



MATCHED

TO THE

*Alien*

KING

ALIEN LOVE ISLAND SEASON 1: BOOK 2

LINDSEY R. LOUCKS

# **Matched to the Alien King**

**Alien Love Island Season 1, Book 2**



Lindsey R. Loucks



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# Contents

[1. Nera](#)

[2. Maxx](#)

[3. Nera](#)

[4. Maxx](#)

[5. Nera](#)

[6. Maxx](#)

[7. Nera](#)

[8. Maxx](#)

[9. Rain](#)

[10. Nera](#)

[11. Maxx](#)

[12. Rain](#)

[13. Nera](#)

[14. Nera](#)

[15. Maxx](#)

[16. Nera](#)

[17. Rain](#)

[18. Maxx](#)

[19. Nera](#)

[20. Maxx](#)

[21. Nera](#)

[About Author](#)



# Chapter One

## Nera

THERE ARE DEAD BODIES, and there are really dead bodies. The difference? Big orange blobs that hover over the really dead ones, apparently. Blobs that look like misshapen pig heads with at least a dozen too many ears, some bad acne, and at least one midlife crisis.

Welcome to my current view...I guess? Yeah...either I was drunk, or I wasn't drunk enough.

"Maxx, what is it?" I asked again in case he hadn't heard me, or in case I hadn't heard him. "Did the pig head get Emjay?"

My big purple alien king held me to him tighter and shook his head at Emjay's floating body in the swimming pool. "No, I did. She came at me again. But we need to tell someone what's happened here."

"I can go to the crewmembers' beach house—"

"Not by yourself, Nera," he insisted. "Someone tried to poison you, remember?"

“Oh. That.” I sounded so blasé about it because the event hadn’t quite filtered through my thick skull and my dozens of questions yet. For one, why go through all the trouble of kidnapping me and throwing me on a reality TV show I never signed up for, only to try to kill me? “Wait, *you’re* not coming with me to the crewmembers’ beach house?”

He reached out to cradle my cheek in his huge palm, such a sweet gesture that my heart beat harder toward him. “Someone should stay here with Emjay.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Of course. Miekil?” When Maxx’s lightning bolt pupils flashed under the pool lights, I rushed to explain. “He’s smart enough to know what would happen to him if anything happens to *me*. Plus, he’s the one who saved me at dinner. I trust him to go with me.”

“Okay,” Maxx lamented with a tight growl.

I squeezed his hand for reassurance and then left him poolside as I went in search of Miekil in the contestants’ beach house. Of course the hundreds of years of hostility between the Xenox and the Killians couldn’t be erased in a single night, but hot damn. Some strides had been made. Okay, maybe more like baby steps, but at least they weren’t at each other’s throats right now.

I found Miekil in the kitchen with his head stuck in the refrigerator. Literally stuck. The tall green horns atop his head had caught on the edge of a shelf.

“Um, help?” he said, his head twisted at an uncomfortable-looking angle.

“I got you.” I maneuvered around his large frame and lifted the shelf up, or I tried to, but there was too much food stacked on top. My stomach growled at the wedges of cheese and fresh fruit and sliced meats, most of which I removed to help Miekil.

“Well, the good news is there’s no baryer fish in here,” he said.

Ah, yes, the food that was poisonous to humans. The food I’d nearly eaten just minutes ago.

“And the bad news is you got stuck?” Finally, I lifted the shelf and freed him.

“No.” He stood to his full height, at least seven feet, almost as tall as Maxx, and straightened the red silk sash around his otherwise bare green chest. “The bad news is there’s no baryer fish in here. I’m starving.”

I winced while we both piled the food back into the refrigerator. “Yeah, I kind of cut our dinner short, didn’t I?”

“It’s not *your* fault someone tried to poison you, Nera. I was going to go check out the crewmembers’ beach house.”

“That’s where I’m headed too to tell them about Emjay.”

His eyebrows skyrocketed up to his hairline as we finished tossing in the food. “You’re coming with me? Does Maxx approve?”

“Uh, I do this thing called what I want.” It came out with more attitude than I intended, so I smiled to soften up my hangry snark a little. “But yes, he approves. In case someone

decides to poison me again, you're the protection while he stands watch over Emjay. And I'm so starving right now that I might just *let* someone poison me."

He reached into the refrigerator again and, careful of his horns, pulled out some cheese slices for the both of us. "Here," he said, handing me four. "And some for me too in case you think *I* poisoned it."

"I don't," I told him sincerely. "You're one of the very few people on this planet I trust."

He smiled then, a genuine one, and though it didn't do a thing for me, someone, somewhere would be a very lucky person indeed to have his smile directed at them every single day.

While we stuffed our mouths with cheese, we slipped out through the back on our way to the crewmembers' beach house.

Even though I'd just seen him, my pulse stalled at the sight of Maxx. Electric energy chased over my skin, peppering goose bumps up and down my arms despite the warm night.

He looked so dominant and powerful and sinfully gorgeous, the perfect storm to completely sweep me and my vulnerable heart away. His purple scales encasing hard muscle glimmered like moonlit amethysts, and the gentle sea breeze wafted his long purple hair across his grim, chiseled face.

I hurried toward him, his scowl aimed at Miekil relaxing when he flicked his lavender gaze to me, and handed him two

of my slices of cheese. “I don’t give just anyone cheese, but when I do, it’s at the most awkward of times, and usually near a dead body.”

A soft smile curved his lush lips when he took the cheese. “Thank you.”

“She trusts me,” Miekil boasted as he skirted around the pool. “She said so herself.”

The pool lights sharpened the drill of Maxx’s gaze on him. “Yeah, well, don’t fuxx that honor up.”

Honor? Damn. How was it that every word out of that alien king’s mouth made me feel like the most treasured person in the entire universe?

I grinned at him, my feet floating me away with hardly any awareness. Even the dead body in the pool and the threat of poisoned death couldn’t sour my mood.

I was lost to Maxx. Utterly consumed by him.

The next few hours went by in a blur filled with yellow crime-scene lasers, a ton of questions, and few answers. Umo, the show’s producer, dripped sweat down his little orange body while he tossed NDA contracts around to everyone. Most of the crew and the cast were tight-lipped about Emjay anyway. Or maybe they knew exactly what we did—not much.

Camera drones swarmed the scene to catch all the action. One of them had captured Emjay earlier tonight on film springing out of the shadows at Maxx and corroborating everything he’d said had happened. There hadn’t been any

sound though for some reason, and though I couldn't bear to watch much of the video, I wanted to know why she'd been screaming at him. Why she'd been so angry to want to kill him.

