of his cell and wait for his tantrum to be done.

The male turns and looks at me. I suppose if I didn't deal with terrifying aliens of all kinds every single day, I'd

probably be a bit more scared of him. As it is, I'm mostly irritated. I'm far more scared of the two men sitting in that office with all the crystalline sculptures, casually talking about fucking me as if I'm no more than a blow-up doll.

Gladiator having a tantrum? I've seen that shit far too many times. So I cross my arms over my chest and wait.

He stalks up to the window, as if suddenly realizing I'm here, and our eyes meet through the glass. A feral smile curves his hard, cruel mouth and his nostrils flare, as if he's sniffing me. I continue to wait, keeping my expression bored. I know that showing fear in front of one of these idiots is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. He can't get through this glass, or he already would have. I'm safe.

I study my blunt nails, pretending to wait.

I expect him to snarl with rage. To attack the glass again. Instead, all he does is watch me.

He's quiet. Too quiet.

I look up, expecting to see him pounce at the glass again, but his strange eyes are narrowed and the look he's giving me is downright assessing. Like he's trying to figure me out. Well, one good turn deserves another. I tilt my head back, studying him, too.

I don't know what race he is, or if he's anything at all. They called him a "splice," which sounds like a lot of things mixed into one. He's the turducken of gladiators, I guess, probably bred to be mean and nasty and rip his opponents apart like he did the new mattress I gave him. His eyes have a vertical pupil, just like a cat's. Predator eyes, I think. His face is somewhat human, though his nose is ridged and blunted and doesn't quite look like mine. He's got two short horns curving

back from his brow, large, pointed ears, and a mouth that hangs open wetly, showing far too many sharp teeth and a huge set of tusks. His hair is like a lion's mane, more of a "ruff" than actual hair, and it continues down his neck and then tapers to a chest that's plated like the mesakkah, broad and full of muscle. He's got a tail, too, like they do, but the skin color's all wrong. His is a strange purplish gray, nowhere near the pleasant-seeming blue of the predominant space-faring alien race. His hands are tipped in claws, but he's got three fingers and a thumb like the other aliens, and he's wearing pants that barely seem to fit his bulging-with-muscle body. He's built thicker and stronger than anything I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of weird shit pass through this place.

He's also got the most stun-cuffs I've ever seen on a slave. Thick bands encircle his neck twice over, along with his wrists and ankles. They flicker constantly, armed and ready to go off. The collar around my neck is slender and marked with Lord Sir's insignia. It's to keep me safe from the guards in the other barracks more than anything else. I can't run away—there's simply nowhere to run. This is a jungle moon with no cities that I know of, and I get the impression it's a lot like a wild game reserve back on Earth, except the rich guys house their pet gladiators here along with their exotic pets. If I ran from this place, there'd be nothing for hundreds of miles in any direction, and I don't know how to survive in the jungle.

So here I stay, cuffed slave or not.

The alien catches me studying him, and that strange mouth of his curls up into an almost-smile. Like he's amused by me. Maybe it's because I'm short. I'm normal height and weight, but to him I must seem like a gnome. I wouldn't be surprised if he was eight feet. No, seven, I decide. Seven and a half, max. He's so menacing and broad that it's hard to tell.

Massive and dangerous. That's all I need to know.

He taps at the glass, trying to get my attention, and I bristle. I'm not supposed to be around the gladiators. This one's a bit of an exception, because my orders are to clean this cellblock, but being around the gladiators is dangerous. They're volatile and bred to be bad-tempered and attack-happy.

"Sorry, bud, I'm not your friend," I mutter as I move to the control panel and light up the restraints on his shock-collars. I type in the access code for the cleaning crew, and a moment later, there's a whine as everything surges online. As I watch, his hands fly over his head and his entire body goes flying backward. He hits the wall with a nasty thump, and I wince, because it sounds painful. He's probably going to be super pissed that I activated them, so I wait patiently outside. Normally, anyone trussed up like that tests out the cuffs a few times before giving up, just to see if there's a weakness.

This guy doesn't bother. He doesn't move a muscle.

I study him through the glass and then decide his drugs must have kicked in. His eyes are closed and he's motionless. He's probably unconscious. I enter the access code again and the doors slide open, shutting quickly behind me the moment I get my cart through. As soon as I'm inside, I start to work. Being in a cell is dangerous, even if the gladiator can't do me physical harm. I've been urinated on before, in the past, when I had to serve in cellblock A and B. Urinated on, spunked on, you name it. I've heard them say all kinds of filthy things to me in a dozen languages, and I had one nearly gnaw his own arm off to try and get free so he could rape me.

So yeah, you don't spend extra time in the cell if you can help it.

I get to work quickly, crawling under the sink and turning off the water at the source. There's a panel in the wall that's been exposed, and I hit the button with the alien writing that I now know says "maintenance." Someone will be in to fix it later. As I crawl out from underneath, I cast a glance over at the alien on the wall.

He's not asleep.

He's watching me with those slitted, predatory eyes.

My flesh prickles with alarm and I get back to work, sweeping as quickly as possible and mopping up water. When the cell is decent, I unroll another bed package and watch it inflate on the cot. There's so few comforts here. I wouldn't get in trouble if I skipped giving him a mattress and blanket, but I can't bring myself to do it. I know what it's like to be a slave. I know what it's like to look forward to the few things you're given.

So I glance up at him as I smooth the plas-blanket onto the thin mattress. "Try not to destroy this one, all right? They'll make me quit giving it to you if you keep tearing it up."

No answer. Maybe he doesn't have a translator. Doesn't matter. With a shrug, I pull my cart back together and head out of the room, locking the doors safely behind me. I use the control panel again, letting the system know that I'm done. Reinforcements frame the doors, a bar sliding across the glass to ensure that he can't break free and follow me. I wait in the antechamber for the hallway doors to unlock. The magnetism hum ceases and it's so quiet I can hear my own pulse.

I should just get going, but I watch as the male slides down the wall and lands on the ground. He lands on his feet—but just barely. His movements are slow and heavy—drugged, I

remind myself. He manages to get to his feet, straightening, and our eyes meet. He heads for the glass.

Oh no. That is just bad news. I grab my cart and head down the hall. I go to the elevator, my back stiff, and when I get inside, I cast one last look in his direction.

He's still at the glass, watching me. The alien has a hand on the glass and it looks as if his pants are unbuckled and he's taken himself in hand. Masturbating? It's typical gladiator bullshit, and disappointing to see in him.

A second later, though, there's a stream of bright yellow down the glass. He looks at me as he pisses on it, and I realize what he's doing.

He's making another fucking mess so I'll have to come back. That fucking bastard thinks this is a game.

Scowling, I punch the buttons in the elevator. Someone else can clean up his piss. I'll tell the overseer that I'm busy.

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## CRULDEN

**T**he female doesn't come back.  
I don't like it.

I piss all over the floor, just because she asked me not to ruin the bedding, and she doesn't come back. Instead, it's a different female, an ooli. She stinks of fear and the smell of her makes me furious. I rage against the cuffs, trying to tear myself free from the restraints until the scientist arrives and sedates me again.

When I wake up, I do not smell the female with the dark brows anywhere. She has not been in this building today. Is she scared of me now? If so, that is disappointing. When protein bars are offered for my dinner, I take them and then promptly step on them, grinding them into powder on the floor. I throw the container of water at the window. It feels like a childish tantrum—probably looks like one, too—but I can't get their attention any other way.

The scientist comes out and studies me through the glass for a long time. I bare my fangs at him, and I can smell the prick of fear racing through him.

“Would you like a better dinner, Crulden?” he asks through the thick glass. “Would it ease your rage if we sent you a better meal?”

“Female,” I snarl, though I hate talking to him. I do not want to give him anything to use as leverage against me, but my desire to see her again outweighs everything. “Send me the female.”

“I’ve seen vids of how you treat your females, Crulden. I’m afraid that’s not possible.” He clasps his hands behind his back and shakes his head. “How about a nice warm soup instead?”

I glare at him, stalking and pacing in my cell in the way I know makes him uneasy. Everything I do is designed to mess with my opponent’s head. I want him to be frightened of me. I want him to have nightmares of what I’ll do to him when I break free. I want him to *fear* .

I also want to know what he meant when he said he saw vids of how I treat females. There’s vids of me somewhere? I want to know more, because I don’t have memories. Somehow, they’ve been taken from me. There’s pieces of information in my mind, but when it comes to who I am—to Crulden—there is a vast, yawning emptiness that worries me. Who am I and what was my past?

Fighting, I think. They want me to fight. I know that from the conversations that they have when they think I am not listening. I do not know what that has to do with females, but I do know I would never fight one. I imagine the scared, pitiful ooli that came to clean my cell. I imagine the strange pale female with the pointy face and the way she looked at me with no fear in her eyes. I would not fight either one.

Strange.



The scientist does not leave his vantage point on the other side of the cell, so I crouch low and wait. He knows what I want. The question will be if he sends it.

A short time later, however, I hear the hiss of the elevator's arrival and then the scent of ooli.

And soup.

I snarl, moving right to the edge of the glass. "If you send that creature in with food, you will not like what I do to it."

The scientist's eyes widen. His fear perfumes the hall, even if he pretends otherwise. "The female or the food?"

"Is there a difference?" I ask coldly.

There's a wash of terror in the hall—the ooli female. Let her be afraid. I do not want the stink of her in my cell. Timidly, she puts the soup in the food slot and shuts the door. A moment later, a bell chimes on my side, indicating that I can now take the soup I do not want.

I open the slot, take the bowl, and slam it against the glass, right where the scientist is standing. It makes an orange, streaky mess, but I don't care. I imagine it's drugged. I imagine it's all drugged, and they're just trying to find the right mix that will make me their pliable little servant. I step forward, trying to look as menacing as I can through the glass. "You think you can get me to do what you want for a bowl of swill? You think I am that easily bought?"

"I do not think you are easily bought at all," the scientist says. His words are brave, but I can smell his fear. "We are only trying to figure out your price."

"I. Want. The. Female," I state again. "The pale one."

"You don't get a female," the scientist says. "I'm sorry."

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## MINA

**A**klish returns to the kitchens, breathless and terrified. “I can’t go back to the elite cellblock,” she tells the overseer. “He doesn’t want any ooli there!”

My heart sinks. Irritation flares. He thinks if he insists enough he can get whatever the fuck he wants? That’s not how this works. I grit my teeth and continue washing dishes, hoping I’ll escape notice until I can slink away to my quarters.

“Mina,” the overseer says, shattering my dreams. “You are needed to go clean your cellblock.”

I dry my hands on my apron, nodding. There’s no use in arguing. It’ll make them wonder what I’m afraid of, and if I show that I won’t do part of my job, I become a problem. If I become a problem, I get shipped out. “Sure thing,” I say, even though I want to strangle a certain fearsome-looking gladiator. How the fuck am I supposed to stay under the radar if he’s acting like this?

I get my cart and I practically stomp behind it all the way back to cellblock C. I hammer at the buttons on the elevator, jaw clenched, and by the time I get up to the right floor, I’m

seething with no outlet to vent to. I can't gripe to my fellow slaves, because they'll gossip straight to the overseer in the hopes of getting favors. I can't complain to my owner, because he'll get rid of me. I sure can't complain to the guards. They're clones and just as gossipy as the slaves. I don't have any friends here because I'm human.

I roll my cart toward the alien's cell. Even before it gets into sight, I can hear him snarling and flinging objects at the glass. I turn the corner, and the scientist is there, watching him. The hairs on the back of my neck rise again, and I do my best to seem cool and neutral and unaffected as I approach.

Immediately, Crudden—the gladiator—quiets as I come into sight.

The scientist looks at me long and hard and then disappears down the hall.

I look at the disaster on the other side of the glass. Crudden's ripped his bed from its moorings and tossed it against the shatterproof glass. There's soup smeared all over the barrier, and a fine beige powder all over the floor. The blankets are whole, at least, but the rest is a disaster.

I move to the lock and activate the cuffs. This time, I don't wince when it slams him against the wall. The mean, irritated part of me wishes it had been a little harder. The moment I step inside, powdery crumbs crunch under my shoes. "What the fuck?" I mutter, outraged at the mess. "What are you, two?"

The male on the wall growls. "Why aren't you scared of me?"

I glance over at him, despite my personal determination not to give him any attention. "Because you're chained to the

wall and I'm not?"

He bares his teeth in what might be an almost-smile. I think he's less drugged today than yesterday. It's probably in his food, which is now all over the windows. The cuffs hold strong. Not that they need to; he doesn't even fight back against them. It's like he wants to be here, just like this.

I study the mess around me, then sigh and get to work. I straighten his bed, slotting it back into the wall. "If you try anything I'm going to leave you to rot in this mess," I say fiercely as I get to work. It brings me uncomfortably close to the magnetized gladiator, but he doesn't move a muscle. Not even his tail twitches.

Good.

Once the mattress is back in place, I look around at the disaster of his cell, then pull out my broom and dustpan. They're slightly different than they would be on Earth, but some things are universal. I get to work, cleaning up the mess, toweling up soup that smells better than what they feed the slaves. My stomach growls as I do, because they save the best meals for the gladiators, who need a lot of protein.

"You're hungry," he says.

I ignore him.

"Are they feeding you?"

I continue working. I'm not here to make conversation. The sooner I can get done here, the sooner I can be back to safety on the other side.

"What are you?" he asks as I mop the floors with a damp towel. "I know you can hear me."

When I continue to ignore him, something hits at my skirts. I look up, outraged, and his tail flicks through the air nearby. I glance down and it's a bit of protein bar—he must have held onto it and used his tail to flick it at me.

“Can you not?” I grit out. “I’m not here to be your friend, so get that thought out of your head. I’m only here because you’re being an asshole and making more work for me.”

“Why aren’t you afraid of me?”

I do my best to ignore him. It’s not so easy to do when he’s looming over you and staring in your direction. I become incredibly aware of my every move, and I try not to shake my hips as I scrub or do anything that might be considered sexual. The last thing I want is the attention of a gladiator.

The attention of anyone, really. I scrape by because I’m unnoticed. I’m quiet and unassuming and it keeps me safe. This is not safe. I need to talk to the overseer. Maybe I can just do double-time in the kitchens until this gladiator is either moved into the barracks with the others or shipped off somewhere else. All I know is that I can’t be around him.

He continues to try to talk to me, and I go right on with my work, not responding to anything. When I’m done scrubbing the last of the fragrant soup off the window, I pack up my cart and turn to him. “Quit making a mess. Seriously. All you’re doing is making more work for me.”

“What’s your name?” he asks, his voice growly and deep.

It’s useless to try and reason with him. With a roll of my eyes, I grab my cart and go.



## CRULDEN

**H**er scent lingers in my cell long after she's gone.

She doesn't leave a blanket or a fresh mattress this time. She's simply straightened my existing ones and spot-cleaned them, and her hands were all over the material. I breathe in her smell, wondering if her small hands are soft or if they're roughened from work. She has five fingers, I've noticed. I wonder if all her people do or if she's unusual.

I sleep well that night, for all that the bed they've given me is uncomfortable and hard. My mind feels clearer, though, and it confirms my suspicions that my food is being drugged. I avoided dinner, and I can think straight. The two are obviously connected.

I still can't recall anything of my former life, though. I have flashes here and there of things, a few faces that flit through my thoughts, but no memories, no people I've left behind. They said there were vids of me, but I don't know what of. Did something happen to me that caused my mind to be wiped? I don't have answers, and my captors won't give them to me, I suspect.

In the morning, a sweet-smelling bowl of noodles is set in the slot. It's brought by an ooli female, not the strange, delicate one with the dark brows and the ugly face and who fascinates me anyhow.

I don't eat it. It's probably drugged. Instead, I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling. *She* asked me not to make a mess because it makes her more work. It makes her hate me. I just want to talk to her, but she's made it clear that if I keep making more work for her it doesn't put her in a chatty mood. Do I care? After consideration, I decide I do. I want her to like me, for some reason. I want her to tell me her name.

I like that she's not afraid of me, but I don't want her every look in my direction to be full of anger. Do her people smile, I wonder.

I remain in my cot until the scientist arrives. He stares at me through the glass, and I roll onto my side and stare back.

"You should eat," he says. "You need to keep up your strength. Is there a meal you'd prefer? Let me know and I'll have our kitchens work on it." When I don't respond (or eat) he continues. "I know you can talk. You had plenty to say to the female last night."

I should have guessed he would listen in. It bothers me, though, that he did. My tail flicks against the mattress, hard.

He continues to observe me, his scent tinged with a hint of fear. "Crudden, your owner and I are quite concerned over your lack of motivation. A gladiator that does not eat and loses his strength is useless to his master. We need you to remain strong and healthy. I am concerned that all the drugs we are putting into your system will have a detrimental effect, and I wonder if there is not a better way for us to work together."



I roll over onto my opposite side, presenting him with my back. I don't want to work with that keffing shithead at all. "Work" together. He means that I should be a good little slave. Be obedient. Kef him.

If he gets close enough, I'm going to finish tearing his tail off next time. The thought fills me with a sick pleasure.

"What if I were to offer you the female?"

He asks it, so low and casual, I almost miss it. Slowly, I turn, sitting up. I watch him with narrowed eyes, not speaking. I hate that he's hit on the one thing that interests me...and yet, I'm intrigued. Hungry and drugged isn't getting me anywhere...perhaps I'm going about this all wrong after all.

"I see I have your attention," he says smugly. "She's not mine to bargain with, of course, but her owner has a very marked interest in your success. If you cooperate with us today, I can arrange for her to visit with you tonight."

"Cooperate?" I growl.

"Eat. Let us perform some physical tests on you. Nothing intrusive, just to get baselines for your vitals." He smiles as if this is the easiest thing in the world. "That's all. Trust us and we can trust you."

I glance at the bowl. "I won't eat that. It's drugged."

"We don't want to drug you. Prove that we can trust you and we won't."

I lift my chin. I don't like giving in but...if I get the female... "Bring me undrugged food and I'll eat." And I turn my back to him. We'll see how willing he is to "work with me" after all.

I breathe deep, but her scent is fading from my blankets. I wonder if he'll bring her back after all, or if that's a lie just to keep me placid.

I'll find out soon enough.

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## MINA

**I** scrub at the plas-coated bowls in the kitchen, up to my arms in suds when I hear the gossiping of the women turn in a strange direction. Normally they talk about who slacked off of work or whoever the overseer is fucking this week. When they start whispering, though, I know something's up. I carefully put down my scrubber and listen quietly, mindful not to clank the dishes.

“...no drugs this time,” the head kitchen slave hisses as she prepares a bowl of noodles.

The woman at her side, an ooli named Hrakich, makes a distressed sound in her throat. “...wise? ...too dangerous...”

“...the elite cellblock.”

I digest this information in silence. They've been drugging whoever it is in cellblock C and now they've decided to stop? What made them change their minds? I think about the male imprisoned there. It's not really a surprise that he's been drugged. His eyes have been heavy and unfocused every time I've seen him. He still has a lot of energy though—and anger

—and like the others, I worry what he'll be like without anything in his system at all.

“Keep your tail out of reach,” the kitchen slave croaks. “Or he'll deglove yours just like he did to the scientist.”

Hrakich whimpers.

I clench my butt in sympathy. I've seen the bandages all over the scientist's tail, and I knew something happened, but not that? Degloved sounds...awful. With a shudder, I pick up the scrubber again and pretend to scrape the nearest bowl. If he's that vicious, why the hell aren't they going to drug him? Being drugged is awful, but one of Lord Sir's gladiators got free once and ran on a rampage through the slave quarters. What happened next wasn't pretty. I had nightmares for months afterward. I know the damage a male like that can do. They—

“Human!” the kitchen slave calls out, and I jump guiltily. “Mina!”

I pull my hands free from the soapy water and dry them on my plas-apron. “Yes?”

The kitchen slave holds a tray out. It's got noodles and a carafe of fresh fruit juice on it, a treat when the gladiators are performing particularly well. “This tray is to go to your cellblock. You're to take it to the lord and wait for instructions there.”

I clasp the tray in my damp hands and then pause. Wait? “Instructions on the food?” I wonder if it's because it's drugged. “Or something else?”

She shrugs. “I'm just conveying what the overseer told me. You can ask him if you want more details.”

Ugh, I'll pass. I hate the overseer even more than I hate Lord Sir and the scientist. He gives me the creeps, and I'm careful not to get on his bad side or else I'll end up with the worst jobs in the compound, like cleaning out clogged pipes or the laundry, which is usually covered in things I don't want to think about.

Or worse. I've heard of some of the other slaves spending a night in his bed. Dunno if it was voluntary. I haven't asked and I don't want to know. All I know is that he stares at me a little too hard sometimes and so I try to stay out of sight and out of mind.

I take the tray from the kitchen slave and head out of the kitchens. It's a lovely day with a gorgeous sunset, the weather mild for V'tarr's moon, but I can't stop to enjoy it. My mind races as I walk across the grounds, heading for cellblock C. The barracks are busy despite the time of day, and I see a couple of guards hounding a chained-up gladiator who's doing yard exercises. I hurry a little faster at the sight of them, because I'm vulnerable out in the open, away from the safety of buildings and even the overseer's unpleasant eye. Sometimes the gladiators push their boundaries, and I don't want to be collateral damage.

I make it to cellblock C quickly and swipe my wrist cuff. The doors unlock, sliding open, and I head inside. I don't see anyone in the halls, so I head toward the scientist's offices, across the way from Lord Sir. As I do, I pass by the new gladiator's cell. He's up and out of his cot. In fact, he's leaning casually against the glass, watching the hall as if expecting something.

The moment he sees me, his tail flicks, dangerously.

Hungry, I tell myself. He's just hungry.

I ignore him, refusing to make eye contact, and swipe my cuff at the scientist's door, waiting. When it opens, I swallow hard and go in, keeping my head ducked. "The overseer said you wished to see me?"

He doesn't get up from his desk, but I still feel as if I'm somehow under scrutiny. "Is this food drugged?"

"I don't know. All I was told was to bring it."

He grunts. "It's for Crulden, but I'm sure you've guessed that." He pauses. "I just want you to know that you'll be safe, human."

Well that's not an alarming statement at all. "Excuse me?" I keep my tone mild and sweet, even though I'm more than a little worried. "I'm not sure I follow."

His gaze focuses on me. He stares me up and down and then steepled his fingers in front of his chin. "Crulden has been...less than enthusiastic about his arrival here. We've been faced with some challenges in regard to his demeanor."

Challenges. Yeah. That's putting it mildly. I'm not sure what this has to do with me, but I wait patiently for an explanation.

"We're trying a new tactic. In exchange for something he wants, we're seeking cooperation from him. Two avians with one throw and all that." He gives me a tight smile. "That's where you come in."

My heart pounds in my ears. "You're giving me to him?"

"What? Oh, no, no." He sits back in his chair and waves his hand, dismissing my concerns. "He can't be trusted with a pet. But he has requested that he get to spend time with you. You'll keep him company while he eats. Don't worry. It'll be

supervised. Lord Sir has indicated that you are a prized possession of his.”

Does...he think I can't hear? We both know that Lord Sir only tolerates me because I'm a gift he can't regift away. “I see.” I resist the urge to twist my hands. “What are my duties in his cell?”

The scientist smiles tightly. “Keep him company. Make him happy. If Crudden is pleased, we're all pleased.”

Fuck.

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## CRULDEN

**I** watch carefully as the female approaches my cell. Her scent is different today. There's a mixture of apprehension and fear perfuming her, but when our eyes meet, I see nothing but anger.

Interesting.

I crouch low at the back of my cell, waiting to see if the scientist will honor his word. If he's going to give me the female as promised. She is silent as she stands outside of my room, the tray in her hands. I watch, drinking in the sight of her as she puts it in place and presses the button that activates the meal slot. For a moment, my anger simmers as the meal is inserted into my cell. This is not what was promised, I think, fangs bared. My hackles rise on the back of my neck and my claws curl, extending. This is not—

The scientist leans in and peers at me behind the glass. "The female will be coming in now. Please be on your best behavior, Crulden. If you harm her, this will be over quickly."

Harm her? Why would I harm the female? I thrash my tail, irritated that he talks to me as if I am a child, but it does not



matter. They are sending the female in. She waits by the door, steps inside the antechamber and lets it lock behind her. Then, the door to my cell opens and she steps inside.

Her scent floods the room.

It is...magnificent.

She turns toward me, and the fear-scent is stronger, but there is still defiance in her eyes. She does not move from her spot by the door, the collar on her neck flashing a gentle reminder that she is just as much enslaved as I am. There are small circlets around her wrists, and her clothing is a shapeless sack that covers her body from shoulder to ankle. She stands in my cell, as proud and unflinching as ever, and I am impressed. The scientist pisses himself if I so much as look at him through the glass, but this human stands before me, almost entirely unafraid.

Almost.

“You have a fear-scent today,” I growl as I get to my feet slowly. I move carefully, because I do not want her to bolt away.

She doesn't flinch. Good. Instead, her gaze remains on me. “I don't know what you want with me.”

“I don't know, either.” I step toward her. Stalking her. She remains where she is, but I notice that her hands clench into fists at her sides. “But I like your scent.”

“I'm happy to give you my laundry if you want it. Can I go now?” Her voice is tart.

I want to laugh. How is it that she is still brave despite the fact that she is in the cell of a killer? That is what I am, is it not? I loom over her, and she is just as small as I suspected. Her head would barely come to the top of my chest if I pressed

her body against me. I lean down, my tail flicking, and inhale, my nostrils flaring. “Why do you want to go? Have I offended you?”

That seems to confuse her. She glances up at me, a hint of a frown on her pink mouth. Her dark brows are drawn together and she scrutinizes my face. “I’m not offended. I just...don’t understand.”

Her fear-scent fades, so I lean in and sniff deeply. It spikes again, but I understand now. She is not afraid of me. She is simply jittery and does not trust the situation. I draw in a deep breath, and the scent of her is so appealing that I want to bury my face in her mane, clutch her to my chest and just...breathe. Just draw in lungful after lungful of her fascinating scent. She does not smell like mesakkah, or ooli. “What are you?”

“I’m a human,” she says. “What are you?”

“An excellent question, and one I do not have the answer to,” I murmur, keeping my voice low. I circle around her again, looking over at the scientist. He watches us still, and I want him to go away. I want him to leave me alone with this female. I don’t like the thought of him listening in when I speak to her. My words are for her ears alone. I lean in again, letting my tail brush against her clothing. I’m crowding her. Testing her, to see how much I can push before she snaps. I reach out and touch a lock of her brownish-gold mane.

She slaps my hand away, frowning up at me.

I hear the scientist suck in a breath, and then the fear-scent comes from the hall. But the little creature—the human—is glaring up at me. I grin. I do not mind her strikes. They are love taps, nothing more. I slide my tail along her leg again, and this time she flicks it away. She frowns up at me. “Eat your food and quit playing your games.”

My grin widens. Perhaps it is a game. If so, I enjoy playing with her. “I will share it with you.”

The female shakes her head. “It’s yours.”

“They will bring me more if I ask for it.” I lean close. “They want me compliant and agreeable.”

“It’s drugged,” she says, voice flat.

I glance out at the scientist. “Have you drugged me again?” I step between the human and the window, not wanting him to look at her. Now that she is mine, he is not allowed to even look in her direction. “Is this food safe to share?”

“No drugs,” the scientist manages. “As long as you behave, I don’t see—”

He keeps talking but I ignore him. I grab the tray and turn my back to him, setting it down on the edge of my bed. I look over at the female, wanting to hover protectively in front of her again, but she glances around and then sits down on the floor.

I join her, sitting across from her, and I place the tray between us. I am not hungry—I’m far too fascinated by the nearness of her. But she seems to want me to eat, so I pick up the canister of drink, sniff it, and then offer it to her.

“It’s juice,” she says softly. “I hear it’s really good. They give it to the other fighters.”

“Then you should drink it,” I encourage. I want her to... look happy. I want her to not stare at me with such wariness. I prefer the spark of indignant outrage to this strange way she is acting. I want her to smile at me.

I wonder what she will smell like when she is happy?

But the female shakes her head. “It’s for you. I’m not allowed.”

My jaw clenches and I grit my teeth. “I allow it.” She’s mine now, and it does not matter what “they” think to allow. I hold the container out to her, waiting.

She gives me another wary look, glances out into the hall at the scientist, and when there is no objection, she takes it from me.

Our fingers brush.

Heat floods through my veins. My sac tightens, and my cock stiffens in response to her nearness. Is that what this is, then? Do I want this female for myself? I toy with the idea, watching as she takes a small sip of the juice and then licks her lips. Yes, I decide. I do want her. She is ugly, I think. Her brows are large and dark and dominate her small, pointy face. And yet...she smells so good.

And she is not afraid.

I stare at her pink mouth, considering, and when she holds the canister back out to me, I take it, but I don’t taste the drink. Instead, I’m reveling in the scent she’s left behind.

Mine. This female is mine.

I give her the juice again, and her lips twitch, though she takes it without protest. “You should eat your noodles before they get cold.”

“I want you to share them with me.”

She shakes her head this time, glancing up at me. “I know for sure they won’t like that. They want you to stay strong. Put on weight. I’m fine. I’ll eat with the other slaves later.”

I do not correct her. She's not going back to them. She's mine now. She will sleep on my bed, in my cell, and I will take care of her. I study her form as I shove great bites of the noodles into my mouth, eating quickly. I wonder if she has a tail under those clothes. I wonder how she got here. I wonder what she is called.

"What is your name?" I ask as I set down my bowl and swipe at my wet chin.

"Mina," she says softly. "And you're Crudden, right?"

I shrug. They call me that, but it does not feel like mine. Perhaps if I had my memories, it would, but who I am is just as blank now as it was yesterday. If she wishes to call me Crudden, I will answer to it. "Mina the human," I say, tasting her name on my tongue. It tastes better than the food, which doesn't have the acrid aftertaste this day.

"Just Mina," she says, and her pink mouth curves up in an almost-smile. I want more of it.

As soon as our eyes meet, her gaze drops. She looks uncomfortable, and that bothers me. "Why will you not look at me?" I hold the canister of juice out to her again, hoping that our fingers will brush once more. "Do you find me ugly?"

"All aliens are ugly to human eyes," she points out.

"I find you ugly, too," I admit.

A startled laugh escapes her, and the sound sends a ripple of pleasure through my system. I want to hear that again. My claws flex with hunger and need.

"I like your laugh," I admit, my voice a low, throaty growl of pleasure. "Do it again."

She stiffens, and the fear-scent flickers.

“I will not hurt you,” I tell her, nudging the juice back toward her. She doesn’t look inclined to take it, however. Instead, she clasps her hands in her lap and stares down at them. Her fear-scent ebbs, but I get the impression that she is trying to make herself...less, somehow. To shrink away out of sight. I do not like it. I want her to look at me. I try to get her attention once more. “Mina.”

The collar on her neck flashes and she lets out a little whimper of pain, her hands flying to her throat.

Confused, my growl deepens. I do not like her distress. “What—”

She looks out into the hall and then gets to her feet. “I have to go.”

Go?

She cannot go. She’s mine now. “You’re staying,” I say, getting up. I glance out into the hall and the scientist is there, his expression impassive. “They gave you to me.”

But Mina’s collar is flashing a warning, and she looks anxious as she clutches her throat. She heads for the door.

I step in front, blocking her from it. “You are mine. They promised.” Her fear-scent is back, but I ignore it. She will not be afraid when the collar is gone. I reach for it, and when it lights up with another buzz of electric shock, I snap the soft metal under my claws and toss it aside. She rubs her red throat, staring up at me in surprise.

“Mine,” I snarl.

“The female is just visiting for your meal,” the scientist says on the other side of the glass. “Let her go.”

“You said she was mine.”

“No, you said you wanted to see her. I complied.” His voice is cold and logical, and even as he speaks, he taps something into his data pad. “Now it’s up to you to keep your side of the bargain. Let her go.”

“You lied.” Rage blisters through my veins, and I feel the adrenaline in my body rising. I keep the female protectively behind me, placing her between my larger bulk and the wall. If they want to touch her, they’ll have to destroy me first.

“I did not lie. I said she would join you. I did not say for how long. Frankly, Crudden, you can’t be trusted with a female.” He gestures at me through the glass. “Look at how you’re reacting.”

He wants to see a reaction? He hasn’t seen anything yet.

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## MINA

**I** plaster myself to the wall, trying to stay safe as Crudden rages and paces in the cell in front of me.

This is all a nightmare. Not only did they make me go into the cell with a dangerous, feral gladiator, they made him think he could keep me. Now that he can't—and I'm glad that he can't—he's losing his mind. I worry that it won't take much for that mad rage to be turned onto me. So I try to stay out of the way. Make myself small. Keep out of the strike zone.

Quiet. Calm.

I rub my neck where he snapped my shock-collar as if it was nothing. It's like...he's trying to prove they can't hold me. Not from him. Sure enough, there's a magnetic hum behind my back and the sound of the magnetism coming online. As I watch, Crudden snarls again, his tusks shiny with rage as one arm is forcefully yanked behind him. Then another. He goes flying backward, his body slamming into the wall. That's it, then. They'll shoot him up with drugs and that'll be the end of this little experiment. I can go back to the kitchens and just disappear amongst the rest of the slaves.



But Crudden's rage only grows as he hits the wall. I stare up at him, at his ugly face with the almost-snout and the enormous teeth that his lips won't quite close over. His claws have extended into long, wicked talons that look as if they could gut me in thirty seconds flat. As I watch, he twists on the wall, trying to work free from the cuffs. A split second later, there's a crack of bone and one hand rips free in a shower of blood and an angry cry from him. He tears at his other cuff and the shock-collar on his neck, and within moments, he's got them all off and flung to the ground, the collars still sizzling and sparking.

His shoulders heave and he looks around wildly. His eyes have flooded with red, like a blood vessel has burst, and it adds to his sinister appearance as he crouches on the ground, looking ready to pounce.

I don't dare move toward the door. I remain where I am, my heart fluttering in my chest like a trapped bird.

Crudden stalks in front of the windows, flinging himself once at the glass, as if he wants desperately to crash through and tear the scientist apart. The other man on the far side looks alarmed, typing frantically into his pad as another siren blares through cellblock C. Crudden snarls at him, then turns away, his gaze falling on me.

Shit. Shit shit shit.

I remain very still, my eyes wide. Do I play this brave or do I try to look soft and vulnerable? In the time it takes for me to decide, he approaches, looming over me again from where I'm huddled on the floor. Those long, wicked claws hover over my head and I squeeze my eyes shut.

A hand touches my hair...and then strokes it lightly. He makes a gentle noise in his throat. "Mina."

I open my eyes a fraction, and some of the red has bled out of his eyes. I think that's a good sign. He looks calmer now, petting my hair. His nostrils flare and he studies me with that intense gaze, looking me over in what can only be a protective manner. One wrist has an odd angle to it, I notice, and there's something white sticking out from his skin.

"You're hurt," I whisper. "You should let them patch you up."

"No one is taking you from me," he snarls, the sound low and dangerous even as he oh-so gently pets my hair. "Mine. All mine."

I'd love to argue with that, but I'm getting far too used to aliens calling me their property. Let him think what he wants as long as he doesn't snap me like he did that collar. I offer a tremulous smile, wondering how the fuck I'm getting out of this room alive. The answer comes a short time later, when Lord Sir's guards enter the antechamber, armed with shock-sticks. There's four of them, and the moment Crudden notices them, his eyes flood with red again. He turns and stands protectively in front of me.

Oh, this isn't going to go well at all.

He launches himself at them the moment they enter the cell. As I watch in horror, one guard raises his shock-stick and slams it into Crudden's chest. It barely fazes the big guy. If anything, it makes him angrier. He growls low in his throat, and spikes burst through the skin of his back and stud along his arms. Holy shit.

Crudden grabs the shock-stick and uses it to drag the guard forward. He leans in, bites down on the man, and rips his throat out with his teeth. Blood sprays everywhere.

The other guards pile on, slamming their shock-sticks into him, but I think he's too charged up to notice. Limbs go flying as he tears another guard apart, ripping him into pieces as if he's made of paper. A third one goes down in a pool of blood and the fourth one abandons his actions, pressing against the wall and hammering the release. Crudden stalks after him, a predator sensing an easy kill.

“Wait,” I cry out. “Don't.”

Crudden turns and looks at me, his eyes bright red.

Hot terror shoots through me as his focus turns to where I'm standing. He's covered in blood, and I've never seen a more deadly creature. I freeze, pressing against the wall as he takes one step toward me. Then another. A gas fills the chamber, and I watch as he stalks toward me, limbs slowing. The gas slides into my lungs, cool as frost, and my vision blackens at the corners.

As I pass out, I see him looming over me, covered in blood, his eyes that hypnotic red...and I hope my throat isn't the next one to get ripped out.

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## CRULDEN

**I**t takes seven deaths before they stop sending men in after me.

I don't kill the one Mina asks me not to. I remember that, even though she sprawls unconscious in the corner. The first round of gasses doesn't work, so they send in more men, attempting to separate her from me. When that doesn't work and I rip out more throats, they try a new tactic. My room is sealed and all the air is removed, making it impossible for me to breathe. I could hold my breath and wait them out, but I don't know if Mina will survive that. I don't know anything about the human species, other than they look impossibly fragile. So I pretend to collapse, because I don't want them to kill my female now that I have her.

She's mine. It doesn't matter that they lied now. I can get them to bend. She'll be mine if they want anything—anything at all—out of me.

When I collapse, they send in a bot that shoots me full of drugs, and then I really do go under.



I DRIFT IN AND OUT. I'm in a med-station for a time, the glass dome whirling with lights while needles dance over my arm. The tech notices I'm awake and pumps me full of more medication. When I finally rouse, I'm in my room again. I sit up on the bed, a foul, medicinal taste in my mouth.

My chamber has been cleaned while I was out. There are new scents all over the bed and the thin blanket. There are new scents on the walls and the floor. The sink has been replaced, with new scents on that, too. I move around in my quarters, picking through the scents, but hers is gone.

Mina.

I want her back.

I crouch in place, pondering what to destroy. Mina doesn't like it when I destroy things and...for some reason, it is important to me that she be happy with me. She says I make more work for her, so I opt to skip eating instead. They want my rage. They want my cooperation. So I move back to my bed, turn my back to the windows, and sleep.

A bowl of something spicy is put into the meal slot. I ignore it, and when a second one is added a short time later and also ignored, the scientist comes to my cell. He stares at me through the glass for a long time, not speaking. I wouldn't know that he was there, except I can smell his fear and frustration as he gazes on me.

"Crudden," he finally says. "Is your appetite off?"

I ignore him.

He leaves, and a short time later, another med-bot enters and shoves a needle in my arm. Immediately, hunger roars through my system. An appetite stimulant. I clench my teeth and ignore it, because in the end, they want me fed and cooperating. They need me more than I need them.

Hours pass.

I smell the scientist—and the lord—before they speak up. “Crudden.” The lord speaks over the intercom in my chamber, his aristocratic voice clipped and displeased. “You are not eating. If you are unwell, speak up.”

I turn and sit up in bed. Glare at both of them.

And I wait.

“You need to eat,” the lord says, leaning over the intercom to chide me. So safe in the hall, in his gray, flowing robes and the long hair that wouldn’t last a moment in an arena battle. I envision grabbing him by that long hair and twisting his head off. Just...right off. Snap. Toss.

I crack my knuckles.

They exchange looks.

“I told you what I wanted for my cooperation,” I say flatly. “And you lied to me. So why should I do anything you want?”

The scientist buzzes in this time. “If you don’t eat, we’ll be forced to implant a nutrient dispenser.”

I shrug. “You think that’ll get me to fight for you?” I give them my ugliest smile and keep my tone calm. “Your pain sticks won’t motivate me. Your food doesn’t motivate me. If you send anyone else into this cell to clean it, I’ll kill them. If you send in more guards, I’ll kill them, too. Nothing you do or say is going to make me want to be your pet gladiator...but if

you give me the female, I'll play along. I'll be your obedient little fighter. But you know what I want."

They exchange another look. The scientist frowns, but the lord looks thoughtful, and I know I'm going to win this particular fight. The lord leans in, his finger on the intercom. "How do we know you don't plan on killing her? Human slaves are valuable."

Kill her? Why do they think I'd harm Mina? Why does Mina think that? I wish I had my memories, but they're all still a blank. Maybe they'll come back with time, but until then, I'll just have to cope. I'm not asking these fools for more information. "I want her alive. She's not a very good companion if she's dead."

The lord turns to the scientist, and I know I've won. The scientist frowns, though, and hits the intercom. "We'll speak of this and get back to you. As a show of good faith, eat your food."

I don't. I don't have to show them anything.

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## MINA

**I** wake up on a cot in the med-bay, my thoughts disoriented. I blink and look around, waiting for the dizzying feeling to go away. When it does, I sit up and touch my throat. A collar is there, slim and cold against my skin. The memory of Crudden tearing the old collar off my throat is vivid. No, he didn't even tear. He just reached over and snapped it as if it was nothing. As if it insulted him with its presence.

I didn't even know that sort of thing could happen.

Experimentally, I give the collar a hard tug. A painful jolt shoots up my arm and I let go, shaking my hand. Not only is Crudden a lot stronger than me, but he doesn't seem to care about the voltage.

My hand tingles as the door to med-bay opens. The scientist isn't anywhere to be seen, but the place is empty other than me. A clone guard steps inside, his weapon holstered, his gray uniform crisp. "Come with me, human."

That's...new. I get to my feet, straightening my clothing. I'm still spattered with all kinds of stains from the incident in



Crudden's cell. I suppose I should be glad that no one changed me while I was unconscious, but my skin itches and crawls. I just want to return to the slave quarters, wash up, and get back into the normal routine. "Is the overseer looking for me?" I ask. "I've been here the whole time. I just woke up."

The guard shrugs. "I wasn't sent by the overseer. My instructions are to bring you back to your cellblock."

A cold prickle moves over my skin. "I...my quarters are in the slave quarters."

"Your things have been relocated," he says.

My things? I don't have things. I have a cot in a room I share with two other ooli slaves. "But—"

The guard shakes his head, raising a hand. "I'm just telling you my orders. Are you compliant or do I need to use force? Because I'd rather not use force."

"I'm compliant," I protest. "I'm just confused." And scared.

"I'm not allowed to ask for clarification," the guard says with a shrug. "As long as you're mobile and able to walk, my instructions are to deliver you back to a particular cellblock." And he waits by the door.

For a moment, I'm tempted to fake dizziness. To pretend that I don't feel well and I should stay in med-bay longer, but something tells me that won't go over well. I run my hands over my stained shift one last time and then take a deep breath to calm my nerves. "I...guess I'm ready."

I'm not. I'm terrified. But I need to find out what my fate is.

I remain calm and quiet as the guard leads me out of med-bay and across the compound. There's a training exercise of some kind going on, and three gladiators are hard at work, wrestling with each other as the pit masters watch. The moment I appear, all three gladiators stop in their tracks and turn to look at me, which just makes my hackles rise. It's that "prey" feeling, and I hate it.

"Back to work," a pit master bellows, and then there's the crackling sound of shock-sticks. There's a grunt of pain, and then the sound of bodies smacking into each other again. I don't look over in that direction or acknowledge their presence. Under the radar, I chant to myself. Under the radar is the only way you'll stay safe. On the radar, and you're prey.

I don't know how I'm going to stay under the radar in cellblock C, but I'll find a way. For now, I keep my head down, my steps quick, and I'm oh so obedient because a bad slave is one that gets attention. I want to be so damn invisible that one day, no one will notice if I'm just...gone.

The moment we enter cellblock C, I can hear the sounds of shouting.

It's coming from Lord Sir's private offices. The guard hesitates, glancing around. "The scientist was supposed to meet me out here," he mutters. "Come on."

I follow after him, trotting down the hall like the good little idiot I am. As I do, we pass by Crudden's cell.

He sits on the edge of his cot, his forearms resting on his knees. It's supposed to be a pose of relaxation, but there's such an air of menace to him that it almost feels like he's crouching, waiting to pounce. His cell is clean as a whistle, the floors gleaming and the bedding fresh. As we walk past, his gaze

locks onto me. He watches me with the guard, and a hint of a smile curves his tusked mouth.

That smile is terrifying. It means he knows something I don't, and I'm afraid of what it is.

I'm glad when we continue farther into the cellblock, but the mental image of that smile haunts me.

"Absolutely not!" The lord shouts from within his office, and the guard pauses with me outside. He moves to stand next to the wall and indicates I should do the same. I do, lining up against the wall next to him, and we both stare at the door as the men inside argue. The lord seems to be winning. "It is not a toy to be discarded! That human is a very high-profile gift! What am I going to tell Lady dra'Niiron if it turns up dead?"

I wince.

"But you're not using the thing," the scientist continues, his voice full of excitement. "This is the only thing that Crudden has responded to. If you want his cooperation, why not see how he performs if given what he wants?"

"And if he tears it apart?"

Oof. I cross my arms, hugging my chest. For some reason, the room feels ice cold. Or maybe it's just me, full of terror. The guard shoots me a sympathetic look.

"If he tears it apart, then we know he can't be trusted." There's a pause. "And humans die in captivity all the time. She's far more useful to our cause keeping him happy than washing dishes, don't you think?"

The lord makes a noise I can't quite understand. "Why not just give him a pile of credits and be done with it?"

“Because he doesn’t want a pile of credits. He wants the female. Not just any female, that female. And you’re not using her.”

There’s a long pause.

“We can use her as a bargaining tool,” the scientist continues, his voice cajoling. “We can monitor how he acts with her, and adjust our plans accordingly. But this is the only thing he’s asked for, and you want your investment to be successful, do you not?”

Another long pause. Then... “I suppose humans do die in captivity regularly.”

