



**HACKLES**  
AND A  
**HONEYMOON**

POPPY RHYS

HACKLES AND A HONEYMOON

Science Fiction Romance

by

Poppy Rhys

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# WARNING

This story contains a non-human alien hero, mature content, graphic language, and possible triggers.

Standalone novel

***Present Day...*****Birdie**

*Just look at them*, I thought as I watched the regency couple on my tablet screen. You know, from that popular show on the streaming service that rhymes with *chex mix*. I paid no mind to the chocolate croissant slowly melting in my hand.

*They're so in love.*

Infuriating, panty incinerating, so romantic it hurts *love*.

It was all fake, scripted. These actors didn't actually want to rip each other's waistcoats or stockings off but I fell for every second of it.

Damn me and my gullible heart.

Love wasn't real. Not the way mainstream media portrayed, anyway. It was manufactured by big corporations who wanted to capitalize on all the bleeding hearts.

Candy companies, greeting cards, jewelers, florists—hell, even ice cream brands, for when the unavoidable reality hammer slammed down on your capricious heart.

I knew watching these shows was pointless. A waste of my time. Really, I should've been cleaning the many piles of

dishes and empty takeout boxes I'd let stack up for seven days during my detachment from the real world.

Bill and Ted, my twin chocolate, tri-color chihuahuas licked their chops while they stared at me.

*Oh yeah, my croissant.*

I propped the tablet on my throw pillow and licked the creamy chocolate off my palm and fingertips like I'd forgotten napkins and good manners existed. If Mr. B could see me through the screen now, he'd hike that wicked brow and walk his eyes over me, stunned at the horror of my boorish etiquette.

*He's a work of fiction,* I told myself as I finished sucking my fingers and took a big bite of the croissant, working my tongue to make sure all the buttery dough got inside my mouth and not on my duvet that I'd dragged into the living room.

I wasn't normally this messy. My life was planned out, pinned down, organized and color coded. I thrived on order. Every shoe had its place, every spice bottle had its label, and every calendar was meticulously sorted. In my world there was no such thing as wrinkles because if one dared to appear, I vanquished it with a hot iron.

At least, that's how my life used to be until it all went sideways a year ago.

What I was trying to say... I never used to do *messy*. And that's why my boss loved me.

*Used to love me.*

She had to still love me a tiny bit, right? All those years—eleven to be exact—that I'd gotten everything right. They

had to count for something, didn't they?

A week ago I would've said yes but seven days was a long time. Six enormous weddings could happen in seven days, and probably had, if I remembered the schedule correctly.

I'd helped all six of those couples curate and book their perfect honeymoon. The ultimate destinations where they could start their new adventure together.

Even if half of those couples would likely end up divorced within ten years, they could at least have a fun memory to look back on. You know, when they were blindly optimistic and the sex was still spectacular.

*What is that smell?*

Anyway, I hadn't heard anything from my boss, Gloria, since she leveled me with a glare and told me to cool my jets at home. That she'd call me—*call me!*

That was code for *you're fired.*

At least, my brain kept insisting that's what it meant.

Honestly, I probably should've used this week to find another steady job considering I had so many bills to pay and my side gigs were nearly nonexistent the past month.

Bobby let me pick up shifts on the barbecue food truck when he needed extra hands, but now that he got a girlfriend whose obsession with smokers matched his own, he rarely called.

And Ines, the dog groomer down the road, hadn't called either. I usually manned the bathing station on Saturday's, but

business had slowed and she could tackle the station on her own with fewer appointments.

I'd made sure to keep my phone off silent so I wouldn't miss it if any of my bosses did ring me.

That in itself was unpleasant.

Aside from the countless warranty spam calls, my voicemail was full of credit card companies wanting to work out payment plans.

"Thanks, Derik," I said to the room. Ted immediately started growling at the utterance of my ex's name.

I scratched his little noggin. "You never liked him, did you?"

Ted sighed like the weight of the world was on his tiny shoulders.

I had Derik to thank for those nonstop calls from the credit card companies. During our two years together, he'd racked up an eye-watering amount of debt in my name.

Lesson learned. Painfully so.

The only upside was that he currently resided in a concrete prison cell for wire fraud. It pleased me to imagine him holding another inmate's pocket. Pretty boys didn't do well in prison, I'd heard.

But the downside? I was left paying for all the shit he'd hidden from me.

I couldn't think about that right now.

Realistically, what other agency would even hire me? I'd signed a contract with the company, *and* I'd broken the big



rule.

Aside from never falling in love with the bride or the groom, there was one other important rule that could never be bent or broken at *Aisle Be There*.

*Never interfere in the couple's affairs.*

I was just a travel agent for ABT, but the rules still applied to me. The personal lives of our clients were none of our business. If it didn't expressly involve the planning and execution of the wedding and honeymoon, we ignored it.

Easy peasy, right? I thought so too. Until last Sunday.

I sniffed the half eaten box of chow mein on my coffee table to see if that was causing the odor.

*No, that isn't it.*

I shoved the last bite of croissant into my trap and started to investigate the other bags and boxes of leftovers, surprised the dogs hadn't tried to pilfer any of it.

*What had I been saying?*

Right. So last Sunday everything had gone to plan. The venue was a beautiful conservatory building at the botanical gardens. The snow fell outside but the interior was full of lush, colorful plants and trickling water features. Every romantic light was lit, every purchased flower at peak bloom, and the live quartet expertly played their instruments.

Monica, the bride, was over the moon. This sweet twenty-five year old with apple cheeks, bright honey eyes, and the kindest personality. Every time she entered a room, I had

to check to make sure forest animals and singing birds didn't trail her.

*You get the picture.*

Normally I didn't attend weddings for clients. I just helped plan their honeymoon. But Monica had been so overjoyed about the unique activities I'd been able to secure for their trip that she insisted I attend the wedding. If not for her, then at least for the cake and open bar.

Try saying no to a Disney princess. It's horrible and I couldn't do it. Besides, I was on a budget and I wouldn't say no to free food and booze.

All that's to say, Monica was the least bridezilla-bride I'd ever met. Which was undoubtedly part of the reason I'd lost my mind for those thirty seconds that landed me here.

One hour before the ceremony, I'd been asked by my best friend, and the planner overseeing the whole thing, Shelly, to search for the maid of honor who'd suddenly disappeared.

*Can you see where I'm going with this?*

After much searching, I'd found her.

I'd found her *and* the groom.

Together.

Pressed up against a bamboo railing at the back of the rainforest biome—and it *wasn't* cacao pods he was looking for under her skirt.

I'd fled, undiscovered, repeating to myself the rules we operated by. It was none of my business. Maybe Monica and her maid of honor were tight like that. Who was I to judge?

My gut said otherwise, no matter how hard I tried to ignore it, and it only got worse, unbearable really, when she reappeared in the suite twenty minutes before Monica would be walking down the aisle.

I'd kept my lips shut, pretending, even to Shelly, that I hadn't found her.

That sweet bride beamed at her best friend, clearly relieved the one person she trusted the most—besides the man she was going to marry—hadn't abandoned her.

My palms were sweaty and my heart was galloping as I witnessed that she-devil give the best pep talk I'd *ever* heard and reassure Monica she was going to live happily ever after with her soulmate—

I couldn't take it!

The blatant betrayal plucked a nerve and my mouth and brain and heart didn't cooperate. None were on the same page. I blurted, "*She's fucking your fiancé!*"

Exactly those words. Nothing to soften the blow or approach it gently or to maybe use a nicer word than *fucking*.

Just straight-up sharp truth.

The world stopped spinning for about five seconds—five long, suffocating seconds—before Monica's adorable smile faltered and she stared at her bestie, the hope in her eyes dying with each moment that ticked by without a fervent denial or any kind of excuse.

Instead, the maid of *no* honor—her new title—looked guiltier than a dog caught obliterating a brand new leather couch.

That's when shit got real.

Imagine my surprise when the kindest bride I'd ever worked with shrieked like a banshee at a gladiator battle and wrapped her perfectly manicured hands around her bestie's throat and began choking her.

I was stunned. So stunned that I just stood there, watching Monica about to commit murder. On her wedding day. In the botanical gardens conservatory suite. With two hundred guests in the building.

It went further downhill when the groom burst into the room and tried to break it up. Monica let go of the purple-faced ex-bestie and started choking her fiancé.

Needless to say, the wedding was canceled, the cops were called, and at least three people got a lifetime ban from the botanical gardens.

It was a doozy.

A royal fuckup that probably cost me my job, yet I couldn't bring myself to regret my verbal diarrhea. Maybe I'd never see Monica again, but I'd wonder about her, like every bride I'd known. Better she got out before she was legally bound to that lying cheat or, worse, had kids with him.

I groaned when I realized the odor I'd been searching for was coming from my armpits.

"My god," I whispered as my eyes watered.

*When's the last time I showered?*

I flopped back onto the couch and turned off my tablet. I couldn't, in good conscience, watch Mr. B stubbornly pine for

his true love while I smelled like a bag of onions.

My phone rang.

I jumped and scrambled for it, startling Bill and Ted into a barking frenzy.

*Mom calling...*

“Shit,” I swore, realizing what time it was. I was late for brunch with the family.

I quickly answered it. “Hey Mom, I’m—”

“Where are you?” Chatter in the background signaled the whole fam was already at Gram’s house.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“If you don’t, there might not be anything left.” She conspiratorially whispered, “I saved some bacon for you, but I can’t guarantee your cousin Margie won’t find it. You know how she is when she’s pregnant.”

I listened to Mom rant for a few more seconds before hanging up, rummaging through my closet, and then hopping in the shower for a quick scrub.

If I thought I could get away with it, I would’ve stayed home to wallow in my self-pity a little longer.

The thing about big families? They’re like bloodhounds.

And unless I wanted to hear about every family friend, local boutique, and business start-up hiring, I needed to act like my professional life wasn’t falling apart.

My phone rang again.

*Gloria calling...*

My stomach immediately clenched and, for a split second, I debated not answering because living in my delusional world where I'd never gone to Monica's wedding sounded a hell of a lot better than facing my boss.

But, money.

I answered. "Hello?"

"Come to the office at two. We'll talk."

Talk? Aside from the obvious, what did that mean?

This was my boss, who I hadn't heard from in a whole week. I couldn't ask for clarification after what happened. If she said jump, I'd ask how high.

"Yes, of-of course," I fumbled. "Two. I'll be there."

The line went dead.

I was either about to be forgiven... or officially fired.

*Shit.*

**BIRDIE**

It was 1:35PM when I showed up at Aisle Be There's office building.

Thankfully I'd been able to sneak out of family brunch without much pushback considering it was well past noon.

Listening to Gram give her unsolicited advice on my dating life, in front of the whole fam, was a torture I didn't mind escaping.

*"You need to get over that crook and get back on the horse while you're still tight and perky, and stop wasting your youth!"*

Such wise words.

I shook it off and focused. I couldn't be late today, of all days. If I knew Gloria, and I did, there were certain things that got under her skin.

Poodles, garlicy food Monday through Friday, and people who arrived *too* early for meetings.

I'd vigorously brushed my teeth and gargled with apple cider vinegar for a good five minutes, so at least I had decent breath. However, twenty-five minutes ahead of time was too early.

"Damn," I swore under my breath and pressed the elevator button. I couldn't wait in the lobby. The creepy pizza

guy who always read those lingerie magazines on his break was there.

He dredged up gross memories of my first job in a department store. The amount of weirdos who called pretending to be interested in lingerie for their girlfriend or wife, only to jerk off, was insane.

I wasn't kink shaming, but spend a few dollars and call a phone sex operator, buddy.

That was the shitty part about sharing a public lobby with eight other businesses. The pizzeria next door was a common lunch spot. I couldn't piss off the staff by complaining about their hired perv.

The elevator finally came and I decided I'd sneak into the warehouse to kill time.

It wasn't really a warehouse, that's just what we called it. The office consisted of three floors while the other businesses occupied the rest.

One floor, the warehouse, was dedicated solely to production items. Chairs, glassware, flatware, vases, silk flowers, so on and so forth. A place where the planners came to *shop* for their events and build samples for their clients.

That side of the business definitely wasn't my wheelhouse.

As much as I could organize, I didn't have a personal style. I was more likely to pick up a pink flamingo handbag and pair it with green corduroy pants and yellow rain boots, if that gave any insight into my lack of panache.



“This might be the last time you see me,” I announced to Shelly once I was in the warehouse. I plunked down in one of the chairs she’d pulled off the display shelf. Eight times out of ten I could usually find her there. “Just thought I should warn you.”

Shelly, the practical one in our friendship, didn’t even bat an eyelash, clearly used to my dramatic revelations. Instead, she continued to stroll down the glassware aisle, in the zone.

“I’m sure it’s not *that* bad.”

I shook my head, fingering the silky golden tassel on the ornate chair I occupied. “She’s gonna fire me.”

“If she was going to fire you,” Shelly started, snatching a blue crystal goblet from the shelf to hold it up to the light, “she would’ve done it sooner.”

“Hello, have you met Gloria? Like, ever? She lives for the suspense.”

“You’re one of her best, if not *the* best, travel agent she has. She’s not firing you.”

Shelly hardly ever said nice things. She was the type of best friend who kicked me in the ass when I deserved it but was ready to remove her earrings and rearrange someone’s facial structure if they talked shit about me.

“D’aww...” I pressed a hand to my chest. “That was unusually sweet...” I wrinkled my nose, instantly suspicious. “Are you getting sick? On drugs?” I gasped. “Did you get laid? Who is he? Do I know him? Is it Leslie from the dungeon?”

The dungeon was floor three where all the boring technical stuff happened. Accounting, social media, inventory, blah, blah, blah.

“Sometimes I wonder how we’re friends,” Shelly muttered, pursing her lips to hide a smile.

“It was Leslie. I knew it!” I leaned forward in the gaudy chair, rubbing my palms together and thankful I could focus on something other than my professional life going down in flames. “Give me the juicy deets!”

“It wasn’t Leslie.”

“Ron?”

“No.”

“Jude?”

“Also no.”

I grunted and tossed my hands in the air. There were only a handful of men who worked at ABT and even less who dated women, so I was running out of options, fast. “The guy who looks like Channing Tatum’s long lost twin? What’s his name...”

“Miles.”

My jaw dropped and I shot out of my chair. “MILES?! You fucked *Miles*?”

“Would you shut up?” She shushed me with crazy eyes. “The whole city just heard you!”

“I knew you were walking funny!”

“You’re delusional.”

“I’m not. Look,” I pointed at her lower half, “you’re even favoring your left leg like you need to see a chiropractor.”

Shelly snatched another goblet off the shelf as her cheeks burned a rosy hue and her telltale grin fully emerged. “We didn’t f-u-c-k,” she corrected, spelling it out—she hated that word. “We made love.”

I gagged.

“Gross, that’s such a wedding planner thing to say.” The only people who could claim *we made love* and it curl my toes were scripted characters in fictional romance shows that I irrationally adored.

*Not* people in real life.

Because there was no such thing as love.

“That’s it?” I frowned. “That’s all you’re going to dish?”

“Shouldn’t you worry about your own dating life?” She shot back. “It’s been a whole year. That’s probably fifteen in vagina time.”

“You’re thinking dog years.”

Shelly shrugged. “Still.”

“Gram already gave me an unwanted TED talk about my nonexistent sex life.” I groaned. “Let’s not talk about me, let’s talk about you and Miles.”

Shelly grinned. “Did she throw the *tight and perky* at you again?”

“Ugh.”

“I love her.” Shelly sighed. “She’s my spirit animal, and I want to be just like her when I grow up.”

I scowled. “You’re deflecting. Now, dish.”

“Don’t you have a meeting to get to?”

“Not for another...” I checked my phone. 1:51PM. “Shit. I should go.”

“Mhm.”

I pointed at her on my way out. “Don’t think I’ll forget about this. I expect disgusting details later!”

My nerves, momentarily forgotten with Shelly’s confession, returned for round two once I stepped into the elevator. The plummeting of my stomach had nothing to do with the short ride to the main floor and *everything* to do with what was about to happen.

The doors opened up to the lobby that’d been transformed from Christmas and New Years over to Valentine’s. Tasteful amounts of pink, white, and red flower arrangements decorated the industrial, yet feminine, office and perfumed the air. Red foil wrapped chocolates and bowls of sweethearts were in choice places for visiting clients.

ABT was always inundated with engagement parties through February and an influx of new clients. Clichés were clichés for a reason, I supposed.

My kitten heels clicked against the polished black oak floor as I walked to Gloria’s office. The front desk admins eyeballed me as I passed, a glimmer of pity in their gazes.

They could all pretend they wouldn't immediately start gossiping as soon as I was out of earshot, but I knew the truth.

I squared my shoulders and took a deep breath. Gloria's door was open, but I lightly knocked a knuckle on the doorframe anyway.

My boss, a health nut who would absolutely die if she'd known the crap I'd stuffed myself with this past week, didn't bother looking up from the paperwork on her desk. Simply gestured for me to come in.

"Shut the door."

The door clicking shut was like the first nail in my coffin, I could feel it. Everything I'd worked my ass off for was about to spin down the drain and all I wanted to do was run.

*Cool the jets, cool the jets, cool the jets.*

"Sit."

I stiffly sat in one of the two chairs on the opposite side of Gloria's desk. They were uncomfortably curved like a piece of art meant for a museum and not for real human butts. I believed she chose them so people wouldn't want to stay in her office long. As if the judgmental air in the room wouldn't scare them away first.

The silence stretched and my pits grew slick.

I needed to say something. Anything. I had to speak up and fight for my job, otherwise what was the point? I may as well start cleaning out my desk and reworking my resume.

"Gloria," I blurted, "I just want you to know I love what I do here—"

“Do you?” She finally looked at me. Her silver eyebrow arched skeptically.

“Y-yes. Yes, I love my job.”

“You broke the rules.”

There was no denying it, no excuses to make. Gloria knew the situation, I’d explained it frantically right before I’d been forced into professional timeout. “I know.”

“Do you regret it?”

I laced my fingers together in my lap and tightly gripped.

*Say yes, dummy.*

*Say you’re sorry.*

*Say it won’t happen again.*

Monica’s trusting face cropped up in my mind.

It would be a lie if I said yes. If given the chance at a redo, I knew I probably would’ve done the same thing. And with Gloria staring at me like I was a frog she was dissecting, she’d easily spot the lie.

I swallowed. “No.”

“Good “

“I truly believe—” I’d started to defend my actions, ready to die on that hill, when my brain caught up. “Wait, what?”

She shot me an indulgent look. “I said *good*.”

I opened my mouth and closed it at least three times while trying to suss out the trick. “I... so you *aren’t* firing me?”

“I should.” She grasped her stack of papers and slid a green clip over the corner before tucking them into a cream folder. “But I won’t. If the condition of your skin is any indication,” she clucked her tongue, “you’ve punished yourself more than any firing would.”

Self-consciously, I touched my cheek.

*How?*

*How* did she always know when I’d binged junk food? Had a zit suddenly sprouted or something? My face had been normal after my shower!

“However...”

*Oh god.*

I gulped down my groan before it slipped.

There was always a *but*. I knew this conversation had been too easy!

“You’re no longer working at your desk.”

My eyes bugged. “You just said you weren’t firing me?”

“Not firing, Birdie. Keep up. I’m relocating you to Ron’s old desk.”

I knew my mouth did the fish lips thing again before I blinked rapidly. “You’re shoving me in the dungeon?”

“Don’t be rude. The dungeon—the third floor,” she corrected herself because even she knew it was ABT’s figurative basement, “is full of wonderful people. You’ll fit right in.”

“I’m confused.” I scrubbed my hands over my thighs.  
“Where’s Ron going to work?”

She held out the folder she just put together and I robotically grasped it. “Ron’s taking over your desk. I’m sending you on assignment.”

“*What?!*” I shouted unintentionally. “But we agreed I wouldn’t have to—”

“That was a decade ago. We’re renegotiating now.”

Except Gloria’s version of *renegotiating* was never a negotiation. She would get what she wanted or else.

I couldn’t afford *or else* right now. I needed this job.

“Wait, why can’t Ron go?”

“He’s got a medical condition and for the foreseeable future, his doctor has requested he not travel.”

*Poor Ron.*

That must’ve been killing him. He was the type who could live out of his backpack forever.

Hold on. Right now wasn’t the time to worry about Ron.

“What about Amy?” I asked. “She loves new assignments!”

“Amy quit this morning.”

That bitch.

*Cool the jets, Birdie. Just calm down.*

I needed to breathe.



Amy wasn't a bitch, that was just my feverish panic kicking in. She was actually super sweet.

I snatched a couple tissues off Gloria's desk and shoved them under my shirt and into my armpits. When I got anxious, my body acted like we were in the Sahara desert.

It was highly possible Gloria was sending me somewhere in the US, Canada or Mexico. Some place I could drive instead of fly or boat. I hated both.

"Gloria," I pleaded, despising myself for doing so but my job was being spit-roasted here. I was literally holding my death papers in my hand. "I've dedicated over ten years of my life to this company—"

"It's appreciated."

"This job is everything to me, and you know how much I hate traveling—"

"I do." She pulled her tortoiseshell glasses from atop her head and slipped them on. "And I've let you languish in this office for too long. You're a travel agent, Birdie. You need to get boots on the ground. Experience firsthand what you're offering to the clients."

This couldn't be real. I'd been fully prepared—as prepared as one could be, anyway—to be terminated today. Not put on assignment.

Thrust into the world at large.

Punished in this torturous way.

I was thirty-two. I'd basically given ABT my best years because this job was *my life*.

I met my best friend here. I'd adopted Bill and Ted from a rescue run by a bride I'd worked with. I'd laughed, cried, and slept at my desk out there more times than I could count and it'd all felt worth it to help couples start their lives off right with the real hope they'd last until death, just as they vowed.

Until this moment.

I realized some people would kill to travel for a living, but I wasn't one of them. I enjoyed being home at night, sleeping in my own bed, and knowing my surroundings.

I must've looked like a lost lamb because Gloria sighed and leaned forward. Her voice, normally finely sharpened, turned soft. "Listen, it was either an assignment or termination after that fiasco with Monica. Joe didn't give me much of a choice."

*Joe.*

*Ugh.*

Joe Royston was ABT's head honcho at HQ in San Francisco. Gloria was the main reason this location hadn't closed and he hated it. Columbus wasn't New York City or Miami, but we held our own here and brought in enough revenue to keep the investors more than happy.

Needless to say, Joe never made it easy.

"This is just a one-time thing, right?" I asked, hope sprouting in my chest. "Once I complete this assignment, I can get my desk back and stay local?"

A lock of her neatly coiffed gray hair curved over her forehead. "In a month, we'll reevaluate."

I clenched my teeth as my hope died.

That was a seasoned way of saying *don't hold your breath*.

What was I going to do? I couldn't go work for a different event planning company if I quit now. At least not for another year. I was under contract with ABT.

"You'll find all your travel arrangements in that folder," Gloria finally said, her small, rare smile meant to be encouraging I assumed. "Pack your bags. You're headed to *New Allu*."

My stomach lurched and sour saliva instantly flooded my mouth.

My voice warbled when I weakly asked, "You're sending me to *space*?"

"We need to explore off-planet potential. Their human population is growing every year—"

I scrambled forward to grab the decorative trash can beside her desk. I buried my face in it and vomited.

Vomiting quietly was never something I was able to do. Instead, it sounded like I was exercising a demon.

Let me just say, the chocolate croissant didn't taste the same on its second appearance.

And after Gloria's assistant rushed in to help, I knew I wouldn't be able to show my face in the office any time soon.

Guess that was the only positive thing about my next assignment.

No one knew me in space.

**BIRDIE**

The announcement bell pinged and the whispery, feminine voice of the shuttle attendant declared, “*Arriving shortly. Please remain seated.*”

All the anti-nausea meds in the world couldn’t calm my queasy stomach.

The mild sedative I’d taken before departure was still pumping through my veins and diluting my volatile emotions. Otherwise I probably would’ve flipped out and landed myself strapped to a chair like Hannibal Lecter.

Conversation buzzed around me as the space shuttle orbited New Allu. I was officially hundreds of thousands of light years from Earth and the whole trip had only taken a few hours and four jumps thanks to the portal technology used by the greater universe.

I tried to remind myself there was less turbulence on the shuttle than my last—and only—flight from Columbus to LA. That trip had been so miserable, I’d rented a car and drove back. My nerves just couldn’t handle flying.

No matter how many flight simulation sessions I’d been to, no matter how much universal manifesting I’d tried, and no amount of meditation or therapy had ever worked to rid me of my fear.

Being a travel agent who couldn't travel—or had limited capabilities—had been the largest hurdle in my career.

*Can't believe I'm floating in space.*

Part of me was amazed because, hey, I was in *space*. Part of me was cursing my bosses. But mostly, I just wanted this thing to land so I could touch some freaking grass.

Now that aliens were speaking to us, it opened a shit ton of industry between Earth and other planets.

To most aliens, humans were the new kid on the block. The new kid who came from a family that set off fireworks on the front lawn at 3AM, yelled at the neighbors, and pissed in their bushes. The crazy people the aliens watched on their hal-com.

Despite all that, I'd heard whispers that some of them were into us.

I was reminded of that little rumor when I'd caught the *umambei* staring at me from across the aisle about ten minutes into the trip.

His pink tentacle beard had slithered in greeting, strobing an array of blushing shades and his almond-shaped eyes, glittering gold and wet looking, widened.

I pretended I hadn't seen him, but every time I glimpsed his silhouette in my peripheral, he was watching.

*Please land the fucking shuttle already*, I pleaded.

Aside from the serious breaches in security aliens had been committing for decades—spying on us, hacking government servers, bootlegging our movies, shows, podcasts,

and online videos—our world powers had been pretty cool about forming alliances when they made their presence known nine years ago.

Granted, what were they gonna do? Say no to a future with better tech, spaceships, and joining a cosmic federation?

*Exactly.*

Once Earth's probation ended, anyway. The aliens knew humans were unhinged and understandably decided to withhold certain tech from us until we could stop bombing ourselves and abusing our planet.

I sighed and scrubbed the back of my neck. My neck that was all kinds of jacked up due to stress.

“Just relax,” I told myself.

For the fifth time today, I texted Shelly, grateful for the technology that allowed my connection to Earth.

**Me:** Remember, Bill needs his blanket to sleep and Ted will act like he's not hungry on first offer, but he'll come back to it.

**Shelly:** I remembered. \*eye roll emoji\*

**Shelly:** Planet-side yet?

**Shelly:** I'm jealous, btw.

**Shelly:** You get to go to space. SPACE!

**Shelly:** FOR FREE.

**Shelly:** Ughhhhh.

**Me:** Trade places?

**Shelly:** I wish!

I took a deep breath and glanced out the window again, taking in all the details of New Allu. I'd seen documentaries about it on TV, but this was my first time seeing it in person.

Even with my stressed state, I could appreciate the depth of my situation.

I was a human, in the twenty-first century, on an alien spacecraft orbiting a planet I'd never been to.

...It was pretty cool.

"First time to New Allu?" Doroha asked, my new acquaintance and seat neighbor. She was from the *Halotur* quadrant which, according to my alien guidebook, was home to three inhabited planets, all with a largely frozen tundra biome.

She'd explained to me she was wearing a breathing apparatus implanted into her respiratory system to help regulate the oxygen rich atmospheres she traveled to.

