

LOVED BY THE
ALIEN
WARRIOR

THE OUTLAWS OF DEEP SPACE BOOK 3

CARLOTTA PAGE

LOVED BY THE ALIEN WARRIOR

BOOK 3

THE OUTLAWS OF DEEP SPACE

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Calla has been dreaming of a new life ...

For me, life back on Earth sucked. I had no friends, no prospects, a crappy job and loads of debt. So when I find myself abducted by aliens and dumped on a near-deserted planet with my twin sister and two other women, I'm not that upset about my sudden change in circumstances. And then there's Kerrok. He's a seven-foot-something alien with an actual tail, and he's trying to claim me as his mate. *Me!* The woman who's never even kissed a boy.

Kerrok has never allowed himself to dream ...

Before crashing on Rainland, I never had the luxury of imagining a future in which I might have a mate all my own. I was an Outlaw of my tribe, damned to spend the rest of my days alone. Now I have met Calla, and she is everything I never allowed myself to want. If only I can persuade her to take a chance on me.

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[Chapter One](#)

TRIGGER WARNINGS

- Discussion of family breakup
- Discussion of the heroine's toxic mother
- Mentions of the heroine's deceased father
- Discussion of the heroine's credit card debt
- Discussion of the hero's past physical trauma (including being branded)
- Discussion of male infertility

For Courtney.

With special thanks to Cassidy and Meg.

CHAPTER ONE



CALLA

I'm not entirely sure when it finally, permanently, sunk into my consciousness that I won't ever be returning to Earth. I think it slowly crept up on me. When we were waiting in the crashed spaceship to be rescued. When Jessica was introducing us to Home Room. When Emeryel returned with Torksten.

It's so quiet in the huge cavern that I can almost hear my own breaths echo around the enormous space. It must be as large as a school hall and three-stories high. With its walls made of stone, lit only by the central fire and the tiny glowing insects that populate the ceiling, it's unlike anything I ever saw back on Earth, and for that reason alone I love it.

I take a deep breath. Even in Home Room the air smells of fresh rain. Of course, that's because it's ALWAYS raining on this planet and the sky is always overcast with angry gray clouds that obstruct the sun and the moon and the stars. That's why we call this planet Rainland—like Iceland but with rain.

Not a single day has passed since our arrival when it hasn't rained, but even the constant damp can't dampen my mood.

We're never going back. We're never going back.

I repeat the chant to myself like a mantra, and because I now really, fully know that the words are true, I smile. Thank goodness!

Unfortunately, my smile only serves to infuriate Sonam, who narrows her eyes at me in a murderous glare. She's sitting in the same place as where she ate her breakfast about five hours ago, and I'm guessing that's because she hasn't moved in all that time.

I try to tame my rogue mouth, but even Sonam's glare and the guilt that tightens my chest can't obliterate my smile.

We're never going back.

She crosses her arms in further demonstration of her disapproval. Her perfectly straight, perfectly black hair is out, reaching down to her waist. It's knotted in a few places, as though she hasn't bothered brushing it today.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' I ask. Sonam is the opposite of happy at the prospect of never returning to Earth, and I'm not entirely sure why.

Well ... if I'm honest, I'm not sure why because I haven't asked her, and it's not because I don't care. I absolutely do, but I'm afraid of her answer. I'm afraid that if I get to know her any more, my guilt will eventually overpower my hard-won happiness, and I'll be as damp and morbid as Sonam.

To be fair, Rose, Jess and Emeryel haven't asked her either. I think they're all too scared to know the truth too. The four of us have accepted our lot in life. Sonam still wants more.

'Ceali isn't tea,' she says, naming the cardboard-tasting powder that Vorden and Kerrok both like to dissolve in hot water.

'No.' I've got to agree with her on that. It isn't anything like tea. Or coffee or hot chocolate or any other human drink, but that's because we're on a near-deserted alien planet in the middle of deep space.

I don't say that to her. Instead, I give her a hug, which she instantly returns, burying her face in my shoulder. And then, almost as quickly, she lets go and turns her back on me. I see her wipe a hand over her face and guess she's crying. Again.

I squeeze her shoulder, the biggest coward for not asking why she's so upset. But living here is kind of like living in a perpetually crashing airplane. The flight attendants always tell you to put on your own oxygen mask before helping anyone else because if you can't help yourself, then how can you really help them?

My oxygen mask might be in place, but I'm still having trouble breathing, so to speak.

Before I have time to change my mind, I creep into my bedroom, which is less of a room and more of a cave. It doesn't even have a bed, just a neat pile of recycled blankets we salvaged from the crashed Hov spaceship. They loved a good hammock. Their beds were hammocks. Their chairs were hammocks. We stripped the fabric out, dyed them green using tree leaves, and divided our spoils equally between us all—six blankets per person.

One I cut into strips to make shoes. I used one to make a door to my bedcave. One I sewed into a pillow and stuffed with dried mountain moss. (It's not exactly as soft as an Earth pillow, but it does the trick.) The last three blankets make up my bed.

I straighten the top blanket, even though I made my bed hours ago and haven't rumbled it since. Then I touch each of my meager possessions—a wooden bowl, a jug and a cup, gifted to me by Emeryel's alien mate; and my Navy hoodie, which Rose gave me back on Earth. I was wearing it when the ugly-as-shit green aliens abducted us. Aside from the jeans, t-shirt, bra and panties I've currently got on, it's all the clothing I now own.

It's about as gross as it sounds. I wash my underwear each night and leave them off to dry while I sleep. One day I went commando, attempting to save myself washing time, but it only resulted in itchy lady bits, and I had to wash my jeans.

Thankfully, even with all the rain, the general temperature on Rainland is mild, so I'm comfortable not wearing my hoodie, which is the nicest piece of clothing I have and which I want to preserve for as long as possible.

Perhaps I could cut it up and make more panties. Hmm. I'm not quite ready to commit. My sewing skills still have a lot to be desired.

Fussing over my things distracts me for all of thirty seconds. There isn't precisely much to do, entertainment wise, on Rainland. It might please me to not be on Earth anymore, but I don't enjoy spending too much time contemplating the abduction itself.

It was absolute hell. I still haven't decided if I'm glad I was unconscious for most of it or if that makes it all worse—not knowing what those fuckers might or might not have done to me while I was out cold.

I mess up my blankets so I can make the bed again. My twin is still in the forest with Emeryel and Torksten, gathering food, so I can't even talk to her about it—or not talk to her, because Rose and I have got this silent agreement where we only mention the abduction and subsequent crash once a day, and we used up today's count before breakfast.

I continue attempting to distract myself by walking into the storage cave. It's similar in size to all the bedcaves but its walls are all indented with rows of alcoves, kind of like built-in shelves.

It's officially my job to keep everything in the storage cave tidy so that we can see what food we have and what we need more of at a glance. Everyone has an assigned job. That was Jess's idea.

She's the leader, along with her alien boyfriend... Husband? Ugh. I wrinkle my nose. Vorden calls Jess his mate, but I'm still not entirely used to that word. It sounds a little too motorcycle-gang, mafia, man-beats-chest possessive.

Not that Jess agrees. She practically melts every time 'mate' comes out of Vorden's mouth.

Today, the two of them are checking on the remains of the Hov ship, the one we women crashed in. They're hoping they can cut up what's left of the metal hull and recycle the pieces into stuff that's actually useful around here. I offered to go with them this morning, and while they both said they'd like my company, I know when I'm a third wheel, so I changed my mind last minute and stayed behind.

I straighten what I have already straightened and fiddle with the sand nuts, checking to see if the newest ones are ready to be removed from their hard outer shell. They only crack open once they've completely dried out, and these ones were only brought in yesterday, so they're still the tiniest bit damp. I put them back, disappointed.

While I oversee the pantry, it's Emeryel and Torksten who oversee the collection of food. Whatever they bring back, I find a place for. I've hung the bitter leaves from the ceiling, I've laid the prickly berries out so they dry evenly, and I rotate the sand nuts daily until their outer shells crack and we can harvest the fatty kernel from their center.

My favorite of everything is the prickly berries. When they're fresh, they're incredibly sweet and juicy, and when they're dried, they kind of remind me of sultanas only with a minty flavor. And they never lose their bright red color, making them look cheerful.

Rose laughed when I said they were cheerful. She says they look like poisonous berries out of a fairytale, which is also true. If it weren't for Torksten convincing us they were safe to eat, I never would've let them pass my lips.

Thankfully, Torksten knows Rainland pretty well, including where all the best leaves, nuts, fruits and tubers are to be found. He crashed here about two years ago, whereas the rest of us have been here for only a month.

He's a strange one. He doesn't like company all that much, except for Emeryel, who he absolutely adores. I guess after spending two years alone on an empty planet, you get used to hearing your own voice and nobody else's. He still jumps sometimes if one of us speaks without warning.

He also looks at Emeryel with the largest puppy-dog eyes I've ever seen, and it's entirely adorable. There's absolutely no doubt in my mind that he loves her. Just as Vorden loves Jess.

So, with those four all outside and busy and in love, that leaves Sonam, Kerrok and me in the caves today.

I cast a critical eye over the shelves but can see nothing that needs my attention. I should make Sonam that cup of ceali I offered, but I've got a feeling she won't drink it. I mightn't know much about her, but I do know that back on Earth she was training to be a chef, and now she can barely stand the sight of alien food, eating only when she's starving.

She has once come into the storeroom, even when I offered to give her a tour.

So that just leaves Kerrok for company.

He isn't as talkative as Vorden, but he isn't as silent as Torksten. He's a happy medium between the two. What's more, there's a confidence about him that I like, as if he knows his own strength and is pleased by it. It's refreshingly honest.

I'm pleased by his strength too—and eternally grateful for it. He literally gave up everything he had when he almost single-handedly killed the Hov after they'd tracked us women to this planet and tried abducting us again. Apparently, they wanted to enslave us as gladiators to fight in some illegal arena, like what happened to Torksten.

Having seen some of Torksten's scars, I know for a fact I wouldn't have lasted five minutes as a gladiator.

Vorden and Kerrok saved us all from death. An ugly, gruesome death.

I wince at the memory of the day the Hov attacked and hurriedly run my hand down my T-shirt, trying to smooth the wrinkles from the cotton and distract myself.

There isn't a laundromat on Rainland. Not even a clothes iron, and I'm looking scruffy, with hair that's protesting the humidity by practically doubling with frizz. Does it make me a terrible person that the thing I miss most about Earth is my old hair straightener?

I head out of the storeroom in search of Kerrok. Sonam sniffs and rubs at red rimmed eyes as I pass.

CHAPTER TWO



KERROK

I hear Calla's approach long before I turn around to greet her. My Hunter instincts never rest, even when I know we are safe, hidden high in the tallest mountain on an otherwise deserted planet.

I slow my movements, keeping my concentration fixed on the view of the valley visible through the open hangar doors. Some of the Mating Females still jump when they see either myself or my brother, Vorden, and I want to cause as little distress to them as I can. They have suffered enough, with their abduction from their birth planet and their near enslavement by the Hov criminal syndicate—one of the worst and most brutal criminal organization Federated space has seen in its long history.

Calla is different. She has never been shy or scared or hesitant around me. She is not as forthright as her twin, but there is always kindness in her words, and kindness has been in short supply these last few years.

When she stalls somewhere behind me, I finally turn to face her. The view behind me of the valley far below and the lush green forest is nothing when compared with Calla. I must physically lock my hands behind my back for fear of moving closer to her or seeking more kindness than she is willing to bestow upon me.

It is a mortifying situation. I am an Outlaw, no longer even a Hunter, and deserve no Mating Female of my own. I move my gaze from her full hair and her pink tinged skin to stare at one of the two spaceships parked behind her. This position is reminiscent of when I used to stand at attention back on Anor. Before the council cast me out. Back then, it had been my constant responsibility to work with the other Hunters to keep the Mating Females of my people safe.

This I know how to do; I know how to protect. I might be an Outlaw, unworthy of Calla's—or of any female's—

attention, but that does not mean I will cease offering my help. 'Are you well? How may I serve you?'

She tilts the corners of her mouth upwards, showing me her top row of teeth in a gesture I have been told denotes happiness rather than aggression. I catch sight of the movement out of the corner of my eye and try to copy it to show Calla I mean her no harm. She winces a fraction, and I know I have failed to adequately mimic her body language.

'I came to see what you're doing.' There is a note of false cheer in her soft voice. She steps around me and approaches the edge of the hangar. Below her, the ground suddenly feels much further away than when I had stood there alone. My instincts demand I pull her back from the edge, but that would require touching her, and as an Outlaw, I am forbidden such things.

But ... the human females are not like Anor'os females. One human even chose my brother as her Mating Partner. Another chose the Ves'os gladiator as hers. We have been here a month, yet the sight of my brother happy with his own female still surprises and confuses me.

My old Hunter instincts are telling me I must protect Calla no matter what the danger.

My Outlaw commandments are demanding I do not even deserve to stand beside her as I am now.

My body is telling me she would fit perfectly against my side, if only I were to wrap my arm around her thin shoulders and step closer. My observations of my brother and his Mating Female have evidently given me dangerous hope.

These thoughts and feelings battle each other in my head until I am locked with indecision. My mechanical hand twitches involuntarily, as does my tail, displaying my confused irritation. Hurriedly, I hid my hand behind my back.

Calla is looking up at me, having said something I did not hear. I open my mouth, but I do not know what I should say in response.

‘A penny for your thoughts.’ She shows me her teeth again. Blunt and unthreatening.

‘Akh?’ I do not know what those words of hers mean. They do not seamlessly translate.

She laughs, a gentle sound that is music. ‘It means: what are you thinking? I’d like to know.’

‘I am thinking ...’

She raises a hand in the air between us. ‘Only tell me if you want to. It wasn’t an order or anything like that.’

‘I—’ I do not want to admit aloud my desires, which even I still do not fully understand. Nor do I wish to lie. ‘Before you approached, I was contemplating the rain.’

‘It never rained like this back in Australia.’

‘Aus—’ I stumble over the unfamiliar name, my desire to know more about Calla momentarily outpacing my many other considerations and worries.

‘That’s where I’m from. Australia’s a country, back on Earth.’ She sounds a little unsure, and I say so. ‘I never know what’s going to be similar in your culture to mine. Maybe you have countries back on your home planet or maybe you don’t.’

I shake my head. ‘Is a coun-tree like a tribe?’

‘Umm. Yeah, I suppose so. A very large tribe.’ Another flash of teeth. ‘So what about the rain were you thinking exactly?’

‘That we do not have an easy way to collect fresh water. Now, if we wish to drink, we must manually collect rainwater from outside, but it would be more efficient if we could pump water directly into Home Room.’

Home Room. I use the Mating Females’ name for the communal cavern where we cook and eat all our meals, and where we sometimes gather to talk. It is the center of lives here on Rainland.

‘Do you think that’s possible?’ She turns to face me, her eyes fascinatingly bright. ‘Could we have running water?’

I want to promise I will bring her all the water she could ever need, but I falter over the unspoken words, once again trapped in indecision, considering whether such a promise would be inappropriate considering our stations.

‘Running water. Wow! That would be truly amazing,’ she says, filling the silence for me. She laughs. ‘Good Lord. Who’d have thought running water would be such a luxury?’ Waving a hand at the open hangar doors, she indicates the forest below us as if encompassing the entire planet. ‘I’m still getting used to all this.’

‘As am I,’ I tell her honestly. *As am I.*



CALLA

‘Running water straight into Home Room would be amazing,’ I tell Kerrok. ‘It would make cooking and cleaning so much easier.’

He nods, and while he might not be smiling, I can tell he’s pleased I’ve understood his idea. I’ve got to crane my neck to see his face. He’s nearly two feet taller than me. Much taller than any human I met back on Earth. His skin is a beautiful deep gray. Although, when he stands in the sunlight, it looks more navy than charcoal. Like a chameleon, I think, the way his skin changes color a little depending on the lighting. In the darkness, he’s almost invisible.

That reminds me of how dangerous Kerrok really is. He’s huge, certainly large enough he could push me off the cliff and not strain a single muscle. And his muscles are considerable! They rope his arm and shoulders, and I have not been above watching the way they move in his back when he reaches over his head for whatever reason. Even now, his chest is bare. The only clothes he wears are a pair of hand-sewn pants made from the same blanket material as my bed and a pair of heavy-set boots. Around his straight hips is a belt holding what I can only presume is a gun.

It isn’t like any Earth gun. It’s small, about the size of my hand, and has a nasty blade that extends beyond the barrel. Jess once told me it shoots a laser.

I hurriedly look away from the gun. I’ve never liked weapons. They really aren’t a thing in Australia, and even after a month I’m still not used to seeing Kerrok and his brother wearing guns at their hips.

I should fear him. Hell, I should be terrified of every alien in the whole fucking universe after being abducted from Earth. Nasty scars run like ribbons over one of Kerrok’s shoulders, evidence of a violent past, and his prosthetic arm looks like something from a sci-fi film. It’s made of metal that’s

somehow been fused to his skin, and whenever he moves one of his metal fingers, they make these little clicking noises where metal meets metal at the joints.

But Kerrok is so unlike the Hov who abducted us I find it hard to associate the two. They are worlds apart—literally.

I take a deep breath. I'm not afraid of Kerrok, I realize. It's both a welcome and terrifying thought. In this last month, my life has changed in so many ways I nearly get whiplash just thinking about it.

'What about the water cave?' I ask him, breaking the silence again. He isn't one for talking much. 'How does the water get into the hot spring?'

He frowns. That's one facial expression we all share: a frown. 'I had not considered the water cave.' There are no whites to his eyes, just green irises that watch me intently.

I start walking toward the water cave, not quite brave enough to keep meeting Kerrok's gaze. I'm not nervous. I'm just ... I don't know. I guess I'm not used to being looked at so closely, not by anyone who isn't Rose.

And maybe I don't like the idea of what he might see. Doesn't guilt shine from my eyes?

That thought has anxiety churning in my stomach, and I wish I'd just stayed in my bedcave. *But* then I'd just be worrying about everything I wasn't doing.

Great. I get to feel either anxious about helping Kerrok or anxious about not contributing more to the welfare of the group. Those really aren't great choices.

The hangar is nearly as large as Home Room and is occupied by two spaceships. One was here when we moved in. It's old and broken and completely useless. The other one is Kerrok and Vorden's Day Tripper, which is only big enough to fit one person. It's elegant, with semicircular wings that curve out from the main body. Kerrok could stand under one wing and not hit his head, but it's still a tiny ship and isn't much use to us because we usually travel in pairs or in a larger group.

It's certainly not large enough to be taken into space for an extended journey, hence its name: Day Tripper.

Kerrok follows me into Home Room. At the center of the cavern is a sunken area. It's circular and surrounded by three steps. It's there that we've built the communal fire pit, and it's on one of those steps that Sonam is still sitting. She casts us both a glance and then hurries into her bedcave.

I try hard not to notice the way she flinches away from Kerrok, but he notices; I can tell by the way his entire body tenses, and he walks the long way around Home Room to the corridor that leads to the water cave so he doesn't have to walk directly by Sonam's door.

It's those small thoughtful gestures that set him apart from our captors—and him not stealing us away from Earth, of course.

'She'll realize,' I tell him. 'Eventually.'

He looks down at me. There's a sadness in his eyes I haven't seen before, and I suddenly want to give him a big hug. All he says is: 'Her reasons are understandable.'

'I suppose.' In fact, I completely agree, but I don't think that makes Kerrok feel any better. It certainly doesn't make me feel any better. 'Give me a second.'

I hurry over to Sonam's bedcave. 'Knock knock. It's just me.'

She pulls aside her blanket door. Like all the other blankets, it's been dyed green, but at the right angle I can still see the Hov emblem woven into the fabric. She peaks at me through the crack. 'I'm fine.'

'I know you are. I was wondering if you wanted to come to the water cave with Kerrok and I. We're going to work out where the water comes from.'

'No.' Her answer is immediate, but then she peaks over my shoulder to where I know Kerrok is standing, way back at the other side of the huge main cavern, keeping his distance. 'No, thanks.'

‘Okay.’ I want to give her another hug, but again I chicken out. As I return to Kerrok’s side, I hear the blanket fall back into place as she closes her ‘door’ on us and on the rest of this brand-new world.

CHAPTER THREE



CALLA

The water cave is only a short walk from Home Room and all the bedcaves. The walls of the passageway are rough, and it's almost completely pitch black because there aren't any of the glow-worm thingies here. They seem to only live in actual caves.

I run my hand along the wall, even though there isn't any actual way I can become lost; the passageway only goes one way. There are no turn offs between Home Room and the water cave.

'I still don't really understand how they made this place,' I say, partly because I don't like the silence and the darkness together, and partly because it's true. The amount of work it must have taken to carve out these tunnels through the mountain is unimaginable, even if they had advanced technology—whoever they might have been.

Jess and Vorden coincidentally stumbled across the tunnel system after we humans had first crash landed on Rainland. It's an entire three-day walk from the ground through all the tunnels up to the top of the mountain where Home Room is.

All the caves and tunnels were completely empty (except for the broken spaceship) when we arrived, and all the evidence points to them having been deserted for several decades—maybe even for centuries.

I attempt to not speculate why they might have left. About what might have driven them from their home. From this entire planet. It's a line of questioning that will probably never be answered and which will only add to my anxiety.

'Outside, the ground is too wet to build on,' Kerrok says. 'It is understandable that they would make their homes in the mountains.'

I nod, even though he can't see me. At least, I don't think he can. I certainly can't see him, but I suppose that doesn't

necessarily mean he has the same eyesight as a human. Maybe his eyes work much better in the dark?

I tug at the hem of my T-shirt with my free hand and accidentally nudge him with my elbow. The tunnels aren't wide enough for the two of us to walk side by side comfortably.

Immediately, he takes a step backwards, letting me take the lead and giving me more space.

'Thanks.' Ridiculous heat flushes my face, and I'm suddenly glad for the darkness.

Then, of course, we reach the water cave, and it isn't dark anymore. Spots of light move around the ceiling, reflecting off the surface of the hot spring and sending ripples of light over the cave walls. Even though I've seen this cave plenty of times since our arrival, I find my breath catching in my throat at the beauty of it.

There mightn't be any shops on Rainland or electricity or flat irons. There's not even running water. But there is the hot spring, and it makes for the best bath experience.

I peel off the handmade shoes I'm wearing, roll up the legs of my jeans and sit on the edge of the pool, soaking my feet. Lord, that feels good. I can't help but close my eyes as the hot water soaks the tension from my body straight out of my toes.

The fucking Hov stole my shoes when they abducted me—as well as my handbag and my mobile. Not that there's reception on this planet, so I suppose losing my phone wasn't a big deal. Losing my shoes was!

They were high-heels, and I guess the Hov assumed I'd have used the stiletto point to stab them. Whatever. They're dead now. Thanks to Kerrok.

I'm stuck wearing shoes I cobbled from pieces of cut-up blanket, and they aren't *exactly* shoes. More like mummy bandages for my feet, but they work better than walking barefoot, and I'm slowly getting used to them.

'Do you think this pool is natural?' I ask. 'Or do you think someone constructed it, like they did with the tunnels?'

‘I am not sure, but it is worth investigating.’

I open my eyes to see him stripping off his pants.

Oh wow. Hurriedly, I stare up at the ceiling. Neither Vorden nor Kerrok have any problem with nudity. Vorden still walks around without pants more than he wears pants, despite Jess’s attempts to get him into clothes.

There’s a distinct difference, though, between Vorden being naked and Kerrok being naked. At least my hot cheeks think there is. It’s easy to ignore Vorden’s nudity. He’s practically married to Jess, and he’s so blasé about the entire thing that I sometimes forget he’s not wearing pants.

It certainly never occurred to me to look at his dick. The more it’s out in the open, the more unremarkable it seems. Kerrok’s, on the other hand, is the complete opposite of unremarkable. It’s remarkable, and I find my gaze drawn back to him even as I command myself to keep staring up at the ceiling.

He’s kicked off his boots and discarded his pants with carefree abandon. Now he’s working on removing his leg armor. It looks like metal scales and covers both his legs, leaving his dick, hips and waist completely and utterly free to my sight.

I’m staring. Yep, I’m staring straight at his penis and balls. I take a deep breath. They’re huge. I mean, ginormous.

And that’s when he’s flaccid. Imagine the size of him when he’s erect!

My face is on fire. I’m probably so red, I’m glowing. Kerrok gives me a strange look when he glances up and sees me watching him. I turn away again, horrified at being caught, and that makes my face burn even hotter. In fact, heat is virtually radiating off me, and suddenly the pool is unbearable when a moment ago it was bliss. I take my feet out of the too-hot water, fanning my face with a hand.

Kerrok presses some sort of latch; there’s a click, and then his leg armor retracts. The scales climb up his legs until he’s wearing nothing but two bands around both his thighs. I’ve got

no idea how all the metal scales fit inside the bands. They're like Doctor Who's Tardis—bigger on the inside than the outside.

He unclips the two bands, drops them on top of his abandoned pants and heads toward the hot spring. It's only now I realize he intends to get into the water.

How, Brain! How didn't you realize this sooner?! It's completely obvious, but I was too focused on not staring that I didn't comprehend the obvious.

I tuck my knees up to my chin and wrap my arms around my legs as he sits on the lip of the pool beside me.

He puts his feet into the water, and entirely predictably, my gaze drops straight to his dick. Which is on the move. Upwards.

Ah, fuck. My entire body is on fire. No doubt I'm blushing all over.

I hate how easily I blush. It's always such a telltale sign I'm embarrassed or feeling out of place. I blushed practically all the time back on Earth. Here, I was hoping I'd gotten over it. Apparently not.

'You do not look so well,' Kerrok says. The concern in his voice is unmistakable. 'Have I done something wrong?'

'Ahh ... ' I have absolutely no idea how to answer. I can't point at his dick as the culprit for my discombobulation. Though how he hasn't already guessed is beyond me. There's no way he hasn't noticed the huge stick behind his legs. It's practically impeding his movement.

I swallow. Unless an erection means something different to him.

Oh God, it's another one of those lost-in-translation moments, and I'm the one who's completely out of line. 'I'm fine,' I squeak, my voice way too high to be normal. 'I'm just a little warm. It's the water!' I hurriedly add. 'The water is warm.'

‘It is.’ He slips into the pool until he’s sitting on the bottom. The water laps at his hips. He isn’t concerned about getting his prosthetic arm wet.

I silently berate myself for my inappropriate reaction. Being naked doesn’t mean the same thing to him as it does to me. He’s comfortable with his body, whereas I’m constantly uncomfortable with mine. I take a deep breath, forcing myself to loosen my hold on my knees.

At least the water covers his dick.

Well, kind of. Because his dick is still thickening, and the tip is already poking out above the water’s surface.

It’s like whack-a-mole, which is such an absurd notion I snort. Which means Kerrok is looking worriedly at me again.

‘What’s your plan?’ I quickly ask.

He frowns for a moment longer before saying: ‘I expect the only way we will find out if the pool is natural or not is to search under the water.’

‘Right.’ A part of me is still immensely interested. In his dick, that is. I want to know, with a sudden scientific interest, exactly how much bigger it can get.

The other part of me is still flustered.

I’ve never—

That is, I’m still a virgin. A twenty-three-year-old virgin. Pathetic? Probably. But that was my life back on Earth. Pathetic Calla with no friends and only her twin sister for company. And— I shake my head, trying to shake away memories of Earth and all my failures, and instead examine the hot spring.

The water is completely clear. It’s a beautiful green-blue color, reminding me of photos I’ve seen of Caribbean beaches. A little steam is rising off the surface, like a bath, and it’s practically still except for the small ripples Kerrok is making as his chest expands and contracts slightly with his breaths.

Am I attracted to Kerrok?

The answer to that question is laughably simple when faced with his naked body, slick with water. Yes, I'm most definitely attracted to him. He's hot. Really, really hot. And not just because he's sitting in a hot spring.

Oh, crap. I remember how I felt every single time my old crush walked into the coffee shop where I worked. He hardly ever even bothered glancing at me, but I counted every single one of those looks as they meant something special to me. Pathetic Calla.

'What about over there?' I point to the furthest curve of the rounded pool from where we're sitting. The water looks like it's moving, but just barely. Almost unnoticeably.

Kerrok pushes himself through the water with ease. He could stand up; the top of the water barely comes up to his thighs, but he keeps low as he crosses the pool to examine the place where I pointed.

'You are right. I can feel a disturbance.' He runs his hands along the side of the pool, under the water, searching for something. 'Let me see.' Taking a deep breath, he sinks under the surface.

Because the water is so clear, I can easily see him, and I watch as he scrutinizes the pool wall. The entire thing has been carved from the rock, but it's impossible to tell if it's natural or alien-made. Water can wear rock perfectly smooth if given long enough.

