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CLAIMING
HER
FREEDOM

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Freedom

By

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Prologue

Elle trembled in her cage.

She had no idea how long it had been. Maybe days. She hadn't slept, too terrified. She'd had no food, licking up water that had come from... somewhere. Her eyes felt like stone, rough, her lids heavy. Still, adrenaline pumped through her. It was impossible not to be terrified, because she knew she'd been taken by aliens. She'd seen them, him, *it*. Dirty, dark clothes and body armour, weapons she'd never seen before, a froth of tentacles coming out from under its hood. Alien language shouted at her as he slammed the bars when she'd begged him to let her out, take her home, let her live.

Everything outside the cage was dark, but it looked like some kind of warehouse, only much smaller. The construction looked temporary, made out of fabric and only enough of a frame to hold it up. There were other cages in here, across from her and to her left and right, but she was the only human. She would guess the other creatures were animals, from the way they snuffled and circled, but what did she know? No one answered her few attempts to communicate either way.

Outside, the weather was bad, wind fluttering the fabric walls, and blowing either rain or maybe small pebbles against them, rattling and drumming. It was relentless, as if the whole place was inside a sandstorm. Inside the shanty, it was hot and muggy, though there didn't ever seem to be any sun.

The front flap was thrown back, and two people entered. The first Elle recognised as her captor. The second was tall, in dark robes that hid him from head to toe. She huddled against the back of her cage, peeking out over her knees, letting her hair obscure her. While she'd been here, she'd seen other things get bought from their cages, walked out on leashes, carried out in tanks or sacks. She guessed this was some kind of black market for exotic animals, but under the circumstances, she didn't think they were meant for pets.

These were not the conditions anything to be loved was kept in, and the creatures that left did not go cuddled in arms.

Elle didn't want to be eaten... but she didn't think she wanted to be left behind either.

She wanted someone to save her. Please, dear God, someone save her. She'd only ever prayed along with everyone else during school assemblies, but she thought the real thing must feel like this. She hadn't known such desperation was possible, such helplessness. She couldn't do *anything*. She wasn't Black Widow. No one had ever taught her how to pick a lock. She couldn't get the guard to open the cage with a bat of her eyelashes. And once she got out, what was she supposed to do? She couldn't hotwire a car, let alone fly a spaceship. She wasn't one of those girls. Hadn't Hollywood promised her someone would save her?

She knew terrible things happened to people, women, all over the world every day. Unimaginably evil things, and nobody helped them. But she didn't think *this* would happen to *her*.

And she *really* didn't want to be eaten.

Her captor led the stranger down the row of cages, stopping at hers, and Elle pulled her limbs in tight enough to make her whole body hurt. The customer bent down, peering at her. It was anthropoid, at least. Two arms, one head. Gloved hands. Torso with shoulders, and flat down the front like a man.

If he bought her, would he eat her? Would she rather live and suffer whatever other torments he might have planned for her, than be eaten? She could imagine what a species of a basically compatible size and shape might want with a woman he bought from a cage, what he could only do to a woman he *owned*.

He leant back and said something to her captor, who unlocked the cage and, for the first time, reached inside.

“No!” Elle screamed, throwing herself back against the bars then darting for the far corner. She screamed shrilly, thrashing as strong hands clamped around her neck and arm, dragging her out from what felt now like the only safe place for her. She didn’t want to be out where these aliens could touch her. Her captor kept her bent forwards, unable to fight, and held her still in front of the customer so he could look at her.

Elle made herself lift her eyes to the man who might be buying her. Under the hood, the bottom half of his face was covered by a tight black mask, but his skin was yellow, and his eyes silver on silver. As soon as she met his eyes, he looked away from her and spoke to the dealer instead. Some agreement was reached, and she was sold. The customer handed over a small bag, and the other pocketed it, then pushed her onto the stranger.

He caught her, and for a moment, she clung tight to him. He was clean, and firm under the robes; his body was so familiar, just like a tall human man. She cowered under his arm, not wanting to let him go.

“Are you saving me?” she whispered, not daring to believe it, and yet her mind latched on in relief. Clearly, this was a good man. She needed to believe that, since she was leaving with him and she couldn’t bear the alternative. He wasn’t dirty or smelly, and he didn’t have tentacles on his face. He could be just like her, just a differently-coloured human. He would understand. He would be kind. He wasn’t big enough to eat her.

This was it. Of course she wasn’t going to *die*, that was ridiculous. *She* wasn’t going to get eaten by aliens in space, she was going to be rescued, just like she was supposed to be. This was just the beginning of some grand adventure.

She tilted her face up again, daring to give him a small, shaky smile.

He rummaged in his pocket and his hands went around her neck, leaving something tight and heavy behind. It was a

collar. She touched it in a daze, and he gave the attached leash a hard yank, snapping her head forwards and jerking her out of her last shred of hope.

She crumbled, and started to sob.

He dragged her outside to where his spaceship was waiting.

1

Three years later.

She'd only been asleep a couple of hours when she woke to the sound of her bedroom door opening. Xerjan was silhouetted in the hall light.

"The master needs you."

Elle pushed herself up into a sitting position, groaning. She wouldn't get any more sleep that night and she was tired. "Alright, I'm going."

She stood and collected her rubber underwear from her wall cabinet, taking it into her little bathroom to change. It could take her up to twenty minutes to squeeze into the set, some extremely high-waisted briefs and something like a binder. They were made out of thick black rubber, and once they were on, there was barely even room for her to get her fingers under them to take them off again, which of course was the point. They preserved her chastity when she went to Borial's bed. Try as he might, he just couldn't fit his big alien man hands under the rubber, not when it practically vacuum-sealed itself to her skin.

She was grateful for them, but they hadn't been her idea. It was Borial who flew into a panicked fit at the barest suggestion that they might one day eventually have sex. She'd been wearing them ever since her second visit to his room. The first, she'd spent screaming and crying and fighting with every inch of strength she possessed, and he'd still overpowered her easily. It had been a close thing. When Borial was in one of his moods, he wasn't himself. Even now, three years later, she couldn't be sure if it had been his self-control that had kept him from actually penetrating her, or if her fear and streaming tears had distracted him too much.

Elle understood her role. She was Borial's cuddle slave. He went into these *heats*, and she was there as a substitute for a mate, like a doll. He held her and rubbed

against her and murmured in her ear. He ran his hands over her body, *begged* her, tried to touch her and whimpered and moaned, but there were a few solid facts that remained true after three years, and she recited them to herself now, to calm the anxiety she felt every time.

One, she had still never seen his penis. He had never taken his pants off.

Two, he had only touched her bare cunt once, after fighting his fingertips in under the side of her rubber gusset, and when she'd squealed, he had kicked her out of bed so hard she'd rolled across the floor, and he had banished her from his room and spent the rest of his episode alone.

Two and a half, he'd never touched her bare breast, or kissed her mouth, or suggested she go down on him.

Three, he could have done all those things and worse a hundred times over by now, and he never had. That first time before the rubber underwear, there had been nothing stopping him from raping her, and he hadn't done it. Nor had he ever demanded she show him her naked body.

Four, Borial had never hurt her. Never hit her. Never withheld food from her. Never put her in danger or let anyone other than his servants touch her.

Borial had a need he couldn't help, and she could treat the symptoms, even if she couldn't cure him. She wasn't happy about it, he'd still bought her, and she was still a slave, and he still walked her about on a collar and a leash. He hadn't saved her, but he hadn't eaten her either. Hers was a comfortable prison, and for that reason alone, she walked to his room without crying or begging.

Anymore.

Rubber underwear snapped into place, crushing her boobs and sweaty, but otherwise tolerable, she left the bathroom and joined Xerjan at her bedroom door. He was a different species than Borial, and was shorter than Elle, with dark green toady skin and yellow eyes. Somehow, everything

about him just smacked of servant. Maybe it was the long tunics, the pointy slippers, or the way he held himself with such solemn, quiet condescension, but she couldn't picture him as anything other than some nobleman's manservant.

He led her to Borial's door, and held out his hand for her translator. She unclipped it from her ear and laid it on his palm. Borial didn't allow it, not since the first time when he'd called her 'Mistress' and she'd replied "What did you just call me?". He'd realised what he'd done and snatched her translator off and thrown it across the room. He didn't want her to understand what he said during these frenzies, and he certainly didn't want her able to give him any orders.

Xerjan touched the door panel and it slid back. Borial's room was dark, but she could see enough in the light from the hall. On his big, wide bed, Borial pushed himself up on shaky arms, his long silver hair falling over his shoulders. His yellow skin was muted in the grey gloom. The covers slid down his back, pooling around his hips. He looked like he should have a woman under him already, but he didn't. He needed her.

Borial could have been attractive, if he didn't own her. His normally vibrant, banana-yellow skin was a bit ridiculous, but his long, straight, fine, silver hair, pointy ears, and regal features made him look like a Tolkienian elf. He was tall too, and just a little too broad-shouldered to be willowy. His eyes were silver on silver on silver. Elle had no idea how she could distinguish his irises, but she could. It was something in the shape or texture, the striations within the colour. He didn't seem to grow any facial or body hair, but she knew he groomed his eyebrows fiercely. Being an ambassador, he wasn't bulging with muscles, but they were there nevertheless, under his skin. She knew because she'd felt them, keeping her in place.

He turned his face to her, and lifted one hand to gesture her to him, curling his fingers.

Elle firmed her resolve, and stepped into the room, the door sliding shut behind her. She hated him. She hated him for

doing this to her, for making her do this. She could recognise that he had a problem, and that he did what he could to make sure nothing permanent happened between them, but she could still hate him for keeping her where she didn't want to be, for touching her when she didn't want him to, for not giving her any choice. She had no power, and she hated him for that.

She hated him, and she pushed it down. She knew now that fighting, screaming, running, begging, trying to escape... None of it worked. No matter what she did, she'd still end up in his bed, in his arms. That was her purpose, why he'd bought her. He was bigger, stronger, and faster than her. He had servants that would help him. The ship's computer responded to his commands, so he could lock things remotely. He could understand the writing on the doors and buttons around the ship. He had every advantage and she had every disadvantage.

So she forced herself to walk to his bed. He lifted the covers for her, and she lay down, her back to him, feeling the immense heat that had built up in the mattress and blankets. She didn't have to do more than lie there. He fit himself in behind her, his arm wrapping around her waist to pull her in against his chest, muttering in his own language that she could no longer understand. His skin had a powdery texture, clammy over his sternum and the insides of his elbows. His hard cock poked the backs of her thighs until he had it slotted in under her pussy, the rubber underwear between them. He whispered something and lifted his head, pulling her hair back from her face. Elle stayed looking blankly forward. He didn't need or even want more from her, and she wouldn't give it to him. Proving her right, he bent his head to kiss her shoulder.

His episodes had stages. He didn't seem too bad yet, he wasn't too far along. It felt like he would have been capable of conversation, if she'd still had her translator – which was why she had to give it up. It felt like cuddling with an enamoured partner, except that she was cold and stony on the inside. He wasn't dry-humping her yet, or making the tortured noises he'd get to eventually. He wasn't palming her tits or trying to

pull her clothes off. Elle pulled the pillow more comfortably under her head. Maybe she could get a few more hours' sleep.

She laid her hand on top of his where it lay on her stomach, and laced their fingers together to keep it from wandering. "Sleep, Borial."

He made a small, pleased noise, recognising his name.

That wasn't the part she wanted him to focus on. "Sleep," she repeated, closing her eyes to demonstrate. After a determined moment, she felt him settle in behind her, his body still rigid, but she drifted off, used to sleeping with him plastered against her out of sheer necessity.

Some time later, she was jiggled awake by his hips frantically humping against her, his arm too tight around her. His forehead pressed against the back of her neck, soaking her skin with his hot breath, all of it in rigid silence as if he was doing his best not to wake her.

She scowled. Her shoulder ached from being kept on her side and her pussy was sore from being sawed against with such force for so long, so she put her hand between her legs to protect it. Borial gasped, realising she was awake, and pulled away for a second, ashamed – but then he came back because he was desperate, and saw an opportunity to get her to touch him. Still shrouded by his pyjamas, the blunt head of his cock ran back and forth along the groove of her fingers.

But he didn't want her to touch him. She'd learned that after the first handful of times they'd been through this, when she'd lost some fear because she knew what to expect, and instead thought maybe that was what she was supposed to do. She'd thought maybe she'd get more sleep, or hell, get the whole thing over with, if she just gave him a handjob. She'd thought maybe doing that would mean she wouldn't have to have sex with him. So she'd rolled over and tentatively slipped her hand under his waistband, her fingertips brushing a hot sweaty erection before nervously gripping it for a squeeze. He'd liked it, he'd *really* liked it, based on the sounds he'd made and the expression on his face. She'd still found herself

flipped roughly onto her back and pinned with her wrists up by her shoulders while he growled words she didn't understand and bit into her neck and shoulder. Yeah, he was a biter sometimes.

So Borial didn't want to be alone for whatever was happening to him, but he also didn't want to have sex, or even *risk* having sex, or to come at all. He made her join him in bed, but only without her translator, and only in impenetrable underwear. He didn't let her touch him. Oh, there had been a couple of times when he'd made himself come by rubbing against her, but they had felt like accidents, and she was expected to just lie there like it wasn't happening.

He didn't care about how it might make *her* feel, having a sweaty man grinding against her, sighing and whispering and growling in her ear, his hands everywhere. She hated him, but it was hard to feel nothing when he used his hand on her throat to bring her ear to his lips, when his hard thighs trapped her hips to the bed, when she could imagine him saying *anything*, really. Her body reacted, and she hated him for that too. She hated that she hadn't had sex in three years, because he was keeping her prisoner on his ship. She hated that she hadn't even seen another human in three years, that she couldn't have a conversation with anyone on her own terms, that she couldn't even look at anyone without him watching from the end of her leash. She wanted to be liked. She wanted to choose who she spoke to. She wanted to choose who was in her bed. She wanted to be able to give herself to someone, instead of living under Borial's dibs.

She threw her elbow back into his ribs and he stilled for a moment, chastised, but he was like a big, undisciplined puppy, wholly focused on what he wanted and deaf and blind to everything else. She tried to wriggle into a more comfortable position at least, but she didn't want to face him, or risk him pinning her. She knew from experience if she sat up or left the bed, he'd grab her and pull her back. He pressed close to her again and kissed and licked along her shoulder, whispering. His hand stroked up her stomach to her breast, but

she was crushed flat by the bra. There was nothing for him to play with, and nothing for her to feel.

Sometimes she wished they could just fuck. Maybe she could get high, and enjoy it while it was happening at least, instead of getting increasingly frustrated as she fended off a handsy man for up to three days sometimes. Sometimes she wanted the worst to happen, just so that things would change. Sometimes she wanted to trick him, fight her way out of the rubber underwear and saddle up before he could stop her, as revenge for keeping her a slave. She could have the power, for a little while, that way. He would have to live with the knowledge he'd fucked an alien, instead of pretending he was above it, when this was his dirty little secret.

It would be so easy to stop protecting him from himself, to just lie still and let him get under the thick briefs. Then it would be his fault. She wouldn't even be forcing him.

But as tempting as that thought was, as much as she wanted to deal him a blow, just one, she knew she never would, for one simple reason. If she fucked this up, he'd probably get rid of her, and she doubted her next owner would be better. The fact was that while Borial made her do *this*, she didn't actually have to fuck anyone for her survival. She had enough food, she had clothes, she had her own bathroom. She couldn't imagine better living conditions for a slave. Any other alien who bought a human slave would almost certainly want to rape or eat her. Unless she could get back to Earth somehow, this was as good as it was going to get for her.

She pulled Borial's hands off her again, and he just wrapped them back around her, murmuring into her neck.

He *could* tell her what to do. He didn't want to come? Okay, but maybe there were other things she could do to keep him calm, make them both more comfortable. As it was, she didn't know if stroking his hair or talking to him, for example, would soothe him or encourage him to get grabbier, because Borial wouldn't talk about it when he was himself. If she mentioned it, he got frosty and snapped at her or left the room,

or sent her to hers. If only she could feel more like a nurse than body pillow or sex toy, but then Borial would have to let her have the power, and that would never happen.

He licked her neck, following the curve of her trapezius, and then mouthed back to her shoulder. She didn't know if he was trying to arouse her or if he wanted to taste her, or was just fidgeting. She didn't know anything about alien mating habits. Obviously, Borial had a dick, in the same place a human did. She assumed he'd chosen her, or at least kept her this long, because she was similar enough to his own species – the Ure from planet Sopa – though she'd never seen a female of his kind, or any other member of his species. Not as far as she knew, anyway. If they weren't yellow elves, she wouldn't necessarily recognise them. Physically, she guessed they were compatible enough for him, but she didn't know if there was anything different about their sexual habits. Maybe only one partner survived, and that was why Borial went through all this with such a violent aversion to actually having sex with her. Maybe pregnancy was guaranteed. Maybe he laid eggs. Maybe there was acid, or serious blood loss.

She'd often wondered why he needed a slave for this. He was an ambassador, so he wasn't the last of his kind. If he didn't want or couldn't have a wife, and if he couldn't have girlfriends or one-night stands, Elle thought he could find women who would agree to these aggressive cuddling sessions. He was rich, and seemed to be in the prime of adulthood. Even without attraction, he could pay someone, instead of buying someone. He must just prefer the convenience of a woman he could control, keep on hand wherever he went, with no life of her own and no one to tell.

It was thoughts like that Elle always came back to. Any time she tried thinking her way around her situation, the stark fact that she was a slave, a prisoner, was an unavoidable obstacle in her mind. No matter what else he did, no matter how he treated her or what he gave her, it always came down to this; that he demanded she come to his bed whenever he wanted, and she couldn't say no. That was why she hated him.

That was why she spent these days and nights in his arms angry and frustrated. That was why she batted his hands away even though it made no difference whether she fought or lay still.

She didn't want to give in.

Sometimes she did, but the fact that it didn't change anything just made her angry again. Her decisions didn't matter. He didn't even seem to notice.

So for hours they lay tangled in the bed, half-heartedly wrestling space or closeness from each other, sweating against each other. Borial murmured and spoke to her and kissed her shoulder and ran his hands over her body. She pushed him away and snapped at him. When he exhausted himself, she could sleep for an hour or two. When she needed the bathroom, she either had to take him with her, or surprise him and leap from the bed, racing to lock the door before he could catch her again, then have half an hour to herself as she fought out of and back into the rubber pants, with him going nuts on the other side of the door.

Once, Borial's mood had lasted for almost four days, and Elle hadn't thought she'd make it. Xerjan left food and drink for her just inside the door – Borial didn't seem to need it – but it wasn't enough, the sleep wasn't enough. In the end, Xerjan had opened the door and darted Borial like an animal and flown them to the nearest medical unit. No one acknowledged it afterwards.

This time, it lasted a more manageable two days, well within normal range.

Elle was asleep when Borial came back to himself, but she surfaced briefly when he picked her up from his bed and carried her back to her adjoining room to tuck her into her own bed. She wasn't allowed in his space when he wasn't in one of his fits. As soon as it ended, he kicked her out, so he could sleep without her. She wasn't allowed to rest where she was, it was back to her small slave quarters. She was aware of murmuring softly and laying her hand on his chest. It felt odd,

him standing again, moving smoothly, the ends of his hair against her forehead. Usually they only touched lying down.

When she woke in the morning, her translator was on her nightstand, and she rolled over and went back to sleep, knowing no one would come looking for her.

2

A couple of days later, they docked with a luxury pleasure cruiser with an unpronounceable name. Apparently, there was someone on board Borial wanted to talk to but hadn't had any luck getting an actual official meeting with, so he'd bought tickets for the cruise and was going to ambush the guy over cocktails or something. Nobody ever thought Elle needed to know what their plans were, she only ever learned anything from overhearing Borial talk to Xerjan.

Elle stared into her wardrobe, while Borial sat on the bed. He was already dressed in his white robes, and tugged at his cuffs idly as he waited for her. Not for the first time, she wanted to pick something he wouldn't like, in protest... but she didn't want to suffer the reminder that the final choice was not hers. She was his slave; he could make her wear anything he wanted.

Alien clothes were weird. Borial was yellow, so his colour options were somewhat restricted, and by extension, so were hers. She had a lot of yellow clothes, as if dressing her in his skin tone could broadcast his ownership of her better than the leash leading into his hand.

He sighed and checked the time, tired of waiting. She wasn't allowed in his room unless he needed her, but he could come into hers and sit around judging her as long as he liked. The gall of it made her jaw clench.

“Hurry up, Elle. I won't be late.”

Late. She didn't know what time the event started, because nobody had told her, and nobody had ever thought to teach her how to read the time, either. She just got taken out and put back when necessary, like a toy.

This wasn't her first rodeo. She knew what was fitting for someone like her at a party like this. She gave in and pulled out a yellow bodice with beaded fringe all over, part of it forming enough of a skirt that she didn't feel indecent. He

would approve, and she was disappointed in herself for taking the coward's way out.

Her hair and make-up was already done. Borial employed a beautician-slash-lady's-maid named Sazi to make sure Elle didn't embarrass him. Sazi was a six-armed blue insect lady, and lived on their ship with them, but she and Elle were not friends. Sazi made no attempt to talk to her, and clearly considered her work tantamount to putting a pomeranian's fluff in a little top knot for a show. She was rough with Elle's hair, and gripped her face hard when she applied the make-up, which changed depending on who they were visiting.

Elle's hair was usually styled up and out of the way. It was more practical, and the aim was not to look pretty or elegant, it was to look presentable. Pretty was reserved for the real people, with rights. Elle's hair was black, and after three years of living with Borial, she couldn't say for sure if he liked it or hated it. Most of the time, he behaved as if it was somehow disobedient to have hair so starkly opposite to his – but during their 'special time', he'd bury his face in it and groan in dirty satisfaction.

She'd come to assume he liked it, but didn't want to, just like her; like it was perverse and made him feel bad, just like keeping her as his little cuddle buddy.

She took the bodice to her bathroom to put it on. She wouldn't undress in front of Borial. When she had it on, after leaning over to dangle her leash out of the way of the clasps while she did it up, she hung up her silk robe and stepped out. She almost never wore shoes. She didn't have to on space ships. Borial wore embroidered silk slippers, but enough aliens went barefoot that nobody seemed to notice that she did too. Her nails were painted yellow by Sazi, fingers and toes. She wondered if Borial kept shoes away from her so she couldn't escape, but it seemed unnecessary when they were in deep space. Where could she possibly go?

Borial saw she was dressed and stood, reaching for her leash and fixing it to the manacle he wore so he could keep hold of her with his hands free. It was all beautiful of course, the manacle a polished chrome that reflected the lights, her chain no thicker than it needed to be to be unbreakable, the delicate metalwork twinkling, and of course, her collar, a thick band of white diamonds that pricked her chin when she looked down. From the neck up, she looked like a princess. From the neck down, she looked like a burlesque dancer.

Borial gave her an appraising up-and-down, checking for anything she might have done to show him up. There was a time she used to make herself bleed before he took her out in public, to make people think he beat her, to make it clear she wasn't with him by choice, but she didn't bother anymore. It hadn't made a difference. It had annoyed him something fierce, but no one had ever tried to save her.

Borial knew she was a person, with intelligence and language and everything else required to be classed as a sapient being, but no one else had ever seen a human before. They thought she was a dog, or they politely turned a blind eye to the enslavement of a race they had no diplomatic ties to. Some people thought it was a fun game she and Borial enjoyed together; some of them thought it was some kind of marriage custom. It didn't matter. Cultural relativity was Rule Number One in ambassador circles. Even the people who were obviously uncomfortable with it didn't say anything to Borial's face. No one ever questioned Borial keeping a woman on a leash.

Despite trying to frame him, the truth was Borial didn't beat her, or hurt her, or yell at her, or do anything abusive or frightening. They'd settled into a Cold War, of sorts. She behaved ninety percent of the time, and in exchange, he didn't push his luck. He saved the outrages for when they were in bed.

"Good," he said simply, finishing his assessment. He didn't stroke her hair or cheek. He'd learned that lesson

quickly. Once bitten, he was twice shy – an example of him not pushing his luck.

Elle didn't answer. She didn't have to. Every now and then, she considered sucking up to him for an easier life, but she thought this chilly open animosity gave her the best living situation. If he liked her any more, who knew what he'd want from her? Wrapping him around her finger, while maybe possible, would only end up with her sharing his quarters permanently.

He tugged on her leash to get her moving, casually, like a dog, and Elle grit her teeth. Arsehole.

Together – she had no choice about that – they left her bedroom. Her rooms on Borial's ship were simple and small, utilitarian, though better than might be expected for a slave. Better even than servant's quarters, more like the poor relation. All the bedrooms were in a row on one narrow grey corridor. Hers was beside Borial's, for obvious reasons, with Xerjan's on his other side. Sazi was on Elle's other side. Borial's room was the largest, with a walk-in closet and attached bathroom. Elle had a bathroom of her own which was the *size* of a closet, and she didn't know what the servants had. She was never invited into their private spaces.

Borial's ship was a display item more than anything, a front. They all lived in basic accommodation tucked out of the way, while the reception rooms were massive, decorated in bright, airy colours, full of soft furniture and art, like a royal boudoir.

The pleasure cruiser was thousands of times the size of Borial's. Elle hadn't set foot on an actual planet since she'd been taken from Earth, it had just been one spaceship or station after another. The recycled air and white noise and claustrophobia was so familiar at this point that Elle didn't even think of it anymore.

They left Borial's ship and, after an airlock and a brief docking umbilical, reached an extravagantly decorated yet bland hallway. It reminded Elle of a hotel, too many miles of

corridor for any interior designer to make interesting. It was beautiful... and repeated every ten feet. Good thing Borial was familiar with things like this, and could navigate by the internal compass of the rich, gravitating faultlessly to the expensive party like a bird using the Earth's magnetic field.

Elle hoped she wouldn't have to stay on Borial's ship for their whole visit, only being dragged out for parties. She wanted to explore. She wanted to see how the other half lived. What else did this ship have to offer? Surely the guests needed more than a ballroom. Were there hydroponic gardens? Could she look out into space? Was there a water slide? She'd lived in space for three years now, and knew nothing about anything.

She didn't worry about looking like a rube as she craned her neck to stare up at the distant, high ceilings. People thought she was a dog, so what did it matter? There was the biggest chandelier she'd ever seen! It was the size of a car! It was funny that it was so similar to what humans had, but she supposed it wouldn't be that different. Sight was an evolutionary advantage, and that required light, and fire would have come before electricity, which meant candles, and crystals and glass reflected and refracted it and just looked pretty.

They reached the ballroom, and its swell of conversation and gentle limp music, tinkling glasses and cutlery. Borial wound her leash around his hand to tie her closer to him until they got situated. Otherwise, some unsuspecting stranger might get goosed by the chain, and start a war or something.

Everything was white, or off-white, and dusky pink. The outer wall was floor-to-ceiling windows looking out on the blackness of space, but Elle was too far away to enjoy it. Banquet tables held platters of food and drink, which was usually the best part of these things for Elle, if Borial gave her enough slack to go get anything. A wide wooden staircase connected to a mezzanine only five steps high, where a huge

fountain cycled through display patterns. More crystal and ice sculptures glittered and shone.

On a space ship, things like wood, crystal, ice, and water might as well have been gold and diamonds for the sheer decadent opulence it took to maintain them on board. Safety and emergency procedures had clearly been shoved pretty far down the list of priorities. One little bump to rock the ship and the floor would become a flooded luge of ice and broken glass. All it would take was an engine failure, and they'd all be praying that window into space could hold as much weight as the floor. Elle tried not to think about the Titanic, or *The Poseidon Adventure*.

Around her, aliens of all kinds mingled in their finery. Elle had become familiar with a number of other species, just by sight. Her translator helped. It, too, was beautiful; gold and shiny, arcing like a wing over the rim of her ear into a point, similar to Borial's pointy elf ears, but it fit too well to have been built for him. He must have had it made specially for her, but in his image.

He tugged her leash again and led her over to the bar, scanning the gathering for his target while trying to look like that wasn't what he was doing. Elle, as a pet, didn't have to restrain herself. She was free to stare at the jewels, the clothes, the multiple limbs and skin-flaps and body paint around her. She was the only person on a chain, as usual, but some people had creatures perched on their shoulders or cuddled in their arms, or sat at their feet. That was where she fit in.

The universe was unfathomably huge, and the sapient species in it innumerable. Yet still, Elle found it boring. They all wanted the same things humans on Earth wanted: money and power. All anyone ever talked to Borial about was gemstones, precious metals, fuel, food, and politics. Nobody ever tried to have a conversation with her, except to coo and hand her a treat. That was the sum of it.

"Elle." Borial murmured her name, getting her attention so he could pass her a drink. Damn it, she'd missed

her opportunity to decide on her own. He had something thick and clear, fizzing gently in a tall thin glass like a champagne flute. She had an odd thing with a fat bottom and a narrow neck that would be hell to drink from, and whatever was inside was blue on top and yellow underneath, with a spiral of something pink sticking out. A cocktail, she guessed. Sweet, low or no alcohol, and difficult to carry around so her hands would be occupied. Borial had done this before.

As always, she briefly considered throwing it on the floor, or pouring it all over herself, making a scene, but she'd tried that before and it hadn't achieved anything. It had only made her look like the animal everyone assumed she was, and annoyed Borial. He'd had to go to his meetings without her for the rest of that trip, and that had made him need her more in the evenings. Sabotaging his missions didn't gain her anything, it was playing her cards before the bets were laid. If she knew when Borial was going to have one of his episodes before it happened, she could negotiate, but they seemed to come irregularly and with no warning. If he wasn't worried about needing her soon, he could just walk away and ignore her.

These days, she just didn't have the fight left in her anymore. She'd fought every way she could think of, and while she'd never been punished, it had never accomplished anything either. As much rage as she carried inside her over her situation, co-operating with Borial gave her the most freedom, so that was what she did.

But she didn't thank him for the drink.

Her hand didn't fit the neck of the bottle very well and she made a noise of frustration, trying to figure out how she was supposed to carry it. She knew from experience that she actually liked what Borial was drinking. It was like fizzy lychee wine or something, but it was a real drink for real people, too sophisticated for the likes of her.

Borial led them away from the bar. To avoid getting her neck tugged on all the time, she had developed a hyper-

awareness of his movements, like a sixth sense of when he was about to move, her peripheral vision always tracking his wrist with the cuff. That annoyed her too, that she had adapted.

He walked them up to a small knot of people and the hobknobbing was on.

“Chancellor,” he intoned solemnly, performing the appropriate bow with his hands raised in front of him. Elle stood behind him and looked away, bored. “What a pleasure to catch you here this evening.”

“Ambassador Kainlani, yes, a pleasure. Tell me, is it true what they say about the tannerite prices on Sopa right now?”

And bla bla bla.

Elle tried her drink. It was so tart, she made a face, staring at it accusingly. She examined the pink spiral suspiciously. Was it an inedible garnish, like an orange peel? Or more like a candy cane, or jelly worm? Only one way to find out. Well, she could ask Borial, but he wouldn't like being interrupted, and they were trying to be considerate of each other these days. She ate it.