Her shape was humanoid but her skin was an icy white with small hints of blue velvet fur along her exposed arms. She had a lean, muscular form and little white claws. Her ears were elfish, and her round eyes were glowing gray. Her hair was made of thin blue cords that moved on their own.

Funny enough, we'd talked about all sorts of things except our destination. And when I say *we*, I really mean *she* talked and I listened. Or tried.

She spoke fast and this new universal implant I'd received before boarding—a requirement to visit New Allu—took some getting used to.

At least I would sound like less of a tourist while on New Allu. Make no mistake though, I totally packed a big-ass travel guide that weighed as much as a watermelon.

“It is,” I finally answered and fidgeted with my seat buckle for the millionth time. “Kind of hope I'll have time to see the Gorgosha monument. I doubt the pictures do it justice.”

“Everyone will know you're a tourist if the monument is on your list.”

I grinned and gestured to my very human self. “I don't think they'll believe I'm a local.”

Doroha buzzed a laugh which sounded like a hive of unhappy bees. “I'm sorry.” Her pointed ears dropped as if she'd been chastised. “I shouldn't laugh.”

“Nah, it's okay.” I waved a hand.

“How long are you visiting?”

“I'll be here for a month.”

From the window view, New Allu resembled Earth but was much larger and had more land than ocean. The continents ranged from deep greens to patches of burnt orange desert areas, and even white zones of frozen tundra. Moody clouds, tinged a soft blue, blanketed portions of the planet.

“If you want to see the Gorgosha monument, I assume you're staying in Foltiza City?”



“Close. Thalewa, right next door.”

“Ahh!” Her ears perked up and her locks fluttered. “That was my next guess.”

“I figured I could plan a day trip for Gorgosha, since it’s not too far away. The transport fares seemed reasonable.”

“They are!” Doroha smiled, flashing her large, rabbit-like teeth. “I’m good friends with the *lushoki* who runs Rui Express. Tell him I sent you and he’ll give you a discount.”

The gesture was kind, especially since we’d just met, but ABT was funding this trip and the tiny bitch in me didn’t care if ABT had to pay full price for everything. “Thank you!”

“Will you be attending the *noda* tournament?”

“What’s *noda*?”

Doroha’s eyes widened. “The top sport in the universe! You’ve never heard of *noda*?”

I shook my head. “Not much of a sports fan, even on Earth.”

Her ears dipped again and I realized she was disappointed.

The lights flashed once and the attendant’s voice floated over the speakers again, thankfully saving me from a boring conversation about sports. “*Preparing for atmospheric breach. Please remain seated.*”

By the time we’d descended through the clouds, New Allu had taken on a new depth.

The river below us was a refreshing turquoise-jade that was unbelievably clear. So clear, in fact, the aquatic life was

easy to spot as it zoomed about beneath the surface.

To the far east, snow capped mountains of an icy region melted into rolling hills of lemony prairies.

The shuttle moved quickly, traversing the globe faster than I thought possible.

We moved over open ocean, thick jungle with mists floating around the canopy, and countryside villages with parceled homesteads and grazing, teal and white reptilian livestock.

The pictures of this place were cheap in comparison to seeing it in person.

In that moment, I was thankful for my sedative, because otherwise my anxiety might've robbed me of those views.

The bright sun glinted off the metallic structures jutting from the landscape once we hit the densely populated cities. Evidence this planet had been inhabited by various intelligent species for a long time.

*“Approaching our final destination,”* the attendant said. *“If this is your first visit to what we call the City of a Thousand Birds, Thalewa is the second oldest settlement of New Allu. Rich with history of the fifteen allied races who terraformed this planet into a safe place for coexistence, prosperity, and trade.”*

The shuttle descended over Thalewa and I was instantly reminded this wasn't Earth.

The foreign architecture ranged from tall, sharp-edged structures with slanted roofs to soft, rounded towers that sat stoutly beneath the azure sky.

The lustrous rooftops and balconies of high-rises were overflowing with alien flora in a myriad of colors as it lined the powdery white coast where frothy ocean waves lapped at the shore.

“Wow,” I exhaled.

We touched down at the end of a metal dock that stretched over water in front of Odetah Rei Plaza, the luxury hotel where I’d be staying.

“Okay, Gloria,” I said to myself, slightly less bitter about being put on assignment. “At least you didn’t skimp on the digs.”

*“Thank you for traveling with Galaxy Prime. Departure will begin now.”*

I grabbed my carry-on bag and left the shuttle with the others. The air was warm, and the breeze carried the salty scent of the ocean with a savory hint from the seaside restaurants dotting the coast.

My stomach grumbled.

I hadn’t eaten since last night, which had been a good idea since I didn’t think anyone on the shuttle wanted to put up with my horrendous barfing.

But now that I was on solid ground, my nerves were gradually dissipating and hunger set in.

A new problem arose when I stepped into the impressive hotel lobby, though. A massive chandelier hung from the ceiling, the drops of crystal sparkling. The polished marble floors stretched out before me, shiny enough that it reflected my image.

My very *sloppy* image.

I instantly regretted wearing my sweatpants and the faded crimson Harvard hoodie that I'd found on a Goodwill rack.

I groaned.

I hadn't even done my hair this morning, it was just tied back in a lumpy ponytail. I'd been so freaked out about the trip, I didn't even consider *where* I was going.

To say I stuck out like a sore thumb in this crowd was the understatement of the century.

I glanced around, my eyes feasting on the glam of it all while I tried to ignore my tacky, travel day appearance.

The walls were painted with murals of alien landscapes I'd never seen and, while I would've explored all the details at any other time, I was all too aware of the hotel guests and their open stares.

*Fuck my life.*

The lobby was extremely busy. Aliens from every allied race, and some that weren't, milled about. And none of them were in anything less than magazine worthy outfits.

From glittering bodysuits and opulent fur robes, to expensive tunics and elaborate headdresses.

I pulled out my phone for a quick text to Shelly.

**Me:** I just witnessed bioluminescent fabric IN REAL LIFE.

The wearer, a *teraka* female, was perfect for it. Tall and delicate, black skin with copper-colored sigils down her exposed spine, and the barest of curves.

The dress, emitting a soft, flickering light that reminded me of white opal, was dramatic and unforgettable, and I wasn't even obsessed with fashion.

**Shelly:** WHAT?! Send me a pic!

A shadow suddenly engulfed me and a gruff *ahem* had me glancing up from my phone and into the eyes of an extremely intimidating member of staff.

Bulky muscle, a horn curving from the middle of his face that reminded me of a rhino, and gray, tough skin, he loomed over me.

"Hi..." I said. If my alien guidebook was correct, he was a *buwore*. A peaceful farming type, though he looked anything but, and not one of the allied races.

*Huh. I'm surprised I remembered that.*

"Can I help you?" He asked, his voice a grizzly timbre.

"Um," I muttered. "Probably. I'm here to check in."

His black eyes looked me up and down before he said, "This way," and led me toward the long front desk where I got in line.

"Thanks."

With a stiff nod, he left.

*Mmkay, so he was friendly.*

**Me:** Can't. Got caught staring.

**Shelly:** \*five crying emojis\*

By the time I made it through the line, my brain was overloaded as I hopped into the elevator. Admittedly, I got turned around three times before I finally found my way.

“This can't be right,” I muttered as I looked up and down the hallway. The doors on this level were far apart, as if the rooms were the size of apartments. And when a guest down the hall left their room wearing a fist-sized gemstone around their neck, I thought I was *definitely* on the wrong floor.

I checked my room number again. “Suite 1098 E...”

The golden text above the door was a series of glyphs but, according to the booking info, it matched.

“Here goes nothing.” I tapped in the keycode on the panel screen beside the door. When it chimed pleasantly and the door unlocked, I hesitantly pushed it open.

I moved inside, closing the door behind me. Immediately, the suite lights slowly woke, illuminating my surroundings.

My jaw slackened as I moved through the foyer where the table held a bottle of foreign amber wine, a note in a language I couldn't read, a basket of assorted treats, and a vase of exotic flowers that were clearly not from Earth.

I stepped down into the sunken, carpeted living area. Plush, cream colored furniture was arranged in a U-shape in

front of the sleek, modern fireplace that flickered with orange and blue flames.

It overlooked a balcony with a small pool and a view of the sprawling city.

“No way,” I exhaled as I explored the suite, completely dumbfounded. “Gloria, I could kiss you!”

It was better than any hotel I’d stayed at or apartment I’d lived in.

And it was all mine for an entire month!

I zoomed through the suite, touching anything shiny, gawking at the art on the walls, and testing the furniture. The suite tablet operated everything from the hidden wall panels of the fridge and the temperature of the pool to the opacity of the windows and even room service.

When I finally made it to the bedroom, I flopped onto the enormous bed and squealed because it was the softest mattress I’d ever laid on. If I closed my eyes, I could’ve imagined I was on a cloud.

I busied myself putting away my clothing when my luggage arrived. It drove some people nuts, but I was the type that used the closets wherever I stayed. I couldn’t live out of my suitcase. The organizer in me wouldn’t allow such chaos.

Once I finished, I straightened the bed and smoothed out the wrinkles so it was nice and presentable when I was ready for it later on.

“Now,” I ticked off the list in my head, “bath, and then food.”

Because tomorrow? Tomorrow I'd face the city of  
Thalewa.



**OMEN**

“No,” I said flatly after exiting the shuttle in front of the hotel. “I won’t do it.”

“Just consider it,” Lykree, my agent, urged. I stared at my hal-com and she glared back at me. Her six eyes blinked out of sync and made my hackles rise. It always unsettled me when she did that.

“Credits aside,” she went on, “this could be a rewarding opportunity for you. Imagine the exposure. It could move your career to a new lev—”

“Lykree? I can’t hear you,” I interrupted. “Reception is terrible.”

“Omen! Don’t do this to me!”

“You’re cutting out...”

I disconnected.

We both knew there wasn’t bad reception. I just had nothing more to say, and if I let Lykree carry on I’d be stuck for an hour listening to all the *great things* joining a dating competition would do for my career.

Under no circumstances would that be happening.

Joining forty other males with inflated egos to spar and sniff after one female? The idea of performing tricks for

someone's personal attention was demoralizing. Not even the fans got that from me on the field.

The human game shows had gripped the galaxy by the throat the past few solars. Some species had begun to produce similar entertainment and put their own spin on it. The shows were broadcasted to more sectors than I could count.

Regrettably, I'd seen a few, but watching and participating were two different things.

I plucked a stray hair off my black jacket as I followed my teammates into the rear lobby where we drew less attention.

I checked my messages for my room number and keycode before splitting off. I'd never stayed at the Odetah Rei Plaza before but, as I found my suite, I noticed the glinting touches of grandeur.

I dropped my bags in the foyer and snatched the note off the table.

*"Welcome to Odetah Rei Plaza, Omen. May your tournament be successful and your stay with us be exquisite."*

"Hmm." I fished a treat out of the complimentary basket and took it, along with the bottle of Karluk wine, and made my way out onto the balcony.

The air was thick with moisture, and with it came the briny scent of saltwater, flowers far too fragrant for my taste, and a hint of roasted meat and spices wafting up from the restaurants nearby.

The city sprawled out around the hotel, far into the distance along the coast, speckled with lights and various

buildings in multiple shapes meant to be functional art.

There wasn't a skyline as dazzling as Thalewa's on any planet I'd visited. But even the skyline didn't live up to the jewel in my mind—Tully Stadium.

Anticipation seized me.

The stadium's roof was a domed ceiling of thick glass that angled out like an ovoid shell. During the day, it caught the rays of sunlight, illuminating the interior. The exterior lights strobed in a vibrant range of color, as if it were alive.

I'd be spending most of my time there for the immediate future. As much as I enjoyed visiting New Allu when I got the chance, I was here for work, not recreation.

We'd finally made it to the midseason tournament after a long, grueling session of games. Four more weeks of competition to see who would play for the Trifton Star. The rest of the season wouldn't matter if we lost our shot at this tournament.

At least, for me it wouldn't.

The team needed this win. We'd had a rough couple of solars since we lost Jo'tren, our *krog*, to retirement.

When someone's whole job on the field was to keep the opposing team from scoring, you wanted a whip-like player such as Jo'tren. Twelve far-reaching tentacles to intercept the orb for any goal he defended? He was nearly irreplaceable.

When Coach found our new *krog*, Pikey, playing on some backwater planet with no real team, it changed our fortunes.

Pikey wasn't Jo'tren, but he was better than the three others who'd occupied the position before him. He had speed on his side and no one in the league could top his rush.

I was just relieved he was with us and not the opposition.

Regardless, it wouldn't matter for long. This team, Meteor Mob, had always been temporary for me. My real focus was the Galactic Giants, the league's prime squad.

I'd dreamt of joining that roster since I was making plays on a muddy field as a cub, and I was so close to getting there I could almost taste it.

I gripped the balcony railing, my tail tapping my ankle.

Coach knew about my ambitions, I'd never hidden that fact. Lykree, for all her annoyances, put the bulk of her efforts into getting me where I wanted to be but it was a struggle.

The Galactic Giants had *unique* stipulations.

I opened the wine and took a healthy pull, licking up the droplet left on my bottom lip. It tasted mildly sweet with the famous spicy finish it was known for.

I scrubbed a hand through my mane and lingered on the balcony for a while longer, taking in all the sights and sounds. I watched as shuttles flew in and out of the docks below, carrying passengers to their next destination. Tourists, potentially noda fans. Millions had arrived on the planet for the tournament.

I gently rapped my knuckles against the railing a final time and headed back inside. The team would meet for a meal soon and, after the day of travel, I could've used a thorough

scrubbing. I couldn't show up smelling like the recycled air of the shuttle.

My com chimed, Lykree calling again but I ignored it.

I kicked off my boots and stripped my jacket and shirt off before rummaging in my bag to grab my grooming supplies.

When I opened the door to the washroom, a heavy wave of damp air hit me and stopped me in my tracks. I inhaled, getting a whiff of something fruity. The washroom was expansive, but the soaking tub was directly in my line of sight and, trust me, what I saw was unexpected.

A human woman.

A *naked* human woman.

New Allu had a mixture of all allied races, and non, including humans who visited and some who'd made this planet their home for many solars.

But none of them should've been here in my room. Surely not naked and soaking in my tub.

My eyes narrowed as I drew closer, assessing her with predatory intent as was my instinct whenever someone invaded my space.

Her tousled brown hair was piled high on top of her head, stray wet wisps clinging to her slender throat and along her temples.

Her eyelids were closed, dark lashes fanned out against her cheeks. She had no idea she wasn't alone.

I was suddenly reminded of my frustration at watching horror films from Earth before I'd sworn them off completely.

I'd thought they were exaggerated because what being would one, blindly run through a dark forest making so much noise and two, wouldn't hear the killer every time they were in such close proximity?

Being within arms reach of a human now, while she was vulnerable, made me realize maybe they didn't have heightened senses.

Little white buds were pressed tightly in her ears, emitting muffled music. My own long ears twitched, honing in on the faint noise.

Probably why she didn't hear me.

My gaze slipped down her throat to her submerged chest. No bubbles skewed my view.

I could see everything.

From the bronze colored nipples, down to her navel, the flare of her feminine hips, and the cleft between her thighs that was covered in trimmed brown fur.

Unfortunately, I stared too intently at that. Enough to cause the hair along my spine to uncomfortably rise.

I internally shook myself, refocusing.

What the six devils was she doing in my suite?

It wasn't unheard of to see a fan lingering near the elevators in hopes of getting a night with a noda player, but I'd never heard of finding one already *inside* the room.

Security should've never let this happen.

Then again, maybe security had the right idea allowing this human in. It presented an interesting proposal...

I'd never been this close to a human before.

Her skin was mostly bare, silky in appearance. Complete opposite of mine—fur covered nearly every inch of my body.

No talons, no spurs, no horns, no protective plates along her neck and belly. One nick of my claw against that beating vein in her exposed throat and she could be Death's next victim.

Not that I wanted to hurt or kill this woman, but her fragility was glaringly obvious.

I wondered if she was here for me, or if she simply wanted to be in any noda players room. Did it matter who the occupant was?

I'd heard the stories of how inventive some humans were in their attempts to couple with other species. This one was already naked, already in my space. It wouldn't be hard to...

My gaze roved over her skin again, stopping when I reached the juncture between her thighs. A foreign sight to me, yet I couldn't deny it was arousing.

Maybe I wouldn't call security just yet.

Her com, a clunky Earth model, sat perched on the side of the tub. I tilted my head to look at the screen. With a press of my digit I shut off the music to her earbuds and waited.

She stirred, her eyelids fluttering open. Her gaze was bleary, unfocused, but the color of her eyes drew my attention. A deep hazel, the irises rimmed in a dark brown.

I wasn't prepared for her unholy scream that iced my blood and killed my ears. They flattened against my skull and

I gnashed my teeth, an unfortunate growl escaping me.

She shrieked as she wildly clawed at the sides of the tub, vainly attempting to shield herself. She didn't have enough limbs to do both.

“Who are you?!” she shouted, her voice echoing off the walls and face panic-stricken. “Get out! HELP!”

“Excuse me? This is my room!” The walls seemed to shake with the force of my words, and I regretted it as soon as the human flinched.

I'd scared her.

She reanimated and snatched a towel off the stool beside the tub, holding it to her body as she scrambled out, water splashing against the floor with every wet, barefoot step she took.

“I'm calling security!”

The end of my tail twitched side to side. *Now* I was annoyed.

“Good. They can escort you out while you explain to them how you broke into my room.”

She stopped mid step and whirled around. “This is *my* room! I should know. I booked it.”

I dragged a hand down my face. I didn't need this drama. All I wanted to do was take a shower and relax before meeting the team for some food.

Instead I was dealing with an unhinged human fan.

“Listen,” I calmly replied, trying to deescalate the situation, “we can forget this issue and you can leave



peacefully. I won't bring it up with security and we can both move on with our night. I'll even autograph something for you if you wish."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously, her plump, pink-beige lips parting as if she couldn't understand—or believe—what I just said.

That was right before her gaze dipped down to my groin.

My very *aroused* groin that strained against my pant leg.

My cock twitched with interest, oblivious to the situation at hand. All it understood was a female—with entrancing curves, even if delusional—was staring at it and had been fully naked in my tub.

"I'm so done with this job," she mumbled under her breath, momentarily squeezed her eyes shut, and hurried into the bedroom.

I followed.

It was clear I'd been distracted earlier, otherwise I would've smelled her scent all over this room like I did now. I'd grown accustomed to stale scents of previous guests in these places but now that I'd caught her fragrance, it was undeniably clear.

"Do you have proof you booked this room?" I asked, indulging her delusion as she opened the closet embedded into the wall. She had all her items in there, which would explain why I hadn't noticed anything amiss initially.

She paused, her tone stating she thought I was an idiot. "I know I booked this room. I have the confirmation and everything."

I plunked down on the bed, taking the opportunity to lay flat on my back and enjoy the softness of the mattress. My spine rippled, the fur on my arms and legs shifting. The tension in my muscles released.

“Could you *please* get off my bed!”

“I think you mean *my* bed.”

“Could you at least put on a shirt or something?”

I threaded my fingers behind my head, and exhaled a long, leisurely sigh. “I’ll be shirtless in my room if I wish. If you’re uncomfortable feel free to leave.”

“Oh my god,” she whispered, struggling to dress herself without letting the towel drop. I didn’t know why she was hanging on to her false sense of modesty—I’d already seen every bare inch of her.

“I’m going to raise so much hell about this place,” she grated, talking to herself. “Double booked the room, did they? I know your scheme, you greedy bastards, and now everyone else will too. This girl is *not* the one!”

*Double booked?*

That hadn’t crossed my mind. I stared at the ceiling, running through the possibilities in my head. What if this human wasn’t a deluded fan and this had all been a real mistake?

What if the press got hold of this story? They could frame it in so many ways, wild ways, that wouldn’t necessarily be truthful, as the press was known to do.

I could imagine the headlines and the never-ending panic calls from Lykree as my fan ratings tanked and my sponsors withdrew. With it being the middle of the season, it could severely screw with my chances of renewing my contract with the team.

And then I wouldn't have to worry about Lykree hounding me to join the dating competition. I'd never have to worry about joining *anything* ever again.

Because I'd be sponsorless.

Jobless.

A noda player without a team.

It would ruin any chance at a future with the Galactic Giants.

I shot upright, my brain racing with worst case scenarios.

My hearts seemed to beat out of sync in my chest before I counted to three and calmed myself down.

"Let's say there was a mistake," I hedged, rubbing my palm over my mane to settle the fur. "Is there a way we can solve this? Preferably quietly?"

She'd just finished pulling on her white shirt, but it was thin enough that I could see her damp nipples standing at attention.

*Focus.*

"You want to work something out?"

By the sound of her voice, it was apparent she didn't trust me.

I inclined my head. A silent *yes*.

“Alright.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “You can get me another room. And pay for it. A bigger one,” she added. “For the mental and emotional trauma I’ve experienced. That I’m still experiencing,” she arced her arm toward me, “because you won’t put on a fucking shirt.”

I looked down at my body, unsure why my chest would bother her. If I didn’t have pants on that might be something to complain about, but a shirt? Were all humans this prudish?

Or maybe she was simply stressed. I supposed if she were being truthful, and she thought I was an intruder, this situation would be upsetting.

I snatched my shirt off the floor and put it on. “Happy?”

“Thanks,” she uttered and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

We’d both been inconvenienced tonight, and while paying for a bigger suite when the tournament was being hosted would be outrageously expensive, it was better than the alternative. If spending some hefty credits meant avoiding a media frenzy that would jeopardize my career, it would be worth it.

“A bigger suite?”

She jerked her chin in a single nod.

I snatched my com off the edge of the bed and prepared to contact the front desk. “I’ll make the arrangements.”



**BIRDIE**

I stood there, eyeballing my intruder while trying to forget he'd just seen me in my birthday suit.

I hadn't shaved my legs in a few days. They were in full-on sandpaper mode. Rough enough to chafe someone if they touched me.

And no, I didn't know why I was thinking about my mildly hairy legs when there were bigger problems to tackle. Like why the hell this alien man claimed my room was his and why he was unbelievably fit.

I took a deep breath.

*No, we aren't going to talk about his furry, muscled body,* I warned myself, even as I let my gaze wander over his form while he was distracted with his call.

*We're also not going to talk about what was happening in his pants.*

I stayed on the other side of the room, next to the small, hefty looking sculpture sitting in the alcove along the wall. The security of being next to something I could grab, and do some decent bludgeoning with if need be, helped soothe my nerves that were hopping all over the place.

His face was humanoid, except he had short, flesh-colored horns rising from the sides of his forehead, just above

the edges of his brow.

His eyes had double, dark violet irises, conjoined, and duplicate lavender pupils of a feline variety. Where a human sclera was white, his were black, making his irises even more mesmerizing. He probably had amazing sight, which meant he definitely saw my leg stubble.

Again, my brain could stop fixating on my unshaven legs.

His mane, the only thing it could be called, was wild. Mixtures of soft purple, jet black, and wisps of white sprouted from his crown. It framed his face, covered the back of his neck, and cascaded over his shoulders. Even grew along his throat and faded into his chest.

His chest which was thankfully covered now that he'd put a shirt on.

To say I'd been frightened when I opened my eyes to discover an exceptionally large, shirtless, brawny alien looming over me in that wonderful tub didn't do my panic justice.

I'd pondered what I would do in a situation like that, thanks to all the thrillers I'd seen. And in those scenarios, I usually went G.I. Jane and got creative with a shampoo bottle.

Not to state the obvious but, that hadn't happened in real life. The fact I hadn't slipped and broken my neck while scurrying out of the tub was nothing short of divine intervention.

"I see," he said, drawing my attention to his mouth and his sharp, pearly teeth.

*Definitely a carnivore.*

I couldn't hear whatever was being said by the manager on the line, but it made the intruders' gaze flicker over me.

*What?* I wanted to ask. I also wanted to put on a bra, but I wasn't leaving the weapon-statues side.

"No that won't be necessary," he added while he examined one of his short black claws.

*What won't be necessary?*

His rounded left ear flicked backward, nearly hidden in his mane.

"Which is?" he asked the manager, looking directly at me. I coached myself not to squirm. "Add it to the account. Yes."

*What's happening?* I mouthed.

He grunted. "I trust you'll be discreet about this?"

I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out why he cared about management's discretion. No one knew me on this planet and did it really matter? I was definitely going to put Odetah Rei Plaza in my report as a hotel to avoid at minimum while the city hosted large events, possibly completely.

I couldn't imagine clients arriving, excited to start their honeymoon, only to end up with a stranger barging into their room and staking a claim.

What a miserable start to married life that would be. And I doubted they'd recommend ABT to anyone after.

He ended the call.

"So what's my new room number?" I asked. "I'll be packed and out of here in ten minutes."



His expression was grim when he rumbled, “Suite 1098 E.”

My brow wrinkled as I reached for my empty suitcase in the closet. “No, that’s *this* suite. What’s my new room number?”

“There is no new room number.”

“Wait a second, you agreed—”

“You’re staying here.” He stood, unfolding to his intimidating height, and I involuntarily took a step back.

“There are no other rooms available.”

My stomach rolled over.

“What do you mean, nothing’s available?” My mind darted back and forth to half-cooked scenarios that only intensified my mounting panic. “Never mind the bigger room, I’ll take a smaller one. I’ll take *any* room. Call them back!”

He scratched the edge of his brow with a claw. “There are no vacancies.”

“What about another hotel?”

“There are no vacancies *anywhere*.”

My dry throat threatened to close off and I coughed when I tried to swallow. “How do you know? You didn’t even call around!”

“It’s the Trifton Star tournament. Every hotel in Thalewa and the surrounding cities are fully rented. They checked.”

My breathing jumped into overdrive and it felt like there wasn’t enough oxygen in the room. I gagged and covered my mouth. “I’m gonna be sick.”

“It’s not ideal—”

“Ideal?” I moaned and gulped down my rising bile. “This is a nightmare!”

His hal-com chimed. He glanced at the screen and silenced it.

“What if that’s the manager calling back to tell you they found something?” I said behind my hand, just in case the bile returned.

“It wasn’t the manager.”

We stood there in silence and I could’ve sworn the air had grown thinner, the room was shrinking, and my blood was thrumming in my ears.

“How long did you book this suite?” he asked, distracting me.

“A month,” I mumbled. “I’m supposed to be here a month.”

“For...?”

I didn’t have to explain myself to this alien man, yet I found the conversation was reining my brain in. “Work. I’m here for work.”

“What do you do for work?”

My eyes dropped to his tail. It was slim, covered in short lilac fur, and it was extremely long. Long enough it wrapped around his muscular left leg several times and still had enough to tap against his ankle.

Did I want to give this person more information about me? We were strangers, even if he’d unfortunately seen me

naked. And my hairy legs.

I didn't even know his name.

“What are we going to do?” I could feel myself getting twisted up again. “I mean, I don't know you, you don't know me—”

“I'm Omen.”

My eyes bugged. Even his name was a dark warning.

“And you're Birdie.”

“How'd you know?”

“The manager told me.”

“Oh, right.” I rubbed my forehead.

“Now we know each other.”

I side-eyed him.

“We're both here for work,” he continued, interrupting my inevitable spiral. “This is just a place to sleep.” My gaze darted to the lone bed, then back to him. “So why can't we share the room?”

“I...”