Jesus, they sure are convinced I’m going to die right away. I shiver, and I can’t seem to stop shivering. This is exactly what I didn’t want. Haven’t I worked so hard for the last two years to not be noticed? To make myself as unobtrusive as possible? It’s all been ruined by that big, violent gladiator, and now they’re going to give me to him because he’s lonely? I don’t know if I’m angrier at him or at them.

I decide I’m mad at them, and terrified of him. I remember my collar and how he snapped it. I also remember how casually he tore someone’s throat out with his teeth.

“I suppose we’ll use his possessiveness to our advantage,” Lord Sir says with a sigh. “Someone find the human slave and bring her here?”

The guard nudges me. “That’s you.”

Of course it’s me, I want to bite out. There are no other humans here. I’m not an idiot, no matter how much they treat me like one. The door opens, and I see Lord Sir sitting at his massive desk, the scientist standing in front of it. The lord has

a resigned look on his face, but the one on the scientist's face is downright triumphant.

“That's convenient,” Lord Sir mutters, glancing at the scientist. He flicks a hand, indicating I should enter. “Come in. There's been a change in your assignments, human.”



I KEEP my hands clasped in front of me as they talk, and the entire time, I shiver. My shivering's due to fear, but no one asks if I'm all right, or if I'm afraid. They just talk about their plans for me.

No one asks what I want. Never do.

It seems that I'm going to be housed with Crulden to bring him into line. What that means is I'll be his to play with, in any and all ways imaginable. If he kills me, they'll be upset of course. I'm a pile of credits, after all, an awkward birthday gift that no one knows what to do with. My collar is programmed with an additional setting—two quick taps will activate an emergency alert. They assure me they will “do their best to get me out of his grasp safely” if such a need should arise.

But if Crulden wants to play patty-cake? I'm his partner. If Crulden wants to rape me daily and it keeps him happy? They're fine with that. This is exactly the situation I hoped I wouldn't be shoved into, and my mind is screaming with anger and terror both even as I silently clasp my hands together and shiver.

Just...shiver.

I'm trapped, and for the first time since I've been sold off to Lord Sir, I feel hopeless. In the back of my mind, I've

always had a plan I've been working towards—be quiet, be unobtrusive, and win their trust. The moment rescue off this planet presents itself, take it. I can't do that if I'm their pet gladiator's prized chew toy. I sure can't escape if I'm trapped in his cell with him.

“He's very important to the roster,” the scientist tells me, that fervent gleam in his eyes. “Make him happy.”

With that, my collar is tested, they pat me on the shoulder, and then take me into the hall, back toward Crudden's cell. I move on wooden feet, my toes so cold I can't feel them in my shoes. My nipples scrape against the front of my shift, and the entire cellblock feels like ice. I clench my teeth as the scientist guides me toward Crudden's cell with a hand on my back, and pauses in front of the antechamber.

“Remember,” the scientist tells me. “Make him happy and we'll be happy.”

Right. Like I can forget? They're hammering it into my head every five seconds.

The door to the antechamber opens. For a moment, I want to run. Just run away, screaming. Run into the courtyard where the gladiators are training, run past them, run to the trees and never look back. I'd never get there, but I'd die trying, at least...unless I didn't die.

That's the thought that stops me. That it'd be worse to try to escape and fail, and live to see the consequences.

So I step forward and move into the antechamber. I close my eyes as the scans move over me, looking for pathogens and hidden objects. When it beeps with approval, I open my eyes and the door whooshes open, splitting apart and sliding back so I can enter Crudden's cell.

Crudden hasn't moved from his spot on the bed.

He doesn't move when I step inside, either. There's a watchfulness to him, and my skin feels permanently prickled when his nostrils flare as he looks at me. He just sits on the edge of the bed and waits.

I remain where I am. My throat feels dry. My head feels fuzzy. I'm pretty sure if he touches me, I'm going to fall apart.

Instead, he looks back to the scientist. "Is this another trick?" His voice is deep, menacing. "The moment I let my guard down, are you going to take her away again?"

"She's yours," the scientist says.

Crudden gets to his feet.

"Provided—"

The gladiator turns swiftly toward the glass, lunging at the scientist on the other side. My heart leaps in my throat, my senses screaming. Outside, I can hear the scientist stumbling backward, away from the glass.

"Is. This. A. Trick." Crudden restates each word in a terrifying, firm voice.

"As long as you don't destroy her, she's yours," the scientist babbles. "And as long as you cooperate. That's all."

A long pause. I'm not sure I'm breathing. I'm not sure anyone is.

Crudden grunts.

The doors whoosh shut, fluttering my hair. My entire body quakes and I can't stop shaking. This is it, I tell myself. This is where he holds you down and rapes you. It's going to be okay.

You'll live through this. You will. It'll pass. You can do this. You'll survive. You're strong.

My mental pep talk sounds like garbage bullshit, even to myself. I clench my jaw when Crudden's gaze swings in my direction. It's like now that he's decided that I'm his to keep, I get his attention. His nostrils flare, and then he moves toward me. Slow. Unhurried.

Terrifying.

He stands right in front of me, so close that I can see the hairs on his chest and the veins that thread under his skin. His pants are new and clean, and his claws look as if they've grown out again, which seems impossible...but then again, he sprouted spikes when he was threatened before, so what the fuck do I know? One of those dangerous, curled claws reaches out and touches the collar of my shift. He scrapes at something crusted onto me, and I realize I'm still covered in blood and gore from before. Ironic that they cleaned him up and not me—shows how much I'm worth to them.

Before I can take a breath, he grabs the front of my tunic in his fist and rips it off.

The fabric falls away, and I'm naked in front of Crudden.

My teeth chatter and clank together. I can't stop shaking. I can't. I'm always so brave, but today, I can't be. Today, I'm terrified.

He picks up the fabric of my shift and holds it out toward the glass, but his gaze remains utterly focused on my face. "This offends me."

"Put it in the slot and we'll have a cleaner-bot take care of it," the scientist says quickly.

I guess I get to be naked and trapped with Crudden.



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## CRULDEN

**T**he female's scent offends me.

She's covered in a variety of smells that mask her normal scent, and I don't like this. Not one bit. Her scent is my favorite thing about her. They've given her to me, sure, but it's clear they've taken no effort with her. She wears the same filthy shift from the incident before, and her garment is ripe with the blood of others. More than that, I can smell other hands that have been on her, ooli and a'ani.

I don't like it. No one should touch her but me. She should smell like no one but me.

I shove the offending fabric out of the slot and snarl at the scientist. "I want food," I tell him. I remember that they didn't feed her well before, and it made her angry. "Enough for us both."

"Of course," the male says, and skitters away to do my bidding, as if I'm the master and him the slave.

I turn back toward the female. Her body quakes and she won't look at me. Now that her offending garment is gone, her

smell is purer, but...she is covered in fear-smell. I heard some of the words they told her, picked up from their conversations.

She is to please me. Just that. I can do with her what I want.

Clearly this scares her.

I do want her. Now that I haven't been eating the drugged food they've been shoving in my direction, other wants have been surfacing. Other needs. I dream about her smaller body under mine, and what it will feel like to have her open up to me, to take me into her tight sheath. I want to stare at her naked body that's right in front of me, even though I don't have permission to look. I want to see if it matches my fantasies. Of course I want her.

But I want more than just a convenient cunt. If that was all I wanted, I could have been given any slave.

But I wanted her.

"You're scared," I point out, blunt.

"I'm t-t-trying to s-s-stop," she manages, teeth clacking into one another.

She's cold, too, it seems. I don't like that, either. I move to my bed, grab the blanket that she gave me, the one that smells like her, and move back to her side. I wrap it carefully around her, tucking it close.

That surprises her. She stops staring at a spot on the wall and glances at me, confusion on her face. "Why...?" She pauses, and then purses her lips, as if biting back the rest of her words.

"Because you're cold. I can't think when I'm cold." Her soft-looking hair is trapped under the edge of the blanket and I

free the delicate strands, trying to ignore that she flinched when I reached for her. “You won’t look at me?”

“I wanted to know what you wanted with me,” she says. “You said you didn’t know. I guess you figured it out, huh?”

Her tone is odd, bitter. “I want you in here, with me.”

“A slave for the slave?”

My frown deepens. I want...a companion. But saying that aloud makes me sound weak. I don’t need anyone or anything. I don’t want to need anyone. The last thing I want is to give the scientist and the lord he serves more leverage against me. “I want you here with me,” I say again, because that is the simplest explanation for it.

“Are you going to kill me?” she asks.

I frown. “Why does everyone keep asking me that? Why would I ask for you if I just intended to kill you? I don’t want you dead.”

“You want a slave,” she repeats bluntly. “If all you want is someone to swing by and pick up your socks, I don’t have to sleep here. I can come by daily and tidy things for you.”

I scowl. “But then you will leave. This way, you stay with me. You will stay in my bed. You will talk to me and share meals with me.”

This doesn’t reassure her. She hitches the blanket higher around her shoulders and gives me another fierce look. “So you’re going to rape me, then?”

Am I? I consider this. It would be nothing to overpower her. To shove her down and push her thighs open and do what I like with her. Her fear-scent would be unending, then. And... she would not like me. She would be angry. Permanently. I

imagine what it would be like for her to hate me. She laughed once, the sound soft and sweet.

I want that again. I do not want to destroy her for a moment's pleasure. I want...I don't know what I want. More of her everything.

"No rape," I say gruffly. "I didn't push for you to be here just for you to hate me."

"What did you think would happen? That we'd be bosom buddies now that we're cellmates?" She looks at me like I'm crazy. "I'm not happy to be in here!"

I bare my teeth at her, frustrated. "It's not about what you want."

"It never is with you guys, is it?" Her tone is bitter, and she glares at me before dropping her gaze and leaning against the wall. "Some things never change."

I am stunned.

She thinks I'm the same as the others? The same ones that enslave me? That keep me as their toy? And yet...that's what I'm doing to her, isn't it? I can hear her sharp voice in my head, clear as day.

I don't like it. I want to tell her that I'm not like them. That I'm a prisoner as much as she is. What comes out isn't that, though. Instead, I find myself saying, "I like your scent."

"You could have asked. I would have sent you my laundry so you can jack off in it."

"Jack...off?" I am not familiar with these words.

She makes a crude gesture with her hand, indicating self-sex.

I snort at that. “I’m not sure you would talk to me if you found me jack-offing on your laundry.”

Her lips twitch, and then she frowns ferociously at me again. “Damn right I wouldn’t.”

“Then this is how it must be. I want to talk to you. More than once. I do not want your laundry.” I feel like...an idiot saying these things, but I cannot describe the ways that she obsesses me. I have so little to look forward to—more meals? Fights in the arena? Why should I not take what I want? And yet, I realize that because I have asked, I have taken her freedom. I know this, and it bothers me, and yet...I will not change my mind. So I say stupid words. “I liked you because you were not afraid of me. Everyone is always afraid. It makes me wonder what kind of monster I am.”

Her face softens. She glares at the wall for a moment longer and then sighs, heavily. She glances over at me. “You’re not a monster, just like I’m not a sex toy. We’re just people. Fucked up, fucked-over people.”

“Mina,” I say. “I remember your name.”

“Crudden,” she says with a little nod. Her gaze moves to my wrist, covered in bandages. “You broke your wrist. Did they fix it?”

I shrug.

She gives me an odd look and holds her hand out. “Can I see it?”

“Why?”

Mina adjusts the blanket around her shoulders, freeing her arm as she holds the blanket tight with the other. “I want to see what it looks like. You went absolutely crazy earlier. I didn’t know what to think. You hurt yourself, too.”

Her words make me feel...strange. It's like she's chiding me for being an uncontrollable beast. Isn't that what they want from me, though? To kill and attack? It's not what Mina wants, though. When I extend my wrist, she peels back the bandages and clucks her tongue over the fresh-healing scars. Like...they bother her.

“Does it hurt?”

Another odd question. “I am in constant hurt. What is one more?” I shrug. “It will heal, and then they will demand I hurt myself in new ways to please them.”

Her eyes grow sad, those dark brows furrowing. Carefully, she reaches out and touches a fingertip to one pink, healing scar. “There's more to life than just pain.”

I watch that small finger, fascinated. “If there is, I haven't experienced it.”

Mina sighs again, and she lifts her hand. “Don't make me feel sorry for you, Crudden. I'd rather hate you.”

“But I like your smell better when you don't.” I want her to put her hand on me again. I want her to touch me on places other than scars that have no sensation. I want to know what it would feel like if those light fingers brushed me...elsewhere.

I am a bad guy, I realize, because I do want more from her than just companionship. I want touches. I want her smiles. I want her scent full of something other than fear.

I need to learn how to get these things.

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**MINA**

**I** 'm not happy.

Understatement of the decade, of course. This is flying in the face of all my careful plans of being unobtrusive, of everyone ignoring me. Can't exactly ignore the pet slave of the favorite gladiator in the compound. But I'm a survivor, and I'll just have to figure out how to survive this.

Crudden says he's not going to rape me, but I'm not entirely sure of what he wants. I don't think he knows, either. I hate that I feel a twinge of pity for him, because it's clear that he's led a very sheltered, very shitty life. I wonder if he's ever been outside of a cage at all? The thought makes me sad, and I don't want to feel sorry for him. I want to hate him, but I'm already struggling with that. He's in a fucked situation, just like me. And he thought I was cold, so he gave me his blanket.

He's the first person on this planet that's given half a shit about me.

So I need to make the best of this, and not making him my enemy is the first thing on the list. I give him a faint, awkward smile and look at the cot. "So...I'm sleeping there with you?"



He nods. “But no rape.” There’s an eager look in his eyes, a hopeful sort of expression. “But if you touched me first—”

“Nope,” I say flatly. “Not gonna happen.” I hug the blanket tighter around me. “We’ll need more bedding.”

“They will give it to me,” he says confidently.

“And I need more clothing, seeing as how you ripped my only piece off of me.”

“It smelled like others. I didn’t like it.” His nostrils flare and his expression darkens.

I mentally file that bit away—scents are important to him. Got it. “Well it was all I had.”

“They will get you more,” he says, as if asking for favors is the easiest thing in the world for a slave.

I’m doing my best not to get frustrated at him, because he keeps watching me with that fascinated, rapacious look. Like he’s hungry. It makes me a little nervous, but he genuinely seems to want to talk, so I’m going to keep talking. I can pull a Scheherazade and keep him entertained for as long as it keeps me alive. I can do whatever it takes. I just need the chance.

Before I can act on that, a figure appears in the hall. It’s one of the ooli slaves, her head bent, a tray in her hands. She shuffles forward, not looking in our direction, and moves toward the food slot. I glance over at Crudden and his nostrils flare as he watches the slave. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but I suspect it’s not good.

The slave puts the tray in the slot, activates it, and immediately races away. Can’t say I blame her.

Crudden gets to his feet, moving toward the tray that now sticks out on our side of the wall. He picks it up, and his jaw

clenches. He hesitates, though, and looks over at me. “You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

I’m always hungry, but the way he hesitates worries me. “What’s wrong with the food? Is it drugged?”

“It smells like ooli,” he growls.

More smells he doesn’t like. The ooli don’t smell great to a human nose—it’s something to do with the damp sheen on their frog like skin—so I can only imagine how bad it must be to a far more sensitive nose. “I can go get food for us,” I volunteer. The more freedom I have to go out and about, the better. “I can get food for us each time you need to eat, so you won’t smell anything but me.”

That makes him pause. His eyes narrow as he looks over at me, considering. “And you’d come back?”

“Where else would I go?” I ask softly. He doesn’t seem to realize just how trapped I am. That I no longer have quarters I can hide in. My bed’s been given to another slave. The others won’t let me hide amongst them. I’m now branded as his plaything, more or less, and so no one’s going to trust me. I can’t run away from him because the entire compound wants him happy.

But if I run errands, at least it’s some sort of nod to freedom.

Crudden watches me for a long moment, utterly silent. I suspect he’s mentally weighing the advantages. After a while, he grunts and picks up the tray, moving toward me. “For tonight, this will do.”

He stands in front of me, and I notice that it’s a different sort of tray than the kind he’s normally given. There’s an auto-stand button. Normally he isn’t given one because he could

then use it as a weapon, so I wonder if this is another test. Are they going to see how far they can push him before he hurts me? If so, I'm not a fan.

I don't show him how to activate the long extender that will make the tray stand on its own (and turn it into a club of sorts). Instead, I wait as he sets the tray on the ground and then crouches on one side, waiting for me. I sit down across from him, tucking the blanket close to my body. He's gone quiet again, and it takes me a moment to realize why. He stares at the tray, and I see what the problem is.

There's two sets of food amongst the dishes. Two carafes of liquid. One is the nicer plas-ware kept for gladiators, and the bowl is filled with steamed vegetables tossed atop thick noodles and with savory strips of meat. It's clear they're romancing Crudden with food, and there's a big serving of the fragrant, expensive juice.

The other serving is clearly for me. My dish is the old, beaten, tarnished metalware that has dents from manhandling. There's a dollop of slave nutrient sludge at the bottom, and the second carafe has water. It's no different than what I've been given every day since arriving, but the sight of it obviously bothers Crudden.

He flicks a finger at the edge of my bowl. "This offends me."

I pick up the bowl anyhow because I've learned not to be picky. "It used to offend me, too, but you get used to it. It helps if I hold my breath while I eat."

Crudden pulls it out of my hand, ignoring the sound of protest I make. "You will not eat this."

Hot disappointment flashes through me. Is he going to take my food, too? No clothes, no food, until I agree to have sex with him? Is this the game? “Then you’re sharing yours?”

He picks up his bowl and offers it to me. “Yes.”

I glance around, looking for the scientist or the lord, because they’re not going to like that I’m eating Crudden’s food. When I don’t see anyone, I take a big chunk of meat and shove it into my mouth.

“They are still watching us,” Crudden says easily. “They watch at all times. Even when they are not here, I know they are watching. They want to see how I react now that they have given in to my demands.” He picks up a large shoot of some green vegetable and holds it out to me. “Eat this, too.”

I take it and crunch into it. It’s been steamed just enough that it’s still crisp, and an unusual flavor bursts across my tongue. It’s amazing, and it makes me realize how terrible the nutrient paste is. “They’re going to get mad I’m eating your food,” I point out, chewing.

“Then they will learn to make enough for two of us. If you are mine—and you are—they will know that to make me happy, they will treat you well.”

I pause in my eating as a new thought occurs to me. “Is the food drugged?”

“They don’t want me drugged,” Crudden says, as if he has all the answers. “They want me cooperative. And I am, now.”

He nudges the bowl toward me when I finish chewing, but I don’t like the thought of eating all his food. His body’s much bigger than mine and probably needs a hell of a lot more fuel. So I take another one of the stinky green vegetables and offer it to him. “You eat, too.”

Cruden takes it without a sound of protest and shoves the entire thing in his mouth, his tusks working ferociously. His mouth is kind of terrifying, actually. I've never seen teeth like that before. I think about how his body shot up with spikes the moment he freaked out, and my heart pounds with a twinge of alarm. There's a lot of him I've never seen before. That means he can't be predicted.

"Fear-scent," Cruden comments as he holds out another slice of meat to me. "Why?"

"I don't have a good answer."

He scowls.

"It's a lot to take in all at once, all right? You." I gesture at his cell. "This. I had little enough as it is and you've taken it from me."

"What did you have?" he asks. "I will have them replace it."

Is he...serious? "Well, for starters, I had plans to escape." I keep my voice low, hoping that it's not picked up on whatever observation equipment is around. "Can't exactly escape with a spotlight on me, which I have now, so thanks for that."

"Spot...light?"

"Attention."

He grunts. "Tell me more of this plan."

I squint at him, frowning. Then I reach out and take another piece of food. Damn it, even his noodles taste better than the leftovers we sometimes get. I feel a little weird for eating with my fingers, but he's doing it, too, and that makes it seem more acceptable. "It's not a great plan. Just...more of a

goalpost. The less noticeable I am, the easier it'd be for me to eventually escape.”

“That...is your plan?” Crudden snorts. “I noticed you right away.”

I want to point out that he's a freak, but that seems... unwise. “I was actually flying under the radar pretty well, thank you.”

He makes another dismissive sound and pushes the bowl toward me, indicating I should eat more. I do, because they'll bring more. If Crudden asks for something, apparently he gets it. “I noticed you right away,” he states again. “You are strange and ugly, for starters.”

“You're no dream prince yourself!”

That makes him bare his teeth, and for a bizarre moment, I think he's snarling. It takes a heartbeat for me to realize this is his version of a smile. “No, I am strange and ugly myself,” he admits. “But you do not carry yourself like a slave. Your scent is not one of fear. You met my gaze when I looked at you instead of cowering. If the others ignore you, it is because they are bigger fools than I thought.”

I mentally file all this information away. Act like a slave in the future. Don't make eye contact with scary fuckers. Got it. “So that's where I went wrong.”

“And now you are mine, and none of this matters,” Crudden says, as if everything is resolved.

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## CRULDEN

**T**he female eats my food in quick, surreptitious movements, her shoulders hunched as she leans forward. It's like she expects me to snatch it from her, but she glances around while she eats, and I realize it is not me she thinks will stop her from eating. It is others.

This both pleases me and makes me angry. I like that she fears me less than others. I like that I am feeding her.

I am furious that she thinks someone will take this from her. The sludge they gave for her portion makes me equally angry. I am glad that I asked for her. Now that she is here with me, I can take care of her. Eventually, maybe she will trust me enough to let me touch her. Until then, I will be her protector.

Once the food is gone, she heads to the lavatory and gives herself privacy by holding up the blanket in front of her. I pretend not to notice, since it bothers her, and I'm fascinated when she washes her hands and then her neck and her face. She smooths her hair down with a damp hand and glances over at me.

The lights go out.

She lets out a yelp of panic, her fear-scent blooming in the air.

Immediately, I move to her side, determined to protect her. “I am here.” I half-expect her to push me away, but she clutches at my arm, gazing around us in worry. I do not think she can see in the dark like I can. How do humans function with such weak senses? It is a mystery. I decide it doesn’t matter, though, and that I like her bad eyes, because she moves even closer to me, her small form pressing against my side.

A voice chimes in overhead. “Crudden’s training will begin in the morning. Please get a full night’s sleep so you can be at your optimal best.” The scientist’s voice is nauseatingly pleasant. “Enjoy your evening.”

“I really hate that man,” Mina mutters.

I do, too. In this, though, I am secretly glad, because now I get to get into bed with Mina. They haven’t brought extra clothes for her, or blankets, which means we get to share.

And I am a bad, bad, bad sort because this excites me.

“Come,” I say to Mina. “I said I would comply.”

She is silent, but she moves toward the bed when I nudge her in that direction. I don’t trust her silence, of course. I know enough about this female already to know that she is always scheming, always thinking. Looking for a solution. We approach my cot, and she pauses. “You said no rape, right?”

I do not smell fear-scent on her, which is good. “That is correct. I did not work this hard to get you in my cell for you to hate me.”

“Mmhmm.” She glances up at me, squinting in the darkness. “If you try something, I’m going to kick you in the balls.”



“If I try something, I will deserve it.” Plus, I doubt her kicks would discourage me. Pain does not deter me from much of anything. But I like her trust. I like that she is talking to me, and easily. I like that she moved toward me when she was frightened, as if trusting me to protect her. I will not threaten that trust for anything.

Mina lets out a heavy sigh, showing me she is not happy, and then climbs onto the cot. I am glad for once that I have not destroyed the thin gel mattress given to me. It is the only soft thing in the room, and I want her to have that softness. I want her to have good things. I want to be able to give those good things to her. Never have I been so obsessed. My memories are fractured, but I don't recall ever paying attention to a female like I do this one.

She moves closer to the wall and then wraps the blanket tighter around her body, cocooning herself. “We're not sharing blankets, so don't get any ideas.”

I want to laugh at her belligerent tone, because it makes me so happy. There is no fear-scent in her at all, and I love it. “I can sleep without a blanket for a night,” I reassure her in a grave voice. “We will ask for more in the morning.”

“Something tells me that's one of the requests that'll be denied,” Mina mutters, but lies down and faces the wall.

Gingerly, I sit on the edge of the cot next to her. She wiggles, moving even closer to the wall itself, but does not turn to look at me. That is all right. Patience is not one of my strong suits, but I don't mind this. Having her here with me soothes the furious parts of my spirit, and I don't mind that she won't let me touch her yet. Of course not. She is too strong-willed for that, and I like her strong will.

I lie down on the cot, one arm behind my head, and contemplate sleep. It'll be impossible. She's too warm, too near. It doesn't matter that she's not moving. My cock is hard and aching, my body awake with her close proximity. I can practically feel her breath. I can almost feel her hair falling against my skin.

I wonder what her skin feels like. The thought makes me even harder, and I reach down to touch myself, and then stop. She wouldn't like that much. She'd think I'm pushing her. Reluctantly, I put my hand on my belt instead.

At my side, Mina shivers. A moment later, she adjusts the blankets, burrowing deeper underneath.

I take a deep breath and then let it out slowly. It frosts in the air, and I realize what they're doing. They've adjusted the temperature in my rooms, changing it so it'll be ice cold inside. So Mina will have no choice but to throw herself into my arms.

They are giving me what I want, the scientist and the lord. They are doing everything they can to subtly push her into touching me. I will have to say something tomorrow so they do not drug her food to make her personality change. I like her prickliness, and I would rather have that than a drugged, enthusiastic female.

I want the real Mina.

She moves on the bed again, the gel in the mattress rippling ever so slightly. With an angry huff, she sits up, then looks over at me. I remain in the same position, stretched out. My pants are on, even though it is far more comfortable for me to sleep naked. And she glares at me. "Did they turn the heat down?"

In response, I huff out another frosty breath, showing her the answer.

Mina makes the cutest little growling sound. “I hate everyone and everything,” she mutters, and lies back down with a thump. A moment later, she rolls toward me, her face pressing against my chest. “Fuck it. You’re warm. Don’t try anything or your balls will suffer.”

And she presses herself against me, burrowing.

I go utterly still. I...do not know how to react. Do I touch her? Hold her? Keep my hands off of her? Nothing in my hodgepodge memory tells me what is appropriate. I know sixteen different chokeholds for use against an opponent, and yet I have no idea how to act with a female. But when Mina shivers again, I hesitantly put an arm around her shoulders.

She makes a sound of pleasure. “You’re really warm.”

I guess I am. The cold air does not bother me, but Mina is not made of hardy materials like I am. She has not been bred and spliced to be unstoppable. She is fragile, and that is part of her appeal as a slave. She is a soft, breakable thing.

A soft, breakable thing that relaxes against me and drifts off to sleep. A soft, breakable thing with her face pressed to the hard, scarred pectorals of a monster, seeking me out for warmth and protection. Ever so slightly, I brush my thumb over her arm. Soft. So very soft. I brush it again, stroking her. If I cannot touch myself, I will spend the evening touching her.

Even though our captors are devious and not to be trusted...I am foolishly glad they are acting as they are. Mina is in my arms, in my bed.

I am content. They want me to comply? I will comply. As long as I get more of this, I will do whatever it is they want

from me.

Except sleep. I do not think I will be able to sleep a bit this night. I want to stay awake every moment, just touching Mina and breathing in her scent. Feeling her relax against me. I do not want to miss a moment of this night.

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## MINA

**C**ruden doesn't hurt me that night.

I wish I could say he didn't "touch" me, but his bed isn't huge and they deliberately turned the air to freezing to force us together. I ended up huddled against his bigger body for warmth, and when I woke up, I was plastered to his chest, his arms around me and his erection burning a hole in my belly.

The most disgruntling thing is that it was the nicest sleep I've had in a long time. Cruden is warm and his skin is softly furred all over, so it's like hugging a heating blanket as I sleep. My ass was cold but the rest of me was so, so warm. And the guy is hard as a rock, his dick enormous and obvious as it presses against my gut, but he ignores it, and so I do, too.

Cruden still doesn't trust me to go get us food, but this time when breakfast is brought, it's two identical bowls of the sweet noodles that everyone gets to eat for breakfast except the slaves. The juice carafe is there, big enough for both of us, and I shove my mouth full of the food and try to ignore Cruden's happy expression.

Or rather, his proud expression. I don't know if he's ever happy, but he likes feeding me.

Fresh clothes are delivered—a loincloth for him, and a slave shift dress for me. The scientist appears, looking at us like an overly enthusiastic matchmaker. I very pointedly ignore him and Crudden both as I dress.

Once that's done, the scientist calls in guards—a dozen of them—and they line the hall, shock-sticks at the ready. The scientist smiles at Crudden, but there's a wariness behind his eyes. I can't say I blame him. Crudden hasn't exactly played fair lately. "You have training in the courtyard this morning, Crudden," the scientist says in a deliberately even voice. "Will you be cooperating?"

Crudden just glares and silently shrugs.

The scientist looks over at me, as if I can answer for him. I shrug, too. Like I would know?

The door to the antechamber slides open, and I'm surprised when Crudden moves toward me instead. He puts a hand on the small of my back, indicating I should go first.

"It isn't necessary to bring the female," the scientist begins.

Crudden glares at him and steps in front of me. "You want my cooperation, she's going to be there."

One of the clones clutches his shock-stick tighter.

"I can go," I say quickly, before this turns into a fight. "I don't mind."

The next few minutes are almost comical as Crudden leads me into the antechamber, and then when he remains calm, into the hallway. Everyone around us is incredibly tense, as if they

expect him to lose his shit, but he only keeps a hand on my back and walks behind the heavily guarded scientist. They lead us out into the courtyard, and normally at this time of day it'd be busy with trainers and gladiators doing exercises, slaves scurrying about, and guards moving from one post to another.

Today, it's completely quiet. I realize they must have cleared everyone out anticipating another reaction from Crudden. I glance over at him to see how he's handling things. He lifts his head, nostrils flaring, and takes a deep breath as a breeze ruffles the plant life around us. It's a nice day—not too hot, not too cold, and no rain. The air is warm and pleasant, and I wonder if this is the first time he's been outside in a while.

My heart twinges for him. Even as a slave, I was at least allowed to leave my room. Crudden doesn't even get that most of the time. He gets a cage where he's stared at all day long. No wonder he wants company.

“This way, please,” the scientist says in a brisk voice, leading us toward one of the training pits. There are more guards there lining the pit, and a couple of chained up fighters with their trainers. One of the trainers is in the pit, covered in shiny body armor, his tail flicking. I'm a little disheartened to see that it's the trainer known for his cruelty, but if Crudden knows this, he doesn't speak up. He simply enters the ring as if this is something he does all the time, then turns to look back at me.

I find that I'm standing next to the scientist. Yippee. We're surrounded by guards, and I give Crudden a weak thumbs-up.

Immediately, my collar flashes and tightens around my neck. I make a “yark” sound and claw at it, frantic, even as a

dozen clone guards suddenly shove shock-sticks in my face.

Crulden crouches low and growls, his back spikes flaring and ripping through his skin. His collar flashes, too, and I wonder if they're doing the same thing to him.

“What is that signal?” the scientist asks. “What are you telling him to do?” His voice is sharp with fear.

“It's a human...signal...” I choke out. “It means ‘good job.’”

Crulden takes a menacing step toward me, and he looks ready to attack.

“No hand signs,” the scientist says sharply. “None at all.”

Immediately, my collar eases and I let out a gasp, holding my throat. “Jesus fuck, sorry.” I offer Crulden a little smile because he's staring at me, looking as if he's waiting for the signal to attack. “It's fine. Really. I didn't realize no one realized what a thumbs-up is.”

Crulden watches me a moment longer, his gaze possessive. When I give him another faint smile and a nod, he seems satisfied. He turns toward the scientist and slowly raises his thumb. I think for a moment that he's going to give him a mocking thumbs-up of his own, but he runs his thumb along one of his enormous fangs, and it comes across as downright menacing instead.

“Before we begin,” the scientist says, voice tight. “I should remind you of the rules. Crulden, you are allowed the female in exchange for your cooperation. We want you to train like the other gladiators. We want you to fight. We want you to win. In exchange, you get the female. No one will take her from you. No one will interfere. She will be kept in your cell and at your side at all times.”



Crudden straightens, the spikes that dot his skin easing back and disappearing back into his flesh. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“You are, and that’s good,” the scientist replies crisply. “But I wanted to remind you. If you try to run or act out, we’re going to kill the female.”

My eyes go wide. I turn to look at the monster standing next to me. “What?”

He ignores me, because of course he does. Instead, he continues. “If she tries to escape or break her collar, we will kill her. If you so much as twitch inappropriately, we will kill her. Her life depends on your good behavior. I trust you understand.”

I can’t breathe. My hands go to the collar around my neck and I swallow hard. I want to claw it off my neck, because it feels too tight, and at the same time, I’m terrified of what happens if I do. My life is in the hands of an irrational, unhinged half-beast gladiator who murders people as easily as he breathes.

And I somehow need to keep him happy.

Crudden flicks a glance over at me, then turns back to the trainer in the arena.

No one moves.

“Well?” Crudden says in an angry voice. “Train me.”



FOR THE NEXT FEW HOURS, I’m forced to stand in place and watch as Crudden goes through his first “training.” They test his reflexes with hits to the arms, legs, and anywhere else that has open skin. Considering he’s wearing a loincloth, it’s a lot

of open skin. They test his “move catalogue,” which means they ask him to perform a move on a terrified clone, just to see if he can do it or not. They throw several clones in the pit and make him fight them, and when that doesn’t prove to be enough of a challenge, they add the waiting gladiators in.

In my eyes, it looks like a lot of torture. They’re absolutely brutal to one another, with biting, kicking and scratching going on in addition to the powerful flips, punches, and chokeholds. Hour after hour, Crudden looks to be unstoppable, but after a while, he starts to flag. The small wounds dotting his skin become bigger, and when there’s a crunch of bone as someone lands on his hand, I suck in a breath.

“Not to worry,” the scientist says at my side. “His healing will take care of it.”

I don’t care if his healing will. It looks like it hurts as he stands up, straightens a bent finger back into place, and re-enters the fight. It’s hard to watch as new, fresh fighters are brought in from one of the barracks, because it just feels like they’re picking on him.

By the time the scientist looks up from his data pad (where I assume he’s recording information about how Crudden is performing), the man I’m sharing a cell with is crouched at the far end of the pit, blood-spattered sand all around him and more of it sticking to his skin. His mane is disheveled and his mouth is open as he breathes heavily. His shoulders are slumped and he looks...tired.

The scientist notices this too. “His stamina is not what we’ve been promised.”

“You’ve been drugging him for weeks,” I point out, since our fates are now tied. “And keeping him in a cell with nowhere to exercise. Give him time to build it back up.”

He blinks and looks over at me. “Of course.” He pauses. “I’m glad you’re invested in his future.”

Like I have a choice? His future is now mine.

The trainer picks up his shock-stick and heads for Crudden again, and my heart drops. He looks so damned tired.

“We’ll work on your stamina, Crudden,” the scientist says loudly, snapping his data pad closed. “I think this is enough for today, though. Let’s get you back to your cell.”

Crudden gets to his feet slowly, and I can tell his mood is shit. His jaw is clenched, and he looks as if he wants to murder everyone. I don’t know what to do. Something tells me he won’t like showing weakness, so maybe it’s best that I get out of his way right now. He heads right for me, and I move forward to meet him before he does anything drastic. “Hey. Why don’t I run to the kitchens and get you an amazing meal, okay? I promise I’ll come right back and it won’t smell like anyone but me.”

His jaw clenches and he looks like he’s about to argue.

I put my hand on his arm. I don’t know why I do it. He still looks murderous, and I have to move closer to him to do it. But he seems to need...comforting of some kind. Maybe I’m imagining the bleak look in his eyes, but I know how I’d feel after a day full of being beat on. I’d want to be left alone, so I offer that to him.

Crudden glances down at my hand on his arm.

I quickly snatch it away again. Maybe I’ve pushed too hard.

“Go get food,” he says gruffly, and stalks past me on the way to the cellblock.

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## CRULDEN

**I** hate all of them.

I storm past the leering faces of the clones, the trainers with their heavy gloves and their shock-sticks, and the hated, hated face of the scientist, back to my cell. I'm angry at everyone and everything. That wasn't a training. That was them venting their frustrations on me, pushing me to my limits just to see what my limits are.

I don't like that they made me look weak in front of my female. I don't want her to think I'm not capable of protecting her. I hate all of it, and I grind my teeth as I stomp back to my quarters. The clone guards trail behind me, but I stay on the path, heading back to my cellblock. Of course I'm not going to attempt anything. Not if it means Mina's life. I'll trot back to my cell like a good slave, because they know I want her back.

If she comes back, that is. Maybe it was a trick, her offer to get away from me. She's probably terrified of me. She watched me brutalize the others that got into the pit with me today, and when I didn't go down quickly enough to suit the trainer, he added more opponents until it made it impossible

for me to win. I still tried, of course, and now I have the bruises to show for it. My body aches all over.

Doesn't matter though. If I was Mina, I wouldn't come back to me. She was furious at me last night for ruining her plans. Furious that I singled her out. If she doesn't come back...I guess I wouldn't blame her. I'd be angry, but what's a bit more anger, after all? They want me angry. They want me raging, but just under the slightest bit of control. Their control.

When I step into the cellblock, there are guards posted at every door with shock-sticks. They eye me warily as I move past, heading for my cell. The doors of the antechamber are open, waiting for my return, and even from here, I can smell the ooli scent in my quarters. Someone's been in there, and the blankets have been changed, the bed freshly made.

It no longer smells like Mina.

I hate it. All of it.

I growl as I stand in the antechamber, the smells assaulting my tired senses. I hate it when they stink up my cell. It's the only sanctuary I have, and now it's ruined. It—

Something hard shocks me in the back, hitting me like a stone.

A shock-stick. A moment later, a boot shoves me from behind, pushing me into my chamber. The doors slide shut, and the guard walks away. I slowly get to my feet again and stand near the door, fists clenched, watching as he strolls away. I memorize his scent, my flesh twitching from the aftershocks. All the a'ani wear the same face, but they have different scents. I'll remember this one, and I'll kill him if he ever comes near me again.

I crouch low, watching the guards. I'm filthy and sweaty, and everything aches, but it's more important that I intimidate the others. I can't show weakness here. Weakness means they'll shove me in with the other gladiators, who would love to get a piece of my hide. There's something about my presence that excites them. I could tell by the way the trainers reacted to me.

Am I famous, then? Why don't I have memories of being famous? Am I a great fighter? I know a lot of moves, but the scientist was disappointed in my performance today. I could tell it from his scent and the look on his face. I don't care about him, but I do care how it affects Mina.

If she ever returns.

The lord saunters out of his chambers, all flowing, delicate gray robes. His long hair would be ripped off his scalp in a moment flat, I decide. Right after I tore those fancy-looking jewel-crusted horns from his head. He approaches my cell. "I'm told training went well?"

I bare my teeth in a snarl.

He gives me a faint smile, but I can smell his fear-scent. "I'm glad to see your fighting spirit remains as strong as ever. Just remember to direct it."

I watch as he saunters away, his tail cuffed with a golden bracelet. I decide that would get ripped off right after the horns. Hair, then horns, then tail—in that order.

The door is almost shut when it slides back open again, and Mina enters in a wash of pure scent. Her eyes widen at the sight of me, and she gives me a bright smile, her smaller form struggling with the weight of a heavy tray. No one offers to help her, of course. She's a slave.

But she approaches my cell and scans her wrist-cuff, then enters the antechamber to be scanned again, and all I can think is that she is back. She returned to me.

She steps inside and taps a finger on the tray, activating a stand. It shoots out and forms a base with three prongs at the end, and Mina balances the waist-height tray. I study it, and my senses think of it as a weapon. I could use it. Hide it. Break the standoff and craft a spear, or a light club—

And then what? Watch as they shock Mina to death? After she came back for me?

No, they have me...and I'm not even that upset about it. The day is suddenly better as she fusses with the dishes on the small tray, pouring water into a bowl. "They straightened up in here, didn't they?" she asks in a soft voice. "It smells unpleasant?"

I nod, moving to sit on the edge of the bed. Now that she's here...all my strength is gone. I am tired.

"I can tell by your expression. Tomorrow I'll say something to the scientist. If they want you comfortable, they need to realize how sensitive your nose is." She pushes a towel into the water bowl.

"I don't want them knowing I have a weakness," I growl.

That makes her pause. "Oh. I'll tell them her scent makes your dick shrivel and you want it to be nice and hard for me." She shrugs, and then picks up the wet towel. "I found some unscented soap. Hold still."

To my surprise, she moves to stand directly in front of me and dabs at my face. I do as she asks and remain perfectly still, thinking of her gentle hands on my skin. She keeps her fingertips on my chin as she washes my face with her other



hand, and she's close enough that her scent envelops me. My cock surges to life, filling with blood and aching painfully. I think about the hand she put on my arm.

She's so small and soft and yet...she's not afraid of me. I could grab her and twist her head off before anyone could take a breath. I could snap her like a twig. I could do any number of brutal things to her but she stands in front of me, between my knees, and cleans my face with a warm, wet towel...and she remembered I don't like scents.

No one has ever been so kind to me.

Mina is quiet as she works, her gaze flicking to my eyes every now and then. "You had a few scratches on your face that welled up with blood, and you've got sand all over you. I thought it might be more comfortable to clean up a bit." Her expression grows flustered and she takes a step back. "And I'm an idiot. Of course you can clean yourself."

She holds the towel out to me.

I don't take it. I nod at her instead. "You do it."

"Oh. Okay." Her mouth moves in an almost-smile. "I wasn't sure if you liked my fussing. I was a teacher back on Earth, you know. Nothing impressive, just pre-school classes. That's small children. And they're messy—so messy. They don't want to stop for anything, either. I'd keep wipes by my desk and just grab a child when they went past and clean their faces. I guess old habits die hard." She puts the towel in the water again, then wrings it out and brings it back to my face, patting me more than cleaning. "If I do something you don't like...will you say so? I'm going to do my best to not piss you off, but you're an alien, and I'm an alien, and we're bound to misunderstand one another. Plus, I've been accused of being

stubborn before, and I'd really like to not get killed just because I'm bossy."

I snort at that. "Are you bossy then?"

"Well, I try not to be?" She smiles at me and cleans my neck, carefully wiping sand off my skin, and then moves to my shoulder. "I've been told it's not an appealing slave trait, so I try to rein it in, but I feel like we're in this together. That we're...friends. So I worry I'm going to get bossy with you."

A friend. I am honored by her words. I have never had a friend before, I do not think. There is not one in my memories, scattered things that they are. I think if I had a friend before, though, it would not feel so monumental now. And yet...as she touches me with soft, delicate fingers, I am reminded that I am a bad, terrible male, because it irks me, too. I do not want to be her friend. I want her to be under me. I want to taste her skin and see the faces she makes when she is pleased. I want to bury myself deep inside her and feel her around me.

Those are not "friend" thoughts.

She presses her lips together, frowning at my skin. "You're covered in these little scratches, Crudden. What did they hit you with?" Her fingers move over my skin. "You've got blood all over your back, too. Are you hurting?"

I fight back a shudder of pleasure, closing my eyes as she touches me. I want to savor the sensation. "No."

I am anything but hurting right now.

Mina leans over me and wets the towel, and I feel her smaller form press against my arm as she does. She cleans my back carefully, rubbing against me, and I try to ignore the tightness in my sac, the hard throb of my cock in my loincloth. Friends, I chant to myself. Friends. Friends. Friends.

“Oh,” Mina says softly, and her hand skims over my shoulder blade. “I think these are from your...spikes. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I groan, unable to help myself. I want to touch her so badly, I clench my fists so I won’t grab at her.

“Crudden?” Mina asks. A moment later, she moves away from me. “Ah. I guess you’re fine.”

When I open my eyes, her cheeks are pink and she’s discreetly not looking in my direction. I glance down at my loincloth and...it’s tented. Huge. Obvious.

I say nothing. What is there to say? She is my friend, and so I will not touch her.

“Dinner?” Mina asks, her voice overly bright. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving,” I admit. This is something I can focus on, at least.

Mina puts aside the washcloth and water, and we tear into the food she’s brought. All of the bowls and cups are scented with her delicate smell, and she must not have let anyone touch this but herself. She’s thoughtful, and it helps my appetite. I eat all of my food quickly, and I notice that Mina eats almost as much as I do. Today we have the same meal—noodles and veg with a pale meat—and our bowls match. She’s not going to let them treat her like less, and I admire that.

I reach out to steal a piece of meat from her bowl, just to see how she reacts, and she slaps my hand. “Eat your own.”

It makes me grin. “Bring more next time, and I will.”

She shoves one last bite into her mouth and then sets her empty bowl down, wiping at her mouth. “I thought it’d be enough but you’re working hard, so you’ll probably need to eat several meals a day. I’ll handle it.”

“And you’ll come back every time?” I ask.

“Buddy, you’re not going to be able to get rid of me,” Mina jokes. “Our fates are apparently tied together, so I’m going to be so up in your grill you’ll be dying to get away from me.”

I do not think so, but I like that she’s thinking of us as “together.” “Even though I ruined your plans to escape?”

She lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Plans change.” Then, Mina leans in close, dropping her voice to a whisper. “When we leave, we’ll escape together. I’m not leaving you behind.”

I stare at her in surprise. She’s changing her plans to include me? The cause of all her problems?

I...think I would do anything for this female.

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**MINA**

**N**o sooner have I put the meal trays in the slot, the lights go out.

Those fucking assholes. I know exactly what they're doing. The lights go out, the temperature's going to go down, and I'm going to bet that no more blankets magically show up. They want us to cuddle at night. They want Crudden to use me.

And judging from the massive boner the guy's had all night, he wouldn't be averse to the idea.

I'm not an idiot. I know how the game is played. A dude getting some tail is a happy dude. A dude getting tail is a dude that has an incentive to get more tail. I have an incentive to keep Crudden alive and performing well, because if he doesn't, I know it's bad news for both of us. Even so...I'm not about to throw myself onto the sacrificial penis just to make those two assholes running things happy.

