



COSMIC
KISSED

HER
UNSUITABLE
SUITOR

CHARITY WELLS

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Dedicated to all my friends and readers who supported me through the long process of writing this book. From the early days when Reynar and Rowena refused to share their story, to the final days when I thought they wouldn't stop talking, thank you for being here with me.

HER UNSUITABLE SUITOR

Scarred from years in an arena and banned from taking a mate of his own, Reynar has resigned himself to a lonely life guarding a pompous young ambassador. Bored with following the vain nobleman around as he's wooed by a planet full of desperate females, Reynar is surprised to find his interest sparked by a fiery young female with the courage to stand up to the arrogant elitist and defend herself. He's helplessly drawn to the woman who seems determined to avoid him despite how her body responds to his. Would she ever take a damaged male as her mate, or will they be forced apart before they even have a chance?

Rowena

My job is easy; order supplies for the gardeners, keep the flower arrangements fresh, program the bot that cuts the front lawn, balance the greenhouse budget, and stay out of the limelight; especially since I lied to get this job. That was bad, but what were the chances the alien visitors would come to this tiny little government owned estate? Suddenly, I find myself wrapped in the arms of a burly male after I've kicked the Saveet ambassador in the jewels. He deserved it, but that's not the point. His bodyguard is bigger, stronger, and so much more enticing than I ever imagined a male could be. He's also going to get me into trouble if I don't keep away from him. So why do I keep ending up in the embrace of my unsuitable suitor?

Reynar

She's feisty and fierce and oh-so-soft under my hands. I want this female more than I've wanted anything in my entire life. Her scent leads me all over the estate in a hunt for the spirited little human, though she's forbidden to me. If she told me no, I

might leave her alone, but that word never crosses her lips. No matter how many times she slips away from me, I'll have her. But I have a job to do and when something threatens my charge, can I let love get in the way?



GLOSSARY OF ACAIRIAN TERMS

Na ahina - my mother

Ni dromo - my father

Ni karik - my brother

Na valeka - term of affection - my desert hopper (basically my bunny)

Dirjik - scarf worn as protection in desert

Ti/ni jesit - a/my kit (baby)

Ni brasa - my son

Ni - my (male possessive connotations)

Na - my (female possessive connotations)

Meersak galek - extremely insulting term for a female

Grex - insult similar to bastard or asshole

INTRODUCTION

One-hundred-thirty years ago, in 2050, we were visited by an alien race who brought advances to our technology and the news that other races populated the galaxy.

Ninety years ago, Earth males began dying from an unidentified, untreatable ailment dubbed AD90, short for Adam's Destruction 2090. There hasn't been a live birth of a male on the planet for ninety years. The loss of men and resultant social upheaval brought about many innovations, such as a one-world government and modifications to our social structure.

The average lifespan for females is one-hundred-twenty, and childbearing years have been expanded as well. Until the Repopulation Initiative, artificial insemination was the only means of conception.

Five years ago, the government invited three alien species to earth to help us repopulate. Some species are reproductively compatible, some are compatible with help, and the Draalians are, to date, considered non-breeding companion species, although doctors across the globe are in a race to rectify the problem.

Earth females have to pay fees and take physical and emotional tests to apply for mates who come here voluntarily.

The vetting process is rigorous for both males and females. Both government and private agencies have organized to help alien males and Earth females find compatible matches, meet, and become mates.

PROLOGUE

My nana's nana was just a little girl when the aliens first arrived in 2050. She'd been playing with her friends when the ships appeared over their city. Many of the adults panicked, calling the children to safety until they learned more about the newcomers and their intentions. Nana told me her grandmother used to say it was the most exciting thing that had ever happened in her life.

As it turned out the aliens were friendly, and we had a simple but abundant resource they wanted. Sure, they could have taken it easily. They certainly had the technology, yet they were peaceful traders and wanted to open a new market with the fledgling species of Earth. Little did anyone know just how desperately humanity would need them in the very, very near future.

Just forty short years later, in 2090, the virus hit and claimed its first lives. But it only targeted the human male chromosomes. Adults, teens, children, newborns, and even the unborn were its victims. Only a small handful were naturally immune to the virus, a fraction of the world's male population, but they weren't spared from its terrible effects. Even though the surviving men donated sperm to thousands of willing women in an effort to boost the world's population, the hidden, lingering consequences of the disease soon showed its

ugly face. The men had been changed, right down to their DNA.

The male fetuses of those donors were the next victims of the virus. They were defective, deformed, and unviable. Often miscarried early, those that made it to full-term were almost always delivered stillborn or died shortly after birth. Soon it was decided that women should no longer attempt to carry the male fetuses, for the sake of the mother's physical and mental health.

Some blamed the aliens. Others thought it was the result of decades of pollution. A few even claimed it was proof of God's wrath. In the end, however, everyone agreed it was bad and named it Adam's Demise or AD90.

The surviving men were housed in sterile domes and tended to by robots and AIs in a desperate attempt to preserve what was left of them in the hopes of a future cure. Unfortunately, ninety years have passed since the onset of the virus that decimated the entire planet. Very few of them remain, and the youngest, now great-grandfathers themselves, are watching the world move on without them.

As for the women, they rebuilt what they could, changing and improving upon the building blocks of history. With the last of the infected men dead and fertility centers no longer attempting to produce male offspring, AD90 was considered to have been phased out. But that wasn't the real problem. Humanity had already suffered a great deal of damage. Even with the best fertility, genetic manipulation, and cloning efforts human scientists had to offer, it would only be a few short years before the world's remaining population began to decline. In the end, they turned to their alien visitors for a possible solution.

The human race as we knew it was doomed, but Earth and its remaining population could adapt. In time, ships were sent out into the stars. Their mission? To contact nearby planets with possibly compatible life forms in the hopes of enticing a portion of the male populations to come to Earth and find mates among the humans.

It was called the Repopulation Initiative Program and despite all its pretty promises, you most certainly had to be rich, fertile, and downright lucky to get your hands on an alien mate.

Not all of us met the criteria. And some of us...

Well...some of us were just trying to get by.



Rowena

“Alright ladies listen up! We just got notification that the UEG convoy is passing through our district next week! We have four days to get the estate ready for some high-level representatives from the Repop Initiative. It’s a small party; just...”

I let my attention wander a bit. Listening to Jerica drone on about important visitors and boss the housekeeping staff around was not my idea of fun. Not that anything about my job was all that fun, but I didn’t really see the need to be here for every single staff meeting. I mean sure, I was admin, but I was only part of the groundskeeping admin. My job consisted of counting plants, arranging equipment repairs, occasionally programming the lawnmowers, and ordering fertilizer and weed killer for heaven’s sake. I spent most of my time in the office behind the greenhouse and never went inside the estate itself if I could avoid it.

Why she insisted on making every staff member come to these weekly meetings was beyond me. This was just a typical ‘Jerica is a bitch and you can’t do shit about it’ move on her part to throw her weight around like usual. She insisted on everyone attending as part of our performance expectations

and if we didn't, we definitely heard about it at our next employee evaluation.

So here we were, crammed into one of the most uncomfortable rooms in the estate's basement. Half the people looked like they'd be asleep soon. The other half looked like they couldn't wait to bolt out the door. I doubted more than a third of the room was listening to anything Jerica had to say. I know I wasn't. Most of the time I zoned out and missed half of what she said in these meetings anyways.

"...North wing and the ambassador's party will be housed in suites in the Southern Wing." Jerica's voice rose in emphasis, drawing my attention back to the front of the room.

Ambassador? That sounded more interesting than the usual UEG drop-ins. Perking up, I focused on the meeting again.

"How many are there in the ambassador's party?" Hester asked, raising her hand as she interrupted.

Huffing in annoyance at the interruption, Jerica checked her notes. "Besides Ambassador Hedran, there's ten staff members and bodyguards of the same species, one non, and the rest are human," Jerica replied. "In total, between the reps and the Saveet group, we have about forty people dropping in."

"A non?" The question came from someone on the other side of the room.

"Yes, the ambassador's head bodyguard is a member of their subspecies, a Noxel. He is unimportant however," Jerica waved a hand dismissively. "He'll be in the background for most of the events, but he shouldn't be a problem. Just ignore him. Ambassador Hedran is the important figure to focus on here. The UEG wants the Saveet to approve more immigrants from their planet Acair. This visit is a tour of the local

government and civilian facilities. *Everyone* is wining and dining this guy. And we get to play home base for the next month or so, including a big gala event in four weeks.”

A chair creaked as someone shifted before speaking. “The catering staff already has all the dietary restrictions for the Saveet, but what about the Noxel?” Misty from the kitchens asked.

Jerica wiped a hand down her face before turning to Misty. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you said he’s a subspecies,” Misty started, cringing as Jerica focused on her. “Do they have any issues or restrictions? Are there any allergies we need to know about? We know a lot of the Saveet have had allergic reactions to shellfish dishes and some ingredients common to the Asian continents. Are the Noxel the same? Do they have the same risks?”

“Not that I know of. We don’t have a lot of information on the subspecies at the moment, as they haven’t been fully tested. There’s only been a few Noxel on Earth so far, but as closely related to the Saveet as they are, I’d say there shouldn’t be too much risk. Just serve him the same menu,” Jerica said, waving off Misty’s concerns.

They haven’t fully tested the Noxel? That didn’t sound good. In fact, it sounded like a disaster just waiting to happen. But what did I know?

“Maintenance just needs to make sure the South wing is clean for the ambassador and his party. Get it done, ASAP. And not just the suites in use, I want the entire wing cleaned,” Jerica ordered, smoothly moving into a list of chores for everyone to work on before the party arrived next week. “Miss Carter?”

I jerked at the sound of my name, jumping up so Jerica could see me at the back of the room. “Yes, Ms. Lawson?” I answered.

“I want you to assist Krista with the florals inside the estate. Make sure there’s fresh flower arrangements in all the suites and major meeting rooms on the day of their arrival. Keep them changed out so they stay fresh. I don’t want to see a single drooping, wilting flower for as long as they are here. That is your entire job for the next two weeks, understood?”

What is she doing? I’m not in charge of the greenhouses, I just handled the inventory. “But I…”

Scowling at my hesitation, she snapped, interrupting me. “Krista can’t do it alone on such short notice, and she’s going on vacation next week. I know you helped with the flower arrangements for the last potluck, they were nice enough. The rest of your duties are secondary for now, and this comes first before you do any of your other assignments. You will help handle the florals for Miss Hawkins while she’s away. Do a good enough job and maybe you’ll receive a bonus,” Jerica stated flatly. She stared at me intently, challenging me to say no, daring me to stand up to her, though we both knew I couldn’t. And then she hammered the last rusty nail into my coffin. “Unless you’d rather help with ditch maintenance for the next two months.”

There was a collective intake of air as everyone in the room went silent at Jerica’s blatant threat. Ditch maintenance was low-level, unskilled labor work usually reserved for droids and their handlers, but as punishment, Jerica would assign her current least favorite employee of the week to the crew. It generally meant that the woman would be shoveling wet muck out of the ditches alongside the droids until someone else

pissed her off, or if the offender was finally forgiven or forgotten.

I shuddered. I've been on ditch maintenance before, several years ago, and I did not want to do it again. "I can handle helping with the flower arrangements, it won't be a problem, Ms. Lawson," I said as confidently as I could.

Now I just had to hope Krista didn't need that much help. My piddly little table arrangements at the potluck had been cutesy and fun, but the ones Krista managed often spanned three or four feet across. If I had to do anything like that by myself, I was so not ready for this.

"Excellent, now as for the rest of you..." she moved onto the next item on her itinerary like she hadn't just threatened me in front of more than forty witnesses.

Welcome to my world.

I sat back down and let Jerica's voice fade into the background once more. Krista and I had less than a week to do the first arrangements. After that, it was just a matter of maintaining the flowers, keep them watered, clean out any flowers that started looking old, and replace them as they wilted. Smaller arrangements could be changed entirely. I sighed, knowing I was in for some really long days.

"So...umm...what do the Noxel look like anyways?" That question came from Sammy, a little blonde teenager who worked in the laundry department. She was one of the kids who spent the whole day washing, drying, pressing, and folding the estates' many bed linens and tablecloths. I was so glad I didn't have her job. They never seemed to come out of the dungeon except for these meetings.

“As we all know from the info-sheets, the Saveet and Noxel come from what’s considered a desert planet with limited water and greenery. It’s mostly mountains and desert terrain. The Saveet are most often described as elf-like, especially by the mating agencies. Delicate, slender, very pretty, somewhat fae-like, pointy ears, that sort of thing, yes?”

Several people nodded at Jerica’s shallow description of the aliens.

“Well, if the Saveet is a sand-elf, then the Noxel is more like a sand-orc or a sand-troll. They are uglier, more brutish. Their features are more varied, coarser, and less refined. They may have larger horns or tusks. Males tend to have heavier plate scales, or natural armor over joints or vital parts of their bodies. Sometimes they have more prominent fangs. According to the reports I’ve seen, they can be somewhat bestial and have been known to possess more violent or aggressive tendencies unless properly trained. A lot of them are employed as guards and fighters.”

“They sound positively horrid,” Shannon interrupted with a shudder.

“Be that as it may, the Noxel don’t matter anyways. The Acair Ruling Council have very strict guidelines that they must meet before being approved for the mating program. Only a few Noxel males have ever been granted permission to come to Earth, while the rest of the applicants are still being evaluated.

“The UEG barracks are hosting the first of those Noxel, but the only other ones on the planet are strictly here with their Saveet sponsors on work related business, and they are required to return home *with* their sponsors. Now, can we get back on track please,” Jerica said, her tone sharpening as she scowled at the women in the room.

“Just remember, as employees of the United Earth Government, you have an obligation to represent the best humanity has to offer. You are here to work, and as you know the terms of your contracts for working with the UEG, in close relation to the mating programs, you are all non-mate compatible in some way or another. The males in the ambassador’s party are strictly and in no uncertain terms *off-limits*. They are always under escort by UEG guards. No UEG employee may engage in a sexual relationship with any member of the ambassador’s party. Any flirting, sexually subversive, or unprofessional behavior will be dealt with swiftly and harshly. Am I making myself clear?”

Everyone was quick to shout an emphatic answer. “Yes, ma’am!”

“Good. Now, we’ve got a lot to do with only a little time to do it, so get to work.” Jerica turned and strode out, snapping the door shut behind her. As soon as it closed, the tension in the room deflated and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Then the excited chatter started.

My closest friend Cass threaded across the room to my side with a huge grin on her face. “Oh my gawd, Ro! Have you ever seen a Saveet before? I haven’t, and I’m so excited! I love meeting each of the new species! Megan’s gonna be so jealous when I tell her! She met a Draalian without me once, but now I get to get her back! Even though it doesn’t really matter, I have heard they actually are like, super-hot and all. I can’t wait,” she gushed, clapping her hands.

Grinning at her enthusiasm, I grabbed my bag off the chair and stood.

Cass and her spouse Megan were total nerds when it came to newcomers. If they ever sold trading cards of the new species,

Cass would own a whole collection of them. She collected every bit of information she could about the aliens, took pictures any time she got close to them, and in general made a bit of a nuisance of herself, but she meant well.

“No, I’ve never seen any Saveet. You know I don’t pay much attention to the news about the alien males,” I replied as we headed for the door. “But I’m sure it will be very exciting.”

“More exciting for you I bet. You get to go inside the estate while they’re here! I’m so jelly!” Cass said, bouncing as she walked.

“Oh yeah, I get to go in and be seen by everybody. I get to be around Jerica more often. Sounds like a blast,” I drawled with a grimace.

Cass winced sympathetically. “Yeah, there is that. But... walking in and replacing the flowers won’t be a problem, ya know. It’s not like they’re going to ask you to take a psych test on the spot. No one’s gonna find out your original was faked.”

Even though her voice had dropped to the barest whisper, and we were already outside, I shushed her frantically. The last thing I needed was someone finding out that the psych eval they’d given me when I was hired had been hacked. Not only would I be in trouble, but so would my older sister. Evie was an AI programmer for a droid company up north. If it weren’t for her, I’d never have passed the UEG evals. She and Cass were the only ones who knew the truth, and I wanted to keep it that way.

As far as the UEG was concerned, I was an infertile asexual with no libido. They didn’t hire horny, single women who wanted male partners and had fully functional ovaries. It was too much of a risk that we might try to steal a male from the UEG barracks.

It wasn't a great job, but the benefits were pretty good, and it paid the bills. I wish I hadn't had to lie to get it, but after stupidly racking up a truckload of debt during my years as a student, I needed a good job to pay it all back, and government jobs paid better than most.

So, I lied on my evals. I didn't own a sex-bot. My apartment was a cheap little closet with a personal med-unit that was specially programmed, by Evie of course, to ignore all signs of fertility, hormone spikes, and sexual activity. My toys were all well-hidden in case of unexpected visitors, and my personal holo-porn collection was kept strictly off-line to prevent anyone from tracking my activity or my preferences, and I never went anywhere near a public med-center. As far as anyone knew, I was just boring old me, not attracted to males, females, or artificials of any kind.

"Cass, I gotta go find Krista and get her to show me what she wants me to do for the arrangements. I'll see you later, okay?" I sighed, looking off towards the greenhouses where the flowers were grown.

"Yeah okay, I'll catch up to you later," Cass said, patting my shoulder. Then she turned away and trotted off to the orchard.

Today was a pruning day and because of the meeting, it would take them all day to finish and clean up. Tomorrow I'd have to check their equipment to see if anything needed replacing or repair. If I had time...

Have I mentioned how much I really, really don't like that stuck up bitch, Jerica?

Reynar

“Incredible. Simply incredible. I will never get used to seeing so much water,” Brixton said, his voice rising over the general murmur of conversation from everyone crowded around the shuttle’s window.

We were currently flying over an area our guide called Florida, in the far southern portion of the Liliium Region. According to our guide, this used to be known as North America. The view outside the window was a long expanse of fertile land, which ended in an endless sea that disappeared over the horizon. And we were heading right for it.

The past three months had been spent bouncing from one UEG Embassy to another within this lush blue and green world. Despite the number of times we had already crossed the ocean, the boy and his entourage were always amazed by it. I was not about to admit that I found the sight of so much water to be somewhat...overwhelming myself. Lounging on a sofa at the back of the viewing deck, I could see a good portion of the shuttle interior, as well as Brixton himself, but I didn’t need to stand at the windows with him.

Besides, it’s not like the ambassador could go anywhere while we were on the shuttle. Here, his cabin, a small mess hall, and maybe the cockpit if he wanted to bug the captain, were the only places he could go while we were in flight. This was one of the few times I knew he’d stay out of trouble. The insufferable little prick was blessedly confined until we landed.

Prick, that was a fun human word. One of many human insults I had learned since arriving, which I found highly amusing. My favorite part of the long journey to Earth had been the Neural Upload Education System. Brixton and I had both used it to learn about Earth’s languages and culture, reading and

writing the major languages, and any other information about the humans we could find. I'd never had a formal education before and found learning enjoyable.

Beyond the standard lessons, I'd requested uploads on human slang, colloquialisms, and any other quirks of speech I felt I should be aware of. I wanted there to be no chance of a misunderstanding because of a simple difference in phrasing a human might use, or a strange word that might sound like one thing but mean something else.

I was rather fond of their various insults. The humans had lots of funny little words like ninny and ass-kisser, or bonehead and brown noser. But I liked prick in particular for some reason. It was another word for the male genitals, and it was not a good one. It suited the boy most days.

Brixton was spoiled, arrogant, and entitled. Being handed this job by his father did not help. Now he was being ferried around a planet full of lonely females, all looking for a mate and hoping to impress the handsome ambassador, so he would convince his people to send more of our handsome unmated males to this planet.

Nearly every night we'd spent on this planet had been taken up with parties and events meant to win him over. What the poor females didn't seem to realize was that Brixton was won over every time he took yet another female to his bed. There was a different one every night, and sometimes more than one. Barely more than a juvenile in my opinion, and certainly lacking in the maturity needed for the position he was in, Brixton thought more with his cock than his brain. He was dragging out this trip, no doubt taking advantage of these females, but who was I to say anything? I was just the bodyguard.

“Reynar! Reynar, come and see this!” Brixton called, waving his hand at me when I looked up.

Scowling slightly, I rolled off the couch and stood, ignoring the nearby human that gasped at my sudden movement and cringed from me. Apparently, I was *scary*. The females either ignored me or avoided me. I was too big, too scarred, and too rough looking for their delicate sensibilities. Not that it mattered. I’d been banned from having a breed mate years ago. The Saveet Council didn’t want me passing my unsightly genetics on to the next generation. I was lucky they hadn’t voted to sterilize me yet.

Not that they would admit it, but one of the many failings of the ruling class of my planet was their obsession with flawlessness. Generations of careful breeding and genetic manipulation had resulted in what they saw as the near perfection of the Saveet, while the Noxel were looked down on as flawed, lower-class citizens. Individuals with milder genetic variations were allowed to apply for strict mating/breeding permits, while those with more extreme physical differences like myself were limited or outright banned from taking a mate or having offspring.

Taller than the rest of the Saveet party, I certainly towered over most of the females of this planet. It didn’t help that my double set of horns were much larger than most Noxel, much less the Saveet with their tiny little nubs and spikes. I had big hands, big muscles, and big scars that put the females on edge. My skin was darker and more heavily armored, and I certainly wasn’t *pretty* like the Saveet males I guarded. I was a fighter and it showed.

The group parted for me as I approached the window and stood just behind Brixton, who leaned against the viewing

shield. The sight below was bright and dizzying, but I chose to look outwards rather than down as my stomach dipped threateningly. Before this trip I had never been in a shuttle, much less in space, and I was still getting used to being so far above the landscape.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Brixton asked, glancing over his shoulder at me. “A wealth of water right here in the open. Who knew there was a planet like this so close? It’s simply incredible.”

“It is beautiful,” I admitted, briefly admiring the vista of blue and green. “A rare jewel in the universe.”

“A jewel indeed. My dromo had no idea how amazing this world was when he sent me out here,” Brixton said ruefully.

“Really? I thought the humans described their planet when they approached the Council and asked for volunteers? Showed pictures even?”

“They did, but you know as well as I that those pictures could have been faked. Would you have believed a strange race of smooth skinned females claiming their planet was over seventy percent water?” Brixton said, ending his question with a laugh. “Not to mention their assertion that *all* of their males were dead or dying.”

Grunting under my breath, I shook my head. “No, I don’t think I would have,” I agreed. “It is rather farfetched. Tiny, helpless females, all alone on a planet full of water and fertile land. It’s a fairytale. Or a trap.”

“A paradise in a sea of stars, and my dromo wants me to claim my own piece of it,” Brixton commented, smiling cryptically as he went back to his perusal of the horizon. The boy fell silent as the landscape flew by.

The planet belonged to the humans; how did Brixton's sire expect him to lay claim to even a piece of it?

Sensing an end to the conversation, I stepped back and allowed the rest of his entourage to group around him again. Grateful to resume my seat away from the dizzying spectacle, I waited for the shuttle to land at our next destination. Inexplicably, Brixton had announced he wanted to see a smaller, less populated embassy area, something that didn't get a lot of traffic. At the same time, he wanted somewhere hot and close to the ocean.

In other words, he wanted to ignore his duties for a while and have some fun, without attracting too many nosey civilians of course. Our guide said she knew just the place and so here we were, whisking away from the major embassies towards a minor government estate with our UEG escort in tow. This could be good by getting away from the larger crowds, but it could also be bad by separating him from the larger portion of the UEG guards assigned to the embassies we'd been at previously. I would have to pay closer attention to our surroundings wherever we ended up.

Mere moments later, the overhead comm chimed politely.

"Please resume your seats and strap in," the captain said, her voice filling the air. "We will be arriving at our destination soon."

The majority of the group immediately left the windows and found their seats. Brixton, however, lingered; lost in his thoughts. The shuttle rattled as it dipped into the lower atmosphere, moving towards the land below.

"Brixton," I called from my seat.

"Hmm?"

“Time to sit down, sir,” I said calmly.

“Oh. Of course.” Brixton fell into the seat nearest the window and strapped in, his movements mechanical and absentminded.

Not a moment too soon the shuttle lurched hard in a downdraft. Two of Brixton’s assistants yelped in fear, then laughed nervously as the flight smoothed out again. Discreetly, I removed my claws from the now torn armrest of my own chair.

Within minutes, the shuttle bumped down onto a landing pad and settled. The nearby window was filled with trees and buildings now instead of sky, but the trees were different from the ones up north. These trees were tall and spindly. Long, skinny bare trunks reached for the sky and were topped with large blade-like leaves instead of thousands of tiny leaves or needles on branches that ran down their trunks. Some trees had large rounded green fruits tucked under the leaves.

“If you follow me, the estate is just up the hill,” our guide said, stepping into the viewing cabin. “They’ve been informed of our arrival and will send someone down for your luggage shortly.”

“Excellent!” Brixton jumped out of his seat as quickly as he could and eagerly followed after the small female who giggled at his enthusiasm.

She led the way to the airlock and keyed it open, while lowering the boarding ramp at the same time. The air that swept in was hot and thick and strangely damp. It smelled of sand and something else, something offensive, but I couldn’t describe it. There was a noise in the air, a dull shushing roar that rose and fell and rose again. In some ways, the heat and sandy smells reminded me of home, but the other smells and sounds were so foreign they made my skin itch.

“What is that intriguing scent?” Brixton asked curiously. “It is both interesting and awful at the same time. I love it!”

The little human guide laughed as she walked up the path. “I take it this is your first time being this close to the shore? You’re smelling the ocean. We aren’t far from it. It’s just over there on the other side of the grounds. What you’re smelling is salt water, fish, seaweed, and maybe a few other things. It’s commonly called a briny smell,” she explained, pointing off towards the buildings we were heading to. “We can arrange a trip down to the beach after you’ve settled into your suite and met with the on-site coordinator. I’m sure she has some scheduling to go over with you, as well as a few invitations you may be interested in before you decide how you want to spend your time during your visit.”

“Sounds fantastic,” Brixton declared, rubbing his hands together eagerly. “I look forward to exploring.” He started bounding towards the front of the estate like some noblewoman’s overexcited pet gricca.

“Ambassador Hedran,” I interrupted flatly. “A moment?”

“Huh?” He stopped and looked back at me. “Oh! Yes, of course. The rest of you go on ahead.” Brixton gave a self-important wave and dropped back to walk with me. “What is it, my overly cautious friend?” he asked teasingly.

“I am your bodyguard, not your friend, and I feel I should remind you that this is not just a vacation destination. We are here on a political mission. The Council, and your family, have expectations. So far it seems you have spent the entirety of your time partying and fucking. Now we are in a less guarded location with no plan in mind. I do not believe we should linger for long before you resume your duties. The risk of attack or abduction is higher here. I am cautioning you to be

more vigilant,” I said as we walked. The rest of the party had already entered the building ahead of us and disappeared.

Brixton laughed, stopping to play with the fuzzy green fronds of a nearby plant that hung over the path. There were a lot of plants along the path and in the beds around us. It was strange and mildly disconcerting to be surrounded by so much greenery. Even the air smelled green; my nose itched with the need to sneeze.

“You worry too much, my friend,” Brixton replied with an impish grin. He knew I hated it when he called me his friend.

I sighed, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “You are a very impor—”

“You worry too much,” he repeated, interrupting me. “This is a world full of small, weak females. How much of a danger could they possibly be?”

“It is a planet full of lonely, desperate females eager for male attention. You saw how the crowds outside the agencies can get on the days they let them see the resident males. You’ve even seen how some of the *trusted* female employees react to you and the rest of the males in your entourage. We have also run into problems with that anti-alien purist group that shows up to protest our presence. They could all be quite dangerous if they were so inclined,” I insisted, throwing out my hands in frustration.

Brixton finally left the plants alone and took the last few steps up to the entry. Holding the door for him, I saw that the entry was empty. Someone must have taken the others off to their rooms, and we would have to wait for the guide to come back. I didn’t like how empty this new place was. Reflexively, I started checking the various alcoves around us, making sure

we really were alone, while Brixton fiddled with a nearby table decoration.

“That’s just nonsense,” he suddenly announced.

“What?”

“Thinking the females around here could be dangerous,” he said, turning to me and coughing out a laugh. “Didn’t you watch those old vid-ay-o entertainments they provided? The ones that showed male and female interactions? If an irate female gets too emotional or out of hand, simply kiss her and she will forget everything.”

I turned to stare incredulously at him. “What did you say?”

“Kiss her. The entertainments all showed that whenever a female got out of control, a male would kiss her, and she would momentarily lose her senses. So just do that. Kiss the female senseless and there will be no more problems with her.”

Brixton’s ridiculous comment was met with a derisive snort from the direction of the interior doors. We both turned in surprise to see a small human female standing there with a large floral arrangement in her arms. A cart holding a number of other flowers sat in the hall just beyond her.

“You mock me?” he asked her in disbelief, a note of intrigue in his tone as he turned to face her fully.

She gave a short laugh that had a mild but definite edge of scorn to it. “My nana used to tell me that men were self-absorbed, arrogant creatures. I wonder how she’d feel if she knew it was universal and not just limited to humans,” the female mused as she stepped further into the room and placed the flowers on a small table by the far wall, then brushed her hands off before turning back to us.

With the plants out of the way, we could both see the United Earth Government logo on the female's collar. Obviously an employee of the estate, I studied her as I did with every individual we encountered. She seemed harmless, save for her sharp tongue, but I preferred to take no chances with Brixton's safety.

Average height for a human female, she would only come as high as my mid-chest. Her figure was plush and nicely rounded with lovely soft curves around the hips and breasts. She certainly wasn't a willowy figure like most of the Saveet females back home. She had lightly tanned skin that was free of the artificial cosmetics other humans wore, and she didn't stare at Brixton with the same covetous hunger I'd seen in all the other human females. Instead, her expression maintained an easy, aloof detachment as she conversed with the young male.

Attractive enough, but certainly not the pale, golden-haired type of female Brixton was usually attracted to among the humans, her hair was a rich dark brown pulled into a tight knot on the back of her head. I found I liked her earthy coloration though. Pretty green eyes flicked over me briefly before moving back to Brixton, who was grinning at the female like he was thinking about doing something incredibly stupid. Knowing my young charge, that was highly likely.

"You don't believe a male can kiss a female silly?" he asked, smiling slyly as he walked over to her.

"I *believe* you've watched too many old human rom-coms, and that you think way too highly of yourself," she scoffed, crossing her arms and cocking an eyebrow at him.

"How can I possibly think too highly of myself? I am an ambassador, the son of one of the richest, most influential

families on Acair, and one of the most highly sought-after bachelors as your people put it. Why should I not think highly of myself?” Brixton said, his tone self-important and lofty as he extolled his own virtues.

Even I had to roll my eyes at his arrogance, but the female looked entirely unimpressed by his words. “Do you need a shovel?” she asked flatly.

“For what?” Brixton asked in confusion.

“For that enormous pile of shit you just dumped on the floor.”

A bark of honest laughter burst out of me at her dry statement. Brixton turned to scowl at me as I smothered it. The female’s mouth tipped up in a grin of shared amusement, even though her focus stayed on my employer. He was less than amused by her. In fact, I’d never seen him so disconcerted by a female before. Normally he didn’t have any trouble charming these humans.

“You are what the old human entertainments would call a *shrew*, aren’t you?” Brixton asked rudely, abandoning his attempts at charm. No doubt he meant to shock a response from the female, but she only laughed again.

“Probably,” she admitted with a grin.

“You don’t think you are just as fallible as any other human female?” Brixton challenged, unwilling to drop the subject.

“Look sugar, those videos you’re referring to are over 100 years old. They were highly exaggerated even then, and most were no doubt created by men. So no, I don’t believe a male could ‘kiss me senseless’ as you put it for one, and for another, you aren’t that attractive as far as I’m concerned,” she explained with a shrug. “Now, as stimulating as this conversation has been, I’ve got eight more arrangements to

place before I can go home for the day. You gentlemen have a nice afternoon.”

Frowning rather fiercely now, Brixton grabbed her arm as she turned to leave, spun her around and kissed her hard, pulling her against his torso as he assaulted her. Protesting, her hands pushed against his chest, trying to force him away, but he held tight, slanting his mouth over hers as he forced his tongue between her lips.

Stepping forward with the intention of stopping him myself, I almost missed what happened next.

The female’s body language changed abruptly, turning aggressive. She grabbed his shirtfront, fisting the fabric in her hands, and pulled it tight. Brixton made a surprised sound as she pushed up into his kiss.

I paused, wondering if I’d been wrong after all. Her leg threaded carefully between his thighs as her weight shifted, then she jerked it upwards, hard. At the same time as her knee surged up, she bit down on his tongue, making him lurch back with a howl of pain. His howl cut off as his breath whooshed out of him from the impact of her knee ramming into the sensitive flesh of his male member.

Almost negligently, she pushed him away and released his shirt, then dropped him to the ground. But her expression was thunderous as she wiped a hand across her mouth.

Brixton lay at her feet groaning and clutching himself pitifully. I stared in awe at the little human. She was glorious. Her lips were swollen from his assault, her hair was mussed from where Brixton’s hand had gripped the back of her head, her chest heaving, and she stood over him like the winning gladiator in an arena match. He groaned and tried to roll to his knees, drawing her ire once more.

Growling the sexiest sound I'd ever heard a female make, she kicked him in the gut and knocked him down again. Her foot drew back for another well-deserved blow, but I finally intervened. Wrapping an arm around her waist from behind, I pulled her away from Brixton.

"Easy, na valeka," I murmured.

Hearing the affectionate nickname, Brixton chuckled roughly, still holding his abused body parts as he lay on the floor. The sound only aggravated the angry female more.

She exploded, kicking and struggling to get away from me, no doubt hoping to beat some sense into my fool of an employer. "You sorry son of a bitch!" she cursed. "If you ever lay a hand on me again, I swear I'll snap it off and shove it so far up your ass you'll be chewing on your own fingers!"

I chuckled silently, impressed with the creativity of her threat. "Enough, na valeka. Enough. He has learned quite the lesson today. He was wrong and he knows it. I will make sure he leaves you alone."

"Yes. Many apologies, mighty warrior goddess," Brixton wheezed from the floor.

I sighed at his asinine flippancy and kicked him myself, though not as hard as she had. But it made him wince and laughingly beg for mercy.

"The ambassador is young and stupid, even for one in such an *important political position*," I said, stressing the last three words. "And I'm sure his own mother would be disgusted were she to learn of his behavior today." The unsubtle threat seemed to get through to the boy where not much else had. Brixton blanched, his golden skin paling and his eyes growing wide in fear.

“No! No, please no. Don’t tell na ahina about my stupidity,” Brixton begged. “You’re both right. I was a terrible oafish fool and I deserve more than a blow to my maleness. I sincerely apologize for my terrible behavior.”

Even as an adult Brixton was terrified of his mother. She was a powerful matriarch and ruled their family with an iron fist. His embarrassing behavior today would certainly have earned her censure and if not, her outright anger.

Brixton rolled to his knees before the small female still wriggling in my arms and placed his palm on the ground in formal appeal. “My manners have been atrocious this day. You have my deepest regrets. Please accept my apologies.”

Not placated, she growled under her breath. “You’re so full of it. You’re only sorry ‘cause you don’t want anyone telling your mommy what you did,” she accused angrily.

“While it is true that the thought of na ahina learning of my rather juvenile behavior terrifies me and I would rather not find out how she would react to it, I assure you, I do regret my boorish actions. You have demonstrated that the females of this planet are not all as they have been portrayed in the entertainments we were shown,” Brixton groveled. “Please. Will you accept my apologies?”

The female huffed again, a small angry burst of sound, but her body went lax in my arms and then she wriggled slightly to shake me off. With some reluctance I released her, though I kept a wary eye on her. I couldn’t let my charge get attacked again.

“You touch me, or any other woman around here, without permission again, and I swear on my mama’s grave there won’t be a piece left of you that’s big enough to identify!” she threatened severely, jabbing a finger at him.

“You have my word,” Brixton vowed with a wince as he bowed in the face of her wrath.

The female visibly debated kicking him again; I could see it in the tense way she held herself. Finally, after glaring silently at him, she whirled on her heel and stormed out, shutting the foyer doors with a hard bang. Brixton flinched at the sound, then collapsed to his side once more, with one hand still clutching his poor, damaged sex.

Peering down at him, I chuckled. “Will you live, or should I ask the Council to send a new ambassador?” I asked, moving to crouch over his prone form.

“What happened to being my bodyguard?” he whined plaintively. “I don’t feel as if I’ve been guarded very well right now.”

“If she had not kicked you for your audacity, I just might have,” I replied with a disgusted snort. Reaching down, I hauled him to his feet. “You would not treat a female so crassly back home.”

“No female back home would have mocked and challenged me so blatantly,” Brixton retorted.

“Regardless, your dromo and ahina expect you to comport yourself with a certain amount of dignity. You would do well to remember the reason you are here,” I chided.

“Since when are you so sagely and eloquent?” he asked, brushing and straightening his robes.

“Neither my species nor my skill set dictate my intelligence. It is your own ignorance that colors your perception of me,” I replied stiffly.

Brixton chuckled. “What a remarkably polite way of calling me an idiot,” he remarked with a shake of his head.

I simply level a look at him, challenging him to prove me wrong.

“As the humans say, lighten up. I have a feeling this will be fun,” he said, finally breaking the quiet moment with his usual unwanted levity.

The way his eyes fixed on the doors the female had left by made my jaw clench. The sudden urge to destroy a rival and claim my female was strong, and I could barely suppress the growl that rose in me. *My female?* The thought made me pause. When did I decide she was mine? Even as I shook off the strange idea, my own eyes fixed on the doors as if hoping she would return.

“Yes, I do think this will be quite fun,” he repeated thoughtfully.

Glancing at him again, I was disconcerted to find him staring at me instead of the doors this time. His grin was smug, too knowing, and a little bit devious.

“Ahhh, *there* you are,” a cloyingly cheerful voice announced behind us.

We turned to the new female who approached and again, I assessed her for threats. This one I didn't like. The pin on her collar proclaimed her as another United Earth Government employee, but she was very different from the spunky little flower girl.

Her clothes were richer, more finely tailored. She wore what they called a 'suit' on her tall, willowy figure. Blonde locks flowed down her back to her waist. Her face was covered in heavy layers of makeup, and expensive jewelry glittered at her ears, wrists, and neck. Icy blue-gray eyes studied us both, narrowing dismissively at me before moving on to Brixton and

widening with a predatory interest. Her tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip hungrily as she assessed the young ambassador.

Her greedy gaze set off every warning instinct in me and I couldn't stop myself from stepping forward protectively as she attempted to approach my ward. She barely managed to hide the sneer curling the corner of her lush pink lips. Pasting on a false smile, she beamed at Brixton brightly as she leaned around me to talk to him.

"It's so good to meet you," she gushed sweetly. "I'm Jerica Lawson, the Estate Manager, and I am looking forward to handling your stay with us. We have lots of local activities to choose from. We can arrange anything else you'd like to do here as well. We are also hosting the annual UEG Summer Gala in a few weeks, which I hope you'll still be here for."

"Oh, absolutely! Sounds wonderful!" Brixton proclaimed. "I can't wait!"

"Excellent! Are you ready to see your rooms?" Ms. Lawson asked, waving towards the interior doors.

"Yes, definitely!" Brixton answered, turning to follow her. The boy was absolutely clueless as to the rapacious nature hidden under that pretty wrapping and fake enthusiasm.

I would have to watch this female closely whenever she was around. There was something very off about her, something wrong in how she presented herself. She was so different from the previous female. It was jarring.

Thoughts of the softer, darker female drew my gaze to the flowers and I lingered a moment longer, eyeing them as I listened to Brixton chatter at Jerica behind me. A deep inhale through my nose brought one last trace of the female's scent to

me, before I turned to follow the galaxy's most annoying ambassador further into the mansion.

Maybe this stop would be more interesting after all.

2

Rowena

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit! I kicked him in the nuts! I just kicked Ambassador Hedran in the freaking nuts! I'm dead! I'm so dead!