Kerrok doesn't surface, even after what must be an entire minute. I stand up and move closer, prepared to pull him out if he needs me, but he appears perfectly fine, and I watch the top of his head with more interest than worry.

Clearly, his lung capacity is much superior to my human lungs.

This might be the first time I've seen the top of his head. He's so much taller than me I'm mostly looking up at him, rather than down. The Hunter tattoos that cover his chest and some of his back spiral up the back of his neck and over the top of his head.

Where his brother has long hair, Kerrok's keeps his hair short, short enough that I can see the general outlines of the tattoos over his scalp through his black hair. And then, of course, there's his tail. It reminds me of a lion's tail, with a tuft of fluffy fur at the end, the same black as the hair on his head. It's moves through the water like a snake, swishing this way and that, hypnotically. And, because I'm now looking at his tail, my gaze naturally moves to his ass. His tight, tight ass.



KERROK

Even under the water, Calla's gaze is on me. I try to straighten my shoulders and keep my muscles tense. It is vanity beyond belief, but I cannot help myself.

I am only acting this way to impress upon Calla my protective strength, I tell myself, but I know that is a lie. That she might like what she sees sends a bolt of exhilaration through me. As well as anger.

Anger because I have remembered the large Outlaw brand which the council burnt into the skin at my hip before casting my brother and me from our tribe.

I deflate. Of course she is not looking at me with appreciation. I was first a Hunter, now an Outlaw. I have never warranted the attention of a Mating Female, and I should be content with my role as their protector.

An important step in such a plan is running water.

I stay beneath the pool's surface for as long as I can hold my breath, triple checking the rock wall and imploring my thoughts to return to order. Drinking water. Drinking Water! DRINKING WATER!

When I eventually breach the surface, I gulp down a large breath of air. Calla quickly looks away from me, evidently hoping I did not notice her staring. I do not ask her why she looks at me or why she looks away, and I do not ask why her face is pink. I do not think I would like the answer. Or maybe I am already supposed to know?

Aliens are confusing.

Calla is confusing. As kind as she is, I do not always understand her.

Instead of asking, I say: 'I have found a small hole near the bottom of the pool where the water is being pumped in. You were right, Calla. This is very interesting.'

‘Really?’ She straightens.

‘It means the pool was designed and is not a natural formation,’ I continue, clamping down on my sudden urge to ply her with compliments.

‘Which is what we want. Because if water is being pumped into this cave, then we could potentially pump fresh water into Home Room. That’s so cool.’ She shows me her teeth. ‘How exciting, Kerrok.’

‘It is,’ I agree as I climb out of the pool, my name spoken in her voice sending awareness through me.

I hurry to turn my back on her, hoping to disguise my hard cock. I have no claim to make on her body. If she were a Mating Female of my old tribe, she would have every right to punish me for such behavior.

Even right to brand me afresh.

As I reattach my deployment bands and pull on the pants the Mating Females prefer I wear, I hear her move behind me.

‘Ahh ... It’s getting late. Rose might be back.’

‘Your sister.’ Dressed again, I turn to face her, but all I see is her back as she leaves the water cave—and me—behind.

CHAPTER FOUR



CALLA

I'm running away. I know it's cowardly, but I can't stop my feet from moving further away from Kerrok. Back in Home Room, I see I was right: Rose has returned—Emeryel and Torksten too.

The ex-gladiator isn't as tall as Vorden and Kerrok, although one of his horns reaches beyond both their heads. He doesn't have a tail and is built like a rock, all hard muscle with shoulders broader even than Kerrok's. I don't think a charging elephant could knock him down—or an elemath!

He's also the quietest and shyest alien I've met so far. He doesn't carry a gun and deploras violence of any kind. He won't even kill animals for food, which is one of the main reasons we've kind of gone vegetarian. Plants are easier to deal with than blood and guts. At least for the foreseeable future.

I hurry over to the group to see what food they've collected and find that they've already packed it away into the storeroom and I needn't have hurried over after all. Trying not to appear disappointed, I force a smile. I haven't forbidden them to enter the storeroom or anything crazy like that, but it does kind of mean I've achieved nothing worthwhile today.

'Did you have fun?' I ask.

Torksten watches me gravely, as Rose and Emeryel both nod. Emeryel's pet climber—which looks like a mix between a monkey and a cat—is sitting on one of Emeryel's shoulders with her long, thin tail wrapped around Emeryel's neck. She chatters to me and holds out one tiny hand. I give her my finger to hold, but she pushes it away.

Okay?

'It was so cool,' Rose says. She's pulled her frizzy hair into a messy bun, and her fabric shoes are stained with mud. There's also a streak of mud on her face, evidence of how busy she's been today—and how busy I haven't been.

‘Torksten took us up one of his climbing trees,’ she says with a smile. ‘It’s like a whole other world up there! It’s not nearly as wet as on the ground because the leaves provide a lot of protection from the weather. And there’s so much fruit! You’ve never seen so much, Calla.’

My smile now is genuine. How can I not be happy when my twin is so excited?

‘Most of it isn’t ripe yet,’ Emeryel adds. ‘But we’re keeping an eye on it, and I’m sure there’ll be a lot of food prep for you really soon.’

Gracie is still holding one of her four tiny hands out to me, so I lean forward, unsure about what she wants. As soon as she can reach, she presses her palm to my cheek. Which is super-duper sweet, if somewhat strange. Sometimes her expression is almost human, but even then I usually can’t work out what she wants.

She pats my cheek, says something else to me in her high-pitched voice and then takes hold of Emeryel’s braided hair. It’s dyed bright green, except for about half an inch of dark regrowth at the roots. Another shadow of Earth, another reminder.

‘Maybe we can devise a way to dry some fruit so it’ll last into the next season.’ I’m not exactly sure what the next season will be, but the larger our food store, the better for all of us. Torksten says it rains all year round, and since he’s been on Rainland for about two years, he’s no doubt right.

Nevertheless, I can’t help thinking that there’s a lot more to this planet than we realize. Kerrok proved that today by discovering the water into the hot spring is somehow being pumped in when originally we’d assumed it was natural.

I collect some tubers from their place in the storeroom. ‘I’ll cook dinner tonight.’ It’s the least I can do.

The four of us plus Gracie sit around the campfire at the center of Home Room while I cut tubers into bite-sized pieces, ready to be boiled. There aren’t a lot of cooking options. It’s

either roast over the fire or boil in water over the fire. Or not cooked at all.

As Rose, Emeryel and Torksten have all been out in the rain for most of the day, I figure they'll appreciate a warm meal. Emeryel in particular, as her wrist is still healing after being broken. It's been a month, but it's a slow process, and after a long day out I'm guessing it's aching, even though she hasn't once complained.

My twin has her hands and feet stretched toward the newly re-lit fire, and when she catches my eye, oozing contentment.

That's one thing I love most about my twin: she always takes everything at face value. When we first crashed on Rainland, she did everything she could to look after me. Now she knows we're stuck on Rainland for good, she's determined to make the most of it. She helped Kerrok build the lift that carries us from the hangar down to the valley floor and back up again, and now she's helping Torksten and Emeryel with food collection.

I honestly don't know what I'd do without her, and I can't imagine what it must be like for the others, trapped on Rainland with no family at all. I can't imagine what it must be like for Sonam, who misses her life back on Earth.

Everything I could want is here.

My sister. My new friends. A chance at a new life without all my past failures hanging over me like an anvil waiting to drop onto my head—and Rose's head, though she had absolutely no idea.

Fuck! My heart pounds, and my hands get all sweaty. 'Need some water,' I mumble.

I practically sprint toward the hangar and through the open door. Standing on the edge of the opening, I stick my hands out into the rain until I've caught enough in my cupped hands that I can wash my face.

I'm shaking as all the guilt I've tried to suppress all day comes flooding over me. Back on Earth, Rose trusted me, and I completely failed her. So much so that I was actually relieved

when we crashed on this planet, so far from Earth—and the bank. It's meant I never have to tell Rose exactly how much I'd fucked up.

Pathetic, Calla.

Of course, she doesn't know why I'm so happy to be here. Sometimes I catch her looking at me strangely, like she knows I'm keeping something from her, even though we promised never to lie to each other. We're all the family we have.

Our father was a dickhead who died a few years ago.

Our mum is a control freak we haven't seen in years.

I plaster what I can only pray is a convincing smile onto my face and head back to the fire and the food I'm supposed to be cooking.

Rose is chatting with Emeryel, thank goodness, and doesn't notice my strange behavior. Kerrok, on the other hand, has joined the group and watches my every move. I acknowledge his arrival with a little wave that startles him, as if he doesn't know what it means or how to respond, and I return to cooking.

Jess once confessed to me she was also pleased to be trapped on this planet with no way home. She has Vorden, the love of her life.

Emeryel has Torksten.

Kerrok has his brother.

I have Rose.

Sonam has nobody. The guilt doubles in size, so strong my hand slips as I'm cutting another tuber, and the stone knife hits the ground with a clatter.

Immediately, Kerrok picks it up for me. 'Let me do that. You should not be cooking.'

I glare at him. 'I can cook as well as anyone else.'

'I did not mean ...' He flounders, confused by my outburst, and I feel like an absolute bully. Of course he wasn't insulting me; he was trying to be helpful, like he always is. I

don't think I've ever heard him say a mean thing this entire month. 'Sorry. Why don't you tell the others about your new plan?'

He watches me for a moment longer, then pulls back his top lip in another approximation of a smile. It doesn't come naturally to him. But who am I to judge? Half my smiles these days are fake.

'It is our plan,' he says. 'Our discovery.'



KERROK

The others are interested in hearing what Calla and I discovered about the hot spring, and the Mating Females all start talking about how good it would be to have running water in Home Room. Their enthusiasm never ceases to amaze me. Anor'os females show little emotion for anything but their young, preferring to withdraw from the world in preference for spending time with their Mating Partners, declining from partaking in any manual duties.

Only Sonam shows little excitement, joining us at the fire only long enough to collect her dinner before returning to the sanctuary of her bedcave.

It concerns me that she still does not trust me or Torksten.

The other Mating Females all watch Sonam's retreat with identical expressions of worry and concern. They too care for Sonam's welfare, but when nobody follows her back to her cave, I speculate that they are as lost about how to help her as I am.

I fear keeping my distance is all Torksten and I can do for Sonam at this moment. When she is ready to talk, we will be here for her—as will Vorden. I know this to be true.

‘So what's the next step in your plan?’ Rose asks. I am not surprised by this question. This human, who looks so much like Calla, is always wanting to know more, to do more, as if she can lift the entire planet in her own bare hands.

If Rose knew of my thoughts and feelings toward her sister, she would not treat me as kindly as she does now. Guilt at coveting Calla when I am not worthy of such a mate almost sticks the next words in my throat. But I clear my voice and attempt to appear as unaffected as possible. ‘I will need to track the water to its source. Once I know where it begins, I can start planning how to pump it into Home Room.’

Rose nods, her expression showing interest. ‘Surely we'll need to test if we can even drink that water? We can drink

rainwater, sure, and we can bathe in the cave water, but can we drink it?’

I peer at Calla, and she winces. ‘Oh, right. I forgot about that.’

Rose rolls her eyes.

‘It does not signify,’ I tell her. ‘We can easily test the water for any harmful additives. May I borrow your data tablet?’ I direct this question to Torksten. He is the only one of us who still has a working data tablet. Mine and Vorden’s have both broken. ‘It will only take a moment.’

Torksten looks ready to refuse, and I know this is because he does not like using any tech. If a ship were to be passing this planet—as unlikely as that might be—they could detect the tech. That is how the Hov found the Mating Females when they returned to claim their lost bounty. Now, we try hard to use as little tech as possible, but occasionally it cannot be helped.

Eventually Torksten agrees. It takes less than two minutes to test the water in the hot spring. Aside from a few harmless minerals that have seeped out of the rock itself, the water is completely harmless—to Anor’os and to humans, ‘making it the perfect drinking source,’ I conclude.

‘That’s really cool,’ Rose says as I return Torksten’s data pad to him, the power firmly switched off.

I do not understand this ‘cool’ the Mating Females often say. I rub the skin behind one ear under which my translator sits. It is nothing more than a small lump, but without it I would understand nothing the Mating Females say. It is the same for them, for they do not speak Common, but some other, unknown language I had never heard before meeting them. For that reason, the translator has trouble with some of their words, especially when there is not an equivalent in the Common tongue. Just to be safe, I clarify: ‘The water is not cool. The hot springs are uncomfortably warm.’

‘No, they’re not.’ Emeryel protest, her pet climber still sitting on her shoulder. ‘They’re the perfect temperature.’

‘I didn’t mean— Oh, never mind.’ Rose laughs. Her laugh sounds a little like Calla’s, but it is not identical, and this new piece of knowledge pleases me. Calla is her own person. As I am not the same as my older brother, despite the many similarities Vorden and I share.

Instinctively, my hand drops to the Outlaw brand at my hip. This brand we share, although mine is considerably larger than his, and I am hit by a fresh wave of shame and guilt and something else. Something that might be panic.

I stand so suddenly Torksten jumps. As an ex-gladiator, he is always on alert for signs of danger. ‘I apologize,’ I tell him. ‘I will have a long day tomorrow. It would be good for me to get some rest.’

Torksten nods, and I know he is silently telling me that this night he will guard the Mating Females. It is a look that they do not notice, which is good. If they were to discover we watch over them at night, I do not think they would be happy. Rose would insist on taking a watch herself, and that would defeat the purpose.

‘Wait.’ Calla also stands, and her face flushes pink again. ‘Can I come tomorrow? I could help you.’

Fear that hope will be displayed on my face has me examining the holster at my hip rather than looking at Calla. ‘It will be an arduous walk through the tunnels with no promise of actually finding what we seek.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘Calla—’ Rose reaches toward her sister.

‘I want to help him,’ Calla says. ‘You’re helping them—’ She waves at Emeryel and Torksten (and Gracie), seated so close together there is not a slither of space between their bodies, and I catch sight of the gesture in my peripheral vision. ‘I want to be useful too.’

‘Hmm. You’d better take some food. And you—’ Rose turns her attention onto me, her eyes narrowed, and she crosses her arms over her chest. ‘You’d better not let anything bad happen to my sister.’

The words she speaks are a vow. I meet Rose's gaze as I press my hand to my chest, at the center of my Hunter tattoos. I might not be a Hunter anymore, but that does not mean I will ever renounce my sacred duty to protect Mating Females.

'I swear,' I say with complete seriousness. 'I will protect Calla with my life. Now and forever.'

CHAPTER FIVE



KERROK

I barely sleep all night and am preparing for a day spent with Calla before the sunlight has penetrated the thick layer of clouds. I have my survival kit, one of the few things I salvaged from the Haul after the Hov destroyed it. I pack food and fill my flask with fresh water, and I then prepare breakfast for everyone.

Everyone, but mainly for Calla.

Torksten rises before all the others, greeting me with a simple nod. He appears tired but content, and I know he remained watchful throughout the night, even as he lay in the arms of his own Mating Female.

Jealousy tightens my chest. I am the only male on this planet without a mate of my own. Of course I am happy for my brother, just as I am happy for Torksten; it is a life I never thought possible.

But I am not like those two. I am more of an Outlaw than either of them. Vorden's only crime was loyalty to me. He followed me into the life of an Outlaw when our tribe found I had broken one of their most sacred laws and dismissed me from our birth planet.

It is entirely my fault Vorden can never return to Anor. Therefore, of the two of us, he most deserves happiness.

I do not grant myself time to question my true expectations for how today will turn out. I do not allow myself to obsess over the fact that I will spend more time alone with Calla. And I certainly do not allow myself to consider why I wish to spend time alone with her.

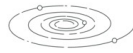
The answers will bring me nothing but disappointment.

Slowly, the others rise from their sleep until everyone is breaking their fast around the central fire—everyone but Vorden and Jessika, who have yet to return from their journey to the crashed Hov ship.

I hate returning to that ship. It reminds me of how close the Mating Females came to dying. I glance at Calla. She sits beside her sister, and they are talking quietly while they eat. I cannot hear what they are saying; they have their heads bowed toward each other, and I suspect some of their words are silent words that I do not understand.

I pretend to care for the fire so I can practice revealing my teeth in a human smile. I do not have the movement right. I must look uncomfortable and possibly threatening. When I catch Torksten staring at me over the top of Emeryel's head, I hurry to straighten my expression into one of neutral hostility.

Maybe he did not see. Maybe he does not realize what I am doing.



CALLA

Rose fusses over me all breakfast, and I totally let her. She even takes the elastic band out of her own hair, so she can tie my hair out of my face. It's such a familiar routine of her caring for me that warmth fills me, and I pull her into a tight hug.

She's a full eight minutes older than me, and she's been mothering me ever since. There were photos once of when we were toddlers. Rose used to climb the bars of our crib and escape. Back then, I was smaller and weaker, so I couldn't follow. She'd throw toys into the crib for me to play with, and she never moved beyond my sight.

The photos are all gone now. When Dad died, Mum kind of went bat-shit crazy and threw everything out, including me and Rose. She'd wanted 'nothing that reminds me of that fucking bastard' in her house. Charming as ever, my mum.

'I'll be back in time to cook your dinner,' I whisper to Rose.

Her arms around me tighten for a second and then she's pulling free of my hold. 'I know you will be—and I know you'll look after yourself and not take any stupid risks.' She tucks a strand of my hair more firmly behind one ear.

'Absolutely.' The thought of the secrets I'm keeping from Rose jumps to the front of my mind, and I duck my head. 'You won't even miss me.'

'Hmm.' She doesn't sound convinced but lets me follow Kerrok from Home Room. Silently, we head down the tunnel that leads into the water cave.

I glance back at my twin, a lump in my chest. I know I'm being ridiculous. It's not like we spent all our time on Earth together, and we've certainly been apart since we crashed on Rainland, but it's always been her who's left the cavern, and I've always stayed behind to wait.

My leaving feels alien. More alien than Kerrok or Torksten or Vorden.

Rose waves, a smile on her face, and I'm a little embarrassed that I'm getting so emotional. She didn't cry yesterday when she left to go food gathering with Emeryel and Torksten.

Good lord, I'm a crybaby. I straighten my shoulders with something akin to a herculean effort and turn away from her. In another few meters, Home Room disappears from my sight.

Kerrok pauses, and I almost run into his chest as he turns to face me. My eyes are stinging, and I wasn't exactly looking where I was going. I stumble to a stop, my feet feeling strange, and it's more than just my handmade shoes. They're heavy and somewhat unresponsive. My feet know they're the ones taking me away from my sister—which is an absurd notion.

Then again, historically, I've not made the best choices when feeling vulnerable. I scrub at my eyes, hoping Kerrok doesn't know what it means to cry.

He's clearly been down into the valley this morning because he's holding a bundle of iridescent leaves, picked from the trees that grow hundreds of meters below us in the forest. As soon as they're exposed to darkness, they glow, which is exactly why we all call them glow leaves. Obviously.

He's wearing a backpack identical to the one Vorden carries, and it looks full, as if he'd prepared for any eventuality. I bet Rose made him pack extra food.

'What's the plan?' I ask, breaking the silence, and I'm relieved to hear my voice sounds normal.

'Are you well, Calla? If you do not want to come—'

'That's not it.' He doesn't know how to smile, yet he notices when a girl's trying her hardest not to cry. 'I'm just being silly.'

'S-Silly?' He falters over the word, and I know it hasn't translated. There are a few human words the translators get stuck on.

‘I’m feeling a little sorry for myself.’ I tell him, kind of relieved I get the chance to change my answer. ‘I’ve spent the last few weeks in Home Room. It’s a little scary to be leaving it behind.’

‘You do not have to. I never asked—’

‘I know.’ I bite back on the sudden thought that maybe Kerrok doesn’t want me coming along today. He didn’t exactly ask so much as I insisted. ‘I want to do this. Running water would be an amazing asset to the group.’

He watches me for a moment longer. I can’t quite meet his gaze. It’s intimidating to be so closely examined by someone who isn’t Rose—or even Jessica, who has taken on a leadership role amongst the women. I worry that he might be able to see everything I’m feeling and thinking, even though we don’t share a lot of the same facial expressions. Even now, from the corner of my eye, I can’t tell if he’s worried or annoyed. There’s a wrinkle across his brow, and he tilts his head to one side.

His tail flicks, hitting the rock wall, and a little dust floats down through the air, the particles shimmering in the soft light from the bundle of leaves he’s holding.

‘It will be an asset,’ he eventually agrees and continues walking toward the water cave.

Hell, we haven’t even gotten as far as the hot spring and already I’m an emotional wreck. I suppress a humiliated laugh.

The water cave looks the same as yesterday.

‘The water is being pumped into the pool from here.’ Kerrok walks around the pool and points at the side where he found the small hole. ‘It is coming in right near the bottom, which suggests the water source is somewhere beneath this cave. I propose we discover what is directly below us.’

‘Sounds good.’ I want today to be a success. I want to achieve something. I haven’t been pulling my weight, and now is my chance to fix that. Cooking dinner and guarding the storeroom can’t be all I’m good for.

Together, we head toward the other tunnel that leads out of the water cave and deeper into the mountain. I've walked a little way down this tunnel before but not far.

Jess and Vorden are the only two who've walked all the tunnels. When we first crashed on this planet, they hiked through the tunnels to the mountaintop. It took them nearly three days to make the full climb to Home Room.

Now it's much faster to take the moving platform Kerrok and Rose built from salvaged spaceship parts. It's kind of like an Earth elevator but without sides or a roof. Honestly, it gives me the heebie jeebies every time I ride it, thinking that there's only a wooden platform between me and falling to my death. It's why I haven't left Home Room all that often since coming up here.

But tunnels I can manage. Tunnels are safe. I take a shaky breath. Tunnels won't kill me, even if they are almost pitch black, the floor and ceiling uneven with stalagmites and stalactites. Even if there's a possibility I'll get lost down here and never find my way back.

Bloody hell. I'm doing it again—not thinking clearly and letting my imagination and my panic get the better of me.

Kerrok lifts his bundle of glow leaves higher, throwing soft light off the tunnel ceiling. It's narrow here, too narrow for us to walk side by side, and I resist the sudden urge to take hold of his tail as if it's a safety line connecting us.

Instead, I relish the softness of the tuft of fur at the end of his tail as it brushes against my legs each time I step too close to Kerrok. Never once does he ask me to move back, to give him a little distance, and after a few moments, the gentle movement of his tail speeds up. I have the strangest idea he's doing it on purpose so he can keep touching me.

In no world can I imagine he's afraid of the semi-darkness. He's at least seven-feet tall and built like a warrior. Which means he's doing it to help me. I draw in a deep, long breath and let it out slowly. His kindness never ceases to surprise me, like how he cooked everyone breakfast this morning. I noticed he served me a meal bigger than anyone else. Soon, the

constant touch of his tail on my leg—despite the barrier of my jeans—settles my nerves.

The tunnel slopes downwards ever so slightly, and judging by the stories Jess has told, it will weave back and forth through the mountain. Kerrok and I have only got to follow it long enough to get below the water cave.

‘How will we know when we’re low enough?’ My voice bounces off the tunnel walls and echoes back at us, louder than I realized it would. I wince at the sound.

‘I do not know.’ Kerrok’s deeper voice doesn’t echo as much. Rather, it vibrates, more touch than sound. ‘I have not come down this far before.’

That doesn’t surprise me. Kerrok is always so busy doing one thing or another for the good of the group, he’s probably not had time for exploration.

The tunnel turns, and the ceiling gets even lower, until Kerrok must bow his head to keep from hitting the rock. It looks uncomfortable, but he doesn’t complain. We keep walking. I think—with the emphasis on *think*—we’ve turned almost a full 180 degrees and are heading back toward Home Room, but of course we’re lower now, so we must be nearly underneath it.

Perhaps Kerrok is thinking the same because he speeds up a little, though not fast enough to leave me behind. I speed up too, excitement finally making this day feel like the adventure it is. The pale light from the leaves he’s holding bounces off the walls, barely illuminating three feet ahead of us.

‘Surely we’re almost there.’ And then suddenly we’re somewhere, but it’s not at all what I’d been expecting.

CHAPTER SIX



KERROK

The tunnel ends abruptly at a large hole in the wall that overlooks the forested valley below. I blink in the sudden light. There is a narrow ledge that extends a little way beyond the opening, and we both step outside into the rain. I do not think it is cold, but I look at Calla to make sure she is not shivering either.

She is not. Instead, she is looking down at the forest. We eat our mid-day meal in silence. I cannot read her expression well. I bite back on my curiosity, but my mouth is already opening despite my instincts shouting at me that it is not my place to ask.

‘What are you thinking?’ The words escape on a breath of air.

She glances up at me. There’s no anger in her eyes and no harsh judgment on me for asking such a question. ‘It’s beautiful,’ she says simply. ‘Whenever I see this view, I’m instantly reminded that we’re not on Earth anymore.’

‘I would have expected looking at me was enough to remind you of that.’ Earth, as far as Vorden and I have been able to discover, is a barbarian planet without space travel. The Interplanetary Guidelines strictly forbid all contact with planet-bound species, so Earth’s knowledge of other planetary species is nonexistent—except for those few who have been illegally abducted.

She lifts one shoulder in a fascinating half shrug. ‘Sometimes, I guess.’

She is lying. While humans and Anor’os share many similarities, she is so unlike any Mating Female I have ever met before, I am constantly marveling at the differences. The top of her head is barely level with the middle of my chest. Where I have plated armor under my skin protecting my chest and back, Calla is all softness and curves. Her breasts are

much rounder and fuller than any Anor's Mating Female, and she is not lethargic and lazy as they are.

Rather, I see determination in the set of her jaw and the way she holds her shoulders. I also see tension. Tension I wish I could ease, although I do not know how.

'You do not miss your planet?' It is another question I would never have dared ask had I still been a Hunter on Anor. Hunters do not ask questions of Mating Females. Hunters ensure their safety—and the safety of their Mating Partners and children. That was my task, and that was where my contact with the females of our species ended.

I run a hand over my rain-dampened face, the tension in my own body almost unbearable, and my bad shoulder aches. Even without looking down at my hip, I can picture the shape and texture of my Outlaw brand. The heat of the iron tore at my skin, tightening and distorting it so that the skin can never properly heal.

It did not cause any serious injury because of the armor plates under my skin, but it hurt like nothing else I had ever experienced, and it still hurts, although not physically.

It is an ugly mark, designed to punish an ugly deed.

Calla shuffles beside me, and it is only then do I realize she has not answered my question. A surge of anxiety runs through me. She must think I have overstepped my boundary, but then she turns to face me, one foot worryingly close to the edge.

'I did not mean—' I begin. At the same time, she practically yells, 'I don't miss it!'

That is the loudest I have heard her speak. I startle, and she winces. 'Sorry. Sorry. I hate myself for not missing Earth, but I can't change how I feel. Fuck it!' She shouts the last two words and then covers her face with both hands.

I take the opportunity to hold her shoulders and gently direct her to take some steps away from the edge. If she fell, she would die, her body soft and vulnerable.

‘I’m such a terrible person. Sonam is miserable as hell, and all I feel is absolute relief.’ The pain in her words is nearly a palpable thing, and it causes me pain.

I know I should take my hands off her shoulders and step away, but I cannot. Locked in indecision, I am waging a war within myself, my old instincts versus my new ones.

Calla shuffles a step closer, her hands still hiding her face. Water has turned her hair a fraction darker than when it was dry. On a breath, she rests her forehead on my chest.

I stiffen, but she does not immediately pull back, seeking comfort from me. From me.

I cannot refuse her anything, and so I wrap my arms around her slight frame, holding her close. She slowly takes her hands away from her face to rest them on my hard chest.

‘I made some crappy decisions back home, and I didn’t know how to fix any of them.’ Her voice is back to its usual volume. ‘I didn’t tell Rose about any of it, and now I’ll never have to because there’s no way for us to ever get back there.’

She sniffs and wipes her nose on the back of her hand. I hold her a fraction closer.

‘I do not miss my home.’ It is an easy admission. ‘It has been many years since I was there last, and I never want to return.’

‘You’re not just saying that for me? You’re not just saying that because you crashed your ship saving me and are stuck here, whether or not you like it?’ She leans back a little way so she can look up at me, a furrow between her brows.

‘I am not. I would never lie to you, Calla.’ It is important to make such a promise. ‘You know I am an Outlaw.’ I wish the words did not stick in my throat, but they do.

She nods. Raindrops have caught in her eyelashes, and they glisten when she blinks. ‘Jessica told me about how you and Vorden were sent away. She said it had something to do with a woman.’