And lived.

It was even nice, sweet.

When it was gone, she sighed. She should have made it last.

She looked around for somewhere to put her drink, but they were in the middle of a crowd. Nothing. Her shoulders slumped.

And so it went. Thirty to forty minutes talking to one group of people, and then on to the next. Introductions were made, promises to meet again soon to discuss things in more detail were passed around. Elle eventually got to eat, but only because Borial was talking to someone in leash-reach of the buffet tables and distracted. She picked and nibbled at things,

quickly and surreptitiously stuffing her face before someone inevitably walked into her leash and Borial noticed she'd wandered off.

When another alien further down the table stared openly at her for long enough to make her uncomfortable, she went back to Borial on her own. Some aliens had a way of looking at her that made her briefly glad she belonged to Ambassador Borial Malalhi Kainlani Ostrix, who had enough clout that nobody had ever tried to buy or steal her from him.

She didn't like to look at the aliens Borial spoke to. She didn't like to count how many looked uncomfortable, how many avoided making eye contact with her, recognising that what he was doing was wrong. That didn't prevent two enormous willowy creatures from bending over her, wanting to stroke her hair and tug on her ears. Borial knew enough by now to stop them with a polite laugh. Their silent bargain didn't extend that far, and she would absolutely slap hands and start yelling. He'd threatened her with a muzzle once. She'd threatened him with an airlock, and that was that.

"Did you know Elevated High Actor Limba Manaken is expected on board?" someone asked Borial.

The woman beside Elle had a blue rabbit the size of a dog sat at her feet. It looked so fluffy. Elle wanted to stroke it.

"Ah... No? Is that correct?" he replied.

Elle wondered if the rabbit-dog was friendly. Presumably, since it was at a party, surrounded by people.

"We passed by Kch'o yesterday, or was it the day before? She's been assigned governor there but I heard she would join us for some respite."

"I see... Well, you know, of course it would be an honour to meet with her, but I don't expect an Elevated High Actor to have time for me, especially if she's here to escape work."

But would petting the rabbit draw attention to her? Would people react like humans would to a monkey petting a

dog, for example? She didn't want that.

“No, I'm sure she'd be glad to meet another Ure after spending all those months wrangling Tofor miners.”

“She won't have been alone there, she'll have had her... partners.”

Elle edged closer to the thing, thinking maybe she could just brush its fur surreptitiously, get a feel without anyone noticing.

“Ah, look, there she is! She just entered!”

“Excuse me, I'll go introduce myself.”

Elle was just about to touch the rabbit when she was yanked back, hard, by her leash, almost pulling her over backwards. As the room tilted, she glimpsed a tall yellow woman with silver hair smiling as she entered the ballroom. She only caught Elle's eye because she was obviously the same species as Borial, and she had never seen another one before, but then she forgot about it as she turned to right herself.

Borial didn't usually pull that suddenly. He might pull on her leash to get her attention, or to signal that she should follow him, or even in extreme cases, to punish her or remind her who was boss, but he almost never tipped her over. It only happened when he forgot her leash was still attached to him.

She stumbled around to face him, but he was already walking away, and as his arm was pulled back by their connection, she watched him jerk it forward, snapping her head forward this time. Pissed, she ran after him, even as he wound the leash around his wrist to bring her closer.

Gritting her teeth, she caught up to him as he ducked through an arched doorway.

“Borial, what the hell?” she growled, her hands gripping her collar just in case he wanted to pull some more.

“We're leaving.”

“Don’t yank me around like that!”

He whirled on her, grabbing the clip of her leash where it attached to her collar, and she tried to flinch back, startled. He looked furious, or *something*. “Behave,” he grit out, looming over her at his full height, while pulling her right up against him. He glanced over her head, back the way they had come.

Elle opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind, when suddenly her stomach floated up into her lungs and her hair stood on end. Borial staggered, a look of alarm and confusion crossing his face. Their eyes met for a moment, and then Elle, too, was forced stumbling to the side by something she couldn’t see. She fell against the wall, and couldn’t get up again.

What was going on? Her feet were still on the carpet, but they felt weightless. Instead, her shoulder ached with the pressure on it where it leaned against the wall.

From inside the ballroom, raised voices were interrupted by the enormous crash of all the food and drink sliding off the table, followed by screams.

She looked at Borial again, panic creeping up her spine. Something was wrong.

3

“Valued guests, please proceed to the escape pods,” chimed a calm female voice over the PA as Elle’s hair crawled up the wall without her permission. “They are located on decks five, ten, fifteen, twenty,-”

“We’re tilting,” Borial said. “Or there’s a problem with the gravity.”

Elle lifted her arms as her senses told her she was about to go sliding into the ceiling, even as everything else looked normal. Borial felt around for something to hold onto, but there was nothing.

“-Forty-five, fifty, fifty-five,-”

“We have to get out of here.” He tipped his head at the ballroom. “Before they panic.”

Elle nodded, and when she tumbled up the wall and all the chandeliers crashed up with her, she fought her feet under her to walk and follow him. Borial took her hand, and she didn’t mind under the circumstances. She’d be pissed at him for his attitude just now later. Why was the ship rolling?

The PA continued. “Do not attempt to reach your docked ship. Please proceed to the escape pods. They are located on decks five, ten, fifteen,-”

Together, they struggled down the corridor. It felt like walking sideways up-hill, tripping over molded cornices and accompanied by a growing mass of detritus that was rolling with them. Were they headed to the escape pods, or was Borial trying to make it back to his ship, some twenty decks away? He was the type to ignore safety instructions in favour of preserving his comfortable luxury. And what about Xerjan and Sazi?

They reached the elevator lobby and Borial pressed the button. Elle could hear raised voices from down the hall, the

thump of bodies failing to cope with the rolling gravity, more broken glass, angry shouting, barking.

“We should take the stairs!” Elle said, pointing. She had to raise her voice to be heard. She didn’t want to still be here when the other party guests arrived. As she eyed the hall warily, a member of staff went running past, tripped, then ran on.

“Stairs?”

“You’re not supposed to take the elevator when there’s something wrong with the building, we could get trapped and no one would know where we were!”

Borial turned to her, his hand on his hip. “And how do you imagine we take the stairs? Slide down the walls? The elevator has cables to move it no matter what the gravity is.”

A distant screeching of metal from within the elevator shaft grew louder as it came closer. It did not sound good.

“Very well, stairs,” he conceded.

It was three decks up – or down – to the nearest escape pods. They opened the door to the stairs, stepping over what had been the top of the door frame, and paused for a moment as they considered how they were going to do this. They were upside down just then, with the stairs overhead like a MC Escher piece, but the gravity was still turning, a few moments more and they could make a dash for it while the wall was the floor. The PA was still cycling through its announcement, and behind them the elevator stopped screaming and the door pinged open as if mocking them. Elle could hear the panicked voices of the other guests, and just as the way opened up in front of them, some other guests entered the stairwell behind them.

“This way,” Borial said, and they hurried forward along the wall, crouching under the stairs as they moved to the next floor, with other guests in ballgowns and finery popping out from the doors as if at random. Elle was so disoriented, she just focused on not tripping over the banister, or hitting her

head on it. If the gravity turned and spilled her onto the stairs, that would hurt.

Luckily, the rotation continued steadily, and while it wasn't elegant by any means, they managed to transition from standing on the wall to standing on the stairs, right way up, and hurried to the deck they needed before it could get worse.

They joined the crowd that was now siphoning off onto every fifth floor, and followed the signs for the escape pods. Around them, people were dishevelled, their hair in disarray from the slow spin cycle, with food spilled on their clothes and their hems soaking up all sorts of colourful things. The corridor with the escape pods looked like every other corridor, only it had airlocks instead of doors.

People swarmed around them, a thick river with an undeniable current. Borial took her hand again, like a parent not wanting to be separated from their child in a busy place, and pulled her quickly forward, searching for an airlock that still had a pod on the other side. His legs were a lot longer than hers, but at that moment, she was grateful. She was scared to be launched out into space. She'd never been in an escape pod before. She knew the theory. It was a vehicle about the size of a car, perfectly safe, and they would either stay grouped together floating in space until help came – and it would, for a luxury cruiser like this with so many important people on board – or land if there was a planet nearby and the ship was about to explode or something. Not an ideal situation, but in an emergency, it was better than the alternative.

Borial found a pod and held his hand to a sensor, opening the door, pulling Elle inside after him. It was utilitarian, but some effort had been made to make it calming. The walls were sky blue, the four seats were white. The door closed behind them and Borial pushed Elle into a chair, buckling her in, then sat beside her and did the same for himself.

“W-What about the others? Do we need to-?”

“No.” He had already called up controls and was pressing buttons.

Elle took the moment to twist in her seat and look at the door. She didn't want to leave anyone to die... but surely Borial knew what he was doing? She didn't want to waste time causing trouble if something was seriously wrong.

It was probably nothing, she told herself. Just a gravity malfunction triggering the emergency protocols. The crew would fix it, and the escape pods would re-dock with the cruiser, and they'd all laugh about it and get big fat refunds. Somebody probably just put their coffee down on the gyroscope.

There was a loud clunk, and she was suddenly straining against the crossed belts of the seat, like she was dangling over a drop. Borial's arm snapped out in front of her as if to hold her in place. She made a small involuntary noise – she wouldn't call it a whimper – and grabbed it. “Borial...”

“You are safe,” he said, but he was too deadpan to be convincing. She knew he put up a mask when he was unhappy.

Before she could think any more about it, there was a hiss as the cabin sealed and pressurised, a pop as it was released from the dock, and a weightless feeling for the few seconds it drifted before the thrusters came on and steered them gently away. Their weight settled back into their seats like normal. Borial let out a breath, resting his head against the seat and taking his arm back.

In the moment of powerless quiet, Elle remembered how he'd held her hand, and before that, how he'd snapped at her. The timing was a bit off, wasn't it? Had he known something was about to happen?

She eyed him suspiciously. “What happens now?”

“I don't know, the pod will take care of it.” He sounded tired.

“What happened to the cruiser?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think we’ll be able to go back soon?”

“I don’t know.”

Elle hesitated for a second. “What about your ship? And Xerjan and Sazi? Will they be okay? Do you think they got off?”

“I’m sure they’re fine. They’re as familiar with emergency procedure as we are.”

Elle didn’t feel very familiar with any of this.

“And the ship will be there when we get back.”

That was a big If though. He didn’t know they would get back, not for certain. Maybe ninety percent of emergency evacuations weren’t because the ship was about to explode or lose life support or vent poison gas everywhere, but some of them were. There were always horror stories about people who floated in space for days, weeks; who starved; who ended up dropped on some alien planet and mummified in their pods! Or got eaten by the monstrous local wildlife! Elle had seen *Alien*, and *Predator*, and- and- She didn’t want anything hugging her face!

It was times like this she really wished there was another human around, someone who understood her and her primitive fears of dying in space, someone who got it and could reassure her. Space had been tamed for Borial, he didn’t appreciate all the unknowns.

She needed to distract herself. “What happened back in the ballroom? Why did you leave like that?” *And talk to me like that?* she added in her head. She ran her finger under her collar, where the diamonds had dug into her skin with how hard he had pulled.

She considered taking it off. She *could* take it off, it wasn’t locked, but it was a whole thing. Borial required her to wear a collar anytime she left their ship, or when anyone other than him or his servants was going to see her. She got it, she

was a slave, it was a sign of ownership. Like a pet back on Earth, if she was out in public without a collar, she might be taken in by animal control, or kidnapped to be sold, or eaten, or any other things aliens wanted to do with humans. She understood not wearing the collar could be dangerous, but she also understood that it might lead others to see her as – *gasp* – a free-thinking sapient person with the same rights they had. Wearing the collar gave her a level of protection, but it also kept her a slave.

And Borial needed something to attach the leash to.

She *had* taken the collar off before, refused to wear it, tried to escape, all of that. She'd flushed them down the toilet, chewed them in half, everything, but Borial had just ordered more, and here she was now, worn down. She didn't really believe anymore that the collar had anything to do with it. It was just a fancy necklace. If she ever got free from being a slave, it wouldn't be because she had a bare neck. She needed help.

At her question, Borial lifted his head from the seat's rest, dipping his chin, as he too touched his neck. He looked troubled for a second, then he shook his head. "Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"None of your concern."

Ah. That was different than nothing. It was something, he just didn't want to tell her. She faced forward as if there was a windscreen to look out of, but there wasn't. She wished there was, to give her some idea of whether or not the cruiser was still in one piece. It might have been fun to watch it barrel-roll through space, if that was what was actually happening. She wanted to know if there was a planet nearby. There should be, since the cruise was a sightseeing tour, but Elle didn't know whether it was between planets when they joined. Would seeing space make her feel less like she was going to die forgotten in a lost, sedan-like coffin in the infinite void, or more so?

The pod had supplies, she knew that, so she decided to check them out for something to do. She couldn't relax now she'd thought of them. What if the pod *didn't* have supplies?

She unclipped her belt and climbed between the seats, her leash clinking softly against itself. She was still clipped to Borial's wrist, but she had enough slack to move about comfortably in the small space.

She knelt in front of the floor-level compartments. She couldn't read any alien language, but emergency equipment used pictograms, same as Exit signs on Earth, so anyone could figure them out. It was still strange to see what aliens thought cartoon food looked like, but then, she supposed it would have been stranger if they used a turkey drumstick and a knife and fork.

The food came out in vacuum-sealed bundles. There were also blankets, water packets, lighters, flashlights, what she guessed was a flare gun, a first aid kit, a thin filmy thing that might have worked like a mosquito net, and some floatation devices. There were big pills with instructions she couldn't read, and a collection of tools she didn't recognise.

She relaxed a little. She could work with this. They had food and water for a few days at least. She put everything back and closed the cabinet back up.

"Have you ever had to use an escape pod before?" she asked Borial, taking her seat again.

"No."

She watched him, waiting for more, but none came. It would have been nice if she could have asked him if he was scared too, but that wasn't the relationship they had. She'd have liked to hear him tell her it would be alright, but that wasn't really him either. Aliens didn't lie to each other like humans did, they didn't have concepts like optimism or a can-do attitude, manifestation, barely even hope. If Borial didn't *know* it would be alright, he wouldn't pretend that he did.

It was one of the little comforts she missed from home, the little social conventions like that, the etiquette that was like its own language. When someone didn't follow those rules and give the answer she was expecting, it was surprisingly lonely.

The control panel's read-out was flashing letters quickly. "What does it say?"

"We're moving."

"...Does that mean anything?"

"I'm not sure, but... I think we'll be landing."

"Oh." Landing. On an alien planet. "Is that... okay?"

"Not ideal but we'll be perfectly safe until we're picked up. We have supplies, we'll stay with the pod, it has a beacon."

"Will that take long?"

"No, I shouldn't think so."

"Right, because you're important." Elle wasn't sure if she was trying to tease him or get him to confirm it to reassure her.

It didn't work. He made a non-committal alien noise, and she didn't feel better. *He's just being modest*, she told herself.

She felt it then, the acceleration pulling at her. She shouldn't feel that unless there was external gravity and atmosphere. They were definitely landing. Elle had been a good Sunday Christian on Earth because everyone around her in her small Irish village was too. She'd done some hard praying since she was taken, and some hard thinking when she wasn't saved. She found it hard to believe, most of the time, that God was out here with her, but she sent out a little prayer now. It wasn't words as such, just a wish, like a reminder to God to look after her, as if she was saying '*If it matters, I don't want to die*'.

She buckled herself back into her seat, held her own hands, and concentrated on taking deep, slow breaths. The pod rattled with the atmosphere, and then briefly with minor collisions, tree branches probably. There was a lurch and a crunch, and they were stopped, they were down.

Elle looked at Borial, who was reading the information the computer gave him. “What does it say? Are we safe?”

“It looks that way,” he said, frowning as he scrolled.

“Should we open the door? Look outside?”

“The atmosphere is safe, for a while. There’s plant-life... No sign of civilised construction or population centres or energy manufacture... Any animals out there could very well be dangerous in ways we can’t predict, and there could be pathogens, and weather changes could be dangerous.”

“But what about the others? Shouldn’t we at least make sure we’re not alone?”

He looked at her, indecisive, and since he wasn’t stopping her, Elle got up and went to the door. She didn’t know why, really. One scary thing should be enough. She should stay in the pod, with its filtered air and life support.

But she hadn’t been outside in three years. She couldn’t help herself.

She laid her hand on the sensor until it beeped, then cranked the big red release lever. The seal hissed, and the door swung out.

Humid air.

Blue.

Bird song.

Elle stepped out, dropping to the ground, her bare feet landing on leaves and soil. Her calves tightened, the sensation overwhelming. She stared, keeping one hand on the airlock door as a tether.

It was night, and everything was blue, radiant electric blue. The ground was carpeted with blue leaves, the trees that grew only a few feet away had blue foliage too. Their brown wood was deep and rich and chocolatey, as if the light filtered differently. It didn't look wholly real.

And then there was the noise. It didn't sound melodious like bird song on Earth, not twittering or tweeting. Elle imagined this must be what the Amazon sounded like. There was something that sounded like an obnoxious laugh, a loud and repetitive *haa haa haa*, and something else gibbering manically, and something calling out with long *ooh* sounds. Everything else blended together into an impenetrable mess of sound, and yet it was *quiet*. The inescapable white noise of engines and air filters that had droned in the background of every minute of every day was gone. She'd stopped hearing it, but she was aware of its absence now, her ears ringing with it and goosebumps breaking out on her chest and arms.

The ground felt so sturdy – unshaken by the vibration of propulsion systems and machinery – that she almost lost her footing. In three years, she'd never stood on an uneven surface, never had to pick her way over rocks, never felt soft dirt giving way beneath her step. She was used to metal floors, sometimes thin carpets. The faint incline now scared her, as if she'd go sliding off.

There was life here, touching her skin, in her lungs. The smells were overpowering, like a perfumery, everything demanding her attention. Somehow, the air communicated the vastness of the sky, as if there was more oxygen than she could possibly put a dent in. It hadn't been calibrated to give her her required amount and save the rest.

Looking down, Elle placed her feet carefully as she took a few more steps, her leash pulling tight. She reached up and ripped off her collar, letting it drop. Borial could reel it back in, she wouldn't wear it here. She rubbed the humidity of the air into the skin of her neck instead, then stretched her arms up to the sky, laughing to herself. She could see the sky and all the stars, and the streaking tails of the other pods

landing nearby, dozens and dozens of falling stars. It was beautiful.

She dug her feet down into the moist topsoil, running her hands over herself like she had new skin. It was a shame she was wearing a beaded yellow fringed corset, but she took her hair down and shook it out, wanting to be wild. She needed this. She wanted to run and lick the trees, she wanted to find fresh water to drink, and fruit to eat. She wanted to cannonball into a cold lake and swim. She felt like if she had to smell the stale chemical air of a spaceship again, she'd die. She wanted to rub the leaves all over herself.

Her skin prickled up the back of her neck.

“Elle.”

She turned, reluctantly, and saw Borial hunched in the open airlock, her good mood quickly fading. The pod looked hideous and foreign by comparison. It was grey with red lettering on the side, clunky and blocky and offensively out of place. The low light and all the blue did something to Borial's yellow skin, fading it, bringing out shadows.

“What?”

“Come inside. Don't expose yourself to things unnecessarily. It's night, and we don't know what's out there.”

In that moment, she thought about running. How many times had she thought about escape? On one hand, this might be the best chance she ever got. On the other hand, spending the rest of her life alone like Tarzan, trying to survive in an alien forest probably wasn't better than what she had. Still, she hated Borial for bringing her back down, for making her see the flaws in this place, for not letting her be happy for just a minute.

If she took off into the trees, what would he do?

She turned away from the pod again. She wouldn't run. But she couldn't go back in yet. “I need to stay out here a bit longer,” she told him. “I can... keep watch, in case anyone comes looking for us.”

Maybe because she'd said 'need', he left her alone, going back into the pod.

Elle stood outside alone for a long time, her arms around herself, feeling the breeze stir her hair against her neck and shoulders, and just *listening*. Listening and watching. Then she started to explore, walking around the pod, mapping the ground and the trees, taking closer looks at everything. She learned their scents and their feel, every different leaf and stem and pebble, the bark. Nothing came to attack her, and her brain drank in the stimulation, fascinated and alive. Back home, her nan would tell her stories of fae folk and Tir Na Nóg. That was how it felt: otherworldly. Maybe she'd died in the crash... though probably not, since Borial was still there, nagging her.

Eventually, when she grew tired and cold, she climbed into the pod to get a blanket, making sure to leave the airlock door wide open. Borial was already asleep on the floor under a blanket of his own, his robes cushioning the hard floor, what she could see of his shoulders and torso bare.

Elle took her blanket and, with the wrapper between her teeth, climbed up the outside of the pod to make her bed on the roof, lying awake and staring at the stars for as long as she could.

4

Daylight woke her. As she sat up and looked around, disoriented, she realised she'd missed the sunrise, but it couldn't be late in the morning. It was confusing to find herself sleeping on the hard metal of the escape pod, nine feet off the ground, only a thin blanket covering her, the dangling beads of her bodice rattling when she moved. It had been so long since she'd woken anywhere other than her bed on Borial's ship – or his.

The sounds of the jungle were quieter, and she had a moment of thinking she must be crazy, because all the leaves that had been blue the night before, were now green. The trees, the spade-shaped plants that covered the ground, everything... which made it look disconcertingly familiar, like Earth. Elle wouldn't mistake it for anything but an alien planet though. Maybe it was the shape of things or the light or the air, but it was just *different* somehow.

She was going to have to find a way down, but first she stood up and looked around. Their pod had cut a trench through the canopy, and now she could look out into a misty valley. She couldn't see the bottom, but she saw the slopes of other mountains, fluffy with green trees, all pouring downhill while white vapor clumped around their heads like caught silk scarves.

The flashing orange beacons of the other escape pods blinked at her from the neighbouring mountainsides, and there were black marks on the landscape where they had punched holes in the forest. Elle didn't see any smoke or fire, which she took as a good sign. When she walked to the edge of the pod, she noticed orange light pulsing from it onto the ground, telling her Borial had already activated their beacon. How long would it take before they were rescued? Elle found she was in no hurry to go back to the ship, any ship.

There was no sign of Borial yet. He must still be sleeping. She went to the side with the airlock and looked

down, finding it still cracked open.

She could use the open doorway to climb down at least.

It was awkward, the threads of fringe on her outfit snagging on every possible thing and jangling like a rattle, but when she finally dropped to the soft ground, Borial hadn't even woken up. She was standing in the doorway looking at where he was sleeping on the floor in his nest of robes, and her stomach sank for a moment. How long would they be here? Would she eventually be forced, by circumstance or by Borial, to share the pod with him at night and sleep beside him? She didn't want to. She didn't think he'd feel her up unless he had one of his episodes – and God forbid he have one here – but she still didn't want that intimacy with him.

She watched the rise and fall of his yellow chest, took in the fan of his silver hair around his shoulders, his softened face.

Women back home would fawn over a sight like that, if it was art posted online. It was a shame the reality left so much to be desired. Elle felt a pang for what could have been. If only he *had* been a good guy, if only he *had* rescued her... But he'd kept her as a slave in a collar and molested her in his off-moments, and now, she couldn't swear she wouldn't leave him for dead if given the chance.

She turned away and evaluated the situation.

They would need breakfast, and water. The escape pod had a toilet of sorts, but it wasn't any fun. The pod wasn't big enough to store a lot of water, or much of anything, so... well, she wasn't exactly sure how it worked. Something to do with drying and freezing and maybe launching into space. Bathing would be restricted to the packs of wet wipes she'd found.

In her head, she pictured bathing in a river, more water than she'd seen in years. A lake, a waterfall, the kind of scale that only existed planetside where everything was natural, instead of the manufactured cramped efficiency of space

living. Made by gods instead of man. She wanted that. She wanted to find some *experiences* here before they got rescued, something to make her feel free and human for a while.

Yes, she considered the dangers. Bugs, germs, poisons, predators. Considered and ignored. This might be the last chance she had for the rest of her life, and it couldn't take more than a day or two for rescue to find them.

Should she just run off now, while Borial was sleeping?

She sighed, and blamed her mother for raising her right, because it felt wrong to do that and she couldn't bring herself to do it. Escape was one thing, but this wasn't that. This would be scaring him in an already scary situation, for no real reason since she intended to come back.

Or maybe she was just whipped and afraid of getting in trouble.

"Borial," she called.

"Hm?" he grunted sleepily.

"I'm going to look for water."

"Nn."

"When you get up, don't drink or eat too much, okay? We have to ration it."

He made no reply, so she turned to go, not quite trusting him to listen to her but having no other option.

"Wait."

She stopped. He was slowly dragging himself up, rolling over like he was stiff. He probably was. He'd be even more unused to sleeping on a hard surface than she was, pampered little lordling that he was. He ran his hand through his hair to push it back off his face. It was so impossibly fine, it only ever hung straight, never disturbed by anything.

"We have water here," he said, squinting sleepily through his usual imperious frown.

“We might need more, we don’t know how long we’ll be here, and we could bathe.”

“We’ll be rescued soon, we have enough.”

“It can’t hurt to have a back-up.”

“You need to stay with the pod for when the rescue comes.”

She put her hands on her hips, even as her eyes darted around for the collar and leash she’d taken off the night before. “I want to look for water.”

“Foreign water will make you sick.”

She pointed at the bottle beside him. “*That’s* foreign water to me, Borial. My kind don’t travel the galaxy, why would it be calibrated for me?” She’d never had a problem before, but the point still stood.

“It’s been treated to be safe.”

“Borial, I’m going. I want to explore! We need to know where we are and if there’s anything we can use or anything dangerous around here.”

“We have everything we need in the pod, and there’s nothing dangerous in here.”

Or exciting.

“You’ll only get lost in the jungle and then when rescue comes, they might want to leave you behind.”

“Then I guess I won’t have to be your slave anymore!” She wasn’t serious, she didn’t want to be left behind, but she knew he needed her too much to let that happen.

“If there are dangerous things here, you could die.”

“*Then I guess I won’t have to be your slave anymore,*” she repeated.

“Elle, I forbid it,” he ordered, scowling.

“Ha!” She tossed her hair, noticing when his hand, the one that normally wore the manacle with her leash attached,

made a very telling catch-and-pull motion. His face twisted in frustration when he realised the reflexive action achieved nothing because they weren't tied together, and she gave him a smug look over her shoulder as she turned to flounce away.

“Wait, I will accompany you.” He started digging around to find the way back into his robes.

She stopped. Why did she stop? Why, indeed. Why the fuck, in fact, but she did, cursing herself. She was raised right, and/or she was whipped. Very annoying. She didn't want to go into the jungle with him! He was not a jungle type of person. But then, neither was she. She wasn't even wearing shoes. Just, if there were monsters out there... Well, she supposed it was just more efficient if he saw her die and didn't have to wonder, so he didn't slow down the rescue by making them look for her.

Or vice versa, if he was the one that got got instead of her.

But she would *not* put the collar back on.

He eventually presented himself beside her, looking ruffled but dressed again in his robes, and shoes. He lifted the collar to put it on her but she dodged away.

“Not on your fucking life,” she said, her Irish accent slipping out stronger than usual.

He frowned, confused and displeased, but she was already walking off too far ahead for him to force the issue, and she stayed a good distance away as they tromped through the jungle.

The beaded fringe from her ridiculous outfit made good breadcrumbs as Elle ripped them off and hung them from eye-level branches to mark their trail, catching the light and twinkling visibly even from far away. First she walked away from the pod, but not too far, and circled it, checking it for she didn't know what. Obvious Shelob dens, eroding cliff edges, ancient alien burial grounds, poorly maintained beaver dams that might give at any moment and flood their landing site...

Not having shoes was annoying, but the leaves were soft and clean-ish. It was just the twigs underneath that were sharp and pointy, and the dirt below them that got between her toes.

Borial was not happy. She could hear him muttering crossly to himself behind her, probably cursing her out every time his robes snagged on something. He ripped them free and tore them. He was getting increasingly roughed up, but did he think she was any better off, with bare legs? Her skin was criss-crossed with faint pink lines. If this planet was going to kill her, it needn't try any harder than an infection or allergic reaction.

She didn't find anything noticeably edible, and no water, so once she had circled the escape pod to her satisfaction and was confident nothing was immediately coming to kill them, she led them back to it for breakfast. She liked to think that her ring of beaded strings would help them find the landing site no matter what direction they were coming from; and the rescuers too, or other guests from other escape pods.

“What was the *point* of that?” Borial snapped as he caught up to her once she was sat in the open airlock, a bottle of water beside her and a nutrition bar in her hands. He swept his hands down his robes, doing nothing to help the colourful smudges. He had leaves in his hair. Elle wouldn't tell him. An elf should have a laurel crown.

He stole her bottle of water, downing half of it, then looked at the bar in her hands expectantly, even as she was breaking pieces off and putting them in her mouth.

“We know more now than we did before, that was the point.”

“We could have missed the rescue.”

“But we didn't.”

“How do you know? They could have been and gone.”

“We didn't go far enough to miss either a space ship or a Search and Rescue team landing.”

“Hmph!” He stuck his nose up, looking away from her snootily. She ignored him. After a moment he turned back, nodding at her meal. “Where’s mine?”

“In the cabinet. Get me another bottle of water while you’re at it.”

His jaw dropped, and he gawped at her. When she didn’t react, he picked up his skirts to struggle his way into the main body of the pod behind her. She heard him opening the floor level storage. “Your aggression solves nothing.”

She wasn’t going to dignify that with an answer.

Something touched her neck.

She struck like a cobra. Before she knew it, she’d spun to face him, and her hand had caught his, holding the collar. He’d tried to sneak up on her with it. She blinked as she took it in, including his half-guilty, half-defiant expression.

Rage surged up in her. She grabbed the collar and threw it behind her as hard as she could, though it only went the length of the leash then rebounded, bouncing in the dirt. She got in his face, snarling through gritted teeth. “Come at me with that thing again, and they will *never* fucking find you.”

He swallowed and dropped his gaze. “It would be safer if you wore it, we wouldn’t get separated-”

She jumped down from the airlock, putting space between them. He had a nutrition bar in his hand, but no bottle of water for her. “You want to talk about *my* aggression? You couldn’t even pass me a bottle of fucking water from the cabinet you were already going into. I know I’m your slave, Borial, okay? *I know*. Do you think I like it? Can’t I have one fucking day off? Don’t you have enough of a tiny shrivelled-up heart to give me that? The rescue team is coming, and when they find us, I’m going back into your tin can spaceship so you can dry hump my ass until I’m old and grey and *dead*.”

“Will I *ever* see another planet? Will I ever get to stand on soil again? Or see another tree? Or feel the sunshine?”

Maybe I am more of an animal than you, because I *need* those things. I don't get them, because I'm a fucking slave, but a twist of fate has given me this and I am *not wearing* that collar, and if you try to put it on me again, that will be it, do you understand?!"