And what that was she'd pointed at him to put an orange dot in the middle of his chest. Whatever it was, it was gone now.

When Emjay was taken away and all that was left were stunned faces, the contestants and crew dispersed to their respective beach houses.

"It's late," Maxx said while he held me to him, his voice as exhausted as I felt. "We should get some sleep."

"Take our bed," Miekil, who hovered near us by the empty pool, said. "Ours being Nera's and mine. I'll take the couch."

"You're sure?" I asked him.

He gave a short nod. "Go before you fall."

I smiled at the kind gesture. "Thanks. Sleep well."

Maxx gripped my hand tighter and glared the closer we drew to Miekil, as if looking for any cracks or catches in his offer. No lies were detected though.

"I don't trust him," Maxx growled on our way inside the bedroom.

"I know," I said with a weary sigh. "And I don't trust *them*."

We stopped in the doorway of the shared bedroom with six big beds, one for each couple. The other contestants spoke quietly with each other as they got ready for bed, but of

course, I couldn't hear a single word unless I stared directly at their faces to lip-read.

“Do you think it was one of them...?” I let the rest of that sentence dangle, knowing he'd fill in the blanks.

He gazed down at me, the harsh worry lines fading some from his face the longer he did. “I don't know, but there are reasons we're both alive tonight. We're slow to trust. We're always on guard.” He lifted his hand and skimmed his fingertips up my jawline, trailing a tingling path. “And we have each other.”

I shut my eyes briefly to savor those sweet words, to savor this moment with him, and held his hand to my face. “But we both need sleep. We could just go back to the bungalow and...”

He shook his head. “It's dark. The horrors out there could be worse than the horrors in here.”

“You're right. We don't know where the threat's coming from. Maybe it was Emjay who”—I lowered my voice when yellow-tentacled Nacket passed near on her way to the bathroom, her gaze raking up and down Maxx's meticulously carved, bare chest—“did that thing to me at dinner, and now that she's been dealt with, we're safe.”

“We were kidnapped though and thrown on reality TV. She didn't stage all that just to try to kill us.”

I sagged against him. “You being right all the time is exhausting.”



Maxx smiled. “For you or for me?”

“Both. Us. You and me.” Those words sounded so perfect together like that, but they invited in a sudden, splitting thought. A stab of panic twisted in my gut. “Maxx, both of us could be voted off the show tomorrow. Or one of us.”

“Hey, one battle at a time.” He leaned down and dropped a kiss on the top of my head. “Maybe we’ll get to stay...and continue fighting for our lives.”

“Yeah...” At this point, I wasn’t sure which would be worse—continuing to fight for our lives here or being separated from Maxx.

Or, if we both got voted off, what he planned to do. Go back to Xenox and his daughter, Roxxanne, obviously, but then what? Would I ever see him again? I wanted to ask him, but a really annoying part of me was afraid to hear the answer.

Besides, Maxx was eyeing the bed now with sleepy yearning. I gently pushed him toward it, and we both climbed underneath the covers like we’d done this a thousand times before in a crowded room.

But this was our first time in a bed together. It felt in no way awkward or strange with him though, and I took full advantage of him sprawled out next to me and nestled myself against his warmth with my head tucked under his chin.

We held to each other, and when the lights dimmed, my eyes could no longer fight the pull.

It wasn't until sometime later that I sensed something strange. My heart beat itself into a riot and sprang my eyes open.

Because I could hear. With my lazy ears that had given up on the whole bothersome listening thing except for the constant buzzing, I could *hear* music. An eerie, magical song with delicate piano notes, soft violins, and no words.

And I knew that song. Every time I heard it, it simultaneously broke my heart with its sadness, filled it with hope and longing, and stopped me in my tracks just so I could listen.

It was my daughter's favorite lullaby. My Lucy's. By default, it was my favorite too. I hadn't heard it since before...

Before.

So why was I hearing it now?

I bolted upright in bed, or tried to. Maxx's arms tightened around me, and his chest rumbled beneath my cheek as if he was speaking. I only heard the music though.

"Do you hear it?" I whispered into the darkness.

He gently tilted my face toward him, a hint of moonlight from the window painting his features in a silvery glow, and brushed my bedhead hair away from my face. "Hear what?"

Then, just like that, the music stopped. The steady ringing in my ears took over again.

"A dream," I said, sinking into his arms again.

But had it been? It had sounded so real, like the first time Rain had played it.

Where was she right now? Where *was* my daughter's killer?

Instead of falling back to sleep, my thoughts churned over memories of Lucy, Rain, and the uncertainty of tomorrow.

## Chapter Two

## Maxx

I WASN'T PROUD OF what I'd done.

As soon as Nera and the Killian left for the crew's beach house, I fished the weapon out of the pool with a nearby net. Then I quickly fumbled to power the damn thing off. Borrowing Nera's idea, I'd stuffed it down my pants before the police arrived.

And now? Now, it was hidden in the upstairs bathroom, the one few ever used. Or at least I guessed no one used it since it was so much cleaner than the others. I'd wedged it inside the toilet paper holder, a temporary location until I found someplace better.

That would have to do while I held Nera through her restless dreams.

"A dream," I'd told her, wrapping her up even tighter.

She'd nodded, but she hadn't seemed so sure.

I hadn't slept at all. Neither had the Killian on the couch, if the red bags under his vomit-green eyes were any indication.

“All quiet on the beach-house front,” he told Nera when we got up the next morning. “Not a creature has stirred, not even another assassin.”

“What’s this? Some good news for once?” Nera turned her bottomless brown eyes to me, splintering my hearts yet again with her raw, untamed beauty. “Maybe we’ll actually make it through the day without someone trying to kill us.”

“Maybe...” The Killian shook his head and pointed at the TV along the seashell wall. “And maybe not. Drama sells. The first episode of *Alien Love Island* just aired. It’s all anyone can talk about.”

“Already?” Nera tensed beside me, and I knew exactly what she was thinking because I thought it too.

What if we were sent home? What if we weren’t?

Either way, I wouldn’t leave Nera’s side. Not until we figured out why we were here, while at the same time figuring out why someone *didn’t* want us here.

Fuxx, what a mess.

Nera’s style team burst through the poolside door then and blinked in shock at Nera.

“You’re awake already?” Oreo, the snippy one with blonde hair and black wings folded strategically around her body, asked.

