

JARKOTH'S FRAGILE MATE

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I

WILLOW

THIS HAD to be one of my life's most poorly planned decisions.

I shifted on my feet at the shuttle port, waiting to board. I was bound for a remote jungle planet called Omega IV. It had once been the location of a lucrative mining station, but they'd had to shut down the entire operation because of the frequent volcano eruptions.

The planet was now under the protection of the United Planetary Conservation Federation. UPCF's primary goal was to protect primordial planets from those who sought to profit off a planet's natural resources.

The Veskhiri, a species indigenous to Omega IV, had lost most of their females to a mysterious waterborne illness. Their numbers were dwindling because of their lost females, so the UPCF introduced the Midas Breeding Program. It was a voluntary program where willing females of any species could sign on to be partnered with a Veskhiri male for the sole purpose of breeding.

The program paid a monthly sum of ten thousand credits for any female willing to take part. Once they gave birth, they were free to leave Omega IV and leave their child with the Veskhiri father to raise.

I'd only agreed to participate in the program because I was desperate for an escape from my life as it was.

My ex, Jack, had cheated on me a few months ago with a woman ten years my junior. I'd caught them in bed together in

our bedroom on the sheets *I'd* purchased. Things hadn't been great with us before it happened, but I'd never thought Jack would cheat on me. We'd been talking about having children and starting anew on a farming planet.

But now, none of that was happening.

With Jack out of my life for good and nothing to leave behind but a dead-end job, I'd begun unconsciously looking for a way out. The Midas Breeding Program was fairly new, and their advertisements had been all over my data pad for weeks.

On a whim, I'd filled out an application. Their requirements were kind of stringent. I'd even had to go through several security and health screenings to be considered. I was thirty-one and in relatively good health, so I'd decided to go for it.

They immediately responded that they had accepted my application and would pay for my shuttle fare to Omega IV.

The planet was closely guarded by the UPCF so that it wouldn't fall prey to scavengers or pirates looking to make a quick credit off Omega IV's abundant mineral resources.

When I saw the shuttle pull into the docking bay, I breathed a sigh of relief.

It was time to start my new life.



THE FIRST THING I noticed about Omega IV was how freaking hot it was.

The air enveloped my skin like a damp cloth, weighing me down. There were six other human women who'd been on the shuttle with me. They all looked nervous, their eyes darting from side to side as they studied the surrounding jungle.

"Wasn't there supposed to be a guide or something?" one of the women piped up. She had thick honey-blonde hair and a

svelte figure.

“I think so,” another woman answered. “But I don’t see anyone.”

The shuttle had already left, leaving us on our own. They hadn’t allowed us to bring any of our possessions, stating that the Viskheri would provide anything we needed and that a supply shuttle would come once a month with a doctor to monitor our pregnancies and to provide us with modern necessities.

We shifted on our feet, casting wary glances at each other.

“I am to be your guide.”

I let out a small shriek and spun around.

A seven-foot-tall, dark-skinned demon glared down at me.

Thick, coarse black braids covered his head, curving along his skull and ending at his shoulders. He had no nose, just two sharp slashes beneath his eyes that I presumed were his nostrils. His ears were pointed and stuck out from his braids on either side of his head. And he wore nothing but a hide loincloth and a leather band encircling his corded right arm.

His eyes were yellow and set back beneath the prominent crest of his brow; his pupils slit like a cat’s. The arthropod-like mandibles of his brutish face were split with two small horns bracketing his mouth. A jagged scar bisected his left eyebrow, giving him a feral edge—er, even *more* of a feral edge.

His reptilian skin was dark and lightened to a mottled grayish hue toward the center of his body. Clearly defined muscle flexed beneath his oddly colored skin. And an honest to gods *tail* with a black tip in the shape of a spade flicked back and forth behind him.

The other women huddled behind me.

“My name is Willow,” I blurted, holding my hand out. “It’s nice to meet you. We’re the group of women that were sent by the UPCF.”

In times of stress, I tended to become loquacious. Nothing could ease my nerves quite like rambling about nothing. I was

suddenly *very* grateful for the intradermal translator the UPCF had implanted behind my ear.

The demon arched a dark brow.

“I don’t think he knows what that means,” the honey-blonde girl whispered next to me.

“Oh,” I said eloquently. “It means, um, hello in our language.”

The demon slowly raised his hand, and I noticed they were tipped with black *claws*.

“Jarkoth,” he grunted. “I will escort you to our tribe.”

After that succinct statement, Jarkoth turned and strode into the jungle.

After a moment’s hesitation, I followed, and the girls trailed behind me.

We fought to keep up with Jarkoth, whose legs were much longer than ours. As we walked, I couldn’t help but ogle the rippling muscles in his back. The guy was seriously built.

We’d been given little information on the Veskihiri. All I knew was that they were a territorial species that could become violent if their tribes or mates were threatened.

I did *not* want to get on this guy’s bad side. He could probably crush my windpipe with his pinky finger if he wanted to.

We quickened our pace to keep up with his long-legged strides, almost losing one of my shoes when we trekked over a shallow morass.

The jungle was verdant with life. Sunlight shone through the canopy of tall trees above us as we were guided through a tangle of low-hanging vines and plants.

“Do you think you could slow down a little?” I called out. “Some of us can’t keep up.”

I cast a worried glance behind me. Some girls were obviously struggling to keep up. The honey-blonde girl was

helping a curvy brunette out of the mudhole she'd gotten her foot stuck in.

The demon ignored me and kept walking.

“Hey!” I shouted, my ire rising.

I caught up with him—somehow—and grabbed his upper arm. “I said we can’t keep up.”

He whipped around, his mandibles spreading to reveal serrated teeth, yellow eyes flashing with fury.

“Do not touch me, *human*.”

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JARKOTH

THE HUMAN FEMALE with red fur had dared to touch me.

I resisted the urge to fling off her abhorrent touch, a low, clicking growl emanating from my chest. She flinched and fell backward, landing on her ass.

I quashed the flare of guilt within me. I did not feel *sorry* for one of her kind. They were all weak, vapid creatures with no claws and no survival skills.

Why my tribe's leader had put us in the position where we were going to be forced to *breed* with them was something I could not understand. Rakhav was an amiable leader, but we disagreed on certain things. Entering the Midas Breeding program had been his idea to introduce new blood into the tribe.

Our low number of females was affecting the males of our tribe. Without a female of their own to mate with, they became irritated and violent with each other. The males were forced to spend their mating heats alone, away from the tribe.

Those with mates were looked upon with envy. Since I had been mated once before, my mating heats were not as intense as the younger males' heats but were still difficult to bear alone.

But to mate with *humans*? I would rather stick my cock in the mouth of an *ee'yirk*.

Several of the females crowded around the one I'd pushed, making cooing noises of reassurance as they helped her to her

feet. She shot me a withering look from beneath the mass of her curly red fur, her emerald eyes blazing with anger.

My cock twitched beneath my hide covering, which made me angry in return.

“We are almost at the settlement,” I bit out. “Follow or stay behind. It does not matter to me.”

Turning, I stalked off, not waiting for her reply.



WHEN WE REACHED my tribe’s settlement, the human females murmured their relief. The red furred female—*Willow*—had kept her distance the entire way.

Good.

I did not want these females here, nor did I care about their *comfort*.

Rakhav was already waiting for us. He spread his arms in welcome, his fangs glinting in the sunlight.

“Welcome,” he boomed. “I am called Rakhav. The Wazgaru tribe is happy about your arrival.”

The only younglings in the tribe, Varu, and Kaxu, stopped to stare at the females with mystified gazes.

“I know you all must be tired,” Rakhav said, “so I will pair you up with your hosts so that they can acquaint you with our tribe and show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

One by one, Rakhav called out a male member of our tribe to pair up with one of the females. My older brother, Dakhal, was paired up with a female whose fur was the color of sunlight. He had been eager for the females’ arrival and had gladly offered to play host to one.

I had declined to offer my dwelling for one of the females to sleep in. I did not want one of them in my home, eating my food and sleeping in *my* furs.

Rakhav called one of the last females forward.

Willow would be left without a host, which meant she would be joining Rakhav's family in his dwelling tonight. Varu and Kaxu would ply the girl with incessant questions about her home world, ensuring she wouldn't be getting any rest.

"And you will be paired with Jarkoth."

My mandibles went slack.

Had Rakhav just said my name?