She didn't even know what she was threatening. Running off into the jungle to never return? Or slitting his throat in his sleep?

He opened his mouth to say something, but she didn't want to hear it. "Now, I'm going. If I die, I die. If I miss the rescue, then I miss the rescue. You can sit here and wonder if I'm coming back, or if you're going to have to stick your dick in a pillow next time you get the horn."

Elle marched off uphill, partly because she was angry and it would burn off the most steam, and partly because it seemed like a good idea. She'd get tired before she went too far, and heading back would be easier. She also wanted to get up high. Stand on top of the mountain, look around her at the vista, the sky and the mountains and all the life, breathe it in and scream it out.

It was tiring enough that she remembered to mark her way with her fringe before it was too late. Tearing up the ridiculous yellow outfit felt good too. She'd feed it into the incinerator as soon as she was back on board.

She was thirsty now. She hadn't had anything to drink since the party, and that nutrition bar had been dry as hell. Stupid fucking Borial. Most of the time, she overlooked his assholishness by telling herself he wasn't evil, just ignorant and cack-handed, so self-obsessed he couldn't really consider what he was doing to her. Then other times it was all too much to bear. Excusing him was sometimes the only way to cope with what her life was.

These were all old thoughts, and they tired her out, retreading all the same ground. Yes, her life sucked, and yes, she was stuck in it. She couldn't change it and that injustice felt like it was crushing her. Nothing ever changed though, she

woke up every day just the same, and went through it all again, and she knew that sooner or later, no matter what she did here, she'd be back on his ship, collared and leashed and ignored.

She stayed out on the mountain for the rest of the day, even if she was tired and dirty and a little cold. She wandered around and around until she found a tiny trickle of water between some rocks and spent twenty minutes drinking her fill, and washing her hands and face. There was no one giving her orders or disapproving of her or watching her. She could lie down among the leaves forever, she thought.

She found a small cliff edge, and she got to stand and look out at the view, like she'd wanted. That made her cry, and cry hard, over everything she was missing locked in Borial's ship, always kept in his arm's reach. Even dogs got taken on walks.

It was so beautiful, and she cried because she'd never seen anything like it before, and she never would again, but she'd got to see it now.

All over the mountains, orange beacons blipped out of time like drunken fireflies. They didn't belong there, on this landscape, but they would be gone soon.

When Elle was dried up and empty, settled back into a resigned, numb sadness, she picked herself up and went looking for food. She tried some things she hesitated to call fruit. She figured if they tasted sweet, they had sugar in, and if her tongue recognised the sugar, her body could probably use it. Even so, she tried each thing with a small internal flinch, praying it wouldn't kill her.

As the light started to fade, the plants around her turned gradually from green to blue, like a spreading rash. It must be something to do with photosynthesis, she thought, remembering words like 'chlorophyll' from her high school Biology lessons. These plants must have evolved to change colours to take advantage of the different light conditions

between night and day. She cupped a leaf in her palm. It really was a beautiful shade of blue.

She had to head back down the mountain to the landing site. She'd be screwed if she was out in the jungle at night, no matter how mad she was at Borial. It took her longer than she expected because she was being careful and making sure she didn't overshoot, so it was full dark when the eerie orange pulse of the pod's beacon guided her back. If there *were* animals in the jungle, no wonder they weren't making themselves known.

No sign of Borial, though the airlock was open. She wasn't going to check on him. If she'd survived eating all that alien 'fruit', she didn't think anything could have happened to him while she'd been gone. *He* wouldn't have left the pod.

She climbed back onto the roof, where her blanket still was. Good thing it hadn't rained. She lay down and covered herself with a sigh, looking up at the stars and the darker black of the canopy.

She heard the hinges of the airlock door, and tensed.

Borial's yellow head popped up by her feet, his silver hair free of leaves now, and looking strange under the alien moonlight. "You came back."

She sighed again, so he could hear it, but didn't reply. Let that speak for her.

He waited a moment for her to say something, then when she didn't, pulled his arm up to touch her ankle tentatively. She jerked her feet away as soon as he touched her. She wouldn't put it past him to try to tie her up again. Maybe he'd spent his day turning the collar and manacle into hobbles for her. She glared at him, and he sighed, looking away. "You are my... *companion*, Elle. My... nurse. I have needs you don't, I understand that-

"Do *not* try to make excuses. Nurses get *paid*. They get *time off*. They *apply* for the job. You bought me from a cage and made my whole life about you."

“I treat you well,” he complained.

Elle just shook her head and focused on the stars. She didn't want to have this conversation. She didn't want to have to argue why she should be free, and have rights, and listen to him reply that she should be grateful he didn't beat or starve her.

Borial waited, but when he didn't get a reply, he took the hint, and slunk off back inside the pod. At least he wasn't making her sleep with him.

5

Day two, Elle thought, waking up with her first thread of worry. Rescue *was* coming right?

She pushed herself up into a sitting position. She still wasn't too cold, but she could be warmer. Her dress was missing a lot of fringe now.

She'd have to check the rations. Borial had been alone with them all day yesterday. He'd better not have eaten them all. At least she could refill the water bottles, and what she had eaten yesterday hadn't made her sick. A wet-wipe bath was probably in order. Unlike yesterday, she hadn't woken up with the first light, which she took as a sign she was getting used to the place, for better or worse. She threw back her blanket and scooted towards the airlock to climb down.

Noise behind her made her whirl. There were people coming, moving awkwardly through the trees, pushing branches out of the way and stepping on twigs, rustling leaves. Elle caught flashes of yellow among the green, and then a shirtless yellow man with silvery white hair fought his way into their small clearing.

Holy hell. It was another Borial.

There was no mistaking it. Obviously, he was a different person. He wasn't as tall and his lean musculature was more prominent, but he had the silver eyes, the pointy ears, the long hair, though Borial's was longer. He was wearing white pants that stopped at the knee and a *collar*. It wasn't diamond encrusted like hers, but it still looked a bit dressed up, white and thick. The leash led back into the trees.

Their eyes met and he froze.

Then two more emerged from beside him. And two more.

Five yellow men with long white hair, short white pants and collars.

What the hell?

They all ducked their chins, looking down and away. More noise came from behind them, and they shuffled dutifully out of the way to make room for... Elle hoped her face wasn't broadcasting her shock too much because it was a yellow woman, a female of Borial's species. Long white hair, everything the same except she was taller than the males, taller than Borial, and had a willowy, long-legged frame with narrow shoulders and only very gentle curves. She instantly made Elle feel like a hobbit in comparison. She wore a long white dress, which was as scuffed with dirt and blue and green marks as the men's trousers, and an intricate sleeve of some kind. It looked like metal, but it could have been some fancy neo-plastic hybrid, metallic white, winding up her arm like a vine, with attachments for the men's leashes.

Elle put two and two together, but didn't get an answer. Obviously the collar and leash thing was not unheard of on Borial's planet, he wasn't an aberration in that, but did it mean anything that for this group, the men wore the collars and the woman held the leashes? Was Borial doing it wrong? Or could anyone be a slave? If it was common practice, why had he bought Elle? Why couldn't he get one of his own kind?

The woman inclined her head politely and spread her hands out by her hips. "Good greetings," she said. Her voice was soft and musical and as beautiful as she was, just as an elf's should be.

Elle realised she was being rude, and returned the small bow. "Good greetings."

"I am Elevated High Actor Limba Tandanen Ilis Manaken of Sopa. We have come to find other guests so we might co-operate and make this situation more comfortable."

"Ah, I am... Elle O'Neill." She hadn't had to give her last name in so long, she'd actually had to think about it for a second there. Saying it out loud sent thoughts of her family, her parents flickering through her mind. She didn't like that, it hurt – but she liked this woman talking to her as an equal. She

liked introducing herself, without Borial holding onto the end of her leash, making her do it like a trick, ready to pull if she got out of line.

Then she glanced at the five men staring at the ground only a couple of feet away from the woman. Did they get an introduction? Didn't seem like it. Oh boy, Elle knew how that felt. It was starting to make her queasy to be on the other side now, the alien who knew it was wrong, but wasn't going to say anything to help.

What would happen when Borial woke up? She guessed he'd put her collar back on, now they were in company. Maybe then the men would forgive her. Maybe they could make friends like dogs at a park.

"What should I call you, Elevated High Actor...?" Borial was the diplomat, not her, and Elle didn't want to put her foot in it and ruin something when this was a survival situation.

"You may call me Limba, of course. And how shall I address you?" She was so polite it was like being physically soothed by a soft touch.

"Elle is fine." She was struck by the woman, but she didn't want to make friends. She still had people on a leash. She was worse than Borial by a factor of five, if it worked like that, and Elle couldn't forget that, even if Limba was the first to treat her like a person since she'd left Earth. "Oh, let me get down."

Limba said nothing as Elle scrabbled gracelessly down the side of the pod, the skirt of fringe on her outfit getting snagged. When she had herself tidied up, she turned to face Limba again, who looked pleasant as if nothing had happened.

"I see you were in the ballroom as well."

"Ah, yes."

"But where are your shoes?" She tilted her head and frowned delicately in concern.

Elle quickly shot a look at the men. They were barefoot too. In case it was a slave thing, Elle said “In the pod.” She regretted the lie almost instantly. She wanted to be treated with the respect Limba was showing her, but how much more embarrassing would it be when the truth was revealed, and Limba knew she’d been pretending?

Speaking of the pod though, where the hell was Borial? She was in no hurry to be banged back in her collar, but he and Limba were the same species and competent adults. Maybe they could speed up the rescue and, more to the point, he’d come out eventually, and Elle didn’t want to get in trouble when he did. She hated it, even as she recognised what was happening, but Borial had stood between her and everyone for so long she yearned for it now. She was institutionalised. She liked the conversation, but it scared her too. Normally she could just listen and nobody even looked at her. This attention was fraying her nerves.

Elle opened her mouth, lifting her thumb to point over her shoulder at the airlock, about to tell Limba she would go and get her shoes, or her owner, when the door opened, and Borial hopped down, stealing any words from her throat.

He was shirtless and barefoot, his hair loose just like the other men. He kept his eyes down, and he was *wearing her fucking collar*. Not just carrying it, but actually around his neck. In one hand, he held the manacle that attached to the leash, and in the other, a pair of ugly grey slippers that she assumed he’d found in the emergency supplies because they looked more like the cosies people put on tissue boxes than actual footwear.

Elle was still too gobsmacked to speak when he knelt at her feet and attached the manacle to her wrist. She flinched back, resisting whatever this was. She wouldn’t have fought the collar, but she fought this new way of being tied to him because she didn’t understand it. How fucked up was that? It was pretty clear he was giving her the power for some reason, even as his hands were big enough and strong enough to force

the manacle on so smoothly Limba might not have even noticed Elle didn't want it.

"I have finished cleaning your manacle, Elevated Mistress," he said solemnly without looking at her. He lifted the slippers displaying them on his palm like a jeweller showing off a necklace. "I found these. I apologise I haven't the materials to fix your other shoes."

In the time that Elle had been with Borial, her comfort had largely depended on interpreting him, his moods, his wants, the way he spoke, everything, so she heard the note at the end of what he said that begged her not to give away that this wasn't normal.

She wasn't an idiot either. A few things clicked quickly into place. Primarily, he wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't of extreme importance. Under normal circumstances, Borial would rather swallow his own tongue than reverse their roles and act as her slave.

So it followed that actually, the slavery on his planet was for men. And all this time, he'd been doing something he shouldn't.

Elle didn't know yet which would get him punished more: keeping a female slave or refusing to be a slave himself, but Borial wouldn't be doing this unless their real relationship being discovered would lead to terrible things happening to him. Would he lose his job? Would he be publicly lashed? Would he be executed? Limba didn't seem capable of making that happen, she was still only one woman and Borial could definitely take her in a fight, even if he was shorter.

Comparing them now, Elle guessed he was older than Limba's men, and he wasn't as ropey. He was nothing to complain about, but he didn't have the six-pack abs or the defined hip ruts of the others. He didn't work out, and Elle suspected the others did... but if they hadn't fought Limba for their freedom, there must be a reason. There were five of them and one of her, and all their leashes were attached to the same

arm. They could run off and drag her behind them until she stopped wriggling and that would be that.

Elle experienced a spike of vengefulness. She could reveal Borial now, and let him be punished. Wouldn't she then be freed? Even if she wasn't, didn't he deserve it, for feeling her up all those times? She held all the power suddenly, and it wasn't because of the manacle.

But she hesitated. She just didn't know enough about the situation. Maybe she would be killed too, as an aberration of the system, or a witness. Maybe she would be put in a zoo, or sold on to someone else.

And did she want Borial to *die*? *Die-die*?

At the end of the day, and as much as she hated not being bolder, he was the devil she knew, and she was still more afraid of the unknown.

She could always expose him later. For now, she kind of wanted to see where this went.

As a test, she wound the leash around her hand, slow, in his face. When the slack was all taken up, she yanked, making his head jerk and his expression tighten angrily. Oh, that was satisfying.

The odds were that at the end of this, they'd be rescued and back on a ship and she'd be the one in the collar again. With that in mind, she thought she'd enjoy this while she could.

"Well, that's not good enough," she said, even as she recognised he was bringing her the slippers as a cover for her own status, but that was what power was. Power let you shit on the nice things people did for you. "I'll need to clean my feet before I put them on."

She turned and marched back to the pod, not giving him a chance to stand first, pulling him over. He struggled to his feet and followed, hunched as she held his neck inches from her shoulder. She hopped up into the open airlock, sitting with her feet swinging, making sure she was visible to Limba.

From the way Borial struggled to stop in time, it was clear he'd expected this to be ruse to get them inside and alone for a chat, but Elle knew where her interests lay. If Limba couldn't see them, she'd lose her leverage.

She kicked her feet and looked expectant. Borial struggled for a moment, then said "I'll get a cloth." He pushed past her to pull himself up into the pod, getting the wet wipes from one of the cabinets. Before he went back outside, he bent to hiss in Elle's ear, but at that moment Limba appeared at Elle's knee, peering in curiously, and he had to shut up and hop back out to kneel and wash Elle's feet. She rested her foot on his thigh, making sure to get his pants dirty.

"You have an Ure male," Limba commented, surprised, but she sounded in no way affronted or horrified. It was only that Elle was human that made the situation odd to her.

"That's right," Elle said smugly.

"How did that happen? If you don't mind me asking."

"Oh..." Her eyes drifted over to the pack of men on leashes for inspiration, but they just made her feel bad for what she was doing so she stuck to the truth. "He was being sold by traders. I found him in a cage. Isn't that right, B-" She swallowed his name. The odds were high this woman would recognise it, since Borial was hardly a nobody. They were the same species and had been on the same ship. They might be in the same line of work.

She'd flipped their roles to make a point. Maybe there was the slimmest chance this experience would stoke some remorse in Borial, make him understand what he'd done was wrong.

"Yes, Elevated Mistress," he intoned through gritted teeth. He wiped her feet, even cleaning between her toes and her nail beds. He could have half-assed it to get it over with, but he didn't, maybe because Limba was watching. He could have pinched her, but he didn't.

“How sad... His mistress must have died... I assume you checked that he wasn't sold for misbehaviour?”

This conversation was making the back of Elle's mouth sting like she'd had something sour, but she was in too deep now. “Of course.”

Limba smiled. “Well, he was fortunate then that you took him on.”

It was clearly meant to be a compliment, but Elle was limp as Borial slid the slippers onto her feet. They had no soles to speak of, but maybe they would be better than nothing.

“I don't think I'd want one that I didn't break myself,” Limba continued.

Elle contained her reaction, but she didn't miss how Borial wrapped a hand around her ankle, or how that hand trembled. If this was a cultural practice, it was not just playing dress-up in the collars. She had the urge to touch Borial somehow, reassure him, claim him, but she didn't know how and he didn't deserve it.

“And your... yours?” Elle asked, looking at the men again. She couldn't call them slaves, she just couldn't say it, but she didn't know if they were meant to be pets, or lovers, or servants, or what. She just wanted to move the conversation away from Borial. What could she say about him? That he made himself useful? That he was no trouble? That she was glad, in this fantasy, to have bought him, met him? None of that was true.

Limba looked at the men too and smiled at them, but it was like a horse trainer talking about horses, not a woman talking about men. She was proud of them as good flesh, not out of affection. “My first two were an arrangement between our families, I accepted one as a gift, and two I chose myself. Those are the ones I kept whole.”

Elle's translator was pretty good but it wasn't perfect. For the sake of her sanity, Elle decided not to interpret that as she would have on Earth. The men weren't horses.

“I see. Well, are you hungry? If your escape pod had the same rations as ours, then they can’t have lasted long between the six of you.” She changed the subject desperately, climbing up back into the pod and digging out all the food and water, as if she could pay the woman to go away. How had she ever liked Limba, even for a moment? How had she ever thought Limba respected her? She didn’t. She respected the mistake she had made about Elle when she assumed Elle was like her. She didn’t respect what Elle actually was, which was someone in the same position as the men she kept on leads.

“Thank you,” Limba said as softly and graciously as a princess. She was the kind of demur fairy woman that didn’t exist on Earth – or at least not anywhere Elle had ever been – the kind that Red Pill douchebags fantasised about, and Elle didn’t think she’d ever met anyone as evil as her. How about that?

Elle carried out their unopened water and six ration bars. For herself and Borial, they could refill the bottles they’d already emptied, and she left a few bars tucked out of sight. Still, they’d better be rescued soon. Limba took a water bottle and drained half in seconds, but she made no move to invite the men over. She took a bar and unwrapped it as quickly as her grace would allow. “You are too generous.”

Elle kept looking over at the men, waiting for them to come to take theirs, but Limba acted as if they weren’t there and they didn’t move. “Aren’t-?” She stopped herself. If she said something, and Limba denied them the food, giving it to them would become something fraught, something that might upset this delicate situation of being alone in the woods on an alien planet and outnumbered. Better to just do it. She nudged Borial. “Take them theirs.”

He snapped his head up to look at her from where he knelt as she emptied her arms into his. When her hands were free, she unclipped his collar, trying to make it look like something she’d done a thousand times. He stared at her.

“Do it,” she ordered, giving him eyes. Was she offended that he seemed surprised she would be thoughtful towards them? She didn’t quite feel guilty yet for bossing him around, but that was different. He had it coming.

He stood and carried the nutrition bars over to the knot of men huddled at the treeline. They took the bars, shooting wary looks at her and Limba the whole time, as if one of the women was going to walk over and smack it out of their hands.

Elle kept half an eye on Borial. What was it doing to him, she wondered, to interact with them? He was an ambassador. He had dodged their fate, somehow, but now he was having to wear it like a mask. Was he terrified of being discovered? Did he feel guilty for being different from them? She could see he was speaking to them quietly, though she couldn’t hear what he was saying.

It jarred. It really jarred, to see him being kind and humane to them, when he’d kept *her* as a slave for three years. She didn’t want to be angry at him for showing basic sympathy, but she was. This situation was fucked up already and now it was just piling more and more layers of fucked up on top.

Limba turned to watch him. “He must be very loyal.”

“Why?”

“You untied him.”

“I didn’t feel like getting up.” God, how was Elle going to handle this? How long was this awful woman going to be here? Should Elle try to rescue the men? Everything she’d ever been taught and her own experience said yes, but how could she possibly, without just pushing Limba off a cliff or something? And Elle already knew what Borial would say. He would want to do nothing. Save himself. Because clearly, he wasn’t opposed to slavery as a practice, he just didn’t want the short end of that stick.

She needed to get Borial alone and have a serious discussion about this, not that they'd ever managed to have a serious discussion about anything before. She'd tried, over the years, to corner him and make him see that he shouldn't be doing what he was doing, but he never listened. If she was alone with him now, what would happen? Would he flip their roles back to what he wanted? Put the collar on her and drag her off into the woods, leaving the men to their fates?

Limba opened her mouth to speak, but Elle cut her off, not wanting to talk about what a good slave Borial made. "Your pod, is it far?"

Limba smiled. "No, it's not."

"Did you bring anything from it? Blankets, rations?"

"No."

Why not? "Was it damaged? Did you crash?"

"Oh, no." Limba continued to smile politely, vapidly. "The autopilot landed it very well."

"I'm glad none of you were hurt." There were only four seats in the pod, so two of the men would have had a bumpy ride at the very least, but Elle guessed Limba didn't count them.

She inclined her head, acknowledging Elle's consideration.

"What made you leave your pod? The rescue team will go to the beacon, it's safest if you wait there."

"There wasn't enough supplies for the six of us, as you said, and I got bored."

You got bored?!

"I wanted to find other people, in case they had any improvements to make to the situation."

This woman was a parasite. She'd descended with her swarm to Hoover up Elle and Borial's rations, and then what? Would they move on to the next person?

Borial edged up beside Elle, reaching out for the last two bottles of water that sat beside her, as if he expected her to hit him or something. Elle pretended she didn't see him as he silently lifted them up and carried them off like a thief to bring to the other men. At least he was taking care of them, even if he was acting like Elle would stop him.

Two bottles of water for five men. It wasn't enough. She didn't know how long they'd been without water, but they'd need more soon. She knew where to find it, but she was suddenly faced with a problem. She didn't want to leave Borial here with Limba. But if Elle took Borial into the woods with her, what would happen? If she left Limba and her men with the pod to themselves, what would happen?

It was like that damn puzzle with the wolf and the chicken and the river.

She didn't like it, but there was really only one thing she could do. She'd have to take a chance on leaving Limba and her pack with the pod, and she'd have to trust Borial. The potential material loss wasn't worth risking any physical harm coming to him or anyone else, and if he strapped the collar back onto her, well... Had she really thought she was going to escape? It would have happened anyway sooner or later.

Elle fixed on her best neutral smile. "Don't worry, I've already explored the area. I can find water for us, and I know what's edible, for me at least, and I'm sure we're similar."

Limba practically simpered, tipping her head and smiling, taking a gentle feminine grasp of Elle's bare arm, making her fight not to recoil. It felt as though Limba should be able to feel her skin crawling away. "How capable you are. I knew it was the right decision to come here."

"We'll be rescued soon," Elle insisted, reassuring herself as well.

"Yes," Limba agreed. Elle waited for more but nothing came.

Time to go.

6

As soon as she and Borial were deep enough in the trees to be out of sight, he ripped the collar off like he was allergic to it, thrust it at her so he wouldn't have to touch it any longer, and scrubbed his hands against his neck.

“Borial, what the fuck is going on?” Elle hissed at him, throwing a cautious glance back at the clearing as he stomped off with a dark murmur. She jogged after him. She wasn't going to let him avoid answering her. She grabbed his arm, and he shook her off. “You owe me some answers!”

“Where are we going? Where is this water?” he demanded.

Elle pointed, because he *was* taking them off track. “Borial,” she called when he stormed off that way instead. “Borial! You're going to explain this to me or I'm not going to play along anymore! I don't want to be a slave-owner! I don't want to make nice with that woman!”

He stopped to shake off a leaf that had stuck to his bare sole, then snapped, kicking through the undergrowth in a fury, ripping leaves up then stamping on saplings, holding onto the tops to make sure he thoroughly broke them.

Elle hung back, letting him get it out. She'd never seen him like this before. Clearly the situation wasn't ideal, but did he really dare to get this pissed off about having to act the slave for a morning in front of *her*? But then, fairness was never really a consideration for him.

Eventually, he'd destroyed enough that he regained control of himself, standing with his hands on his hips and his head tipped back. He pressed his lips together as if he wanted to scream, then took a deep breath and got it under control.

He turned back to Elle. “Come, let's get the water.”

She approached. “I don't think you're in a position to tell me what to do anymore.”

“Humour me.”

He took her arm to pull her along, which she'd always found annoying but it was better than the leash. It was strange to be walking next to him while he was only wearing pants, and their steps actually made a sound. She could see his yellow skin shift over his muscles and bones just inches away, turning his body into one cohesive machine. Normally his bare skin was reserved for the dark, under bed covers, for the times he wouldn't talk about. There were tangles in his hair, disrupting the smoothness, and making him look real and masculine somehow, less like an elegant painting, and she had the urge to reach out and fix them for him.

It was not a short walk, but she'd give him a moment of peace. It hadn't escaped her that she was the one carrying the water bottles. What was she doing, giving him sympathy, when all that had happened was he'd got a taste of his own medicine?

When they got to the small spring, and Elle crouched to fill the bottles, he found a rock to sit on behind her.

“I will tell you,” he announced, trying for his customary grandeur, but it wobbled.

Elle focused on her task, giving him space, because she did want to hear it.

“You may have noticed...” he began, choosing his words carefully. “That I have... *needs*... that I can't control.” He left a beat for her to reply, but she didn't. “On my planet, males outnumber females many times over. It got to the point- Well, there have been many movements throughout history trying to deal with this, but currently we are in a situation where-” He struggled, then rushed on. “Males need to mate. We need to. We need to have a female. It has been bred into us by the scarcity of females. Only the males who would do *anything* to father children did so, and through the generations, we have evolved to be... desperate creatures.”

Elle finished her first bottle, capped it, and set it aside, taking the opportunity to peek at him. He sounded sad, defeated, but his expression was pure self-disgust.

“Obviously, we didn’t want to hurt the females, and they were being hurt, in the fights over them, and we were losing them and making things worse. The laws changed, generation by generation, and now, they choose. They choose their harem and once a male is mated to her there’s nothing he can do. It is for life. It is instinct, biology. It is simply how we are made. So if she asks him to wear a collar, he does. If she asks him to- He does. We do. We do it. Whatever the female asks. And things are stable, on Sopa.”

Elle chanced a reply this time. “That hasn’t been my experience.”

He looked up at her from where he had been staring at his hands, lost in thought. “You mean between us. No, well, we’re not mated.”

The rubber underwear. Okay, so, he was saying if he ever actually stuck his dick in her, their power relationship would have flipped? No wonder he made her wear it.

“But I still need you. A woman of my own. It was too difficult without. I couldn’t endure it, I would have sold myself to a female of my own kind and-” He shook his head. “I didn’t want that.”

“So you made me a slave instead? So you wouldn’t have to be one?”

“I treat you well.”

“You keep saying that! You understand that having no freedom of my own is not treating me well, right? You understand keeping me as a prisoner with every single thing about my life being decided for me is not treating me well? I’m not going to thank you for not being worse.”

“It was a... necessary evil.”

“No, it wasn’t! You could have hired somebody! You could have *romanced* somebody! You didn’t have to buy a poor little alien with no one to defend her. But you did, so you could keep the power.” Elle took a deep breath. It wouldn’t do to be overheard yelling about this, not if they were going to try to maintain the ruse when they got back to camp.

“I understand,” she began, not believing she was really doing this, extending any measure of compassion for him, but she *really* wanted him to get this. “That sex is scary for you. But you’re an ambassador. You *know* it’s not like that everywhere. You could have found someone willing, but you didn’t want to. You didn’t want to trust somebody, when owning them is safer, so you can snap your fingers and they *have* to be in your bed. You are not a victim, Borial. You made *me* the victim, and it wasn’t self-defence, it was just fear and power working together.”

Maybe her words had some kind of effect on him, because he tucked into himself, pressing his knees together and leaning over them, folding his arms into the gap. “I never found anyone I was compatible with. Do you think it’s so easy? That anyone would do?”

“I remember being in a cage, and *so scared*, Borial. And you came and *bought* me, and you want to talk about compatibility? I thought you looked so *human* compared to the other aliens I’d seen, that I really thought for a moment that you were there to rescue me. Then you put a leash on me. You didn’t have to do that. You really didn’t. You could have just asked, and I would have said yes, for fuck’s sake. I was in a *cage*. Do you think I wouldn’t have agreed to live with you to get out of it?”

“Would that have been better? I would still have-”

“It would have been my *choice!*” She wrestled herself back under control. “You never once gave me the choice.” He opened his mouth as if to speak but she cut him off. “And it’s too late now.” If he asked her now, she’d say no out of spite.

Urgh, she was so angry! She turned back to filling water bottles. They'd brought four. It wasn't enough for the eight of them. How many trips a day would they have to make? She felt like Limba's servant, though maybe that was a step up from Borial's slave.

"I couldn't afford to give you a choice. What if you said no?"

"Fuck you, Borial. Fuck *yooooooooou*." He made her so mad. Did he really expect her to point out what they both knew, that if she'd said no, *then* he could have brought out the collar? It could have been his last resort, not his go-to.

Though... would that have been better?

"What do I have to do now?" She wanted to change the subject. "Do I really have to pretend you're my slave? Why can't you just be free?"

"It doesn't work like that. Ure males are never free, we need females."

"You don't need to wear a collar though. We could just be in a relationship, like we do on Earth." Which reminded her. She turned back to him. "What am I protecting you from, anyway, by doing this? And how did you manage to become an ambassador if the men on your planet are all enslaved?"

"My mother is... important. She sent me to a boarding school off-world and I never returned. To save face, she made me an ambassador. If I ever return to Ure-controlled space, I'll be shackled to a woman before the day ends."

"But why do we need to pretend you're a slave?"

Borial gave a long sigh, and Elle wasn't sure if it was because he found her stupid, or because it depressed him to admit the state of his species' affairs. "Limba is also important. If we pretended to be in a relationship, as you put it, it would upset her males. By pretending to be a slave, she won't find out who I really am, and she will consider me your property. If I don't belong to you, she has the legal rights to kidnap me and take me back to Sopa to be... assigned. I am a

deviant, an aberration, and an embarrassment to other Ure. It is only because no one knows what I do that I can live free.”

“Wow, being kidnapped and enslaved, that must suck,” Elle said, labouring it to make sure he understood her sarcasm. “So your mother doesn’t know you’re keeping me as a slave?”

He looked away. “I have told her I have a helper, that is all. My mother doesn’t travel among other cultures. She doesn’t know what aliens are like, so she believes anything I tell her.”

“And does she think you’re a freak, and all that?”

“She doesn’t approve. She wants me to return home and settle down and contribute to a family, but she hasn’t seen me in so long, she doesn’t really care. She has other children.”

“Why don’t you want that, if that’s your culture? You clearly don’t think slavery is that bad if you can do it to me.”

“I have never hurt you. Ure females hurt their mates. Badly. There is a... custom. A medical procedure. They all do it. They find the needs of their males too taxing when they have so many, so they keep one or two for procreation or pleasure, and the rest they... make the needs go away. I didn’t want that to happen to me.”

Anyone else, and Elle would have stopped pushing, but Borial didn’t deserve that from her, not when she was in this insane situation with him. “Why not, if you don’t want a mate? You don’t have sex with me, you don’t like your ‘needs’, I know you find them inconvenient and awkward and embarrassing. Wouldn’t you be happier if you got rid of them?”

“No.”

“But-”

“*No.*”

Elle wasn’t such a bitch that she’d keep pushing even now. She had a pretty good idea what he was talking about. She tried to sanitise it in her mind like he had, with words like

‘medical procedure’. Maybe it wasn’t so bad, like a vasectomy. She had to think of it that way, because the alternative was too horrible to turn her mind towards. But at the same time, was it her problem? How much did she really owe him?

She let it sit for a quiet moment.