“Eh, debatable.” Nera shrugged, her slim shoulder grazing my side and sending an intoxicating shock through my whole system. “I’m upright, but... Is that coffee for me?”

She pointed at the steaming mug that the other member of her style team carried, Smitha, the black-haired one with too many sparkles on her face and wearing skintight pink.

Nodding vigorously like she'd already drunk a whole bucket of coffee herself, she held it out toward Nera. "Black like your soul, stronger than everyone else's feelings, and enough to keep you out of prison. Just like how you said you like it."

Nera all but folded herself around the cup. "Smitha, if you're trying to make me love you, it's working."

Smitha turned a deep shade of crimson and giggled while the winged one next to her shifted uncomfortably on her feet and tried not to wince.

It was so interesting, to me anyway, witnessing people's tells. Color changes for one. Xenox stayed our customary purple no matter what. But Smitha's blush... She obviously had a thing for Nera, and Oreo obviously had a thing for Smitha.

"*Alien Love Island* indeed," the Killian muttered, his brows raised toward Nera's style team.

Fuxx him sideways for coming to the same conclusion as I just did. Fuxx him sideways with a barbed stick.

Nera turned to me, her fingers brushing my abs and surging heat straight to my groin. A delicious distraction from my enemy.

"Be careful while I'm gone, okay?" she said.

I leaned down, brushing my thumb down her cheek, and tipped her chin up to meet my kiss. Hungry. Demanding. I couldn't help but possess her mouth mercilessly for all to see that she was *mine*.

When she pulled away, breathless, her eyes glazed over, and her nipples poked through the thin fabric of last night's black dress. That dress did things to me. Carnal things. Amazing things.

Groaning, needing to touch her once more, I stroked her cheek again and kept my voice low so only she could hear. "You trust them?"

"I mean, they have coffee." She smiled, and it lit her entire face, a multifaceted gemstone hewn just for me. She cut her gaze to the Killian on the couch and then back again. "Behave yourself, okay?"

I gave a noncommittal grunt, one that made her cock her head in a warning as she pulled away.

"I'll behave myself too, in case you were wondering," the Killian announced loudly with a wide grin.

Nera smirked at him and then shot me a look I could read all too well—it wasn't him she was worried about. She left with her style team then, already sucking down the coffee Smitha had handed her.

Leaving the Killian and I alone. Completely alone. I'd been so distracted with Nera, I hadn't even noticed the other contestants had already vacated the beach house.



“I trust her style team,” the Killian blurted.

Had he heard my question, or was he just that astute when it came to basically everything inside my head?

I offered a short nod, looking everywhere but at him, and crossed my arms.

He sat back on the couch and rested his long arms along the tops of the cushions. The muted television in front of him flashed people’s animated reactions of *Alien Love Island* all over his blank stare.

Awkward silence stretched through the room, tightly, weighted with all sorts of expectations. I didn’t want to talk to him. At the same time, I had one question. One question that tripped over and over onto the edge of my tongue—

“Did you hear music last night?” I blurted.

“What was that thing in the pool with Emjay?”

We asked our questions of each other in the exact same second, because of course we fuxxing did.

“I’ll answer first,” he said, baring his teeth in a fake smile. “No. No music. Why?”

I nodded slowly. “No reason. And no, I don’t know what that was in the pool with Emjay.”

“Huh...” was all he said as his green eyes narrowed quizzically on mine.

He didn’t believe me, probably because I wasn’t telling him the truth. He was too smart. Too smart for his own good. He’d

likely noticed that the orange glob of Klio-3 indicating Faid locations that had been floating above the pool was gone when he and Nera came back last night from the crew's beach house. Kind of a hard thing not to notice.

Ignoring his probing stare, I went back into the empty bedroom. I figured I had about two hours to grab some sleep before my own style team came with chains and whips instead of coffee.

Why chains and whips?

Because yesterday they'd tried nipple clamps and fuzzy wrist restraints.

It hadn't worked out well for them.



TODAY, PETE, HOST OF *Alien Love Island*, kept his distance from me and my fist.

Smart man. Smarter bruise. It stayed mostly hidden underneath his Aviator sunglasses, which reminded me of Emjay's mirrored eyes.

A shudder iced up my spine at the thought.

I sat in the hoverchair on the far end of the males' side of the wooden platform, the best seat in the house to keep an eye on everyone. No one looked my way as they frantically prepared for the show to start. No one came at me with a dagger or nipple clamps either.

Things were really looking up.

Then, up the short flight of stairs to the platform, came Nera.

Thoughts stalled in my head. All languages ceased to exist. My pulse multiplied into a thousand beating points that ricocheted against my scales.

She was stunning. Breathtaking.

The ends of her long, sheer red dress breezed out to her sides and showcased much of her long, lean legs. Legs that had been wrapped around my hips while I'd thrust inside her only yesterday, but too long ago.

The dress's neckline plunged all the way to her navel where a ruby crowned with diamonds cinched the fabric together. Her gilded skin glowed with the colors of the setting sun. Her long dark hair had been curled and glossed, and her face had been painted to highlight those big brown eyes that undid my soul every time I looked into their depths.

Like now.

Even though I don't remember doing so, I'd stood to take all of her in.

She stopped at the top of the stairs, and when she smiled, the rest of the planet faded away. It was just the two of us, caught inside a moment.

Our moment.

“...any day now, you two. Don’t you want to know who our audience picked to stay or go?” Pete’s voice slowly filtered in, and he gave a nervous chuckle. “My face has already decided who it wants to go, but unfortunately for me, it doesn’t have a say.”

I shot him a look, which snapped his mouth shut, and sank back onto my hoverchair.

One of the other female contestants—June—tugged at Nera’s hand since she probably hadn’t heard Pete, and Nera plopped down in the seat next to her.

“Great. Grand. *Finally.*” Pete sucked everything in so he could button his skintight jeans. “We ready?”

One of the crew reached out to him. “Do you need a bigger size—”

“I’m fine, Janice,” he said, swatting her hand away. “This is the size I wear. Things are just...smaller on this planet, that’s all.”

What an odd thing to admit in front of a crowd. Yet no one laughed, not with everyone’s nerves corkscrew tight.

A few seats down from me, the Killian leaned forward and muttered so low to Pete that only the guys could hear. “You’re going to ruin your junk, man.”

“The junk’s fine,” Pete hissed. “Let *me* worry about my junk.”

Of all the things I thought I’d hear today, none of it was about Pete’s junk.

“I’m just saying.” The Killian sat back and crossed his bulging green arms. “What if you get a hard-on? There’s no chance that will happen in those jeans, not with them constricting your blood flow like that.”