My mind raced in a flurry of panicked thoughts, even as I maintained my easy stride out of the front foyer. Once I was safely out of sight, however, I shoved my cart of flower arrangements into the first empty room and bolted for the nearest employee bathroom where I proceeded to violently toss my cookies.

I absolutely hated confrontations. Handling them was easy enough if I had to, but as soon as it was over, the stress and nerves and adrenaline always left me feeling sick and shaky afterwards. Some of those times were easier than others, and this was not one of those.

The ambassador is gonna get me fired, I know it, I thought as I washed my face. Eyeing my pale complexion, I rinsed my mouth, spitting the vomit taste into the sink and groaning under my breath. He's so gonna get me fired. He'll go to Jerica and complain about the bitchy flower girl who assaulted him, and I'm gonna get fired! Or jailed...Do they jail people for attacking an ambassador? I think they do...God

I'm so dead...I'm gonna go to jail and some criminal is gonna make me her bitch...I don't want to be someone's bitch...

Jerica wouldn't care if I claimed self-defense, not when her reputation was on the line. It was my word against his, after all. I was a lowly worker with no proof. They could say I came on to the ambassador, maybe hoping to snag his attention and better myself with a rich male from Acair. Maybe they'd claim I attacked him after he turned me down? It was a fight I didn't see myself winning. Maybe I should run away? If I took off before he reported me, maybe I could escape?

No, that wouldn't work. My wry-com would totally give me away. My money was on it, my contacts were on it, everything was on it. My entire life was there. They could definitely track me with it, and there was no ditching it since Earth didn't use paper currency anymore.

"I am so fucking screwed," I told my reflection.

Voices out in the hall made me tense up and I froze, staring fearfully at the door. Certain that this was it, that security was looking for me, I waited for the door to burst open, but the voices continued onward. I slowly relaxed as they faded away. Fuck it, I just needed to do my job and act like nothing happened. If he reported me, I'd know soon enough...

I took a deep breath and peeked out into the hall. I sighed in relief. It was completely empty. Quickly grabbing my cart from where I stashed it, I hurried to the other rooms that needed flowers and placed them as quickly as I could. I wanted to get out of the estate and hide in my office for a while. It wasn't until I was down to the last rooms that I realized the ambassador's suite was one of them.

Cursing silently, I stared at the doors of the last two suites I had to go into. So far, the other rooms on this floor had been

empty, because the occupants were already out exploring and touring the estate. I could only pray Ambassador Hedran was doing the same, especially since I didn't know which suite was his yet and I really did not want to run into him again. Kicking a politician in the junk should be a one-time thing.

I stared at the doors, realizing it only made my sense of dread worse, so I grabbed one of the remaining arrangements and strode purposely for the first door. Knocking, I waited a moment, then tried the handle when there was no answer. It opened without needing my master key, so the occupant apparently left it unlocked. Letting out a relieved sigh, I headed deeper into the empty suite to set the flowers on the table in the middle of the main room.

There was a surprising amount of junk already scattered about the suite—considering the group had just arrived an hour ago—and I found myself stepping over clothes and bags as I crossed the room. A smaller bag was spilled across the table, which tumbled into a rainbow of colorful ribbons, jewels, and other baubles. I moved some of them from the center of the table and accidentally caused a handful of jewelry to roll off the table and hit the floor, then ping off the wood as they disappeared under the chairs. I seriously considered ignoring it, since it was obvious the tenant didn't care about his things, but I did not want to get blamed if anything went missing.

Leaving the flowers in the newly clear spot, I dropped down and hunted for the fallen objects. My search turned up four gold charms, which I reached up and chucked on the table as I found them, but further shuffling under the chairs showed no others so I assumed I'd found them all. Backing out from under the table and starting to stand, I hit someone big, warm, and unyielding.

My backside bumped into a large body and then a strong arm banded across my front, trapping me against a hard chest. Long thick fingers tipped in sharp claws wrapped around my throat and jaw. A low growl rumbled in my ear. My nose filled with a spicy, musky scent which made my belly clench and my panties dampen with an intense desire that surprised me. I could barely bite back the moan trying to escape.

“We meet again,” a deep voice growled softly over my head. “What are you doing here, na valeka?”

I whimpered softly, shivering as the arm tightened around me, holding me closer. My favorite, most private pleasure-sim didn't come close to what I was feeling right now. Whoever this male was, he was setting off every single one of my deepest, most secret fantasies. The ones no one around here could find out about. The ones that could *definitely* get me fired if my bosses knew I wasn't the asexual I claimed to be.

“Who exactly are you and why are you in these rooms?” he demanded again.

“R-Ro. My-my name's Rowena. I'm with the botanics and inventory department. I was just placing the flower arrangements,” I stuttered over my explanation, resisting the urge to press into the warmth of the male's body against my back.

Another low sound purred out of his chest and his head dipped, filling my peripheral vision with a large silver and black shape. The male sniffed the side of my neck, just below my ear, his breath hot on my skin. Something hard and rough brushed against my temple. Pale braided strands fell across my shoulder and dragged heavily over the small bare patch above my sleeve. I trembled again, groaning under my breath as my

head fell back onto his shoulder. His hands tightened on me, nails pricking my skin.

“Oh shit,” I blurted in a breathless whisper as the tiny stings of his claws sent off an electric rush through me, making me shudder from the small fearful thrill.

The alien tensed, then released me abruptly. Pushing me away, he spun me around by my arm to face him. I stared up into the bluest eyes I’d ever seen and was dumbstruck. It was the big alien from the foyer. I hadn’t really looked at him earlier because I’d been so mad at his boss. He was really tall; I had to crane my neck to look at him. All I could do was stare into those beautiful blue eyes.

This male was different from the Saveet Ambassador. Definitely older, more mature, he had a lean face with a square jaw and sharp cheekbones. Instead of Hedran’s softer golden hues, he was silvery gray and spotted over his shoulders with heavy black scales that ran down his arms. More of those scales framed his eyes, cheekbones, and chin.

Two pairs of horns rose off his head. One pair were short, sharply pointed, lightly curved, silver spikes protruded from his forehead and bent back over his head. I would bet money he could still skewer someone if he headbutted them, but they didn’t stick straight up. The other pair were bigger, darker, ram-like horns which curved out from his temples and went down towards his ears before coming back up to sharp silver points on either side of his forehead.

His hair was nearly white, pale and luminous against his gunmetal gray skin and black scales. Black and silver rings circled through his locks, flashing in the overhead lights. Piercings decorated his thin elf-like ears. Another peeked at me from his eyebrow, nearly hidden by his hair.

Glancing down, I stared in shock at his bare torso. It was this massive expanse of gorgeous bare skin and heavy scales that made my mouth water. This guy was *built!* Hadn't he had a shirt on earlier? What happened to his shirt?

Shirtless, he wore a set of loose emerald-colored trousers with what looked like armored boots. A tattered cream scarf hung from his belt. Armored gauntlets covered his forearms down to his hands, everything strapped in place with thick leather belts.

Where he wasn't covered by fabric, he bulged with muscle. His abdomen was stacked with at least an eight pack, maybe ten, topped by massive pectorals that looked like you could bounce a quarter off them. And criss-crossed all over his bare skin were scars. Lots of scars.

Long puckered scars slashed across his chest and belly where someone had tried to cut him open, and claw marks ran parallel down one arm. Wrapped around his upper arm was a large straight scar that looked as if he'd nearly lost his arm. A thinner scar bisected the unpierced eyebrow, just missing his gorgeous blue eye. Another scar broke the soft lines of his lower lip.

I couldn't help but stare at the alien. He was big and strong and rough and just...just beautiful. He was beautiful. So I stared at him in wide-eyed shock. How had I missed how gorgeous he was when we met in the foyer?

His eyes narrowed and then he glared down at me. A snarl twisted his lips, showing sharp fangs which caused the scar that cut into his lip to pull into an ugly grimace. A hint of trepidation shot through me, cutting into the lust I'd been feeling only moments ago. Suddenly, instead of seeing his gorgeous blue eyes and naked chest, I was seeing a lot of big horns, sharp teeth, and angry alien.

“Get out!” he barked savagely, pointing at the door with one hand and shoving me towards it with the other.

Startled, I hurried out of the suite and stumbled into the hallway. The door slammed shut behind me, cutting off the snarls from the big male inside. My heart was pounding, my knees felt weak, and I was having trouble catching my breath. Whatever had just happened left me reeling.

“What the hell was that?” I muttered under my breath, turning to stare at the suite I’d just been booted from.

“Is there a problem here, Miss Carter?” a sharp toned question snapped, breaking through my distraction. Jerica Lawson, the bane of my existence, was striding straight down the hall towards me.

Great, just what I need after that experience, I thought, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Well?” she demanded.

“No, no, ma’am. No problems. I just...I just met one of the new residents. He was...uh...” I trailed off lamely, brushing a wrinkle out of my uniform.

“Ah, The Noxel. Yes, he’s a very brutish fellow, isn’t he?” Jerica asked as she sniffed haughtily, gazing in the direction of the closed door.

“Uhh, he’s a little intense,” I commented with a shrug. “I think he was a little put out that I was in the room when he arrived.”

“Well, his job is to protect the ambassador. I imagine finding an unknown human in his quarters probably had him a little on edge,” Jerica flicked an imaginary lint from her sleeve, “especially when the ambassador was with him.”

“Oh. Ambassador Hedran was with him?” I asked, startled, glancing at the door involuntarily. I hadn’t noticed there was another male in the room.

Jerica eyed me with a raised brow, then let out a harsh bark of laughter. “Now I *know* you’re an asexual weirdo,” she said rudely. “No normal woman with a healthy libido would fail to notice a male *that* pretty. Even with the scowling monstrosity standing right in front of him.”

Only years of practice had kept me from reacting to Jerica’s barbs. Her opinion of anyone beneath herself was always bitchy and not worth noticing. There was nothing abnormal about me despite what she thought, but this job was more important than stooping to her level, no matter how much I might want to.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” My boss’s sudden glare was studious and watchful, almost as if she hoped to catch the big male in a misstep that would allow her to punish him or send him away. I knew she didn’t care about me, she just didn’t seem to like the ambassador’s bodyguard. I wondered what he’d done to get on her bad side so quickly.

“No, not at all. He just growled a little and kicked me out of the suite,” I assured her. “It was just startling, that’s all.”

Jerica gave me an irritated sniff and looked down her nose. As she did so, she tossed her hair haughtily. “Very well. Just stay out of the way and see to your duties as usual.”

“Yes, ma’am. Of course,” I replied, but she was already pacing away, no doubt her interaction with me now forgotten. I sighed, then pulled my hair out of its holder, letting it tumble down my back. Quickly smoothing it down again, I bundled it back into a bun and tied it into place once more. “Back to work.”

I grabbed my cart and headed down to the last suite on my list. Once I had the flowers in place, I could forget all about huge growly aliens with their big strong hands and their hot muscular bodies and their brilliant blue eyes.

Yeah, right...

Reynar

“Well...that went well,” Brixton commented drily from the doorway behind me.

I winced. That had *not* gone well. We’d been discussing his itinerary for the next day when we’d heard the sound of someone moving about in the front room. Needless to say, we’d both been rendered speechless at the sight of the female’s ass practically on display as she crawled around under the table. The only thing more shocking was when she crawled out and I realized it was the fiery female from earlier. I couldn’t resist the urge to confront her and wrap her in my arms again.

She’d almost seemed to enjoy my touch, then I’d felt her body shudder. The tremor had run through her and there’d been a hint of acrid fear in her scent. When I’d spun her around, her eyes had gone wide at the sight of me. Somehow, earlier, she hadn’t really seen me and was too focused on Brixton to give me more than a passing glance. This time she got a good look, and it was the same as with all the other females: frightened of the monster.

“The one female who stands there eye-fucking you instead of quivering in ridiculously feminine terror and you have to go and throw her out,” Brixton said with a pouty tone. “I thought that was rather fun until you ruined it, you big oaf.”

Turning, I stared at the younger male in incredulity. “What are...Are you insane? What are you talking about?”

Brixton burst into riotous laughter, his eyes dancing as he watched me. “You really don’t see it, do you?” he replied once he stopped. “You didn’t notice how aroused that female was over you? Didn’t smell the wonderful change in her scent when you pulled her against you?”

“I smelled her fear,” I growled, stomping towards the small bar for a much-needed drink.

Brixton scoffed lightly. “A little fear can make sex and arousal more exhilarating! What you did stimulated her, excited her; her slit was wet for you. She likes you. Or she did until you snarled and chased her away like a brute.”

My thoughts churned as I poured a glass of something the humans had labeled vodka. It didn’t really have much of a smell and looked like water, so I decided it must be one of their milder alcohols. When I turned back to the main room with my drink in hand, I noticed Brixton was peeking through the door. This was the stillest and quietest I’d ever seen the male in his entire life and it made me want to rip him apart, since I knew he was spying on my female.

My hand clenched around the glass I was holding. There was that idea again. She wasn’t my female, not now, not ever. She couldn’t be. I watched in seething silence until Brixton eased the door closed and returned to the middle of the room, flopping on one of the sofas. He was grinning that stupid grin again as he watched me, like he was waiting for me to give away my thoughts. Instead, I threw back my glass of vodka, downing the contents in one gulp.

The scentless drink burned like acid as it ran down my throat and tore its way to my stomach, which left tears in my eyes.

Choking and gagging on the poisonous brew, I dropped my glass, only vaguely hearing it shatter as it hit the ground. Brixton laughed from where he sat, watching me die an agonizing death by human liquor.

When I could finally breathe again, I blinked to clear my vision and found I'd collapsed to my hands and knees on the floor. Brixton handed me a glass of actual water and patted me sympathetically as I sipped it in between gasping breaths.

"Next time, ask which ones to avoid," he said with a chuckle. "You won't like moonshine either, by the way."

"It doesn't even smell like it should hurt that much," I wheezed. "It's worse than the cactus liquor they make at the Grestian Oasis."

"Yes, it is," he agreed in a drawl. "And moonshine reminds me of bortege wine from the Delrex Caverns."

We both shuddered at that comparison. Bortege wine wasn't even made from fruit. Instead, it was distilled from the blood of a domesticated roca-beast that had been fed a strict diet of dried sand-hoppers. The wine was sour, acidic, and had an old meat aftertaste.

"I'll pass, thank you," I said gruffly.

"I thought you might. The best human alcohols are the ones they call mixers. And champagne. I like champagne. I'll order you my favorite at the next banquet," Brixton offered, folding his frame into the cushions of the sofa once more.

I grunt in reply. I'll be working and unable to drink, but there was no point arguing with him. He'd order one for me regardless of my protests. I'd just have to dispose of it when he was busy elsewhere.

"The female—" he started.

“Don’t,” I interrupted, trying to end the conversation.

“—really likes you,” he finished, giving me that annoying grin of his.

Sighing, I shook my head in denial. “There’s no way.”

“Then why would she defend you?”

“What?”

“Out in the hall. Her superior found her out in the hall and must have noticed how flustered she was. She was asking if you’d hurt her. She could have lied and had you punished. Instead, she defended you. And she didn’t notice I was in the room. It’s strange, you know.”

“What is?”

“I’ve never had a female make me feel quite so inadequate as your little warrior does,” Brixton said in a thoughtful voice. “It’s very strange.”

Glancing at the door she’d left through, I couldn’t help but agree with him. Fiery little Rowena left me feeling rather strange as well and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.



Rowena

Surprisingly enough, the first few days of the ambassador's visit passed rather quietly with no further run-ins with the male or his bodyguard. Once I got the floral arrangements in place, I didn't need to spend much time in the estate except to add some water to the vases and check for signs of wilting.

Krista was gone on her vacation, and I was now in charge of keeping the flowers alive. I did discover that some of the flowers we'd used were more delicate than the others and started wilting soon after being placed in the arrangements. Those needed to be dealt with quickly before Jerica noticed.

The smaller arrangements inside the suites were easy enough to take care of. I snuck in when everyone was out, watered them, swept up the wilted petals, and plucked out anything that was dying. The only issues I'd had so far was walking into the bodyguard's suite one morning and hearing the shower running, so I hightailed it out of there and came back later. Then another morning, I found the arrangement in the ambassador's suite had been knocked over sometime the night before and I had to run back to the greenhouse to make a new one.

The fifth morning since the group arrived, I was in the largest conference room with a boxful of freshly cut blooms. This particular arrangement was beautiful but enormous and took up an entire corner of the room. It consisted of everything from small puffy blossoms in fluffy clusters around the opening of the wide vase, to long flowering cherry branches that spread out in wide arcs and touched the walls. It was one of Krista's more ostentatious designs and could only be pulled off in the spring when the cherries were in bloom, but it was gorgeous. Plus, Jerica *demanded* this arrangement, so it had to be done.

It was only meant to be displayed for two or three days. After that, the small blooms would start to die and needed refreshing. The branches wouldn't last much longer either, but I would have to make it last for as long as possible.

With that goal in mind, I was now tucked under the front branches of the floral arrangement, slowly pulling flowers out of the giant heavy base, swapping them for fresher sprigs and stems. The branches stretched out over my head and snagged in my hair as I moved, rustling gently whenever I pulled free. Surrounded by the cloyingly sweet scent of blossoms, my sinuses ached.

The door creaked and I froze, still not used to being inside the estate like this. Glancing past the branches curving over my head, I realized I was partially obscured by the arrangement itself and completely shielded by the conference table sitting in the middle of the room. Whoever was walking in wouldn't see me unless they came around the table and looked right at me. I hesitated, knowing I should announce myself, but I was nervous about being caught in the conference room. Swallowing anxiously, I opened my mouth to speak but stilled again as other voices cut me off.

“Jerica, I’ve got the infor—”

“Not out here, you fool! Inside, where no one else will hear us!” Jerica hissed. I didn’t know who it was and I didn’t recognize the other woman’s voice.

The door closed and I flinched when the table creaked under someone’s weight. As long as whoever was leaning on the table stayed over there, they wouldn’t see me.

“Now you can tell me what you learned,” Jerica ordered haughtily.

“The family is rich, like they could own half the planet if they wanted to, super rich. They’re seeking a big political alliance for the kid, so the dowry is huge. They want a permanent *in* with the UEG, but they also want ties with a lot of land, so they’re looking for a *top tier* match and are turning down inquiries left and right.” The mystery woman listed out the information excitedly. I could practically feel her jittering.

Jerica hummed thoughtfully. “You think they can get one?”

“Oh yeah,” she replied eagerly. “There’s a lot of interest from the Gerhardt family *and* the Henricksons, and that’s not even counting any of the international families. All the big players want this kid.”

“What about the career?”

“Not a problem. It’s a ruse. That career is over, done, finite. The family already has a replacement in place to take over. They don’t care about a career, it’s just an excuse to show off. You know, trot out the pretty little pony and all. From what I’ve learned, once the wedding is over, that couple is going to be expected to pop out babies asap. Though there is a fertility block in place, it has to be removed by a med-unit first.” Jerica’s friend let out a nasty little chuckle.

“Any chance of the match falling through once it’s made? Or being terminated?”

“Nope, apparently the match is somehow permanent. I couldn’t get any info on why or how. Once it’s done, it’s done.”

“Good, so the family can’t annul it even if they come after us,” Jerica mused with a thoughtful sound. “We just need to figure out how to slip away and stay hidden long enough to make it permanent. I’m sure getting pregnant right away would help seal the deal, so we need to have everything set up for that too.”

The stranger laughed. “Never thought I’d see the day you’d want to elope,” she teased.

“Shut up bitch,” Jerica snarled. “Just keep this shit to yourself and I’ll see you well rewarded when this is done.”

The table lurched as someone, Jerica probably, shoved away from it. Then the door banged open, and Jerica’s heels beat a quick staccato march away before the door swung shut again, cutting off the sound. I nearly wet myself when another ugly chuckle rolled through the air. Her friend was still here.

“Greedy damn bitch,” she muttered to herself. The door finally creaked open, and her steps left the room as well, but I stayed frozen in place for another few minutes before daring to move.

Peering around the base of the table, I checked for feet. Finding none, I slowly peeked higher. The room was empty. I breathed a sigh of relief. I didn’t know what the heck that was about, but I could only imagine how pissed Jerica would be to find out I’d overheard her conversation. And planning to elope? What the hell was that about?

Who was Jerica planning to elope with? And did the poor girl have any idea of what she was getting into with that horrid bitch? Did she even know about the elopement plans? There were so many questions about that highly suspicious conversation, but did I really want to answer them?

Reynar

Someone has been in my rooms, I discovered upon returning from the dining hall after a morning meal with Brixton. The boy was visiting with yet another human supplicant, this one a local from the nearest mating agency hoping to court the favor of the Acair Council. I was off-rotation this morning with the assurances that the UEG guards and my team were more than enough to handle any problems that may arise. Considering they weren't leaving the grounds of the estate, I was inclined to agree. The humans were competent enough and had been trustworthy as far as I was concerned. My own team were well-trained, competent males who knew how to keep an eye on Brixton.

The housekeepers came in daily to make the bed and pick up the dirty laundry, but this one wasn't one of them. I caught the new scent as soon as I entered my suite. A different female than usual had been inside recently. Her presence was further confirmed by the fresh flowers in the center of the table. Their heady fragrance nearly drowned her more delicate one, but it was there, the last of it lingering near the door. Rowena had been here. The urge to track her down clamored in me, but I shook it off. She was off limits.

Proceeding further into the room, I ignored the disappointment that rose in me as her scent faded under the heavy floral odor. I

wanted only to retrieve my training harness and go for a run, just because I was no longer a gladiator did not mean I would no longer train as one. Pausing at the sight of my bedroom door ajar, I scented the air again, but detected nothing under the scent of flowers and the tiny traces of my Rowena.

My Rowena, ha! I scoffed at my outrageous presumption.

Pushing the door open, I paused and inspected the room closely. Her scent was stronger here. Everything looked the same...except...I'd dropped my towel on the floor after my shower this morning, hadn't I? It was now hung over the back of the chair. Picking it up, I sniffed it and smiled as Rowena's scent wafted from its folds. She'd been here in my bed chambers, touching my things. Her scent grew stronger as I roamed the room searching out the source.

A tunic discarded on the foot of the bed had been neatly refolded. Tools used to sharpen my favorite blades had been straightened on the desk. The lid of my hair oil was slightly crooked as if someone had opened it but hadn't closed it properly. There was no rhyme or reason to the items Rowena had touched. Why had she gone through my things? Was she looking for something in particular? Abandoning the idea of training, I decided to seek out the nosey little female and find out just what she was up to.

Knowing I couldn't ask for her directly, I simply wandered out onto the grounds as if on a morning stroll. The estate gardens were lovely and had quite a few walking paths winding throughout the various sections. The paths branched off in different directions, some going off to the North around the side of the estate, some to the East, deeper into the garden. Rowena's scent led down an Eastward path, curving towards the back of the property.

As I carefully followed the lingering traces of her scent, I stalked Rowena down the garden paths to the back of the estate. There was almost no foot traffic and there were fewer security cameras this far out from the main building.

The flowers and plants here grew in more regulated formations. There was more regimented planning and fewer of the casual beds like the ones around the mansion. More than half the beds were vegetables and fruits as opposed to ornamental flowers and shrubs. This must be where they harvested the plants they used to feed and decorate the estate. My suspicions were confirmed when I spied a handful of bots harvesting from a few beds over.

The breeze was light today, but it did make following Rowena's scent much more difficult as it wafted away until I simply wandered along the paths, hoping to find her. The sun drifted lazily higher, warming my skin. I paused near a small pond, finding it was neither decorative or ornamental. It appeared to be there strictly as a water source for a nearby sprinkler system, but there was a small flowering water plant growing on its surface regardless of its intended use. Small, round, flat leaves floated in clusters with bright pink flowers. They added a pop of softer color to the dark water. It was a pretty scene in the middle of all this rigid structure around me.

The wind shifted just then, changing direction to blow in my face and bringing a welcome scent. Rowena was close.

Turning into the wind, I followed the sweet lure of the female's scent. Emerging from a small stand of trees, I spotted her at the base of another. She appeared to be trying to cut some of the smaller flowering branches from the tree. No doubt for the estate, if I had to guess from the number of other flowers I saw inside the cart she'd left in the tree's shade.

Quietly moving closer, I could see the sheen of sweat on her skin and a smudge of dirt on her cheek. Wisps of hair had escaped her braid, drifting around her face and clinging to her damp forehead. I grinned as she growled under her breath, cursing and swiping the sweat and hair from her eyes as she reached for her target. Distracted, she had no idea I was right behind her. I leaned in, silently breathing in the delectable odor of her body. How was I supposed to resist this female when she smelled so good? Why did I even want to?

“You were in my room again, na valeka,” I whispered in her ear, startling a shriek of surprise from my little female.

Rowena whirled around, staring wide-eyed at me. My hand caught the trimmers that swung around with her, and I held them almost negligently, like she hadn’t almost hit me with them.

“You scared the hell outta me!” she snapped angrily.

My lip quirked, pulling at the scar there and revealed a hint of my fangs. She was so adorably fierce. “You were in my room again,” I repeated softly, pulling the trimmers free of her grip and dropping them on the ground.

“Well...yeah, I...I had to change the flowers. It’s part of my job,” she replied nervously.

Prowling closer to my prey, I loomed over Rowena, watching delightedly as she unknowingly backed herself into the tree. Her back hit the trunk and she gulped. Her hands flew back to grip the bark briefly before coming back to cling to each other in front of her body.

That little bastard Brixton was right, the smell of fear and arousal filled the air as I caged her against the tree. Her hands

came up between us, resting on my chest, but neither pushing me away nor pulling me closer.

“You were in my *bedroom*, na valeka, where there are no flowers,” I clarified, giving her a secretive smile. “You were even on my bed. What were you doing? Not housekeeping work, for the suite was not cleaned. Not maintenance, for nothing was broken. Not for room service, for I ate in the dining hall. So, what were you doing in my bedroom?”

“What does na valeka mean?” she asked instead of answering.

I smiled, and her expression told me she knew I could tell she was avoiding my question. “I will tell you one day, na valeka, but not today. Today... today you will tell me why your scent was on my sheets. Did you lay in my bed? Wrap yourself in my blankets? Put your sweet head on my pillow?” I purred.

Bracing one hand on the trunk overhead, I leaned in to rub my cheek over hers, marking her with my scent as I growled my words softly in her ear. It was the barest touch, the only part of me that made contact with her. Her breath hitched in my ear as a tiny shudder ran through her, the scent of her desire strengthened.

Rowena

All I could see was him. Blue eyes. Bare chest and shoulders. Huge black horns filled my vision, even as he carefully angled them away from my face. I could feel the warmth of his body as he overwhelmed my senses. His musky-spice scent filled my nose and sent wet heat pooling between my legs. Turning his head, he sniffed the curve of my neck, then drew his tongue across the beads of sweat there. Shuddering, I moaned softly and felt hard muscle under my hands.

“Did you pleasure yourself in my bed, na valeka?” he whispered, then nipped at my earlobe.

I jolted, first from the shock of his bite, then from the words as I finally made sense of them. Stiffening angrily, I pushed at him, trying to ignore the desire to explore the scars and muscles and scales I felt on his chest.

“You’re a pig! Get the hell off me,” I ordered crossly. “I did no such thing, and I don’t have to answer you! So fuck off!”

Instead of being insulted, the male chuckled. “There she is,” he said softly, eyeing me with a heated expression.

“There who is?” I couldn’t push him away, so I settled for crossing my arms over my chest and scowling up at him.

“The little warrior who dared to kick a favored son of Acair in the, what do you humans say? In the balls, is it?”

“Yeah, and I’ll fucking kick yours in too if you don’t leave me alone,” I threatened.

“You will try, na valeka, but you will find I am much faster than the spoiled little boy you defeated just days ago.”

“I’m a lot tougher than you think I am, jackass,” I retorted.

“Reynar.” His reply was short and confusing.

“What?”

“My name is Reynar Velden. Not jackass, not alien, not bodyguard,” he explained, lifting his free hand to pull my braid over my shoulder.

The sight of it sliding through his big fingers as he raised it to his nose and inhaled sent more shivers tingling through me. I had to resist the urge to melt into him. He must have seen the

slight softening in my frame though. His hand tightened and he pulled lightly on my hair, tugging me towards him.

“What are you doing?” I asked quietly.

“I don’t really know, but I don’t want to stop either,” he murmured, hesitating just before his lips touched mine. “Don’t make me stop. Please don’t ask me to stop,” Reynar said, his voice dropping to an almost desperate whisper as he hovered over me.

“We shouldn’t,” I replied just as quietly, but my hands flitted up to his chest again and caught at the braided strands that had slipped over his own shoulders, preventing him from pulling away.

A growl of desire rumbled in his chest and he closed the final distance between us. His arm slipped around my waist, crushing me to his body and then his lips were on mine. His kiss wasn’t soft and coaxing. It wasn’t sweet and slow and seductive. It was fierce and hard and addictive, a fight for dominance as he claimed me in one swift, brutal act of passion. I couldn’t get enough of it.

Fangs nipped at my lower lip, drawing a gasp from me. Sliding his tongue past my lips, he licked at my own in a wet, erotic tangle. He breathed into me, filling me with heat, then took it back just as easily. I was dizzy from the barrage of sensations. He thrust against my tongue, mimicking the act of fucking, which left me breathless and weak in my knees. His hands roamed over my clothes, searching for a way underneath and then he found a way in.

The hard sweep of his hands on my bare skin dragged a moan out of me that felt like it came from my toes. I broke free from his kiss, gasping for air and arching into his palm as his hand delved into my bra from below and massaged the aching flesh

of my breast. His face tilted into the curve of my neck again and he suckled at the soft spot just above my shoulder, making me cry out and writhe against him.

“Oh fuck! Reynar!” I gasped as his hand pushed down the front of my cargo pants and started fighting with the edge of my panties. The delicious rasp of his rough fingers set my nerve endings on fire.

A sudden urgent beeping interrupted us and made us both freeze. We panted harshly as our surroundings filtered back into our awareness. Reynar took a deep breath, smoothed a hand over his hair, and stepped away from me, raising his comm unit to his face. Tapping it to answer, he stared at me as he spoke, pinning me in place with his intense gaze.

“What is it?” he asked, sounding only mildly inconvenienced, yet looking highly agitated.

“Reynar!” The ambassador’s voice rang out enthusiastically. “Where are you, my good friend?” There was a slight slur to his speech the longer he talked, and I grimaced. It was rather early in the day to be wasted.

“Are you drunk, Brixton?” he asked irritably. Apparently, he shared my opinion of the ambassador’s poor timing. “It’s not even midday.”

“Tchh! No! Of course not! I just had some lovely little human drinks called mimosas with my brunch. They are made from *juice*,” he retorted with a drunken giggle. “They are tasty! I have had eight of them!”

I facepalmed with a sigh. Misty in the kitchens did make a lovely mimosa. Lovely and mean, considering she put nearly twice the alcohol they’re supposed to have in them. I’m not even sure they qualify as mimosas anymore since they only

had enough orange juice to give them the right color. Mary apparently used something a heck of a lot stronger than champagne in them too. Ambassador Hedran was most definitely wasted and very likely on his way to one hell of a hangover.

“Where are you?” Reynar demanded, his expression turning serious and angry. “Where are your current guards?”

Brixton chortled like a child before answering in a conspiratorial whisper. “I snuck away from them and I’m hiding in the linen closet with *all* the fluffy towels.”

Reynar groaned under his breath and carefully dipped his forehead against my shoulder for a moment. “Stay put,” he gritted between his teeth without lifting his head. Cutting his comm-link, he sighed and then kissed my forehead before stepping away from me. “Regretfully, duty calls. I must leave you to locate my charge before he does something truly idiotic.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s okay. This was probably a bad idea anyways,” I stammered slightly, trying to pull myself together and not beg him to ignore his moron boss in favor of a roll in the grass.

“Sometimes the best ideas are bad ideas,” he replied, leaning in and kissing me again. This time it was a gentle kiss, soft and sweet. He slanted his lips across mine, coaxing me to open again. Slipping a hand behind my neck, he tilted my head back, deepening the kiss and nipping gently at my bottom lip. He pulled away and his features softened. “I hope to have many more bad ideas with you.”

He was gone before I could reply, striding away through the trees and disappearing back into the gardens. How a male of

his size could move so quietly I had no idea, but if I didn't already know he was there, I'd never have believed it.

It was hard to concentrate on my work after he left. I didn't know what I was going to do. Letting him flirt and kiss me was such a bad idea, but it was so nice having someone pay attention to me like he did.

Growing up, I'd always felt like the odd one out. My sister Evie was the biological daughter of our family group. Our moms birthed her naturally. They saved up and managed to get Mama Kate approved for in vitro fertilization. Evie was the miracle baby of the family, while I was adopted. They took me in when my birth mother died in an accident. The moms never made me feel like I was any less wanted than Evie. It was all in my own head of course, but it didn't make me feel any better and it made it hard for me to reach out to them.

So I acted out, took risks, did stupid stuff, and made a general nuisance of myself. Hence my current financial straits. My moms were always trying to figure me out and I was always trying to push them away. Oddly enough, Evie was the one person I felt I could open up to. She was the only one that never made me feel like I was a screw up, even when I knew I was. When I needed help, I turned to Evie and she helped me, no questions asked.

I really wanted to ask Evie for advice about Reynar, but the risk of my comms being monitored while the ambassador was in residence was too high. This time, I was on my own with my problems. I'd have to figure this shit out by myself, and I wasn't very good at thinking with my head around him. Reynar made every inch of me sit up, begging to be touched.

Honestly though, I wasn't sure how helpful anybody could be with this situation.

Reynar

Leaving Rowena behind when her scent was so strong, I knew she was wet and willing, but it was one of the hardest things I have ever done. When I found that idiot Brixton, I was going to make him wish he'd never even heard of a mimosa much less let one pass his lips. In my frustration, I failed to ask which linen closet he was hiding in before he turned his damned comm off. Now the little twit wasn't answering it and for obvious security reasons, his comm could not be tracked without a great deal of bureaucratic nonsense. I was forced to ask the human workers where to find the closet with the *fluffy* towels.

The estate itself was four stories in a U-shape with two wings coming off the main part of the mansion. There were twenty-two living suites between both wings, as well as a handful of conference rooms, receiving rooms, parlors, and a ballroom. Besides the public rooms, there were also non-public areas like kitchens—yes more than one—laundry, and various closets for cleaning and storage. At least half the closets throughout the manor were actually linen closets.

And it was just my luck to discover that nearly half of those linen closets had fluffy towels. Starting with the ones closest to where Brixton ate brunch with the humans, I directed a search of every closet. As time was of the essence, I chose expediency over discretion and alerted my entire team to find the missing ambassador. The UEG guards and my own team members who were supposed to be keeping an eye on him would be receiving an earful *after* we found him, both for

losing him and for not following protocol and alerting me immediately.

After eighteen minutes and twenty-three linen closets, I finally opened one outside a third-floor sauna and located my charge curled up in a nest of towels he'd made in the bottom of the big closet. It might be cute if he was four and hadn't unknowingly pulled me away from Rowena.

Sighing, I tapped my comm, opening a link to the rest of the team. "Stand down, I've found him. Third-floor storage closet near the sauna and hygiene rooms."

A series of acknowledgements answered me before I silenced my comm. Reaching out, I poked Brixton with my boot and drew a grumble of complaint from the snoring male. He rolled away from me, pulling more towels over his head to block out the light from the open door.

Squatting closer to the heap that was the Saveet Ambassador, I leaned close to his head and pulled the towel away from his ear. "Brixton!" I barked.

He jumped and sat up, smacking his short horn spikes on the shelf above his head, then fell back into his heap with a groan. "Owww, wa wuz zat for?" he asked, slurring badly and squinting at me.

"You are very drunk," I replied, grabbing his arm and guiding him out of his towel nest. "You are drunk and making a mess in the closet. You eluded your own protection team and have been missing for far too long. You weren't answering your comm."

Brixton giggled, grinning lopsidedly. "An you foun me. I knew yud fine me, Ray. You alway fine me. You ma bes fren."

“I am your bodyguard, Brixton. It’s my job to find you.” I sighed, trying to stand the young male on his feet. He reeked of alcohol and could barely keep his eyes open.

“Noooooooooooo. Nooo, no, no. Yoouuu can’t jus say that!” he replied, shaking a finger in what I’m sure he thought was my direction, but ended up being more to my left. “You er alway ther fer me. You gib me advize an tell me wen I’s bein a idiot an look ou fer me. Jus like a gud big brudder. You my...”

Brixton’s eyes rolled back into his head and his words cut off as he pitched forward, passing out once more. Catching him before he could hit the floor and damage himself, I hefted him over my shoulder, put his drunken rambling out of my head, and turned down the hall to take him to the med-bed in his room. He needed an exam to make sure he hadn’t caused himself any damage with this latest escapade.

“Oh good, you’ve located him,” a familiar, feminine, and unwelcome matter-of-fact voice stated.

Barely suppressing a growl, I turned to face Ms. Lawson. I did not want to deal with her at this moment. There was something about the woman I didn’t like and it was obvious that she definitely didn’t like me either.

“I would not have had to locate him if your security team had been doing their job,” I replied stiffly.

Her false smile fell and she glared openly at me. “And just where were you then? You *are* his bodyguard.”

“I am entitled to my off-cycles same as your staff. You assured me they were competent to assist my team in keeping an eye on him. Obviously there were failures on both sides. I also question the intelligence in serving such strong alcohol so early in the morning. My people are unfamiliar with Earth

alcohols and their effects on our systems. Is that common for you humans? To become incapacitated before the day truly begins?”

Ms. Lawson’s body went stiff with outrage, her fists clenched and her frame shaking in anger. “How dare you question how I handle my staff. They are more than competent. If anything, the failure is on you and your staff. And if I had any say, you would be gone for your insolence,” she hissed.

“It is good you have no say then, otherwise I’m sure Brixton would still be missing, or worse,” I growled, striding away from her.

“He is Ambassador Hedran to you, you animal!” she snapped behind me.

My only reply was to throw a vulgar human gesture I’d learned from the vid-ay-os over my shoulder at her. Her gasp of outrage made me grin, but the muffled giggles from a witness in a side hall were more rewarding. It seemed she wasn’t very popular with her own staff either.

Carrying Brixton up to his suite, I keyed open the door and headed for the med-bed. It lit up as soon as I stood inside its sensor range, the screen powering up and entering a waiting mode. I lay the young male on the bed gently, arranging his long limbs to lie straight so he was comfortable while the unit scanned him. The jostling roused him a little and he groaned.

“Surry,” he slurred.

“For what?” I asked, tucking the blanket over him. Sure, he was a prick sometimes, but I remembered when he was a kid following me around. He wasn’t all that bad.

“Fer bein a ass,” he mumbled.

“Ehh, just makes the job more interesting,” I muttered, then I stepped back and pressed the button to start the diagnostic and treatment cycle. He’d be fine in no time. Some fluids, a nap, and a little bit of pain medicine for the headache he would no doubt have, and then he would be the same pain in my ass that he always was.



Rowena

Getting roped into serving at a late afternoon beach party for the visiting aliens was not my idea of fun. I would much rather be *enjoying* the party myself, but at least it wasn't horrifically hot today. For late-April it was a breezy warm day—nice and sunny for now—but not uncomfortable. At least they let the staff wear beach clothes too, so I wasn't uncomfortable in my stuffy uniform.

The ambassador, his entourage, and his groupies were all laughing and splashing around in the rushing water. The waves were stiff and cranking, verging on being choppy if the wind picked up, but as long as no one went too far out, it should be safe enough to play in the shallows. Four or five lifeguards stood ready, waiting all around the beach perimeter. Reynar stood just above the waterline like a sentinel, watching the boisterous group with an alert but bored expression.

My job was to set up the food and drinks on the tables that had been set up just above the high tide line. The path up and down the beach took me past Reynar and each time I felt his attention shift to me, his eyes were like a brand. Not staring at him in return was difficult.