“So you need to pretend to belong to me so Limba doesn’t take you home and make you a slave, is that right?”

“Preferably, yes.”

“You know what I’m going to ask you, right?”

“What?”

Elle crossed her arms. “What’s in it for me?”

“What?”

“You think I’m going to do this for free? Out of the goodness of my heart? You’re a professional negotiator. You must see that I have the leverage here, for the first time since we met.”

His jaw clenched, she saw the little tick of muscle at the corner, and his lips tightened. “What do you want?”

“My freedom, obviously.”

“No.”

“You can get someone else, it doesn’t have to be me.”

“Why would I do that? We’ll be rescued together, and after that, where do you think you’ll go?”

“I’ll go back to your planet with Limba, and get myself a team of men to look after me.”

His eyes widened with genuine shock, as if that was the vilest thing he’d ever heard. She waited for him to come up with a counter argument, but the seconds ticked by and he thought and thought, and she watched him realise he really didn’t have the power here, she did.

“Define freedom,” he said slowly, unspooling the words as if every syllable cost him teeth.

“I choose where I go and what I do. You can’t give me orders anymore. I decide what I wear and when, what I eat and when, when I sleep and when I get up. I bathe when I want to. No more Sazi. I decide what make-up I wear, *if* I want to wear it. I talk to whoever I want, for as long as I want. No more collar, no more leash. You’ll give me money, so I can do all that. I have all the freedom you do, make all the decisions about myself that you decide about yourself. And I’m not your legal property. If I decide to leave, you can’t get the police or soldiers to bring me back. I have rights.”

Borial looked pained, rubbing his forehead with the tips of his long elegant fingers, his eyes closed. “So you are saying I have already lost you?”

“I’ll still live on your ship with you, if you behave yourself.”

“And if I don’t? You will abandon me?”

“Well, if I don’t behave for you, what happens to me? Huh? I can only imagine it’s worse than what will happen to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“If I fought you, and screamed, and embarrassed you every time you took me out, you’d get rid of me. Sell me or kill me or give me away.”

“No, I would never do that, I need you,” he said simply, as if it was obvious, of no consequence.

Elle snorted, “Come on.”

He looked up at her as if surprised by her reaction. “It’s true. I need you, I’ve told you that. I wouldn’t have bought a slave if I didn’t. If you behaved like a feral animal, I would restrain you more, that’s all. Separating us is not an option for me.”

Elle hesitated to believe him, to believe that she had any kind of security in the life he kept her in, but he didn't seem to notice.

“But you're telling me my options are to either let Limba abduct me and see me bound to a female on Sopa, or to host you on my ship and suffer.”

“Suffer?”

“If I give you all these *choices*,” he said disdainfully, “You hardly expect me to believe you will choose to come to my bed when I need you to.”

Shit. Would she? Was that what she was saying? According to him, that was the only investment he had in her. Without that, he had no motivation to keep them together at all. Sure, today, he didn't want Elle to expose him to Limba, but in the long-term... If she did sell him out, she wouldn't really have anywhere to go. Maybe she could make something of a life on Sopa, but that had largely been a bluff. There was no guarantee Limba would let her go there, or that she would be able to do what she'd said and take a pack of males of her own, and if she did, wasn't that just trading one Borial for five? Even if she told herself she'd give them their freedom, if Borial was telling the truth and they couldn't leave her, she'd just find herself in bed with an alien much more often than she did at the moment.

She could see his point. Unless she agreed to comfort him in his times of need, he had no reason not to simply turn himself in right then and there, which meant she should at least agree for now... no matter what she actually intended to do.

“...I will, if you honour my demands and treat me as an equal.”

Borial stared at her, maybe doubting her.

“It's what you need, right? In exchange for room and board, and a wage, I'll do what I've been doing. I'll be like

Xerjan.” She met Borial’s gaze and held it, willing him to believe her, trying to give nothing away.

“Alright...” he said eventually, maybe only believing her because he had no choice. “But then there will be limits on your freedom. You will have to go where the ship goes, and that is where I need it to go, to carry out my duties. And you cannot and must not dress, speak, or act offensively to any of the people I meet with in an official capacity. You will not embarrass me or reveal any sensitive information about me or my work. Nor will you eat anything or attempt anything that could risk your life.”

Elle held up a hand. “I’m not trying to die or start any wars. I promise not to do any of that *on purpose*. Accidents happen, though. I don’t know much about aliens. You’ll have to teach me.”

He seemed to consider this. “Fair.”

“So it’s a deal. I’ll help you now, and in exchange, I get to make my own decisions once we’re back on the ship. *Forever*. I’ll help you when you need it, and you’ll let me stay on the ship and pay me?”

Borial took a deep, reluctant breath. “You won’t leave or refuse me, and in exchange I will be less heavy-handed.”

She gave him a warning look.

“I will give you freedom,” he amended. “Provided my needs are met.”

“We are in agreement?” she clarified, aware that what he’d said was not the same as what she’d said.

He nodded, once, firmly. “We are.”

She walked over to him and held out her hand for a shake. He looked puzzled, and she realised they’d never done this before. They’d never had any reason to. “Palm to palm. It’s how we seal a bargain on Earth.”

Always quick with foreign customs, Borial gave her his hand and she shook it twice and let go. A shiver of fear still

passed through her, like an electrical current upsetting her insides. If he decided to renege, he could. He was still bigger and stronger. Once they were back on the ship, she'd have no leverage any more. She just had to believe he would keep his word.

“And you'll teach me to use the computers,” she added as he stood.

He huffed. “Very well.”

“What do I have to do then, to convince Limba?”

He looked at her sideways, as if she should know. “Only what I have always done to you.” He reached out and took the collar from her hand, though he didn't put it on yet. “Finish with the water.”

“Why don't *you* finish with the water?” He narrowed his eyes, but she drew his attention to the bottles she'd already filled. “As equals, remember?”

It clearly galled him, but he gave in after a moment and moved around her to kneel by the stream.

It seemed he intended to honour their agreement.

7

When they got back to the clearing, before they were in sight, Borial put the collar back on with a grimace. Elle took a moment to really look at him in it, with his chest and feet bare. Did he look different from Limba's men? Not really, not in any huge way that she could see. Was it really that easy, to turn an ambassador into a slave? Take his shirt and shoes, and put a collar on him? Would all the politicians and rulers he'd dealt with at all those fancy parties turn away from him now, the way they'd turned away from her?

The collar was thick, every inch studded with white diamonds, in stark contrast to the rest of him that was growing increasingly scruffy and dirty. It made his hair look greyer, more silver in comparison where it fell about his shoulders. She wondered how it felt against his Adam's apple, if it was too small for him, since it was made for her. He didn't seem uncomfortable in it, not physically anyway. She tried not to think whether it suited him or not.

Elle followed Borial to the knot of males who were now leashed to a low tree branch to hand out the water, and once again, Elle's stomach turned over. They only had four bottles. She and Borial had drunk their fill at the spring, but the walk wasn't a short one. Would they leave themselves with nothing, when they had been the ones to get it? Even if they gave out every bottle here and now, one of Limba's men would get nothing unless someone shared.

The men's eyes widened in alarm when they spotted her approach, but they couldn't escape, leashed as they were. Their gazes darted around, to the ground, her face, the sky, her shoulder. They clearly didn't know which would be ruder, to look at her or to look away.

"Here, water," Borial said, handing the first of them a bottle. Thankfully, he took it.

“My name’s Elle, what’s yours?” she said, holding out a second bottle.

It would almost be comical, the way he turned his face away from her like a guilty dog.

“My Elevated Mistress is a different species. She’ll be offended if you don’t answer her,” Borial said.

The man deliberated for a moment more, then answered quietly, “Tiks.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tiks,” Elle smiled, trying to hear any similarity in his voice to Borial’s, and any way they were different.

Limba popped up behind the group, scanning everything almost innocently. “Elle, you found water?”

“Yes.” She had one bottle left in her hands, the others had gone to the males. It didn’t take her more than a couple of moments to run the calculations. If Elle didn’t hand it over, Limba would take a bottle from her mates, who would get less as a result. She could practically feel Borial radiating pressure in her direction. She guessed it would be a faux pas for him to give Limba anything. Biting down on a grimace, Elle held out her bottle. “Here. For you.”

“*Thank* you,” Limba gushed, her hand going to her heart. She drank some, then capped the rest. She could share. She didn’t. The five males had three bottles between them. Borial and Elle had none.

In her mind, she urged the males to finish quickly, and she didn’t miss the way they turned their backs to their mistress, huddling in a protective circle as the water was passed around. They must be starving, Elle thought, but they had no containers for food. Maybe she could use a blanket as a sack. It would be best if she could get some of the men to accompany them, then more of them could eat their fill before carrying food back for the rest.

There was no one else to breach the subject. The men clearly just got what was given to them. Elle was the only one

who could talk to Limba. “We need food.”

Borial was probably mentally slapping his forehead at her lack of finesse, but Mr Ambassador wasn't allowed to speak, so Elle had to rely on her three years of watching him. Well, half-watching him.

Limba nodded gracefully, ruefully, as if this was an indelicate, embarrassing necessity that she was shy about acknowledging. “Yes.”

“B- My... male and I can't carry enough to feed everyone. We'll need help. Send some of your males with us.” Elle spotted the glint of suspicion that immediately came into Limba's eyes. “Or we can all go, but it's not a short walk, uphill into the woods. And if the rescue comes while we're away, there'll be no one here to tell them to wait.”

Limba didn't look convinced, but she turned her eyes to her males, considering them one by one with narrow-eyed scrutiny. Then she made a decision. “You can take Tiks and Oloh,” she announced, unclipping two leashes from the tree and clipping them together instead, so that the two males had a length of chain dragging between them.

So four members of the party would go out and get food for the other four. Those were numbers Elle could work with. Limba would stay back with the majority of her males, happy as Larry.

“Thank you,” she said, and she nudged Borial. “Go and see what you can find that we can use to carry food back, blankets and such, the bags that they came in.”

He walked off, and the two males kept their heads down, glancing at each other nervously while Elle smiled at Limba, hoping he wouldn't take long.

When he returned, she led them off into the woods.

Tiks and Oloh followed at enough of a distance that she felt she could whisper to Borial without being overheard.

“Can we help them?”

“No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“What are you proposing? They belong to Limba.”

“They’re people, they don’t belong to anyone.”

“If someone stole you from me, do you think I wouldn’t pursue it? Bring the law after you?”

“Fuck you.” She didn’t need the reminder of how trapped she was.

“You think there is a difference between escape and kidnapping. Legally, there is not.”

“But couldn’t we-?”

“They want to be with Limba. She is their mistress, their mate, their female, whatever word you want to use. Just because you dislike our situation doesn’t mean they dislike it.”

“Then why have you tried so hard to avoid it?”

“Once an Ure male mates, his brain chemistry changes. I have not mated, so I can see the flaws, just like you can.”

She opened her mouth to keep arguing, scowling, but he turned her to face him, stopping them but keeping his voice low. “If you remove them from Limba now, they will only grieve her loss. Maybe they might find a new mistress, but it’s unlikely. Only the most charitable of females will take a male that’s belonged to another first. Without a female, they will suffer. There is no place for them in Ure society, other than perhaps a hospital.”

“But you said their needs have been... removed.” She tried not to think what that meant.

“Maybe.”

She watched him, waiting for him to say whether that made a difference, but he didn’t. He didn’t seem to think it was worth helping them. “So if they don’t need her, what’s to

stop them doing like you did, living in space? You could give them a job on the ship.”

He sighed heavily. “It’s...” He struggled to explain. “They would be sad,” he finished.

“You could at least ask.”

“If they admitted, even to me, that they wanted to leave her... That sort of thing is brutally punished on Sopa. They would never risk it.”

“You could *ask*.”

“And then what? We don’t have our own ship here. We will be rescued together. Do you suggest we buy them? Do you know what that would cost? Do you think Limba would agree? Do you think she wouldn’t replace them with others as soon as she returns to civilisation? And if she says no, do we steal them? How would we do that? Can you imagine the consequences?”

“Borial, I know you don’t get this, but some things are worth more than preserving a polite political atmosphere. Who is Limba, anyway? What can she really do to us, realistically? Especially if she can just replace them, who’s to say she’d care?”

“She would care. It is the highest form of robbery, an insult a female will not bear. And she is the ruler of an important mining colony for Sopa. It is distant from our home planet, but that just means the oversight is non-existent. She could kill us all and Sopa might not find out for months, maybe years.”

“Kill us with *what*?” Elle asked, exasperated.

Borial threw up his hands, just as frustrated as she was that Elle was not grasping this. “Whatever she pleases!”

Elle was caught between thinking he wasn’t trying because slavery was normal for him, and believing him, that it really was somehow a lost cause. He knew his society better than her, and how things worked in space.

It made her sick to think about. Would she let those men go back to their lives on leashes if she knew fighting for them would risk her life? Shouldn't she risk her life for them, just on the principle? Wasn't that how she'd been raised? But was she strong enough, and could she pull it off? She hadn't even managed to save herself. She didn't want to die or suffer or get hurt if it wouldn't actually change anything. And how many lives made it worth it? Would she risk war for just one? Shouldn't she? How many times had she wished someone would try for her? Just try?

Borial sighed. "You don't understand, Elle."

"I'm the one who's been a slave!"

"No, Elle, you don't understand. What you have done for me is nothing compared to the reality of what Ure males live through."

"All the more reason to help!"

He stepped toward her, taking her face in his hands and looking down into her eyes. He looked some combination of desperate, scared, and touched. Elle staggered, the sudden intimacy uncomfortable. "Please listen to me. What you are suggesting will not work. It is not that simple. Separating them from Limba will not solve anything." He moved one hand to lift hers to his chest, pressing it against his sternum. "The chains are in here. That is how it is for Ure males. Do you understand? When we are bound to a female, we do not think of freedom anymore. We are not like your kind."

Elle found that hard to swallow, and she knew it showed on her face, but Borial maybe realised how he was touching her and stepped away, and she let it drop because Tiks and Oloh had caught up to them, glancing curiously at the way Borial had been holding her.

She cleared her throat. "This way." As she stomped off, Borial fell in with the two men, and she heard them start a quiet conversation she couldn't make out.

Maybe he was spinning them some fairy story about the romance possible between mates, to encourage them to leave Limba.

Ha.

Elle really couldn't see the appeal in having five mates, if this was how Limba lived, with the men only talking to each other and too quiet for her to hear.

It took them a long time to find enough to eat, moving from tree to tree. They had to feed themselves first, and fruit wasn't exactly filling. She thought about the four back at the pod. She wondered if Limba had finished off the ration bars yet. She wondered how hungry her other three mates were.

She tried to engage Tiks and Oloh, show them they didn't have to be scared of her. She passed them fruit and said "Here you go," with a smile, but they would just accept it with a bob of the head, their eyes on the ground.

At least they talked to Borial, and got some kind of outside perspective, she hoped. She didn't know how committed Borial was to this bit. Very, judging by what she'd seen so far. He was probably telling them how much he loved wearing a collar and being mated to her... if he could get it out with a straight face.

She watched them together. They didn't look the same, even if they did all have yellow skin and long silvery-white hair, and wore nothing but similar white cropped trousers. Did he enjoy talking to them? He made it sound like he hadn't spoken to his own species in a long time. Did they have anything in common?

She took him aside again, after they'd been picking fruit for almost an hour, and had moved on to filling the blanket instead of their own stomachs.

"What have you been talking about?" she asked. "Have they said anything?"

"Nothing unexpected. They asked me about you, since you're not Ure, and where we live, and how we met, and such.

They don't want to talk about Limba.”

“What did you tell them? What if they report back to her and she asks me and I don't know what you said?”

“Calm down. I repeated what you told her. I was being sold and you bought me, and we live on a ship going from place to place. That's all.”

“Okay...”

“I did learn that Oloh's cousin is another of Limba's mates, and they're very close. It's why she chained them together. Oloh won't leave his cousin behind, and Tiks can't go anywhere without him.”

Elle glanced at the two men, a sick feeling in her stomach. She hated it, she hated it all, even if just then they didn't look unhappy, staring up into branches for fruit. “Do they love her?”

When Borial was silent, she looked up at him instead, but he was watching the others. He felt her gaze and met her eyes briefly, offering her only a helpless shrug.

8

As the daylight started to fade, and the greenery around them began to shift to blue, Elle guided them back down the mountain to the pod. That had taken far too long to do every day. One trip for water and one for food? Things would get very uncomfortable if they weren't rescued soon.

Limba and the others gathered round hungrily as they arrived, so they laid the blankets out on the clearing floor and had something like a picnic, lit by the throbbing orange beacon and the interior light coming through the pod's airlock. While Limba was distracted, Elle followed Borial back into the pod. She checked what was left of the supplies, gathering up everything she could carry, while Borial checked the computer for messages. Nothing. He snagged up a packaged tent, and they snuck away. Elle didn't want Limba helping herself to the little they had left, but she didn't want to be seen hoarding it either.

Limba's mates never complained about being hungry or thirsty, or cold, or dirty. They just stayed clustered together by their tree, Tiks and Oloh leashed to it once again, like an external embodiment of Elle's dilemma, a guilt tumour.

Limba was taking the pod for the night, of course. Borial set up the tent as far away as he could, and Elle appreciated the limited privacy. When he was done, he came over and cleared his throat.

"I have finished preparing our tent, Elevated Mistress," he said, giving her a significant look. He had explained that all females were 'Elevated'. She hadn't missed that he'd said 'our'.

God, this was another thing, wasn't it? Another thing she would have to do for this bullshit situation. She would have to share his tent to sell the idea that he was her slave.

She tried to be mad, but she was too tired. All she wanted was to crawl into the thin shelter and get out of this

crazy world where slavery was just fine and dandy. She hadn't won any of the fights she'd taken on that day, and she felt beaten down. All she wanted to do was stop pretending for a little bit.

She followed him into the tent. It was odd, the fabric puffy and unfamiliar, some space-age stuff that she just had to shrug off and accept, as usual. Borial had done his best, though, she did allow him that.

“Can you make sure the other men have blankets?” she asked, her voice low, trying not to be overheard by Limba.

He gave her a pained look. “There aren't enough,” he whispered.

That wasn't good enough. Elle knew the pod was outfitted for four people, and there were currently eight of them, but still. “Is Limba letting any of them share the pod with her?”

“One or two, her favourites.”

Elle pulled the blankets out from under her. “Give the others these.”

Borial hesitated. “Elle...”

“What?!”

“Limba won't like you providing anything for her males. Not at all.”

“I don't care!” she hissed, and Borial took the two blankets and left, coming back a moment later.

Elle scowled and lay on her side, facing the wall of the tent. The floor of it was cushioned too much, as if inflated, making her struggle to keep her balance. Borial lay down behind her. She hadn't been too cold sleeping on top of the pod, so she didn't think they'd get cold now. She and Borial would heat the space just by being in it.

Tomorrow, she would insist Limba go and get the blankets and pillows from the pod she'd abandoned.

“Elle,” Borial whispered.

“What?” she snapped back.

“Thank you.”

That gave her pause. She sat up to look down at him, his hair spreading around his face. “You’ve never thanked me before.” She was thinking of all the heats, all the parties, everything he’d put her through.

“Yes, I have. You just didn’t understand me,” he said, and he gestured at the translator fitted to his ear with a weak smile.

Damn him, where did he get off acting so wistful when their whole relationship was his fault, on his terms? She understood now that he’d always taken her translator so she couldn’t give him orders, since it seemed he’d be biologically compelled to follow them, but still. He’d kept her in the dark on purpose.

“That’s another thing that’s going to change,” she decided, barely aware of what her mouth was saying. “You don’t take my translator anymore. Things are going to be different.”

He opened his mouth to object, a glint of fear and affront in his eyes, but she cut him off. He wasn’t giving the orders anymore. She shifted onto her knees to look at him properly.

“We’re not going to do it like we always have.”

“But you agreed to help me!” he whispered, lifting himself onto his elbows and glancing nervously in the direction of Limba through the tent wall.

“I will, but I’m making it more pleasant for me. I get my translator.” She thought for a second. “And *you* wear the rubber underwear if you want it!”

His jaw dropped, and she could tell he was uncomfortable to be discussing it. If he still had the power,

he'd be leaving the room, but he didn't. In fact, he was still wearing the collar. Had he forgotten it?

Her lips curled in a smile. "That's right. You're the one who doesn't want to have sex, so you wear it. And I'm done being sexually frustrated. When we're in bed together, I'm not going to lie there like a log anymore. I'm going to touch you back."

His eyes leapt wide in maidenly shock. "You can't do that!"

"Why not? Your hands are all over me."

"That's... different!"

"Why? Because you're in control? If you're wearing your rubber underwear, you'll have nothing to fear."

"It will be more uncomfortable for me than it is for you."

"How do you know how uncomfortable it is for me? Because let me tell you, it's uncomfortable."

"But you don't have..."

"A dick?" She shrugged. "Then don't wear it if you don't want to."

He took a steadying breath, determined to make her understand. "We can't- You can't touch me. It will be different then. I will react... differently."

"You mean you'll like it? So will I, so we're even."

He tipped his head back with a noise of frustration. "I don't want to be mated, I don't want to enjoy it, I don't want to get any closer to you than I have to be!"

"Then you shouldn't have bought a fucking slave," she told him through gritted teeth. "You're only thinking of yourself, thinking your sexual needs matter more than mine, well they don't. I want to have sex too! I wish I could have it with someone other than you, someone I like, but this is the situation we find ourselves in. It's hard for me, to have a man

touch me like that all the time and have nothing happen. Is it so bad if we just lie face to face? Kiss? If I put my hands on your shoulders? I can make myself come, you don't even have to do anything."

She started her speech angry and finished it shy. She didn't want to sound like she was asking permission – had *he* ever asked for permission? – but still, it was hard to ask anyone to kiss and cuddle her, and treat her more gently, especially when that man was her slavemaster.

Borial shuddered, and gave an aggrieved moan, covering his face with his hands as he flopped onto his back again, drawing her attention to the swollen lump in his pants. Her eyebrows shot up. Had she turned him on? She never had before, outside of his-

"Oh. But you just finished..."

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice muffled by his hands. "It's Limba. I haven't been around a female of my own kind since I became an adult. I can only think my system must be... reacting, to her. Like I said, we are desperate creatures."

He scrubbed his face with one hand, the other lying on his chest as he stared up at the ceiling, looking resigned.

Elle waited to see what he would say. Seeing him through a heat in this tent, without soundproofing or a comfy bed, or anyone to bring them food and water, was a grisly prospect, but she didn't see the alternative. Maybe if she asked, she could kick Limba out of the escape pod, and she and her males could move on to another group.

Elle hadn't wanted to test her new agreement with Borial so soon.

He shifted his eyes to her. "Will you help me?"

She supposed it was a good sign that he was asking. "Will you... make the changes that I asked for?"

He sighed, and his eyes flicked to the entrance of their tent. "You may touch me. But you must ensure I do not mate

you.”

“Is that just... putting *that* in *here*?” Elle asked, pointing.

“As far as I know.”

“I can do that.” They stared at each other a moment longer, apprehensive without their routine to fall back on, then Elle decided to take the lead. It looked like he was waiting for it, and she’d wanted to kiss him for a long time, if only out of curiosity, if only because she hadn’t kissed *anyone* in so long. She leaned slowly over him, resting her hand on his chest for balance, holding his eyes in case he looked disgusted. His skin was warm, and soft, different but familiar. Just before their lips met, he spoke.

“A kiss?” he asked.

She nodded.

“What is that for your people?”

Thrown, she asked him, “What is it for yours?”

“Sometimes, after mating, if the female is pleased, she will allow this.” He brought his hand to her cheek, hesitated, then gently used his thumb to draw her lips apart. His mouth was barely an inch away, and he told her in a whisper, “Like this. Lying together, sharing breath, measuring heartbeats.”

Elle stared at him, tantalised by the moving of his lips just out of reach, stirring the air between them, his words spoken into her mouth. Her skin tingled with a flush of arousal, and her breasts grew heavy inside the silly beaded yellow bodice she was still stuck in. “Ours is a bit more... aggressive.”

“Aggressive?” he asked, concerned, his fine silver brows drawing together. His eyes flicked between hers, striated in a way she’d never managed to put into words, like fractures radiating out from a single point, like shattered, frozen aluminium.

“We touch lips, and use our tongues.”

The crease between his brows didn't relax as he said, "Show me."

Elle was nervous, but she wasn't going to wait for more of an invitation than that, not when she felt like she'd been waiting for years already. She barely had to move at all to touch their lips together. His were firmer than hers, dry, no hint of teeth, the edge of them almost palpable, as if carved. She kept it simple, gentle, only lingering for a second or two before she made herself pull back.

She checked his reaction, holding her breath as she waited to hear him say he'd never do it again. He rolled his lips into his mouth for a moment, considering.

"I didn't feel your tongue."

"That... comes later."

His arms circled her waist. How strange it was, to be like this with him. Normally he was on top, or behind her. Like this, she could feel his stomach against hers, the tangle of their knees, see his hair fanning around his face, his delicate pointed ears. It felt like they were really lovers, even though his arrogant, commanding, snooty face hadn't changed. "Show me. Everything."

Okay, then. She leant down again, thinking he didn't know what he was asking for as she felt the reins on her libido slip. She kissed him and kept kissing him this time. The texture of his lips was nice. Not alien at all, she thought, or at least, not so alien that it distracted her. Now it was her turn to use her hand on his cheek to gently coax his mouth open, so she could flick her tongue between his lips. His arms gathered her closer, so she slowly and purposefully dipped her tongue into his mouth, seeking his. When they touched, he pressed back against her, and Elle felt a surge of victory and relief. His tongue was hot and slick, and he didn't taste of any of the things she'd subconsciously expected him to, like banana flavouring or lemon meringue pie. Instead, he tasted... normal, like any other man she'd kissed, real and alive and strikingly *there*.

She kissed deeper, and his hand moved to cup her head, holding her there. She could tell how focused he was, even as she melted against him and crawled up his body. When his tongue followed hers into her mouth, she moaned, and he surged against her, rolling them so that she was on her back with him leaning over her. He only showed passion like that during his heat.

The beads on her outfit were digging in. Suddenly, she couldn't bear to wear it for one moment more. She tore away from him. "Get this thing off me."

They both fumbled for its fastenings, but Borial could see better and got there first, freeing her in degrees until she could wriggle away, leaving it behind like a shed snake skin. Borial swept it to the edge of the tent, his eyes never leaving her. She was only wearing panties now. Had he ever seen her breasts before?

Despite everything, she wanted him to. She wanted him to touch them, didn't think she could handle it if he didn't.

This wasn't about giving him anything, comforting him, or obeying him. It wasn't forgiveness. This was about Elle getting what *she* wanted. This was about pleasure for *her*, and being an active participant who made decisions about what happened between them, instead of a biologically compatible body pillow.

Borial cupped his hand around her ankle, slowly sliding it up her calf, keeping his eyes on her face, as if he was testing her reaction. "Is this what you want?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

She moved towards him, her hand going straight to his cock, but she'd only just gripped him through the fabric when he batted her hand away with a gasped "Don't!" They both froze, uncertain of each other. "I mean..." he tempered. "It's too much."

"Okay..." she hedged. "I won't touch you there. Is there anything else I shouldn't do?"

He sighed heavily. "I don't know. And you? Is there anything I shouldn't do?"

Judging from the flash of guilt on his face, they'd realised at the same time that until now, she hadn't really consented to anything she'd done with him. That was being a slave. Even now, she was being pushed. She could dictate how they were together, but refusing altogether would have too many negative consequences. She was excited now only because he'd been arousing her and leaving her unsatisfied for three years. If she had a choice of partners, would she choose him? She wanted the intimacy, but that was all she could say for sure.

It was still a big step up from how it normally was though. She wasn't just grimly getting through it because it was her lot in life.

"Just stop if I tell you to."

His expression twisted, as delicately as a yellow elf's could. "I'm not sure I can be counted on to control myself."

Elle's blood ran a little colder, but then she reasoned that he wouldn't do anything to her that he hadn't done before, and this time, she was allowed to join in. This time was supposed to be fun. This time she would welcome his hands on her because he wouldn't kick her out of bed if she kissed him.

Still, she frowned. "How do your females...?" She wasn't sure how to finish that question, mainly because she knew the answer. Female Ure had their males 'fixed'.

Borial looked away from her. "We are tied up," he said matter-of-factly, and touched his fingertips to the collar around his neck.

"Oh."

A silence hung around them for a moment, and Elle didn't want it to. She wanted to be kissing and touching and feeling good. She didn't want the knowledge that he had never tied her up in bed, never tried to, despite owning her and

nobody being there to stop him, to bring an odd lump to her throat. She wasn't grateful. It wasn't sympathy exactly. It was just a tilting of perspective, where for a moment, she caught a glimpse of the ways he had tried with her, to be kind, and do better. It was hard to swallow.

“Then just don't do anything you haven't done before.”

Relief smoothed his expression. “That I can promise.”

“Let's kiss. Kissing was good.”

His lips twitched up in the tiniest hint of a smile. “Yes, kissing was good.”

She didn't want to think about anything else. She leant forward, pausing just for an instant so he could see her kiss coming and pull back if he wanted to, then closed the gap. Kissing him was odd. She knew she should hate him, she knew she shouldn't want this, but she'd take it anyway. She just wanted something for herself.

This kiss was slower, gentler, lighter. She put her hand to the back of his neck and pulled him in closer, trying to deepen it, wanting that passion back. She buried her hands in his hair greedily, finally getting to touch without being pushed away, like a naughty child left alone with the cookie jar. It was silky and fine, just as she'd expected, and she let her enthusiasm tell him that she would not be stopped this time. He'd better be ready because she was starved for it.

His hair cushioned the diamonds of the collar, but she could still feel it there, and she didn't want to. She wanted to feel skin. With her other hand, she sifted through his hair to the buckle, working it open. She'd undone it on herself enough times she could easily do it without looking. When it loosened and she let it go, dropping it into his lap, Borial moaned and pulled back just enough to look at her.

“You took it off.”

She picked it up and tossed it over with her outfit.

Borial looked floored. “You don’t know what you’ve done.”

She took his hand and fitted it to her breast, making him take its weight. “Yes, I do.” Elle pushed on his shoulder until he was lying on his back, then she straddled his hips and pressed herself against him. His hand flexed against her breast, and he moaned softly. His skin was like warm silicone against her bare breasts, and his cock was hot between her legs. “Don’t wear that thing tomorrow,” she said on impulse.

“Yes,” he sighed, as if deeply satisfied, his eyes on her mouth. Then they widened suddenly in alarm and jumped to hers, almost guilty. She didn’t realise why until he hurriedly reached up and unclipped his translator, tossing it away to bounce onto her dress.

She’d given him an order.

He’d agreed, but maybe he’d felt he couldn’t refuse? He clearly didn’t want it happening again at any rate.

He looked up at her, nervous and defiant, as if afraid she would be angry and daring her at the same time.

She bit back anything she might have said, frustrated. It wasn’t what she wanted, to not be able to communicate with him, but he wouldn’t understand anything she told him now. Arguing was pointless.