Nodding sagely, Sal next to me pressed the fingertips of his hands together. “All good things come to those who make room for the boner.”

“Facts, man.” Josh shrugged. “Hard dicks get you laid. Snack-sized ones crushed inside denim don’t.”

Ooookay, enough was enough.

“Go change your fuxxing pants, Pete,” I demanded.

He jerked back like I was going to hit him again, but despite reaching my limit of talking about dicks long ago, I wasn’t planning to.

“I’ll just be a minute,” he said, sprinting toward the stairs. “*Janice!*”

“We’re losing daylight here,” Umo, the little orange producer, shouted after him.

I sagged back in my seat and groaned. All I wanted was to know my fate—stay here with the damn circus, stay here anyway with Nera and avoid the circus, or take Nera with me to...anywhere. Someplace safe, just her and me, minus that dress of hers.

“King Maxx,” the Killian muttered to me, leaning forward with one eyebrow raised. “I gave you an opportunity. Are you going to take it?”

Take the opportunity to minus Nera of that dress? Hexx yes.

It took a moment for my mind to tug away from that particular image of her and focus on what he was saying—and who he was pointing at.

About ten feet from the platform, standing on the white sandy beach, was a crewmember. *The* crewmember Umo had sent to go search an entire planet for Emjay yesterday. She hadn't come back—until now.

This might be my one chance to hear if she knew anything more than I did.

Before anyone could try to stop me, I lunged for the platform's banister, supported my swing over it with one hand, and launched myself to the sand eight feet below. Gasps and groans sounded behind me, but no one bothered to get in my way.

The girl saw me stalking toward her, and she backed away, searching the beach with wide eyes as though desperate for someplace to flee. She was a little stick of a human, no older than her early twenties.

“Where did you go to try to find Emjay?” I demanded, too gruffly.

She shivered as she opened and closed her mouth several times before actual words finally tumbled out. “Well, I looked at the camera drone footage first.”

“And?”

“A-a-and there’s a couple bungalows on the other side of the jungle. The drones saw her go in one.”

“Which one?”

She scrunched up her face to look like a confused little beaver. “Which drone?”

“Which. Bungalow,” I said through gritted teeth.

Patience. Not a thing I had a lot of these days.

“Um, the one on the far right when you’re facing them? She was gone by the time I got there though. But look. I found something curious.” Canting her head, she dug around in her shorts pockets.

All six of them. All of them too tiny to hold much of anything, but oh my fuxxing goddess, she was still searching them a full minute later.

Finally, with a magician’s skill but with none of the finesse, she pulled out a black handkerchief. Emblazoned on its center was the Earth Space Fleet seal.

“Kind of weird that would be here, huh?” she said. “What could they be doing on the same planet as *Alien Love Island*? And what does Emjay have to do with them?”

Why, indeed. She claimed she wasn’t an assassin, but did she work for Earth Space Fleet? A largely human organization since they were based from, you know, Earth?

We might never know.

I grunted a non-answer to all three of the girl's questions. "Mind if I take that?"

She shrugged and handed me the handkerchief.

I took it and folded it into my pants pocket. "What took you so long to get back here?"

"Um...I... There were— Uh." The girl turned an astonishing shade of red I never knew even existed.

But then I nodded when her embarrassment turned crystal clear. "Sex toys in the closet?"

She groaned in frustration and curled her fingers into tiny fists. "I work with Pete all damn day. Do you know how hard that is? How hot he is?"

"No," I said firmly. "I don't."

"You won't tell anyone, will you?" she asked as she bounced up on her toes.

"Your secret's safe with me." I turned and strode back to the platform where the contestants and crew were not so patiently waiting.

This time, I took the stairs, mostly to be close to Nera, if only for a second. She met my gaze with a hearty glint of curiosity in her fathomless brown eyes.

And not a hint of jealousy that I'd been talking to another girl, which made me want Nera even more than I already did. She knew she was completely, unconditionally mine—always—and I was hers for as long as she didn't know the truth.



My heart clenched at just the idea of her.

I nodded to her on my way past, a promise for later. She nodded back and smiled, a show of trust I wasn't so sure I deserved.

“You could terraform a whole planet with the amount of sexual tension between you two,” someone joked behind me.

Bling, I thought.

Someone else—yellow-tentacled Nacket—clucked her tongue. “Wish he'd look at me like that.”

Yeah, never going to happen. Nothing against tentacles. I just prefer women with much less slime coating their skin. If that makes me shallow, then so be it.

I took my seat just as Pete jumped up onto the platform again, looking much freer and happier in his still too-tight jeans. But this new pair had a little extra room for growth in the upper part, and Pete took full advantage. He sported an average, human-sized boner, all of its ridges pressed tightly, but not too tightly, to the denim.

I almost felt sorry for the girl on the beach I'd just spoken to who stared at him with her mouth dangling to her feet.

But if he got anywhere close to Nera with that thing, I'd lob it off and feed it to the sharks. Then I'd give him a matching black eye to balance him out a little. It's the least I could do.

After adjusting his Aviators, Pete raised his hands in the air. “Are you ready?” he shouted.

A cheer rang through the crew and most of the contestants.

The camera drones converged on Pete like he was their savior, and he lapped that attention up with a suggestive swivel of his hips.

The girl on the beach fainted. No joke.

“Action!” someone called.

Pete spread his arms wider than his fake smile. “Welcome to *Alien Love Island*. Tonight we’ll find out who you, the viewers at home, have decided to keep around for a chance at finding love, and who you’ve decided to send packing.”

My gut tightened. I shared a look with Nera.

Time to find out what fate had decided.

## Chapter Three

## Nera

“BUT,” PETE CONTINUED, MAKING my heart squeeze even more, “because I’m a glutton for punishment— *your* punishment, ha-ha—we’re going to wait on the show’s results for a hot minute.”

Next to me, three-breasted Bling squirmed in her seat. The other contestants held their collective breaths.

I looked again to Maxx, wanting us both to stay while simultaneously wanting us both to leave. My mind was a riot of confused thoughts, all spiraling around Maxx. His purple lightning eyes helped anchor me, and the slightest smile on his sinful mouth gave me hope.

For us.

Yeah...but also I was just plain old eye-fucking him. I was pretty sure I was about to be haunted by the soul of my exploded ovaries.