He'd been on my mind ever since our kiss in the garden yesterday. I'd dreamed about him last night, woken up wet and aching because of him. Why had he come looking for me? He wasn't a mate candidate, and even if he was I wasn't in a position to apply for a mate. If the employment office found out I lied, I could be facing some serious fines. I'd definitely lose my job. Getting involved with the handsome alien wasn't worth the trouble, especially with him leaving when the ambassador left.

Sighing under my breath as my thoughts tumbled about, I headed back to the catering truck for the next grav-pallet of food and drinks. Guiding it to the tables, I arranged everything under the umbrellas, replacing trays that had already been emptied and sliding the extras into cooling units under the tables.

"It is good to see you here, na valeka," Reynar said, his low voice coming from over the edge of the table. "Saves me the trouble of hunting for you later."

Looking up, I saw him on the other side, seemingly perusing the snacks. His brilliantly blue eyes flickered warmly over my swimsuit as I stood, and a quiet, appreciative purr rolled out of him.

"Uh, can I help you find something?" I offered, trying to play it cool. I couldn't take any chances. There was no telling who could be listening.

"The ambassador wants a snack, but I've already found what I want," he replied softly, quirking a small smile at me. I shivered at the hint of fang that flashed from his lopsided grin. He made a show of picking up a strawberry and taking a bite, then licked the juice off his lips.

Why does he have to be so fucking hot? I thought, cursing my shitty luck. “Do you need a drink to go with your snack then? We have a nice selection of flavored water and carbonated beverages?”

“I—”

Sudden shouting cut off whatever flirty response he might have had, and we turned to look down the beach. A big wave must have crashed into the group in the water, knocking everyone over and tumbling them about. Reynar and I moved away from the tables and I knew he was trying to locate Brixton in the mass of flailing bodies.

Another wave rolled over the group, knocking them about again. Members of the staff shouted for help as they rushed across the sand to the distressed party. Forgotten beach towels blew away in the wind, abandoned amidst the panic.

The lifeguards all moved in and started fishing people out of the water and getting them back on their feet, but still the ambassador hadn't appeared. It was becoming increasingly apparent that there weren't enough lifeguards as a third massive wave slammed in and sent people flying again. A neon green flash popped up briefly on the other side of the wave as Reynar and I raced for the water's edge.

“BRIXTON!” he roared.

The ambassador was being pulled out to sea and I remembered hearing someone say earlier how he couldn't swim. The waves rolled him under again before he could call for help. The lifeguards were still distracted and kept fishing out the others. They hadn't noticed the lone body disappearing into the deeper water. Reynar's bellows got everyone's attention though and they looked up, watching us both run for the water.

He couldn't swim any more than Brixton could, so I stopped him at the water's edge by placing a hand on his chest.

"Stay here!" I yelled, ripping off my sarong to free my legs and thrusting it at him. Then turning, I plowed into the water, diving under the incoming waves. Shouts faded behind me as I focused on the green clad figure in the water somewhere in front of me. Someone should be fetching a wake-rider and following me soon.

Brixton surfaced ahead of me again, gasping for air and clawing at the water, trying to keep his head up. It was a rip current though, I could feel it pulling at me and I swam with it, letting it pull me towards him faster. As I got closer, I saw that he was fighting it while trying to stay above water. I could see the panic in his eyes as he tired.

Panicked people make for the worst rescues, I thought.

The water rolled him under again, just before I reached him and dove, chasing the young male as the current pushed him into the darkness below. His copper-colored skin and golden hair shone in the water, making him a beacon in the blue. I snatched at him, grabbing a handful of glittery braids. Then I yanked him back to the surface. We came up outside the current and into the calmer open water of the ocean.

Brixton puked out water and sucked in air as his head cleared the water. Immediately grabbing me in desperation, he pulled me under in his terror. Fighting free of him, I dragged him upwards once more. He grabbed at me again, flailing and crying as waves rocked around us. Needing to get control quickly, I punched him hard in the jaw, wincing at the pain radiating through my fist from the impact.

Momentarily stunning him, I slipped behind Brixton and wrapped my arm around his neck, pulling him into a float with

me. We couldn't fight the current back to shore, but I knew the lifeguards would be right behind me. They'd fish us out soon enough, as long as the ambassador didn't panic again. He tensed in my grip, his hands coming up to clutch at my wrist.

"Don't fight me," I ordered, tightening my arm around his neck. "I swear I will choke you unconscious if I have to. Just relax and float with me. The others will be here soon."

"You...you hit me," he accused, panting weakly.

"Would you rather I let you drown?" I countered.

"No. No, I am very glad not to be drowning any longer, but why did you hit me?" Brixton asked, his voice trembling slightly, which made him sound scared and very, very young.

I sighed softly. "You were panicking and what you were doing could have killed us both. I needed you to stop, but there was no way you were going to listen to me like that," I explained, adjusting my hold and treading water a bit. Brixton tensed again. "Just relax, Brixton. I've got you. You're safe now. I promise."

"I would have thought you of all people would rather see me dead," he joked in poor taste.

I scoffed. "I hate paperwork. You can drown when I'm not around, that way I don't have to fill out an incident report."

Brixton choked out a laugh at my words. "Duly noted, my warrior goddess."

"I'm not your anything, bud. Just remember that okay?"

The low buzz of a wake-rider reached my ears just before the tiny watercraft came into view, with a red-clad lifeguard at the helm and Reynar standing tall behind her. Two other boats flanked it but stopped out of range as the first one pulled close

to Brixton and me. They pulled up beside us, the waves from the boat rocking us roughly and splashing Brixton in the face. He sputtered and thrashed at the water as fear hit him again, but Reynar and the lifeguard were already there, leaning over the side and pulling him out of my arms.

Relieved of my burden, I floated for a moment while they got him settled on board the little boat. I was just too tired now to climb out on my own, so I waited for help. When a shadow fell over my face, I opened my eyes and realized that Reynar was reaching out for me. Taking his hand, I let him pull me out of the water and into the small boat. The lifeguard handed him a big towel and he wrapped it around me, pulling me close for a short hug when the lifeguard turned her back. His lips placed a quick kiss in my hair as he sat me next to Brixton, who was also wrapped in a towel and appeared to have already passed out on the bench.

“Poor kid,” I commented, looking over at him.

“He’ll be fine,” Reynar assured me. “As a boy, he was always getting himself into one perilous scrape or another. He always recovered rather well. I’m sure in a day or two this will all have been yet another grand adventure for him.”

“I guess it’s better than dwelling on the trauma,” I replied with a shrug.

“He would be gone if not for you,” Reynar stated, turning serious. “Of all the things I would have expected, this was never something any of our people planned for. We have no experience with such an abundance of water. Getting this boat took far too long. You saved his life where I would have failed. Thank you.”

“Hey, no big deal. I grew up on the beach. I could swim before I could walk,” I said easily. “And like I told him, I hate

paperwork. He can drown on my off day, so I don't have to write an incident report."

Reynar laughed, drawing the attention of the lifeguard who looked at me in question. I shrugged and shook my head. I didn't really know the woman, but I figured there was nothing to see that I should worry about, and I was so tired I didn't really care, though I knew I should.

It was a short ride back to the beach and I groaned when I saw Jerica's figure in the front of the waiting crowd. I just wanted to go home at this point but if she was here there would be questions, lots and lots of questions.

The wake-rider drove right up onto the beach, quietly switching to hover over the sand as the driver took us straight to a waiting medic crew. Brixton was loaded onto a stretcher and whisked away to a mobile med-pod that would check him over while we waited. Reynar spared me a final glance and nodded, then followed behind the medics and disappeared.

"Miss Carter!" Jerica shouted, her voice ringing out across the beach, making me cringe.

Stepping down from the boat, I turned to face my boss who marched towards me like an angry bull. The breeze that had been so nice earlier was now chilly on my wet uniform. I shivered, pulling the towel tighter around me. "Yes, Ms. Lawson?" I asked when she was right in front of me.

"The others have told me some of what happened already, and your bravery is rather commendable, Miss Carter. I'd like you to stay on the property tonight. I want a full report of this incident first thing in the morning," she said somewhat stiffly, her attention more on the upper half of the beach where the medics had taken Brixton.

Wilting unhappily, I nodded, even though she wasn't looking at me. "Yes, Ms. Lawson. I'll sleep in the apartment above the greenhouse office if anyone needs me."

"Very good. See the medics when you get a chance, then get some rest. We'll talk tomorrow," Jerica ordered, already striding away.

As soon as she was gone, I got mobbed. Everyone had something to say, whether it was to express their amazement at my daring rescue, ask if the ambassador or myself was okay, or simply to tell me they were glad everything had turned out so well.

Eventually, I took the first opportunity to slip away and made my way back to the estate as the sun set in the west, lighting up the sky in a riot of oranges and pinks. There was no way I was letting the estate medics examine me.

Back in the greenhouses, I pulled a spare set of underclothes out of my locker and tumbled into the little bed in the old apartment. Staying here overnight sucked. Hopefully the interview would be short and simple, so I could get back to my life without any more interruptions.

I really needed to stop jinxing myself.

Reynar

Brixton was seen and cleared by the medics with a little water in his lungs, but otherwise he was fine. After seeing him settled in his bed and leaving a guard at his door in case he needed anything, I went back to my own quarters.

I couldn't settle though. My thoughts were a riot of panic and worry, pride and amazement, and it all left me confused. Watching Brixton disappear into the sea had been horrifying in

an unexpected way. I realized I liked the boy. Despite his spoiled tendencies and immature outlook, the young male wasn't as bad as some males I'd dealt with over the years. It would be a shame if something actually did happen to him.

At the same time, watching Rowena dive down and pull the boy from certain death, had been nerve-wracking. What if something happened to her? What if I lost her as well? Losing Brixton would bother me, but I had a feeling losing Rowena would destroy me. How had a female I shouldn't want, and couldn't have according to my own people, become such a vital part of my life? I barely knew her...

The length of fabric she'd ripped off and thrust into my hands earlier still hung from my belt. Floaty and soft, the lightweight black material was tied at her waist in a small, simple knot and hung down to cover her hips and most of her legs. Worn as a skirt, it was long enough to wrap numerous ways if needed, similar to the dirjik I wore around my own waist. A dirjik was used mostly as a head covering when out in the worst of the desert heat, but also doubled as a blanket when the temperatures dropped at night, or as a protective covering against the grit of sand during a windstorm. No resident of Acair went into the desert without a dirjik. Even Brixton still occasionally wore his out of habit, though his was made of much nicer material than mine.

Rowena's wrap slid through my fingers like Ditarrian silk and her scent wafted from its folds as I wrapped it around my fist and brought it to my nose. I hadn't seen her on the beach after Brixton was cleared to return to his suite, but someone had commented that she was spending the night on the estate. Perhaps I could go find her to return her wrap. Yes, that was what I needed to do, return her wrap. Surely, she would be looking for it.

Certain of my reasons for seeking the female despite the lateness of the hour, I slipped out onto my balcony and over the railing. Climbing easily from one balcony to the next, I quietly traversed the outside of the manor house and dropped four stories down to the ground. From there it was a short walk to the back gardens and beyond to the greenhouses and orchards. The gossipers on the beach had said Rowena was staying above the office in one of the greenhouses. That shouldn't be hard to locate, only one greenhouse had a second story on the building attached to its back.

It was dark and quiet in the greenhouse as I eased the door open and stepped inside. The air was cloying with the scent of green, growing things, and pollen heavy flowers. Leaves hung over the narrow pathway and brushed along my shoulders as I walked between the overgrown plants. The path branched at the office door; one branch leading inside, the other leading off to a staircase on the left-hand wall.

Taking the stairs with silent steps, I crept up to the closed door at the top. Rowena's scent filtered through the flimsy barrier, slightly hampered by the green smells from below, but there regardless. Inhaling her scent, I rested my head on the door for a moment as the sweet smell warmed and comforted me. My female was close.

The door opened with a creak that made me cringe, but the only sound in the other room was the soft snuffling of Rowena's sleeping breaths. The door closed more quietly than it opened, and I crossed the floor to look down on the human who'd captivated me from her first outburst against Brixton.

From a nearby window, moonlight shone down on a bed and the female who was lying across it. I couldn't help the soft chuckle that came out of me as I looked down at her. She lay

face down asleep, sprawled atop the mattress. The cover had been shoved down the bed, exposing the line of her back and the curves of her beautiful body. She wore a tiny pair of lacy undergarments and a small black top that barely covered her. The rest of her skin was bare, begging to be touched. Her dark mane of hair was spread out over her pillow in soft waves. My fingers twitched with the urge to run through her tresses.

Rowena suddenly snorted, snuffling in her sleep and rolled away from me. I smiled ruefully. I had hoped she might still be awake, but the evening's rescue must have left her more exhausted than I'd expected. Carefully untangling the blanket at her feet, I pulled it up over my female and tucked it around her. Because I couldn't resist touching her, I skimmed the back of one finger down her bare cheek.

Tiny fingers grabbed my wrist. Rowena blinked slowly. Turning to look over her shoulder, she smiled tiredly at me.

"Reynar?" she asked, her voice soft as she rolled towards me more.

"Yes, na valeka, it's me," I answered, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Mmm, good," she said, then yawned. "Lay down already, kay? I'm cold."

Tugging on my arm, she pulled me closer, and I struggled not to laugh as she maneuvered me into a place next to her on the bed. Her curvy little figure curled against my chest as she wrapped my arm around her waist and drifted back to sleep. I was still fully dressed and even wearing my shoes, but I didn't want to wake her by trying to undress. I carefully toed off my boots and cringed as they thudded onto the floor. Thankfully, the noise didn't wake my female. She merely snuggled closer with a contented murmur.

Lying with her, I found myself memorizing every detail I could. Her scent in my nose, her hair on my skin, her warmth seeping into me. There was no way to describe the feel of her in my arms. I've mated before, slaked my body's desires in the warm, wet heat of a willing female, but never have I held one that was so important to me before. This was a mistake: I knew that now. There's no way I'll be able to leave her behind when Brixton moves on.

"You destroy me, na valeka," I whispered, kissing the top of her head.

Rowena groaned lightly. "Sleep now, nookie later," she grumbled, rolling over and burying her nose in the fabric of my vest. Her knee slid between my legs and looped behind my knee, which anchored me to her.

"Of course, my love."



Rowena

Some dreams are blurry messes, unidentifiable and easily forgotten by the time morning comes around. Others are quite vivid and detailed with layers of sensation that make them all too real and leave you reeling when you realize that none of it was real. Like the one I was currently having, for instance. I was having a lovely, vivid dream about a certain tall, growly, blue-eyed alien that should not be featuring anywhere in my thoughts, waking or asleep. Hopefully the dream didn't end too soon.

A hard, warm body curled around my torso from behind, one arm wrapped tightly about my waist, the other pillowed under my head. My subconscious mind had definitely chosen Reynar for my dream lover again instead of some big faceless male like I used to dream about, but that was okay, I liked Reynar. He could star in all my naughty dreams from now on.

The sheer amount of sensory input in this particular dream was almost mind boggling. I could practically *feel* the heat from his body where he pressed against mine. His heartbeat pulsed against my back through the thin fabric of my camisole. His hands moved over my body in a gentle massage that made me murmur with pleasure. If only those hands would move to more interesting areas.

And he even smelled amazing. That musk of his reminded me of sandalwood, spicy peppers, and hot sandy beaches. It made me smile and wriggle closer to the big male, breathing deeply and pulling it into my lungs. Some people may think it's a weird smell, but I don't. I loved how warm it made me feel.

Dream Reynar purred deep in his chest and pressed his hips into my ass, rubbing the hard bar of his erection against me with a sleepy groan. The arm around my waist shifted and his hand delved under my cami to caress my bare stomach, claws tickling the sensitive skin. Giggling lightly, I grabbed his wrist and shifted his hand upwards to fondle my breast. Obliging, he squeezed it with gentle fingers, rolling the nipple between his claws. My breathing hitched in a little moan and I arched into him, pressing more of my flesh into his grasp.

Reynar's purr turned into a soft growl as his lips latched onto the bare skin of my shoulder and sucked lightly. Shivers ran through me as his sharp teeth gently scraped along the curve of my neck. I hummed happily at the erotic zing of sensation. Sleepy mumbles turned into a yelp of surprise when he bit down in a possessively dominating hold, his hips grinding hard against my ass as he almost pulled me under him with a fierce growl. My eyes popped open at the sharp sting of his fangs on my skin, and then I realized two things. One, I was still on the estate and two, this was most definitely not a dream.

"Whoa! Stop! Hang on! Shit! Wait!" I screeched, babbling insanely as I bolted out of his arms and dove for the side of the bed.

My escape was in no way graceful, dignified, or entirely successful. My feet, still tangled in the covers and threaded between Reynar's feet and legs, tripped me up and I fell,

tumbling roughly out of bed. Reynar's claws were caught in my camisole and scratched me. A ripping sound filled the air, but I barely heard it in my awkward attempt to flee the male in my sheets. I ended up on my back and on the floor gaping up at the shocked but laughing eyes of the big alien who peered over the edge.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, scrambling upright and staring at him in disbelief.

"I came to check on you, na valeka," he replied, smiling smugly as he shifted to lay more comfortably on my bed. "And you invited me to stay."

"I did no such th...I would never...There's no way..." I sputtered, protesting weakly as flashes of last night returned. Reynar's soft voice in the dark. His gentle touch on my cheek. Me ordering him to lay down with me. The feel of him snuggling against me as I dragged him into my bed.

Reynar simply grinned smugly and cocked an eyebrow.

Blushing furiously, I groaned out loud and flopped my back on the floor, then hid my face behind my hands. He was right, I had asked him to stay. Hell, I'd flat out ordered him to stay and physically manhandled him into my bed. I had never been so embarrassed in my life and now I didn't even want to look at Reynar.

He made an appreciative sound which made me crack my eyes open and peek at him curiously. His bright blue eyes were locked on my bosom, which I suddenly noticed felt rather chilled. Looking down, I discovered that the ripping sound I had heard during my fall had been my camisole tearing open after catching on Reynar's sharp claws, which left my tits out on full display.

“Oh, for the love of,” I blurted, sitting up again and turning away from Reynar’s hungry gaze as I gathered the bits of my shirt together.

He chuckled at my embarrassment. “You are a lovely sight in the morning, na valeka,” he said as he sat up and swung his legs off the bed.

Dismayed at the flash of disappointment that went through me as I took in his fully dressed state, I couldn’t help but admire the stretch of his muscles as he reached for his boots. The simple vest he wore left his arms bare, as well as a good portion of his chest. His scales formed an enticing trail across his shoulders and collarbones before dipping down to his sternum. The naughty side I hid away wanted to lick every scale, especially the ones peeking out of the space between his pants and vest before running down in a sexy V to his groin.

Stop it! Bad Rowena!

“You can’t be here, Reynar,” I groaned, standing and walking over to peek out the door at the floor below. The greenhouse was still dark, but it wouldn’t be for much longer. “If anyone sees you in my room I’ll lose my job. Or worse.”

“No one will see me,” he replied calmly, wiggling his feet into his shoes.

“There’s at least forty people on this estate every day when we don’t have guests! There’s gotta be twice that or more now! I think there’s a good chance someone could see you!” I snapped, closing the door.

“You do not know much about me yet, na valeka, but be at ease. If I say no one will see me, then no one will see me,” he repeated in that infuriating, even tone. He stood up and stalked towards me with his predatory grace.

“How can you be so sure?” I demanded, resisting the urge to stomp a foot at him.

He let out a dark smoky sounding laugh. “I am Reynar the Relentless. Eight-time Champion of the Curlass Arena,” he boasted, coming to stand over me. His hand came up to trail across my cheek, his thumb gliding lightly over my bottom lip in a caress that made me shiver.

“I don’t know what that means,” I admitted in a quiet voice, staring up at the heat in his eyes.

“It means in an arena full of traps, obstacles, predators, and darkness, against nine other gladiators, no one saw me until I wanted them to and by then it was much too late,” he explained in a low, rough voice that stroked the darker parts of my libido, which made her want to roll over and spread her legs. “It means I hunted my opponents over the course of eight risings and took only minor wounds when they tried to defend themselves as I ripped them apart.”

His hand curled in my hair and tugged my head gently back. I barely suppressed the whimper that tried to slip out of me as he dipped his head to drag his nose along my neck, inhaling my scent. “It means I am unmatched and undefeated when it comes to stealth, hunting, and capturing my prey.” Rayner’s words ended with a sharp nip to my shoulder which made me gasp and jerk away.

“Out! Out right now! Get out of my room and don’t get caught leaving,” I ordered as I quickly backed away.

Reynar stalked after me, flashing that sexy little bit of fang in his smirk. “Of course, na valeka. I just need one little thing,” he said, agreeing all too easily. There was a light purr in his chest as he caged me against the door, his big arms blocking

me in from the sides. His chest just barely brushed against me with each breath he took.

It was too hot in here now. Too hot, too close, too everything. Reynar was being very alpha, but it was such a turn on. I gulped at the air, struggling not to pant as his scent washed over me again. My panties were soaked, my thighs felt damp. I itched to touch him, wanting to lick his skin and roll around with him until no one could tell our scents apart. This was bad. Really, really bad. And I didn't want it to end.

“Wha...what do you need?” I asked in a soft voice that felt like it belonged to someone else.

Reynar leaned in so close his breath wafted across my cheek. He whispered in my ear, “I simply need a good morning kiss.”

I shuddered with want. “Okay,” I whispered back.

Reynar's arms were moving before I finished that one little word. He pulled me off the door and into his embrace, actually lifting me to his lips. One hard muscled leg pushed between mine until I found myself straddling his thigh and clinging to his vest. The rough surface under his trousers dragged across my clit, setting my nerves afire as he pulled me against his body.

Choking out a high-pitched gasp of pleasure, I rocked wantonly on his thigh, desperate for more. His lips met mine in hard, greedy sips and nips, his tongue sliding against mine in a way that made my pussy clench with a desire to be filled. My fingers clutched at his shoulders as I undulated in his arms.

His hands spanned across my back, one sliding up to grip the back of my neck, the other digging claws into the skin of my waist in tiny little pricks of fiery sensation. His growls were

louder now, echoing through my body with each breath. Devouring me with his kisses, Reynar set my heart racing, but as I pushed back to try and take more, he snarled against my lips.

Hands shifting, his leg dropped out from under me and he spun me to face the door. In a long slow slide, his hands trailed down my arms to grab my wrists. As my breathing quickened, he raised my hands and pressed them onto the door's hard surface. He nuzzled the bend of my neck again, his horn brushing the side of my face and catching in my hair as he pushed my head aside to inspect my skin. I shivered at the sounds that rumbled from the big male at my back. Not being face to face with him added an element of suspense that made me hot and anxious, but oh so turned on as well.

His hands slid back up my arms in a glide that left goosebumps flaring in their wake. "Don't move," he purred in my ear.

"What are you—" I started, turning towards him.

His snarl stopped me and I froze, staring nervously at him over my shoulder. Reaching out, Reynar repositioned my hands and turned me back to the door, his body crowding hard against me. His cock was a hard, hot brand pressing into my back as he posed me the way he wanted.

I shook with fear and lust. Reynar was big and scarred, and more aggressive now than any other time I'd been near him. The desire he stoked in me roared like a wildfire and I wanted so much more. All he had to do was growl once more and I was lost.

"Don't move," he ordered again, roughly this time. Still pressed against my back, I felt the tremor shivering through

him as his hands trailed over my arms again. “Stay right there.”

“O...okay,” I stammered, licking my lips.

Reynar’s hands squeezed my shoulders before he stepped back just a little. His body heat still warmed my back, but the space between us made me want to lean back into him. I didn’t move this time though, I wanted to know what was next.

What was he doing? What would he do to me?

With a swift tug, he sliced through the straps of my cami, dropping the torn top to the ground. There was only a second to register my own nudity, then his hands were there, cupping my breasts and kneading the soft flesh. I gasped loudly at his heated hands on my cooler skin as I arched into his grasp.

“Shhh,” he cautioned. “They might hear you.”

Eyes I didn’t remember closing flew open and I strained to ignore his touch long enough to listen. Sure enough, I heard the rattle of the outer doors opening and closing.

“Reynar!” I whispered urgently, trying to push away from the door.

He stepped into me instead and pinned me against it. “Shhhh,” he replied calmly, nipping my shoulder hard enough to make me squeak.

Abandoning its massage of my breast, one of his hands traveled down my belly to slip under my waistband. Reynar growled a little louder when his fingers encountered my soaked curls underneath. I moaned quietly, trembling violently as he stroked through the curls to find my slit, exploring the edges with gentle claws.

“Ah...ahh...Reynar!” I panted, trying not to cry out.

The evil male that he was, he chuckled in my ear. “Feels good, na valeka?” His fingers brushed across my clit, making my legs shake and nearly collapse. Only his weight on my back kept me standing upright against the door. The noise below was steadily getting louder. Someone would come looking for me soon.

“Reynar, we have to sto—”

He cut me off again with another nip to my shoulder. “Do you really want that?” he asked, soothing the bite with a lick of his tongue. “Say it. Tell me you want me to leave and I’ll go. But is that what you really want?”

The wet caress of his mouth, the hand on my breast, and the fingers exploring my sex were all short circuiting my better sense because I didn’t hesitate to shake my head in answer. No, I didn’t want him to stop. No, I didn’t want him to leave me yet. No, I didn’t want to order him away. Reynar hummed in amusement, and then he leaned in to kiss the spot he’d just bitten.

A cry of protest burst out from me when he pulled his hand out of my pants, but then he shushed me again. I turned to glare at him and watched with wide eyed longing as he licked my slick off his fingers. His eyes gleamed hungrily while he lapped every bit off his fingers, and I wondered what I tasted like to him. And then I wondered what he tasted like. His eyes followed my tongue while I licked my lips at the thought.

Leaning in again, he kissed me, and I tasted my own musk on his tongue. It was salty and tart and combined with the flavor of his own mouth. It was one of the best things I’d ever experienced. I whined when he pulled away and then he chuckled again. With a heated look, he bit off two of his claws,

carefully blunting them before he delved back into my panties with that hand.

Ruthlessly thrusting the blunted fingers into my slit, he caught my cries with a kiss, muffling me as he pumped both fingers in and out of my pussy in fast, hard strokes. Each thrust had me clawing at the surface of the door. His palm dragged over my clit, strumming it with each stroke. His fingers hit that bundle of nerves inside at the same time and I was mindless with need in seconds.

I struggled and arched, thrashing in his arms and bumping into the door. Reynar pulled me off it, bracing his free arm between me and the hard surface. His arm was in front of my head now and I bit him in my desperation to stay quiet. He grunted at the feel of my teeth, muscles tightening as I latched onto his forearm.

His chest rumbled in a low approving growl as he stroked me to orgasm. Every muscle in my body was so tight I felt like I was about to break. Shaking uncontrollably, I moaned and whined at the feel of his fingers filling me. It wasn't his dick, but it still felt so good. He kept driving me closer and closer to that edge until I finally flew over it.

I came with a muffled shriek, biting further into his arm. His fingers in my pussy didn't stop moving, even as my muscles contracted around them. Reynar snarled at the same time and his fangs suddenly dug into my shoulder, drawing a second orgasm from me, right on the heels of the first. His weight bore me down to the ground and I barely registered his hips curling and kicking against my ass as we collapsed to the floor. With his fingers still pumping into me and keeping my nerves strung tight, he pinched my clit. A third orgasm shattered through me, leaving me gasping and lightheaded.

When I finally managed to catch my breath and could see straight again, the room was empty and I was still propped against the door. Reynar must have slipped out and left me in a limp, sexed out puddle on the floor, though he had tucked the blanket from the bed around me before he left.

Jeez, how long was I out? I wondered, sitting up gingerly. Wobbly from three orgasms, I sat with my back to the door and tried to gather my wits. The window on the far wall was open, so he must have used that to exit the room. The problem was, I think I was more upset that he left without saying goodbye, than I was worried that he could have been seen.

Groaning to myself, I knew I still had to get up and report to Jerica. My lips felt puffy from his kisses, my shoulder ached where he'd bitten me, and my torn camisole was gone.

I am so screwed...

Reynar

If not for the steady increase in noise and movement on the lower level outside Rowena's room, I'd have stayed with her longer, held her more, kissed her more, but I knew she worried about me being seen. After wrapping her with the blanket and placing a quick kiss on her head and the mark I left on her shoulder, I slipped out through a window that opened out onto the back of the estate. I didn't like leaving her in the floor, but the door didn't seem to have a lock and I knew she wouldn't want to risk someone just walking in on her in that condition.

As an impulse, I had her torn sleep shirt tucked in my pocket. It had ended up on the floor beneath us and was saturated in both our scents. The reminder was too irresistible to pass up,

even though I'd have to hide it from everyone. Although her wrap was also hanging from my belt, I couldn't return it to her just yet.

Climbing the balconies back to my suite proved slightly more difficult on my return because some of the residents were now awake, but I finally made it into my suite and closed the doors behind me. I would need to wash myself and rinse my clothes before they went to the laundry. The scent of Rowena's release was strong on me, as was my own.

I grimaced, looking down at the wetness on my pants. It had been many, many risings since I released *in* my own clothes, but Rowena's scent and the sounds she'd made got me so hard. Then she'd bitten me as she came, which shredded the last of my own control. I'd come with the sound of her muffled cries in my ears.

Glancing at the little tooth marks in my arm, I chuckled, knowing that no one could see them or we'd both be in trouble. I would have to hide those under my bracers for a few days. My blunted claws would be hard enough to explain, but I might have an easier time hiding those.

I sighed happily, looking at the fingers in question. It had been worth it though, to feel her shatter in my arms. A breathy echo of laughter behind me made me freeze.

"I was going to ask where you've been all night, but that *odor* is rather self-explanatory," Brixton crowed. "The stuffy, unsmiling Reynar sneaking out to be with a female! I love it!"

Turning, I spotted him sitting in the front part of the suite. He lounged lazily on the sofa, chortling gleefully. His eyes widened as he got a good look at me and the state of my clothes.

“You released in your own pants? And she left teeth marks? Ooh, she’s such a feisty female!” he added, spying the bite on my arm. “But I think we already knew that, didn’t we?” Brixton’s sly grin set my protectiveness on edge.

I couldn’t stop the growl that rolled out of me anymore or the glare at the boy who could ruin everything for Rowena and myself.

Brixton’s eyes went even wider and he fell back on the sofa, laughing harder. “Do relax, old friend!” he scolded. “I find it delightful you are actually breaking a few rules for once.”

“Breaking the rules could destroy her life and mine. You know that,” I finally snapped, not relaxing. “The Council would see me dead before I could breed young, and her people would punish her for being with any one of us outside of the mating agencies they have set up. Your dromo would certainly think I had endangered you by sneaking away to see her.”

“Tell me something,” Brixton said, standing abruptly. “Do you like her? Or do you want to go home? Back to Acair?”

“What does it matter? I am assigned to you. I go where you go,” I replied, wondering what he was going on about.

He scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. “Forget all that. If you had the choice, would you go back?”

Eyeing the young male suspiciously, I considered his question. “No. No, I wouldn’t go back. There’s nothing left for me there,” I answered honestly.

“Good. Then mate the female. Take her as your own. Once you do, you’ll be considered a citizen of Earth and the Council will have no hold over you,” Brixton declared flippantly. “We’ll figure out a way around the rest of the problems later.”

“It’s not that easy. She could still get into trouble with her people. Your dromo would certainly protest if I abandoned my duties to you. You know as well as I that it’s not so easy for Noxel to leave Acair behind. And I know he intends for me to return to the arenas when you no longer need me. He told me so himself.”

Brixton scoffed, rolling his eyes in disdain. “Pfft. It would serve him right to lose his favorite gladiator to a pretty female on this watery little jewel, but my dromo is busy with other things. He has ordered me to take a human mate of high standing, he wants to cement ties with this water rich world. I won’t be leaving anytime soon. I will not, in fact, be leaving this world at all once he finds an appropriate match for me. I will be retiring to the bedroom of some rich, well appointed, beautiful female in a strong political position where I will breed an heir in her womb and bring glory to the Hedran family name,” Brixton said, his tone bitter and rueful as he bit off his words. “By the time he finds out about you, it will be too late for him to do anything about it.”

“I thought you enjoyed being the ambassador,” I said, moving to sit on the edge of a nearby table, transfixed by this side of Brixton I was not familiar with. “You’d give that up for a mate?”

Scoffing again, he snapped his next words. “Ambassador! Ha! I am a puppet! A figurehead, a...a play actor for my family’s many machinations. Have you not noticed that Grechto attends every meeting? He’s present for every important introduction. *He* is the one passing reports to my ahina. *He* sends the information my dromo asks for. Grechto is the real ambassador, I’m simply a face.

“When my father sees me mated, Grechto will step in as the *new* ambassador and I, I will be left behind as a newly mated male tasked with the all-important duty of fucking my new mate and impregnating her as quickly as possible. I would rather you not still be my guardian when Grechto becomes the ambassador. In fact, I would very much like for you to disappear into the wilds of Earth with your pretty little female before then. He is a purist who is much less inclined to be as understanding as I.”

Silently considering Brixton’s words, I studied him. He seemed earnest and sincere for the first time since I’d known him. This Brixton was being very serious, and he didn’t like the truths he was revealing. He knew about his dromo’s plans, he didn’t like knowing that he was being used by his own family. It was strange to feel a sudden connection to the boy. Right now, he wasn’t Ambassador Hedran. He was just a young male being pushed around by people bigger than himself and couldn’t find his feet.

“I can’t force her,” I said after much consideration. “She’s nervous about getting caught with me, fearful of the future. If I push too hard, she’ll run and I’ll lose her.”

“I have no plans to leave anytime soon,” Brixton said. “Take whatever time you need to woo her. I’ll ask about the mating process and paperwork as it pertains to my position as ambassador. Maybe I will discover something to help you both without raising anyone’s suspicions. And failing that, I will demand that my father make arrangements on your behalf if he wants my cooperation in his dealings.”

Going still, I stared incredulous at the younger male. “You would do that?”

“Of course, ni karik,” Brixton said, stepping forward and placing a hand on my shoulder. “I may poke at you every so often, but I want to see you happy.”

Hearing the younger male call me brother while he was sober was unexpected. I’d known him such a short time before going away to the arenas for training, and then I was called back from the arenas just before he packed up to come to Earth. I wasn’t sure I felt the same about him, but I noticed that underneath the teasing and the immaturity, there was a young male who wanted to be free of the politics as much as I did. Reaching up, I gripped his shoulder in return, unsure of what, if anything, I could say in response.

“Now! Go clean yourself up. We have a meeting this morning and you certainly can’t stand behind me reeking of sex and covered in your own seed,” Brixton announced brightly, laughing and whirling around to flop back on the sofa.

I scowled at him. That was the ridiculous little prick of a boy I was more familiar with, but this time I felt the corner of my mouth turn up at his antics. The male wasn’t half-bad after all.



Reynar

One Earth hour later found me following Brixton through the lower halls to the estate manager's office. Soft voices floated through the door, too low to make out, but it was the light scent in the air that made me nervous more than anything else. Rowena was here. Why was she in the manager's office? Had someone seen me after all? Was she in trouble now? Had I ruined everything with my selfishness?

Brixton knocked loudly, interrupting the conversation inside.

"Come in," Ms. Lawson's distasteful voice called out in reply.

Unhesitatingly, Brixton pushed open the door and walked through. On the other side, I saw Ms. Lawson and my female. Rowena looked calm and unperturbed, not like someone who was being reprimanded for misbehavior, so I allowed myself to relax. I still wasn't sure what was going on, but it didn't seem to be something I should be concerned about.

Ms. Lawson waved us to a seat, acting especially welcoming towards Brixton. "Come in Ambassador, come in. Miss Carter and I were just discussing the incident at the beach yesterday and how best to prevent that from happening again."

Brixton smiled brightly. "Excellent! Have you mentioned my request yet?"

“No, not yet Ambassador. I hadn’t gotten to that yet,” she replied with a barely hidden grimace.

Rowena glanced at me in confusion, but I gave her a tiny shrug. I was just as uncertain as she was.

“Well, Miss Carter,” Ms. Lawson began. “The Ambassador did enjoy his visit to the beach yesterday. At least, until it was cut short by the incident with the wave, he decided he’d like to return. In a safer fashion, of course. Despite my objections, he wants you to teach him how to swim.”

Rowena gave a startled jolt. “Me? But I’ve never taught anyone how to swim. I don’t know if I could.”

“Be that as it may, as evidenced yesterday you are an exceptional swimmer. And you are the one who rescued him. He feels comfortable with you. Due to that, he has requested that you be the one to teach him, even though we have several very capable instructors on staff.” She paused, her expression stiff and almost sour as she glanced between Rowena and Brixton.

“Starting today, your office duties have all been reassigned and until further notice, you will be his swim instructor. Krista is also back from vacation and will resume handling the florals herself,” Ms. Lawson stated flatly. The fingers of one hand tapped irritably at the tabletop in a short staccato pattern that certainly betrayed her aggravation with the situation.

“For the first few lessons you’ll use the estate pool. When you feel he has progressed, you can move lessons to the open ocean. Lifeguard support will be provided, of course.”

Rowena hesitated, wringing her hands together before replying. “But the staff is already shorthanded. There’s a lot of work to be done, and the monthly inventory audit is due. They

need my help. It's time to order next season's supplies. I can't just abandon *all* of my duties," Rowena protested reluctantly.

"That's perfectly understandable my dear, and I don't want to take your entire day," Brixton assured her. "I just need a few hours of your time. I would rather not drown the next time I go near deep water. It's highly doubtful you'd be there to rescue me a second time."

Rowena let out a small laugh at Brixton's light teasing. "No, I can't guarantee I would be there again," she admitted. "I suppose I could spend a couple hours at the pool in the mornings to try and teach you how to swim."

"That would be lovely," Brixton said. "Then you can return to your other duties afterwards. Hopefully that won't throw your schedule off too much."

"That's that then," Ms. Lawson announced. "Starting today, you will take Ambassador Hedran down to the pool and begin teaching him how to swim."

"Yeah, okay," Rowena agreed, nodding. "I'll just need to go change."

"Wonderful!" Brixton exclaimed, clapping his hands happily. "Reynar and I will meet you at the pool in just a little while. I look forward to our first lesson."

Rowena dipped her head and left the room without another word.

"Ambassador Hedran, are you absolutely sure you want Miss Carter to teach you to swim?" Ms. Lawson asked, turning to Brixton once Rowena was gone. "As she said herself, she is not a teacher. We have some wonderful, fully trained instructors right here on the estate. The lifeguards that worked on the beach yesterday could teach you just as easily."

Every trace of good humor left Brixton's face in that moment, and his face transformed into the most serious expression I'd ever seen him adopt as he turned to the female behind the desk. "Ms. Lawson, with all due respect, your *fully trained* lifeguards almost let me drown. Miss Carter was the one who saw me get swept away. *She* was the one who chased me down and pulled me from the water. *She* saved my life. At this time, I trust her more than any other human in this entire facility. So yes, I am very certain that I want her as my instructor, and you will cease trying to change my mind or interfere with my choice," Brixton replied coldly.

"Of course. As you wish, Ambassador," Ms. Lawson replied, dipping her head demurely.

Brixton, having dismissed her as unimportant, was already turning to leave and missed the angry snarl that flashed across her face at his chastisement. But she couldn't hide it from me. The more I saw this woman, the more I didn't like her, and the more I felt like something was up.

"Come along, Reynar. We have a lesson to get to," Brixton announced, his cheery mood firmly back in place.

"Right away, sir," I replied, my eyes lingering on Ms. Lawson. She returned my stare with her own haughty expression as if to say she wasn't afraid of me. To her, I was nothing.

There's something wrong with this female, I thought, staring her down. Not once did she flinch. Instead, her chin tilted a degree higher. *There's definitely something wrong for her to challenge me directly*. Finally, I turned to follow the ambassador. To be honest, I was looking forward to spending time with Rowena without having to sneak off to see her.