Was this how he felt during their previous sessions? Looking at her face and knowing nothing he said would change the blank – or more likely angry – look in her eyes? She couldn’t say she liked the feeling, not at all.

She just had to focus on the physical.

What did she *want*? How did she want to do this? In her heart of hearts, what was her greatest frustration? What would heal her the most?

She cupped his cheek again, and slowly moved into a kiss, gentle, leaving him free to pull away if he wanted to. She tested the give in his bottom lip, fit his cupid’s bow to hers,

trying to find all the ways they fit together. When he breathed, she felt it, the warm draught raising goosebumps on her neck; and when she exhaled, it was into the thin sliver of space between them, her breath billowing off his cheek. She licked the seam of his lips, wanting more.

Making out like teenagers? If there was any god of revenge, a patron saint of women wronged, Elle hoped they weren't watching this. It didn't feel right not to make him suffer more, but this was what she wanted. All those nights of him turning her away from him, *three years* of being blocked and ignored and treated like an object... Giving him the same treatment wouldn't be the opposite of that, this was. She was tempted to give him a taste of his own medicine, but not yet. Not when they couldn't understand each other. She wouldn't turn into him.

What she wanted was to be seen and acknowledged and romanced, *seduced*, just a little bit. To take it slow, not to be brought to him and grabbed.

And he kissed her. He did. She stroked his jawline with her thumb, and he let his hand rest on the dip of her waist. Their lips met and she taught him what to do, what she liked, breathing a moan to encourage him when he got it right. She leant closer, and her breasts pressed against his chest, her stomach to his. His erection burned between her legs, still covered by his trousers. She traced the long rim of his ear, and he flicked her finger off with a brief twitch, making her smile. She'd go after that ear again later.

When he touched his tongue to hers, she pushed him down onto his back. He arched his spine, trying to wriggle his trousers down his hips. He made a noise of frustration, breaking their kiss to shudder.

"*Please,*" he begged quietly. She could understand him; she had her translator. He just couldn't understand her. To honour their agreement, and preserve his own autonomy, he'd given up his dignity. She would understand every sordid, pathetic thing that left his lips now.

She considered it, but she'd promised him she wouldn't touch his cock, the poor bastard.

She pushed herself up, seating herself in a comfortable straddle, his muffled cock pressing between her parted lips through their remaining clothes. Would he be able to feel her get wetter?

She lifted his hands to her breasts again, and he made a low noise, massaging her obediently. Warm pleasure radiated out from his hands, washing through her, melting her. How could it be this easy, after everything?

She shifted her attention to his body, running her hands over his stomach. She traced his hip bone with the tip of her finger, and the small dent there that flowed between his legs. His skin was smooth and warm. She'd never touched him like this before, tenderly. She was braced for him to push her away or stop her, set a boundary, but he didn't. She rocked forward, testing, and he choked on a breath. He felt that then.

She did it again. If she wanted to come, she had to do it herself. Could she do it like this? She almost couldn't remember how to make herself come. She'd touched herself over the last three years, of course, but with a partner? With a cock? Myths and fantasies floated through her head, ideas of riding him until she was soaked and he was feral with her denial, but was that a real thing or just something from the internet?

Now was her chance to find out. His heats lasted for days. She should pace herself. She rocked, seeing where it could go, and he panted, watching.

“Elle...”

She wondered what it felt like for him, needing to come but not wanting to. Being so horny but not wanting to fuck. She couldn't deny wanting to torture him a bit. She ground down harder and he threw his head back.

“Mis- *Elle*.” He dropped his hands from her breasts to her thighs, creeping them to her hips. She could guess he

meant to direct her, pull her down harder and move her how he wanted, so she took his hands and moved them back to her breasts, a clear command even if her couldn't understand her.

As if Borial was one to be commanded.

A brief scowl of thwarted impatience flashed across his face, and then he surged up from beneath her, sitting up, and before she knew it his arm had gone behind her back, bringing her chest to his mouth. Her hand flew to cup the back of his head, her fingers tangling in his hair, as he mouthed first at her neck, licking up to behind her ear, and then dragging his lips down to her breast, his breath hot. He flicked his tongue out against her nipple, testing, and she gave a small cry, encouraging him. He sealed his mouth around her, and for a quiet moment, she matched her now restricted rolls against his cock to the sweet pulls of his mouth.

She wanted to tell him not to stop, to keep doing that. She wanted to tell him how good it felt, but she couldn't, he wouldn't understand her.

She wanted to come while he was doing that.

She felt a flutter of shame as she pushed one hand into her underwear, but she got over it as her fingertips slipped over her wet slit, opened wide by Borial's hips. She found her clit easily, immediately, rubbing quickly in little circles. Her thighs and stomach tightened and she moaned again, mesmerised by the unseen movement of his hot tongue against her nipple. She gripped his neck hard, unwilling to let him get away, and he caught her nipple between his teeth, pulling gently as he sucked, drawing off her and quickly switching to the other breast.

She rubbed, her wrist bumping against Borial's stomach. After a moment, he stilled, and when she looked down, she guessed he was watching what she was doing from the position of his head, which was all she could see. Feeling shy, she drew her hand out of her black panties. Borial's hand disappeared from her waist, brushing the inside of her thigh

before his thumb pushed up through her folds, over her panties, making her stiffen.

It was obvious she was wet. Borial lifted his head and studied her face, his expression hard to read. When he ran his thumb up her again, and she couldn't hide how her whole body reacted, it was clear he'd figured out more or less what was happening.

"You... You want to do it?" she asked him quietly, but he didn't answer, didn't understand. Instead he kept looking at her questioningly, and rubbing softly. Elle pushed into his thumb as it passed over her clit.

"Is this right? Does this please you?" he murmured to her, his eyes on what he was doing so she couldn't even answer him with a look. Maybe he didn't want an answer, and preferred whatever he was telling himself.

But she still wanted to come, and he was moving too slowly, and this was meant to be about her, so she guided his head back to her chest and used her hand on top of his to teach him where to rub and how. He didn't seem to have any problem licking and sucking her breasts again, and with more pressure and speed, she was soon moaning and twitching against him. His arm around her back tightened with her, and he lifted his mouth to her neck.

"Finish," he said softly. "Let me give you your gift. *Please, Mistress.*"

Elle bucked against his thumb and cock, and came. He grunted when she seized in his arms, and when she came down and pulled back to look at him, his eyes were soft and shy, unsure. He dipped his face to hers just a fraction, glancing at her mouth and back to her eyes. She watched him swallow. As the moment stretched, he gave in first.

"Did I please you?" he whispered, almost inaudibly.

Elle remembered what he'd said before, and took his jaw in her hand, parting her lips to share her breath with him.

She waited until she was sure he'd understood, then kissed him.

9

Morning eventually came, though neither of them slept. Elle had kept her promise not to let him inside her, though he had eventually started begging. They'd both ended up naked, and she'd lost count of her orgasms. Borial had become enamoured with them, though Elle didn't fool herself that it was anything other than his heat talking. His work with his hands was so-so, he got distracted too easily. His oral, though, was world-class. He was the perfect balance of fierce and demanding, needy and giving. It was a hell of a job getting him to leave her pussy alone when she couldn't take it anymore.

He called her 'Mistress', and he begged her to fuck him, to give him relief. She did, three times. She used her hands, her mouth, and she'd ridden him, slicking his hard cock through her slippery folds while he thrashed and begged some more. The biological forces that rode him wanted to come inside her, and she was not opposed, but she wouldn't do that to him.

She understood why he'd always taken her translator. She didn't forgive it or condone it, but she saw now that he was a completely different person when in the throes of these attacks. She liked this one better, truth to be told, even if he was tireless. He would come and be on her again in seconds, face buried in her hair, as if he couldn't get close enough.

Sex in a tent, or almost-sex, left a lot to be desired. She was glad he hadn't been too interested in being on top, or she'd be bruised for sure. She also had to accept that Limba and her males must have heard them. Elle had forgotten to be quiet, and Borial had only had one thing on his mind. But... she didn't really care. It felt rebellious. Even if Limba thought Elle was keeping Borial as a slave, there could be no doubt that she took good care of him. She hoped she'd shown Limba a thing or two, maybe opened the eyes of her males a bit.

She just hoped she hadn't made them feel worse.

Borial was sleeping finally, so even though Elle could use some of that herself, she forced herself up and out to get some food and water. When she opened the flap of the tent, she found one of the water bottles on the ground at the very edge of the tent, obviously put there for them. There was only a couple of inches of water left in the bottom, but considering how hard it had been to gather enough for everyone, it was very generous. She knew who had done it too, and it wasn't Limba. Elle looked across the small clearing to the tree Limba's mates had claimed as their parking spot. All five of them were sleeping in a haphazard pile, her two blankets failing to cover them all.

Her heart broke a little bit. The gesture of giving away their small water ration was already almost tragically touching, but seeing that Limba hadn't allowed any of them to share the pod with her, and knowing that Borial had either underestimated Limba's callousness or out-right lied to Elle to spare her feelings...

It was too much for so early in the morning after the night she'd had. She didn't even know if the males had meant for the water to go to Borial, since they would know what he was going through, or for her, or for both of them. Maybe they had wanted to help her stay with him, so he wouldn't have to suffer without her. Regardless, she tipped the water back and took the bottle, collecting two more empty ones to bring back with her from the spring. It wasn't enough, even if she drank her fill at the source and only gave Borial the one bottle, it would still only be two bottles between the five men.

Limba, as far as Elle was concerned, could dehydrate until the rescue team came. She knew that wouldn't happen, that she would take anything Elle gave to the men, but Elle could do her best to make sure they got some first.

She yawned as she headed into the forest, following her path of yellow beaded strings of fringe. Rescue needed to come soon, or things were going to get hairy. With Borial not only incapacitated, but needing Elle's constant attention, they'd be screwed for food and water unless Limba relaxed

her fears about her mates escaping and chipped in. Elle couldn't quite bring herself to think she was tired of the alien planet and living outside – she was in no hurry to go back to living on the ship – but a shower and a change of clothes would be greatly appreciated. Putting the bodice back on her sensitive skin, sticky from the night's activities and used to the nylon of the tent, had been like zipping herself into a bag of nails.

She reached the small hidden spring, filled the water bottles, downed one herself and filled it again, and hurried back, afraid of Borial waking up without her. It made her a little uneasy, how quickly her feelings for him had changed. Just two days ago, she would have been happy to leave him to squirm. Was it his promise of freedom that had softened her towards him, or his sob story? Did giving her hope make her forgive him? Did understanding where he was coming from make up for three years of slavery?

No, it didn't, and if he went back on their deal, she'd hate him more than ever. Maybe having hope now, based on a promise made under duress, made her an idiot. Maybe it just made her human. Maybe she wanted a friend badly enough, she'd even settle for her slavemaster. Maybe she was just sick and tired of hating. Maybe she'd take whatever happiness she could find.

She got back to the clearing, and realised immediately something was wrong. She'd approached from near the males, ready to give them their water, but they were all up and huddled together, shifting about as if they didn't know where to look. They kept glancing across the clearing, or staring determinedly at the ground.

Elle looked to see what had upset them.

Limba was standing by the tent. Borial was on his knees in front of her, naked. She had one of her leashes looped around his neck, caught under his chin, forcing him to look up at her. Elle could tell from his unfocused expression that he was still in heat.

Without realising, she threw the bottles down, a feeling she couldn't name boiling up inside her, like indignation times a thousand. How dare she? *How dare she?* She was not allowed to see Borial like that, in heat or naked, and she was *not* allowed to put a *leash* on him!

“Limba!” she yelled, much louder than she needed to, running the short distance and skidding to a stop beside them. She snatched at the chain, even though her hands were shaking and half the size of the other woman's. Limba didn't let go, but she didn't resist hard enough to stop Elle from pulling the chain off over Borial's head, messing up his hair.

He cringed against Elle's leg, and when he rested his face against her thigh, breathless as he always was at these times, his skin felt burning hot. He clung to her with one hand all the way up the inside of her thigh. “Help,” he gasped, weak from battling his own body.

Elle slid her fingers into his hair, holding him to her. “Limba, what the fuck do you think you're doing?”

“He came out,” she said, as if that explained everything. “I could see he was in need.”

“I was looking for you,” Borial objected quickly, turning to rub his face against her.

“He is not yours, you shouldn't have touched him, you had *no right* to put *that thing* around his neck!”

Limba blinked innocently. “He'd taken his collar off, I was preventing him from escaping.”

“I took the collar off!”

“What? Why would you do that? Are you rejecting him?”

“No, I took it off because people *shouldn't be made to wear fucking collars!*”

Limba's expression deepened into confusion. “What?”

Elle realised she was on the edge of a diplomatic misstep, but she hadn't decided yet if she cared. "Bor-" She bit off his name again, but she had his attention. He looked up at her and she cupped his cheek. "Go back in the tent," she said as gently as she could.

He crawled away, still naked. The difference between him now and his usual overbearing, stuffy, arrogant self was greater than night and day. She suspected he'd take a long time to recover from his embarrassment over this when he was back to normal.

"You know, you wouldn't have to deal with his needs if you just took him to a medic and-"

"Get one thing straight, Limba. He is *mine*. You don't touch him, you don't restrain him, you don't put anything on him. I am not taking him to any fucking medic, I am not doing *anything* to him, and he doesn't wear a collar. He's not my fucking slave. We're-" Her fiery speech skipped as she struggled to find a word that suited. "Partners. We're *equals*. And I don't mind his needs. I *like* them. They suit me just fine. I'm glad for them."

Limba looked like, if she had a fan, she would snap it open and flutter it in affront as she flustered about for a response. "I was only trying to help."

"Worry about your own males. In fact, while we're on the subject, you need to treat them better. I don't care what you think or how you were raised, they're worth just as much as you are, maybe *more*, since you seem like a massive *bitch*. If I could take them from you and give them better lives and make them happy, I *would*, but I've been told I can't do that, so let me just say, one day you will have a reckoning. One day you will have to answer for what you do."

And with that cryptic warning she didn't even understand herself, Elle spun and angrily sealed herself back into the tent with Borial. She didn't even know if she meant it in the religious Answer-To-God way, or a Mass-Uprising-and-Guillotine way, but the hope that one day wrongs would be

righted was all she had in this shit sandwich of a situation. She couldn't rescue the males, she couldn't change a society on a planet she'd never been to, and it ate at her that she knew that kind of thinking was how everyone justified doing nothing about the injustices around them, but-

Borial interrupted her seething by pulling her away from the entrance of the tent and seating her over his cock. By the time she caught her balance, his hands were already working on the fastening of her dress. "You called me yours."

"Oh, well, uh-"

"You said you like my needs."

"I did, didn't I?" She frowned for a moment, trying to figure out if she'd meant that, but Borial didn't give her time, pulling her outfit off and forcing her to coordinate herself again.

"Take me, please," he whimpered, trying to get her to follow his train of thought with small sipping kisses pleading at her lips. His hands on her hips were less tentative, and she had to quickly notch his cock down flat and sit on it so he couldn't get it inside her, and he whimpered again in frustration.

He was right though, he was still in heat, and he did still need her, so Elle let him distract her, redirecting her anger with Limba into something more constructive.

"I will," she said, and pulled out of his hands to move quickly down his body, lowering herself to take his cock into her mouth.

Borial let out a deep, rattling sigh, like a petulant child being promised a dog when they wanted a pony. He'd take it, but he was settling. Elle excused him because she knew he wasn't himself. In fact, she found it kind of cute.

"I made a promise," she reminded him, licking at his head.

He shifted his legs to give her more room. “I want to be yours,” he complained in a breathy whine.

“You can tell me that when this is over. Just let me make you feel better.”

He dropped his head back and huffed, taking the pleasure she was giving him. He’d become familiar with her mouth the night before. Elle had worried at first that it would be too much, too close to real sex. She’d expected him to get his orgasms mostly by accident, from rubbing up against her, but once he was in the swing of things, he definitely didn’t object to being touched the way he used to. The verdict was still out on whether he’d feel the same way when his heat was over, but for now at least, it didn’t look like the rubber underwear was ever coming back.

It was a peculiar feeling, to think that this was what she’d been missing out on for so long. When they were allowed to touch each other, it was so easy between them. Everything flowed, even if they weren’t having full penetrative sex. She couldn’t say she wasn’t satisfied. She just had to keep reminding herself that this Borial was not the real Borial. She’d have to deal with *him* later.

Borial got bored of her blow job – that was another thing she’d noticed, his biological imperative was far more about *her* pleasure, and he didn’t put up with not touching her for long – and pulled her up to kiss her, rolling them gently so she was on her back and he could return the oral favour.

Before he’d really got going though, they heard engines outside. Elle didn’t think she’d ever heard the engines of a dropship before, but still she somehow recognised them. The walls of the tent fluttered.

She sat up quickly and pushed Borial away, while he made a small noise of complaint. “I think the rescue is here,”

He just tried to get back between her legs.

“No, Borial, get dressed!” She fumbled with her stupid outfit and tossed his pants at him. After a last mournful look at

her naked body, he began pulling them on. When they were both decent, Elle stuck her head out of the tent.

There was indeed a big black carrier hovering above the tree line, and a couple of black suited and helmeted people scanning the hands of Limba's males while she waited off to one side, as if she'd been done already. She glanced at Elle, but looked away again, finished with her for now.

Elle watched them all get scanned, the little machine giving a beep and the operator reading the result. They were led over to a little elevator that looked more like a button-seat ski-lift which took them up to the carrier, and Elle emerged from the tent, deciding it looked safe enough.

Borial followed her out as the SWAT-looking person approached and reached for her hand, efficiently scanning it. "Greetings, passenger, we have come to escort you off-planet. I am checking your biometrics against the provided passenger log. Do you have any injuries?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Do you know of anyone else in need of escort?"

"No, just me and..." She gestured to Borial who stood shivering against her back, unsure if it was safe to give his name yet. He looked distinctly worse for wear. She supposed they both must.

The person scanned Borial's hand, though he flinched away from the stranger's touch, and looked at the screen a little longer than they had for Elle. "His biometrics suggest he is experiencing an extreme hormonal event."

"You could say that," Elle replied, and when the visor turned towards her, she decided to keep it simple. "Yes, he is."

The person reached for something from a pocket on their belt. "Medical care will not be available until you are processed on the ship. For his comfort, I recommend sedation. Do you have the right to authorise that?"

"Um..." No. "Yes."

“Do I have your authorisation?”

Sedate Borial? Well, it had happened before, and it was probably true that he wouldn't want to be 'uncomfortable' in public. “But I won't be able to carry him or anything.”

The person gestured over their partner. “We will transport him.”

“Okay, then...” she said hesitantly, looking back at Borial's face. His expression gave no sign of having followed the conversation. The first agent or officer or whatever they were stepped forward and zapped him with something that made a faint puffing sound, and he dropped like a stone, caught by the second person who swung him up over his shoulder and carried him over to the elevator thing. Elle jogged after them, but she had to wait as it wasn't big enough for the three of them. When the little metal disk came back down its frame, she stood on it and got carried up. The person was strapping Borial into a seat, so Elle quickly took the one next to him. His head rested back against the wall and his mouth was open, as undignified as Elle had ever seen him. The agent buckled her in too, without asking, and disappeared.

The carrier was just that. There were seats lined against the walls and not much else. Across the aisle and a little way down, Limba pointedly ignored her. The males were watching, and all of them had water and food, which Elle realised had come from storage under the seats. She bent down to get hers out, the safety belts cutting into her, but when she sat up again, a wave of tiredness swept over her and she lost her appetite. Maybe it was because they were finally safe, or because she was sat down in the quiet with no one needing her, but she was crashing hard, so she decided to just lace her fingers with Borial's, lean her head on his shoulder, and shut her eyes.

10

They had to wait on the carrier for what felt like hours while the ground team rounded up passengers. When it was full, it took them back into space, where they were offloaded onto a different ship. Elle wondered who would have to get all the escape pods back, and how they'd do it. She and Borial were briefly checked over by a medic, but when they had no complaints and came back healthy enough, though Borial was still unconscious, they were assigned quarters and left to their own devices.

Borial was carried on a gurney and deposited on the bed of the little cabin. There was a print-out of what Elle guessed was directions to the mess hall, given the pictures, but she couldn't read it. She was tempted to just fall into bed, and sleep while Borial did, but she kept herself up long enough to shower. Then she crawled in next to him, watching his sleeping face, trying to analyse what she was feeling. Compassion? Pity? Did she feel bad for him and what his body kept putting him through? Did she feel bad for how his society had forced him to live alone in space rather than be collared and 'fixed'? None of it excused what he had done to her... Only his actions from here on out would heal that.

He looked a mess. He had truly fallen from grace, and she knew when he was back to his senses, he would probably be disgusted by his messy hair and how dirty he was. He would be mortified by how many people had seen him naked, on his knees, delirious. Would he remember anything else? Would he remember Elle defending him, claiming him? How would he feel about that? Would he remember the things they'd said to each other?

Only time would tell. She rested one hand on his arm, and fell asleep.

Borial slept for a really long time. Elle was considering going for the doctor when he eventually stirred. He lay there and rubbed his hand over his face, and she waited with bated

breath. He looked around at the room, and she suspected he was still groggy from the sedatives because normally he would either be pulling her in close for some nooky, or he'd be frostily snapping out commands.

His eyes found her and ran down her body. Unfortunately, she was still in the yellow nightmare, since it was that or a towel or a bedsheet, but she was clean. He didn't move to touch her.

He was back to himself then.

"Rescue came?" he asked.

"Yeah." Why was she so nervous?

"What happened?"

"How much do you remember?"

He dropped his head back to the pillow. "Not much."

Elle got up and fetched a bottle of water for him, pressing it into his hand. He murmured gratefully and drank it slowly as she spoke.

"You went into heat." There, the predictable tensing at the mention of the thing she wasn't supposed to acknowledge out loud. "We renegotiated. I helped you. Then yesterday morning, when you were asleep, I went out to get food and water." Did he really need to hear about the scene with Limba? "And when I came back, the rescue team had found us. They sedated you because they said you would be uncomfortable otherwise, and you've been asleep ever since."

He finished the water and lay the empty bottle aside delicately, back to his space-elf manners. He made a face as he looked down at himself. "And my clothes?"

"Still on the escape pod, but we might be able to get supplies here, I don't know what this says." She jumped up and showed him the sheet with instructions.

He scanned it and grunted a confirmation. "Yes, we can request clothes and basic needs." He closed his eyes again,

head against the pillow, his hand flopping back to the bed.

“How do you feel?” she asked, perhaps a bit redundantly, but she didn’t want him to go back to sleep, he was her only company.

“Tired.”

“You should eat something. Get cleaned up and get some new clothes.”

He didn’t answer, looking for all the world as if he was asleep.

“I can’t do it by myself,” she admitted weakly. So much for her new independence.

She wondered for a moment if that would make any difference to him, but he did drag himself up after a pause, rolling heavily to his feet then staggering, unbalanced, with his hand on his forehead. “Excuse me. Give me a moment.” He slouched off to the bathroom, and she heard the water turn on.

She let out the breath she was holding. They’d get what they needed to make themselves comfortable, she could eat a proper meal, and he hadn’t immediately started yelling at her or making excuses to take back what he’d said. Things were better than she’d expected.

When he came out of the bathroom, he looked more himself. Squeaky clean, except for the unfortunate trousers, his yellow skin bright, and his fine silver hair wet and combed back from his face, regal as ever with his pointy ears. Still no shoes though, for either of them.

“Clothes first,” he said.

He hadn’t eaten properly in almost four days, but of course appearances were more important. Elle would take it though. She never wanted to see the prickly yellow bodice again.

As they left their cabin, he looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “Where’s your collar?”

Elle stiffened. “Left behind on the planet,” she said, her jaw tight.

He faced ahead again. “Shame. We could have used the stones to pay for things.”

“As if you would ever do that.”

He looked at her curiously. “Why not? That’s what it’s for.”

“What? No, it wasn’t.”

“No, not it’s whole purpose,” he admitted shamelessly. “But if we were ever separated, I didn’t want you to be without means.”

Elle stopped, rooted to the spot as her jaw dropped and she tried to take that in. “Bullshit,” she said at last.

He stopped too, turning back to face her, appearing startled. “No.”

“That collar served *one* purpose, and that was to keep me tied to you. If it did anything else, it just showed that I was owned, and the diamonds were to make you look flash, to tell everyone my owner was rich.”

“Yes, but it was also...” He seemed to struggle for the word. “Your inheritance. I couldn’t recognise you legally for... obvious reasons. But if I died, you would have that. It would support you for years, long enough to make some sort of life somewhere. If we got separated, you could use a stone to pay for food and accommodation, help. It was... recompense, I suppose, as well. A bride-price.”

And she’d left it behind.

No, fuck that, it was a *collar*.

It wasn’t sinking it that he’d meant it as some kind of safety net for her. He must be bullshitting. Making stuff up to make himself look better now that they’d agreed he couldn’t control her anymore.

Right?

“If we got separated... it probably would have been because I got kidnapped for the diamond collar I was wearing,” she said, starting walking again and catching up to him.

“Yes, that did occur to me,” he allowed. His plan had so many holes in it. “But I always thought one day you would escape, and then you would take the collar off, and I would hope you’re at least smart enough to hide it and not wear it out in the open in places you shouldn’t.”

She couldn’t believe his chastising tone over something that had never even happened.

“It was the best I could think of,” he finished.

Elle turned that over in her mind. “I used to flush them down the toilet.”

“Yes, you did.”

She didn’t have any more to say to that.

They reached a commissary of sorts, and Borial began the surprisingly long process of acquiring clothes, toiletries, and everything else he thought they needed. Of course, for a hoity-toity ambassador like him, it was a lot. The clothes were basically scrubs, but they fit well enough and covered them, and they were softer against her skin than what she had been wearing. Borial paid for it all with a scan of his hands, which she supposed was more like an I.O.U.

Next he took them to the mess hall. This ship clearly wasn’t a passenger cruiser, and definitely not a luxury one like the one they’d been on, but Elle struggled to place it. The staff all wore uniforms that screamed military, but they were a mix of species, and the décor was bright, like a hospital. It might have been a professional rescue or disaster relief ship, but that seemed like a heavy response for what had happened. She’d expected the cruise company to send another ship to pick them up and deal with it in-house, with a lot of bowing and scraping and apologising and refunding.

They had to collect packaged meals from a counter, and take them to big tables with benches, definitely not Borial's usual scene, but at least there was a good selection, and Borial didn't pick for her. She had to get him to explain what things were because she still couldn't read any of the alien languages, but he did so quietly and patiently. That was promising, and did a lot to reassure her that he had properly internalised that their relationship would be different now.

Elle got the closest thing to a chicken sandwich and a cup of coffee. It was neither, of course, but she could settle for the strange thick drink that kicked like a double-strength Red Bull.

"Are we going to get our ship back? I mean, your ship?" she asked, after Borial had put away most of his meal.

"We should do, if it was salvageable."

Elle supposed there was still the chance that whatever had caused the evacuation had actually gone on to destroy the cruiser and their home with it. She wouldn't ask what they would do if that was the case. Thinking about it made her too anxious, now that she knew if he ever fell into the hands of his own people, bad things would happen. Limba was still on board somewhere. The odds of running into her felt slim, but if she called someone to come pick her up, maybe she'd tell them about him...

"What about Xerjan and Sazi?"

"I'll register an inquiry with the crew."

Elle couldn't quite bring herself to say she was looking forward to seeing them again. Truth be told, she didn't like either of them, but she could hardly forgive Borial and not them.

They went up for seconds.

She couldn't bring herself to ask what she really wanted to. It was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn't want her hope ripped away yet.

When they got back to the cabin though, she couldn't keep it in anymore. "Are you really going to treat me as an equal?"

Borial was sorting through their supplies, dividing them into his and hers piles of clothes, food, and toiletries. He didn't even turn around. "Not all the time. I'll make mistakes. As you said, I need you. Fear of losing you will make me controlling." Then he did straighten up and face her. "Will you keep to your half of the bargain? You will come when I need you?"

She didn't know how he kept such a straight face after everything they had done, but she supposed he was a professional negotiator. She felt her face heat. "Yes. You're happy with how it was last time?"

Oh, that did get a blink, and he dropped his eyes. "Yes. I thank you for not- for keeping your promise and not mating me, when I asked you to."

"No problem." Wow, another thank you.

He seemed to shake himself, drawing himself up for something. "You've seen now what I become, how it is for me, but you didn't take advantage and you could have. You could have ordered much more from me than your freedom. I didn't think..."

She waited him to finish, but the silence was too long. "I'm not Limba. I'm not Ure."

"It doesn't disgust you?"

"What your women do to your men disgusts me. Keeping people on leashes disgusts me. But how you behave in bed doesn't." She took a deep breath. "In fact, I kind of like it. I prefer it. Normally you're so... frosty, but when you're like that, you're a lot more endearing."

He sat suddenly. "Endearing."

"Cute."

"Cute."

She went to sit beside him on the bed. She didn't know why she was pushing this, or what she was hoping to achieve. Maybe they'd formed some kind of trauma bond. Maybe he was just the first sexual partner she'd had in years. Maybe she'd do almost anything to keep from returning to life as it had been before the planet.

She touched his forearm, slowly sliding her fingers down his wrist to take his hand when he didn't object. He stared at their laced fingers.

"How do your people do it then?" he asked.

"Lots of different ways, there aren't really any rules. For people like you and me, well, let's say a man and a woman who like each other, there's dating, and sex, living together, marriage, kids. That's usually how it goes."

"Explain it to me."

"We're not forced like you are. We just pair up with people we like. It's called falling in love. You meet someone and you like them so much they become your favourite person, enough that you want to spend the rest of your life with them. You reject everyone else, you live together, you legally combine your possessions, you have kids. People can do it however they want, but that's the gist."

"*Pair* up?" He lifted his eyes to meet hers.

"Yeah. Some people like more, but for the most part, we form couples. It's called monogamy, and if you sleep with someone else other than your partner, it breaks their heart."

"Oh!"

"Not literally."

"Oh." He ran his thumb across her knuckles. "So, hypothetically, if someone like you and someone like me... You would be mine and I would be yours, and there would be no others, and we would be equals?"

"Yeah."

“And you wouldn’t... make me do anything I didn’t want to do?” His voice was so quiet, she had to lean in to hear him.

“No, I wouldn’t. And you wouldn’t make me, either.”

“You wouldn’t take me to the doctor?”

“No! Well, unless you were sick. But I wouldn’t do what you’re thinking. I like your needs right where they are. I’m a sexual person too, I need your needs – as long as you put out, not like before.”

“But you wouldn’t want to do that with me.”

He wasn’t asking, and Elle didn’t have an answer.

“Would you?” He turned his face to hers, and she had leaned in so close to hear him that he had to tilt his head to avoid their noses bumping, as if he was about to kiss her. She stared into those eyes of his, frozen silver, and thought she detected a little of his heat-self, the sweet one, who was honest and needed her. Could that be the real Borial, and the one she knew best was just a mask? A defensive performance?

