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MIRANDA MARTIN



EVE'S SALVATION

RED PLANET JUNGLE BOOK FIVE

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EVE

“*F*ind a nice guy, settle down, live your life,” I mutter under my breath. “Right.”

Sweat pours into my eyes faster than I can wipe it away. I thought being on a planet would be cool. I used to dream about what it would be like to feel real gravity. The ship did a good job of fooling you, but I always knew, on some level, that it was artificial. It never felt quite right.

But when I dreamed, it was of a proper planet. One terraformed and prepared for human life. The planet we were supposed to go to. Not that I would've ever walked on it. There were still three more generations to go before we'd arrive. I still dreamt about it though.

Especially as I sat by my mother's sick bed, caring for her in her lucid moments, and trying to get through the rest of the time when she wasn't. Medicine on the ship was good, but there are some things it can't help. And, just like my mom, I'm a walking time-bomb.

Someday, at some undetermined point in time, those genetic markers will kick in and I will begin the agonizingly slow decline. I guess that's the upside of crashing on Tajss. As dangerous as it is here, it's highly unlikely that I'll survive long enough for my body to screw me over. Bright sides, am I right?

I snort and wipe the sweat away. Again.

Othim, the handsome Zmaj dragon guy, looks over his shoulder with open curiosity.

A flush creeps over my skin. Am I perv? I've been creeping on him for what feels like ages. Is it weird to be so into an alien? I'm hot, hungry, and exhausted so my thoughts are jumping around like a fish out of water.

Othim stops and turns. "Are you okay Eve?" he asks.

I'm pretty sure that's what he's asking. I'm filling in gaps in my understanding of the Zmaj language with guesses. I take a moment to look him over. All his race, at least the ones we've met, are incredibly well built. There's some good genetics at work for you, which must be nice.

He's over seven feet tall, closer to seven and a half, putting him a head taller than the other Zmaj who keep us survivors alive. His face is angular, almost a diamond shape, but still humanoid. He has the most gorgeous topaz eyes that glitter with the sun like they're molten gold or something. His scales are a dusky tan and cover his body as a protective layer.

Zmaj don't wear shirts, not that I blame them. If I looked that good, I'd avoid a shirt too. Why have all those muscles if you're only going to hide them? I'm sure it's more a matter of practicality than that, but a girl can imagine. Washboard abs, bulging pectoral muscles, biceps that look strong enough to lift a thousand pounds, all while still being lithe and agile.

The Zmaj also have wings, leathery affairs that fold tight to their backs. They can't fly, per se, but they do glide, and I think the purpose of the wings is to lighten their weight when they run. And of course, they have a tail. Othim's is longer and thinner than the other Zmaj and it tends to be twitching and almost always in motion. I wonder if that's an involuntary thing or not.

"Define okay," I say, shaking my head. "I'm hot, hungry, and tired. Does that count?"

"You waste much moisture," he observes, staring at my forehead which is covered in sweat. Again.

“You think? I’m not made for this heat,” I snap. I feel bad about being surly but I’m hangry and miserably hot.

“No,” he agrees.

“Gee, thanks,” I say. “Very helpful.”

He hands me a skin of water. Something I never in my life thought I’d ever experience, much less be grateful for. Who drinks water from a skin? I sip the refreshing liquid, having learned the hard way to not gulp, despite the demands of my body which reacts to the warm water like it’s the best, most tasty beverage I’ve ever had. The memory of the one time I did that still lingers.

When I hand the skin back to him he produces a folded piece of leather that he carefully opens to reveal bite size squares of smoked meat. He holds that out and I take one of them too. As I chew on the tough meat, which is an exercise for the jaw muscles, Othim watches and waits.

“Is that better?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say around a mouthful of jerky, but the savory flavor is satisfying and already filling the growling void in my stomach.

“Good,” he nods sharply then continues to stare.

“Are we gonna keep going?” I ask. “Isn’t there a long way to go?”

“There is,” he agrees but doesn’t move.

He adjusts the straps on his shoulders, shifting the pack he carries while continuing to stare. It’s gone beyond the point of rationality, and I shift my weight from one foot to the other, trying to not talk while I’m still chewing, but this is uncomfortable.

“Are we going to, uhm, go?”

He blinks in slow motion. That’s a Zmaj thing they do and it’s so incredibly alien. I’ve never met a human who has done anything like it. The eyelid slowly moves across the eye like it’s on a lazy day stroll, no hurry, nothing to do.

“Eve,” he says, and his voice is deeper, huskier. He takes a step closer, and I can’t deny the thrill that races from my core. “You are very beautiful.”

My mouth is dry, and my heart is hammering loudly in my ears.

“No, I’m not,” I counter, and he does that slow blink again.

“You are... not?”

“No,” I say. “I’m no Ziva or hell even Riley looks better than I do.”

“Why do you say this?”

I shrug, shaking my head. Listing off all my faults isn’t fun or sexy.

“Can we get going? Please?”

He frowns, opens his mouth, then snaps it shut and nods. He turns and walks but as he goes, he looks over his shoulder.

“You are wrong.”

That’s it. He doesn’t explain more or add to the conversation. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was flirting with me. If he was human I’d be able to tell, but what do I know about how a Zmaj flirts? Do they flirt? Or are they more animalistic?

Two Zmaj and two of my fellow crash-mates have fallen for each other, which is nice and sure I’m a tiny bit jealous of them. Jealous isn’t the right word. Envious, that fits. Before my mom got sick, she knew it was coming and she was always impressing on me to find a man, have a family. The unspoken implication being to do it while I still could before what’s coming. Those words we never said, though.

I miss you mom. I miss our long talks. What would you make of this situation? What would you think of Othim? How about that? Your daughter is daydreaming about hooking up with an alien-dragon man.

And daydream I have. Often. I don’t know what it is about him, but he haunts my dreams and fills my idle waking moments with wonderings. Wondering what his lips would

feel like. Taste like. What it would be like to run my hands over his muscles. What do those scales feel like?

Unfortunately, I'm not all that. Simple, plain, unremarkable, that's me. Not bad, not special. I'm me. And I've learned to be comfortable with it, mostly. Except for those rare moments of envy when I see a happy couple, but how much of that is envy of what they have and how much is worried about what's coming for me? Fears of how long I have before this life is over.

The jungle is thick, hot, humid, and generally miserable. We've been tramping through it for almost an entire day and still don't seem to be any closer to our destination. It's also hard to measure distance and time, both because the jungle doesn't seem to change, and the canopy blocks the suns. Which is probably a good thing, how hot would it be if those two red demons were staring right down on us?

"Are we getting close?" I ask.

"No."

Simple. Short. Taciturn, that's Othim for you. Man of few words. Or alien of one. Who knew that was a universal trait for alpha-holes.

"Well how much further then?"

"A day."

"Care to elaborate?"

"No."

He doesn't look back and doesn't stop. Marching forward like an unstoppable force. I've seen him fight and it was terrifyingly beautiful. The weapon on his back that they call a lochaber doesn't look like much, but when he wields it— look out. It's a six-foot-long staff with a metal cap that comes to a point on one and on the other end a curved blade is mounted that has a gleaming sharp edge. Every part of the weapon is used when he works it. The shaft twirling and whirling, the point stabbing, and the blade slicing parts off his opponent.

“You don’t have to be a jerk, you know?” I have a really bad habit of blurting out random things while my thoughts are elsewhere racing a hundred miles an hour.

He stops his relentless march. His head bows which hunch his shoulders and pulls the tips of his wings up as he does. The ever in motion tail stops, going preternaturally still. It looks like he’s staring at the ground, so I stop too, waiting with bated breath. My nerves jangle, wondering if I hit a nerve and if so, how? Othim is unflappable, nothing seems to change him, but calling him a jerk does?

Finally, after at least a dozen thundering heart beats he turns around. His golden eyes stare, making an anticipatory shiver run down my spine. My belly clenches tightly, not with fear, but with unfettered desire. Damn it, I’ve always had a thing for a guy’s eyes. Great eyes are incredible, expressive, interesting, exciting in all the right ways and Othim has it all.

“I do not know this word,” he says, speaking at last.

“What word?”

“J-eyr-k.”

He sounds the word out, not getting it right and only then do I realize I slipped a Common word into the middle of a sentence in Zmaj. Of course, he doesn’t recognize it. He’s much too manly to learn my language. Me Othim, me alpha, you learn my language.