I'm not a virgin. I also don't find Crudden as ugly as I used to. He'll never be movie-star handsome, but the more I look at his face, the more familiar it seems to me. I don't mind the tusks or the fact that his mouth can't close over his teeth. I

don't mind that he's got catlike eyes that dilate whenever they smell something, or that he's very thoroughly NOT human. But I like his face more than the handsome blue alien that's running the show, or his buddy the scientist.

Doesn't mean I want to have sex, especially not when it's being engineered by others.

"Just one blanket," Crudden says quietly.

"I noticed." I also noticed it's getting slightly colder, and it'll be extremely cold soon. Dicks. "We'll share."

"It's not necessary."

It might not be, but I know he's used the blankets in the past. They're a comfort, and he's had so few of them that I'm not about to steal another from him. I move to his side in the darkness and put my hand on his arm. He's still seated on the edge of the bed, and he tenses the moment my fingers brush him. "Are you going to rape me?" I ask bluntly. "Has anything changed?"

"Of course not." Crudden sounds slightly offended that I'd ask.

"Then we'll share." I climb into the bed and move to the spot against the wall, slipping my legs under the blanket. "Come on. You've had a hell of a day. You must be tired."

Crudden hesitates, but only for a moment. He gets up, lifts the blanket, and then slides his large form under the blanket next to me. His limbs brush ever so slightly against mine. "I am tired...but I don't want to sleep, either."

"Why not?"

"Because then tomorrow will get here sooner."

My heart squeezes with sympathy. I wouldn't look forward to a repeat of what they put him through, either. "You don't like fighting?"

"I don't know. No one's ever asked me." He huffs, his breath stirring the blanket. "Was that fighting? Or was it just an excuse for them to vent their frustrations on me?"

I wondered the same thing myself.

We lie in bed in silence for a few, and the chill of the room starts to get to me. I edge closer to him, because he's so warm and he's so big he can envelop me like a cloak. As I move closer, he shifts his weight, and I realize he's moving back. He's trying to put distance between us, which doesn't make sense...until it does. He's still turned on and doesn't want me to know about it.

"Crudden," I say softly. "Can we discuss the elephant in the room? I know you're attracted to me."

He's quiet for so long that I worry I've offended him. The only sound in the room is that of his raspy breathing.

When he finally speaks, I'm relieved. "I cannot control how I react to you. And I cannot deny that I want to touch you."

I prop my head up on one hand, looking down at him. His eyes shine like a cat's in the dark, which is a little eerie, but there's an endearingly worried expression on his face that soothes any fears I might have. "But you said you wouldn't touch me, right?"

"Not if you did not want it, no." Crudden pauses. "You are the only ally I have here. I will not ruin that."

"You're my only friend here, too," I say. "As long as we're on the same page, we're fine."

“Page,” he echoes.

Oof. “It’s a human saying. Like we’re of the same mindset. We’re a team. We’re in agreement.”

“I am all of those things, yes.” He pauses. “And I am...big. I would probably hurt you.”

I’m going to discreetly ignore that comment. If I say no, my vagina has superpowers and can withstand any dong you toss its way, is it going to encourage him? If I agree that he’s too big, is it going to make him feel bad about himself? The best choice, I decide, is to avoid the statement entirely. “You’re not tired,” I point out, feeling extremely obvious in my attempt to steer the conversation. “Tell me more about you.”

“What is there to tell?”

“What kind of alien are you, for starters? I can’t tell.”

“I am a splice. They made me in a lab out of a little bit of everything.” His teeth flash bright in the darkness. “Everything frightening and cruel, they threw into a test tube and out came me.”

“You’re not cruel,” I correct him. “Don’t say that about yourself.”

“How do you know? Just because I’m not cruel to you does not mean I’m not cruel to others.”

“Well, let’s look at the ‘others’ you’re surrounded with.” His lion-like mane is trapped under my arm, which I realize when I shift my weight a little and he immediately moves his head. Oops. I reach out and run my fingers along the edges of his mane, making sure that I don’t pull on it. To my surprise, Crulden closes his eyes and leans in closer to me, as if hungry for my touch.



There's something about his need that calls to me. Even though it's probably a bad idea, I gently comb my fingers through his mane, and I can practically feel the pleasure radiating off of him. He sighs heavily and moves closer to me, and I'm oddly pleased that I can give him this small moment.

"There's Lord Sir," I say softly. "And if you're cruel to him, I wouldn't mind, because he's a dick who enslaves people and uses them. And there's the scientist, who looks at you like you're a project and not a person. You can be cruel to those two and it doesn't count."

His mouth curves in a faint smile and he moves even closer to me.

I keep stroking his mane, because it's soft and thick, and because I've never seen someone get so much joy out of a simple touch. "There's the clones, who I would argue are just doing their jobs and are probably prisoners just as much as us. So maybe don't be cruel to them."

"One booted me in the back after he shocked me with his stick," Crudden murmurs, his voice drowsy.

Hot anger blasts through me. Fucking really? "I take it back. Fuck them. And fuck your trainers, who are dicks. I don't know about the other gladiators, because something tells me they're in the same position you are—no one's here by choice. So I guess that doesn't make me a good person, because I don't care if you're cruel to people that deserve it. But maybe be nicer to the ooli slaves, because everyone kicks down on them."

"I will remember," he says softly. "Slaves, good clones, and gladiators who do not choose cruelty. Everyone else does not matter."

“Damn straight.” And I keep stroking his mane until he drifts off to sleep.



*“I’LL BE SO good to you, Mina,” the rough voice rasps as he caresses my breasts. “You want it too, don’t you?”*

*“Y-yes,” I whisper, entranced as my lover skims down my belly. His tusks rub against my skin and then he pulls me against him, all wild lion mane and cat eyes.*

*“My Mina,” he says. “I’m going to fuck you so hard.”*

I wake up with a jolt, gassy and breathless. My pussy throbs with need, and the dream plays through my head, so vivid it feels like a memory. Crulden’s mouth on my skin. Crulden kneeling between my thighs. Crulden pushing me down and having his way with me.

Christ, that was a vivid dream.

The warm body behind me rocks gently against me, hips pushing against mine. A thick, hard cock rubs against my backside, and my eyes nearly cross. Oh god. Oh *god*. He rocks into me again as I lie there, frozen, and then mumbles something incoherent.

It takes me a moment to realize that Crulden’s dreaming. He’s grinding against me in his sleep, and the horny, just awoken part of me is enjoying it far too much. Not trusting myself—or him—I ease out of his grasp and press my back to the wall, watching him sleep. His eyes are closed and he shifts a little, then smacks his lips and rolls onto his back.

The thin blankets perfectly outline the absolute beast in his loincloth. I mean, Crulden is size-appropriate, it’s just that he’s

huge anyhow. Of course he's enormous. And hard. And thick.

I might stare at that outline for far longer than I should.



I'M RATTLED the rest of the day. The dream was so damn real, and I don't know what to think about it. I also don't know what to think about the fact that Crudden was grinding against me and I didn't say anything. He's trying really hard to ignore the fact that he's attracted to me, and I don't want him to... don't know. Have regrets? Be mad at himself?

Stop?

That's a foolish thought. Just because someone treats me like I'm worth a damn suddenly doesn't mean I need to ride their dick in appreciation, and I scrub the idea from my head the moment it appears.

If Crudden notices anything off with my attitude or my scent, he says nothing, which I'm utterly grateful for. We eat a breakfast I head to the kitchens to get, and I'm pleased that I'm getting a little more freedom. After we eat, the guards appear and Crudden goes out into the courtyard for the day's training. Unlike yesterday, it's not a fleet of clones and trainers. This time, it's just one, and they work on Crudden's stamina. Hours pass as I sit in the sun near one of the clone guards as Crudden runs through a series of training obstacles over and over again. They break for a short lunch, and then Crudden is back at it again, working so hard that his mane gets plastered to his shoulders with sweat, and I end up going to get water so Crudden doesn't collapse. They forget they've been keeping him penned up, and he's no good to anyone if he works himself sick.

My bossiness amuses the clones and the trainer, but Crudden's working hard alongside them, so no one complains. I can't help but notice that the scientist isn't out here today. I guess Crudden is less interesting now that he's compliant.

By the time we head in at the end of the day, Crudden is utterly exhausted, so we eat dinner and I towel-bathe him again. We climb onto the bunk after the lights go out and I play with his drying mane and we just talk about the day, or our plans to escape, or nothing at all. Just talking.

My dreams are full of filthy scenarios, and I still don't know what to think about that. I haven't woken up to Crudden rubbing himself against me again, which is good...I think.

Part of me wonders how I'd react if he did.

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## CRULDEN

**M**ina has been acting weird some mornings. Then again, so am I.

I didn't realize how difficult it would be for me to have a female in my quarters with me, her warm, soft body pressing up against mine while I sleep, her incredible scent in my nose. Every morning, I wake up hard and aching, the perfume of her so thick in the air that I am at the edges of my limits. I quickly rush to the lavatory—the only bit of privacy I have—and jerk my cock until I can control myself. Mina goes and gets food for us, unaware of my shameful actions.

There's something new in her scent lately, too, something musky and rich that makes my cock even harder. I'm afraid to ask. It's not a fear-scent, but I'm not entirely sure what it is. I don't know enough about humans and Mina's impossible to read. All I know is that the moment I smell it, my cock hardens so intensely that I drip with pre-cum. Mina is clearly uninterested, however, so I keep these reactions hidden. I don't want her uncomfortable, not when she's the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Having Mina at my side makes things...bearable.

I don't mind the endless, brutal fights or the fact that the other gladiators and trainers are doing their best to harm me. I don't mind the continuous endurance training. I don't mind that I now get scheduled "boosters" shot into my veins every day for optimal performance. None of that matters because Mina watches me fight all day, every day. She retrieves my food and gently bathes me at the end of the evening, talking softly. Then, my favorite time of day happens—the lights go out and we're alone together.

As alone as we can be considering we're both prisoners, I suppose.

But it feels like the world comes down to just the two of us when the lights go out. Even though I'm sweaty, Mina lets me put my head in her lap and she combs through my mane with her delicate fingers, and we talk. She tells me stories of her world and...well, I listen. I don't have stories to share. I know training moves. I know how to crush a windpipe for fourteen different species of alien. I know the rules for every type of sanctioned gladiator fight, and some for unsanctioned ones. I know all kinds of useful gladiator and arena information, and nothing about myself.

"Maybe they wiped your memories before you came here," Mina suggests when I mention my frustration to her. "To make you easier to train. So you wouldn't know what you left behind."

She might be right. All I know is that there are massive, unexplainable holes in my memory, and I'm determined to fill them all up with thoughts of Mina.

I like Mina's stories best anyhow. When she's not telling me about her life back on Earth as a child-wrangler (a

“teacher” she calls it, though it does not sound like much teaching), she tells me stories that are from books, or fairy tales. Humans are full of all kinds of stories, and her favorites are the romantic ones.

“Where does your name come from?” she asks one night, her fingers in my hair in the way I love. I’d never ask her to touch me—it has to be her idea—but when she does, my world stops. I love this time of day the best, when she reaches for me and lightly brushes my hair and makes me feel good.

“I don’t know,” I tell her, drowsy. “When I woke up, they told me I was Crudden.”

“When you woke up?”

I nod slightly, not wanting to interrupt her ministrations. “They did something to my memories, I think. Erased them. They woke me up and said my name was Crudden and I was to fight for them. I...did not like that idea.”

She chuckles. “No, I can’t say I’d be thrilled either.” Her fingers brush over my ear and my tail flicks in response at how pleasant that small caress is. “You want to know the story of my name?”

“Yes.” I want to hear all her stories, even the smallest ones.

“It’s a little silly.” Mina smiles, lost in thought. “So in the early nineties, my mom was a goth girl. Back then it was popular to be edgy and wear lots of black lipstick and eyeliner, black clothing, and to talk about how much the world sucked. It was a look, I guess. She and my dad were both into it, back when they were married. And my mom’s favorite movie of all time was *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*. It was a movie—that’s like a vid but about a story instead of the news—that was super over the top. Vampires in red armor, damsels in distress, super

cheesy. Very edge lord. It's based off of a book called *Dracula*. I don't suppose you know what a vampire is?"

"No." I'm still stuck on "edge lord." Or goth girl. Or all of it, really. But her tone is fond and sweet, and I just want her to keep talking.

"They're monsters, basically."

That perks my interest. Monsters are my people. "Oh?"

"Yep. They've got big fangs and cold skin and they drink the blood of people to survive. Unholy, too. Or at least, they're supposed to be. But in the movie, they made Dracula—the monster—really suave and charming. And he kidnaps the heroine, Mina Harker, because he is in love with her. It's all very romantic if you're into monsters and kidnapping, which my mom was, of course." She chuckles.

"And she named you Mina after this Mina Harker?"

Mina nods. "It's supposed to be short for Aramina or Wilhelmina or something, but my birth certificate is Mina only. Just Mina. Anyhow, the movie has a sad ending. The monster is killed and you never really know if Mina loves him back or if she's just brainwashed by him. She goes on and marries someone else and that's the end of the story."

I frown. "I do not like that story much."

She strokes my mane back from my face. "Neither did my mother. I mean, she loved it, but she absolutely wanted Mina to end up with the monster."

I could see that. I feel the same. But...I'm not surprised. "No one ever falls for the monster."

Her hands pause. Then she goes back to stroking my hair. "It's just a stupid story."





I DON'T SLEEP at night if I can help it.

Each night, Mina eventually drifts off and I hold her close, tucking her against me to share my warmth and ignoring the iron bar of my cock pressed between us. I stay awake for as long as I can, watching her breathe, watching her sleep, drinking in her scent and gently touching her skin. Nothing intrusive. Just...I've never had someone to touch before. Not in a pleasurable way. My memories of touches are filled with being held down in the medical bay, or the rough treatment of the clones.

Never gentle. Never pleasurable.

Perhaps that's why I'm so addicted to Mina. She's all the softness I've been denied.

I end up sleeping a little here and there. Mina worries about how tired I am most nights. "I know they're working you hard, but I'm worried," she says one night, touching my mane in that gentle way of hers. "Should we talk to the scientist?"

"No. Absolutely not." I grab her hand, and she jerks back with a hiss. I've scratched her with my re-growing claws. They've stopped shearing them, and Mina's soft skin immediately blooms with a line of red. Hot shame courses through me and I sit up. "I hurt you."

"It's just a scratch." She quickly licks the back of her hand to make the blood go away. "Don't worry about it. You didn't mean to."

“I...apologies.” I look around the room, hating myself. “I should sleep on the floor.”

“Stop it, Crudden.” She licks her hand again when more blood wells up. “It was an accident. It’s no big deal.”

But it’s a big deal to me. I don’t like that I can hurt her, even when I don’t mean to. She pats her thigh, indicating I should lie back down again. I do, because I cannot resist her, and she puts her injured hand on my chest, determined to ignore it.

“Where were we? Right. You and your lack of sleep. You really do need your rest, Crudden. I can’t imagine trying to keep up with what they put you through and you not getting enough sleep.” She purses her lips, thinking, and those heavy brows of hers draw together.

The scratch on her hand is still welling up with a small line of blood. Automatically, I pick up her hand and lick the back of it, like she did.

Mina freezes.

I do, too. That hot, musky scent floods the room, and it only confuses me more, because my cock responds.

“Don’t do that,” Mina says softly, pulling her hand from my grasp.

“Apologies.” I am messing up all over the place tonight.

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## MINA

**E**ven after being with Crudden for two weeks, the sex dreams still show up, hot and heavy, every night. It makes me feel...strange. I don't know what to think. I'm fond of Crudden and being in the cell with him and in his presence constantly has shown me that he's very different than I initially thought. Yes, he's brutal in the arena and the training pit. He's ruthless with the a'ani guards, too. He attacked one for standing too close to me. His misbehavior activated my collar and I choked for the longest minute ever while they got him in line.

Crudden was full of apologies and remorse after that, so I can't be mad at him. He's being trained to attack. He's protective of me. The two things are bound to collide. With me, though, he's the most gentle, caring friend I've ever had. He looks out for me. He listens to everything I have to say with great attentiveness, as if I'm dropping pearls of wisdom all over the place. He lets me snuggle against him while we sleep, and he never, ever tries to touch me inappropriately.

Which is why I'm the weirdo.

The sex dreams turn me on. It's always Crudden in the dreams, always him fucking the hell out of me while I scream and cry with pleasure, and I wake up all hot and bothered and thinking about how he'd licked the back of my hand. How his tongue had felt against my skin. My head must be fucked, because this is not supposed to be sexy for me. I know we have no privacy. I know it would make the scientist and Lord Sir both jump for joy if Crudden started fucking me, which is reason enough to not do it.

Yet I can't stop thinking about it.

It doesn't help that I bathe him every night with a towel, and it gives me a bird's eye view of his big, strong body. That I rub all over him and get a chance to appreciate his sweaty, muscle-covered frame. It sure doesn't help that he gets turned on every time and that loincloth of his tents up.

This is exactly what our captors want, of course. They want Crudden fucking me and attached to me because it makes him controllable. He's been a model gladiator (well, with the occasional neck-snapping of a clone) since they introduced me. All this attraction to him is making me crazy, though, and I worried they put something in my food. I wouldn't put it past the scientist. After all, they're constantly shooting Crudden up with "supplements" and nanobots to enhance performance. Why not a little bedroom incentive?

For two days straight, I decide I have a "craving" for the slave food and get myself servings from the communal paste. I don't touch Crudden's delicious food, which he finds strange, even when he offers it to me. At the end of two days, though, I feel the same, and I have to conclude that no one's drugging me to be horny.

I'm...just horny.

My libido has been in hibernation ever since I was stolen. It's picked a hell of a time to wake up.

It also colors how I act around Crudden. I try not to watch him too closely when he trains (even though there's nothing else to watch) because I don't want to give the scientist ideas. He shows up a few times a week to watch the training for a while, and today, in particular, he stands next to me and makes notes about Crudden in his little electronic pad. I wish I read alien languages, but it looks like nothing but squiggles to me. The day's a steamy one, the jungle fresh off of a morning rainfall, and the air is thick and humid. Crudden's dripping with sweat as he wrestles with another gladiator—this one a gray-skinned man that looks like a cross between a turtle and a human, with a bit of rhino thrown in. I can't help but stare as sweat trickles down Crudden's broad back when he flexes, and it's making me all kinds of uncomfortable to stand here amidst a group of clone guards and the scientist and feel like this.

The scientist shoots a look over to me. "What do you think of his training?"

"Why are you asking me? I don't know anything about gladiators." I keep my tone light, even though I want to turn and kick him in the shins.

"You seem very interested."

"There's literally nothing else for me to do. I'm his pet, remember?"

The scientist smiles thinly at me. "You still belong to Lord Sir. You are just on loan to keep Crudden happy."

Great. "Maybe don't say that in his earshot or you might lose another clone."

"Have you copulated with him yet?"

I stare in horror at the scientist. “Excuse me?”

He lifts his chin, nodding at Crudden. “You’re there to make him happy. Have you copulated?”

Even if we had, the last person I would tell would be this asshole. I cross my arms over my chest and take a deliberate step away from him. “None of your business.”

“That’s where you are wrong. I was brought here specifically for Crudden.” His smile is bitter. “Everything pertaining to him is my business, and you’re not answering the question.” The scientist studies me, his head tilted. “Do I need to schedule you for a medical exam to find out the truth or are you going to tell me?”

A medical exam? For that? I can just imagine how utterly invasive he’d make it, and I shudder, taking another step away. “No, okay? Nothing yet.”

“Mmm. Lack of interest on his part?”

I stammer, trying to think of a way to answer him without getting into too much detail. I’m not about to tell him about our polite agreement for no rape, that the ball is in my corner, because they would absolutely figure out a way to force me into it. Chills move over me despite the hot day and I rub my arms. “It hasn’t come up, all right?”

“Mmm,” the scientist says again. “That might be a residual effect from the medications he was on. I’ll have to see if we can tweak that.”

Before I can reply, Crudden tosses his heavy opponent into the sand as if the huge monster rhino-turtle-man weighs nothing. He storms over to us, his eyes reddening with anger. “Why do I smell her fear-scent?”

And he heads directly for the scientist.

“Stop him,” the scientist yelps at me, taking a step backward.

Shit. This is my cue. If he loses control, we’re both going to suffer. I immediately step forward and put my hands on Crulden’s sweaty chest, stopping him in his tracks. “Hey, hey,” I say softly. “Calm down. Your eyes are going red.”

“You smell like fear,” he says thickly, his teeth bared in the most menacing way I’ve seen. His eyes are flooding with red, but his spikes haven’t come out, which means the situation can still be saved.

“He was asking me creepy questions about female health and I didn’t like it,” I lie quickly. I pat Crulden’s chest. “Seriously, it’s okay. There’s no reason to get mad.”

He points a long, thick claw at the scientist. “You do not talk to her. She’s mine.”

The scientist opens his mouth to protest and then snaps it shut again. Smart man. He nods quickly and then hurries away, surrounded by guards. I’m left with Crulden, who looks ready to lose his shit, and the other gladiator, who is discreetly trying to leave the ring before Crulden attacks him with this newfound rage. He’s been moving through his paces all day, Crulden, but he hasn’t been amped up like this, and I think everyone acknowledges that it’s dangerous. I watch the clones ready their shock-sticks, and the trainer activates his, too.

“Hey,” I say softly again. “Focus on me. Eyes on me.”

Crulden finally looks at me instead of the scientist’s retreating back. “You are all right?”

“I said I was, didn’t I?” I give him a brilliant, casual smile and then smack his sweaty chest. “You, my friend, are very ripe, though. You stink.”

The red floods out of his eyes again just as quickly as it came on, and he huffs out a small laugh, then leans forward in a threatening way. “Don’t make me rub my sweat on you.”

I squeal and race away, back to the safety of the sidelines. “Gross!”

Am I acting a little silly and girly in front of everyone? Sure. But Crudden’s got that almost-smile on his face, and his eyes are not danger-red, and the moment has been saved. He turns back to the trainer and lumbers into the arena pit again. He puts his hands on his knees and waits for his next opponent, and I’m just glad that this didn’t go down like it could have.

I’ll talk to him about it later tonight, when we’re alone. I’ll remind him that he needs to think about both of us, and that sometimes my scent is just that—a scent. That I’m not in physical danger if I have an unpleasant conversation.

Tonight, I decide. We’ll get it all out in the open so he calms down.



AFTER TRAINING IS DONE, I head off to the kitchens to get food for Crudden. I make sure to get a double portion for him—if he’s not sleeping, at least I can stuff him full of good food—and an additional portion for me. I watch all of it as it’s prepared to make certain nothing gets added, and ignore the smirks of the overseer, who’s watching the kitchens.

“Don’t get too proud,” he warns me. “Once Crudden’s no longer fascinated with that little human cunt of yours, you’ll be back here eating paste like the rest of us.” He looks me up and down. “If he doesn’t eat you first.”



“Whatever.”

He just shakes his orange head, amused. His pebbled skin folds tight on his cheeks as he leers at me. “You really have no idea what you’ve gotten yourself into, do you?”

I take the tray, glare at him, and head back out of the kitchens. I know all about Crulden. I know how fucking scary he can be. I also feel completely safe with him, so I’m not sure what’s up with all the ominous warnings. They act like Crulden’s going to dismember me, but they don’t know him like I do. I know some of it is for show—Crulden’s got a reputation to maintain—but I also don’t like how they talk about him. Like he’s a monster.

He’s not. He’s just been pushed into a corner and forced to do things he doesn’t want to.

If anything, they’ve made him into the monster. They’ve stripped him of his memories and his dignity, forcing him to attack or be attacked. How can they expect any less?

And why am I so fired up to defend him? I frown to myself at the thought.

When I get back to cellblock C, Crulden’s cell is empty and there are a pair of guards there, waiting for me. My heart drops and I fight a wave of panic. What’s going on? Are they splitting us up? The thought is devastating. For the first time in the three years since I’ve been taken, I feel like I have a friend.

I feel like I have something to lose again, and I’m vulnerable. I don’t like it.

Swallowing hard, I move carefully to the food slot and set the tray onto the mechanized runners that will feed it over to the other side. As I do, one of the a’ani guards approaches me. Some are nicer than others, but it’s hard to tell who’s who

because they're clones. In uniform and with standard haircuts, it's hard to tell them apart—they all have bright red skin delineating them as clones, black hair, and muscular forms. This one's no different. When the tray waits in the warming slot, I turn to him, a question in my eyes. "Where's Crudden?"

"You're to follow me." He lifts his chin, indicating I should come along, and then turns and walks down a side hall that I rarely go to. The cellblock is actually quite a large building, with multiple rooms and multiple levels of security. When the second clone steps in behind me, I'm puzzled more than afraid. Where are they leading me? We head downstairs, into a section that's normally the guard barracks, and my skin prickles as I'm led past room after room that are the private quarters of the guards themselves.

Is...someone about to get rid of me? I know the guards have no love for Crudden. Is this their way of getting back at him? If so, though, where are they hiding him?

"I'm not sure I should be down here," I stammer, fear sliding through me.

"Just shut up and come on," the clone in charge says. "Down here."

He leads us down a side hall and then pauses in front of a door with what look somewhat like lavatory markings. Once there, he moves to the side and gestures that I should go in. "Take your time."

And he smirks.

All right. I'm pretty sure at this point I'm not dying, but if they want me to clean up their toilets, they've found the wrong girl. Crudden would absolutely lose his shit if I returned smelling like a half-dozen clones because I have to clean up

their bathroom. I'm curious, though, so I put my wrist-cuff to the reader and wait.

A wave of steam and soap-scents hit me the moment the doors slide open. In the distance, I can hear running water, and it looks like a strange sort of locker room. Oh. Showers. I did point out that Crudden smelled. I purse my lips, full of questions, but a quick glance at the smirking clones tells me they're the wrong ones to ask.

Maybe Crudden is finishing up with a shower and they want me here to calm him down.

I move forward, heading past a line of cubbyholes and benches toward the sound of water. The place is empty, a couple of baskets of laundry staggered along the wall. There are no laundry-bots, since the gladiators don't play well with expensive equipment, so the clones must do their own housekeeping. The tile floors are slick and damp, and steam rolls out toward me as I head farther in.

And stop.

Directly ahead of me are the showers. It reminds me a lot of Earth communal showers in prisons, where it's a bunch of spray heads pouring into a big area, a metal bar at waist height. There's a damp towel on the bar, and a stack of fresh ones on a shelf away from the water. In the far corner of the room, Crudden stands utterly naked, his back to me. His tail flicks back and forth, but it doesn't quite hide the magnificently muscular ass. I stare at Crudden's form, because he's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. His back is broad, the line of his spine strong and elegant as it leads down to rounded, gorgeous, biteable ass cheeks. His head is bowed as he stands under the water, letting the droplets cascade over

him like a waterfall. One big hand is on the tile, and he looks...relaxed. Content.

Really, really naked.

I don't know why I'm obsessing over his nudity. I've seen lots of naked aliens. You pop that cherry the moment you're stolen from home. And I've seen naked guys before. I'm no virgin. I know how to handle a penis or two, and if my mother ever asked, it was never more than two, ever, and not at the same time, because I was a good girl. But something about Crudden just leaves me breathless.

He's magnificent. For all that Crudden's face is ugly, his body is a thing of sheer beauty.

His head moves and he opens his eyes under the cascading water, looking over at me. "Mina."

I move forward, silent. I'm not sure what to say.

He turns toward me, and then I get a dose of full frontal. "Will you wash me?" he asks. "Like you always do?"

Sweet Mother Mary.

I try not to stare at the absolute monster between his legs. It's just a penis, I remind myself. Aliens are different sizes and so alien penises are different sizes. But Crudden is very, very big, very much not circumcised, and very, very thick. As I approach, his cock lifts off his thigh, hardening, and juts into the air. His balls are large and full, the head of his cock is prominent and a thick vein twists its way down the impressive length, and oh my god, why am I staring at Crudden's cock vein?

This is a problem.

He glances down at his cock—his magnificent, stunning, standing-straight-at-attention-for-me cock—and grimaces. “Apologies.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Because we both know this happens when you touch me and I know you don’t like it.” His expression is tense, like he’s waiting for me to bitch at him for having an erection.

“You can’t control it,” I point out, even as I move forward and take a washcloth from one of the piles near the communal shower.

“I do not think I would, even if I could,” he says in a low voice. “That makes me a problem.”

I swallow hard, because I don’t know what to say. He likes getting hard around me. God help me, maybe I’m weird, because I like it, too. I like the feeling of knowing I can do this to him, and what does that say about me?

Cruden pauses for a moment, lifting his head. “There’s that scent again.”

“What scent?”

“On you. You sometimes have it in the morning.” He leans in and breathes deep, and I swear to god, his cock twitches. “Why does it smell so amazing? What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I admit, and look around for soap. I guess I’m washing him. It’s a no-brainer. I know I shouldn’t touch him, shouldn’t encourage this, even as I find the soap dispenser, activate it, and rub the wet dollop into the towel. His talk of scents is distracting me when I really want to focus on important things.

Things like that dick vein. And the fact that his foreskin has pulled back, revealing more of his fascinating cock. Things like his perfect, gorgeous ass.

Basically all the things I shouldn't be noticing.

I reach out and wet the cloth in the shower spray. Crudden hasn't moved from his spot under the spray heads, and I imagine all this hot water must feel good on tired muscles. I move closer to him, ignoring the fact that the water is spattering off of his skin and making my shirt damp, and I place the cloth on his lower arm to start. "You fought well today," I say softly, but I'm not thinking about fighting. Instead, I notice that his dick twitches the moment I touch him, reacting to my nearness. I was supposed to bring up something important, but I'm having a hard time remembering what it is. Oh. Scientist. Right. "But we do need to talk."

"About?"

I slide the cloth up his arm and he groans, eyes closing, and warmth coils in my belly at his reaction. He makes it such a pleasure to touch him. I wash all the parts I can reach, and then move along to his back, running the cloth over his broad muscles and trying not to be too much of a lecher. "You nearly lost it when you thought the scientist was scaring me. You've got to remember that we're in a vulnerable situation."

He grunts, shifting his feet.

"I'm serious. There's going to be times that they scare me a little, just because of who they are and who I am. It doesn't mean you need to step in and freak out. I'll let you know when I need you to handle things."

"You don't need anyone."

I'm surprised to hear him say that. Me? Not need anyone? Is he insane? I'm the most vulnerable person here at this compound. The moment the thought crosses my head, though, I know it's not true. We're all vulnerable in different ways. The ooli slaves are trampled on by the overseer and ignored by the clones. The clones are brutalized by the glads. The glads are brutalized by their trainers. I kinda fall nowhere in that mix, and so I guess I get away with as much as I can while trying to fly under the radar. I've never had to suck anyone's dick for a meal, after all, and I know that some of the ooli haven't had the same luxury.

It's interesting that he sounds so sad when he says that, too. Like he's sad that I don't need him. "You're wrong," I say softly as I scrub his back, the cloth moving down the enticing length of his spine. God, he's gorgeous. His skin ripples over his muscles and he's just strength and beauty all tied up into an appealing package. I wonder if I can wash his buttocks without him reading too much into it, and then I decide I'm going to anyhow. Fuck it.

Daring greatly, I drag the cloth over the globe of one ass cheek, rubbing.

Crulden goes very, very still.

I bite my lip, wondering if I'm being a creep. He hasn't given me permission to touch him, and if the tables were turned, how would I feel? Am I just toying with him? Hot shame darts through me and I pull away. "If I'm touching you too personally—"

"No," he says quickly. "I don't mind. I...I like it. Keep touching me, Mina." His voice lowers to a husky almost-purr. "Please."

Arousal flushes through my body and the steamy showers suddenly feel far too warm. I glance up at Crudden, but his head is forward and he's not looking anywhere. He's just standing under the spray, letting it cascade over his head, one hand still on the tile. He looks a little tense, but who wouldn't be with someone rubbing soap on your backside? I trail the cloth over his skin, choosing my words carefully. "I don't want you to think I'm using you. Your body is yours."

A laugh chokes out of him. "If this is your idea of using me, Mina, I am all for it."

I smile at that.

"I am just grateful you want to touch a hideous beast like me at all. I appreciate your help." His tone has changed, becoming a bit harder, as if he's trying to distance himself. "Thank you."

My smile quickly changes to a frown. "You're not a hideous beast."

Crudden doesn't respond.

Is that how he sees himself? As some sort of monster? I wish he could realize how I see him—as a thing of beauty, a work of art sculpted from a hodgepodge of elements to create something powerful and yet still capable of being gentle and intelligent. Strong. Full of feelings. More than just a killing machine. I run the cloth over his backside, unable to help myself. I rub in gentle circles, touching him. "You're not a beast."

"I am their pet monster. I know this. You know this." He shrugs, sending a spray of droplets over my already soaked shift. "I was bred for this. That's why they're so angry when I



don't comply. What good is a monster if he won't attack on command?"

My heart aches. I'm the reason he "attacks on command." I hate that I've been put into a position to hold him captive. I hate that he feels like he has to be a leashed monster just to spend time with me. I hate that he sees himself as a beast most of all. Maybe he was in the beginning, but that's not how I see him now. I slide the soapy cloth over his hip, and as I do, I catch a glimpse of his cock twitching again. The head of it is flushed a deep shade, and covered in droplets that I suspect are not entirely from the water. It strains as I pause, and Crudden puts his other hand on the tile, too, as if to stop from touching himself.

Suddenly, I know what I want to do.

If I do this, though, it's going to change everything between us. Do I tear down our careful relationship to give him a moment's pleasure? I study his profile, his strong jaw jutting, the tusks pushing out and distorting his mouth, his blunted nose and heavy cheekbones that lead to a plated brow and a pair of horns that are nothing like the gilded ones that the scientist and Lord Sir wear with flourish. If I do this—and I want to do this—I could fuck everything up.

But being a slave has taught me that you take what you can today, because tomorrow might be a brand new fuck-over. Might as well not live with regrets.

"You're not a beast," I say again, and move to his side. I slide the cloth over the front of his hip, my movements deliberate as I gaze up at him. "You're beautiful to me."

And I slide the cloth—and my hand—over to his cock and grip the base of it.

Crudden's breath rasps. His claws make a scratching sound on the tile and he looks over at me, incredulous, as if he can't believe what I just did.

Hell, I'm not sure I believe I did it either, but I'm enjoying myself too much to stop.

I slide under one of those braced arms, until I'm directly in front of him. He towers over me, the water getting both of us wet now, but that seems trivial. I'm not cold. There's so much heat in the air—and between us—that I feel warm all over. Crudden's gaze is locked on mine, breathing heavy, and he doesn't move a muscle. He's waiting for me.

Slowly, I stroke the cloth up and down his length, soaping him up. "Should I stop?"

He swallows hard and then shakes his head slightly.

"Tell me if I do something that doesn't feel good," I say to him. "If the cloth is too rough. If I'm too rough." I keep my words even and calm, even as I slowly work the soapy cloth up and down his shaft. I've never dealt with foreskin before, but I've heard it can help with a hand job, so I squeeze tight and drag my fist up and down his length.

"Mina," he growls, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

Crudden's eye contact is unwavering, and it's the most erotic thing I've ever experienced. He stares at me like he wants to devour me whole, all the while I work his cock with the soapy towel. My strokes start out slow and steady, but I increase the speed as I gain confidence. Touching him is turning me on, knowing that I've got control of this enormous, dangerous man. That my touch brings him so much pleasure.

That I'm the one to give this to him.

He makes a small “unh” in his throat, as if he can’t help himself, and that little sound makes heat pour through my system. I’m wet between my thighs, my pulse throbbing, and I work his shaft faster, my grip tighter. He makes that sound again, and then jerks his hips, thrusting into my grasp.

All the while, he stares down at me, never breaking eye contact.

“I’ve got you,” I tell him softly. “Let me give you pleasure. Let me show you how beautiful I find you, Crudden.”

His claws make another horrible scraping sound on the tile above my head, but it only excites me more. He thrusts into my grip, shuttling against my hand, and I’m utterly fascinated at how this has turned from me giving him pleasure into something we’re sharing. I look down, breaking eye contact, so I can watch. He pounds into my soapy, towel-covered fist, the head of his cock sliding out the other side over and over, teasing, and I can’t help myself—I reach out to brush my fingers over that purpled head.

Crudden erupts. With a hard grunt, semen floods out of him, splattering all over my wet shift and over my hands. His cock pulses in my grasp, and it’s like I can feel his release as my own. I suck in a breath, utterly fascinated as he comes and comes, covering me in his release even as he plunges into my tight fist. I squeeze harder, trying to make the pleasure last, until he gives one final thrust and then sags against the tile, caging me underneath him.

I’ve just changed everything between us. But I feel good. Happy. Pleased.

Almost as satisfied as Crudden.

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## CRULDEN

**M**y head is awash with a maelstrom of emotion. Mina's small form is wet under me, and my seed covers the front of her gown. I push back from the tile and gaze down at her. Her soft hair is now wet and sticks to her head, making her face seem that much more fragile. Her dark brows lift as she studies my expression, and she smiles up at me.

“I liked that,” she says simply.

As if it was nothing. As if she did not tear my world apart and remake it with her small hands.

Mina slides along the tile, moving out of my grasp, and I watch, dazed, as she moves toward the stack of towels waiting at the edge of the showers. “Mind if I take a quick wash, too?”

Mind? She could shove a knife between my ribs right now and I would not mind.

The human gets a fresh towel and pauses, plucking at her wet shift. To my surprise, she soaps it and heads back to me, determined to finish her washing of my body. “You're the

important one,” she reminds me. “No one cares if a human slave is a little grimy.”

Her movements are brisk, and she even cleans my genitals with quick, gentle touches, then steers me back under the spray so I can rinse off. All the while, I stand there dumbly, my cock throbbing with the aftermath of my release. I can't stop watching her as she strips off her now-dirty shift and tosses it onto the tile, then steps under the spray of a different showerhead and begins to wash her hair. “You're going to have to do your own hair,” she tells me. “I can't reach yours.”

And she points at the hair-soap dispenser as if this is normal for us. As if nothing has changed.

I cannot seem to think straight. Luckily, washing my mane does not require much thinking so I do as she commands, soaping up the thick ruff of fur that coats my head and my neck. Mina touched me of her own volition. She worked my cock and made me come.

She said I was beautiful to her.

I search through my memories, trying to recall if I have ever been with a female before. There is nothing, only more blanks. I bite back a growl of frustration. Why is it that I know three dozen fighting moves and yet I cannot recall a single face before I woke up here? It makes no sense, and it angers me. I shove the thoughts away.

I don't need to think of other females anyhow. Mina is enough for me. I don't want my thoughts polluted by another. I want to just think of her, of her sweet scent, of how she boldly held my gaze while she stroked my cock, as if she was challenging me...and I loved it.

My brains feel rattled, even as a curious sort of laziness slides through my veins. Coming with Mina like that felt... good. I feel relaxed now. I'm tired, too. Tonight I will not be able to watch her sleep for long, I don't think. I'm going to drop right off to sleep and I'm not even angry about it. Maybe if I dream, I'll dream about Mina's hands on me again, this time without a towel and soap. Just Mina, with that defiant look, daring me not to like her touch.

After we rinse off, Mina demands that I sit down on a bench and she rubs a dry towel all over me, then dries my mane as much as possible by hard-rubbing that same towel through the strands. Once that's done, she picks through the counters, looking for grooming implements, a towel wrapped around her nudity. She finds a comb and works the snarls out of my mane, talking all the while about showers back on Earth. People on Earth like all kinds of scented shampoos and body washes, she says as she combs my mane. I'd probably hate them, but she misses opening a bottle and smelling all kinds of fake fruity things. That was one of her strongest memories of home, she tells me. Here, the slaves aren't allowed to bathe often, and when they do, everything is unscented because alien noses can be sensitive.

As she works, she presses her smaller body against mine, her skin rubbing all over me, and it makes my cock stir again. I like when she's bossy like this. I like when she acts like she owns me. Like I'm hers to take care of. It makes me feel good inside.

Even so, it makes me wonder if I am not missing something. Who takes care of Mina? Who gives her pleasure? I wonder if I can. I think about what she did to me, but she does not have a penis. There's nothing there for me to stroke,

just a little fold hidden under some of her body fur. I want to ask her, but I feel foolish. I should know this, shouldn't I?

It's another part of my memory that has been wiped, I guess. Still, I would like to pleasure her, if she'd let me.

Once Mina is done grooming me, I put on the pair of pants that were brought for me to wear, and she looks for something for herself. There's nothing for a female down here, though, and she drops the towel and wrings out her sodden shift. "I guess I'm wearing this back."

"I'm...sorry." It stinks of my come and it's wet, to boot. It can't be pleasant for her to wear.

Mina just shrugs and shimmies it on, the wet fabric sticking to her slight frame. The tips of her breasts are pebbled tight, curiously, and she plucks the fabric away from her skin as if trying to hide this. "Let's go. You look tired."

I put my hand on the back of her neck possessively as we move toward the door, because I know there are guards outside. I want them to realize that she's mine and I'll kill anyone that looks at her.

When we leave the shower room, though, Mina's smell changes and her posture stiffens. The clones waiting outside smirk in our direction, but say nothing, and I wonder if Mina is ashamed for touching me. She smells like my seed, and I wonder if she regrets what just happened. The guards think she was there to pleasure me...and she did.

There's no privacy in our situation, but I get the sense Mina is upset anyhow.

That makes me feel bad. I feel worse, too, because I do not regret it. I liked her touching me. I would choose it over and

over again if given the choice to re-do that moment. I cannot even say that I am sorry, because I am not.

When we return to our cell, Mina busies herself with serving our food, and there is a fresh set of clothing for both of us. She snags her shift and takes it to the lavatory to change, and our old clothes are tossed into the food slot for another slave to launder. She's quiet through dinner, though she eats with a healthy appetite. When the lights go out as they always do, she makes a sound of annoyance and packs up our empty dishes, puts them in the tray slot, and then takes my hand. "Come on. Bedtime."

We climb into bed together and Mina arranges the blanket (and my limbs) to suit herself. When she's curled against me and comfortable, her hand goes to my chest and she toys with the fur between my pectorals.

"Sorry if I'm being weird," she whispers. "It's just...what we shared was a private moment between us. And then coming out and seeing the a'ani's faces, you know they're going to tell the scientist and Lord Sir right away. It feels like they're stealing it from us."

I touch her cheek, mindful of my claws. I want to cut them back down again, but they're a useful tool for when I have my first real fight, and I'm handicapping myself if I blunt them. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I just...hate that we're playing right into their little games, you know?" Her breath fans against my chest, her fingers twining in my chest fur. "All of this is designed so I turn into your little fuck-toy. The fact that they won't give us more than one blanket. The fact that they shoved me into the shower with you. They asked me if we were



copulating before and I said no. I feel like we're playing into what they want, and it makes me angry."

My hand stills on her cheek. I pull away. She doesn't want to touch me, then. My chest aches at the realization.

Mina immediately grabs my hand back and presses my palm to her cheek, returning me to where I was. "I'm not mad at you, Crudden. I just hate that they're so involved. There's nothing I'd like more in the world than to spite those two assholes, and yet here I am, giving them what they want." She sighs. "Because it's what I wanted, too. And I guess I'm a little mad at myself over that."

I don't know what to say. "Because...you touched a monster?"

She pinches my nipple and twists, making me jerk back in surprise.

"Ow!"

"Because it makes them happy, you doofus," she hisses at me. "Quit calling yourself a monster."

"What am I, then?" I am curious how she sees me.

"You're a person. You're just...Crudden." She settles down against me again. "Quit insulting yourself. I don't like it."

So fierce. It's one of the things I like best about her. "I do not feel like Crudden," I admit. "Maybe that part of me was wiped when they wiped my memories. Sometimes it feels like it doesn't fit."

Mina looks up at me. "Would you like for me to call you something else in private? Something between the two of us?"

I would love that. The thought of sharing something with her floods me with pleasure. I nod.

“What, then?”

I...have no idea. I try to think of a name, but this is one of those areas where my mind is shattered and fragmented. I cannot think of anything appropriate.

She pats my chest. “Take your time. We’ll stumble on the right thing eventually.”

I think about names as I hold her close and drift off to sleep, though. Names. Her name is Mina, after the female in the love story about a monster.

Maybe...maybe this Mina can love a monster, even if the last one didn’t.

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**MINA**

**I** ‘m a little on edge the next morning. News must have traveled fast around the compound, because the smirks sent my way make it clear that they all know Crudden and I are fucking.

And while the truth isn’t quite that, it doesn’t matter. I got called into his shower, we were there for a while, and when we came out, I was naked and smelled like his spunk. I’m sure everyone’s put two and two together.

To make things worse, Crudden’s acting a little more mellow, too. He doesn’t get mad when the trainers smack him with their shock-sticks, or when they insist he’s not moving quickly enough and has to do a particular obstacle course faster again. He just jogs right back to the beginning as if it’s nothing and starts over.

He’s fucking cheery. All because he got a hand job in the shower.

Part of me’s kind of smug about that hand job, too. I like that I have such an effect on him. I like that he watches me

intensely all day long, as if he's memorizing my face. I just wish everyone else wasn't smirking about it.

It gets worse when Lord Sir shows up with the scientist to watch the training. Crudden's in the ring with one of the quicker glads, a smaller race than the overseer is—the ones with orange skin and creepy eyes. He's still bigger than me, of course, but next to Crudden, he looks like a waif. His method of fighting seems to be lots of movement—floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee, I guess. All the while, Crudden's trainer shouts at him to move faster, to think on his feet, to close the distance.

I try not to show any expression on my face, just so Crudden won't react, but I'm a little worried that Lord Sir and the scientist both are out watching. They study the two gladiators as they spar for a while, and when Crudden draws first blood with his claws, the other glad is bandaged up and then they go back into the ring again, this time with long wooden staves.