I didn't like the sound of that. There was only one bed. And while this was technically a work assignment, I'd also planned to treat it as my vacation.

Was it a vacation if I had to share my suite with a stranger? People in hostels did it all the time, but this wasn't that.

“I need to make a call,” I blurted and bolted around him. I slammed the bathroom door shut, locking myself inside.

My phone was drowning in a sudsy puddle of water and I snatched it up, my eyes wide as I prayed it wasn't ruined. "No, no, no," I chanted as I used my shirt to dry it off.

I tapped the screen and it blinked awake. My shoulders sagged and I blew out a relieved breath. With trembling fingers I searched my contacts for Gloria and anxiously waited as each ring went unanswered.

The local time back home was just after noon, so why wasn't she picking up?

It went to voicemail and I tried again.

She finally answered. "Hello?"

"Gloria!" I exclaimed, my voice unfortunately inching toward a hysterical pitch. "I've got a huge problem!"

After I relayed the details, she took her sweet time responding. "Okay..." she drawled, "so you have a roommate. What's the issue?"

I glared at the phone. "I just told you the issue. I have no idea who this person is!"

"Listen," she sighed, as if me having a stranger in my hotel room was just as uneventful as the office printer getting jammed again, "I can bring you home, but I'm only going to send you back in a few weeks once this tournament business is over. Until then, I'll put you on assignment in Greece."

*Greece?*

That would be a minimum fifteen hour flight, and over open water, never mind the chaotic layovers.

*Fuck my life.*

This couldn't get any worse. It was like my boss didn't even know me after all these years.

“Or,” Gloria went on, “you can suck it up, get the assignment done, and maybe enjoy yourself while you're there.”

A headache started just behind my eye, like a thick, hot needle being drilled into my skull. I ran my fingers over my face, regretting the decision that led me to this point.

If I'd been able to say no to Monica, I never would've attended her wedding where everything went wrong, and I could've continued blissfully living my mundane life at my desk in Ohio.

But here I was, on an alien planet, faced with an uncomfortable decision to make.

“Well,” Gloria prodded. “What's it to be?”

*Three days later...*

## OMEN

“You played like beast shit today,” Coach Poe railed at me, his rage filling the room and turning his carapace orange. “Except beast shit would fertilize the field and be useful!”

We’d barely scraped in a last point to put us in the lead before the end horn blew. Whenever it was a close call like today, with a final score of seventy-three to seventy-two, Coach went nuclear afterward.

Today, I was the focus of his attention. My game had been abysmal. It was a surprise Coach hadn’t kicked me off the field in the first half.

“I know, Coach. Won’t happen again.”

His voice boomed when he bellowed, “Get that kink out of your tail or it’ll be Yuri on the field next game!”

I glanced over at the reserve *victu*. His red mandibles clicked with interest, taunting me with his subtle mockery. My blood boiled.

*Smug bastard.*

It took all of my strength not to snap my teeth when I answered, “Understood, Coach.”

I hit the shower, letting the scorching water drench my fur. I tried to focus on the plays in my head, where I could improve so the next game wasn't a disaster, while I tried to block out all thoughts of her—my human roommate.

I clenched my fists and suppressed a growl when my back popped, the physical manifestation of my endless nights on the couch and my desperate need for a real bed.

I'd insisted Birdie should have the bedroom, even though she tried to negotiate taking turns, but I'd declined. What a stupid decision on my part.

It'd been three days of cohabitation—or absolute hell. They were interchangeable at this point.

Her bone-rattling snores, thunderous and relentless, were pushing me over the edge. I was going insane.

We weren't even in the same room, but I felt like the walls vibrated, echoing that nightmarish sound through the entire suite.

Fuck, it was loud.

I didn't believe it at first. Something so thunderous coming from a creature of such slight stature was bizarre.

But it was her. And it was nonstop.

The tendons along my shoulders throbbed when I stretched. Sleeping on the couch was tearing up my body. I needed a proper bed, else I'd be playing like shit for the foreseeable future. And playing like shit would cost us this tournament. Or, worse, get me benched.

I refused to let that happen. This wasn't just about Yuri. The whole galaxy was watching to see which two teams would face off for the Trifton Star, including all the other squads scouting for next solar's talent. Trades would happen, new contracts would be drawn, lives would be changed for better or worse.

Lykree was certain the Galactic Giants would make an offer if I just got my shit together and met their requirements.

Thoughts of the dating show latched onto my back like a singular parasite, sucking the joy of this tournament from my body.

Even if I did agree to it, I'd have to put off my dream for another season. Another failed solar where I'd be subjected to Rexer's relentless ridicule for the duration of the off-season back home.

He never missed a chance to tell me I should accept my place, that I wasn't good enough to make the cut for the top squad.

I was average.

Even though I'd worked myself into the ground to progress through the ranks. I'd done that shit on my own, letting his insults fuel me to be better, faster, stronger.

I closed my eyes and exhaled as the hot streams of water cascaded over me.

There was no guarantee of victory in the dating competition. There was no guarantee we'd even tolerate each other in the end.

It would be wasted time and effort.



I'd have better fortune plucking a random fan from the stands and pledging matehood to her.

Thain Julish, the owner of the Galactic Giants, was an unconventional individual. He wasn't like the other team owners. He saw things differently and set firm standards. Anyone lacking was cut or turned away.

Besides only offering contracts to the top talent, every player was mated. There were no bachelors on his roster.

*"We stand above the rest,"* he'd sternly declare whenever questioned during interviews. *"When a Galactic Giant has something to lose, he fights harder, plays harder, brings home the victory. Noda is life."*

I finished up and dried off, moving slower than was normal for me. I needed a massage and the rest of that Karluk wine sitting in the refrigerator back at the suite.

More than once over the past few days that felt like eternity, I'd regretted not taking the manager up on his offer. He'd planned to have Birdie removed from the suite and compensated with a free ride home and a voucher for a future stay at Odetah Rei Plaza.

And I'd stopped him.

The me from three days ago—pain free and fully rested—had shot down the idea because... Well I didn't know why. It just didn't seem right, I supposed.

She had more claim to the suite than I did since she'd arrived first. A glitch in the booking software wasn't Birdie's fault.

Yet current me—the painfully exhausted one—was contemplating sleeping on the balcony just to get some uninterrupted rest.

I'd already considered crashing with a teammate, but most of these fuckers were territorial when it came to small spaces. Except Pikey. But he was a *skushoju*. Their exhaust glands periodically sprayed a pungent odor while they slept to deter predators.

I'd be going from one hell to another.

My hal-com chimed repeatedly. Lykree calling. I dropped myself onto the bench in the locker room.

"I should warn you," I answered gruffly, dragging the towel off my shoulder and tossing it into the hamper, "I'm not in a good mood."

"How is that different from any other day?" Lykree quipped and my lips twisted into a wry smile. "So I got a very interesting call from Heboa today. You remember him, don't you?"

My ears shot forward. The head scout for the Galactic Giants? Of course I remembered him. Lykree was teasing me. Every damn player in the league knew of Heboa.

My hearts beat like a pair of war drums in my chest. "Yes."

"He watched you play today."

I grimaced. "That's unfortunate."

"Really? Because he was impressed."

Confusion wracked me. If I had to rank my worst plays of all time, today would make top five. “What?”

“Said your collaboration on the field is exactly what he’s searching for come next solar.”

I nearly dropped my com when my hand went lax. “Don’t fuck with me Lykree—”

“I would never joke about this!” she proclaimed. “This is it, Omen. This is what you’ve worked for.” The excitement in her voice was audible when she added, “He wants to discuss a contract.”

Adrenaline shot through me and I stood, muscle pain be damned. I couldn’t sit still. I paced alongside the bench, the tantalizing possibility of landing my dream contract spurring me forward.

“There’s just one thing,” she hedged, voice heavy with implication. “You need to meet the requirements, and that means a mate. Which means the dating show—”

“No,” I growled, my jaw clenching and my body tensing in defiance.

“Omen, there’s no getting around this. You need—”

“I have one,” I burst, the words leaving my lips before I had a moment to consider the consequences.

*Fuck.*

Why did I say that?

What the hell was I doing?

Lykree was silent and I glanced at my com to see if she disconnected.

“...You have one what?” she asked cautiously.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tapped my forehead against the cool metal of a locker door, internally berating myself for blatantly lying to my agent.

I'd momentarily lost my fucking mind with the possibility of a contract with the Galactic Giants right at the tips of my claws.

“Omen? You have a what?”

I tilted my head back and stared at the ceiling, realizing there was no way out unless I wanted to give up on my dream, because I wouldn't be forced to suffer through a fucking dating competition.

I had to see the lie through.

I hardened my resolve and buckled down when I replied, “A mate. I have a mate.”

\*\*\*\*

The fiery sun was sinking over the ocean as I leaned against the gold-veined blue marble bar inside the suite and swirled the Karluk wine in a short glass, replaying the conversation with Lykree over and over.

I knew she didn't believe me. Her voice had been laced with skepticism when she pummeled me with questions about my mysterious mate and asked me why I didn't tell her sooner.

*Because she's not real.*

At this point I really would have to pluck a random fan from the crowd and dedicate myself to her.

I groaned and gulped down my wine before pouring more.

Would it matter if I were miserable with some random mate at home, so long as I was happy on the field?

I'd never had much fortune with relationships. My brain, cock, and heart all had their own agenda and the divide usually ended in disaster.

It paired me with females who stole my credits and possessions, used me to increase their own fame, or just wanted to fuck a noda player.

My bad judgment was notorious and now I had to rely on it to steer me correctly.

I was fucked.

My ears twitched while I stood there, drowning in my self-imposed suffering, when my acute hearing picked up Birdie's voice in the hall outside the suite.

I probably should've used the time she'd been away to sneak a nap on the bed, but I'd been too lost in my thoughts.

"I can only do twenty-five a month," she said. Since I didn't hear anyone talk back, I assumed she was on a call.

Eavesdropping was inevitable—my hearing was too good and her mouth was too loud—so I didn't bother feeling guilty.

"Yes, twenty-five. Why?" She made an impatient noise. "Because fifty is too much! You aren't the only company I'm paying. Yes. Yes, I know."

The faint beeping of the keycode panel, and subsequent jingle signaling she'd input the wrong number—twice—caused her to erupt.

“You know what? I DON'T CARE!” she yelled. “Send it to collections! It's not like my credit isn't already fucked, thank you very much! What's one more—Hello? Hello?” Birdie grumbled, “What a prick.”

Collections? Credit?

I tapped a claw against my glass as I picked apart that new piece of information about my human roommate.

Was Birdie in debt?

I didn't know anything substantial about her. With training for the game, I hadn't been here except to rest. By the time I'd return from the stadium, Birdie was usually asleep. This was the first time I'd get to see her awake outside of our initial meeting.

Not that her naked figure hadn't occasionally penetrated my mind these past few days. Remember what I said about my brain, cock, and heart having different agendas?

The keypad dinged and the door unlocked.

**BIRDIE**

I staggered through the door, my skin already blazing like an inferno and it had nothing to do with blushing and everything to do with sunburn.

Every exposed area—which was a lot considering I’d worn a tank and shorts—was warm to the touch and overly sensitive.

“What happened to you?” Omen asked, startling me.

I jumped and then yelped when the back of my purse slapped against my thigh, sending a sharp jolt of agony through me.

“Ssss,” I hissed a breath and gingerly rubbed the throbbing patch as I tried to soothe it. “It was a bad day!”

I’d said that a little too loudly, my discomfort and that pushy account representative making me snippy.

“I can see that,” Omen muttered as he tapped a black claw on his glass of amber liquid. “Why is your skin turning pink?”

I dropped my purse on the foyer table and slowly moved toward the fridge, careful not to rub or bump against anything. “It’s called sunburn.”

His gaze followed me, adding to my uncomfortable state. “It’s painful?”

“Uh, yes.”

“You can’t prevent it?”

“I forgot my sunblock at home.” I sighed and grabbed the bucket of ice in the freezer. “And when I asked the person at the gift shop about it, she looked at me like I’d grown a second head. So I’m guessing sunblock isn’t a thing on this planet. Which really fucking sucks right now.”

Omen leaned on the bar and watched me place perfectly squared ice cubes on a damp towel and carefully press it against the side of my neck.

I moaned at the subtle relief. Now, if I could just get a giant ice pack for the rest of my body.

“Couldn’t you avoid this by not standing in the sun?”

I stared at him.

He stared back.

“Wow,” I deadpanned, “hadn’t thought of that. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

He grinned, a flash of inhuman teeth behind his pale purple lips before he asked, “Why were you in the sun if it burns your skin?”

“Yes, well, the plan was to visit the Hallotey Gallery.” I winced as my bra strap dug into my shoulder when I shifted the ice. “But there seems to be a stupid sports tournament in town—in case you hadn’t noticed with your keen observation skills—and everyone and their dog is here. I stood in line for two hours before I gave up. And guess what?”



Omen's brow lifted. "What?"

"The Ullori Museum was even busier. Do you know what I did?"

"Stood in line?"

"I stood in line. For an hour. And still didn't get inside." I shifted the ice pack again. "So you can see how my day went, and why I look like a boiled shrimp. Now, if you'll excuse me," I moved at the speed of my elderly great aunt, "I need a cold shower."

"Before you go," Omen began, "I was thinking of ordering in tonight. Did you want to join me?"

I stopped in my tracks and looked over at him, fully prepared for him to say he was joking, but he appeared serious.

"...Why?"

We weren't friends. In fact, I knew nothing about him except his first name. This was the only time I'd seen him in the three days we'd shared this suite.

*Thankfully.*

It was embarrassing to even look him in the eyes, knowing he'd seen every part of me, yet whatever was in his pants was still a mystery.

Not that I cared to ever find out what was in his pants.

*Ugh.*

He hadn't moved from his lean against the bar, but the tip of his extremely long tail was tapping against his ankle, as if he could read my wayward thoughts.

He rolled a shoulder in a very human gesture and the muscles beneath his shirt stretched the tight white fabric. “Figured we’re sharing a suite. Why not share a meal? You can tell me about life on Earth.”

My brows knit together in a frown as my mind instantly grew suspicious before I made a conscious effort to stop it. Not every man, human or non, was Derik—not everyone had an ulterior motive. I had to remember that.

“Aren’t you busy?” He’d barely been in the suite except to sleep. Just like me, he’d said he was here for work.

“I’m free for the night.” He canted his head. “But if you’d rather—”

“Okay,” I blabbed.

That hint of a smile returned and my guts did that flippy-floppy thing against my will. The flippy-floppy thing that one hundred percent of the time led me into temptation.

“Okay,” he echoed, his eyes glinting with something mischievous.

“After a shower. And a nap,” I added quickly. “I need a nap.”

“I’ll be here.”

I continued my stiff, snails-pace shuffle toward the bedroom, totally confused about why I agreed to dinner with my alien roommate.

\*\*\*\*

## OMEN

I'd heard the shower turn on, and a half-hour later, it turned off. It wasn't hard to miss the grunts and groans from Birdie moving through the room before the noise settled and her horrendous snoring began.

I shook my head.

That's what I had to look forward to tonight—another handful of hours tossing and turning on the couch with a human engine revving in the other room.

By the time the sun completely disappeared and nightfall crept up, I'd begun to wonder if I should cancel the room service.

I checked the time. How long was a human nap? She'd been sleeping for three hours.

"Birdie?" I called, gently rapping my knuckles on the door to the bedroom. Her snoring didn't cease.

I knocked again. "Birdie?"

Her snores quieted and she mumbled something but no answer.

"I'm coming in," I announced, giving her a moment to tell me to get lost before I opened the door.

She was wrapped up in the bed, buried beneath the comforter, and on her side, still asleep. Her teeth chattered when I got closer, and the skin on her face was an angry pink now.

I wasn't an expert on humans—I barely knew much about them outside of their televised entertainment—but this didn't seem normal to me.

Heat radiated off her as if she actually was an engine, yet she shivered as if she were cold.

I extended my hand and brushed the backs of my knuckles across her forehead. The first time I'd ever touched a human. Her skin was smooth, furless, yet soft.

And she was burning up.

Human health was beyond my knowledge, but New Allu hotels always kept in-house medical staff. They might've known how to assist.

I found the suite tablet and sent in a request for a doctor. It wasn't long before I heard a knock.

“Come in,” I said once I opened the door. The doctor, a short and stout *wei-weiv* male with cloven feet, a gray-feathered body, and a yellow beak squawked with surprise.

“You're Omen Bainbridge,” he whispered in awe and double checked his hal-com. “I must've missed your name on my call-sheet.”

“No mistake.” My hackles dared to rise with my annoyance before I willed them flat. “I'm not your patient. It's a human female.”

His surprise heightened when I led him to the bedroom. I could tell, by the way his beady black eyes darted from Birdie to me and back again, he wanted to ask questions.

It wasn't difficult to imagine what those questions might be. I wasn't sure if it was the expression on my face or Birdie's clacking teeth, but he didn't voice his curiosity.

I crossed my arms over my chest and stood back while he raised his handheld device and started a quick scan.

He pulled back the comforter, as if to get a better look at her skin, only to reveal Birdie was completely naked.

It was obvious the doctor wasn't expecting this since his feathers fluffed and his gaze nervously sprang toward me again.

I stepped forward to pull the blanket up to her chest, making sure she was covered. She moaned and babbled something incoherent, triggering something in me.

It took an unusual amount of willpower to stop myself from snapping at the doctor when I asked, "You can't scan her with the blanket on?"

He was a physician. I didn't know why I cared if he saw Birdie naked if it would make it easier to figure out how to treat her.

"Y-yes, yes," he stammered and cleared his throat. "Of course."

"She called it a sunburn," I mentioned, in case that was helpful.

"Not to worry," he reassured. "We'll have your, er—" he checked his hal-com, "Birdie well in no time."

She wasn't *my* anything, but my jaw wouldn't budge to correct him. And I was having a difficult time stepping back

from the bed. My feet felt like iron weights as I retreated, giving the doctor space to run his tests.

He opened his bag and removed a transparent patch. After peeling off the back, he placed the adhesive side against her arm.

“What is that?”

“A fast acting serum absorbed into the skin. It’ll bring down her fever and wake—”

“What’s going on?” Birdie groaned, rubbing her eyes. She sat up, holding the blanket to her front.

“Ah! Worked quicker than I thought.” The doc rummaged in his bag. “I’m Doctor Gupti, Birdie. I’m here to administer medication to help with your severe sunburn.”

“Oh,” she sighed, brushing her loose hair away from her face. Her unusual eyes flickered over me and then back to Gupti. “It’s never been this bad before.”

“First time to New Allu?” Dr. Gupti asked.

Birdie nodded.

“I thought as much. The sun intensity is much higher here than Earth. If you want to be outside, you’ll need this.” He held up a case with three vials of blue liquid. “It’s freely available to the human population at any medical station.”

“What’s in it?”

“It’s a cocktail of enzymes and proteins that will strengthen your DNA repair mechanisms.”

Birdie squinted. “I barely passed my science classes, so I didn’t understand any of that.”

Dr. Gupti chuckled. “Drink one per day for three days and you won’t have to worry about sunburn.”

“Like... ever?”

“It’s permanent.”

“Wow,” she breathed, accepting the vials. “Some humans would go nuts for this stuff on Earth.”

“If they travel to New Allu, it’s free.”

Birdie snorted. “Have you seen the price of space flights? You could buy a nice used car instead.”

Dr. Gupti’s expression morphed into confusion, even as he laughed it off.

I might’ve been confused too had I not heard her conversation earlier today. But it was clear Birdie was conscious about money because she either had very little of it or owed someone.

“Can I drink one now?” Birdie asked, holding up a vial.

“Yes.”

She downed it. “How soon before I can go outside? I have plans tomorrow and it’ll probably involve more standing in the sun.”

Again, Dr. Gupti’s sight lingered on me and shifted back to Birdie.

And that’s when it struck me.

A spark of realization that I didn’t need to settle on a random fan and tie my fate to her. I didn’t need to bind myself in a loveless union for the rest of my miserable life.

Not when there was a perfectly good candidate right in front of me.

Not when we could offer something the other desperately needed.

The base of my horns grew warm and my tail twitched with anticipation.

That's the moment I knew I'd found the answer to all my troubles.

*Birdie.*



**BIRDIE**

*Note to self: never do this again.*

It was my second day of standing in line, hoping to check off at least one activity from my list, when I had to remind myself I loved my job.

*Because right now? I really didn't.*

I tilted to the side to gauge how much longer I'd be standing there, waiting for a chance to tour the Krish Hall.

"Not looking good," I muttered to myself, seeing the multiple lines of alien people stacked up.

Today I'd come prepared with my giant, floppy beach hat and oversized sunglasses to block out the sun. Was really channeling the Hampton's housewife vibe.

Not that I needed either, it seemed. My angry pink skin from yesterday had subsided overnight, along with the pain.

The miracles of alien medicine.

Without it, I probably would've been in a world of misery today. I didn't even want to think about the blisters and skin peeling.

Omen calling the doctor had been unexpectedly sweet...

Even more so when he offered to reschedule our room service dinner to tonight because I'd been way too exhausted

after all that.

I hadn't seen him this morning before I left. He was already gone. Which made me wonder what exactly he did for work. Always up early, usually back late.

I pulled out my phone and marked Krish Hall as another failed attempt before leaving the line. According to my guidebook, there was an outdoor market nearby and within walking distance.

“Let's try that.”

My stomach grumbled, reminding me it was way past lunch and I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

The sidewalk was congested, just like the rest of the city. It was seriously the worst time Gloria could've sent me to New Allu.

The crowds were enormous, and every restaurant was booked solid and allowed no walk-ins. Trust me, I'd tried.

Hoped Gloria loved empty reports, because I wasn't making any headway in this place.

As I moved along the wide sidewalks, I picked up bits and pieces of conversation in foreign languages. Clicks and pops, chitters and whistles. Even if my implant translated, it was all a cacophony of sound.

I loved it.

The strange and beautiful architecture varying from sharp and sleek to round and curvaceous. That alone was an art to be admired.

I turned onto a narrow street lined with cozy, bustling shops. Strategically planted trees sprouted from manicured strips of garden along the edge of the sidewalk. Tall, white-barked trunks with curving branches that arched over the street. Its sky blue foliage rustled in the light breeze and created shade.

The savory scent of sizzling meat wafted through the air, growing stronger as I neared the market.

It was easy to spot ahead. People milled in and out of the entrance that was marked with a nearly transparent, electronic banner which read, *Nobbekury Market*, in pastel orange text.

Someone whistled loudly, the sound penetrating the hum of the mass around me, and I instinctually glanced across the street.

My sight locked with a thin, aquatic-looking individual staring back at me. He, and two others near him, instantly waved and held up a crystalline object that resembled the alien version of a long lens camera. A palm sized vid drone hovered above him.

*Weird.*

I kept with the crowd, excitedly entering the outdoor market. Which, at this point, was the first official place of interest on my list that I'd been able to get into.

The guidebook had not done it justice! It was buzzing with activity and delightfully overwhelming. I immediately got sucked into its immersive chaos.

Everywhere I looked, tables were piled high with shimmering gemstones, intricate metal jewelry, and hand sewn

items of vibrant clothing, while strange furry, neon-colored critters were being sold as companions.

The farmers markets on Earth couldn't compare.

My gut rumbled again as fragrant sweet and savory smoke curled around me when I passed tables with platters of exotic foods while people haggled prices.

“Pretty human,” someone called. I turned, coming face to face with a *ker'kii*.

My height, with bright red skin and pale blue hair that was twisted into a mass of tiny braids. Black and pearly white shells and beads were weaved into the strands, and a long, golden feathered earring hung from her left lobe.

I smiled, drifting closer to her stall, as if pulled by an invisible chord.

“Hi...” I greeted curiously, my gaze sweeping over her wares. Odd pieces of jewelry, strange objects with tinkling bells, and a myriad of liquid and rocky substances in corked glass bottles.

“It's your first time to New Allu,” she said matter-of-factly, her voice low and feminine.

“How'd you know?”

She shrugged, smiling, showing off teeth that were mostly flat. “These are easy things to spot.” She gestured toward me. “Give me your hand.”

Again, my body moved on its own, as if her command couldn't be ignored. I laid my hand in hers, palm up, confused as to why I did that.

Even after I thought to pull it back when her thumb swiped my palm, the urge melted from me.

“You’re alone now, Birdie,” she whispered after tracing the veins in my wrist all the way up to the crease of my elbow. “But that will change.”

I frowned, alarm bells ringing in my head before they quickly snuffed out. “How did you know my name?”

“You told it to me.”

“I didn’t.” Or did I? Maybe I did...

“You did.”

“Oh...” My brain felt fuzzy. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Kosmos.” She tapped a vein in the middle of my forearm. Its faint blue-green hue was visible through my skin. “This one is special.”

I’d never been one for the mystical scene. It was all a little too woo-woo. Even the one time I’d tried universal manifestation to rid me of my fear of flying.

*Maybe that’s why it didn’t work...*

“Special how?”

Kosmos dipped her finger in a red, oily substance and drew an X across the skin she’d tapped. “You’ll see. *Luoko* has never failed at finding its mark.”

She lowly cackled, pleased with herself.

My mind cleared and I snatched my arm back. I didn’t know who *Luoko* was. My implant didn’t translate that particular word, so it had to be a name.

“Who are you talking about?” I pulled a tissue from my purse and rubbed the red oil off my skin, but a faint stain remained.

Kosmos had already turned her back to busy herself with rearranging her odd collection of glass bottles.

I moved away from her stall, perplexed at the whole interaction. And what had that oil been? Some kind of temporary pigment?

The name Luoko lingered only for a little while as I aimlessly drifted through the market, but soon enough I was distracted by other sellers.

“Half off if you buy five!” a vendor shouted to the crowd, thrusting a spiked, creamy yellow fruit in his three-fingered hand. When he noticed me staring, he added, “Safe for humans!”

Feeling caught, I stopped by the stall. “What are these called?”

“*Ta-Tek*,” he answered, slicing one in half to reveal a glistening azure-speckled flesh. “Sweet, with special powers.”

He handed me a sample and his prehensile nose, that reminded me of a miniature elephant trunk, snorted with what I assumed was laughter.

I accepted the sample, curious about these ‘special powers’ when my phone vibrated in my back pocket.

*Shelly calling...*

I hit ignore and popped the small hunk of fruit into my mouth. A sweetness, with just a hint of lip-smacking tang,

filled my mouth.

“Oh my *god*,” I moaned. “What did you call this again?”

“Ta-Tek.”

“Ta-Tek,” I repeated.

My phone vibrated again.

*Shelly calling...*

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I’ll take five of them, please.”

He tooted his trunk and started packing them as I answered Shelly’s call. “Hey, I’m kind of b—”

“Is there something you want to tell me?” Shelly asked with a tone of expectancy. The crowd around me was loud, and I wasn’t sure if I’d heard her correctly.

“What did you say? Oh! And how are my babies doing?”

“They’re great,” she said quickly, impatiently. “Excellent adventures and all that. Stop beating around the bush!”

I scowled, hearing that loud whistle again, but I was too focused on paying the vendor and trying to understand what Shelly was talking about. “I don’t know what you mean?”

The vendor was no longer focused on our transaction when I accepted the bag and tried not to drop my phone or wallet.

“What do you mean, you don’t know what I mean?!” Shelly squawked. “You’re boning a noda player and I had to find out online! I’m so disapp—”

“Wait what?” My confusion skyrocketed, but a nervous chuckle escaped me. “Are you okay? You sound like you’ve

had too much coffee.”