No, that’s not true, don’t be unkind, I admonish myself.

He’s trying to learn Common. It’s a much more complicated and nuanced language than Zmaj. Earth used to have thousands of languages, which seems completely unreal. History class taught us that as they ventured into space and conquered new worlds it ended the need to fight over small plots of territory on Earth itself. That opened the door to a universal language which ‘borrowed’ words from all of them.

It’s an interesting concept and tells me that here on Tajss they probably never had multiple cultures and inter-country conflicts. I wonder, not for the first time, at the true history of this planet. How did it become like it is? I’ve seen that they

once had advanced tech, nice buildings, machines, and such but those are all in ruins now. The Zmaj who rescued us speak of an event they call the Devastation. What does that mean?

While I'm musing on history and the implications of things that don't matter in the slightest, Othim is staring, still waiting for me to answer. My cheeks burn hot, embarrassed that I totally space cadeted and forgot to respond. I kick a stick that happens to be lying close to my foot and shake my head.

"Nothing, really," I say.

"Nothing? It means something. All words have a meaning, otherwise they are not a word."

Damn it, do you have to push me to admit I was the jerk?

"Sure," I say, looking anywhere but him. "Right. It means very fine person."

"Oh," he says and when I dart a glance up, he's looking thoughtful as he chews this over.

He practices the word until it's a passable sounding version. Zmaj tend to drag out some syllables and make others hard which gives them some difficulty with Common. When he says it close enough, I smile and nod. He smiles broadly and it melts my heart with joy to see that look on his face which is almost immediately replaced with regret because I'm teaching him wrong, and I know it. He grunts in what I assume is satisfaction, turns and resumes marching.

I fall in behind him. The way his hips rock and his tail swings are good distractions from the bad feeling of having called him a jerk and then taught him it means something it doesn't. He's so proud of learning it, the joy on his face was blatant.

I'm sure I'm going to come to regret this moment.

OTHIM

*E*ve. *Eve-uh-ly. Evuh-lee-ynnn.*

I practice her name, repeating it over and over in my head. Trying to smooth out the syllables and say it the way I hear the other human females do. I want to say it perfectly. I want her to see the care I put into speaking it.

Her language is complicated and full of soft sounds that are hard to form. Speaking her words feels like chewing sand, grains sticking to my tongue and making it impossible to communicate correctly. Still, this is a simple thing. Or I thought it would be, but as it turns out, that is far removed from the truth.

I will master this language. I am a warrior, there is no challenge I will not overcome. Even one such as this. Her scent fills my nostrils, distracting me from my practice. I cannot turn to look at her, I do not wish to scare her with my arousal. My prime cock reacts to her presence and when the winds shift bringing me her scent, it responds.

If I turn now there will be no hiding the tent in my pants. My cock is throbbing and if I was not with her, I would take the time to relieve myself, but that is not an option. *Stay with the plan Othim.* The plan is good. Get Eve to safety. My dragon rumbles satisfaction, knowing that I am protecting her.

She is the one. The dragon laid its claim the moment Urok brought these aliens to our home. As soon as I saw her the dragon roared to life and I knew. My blood was so hot I felt

feverish, as if I had caught felinus sickness. It took all my control to not grab her and claim her.

When it happened, I thought it was because she is so obviously female. A sight I'd thought to never see again and perhaps the dragon was wrong. That it was confusing the genetic drive to survive through children, that it was not an actual claim. But if that was the case, then it should have eased.

It has not eased. It has grown. Stronger and stronger. Every day, every passing moment, my desire and my need for her grows. Only when I am in action towards claiming her does the dragon rest and give me space to think. But even then, it is there, ready. Looking for any opportunity.

I cannot look at her for too long. It is a struggle to control the dragon, especially now that we are alone. In the jungle, where if she would only accept me we could make glorious, sweet love. I want to taste her. Bury my face in her sex. I want to give her pleasure until she is nothing more than water in my hands.

Stop.

I force my thoughts onto a different path because my cock is leaking seed and if I continue down this path, I am not sure my willpower will be strong enough. The bijass creeps in, ready to pounce, and if that primal self takes over, I do not know what I might do.

And I will never hurt her. This I know. Even if the bijass was to take over I could not hurt her. She is my treasure. I will protect her. Always.

“Are you sure this plan will work?” Eve asks.

My scales itch with irritation. Can she not see how hard I am struggling to stay in control? Is it not obvious?

The sound of her voice is the sweetest of music. It tickles my ears and if I had my way, I would stop and listen to her for an eternity. It both arouses and soothes the dragon, leaving me in the middle of a struggle to not act inappropriately.

I do not wish to frighten her. How will she respond if she sees my arousal? Is the scent on the air her own arousal or is it something else? She is an alien, how can I possibly know what each of her scents means, except that I love them all.

She smells sweet with hints of salt that gets stronger the more she wastes moisture, but below that scent is a musky one. That musk is tangy and reminds me of a fine fermented brew, one that I want to devour. I think that is her arousal. I hope so, for it has grown stronger. If it is, then she is coming to accept me.

But what if it is not?

“Othim?” she asks, pulling me out of my distracted musings and forcing me to realize I did not answer her.

“Yes.”

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes.”

My throbbing prime cock feels harder than ever before. The musky scent of her is stronger and every time I inhale it ignites feverish fantasies of the things I will do to her body when she accepts me. When. Not if. She will. We are meant for one another.

How? Why? Those are questions for poets and philosophers, of which I am neither. I only know the truth of it. I know to trust my dragon, for I have done everything possible to deny it and that has gotten me nowhere.

“Are you going to answer?”

I sigh heavily. “No?”

“No? Seriously? Do you not like me? Do I talk to much? What is this? None of the other Zmaj act like you, what is your problem?”

The dragon is roaring. It is loud in my ears and impossible to ignore. My hearts are racing, my cock is throbbing, my scales itch, and there is an ache in my groin of overwhelming desire and need. I can barely hear her over the feverish rushing of my blood, all of which is going to my cock.

Only just in control of myself, I spin. Her eyes widen, her mouth opens, and she takes a step back as her face pales. I cannot stop. I grab her by her waist and press her against the trunk of a tree.

Her body crushes against mine. The swell of her chest and what I imagine, no what I hope, is her alien breasts press against my scales making me somehow harder still. Exotic ideas, imaginings filling my head even as the tang of her desire fills my nostrils.

She wants me. I smell it. I know it because she does not fight but places her hands on my neck and then runs them over my shoulders. I feel her heart pounding. Her breath trembling. Her lips quiver as she looks up into my eyes.

Claim her. Mine. My treasure.

That is the dragon. The dragon knows but she does not. I see it in her eyes. The doubt that dances in them and that stops me.

“Eve,” I whisper her name because the lump in my throat prevents me from speaking any louder.

Her delicate pink tongue darts out, moistening her lips. They gleam in the muted beams of sunlight that break through the jungle canopy. My cock throbs, pressed hard against her belly.

“Yes,” she says hoarsely.

Her hands rub my arms, squeezing my biceps. She lifts her right leg and hooks it over mine, opening herself for me. She wants me.

But she has not consented. This is bodies and desire, which is not enough. I will not take her until she accepts me. Wholly, taking my heart for her own and giving to me hers. I step away from her and turn my back.

“We must travel,” I force the words out, not looking over my shoulder, staring down at the bulge in my pants that my aching cock has formed.

The front of my pants is stained with wetness that leaked during this brief encounter. My head is full of thoughts of all

the ways I could take her and the sounds of pleasure she will make, but I push them aside.

“Othim, do you...” she trails off, not finishing her thought.

Is she going to ask? Will she offer herself to me? If she does, can I hold myself back?

If she offers herself, I do not think that I can resist. Yet I must. Zmaj mate for life. I will mate for life. I lean into the training I received in the Order. Mental exercises that taught us to resist our bijass, to keep the primal fog at bay. It is not easy though, when I learned the techniques all I was fighting against was the fog of rage and that was easy. This is anything but.

“Travel,” I say and force myself into motion.

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EVE

*M*y panties are soaked and I'm breathless. What was that?

I thought for sure he was going to have his way with me and I was willing and ready. Did I do something to make him think I wasn't? What? Is there some Zmaj custom that I broke? Is it taboo to touch the neck?

He marches away but I can't move. I'm stuck in confusion and indecision. The tightness in my lower belly feels like a spring that's going to explode at the slightest touch. My hand drifts towards my pants without conscious thought, but then I realize what I'm about to do and stop myself.