Willow stepped forward, shooting me a wary look. I turned to Rakhav who was already looking at me with a placid expression.

"I did not volunteer my dwelling for one of the humans," I grated.

"I know," Rakhav intoned. "I have done so for you."

"I wish to decline."

"I do not accept."

We stared at each other. It was forbidden to question the chieftain of our tribe, but I was wholly against playing host to any human—especially *her*.

"It's all right," Willow said, drawing our gazes. "I don't have to stay with Jarkoth. I can sleep outside."

Irritation rose within me. Would she rather brave the jungle at night than stay in my dwelling? *Vexing female!*

"I will not allow that," Rakhav said, his voice holding an undercurrent of firmness. "You will stay with Jarkoth in his dwelling until you have chosen a breeding mate. And Jarkoth will acquaint you with the jungle and our ways."

Stepping forward, I gritted, "Rakhav—"

He sliced his claws through the air. "It is done, Jarkoth. I will hear no more of it."

Rakhav turned and strode away, his younglings following on his heels. I turned toward Willow, frustration brimming

within me. She crossed her arms over her chest and raised one of the lines of fur above her eyes.

“So, where do you live?”

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WILLOW

SMOKE SNAKED from the fire in front of me and curled into the night air above Jarkoth's dwelling.

The view of the night sky was different from the one back home. It was absent of the miasma of smog that I'd grown accustomed to, free of toxins or pollution from the overpopulated city.

Omega IV's stars shone like opalescent pearls sprinkled around its two moons against a backdrop of velvet black.

It was truly breathtaking.

Too bad I had to share the moment with *him*.

I glared daggers at Jarkoth across the fire. He had been sharpening his spear for over an hour, ignoring my existence entirely.

A few of his braids had fallen over his prominent brow as he worked, his yellow eyes narrowed in concentration. I couldn't deny that he was... *arresting*. Beautiful wouldn't be the correct adjective to use for him. No, his facial features were too harsh for that, but he exuded an air of raw primality that I couldn't help but admire.

Confidence had never been an arena I excelled in. When I'd first met Jack, it'd taken me several weeks to work up the courage to even *talk* to him. Now that I was on a foreign planet surrounded by males who sought to procreate with me, I needed to be more straightforward about what I wanted.

And my first trial toward that goal would be winning over the grumpy alien demon who seemed set upon disliking me.

It wasn't my fault that Rakhav had foisted me onto him. I'd tried several times to start up a conversation with him, but he'd stonewalled me each time. I didn't know what had crawled up his butt, but he shouldn't be taking it out on me.

If he was that adamant about hating me, I would do the adult thing and communicate my feelings to him.

"You're being an asshole."

Whoops. So much for being an adult.

His head whipped up, scowling. "A what?"

"Ass," I repeated slowly, "hole. It means you're being mean."

"Mean," he echoed in a mocking tone of voice. "You talk like a youngling."

My face heated. "I don't know what you have against me, but I've done nothing to you."

He grunted, his eyes returning to his spear. "It is not what *you* have done, but what your species has done."

"Oh," I said lamely. "Well, you can't lump all humans together. Each one of us has different personalities and motivations."

"You are all the same."

I frowned. "That's not fair. I don't think all the Veskhiri are the same."

"How magnanimous of you," he said acerbically. "But I will not be swayed to like your species simply because you have something we need."

I blinked. "Something you need?"

He turned to me, the firelight turning his eyes golden, slitted pupils expanding. "Your cunt."

Unbidden, I felt a pulse of heat in my lower belly. I narrowed my eyes, ignoring the traitorous coil of arousal

within me. “You don’t have to be rude,” I grumbled. “It’s not like I wanted to pair up with the biggest asshole in the tribe.”

He shot me a scathing look. “Then perhaps you should find another one of our males to *pair up* with.”

“Maybe I will.”

His hands tightened on his spear, his body tensing. “Do whatever you like, *human*.”

I resisted the urge to pick up the clay cup I’d been drinking out of and hurl it at his head. Instead, I laid down on the pallet of furs he’d given me and gave him my back.

What a jerk!

I knew if I went to Rhakav in the morning and asked him to put me with another male, it would give Jarkoth exactly what he wanted. Well, I wasn’t going to do that. If he was so adamant about disliking me simply because I was a human, I was going to prove him wrong.

His grumpy guy routine wasn’t going to make me tap out.

Smirking, I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the blissful escape of sleep.



THE FOLLOWING DAY, I sat with the other women I’d arrived on Omega IV with.

We were crowded around a fire that Dakhal had made for us. Dakhal had been paired up with the honey-blonde woman I’d talked to when we first arrived. Her name was Maia, and I was surprised to learn that she came from the same city I’d grown up in.

“Dakhal is going to take me hunting today,” she said, scooping another helping of the pulpy fruit we’d been given into her mouth. “I’m looking forward to it. He’s been really sweet to me.”

I smiled, ignoring the stab of envy I felt. Why couldn't I have been paired up with Dakhal?

"That sounds fun," I said. "Jarkoth left before I woke up, so I don't know what's on the agenda for us today."

I had a feeling that Jarkoth would remain conveniently absent for most of the day just to avoid talking to me.

"Have any of you picked a breeding mate yet?"

We looked toward the curvy brunette who'd spoken. I'd learned that her name was Isla.

Almost all of the girls shook their heads. Maia remained silent next to me.

"I've already agreed to be Kuvari's," a girl named Ellie piped. She was small, with long black hair, olive skin, and dark eyes.

"I don't think Lorvhak likes me," another girl named Scarlett said, tucking a lock of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. "He's really quiet."

"Well, it's only been a day," I said, smiling at her. "There's plenty of time to get to know each other."

"Yeah, you're right," Scarlett said, giving me a tentative smile.

I turned to Maia and gently prodded her with my elbow, giving her a wry smirk. "You and Dakhal, huh?"

She grinned, flushing. "I like him, but we haven't agreed to be breeding mates."

I nodded. "Well, maybe you'll get more of a chance to talk about it with him today."

"Maybe," she replied, her blue eyes gleaming with excitement.

I turned, catching sight of Jarkoth disappearing into the tree line.

Standing, I set down my clay bowl and turned toward Maia. "I'll see you later tonight. I have to talk with Jarkoth

about something.”

She nodded. “See you later, Willow.”

After waving goodbye to the other girls, I sprinted after Jarkoth, worried I’d lose him. He walked so damn *fast*.

When I finally caught up with him, I called out, “Hey, slow down.”

He stiffened, coming to an abrupt halt. When he turned to face me, I couldn’t help but flinch. He looked furious, and the long hunting spear he held only added to his menacing demeanor.

“What are you doing?” he asked slowly.

I shrugged. “I wanted to see what you were up to. You’re my host, so you’re supposed to show me the ropes.”

He crossed his arms over his broad chest, giving me a flat look. “Go back, human. I do not need the burden of caring for you while I see to my duties.”

I brightened. “Duties? What do you have to do?”

He huffed impatiently. “I must check the traps that my tribe brothers and I set yesterday. We are having a feast tonight to celebrate your arrival and *acceptance* into the tribe, so we will need much meat to feed everyone.”

He’d sneered at the word *acceptance* as if it were something foul.

“Well, I can help,” I said stubbornly. “Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it.”

Jarkoth’s gaze raked over me, making my skin pebble with awareness. I was dressed in the same clothes I’d worn yesterday: sage green shorts, a black tank top, and hiking boots.

“No,” he growled.

He turned and strode away, leaving me with my mouth agape.

JARKOTH

THE SOUND of snapping branches and muttered curses followed me through the jungle.

Willow had followed me despite my refusal to allow her to come.

Stubborn female.

She was not quiet, and I became increasingly irritated by her presence. But not just her presence—her scent. I had not been able to sleep last night with that maddening scent permeating the air in my dwelling. It smelled like the nocturnal *yuvixi* flower after bloom, sweet and crisp. It met my nostrils now, making me grind my fangs together in agitation.

Why could she not have remained with the tribe? It was dangerous for a soft creature like herself to accompany me. She had no fangs, no claws, and no weapon.

All she would be doing was slowing me down. I would have to ensure that no harm befell her while I checked the traps.

“How far away is it?” she called out.

“Fifty *duvecs* toward the *Shavhaji* Mountains,” I replied tonelessly.

“Right, *duvecs*.” She was silent for a moment. “What’s a *duvec*?”

I sighed and came to a halt. She bumped into me, her soft curves pressing against my back muscles. The brief contact

made my cock thicken.