The scientist then turns to me. "Come, slave. It's time for you to have a medical check-up."

I swallow hard, because I can just imagine what that entails. Crudden pauses, watching me, and the other gladiator clubs him on the side of the head with his staff, earning him a snarl from Crudden and another shout from the trainer.

"Let me tell Crudden where I'm going," I say. "Or he's going to get upset."

Lord Sir looks pissy at the thought, his shoulders drawing up, but the scientist nods. "You know his moods best. Go, then. We'll wait for you right here. Make it quick."

Oh, both of them are accompanying me? Joy oh joy. I jog forward, hopping down onto the sand of the pit and signaling for the trainer to pause. To my surprise, he actually does. “Hold,” he bellows, and the orange gladiator takes a step back, panting. Crudden immediately stalks toward me, a frown on his face.

“What is it?” he asks. “What do they want?”

I put my hands on my hips and shrug, casual. “A medical check-up. The slaves have them regularly, and I guess they’re also going to take this time to grill me about our fun in the shower, because you know we can’t have secrets.”

He studies my expression. “Are you...all right?”

I know what he’s asking. Am I upset that they’re demanding this? That we’re going to have to talk about it? That I’m going to have to admit to our owners that we’ve played right into their hands? I’m really not, but Crudden’s mood is more important than mine. If I say I’m upset, he’s going to lose his shit and hurt someone. Not me, but someone else...and they’ll take it out on him, or on me.

So I just take his hand and squeeze it. “I’m fine. I can handle it. Will you be okay if I’m gone for a little?” I gesture over at the resting gladiator. “Maybe don’t chew his face off until I return?”

Crudden lets out a breathless laugh, and it’s the first one I’ve heard from him. I...like it. “No chewing until you return,” he promises. “Just sparring.”

“Great. You go back to work. I’ll tell you everything when we get back.” I smile up at him, and because he still looks a little troubled, I crook a finger. “Bend down.”

He does, his face sweaty, his mouth slightly open like always, a questioning look on his face.

I move forward and press a small kiss to his cheek. “Go have fun.”

I love the flummoxed look on his face as he touches his cheek. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that in public, but everyone thinks we’re screwing anyhow.

Might as well let them think I’m happy about it.

I saunter off, and the trainer starts the fight again once I’m out of the ring. I hear the sound of staves smacking, and a “Crudden, concentrate!” bellowed from the trainer. It’s followed by an absolutely brutal smack that makes me wince. “Not me,” the trainer spits. “Him!”

I bite back a smile.

That inward smile fades the moment I head back up the path to where Lord Sir and the scientist are waiting, accompanied by guards. They both look impatient as we walk back toward Lord Sir’s private apartments in the compound. I remain silent as we walk, even though we turn and head toward Lord Sir’s private offices instead of the scientist’s med-labs. Okay, not a check-up, then. That was a lie. I wonder what I’m truly being brought in for, and my heart hammers in my chest. I force myself to calm down, because Crudden won’t like my fear-scent.

It’s not a big deal, I tell myself. They can’t get rid of me. Not if they want his cooperation. And they want that more than anything. I’ve never seen two bastards as smug as Lord Sir and the scientist now that Crudden is being their pet gladiator.

We enter Lord Sir's office from the main door, and it's a little odd to me to not come in through the slaves' entrance. Lord Sir moves to sit behind his big fancy desk, and the scientist takes a seat across from him. There's another empty chair next to the scientist, but somehow I doubt they want me to sit down with them. I remain standing, just in case. I figure if I'm wrong, they'll correct me.

As they settle themselves into their seats, I notice out of the corner of my eye that the a'ani guards file quietly out of the room and shut the door behind us. I know they won't go far, but they've been told not to listen in. Not a great sign. I clasp my hands in front of me and wait patiently, just like a good little slave. They don't need to know the truth.

"You've done a good job of getting close to Crudden," the scientist says, studying me. "Is he happy with you?"

How best to answer that? The obvious answer is "Of course" because no slave with half a brain would say she's failing at her job. So there must be more to it than I'm reading. "I wouldn't say Crudden is a happy sort, period. But he seems more settled with me around. I'm learning what sorts of things trigger his bad moods and taking steps to avoid them."

Lord Sir's eyes widen a touch and he leans in, smiling. "I'm pleased you've taken such an interest in Crudden. Truly, if we all work together, we'll make him a success. I know it."

I love the corporate team-building garbage he's spouting. Some things never change, no matter the planet. He's making it sound like this was all my idea, like they didn't throw me in just to appease Crudden in the midst of one of his temper tantrums. That it's turned out better than they hoped is all my doing, not theirs. But I know how to play this game. I smile politely. "Teamwork and all that."

“Crudden has been a challenge since he arrived,” the scientist says. “How does he feel about his training? Is he being pushed enough?”

Even though I want to keep a calm expression, I can feel my brows furrowing. Is he being pushed enough? They beat the man within an inch of his life every damn day. He does mock battle after mock battle, endurance training that would exhaust Olympians on Earth, and they’re asking me if he’s being pushed enough? I think he’s being pushed too much. “I don’t know anything about gladiators,” I confess, and it’s the truth. “So I wouldn’t know what to tell you.”

“Has he communicated to you about how he feels?” Lord Sir leans forward, his expression avid.

*Just that he hates you and everyone here. That he’d rip all your throats out if given half a chance.* “We don’t talk about fighting.”

They exchange looks. “That is very disappointing,” Lord Sir says, his tone full of disapproval. “One of your tasks is to help us assess his readiness. Consider this your primary objective, as of today.”

Readiness? “Readiness for what?”

“He’s not ready,” the scientist says, a frown on his face. “He’s still too unstable.”

Lord Sir dismisses him with a flick of his blue hand. He turns his gaze on me, his horns gleaming in the afternoon sunlight streaming in through the windows. “There is an underground championship coming up in a month. Nothing legal, of course, but that’s a small matter easily remedied with the appropriate greasing of hands. I want Crudden to participate in it. I think he can win me a great deal of credits,



but I can't put him in the arena if he's not ready. It'd do no good for my investment if he's torn apart in his first round."

A hard knot forms in my throat. Torn...apart?

Crudden could die. It's a stark reminder that Crudden's job is to fight to the death.

"He's not ready," the scientist states again. "He's still too disoriented from stasis. It'll take him months to shake off the vestigial effects. We need to think of this as a long-term investment."

"I am tired of you throwing around the whole 'long-term investment' phrase," Lord Sir snaps, the first time I've ever seen him lose his temper. He's always cool and regal, but today he's frowning fiercely at the scientist. "He's costing me a small fortune in clones, so he needs to make me a larger fortune. The sooner the better. Word is already spreading that I have my hands on Crudden the Ruiner. Think of the credits. Think of the honor for my stable."

"I am thinking of the gladiator, my lord, as I am paid to do so," the scientist says stiffly. "I know you wish to impress your friends—"

"Impress!" Lord Sir scoffs, offended.

"—but you will lose a hearty investment if you put Crudden the Ruiner back into the arenas too quickly."

"Unless I were to bet on him losing," Lord Sir muses. "Truly, it is a winning situation any way we look at it."

I want to run away. Not only is this fight between them uncomfortable and something a slave shouldn't view if she wants to keep her head, but I can't process the fact that Crudden is supposed to get into the arena and he *might not*

*come back out* . The thought fills me with terror. Crudden could die.

And Lord Sir might deliberately engineer it to win credits by betting against him.

They both turn to look at me. “Well? Is he ready?” Lord Sir states, impatience in his tone. “Do I bet for or against him?”

I open my mouth, but the only thing that comes out is a wordless little bleat of terror. I hold Crudden’s life in my hands and...I don’t want to. “I need more time,” I say desperately. “Time to assess how he’s doing.”

“You have a week,” Lord Sir says. “After that, I need to know which way to place my bets. If you think to lead me astray, you’ll both die, and I’ll make sure it won’t be quick.”

Terror floods through me. All I can do is nod. I’ve seen what happens to slaves that are “punished to death.” It involves the gladiators being allowed to do whatever they like to her, and the gleeful violence I’ve seen in their faces whenever I pass by with the guards frightens the hell out of me. “I need time,” I say again.

“One week.” Lord Sir flicks a hand in my direction, indicating that I’m dismissed.

The scientist gets to his feet. “I’ll escort her back to Crudden.” He takes me by the elbow and drags/leads me out of the room. I let him, dazed, and I’m only half aware of the clone guards that file into place after us. We head outside in silence, and I’m not entirely surprised when the scientist leads me around to the far side of the building instead of directly back to Crudden. He pauses and gazes at the edges of the forest, just beyond the high, protected walls of the compound.

Somewhere in the distance, there's the sound of rushing water and on the horizon, I see the waterfall. It's all very pretty, I guess, if one has the time to look around.

I can't stop thinking about Crudden, dying. Crudden, who braced his hands on the wall over me as I jerked him off, who watched me with such intense eyes full of yearning. Who looked at me as if he'd never seen something so perfect in his life. Crudden, who thinks he's a monster.

He deserves so much better than to be treated like a trained animal. It's unfair.

"You stink of fear," the scientist tells me, tilting his face toward the breeze from the waterfall. "I'll give you a few moments to recover, but you need to think about how Crudden will react if you return reeking of fright."

I suck in a deep breath. Right. Right. Okay. I need to calm down. Nothing has changed. Our situation is still garbage, and it's still us against the world. They might have changed the goalposts a bit, but at the end of the day, it's just me and Crudden, looking for a way to escape this hellhole.

The scientist glances over at me after a time. "Obviously it is in both our best interests for him to win."

It surprises me to hear him say that, but I don't let it show on my face. Of course. Lord Sir is his boss and he has to answer to him. If he was brought in to "prepare" a special gladiator and that gladiator dies, he's a failure. It doesn't make he feel sorry for him, because he had the opportunity to walk away from this job. Crudden's never been given that option. He's been treated like a toy since the day he arrived.

"You need to find out if he's ready," the scientist says when I remain silent. "More than that, you need to make

certain that he's ready."

I swallow hard. "I...I don't know anything about gladiator bouts. We don't talk about fights."

"You need to," he says bluntly.

I shake my head. "He still doesn't have memories from before. His mind is a big blank before he got here. It frustrates him. How's he expected to perform like he used to if he can't remember how he used to perform?"

The scientist is thoughtful. "It's probably a side-effect of the stasis. I've heard that it can cause brain damage in some if not properly administered." He doesn't look convinced. "Perhaps I should add a few memory-enhancement drugs to his daily stimulant shots in order to speed things along. His last fight was over five years ago, but five years of stasis shouldn't have memory effects on him." He rubs his chin. "I'll have to do some more research."

I cross my arms, confused. "What do you mean his last fight was over five years ago?"

He blinks at me. "Just that. The last known fights of Crudden are on vid. Very popular. It's one reason why Lord Sir is so very enthusiastic about his purchase."

Vids. I didn't think about that, but these people love vids of gladiator fights. Suddenly, I want to watch all of them. I want to see Crudden how he was before. I want to learn more about him. "I can watch his old vids," I volunteer eagerly. "See how he's fighting in them and compare it with now. Maybe remind him of things he's forgotten? I'd be better able to tell you guys how he's doing if I have something to compare it to."

The scientist brightens, nodding. “I like that idea. I’ll acquire them for you.”

Some of the tightness in my chest eases. We can get out of this, I tell myself. We can. All we need is a plan.

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## CRULDEN

**M**ina is quiet and thoughtful as we return to my cell that night. Her scent smells like sunshine and fresh air, but underneath it are slightly more sour scents, and there's no trace of the delicious musk that appears from time to time.

That worries me. Mina is normally bossy and full of instructions as we eat, but tonight, she's quiet. She slurps down her noodles quickly, and when I dig a claw into her bowl to steal a chunk of meat, she doesn't smack my hand. Instead, she holds her bowl steady for me to steal from. I narrow my eyes at her, not liking this. The simmering rage that boils in the back of my mind threatens to erupt. Not at her. At others, who have changed her. "What did they say to you today?"

She looks up at me in surprise. "Who?"

"You know who."

"Oh. Right. Sorry, I was just thinking." She pokes at her noodles with her eating sticks. "They asked me about you, actually."

I stiffen. Flashes of memory race through my mind. Of Mina, her sharp gaze intense as she strokes my cock. Of how good it felt. How...forbidden. Did they ask about...that? “And?”

She looks thoughtful. “They asked me about your fighting. If you’re ready for the arena. I told them I didn’t know.”

“I guess it would depend on who they put me up against.”

My response makes her angry. “I said I didn’t know, all right?” She tosses her bowl down onto the tray between us, spilling broth on the smooth surface. “I don’t trust them, and I don’t like that they’re asking me instead of you.”

“They want to turn us against one another, perhaps,” I say, uneasy. Mina is the only thing I have that is good and right. I like her more than soft blankets, more than the best meals. I like her more than the fresh breeze on my face when we’re outside. I would choose her over all of that. But I do not know if she would choose me, and the thought makes my gut clench.

“They’re assholes,” Mina agrees, an unhappy look on her face. “I worry they’re going to push you into fighting when you’re not ready.”

She worries over me? I am surprised. “What about you?”

“What about me?” Mina tilts her head, her brows dark slashes of frustration. “Aren’t you listening, Crudden? They want me to spy on you and tell them how you’re doing with your fighting. It makes me angry. They’re asking me to tell on you.”

My heart swells with warmth that she wishes to protect me. “Mina, everyone here will be asked how I am fighting. The trainers, the scientist, the glads I spar with. I expect this. Do not worry about it.”

“I just don’t want to sell you down a river.”

I have no idea what that means, but her protectiveness makes me feel...good. Good in ways that are so different from the scientist’s careful monitoring of my health. “You won’t. I trust you with my life.”

Her jaw clenches. “I don’t want it to come to that, Crudden. I don’t know anything about fighting. What if I tell them you’re a frightening badass and then someone else steps into the ring with you and rips your throat out?”

Now my pride is stung. She thinks I would be so easily defeated? “Then I am the problem, not you.”

“Yes, but I don’t want that to happen.”

Is this what is souring her mood? “So you think I will be so easily destroyed once I fight?” I push aside my own bowl. “I might as well give up now if I am so very fragile.”

Her mouth opens. A hot flush crosses her face and she scowls at me. “Don’t get butthurt. They want to put you in the ring and if you’re not ready, they want me to tell them so they can bet against you. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“It should be an easy answer, since I will apparently get my throat ripped out at the first sign of danger.” I get to my feet, and my angry surge makes the tray flip over. The remnants of our food splatter on the floor between us, and Mina makes a frustrated sound. I stomp to the far end of my cell, pacing in front of the windows, and my tail flicks with agitation. This is different than my normal fury—my spikes feel buried deep, and my eyes do not burn like they do when they are about to flare red. I am just...annoyed.

She thinks I am weak.

She thinks I cannot handle what they throw at me.



She thinks I will die the moment I enter the arena. Such confidence in me. Fighting is my only job. It is something I have been bred—been *created* —to do. And she thinks I will fail.

It is galling.

The clink of dishes sounds behind me. Mina crouches on the floor, cleaning up our mess. She mops it up with one of the plas-film napkins she brought, and glares at me when she tosses the towel onto the tray. “I’m not going to fucking apologize,” she hisses at me as she picks up the tray, kicks the stem of the stand to make it retract, and then carries it into the food slot. “Excuse me for being worried about you, you big ass. It won’t happen again.”

She taps the button to send the tray to the other side with more force than I’ve ever seen her use. She tosses a glare at me and marches toward the antechamber, no doubt so she can take the tray back to the kitchens and give herself a chance to get away from me.

I pace angrily, watching. So she thinks to retreat from me?

The doors to the antechamber don’t respond. She swipes her wrist again, and again, and then glares up at the ceiling. She realizes at the same time that I do that they are going to force her to stay with me. “Those fucks. I hate everyone here. *Everyone.*” She kicks at the door with her small foot and then storms toward our shared bed. As I glare, she snags the blanket, pulls it over her head, and lies flat and stiff.

The lights go out overhead.

Bedtime. Like a child. Clenching my jaw, I keep pacing. Back and forth, back and forth, in front of the glass. There’s

nothing to look at, but I don't want to go to bed just yet. Not until Mina apologizes. Not until—

A small, watery sniff breaks the silence.

My hackles go up. I turn toward Mina, where the covers are still pulled over her head, as if she can somehow create privacy for herself. I prick my ears, homing in on her sounds. She draws in a shaky breath and sniffs again, the sound congested.

She is...crying? Because of me? This fearless female, who gave me a defiant look of pleasure as she stroked my cock...is crying because we argued?

Intrigued, I move toward the bed. Mina doesn't move under the covers, but I can smell the delicate scent of her tears. My intrigue changes to guilt. I don't like that she's sad. I tug on a corner of the blanket, and she immediately tugs it back out of my hand. I bite back a snort of sudden amusement and tug on the blanket again. This time, she doesn't jerk it back and I get under the covers with her. She keeps the blankets pulled over her head so I do the same.

Then we are both under the blanket, and Mina will not look at me. Her arms are crossed over her chest, her posture that of anger, but tears roll down her face. Her breath perfumes the air underneath the blanket and I decide I like this cocoon she has made, because it smells like her.

“You are mad at me,” I venture.

“I'm mad at the situation.” She swipes an angry hand over her cheeks.

“You think I am weak and will get my throat ripped out—”

Her nostrils flare and she glares at me. “I'm scared that I'll be all ‘yes, he's amazing’ and then I'll be the reason you die.

That's why I'm fucking upset, you idiot. I know you can handle yourself. You're scary as shit in the training pit. You kick everyone's asses. But I don't know anything about fighting, and I care about you, and that's why I'm upset!"

I curl a finger, reaching out with my knuckle to brush away the tears on her cheek. I am ever-so-mindful of my claws. I want to shear them off so I can touch her properly, but I will need them for the arena, so I must not. She lets me wipe away her tears, her lower lip trembling. "I don't like your sadness," I say finally. "It makes me sad."

"I just feel so...helpless." She looks over at me. "You're the first friend I've had here. I don't want to be responsible for your death."

"You won't be. I would never blame you."

"I'd blame myself."

"If I tell you not to, will that help?"

Her little huff is both frustration and amusement. "You're ridiculous." But she holds her arms out, inviting me to lean against her. I move in automatically, resting my head against her breasts. Carefully, I curl my hands around her smaller body, holding her tightly as she wraps her arms around me. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pick a fight."

"I did not mean for you to get upset over me. I'm a gladiator, Mina. It's all I can remember. There's nothing in my head but training and arena rules." And you, with your hands on my body, I want to say, but I hold that back.

Mina's fingers dig into my mane and I close my eyes, giving myself over to the pleasure of it. She always knows just how to touch me to make me feel good. "I wish I could do something to help," she says softly. "I'd do anything for you."

I think of her soft hand under the soapy towel, and how she worked my cock, that pleased look on her face. “I wish you had a penis,” I tell her. I would love to give her the same pleasure she gave me.

“What?” Mina goes still, her hand pausing in my mane just as her nails begin to scratch at my scalp. “I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

“I said, I wish you had a penis,” I say again. “Then I would know how to pleasure you. I don’t have anything in my memories about pleasuring females. I wish I did, because I think about the way you touched me, and it makes me want to do the same for you. To make you feel good, like you made me feel good.”

“Oh,” she breathes. Her hands tremble and she strokes my mane again. That musky, enticing scent rolls through the air under the blanket, and my senses prick. “That’s oddly sweet of you, Crudden. I’m a woman—born female and identify as female, too. I have a vagina and uh...I forget the technical terms for all of it, really. A pussy.”

“Mmmm.” I rub my face against her chest, hot spikes of pleasure coursing through me at her thoughtful, soft voice as she describes her body parts to me. “Pussy. Vagina. Do they feel good like my penis when you touch them?”

Her breath hitches. “Yeah.”

“Can I...touch them for you like you touched me?” I have thought of nothing else but those touches since they happened yesterday. My dreams were full of Mina, endlessly tugging on my cock. Sometimes with the towel, sometimes with her hands. Mina, spattered by my seed. Mina, reaching for me with greedy, confident hands.

It is a wonder I didn't get my throat ripped out in the ring today, I was so distracted.

It is that very same distraction that takes me a moment to realize she hasn't answered. I rub my face against her shift again, imagining how soft she is underneath. Her breasts, her belly. I could swear that enticing aroma is coming from her, but I don't know what from. "Mina?" I ask, as it dawns on me that she's silent. "Have I asked for too much?"

"No." Her fingers go through my mane again. Her voice is soft. Aching. "You can touch me. Just...mind your claws."

And her legs part, as if welcoming me to the space between them.

I groan, the hot scent of her perfuming the air. It is coming from her, I realize. I slide down under the blankets, carefully gliding my fingertips over her bare legs. Her shift reaches her knees, so I push it up, because I want to stare at that tuft of fur underneath, the one between her thighs that hides all her secrets.

My hands tremble, because this is what I have dreamed of—touching her. Pleasuring her. I want to do it right.

Mina is tense, but when I breathe in her scent, there's no hint of fear. I push her shift up, realizing just how rough it is against her soft skin. She deserves better than this. She should be dressed in the fine robes that Lord Sir wears. Reverently, I guide the fabric up her thighs and slowly reveal the juncture between her thighs, the spot that has fascinated me for days upon end now.

My breath hits her skin and she shivers. Her hand goes to my mane, her nails scratching against my scalp. She's silent, as if she does not want to interrupt my exploration. I want her

to talk, though. I want her to guide me. “Tell me if I do something that distresses you.”

“You’re fine,” she says, voice soft under the blanket cocoon. “Touch me however you like.”

And she shifts her weight, spreading her thighs a bit wider. She wants me to touch her there, I realize with pleasure. I reach for her and then stop, because one of my wicked, curved claws looks abhorrent this close to her skin. I curl them inward, making a fist, and decide I will use my knuckle to touch her instead of a fingertip.

I brush my knuckle over the tuft between her thighs. It feels different than the hair on her head, coarser, the color darker. The strange, musky scent grows thicker, concentrated here. I can ignore it no longer. “Mina?”

“Yes?” She sounds as breathless as I feel.

“What is that scent?”

Her thick brows furrow together. “What scent?”

“The one coming from your...” I struggle to think of the word she used. “Pussy.”

“Oh.” She pauses. “Wow. Okay.” Her legs draw together, as if she is ashamed. “Maybe that’s enough for today—”

“No.” I put my fist carefully against the inside of her thigh, stopping her from shutting them. “I did not mean it badly. It is a scent that has been haunting me for days now. Sometimes I smell it and it makes me wild with hunger. I didn’t know it was you.” I lean in, brushing my tusks against the tuft of fur between her thighs. “I love it, Mina. Nothing has ever smelled so good.”

She sucks in a breath, gasping. Her hand clenches in my mane. “I didn’t realize your nose was that sensitive.”

“What am I smelling?” I ask, unable to resist her any longer. My tongue darts out and I taste her skin, the crinkle of fur here. I move a little lower, using the tip of my tongue to trace the seam of her body, where the scent seems strongest. “Is it sweat? Is that why you’re wet here?”

She moans, and when her thighs twitch, I press them back open again. She gives in to me, her fingers twisted in my mane as her thighs go wide, wider than before. She’s welcoming me, and the realization makes my chest swell with pride. “It’s...my arousal. Like...when your cock leaks pre-cum. I get...slick when I get turned on.” Mina pants, pausing between words. “It’s normal, I promise.”

She gets...wet? Slick? And it smells this good? Fascinated, I use my knuckle to brush her folds apart. Sure enough, her soft skin gleams with wetness here. I taste it with the tip of my tongue and nearly lose control. It is like her scent, concentrated—rich and musky and intense.

To think I have been smelling this all this time. She was aroused and never said a word to me.

She was aroused...from me. The thought is staggering and fills me with fierce joy. How many times have I smelled this scent in the last week, wondering what it was? Now that I know, I cannot believe it took me so long to realize this. “I smelled you when you touched me,” I rasp, moving my knuckle through the wetness on her skin. She is indeed slick here, the moisture thick and heady and my mouth waters. “You liked it?”

“I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t,” Mina says softly. “I loved touching you. I loved making you feel good.”

I groan. “I want to do the same for you. Tell me what you like, Mina.”

She makes another little gaspy sound, and then her fingers move slowly toward my mouth. I think for a moment that she’s going to touch me, but she carefully parts her folds with a touch. With her other hand, she touches herself, showing me.

Teaching me.

I watch, utterly fascinated, as she draws light, airy circles around the little bump of flesh tucked at the top of her folds. “This...” she says, and gasps, aroused by her own fingers. “This is really sensitive.” She moves lower, and I watch as she dips a finger into the entrance to her body. “It feels better when it’s wet, because then my fingers really glide over it.” She demonstrates, and I feel her thighs tense against me. She moves back to the opening of her body and pushes a finger in. “And it feels good to touch myself inside, too.”

I hate my claws. Hate that I cannot give her my fingers. If her thighs are tender, she is beyond soft here, in this most fragile area. My claws will go nowhere near it. “How do I do this for you?” I ask, feeling foolish and grotesque. “I am monstrous.”

“No,” she says quickly. Her fingers caress my jaw, and she touches my face with those scented fingers. “You’re just different. It doesn’t mean bad. If you can’t use your hands, your mouth will feel good, too.”

“How?” I ask again. I want to do this for her. I’m aching to give her this, but my mind has no knowledge of these things. “Explain to me in great detail, Mina. I want to get it right.”

“Well...” Mina licks her lips as I watch her face. She squirms a little. “Your tongue would feel really good there.



But only if you want to do that, of course—”

I am on her like a ravenous beast before she can finish her words. My tongue? I have an exceedingly competent tongue. I can do this. I clench one fist against her thigh, keeping her spread wide, and drag the slab of my tongue over her seam. When I push forward with my tusks, they press into her folds, pushing them apart and leaving her open for me to feast on. I lick at the small, rounded bit of flesh with my tongue. “Does this have a name? Is this more pussy or is it something else?”

I want to learn all of her.

She gasps as I lick it, her legs jerking. “Clit. It’s a clit. Oh...go soft, Crudden. Go soft.”

Her hand goes back to my mane, her fingers tight in it as I try to do as she asks. I liked it when she was rough with me, but Mina is fragile. Of course she needs different things. I circle around the little “clit” with my tongue, surprised at how firm it is. I remember how Mina wetted her fingers in her own juices before returning to touch her clit again, so I make sure my tongue is wet and slippery when I lick her.

She groans, trembling, and when I look up, she bites down on her knuckle, trying to keep quiet. She doesn’t want anyone to hear us.

I understand that. This is our moment. It’s not for sharing with others.

I press my face to her pussy again, teasing the nub until the scent of her grows too irresistible. I move lower, grazing my tongue against the entrance to her body, and the taste of her washes over me. I groan. “What is this part of you called?”

“Cunt,” Mina breathes. “Inside me, that’s my cunt.”

Inside her. I want to be inside her more than anything. I groan at the thought, but make no move toward it. I am far too big, and she is far too small. She might want a monster to lick her pussy, but she'd never want to mate with me. I will take what she gives, though. If she wants nothing but lickings, I will make sure they are the best lickings ever.

I want her to crave my touch as badly as I crave hers.

So I lick her slowly, pressing my tongue against the entrance to her cunt. I push it inside her, and her hot walls clasp my thick tongue on both sides. I love the sounds of pleasure Mina makes when I touch her like this. She sounds as if she's coming apart, and Mina is always composed, always so pulled together. This Mina is not. This Mina writhes against my tongue, panting. This Mina tugs tightly at my mane with her hands, her breath sobbing out of her.

This Mina likes it when my tongue stabs deep into her, like I want to do with my cock.

One of her desperate hands goes to her clit again, while I push my tongue slowly in and out of her cunt. She touches herself frantically, as if my tongue is not enough for her. With a growl, I bat her hand aside, covering her mound with my hand protectively. While I am between her thighs, this is all mine. I am going to be greedy and selfish with her, and possessive. If she wants more touching, I'm going to be the one to give it to her.

So, carefully, I use the pad of my thumb to roll her clit back and forth, even as I plow my tongue deep into her tasty cunt again.

"Oh fuck," Mina whimpers. Both of her fists go back to my mane and she grinds my face down against her pussy. "Oh

fuck, Crudden. That's so good. Oh fuck. Your mouth. I can't... I can't..."

I groan against her soft flesh, fascinated. She's painting my mouth with her need, and her scent is everywhere. It makes my cock ache fiercely, so fiercely that I grind my hips against the mattress while I work her with my tongue and thumb.

"I'm so close," she whimpers. "Harder. Make me come."

Harder? I can do harder. I move my thumb faster over her clit, and thrust with my tongue, as if I'm lapping at her insides. She grinds my face against her softness, and I love it. I love that she's using me and taking what she needs. A needy sound rips from her throat, and she cries out, even as her cunt tightens and flexes around my tongue. In the next moment, a warm wetness coats my mouth as she comes, and I cannot stop the growl of fierce pleasure as I lick her clean.

She spurted her release, like I do mine. I know this means I did well. I made her feel good like she makes me feel good. Pleased, I lick my chops and glance up at her.

Mina is sweaty, tendrils of her hair stuck to her skin, breathing hard. Her lips are parted and she looks utterly dazed. Spent. Well-pleasured.

My pride grows larger by the moment.

I cannot resist dragging my tongue over her delicious folds again, though. She tastes incredible, the musk of her thicker than ever. "Should I stop touching you?" I want to keep licking her forever but I know after I came, my cock was sensitive and needed rest.

She brushes her fingers through my mane, shaking her head. "Come up here with me." She nods at the pillow she

rests her head on—a human contraption she made herself and brought from her slave quarters. “Give me a moment.”

A moment. I can do that. But only a moment. The need for her still burns within me, and I fear I won’t be able to stop touching her. But because she has asked, I carefully ease the shift back down partly over her thighs and then move under the blankets to place my head near hers. I face her, drinking in her beauty. How did I ever find this female ugly? Her nose is strange and her brows dark and prominent in her pointy face, but there is nothing I would rather look at than a well-pleasured Mina.

She smiles at me and brushes her fingers over my jaw again. “We were a little loud, weren’t we?”

“I was not.”

A giggle escapes her, and she sounds lighter and happier than I have ever heard her. “Okay, I was. I tried to stay quiet but I didn’t do a very good job of it.” Her cheeks are pink with color. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Touched yourself?”

Her brows furrow. “No. I mean, I’ve never squirted. Came so hard.” Her fingers move over my chest, twining in the pelt there. “Your mouth is pretty amazing.”

I made her come harder than she ever has before? My pride only grows. “I want to do it again.”

“Soon,” she promises. “Give me a moment to catch my breath, and I certainly won’t say no.” She slides a little closer to me, my tusks practically touching her face. “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“Can I kiss you?” Her gaze is on my face, her breath warm under the blanket.

“What is a kiss?”

She props up on one elbow, watching me. “How much do you know about humans and sex?”

“I know that you like your cunt licked because you showed me,” I say, uneasy. “And I know that you liked touching my cock almost as much as I liked it.”

“What else?”

I rack my memories, but once again, they come up blank. “Should I know more?”

“Crudden.” Mina’s voice is soft. “You really don’t know anything about sex at all?”

“Why would I pretend ignorance?” It makes me feel foolish. She speaks as if I should know these obvious things, but it is all new to me. “Perhaps I lost this when my memory broke. All I know is when I look for other memories of other females, all I have is you.” I run my fingers lightly down her arm. “And I am not unhappy about that.”

She smiles at me. “So you’re a virgin.”

“Am I?”

“As far as I’m concerned, yes.” She leans in and presses her lips to my cheek. “And that’s a kiss.”

“Lips on the face?”

“Or on the mouth.” She leans in, moving toward my mouth, and then pauses. Her fingers skim over my permanently parted lips, pushed apart by my tusks. “Would it be intrusive for you if I kissed your mouth?”

“My mouth is not like yours. You would not like it.” It is very beastly, just like the rest of me.

Mina shakes her head. “How many times will I need to say that you’re just different and that it doesn’t make you bad? Or unattractive?”

“Just because you are used to looking at my face doesn’t change that I am unpleasant looking. I know the truth of it.” My fearsome expression is a boon in battles. Not so much in the sheets.

“I like your face,” she tells me stubbornly. “No one else matters. So can I kiss you or no?”

“Mina, you know you can do whatever you like with me and I will enjoy it.”

A smile blossoms across her face. She leans in, studying my grotesque mouth, and then presses her small, soft lips to my lower one. She sucks lightly on it, her teeth grazing over my lip, and it sends a hot stab of need through me. When I groan, she lifts her head and presses another light, teasing kiss on my upper lip, giving it the same treatment. “See? Kissing. It’s just as good with you. It doesn’t matter to me that your mouth is different.” Her tongue flicks along my upper lip, grazing it. “Because it’s your mouth, and that makes it good.”

She is destroying me, this sweet creature. I grab her and pull her down against me, holding her tightly. “Let me lick your cunt again,” I whisper when she moves in for another kiss. “I love tasting you.”

Mina chuckles, ignoring my command, and nips on my lower lip again. This time, she bites down harder, and her teeth excite me. I love her show of fierceness. I love how utterly unafraid of me she is. “If you go down on me again, I’m going

to leave another wet spot on the bed and then there will be no place to sleep.”

“I don’t care,” I rasp, and when her little tongue teases along one of my tusks, I nearly come in my loincloth. “Let me lick you. I need you so badly.”

“How about I make you come instead?” Mina whispers. She has that playful look in her eyes, and after she presses one more kiss on my chin, she slithers down my chest, all soft limbs and determined, kissing mouth. I can scarcely believe it when I feel her hands on the waist of my loincloth. In the next moment, her hands are on my aching cock, hot and eager. “Look at how big you are,” she purrs. “My fierce, sexy gladiator—”

I come instantly. The moment her hands wrap around my shaft and she squeezes, I erupt. Hot seed covers her hands and the front of her dress, and like a rutting beast, I pump into her grip while she murmurs sweet things to me. It is over quickly, but it is just as satisfying as the first time—maybe more so because this time there was no towel, and Mina’s hands are just as wonderful on my cock as I imagined.

She works me with a few tugs, squeezing tight, until the last of my seed coats her hands. Then she sighs happily and leans in to kiss my chest. “I like touching you far too much.”

I like it, too, but in my eyes, there is no such thing as too much. However much I get of her is the perfect amount.

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## MINA

**A**fter we clean each other up, we hide under the blanket fort for a little while longer, talking about nothing at all. When I see Crudden's eyes start to close, I know he's exhausted, and so I pull him to my breasts and play with his mane until he goes to sleep. It's the only way I know for sure that he'll actually sleep. If I don't, I'll wake up to find him watching me with that fascinated look on his face.

The next morning when I wake up, my body is tucked against his, spooning. I'm the small spoon, and his fingers dig into my hip, claws pricking at my skin. His cock grinds against my backside, pressing against my buttocks. I bite back a moan, not wanting to wake him up.

This time, though, I don't move away. Like the naughty, needy thing that I am, I rub back against him, parting my thighs so he can grind against my sweet spots. When the head of his cock presses against my core, I bite back a sob of sheer pleasure, my eyes nearly rolling back in my head from how good he feels.



“Mina?” he asks sleepily, even as his hips jerk against mine again.

“Don’t stop,” I breathe, rocking back against him. “Don’t stop.”

He groans and then grinds against me hard, my hips pinned as he uses me. Now that he’s awake, he’s unleashed, and oh god, it’s intense. He comes before I do, though, because I always need more. I whimper as his hot seed spills over my now-bare ass and thighs, my shift riding up to my waist. Crudden groans, practically driving me into the mattress as he thrusts against me, lost in his pleasure. With a small sound of frustration, I slide my hand between my thighs and frantically touch my clit.

“Mine,” he growls against my ear. His big body presses mine into the bed, and his hand shoves mine aside, and he then carefully rubs my clit until I come, sobbing with the intensity of it. Hot pleasure quakes through me as his hand works me over, and his mouth presses against my shoulder, in an awkward—yet utterly sweet—kiss.

When we’re done, we both lie there, spent. I sigh, content, as Crudden’s fingers leave my pussy and trace over my arm. He’s always so careful with his claws, I realize. So very careful with me. Some monster. The thought makes me smile as I turn to look at him. “I’d better get up and go to the kitchens to get your breakfast soon.”

“Let me clean you up, first.” He kisses my shoulder again and then gets out of bed, stark naked, his cock still erect.

I lean back on my elbows, watching him as he moves toward the lavatory set-up. I know somewhere out there, the scientist—and probably Lord Sir, too—are watching us. For all I know, they’re diddling themselves to the thought of us

fucking. I can't find it in me to care. If they won't give us the privacy to have a relationship, we'll take the relationship anyhow and fuck the privacy. I'm not going to deprive myself of Crudden's company just because those two chuckleheads might be watching. That's not fair to Crudden, and it's certainly not fair to my well-licked pussy.

He gently towels me down, wiping my skin free of his seed, and I can tell from the look on his face that he's getting aroused all over again. "You're going to smell like me all day," he says, voice low with pleasure. "Everyone will know what we did."

"Everyone already knows anyhow," I say with a shrug. "They'll smell me all over you just as much."

He rubs his lip, and the look on his face tells me that he likes that thought a lot.

Really, it's not surprising. Our room reeks of sex. I smell it the moment I return with our breakfast, and I know human senses aren't nearly as keen as alien ones. When the clone guards arrive to take Crudden out for his training, I can tell on their faces that they smell it, too. It doesn't matter that we've changed our clothes. The bedsheets are redolent with our scents, and I suspect we'll return to clean laundry that will just as quickly get dirty again tonight.

And I'm looking forward to it.

Smiling, I'm in a stupidly great mood when I go to watch Crudden's sparring practice. He's against three opponents today, all of them armed with shock-sticks while Crudden is bare-handed. He's able to handle them well, and I remember that I'm supposed to be determining how his fighting is doing. Right. Like I know anything about fighting. I try to watch intently, but the day gets insanely hot and I get sweaty.

Crudlen does, too, his thick muscles dripping with sweat as he moves, and it grows...distracting. I think about last night and how eager he was. How he didn't know the first thing about sex, which still surprises me. How is it that he knows so much about arena fighting but doesn't know shit about what's pleasurable in bed? Is it because he's not supposed to feel pleasure? That doesn't seem right to me, though. Pleasure is the carrot on the stick for these gladiators. They give them hard, terrible lives and throw them a bone every now and then to incentivize them. I feel like I'm missing something obvious.

But what?

I think about Crudlen and how excited he was to touch me. It turned him on so much to go down on me that he came the moment I touched him back. I think about this morning, too, and my thighs tighten instinctively. For a man that doesn't know much about sex, he's sure a quick learner. Just thinking about him is getting me hot and bothered.

A throat clears.

I look up, fanning my face. The humidity in the jungle is worse today, the sun beating down, and everything feels damp and muggy. The trainer is standing there at the edge of the pit, a frown on his face as he gazes at me.

He lifts his chin the moment our eyes meet. "You're distracting him."

I blink, looking over at Crudlen. Sure enough, the front of his loincloth is tented, and he keeps glancing over at me even as the others lunge at him.

Oh. Oh shit. My horniness is stinking up the joint. How embarrassing. I jump to my feet, smoothing my rough shift down over my thighs. This isn't going to help him be at peak

performance. I move to the edge of the pit and wait for Crudden to notice me. “I’m going to go to the kitchens and make sure they fix something nice and refreshing for your dinner tonight, all right? It’s so hot that I’ll get you some extra juice.”

He clearly isn’t happy about it, but gives me a brief nod. “You’ll be safe?”

I know what he’s asking. It’s not if I’ll be safe or not. No one would dare touch me because he’d rip their heads off. He always worries I won’t come back, but he won’t ask that in front of others. “Absolutely. I’ll see you at dinner.”

And I wink at him and blow him a kiss. Might as well lean into the whole “Crudden’s woman” thing.

I’m rewarded with a tusked grin, and that makes me feel warm. Smiling to myself, I ignore the stares and lecherous looks of the guards and other gladiators as I cross the courtyard and head for the kitchens. It’s definitely a steamy, gross day, so I’m thinking something like the jungle equivalent of watermelon, or lemonade. And since I’m on a mission for Crudden, I ignore the overseer and head right for the head cook, making my demands. It turns out there is a sweet, light juice that pairs well with water and a sugar-like substance, and they promise to send an icy pitcher of it over along with a cool, crisp set of veggies, cold cuts, and some equally cold melon.

I head for the scientist’s office after that and demand shower time for Crudden, too. He’ll want to get all that sweat off of him—and have me touch him again. I think about that shower room as the scientist pulls out a small vid streamer and shows me into the area where he keeps recovering patients. It’s

empty right now, so I hop up on one of the cots and wait for him to start the streamer, since I can't read their language.

“You tap on this to activate,” the scientist says, as if I'm a child. “Are you going to remember this?”

“Yes. Are you going to remember to insist that Crudden get a shower?” I counter, bold as ever. It'll make him feel so good. I'll make him feel good, too, I decide. I tingle all over at the thought, my mind full of mental images of Crudden going down on me on the shower floor, Crudden with his head parked between my thighs as he presses me to the tile wall, Crudden under the spray as I jerk his cock...

Maybe tonight I'll use my mouth. Maybe—

“Are you going to actually watch the vids?” the scientist asks, impatient at my daydreaming. “Or are you just here to irritate me?”

I scowl at him. “I'm going to watch.” And I push the button he showed me. “See?”

The vid streamer cues up, triumphant music playing. The scientist just rolls his eyes in my direction. “Congratulations. You can operate something a child can. Good job.” He nods at the old vid streamer in my hand. “That's my only spare, so don't break it. Better yet, don't touch anything. I have several of his more famous bouts already cued up, so all you have to do is watch.”

“I'm watching,” I promise, and the music changes, drawing my attention. The scientist leaves, and then I'm alone, watching the vids. The first few minutes, it's nothing but pedigrees and family names of the lords who will be sending in gladiators, and I could care less about them. I don't know

how to fast forward, so I drowse, barely paying attention, as the vid drones on and on.

Then, a familiar face appears.

My heart stops at the sight of Crudden's visage on the small screen. It's him—there's no mistaking that savage face—but it's odd, because there's something about him that's... strangely different. I can't put my finger on it. When he moves into the arena pit, I sit upright, fascinated. The very way he carries himself is different. He's all tension, as if bristling with anger. Maybe that's it? The gladiator on the vid is just a ball of rage, waiting to be released. When I think of my Crudden, I don't think of him like that at all.

Maybe his time in stasis wiped out all that rage. Maybe when he lost his memories, some of that anger drifted away, too. It's fascinating, though. To see the man I know so well and to realize that he's had this entire violent life before he came here.

"Crudden the Ruiner," cries the announcer.

Oh, yikes. I'd forgotten he was called the Ruiner. I know it's common amongst wrestlers and boxers to give themselves tough names back on Earth, but I'm still a little shocked to hear "Ruiner" when someone mentions my lover. I think of the man that holds me tenderly every night in my sleep. The man that oh-so-carefully licked me and wanted to learn the words for my body because he wanted to know how to please me.

I don't see him in this angry, hulking monster that wears his face.

His opponent comes out, waving to the crowd, and he's one of an insect-like race that reminds me of caterpillars. His skin is a sickly yellow-green, but his segmented body is long

and probably very strong. Arm after arm flexes, his long body undulating, and then he takes a fighting stance as he moves opposite Crudden, who remains utterly motionless.

There's a chime, and then Crudden is on the other guy before I can blink. It goes so fast that at first I think the vid has been sped up. Crudden's on the guy in a flash, leaping onto his back. He digs long, nasty talons—long and familiar—into the caterpillar guy's back. I recoil in horror as he rips a segment free from the middle of the caterpillar's back, dismembering him. Blood gushes all over the sands and the crowd roars as Crudden neatly hops back down to the ground and circles around, a cruel smile on his face like he's toying with his opponent, who lies broken and bleeding on the sand after just a breath.

As I watch, Crudden makes a taunting gesture, indicating he wants his opponent to get up. The crowd at the arena is screaming wildly, and when the caterpillar guy doesn't get up, Crudden stalks toward him and rips an arm off one of his segments even as the alien tries to fight back. He's so clearly not ready for anything Crudden does that it doesn't even feel like a match. It's just...brutality. After a few more arms are carelessly ripped off of his opponent, Crudden bares his fangs and slices another segment off, as if trying to destroy as much of his enemy as possible.

The ruiner. I get it now.

I turn the match off before he goes in for the kill, because I don't want to see it. His opponent was so clearly outclassed that it feels like a snuff film. The vid stops, thankfully, and then the screen displays a long list of other files—presumably more vids that have been cued up for me to watch. I pick another in the middle of the list and watch another fight, this

time with a mesakkah gladiator who looks tough and nasty, his blue skin covered in old scars. He's got a spiked club in his hands, and as Crudden steps out into the ring, I'm worried for my guy.

I shouldn't be. He dispatches this other opponent as messily and brutally as the other. He doesn't go for a quick win, or a neat one. He takes them apart, limb by limb, spraying blood everywhere. It's done just to be cruel and evil, and I can't line it up with the man I know. My soul feels like it's shriveling as I watch the match end, when Crudden rips the other guy's head off and then shoves his cock into his opponent's mouth. Jesus.

I think of how I touched his cock, and how he acted so gentle, so careful not to touch me. How he groaned my name as if he'd never felt anything so good or sweet before.

I'm about to turn the vid off when the roar of the crowd gets louder. A sick knot twists in my stomach as a female slave—wearing nothing but a slinky loincloth—is brought out. The prize. Oh no. The vid shows Crudden's face light up, his eyes flaring a dark, familiar red, and he tosses aside the severed head, his cock still hanging free, and stalks toward the female. She's being brought out by a guard, and it's clear she doesn't want to be there. An alien race that looks delicate and birdlike, she's covered in a fine greenish-blue down that must be feathers. She twists at the decorative lead chain on her throat, the one the guard is holding to keep her prisoner. Shocks move up and down the chain and she still fights desperately, dying to get away. She doesn't want to be anywhere near Crudden, who's still spattered with the blood of his kill, and I don't blame her. She screams in terror, and I know I'm going to hear that sound in my nightmares as Crudden stalks toward her.