Returning to our rooms, Brixton and I changed into more suitable clothing that we could wear in the swimming pool,

something human females called swim trunks. Really, they were simply short pants that came to our knees. Brixton had worn a pair at the beach, but this was the first time I'd worn the odd, loose garment.

I changed my bracers out for simpler cloth arm wraps, so that no one would see the bite on my forearm, and wore a simple vest as well. Unlike Brixton, I was not as comfortable with going about half-naked around the humans, even if Rowena was going to see me as well.

Once we were considered appropriately attired for the pool, I followed Brixton back through the estate and out to the pool. A bored looking woman in a lifeguard uniform sat waiting in a chair to the side, but Rowena had apparently not arrived yet.

"You may go," Brixton announced, waving her away dismissively.

"But I'm the lifeguard," she protested in surprise.

"We don't need a lifeguard. Once Miss Carter gets here, she can be our lifeguard," he replied easily, ordering her away again.

"Rowena? But Rowena's not a lifeguard. Ms. Lawson said—"

"I don't care what Ms. Lawson said, Rowena is my swim instructor and she will double as my lifeguard. I do not need you. Please leave. Now," Brixton ordered arrogantly. Again, his words were accompanied by a pompous wave of his hand as he shooed her off towards the estate.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir," she said, finally gathering her things and leaving.

Once she was gone, Brixton turned and grinned at me. "Good. Now you can talk to Rowena without having to worry about somebody listening in," he said and then chuckled.

“You meddling little bastard,” I stated, laughing at his deviousness.

“Well, as the ambassador, I should get to have a little bit of fun.”

Quick footsteps on the patio surface silenced us and we turned, waiting to see who was coming before saying anything more. I breathed easier when I saw Rowena hurrying around the corner. She was dressed in a strange high-necked swimsuit with short sleeves. Made of a thick black material, it was very different from the garment she had worn to the beach. This garment covered her from the curve of her neck to midway down her arms. It was one piece covering her entire torso while the entirety of her legs were bare. And I couldn't help remembering how beautiful her bare legs had looked in the morning light.

Glancing around, she spied us standing alone and slowed. “Where's the lifeguard?”

“You are the lifeguard,” Brixton announced.

“Oh no. Nope. No. I'm the swim instructor. We also need a lifeguard,” Rowena protested in frustration.

“I sent her away. There is but the two of us and yourself. Why do we need a lifeguard? I'm sure Reynar knows to stay in the shallows while you teach me. Unless you're also able to teach him how to swim,” Brixton explained, as if everything was perfectly logical.

“That is *not* how this is supposed to work,” she said with a sigh, rolling her eyes.

“Yes, but I am the ambassador, and I get to say what goes.”

Rowena stared at him in disbelief. She looked as if she was trying to figure out if he was serious or not. At the same time,

I struggled not to laugh at her incredulous expression.

“I can’t decide if you’re crazy or not,” she said, throwing her hands in the air.

Brixton’s happy expression faltered. “I just wanted a little privacy from prying eyes.”

“Why would we need privacy from prying eyes?” she asked, suspiciously glancing at me.

“Despite what you may think, I dislike constantly being the center of attention. Always having a lot of people around can be exhausting and distracting. For these lessons, I’d rather keep it low key, as you humans say. Besides, it gives me a chance to seduce you when no one else is around,” he said, ending with a teasing wink.

While I was thankful that Brixton was keeping his knowledge of my visit with Rowena a secret, I thought it might almost be easier if we could explain that he knew and was trying to give us time together. Or it could scare her away even quicker.

Rowena sighed. “Alright, fine, we will do this your way. We’ll keep it private for now and I’ll be the lifeguard and the swim instructor, but that means that one of you has to stay away from the deep end while I’m teaching the other,” she said, relenting. “But when we go to the beach, we have to have another lifeguard.”

“Done,” Brixton said, rubbing his hands together. “Easily done. What do we do first?”

“First, you’re going to get your butt in the water and we’re going to teach you how to float.”

“Float? But I want to swim,” Brixton complained.

“Swimming comes later. First you learn how to float.”

“Okay!” Brixton turned towards the pool and made as if to jump in.

“No! Stop!” Rowena called quickly, making him freeze on the side of the pool. “Do not jump in right there.”

“Why not?” Brixton asked.

“That’s the deep end. If you jump in right there, I’m gonna let you drown.”

“But you’re supposed to be my lifeguard.”

“I am also your extremely reluctant swim instructor and if you don’t listen to me, I’m gonna let your ass drown.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound right,” Brixton exclaimed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, but that’s how I lifeguard. Ambassador or not, you do something stupid, I let you drown. Now walk around to the far side where the steps are and walk down the steps into the shallow end of the pool. No jumping.”

Brixton eyed the water for a moment, then glanced at Rowena and finally glanced over at me as if asking if he should go ahead and do it. I shook my head and cocked my chin towards the direction she told him to go. He sighed, allowed his shoulders to slump a little, and then trotted obediently around the pool to the steps.

“Have you had a good morning, na valeka?” I asked softly as she approached me.

“You left me in a heap on the floor,” she accused in a low hiss.

“You tore my shirt, then stole it. And you left bite marks on my shoulder that are a bitch to cover up. I’m wearing a freaking wetsuit thanks to you and your teeth! How do you think my morning has been?”

“It sounds like you had a very good morning then,” I teased.

She scoffed and slugged me in the shoulder, then hissed and shook her hand because it hurt. I couldn't help but laugh. “Just keep it down. There's cameras and shit out here. Fuck, what are you made of anyways? Rocks?” she griped, rubbing her sore knuckles. “Brixton! Get back by the stairs till I get in! I swear I will let you drown if you can't behave!”

Brixton laughed as the little human fussed at him like a nursing ritiki. Rowena hurried around the pool and followed him in, actually smacking the back of his head in her irritation, which made us both laugh raucously. It was good she didn't treat him with the same inane deference most humans did. She would challenge the younger male, make him listen and respect her, rather than spoil him and let him have his way.

Pushing and pulling him around, she guided Brixton through the process of learning ‘not to drown’ as she'd described it. The first few times she got him to lay back in the water and as soon as she let go, he sank like a rock and came up spitting out water and coughing. His complaints were met with admonishments that this was his idea and that she could go get a real instructor if he had a problem with how she taught him. Each time he declined, he would return to his lesson with new determination.

It was amusing to watch her bully the young male, making him listen and follow instructions for once. When she finally had him floating on his back, she turned to me and held out a hand. I let her draw me closer, but instead of letting her pull me down into the water, I tugged her against me and playfully nipped the air. Hissing at me to quit and behave, she yanked her hand free and returned to Brixton's side, praising his successful short-lived float, but I noticed her peeking at me

through the fall of her hair as she repositioned him again and pushed him onto his back.

Two hours passed with a swiftness that both relieved and irritated me. Relieved, because I was on a razor's edge of control; were we anywhere else, I might have carried her off to claim her already. And irritated, because our time together was stilted and finite. It was coming to an end, and I really wished the rest of the world would fuck right off so I could have more time with the spirited female who held my heart in her soft little hands.

“Alright you two,” she stated. “Time’s up. You gotta get out of the pool. I’ve got real work to do.”

“I did well, yes?” Brixton asked as he climbed out, heading for his towel on the far side of the pool.

His eager question reminded me of the youngling he used to be, the one who’d follow me around the family grounds before I was sent off to training. Rowena must have been thinking something similar because her expression softened. She smiled gently, tailing him up the stairs and out of the pool.

“Yes Brixton, you did very well for the first lesson. In fact, tomorrow we’ll work on combining your float with a backstroke,” she said, nodding.

He grinned happily at her praise and trotted off. Following behind her, I climbed the stairs as well, enjoying the view of her sweet rounded backside.

“I enjoyed our lesson as well, na valeka,” I stated quietly, coming up beside her.

“What lesson? You stood in the water and watched the whole time. I didn’t see you learn anything,” she retorted with a soft snort.

“I am very good at learning from instruction. I do not always need to do something right away to learn it, but I definitely enjoyed watching you in that tight, wet swimsuit that covers so little of your body. It reminded me of our time together this morning,” I said with a low growl, smiling at the shiver that rippled through her. “Tight and wet on my fingers.”

She cleared her throat and snatched up her towel, rubbing briskly at her skin before speaking again. “So how did you get stuck with the boy wonder?” she asked as we strolled around the pool.

I chuckled at her deflection and glanced up at Brixton, who was drying off on the far side of the pool from us. After a brief scrub with the towel, he flopped tiredly onto a lounge and threw an arm over his eyes.

I shrugged, throwing my own towel over my shoulders. “I was born on his family’s estate,” I replied. “My mother was a servant there until her passing. She cleaned the kitchens and tended the lower gardens.”

“And your father?” she asked curiously. Reaching up, she twisted her hair between her hands and forced the water from the strands.

I thought for a moment, unsure of what to say, then decided to stick with the truth. “I never knew my father. My mother didn’t tell me who he was. To be honest, I’m not sure she even knew herself.”

Rowena looked confused. “Why wouldn’t she know?”

“My mother was one of the few Noxel women that was considered attractive. She was beautiful even. She had the attention of a few Saveet suitors, but not in such a way that they would take her as a mate,” I explained cagily.

“Oh,” Rowena said with an understanding sympathy in her voice. “I’m sorry they treated her like that. And then you came along?”

I grinned, flashing my fangs. “Yes. Imagine everyone’s surprise when I came out looking the way I do. The beautiful Noxel mother of mine and her perfect Saveet mystery lover, and they created me,” I said, waving a hand at my own face.

That made her expression turn thoughtful. “So you’re actually a hybrid between Saveet and Noxel?” She asked, glancing over at Brixton.

Nodding, I decided to go ahead and tell her how my own people saw me. “I am. I’m a half-breed, but no one will admit it. They have pushed me down to be the worst of the Noxel genetic mutations. I am considered undesirable because of the severity of my dominant genes. I’ve even been banned from taking a mate and breeding young,” I explained. I didn’t like telling Rowena everything, but she needed to know it all before we went any further. She needed to know the risks if she were to take me as a mate.

“But you don’t look that different from Brixton,” she said. “Just a little bigger.”

I snorted at her oversimplification. “I am more than different enough. My outer horns are much bigger than most, not to mention I have two sets. I also have more scales than most and I am physically a lot bigger than most of the Saveet. These traits are considered genetic throwbacks.”

Frowning now, Rowena gave me a disgusted look. “Your planet’s kind of fucked up, you know that right?” she said, making a disparaging sound.

Rolling my eyes at her observation got me an irritated shove from the female. “I know, I grew up there. It’s hard not to know when you spend your entire life being reminded of how unwanted you are. I am extremely lucky they haven’t chosen to forcibly sterilize me just to make sure I can’t breed.” The look of shock on Rowena’s face was almost amusing.

“They would do that? That’s seriously screwed up. But that still doesn’t explain how you ended up babysitting the world’s biggest brat though,” she said, throwing her hands out in exasperation. “I mean, Brixton’s alright I guess, but he is a bit spoiled.”

Her last comment made me laugh, wiping a hand down my face. “He’s very spoiled. Like I said, I was born on the estate. But as I got older, I helped my mother with some of the physical chores like digging out the garden beds. I was about five solars old when Brixton was born and normally I wouldn’t have had anything to do with a son of the estate, but when he was three, he managed to get out of the nursery and fell into one of the garden ponds. I jumped in and fished him out, so his father decided that I should be his new companion since I was a big, scary looking, eight solar old Noxel boy and Brixton’s hero. I was forced to follow him around for about two solars until I had a major growth spurt.”

Rowena growled audibly, drawing a smile from me. “Ugh! So you were a free babysitter even then?” she said, her aggravation obvious. “What happened after that?”

“Brixton’s dromo saw how big I was getting and decided I would be a good investment in the arenas, so he sent me away for gladiator training. I spent eight years in training before my first battle. And then I spent another twelve years fighting before I was called back to watch over Brixton again.”

“He just sent you to be a gladiator when you were ten years old? They didn’t ask you? He just decided that was what you were going to do?” Rowena said, looking appalled.

“Essentially, yes.” I clasped my hands behind my back as we continued to walk a circuit around the pool. Our progress was slow. The conversation had caused a few pauses, especially during the more disturbing parts, but Rowena followed willingly, despite her distress.

She was quiet at first, trying to process everything I’d said. “And you didn’t have a choice at all? How can you be so calm about it? You were a child. You could have died.” she asked finally.

My shoulders rose and fell in a shrug of acceptance. “I am Noxel. We are not considered full citizens on our planet and we must have permission from the Council to take a mate, to breed children, or to move to a new home. We don’t have the freedoms that the pureblooded Saveet have. We don’t have the freedoms that you have here on this planet. So, no, I did not have a choice about being a gladiator.

“When your Saveet sponsor tells you that you are going to scrub toilets for the rest of your life, that’s what you do. When he tells you that you’re going to stick a sword into another living person or die, that’s what you do. We don’t get the luxury of choice,” I said with a sad shake of my head. “That’s why so many of my people are petitioning to come here.”

“That’s just terrible,” Rowena said softly. “Sponsors my ass, more like owners. Your people are treated like slaves. No one should have to live with such restrictions.”

“There are a few Saveet trying to make changes. Brixton, for all his immaturities, is one of them. He says he wants to open more immigration opportunities for Noxels. He even

expressed a hope that I find my own mate and settle down with a family one day.”

Rowena glanced thoughtfully at Brixton’s prone form. The tired young male was passed out and snoring softly in the poolside lounge chair. “He’s a good kid,” she said simply. “I hope you get that too. I’ll see you guys for tomorrow’s lesson.”

Ducking around me, Rowena fled the pool area, leaving me with a sleeping Brixton and a worry that I’d frightened her by being too honest too soon. I should try and give her space to process everything I’d told her. Unfortunately for her, the way she ran away set off my hunting instincts, my urge to stalk my prey. As soon as Brixton was secured, I had to go after na valeka, my fierce little desert hopper.

Rowena

Unplanned swim lessons and sexy, half-naked aliens notwithstanding, I had other things to do. Leaving Reynar and Brixton by the pool to dry off, I headed back to my office to put on my uniform and then took my tools into the garden to get to work. There were beds to be weeded, and some of the plants were too delicate to trust a droid to tend. Most of my job might be inside an office, but I did take responsibility for two of the furthest garden beds that needed hand weeding, just to take some of the load off the already overworked staff.

I was elbow deep in mud and smeared in filth when a shadow suddenly fell over me, blocking my light. Sitting up, I looked over my shoulder and sighed at the sight of Reynar standing

behind me, grinning triumphantly. I wasn't unhappy to see him though. His mood was infectious.

"Found you," he announced in a low, rough voice that made me shiver.

"It's not like you have to look very hard. I'm still on the estate, you big goofball. What are you doing here?" I asked, dropping my handful of weeds in the nearby pile and wiping futilely at the dirt on my hands. Trying to act like I didn't care, I turned back to pull more. "You're supposed to be guarding the ambassador."

His sexy lips twisted in a cheeky little smirk as he squatted beside me. "The others are with him now. I wanted to see you again, na valeka," he said, reaching out to run his fingers through the wisps of hair that escaped my braid.

Scoffing gently, I pushed his hand away. "You just saw me an hour ago. I have to give y'all swim lessons every morning now, remember? You'll see me again tomorrow."

"Yes, but evading the others in broad daylight to find you is a challenge I enjoy," he replied, leaning in to sniff the lines of my neck, his tongue flicking out to taste me.

I pushed harder, trying to dislodge the big alien who had an arm around my waist and was pulling me into the curve of his body. "Ew. I'm all sweaty and gross right now!"

"You could never be *gross*, na valeka," Reynar purred. "Your sweat is a sweet perfume that fills my nose, a salty treat on my tongue. Your scent calls me, warms my body, and hardens my cock." His words were a low growl in my ear. He stroked his very obvious erection against my ass and trailed his claws down the curve of my spine.

My uniform dulled the sensation, but it still felt good. I shuddered pleasantly, arching into the touch. Reynar's rich, dark chuckle at my reaction brought back flashes of our morning's naughty interlude. My cheeks flushed.

Unable to help myself, I giggled when he playfully nipped my ear. "Stop it!" I scolded. "I have work to do!"

"If I recall correctly, your old duties were excused by Ms. Lawson so you could attend to your new duties," he said, pulling me away from the flower bed and turning me to face him. One of his hands found the fastener at the neck of my uniform and parted it, then slipped inside to graze my bare skin.

"Stop that!" I snapped, swatting his hand away with a growl.

Reynar's own growl filled the air. Suddenly, I was on my back in the grass with his big body crouching over me. All I could see was him and he was beautiful. Gorgeous blue eyes, sexy silver skin, dark horns, and white hair. He stared down at me like I was the most important thing in his world.

"Why do you keep coming after me?" I asked, reaching up to touch his cheek.

"I will always come after you, na valeka," he said with promise in his eyes. "I am yours."

"But I can't keep you," I whispered sadly.

"What if you could?"

"If I could?"

What if I could? This big, growly, scarred male was asking me if I wanted him. He was asking if I'd keep him if I could. The hope and desire in his eyes begged me to say yes, to take a risk with him.

Pulling him down, I kissed him softly. His lips were warm and soft on mine. Silvery ropes of his hair fell down around us as he leaned over me, forming a curtain to shut out the rest of the world. Reynar nipped and kissed along my jaw, then slowly moved down my neck. His hand tugged at my uniform again, parting the front of the jumpsuit. Slipping inside, his fingers were hot on my skin. They were rough and calloused, but oh so nice.

Sliding his knee between my thighs, he pressed it against the damp ache of my pussy, which added light friction to the burning tease of his hands on my skin and the light sting of his teeth at my neck. I arched against the pressure and moaned, grabbing fistfuls of his tunic and holding on tight. Reynar pulled the sides of my jumpsuit away from my breasts and sucked at the soft upper curve of one, just above my bra, then hooked his claw under the lacy bow in the middle and sliced right through it, making it fall open.

The breeze was cool on my lust tightened nipples and made them pebble even harder under Reynar's gaze. He grinned appreciatively, flashing those sexy fangs of his. Licking his lips as he stared down at my naked breasts, he purred in his chest. Then his head lowered and his tongue dragged across a nipple in a slow, hot swipe that made me groan. Doing it again, he blew on the wet flesh. I gasped as my nipple beaded almost painfully in reaction.

With a low rumble of amusement, he closed his lips over the tormented bud and suckled it, which drew a mewl of pleasure from me. My hands closed on his horns. The texture of them was rough under my palms as I held him close. The prickle of his claws on my other breast tickled the edges of my attention as he massaged and plucked at it. When he raised his head, I almost cried in protest until he nipped the other breast, then

soothed the sting by sucking that nipple between his lips as well.

I was desperately trying to stifle my little cries and gasps of delight when voices not far away startled us apart. Shoving Reynar away with a gasp, I rolled over and righted my uniform as quickly as I could, though there was nothing I could do for the ruined bra. I practically dove back into the flower bed, praying he got out of sight, while I got back to work by hiding my embarrassment behind handfuls of weeds and dirt.

“Oh! Hey Rowena!”

I recognized Michaela’s voice; she was one of the other gardeners. A quick glance over my shoulder showed her and Kinsey walking by with their own tools. They must be heading to one of the other beds that needed weeding.

“Hey girls,” I called back as I worked. They kept walking and I sighed in relief when they disappeared around some shrubs.

“That was close.” Reynar chuckled out of nowhere, almost making me shriek in fright.

Looking around, I finally spotted him crouched in a tree practically overhead. “You scared the hell out of me!” I snapped. “Stop doing that! We almost got caught this time!”

“Ahh, but that’s half the fun,” he said with a grin, dropping out of the tree to land in front of me. He had a muddy handprint on his cheek and another on the front of his vest, but I was too shaken up by the close call to find it funny.

“No, it’s not!”

“Perhaps I should just visit your room again tonight instead?” he suggested with a hopeful look.

“You can’t. That was just overnight so Jerica could get my statement first thing this morning. I’m going home to my own apartment tonight. Off the estate,” I explained.

His hopeful, lopsided grin fell. Leaving a disappointed grimace in its place. It was so dejected, I was tempted to stay overnight again just to wipe that sad frown away, but that would only make someone suspicious. He huffed, then gave me an impish smirk. “Then I will simply have to savor what little time we have and steal another moment with you tomorrow.”

With a quick sweep of his arm, Reynar scooped me against his body for one more kiss, growling deep in his chest as he did. He nipped at my bottom lip, making me gasp, then dipped his tongue between my open lips to stroke my own. I moaned softly as his hands massaged my back and ass. He pulled me closer, pressing me into his arousal. Returning his kiss, I licked across one of his fangs and felt him shudder as he gripped me tighter. When he pulled away, we were both panting. His eyes were glazed with lust.

“How am I supposed to walk away when you kiss me like that, na valeka?” he asked between heaving breaths.

“I dunno, but you better do it quick, cause if we do that again, I don’t think we’ll be able to stop,” I said breathlessly, pushing further away from him and grabbing my bucket of tools. The bot would be along later to clean the pile of weeds off the path. I just needed to get away from Reynar before he completely destroyed my self-control. “I’ll...I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Without waiting for his response, I turned and hurried down a path that led away from the male who was so dangerous to my current state of mind. Just before I turned the corner, I glanced

back and saw he was still there watching me. He had one hand resting over his heart as if it hurt. Turning away again, I rushed off so I wouldn't run back to him.



Rowena

The next morning was a mess. I woke up late, had to throw my clothes into a duffel bag to dress at the estate, missed the public transport, and had to call for a personal shuttle to pick me up from my apartment. Waiting for that shuttle felt like an eternity, even though it wasn't more than twenty minutes.

I got to the estate forty-two minutes late and knew that Brixton and Reynar were probably waiting for me by the pool. My med-bed at home could have healed the bite mark Reynar left on me, but as soon as I thought about doing it, I immediately dismissed the idea. I actually liked seeing it. At least my wetsuit was comfortable and hopefully I wouldn't have any more delays.

“Miss Carter!”

And I just had to summon Satan herself, I thought and sighed, stopping to wait for Jerica who was storming across the lawn towards me.

“Yes, Ms. Lawson?” I said politely, cringing inside at her expression. She looked pissed, but why? Surely it wasn't because I was a little late?

“I was informed that the lifeguard I assigned to the ambassador's swim lessons was dismissed for no reason,” she

snapped accusingly.

“I had nothing to do with that. It was Ambassador Hedran’s decision. He felt that a lifeguard was unnecessary when it was just us at the estate pool. I protested, but he insisted. I did insist that we have a lifeguard on hand when lessons moved to the open water, but as long as he followed directions and safety rules here in the pool, I could handle the duties of an instructor and lifeguard,” I explained with an apologetic grimace. “He wouldn’t budge on the lifeguard though. Said it felt like an invasion of his privacy.”

“Why would it be an invasion of his privacy if there’s no need for privacy? What does he need to hide?” she demanded.

“I honestly don’t know, ma’am. I think he was just a little embarrassed that he can’t swim and didn’t want people watching while he learns,” I said, shrugging.

“That better be the only reason he wants to be unsupervised with you, Miss Carter,” Jerica snarled, stabbing her finger into my sternum.

“Ewww, you think I have any interest in the ambassador? Or he in me? He’s uncouth, immature, pushy, and spoiled rotten. I’ve known toddlers with better manners,” I protested, shuddering and curling my lip in disgust. “If it weren’t for him I wouldn’t be spending half my morning playing catch up on all my other work. Do you think I like wearing a wetsuit for simple swim lessons? Honestly, it’s so I show as little skin as possible in front of that jackass.”

Jerica stared at me, no doubt looking for any hint of a lie. But everything I’d said was true. I just left out the part about how the jackass was kinda growing on me and that I liked being around Reynar. If she knew any of that I would be in so much trouble.

“Don’t insult Ambassador Hedran,” she finally snapped before storming away.

Blowing out a relieved breath, I continued on to the pool. We would have to be very careful in our interactions from now on. For some reason, Jerica was on a warpath when it came to Brixton. The more she watched him, the more she would see of me and Reynar.

Speaking of whom, the two males were waiting under the lounge umbrella as I rounded the corner. Brixton was bouncing impatiently in his seat, while Reynar stood stoically nearby, watching the gate to the pool deck. His face didn’t change much when I came into view, but I spied the subtle crinkle around his eyes that betrayed a happiness to see me.

“Rowena!” Brixton cheered, suddenly noticing me. He jumped up and yanked his vest off, throwing it down with his towel. “I thought you weren’t coming! We are ready for my lesson!”

“Ambassador Hedran, I’ve asked you not to use my first name. It is overly familiar and unprofessional. And I’m sorry I’m late, gentlemen,” I said calmly, keeping my words as diplomatic as possible, hoping that both males would pick up on what I wasn’t saying. “I was already running late this morning, then Ms. Lawson stopped me to express some concerns about our lack of lifeguard supervision.”

From the sudden seriousness of Brixton’s expression, it came through loud and clear. “I see,” he said in a flat tone that told me he was angry. “Perhaps I should ask the UEG to reassign the Estate Manager until my stay here is over. She seems to be overly concerned with my personal business.”

My eyebrows went up in surprise. Could he do that? Come to think of it, probably. The UEG wanted him happy and

convincing his people to come to Earth. They'd probably do just about anything he asked.

"Ehh, I wouldn't worry about it. She's just doing her job, trying to make sure you stay safe and all," I replied, waving my hands dismissively, then swiping a finger over my ear when his eyes shifted to me.

He blinked as if surprised at the idea that anyone would be listening in on us, then hummed quietly under his breath. "Fine, let us proceed with my lesson. The day is already starting late, and I dislike being made to wait."

"Yes, sir," I said, almost smiling at the arrogant tone he'd adopted to cover his peevishness.

Lesson two wasn't nearly as much fun as lesson one had been. Reynar stayed out of arm's reach, probably to avoid any appearance of impropriety, and Brixton spent most of the lesson aggravated at Jerica's meddling. He whined and pouted that he wasn't proceeding quick enough for his own preferences. He demanded that I let him go deeper, then griped when he promptly sank, and I had to fish him out again. He sulked in the shallow end and made none of his usual jokes while I demonstrated the backstroke. All in all, I knew why he was irritated, but I was glad when the two hours were up.

"You did well, Ambassador. Tomorrow, we might try to work on your sidestroke," I stated as I wrapped a towel around myself.

"I was atrocious, and we both know it," he announced. "Thank you for putting up with me anyways. I can only hope that tomorrow my mood will have improved."

I chuckled at his comment. "We'll see." Waving to them both, I left the poolside and headed for my office. I needed to go

over the inventory reports and order some supplies for next month's delivery.

"Is it done yet!?"

I stopped short at the sound of Jerica snapping at someone around the corner. There was no way in hell I was walking into one of her tirades willingly. Time to go the long way around. Something about her tone however made me hesitate. I would never normally eavesdrop, but Jerica was setting all my nerves on end lately and I didn't know why. What was it about her that had me so on edge? Creeping closer to the corner, I discreetly pressed against the wall to listen.

The reply was calm, low, and harder to hear. "Almost. I've made more than half the transfers, but the rest got interrupted. I'll have to go back later."

That sounded like the mystery woman from the conference room last week.

"I don't want excuses. I want the job done! My timeline is critical! If you can't finish on time, you don't get paid!" Jerica snarled.

She sounded pissed and I could just picture her stabbing one of her pointy claws in the other woman's face. She always wore those horrid, long nails that were just right for digging into someone's skin. They looked like daggers after all. I could see her tearing those things through her target's skin and drawing blood, ripping ribbons of skin away as she lacerated her victim to pieces. I shuddered at the visual.

"I'll get it done. I just need another day, maybe two at most. Everything else is ready; the meds, the transport, the cabin. It's all stocked up and sitting pretty. Just like you wanted," the other woman said.

“It had better be!”

The clack of Jerica’s expensive heels was my only warning that the conversation was over, and she was heading my way. I bolted into a nearby alcove and ducked behind the big ornamental flowerpot inside. Holding my breath, I listened as the sound of her footsteps marched by and faded away. Then I waited longer in case the other woman came this way too. Fortunately, she seemed to have headed in another direction and all was quiet. Peeking out, I made sure no one was around and then hurried to my office.

Whatever Jerica was up to it didn’t sound good, but who could I talk to about it? Would anyone believe me? She was rich, from a well-respected family, and a long-time UEG employee. Would anyone really believe me without any kind of proof? And who was the woman she was talking to? It wasn’t easy for non-employees to just walk around the estate. So, how was this woman just strolling in and out without question?

Reynar

Brixton was pissed. I don’t think I’d ever seen him as angry as he was now and rightfully so, though he contained himself until we reached his suite and activated his personal jamming device. When it was on, no one could listen to anything he had to say, no matter how many devices they may have planted in his suite.

“That stuck up, meddling bitch!” he ranted, throwing his towels and wet clothes in the laundry bin.

“That female could be a problem,” I agreed. “We must proceed with caution around Ms. Lawson. She can make things

difficult for not just you, but for anyone you interact with here on the estate. Rowena included.”

“I do not like it when others meddle in my affairs. I’ve had more than enough of that in my life,” he scowled, clenching his fists as he paced the room.

“Understandable. She can be dealt with if she becomes an actual threat. For now, how do we handle this new development? If she is monitoring your communications that could be a threat to Acair business as well. Would the other United Earth Government Representatives remove her from the estate on accusations alone, or would we need proof of wrong-doing?”

“I honestly don’t know, Reynar,” Brixton said with a grimace, sprawling on the nearest sofa with a growl of frustration. “If I felt like I had more influence here, I would say yes, but I really don’t know.”

“Then we wait. Let the threat reveal itself first, but we should distance you from bystanders who could be harmed. You should return to some of your less-charming habits,” I advised, feeling tired and shaking my head at the irony. I’d wanted the boy to mature and be more responsible. Now, when he finally seemed to be changing, I had to tell him to go back to being a prick. Not only that, he had to direct the brunt of his arrogance at the one person who seemed to be important to both of us in some way.

“Less-charming you say?”

“Unfortunately.”

“And when should I do this?”

“As soon as it can be done,” I said, sighing. “The sooner Ms. Lawson sees you acting the arrogant ass with Rowena and

possibly any other eligible female she would view as a threat, the better.”

“Ugh, I didn’t really like the arrogant old me,” he admitted, glancing over at me. “I was a bit too full of myself if you hadn’t noticed.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. The way he’d looked at me as he said that, as if hoping I really hadn’t noticed how much of a prick he was. “Oh no, I only noticed it every now and then,” I scoffed when I stopped laughing.

Brixton smirked at my terrible lie and threw a pillow at me. “Ass,” he said simply, then chuckled as he fell back into the cushions again.

Knocking at the door interrupted further conversation. Brixton sat up, neatly straightening his tunic before waving me to answer it. Grecto stood on the other side; the side of his mouth tilted up in a sneer as he looked up at me. Dismissing me just as quickly, Grecto spotted Brixton and stepped past me and into the room.

“Grecto,” Brixton said, keeping his voice flat as he addressed the unwelcome older male. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I received communication from your dromo. The UEG is hosting a dinner off the estate tonight, and you are to attend. There will be representatives from all of the local agencies and the nearest UEG facility, as well as a few notables your dromo would like you to meet.”

“With you at my side no doubt?” Brixton asked drily.

Grecto’s lips thinned into an unpleasant, tight grimace. He stared at Brixton before answering. “As your *assistant*, it is

expected of me to attend with you and take note of anything of importance that Patriarch Hedran would want to be aware of.”

“Of course. Very well. When do we leave?”

“The shuttle will be escorting us around three this afternoon. It will take approximately an hour to reach our destination, and there is a small tour and appetizers beforehand,” Grechto explained.

“Fine. Leave now. I will be ready,” Brixton ordered pompously, waving Grechto away with one hand.

The other male scowled at Brixton and opened his mouth as if to say something more, but I moved to stand in his way. Grechto’s attention shifted to me and he sneered again. Knowing how much the male disliked me and what I represented, I bared my fangs back in a silent challenge.

Grechto was a supporter of the Purification Movement, a portion of the Saveet population who believed in the eventual eradication of the Noxel. He saw us as impurities to be purged from the perfection of the body of Acair. How Patriarch Hedran could possibly support this male as an ambassador with the task of bringing Saveet and Noxel males to Earth was beyond me, but I didn’t believe Grechto would ever have my people’s best interests in mind.

The smaller male faltered under my direct glare. He was soft and counted on his position and family background to protect him. The problem was that until he was publicly named as the actual ambassador, Brixton still outranked him. And I protected Brixton, so he couldn’t do anything to me. Many of them considered me as little more than an animal; a vicious, barely trained paloua hound guarding its master. If I snapped Grechto’s neck and said he was threatening Brixton, everyone would shrug and move on with their day. He knows it too.

Grechto broke eye contact with a curse, turned on his heel and stomped out. “Control your beast!” he spat before slamming the door behind him.

Turning back to Brixton, I made a comical snarl at him just because. His eyes went wide and he snorted, then burst into laughter and fell back onto the sofa.

“He really doesn’t like you, does he?” he asked when he caught his breath.

“I can’t imagine why not. I feel like I’m a rather likeable beast, don’t you?”

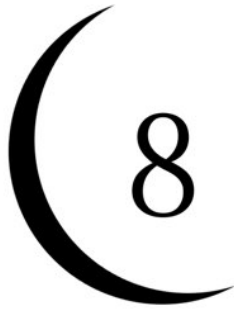
My question sent Brixton into another fit of sniggering. He shook a finger at me as he wiped tears from his eyes.

“I can’t believe it took us this long to really become friends,” he said.

I stayed silent, unsure of how to respond without insulting him. I needn’t have worried though, Brixton’s next words were enough for me.

“Of course, I have been a bit insufferable until recently, haven’t I?”

I just ruffled the locks between his horns and grinned when he swatted at me. “Come along, O Insufferable One. Lunch hour approaches. We should find something to eat before you have to start primping for the fun this afternoon.”



Rowena

“Hey, Ro! Wait up!” Cass yelled, catching my attention as I was heading back to my office from lunch.

I stopped to let her catch up and smiled as she rushed over. She was always such a mess, but she was my best friend so what could I say? Cass spent all day in the orchards and greenhouses, which showed in the dirt smudged on her cheeks and the tan on her skin. Her hair was always a puff of frizz that escaped everywhere, and her uniform stayed muddy at the knees. She was also extremely happy. Cass loved her job, loved mucking about in the gardens and climbing trees.

“What’s up babe?” I asked once she got closer.

She grinned excitedly. “Megan and some of the other girls are going to meet up at the beach after work this afternoon for a little bonfire and some swimming. I wanted you to come with us,” she said, grabbing my hand. “We haven’t hung out in forever! These last two weeks have been so busy and stressful with the UEG people here. We need to have some fun! Let loose a little!”

“I don’t know. I have to be here early for the ambassador’s swim lessons. I don’t think I can party and get drunk on the beach tonight,” I replied reluctantly.

“Oh, don’t worry about that! Most of us have to be at work tomorrow morning. We aren’t planning to drink anything real hard or party all night. Just a little bonfire at sunset, maybe a beer or two.” Cass pleaded, giving me big puppy dog eyes. “I think most people are going home before midnight. It’s just a chance to hang out and relax with friends. Please say you’ll come?”

“Ack! No! Not the eyes! Not the eyes!” I joked, flailing and shying comically away from her. “Alright, alright! I’ll come! You know I could never say no to those eyes.”

Cass’s fist pumped into the air, as she jumped around. “Yes! Girls’ night, here we come!”

Laughing, I watched her run off, undoubtedly heading back to whatever chores she had left for the day. Hanging out with my friends could be fun.

“You look happy, Miss Carter.”

I jumped, startled at the voice in my ear. “For heaven’s sake, Brixton!” I hissed. “What is it with you and Reynar scaring me all the time?”

Brixton laughed at my whispered tirade. Reynar, who was still standing behind him, couldn’t hide his own smirk of amusement. “Apologies. It was not my intention to startle you. We were simply passing through, and I wanted to stop and thank you again for your patience with my sour mood this morning,” Brixton said calmly and diplomatically.

“Uh, I appreciate it, but you weren’t too awful this morning. Everyone is entitled to a bad day once in a while so...” I shrugged, unsure of the direction the conversation was going.

“As I was saying, you look very happy after speaking with your friend. Is she your mate? Or a suitor maybe?” Brixton

had the oddest gleam in his eye as he questioned me. His gaze flicked over my shoulder for the briefest second, then back to me.

Just what was he up to?

“Who? Cass? No, she’s just a friend. We’re meeting up with some other friends at the beach tonight for a little get together.”

“Oh? A party! That sounds like fun. We shall join you later.”

“You are *not* invited,” I informed him, grinning at the shock on his face. “It’s a girls only party, so you can’t come.”

“You can’t stop us from just showing up,” he replied, frowning.

Crossing my arms, I glared at him. “No, but if you show up and ruin the first girls’ night I’ve had with my friends in months, I will push you off in the deep end and let you drown tomorrow. Capiche?”

“I do not know the meaning of *capiche*,” he said with a sniff.

“It means do you understand? If you screw up my night and piss me off, you’ll wish you were dead. Understood?” I stood toe to toe with Brixton, my finger not quite jabbing him in the chest as he scowled at me. “Just because you’re *the* ambassador doesn’t mean you’re welcome anywhere you want to go.”

“You are an ill-tempered shrew, and I *am* welcome anywhere I wish to go, because I am *the* ambassador,” he announced.

“Yeah, and you’re a spoiled, pushy jackass,” I retorted.

“The only reason I put up with you is because you are the only female who doesn’t want anything from me,” Brixton stated coldly. “Fine. Go to your girls’ party. I will not interrupt

simply because I prefer to avoid the sharp-edge of your tongue, but I expect you to be on time in the morning. Your tardiness this morning will not be tolerated again.” With that, he spun on his heel and marched away. Reynar eyed me a moment longer, then followed at his back without a word.

“Arrogant asshole,” I muttered under my breath. What was with the sudden mood shift today? Brixton was always so easy going, even when I was insulting him. What was with the jerky attitude just now? His words stung. Did he really feel that way?

Huffing irritably, I turned to resume my walk and spotted Jerica watching me from not far away. Had she been close enough to hear everything? Did she hear us arguing? Oh shit, did she hear me threaten Brixton?

She didn’t look angry this time. In fact, the look she leveled at me was some strange mix of smug satisfaction and sadistic delight. It was like she’d enjoyed watching Brixton insult and belittle me. Smirking as our eyes met, she sauntered over.

“It’s so good to know for sure what kind of relationship the two of you have,” she said, practically purring as she walked up. “I hated thinking you’d thought of having any chance of getting anywhere with a male like him.”

Staying silent, I waited for her to finish whatever she wanted to say. She was gloating. There was no point in trying to protest. This would end when she was ready to end it.

“However, that was no way to treat a representative of the Repopulation Initiative. If I ever hear you being so disrespectful to our guest again, I’ll have no choice but to have your employment contract terminated and have you escorted off the grounds immediately. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am. It won’t happen again,” I answered stiffly.

“Good,” she purred. “Oh, and stay in the greenhouse apartment for the time being. We don’t want you to be late for the ambassador’s lessons now, do we?” Jerica smirked again, knowing she was purposely upending my life for Brixton.

“Can I at least make a trip back to my apartment for some of my things?”

“I think you should stay on the property in case Ambassador Hedran decides he needs more of your time. Just send your little friend Cris to get your things,” she said dismissively.

“You mean Cass?”

“Yeah, whatever the little twit’s name is, just send her,” Jerica sneered, waving her hand in aggravation. “Now go. I’m sure you have plenty of more *important* things to see to before your precious party. Just remember what I said about being respectful of our guest.”

“Yes, ma’am, ” I said sourly, walking off in a huff.

Reynar

The unpleasant encounter with Rowena weighed heavily on both Brixton and I as we went about the rest of the day, but we felt it had been necessary. Considering Ms. Lawson’s confrontation with Rowena before this morning’s lesson, and with Rowena’s subtle warning that we were likely being monitored during them, we couldn’t help but notice the way the Estate Manager had been watching us as we approached Rowena. Any indication of a positive relationship would have been disastrous, but not for us. All the blame would fall on

Rowena. Neither of us wanted her hurt by the woman's petty jealousies.