It is purely instinctual, I reasoned. I had been without a mate for many lunar cycles, and that was why my body kept reacting the way it did to Willow.

Turning, I found her standing close to me. I looked down at her, hoping my expression conveyed disdain, not arousal.

Little dots adorned the bridge of her pert nose and cheeks. Her green eyes were wide and bright; her plush lips parted as she panted from exertion. She'd braided her mane of red fur, but some pieces had come loose, curling around her rounded ears and framing her face.

She differed from a Veskhiri female. Our females were not soft and pale, nor did they have eyes the color of the jungle after a fresh rain. But I found her... pleasing.

I gnashed my fangs at the direction of my thoughts. I did not want a pale, defenseless *human* as my mate.

I needed to sever my strange attraction to her before it deepened.

"You must return to the tribe," I gritted. "It is not safe for you to follow me."

"I can keep up," she persisted, poking out her succulent lower lip. "You don't have to *protect* me."

"Listen to me, *human*...."

I trailed off, canting my head. I'd heard a snapping sound somewhere in the distance.

Veskhiri males had naturally heightened hearing abilities. We were bred to be hunters, and our women were just as fierce. But Willow was not, which made it all the more dangerous for her to be with me while I checked my traps.

"Willow," I said in a low voice, "get behind me."

She stiffened, her green eyes warily darting around our surroundings. "What is it? Did you hear something?"

Sidling up to me, she placed her hand on my upper arm. I tried to focus on listening instead of the feel of her small, soft

hand on my bicep.

There it was—another snapping sound, closer this time.

I took my spear into both hands and set my feet apart.

This was the exact reason I did not want Willow to follow me. My protective instincts roared to the surface, pulled forth by the potent scent of her fear.

Willow's nails suddenly dug into my hide, her breath hitching.

I looked up, tensing when I saw what had frightened her.

A *vi'erlak* watched us from a nearby tall tree. Its quills were spread in warning, the aposematic slashes through each quill glowing red in warning. The *vi'erlak* carried a paralyzing agent in their venom that could incapacitate even the strongest male Veskhiri.

It snapped its mandibles and let out a low growl, venomous saliva welling on its fangs. Its rotund body shivered, quills puffing out further. Even though it was small, one rake of its claws could mean death for someone as small as Willow.

I hurled my spear toward it when it lunged, hoping to lance its heart in midair. My spear struck its quills, several of them snapping off. It let out an enraged snarl and fell to the jungle floor. While it flailed on the ground, temporarily stunned, I grabbed Willow's hand and pulled her forward. I scooped up my spear from where it had embedded itself in the ground next to the writhing *vi'erlak*.

We ran through the jungle, leaves and vines snapping against my hide.

“I-I can't run that fast, Jarkoth!”

I slowed and swept Willow into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck, burying her face in the hollow of my throat. I ran, my feet pounding against the jungle floor. I still clutched my spear in one hand, ready to throw it if need be.

The low, rabid snarls of the *vi'erlak* echoed behind us.

To make matters more difficult, it began raining. Thunder boomed in the distance as I ran, Willow making small, soft noises, conveying her fear.

I knew of a nearby cave hidden behind a waterfall, so I altered my course.

When I heard the crash of water against rock, I followed it.

The waterfall came into view. I sprinted toward it and clambered over the slippery rocks with Willow still in my arms.

“Hold your breath,” I bit out.

Willow squeezed her eyes shut as I plunged us beneath the hard fall of water. She let out a gasp of air when we reached the inside of the cave. I set her on her feet, my chest heaving. We were both drenched, Willow’s coverings sticking to every curve of her small body.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, leaning down and placing her hands on her knees. “I-I can’t believe that just happened.”

“They are nocturnal animals,” I said, placing my spear on the cave’s craggy ground. “It is strange that one was out during the day.”

Perhaps they had been drawn due to the arrival of the human females. It couldn’t be denied that humans made the perfect prey with their soft bodies and insufficient survival skills.

Willow hugged herself. “What do we do now?”

“We wait until the rain stops. It will wash away our scent so that the *vi’erlak* cannot follow us home.”

Home. Did Willow even consider our tribe her home?

“Okay,” she said. “I just wish we would have brought some food. I’m starving.”

My protective instincts flared again, and I felt an intense *need* to satisfy her hunger as soon as possible. That did not bode well. Already my body thought of her as our mate.

Banishing the thought of matehood from my mind, I turned and began untying my hide covering.

“W-what are you doing?” she asked, her eyes rounded.

I frowned at her horrified expression. “My covering is wet. I am going to stretch it out on the rocks to let it dry. You should do the same.”

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WILLOW

JARKOTH'S COCK WAS HUGE.

And... *alien*.

I stared in rapt fascination as he stretched his loincloth out on a flat rock.

His cock was the same alluring dark shade of the skin on his shoulders and legs. He was hairless, leaving nothing to the imagination. The head was double-ridged, and at the base of his shaft were two tiny tubules on either side. A dark tapered, fleshy appendage about two inches long in length sat at the top of his shaft and looked... *wet* with little black tendrils wreathing it.

I swallowed thickly, sitting down on a rock as far away from him as I could. How did that thing even fit *inside* someone?

Jarkoth turned. "You should remove your coverings and lay them out to dry."

"No way," I practically shrieked. "I'm not getting naked with you watching."

His mandibles twitched. "Why?"

"B-because I don't want you seeing me naked."

"Nudity bothers you this much?"

I huffed. "Not nudity, it's just... we're not *together* like that."

“Like that,” he repeated flatly. “You mean we are not mated.”

“Um, where I come from, we call it dating, but yeah.”

“Humans are strange creatures,” he muttered, sitting on his loincloth.

I tried and failed not to look between his legs. His thick cock was at half-mast between his thighs; the upper appendage was now erect above his shaft. The traitorous throb of heat in my pussy made me bite my lower lip between my teeth.

Was I really getting turned on by the sight of an alien cock?

I’d expected to sleep with one of them to make a baby, but I’d never thought about the actual *act* of making a baby. Now that I saw what I was up against, it was hard not to feel intimidated.

The Veskhiri males were so much bigger than us, and if all of them had monster cocks like Jarkoth’s...

There were going to be a lot of limping ladies soon.

Averting my gaze, I hugged myself and rubbed my upper arms. Now that the adrenaline in my system was waning, I realized how cold I was. I was practically vibrating with how hard I shook.

“Willow.”

I looked up, startled. “Y-y-yes?”

“You are cold,” Jarkoth rumbled. “Remove your coverings and come sit next to me. I will share my body heat.”

I cast a wary glance toward the waterfall. I guess it wasn’t like anyone was going to come traipsing in. And I *was* cold...

Getting to my feet, I walked over to where Jarkoth sat on the rocks. With shaking hands, I began to undress. I kept my bra and panties on, too embarrassed to take them off.

Once I’d laid my clothes flat on the rocks next to Jarkoth, I looked up.

He was looking at the waterfall, his mandibles clenched.

I couldn't help the sting of hurt in my heart. Did he really hate me so much that he couldn't even look at me? I knew he had a thing against humans, but I thought that our near-death experience had drawn us at least a *tiny* bit closer.

Tentatively, I sat on my clothes and hugged myself. I was so damn cold. My teeth were on the verge of chattering.

“*Willow*,” Jarkoth rumbled. “You are cold.”

“I-I'm all right,” I stammered, remaining stubborn.

I didn't want Jarkoth to think of me as a nuisance or *weak*. For some reason, it mattered what he thought about me. He'd been nothing but a grouch since I'd arrived, but there was something about him I felt drawn to.

“Please, Willow,” he rasped. “Let me hold you and provide you with warmth.”

“Well,” I said softly, “all right.”

I practically scrambled into his lap, tucking my nose into the hollow of his throat.

He felt *heavenly*. His big body radiated warmth, seeping into my skin in comforting waves. His skin smelled like smoke and spice, which made my mouth flood with saliva. A low, rumbling, clicking sound emanated from his chest.

“I did not realize how susceptible your kind were to cold,” he said in a low voice. “Your kind is so fragile....”

He pinched one of my curls between his clawed fingers, rubbing it. “You're soft everywhere. It is strange.”

“What a way to compliment a girl,” I mumbled against his skin. “You know, I think you're strange, too.”

He tensed. “What do you mean?”

“Not in how you look,” I clarified, “but in how you act. I think the whole grumpy alien thing is a front.”