“Birdie!” someone in the crowd yelled. I glanced around, noticing others around me were shooting curious stares my way.

Unease slid under my skin.

“Birdie!” the voice called again as Shelly yammered in my ear, but I couldn’t pay attention to her and find whoever was calling my name.

Then I spotted him. The skinny alien man from across the street. He was inside the market now too.

And waving at me.

“Birdie,” he shouted above the chatter and distance. “How long have you and Omen Bainbridge been mated? Was it love at first sight?”

At that, even more people gawked at me, the noise in the market slightly lulling in my direct radius.

My confusion tripled. No, quadrupled.

How did they know my name? Who were these people?

*Hold on.*

Mated?

To Omen?

“Shelly,” I whispered as I held the phone to my ear, backing away from the vendor and searching for the nearest exit. “What did you read online?”

“That you’re mated to a noda player!” she nearly shouted in her excitement. “*The Omen Bainbridge!* I can’t believe you



held out on me all this time!”

“Shelly,” I could hear the slight alarm in my own voice, “I’ve only been here four days and I didn’t even know Omen’s last name until just now. I don’t know what the hell is going on!”

The guy calling my name was following me, and his two lackeys. Their drone hovering, their lenses pointed my direction and drawing way more attention than I was comfortable with.

My heart bashed against my ribcage as I darted out of a side exit and into the congested throng of non-humans along the sidewalk.

“Well,” Shelly cleared her throat. “According to *Vanity Interstellar*, you’re mated. Like, the alien version of married, to a noda star. The best victu in the league, apparently. Which, if I’m reading this right, sounds kinda like a striker.”

“Wh... I...” My mouth opened and shut, words and proper thought failing me as I digested this information, yet nothing made sense.

*What is happening to my life?*

\*\*\*\*

## **OMEN**

Lykree was calling non-stop, but I’d ignored it most of the day and focused on drills that Coach had me running. He

was still moody about yesterday's game, but I'd take whatever he had to throw at me. I could jet these turns in my sleep.

My thoughts were another matter.

Birdie. Birdie. Birdie.

I went over the possible scenarios in my head. How I'd propose the idea, what the rules would be, and in what ways could I approach it gently yet directly.

People got cagey when talk of personal finances entered the conversation, and I had a feeling Birdie was extra sensitive about it.

By the time I was worn ragged and finally hit the showers, I checked my hal-com to discover exactly why Lykree had called an unusual amount.

She'd sent me snippets of multiple articles in the gossip threads with headlines about my personal life and they all involved my *mystery mate*, Birdie Clayton.

I frowned, unsure who would've known about Birdie except—

*Ahh...*

*Dr. Gupti.*

He was the only one who could've leaked anything remotely bait-worthy enough for the press to run with it. It was unlikely the manager and booking staff would've said anything for fear of tarnishing the hotel's reputation.

But Dr. Gupti could've and, apparently, had.

I thumbed through the photos and vids, all of them posted today. I tried to muster up some kind of frustration about the

press, yet I couldn't.

In their insatiable hunger for any tender bits of meat they could peddle for some views and subscriptions, it had always turned out badly for me.

Except now.

This time it leaned in my favor.

A wicked grin tugged at my mouth as I scanned through the pieces sent to me. Those bastards were doing all the heavy lifting for me. And it was blazing like wildfire across the threads because she wasn't *verkonie*, like me.

She was *human*.

Interspecies relationships weren't unheard of, just unlikely. Interspecies relationships with humans, though? It was still taboo.

Humans were compelling for scripted entertainment but their species was too young and volatile. I wasn't saying pairings with humans didn't happen, it just wasn't openly spoken about, never mind publicized to this degree.

Birdie's image filled my screen and I found myself examining her too closely.

How her thick brown hair was tied back at the nape of her neck. The loose, rainbow colored shirt draped over her form and the V-neckline that made my eyes instantly plunge to her slight cleavage.

Even the way her jeans molded to her shapely hips and legs left me wondering if she had to peel herself out of those at the end of the day.

What would it feel like if *I* unbuttoned those jeans, and tugged them off her hips, down her thighs—

A locker slammed and snapped me out of my trance. I shook my head and pocketed my com.

“What’s wrong with you?” I muttered.

Leaving the stadium was a true circus. I avoided the press, dodged the camera drones, and ducked into the waiting transport. The ride to Odetah Rei Plaza was short, but once there, I had to do the duck-and-weave all over again.

Thankfully the hotel was known for hosting high profile guests, so their protocol to keep out the press was top notch.

This wasn’t like me. Normally I’d have no trouble talking to them, setting the story straight, giving them something else to yak about but I couldn’t. Not yet.

I needed to talk to Birdie first.

Which wouldn’t be hard since, as soon as I walked into the suite, I was met by a frazzled little human burning a path across the living room carpet with her bare feet.

She looked up, eyes wide and a little unhinged. “What the *fuck* is going on?!”

**OMEN**

“What is this?” Birdie held up her com with yet another gossip article, this one titled, *Humans: Good enough for Bainbridge, good enough for you?* “Why are they saying this?!”

Alright, so I needed to approach this with some finesse. Some care. Some creativity.

“Because we’re mated.”

I winced.

*Shit.*

No, those were the wrong words. I meant to pose this as a question. Later on. After much discussion.

Birdie’s face drained of all color.

“Or we *could* be,” I quickly recovered and dropped my bag by the door before edging closer toward her frozen figure. “This could work out for both of us.”

Inadvertently, my willful gaze flickered down her body before I forced myself to focus on her face, which was waffling somewhere between death and fury.

I’d decided, at that point, it was easier never seeing Birdie during the first few days. Because when she stood right

in front of me? It was exhausting to keep myself from thinking about her naked body in the tub and focus on the conversation.

“Please explain,” she thinly replied, “before my blood pressure skyrockets and I stroke out.”

“Do you need to sit down?”

“I need you to explain.” She resumed her pacing, reminding me of a captured feline.

“Have you eaten today?” I asked, stalling, trying to think of a way to make Birdie more amenable to the idea I was about to propose. People were generally more pliable after a good meal. “I’ll get room service delivered.”

“Omen,” she said impatiently, and an uncontrolled shiver rolled down my backbone. She’d never called me by my name before.

I liked it.

Liked it a little too much.

“I should be honest,” I hedged, shoving my claws through my mane, “I heard your conversation yesterday.”

Birdie cocked her head as if silently asking, *what conversation?*

“Where you discussed monthly payments and what you could and couldn’t afford—”

“You eavesdropped?” Her mouth fell open. My eyes dipped to her lips that were pleasantly curved and an intriguing beige with a pink center.

“You talk loudly and I have good hearing.” I tilted my head, implying it was just a fact. “It wasn’t intentional.”

Her cheeks reddened and she looked away, her brows cinched together above her nose, and she went back to pacing. Slower. Thoughtfully. Less heat to her tread.

“What does that have to do with the gossip posts? Or the people who chased me all the way back to the hotel today?” She gestured with her hands as she spoke, a distinctly human quirk. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re a professional noda player?”

\*\*\*\*

## **BIRDIE**

After being chased back to the hotel, I’d scoured the internet for every scrap of information about Omen. I had no idea I’d been sharing a room with an alien superstar who was beloved by, seemingly, the whole universe.

“You didn’t ask,” he replied.

He was right. I’d been too hung up on the fact we’d been double booked and I was rooming with a stranger.

It all made sense now—why he offered to autograph something for me when he initially tried to get me out of the suite. He’d mistaken me for a rabid fan.

It was laughable. I didn’t even like sports.

Looking him in the eyes, even now, was already difficult because of the tub thing—which I still wasn’t over—but now that he knew I was broke? In debt up to my hairline?

I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

The fact he was probably loaded was the cherry on top of the metaphorical embarrassment sundae.

*It doesn't matter, I told myself. I'll never see him again after this nightmare is over.*

Embarrassment aside, what didn't make sense in all this? Omen saying we *could be* mates.

“Back to the mate thing.” I twirled my index finger as if I could rewind the conversation with a flick of my wrist. “What did you mean by that?”

He tapped out something quick on the suite tablet and set it aside. His broad, muscular frame was way too close even though he stood a good ten feet away from me. He was too tall, took up too much air and space, and made the skin at the base of my spine prickle with heat.

That had nothing to do with my embarrassment and everything to do with the intensity of his gaze that followed me no matter which way I turned.

*Does he look at everyone this way?*

“I think we could help each other out.” He took another step into the living room, shrinking the space between us, which I definitely didn't want.

I sidestepped the coffee table and kept that between us. “How?”

He glanced at the table, just quickly, and took another step. His black shorts and loose white tee revealed thick, well-formed legs and arms with cords of muscle beneath the sleek



pale purple, nearly white, fur. Body built for speed and endurance.

*Why* was I paying attention to his jacked physique?

“I can provide something you need, and vice versa.”

And here we were for a second lap of embarrassment because it was obvious what he thought I needed was money. Why else would he admit to hearing my conversation yesterday?

Maybe he wasn't wrong. But it still stung my pride.

My eyes thinned as I tried to get a read on him. “Just so we're clear, you're talking about money right?”

“Yes.”

“Money for what?”

“In exchange for helping me.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Is it shady? Is it some weird sex thing? I'm not—”

“No, no,” he held up a hand, stopping me, a grin kicking up one corner of his mouth. “It's really simple. You pose as my mate, I pay you money.”

My suspicion hiked. “Why?”

“So I can land a contract with the Galactic Giants next season.”

I side-eyed him, waiting for the catch that never came. “That's it?”

“That's it.”

My shoulders relaxed a smidge when I realized it had nothing to do with sex or illegal shit.

“Why do you need me? There’s probably a whole fandom out there willing to marry you and have your babies. For free.”

He grimaced. “No. It has to be you.”

My abdomen did an unfortunate summersault at the conviction in his tone. As if I was the only woman, in the whole universe, who could solve his problem. Or, in this case, be his fake mate.

I didn’t know whether to be flattered or bothered. My body clearly thought it was a win and, as I let my sight travel over Omen, I could understand.

I had eyes. I could see that Omen’s alien features were ruggedly good-looking, especially when he smirked. Physical attraction was involuntary, but I couldn’t let it interfere with my brain. And my brain was telling me this wasn’t a good idea.

If the alien paparazzi foamed at the mouth when they only *thought* I was Omen’s wife, or mate—whatever—I couldn’t imagine what they’d do if Omen confirmed it as truth.

There’d be no way I’d get any work done if I had to fight off a swarm every time I left the hotel. I mean, not that I was making any progress as it was.

Regardless.

Bad idea.

“I’m just here on assignment.” I shrugged a silent *sorry*.  
“So, I think I’ll pass.”

“Birdie,” he rumbled, taking another step toward me, “I *need* this contract. And I need *you* in order to get it.”

The way his conjoined irises and double pupils pierced mine, the urgency in his words, almost swayed me. The air between us crackled with energy. *Yes* was right on the tip of my tongue before I snapped out of it.

“Listen, I don’t know anything about sports, especially non-Earth sports, but since when did anyone need a wife—mate—to get signed to a team?”

“Thain Julish, the owner of the Galactic Giants, requires every player on the roster to be mated.”

He was standing directly on the other side of the low table now. I could smell the warm, clean scent of his fur. An inviting aroma that made my eyelids feel heavy, like I could lean into him and rest my palms on his rippled, furry stomach.

He was close enough I could reach out and tug the hem of his shirt. I could imagine myself wearing it the morning after a wild night with him. How it’d brush the tops of my knees like a dress might.

*Ugh.*

*Stop it!*

I momentarily squeezed my eyes shut and got a grip on myself. I stepped backward again, my neck already feeling the strain of looking up at him. He had to be lingering around seven feet, if I took my height into account.

*Too close. Too tall.*

“Shouldn’t that violate a code of ethics or something?” I asked.

“Every team owner has a right to set standards for their players.”

“Those standards are outrageous! It should be based on talent, not your personal life or your marriage status.”

His smug grin returned but his gaze was filled with an unexpected curiosity.

“What?” I grumbled.

He shook his head, his fuzzy left ear flicking. “Humans really do argue about anything.”

Irritation simmered in my veins as I dodged around him, headed directly for the bedroom. I didn’t need his mockery. He grabbed my arm, stopping me, and pulling me back.

“Let go of—”

“Have you ever worked for something your entire life?” There was power in his grip, yet his hold on me was surprisingly gentle. I could feel his claws rub against my flesh, but I wasn’t afraid. His tone was urgent, pushing me to understand. “Been so close to achieving your dream that you’d do almost anything, *anything*, to get there?”

I’d never been passionate about anything like that. I’d dedicated most of my adult working life to ABT because I enjoyed it. But it wasn’t some lifelong dream. And I didn’t think my obsession with scripted romantic dramas counted.

“No,” I admitted.

“Everything I’ve done in my career, on the field, it’s been for one moment,” he professed, tone reverent. “*This moment.*” His thumb caressed my skin as if he couldn’t help himself before he finally released me. “Just... consider my offer.”

My arm burned with the intense heat of his giant palm where he’d held onto me. A mark I couldn’t scrub off and wasn’t sure I wanted to.

My phone chimed incessantly as I backed away from Omen, shattering the silent void between us. I pulled it from my pocket and glared at my screen.

*Alert: Your \$152.35 external transfer to MBU\_CREDIT has been approved.*

*Alert: Account balance, \$629.03*

Alarm shot through me.

That wasn’t supposed to go through. I thought I’d canceled the transaction!

The automatic payment for rent was due in three days and I wouldn’t get paid for another week. There wasn’t enough money in my account to cover it.

Which meant my landlord would charge me an extra twenty bucks per day for each day late. And that was *on top of* the insufficient funds fee my bank would slap me with.

I took a deep breath, my throat feeling tight as dread gripped me.

*This isn’t happening.*

“Everything all right?” Omen asked.

I clenched my teeth, cursing Derik and my past blindness for the—who knew, I’d lost count.

If I was back on Earth, I could’ve done something. Anything. I could’ve taken on some odd jobs with Task Ticker, got enough cash to cover rent, and survive another day for the next financial crisis that was bound to happen.

A knock startled me out of my thoughts.

“That’ll be the food.” Omen headed into the foyer and looked back at me. “That is, if you still want to share a meal...?”

My stomach chose that moment to gurgle and answer for me.

His left brow shot up. “Sounds like a yes.”

I stood off to the side of the kitchen as the waitstaff spilled into the suite guiding hovering platters of steaming food, and glass carafes filled with amber, crimson, and glowing green liquids.

Their glances weren’t as covert as they probably meant them to be, but I was too baffled at the amount of food Omen had ordered to really care.

Was he inviting his whole team or something?

“All this is for us?” I finally asked once the last waiter left and we were alone again.

“I didn’t know what you liked.” He poured two glasses of the glowing green liquid as I took a seat. “Now you can try the whole menu.”

“I don’t think the fridge is big enough to hold all these leftovers.” I grasped the glass, wary of how radioactive it appeared. “I’d hate to waste any of it.”

“Anything left over, I’ll give to my teammates.” He shrugged and took a seat. “They’re bottomless pits.”

“That works.”

My money trouble plagued me as I took a sip of the green wine. It was tangy with a little heat on the tail. I couldn’t even fully appreciate the savory smells of the roasted meat, the colorful vegetable stew, the mounds of glistening fruit, or the freshly baked goods.

“How much would you pay me if I said yes?”

The air grew thick. With the light in the dining room glinting off his flesh-colored horns, he paused. Curls of steam wafted off the forkful of meat poised at his lips before he reanimated. He chewed slowly, considering my question.

“How about...” he made a thoughtful sound, “fifty thousand?”

My fork screeched against the plate as I cut my food. “Are you serious? In cosmic credits?”

He jerked his chin in a single nod. “If it’s not enough—”

“No, it’s...” I did the conversion calculations in my head. One cosmic credit equaled around five US dollars. Which meant...

*Holy shit.*

A quarter of a million dollars.

My throat constricted around my next bite of food and I tried not to choke.

I set down my fork and stared at the alien man asking me to be his fake mate. “You don’t even know me.”

“Then enlighten me.”

“I don’t even know you.”

His lips curved into a sly smile. “Ask me anything.”

I took a deep pull on the radioactive-looking wine and then a steadying breath. “If I do this, I’d require half the credits up front.”

Omen leaned back in his chair, an impish glint in his eyes that made me nervous. “How do I know you won’t run off with the money? As you said,” he gestured at me with his fork, “I don’t even know you.”

*Goddammit Birdie!*

“A deposit then,” I countered.

“A deposit,” he echoed, tapping his fork on the edge of his plate. “Five hundred credits.”

Five hundred cosmic credits would be more than enough to cover my rent and any bills coming out of my account for a few weeks, but the haggler in me couldn’t resist. “One thousand...”

“Done.”

“And,” I held up a finger, “I want it in writing. A contract, if you will. Drawn up by my lawyer.”



That sounded fancier than it was. I didn't have a lawyer. I had a grandmother who read too many legal blogs and listened to too many crime podcasts. But Omen didn't know that.

“Also,” I added hastily, “sex is off the table.”

At the mention of sex, Omen's eyes flicked down to my chest and back to my face. It was lightning fast, but I saw it. And I suddenly wished I was sitting at the far end of the table instead of one seat away from him.

“What about public affection?” he purred, and I nervously rubbed the side of my neck. “Who would believe we're mated if I couldn't touch you?”

*Jesus.*

My face grew hot and I took another gulp of my wine, trying to wipe away the mental image of Omen wrapping me in his arms or kissing me with that dangerous mouth.

*I knew this was a bad idea.*

But it was over two hundred grand! I'd have enough to pay off the mountain of debt that Derik stacked up, and then a healthy chunk to stash into my empty savings account.

What was some hand-holding or a few kisses in comparison?

“Fair point,” I begrudgingly mumbled. “Then there has to be some ground rules.”

“Such as?” He tore off a piece of the fragrant purple loaf and popped the hunk into his mouth, that healthy muscle in his strong jaw popping with each chomp.

*Stop looking at it.*

“No kissing on the mouth, for one.”

“Ahh, I’ve seen humans do this in the vids.” His gaze darted to my lips. “My people don’t do that.”

“They don’t kiss? Really?”

“Not on the mouth.” He flashed a wicked smile that was packed with innuendo.

My brain took a dive because it was obvious what he meant. And that was definitely *not* going to happen.

“A-anyway,” I stammered, ignoring his taunting chuckle.

“No sex, no kissing on the mouth. Any other rules?”

“Yeah, actually.” I turned toward him. “If we’re pretending to be married—mated—does that mean this would be our honeymoon?”

“Honeymoon?”

I nodded. “It’s a vacation newlyweds take to celebrate their new life together. It’s been a human tradition for centuries.”

He considered this, his clawed hand scrubbing his jaw.

“That’s why I’m here. I work as a travel agent for an events company that specializes in weddings. Normally I’d be at the office, living vicariously through my clients, but my boss...” I shook my head. “Never mind, it’s irrelevant. Anyway, it’s been rough. Every place is packed, every restaurant booked. It’s a nightmare.”

“This is what humans do on a honeymoon?”

“Aside from bang each other’s brains out,” I divulged, instantly regretting it, “yes. Ahem. They explore their destination together. Activities, food, excitement.”

“And this is really what you want to do?”

I picked at my plate, feeling awkward for asking him to treat this like a real honeymoon, bedroom boom aside. But it would surely help me get some work done. He was a noda star, and I was banking on him having connections. “Yes.”

“It *would* look good for the press...”

“And give them something to photograph. Thain Julish won’t be able to offer you a contract fast enough.”

He let out a low laugh and I managed a small smile.

“So,” I drawled, outstretching my arm to offer my hand, “do we have a deal?”

He eyed my hand for a beat before he grasped it. His warm fingers brushed my wrist, the fur on the back of his hand tickling the tips of my digits.

“We have a deal.”

He let go and I picked up my wine glass, about to ask what the neon stuff was called.

“One more thing,” he mentioned. “We should discuss your nocturnal emissions.”

**OMEN**

Choking on her drink, she coughed, pressing a hand against her chest while her eyes widened. “My what?”

“Your snoring.”

Her horrified expression slid into relief before she awkwardly laughed and shook her head. “That’s not what nocturnal emission means on Earth.”

“What does it mean?”

A deep flush of red bloomed across her cheeks and she took another drink of her wine, completely dodging the question. “I don’t snore.”

She didn’t snore? She was either boldly lying to my face or in complete denial! My fork clanged against the plate when I unintentionally dropped it. “Yes you do and it’s monstrously loud.”

Her jaw dropped. “You’re insane.”

A humorless laugh escaped me. “Insane is exactly where I’m headed. Have you ever consulted a physician about it?”

“I haven’t,” she set down her glass of wine, “because I don’t snore.”

“Denial won’t fix the problem.”

“There is no problem.”

I gripped my knife too tightly and set my hal-com on the table. With a flick of my fingertip, the audio file of Birdie's nighttime-one-woman-symphony echoed throughout the room.

She sprang out of her chair. "You recorded me?"

I lifted a brow and smirked. "So you admit this is you? I thought you didn't snore?"

She sputtered and tossed her hands in the air. "I don't!"

I made a derisive sound and picked up my dropped fork from my plate. "We both know that's a lie."

Fury lit up her eyes. "And here I thought this fake mate thing would be easy." She started to storm out of the room and I stood.

"Wait—"

"So you can humiliate me some more?" She snorted. "No thank you."

"I'm... sorry." The apology wedged from me. "Will you please sit? You barely touched your plate. And if this is going to work, we have a lot to discuss."

She dug her bare toes, that were painted a sparkling yellow, into the carpet before she slowly returned to the table. "Even if I did snore," she uttered indignantly as she sat down, "it's not like I'm doing it on purpose."

I grunted and refilled her glass.

"I'm serious." She ladled some of the vegetable stew into a bowl for herself. "Does it keep you up at night?"

"Unfortunately," I grumbled.

“Sorry.” She cringed. “How’s the couch treating you?”

“Like shit.”

“I noticed you were a little stiff yesterday. You should take the bed tonight. I’m smaller. The couch would fit me better.”

“Thoughtful of you but—”

“I won’t take no for an answer.”

Birdie silenced whatever I planned to say next when she winked at me and dug into her stew.

The moaning and groaning as she tried different dishes and complimented the chef—who wasn’t present and would likely never know he’d supremely satisfied a human woman’s palate—had me struggling to remember to ask basic questions.

It didn’t matter. Without words, I was learning more about Birdie than I would have otherwise.

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## **BIRDIE**

After gathering up the stuff I’d need for my night on the couch, I plopped down on the edge of the bed and snatched up my phone.

My bank account couldn’t take another unexpected hit, so I needed that contract asap. The sooner I got that squared away, the sooner Omen could transfer the deposit.

“Hello? Can you see me?” Gram asked the camera as soon as the video chat connected.

“Hey Gram, I see you. I won’t keep you long, I just called because I need a favor.”

I studied my screen, trying to make out the state of my grandmother’s living room behind her for clues as to what the hell was going on.

A Twister mat was wrinkled on the floor and unpackaged fruit leather was strung across the coffee table beside too many empty beer bottles.

“You don’t even have to ask,” she said gravely. “I know exactly how you can get away with it.”

“What—”

“Not on the phone! You know the feds can hack these things.”

I frowned, confused. “What are you talking about?”

She leaned closer to the camera, her red lipstick-smearred mouth nearly touching the lens as she whispered, “The body!”

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and implored the cosmic forces for patience. “How much did you drink? You should really eat something.”

“I did! Richard and I treated ourselves to my edible panties. Don’t buy the apple flavor. They taste like mango Gatorade and nobody likes that shit!”

Oh my god...

I wished I could say this type of behavior from my grandmother was unexpected, but after Grandpa passed ten

years ago, right before the alien contact went public, she'd been occasionally channeling her inner slutty sorority girl.

“Who's Richard?”

“My new lover! Say hello to my granddaughter, Richard.” She turned the phone toward an elderly man who was hunched over on the couch in a pair of rubber ducky print boxers.

“Hi.”

“He's exhausted,” Gram whispered after a wicked cackle.

My lips rolled into my mouth and I bit down to stave off the embarrassed laughter threatening to escape me. I'd need hypno-therapy to remove this entire conversation from my memory.

“Gram, I actually called because I need your help with a legal contract.” It was just best I carried on to the real topic so I wouldn't be subjected to more unwanted information about Gram's sex life. Which was apparently spicier than my own.

Gram's painted on eyebrows stitched together. “So there's no dead body?”

“There's no dead body.”

“Never mind, Richard!” She hollered. “You don't have to leave. There's still some juice in these batteries!”

I groaned. “You can call me back—”

“I've got time, honey. He needs a nap anyway. I'm not trying to kill the man.” She waggled her eyebrows. “Tell Gram what you need help with.”



That could be added to the list of things I wanted wiped from my memory.

“So there’s this guy—”

“What?!” Gram shouted. “You met a man? Praise the Goddess, I thought you’d nev—”

“No, Gram, it’s... he’s... it’s complicated.”

She grumbled. “Hold on, I need some Maalox for this.”

She snatched up her bottle of peppermint flavored antacid and took a healthy swig, smacking her lips afterward.

“Alright, I’m ready. Hit me with it.”

After I relayed the situation to her and the specifics I wanted in the contract, Gram stared at me.

“Let me get this straight because that last beer must be messing with me.” She took a deep breath. “You’re getting Pretty Woman’d and there’s no blow jobs involved?”

I dragged my fingers down my face. “I’m not a hooker, Gram.”

“Don’t knock it until you try it!” She bit into a half-eaten pair of red panties and chewed loudly. “Just don’t tell your mother. I love her, but she’s a pearl-clutcher.”

Almost everyone was a pearl-clutcher in comparison to Gram, but I bit my tongue.

She cocked her head. “No sex? Really?”

“No one’s getting sex,” I repeated. “No one’s getting blow jobs.”

“What type of vacation are you on? The fun sucking kind?”

“It’s a work assignment. Not a real vacation.” I sighed. “Gram, I just need something written up. Can you help?”

“I’ll help. But, I’m just saying, you’re never gonna get this man unless there’s some knob-gobbling involved!”

“I’m hanging up nooowwww,” I sang. “Love you, byyyyye.”

As soon as I hung up, I searched: *is hypno-therapy legitimate and can it remove mental trauma?*

**OMEN**

The force of a thousand stars roared within me as I blazed across the field today. My feet thundered against the turf, not a step missed, as I cleaved the air with razor sharp precision. Even Pikey, the swiftest on the team, had a hard time keeping up with me during practice runs.

His stride faltered when I landed a pristine ten points through the *slem* ring—the smallest and most difficult of the six goals on the field.

“Tell me you didn’t dip your tongue in *ubo*?” He leveled me with a chiding glare.

“Look at me.” I pointed a claw at my face. “Are my eyelids twitching?”

Pikey squinted his three red eyes, the skin along his short, black-furred snout wrinkling as he scrutinized me. “Not yet.”

“I don’t touch that shit.” I tossed the orb in my hand while I dashed circles backward around him. “And you know that.”

“Today you played like you licked a whole bag.”

He wasn’t wrong, but my energy hadn’t come from an illicit drug. There was no way I’d jeopardize my career for *ubo*.