Brixton had taken the chance to start a neutral conversation and when it might have turned pleasant, he'd been pompous and insulting. The confusion and hurt in Rowena's expression made me want to pull her in my arms and comfort her, but it was too public. Jerica was watching too closely, delighted with Brixton's boorish behavior.

"You'll make it right, won't you?" he asked when we reached the relative privacy of his suite.

I nodded, knowing what he meant. "I'll find her later and explain."

"Good. Sneak out to the beach if you have to. It should be safe enough to catch her alone out there," he suggested, heading for his wardrobe.

"We'll be away from the estate until late. I don't know if we'll be back in time for me to catch her out there," I said, sitting in a lounge across the room. I watched him sort through his robes for an appropriate outfit for tonight's dinner.

"You are staying here," Brixton announced, his voice muffled as he dug deeper into the wardrobe.

"I'm your chief bodyguard. Why would I stay here?"

"I will take the others with me, all of them. I do not need my big, scary Noxel at my back intimidating those poor little females and distracting everyone," Brixton explained, leaning out of the closet to wink teasingly at me. "There will be plenty of security there, and I promise not to drink any alcohol this time. I will keep my wits about me, so you don't have to worry your pretty little head about what I'm getting up to."

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, knowing from past experience Brixton wasn’t good at keeping his wits about him.

“Yes. Rowena is a good person. I like her. She doesn’t fawn all over me and I enjoy that about her. I know you *like* her a lot. I took no pleasure in hurting her today and I want her to know why that was needed. Take your night off. Sneak away to spend time with your female, if she will let you of course,” he said, chuckling at the last comment. “Maybe you can even come back reeking of sex again and not have it all over your pants this time.”

“You ass,” I spat, laughing and throwing one of the seat cushions at him.

The rest of the afternoon passed slowly. Brixton dressed in his casual finery and boarded the shuttle with the rest of his retinue and a contingency of UEG guards. Even Ms. Lawson went with the group as an escort to make introductions and show him around. I was not happy about that unexpected addition, but Brixton waved my worries away with the remark that if Jerica was with him, at least she wasn’t spying on me or Rowena. It was hard to argue with that logic, but when in the hells had the boy started growing up?

After they left, I wandered the estate. There was no sign of Rowena anywhere on the grounds and searching the offices would only raise suspicion. So instead, I wandered. Strolling along the garden paths was not as soothing as I had hoped.

Some of the humans were getting used to me, but there were still so many who were startled as they noticed me. I suppose they could have been surprised by my silent appearance on the path in front of them, or it could have been my fearsome visage. I didn’t care to find out what bothered them the most. The astonished gasps and fearful flinching got tiresome rather

quickly. After an hour or so of it, I simply headed back to my suite to wait until I could sneak out to the beach.

Crossing the final distance between the gardens and the house, I was rounding the side of the pool area towards the door when a small body crashed into me. Reflexively, I caught the tiny blonde female before she could hit the ground. She stared up at me wide-eyed as I set her back on her feet. At least she wasn't quaking in fear.

In the collision, she'd lost the bag she was carrying. She seemed in no hurry to retrieve it, so I reached down and picked it up for her. As I lifted it from the floor, a familiar scent wafted up from it. My eyes narrowed on the female who still stared at me as I held the bag higher and smelled it again.

"This smells like Miss Carter. Who are you? Why do you have Miss Carter's property?" I asked suspiciously.

The tiny blonde blinked, then looked at the bag as if just realizing what I was holding. "Oh! I stopped by her place for her. Jerica said she had to stay here on the estate, so she asked me if I could go get her stuff since she can't go home right now," she explained, slowly reaching out and taking the bag from me.

"Why is she not allowed to go home?"

The female looked a little uncomfortable, avoiding my gaze and hugging the bag close to her body. "Weeelllll, your boss was kinda mean to her earlier and I think Jerica is hoping it'll happen again if she has to stay here. She doesn't like how much time he's been spending with Rowena, but she does like the fact that he was so harsh with Ro. She's a bitch like that, but you didn't hear that from me."

The small human darted around me and took off down the path, with Rowena's bag wrapped tightly in her arms. Turning, I watched as she sprinted away. Did she think I would chase her? Skidding to a stop at the turn in the walkway, she looked back at me and waved.

"Nice meeting you!" she yelled, then bolted out of sight with a giggle.

I couldn't help the chuckle that slipped out of me. She was a strange little thing, but it was nice to talk to one of the females without them fearing me.

Continuing inside, I grabbed some dinner for myself and took it up to my suite to eat and then waited for nightfall. It seemed there was more to apologize for than just a few cruel words. I meant to do my best to make amends. I knew Brixton would be angrier when he found out that Ms. Lawson was hoping to see him heap more abuse on my sweet Rowena.

Rowena

"Ro! Ro! You're never going to believe what just happened!" Cass burst through my office door like a hurricane, adding more noise to the dull ache already trying to start up in my skull as she thumped my bag down on the desk between us.

"What happened, Cass?" I asked, trying to rub my temples.

"I just ran into the Noxel guy! Like, I *literally* ran into him! He's like a frickin brick wall! I would have hit the floor if he hadn't caught me. He's HUGE! Oh, my gawsh, how do you give the ambassador swim lessons with that guy standing over you? I mean, he's not really all that scary, he seemed fairly

nice, but he did get kinda intense when he realized I had your bag.

“Did you know he knows your scent? Like, he totally sniffed your bag and nearly accused me of stealing your stuff. But when I explained everything, he seemed understanding and all. I mean, he even seemed a little concerned about Jerica making you stay at the estate, not that he said so but it was the way he looked at me while we were talking and all.

“I wanted to talk with him more, but it was so weird having him stand over me like that. I swear I’m practically at eye level with his bellybutton. I just couldn’t stay any longer, so I bolted.”

Cass’s words hit me at a mile a minute and I could barely keep up. “Wait, wait, Cass! Slow down girl. Did you just say you ran into Reynar?” I interrupted, holding up a timeout sign with my hands, the headache forgotten.

“Yeah,” she said. “Like, I totally ran smack into him. It would have been hysterical if I wasn’t completely shocked at meeting him.”

“Why didn’t he go with Br—Ambassador Hedran?”

“I dunno,” she said, shrugging. “But he’s wandering around the estate right now, though I think he might have been going inside. He’s nice, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he’s not nearly as grumpy as he looks,” I admitted with a grin.

Cass cocked her head curiously at me for a moment, then her eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open. “No freakin way!” she squealed.

“What? What are you—”

“You like him!” Cass accused much too loudly for my peace of mind.

“Fuck, Cass! Shut up!” I hissed, launching out of my chair and clapping a hand over her big mouth. “You can’t say shit like that around here!”

She cringed and I let go. “Sorry,” she whispered. “I wasn’t thinking. If it makes you feel better, Noel’s running errands, so there’s no one out front. I don’t think anyone would have heard me.”

“It’s okay, just watch it alright. I’ve already got Jerica all over me cause she thinks I’m after Brixton, but I’m not. He’s too stuck up,” I said, stepping back to sit on the edge of my desk.

Why was Reynar still here?

“Brixton?”

I grimaced. Cass *would* catch that slip up too. “Ambassador Brixton Hedran. He’s okay. I don’t know what happened earlier, but usually he’s okay, even if he is a bit spoiled.”

“Giiirrrrrlll,” Cass exclaimed, dragging out that one word, shaking her head at me. “You have got to tell me what the heck you have been up to the last two weeks. First names with the Ambassador and his bodyguard? What the heck is going on?”

“Not right now, Cass. I’ll tell you later, okay?”

“You better. I’m going back to work. I’ll see you in a couple hours when I clock out and then we need to talk,” she stated seriously, wagging a finger at me.

I snorted in amusement. Cass was never this serious. “Yes, ma’am,” I answered, saluting cheekily. “Now get going. I’ve got work to do, too.”

Cass waggled two fingers from her eyes to mine in an I'm watching you gesture, then slipped out the door. Shaking my head at her silliness, I moved my bag to the floor and reached for my inventory sheets again. I'd already submitted the order, so it was a simple matter of updating the budget and making sure everything got delivered on time. Same shit, different month, over and over and over. There was a certain comfort in monotony though. It just got boring every now and then, but somebody had to do it. I was happy enough it was me.

The comms chimed and I reached over, tapping the desk unit to accept the call. "Graylin Estate Landscaping Office, Carter speaking. How can I help you?"

It took a moment for the video to come up on the old vid-unit, but audio came on right away. "Hey Rowena, it's Macy."

Macy's face popped up shortly after she spoke, filling the screen with her concerned expression. She was my contact at the supply depot. All my orders went through her office.

"Macy! I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. Is there a problem with the order?"

"I'll say. I can't fill it. The order was rejected," Macy explained apologetically.

"Rejected? What do you mean rejected?" That didn't make any sense, I'd never had an order rejected before.

"It's just what I said Ro, your spending account was rejected. I can't fill your order," she repeated.

"But why would it be rejected?"

"According to the return slip, insufficient funds," Macy stated.

"That doesn't make any sense. The budget's good for another six months. I balance it myself and I haven't ordered anything

I don't normally order. Have there been any changes in your fees that I don't know about? Something that may have come up after the order went through and maybe I wasn't notified?"

"No. No changes in the last three years, so it's not on our end. Whatever happened is on your end. Are you sure you've tracked all your orders?"

"There shouldn't be any missing orders. I log every single one as I'm ordering them. I balance the budget after every order."

"What about the rest of your department? Could someone else have used the account to order something without going through you and then forgot to log it in the budget?"

"I'm the only one who is supposed to have access to this charge account as far as I know. No one else knows my passwords," I grumbled, wracking my brain for answers. "Shit, I don't know what's happened. Alright, just put the order on hold for now. I need to figure out what's going on."

"Sure Ro, no problem. Just let me know," Macy said agreeably. She hung up and I stared at the dark vid-screen in frustration.

What the hell happened to my budget? I'd had the same budget for the last four years. My orders rarely changed from month to month. I had it down to an art. There was never any overspending. There were never any rejected orders.

Hissing under my breath, I pulled up the spending account for my department. The cover page, where all my totals were displayed, showed a balance that was typical for April. According to the data, there were more than forty thousand credits. Digging deeper though, turned my stomach.

Someone had fucked with the account. The account itself was nearly empty. There were less than a hundred credits in it. My

algorithms had been altered to make my entry page appear normal. How? How had someone hacked into the account and stolen the money? How had they changed my formulas? Everything was password locked and coded to alert me whenever there were any changes. And the system log was no good, it only showed my own name on the access history. Who had gotten round my system?

Someone stole the money, but everything made it look like the culprit was me. This was really bad. Sitting back, I tried to think through my shock. What could possibly come of someone doing this?

Tapping a quick number on my wry-com, I fidgeted in place until the connection clicked open. “Evie? I need your help. I think I’m in trouble...”



Reynar

Once night fell, sneaking out to the beach was easy. Yet catching Rowena alone however, not so much. She was surrounded by other females, all laughing and playing. They swam in the waves that lapped at the sand, then dried off in the warmth of the bonfire. They talked and shared food, eventually the females started to drift away by the ones and twos. Each saying their goodbyes as they left.

Finally, it was just Rowena and two others, the tiny blonde who'd crashed into me earlier and a curvy female with a shockingly bright pink mohawk. They sat on a blanket and talked quietly for a long time. Or Rowena did a lot of talking and her friends listened. They were too far away for me to hear what was said, but their expressions registered a rather wide range of emotions. From where I watched, I saw shock, sympathy, amusement, anger, sadness, and even a touch of glee. Humans were strange and hard to understand sometimes, but it was worth having Rowena by my side, if Brixton could really help make it happen. If not, we'd be fugitives for the rest of our lives. And that was a hard way to live.

By the time the other females hugged my Rowena and finally left the beach, the moon was high and full in the clear night sky. Alone, Rowena sat by herself and stared up at the stars,

making no moves to get up just yet. The fire had burned down to coals, yet the night was warm enough without it.

“I know you’re out there,” she called out.

A small smile spread across my lips. I silently left my hiding place in the trees and walked over, crouching on my heels behind her on the blanket. “And how did you know I was there, *na valeka*?” I asked, trailing a hand over her hair.

She leaned into my touch. “Cass told me you stayed behind tonight. I knew you’d come looking for me.”

“Always,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head. “Did you enjoy your girls’ night?”

“Mhmm,” she answered, leaning back into my chest.

Even though I balanced easily, even with her weight against me, my arm draped around the front of her shoulders and held her close. She raised a hand to my arm, then trailed her fingers back and forth along my skin.

I kissed the top of her head, breathing in her sweet intoxicating scent as I did, and considered my next words. “Brixton did not mean his harsh words to you today. He wanted you to know that,” I said, filling the air with quiet words. I paused when Rowena’s hand tightened briefly on my arm, but she gave me a tiny pat and resumed her gentle stroking, so I continued. “He spied that evil woman listening in and knew she was up to no good. He did it to protect you from her jealousies, but it hurt him to do so. I think he likes you nearly as much as I do, *na valeka*. Though, not in the same way.”

Her wandering fingers paused again and she sat up, turning in my arms to look at me. “What does that mean? What does ‘*na valeka*’ mean?” Her pretty green eyes stared into mine as she waited for an answer.

“It means my desert hopper,” I explained.

She gave a small, confused laugh. “Desert hopper? I don’t understand. Is that like a bunny rabbit or something?”

I smiled. “My planet is mostly desert, as you know. Out in the dunes, just beyond the oasis borders, there is an animal called a valeka, or a desert hopper. They are beautiful little animals, prized for their shiny scales and the long soft fur that runs down the middle of their backs. They have large back feet and can jump great heights and distances, as well as thick front claws for digging complex tunnels under the sands. I’m not sure what a bunny rabbit is, but if those features are similar, I suppose it could resemble an Earth bunny.

“However, the valeka is a fierce predator, especially the females. They look small and harmless when you first see them, but when threatened they can and often do take down larger animals to defend themselves and their burrows. Also, valekas are carnivorous and have very sharp teeth.”

“So you’re saying I’m like a space-bunny?” she asked in a flat voice.

I grinned teasingly. “Yes,” I said, tapping her on the nose. “My space-bunny; fierce, aggressive, and adorable.”

Rowena blinked and burst out laughing. Pushing upwards, she knocked me to my back, then she straddled my waist. Her hands came up and grabbed my shoulders as if to pin me. I found her sudden boldness shocking and arousing.

“What are you doing, na valeka?” I asked, reaching up to wrap my hands around her hips under the edge of her cover.

Rowena wore a loose, lightweight tunic over a simple swimsuit, much like the one she’d worn to the beach just a few days ago. Her legs were bare against my sides, and she was

warm under my hands. The soft, unbound waves of her hair slipped over her shoulder and brushed my cheek as she leaned over me and stared into my eyes.

“Why me?”

“Why *not* you?”

Huffing, she leaned back, shifting her weight onto my already straining cock. We both groaned at the feel of it trapped between us, but she stayed serious.

“Why me, Reynar? Why are you so set on me? There are so many other women here who are prettier and more successful, and who are less likely to get you in trouble if you get caught than me!

“I’m...I’m nobody. I’m a secretary who sometimes pulls the weeds and programs the lawnmower and buys the horse shit that goes in the dirt around the vegetable gardens. I’m in debt up to my eyeballs because I fell for some stupid money-laundering scheme when I was in college that I was too dumb to recognize before it was too late! I’m not from some high level, richie-rich family. You get nothing but trouble if you get caught with me. I am *so* not worth that kind of trouble,” she ranted, throwing her hands in the air. “So why risk so much for me?”

“I would risk everything for you,” I replied, rubbing gentle circles into her skin.

“That’s not an answer,” she snapped irritably, pushing herself away from me to stand.

My hands tightened on her hips. I pulled her back down, grinding myself on her hot slit. Rowena gasped and bit her lip. She grabbed at my vest for balance as I did it again.

“Let me finish,” I chided softly. “You are worth everything and I would risk it all for you. No other compares to you. You are the bravest, the fiercest, the strongest, and the most beautiful female I’ve ever known. You have the biggest heart. You’re clever and sweet. You treat Brixton and I as if we are equals. And you *see* me.”

Her expression became softer. “Of course I see you. What else would I see?”

I took her hand and set it on the worst of my scars. “These.” Then I moved it up to my horns. “These.” I nipped her fingertips with my fangs. “These.” And finally, I set them to the thick scales around my collar bones. “These...My own people see *these*, the things that make me different, so do most of yours. They fear what they see, but you have always seen what was underneath, haven’t you?”

Rowena gave a soft smile and traced her fingers around the biggest scales. “You want to know what I thought the first time I got a good look at you?”

I nodded, curious. I wanted to know everything about her.

“I thought you were beautiful. You had the prettiest blue eyes I’d ever seen. And I wanted to run my hands through your hair to see if it was as soft as it looked. Your scars made me want to touch you and trace each one with my fingers. Then you growled at me and I just wanted to melt at your feet.”

“I thought you were afraid of me,” I admitted, sliding my hands higher and kneading her lower back.

She bit her lip and rocked her hips in a slow glide that made us both groan again. “I was a little, but I was more afraid of how you made me feel. It was a sexy, fun kind of scared,” she said, licking her lips. “You were so big and gruff with your arms

around me and with your hand at my throat. I was so fucking wet. You could have pushed me down on that table and had me right then.”

My cock twitched almost violently at that visual and I rolled, taking her to the blanket under me. Rowena gasped at the sudden switch, then laughed and pushed her hands between the edges of my vest. Flicking the buttons open, she shoved it off my shoulders and I quickly threw it aside as I settled between her thighs. Quick little fingers trailed along my scales, dipped between my muscles, and smoothed over my skin as she explored my chest.

“Your skin is so soft compared to the scales,” she said, brushing along the lines between the two textures. Her fingers followed the lines of the two largest scars that criss-crossed my torso. “What happened here?”

“My first fight,” I said, covering her hand with my own. “Nearly got myself gutted by a Draalian fighter. After that, I quickly learned that the arena was an unforgiving place. Most of the fights were kill or be killed. There was no room for mercy in the arena.”

“That’s awful,” she whispered. Leaning up, she kissed the scars, then curved a hand behind my neck and pulled my head down to kiss me.

I met her hungrily, nipping and sucking at her lower lip. When she opened to me, I slipped my tongue into her mouth and entwined it with hers, tasting her. One of her hands cupped my cheek, while the other wrapped around my shoulders, holding me close. We parted, panting for breath, and then came together again. I couldn’t get enough of her.

Pushing her cover upwards, I skimmed a hand over her soft belly and stroked at her skin, fumbling at the edges of her

bathing suit. She giggled and let go of me, then pulled at the cover herself. She wriggled and contorted under me until she got it over her head, leaving only the separate pieces of her suit covering her breasts and groin. Grabbing the waist of her bottoms, she pushed them down.

“Help me get these off,” she ordered.

Only too happy to oblige, I grabbed the silky fabric and slid them the rest of the way down, then kissed her belly while crawling down her body. Rowena shivered and arched into the simple touch, thrusting her hips towards me. Her knees rose up on either side of me, opening her most delicate flesh to my gaze. Her scent was strong and sweet. It called to me, making my mouth water. I longed to taste her again.

Discarding her little pants, I sat back on my heels and stared down at the female laid out like a prize before me. She'd pulled her top off already, exposing the lush curves of her breasts. Her nipples were hard, rosy points begging for my touch. Her slit glistened; wet and waiting. Rowena watched me, desire stark in her eyes as she stared hungrily back at me.

“You are worth risking everything for,” I whispered reverently.

Leaning in, I kissed the inside of her left knee, then her right. Her breath stuttered in her chest as I pushed her legs further apart and kissed each thigh, working my way up her legs. Grinning against her trembling flesh, I nipped the inside of her thigh, leaving my mark on her skin. She yipped and jumped, then moaned when I soothed the spot with my tongue.

“Reynar,” she whined breathlessly, drawing out my name as she arched under my touch. “I need you, please. Please, Reynar.”

Finally setting my shoulders to the backs of her thighs, I licked her from slit to clit, filling my mouth with her taste. My beloved squealed, then her legs clamped together on my horns as she grabbed handfuls of my hair. Lapping eagerly at her slit, I alternated thrusting my tongue into her creamy sex and circling around the hard nub of her clit.

Rowena's heels dug into my shoulders and she tugged hard on my left horn, trying desperately to pull me closer. She twisted and jerked so hard that I had to pin her hips down as I licked and sucked at her sensitive flesh. Moans and whimpers spilled out from her in louder cries.

She tensed and gripped my hair tight, so close to her breaking point. It was almost painful, but I wanted to feel her come apart. Thrusting my blunted fingers into her tight channel, I stroked her inner walls. My lips closed over her clit and I sucked hard on it. Rowena shattered, screaming my name and shook under me as I drank her sweet release.

Rowena

I barely felt it when Reynar gently set my legs down and crawled up my body, with his face wet from my orgasm. I tasted myself on his lips and tongue when he kissed me. It made my entire body tingle and my head spun from the lack of oxygen as if I was gasping for air. He dipped his head and took a nipple in his mouth, suckling and nipping it with his teeth. When it was swollen and aching with pleasure, he switched to the other, giving it the same treatment.

Soon I was squirming and panting for more, begging him incoherently as he left more little bites on my breasts and

shoulders; marking me, claiming me. He raised up briefly and pushed the last of his clothes off. Settling between my thighs once more, he slid his dick across my pussy, wetting his hard length in the slick leaking from my body. I shuddered at the feel of ridges dragging through my folds, and I unconsciously undulated against him. Mewls of pleasure escaped me as he did it again and again.

I angrily shoved at his shoulder. “Stop fucking teasing me!” I snapped. “Just fuck me already! I can’t take it anymore!” I was sobbing with frustration. I reached between us to rub frantically at my own clit, too impatient and frantic to get off.

Reynar growled and grabbed my wrist, pulling my hand away from my clit. My anxious whine turned into a moan of need when he licked the wetness from my fingers, sucking them into his mouth before pinning my hand beside my head. The look in his eyes as he met mine was fierce and heated.

“Please Reynar,” I moaned.

“I will give you what you need, na valeka.” A deep purr rumbled in his chest as he rolled his hips against me. His cock nudged my opening, pushing in just a little. He tensed up. Shifting the hand holding my wrist, he threaded his fingers through mine. “You are mine, na valeka. Now and forever. My heart, my love, and my life,” he whispered with gentle seriousness that brought a pang to my heart.

Tears threatened to fall. “I’m scared, Reynar. What if there’s no going back?”

He smiled softly. “There was never any going back. Not from the first time I held you in my arms, na valeka.”

With that, he stroked into me with a single hard thrust, seating himself to the hilt. He was big enough for it to hurt in that

pleasurable, painful way that made me arch into him with a scream of ecstasy. Wrapping my legs around his waist and with my free arm around his shoulders, I clung to him with all my strength as he set a powerful pace. There were ridges on his cock that rubbed in all the right places. It lit a fire in my nerves. Reynar's hips slapped into me over and over, jolting me into the blanket.

The scales on his chest and shoulders chafed my skin where I held him, adding a little sting to the pleasure of his touch. He buried his face in the curve of my shoulder, his fangs grazing the skin there as he nipped at the tender flesh with each thrust. I had to lean my head to the side to avoid rubbing against his horn, but his hair hung down, tickling my breasts as we moved. Every tiny sensation added to the whole, and I was dying in his arms. Moans and curses flew from my lips between gasps, begging for more. My nails clawed at his back and scraped the scales trailing down his spine.

Reynar was so lost in the sensations himself; he'd started speaking adorations in his own language. Gasps and grunts and moans were interspersed with murmurs of alien words I didn't understand, but they sounded affectionate and sweet. They were full of love and praise, occasionally broken by the sharpness of a curse while he strained over me.

I could feel another orgasm building and twisting inside me. It rushed through me, tensing my muscles and bowing me against Reynar. He felt it when my pussy clamped down on his cock, making it harder for him to thrust in and out of me. His pace faltered and he reared up, jerking his hips harder and faster. He still clung onto my hand, his fingers laced through mine as he held me tight.

Pulling me up into his lap, I suddenly found myself straddling his lap as he thrusts upwards without missing a beat. Our interlaced hands were now between us, and he's wrapped his free arm behind my back to hold me steady. My clit rubbed against the scales on his pubic bone now, and this new position drove him higher and deeper into my pussy. One good, hard thrust made him hit that sweet spot deep inside.

"Ahhh! Fuck!" I screamed and came hard, shouting into the warm moonlit night.

"Ugh! Rowena!" he groaned, coming as my pussy pulsed around his dick, milking him. He shuddered and shifted, thrusting into me again, triggering another orgasm. His cock twitched inside me. He leaned forward and bit down on my shoulder, piercing the skin while holding onto me as I shrieked his name.

How long we sat there in each other's arms, I don't know. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. All I knew was that I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to go back to my regular life because that meant having to hide what we had, having to pretend we didn't mean something to each other. But life sucked and the world hated the underdog.

"What have we done?" I asked, suddenly feeling desolate. I didn't let go of him, though. I couldn't let go of him, couldn't push him away. There was no turning back now.

"Do you regret it?"

I didn't even have to think about my answer. "No. No, I don't regret it. I just worry about what comes next. What happens when we're discovered? What happens to you?"

I didn't care what happened to me.

“Whatever happens, happens, and we will face it all as one,” he replied, squeezing my hand where he still held it between our bodies. I suddenly realized that in our position, our entwined hands rested between our hearts: his against mine, mine against his. The significance made me melt just a little more.

“As one,” I repeated, kissing him softly.

He purred low in his chest, smiling and stroking my hair. “There is nothing we cannot face together, my love.”

The wind picked up briefly, throwing the salty spray of the ocean across my bare back and reminding me where we were. “Come on, lover boy,” I said with a teasing grin. “Time to show me some of those swimming skills you’ve learned just by watching me teach Brixton.”

Disengaging from Reynar brought a groan from us both as his dick slipped from my pussy, but I didn’t let it stop me from hopping up and running naked through the sand to the water’s edge. Reynar followed a bit slower, his eyes scanning from shore to tree line for threats, always the ever-vigilant guardian. When his gaze returned to me though, it lit up with appreciation as he studied my naked body standing in the low waves.

Shaking my head while laughing, I turned and dove into the next wave, then paddled deeper into the water. Reynar waded in, letting the waves rock into him as he followed me. I met him in the waist deep water, coming up out of the wave like a mermaid, and splashed him. He wiped water from his eyes and gave me a mischievous grin, flashing his fangs in the moonlight as he reached out for me. With a squeal I dove away, ducking under the water again, slipping around him.

I popped up behind him and splashed him again, then dove before he could turn and catch me. The third time I came up, he was ready and I found myself trapped in his arms. Wriggling and cursing, I tried to escape, but he held me tightly, growling playfully while kissing me.

Slippery struggles soon turned to sweet caresses and moans of need. The soft waves rocked into us gently as Reynar pushed his length into my body once more, still standing in almost waist-deep water. Strong arms lifted and lowered me onto his cock while I clung tightly to his shoulders. My thighs gripped his hips, riding him while the ocean embraced us both. When we came this time, it was quieter, closer, more personal. Both of us gasped and clung to each other as he walked us out of the water and collapsed onto the wet sand.

When I finally caught my breath again, I heard a persistent beeping noise coming from the blanket up the beach. My wry-com was going off. Cursing under my breath, I pushed myself up on wobbling legs and went to answer it.

The screen indicated it was Cass calling. I knew she was waiting for me to call and let her know I'd made it home safe. If I didn't answer, she'd come looking for me, so I tapped the button to connect the call and listened for the beep. "Go for Ro," I said tiredly when it picked up.

"It's about time, girl! This is the third time I've rung your comm. I was starting to worry about you. What took you so long?" Cass scolded.

I winced. I'd told her some of what was going on with Reynar earlier, but of course she didn't know about this newest development. "Sorry Cass. I was swimming and left my comm on the blanket. What do you need?"

“The UEG party is due back soon and I figured your Noxel friend might need to make an appearance when they show up. I think he’s got just enough time to run back and shower if he hurries.”

I nearly groaned aloud. “What makes you think he’s with me?” I asked, trying to be nonchalant.

Cass laughed. “I left my Music Max. When I came back to grab it, you were definitely not alone. Make sure you take it to your room so I can get it tomorrow, would you?”

My best friend could not have sounded any smugger if she tried.

Looking over, I glanced at the little music player she mentioned. I actually groaned aloud this time. It was right there on the blanket next to where Reynar and I had made love for the first time.

“How much did you see?”

“Oh honey, I know you must have had a *really* good time,” she teased. “Bow-chicka-wow-wow.”

I was wrong. She could sound smugger.

“You can’t say anything,” I warned, worried about what could happen if she slipped up and accidentally blabbed the truth. As much as I loved Cass, she was terrible at keeping secrets.

“Not a peep,” she promised. “Now get him moving! Bye sweetie.”

She hung up, and I sagged where I sat. The breeze picked up again and this time it carried a little chill. I shivered from the wind until a warm, lightweight fabric draped over me and blocked out the cold. Reynar wrapped the fabric snugly

around me and tucked the ends in, which made me a warm, little Rowena burrito.

“Trouble?” he asked.

“Not exactly,” I started. “Brixton and the others will be back soon. You probably need to go back to your suite and shower so you can meet them...”

“And?”

“And Cass knows about us already,” I said with a half shrug.

“Cass?”

I smiled. “My best friend. She’s the little blonde that crashed into you earlier. She came back for something she forgot and saw us together. She saw enough to know we were *together* together.”

“Ah. Is that a problem?”

“Not in the sense that she would purposely tell on us, but Cass is terrible at keeping secrets. She almost always gives it away by accident,” I said with a worried grimace.

“Then we will not worry about it right now. Come my love, we must head back to the estate.”

“You go on, I’ll dress and clean up here. We can’t be seen together,” I protested.

“I will not leave my mate alone in the dark, no matter how fierce she is,” he replied, leaning down to kiss the end of my nose. He shrugged into his vest, having already donned his pants. “I will walk you to the edge of the estate at least, and then you can pretend you do not care for me.”

I frowned at his phrasing. “Don’t say it like that. Of course I care. I love you. I just don’t know what we’ll do if we get

caught together,” I objected, jumping up to face him. “I don’t want you to get into trouble. We don’t have a plan yet.”

He chuckled down at me. “I jest, na valeka. It took me this long to get you to accept me. I would never accuse you of not loving me.”

“Well, you better remember that,” I said with a sniff, turning to search for my suit bottoms.

Reynar’s hands gripped my hips. He yanked me back against him with a growl. Arms circled around me. Long fingers wrapped tightly around my throat and jaw just like he had done the first day we met. I whimpered, heat rekindling in my belly as he nuzzled the side of my neck.

“Never would I forget,” he whispered, nipping my ear.

He inhaled a long shuddering breath. I dropped my head back on his shoulder with a low groan. “We have to get back,” I complained unconvincingly.

“I know,” he replied, tugging the wrap down and kissing my shoulder.

“Then let go so I can dress,” I ordered, then let slip a chuckle.

“Mmm, but you smell so good when you want to fuck. And you fit against me so perfectly,” he purred roughly.

“Later,” I promised, with a roll of my hips into his newly hardening erection. “We can play again later, but we really do need to go.”

“Bossy little human,” he grumbled, finally letting me go.

Grabbing the pieces of my suit, he handed them to me and waited in silence while I redressed. When I pulled my overshirt on and covered my newest bitemarks, he stepped forward and wrapped the fabric he’d originally bundled me up

in around my hips like a skirt, tying it at my side and fussing with it until he was happy with how it hung.

“What is this?” I asked, holding part of it out. It was light and silky, but warmer than it looked. I recognized it as one of the scarf things he usually wore as a belt.

“My dirjik,” he answered as he picked up my blanket and shook it out before folding it and tucking it into my bag with my other things and Cass’s music player. “Every resident on my planet owns at least one. It protects us if we go outside the cities. The dirjik is a shield from the burn of the blinding suns and warms those unlucky enough to get caught out in the frigid temperatures of a rare Acair nightfall.”

“Rare?”

“Yes. My planet has three suns. Night only falls a few times every orbit. Six, seven times at most. More likely only three or four in a normal orbit. Those nights are festival nights, celebrations held all over the world from sunset to the next sunrise,” he said, holding out a hand.

“I bet coming to Earth was a little weird for you then?” I asked, taking his hand and letting him lead me across the beach. We strolled slowly through the trees towards the estate.

He snorted under his breath. “That is an understatement. It took time to get used to a normal Earth cycle, but now I can’t imagine returning to Acair with its bright, endless days.”

The estate boundaries appeared much too soon and we paused before crossing them, reluctant to separate just yet. Reynar drew me into his arms, tucking me under his chin as he wrapped me tightly in his embrace. I hummed a happy sound, snuggling into his chest. That low, soft purr he sometimes

made started up in his chest. I giggled at it. Reynar made a curious noise and I felt him shift to look down at me.

“I didn’t know any of you aliens could purr, but I like it,” I stated, rubbing my face into his soft skin.

“To be honest, not many of us do. It is another of my many defects,” he admitted.

I pinched his side with my nails and he jumped under my hand. “You do not have defects,” I scolded. “I like everything about you. Anybody who has a problem with you can go to hell.”

“There’s my fierce little space-bunny,” he teased. “Come, na valeka. It is time to return.”

Kissing me quickly, he ran his claws through my hair and cupped my cheeks before releasing me. Another soft kiss was placed on my forehead, then he nudged me towards the path I needed. With a sigh, I headed for the greenhouses at the back of the estate, glancing over my shoulder at the male who had so thoroughly upended my life. Standing back in the shadows, I could just barely see the lighter shades of Reynar’s hair as he watched me walk away.

Reynar

Watching my mate walk away was harder than any arena battle I’d ever been in, even the first one that nearly killed me. I wanted to follow her back to her quarters, sweep her into my arms, and make love to her over and over. I wanted to lock her in my own room and taste her sweet skin on my tongue. If it weren’t for the countless other humans who’d no doubt interrupt, I would like nothing more than to simply track her

down in the gardens and drive my aching cock into her hot channel right there in the flower beds.

Growling through my teeth, I adjusted the aforementioned aching flesh to a more comfortable position, then headed for the manor house. Circumventing the main entries, I made it back to my suite without being seen. Reluctant to wash Rowena's scent from my skin, but knowing the others would recognize the smell of sex, I stripped myself down and stepped into the shower. I was still washing when I heard the outer door open.

"Oy! Reynar! Where are you, my friend?" Brixton yelled, sounding jovial as he grew closer.

Sighing, I shut the water off and grabbed a towel. "In here, Brixton," I called back.

He walked in but stopped short at my nakedness and turned back to the other room. "Would it not be easier to blind me with a knife, Reynar? Must you subject me to the sight of your bare genitals so that I desire to tear my own eyes out to erase the vision?" he griped, laughing as he retreated from the bathing room.

I laughed as well, contemplating the strange turn my relationship with Brixton had taken on this stopover. Before, we'd been strained and distant. Was it he who was changing or was it myself? He had made overtures in the past, called me his friend, teased me about my moods. It wasn't until we came here, until Rowena came into both our lives, that I started seeing him as more than the spoiled boy I'd always seen. Or that he'd started acting less like the spoiled boy he'd always been.

Wrapping a clean dirjik around my waist, I walked out of the bathing room and started gathering my clothes to send to the

wash. Brixton was lounging in a chair in the front room when I walked through with the dirty clothes, but he sat up once he saw me.

“Did you enjoy yourself tonight?” I asked, taking the clothes to the balcony and shaking the sand out of them before placing them into the laundry bag.

Brixton gave me a bright smile, inhaling deeply. “I think the question is whether or not *you* enjoyed yourself tonight, ni karik?”

“I will not discuss my evening with you,” I replied with a sniff of disdain.

Brixton fell back into his chair with a loud laugh of delight. “Wonderful!” he crowed. “I am happy for you.”

“It is not safe to announce such things,” I growled, throwing a cushion at him as I settled into a seat across from him.

“Of course, of course. We’ll work on that. As for my evening, it was all things an evening of politics should be. Dull conversation, followed by self-important posturing, and rounded off with a great deal of...how do they say it? Shmoozing?” he grumbled tiredly.

“Oh?”

“Yes. Each of the mating agencies brought a lovely young representative to *describe* the benefits of their organization,” Brixton said, rolling his eyes while emphasizing the word describe. “And each one tried so hard to get me alone, I was actually afraid for my virtue.”

I snorted. “You lost your virtue five minutes after we set foot on the first human ship,” I stated boldly.

Nostalgia lit Brixton's face with a softer smile. "Yes, and she was such a sweet thing, too. Until you kicked in the door and terrified her. She wouldn't even look at me after that."

Considering he'd snuck away to be with her, I ignored his comment. "Anything else happen?"

"Not really," he said, then sighed. "We wined and dined. They talked and threw their females at me. A few of my dromo's candidates for my mating were there, but they were dreadfully dull. I did meet a few of the mated males that came to Earth on earlier ships and were matched through the agencies."

"Saveet males?" I asked, thinking the UEG had probably provided peers to make Brixton more comfortable at the dinner.

"Not all of them, no," he replied, surprising me. "There were two Saveet males, three Draalian brothers, a Zrestrian, and a Noxel like yourself."

I scoffed lightly and gestured at my features. "I highly doubt he was much like me."

"No, you're right. He wasn't quite as ugly as you," Brixton teased, dodging the pillow I threw at him. "Though he did have the bad luck to have been born a rather unfortunate shade of pink."

"Pink?"

"Well, not quite pink. He was somewhat pink and somewhat orange and even a bit green around the edges. It was a strange color mutation if I do say so myself, but his female seemed to love it. She called him her 'walking sunset' or some other adorably mushy nonsense," Brixton explained with a grin. "Very nice fellow though. Really straightforward male. He had

no qualms about pleading the case for other Noxels to come to Earth more readily. I rather liked his approach.”

“Sounds like a good spokesman for our males to have.”

“I thought so myself,” he admitted, nodding. “I’ve invited him to meet with me later this week.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed the dinner, even if you didn’t get to drink and run off with a female,” I told him.

“Yes, soberness and real conversation made the event quite different. Especially without you to come chasing after me. The idea of shirking my responsibilities seemed rather dull this time around,” Brixton said with a thoughtful tone. Then he grinned mischievously. “*And* Ms. Lawson didn’t seem very happy when she couldn’t have any of my attention.”

“Is that so?”

“Quite unhappy, in fact. I believe she left part way through the meal after I ignored her third attempt to turn the conversation to her family’s privately owned island out in the gulf or some other nonsense she thought would impress me. She even ignored me when we finally returned to the shuttle after dinner.” Brixton made a disappointed moue at that, then rolled his eyes again and barked with laughter. “That female has a severe case of self-importance. She really hates not being the center of attention.”

“That female *is* dangerous,” I warned, pointing at Brixton. “I’ve seen her type before. She is a predator, and you are her prey.”

“I will agree that she needs careful watching,” he conceded. “I do not like her at all. For all that she is as a beautiful female, she makes my cock shrivel with a single glance.” The young male’s body shuddered in place.

“It is good you are aware of her in such a way. I worried you might be too naïve to notice,” I admitted.

“There you go again,” he said with a rueful sigh.

“What?”

“Ever so politely calling me an idiot,” he said, grinning.

I snorted at his joke. “Away with you, idiot boy,” I ordered. “We’ve all had a long night and it’s time for bed. You have lessons with Rowena in the morning.”

Pushing out of my chair, I encouraged Brixton out of his and bundled him off towards his own room. He stopped before we reached the door, then turned round with a serious expression on his face. He eyed me reluctantly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“As happy as I am that you have claimed a mate, and as much as I’d like for you to see her as often as possible, I think that for her safety I should ignore my lessons for the next few days.