I'm even more horrified when he lunges for the guard and tears him apart, limb by limb. When the other guy releases her chain, the female tries to run, but they lock the gates into the arena and she's trapped there with Crudden. My mouth hangs open as he hunts her down, grabs her by her tufted head-feathers, drags her back to the center of the arena, and then uses and abuses her in horrible ways.

And then he dismembers her, too.

I throw the vid player down as if burned. I can't believe what I just saw. I can't believe I volunteered to watch all of that...and more. I'm supposed to watch this shit daily for the next week so I can determine if Crudden is ready to fight? I want to laugh hysterically. I want to cry. I want to go to the slave quarters, hide under the blankets of my old bed, and never, ever come out again.

I curl up on the hard cot, trying to process what I just saw. That was Crudden—no one else has that unique face and build. I've seen a lot of aliens in some context or another—even the caterpillar one wasn't a shock to me. But Crudden is a splice—a mash-up of all the most brutal parts so they could make a perfect gladiator. The perfect fighter.

Except...that wasn't fighting that I saw. That was just straight up savagery. His second opponent yielded in the hopes of mercy. Didn't matter. He slaughtered the guard who brought out his prize...and then slaughtered the prize, too...after thoroughly using her. I want to vomit at what I witnessed, but the hard knot in my throat won't ease up. It feels permanent.

He tricked me. Tricked me into feeling things for him. Tricked me into thinking we were in this together. Tricked me into thinking he was practically a virgin. I close my eyes, and I can still hear his voice, full of lust and wonder, as he rubs his

knuckle over my folds. “Clit,” he’d breathed, as if wanting to memorize me.

I can’t line that up with the guy on the vid, the one that wore his face but moved differently. The one that destroyed everything he touched. What’s going to happen to me now? Is Crudden the Ruiner going to snap and ruin me next? Are they going to have to pick up pieces of me from all over the cell if I piss him off?

I think about when I first saw him, how angry and feral he’d been. How he calmed when I got in the cell with him. I’m such an idiot. It’s all a long con, isn’t it? Is the vicious side of him bored, so he wants to make me have feelings for him? Is that what this is?

I don’t have answers. All I know is that I hate all of it. I wish I could go back to being ignorant. I get to my feet and pick up the vid player. I set it down on the corner of the scientist’s desk as I leave, and I walk on heavy, slow feet back toward cellblock C.

Crudden is a monster. It doesn’t matter that he doesn’t have those memories. He still did those horrible things to those people. I don’t know if I can be his friend anymore.

I certainly can’t let him touch me, ever again.

Our shared cell is empty. I enter it, because I know I won’t be allowed back to the kitchens, back to my old bed. Crudden will pitch a fit, and I...I somehow need to keep him happy. I fight back the feeling of panic at that realization as I sit on the edge of the bed. Keep a monster like that happy? He’s going to want me to touch him again. He’s going to want more kisses, more caresses.

Oh god. I fucking kissed him.

My throat hurts, and I claw at the shock-collar at my throat. It sends waves of pain up my arms, but I keep trying, desperate to be free. I try until my head throbs and my arms buzz with aftershocks, and my throat feels like raw meat. Still, I keep trying.

I didn't fight so hard for so long to get such an ugly ending. And I have no doubt that if I stay with Crudden, I'll get the same ending that the poor bird-woman slave got. I swallow hard, but my throat's too tight, and then everything hits at once. I barely make it to the lavatory before I vomit up the contents of my stomach.

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## CRULDEN

**S**howering is far less pleasant without Mina. I linger in the hot water, washing away the sweat of the day, hoping that my companion will join me. I think about last time, how Mina smiled as she stroked my cock, and I'm hard and aching even as I soap myself up. Mina never shows, though, and my lust changes quickly to worry.

Has something happened? Are they taking her away from me?

The last time I saw her was earlier in the afternoon, when the sun was beating down, the air steamy as I practiced for the fights. Now, the sun is gone, and this is the longest we've been separated since she became mine. If they're holding her back from me, they're going to regret it, I think with a dark scowl. I'll make them sorry if they try to keep her from me. I dress in a clean pair of trou, fumbling at the auto-fasteners thanks to my long, deadly claws. They've grown at an incredible rate, now so long and wicked that they're practically hooks, and just as deadly. I don't like them, but I also don't want to deprive myself of an advantage I might need, so they stay.

The guards that file in to escort me back to my cell look as they always do—a mixture of wariness and boredom. If they know of something that’s happened to Mina, they’re hiding it well. I detect nothing unusual in their scents, so I’m calm until I return to my cell.

I can smell Mina’s fear before I get into the cell itself. The hot, acrid stink of terror is all over the cellblock, along with the old scent of vomit. I smell her tears, too. I’m growling with fury as I approach the cell, and I see Mina huddled in the corner of the room, her knees tucked tightly to her chest.

Something’s happened to her. Someone’s hurt her. My skin grows hot, my eyes flooding with red, and the anger-spikes push through my skin, sending waves of pain through me. I don’t care. I just need to get to my female. My guards go on alert, the smell of ozone filling the hall as they ready their shock-sticks and take a step back from me. One speaks into his wrist-comm. “Lord Sir, we have a situation.”

“Mina,” I snarl.

“Go into your cell,” the lead clone says. “Don’t give us trouble.”

My stun-cuffs are lit up, sending shockwaves up my arms, and my neck collar is, too. I’m barely aware of it. Pain can’t keep me from her. If I’ve found out that someone has hurt my female, I’m going to tear this entire building down to find him. The door to the antechamber slides open and I step inside, pressing up against the mechanized doors on the other end that are the only things holding me back from my Mina.

She needs me.

“He’s contained,” the clone calls out. “Stand down.”

Stand down. As if they could somehow stop me. The rage is building in my system, and I need answers. I step inside once the doors part and rush to Mina's side. There are food scents in the room, too. There's a tray full of cool, fruity-smelling things, things I've never eaten before, and I suspect those are Mina's doing. She insists on foods she thinks I'll enjoy. She always thinks of me. Supports me.

I can do the same for her.

I move to her side, and as I do, she backs away from me, her fear-scent spiking. "Your eyes," she whimpers, flinching backward.

I stop immediately. My eyes are red, my spikes out. I'm scaring her. I take a step back, trying to force myself to calm, to make those things recede. I can't, though. I can't calm down, not when she's so terrified. "What did they do to you, Mina? Tell me who hurt you, and I'll destroy them."

Her terror-scent only increases, and when she looks over at me with that frightened expression, I realize that I'm the one she's frightened of.

"It's nothing," she finally says, her voice small. She tries to smile and fails miserably. "You should eat."

I don't understand what's going on. "What did they say to you? Why are you afraid of me?"

"Like I said, it's nothing." The smile that forces its way onto her face looks like a parody.

I take a step toward her, and she flinches back again. "When I last saw you, you were happy. Now you are frightened. Tell me what has changed or I'm going to lose my mind, Mina." I'm close to snapping as it is.

She trembles, hard, and her fear-scent is so strong it turns my stomach. “I...saw some of your vids today. Your previous matches.”

“And?”

Mina averts her gaze, as if she can't stand to look at me. “You lied to me. You're not who you say you are.”

“I don't understand.” How have I lied? What did she see? She licks her lips, and she looks so uncomfortable and miserable that it hurts me. I ignore the clone guards, still outside our cell, watching us. Mina is all that matters. Mina is my entire world. I take another step closer, blocking the sight of her from the others outside, and I hate that she tenses. “What did you see?”

“Are you going to attack me?” she whispers.

“No. Why would I do such a thing?” I crouch low, trying to make myself seem as helpless as possible, and I'm relieved when my spikes slowly sink back into my skin. The red is leaching from my eyes, but the frustrated anger simmers just below the surface, and I know it won't take much for me to lose control. The need to fix this for Mina, to protect her, is driving me insane. I reach out a hand to her and she turns away. “What did they show you to make you so afraid of me?”

She trembles hard, staring at a spot over my shoulder. She won't look me in the eye. “I thought you were just another gladiator. Another slave like me, just one that's being forced to fight. I didn't realize I was so wrong about you.” Her gaze flicks over to meet mine and then just as quickly darts away again. “This is all a game to you, isn't it? You're just fucking with my head. This isn't who you are.”

“I don’t understand any of this,” I snarl. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about. I would never lie to you. You’re my only friend.” Her hurtful words feel like knives, sinking into my spirit. “Tell me what they showed you.”

“I saw vids of your fights.” Her voice is dull, defeated.

“And...?” I prompt. There has to be more to this.

Mina shudders. “It was like a nightmare.” She shakes her head. “I watched you...not fight. It wasn’t a fight, because a fight implies that the other person can hold a candle to you. It was...a beating. It was torture. They’d throw someone in the ring with you and you’d just get this awful, evil look on your face.” She swallows hard, her expression bleak as she hugs her knees. “I watched you dismember people for fun. I watched them bring a prize slave girl out to you. You raped her in the middle of the arena and then pulled her apart while she screamed. And I think to myself, that’s not the Crudden I know. He would never do that. He didn’t know how to touch me, and when he did, it was soft, and good. So either I’m the biggest fool ever or you’re the best liar. Or both.” Her eyes fill up. “And it hurts me, because I trusted you. I trusted you and you’re a monster.”

This time, I flinch. She sees me as a monster again. To her, I’m the nightmare in the vids she watched. I wish I knew what she was talking about. I try to drag up memories of old matches, bouts that I clearly won since I am alive and yet... there is nothing. Why is it that I know dozens of fighting moves and the minute details of arena rule changes, and yet I cannot recall a single bout? There is nothing there in my memories. “It wasn’t me. I didn’t do that.”

“But you did,” she says softly. “I watched you. I know your face.”



“I would never hurt you.”

“How am I supposed to know that?” She shakes her head, not looking at me. “And how am I supposed to believe that when you gleefully hurt other people? What you did to that woman...” Mina swallows hard. “I’m never going to be able to get the sight of it out of my head.”

“Mina,” I call softly, and hold my hand out to her, palm up. “I swear to you. I would never hurt you. You are the only good thing in my life.”

Her gaze lands on my extended hand and she stares at it, not taking it. “Your claws,” she says softly. “I watched you sink those into someone’s back. Just...just to hurt him. He wasn’t going to beat you. You just wanted to make him scream.” And she huddles against the wall again, like if she presses against it hard enough, she will somehow escape this cell.

Escape me.

I know in this moment that if they gave her the choice, she would turn her back on me and never return. The thought doesn’t fill me with anger, but a dull ache. I’m the monster to her. I’ll never be anything but a monster she’s forced to endure. I stare down at my hand, at the hook-like, deadly claws tipping each finger. Claws that my trainers have been encouraging me to use more in practice fights.

I hate them. I hate them as much as I hate myself. With a feral growl, I shove a finger into my mouth and use my teeth to saw each claw off, down to the quick. I don’t care that I’m taking a tool away from myself—I just want Mina to stop looking at me with fear. I want her to like me again. I get rid of claw after claw, spitting the remnants aside onto the floor, and when both of my hands are free of them, I flex my fingers and

then hold my hand out to her again. She's been silent all this time, and when I extend my palm toward her once more, she looks up at me, and her eyes are shiny with tears.

“You know what's the worst? I let you in.” A droplet rolls down her narrow cheek and she swipes it away, staring at my hand. “I've been okay for years without a single friend. I've survived. And now I feel like you've murdered the only friend I ever had. I hate you because I want my friend to comfort me...and he doesn't exist.”

Her crying breaks me. I reach out and brush my knuckles lightly along her arm. “Mina. Please. It's not me. I swear it's not.”

Even as I say it, though, I don't know if I'm lying. My memories are a mess. How can I not remember things as important as this? Shouldn't a gladiator remember his fights? His glories? Shouldn't I remember touching a female other than her? But when I rack my brain, trying to find evidence of these things, all that is there is Mina. Mina touching me in the shower. Mina in the bed with me this morning, making soft sounds as I ground my cock against the cleft of her ass.

She'll never let me touch her again. Just like in her story, Mina can never love the monster.



MINA IS DISTANT ALL NIGHT. She doesn't want me to touch her, or even talk to her, and I eventually give up, because my repeated attempts to convince her that I'm not a monster just make her more upset. The foods she chose for us remain uneaten, and when she will not join me in the bed, I don't force her. Instead, I take the blanket and carefully wrap it

around her in her spot in the corner. I lie flat on my back on the mattress and pick through my memories, trying to find something—anything—that will tell me that I am not the monster Mina thinks I am.

*Regular bouts are battles to the death. Two gladiators enter the arena pit, using the weapons of choice that their owners have provided. Unarmed bouts are increasingly popular, where one or both gladiators are given no outside weapons. As such, the gladiators are free to use what they can to take out their opponent. A match is considered a “win” if one opponent is killed, knocked unconscious, or asphyxiated into a stasis state, dependent upon the species. Loss of limbs does not indicate the end of a match.*

*Each lord may have multiple gladiators in his stable, but only one roster will be entered into a competition. Each roster should include six mid-level gladiators, one prize gladiator to head the stable, and three slaves to be donated to the competition for use in matches and/or as prizes.*

*A win will give a stable five points, a tie three points, and a loss one point. Points will be detracted if a gladiator should go rogue and attack anyone other than his opponent. The penalty list is as follows: ten points detracted for attacking the lord of a stable, five points for an announcer, five points for each audience member wounded...*

The litany of rules chugs through my head, all of them useless. There are no faces assigned to these words, no memories, no nothing. They do not feel as if they belong to me. They are just words in my head.

Mina wakes up before dawn and heads toward the antechamber, heading out to get our food.

“You’ll come back?” I say, and my voice is as desperate as I feel.

“I don’t have a choice.” She still won’t look at me. And when she returns a short time later with my favorite foods and hers in a slave bowl, it feels as if the wall between us is back again. We’re no longer friends and companions, she is telling me silently. She is my slave, here only because I wanted her.

I should be kind and insist that they send her back to the kitchens, with the rest of the cooking and cleaning slaves. But if I am as awful as she says, why not own it? So I keep her.

We are both silent as I head out for the day’s training. She sits in her normal spot in the sun, surrounded by clone guards, at the edge of the training pit. I try not to watch her closely, but it’s clear I am distracted. My opponents have shock-stick clubs this day, and they pound on me relentlessly, sending fire up my veins with every score. The trainer in his armor shouts at me to concentrate, but I only snarl at him and return to my starting spot, ready for the next bout. All the while, I watch Mina. She is expressionless, her dark brows the only color in her small face.

The trainer turns to see what I’m looking at, and he scowls when he realizes it’s my female. “Get her out of here,” he says to the guards. “She’s a distraction today.”

“She stays,” I snarl, moving right up to the male and getting in his face.

The trainer—a mesakkah of low caste, judging by his tarnished horns—holds his ground. He glares defiantly at me. “Look, friend. You and I both know that my job is to get you ready for your first arena bout in Lord Sir’s stable. I don’t know what kind of lovers’ spat you two have going on, but I do know that as long as she’s sitting there, glaring at you, your

focus isn't going to be on fighting. So get it together, or Lord Sir's going to have us both put to the death for being failures."

I glare at him, at how close he is. How dare he not back down? My hands clench into fists, and I think it would be so easy to bite his throat, just rip it out—

And prove to Mina that I'm the monster she thinks I am. I glance over at my female. She's stiff, her eyes wide, and her fear-scent plays on the breeze. She's just waiting for me to lose control so I can prove that her fears are right.

That defeats me like nothing else does. Sighing heavily, I turn away, stalking back to the starting spot in the pit. "Get her out of here, then."

I don't watch as Mina leaves. I'm not entirely surprised when the other glads turn in their weapons and head out, too. "Let's focus on endurance drills today, since your attention span is elsewhere," the trainer says. "Take a quick break to hydrate, and tell me when you're ready."

"I'm ready now." Maybe if I work hard enough to pass out, I'll forget that look of fear and disappointment on Mina's face.

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**MINA**

**I** 'm almost relieved when I'm sent away from watching Crulden. Seeing him in the pit just reminds me of the horrific vids from yesterday, but in an entirely different sort of way.

Crulden doesn't move the same.

I don't know how to explain it. There's something about all of it that bothers me. From what I can tell of alien culture, they don't treat their vids like people do back on Earth. They're not interested in manipulating faces or special effects or anything like that. There's an honor in recording things exactly as they happened, in their eyes, and vids are treated more like the news than actual entertainment. Unless someone's gone rogue and has started fucking with vids, that's truly Crulden on the screen.

But he doesn't move the same. That cobra-like deadliness isn't quite there. I don't know how else to describe it. The Crulden on screen was utterly terrifying, his eyes cold and calculating. And I can't help but wonder if that's truly my Crulden after all. The one that was visibly distressed last night

when he saw my fear. He bit off his claws in the hopes of making himself less frightening to me, and slept without a blanket. He didn't eat. He didn't pressure me to join him in the bed, and he sure didn't try to force me to do anything.

Did they overhaul his personality when he was in stasis, somehow? Take the cold-blooded killer out of him? But it makes no sense. If he's going to be fighting in the arena, wouldn't they want him to be that cold-blooded killer? Was he damaged, then? Is that why they're constantly training him even though he should be a killing machine already?

I feel like I need answers, and the only thing that has them might be more vids.

The thought of watching more bouts turns my stomach, but I said I would, and I suppose I have to. So I point at the scientist's little office as we cross the compound, and my guards escort me there.

As I go inside, the scientist is at his desk. He looks up from the multiple data pads he has scattered across his desk, and on screen is what looks like a health profile for one of the other gladiators. He frowns at the sight of me, but gets to his feet, waving away the guards. "I'll call you when she's done." He plucks at the shoulder of my slave shift, careful not to touch me, and leads me into one of the back rooms like I'm a naughty pet. If my entire situation wasn't so sad, it might almost be funny.

It's the same room as yesterday, and the scientist pulls out the old data pad, a sour look on his face as he pulls up the files needed. "I'm told you and Crudden slept apart last night and he's not doing well in training today?"

The fact that we have no privacy shouldn't surprise me, but I bristle anyhow. "So?"

“Your job is to make him compliant,” he says in a crisp, irritated voice. The scientist holds out the data pad for me. “I don’t care if he wants you on your knees all night long. Make him happy.”

Disgusting asshole. I glare at him and snatch the data pad, moving away to sit on one of the empty cots.

“Happy,” the scientist barks again. “Remember that!”

I stare at the data pad, not turning it on until he leaves. Once he finally does, I feel like I can breathe, just a little. I turn on the data pad...and instantly fight nausea the moment Crudden’s cruel face fills the screen. Despite my promise to watch the fight, I raise a hand over the screen, hiding the worst parts while I watch Crudden’s face instead. I can’t shake the feeling that he’s had some sort of personality transplant.

This isn’t my Crudden, and it feels weird and strange to say that, and yet I can’t shake it. Last night should have been a shitshow. I expected him to laugh in my face that I’d figured him out, hold me down, and then rape me or kill me. He did none of those things. Instead, he was visibly distressed that I was upset. He covered me with a blanket.

My unhappiness made him so miserable and distracted that he’s fighting like shit today.

And even in his worst moments, when he attacked the guards that first day, he never had that dangerous, cobra-like look on his face. The one that the vid is zooming in on right now, the one that sends chills down my spine. It’s a gleeful sort of evil, as if he knows he’s causing misery and loves it. I wince as the Crudden on screen moves and a splash of blood hits his face. God. This is just awful. I keep glancing away, waiting for the fight to end, and wish desperately for a fast-forward button.



It's somewhere in the middle of the next fight that things click.

This time, Crudden's fighting a trio of champion gladiators, a nasty looking set of triplets—or clones—that are all dressed in similar armor. They have red skin, but they also have some terrifyingly bizarre features, like serrated teeth and oversized mouths. Crudden is his usual self, but the three attack him fearlessly and one latches onto his hand while the other two distract him, and it's the first time I've seen anyone come close to even injuring him.

It's a messy fight, and by the time it becomes obvious that Crudden's going to win, all four of them are covered in blood from numerous wounds. One of the shark-face brothers lunges in at Crudden again, latching onto his shoulder and clamping down while another goes for his hand once more. This time, Crudden lets out a horrific cry, and rips the head off of the brother on his shoulder and slams it into the one on his hand, who doesn't let go.

The camera zooms in, and I watch in disgust as the shark-face bites off Crudden's smallest finger. Blood goes everywhere again, and I can't get over how much blood is in these damn vids. By the time it's all over, the three brothers are in pieces on the ground, and Crudden stares down at his hand with a feral snarl. He stares at his missing finger, then grabs the severed head of the brother that took it, fishes it out of the mouth, and flings the finger down on the ground and storms towards the gates.

In a way, I'm relieved. There's no "prize" this time.

The next fight must happen some time after the last, I realize, because when Crudden appears, he holds up one scarred hand as he enters the pit, and I see he's still missing a

finger. The bite's still there on his shoulder, too, and the announcers burble in their alien languages about Crudden's battle scars.

Battle scars.

Oh my god.

I turn the vid off, clutching the data pad to my chest as a flood of realizations hit me.

Crudden—the one out there in the practice arena right now—has all his fingers. How many times have we touched? How many times have we carefully linked fingers, mindful of his claws? I would have noticed a missing finger. I'd have noticed scarring on his hand.

But Crudden isn't really scarred anywhere. His skin is smooth and unbroken. There's no trace of the nasty bite on his shoulder.

It's not him.

Hot relief floods through me at the realization and I choke back a sob. Of course it's not him. They move differently. They act different. I grab the data pad again and turn the vid on, just so I can stare at the other Crudden with sheer relief. It's not him.

Mine must be a clone.

It makes sense. All of it makes sense. Crudden—my Crudden—has no memories of anything before waking up in stasis, something that's frustrated him endlessly. He's charmingly unaware of my body, which doesn't make sense given the other Crudden and his antics. More than anything, he's not openly cruel. He deliberately avoids using his claws and spikes on the other gladiators in training. I've seen the

trainers try to goad him into anger, and he ignores them every time.

That doesn't match the Crudden of the vids.

They're two different people with the same face. Mine must be a clone. An illegal one, I realize, as he doesn't have the bright red skin that marks him as such. Someone sold Lord Sir a bad clone, and he can't fight as Crudden in the upcoming championship.

The thought sends a burst of excitement through me. It's the answer I've been seeking. Crudden won't be killed that way. Sure, they won't be happy he's a clone, but maybe they'll relegate him to training or practice here, and then we can escape.

It's not him. The realization makes me weak with relief. It's not him. It's not.

I have to let the scientist know so they won't send Crudden off to the championship. I race to my feet, the data pad clutched to my chest, and burst into his office.

The scientist sits back with an expression of pure annoyance on his face, his mouth pulled down into a frown. "Don't you humans have manners?"

I ignore it. If there's one thing being a slave has taught me, it's that the blue guys—mesakkah—think very highly of themselves and very little of everyone else. Instead, I hold out the data pad. "I have to show you something. Crudden can't fight in the championship."

His eyes narrow at me. "What do you mean?"

"He's a clone," I babble. "His skin's not red, but he's a clone. Look. I can show you." I hold the pad out, and with my directions, the scientist replays the video of the fight with the

triplets. “Look at the bite,” I say. “Look at his hand. They damaged him, but my Crudden doesn’t have scars. He doesn’t move the same, either. If you watch several of the fights, you’ll see it.”

“I’ve seen all of the fights,” he snaps at me, angry.

“Well, you missed the obvious, then,” I retort. “He’s a clone. We have to tell Lord Sir. He can’t send a clone off to fight.” I try to hide my excitement. This opens up so many new pathways for Crudden. Maybe he can train instead, like some of the older gladiators that no longer fight. Lord Sir’s stable rotates fairly often, but we just need a few more weeks to plan our escape. We need Crudden not to be watched twenty-four seven. If he’s not locked into a cage—and me with him—we can make a break for it.

The scientist stares down at the pad. “You’re right,” he says thoughtfully. “We do have to notify Lord Sir.” He puts a hand on my shoulder and then quickly draws away again, as if he remembers that Crudden doesn’t like other scents. “This is excellent work. I will tell Lord Sir what you discovered. Good job.”

I smile, because everything’s right in my world again.

My Crudden isn’t the monster. He just wears his face.



BEFORE I CAN REJOIN HIM, the scientist speaks with one of Crudden’s trainers and has him pulled into his office for “tests” and “enhancement boosters.” All gladiators deal with that sort of thing, so I’m not surprised. He probably wants to run a few tests of his own before going to Lord Sir with my conclusion, but I know I’m right.

I know they're not the same person, and so I head to the kitchens to prepare a plate of food for him. He didn't eat last night, so he's going to be beyond hungry later today.

He... might also be disappointed, I have to remember. Ever since he awoke, he's been told that he's Crudden, a great gladiator. He's trained brutally for weeks on end, and now he might never get to fight. I can't imagine what that's going to do to him, so I mentally prepare myself to be supportive and loving. Yesterday was a fluke. We're still in this together, and we're going to escape. Even if he's crushed, he'll have to see that it's a temporary setback, and one that's better for our future.

Weird that I'm thinking of "us" and "future" together. But...I can't imagine escaping here and leaving Crudden behind.

As day turns to night, though, and there's still no sign of Crudden, I start to worry. Should I not have said anything to the scientist? It goes against my "flying under the radar" mantra, but I can't let them send Crudden—my Crudden—off to some championship. They're going to expect him to fight at the same level as the other guy. And while my Crudden is swift and lethal and has all the gladiators here sweating bricks, he's not quite the same as the other Crudden.

And I don't want him to die because they think he is.

If they don't send him, Lord Sir will probably be pissed. Maybe he'll sell Crudden off to someone else, and the thought makes me hurt in every part of my soul. Even so...it's not a death sentence, and right now I worry that if he goes to the championship, he won't come back. If he's alive, that's all that matters. I tell myself I did the right thing. I did.

When the door to the cellblock hallway opens up, I hold my breath. Two clones stumble in, one on each side of Crudden, supporting him. The gladiator stumbles with every step, his head hanging forward, and it takes me a moment to realize that he's been heavily drugged. I press my hands to my mouth in horror as they shove him into the antechamber into the cell, and I see the bandages.

There's an enormous bandage over one shoulder, and one over his hand.

"Crudden?" I race forward, running my cuff under the door panel to activate it. He practically falls into the cell atop me, and the clones laugh as they leave. My gladiator rolls onto his back, his face bleary, and his eyes glazed. I touch his cheek. "What happened?"

"Scars," he murmurs. His words are slow, his tongue thick. "My...scars...didn't match."

Oh no.

My worst nightmare has been confirmed. They're not going to pull Crudden from the championship after all. They're just going to maim him to match...and it's my fault. I touch his bandaged hand and he hisses in pain. "Oh god, Crudden. I'm so sorry."

"You...still hate me?" He stares up at me, and his cat-like pupils are so dilated they're enormous, dark circles in his face. "Scared...?"

I shake my head, tears pouring down my face. I shift on the floor, staying down there with him, and I pull his head into my lap, letting him use my legs as a pillow. I know how much he loves it when I run my fingers through his hair—his mane, as he calls it—and I do so now, even as I fight back sobs.

I'm so stupid. So, so stupid. I thought if he was a clone, I'd save him. That they couldn't use him. Instead, I've just played into their plans. I didn't think anyone could be so cruel, but that's me still thinking like a human. I keep forgetting that this universe is harsh and unfriendly.

"I'm so sorry, Crulden," I whisper as I stroke his mane. "I'll make it up to you."

He smiles up at me, as if I'm beautiful. "But you don't hate me."

"Never," I whisper. "We're in this together...as long as you don't hate me."

"Never," he echoes.

I have a feeling he'll change his mind when the drugs wear off, but for now, I just comfort him like I can, and cry silently at what I've done to him.

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## CRULDEN

**I** hate the drugs more than the pain. A gladiator's life is full of enhancement boosters and shots of all kinds, but I don't like the drugs that make me doopey, the ones that make me compliant and dull. They pump me full of those when they take me to the scientist's office, claiming that they're vitamin shots, and by the time I realize what's happened, it's too late.

After that, it's all a haze of jumbled memories. Of Lord Sir and the scientist comparing my health charts. Of them carving into me with knives and rubbing something into the wounds that burns and blisters—so it'll scar, I overhear.

Then, they remove my smallest finger.

It's like something out of a nightmare, and when I return to the cell I share with Mina, I'm barely aware of my surroundings. I only know that Mina's scent is pure joy to me—not a trace of fear in it—and she strokes my mane as the drugs work their way through me.

The pain returns as the drugs ebb, and my mind clears. Dimly, I'm aware that it's morning. Mina should be sliding out of bed to get my meal from the kitchen, as our normal habit.



Except...she's not in bed. She's stayed on the floor with me all night, my head in her lap. Her hands are in my mane, and if I turn toward her, my face would be pressed against her belly.

It's my favorite place in the world to be, and I don't want to change a thing.

"Crudden?" Mina whispers, and I should have known that she would notice I was awake. She notices everything about me. "How do you feel?"

I consider this. Parts of me hurt, but parts of me always hurt. My hand feels like it is on fire, and it still hasn't quite sunk in that I am now missing a finger. My head throbs with the aftermath of the medication, and my mouth is dry. But my senses are full of Mina, so I find that I do not care quite like I should. "I will survive," I say, choosing my words carefully. "Why are you on the floor with me?"

I want to ask more. Why are you suddenly not afraid of me? What changed? Do you pretend not to hate me so I will let my guard down?

To my surprise, Mina begins to weep. "Because they left you on the floor and I couldn't pick you up. It's all my fault, so I stayed with you." Her breath catches and she sobs. "It's all my fault."

I gaze up at her, at her strange human face with the thick, slashing eyebrows and narrow cheeks. She has become so dear to me that I no longer see her as anything but beautiful. Perfection. "Don't cry."

"How can I not?" she says bitterly, as tears roll down her face. "I let my guard down. I was just so happy that you weren't him that I got carried away. I trusted others to have

your best interests at heart and now I've made a mess of everything. And I let them hurt you."

Her voice breaks on the last note, and it takes a moment for my foggy head to soak all of that in. She's crying over me? "What do you mean?"

"It's my fault," she says again. "When I watched your vids again yesterday, I realized that you were different. You have the same face but you move different." Her voice becomes hard and brittle and she blinks rapidly. "I saw Crudden's pinky bitten off in a fight and I realized that you weren't him. That all the horrible things I'd seen were someone else. You just have the same face. I realized you must be a clone, and it all made sense. That's why you don't have memories of a before—there's no before for you. And I thought...I thought..." She breaks, her breath ragged. "I thought if you weren't Crudden, they wouldn't shove you into the championships. It turns out that they mutilated you to match instead."

Ah.

It all makes sense now.

I should be upset to find out that I'm a mere copy of someone, but instead, it feels as if all the pieces of the puzzle have slid into place. The fact that I am a clone makes sense. My disorientation, the lack of memories, the fact that my stamina doesn't seem to be what they want, all of it contributes to the theory. I suspect the only reason I know as much as I do about fighting moves and arena rules is because they somehow forced the information into my head.

So maybe I should be angry that I'm not the real Crudden...but I'm glad. I'm glad because it means I'm not *that* monster. I might be a monster in some ways, but Mina's no longer afraid of me.

In fact, my poor Mina is devastated because she wanted to save me and ended up harming me instead.

I lick my dry lips, thinking about the other clones. “My skin isn’t red.”

“I know. You must be illegal. They’re trying to pass you off as the real thing but...you’re not him.” Her fingers caress my brow. “I should have known it wasn’t you from the start. I’m so sorry, Crudden. I’ll understand if you hate me. I just hope you’ll let me somehow make it up to you.”

“Hate you? Why would I hate you?” I reach up to touch her face with my uninjured hand. Her skin is wet with tears, and she can’t seem to stop crying. I’m humbled that she cares so deeply for me. Has anyone ever cried for me? For this Crudden? I suspect not. “Mina, you are the only good thing in my life.”

She cries harder, turning toward my palm and pressing a kiss there. “We’re going to get out of here,” she promises me fiercely. “Nothing about that has changed. You and I, we’re going to somehow get free and we’ll start over. It’ll just be you and me.”

“How?” I ask. I have no memories of any life but this. I’m not prepared for anything but fighting. But Mina wants us to be free, desperately, and I want to be with Mina. If they let me keep her forever, I think I would stay here forever and be happy. But if Mina goes, I’m going with her.

Mina considers this. “I don’t know yet. We’ll think of something, though.” She touches my face, her fingers tracing the lines of my jaw. “You’re not a monster, though. You’re not him. You’re my Crudden, not that Crudden.”

I like being hers. I like that more than anything. “Not Crudden at all.”

She kisses my palm again. “Do you want to be called something else?”

“I like it when you call me yours,” I admit, and her cheeks flush. “What do you want to call me?”

“We’ll think of something,” Mina promises me. “I’m sorry I doubted you.” She looks as if she wants to cry again. “I’m so mad at myself for getting you into this mess.” Her fingers graze over my distorted mouth. “You should hate me.”

“Never,” I murmur, and I wish I could kiss her the way she says humans kiss. Full on mouth-on-mouth. I wish I could show her how much she means to me. How she makes everything better just by smiling at me. I’d give up all my fingers for Mina. I’d give up my life for Mina. She needs to realize that.



THEY LEAVE us alone for the rest of the day, but when Mina returns from the kitchens with the evening meal, she’s got a faint frown of displeasure on her face. “They were going to add a pain medication to your food and a sedative. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel about that, so I made them put it in a separate jar.”

“No sedative,” I say, trying to flex my wounded hand in the bandages. “I don’t like being groggy.”

She gives me a fierce look. “I don’t like you hurting.”

“Then come make me feel better.” I pat the side of the bed. I’ve been in it for most of the day and it’s odd to lie about after

the last few weeks have been so busy. I don't tell Mina that my wounds burn like acid. I vaguely remember Lord Sir mentioning something about coating them with something to ensure that they'd scar. It makes it impossible for me to sleep, and all I want to do is rip the bandages off and claw at the various spots on my body. But I suppose they won't let me do that, either. So I want Mina's company.

My female sets the tray down and climbs into bed next to me. She studies the nasty, covered bite on my shoulder and then moves a little lower, setting her head on my chest. "Tell me if I bother you."

"Never." I can't resist the sight of her, and I put my hand in her soft hair, pleased I can finally touch her without worrying I'm going to stab her somehow. "I like my claws short. It lets me touch you properly."

"I don't like it," Mina says, her fingers playing with the hair low on my belly. Her breath fans over my skin, warm and gentle. "It's another thing I've fucked up. You need every advantage going into your fights. Maybe I should talk to the scientist and see if he can give you something to amplify regrowth—"

"No." I don't want more stimulants.

Mina sighs again, as if I'm being impossible, and her fingertips move over my lower stomach. She's rather close to my cock, and I can't avoid the realization. A dark, terrible thought in my head appears and I wonder how easy it'd be to push her down toward it, to suggest that she pleasure me. But no. Mina has enough people demanding things from her. I won't be one of them if I can help it.

"You know they're going to make you fight," she says in a small voice. "And they're probably going to bet against you."

“Probably.” I can’t think about it right now. If I die, I can’t protect Mina, and somewhere in all this, protecting Mina has become my priority. So I can’t die. I have to win my bouts, even if they’re rigged. “We’ll figure something out.”

She rubs her cheek against my skin. “We will, won’t we?”

“We will,” I promise.

Her hand steals to my cock, stroking my length through the training loincloth, the only clothing they give me now. I harden instantly, an ache of lust roaring through my system. “Can I touch you?” she asks, her voice a whisper. “Or do you hurt too much?”

I want her to touch me more than anything...but tonight, it feels wrong. I want Mina to touch me because she wants to touch me, not because she feels guilty over what happened. If she touches me today, I don’t know which one it is. So I stroke her hair. “Can we just be together like this for tonight?”

“Of course,” she says softly, and presses a kiss to my stomach. “I’m sorry you hurt so much.”

I don’t correct her. I just card my fingers through her soft hair. A few days from now, perhaps, when she’s feeling less responsible, we can touch each other again. For now, I need to make sure Mina wants me - cloned beast and all—and that’s going to take time.



THEY GIVE me a day or so to rest up, and then it’s back to the training pit. It makes Mina unhappy, but I’m not surprised. They don’t care if my hand hurts, or if the wound on my

shoulder burns when sand brushes over the surface. They want me training.

So I train.

Things between Mina and me are different, too. She's in my cell with me at night, at my side when I train, but the easiness between us is gone. It's been replaced by something vaguely uncertain, and when we go to sleep at night, I don't reach for her. I want her to be the one to reach for me. Maybe it's my pride that insists that Mina show she wants me for me and not because she feels guilty, but I need her to reach out.

And she doesn't, which makes things strange between us. I don't know what to think. Mina's not here of her own volition, so I shouldn't be mad or hurt if she doesn't touch me. Yet that's exactly what I am—I'm angry and upset because she hasn't closed the gap between us. She hasn't decided to touch me just because she wants to touch me.

I take it out on those in the ring. I pick fights. I do what I must, because I have promised to cooperate so I can keep Mina.

Lord Sir approves of my newfound bloodthirstiness. "Back in fighting form, I see," he says when he watches from the arena bleachers. "Perhaps all you needed was the right incentive."

Was cutting off my finger and scarring me supposed to be the incentive? I kick sand in his direction, and the trainers come after me with shock-sticks. Worth it, though.

Mina watches my new attitude with frustration, her lips pursed. I know she disapproves, because when I act out, they hurt me, and she doesn't like that. But after seeing me wounded and collapsed on the floor, my pride has taken a hit.

I'm not the ferocious, unstoppable Crudden in the vids. In her eyes, I'm the weak one, so I do my best to show off. I fight longer, and harder, and with more enthusiasm than I have since I started, because I want Mina to notice.

I want Mina to see me as just as deadly as the other Crudden, not the fragile, wounded clone curled up on his cell floor.

If I want to train into the night, they're more than willing to let me.

It's a few days after my scarring, when the sun goes down and one of my trainers is determined to bruise every bit of my hide. We work with wooden staves, though the scientist feels it's a waste of time. "He's Crudden the Ruiner," he says with a dismissive sniff. "They won't give him a staff."

Even so, my trainer is thorough and wants me to have practice with it. I can respect that—and him—so I give it my best shot, even though day flows into night, and the stars come out. The weather cools once the sun is gone, and lights come on all over the compound. It turns the place from a prison into something almost pleasant, with golden lighting making the ferns dance in the shadows. Mina doesn't complain when the lights come on over the pit and the stands, either. She simply continues to sit, watching me with a hint of a frown on her face, like she doesn't understand me.

Maybe she doesn't. It only adds to my foul mood, and when my trainer throws me the staff one more time and indicates I should go another round, I welcome it.

I lift my head, about to suggest that I should take on multiple opponents—just to get my juices flowing—when I scent something odd.



Strangers.

The scents aren't ones I recognize. One of them is mesakkah—like the scientist and Lord Sir, but different. The other is sweeter, richer. Human. And female.

I pause, staring into the shadows. There, hiding along the wall, I see a male mesakkah, holding a club. He's got a female with him, and when he looks me in the eye, he carefully tucks her against him. He's filthy, his clothing torn and muddy, his horns tarnished, and when he glances over at the hangar in the distance, I realize they're breaking in to steal a ship.

Lord Sir doesn't know they're here.

I'm fascinated despite myself. His human is dressed in very little clothing, but she looks as muddy and exhausted as he does. More than that, there's something interesting in her scent. She's...gravid. Pregnant. He's her mate, then. Not like the scientist. Not like Lord Sir. He's with the human female, and judging by the way she clings to him, she's with him, too. There's another behind them, but he's not interesting to me.

I'm interested in that pregnant female. I don't want her, of course. But I think of Mina carrying my child and...I want that. I want that more than anything.

Almost as much as I want to see them escape. I want to see what happens. Because I imagine myself as that protective male, and Mina as the female...and I want them to escape. I want them to get out of here, so I can see if it's possible for us.

So I pause and glance over at Mina. "I need a break."

Mina hops into the ring, a pitcher of the refreshing fruit drink I like in her arms. "About time." Her tone is full of annoyance but the look on her face is worried. "You okay?"

“Let’s hurry it up with the chitchat, all right?” one of the clones says. “We’re missing meal time with all this flirting between the two of you.”

It’s said in a good-natured way. The clones that watch us fight are very into the practice, encouraging me and alternately egging on my enemies. They’re competitive, and talkative, but I normally ignore them. I take the pitcher from Mina, drink, and then lean in toward her. “Stay back.”

Her brows furrow. “What—”

I turn and slam the heavy pitcher into the head of the guard nearest to me. “I don’t like your attitude toward my female,” I roar. I’m picking a fight, and immediately, every clone guard is in the ring, piling onto me. I fight them all, tossing and flinging bodies about with abandon, eager to create a distraction so that other female—the pregnant one—can get away with her mate.

I hope it’s easy for them. I hope this, because I want it to be easy for when Mina and I escape.

“Crudden!” Mina shouts, and I think for a moment that she’s angry I’m hitting the clones. Then, she jumps on the back of one of them, smacking him with her fists. “Don’t you fucking hurt him! Stop it!”

I roar in anger as the guard tries to fling Mina off of him, and dive toward the fool. I’m probably going to get shocked to the next moon and beyond, but it’ll be worth it. I can’t wait to tell Mina about the others.

If they get away, that is. With a furious snarl, I grab the head of the clone closest to me and shove it at the stone lip of the pit.



## MINA

**I**t's all chaos tonight. First, Crudden starts a fight—over me, of all things—and gets all the clones riled up. Then, there's a breakout of some kind. At least, I think it's a breakout. Alarms go off, and everything is thrown into lockdown. My collar lights up and chokes me until I black out, and one by one, I see other slaves dropping, too. We're being disabled so we don't flee, either. The last thing I remember is a clone's boot crunching on the gravel near my head as I slump in the pit...then Crudden carefully cradling me against him.

When I wake up, though, I'm alone. Crudden isn't in the cell with me. In fact, I'm not in cellblock C at all. I'm in the scientist's office—the infirmary, I guess, though he never treats sick people here. Just shoots the glads up with all kinds of drugs. There's a couple of clones in the beds down the hall, but I'm in this private, nicer room by myself, probably because the scientist doesn't know whether to put me with the slaves or not. I'm too important to be shoved in with the ooli but he can't leave me with the clones, either.

Not after Crudden just picked a fight and they're probably pissed at him and looking for revenge. I'd be too easy a target.

I still can't figure out what the fuck was going through Crudden's head when he did that. Why go apeshit and start something after weeks of being on "good" behavior? It's just going to give them an excuse to use against us, something to point at as an example of what happens when we disobey. The fact that he's not in here with me tells me we're being punished somehow...or at least, Crudden is. I suspect they think my punishment is having to spend every moment with him.

A few weeks ago, I'd have agreed. Now, being away from him feels like the punishment.

I get to my feet, wincing at the pops of stiff joints. My neck aches, too, a residual from the collar being activated. That, and my hair's staticky and sticking to my skin. I push it off of my cheeks and head into the scientist's office, looking for someone in charge so they don't think I'm escaping.

The scientist is busy at work behind his desk, a frown on his face. He looks up when I enter and the frown deepens. "About time."

"Sorry I passed out when you guys electrocuted me," I snipe back. "Darn humans." I look around his office, though I know no one else is in here. "Where's Crudden?"

"You're staying here tonight," he says, looking back down at his data pad. "Crudden is being disciplined."

The word sends a wave of fear through my system. "Disciplined how? Are you guys hurting him?"

He looks up in exasperation. "By taking away his favorite toy." He sets down the pad and regards me. "Did you really

think we were going to torture him? When Lord Sir needs him in perfect fighting shape for the championship?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "So he's going to be in the championship?"

The scientist grunts.

"As Crudden, or as a clone?"

He looks up sharply. Glances around. Then he moves past me and shuts the door to his office and leans against it. "If you value your life, you won't bring that up again."

I cross my arms over my chest. His words frighten me, but I'm not about to show him that. "What do you mean?"

"As far as I am concerned, he is Crudden the Ruiner," the scientist hisses in a low voice. "As far as you are concerned, he is Crudden the Ruiner. There is no evidence of cloning. Do you understand me?" When I open my mouth to object, he shakes his head and cuts me off before I can say more. "An unmarked clone trying to pass off as a famous gladiator would be a very bad thing. It would make his owner look bad. It would ruin his investment. An unmarked clone is contraband. If word gets out, Lord Sir will make sure that it is a rumor only. That there is no Crudden clone in his roster. Do you understand me?"

My throat knots up, and not for the first time, I wish I could yank my horrible collar off. "You mean he'll get rid of the evidence," I say dully. "He'll murder him."

"Foolish female," the scientist says. "You can't murder a slave. You're a possession, not a person."

I decide in that moment I hate him. Furiously, feverishly hate. Crudden's not a person to him. He's job security. Fucker.

I hate even more that Crudden's fate is in my hands. If I try to tell anyone the truth about who he is, the scam that Lord Sir is trying to play...they'll kill him.

Now, more than ever, we need to escape.

He opens the door and gives me a sour look. "I have work to do and you're interrupting. You're not to leave this office until you have permission. Until then, you can make yourself busy by cleaning up around here."

I smile sweetly, wondering how many of his office things I can dunk in the toilet before he catches on to me. "Of course. Cleaning's what a slave is good for."

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## CRULDEN

**I** knew they'd punish me for acting out, and so I'm not entirely surprised when I wake up and Mina's not in my cell. I make a lot of noise, letting them know that I'm angry, and the ooli slave that comes to deliver my meal passes on a message from Lord Sir. My pet will be returned to me tomorrow, if I "behave."