A full night's sleep, on the galaxy's most comfortable mattress, was the cause. Even my charcoal gray bodysuit that clung to me like a second fur didn't feel restrictive today, and Birdie's snoring didn't bother me last night at all. I was back to my normal self. No aches or pains, no frustration.

Coach blew the horn, signaling the end of practice.

I jogged off the field, Pikey beside me.

"When were you going to mention you were mated to a human?" He jabbed his bony elbow into my side, the white strip of fur streaking over his head and down the back of his neck strobed green, indicating his annoyance.

Pikey was probably the one person I could trust with the truth—the closest person I had to a friend—yet I couldn't bring myself to reveal the arrangement I had with Birdie. She wasn't my real mate. Not that he would be able to tell. He wasn't verkonie.

Instead I played it off with an easy shrug. "You know how it is when these things go public."

"Suppose you're right." He seemed to accept that excuse, the green hue fading back to white. "Maylin hates it."

Pikey's mate was notoriously shy and despised having her photo taken. That just made the press love her more.

A while later, I slung the strap of my gear bag across my chest and left the stadium. The circus was lingering at the back entrance, catching my teammates one by one as we left.

I'd prepared for them today. After signing the basic agreement Birdie had offered me last night, we were officially in this now. So when the drones zipped around me and the

barrage of questions came from a few familiar faces, I knew what to say.

I'd keep it simple. Short. Direct.

Asha from *Daily Noda*, pushed through the little crowd and her voice penetrated the noise, silencing the others. "Is it true, Bainbridge?"

Flashing a sly smile, I replied, "You have to be more specific, Asha."

Her long, neon green lashes on her singular eye fluttered. "Are you mated to the human female named Birdie Clayton?"

Both my hands gripped the strap across my chest while I paused for dramatic effect. As if I had to internally debate whether I wanted to reveal to the universe who I was intimately involved with.

I took a deep breath and one word left my mouth.

"Yes."

The group erupted into another round of questions, all of them talking over each other until it turned into a hum of chaos.

But that was all I had to say. One simple word to confirm Birdie was mine—at least publicly. Just a morsel for the reporters who would undoubtedly blast it all over their respective outlets for views and clicks.

It would reach Thain Julish and his headhunting team, because now? Now I ticked all their bizarre boxes.

With Lykree already discussing a contract with Heboa, I knew it wouldn't be long before I was on the Galactic Giants

roster for next season. Signed and sealed.

My lifelong dream of joining the premier team in the league would be a reality.

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## **BIRDIE**

Now I understood the true depth of why Omen had his surly moments the past few days. That couch was *not* meant to be slept on.

In this case, looks weren't just deceiving—they were downright false advertisement.

I glared at the couch in question, the optics not computing with reality. And that reality was, the appearance of this couch promised a luxurious experience that in no way delivered. Sitting on it wasn't so bad, but laying on it? Through a whole damn night?

*Oh my god*, it was the worst.

As I rubbed my neck, a pained groan simmered at the back of my throat. It hadn't gotten better throughout the day, it only intensified with every passing hour. I ached like I'd been trampled by a herd of antelopes.

The suite door opened and shut.

"Birdie?" Omen called. The newly sprung leprechaun in my belly did a little flip when he said my name.

“In here,” I replied, watching as he strode in from the foyer after dropping his bag.

I tried not to stare. He seemed happier today, more alive and at full power. The spring in his step brimmed with an energy that I wished he could share because I could use a jolt of it.

Unfortunately I had eyes and they were betrayers of the highest order because they slipped down his body, drinking in every detail.

The tight stretch of his black shirt over his broad, muscled shoulders. The way his short sleeves fit snugly around his shapely biceps. The dips and valleys of every chord of strength beneath his sleek, short fur.

My fingertips prickled with an itch that couldn't be scratched—touching Omen. Tracing my hands over the hard body I stared at now...

*Stop it!*

I blinked hard and shook the tempting, wayward thoughts from my head.

I would not be doing any of that.

*Except you will.*

Outside this suite I had to act like we were so in love. Love that I didn't believe was real. But Lust? Lust was real. I could play the lustful partner.

His expression shifted to confusion when he saw I was still in my pajamas. “Did you forget about dinner with Lykree?”

“No, I’m just moving slower today. I’ll be ready in thirty minutes.”

He moved closer and I had to consciously stop myself from taking a step back. He’d been right about one thing last night. I needed the practice of being closer to him so when we were out there, among the public and the press, people bought what we were trying to sell.

“What’s wrong?” He looked between me and the dreaded piece of furniture I was standing in front of. “Ahh... it’s the couch isn’t it?”

“It’s the couch,” I muttered.

He gestured to my massaging hand. “Is that why you’re rubbing your neck?”

“It’s just a crick. It’ll work itself out.”

“Or,” he moved behind me and brushed my hand away, “I could try—”

“No, it’s o... okay...”

My words trailed off when Omen placed his warm, callused hand on my neck, the other on my shoulder to keep me in place.

He gently dug his thumb into the tight muscles along the curve of my neck and my eyelids fluttered closed and knees went weak.

The embarrassing sounds that came from me...

“Here?” Omen’s smooth, baritone voice floated over me and I felt his chest against my back when I melted against him.

“Yeeeeesssss,” I moaned.



His strong, capable hands worked my neck like he was born to do this one job. A storm of sensation unleashed within me.

The gentle scrapes from the tips of his claws simultaneously tickled and scratched, making goosebumps travel down my arms. A full-body shiver rolled through me and I curled my toes into the carpet.

He was an inferno at my back. A wall of blazing heat. I could've wilted to the floor when he found the knot and gently, but firmly, worked it loose.

His voice was thick when he asked, "How does that feel?"

"You don't want to know," I muttered.

His low chuckle that rumbled in his chest and throat but never left his mouth, rolled through me like thunder, reverberating deep into my skin, muscle, and bones.

His hal-com chimed in his pocket and his hands slowed to a stop. "That'll be Lykree. You should get ready."

I didn't want the massage to end. That's when I realized I remained leaning back against him, soaking up his heat, even though his expert hands had ceased their magical work.

I got hold of myself and stood on my own. "Right," I limply uttered, trying my best to walk on legs that were suddenly made of jello.

In the bedroom, nerves tied my stomach into knots. We were having dinner with Omen's agent. Out in public. For the first time. Where people could see us and speculate and judge our *'relationship.'*

Maybe it was stupid, but I didn't want Omen to regret taking me out in public or to be embarrassed with me at his side.

Remember how I said I didn't have much of a personal style when it came to my clothing? Well, now that was more obvious than ever.

I saw the photos of me in my baggy tie-dye shirt that didn't go with anything else I had on. I'd packed a bunch of stuff, but I didn't trust my own opinion.

Instead, I consulted Gram and Shelly on video chat.

"What do you think?" I asked them, turning this way and that, modeling the first option.

"Are you trying to join a convent or land a man?" Gram asked too loudly as she adjusted her outrageously large cat-eye glasses and peered into the camera.

Shelly snickered and I groaned.

"Gram, this isn't real."

"The dress sure is," she fired back. "A real disaster! No man will get a stiffy seeing you in that."

My mouth fell open. "Gram!"

Shelly was no longer snickering but cracking up.

"What? You asked for my opinion."

"Gram's right," Shelly said as she recovered, letting another chuckle slip. "No one's going to believe Omen's tapping your ass if you wear that."

I buried my face in my hands as regret swamped me. “I should’ve never called you two.”

“It’s a good thing you did, child.” Gram pursed her lips in disapproval. “Otherwise his dick would’ve shriveled up and no one would get laid!”

“Oh my god,” I tossed my hands in the air, “we aren’t really married! No one’s fucking anybody!”

Gram shook her head and I could feel my long-dead maternal ancestors’ disappointment through her expression alone. “What a good waste of perky tits!”

“I’m changing the dress.” I peeled off the nun-in-training habit and picked up the next option. A pretty blue petal dress that I held against my front. “How about this one?”

“Definitely getting PTA mom vibes,” Shelly pointed out, taking another sip of her wine cooler.

“I thought you said you went shopping?” Gram asked, skepticism coloring her tone. “These are boring Earth clothes. Where are the sentient thongs that ride up your ass? I’ve read about them on the alien sex forums!”

Shelly’s chin was suddenly covered in her wine cooler and I was too stumped to be mortified. “Sentient thongs?”

“The best ones come in glitter fabric,” Gram explained as she grabbed her tablet and held it up to the camera to show the search in a forum labeled *Extraterrestrial Exchange*. She hit play on a video where a human woman modeled a glittering red thong that was speaking.

*“Mmm, I love the way you fill me up.”*

*“I don’t want to come off too strong, but I know you’re excited. Can I help you take care of that?”*

The commercial flipped to a human salesman with a broom mustache who shouted, “NOW IN ENGLISH!”

Shelly wheezed.

I had no words. And I wasn’t sure if I should’ve been more concerned people were walking around with sentient underwear or about Gram deep diving on an alien sex forum.

“Sorry to disappoint,” I said, tossing the dress and picking up the third option, “but I don’t have any sentient thongs.”

“Youth is truly wasted these days,” she grumbled as I shimmied into the next outfit.

“How about this one?” I did a full turn, showing them the black V-neck tunic dress. Was simple, comfortable.

“That’s much better!” Shelly declared.

Gram nodded after peering close at the screen. “Easy access. If he doesn’t bend you over a table in that dress, then move on, missy.”

I didn’t even bother repeating that this was a business arrangement and no one was getting laid. It would only fall on deaf ears.

After getting approval with the shoes, I was ready to face the public at large.

*Don’t fuck it up, Birdie.*



*Birdie*

“You look...”

A bolt of dread streaked through me when Omen gave me a head to toe, his expression unreadable as we stood across the foyer from each other.

My nervous smile dipped on one side of my mouth and I probably looked a bit nutty.

“Is it bad?” I groaned and glanced down at myself. “I can ch—”

“No!” He quickly insisted, “No, you look nice.”

“Oh.” I fiddled with the strap on my purse. “Well, thanks.”

My eyes took in his appearance, noting that before tonight I’d never seen him in anything besides what could only be described as sports wear.

His creamy, off-white jacket had a high, stiff collar and failed at hiding just how brawny his frame was. The white, untucked shirt underneath only emphasized he wasn’t a small male.

And if anyone doubted he was a noda athlete, all they had to do was look at his legs. His matching white pants showed off his thick thighs and calves. They were tucked into

high-top white boots that had no seams or laces, making me wonder if there was a magnetic fold on them somewhere.

“You look nice too,” I finally said after thoroughly ogling him. I couldn’t help it. His features were pleasing to me. And all his shades of purple popped against the blank canvas of his clothing, making him hard to ignore.

His long tail extended behind him, lazily undulating.  
“Thanks.”

We were complete opposites tonight. Yin and Yang.

He tipped his head as if he could peer into my mind with those brilliant violet eyes. “Are you ready for this?”

I took a deep breath to bolster myself and declared, “As ready as I’m going to be!”

Normally when I walked through the hotel lobby since my arrival, I got a few curious stares, but nothing major. Walking through the lobby beside Omen?

Totally different story.

He drew attention like the sun drew the longing, young sunflower. When his hand, warm and big, captured mine, energy crackled in the air. Conversation hummed louder as if they’d been unconvinced, until that moment, Omen was newly spoken for.

Omen was physically declaring, in this small way, he was mine and I was his.

*It’s not real, Birdie.*

I knew that.

When he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze, I peered up at him. His smile, fang-filled and surprisingly charming, made the tension in my shoulders melt away.

“Good evening, Bainbridge,” the grouchy buwore from my first night here greeted when we neared the entrance. “Your transport has arrived.”

“Thank you, Runi.”

Runi grunted. When he saw me, he dipped his chin, which was more than the gruffness he’d shown me before.

The night air was warm, humid, but I didn’t have to endure it long. A sporty black transport waited. Its exterior almost matched the night sky, reflecting the radiance of the city. A haze of white lights shone beneath its hovering body.

The door swung open and up, revealing two cushioned seats made of a burnt orange leather that had faint scales.

Across the street, a handful of reporters hovered, holding cameras and calling out our names in hopes of getting our attention. Omen ignored them as he helped me into the transport, so I did too.

He swiped the sensor and my door closed, sealing shut. Once he entered from the opposite side, he tapped the large navigation screen on the dash. With no more prompting, the self-driving vehicle eased into a smooth ride through the streets filled with other travelers, weaving in and out of traffic and accelerating toward our destination.

His scent filled the small space. Peppery, clean, with spicy hints of ginger that filled my lungs and made me a little too eager to take my next breath.



*What did that massage do to me?*

“Wow,” I exhaled, eyeing the lively, glowing metropolis through the windows as I tried to distract myself. “The city is so different at night.”

“Wait until you see where we’re going.”

The skin at the corners of his eyes crinkled with his cockeyed grin. A mixture of excitement and apprehension swirled within me—that could mean anything on New Allu.

“We’re not flying anywhere, I hope?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not this time.”

My nape prickled. “This time? Omen, I *hate* flying.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, resting his arm on the middle console separating our seats. “I’ve got you.”

For a split second, the impending doom of whatever flying he had planned, at some unknown point, disappeared.

Before it came roaring right back.

Omen’s hand gripped mine briefly, the touch distracting and sending a charge of electric warmth through my veins. “Look,” he leaned closer and pointed ahead, “you’ll want to see this.”

Straight ahead, the road ended, the *city* ended, right against the oceanfront. A dark tunnel loomed and, before I could utter a sound, the transport surged forward, diving into the black tunnel.

My knee jerk reaction was to squeeze Omen’s hand like it was a lifeline, as if we were about to drown in this transport.

His thumb, pleasantly rough, swiped soothing circles over my knuckles.

The darkness around us, only lit up by the glow of other transports, lasted for just a few moments.

My jaw went lax, my lips parting, when the tunnel brightened and the arched walls around us went transparent, revealing we were traveling in an underwater highway now.

“Are you kidding me?” I gasped, drinking in the beauty of the deep sea world around us.

Everything glowed with bioluminescence. Schools of fish with flecks, spots or stripes zoomed about or lazily wandered. Corals and sponges the size of this transport ranged in shades of neon blues, blushing pinks, and vibrant greens jutting from clusters of craggy rocks.

Tall fronds of seagrasses swayed and glowed. Plants fanned out in every nook and cranny amongst the underwater cliffs and outcroppings.

“Are those *mermaids*?!” I gaped at the three humanoid figures that swam above us. Their freckled androgynous torsos faded into scaled tails with gauzy fins in a rainbow of pigment.

“Mermaids?” Omen asked curiously.

“On Earth they’re mythical ocean dwelling creatures,” I quickly explained. “Half human, half fish.”

“I’m not surprised,” he murmured, leaning forward to watch them shoot ahead, as if racing the transports. “The allied fifteen commissioned their relocation to multiple planets a few hundred solars ago to avoid their extinction. The *sirenka*.” His

lips twitched when he glanced over at me. “And they aren’t half human.”

“Sirenka...” I repeated, the word sounding like a specific English one. “Do they sing?”

He hummed acknowledgement. “They have beautiful songs.”

My eyes lit up as I made the connection. “Earth also has legends of sirens. Sort of like mermaids, but less friendly and known for luring sailors to their watery deaths.”

“Some species are sensitive to the vibrations sirenka create when they sing.” He pondered. “Humans might be one of them.”

A giant snake-like being with the head of a dragon swiveled through the water, stealing my attention and disappearing into the yawning mouth of a dark cave.

When we resurfaced, the landscape had slightly changed. The buildings were smaller, less skyscrapers and more cozy seaside eateries and boutiques.

Tourists milled about along the sidewalks, darting in and out of shops, but it wasn’t as chaotic as where we’d traveled from.

“We’re here,” Omen announced as the transport pulled to a stop in front of an outdoor restaurant. “Don’t be nervous. Lykree’s chatty, but harmless.”

“Does she know about...” I wagged a finger between the two of us, “this?”

“This?” he teased, playing dumb. “That you’re my mate?”

“*Fake* mate,” I corrected, suppressing the sultry flutter that attempted to bloom in my belly. “Underscore, bold, and italicize the word *fake*.”

“If this is fake, does that mean I *shouldn’t* bend you over a table when we get back to the suite?”

I accidentally inhaled my saliva and burst into a coughing fit. When Omen patted my back, I slapped his hand away and gasped for air.

“You eavesdropped *again*?!” I wheezed.

“I told you,” he twitched both his ears, “I have good hearing.”

“Can you at least pretend to not listen next time?”

His eyes glinted with amusement, but he didn’t make any promises. “Why would I tell Lykree this isn’t real?”

“Because she’s your agent?”

“The less she knows, the better.” He reached over and tucked a stray lock behind my ear, short circuiting my brain.

Why did he keep touching me? We weren’t in public right now. These windows basically had limo tint.

“Isn’t it a little weird you suddenly have a mate when you’re angling for a contract with the Galactic Giants?” I asked, trying to ignore how my ear tingled after his graze.

“If I know Lykree, and I do, she won’t care as long as it doesn’t explode in our faces.”

“No matches.” I ticked an invisible box in the air. “Got it.”

He got out, appearing at my door to offer his hand. I took it and told myself it was for moral support and not because I enjoyed it.

The valets—twins with the lower half of an octopus and the upper half of a humanoid bird—split, one taking the transport, one directing us toward the host who stood a few feet away.

Her mouth fell open. “Omen Bainbridge...”

Omen’s smile came easy, making it obvious he dealt with this reaction often enough it didn’t faze him at all. “That’s me.”

She shook her head, composed herself, and then feverishly scrolled through her tablet. “Oh, yes, you’re with Lykree. Right this way!”

Wooden beams criss-crossed above us, covering the entire outside seating area. They were lined with exotic foliage and winding vines with bulbous growths that glowed, providing an intimate low light to all the tables and the bar along the back.

The place was packed. Every table taken, every stool at the bar occupied. Waitstaff danced through the space between tables as they orchestrated hovering plates and bowls filled with unique cuisine to swerve and twirl to their designated tables.

Conversations paused and resumed with excited buzz as we made our way through, following the host to a table in the

back, directly beside the railing overlooking the illuminated surf.

“You made it,” said a female with pale teal skin and six eyes who sat at the table.

She had four translucent wings hanging at her back, two antennae protruding from her forehead like expressive eyebrows, and segmented limbs similar to an arthropod.

“Birdie, this is Lykree,” Omen made introductions as Lykree stood and made her way to me. “Lykree, this is Birdie. My mate.”

“So good to finally meet you. I was beginning to think you weren’t real.” She laughed, the sound reminding me of rustling dry leaves, as she pressed her cheek to mine in a form of greeting.

I nervously chuckled. “I promise, I’m real.”

Omen pulled out my chair and I sat. The black text of what looked to be a menu materialized on the white tablecloth in front of me.

All in alluvian glyphs, which I couldn’t read.

“This place has the best *erikia* platter I’ve ever had the pleasure of devouring,” Lykree gleefully expressed. “I stop here any time I’m on New Allu. It’s my favorite restaurant.”

“What’s erikia?” I asked. “Maybe I’ll try that.”

Omen side-eyed me as if I’d just dared him to eat a toad. “I don’t think you’ll enjoy it,” he ventured.

“I love trying new food.” That and I couldn’t read alluvian glyphs. It sounded like a good way to embarrass

myself and Omen in front of his agent if I asked him to tell me what was on the menu. Instead, I went the easy route. “I’ll have the erikia platter.”

Lykree’s wings fluttered. “Perfect!” A few taps on the table and she sent in our order.

A round of drinks were delivered, including a fruity green cocktail Omen thought I’d enjoy.

“Mmm,” I moaned around the icy sweetness when it flooded my mouth. “It’s delicious! What’s in it?”

He took a sip of his yellow liquor that puffed cold steam, and grinned. “It’s better it remain a mystery.”

A slither of discomfort made me set down the cocktail. “Can I get a glass of water?” I asked the next waiter who strolled by, all with Omen’s taunting chuckle as a background.

“So, let’s get down to business.” Lykree pulled out her hal-com.

“Lykree...”

“I know, I know,” she shushed Omen. “We’ll go over your schedule and then talk no more about it.”

Omen grunted but he didn’t argue.

She went through a dizzying amount of upcoming events Omen was meant to show his face at. I zoned out and just enjoyed the salty breeze and the beautiful atmosphere.

We were interrupted a couple times by fans who dropped by the table and wanted a picture with him or an autograph.

To my surprise, Omen handled it with grace. He wasn’t like some celebrities back home who were rude or refused fans

who approached them in public. He smiled and engaged with them, leaning in for a photo and signing whatever they handed him. Even chit-chatted with a kid and showed him how to position his little foot for better control of the *orb* on the field. Which I assumed was the ball they played with.

It was... sweet.

“Ohh, there’s our food!” Lykree’s antennae bobbed excitedly.

The waiter directed our floating dishes through the air. The little dance the dishes performed was cute and memorable as they swirled down from the air and settled on the table.

It was at that moment I wished I’d listened to Omen because I was swiftly reminded I was on an alien planet. And not all aliens ate food that my stomach agreed with.

The dish wriggled with roaches in a gooey red sauce.

That was the only way I could describe it! Big, fat roaches. You know, like the giant ones found in Florida that made a person want to light the whole place on fire and run away screaming.

To make it worse, one lifted its wings and attempted to *fly* off the plate. It failed. And when it tried to skitter out of the platter, its legs kept sliding on the lifted side of the dish, unable to get traction.

“Don’t worry, the buka oil coats their wings,” Lykree assured me, stabbing one of her roaches with a pick and elegantly gobbling it down. “They won’t escape.”

My mouth watered and my teeth clenched, warning me I was about to barf. Especially after Lykree’s next bite where a



saucy, crunchy piece of wing got stuck in the corner of her mouth before her narrow tongue darted out and licked it up.

I shot out of my chair. “Excuse me,” I limply muttered, “I need to wash my hands.”

\*\*\*\*

## ***OMEN***

“Why hasn’t she been to a game or at least a practice?” Lykree needled me once Birdie hurried off to the washroom.

“How do you know she hasn’t?”

Her six eyes did that thing I hated where they blinked out of sync and made my hackles twitch beneath my clothing.

“I know all.”

Apparently not, otherwise she would’ve known I’d embellished the truth about Birdie and me. I didn’t mention that aloud. Instead, I took another sip of my drink and shrugged. “She doesn’t like sports.”

Lykree set her squirming victim down and sheathed her fangs. “What?!”

I grinned. It wasn’t often Lykree’s teal skin flickered, but her black spots almost fully revealed themselves with that admission.

“She doesn’t like sports,” I repeated.

“Not even *noda*?” Lykree was nearly apoplectic.

“Not even noda.”

“This can’t be!” She fretted. “Surely there’s been a miscommunication?” She paused and took a deep breath, muttering to herself before saying, “Birdie just doesn’t know she likes noda. *Yet*. Once she sees you on the field, she’ll understand.”

Lykree could be pushy, but her heart was in the right place. She’d been able to open doors for me that I would’ve ignored otherwise. Pushed me when I didn’t know I needed it. Cheering me on in her surly way.

I slid Birdie’s platter to Lykree’s side of the table. “She’s not going to eat that.”

“Why not?” Lykree asked around a mouthful and daintily dabbed buka oil off her lips. “These are the freshest erikia you could find on New Allu.”

“Most humans don’t eat live creatures.” I’d learned that much from their films. “Or insects.”

She made a thoughtful sound and accepted the platter. “These won’t go to waste, but what’s Birdie going to eat?”

I tapped my extra plate piled high with sautéed vegetables, bei-tu noodles, and tender chunks of buttered crustacean.

I’d ordered two dishes for a reason. I wouldn’t let Birdie go hungry.

“How sweet.” Lykree’s antennae straightened. “I forgot to mention, your family’s hosting a charity gala. I’ve added it to your schedule.”

My teeth nearly cracked when I clenched my jaw.

**BIRDIE**

My days blurred together. I didn't think I'd ever understand what it meant to be a trophy wife on Earth, but among aliens? It was like a never-ending existence of constant confusion.

About everything.

What to say, what not to say. Apparently in some alien cultures it was considered rude to inquire about basic stuff most humans discussed with random people they met.

Such as asking what someone did for a living or if they were here on vacation or about their family.

At the banquet last night, one extremely tight-lipped benefactor nearly raged when I asked her if she was enjoying the nice weather.

Later on, Omen explained the weather was a sensitive subject for her. A terraforming species had previously invaded her home planet and rendered it unlivable for her people.

I'd felt terrible.

I was fucking up left and right as Omen's mate, and I detested falling short. When I agreed to something, I saw it through. Even if it was grueling or uncomfortable.

After that I'd ordered a pile of guides on alien cultures that frequented New Allu, and hit the books. If I was going to

be Omen's fake mate, I was going to fucking own that role. At least for a couple more weeks.

The information I'd garnered from studying all day could be used for my report to ABT too. If clients were going to honeymoon here, they'd probably appreciate a few tips on how to be respectful to the locals.

The water swished around me as I moved to the edge of the pool and reclined against the built-in seat.

I'd raised the temperature, turning it into a giant hot tub. Wild curls of steam lifted off the surface while I stared at the night sky, a canvas of a million stars, and listened to the waves on the beach below crash against the shore.

I was desperate to claim the bed tonight. It was my turn again. After last night's torture, I didn't think I could take another round of the couch. The steaming warmth of the water was taking off the edge, though.

What would've been amazing? Another massage from Omen's miracle hands. Not that I'd actually ask him for one, but I wouldn't say no if he offered...

He'd acted strangely after we had dinner with Lykree. I didn't know what transpired between them while I was in the bathroom, trying not to vomit, but when I got back to the table, Omen's gruff attitude had returned.

I closed my eyes and relaxed.

*Aliens are so weird.*

\*\*\*\*

## OMEN

I leaned against the doorframe that overlooked the deck. Birdie rested against the edge of the pool, her eyelids closed and her head tilted back.

She didn't know I was there. It gave me a moment to appreciate her scantily clad body.

The garments she had on were barely more than knotted lengths of string strategically covering her most sensitive bits but failed to hide the soft curves.

Maybe I was a pervert, but her poor human hearing was becoming my new favorite thing. If I stayed silent, she could go whole swaths of time without knowing I was lurking, studying her.

I'd done it a few times. She never knew I was there until I wanted her to. Her breath would speed up, her single heart would flutter faster, and her body would tense and flush in my presence if I caught her by surprise.

The base instinct in me savored every bit of it.

I moved to the edge and jumped in, startling her.

She yelped and gasped for air, clutching her chest. "My god, you scared the piss outta me!"

I chuckled, drifting closer. The surface rippled with my movements. "Is that why the water's warm?"

She made a face. "Ew."

Before she could draw another breath, I trapped her against the edge of the pool. Her chest touched mine as I crouched so we were nearly eye-level.

The panic in her eyes, as if she were a cornered animal, didn't line up with her scent. When I leaned in, I could smell her blatant arousal. Potent beyond the salt and minerals of the pool.

My mouth watered.

Living in this small space with her was driving me mad. Everything lingered with her fragrance, especially the bed. I wouldn't let the staff change the sheets the day after she'd had her turn. Sleeping where she'd slept, burying my face in the pillow she'd used and deeply inhaling?

*Fuck.*

And her scent told an even better story. One where her arousal lingered on the sheets. She'd touched herself in that bed.

I got hard thinking about it.

*Sex is off the table.*

That's what Birdie said. It was in the contract I'd signed. Each day I cared less and less about it.

This wasn't real, she wasn't mine, not in truth, but why couldn't we have a little fun? Her body wanted something I could provide.