The constant buzzing, background noise of the jungle penetrates my confusion only when it stops. It's never a good thing when that happens. I look around, but all I see is trees, thick plants, leaves, and undergrowth. Shadows that seem to dance to a music of their own as beams of light filled with dust mites become tiny spotlights.

My survival instincts have sharpened by necessity. Othim and the other Zmaj have also been ever vigilant in teaching us poor humans what to do and more importantly what not to do. One of those 'don't do's' is to not yell or make noise in a situation like this one.

I scan the area again, studying every possible hiding spot. Adrenaline is making every sense on hyper-alert. It's almost nauseating. Something made the small creatures, birds, and insects go silent because they don't do that on their own.

Othim is getting further away, barreling through the jungle with a single-minded determination that makes me wonder if he's angry and if so, why? I was ready to offer myself to him. I wanted him, still do, but then why did he turn away? I can't be reading the signs wrong, can I? He's alien, sure, but that state of arousal is about as clear cut as anything I've ever seen.

I move forward carefully. Every step I take is planned. I examine the ground and place my weight onto my foot slowly to avoid making as much noise as possible. The biggest predators of the jungle hunt by both smell and sound, according to what we've been taught.

Smell I can't do anything about and I'm sure I'm a culinary delight of scents. The jungle is hot, sticky, and I'm a freaking mess. I haven't had a bath in at least a week and even then was only a quick rinse, not a nice luxurious soak in a hot tub. We don't have tubs. We have pools and rivers that we use.

The hair on the back of my neck and arms is standing on end as I strain to control my racing thoughts and instead be aware of my surroundings. Anything that might tell me what direction danger is coming from. Because it is coming. That I'm certain of.

I look ahead at Othim's back, willing him to turn around. To look, to see that I'm falling behind. How is he missing these signs? He's the one who taught them to me.

What if he's not missing them? The thought occurs and icy fingers brush across my skin as dark wings flutter in my thoughts.

No. Othim would never, no Zmaj would. Except... he was Order. Maybe he's a plant? Is he here to lead me into captivity? Is that the danger I sense?

Something cracks behind me and my shoulders tense, my belly knots, and I duck without looking. As I do, the world both slows and speeds up at the same time. A blur flashes over my head. There's a screech, then a roar, and the eerie silence becomes a rampage of crashes, bangs, growls and slamming of flesh on flesh.

The action is in front of me. I don't take time to look or understand before I move to my left, away from the danger. I can't see if there's more there.

I race to the closest tree and place it between myself and the cacophony, using the foliage to shield myself. Pressing my back against the trunk, my heart is hammering and I think I might hurl with all the adrenaline racing through my system, but there's no time for being silly.

Look. Carefully look around, judge the jungle.

Massive plants, dozens of different ones, all overgrown, all capable of hiding a threat. I look just as the Zmaj have taught us. Only when I'm sure that there's no more immediate threat do I dare to peek around the tree.

Othim is fighting a creature, but they're moving too quickly for me to make out what it is. The thing is all over him, a blur of gray motion that looks like a shadowy blob with claws. Those claws are long, sharp ivory-colored things that pull back, pause, then slash over and over.

Othim keeps the creature at bay, grabbing parts of it and pushing with his hands while his tail slams into it over and over. The impact of his tail is so hard that I feel it in my guts. With each strike the thing screeches like a terrified baby. The sound hurts my ears.

Suddenly the thing goes limp in his hands. Othim stands, hunched over, holding it by what I think is its neck. His wings are open, his tail stands straight up, and then he raises the creature and shakes it. The body moves limply, no fight left in it. Othim leans his head back and roars then a ball of fire bursts out of his mouth.

I gasp, having forgotten in all the excitement that Zmaj had that ability too. Fire-breathing alien-dragon-men. Inanely, I wonder if that's something to worry about when they have sex. Like, when they climax and give their body over fully to that intense pleasure, is there a chance they'll belch fire?

I shake my head to clear it of such ridiculous thoughts. I look around once more to make sure that there's no obvious threats

that I'll be stupidly putting myself in the path of before stepping around the tree and walking towards Othim.

He drops the carcass and in one long stride he's grabbing me by my waist and I'm off my feet as he holds me up at arm's length. It happens so fast all I manage is a gulp. He inspects me closely, even turning me around to look at my backside. My cheeks warm when he pauses to stare at my ass which is a lot curvier than I've ever been comfortable with.

"Othim, I'm fine," I protest when his staring goes on too long. I squirm a little in his grasp.

"You are sure?"

"I think I'd know if I wasn't."

"Did it scratch you?"

"I don't think so," I say, now I'm not sure either.

A scratch? I don't think it did but why worry about a scratch. Looking down from this height, the thing's claws are huge. I'd be much more worried about being shredded. Othim pulls me in close and inspects my back then sets me down on the ground and runs his fingers through my hair.

"Must be sure," he says in a tone that is possessive and controlling and, I hate to admit, makes me wet all over again.

It's caring, dominating, and demanding in just the right mix. He pulls my hair enough to hurt and I yelp, pulling away from his ministrations. Even that's a little hot.

"Enough, Othim," I say, shaking my head and turning to face him. "What's the big deal?"

"Felinus have poison," he says, staring with his unblinking and unnerving eyes that are so incredibly deep and beautiful. "One scratch is enough."

"Enough to what?"

He doesn't answer immediately, instead doing one of his long, slow blinks. His lips part like he's going to speak, then shut, then part again before he speaks at last.

"Kill."

“Oh.” I don’t say more because what else is there to say. Sometimes, a lot of times, I hate this place.

The first rule of Tajss is everything is trying to kill you. The second rule of Tajss is that really, everything is trying to kill you. I take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale slowly.

“You are fine?”

I do a mental assessment of my body, looking for any little hint of something wrong because I really don’t want to hurry up and die. I’ve already got an unknown date of expiration that will be painful and much sooner than I’d ever want, no need to rush that. Nothing seems wrong, though, so I nod.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Good.”

He doesn’t say more but he doesn’t move or look away or, of course, blink either. He stares with those rich golden pools that melt any defense I might mount and consume my thoughts. I want to stare into them while he fills me.

My throat and mouth are dry. I swallow, trying to force in moisture but it’s no good. Othim grabs the water skin on his side and holds it out. I force a smile, my thoughts spinning, and take a drink. The water is warm, but crisp and refreshing, though it has a slight taste from being in the leather pouch. I don’t mind, this is my life now.

“We should, uh, probably, you know, move.”

Othim stares. My heart thunders. One. Two. Three. Four. Then he nods almost imperceptibly, but he doesn’t move.

“Eve,” he says my name and my knees go weak, again. “I am sorry.”

That’s confusing and not what I expected or hoped for.

“Huh?”

His eyes dart to the carcass of the thing he killed and I also look over as I try to puzzle out what he means. Now that it’s lying there lifeless, it’s kind of cute. I’d compare it to one of the big cats of Earth, but it’s not exactly.

It's big with gray and black stripes along its fur. The way it lays exposes leathery skin that attaches to the backside of its forepaws and to the body, making a wing that would be good for gliding. The ivory claws are fully extended and each one is the width of my hand. It also has a long tail that has something that looks like a stinger on the end of it.

I always loved cats and this one looks like it needed some good scratches. We weren't allowed to have actual cats on the generation ship, but I watched a lot of vids with them. Earth used to make these ridiculous vids of cats being cats.

Loss and sadness swells in my guts, threatening to swamp my thoughts so I shift back to what's important. Compartmentalize, it's the best way to deal with losing everything you ever knew or loved.

"That's not your fault," I shake my head and point at it. "How were you supposed to know that thing was about to pounce?"

"I am a warrior," he says. "And your protector. Always."

"Always?" I ask, latching onto that last word. The way he says it is possessive and makes me hot in a way that one simple word never should. My protector? Always.

He nods.

"What do you mean, Othim? Forever?"

He frowns, then scratches behind his ear as his brow furrows. His mouth moves a moment before he speaks in Common.

"Forever. All, time."

My heart jumps, skipping at least three beats, and my knees betray me at the same time my pussy is freaking gushing. It's great until the dark thought comes with an image of my mother in her hospital bed to remind me that my forever is going to be so much shorter than he knows. I drop my eyes to the ground and touch his chest, trailing my fingers over his pectoral muscles.

"I'm not all that."

He trails a finger over my cheek, tugging until I look back up into his eyes.