‘I broke a sacred law of my people. A Mating Female I was supposed to protect invited me into her chamber, and I entered, despite there being nobody else in the room.’

I pause. My tail flicks back and forth, spraying water in a sweeping arch behind me as I wait for her response. As I wait for her disgust.

‘I’m sorry. What?’ Calla takes a step back. With reluctance so strong it is a physical force, I let her go. ‘They kicked you off your planet because you were alone in a room with a woman?’

I hear no disgust in her voice, only anger.

Anger at me? Or for me?

‘I was a Hunter. She was a Mating Female.’

‘And?’ Calla presses her hands to her hips. ‘What of it?’

‘That is forbidden.’

‘So you had sex with another guy’s wife—I mean, with another guy’s mate?’

‘No! We did not procreate.’

‘Okay. So you kissed? Or was there a bit of over-the-shirt action?’

‘Akh? Over-the-shirt?’

She gestures at her covered breasts in a manner that does nothing to clarify her words, but now my gaze is on her chest, and my cock immediately takes an interest in the proceedings, half hardening. Thankfully, I believe it to be hidden by the pants I am wearing. Strange as they may be, there are clear advantages to such material coverings.

I stare over her head to the view of the mountains beyond, needing to look at something—anything—that is not Calla. And certainly not Calla’s rounded breasts, becoming more and more visible as the rain sticks her clothes to the curves of her body.

We are so high the clouds look almost close enough to touch.

‘Let me get this straight. They branded you and your brother with a literal honest-to-God brand, and then kicked you off your home planet all because you stood in a room with a woman. Alone?’

I nod. ‘My brother chose to be declared an Outlaw with me. He could have stayed.’

The way she is looking at me makes it all too evident that she is shocked. The expression is so clear on her face that even I cannot misinterpret it. ‘That is not like Earth,’ I think aloud.

‘Hell no. And what about now? We’re alone together.’

‘I know, but I promise nothing will happen.’ I speak quickly, wishing to make my intentions clear. ‘I want nothing more than to protect you, to make your life easier. To help you be happy.’

‘I don’t ... ’ She falters. ‘I can’t say that doesn’t sound wonderful because it does—you looking after me. But I’m responsible for looking after you. That’s how this works.’ She makes another gesture, this time gesturing between the two of us.

‘What works?’

‘Friendship.’ She frowns. ‘We are friends, right?’

‘Yes!’ I sound too eager, but I do not care. Friendship with Calla is a gift bigger than I could ever have asked for. ‘We are friends.’ The word `ls strange in my mouth. I have never spoken such words to a Mating Female.

I am indeed wealthy. I have my brother. And now I have Calla, my friend. *My friend.*

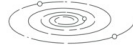
A part of me wants more, but I am so determined to appreciate the gift of friendship Calla has given me that I show her my teeth.

She laughs, a beautiful, clear sound. Then her gaze drops to my brand. ‘I can’t believe anyone could do that to you.’

When she touches my hip, I am so surprised that I jump.

‘Sorry.’ She ducks her head. ‘Sorry.’

‘No. That isn’t—’ But she has already stepped around me and into the tunnel. ‘Calla— My friend—’ Despite the rain, I search for anything to say that will draw her back to me, back into the moment of intimacy I never assumed I would share with any Mating Female, let alone with Calla. My gaze finds the carving that marks the wall beside the tunnel entrance. ‘Look at this.’



CALLA

I step back into the rain, my face hot with a blush. Kerrok is pointing at the rock wall of the mountain, right beside the tunnel entrance, and I see a pattern of lines carved into the stone.

‘That must be where Jess and Vorden carved their map.’ I haven’t seen one before, but Jess told me about how when she and Vorden were first exploring the tunnels they used to carve a map into the wall at every entrance as a way of remembering directions. There isn’t exactly any paper or pens on this planet. Cave carving or word of mouth are our only means of communication.

I briefly close my eyes, almost unable to believe I just spilled my guts to Kerrok like that. He asked one question and next minute I was practically yelling all my problems at him.

With a shaking finger, I trace one of the carved lines. It looks a little like a maze, and I try to find the beginning. It’s easy enough. Not once is there a dead end. In fact, the more I examine the map, the more I realize the tunnels are one long tunnel that twists and turns its way up through the mountain, leading to the hot spring and then to Home Room.

‘What do you think this is?’ I run a finger down the center of the map. ‘The tunnel never cuts through the direct center of the mountain.’ It’s like there’s a column of stone running up the mountain from the ground to the base of the water cave, and not once is it interrupted by the tunnel.

‘I am not sure.’ Kerrok frowns.

I’ve noticed that the corners of his mouth turn down much more easily than they turn up. I suppose he has different facial muscles to a human. Maybe that’s why smiling doesn’t come easily to him or his brother—or Torksten.

‘We are close to that area.’ He points to where we are on the map and traces a line along a tunnel to the column. It

should only be a few meters away, and so we duck back inside to investigate.

It isn't as close as I'd assumed, and I trudge after Kerrok. I'm not tired exactly, but in the last month I haven't done all that much exercise. Staying in Home Room doesn't lend itself to much physical activity beyond organizing the pantry and preparing most of the meals.

The glow leaves haven't wilted yet, and I watch Kerrok's back as I follow him to the stone column. There's tension in his shoulders. At least there might be. It's a little hard to tell. Perhaps that's how his shoulders are: all sharp lines and defined muscles.

Only, now I think about it, I'm not sure those are muscles. They're probably the protective plates Jess told me about. They're just under his skin, across his chest and back. I trace the patterns across this back with my gaze. Some plates are large, others are tiny, giving him full mobility, particularly along his spine and across his shoulders. The shape of some plates is easier to see than others. Some are more visible when he moves a particular way and the edges sort of slide against each other.

Don't get me wrong, it's not obvious. Hell, it took me a month before I fully realized. But now that I know what I'm looking for and have an uninterrupted view of his back and all the time in the world to examine him, I can see them shifting slightly under his skin as he walks.

That would explain why, when he hugged me, it felt like being hugged by a warm rock wall—completely impenetrable. I didn't hate it. In fact, it made me feel safe.

Oh, hell. I run a hand over my face and almost walk straight into Kerrok's back. I squeeze around him to see what's caught his attention. He's staring at a blank wall.

'This it?'

He nods and touches the wall, running his metal hand over it as if he's searching for a secret door. For a moment, I watch,

fascinated by how hand-like his prosthetic is. It moves as though it's always been a part of him.

I copy his movement, touching the wall with my own hand. It looks like an ordinary tunnel wall to me. There are even a few stalactites clinging to the ceiling overhead, one nearly half the length of my arm. I touch the tip where there's a bead of moisture. The stalactite itself is cream colored and a little waxy, like a candle. For a second, I'm tempted to suggest we set one alight to see if it'll burn, but of course it won't. It's not actually made of wax.

'Can you feel that?'

'Umm?' I copy Kerrok again and press both my hands to the wall, pretending I hadn't gotten completely distracted.

Considering the tunnel is so narrow, we're pressed shoulder to shoulder. Kerrok can't straighten to his full height, not with the stalactites.

'Is it vibrating?' I frown, concentrating on the wall. It's possible I had imagined it.

'I believe so.' He shifts a little so that he's standing partly behind me. As he has both hands pressed to the wall, I find myself standing in the cage of his arms. I study his prosthetic arm. It's nearly impossible to tell where his skin ends and the metal begins.

'Can you—' I press my lips together. It's probably really rude of me to ask about his arm.

'Can I what?' His voice is quiet, and the heat of his breath tickles the back of my neck. 'Ask me what you will, Calla.'

'Can you feel what you touch? With your prosthetic?'

'I can.' I feel rather than see him nod. 'It is a part of me, more biology now than tech. A little like your translator.' He touches the spot behind my right ear where my translator sits under the skin. I can't feel that it's there; it's a part of me now, kind of like my ear: I know my ear is there, but I can't actually move my ear.

‘And using your arm isn’t like using Torksten’s data pad?’
In for a penny, in for a pound.

‘My arm is a receiver only. Again, like the translators, it does not send out any signal and remains untraceable.’

‘I see.’ At least I think I do. ‘How did you lose your arm? You have such deep scars.’ I touch his shoulder, roped with muscles and scar tissue.

‘It happened after I was Outlawed. Our tribe flew us to the nearest trading planet and left us there without a ship of our own or any supplies, and so we joined a bounty hunting party. We knew how to fight.’ He clears his throat. ‘We *only* knew how to fight, so it felt like a good opportunity.’

‘But it wasn’t.’ That’s not hard to guess.

‘But it was not.’ He pauses long enough I think that’s all he’s going to tell me. ‘We were ambushed. Our bounty somehow knew we were coming for them and set up a trap. Nobody died, but it was close. Very close.’

‘And then what?’ I look at him over one shoulder.

‘Then I built my mech arm, and Vorden and I continued to survive.’

Survive? That’s the best thing he can say of his time as an Outlaw?! Fury boils up inside me, and I want to scream at the people who abandoned Kerrok for such a punitive crime as being along with a Mating Female.

‘Fuck them!’

He blinks. ‘I do not wish to fuck them. I only wish to fuck you.’

‘No. I mean—’ A laugh bubbles up my throat despite my anger. ‘They all suck, for what they did to you.’

‘Aka? Suck ...’ His eyes darken with desire as he watches me. ‘If you insist.’

I roll my eyes. I’m trying to defend Kerrok, and his mind is in the gutter. Though I suppose it’s my fault—or the translators.

He remains still, his undivided attention on me. His body temperature is hotter than a human, and warmth radiates off him. It's strangely calming, and I take a deep breath.

In that moment of calm, I know we haven't imagined the vibrating wall. I can feel it clearly beneath the palms of my hands.

'What do you think's making the vibrations?'

'That I cannot answer.'

We stand like that a moment longer. I hate how much I like it. Here, I'm shielded from ... well, from everything. His body creates a barrier between me and the rest of the planet.

A barrier between me and all my panic and worry and guilt.

Kerrok the Hunter. Kerrok the Outlaw. Kerrok the Bounty Hunter. Kerrok of Rainland. He has had so many lives.

Then he steps back and breaks the spell.

Hurriedly, I run a hand through my hair, dragging the wet strands away from my forehead and trying to smooth it into some semblance of order.

Well, that was strange, and I hear the shake in my breath as I let the air out of my lungs.

I turn to face him, but Kerrok is staring rather resolutely up at the ceiling somewhere over the top of my head. I glance up there instinctually, assuming he's seen something interesting, but it's just stone and stalactites.

'Sooo,' I drag the word out. 'Do you think that vibration has something to do with the water?'

'Calla. My friend.'

'Yep? Kerrok?' He's acting really, really strange. I lean to the side, as much as the narrow walls will allow, to peer behind him, but there's nothing there either. Okay?

'Maybe the water is being pumped through the center of the mountain to Home Room,' he admits finally.

‘Cool. So now we have to work out a way to tap into that water. Well, I guess we need to prove if your theory is right first, and then tap into the water, maybe diverting some of it to Home Room.’

He nods.

‘Are you alright?’ I try to rub out the wrinkles in my cotton T-shirt. Rock dust has turned the once white fabric an off-gray color.

‘I am.’ A muscle twitches in his cheek. Only then does he look down at me. ‘I have never had a Mating Female as a friend before. I am finding it difficult to know how I should be acting.’

‘Oh.’ Surprise forces a half snort, half laugh from my mouth, which is such a stupid noise my face prickles with heat. ‘I’ve never had a Hunter as a friend before.’

‘Outlaw,’ he corrects, and it sounds as if he’s had to wrench the word from his gut.

‘I’ve never had an Outlaw friend before.’ I press my hands to my hips. ‘You know, you might have been an Outlaw back on ... umm—’ God, I’ve forgotten the name of his planet. My face grows hotter, but I don’t let it stop me. ‘You might have been an Outlaw back on your home planet, but you’re not an Outlaw here. On Rainland you’re just *Kerrok*.’

He blinks his entirely green eyes, and the silence is so deafening it’s basically painful.

I swallow.

Kerrok touches one of my cheeks with a metal finger. It’s cold, where the rest of his body is warm. ‘Why do you change color?’

‘Oh, ha-ha.’ I force a laugh, as if my entire chest didn’t seize up. I absolutely hate that I wear my fear and my panic and my embarrassment on my face. It sucks sometimes. For starters, it makes me a terrible liar. And because I know I’m terrible at lying, I panic even more when I’m trying to lie. I basically hadn’t been able to meet Rose’s eye for months back

on Earth, trying to keep my secrets from her. 'I'm a chameleon.'

He nods sagely. 'Akh.'

'What? No. That was a joke.'

CHAPTER SEVEN



KERROK

Deciding there is not much else we can do this day, Calla and I start walking back toward Home Room. She is silent as she walks behind me. While she was silent at the beginning of the day, that was a peaceful silence. This, now, is a painfully awkward silence.

I do not think she noticed my unworthy cock swell as we felt for vibrations in the wall, Calla within the circle of my arms. She did not notice how close I came to closing the gap between us and pressing my chest to her back. She did not notice how close I came to ... coming.

Or maybe she did?

It was blissful torture to stand so close and not touch.

Friends. The word runs around and around my head. *Friends, friends, friends.* I know her friendship is a gift, but I am already realizing I should never have accepted it.

Can I give it back?

Is that allowed?

How can I be Calla's friend when my body threatens to betray me whenever we are close? How can I be Calla's friend when I want to lick between her legs until her knees give way and she is screaming my name?

I shake my head, biting down so hard my jaw aches.

It takes everything inside me to keep walking, following the tunnel back to Home Room and the other humans. When we pass the hot spring, I suddenly wish it were ice water so I could freeze the heat from my body. Instead, I walk straight by the pool, steam rising from its surface.

I can hear Calla's light footsteps behind me, but before I can move from the tunnel into Home Room, she takes hold of my flicking tail. My body freezes.

‘Kerrok? We’re okay, right?’ The uncertainty in her voice almost breaks me there and then.

I turn to look at her. Her face is a deep, delightful pink, and I am bombarded with thoughts of how her coloring would look next to mine if we were to stand outside in the muted sunlight. My dark grays and blues beside her succulent pinks. More intriguing: how would our coloring look if we were skin to skin?

Unsurprisingly, my cock is once again rising. At this rate, I will be stiff and leaking for the rest of my life.

I close my eyes, and the next thought comes unbidden and with such clarity I cannot continue ignoring it.

I want to be Calla’s Mating Partner.

Fek! Never before have I allowed myself to admit as much so fully and completely, but in this moment I’m possessed by my wanting the small, delicate and infinitely fragile Mating Female standing before me. I’m possessed by the idea that I might have a mate of my own. That I may have Calla all to myself.

Calla, who has always been so kind. Calla, who loves this planet and our new lives here. Calla, who told me just moments ago that on Rainland I am not an Outlaw. She said those words as if they were simple to speak. She said those words as if they were the truth.

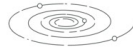
Just as truthful as my deepening and undeniable longing for her.

‘I know you didn’t exactly ask for my help today,’ she says, her voice low so the others cannot hear. ‘But I’m grateful you let me come anyway. I want to help more. I want to be useful. Does that make sense?’

I open my eyes. She has crossed her arms over her chest in an unmistakably defensive move.

Horror that she would think I did not want her spears through me. ‘I am glad to have your company, Calla. We made important discoveries today that I believe will be of significant benefit to everyone here.’ I force the corners of my lips to rise

and show her my pointed teeth. It is hard to talk like this, but I force myself to lie through my smile. ‘We are friends.’



Calla seeks the company of her twin as I stalk across Home Room toward my brother. Finally, he and Jessika have returned.

‘Hi, Kerrok.’ My brother’s mate waves, an entirely human movement.

‘Jessika.’ I have noticed some of the other Mating Females call her Jess on occasion, but it is not right for me to do so. Instead, I press my fist to my chest in a sign of respect and loyalty.

Something about my composure must hint at my need to speak privately with Vorden for Jessika says nothing else to me. Instead, she rises onto her toes to press her lips to the highest part of Vorden she can reach, which is the top of his chest. Then she hits his backside with her palm and walks away.

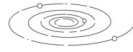
Vorden’s eyes widen in surprise and then darken with desire as he watches his mate stride away from him.

I take his arm and pull him into my private bedcave. The ceiling is tall enough that we do not have to bend our heads, but it is not so large that I can start pacing off all the energy currently consuming my body. Nor does the cave have a door; I have not sacrificed one of my blankets to make a privacy screen as Emeryel and Torksten, and Sonam, have. I had not envisioned I would ever need privacy. Now, I wish for nobody to overhear what I have to say to my brother.

‘Vorden, I need your advice,’ I practically whisper.

Immediately, I have his full attention. Before our ship was destroyed in a battle with the Hov, he was our captain. He is a natural leader, not only because he is a few years older than me. ‘About what?’

‘About how to mate a female.’



‘This is indeed serious.’ Vorden is quiet for a few breaths. ‘You wish for a human to make a claim on you?’

For a heartbeat, I see the smallest flash of panic in his eyes. Anor’os females are each assigned multiple Mating Partners, the male of our species being far more populous than the female, but I have always known Vorden would not share Jessika, even if I were interested.

‘No.’ I take a step back from him, wishing to separate myself from that idea. ‘Not Jessika.’

Another silence. ‘Calla, then.’

I want to nod. I want to confirm it is Calla I desire, but my old instincts suddenly hold me in their grip, and I can do nothing but remain still. Shame at even hinting about such a hope is a fierce enemy, and I avoid my brother’s gaze when I have never avoided his gaze before, not even when I was first decried as an Outlaw.

I do not see him approach, but he must move closer because he claps me on the shoulder. ‘You deserve happiness. Calla will make a worthy mate if this is also her wish.’

‘I—’ The words stick in my throat. ‘What if she—’

‘You must make your interest known and then let her decide herself if she will have you as her mate.’

I grip the handle of my gun, resting in its holster at my hip. ‘How?’ As a Hunter, they taught me to fight, to kill, to protect. As an Outlaw, I taught myself to repair spaceships. Vorden might have been our captain, but I was our engineer. I was the one who kept us flying, even when it had felt as though the universe was against us.

I know nothing of claiming a mate of my own.

‘That is easy. You kiss her. My Jessika says that kissing is something humans do to show their appreciation of each other.’

‘Kiss? You mean how Jessika kissed you on the chest?’ I point to the spot. Calla’s clothes always cover her chest. Am I supposed to kiss her clothes? I think back to what Calla asked me earlier: *a bit of over-the-shirt action?* Was this what she had meant?

‘Kissing can happen anywhere,’ Vorden says, and his eyes darken again with memories. ‘But it is best to start with kissing on the lips. If she is interested, she will kiss you back. At the same time, I mean.’

‘I understand,’ I say, although I do not really understand.

‘It is pleasurable. Once you have tried it, you will thank me for the suggestion.’

I try hard not to narrow my eyes in disbelief. ‘How would I go about ... kissing Calla’s mouth?’ Even the words are foreign to my tongue.

‘You—’ My brother slips a hand behind my neck and takes hold.

‘Are you sure?’ I frown. ‘It feels as if you are preparing to attack me.’ This is the perfect hold for a takedown.

‘This is just the start. Next, you bow your head so you can reach your potential mate’s mouth, and you press your lips to hers.’ He does not demonstrate any further. I open my mouth to tell him I still do not understand, but suddenly Calla is at the door to my bedcave.

Vorden takes a hasty step back, but Calla is not looking inside. Instead, she has her back to us, offering privacy without having to be asked.

‘Dinner is ready, boys. Come and get it.’

Vorden slaps me across the chest, his lips pulled back in an approximation of a human smile. ‘It is a good plan, yes?’

I do not answer. Instead, I hurry to follow Calla back into Home Room. Kissing sounds disagreeable. I will devise another, better way to show Calla my appreciation. Then maybe, *maybe*, she will claim me for her own.

CHAPTER EIGHT



CALLA

‘C alla and I must leave for a few days,’ Kerrok announces to the group during dinner. Everyone pauses in their eating and glances between us, including Rose who looks instantly suspicious.

‘Why?’ my twin asks me.

‘Yeah, why?’ I ask Kerrok.

He tells Vorden and Jessica about our plan to divert running water into Home Room for cooking and drinking, the only two who didn’t know what Kerrok and I were doing today.

‘This day, we discovered the tunnel does not cut through the very center of the mountain. There is a column that runs from the ground to the base of the water cave, and we believe that is how the water is being pumped into the hot spring.’ He finishes by telling everyone about how we made such a discovery and the vibrations we could feel when we pressed our hands to the wall of the central column.

The others look impressed, and I grin at Rose.

She bumps my shoulder with hers, but I know she’s happy. We all want running water into Home Room. It would be an absolute luxury.

Except for Sonam. She’s the only one not seated around the cooking fire. She took her dinner back to her bedroom cave when I first started serving our portions, and when I look over at her cave, the blanket door is motionless.

‘So you’re thinking there might be a lake under the mountain?’ Jessica asks. She’s leaning against Vorden, who has one massive arm around her shoulders.

Kerrok nods. ‘That is right.’

I glance at him because he never mentioned the possibility of a lake to me, and when he hurriedly looks away from me, I

get the impression that idea hadn't occurred to him. Until now. But surely that's why he proposed that he and I need to leave for a few days—to find the source of the water?

I clear my throat. 'We're heading down the mountain through the tunnels?'

'We need to know if there is any way into the central column,' Kerrok agrees. 'Maybe Vorden and Jessika missed something when they first mapped the tunnel.'

Kerrok shares a glance with Vorden. The brothers are similar, but not as similar as Rose and me. Sometimes when I look at her, it's like looking into a mirror with only a few slight differences reflected. Sometimes I think I know her face better than I know my own.

'It's a possibility,' Jess concedes. 'It was very dark, and we didn't always have fresh glow leaves to light our way.'

'You'll be gone at least six days. That's a lot of food to carry.' Emeryel is sitting on Torksten's lap, one arm around his shoulders, their empty dinner bowls on the seat beside them. Gracie is curled up in Emeryel's lap, her tail wrapped over her eyes as though to block out the light of the fire. She's asleep, her soundless breaths deep and slow.

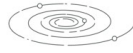
'I will bring my pack,' Kerrok says.

'And you can borrow mine too,' Vorden offers. 'Jessika and I will stay close to Home Room while you and Calla are gone. Our plans to salvage what is left of the Hov Freighter can wait. Running water is more important.' He nods all serious and stern at Kerrok, who nods all serious and stern back.

For a second, I think there's something else going on that only those two know about, but I dismiss the theory. The brothers know how much running water into Home Room could improve our lives here. They're just prioritizing jobs.

I duck my head, trying to hide my proud smile. I, Calla, am working on a priority job. I'm contributing to the entire group. I'm so pleased with myself for not letting my fears and guilt hold me back.

It's a brand-new life on this brand-new planet, and I won't let anything hold me back.



We set off early the next day, Kerrok carrying his backpack and me carrying Vorden's. At first, Kerrok tried to carry them both, but I insisted. If we're going to look for the water source together, then we should both carry some of the load. It's only fair.

It's mostly food in my bag, so it isn't too heavy—sand nuts, berries, a few tubers. We've got enough for four days; although by the third day we should reach the bottom of the mountain where we'll be able to detour outside to collect more food if needed, so a lack of food won't be a concern.

I'm also not nearly as concerned about leaving Rose today as I was yesterday. I know she'll be waiting for me when I get back. In the meantime, she's got a lot of things to keep her occupied. She's never been short of inspiration for things to do, even back on Earth. She was always busy with her studies and her uni lectures.

It takes almost no time at all to reach the water cave. Kerrok and I walk in silence as we pass by the hot spring and retrace our steps from yesterday. He's carrying another bundle of glow leaves, which scares away the darkest shadows.

Now and then, the tip of his tail brushes against my jean-clad legs, as though he's double checking I'm still there. It's sweet.

Ahead, I can see a little sunlight, where the tunnel opens on the side of the mountain. That's where we stopped yesterday, but we don't stop today. Kerrok instead follows the curve of the tunnel, and we walk straight by the opening, back into the semi-darkness.

It's kind of boring if I'm being honest.

I'm grateful that today my thoughts aren't spiraling out of control, not like they were yesterday, but clear thinking is

giving me a lot of extra time to kill. I look around for something to focus on, but a tunnel looks like a tunnel—long, narrow, enclosed. A few lumps and bumps in the rock. A few stalactites and stalagmites.

I watch Kerrok's back instead. He isn't one to make idle conversation, and I can't think of anything to say about our expedition that hasn't already been said, so I keep quiet. I tap the rock wall as we walk, counting in my head from one to one hundred and back again.

'Sooo ... '

'Yes?' Kerrok immediately pauses and looks around at me.

'Oh, nothing. I was just saying *sooo* ... '

'Sooo ... ' He repeats, drawing it out, copying my emphasis. Maybe it doesn't translate?

'Is there anything you'd like to talk about? You know, while we walk.'

His frown deepens.

'Because we're friends.' I finish lamely.

'Akh.' He continues walking.

'Nothing?'

'I am thinking.'

'Oh.' Thinking about how annoying I am? Or thinking about what he wants to talk about? Whatever the answer is, I'm blushing. God help me and my big mouth.

'I wish to talk about Earth,' he finally says. 'Did you have many Mating Partners on Earth?'

He's chosen the least enjoyable topic in the entire galaxy. I pull a face behind his back.

'Calla?'

How do I even answer that? *No, Kerrok. I never had a relationship. Nobody I met ever really wanted to date me—unless, of course, they had a thing for twins, and even then dating wasn't what they wanted.*

Oh, and to top that, a so-called friend once told me I've got a toxic view of romantic relationships. Ash was working at the café part-time while studying, and she absolutely loved to analyze everything that was wrong with me, from my ideas about love to how I put on my shoes and socks. Just because I wasn't at uni and she was.

It used to drive me up the wall. I'm pretty sure it's partly Ash's fault that I've got what she termed an 'inferiority complex'.

And my parents. It's absolutely my parents' fault. They were a nightmare. Always claiming they were in love but at each other's throats all the bloody time. They actively tried to make each other as miserable as possible. So much so that they didn't have any focus left over to give to me and Rose.

And then Dad died, and Mum chucked us both out.

Instead, what I say aloud is, 'Nope.' And clamp my mouth shut.

His shoulders stiffen, and silence falls again. *Fuck.* I was the one who asked Kerrok to talk, and then I got too self-conscious and too in my own head, and I shut him down.

'How about you?' I ask. 'I'm still a little hazy about what Jess told me. She said there aren't many women of your species left.'

'The birth rate for females is much lower than the birth rate for males.'

'Is that why you weren't allowed in a room with a woman?' That makes absolutely no sense to me. His people really branded and outlawed Kerrok and his brother because he was alone with a woman. It sounds like hell.

'I was a Hunter, not her Mating Partner.'

'What even is a Mating Partner? Are men assigned women?'

'The council assigns Mating Females multiple Mating Partners,' he says, as if it was obvious.

‘That doesn’t happen on Earth. We get to pick our own mates.’

‘There are many Mating Females on Earth?’

‘Well, I guess. But we don’t call them *Mating Females*.’ I hate that term. ‘They’re just women.’

‘And the males?’

‘They’re just men. No-one’s assigned to anyone else.’

‘Then how?’ He practically growls his frustration.

‘Then how, what?’

‘How do you know the mating will be productive?’

‘Ahh—’ I really, really regret asking Kerrok to pick the conversation. Right now we could be walking in blissful silence. ‘We don’t. Well, I guess there are tests people can do to check. Like at a fertility clinic.’

‘I understand.’ He nods, even though I don’t think I’ve been clear. As I open my mouth to attempt another explanation, he says, ‘We have tests too. When a male comes of age, his milt is tested. Then, depending on their virility, the council assigns them a position—Mating Partner, Guard or Hunter.’

‘Milt, as in—’ I realize he means sperm, and I blush even more. ‘I see,’ I quickly add before he explains.

Kerrok doesn’t sound embarrassed. He sounds matter of fact, so I take a moment to ponder about what he’s told me.

They didn’t assign him the position of Mating Partner, meaning he must not be ... virile. So he could have sex with, say, someone like me and I wouldn’t get pregnant.

Interesting. Very interesting.

That’s when I realize I’m staring at his ass again, the point right below his tail. Of course, it’s hidden by his pants, but I can still make out the general shape. Besides, I’ve got the memory of how he looked buck naked sealed in my brain.

So now I'm thinking about his dick, and how it looked when he was sitting in the hot spring when the thick head was poking out of the water.

I tap my hand against the tunnel wall faster and faster. A friend isn't supposed to want to wrap their body around their other friend, but that's exactly what I want to do to Kerrok. I want to do all the things I never did back on Earth.

Fucking hell. I really want to have sex with Kerrok.