“A *front*?” he repeated in his rumbling tone.

“Um, like a façade—something you use to keep others away.”

He grunted but didn't respond. We lapsed into silence for a few moments.

I wondered if something had happened to him in the past to make him dislike humans so much. From what I'd gleaned from the UPCF documents I'd been sent, the Veskhiri had even mated with humans when Omega IV had still been a mining planet. Did he have some kind of vendetta against us?

“Jarkoth,” I said softly. “Why don't you want a breeding mate?”

He let out a deep breath that ruffled my damp curls. “We should sleep. I do not think the rain will be stopping anytime soon.”

I nodded. Pushing him to divulge something personal wouldn't be right, so I let the subject drop. “All right.”

Jarkoth arranged us on our clothes so that we were spooning but kept our lower halves apart.

Eventually, I succumbed to the insistent tug of exhaustion.

6

JARKOTH

A THROBBING ache in my cock roused me.

Willow was still asleep in my arms, her ass pressed against my stiff length.

My fangs had lengthened in my sleep. I snapped my mandibles to ease the ache and let out a low growl, pulling away from Willow's delectable body.

My mating heat.

It was not due for many moon cycles, but my cock stood upright between my legs, fluids weeping from my slit and tubules. My sac had grown laden with seed, the weight almost unbearable.

Digging my claws into the rock next to Willow, I snarled.

Willow opened her eyes, blearily glancing around the cave. "Jarkoth?"

I distanced myself from her soft body and embedded my claws into the rock beneath my hips. "Stay back," I growled. "My mating heat... I think you have triggered it."

She sat up, causing her sweet scent to waft toward me. My cock pulsed with the need to bury it in her cunt.

"Stay back," I bit out, my voice almost unrecognizable. "I cannot control myself right now, Willow. And if you touch me...."

Willow's green eyes widened. "Is it... is it that bad?"

I gave a sharp nod.

“It will not end until I have slaked my need.” I gritted my teeth against a wave of searing heat in my groin. “It will become painful if I do not tend to the urges of my body.”

She visibly swallowed. “Should I... go get help?”

“No,” I ground out. “The *vi’erlak* could be lying in wait. I do not want you venturing out without my protection.”

Her green eyes were rapt on my cock. It *throbbed* under her pretty gaze, as if calling out to her.

She licked her lips. I was helpless not to follow the small dart of her pink tongue against her flesh with my eyes. I wondered how that soft little tongue would feel on my shaft.

Groaning, I tried to banish the forbidden thought from my head, but it was difficult when she was only a few feet away and looking at me with her hungry gaze.

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do?” she asked, her voice husky. “I-I could... help you. It wouldn’t be a big deal, Jarkoth.”

I clenched my jaw. The stone beneath my claws crumbled. Did she know the effect her words had on me?

Enthralling female!

“It is too much of a risk,” I grated. “A bond could form between us if I am not careful.”

She stood, and I tried not to stare at her breasts beneath her thin white covering. I could see the outline of her pert nipples. They were the same light pink as her lips.

“Then we’ll be careful. How do we avoid forming a bond?”

I made a rough noise. “I cannot bite you or spill my seed inside of you.”

Her lips parted with a soft breath. “Well... we can do that. It would be easy.”

“*Easy?*” I said gruffly. “Maybe for humans, but for the Veskhiri, sharing a mating heat is only done with someone you are prepared to bond with.”

She worried her lower lip between her blunt teeth before stating, “I’m not Veskhiri. Maybe we could avoid it somehow since I’m human?”

“You cannot *avoid* a mating bond,” I bit out.

She frowned. “Well, I’m not just going to sit here and let you suffer, Jarkoth!”

Before I could reply, she began taking off her coverings. My mouth went dry as she revealed her body to me. Her small breasts were as beautiful as I’d imagined. They would fit between my claws perfectly. And her sex...

I let out a low growl. “*What* are you doing?”

A thatch of soft-looking red fur adorned her sex, leading down to—

My cock jumped, my sac drawing taut. Her tiny slit was dewy with arousal and fuck—her scent. The cave filled with her natural pheromones, honing my body for mating.

“*Willow.*” I looked away, squeezing my eyes shut as I inwardly fought my intense need for her. “I do not want to mate with a *human.*”

“You’re such a stubborn asshole.”

My eyes snapped open, and I let out a low snarl, whipping my head around to face her. “Careful, human. The Veskhiri are not as docile as your precious UPCF has made us out to be.”

She was standing just in front of me now, her pink-tipped breasts inches from my mouth.

If I leaned forward, I could take one into my—

No!

She snorted. “As if I could ever mistake *you* for being docile,” she muttered. “You’ve been cruel to me since day one.”

“Cruel?” I grated. “You are talking like a youngling again.”

“I’m not a kid!” she pouted, stamping her small foot.

“And you act like one, too.”

“I do not!”

“Stubborn *female!*”

Before Willow could bite out another retort, her mouth was crushed to mine. Her small face fit perfectly between my mandibles, my horns brushing the soft skin of her cheeks. She moaned into my mouth, and I took advantage, sweeping my forked tongue inside. I pulled her onto my lap, clutching her lithe body close.

My hand slid down her flat stomach, my fingers caressing the soft patch of fur above her sex. She let out a tiny whimper when my claws grazed a hard little bump.

“What is this?” I husked against her lips.

“My clit,” she breathed. “It’s how—*oh*—it’s how human females achieve orgasm.”

When my claws slid over her slit, I felt a gush of wetness.

I growled, delving my tongue back into her mouth, licking her blunt teeth, and relishing in our differences. She did the same, sliding her flat tongue along one of my fangs. My cock pulsed with desire between my legs.

When we pulled apart, her lips were stained red with her blood. The sight nearly sent me to my knees.

“Willow—”

“Shut up,” she groaned, leaning forward for another kiss. “Don’t ruin this.”

She smashed her mouth to mine again, making me groan. I pulled her closer, savoring the sweet press of her body against mine.

And finally succumbed to my instincts.

WILLOW

WAS THIS REALLY HAPPENING?

Jarkoth's cock rubbed between my thighs, inches away from my pussy. I bucked my hips, needing friction. I felt like I would die if he didn't get his cock into me that very second.

His clawed hands curved over my ass, hitching me closer.

"Inside," I moaned. "Inside me—*now*."

Jarkoth growled against my lips. He shifted me on his lap so that I was straddling him backward, spreading my legs with his knees. His cock slid against my cunt, the tendrils around the appendage at the top of his cock undulating against my wetness.

His claws dug into my skin, keeping me in place. He leaned in, scenting my throat.

"You smell so sweet," he rumbled. "I want to *breed* you."

"Fuck—yes," I moaned, arching my back.

My breath hitched when I felt his cockhead nudge against my opening. I wiggled my hips, and the broad head sunk between my swollen lips.

"*Willow!*" he bellowed, his voice rebounding off the cave walls. "Your hot cunt is sucking me in."

The stretch brought with it a bite of pain. His double-ridged head slid against my walls as he wedged himself inside of me. The tendrils surrounding his upper appendage writhed against my hole, the feeling slick and forbidden.

Just when I thought I couldn't feel fuller, he began to *move*. He lifted me under my arms as if I were rag doll and began driving his hips upward. I could do nothing but hold onto his forearms as he pounded his cock into me, low grunts accompanying each thrust.

His fingers slid over my breasts, pinching my nipples between his knuckles as he fucked me from behind. I cried out each time he bottomed out, feeling stretched beyond my limit.

The position I was in didn't give me access to my clit, so I gritted my teeth against the building pleasure I couldn't see to completion. He clasped me to his chest and lifted me until just the head of his cock was inside of me.

"My clit," I panted. "Touch my clit."

"Do you want to come, Willow?" he rasped against my ear.

I nodded fervently. "Yes!"

When I felt the pointed end of his tail slide up my leg, I let out a small gasp. It twined around my leg, prehensile and sinuous. He pressed the flat end of his tail against my clit and rubbed it back and forth as he began lowering me back on his cock.

I felt split open, my legs splayed wide over his thick thighs as he sank back inside my cunt.

"Then *come*," he rumbled, driving his hips between my legs.

Everything tightened below my navel, the thin thread that held back my orgasm drawn taut. His cockhead pummeled the mouth of my womb, reaming me open with the sheer brutality of a beast in a rut.