“Yes. You are.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, laughing because I’m feeling giddy and ridiculous. “You’re being awfully nice.”

The confusion on his face makes me laugh harder. “I am.”

“Good,” I say, giggling. He seems to take it as me laughing at him, though, which wasn’t my intention.

“Travel,” is his only response.

“No, Othim, I’m sorry,” I say as he turns away.

He doesn’t respond, shifting the pack on his back then walking. “Stay closer,” he orders over his shoulder.

Regret churns in my stomach as I fall in and obey his command.

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OTHIM

S *tupid.*

Shame and anger mix, a potent storm in my head. I put her in danger. A felinus? How could I not have been aware of the creature stalking us. I let myself be distracted, it is the only reason.

Her scent, her curves, all my awareness is consumed by her presence. It has been close to impossible to keep my thoughts away from her. And that distraction almost cost me everything. Fool. I will not let it happen again.

Every time I look back to check on Eve, an empty ache throbs in my core and the dragon rumbles. The dragon's primal urge is simple. Claim her, breed her, protect and provide for her. Except nothing is that simple.

"Othim?" she asks.

There is a tremble in her voice that concerns me, and I want to stop, take her in my arms, and reassure her. I want to, but if I do, I'm not sure I can keep myself under control. The dragon knows she is mine. I know she is too, but she does not. Until that happens, I am stuck and this feeling is miserable.

"Yes?" I ask, not stopping.

It is best we keep moving. We have a long way to go and the Order is still hunting us. This plan must work.

"Are you mad at me?"

Surprise causes me to stumble to a stop. "Mad?"

She moves closer. I feel her presence. Soft, gentle, and kind. I do not have to turn to see her. She is there and in that there is a comfort that eases the tension in my core and calms the raging storm of my thoughts.

“Yes. Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong?”

Her voice is full of worry and that forces me to turn. Moisture is pooled in her eyes and she is paler than normal, but every bit as beautiful. She has such delicate skin and it is soft. So, so soft and I want to touch it, but I resist.

Her face is gentle and more round than oval. There is a bump at the bridge of her nose that accents her face beautifully. The hair on her head is a reddish-brown color that hangs heavy with the moisture she exudes, random strands decorating her face in splayed splotches that I would like to wrap around my fingers. She is breathing heavily as if from exertion, but I do not think that is the real reason.

Her chest rises and falls and with every inhale, those soft looking mounds beneath her blouse push forward, calling to me. My cock throbs in desperation to answer that call and the dragon rumbles agreement.

“No.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

She closes her eyes, inhales deeply, and when she opens them, I cannot read the look on her face. It looks like a mix of sadness and anger.

“Then be nicer,” she says, her voice sharp.

“Nicer?”

“Yes,” she nods. “Nicer. I’m scared, no, terrified. That thing...”

She motions behind us towards where the felinus corpse was left and her entire body trembles. Tiny, wasteful balls of moisture escape the corners of her eyes to trail their way through the dirt on her face.

“Felinus,” I fill in, trying to be helpful.

“Felinus, whatever,” she shakes her head. “Why didn’t you notice it? Did I do something wrong?”

Her words are a punch in the guts. My stomach clenches tight and I cannot inhale. She knows I missed the creature, but she thinks it is because I am angry with her. How do I fix this?

“No,” I say and shake my head. I try to find the words, but I can’t focus. My cock is throbbing, the dragon is roaring, and the red fog of the bijass pushes across it all. *Mine. My treasure.* “No.”

“No?” she asks, throwing her hands up between us. “Othim, I like you, and I know you don’t seem to talk much, but can’t you please use some words here? What do you mean no?”

A thousand words come at once, crashing together in my head and making a jumble that leaves me with nothing to say. How do I put feelings into words? I know. That is it. I know she is the one. I know I made a mistake. I know I failed. Yet none of this is that simple, not for her. I have told her, but she has not reacted the way I would expect.

I thought I had risen above this. That these primal instincts were left behind by my training in the Order. That is what the Eye taught us. Control is everything and we can be more than our primal, bestial selves. We could avoid falling into the bijass and becoming little more than animals like the rest of the surviving Zmaj.

I try to speak but no words come out. I want to tell her how I feel. I want to show her but she is so beautiful it’s distracting and my failures compound the difficulty. Words have never been my strength. So lean into what I know.

Moving slowly, I reach for her and place my hands on her arms. I rub along the length of her skin. A smile plays on her lips then she frowns and shakes her head.

“Eve,” I say, rolling her name off my tongue as if it is the sweetest of fruits.

“Othim, this isn’t enough,” she says. “I need to know. What did I do wrong?”

I stop rubbing her arms but keep my hands on her. I am acutely aware of my throbbing cock aiming directly at her belly and leaking into my pants and I have no doubt she is aware of it too since her eyes keep furtively darting down.

“Nothing.”

“No, Othim. Not good enough. What happened?”

“It is not your fault.”

“Okay, then what?”

She is not letting this go. I cannot say it. I do not want to admit out loud how badly I let her down. I do not want her to not see me as worthy, but I am not. I put her in danger.

“Must travel.”

I let go of her arms and turn to move, but she grabs my arm and pulls me back around. My tail is twitching madly, stirring the detritus of the jungle that litters the ground around us. I turn and meet her eyes and the dragon roars loudly in my ears. *My treasure. Mine.*

“Othim, no, please. I have to know. You go from being taciturn and kind of mean to being nice. What is happening? Do you.... Do you hate me?”

Shock strikes through the confusions filling my head and leave clarity.

“Never,” I say, touching her cheek and trailing my fingers along her jawline. “You are beautiful. My treasure.”

“Treasure,” she repeats as she moves her hand to my chest. Her touch is the sweet kiss of the suns on my scales. “That’s what the others call their mates.”

I nod, not trusting my voice to speak. She traces a circle on my chest, then her fingers trail around and down. My cock pulses and leaks, straining to be free. She bites her lower lip then looks up.

“Eve,” I say, but she puts a finger over my lips.

“Are you still with the Order?”

“No,” I say, not understanding what she is asking. “I was evicted, long ago now.”

“How do I know? For sure?” she asks, but she does not stop tracing lines over my chest and across the top of my stomach. My muscles tremble with the effort to hold back.

“I said it.”

She shakes her head. “Othim. I’m scared.”

I cannot stop myself. I wrap my arms around her waist, and I pull her close, lifting her off her feet so her face is close to mine.

“No.”

“No? It’s not that easy, Othim. I’m scared. I don’t know if I can trust you. I don’t know if this plan will work. What if the Order catches us? What if some terrible creature or a crazy plant kills me?”

“No,” I repeat, forcefully. “I will protect you.”

“And how do I know I can trust you?”

“I said so. You are my treasure.”

She swallows and takes a deep breath, forcing her chest against mine, and the hard points of her nipples rub on my scales making my cock spasm.

“Othim,” she whispers. “I’m not the one you want. I’m not right for you. I’m sorry.”

I stare into her eyes, waiting for her to explain. She does not say anything though. She does take my face in her hands and then runs them down over my neck and across my shoulders.

“Am I right that Zmaj only take one mate?”

“Yes.”

“Ever?”

“Yes.”

Her face falls, her mouth turns down into a frown, and she bites her lower lip. The moisture is in her eyes again and her

sadness is palpable. It batters at my senses and I want to make it stop, I want to give her joy and pleasure.

“I thought so,” she whispers, then she puts her head on my shoulder and squeezes tight. “I’m sorry. I’m not the one. I wish I was.”

I do not understand her words. She must not be using them correctly. She is not as fluent as Ziva or Riley. That is the only thing that makes sense. She means something other than what she is saying. If she wishes she was the one, then she must be the one and she knows it.

“Eve, you are the one.”

She eases her grip and pushes against my chest, so I set her on the ground. She crosses her arms over her own chest as she shakes her head and turns away.

“We need to move,” she says. “Long ways to go, right?”

She has her back turned and I stare at her for a long moment, listening to my hearts pounding as my cock pulses but there are no words to fix this, so I adjust the pack on my back and take the lead.

EVE

The lump in my throat stays in place for what seems like a long time. I keep trying to swallow it, but it's held in place by the knot in my stomach.

Forever.

A lifetime at least. That's what any couple wants. But the Zmaj, they take mating more serious than humans. I can't do that to him. Mentally I pull myself away from the edge. I can't fall for him or let him fall for me. It's not going to work. I've got an expiration date.