I find it interesting that no one arrives to give me this message in person. Indeed, everyone seems to be preoccupied. I can hear Lord Sir making several angry vid connections in his office, and the a'ani aren't full of their usual swagger. They look uncertain.

The male I saw last night must have escaped with his female.

The realization fills me with a curious sort of pleasure. I don't care about the fates of others. I certainly don't care about the a'ani who snipe at me, or the ooli who quake in fear if I look in their direction. I want to destroy Lord Sir and his pet scientist, of course. But caring about others? I care about Mina, that's it.

But I am very interested in that male and his female. She carried his child—it was in her scent. And I replay his protectiveness toward her over and over again. That female fell in love with an alien. Surely he’s ugly to her like I am to Mina? I touch my jaw as I sit alone in my cell, pondering this. The mesakkah look better than I do, though. They have no tusks, and strong, tall builds. My shoulders are hunched with muscle, my face is ugly, and I’m hairy.

Mina would be far better off with a mesakkah...but I’ll rip the throat out of anyone that looks twice at her. She’s mine. Even if it means I have to use trickery to keep her at my side, I’m not letting her go.

I pass a long, lonely night without Mina at my side, and it makes me...listless. I knew it was coming, knew that I’d be punished for “acting out” in my training, but I wanted to see what would happen with the male and his female. There was no time to consider my actions. Without Mina at my side, though, I don’t feel the need to do anything. I don’t eat. I don’t stretch my aching, tight muscles. I don’t destroy everything in my cell, because I know things like that upset Mina.

I don’t bother to get up when the guards arrive in the morning, either. I show them just how little I care by rolling over in bed and presenting them with my back. My collar activates, sending a shockwave through my body, but it’s not strong enough to make me sit up. They pulse it a few more times, and I deliberately ignore them, even though it becomes increasingly difficult.

“If you’re not going to cooperate, maybe we need to try the collar on the female, eh?” One of the a’ani calls into my cell.

I turn and glare at them, getting to my feet.



“Thought so,” the guard says smugly, and taps at the glass. “Up and at ‘em.”

I head toward the door slowly, letting menace permeate my movements. I watch the clone with intention. I’m going to tear him apart, I decide. The moment Mina and I have a chance to get away, I’m going to find this clone and rip him limb from limb for threatening her. I’m going to make it hurt. And I’m going to enjoy it.

“What are you smiling at?” he sneers as I get into the antechamber.

“How much I’m going to enjoy tearing you apart,” I say, giving him a tusked smile. They stay clear of me after that, probably thinking about the guard I tore apart last night in my diversion. I don’t consider them people, these guards. They could be like Mina, sympathetic and understanding. Instead, they take their limited authority and abuse it. They jeer at the gladiators, kick us, and act like bullies. I’d tear all of them apart if I had to, and wouldn’t think twice about it, just like they don’t think twice about kicking sand in my direction when I’m fighting.

Mina’s all that matters.

I straighten up, some of my listlessness leaving me when I see her slim form seated in the stands at the edge of the pit. She has two guards at her side, as always, but she looks the same as she ever does—hair pulled back from her face, dark brows and arresting features in a too-thin face.

She’s beyond beautiful, and gladness curls through me at the sight of her. I want to smile when she beams back at me, but the clones are watching, and I don’t want to show them weakness. My opponent enters the arena, giving an uneasy

look at his trainer. It's one of the thick, unpleasant moden in the stable, and it's obvious he doesn't want to fight me.

That'll just make this easier, then. With a ferocious snarl, I lunge for him.



TRAINING GOES...WELL enough.

I lose myself in the fights, letting adrenaline rush through my system and carry me. I'm fatigued and hungry, but when a new opponent enters the arena, I find a surge of energy I didn't know I had, and I attack. I must run through half of the bout-ready stable before my trainer decides to move to endurance training, and I spend the rest of the day pushing boulders across the compound or jogging laps around the wall. As I do, I notice that the hangar—where Lord Sir keeps his spaceships—is heavily guarded.

They escaped, then. I like that.

After the trainers are done with me, I'm sent to the showers alone, but when I return to my cell a short time later, Mina is there waiting. She's perched on the edge of the bed in her normal slave garb, and a tray laden with food stands upright next to her. She gives me a bright smile as the guards escort me to the antechamber, and that too-bright smile remains until they all leave.

The moment they're gone, Mina's smile turns to gritted teeth. She reaches over and pinches my arm, twisting a hank of hair. "What the fuck, Crudden?" she hisses, showing me a flash of anger. Then she brightens, clearly acting out for whoever might be watching us from afar. "I heard you skipped

breakfast so I got you extra today. Don't you know you're not supposed to skip a meal if you're trying to put on muscle?"

"I don't need more muscle," I grump, but I am hungry.

She picks up an overflowing bowl and promptly shovels half of her portion into mine. "I ate earlier. They kept me at the scientist's offices," she says, her voice normal. "Eat mine. You need your strength."

"But...you like your food." I hesitate. I know Mina loves having the good food the glads get. I don't want to take it from her.

"Yes, but you need your strength." There's an odd note to her voice that tells me there's more she wants to say and feels like she can't. "Eat up."

I do, taking big mouthfuls. There's a chunk of a particular vegetable that Mina likes, and I fish it out with my eating sticks and offer it to her. She automatically leans over and puts her mouth on my sticks, eating, and I freeze, stunned. Her mouth was just on my sticks. She goes back to her bowl, and I quickly shove my sticks into my mouth, hoping to taste her. It just tastes like dinner, though. Disappointing.

Once the food is gone, Mina reaches over and touches my drying mane. Her hand skims down my chest, making my body respond. "Shall I brush your hair for you before bed?"

I nod.

That must be the wrong answer, because Mina frowns ever so slightly in my direction, and then bites her lip, fluttering her lashes. Is she...is something wrong with her face? I squint, confused, as she drags a finger down the front of her slave shift, between her breasts.

“Are you well?” I ask, concerned. “Should I get the scientist?”

Her eyes flash, and then she takes my hand in hers and presses it to her breasts, rubbing them against my knuckles. That has my attention. My cock immediately hardens, my sac tightening. “I just don’t want you displeased with me. I didn’t like being sent away. Can I pleasure you?”

I swallow, suddenly nervous. This...feels like a trick. Mina seems angry, but at times, her actions are seductive. I don’t understand. Why doesn’t she yell at me like she normally does? I never mind that, or her bossiness.

But I am also not going to turn down an offer for her to pleasure me. “Of course.”

“Let’s get under the blankets,” Mina says quickly. “I’m shy.”

We move to the bed and I climb in, moving onto my back. Mina immediately dives under the blanket, settling between my thighs. My cock is harder than the wooden staff I had yesterday, pointing straight up at the ceiling despite the coverings.

Her breath is warm against my skin, and I wish I wasn’t wearing my loincloth. I want to feel her everywhere. I want her hands on my cock. I want her breath on my cock, too. Mina’s fingers tap my thigh. “Pull the blanket over your head so no one can see us talking.”

I do immediately, because I’m helpless under her touch.

Her eyes meet mine as she crouches between my thighs, her hair falling around her face, the blanket falling over us. “I’m hiding under here because they’re watching us like

hawks,” she whispers. “We have to be very careful how we act around one another.”

Oh. I lick my lips. “Is that why...”

“Yes.” She nods quickly. “I figured if they thought we were doing things, they wouldn’t pick up on our voices.”

Hearing this does not ease the ache in my body. Just seeing her perched perfectly between my thighs only makes things worse. “Does this mean you’re not going to pleasure me?”

She blinks, as if it takes her a moment to realize what I’m asking. Her gaze goes to my cock, as if she’s just now aware that I’m straining against the fabric of my loincloth. My face feels hot with embarrassment. I shouldn’t have asked. It’s her right to touch me only if she wants to. I would never demand such a thing from her. She looks up at me again, her pupils dark, her lips parted. “Is...that what you want?”

“I always want that from you,” I admit, voice hoarse with need. “Forget I asked. It’s fine.”

“I should kick you in the face for scaring me like you did,” Mina says, and to my shock, she leans in and rubs her cheek against the bulge of my loincloth, then licks a stripe across it. “But I’m not going to.”

I groan, fisting my hands at my side. “Can...I touch you?”

“I don’t think so,” she says, a playful, husky note in her voice. “You’re going to distract me and I need to tell you a few things while we do this.” She flattens her tongue and drags it over the aching head of my cock, and I swear I feel it through the fabric. I can’t believe she’s doing that to me. I can’t believe she just put her mouth on my loincloth.

I wish it was my skin. I wish that more than anything, even as I can’t tear my gaze away. I can’t believe she’s here, under

the blanket with me, running her mouth over my loincloth as if my ugly form is arousing to her, somehow.

Mina looks up at me, her eyes heavy. “Pay attention,” she whispers. Her hands go to the waistband of my loincloth and she releases the simple auto-fastener that keeps it to my waist. “You’ll listen even if I’m distracting, right?”

My nails dig into the mattress, my nostrils flaring. There’s a hint of her arousal scent floating in the air under the blanket, and it’s making me even harder. She likes doing this. She *wants* to do this.

With me.

“Crudden?”

I stop staring at her mouth for a moment, trying to focus. “Listen,” I say thickly. “Yes.”

“Okay, good.” She smiles sweetly, pulls my loincloth off my hips and tosses it out from under the blanket when I lift my body to help out. Her hands move to my thighs, and then she leans in and gives my cock a slow, obscene lick, from base to tip.

The groan I make is so loud it echoes in the room.

She lets out a huff of amusement, and I feel it all over my skin. The small hairs on my arms prickle, and I know that I’m going to be a panting, foolish mess if this continues...and I want it to continue more than anything. “Your mouth,” I manage. “You...you’re using it on me.”

For a moment, Mina’s confidence falters and I want to kick myself. “Oh. I didn’t think about hygiene rules. I forgot. Should I stop?”

“No,” I bite out quickly, reaching for her head to shove it back down onto my cock. I manage to control myself—barely—and just brush her cheek with my fingertips. “I like it. Please. Keep going.”

She bites her lip and then her small, pink tongue flicks over her lips. “How can I resist when you say please?” She leans over me again, and her hand grasps the base of my cock, and I watch in stunned fascination as she carefully feeds the head into her mouth, closing her lips over it. Oh...that is...

Mina sucks on the tip, her tongue caressing the underside. And there’s pressure, and wet heat, and it’s so good I make an incoherent noise, my hips arching off the mattress. She releases me with a soft *pop* and then flicks her tongue over the tip, and hot pleasure curls up my spine. “Now,” she whispers. “We have to talk.”

“I...don’t mind...you talking.” I’m even able to get a few words out, which surprises me.

She huffs again, amusement in her voice. “I’m sure you don’t.” Her hand grips my shaft again and she slowly, gently, slides my foreskin up and down, using it to create friction on the base of my cock. It feels good, but not as good as her mouth, and I wonder if I’d be a demanding ass if I asked for her lips again. When she speaks, it’s in a low voice, so soft I can barely hear it. “I talked to the scientist today.”

“O-oh?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t try to talk,” Mina says helpfully. “Maybe you just listen.” She moves her hand up, squeezing the underside of my cockhead, her thumb moving over the divot that leaks wet pre-cum all over her skin.

“Listen,” I rasp. “Yes. I can listen.”

The pad of her thumb skates through the wetness in circles, and my hips jerk in response. She leans in and gives my cock another lick, as if licking juice from a particularly ripe melon, and now I'll never be able to eat fruit without thinking of that. Her mouth is fascinatingly, glaringly pink against my gray flesh, and all the while, that messy, wet tongue drags over my cock as if I am the treat she's waited for all day. "No one can know you're a clone," she tells me between licks. "They're going to play you off as the real Crudden, and if anyone even hints otherwise, the scientist said they'll get rid of them."

I had guessed as much when they scarred me and Mina confessed her unwitting part in it. None of this surprises me.

"You have to keep acting like that Crudden." Her mouth is utterly distracting. "We can't let on. Your skin isn't red like the a'ani, which means you're illegal. I didn't think of it at the time but Lord Sir isn't going to want to be caught with an illegal clone. He'll get rid of the evidence. He'll get rid of you." She pauses, worry on her face. "Do you understand?"

I nod. "I'll be careful."

None of this is surprising to me. My life is worth nothing to the scientist or to Lord Sir. I'm only as useful as my winning streak. The moment I lose, I'm dead. Because of my notorious name—a name that isn't even mine—there'll be no regrouping or coming back from a loss. There will just be a brutal, ugly death.

It's another reason why I want to soak up all the moments I have with Mina. Because I know this can't last. I'm not one that's fated for happiness. I'm the monster in the story.

"You'll be careful," Mina says hotly, "because you need to stay alive until we figure out how to get the hell out of here." Her hand tightens on my cock and she gives my shaft an angry



swipe with her tongue. Even when she's mad at me, she's still pleasuring me, and my chest tightens with hunger and need. "You and I are going to get free, somehow, but not if you keep pulling stunts like you did last night. Which is another thing I wanted to ask you about." She strokes my cock, working me with her hand expertly, and I close my eyes in ecstasy. "What the fuck were you thinking with that stunt last night?"

"S-stunt?" Her movements have gotten faster, rougher with her agitation, and I'm close to the edge. My sac tightens, drawing up, and I clench inwardly, trying to hold back so I don't blast her face with my seed. I can't think. All I can focus on is Mina's mouth. Mina's hand. I'm supposed to be listening —

Mina sighs, and her nails scratch up one of my hairy thighs, sending another shudder through my body. "You're useless and it's all my fault." She chuckles and squeezes my cock again. "FYI, it's totally fine for you to come in my mouth."

And before I can ask what "effwhyeye" means, her hot, suctioning mouth is on my cock again. She pulls me deeper, her slippery tongue gliding along the underside of my cock even as her other hand goes to my sac and gently strokes it.

"*Unh .*" The sound rips out of me, fierce and guttural. My hand goes to Mina's soft, soft hair, as she takes me deep and sucks, and sucks, and sucks. I've never felt anything so good, and I can't last. I come with a growl, my body bowing off the bed, and all the while, Mina and her terrible, wonderful mouth keep working me. My seed floods her mouth and I'm dimly aware of the choking cough that she makes before she regroups, her tongue on my skin again as she licks me clean of

my release, lapping up the spatters on my thighs and my belly, her hot little mouth determined and sweet.

Her tongue glides up the muscles of my stomach, and then Mina straddles me, her hot cunt suddenly pressing against my shaft. “I’m gonna ride you for a bit to get off,” she tells me, breathless. “Let me know if that’s a problem.”

As if I’d have a problem with anything she does. I slide a hand to her hip as she rocks over me, her slave gown pulled up around her waist, and her pussy folds envelop my shaft. She works herself along my throbbing length with little snaps of her hips, rocking over me. “Now,” she murmurs, riding me like a goddess under the blanket, “tell me.”

Tell her? When my cock is dragging through her folds and she’s making those little noises? When she’s so wet and fascinating as she rubs up and down my still-turgid length? I watch as the head of my cock peeks through her folds, bumping up against the tuft of curls, and Mina lets out a breathy little gasp.

She puts a hand on my chest, steadying herself as her movements get faster. “Crudden. Scene. Yesterday.”

I’m fascinated as she pants, working herself over me. Using me. She’s incredible, and I love that I get to watch her seize her own pleasure. “Can I touch you like this?”

“As long as you...talk.” Her eyes close and she focuses inward, her lips parting as she rubs up and down, grinding on me.

I remember the little bit that she liked touched—the clit. I carefully reach out and seek it with my thumb, searching through her glossy folds for that spot. I know I find it when Mina clenches tight, her thighs gripping me. I start to rub,

trying to remember what she wants me to talk about. Yesterday.

Ah. Diversion.

I stroke my thumb pad over her clit, and she reaches down and adjusts my hand, indicating I should touch next to it, not directly on it. I love when she shows me what she likes. Her nipples are pricks against the thin fabric of her gown, and they jostle against the material. I want to see them, I realize. I want to shove my cock between them and use her like she's using me, and the thought makes my cock twitch with new life. "I saw strangers," I finally remember to say, too fascinated by the female on top of me. She's moving fast now, and I make my movements faster, too. "A male and a female. And a clone. They were escaping."

Mina jerks over me—at first I think it's surprise, and then I realize she's coming. Warmth floods out from her cunt, and she gets my skin all wet and perfumed with her scent, and I groan in pleasure. Her movements slow and Mina sighs, then drapes herself forward over my chest. "Well," she eventually says. "That was a spectacular failure."

My chest seizes. She didn't like that? "It...was?"

"Yeah. We both suck at multitasking."

Oh. I let out a relieved chuckle. "But you...liked everything else?"

She runs a hand over my pectorals, lazily circling one of my nipples. "Of course I did. I love touching you. I wouldn't be on you like a horn dog if I didn't."

I have no idea what a horn dog is but I am glad of it. "I am sorry I could not focus enough to talk."

“Well, we’re still under the blankets, even though it’s getting a little steamy under here.” She glances up at me and smiles. “We still need to talk.”

We do. She’s not wrong about the steamy, though. Between our heavy breathing and the moisture of our bodies, the air under the blanket feels as thick as the jungle air just before a storm. It reeks of sex and Mina’s body and I love it. I want to drink it in forever. I reach out and run my hand over her back, wanting to touch her like she touches me. To just... hold her.

Mina taps on my chest. “Well? You said they were strangers?”

Right. I was supposed to speak. I forget everything when Mina is around. “I saw a male—a strange mesakkah—and his female. They had someone else with them, but I didn’t see his face. The female was human. Like you. And she was pregnant. I could smell it in her scent. They were escaping this place.”

She goes still against me. “Escaping? How?”

“They were sneaking toward the hangar. I wasn’t sure how they were going to escape, but I wanted to help. I thought they might get caught, so I made a diversion. I think they got away, too, because there have been more guards on me.” Every time I turn around, there are more a’ani faces watching me.

Mina makes a soft noise. “I was wondering about that. Someone stole one of his ships. Lord Sir’s been in a terrible mood. Everyone’s tiptoeing around.” She touches my chest again. “Did you know them, then? Had you seen them before?”

“No. But I thought if they could get away, we could, too. We could watch what they did.”

“Well, yes and no.” She draws circles on my chest, thinking. “They did get away, it seems, but we can’t do what they did. They’re watching the hangar even more closely now than ever before. Not that it matters, because I don’t know how to fly a ship. Do you?”

Disappointment crushes my hopes. “Oh. No. All I know is how to fight.”

“We’ll just have to figure something else out,” Mina says firmly.

“As long as we’re together.” I hold her tight, and I’m glad of my missing claws, because it lets me touch her freely.

Mina pauses and looks up at me. “Actually, that’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about, Crudden.” Her strange, small face is so serious. “If you get the opportunity to leave, you take it. Don’t worry about me. My life’s not in danger like yours is.”

What is she saying? “I’m not going anywhere without you.”

She grabs a handful of my chest hair and pulls, frowning. Her dark brows are one angry line. “You’re not listening to me. I’m not in danger. I’m like a pet he doesn’t want, but he can’t sell me off and he won’t get rid of me. I’m fine. It’s you that’s in danger. If you get a chance to leave, I don’t want you to even think about me, okay? I want you to go. Promise me.” When I say nothing, she tugs harder. “Promise me.”

“No.” I’m not leaving her behind. “We go together or not at all.”

“You can’t escape if you’re dead,” she mutters, and then flicks the blankets back, letting in the cold air.

We’re done talking, it seems.

*OceanofPDF.com*



*Two Weeks Later*

**MINA**

**I** watch from my spot on the bed while Crulden is fitted for an arena costume. An ooli seamstress—one of the many slaves—trembles as she works on fitting the buckles to Crulden’s leather kilt. It’s nothing but straps and metal, the kilt, belted at the waist and covered in sharp, alarming objects that they’ll probably want him to use against someone. Spikes dangle off of each section, and to me it looks more like he’s wearing a cat-o’-nine tails instead of an actual costume. I guess that’s the point, but I don’t like it.

If Crulden can use that stuff, someone can use it against him.

His hands are on his hips and he growls when the female pulls out another spike-laden strap and begins to sew it on to the front.

“Can you not?” I call out, hugging the pillow on the bed to my chest. “She’s just trying to do her job.”

I know he's bothered by the fact that someone else is touching him, but it has to be done. "I can't make your costume," I point out. "And the sooner you let her finish, the sooner she can go."

Crulden just scowls, his tail twitching with impatience.

I don't blame him. Everything feels like a lesson in patience lately. It's been over two weeks since they maimed him, and his scarred hand and shoulder have healed up nicely, even if I do feel sick to my stomach every time I see them, knowing I caused that pain. We're a week out from the championship, and Crulden will be leaving in five days to travel to some remote planet where all the gladiators are being taken for the big spectacle. That means the trainers are pushing them harder than ever, the scientist and Lord Sir are both in our faces, and my anxiety is through the damn roof.

I'm a mess as the championship approaches. Crulden takes it calmly, but all I can think about is that he's not that first Crulden. He's dangerous, but he's not crazy-insane-rabid Crulden, and I worry he's going to die. I look for ways to escape, harder than I ever have before. I take long, winding routes to the kitchen. I make up chores I'm running for Crulden—new clothes, a snack, fresh blankets—and scour the compound looking for ways we can escape.

Ever since the break-in, though, there's nothing. There are more clone guards posted than ever before, and I never see an opportunity. I'm starting to feel like my big, bragging promise to Crulden was nothing more than hot air and I'm going to get him killed.

Watching him get fitted for his arena costume just stresses me out even more. I hug the pillow closer, wishing I could lash out like he did before. We don't want to be separated, though,



so we've both been on our best behavior. I'm constantly at Crudden's side—when I'm not looking for a way for us to escape—and the longer I'm with him, the more upset I become.

I've been so careful the entire time I've been captive. It's been, what, three or four years now since I was stolen from Earth? It's hard to say because all of my days ran together before Crudden came. It was always the same cycle of bullshit—wake up, do chores, keep your nose clean and stay out of sight. There was no room for friendship, or attachment, especially as a slave with no control over my life. Now, though, I've grown attached.

No, more than attached. I'm obsessed with Crudden.

Even now, my fingers itch to touch him. I want to slap the ooli slave's hands away and demand that she not touch my man. I want to grab Crudden by the belt, drag him into bed, and suck his cock until he's writhing under me. I want to hold him down and sit on his face and let him lick me until I can't stand it.

For the last two weeks, we've been all over each other the moment we get a second alone. Hands, tongues, mouths, ears, whatever we can lick, touch, or taste, we do. The moment we're alone, we head for the blanket on the bed, pull it over our bodies, and then pleasure each other until we pass out.

It's always pleasuring, too. Never fucking. I'm pretty sure Crudden would fuck the hell out of me if I asked, but...I never ask, and he lets me lead. If he wonders why we never do more, he doesn't say. He takes what I give him and I make him feel good, and he makes me feel good. I know I'm being selfish in not going all the way with him, and I know absolutely why I'm doing it.

Because if we go all the way, he's going to be my person. I'm going to fall in too deep. I'm going to realize that I'm in love with him, and love never turns out well for slaves. What we have is temporary. If he doesn't get killed in this fight, he'll get killed in the next one. Or the one after. Or Lord Sir will decide his human plaything should go back to his house back on Homeworld, and then we'll be separated forever.

And I can't let myself hurt like that. Being a survivor is a fragile thing. It means protecting yourself, even when all you want to do is grab someone and love them so hard they can't see straight.

Crudden is easy to love, too. Not that I'll allow myself to love him. If I could, though, I'd love his protectiveness, his interest in the world around him. I'd love that he listens to everything I say as if it's vitally important, and how we talk for hours in bed when we're supposed to be sleeping. I'd love how pleasure for him is always something he's a little hesitant to grasp, as if he's not sure he deserves something so good. I love that when I go down on him, I can practically see the stars in his eyes.

But I'm not allowed to love, so all we do is take a little pleasure here and there.

I consider this as the ooli slave finishes up, and Crudden's trainers arrive to take him to the pit for the day's training. "I'll go run to the kitchens to grab something to drink," I tell him, running my fingers over his arm before we head in opposite directions. He heads off, surrounded by a dozen guards, toward the arenas. I head for the compound kitchens, taking the long way and touching my collar to feel if it reacts to the boundaries when I move closer to the walls. Crudden could snap my collar, but I can't do the same for him. Even if we

found a way into the jungle, I don't know how far it is to the next city...or if there's even a city out here. There's no air traffic of any kind, and no gate to the outside jungle. We're very much an island of civilization out here in the wild.

There has to be something, though. I'm not about to give up.

I head into the kitchens, and wrinkle my nose at the smells. Freshly slaughtered meat is everywhere, and it seems like every single slave in the compound is helping prepare food. I head for the cook I normally go to with Crudden's dietary needs, mindful of the overseer, who talks to one of the guards nearby.

"What's going on?" I whisper as the ooli woman hurriedly chops fragrant yellow melon. "Is this all for the glads?" I've noticed that Crudden's food portion has increased recently... and so have the stimulants they've been adding to them.

The woman shakes her head, casting a worried look toward the overseer. "Some for the glads, but company's coming, too. Lord Sir's going to have guests."

Guests? What kind of guests? In all the time that I've been here, Lord Sir has never, ever had guests come and stay. This isn't a good sign. I glance over at the overseer, who seems very chatty with the guard. Is that what they're talking about? I sidle forward, pretending to pick up foodstuffs for a tray. All the while, I move closer to hear what they're saying.

The guard mumbles something, his voice low, and I bite back a surge of frustration.

The overseer laughs. "Stimulants. All stimulants," he says, hooking his fat thumbs into his belt. "They're getting them worked up for the tourney."

“Is that safe?” the guard asks.

“Does it matter?” The overseer chuckles again, as if this is all hilarious. “And it depends on what you’re worried about. Worried they’ll break free and pulp your face? You’re right to be concerned. They’re going to be so jacked up that they won’t come down for weeks. But if you’re worried they’re going to grab the guards and rape them,” he shakes his head. “Lord Sir’s already considered that. Most of the stimulants they take are also laced with something that prevents them from getting an erection. That part of their anatomy won’t work.”

The guard looks unconvinced. “If you think a glad can’t hurt you just because their cocks aren’t in working order, you’re an idiot.”

The overseer grunts. “Not my problem.”

“You sure this stuff works, though?” The a’ani rubs his hairless chin, frowning. “I’ve heard Crudden goes after his female every night. Doesn’t let her sleep because he’s too busy plowing a hole straight through her.”

Ew. I bite back a grimace and move a little closer, shoving fruit onto a tray. I’m not sure I want to hear this, and yet I can’t leave without hearing it first.

The overseer makes a noise of disbelief. “You think they have Crudden on the same stimulants they have everyone else on? You’re a fool. Of course they’re pumping him full of as much as they can. Lord Sir doesn’t care if he wears a furrow into the girl’s cunt as long as he doesn’t kill her, and as long as he wins at the tourney. If anything, they’re going to give him something to make his cock harder,” he continues, all bluster. “You know how the audience loves it when he attacks a prize.”

I fight back the urge to puke all over both of them.

“If I had credits, they’d be on him,” the guard says. “He...” He trails off, and our eyes meet. He gives me a funny look, half revulsion and half pity. The guard clears his throat.

The overseer turns. If he’s surprised to see me, he makes no show of it. Instead he just gestures at the hall. “You need to find the housekeeper, female. She’s looking for you.”

My scathing response dies in my throat. Wait, what? Why is the housekeeper looking for me? She’s the head female slave, and one I rarely ever cross paths with, especially not now that I’m Crulden’s plaything. Maybe it’s about Crulden? With a frown, I head out of the kitchen. All of me wants to smart off to the overseer and his guard buddy, but I’ve been a slave long enough to know that’s a bad idea.

But slaves have a way of getting back at people. I’m totally going to put a few pubes in their food when I take my place back in the kitchens.

Then, I pause, because hot grief rips through me. If I go back to the kitchens, it’s because...nope. Nope. I don’t want to think about it. I shove that thought aside and inwardly brace myself, heading through the labyrinthine tunnels of the slave quarters. There’s an entire compound under the compound, full of ooli and a’ani, and everyone’s rushing around more than usual. There’s a heightened sense of urgency in the faces of the slaves that pass by me, and I remember what the cook said—that Lord Sir will have a guest. Is that why everyone’s freaking out? Or is it because of the upcoming championship, which is less than a week away and feels like a ticking time bomb?

I find the housekeeper—an older ooli female in a long slave shift with bright white sleeves and an equally bright red choker to make her stand apart from the others. She’s in a

linen room, instructing slaves on their mending. When I enter, she makes a worried croaking sound at the sight of me, rushing forward. “Good. There you are. Here. Take this and change. Are you clean? Do you need to bathe?” Her nose wriggles and then she shakes her head. “You smell like sex. Go and bathe, quickly now. Put that on and go find Lord Sir. And hurry.”

I clutch the soft package to my chest, confused. “I need to get back to Crudden. What’s going on?”

The housekeeper shakes her head. “No. None of that. Lord Sir gave me orders that you’re to go to him. He’s got a guest coming—a lord from Homeworld—and he needs his pet on display. Go now, go bathe.” She puts firm, clammy hands on my arms and turns me around. “If you don’t hurry, he’ll have both of our heads.”

The snotty part of me wants to point out that he won’t have my head, since I’m his pet to show off, but I don’t want to get her into trouble just for doing her job. There’s enough worry in her voice to make me hustle into action. I head down to the slave chambers and can’t help but notice how the bathing facilities here are vastly different than the ones that the a’ani and the gladiators use. These are very familiar to me—there’s no fresh-smelling soaps, no soft towels, not even a bare tile floor. Here, the water runs off on slippery rock, and the spouts for the water are rusty and groan when I turn them on. The water is tepid at best, and I wash as quickly as possible, tossing my slave shift into the laundry container before opening the package that the housekeeper gave me.

Inside is...a soft, filmy dress.

I blanch when my callused fingers snag on the silky material. What am I supposed to do with this? It’s pretty

enough, the fabric of the sleeves soft and sheer and glimmering. It changes colors, like a rainbow on a timer, as I watch, going from blue to purple to red and cycling through the spectrum. It's...really nice. Is this a mistake? I put it on, and as the fabric slithers over me, I realize that the dress has no sleeves. It's a shift, and the entire thing is sheer. You can see my nipples and the dark patch between my thighs through the fabric.

Well...fuck. This is a trappy dress for a sexy pet, something I'm not. Something I've never been for Lord Sir.

That's...worrisome.

I wrap one of the coarse towels around the shimmery dress, hiding everything, and head back out to the housekeeper. She frowns at my wet, snarled hair and the towel I have wrapped around me. "Why am I supposed to wear this? Crudden's going to lose his mind."

She shakes her head as if I'm being difficult, and reaches for the towel. We tug-of-war over it for a moment, but when she glares at me, I reluctantly release it. "These are not my orders," she tells me. "It all comes from Lord Sir. You're not to go to Crudden. You're to go to Lord Sir and remain at his side like a good human slave." Her gaze flicks up and down over the dress, then she turns away, dismissing me. "Now, if you've finished with your tantrum, I have dozens of other slaves that need directing so we don't get the lash. Understand?"

I swallow hard. "Understood."

I cross my arms over my chest and head out of the slave quarters to find Lord Sir.

I do my best not to go outside, where Crudden's practicing out in the arena pit, no doubt waiting for me to return. I'm worried that he's going to lose his shit when I don't show up. I'm worried that he's no longer going to be compliant because they're going back on their agreement to let me stay with him, and he'll get himself killed.

I'm also worried about myself. This gown leaves nothing to the imagination. If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck... I don't let my brain finish the statement. The only dick this "duck" is sucking is going to be Crudden's.

I'll stab Lord Sir in the gut before I let him touch me.

When I can't find Lord Sir in any of the connected compounds, I figure he must be in his personal quarters. That means crossing the practice yard in my skimpy outfit, and running into Crudden, who's going to lose his flipping mind. I swallow hard, take a deep breath, and then run my cuff under the door lock to go outside. I'll just have to talk to Crudden. Get him to understand that he can't flip his lid. That we need to play this next part calm and cool.

It's just for show, I tell myself. Hasn't Lord Sir indicated that before? Just for show. He's not interested in me. I'm a pet he can't get rid of, and he's going to show me off to someone else for...some reason.

I head outside, and the muggy air hits me like a slap to the face. It makes my filmy shift cling to my body and only adds to my embarrassment, especially when one or two of the a'ani guards stop in their tracks and stare at me in surprise. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I keep my head held high, even though water is dripping from my hair down my back, making the clingy material stick to my ass. Talk to Crudden, I pep talk myself. Get him to chill. Then see what Lord Sir is up to.



Easy. I can do this.

“*MINA*,” a furious voice snarls, rising above the everyday sounds of practice. The courtyard goes quiet, and all eyes turn toward me.

I trot a little faster, heading for Crudden’s usual practice pit.

He’s there right now and shrugs off the trainer that tries to stop him. Crudden hops the low wall in a quick leap, storming toward me, his gaze on my body. Behind him, additional guards scramble to his side, and I hear the sound of a dozen shock-sticks arming. If Crudden tries anything, they’re going to take him down.

I move to Crudden’s side and he immediately pulls me against him, shielding my body with his bigger one. He snarls over his shoulder as I hunch against him. “*NO ONE LOOK AT HER.*”

“It’s okay,” I say softly. His eyes are flaring with red, and I can tell he’s inches from losing his shit.

“It’s not okay. Why are you dressed like this? You don’t like it.” His nostrils flare, and he’s bristling with anger. “I can tell you don’t like it. And you used a different soap. You...you washed my scent off of you.” He casts another angry look at the guards around us, angling his body so they can’t look at mine. “What’s going on?”

“I went to the kitchens and they told me to find the housekeeper,” I explain quickly. “Lord Sir wants me cleaned and dressed up. I think he has company coming and he’s going to trot me out in front of them.”

“No,” Crudden says automatically, as if we have any control. “You belong to me. They said so.”

“It’s just a little game they’re playing,” I tell him, putting my hand on his sweaty, hairy chest. When did his big, hairy body become so damn sexy? I thought I was into clean-faced, well-groomed men back home, but I love Crudden’s wildness. I love the thick mat of hair on his chest and his big hairy thighs. It’s just part of who he is, and I love his ugly, brutal face because it hides the best, most protective, most vulnerable man underneath. “I need you to listen,” I say softly. “Will you do that? For me?”

His nostrils flare, over and over again, and I can tell he’s trying to get himself under control. There’s still far too much red in his eyes, so I stand calmly in the cradle of his arms, my hand on his chest, and I wait.

When the red leaches from his eyes and his breathing slows, he nods at me. “I’ll listen.”

“Lord Sir has guests coming,” I whisper. “All the slaves are up in arms, preparing all kinds of food, so it must be someone important. I think that’s why I’m supposed to be dressed like this and hang out with him. Remember I’m the pet someone gave him? He’s probably just showing me off as a mark of pride, like one of his stupid vases. Once that’s done, he’ll return me to your side. But that means you have to keep going like nothing has changed, all right? No freaking out, no attacking the guards. We don’t want to give them a reason to separate us again. Understand?”

He grits his teeth, his tusks shifting against his face. “I don’t like it.”

“Oh, baby, I don’t like it either,” I say with a little laugh. “Trust me.”

Crudden’s gaze suddenly pins me. “What did you call me?”

I blink. “Oh. I called you ‘baby.’ It’s a human term of affection. You call your partner that. It’s something soft and sweet between the two of you. A term of endearment.” I run my fingers through his chest hair. “You’re nothing like a baby, trust me.”

“But I am...your baby? In the endearment way? The partner way?”

Licking my lips, I nod. “You’re mine and I’m yours,” I whisper. “We just have to get through a few more days, I promise. Then we’ll...figure something out.” I don’t know what, but something. “Okay, baby?”

His big hand covers mine. It’s slightly sweaty and sandy from his exercises, but I love it. “I like it when you call me that instead of Crudden. It feels like mine, when his name isn’t.”

My heart aches at that. “When we get away from here, we’ll find a new name for you,” I promise. “Until then, we just have to hold on a bit longer.” I keep my voice low, glancing at the nearby guards. “Can you...will you go back to the ring and practice like everything is normal? For me?”

The red flares in his eyes again, but his expression remains calm. “You swear to me you’ll be safe? That no one will hurt you?” His gaze flicks over my clothing again. “This is not what a pet dresses like.”

I know it’s not, but I’m clinging desperately to the hope that it’s all for show. “It’s going to be fine,” I promise him. “Just wait for me to come back, okay?”

Crudden nods reluctantly, and I’m able to breathe again.

“I’ll miss you,” he murmurs. “Can I take it out on them?” He indicates the guards with his chin.

I chuckle. “Anything goes in the ring, but only in the ring.”

“Damn it.” But he picks my hand up and presses it to his mouth, those lips that never close right over his obscene tusks, and gives me the best kiss on the hand that he can.

And I’ll take it, gladly.



LORD SIR IS in an absolutely garbage mood when I find him. He’s in his quarters, his personal servant brushing his long, dark hair for him. He frowns at the sight of me, as if I still don’t pass muster. “Do something with her hair, will you? She looks vile. No one’s going to believe she’s a pampered pet.”

Immediately, the servant—a female with fluffy pale feathers covering her body and a long, slinky gray robe—moves to my side. I’ve seen her around the compound once or twice, but she doesn’t mingle with the rest of us, and I notice there’s no slave collar on her. She parks me onto a stool, grabs a comb, and starts to rip it through my hair. “All is in preparation for Lord va’Rin’s arrival,” the bird-servant says in a sweet voice. I try not to flail as she jerks on a knot, my scalp lighting up in pain. “What else can I do to ease your burden, Lord Sir?”

Lord Sir paces in his room, his delicate gray embroidered robes swirling. Today, he’s got a silver headband over his brow, and it hugs right up against his plated horns. It’s crusted in jewels and the swirly symbol that repeats on the walls and the doors here, which must be his house symbol of some kind. He’s got jewelry on his tail and on his fingers, and something under his robes clinks and tinkles when he walks, which makes me think of jeweled shoes of some kind. “I don’t

understand this,” he mutters. “Remind me what he said in his correspondence?”

The female servant rips at a snarl in my hair, then spritzes something that reeks of flowers on my scalp. The comb glides through after that, for which I’m thankful, even if I do stink and Crulden will hate it. “His missive indicated that he and his mate are visiting an ambassador in the area. They heard you were at your vacation home and wished to pay their respects. I did not detect any hidden messages in what he sent.”

“There has to be a reason,” he gripes. For the first time since I’ve been his slave, Lord Sir looks agitated. “His timing is very suspect, as is the fact that he’s dragging that human creature here.”

“I’m told by my spies in their household that his human mate is pregnant with their third offspring,” the bird servant says calmly. “Perhaps that is why he brings her with him?”

Wait, what? There’s a guy coming with a human wife? I try not to let my surprise show on my face. I thought humans were slaves and playthings. If the lords back on his home planet are anything like Lord Sir, I feel super sorry for that poor sucker that had to marry someone. She was probably coerced. He probably beats the stuffing out of her and rapes her constantly. I clench my jaw and fight back a shudder. Sometimes I forget that I’m one of the lucky ones because Lord Sir mostly forgets I’m around...until now. “So what do you want me to do?” I ask, interrupting. “Is there a reason I’m supposed to be here?”

“You,” Lord Sir snaps, “will be silent unless spoken to.”

The female servant tugs on my hair, and I don’t know if it’s a warning or a punishment, but I get the hint. I shut my mouth and wait.

“Lord va’Rin’s human wife will want company,” Lord Sir finally says. “She was very excited to hear I had a human of my own.” His mouth thins as he looks at me. “I want you to find out what their purpose is in coming here. I want you to be her friend and report back everything to me. Understand?”

I stare at him mulishly. My expression probably tells him what I think of that idea.

Lord Sir studies his nails, picking at a cuticle. His hands probably aren’t rough like mine. They won’t snag on soft fabric. He stares at his fingers thoughtfully and then looks over at me. “I know you have concerns about Crudden’s readiness for the upcoming championship. I, too, have concerns. If you find out useful information and be a good spy, perhaps we’ll delay his debut.” He gives me a thin-lipped smile. “I know how much you value your position as his prized toy. So think on that.”

I can’t tell if that’s bribery or blackmail. I suppose it doesn’t matter. Information in exchange for buying Crudden some safety? I’ll be all over this chick. “What’s her name?” I ask, and when he shoots me another nasty look, I add in, “I should at least know her name if I’m your prized pet.”

“As if I know such things?” Lord Sir asks with a tired voice. “I don’t keep track of all my associates and their abhorrent predilections in bed.”

“Milly,” the bird servant says softly. “Her name is Milly. And he is very fond of her.”

Yeah, I’ll bet. I bet Milly chokes an excellent cock, and that’s where all his fondness comes from. Doesn’t matter. If it helps Crudden, she’s going to be my new best friend.



I WORRY about Crulden all afternoon as I follow behind Lord Sir like a trained dog. He paces all over the compound, barking orders to slaves already stressed out from preparations. Ferns in the gardens are trimmed. The sand in the arena pits is raked fresh. The gladiator barracks are inspected and slaves cleaned and dressed in their finest. New bouts are staged in obvious locations so this new lord can admire Lord Sir's gladiator stable. I keep to Lord Sir's side, hating the way that everyone stares at me in my whisper-thin gown. It snags on everything, too. The path. The ferns we pass by. A guard steps on the long, flowing hem.

I'd kick someone but I don't have shoes to go with this dumb gown.

When the afternoon sun is at its hottest, a silvery speck appears in the sky. The gardeners are sent away and Lord Sir straightens his robes. I obediently stand a few feet behind him with the scientist and a few others, watching as the speck grows larger and the sound of a spaceship fills the skies. It's a sleek little thing with long, long wings and a fat belly, and nothing like I'd pictured it. As Lord Sir steps forward, it lands on the designated spot, and then guards pour out, these in deep blue uniforms edged with pale yellow. I notice that all of them are mesakkah, not a single one with bright red clone skin. Interesting.

A moment later, an austere, regal-looking mesakkah comes down the ramp, his steps precise and perfect. His head is held high and he doesn't wear the trappings and jewelry that Lord Sir does. His robe is pale yellow all over, with black embroidery of various symbols at the hem. His horns are

beautifully polished, but not nearly as fancy as Lord Sir's, as if he doesn't need all that nonsense. He turns his head, and I see long, silky hair that falls all the way down his back, clasped into a tail that rests against his tail. Huh.

He holds a hand out and helps a dainty woman from the ship.

As she comes down the ramp, I try not to stare too hard at this "Milly." It's the first human I've seen for a while, and my first thought is that she's ugly. I've seen aliens faces for too long—her features look impossibly tiny, her skin a pale, freckled gold, and her hair is a sunny orange-red. She wears a flowing dress that matches her husband's robes, belted low on her belly and showing off the bulge of her pregnancy. And she smiles in delight at the sight of Lord Sir's home, her face wreathing in a smile.

"Oh my, it's so warm here," she calls out cheerfully. "Isn't that lovely?" She looks around, smiling, and I could swear her gaze lands on me for a hot moment, then flicks away. "What a beautiful home! Darling, I want a jungle home, too."

"We shall see," Lord va'Rin says in that oh-so-polite tone of his. He holds her hand carefully, as if she's the most delicate creature possible, and I have to admit, they're an odd couple. I get the impression that he's older and doesn't have time for bullshit, and Milly looks very much like she brims with bullshit. Her face is full of eagerness, and I get the impression she's not too bright. Weird, but then again, she probably makes him happy in bed. Maybe this is the alien version of May-December romance, and Milly's a fortune hunter who married her sugar daddy.

And really, if that's the case? Props to her. It's hard out here as a slave. Lord va'Rin isn't treating her like she's just his



whore, though. He's holding her arm delicately and gazing down at her with such obvious affection that it makes me ache deep inside.

"It is an honor to host you," Lord Sir says, coming forward. "Please, let me know what you would like first. A tour of the grounds? Perhaps to enjoy a sparring match amongst my gladiator stable? Refreshments? Or would you prefer to go to your rooms for a time? My home is open to you." He bows, his tone so obviously saccharine and fake I'm surprised no one calls him out on it. I also can't help but notice that he's addressing his comments to the lord alone, ignoring the man's wife.

"My heart?" Lord va'Rin asks, glancing down at Milly purposefully.

"I should love a tour of the grounds," she gushes. "I want to see everything!"

"Charming," Lord Sir says with a thin smile. "Come, then." He gestures that they should follow him and then glances in my direction.

I trot forward like the dutiful little human plaything I am, smiling.

"This is my human." Lord Sir pauses, and then continues. "Her name is Rina." I don't correct him, just keep smiling brightly. Guess I'm Rina now. "I hope you will find her company as amusing as I do."

"I'm sure we will," Milly gushes, smiling over at me. Lord va'Rin just blinks in my direction and turns his austere gaze to Lord Sir, waiting.

I fall in line behind all the others, staying close to the guards as we walk the grounds. I tune out of the tour guide,

because I don't care how much the buildings cost or how long it took for them to have the materials shipped here. It's all babble that has nothing to do with me. Instead, I look for signs of Crudden. He's not in his cell, and when we tour through the gladiator barracks, he's not there, either. It makes me wonder if Lord Sir is hiding him for some reason. Is Lord va'Rin not supposed to know that Lord Sir has him?

I chew on my lip, agitated, as we walk.

An hour or so into the tour, the heat of the jungle grows unbearable. My dress sticks to my body and the hair at my nape is wet with sweat. Milly no longer looks like she's blooming with good health—she just looks tired and overheated.

Her husband notices this too, frowning as our little group moves to sit on the arena benches. Lord Sir has a few of his gladiators out for a sparring match, and while I'm used to the discomfort of the jungle's damp heat, Milly is not. "My mate needs a respite, I'm afraid."