He’d asked her a question, so she had to answer. Would she do that with him? She’d already agreed to have sex with him, or as close as they could get. She was looking forward to it. She already saw him in her future.

“You don’t want to mate though, I thought.”

“Mm.” He made a small noise of considered acknowledgement and looked away, as if it was true, or had been true. She couldn’t tell if he was reassessing or not. Then, “You are my favourite person, Elle.”

She didn’t know what to say. Only days ago, she’d hated him. She might be able to see herself in a relationship with him, because that would be a huge step up from what their relationship had been. She’d much rather be a girlfriend than a slave, and be treated well. But a mate, which seemed to be the same as a wife, only more permanent? The harsh reality

was that she would probably never make it home to Earth, but was she ready to give up on a life of her own making?

Her feelings for Borial were complicated. She *knew* him, somehow, and he was hers somehow too. Her master. Her captor. The man who bought her, collared and leashed her, thrust against her in a frenzy and palmed her tits, who thought he'd done right by her, who'd tried to do better for her than he'd ever been shown how – who begged her and worshipped her and was completely undone by her.

But had she chosen any of that?

Apparently, he didn't need an answer. "I think... you would be safe, to belong to," he continued in a whisper.

Safe the way he meant it, yes, because she had no interest in mutilating him. Did she want to *own* him like that though? He'd owned her... but he'd never had the control over her that he was referring to now. It was a daunting thought.

"If I was mated, I would be cute and endearing all the time." His lips caught up in a faint smile, humour at his own expense. Was he *flirting*? Perhaps he was beginning to realise she was reluctant.

"Really?"

"Not to the same degree, but... I would not be frosty."

"Would you still- I mean, would you be able to have sex more often?"

"Oh yes, I am able at any time, it is only when I don't that it... builds up." He sighed. "Honestly it's very tiring."

She smiled. "I know, I'm there." She couldn't help teasing him, lightening the mood, and bumping his shoulder with hers, all while her mind whirled.

To her surprise, he actually smiled properly, just for an instant. She didn't know what she'd been expecting, but he had deep smile lines bracketing his lips, and they made him look mischievous, impish, more like a playful faery than an elf. "Quite."

“Listen.” Time to do away with hypotheticals. “We don’t have to decide anything now. Let’s rest and recover, hide from Limba, get our ship back, find Xerjan and Sazi.... See if this new arrangement holds when life is back to normal. Humans don’t jump into these things.”

“...Alright.” If he was disappointed, she didn’t care enough to change her position. She couldn’t promise him forever. He’d kept her in a box for three years, and four days outside didn’t change that. She needed time to think.

11

Elle should have known how quickly everything can change. She'd been abducted by aliens once already. With just as little warning, she'd been bought by Borial. They'd had to evacuate the cruiser and abandon everything they had, and they'd been rescued, all just as abruptly. She didn't know why she never saw these things coming, but she didn't.

Well, maybe that wasn't true. She had been worried about Limba, and what the woman might do after her tongue-lashing from Elle, but Elle hadn't seen anything she could do about it other than try to avoid her.

So could she really say she hadn't seen it coming, when their cabin door opened suddenly, and a team of armoured women with yellow skin and white hair pushed their way in?

Elle was on the bed. Borial was stood by the window. There was no escape, and they only had a second or two to react. Elle set aside the small tablet Borial was teaching her to use and sat up, looking at him. He backed away into the corner, his eyes darting around the room. He was looking for a weapon or an escape, but there was none, and as he realised that, he began to curl up, slumping down the wall.

Elle realised what was happening. Obviously Limba had snitched, and these women were here to get Borial. She guessed his only chance of escaping the future he so dreaded was if she took ownership of him like she had on the planet. As the soldiers looked around the room, also presumably checking for weapons or escape routes, Elle got to her feet and put herself between them and Borial. She put her fists on her hips and cocked her chin up.

“What is the meaning of this?” she demanded as best she could, not feeling a match for these women who were all at least a foot taller than her.

“Step aside.”

“No. These are *our* quarters, and you’re disturbing my property.” She wanted them to include Borial in that.

“We have received reports you are keeping a citizen of Sopa in hostile conditions. We have come to rescue him. If you resist, we will arrest you for violent crimes.”

“*Violent crimes?*” she spluttered. “What violent crimes?”

The woman sighed and brought out a metal cylinder, from which she pulled down a scroll, showing the writing to Elle. “With the power given to me by the Elevated High Council of Sopa, I hereby command you to surrender the Ure male you are keeping in negligent conditions. If you fail to do so, you will be charged with any or all of the following: assault, abuse, neglect, torture, kidnapping-”

“*What? Are you kidding? How the hell do you work that one out? I’m keeping him in negligent-?*”

“Multiple witnesses can confirm that you have denied him medical care, and are keeping him in an incomplete relationship that causes him to suffer. Do you deny this?”

Elle’s jaw dropped. *She* was the one in trouble? Limba had summoned these people to *rescue* Borial? Elle presumed the ‘multiple witnesses’ were Limba’s males, and maybe even the rescue crew who had found Borial in heat. She thought back to what, exactly, she had yelled at Limba.

I am not taking him to any fucking medic, I am not doing anything to him, and he doesn’t wear a collar. He’s not my fucking slave.

Holy shit. She had basically confessed. These people thought that *because* she wasn’t keeping Borial as a slave and cutting his nuts off, she was abusing him.

“It’s not like that. We’re in a consensual-”

They didn’t want to hear it. The leader pushed past her, knocking her over onto the bed, and as she righted herself, she heard Borial gasp, “No. No! Get your hands off me!”

“Stop!” Elle cried as the woman pulled Borial to his feet, shoving him into the centre of her team. “You’re not even going to ask him?!”

“He’s not wearing a collar. We have confirmed with the ship’s captain there is only one Ure female on board and she has provided a statement that he does not belong to her. We must assume then that he has no mistress, and therefore must be returned to Sopa for his health, and for the protection of foreign females.”

Foreign females? Elle supposed they meant that without a mate, Borial’s heats would drive him to attack someone. He hadn’t. He’d bought a slave, but he hadn’t ever done more than hold her.

As they hustled him out of the cabin, she jogged after them. “Do you know who he is?” she tried. Surely they couldn’t pull this shit on an *ambassador*. Hadn’t he said his mother was important?

“We don’t need to know his name to recognise a male in need.”

Borial was digging his heels in and begging them in broken sentences she couldn’t follow while keeping up her own argument, but they had his arms twisted behind his back and he was outnumbered. Even if they got away, where could they go on a spaceship? They’d be found eventually.

“He’s mine. He is. We just follow the customs of my people,” Elle tried. She’d said that Limba as well, but it seemed the Ure had selective hearing. “Y-You’re stealing my property. You can’t take him.”

“He is not wearing a collar.”

If only she hadn’t left it on the planet. “We were in our private quarters. The woman who accused us will tell you that he was wearing it before, when they met.”

“Do you have papers?”

No, she didn't, because she was an illegal purchase. She had no I.D., let alone anything that claimed Borial was her mate. "We had to evacuate our ship, we haven't been able to go back yet."

"Do you have them?" The team stopped walking. From the middle of them, Borial begged her with his eyes, but what could she do? If she lied...

"I..." she hesitated.

One of the other women huffed in frustration and grabbed Borial's face, turning it to hers. She lowered her mouth to hover just in front of his, and Borial jerked his head away before Elle realised it was one of their kisses.

The woman hummed in consideration, and looked at the leader. It seemed his reaction had sowed a seed of doubt. The leader pushed in and took over, standing before Borial while he was still held from behind.

"Do you acknowledge this woman as your mate?"

"Yes!"

"You are mated in full and she is your carer? Your mistress?"

Elle hoped she was the only one who could read the small squirm of hesitation in Borial's body language. "Yes, she sees to all my needs."

"You are whole then?"

Elle could see how much it cost him to discuss his privates in public. "Yes."

The woman glanced at Elle. "Why? You will not father anything on an alien."

Elle's spine stiffened in affront. How dare *they* call *her* an alien?

"Her species only take one male. She wants the pleasure of mating whether there are children or not."

The woman hummed, staring at Elle as if weighing the truth of what he'd said.

Borial doubled down, trying to convince her. "I do not question my Elevated Mistress' decisions. I am hers to do with as she pleases." He hung his head, his hair obscuring his face from Elle. If the situation wasn't so dire, she might have enjoyed the lies he was having to tell.

Then the commander reached down and grabbed his cock.

Elle leapt forward as Borial threw himself back, but the squad of women closed around him and their leader. In the tussle of bodies, she didn't see exactly what the woman did as Elle strained to reach between the soldiers to pull her hand away, but Borial was fighting to get free. In only a moment or two, the commander took her hand back.

"You lie, she hasn't claimed you."

"I belong to her!" Borial snarled with such conviction even Elle believed it for a second, but the commander clearly didn't.

"No, your body is not loyal."

"He's mine! It's none of your business what we get up to in private! You don't know my anatomy, or anything about me! We-We're waiting for marriage, so he can belong to me in the ways of my people! We were heading to my home planet after the cruise!"

The soldiers looked at each other.

"Regardless," the commander said. "We have our orders. You can clear this up at tribunal on Sopa."

"No!" Borial shouted, digging his heels in again as they resumed their march.

"You wouldn't do this to one of your own! If I was Ure!" Elle insisted as she kept up with them.

“If you were Ure, you would know how to care for him properly.”

Elle couldn't think of anything more to say. She tried, as Borial kept struggling, but too soon they were in the hanger, and the women were marching Borial up the gangway. It seemed they didn't care if she came or not, they were there for Borial.

If Elle went, who knew what she'd be facing? Possible criminal charges, for starters, with the punishment unknown. She'd be at the mercy of these crazy people. But if she didn't go... she knew what would happen to Borial. She could hope that his mother would intervene and save him, but she knew she wouldn't. She wouldn't see anything wrong with Borial being forever bound to some woman who would 'take care of him' and geld him.

Should she care? Wasn't this a fitting end for the man who had enslaved her?

Elle dashed up the gangway after them, the doors closing behind her.

“Did you get lost?” one of the soldiers muttered as the commander and the pilot set up in the cockpit.

Elle ignored her. Borial was buckled into a chair against the wall. It was only a small dropship, one room, not unlike the escape pod from the cruiser, just bigger. As Elle got her bearings, a soldier pulled down a collar from an overhead bin and locked it around Borial's neck, the chain bolted onto the ceiling. His face tightened but he said nothing. As the engines kicked on, the soldiers relaxed and found their own seats, most of them against the opposite wall, facing Borial. Elle took the seat beside him, offered him a concerned look, and took his hand. They couldn't speak without being overheard, and Borial was too emotional to want to, but when she squeezed his hand, he squeezed back, and didn't let go for the rest of the flight.

12

The dropship docked with a larger one, but they were not invited to disembark. For hours, they sat strapped into the small fold-down seats, feeling very much under arrest. They were never left alone, always watched by two or three of the soldiers, while the others communicated with the crew or their superiors. Elle was glad when the journey ended with atmospheric turbulence, which scared her before Borial murmured an explanation, and they landed. Then she was scared for different reasons.

What was going to happen to Borial? To her?

The soldiers around them unbuckled and gathered themselves, then unclipped Borial's leash from the ceiling and moved to pull him out. Elle quickly undid her safety belts while Borial did the same. The commander led him to the hatch and down the ramp into a hanger bay, and then out through the bay doors with Elle scurrying after them. To Borial's credit, he stood tall and straight, gliding like Elle was used to.

When she stepped out onto the planet, the light hurt her eyes, so she didn't immediately see the small crowd gathered. She felt the breeze though, and smelt the slightly sour scent it carried from the ship's fuel. She was standing on a hard landing pad.

"Greetings, High Chancellor," the soldiers all chimed in unison, performing a bow while Elle blinked and tried to get her eyes to adjust. It felt like the light was the wrong frequency or something. Was the sky green?

"Greetings, Commander," spoke a woman's voice Elle didn't recognise. "I see you have rescued him. Commendations."

"Thank you, High Chancellor."

Elle forced her hand down from where it was shielding her eyes, and made herself look. A group of tall willowy

women in opulent white and gold robes stood arranged at the edge of the landing pad.

A woman stepped forward from the group, to one side of the High Chancellor. "Borial."

"Mother."

"I am glad you are safe."

"I have always been safe. Allow me to introduce my mistress, Elle O'Neill." She could hear the urgency in his voice, and stepped up to his side, though she didn't feel ready. She peered up at a woman with yellow skin and white hair, seeing an elderly Ure for the first time. She didn't see a resemblance.

Borial's mother stared down at her, unimpressed. Maybe there was the resemblance. "You have no mistress."

"Elle has been with me for years."

Borial's mother looked at the commander, who said, "There is no evidence they are mated."

She looked back at her son. "Do not lie to the High Council."

"I am not."

She moved on, seeming unwilling to incriminate him further. "You are not dressed appropriately."

"We did not have access to our own clothes after the emergency evacuation."

She turned to stare at Elle again. "What is she?"

"Human."

"Why isn't she speaking?"

Borial looked down with an almost audible clench of his jaw. Elle had to take it from here. "I can speak."

"You claim to have the care of my son?"

"Yes."

“Where is your collar?”

“We were taken from our private quarters. There’s no need for him to wear it when we’re alone.”

“No need?” she sounded lightly scandalized.

“No.” Elle glanced at Borial. “He wants to be with me. He’s... well-behaved.”

His mother looked between the two of them, but Borial was keeping his face down. “You are saying you lost it?”

“I know where it is, I just don’t have it. I was not given the opportunity to properly collar him before he was dragged away from me.” Talking like them was too easy. It was almost contagious, but Elle still hated how it felt coming out of her mouth.

The commander chipped in. “High Diviner, the female has no papers or identification. Witnesses swore to her denying ownership and care of him. He is not loyal to her. She is accused of keeping him in a negligent relationship.”

Borial’s mother turned her sneer back on Elle. “Well, we will get to the bottom of it. If he is not mated, then it will be no difficulty to see him so. I am owed many favours.”

“But I *am* mated, so you cannot separate me from her,” Borial argued. “I belong to her.”

For the first time, the woman’s face softened. “You might think so,” she said tenderly, but in such a patronising way that Elle’s gorge still rose. “She might have made you promises and taken advantage of you. I understand how your body can make you feel. But a doctor will be able to tell us the truth, and then we can see you properly cared for.”

Borial blanched so suddenly at the mention of a doctor that Elle moved to catch him, but luckily he didn’t faint. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“Oh hush,” she said, and waved him off, turning to rejoin the rest of the council.

Borial lunged and caught her arm, whispering. “Mother, please. Half an hour alone and I will be properly mated to her, I promise. We’ll go away. This will all go away.”

She clearly didn’t want to give him away, but it seemed impossible that none of the soldiers surrounding them had heard him confess. All she could do without drawing more attention was to cast a frosty look back at him and pull free.

Elle wasn’t sure what to make of his assertion that they would be mated at the first opportunity, but she supposed she’d better decide soon, because it might come to that. As she understood it, if they were permanently mated, they would be allowed to leave with no consequences, but they would be bound for life. She didn’t know what would happen to him if she left him. Maybe he’d be okay. She knew what she was in for if she stayed though. Did she want to stay with Borial for the rest of her life?

And if she refused, what would happen to them? It wasn’t as simple as giving up her freedom to save him from an unwanted amputation. If she was found guilty of negligent abuse, or whatever they were charging her with, she didn’t know what her punishment would be. She couldn’t pay a fine, and she definitely didn’t want to go to alien prison or be executed.

As Borial’s mother rejoined the robed women, the High Chancellor spoke again. “You will be detained until your tribunal, so the High Diviner’s son can receive the proper medical care, and we will learn the extent of your crimes.” She tipped her head at the commander, and the soldiers encircling them started moving, sweeping Elle and Borial away with them. Borial didn’t say anything, so Elle kept her mouth shut too.

They were led away from the landing pad and the open space, past a hanger. This was clearly a military base, judging from the fence Elle glimpsed at the periphery, but a small one. They were loaded into a vehicle, and when they got out it was just a sequence of doors and corridors that Elle couldn’t hope

to keep track of. She thought they were in a city, and this building was grand enough that in her mind, she thought of it as a city hall or courthouse. If Borial's mother was on the governing body of the area, if not the planet, then it made sense this would be the fanciest courthouse available.

Even the cell she was left in was more like a waiting room. It was all white and brightly lit, with a bed, toilet, sink, armchair, coffee table, and what appeared to be magazines. There was a small window in the door but that was it, so it felt pretty private.

Borial was taken somewhere else. She didn't think they'd hurt him, given how important his mother was, but she still worried. She knew how scared he was of doctors, but there was nothing she could do. It didn't look like they'd be given that secret half-hour to take care of business.

With nothing else to do, she looked through the magazines. She couldn't read a single word, but she feasted on the pictures of people with Borial's colouring out in an alien world, going about their business. She studied their clothes, their vehicles, their accessories. The only men that featured were in the background, accompanying their mistress somewhere. There was even what Elle guessed was an advert for a collar and leash that didn't feature any men in it.

She was given a meal to break up the evening, and not long after, the lights went out for the night. She lay awake in the half-dark, lit by the light in the hall coming through the window in the door, thinking and listening. Was Borial somewhere nearby?

What would she do? What did she *want* to do? What did she *have* to do?

Mostly, she just felt angry and tired that whatever happened wouldn't be her choice. Again. She spun scenarios in her head where she managed to turn it around, but ultimately, pre-emptively making herself okay with whatever had to happen so that it *felt* like her choice was just a coping mechanism. It wasn't real freedom. It wasn't the freedom

Borial had promised her. Maybe she *would* end up a sex-slave for life, just with a different title.

Hours after lights-out, she heard people moving in the corridor. Shadows fell across her body under the bed-clothes as the light was interrupted, and she quietly got up to check it out, having seen too many prison movies to feel confident that it was a benevolent visit. She crept to the side of the door, trying to see out without being spotted. There was a group of men, bare-shouldered, huddling down the corridor. Elle heard a door unlock, and when they were far enough away, she moved to see better.

“There now, be quick.” Elle recognised the whispered voice as Borial’s mother.

“Borial!” whispered a man’s voice she didn’t know.

It was at the limits of what her translator could pick up, but she heard a gasp, followed by a lot of gentle murmurs.

“It’s so good to see you.”

“Where have you been?”

“What happened?”

“Are you alright?”

“Your Elevated mother told us-”

“I’m fine,” Borial interrupted. “It’s not what they’re saying.”

“What *happened*?”

Borial sighed heavily, and then no one spoke for a long moment.

“Tell me,” his mother said. “I want to know. I want to hear it from you.” He didn’t answer right away, so she pressed him again. “I won’t use it at the tribunal. I am your mother. I want to protect you.”

Borial sighed again, and then he spoke. “Elle and I... She never took advantage of me. Rather, I took advantage of

her. Her people are primitive, still. They don't travel space, they have no alliances. She was kidnapped from her planet and I... I needed someone, a female, to help me... cope. I wanted to stay free. So I began looking at... slaves."

There was a sharp intake of breath.

"Elle was the first I felt compatible with. I bought her. She was petrified, she didn't understand what was happening. She was terrified of me. She fought me, for a long time. She wanted her freedom. She still does. I suppose we're alike in that way. I put the collar on her."

"You-!?" his mother shouted in outrage, cutting herself off to stay quiet. "You dared to collar a woman? Your mate?"

"You would despise me if you knew the things I have done, mother. You would think me the worst kind of depraved monster. But I did my best not to hurt her. She always had enough to eat, to wear. I never let her hurts or ailments go untreated. I stayed away from her, gave her peace, when I didn't...need her."

"Are you telling me you *forced* her-?"

"Not what you're thinking, or I would be mated now, wouldn't I? But I took her into my bed and held her, and I don't think she ever wanted to be there."

"How long?"

"Three years."

"*Mother Almighty.*"

"You could have come home, and we would have found you a mate," one of the men pleaded.

"I didn't want one. I didn't want to be owned, chained. I didn't want my body to be subject to a stranger's whims."

"It is... not so terrible as that..." a male said stiltedly.

"We have been happy with your Elevated mother, with you children."

“While I still had my mind to think, I knew I didn’t want it,” Borial insisted.

“Then by rights,” his mother continued. “You should be the one punished by the tribunal, not her. She was not using you, taking advantage of your biology and denying you the completion of your relationship... To imprison a female and slake your needs on her against her will... What you have done carries the death penalty. How could you do this? You’re my son! How could I create such a monster?!”

It felt so strange to hear this woman side with Elle over her own son. Elle had been ready to hate her, already feared her, but here was the understanding and recognition she’d wanted for three years. She’d wanted someone to call Borial a monster and separate them... but now it felt like everything had changed, and Elle couldn’t keep up.

“I know, mother. I’m sorry! I couldn’t see another way. My independence mattered more to me than anything else. I thought I could make her life tolerable, at least. I’ll take my punishment, just *please*, don’t force me to mate an Ure woman, I’m begging you!”

“Why is *that* so much worse than death?!”

“The knowledge, the knowledge of how far I had fallen, of what my life *was*-”

“You would enjoy it. You would be comfortable. I would find you a good woman.”

“No, mother, *please*. Please let it be my choice.”

“You are not giving me a choice, are you? Either I return this woman to you for you to abuse, or I see you mated to an alien with a grudge against you, or I see you executed! All because you will not submit to a woman of your own kind! Why? Why are you so *ridiculous*?”

If his mother hadn’t sounded so genuinely upset, Elle might have called out to contribute to the conversation, since they were deciding her future. As it was, her throat felt glued shut. Her loyalty, such as it was, was still to Borial. She could

still understand him better than she could the others, and hearing him say he was sorry.... It was hard to listen to him beg. He just wanted a choice, like she did.

But he was the one who'd taken her choice away.

"Before, on the planet we evacuated to, Elle promised to help me. We negotiated. I would give her control of her life if she would continue to help me with my needs. And she did! We might have a different relationship now. She might want to be with me." He sounded less than sure, more like he was exaggerating to give himself more of a chance, but wasn't that what had happened? Wasn't that what they had agreed?

"Is that your plan? Or is your plan to continue to lie?"

"Isn't that our best chance?"

"The doctor will discredit you. You cannot pretend to be mated when you aren't!"

"Do I have to be mated to belong to her? Isn't female ownership of males sacred on Sopa? If we claim that her culture requires a ceremony first, isn't that credible?"

She sounded frustrated, like she was spelling out something very simple. "Her claim is not complete."

"Doesn't a betrothal count for anything?"

"It counts for very little when you have nothing and no one to verify it, and High Actor Limba Manaken has signed a statement that your female *denied* ownership of you!"

"Her culture does not believe in the ownership of people."

"Mother Almighty," his mother said, and Elle could hear her rolling her eyes in exasperation. "It might be worth her while to pretend!"

"You could betroth us at the tribunal tomorrow. I'm your son. No one could argue if you gave me to her."

"Why would I do that?"

Elle expected him to say something like “to save my life”, “because I’m your son,” but he didn’t. The silence rang like a bell as he failed to give a reason, and Elle’s heart twinged in sympathy. Borial really didn’t believe his mother would help him.

Another male voice spoke up, one of the men Elle now assumed were the High Diviner’s mates. “For us, Sorylla...” he implored softly. “So we don’t lose our son, for your mates’ sakes.”

There was a sharp flutter of fabric, as if she had moved her arm suddenly. “Don’t play that game. I hate it when you whimper at me.”

“Sorylla...”

“Please...”

“Save him...”

“Get your hands off me! Oh, the lot of you are terrible!” There was more fluttering, then quiet. “Pester, pester, pester. I suppose you’ll see me in a tribunal next if I don’t. Almighty knows you have a wonderful knack for disappearing when you want to punish me.” She sighed. “I won’t help you at the tribunal, but I won’t reveal anything I have heard tonight. As it stands, the woman is in more danger than you are. I hope for your sake your story is convincing.”

“She doesn’t deserve to be punished,” Borial objected.

“Be that as it may, this is the situation.”

“Surely if we mate, there is no issue.”

“The issue is whether or not she is abusive. The court will not give you to her if they believe she is, and your testimony will not be considered accurate, under the circumstances.”

“Because they believe she has already won my mind? You see the flaw? They can only save me from her if I don’t belong to her?”

“Don’t argue, they’re doing it for your sake.”

“Mother, you could end this.”

“We will see what the tribunal decides. Then, if either of you is sentenced, I will do what I can to alleviate your punishments. Now we must go, we’ve been here long enough. Your fathers wanted to see you, that is all.”

There were more quiet murmurings, and the sound of feet and fabric, and Elle imagined Borial was hugging his fathers goodbye. She stepped back away from the door, sitting on the bed where she could still see the window.

“We will see you again tomorrow,” the High Diviner said, and then came the sound of the door closing and being locked, and then the family trooped past her window. None of them looked in at her except for the very last one, an old male who glanced through and jumped when he saw her looking back at him. He ducked his head quickly and disappeared.

Elle felt like she had more questions now than she had before.

13

At least Elle didn't have to wait long for the tribunal, probably because Borial had such an important mother. She'd already figured out she wasn't going to have a lawyer, or a defence. She didn't know if that was a good or bad sign. Probably bad, if their lives were on the line.

A guard came and unlocked her door, stepping aside to let her out. Borial was already in the hall, a black collar and leash around his neck. She wished they could have changed their clothes and brushed their hair. As it was, it wouldn't be hard to believe that she'd been keeping Borial in sub-par conditions.

They shared a look in place of saying good morning, and Borial took her hand and squeezed. He looked forlorn, making it hard to hold onto hope. She squeezed his hand back, and they walked surrounded by guards to the court room.

"Are you alright?" she asked under her breath. She wanted to know the results of the doctor's visit.

"Elle, I am so sorry this has happened."

"It's not your fault. Not like you wanted this." She looked around, trying to follow what was going on around her. "Who put that collar on you?"

"The guards. I am unmated, and therefore dangerous."

Ah, the doctor had rumbled them. At least Borial seemed okay, not like the doctor had done anything but examine him.

They reached the courtroom, which looked more like a conference room. Along the far wall was a long, shiny wood podium for the judge to sit behind. On the right was a handful of people sitting much like a jury. The room was divided by a low wooden barrier with a gate to separate the audience from the people involved. Two wooden boxes were evidently where the defendant and prosecution were meant to go.

Elle recognised the judge from the council the day before, when they'd met at the landing pad. Borial's mother, the commander of the soldiers, and the High Chancellor sat behind the barrier in the audience section with another couple of members of the council. The guards took Elle and Borial through the gate and to each box, where Borial's leash was clipped to a hook.

The judge was another elderly Ure woman, the front of her long white hair braided back out of her face. She wore white robes with white detailing on the cuffs and down the front that caught the light. She watched them get situated, the guards retreating back behind the barrier, and when everything was quiet, she began.

"Please state your name for the record."

"Elle O'Neill." She tried to keep it from sounding like a question.

"Your title?"

"Uh, miss."

"Mm. Species? Home planet?"

"Human. Earth."

There was a lingering moment as everyone in the room seemed to digest as one that they had no idea where that was, then the judge continued.

"Alright. We have convened today on the matter of the mating of Borial Malalhi Kainlani Ostrix, son of High Diviner Sorylla Kainlani To'Ost. Elle O'Neill is accused of keeping him in neglect, and denying him medical care, as testified by High Actor of Kch'o, Limba Tandanen Ilis Manaken. The accused denies this, is that correct?"

The judge looked up from her papers, spearing Elle with her sharp gaze. For a moment, Elle hesitated. No one had explained the rules to her. Was denying the charges the same as pleading innocent?

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” Elle said, catching herself from adding ‘Your Honour’. Hopefully, they wouldn’t hold her ignorance of the correct form of address against her. She stood straighter, reminding herself that women were in charge here, and had seriously inflated ideas of themselves.

The judge seemed to expect that response, and moved on. She didn’t ask Borial anything. She lifted a piece of paper, scanning it over. “I have the High Actor’s signed testimony here, and the results of the medical examination of the High Diviner’s son. The doctor confirms he is not mated, but found no sign of untreated illness or injury other than mild mating stresses. So, how do you answer the charges, Elle O’Neill? And do not lie to me.”

Elle knew looking at Borial would make her seem guilty, but she really wished she could get some kind of clue here. She decided to start at the beginning, and tell the truth as much as she thought was wise.

“Borial and I met three years ago. I had been stolen from my planet, and I was lost and confused and scared. With nowhere else to go, I started living with him on his ship. When he, um... needed female attention, I helped him.

“I only recently learned anything about Ure mating practices. I didn’t know the difference between mating and not mating, or what our relationship might mean on Sopa, but Borial seemed happy with how things were. Where I come from... I mean, humans are very different. Our matings aren’t biologically permanent the way they are for your males. We try out several mates until we find one to settle down with, and we only do that with one person, generally speaking, so we’re very picky. We usually take years of living together before committing for life, and becoming mates as you understand it. We mark that with a special ceremony in front of friends and families, and overseen by an authority. So... I didn’t consider myself mated to Borial, and he didn’t- I mean... You said it yourself, he is not mated. So when I said that to Limba, I mean, the High Actor, it was accurate. To me. In the sense that

our mating is- was not finalised, so I didn't consider myself to have the right to, uh, have care of him."

A choked noise made her glance at Borial before she could help herself, and he was staring at her with wide eyes, appalled. He gave a minute shake of his head.

"The team that retrieved you from the rescue vessel have all sworn you both insisted he belongs to you, now you deny it?" the judge asked.

Elle realised what she had done wrong. If she didn't claim him, he might be given to someone else. "He- I- Do you have the concept of 'dibs'?" She winced, then hurried on as inspiration struck. "Betrothed! We're betrothed! I considered us betrothed, so in that way, he is mine." She remembered Borial's lie from when they were first arrested. "We were waiting to make it final in the manner of my people. We were on our way to do that when we had to evacuate to that planet and lost our ship."

The judge considered her for a long moment, then her gaze shifted to the audience. "High Diviner, what say you? Do you contest her claim?"

Borial's mother got to her feet. She didn't look at Elle, swallowing before she spoke. "No, High Proclaimer. My son informed me years ago he was in a woman's company. I assumed they were mated, but I know of nothing that contradicts her story."

"Knowing they are not mated, you don't want to take back care of him?"

"No, High Proclaimer. They may mate if they want to." She clasped her hands in front of her and bowed her head.

"You don't want to press neglect charges?"

"No, my son seems healthy enough, if a little old to still be unmated."

Again the judge seemed to think, slow and still like some fantastical wise tree spirit. Finally, she shifted her focus

to Borial. “And you, do you have anything to add?”

“No, High Proclaimer.” He kept his head bowed too.

“You swear Elle O’Neill’s testimony is truthful?”

“Yes, High Proclaimer.”

“Then for the record, have you been neglected by her, or denied medical care?”

“No, High Proclaimer.”