On the ship there was a small possibility that they'd find a cure, but on Tajss there is no such hope. My fate is inevitable. At some point my body will betray me, and as things stand now, there are no facilities to care for me while my body deteriorates. I'll be better off by far if I let myself get killed.

My thoughts spin around like this as we march on. The jungle is thick, hot, and humid. Traveling in it sucks even without the need to be constantly alert for danger. And my thoughts are a distraction. Othim seems distracted too, even his tail isn't twitching as much as it usually does.

He keeps looking over his shoulder and when I see him do it, I force a smile. I certainly don't feel anything to smile about but I've already hurt his feelings. All I can do now is try to navigate the mess without creating more of a problem. I need a distraction and so does he.

“Do you think this plan will work?” I ask, breaking the long silence.

“Yes.”

I roll my eyes. Seriously Othim? Work with me here. “What if it doesn’t?”

“It will.”

“But if it doesn’t?” I insist.

“If not, sooner or later the Order will capture us.” He pauses for a moment then adds. “You and the humans.”

“What do you mean the humans? What about you and the other Zmaj?”

“We will be killed.”

“No!” I protest. “Why would they do that?”

“The Eye cannot tolerate us. We are supposed to be dead already. If it became broadly known that we were banished and the reasons why, it would undermine the Eye’s power.”

I take a moment to digest that. It’s a lot of words for him and he doesn’t seem to mind that I don’t speak right back.

“We can’t let that happen,” I say.

Othim shrugs as if he’s said nothing of import. A comment on the weather or something similarly banal. Not a pronouncement that if we fail, he and his friends will be dead. Which might be better than what us human girl will be enduring.

“This will work.”

He speaks with absolute certainty. He knows his stuff, of that I have no doubt, but he can’t know this will work. None of us can.

“How much further?” I ask.

“Half a day.”

I nod. “And the Order doesn’t know about this place you’re taking us?”

“They do.”

“They do? I thought they didn’t?”

He shrugs. “It is unlikely there is any place on the continent the Order does not know. This is simply far enough away they will not think to look there.”

“Okay,” I say as cold trails through my body. Fear grips me tightly, I know that’s all it is, and besides, what else can I do but push on.

“Why do you deny it?” Othim speaks suddenly.

“Huh? I’m not denying anything.”

He moves close, pulling my attention off my worries about the mysterious Order and what they’re going to do to us and how we can avoid it. His tail curls around the back of my thighs and pulls me closer.

“Eve.”

He says my name and my skin is on fire. It’s more than a flush it’s something beyond that. It’s everywhere. Every part of me burns hot, like a sudden onset fever. There’s no air, it’s all gone, pushed away by his dominating presence.

“Othim, I can’t.”

“You can. You choose not to.”

“Right. I choose.”

“I will not force you. Please, explain?”

I bite my lip, avoiding looking up. If I look into his eyes, it’s going to be too much. I won’t be able to resist my own desire if I do. His eyes will melt my heart and I’ll fall into him then it will be too late. I won’t be able to save him.

You have to live, Eve, my mom whispers in my head.

I see her still, clearer than any memory. She lies on her hospital bed, this awful disease wasting her away. She was under a hundred pounds, little more than skin and bones. She grabbed my hand and squeezed, tears filling her eyes and ordered me to live.

She knew what I was thinking. I could never hide my thoughts from her. She always got right to the heart of anything that was on my mind. How could I live knowing that it was going to end? No, not live, love. I have lived. I've done a lot, enjoyed life, ate great food, made great friends, and of all the people on the ship, I survived.

Which is part of it all isn't it? Survivors guilt multiplied by the fact that I'll never live to grow old. How can I possibly let him fall in love with me? For what? A few years?

Tomorrow isn't guaranteed for anyone and here on Tajss that's even more true. Every day is filled with danger to the point I no longer worry about it. None of us do, but even that doesn't change my future.

His chest rises and falls and at the bottom of my vision is the throbbing bulge of his pants. I ache with an empty need. My lower belly is tight, and I can't help but drop my eyes down to his impressive cock, the tip of which dances right next to my belly.

Girls talk. I know how different a Zmaj is built down there. I want to see it. Feel it. Taste it. But that would open the door. And if that door opens I'll walk through, so will he, and how is that fair? I can't do that to him.

"I can't," I shake my head.

"You are my treasure," he says. "This is the way."

His voice is husky and gravelly and all I want is to throw my arms around his neck, kiss him and give myself over to him in every way possible. When he looks at me like he does, my heart speeds up and it's hard to breathe. It's incredible. It makes me feel beautiful in ways I never knew I could.

"Othim, I won't do this to you."

"To me?"

He hooks a finger under my chin and tries to pull my face up, but if I do that I'll see his eyes. Those damn eyes. I resist, but he's strong, stronger than my willpower. My stomach flip flops and I fold. I look up and I melt into those golden pools.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” I whisper because I can’t force myself to speak louder. Emotions are raw, painful, and more than can fit into words.

He blinks. Slowly. Lids come down like shutters closing on windows streaming golden light into a dark and lonely night. He opens them just as slowly then shakes his head. He licks his lips, and his tongue holds my attention. Anything to escape those soulful eyes. His tongue is dark, not pink like a human tongue, but closer to black. At least it’s not forked, that’d be too weird. He’s alien enough without that.

“You could never hurt me. I am strong.”

“I know you are, but still,” I say, forcing myself to look away. “We need to move. Right? We can’t stand around out here in the jungle. It’s not safe.”

“No.”

“Right, I agree. Not safe at all.”

I try to move past him, but he places a hand on my shoulder and stops me. There’s no force in his touch, he doesn’t need any. I’m torn. I want to leave because I know it’s the right thing to do, but my heart has its own ideas. It knows, and I do too, no matter how I try to deny it.

“Eve. Please.”

“Please?” I ask, my voice trembling. “Please?”

Tears swell in my eyes and I curse myself. Now is not the time to cry. I’m trying to be strong. I’m doing my best to deny everything my heart is telling me because I don’t want to do this to him.

“Yes. Please. Tell me.”

When I inhale, my breath shudders as I struggle to contain all the emotions. It feels like it’s too much for my body. I don’t know how I can feel so strongly and not explode.

“Othim, it’s too hard. I don’t know the words.”

“Try. I will try too.”

He pulls on my shoulder, insisting that I turn back to him. I resist. Berating myself for my weakness. He's not mean, doesn't force me, but it's clear he's not going to stop pushing down this path. He wants to know, and I can only imagine that for him he needs to.

He loves me. I am his treasure and if I've learned nothing else about these alien warriors it's that once they choose a mate, they're single-minded in staking their claim. Which would sound weird and gross if they were human, but they're not. They're so much more.

Damn it if I don't feel the same way. I want to be with him.

But. The but of my life. The one thing that isn't going to change. I won't live past fifty years old. That's not old for a human and from what the girls and I have learned, that's barely the blink of an eye for the Zmaj. Their memories are crap but they seem to live for a long time.

"Truth is I will hurt you," I say, jerking free of his hand on my shoulder. "I will end up leaving you and you will be all alone. Okay? I don't want to do that to you. I don't want you to choose me, not because I don't like you, but because I do.

I'm damaged goods Othim. There's something wrong with me," I gesture up and down my body, still not turning or looking at him. Instead, I stare out at the gloomy green of the jungle. "And I'm not going to live a full life. I will die early. That's all there is to it and I don't want you to have to deal with it. Okay? Now can we please continue this stupid journey and get to where we're going?"

"Eve."

He doesn't yell. Doesn't force me, but his voice compels something deep inside. I don't know what it is about him. Something in the tone, the way it quavers, subtly where I barely notice it, but some combination of all those things causes me to make the worst mistake of my life.

I turn.

And his eyes are ablaze with a burning fire that melts through any defense I might have. I waver as my knees go weak and I

can't take a breath. I'm lost in his eyes. The sounds of the jungle, that constant white noise of insects and bird calls is drowned out by the thundering of my heart in my ears.

I raise my hands and drop them. I shake my head then I'm nodding, none of which makes sense but I can't make sense of what's happening. And I can't tear my eyes from his. He looks grim, serious. A deep frown pulls down his brow, making his horns come forward.

"Othim?" I ask, voice trembling.

"I can fix this."

I can't hold back a gasp or the tear that breaks free to leave a cold trail down my cheek. "No. You can't."