The thought is so strange to me, I startle. Considering my crush back on Earth barely even looked at me, I didn't spend too much time fantasizing about having sex with him. I mainly fixated on how to get his attention, and then my whole face would turn bright red and I'd never acted on any of my plans.

But here and now, I seriously want to have sex. With Kerrok. I don't just find him hot and delicious; I want to act on those feelings of hotness and deliciousness.

My hands shake, and I stuff them behind my back. *Oh God.*



KERROK

Calla stops talking as we near the central column. I approximate we are two levels below the water cave. The air smells of vegetation dust and earth, which tickles my nose. When I press my hands to the rock, the wall's vibrating.

'Do you think the vibrations are stronger here?' I ask, and the knowledge that I can freely ask Calla her thoughts and opinions on such matters gives me a little thrill. To talk so freely with her is a luxury I will always cherish.

She holds her hands against the wall, and I await her answer with anticipation.

'Yeah, I guess. Only it's still faint. If I didn't know what I was looking for, I'd probably not even have noticed.'

I nod my agreement, trying hard not to fixate on her earlier answer when she said she did not have a Mating Partner back on her birth planet. It is excellent news. More than I could have hoped for. Had she been an Anor'os, she already would have been assigned many Mating Partners. But she is human. She is Calla.

Mine. The aggressive thought is partnered with my tail instinctively wrapping protectively around one of her legs. I freeze at the contact. I can only control my tail if I concentrate on it. Otherwise, it does as it wishes.

Calla looks up at me, her eyes hooded. Her lips are parted, and I am reminded of my brother's advice. *Kiss her. On the lips.*

But how? Do I ask permission? Do I pounce suddenly? Do I move slowly enough that she has time to reject my admiration?

I wished to think of some other way to show my feelings, and I have had no scudding ideas. But standing here, I cannot wait for another opportunity. She swallows, and I watch the

enticing movement of her delicate throat with all the hunger of a starving Anor'os.

I am starving, although not for food. For touch. For Calla's touch.

Intoxicating, she smells a little of salt, a little of rain and a little of something else I can't quite pinpoint. A groan echoes around the narrow tunnel, and it strikes me I was the one who made such a sound.

'Kerrok.' I watch as her gaze darts to my mouth and away.

I will kiss her, I decide, and I bow my head, slowly so she can escape.

She does not move, and then my lips are touching hers. We stare at each other, unmoving. She is so close my vision of her is blurry.

'Is this right?' I ask against her mouth. I have no point of reference except for what Vorden has told me, and the few kisses I have seen him share with Jessika.

'Ahh ... ' When her lips move against mine, my cock twitches, interested, although the rest of me has no idea if what I am doing is correct. 'What exactly are you trying to do?' There is hesitation in her tone.

'I am kissing you,' I tell her, bending my knees to bring our heads more to the same level.

'Oh. Well—' Her face flushes with heat. 'I guess. I mean, I think so?' She leans back, breaking the contact between our lips.

It was a tolerable experience; any contact with Calla is desirable—my cock is in full agreement—but it was not quite the showing of appreciation Vorden promised it would be.

She does not look appreciated. Rather, she looks flustered and—I squint for a better view in the semi-darkness—nervous?

'I am not precisely an expert on k-kissing.' She stumbles over the last word.

‘I have never kissed anyone before,’ I confess.

‘N-neither have I.’ She leans back another few inches until her back is resting against the vibrating wall.

‘In that case, we will have to practice. Yes?’

She does not meet my gaze, and the splotches of pink color have traveled down her throat and under the collar of her tee-shirt. Then she nods. ‘Yeah.’ It’s a breathy whisper that has my cock twitching. ‘We should practice.’

CHAPTER NINE



CALLA

‘Practice makes perfect.’ My laugh is hollow, and Kerrok must hear it too, because he gives me another one of his long looks and then straightens suddenly as if he’s come to a conclusion. He hits the top of his head on a low portion of the ceiling. The sound echoes down the tunnel, and I wince in sympathy. Kerrok hardly seems to notice. Maybe he’s got a thick skull.

‘We will continue with our exploration. There is time for practicing when the sun sets and we settle down for the night.’ Settling his backpack more firmly on his shoulders, he flashes me both rows of sharp teeth and takes the lead again.

I watch his back as he walks further and further away from me. The light of the glow leaves fades until I’m standing in darkness.

Part of me wants to shout at him to return, to keep kissing me with his strange, closed-mouth kisses. But the other part of me is relieved he so easily stopped. I let out a shaky breath. How can I fear something I want so much?

His little circle of light has almost completely disappeared from my sight, and I hurry to catch up, my fear of being left behind outweighing my humiliation.

Besides, he’s right: we have work to do now. I can worry about kissing Kerrok later.

Unfortunately, my brain doesn’t get the *later* memo, and I can’t stop obsessing about our kind-of kiss *right now*. Heat stings my face, and I berate myself for admitting I’d never been kissed before.

I silently try counting again, and then I recite the entire café menu to myself, but even that does little to distract me—I could recite that thing in my sleep and still have the mental capacity to dream about something entirely different.

‘Sooo ... is Vorden your only brother?’ I ask the first non-kissing question I can think of.

‘I have many brothers. Our mother is a successful Mating Female. Before the council outlawed me, they had assigned our mother her eighth Mating Partner.’

‘Eighth! Wow. That’s—’ That’s a lot of sex.

Apparently, I have a one-track mind.

‘Vorden and I are most similar in age, and the council assigned us to the same Hunters’ unit. My other brothers are all younger, and it is not customary for brothers to spend any time together once they have reached maturity.’ He glances at me over his shoulder. At this angle, the glow leaves illuminate only half his face, and he looks a little like something out of a movie. But he isn’t some Hollywood fantasy. He’s real. As if to prove this point, his tail lightly brushes my leg, right above my knee.

‘You and Vorden being so close is kind of unusual, then?’

He considers my question for a moment as he continues walking. Despite the difference in our heights, he never walks so fast that I can’t keep up. ‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘It’s the same for me and Rose. Twins weren’t so usual back on Earth. Sometimes people didn’t know how to treat us. A few people even used to think we were the same person. Like, if they told Rose something, they’d expected me to know about it as well.’

‘You are not telepathic.’ He pauses. ‘Are you telepathic, Calla?’

‘No.’ I laugh, and I’m pleased to hear it sounds normal again. ‘We don’t have some freaky twin thing going on.’

He nods. ‘I did not think so.’ He says it with such earnestness, I’m taken aback.

Man, he’s a sweetie.

A sweetie-pie in the body of a seven-foot alien with a tail and amazing tattoos.

He keeps walking, and that's when my brain finally catches up with what he asked. 'Wait, are there telepaths in—' I gesture at the tunnel ceiling, vaguely trying to encompass the entire known universe. That is, Kerrok's known universe. Not mine. Mine is just Earth, that crappy Hov spaceship in which we were abducted, and here: Rainland.

I'm not sure he sees my gesture, considering I'm walking behind him, but he seems to know what I mean, because he says: 'Yes.' I practically hear his *of course* at the end of that sentence, but he's way too polite to say it.

'Huh.' Telepaths. I guess if alien brides with eight partners, spaceships and forest planets where it never stops raining exist, then why not telepaths too? 'Have you ever met one?'

'Once. As Outlaws, Vorden and I met many people.' His tone darkens, and I get the feeling that most of those people weren't nice.

'Did you ever meet any other humans?' The question is out of my mouth before I've fully comprehended what I'm asking. As soon as I've said it, I'm desperate to know the answer. Surely Jessica, Emeryel, Rose, Sonam and I aren't the only women to have been abducted throughout the entire history of Earth.

But he shakes his head. 'I have met nobody like you.'

The way he says *like you* and not *humans* sends tingles through my body. Surely that's a good thing when it was me he wanted to kiss earlier, and it wasn't any ordinary kiss. It was his first kiss.

His first kiss.

Surely there's something romantic about each of us being the other one's first?

I still get the cringes remembering how I admitted I'm a virgin, but perhaps I shouldn't. Kerrok hadn't kissed anyone before me, and I don't think he's pathetic.

Quite the opposite, in fact. The tingles intensify. I'm getting hot around the collar. All too soon, my jeans are airless

and uncomfortable.

I fan myself with a hand, but it does little to subdue the direction of my thoughts.



KERROK

I can hear Calla moving behind me. She is full of restless energy. I subtly increase my speed, and she follows without pause. At the next bend in the tunnel, I see a new light ahead—another entrance. Together we step out onto the ledge, into the fresh air and the cooling rain.

The rain and the mud and the floral sweetness of vegetation scent the air. I relish the coolness of the water on my skin, after nearly overheating with thoughts of touching Calla rushing around my head. I know my mistake; I know why my kissing did not work as it should have. I did not cup the back of her head with one hand as Vorden demonstrated, and that is why Calla did not feel appreciated.

When she feels appreciated, when she notices my intentions, when I kiss her again, she will claim me as her mate, and I will sink my cock into her hot quim. Our union will not bear children, but considering I never expected children, let alone a mate, I am satisfied with Calla. She is enough for me. Our life together will be a joyful one, and I will ensure she never wants for anything.

It is a simple plan. It is a good plan. It is more than I could ever have wished for in my previous lives as a Hunter and an Outlaw.

I scudding hope it works.

I cannot help but look at her now. In the overcast sunlight, I can see the individual strands of her hair, looped as it is through an elastic band. I imagine how it would feel to fun my fingers through such hair. How she would feel if I were to close the distance between us until we were skin to skin.

Of course, to do that I would have to remove her clothes—and now I am imagining how I would strip her bare. I would take my time, removing one piece and then another, until she was slowly revealed to me.

These clothes the Mating Females insist upon are not so bad.

‘We’re definitely lower down than before.’ She peaks over the edge and then looks up at the mountain towering over us. We are indeed further down. Not yet halfway. One-third, I speculate, or thereabouts.

Taking a breath of fresh air, I follow the direction of Calla’s gaze and stare out across the valley. It is the same valley where the Hov ship crashed and where I crashed the Freighter.

There is another one of Jessika and Vorden’s maps carved into the mountain rock—showing the tunnel from the ground until this point. Calla runs a finger along the carving, tracing it back to the beginning. Her hands are small, much smaller than mine, her nails bitten short.

I want nothing more than to kiss each of her delicate fingers.

If only night would come sooner, then we could start our practice.

I glance toward the sky, but it is impossible to see the angle of the sun. The cloud is much too thick. This valley sits directly under one eye of the storm. I decide I cannot wait much longer. ‘We will set up camp at the next entrance.’ Whether night has fallen or not.



If Calla notices my increase in speed, she says nothing, even when she is close to running to keep up with me. We cross one length of the mountain in record time, stopping only briefly at the stone column at the center to press our hands against the rock and feeling the vibration. Again, it has increased slightly.

When we burst out onto the next entrance, I must hold out my arm to stop Calla from running straight off the edge. She laughs and wipes a strand of loose hair away from her face. This entrance overlooks another valley, one which I am less

familiar with. The clouds here are thinner, the rain is lighter, and the forest is not so dense.

Maybe the sunlight isn't as bright as before? Maybe darkness is coming?

It cannot come soon enough. I untangle the individual branches of glow leaves from the main bundle and prop them up around the tunnel entrance in preparation. They are wilting fast and will not last much longer, but the result is a softly illuminated section of tunnel maybe the width of my arm span. It is a small space, but certainly large enough for two people pressed close together.

‘Look.’

As I step back outside, Calla points to a small herd of elemaths—large, four-legged creatures, natural to this planet. They have gray, leathery skin, and short trunks with which they tear leaves off the trees to eat. Two are full sized, one is small. A family?

I look sidelong at Calla and find her watching me closely. Her lips are slightly parted, and her breathing is elevated. I can smell her anticipation.

She is nervous. Of me? I am not sure. I certainly hope not.

With a glance toward the sky, I can see that the shadows are finally lengthening.

I brush her temple with one finger, pretending I am brushing away a strand of invisible hair. She shudders.

‘Are we camping here for the night?’

I nod, and that is when her stomach talks.

‘You are hungry.’ With reluctance so strong it is a physical force, I pull my hand away and collect some shelled sand nuts from my pack. She pops one into her mouth, drops her own pack onto the ground by the entrance, and surveys our camping site.

Admittedly, there are a few lumps and bumps in the rock floor and the occasional stalagmite. It is not nearly as tempting

a sleeping space as our usual bedcaves, but it will do. Here at least we have complete and utter privacy.

Privacy was never something I aspired to before. Spending time alone with a Mating Female was always forbidden. Now I marvel at the fact that I find spending time alone with Calla not only a necessity but a natural state. I am content when I am with her.

Contentment is undervalued. Contentment is an indulgence I have rarely felt.

I glance toward the sky, just visible through the narrow tunnel entrance. Darkness is creeping over the mountaintops.

‘We forgot blankets.’ Calla says as she tries to find a comfortable spot on the tunnel floor inside the entrance and out of the rain. ‘I guess we’re just going to sleep as is.’ She eventually sits down, resting her back against the tunnel wall and stretches her feet out before her.

I feed her more sand nuts and a few dried berries and take my seat beside her. The ground is hard and uncomfortable, but I have slept in worse conditions—much worse.

Immediately, my tail wraps around one of her legs. I have no will to stop it. I focus all my concentration on the tiny spots that dot her cheeks and nose. They are of a darker pigment. How had I never noticed them before? Sometime soon I wish to count every one of them. Now, I say: ‘Is this a good time for kissing practice?’ Unfamiliar excitement and anticipation settle in my stomach, even as my cock rises. My heart beats faster. I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

‘Oh. Wow.’ Pink washes across her face. ‘You said exactly what you were thinking,’ she says.

‘Should I not?’ Is that a human thing—to not speak what they are thinking?

‘No, I liked it. I mean, it’s probably a good thing one of us can do that.’

I turn to face her more fully. ‘Calla?’

‘Ah, yes?’ She fiddles with her tee-shirt, attempting to smooth it flat with the palms of her hands.

I take both her hands in one of mine, holding them still. I am shocked at my audacity, but when she does not scold me or pull away, I know I have not misjudged. ‘What do you want?’

There is a moment of complete silence when I can hear only the rain outside and Calla’s breaths. And then, in a quiet, lonely voice, she says: ‘To kiss you.’

CHAPTER TEN



CALLA

Kerrok shifts so fast I barely see him move, and then I'm seated on his lap. I grab at his shoulder in surprise, bracing myself with one hand. He's warm to the touch; even through my jeans I can feel the heat of his body. His chest is as hard as the rock wall I'd been leaning on, but he's all smooth lines. Slowly, daringly, I let my hand drift further down his arm to his bicep and then across to one pec. He doesn't have any nipples or any hair on his chest, and I trace one swirling tattoo. It's like touching soft, warm steel.

His skin isn't like my skin. It's softer, somehow. Like velvet—but not velvet when you rub it the wrong way and it makes you shudder; it's silk velvet, extremely soft and hairless, if that even makes sense.

His gaze on my hand is almost a physical touch, and when I glance up at his face, I see the smallest twitch in his jaw, as if holding himself still is an all-consuming task.

'Hello.' My heart is racing a mile a minute, but the rest of me is strangely exhilarated. It's like now that I'm here, within Kerrok's arms, a lot of my insecurities have faded away. Or maybe it's that my brain is so full of thoughts about Kerrok that there isn't space left for anything else.

Seated like this, we're still not eye to eye nor, more importantly, mouth to mouth.

'Hello.' He returns my greeting with all seriousness—or perhaps he looks serious to me because smiling doesn't come naturally to him. I trace one tattoo up the side of his throat and then move my touch to his cheek. There's so much tension in his jaw I could probably cut glass against his cheek.

Maybe I just need to get him out of my system. This might be a kiss-once-and-move-on-with-my-life kind of situation, and after today I can hopefully stop obsessing about everything Kerrok.

I lean forward and do exactly what I've been wishing I was brave enough to do all day: I kiss the sharp line of his jaw.

'Calla.' He practically moans my name and cups the back of my head in one large hand. The kiss is as awkward as before. He touches his lips to mine and then ... nothing.

'I think,' I say, speaking against his mouth, 'we're supposed to move.'

'Move?' He fits a lot of questions into that one word.

I can't believe I'm the one doing the instructing. Most nuns probably have more experience with kissing than me, yet here I am about to embark on my first-ever teaching experience as if I'm some sort of qualified Cupid.

'Move, like—' I try to think of an example, Kerrok's breath tickling my face, and come up completely blank. 'Maybe we experiment.' I kiss his mouth once, twice, three times. Tiny kisses, soft and barely there.

His eyes shudder closed, which is honestly a tremendous relief. I mean, I fancy Kerrok and all, but being stared at while attempting kissing was making the whole awkward experience even more awkward.

I close my own eyes.

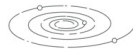
It's his turn to press kisses to my lips, and on the third kiss, one of his pointed teeth grazes my lip. The combination of softness and sharpness sends thrills through my body, and I gasp, my mouth opening. His fourth kiss somehow touches my tongue.

He freezes for a second, and then we're kissing. Like actually kissing. I twist in his lap for a better angle, wrap my arms about his head and deepen the kiss.

It's a heady experience. My whole body goes at once languid and supple as well as taut with desire. Heat spreads through my veins, cumulating between my legs where there's this sort of aching, tingling feeling that isn't quite enough. I rock on Kerrok's lap, desperate to get closer. I want there to be no slither of space between us.

That's when his hard dick presses against my side. At least, I'm pretty sure that's what it is. I've never actually felt one before, but I don't want to stop kissing long enough to look down to check. So I don't.

His fingers tangle in my hair, and he locks his other hand around my back. It's a possessive hold, as equally possessive as I'm being. Then there isn't another thought in my head except for how fucking wonderful this all feels.



KERROK

Kissing is wondrous. I cannot explain why no Anor'os ever invented kissing. How could a millennium of evolution have passed by and not one Anor'os thought to show their appreciation with their mouth?

Calla kisses with the same focus she bestows on anything she has put her mind to. She holds me close, as though she cannot bear the idea of being parted from me until I am the only thing she is touching. It is Calla and me and nothing else.

I cradle the back of her head, exploring her hair with my fingers as we kiss. Our tongues tangle, and I feel a weakness seeping through my body even as my cock strains against the confines of my pants. Fek these scudding pants.

I want to tear them from my body. I want to sink my cock into Calla's dripping quim. I want—

She rocks again, and the side of her leg rubs against my cock. The friction of her body and the fabric of my pants are almost too much to bear. With a groan, I break free of our kiss.

Calla's lips are red and swollen. Her eyelids are heavy, and the look she gives me is dazed with desire. A drop of pre-cum leaks down my cock, and I grit my teeth, so close to coming I cannot think straight. Somehow I manage to slide out from under Calla. I say something—anything to excuse myself—and rush into the rain, stopping right at the edge of the cliff.

Fek!

I have my cock out in a heartbeat, and a single pump of my fist is all it takes. My milt erupts from the tip in three long spurts as I come harder than I've ever come in all my life. My milt arches through the air and drops over the cliff edge like milky rain. I shudder, my breaths coming too fast, my heart beating too fast and my thoughts too foggy.

There is a sharp gasp, and I look up to see Calla. Her gaze is on my exposed cock, the end still decorated with a bead of

moisture. She has her bottom lip trapped between her blunt teeth.

‘Calla, I—’ But before I can say anything more, Calla has returned to the tunnel.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



CALLA

The look Kerrok gives me is enough to melt an entire iceberg. He's followed me back into the tunnel entrance, and I swear, if he were human, he'd be blushing right now. Maybe his face is a touch darker than usual? He's also holding his shoulders particularly stiffly, and he's got one fist pressed to his chest—the Anor'os symbol for allegiance, I think.

He looks rather like I feel: flustered, embarrassed, wet between the legs, and scared.

Before today, I'd have said it was impossible for Kerrok to be frightened of anything. He basically, single-handedly, shot down an entire Hov spaceship full of aliens intent on re-abducting all the humans on Rainland. How could such a warrior be afraid of anything after that?!

But I'm forgetting one important fact: Kerrok is as new to this ... to this ... I don't even know what to call it—relationship? experiment? practice?—as I am, and I'm bloody terrified. I'm terrified of the strength of my own feelings. I'm terrified that I'll burst out of my own skin, for how can so much pleasure and lust and longing and attraction and happiness fit inside me all at the same time—and all directed toward a single person?

The ghost of his hands is still on me, and I want to step back into his arms. I want to move closer, but it's like I've forgotten how to move.

'We're good,' I assure him, because I don't know what else to say. *I was really turned on when I saw you touching your own dick, but I rushed back inside because I'm terrified that you'll want to have sex with me, and even though I totally want to have sex with you, I'm not sure I'm ready just yet for that to happen. Everything is changing so fast, and my head is spinning.*

Sex is a big deal. At least, it is to me. Having never done it before, I've definitely built it up in my mind into something

almost beyond the realm of reality. Before being abducted, the extent of my experience was a game of catch-and-kiss I played in year 3 at school with some classmates and my unrequited crush on a man who barely knew I existed.

Hell, maybe I do have a toxic idea of romantic relationships.

I grit my teeth. Fuck Ash for psychoanalyzing me in the middle of a bloody coffee shop without my permission. And fuck my brain for beginning to believe her all the way out here, millions of miles away from Earth, in the middle of bloody outer space.

The silence in the tunnel is nearly deafening. Kerrok looks like a statue. I don't think he's moved a muscle since following me here.

I force myself to smile. 'How about we eat a proper dinner? I could cook some of the tubers we brought if you light a fire.'

He nods his agreement, and we spend the next while working. We still don't talk, but a little of the tension leaves Kerrok's body, and we regain some of our earlier harmony, thank goodness.

There's something quietly domestic about him gathering the odd stick and dried leaf from the tunnel entrance (blown in long again by the wind) as I prepare the food. Don't get me wrong, I'm not one of those women who believes in traditional gender roles. Absolutely not. Votes for women all the way! But I love the easy way that Kerrok and I can work side by side to achieve something as insignificant as dinner.

I close my eyes for a moment. In reality, what I probably actually love is the fact that I'm not doing this on my own. I didn't have any friends back on Earth, not in the last year or so. I was either at work barely making minimum wage or in the apartment I shared with Rose, trying to make ends meet and struggling to pay the growing mountain of secret debt I'd gained by buying groceries and paying rent. Panicking about the bank banging down our front door and demanding their money left little space in my head for meeting new people.

And now, here, on this forsaken planet, I still have Rose, but I also have Jess, Emeryel and Sonam, as well as Vorden and Torksten, and, most importantly, Kerrok.

I glance at him over the top of the baby fire he's built. With limited material to burn, the fire is going to be more of a flash in the pan than anything long term. Luckily, the tubers don't take too long to cook down into something resembling thick porridge. It's not all that appetizing, but it's filling and nutritious.

As if sensing me watching him, Kerrok looks up. There's an expression on his face I don't completely recognise, but eventually he pulls back his lips to show me his perfectly white, perfectly sharp teeth in what passes as a smile. 'Do not worry, my Calla. We need not speak about it tonight.'

The most ridiculous sense of relief floods through me, and my face heats with a new blush. I'm embarrassed by how relieved I am. I know we're going to talk about this ... about *us* sooner or later, but my cowardly self would much prefer later.



After dinner, when the fire has burnt itself into ash, I fall into an exhausted sleep. I don't even notice the hard rock floor, at least not until the next morning when I wake up to find myself transformed into one huge, aching bruise. Sitting up is a literal nightmare, and I have to rub my legs and arms to get them working again. My neck cracks. My back cracks. My knees both crack. I'm sore and tired and dirty with rock dust.

Kerrok is nowhere in sight, and I make my way outside so I can rinse my mouth with water and attempt to brush my teeth with this little stick thing I brought with me. It's a literal stick, and I've tied a square inch of fabric to one end, making a cave-era cotton bud. I rub each tooth, front and back, rinsing the cleaning stick in rainwater between each one. It's entirely unglamorous and takes ages, but it's one reality of living on a

planet without a Target. Eventually, one of us will need to invent a way to floss.

Finally, I chew on a dried pickle berry, which has a refreshing taste that kind of reminds me of peppermint but without the pepper or the mint.

As I'm finishing my 'personal admin', I spot Kerrok. He's a few meters below me, climbing up the mountainside. There are technically steps up the outside of the mountain, carved from the rock face by the same aliens who made the tunnel, but they're not steps I ever want to climb. For starters, each one is several feet tall, making it much more of a climb than a walk. Jessica navigated them when she was desperate to reach the valley floor when she first found Home Room, but she's the only human to have tried. The rest of us all take the platform elevator Kerrok and Rose made.

Well, I've taken it twice, and that was more than enough to turn my stomach.

Kerrok makes the climb appear super easy. As I watch, his tail lashes out behind him, giving him extra momentum and speed. He practically glides up the last few steps even though he's carrying a fresh bundle of glow leaves in one hand.

'I did not want us to walk in the dark,' is all he says as an explanation when he reaches the tunnel entrance.

'Thank you.' With one last sweeping look at the beautiful view, I shoulder my backpack, and we continue our exploration.

The day passes uneventfully. We make three more passes along the length of the mountain, stepping over a foot-sized hole in the tunnel floor Jess and Vorden warned us about. We find five more entrances where the tunnel meets the mountainside, and three more times we stop at the central column of stone to press our hands to the vibrating wall. The vibrations get stronger the further down we get, and when we finally stop for the night at the fifth tunnel entrance, it's clear that we're about two-thirds of the way down. The treetops are almost within touching distance now, and I spot a few wild

climbers jumping from branch to branch, chattering quietly to each other.

I can't bring myself to glance away from the view. Looking out over the valley reminds me that this is Rainland and not Earth. I stand there long enough that the shadows lengthen. Darkness falls like a blanket over the iridescent forest, and the glow trees begin to shine.

It happens slowly at first, little pinpricks of lights here and there across the forest canopy. Then more start glowing until each glow tree looks like it's alight with hundreds of thousands of fairy lights. They spot the forest, sometimes in small clusters, sometimes alone, always breathtaking.

Kerrok is moving around in the tunnel behind me, setting up our camp for the night. I close my eyes, trying to question my own feelings. I can't just be nervous about having sex, can I? Surely there's something more to my hesitation?

The answer comes easily, as though it has been waiting all day for me to ask the question. I'm scared about ruining my friendship with Kerrok. Hell, I'm scared about ruining everything and anything. This entire planet is filled with brand-new opportunities, and I've got a clean slate here. It's not like back on Earth when I had the worst credit score rating in the history of Australia, where I couldn't even manage a few credit cards or find a job I enjoyed or afford to rent an apartment I liked. Where my dad had died, and Mum had destroyed any future possibility of a relationship with me and Rose. Where I was lying to Rose about my ability to cope.

Everything back on Earth had been falling into a million tiny pieces.

Here, everything is still fresh. Everything still has the potential for success.

I let out a deep breath. I can't fail at anything if I don't try, but I also can't succeed at it either.

Bringing running water to Home Room would be a feat worthy of pride, but there's always a chance it won't work, and that doesn't mean it isn't worth trying. Kerrok knows this.

Everyone else seems to know this. Even my head knows this. Now I've got to convince my heart.

It's the same with whatever is between Kerrok and me. If I don't have the bravery to give it a go, then I'll be setting myself up for failure before I've even begun. Still, my heart races and my palms get all sweaty. I don't want to fuck this up.

When I finally step back into the tunnel, Kerrok has already built a fire and cooked our dinner. He watches me with something like expectation, and I know it's time.

'We should talk.' The words feel like a weapon when I say them, but he doesn't flinch and he certainly doesn't start yelling or getting defensive, like they sometimes portray human men in movies as doing. Instead, he pats the ground beside him, indicating I should sit, then he feeds me porridge seasoned with fresh berries he must have collected this morning. Only once I've finished eating and he's washed both our wooden bowls in rainwater does he nod his agreement.



KERROK

I have waited all day for my Calla's thinking to catch up with her feelings. If there is one thing I have observed these last few days watching her and talking with her, it is that she feels everything with such strength. When she is happy, she is joyous. When she is unsure, her fears and worries begin to get the better of her.

I want nothing more than to give her a life of happiness.

I begin the conversation by showing her my teeth. I want her to know I mean nothing but kindness and truth.

She smiles in return, although there is some hesitancy in her gaze, amplified by the way she tugs at the edge of her tee-shirt, as if she can stretch it smooth.

'I wish to be your mate,' I say into the quiet.

My reaction to my words is more instantaneous than Calla's. Had I still been on Anor, I never would have imagined having such a conversation with a Mating Female. Here, with Calla, becoming her Mating Partner is not only a possibility, but it might someday become a reality. Although that does not mean all my old fears, thoughts and training have not come back to haunt me, and an impending sense of doom settles on me like a weight as part of my mind tells me I am not worthy of such an honor. That I should not even be sitting here alone with Calla. That I am an Outlaw seeking something beyond my reach.