Heat gathered at the apex of my thighs as his tail slid wetly over my clit, the edge of it catching and causing a sting of pain that pushed me over the edge. My orgasm seized me in an unyielding grip, sending a cataclysmic wave of pleasure washing over me.

A high-pitched scream tore from my throat as I came, my nails digging into the skin of his forearms.

“Willow!” he growled, his voice unrecognizable. “You’re making me—*spill!*”

At the last second, he pulled out, his cum shooting across the cave floor between our legs.

It went on and on, the ribbons of pearlescent fluid lashing against the ground as he roared his pleasure. I barely registered the pinpricks of pain against my hips as his claws sank into my skin.

I rode out the aftershocks of my orgasm against his shaft, whimpering.

As we both came down from the high of our orgasms, our panting breaths filled the cave. He carefully relinquished his hold on my hips, and I winced. I looked down, warmth suffusing my belly when I saw he’d drawn blood.

“I’ve hurt you,” he said in a low voice.

“S’ok,” I murmured dazedly. “Doesn’t hurt.”

He huffed and lifted me, gently setting me next to him on the rock. The cool, craggy surface soothed the ache in my womb somewhat.

He stood, his cock still hard. The tendrils on his upper appendage coiled, hugging the base of his shaft. He grunted, palming his cock.

“It is not over.”

As if I were in a trance, I stood and bent over the rock, presenting my pussy for fucking.

He made a rough noise. “You have the prettiest cunt I have ever beheld, Willow.”

I whined, pressing my ass out further, hoping it would entice him. I’d never been this horny before in my life. I wanted to be filled again and feel his tendrils against the most intimate part of my body.

“Again,” I said hoarsely.

He let out a dark chuckle. “Demanding female.”

Before I could debase myself any further, he mounted me.

We didn't stop for hours; after a certain point, I stopped counting my orgasms.

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JARKOTH

FIRELIGHT DANCED over Willow's delicate features.

When we'd finally returned to camp after hours of mating, we'd gone our separate ways.

Willow had helped the other human females prepare for the feast while I'd returned to my dwelling to repair my spear. While I'd worked, I could not help but remember how Willow's tight cunt had felt around my cock. Her tiny slit had eagerly accepted my length, drenching me in her fluids and pheromones.

I'd foregone washing just to keep her scent on me and thought that the animalistic need I felt for her would slowly abate once my mating heat was over.

It had not.

It was even worse now. I wanted to stand up and go to her, throw her over my shoulder, and take her back to my dwelling for more mating.

But I could not. The mating heat had been the only thing that tethered us at that moment. Now that we were back with my tribe, things had to return to the way they were before.

I'd been staring at her for most of the night, committing every part of her to my memory. She had let down her red fur after we'd gotten back, the curled ends falling just below her pert breasts—breasts that I knew were tipped with the most mouthwatering shade of pink.

Even now, my cock began hardening beneath my hide covering. She laughed at something one of her female friends said, her green eyes sparkling with mirth.

The ache in my chest intensified. I tightened my claws around the small bone I had been whittling.

“You look unwell, brother.”

Dakhal sat next to me, a hunk of cooked meat between his claws.

“I am well,” I said roughly.

I watched as Varu and Kaxu bounced over to Willow. They presented her with a strip of hide, impish smiles adorning their small faces. Willow bent down, allowing them to tie the hide around her eyes, effectively blinding her.

I knew at once what game they wanted to play with her. It was a game I’d played myself as a youngling. She was led forward by Kaxu, stumbling slightly. Once she was a good distance away from the fire, Varu began spinning her in small circles to throw off her sense of direction.

Willow laughed and went along with it, her small hands grasping sightlessly for the younglings as they darted away.

“You have not taken your eyes off of her since she arrived.”

My gaze snapped to my brother. “What?”

He inclined his head to where Willow played with the younglings. “If you wish to mate with her, you should.”

“I want no such thing,” I bit out, incensed that my brother could see right through me. “I am only playing host as commanded by Rakhav.”

Dakhal shrugged and bit a chunk from his meat, chewing thoughtfully. “I am going to mate Maia.”

“You are sure of this?” I asked, looking askance at my brother.

He nodded, his yellow eyes gleaming from the firelight. “She has accepted my proposal, and we are to be breeding

mates. She will give me fine, healthy younglings.”

“But she is human,” I gritted.

“I do not care,” Dakhal said. “She is mine, human or not, and I will have no other.”

I frowned, my gaze returning to where Willow was playing with the younglings.

One of the unmated males in my tribe, F’Jahl, was at Willow’s side, his hands on her hips as he spun her in gentle circles while she laughed.

I felt the bone I’d been whittling crack between my claws. Searing jealousy rose within me, nearly choking me with anger.

Willow was *mine*. I bared my teeth and let out a low, clicking growl.

Dakhal let out an amused huff. “You want to claim her.”

“I do not want her,” I snarled, throwing the now broken bone into the fire. “I do not want a *human*.”

Ignoring Dakhal’s bemused expression, I got to my feet and stalked back toward my dwelling.



WHEN WILLOW RETURNED HOURS LATER, I tensed on my pallet of furs. Her natural sweet scent was mingled with smoke and *F’Jahl*. I tamped down a possessive growl.

It was none of my concern if she wished to mate with F’Jahl. She had come to our planet for a breeding mate, and he was one of the youngest males in our tribe. It only made sense that she wished to mate with him...

I dug my claws into the fur beside my hips, shredding it.

“You’re awake,” Willow whispered. “Where did you go? I thought you were going to stay for the feast.”

“You did not seem to notice my absence,” I said coldly. “You were too busy playing *games*.”

She was quiet for a moment. “We should talk about what happened in the cave, Jarkoth.”

“I do not wish to talk about it. I was only acting on my instincts.”

Huffing, Willow crawled over to my side of the dwelling, bringing her sweet scent with her. I did not look at her. If I did, I would be lost to her beauty again.

“Why are you acting like a jerk again?”

“I am not *acting* any way,” I said through clenched teeth. “You humans perceive things differently from us.”

“Uh-huh,” she said drily. “So you’re really not going to talk to me about what happened?”

“No,” I said gruffly. “There is nothing to talk about.”

I heard her breath hitch and felt as if my chest had been lanced.

“Whatever,” she said hollowly.

She turned and tore open the flap to my dwelling, darting into the night.

Where was she going? The jungle was even more dangerous at night.

I got to my feet and went after her, catching sight of her just before she disappeared into the tree line. Letting out a frustrated growl, I followed the trail of her sweet scent.

WILLOW

I *HATED* JARKOTH.

He was the biggest jerk on Omega IV and possibly the entire galaxy.

I'd stupidly thought things had changed between us since we shared his mating heat in the cave. But just like I'd been wrong about Jack, I'd been wrong about Jarkoth.

He didn't want to be breeding mates with me. He didn't want to be near me, period.

I ignored the stabbing sensation in my heart and veered left, stomping through the jungle without a destination in mind. I just needed to get away for a few minutes before I returned to his dwelling because, in truth, all I wanted to do was kiss him.

For reasons unbeknownst to me, I was attracted to the one male in the entire tribe who didn't want a breeding mate. I huffed at my stupidity, trampling over alien greenery as I trekked deeper into the jungle.

The jungle was eerily quiet at night. I turned, glancing back at the way I'd come.

Had I turned left or right?

A low creak made me spin around.

"Hello?" I called out. "Who's there? Jarkoth?"

Something big came barreling out from behind a copse of trees, headed straight for me. I screamed and bolted in the

other direction. Before I could get more than twenty feet away, I was tackled from behind.

I hit the ground with a harsh thud that knocked the breath from my lungs.

“*Female.*”

A Veskhiri I didn't recognize pinned my arms to the ground and lowered his head, scenting my throat. I turned my head away, grimacing. He made a strained clicking noise that turned my veins to ice.

“Who *are* you?” I cried out, trying to buck him off. “Get off of me!”

I grappled for control, but he effortlessly overpowered me. Spreading his mandibles, the Veskhiri let out a low hiss, sending spittle flying.

Terror seizing me in a vise-like grip, I thrust my knee up and slammed it into his genitals. The Veskhiri let out a low snarl of pain, and his grip on my wrists loosened.

Frantically, I wriggled out from beneath him. I rolled over and crawled away on all fours, my breath coming in panicked gasps. When I felt long fingers wreath my ankle, I let out an ear-piercing scream.

In the distance, I could hear something crashing through the jungle.