“Ms. Lawson was strangely pushy tonight and when I continued to ignore her, she became visibly enraged. She could do nothing at the dinner party, but I worry that she could take it out on Rowena if she believes I am favoring another,” he said with an unhappy huff. “I think we should give Jerica a few days to cool off. Maybe I should even pretend to pay attention to her to soothe her petty jealousies. I would not bring her wrath down on my friend, your mate.”

The fact that Brixton was willing to seek out the bitchy female in order to protect my female spoke volumes of the maturity he had gained in just a small amount of time; the maturity he continued to gain as he spent more time with Rowena. I was proud of him for thinking beyond his own selfish desires.

Surprising both of us, I pulled the boy under my arm for a brief embrace and rubbed his shoulder.

“It is a good thought. We will give Rowena some space for her safety. I can seek her out in private, but do not go out of your way to be near that evil creature. I think shunning most female company should be enough.”

“If you are certain that is the best course?”

“Now you ask my advice?” I teased. “Where was this male months ago when I was pulling you from the arms of yet another nameless female? For all we know you may have bred a half dozen whelps by now.”

Brixton shook his head and grimaced. “That is the one thing I have not been foolish about. Dromo knew I would likely sample the local offerings and so he had the doctors do a temporary sterilization on me. He did not want to risk any illegitimate claims on the family name. It can be reversed, but I’m not allowed to tell anyone about it until my future mate is decided.”

“Risky. What if it went wrong?”

He shrugged. “You know how much research our people have invested in breeding and genetics. If my sterilization could not be reversed, my sperm could still be harvested and my mate inseminated by artificial means. My dromo will get his Terran heir one way or another.”

Scowling down at the shorter male, I thought about everything I knew about Patriarch Hedran. “Just when I thought there were no more reasons to dislike your dromo...”

Brixton let out a single short scoff at my dry remark, then shrugged, patted me on the arm, and walked out. Following, I

made sure his suite was clear before I set the alarms and left him to rest.



Rowena

There were parts of me that ached that had never ached before in my life. I went to bed feeling wonderfully tired and well-worn from Reynar's attention and was asleep in no time. My dreams replayed every delicious second of my time on the beach with my big handsome alien lover. I woke shaky and wet, my hands stroking desperately at my clit as I brought myself to climax again. It felt good but left me with an empty feeling. Reynar had ruined solo sex for me.

Showering soothed some of the sore muscles and washed away bits of gritty sand I'd missed with my quick rinse before bed. It also revealed just how many love bites Reynar had left on my skin. I groaned in amused horror while I inspected each one. Except for his first, deep claiming bite, the rest were shallow, surface bites. Thankfully none of them would show over my usual neckline, but I would have to continue wearing the wetsuit. Noticing a bite on my upper thigh, I added a pair of slim black trunks to my suit this time, chuckling ruefully as I pulled them on.

Brushing my hair, I made sure there were no hickeys on my neck, though I did find one scratch that could have been from his teeth or his horns, but it was fairly small. I could say I scraped against the reef while swimming last night. Satisfied

when every love bite was covered, I grabbed my usual towel and headed for the pool.

Surprisingly, Brixton and Reynar hadn't arrived yet. They were usually waiting on me and I wasn't early. I wasn't late either, but I certainly wasn't early early. Maybe Brixton was having trouble waking up today. He did go to a dinner party, so he probably had a hangover.

Not one to sit idle, I set my things down and dove into the pool. After a few warm up laps to stretch out I felt more alert and awake. By now the males were nearly a half-hour late and I was beginning to worry, but on my return lap, I spied Reynar's big frame waiting by the stairs as I neared. Pleasure warmed through me at the sight of him. I struggled not to smile as I came out of the water.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming," I said when I emerged. "Where's Ambassador Hedran?"

Reynar gave me a long-suffering look before answering. "The ambassador has decided your lessons are no longer required. He's grown bored with you and doesn't wish to be bothered anymore. You are dismissed to return to your previous duties," he recited as if reading from a script.

There was a split-second flash of hurt at his words and attitude, then I remembered what he'd told me at the beach. This must be part of Brixton's plan to protect me from Jerica. It sucked, but I understood.

"Yeah, well good. I was sick of catering to his stupid demands anyways. Your boss is a spoiled brat and I can't stand him," I scoffed.

"You should be more respectful, little human," he growled, flashing those sexy fangs at me.

“Ha! Why should I? This is my planet, you might be all big and growly, but here you’re no better than a space-bunny,” I taunted, knowing he’d remember our conversation about valekas being space bunnies. If I was his space-bunny, he was mine.

His eyes flashed with heat and his arm shot out, fingers suddenly gripping my jaw gently as he pulled me close. I’m sure it looked more fearsome than it really was, but for me the move was such a turn on. Barely suppressing the moan that rose in me, I grabbed his wrist in both hands and kicked my feet as I was pulled up on my toes. I was instantly wet between my thighs, and I’d have given anything to go somewhere private with Reynar right now.

Nostrils flaring, I knew he could smell my desire when his chest rumbled and his pupils dilated. “Were it not for the cameras,” he whispered, “I would turn you over the nearest table and fuck you right now.”

Shuddering at the thought my hands tightened, digging my nails into his skin. “Save that for later,” I teased quietly.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Put her down!” someone yelled.

Looking over, I saw three of my coworkers at the pool gate staring at us, horrified. One of them appeared to be trying to call for security. Reynar carefully let me go and I stepped back.

“It’s alright girls, I’m fine,” I called out, grabbing my things and walking over to them.

“That didn’t look alright,” Megan responded tartly, glaring past me at Reynar. “It looked like he was attacking you.”

“No, he wasn’t attacking me. I provoked him,” I admitted, pushing all three women out of the pool area. “He was just coming to tell me that Hedran has decided he doesn’t want swim lessons anymore and I was rude. It’s my fault. He didn’t hurt me, he was just telling me not to insult the ambassador.”

“You insulted the ambassador?”

“Yeah, he’s been a bit of a brat, but it doesn’t matter. Let’s just go.”

“You should tell Jerica,” Lex chimed in.

“Oh Lord, please don’t say anything to Jerica. She’s already warned me once to stop insulting Ambassador Hedran. I really don’t want to get into any more trouble. That was my fault and I’m totally okay, I promise!” I begged, grabbing at Lex and Megan’s sleeves as I pleaded with the three women to drop it.

Jessi sighed. “Fine, but only because there’s no marks where he grabbed you, and you say he didn’t hurt you. If he’d left a single smudge, I’d string him up myself. If he touches you again though,” she said warningly, pointing a finger at me.

“It won’t happen again. I am avoiding those assholes for the rest of their visit,” I promised, crossing a finger over my heart and mentally crossing my fingers at the lie.

“Well, alright. As long as you swear you’re okay,” Lex agreed.

“I’m fine. Y’all go to work. I gotta go change and get to work too,” I assured her.

Lex and Jessi split off, heading away to their work areas, but Megan stayed a moment longer, eyeing me suspiciously.

“If I didn’t know better,” she mused, “I might say you almost looked like you were enjoying being held like that.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, trying to sound confused and hide the sudden spike of dread she provoked.

I must have failed because a sly little grin grew on her face. “Yeah, and he looked like he might have been enjoying holding you too.” She threw her head back with a laugh and clapped me on the shoulder. “Damn girl! You’ve got a death wish or something,” she stated and then she was gone, leaving me in shock that someone else realized there might be more between Reynar and me.

Megan was a good woman. She didn’t generally gossip as far as I knew, so I was hopeful she’d keep her revelation to herself. It was still disconcerting though. Maybe it *was* a good thing that Brixton was cancelling our lessons if that one interaction had given me away to one person already.

Shaking my head, I rushed back to my room to change. Workers called greetings as I hurried through the greenhouse to the apartment, and I waved in response. When I pushed the door open, an urgent beeping demanded my immediate attention. I dug the privately coded wry-com out of my bag and answered right away.

“Evie, I’m here. Did you find out what happened already?” I asked, dropping my wet towel on the bathroom floor.

“What have you gotten yourself into this time, Ro?” she asked, her voice sounding strained and worried. “Tell me you’re alone right now.”

“Why? What did you find?”

“A crapton more than you thought,” Evie hissed. “Are you alone?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m alone.”

“I hacked into the estate’s mainframe. Every single one of the spending accounts have been altered. Most of them are already empty. The rest are set to transfer at the push of a button.”

“Transfer where?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m still trying to follow the breadcrumbs. Whoever the hacker is, they’ve been hands-on and they’ve covered their tracks. The one obvious trail is the one they want followed and that’s what’s bad.”

“Why is it bad?” I asked, dreading Evie’s answer because I was almost sure of what it was.

“They’re setting it up for you to take the fall, Ro.”

I had to sit for that. I plopped onto the edge of the bed. “But why me? And how could they possibly make it look like I did it?”

“Your login is all over the system. They copied your code and smeared it everywhere, like tracking dog poo in on the bottom of your shoe. Once the theft is discovered, everyone will follow the poo tracks back to you and then they’ll see all the other crap you’ve been hiding. The investigators will insist on new evals and neural-polys on *their* equipment. They’ll find out about your debt and your fake psyches. They’re going to know about everything. That alone makes you look guilty.”

“But I’ll be cleared when the poly comes back with the truth, that I didn’t steal the money or give anyone my login to steal it, right? I mean, everything else is going to flush my life down the toilet, but I’ll at least be cleared of the theft. Won’t I?”

“I hope so, but you’ve successfully tricked a UEG system for the last six years. What if they think you’re still tricking the system? I don’t know what to tell you, sis.”

“I don’t even know who to go to with this. I’ve been catching bits of weird conversations between Jerica and someone I don’t recognize. It sounds like she’s planning to elope or something, and now there’s this. What do I do?”

“Let me do some more digging and I’ll let you know if I find anything you can use as evidence,” Evie said with a sigh.

“Okay. Just be careful. I’ll never forgive myself if you get in trouble because of me.”

“You know there’s no one on the net who can catch me,” she teased. “We’ll figure this out, sis. We always do. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Hanging up, I stashed the private comm again. It wouldn’t do any good to get caught with it on the estate, so I made sure it was on silent. Now I knew for sure someone had it out for me, but who? Jerica maybe, but she could just assign me ditch duty and make me miserable for the rest of my employment contract.

Who in the world had I pissed off so badly that they wanted to bury me like that?

Reynar

I’d cursed myself for my foolishness as I stalked away from Rowena and the other females at the poolside. Letting my baser instincts get the best of me had been a mistake. My impulse had been to answer her challenging tone, demanding I establish dominance. It was heedy, the feel of her in my hands, the smell of her arousal as she responded to me.

Then those other females had interrupted and I'd realized my mistake. We were too public. There was too much of a chance of getting caught by the wrong person. I waited while my mate handled the other females' ire, then made my retreat once she started shepherding them away. They still glared over her head at me, but seemed accepting of her explanation, if not happy about it.

Frustrated with the morning's turn, I stalked a random garden path rather than return to my suite just yet. Brixton was sleeping in, still tired from his late night, and there were no plans for the day. There was nowhere I had to be with Brixton until late this afternoon.

"Hey!" a strident female voice demanded, it stopped me in my tracks. "I wanna talk to you!"

Turning, I found myself looking down at a small, dark-haired female who glared at me with crossed arms. She was one of the three from earlier. This one had watched me closely while Rowena made her explanations.

"Yes?"

"You wanna explain what that was *really* all about back there?" she asked, her weight shifting to one hip.

"I believe you were already given an answer by Miss Carter," I replied.

"Yeah, she gave us an explanation. I don't believe a word of it, though. Personally, I think she's protecting you and *that* could get her in a lot of trouble," the female accused.

The female's concern for my mate was genuine, so I debated answering her honestly. "I would never allow harm to come to Miss Carter," I said, trying to keep my words as neutral as possible.

The female studied me with quiet intensity. “You both suck at hiding your feelings for each other,” she announced, a little smirk curling the corner of her mouth. “You need to work on that before anyone else notices.”

“I don’t—”

“Yeah, I don’t care how you deny it,” she said, cutting me off. “I saw the way you were looking at her and the way she looked at you before Lexi freaked out. And I saw the way you watched us when she was ‘*explaining*’ what was happening between you two. You were ready to protect her if needed. I don’t know what’s going on with you guys, but you need to keep the hot and heavy behind bedroom doors before you get Rowena fired, or worse, thrown in jail.”

The time for subtlety with this female was obviously over. “Rest assured, female. I will gleefully commit violent acts of butchery before I let anyone lay a hand on my mate,” I stated with a fang baring snarl. “Should anyone attempt to take my mate away, they will have to go through me to do so. And when I am done eviscerating the offending party, I will take my female and disappear into the underbelly of this planet’s society where no one will threaten her again.”

Her eyebrows climbed to her hairline as I spoke. By the time I’d finished, her eyes were huge and she leaned away from me. Her posture was wary and her scent was tinged with a bit of fear, but she bravely stood her ground.

“Well,” she said in a soft voice, “uhh that’s good to know, but it would still be better for you both if you could keep the wet-panty, lusty-eyes thing to yourselves, okay? Rowena’s a nice girl and I don’t want her getting hurt.”

Her comments made me chuckle. “I will endeavor to be more discreet.” I assured her with a brief nod.

“Good. That’s good,” she repeated as she turned to go. And then she stopped briefly. “I’m uh, I’m Megan Carmichael, and I hope you two get to be together for real one day.”

Crossing my fist over my chest in salute, I accepted her good wishes. “Reynar Velden.”

Megan dipped her head in acknowledgement and left in a hurry. Despite the unexpected encounter, she left my mood considerably lighter. At least not all of the humans were against Rowena mating me. If Brixton could find a way to free me from the Council’s chains, maybe I could have a life with the female I loved.

Rowena

Resuming my other duties meant Krista handed me a cartload of vases and sent me into the estate to trade them out with the ones inside. I spent the rest of the morning swapping out one wilted arrangement after another. Just before noon, I ended up in the South wing outside Brixton and Reynar’s suites with the last of the vases.

Knocking on Brixton’s door I got no answer, so I swiped my card over the lock. It blinked green and let me in. The suite was empty. Swapping the flowers took no time at all, then I swiped my card over Reynar’s lock without knocking. If Brixton was out, I figured Reynar would be out as well.

But I was wrong. A ruffled, sweat covered Brixton looked up in surprise. He stood on the balcony with a glass of icy water in his hand. Smiling, he came over and took the flowers from me, shoving them onto the nearest table and wrapping me in a damp, smelly hug.

“Rowena! I am so glad to see you,” he said. “I was afraid we wouldn’t get the pleasure of your company again after we decided to end the lessons.”

“It’s good to see you too. I really wish you hadn’t let Jerica scare you into ending the lessons, but I understand why. I can’t stay long though. There’s cameras in the hall. She’ll get suspicious if I’m in here for too long.”

“I understand. But do go and see Reynar at least,” he suggested with a wink, pointing me towards the back room. “We just got back from sparring in the gym.”

I shared his wicked grin when I realized I could hear the shower running. “I *should* pop in and say hi, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes, you definitely should.”

Sneaking through the bedroom, I peered through the open bathroom doorway at the naked alien standing in the shower. Reynar seemed even bigger in the well-lit bathroom as water sluiced over his skin. His back was to me, his eyes were closed, and his hands ruffled through his dreads, shifting them apart to rinse evenly. My panties were instantly wet.

The scales that circled his neck and shoulders trailed down his back in a protective cover over the length of his spine. They ended at his lower back, just above a single straight scar where a human’s tailbone would be. More scales formed a defensive layer over his flanks and down the fronts of his thighs to just below his knees. When he turned towards me, I saw he had another layer of scales across his lower abdomen that formed a dark V that drew my attention straight down.

It had been too dark on the beach to even try and see what kind of equipment Reynar was packing. All I’d known was that he was big, hard, and covered in ridges. Now I could see it

all and the view made my mouth water. Reynar's dick was a darker gray than his skin, but not as dark as his scales. The head was a thick bulb with a slight point on the end. Rows of ridges lined the top of his cock all the way to his groin. He had no pubic hair, yet scales covered his abdomen all the way down his pubic bone to the base of his penis, right where my clit would rub if he ground against me.

Reynar grabbed a wash rag by feel, soaped it up, and started washing his body, his movements slow and thorough. Once he reached his genitals, he soaped them carefully, washing under his dark, heavy testes, then around the length of his rod. Dropping the rag, he pumped his dick slowly, the flesh stiffening in his hand. That purr started in his chest and I looked up at his face to find his eyes were open and watching me. He had that sexy smirk on his face while he stroked himself.

"Hi," I said quietly, as my gaze dropped back to the hard cock in his hand.

He groaned, his breath coming in little panting grunts as he stroked harder. Precum already beaded at the end, smearing his length as his hand caught each drop and spread it over his ridges.

"Want some help with that?"

Reynar nodded, letting go of himself to shut off the water and step out of the shower stall. I met him in the middle of the floor and grasped his wet, straining erection with my own hands. It was hot and silky soft. He shuddered at my touch, eagerly reaching for me with dripping hands.

"Ah, ah, ah, don't get my uniform wet," I chided.

Dropping to my knees, I gently stroked my fingers down his cock, noticing how the ridges on the bottom were thicker and bumpier than the top ridges. His flesh twitched in my hands, pulsing as I explored the space between the head and the first ridge. Reynar's hips shook when I reached under and cupped his balls, squeezing them gently and weighing them in my hand.

"Na valeka, please," he stuttered above me, his hand resting on my hand, stroking my hair.

Leaning in, I licked the little bead of precum from the slit at the head of his cock, tasting his salty musk and a hint of the soap he'd been using. He groaned, hand flexing in my hair. I licked him again, then closed my mouth over the tip and sucked. Reynar jerked in my hands, gasping loudly, and making me grin.

Ducking further, I tongued his ridges as they passed through my lips. Bobbing up and down on his cock, I sucked and hummed along his length, listening to his increasingly ragged breathing. Both his hands were fisted in my hair, ruining the simple bun I'd had it in, as he fucked my mouth with careful thrusts of his hips. I didn't have a lot of time to spend teasing him, so I needed him to quickly lose control.

Swallowing around his length, I squeezed the base of his cock and hummed as I sucked him to the back of my throat. Reynar shouted above me, his hands clenched, pulling my hair. His cock shoved deeper, almost gagging me, and I moaned around him. The vibration made his whole body tense hard, then he trembled as he came. Hot seed shot down my throat and I swallowed it down, drawing more shudders from him.

One last lick to his softened cock and I stood, stretching up on tiptoe to smooch him on the cheek. "Have a good day, babe," I

said, ducking the hands that came up to catch me and hurried out of the bathroom, giggling.

Reyar made a wordless noise of protest as I left, still too breathless and wobbly to do anything else.

Stopping in the front room, I ignored Brixton's knowing smirk while I fixed my hair back into its previous bun, then I slipped out the door and went back to work.



Reynar

Duty kept me away from Rowena for two days after she surprised me in the shower and sucked my cock. Brixton had laughed himself sick when I'd gathered my wits enough to stumble from the bathroom only to discover she'd already fled the suite. I had snuck out after dark and gone to the little apartment over the greenhouse, but was disappointed to find she wasn't there. Now that Brixton had canceled his morning lessons with her, it seemed she was allowed to return to her own home.

The next day, Brixton was needed off-site for meetings with members of the Repop Initiative and surprisingly enough, kicked Grechto and the other assistants off the shuttle. He spent the entire day being attentive and curious about the mating process the humans had set up for their people. He asked questions about the applications and fees, the meet and greets, even the neural compatibility matching that could be requested. He immersed himself in their progression from potential match to confirmed mates.

We toured the barracks and met some of the males currently living there. Focused primarily on rebuilding the world population, the UEG barracks were filled with fertile, breeding compatible males rather than companion mates. Attached to

the barracks were fertility centers for females who wanted children but weren't interested in taking a mate. Brixton thrilled the resident doctors when he chose to share a Saveet hormone formula that increased the survival rate of stored seed. I'm sure his dromo would love to know he was giving away Acairian secrets. Good thing it was just us to witness his disloyalty.

The best part of the day was waiting for us when we returned to Brixton's suite later that evening. It was long past nightfall and Rowena was no doubt gone for the day. We were both tired and looking forward to a good night's rest, but it seemed that was not meant to be. There was an unhappy surprise waiting outside his door.

"This is an absolute outrage, Ambassador Hedran," Grechto snapped as soon as we came into sight. "I will not be left behind like a naughty child!"

"It was not a punishment, Grechto. You were simply not needed for this trip," Brixton calmly replied without slowing his pace. We keyed the door open and headed in, but Grechto shoved in after us.

"I am the liaison to the Acairian Council! I should have been there to gather information so I can make my report!" Grechto spat. He rushed forward, stepping in front of Brixton, and forced him to halt.

I growled at his audacity.

Grechto's eyes narrowed at me. He sneered. "Rein in your beast, Hedran. I won't tolerate it threatening me."

Brixton's hand planted firmly on the middle of my chest, and I realized I'd started towards Grechto without thinking. Gently pushing me back, Brixton stepped in front of me and stood toe

to toe with the wiry little bastard in our path. “At the moment, *I* am still the ambassador and therefore *I* am the Council’s liaison and *I* will make the reports as *I* see fit. *You* are not needed. And *I* no longer believe that *you* are the right male for the job,” he stated in a soft and decisive tone.

Grechto sputtered in outrage. “You don’t have the authority to make that decision. Only Patriarch Hedran can do that. As long as you’re playing as the ambassador, I’m your assistant. But once they’ve mated you off to one of these ridiculous little humans, then I’ll be the ambassador!”

Brixton grinned savagely, baring his fangs in a wide snarl. “See, that’s where you’d be wrong. Not one of those ‘ridiculous humans’ as you call them has any idea of ni dromo’s plans. They’ll believe anything the Acairian Ambassador tells them simply because they want to keep me happy, so I’ll bring my people to their lovely little planet.”

Confusion and worry warred on Grechto’s face as his eyes darted from Brixton to me and back again. I wasn’t afraid to admit I was confused myself. What was Brixton saying? What was he about to do?

“I think it’s time you went home, Grechto. This planet and the job don’t seem to suit you,” Brixton said with a sad shake of his head.

“What are you talking about? What are you saying? You can’t send me back,” Grechto protested, jabbing his blunt, perfectly manicured claws at Brixton. His skinny frame shook with unconcealed rage. A poor excuse for a growl grumbled from him as he tried to intimidate the younger male.

“Reynar?” Brixton glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyes wide and innocent. It was the look of a boy who was about to start some serious trouble. I couldn’t wait.

“Yes, Ambassador?”

“I’m scared,” he said, feigning fear. “Grechto is threatening to hurt me. You saw how he tried to hit me just now, didn’t you?”

I grinned, turning a glee-filled look on the suddenly pale and wide-eyed Grechto. “I did indeed. In fact, I think I even saw a weapon.”

Brixton laughed and clapped his hands together. “Yes! I did too. Detain him, would you? He’s had a hard time since we came to Earth, and he just needs to go home.”

“You-you can’t do that!” Grechto balked. He lunged for the exit, but he had to go around me to get to it. I snagged him by the collar of his robes, yanking him off his feet.

“Oh, but I can,” Brixton said with a smirk. “Get his comm too, Reynar. He won’t need it until he gets home.”

“No!” Grechto cawed as he lashed out at me.

I nearly dropped him as the urge to laugh came over me. Nearly half my size and most certainly a fraction of my weight, and yet the scrawny male thought he could attack me? He spun wildly in my grip, kicking and flailing in a mad attempt to get free. Catching his arm, I divested him of his comm-unit by simply snapping the band that wrapped around his wrist. I dropped it. It hit the carpet with a dull thud.

“I’ll have your head, you filthy grex!” Grechto cursed. “You can’t touch me! You can’t touch me!”

Brixton tsked. “Such language is unbecoming of an ambassadorial staff member,” he chided.

Grechto snarled and writhed in my grip, spitting curses. The door suddenly opened and a squad of UEG security guards swiftly filed in, with stun batons in hand. The lead officer’s

eyebrows rose at the sight of Grechto fighting to get free of me. Brixton gave a hearty sigh as he stepped forward to meet the females.

“Thank you for coming so quickly ladies. As you can see, my assistant has suffered a mental breakdown. He’s become aggressive and attempted to attack me in his fragile state. I believe the best thing to do for him is have him sedated and returned to our home planet via a stasis pod. Our healers can help him recover once he’s back in a familiar environment,” Brixton explained, sounding sincere and concerned for Grechto’s well-being.

It was hard not to guffaw right in his face.

Grechto exploded in outrage. “You can’t send me back! I’m the real ambassador! Not that pompous, spoiled fraud! Me! I’m the ambassador! You have no authority! You’re just a fucking breeder waiting for some stupid human slit to fill!”

The females all gasped at Grechto’s crude insults. Brixton sighed and shook his head sadly. “I apologize, my dears. I’m afraid he doesn’t know what he’s saying. Please see that he is returned home as quickly as possible so he can receive the treatment he needs.”

“Yes, sir,” the lead officer replied. She stowed her baton beside a holstered laser pistol and pulled a set of restraints from her belt, then stepped towards Grechto and myself.

In a surprising move, Grechto twisted free and ripped his tunic down the back as he yanked himself out of my grip. He darted away from me, knocking the female to the ground and grabbed at her holstered pistol. For the few seconds it took me to grab him again, Grechto’s snarls and the panicked cries of the females created a symphony of chaos in the room while the angry male tried to steal a weapon.

Gently pushing a female out of the way, I grasped Grechto's nape with one hand and his shoulder with the other, then placed pressure on the nerves there. The enraged male yelped in agony, slapping weakly at my hand. I pulled him off the female and threw him away from the group. Falling into the wall, he growled and pushed himself up to lunge at me in a mindless attack.

Grechto was no fighter. He'd never trained as a gladiator, never taken self-defense training of any kind. There was no way I would ever consider him a real opponent. With a single jab to his jaw, he dropped, falling limp to the floor and didn't move again.

One of the females moved in and quickly had him shackled at the wrists and ankles. A second female produced a collapsible hover stretcher and loaded Grechto onto it. Then the lead female approached Brixton as her team escorted the stretcher to the door.

"Is there anything else we can do for you, sir?" she asked. There was a mark on her face where Grechto had hit her. She brushed uncomfortably at her uniform, but she seemed calm enough.

Brixton noticed her discomfort too. "Did he hurt you?"

She looked momentarily startled, then sighed. "I'm fine, just a little shook up. The med-unit will handle this easy enough," she said, gesturing to the bruise on her cheek. "I've never been attacked like that before. It was...disconcerting."

"Go take care of yourself," Brixton instructed. "I'm fine. Just send him home. Unless you want to press charges? No one here, myself included, would blame you."

“Oh no, that’s not necessary, sir. I think getting him home where he can get some help would be the best thing for this situation,” she said, shaking her head.

“Very well. See that he’s kept calm and my people will take care of him back on Acair,” Brixton said. “That will be all, my dear.”

The female nodded once and turned, following her team out the door. A single female lingered as if waiting for her leader, but after the woman passed she hesitated. Peering out the door after her team, she turned back to us. I recognized her as the female who’d confronted me about Rowena a few days prior.

“Hey, Velden,” she said in a low voice, her gaze darting back to the corridor.

“Yes, Miss Carmichael?”

“Just thought you might like to know that Ro’s working in the warehouse out past the south lawn tonight. Probably til late since she’s doing inventory, and the cameras in there aren’t worth shit,” Megan said, winking at me as she hurried out the door to follow her team.

Brixton snorted in amusement.

“What?” I asked, turning to face him.

He hid a grin behind his hand as he looked at me, then burst out into loud laughter. “You’ve got the security staff helping you sneak around with your female now?” he asked in between guffaws.

“I do not. She happened to witness my mate and I together and figured out we were together,” I explained with an aggravated huff. “I did not ask her to tell me where to find my mate.”

Brixton rolled his eyes. “Oh, that makes *all* the difference, yes.”

Growling at his sarcasm, I cuffed him on the back of the head. Rather than being chastised, he simply laughed again, then ducked under my next swing.

“Come here and let me beat you,” I said with a fake snarl.

“Piss off and go find your mate,” he ordered, chuckling as he dodged me again.

I shook my head. The male was turning out to be a good friend and that continued to surprise me. He was audacious but amusing, self-important but kind-hearted. It was a rather odd mix of personality quirks that I found myself appreciating more and more each day.

“You are lucky I’d rather spend time with her than with you,” I said with another mock growl.

Swiping at him one last time while he taunted me impudently, I turned and opened the balcony doors, jumped the rail, and climbed down to go look for my mate.

Rowena

Inventory sucks, I thought as I climbed over another pile of lawn feed that was in the wrong place. These were the spring weed and feed bags that *should* have been in the front of the warehouse with the other spring supplies. I organized this warehouse myself, there was a diagram for heaven’s sake. Spring supplies went in the front left quadrant of the warehouse. The back left, where I was currently working, was

dedicated to Fall supplies. Why couldn't people follow the diagram? It would make my job *so* much easier.

Unfortunately, because they were in the wrong place, I had to climb over them to get to the supplies I needed to find. Spring inventory was long done and over with now. I had to check my list against the physical inventory for the Fall supplies to make sure I didn't have any inconsistencies, especially since I was still trying to figure out what to do about the missing budget and couldn't order anything right now.

Perched on a pile of spring fertilizer, I was leaning precariously over the side of a storage bin when the bags under me shifted. Already off-balance I flailed, grabbing at the bins as I slid with the avalanche of bags.

“Woah! Shi—”

My curse cut off as the air rushed out of me when I slammed against someone hard. Strong arms wrapped around me and pulled me away from the still falling pile of lawn feed.

“In trouble again, na valeka?” Reynar asked, shifting me into a bridal hold as he strode away from the mess.

I rolled my eyes and poked him in the chest. “Pfft. I'm never in trouble,” I exclaimed haughtily. “It's other people who are trouble.”

His chuckle was a rich, warm sound and I rested my head against his chest to listen to its rumble while he carried me.

“What are you up to in here, my love?”

“Oh not much, just doing the quarterly inventory,” I said.

“And it requires you to fall off of things?” he asked teasingly.

“Of course. Don't you know the most important part of inventory is falling off of something,” I replied.

“How could I forget,” he said softly. He set me on my feet well clear of the landfall of fertilizer, then turned to look at the mess. “I get the feeling that these are not in the right place?”

“You would be right about that. The entire pallet should have been stored over there,” I said, pointing over my shoulder to an empty storage bin.

“Allow me to help with that,” he said, moving back towards the fallen bags.

Stripping out of his tunic Reynar hung it over a nearby railing and lifted the first bag over his shoulder. His muscles flexed and bunched, drawing my eyes to the bulges and lines of his sexy body. The arrow of scales down his back shifted with each movement, making his scars pull while he twisted, lifted, and carried each bag as if they weighed nothing.

Watching him work was a turn on. I’d never realized watching anyone do physical labor could be a turn on for me, but with Reynar it was. He made it look effortless and easy, which reminded me of the night we spent on the beach. Reynar’s strong arms around me, holding me close while driving himself into me, his muscles bunching under my hands. I felt myself getting hot and wet the more I watched him.

“Tell me about your scars,” I demanded, trying to distract myself.

“What about them?” Reynar replied, moving the bags I’d pointed to.

“Well, I know you said the big one came from a Draalian in your first fight, but what about the others? Like the ones on your arm here.” I trailed my fingers over the claw marks on his bicep.

Reynar glanced down at my hand on his arm, then looked at me with heat in his gaze. “Those came from a rissic in a beast fight,” he said with a nonchalant shrug.

“What’s a rissic?”

“It’s a large feline that dens in the Northern mountains of Acair.”

I wondered if it was similar to lions or tigers. “Oh really? How big are they?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “If I’m calculating your human measurements correctly, he was about four feet tall at the shoulder, maybe six and a half feet long. I believe he weighed somewhere around five hundred and eighty pounds? I’m not entirely sure.”

“Wow, that’s a big carnivore,” I said, awed over the size of the animal.

Reynar let out a little snort. “Actually, the rissic eats only cave algae and cactus fruits. Despite its size, it’s normally a timid animal that prefers to keep to itself.”

A herbivore? That sounded so odd for such a large animal. “Really? Then why would this one attack you so savagely?”

“Rissic can be captured and trained to fight. The one that gave me these was young and inexperienced. Had he been better trained, he might have done more damage before I killed him.”

“More damage? It looks like he nearly tore your arm off,” I stated in disbelief.

Reynar scoffed and dropped the bag he was moving. “His mate gave me these,” he boasted, turning and pointing out a set of puncture scars on his side.

I reached out to touch one and then my eyes went wide with shock as I followed the others and realized what they were. “Oh my God, Reynar! Those are teeth marks,” I exclaimed.

“Indeed,” he said, grinning. “She picked me up and shook me like a rag.”

He laughed again while I manhandled him around to see all the puncture marks. “This bite scar is at least eighteen inches across! She must have been huge!”

Nodding, he went back to moving the bags I’d nearly fallen off of. “She was. Female rissic are much bigger than their mates.”

“OK, what about that scar? How’d you get that one?” I pointed to a wound that nearly bisected his entire arm in a clean straight line.

Frowning, he traced at the mark himself. “This came from another Noxel.”

“Like you?” I asked, sympathetic to the pain I saw in his features.

“No,” he replied, shaking his head. “He was bigger, meaner. I think he’d been purposely bred to be as genetically extreme as possible. I think they did something that warped him so his mind was crazy and animalistic. I don’t think he even felt pain or fear. Killing him was difficult for many reasons.”

Stepping closer, I wrapped my arms around the male I’d fallen in love with. I wished I could take some of that pain away. “I’m sorry you had to do that,” I said softly.

He shrugged again, hugging me back. “It is the life I was born into. So many others have had it worse than I.”

I tightened my grip on him. “It’s still awful.”

“It brought me to you. If that was what it took to get here, I would do it a thousand times over,” Reynar declared firmly, tugging my head back and kissing me breathless.

I panted when he eased back. “Okay, okay, lover boy. You have a point,” I said, patting his bare chest. “I still don’t like that you had to almost die so many times to get here, though.”

Reynar growled. “How many times must I tell you, *na valeka*? I am Reynar the Relentless! I did not *almost* die so many times, as you say. My worst injury was the one inflicted by the Draalian. Despite that, I was undefeated. My injuries were mostly superficial and annoying with a few exceptions that required more than a bandage.

“The only reason I bear these scars is because my sponsor *wanted* me to have them. Scars make a fighter look fiercer, more dangerous. They encourage betting. I bear scars because he wanted to make more credits off of me. Some of them were even treated to encourage the scarring to be more severe, like this one,” he said, running a finger over the scar that started on his shoulder and trailed down the back of his shoulder before disappearing into a mess of scars.

I sighed, disgusted at the horrible things that had been done to my mate. “And these? Where are all these from?” I asked, touching the tangle of abused flesh on his back, afraid I already knew the answer.

Reynar sighed. “Those were given to me when I tried to run away from my training. I received word that *na ahina* was sick. They would not let me leave to be with her, so I snuck out. When they caught me I was whipped until I bled, then locked in a cell. She died before I was let out.”

My stomach turned and I felt physically ill. “They wouldn’t let you be with your mom when she died? But...Why? I mean,

it's not like they wouldn't know where to find you, right?"

"They didn't care. I had a big fight coming up and they wanted me to train everyday. Their beating backfired on them, though. I got sick from infection and missed the fight while in the medics' care." He chuckled dryly at the irony.

"Serves them right," I said with a scowl, which drew another chuckle from him.

"You have not asked me about the scar on my lower back," he said, pulling away and turning to point at a scar just above his butt. Half of it was hidden by his waistband, but I remembered seeing the thin, straight, nearly invisible scar when I spied on him in the shower. Something about the teasing tone of his voice and the mischievous glint in his eye told me it wasn't like any of his other scars.

I eyed him suspiciously before speaking. "Okay, I'll bite. Where did *that* one come from?"

"That is where they cut off my tail," he announced, grinning.

Startled, I stared at him incredulously. "Your tail? You had a tail? They cut off your tail!?" My voice rose as I babbled in astonishment.

Reynar laughed again and grabbed me by the hips, pulling me close. "Calm yourself, na valeka. I was an infant when they did it and don't even remember it. I was merely teasing you."

"But why would they cut your tail off? Was it damaged? Did it cause you pain? Please tell me they had a good reason for taking it off," I pleaded. I *needed* to know they had a legitimate reason for deliberately mutilating a helpless baby.

Reynar's eyes saddened when he watched the emotions play over my face. "It was an unacceptable deformity in their

eyes,” he admitted. Stepping back, he sat on a stack of empty leaf bags and pulled me into his lap.

Straddling his thighs, I let him pull me into his arms to cuddle against his chest. I let the sound of his heartbeat soothe me. It took several moments to find my voice again. “Why are the people in charge of your planet so awful?”

Reynar massaged my back, thinking about his answer. “To be honest, removing my tail was likely an act of mercy on their part. Had they left it, I would have been immediately identifiable as a genetic deviation, even as an infant. It would have made me a target before I was big enough to defend myself. My horns didn’t come in fully until puberty and my nubs were hidden by my hair. The tail would have been harder and more uncomfortable to conceal,” he explained in a gentle tone.

I wasn’t sure if his explanation made me feel any better, but I sat up and stroked the scar that ran across his pectorals. “They may have done that to protect you, but that should never have been an issue to begin with. Whether you had a tail or a second head, you should have been allowed to keep it without fearing for your own safety. The fact that your planet is so anti-diversity is just heart-breaking.”

“Which is why bringing my people to this planet brings them so much hope,” he said, brushing his fingers down my cheek.

I huffed, blowing my hair away from my face. “Well, I bet you’d have been even sexier with a tail,” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

Reynar snorted, then pulled me down for a kiss. He nipped my lower lip, then slipped his tongue inside to entwine with mine, then I gasped at the light sting. His hands slid up my sides and

under the edges of my blouse where they caressed my bare skin. I shivered at the heat of his hands on my cool flesh.

Tracing my own hands over his wide pectorals, I located the flat disks of his nipples and lightly scratched my nails over them, drawing a groan of pleasure from the male I loved. His cock was hard and pressed against the confines of his trousers where it was trapped under me. I could feel it straining between us.

Reynar's mouth trailed down my jaw to place kisses along my neck. His hands shifted to the buttons on my shirt and he deftly slipped them free, pushing the fabric off my shoulders and baring me to his gaze. I wore no bra today and his eyes were heated when he stared at my breasts.

"Ah, na valeka, my love. You are a beauty," he said and reached out. He carefully traced his claws over the peak of one nipple.

I shivered again at his touch and arched towards him. Leaning in, he took the hard tip in his mouth and laved it with his tongue, sucking and licking at it before moving to the other. His touch was gentle and soft, reverent, even while he traced patterns in my skin with his fingers and tongue.

I panted and mewed under his touch, pulling his shoulders and horns to bring him closer, rolling my body against his as I sought more from him. More heat, more friction, more *something*. And still he kept his caresses slow and soft, mere whispers of pressure on my skin.

It made me desperate. I was hot, wet, and more than ready. "Reynar..." I whined. "I need you."

"Yes, beloved. Yes," he said, hissing when I stroked his erection. "I need you too."

Urging me to stand, he helped me slide my leggings down, then freed his cock from his trousers. Shoving his pants down his hips, he pulled me back into his lap and down to straddle him once more. Grabbing his dick, I positioned it at my entrance and slid his entire length into my pussy. He growled, grabbing my hips. His claws bit into my skin and it felt so good as he lifted me up and dragged me down on his cock again, helping me ride him.

I wanted to ride him hard and fast, but he kept me to a slower pace, raising me all the way to his tip and pulling me all the way down to rest against his thighs. Gripping his shoulders, I stared into his eyes and showed him all the love I felt for him. His love shown back from his own eyes as he bit his lip at the strain of keeping to such a slow rhythm.

“More, Reynar. Give me more,” I begged, tightening my thighs, trying to push harder against him. I leaned in and bit him on the shoulder where his scales were thinnest, hard enough to leave my own teeth marks.