“Alright. I shall give my proclamation. Elle O’Neill, as there is no physical evidence of medical neglect, the male does not claim there was, and his matriarch is satisfied, I will clear you of the medical abuse charges. As for the neglect charges, it is my opinion that you were negligent. Regardless of what knowledge you had or what the male may have told you or not told you, you yourself claim to have witnessed multiple of his needings. A sensible woman would have understood for herself the threat he poses as an unmated male, as well as what action to take to neutralise this threat. Your claim that you were together for three years, and that you cared for his needs in that time, and yet he is not mated, frankly baffles me. I don’t understand how such a thing is possible, but I accept your claim of betrothal. The High Diviner does not contest it either. However, I cannot release the two of you while he is unmated and whole. Adult males must be mated or neutralised, or secluded at home if this is not possible.

“Therefore, I shall be satisfied to see the two of you fully mated before your release. Should you refuse, Borial will be remanded into his mother’s care. Do you accept this order?”

Elle gaped for a second, but only a second. She’d known this was coming, hadn’t she? And she couldn’t very well say no, not with the whole court watching her, including Borial, leashed and collared beside her. “Yes, High Proclaimer.”

“Good. Then we shall make time at close of court tonight to witness your mating, in adherence to your people’s

customs, though I admit I don't relish the prospect." Her mouth twisted as if at something unpleasant. "Witnesses, are you satisfied?"

The people watching from the jury box nodded and murmured in the affirmative.

"Then this is resolved. Please see them out."

The guards moved, letting Elle out of her box, and unclipping Borial from his. She looked straight ahead, aware of Borial's mother following them out. What had she just done? Did she have to marry Borial now? That didn't seem so bad. That could easily be forgotten about once they were off-planet. She didn't want to celebrate where they could be seen though, just in case.

Once outside the courtroom, Borial's mother thanked the guards, who bowed and left. It looked like they really were off the hook! Elle turned to Borial, but he looked pale and sick. Elle glanced at his mother, but got nothing from her stoic and severe face. She knew she could speak freely in front of the High Diviner because of what she'd overheard the night before, but they didn't know she knew that, so she wondered if she should maintain the lie for now.

"Wh-What happens now?" she asked.

"We..." Borial rubbed his face, then curled his fingers under the collar, tugging hard. The chain dangled, the end in his mother's hand, where the guard had given it to her. "You heard her. You agreed to it. They'll watch our mating."

Elle got a sinking feeling in her stomach, chilling her, and making her feel like she suddenly needed to pee. "Mating like... marriage ceremony, right?"

Borial spread out his hands, his eyes saying it all. "What's a marriage, Elle?"

"But," she glanced at his mother again, who was allowing herself a faint scowl. "They're not going to watch us..."

“What?”

“*Mate.*”

He widened his eyes as if to say *What else?*

“They’re not going to watch us *have sex!*” she said, whispering the last two words in a hissed rasp. It felt wrong to talk about it in front of his mother.

“That was the Elevated High Proclaimer’s order.”

Elle stared at him. Then her hand moved on its own, snatching the chain below his collar like it was a tie, and pulling him down to her level, towing him a few steps away from his mother. “You’re telling me,” she growled, trying to keep her voice down. “That that woman in there is going to *watch us fuck?*”

Borial met her eyes and held them with his own, steely and beautiful with their cracked aluminium look. “Not just her,” he said, letting some of his own anger out. “*You* said ‘friends and family’!” He watched her figure it out.

“Not your mother!” she said, horrified.

He prised her hand off his chain and stood up straight. He smoothed it down against his bare skin, and the feel of it seemed to turn his anger into a wash of sadness. “Enjoy your freedom while it lasts.”

Barely able to think around that revelation, Elle trotted after him as he returned to his mother’s side, who lifted his leash and gave it to Elle.

When she hesitated to take it, the High Diviner said “One of us has to hold it. It should be you,” so Elle reluctantly accepted it. “Allow me to accompany you back to your... accommodation.”

She turned and they followed her back to the cells, the chain slack in Elle’s hand as her mind tilted with what was coming. When they stopped outside her open door, she panicked. “We need to talk about this.”

The High Diviner tipped her head to gesture for Elle to precede her into the cell. They all went in together, and she left the door open.

“Elle O’Neill,” the High Diviner began, stepping up close to Elle, and awkwardly cradling her hands between hers, the chain leading away. She looked down into Elle’s face. “My son never wanted the life I would have chosen for him. As his mother and matriarch, it is my duty to see him cared for properly; instead he chose determinedly to live away from me, and defy what is right for Ure. Still, he found you, and now you will be mated in the way that is right for him. He will be forced into the position he was always meant to take. Yet I am sorrowed. I can see the pain it causes him, and you. He told me your true relationship last night, and I can only apologise for his actions. If you wish to be released from this order, I will help you. You need not be bound to him for life. I know what he has done to you, and it is wrong. He should be punished, and you should be set free.”

Elle let out a breath. “Thank you... but I can’t- I can’t just abandon him to his own personal nightmare. Despite what he’s done to me, it’s not how I was raised. I have to live with myself too, and I can’t leave him to a living hell. I know with me he’ll be... better off, so I have to believe we’ll be able to figure out a compromise.”

She could have made a joke about how she’d be okay, because she’d have the power, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it, not while Borial was stood right there listening. She was facing down an unpleasant night, and a marriage she hadn’t decided she wanted, but he was watching his freedom circle the drain without hope of ever getting it back. It seemed that once they had sex, he would be a different person. How terrible to have that ordered by a court. It probably felt like he’d been scheduled for a lobotomy. It was everything he’d tried so hard to escape, though Elle meant it when she said he’d be better off with her than anyone else. She’d leave him alone, she wouldn’t abuse the power she’d have over him.

“At the very least, he’ll owe me after this,” she finished lamely.

The High Diviner let her hands slip away. “As a mother, I always wanted my sons to be mated to women I know, and trust, who will treat them fairly, and care for them well for their whole lives, hopefully somewhere I can visit. But I don’t know you. What you have said leads me to believe you will not care for him the way that he needs. I know you don’t subscribe to the collars and leads, and I know that as soon as you are released from the court’s custody, you will both vanish back into space and I may never see him again. This is not what I want.” She heaved a heavy sigh. “But I am not immune to what he wants either. Perhaps I spoiled him as a child. I know his fears, I can see how real they are for him, though they don’t make sense to me.

“When your child cries out for your help because he is scared of the dark, though you know there is nothing to fear, do you ignore him? Of course not. This is our weakness, I suppose. You pretend the monsters are real so he will believe you can fight them off for him. Now here we are.” She dipped her head for a moment and tucked her hands into her opposite sleeves. “All that is left is to take as much of the sting out of your mating as I can. I saw you are not happy being watched in your sacred moment. I can’t say I am particularly keen to watch it either, but I will be there, and I want you to know you can ask me for anything you need.”

Elle struggled to think of anything that would improve the situation, while knowing that while it was happening, she’d probably be able to think of a hundred things. “Proper clothes, for both of us. He’s an ambassador. He should wear the fancy robes, not go bare-chested like the rest of the men here.”

Elle could tell from the High Diviner’s expression that what she’d asked would be difficult, if not outright blasphemy, but she didn’t argue.

“And a bed. I want a bed. And as much privacy as you can get us. Screens, or curtains, whatever there is. No recording, no video, no audio, no photographs, no... holograms, nothing that’s going to last.”

“Of course.”

“And... I need to talk to Borial. Alone.”

The High Diviner looked between the two of them, obviously thinking of the open cell door.

“We don’t have a ship. Where are we going to go?” Elle said quietly. “If we do this, we’ll be safe for good. We won’t run.”

The High Diviner sighed, and stepped away to leave, pausing at Borial’s side. While he faced Elle, and his mother faced the door, she cupped his opposite cheek and kissed his hair. Borial was older than Elle, she put him in his early-to-mid-thirties, and his mother was twice that, but she supposed you never stop being your mother’s child.

“Why is it always the troublesome ones?” she mused, love filling her voice. “Your father was never like this.” She kissed his temple, lingering for a second, and then she left, her robes sweeping after her. She left the door ajar.

Elle stepped up to Borial and took off his black collar. Now they were alone, she didn’t know what to say. She sat on the small, thin bed. She’d been on her feet too long, and the day was not over yet.

Borial sat beside her.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. She knew the technical answer, but that wasn’t what she meant. She didn’t mean having sex in front of a judge and his mother.

Borial sighed. “This isn’t what I wanted, but... Thank you, for doing this to save me. I will ensure the rest of your life is as good as I can make it.”

She lay back, though it wasn’t comfortable, her shoulders up against the wall. “What... will being mated to

you really be like?”

He mirrored her again, lying back with her. “You will be able to persuade me to do anything. I will be needy, and... pathetic. I’ll follow you around, hoping for your attention.”

She didn’t think that sounded like the death sentence he made it out to be. Was it what she wanted? Not really, but if she could command him, then surely she could make it bearable. “I want to stick it to them, when we have to do this. I want to do it in a way that shows them they’re wrong.” She turned her head to look at him. “How do Ure usually have sex?”

He looked uncomfortable. “You don’t know?”

“I mean positions, things like that. Favourite foreplay. Do you dirty talk? Are you expected to do it in complete silence? I already know you don’t kiss like we do. You said the men are usually chained up. Is that going to happen this time?”

“I imagine so.” He scratched his neck. “If there is a bed, the collar will most likely be clipped directly to the frame. You might be offered restraints for my hands.”

She turned her face back to the ceiling. “Well, you’re not going to be wearing a collar. I won’t restrain you. I guess that means men are usually the ones on their back. What if I put you on top?”

“They will think I am attacking you, and intervene.”

Elle huffed, frustrated. “I can make it clear you’re not.” She imagined herself deliberately moaning his name, and loudly asking him to take her for the sake of their audience, and cringed. She pushed the heels of her palms into her forehead, closing her eyes. “It’s not right. This isn’t how it should be. We could’ve...” They could’ve come together with tenderness and sincerity on their own terms, as the foundation for a real life together.

“After this, we will be free,” Borial offered beside her, his voice solemn.

Free. She'd wanted to be free for a long time, but this didn't feel like it to her. "No, we won't. Sounds like we won't ever be." It was starting to get to her now, the fear, the mortification. Really? Letting him fuck her in a room full of strangers? "I don't know if I can do this."

He sat up, bracing himself on a hand placed beside her opposite shoulder, his free hand pulling hers away from her face so he could look down at her, cover her. "It can be quick. We'll keep our clothes on."

She looked up at him, wanting to take the comfort he offered, wanting to believe he had the answers but teetering between what she saw now and the memories she had of him, all the times he had forced her to do things she didn't want to do, pulled her around by a chain on her neck. He was still wearing the bland scrubs, and his hair had a couple of tangles, but he still looked like Borial. Yellow skin, impenetrable silver-sparkle eyes, thin and aristocratic nose, sharp jaw and cheeks, the high arch of his brows. It wasn't a kind face, but for three years she had associated it with power and skill, success. Could she put her faith in him now? She knew he had no power here, but he had knowledge she didn't. Could she believe that he wanted to help her? She believed he wanted out of this situation as much as she did... but she was the one who had to lie there and take his cock.

"Kiss me." She wanted to feel if what she had felt in the tent was still there, if any of it had been real. How she wished they could go back to that now...

Borial looked surprised for a moment, then his face softened and dipped to hers. He kissed her gently, in commiseration, but that wasn't what she wanted. She took hold of his head, digging her hands through his long silky hair, opening her mouth and demanding he kiss her harder. He hesitated, but then he pushed his tongue forward into her mouth, and she clung to him, kissing him as she wanted to be kissed.

When she let him go, he pulled away slowly, and she got the impression he was a little dazed. “You’re not a slave, Borial,” she whispered. “Don’t act like you are. I need you to act like you.”

“You hate me, how I treated you.”

“Don’t treat me like that then. Be something else.”

“What?”

“My partner. We need to be equals. Show them... that I’m not saving you or claiming you or owning you. And you’re not serving me. We’re protecting each other because we’re a team. We have to be.”

He sighed through his nose, then lowered his forehead to hers, his eyes closed. “You are asking me to be selfish?”

“No, but I’d rather do what you want than what they want, so just... don’t think about them.”

He opened his eyes. “Will you do the same?”

Ah. Damn. She kind of had to, didn’t she, if she was asking it of him? She pulled a face and groaned, and he actually chuckled softly. “No promises.”

He stopped her squirming, pressing her back down. “*No*. You will see only me, and think only of me.”

She stilled, momentarily arrested by this glimpse of his old domineering attitude. “You’ll have to make me.”

He hummed. “We’ll see.” He rolled off her but stayed close. “You might be the first female in a long time to take on an unmated Ure male with no restraints. Maybe they’ll all flee the room.”

“And leave the keys to the spaceship?”

His lips twitched, and she knew that wasn’t how spaceships worked. “Yes, and leave the keys to the spaceship.”

She struggled up to sit beside him, and he lifted her hand to kiss the back. “Partners.”

“Partners.”

14

The clothes Borial's mother brought suited him; Elle, less so.

“Your father wore these robes to our betrothal,” she said, watching him adjust how the heavy fabric fell around his shoulders. “He is proud to have you wear it now.”

Elle couldn't read how that made him feel as she continued to fuss with her own heavy drapery that was far, far too long for her. She didn't know what order the layers were supposed to go in, either. Borial combed his hair back until it was as smooth as silk, standing as regally as ever. He was only missing the crown.

Elle stopped fussing with her own clothes, deciding it really didn't matter. She wasn't naked, so it would have to do.

She really missed jeans.

When Borial turned to her, she grinned. He looked like a king. It was in his bearing, they couldn't take it from him. They'd bent him, but he'd sprung back into shape now. His mouth even had that slightly pursed look of perpetual disapproval that she hated so much. He was so slappable, and she loved to see it, because this was her Borial, not theirs.

His mother noticed too, frowning. “You mustn't look so contemptuous.”

“Yes, you must,” Elle interrupted, smiling at him, the humourless stick. It was refreshing and reassuring. She almost, *almost* wanted her collar and leash back to complete the picture, because then Borial would have the power and could fix this. He'd hated himself for wanting to fuck her so badly, and looking ahead with that lens, she almost shivered in anticipation. Even under these circumstances, all that tension had to mean some pretty memorable sex.

She closed the gap between them and took his hand, but then his mother was holding out the leash and collar to her,

and her smile dropped. Borial's lip curled in displeasure.

"Do we have to?" she asked.

"Yes."

Elle took the collar, and slowly reached up to wrap it around Borial's neck. He dipped his head, helping. She buckled it, then took the end of the leash. It felt wrong in her hands. The atmosphere felt poisoned.

"I shall show you to the prepared boudoir," The High Diviner said, and Elle swallowed. A boudoir, huh?

Mercifully, it seemed to be after hours in the court house, and they didn't run into any staff in the corridors. Elle walked beside Borial, the leash loose in her hand. With her other hand, she lifted a fistful of fabric so she didn't trip in her robes. Everyone was silent, so only the faint, gentle clinking of the leash accompanied the rustle of their silks.

Borial's mother knocked on a door and opened it without waiting. She entered, bowed, and stepped aside, holding her hand out towards Elle and Borial as they came in behind her. The 'boudoir' was nice, though Elle struggled to see what the room had been before this. Wood panelling, a landscape painting, and a huge bed. It reminded her of Borial's back on the ship, but it had a large frame around it, draped in gauzy pink fabrics. Against the far wall, three women sat, and Elle recognised the High Proclaimer responsible for all this.

"Welcome, Elle O'Neill," she said, slightly stilted. "I hope the preparations are sufficient?"

She could say no, but that would only delay this, not prevent it. If she said yes, they could be off-world by the end of the day. "Yes, thank you."

Borial's mother swept over to take the empty seat against the wall, completing their little audience.

Elle looked at the bed. It was too exposed. Elle would never normally have sex with people in the same room. The idea that a few drapery scarves would make the difference was

laughable. There was a wooden screen patterned with holes that stood between the bed and the two women Elle didn't recognise, but it wasn't enough.

"Then, you may begin," the High Proclaimer said.

With Borial's leash in her hand, Elle walked over to the foot of the bed, staring at it. There were no pillows or blankets, just a padded mattress. There was a chain wrapped around the middle strut of the headboard for Borial's collar, and manacles with chains lay unspooled like snakes at the far corners. She knew what she had to do, but when she tried to imagine getting sexy, she just couldn't. But she had to.

Borial had followed her, led by his chain, and stood beside her, staring at the bed.

First things first, she decided. She turned to him, and unbuckled his collar. Despite everything, his hair was still cool and silky against her fingers, and his robes were warm from his skin where she brushed them. She took the collar off and let it drop to the ground.

"What are you doing?" the High Proclaimer demanded, audibly fighting to keep her voice level.

"We don't use collars where I come from," Elle said. "He needs to do this of his own free will."

A look of gratitude flashed across Borial's face, and he brushed his fingertips against her hand.

Time to get real. With a toss of her hair, Elle looked over her shoulder at the women watching. "You might see some things you've never seen before," she said. "This is *my* marriage ceremony, and Borial already knows what I like. I don't want any interference. He is not hurting me."

"You underestimate-"

"No, *you* underestimate." Perhaps not the maturest comeback, but Elle turned away from her and the High Proclaimer didn't speak again. "Let's lie down. If you..." She steered Borial into swapping places with her, so his back was

to the women, and then crawled onto the bed. He followed, and they faced each other, fully dressed, but Borial's body would block the view of Elle from the audience. With a last apologetic look, she tilted her face up for a kiss, resting her hand tentatively on his waist and trying to focus only on him and what she *felt*, the body under her hands and the warmth emanating from his chest to hers.

He met her lips with his, and Elle tried not to think how the other women might be reacting. Borial was a good kisser, and Elle sighed through her nose and relaxed into it, rolling onto her back so he could cover her. It was funny how familiar his gentleness could be, when really she hadn't known it very long, only a matter of days. But it turned her problem into the familiar one of 'This is *Borial*', rather than anything else, and she already knew she liked Borial. A little. She liked kissing him. She loved the new feeling of him giving into her, meeting her in passion, instead of how it used to be. And she *adored* the fall of his hair against her cheek. She wasn't mad at him, when he was kissing her like this for her sake, in this awful situation, making no demands for himself. She didn't hate him when he took the time to slide his tongue against hers. He was generous and kind, like this.

She knew there was more, but she wouldn't be hurried. She slid her hand into his hair and kissed him harder. She wouldn't stop until she was ready.

His hand slid up her side, over her clothes, until his thumb just brushed her breast. In the space of a breath, he whispered "May I?" and she nodded, then thought she'd better speak out loud, for the benefit of their audience.

"Yes."

The weight of his palm slid over her tit. There were too many layers of fabric between them, but it was still nice.

"I wish I could see, and feel, your breasts," he whispered, and Elle gave a small smirk.

“I just bet you do.” She let her eyes sparkle at him when he met her gaze for a moment, both of them thinking of three years of the rubber underwear.

He let the tip of his nose touch hers, holding her eyes, while she stared up him like prey playing with its tamed predator. “Shall I kiss your neck?”

She would like that, but would that then expose her face to the watchers? Would she catch sight of them and lose her building passion? Should she let that stop them? She squirmed, then tilted her jaw up and away, inviting him. He dipped his face to her throat, and licked up her neck, sucking behind her ear, making her shiver all over.

If they didn't have an audience, she would have moaned to praise him. Because they *did* have audience, she thought she should do something like that anyway. “Borial,” she sighed. “Good.”

That was all she could manage, her throat tight with a trapped whine as he kissed over her pulse. She remembered with a lurch that maybe she should be touching him, that maybe he would need more foreplay than usual because of the circumstances. He wasn't in heat after all. She ran her hands over his stomach and then lower, trying to see if he was aroused. The many layers of robes made it difficult, but he took her pawing at him as a signal to start inching her robes up her legs, and slip his hand under.

Even as she felt chilled, and wished they could be doing this under a comforter, his hand cupped the top of her thigh, his fingertips just brushing the hair of her slit, making her tingle. She hadn't worn underwear. “May I?” he whispered again.

She didn't know what to say, part of her still rebelling at the idea of having sex in front of people, but she knew she had to, and she knew she definitely wanted to be wet and ready when she did. At least he knew how to touch her now, from their time in the tent. “Yes.”

As he brushed his fingertips between her lips, she wished she could just roll him over and suck him off, something overtly sexual like that would turn her on. It was what she had done in the tent, when she'd had control, but it would expose them too much now. It was proving difficult to feel passionate when she knew people were watching, and they had to keep their clothes on and be mindful about where they put themselves. There was a solid chance this would be the worst sex of Elle's life, and the fear that she couldn't get turned on enough and Borial would hurt her wasn't helping.

He rubbed gently at her clit, but she could feel how dry she was. Everything she could think of to turn herself on, she didn't want to do when people could see, so she just lay frozen where Borial was sheltering her from sight.

She forced herself to do something, mirroring Borial by rucking up his robes and seeking out his cock with her hand. She clasped it once, as if to establish its position, then ran her fingertips along it in a gentler tease. He bucked his hips towards her, so that was something. Feeling a little better, she worked him to full hardness with soft squeezes and pumps while he stroked her clit.

When he rolled her onto her back, she went, pulling her hands from his cock to rest on his waist, thinking '*This is it*'. She squeezed her eyes shut, her legs spread around his hips, knees bent, knowing there was no way to hide that. She just tried to relax, like she was at the doctor, and when his cock fell against her sex and made a tentative slide up, it was obvious she was not wet enough. This was going to suck.

Suddenly he pulled away from her, getting up from the bed. Elle quickly tugged her robes back down, her eyes flying to the women who watched him with suspicious frowns.

Elle looked to the end of the bed, where Borial stood, the collar in his hands. He unclipped the chain and let it drop with a silvery rattle. Did he want to wear it after all? What was he doing? She wanted to ask but didn't want to give away that she didn't know.

He climbed back onto the bed, resuming his position between her knees. Then he reached down slid the collar behind her neck. Her jaw dropped. “You *prick!*”

“How *dare* you-?”

“Borial, you *cannot!*”

“He can do whatever he wants!” Elle barked at the peanut gallery, then looked back up at Borial. Was he really doing this? A feeling of betrayal teetered in her. She couldn’t quite believe it.

Once the harsh black leather collar was buckled – extremely loosely, he could grip the front without even touching her – he smirked, then flicked his eyes up to hold hers, a message there. “Just like old times,” he said quietly.

She stared at him, the leather cold and close against her neck where he held it tight.

His expression flickered for a moment with worry, and he bent his head to her ear. “You said you didn’t want me to be a slave, Elle. You asked me to act like myself. What better way?” He gave the collar a light tug.

A choked laugh broke from Elle. She couldn’t decide if she understood him, or if she’d slid into hysteria. He’d known she was struggling to get out of her head, so he put the collar on her as a distraction, as an invitation for her to be angry at him instead of mortified. “You *fuck*. You arrogant *dickhead*,” she laughed, and she felt the corner of his mouth pull up in a smile against her cheek. What a way to break the ice.

“Now, shall I lick you wet for me?”

That cut her laughter off, and made her breaths start coming in shallow pants. “Not sure,” she admitted.

He waited a moment, then knelt up, releasing the collar. She lay looking up at him as he stripped off his top robe, offering it to her. “Shall we hide under this?”

She hesitated, so he flapped it open over her like he was laying a tablecloth. It was a huge, voluminous, golden

thing, and as it came down he ducked underneath it, taking her mouth again. The silk fell to rest all around them, the light coming through like a filtered sunrise. She couldn't see anything beyond the robe, and it made her feel like a kid in a blanket fort... with an elf king who wanted to go down on her.

She hugged him to her as they kissed, and maybe she started to feel something. It wasn't just the illusion of privacy the robe gave her, and it wasn't just his weight between her thighs. It was a combination of the two, with the kindness of the gesture on top. He'd shed a layer to give her more protection. He'd made wearing the collar playful... and aggravating. And he was... welcome. So welcome. Her body started to wake up. She wanted this man, and more than physically.

He moved from her mouth to her neck before drawing further down her body. She had to hold the robe to keep it from slipping away after him. When he got to her bare thighs, he captured her eyes and held them. He stroked her legs, squeezing, trying to reassure her, and then pressed a kiss to the inside of her knee. She understood what he was saying. It was him and her, together, and she was safe with him. He wouldn't hurt her. She gave him a weak nod.

When he kissed her knee again, she felt his tongue, and her sex tightened in anticipation.

He sucked wet kisses down her thigh, each one teasing her more, adding his thumb rubbing softly against her entrance, and she could feel herself slicking it up. His breath came hot against her wet sex, even as he continued to hold her eyes, and she watched his orange tongue dip out of his mouth towards her. He licked her, the soft, textured muscle sliding over her, and her spine stiffened. She hissed and mewled. Watching was so much more erotic than it had been before. It kept the fact that it was *Borial* forefront in her mind, inescapable.

His eyes closed in an expression of anguished rapture, and he tilted his head slightly, his lips working to find her clit.

He wasn't there to play with her. He latched on and sucked gently, wetly, his thumb spreading her own juices further and further up with each pass until he felt he had enough to push a finger inside her, then two. She rocked her hips against him, not quite chasing orgasm, but wanting it to be clear that she was there with him. His fingers stayed inside, only pumping an inch or two as his tongue flicked over her clit inside his mouth.

She kept her whimpers as quiet as she could. He pushed his free hand under her robes, from her bared hips to her breasts, fondling her under all the layers, and she squirmed all the more. She laid her hand on top of his, frustrated that she couldn't feel him skin to skin, couldn't control what he did, but that new sensation of having him under her clothes where she couldn't get to him only twisted her higher.

"Do you want to come?" he murmured into her pussy, barely tearing himself away to speak. His finger twisted inside her, soaked.

"I- No. Need you." She didn't want to waste this feeling. If she came, she might come down enough to become self-conscious again. She held her arms out to him, and he extricated himself from her pussy, crawling back over her body, his front settling against hers, belly to belly. He notched his cock against her open sex, thrusting it against her.

"Alright?" he asked, the scent of her sex filling the space between them.

"Yes."

"Remember..." His own breath was coming a little harsh now. "Only us. Only me. Only you."

She nodded, caught by his silver eyes again. It still felt new to be allowed to stare at them for so long without him looking away.

"Do you want this?" he asked, giving a particularly sharp thrust against her.

"Do you?"

The dazed lust in his face was briefly replaced by something else, and he dropped his eyes, taking hold of her collar again. "I want you," he said after a moment.

She nodded. "Me too. I want you. I want you to fuck me and I think I might want you in general too."

"And after?"

"After is after. You don't know what that will be any more than I do." She traced his jaw with her tongue and held him tighter, pulling him down so she could speak into his ear. "Give me your cock."

"It will change everyth-"

"No. Shh. Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll deal with the rest later. Or do you want me to beg?"

He shook his head. "If you begged, I..."

She nudged her nose into his, their lips an inch apart, making him look at her again and see her smile. "Then take me."

He still looked a little uncertain, but his cockhead found her entrance and surged smoothly inside, making her choke on a gasp as he moaned, long and loud. He waited for a second, his forehead dropping to her shoulder, but then it seemed he couldn't wait any longer, beginning to thrust jerkily. She tightened her thighs, the feeling unravelling her.

He wasn't the most skilled, but she could feel him trembling with the effort of holding himself back as much as he could, trying to keep himself stable. She tilted her hips, trying to catch him where she needed him, get him to brush her clit.

This was *Borial*, fucking her, *inside* her. Her slavemaster, her lord... and some little part of her deep down in her perverted id was seriously getting off on that. He was

holding her down and fucking her after *three years* of denial. The one man in the universe she shouldn't be fucking, but it was happening. She'd broken him. She was about to win, and lose, at the same time. As soon as he came inside her, that would be it.

Her cunt was so wet and swollen and over-stimulated, she couldn't help but gasp and moan as he worked her. She felt like a furnace in her many layers, Borial's robe over their heads making it hard to breathe. He kissed her neck, the other side now.

"Elle... Mistress..." he panted, even as he kept a one-handed grip on the collar, tugging it lightly with his thrusts, using it to pull them together.

She slid her hands down his back, pushing on his hips as she tilted hers up, arching against him. "Borial... Don't stop..."

"Feels too good," he whispered like it was a secret. "You feel too good, I- I can't-" He bit her shoulder, and it might have hurt if not for all the fabric.

She just clung to him. "Faster. Harder."

He groaned and obeyed her, wet claps filling the room, the bunched-up fabric between them digging into her stomach. She couldn't reach between them to get to her clit, she could only writhe and lift her leg higher against his side. She licked his throat, tasting the foreign salt of his sweat, and he moaned again, shuddering to a halt, his cock pulsing inside her, and she realised he was coming. She continued to rock her hips against him, thinking about his come pouring into her until she triggered her own orgasm, seizing around his cock and making him shake and moan all the more.

For a long moment, their heavy breathing was the only sound as they both came down. Then Borial's hands found hers and moved them slowly off him to the bed above her head. She thought he was holding her hands, until he thrust

through her again, and she realised he was actually pinning her.

“More,” he breathed into her neck.

If Elle hadn't been told that sex would change him, she wouldn't have thought anything of it. As it was, she was suddenly on alert. “Borial?”

He didn't seem to hear her, shifting his weight for more leverage to keep going.

Before she could say anything else, the robe was ripped off them, dazzling Elle with the light and making her shriek and flail in alarm. Borial gave a startling snarl as he was pulled off her by his hair, his cock leaving her body far too abruptly, and Elle snapped her legs shut, pushing her robes back down.

She watched the High Proclaimer drag Borial off the bed and force him onto his knees, his lip curled in fury but his body limp and obedient.

“Congratulations,” she said stiffly. “You now have a fully-bonded Ure male as your legal mate, as recognised by this court. What you do with him, and how you handle him, is on your head. I believe the High Diviner will arrange transport for the two of you?”

“Y-Yes,” agreed Borial's mother, frozen, her eyes wide at this rough treatment of her son.

“Good. Then we are concluded,” the High Proclaimer announced, pushing Borial down away from her and sweeping from the room with her attendants. Elle made a second's awkward eye-contact with Borial's mother, and opened her mouth to say something, but Borial was already climbing up the bed and over her, apparently uncaring that his mother was right there. Elle flattened back in alarm.

“Borial, stop,” his mother ordered sharply.

“I don't want to stop,” he panted, his voice low and rough. He situated himself over Elle, investigating her neck

with his mouth and nose. “I can make you feel good,” he promised her.

Holy shit, was this what they’d all tried to warn her about? Why Ure males wore restraints? Elle put her hands against his shoulders and pushed, lost for words. It seemed a betrayal to order him off her like the other women had done, and part of her didn’t want to find out if he was going to ignore her if she did.

The High Diviner sighed and reached down to grab the length of his hair like a rope, pulling but not as roughly as the High Proclaimer had, just enough to get him crawling back.

“If you don’t want to pass me that collar, then you will need to order him to stop. If you want to continue, it would be better if you didn’t do it here.”

Elle’s hand jumped to the collar. With his hair being pulled like that, Borial knelt on the bed with his head tipped back, his neck exposed, looking annoyed and inconvenienced and impatient, but hardly foaming at the mouth in a frenzy of lust. Yes, his cock was still obviously hard under the robes, and the Borial she knew would have had more of a reaction to having his hair pulled, but... she didn’t want to put the collar on him. He’d been so afraid that exact thing would happen if he mated.