“Inside that hot minute, we’re going to play another game,” Pete said with a waggle of his eyebrows over his mirrored

sunglasses. “The winner, whether they’re voted off the show or not by the viewers, gets to choose one person to spend the night with in the honeymoon bungalow. *Are you ready to play an alien love game?*”

The contestants cheered. Well, all of them but me, Maxx, and Miekil. Maxx and I were too distracted with mentally undressing each other, and Miekil was probably too busy dissecting every mystery on this planet.

“I’d like all of you to go to the big table at the back of the stage for the game called Lock & Key.” Pete waved his arm with a flourish. “Get on over there!”

I rose along with the others and concentrated on not catching my billowing dress under a heel and kissing the stage with my whole face. The other women breezed past me, their heels even taller than mine. Just...how? Why was I not blessed with that particular talent?

As I drew slowly closer to the table, Pete tossed me a lopsided grin from the other side of it. “Good evening, Ne—”

A growl cut him off and snapped his mirrored sunglasses toward the towering, imposing Xenox warrior king who appeared at my side.

Pete visibly shriveled, color rising to his cheeks, and held up his hands as though to defend himself. “I was just going to say,” he muttered, “that she has a speck of white on her shoulder. Looks like bird poop. Might want to look into it. I wasn’t going to make out with her or anything.”

I grinned at his kindness, brushed whatever it was off my shoulder with a grimace, and shot Maxx a teasing scowl. “Thanks, Pete. His Majesty only knows how to attack, not heel.”

Maxx brushed his huge palm down over the skin at my back, eliciting a tingling shiver everywhere, and leaned down toward my ear. “Are you implying that you’re going to train me like a dog?”

“There could be biscuits involved,” I whispered to him. “Maybe even a pat on the head if you’re lucky.”

“And other...rewards?” His hand slid lower, cupped my ass, and squeezed it possessively.

An aching thrill slicked between my thighs, and I ground them together to ease my need for him.

“Lots of praise,” I said on a shaky exhale, “especially if you’re a good boy.”

He groaned. “I’ve never wanted to be a dog so badly in my life.”

He said it when there was a lull in the conversation as the others stared expectantly at Pete for directions. Everyone heard Maxx. Everyone, including the camera drones.

They all looked at us like we were crazy, including the camera drones. Which...yep.

I snorted a laugh. “Sorry. We were just...”

“Describing your various kinks on a TV show?” Pete nodded and held out his hands. “Who *hasn't* done that?”

All the other contestants raised their hands. Even Miekil who tossed me a playful smile.

To his credit, Maxx didn't look the least bit embarrassed. He was too busy hooking his finger into the back of my low-cut dress for a lovely view of my ass crack.

Yes, that's right, ladies and gentlemen, it was all commando all the time from here on out because I knew it would drive Maxx crazy.

Correction—*crazier*.

I swatted his hand away playfully. “Please continue, Pete. We'll behave ourselves. Promise.”

Nothing but lies. Not with this pillar of hard, scaled muscle next to me that filled me with so much warmth and longing that he made my head spin.

“Lock & Key,” Pete said with a mysterious flare, as if I hadn't just derailed the whole show, “is a game of speed. You have one hot minute to pick a heart-shaped padlock. Those locks have names on them, so pick the name of the person you want to spend the night with. Then, find the one key to unlock the lock.”

The contestants nodded. I did too.

Finally, a game I actually cared about. This one I could play and win if it meant alone time with Maxx in a bed without a crowd of people around.

“The one hot minute doesn’t begin until I say go.” Pete paused for a long, dramatic beat. “*Questions?*”

His shout whipped through the air, making some of the others flinch and jump. Not me though because I’d been shouted at plenty during my time at military school and much of my duties with Earth Space Fleet. Not Maxx either since he was laser focused on a heart-shaped padlock with my name on it halfway across the table.

I grinned up at him with what was sure to be an epic sassy tease tipped on my tongue just as Pete yelled, “Gooooo!”

A mad scramble erupted around the table. Arms and tentacles flung out for first the padlocks and then the mountains of keys.

“Where’s Maxx?” I murmured, searching for a lock with his name on it. “I want Maxx.”

“Head’s up, Captain.” Miekil, standing at the far side of the table, tossed one to me.

I snatched it out of the air one-handed. “Thanks.”

Both the locks and keys looked really old like they’d been in someone’s basement for centuries and were made out of rusty, but still hearty, steel.

After trying key after key, I realized my mistake of casually dropping the failed ones back into the huge pile in front of me. This wasn’t like laundry. I needed separate piles.

“Forty-five seconds left,” Pete called.



Yet even my brilliant plan of separate piles didn't work so well because Josh next to me kept throwing his discarded keys into my used pile, and I obviously hadn't tried those yet.

When he started to do it again, I grabbed his arm and said, "Huh-uh. Nope."

He shrugged. "Sorry?"

His insincerity ground my teeth together. I *hated* when people put a question mark after an apology. It's exactly what my ex-husband used to do.

More keys. More fails. My used pile grew higher and higher.

"Thirty seconds," Pete called.

"I should've come up with a better plan than separate piles," I muttered to Maxx, flinging another failed key to the growing mountain. "Is it too late for the tens of people who voted for me to stay on the show to change their minds?"

Except I was talking to myself because he was no longer next to me.

"Maxx?" I turned and found him sitting on a hoverchair at the front of the stage.

He was shifting the lock with my name on it toward the setting sun, peering inside it and inspecting it closely. Then he rose up out of his seat with one of those big, rare smiles on his face that always flipped my heart end over end.

"We win," he announced as he strode to the table.

“But...” I pointed at his still locked lock.

He leaned over the table with his long, purple-scaled fingers sliding away keys, searching with intent instead of at random.

“Fifteen seconds!” Pete yelled.

Maxx plucked a key free, one that looked like all the others, except the two prongs at the ends had tiny half circles attached to their bottoms. Quickly, he plugged the key into the lock and turned it. The rusty spring at the top popping loose made me melt into a puddle, but no one else noticed he’d won or my brand new puddle status.

Maxx chucked the lock and key at Pete. It landed at his feet with a heavy clank, and he looked down at it in surprise.

“And we have our winner,” Pete announced. “King Maxx and Captain Nera, whatever our audience has decided about you two, you’ll at least have one romantic night together in the honeymoon bungalow.”

The other contestants groaned and hissed and tried to decapitate me with their death-ray glares.

But I hardly noticed because Maxx had locked me into his sinful stare, puddling me even more, his purple lightning eyes flashing all the night’s possibilities. An echoing pulse curled between my legs and summoned me closer to him.