He doesn't blink. We stare at each other and I do blink, many times to clear the blur of frustrated tears, but he doesn't. I watch and he looks like he's calculating. He's looking at every possible outcome, every possible action, and taking his time to look at every possible permutation.

"I can."

Anger breaks the logjam, winning the battle royale of emotions storming in my thoughts. Right or wrong, it comes out on top and now I'm shaking for entirely new reasons.

"No, you can't. You have no idea how cruel that is!"

He tilts his head and blinks as he shakes his head. "No I—"

"Othim, no. Do not tease me with this. I've lived with this all my life. It cannot be fixed. There was a chance and even that was small, but that died when the ship was attacked, and we crashed. My one hope was there and now it's gone."

"There is hope."

"Othim, I never thought you were cruel, but this is. Stop. Now."

I spin and storm away. I can't look at him, can't stand the sight of him. Tears stream down my face and all I want to do is get away, run to my room, slam the door and have a breakdown in private. I have no room and I can't go too far because this

stupid jungle is too dangerous, but at least I can get a little bit of space.

He's always been nice. I can only guess that he doesn't understand how much this hurts me but that doesn't make it any less painful. I only make it about three strides before there's a loud growl and I'm swept off my feet.

The world spins.

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OTHIM

*H*er reaction does not make sense. She is upset and angry, but I know I can help her. I can save her. As soon as I realized how to fix her, my dragon roared in triumph. But now, faced with her unexplainable anger, the bijass surges through my mind.

Mine. She is running, but she is mine. She is in danger. I must save her.

I leap, landing a step behind Eve and hook one arm under her legs. I catch her in the other arm as she falls. I spin her body as she struggles until I have her under control, then I run.

Shelter. The air is wet, and I know that it will rain soon. When it does, she will need shelter. Shelter and food. I will provide.

My treasure. Mine.

She protests, struggling, wiggling, but I tighten my hold and continue to run. A red haze covers my vision of the jungle. We are bounding through the undergrowth, dodging around trees, and leaping off moss-covered rocks.

I scouted the path for this plan. There is a cave system not far. At the time I investigated it, it was empty. That does not mean it will be now, but I am the dominant male. Nothing will stand between me and my treasure's safety.

“Othim!” She screams my name and I glance down but most of my attention must remain outward to avoid the many dangers of the jungle. My cock throbs. Soon she will scream my name in pleasure, not anger. Even though I know she is

confused and upset, the sound of my name on her lips strengthens desire, fueling the primal urges that have overwhelmed me.

“Put me down! What are you doing?”

The first drops of rain break through the canopy, dripping off the thick foliage and making the jungle floor slick and treacherous. One misstep will spell disaster. I open my wings enough to lighten my weight, helping to avoid a fall.

“Mine,” I growl.

“No, Othim. I told you, I can’t.”

Her words make no sense. She does not want to hurt me but what she is doing hurts more. I will get her to safety and I will fill her with my seed. I need her, need to breed her, plant my seed in her womb. Give her our children.

With Eve in my arms, the way her body molds to mine, the warmth of her skin soaking into my scales, the dragon in me purrs with contentment and anticipation of our mating.

The ground angles up and I know I am close. The rain is coming hard and fast now. Eve shivers in my arms and her teeth chatter. Shelter. She needs shelter.

I hunch over to protect her from as much rain as I can and dig deep to run faster. The cliff appears blurry from the water in my eyes and the haze of the wind-blown rain. I shift Eve to one arm, crouch, then leap.

I grab the lip of the cave and pull up. Eve gasps, wrapping her arms around my neck and clinging tightly. I strain, feet scrabbling against the cliff wall, and slowly pull. When I get us high enough, I push Eve into the cave. Once she is safely inside it frees my other hand and I pull myself up next to her easily.

I take a moment to let my muscles rest from the exertion, breathing heavily.

Eve steps away, rubbing her arms and shivering.

Ignoring the soreness of my own muscles I move past her, deeper into the cave.

When I explored before, there was a stash of dried branches and kindling from some prior tenant. Probably one of the Order hunters has used this cave. I gather the materials and shape them into a proper fire. Once it is prepared, I exhale a breath of fire and the kindling catches. In moments there is a small, but sufficient fire lighting the glistening stone walls of the cavern.

With Eve now safe and provided for, I can reclaim my mind from the fog of the bijass. I am left with the aftermath of emotional turmoil and the mess I have created with my treasure.

She moves towards the fire slowly, there is a cautiousness to her steps. She does not take her eyes off of me. It only takes a moment to figure out that she is scared. Of me.

A punch to the guts would have less impact.

“Eve,” I say, and she flinches when I reach a hand towards her.

I drop my arm and stare into the fire. The yellow-orange flames are licking higher, consuming the sticks. It casts dancing shadows on the walls that look like they are telling a story of their own. But the only story I am interested in is hers. No, ours. I try again.

“I can help,” I say.

“No,” she says, crouching and leaning close to the fire.

Water drips from her hair and off her blouse. The mounds of her breasts are perfectly outlined by the wet fabric and her flawless, tight nipples poke through. However, I do not confuse her body’s reaction for desire. I am neither blind, nor a fool.

“Yes,” I counter.

What is it about her? Words flee when I try to speak to her. It becomes so hard to form them, to express the thoughts in my head. Her smell, her beauty, everything about her consumes every ounce of rationality in my head and all I can think of is caring for and pleasuring her. Imaginings fill my head making it impossible to talk.

“No, Othim,” she says, not looking away from the fire.

The defeat in her voice is unmistakable. She has given up and that is something I cannot allow. I move slowly as I walk around the fire to the same side she is on. She watches me out of the corner of her eye, but she does not move away, which is a positive sign.

“I am sorry,” I say.

“For what?”

“I did not mean to scare you.”

“You did.”

“I know,” I say. “The bijass, you, it is hard.”

“You grabbed me and ran.”

“I am sorry.”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

I sit down next to her. We are so close yet so far apart that I am cold despite the fire. We both stare as it consumes the fuel I gave it until I add more. The silence between us shifts over time, going from stiff and uncomfortable to something more normal.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

“No.”

I nod understanding and we resume our silent vigil. The suns set outside but the rain continues. The soft patter of drops drums against the jungle canopy outside.

Thoughts come, things to say, actions to take, but none of them seem right and so we sit. Time passes as the darkness grows deeper outside this makeshift shelter then at long last she shifts closer. She has her own warmth. Fire made flesh and blood and I want, desperately, to pull her tight to me, but I do not act so boldly.

“Eve?” I ask, daring to speak at last.

“Yeah?”

“I did not mean to scare you,” I repeat my earlier words.

“I know.”

Silence resumes but it is different. The tension drains from it and we are again as we were or something close to it. I am grateful and decide to do nothing to interrupt it for a while, but I do know how to help her.

Epis. The lifeblood of Tajss. I cannot sit on this great secret for long and not share it. The idea burns at the front of my thoughts. At last, I cannot wait any longer.

“There is a plant,” I say, and she sighs. I almost stop, but to stop now would be cowardice. This is the time for action and I will not let it go until she knows I understand. “Please, listen. I do understand.”

“Othim, it’s fine. I’ve made my peace with this, but there’s no way you can understand. It’s a genetic thing, rare. My forebears should never have been allowed on the ship in the first place. When the generation ships were loaded, they scanned every passenger for genetic flaws that could jeopardize the mission, but somehow my great-grandparents made it past those precautions carrying this little gift with them.

I’m going to die early. And I’m fine with it, but I won’t inflict that on you. You need to find someone else to chase. One of the other girls, someone who won’t leave you alone.”

“You do not understand,” I insist, tension making my shoulders knot tightly. “That is not possible. We are meant for each other.”

“No!” she shouts and scoots away, then rises to her feet and paces to the far side of the cave.

The flickering flames of the fire cast her face in stripes of bright yellow and shadow giving her an alternating monstrous and beautiful look at the same time. She paces back and forth making futile gestures with her hands.

“I’m trying to save you. Why can’t you understand that?”

“I do, but you are not listening,” I say, not rising but my tail is upright, curling over my head in anger. She is infuriating. “You think that I have a choice but there is no choice. We are made, one for another, and that choice was not ours to make.”

“It’s not fair,” she shouts. “Why are you doing this to me? Do you have any idea how hard this is? I like you. I do, but I’m not going to do this to you.”

“Listen, please,” I plead.