Jarkoth appeared moments later; his face contorted with fury. When he saw me trying to yank my ankle away from the other Veskhiri, he let out a ground-rumbling roar.

“*Mine,*” the Veskhiri hissed. “I found her!”

Jarkoth leaped toward the Veskhiri holding my ankle captive, fangs bared, and mandibles spread.

He landed on top of the Veskhiri attacking me, grabbing his braids, and yanking his head back.

“*My female,*” he snarled, smashing the Veskhiri's face to the ground.

I managed to twist away, rolling to my back and sitting up to watch in abject horror as Jarkoth rent the Veskhiri's braids from his scalp.

The Veskhiri let out an ear-splitting cry and scabbled away from Jarkoth, limbs bending inhumanly.

Heart in my throat, I grabbed the nearest thing to me—a large rock—and hurled it at the Veskhiri's writhing form. It hit his head with a crack, his neck snapping sideways.

“Willow!”

Jarkoth ran to me and shoved me behind him.

The felled Veskhiri whimpered, making odd, broken clicking noises as he rose to his feet, staggering backward. Dark blood spilled down his forehead, sluicing down his mandibles. The place where I'd clocked him with the rock was welling with blood, too.

He glared at us with hatred burning in his yellow eyes. With one last hiss, he turned and fled into the jungle.

Jarkoth turned to me, his chest heaving. I whimpered, throwing myself into his arms. He clutched me close, nuzzling into my curls.

“Willow,” he rasped. “Are you unharmed?”

I nodded. “What the fuck was that?”

“A Veskhiri from another tribe. He was in the throes of his mating heat.”

Pulling back, I looked at him with bewilderment. “But you never acted like *that*.”

He grunted. “It affects each male differently. The lack of females among our species has driven some males to madness.”

Frowning, I pressed my cheek to his chest. “No wonder the UPCF introduced the breeding program.”

“We must return to my tribe,” he said. “There are more dangers that lurk in the darkness of the jungle.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “But I think that asshole twisted my ankle.”

I tried putting pressure on my foot but sucked in a sharp breath when I was met with stinging pain. Wobbling precariously on one foot, I braced my hands on Jarkoth’s shoulders for balance.

“If you could just put your arm around me—”

I let out a startled yelp as Jarkoth swept me into his arms and began his trek back toward the settlement.



“I WILL HAVE our healer look at it at first light.”

Jarkoth gently set my foot down, resting it on some wadded-up furs. We were back in the safety of his dwelling. He had started a small fire, and the warmth of it felt nice against my skin.

“Thank you,” I said softly. “And thank you for saving me... again.”

He grunted and turned, throwing more kindling into the banked fire.

As the firelight caressed his inhuman profile, I thought of the first time I had sat with him in his dwelling. He had said that all humans are the same. It again made me wonder if he harbored anger against humans for a reason unknown to me.

He’d already saved my life twice, and now he was tending to my wounds. There was a softness in him I didn’t think he readily showed to others. And for him to be showing it to *me* spoke volumes.

“Jarkoth,” I said. “Why do you hate humans?”

He didn’t turn to face me, staring into the dancing flames. “Humans are a destructive species. They have no empathy for things they believe are theirs by right.”

My lips twisted into a regretful smile. “I suppose you’re right about that. But to hate all of us because of a generalization seems unfair.”

“Unfair,” he repeated tonelessly. “That is not a word the Veskhiri use.”

“What word would you use?” I asked weakly.

“Logical.”

I let out a strained huff of laughter. “But logic and fairness are mutually exclusive.”

He didn’t look away from the fire, his mien hardening. “The humans polluted our jungle. They sought only to take, and once they left, our people suffered the consequences of their selfish endeavors.”

I swallowed thickly, remaining silent.

“The females began dying, and our birthrates severely decreased. When the UPCF came, we were on the verge of extinction.” He finally turned to me, his eyes like molten gold. “Do you now think my summation of your species is *fair*, Willow?”

I didn’t blink, afraid my burning eyes would give too much away if I did. “But you can’t hate all of us, right?”

The silence that followed was fraught with tension.

“No,” he finally said. “Not all of you.”

Warmth suffused my chest, and I flushed. I laid back on my furs and stared at the view of the night sky the hole at the top of Jarkoth’s dwelling offered.

Even though Jarkoth remained wary of humans, I knew I had gained his trust that evening.

IO

JARKOTH

“YOU MUST HAVE PATIENCE, WILLOW.”

She huffed and gracelessly stabbed her spear into the water once more.

“Damnit,” she hissed. “I missed again.”

She had been begging me to teach her how to *fish* the Veskhiri way. I’d finally capitulated and had fashioned her a smaller replica of my spear to use.

I stood from where I’d been sitting on the embankment and waded over to her in the shallow part of the river. I positioned myself behind her and placed my hands over hers on the spear.

“You are too eager,” I murmured in her ear. “Wait.”

The little strips of fur over her eyes drew together in concentration. This close, I could smell her unique sweet scent. It invaded all my senses, making my cock harden. I carefully kept my hips away from her.

A shiver of movement beneath the water made me still. “Now, Willow,” I urged quietly.

She drove the tip of her little spear into the water, sending a spray of water upwards.

“I did it!” she exclaimed, yanking her spear back.

The tiniest *se’lia* wriggled helplessly on the tip of her spear.

“So you did,” I said. “Well done.”

She grinned, holding up her catch. “Now I’m an honorary Veskhiri, huh?”

“You are my fierce huntress,” I purred, tightening my arms around her.

She giggled, and I could not resist nuzzling into her fiery fur.

Her breath caught. We both stilled, the susurrations of the river becoming deafening.

“*Jarkoth*,” she whispered.

Slowly, she turned her head and looked up at me. Our breaths became intermingled, the ache in my cock intensifying. My fangs throbbed with need as I gazed down the pale column of her throat. Her eyes darkened, becoming the color of the jungle at night. The delectable scent of her arousal met my nostrils.

She leaned in, her plush lips parting.

“*No*,” I hissed, abruptly pulling away.

“Wait—*Jarkoth!*”

I stalked to the shore, ignoring the traitorous throb in my chest. When she grabbed my bicep to stop me, I shrugged her off. “I cannot.”

“Why not?” she asked, throwing down her spear. “Don’t you want me?”

“*Yes*,” I growled, whipping around to face her. “That is the problem. I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything before.”

She sucked in a sharp breath. “And that’s... a *problem* for you?”

I huffed, gnashing my mandibles. “I should not want you. You are human, and I am Veskhiri.”

“And that matters *why?*” she asked, her eyes narrowing. “If we like each other, what does it matter if we’re different

species?”

“It matters to me.”

Her face fell, and a calculating glint entered her green eyes. “I see,” she said coolly. “Then I guess it won’t matter if I accept F’Jahl’s breeding offer.”

I stilled, possessive anger seizing me. “*What?*”

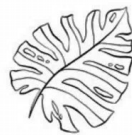
“F’Jahl,” she said casually, crossing her arms over her chest. “He offered to be my breeding mate. I haven’t given him an answer yet, but I guess if you’re so set on hating me —”

“You would not *dare*,” I snarled.

She lifted one small shoulder in a shrug. “And why wouldn’t I?”

Plucking up her spear skewered with her catch, she shouldered past me and strolled toward the jungle with her chin defiantly raised.

Vexing female!



THE TRIBE WAS alive with newfound hope.

Most of the human females had picked their breeding mates and sat with them around the communal fire.

But my eyes could not leave the red furred female that sat across the fire from me.

Willow was wearing what the female Veskhiri wore during a celebration, a white fur hide. The hide enveloped her luscious little body as if made for her. It bared her long legs, shoulders, and the upper swells of her breasts.

Rakhav’s mate had fashioned her a crown made of white *eeyiri* flowers that signified her status as an unmated female.

It set my fangs on edge.

My instincts clamored for me to claim her, to make her mine. To my chagrin, she was sitting next to F'Jahl, close enough that their arms touched. She'd been sitting next to him for most of the night, smiling and laughing at every trivial thing he did.

It was maddening.

She turned, her gaze clashing with mine. In a calculated move, she placed her small hand on F'Jahl's forearm.

Jealousy blazed within me, stoked by my possessive instincts roaring that Willow was *mine*. I glowered, seething as another male touched what was mine.

"You are not enjoying yourself, Jarkoth?"

I turned, seeing that Rakhav was now seated next to me. I hadn't even noticed him approaching, too distracted by Willow.

"I am content," I said gruffly.