“Think you can handle me for a whole night?” I whispered, fanning my fingers across his broad, naked chest.

Pure, unadulterated desire heated his stare, so much that a tide of fire blazed underneath my skin.

“I’m sure I can keep up.” He lifted his hand to my shoulder and smoothed my dress’s strap down as though he was going to take me right here. Right now. Like he couldn’t wait any longer. “No one understands your body like I do.”

Swear to god, I almost came.

Pete tapped me on the shoulder to snap me out of my Maxx-induced haze. “If you could please wait to strip each other naked, that would be much appreciated.”

“So says you,” June purred over Maxx’s shoulder, already peeling his pants off with her one eye.

Maxx’s gaze dipped to my lips as he fixed my strap and then threaded his fingers through mine on his chest. “Later,” he rumbled.

That one word weighted me down with so many aches for his touch. I felt heavy with lustful need while I dragged my heels across the stage back to my seat. My mind spiraled around tonight, but what Pete was already saying snapped me back to reality.

“...twenty-eight billion votes came in from all over the universe.” He spoke in a hushed, dramatic voice to really play with everyone’s emotions.

Kind of had to admit he was good at it, his pecker outline in his jeans and all. Even I found myself perching on the edge of my seat.

“*Alien Love Island* has shattered reality TV records, and it’s all because of you: the contestants willing to risk it all for a

chance at love. Who will win? Who will be sent home? Who do they most want to see you matched with as a couple?”

He casually walked to the edge of the stage, turned, and posted his hands on the banister behind him, the camera drones swarming his every blink.

“Now, the viewers have spoken, and what they said *will* shock you. So let’s hear it.”

He waved his arm, and a holographic viewscreen immediately appeared with all of our names printed across it. Beside our names, numbers calculated too quickly to make any sense of.

This was it. After tonight, would we be staying or going?

But then, everyone whirled to face behind us, stood, and froze, cutting straight through the tension and expectancy. They stared with wide, scared eyes like something was prowling toward us from the thick jungle foliage.

I swallowed thickly. “Uh, Maxx?”

# Chapter Four

## Maxx

A MASCULINE BELLOW. A tense one. A frightened one.

It had come from behind us, from the direction of the jungle.

And then it had come again.

At the same time, I leaped up out of my hoverchair and whipped around to face the wall of jungle, which was too dense to see inside. Someone in there was in trouble. I'd heard screams like that before during battle. Nothing that sounded like that ever ended well.

“Cut!” someone shouted.

“I’m not doing my results intro again,” Pete protested behind me. “It was golden. Even *I* got chills.”

“Who was it?” the Killian, standing a few chairs to my left and also facing the jungle, demanded. “Is anyone missing?”

Beyond him on the female side, stood Nera, sensing the tension and facing the rest of us with wide eyes.

“Uh, Maxx?”

“Someone screamed from the jungle,” I explained, remembering her hearing problem.

Immediately, she pulled a gun from...somewhere and aimed it with steady precision at the jungle. No one else seemed to notice, their attention riveted to the wall of thick greenery. The long red strips of her dress breezed up and around her head, giving her an ethereal, deadly quality.

Exactly like the Xenox warrior goddess, minus the scales.

Fuxx, she was beautiful.

She caught me staring and hiked up a slender shoulder. “What? Someone’s trying to kill me, remember?”

“Where were you hiding that gun?”

She offered me a little smile, the brazen glint in her brown eyes hardening everything south of my belt all over again.

This woman would be the death of me. And I couldn’t wait.

“Um, the contestants are all here,” a female crewmember said as she tapped on a holographic laptop. “Other than...well, you know. Emjay. I’ve got the crew’s roster right here.”

“Start calling names,” Umo demanded, plugging a lit e-cigar into his ugly mouth. “I want everyone accounted for.”

“With all due respect, sir,” the crewmember began, “none of us would dare wander off in the jungle, especially during film —”

“Just do it!” he shouted, his little orange body practically vibrating with rage.

“Yup,” she said in a shaky voice and then started calling out names.

“We should go in and do a sweep,” the Killian muttered.

“Knock yourself out,” I told him.

“The more eyes, the better.” He pinned me with a dark look. “Unless you’re too scared.”

I scoffed at him and rolled my eyes so hard I practically did cartwheels. “I’ve visited this jungle more than my fair share. The caterpillars are actually quite lovely. I wouldn’t recommend the exploding spaceships though.”

The Killian blinked. “What?”

“No, no one’s going in there,” Umo shouted as he came up the stairs, smoke curling up behind him, “because it sounds like no one’s coming out.”

Nera watched his mouth move carefully, never once breaking her deadly warrior stance. “Even if it’s one of your own? Because if it is, that ugly smell that’s wafting up your nose? That’s a lawsuit. Not your cigar smoke.”

Umo shook his little orange head like he was trying to unscrew it and puffed smoke even harder. “The crew signed contracts.”

“Yeah, for accidental dismemberment,” Pete told him incredulously. “What if it was me in there? The star of your



show?”

“It’s not.” Umo strode past him and patted him on his abs. “And you’re *not*. Look at the numbers, kid.”

Except for Nera, everyone turned to the holographic screen at the front of the platform, the thing we’d all been glued to before we heard the screams. Some of the numbers by our names had stopped scrolling.

Nera had over four million votes.

I had ninety-six million.

*Fuxx*. Did that mean she was leaving me?

My heart did a dangerous leap toward my feet and stayed there. My next breath burned. I looked toward her, but her focus remained on the jungle, all of our voices soundless to her static-filled ears.

I’d only spoken to her for the first time a few days ago, but I felt like I’d known her since I’d seen her on TV ten years ago. She’d shown then how big her heart was, and how ravaged it was, and I’d never forgotten her. Not once.

And now that I knew her inside and out, I’d never be the same without her.

“All of us are accounted for, sir,” the nervous crewmember told Umo.

“Fine,” he grouched, literally brushing his hands of the whole thing. “It must just be some unlucky native, then. Not our problem. Pete, you with me?”

Not our problem? That seemed harsh.

“Yeah, I’m with you,” Pete said, still eying the jungle wall skeptically. Then to himself, he added, “You bag of limp, orange dicks.”

My sentiments exactly, Pete. Astonishingly accurate too. But now I’d never look at Umo the same again.

“Then let’s pick up where we left off,” Umo called on his way off the platform. “No more interruptions. Start where you left off. I’ll be in the crew’s beach house going over numbers.”

“And...action,” someone shouted.