She met his eyes. “Borial, we’re leaving here now.”

His face instantly transformed to one of fear and grief. “No, I want to keep going.” He tried to move towards her again, fighting against his mother’s hold.

“We’ll talk when we get somewhere safe.”

He noticed her ankle was within reach and slid his hand up it in an attempt at seduction. “I can be better if you show me how,” he almost purred.

Elle slapped her hand on the bed, making them all jump. “Borial, snap out of it!” she cried, her voice shaking. He was scaring her. He was supposed to be the same person afterwards. He wasn’t supposed to change this much. She

needed him to get her through this life in space she knew nothing about.

He looked chastened, almost cringing. “I’m sorry, Mistress.”

“Elle!”

“Elle,” he pouted. He stroked her leg again. “I’m sorry. I’ll be good.”

She looked at his mother, at a loss. “He... He’ll get better, right? This isn’t permanent?”

She shrugged, a little sadly, looking down at her son, held back by his hair. “Depending on how you treat him, you can keep him like this or help him be more like he was.”

“How do I do that? Get him back to how he was?”

“If you keep him hungry – and whole – he will always beg for you like this. If you want him as he was, you have to let him exhaust himself completely. Surrender your body to him, until he runs out of ideas. Then, he might feel confident enough that you belong to him to think of other things. Time, as well, will help. Some women deny their mates their company so entirely that it breaks this attitude they have, and they dare not ask for more, but that would only work until you next take him, and it would be an awful, cruel way to treat my son.” She looked wistful. “Every mating has unhappiness. It can be yours or his.”

Elle looked back at Borial, worried now. She wanted him back the way he was, but when his mother said *surrender your body*, what did that mean? Hadn’t she just done that? How long would it take him to exhaust himself? He wouldn’t really hurt her, would he?

A few things were clear, though. Elle needed a bath. They needed to get out of this court house, and somewhere safe. They needed food.

“You said you’d secure transport for us,” Elle reminded her. “Where can we stay until then?”

“You will stay with me. My son can come home now.”

15

Elle expected a fancy house – she knew Borial’s mom was important from her title and from what he’d told her – but this was another level. This was a royal *palace*.

Almost.

A royal vacation home.

Getting Borial there had been challenging. He was entirely focused on having sex with her again, but he wasn’t unhinged. More like a child that wanted the cookie in your hand. He could be bribed, but he wanted that cookie, and he was not above playing all sorts of games to get it.

The three of them sat in an oval compartment for the journey, not unlike a limo with curves instead of corners, and his mother watched while Borial piled himself all over Elle. Seduction was his main tactic, kissing her neck and gripping her knee, pulling her legs apart. She shoved at him but he just came back, and so the rules began to stack up.

“Not in front of your mother.”

“Not in the car.”

“Wait until we get home.”

He was begrudgingly obedient, but he didn’t back off, and sat almost glaring at her, not an inch between them, the entire way. He was willing to be bribed with the promise of sex *later*, but he didn’t seem to have much faith she’d pay out. Only that, and a fear of upsetting her, kept him in line.

She took off the collar, but she kept it with her, just in case, and that told her how unsettled she felt.

When they arrived at the house, Borial didn’t give her any more space, sticking to her back. Once through the door, Elle was confronted with an enormous, multi-storey entrance hall with a chandelier, marble, and the biggest staircase she’d ever seen.

His mother stopped behind them at the doorway while Elle marvelled, and did something to the base of what Elle had thought was decoration, which caused a mechanism of delicate flowers and leaves to bloom up the wall and across the ceiling, into the other rooms. It was some kind of domino effect. By twisting the base, Borial's mother cause a ripple to move through the carved structure, opening it up with a dry rattling that flowed away from them through the house.

A moment later, the first of her mates arrived, gasping at the sight of Borial.

The male bowed to the High Diviner. "Welcome home, Elevated Mistress," he said, smiling, then hurried over to embrace Borial even as other men came from other rooms.

Borial grabbed Elle's wrist, refusing to be separated as he was swarmed by the men who had presumably raised him, so she just had to stand there like a lemon.

"Borial! You're home! We are so glad to see you."

"You won your freedom?"

"How you've grown!"

"Thank you, Elevated Mistress!"

"Yes, thank you!"

"Thank you!"

"Praise the Mother Almighty!"

Borial's mother waved them off. "Yes, yes, quiet now. Borial has mated this woman earlier today and is struggling. I believe her intention is to care for him alone?"

"Uh, yes!" Elle startled.

"Then one of you show her to guest chambers. I am tired," and with that, she walked away. Elle couldn't blame her, she'd want a stiff drink too.

None of the males wanted to meet Elle's eyes, dipping and bobbing their heads to avoid her gaze as if it was some

kind of game, but the closest one gestured behind him. “If you’ll follow me, Elevated Lady.”

She followed him, trying to ignore the other five males orbiting Borial behind her. “My name is Elle, Elle O’Neill.”

He didn’t react.

“What’s your name?”

Suddenly there was an extra three feet of space between her and Borial’s fathers.

“Ahhh...” he struggled. “Hylte,” he admitted eventually, after failing to find a way out of it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hylte. Thank you for showing me the way.”

Hylte hesitated another moment, then said “Thank *you* for mating our son.”

“Oh...” Now it was her turn to struggle for a response. “I just hope I can care for him properly. You might need to help me there. I’m not Ure, obviously, so I don’t know what I’m doing. If you know I’m doing something that makes things harder for him or me, please tell me, because I doubt I’ll be doing it on purpose.”

“I could never correct an Elevated Lady!” He sounded genuinely appalled.

“Please. I don’t want to hurt him and I don’t think you want me to either.”

Hylte struggled for a moment, then allowed “I will let my Elevated Mistress know if I become aware of anything.”

That was clearly the best Elle was going to get. “Thank you.”

They climbed the stairs, and reached a set of wooden doors, with holes cut into the arched tops. It put Elle in the mind of *Arabian Nights*. Hylte gestured to the door. “I hope you find these quarters to your liking.”

Elle opened them, peeking inside. It was an entire suite. The far wall opened onto a massive balcony, overlooking the grounds of neatly cultivated flowers. “Thank you, this looks amazing.”

Borial put his hands on her hips and buried his face in her hair, done waiting it seemed.

The males thanked her in turns for mating Borial, then left them alone. Borial immediately hustled her into the room, heading for the bed.

“Wait!” she cried, stopping his hands.

He groaned. “Don’t make me wait,” he gasped, his eyes unfocused.

“I want to bathe, and explore.”

“I will bathe you with my tongue.”

“Show me the bathroom, Borial, *now*.” It didn’t feel good to give him orders, but it seemed necessary. He groaned again, but eased up and, with a dark scowl, led her through another archway where a sunken bath, more like a mini swimming pool, steamed lightly. The room was mosaiced in shades of brown, with blue patches to mark the edges for safety. There were benches against the walls, and the windows were not glassed, but shuttered with more wooden frames, dimming the room. At the far end of the pool sat a tray Elle assumed held soap and toiletries.

“Oh my God...” She started pulling off the damn robes. “Let’s take a bath, huh? You can join me.”

At that, Borial began ripping off his robes too.

She stepped in carefully, but the water was heaven, just the right degree of heat against her body, melting off the sweat and come, and relaxing her stiff muscles.

With her head-start, Elle was on the far side of the pool, checking out the soaps, when Borial splashed in behind her. He surfaced and grabbed her, his radiant hair grey and

slicked back, his yellow skin deep and warm against the brown tiles. She rested her arms on his shoulders. “Finally alone.”

He wasted no time in kissing her, lifting her so that she wrapped her legs around his waist. He pressed her against the wall of the pool, and she felt the hot water between her legs, along with his erection tapping her butt. It wasn't a gentle, tender kiss, but it was smooth and deep. His frenzied need for her might not have been contagious, but it was very persuasive.

If he didn't care that she hadn't washed, then neither did she. He slid his cock home in her without preamble. She was swollen and tender from earlier, wet mostly from his come, but the angle meant he couldn't fuck her too hard. He pumped rhythmically, and she shifted in his hold, trying to get into the best position.

He broke the kiss to pant raggedly, looking down, trying to see where they were joined, but there was no gap between them. He looked at her face instead, and Elle saw a glimmer of the old Borial, or at least one she recognised, uncertain and a little scared.

“Good?” he asked.

She nodded. “Good.” Pulling her arms away, she leant back, reaching for the floor behind her. He stepped back, giving her space, swapping his hold to her ass so he could fuck her while she reclined, her elbows on the tile, the rest of her floating in the water. He could watch it now, his cock stroking in and out of her. He needed both hands to hold her up, even with her legs around him, but she understood from the way one hand kept trying to leave her and then resettling that he wanted to touch her.

The water splashed as he tried a new angle, glancing at her face, trying things out. She slid her own hand down her stomach to tease her clit a little.

“Mis-”

She kneed him in the side like she was spurring a horse.

“*Elle*,” he exhaled heavily, his shoulders dropping like he’d put down something heavy.

“Are you going to come, Borial?” she asked.

He bit his lip, nodding.

“Do you want me to come?”

“*Yes*.” He sounded like he really did, like he needed that more than his own release.

She strummed her clit with a bit more focus, helping him, and how he felt inside her changed as she tightened up. She liked this more, even as he shuddered and his fingertips dug into the soft flesh over her hips. “Go deeper,” she told him.

He did, abandoning speed in favour of bottoming out every time. She liked that better too, tossing her head back with a grunt. It wouldn’t take long to come like this. She touched herself, felt every inch of his cock inside her and the dull bump of his cockhead at the end of her channel as he claimed her completely, and worked herself up into an orgasm that almost had her slipping off her perch and into the water as she writhed. A couple more pumps from him, and Borial was coming too, shaking as he shot himself empty inside her.

An alien, Elle thought to herself idly. She hoped it was safe.

Borial let her legs down, needing to catch his breath. She stood, waiting to see what state he’d be in now and wondering how long she had to wait before washing off his come to avoid being rude.

When he didn’t say anything, she had to. “Better?”

He nodded, looking down, his chest still heaving like he’d run a mile. He ran his hand over his hair, though it couldn’t get any smoother.

Elle gave him a moment, then drifted away to get some soap and started lathering up her skin. She'd done one arm when he caught up to her, standing behind her. He reached around her, his arms fitting along the outsides of hers, and took the bar of soap, then something that turned out to be the equivalent of a loofah. He slowly swept her hair over her shoulder to lie on her chest, and then he was washing her back. It was pleasant, more than pleasant, and Elle let her head fall forward, enjoying the feel of his hands, the hot water flowing down her skin, the bubbles where they clung.

"I am sorry," he said quietly, and Elle heard the old Borial in it.

"For what?"

"This."

She sighed through her nose. She couldn't exactly pretend this was something she'd wanted. It would be dishonest of her to brush his apology away, even if she didn't really consider it his fault. "Apology accepted," she said, wanting it to end there.

She turned to see his face and judge how lucid he was. He looked enough like himself, even naked, that she debated covering her boobs, but she decided not to. They were in this now. "Are you back to normal?"

He shook his head. She stared back at him for a long moment, the rest of their lives stretching out in front of her. If he didn't talk to her, she wouldn't know what to do. He needed to help her manage him, she couldn't do it alone and still treat him right. He lifted the loofah again, asking with his eyes if she wanted him to continue. She considered him for a second longer, then relented, offering him her arm. They'd take it one step at a time, or at least, she'd give him a little longer to acclimatise. Maybe he would go back to normal on his own. The fact that he was talking now without trying to fuck her was proof that he would at least have lucid moments, and she could work with that.

Getting clean felt so good she didn't want to leave the pool. When she was all scrubbed, she ducked under the surface and pushed away from Borial, letting the water drag through her hair, against her scalp. When she came up, he was there, ready to work oils through it that foamed a little. Maybe she'd end up with hair as soft and silky as his. She dunked herself again when he was done. The pool wasn't big enough to really swim, but she was tempted. Then she washed him in turn, and scrubbing his yellow skin gave her the opportunity to examine his body in more detail than ever before. She made him sit on the edge of the pool, dripping, so she could do his legs, then let him back in so she could wash his cock gently.

It was already hard, and he gasped as she wrapped her hand around him. His face told her he needed her again, his mouth slack, his bottom teeth showing as if his plump bottom lip was simply too heavy to support, and his eyes sparking.

He gripped her arm, but otherwise he patiently bore her washing him. Once she was done though, he steered her back against the edge of the pool.

"Need you," he mumbled perfunctorily, as if he was voicing the obvious just to be polite.

She turned away from him, pulling her upper body to lie on the tiles, her legs dangling into the water and her ass presented to him. The tiles were warm from whatever system heated the water. She rocked her hips to get her hand between her legs, cupping her pussy. She spread her legs and tapped her entrance with her finger. "Here. Like this."

Somehow, she could tell without looking he was a little confused, but the water surged up against her as he took his position. "Yes."

She felt the head of his cock probe her entrance, and realised all their washing had been too thorough, she wasn't wet enough for this. She jerked, kicking his hip with her heel. "Wait."

He made a noise between a whimper and a gurgle.

“You need to make me wet first. Aroused,” she added, not wanting to hear about how they were both soaked and dripping from the bath.

She could feel him consider this conundrum, and his fingers twitched against her hip, as if he had actually drummed them. The water splashed again, and when she looked over her shoulder, he’d disappeared. Then she felt his shoulders lean into the back of her thighs, and he nosed between her folds, swiping a big lick of her sex. She stiffened in surprise before melting into it.

“Don’t drown,” she mumbled, settling her face against the pillow of her arms.

He just moaned.

16

Borial's mother hadn't been exaggerating when she'd said Elle would have to 'surrender her body'. Borial fucked her from behind, bent over the edge of the pool, and they rinsed off again. By the time they made it to the bed, he was horny again. Elle made him wait until they'd eaten, but after that? She lost count. Eventually she'd given up on moving, just lying limp and letting him position her how he wanted while he whimpered with guilt and need, apologising endlessly.

She even let him fuck her ass, which had been an interesting experience for sure. His fingers had been gentle as he'd opened her up, licking her crease and begging, and when he'd slid inside, and his hot wet skin had come down against her back, his arms shaking beside her as he held himself up... She'd never felt so full, so *taken*, and so in control. She couldn't help but spread her thighs and moan, lifting her hips into him and resting her cheek against his fist. She hadn't expected it to feel as good as it did.

She could have stopped him at any point, she knew that. When she told him to wait, he waited. When she told him to slow down, he slowed down. He'd asked for permission for every new thing. She didn't stop him though, and she had to admit, part of it was morbid curiosity. Just how far could they push themselves? Would he *ever* get tired? Would *she* ever get tired of this new, desperate animal side of him? She'd seen him in heat before, but never got to pair his growls and huffs and whimpers with his cock moving inside her, or his sweaty body rocking against hers.

She found herself just watching him, and she must have been hallucinating with exhaustion because he became a thing to behold, beautiful and male and hers in a way nothing else ever had been. She understood in those moments that from now on, he could be on one side of the universe and she on the other, and he would still be like this for her. It was scary

and gratifying all at once. She'd been his slave, but now she *owned* him, all the way down to his soul.

She wasn't aware of falling asleep. She couldn't swear he hadn't still been fucking away when she passed out, and when she woke, wrung out and confused, she couldn't remember everything perfectly. She lifted her head, sore, as light poured in from the balcony, turning everything yellow. She wanted a drink and some food, and caffeine. As she pushed herself up, she realised Borial was sitting on the end of the bed, fully dressed, his hair brushed and neat. Elle stilled. Was this a good sign?

He noticed her, and jumped up, clasping his hands demurely in front of him and bowing. She'd never understood how he could do that without his hair slipping.

"*Elle,*" he choked, and then he threw himself to his knees by the bed reaching for her but stopping himself before he touched her, his hands lying on the bed between them. "I am *so sorry.*"

She swallowed, her throat sore. "Don't be sorry." It wasn't fair that she sounded so rough when he was so neatly put together.

"I wasn't myself."

"Are you yourself now?"

He looked away. "Not... entirely."

Elle sighed, and let her head drop. "What does that *mean?*"

"I will need you again. I'll be... overwhelmed."

Elle whimpered, almost laughing, almost crying. "I don't know if I can physically take it."

He put his hand on her back lightly, as if wanting to comfort her but not knowing if he was welcome. "I understand now why Ure males don't mind... what happens to them. Seeing you like this, I feel I would do anything to myself to stop it."

Elle shook her head. “We’re not doing that. It’s off the table. I promised you.”

“You are a good woman, Elle, but if I’m hurting you, what can we do?”

“Figure it out. You’ll calm down in time. Maybe there are pills you can take or something temporary like that. I bet the women here never even looked into it. We can go to a doctor on another planet. Hell, maybe there are pills *I* can take.”

“You would do that?”

She shrugged. He looked pained, and gathered up her hand in his, pressing the back of it to his cheek. It was so strange. It was Borial, but it wasn’t, but it *was*. She was precious to him, but was it real? Did it matter, when they had to live it either way?

“Do you hate me now?” he asked quietly.

“No, I don’t hate you.”

“How... *do* you feel?”

“I’m asking myself if this makes me your sex-slave after all.”

He flinched, his silver brows jerking together as if he’d been hit. “*No*, you’re my mistress!”

“Would you have said that yesterday?”

“We can’t go back to yesterday. Please, Elle, I want to make you happy.”

She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling, thinking, feeling, trying to read herself. What did she want? Where could they go from here?

“Everything we said on that planet, I still want it. I decide what I do, what and when I eat, sleep, bathe, dress.”

He nodded against her hand. “Yes.”

“And so do you.”

That time there was a pause, and she felt his jaw flex as he swallowed. “Yes,” he answered again, with less enthusiasm.

“I don’t want my whole life to be lived in bed. I don’t want sex to be the most important thing about me.” She turned her head to meet his eyes, something taking shape in her mind. “I want you to take me somewhere real, with grass and sky and mountains and trees, and *rain*. And if I want to run, I’ll run. If I want to swim, I’ll swim, and if I want to get dirty, I’ll get dirty. I want boots that pinch my feet. I want clothes that smell new. I want to laugh. I want to walk through a marketplace full of people and buy things. I want quiet and fireplaces. I want things I’ve never seen before. And I want you to give them to me.

“And I want you to love me, love me like *crazy*, more than anyone else ever could.” She rolled to her side, taking his hand, tears gathering in her eyes as she considered the life they could have. “Do you understand? This is it for us, so it has to be *it*. It has to be enough, more than enough. Everything. The best-case scenario. The love of my life. You owe me that.”

He nodded quickly. “Yes. I do. I will.”

“And this isn’t a trade. I’m not asking for all this in exchange for letting you fuck me whenever you want. Hell, I’m not even asking for it, I’m just letting you know it’s what I want. I’ll keep sleeping in your bed, because I know you need it and I’m a nice person, and truth be told, I’m starting to think I love fucking you.” She brushed his cheek tenderly, wondering idly where all this was coming from, this new-found clarity. She might have just been exhausted, or maybe her shit life had turned around into everything she’d wanted it to be.

“There’s something about it, something about you. You’re the man in my life. My partner. We can be that. It would be easy. So I want to keep sleeping in your bed and making love to you. I want you to keep wanting me. And I want you to give me everything I just said because *you* want to, because you want to make me happy, because *you’re* a nice

person – because you love me, because I’m your woman and your partner...”

God, she was asking him to love her? Just because she’d decided he was good in bed?

For so long, she’d known she needed him to survive. He’d been her safe haven and the single source of all her anguish and rage. Now it had all come to a head and he’d fucked the life out of her in ways no man ever had, and all the hate and rage were just memories. They weren’t gone, but they were old wounds. Tender, but not bleeding. They would heal, with a little work from both of them.

He’d never kick her out of bed again, she realised. He’d never treat her coldly, or make her feel small and inconvenient. She more than believed that, she *knew* that, and that certainty let her give him all of her, and receive all of him in return. The intimacy they had shared – the vulnerability of coming on his cock and knowing he wouldn’t sneer at her, paired with his vulnerability of wanting her so much he wasn’t himself anymore – it was what she’d needed all along.

That, and the freedom he promised her, that she could already feel like a lightness all around her.

But it was all too sudden for big declarations, not when they were both more than a little fuck-drunk.

“If you do love me, though, keep it to yourself for now because I won’t believe you.” She brought her emotional shields back up and turned away again to contemplate the ceiling. They must both be crazy. Delirious.

A moment passed in silence and she wasn’t even embarrassed. She was happy to wait for a reply.

His silk robes slithered as he stood. “Very well, allow me to get started, if you don’t need me with you?”

Her eyes bugged and snapped to his face. She hadn’t expected that, but he sounded like Borial again, frosty and imperial, formal and hard... but with a new soft edge, as if he was teasing?

“You’ll find everything you need in this room to get washed and dressed, and my parents will feed you if I am out of the house. I will return this evening, and surely make love to you again, however you most wish it.” He bent to kiss her forehead, then swept away to the door and she spluttered. He’d just opened it, but he turned back.

She gaped at him.

He shut the door and came back to the bed, lifting her hand and running his thumb across her knuckles. “I go to reclaim our ship,” he murmured softly, “To take you to this place you want to go, to give us a home, and privacy...” He flicked his eyes to hers, capturing them as he lowered his mouth to her knuckles. “What should I have said? ‘Yes, Mistress?’” Then he kissed her hand, smirked, and winked.

Winked.

Speechless, Elle couldn’t respond. He left for the door again. “Be ready for me. I will be...” He seemed to struggle for the word, shame stealing over his face, so Elle rescued him.

“Got it. Go get ‘em, tiger.”

He gave her a perplexed but indulgent look, and then he was gone.

This was madness.

But if anyone could do it, Borial could. Maybe he was only obeying orders. Right then, she didn’t care. He clearly functioned better with some kind of purpose, instead of sitting here beating himself up.

Elle hadn’t slept enough, she could feel it, but she could hardly give that whole speech about not spending her life in bed and then refuse to get up now. So she dragged herself out and went to investigate her clothing options, and find a hair brush.

Epilogue

Three Years Later...

“Don’t make me come,” Borial begged.

“I’m not even doing anything.”

That was a lie; she was pulling the tight ring of her index finger and thumb down his swollen cock. It wasn’t enough to qualify as a handjob in her opinion, or any kind of sincere attempt to bring him off, but when Borial got into his moods...

He moaned in complaint, shifting his leg on the bed.
“*Elle.*”

“What?”

“I want to come inside you, Mistress...”

“Yeah, you said that already.” She reached the base of his cock and returned her fingers to the head, starting again. She wasn’t edging him. He was just being really stubborn. She grew impatient and gripped the slick head of his cock, working with her fingertips.

“Stop!” he cried, his whole body tensing, eyes wide in alarm.

Elle took her hand off with a frustrated huff, folding her arms and staring at him as he panted. He rolled his hips towards her, chasing the sensation. “You’re being annoying now. You need to make up your mind.”

“I need to come inside you,” he puffed, his eyes closed, exhausted and sweaty, his face drawn.

“Well, you can’t.” They had an appointment at a fertility clinic tomorrow and the doctor said Elle couldn’t have sex or ‘take in’ Borial’s semen until he gave the okay. He needed a baseline for the human reproductive system before he started playing around with it. Unfortunately, it was taking

longer than Borial could wait. It was unpleasantly nostalgic, watching her husband descend into his first heat in three years.

Heat Borial was crazy Borial. He was irrational, single-minded, and feebly manipulative. Did he think Elle wasn't also frustrated? She wanted to have sex too!

Heat Borial wanted to fuck, he wanted to plant his seed, and he was holding out until she gave in. He didn't want a handjob, but that was all she could offer him.

She stroked his side, trying to comfort him. "Look. Just let me make you come, and then you'll feel better."

"But..."

"But what?"

But nothing, it seemed, since he didn't reply, making her wonder if he'd actually fallen asleep. She eased to her feet, thinking she'd let him rest.

"Don't go!" he cried, suddenly awake.

She rolled her eyes. Maybe she wasn't ready for motherhood, if it was anything like this. She turned back and climbed onto the bed, crawling over him so she could lie beside him. There wasn't a lot he could do, since his hands were chained to the frame over his head. She tucked her cheek onto his shoulder, her arm around his waist.

"You want to have a baby, don't you?" she prompted him, trying to remind him what was at stake.

"Yes!" he replied, his tone suggesting his way was the way to make that happen.

"Then we have to wait."

"Untie me, and-"

"If I untie you, we'll have sex, just like last time and the time before that, and then we'll have to start all over. We're so close this time. Just wait a little longer. Let me help you feel better." She slid her hand down his stomach. He groaned, but he didn't tell her to let him go when her hand

circled his cock again and gave a squeezing stroke. “And then next time, we can fuck like animals, and I’ll make you a dad-” He groaned loud, drowning her out, so she pumped faster. “Hmm? Would you like that, *master*?”

He shuddered and exploded all over her hand, the sleeve of her robe, his stomach. She worked him through it, licking and nibbling at the corner of his jaw. When he was done, his body limp, she let his cock go but stayed cuddled close to him while he caught his breath.

“Cheating,” he murmured, half-conscious.

“You love it.” She lifted her hand to her lips, sticking out her tongue to taste him, but he bucked sharply.

“Don’t put it in your mouth!”

“Oh, right, yeah.” She looked around for something to wipe her hand on, but she wasn’t going to use her fancy robes or his bedding. It was easier for her to get up and go to the bathroom than do a load of laundry, so she forced herself up. When she came back, she unlocked the shackles on his wrists and let him pull her down beside him for a cuddle.

Thinking about the child they were trying to have, Elle felt like the Grinch, like her heart had grown three sizes. How she felt about Borial now, compared to how she had when they’d first mated three years ago... There was no comparison, and she was sure he felt the same. The words she had weren’t enough. He was her man, her mate.

She loved him.

He had given her everything she’d asked for and more.

After Sopa, Borial had found their ship in a shipyard in space, and taken Elle on a complicated ship-hopping trek to get back to it, then had to pay off the repairs. It had been a big adjustment for both of them, being mated. Borial had picked up his ambassadorial duties again, and Elle had moved into his room. There’d been speed-bumps. Learning to manage his need for her, and his shifted priorities, had been a long process.

They got Sazi and Xerjan back, then Elle had asked Borial to replace Sazi, and he had. The blue bug lady had always been rough with Elle and treated her with disdain, but her mammalian replacement had no problem working for a human, and helped Elle present herself to advantage whenever she left the ship, working with her to make sure she was comfortable. She accompanied Elle on shopping trips whenever Borial had meetings planetside, and now Elle had a full wardrobe of clothes she liked, and considered the woman a friend.

Borial had still thrown his weight around at first, trying to forbid her from leaving the ship for her own safety, but their new mating meant she could shut that down quickly, and in time, Borial was bright enough to start using honey instead of vinegar. After his business was finished, he took her out on his arm, showing her around himself, until she was going to bed happy. Those first few months of exotic dates had been everything she'd wanted, and it wasn't long before she'd fallen in love with him. It was easy when she felt safe and treasured and *seen*, and when her life was full of beauty and exotic and wonderful things.

And great sex.

Borial was undeniably the engine of their sex life. He needed her, and if he didn't get her, he started to slip into a Mr Hyde personality that lived only to get her into bed, and Elle had never been wanted like that before. It didn't even annoy her, she mostly found it flattering, and useful, when he was being a pain in the ass. It was hard to be mad at a man that would blow off any responsibility to stay in bed with her, pulling her into his chest if she tried to leave, pitching his voice to the exact tone that made her spine melt, and telling her all the things she loved to hear.

He'd cup her pussy and ask for her gift like he'd die without it, and try as she might, she just couldn't hate that.

And the roleplay was... Well, they were both fucked in the head, that's all she could think about that. Borial loved and

hated to be collared and leashed and restrained, to be talked down to, commanded, punished for his crime of enslaving her and his audacity in mating her, for his depravity in soiling her with his seed. And Elle loved to do all that for him. She loved the power. The deep, dark, little nugget inside her that would never see Earth again wanted to rub his face in it, and use his need for her against him.

She would never tell anyone about the times they flipped the script, and she was the slave, taken by her master. It just turned her on, when *he* flexed *his* power. She'd been so afraid of it for so long, that having it happen with pleasure and control was healing. She'd had no power before, but now she did. Anything she said, he would do, so she could let him play the master, using her body to relieve his lust. She could make her fears real and come out the other side unharmed and sated, her husband holding her.

Borial was as fucked in the head as she was, so he enjoyed it too. He liked power just as much as she did, and he healed from playing out his greatest fears in the same way.

About a year after mating on Sopa, Elle suggested a marriage ceremony. It was a beautiful day on a beautiful planet, and nobody but them and the crew knew about it.

Now, they wanted a baby. But that wasn't all. They'd been thinking of ways to help Ure males, and Elle had suggested founding a school off-world, so more boys could do what Borial did, which was to simply never return. They could mate with other species when the time came, since that was obviously an option. It would take a lot of planning though.

For now, Borial had fallen asleep around her, and she knew if she tried to leave, she would wake him. It had happened before. Planning for a baby must be making her sentimental, because her mind wandered back to how it used to be between them. Being held like this by him, in bed, used to fill her with so much rage. The past was like some strange dark mirror to her life now. She knew the path that had led her

here, but the difference between then and now was like night and day.

She should send the High Proclaimer a thank you note, she thought to herself, knowing she wouldn't, but nevertheless feeling a small wisp of gratitude for the crazy women on Sopa who had forced her and Borial to mate. Maybe his mother would like to visit.

She snuggled into his chest, pretending not to notice his hand creeping up her thigh on a seduction mission she would have to shut down, at least until after their appointment tomorrow. She let herself smile though. How strange to be this happy, after being abducted from her home planet and sold as a slave to the very man in bed with her now.

“Borial?”

“Hmm?”

“I don't think I ever said it...”

“Said what?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Buying me.”

He forced his eyes open, blinking through his heat-haze, recognising the importance of the moment. “Do you mean that?” he whispered.

“Yes. You weren't a bad master. If anyone else had bought me, I wouldn't be here now, so... Thank you.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand, his palm damp with sweat but still the most precious palm in the galaxy to her. He brushed his thumb under her eye. “I'm sorry.”

“What for?”

“Buying you,” he said with a rueful shrug. “Instead of saving you, like I should have done. I shouldn't have treated you the way that I did. I don't deserve to be forgiven for it,

but... it was the best thing I ever did. It was my honour to keep you safe, in my own inept way. And mating you..."

"What?"

"Saved me. From everything. I don't deserve it."

She understood what he was referring to. Borial buying her had kept her safe from all the myriad things an alien slave could expect to be subjected to, and mating Elle had kept him safe from everything a male Ure could expect from mated life. They made quite the pair.

"I guess we saved each other then."

He hummed in agreement and kissed her hair, tucking her head under his chin.

He needed to sleep and Elle wanted to let him, so she didn't pursue the conversation. Instead, she thought of baby names until she drifted off with him.