"Of course," Lord Sir says, and snaps his fingers at me. "Come and show Lord va'Rin's mate where their rooms are."

I hope no one notices the weird way he just stressed "mate" as if the word tasted bad in his mouth. I beam at Milly, best friend mode activated. "Of course. Won't you come with me?"

Milly gets to her feet in a swirl of fabric, joining me, and one of Lord va'Rin's guards falls in behind us. "You must love it here," she gushes. "All this greenery and this damp weather. I hear it's wonderful for the skin. Do you find that to be true?"

I hide my callused hands. "Uh, absolutely. I was just telling Lord Sir today how much I like the weather here," I lie.

“We do have some great fruit, though. Very cool and refreshing. Some of the melon even tastes a bit like watermelon from back home.”

A wistful look crosses her face. “Really? That’d be lovely.”

I guide her through the compound, avoiding the wing where Crudden’s cell will be. Lord Sir’s guest quarters are in the same hall as his personal quarters, and the air here is cool and refreshing. Their rooms are lovely, the blankets soft and shimmering and nothing like the stuff the slaves are given. “Please let me know if there’s anything else you require, and I’ll make sure it’s brought for you.” It sounds pretty good, even to my own ears, though I feel like I’m playing a role. When servants arrive with a tray full of melon and juices, I indicate they should set it down on a table. The kitchen slave gives me an odd look, but says nothing. “So, did you guys have a nice trip here?” I ask, feeling lame and stupid. “Nice... ride?”

“It was exhausting,” Milly says, sitting dramatically down onto one of the cushioned stools at the table. She flicks a hand at the servants. “You all can go.” After they file out, she picks up a glass of juice and then nods at her guard, who goes to the door, steps out into the hall, and then leaves me alone with Milly. She takes a sip of juice and glances around. Her tone changes to one of dry amusement. “So he pushed you onto me, did he, Rina? Is it one of those ‘all humans know each other’ scenarios?”

I’m too surprised to respond. This isn’t the airheaded, chirpy human that I thought. “Actually it’s Mina.”

She groans. “He’s one of those, huh? I was going to ask if you were fond of each other, but I guess that’s my answer.”

She takes a bite of melon. “How long has he owned you? And do you even want to be owned?”

I blink.

Milly chuckles. “This melon is delightful, by the way. We don’t have any like this back on Risda. Sorry if I come on very strong. I’ve become very passionate about rescuing humans in bad situations ever since I married Varrik. He indulges me far too often, and I figured while we were here, I’d ask about you.” She leans forward, her arms on the table. “So tell me about you. Please. I know I’m being pushy, but I also don’t know how much time we’ll have to speak in private and I want to see if I can help. A lot of human slaves are not treated well by their owners, and I always try to make sure when we visit someone new that they’re happy and content with their lot. If they’re not, I want to help.” She waves a hand. “But if I’m out of line, please tell me so. I’m just trying to look after my fellow human, and like my Varrik tells me, sometimes I get over-enthusiastic.”

The small, frightened part of me isn’t sure if this is an act or not. If I can trust her. The bigger part of me is screaming with joy. This could be our chance. This could be Crudden’s chance. We could escape here together, if Milly will help us. But I remain calm, my face expressionless. “You’re not what I expected.”

She takes another bite of melon, then grins at me. “I know. I put on the ‘dumb human’ act whenever we’re around Homeworlders. My husband’s people are very intelligent, but not when it comes to humans. They think we’re all oversexed idiots, so I play the part and let them talk over me. Works like a charm.” She flutters her lashes at me, a vapid expression on her face. “Sometimes far too well.”

This changes things. I have to decide who to trust in a flash, and it's a gamble. I can trust Milly and hope she's not lying to me, or I can trust what Lord Sir says and spy on Milly and buy Crudden more time.

Desperate, I reach out and grab her hand. "You have to help Crudden get out of here. Please."

Her eyes widen. She puts down her delicate eating sticks and clasps my hands. "That's the gladiator? My husband wanted to come here to take a look at him."

I nod, a knot forming in my throat. "He's a clone. An illegal one. Lord Sir's trying to hide it. He's going to shove him into the games whether he's ready or not, and just bet against him if he's not. I can't let him die." My voice cracks. "Please. I'll do anything."

Milly's eyes are full of sympathy. "You care for him?"

"I love him. He's not like the Crudden in the vids. He's different. I swear to you he's different. They're trying to make him into a monster, but he's not. He fights because they make him. He doesn't want to be here. Neither of us do."

The look on Milly's face is one of determination. "Tell me everything."



AFTER I SPILL my guts with Milly, I'm terrified. I can't stop shaking. I worry I've made a mistake. That I've somehow sold out Crudden—and myself—and Lord Sir will find out. We'll be separated. Torn apart. I'll never see him again. Or worse, he'll be killed. Milly sends me out of her rooms with instructions to find her husband and tell him that she's feeling

ill, so she can talk to him in private. I head out to the arenas, sick at heart, and find the two mesakkah lords. They sit in the bleachers in their heavy robes, seemingly unaffected by the heat save for a few beads of perspiration dotting their skin. Lord Sir seems to be dominating the conversation, with Lord va'Rin looking on and listening with interest.

Crulden is nowhere.

I go to Lord Sir and drop to his feet, hoping I look properly submissive enough. He makes no sound, but I can feel his annoyance in the air as he touches my head like a dog. "What is it...my pet?"

Nice save, asshole, I think to myself. I look up and focus on Lord va'Rin, who seems as unapproachable and remote as Lord Sir. Dear god, I hope I didn't make a mistake in trusting Milly. "Lady va'Rin feels ill and is going to take a nap for the afternoon. She wanted me to tell you."

A faint frown mars Lord va'Rin's elegant features. He turns to Lord Sir. "You'll forgive me if I see to my mate? This newest pregnancy of hers has been difficult." He gets to his feet without waiting for an answer, shaking out his robes and nodding to his guards. "We shall have to save the entertainment for tomorrow, perhaps."

"Of course," Lord Sir says. "Will you still dine with me this evening? My slaves have been working very hard to put on an impressive meal."

"Slaves," Lord va'Rin says. "Are all your staff slaves? How droll." His mouth quirks in a polite smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "We should still join you for dinner, yes."

"Did you wish to bring your human, then?" Lord Sir asks.

“My mate?” Lord va’Rin corrects, his voice delicate and yet lethal. “Yes, I imagine she would still like to eat, as much as anyone else would.” He gives us a wintry smile, nods his head, and leaves.

Lord Sir keeps smiling until va’Rin is gone, and then grabs me by the arm and marches me away with him. “What did you learn?” he asks in a silky voice.

Shit. Right. “There’s no melon on their planet? She likes our melon.”

He gives me a scathing look. “Did they say why they’re here? Why they’re visiting now?”

I shake my head. “I promise, all we talked about was melon and...shoes.” That sounds appropriately girly. “She wondered why I didn’t have shoes.”

“Because it’d be a waste of credits, of course. And if you had shoes, you might get it in your head to run away.” The smile he gives me is ugly. “But you won’t leave without Crudden, will you? You’ve grown fond of him. Humans really will put their mouths on anything.” He shakes his head. “Revolted.”

I clench my jaw. “I’ll see what else I can find out,” I lie. “But she’s kind of...stupid.”

“I noticed.” He flicks a bit of sand off his sleeve. “I have no idea what Lord va’Rin is thinking, actually marrying that creature. Keeping a human is common, but marrying one? Might as well marry an avian, or a feline.”

I say nothing to that.

He quizzes me for a bit longer on Milly—what did she look at, what did she eat, what did she comment on about the room—and then I’m sent off. He wants me “out of his sight”

for a few hours until dinner, but I think he's forgotten I don't have anywhere to go. My bed in the slave quarters has been confiscated...not that I want to go back there. I know exactly what I want to do with my "spare" time.

I head for cellblock C, and when I see Crudden seated on the edge of his bed, my heart leaps in my throat. He looks so damn dejected that it hurts me. His shoulders are slumped, his big body listless. He doesn't look up when I approach down the hall, either. I must not smell like me, I realize—the hair stuff's flowery scent is a little overwhelming. I move to one of the windows and tap gently on the glass to get his attention.

"Mina!" His growl of surprise makes my system flood with pleasure. I smile at him as he jumps to his feet, and then I move toward the antechamber, swiping my cuff so I can get in and hold him—touch him—for a while. There's a guard down the hall, but I ignore him.

My cuff doesn't work, though. I scan it twice, and then when it keeps buzzing a decline, I slam my fist against the door pad. "They won't let me in to see you."

He puts a hand to the glass. I hate the wariness in his eyes. I hate that there's fear there—not for himself, but for me. "When do you come back?"

"I don't know." I press my hands to the glass, wanting to touch him so badly I ache. "I miss you."

His mouth curves in an almost smile. "You just saw me this morning."

"It doesn't matter. I still miss you. I hate this. I hate all of it." I want to tell him about my conversation with Milly, but I don't dare. We can't have privacy. Everything I say to him has to be spoken loudly to get through the glass, and there's no



way I'm blurring the plans out. "I just wanted to see you." I give him a hesitant smile. "No matter what happens, play along, okay? Don't attack. There's too much at stake."

"If they keep you from me," he warns, a dangerous look on his face.

"If they keep me from you, they're not going to have any reason to put us back together if you attack the guards," I point out, glancing at the a'ani down the hall. "Just...hang on for a little longer, okay?"

"Did he touch you?" Crudden demands. "I can't make out your scent." His fingernails score against the glass, and even though they're blunted, I hear the screech of glass underneath them.

I shake my head. "I'm fine. No one touches me but you."

His nostrils flare, but he seems to accept this. "No one but me."

And because I'm feeling lonely and desperate and worried, I need more. I need to show him how I feel. I want to hold him and bury his face against my breasts. I want to stroke his mane and reassure him that everything will be all right. That we'll be together. That no one's going to tear us apart now that we've found each other.

But this fucking glass is separating us, and they've deactivated my cuff as if that's going to keep us apart. An idea flicks through my head, and I grab my skirt and lift it up. Lord Sir thinks I'm a disgusting human? I'll show him how disgusting I am...and I'll show Crudden how much I care for him.

Crudden's eyes narrow as I hike my filmy skirts up to my waist. "What are you doing?"

“Showing you a little something that’s just for you,” I say, breathless. I slide a hand between my legs and start to touch myself like a damn heathen. I circle my clit with gentle fingers, until I’m wet and aching, and I keep going, putting on a show for my man. Crudden watches as I finger myself, my chin lifted in defiance. They think they can keep us apart? They don’t fucking know us.

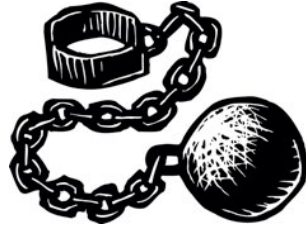
They think we shouldn’t touch? That because he’s some monster in their eyes that I shouldn’t want him?

I show them just how much I want him. Just how wet he makes me, all from a glance. And I know they’re watching. I know there’s cameras logging this. I know the guard at the end of the hall is watching. I know all of it’s going to be reported back to Lord Sir.

When I come, I bite back a moan, because only Crudden gets to hear my sounds. I drag my fingers through my wetness one more time, and then smear it on the glass so he can scent it. “That’s for you,” I tell him. “No one else.”

I don’t care who saw. Let them look. Let them all fucking look.

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## MINA

**I** ‘m in a slightly better mood by the time I head to dinner. They’re keeping me and Crulden apart, but I feel like I’ve established how I feel about such things—and Crulden knows how I feel about him. Lord Sir does his best to hide the disgusted look on his face when I move to his side, and I’m pretty sure I reek of pussy.

Dinner is a weird affair. Milly and her husband sit on one side of the table, Lord Sir on the other. Milly’s face is the pouty look of a bored housewife, and Lord va’Rin slouches in his chair slightly, as if he’s bored by the wealth of dishes being brought out, as well. I’m given a bowl at a side table, behind my owner. Course after course of food is brought in, and I’m not entirely surprised when they only eat a few bites between casual conversation. Then, the plates are cleared away and a new round of delicacies are placed before them, so they can only eat one or two bites all over again.

And I have a bowl of noodles. Because of course.

I don’t care, though. I’m too nervous to eat. I want to watch Milly and her husband to see what they say—if

anything—to Lord Sir about Crudden. My conversation with Milly this afternoon made me hope that they're going to get him out of here, somehow. Milly made it sound as if they've rescued other people, given them a home on Lord va'Rin's personal "vacation" planet, much like this particular moon belongs to Lord Sir. There's just one problem—I have no idea how they're going to accomplish it.

Lord Sir is absolutely not going to give up his prize fighter, not one he's spent so much money on. Not one that he's carefully mutilated so no one will know he's a clone. It's too much money, and if there's one thing I've learned about Lord Sir in my years of being his slave, it's that he's cheap. He's cheap about everything except those stupid crystalline vases in his study. Vases? No cost too great. Staff? Get some cheap slaves and make them do all the work. I watch the ooli slaves scurry around the table, serving and clearing dishes, and notice that both Milly and Lord va'Rin do their best not to look at them. I wonder if it's to hide expressions of distaste or something else.

Actually, Milly's expression is so very careful that I worry I've trusted the wrong person. Normally I don't have trouble scarfing down my food, but today, I can't do more than pick at a few noodles with my eating sticks, my stomach tied in knots. What if she lied to me? What if I gambled on our future and lost? Did I trust her just because she's human and now she's going to fuck me over?

Have I forgotten the first rule of being a slave? Trust no one?

"I've heard that you're going to be bringing your stable to the underground championship," Lord va'Rin says casually, bringing a goblet of fruited wine to his lips. "Is that why

you've spent so much time out here in the wild? Selecting the best fighters for your stable?"

I go still.

Lord Sir doesn't react. He picks at his food, selecting a choice bit and raising it to his lips. Once he's done chewing, he dabs at his mouth with a delicate, embroidered napkin and finally answers. "Are you finally taking interest in the games, Lord va'Rin? I thought you chose not to have a stable of your own."

"I am not interested in having my own teams, but I do like to follow what my fellow Homeworlders are interested in." His smile is cool. "Rumor has it that you have quite the stable."

"I showed you my fighters earlier. Or did you care for another demonstration?"

I poke at my noodles, pretending to eat. The knot in my stomach grows.

"I would like to see all of your fighters, actually," Lord va'Rin says. "One in particular interests me greatly. In fact, I've heard you've recently acquired Crudden the Ruiner."

My tongue feels like it's glued to the roof of my mouth. I try to watch the two lords out of the corner of my eye, but my table is facing away from them. The only thing I can see is the slight flick of Lord Sir's tail, indicating that he's not happy.

"Rumors. Nothing more."

"Then you're not entering him in the championship? Because I've heard that you're prepared to bet quite a bit of credits in this next tourney. I've heard your creditors have readied their accounts and are waiting for a fresh infusion of

funds. I find this fascinating, since everyone on Homeworld knows that the hs'Serr family is mortgaged up to their horns."

He says Lord Sir's name strangely. I dare to sneak a glance over at Milly, but her gaze is downcast and she eats her food, a bored expression on her face, as if all this talk is uninteresting to her. She holds out her cup, not looking up. "More juice."

A slave races to refill it. I give up all pretense of trying not to watch and just stare at the table and its occupants.

There's an uncomfortable pause in the room. Lord Sir finally chuckles, flicking his napkin. "You've been keeping tabs on me, I see."

"I keep tabs on all my friends," Lord va'Rin says, and there's a small smile on his mouth, as if he's daring Lord Sir to say they're not friends at all. Something tells me they're not, but no one's going to admit it.

Lord Sir shrugs, picking up his goblet. "Perhaps I've acquired him. Why does it matter?"

Lord va'Rin straightens, ever so slightly, and his bored slouch disappears, replaced by ramrod-straight posture and an intense look in his eyes. "Because I know he's an illegal clone and I would hate to see you ruin your reputation and your fortune over such a thing."

I'm glad I'm not eating, because I would have choked. My eyes go wide, and Lord Sir's tail lashes so violently a piece of jewelry falls off and clinks to the floor. I scoop it up and hand it to an ooli that comes racing in behind everyone. The room is utterly silent, the tension so thick you can practically feel it.

Lord Sir recovers, his tail slowing, and he gives his head a small shake. "Whoever told you that is feeding you lies, I'm afraid. My Crulden is the real thing. I purchased him from a

very reputable dealer who assured me he's been in stasis for the last five years, since his final match under the ha'Kosor stable."

"A pretty lie, and almost believable," Lord va'Rin says. "Except that I know it is a lie."

"How do you know?" Lord Sir snaps.

"Darling, try the pickled veg," Milly chirps, waving one of her eating sticks at her husband. "It's delicious." She smiles at Lord Sir. "This is a fine table. I can't thank you enough for inviting us."

I think for a moment he's going to snarl at her, but he manages a stiff "Of course."

There's a long pause in which everyone samples the food, and I feel like I'm going to go out of my mind if someone doesn't get the conversation back on track. I feel like I can't breathe. I need someone to speak up. To fucking answer. To—

"How do you know?" Lord Sir says again, his tone easier, more contained. "I am assured that Crulden's sale was above board and I paid quite a few credits to acquire him. I'm positive that whoever told you these lies is simply looking to sabotage my stable."

"I know," Lord va'Rin continues, offering his wife a tidbit from his plate. "Because I recently had a batch of illegally duplicated human and gladiator clones dumped into my lap, and I have a Crulden as well."

I. Can't. Breathe.

There's another Crulden? Lord va'Rin has one? Or is this all made up after the conversation I had with Milly? I shoot her a look, but she sips her juice and picks at her food as if utterly bored by the tense conversation around her.

“Explain yourself,” Lord Sir says, voice sharp.

“Several years prior, my family lost a ship called the *Buoyant Star*. We put a bounty out on it, but it was never located until a month or so ago.” He toys with the rim of his goblet, his expression never changing from that deeply bored look. “When it was returned to us, we found out that pirates had been using the ship and had filled the hold with slaves. Cloned slaves. Well over a hundred of them, and quite a few were of famous gladiators. My Crudden is a clone, and I’m willing to bet that yours is, too.” He lifts his goblet. “I’m going to rehab the poor, unfortunate creatures and set them to work on the fields on my planet, just like I am with the human refugees that have come to me. All life is important, after all.”

And he smiles.

“Which is why we are here. I’m here to ask you to turn over your Crudden so I can bring him into my rehabilitation program, since he’s useless to you.”

I take a deep breath, and it feels like all of the strength has left my body. If this is true...they were here to rescue Crudden all along. He’s going to be saved. They’re going to free him before Lord Sir gets him killed. I want to pass out with sheer relief, but I also don’t want to miss a moment of the conversation.

“Useless?” Lord Sir sputters. “He is not useless to me, and he is not a clone. I don’t know how you’ve come to that conclusion—”

“Crudden the Ruiner was pulled from the roster lists over five years ago and disappeared. Suddenly he reappears mysteriously with you at the same time that I find a clone of him?” Lord va’Rin tsks. “It looks obvious to me, my dear friend. And if you try to place yours in the championship,



they'll check him thoroughly for clone markers in his genetic makeup. I think we both know what that will show."

Lord Sir is utterly silent.

"I am aware that this causes quite a disruption to your stable," Lord va'Rin continues smoothly. "And since this will bring you some distress, I am prepared to give you a large grant of credits for your contribution to my special program. You will be seen as a thoughtful, kind, and benevolent benefactor." He smiles politely. "Which of course you are."

Lord Sir must sense that he's cornered. He drums his fingers on the table, staring at Lord va'Rin. "You think you're very clever, don't you?"

"On the contrary." Lord va'Rin raises his wine goblet. "I'm merely here to help a friend before he embarrasses himself. Think of the trouble it will cause you to present him. If you make a single credit on him and it gets out later that he's an illegal clone? You'll be banned from having a stable at all, and I know you do so love your stables."

His fingers drum on the table again. "Fine. But I have a specific price in mind."

"I am sure you do," Lord va'Rin acknowledges with a nod of his head. "Your credit clerk can speak with mine and hammer out the details."

"Fine." Lord Sir stabs at his food angrily. "You'll forgive me if I have to leave after dinner. I find that pressing duty calls me away."

"Of course," Lord va'Rin replies. "We will cut our visit short. Completely understandable."

"Darling," Milly says, and touches her husband's arm meaningfully.

“Ah yes,” Lord va’Rin says. “Before we depart, I have to ask. My wife has grown very fond of your human and looks to add another to our household. Are you interested in selling her?”

“No,” says Lord Sir flatly. “I’m afraid that’s not part of the deal. She stays with me.”

“But,” Milly begins.

Lord Sir sets down his cutlery. “It is out of the question. You will not denude my household of all my slaves simply because you have me at a disadvantage, and I’m insulted you will even try. She was a gift from Lady dra’Niiron. I would never insult her house by giving her precious gift away.”

Lord va’Rin touches his wife’s sleeve. “Some other time, my heart.”

Milly affects a pout. “Very well.”

And I feel like I’m dying inside all over again. The feeling passes swiftly, though. It’s all right. Even if I can’t get free, I don’t mind as much if Crudden is safe and happy. I love him, and I want him to have a good life...even if it can’t be with me. As long as he’s alive and well, that’s all that matters.

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## CRULDEN

**I** don't see Mina again that night. I'm not entirely surprised because Lord Sir is entertaining guests, and he wants Mina with him. My eyes threaten to go red at the thought of him touching her hair, him brushing a hand over her soft skin. Of him pulling her into his bed—

But Mina can take care of herself. She'd gut Lord Sir if he tried anything.

Unless he held her down...or used her collar on her...

I groan, hating the tortured thoughts that race through my head. I spend all night pacing in my cell, worried that my female is being hurt, that I can't get to her to save her.

Just before dawn, the scientist comes and stands in the hall outside of my cell. He clasps his hands behind his back, his tail swaying. There's no fear in his scent this time, only sadness. He watches me for a time, then sighs. "Goodbye, Crulden. We could have been great together."

What is he talking about?

The scent of gas hits me before I realize what's going on. "What are you doing?" I growl, grabbing the blanket from the bed and ripping a strip of it off. I wind it around my mouth, trying to filter the air, even though I know it's no use. "Where's Mina?"

"Be calm," the scientist says, and his voice is low and sad. "Enjoy your new life."

"Mina!" I growl. "Where's *MINA*?" I slam a fist against the glass partition, over and over again. My hands grow bloody with the force of my hits, and the air grows thick and choking. My limbs get sluggish, even as the cloudy mist infiltrates my senses. It's not enough to send me under, just enough to make me slow.

I fight it, though. I won't let them take me away from Mina. I won't. "*MINA!*" I howl. "*BRING HER BACK. YOU PROMISED.*"

My heart feels like it's being torn out of my chest. I slam my body against the wall, hating that everything feels heavy now. I can't stop. I have to get to her. Have to save her. She needs me.

A black haze covers my eyes, and I know I've got so much of the drug in my system now that going under is just a matter of time. Still, I fight it, even though I can't see straight, even though it takes all of my strength to pick myself up after I slam into the wall. "Mina," I say over and over again. "Mina."

New scents trickle in through my dulled senses. "Someone get her," a voice whispers. "He's going to hurt himself."

I want to tell them that I don't matter. That nothing matters if I can't protect Mina. My Mina. The only one that's ever cared. The only one that's ever understood. The only one that's

ever touched me or smiled at me. The only one that's ever cared if I hurt. The only one I care about.

And then...I smell her. Mina's cool, sweet, perfect scent envelops my senses. I fling myself against the glass once more, desperate to get to her. "MINA!"

"Let me in," I hear her say, though she sounds as if she's coming from far away. They all do. "My cuff doesn't work. Let me go talk to him."

"Are you sure it's safe?" another female asks.

"It's safe," Mina says confidently, her voice a little louder. There's a pause, and then the door to the antechamber opens, and Mina's scent floods my cell. I collapse to the floor, and then her hands are on my mane, stroking my hair. Her fingers brush over my face, and she makes a soft noise at the slack drool coming from my mouth. "They've drugged him. Why are they drugging him?"

"To make sure he's compliant, I imagine," says an erudite voice. "Someone bring an antidote."

Mina slaps someone's hand away when they touch me. "I'll do it. Leave him alone." Her hands move over my arm and then something hard and sharp presses against my skin. "Give him a moment. Everyone stand back so he can get some air."

Her fingers caress my face as time passes, her hands moving over my mane and my neck. She keeps touching me until some of the blackness recedes and I can focus on her face. It's the same sharp, pointed face I'm obsessed with, her eyes rimmed with hints of red as if she's been crying. "Good," she says softly. "You're awake. Hey. Big news—you've been pulled from the tournament." She tilts her head, indicating a

blurry figure behind her. “Lord va’Rin is going to take you away to a place that’s nice and quiet and remote, and no one will harass you or hurt you ever again.”

“But...” I lick my dry lips. “We...I have to fight. That’s part of the agreement.” So I can keep her.

“I know,” Mina says, stroking my face. “The rules have changed, though. This is better than that. They were sending you to die. This way, you get to live.”

“When do we go?” I ask, my thoughts scrambled. What Mina’s telling me is confusing, but if she wants to go, I’ll go. I’ll follow her anywhere.

“Right now.”

Mina helps me to my feet, snapping at the guards that try to enter my cell. She doesn’t want them anywhere near me. I know she’s not strong enough to help me stand, so I do it on my own, using her shoulder for balance. When I’m on my feet, I blink and focus on the people in the hall...and the fact that the antechamber doors are open.

I can walk right out.

“Come on,” Mina says in a low, gentle tone. “Let’s get to the ship.”

A ship. The thought pierces my fogged mind. Yes. A ship. I want to ask if we’re escaping, but I don’t dare say the words aloud.

She remains at my side as we leave the cellblock, stays with me as we cross the yard. Lord Sir is nowhere to be found, and instead of a’ani guards everywhere, there are mesakkah—blue-skinned men in yellow-trimmed uniforms that look at me with curiosity and not malice. It feels...odd, but not unpleasant. Mina would tell me I’m too used to being a

monster. Why don't they look at me as if I am one? It doesn't make sense.

We get to the landing pad, and my mane whips around my face, the wind here wild from the engines of the ship humming and waiting for take-off. A ship. I don't have any memories of being on a ship. "Is this good?" I ask Mina.

"Very good." She pulls away, coming out from under my arm and moves to stand in front of me. "These people are your friends, all right? No matter what happens from here on out, they're here to help you. Remember that." She gives me an intense look. "You'll remember, won't you?"

"If you trust them, I trust them."

She nods. Mina looks as if she wants to say more and then gives me a tight smile. "Good luck."

It seems an odd thing to say, and even odder when she turns to walk away. I stumble after her, my feet heavy. "Wait. Where are you going?" I snag Mina's gown—the flimsy, see-through thing that shows her entire body—and tug on her arm. "Mina."

Mina pulls out of my grasp, her jaw clenched. "Crulden. Just...remember what I said, okay?"

"Where are you going?" I repeat. The drugs are fogging my brain, but this seems wrong. Mina should be at my side, not leaving and heading toward the compound. She should be heading for the ship...right?

Mina shakes her head, sliding out of my grip. "Let go of me, Crulden. Don't be difficult about this."

"I don't understand."

“I can’t go,” she says, and touches her neck, where her slave collar still winks an alert, ready to go off the moment she tries to leave the grounds. “Lord Sir won’t release me.” She nods toward the ship. “You need to leave with them, though.”

“No.” I’m not leaving without Mina. This feels like a joke. I’ve never wanted to escape—what would I escape to? All I’ve ever wanted is her. I reach forward, to snap the collar off her neck.

To my surprise, Mina puts her hand over it protectively. She shakes her head. “You can’t.”

A female steps forward, her hand on her swollen stomach, and it takes me a moment to realize that she’s pregnant, that the strangeness in her scent is because she carries a child. She’s human, like Mina. Like the other pregnant female. She gives me a faint smile and gestures at the ship, all the while, the mesakkah lord behind her goes very, very still. “Please come with us, Crudden. I promise we’ll explain everything on the way to Risda.”

“Not without Mina,” I say again.

“But—” the female begins.

“Not. Without. Mina.” We said we’d get out of here together, and I’m not leaving her behind. I don’t care what it takes. Red begins to seep in behind my eyes. If I have to rip the throats out of everyone here—

Mina moves forward, and to my surprise, she gives me a rough shove, her hands slamming into my gut. “You stupid idiot.” She’s furious, anger flaring in her eyes. “Are you going to give up on your chance at freedom?”

“Yes.”



“Because of me?” She laughs, the sound hard and bitter. “Why? Because you care for me?” Her voice becomes mocking. “Because you looove me?” She shakes her head. “Newsflash, Crudden. I was just using you to get out of my situation. Now that you can’t help me any longer, I don’t need to bother. So quit being such a fucking baby and get on the damn ship.”

I stare at her in shock. The hateful words don’t sound like something she’d say. That’s not the Mina I know. “You don’t...mean that.”

“Oh, I absolutely do,” Mina says, her expression brittle. She gives me another shove, which is ridiculous, considering I’m enormous and she’s so delicate. “You may have feelings for me but I don’t love you, Crudden. You’re just the monster. Remember the story I told you?” Her mouth twists. “No one loves the monster. Now get on the fucking ship and quit making a scene. I’ve got to get back to work.”

She turns and storms away, and I just stare after her.

I feel as if I’ve been punched in the chest. Like someone’s scooped all the air out of my lungs and left me hollowed out.

Mina doesn’t care about me. She was using me. I’m a monster, just like she said...and she doesn’t care about me. I’m useless to her now. I turn away from her, slowly. This doesn’t feel real. I want to go back to my bunk, back to hiding under the blankets with Mina. I’d turn around and go back to my cell on my own if it meant she’d be there, waiting.

But she’s made it clear that I’m no good to her anymore.

The people waiting on me—the mesakkah, the pregnant human, all of them—give me strangely sympathetic looks.

“Come along, Crudden,” the female says, gesturing at the ship. “Won’t you join us? We can explain everything on board.”

And because I have nowhere else to go, I nod. Part of me wants to rage—to tear this female apart, to attack the guards watching me. To take my misery out on everyone around me. But it feels like too much effort. I feel defeated in my spirit, like I have nothing to live for if Mina isn’t with me.

But she wants me to go on the ship with them, so I let them lead me forward.

It isn’t until I’m shown my quarters—real quarters, as if I’m a real person and not a monster—that it starts to sink in. I’m free. I’m not a gladiator. I’m not Lord Sir’s pet attacker. I’m not going to be doing round after round in the training arenas with other gladiators who want to tear a chunk out of my hide, or trainers that want to take their petty grievances out on me.

I look in the mirror in the lavatory and my reflection looks odd. It takes me a moment to realize that it’s because I’m no longer wearing a slave collar. My throat is bare. Mina must have removed it when I was nearly under with the drugs.

It feels...strange.

As strange as leaving without Mina.

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## CRULDEN

**T**he ship is the nicest prison I've ever been in...but it still feels like a prison.

I pace in my quarters back and forth, trying to calm my mind. It's been a day since we've left Lord Sir's jungle moon behind. A day since I was given these quarters, with the softest bed I've ever had, and equally soft blankets. There are fresh clothes—robes that will fit over my hulking form. There are trays of delicious foods sent my way.

I ignore all of it.

I hate everything. I hate all of this. And most of all, I hate myself. I want to hate Mina, too, but I can't, and that makes me angry. She used me. She tricked me with her smiles and her soft touches. She made me think I was special to her.

And...I miss her. I hate that I'm still thinking about her. I hate that I can't sleep in that comfortable bed because I keep thinking Mina should be there with me. I feel like a fool. She thinks I'm a monster and...and I still want her. Still remember her softness and her smile, her delicate scent, and the feel of her hands on my skin.

I don't know what to do with myself now. I've been trained to be a gladiator and yet, I'm told that can't happen. The new lord—Lord va'Rin and his wife Milly—have explained why they have come for me. The male that I let escape with his pregnant female was a friend of theirs. He told them about how I helped him escape, and they wanted to help. They have a clone of Crudden the Ruiner that's come into their possession, and so they knew I must be a clone, too. Normally an illegal clone would be destroyed, but Lord va'Rin feels that's an unfair fate. He's working with his government to create a "reform" school for us. On his home planet, Risda III, I'm going to be educated and given land. I'll be taught to read and to write, and set up with a plot so I can farm or do as I please. I'll be given a new identity, too.

It'll be a fresh start.

I'm...not excited about it. Maybe if Mina was here...but it doesn't matter. She's not the Mina I thought she was, anyhow.

So I pace in my chambers. And pace. And pace. I don't sleep. I don't eat. I just walk back and forth, and I think.

A gentle chime sounds at the door.

I turn and stare at it, waiting for the person to enter. When nothing happens, the intercom in the room buzzes a moment later. "Crudden? It's Milly—Lord va'Rin's wife. May I come in and talk to you?"

I want to shrug that it's their ship, but it's still foreign to me that they are giving me the freedom to say no. To say that I don't want to be disturbed. I can shut them out and they'll leave me alone, and after being a slave...privacy is somehow more bizarre than anything. I want to say no, but Milly is human, and pregnant, and she reminds me of Mina...and I am weak and foolish. "You may enter."

The door slides open a moment later and Milly steps inside. She gives me a gentle smile, her hand skimming over her rounded belly. Really, she doesn't look much like Mina other than they are both human. Milly's hair is a bright orange-red shade and her skin golden from sunlight. She wears a rich, flowing dress belted below her belly, and her figure is round with her child, her face full and kind. Mina is milk-pale with dark, slashing eyebrows. Her face is pointy and anything but kind...and I want nothing more than to look at her again.

Milly leaves the door open, and I scent a guard on the other side. As if I would harm her...but then I think about what Mina told me of the other Crudden's antics. Perhaps the guard is wise. "Hello, Crudden," Milly says brightly. "I heard you haven't been eating. Is everything all right? Is there something in particular you'd prefer to eat? We can talk to the ship's kitchen and make sure that we prepare what you enjoy. We want you to feel like a guest."

"Not hungry," I say, and I sound sulky and pathetic.

"Would you join myself and my husband in the rec room later for some music?" Milly asks. Her smile is kind and maternal. "Lord va'Rin won't speak of anything that makes you uncomfortable. We just want to get to know you better as a person. It'll help us determine how to help you once we get back home."

"No. I want to stay in here."

"And brood over Mina?" she asks, her brows going up.

I scowl in her direction. "You do not understand."

"Oh boy." Milly walks past me and sits down at one of the chairs at the table in the corner. The quarters were obviously designed for those of mesakkah build, because she looks

dwarfed in the chair, and it's too small for me to use. She makes herself comfortable, adjusts her skirts, and gives me a knowing look. "Can I speak freely?"

"Can I stop you?"

"Great. Excellent." Milly clasps her hands on the table. "Are you mad that Mina was left behind? Because if you are, I totally get it. Or are you mad about what she said to you?"

The look on her face is probing and yet sympathetic. I do not know what to say, though. I am not used to people...liking me. "Mina betrayed me," I say finally. "She was not who I thought she was."

Milly straightens. "I thought that was the case. Okay. Great. So now I get to tell you that you're being an idiot."

That is...unexpected. "What did you say?"

"I said that you're an idiot." Milly gives me a sweet smile. "You're letting your feelings get in the way of common sense. You do realize Mina said all that nonsense just to get you on the ship with us?"

I glare at her. Of course I considered such a thing. "She said—"

Milly raises a hand, cutting me off. "She said all kinds of nasty, hurtful things. I know. You were drugged and upset and she was afraid that Lord hs'Serr would change his mind. So she wanted you on our ship as quick as possible. She knew you'd be upset if she couldn't go, so she said those things to ensure that you'd leave with us."

I can feel myself frowning down at her. "How do you know this?"

“Because I’d do the same for my husband,” Milly says softly. “And when I met Mina, I realized she was in love with you. The moment we had a moment alone, she was begging me to save you. She was terrified that Lord hs’Serr was going to get you killed—and I think she was right. Our intel tells us that Lord hs’Serr was placing bets that you’d lose in the championship and then he’d make a great deal of credits by betting against you. Mina was absolutely terrified and her only thought was to get you to safety. She never asked me about herself. She never asked me to help her. She just wanted me to protect you.”

My gut clenches. “She asked about me?”

“She loves you.” Milly continues to smile at me. “She wanted you safe from harm.” At my skeptical look, she makes a gesture with her hand. “Think about your private moments together. Do those line up with how Mina was acting?”

I think about Mina, then. I think about Mina in the shower, touching me with that pleased look on her face. I think about Mina pulling the blankets over her head and putting her mouth on my cock. I think about Mina stroking my hair and holding me after my finger was removed, and how her tears dripped down onto my skin.

I am a fool. I am a dozen times a fool.

“This is worse,” I tell Milly, suddenly agonized. I clench my hand into a fist, wanting to drive it into my own skull. “Because I’ve left Mina behind. We promised each other...we promised we’d escape together. And I have left her—”

She shakes her head, stopping me before I can lose control. “I know. I think Mina knew you’d react badly and that’s why she said what she did. It’s not ideal that we had to leave her behind. I don’t like leaving any human in slavery, ever.” Her

mouth grows firm and hard with determination and her eyes glitter with steely intent. “But Lord hs’Serr was being difficult. He was in a pissy mood because we backed him into a corner to get you out of his hands. We can’t steal her from him because he’s right – she was a gift from Lady dra’Niiron, and no one wants that lady on their bad sides. It would cause a nasty incident and friction between several Houses if we stole her. We had to leave her. It’s not ideal, but it’s temporary. We have a saying back on Earth—we’ve lost the battle, but not the war. Be patient.”

Patient.

I have never had to be patient before, ever.

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## CRULDEN

**I**t takes weeks for Lord va'Rin's plan to be enacted.  
They are the best and worst weeks of my life.

I hate the waiting. Hate it. Lord va'Rin reaches out to some of his fellow nobles on Homeworld, enacting some sort of plan to outmaneuver Lord Sir—or Lord hs'Serr, since I've been saying his name wrong all this time—and I'm told that these things take time. That because it involves a trivial matter (a human) that we have to wait for his friends to take the time out of their busy schedules full of parties and social events to answer.

I hate all of them. Well. Almost all of them. Lord va'Rin is different, but I think it's due to his wife more than anything else. I'm forced to wait, and as I wait, I worry over Mina. I can't talk to her. Can't hold her and reassure her that I'll protect her. She's alone, and probably afraid and sad, and it gnaws at me. Tears at my spirit and makes me miserable.

Only the reassurance that this is temporary gets me through the day.

Even so...

There are small joys. Risda III is nothing like Lord hs'Serr's jungle moon. While parts of the planet are less hospitable, the area we are in is green and growing, full of trees and fields lined with crops. There's a small community that has sprung up to take care of the needs of the human refugees that have been flooding into the planet. Lord va'Rin and his wife tell me they initially wanted to house only a few humans to give them a fresh start, but more reached out, and they found they could not refuse. Over time, Port has grown to house several hundred humans, along with merchants and a few members of Homeworld's militia, since the quiet settlement has started to attract other unsavory types looking to settle down, as well.

For the first few days, I don't know what to do with myself. I watch as people move around the small town, most of them human and female. Some have a mate with them, always of a different race (sometimes mesakkah, sometimes praxiiian, sometimes something else). Some have children. Some are alone. No one is followed by guards with shocksticks, waiting to keep them in line. No one wears a slave collar.

They just...go where they like.

It takes me a while to realize I could, too. That I could leave my room in Port's temporary housing quarters, walk out of the town and...simply keep walking. No one would stop me. As long as I don't hurt anyone else, I'm free. I can sleep out in the open for the rest of my days, breathing in fresh air and lying on soft grass. I didn't know I wanted it until now, and I find I spend a lot of time outdoors, just because I can sit in the sunlight and simply...be.

I thought Lord va'Rin would keep me under close guard because I'm a dangerous monster. He doesn't, though. In fact, I'm given no guards at all. At first I think they're stupid. They know I'm a clone of Crudden the Ruiner, the most dangerous, most brutal gladiator of our time. I saw a few vids of his fights when I first arrived, just to see, and I couldn't stomach the sight of them. He hurt people just to hurt them. Not just the other gladiators, either—bystanders, his owner, his prizes. There's a dark rage in his eyes that makes me realize that even though we share a face, we're not the same.

I'd fought and attacked and mauled my guards because it was expected of me. Everyone had treated me like they expected me to be dangerous and lethal, and maybe in my newly awakened clone mind, there was some vague Crudden-memory that told me this was what was supposed to happen. But now that I'm out of that environment, now that I have choices, I'm not interested in attacking anyone just for the sake of hurting them.

They just want to be left alone, like me. They want to spend their time with a mate, or sitting in the sun.

And I want that more than anything, so I leave everyone alone.

In the first few weeks, I have a hard time filling my days. It's difficult to sit and wait to hear from Lord va'Rin, to know that my Mina's freedom waits on the whim of some spoiled mesakkah. But I have no choice, so when Lady va'Rin gently suggests I utilize the time to learn things, I do so. At first, I go to a class where an old mesakkah male is teaching the locals how to read and write in Homeworld script. I am the only male in the class, though. Everyone else is human and female, and some look at me in wary fear. I don't like that, so I leave. It

feels disloyal, anyhow. If I am to learn to read and write, I want to do so with Mina, so we can learn together.

I offer to help out at Lord and Lady va'Rin's estate, since I don't know what to do with myself. I don't have any applicable skills other than hurting people, but I don't want to train with the guards, either. They look at me with wariness, my tusked face reminding them of Crulden the Ruiner. I don't like that, either. I'll never be able to relax if everyone sees me as Crulden for the rest of my days.

So I talk to Milly. She takes me into Port and introduces me to a mated pair of human females who tailor clothing to special sizes. They normally deal with humans, but I'm not built like humans. They like the challenge, though, and end up making me plain, well-fitting clothing. Tunics with cloth belts and plain, baggy trou. Jumpsuits for working in the field. Clothing that looks soft and comfortable and loose and hides my muscle-covered form.

One of the females discreetly suggests I cut my mane. It will change my appearance, she tells me. It will pull me further away from looking like Crulden the Ruiner. At first I balk, because some of my best memories of Mina are her fingers running through my mane...but I want to be my own person, too.

So I let them shear my head and neck and jaw, until the only hair left upon my head is above my ears, and even that is short and stubbled. They show me how to lotion my shaved skin to keep it soft—something that makes me snort with amusement—and give me a shaver so I can do it on my own. I hate it at first, because my neck is bare, my throat is bare, and all I can think about is Mina's soft hands buried in my mane as she sighs under me.

But after a few days, I start to like it. No one stops to stare at me in the streets with fear. My shaggy head is much cooler, too, and my neck no longer feels sweaty constantly.

After this, I want to make more changes. I go to Milly and ask her how I get my hated tusks removed. She has a dental surgeon flown in from a neighboring station, and a week later, my tusks are gone, and for the first time, I can close my lips entirely. I no longer have to constantly wet my tongue to keep it from feeling like sandpaper. I can smile like a normal being.

And when people see me on the streets, they no longer see Crudden. They see a strange alien—a splice—but they do not see a monster. I take on a different name, too. I want a name to go with Mina's and I ask Milly about it. She knows of the story—Dracula—and suggests the name Jonathan, since that is the character Mina's husband. I use it, but it doesn't fit me. Maybe in time, it will.

Days pass. I think of Mina and all the things I want to tell her about as I settle into my new life in Port. Lord va'Rin and Milly have offered to set me up on a farm, but I don't want to make decisions without Mina. I want to wait for her. So I help out where I can, and I meet people.

I even find a job I enjoy. On Lord va'Rin's land, he has an elderly human female named Doris that practices what she calls "animal husbandry." Most of the initial meat-stock are cloned from tubes, but once a farm is established, the idea is to breed more meat-stock and to become self-sustaining and profitable. Homeworld mesakkah are primarily not meat-eaters, I'm told, but they cater to the rest of the galaxy, who loves to eat meat. The human farmers are inexperienced with caring for their animals, however, and so Doris goes on a great many "house calls" to visit and help with ailing animals. One

day, Doris needed a strong pair of hands and took me with her, and that afternoon, I pulled a breech calf out of its mother's body. I held the gooey, disgusting thing against my chest as it bled, and my world changed.

I helped something come to life.

After that, I sought out Doris constantly. If she went on a house call, I wanted to go. I accompanied her everywhere, as bodyguard and assistant, since Doris was older and she'd been robbed twice by refugees posing as farmers. The militia in Port was well-meaning but overtaxed, and the human settlers generally mistrustful of outside help. My hulking form scared off anyone thinking to harass Doris, and in turn, she took me on as an assistant, teaching me what to look for in sick animals, how to help one through birth, and how to tend to them.

Working with animals felt good and right. It helped pass the time and made the days go by quickly.

At night, though, I made marks on the wall in my room, counting the days I'd been without Mina.

*I'm being patient* , I tell her each night before bed. *Please wait for me* .

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## C RULDEN

I wipe my hands clean of birthing gunk as Doris’s old data-pad chirps with an incoming message. Behind me, the meat-stock—Doris calls them *cows*—lick the new baby clean, the small herd surrounding it in the field to protect it from predators. I smile at the sight, because it feels like a job well done. I never get tired of helping the babies into the world.

Doris’s pad chirps again, and I look over at her. She peers into the eye of another one of the cattle, shining a tiny hand-sized light into the pupil. The pad chirps a third time. “You going to answer that?” I ask.

“Don’t rush me,” Doris snaps.

I don’t mind her surly attitude. I actually find it refreshing. I’d rather people grump and snarl at me than quiver in fear. Doris weighs less than Mina, her hair a steely gray and her face lined with wrinkles, but she is absolutely fearless and doesn’t like to be told what to do. I wait for her to finish examining the cow, trying to ignore the chirping of her data-pad.