The hoverchair slammed into the backs of my knees and dropped me down into it. The Killian’s too.

Not the goddess Nera, who neatly sidestepped hers and fixed it with a death stare before noticing the camera drone practically stuck to her face.

She looked around, saw everyone in their seats again staring expectantly at Pete, and with a cocked eyebrow, she dropped into her hoverchair. Her dress hid the secret place she hid her gun, and when she saw me looking, imagining, *salivating* about where she could possibly keep it, she shot me a wink.

I groaned and shifted in my seat, my pants uncomfortably tight. I’d never been so jealous of a fuxxing gun in my life.

“Now,” Pete said in a low, dramatic voice and tapped the viewscreen behind him, “let’s find out what the viewers think of all of you. We’ll start with the males.”

The names and numbers rearranged themselves with only the highest number on top showing for now.

Me.

“King Maxx,” Pete said, whirling to face me. “Ninety-six million beings all across the universe voted for you to stay on *Alien Love Island*. An astronomical amount. How does that make you feel?”

I had no idea how to answer that since all my emotions were currently tied up in Nera and keeping her safe. So I decided to sidestep with the grace of Nera and go instead with a humorous musing about the other female who ruled my heart. “It makes me feel that my daughter, Roxxanne, had something to do with it. Like she bribed the millions of her friends.”

Pete smirked and then forced a chuckle. “That would be quite a feat for Roxanne to bribe that many.”

“You don’t know my daughter.” I must have said it like a threat because Pete’s snarky expression dissolved in seconds.

“And something tells me that’s probably for the best.” He shot me a grim smile. “Would you like to hear some of the comments our viewers said about you?”

“Not really.”

“Well, I’m going to tell you anyway. One called you a KILF, or a king I’d like to...” Pete waved his hand in the air. “Well, you know. Several others formed the XXXenoxx Lay Squad, spelled with three Xs. Another said that your ass is,

and I quote, ‘the finest slab of man meat I’ve ever seen,’ and she’s been around for over two hundred fifty years.”

The other contestants laughed. Not Nera though, who was reading Pete’s lips with a frown of...disgust. Maybe she was as much of a fan of objectification as I was, meaning not at all.

Leaning forward, I caught her eye and smiled.

At her. No one else. For no one’s benefit *but* her.

When she smiled back, something deep inside me soared, like great feathery wings stretching and taking to the air for the first time in years.

I couldn’t wait to hold her again.

Pete asked me something else that I didn’t bother to listen to, and then he finally said, “Anyway, King Maxx, you’re staying. Congratulations. Let’s move on. *Quickly.*”

In second place, with considerably fewer votes than I had, was the Killian. Irritation sparked that he was staying, but if I was being completely honest with myself, a little relief did too.

Nera trusted him. I guess that meant I should by default, but no. Not even a little.

As soon as Pete finished grilling him, the Killian nodded at me. I gave him nothing in return. None of this meant I had to like him.

Once Pete counted down the first four places for the guys, it was pretty obvious which male was getting voted off the show.

“What?” one-eyed June shrieked from the other side of the platform. “You can’t go! I forbid it!”

With tears in his eyes, Josh, a human, surged up from his hoverchair, and they came together in the middle of the platform in a sobbing embrace. The camera drones pounced on the couple and showed the drama all over the viewscreen.

The whole thing felt very scripted and forced.

It was then I spotted the bottle of hot sauce underneath Josh’s seat, hence his splotchy, weepy face.

Wait, did that mean he knew he was getting voted off? But Nera didn’t know. Did that mean she was staying?

*Finally*, someone escorted Josh off the platform.

Now it was the females’ turn.

My stomach twisted itself into knots. My nerves unraveled. I didn’t know what to do with this feeling of no control. I hated it.

The female with the highest number of votes turned out to be Bling. I didn’t care about Bling or her feelings about the matter, so I zoned her out completely.

Second place went to tentacled Nacket.

Blah, blah, blah, get to what matters.

Then it was time to reveal third place. This was it. If it was Nera, she stayed. If it wasn’t, well...it didn’t really change anything. We would just have to find a way to be together.

And find a way off this planet.

“Now it’s down to Beth and Captain Nera,” Pete said in a hushed voice.

The camera drones swooped in on both of them.

Beth tapped her high heels against the platform and gnawed on the tips of her webbed hands. Nera sat perfectly still while staring at Pete’s mouth so as not to miss any of his next few words.

A really annoying pause followed, so long that I thought Pete had either fallen asleep with his eyes wide open or he was prepping for my fist through his face in slow motion. I curled my fingers for the second option when finally he tapped the viewscreen.

“Captain Nera Cotrobin!” Pete announced.

Thank. Fuxx. I heaved a long breath, my lungs burning as though I’d been holding it for quite some time.

“Coming in at four million votes.” He cocked his head at Nera. “How does that make you feel, Captain?”

“Um.” She sat back in her seat and crossed those long legs of hers while casually regarding Pete. “Hungry for tacos?”

Her style team standing nearby laughed. I did too, drawing shocked stares from almost everyone.

Nera shot me a gorgeous grin, straight through my hearts.

“Well, damn it, now I’m hungry for tacos too.” Pete shook his head hard as if to clear it of taco daydreams. “Now, Captain, I have to say that some of the viewers’ comments

about you were all over the place. Some called you too dangerous to be on the show because you like to wave guns around, even when you're nude.”

A male crewmember on the sand laughed—too loud, too lascivious.

Slowly, I stood and stared him right the fuxx down, which shut him right the fuxx up.

He paled twenty shades lighter and sealed his mouth shut. Knowing he wouldn't make the same mistake twice, I sank back into my hoverseat again.

Seeming to miss that exchange, Pete took a step forward, his focus all on Nera, and turned suddenly serious. “Others said they just wanted to give you a hug because of... Well, because of your past.”

Nera stared blankly at him, but the slightest tic of her jaw gave her away. I'd memorized her expressions and her reactions to things, even in the short time I'd known her, and that was her trying her hardest not to flinch. That was her not showing the slightest chink in the walls she'd so carefully erected around herself.

“What do you say to that?” Pete asked her softly.

“Well, Pete,” she said without missing a beat, “I'm not much of a hugger, but I appreciate the sentiment.”

He smiled at her, a genuine one with a little bit of sadness pinching the corners of his mouth. Then he walked away from her and didn't say anything. A rare moment of silence from

him, and I wondered what exactly was going on behind those Aviators.

The rest of the crew just stared at him, confused.