Reynar snarled, his hands tightening on my hips. I felt the sting of his claws in my skin. He pulled me down harder and faster until I slapped onto his thighs with every thrust of his cock driving into me. My clit rubbed against the scales of his abdomen with every stroke, driving me higher and higher until I was crying aloud in ecstasy.

He grunted and cursed in one breath, whispering praises in the next while pulling me closer. His forehead rested on my collarbones as I arched into his movements, riding his body faster and harder. Panting, I moaned when he shifted and swiped his tongue along my neck.

His purrs reverberated in the air around us, loud and heady. “Come for me, na valeka,” he growled, gently biting the side

of my neck. Moving down, his hand threaded in my hair and pulled my head aside. He kissed my shoulder, scraping his fangs over the skin and making me shudder in anticipation. Reynar's hand tightened. I gasped at the sweet sting in my scalp.

His thrusts became rougher, more ragged, and his breathing was harsh in my ear. The pleasure became almost painful. Reynar stiffened under me, biting into my shoulder as he came. The sharp burning sensation swept me over the edge into my own orgasm and I screamed, trembling in his arms from its force.

Collapsing on his chest, I relaxed into his hold and struggled to catch my breath. His chest rose and fell roughly as he did the same. His hands massaged my back in soothing circles and his contented purr was a muted rumble, just barely audible under my ear.

"I love you," I whispered, kissing the side of his neck while tracing my fingers over his skin. "I love you and it scares me so much. I never thought I could feel this much for anyone."

He let out a single, small chuckle. "Then we are well matched, my love, because you terrify me as well. Were I to fight a thousand battles against a thousand enemies, not one would fill me with as much fear as the thought of losing you."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding him tight. "You won't lose me. Not if I have anything to say about it."



Rowena

It was the day after making love to Reynar in the warehouse and here I was stuck in another staff meeting. We'd parted ways late that night, but I wouldn't see him again for a few days. Brixton had meetings off-site and Reynar was with him of course. I missed him already. Having to listen to the head bitch on campus was not my idea of fun, but it wasn't like we had much of a choice, so here we were.

"Alright people, listen up!" Jerica's voice was already sharp and strident to start out the meeting. She was in a pissy mood and looking to take it out on everybody. "This Friday night is the big banquet. Everyone needs to be on board for this. Kitchen staff will handle the cooking and catering. Housekeeping, set up the ballroom and dining. Those tablecloths and floors had better be pristine! Gardening staff, I want every blade of grass and every leaf on every tree manicured to perfection. Office personnel will act as wait staff during the event, and everyone stays after to clean up! Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Each department has a list of tasks to be done by the end of the week. Anyone caught slacking will be docked that day's

credits from their wages; no argument, no exceptions. There will be a number of officials coming including the other alien ambassadors and the head of the Repop Initiative.” Jerica typed a command on her data pad and wry-coms around the room chimed. “Some of you who just received a separate assignment, you will report for training immediately.”

“Has the menu been decided, Ms. Lawson?” Misty from the kitchens asked nervously.

“Yes, it’s going to be Mediterranean and Asian inspired,” Jerica answered without looking up from her datapad. “Now as for the dec—”

“Is that safe though?” Misty interrupted. “According to our information sheets, many of the Saveet have severe allergies to a number of Asian spices.”

Jerica glared at Misty, making the poor woman duck her head in embarrassment. “These Saveet have all tested safe from those allergies. Ambassador Hedran enjoys Asian cuisine. The menu is fine.”

I couldn’t help but notice how Reynar wasn’t included in that statement. His biology was similar to Brixton’s in the same way mine was similar to my sister Evie’s, but that didn’t mean Reynar wouldn’t have allergies Brixton didn’t have.

“What about Ambassador Hedran’s bodyguard?” I asked, drawing the woman’s attention away from Misty, who wilted in relief.

“What about him?” she demanded in reply.

“You said the Saveet were all tested, but he’s not Saveet, he’s Noxel. Was he tested as well? Is the menu safe for him?”

“Who cares? He’s a servant. His job is to watch for threats to the ambassador, not to sit around eating dinner,” she sneered.

“I’m sorry, but I’m sure you’ve noticed Ambassador Hedran can be quite casual with his staff. He may insist on Mr. Velden joining him for the meal instead of just standing around behind him. It’s not a good idea to assume otherwise.”

Jerica was practically shaking from anger by the time I finished but lashing out at me for making a valid argument, especially in front of some forty odd witnesses, would not go in her favor. Miraculously, she took a deep breath and visibly calmed herself before answering, though her tone was still tight and unhappy. “Fine. I will send for allergy testing on the Noxel as well. Now if there are no more interruptions I’d like to get back on topic. The decorations...”

Tuning out the rest of the meeting, I was just grateful when it ended, so I could slip out without getting waylaid by Jerica. I’m sure she would like nothing more than to rip me a new one, but I was hightailing it out of there before she could get ahold of me. Thank God she wore such noisy heels all the time. The clatter of those heels behind me sent me scurrying through an open doorway and diving behind a large, conveniently placed desk. Oddly enough, the heels and a second set of footsteps followed me in, but stopped just inside the door and closed it behind them.

“What are you doing here right now?” Jerica hissed. “I told you not to come into the estate anymore. There’s too many people! Someone might see you!”

“We might have a problem,” the other woman interrupted.

“What do you mean?”

“Everything is ready, but I think someone is poking around in the accounts. I can’t tell for sure, but I’m picking up on some static or something that looks off,” Jerica’s friend said, sounding near panicked.

What accounts was she talking about? Was she behind the estate's missing funds? Was Jerica in on it? Were they seeing where Evie was trying to find them?

"Can they trace it?"

"They shouldn't be able to, there's no trail. I've bounced it through the ghosts and back trailed it across the network, but..."

"But?"

"But I don't know! They shouldn't be poking around in it to begin with. How would they know there's something wrong?" she exclaimed, the frustration in her voice palpable.

"Just keep an eye on it. It won't matter after this weekend anyways, but keep an eye on it until then. Let me know if anything changes," Jerica ordered. Pulling the door open, she slipped out, quieter than she'd walked in. Her companion made an exasperated noise, then shoved a handful of books off the desk and stormed out after her.

Whatever was going on was starting to sound bad. I needed to tell someone else what I'd heard. Unfortunately, the only other people I knew I could trust around here were away from the estate for the next three days and until Reynar and Brixton came back, I needed to keep my head down. From what I was starting to realize, if Jerica learned I'd overheard any of her conversations, I probably wouldn't live to regret it.

Reynar

The unexpected trip had taken us away from the estate and my mate for five days, not three, and I was irritated at the number

of delays we had encountered prior to our return. Granted, some of them had been worthy delays. Brixton had met with the Noxel male from the dinner party the night I had claimed Rowena.

His name was Harken. He and his mate ran a smaller mating agency that specialized in finding mates for males who were considered less desirable. It was a branch of an agency called A Hope for Second Chances. They were lobbying with Brixton to bring more Noxel males into the agency, especially since all Acairians were considered breeding compatible without medical assistance. There was a high demand for breeding males, which meant fees for mating a Saveet were more expensive. If the Noxel could come to Earth, Harken and his mate were hopeful that would bring some of the fees down and open up more opportunities for other Earth females to have families of their own.

Other delays were just annoyances. Patriarch Hedran had called and insisted on Brixton attending a luncheon at the home of a family called the Pritchards. Once there, no less than three of the adult daughters had simpered over and fought for Brixton's attention the entire time. The spoiled, condescending attitudes made us both ill and by the time we made our escape, Brixton was swearing he would cut off his own cock before he let even one of those shrews touch him.

Finally done with official meetings and dinners and luncheons and conferences, all of which Brixton took a surprising amount of interest in, our shuttle touched down on the landing pad outside the estate. It was late, everything dark and quiet, several pretty globe lights hung from the trees along the pathways, marking the way up to the mansion. The breeze was cool and heavy with the salty ocean air I'd come to enjoy over the last few weeks.

Brixton was tired and readily went off to his bed, yawning after I cleared his suite. My own suite was empty and dark when I entered, but the air was heavy with Rowena's scent. She'd been here, and recently from the strength of her scent. Closing the door and turning on my lights, I found the dirjik I'd given her folded neatly on the entry table. It was heavy with the smell of my mate. Why had she returned it? Did she not know that it was a traditional mating practice for the male to give his female his dirjik?

Picking it up and holding it to my chest, I inhaled Rowena's sweet scent. I would have to return it to her and make sure she knew what it meant when I covered her in my dirjik. Something crinkled inside the folds of fabric. Investigating the noise, I found a small piece of paper tucked in between the layers. There was a single word written in bold, loopy letters on the paper and followed by multiple exclamations that made me think the message was rather urgent.

BEACH!!!

Tucking the note in my pocket, I double checked the auto-sentries on Brixton's suite, then wrapped the dirjik around my waist with the one I already wore, then slipped over the balcony and into the dark. As I made my way through the quiet stillness of the sleeping estate, I easily reached the beach without coming across any other late-night wanderers.

The beach appeared deserted, but Rowena had left that message. She was around here somewhere. Sticking to the shadows, I stalked along the treeline until I spotted a lone figure standing at the edge of the waves. The light wind blew her hair away from her face and molded her dress to her body. The moonlight luminated her against the dark ocean waves, making her look ethereal and otherworldly.

Crossing the sand on silent feet, I gently wrapped a hand around her throat, pulling her back against my chest as my other palm rested on her belly. She jumped at my first touch but relaxed into me when she realized who held her. Her scent bloomed with arousal and I purred, dropping my head to snuffle the side of her neck. The dress she wore was a sleeveless sheath with simple straps that barely covered her shoulders and only went as far as the tops of her knees. It would take no effort to strip it from her body and claim her again on the sand. The bite marks where I'd claimed her were visible to anyone who looked. It was a bold and reckless move on my mate's part.

"Ah, na valeka," I sighed, kissing her shoulder. "You are the brightest star in the night skies. You are my guiding light, the one that leads me home. I missed you greatly this week."

Turning in my arms, she wrapped her arms around me and buried her face in my shirt. "God, I missed you too," she said, her words muffled in the fabric. "This week has been hell. I needed to talk to you. I got really worried when you didn't come back on time. It's just been awful without you."

"I am here, na valeka," I said, stroking her back reassuringly. "I did not want to be gone so long either, but I am here now. Tell me what is wrong."

She tensed, her head coming up to look around warily. "Not here. Come on." Taking my hand, my mate drew me further down the beach and away from the estate property.

We walked in silence for many minutes. The ocean was a quiet murmur on our right side. The further from the estate we walked, the darker it got, save for the natural light from the moon and stars. A small hut appeared in the distance, which Rowena pulled me towards.

“This is a public storage building,” she explained quietly, pushing the door open and slipping inside. “Folks around here use it to store beach chairs and umbrellas. As long as it all gets put back neatly, no one minds sharing the gear. We left the property line about a mile back. There’s no risk of security cameras or patrols finding us here. Jerica added more of those while you were gone.”

“Tell me what bothers you so, my love,” I asked again, pulling her into my arms once more.

“I just need you right now,” she replied. Her hands shook when she grabbed my collar and pulled me down for a kiss. I felt the desperation in her touch. Something had frightened her while I was gone, something she felt she needed to chase away with sex. I let her lead me where she wanted, needing to give her the comfort she so strongly desired. Her little tongue slipped into my mouth and danced with mine, licking the edges of my fangs in a way that made me shiver.

Pushing her back against the wall, I caged her there and slid my hands down her hips to catch at the bottom of her dress. Her bare thighs were hot under my hands as I slid them back up her body. She was bare underneath. Her breath hitched and she clawed at the closures on my tunic. A quick tug and I swept her dress off over her head, interrupting her bid to get to my own skin. As soon as she was free, her fingers went back to my clothes. She growled, trying to free the buttons.

Deciding to end the struggle, I yanked my tunic open for her, tearing the fabric and scattering at least two buttons. Her fingers were a brand on my flesh. She placed a kiss on my chest, her tongue tracing the edges of a scar. Shuddering, I closed the small distance between us and pinned her to the wall with a snarl.

Rowena's arms were around my neck and her legs came up to wrap around my waist as I ground my hard cock against her wet slit. My trousers were still in the way and the fabric rubbed roughly against us both, making us both cry out in pleasure and frustration. Rowena pushed a hand between us, trying to get at the closure of my pants. I growled and fumbled with the clasp myself.

Freeing my cock, I shifted her higher and thrust my aching length into her warm, wet slit. She cried out in ecstasy, dropping heavily on my cock. My claws dug into the wooden shed wall while I pounded into her body. Rowena clung to me, her sheath clutching and fluttering around my flesh. Her muscles pulled at me as I thrust in and out of her, each stroke trying to force me deeper.

Her blunt little nails clawed at my shoulders, catching on the scales and leaving furrows between them. The small shed filled with her gasps and moans as well as my own growls and snarls. The wall creaked from the force of our bodies slapping together.

Rowena wailed and tightened in my arms, her body arching against me with a scream as she came. Her sheath squeezed hard on my cock, driving me to my own release. I roared, slamming my hips into her one last time and stilling, with my cock buried deep inside her as I pumped my mate's womb full of seed.

There was a small instinctual part of me that wondered if this was the time I bred my female, if this was when she carried my kit. Getting her pregnant now would not be the smart thing to do, but the selfish animal in me would like nothing less than to see her heavy with my young.

Giggling erupted outside the shed and then a voice called out nervously. “Uhh, we’ll come back later.” More giggles receded into the distance.

Rowena stiffened in my arms. With a quick glance out the sliver of open doorway next to us, I spied a trio of young females racing down the beach away from the estate. They looked too young to be employees of the UEG and were very likely just looking to have some late-night fun on the beach.

“They’re going that way,” I told her, pointing out their direction of travel.

She relaxed against me. A gentle push of her hands indicated she wanted down, so I lowered her to the ground, reluctantly withdrawing from her sweet body. We both shuddered at the drag of retreating flesh and gasped softly into the night air. Reaching down, I retrieved her discarded dress and helped her into it, then righted my own clothes.

Rowena was quiet when we slipped out of the shed and made our way back towards the estate. She stopped us somewhere out of sight of the shed, away from the estate’s boundaries, and pulled my arms around her shoulders. I held her as she stared at the ocean waves.

“What worries you so, my mate?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“There’s so much that I don’t know where to start,” she admitted.

“Just start at the beginning.”

She huffed. “I don’t think it’s that easy. I’m not entirely sure what the beginning is anymore.”

“Then start with whatever worries you the most,” I said, giving her a squeeze. “What is the biggest fear in your head

right now?”

“Jerica is up to something,” she said in such a flat, serious tone that almost didn’t sound like it came from my Rowena.

I shifted to look down at her face. She glanced up at me with fearful eyes. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve overheard her and some strange woman talking at the estate a few times. At first it sounded like she was planning to elope with someone but then it sounded like something more serious than just eloping. The day you guys left, I heard them talking about accounts and making transfers.”

“Transfers?”

“Yeah. I think they were talking about money transfers. Specifically, the estate’s money,” Rowena explained. Her breath shuddered in her body as she spoke. “I had a problem with the greenhouse accounts the other week. The budget was just...gone. I asked my sister Evie to hack into the estate’s network and see if she could track it down.”

I rubbed my hands up and down her arms to comfort her. “What did she find?”

“All the accounts have been tampered with. They’re either empty or set up to transfer at the push of a button. She’s trying to figure out where it’s all going, but that’s not the worst part as far as I can tell.”

“What else is there?”

“Whoever is stealing the money is making it look like I’m the one doing it,” she said, turning to bury her face in my tunic. “I don’t know what to do. Why would anyone frame me for something like that?”

My arms closed protectively around my mate, and I held her tight. “I do not know, na valeka, but I will not let them hurt you. We will find a way to keep you safe from this. I will take this to Brixton, he can reach out to others outside of this estate. We will find answers,” I promised my mate.

I held Rowena on the beach until the moon started to set and we were forced to part; her to her home, and I back to the estate. As soon as Brixton woke we would begin our own search for the culprit. If it was indeed Jerica, the human authorities had better reach her before I did.

Reynar

Like most High-Society banquets, this one started with a receiving line, a very long one. As the Guest of Honor, Brixton was expected to greet *all* of the people who came to see him. And as his bodyguard, I got to stand behind him and scowl at every one of them, assessing their body language and watching for the possibilities of a threat. It took over an hour.

By the time we got to leave the line, I had to admit that Brixton was good at playing the politician. He was attentive, charming, and conversational. He greeted everyone uniquely and listened to them in return. Everyone walked away smiling and relaxed, impressed with the boy's affable professionalism. Like myself, they'd known too many complacent political figures who barely noticed them and moved on to the next. Brixton had changed a great deal and it showed in how he handled each person he spoke to, no matter how tired he must be by the time receiving was over.

Beyond the receiving line, everyone mingled, munching on tiny appetizers and sipping champagne as they chatted about everything and nothing all at once. Business deals concluded in corners with handshakes, while illicit liaisons snuck off to dark rooms for quick romps before dinner. It was the same as

any party I'd ever attended; powerful people showing off their wealth for other powerful people.

The mating agencies had even graciously volunteered their resident males as dates for this event, provided they all wore tracking devices of course. The Human women were a colorful mix in suits and ball gowns, which complimented their beauty. There were besuited Draalian males scaled in every shade of blue imaginable, a few of the rarer Zresta males dressed in garb that was fitted to their unique frames more comfortably than human designed clothes, and the earthy Saveet males dressed in their traditional formal robes.

Brixton wore a very formal robe made of ivory and gold Ditarrian silk, profusely embroidered with gold thread and covered in a pattern of Genarian pearls and clear Hestrian gemstones. It was an atrocious display of Acairian wealth that hung heavily from his body and made him slow and stiff as he moved about the party. He had protested wearing the gaudy thing, but his dromo insisted on it. As a result, Brixton was forced to moderate his movements or spend half the night tripping through the party. It irritated him that he couldn't move as freely as he would have liked.

It irritated me as well. If I was forced to defend him, the robes made it much more difficult to do my job. In an emergency, I would normally throw him over my shoulder and retreat, leaving my team to cover our escape to a safer location. The robe, however, made him nearly fifty units heavier. It was too stiff to simply throw him over my shoulder, so it would have to be stripped from him first. If Brixton was unconscious or already injured, that would make it even harder. I was prepared to do just that with a hooked blade that would cut through the heavy fabric and embroidery quickly, but the extra time was always risky.

My own robes were formal as well, but much simpler. I wore a black short-robe of Ditarrian silk over loose, comfortable pants and a cream colored dirjik with a simple border of black embroidery. My forearms were protected by black gauntlets specifically made for such formal events. They were ornamented and engraved to be pretty but still highly functional. It hid a pair of very large knives that could be pulled from the ornamentation and used when needed. The armor on my lower legs were similarly decorated, though the hidden weapons included a pair of laser blasters that had not been cleared by the Earth authorities and would very likely be considered highly illegal should they be discovered.

The estate grounds and ballrooms were crowded and overflowing with the number of attendees and servants that were scattered about. Women dressed in dark uniforms carried trays of drinks and snacks throughout the mob, appearing and disappearing as if summoned. I knew my female was here somewhere, but I had yet to see Rowena and so much of my attention was required to keep track of Brixton and the people around him.

As the ambassador, Brixton seemed to be in his element tonight. The whole affair was making me uncomfortable, though. There were too many scents in the air; food, people, perfume, flowers, everything mixed and twisted in the air, ruining both my senses of smell and taste, which forced me to focus on other senses. Those weren't much better. The lights and colors and waves of movement threatened to overwhelm my vision if I tried to fixate on too many things at once. The cacophony of voices and music filled my ears, deafening me to anything beyond Brixton and his bubble of conversation.

As a result, I was on edge. Jumpy and tense, I watched everyone with suspicion, growling at any who got too close.

Thankfully it was noisy enough that the females—and most of the males—couldn't hear me. Brixton's mouth quirked a little every time. He was close enough to hear me and it amused him, even though he understood my agitation. After hearing Rowena's concerns, we were both slightly on edge as we tried to decide what was going on at this estate. Brixton had sent off a message to a contact in the UEG he trusted, but he'd received no answers before the banquet had begun.

A hand on my arm made me flinch and I turned, finding Brixton at my side. I'd been scanning the room, looking for both Jerica and Rowena, neither of whom I'd seen since early in the day. Not seeing my mate made me concerned for her safety. The last time we'd been in contact was when she shared the information about the missing estate credits and the conversations she'd overheard. Jerica missing from a banquet she was responsible for organizing, concerned me for different reasons. Did it have to do with Rowena? Was Jerica executing her plan while everyone was busy, whatever her plan was?

"Calm yourself, my friend," Brixton said quietly, patting my arm. "No one will try anything with all these witnesses. It's inconceivable. It would take an army."

"If I have learned anything these last few months, it is that human females are not what we expect females to be. They are strange, illogical, devious beings that think in ways we would not think ourselves. They may not be physically stronger than ourselves, but I would not want to face them in a contest of wits, intelligence, or resourcefulness. Given the time and tools, I do not doubt these females could outmaneuver an arena of gladiators," I replied.

Brixton laughed. "You may be right about that Reynar, but I still think there are far too many witnesses for any kind of

nefarious plan to be successful.”

“We cannot afford to let our guard down,” I said, irritated at his blasé attitude.

“And I’m not, but I also have to pretend to enjoy myself. It would help if you didn’t look like you were about to eat the next person who tried to talk to me,” Brixton said, then sighed. Reaching out, he snagged a pair of tiny food items from a passing server’s tray. He handed a morsel of food out to me. “Have a snack and try to calm down. I was told earlier that this is a chicken salad of some kind. It’s good.”

Taking the insultingly small treat, I threw it in my mouth without looking at it. Chewing a few times, I swallowed and went back to searching the room for either my mate or the female I felt posed the biggest threat. Spotting Jerica, I stiffened when I realized she stood not far from us, watching me intently. There was a gleam in her eyes I didn’t like.

I turned to Brixton to warn him, but instead of words, I coughed roughly. My tongue felt strange. The inside of my mouth itched and a puffy sensation in my throat made it hard to breathe. Grabbing his shoulder, I yanked him to me as I coughed again, feeling weak. My heart was racing, and I wheezed out as I breathed. I couldn’t pull any air back in. When my head started spinning, I fell.

Voices shouted my name, but I couldn’t tell who was who. Faces blurred. Holding tight to Brixton, I felt when he was pulled away from me and I clawed at the air where he’d been, trying to grab hold of him again. But he was gone. White uniforms crowded around me, pushing the colors back and they all grabbed at me. I snarled weakly, fighting them off. Then one scent reached me, and I calmed slightly as a darker figure pushed in front of me, grabbing my cheeks and holding

me. My mate was here. The white figures came back, but she held my attention, calming me and begging me to be okay.

Pain, sharp and agonizing, stabbed into my thigh. Fire burned in the muscle there and I jerked, trying to escape from it. There was more shouting I couldn't hear through the pounding in my head and something else stabbed into me. My arm this time, but instead of fire, this one spread ice and numbness through me. Something was fitted over my face. I smelled gas. I tried to pull it off, I had to get to Brixton. He was gone, someone had pulled him away from me. Too weak from the ice in my veins and the gas in my lungs, darkness fell over me until I was gone.



Rowena

It took three shots of modified, alien-friendly epinephrine to stabilize Reynar long enough to move him to the nearest med-pod. He was in the pod nearly eight hours before it fully cleared his system of the allergen that caused his anaphylactic reaction, even though the first thing it did was purge his stomach and flood his lungs with oxygen. The culprit? A sprinkle of ginger on a mouthful of chicken salad spread on a cracker. Reynar the Relentless, eight-time Champion of the Curlass Arena, brought low by a sprinkle of ginger.

Reynar's anaphylactic reaction had happened so quickly and had been so severe that the banquet had devolved into chaos. The VIPs were hustled out of the party while medics ran in. In my opinion, it took far too long for the med-scanners to rule out poisoning and settle on an allergy. By then Reynar's beautiful silver skin was a flat, dull gray, and his breath wheezed loudly with every pain filled heave of his chest.

The medics only let me sit by the med-pod while we waited for it to open because I was the only one who could calm Reynar enough for them to administer the epi injections. They didn't know our relationship, but I knew they suspected something. For the time being, they didn't care. They just wanted to make sure he didn't start freaking out as soon as he

woke up. I knew the chances of that were pretty high, though. Especially once he learned that Brixton was missing.

In the aftermath of Reynar's medical emergency, I'd looked for the young Saveet only to realize he wasn't in sight. Torn between following the medics and finding the ambassador, I grabbed the nearest UEG guard and asked where he'd been taken. I knew Reynar would want to know Brixton was secure when he woke up.

The guard had been confused; she didn't know what I was talking about. Asking around further revealed that no one knew where he'd gone. None of his own people, none of the security in attendance, no one had seen the ambassador since Reynar's collapse.

Now security was in a mad scramble as they searched every corner of the estate and beyond for clues to Brixton's location. So far, the only thing they'd learned was that not only was the ambassador missing, but Jerica was missing as well. If I had to guess, the rest of the estate accounts had been drained too.

I'd commed Evie as soon as we'd realized just how bad the situation was. She was tearing through the UEG estate's networks with a virtual sledgehammer, no time to finesse it now. IT was in a tizzy as they watched their precious firewalls crumble one after another at the hands of a civilian hacker on the other side of the nation. It wasn't pretty, but everything she found was immediately funneled to the UEG team organized and waiting to mount a rescue.

The med-pod beeped beside me, and I jumped at the sudden sound. A white-clad medic bustled into the room and tapped a button to quiet the alarm, then began typing in a series of commands on the screen. The cover of the pod unsealed with a hiss and retracted, leaving Reynar exposed on the gel pad.

He groaned as the effects of the unit's sedation gas wore off. Going from groggy to semi-alert in a short amount of time, Reynar rolled abruptly and one of his hands lashed out. The medic wasn't fast enough in moving away and found herself hauled against the side of the pod and closer to a snarling, disoriented Noxel. I jumped in between them. My hands latched onto my mate's wrist to stop him from pulling the terrified girl any further off her feet.

"Reynar!" I snapped, drawing his attention.

He focused on me and let go, the medic forgotten. She scurried from the room as soon as he dropped her. "Na valeka?"

"I'm here. It's okay, baby," I said, hugging him. "You're okay."

"What happened?" he asked, giving his head a shake as he pushed himself upright.

"You had a severe allergic reaction to something you ate last night. It nearly killed you, but the medics got to you in time and you're fine now. You're just a little groggy from being in the med-pod for so long, but if you can refrain from attacking the medics now that you're awake, I'm sure they could give you something to wake you up a bit more," I explained.

"Sorry, I don't react well to some medications," he said, his eyes downcast. His hand scrubbed at his face, then he looked up, taking in the sterile room.

"Where are we?"

"A med-room on the first floor. They're only used for emergencies like yours," I said, looking around too.

Then he asked the question I dreaded most. "Brixton? Where is he?"

I winced before answering. “We don’t know. He disappeared sometime after you collapsed. Jerica is missing too. Everyone is searching for them, but we don’t know where she’s taken him.”

Reynar’s face went hard, and he growled deep in his chest. It was a harsh, angry sound that chilled me. I was glad it was directed at someone else. “Get them in here. I need to be clear-headed and on my feet!”

Reynar

“I need my left gauntlet as well,” I said, pushing to my feet. I hated how weak I felt. My body ached and my lungs felt like I’d run a two-day endurance race with no break for rest. Each breath burned as I inhaled.

Rowena watched me long enough to be sure I wouldn’t fall, then rushed from the room to do as I asked. The medic was taking too long to return, but Rowena was back with my gauntlet before them. I took it and began dismantling the outer shell to get to the inside of the wrist piece.

“Do you need the other one?” she asked anxiously.

I shook my head without looking away from my task. “No, my love. This is all I need for now,” I stated, pulling the hidden comm-unit free and showing it to her. “This will lead us to Brixton.”

“Is it a tracking device?”

“Not precisely, but I can use it to activate a hidden tracking device on Brixton,” I explained. “It’s a simple code-burst communicator. Long-range, but limited capabilities. I can only

send rudimentary messages in the form of codes less than twelve characters long. There's very little lag time between sending and receiving, and there is always someone waiting on the other side to answer in case of an emergency like this. It's limited but efficient."

"Wait. So Brixton's wearing a tracking device?" Rowena asked, looking confused. "But what if Jerica finds it? She'll dump it and we still won't find him."

"He's not wearing a tracker. He's been implanted with one," I explained. "She'll only find it if she cuts him open."

"No one else has mentioned tracking him, so I'll assume they don't know about it. Why wasn't the UEG security team or the rest of your own team for that matter, informed?"

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "It was his father's idea. Patriarch Hedran decided that only I, Brixton, and himself should know about it. I told Hedran he was taking a foolish risk by limiting the knowledge so severely. That there should be others who knew, but he did not even want the UEG security team to know."

"Well, that's about the dumbest thing I've ever heard. What if something had happened to you? Of course, something almost *did* happen to you, so..."

It would still take an unknown amount of time for the tracking signal to focus on Brixton though, so I tapped in the command code to request tracking activation. The return reply took only a few minutes and came with not only a request for the confirmation code, but also a demand for an explanation as to why it was needed. Apparently, the patriarch was in his office today. I would *definitely* be dealing with that later.

Sending the confirmation code, I put off the demands with a simple code that told the receiver it was an urgent situation, and that they would be updated at a more appropriate time. The demand code came a second time, but I ignored it as I'd already gotten notification that the tracker was active and searching.

"If something more serious *had* happened to me and I was unavailable after Brixton went missing, the UEG would be required to contact his father to inform him of Brixton's disappearance. The tracking device could still be activated, it would simply take longer. That's why I told him he should make others aware of it, yet he refused to see reason," I stated with frustration.

A medic finally arrived. "I understand you want to see one of us, Mr. Velden?" she said, staying close to the open doorway. I could smell her nervousness from where I leaned against the side of the med-unit.

"Yes. I am still feeling very weak. I need your assistance in regaining my bearing so that I may retrieve my charge before he is injured or worse," I replied, waving to encourage her over.

She hesitated still. "Nancy says you attacked her when you woke up."

"Likely," I admitted. "I am a trained warrior. I was disoriented, groggy, and caught up in my last memories of Brixton being pulled away from me as I collapsed. I apologize for frightening her, but I cannot change what I am."

Rowena made a sympathetic sound and slipped under my arm to bury her face in my side, wrapping her arms around my waist in comfort. It felt good having at least one person who didn't look at me like I was lesser. Well...two. Brixton might

be a pain in my ass at times, but he had never looked down on me either. More like he'd looked up to me for some strange reason and now, I just wanted to make sure I was worthy of his regard. What a strange situation this was turning out to be.

The medic nodded. "I can accept that," she said. "Not everyone wakes up in the nicest mood, so we shouldn't expect sunshine and roses from you either. Alright, Mr. Velden. Let's get you revved up, shall we?"

I didn't know what "revved up" meant, but if it got the shakes out of my hands and the fuzz out of my head, I was ready for just about anything. "Yes, let's 'rev me up'," I stated, giving Rowena a quick squeeze. "My love?"

Rowena looked up with a little start. "Yeah?"

"Go up to my suite and get the gray bag out of my closet. Start unpacking it for me. I'll be up in a moment to dress," I instructed, kissing her head.

"Okay." Rowena leaned up and kissed my lips, not caring that we were under the watchful eyes of the medic. The people around us must have realized so much by now that it no longer mattered. She ended the kiss with a caress to my cheek, then hurried out to do as I asked.

"Have a seat on the gel-pad, Mr. Velden," the medic ordered after she left. "I need to have the unit take a quick reading, then we can administer some booster shots and maybe an adrenaline shot if it's compatible with your system."

Laying back on the med-unit once more, I waited not-quite patiently as it ran an assessment scan and sent her its analysis. The medic silently typed in a series of commands as she read the return data. A small med shield rolled out of the bed and closed gently over my forearm, holding it still. It molded to

my arm, then there was a warming sensation. A tingle spread through my veins. The shield released and retracted into the bed.

The medic laid a hand on my shoulder, stalling my attempt to sit up. “Wait a moment please,” she said absently. “That’s gonna hit you in about three, two, one...”

A rush of dizziness hit me and my head spun, making my eyes shut in a grimace of discomfort. Then my stomach turned violently with nausea and I rolled sideways to be sick over the side of the bed. There was nothing to vomit however and the heaving quickly passed. Once the ill feeling and dizziness passed, I felt as if energy was suddenly charging through me. I was hot and a little sweaty already. My heart raced like I’d been sparring half the morning. The grogginess was gone and I was clear headed. My muscles felt stronger, no longer rubbery and limp.

“What did you give me?”

She smiled at the slight accusatory tone, a mild chuckle shaking her frame. “Just a mild cocktail of adrenaline, electrolytes, vitamins, caffeine, and amino proteins to get you up and going. I’m thinking it worked?”

“I feel like I could battle a wild takori beast and still race a herd of roca across the dunes of Herosta,” I replied, climbing off the table. “Thank you. I must be going now.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger,” she said as I walked out.

On my way up to my suite, I sent an alert to the security teams to gear up and be ready to go. As soon as I received Brixton’s signal, I wanted to head out after him. Upstairs, I found Rowena laying out my armor and weapons on the bed. She worked quickly and efficiently, untangling the weapons

harness I hadn't needed in all these weeks. Without a word, I stripped the last of my banquet finery and pulled on the skin suit that went under my armor.

Each piece of armor was custom fitted, fully articulated, and made to move as I did. It was much better than any of the other armor I'd worn in the arenas. More expensive too, but justified since I *was* protecting a Patriarch's son.

My comm-unit beeped, drawing mine and Rowena's attention. Checking it, I was relieved to see it had finally connected to Brixton's signal. "I have to go now, na valeka," I said, strapping on the last of my weapons.

She nodded. "Go and get our pain in the ass back," she said, giving me a soft kiss on the cheek.

Turning, I strode out the door as I sent a signal for the teams to meet me at the shuttle. Brixton's signal was somewhere far to the south of us and not moving. As long as it stayed put, we could catch up to him, otherwise we'd be tracking it until it stopped again. When I got my hands on Jerica there would be hell to pay.

It took the shuttle three hours to reach Brixton's signal. By then, the young male had been missing for thirteen and a half hours. Pacing the interior of the shuttle, I growled at every fidget, every cough, every impatient sound or movement the others had made. I snapped at the female UEG security members as much as I snapped at the four Saveet males on my own team.

Shuttle scanners picked up a small structure in the vicinity of Brixton's signal when we drew closer. The landscape below was dense and swampy, with huge trees weighed down by thick vines. Branches covered in hairy-looking moss sheltered

a wooden cabin in a clearing surrounded by a river of dark, dirty water.

Directing the pilot to land quietly in a clearing just north of the cabin, I turned to the others and addressed them. “When we get close, split into two teams and flank the cabin. I want it surrounded before anyone knows we’re here. The scanners show that the cabin is rather primitive. They won’t know we’re here and there are only three life signs inside. With any luck, we can draw Jerica and her accomplice outside and take them down before they try anything. Be quick and be silent. Ambassador Hedran has already been in their hands for far too long.”

“Watch out for snakes and gators, too!” one of the humans interrupted.

“What?” The female cringed slightly when I turned towards her. I scowled in annoyance. “Repeat what you said, female. If there is danger here, we need to be aware.”

She nodded and cleared her throat. “Well, this is a swamp in a southern climate. We have lots of snakes, especially venomous ones. We have alligators as well.”

“Explain what snakes and ‘gators’ are for us please,” I ordered, turning to watch the ground approach. “But do so quickly.”

“Uh, okay. Snakes are long, legless animals. They’ll mostly leave you alone, but if you get too close to the venomous ones, they will bite you. It can kill you. Alligators are predatory reptiles that live in and around the water. They have really big mouths with lots of sharp teeth and they can get really big. They’re very aggressive and will attack without provocation. They’re good at camouflaging and can be mistaken for logs floating in the water. If you get too close to the water and you

aren't paying close attention, they have been known to grab people and drag them in. Most people don't survive a gator attack."

"Understood. Stay away from the water as much as possible and be wary of your surroundings," I summed up, nodding my thanks to the female. She blushed and ducked her head.

The shuttle bumped onto the uneven ground, settling at a slight angle before the pilot cut the engine. I hit the button for the door and watched it open. Aggression rising in me. This was what it felt like before every fight. This rush of adrenaline and anticipation. My team stood behind me, fidgeting with nerves as they waited to exit. Surrounded by the females of the UEG team, each one had the same equipment; restraints, laser pistols, knives, and stun batons. They were inexperienced but prepared for this fight.

"One more thing," I said as my team settled. "I want the bitch alive, but do not risk the ambassador to take her. If she puts him in danger, take her out." With that, I strode from the shuttle and out into the clearing.

We disembarked and hiked through the trees, keeping to the shadows and away from the river's edge. The underbrush was dense and moving too quickly produced more noise than I liked, but we made progress as best we could. The female who shared the warning about the local dangers pointed out a large non-venomous snake sleeping on a tree branch, but it was one of my own men who spotted something in the water.

The male shied further away from the riverbank, bumping into me. "What is that!?" he asked loudly, pointing at the water's edge.

Looking past him, I spied a large, scaly quadruped laying half in the water. Its hide was dark and wet, while its gaping mouth

was a soft pink. It looked heavy, ungainly, and unintelligent, but there was something sinister about its beady black eyes and massive toothy maw. Scars decorated its snout and forelimbs from a lifetime of territorial disputes.

“*That* is an alligator. A big bull gator too. Steer clear of him, they’re faster than they look and mean as hell. If he decides to chase us, run like your ass is on fire cause you don’t want him to catch you,” the female explained.

“Keep walking,” I ordered, eyeing the big predator. “But keep your eyes open for more.”

As we neared the cabin, it seemed that luck was on our side. We saw a few more alligators and snakes but none bothered us. Angry voices nearby told us all that our targets were outside and distracted. Signaling to the other team, I sent them around the far side of the clearing. Circling through the trees on our side, my half of the team caught sight of Jerica arguing with an older, dark-skinned female on the grass in front of the building.

Jerica was angry about something, tossing her hair and snarling at the other female. “You said bonding him would be easy and once it was done, there was nothing they could do to separate us,” she snapped, stabbing an accusatory finger at the woman.

“I gave you the information I was given,” the other female sneered. “Whether you can make it work is up to you, but the bond shouldn’t be as hard as you’re making it. Just fuck him and get him to bite you. He’s drugged. It shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“The drugs are keeping him from getting hard! I can’t fuck a limp dick. What if I just get him to bite me? Will that form the mate bond?” Jerica asked, throwing her hands up.

A mate bond? She wanted a mate bond with Brixton? Wherever they were getting their information, they were severely lacking in details. The bond didn't form just from sex and biting. It was deeper. There was an emotional connection, there was love. You had to want the bond. Brixton could bite her a thousand times and never bond with her.

"I *don't* know. There's some Viatol in the supplies I brought, though. It hasn't been tested on any of the aliens, but it was the safest erectile aid the men were using when they were still young enough to donate sperm but were getting too old to get it up," the woman suggested. "Maybe it'll be safe for your little fuckboy?"

"You'd think with his reputation he wouldn't *need* any aid in getting it up for a woman, but he's being decidedly difficult about this," Jerica complained.

Spying the lead for the secondary team in the brush across the clearing from me, I waved a quick signal to surround the two women and capture them. While they continued to argue, we spread around the perimeter, circling our prey on silent feet. I crept out to take a defensive position between the women and the cabin. Once everyone was in place, they stepped out into the open, weapons ready and waiting for my signal.

The other woman saw me first, spotting me over Jerica's shoulder. She paled and her eyes went wide with undisguised fear.

Jerica was too caught up in her own selfish pursuits to notice her companion had gone deathly still. "Fine," she said angrily. "Go get the Viatol. I'll dose him with that. If dosing him doesn't work, we'll just have to let the sedatives wear off and do this the hard way."

The snarl that rolled out of me at that statement was loud and ugly, and alerted the evil woman to my presence. She whipped around and gave her own growl at the sight of me blocking her way to the cabin.