I ignore the negativity and focus my attention fully on the Mating Female seated beside me.

Calla blinks slowly. 'Huh?'

'H-uh?' I repeat, testing this new word for myself. It did not translate, and I do not understand it, although it is something I have heard Calla and the other humans say before. Then it did not seem so important. Now, it is imperative I know its meaning. 'What is *huh*?'

‘Oh, it means I didn’t see that coming.’ She runs a hand over her face.

I take another moment to think. ‘I still do not understand.’

She laughs, but it is not her usual cheerful laugh. She is getting scared again, my wonderful Calla, who is prepared to have this discussion with me even though it frightens her. In truth, it frightens me too—the possibility that she will ultimately reject my offering, leaving me with nothing, leaving me as I have always been: alone. My tail tightens its hold of her leg, not tight enough to hurt, enough that I feel more connected to her.

If these are to be my last moments of hope, I do not want to waste them not touching her.

‘Sorry.’ She gives her head a little shake. ‘I’m not being very clear. I mean, of everything I thought you were going to say, I wouldn’t have guessed it would be that.’

Evidently, I have not made my intentions clear enough. ‘Yes. I am announcing my intentions to show you appreciation. I wish for you to claim me as your Mating Partner. Not this very moment,’ I hasten to add. ‘When you are ready for such a decision.’

‘You are—So *you* mean—’ She takes a breath. ‘You really want to be my mate? This thing is more than just practice?’

‘I wished to practice kissing with you so that I could use kissing to express my appreciation. Now I believe I have mastered kissing. Yes?’

‘Oh, I agree,’ she answers a touch breathlessly. ‘What precisely does *expressing appreciation* mean?’

‘It means I wish to be your Mating Partner.’ Wish. Desire beyond all else.

‘Right.’ Calla takes another deep breath. ‘I u-understand.’ Her cheeks are pink, and when I touch a finger to her skin, she is warmer than usual. I want to pull her onto my lap, but I am not quite brave enough.

‘And last night, when umm ... ’ Her face turns from pink to red.

‘When I pleased myself thinking of you, your kisses fresh in my mouth?’ I ask. My cock remembers how it felt when Calla rubbed herself against me, our bodies pressed so close together we were almost mating. Blood rushes south, and the appendage in question hardens.

‘Yes, that. Why did you run away?’ She examines one of her hands as though she has never seen it before, although I think she is not really looking at it. When I do not immediately answer, she glances up at me.

I tell her the absolute truth. ‘I wanted so much to push down your pants and thrust into your hot quim, but I did not think you were ready for that. You have not yet agreed to be my mate.’

‘We have to be mates to have s-sex?’

‘Yes.’ That is how it has always been done. An Anor’s never procreates with a Mating Female not his own.

‘Oh.’ She scrunches up her nose in an expression I do not know how to read. Disappointment, maybe?

‘Nooo?’ I drag the word out in my uncertainty. The council strictly forbids Hunters to procreate and prevents Outlaws from having any contact with their tribe, yet my brother is happy with his Jessika—and Torksten with his Emeryel. Their choice of each other had nothing to do with breeding viability, as my choice of Calla does not. The tribal laws of Anor do not apply to Rainland. ‘No,’ and my answer this time is firm.

‘I really like you, Kerrok.’ My name on her tongue sends fresh heat into my body. ‘I really enjoyed kissing you. And when I saw you, ahh, touching yourself, that was really hot.’

‘Hot?’

‘Sexy. Desirable. I liked it. I just got a little scared. Well, a lot scared.’ She tugs at her tee-shirt again. ‘This thing between us is going so quickly, when I thought I was beginning to get a handle on everything else—on being abducted, on this planet, on this whole new life. I suppose I was overwhelmed.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I’m definitely still overwhelmed.’ Despite her words, her smile is a little more herself. ‘And I’m not ready to become your mate. Wow, even saying that is—’ She shakes her head, as though hardly able to believe the words.

I force myself to keep breathing smoothly, but the air sticks in my throat.

She touches my arm, and my gaze immediately follows the action, her pale skin against my charcoal. ‘Why can’t we just keep practicing? Kissing and o-other things.’

‘Other things like?’

‘Other things like s-sex.’ She closes her eyes on the last word. ‘If you’d like.’

All the air seems to rush from my lungs in a sigh of relief. This is not a rejection, just a request to slow down. I stop resisting the urge to pull Calla onto my lap. She comes willingly, resting her forehead on my shoulder. I kiss the side of her head and hold her against my chest. She could ask me anything, and I would never say no. ‘I would like that very much.’

With Calla in my arms, my cock is hard and aching, like a Hunter ready to respond to her every command. It takes much concentration not to thrust against her leg for my own gratification. ‘We will continue practicing. Will you consider claiming me as your own, yes?’

A moment’s hesitation. ‘Yes.’

My entire chest expands with that single word, with everything it means, and I hold Calla closer. She is my everything. Soon, if I am lucky, I will be hers.

We sit like that for a few heartbeats, then Calla taps my shoulder, and I reluctantly let her go enough that she can lean back to meet my gaze. ‘Back on Earth, we call that dating.’

‘Day-ting? That is practicing?’

‘Practicing and spending time with someone to see if you want to marry them. Or I suppose mate them.’

‘And you have done day-ting before? With a male of your tribe?’

‘Huh, no, actually I haven’t.’ She squirms on my lap. ‘This is all new for me.’

I think I should not be so pleased with her answer. Her life before Rainland, before me, was her own, but I cannot help the prickle of pride that swells my chest at the thought that she has day-ting nobody but me.

I kiss her mouth with closed lips. Just a brush, barely a touch, nothing like the open-mouthed kisses we shared last night. This kiss is special in its own way. It is a silent promise. ‘We will do day-ting,’ I agree, and I will prove to Calla that I am worthy of being called her mate.

CHAPTER TWELVE



CALLA

I 'm dating Kerrok. I'm dating a real-life alien.

The words run circles around my head as if I'm completely empty of any other thought. It gains momentum, barreling like tumble weed in an old Western movie.

I'm dating Kerrok.

I can't stop grinning. Good lord, I must look like a smug fool. I feel smug. And safe and seen and loved.

I watch him moving about the tunnel entrance as he double checks out packs are safe, as he drops the last of the wood on the fire and generally keeps busy. After that chaste kiss, he put some space between us, and it's all too clear why. His dick is pressing hard against the confines of his pants. His movements are awkward and somewhat muddled, as though he's only giving the chores half his attention. This only makes me grin wider. He's such an adorable sweetie. The kindest, most thoughtful man I've ever met.

He knows I'm not quite ready for sex, and so he's keeping his distance because clearly sex is very much on his mind. It makes me want him more.

I wiggle where I sit. My *quim*, as he called it, is tingling with need, my panties damp from longing. Sex might be a big step forward I'm still hesitant about, but that doesn't mean we can't do other stuff.

I remember his expression when he had his hand wrapped around his dick and cum was leaking from the tip. He'd thrown back his head, and my name had lingered on his lips.

Maybe I'm feeling brave enough—and horny enough—to give him a similar gift in return, something to show him that I mean what I say even though sex isn't for today. My heart thumps heavily in my chest as I lean against the wall, my legs crossed before me. Watching him move about the tunnel, I press one hand to my stomach. Heat floods my face at the

thought of what I'm about to do, but it's like need possesses my body because even my acute embarrassment doesn't stop my hand from unbuttoning my jeans and slipping into my panties.

Maybe the catch of my breath alerts him to what's happening—or maybe he can smell me, even across the distance of the fire—but he freezes for a second and then looks straight at me, straight at my hand in my panties.

I part my folds and press two fingers to my clit. My touch is instant relief and a sharp increase in wanting all at the same time. Almost of their own accord, my hips thrust, moving my clit against my fingers. My toes curl, and I bite my bottom lip as if that will help contain this overwhelming feeling within my body, but it continues to build and build.

Experimentally, I move my fingers, and a gasp escapes my mouth, breathless and nearly inaudible. Kerrok's answering groan echoes off the tunnel walls as he hurries to tug down his pants and take his cock in hand. It's hard. The end is a dark charcoal, nearly black. My eyes linger on the bands that strip his cock as I imagine him pushing into me.

My channel tightens as if he's really inside me, and I'm so wet I can hear my slick fingers moving.

Kerrok locks his heavy-lidded gaze on my covered crotch, and when I glance down, my arousal almost peaks at the sight of my hand disappearing into the waistband of my panties. They're plain black cotton, but they could have been diamond-bejeweled lace for how powerful they're making me feel.

Fuck, I'm hot. Like sexy, desirable hot. And it's such an unusual thought to have about myself that fresh tingles race through my nerve endings.

Kerrok moans again. His hand moves on his cock, rough strokes, rougher than I would have imagined could be pleasurable. His hips rocks, as do mine despite the distance between us. I slip a few inches down the wall.

Oh, fuck. I'm actually going to come like this. I'm pleasuring myself in front of another person. In front of

Kerrok. Masturbation has always been a solitary activity, something I've done behind a locked door and a drawn curtain. Something to be ashamed of. Something to be silent about.

I release my trapped lip. I don't feel ready to shout, but I stop trying to quieten my own loud breaths. 'Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes,' I say again and again, barely more than a whisper, but I'm so bloody pleased with myself for saying it aloud. 'Oh yes. Oh please!' I don't know if I'm begging Kerrok or myself, and I use my free hand to push my fingers more firmly against my clit, fucking my own hand.

Kerrok presses his other hand to the wall, his knees buckling, his hips flexing. There's such power in his movement. He's practically pumping into his fist, and he looks straight at me when he finally shoots his load. Glistening cum waterfalls from his cock in three sweeping arches while sweat glistens on his forehead and chest. It's the most stunning thing I've ever seen.

'Calla. Calla. Fuck.' He shouts as he wrings the last drops from his cock, and undeniable, overwhelming pleasure pulses up through my body, and I follow Kerrok into orgasm.



KERROK

I see the moment Calla's thinking clears. Her smile falters, and she snatches her hands from her pants, her eyes widening. It nearly breaks my heart, and I close the distance between us in two long strides. Of the two of us, she alone deserves to feel no guilt for what we have just done.

Kneeling by her side, heedless of the uneven rock floor, I take that hand between both of mine and lick the juices from her fingers. The taste of my Calla is enough for my cock to harden once again. I want to close my eyes and savor the taste forever. Instead, I watch Calla closely, making sure she sees my pleasure. Kneeling as I am, I spread my legs, displaying my cock proudly. Never do I want her to be ashamed of her own wants.

'Kerrok.' The hesitation fades slowly from her gaze, and she watches me lick the last of her fingers with her mouth slightly open, her breaths still pants.

Then, because I can, I use one of her fingers to wipe a bead of my milt from my bare chest and I lick that too. My taste is nothing in comparison, but the way Calla gasps makes it worthwhile.

'That was an excellent practice,' I tell her, and she laughs, bright and a little surprised at herself. It is a joyous sound. The most beautiful I have heard.

'Next time,' I promise, 'I will lick your juices from the source.'

'You'll—? Oh.' A fresh touch of pink stains her cheeks.

'It will be more kissing practice, my mouth on your quim. Yes?'

Without pausing, she nods. 'Definitely.'



Sleep that night is a torture, my body acutely aware of Calla so close, my cock demanding more of her attention. Every time I breathe in, I can smell the lingering scent of her arousal and my milt. It is a heady smell, she and I mixed.

Calla, however, never wakes, her head cushioned by her hands and her pack. In the end, I escape outside four times during the dark hours, using my hand to wring my cock dry, but never does it remain subservient for long. Calla's scent is too strong. Calla's very presence is too vibrant, even in sleep.

When at last weak sunlight lifts shadows from the valley below, I set my attention on making us a meal to break our fast, and when that is done, I climb down the external steps to the valley and collect a fresh bundle of glow leaves.

On my return, I see Calla has finally woken. Her hair at the back of her head is rumpled and knotted, her eyes are still heavy with sleep and the smile she gives me is one of secrets shared. This is how she will look at me every morning for the rest of our lives, and this thought has my cock rising once again, to nobody's surprise.

I hurry to feed her, and then we are on our way, following the tunnel downwards, searching for the water source.

'We should reach the ground today,' she says, sounding distinctly pleased with herself, as she should be. 'You won't have to climb down the mountain to reach the glow leaves.'

'I do not mind the climb,' I say truthfully. Today, the climb was about all the release I could find from my possessive thoughts of Calla. How have Vorden and Torksten found the capacity to concentrate on anything but their Mating Females? How do they have the fortitude to turn their minds from procreation long enough to achieve anything else?

It is a question I cannot answer, and I miss the first central column we pass, my thoughts so engaged with remembering the look on Calla's face as pleasure exploded through her body at the touch of her own hand. I am desperate to make her look that way myself.

It is Calla who holds her hand to the central column of stone and announces that the vibrations are still increasing in strength. I take the opportunity to press both my hands to the wall on either side of Calla, marveling at our closeness. She washed herself clean in rainwater while I was collecting glow leaves, but standing here I can scent a fresh wave of desire course through her. My body responds in kind.

Pink color tinges her cheeks, and she's silent for a moment. I want to ask her about what she is thinking, but before I have the wherewithal to form comprehensible words, she ducks under one of my arms and continues walking.

The rest of the day passes as a similar torture to the night—Calla so close, but so beyond my reach. I spend each moment waiting for a chance to 'accidentally' brush against her. Maybe it is my tail that caresses her leg as she takes a sip of water from my flask. Maybe it is my hand catching her elbow as she stumbles on the uneven ground. Maybe it is my arm brushing against her shoulder when the tunnel grows tighter and I must bow my head to fit.

With each 'accidental' brush, she casts me a small smile; she knows exactly what I am doing. And occasionally she touches me back, when she suspects my attention is elsewhere and she will not get caught. I relish each of her touches a thousand times.

We reach the final tunnel entrance as the light fades. It is approximately two arm lengths from the valley floor—a distance easy enough for me to jump but which Calla would need to climb. We stand at the edge of the drop, surveying the forest before us. The tree trunks are thick, larger than any trees on Anor'os, and I must crane my neck back to see the branches high overhead. We cannot see far into the forest, dense as it is.

A foot of thick mud covers the ground, making walking for any length of time a struggle. Calla wrinkles her nose at the sight, an expression I associate with her displeasure. But the trees she watches with a soft expression. These she likes.

‘I’ve always loved trees,’ she says when I ask for her thoughts. ‘These are just so beautiful—and big! They make me happy.’

‘They are another reminder that you are on Rainland?’

‘Exactly.’ She sighs. ‘Although now you’ve said that, I’m thinking about Earth again.’

‘These are not good thoughts. Yes?’ I roll my aching shoulder, trying to ease some of the tension in my scars.

‘Yes.’ A pause. ‘When Rose and I moved out together, we couldn’t afford for both of us to go to uni.’

‘Un-nee?’

‘To school. To lessons.’

I nod my understanding. *To training.*

‘So we came up with a plan. She would go to uni and get her degree, and I’d work full time so I could pay for our food and rent and stuff.’

This time, I do not interrupt with questions. I can understand enough of her words to understand her overall meaning.

‘It worked well for the first year, but the further she got into her studies, the more stuff she had to buy. A computer, software, textbooks. I couldn’t keep up.’ She tugs on a strand of her frizzy hair.

‘It does not sound like a fair plan.’

‘Oh, it was. Rose was going to get her degree in graphic design, and then she’d be able to find a better-paying job, and with the money she’d make we would spend on my uni degree. I wanted to study archaeology, you see, which was way more expensive than graphic design. I was going to go to Greece and all sorts of things. But—’ She shakes her head. ‘I couldn’t keep up with my side of our agreement. I was stuffing e-everything up. I-I ...’ She stumbles over her words. ‘I had so much debt. I kept borrowing money because I wasn’t making enough to support us, and everything sp-spiraled horribly out of control.’

I take her hand, stopping her from tugging at her hair. ‘We are all starting a new life here. You do not need to think about your old life anymore.’

‘I know you’re right.’ She lets out a frustrated sigh. ‘It’s a waste of energy to worry about what happened before. Only, sometimes I forget that old life is over, just for a few seconds, like when I first wake up in the morning or when I see something here that reminds me of something back on Earth. It’s enough to jolt me right back there, to all my old worries and insecurities. And guilt.’

‘I am the same way. It is taking time to undo some instincts the council instilled into me as a young Hunter.’

‘You said you don’t miss your home planet.’

‘I do not.’

‘Because of what they did to you.’ She glances at my Outlaw brand. Before, I might have flinched away from such an examination. Now I know she is only curious. There is none of the judgment in Calla’s eyes that I saw in the eyes of my fellow Hunters. ‘But what about certain people? Do you miss anyone in particular?’

I think of my mother, but even before they outlawed me, it had been many years since I had seen her. She much preferred the company of her Mating Partners to that of her grown children. I think of the other Hunters, many of whom I shared difficult and dangerous situations. But they shunned me when I was branded, and I can never forgive them.

‘No. Vorden is here. There was nobody else.’

She nods. ‘I can understand that. I don’t really miss anyone either. We’re both so lucky to be stranded with our siblings.’

Silence falls, and I can tell she is lost in her thoughts of Earth.

‘I can think of many ways to distract you.’ My tail wraps itself around Calla’s waist. She runs her fingers through the tuft of hair at the end, and secondary sensations run along my entire tail and up my spine.

She looks at me sidelong. 'More practicing?'
'More day-ting.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



CALLA

I slip off my backpack and drop it to the ground. Kerrok has also abandoned his backpack and is now decorating the cave with glow leaves. For one absurd moment, I'm reminded of that classic scene in most romance movies where the hero scatters rose petals in a path leading to his bed. It's such a real-life dating moment that my stomach fills with butterflies.

I stalk him across the cave, not wanting there to be any space between us. I step over what looks like the remains of an old fire in a small ring of stones—Jessica and Vorden's maybe, from when they first found this cave?

Kerrok has his back to me, and at my touch to his tail, he lets out one of those gorgeous moans I love so much. I want to sound like that when he touches me. I want to be free to express my pleasure.

He turns around so quickly I don't properly see him move. One moment I'm behind him. The next moment I'm in his arms, my feet dangling over the ground, my mouth being thoroughly ravished by a kiss.

I wrap my arms around his neck, holding on with no intention of ever letting go.

Our tongues tangle. We taste of each other. We breathe the same air.

His hard cock is pressing against one of my legs, and everything inside me is on fire.

This isn't enough. I want— I *need* to be closer.

I wiggle in his arms, showing I want to be put down.

His moan this time is more a groan of disappointment, but he relents. Without waiting for my self-consciousness to catch up, I pull my T-shirt over my head and tug off my jeans. It's a battle trying to do anything with skinny jeans and shaking hands, but eventually I kick them off.

My bra is as boring as my panties, and they don't even match. Potentially my last proper bra and panties ever.

Kerrok watches me like all his dreams have come true. It's enough to bolster my self-confidence into admitting what I thought of earlier today but wasn't brave enough to mention at the time. 'I've got an idea. I want to try something.'

I lead him from the cave and back into the tunnel, the way we'd originally come, taking a sprig of glow leaves to help see the way. It doesn't take long to find the central column; we've become experts at locating it, and the vibrations are stronger here on the ground than they've been anywhere else in the mountain. They're strong enough that when I press my hand to the wall, my entire arm visibly quivers. I turn Kerrok around and press him against the solid wall.

His eyes widen as his entire body vibrates.

'It's strong here.' I stand next to him. It's kind of like a mix between a full-body massage and a full-body sex toy. Is it crazy that I almost want to hump the wall?

Instead, I put a hand on Kerrok's shoulder and jump up. It's not exactly elegant, but he gets the picture and catches me around the waist. I drop the glow leaves, and they land by his feet.

Making out with Kerrok is quickly becoming one of my all-time favorite things. Making out with Kerrok while his entire body is vibrating is a heavenly experience. I honestly can't help but rub against him, one hand wrapped around his neck, my other hand in his short-cut hair. The individual strands are thicker than human hair. It isn't exactly spiky, but it certainly adds another element of touch to this entire experience.

I writhe against him, and when one of my legs brushes against his cock, his entire body tenses.

I pull back from the kiss just long enough to ask, 'Yes?'

He manages a pained nod, and then it's like he can't stop himself and his hips thrust, once, twice.

‘Pants off,’ I tell him in a voice that sounds much like I’m issuing an order. I’m surprised by my confidence.

Kerrok doesn’t hesitate. He takes my weight in one arm and uses his free hand to discard his pants. Of course, he’s still wearing scale armor over his legs, but at least now his cock is free. Free and rubbing against the bare skin of my leg.

I press my tights together, trapping his cock between them, and his hips buck in jerky thrusts. There’s nothing elegant about his movements either, but is there ever when two people are humping each other?

I decide to go with the flow, allowing my body to tell me what’s good and what isn’t. Honestly, it all feels fantastic, and I wish I’d also stripped off my bra and panties, but it’s too late now, and I’ve actually soaked through the fabric.

Fuck. I’m acting exactly like an untried college student, too desperate to wait any longer. It’s exciting and liberating, and it’s everything I missed out on when I was younger.

Kerrok is thrusting between my thighs, and I’m rolling my hips, seeking friction against his hard stomach. All the while the wall sends vibrations through Kerrok and into me.

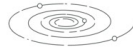
I swear my eyes roll back into my head, and it takes almost no time for an orgasm to rocket through me, starting at my quim and rolling up through my body in waves of pleasure that make it impossible to stop moving.

Kerrok lets out a shout, one hand gripping at my ass and pressing me closer. The sensation of his cock spurting his release is strange but no less desirable, as I drop my head onto his shoulder, breathing through the aftermath.

His cum splatters my back, and I would have startled, had I any energy left. I’m drained and content, happy to stay within the cage of Kerrok’s embrace.

My heart is beating so hard and fast that for a second it takes over all my conscious thoughts. Slowly, I notice Kerrok’s heart in the pulse in his throat. It’s similarly racing, and his breathing is as ragged as mine. We might both have

been virgins when we met, but we're making up for lost time.
And, good lord, it was worth the wait.



KERROK

I know for an absolute fact that my Calla is brilliant. Being at the receiving end of one of her ideas is like standing in a thunderstorm and being hit by lightning. As she releases her hold around my neck and slides down my body, I wince at the oversensitivity of it. My body is wrung out. My cock twitches, nonetheless, making its interest in a second round abundantly clear.

I can never get enough of Calla. Even the foot of space she's put between us now is too much. I bow my head, examining her expression, searching for any sign that she regrets what just happened between us, but she's smiling. It's a rather dazed smile, but a smile all the same.

Before this time spent alone with Calla, I had not realized how varied the emotions behind a human smile could be. It is not just for happiness, I think, but for many feelings, including dazed contentment. I puff up my chest, standing to my full height, as pride settles onto my shoulders. I did that; I am the reason for such a smile.

I pull back my own lips, showing her my teeth, and she rises onto her tiptoes to press a kiss to the highest part of me she can reach, the base of one shoulder. It reminds me so much of how Jessika acts when she is with Vorden that my smile widens all on its own.

Any moment now, Calla will accept me as her Mating Partner.

A soft rumbling sound echoes down the tunnel, and Calla presses a hand to her stomach. 'Wow, I'm hungry.'

'I will feed you.' After picking up the glow leaves, I take her hand, and our fingers lock together naturally. 'Come.' I start toward the cave at the tunnel entrance, where we both left our packs.

Her feet drag, and I pause. She's staring at the vibrating wall. 'Does it look strange to you?'

I follow her gaze, holding up the glow leaves—or what I left of them, having accidentally trampled them in my lust state. There is nothing about the wall to show it vibrates. It looks like the other tunnel walls look. Only its location at the center of the mountain hints at the possibility of it being important. ‘I do not think so.’

‘Hmm.’ With a shrug, she follows me back to the cave, where I wash her back in rainwater, relishing this simple task that lets me touch her soft skin. There is so much of her left for me to explore.

After that, she makes me turn around so she can wash her small pants in private, and when next I may look, she is dressed again. I cannot wait for the day when she stands before me completely naked. I do not doubt her bravery for a moment.

Until then, I must complete other necessities, such as collecting firewood and cooking dinner. Once we have eaten, Calla settles against my side, and I hold on to her as she falls slowly into sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



CALLA

After three nights of camping together, Kerrok and I pretty much have our routine down pat. Today, however, we're a little unsure about what's supposed to happen. We've reached the bottom of the mountain and still haven't found the original water source for the hot spring up near Home Room.

Once we've eaten breakfast, our legs dangling over the edge of the cave entrance, we return to the central stone column, better known as the 'vibrating wall of mutual pleasure'. I blush just thinking about what we did together last night, but I don't regret it. Not one bit.

Me not regretting it is a surprise. I'm used to regretting most things. It's a relief, and it certainly leaves room in my head for other thoughts. Thoughts like how I want to ravish Kerrok all over again.

Before I can suggest round 2, I get that same niggling sense I had last night—that there's something different about this section of the tunnel. I touch the wall, which is vibrating as much as last night. When I still can't decide what's different, I follow the tunnel a little deeper, keeping my hand on the wall. Is it damp?

That wouldn't be unusual. We're on a planet where it rains constantly. The stalagmites and stalactites are evidence enough that the tunnels don't stay dry despite being under cover. There must be so much water on this planet that it leaks through the stone of the mountain.

My fingers catch on a small crack of rock, and I pause. The wall is uneven, even though the aliens here before us must have made this part of the tunnel. I'm guessing they found the entrance cave and then drilled in from there to make the rest of this, and over the years the stalagmites and stalactites have started taking over—very, very slowly.

'What are you looking at?' Kerrok asks, moving closer and bringing the light from the fresh glow leaves with him.

‘I’m not sure. There’s some sort of crack in the stone here.’ I run my finger along the crevice. It’s only a few millimeters different from the rest of the wall, but it’s straight—too straight to be a natural occurrence. ‘It looks a little like the hangar doors,’ I admit, thinking of the large stone doors in the side of the mountain that open wide enough for a small spaceship to land inside. Of course, the only spaceship we have that still works is the Tripper, and it’s only just big enough to fit Vorden and nobody else, which means it’s basically useless to us. Nevertheless, everyone has agreed we enjoy leaving the hangar doors open; it keeps the air in Home Room fresh and smelling of rain.

I’m not tall enough to follow the fracture all the way up, so Kerrok takes over, tracing what looks like the outline of a narrow door.

My heart speeds up. ‘How do we open it?’

‘I do not know. The hangar doors have a button control. Maybe there is a similar button here?’

We search the wall, the rough stone grazing the palms of my hands, but I don’t stop. This is why we’re here; this is what we’ve been looking for these last three days.

‘Here.’ There’s a soft click as Kerrok presses something, and the near-invisible door releases. The crack is only about an inch or two wide, so we both take hold of the edge and heave it open. It weights a fucking ton! I don’t think I contribute any useful muscle; it’s all Kerrok.

Stale air tickles my nose, and I sneeze. ‘Stairs?’ I glance at Kerrok, who directs the light from the glow leaves through the now open door. I was right; there are stairs, but not Earth stairs. They’re a lot like the stairs running down the outside of the mountain—with a drop of several feet between them.

‘I could carry—’ Kerrok begins, but I shake my head.

‘If Jess can manage them, so can I,’ I say with more confidence than I currently possess. They honestly look like a death trap, but I’ve come too far to turn back, and maybe there are only a few steps.

We jam the door open with a rock and leave my pack at the top of the stairs, since I'll have enough trouble getting down without its added weight. Any important supplies I might have been carrying fit into Kerrok's pack anyway, now we've eaten three days' worth of food.

Climbing down is NOT FUN. I go backwards so I can hold on to the previous step until the last possible moment while I lower the rest of my body over the edge. I'm probably quite lucky not being able to see how steep it is. Otherwise I don't doubt I'd get fear paralysis halfway down. Kerrok goes first. I jokingly think it's so he can put his hand on my ass, but I'm grateful for any help and all help. And if I fall, I know he'll catch me.

Unfortunately—and predictably—there aren't just a few steps, and we climb down what must be fifty, until my arms are shaking and I'm panting with exertion.

The stairwell amplifies every tiny noise and echoes it back at us, making talking difficult. When Kerrok finally announces we've reached the bottom and his voice isn't immediately swallowed by its own echo, I let out a faint cheer, but I'm too exhausted to look around. I press my forehead to the stone wall, trying to absorb some of its coldness.

'Calla.'

'Yeah?'

'Calla. Look.'

I straighten. The stairs open into a cavern at least the size of a football pitch. The roof is maybe fifteen feet high and covered in glow worms that look like someone has strung fairy lights higgledy-piggledy over every inch of the ceiling. The light isn't strong enough to illuminate every shadow, but it certainly beats carrying a bundle of glow leaves.