And—I'd be honest—I wanted her.

\*\*\*\*

## **BIRDIE**

“You’re too close.”

“Am I?” He rested his palms on either side of me.

I was trapped. The wall at my back, his muscular chest at my front. The water got even warmer from his inhumanly high body heat.

“Y-yes.” I gulped and his eyes darted to my throat.

His face moved closer to mine, his lips hovering above my mouth.

“No kissing.” My voice was hoarse, my words breathless. My body meant one thing and my mouth said another.

Why did I say that? Of course there’d be no kissing. It was in our contract.

“I told you,” he whispered right at my ear, warm breath fanning my lobe and making me shiver. “My people don’t kiss on the mouth.”

*Oh. Right.*

And there went my lady bits, betraying me.

“Where do they kiss?” Again, my mouth moved and the words fell from my lips, but I didn’t mean to say them aloud. They were supposed to stay locked in my head.

He pulled back so we were face to face, ignoring my question when he said, “Come to the stadium with me tomorrow.”



“Why?”

He curled a knuckle and lifted a water droplet from my cheek. “I’ll show you around, introduce you to the team. You might enjoy yourself.”

“You aren’t worried I’ll embarrass you?”

All four of his lavender pupils widened and shrank. “Are you?”

I snorted, which was super attractive. “Yeah. I think after last night, it’s pretty obvious I have a lot to learn.”

“You don’t embarrass me.” The tip of his tail lightly drifted down my thigh beneath the water. The corner of his mouth tugged up in a teasing grin. “I’m the envy of every fucker in Thalewa with you by my side.”

At that I *did* laugh.

His smile melted away and the tip of his tail languidly stroked the sensitive skin behind my knee, causing my heart to pound faster. “Even if no one cared, I’d still want this with you.”

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth and bit down. His eyes followed.

*This isn’t real, Birdie.*

*He’s using you, you’re using him.*

I had to internally slap myself, my sarcasm rising as a defense mechanism when I joked, “Relationships aren’t so bad when they aren’t real.”

“Easiest one I’ve been in,” he agreed.

My eyes narrowed, picking up on a story there. “Bad luck with love?”

His hands flexed where he gripped the edge of the pool, the muscles in his biceps tightening and relaxing. “You could say that.”

My hand, with a mind of its own, reached up to graze his jaw. The wet fur slid like silk across my fingertips. “I know what you mean.”

When my digits drifted upward, along his cheek, he turned his head and nipped my fingertips, making me flinch and snatch my hand away.

A surprised laugh erupted out of me before the silence blanketed us again.

“Are you going to keep me trapped here all night?” I finally asked.

His tail crept higher, snaking up my leg with a slowness most might ignore, but it was all I could think about. Every millimeter brought his curious appendage closer to my inner thigh.

“Just until you agree to come with me tomorrow.”

“Omen...”

Was it just me or did he inch closer?

“Birdie...”

God, the way he said my name... The velvety timbre of his voice that melted over me and left a trail of goosebumps down my arms. Heat pooled in my belly.

This was dangerously treading the line I'd marked in the sand. Yet my convictions about the stupid contract were quickly fracturing.

“Okay,” I said quickly, “I'll go.”

Another inch closer. I felt his breath hit my skin when he confessed, “I lied.”

His tail curved around my thigh, the tip softly dragging back and forth along the seam of my pussy. The only thing separating his tail from my flesh was my flimsy bikini bottoms but it didn't matter. Every nerve in my body was so sensitive, I could've mistaken his tail for the end of a live wire, sending shocks of electricity through me with every stroke.

My lips parted, my breath quickened, and I should've shoved him away, yet I didn't.

I didn't want to.

I just wanted more of whatever his tail was doing.

This was no longer about the stadium or our deal.

His arm snaked around my hips and pulled me against him. His cock, hard and long in his shorts, brushed against my leg.

“Omen,” I moaned.

Wait, that came out all wrong. I meant to say it with some conviction, some ass-kicking intensity. But no. It was like a plea for more.

The more I wasn't expecting until he gave it to me.

His mouth kissed the soft spot under my ear and I nearly became one with the pool water, melting into a puddle of hot

liquid.

My hands pressed against his chest, burying my fingers into his hot, wet fur.

Words failed me when the tip of his tail found its way under my bikini bottoms and dove between my pussy lips, brazenly gliding against my painfully swollen clit.

My sharp inhale devolved into a series of uneven moans. Especially when his tail slid up and down, wickedly rubbing me. Gently teasing until I rocked my hips in rhythm with his clever appendage.

“Do you like that?” His hand gripped the back of my neck, firm, yet gentle, and the tips of his claws pressed into my skin. The conflicting textures had my nipples beading into hard nubs.

“Mmph.” I didn’t know what I meant to say. It was just a grunt. I couldn’t think properly.

My hands slid up his chest, against his throat, his neck, and dove into his wild mane. I gripped, holding on as I tried to grind against his tail, but I couldn’t get traction.

I wrapped my legs around his torso in my quest for more of everything—his heat, his solid muscle, his touch.

“More?” he rumbled at my ear, his sharp fangs grazing the curve as if he might bite it.

“Yesss,” I hissed between clenched teeth, my hips going wild as I squirmed in his hold.

His tail flicked my clit side to side, the new direction causing me to cry out because it felt so fucking amazing.

He lightly dragged his claws down my spine. The sharp flood of sensation had my hands fisting into his mane before grasping his shoulders and digging my nails into his back.

His palm, huge and rough, gripped my ass cheek, testing the ample flesh and controlling my movements.

A frustrated sound eked in the back of my throat. I couldn't remember any man ever keeping me on edge and turning me into a shivering lump of flesh that had one mission: get the Big O.

I was so close that I could feel it in my toes and fingertips. Steam and sweat pebbled on my exposed skin above the water and rolled into fat droplets. I felt each one.

“Omen, I'm...”

His lips and tongue tasted my skin, dragged along my shoulder, drowning me in everything *him*.

His peppery scent, his embrace, his low growls that revealed he was just as aroused as me.

I wanted every part of Omen in that moment.

I wanted more than just his tail.

I wanted his mouth on mine, no matter if his people kissed like that or not. I'd show him. I'd let him possess me in every way possible.

It was my turn to whisper in his ear. “Faster,” I begged.

His grip on me instantly tightened, his groan deepened, and his tail-tip went wild on my clit.

That was it.

That was all I needed.

The stars glowed brighter when I tipped my head back and shouted my release to the sky. It rolled through me like warm syrup, sweet and delicious, coating every part of me in its sticky path.

Omen anchored me to him. Kept me from floating away as every bold sensation rocked within me while he stroked me through it, his tail never letting up. His hold never easing, his mouth on my skin never lifting.

I went limp in his arms, a soft, bewildered laugh bubbling out of me because I'd never experienced anything so consuming.

He pressed me up against the wall of the pool, his four pupils blown, his demeanor ravenous, and his hard cock pressing against me.

It jolted me back to reality.

“Wait, Omen, I—”

I squirmed out of his arms, the hunger on his face alerting me to what just happened here and the cliff we teetered on if we went any further.

*Fuck.*

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

He captured my arm, swiftly pulling me back to him. This time I faced the pool's edge and he was behind me.

His big body caged me in, his searing chest against my spine, his cock snug against the crack of my ass.

That low growl simultaneously sent a jolt straight to my pussy *and* gave me a healthy dose of terror.

With lightning speed he untied my bikini bottoms, and snatched them away, slapping them onto the deck with a wet splash.

“Omen—”

His cock slid between my thighs and through the swollen lips of my pussy, his thick length sliding against my overly sensitive clit.

A wobbly cry rippled from my throat and my knees went fucking weak. I gripped the edge of the pool to keep from going under before Omen seized my hips.

My fuzzy mind raced and alarm bells blared, telling me if I didn’t get out of here, me and my body were two shakes away from getting impaled by that giant thing.

“STOP!” I shouted and we both froze.

I scurried out of the pool, dragging myself up and over the edge, not caring that Omen got a head-on view of my whole ass as long as I got out.

I snatched up my bottoms and backed away, water sluicing off me in sheets.

Omen’s dark gaze was fixated on my pussy, which I quickly covered with my hand since there was no way I could tie my bikini bottom back on fast enough.

He blinked, his pupils narrowing as he peered up at me, seemingly pulling himself out of a trance.

Awkward silence wedged between us as what just happened fully settled in.

I moved toward the door when his voice stopped me.

“Birdie?”

I glanced back.

Whatever beast mode he’d slipped into was gone, but his face was dead serious when he said, “I’m not sleeping on the couch tonight. And neither are you.”



**BIRDIE**

The hot water of the shower cascaded over me and the steam turned the bathroom into a comforting cocoon. My nerves were shot to hell as I tucked myself against the wet stone wall for a moment, attempting to decompress.

I soaped up the sponge and scrubbed my body, washing away all evidence of arousal, yet I couldn't seem to erase Omen's touch.

The lingering feel of his body against mine, his solid arms around me, his tail and claws and mouth.

I was stalling for time.

I didn't know what I would do once I left the bathroom. I didn't know what Omen had planned.

Sharing a bed? That reeked of trouble after what just happened.

My angst manifested when I scrubbed my arm raw. That stupid mark hadn't gone away, no matter how much I scoured my skin. Whatever Kosmos touched me with had stained.

I toweled off and vigorously brushed my teeth while my mind raced with every possible scenario that could happen once I left the bathroom—and every possible way I could avoid each of them.

As I pulled on my flimsy pajama shorts, I cursed the me who packed my suitcase back on Earth. That Birdie had anticipated a tropical paradise—alone—and chose the skimpiest stuff. None of it covered much.

I was tempted to sleep fully clothed, but that sounded like a different kind of hell.

Slowly, I opened the bathroom door and peeked into the room.

It was empty.

Quickly and quietly, I scurried through the room, snatched up the extra pillows stacked on the chair in the corner, and used them to build a border down the middle of the bed.

Maybe it was silly, but I just knew *this* would keep Omen on his side and there would be no mingling limbs.

*Problem solved.*

It was all a mental game that I intended to win. Did every romantic comedy crop into my head where this downy wall failed?

Unfortunately.

Did that deter me from building the damned thing?

Hell no.

My chicken ass didn't want to face him, so I turned off the lights and immediately dove under the covers. I reached a hand out, blindly patting the pillow border to make sure it held up.

If I was lucky, Omen would stay up long enough for me to fall asleep.

As soon as the thought entered my mind, the door opened and I forced my eyelids shut. My ears strained to hear what he did.

Damn him and his silent movements!

His voice unexpectedly came from the other side of the bed. "I know you're awake."

How did he move that fast with zero sound? And how did he know I was awake? My eyes were closed and my breathing was mostly even.

He grasped one of the pillows along the middle and my hand shot out to grab it too. "The border wall stays!"

An annoyed growl clicked from his general direction. I couldn't see him in the dark, but his presence was nearly suffocating.

He let go of the pillow and the bed dipped. The air charged and felt thick. If I reached out my hand, I knew I could touch him.

The seconds ticked by and I didn't feel any calmer.

"Your heart is beating too fast," he spoke into the darkness. "What are you afraid of?"

So that was how he knew I was awake...

"This," I whispered.

"This?"

“Sleeping in the same bed after...” I swallowed to wet my dry throat.

*After you gave me the best orgasm of my life—with just your tail—and nearly impaled me on your monster cock. Which, I’ll probably regret missing that ride when I look back on this moment years from now. Or hours. Who’s really counting?*

“After the pool,” I finally finished aloud.

“I don’t regret it.”

I rolled my lips into my mouth and bit down, coaching myself not to react to his low, baritone rumble from just a couple feet away.

“Sleeping in the same bed doesn’t seem wise,” I muttered. I waffled with indecision between thanking him for what he did out there—helping a girl out and all—or if I should apologize for leaving him hanging.

*No, don’t make it awkward, Birdie.*

I kept my mouth shut instead.

“Cub league in the morning,” he stated. “Neither of us can afford to be hobbled by that couch tomorrow.”

*Ahh...*

For some reason, that logical explanation settled my nerves. Just a tiny bit.

He wanted to be at his full physical potential tomorrow for the kids. And I particularly didn’t want a kink in my neck all day.

Maybe I'd freaked out for nothing. He didn't want to molest me in the middle of the night. He just wanted a decent sleep on a great mattress.

I relaxed, pulling my half of the covers up to my chin and settling in.

“Goodnight, Omen.”

\*\*\*\*

## **OMEN**

“Goodnight, Birdie.”

I clenched my jaw and stared at the ceiling, as if I could will away the storm stirring inside me. My hands fisted on my stomach while my senses were consumed with her presence. I'd stay on my side of the wall of cushions she'd erected between us.

For the best, because Birdie wasn't wrong. Sleeping in the same bed was a stupid decision. Stupid, but necessary. Tomorrow would be a long day.

The seconds seemed like minutes as I mulled over what happened. She triggered something in me. A primal urge that clawed at my insides in a way I'd never experienced.

I'd been in relationships before and each time my physical and mental needs were imbalanced, leading to unfavorable results and unwanted drama with my past partners.

None had ever called forth the true verkonie bond in me. My people referred to it as a fever. *Udonie*.

I didn't come from a race where a biological quirk designated one person—who I didn't pick—in the universe as mine. We got to choose our life mates. Which made marking a sacred choice amongst my kind because once we chose to share it, that was it.

There would be no one else.

Our bodies were physically incapable of being aroused by anyone who wasn't our chosen mate. Even after their death.

Udonie rarely happened anymore. With the option to pick a mate, to freely give our bite to one person, verkonie didn't chase through the universe, searching for someone to trigger the fever.

Why risk the possibility of never finding it and being alone the rest of their life?

Instead, verkonie were practical. When they found someone to commit to, they demonstrated their devotion by giving or receiving the powerful bite of the male.

Matehood was as complex as one decided to make it: simple love or an intricate game of familial connections and finances.

From what I gathered, humans and verkonie were similar in that way.

But udonie?

The fever didn't discriminate and no one could explain what caused it or why. There were theories, spiritual

superstitions, but nothing scientifically proven.

I wasn't completely sure that's what happened in the pool, but I couldn't imagine what else it would be.

A thread deep in my core had been plucked and called forth by Birdie, pushing me into the realm of instinct. For a few moments, my only conscious thought had been to claim her as mine—mind, body, soul. It went beyond the physical.

Not that I wasn't already salivating for my next chance to touch her.

*Fuck.*

Everything about her tonight was impossible to ignore and my body ached for an entirely different reason than when we first met.

*Stop thinking about her, idiot.*

Last thing I needed was an erection while the focus of my lust was within arms reach.

I closed my eyes and drifted to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

A ferocious snore erupted from Birdie and my eyelids flew open.

I peered over the wall of pillows at her, seeing her gaping mouth and her arms spread wide as another rumbling sound gored the silent room.

*What the six devils...*

I couldn't sleep like this. It was difficult enough in another room, but lying right beside her? My eyeballs nearly rattled in my skull on her next hellish inhale.

"Birdie," I whispered, my voice thick with exhaustion. "Birdie, you're snoring."

Her only response was a honking gasp.

I dragged a hand down my face and stared at her while she carried on, her snores cranking up.

There had to be a way to fix this. I needed sleep, but I didn't want to leave. The bed was soft and, apart from the snoring, sleeping beside Birdie calmed my spirit more than I wanted to admit.

I reached over the pillows to gently roll her to her side, pausing when she grunted. The snoring diminished.

*Thank fuck.*

The next time I woke, the hazy light of dawn was peeking through the wall of windows and softly illuminating the room. I nuzzled my nose into Birdie's wild tresses and deeply inhaled. The scent of her shampoo made her smell like fresh baked pastries.

Awareness flooded back and I froze in place.

I took stock of my body and where everything was.

Where I ended and Birdie began was unknown. Her legs tangled with mine, her ass was tucked against me, and my hand... her hand...

My hand was tucked down her thin shorts with my palm cupping her sex like I was trying to protect her from some



unknown assailant defiling her in the middle of the night—besides myself.

One of her hands was in her shorts too, draped over mine, holding it there.

*Shit.*

Now that I knew where my hand was, it was impossible to ignore the way her soft, trimmed fur felt coarse, yet irresistibly soft and radiating warmth. Feeling it against my fingertips shot a bolt of awareness straight to my groin.

And the longer I had to assess every texture, I realized that silky warmth wasn't just her skin or fur, but another substance entirely.

Unbidden, my digits twitched.

Then Birdie's did too.

Her breathing deepened and her ass shifted against my cock that was rapidly taking notice of the situation and readying itself for *any* occasion.

Preferably one that involved my cock exploring the cleft between Birdie's thighs.

I wouldn't forget the sensation of running my length through her slick heat any time soon.

*Unfortunately for me.*

My fingers shifted, just slightly, just enough to burrow the pad of my middle digit in her slit, careful to keep my claw from curling.

It bumped against something. A hardened nub. The slick flesh fluttered in tune with Birdie's pulse.

She gave up a breathless moan on her next exhale that was erotic enough to send my hackles rising.

My eyelids hooded and I had to bite the side of my tongue to keep from groaning.

Her hand that laid over mine, trembled. Her fingertips pressed against my knuckles. Gripped and dug into them before her middle digit rubbed.

*No... she wouldn't.*

I mimicked her motion, rubbing the pad of my middle finger over the nub. Her breath came quicker, her hips ever so slightly shifted, and her hand squeezed against mine.

It was the same reaction she'd had last night when my tail touched her there. It wasn't hard to figure out that little protrusion gave her immense pleasure when stimulated.

It was wrong.

Touching her body while she was clearly in a vulnerable dream state was devious.

And yet...

I didn't stop.

This simple act was giving us both something we wanted.

The longer I circled and stroked her, the more she rocked her hips, her plush ass rubbing against my cock.

It wasn't long before I anticipated each motion and softly bumped against her, creating a blissful friction that had my balls aching and my tip drooling in my shorts.

I was dangerously lost in the fucking mouth-watering sensations flooding my body when Birdie became fully aware.

Her hand left mine and drifted up the side of my face. Her head turned, her gaze locking with mine—

She grinded into my hand, surprising the fuck out of me.

The way she bit down on her bottom lip, gripped the back of my neck for leverage, and slammed against me?

There was no damn way I would let her get away before she finished.

Her flimsy nails dug into my nape, causing my hips to pump against her ass with more vigor than I intended.

A surprised sound split from her mouth and her lips parted. She didn't expect that. I could tell by the way her pupils dilated and her breath hitched.

“You like that?” I asked, increasing the pressure of my middle finger.

She moaned, “Mhm...”

“What do you call this?” I gently flicked the nub side to side and she gasped.

When she didn't answer and continued to ride my hand, I slowed my motions, lightly tapping on it. “Birdie...”

Her frustrated grunt as her hips humped forward, chasing the friction my digit could provide, caused my cock to throb.

Watching her silently beg for more roused an interest that goaded me to push her limits.

“Clit,” she huffed, pressing her hand against mine and grinding against my finger. Her satisfied moan drove me.

I wanted her to experience every last drop of pleasure I could twist from her. That beautiful release that turned her into a boneless being in my arms last night?

I needed to see it again.

My claws lightly pricked the outside of her wet, sensitive lips while I increased the speed of my circular motions against her clit.

“Omen,” she sighed. My ears shot forward, flicking as my hackles stood up, the enjoyable sensation of hearing my name on her tongue felt in every fiber of my being.

“Fuck,” I snarled against the side of her throat. I kissed her thin, soft skin and my tongue darted out to lash against the bead of sweat that rolled from her temple and down past her delicate jaw.

She tasted delicious.

“I’m—I’m—”

She threw her hips back into me, her spine arched and bowed, her shoulders pressing against my chest.

The carnal cry that erupted from her almost had me spilling in my shorts.

Her body bucked and thrashed uncontrollably, vibrated and trembled against me, but I didn’t let up. My hand followed her hot slit, back and forth, side to side, riding her through her unbridled climax that threatened to overtake us both.

“Breathe,” I gently commanded.

She took a shuddering breath, her body still writhing against my hand and her lungs belting cries of ecstasy that would be forever burned into my memory.

I felt when it was over, when she became so sensitive her pleas turned choppy and her body jerked with the slightest graze against her clit.

There was a frayed thread stopping me from spreading Birdie's thighs and burying myself between them. If I didn't back away now, I'd be lost.

She made it abundantly clear she didn't want to go that far. And after what happened, the base instinct that tried to swallow me up last night, I knew anything further than this was a disaster waiting to unfold.

I pulled my soaked hand from her shorts, untangled myself and leapt off the bed.

I needed a cold shower or there'd be no turning back.

**BIRDIE**

Two-and-zero.

That was my current score regarding Omen.

I dug the heels of my hands into my eye sockets.

*What is wrong with me?*

Did I have no self control anymore?

I slurped my hot coffee, scalding the inside of my mouth and nearly dropping my mug.

“Shit!”

Thinking about Omen and his whole body wasn't my morning mission, even if my brain tried to derail me into believing it was. I had a few more minutes to cram in as many facts about his teammates as I could before we left for Tully Stadium.

I wanted to make sure I had the proper greetings memorized so I wouldn't have a repeat of the banquet the other night.

This fake mate stuff was serious business, but my new mantra was soothing.

*A quarter of a million dollars, a quarter of a million dollars, a quarter of a million dollars...*

I sighed, feeling better already.

Just a couple more weeks to go and I'd be outta here, could pay off all my debt, and then move on with my life plans.

I told myself the reason for my sudden churning stomach after that thought was because of the coffee. There was no reason to pay it any mind.

After popping an antacid tablet, I flipped through the alien guide on the dining room table—that I'd specifically ordered in English—speed-skimming over information and making notes of anything that specifically stuck out.

And because I was honestly trying to be a good fake mate, I'd stuffed a *Noda For Dummies* in my purse before we left.

Something had shifted with Omen.

The short ride to the stadium, he didn't mention what happened last night or this morning. He didn't act distant like some human men did the day after.

If anything, he stood *too* close to me, held my hand *too* long, and it seemed like he touched me at every possible opportunity. A brush of his arm against mine, picking a piece of fuzz off my red silk sweater, his hand briefly on the back of my neck and then at the base of my spine as we moved with the PR team through the impressive halls of the stadium.

All without skipping a beat.

He chuckled, answered questions about his involvement, and the whole Meteor Mob team, with the cub league and how he wished it'd been formed when he was a youngling because he would've loved it.

Every time he flashed his brilliantly sharp smile, I had to coach myself to act normal. Like Omen smiling in my direction happened every day and who cared if it had this dizzying roguish charm. Because if I wasn't careful, I would've swooned just like every female reporter there.

*That would not be me.*

"You going to be okay?" he asked close to my ear when we were right at the edge of stepping onto the field. I could hear the kids happy squeals and high-pitched laughter but the high walls on either side of us blocked my view.

"Yep!" I patted his unyielding chest. "Go do your thing. I'll find a seat."

He tweaked my chin with his thumb and index finger, eliciting a burst of fluttering in my abdomen, before he jogged out onto the field.

I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear and pulled myself together. Something that simple shouldn't have felt so good. Had to remind myself it was all for show because we were in public and he had to make this look legit.

That logic soothed me as I found the stairs that led to the seating and climbed them. The field came into full view and my jaw went slack.

*Holy shit...*

It was enormous!

I'd seen it at a distance from our hotel balcony, but the sheer size was overwhelming in person.

*This is Omen's office.*



The glass ceiling domed over the structure, allowing the bright mid-morning sun to shine directly on the field. The turf was the most vibrant shade of green and the surrounding seating was made of a white material that had an iridescent sheen when a ray of sunlight flickered over it.

Windowed rooms lined the top two levels and I assumed they were similar to stadium boxes back on Earth. AKA, big money makers.

I made my way up the side aisle, avoiding the clusters of alien parents seated in the first few rows close to the field. I settled into a seat that was far enough away so I could avoid having to chat with anyone, yet close enough I could see and hear the action on the field.

Omen's whole team was out there, running drills with kids that seemed to range in age and size. From thigh-high to almost as tall as me. The players still dwarfed them.

Omen looked up, spotted me, and shot me a smile and two-finger wave.

I almost swallowed my tongue.

I fished in my purse and discreetly pulled out *Noda For Dummies* once the nearby parents stopped giving me curious looks.

Before I even reached page twenty, my phone chimed with a text from Shelly with a screenshot of me and my book.

**Shelly:** Really?

I glanced up, seeing the press on the other side of the field that I completely missed before. A couple of those damn foreign cameras pointed in my direction.

I scowled.

There was a circus of kids looking adorable around a bunch of buff noda players. The last thing people wanted to see was me and my dumbed down guidebook.

**Me:** I should've brought a decoy magazine.

**Shelly:** I'm so proud of you.

**Shelly:** Get *Football For Dummies* next. This is the year you're going to a Buckeyes game with me!

**Me:** Hard pass.

**Shelly:** \*sad face emoji\*

**Shelly:** Bill and Ted say hi.

Another picture came through of my little chihuahuas, but Shelly had stuffed them into scarlet and gray OSU football sweaters, making me homesick.

A shadow loomed over me and swiftly, three individuals were plopping down in the seats around me. One on either side and the third directly in front.

“So you're the human everyone's buzzing about,” said the person to my left. If bear shifters were real, he'd be one of them. Bipedal, bulky muscle beneath his brown and tan fur, and a muzzle full of sharp teeth.

“Err—”

“Probably shouldn’t read that here,” the female on my right conspiratorially whispered and jutted her pointed pink chin toward the photographers. “Just asking for trouble from the vultures.”

Her long white hair glittered like she had organic strands of sparkly yarn sprouting from her crown, and her blush-colored skin was severely freckled with magenta spots.

“I’m Tayma,” she smiled, revealing her dainty bottom tusks and pointed at the ursidae-looking individual. “That’s Joa-Trell, and,” she swiveled her digit toward the other person in front of me, “she’s Yui.”

Yui didn’t have a nose, just a flat expanse where one might be on a human. Wide, round eyes that reminded me of an owl, and raised ridges along her hairless head. Her skin was an ombre of purple and white.

“Hi!” She greeted me in a nasally voice.

“Uh, hey,” I cautiously replied. “I’m—”

“Birdie,” Tayma interrupted. “We know.”

I gripped my book and regarded them curiously again. “I don’t mean to be rude but...”

“You’re wondering why we ambushed you?” Joa-Trell asked and a relieved smile curved my mouth.

“Nailed it.”

“We wanted to get to you first,” Tayma admitted and hitched a thumb over her shoulder. “Before the glamor squad could tempt you to their evil side.”

I leaned forward, trying to get a look at the *glamor squad* but all I saw was a group of well-dressed individuals. “Who?”

“Mates of the top earners on the team,” Yui squeaked.

“Our mates are new to the roster,” Tayma mentioned, pointing out two players on the field. “Number twenty is Loi Puhn, Yui’s mate.”

Yui swooned.

“And number twenty-three, Eris Kei Nubia, belongs to me.” Tayma grinned and rose up to shout at a youngling, “DON’T LET HIM BOSS YOU AROUND, LITTLE GUY!”

Her outburst had me chuckling but drew some scowls from the parents. On the field, Eris shook his head as if used to it. He was the same species as Joa-Trell.

“What number is your mate?” I asked him.

Before Joa-Trell could utter a word, Tayma declared, “He’s mine too.”

He grunted.

“Oh. Ohhhh,” I trailed. “So you three...?”