“I am listening. I’ve done nothing but listen. You love me, I’m your special mate, but none of this can be. If you stick with me, then you’ll be left alone. Pick. Someone. Else!” She accents each of her last words with a stab of her accusing finger.

I can stand this no longer. I have strained with all I am to sit and be calm but she will not listen. I leap to my feet and growl. Her eyes widen and she takes a step back, coming up against the wall. I do not move closer, but I do glare.

“You are infuriating,” I snap. “I love you, more than anything, but please let me tell you my thought. I can save you.”

“No—”

“Stop,” I cut her off. “You have a genetic disorder. I do understand. I am not a barbarian. My planet, my race may be on the verge of extinction, but we were an advanced species.”

“Fine, that doesn’t mean—”

I do not interrupt her with words but the look on my face is enough to stop her.

“Eve, there is a plant, we call it epis. It has many properties. It extends life. It heals. It was the reason behind the Devastation. The war was over who would control it, but that is history and does not matter. What matters is that it alters the taker’s genetic coding. That is how it works.”

“That’s impossible.”

“No, it is not.”

“But...”

“Yes. It could save you.”

Her eyes are wide and her lips quivers as she stares across the fire. “Othim.... No...could....”

“I think so, yes.”

She bites her lower lip, crosses her arms over her chest then nods. “How do I get it?”

Now I frown because that will be the problem. “The plant does not grow on this continent,” I say. “It is fairly common though on the rest of the planet.”

“Oh,” she says, her face falling.

“I will get it for you,” I declare.

“How? We don’t know if we can avoid the Order much less get off the continent and go to some other one.”

I move around the fire and place my hands on her waist. She does not resist as I pull her close. “Am I wrong in that we do have some time?”

“No,” she says, looking up and into my eyes.

“Then I will make it happen.”

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as I am that the suns will rise in the morning.”

Moisture falls from her eyes, washing trails into the grime on her face. She takes a shaky breath, shakes her head, then laughs. “This can’t be real.”

“I assure you that it is.”

“But... I’ve lived with this almost my whole life. Knowing that I’d never grow old. And now, just like that, you’re saying there’s what, some magic plant that will fix it?”

“It is not magic, it is science.”

“Whatever,” she laughs.

“Why do you express this sadness?” I ask, wiping the trailing moisture from her face.

“It’s not sadness, it’s joy.”

“This is not sensible.”

“Humans are not sensible,” she says with a laugh. “We’re a mess.”

I run my fingers through her hair, tracing them along her cheeks and then over her full lips. “You will be my mess.”

Her lips tremble and it spreads across her entire body as if she is cold. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close and she does not resist. She moves her arms around my chest and I enfold us in my wings. I hold her tight until she is no longer shivering and longer still.

I could stand here forever. Her scent fills my nostrils and makes me feel light in my thoughts. The dragon rumbles deep in my core and there is absolutely desire, but also more. Together we are complete and I feel whole. I do not think I ever knew I was missing a part of myself, but holding her, I know I was.

She shifts her position and then kisses my chest. Her moist lips press against my scales and desire roars to life. She does not stop. Her fingers move up and down my back, rubbing, massaging, and trailing. Her lips dance across my chest until I lift her, bringing that sweetness to my own lips.

She wraps her legs around my waist. The soft, fleshy mounds of her breasts press hard against me, and my cock is stiff and waiting. Ready with aching, leaking need. My seed drips to stain my pants.

When our lips meet at long last, the smell and taste of her is the most delightful, enlightening, beautifully perfect moment that I have ever experienced. I am transported as the world disappears around us. There is only us and we are perfect.

She moves one hand from my back and pushes it between us then down. Driving further and further down until it slips under the tie of my pants and when she touches my cock I almost explode.

EVE

*H*is cock is, as I expected, huge. I've heard about the differences, of course. Girls talk, but hearing about it and feeling it are two entirely different things.

Every part of my body is on edge, ignited by electricity that runs through me at the thought of being with Othim. Of letting him take me. No. Of giving myself to him.

He could have taken me at any time, but he hasn't. I kiss the cool scales of his chest, licking the layered edges where one small scale meets the next, tracing the lines with my tongue.

I fondle his stiff cock and rub his sticky seed between my fingers. I wonder what he tastes like and, on impulse, I raise my fingers to my mouth. I look into his golden eyes as I do. They widen, his lips part, and he exhales heavily as I slide my fingers past my lips.

Salty with a hint of orange.

Twirling my fingers in my mouth, I watch his face and enjoy his reactions. He grunts and his hard cock pulses between us, issuing more seed. He moves his tail and uses it to hold me up, freeing his hands. I lean back and give him access.

He takes my invitation. His hands run through my hair, over my face, and then they're on my chest. His big fingers fight with the small fasteners of my blouse. I could help, but the intensity of the look on his face is entrancing. Single-minded and intent. His eyes narrow, his jaw tightens, and then he growls.

The first fasteners give way at last, and having learned how, the rest offer little resistance. When my shirt falls open he stares at my bare breasts. The only bra I had to contain them wore out and I'm not big enough to bother binding them.

His mouth is open and his tongue pokes out. A low grumble that comes from his core rattles out of him and then he exhales heavily.

"Beautiful," he whispers. "My treasure."

He buries his face between my tits. He lavishes them both with his tongue and lips. Massaging, licking, tasting, and growling. I throw my head back as the sensations flood my brain. The vigor with which he works is almost overwhelming.

I grab his cock and stroke. Long, slow strokes enjoying the feel of it. The underside is soft, incredibly so, almost like brushing silk. Delicate may not be a very manly word, but it absolutely describes the sensation.

While the underside is softness itself, the top has the infamous ridges. They're like waves. They're hard, but when I grip down they don't feel like bone, they have some give, more like they're made of cartilage. Which makes sense.

I try to close my hand around his member but it's too big for me to grip with one hand. Giving up on that effort, I stroke my hand down and back up. Othim groans into my breasts and thrusts his hips forward. I'm pretty sure that means he likes it.

We fondle and play with each other. Sensations build and the scents of sex fill the air until at last he raises his head from my chest. His golden eyes burn into mine and then I loosen the death grip of my legs around his waist.

He opens his wings and lowers me to the ground. I step back, my blouse hanging open and loose. My nipples are stiff in the cool air. We stand an arm's length apart, studying one another. I don't think I've ever understood the idiom of 'his eyes drank her in', but with the way Othim looks at me, I get it now.

His gaze contains open, burning desire. His eyes move up and down my body like he's taking in every inch. Memorizing every pore, every flaw, and for an instant I become self-

conscious. Acutely aware of every flaw that I know is there. One areola is bigger than the other, my left tit is slightly smaller. There's a mole on my right side. The swell of my belly has a bit too much fluff despite the hard living we've done. I cast my eyes down, avoiding his gaze, not wanting to see him find me wanting.

"Eve," he says, his voice deep and rumbling with insistence. I'm drawn by that rumble. Willing or not, I lift my eyes to meet his and the love burning in them blasts away my insecurity. "My treasure."

He drops to his knees, grabs my hips, and pulls me forward. He kisses across my belly, licking, nibbling and tasting. It tickles and I laugh, grabbing his horns and pulling his head back.

"That tickles," I admonish.

"Beautiful," he says.

His fingers hook into the hem of my pants then he somehow manages to undo the fastener with his teeth. He jerks and my pants are around my ankles and his face is next to my sex. His warm breath brushes across my pussy and I shudder. My pubic hair glistens with desire and the scent of myself fills the air.

He licks his lips then looks up as if asking permission. I nod and he buries his face into my pussy. I stumble back with the force, and he moves with me. His tail wraps around my lower back, resting just over my ass and I rest my shoulders on the wall of the cave.

I step out of my pants and spread my legs, giving him full access. He kisses up and down my thighs letting his tongue drag across my opening as he moves from one side to the other. Tension is building, my core so tight I'm sure I'll explode. Involuntarily, I thrust my hips forward, ready for him to take my pussy with his mouth.

He continues to tease until I can't stand it any longer. I grab his horns and pull him to my center. He's not gentle and I don't want him to be. His tongue pierces my folds and I tug, holding him deep inside.

The orgasm that's been building breaks free. I fall into my pleasure, and it catches me like a cloud that I ride to the climax. When it passes and I ease my grip on him, he pulls back and his face is covered with my wetness. He looks up the length of my torso with a broad smile on his face.

"Mine," he growls, and the absoluteness of his claiming is such that I almost come again.

"No," I shake my head, breathless. "Mine."