That's when I finally see what Kerrok has been staring at. It's a lake. An honest-to-God underground lake.

'WOW.' The water is a darker green than in the hot spring, and it's completely still. Not a single ripple disturbs the

surface, while it perfectly reflects the stalactites hanging overhead. ‘I wonder how deep it is.’

We both shuffle forward until the toes of our shoes are almost touching the water’s edge. I can’t see the bottom, despite how clear the water is. For all I know, the core of this planet might be water, and there could be an underground lake at the bottom of every mountain. Water instead of lava. Life instead of death.

‘Do you think anything lives in there?’

‘I do not know. It is a distinct possibility.’

That wasn’t the answer I’d been hoping for. ‘When you scanned the water in the hot spring, Torksten’s tablet said it was clean.’ I can hear the nervous note in my voice.

I’m not ready to go swimming in the lake, but that doesn’t mean I can’t stand here and admire its beauty. Because it is beautiful. It’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen—perfect in its stillness. Just existing.

I don’t know how long we stand there. Kerrok’s as content as I am to observe. It’s like we’ve stumbled into a sacred space. Finally, he fills one of our two flasks with water from the lake, tests it on his tongue and then takes a sip.

‘Clean,’ he concludes. ‘And hot.’

‘Do you think this water is being pumped through the mountain to the hot spring?’ I glance up at the ceiling but can see no hint of any pipes or pumps or ... whatever else is needed to move water.

‘There might be only one way to check.’ He looks at the lake, and it’s like I can almost hear what he’s thinking.

‘Nope. Not happening.’

‘Calla.’

‘You’re not going swimming in that.’

‘I will be perfectly safe.’

‘If anything happens to you, I won’t be able to do anything to help.’

‘Yes, you will.’ He unclips his laser gun from the holster at his hip. I forgot he was still carrying that thing. I guess I got used to it after all.

It’s heavy and made for someone with a larger hand than me. Nevertheless, I can reach what I believe is the trigger easily enough. ‘You want me to shoot something?’ Or stab them? The blade on the end has teeth, kind of like a saw, and I try very hard not to imagine the damage it would do cutting into someone.

‘Only if it attacks.’ He says that as if it’s obvious. Already he’s stripped off his pants and is clicking the small latches that retract his scale armor. Normally I’d be thrilled to see his naked ass, but even the sight of his cock and balls and thick thighs doesn’t make me any more confident about this plan. ‘All will be well, Calla.’ He kisses the corner of my mouth, and with a sudden movement, releases the spikes in his non-prosthetic arm.

I jump back. ‘Holy hell!’ Now those I had forgotten about!

There are ten, each about two inches long and ending in a deadly point. The first one is up near his shoulder and the last is at his wrist. I never doubted for a second that he was a fighter. Now I’m wondering if he ever met an opponent brave enough—or stupid enough—to take him on.

He dives into the water. There’s barely a splash, but the ripples he makes reach out across the entire lake. My heart feels like it’s in my mouth, and I try reminding myself of how long he held his breath when underwater in the hot spring, but it doesn’t help.

I don’t think I blink the entire time. It feels like hours but is probably no longer than a few minutes, and then Kerrok’s head breaks the water’s surface.

‘Are you okay?’ I offer him a hand to help pull him out, and while he takes it, he lifts himself out of the water using his other hand and a flick of his tail. I return his gun, glad to be rid of it. Even gladder not to have needed it.

His hand is hotter than normal, and the coloring of his face a touch darker as the heat of water has made him uncomfortable.

‘It is deep. I did not reach the bottom.’ He shakes his head to remove water from his short hair. ‘I found several tunnels in the lake’s wall which look to have been purposefully carved.’

‘Sooo this is the source for the hot spring?’

‘Likely.’ He gives his tail one last flick, sending an arch of water droplets through the air behind him, and indicates we should follow the path around the lake’s edge. We head right, in the direction Kerrok saw the underwater tunnels, and sure enough, there’s another, much smaller cave hidden in shadows with what looks like a control panel set into the rock wall. There’s one lever.

‘Computer?’ Kerrok asks the room at large, but when nothing happens, he gives me what is unmistakably a sheepish shrug. ‘I thought it may have been voice activated.’

‘These things should come with an instruction manual. What if that’s the self-destruct button?’ I nod at the single lever.

Kerrok stares at me. ‘There are self-destruct buttons on your birth planet?’

‘Ugh.’ I don’t actually know. ‘I’m hoping not.’ I wouldn’t trust some idiot human man not to press it, if there was.

‘I could reverse engineer the panel.’

‘Or we could just pull it?’

The look he gives me is a classic *do you really think that’s a good idea when, given five days and a shit ton of tools you don’t know how to use, I might be able to reverse engineer the system?* Or, at least, that’s what it looks like to me.

‘It might not even still work. It’s not like there’s any electricity on this planet.’ We certainly haven’t stumbled across any large coal-fired power stations or nuclear reactors.

‘No,’ he concedes. ‘I suspect everything here runs on hydropower. The water pressure in that lake alone would be

enough to power a small city.'

'That's good, right?' I don't entirely understand what he's saying, maybe because his ideas of hydropower are much more advanced than any hydro back on earth. 'We don't want to start up any machine that might signal our position to passing ships.' If we did that, Torksten would probably have a nervous breakdown, and then Emeryel would want to kill me for giving Torksten a nervous breakdown. Considering she not only made an ex-gladiator fall deeply in love with her but also contributed considerably to our food collection, all with a broken wrist, I don't want to get into her bad books.

'That is correct. Hydropower would be virtually untraceable.'

'Cool.' Staring straight at Kerrok, I take hold of the lever. I keep my movements slow enough that he can still stop me if he really, truly objects, though he must want to know what the lever does as much as me because he didn't move.

I pull. Then I push, and when the lever still won't move, I use both hands to pull again.

Finally, creaking with disuse, it moves.

Absolutely nothing happens.

With another shared glance, we move back to the lake's edge, searching for signs of change. A bubble rises to the top of the otherwise motionless water and pops. More and more bubbles follow, until there's a continuous stream of them coming from the right, about where the underwater tunnels are.

'Did we turn the water on?'

'Akh ... It appears we turned the water on,' Kerrok agrees. 'Although we will not know for sure until we return to Home Room.' He runs a hand over his head, apparently planning. 'We could take the external platform back to Home Room instead of walking for three days back through the tunnel. That would allow us to confirm our hypothesis more speedily.'

Despite his rather methodical line of thinking, there's a new glint in Kerrok's gaze, and I know he's as excited about

this potential discovery as I am. Turning on a tap doesn't sound important, much less interesting, but it's hella important and hella interesting on this planet. I might not eat another pizza for the rest of my life, but I'm possibly going to have running water!

I grin at Kerrok. The soft light bouncing off the lake's surface is throwing patterns over his face and chest, illuminating the harsh lines of his shoulders and deadly spikes.

I've definitely got the hots for this Kerrok, as much as I absolutely adore his kinder, gentler side. I touch his arm, allowing myself the privilege of exploring one of those two-inch spikes. He freezes, as though afraid any movement might cause me harm. But I'm not afraid. In fact, I don't think I've felt this confident in years.

'There isn't any rush. The water's got to be pumped up the entire height of the mountain, and I can imagine many activities we could do to pass the time.'

His eyes darken as he looks at my mouth. I swear the irises darken a shade or two, and I can practically sense his gaze caressing my body.

I tug him back into the control room as he retracts his spikes. There's not a mark left on his arms to show they'd ever been there.

Aside from the single lever, the consul is just a shelf of stone, jutting out a few feet from the rest of the wall. I jump up to sit on it, as if it were a kitchen counter, and now I can wrap my legs around Kerrok's waist as he moves closer to kiss me.

The kiss is deep and lingering with the hint of a promise.

All too soon, he pulls away, and the space between us is a bereavement. I try to hold on to him with my legs, but it takes no strength for him to slip free.

'You don't want—' Before I can say anything else, Kerrok drops to his knees.

My eyes widen. Like this, his face is virtually level with my stomach. When he licks his lips, I swear I melt. I'm a Calla-shaped puddle, so wet I can smell my arousal.

It takes Kerrok little time to unbutton my jeans and pull them down. The great thing about wearing homemade shoes from what used to be a blanket is that my skinny jeans fit right over them so we don't have to fiddle with laces or anything like that. It's zip-and-pull, and I'm naked from the waist down.

It takes a moment for my lust-filled brain to catch on to the fact that Kerrok removed my panties at the same time as my jeans. As embarrassment is hitting and I'm moving to cover myself—it's not like I've manicured down there this last month being without tweezers or a razor—Kerrok pushes my knees apart and licks the inner length of one thigh.

I moan, and the sound echoes off around the cave. 'Kerrok.'

'I promised to taste your arousal at its source,' he says, his voice scratchy and deep, and that's all the warning I get before he licks me *there!* Parting my folds with his broad tongue, narrowing it to a point and pushing the tip into my vagina.

My hands scrabble at his head, though his hair is too short to grab. I don't know if I'm trying to push him away or push him closer. All I know is he feels fucking fantastic, and it's almost more sensation than I can bear.

Bloody hell! My hips buck, and I fall back onto my elbow, half propped up, half laid out on the control panel.

His tail wraps around one of my legs, pushing my knees even further apart as Kerrok does what I can only describe as 'feast'. On me.

Kerrok homes in on my clit thanks to my reaction. I'm a writhing Calla-puddle of want and need. My brain stops providing me with logical thoughts, and it's about all I can manage to throw my head back and moan.

God, I moan, and then I pant, 'oh yes, oh yes, oh yes.' And as my orgasm rolls through me, more powerful than any that have come before, I shout, loud and long and unencumbered.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



KERROK

I relish the taste of my Calla on my tongue as I suck and lick at the small bud hidden between her most private folds. It is like nothing I have ever experienced, and I am light-headed with desire.

Enticingly, Calla's muscles tense as her pleasure peaks, and then she is grabbing at my shoulders, trying to pull me up for a kiss. Ignoring the pain in my knees, I heed her request, and the idea she can taste herself on my tongue grips my cock.

Only when she must draw back for air does Calla pause. She looks at me through lust-heavy eyes, then her gaze moves to my cock.

It points straight toward my stomach, and when Calla wraps her small hand around the base, I must bite my bottom lip to keep from coming here and now.

I want this moment to last, and the look Calla is giving me suggests she does too.

'I can feel the bands,' she says, her voice a little croaky with overuse. 'They feel ...' She bows her head for a closer examination, and— *Fek!* It is hard to restrain myself from thrusting into her fist.

Her hand is smaller than mine, more delicate, and her movements are less practiced but more considerate.

Her hold is nothing like when I have pleased myself. Her fingers barely touch her thumb, her small hand fascinatingly exaggerating my size, and I stare at where she holds me, determined to imprint the image into my memory. I will never, in all my future years, forget this moment.

She runs her fist from the base to the tip, pausing as she passes over the bands that strip my cock. My desire ensures they are engorged, as the head is, and I see Calla swallow, her eyes widening with this discovery.

'They feel *fantastic*,' she finally concludes.

I think we are both imagining my cock inside her quim, expanding and stretching her. I swallow too. That is when she does something which I had never imagined—she bows her head and licks the tip of my cock, cleaning it of pre-cum.

I cannot stop the desperate jerk of my hips as she pulls back. ‘Do that again, and I will erupt,’ I warn her.

She grins at me, a flash of white teeth, and then sucks the head of my cock into her mouth, hollowing her cheeks.

‘Fek!’ I grab at the control panel, scrabbling at the stone with suddenly weak fingers, willing myself to otherwise stay perfectly still, but I cannot stop the pulse of milt from my cock just as I cannot stop the orbit of planets around their sun. Stars explode behind my eyelids, and I come in two, three, *four* spurts with such strength it almost hurts.

Calla swallows, but it is too much, and a dribble of my milt rolls down her chin.

For a heartbeat her eyes are wide, as if she cannot believe what just happened, what she just did.

‘Calla—’ I swear my heart misses a beat.

She cleans her chin with a finger and licks her finger clean. My body shudders, and my cock makes one last attempt to kill me as it squeezes out the last drops.

‘That was—’ I try to find words, but I cannot yet think of anything beyond how Calla had looked when licking her finger. I pull her into my arms, kissing any part of her I can reach. Her ear, her neck, her temple, her jaw.

She laughs. ‘Wow. I’m really beginning to enjoy sex.’

‘What is that magical bud between your legs? The one that has you yelling my name when I suck on it.’

‘I yelled your name?’ Her eyes widen, but she straightens her shoulders, and her expression of self-satisfaction mirrors my own. ‘I yelled your name.’

‘You yelled my name,’ I confirm, and my smile comes almost naturally.

‘Well, that magical bud is my clitoris. More commonly known as ‘the clit’. And you, my friend, are the first person to touch it—aside from myself.’ Her face colors beautifully, but she does not lose her smile.

‘Your clit-oris.’

‘Clit is good.’

‘Calla’s clit.’ The new word sits well on my tongue. I like it and raise my voice: ‘Calla’s clit. Calla’s clit. Calla’s clit!’

‘Steady on!’ But she laughs.

‘There is nobody here to hear.’ Absurdly, I wonder if Vorden has found such a bud between his Mating Female’s legs. If not, I vow to tell him of this wondrous discovery. It was he who instructed me to kiss Calla. I can repay the service by telling him of the *clit*. Even in my thoughts, it is a striking word.

‘Touch wood.’ She taps her head in a motion I do not understand.

‘That is not wood.’

‘You’re right.’ She hurriedly touches my stiff cock, a light brush of her finger, but it is enough to startle a moan out of me. ‘Touch wood.’

‘I still do not understand.’ And it is becoming increasingly hard to focus on her words. Unlike yesterday, Calla has not yet made any move to reclaim her pants and is absentmindedly rubbing one bare calf against my outer thigh. Her legs are still parted enough that I catch glimpses of her glistening folds with each upward stroke. I am mesmerized.

‘It’s just a silly human superstition. Speaking of wood, you’re ... umm ... very keen.’ She nods toward my cock. More color stains her cheeks, and she slides off the control panel, landing lightly before me. She is so close I would need only to bow my head and we could kiss again.

‘Always, when you are near.’

She leans a fraction closer, and the breath catches in my throat as the slight curve of her stomach brushes against the

swollen tip of my over-sensitive and well-used cock, but then she pulls back, her lips curving down in a frown. ‘What’s that?’

‘What?’ My head is heavy and my thoughts sluggish. By the time I comprehend her question, she has pulled on her pants again—both the small pair and the large—and has moved to the far side of the cave.

‘There’s a tunnel here, but it’s too dark to see where it leads.’

I collect my bundle of abandoned glow leaves and hold them up. The tunnel is narrower than any we have seen before. It sits in shadow, its entrance blocked by a large stalagmite.

It takes some maneuvering for me to fit, but I take the lead. There is something about this tunnel I dislike, and I rest my free hand on my holstered gun. My tail brushes against Calla’s leg with each step; she is close behind.

The tunnel takes us a short distance before opening into a large circular cavern, larger than the underground lake. Larger than the hangar.

Glow worms once again cover the roof, their bioluminescence casting enough light for us to see by. The first things I notice are this cavern’s similarities to Home Room. It is at least three stories high, with open doorways at even intervals around the walls. I count twelve, and that is only the ground floor. Narrow stone steps lead up to the second and third stories, where there are another twenty-four doorways, each reached by a narrow ledge of stone that runs around the edge of the circular wall.

‘It’s empty.’ Calla steps up beside me. She narrows her eyes as she squints through the semi-darkness. Her eyesight, I think, is not as adaptable to different light levels as mine.

‘Not quite.’ I point.



CALLA

I can't see what Kerrok is pointing at until I'm nearly halfway across the cavern. Perhaps it's because my brain refuses to believe what's right there in front of us.

It's a man. He's standing against the far wall with his arms outstretched to either side in what I'd call the Jesus pose. His legs and arms are shackled to the wall. Something has embedded huge bolts into the stone, and there's what looks like a feeding tube stuck down his throat. The end of it comes out of his mouth and is attached to some sort of apparatus that's unlike anything I've seen before. Definitely alien tech.

His skin is as pale as ice, and I'm pretty sure if I touched him, he'd be cold and clammy. He looks kind of human. From a distance, I'd swear he was. Only now I've seen his wings. Real wings! Someone has also bolted them to the wall. Stretched wide, they're at least ten feet, and they're a little like bird wings. They even have feathers.

'He's an angel.' Even as the words leave my mouth, I know that can't be right. We're too far from Earth for this man to have influenced humans. But he's how I've always imagined angels to look. 'Is he dead?' I take a step closer, but not close enough to touch him. My body recoils at the thought of him being dead. I mean, I've never seen a dead body before, let alone a dead alien. 'Kerrok?' Panic buries itself in my voice.

'He is not dead. He is in cryostasis.'

'In cryostasis? You mean like asleep? For a really long time?' The only thing I know about stasis comes from sci-fi movies, like when Darth Vader put Han into stasis in one of the *Star Wars* movies.

'For a long time.' He examines the apparatus the man's neck tube is attached to. 'It runs on hydropower, as we suspected.'

'How's that possible? We just turned the water on.'

‘I can only speculate, but I suspect the water from the hot spring would be more than enough to power this equipment.’

I frown at him, not understanding. But knowing how the technology works is the least of my worries. ‘We found a man.’

‘We need to report back to Vorden and to the others. They will want to know.’

‘Hell yeah.’ I back up. I’m not sure I want to stay here. Not with *him*. Not now that I know.

All this time, for an entire month, we’ve been living at the top of the mountain while he’s been down here. Sleeping. I shiver. It’s like walking over someone’s grave. Only they aren’t dead.

Kerrok takes my hand, and while I’m extraordinarily pleased he’s here, it doesn’t do much to make me feel better. My stomach clenches, and I wish I’d never found this cavern.

How can we keep living like we have been knowing he’s down here? ‘Can we wake him up?’

‘The question is: should we?’

‘Of course we should.’ I peer up at Kerrok. There’s a line between his brow and concern in his eyes. I falter. ‘Or maybe not?’ We know nothing about this man. Maybe he’s been chained to the wall for good reason.

‘What’s in here?’ In a desperate attempt to distract myself, I gesture toward one of the open doorways leading off the main cavern. They look like the small bedcaves that line the walls of Home Room, but when we peek into one, I realize how wrong I was.

‘It’s a tomb.’

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



KERROK

We step into the closest of the small caves. The ceiling is only just high enough for me to stand straight. At its center sits a rectangular block of stone, its edges cut perfectly straight. A smaller rectangular stone into which symbols have been carved covers it. I think the symbols are writing, but my translator cannot decipher any of the words.

Calla has her hands clasped before her chest and shakes her head, as if she can read my thoughts and already knows what I am planning on doing. I wish I could follow her direction and move away, but I need to know. After handing her the glow leaves, I push at the stone lid, my metal fingers clicking against the rock with each heave. The lid is extremely heavy, and I can only move it a short distance, just far enough to expose a small gap.

Calla moves to my side, one hand on my lower back, right above the base of my tail. It wraps around her leg as she holds the glow leaves up. Together, we lean forward to look inside.

The air is thick with disturbed rock dust, and Calla coughs, waving a hand before her face. For a heartbeat, I can see only darkness, then white bone and fragments of cloth.

It takes Calla a few moments longer. She sucks in a deep breath. 'It really is a tomb.'

'Yes.' I pull the lid back over, covering what little remains of the body within. I know little about the dead other than how to kill, but I think these remains have been here many decades, centuries even. This matches with what little else we know of the civilization who came before us, but it also raises many more questions.

Has the winged man also been here for centuries? It would be cruel if it were true. Everybody he would have known will have died. The children of the children of his generation will have died.

We check a few of the other caves. Each holds a sarcophagus. Each has been engraved with words we cannot read. Names, maybe. Dates? Platitudes?

Stepping back into the main cavern, Calla looks at the winged man chained to the wall and deep in cryostasis. ‘Why put him down here with all these dead bodies?’

This is a question I cannot answer and so I remain silent.

‘Come on.’ She slips her hand into mine and tugs. ‘Let’s get out of here. This place is giving me the creeps.’

I let her pull me from the room, and we walk in silence back past the control panel, past the underground lake and up the stairs. Calla struggles to climb, and in the end, I wrap her arms around my neck and carry her up. It is easy enough for me to climb one-handed when I have my tail for balance and extra strength.

At the top of the stairs, I break off a fragment of stalagmite to use as a doorstop, and Calla pulls on her pack. We do not need to speak to know what we will do next, and I help her scramble down into the mud and the rain. Darkness is threatening; the day is almost over, but it does not take much time for me to untie the platform from where it is being held steady by a length of rope around the base of a tree and to settle us both on it.

Activating my gravity-locking boots, I press the control button, and the platform rises. It rocks gently, adjusting to our combined weight and influenced by a light breeze.

Rose and I designed the wooden platform soon after we settled into Home Room, and I constructed the controls from salvaged tech. It’s a completely closed system, untraceable and powered by its own cyclical motion, not unlike the hydro system Calla and I have discovered.

Perhaps, like us, they too were in hiding. It is an interesting hypothesis, and I store the thought away for closer examination later.

When we reach the hangar at the top of the mountain, Calla steps off the platform in a trance-like state. She barely

looked at the view nor noticed the movement of the platform.

I wish I could think of something to say to make her feel better. Instead, I remember the winged male, chained to the wall, essentially trapped under so many tons of rock and long ago abandoned.

‘It’s so morbid.’ Calla shudders, but before I can respond, a yell splits the otherwise silent air.

‘Calla!’ Rose engulfs her twin in a hug, and Calla buries her face in the crook of Rose’s neck.

Her shout must have alerted the others to our return, and soon Vorden claps me on the shoulder in welcome as Jessika also hugs Calla.

‘You’re back already. We thought you might be gone another day at least,’ says Emeryel, as she and Torksten add their own welcomes. ‘Tell us all about it.’

‘Oh.’ Calla’s shoulders visibly sag, and I know she does not want to be the bearer of such news.

‘I will tell,’ I say.

She gives me a weak smile. ‘We’ll both tell. But let’s sit down first. I need some hot tea. I mean, some hot ceali.’

‘Good idea.’ Rose links her arm with one of Calla’s and leads her from the hangar. The others follow, keen to hear about what we have found. As they pass the abandoned ship, Calla winces, evidently uncomfortable with the reminder of the people who came before.



CALLA

The fire is already burning at the center of Home Room, and I take a seat on the closest step, stretching my arms and legs toward the flames, trying to scare away some of the cold that has seeped into my body. Rose fusses around me, and for the first time I find it a little annoying. I tell her to sit beside me instead, but she doesn't listen, insisting on unwrapping my feet of their handmade shoes and checking what else of me she can see for signs of cuts or bruises.

Jess's umbrella lays abandoned on a step. She's stripped the plastic fabric from the metal arms, as though she'd been working on salvaging it when she heard Kerrok and me return.

Emeryel makes the ceali, serving it into the wooden cups Torksten carved. I wrap my fingers around my cup, waiting for the heat to soak through the wood and warm my nerveless fingers.

Little Gracie jumps from shoulder to shoulder. She pauses on my shoulder long enough to stick her small, furry face into my ear, as if searching for something. I pet her under the chin, and she chats to me. Sometimes I think it genuinely annoys her that we don't understand what she's saying, and I make a mental note to ask Kerrok if he can tune our translators to track her words. If that's even possible.

Kerrok begins, telling them of our hike down the tunnel to the base of the mountain. He fails to mention the kissing practice or his declaration that we should be mates. I'm grateful for that. I want time to tell Rose in private.

I add in snippets to his tale here and there. A part of me understands I'm subconsciously delaying the inevitable.

As we talk, Sonam joins us, her long hair tucked behind her ears. She sidles up to the group, trying to remain inconspicuous. Emeryel hands her a fresh cup of ceali, which she takes but doesn't drink. Her eyes are red, like she's been crying recently. I want to hug her, but she doesn't come close

enough, her gaze darting from Vorden to Torksten to Kerrok, clearly still worried they'll suddenly turn on her.

I wish she could understand there's nothing in Home Room to fear, but I know that once she hears the end of Kerrok's and my story, she'll be even more frightened and for good reason. Hell, I'm scared.

The angel couldn't have been abandoned in that tomb for no good reason, and my imagination keeps planting new and ever-more gruesome ideas about what he did to deserve such a punishment. Maybe he killed all those people. Maybe he's been damned to watch over the decomposing bodies of his victims for eternity.

Fucking hell. I'm giving myself goosebumps. It's like a bad Halloween tale. *The Angel locked beneath the stairs.*

Kerrok reaches the part about the hidden door and the stairs down to the underground lake. 'It was stunning,' I tell them. 'One of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen.'

'Then why do you look like that?' Rose demands. 'Like somebody died.'

Kerrok and I glance at each other, and Rose presses her hands to her jean-clad hips.

'Don't you dare tell me someone died.' She looks around Home Room as though expecting to find us short one person, but we're all here.

'Well, nobody died, exactly. At least nobody died recently.' We explain about the sarcophaguses. Or should that be sarcophagi?

Jess's mouth drops open. 'They were there the entire time? We didn't notice any door.' She looked at Vorden.

'It was pretty well hidden.' I reach over Rose and squeeze Jess's hand. She squeezes mine in return.

Sonam has paled. Emeryel is hugging Gracie and sitting within the circle of Torksten's arms. Torksten has said nothing, but that's hardly unusual. Rose is still watching me through narrowed eyes.

‘What else?’ she demands. ‘What aren’t you telling us?’

Everyone looks at me.

‘T-there was a man down there.’

‘In a tomb?’ Jess asks.

‘No.’ I don’t know how to explain. ‘Umm. In cryostasis, Kerrok says.’

‘Cryo-what-now?’ demands Rose.

‘Like in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,’ Emeryel asks. ‘Only to be woken with true love’s kiss?’

‘I guess, but without the kiss part. He looked like he was asleep, and there was this tube down his throat connected to some sort of hydro-powered box thingy,’ I finish rather lamely. ‘I really don’t understand how it works.’

‘Who cares how it works! There’s a literal Sleeping Beauty directly below us right now.’ Rose points at the ground at her feet. ‘Is nobody else freaked out about that?’

‘Actually—’ I look around the cavern. ‘Assuming Home Room directly lines up with the one below us, I’d say he was about there.’ I point across Home Room to the wall opposite. Thankfully, nobody’s bedcave is in that direction. All our rooms are clustered together at the other end, except for Emeryel and Torksten, who’ve chosen a bedcave on the top floor, two stories overhead.

I see Emeryel glance up at it, and I can only guess she’s pleased about that decision.

Sonam backs away from the fire, and I stand up, holding a hand toward her. ‘Don’t go.’ But she turns her back on us, and flees to her bedcave, pulling the blanket door into place so we can’t see her.

Silence fills the air for a long time.

I tug at my T-shirt, which has collected a whole extra layer of rock dust since finding the lake. ‘He had wings.’

Again, they all look at me. Emeryel’s mouth has fallen open into something resembling an O.

‘Wing can’t be too unusual, can they?’ I ask Kerrok. ‘I mean, considering just how many alien species there are, surely a few have wings?’

‘I have not heard of any winged species developing space travel.’

Vorden shakes his head in agreement with his brother.

Torksten clears his throat as it’s been some time since he last spoke. ‘Neither have I. Not even when I fought in the Arena, and I met many species there I had not previously encountered.’

He always says *arena* like it has a capital A, and a haunted expression briefly passes over his face. Emeryel reaches behind her to cup his cheek, and he closes his eyes, practically nestling closer. It’s totally adorable. And a little sad. The scars that mark the shoulder of Kerrok’s prosthetic arm are nothing compared to the scars that cover Torksten’s chest, back and neck. He even has a few on his face, and one of his horns has clearly been broken and has grown back crooked. He looks like he’s been dragged to hell and back.

Thank goodness he has this planet to hide out on. I only wish Sonam could see that Rainland is a sanctuary, not a prison.

‘Let me get this straight,’ says Rose into the momentary silence. ‘We have an entire tomb under us, with ... what? Twenty sarcophaguses?’

I wince at her words. The angel chained to the wall might disagree with the whole ‘Rainland is sanctuary’ idea.

‘We did not check every cave, but it was like this space.’ Kerrok indicates Home Room, surrounded as it is by three stories of smaller caves.

‘So thirty.’

‘And that’s assuming there’s only one body in each of the sarcophaguses,’ says Jess.

‘Great. I hadn’t thought of that.’ Sarcasm weighs heavily on Rose’s words.

Emeryel frowns a little at Rose's directness, but Jess isn't bothered by it.