“We were cubhood friends,” Joa-Trell said. “We both ended up bonded to Tayma. It’s... challenging.”

“I keep telling them to screw and play nice,” Tayma sighed, “but they aren’t interested. *Allegedly.*”

Yui giggled and Joa-Trell growled, which sounded like a rumbling cave about to crumble in on itself.

*To be a fly on their wall.*

They probably had enough romantic drama to fill a whole TV show.

*Will Joa-Trell and Eris finally give their mate a good dicking down and... possibly... each other? Stay tuned for next week!*

“So, you see,” Tayma uncurled her clawed fingers through the air, “you’re better off with us, not the glamor squad.”

“Oh.” I shrugged. “Okay.”

Tayma side-eyed me as if gauging for a reaction. “You really don’t care, do you?”

Panic spiked my blood for a second. *Should I care?* Would I care if I was Omen’s real mate? I tried to think of a good excuse to explain away my lack of interest in whose side or whose squad I was on.

“I’m new to all this.”

At least that was the truth.

She shared a glance with Yui and Joa-Trell as if communicating on a wavelength I didn’t have access to before she nodded once. “We like you. So we’ll help you out.”

I laughed. “Well, thanks?”

“Put the book away before you embarrass yourself further,” Joa-Trell advised in his gruff voice. “We’ll teach you everything you need to know.”

“Deal!” They didn’t have to offer twice. I quickly stashed my book back into my purse. “Explain it to me like I’m five.”

“The main facts to remember: there are six goals in noda, and each one has a different amount of points,” he started before I held up a finger.

“Question.”

“What?”

“Why six goals and why are they all different amounts?”

“Noda has six goals for the challenge. The slem is the smallest.”

“How many points?”

“Ten, because it’s the hardest to net. And the *kley* is the largest. Only offers one point.”

“Got it.” I nodded. “What are they playing with out there? A ball?”

“Essentially,” Tayma cut in. “It’s called a *grit* and it changes shape, just slightly, depending on how it’s being used. If it’s held or thrown, it’s *fru* or ovoid. If it’s ground play it’s *tuw*, or round. Everyone just refers to it as the orb.”

My brows knit together. “Why does the shape change?”

“For versatile play,” Yui piped up. “Harder to hold a round ball under the arm while running and impossible to guide the grit down the field if it’s ovoid.”

“Fair enough.”

“The grit changes temperature. The longer it’s in a single player’s possession, the hotter it gets.”

“Are you saying a bunch of grown men are playing hot potato?” I grinned.

“I don’t know what a potato is,” Joa-Trell claimed, “but it’s to encourage passing. Once it’s tossed to another player, it immediately cools down before it repeats the process.”

“So weird. I’ll have to see this for myself.” I pulled out a bag of fruit snacks and popped a chunk into my mouth before offering some to my new friends. “So how many players on the field?”

“There’s four krog for each team, but only two on the field at a time. They defend half the goals, and all six goals rotate every five minutes.”

I shook my head. This game sounded dizzying and I couldn’t keep up with the names of the positions as he continued to break down who went where and why.

“So that’s... ten players?” I’d lost count.

“Nine on the field for each team and twelve in reserves, which makes a roster of twenty-one.”

From what I gathered, this game was like a fever dream fusion of Earth’s American and European football and rugby, with a truck load of alien stuff thrown in. It was like learning another language.

*A quarter of a million dollars, a quarter of a million dollars, a quarter of a million dollars...*

“You continue to shock and amaze,” Tayma declared when I pushed my sleeves up to my elbows. I should’ve worn a T-shirt.

“Huh?”

She pointed a trimmed claw at the faded red X on my forearm from Kosmos. “Your ker’kiio charm.”

My eyes bugged and too quickly I blurted, “You know what this is?”

Tayma cocked her head. “You don’t?”

“No! Some weird lady at the Nobbekury Market muttered something about Loco or Luki never missing a mark and, no matter how hard I scrub, this thing won’t come off.”

“You mean Luoko?” Yui whispered, her eyes widening.

The way she said it made my scalp pull tight and tingle. “...Yeah. That’s it.”

“That, my new human friend, is a love charm.” Tayma grinned. “Or a curse, depending on how you look at it. Luoko is relentless. *If* you believe in ker’kiio lore, anyway.”

“I-I don’t.”

I didn’t know anything about ker’kiio culture. Like, at all. Only reason I’d known Kosmos was ker’kiio was because I’d briefly seen them mentioned in my guidebook.

“Don’t worry, it’s probably nothing,” Joa-Trell brushed it aside. “Whoever did that was wasting their time. You’re already mated to Bainbridge.”

Except... I wasn’t.



**BIRDIE**

This was bad.

This was *really* bad.

For days I'd tried to ignore the sweeping tide called *Omen* that threatened to overtake me, physically, mentally, emotionally.

*It's not real*, I consoled myself while I paced on the deck. It's just an unwanted love charm. A curse.

I'd pinned all my rage on Kosmos' little trick. If I could find her, if I could get her to remove the mark, I had convinced myself I could go back to normal. *My* normal. I wouldn't have this spark of whatever *Omen* lit within me.

*Hope.*

The spark was *hope*.

Like maybe him holding me close out in public wasn't just another game, but something genuine. Maybe he felt the same feverish ache in his chest when I returned his embrace or slid my hand into his and held it tight?

And none of this was a fucked up hallucination brought on by exhaustion either. Honestly, I'd had the best sleep of my life this past week.

Every morning, my back remained warm and his scent clung to the space behind me as if he'd held me all night long and only vanished moments before I pried open my eyes.

Day after day, I rushed to Nobbekury Market since I'd found out about the charm. And every day, Kosmos' stall was empty.

"When will she be back?" I'd asked the neighboring booth. "It's extremely important I speak with her."

"Kosmos comes and goes," the reptilian merchant uttered with an indifferent shrug. "When she's here, she's here. And when she's gone, she's gone."

I snatched up my purse and headed out, the familiar route to the market ingrained in my head now. Maybe I'd gone insane, making this trip over and over that gave me the same results every time, but I had to try.

*Please be here today, please be here today, please be here today,* I chanted as I made a beeline through the crowd toward her stall.

The sight of liquid-filled glass bottles and a flash of red skin and blue hair sent a spike of adrenaline surging through my veins as I dipped and dodged amongst the throng of alien people.

"Kosmos!" I was breathless by the time I skidded to a halt before her and jerked my sleeve up my arm to reveal the mark. "Take it back."

Her pale gray eyes darted to the mark and up at me. She batted her hand as if brushing away a gnat. "What's done is done."

A fuzzy feeling prodded at my mind and I shook my head, forcing it away. “You can’t use your tricks on me this time.”

After some research, I’d learned a number of older ker’kiio had a knack for controlling the thoughts and emotions of those unaware of their talent.

Now that I knew what Kosmos was attempting? It didn’t work.

Kosmos harrumphed, her face pinching into a scowl. “Luoko has already been called upon.”

From what I could find, the ker’kiio believed love was a force, as real an element as rain or fire, and they called it *Luoko*.

I leaned in so my conversation with Kosmos wasn’t overheard. “I don’t believe in Luoko.”

“Liar.” She cackled in my face. “Why else would you be here?”

“I... I...”

“You want to know what I think?” Kosmos lifted a single blue brow.

“Not particularly,” I muttered.

“Luoko has already arrived. Planted a seed.” She jabbed my chest with her bony finger.

“Ow.”

“Right there.”

I frowned and gingerly rubbed at the spot as if she'd left another curse on my person.

“Now go away. I'm busy.”

She dropped the curtain, ending our conversation.

The world was a blur of muted sounds, vibrations, and colors as I made my way back to the hotel, my steps slow and wooden. My mind was a chaotic roar of all that had happened and the mark on my arm burned like a hot iron brand, reminding me of its existence.

*Love isn't real.*

It only existed on the feathery pages of a scripted drama. No one I knew had found this elusive thing. Only lust and comfortable reliance existed in real life. Eventually relationships broke and crumbled and people moved on. People used each other for a finite amount of time so they didn't have to be alone.

That couldn't be love.

That's what I told myself. That's what soothed my restless soul. This was all some silly mind trick that I'd fallen for, but if I just pulled myself together, I'd be okay because—

*Love isn't real.*

\*\*\*\*

**OMEN**

“I want you to hold onto him. Cling to Omen as if he’s the oxygen in your lungs and you need him to survive.”

Birdie’s hazel eyes peered up at me beneath her dark, curled lashes while the photographer, Frey, spouted instructions at us.

My eyes locked with Birdie’s and the rapid fluttering of her heart beat in my ears. It sped up and her round pupils widened.

Through this whole product shoot, it’d been this way.

Her pink tongue would dart across her bottom lip, especially when her gaze fell to my mouth, as if by reflex.

What was going on in that beautiful head of hers?

“This isn’t going to work,” Frey quickly deduced and snapped her three fingered hand, summoning one of the many assistants in the studio. “Bring the stool. I want her to appear ethereal, weightless, as if her dainty human body is floating in this gown.”

“Dainty?” Birdie muttered dubiously under her breath and I cracked a smile.

A stool was placed beneath her and Birdie’s pulse kicked into a gallop now that she was closer. We were nearly eye-level as we stood there, me in my black noda bodysuit, her in the newest gown Waya Ris designed.

The prismatic fabric was imbued with *quarkit* smart fibers. The long skirt and train shrank and expanded on its own, never touching the ground once activated. It billowed and undulated all around Birdie, gently swaying as if she were floating underwater.

The straps curved over her shoulders, the neckline sharply plunged between the perfect mounds of her breasts, and the bodice hugged her torso before flaring at the curve of her hip.

The sight of her exquisitely formed legs exposed by the daring slits up the sides only hypnotized me further.

She was the most mesmerizing creature I'd ever laid eyes on. And no, that wasn't my cock speaking, even if I wished it were.

*Fucking idiot, that's me.*

"Drop your right hand," Frey told Birdie.

"Like this?" She laid her palm on the space beneath my shoulder and above my pectoral muscle, her arm reaching across my chest to do so.

"Yes, yes, yes," Frey delightedly hissed. "Now lift your right leg. Omen, hold her against your body."

Birdie cleared her throat and awkwardly muttered an apology as she dragged her knee up my body.

*I could fuck her right now, just like this, if I angled my body toward hers.*

I curled my fingers over her silky bare skin. My digits tucked into the soft crease at the back of her knee, holding it to me. With her balancing on one foot against the stepstool, she shifted her weight against me, her breasts pressed into my chest.

*Do not get hard, I coached myself.*

“Tilt your head back,” Frey called. “I want to see a look of desire! You’re a seductress from another world and need a virile male who’s able to meet your needs!”

A sound eked at the back of Birdie’s throat as that unnaturally captivating blush spread across her nose and cheeks. She immediately looked up at me.

“Yes, yes!” Frey cheered, snapping photos.

When she peered at me with those strangely beautiful eyes, we were in our own cocoon. The studio staff beyond the bright set lights, and Frey shouting her enthusiasm, fell away.

My hand slid over Birdie’s hip, the insatiable need to have more of her against me rearing its head.

It didn’t matter that I held her every night while she slept.

*Because again, I’m a fucking idiot.*

By any standards, I should’ve had my fill. But I was a greedy motherfucker. There was so much more I wanted from her.

That thread she strummed, somewhere deep at my core, had only magnified. It called for Birdie, whether she could hear it or not. Whether I buried it and refused to acknowledge it.

This was udonie.

Even if I dismissed it—*which I certainly fucking did*—or attempted to explain it away...

The fever wouldn’t be calmed.

Birdie was *mine*.

Her breathing deepened. Her hand inched upward, fingertips gliding against my neck, twisting into my mane. Her face was only a breath away from—

She kissed me.

Her lips pillowed against mine, a bolt of awareness blazing a searing hot trail through me.

She kissed me in her human way and I...

*Fuck.*

One hand tightened on her hip and the other that held her leg gripped her plush thigh. My claws gently dug into her flesh.

*Is this what I've been missing out on?*

I groaned against her mouth, tasting citrus on her tongue when it slid against my fang. I almost cursed the six devils.

Sensation blasted through my body, consuming me whole. My nostrils flared, her arousal hitting me like a speeding tram, slamming me square in the—

“That’s a wrap!” Frey shouted. “We got the shot!”

Birdie swiftly broke away. Her eyes bore into mine.

A line had been crossed.

She knew it.

I fucking knew it.

This might’ve started as a fake arrangement, a mutually beneficial situation, but it was more now.

It was *real*.





**BIRDIE**

We were supposed to be on our way to the charity gala being hosted by Omen's parents, but I didn't care.

The entire half hour between our photoshoot kiss and now had been pure torture. I almost chewed off my entire thumbnail waiting for Frey's crew to outfit Omen in a robe that complimented my dress.

Now we were in his sporty transport, speeding through the lit up city and all I fucking wanted to do was finish what we started.

I slammed my hand against the navigation screen and gathered the expensive fabric of the Waya Ris gown—that was on loan—in my arms, and climbed over the middle console separating me and Omen.

*“Rerouting. Rerouting. Rerouting.”*

I didn't care if the transport rerouted us across the globe as long as it kept driving.

“I want you so fucking bad,” Omen growled against my mouth when I straddled his lap. He captured my lips for another soul-stealing kiss.

His mouth on mine?

The best kiss of my life.

It was new and exciting. His intensity tore down my inhibitions, devoured me, and drove me wild.

He followed my lead at first, learning with inhuman speed what made me moan and writhe. It wasn't long before I was gasping for breath because Omen took what he wanted, craved, desired, leaving me panting for breath and wanting more.

Every pull from his lips, every time his mouth locked against mine, an eternity stretched inside a fleeting moment.

It broke all the rules. Went against the contract we signed.

*I don't care.*

Maybe it was self-sabotage, maybe I was a glutton for landing myself in situations that would inevitably end badly for me.

*Or...*

Or maybe I just wanted *this*.

Maybe I just wanted to live in this singular moment and share a physically satisfying encounter with an alien man.

I didn't need to think about the contract, the curse, or what might happen ten minutes from now, an hour from now, tomorrow, next week—

Just... *this*.

Omen curled his fingers over my shoulders, pulling the straps down my arms, tugging until he freed my tits.

“Fuck...” he exhaled, his eyes drinking in my naked chest with a raw hunger.

My nipples tightened, hardening under his beastly gaze.

*Prey, meet predator.*

I pulled my arms out of the straps, my hands diving into his fluffy mane and pulling him close. “Kiss them,” I begged, biting into the tip of my tongue when he obliged.

The feel of my nipple being sucked into his hot, demanding mouth stole my breath. When he flicked his textured tongue against it? My clit throbbed like there was a direct line to my pussy.

“Omen...” His name was a prayer on my lips.

My hips rocked against his, the bulge in his pants telling me he wanted this just as badly as I did.

“Birdie,” he groaned, kissing up the side of my neck, following the shell of my ear with his tongue, and moving back to my mouth to swallow my moans.

He framed my face with his big hands, pushing fingers and thumbs into my hair. The tips of his claws scraped against my scalp and elicited a sharp plea that got trapped in my throat.

*More.*

I wanted more of that.

*Mess up my hair.*

I didn't give a damn!

In that moment, I didn't even care what he did to me. Mark up my body with his claws, shred this damn dress, or smear my mascara. He could ravish me, take his pleasure and

give me mine, and if I walked into that gala looking like I just ran through a hurricane, I'd do it all over again.

I knew the kind of bliss Omen could provide.

It'd be worth it every fucking time.

I dug my fingers under the magnetic seam of his expensive robe, easily ripping the fabric open to reveal his furred chest beneath.

The rolling chuckle in his chest rumbled like a purr against my palms when I ran them over the hard, rippled muscle beneath his fur.

“Such violence,” he teased, rolling my nipple between his rough fingertips.

“Sometimes,” I admitted, nipping his bottom lip, “I'm impatient.”

“I hadn't noticed.”

“Omen?”

He lifted a brow.

“Shut up and fuck me.”

That easy laughter unwinding in his chest quickly flipped to a clicking growl that had my whole body burning with pure lust.

Our fingers couldn't move fast enough to get his damn pants unbuttoned, and all the fucking fabric from the dress was floating through the whole transport like some kind of angelic robe that defied gravity.

I swatted the edge of the train out of my face and almost choked on air when Omen's cock sprang free.

"Sweet baby Jesus," I whispered.

"Who's Jesus?" Omen snarled as if I'd accidentally called him another mans name.

"Never mind."

I wrapped my hand around his pulsing cock, my thumb unable to touch my fingertips. That's how thick he was.

I knew he was packing something substantial, but to see it with my own eyes and feel it glide against my palm...

At my touch, Omen sucked back a breath between clenched teeth. His reaction sent ripples of desire twisting through me.

Translucent precum oozed out of the tip, wetting his length when I ran my hand over it.

Something tickled the back of my pinky and I quickly pulled my hand away.

"What was that?!"

Omen's smile was wicked. "My *urie*."

"What's a urie?"

I peered down, watching a trio of rippling pink and purple tentacles protrude from the base of his cock. They grew, lengthening, thickening, until they were the size and girth of my middle finger.

"They're meant for pleasure," he said, voice low and gruff with arousal. "They can be used for texture..."

They lengthened again, curling around his cock and reshaping themselves into spiraling ridges that wrapped his shaft.

My mouth fell open.

“But something tells me,” he whispered, “you’ll like them for a different purpose.”

The urie unraveled and shrank, their tips curling and flickering, beckoning.

“Yes.”

A desperate heat simmered between us as we got swept away with frantic caresses, groping, and insatiable connection.

I didn’t need any more explanation. I didn’t want to get stuck in my head and lose out on something I’d finally let myself have.

There would be no overthinking tonight.

I couldn’t get enough of him, his claiming growls, the tips of his claws on my sensitive skin—it was heaven.

But it wasn’t enough.

It was like we surfed the same wavelength, knowing exactly what the other wanted, because his thumb curled under the side of my soaked panties and pulled them aside.

I grasped his cock, dragging the triangular head up and down the seam of my pussy. It bumped against my clit and I whimpered.

I positioned him at my entrance, hovering above his lap, and shifted my hips. The tip wedged inside me, pulling a

chest-deep groan from Omen, the sound scraping against every raw nerve in my body.

His free hand slid up my thigh, over my hip, his hand huge enough that his claws pricked my ass cheek when he clamped down and pulled me.

Inch by inch, we both watched my pussy swallow his cock until I was halfway down his length.

My breaths were shallow as I rose up, our slick making it easier to take more of him on my second descent.

“Fuck,” he groaned between clenched teeth.

Omen yanked me down, breath whooshing from my lungs, the sting of the sudden stretch overwhelming me.

I could take it.

The thrill of a pain I knew would melt into pleasure soon enough, licked through me like hot flames, especially when his urie latched on to my clit.

My head fell back on my shoulders and I cried out, the tentacles twisting and squeezing, swelling and rotating like Omen directed them to perform patterns that would elicit the most wild and rabid responses from me.

Because as I feverishly clutched him, my nails digging into his shoulders, his chest, his arms—anything I could grab onto—his death grip on my hip guided me, bouncing me on his cock until I thought I’d burst.

The stimulation was too much.

Omen lowly rumbled, “*Mine.*”



An overwhelming, nearly unbearable wave of sensation broke through me. A summit of mind-blowing synchronicity where every fiber of my being answered Omen's demand and *obeyed*.

There was no escaping it.

There was no denying it.

All I could do was hold on while I shattered into a million little pieces.

It stole everything from me. My ability to utter sound, my air, my senses, until I was simply this pulsing, throbbing thing.

He fucked like a madman, pushing me away and yanking me back down until he was coming with me. His hot seed painting my insides and claiming me as his.

My eyelids flew open, my voice found, the air sucked back into my lungs as an electrifying flurry of awareness lit through me and I cried his name.

\*\*\*\*

“Are you sure you don't want to skip this event and head back to the suite?” Omen asked after we finished cleaning ourselves up and righting our clothing.

I fixed my lipstick in my compact mirror. Whatever Omen did to my hair, it looked better.

“This is your parents charity,” I scoffed. “Of course we're going. Besides, we promised Waya Ris I'd wear the gown.”

The gown chose that moment to float in front of my face and I, once again, swatted it away.

On the other side, Omen smirked before leaning across the middle console and grasping my chin between his thumb and pointer finger.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.” He said this like it made his chest ache.

And then ruined the lipstick I just applied with another kiss that he couldn’t seem to get enough of. I laughed against his mouth, gently pushing him away.

“Stop. We’re almost there.”

He blew out a long-suffering sigh.

\*\*\*\*

## **OMEN**

The gala couldn’t end soon enough. I didn’t want to be there. I could’ve imagined my time well spent doing other things.

Such as fucking Birdie again.

I ran a hand through my mane and willed my thoughts away from that subject, else we’d both be screwed.

Where was she anyway? She’d slipped away to the washroom with my mother at least ten minutes ago.

I leaned on the high table, swirling my drink in one hand as I peered down into it.

If Lykree wasn't meddling, I could've avoided this event. Avoided Rexer, the man who never missed his chance to put me down, diminish my accomplishments, and inform me I was a disappointment.

He liked to claim he was keeping me humble. I used to believe that.

When I glanced up, I realized he was walking toward me.

"Shit," I swore under my breath.

I'd done a fantastic job of avoiding him the past hour, but now that we'd made eye contact, there was no escaping.

The senior verkonie male shared my coloring, but his shades of purple were darker than mine.

"Son," Rexer greeted when he came to stand beside me.

"Hello, Dad."

Did I forget to mention he was my father?

"Didn't think to consult your mother and I about this human you've told the public you're mated to?"

To anyone else who might be looking on, they'd only see a father and son having a nice conversation.

Rexer kept his expression light, friendly even, though he wielded his words like a sharp blade.

"No." I'd learned long ago it was best to keep my answers clipped. If it didn't line up with what my father wanted, it fell on deaf ears anyway.

“Of course you didn’t.” He chuckled. “The six devils gave you more brawn than brains.”

“So you keep telling me.” I grinned, keeping up appearances.

His smile didn’t reach his eyes when he sternly said, “You’re fortunate no other verkonie male is here tonight. They’d sniff right through your bullshit. That girl isn’t your mate. There’s no trace of your mark. Though I’m sure anyone with a fucking nose can smell your filth clinging to her.”

My growl nearly erupted before I swallowed it down. I couldn’t keep it out of my voice when I warned him. “Don’t.”

He could see through the ruse. It was easy for any verkonie male to smell that Birdie was unclaimed. No verkonie venom ran through her veins. Without my bite, she wasn’t truly mine.

Most of my people didn’t frequent New Allu. Not even for noda. They were easy to avoid, so it was a risk I’d been willing to take.

“If this gets out—”

“It won’t.”

“If it does...” Rexer’s smile widened and he settled his hand on my shoulder, squeezing. I knew it was all for public show. As if he and I were having a pleasant conversation about joyful family matters or the tournament instead of him reaming me for Birdie. “The amount of shame you’d bring on the Bainbridge name would be your last act as my son. Make no mistake, I will disown you.”

His hand gripped too hard, driving his point home. I refused to give him the satisfaction of a reaction, no matter how uncomfortable his grasp was.

“I’m glad we understand each other,” he finally remarked, patted my shoulder, and took a sip of his own drink right before my mother and Birdie returned.

“Oh, darling, there you are!” My mother, Denella, moved to my father’s side. He dutifully brushed a kiss to her forehead.

He was a shit father, but he treated my mother like a precious gem. I endured Rexer for her because it would tear her apart to know the truth and I wouldn’t be the one to do that to Denella.

“Have you met Birdie?” Denella beamed, fondly brushing her knuckles over Birdie’s cheek. “She’s a delight. Perfect for our Omen.”

Birdie moved to my side, slipping her small hand in mine. I gave into my urges and lifted her hand, planting a kiss on her knuckles.

Didn’t hurt that it probably sickened Rexer.

“Nice to meet you,” he dipped his chin in salutation. “If you’ll excuse us... Your mother and I have guests to greet.”

He guided Denella away.

“Is something wrong?” Birdie asked. “You’re glaring daggers at the back of your dad’s head right now.”

*Am I?*

“Hey...” Birdie’s hand reached up to cup my face, the pad of her thumb stroking my cheekbone. “Where did you go

just now?”

I set down my glass, turned my head to kiss the inside of her wrist, and then twirled her around so her gown could breathe.

“Right here with you,” I claimed, forcefully shoving my hatred of Rexer to the back of my mind. “I think you deserve a dance.”

“Teach me your ways, *oh wise one*,” she teased and tossed back her head, her infectious laugh spilling out of her as I spun her around on the dance floor amongst other guests.

“Oh, look!” Birdie waved across the room. “There’s Lykree!”

My gaze followed, spotting my agent standing between my father and the Galactic Giants scout, Heboa.

Lykree waved back when she spotted Birdie and me, but all I felt was a sense of dread.

Rexer’s knowing smirk was a warning. With that expression alone, he let me know he could ruin my entire career with the information he had. The lie that could knock me flat on my ass and wipe out my future.

One word to Heboa and everything would come crashing down.

**BIRDIE**

“Omen, no!” I yanked on his hand. The one that gripped me and pulled me toward my worst nightmare. “*Please.*”

“Just trust me.” His reassuring eyes bore into mine as he gently, but firmly tugged me across the white-sand beach where I dug my heels in. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I can’t do this!” The panic was crawling up my middle and threatening to manifest in the form of vomit.

“Yes you can,” he promised. “But if you keep dragging your feet, I’ll toss you over my shoulder and I won’t give a damn about what the tabloids report.”

“I physically *cannot.*” My knees wouldn’t unlock and my body wouldn’t cooperate.

Omen had enough and effortlessly swooped me up and over his shoulder, just as he’d threatened.

“This is humiliating!”

“You have a beautiful ass. They’ll get a good shot.”

“Hilarious!”

“I thought so too.” He chuckled and patted my butt.

The giant bird-like creature screeched and I flinched, pushing myself up to gawk at it.

A two-person leather saddle was strapped to its back, our overnight bag secured at the rear. His handler held a tether to keep him on the ground for us.

“I’m gonna be sick,” I moaned and covered my mouth. My nerves were twisting my insides into knots like they were vying for a Girl Scout’s badge.

“The anti-nausea meds should kick in soon,” Omen remarked, seemingly unbothered by the idea I could barf on him at any second.

Our ride, he’d called it a *korgu*, had golden and fuchsia feathers sprouting over its twin set of wings. Its body was scaled. A dizzying pattern of those two shiny colors spread out across the diamond-shaped scales.

Its giant head had six eyes, three on each side, and a yellow beak with a sharp tip that appeared powerful enough to break bone and rip flesh.

The korgu didn’t look too happy to be here and I was more than content to let it go about its business and *never* bother them again.

Omen planted his foot in the saddle bar on the side and easily hoisted himself up into the seat—with me still hanging over his shoulder.

I dry heaved as the world spun.

My breaths were shallow, panicked, as Omen pulled me down, righted me, and sat me astride the beast in front of him. With a few buckles, he strapped us to the saddle.

“You said you wanted a honeymoon, right?”



“This isn’t what I had in mind!”

Omen’s easy laughter vibrated his chest while he leaned down to accept the reins from the handler. “Do you trust me?”

“I’m having serious doubts right now,” I snapped and warbled a sound when the krogu shifted.

“Birdie, look at me.” The sincerity in his voice drew my attention and I glanced up at him over my shoulder. “I would *never* put you in harm’s way.”