"You do not look content."

My gaze unerringly slid back to Willow. "You have something to say, Rakhav?"

"If you desire the human female, you must make your intentions known."

"You sound like Dakhal," I grumbled. "It is not so simple."

"You did not agree with my decision to accept the UPCF's offer to send the human females for breeding."

My mandibles twitched in irritation. "They are not our kind, Rakhav."

"Look at the tribe, Jarkoth. The males are much more content since the human females have arrived. I will always do what is best for this tribe," he said solemnly. "And that includes you as well, my friend."

Rakhav stood, returning to his mate and younglings next to the fire.

Shoulders relaxing, I watched with envy as Varu and Kaxu squeezed between their parents. I had always yearned for younglings, but when I'd been mated before, it had never come to fruition.

My gaze returned to Willow. She was alone, F'Jahl thankfully absent.

I wondered what younglings with the red furred female would look like. Would they resemble the soft-skinned humans or the Veskhiri? I realized that if my younglings looked like *Willow*... I would not mind at all.

Despite her soft skin, she was a formidable female, and I knew that any offspring she produced would be just as fierce as she was.

If I set aside my hatred for the humans and the damage they had wrought on our planet, could I truly have a future with Willow?

F'Jahl returned to Willow's side, holding an offering of *vos'aj* meat. Part of courtship for our species was offering a female meat from an animal we had hunted. The thin red fur above Willow's eyes rose, and she lifted a hand to accept the offering.

I could not stand for this. Mandibles grinding, I rose.

Willow was *mine*.

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II

WILLOW

“THANK YOU, F’JAHL—”

A low growl made me freeze. I tilted my head back, meeting a pair of narrowed yellow eyes.

“Jarkoth?”

F’Jahl stood, puffing out his chest. “The female has accepted my mating gift.”

“She is not yours to claim,” Jarkoth grated.

F’Jahl let out a low hiss, his mandibles spreading to reveal his serrated teeth. “I have offered my mating gift, and she has accepted.”

My eyes widened. “Mating gift?” I echoed, my voice rising several octaves. “I-I didn’t know it was a mating gift!”

I fought the urge to hurl the cooked meat into the fire.

In truth, I had just been trying to make Jarkoth jealous. I thought that if he saw me with F’Jahl, he’d figure out that he was wrong about us and seek to rectify his mistake. I definitely wasn’t trying to get shackled up with another Veskhiri without my knowledge.

“You sought to trick her,” Jarkoth accused. “She would never accept a mating gift from you if she was aware of our customs.”

“She bears no mating mark,” F’Jahl said smugly.

Jarkoth's eyes darkened. "If you so much as *touch* her again—"

"Hey!" I shot to my feet, putting myself between the two males. "I'm not claimed by anyone yet. And I don't like that you're arguing over me like I'm a piece of meat." *No pun intended.*

I turned to F'Jahl. "F'Jahl, you've been kind to me, but I don't appreciate being tricked."

His mandibles drooped, looking thoroughly chastised. "I apologize, Willow. I did not intend to trick you."

I gave a sharp nod. "Thank you."

Everyone sitting around the fire had ceased conversation to stare at us. All you could hear was the crackle of the flames, and the occasional chitter of nearby insects in the surrounding jungle.

I sighed. "Come on."

Turning to Jarkoth, I grabbed his hand and led him away from the fire and toward his dwelling. Once we were inside, I whirled on him. "What is your problem?" I hissed. "You're so hot and cold. One minute you want me, and the next, you act as if I'm the most abhorrent thing on this planet."

His hands were clenched into fists at his sides. "He had no right to offer you a mating gift. You still wear *my* scent."

I threw my hands up in exasperation. "And what does that matter, Jarkoth? You said you didn't want anything serious between us. You've made *that* abundantly clear."

"I—" he broke off, mandibles twitching. "F'Jahl was trying to coerce you into a breeding agreement without your knowledge."

"At least he's being upfront about what he wants," I snapped.

He let out an irritated huff. "I do not know your meaning."

"I think you do." I hugged myself and kept my expression carefully neutral. "And I thought you said a human and a

Veskhiri aren't meant to be together. That it wouldn't be *logical*."

"It would not be."

"Then how do you explain your behavior towards me?" I retorted.

He didn't answer right away, his big body tensing. Something akin to regret flashed in his yellow gaze, but he quickly shuttered it. "My behavior is not logical," he finally grated, "and I plan to rid myself of these bothersome emotions as soon as possible."

Bothersome? I narrowed my eyes.

"Fine," I said brusquely. I pivoted on my heel and marched to the dwelling's exit flap.

Jarkoth grabbed my wrist, halting me. "Where are you going?"

"To tell F'Jahl that I'm going to accept his offer."

"*No*," he hissed, spreading his mandibles to bare his pointed teeth.

I glared at him, not backing down. "And why not?"

He faltered, his fingers tightening around my wrist. "Because it is too dangerous to go out at night. You must wait until morning."

"Dangerous?"

He released my wrist and gave a sharp nod. "It would be unwise to venture out at this hour. Remaining in my dwelling until morning would be best."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine, Jarkoth. But in the morning, I'm asking Rakhav to move me in with someone else."

Jarkoth's claws twitched at his sides. "That would be advisable."

I studied him for a moment, scanning his face for any flicker of emotion, but I found none. Letting out a soft huff, I turned and laid down on my pallet of furs.

“I’m going to sleep,” I said numbly. “Goodnight, Jarkoth.”

Not waiting for his reply, I turned away from him, blinking away a sudden shimmer of moisture in my eyes.

I thought the Midas Breeding Program would be a fresh start for me. A chance at a new life away from Jack and the tumultuous emotions of my heart.

Once again, I was wrong.

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JARKOTH

A DELECTABLE SCENT roused me from my slumber.

Willow was twisting and turning on her furs on the other side of my dwelling. I went to her, kneeling next to her side. Her red fur was fanned out around her head, the thin strips of fur above her eyes drawn together as she slept.

The sweet scent was emanating from between her thighs. Unable to stop myself, I leaned down and scented her.

“You are needing,” I growled.

Her eyes opened, and she blinked blearily up at me. “Jarkoth?”

My braids grazed the tops of her thighs as I scented her again, a clicking hiss escaping me. “Your cunt,” I said roughly. “I want to taste it.”

“I-I don’t know if we should—” her words cut off, a long moan escaping her as I grazed her inner thighs with the tips of my claws.

“Let me taste you, Willow. I will satisfy your ache.”

She was quiet for a moment before finally giving a jerky nod. “O-okay.”

Shimmying out of her hide dress, she bared herself to me. The pale swells of her chest made my mouth flood with saliva, the pink tips beckoning me. I raised my hands and pinched the small nubs between my claws, rolling them until they were swollen with blood.

“Do these ache for me, too?” I rumbled, hungrily twisting the little buds until she was writhing beneath my claws. “They are so sensitive—like the rest of you.”

“Yes,” she moaned, pressing her chest out. “L-lick them.”

Needing no further instruction, I released her nipples and took one pink tip into my mouth, lashing it with my tongue. She cried out, the sweet scent of her cunt getting stronger.

I pulled back and laved the other one with my saliva, ensuring it was just as swollen as the other.

Sliding my tongue down her slender waist, I caressed the hollows of her hips and the small thatch of red fur above her slit. It was damp with her arousal, drawing a low groan from me.

“Lick my clit,” she demanded, rolling her hips. “P-please.”

Anything!

Growling against her soft flesh, I lapped at the small bead at the apex of her slit. I pinned it between the split end of my tongue, rubbing it from either side.

Willow keened, and I felt a flare of possessive pride. Everyone in the tribe would know that I was pleasuring my female, and that I did it well.

Parting her wet folds with my tongue, I delved my stiffened tongue into her opening. Her walls clamped down around my tongue, pulsing hotly. My fangs slid over her sensitive skin as I fucked her opening with my tongue.

“Jarkoth!” she cried out. “I-I’m close!”

Closing my mandibles around her slit, I shoved my tongue as deep into her channel as it could go, caressing the mouth of her womb. She screamed, undulating her hips against my mouth as her walls spasmed around my tongue. I snarled against her flesh, fastening my mouth around her entire cunt. My fangs pricked her soft flesh, drawing blood.

My cock throbbed between my legs, and I could feel the tendrils of my upper appendage writhing, *needing* to lock onto our mate.