“You! I guess it was too much to hope I’d succeeded in killing you by making sure every dish had ginger in it,” she snarled.

“You knew,” I stated, not questioning. A plan like this, it made sense that somehow she would know.

“Of course I knew! That stupid cow Miss Carter insisted on allergy testing to make sure we didn’t feed you anything that would make you sick. It didn’t take much effort to hide the results from everyone and change the menu just enough to effectively poison the entire meal. I just had to wait for you to eat something and then make my move,” she sneered. “How’d you find us? I stripped him out of everything and dumped it all in the bay. I know he’s not wearing a tracker.”

“You really think an important male like Brixton would *wear* a tracking device? Especially around greedy beasts like you?”

I watched with satisfaction as understanding dawned on her face and she scowled. Her partner had already noticed all the other guards and dropped to her knees with her hands behind her head, but Jerica was so focused on me that I doubted she could see anything else.

Shrieking in rage, she launched herself at me. I let her come. She hit me as hard as she could, which wasn’t hard considering she was half my size, but it was amusing to let her try. Grabbing her by the wrist, I flipped her over my hip, letting her weight slam into the ground. Air whooshed out of her lungs with a bark of pain as she landed at my feet. Before she could roll over, I planted my boot in the center of her chest and pinned her there.

The head of the UEG team stepped forward with a set of cuffs. “Jerica Naomi Lawson, you are under arrest for kidnapping an Interplanetary Ambassador, unlawful imprisonment, assault, attempted rape, and attempted murder. This entire incident has been recorded and logged for review by the United Earth Government’s legal board. You will be prosecuted and penalized to the fullest extent of the law,” she recited while shackling the struggling female and rolling her to her face to secure her hands behind her back.

Stepping off of her, I turned to the cabin and pushed the door open. After listening to her conversation with the dark female, I worried about what I would find inside. The building was as small and primitive as it appeared from the outside. A single room, the cabin had a cooking area on one side and a sitting area on the other. The back was separated into sections as well.

A small sanitation unit in the corner was one of the only modern conveniences in the cabin. The other corner was curtained off and dark. A low groan issued from that corner. Ripping back the curtain, I found what I was looking for. Brixton blinked up at me, groggy, naked, sporting a few injuries, and tied to the bed frame.

He grinned, the cut on his face pulling at his lip and making him wince. “I knew...you...you’d be...here,” he said tiredly, his words dragging out between each labored breath. The drugs Jerica had mentioned could be part of the problem, but I imagined the bruises on his ribcage didn’t help.

Pulling a knife, I started cutting him free. “Since when do I ever let you just run off without me?” I replied softly. “What did that meersak galek do to you?”

Brixton chuckled, wincing again. “You...shouldn’t...use such...dirty words,” he rasped. “She couldn’t...do any...

anything to...me. Told ya...that...bitch...shrivels my...cock. Pissed her...off, though,” he said, rolling away from me. His sides and back sported a few bruises as well. He’d been beaten on top of whatever else the evil woman had done to him.

“Stop joking, boy,” I scolded, hiding the pain in my voice.

Pulling the blanket free of the bed, I wrapped it around him and lifted him up. Moving to the sitting area, I set him on the sofa and made sure he was steady before stepping to the door. The shuttle had already been brought into the clearing and the two prisoners loaded. The UEG women were making recordings of the cabin and the smaller shuttle the women had used in the abduction. One waited nearby, snapping to attention when I noticed her.

“Do you need anything, sir?” she asked.

I nodded. “Fetch the medic. And tell them they can come in and make their recordings in here as well. I want to get done quickly and get Brixton back to a safer place as soon as possible.”

“I’m the medic for this team, sir. I was waiting until you needed me,” she answered, then turning, she waved over two other team members and gave them instructions to start taking scans of the interior of the cabin. “They need to get a recording of the ambassador’s condition real quick, but once they’re done, we can get him field treated and moved. They’ll finish here and fly the second shuttle back later. It’s part of the evidence anyways.”

Grunting acceptance, I returned to Brixton who was dozing in his seat. He jerked awake at my touch, nearly hitting me, then gave me that goofy, tired grin again and relaxed, leaning against me. “We...going home?” he asked with a yawn.

“Soon. We’ll leave soon. The medic is going to check on you first and they need a quick scan of you for evidence, but we’ll leave soon,” I assured him.

“Not naked...don’t want to...be...naked again,” he protested, clinging to the blanket.

The females in the doorway paused and took in the state of the room before sharing a sympathetic glance. “We don’t need a full body scan, Ambassador,” one said softly. “Just a quick picture of your face should be enough for now. The med-unit will gather any other data they need for the investigation, okay?”

Brixton had gone very still and quiet at her voice, but as she talked, the tension eased out of him. “Okay,” he said, yawning again.

They took their recordings and gave us some room while the medic knelt at our feet with her scanner. “Alright Ambassador, we’re going to see what she dosed you with and see if we have something to counteract that. We’ll also make sure there’s nothing serious we need to address right away,” she said as she turned on her scanner and held it up. “I need you to hold out your hand for a quick blood sample.”

The scan, bloodwork, and subsequent booster shot took only a few minutes, but it succeeded in waking Brixton up. His eyes cleared and his demeanor became more aware and relaxed. He was less wary now that he could control his own body again, though he did move cautiously because of the discomfort.

“Better?” the medic asked after observing him for side effects.

“Yes, much. My thanks,” he replied.

“Do you feel up to giving an initial statement?” one of the others asked. “They will ask for a more in-depth interview

later, but we feel it's important to get a statement as early as possible while memories are still fresh. However, we don't want to unnecessarily distress you either."

Brixton looked thoughtful for a moment before answering. "I can give a statement, but I prefer to keep it brief if that's alright?"

"Whatever you are comfortable with at this time is fine," she agreed.

"Alright. Reynar got sick and collapsed. The dark female posed as a guard and claimed she was taking me to safety because of the supposed attack. When she took me to Jerica, I tried to leave, but they attacked and beat me, drugged me, and brought me here. I was stripped and tied to the bed. Jerica tried to force a mating, but became enraged when my cock refused to harden for her. She beat me again, threatened me, gave me more drugs and tried to mate me a second time. When that failed, she left me here to go outside and yell at her cohort. Then you arrived," Brixton detailed in a tense and succinct manner. "Now, I hurt, I'm tired and I'm hungry. We're leaving this awful place and I will give a proper interview when everything else has been addressed."

"Of course, Mr. Hedran. The shuttle is ready to leave whenever you board," the interviewer stated, stepping away from us so Brixton could stand.

Giving him a steadying hand, we walked out to the shuttle and boarded. The pilot had a robe waiting on a seat for him and I helped him into it before getting him strapped in. The others boarded behind us, leaving a small group behind to finish the investigation. Once the shuttle closed, we took off and flew away from the horrid cabin in the swamp with two prisoners

locked in the brig and an injured young Saveet dozing in the cabin.

We didn't go back to the estate. Instead, there were orders to deliver Brixton to a more secure UEG location close by. Once he was treated and released by the medical staff, we were flown further north to another facility where the remainder of his entourage was waiting for us.

Reynar

Brixton was safely ensconced in the UEG's Embassy Quarters, far enough away from the little estate in Southern Florida that I felt an ache at the separation from my mate. Left behind, Rowena had no way of knowing where we were. There'd been no time to find her when Brixton was retrieved from Jerica's clutches. At the time, Brixton had been in bad shape; drugged, injured, and barely conscious. The rescue team and I had whisked him off to the nearest UEG medical center and from there, a transfer to a more secure location.

I couldn't even comm Rowena. The entire estate was currently under investigation while the UEG tried to figure out who all was involved in the kidnapping plot. There was no telling how they would react when they found out just how close she and I had become. I missed her and I worried for her safety, but I had to make sure Brixton was safe first.

That was the crux of my struggle. Was my duty solely to him? I was supposed to protect the younger male, to keep him safe, but I almost failed. He'd been kidnapped. What if we hadn't found them in time? Had I missed the signs because I was distracted? But what about Rowena? She was my mate. We were bonded, and even now I yearned to seek her out. I couldn't leave her unprotected either.

Struggling with my own internal dilemmas, I hadn't seen Brixton much since we'd arrived. He'd mostly kept to his rooms after being seen by the medics and then giving his full interview with the UEG investigators. I wondered if he blamed me for what had happened to him. It did surprise me when he finally sent for me on the fifth day after our arrival.

"I am serious about this, ni dromo!" Brixton said, his voice strident and firm as I pushed the door open. He sat behind his desk on the far side of the suite's receiving room.

I stayed quiet. I hadn't expected him to be on a comm with his father when I walked in. The aide who came to get me had said he was awake and wanted to see me, but they hadn't said that he was pissed off and contacting his parents.

The front room of Brixton's new suite was not as nice as the estate had been. This Embassy was almost sterile in their decorating style. White furniture, white walls, white linens. The only relief from the white was the occasional black pillow, vase, or wall decor thrown in some random place to draw the eye away from the stark landscape of white. They didn't even put out any flower arrangements.

"Ni brasa, you can't expect me to cancel the arrangements I've already made," his father replied gruffly. "They were finalized a week ago. You will mate the daughter of the Pritchard family next week. And get the medics to see to that wound before it scars and ruins your face."

"I will not. I rather like how imperfect I look now. Besides, I am done being your pawn in this. You want me to take an Earth woman as a mate? Fine, I will. But it will be one I choose. I will not mate to satisfy your political machinations. I will find my own mate and I will mate for love or not at all," Brixton snarled, taking a stand.

“And what will I tell the Pritchards?” his dromo demanded angrily. “You are ni brasa, my only son! You will do as I say!”

“I am not your only son,” Brixton spat. “Just the only one you acknowledge. Your other son deserves better from you, but you aren’t capable of that, are you? You’re barely capable of being my dromo, much less his! He’s lucky you didn’t get him killed solars ago!”

That was a surprise. This was the first I’d ever heard of Brixton having a brother. I wondered who the other male was and what he’d been through if Brixton felt his life was in danger.

“How do you know about that?” Patriarch Hedran said, his tone worried. All of a sudden it seemed Brixton was in a position of power.

“I’ve suspected for some time. There were a number of similarities that no one else seemed to notice. His eyes, the color of his horns, the number of scales on his chin even; he looks so much like you, ni dromo, if you just look. I had it confirmed in secret shortly before we arrived on Earth. And I spent months trying to connect with him, but he couldn’t stand me,” Brixton explained.

Suspicious and denials warred in my head as I listened to him speak.

“Of course not,” Hedran scoffed. “But you are Saveet nobility. Why should he matter to you?”

“Shame on you, ni dromo. He is ni karik! My brother! He is Saveet nobility too. Yes, he was born to a Noxel mother, but you could have taken him in, claimed him as your eldest son, your brasa, and raised him beside me as ni karik, but your selfish narcissism doomed him to a life of servitude and pain.

His ahina died alone while he was off in some arena, fighting for his life because *you* decided to make him a gladiator. And he only ever saw me, his brother, as a spoiled, selfish youth. I didn't know how to get his attention except to act a fool, at least if he was rescuing me and looking after me, he was talking to me. Even if he ever so politely called me an idiot when he did so." Brixton leaned around the monitor and winked at me.

He'd known I was there the entire time. He was telling me I was his brother. Patriarch Hedran was the male that had lain with my ahina and gotten her pregnant. Hedran was my dromo. Brixton, the annoying young male who had followed me around as a small child, was my brother. I fumbled for the nearest chair, sitting heavily and putting my head in my hands as I tried to process everything I suddenly knew.

"He doesn't need to know," Hedran started, cutting off when Brixton growled.

"He does! He needs to know he has family! Even if the only one who cares what happens next is me!"

"And what happens next, Brixton? What do you expect me to do?" Hedran said, his voice furious and hard. "I can't change the past, and I will not acknowledge him. He will not have the Hedran name."

"I don't want the Hedran name," I blurted, making my presence known.

Curses from the other end of the comm made it clear Hedran had not been aware I was in the room as well. That male hated to be caught off-guard.

"You told him?" he snarled at Brixton.

“Reynar deserved to know the truth. It took me months to get him to see me as a friend and I didn’t even do that on my own. We met a human who treated me like an equal. She didn’t fawn over me, didn’t put up with my pomposity, she just put me in my place. And the more time we spent with her, the more I wanted to be a better person. And the better I behaved, the closer I got to my brother. She saw us both as males of equal standing and worth. I will not be a male like you any longer.”

“What are you saying?” Hedran asked, sounding wary.

“I am saying Grechto is on his way back to Acair and I am remaining the ambassador for the foreseeable future. I will be pushing the Council to approve more Noxels for immigration to Earth and I will be seeing them properly settled. The Saveet males coming here don’t need my help. They’re attractive and highly sought after by these females. It is the Noxel who need me as their voice.”

“I will inform the UEG that you are not the ambassador and have them send you home,” Hedran threatened.

“Do it and I will disappear. There are people here who help endangered males find safe havens. Reynar and I will both seek their help. And if you think to trace either of us, you should know I have already had your tracking devices removed. I also have a message waiting to send to Ahina’s private comm system detailing a number of your indiscretions, including the son you refused to acknowledge. She might be a matriarch, but she has always believed in males taking responsibility for *all* of their offspring. She will claim Reynar very loudly and publicly on your behalf, even though I would lose my status as your heir.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“The humans have a saying here. *Try me*,” Brixton challenged, standing and getting close to the screen as he snarled the words at his dromo.

“What will it take for that message to never reach your ahina?” Hedran asked, a low growl of self-disgust in his question.

“Reynar is a free citizen. With *all* the rights of any Saveet male of Acair. He can mate and breed and live with whomever he wants. He has the Council’s full permission to seek a mate on Earth and they will pay any fees the Earth agencies require, including whatever his mate’s fees are. He has already passed all the required psych testing and neural training any other immigrant male would be required to take so that is not an issue, but should there be any issues, I expect the Council to see it handled expeditiously. Are we clear on that?”

Brixton had ticked off his demands with an almost evil glee. I couldn’t imagine the shock his dromo must be experiencing right now.

“But he’s...”

“He’s never returning to Acair anyways, so what does it matter if he breeds with a human?” Brixton interrupted. “You and your genetically *perfect* little council never have to see him again. Oh, and by the way, he got his good looks from you. His dominant genetics are on the male alleles. Apparently, I took after na ahina.”

It was nearly impossible not to burst out laughing as I listened to the outraged sputtering that came from Patriarch Hedran. To him it was inconceivable that he would be the reason I was so imperfect. He was Saveet after all.

“My other stipulations are, as I already said, that I will remain the ambassador. I’m ready to assume the role properly and I

will not be replaced. As for taking a human mate like you want me to, I have no problems with that. However, it will be on my terms. You have no choice in this matter, ni dromo. I will not bend. You can give me what I want, work with me, or I will vanish with the family I choose, and you will be left dealing with the scandal of a family you rejected,” Brixton finished calmly, his tone firm and unyielding.

Reaching out, he ended the call before his father could answer, then he stood and came around the desk to stand in front of me. Then my little brother hugged me for the first time.

Rowena

I lost my job. The UEG did their investigation and while I was cleared of any wrongdoing, my many other lies were discovered, and I lost my job. Jerica and her accomplice were jailed for kidnapping and assaulting a foreign diplomat. Thanks to Evie, all of the missing funds were recovered and returned to the estate. Interplanetary disaster was averted, but I lost my job.

That was three weeks ago. The kidnapping had happened almost five weeks ago. I haven't seen or heard from Reynar or Brixton in all that time. It surprised me how much I missed Brixton, but I felt that missing Reynar was killing me. I wasn't sleeping well, I was constantly exhausted, and I spent half the day ill and unable to keep anything down. My head hurt all the time and I often had vertigo.

My med-bed said I was fine, so I decided it was just depression, so I spent a lot of time napping and eating my way through a case of cookie-dough ice cream. Drone deliveries

were a godsend since every time I left my apartment, I was bombarded by journalists wanting to know my side of what happened in the foiled kidnapping of an interplanetary ambassador.

It sucked. I couldn't go looking for a new job, I couldn't go to the store, I couldn't even walk down my street without at least four news drones in my face demanding answers. If it weren't for privacy laws, I'm sure they'd be knocking on my doors and windows too, but the laws kept them off private property. They could only bug me when I stepped foot on public grounds.

Evie checked in on me frequently. So did our moms. Everyone dropped in on me right after I got fired and we had a good long talk about everything. I came clean about my debts and how I'd had Evie rig my tests. They weren't happy about me roping her into my lies, but they tried to be understanding. They were at least sympathetic. Mama Hanna shared a story about how she got conned out of a rare family heirloom that had belonged to her grandfather and her fight to get it back. She never did, but she understood my embarrassment and unwillingness to come to the family for help.

Eventually I told my family about Reynar and falling in love. That was the first time I cried over him being gone. I was lucky the UEG hadn't arrested me for being with him while I was an employee. The government knew he was on the other side of the continent though and not likely to come back as long as the ambassador was under UEG protection.

There was no chance I was going to get my mate back. He was the love of my life, and the UEG would see to it that we never saw each other again. The evening ran late as we talked, and I

slept on the foldout sofa with my moms and my sister, just holding each other like we used to when Evie and I were kids.

When my family left in the morning, I felt closer to them than I had in a long time. It made me realize I hadn't been fair to them. They had always been there for me, and I was just being stubborn. Now I talked to them daily and let them bolster my spirits when they could. The rest of the time, I moped and snacked and in general, I felt like garbage. That was the only thing I didn't tell them, though. They worried about me enough, they didn't need to know I was staying ill all the time.

Despite another scan from the med-bed assuring me I was fine, except for my blood sugar being a little high—too much ice cream no doubt—I was hugging the toilet yet again when Evie dropped in for a visit. She had a key, so she just let herself in and found me miserably yarfing into the toilet. Her shocked gasp was my only warning that I had company before I heaved and wretched into the bowl again.

“Oh my God, Ro! Are you okay?” she asked, dropping her bag by the bathroom door and stepping in to scoop my hair away from my face while I puked.

Finally the heaving stopped, and I sat back against the wall. Evie grabbed a washrag and wet it, then wiped my face like I was a kid. I let her. It felt good and I was too tired to fight with her.

“I'm okay,” I said after a few minutes. “Just a little sick to my stomach.”

“A little?” she snorted mockingly. “Girl, you look like shit. How long have you been sick?”

“I'm not sick. Med-bed says I'm fine. I think it's just stress and depression over Reynar. I miss him so much,” I admitted,

starting to cry.

“I think I need to look at that stupid bed. You are not fine. Even if this is stress, the bed should be able to give you something for your stomach and nerves.”

Urging me to my feet, she bullied me down the hall and made me lay in the med-bed. The gel pad cradled me while she tinkered with the data-screen, humming to herself as she checked its schematics. I snoozed on the comfy pad only half aware of the various beeps that came from the computer.

“I think I know the problem,” she muttered vaguely, pressing more buttons. “I’m doing a factory reset on the software. Once it loads, we’ll run a new diagnostic and see what she says, okay?”

“Yeah okay,” I grumbled drowsily.

Sometime later, I woke to her shaking me gently, an excited light in her eyes. “Wake up, Ro! I know what’s wrong with you!”

Yawning as I sat up, I realized I felt better than what I had in days. “Did you give me something while I was out?” I asked.

She grinned brightly. “Ohhhhh, just a little shot for the nausea, something for the achy muscles, a bit of a booster for energy, and some prenatal vitamins, that’s all,” she rattled off happily.

“Oh. Okay, what was wrong wi...did you say *prenatal* vitamins?”

Evie nodded ecstatically. “I did!” Flipping the monitor towards me, she swiped an image into the main window, enlarging it. It was an ultrasound image. Smack dab in the middle was a tiny, little bean-shaped fetus.

“That’s what was making me sick?”

“Yup!”

“That little bitty thing?”

“Well, *they* are what is making you sick,” she said, then laughed.

“They?” I felt faint all of a sudden.

Evie flicked another image into the frame. This one showed a second bean shaped baby just behind the first. There were two of them. Two tiny little pieces of Reynar growing right under my heart. He was still with me. I couldn't help it. I burst into tears.

Evie wrapped her arms around me and held me while I sobbed. Losing Reynar hurt so much. I didn't even know if he was still on the planet or if they'd sent him home, but at least now I had part of him with me. I wasn't going to be alone after all.

I cried myself into exhaustion, completely wasting the nice little pick me up Evie had given me earlier. She wiped my face again when I was done, then walked me to my bedroom and tucked me in. There were no words right now, but I think she knew I would probably start crying again if she tried to talk to me. Fuzzy-headed and weak, I lay in bed, drifting back to sleep as she pattered around the room picking things up for me. Just as my eyes were closing for the last time, Evie sat down at my net-hub and activated the screen.

“Where the heck are you?” she muttered to herself, as her fingers flew over the touchscreen. I was too tired to wonder who she was looking for.

Reynar

Hedran heeded Brixton's threats. There were no more communications from the patriarch after Brixton ended the call, but we had his answer by the end of the week. An official message arrived from the Council detailing my new status as a Saveet citizen of Noxel heritage. It was officially a new designation for half-breeds, and Brixton planned to make judicious use of it in the future for other half-breeds who'd been denied their own rights by the Council.

According to the Council, I was no longer under a sponsorship to the Hedran family and therefore not obligated to continue working as Brixton's bodyguard. Naturally Brixton insisted on rehiring me as his new Security Advisor, with a pay raise and other benefits. Since the Council was responsible for paying the ambassador's staff, I gladly accepted the job. I was also in no way restricted to the same rules and laws that governed the full-blooded Noxel citizens. They would not impede my desire to start a family in any way. There was some other vaguely legal, fine print, mumbo-jumbo thrown in, but the gist of it was that if you stay out of our house, we'll stay out of yours.

That was fine with me. I had no interest in returning to Acair ever again. I had a mate here on Earth and I was eager to reunite with her. If only I could convince the UEG to cooperate with me and tell me where she was. It had been nearly seven weeks since we'd separated. I was free to take her as my mate with no fear of reproach from anyone. Hedran himself had agreed to pay any fees that the UEG might demand in order for her to legally be my mate.

For some reason though, the UEG was being evasive. Their excuses were numerous and annoying. Rowena no longer worked for the estate, her contract had been terminated for Falsified Neural Testing and Documentation. Privacy laws prohibited them from giving me her home address. It was

against government policy to send official comms to an employee who'd been fired. They would try to contact her, but they couldn't give me her private comm information without her express permission. The list simply got longer and longer until I was ready to bite someone's head off.

After yet another failed endeavor at getting someone to help me find my mate, I was pacing in my quarters in a frustrated attempt to not strangle some pencil-pushing UEG twit. My mood was so poor that Brixton had laughed and banished me from his suite until I 'got my shit together' as he put it.

So here I was, pacing and growling at the walls of my too-small suite. Brixton's rooms could fit three of mine with little difficulty and room to spare. That was unsurprising, he was an ambassador after all. I expected him to have a nice room. It would have been nice if it took more than six steps to cross my own room, however. My rooms consisted of a small sitting room with a tiny sofa and a desk with a comm station, a bedroom with a bed that was not quite long enough, and a hygiene room with a shower I couldn't quite turn around in. Circling the little sofa repeatedly did nothing for the fragile state of my nerves.

I wanted to steal a shuttle and fly back to the estate. If I had to search every square mile around that mansion until I found her, so be it. The residents would be calling the authorities about the crazy feral alien running mad through their yards. On my millionth circuit around the small room, my comm unit blinked on and a female's voice spoke.

"Hellooooo? Anybody out there?"

I paused, unsure if I should answer. Who was this stranger and how had she activated my comm? Was this a trick? Where I

was standing, I knew she couldn't see me, and if I said nothing, she would never know I was there.

“Dammit! I was hoping this was the right room,” the strange female cursed. “Hello?” she called again, louder this time. “If anyone is there, I’m trying to find Reynar. Rowena really needs h—”

I dove around the comm at Rowena’s name, cutting off the female’s words and startling her. She jumped in her seat, then laughed nervously as she focused on me.

“You said Rowena needs me? Where is she? Is she safe? What’s happened to her?” I demanded, rapidly firing questions at her.

“Damn. She wasn’t kidding when she said you were big,” she commented dryly. “She’s okay, but she misses you terribly and has been ill lately because of it.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

The female grinned but shook her head. “That’s something you should ask her yourself.”

“I would, but the UEG has been keeping her from me!” I growled, almost slamming a fist into the desk in frustration. “I’ve been trying to find her for weeks now and all I get from them are excuses!”

“Sounds like the UEG alright. Obfuscations and lies. They probably want to find you a nice high-ranking human mate since you’re so closely tied to the ambassador. Good thing Rowena has an amazing hacker of a sister who can slip through the UEG firewalls and skim through their residential system until she found the right room number to get her sister’s man on the phone,” the woman bragged proudly.

“You are Evie?” This human looked nothing like Rowena. Evie had short, curly black hair, a round, elfish face, and creamy, pale skin. Her eyes were a pale icy blue surrounded by thick, long lashes. I’d thought Rowena was small, but this woman was tiny.

She nodded. “That’s right, babe. But enough about me. You want to find Rowena?”

“Of course. She is my heartbeat, my lifeblood. I am nothing without her,” I vowed, with my hand over my heart.

“Aww,” Evie cooed, her eyes going soft. “That’s adorable! Okay, lover boy, we need to get you and Ro back together. Here’s what you need to do...”

Rowena

Remember what I said about some dreams being so vivid that you don't want to wake up and find out it wasn't real? I've had a lot of those lately. Dreams about Reynar sliding into bed and wrapping his big warm body around me. Dreams of his hands on my skin as he touches me again. Dreams that leave me shaking and wet and crying in frustration when I wake to nothing but an empty bed. And yet, I still have those dreams. Night after night, yearning for my mate's touch.

Yeah, I'm having one of those again. This one is more real than the last and I know it'll be harder on me when I wake up, but I want to drown in it for as long as I can. Reynar had his arms around me, just like always, and he was kissing the back of my shoulder with sweet, slow kisses that made my skin tingle. His mouth moved to my neck, and he sucked tenderly at the sensitive curve between the neck and shoulder. I could feel his hard-on pressing roughly against my ass, so I pushed my hips back, rubbing against him and making him growl in my ear. Shivers ran through me from the sound. My skin tightened, leaving goosebumps all over my body.

"Ah, na valeka," he said, purring roughly. "I have missed you, my love."

“I miss you too, Reynar,” I whined. Reaching back, I cupped his cheek and pulled him over my shoulder for a kiss, desperate to feel more of him before I woke. “I need you, Reynar.” I’m pleading with a dream, I know, but I miss him so badly.

“I’m here, na valeka. I have you,” he promised, and I wanted to cry because I knew it wasn’t real.

Sliding his hand down the front of my torso, he cupped my breast, squeezing it gently, then he dragged the edge of his claw over my sensitive nipple. I was naked. I remembered I’d gone to bed naked. That was unusual for me, but I’d been so tired after my shower, so I just crawled into bed and passed out. Part of me felt bad about leaving the after-dinner cleanup to Evie. She’d stayed with me for the last two weeks since discovering my pregnancy, but this first trimester was wearing me out, even with the vitamins and boosters she was giving me regularly.

A pinch to my nipple made me gasp and shattered my sleepy musings. Reynar growled softly, nipping my shoulder before speaking. “If your thoughts wander so easily, perhaps I’m not giving you enough attention,” he whispered, placing nips and kisses after every few words.

His touch turned more aggressive and he slipped his fingers between my thighs, playing in the slick he found there. Moaning, I arched into his caress and opened my legs wider. He lifted my leg higher and hooked it over his own, spreading me. He trailed his claws back up the inside of my thigh. I trembled again and my breathing hitched sharply as he toyed with my clit, rolling it between his fingers, making me whimper pitifully. This was the best wet dream ever.

“Reynar! Please!” I cried, grabbing his hip and pulling him tight against me. His cock slid between my ass cheeks, a teasing promise I longed for. “Fuck me, please! I need you!”

With his hand cupped hard over my pussy and two fingers stroking halfway inside me, he ground his palm into my clit, setting off starbursts behind my eyes as the sensations tumbled me over the edge of an orgasm.

While I shook and mewled from that first release, Reynar shifted and slid his cock inside my still quivering pussy. Rolling into me, he pressed my sweaty body into the mattress, then gripped my nape with his teeth and fucked into me with quick, firm strokes of his hips. The sharp bite of pleasure-pain from his fangs in my shoulder made me realize I wasn't dreaming.

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Yes! God, yes!” I cried, fisting my hands in the bed sheets and pushing back to meet Reynar's thrusts.

He snarled against my back, bearing down on me and driving me against the bed. The ridges on his cock dragged at the walls of my pussy, setting the nerves ablaze as they tripped across the sensitive flesh inside. I wailed in delight, screaming his name and racing towards another release.

My legs spread wider, tilting my hips higher to take him deeper, needing him deeper. With a savage growl, he released my neck, sitting back and jerked my hips off the bed without missing a thrust. I found myself sitting up in his lap, his arms around my body as he bounced me up and down on his cock. My legs were spread so wide that my hips ached. All I could do was cling to his arms as he fucked me, but I welcomed the mild discomfort with the ecstasy so long as Reynar never let go of me again.

Reynar growled praises in Acairian, murmuring them against my back amidst his own groans and hisses of pleasure, his breath hot and panting on my skin. More than once, his tongue flicked out to lick the sweat from my body. His teeth and lips peppered my shoulders and nape with kisses and nips as he bent over me, pushing me to the bed once more.

Pinning me down, Reynar caught my hand in his and threaded his fingers with mine, holding me tightly as he curled and bucked against my back. Beyond words now, I drowned in the sensations while my mate owned and manipulated my body. His cock swelled inside me, and my muscles clenched on those ridges of his. Pushing a hand under me, he stroked my clit almost reverently compared to the animal he was at my back.

I spasmed, my entire body heaving with the force of my orgasm. I shrieked his name as I came. He sank his teeth into my shoulder, marking me once more, as my pussy clamped down on his dick, gushing liquid heat down my thighs. He came hard, releasing my shoulder with a roar, his body straining over mine. He surged into me again, before stilling, and his cock jerked, pumping his seed into me.

Half-collapsing on me, Reynar gathered my limp body in his arms and rolled to his side without pulling free of me. His lips pressed warm drowsy kisses to my shoulder once more as he snuggled against my back with a happy rumble purring out of his chest. "I'll never leave you again, my mate," he promised, burying his face in my hair.

Reynar

I couldn't have asked for a better reunion with my mate. Rowena welcomed me back into her bed and body with an enthusiasm that made up for the weeks we'd been apart. I looked forward to expending much more energy on her as the days passed. There were so many different things I wanted to do with my mate. For now, I was just happy to have her in my arms once more.

We'd fallen asleep in a tangle after our lovemaking. I woke several times in the night, just to make sure I wasn't imagining the feel of her in my arms. Each time, I simply watched her sleep until my eyes were heavy and I slept again. She had looked so tired when I first arrived, I hadn't meant to wake her. I just wanted to hold her, but she was naked and warm and had fit so well against me that I couldn't resist touching her. And the sounds she made had been utterly devastating to my self-control.

It was near morning now, and the room slowly brightened around us while the sun rose. This was always my favorite time of day but seeing the dawn on my mate's skin was the most beautiful thing I'd ever experienced. I couldn't wake to see a million more dawns with her. No one was taking me away from her again.

Light hit her face as she grumbled softly and turned round in bed to snuggle her face into my chest. I started purring at her touch, the sound made me smile. The only other time I'd ever purred was as a small child in my mother's arms. Before Rowena I hadn't thought I could purr again.

Her lips curled in her own small smile and she gave a sleepy hum. "Reynar?"

"I'm here, na valeka," I said softly, rubbing her back.

“I’ve missed you,” she said as she placed a little kiss on my chest.

“And I you, my mate,” I admitted. “But that is in the past. No one will take me from you again.”

She grimaced, then snuggled closer. “You don’t know that. I’m not in the registry, I don’t have any money to sign up for a mate, and you’ve said you’re banned from having a mate. I don’t know how you got here, but as soon as they find out they’ll take you away again,” she complained sadly.

“Not this time, my love. Brixton fixed everything for us. He got the Council to grant me full rights as a Saveet citizen due to my breeding. I am free to take any female I want for my mate, and *I* choose you.”

“I still don’t have the right to take a mate,” Rowena protested.

I chuckled, flashing my fangs when she glared up at me. “Brixton took care of that too, na valeka. Your paperwork has been completed, and you are cleared to apply for a mate. Though I do hope you will choose me as well.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really,” I assured her. “It took me a few days to admit it, but I knew I wanted you from the moment I saw you. And I wanted you to want me too.”

“Well, of course I...”

Rowena paled, her eyes going wide. Shoving away from me, she scrambled off the bed and threw herself through the door and down the hall naked. I followed, concerned about her sudden change in demeanor. My concern grew when I heard her retching and came around the doorway to see her heaving miserably into the toilet bowl.

“Na valeka! What is the matter, my mate?” I asked, rushing to her side.

Gathering her hair away from her face, I held it while she vomited repeatedly. When she finished, I gently lifted her from the floor and washed her face before carrying her limp body back to bed. Tucking her in, I brushed her hair back and purred worriedly over her distressing paleness.

It was a relief when she finally spoke. “I thought you only purred when you were happy,” she said tiredly.

“I purr to give comfort to loved ones as well,” I confessed. “Are you okay?”

She chuckled, then reached for my hand. I let her take it. “*We* are going to be fine,” she stated, placing my hand on her lower belly. “I’m just having some morning sickness. It should pass after the first trimester, but we’ll see.”

As much as I hate to admit it, it took me a minute to understand exactly what she was saying. When I did, I jerked my hand off her stomach in surprise, staring from her lower body to her face and back again. I don’t know what my expression was, but she thought it was hysterical because she burst out laughing. Cautiously reaching out again, I placed a gentle touch on her belly.

“Ti jesit?” I asked in a quiet, incredulous tone, reverting to my birth language without thinking.

Rowena cupped my cheek with an amused smile. “If that means baby, then yes,” she answered. “I’m pregnant.”

“Ni jesit. My kit, my...my baby,” I repeated, feeling overwhelmed.

“Welllllll,” Rowena said, dragging out the word, “more like babies.” She held up two fingers, her blunt little teeth

worrying at her bottom lip as she did so.

“Two babies? How is that possible?”

“I take it your people don’t have twins?” she asked, rubbing what she could reach of my arms from where I sat beside her.

“Is that what it’s called? Humans can carry two kits at a time? Females on Acair have never carried more than one,” I explained, the shock still seeping through me. I was excited and happy and completely stunned all at once. It was an amazing feeling. I felt my face stretching into the biggest smile I’d ever had.

Rowena scoffed at me. “Honey, there have been humans in history who carried up to eight kits at once!”

That made me feel faint. “Eight?”

Rowena burst into loud laughter again. “Lay down before you fall down,” she ordered. “Yes, eight, but it is really, really rare. Most women only carry one. Twins happened maybe once in every three hundred pregnancies naturally, and that was *before* the AD90 wiped out our male population.”

Laying on top of the covers beside my mate, I cuddled beside her as I tried to picture myself as a dromo. Rowena would be an amazing ahina. She was sweet and loving and took no nonsense from anyone. After seeing how much her influence had affected Brixton so quickly, I knew she would be the perfect ahina. But myself as a dromo?

“Twins,” I repeated again with a worried sigh.

“Are you okay with that?”

“I am unsure about my abilities as a dromo,” I admitted. “I have had no examples to teach me the skills I need to care for

kits. To teach them. I have never even held a kit. What if I do something wrong?"

"*You* are going to be a great father," Rowena insisted. "You're strong and protective and responsible. You are loyal and I know you cared about Brixton, even when you didn't really like him. Everything else you can learn along the way."

Snorting under my breath, I scoffed at my own fears. "I am Reynar the Relentless," I declared mockingly. "And I am absolutely terrified of a pair of unborn kits."

Rowena laughed gently, hugging me to her and kissing me softly. "You, my good sir, are Reynar the Relentless, mate of Rowena, and soon to be dromo of two little half-human terrors," she teased. "There is no amount of training to get anyone ready for fatherhood, but I'll be with you every step of the way."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I declared, kissing her back.

Sudden beeping interrupted us, calling her attention to the comm-station in the corner. "Ugh, hold that thought," Rowena sighed, her head dropping back on the bed. She growled as the beeping continued, then she rolled away from me. Grabbing her robe, she pulled it on before sitting in front of the unit and hitting the answer button on the screen.

"It's about time you answered," her sister Evie said playfully. "I was beginning to think your mate was going to keep you in bed all day."

"How'd you know he was here?" Rowena asked, glancing at me. I grinned innocently in return.

"Duh, Ro! How do you think he got there?" Evie shot back. "The UEG certainly wasn't helping him find you, so I did it

for them.”

“You’re the best, Evie,” Rowena told her sister fondly.

“I know. Oh, and you might want to reassure your neighbors. They called the authorities last night. I managed to head them off before I left, but I’m sure Merrylyn and Feli would like to know you’re okay. They thought you were being attacked by a wild animal.” Evie’s tone was full of a smug ribbing as she detailed the neighbors’ concerns with glee. “I’d left the apartment before you two started up so I had no idea, but I was still in the lot waiting on a transport when the officers arrived. They asked where to find your apartment and we talked when they found out I’m your sister.”

“You can’t be serious,” my mate groaned flatly, covering her eyes with her hand.

“I believe it was the screams of ‘Yes! Yes! Oh God! Yes!’ when I opened the door that convinced the officers you were fine,” Evie stated, then laughed. “After that, we closed the door again and they let your neighbors know it wasn’t what they thought, but I’m sure the girls would appreciate knowing you weren’t being mauled by a bear.”

“I hate you, Evie,” Rowena stated without looking up from her hands.

“Love you too, Ro,” Evie replied cheerfully. “The moms expect you and Reynar at the house for Sunday dinner with the family.”

“Kay, see you then,” Rowena hung up, then crawled back in bed with me.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

She looked at me very seriously for a moment before bursting into laughter. “Come here you,” she ordered, pulling me close

for a heated kiss. “If I can’t ever look my neighbors in the eye again without being embarrassed, it might as well be because they think I have a whole menagerie of wild beasts attacking me.”

I was more than happy to help her put that idea into her neighbors’ minds.

EPILOGUE

Brixton

I smiled, reading the short message from Reynar. He'd reunited with his mate only to discover she was carrying his young. It was almost hard to imagine. My big grumpy sibling was going to be a dromo already. I was happy for him. He and my new sister-by-law were spending a few days with her family, then they planned to pack her things and join me here at the Embassy. I looked forward to seeing them again.

It was a blessing that Reynar had agreed to continue at my side. I didn't just want ni karik as my bodyguard. I wanted him as my advisor, my friend, my right-hand male. He and Rowena were all I had now that I'd cut ties with the rest of my family on Acair. I would continue as ambassador for convenience's sake, but that could change in an instant.

I hoped to do as much good for the people of Acair as possible while I could. Especially for the Noxel and the lower castes of Saveet. They were the ones who needed my help. They were the ones who needed a new life away from the sands of Acair. Perhaps I could give them that.

Now if only I could get the nightmares to go away...

COSMIC KISSED

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Love Uncaged

AWOL Alien

Sweet Dreams

Trophy of the Dragon

Dubious Treasure

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A Very Alien Christmas Tree

Dance for Me: A Dark Tale of Beauty and the Beast

The Alien Pirates' Treasure

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charity Wells is a paranormal/sci-fi romance author. A voracious reader and lover of all genres of romance, she happily devours everything from Viking warriors to alien overlords. Her favorites though are reptilian or feline aliens, shapeshifters, and just about anything with wings and/or tails, especially prehensile. She likes strong, muscley males who can be total badasses for, and super sweeties with, their chosen mates. And biting, Charity *really* likes biting.

Charity spends her days working at her local airport, squeezing in as much writing as possible, and taking care of her four minions and the cranky old wolf she married. When she has spare time, she likes to bake novelty cakes, make candy, and every once in a while, do some kind of crafty little project or another.

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