I wrap an arm around my twin and tug her closer. She's always trying to be the tough one because she's had to look after me.

'As well as an angel in stasis,' my twin finishes. She doesn't exactly snuggle against me; she's never been one to admit to feelings of weakness or fear, but a little tension leaves her shoulders at my touch, and she doesn't push me away.

'Yep.'

'Correct.'

Kerrok and I answer at the same time. I blush. Can the others tell we've had sex?

We might not have done the official deed, but I'm pretty sure mutual masturbation, some wall humping and then oral counts as us basically having had sex. I certainly feel different. Not in any physical sense. It's more— I rack my brain, trying to find the right words to describe it.

It's more like I've joined a secret club all the others were already a part of.

Whenever anyone asked me about who my first kiss was or how I lost my virginity, I never knew how to answer. I felt ashamed I didn't have a story, like I was somehow less of a person because I hadn't ever been kissed. Which is completely and utterly ridiculous. Sex shouldn't matter enough that not having any makes me ashamed of myself.

Having had sex doesn't make me any more important as an individual.

Yet, on the other hand, it has made a difference. A huge difference. I like sex. I know that about myself now. I'm empowered by that knowledge.

I like sex.

Hell, I *love* sex.

I especially love having sex with Kerrok.

He's sitting beside his brother. There's only a difference of an inch or two in height between them, and I can see a lot of other similarities; they're clearly brothers. But the differences that make Kerrok himself are what I love most. His scars. His mismatched arms. His thoughtfulness. The way he moans right before he comes.

As though he can hear my thoughts, he looks up and catches my eye. He doesn't smile, but he tilts his head to one side in a movement I recognise as his 'serious examination'. He's looking at me like there isn't anything else in the entire world that needs his attention, like I'm the center of his thoughts.

Butterflies fill my stomach.

'Calla. Callaaa.' Rose waves a hand in front of my face. 'Are you alright? You're not listening.'

'Oh.' I shake my head, trying to remember what it was we'd been talking about. Oh, fuck. The angel. Right. That was kind of important. 'I'm listening. I'm just tired. It's been a long day.'

'We've all had a shock tonight,' agrees Jess. She stands. 'Why don't we finish this conversation in the morning, after we've all had some time to adjust?'

'This is a wise decision.' Standing too, Vorden kisses the top of Jess's head. Not condescendingly. Because of their height difference, sometimes the top of her head is the easier part for him to reach. She moves up a step. She's still shorter than him, but now she can wrap her arms around his neck.

'An early night.' She grins at Vorden.

Rose rolls her eyes, but Emeryel and Torksten are in sudden and urgent agreement. With Gracie on her shoulder, Emeryel stands and holds out a hand to Torksten. He takes it, looking like he'd follow her to the moon and back. They're halfway up the stairs to their bedcave before Jess and Vorden finish saying their goodnights.

'It's like 5pm!' Rose looks at her non-existent watch, but Jessica waves at us over her shoulder.

‘That’s one way to clear a room. They didn’t even eat dinner.’ Rose pours what’s left of the ceali into my cup. ‘So, did you two do anything else interesting while you were away? Other than finding a tomb and a lake and an angel.’

Kerrok opens his mouth to answer, but my heart rate spikes, and my hands get all sweaty. ‘Nope. That was everything.’

Kerrok closes his mouth, and I know I’ve fucked up.

I want to tell my twin, I really do, but my whole body freezes with sudden panic. This is all so new. I’m not even sure how to start such a conversation. It’s always been Rose who’s had boyfriends, never me. She stopped asking me about that kind of stuff years ago when she realized how uncomfortable it made me, and I was so grateful I didn’t have to go through the rigmarole of explaining yet again that I’d chickened out even kissing a boy that I never brought it up either.

Fuck. I close my eyes. My heart is racing a mile a minute, and I legitimately feel sick. Is Kerrok even my boyfriend? How would I describe our relationship to Rose? How could I possibly quantify it to my sister when I still haven’t fully quantified it to myself.

We’re practicing hardly seems to cover what Kerrok and I are doing anymore, but at the same time that’s exactly what we’re doing. It’s both practice and so much more.

‘I will make us some food.’ After a slight pause, Kerrok nods once, as if confirming with himself this is a good escape plan, and heads toward the storeroom. I want to follow him, but Rose has taken hold of my hand.

‘Seriously, Calla. You’re alright?’

‘I’m fine.’ When she gives me her classic *I don’t believe you* look, I laugh a shaky laugh and just have to hope it sounds genuine and not like I’m on the verge of a relationship classification crisis. ‘Really, I am.’

‘Hmm. You look different.’

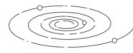
‘H-how?’

‘Happy, I guess.’ She shrugs. There are shadows under her eyes, dried mud outlines her fingernails and there’s a tear in her T-shirt she hasn’t fixed yet.

‘How are you?’ I pull her hands into my lap, rubbing the back of one with my thumb.

‘Me?’ Her eyebrows rise, and I instantly feel terrible for not asking her this sooner and more often. ‘Fine. Completely fine.’

I examine her more closely. She looks tired, dirty and worn, but she doesn’t look unhappy, however much of a shock she’s had this evening. I think she’s telling the truth.



KERROK

It is never truly lightless in Home Room. The glow worms do not stop glowing because it is night. For this reason, I finally decide to sacrifice one of my blankets to make myself a door.

It is not a difficult thing to make, and as I work, I try not to watch Calla and Rose. They are the only two still seated by the central fire. When the door is complete, I settle into my bed.

This small cave, with walls only just tall enough for me to stand to my full height, is a space all my own. Before Rainland I never had such a luxury. Now I miss Calla and would give up my personal space in a heartbeat if it meant she was lying beside me.

Her and Rose's voices are too soft for me to hear clearly, and I lie there listening to their steady incoherent murmur.

I must eventually fall asleep because the next thing I know someone is pushing gently at my shoulder, urging me to move over. Groggily, I roll onto my side. I must have been more tired than I'd realized. Thankfully, this night is not my night to remain on guard. That task has fallen to Torksten once more.

I lift one corner of the blanket covering my body, and Calla slips in beside me. Her feet are cold, and I press them between my thighs, warming her.

'You came,' I whisper into the stillness.

'Of course I did.' She rests her head on my chest, one hand under her cheek. A single strand of her hair tickles my nose. 'I'm sorry I didn't tell Rose—or the others. I ... froze.'

I kiss the top of her head, smoothing down her hair. 'I understand. You do not need to explain to me.'

'Did you tell Vorden?'

'No.' In a moment of quiet earlier this evening, my brother had asked if I had kissed Calla, but I pretended not to hear him. 'For now, this is our secret.'

‘Just until we’ve decided,’ she agrees.

‘I have made my decision. I will want no mate but you, and when you decide the same, I will lick your quim until you are shouting my name, and everyone will hear how well I pleasure you.’

‘Kerrok.’ Her cheeks turn pink. Even with my new door, it is not so dark in my bedcave that I cannot see her color.

‘I still do not know why you change color?’ I brush one cheek with my metal knuckles. My Calla is not cold any longer.

‘I can’t help it. It just happens.’

‘It is a good thing, yes?’

‘It ... ’ She wrinkles her nose. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I think it must be a good thing. You turn pink whenever you are considering my cock.’ I flex my hips so my erection tents the blanket.

‘You know, you might be right.’

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



KERROK

‘**K**errok. Wake up.’

I sit up, and Calla stifles a yelp as she shuffles back to give me room. Evidently, she’d been leaning over me.

‘Sorry.’

‘We forgot the water.’ Her eyes are bright, and sleep has disheveled her hair more than usual.

‘The water?’

‘*The* water. The lever. What did the lever do?’

‘Fek.’ I push the blankets off, intending to stand.

Her eyes widen at my nakedness. My cock is stiff after I slept so close to Calla.

‘Maybe the water can wait.’ She licks her lips, but then, to my eternal disappointment, shakes her head. ‘Nope, water first. Sex later. And possibly somewhere more private than in the cave next door to your brother and Jessica.’

‘They will not mind. I have heard them many times.’

‘Nope.’ She raises a hand between us. ‘It’s too early in the morning to begin my career into voyeurism. Come on.’ She throws my pants at me, and when I am dressed, I follow her into Home Room.

It is silent. Everyone else remains asleep. Everyone except Torksten, who stands in the doorway to his bedcave, looking down at Calla and me. She does not notice, and I press a fist to my chest in recognition. He nods once and returns to his bedcave, leaving us to our exploration.

Calla walks a full circle of Home Room, examining the wall and peeking into the empty caves. She stops longest before the storeroom, looking at the fully stocked shelves of food. I stand by her side.

‘They managed perfectly well without me for three days,’ she whispers. A hesitation. ‘Come, we should check the water cave.’

The tunnel is dark without the light of the glow worms or glow leaves, and I run my hand along one wall, using it to guide my way. Calla catches hold of my other hand, and my tail wraps around one of her legs.

The water cave looks how we left it, the water green-blue and almost perfectly still.

‘It would be disappointing if all we did was turn off the hot spring,’ she says, her voice normal now we are out of earshot of the others.

I kneel on the lip of the pool and reach into the hot water, searching for the small holes I found not four days ago. The slow movement of water is still there, as before. ‘We did not. That has not changed.’

‘Good. But if it isn’t in here, then what does that lever even do?’ She runs a hand over her head, notices her hair and begins to finger-comb the strands. ‘What if the lever has nothing to do with the water up here? Perhaps the lake isn’t even connected.’

‘The lever might not have been the answer we were looking for, but I do not doubt that we will figure out a solution to our running water problem.’ I wrap my arms around Calla, and she leans her cheek on my chest, as she did when she sought comfort from my hold.

It feels as it did then: an honor to be trusted.

My life has changed in so many ways since crashing on Rainland. If my old self was to see me now, I would be unrecognizable. I may be trapped on this planet for the rest of my life, but I have found something more important than traveling. I have found a new tribe, here with my brother and his mate, with my Calla and the other Mating Females. Torksten probably feels the same way. Once he was alone; now he isn’t.

Calla presses a kiss to my chest. ‘We’re alone.’

‘We are.’

‘The others won’t be up for another few hours yet.’

‘That is right.’ I bow my head, but she ducks out of my hold, laughing.

‘I’m going to have a bath. I really need a bath!’ She strips off her clothes, and I follow, fumbling with the clips of my leg armor as Calla drops her smallest pants onto the ground and unfastens the fabric she wears around her breasts.

It is the first time she has been completely without coverings, and I think I might come there and then, just from looking at her. She makes a move as though to cover herself and seems to consider better. ‘Do you a-approve?’

She is curved in a way Anor’os females are not, and her breasts are much larger too. Each one could fit in the cup of my hand. A curious patch of dark hair is nestled at the apex of her legs, like a curtain waiting to be parted. When I licked her quim, I noticed the hair there is not as soft as the hair on her head but nor is it as coarse as my own. I relish the differences between our bodies. Her softness to my hardness.

‘You are— I mean— ’ I did not think I would be self-conscious, when—*if* the time came. Anticipation races through my nerve endings but it is mixed with something else, something that churns my stomach and tightens my chest.

She smiles again, recognizing my inability to form coherent thought as the compliment it is, and climbs into the water, sinking deep until just her head and shoulders are above the waterline.

With a pleasurable sigh that goes straight to my cock, she wets her hair, scrubbing at her scalp.

For a moment, I stare at her, unable to move, barely even able to draw breath.

‘Heavenly.’

‘Heav-en-lee?’ I ask, then immediately decide I do not care and step into the pool beside her. I tug her close. Her skin is slippery, and she practically slides onto my lap, her legs

straddling both mine. Like this, her breasts are lifted over the line of the water, and I wait not a heartbeat longer to suck one nipple into my mouth. There's a hint of saltiness mingled with the minerals of the water.

She wraps her arms about my neck and entwines her fingers through my short hair.

Experimentally, I flick her nipple with the end of my tongue, remembering how she tasted when I licked between her folds, and she arches her back, pressing closer. Using her body to tell me what she wants. The water is uncomfortably hot, but I pay it no attention. Everything in my field of vision is Calla. Everything I can smell, touch and taste is Calla.

‘Kerrok.’

‘What, my Calla?’

‘Please. Just ... please.’

I nip at her delicate skin, shielding my sharp teeth with my lips, desperate to mark her as my own but not hurt her. She rocks against me, her curved belly tickling one side of my leaking cock, and the sensation of the water and her smooth skin harmoniously mingling.

‘I want to be inside you.’ I want there to be no space between our bodies. Lust and love are blurring my vision, and I blink trying to bring Calla back into focus.

‘I want that too.’ Holding my shoulders for leverage, she lifts a little and rubs herself over the head of my cock. *Fek!* My eyes close for one blissful moment, and then I catch her hips in my hands, holding her still. A silent plea.

‘I will not last if you keep doing that,’ I tell her honestly. And hoarsely. My voice sounds strained and overused. It doesn't come as a surprise, hearing my own desperate need.

‘Sorry.’ Another beautiful laugh. My Calla is happy. She stills, watching me expectantly, her bottom lip trapped between her blunt teeth.

With one hand still on her hip, I use the other to direct my hardness to push at her core, and slowly I push the head of my

stiff cock into her delicious heat. I feel her stretching to accommodate me, and the wetness of her quim welcomes me.

‘Oh, wow. That’s— ’ A choked sound. An experimental wiggle. ‘So strange.’

‘A good strange?’ I grit my teeth, desperately waiting for her consent to continue. I need to know she is well, that she is comfortable.

‘Hmm, a very good strange,’ she practically purrs and lowers herself inch by slow inch, until I am fully seated inside. It is tight, her quim encircling my cock.

‘Oh.’ Bracing herself on my shoulders again, she rolls her body experimentally. ‘Oh, wow.’

‘I. Can’t.’ I clench my jaw between each word. My hips cannot stay unmoving; despite my determination to remain still, they jerk in tiny movements that cause so much friction. ‘Stop.’ I finally manage to say.

‘Then don’t.’ She digs her blunt nails into my skin and lifts almost completely off my cock before bearing down.

The last shred of my self-control tears. I roar my need and slam deep into her. She rides my cock, bouncing on my lap from the power of my upward thrusts. Her breasts bounce before my chest, and I greedily lick one plush nipple, even as the pleasure in my body explodes outwards.

Calla’s breathing speeds up, and she throws her head back, her quim gripping my cock, milking me of milt. I come in long spurts, filling her.

‘Oh yes. Oh yes. Kerrok!’ She pants my name, chasing her pleasure, taking from me what she needs. I slip a hand between our bodies, caressing her clit, and her eyes snap open. ‘Hell.’ She shudders, blinking as though she has momentarily lost her vision, and then her head comes to rest on my shoulder, her forehead damp with sweat. My cock gives one last twitch, determined to release every drop into my female.

‘That was—’ Her whole body is shaking in the aftermath. I know exactly how she feels. I am still seated inside her. I

never want to leave. I never want our bodies to be parted. I press a hand to her back, keeping her close.

Next time, I silently promise myself. Next time I will make her come twice before I lose control. Next time I will make it last longer.

Next time. The realization that there will hopefully, wonderfully, be a next time is a greedy thought and something I cling to as though it is a lifeline. She might not yet have called me her mate, but I know my Calla. I know she wants me, as I want to possess every inch of her.

My tail rubs against her ass and then presses against her tightest hole, not hard enough to enter, just enough to make my intentions known. ‘Next time.’ And the words sound like an oath.

She straightens. ‘Oh.’

‘Yes?’

‘Ahh. Y-yes. If you’d like that.’

‘Maybe I will enter your ass while I press your breasts against the vibrating wall.’

She swallows, and I kiss her throat as it moves. ‘I’d like to try that. I want to try everything with you. All of it.’

‘There is more? Do you have another idea?’

‘Oh, babe, I’ve got lots of ideas.’

‘Babe?’ I wrinkle my nose as I have seen Calla do when she is not sure about something.

‘Sweetheart,’ she clarifies. ‘Lover. Darling.’

Lover, but not yet mate. ‘What ideas?’

‘Once, I read about this thing c-couples can do where the woman—’using her arms, she pushes against the sides of her breasts, squeezing them together—‘does this, and then the man t-thrusts between them.’

‘That is creative.’ My gaze locks on the small channel between her breasts, my cock hardening inside Calla. ‘You

never cease to amaze.’

She squirms on my lap. ‘Again?’

‘Always, when I am with you.’



CALLA

Kerrok is like a man possessed. I come twice more before he finally pulls free of my body. I'm sore, yet I feel the loss of him acutely. Instead, I wrap my arms around him and press my cheek to his hard chest. I can't hear his heart; the bone plating under his skin makes it impossible, but I cherish the rise and fall of his chest with each breath, and I try to slow my breathing to match his.

The others will wake soon, and unless I want them to find out this way, Kerrok and I need to get dressed pretty sharp-ish. Besides, my fingers and toes are getting that wrinkled been-in-the-water-too-long look.

'Thank God the water's constantly being replaced.' I shudder, knowing for a fact Jess and Vorden have had sex in this pool. Probably Emeryel and Torksten too.

'The rock acts as a natural cleanser,' Kerrok says, as if he can read my thoughts. 'By the time it has cycled from here, down the mountain and back into the lake, it will be completely clean.'

'A natural water filter.' I shake my head. 'I just won't think about it too hard.'

My eyelids are heavy, and I wish I could stay like this forever, within the circle of Kerrok's arm. Everything stills, even the water, and that's when I notice it: a vibration. Still soft enough, I might easily have missed it.

'Can you feel that?' I climb out of the water, heedless of my nakedness for the first time in my life. Barefoot, I move to the closest wall and press my hand to the stone. Nothing. I move a few meters long and try again. Still nothing. I cross the water cave and touch the wall there. A vibration. Or maybe I'm imagining it because I want it to be true.

Kerrok stands, and the water streams from his gorgeous body. God, he's got a tight ass. And thighs. And chest. And

everything. My knees are a little weak from just looking at him.

The vibration increases. I peer at the wall, searching for ... I don't know what.

A bead of water lands on my forehead and runs down my nose. I glance up at the ceiling. I'm standing directly under a stalactite.

It exists in the curve where the wall becomes the ceiling and is one of the longer ones in this cave. Already a new drop has formed on its tip, and I catch it in the palm of my hand. Another drop appears, which is strange. Stalactites usually take hours or even days to form a new water drop. I should know; I've spent a lot of time this past month staring at tunnel and cave formations.

The drips come faster and faster until they're running down the stalactite like a dripping tap.

Kerrok reaches up and snaps the stalactite off at its base.

A shit ton of water pours out of a perfectly circular hole about the size of my fist. Kerrok and I are both drowned in hot water, and we jump back.

I burst out laughing, flicking water out of my face and off my hands. I'm drenched! So is Kerrok, who's blinking water out of his eyelashes.

Already the water pressure is lessening and evens out to a steady stream, like a low-pressure waterfall. I touch it. It's hot, but not boiling, thank goodness. About the same temperature as the hot spring. Catching some in my cupped hands, I take a sip. It tastes like water—maybe a little more minerally than rainwater but perfectly drinkable.

'I think we did it.'

Kerrok's examining the waterfall with academic interest, and I can imagine how he's putting the pieces together, analyzing how the whole thing works.

We're standing in a puddle of water.

'I hope we don't flood the cave.'

‘I do not think so. There should be a counterpoint.’

We examine the ground. The water is running across the floor of the cave, pretty much as you’d expect, but when it reaches the far wall, it drains away, as though there are microscopic holes in the floor.

‘That’s lucky.’

‘It is not luck,’ Kerrok corrects. ‘Whoever designed this water system accommodated drainage needs.’

I smile at how literally he takes everything I say. ‘As impressive as that is, I’d like them a lot more if they hadn’t also kept an angel locked in the basement.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



CALLA

‘We should celebrate!’ Jess is grinning, as are Rose and Emeryel when Kerrok and I show the others (minus Sonam, who’s still hiding in her bedcave) the permanent waterfall we uncovered.

‘Pool party!’ Rose shouts. ‘We’ll get food, and we’ll go swimming. It’ll be great.’

‘We do deserve a little fun,’ Emeryel agrees, her dyed green hair piled on top of her head, an inch of dark roots showing. ‘It’s been a tough month.’

‘Remember how we were going to go dancing that first night we met?’ Rose asks.

‘That didn’t exactly work out how we’d planned.’ Jess winces, as though she’s still blaming herself for getting us abducted when all she did was initiate the first meeting of the Lonely Women’s Friend Club. Was it only a month ago? So much has happened since that night the five of us went drinking.

‘We should have a party.’ I glance toward the hot spring. It’s big enough to accommodate us all, but it’s not big enough to swim in. ‘We could go to the lake.’ But even I regret that idea as soon as it leaves my mouth.

‘Maybe we’ll keep clear of cryo-man for now,’ says Jess. ‘At least until we decide what we’re going to do with him.’

‘We’re going to leave him there.’ Rose crosses her arms. Her stance says *fight me at your own risk*.

‘I agree with Rose.’ Emeryel looks a little pale at the thought of waking him up. ‘We know nothing about him. If he’s been asleep for as long as we think he has been, then he can stay asleep for a while longer.’

Torksten nods his agreement.

‘Besides,’ I say, ‘we want Sonam to come, and there’s no way we’re getting her all the way down the mountain. It’ll be hard enough to convince her to come to a pool party here.’

‘We could decorate.’ Emeryel looks around the water cave, which is much wetter now the waterfall is running continuously. ‘We could hang some glow leaves up.’

‘Cool. Emeryel, you’re in charge of the decorations,’ Jess delegates, as our unofficial leader. ‘Torksten and Kerrok can organize the food. I’ll be in charge of persuading Sonam to come. And everyone else can pick which task they want to help with. We’ll meet back here at sundown for the best pool part-ay in all of deep space.’

Kerrok, Vorden and Torksten exchange looks. ‘What is a pool part-ay?’

‘Oh, my lover.’ Jess links arms with Vorden, pulling him down for a kiss. ‘You’ve been missing out on life. Pool parties are awesome!’



The whole day passes, and I never once find the opportunity to sneak away with Kerrok for a few minutes of privacy. Even with all the prep, Jess finds time to tug Vorden into their shared bedcave for what I can only presume is pre-party sex, while Emeryel and Torksten disappear after lunch and reappear looking rather ruffled with Torksten’s braids half unraveled. Of course, those guys don’t care if we know what they’re doing, whereas Kerrok and I are still trying to act inconspicuous.

I must be content with snatching glances of Kerrok as he helps with the decorations. I’m on the food team, which is fun in its own way but not half as fun as a quickie with Kerrok would have been.

It sucks, and I only have myself to blame.

By the time darkness swallows the valley below, we’re ready. The water cave is looking stunning, with bundles of

glow leaves tied to stalactites in the style of chandeliers, while glow worms still cover the rest of the ceiling, looking like fairy lights. The decoration team has even strung prickly berries onto a length of thread, a little like a Christmas garland dangling between bundles of glow leaves.

The food team has made a bit of everything: tuber porridge, sliced fresh fruit, roasted nuts and more prickly berries for dessert and a minty kick. We've laid it out along one edge of the hot spring, in a kind of self-serve buffet. It honestly isn't the best picnic food I've ever eaten, not even in the top twenty, but it's food, and everyone's too happy with finally having running water to care about the plainness of the meal.

Jessica, Emeryel, Rose and I have stripped down to our underwear, as if we were wearing bikinis. I feel daring. I never wore a bikini back on Earth, but I'm among friends here. That fact alone makes it a million times better than any party I did or didn't attend on Earth.

Gracie plays in the spray of water from the waterfall. Her fur is thick enough that the water rolls off her back. She wets her four hands and presses wet handprints to the cave wall. She looks as happy as a duck in water—or as a climber in water.

Once we've eaten, Torksten brings out the hooch he's apparently been making from fermented nuts. It's thick, like nut milk. He takes a swig directly from the wooden jug and passes it around. Emeryel pulls a face when she drinks, and I choke.

'Fuck. That's got a powerful kick.' Jess tries to high-five Torksten, but he stares at her like she tried to hit him, and she quickly withdraws her hand, somewhat bashfully.

Tipsy Emeryel spends the next while explaining what a high five is, whilst tipsy Jess climbs onto Vorden's knee, and they makeout.

Rose rolls her eyes. She's linked arms with Sonam, and I'm pretty sure Rose's hold on the other woman is the only thing keeping Sonam at the party. She's sitting in the water

fully dressed in her jeans and T-shirt, her neck scarf wrapped over her hair, as though the wool will keep her hair dry. She keeps throwing Kerrok uneasy looks, as though he might suddenly announce he wants to makeout with her or something equally devastating, all because he's the only unoccupied alien. Doesn't she know he's taken? I surreptitiously slide closer to him, the urge to leave my mark on his skin increasing by the second.

I could sink my teeth into one of his perfect pecs. Only I'd probably crack my teeth.

The cave walls start spinning.

I'm definitely drunk. It's been an age since I've had a drink, and I'm such a lightweight it's not funny. I close my eyes, but that makes the spinning worse.

I rest my rotating head on Kerrok's arm. If anyone can keep it from spinning, it'll be my lover. From his angle, I can see the underside of his chin. God, he's got a gorgeous chin. It's so delicious I could lick it up, like an ice-cream.

'You're hot,' I hear myself say. Only it sounds more like 'Yehot.' I try again, but my tongue has forgotten how to work.

'Akh?' Gently, he tugs the jug of hooch from my hold.

'Come on. Drink this.' My twin fetches me a cup of water, collecting it from the waterfall.

'I found this,' I tell her, pointing to the water in the cup. 'I found this. With help from my Kerrok.'

'Yep. You certainly did.' She tips the cup toward my lips, and I take a long drink. Wow, I'm parched.

'That's good water.'

'It's excellent water,' she agrees. 'You did a fantastic job.'

I stare at her, trying to work out if she's placating me. But of course she's not. She's my twin. I point at her head. 'That's my face.' I wrap my arms around her. 'God, I love you. You're the best.'

She pats my back, like she used to when we were younger. Fuck, I've missed my sister. I mean, I didn't physically lose her, but I've spent so long keeping secrets from her it's like we haven't talked. *Really* talked in ages.

I rub her back in return. 'Let's never be parted.'



KERROK

Torksten's hooch has gone to my Calla's head. She drapes herself over Rose, sinking lower into the water.

'Kerrok.' Rose wraps an arm around Calla. 'Can you give me a hand? It's about time she went to bed.'

I ignore the hard lump of jealousy that forms in my chest, and take Calla from Rose's arms, lifting her gently out of the water. She runs wet fingers through my short-cut hair, tracing the lines of my Hunter tattoos over my scalp.

'You are drunk,' I tell her, and she laughs her agreement.

'She doesn't normally drink.' Rose confirms my suspicions. She follows us from the water cave, down the short tunnel and into Home Room. We start toward Calla's bedcave. I have never been inside. I imagine it is immaculate with everything assigned to its own place.

'Thanks for helping.' Rose holds the blanket door open for me, and I duck under the lintel, cradling Calla's head so she does not accidentally hit it on the narrow door frame.

Her room is how I imagined, sparse but neat. She's made her bed, her blankets folded expertly. The air even smells a little like Calla. A little salt, a little rain and a little something unique to her. I breathe deeply, trying to commit the smell to my memory.

Once I have laid Calla in her bed, Rose pulls a blanket over her, and it is clear Rose is dismissing me. I want to stay, but what can I say: *Calla is my almost mate. Calla and I are day-ting.*

In the end, I state my wish to help if Rose needs anything and leave the siblings alone. Calla is already asleep and does not see me leave. I do not return to the party. I am in no mood to see Vorden and Torksten happy with their mates.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



CALLA

I wake with a splitting headache and a fuzzy mouth, and it's my fault.

Much, much later I manage to struggle out of bed without my head falling off my shoulders, and I vow never to drink anything Torksten's made ever again. His hooch is so strong it could probably power a spaceship!

'Why isn't there any paracetamol on this planet?'

There is however a cup of water by my bed, and I take a few cautious sips. When my stomach doesn't start a revolution, I gulp the rest down and wipe my mouth on the back of my hand.

Once I've shuffled out of my bedcave, I can't see Kerrok anywhere. I'm almost pleased about that. Part of me doesn't want him to see me like this; the other part wishes I could curl up on his lap and go back to sleep.

It takes forever to complete my toiletries, but having clean teeth is a life changer. Jess, Emeryel and Gracie are sitting by the central fire, and Jess waves at me, using her other hand to shield her eyes from the firelight. Emeryel's faded dress is crumbled enough to make it obvious she slept fully clothed last night. They look as bad as I feel, but I don't approach. There's something I've got to do first.

I shouldn't have been such a bloody coward yesterday. And the day before. *Fuck*. I can only pray Kerrok will forgive me.