Once her orgasm subsided and her body loosened, I let my tongue slide wetly out of her cunt. Gripping the base of my shaft, I began stroking myself, my eyes roving over Willow's pale body.

"Watch me spend," I ordered, my voice rough.

Willow's gaze snapped to me, and as soon as it did, I roared my pleasure, spilling between her legs. My seed lashed her slit, marking her with streams of my claiming spend.

Marking her as *mine*.

I collapsed next to her, drawing her into my arms. Our panting breaths filled my dwelling, and so did the scent of our combined arousal. It smelled... *right*. It was the way it should be.

"Jarkoth," she breathed, pressing her cheek to my chest.

I sifted my claws through her curls, a low, satisfied clicking emanating from my chest.

"I love you," she whispered, her warm breath fanning over my chest.

I tensed at her words. An influx of emotion arose in my chest, and I didn't know which to address first.

"But I know this doesn't change anything," she said softly. "And that's okay."

After a moment, her breathing evened out, indicating she had fallen asleep.

Tightening my arms around my mate, I came to the decision that I would tell her how I truly felt when she awoke.

And I would finally claim her as mine.



WHEN I AWOKE, I noticed that my mate's warmth was absent from my side.

I left my dwelling in a hurry, spotting Willow's human friend, the one with hair the color of sunshine. She was sitting with my brother in front of his dwelling.

"Where is Willow?" I asked, impatient to find my mate.

The strips of fur above the female's eyes drew together. "Well... she left."

"Left?" I bit out. "What do you mean?"

"She went to the shuttle that arrived to provide aid to the humans, brother," Dakhal said.

My mandibles clicked with frustration. "She is returning to her planet?"

Dakhal and the female shared a look.

"Yes," the female said softly. "She said the breeding program wasn't working out and wanted to return home."

I whirled, turning toward the jungle surrounding our settlement.

Did she leave?

Without responding, I rushed into the jungle and followed Willow's scent to where the transport shuttle had landed when it first brought the human females. I spotted Willow being led forward by a strange male, his hand on her upper arm.

"Willow!" I growled, rushing up to them.

The male's eyes widened with fear before he quickly retreated toward the shuttle.

Surprise flickered over Willow's delicate features. "Jarkoth?"

"You are leaving?" I asked.

She nodded, giving me a wistful smile. "I think it's best if I go home."

"Will you speak to me before you make your decision? Allow me to explain myself—what happened to me."

"Explain yourself?"

I shot the cowering male next to the shuttle a loathing look. “If we could speak in *private*.”

Willow studied me for a moment before finally nodding. I took her soft hand in mine and led her further into the jungle.

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WILLOW

JARKOTH'S inhuman features were forlornly twisted, his mandibles cinched tightly together.

"What happened to you?" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

He had led us some distance away from the transport shuttle, secluded by the surrounding trees and vines.

"When the humans came, they brought illness," he said haltingly. "The Veskhiri females began dying off in droves... my mate included."

I sucked in a sharp breath. His *mate*?

"When Yelharya became sick, there was nothing the healer could do. She perished only three days after becoming ill. After she died, I came to hate the humans. After we learned that the mining stations the humans had erected were responsible for the sickness among our females, it was too late."

"I'm so sorry, Jarkoth," I said softly.

He grunted, averting his gaze as his tail flicked disjointedly behind him. "I have treated you unfairly, Willow. You were correct in your summation. There was no logical reason for me to want you, but I did." Lifting his head, he met my eyes. "I do."

I slowly shook my head. "What are you saying?"

“I want you to remain here with me—to become my breeding mate and share my dwelling.”

My breath left me in a rush. For a moment, all I could do was stare at him in disbelief. “But you said that a Veskhiri and a human aren’t meant to be together. That we’re too different.”

“I said it in falsehood,” he bit out. “Out of spite. The injustice that was done to my people was not your fault. In my blind hatred of humans, I took out my anger on you—my mate.”

I swallowed thickly. “Mate?”

He gave a sharp nod. “I have thought of you as my mate since our time in the cave. I want no other.”

Moisture gathered in my eyes, and I hastily wiped it away with the heel of my hand. “But how can you be sure?” I asked shakily. “You seemed so adamant that we weren’t meant to be together.”

He cupped my face, his clawed thumbs grazing just below my eyes. “I want *you*, Willow. Allow me to claim you, and I will care for you and any younglings that I put inside you.”

Even though my heart was melting, my lips quirked. “Well, when you put it like that....”

Jarkoth huffed, lowering his face to mine. His mouth met mine, and the sweep of his tongue made me moan. Even though the sensation of his horned mandibles felt alien, I felt a pulse of heat between my legs.

I pulled back, casting a wary look around.

“We have to mate *here*?” I asked dubiously. “Out in the open?”

“It is the way of our people,” he said simply. “The jungle must witness our mating to solidify our bond.”

All rational thought fled when I felt his tail brush against my calf. I knew what he could do with that tail, and suddenly, fucking out in the open seemed like a *great* idea.

“Make me yours, Jarkoth.” I cupped his brutish face. “Claim me.”

Lowering his head, Jarkoth pressed his mouth to mine. “Yes,” he hissed against my lips. “Mine.”

I pulled back, pressing my hand to his broad chest. “But first, I want to make *you* mine.”

Before he could ask what I meant, I dropped to my knees.

“Willow?” he asked hoarsely.

I flipped up his loincloth, and his hard dick sprung forward, the double-ridged head gleaming in the sunlight. The tubules on the side of his cock were already leaking. Gripping his meaty thighs, I took his cock into the back of my throat in one go.

“*Fuck,*” he groaned. “What are you doing?”

I bobbed my head, caressing the veins on his shaft with my tongue. The fleshy appendage at the top of his cock met my nose, his tendrils curling around the base. I sucked in bliss, feeling the broad head of his cock press against the back of my throat.

He buried his claws in my hair, gently tugging.

“You will make me spill before I am ready,” he gritted. “*Intoxicating female.*”

I reluctantly relinquished his dick, giving the head a kittenish lick.

With a low growl, Jarkoth lowered himself to the jungle floor and began tearing at my clothes. I laughed, helping him remove my shorts and boots. Once I was naked, I laid back on the soft ground, tree roots bracketing my body.

Jarkoth braced himself on his forearms over me, his cockhead bumping against my pussy.

“After I claim you, you will be my mate, Willow,” he rasped. “Forever.”

I hooked my ankles around his narrow hips and dug my heels into the small of his back. “Then hurry up.”

Emitting a low rumble, Jarkoth took his cock in hand and positioned the head at my entrance.

“I claim you, *Willow*.” He drove his hips forward, sinking his length to the hilt inside me.

I cried out, wrapping my arms around his neck. He growled, rutting into me. The appendage at the top of his cock rubbed against my clit each time he bottomed out, adding a toe-curling sensation that made my eyes roll back.

“*My mate*,” he husked, beginning to pound into me. “I want to *breed* you.”

The tendrils surrounding his upper appendage undulated against my sex, suctioning themselves to my clit and pussy. Jarkoth’s chest rubbed against my nipples, teasing the achy buds with his hard body.

Before long, he was hammering into me. I went wild beneath him, scratching at his back and spreading my legs as far as they could go. He swiveled his hips, hitting a spot deep inside of me that made my vision go momentarily white.

“*Gods*,” I moaned, tightening my legs around him.

Molten pleasure exploded within me, my walls clamping around Jarkoth’s pistoning cock. He roared, slamming his hips forward a final time. Cum flooded my channel, and I keened with pleasure.

“*Willow*.”

Jarkoth shot forward, sinking his fangs into the spot between my shoulder and neck. I screamed, my orgasm and the pain of his bite seizing me in a euphoric hold.

He carefully pulled out, a gush of semen sluicing out of my pussy and trekking down my inner thighs.

I flushed with pleasure, knowing that he might have gotten me pregnant.

Jarkoth nuzzled my sweaty hair, cooing in that alien way of his. “I did not get the chance to tell you before,” he said. “I love you, my fragile human mate.”

Heart soaring, I pressed a quick kiss to his mandibles. “I love you, too.”

He stirred his still-hard cock, drawing a small moan from me. “We must return to the shuttle to let them know that you are staying behind.”

“Just one more time?” I asked sweetly, grinning up at him.

He let out a strained chuckle and replied, “My insatiable mate.”

“Your *only* mate,” I corrected, unable to wipe the dopey grin from my face.

His yellow eyes met mine, shining with happiness. “My only mate.”

The end.

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