I grab his face and pull him back into my pussy and he goes willingly, giving himself to me. His tongue is magic. I know he's not been with any other human women, but his mastery of my body is such that it would seem he has spent a lifetime mastering the female form.

He works my folds, gripping my hips with his clawed hands. All the while the tip of his tail works its way between my backside until it's teasing my backdoor. It increases my desire and when the tip slips inside I explode.

I'm left a shuddering mess, upright only because he's holding me, my own knees having betrayed their purpose. He kisses his way up my belly and across my chest as the aftershocks of my second orgasm pass. At last his lips are on mine and I taste myself on his tongue.

He lowers me to the ground, his massive body covering me fully. His cock is at my entrance, ready and so am I, but he stares into my eyes, waiting.

"What is it?" I ask.

"You want?"

It's such an inane question. Have I not made it clear I want him? Am I not wet enough for him? Has he not given me more pleasure than I've ever known? But through the blurry haze of lust, I realize that this is a moment and he is making sure.

If he does this, for him we will be committed. This is it. After he does this, he will take no other mate, ever. And he will expect the same of me.

Not the kind of weighty decision to be made in the mind-numbing throes of desire, but I don't hesitate because I realize I made the decision long ago. I know he's the fabled 'one'. My perfect mate, the man I want to spend eternity with.

My hesitation was the time bomb in my genes, but if he's right, that won't be a problem either. And we're making the decision together.

I bite my lip and nod. "Yes. I choose you Othim, forever."

His smile lights up his face and his eyes burn brighter. He doesn't speak again but thrusts his cock in with a single hard motion, burying himself deep inside my body and I take him. His cock, his soul, and all that he is, is mine.

Forever.

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OTHIM

*W*e spend an extra day making love. The others will be fine, I am sure of it. They have the other males to protect them. This time I claim as ours.

My mate has accepted me. I am worthy of her love and the only proper celebration of this is to give her pleasure until she cannot walk then repeat that again.

And pleasure her I do. We drain both of my cocks over and over, and while my body is recharging, preparing more seed to give to her, we hold one another and talk. I provide food and water and we let the suns pass over one more time.

I delight in everything that is Eve. We learn of each other and grow more comfortable as we pass the time, understanding each other better. She delights in many things, not the least of which is my body, which is a wonderful thing for me.

“No,” she says, move your left foot forward. Good, good. Can you move your tail right?”

I obey her commands. One of the things she enjoys is having me pose for her. Humans have different forms of art, but some of them are similar to things we had before the Devastation. She enjoys drawing and is sketching with a piece of burnt charcoal on the wall of the cave. She studies me over her shoulder then draws a few more lines.

“I like the light on your cock,” she says, with a mischievous grin.

“My cock likes you,” I say, voice low and grumbly with desire as the dragon surges and my cock dances, bouncing up and down.

“It better,” she says.

She places the finishing touches on her drawing then looks at it with a critical eye tinged with wistfulness.

“What are you thinking?”

She sighs. “I miss this,” she says, motioning at the drawing.

I have no trained eye but the art looks very good to me. It looks like me, which is more than I could accomplish, especially with such a rough medium.

“Give me time and I will build you an art studio.”

She laughs and turns away from the drawing. I look at my pants on the floor and know, with great reluctance, that I need to put them on. We must meet the others, our time alone is ending.

“You’re impossible.”

“No, I am, that is all.”

She shakes her head but her eyes are on my pants and her own which lie next to mine. We both know we have to go, but neither of us moves. I am sure she does not want to end this time any more than I do. So we linger.

“I love you, Othim.”

“My treasure,” I say, moving to her side. There is a hint of sadness and I would remove its cause. I kneel and take her hands. “What is on your mind?”

She shakes her head, staring at the remnants of our fire before meeting my eyes.

“There are so many variables,” she says. “So many things that can go wrong. Will we escape the Order? And if we do, how do we get to the other continent where you say this plant grows?”

I squeeze her hands then kiss her cheek. “Do not worry, my treasure. I will make it happen.”

“And you’re too certain.”

“We are in balance,” I agree. “As it should be.”

She laughs then rises.

Eve walks to our pants, and I take the time to admire her full ass and the way it jiggles when she moves. Her hips are wide enough to be good for children. The curve of her side is such that as my eyes roam, I see the side of her breasts, which always make me hard.

It is so exotic to have the breasts exposed as hers are. I cannot get enough of them. She bends over and the fullness of her backside makes my cock even harder as I can see hints of her femaleness which glistens with invitation.

It is a great effort to not take her again. How is a male to resist such temptation? I lean heavily into the mental training of the Order to keep myself from doing it, but it is no easy thing.

She pulls her pants on and turns as she fastens them, hiding the patch of fur that holds her delicate scent. My mouth waters, wanting to bury myself inside her again.

“Are you going to do something with that thing or get dressed and do what we both know we have to?” she asks, staring at my throbbing member.

The teasing is clear so I rise slowly. I pose, putting one foot forward and twisting my hips so that my hard cock is on full display. I tense the muscles of my pelvis making it bounce for her and she giggles.

“You wish to care for it?”

“Of course I do,” she says, swaying her hips as she walks closer.

Her soft fingers wrap around my stiffness and stroke. She leans her head back and I claim her lips, groaning into her mouth. She strokes faster and suddenly I am swept away by the sensations and in only a few moments my seed is exploding. It spurts across the cave and lands in the dirt.

“Wasteful,” I grumble.

“Yes, but we don’t have time,” she says. “We’re already past due to meet the others.”

“They would wait,” I argue.

“And they would worry.”

I cannot argue with the truth of her words, and that forces me to let go. I will my second cock to leave its readiness and re-sheath itself in waiting, then put my own pants on.

When Eve is fully dressed, I gather up the pack of our things. We stand side by side, arms around one another, and admire her art. The sketch on the wall depicts me in such great detail that anyone who knows me would recognize it.

“You are very talented.”

“Thanks,” she says. Then she walks to the wall and rubs out the picture.

“What—” I try to stop her, but she pulls free and finishes the job. “Why did you do that?”

“Because if one of the Order finds this cave, then they might recognize you.”

“Oh,” I say.

I am stunned I did not think of this. She is as brilliant as she is beautiful. She dusts her hands and then we leave our cave to continue the journey. As we leave, I inhale deeply, wanting to remember forever every detail of this place. Of our first joining and of the time we shared here. There will be many more such joinings, and many more adventures in our future, but this one is the first and that is always a special thing.

EVE

The jungle sucks overall but it's not a bad journey. Mostly it's hot, muggy, and there are lots of insects. Yet beneath all the annoyances there's a simplicity and a beauty to it all. I see this world differently now.

I suspect it's the afterglow of amazing sex, but it doesn't fade even by day two of our journey. On day three, I'm sure that it's not an afterglow but something else. I finally realize that I'm seeing the world anew because I'm no longer detached from it.

All my life I've lived with the certainty that my time here is short. The timebomb in my genetic code could be set off at any moment and once that clock starts, it was over. In response, I never let myself get too attached.

Death was a constant companion. Silent, dark, and brooding. Right there no matter how joyful an experience was, it was colored by the presence of that grim reaper. I lived but I didn't. I kept the world at bay to protect myself.

It's what I was trying to do with Othim. Keep him at bay. Outside the inner bubble where I knew that I would leave nothing but pain in my wake. I couldn't do that to anyone, but Othim was too insistent. He didn't let me be like everyone else in my life.

And now he's given me hope.

Hope which makes the world look a lot brighter. There can be a future. And that future might be beautiful because it's on us. We'll make the most of it together.

Tomorrow is never a guarantee. No one can say that, especially here on Tajss. But what I do know is that no matter what, I won't face it alone. And that's worth fighting for. No. It's worth living for.

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About Miranda Martin

USA Today bestselling author Miranda Martin writes fantasy and scifi romance featuring heroes with out-of-this-world anatomy that readers call 'larger than life' and smart heroines destined to save the world. As a little girl, she would sneak off with her nose in a book, dreaming of magical realms. Today she brings those fantasies to life and adores every fan who chooses to live in them for a while.

Though born and raised in southern Virginia, Miranda Martin is a veteran who's traveled to places like Korea, Hawaii, and good 'ole Texas. She's since settled in Kansas, the heart of America, with her husband and daughters, a cat, and wishes for a pet dragon or unicorn. When she's not writing, you can still find her tucked away somewhere with a warm blanket and her nose in a book.

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