Rose is in the hangar, sitting outside in the rain with her legs dangling over the edge. She's mostly dry, protected by the mountainside, and I sit beside her. You get used to being damp when living on a rain planet.

She rests her head on my shoulder, and for a moment we stare down at the view. Already, greenery is starting to fill the gaps made by the crashed ships and the avalanches. In a few

more months, the clearings will be hard to spot, and in a few years, it'll be like the Hov never came.

I'm glad.

The comfortable silence is so deep I don't want to break it, but I've got to speak. I've been carrying around secrets for too long. 'Y-you know that agreement we made with each other—that you'd go to uni and I'd work to pay our bills?' My voice is a fraction too high pitched, too feeble.

'Of course.' She straightens to look at me, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Anxiety churns in my stomach. 'I know we did it for good reasons, but I really wasn't coping. I should have told you sooner, but I had all these feelings in my head about how I was a failure, and I didn't want to put that pressure on you when you had so much going on in your own life.'

'What pressure?' Her shoulders drop. 'It was my fault. I should have—'

'No, it wasn't. I knew you'd think that, but it isn't true. I made some bad decisions and then dug my heels in when I should have asked for help. I have ... ' I swallow. 'I had a lot of credit card debt. Like A LOT.'

Rose turns her whole body toward me, slipping a foot under her butt.

'Like thousands and thousands of dollars.'

The lines around her mouth deepen, and I can tell she's upset. I also hate that she's silent.

'I'm sorry.' That sounds pathetic, and I wince. 'I screwed up.'

'I don't care about debt. Fuck it, Calla. Banks suck, and life is hard sometimes. I only care about you.' She holds my hand. 'I care I didn't do something to help you.'

'I didn't tell you. You couldn't have known.'

'But I knew something was wrong. It was obvious you weren't happy, but I kept telling myself that you'd get better

once I graduated. I kept telling myself there were only a few months left, and afterwards everything would fall into place.'

'Are you disappointed you never graduated?'

She doesn't pause to consider. 'Nope.'

'But it was three years of your life.'

'It was three years of our lives. Screw uni. What use is graphic design on a planet without computers?' She tugs me closer. 'You're happier here. That's much more important.'

'I am happier. Thanks to you.'

She snorts her disbelief.

'You were the one who dragged me along to the friends' club meeting. If you hadn't done that, we wouldn't have been at the bar, and then we wouldn't have been abducted. Which means we wouldn't be here.'

'Fuck, the world's a crazy place.'

'Yep.'

We fall silent for a long time. The cliché about a weight being lifted off your shoulders is a cliché for a reason. I'm honestly lighter.

'You really don't care about the debt?'

'No! Of course not. Though I'm a bit pissed you didn't tell me sooner.'

I rest my head on her shoulder, and there's more silence, as though we're both lost in our own thoughts. I'm thinking about Rose and uni and debt and how stupid I was. I should have told her sooner. I absolutely should have, but because I wasn't coping, I doubtlessly wasn't thinking straight either.

The stress was an avalanche. It picked me up and rolled me straight over the edge of the cliff. And then there's Rose. The complete opposite of an avalanche. Always by my side, no matter how much I fuck up.

I nudge my sister. 'Why *did* you drag me along to that meeting?'

‘I don’t know.’ She shrugs.

‘Come on. There’s got to be a reason.’

She shrugs again and mumbles something that sounds like, ‘You didn’t have any friends.’

‘See! You *were* helping me.’

‘It wasn’t enough.’

‘It was more than enough! Imagine if you’d done more. We might have ended up ... I don’t know. In the middle of a giant space war. Or as leaders of a rebel union, fighting to bring down an empire.’

She rolls her eyes. ‘Star Wars?’

‘You never know. That stuff could be real. We could have ended up on that ...’ I can’t remember the name. ‘That frozen planet. Living in an ice cave.’

‘Thank God for rain! We’d never have survived the cold.’

‘Or imagine if Vorden and Kerrok hadn’t found us.’

‘I don’t want to imagine that.’ She shakes her head. ‘Sure, we *might* have survived without them. But it’s heaps better with them here.’

‘Yeah.’ I smile, remembering Kerrok’s fine, fine ass. It is heaps better with them.

‘What are you grinning about? You look like a maniac.’ Apparently my grin is infectious because Rose grins too. ‘Did Kerrok kiss you?’

My mouth drops open as my eyes widen. ‘How’d you know!?’

‘Come on!’ There’s a silent *We’re twins, you idiot*. ‘You were all over him at the party last night.’

‘Oh God.’ I bury my face in my hands. ‘Was I?’ I have a faint memory of wanting to lick his chin.

Did I lick his chin?

Please let me not have licked his chin in front of my sister.

‘Sooo?’ She drags the question out.

‘Sooo.’ I’m blushing and my heartbeat speeds up as though I’m halfway between my flight or fight instincts. I don’t want to have this conversation as much as I do want to. ‘Sooo I really like him,’ I finally confess, not able to lie to my sister.

‘Oh. Calla and Kerrok, sitting in a tree. K. I. S. S. I. N. G.’

My face continues to heat. I’m my own miniature sun, burning up.

‘Calla!’ Rose practically screams. ‘You’ve done more than just kissing him!’ She points to my face.

‘Go away.’ I hide my face in my hands.

‘My baby sister is all grown up.’

‘Go away.’

‘Seriously.’ Her voice drops to a whisper, clearly not wanting anyone to overhear, even though nobody else is in the hangar. ‘Do you like him? A lot *a lot*?’

‘Yeah.’ I’m looking anywhere but at Rose. I tug at my T-shirt. I examine my nails. I pretend to brush some rock dust off my shoulders. ‘He asked me to be his mate.’

She freezes. For a second, so fast I could have imagined it, I see a flash of jealousy cross her face. ‘What did you say?’

‘That I’d think about it.’

‘And?’ She leans a fraction closer, her face curtained by her dark, frizzy hair.

‘And I’ve thought about it.’

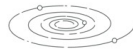
‘And?’ She looks about ready to strangle me for information.

‘And I want to say yes.’ As soon as I say the words aloud, I know they’re true. I do want to be Kerrok’s mate. I want my new life on Rainland to include him.

‘Oh wow.’ She lies back on the rock floor.

‘Yep.’ I lie down beside her, and she turns her head to look at me. I stare into hazelnut eyes the same shade as my own. ‘The world is strange. Who’d have imagined I’d end up mated to a nice guy?’

‘Me. I could imagine it.’ She sighs. ‘You’re my favorite person in the entire fucking universe, Calla. Of course Kerrok was going to fall in love with you. It was inevitable. The poor guy didn’t stand a chance.’



KERROK

I help Torksten prepare a meal for the Mating Females. Emeryel is pale. Jessika has her hands on her head. Sonam has returned to hiding in her bedcave. Rose and Calla are sitting together in the hangar, talking privately.

The knot of jealousy that filled my chest yesterday when I watched the siblings together has evaporated. Today I can think clearly, and I am grateful Calla has Rose by her side, as I have Vorden by mine.

When the meal is prepared, I serve it into eight wooden bowls carved by Torksten, and the group gathers around the fire. Even Sonam stays to eat, when usually she retreats with her food to eat in private.

Tonight it is Calla who stalks silently around the group and ducks into the tunnel that leads to the water cave, her food untouched. Trying not to draw attention to myself, I wait a few moments, abandon my half-eaten meal and follow. The sound of the waterfall fills the tunnel, and I follow it to the water cave, where I find Calla sitting on the edge of the hot tub. She has her back to me, and I see the strips of cloth she wears as shoes in a neat pile on the ground.

The water cave is still decorated from last night's pool part-ay, and the glow leaves hanging from the ceiling in bunches have not yet wilted because of the high humidity.

I take off my boots, pants, belt and deployment bands, and sit beside her with only my feet and ankles in the hot water.

She wiggles her toes, a smile playing with the corners of her mouth. There is something calm about her this afternoon. Something restful, as though she has sorted her thoughts into their relevant categories and does not presently have any stray worries circling through her mind. I wonder for how long it will last, but I adore my Calla in all her forms. Calm, panicked, excited, lustful, anxious, happy, contemplative.

I bump her shoulder lightly with my arm as I have seen some of the Mating Females do to each other if they want their attention.

She looks at me, blinking slowly. ‘Hello.’

‘You are well, yes?’ I believe I know the answer to this question, but still I would like confirmation that I am reading her facial expressions and body movements correctly.

‘Very well. In fact, I’ve decided.’

Immediately I straighten, and my hand drops to my hip, where my gun usually rests, but of course it is not there at this moment. ‘A decision?’ I ask carefully, wishing I could slow down time so we could sit in the moment before she tells me her answer forever. I do not know what I will do if she does not want to claim me for her mate.

It is her turn to bump my arm with her shoulder. ‘I’m in love with you, Kerrok. I can’t imagine my life without you. Actually—’ Her smile slips a fraction. ‘I can, and it isn’t good.’

‘This means you accept? You wish to be my mate, yes?’ There is a slight manic tone to my question.

‘I do.’ She nods. ‘I absolutely do.’

For a moment everything goes still, then my mind and heart accept her words for what they are, and I let out a triumphant shout.

She laughs, and I swallow her laugh, as I pull her onto my lap and kiss her with wild abandon.

Much later, we break apart so Calla can catch her breath. Her lips are swollen with our kisses, and I rest my cheek on the top of her head, one of her hands on my chest, neither of us willing to put any more space between our bodies.

‘Tell me again,’ I insist.

Her laugh is music.

‘I, Calla, promise to love you for the rest of my life. Until death do us part.’

‘Death? What of death?’ My unease must be evident because Calla kisses my shoulder.

‘It’s just what we say, back on my birth planet, when two people decide to become mates. What happens on your planet?’

‘When a Mating Partner comes of age, the council considers a comprehensive list of requirements and test results and chooses the most viable Mating Female for him to be assigned to.’

‘So romantic. Then what?’

‘It is not romantic.’

‘I was joking.’

‘Akh. Then the Mating Partner is added to his Mating Female’s procreation schedule, assuming she is not already carrying a child.’

‘And if she is?’

‘They wait until she has birthed her child and has sufficiently recovered.’

‘Wow. That’s—’

‘Very clinical.’ Until I came to Rainland and met Calla, I had not given the system much consideration. I was a Hunter, and then an Outlaw, never to be assigned my own Mating Female, and so it was not worth the pain to consider. ‘I am very pleased we are here.’

‘The odds of us ever meeting couldn’t have been smaller, but everything worked out in the end, and I have every intention of being happy with you for the rest of my life.’ She straddles my legs, facing me. ‘You know, there’s another human tradition I always wanted to do, when I finally found a mate.’

‘Anything.’

‘You don’t even know what it is yet!’

‘Your ideas are flawless.’

Her cheeks shade a soft pink. ‘We should go on a honeymoon.’

‘A honey-moon—’

‘Before you ask if I mean a moon made of honey, I don’t.’

I might have asked that if I knew what honey was. Instead, I motion for her to keep explaining.

‘It’s what we call a holiday that two people take once they’ve pledged their love for each other.’

‘And that is what we have done? Pledged our love?’ I want to be entirely clear about our situation.

‘I bloody well hope so. I mean, you do love me, don’t you?’

‘With every cell in my body,’ I swear with the seriousness such a promise deserves.

‘Oh, thank god.’ She lightly hits my chest. ‘So now we get to go on a holiday. Just for a few days. Just the two of us. We’ll do some sightseeing, some exploring and have loads of sex.’

‘Akh.’ I nod wisely. ‘I was right: your ideas are flawless.’



CALLA

It takes about five seconds for the news to spread about Kerrok and I. Jess and Emeryel both squeal their delight, and it's like I'm being welcomed into the *married women's* club. Rose keeps her distance, and I can't help thinking again that she might be jealous, but then I'm pulled into everyone's talk of our honeymoon and the thought slips my mind.

Kerrok and I decide we want to visit the other valley, the one nobody's been to yet, except for Torksten. From what I've seen of it, there's a lot less rain, fewer trees and actual grass instead of mud.

The idea of seeing grass on my honeymoon is both bizarre and exciting. I've missed grass. Hell, I've missed any surface that isn't rock and mud.

Kerrok and I pack food into his backpack but not too much considering we'll be down in a valley where food is relatively easy to find. This time, however, we remember to pack blankets so we can make ourselves a proper bed.

I shiver. Grass and a bed. What luxuries!

The following day, we gather in Home Room. I hug Jess, Emeryel and Sonam one last time. Rose throws a handful of dried prickle berries, as if they're rice or confetti. Torksten doesn't appear too pleased with the wasted food, but Gracie jumps down from Emeryel's shoulder and starts gathering the berries in her four hands and stuffing them into her mouth, so they're not wasted after all.

'I can't believe you're married.' Rose says, pulling me into a tight hug. She buries her face in the side of my neck, and I close my eyes. We're the same height. Two sides of the same coin.

'I know. Neither can I.' Kerrok and I didn't exactly have a big traditional Earth-style wedding, but sharing promises as we did was perfect and intimate. I love him, and he loves me. That's what matters most.

Perhaps I can braid him a wedding ring from dried grass?

‘I love you,’ I tell my twin.

She holds me for another second before pulling away. ‘You’ll be back in ten days?’ Her serious *mother hen* expression is back as she looks me over, searching for anything that might need her attention.

‘Yep.’ Ten days with Kerrok and nothing else to worry about. Sure, there might be an angel trapped in the base of our mountain, but for ten days I won’t think about him. It’s going to be me and Kerrok and a *lot* of honeymoon sex.

A shiver rolls along my nerve endings.

Fuck, I love sex.

I love Kerrok even more.

‘Hmm.’ Rose doesn’t appear entirely convinced there’s nothing I need help with, but after another long look she finally steps back. Just far enough she can turn her glare onto Kerrok. ‘If you do anything to hurt my sister, I’ll hunt you down and make you pay a thousand times over.’ She gets up into his face, which is quite a feat considering their height difference.

Kerrok doesn’t scoff or laugh at her threats, even though one of his thighs is nearly as thick as Rose’s whole body. Instead, he meets her gaze as he presses his metal fist to his chest. ‘I will love and protect Calla for the rest of my life—and beyond. This I swear.’

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THANK YOU for reading Calla and Kerrok's story. I wanted to write a fluff piece, a love story with low stakes. It didn't quite turn out that way, considering all the panic and pain Calla was holding inside of herself. But I love how it turned out nevertheless, and I hope you enjoyed reading *Loved by the Alien Warrior* as much as I loved writing it.

If you're wondering about the angel in the basement, you're certainly not the only one. But you'll need to wait a little longer. Sorry! Next up is Rose's book, and I have a strong feeling she'll be too much of a handful for only one mate. That's right! Book 4 is going to be M/F/M. (Keep reading for a Sneak Peek!) Book 5 will be the angel's book. I already have a title: *Mated to the Alien Angel* (unless of course someone else publishes a book by this title before me! Then I'll have to think of something else.) This means, at the very least, The Outlaws of Deep Space will be a five-book series. After that, I'm not entirely sure. I have some ideas. We'll both have to wait and see.

In other news, I now have my a newsletter. YAY. If you'd like to be updated about future releases, book sales and so on, [sign up](https://subscribepage.io/carlottapage) at subscribepage.io/carlottapage

Finally, reviews are the lifeblood of the independent author, so please consider leaving a review on Goodreads and Amazon.

Until book 4, happy reading, my friend.

Sincerely,

Carlotta Page

SNEAK PEEK



VYN

I check the scan results for what feels like the millionth time and make a note on the log. Nothing has changed and nor is it likely to change. Resting my booted feet on the edge of the consul, I lean back in my chair, the gravity lock allowing me to lie nearly vertical without the chair legs sliding out from under me.

While Kovel rests, I'm suffering watching duty—although there is very little for me to actually watch. Time passes with severe slowness.

We stationed our Fighter above the only planet in this part of space. No other planets orbit its sun. It is a singular point in an endless sky of nothingness.

In the fourteen days Kovel and I have watched over this lonely planet, we have seen no signs of other ships. Why would there be any? Nobody ever comes this far in deep space.

Not unless they are hiding.

My eyes drift close, and I jerk upright, shaking my head as though to shake away my boredom. Clouds encircle the planet in an almost impenetrable barrier, and I focus my attention on one of the four storm eyes visible from this location. It is a swirling mass of cloud, angry gray and black. I am not thrilled with the prospect of navigating such thick cloud when Kovel and I finally decide to strike.

I much prefer a dry planet to a wet one.

Already my gaze is softening, my attention shifting, and I stifle a yawn. Ninety per cent of bounty hunting is watching, waiting and planning. Only the last ten per cent is action. It was an important lesson—and a tough lesson—for me to learn, but such knowledge can be the difference between life and death.

Thinking of the inevitable advance, I pick up the bounty token and flick the activation switch. The hologram ignites. The token projects the likeness of our target over my open palm, just five inches tall. Slowly, it rotates a full circle so that I can see them from all angles.

The reward for their capture sits over their head like a halo. It is an almost unimaginably high reward. Then again, few cross the Crima Cartel and live to tell the tale. That this target stole a ship from the cartel means that the cartel are determined to make an example out of them. They cannot let such a crime go unpunished or else they will appear weak.

I continue my examination of the target, searching for any clues that might help Kovel and I capture them. The Anor's brothers are similar in stature. Their tribal markings decorate their chests in dark ink that is almost invisible on their charcoal skin. The elder has his spikes extended. They pattern the backs of his arms, and even in hologram form, the sharpness of their points is unmissable.

His younger brother has his laser gun drawn. As the hologram completes another full circle, it appears as though his gun is pointing right at my chest, however small it may be.

The scars that paint my face sting as though in remembrance of a similar gun, and it takes all my self-control not to throw the token across the cockpit in disgust.

These Anor's Outlaws might not have been the ones who almost killed me. Kovel and I will capture them regardless. We will return the Outlaws to the cartel, and the cartel will exact their painful punishment until the Anor's brothers beg for death.

THE OUTLAWS OF DEEP SPACE

[Claimed by the Alien Outlaw](#)

[Rescued by the Alien Gladiator](#)

Loved by the Alien Warrior (this book)

Adored by the Alien Hunters (coming soon)

Mated to the Alien Angel (coming soon-ish)

ABOUT CARLOTTA PAGE:

Carlotta Page is the pen name of a historical romance author living in Australia. She has two cats and won't read any book that doesn't end happily.

Facebook: [Carlotta Page](#)

Instagram: [CarlottaPageAuthor](#)

CLAIMED BY THE ALIEN OUTLAW

See where it all began.

Jessica's problems are just beginning ...

Being abducted by aliens wasn't on my to-do list. Make more friends was. Pass my finals was. Not get teleported onto a flying spaceship! But shit happens, and here I am—along with four other women. That is, until the spaceship is damaged in a near-fatal collision and our alien kidnappers flee, abandoning us. It's immediately apparent that we're not ready for such an adventure. I certainly don't know how to fly a ship or survive on a strange planet.

Vorden's problems have never been worse ...

When I see a Freighter crash on a barbarian planet in the middle of deep space, I know it is the perfect distraction after months of endless nothing, and so I follow it down onto the surface. That is when I learn there are slaves aboard, and one of them is feisty Jessika. As an Outlaw from my tribe, I have no right to claim a Mating Female, yet I am tempted by Jessika as I have never been tempted by a female before, and soon I am willing to risk everything for a chance at a future with my alien mate.

CHAPTER ONE



THE LONELY WOMEN'S FRIEND CLUB

Looking for a genuine friend?

First meeting 8 January, 7 pm

Meet outside Ashley's Bar on York Street for drinks and a
chat.

No perverts.

JESSICA

If anyone even saw the flyer I'd pinned to the noticeboard of my local Sydney library, they probably thought it was some dumb joke. Or worse—that some idiot man was hoping to meet a desperate woman for an easy lay. Humiliation burns my cheeks. Nobody's coming.

Aside from my face, the rest of me is freezing and I shuffle from foot to foot, trying to keep warm.

The Lonely Women's Friend Club had felt like a good idea last weekend when I'd printed the flier, and who could blame me? Last weekend was the one-month anniversary of my shitty ex, Andrew, telling all our friends—now my treacherous former friends—that I'd cheated on him when he was the one who'd cheated on me.

The asshat!

A group of women in miniskirts and puffer jackets are headed my way, and I quickly double check that the collar of my navy blazer is lying flat and my skirt isn't caught in my panties, even though I checked at least three times before I left my apartment to come here. By the time I reassure myself my appearance is up to scratch, the miniskirts have walked straight by me without even glancing my way. My shoulders drop. Obviously they aren't lonely. They were all tall, leggy and exuding confidence.

I, on the other hand, barely break the five-foot-two measurement, and my confidence was shattered a month ago. My eyes burn, and I scrub my face. Not again! I've shed more tears than Andrew ever deserved.

'Are you the Lonely Women's Club?'

The timid voice barely manages to pierce through the live music coming from the bar across the road, and I jump when I realize someone's standing beside me. I didn't see her approach. She must have been hidden by the other women.

‘That’s me.’ I smile and point to my name tags.

Jessica Waters

Lonely Women’s Friend Club

I know how pathetic it must look to have ‘lonely women’ handwritten on one of those little white labels and stuck to a boob, but how else was anyone going to recognize me?

The other woman has straight black hair that falls down her back almost to her waist.

She’s dressed in jeans and a plain black jumper that suits her coloring but does nothing to help her stand out from the crowd. She sticks out her hand to shake mine, and her fingers are trembling.

The fact that she’s as nervous as I am makes me feel a little better. In fact, I’m so bloody relieved that somebody came and that I’m not the only miserable woman in all of Sydney that I accidentally shake her hand with a little too much enthusiasm. ‘It’s wonderful to meet you.’

‘I’m Sonam. I almost didn’t come.’

Her confession is spoken so quietly, again, I almost don’t hear her.

‘Well, I’m super pleased you did come, Sonam. It’s so hard to make friends when you’re an adult, right? There isn’t exactly an app for friendship, and it’s not like we’re at primary school anymore where the teacher makes everyone play nicely ...’ I know I’m rambling, but Sonam is so clearly uneasy that I keep talking so there aren’t any awkward silences she feels pressured to fill. About two minutes into my rant about making friends, three more women have joined our group. I make sure to greet each with a smile.

I can’t believe so many have come!

The others introduce themselves as Rose, Calla, and Emery. Rose and Calla are clearly twins. They’re both wearing a hoodie and jeans. One hoodie has got a red crest and *The University of Sydney* written on it, while the other one is plain navy. Truthfully, it would be a little hard to tell the twins apart

if it weren't for the different jumpers. I hand out the spare white labels and the marker I brought so they can write themselves a name tag.

That done, I usher everyone inside. I booked a table and ordered two jugs of beer in advance to be on the safe side. I'd underestimated how many would come, and our knees knock into each other under a table meant for three. I don't care. The first meeting is officially underway.

Rose hands out the glasses and pours everyone a drink, and Calla downs half her beer before I've even tucked my bag and umbrella safely under my seat.

'Welcome, everyone.' I'm practically shouting so they can hear me over the blasting music and the talk of the other patrons. 'The first round of drinks is on me, obviously. Then I thought we could go around the table and introduce ourselves. After that ...' I shrug, making it clear that we can all decide on something later. I want this club to be a friends group, not a dictatorship.

'My name's Jessica. I'm single. My ex is an asshole and ...' I stall. Of everything I planned, I forgot I'd need to introduce myself. 'I love to read sci-fi. You know, like Douglas Adams, Ursula K Le Guin, Anne McCaffrey—' Before I can bore anyone, I hurry on. 'I don't have much time for reading anymore because I'm working full time and studying part time.'

I feel self-conscious telling them this. At twenty-seven, I'm older than almost everyone else doing the same courses as me at uni. I don't feel old, but I'm considered a mature-aged student, all because I took a few years off between finishing high school and starting tertiary study. It kind of sucks.

Actually, it sucks a lot.

'What are you studying?' Rose asks even as she continues watching her twin.

'A Bachelor of Information Studies. I want to be a librarian.'

‘I didn’t even know you needed a degree for that,’ Emery says. She has hair dyed an emerald green that matches her eyes beautifully, and it’s tied in a messy knot on top of her head. She’s wearing a faded summer dress that reminds me of the beach. Maybe she’s a surfer. Bondi Beach is only about a thirty-minute drive from here.

‘Yep. Three years. Well—’ I sigh dramatically. ‘It’s going to take me six ’cause I’m only studying part time. What about you, Sonam?’

Her response is inaudible with all the noise. I smile and nod like I’m listening because I don’t want to have to keep asking her to repeat everything she says, not when it’s already taking her an effort to speak before a group of strangers.

‘And how about you, Emery?’ I ask when I’m pretty sure Sonam’s finished speaking.

I hear the words ‘TAFE’, ‘gardening’ and ‘searching for a job’. Meeting at a bar wasn’t the best idea I’ve ever had. I picked this place because the internet told me it’s owned by a woman, and that fit nicely with the theme of our new club. I didn’t know it would be so loud.

We should have met at the library. Only then there wouldn’t have been beer. I follow Calla’s lead and skol half my glass.

When Emery finishes talking, we all look to the twins.

‘Hi. I’m Rose.’ Rose gives a sardonic wave. ‘Calla and I grew up in Sydney, but our dad’s dead now and we don’t speak to our mum.’ Her expression darkens. ‘I guess we’re here because ... because I thought it would be a good idea for us to get out a bit more and meet some new people. Some nice people.’

She looks to her twin, but Calla just stares down at the table. I wouldn’t have said she looked like the nervous type. Instead— I hunt around for the right word and come up with ‘haunted’. The moment I think it, it’s all I see when I look at Calla.

Clearly sensing her sister's disquiet, Rose slams her hands down onto the table, making Sonam jump and drawing all our attention. 'We should go dancing,' she declares so loudly the group of guys at the table next to ours glance over at us. 'There's this great little place just down the street that plays disco on Saturday. At least, it did a few years ago. We should check it out.'

Emery and Sonam look to me. Rose and Calla are already getting to their feet.

I stand up too, grabbing my bag and umbrella. It's not like we're going to have any heart-to-heart conversations screaming across a table, and it's been years since I've gone clubbing. Andrew never wanted to go anywhere.

Pointing my umbrella at the door like I imagine a general would point a gun when leading his troops into battle, I yell, 'Fuck it! Let's go dancing, ladies.'



Sometime later

We never made it to the club. They must have been waiting for us right outside the bar, or maybe it was a completely random abduction. A wrong place, wrong time kind of deal. Either way, the moment we stepped outside, everything went blank, and I woke up here. Caged, tagged and face to face with a real-life ALIEN!

He's green. Like an actual bright green, and his skin is all lumpy. It honestly looks like he's covered in green bubble wrap. There's no denying what he is. Nobody could make a costume that believable.

For one mad minute I wonder what would happen if I poked one of his lumps with a pin. Would it burst? Or slowly deflate?

I pull my knees closer to my chest, locking my arms around my legs. The floor is icy cold and perfectly smooth.

I'm betting if I tried to stand, my runners would have a hard time finding any traction.

I've no idea where we are. There aren't any windows. I can't see anything but the one room. I have a horrible feeling I can feel the floor under me moving, a little like how you can feel a car move. But aliens don't have cars. At least, in the books they don't have cars. Which means ...

My breath catches in my throat.

Aliens are real! Aliens are real!

And I'm on a fucking spaceship!

The words tumble around my brain. My head aches, and my arm itches where I have these alarming pinpricks in my wrist and inner elbow. I've no idea what the hell they did to me while I was unconscious, and I've got no idea how long I was unconscious for.

I've pinched my arm so many times I've got bruises. This is no dream. Dreams don't smell, and this place stinks like stale air and something else I can't quite work out, something alien.

Nope, this is no dream. This is hell.

The alien guard watches me, just as I'm watching him. His bug eyes are deep-set into his face, and his whole head has got to be twice as large as mine, but it's much narrower near his mouth and wider up around his forehead.

That's about where the similarities between us end. He's standing tall, whereas I'm trying to make myself look as inconspicuous as possible. I'm pretty sure I'm going to faint any second.

The other women haven't stirred yet, and I can't help thinking they're the lucky ones. I wouldn't have minded even a few more minutes of blissful ignorance.

I drop my head onto my knees but force my gaze to stay on the guard. If he even thinks of taking a step closer to our cells, I want to know about it.

He chuckles, as though he can read my thoughts.

Bloody hell! Perhaps he *can* read my thoughts!

I immediately dismiss the idea, not because I think mind-reading is impossible. I'd believe about anything at this point. But if I start worrying about him mind-reading, I'll go insane, and right now I've got more important things to worry about. Like escaping this *literal SPACESHIP* and getting back home to Earth.