His thumb claw brushed back and forth along my jaw.

“So I’ll ask again,” his four irises darted back and forth between my eyes, “do you trust me?”

Was it the anti-nausea meds kicking in or did something in his voice, his gaze, wrestle my uneasy spirit into submission? I didn’t know, but I found myself nodding.

He kissed my temple and wrapped his arm around my middle, the reins clutched in his fists.

“Hold tight,” he whispered in my ear.

My knees instinctively clinched the saddle and my hands settled on his muscled arms around me.

Omen whistled and shifted the reins, guiding the krogu into action.

I bit the inside of my cheek to quell my scream when the krogu’s massive wings *whooshed*, flapping and kicking up sand due to the gusts of air his powerful wings created.

Omen handled the mount, guided it, with expert precision, as if this was second nature to him. That alone

helped ease whatever remaining tendrils of fear I had left when we ascended.

His capable hands, his reassuring hold, it melted my phobia away like nothing else ever had.

We soared along the coastline, the salty wind pulling flyaway strands of hair from my bun. I didn't care.

I dared to spread my arms, my trembling fingers gliding on the wind while Omen held me close to his chest.

The urge to belt my release to the clear blue sky was so overwhelming, I couldn't help but howl.

“Awwwooooo!”

Omen's chuckle rumbled against my spine and I smiled.

I'd never been able to let go of my fear before. Moving through the air, at the mercy of a machine or, in this case, creature, was something my brain couldn't handle.

And yet, being in that saddle, secured to Omen and the giant reptilian bird... I was actually enjoying myself. For once I wasn't thinking about all that could go wrong.

My arms spread wide, I laughed.

He anchored me in more ways than one.

I was in the moment, tossing hesitation to the wind, and savoring the adventure.

It was freeing.

“How can you fly so well?” I asked, raising my voice over the light whistling of the wind when the krogu caught a swell of air and glided.

“My parents raise thoroughbred krogu on my home planet.” His hand flattened on my abdomen, causing it to dip in response. “I’ve been around these creatures my entire life.”

“What are they used for?”

“Entertainment. Sometimes leisure, mostly sport, racing.”

“Racing?”

“It’s popular for gambling, but there’s an entire competitive sport world dedicated to these creatures.”

In other words, he came from money.

I’d had my suspicions when I met his parents at the gala. His charming mother had that air about her, and the cunning glint to his father’s eyes reminded me of the wealthy men on Earth.

We dealt with plenty of Rexer’s kind at ABT. Rich men always wanting more, and to control everything and everyone around them.

“We’re headed there.” Omen pointed ahead and spoke directly into my ear. “La Lei Rumoi.”

My eyelids hooded at the feel of his mouth against the shell of my ear. My toes curled inside my shoes and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself from sighing.

I followed where he pointed, seeing the maze of sandbars that snaked around the mass of land like white veins in the aqua waters.

The small island rose up out of the crystalline sea. Nestled in between giant, colorful trees and flowering vines

were squared, sienna-colored structures with rooftop terraces that overlooked the surrounding ocean.

Winding cobblestone streets zigzagged across the hillside, connecting one property to the next. As we flew closer, I spotted residents in loose-fitting robes that billowed around them with the salty breeze, as if setting the perfect scene for a tranquil getaway destination on a TV commercial.

I suddenly wanted to lay out on one of those loungers and sip fruity cocktails all day.

We landed smoothly on the beach and Omen unbuckled the straps holding us to the saddle.

In a few maneuvers, my feet landed on the plush white sand, the air whipping around me and carrying the scent of exotic flowers in bloom and fresh, healthy greenery.

“So,” Omen drawled, tossing our bag over his shoulder after passing the reins off to another handler. “Remind me again of what couples do on a honeymoon?”

When I glanced up at him, a knowing, cocky grin slanted his mouth. That alone told me he remembered *exactly* what I revealed to him about honeymoons.

“Well,” I feigned innocence, “they explore the local sights, meet new people, and have adventures.”

He canted his head, his ear flicking. “Is that all?”

*This cheeky bastard.*

“Yes,” I lied.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.”

His white, button-down shirt rippled with the breeze when his hand captured mine. We headed for the stone steps leading off the beach and up into the quiet town.

“I seem to recall one other thing couples do on a honeymoon...”

My lips rolled into my mouth and I bit down, suppressing the damn smile trying to break free.

“Oh?” I eventually uttered.

“Oh yes...” The low timbre of his voice, indecently filled with innuendo, sent my lower half into a tailspin.

Were we supposed to be exploring the island, delighting in local cuisines and engaging in unique activities?

*Probably.*

Did we?

*Define unique activities...*

Because as soon as we reached our little square villa, Omen cornered me. Backed me up against the big, luxurious bed and tugged off all of our clothes in the slowest way possible.

He explored my body in a way no other ever had. With new eyes, a deep curiosity, and an insatiable appetite for every part of me.

I committed this to memory. The way he worshiped my body, held me close, dove into me the way gentle waves might roll against the shore.

He was in no rush to get us to the finish line. We weren't in a speeding transport, late to an event, and no one was

expecting us.

This was the only place we were meant to be right now.

I savored it.

\*\*\*\*

## **OMEN**

Birdie's skin gently quaked when I pushed inside her. Her breasts easily bounced with every delicious rock of my hips while she sprawled under me.

Her thighs clinched my sides, her nails digging into my flesh, pulling me deeper while my urie lightly tugged and twirled around her clit.

I took my time, my hips rolling forward and away at a leisurely pace that allowed me to revel in every last detail, every last ripple of feeling.

We chased that summit, both of us clamoring for release.

The fever gripped me and wouldn't let go. My fangs grew warm, the venom that would mark Birdie as mine made them throb.

The only time my fangs would ever be used in this way. This one time they'd fill with a venom that would blend with her blood, mark her as mine. Forever.

I couldn't stop it.

She moaned my name and drew me in. My cock twitched, readying for the moment I'd sink my teeth into her.

She was human. Her flesh was tender, easier to harm.

Birdie crested, her back bowing against the mattress as she came, dazed and languidly clinging to me.

I latched on. My mouth at her shoulder, my fangs primed as I bit down. Just enough to prick her skin.

Just enough to inject my venom that would claim her as mine to any verkonie male.

She didn't even push me away. She pulled me closer, kissed along my shoulder and whispered nonsense to me.

The four punctures from my fangs welled little beads of blood that I quickly licked away, allowing the enzymes in my saliva to help the wounds close.

Birdie was mine.

Truly and thoroughly *mine*.

**BIRDIE**

Watching Omen play was thrilling. I wasn't suddenly into sports after a lifetime of indifference—I was into *Omen*.

The Meteor Mob had won every match they were in, busted their asses to get to this moment. To be one of only two teams in the league to occupy Tully Stadium's field under the bright lights tonight, cheered on by millions of fans, and playing the game they lived and breathed for.

"He plays better when he knows you're watching him," Heboa said, coming up to stand beside me in the open box. He was my height, a little taller, with yellow fur and an elongated snout that was reminiscent of a canine.

I smiled, the thought settling snugly in my chest. "You think so?"

"I've watched his games for a few seasons." He clapped as the rest of the stadium erupted when Omen scored ten points with a slem goal. "See?"

"*GOOOOAAAALLLL!*" The announcers screamed.

Omen zoomed down the field, his teammates flying after him as the fans lost their minds. The front rows reached toward him as he blazed by, fueled by his recent score.

And all the way from across the field, somehow he knew exactly where I was. He focused in my direction, pointing up



at me as if to say, *that one's for you.*

A stupid giggle flew out of me.

The crowd broke into a song, chanting Omen's name before the next play began.

"We'll be happy to have him play for the Galactic Giants next season," Heboa admitted and my eyes lit up.

My hands flew to my mouth and I squealed. "Really? You're signing him?"

"That's the plan." Heboa's blue eyes dragged down my body, the action contrary to our cordial interaction. His voice lowered and he leaned sideways as if he were about to say something confidential to me. "I can keep a secret."

A bolt of fear streaked through me and my smile faltered. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I know you aren't his real mate," he said in a low tone so as not to alert anyone else around us.

My smile was forced now, just in case anyone was watching. "I don't know what you m—"

"Rexer filled me in." He applauded when someone scored another goal, but by that time I was simply trying to stay steady on my feet.

I robotically clapped, racing through my options. What I should say, what I shouldn't say, and wondering if this was a trap.

Omen told his dad about our arrangement? How else would he know? No one on this planet had any idea. And

Gram and Shelly would *never* in a million centuries say a word to anyone.

A sense of dread swept over me like a cold bucket of water. “You won’t tell anyone?”

“Of course not.” Heboa leaned against the railing beside me, his voice dropping. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

I pressed my lips together to keep them from quivering as a wave of nausea threatened to embarrass me before I gulped the sour bile down. “You want money?”

His Cheshire cat smile weighted a stone in my gut. “I have money.”

I gripped the railing, watching the game below as if I was actually paying attention and not holding onto the railing like a lifeline while the carefully constructed house of cards came tumbling down around me.

“I’ll make it simple,” he began. “You let me sample a human, Omen gets his contract.”

Words failed me. My mouth opened and shut, but nothing came out because I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“Don’t worry, I won’t release inside you,” he whispered. “After a nice, thorough bathing, he won’t even be able to tell you rode another male’s cock.”

My mouth filled with sour saliva and the backs of my eyes stung.

“His future is entirely in your capable hands.” Heboa smirked as his eyes lewdly drifted over me. “Agree and I’ll

have a contract ready for Omen tonight. Otherwise..." He tilted his head. "Well, you understand. I'll give you until tomorrow to come back with a decision."

"Excuse me," I muttered, hand over my mouth. I moved through the interior box, trying my best to appear normal, happy even, as I made my way to the bathrooms.

I fumbled with the lock and then ran to the toilet, doubled over and vomited.

My eyes watered, my stomach cramped, and I let loose the flood of tears and anything left in my gut.

Humiliation swamped me at being propositioned like a piece of meat to be passed around.

I wasn't angry at Omen for telling his dad, if that's what actually happened. An empty feeling threatened to consume me at the realization that maybe I'd crossed a line.

The reality was, Omen and I weren't a real couple. He owed me nothing except what we agreed on if I held up my end of the deal.

Except now that was attached to sleeping with Heboa.

I heaved again, my newly emptied stomach unable to offer up anything except a drizzle of bile. I dragged the back of my hand across my wet mouth and snatched tissues from the dispenser to blow my nose.

*I can't do it.*

*I won't do it.*

I'd rather leave with a piece of my dignity intact than share my body with a sleazy pile of shit like Heboa.

Even if it meant costing Omen his dream team.

“I’m sorry,” I uttered aloud, shaking my head, even if Omen couldn’t hear me. “I’m sorry.”

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## **OMEN**

“Have you seen Birdie?” I asked Lykree, interrupting her conversation with Heboa once I was in the private box after the game.

“Omen,” Heboa shook my hand. “Great game. Congratulations on the victory.”

Pride swelled through me and I grinned. It was all coming together. “Thank you.”

The room was crowded with my teammates, their friends, Meteor Mob staff, press, and some celebrities. The music thumped and the food and drinks were plentiful.

We were floating high after winning the Trifton Star, and I wanted to share the success with my mate.

“Oh, um,” Lykree tapped her chin. “I think I saw her near the washroom.”

“I’ll check there. Thanks.”

I made my way through the crowd, keeping an eye out in case I spotted her somewhere else. It took forever to get there

because every few steps I went, someone was stopping me to toast our win.

I rapped my knuckles on the door meant for females.

“Birdie, you in there?”

My ears strained to listen for a response. Everything was loud but I heard it when her small voice said, “Yes.”

“You okay?”

She didn’t respond.

“Birdie?” I settled my hand on the knob. “Can you let me in?”

The latch flipped and she hid behind the door, but allowed me in. I shut it behind me, unease immediately punching me in the gut when I got a look at her.

Smudges of cosmetics under her eyes conveyed she’d been crying. Her nose was red, and her skin was pale.

My hands gently gripped her shoulders, pulling her to me. Her body melted against mine, she buried her face in my chest and her soft sobs nearly broke me in two.

“Birdie,” I crooned, rubbing the palms of my hands up and down her back, “what happened? Tell me what’s wrong?”

“You’re going to hate me if I do.”

“We both know that’s a lie.”

“You will,” she mumbled against me.

When she spoke next, revealing to me exactly why she was in there, and who upset her that badly, my world tilted sideways.

My ears rang with a never-ending knell that flushed out the noise of the crowd around me. It blocked out anyone who called my name, the cheers, the laughter, as I split through the room with one purpose—to fucking annihilate Heboa.

He didn't have a chance to say my name or make any excuses when I reached him.

The power in my arm as I went in swinging, my knuckles landing with an audible thud against his smug fucking face.

I didn't pay attention to the screams as guests scattered. A tunnel vision gripped me as I followed Heboa down to the ground, letting my rage fly.

*How fucking dare he?*

“You thought you could have her?!” I seethed, my fangs dripping at the first draw of blood.

*“Touch what's mine?”*

My claws ripped into his chest and I cranked my elbow back to get good leverage as I slammed my fist down into his jaw again.

*“TAKE WHAT'S MINE?”*

Heboa's garbled screams as I lit into him were simply fuel to my unquenchable thirst for destruction.

My teammates rushed me, arms grabbing onto me but they were no match right now.

I felt invincible with the fucked up and dangerous mixture of adrenaline and fury boiling inside me.

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## **BIRDIE**

Omen had left the bathroom in a menacing daze, as if he was on autopilot.

“Omen?” I said, trailing after him, but it was like he couldn’t hear me. As if whatever I said to him flipped a switch and he was this beast I’d never seen before.

I’d thought maybe he would be upset, but I never would’ve guessed what happened next.

The absolute wrath he brought down on Heboa.

My hands flew to my mouth as he mauled him. It was so fast, his damage so complete and expeditious that Heboa was already profusely bleeding before I could yell his name.

“You spawn of a fucking beast!” Omen bellowed, slamming his fist repeatedly into Heboa’s snout.

His teammates descended on him, attempting to pull him off of Heboa who wildly swung and tried to defend himself, but Omen bellowed a roar and flung them back every damn time, just to get in another vicious blow in.

“Omen!” I shouted, but he couldn’t hear me through whatever haze was choking him right now.

I moved closer, rounding so I was in his line of sight just as his teammates wrestled him back again. Real fear gripped me because if no one could stop him, he’d kill this man.

His fangs dripped and curled with loops of saliva, the face of a rabid beast about to go in for the kill.

“OMEN!” I screamed his name, stepping closer, reaching out a hand to cup his face.

His eyes, violet and black and terrifying, refocused.

“He’s not worth it,” I whispered.

His breath grunted from him but he saw me now. His forehead rested against mine as stadium security and the police burst into the room.

“Call for medical,” one of them said.

Lykree grasped my shoulders as we watched Omen get escorted out.



**BIRDIE**

*“I’ll be there before you leave.”*

That’s what Omen said to me this morning right before he left. He was meeting with his coaches after what happened last night. Heboa was raising hell and the real threat of Omen losing his career loomed like a gathering storm.

My bags were packed, perched by the door. The minutes ticked down and I sat there, waiting.

*“I’ll be there before you leave.”*

He didn’t ask me to stay.

He didn’t say we’d make a plan.

He didn’t make any promises or declarations.

He said he’d be here before I left, that was all.

My first alarm went off, warning me not to miss my shuttle.

I waited.

I paced the living room, anxiously chewing my thumb nail.

My second alarm blared, warning me my shuttle would leave in an hour.

And I waited.

I waited until my third alarm roared, shrieking at me that my shuttle would leave in thirty minutes.

I couldn't move my flight to another time. Gloria expected me back tonight. Joe Royston from HQ was arriving and wanted the report I'd assembled in his hands by dinner time.

My fingertips pressed into my forehead.

Maybe this was a sign.

We'd barely spoken to each other. Maybe he was embarrassed, maybe he was worried about his career.

Maybe he thought I'd fucked up his life.

Maybe *I* thought I fucked up his life.

If we never met, if I hadn't stumbled into his hotel, he might not have played for the Galactic Giants next year, but at least he'd still have a career.

After all this?

Who knew if he'd be able to play noda ever again.

I gathered my bags, took one last look around, committing this suite to memory because it was a place where I discovered that one person could truly love another.

A place where I, Birdie Clayton, fell in love with Omen Bainbridge.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and shut the door behind me.

"Your transport has arrived, Miss Birdie," Runi rumbled politely and took my bags.

A soft smile curved my lips. The big buwore had finally warmed up to me in his own way. I patted his arm. “Thanks Runi.”

Across the street, on a giant electronic billboard, was a picture of me and Omen. The one from the Waya Ris product shoot.

I bit my bottom lip, steeling my heart against the onslaught of emotion.

Frey had captured the perfect image, right before the kiss that started it all. Raw desire and beauty.

I willed myself to look away and get into the transport.

By the time I was on the shuttle, about to make the second portal jump, I’d already convinced myself this was for the best.

*“I’ll be there before you leave.”*

It was easier for me that he’d stayed gone.

\*\*\*\*

## **OMEN**

The room was a chaotic buzz of conversation about my future as my agent and lawyers debated with Heboa’s legal team that were backed by the Galactic Giants.

I was watching my career spiral down the drain in real time. I’d barely escaped legal charges by the Thalewa police

department on account of my clean record and the fact the chief was a huge fan.

Meteor Mob's team management was *this close* to dropping me.

*Hell, they still might.*

I should've been devastated. Should've been chewing my claws off and waiting with baited breath for a decision to be made. Maybe even begging management to keep me.

Yet as I sat there, listening to the back and forth while others decided my fate, all I could think about was Birdie.

The time on the wall said I had an hour left before her shuttle would depart.

I should've told her how I really felt last night.

I should've told her about my bite. How Rexer was wrong. Heboa was wrong.

She was mine.

This was real.

This was real and I loved her.

But I didn't tell her.

I didn't tell her because I thought it would be unfair. At least last night, after all that happened.

I wanted Birdie to be with me because *she* decided to.

Not because I manipulated her feelings during an emotionally unsettling time. And if I told her she was it for me? That my bite was a one-and-done deal and I couldn't physically be with anyone else the rest of my life?

She'd feel obligated.

She'd pity me.

I didn't want her to be with me out of pity.

I didn't know what I was going to say. I'd shamed myself by going after Heboa the way I did, yet I couldn't bring myself to regret it.

I'd do it again and again.

"I have to go," I whispered to Lykree when the time hit fifteen after.

"Omen..."

"Birdie's shuttle leaves at eleven." I glanced up at the clock. "I don't have time to stick around."

Lykree looked over at the clock and frowned. "That's an hour slow. It's past eleven now."

"What?!"

I shot out of my chair and ran toward the door, snatching my hal-com off the table. These lawyers were paranoid someone was going to record the conversation.

*11:17AM*

"Fuck!" I shouted, silencing the room.

"Omen, we still—"

"I can't stay!" I said as I was already moving through the door. My pulse whooshed in my ears as I ran through the stadium's halls, rushing into a waiting transport, and setting the coordinates for the hotel.

*"I'll be there before you leave,"* I'd told her.

I dragged my hands down my face and roughly scrubbed.

The transport couldn't get there fast enough. When I burst through the door of the suite, I called her name.

“Birdie? Birdie you here?”

Silence met me.

Everything of hers was gone when I checked through the closet.

The only thing left was one of her pink sticky notes with a message scrawled on it.

*I waited.*

*-B*

**BIRDIE**

This was the worst possible place Gram and Shelly could've brought me.

I glared at the bamboo railing in the rainforest biome of the botanical gardens conservatory where, a month and a half ago, my entire life had veered off track.

*Why did they bring me here?*

Surely my best friend knew what a sore spot this place had become for me?

Life was a series of decisions and the choice I'd made to attend Monica's wedding—right here in this conservatory—just mere weeks ago, had resulted in an adventure that saddled me with a broken heart.

I rubbed my chest as if I could physically soothe away the hurt. It was impossible, but I tried, nevertheless.

I'd slowed to a stop, lingering in this biome and falling behind the tour group. My cheeks grew wet and I wiped at them with the backs of my hands, what little control I still possessed unraveling.

"Dammit," I muttered, and sniffled. Now was not the time for the waterworks to start.

*Don't think about Omen, don't think about Omen, don't think about Omen.*

The more I tried to shove it from my mind, the worse it became until a thick lump lodged in my throat and made it hard to draw breath.

Never in my life had I experienced anything like this. I didn't want to do it again. I didn't want the love they portrayed in scripted drama.

It was real.

It was fucking real and amazing while it lasted, but when it was over?

The worst pain I'd felt. A pain I couldn't fix with some peroxide and a bandage. A physically and emotionally handicapping ache that dug into the roots of my soul.

I just wanted to rip it out and forget.

Forget Omen.

Forget what he awakened in me.

Forget all of it and just go back to my blissfully ignorant belief that there was no such thing as real love.

My life was easier when all I had to worry about was the next bill to pay.

*Not this.*

Not coaching myself to get out of bed in the morning, to feed myself, to breathe and exist in a world where I didn't have *him*.

"Do you know how long it took," a gruff voice said from behind me and I stilled, "to find a shuttle that had available passage to Earth?"



My vision went blurry and I closed my eyes against the new tsunami my tear ducts decided to unleash in that moment.

*Please don't be crazy*, I begged of my mind.

Hallucinating Omen's voice would be the absolute worst living nightmare.

"Go on," Omen urged. "Guess."

I felt a wall of heat at my back.

Hallucinations weren't warm, were they?

Hallucinations didn't have a scent like Omen—sultry, clean fur, a hint of soft leather and spicy ginger—did they?

Maybe I was crazy, maybe I was full of desperate hope, but I wanted this a little longer, even if it wasn't real. So I murmured, "Seven days?"

We'd been apart for one entire week. I couldn't imagine what hollowed shell I'd be a month from now.

"Seven. Damned. Days."

His large, callused hands flattened against my sides, his chest pressed against my back and his mouth found my neck.

My shoulders shook with the sob that threatened to unleash if I didn't clamp my lips shut.

"But I'm here now," he whispered beside my ear, "and I won't leave unless you tell me to."

He was real.

He was real, and he was *here*.

I turned within his arms, peering up at the alien man who'd become an integral part of my existence.

His hands framed my face, careful not to scratch me with his claws when his thumbs swiped away my tears that wouldn't take a hike and leave me alone.

I croaked, "You promise?"

His crooked smile was like the sun warming my frozen, slow-beating heart as he pledged, "I promise."

He kissed me.

The kind of kiss that said everything words just couldn't convey. He'd pull me down with it, drag me into a cocoon where nothing and no one else around me mattered but—

I pushed against his chest, breaking the kiss as a curl of anger unfurled inside me. "Why didn't you call?!"

His eyebrows shot into his hairline as if my sudden switch in gears shocked the hell out of him. "You never gave me your number."

"What—"

*Wait.*

I ran over the past month in my head and realized he wasn't lying. At no point in time had we exchanged contact information. There'd never been a need since we were either together or could find each other at the suite each night.

"Oh..." I lamely muttered. "Then how'd you find me?"

"Asha with the Daily Noda." He rolled a shoulder, his lips twitching. "Promised her an exclusive about our fake relationship if she helped me find you."

"Oh no, Omen you didn't—"

“I did.” He tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear.

“But what about your dream?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You’ve been fighting for it your whole career. How can you just throw it all away for... for...”

“For you?”

My lips pressed together, unable to find words.

“Noda doesn’t matter,” he softly declared, “if it means I get you, in the end.”

I swallowed that damn lump that tried to swell in my throat again.

“I don’t care who knows how we began. It only matters where we’re at now. That I, Omen Bainbridge—in case you forgot my name,” he grinned when I slapped his shoulder, “love you.”

“Goddammit,” I whined as my eyes watered and the tears came back with a vengeance. Elation bloomed in my chest and it threatened to burst from me if I didn’t declare the words that I’d tried to bury, to deny—

“I love you too.” A wobbly laugh bubbled out of me as we both wiped at my face. “Now kiss me again before I change my mind.”

“As if I’d let that happen,” he rumbled, pulling me to him. His embrace was crushing, yet tender, holding me like I could float away at any moment, but he’d never let me go.

His lips slanted over mine and I knew...

I knew I'd be tethered to him, anchored to him, and loved by him for the rest of my existence... and I couldn't think of a better life than that.

# EPILOGUE

## BIRDIE

“Come on, Ref!” I shouted as Omen got flagged. “That was a shit call!”

“Yeah!” Tayma yelled. “What gives!”

“Would you two sit down?” Joa-Trell rumbled.

*See number five on the field?*

*He's mine.*

Omen turned and pointed at me, his little acknowledgement that he noticed I stood up for him.

“*I got you, babe,*” I mouthed from the front row seat, my stupid grin so wide it hurt my cheeks.

It was Omen's first game with the Galactic Giants and it showed. Normally he would've been ready to exchange words with the ref over a flimsy flag, but he was just happy to be on the field.

This was a good day for him, whether he won or lost.

Lykree sat beside me, chatting away with Yui about events she had planned for Yui's mate now that he was her client.

Midseason trades happened and it turned out, not only did Omen get a contract from the Giants, but so did Eris and Loi.

Traveling for Omen's games was that much better with my trio of alien friends at my side. And exploring various planets and territories made my reports invaluable to ABT, who I still worked for.

Honeymoons were still my catnip.

So much had happened, but to sum it up, Lykree was a badass who was scarily good at digging up dirt.

Turned out I hadn't been the first person Heboa propositioned. He'd leveraged a contract against five other noda players and their mates. None of them had a fake relationship, but that didn't matter to Heboa. That was just a particular circumstance he tried to use against me and Omen.

Mine had just been more... public. All thanks to my protective, insanely fucking hot alien husband.

He was my *real* husband and mate now. We'd made it official.

I'd been so pissed he hadn't told me what his bite meant, but after he explained he wanted me to choose him because I loved him, not out of pity for some biological quirk?

*Swoon.*

Don't get me wrong, I was still annoyed, but... I also loved him a little bit more because of it.

"YEAHHHH!!!" I shrieked and shot out of my chair when Omen made the final goal at the last second, blitzing them ahead by five points and winning the whole game.

So maybe I was a bit of a noda fan now. Still didn't care for Earth sports, but... noda was growing on me.

*Can you tell?*

A while later, I waited outside the locker room until I spotted number five push through the door, bag slung over his shoulder and mane still damp from his shower.

His slow, lopsided grin had my toes curling in my boots. Would I ever get used to that fang-filled smile?

“Well hello,” I sing-songed. “Can I get an autograph, please?”

“For you?” Omen pulled out an imaginary pen. “I’ll sign anything. Tell me where you want it.”

I curled a finger, beckoning him down to my level so I could whisper in his ear, “My left ass cheek.”

His growl rumbled in his chest as he swooped me over his shoulder and I yelped, falling into a bout of laughter. Decided to smack his ass while I was hanging there, causing his tail to whip side to side.

“Just wait until we get home,” he promised in that baritone voice of his. “I’ll be signing both cheeks tonight.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time!”

He toted me off like the caveman he could sometimes be. It didn’t bother me though. Every love story had its weird quirks, right?

Mine just involved an alien man who loved autographing my ass in more ways than one.

*Ahh, real love.*

## Author Note

Thank you so much for taking the time to read! Hope you enjoyed this little adventure.

See you next time!