She finally harrumphs, flicking her light off and shoving it into her pocket. “Fools keep letting their cattle wander into the

crop fields. How many times have I told Betty and that fool alien of hers that if her meat-stock get into the herbs, they're going to get all loopy?" She shakes her head. "No wonder they're having trouble giving birth. Damn things are high as kites." Doris rolls her eyes. "I'm going to have to talk to them again. And again. Like talking to fucking brick walls sometimes."

The pad chirps again.

"Everyone thinks they're a fucking farmer," Doris mutters, finally picking up her data-pad. "What?" she bellows into it.

"This is Milly va'Rin," a sweet voice comes over the comm. "Is Jonathan with you?"

It takes me a moment to realize she refers to me. I'm Jonathan.

At my side, Doris scowls in my direction. "Don't you have a data-pad of your own, you big idiot?"

"Not yet." It's on my list of things to do.

"Well please, let me be your answering service," Doris says sarcastically. She holds the pad out to me.

I just grin, because she's all bark and no bite. Doris marches off toward Betty's homestead, no doubt to yell at her for letting her cattle wander in the fields and eat her crops. I gingerly hold the small data-pad, trying to figure out which button I have to push to get it to work. "Um. Milly?" I call out, hoping she can pick up my voice. "Is this working?"

"It is." Milly's voice is calm. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to ask you to come by the estate when you're done with your work. We've heard back from Lady dra'Niiron. She's crafted a letter for us to take to Lord hs'Serr to try to win Mina away from him. Whenever you're ready, of course."



My mouth goes dry.

Mina. It's finally time to save Mina.



DORIS GRIPES ABOUT FUEL, but drives her air-sled back to Port at top speed. She knows how urgent this is to me. Knows that Mina is everything to me. “Go save your woman,” she grumbles as she veers into the small settlement. “And if you two need a place to stay when you get here, you can come live with me for a while. I’ve got the space.”

It’s an unexpected kindness. “Thank you.”

She gives me a cross look. “Whatever. Just go save the day or something. Be a hero. Get out of here.”

A hero. Me. The idea is laughable. She doesn’t know I’m the bad guy in all this.

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## CRULDEN

**I** fidget in my seat as Lord va'Rin's delicate ship lands inside Lord hs'Serr's familiar compound. The thick, green jungle spread out beyond the wall reminds me of before, and my thoughts fill with Mina.

Not for the first time, I worry over my shaved mane and my missing tusks. Will she remember me? Will she like the changes? Or will she find that I'm too different now? It's been over two months since I've seen her, and every day has been both joy and agony. Traveling back here has taken two long days, and I feel useless and twitchy.

Lord va'Rin and Milly have a plan, one that I'm not involved in at all. I want to do something—anything—to help save Mina, but if this works, I'll grab her into my arms and hold her close and thank all the stars in the sky that she's free.

“Remember,” Milly says in that soft, bright voice of hers. “Follow Lord va'Rin's lead. We already know Lord hs'Serr is going to be difficult. He's going to feel outmaneuvered and slighted. We'll have to resort to flattery and to make it seem like we're doing everyone a favor. Understand?”

I nod, my nostrils flaring. The ship's barely landed and I'm already sniffing the air, trying to draw in Mina's scent. Have they sent her back to the kitchens to work? Or is she still being forced to follow after Lord hs'Serr? Worse...are they forcing her to serve another gladiator?

Has she fallen in love with him?

The thought eats at me. I know Mina has to do whatever she must to survive. As long as she loves me, nothing else matters.

Milly and Lord va'Rin exit the shuttle first, dressed in their elegant house robes. Behind them file three servants, dressed in va'Rin livery and carrying enormous boxes of gifts. In exchange for forcing Lord hs'Serr's hand, Milly and Lord va'Rin are going to entice him with three of the crystalline vases he loves so much. They're gifts to soothe his spirit and to smooth things over. I just hope it works. Mina's worth more than a thousand vases.

I follow behind the guards, keeping out of sight as much as possible so Lord hs'Serr doesn't notice me. I wear one of the livery uniforms myself, and my skin is a deeper, richer gray from being in the sunlight all day long. With my head shorn and my tusks removed, I almost wonder if he'll recognize me. I rub the spot where my missing finger once was.

I wonder if Mina will recognize me.

To my disappointment, there's no scent of Mina on the wind. She doesn't appear with Lord hs'Serr, either. He arrives with his clone retinue to greet Lord and Lady va'Rin, and it's obvious that things are stilted between them. There's no invitation to dinner, no invitation to stay and be his guest. He meets them at the landing pad and gives our group a sulky look.

“To what do I owe this honor?” Lord hs’Serr asks, his expression distinctly unwelcoming.

“You received our missive from Lady dra’Niiron?” Lord va’Rin replies, stepping forward. “What is your answer?”

Milly has explained everything to me. Lady dra’Niiron is a very influential noble back on Homeworld, and the one that gifted Lord hs’Serr with Mina in the first place. She is also the noble that gifted Milly to va’Rin, once upon a time. Lord va’Rin asked her to write a letter on his behalf, explaining that Mina was in love with me and, as a romantic gesture, that we weren’t to be parted.

I’m told that Lady dra’Niiron’s first reply was exceedingly unpleasant, but with the appropriate bribery, she’s followed through and written a gushing missive to Lord hs’Serr asking him to give up Mina so we can be together. The letter was sent while we were in flight, heading for Lord hs’Serr’s vacation home, so he could have time to digest it. The presents are a gift to soothe ruffled feathers and cost ten times more than Mina’s worth, so Milly is hopeful that it will go over well.

But...I can’t smell Mina anywhere. Her scent’s not in the compound, not on the air, and my senses prick with a feeling of dread.

“You have outmaneuvered me well,” Lord hs’Serr says in a dry voice. “To think, if you but applied such focused efforts to our government, the mesakkah would rule all of space.”

“I have no interest in ruling all of space,” Lord va’Rin says. “I merely wish to settle down with my family and enjoy our lives. And I would like the same for your slave. Will you give her over? I realize this is trying for you since *Rina*”—he stresses the name—“is so very beloved. But we hope that the gifts of these vases will make up for the loss.”

“I would gladly do so,” Lord hs’Serr says. “Alas, I’m afraid it’s too late.”

My skin grows cold. I shove to the front of the group, past the guards, past the gift-bearers. Hot rage blisters through me and I can feel my eyes turning red. “Where is she?” I snarl. “Where is Mina?”

Lord hs’Serr is immediately surrounded by guards, and the sound of a dozen shock-sticks humming to life fills the air. He remains expressionless, giving me a cool look. “Call off your pet monster, va’Rin.”

“Jonathan.”

“Where is she?” I will not be stopped.

“Jonathan,” Milly echoes, putting a hand on my arm. I want to fling it off, I want to rip the heads off of every single one of those smug, grinning clones. “Calm yourself,” she whispers. “Remember.”

“Where is the human?” Lord va’Rin asks. “She was here two days ago, surely, when our letter was sent. It will be very bad form for you to sell her out from under our noses.”

“Oh, she has not been sold,” Lord hs’Serr smirks. He flicks at one of his embroidered cuffs, paying it great attention as my temper grows and grows. Red bleeds through my vision, coloring his robes scarlet.

I’m going to kill him.

And I’m going to make it hurt.

“Where is she?” Lord va’Rin demands. “I will not ask again.”

“The female is participating in a training exercise with my gladiator stable,” the noble says, adjusting his robe cuff.

“They’ve been training so well, you know. They had to work hard to fill in the hole in my roster, so this is a treat for them. If they find her, they get to play with her.” He gives us a cold smile. “But if you find what’s left, you can have her.”

With a roar of outrage, I lose control.

My Mina.

They’re hunting her like an animal.

Spikes rip through my skin, shredding my clothes. I storm towards the walls, determined to find her. To save her.

To protect her like I’m supposed to.

Chaos erupts in the courtyard. Distantly, I’m aware of several of the clones rushing forward, jabbing their shock-sticks into me, but I’m so pumped full of adrenaline and anger that I grab the sticks and fling them aside, the shocks doing nothing. “Leave him alone,” I hear distantly—Lord va’Rin. “Let him find her.”

Find her. The words drill through my mind.

Find her.

Bring her home safe.

Kill anyone that gets in my way.

Like the monster that I am, I reach the wall and dig my shorn claws into the stone. A hot, painful shock ripples through my system but I ignore it, climbing the sheer face until I reach the solar panels on top and rip them down. I scale over the top of the wall and thump down onto the other side, utterly mindless except for one thing.

Mina.

Her scent is out here, I realize. Old and distant, and crisscrossed by half a dozen other scents. Other gladiators.

With a feral snarl, I begin to hunt.

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**MINA**

**I** *'m dead. I'm dead. I'm so dead.*

The thought ping-pongs back and forth in my mind as I run, breathless and panting, through the underbrush. I've managed to survive for two days now, running like a wild woman and climbing trees, anything to try and get my scent off the ground. I have no weapons. I have no armor, no nothing but the slave shift on my back and my wits. For two days now, I've lived off of sheer adrenaline, racing away when I had nothing left in the tank, struggling onward even though I want nothing more than to sleep or to hide.

But I know from my experience with Crudden that scents are important to hunters, and so I can't stop. I do everything I can to throw off my scent, rolling in mud and animal scat when I have to, crossing through creek-beds and backtracking over my own trail. I use every trick I've seen on television and read in books, and I know it's not enough. Everything out here is bred to hunt, to track, and to kill. When they're not in gladiator games, they're chasing down humans just like me. I'm not going to be able to outsmart them.



I'm also running out of strength. I haven't eaten in two days and barely drank anything. I've been bitten by so many insects that my face feels swollen and hot. My feet and hands are torn up and blistered from running and climbing, and when the adrenaline of terror wears off, they're going to hurt like hell.

I pause for a moment, to catch my breath. I want to lean against the nearest tree, but I'm afraid I'll leave a scent marker there, so I just crouch low in the dirt and hug my knees, letting exhaustion move over me in a wave. I'm so tired. I just want to lie down and sleep, but that'll be death. I have to keep moving. When they catch me, I want them to at least work up a fucking sweat. I want to make them work for it. I'm not going to die without a fight.

At least Crudden is free. At least he got away.

It's funny. In the initial days of his loss, when they sent me back to the kitchens, I thought it would hurt more. I thought I'd be bitter and unhappy that I'd been left behind. That he got away and I didn't. I kept waiting for the jealousy to kick in, but it never did. I think of him, enjoying life out on some other planet, maybe riding around on a spaceship or sleeping out under the stars and it makes me...happy. I want that for him. I want him to have a life of freedom. And if I can't have it, I'm thrilled that he can.

There's no bitterness in me, only a quiet joy that he's free. I hope he remembers me in a good way, and not how we left one another. I hope he eventually realizes that I said those hurtful things so he'd leave and start a new life. I hope he thinks of me with affection and not anger. I hope—

A twig breaks somewhere in the forest.

Fuck.

Tension ripples down my spine, sending chills through my body. Even though I'm exhausted, I force myself to get up. To start running again.

I have half a day's lead on the six gladiators hunting me. Six brutal beasts who have some of my clothing to track my scent. Six monsters who have been given carte blanche to do as they like with me if they catch me.

When they catch me.

It's going to be ugly, so I'm going to run, and run, until there's nothing left.

I race through the underbrush, my feet skidding on slippery mud, and I look for the next place to run, to hide. The trees here are taller and far more difficult to climb. I need to find a creek, or a river, or something to disguise my scent, my trail—

“Huuuuuumaaaaan,” a voice calls from somewhere behind me, full of mocking laughter and cruelty. “I can smell your fear.”

Gooseflesh breaks out over my skin. My lead is gone. I'm about to die. Frantic, I look around for a weapon of some kind, but there's nothing. I thought the jungle would be teeming with life, but it's only mud and bugs and ferns. I'm fucked.

“Huuuuuumaaaaan,” he calls again, and this time it's coming from my right.

I turn, heart racing, looking for a hiding space. A rock. A club. Something.

The bushes to my right rustle, and I nearly swallow my tongue in fear. I grab a fistful of mud, trembling, and stand straight and tall. If I'm going down, I'm going to do it with dignity, then. Maybe if I get mud in his eyes, it'll piss him off

so much that he kills me quickly. “Come and get me, motherfucker.”

The bushes quake violently, the fronds shivering, and I fight the urge to vomit. Save the puke for when he touches you, Mina, I tell myself. Weaponize it. Make that fucker miserable.

Frozen but defiant, I stand tall even as the bushes give one final shake. There’s a snarl, and then silence.

A looming figure steps out from the shadows. Big. Heavy. Strong. His shoulders are impossibly broad, the outline of his body thick and bulging with muscle. He takes a step forward, and then another.

Another step, and then I can see his face.

I’m...hallucinating.

I stare in stunned surprise as the gladiator moves forward with...Crudden’s face. Is this a trick? He’s deeper gray than my Crudden, and he’s got no mane, just a shock of short, buzzed black hair atop his big head. No tusks, either, but the eyes and the big, brutish, almost feline nose are the same. He’s got the heavy, ugly features that I find so fucking dear...

And he moves like Crudden.

His eyes are red like Crudden’s.

I remain frozen as he approaches, his tattered clothing hanging from his body in strips. He’s spattered in mud and blood, and his nostrils flare as if he’s drinking in my scent.

He stalks toward me, and I hold the mud in my hand higher, trembling.

The stranger wearing Crudden’s face looks down at the mud in my hand. “What’s that going to do?”

He...sounds like Crudden. My resolve crumbles and I burst into tears.

“Mina,” he murmurs. “My Mina...”

He takes a step forward—and someone leaps onto his back from overhead.

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## CRULDEN

**I** ‘ve trained for this.

As I hunt through the jungle, searching for Mina, it feels almost too easy. Her trail is impossible for me to miss. I can tell she’s trying to mask it, but I’d know her scent in a city full of a thousand people, a thousand scents. Once I have it, I can’t lose it—or her.

There are others on her trail, but I dispatch them quickly as I come upon them. A broken neck for one, a quick drowning for another. They fight me—they all fight me—but I’m made of a monster’s genetic material. They’re no match for me. I take out four before I ever get close enough to find her footprints. If they had used this time to run into the jungle and race away to freedom, I wouldn’t care.

But since they’re hunting Mina, they have to die.

I find Mina moments before I find the gladiator mocking her. Stalking her. She’s stopped running, and her scent is so full of fear and weariness that it makes my spikes sprout anew, and fresh red bleeds into my eyes. The gladiator is in the

bushes, waiting to spring on her, and I tear him apart before he gets a chance.

When I emerge and get a good look at Mina, she doesn't believe it's me. I can tell that on her face, on the hope and yearning and sorrow etched into her expressive eyes.

Then, I'm attacked again. I immediately fling him off of my back and pounce onto him. Again, it's too easy. I take him out quickly—a toss to the ground, a foot stomped on his spine, and then I bend him backward until everything snaps and he goes limp. I am a monster, after all.

Once he's dispatched, I turn toward Mina reluctantly. I didn't want her to see that. I didn't want her to see me in my element, acting like the Crudden clone that I am. I don't want her to be afraid of me, to hate me.

Mina sobs and runs forward. Before I can process this, she flings herself into my arms, weeping.

I wrap my arms around her and sink to the ground, my knees weak. "Mina," I groan. "My Mina."

"Crudden. Oh my god. Crudden." She chokes back her tears, running her hands over my face. "You can't be here. They can't bring you back. That's too cruel. You can't—"

"It's okay," I promise her, grasping her frantic hands in my bigger ones. "It's all right, baby. I'm here to get you. That's all."

She goes still. "B-baby?" And then my strong, brave Mina bursts into fresh tears, bawling as she wraps her arms around my neck and holds tightly to me. "I m-m-missed you so much. I love you. I'm so sorry I said those things I didn't mean it I just wanted you to be safe." She flings the words out like they're weapons, determined to hit the target with sheer

volume instead of precision. “I love you and I never meant them I just needed you to go with them even if it meant I had to stay—”

I stroke her hair. It’s filthy and reeks of animal dung, but I don’t care. I’m never letting her go again. “I’m here. It’s all right. I love you, Mina. You’re mine—my mate—and I’m always going to protect you.”

“I love you,” she says again, and her tear-filled eyes are desperate as she searches my face. “You know that, right? I love you. I love you so much.”

And then she breaks all over again.



WE SIT in the ferns while Mina has her breakdown, and I cradle her in my lap and explain everything. Risda. The letter. Lord va’Rin and his wife. Mina doesn’t like to show weakness, so I hold her until her tears dry up and she feels ready to go back. She clings to me, as if terrified I’ll disappear again. “What if we go back and he won’t let me go?” Her jagged, broken nails dig into my skin. “What if he changes his mind?”

“Then I’ll take him out like I did the others,” I vow to her.

“You’d do that for me?”

“Mina, I would do anything for you.”

She reaches up and touches my face, her fingers skimming my mouth. She touches my lip and then draws back. “I’m dirty —”

“I don’t care.” I want her to touch me. I take her hand and put it on my mouth again. “Never stop.”

Mina reaches out and touches my mouth again, her fingers light as feathers over my lips. “Your tusks are gone. I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“I hated them. They made my mouth hurt. And I couldn’t kiss you properly. So I had them removed. I’m not Crudden. I don’t want to be him. I don’t want to be a gladiator. So I... changed a few things.” I’m suddenly uneasy, worried she won’t like the new me. “Is this...all right?”

“What do I call you?” she asks in a low voice.

“Yours,” I say bluntly.

That brings a hint of a smile to her too-thin face. Mina looks awful, her eyes hollow and her mouth almost as pale as her skin. She hasn’t been eating, and she looks as if she’d snap under a gentle breeze. I’m going to take care of her, though. She’ll never struggle again, not while I’m around. Her gaze falls to my mouth and she licks her cracked lips. “I know I’m gross, but I’d really like to kiss you right now.”

She’s “gross”? She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

I cup the back of her “gross” head and lower my mouth to hers. It feels different, kissing her without my tusks. All the impediments to our mouths meeting are gone, and it’s just her soft lips against my harder ones. I kiss her gently, pressing with light, tender nips, until her lips part and she opens up for me. Her tongue darts against mine, and then we’re kissing as if nothing else in the world matters. I groan low in my throat, my tongue stroking against hers as I claim her mouth with deep, intense strokes, needing more and more of her. She makes little whimpers of pleasure in her throat, her hands on my shoulders as I kiss her, over and over again.



Mina. My Mina. For her, I'll be the monster.

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**MINA**

**I** don't draw a breath until we're in the ship and it's in space.

It all feels like a dream. Lord and Lady va'Rin, Lord Sir and his stupid fucking vases, and Crulden, holding me tight and refusing to put me down until we're in his private quarters on the ship. Even then, it doesn't feel real. I'm in shock, I think, and I shake like a damned rabbit even after Crulden closes the door to his quarters and I feel the vibrations of the ship's engines blasting through the floors. He's patient with me, though. Crulden just picks me up and takes me to the shower in his room, strips what's left of my slave shift off of my body, and then gently washes me. He soaps my hair and tenderly takes care of me, then rubs a medicated ointment into my bug bites and scratches. He sets me down on the edge of the bed and combs my tangled, wet hair out for me...and I can't stop shaking.

"I need to go and get you something from med-bay," he tells me, a worried look on his face. "Your pupils are too big."

I cling to his hand. "Don't leave me. Don't."

So we go together, me in a towel, and Crudden in fresh clothes, and they give me a sedative that will bring me down from this fucked-up need to *run run run* and hide.

When I wake up hours later, though, Crudden's beside me in the bed, stroking a lock of my hair. "It's all right," he murmurs. "I was the same way when I first got out. I kept expecting to feel the collar around my throat again. To have it turn out to be a trick." He rubs his thumb over my bare shoulder. "But it's real, Mina. And I'm here."

My chest hurts with how much emotion is pouring through me. I want to cry all over again, but I also don't want to weep like a fucking baby for the next week and a half. Not when there are other things to do. Not when I've missed Crudden so much that seeing him is like a physical stab of pain and pleasure all at once.

"Where do we go now?" I whisper. "What happens to us?"

"Well." Crudden's voice is calm, easy. It's like he's a different person...and yet the same. He strokes a fingertip over my forehead, as if he needs to touch me constantly. "First, I'm going to feed you because you're too thin. And you're going to sleep. And you're going to get better. And we're going to go to Risda. It's a farm planet, baby. It's run by Lord and Lady va'Rin and there's so much sunshine and open space that you won't believe your eyes. There's hundreds of humans living there, running little farms and being independent." He traces a line down my beaky nose, as if I'm the cutest, most fragile thing in the universe and he's fascinated with me. "I thought at first that I'd be a bodyguard, because that's all I'm good for. Just strength and muscle and scaring people. But I didn't like the way everyone looked at me like I was a monster. I wanted to leave that behind. And then I met Doris."

My heart freezes in my chest. “Doris,” I echo flatly.

“Yes. She’s...special.” He chuckles.

Jealous, ugly rage blisters through me. He loves me, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t come back for me if he didn’t love me. But Doris sounds human, and she makes him smile and—

“Doris works with the animals. She’s the most unpleasant old female I’ve ever met, too. But I like that. She’s not intimidated by me. She just bosses me around and acts like she’s in charge and she’s teaching me how to take care of the cattle. I love working with animals, Mina. It’s amazing.”

I breathe a little easier. “So...do I need to kill Doris? Do you love her?”

Crulden looks astounded. “Mina. Doris is old enough to be your mother’s mother. Of course I don’t love her. I love you.” A hint of a smile curves his flat, odd mouth, so strange to look at without the familiar tusks stretching everything. “I’m an ugly monster. You’re the only one foolish enough to love me.”

“No,” I say hoarsely. I touch his chest, but it’s covered by his clothing, and I wish I could wrap my fingers in the hair covering his body, as if I can tie myself to him and we’ll never be separated again. “You’re the best. Anyone would love you.”

He grins. “You are blind.”

“Like you’re not? I’m not exactly a beauty queen myself. Or pleasant to be around.”

Crulden’s eyes glitter. “Ah, but you’re mine.”

And somehow that’s better than any compliment about my looks. Because I want nothing more than to be his.



TRUE TO HIS WORD, Crudden stuffs me full of food. It's a lot of noodles and veg, since Lord and Lady va'Rin don't eat a lot of meat, but it's all flavored beautifully and spiced and I eat three bowls before my stomach starts to hurt. My appetite's been nonexistent since Crudden disappeared. It's been difficult to choke down the slave paste, and I don't realize until now how long I've been running on fumes, just existing. I want to stay up and talk to him—I want to talk to him forever—but after I eat, my eyes get so heavy that I don't protest when Crudden tugs me back to bed.

I sleep for hours. Days, maybe.

When I wake up, Crudden's beside me, sleeping, his arm protectively over my hip. I want to burst into fresh tears at the realization. That yes, maybe I do get to have Crudden after all. Maybe I do get a happy ever after, for a little while. Happiness floods through me and I turn toward him, pressing my cheek and the rest of my body against his. I let out a small, contented sigh.

It takes maybe thirty seconds for me to realize that there's a hard bar of iron pressing up against my front.

I smack Crudden's chest lightly, full of warm amusement. "You're not asleep."

"I'll sleep when we're settled on Risda and I can finally relax, knowing you're not going anywhere." He holds me a little closer, his big hand splayed across my lower back. He holds me so close, so firmly that I feel safe and relaxed for the first time in months.

It's finally sinking in that he's not going anywhere, and that we'll be together.

I run my hand down his chest, because I'm suddenly not tired. I think of all the nights we've been separated, all the touching we've missed out on. I think about how we never actually had sex, because I was afraid it wouldn't last.

I'm tired of being afraid.

I find his nipple through the fabric of his jumpsuit and give it a little pinch. He jerks slightly, but I hear his breathing speed up, and it sends a flare of excitement through me. "How come you're sleeping fully dressed?"

"I...don't know. Do you not like it?" He strokes my back. "I guess I was so distracted by taking care of you that I forgot about undressing for bed."

"I like you naked," I tell him boldly, and run my thumb over his nipple again. It's hard under the fabric, a tight little bead poking against the material. "I like rubbing myself against you and feeling the hair on your chest and thighs. I like your warm skin. I like your smell." I lean in, rubbing my face against his clothed chest. "I really like it when your hand goes between my legs and you touch me—"

Crudden's groan cuts me off. "Mina." His voice is ragged and husky with need. "Should you...should you be sleeping?"

"I should be touching my man." I pull one of my legs from its spot sandwiched between his and hook it over his hip. "I should be demanding that he fuck the daylights out of me. We've been apart so long, and I've missed him so much..."

His groan turns into a low growl, and then his hand is under the filmy sleep shift I'm wearing. He skims his fingers up my thigh and then grips my ass, his hand so big that one of

my cheeks fits his hand perfectly. “I missed you.” He sounds hoarse. “I missed touching you, and your scent, and your smile, and even when I was happy on Risda, I was still miserable because you weren’t there with me.” He hauls me up his big body, until our faces are lined up. Our eyes meet, and then he stares at my parted lips. “I didn’t make any decisions, didn’t do anything because I wanted to do it all with you. Lord va’Rin offered me land, but I wanted you to help me pick it out. I’m no good without you at my side, Mina. I’m just lost.”

He’s the sweetest. My heart aches with how much time has been stolen from us. I’m going to make it up to him, I decide. Every moment of this trip is going to be in bed, fucking like bunnies. “Kiss me,” I demand. “Kiss me like you missed me.”

Cruden rolls forward, and then I’m under him and he’s on top of me. He cages me carefully in his arms and gazes down at me. “I can’t.”

“Because you didn’t miss me?”

“Because if I kiss you enough to show you how much I missed you, I’ll never let you up for air,” he rasps. He leans over me, his lips brushing lightly over mine. “Because I’ll devour you whole.”

His words send an erotic thrill through me. “But what a way to go—”

Cruden’s mouth is on mine then, even as his hand snakes under my sleeping gown and presses between my thighs.

Oh fuck, fuck fuck fuck. I squirm against his fingers, so big and brutish and arousing. If he fingers me while he kisses me, I’m going to shatter into a thousand pieces...and I want that more than anything.

“Mina,” he breathes against my lips, kissing me oh so gently. “My Mina.” His fingers stroke through my already slippery folds, rubbing gently from core all the way to clit.

I rock against his hand, desperate. He’s being so gentle and I’m so fucking hungry for him. I grab onto the sides of his face, and instead of encountering mane, I encounter stubbled skin and ears. Oh. It throws me off for a moment, but then his tongue swipes over my lower lip in a playful lick, and I’m drawn back in again. “Crudden. Oh, baby—”

He pulls away from me, gazing down at my face.

“What? What did I say?” I squirm against his fingers, still under the hem of my nightgown.

“I’m not Crudden.”

For a moment, I’m utterly flummoxed. He’s the man I love. I know the way he moves, the way he speaks...then I realize he’s objecting to the name. He’s not Crudden the Ruiner. Of course. “I’m sorry,” I say, studying him. “What should I call you?”

“I...I’m not sure. Milly helped me pick out the name Jonathan, after Jonathan Harker.”

Mina Harker’s husband. So he was thinking about me, even then. My heart fills with warmth, even as I test the name out. “Jonathan. It...”

“—doesn’t suit. I know.” He shrugs. “People call me that and I forget they’re talking to me. It doesn’t feel like me, but I don’t know what else to be called.”

I stroke his cheek. “We’ll figure it out.”

He leans down and kisses me again. “I wanted to tell you.” His mouth captures mine. “Do you still love me? Even if I’m



not him? Not a gladiator? Even if all I do is work with animals all day long and don't fight anyone?"

The thought fills me with an aching sweetness. "I want you more than ever."

Crulden—no, my man—kisses me again, his lips going from soft and yielding to firm and demanding. His tongue flicks against mine, even as his finger deftly skates over my clit. I whimper, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Let me pleasure you," he murmurs against my lips. "It's been forever."

I want that. I want everything.

He rubs my clit, his mouth on mine until I'm practically crawling out of my skin, panting with need. "Now," I demand. "Now. I'm so close."

"Not yet," Crulden promises. "Soon."

With a frustrated little growl, I bite down on his lower lip and suck on it. He hisses in response, jerking away, and then his fingers work my clit with furious little circles. Release explodes through me and I cry out, clutching him tightly as wave after wave crests. He kisses my neck and jaw feverishly, pressing his mouth to my skin over and over again as I rock against his now-damp hand. When I finally relax, I press my forehead to his and sigh with pure contentment. "God. I needed that."

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, rubbing his nose against mine. "Can I watch you do that again?"

I shake my head, cupping his face in my hands. "Next time I want you to come, and I want you inside me when you do."

He goes still, looking at me with a questioning gaze. “Are you sure? I’m not too big?”

I arch an eyebrow playfully. “Fishing for compliments?”

Crudden’s face flushes, and he gives my pussy one final, affectionate stroke before his hand slides to my backside, gripping it. “No. I just don’t want to hurt you.”

His lip is still flushed and a little puffy from where I bit down on it. I skim my thumb over it. “Did that hurt?”

“No.” His eyes seem to grow just a little darker. “I liked it.”

“Well then, there’s your answer.”

It takes a moment for my words to sink in. He studies my face, considering. Then he grins—a huge, beaming smile that utterly melts me—and jumps to his feet. I want to ask what he’s up to when he starts to strip, ripping his clothing off as quickly as he can. Ah. I should have guessed. Fighting back a giggle, I sit up long enough to tug my nightgown off over my head and fling it to the ground. Then, I lie on my back and watch him fight his way out of the slightly tight jumpsuit, yanking on the legs. It’s taut over his muscular thighs and incredible ass, and the view is amazing.

I let my hands wander up to my breasts, teasing and rolling my nipples because I’m feeling good, and I want to feel even *better* again quickly so he can have his pleasure, too.

He kicks off the last of his clothing and turns to look at me in the bed. Crudden’s eyes light up at the sight of me, sprawled in the bed and watching him as I touch myself. His gaze stays on my breasts. “I never touch those,” he says thoughtfully.

“You never ask.”

“I’m asking now.” He moves toward the bed, and the sight of him takes my breath away. His shoulders are heavy and thick with muscle, but I love the sight of him. I love that thick, pelted chest and the hair on his arms and thighs. I love the heavy cock that stabs out at me, the head flushed and slick with pre-cum. I love all of him and I can’t wait to touch him all over every day for the rest of my life. Crudden sits on the edge of the bed, his cock rising from his lap, and as I caress my breasts, he strokes his cock, watching me.

Oh fuck. That’s the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen. “That’s mine,” I tell him. “I want to touch it.”

“You’re touching what’s mine,” he counters.

“Then come and touch them.” I cup my breasts, as if giving him an invitation.

He makes a low, growly sound in his throat that sends a thrill shooting through my body, and then he climbs onto the bed on hands and knees, stalking forward as if I’m his prey. Did I not just come moments ago? Because I’m getting all squirmy all over again, ready for him to touch me and fuck the hell out of me. “My Mina,” he practically purrs.

I suck in a breath at how sexy that sounds, and my fingers tease my nipples harder. “My Crul...” and then I pause, because I know he doesn’t want to be called by that name.

“Mmm, I actually like that.” He bends over me and swats my hand away from my breast, studying the small mound with intensity. “Yours. That’s what I should be called. My Crul. *Mycrul*.” He slurs the sounds together. “So whenever I hear it, I know I’m not him, but your mate.”

“Mycrul,” I murmur. “It’s a hell of a lot better than Jonathan.”

“Are these sensitive?” he asks, cupping one of my small breasts in his giant hand. His thumb strokes over the tip, his expression thoughtful. “You’re so soft here.”

I whimper, my heels digging into the bed. “Very sensitive.”

“As sensitive as your clit?” He leans down and his breath fans over one peak.

“In...different ways, but yes.” God, he’s making me crazy with this casual examination of my body.

He bends over my breast, squeezing it lightly so he can feed the pale pink tip into his mouth, and the breath sobs out of me when his lips close over it. His tongue flicks against the tip and then he sucks on it, then licks it again, as if testing out different strategies.

My hands flutter to his shoulders, looking for his mane that’s no longer there. It’s going to take some time to get used to, but if it makes him feel different than the other Cruden, then I love it. “Myrcrul,” I breathe, trying out his new name as I scrape my nails over the stubble on the back of his neck. “Your mouth feels so good.”

Myrcrul laps teasing circles around the tip, until it’s wet and gleaming, and then lifts his mouth and moves to my other breast. “I like this.” His teeth nip—ever so carefully—at the peak, giving my skin a light scoring that sends shivers through my body. “You have so many pleasure spots. I wonder if I can touch them all at once?”

And he props his weight up on one elbow, nuzzling at my breast as his other hand reaches between my thighs.

The needy sound I make is practically unholy. “Need you,” I tell him, scratching at his scalp in the way I know he likes.

“If you want to make me come again, do it with your cock. I want you inside me, filling me up.”

His control falters. Mycrul shudders against me, lowering his head, even as he strokes his fingers through the wet folds of my pussy. “Mina...”

“Oh no,” I say, dragging his head up. “Don’t you get shy and worried on me now. We’re going to have sex and it’s going to be glorious.”

He rolls onto his back next to me in the bed. It’s bigger and softer than the bed we had back in his cell, but being here with him reminds me of those times, and I have to resist the urge to draw the blankets over our heads so we can have privacy. No one here will spy...but still. Mycrul closes his eyes, the back of his hand on his brow, and his skin is sheened with a fine sweat. “Just let me compose myself so we can go slow. Give me...a moment.”

We’ve had a thousand moments slip through our grasp. I don’t know why he suddenly thinks I’m so breakable, but I’m determined not to waste any more time. I sit up and then sling my leg over his hips until I straddle him. “Looks like I’m taking control, then.”

He groans, his eyes fluttering open and his hands going to my hips. He clasps me against him. “Such a bossy creature.”

“You love it.”

“I do.” He lifts me as if I weigh nothing, then settles me over him, my folds clasp his cock between them. He rocks me up and down his length, rubbing me over him and groaning. “Oh, I do.”

My eyes nearly roll back in my head at how good it feels. I never thought having him grind against me like this would feel

so damn amazing, but he manages to hit my clit with every rolling thrust, and between that and the friction, I'm a goner. He works me over him until I'm moaning, my pussy soaked once more.

But then he just keeps rocking me over him, and I realize this is another stalling tactic. Sneaky, sneaky, gorgeous man.

"Mmmm," I breathe, and lean forward to place a hand on his chest. "You feel so good, baby."

Myrcul's face is contorted slightly, his breathing coming in sharp, staccato pants. He's on the edge. I can tell. "Mina. My Mina."

"I'm going to make you feel even better," I promise him, and lift my hips. I push his hands away when he tries to pull me back down, loving the way his breathing gets ragged as he realizes what I'm doing. I reach between us, grasp his now-slick cock, and fit the head of it to the entrance of my body. "Relax. I've got you."

The breath huffs out of him in an almost-laugh, as if my suggestion is ridiculous.

I sink down on him, just a little, testing things. He's big, all right, but I'm not surprised by that. I know his body as intimately as I know my own, and while he's going to stretch me, I know he won't hurt me. I work my hips over him, flexing a little as I let gravity do its thing, taking him into my body, inch by slow, thick inch.

Myrcul is frozen underneath me, as if scarcely daring to breathe.

I remind myself that even though we've touched and kissed and caressed and licked each other in a variety of ways, this part is new for him. I ease down a bit more and then guide

his hands back to my hips. "I'm going to ride you," I tell him. "If you don't like it, let me know."

The groan he makes is utterly pained. "Not...like it?" He shakes his head slightly. "You're destroying me with your body."

"That sounds good." I rock my hips over him, lifting and then sinking back down. My breath stutters, because damn, he is big, but pleasure slides through me like liquid heat. His eyes close, and I love the look of sheer, intense pleasure on his face. "Tell me how it feels."

"Tight," he pants, as I move up and down his thick shaft again. "You're so tight."

"And that feels..."

Myrcul shudders. "*Good*."

I rock over him, my movements slow and steady. He's big, but with every movement, I take a bit more of him into me, until I'm bottoming out and rolling my hips all the way down his length. "See?" I breathe, as if it's the simplest thing in the world to ride his monster cock. "Everything fits just fine. And you feel amazing."

He groans.

"So good," I tell him, riding him. My nails scratch at his stomach and then I push my hips back down onto him. "So fucking good, Myrcul. We're going to do this every night for the rest of our lives."

"*Mina*." His hands spasm on me, his grip tight. Then he relaxes, as if deliberately letting go of me. As if he's scared of holding on too tightly.

Oh no you don't, I think. I put my hand over his, forcing him to hold onto me. "Tell me what you want," I demand as I work my hips over him. "Slower? Do you want me to move slower?"

"Fast," he growls. "Move...fast..."

"Help me." I press his hand against my hip. "Help me move. Fuck me with your big, fat cock."

He growls again, as if on the verge of losing control, and this time, when I lift off of him, I hold myself up, my body sliding all the way off him except for maybe the tip. And I wait for him to respond.

Myrcul makes a strangled sound and then grips me tight, slamming my hips back down onto him and sinking me onto his shaft.

We both suck in a breath, and he goes still underneath me. I moan. "Oh, baby, that was good. Again." I move in the same teasing motions I did before, practically lifting off of him and then waiting for him to drive me back down onto his length, to force his cock back into my body. It feels intense, and almost like too much, and my toes are curling and my body is humming like never before. A new kind of pleasure is unfolding in my belly, as if I'm chasing a different kind of orgasm, and I want more of it.

This time, when I try to lift my hips, my mate snaps. He grabs me tightly, and then his hips jackhammer upward, pounding into me even as he drags me back down onto him. I lose control of the situation, and I'm breathless with joy as he uses me, slamming me onto his cock as he fucks the hell out of me, working me over him. Our bodies move faster and faster, until I can't tell which one of us is being rougher with the other. All I know is that the climax is just out of reach, and I'll



do anything to get it. So I use him as much as he uses me, until the bed is creaking with the force of our movements, and my thighs are slapping down against his skin with each slam of our bodies.

Then, it blooms inside me, hot and liquid. I gasp out his name—Myrcul—as the bone-deep orgasm quakes through my body, sending me over. My legs and toes curl up, my body clenching around him, and then I hear Myrcul’s panting breath shudder brokenly. His movements stutter, and then heat floods through our joined bodies as he comes inside me, and we rock together, riding the wave of release.

I lose track of time. I lose track of everything, really. Lost in the haze of two orgasms, I’m barely aware that I’m still on top of him, my hips twitching as if I can’t stop moving, can’t stop grinding over him. I’m too addicted to the pleasure of his big body. He pulls me down over him, draping me against his chest and then arranges my arms so they go around him. Myrcul strokes my back and holds me close and whispers my name over and over again even as our bodies slide apart.

“I love you,” I whisper to him as I cuddle against his big, hairy chest. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” His hand strokes down my damp back. “I’m...going to need to do that again. Soon.”

And I chuckle. As if I’d have a problem with that? “Just for the record, I don’t plan on leaving this bed for the next few days.”

His fingers glide over my skin. “I might need more time than that.”

“Well, all right,” I muse. “But they might look at us weird if we’re fucking like bunnies while they try to show us our

new home.”

A deep rumble in his chest. Laughter. “You know what I mean.”

I do. But it’s fun to tease him anyhow.



WE NAP A LITTLE, and then Mycrul wakes me up, his need hot and urgent. He pulls me under him this time, and we fuck so hard that the bed creaks and groans and threatens to pull away from the wall. Then we fuck in the shower. We return to the bed for another power nap and yet another round, and I make it as far as the food dispenser before Mycrul is on me again, pushing me up against the wall and parting my thighs before driving home.

The others probably think he’s killing me. Or at least they might if I wasn’t crying his name out so loud, along with things like “Harder” and “Fuck yes, come all over me.” That probably ruins the suspense, now that I think about it.

The trip to Risda III feels like it’s nothing more than a few hours, even though I know days pass. Someone eventually comes and knocks on our door, letting us know that we’ll be disembarking soon. We kiss one more time, and I give Mycrul the world’s briefest hand-job, just because I love touching him, and then we get ready. Our room reeks of sex, my hair is permanently snarled at the back of my head from being rocked into the mattress, and I couldn’t be happier.

No one says a thing to us when we land, but Milly va’Rin looks very pleased. Her husband does, too, though his pleasure seems more tied to hers than to our happiness. Doesn’t matter. As long as I live, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to repay them

for their kindness. I thought everything on this end of the galaxy was cold and cruel, but maybe this is a new start in a million different ways.

Myrcul takes my hand as we head toward the ramp. His excitement is palpable, and he looks almost like a little kid as we head off the ship. “Close your eyes,” he tells me, leading me toward the exit. “I want you to notice how clean it smells when we arrive. It doesn’t smell like the jungle at all. It smells like...like sunshine.”

The jungle had plenty of sunshine—and lots of heat—but his enthusiasm is infectious, so I obediently close my eyes and let him lead me down the ramp. The moment we step outside, the wind rips at my hair, and it feels almost...chilly. I’m so used to the oppressive mugginess of the jungle that this feels cold and sharp and surprisingly lovely. I lift my head, tilting toward the wind, and take a deep breath. I smell the ships, of course, that faint tang of burned metal, but beyond that, it smells...crisp. It’s hard to describe with my paltry human senses, but I wonder what it feels like to Myrcul, whose sense of smell is incredible.

I squeeze his hand, smiling. “I like it.”

“Just a few steps more,” he tells me, guiding me carefully forward. I’m not afraid. His hands are on me, leading me, and I know he’d die before he let me get hurt. I have nothing but trust in him. “Then you’ll see it.”

Biting my lip to keep from smiling, I nod. This is a serious moment for him, and I want to be serious, too.

“There,” he finally says. “Now you can look.”

I don’t open my eyes just yet. Instead, I tease him a little more. “What am I looking for?”

“Home,” Mycrul says.

For some reason, a knot of emotion forms in my throat. I open my eyes, and I stare out at the new world, at Risda III. It’s nothing like the wild jungle planet, with its daily rain, endless mud, and constant bugs. It’s not nearly as green for one. There’s greenery, all right, but there’s a small, square patch of city spread out just below the hangar area up on the cliffs, where the ships dock. In the distance, I can see people on the streets, and small buildings lined up. Strangely enough, it reminds me of a Wild West town, with everything along Main Street. But the people here are wearing different clothing, and it takes me a moment to realize that their faces are...human.

Beyond the little settlement, hills upon hills roll into the distance. They’re mostly golden, divided into neat squares, and reminds me of farmland back home. There’s even black dots wandering over the fields, and those must be the cattle.

It’s so quiet and pastoral and homey...and it’s perfect.

At my side, Mycrul squeezes my hand. “What do you think?”

I look up at him, so happy I could burst. “I think we’re home.”

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello there!

If you don't follow me on Facebook, perhaps you are unaware, but I'm an idiot! :) Because when I originally envisioned this story, I really, really thought it would just be a novella. I'd write a quick little piece about Crudden the Ruiner and how he wasn't really \*that\* Crudden but a clone. And ever since I threw him into the story, I wanted to write a book for him. His heroine came to me immediately - she was a slave in the same household, and she'd been assigned to clean his rooms. I initially thought she might be like Elly, broken and a little fragile.

NOPE.

Mina came snarling onto the page, half-feral and all attitude. Of course that's how she is. That's how she survived. By being crafty and cunning and just biding her time to escape. The answer was obvious to me the moment she opened her mouth. And of course she's the perfect heroine for brutal (but somehow innocent inside) Crudden 2.0.

I \*loved\* them. I loved writing them so much. I don't know about other authors, but for me, writing every book is different. Sometimes the idea is killer but when you go to

write it, it's like pulling teeth. Sometimes it flows like butter. The funny thing is that you never know which one it's going to be when you start the story, and they all read the same in the end (and I will never confess which ones I struggled with!). This one practically wrote itself, though. I couldn't get the words out fast enough! There were actually a few scenes I wasn't able to work into the story that I wanted to include, and I probably could have made it twice as long. I'll save it for the sequel, **WORSE GUY** (we've still got another Crudden floating around, right? Right). I'm only half kidding.

I really hope you enjoyed this! It was a bit of a veer off from my regular series (but not really? Since it's tied in with *Corsairs?*). But I wanted to try my hand at writing a villain - spoiler, they end up being just as much of a cinnamon roll as any other Ruby hero.

If you're in the mood for additional villain type stories, Ella Goode has **BAD GIRL** which came out a few weeks before this book and has a heroine seeking revenge. Upcoming, Kati Wilde will have **EVIL TWIN** , about a bad guy who wants the throne and will do anything to take it. I love morally gray stories! They're a lot of fun, and I really hope you enjoyed this trip on the dark(ish) side with me.

As for what's coming up next...**CORSAIRS: KASPAR** will be coming out and will include an extra-sized epilogue where I wrap up a few more things, reunite some characters, and basically give you a good reason to read it all the way through again. After that, I **PROMISE PROMISE** we're getting back to Icehome. It's gonna be summer and we'll need a break from all the heat!

Thank you so much for reading! <3

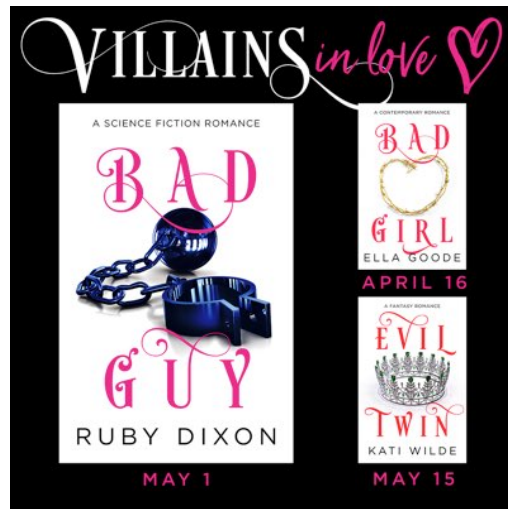
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