Finally, he leaped back around, the TV show host in him on complete display once again. “Beth, that means you’ve been voted off *Alien Love Island*. I’m so sorry, but pack your bags. A ship’s waiting. It’s a shame to see you go.”

“What?” She blinked rapidly as though this were some great shock.

“You have to go, hon,” Pete told her with a jerk of his head toward the stairs.

“Oh. Okay.”

A crewmember came to escort her off the platform.

“But will there be tacos?” she asked him.

Nera must’ve read her lips because she gave her a thumbs-up. “Oh, always. That’s not even something to worry about.”

The girl grinned and nodded.

As soon as she was off camera, Pete wiggled his thick eyebrows above his Aviators so much that they became sentient and continued wiggling on their own. “I’m not done with the shocks though. No, siree. I have shocks for daaaayys. Someone keep those keys away from me because it’s about to get all electric in here.”

My royal diplomacy training swallowed up my groan. Polite titters came from some of the contestants at that epic fail of a



Benjamin Franklin joke.

Sighing loudly, Nera leaned forward and buried her head in her hands. “Oh my *god*, Pete.”

A slow grimace peeled back Pete’s lips as he shot her an irritated look she couldn’t see. “Kindly edit this part out, thanks.”

I laughed. It just tripped out, and I wasn’t even sorry.

Pete shook himself and flashed his megawatt smile again. “One contestant went home early. Two just got voted off. In typical *Alien Love Island* tradition, surprises await. Which is why we’ll find out how our audience matched you with in the third episode. And which is also why we’re bringing three new contestants onto the show right now!”

Two bikini-clad Lioness aliens and yet another half-naked human male with glasses paraded onto the platform then, jiggling and laughing and bouncing with excitement.

I didn’t even catch their names. Neither did Nera who still sat with her head between her knees. Had she fallen asleep?

Yet again, I chuckled, drawing the attention of the Killian.

“Careful, King Maxx,” he muttered over Pete’s introductions with a raised brow. “You laugh any more, and someone might call you happy.”

But I *was* happy. As happy as anyone could be while kidnapped and forced onto a reality TV show with the occasional assassination attempt.

Because I was with Nera. The woman who held the parts of my hearts I didn't even know were missing.

Finally, someone yelled, "Cut! That's a wrap on episode two, folks."

Nera jerked awake at that, then she yawned and stretched that lithe body of hers until her back arched and her barely covered chest almost burst out of her dress.

Fuuuuuuxxx.

My cock jerked awake too, and I surged to my feet and started toward her before I'd even given my body that command. Apparently my dick was now in charge.

"Remember to splice in the newbies' intro videos," Pete called to no one in particular. "We should get forty-four minutes out of all that, right?"

"That's what the long, dramatic pauses are for," someone else said. "It's fine."

"Nera." Her name was a low growl from deep within me.

She gave a sleepy, sexy smile when she saw me standing in front of her and took my outstretched hand to help her to her feet.

"You. Me. Bungalow." She pressed in close to me, so close that the heat of all that skin burned the rest of my self-control to cinders.

"I'm ready." Unbidden, my kaxxui, the sexual serpents Nera had enjoyed so much before, slithered out from the sides of

my Adonis belt, stretched the fabric of my pants, and flicked and curled between the apex of her thighs, eliciting a soft moan.

She stared up at me, her brown eyes fevered. “So you are.”

“We better take the shortcut through the jungle.” I pulled her in closer, feeling her everywhere.

She nodded. “For science. And for the possibility of discovering the source of that scream that everyone was just like ‘eh’ about.”

“Right. This fuxxing show.” I took her hand and led her to the back edge of the platform.

We stopped at the wall of jungle, which was roughly where we’d stumbled onto the show the first time. Was this the best idea? It would get us to the honeymoon bungalow sooner, but the setting sun was already casting darker hues across the sky.

“Room for one more?” The Killian stepped up to Nera’s other side. At my threatening step toward him, he rolled his eyes. “In the jungle, not either of your pants. Relax. After the jungle, I’ll be outside your bungalow. I can be your lookout in case someone decides to try to kill you both again. Which, let’s be honest, someone probably will.”

Nera turned to me and then back again in case she missed seeing us speak. Questions lit her eyes.

Same, Nera. Same.

“What do *you* get out of it?” I growled at my mortal enemy.

He quirked a green brow. “One night away from the beach-house orgy? You have no idea the kinds of things that didn’t happen in the bedroom last night. The kinds of holes that were filled with any number of—”

I held up my hand. “Stop. Talking.”

He did with a quick, secret smile, and I had to wonder what else was driving him into the jungle and beyond with us. What else was spinning in that overactive mind of his?

Did I trust him? Fuxx no. Did Nera?

As if hearing my thoughts, she looked up at me and nodded.

I hissed out a sigh. If he aided in protecting Nera while we were otherwise engaged, so be it.

“Fine,” I told him. “But no more about orgies.”

“Sure, unless there’s some in the jungle.” He mock-shivered. “They could be anywhere.”

I flicked my eyes to the heavens while Nera snorted and bumped me lightly with her shoulder. It’s likely I’d regret letting him come with us.

Regardless, as one, we stepped into the jungle.

# Chapter Five

## Nera

THE DENSE FOLIAGE SWALLOWED the waning sunlight in one gulp, leaving us in almost complete darkness. In the middle of a mysterious jungle. Where screams had supposedly come from no less than thirty minutes ago.

What could go wrong?

“Thank goodness for this.” From the folds of my dress, I pulled out a little flashlight and powered it on.

Maxx squinted against the light, his expression bewildered. “Where are you keeping all this stuff?”

“You play your cards right, I’ll tell you all my secrets.” With a smile, I nodded forward. “The sooner we get to the bungalow—”

“The better,” he rumbled, curling his fingers around my hips with bruising intensity.

I gasped at his strength, at the thrilling heat in his touch. The lightning bolts in his eyes flashed with desire and threw sparks up and down my skin.

I couldn't wait to be alone with him again.

Miekil stepped toward us, his attention aimed at our surroundings, and I glanced at him to see his mouth move. "Just a reminder, but we're in a dangerous jungle, so maybe hold off on the eye-fucking for a minute?"

I huffed a laugh. I hadn't acted like this since I was a teenager. Maybe not even then to this extreme.

Reluctantly, almost painfully, Maxx and I dragged our gazes away from each other and faced the jungle again.

It kept completely still, not a single branch or leaf swaying, as though it held its breath.

And it was growing darker.

"Is it just me," I whispered, thumping the flashlight's hard plastic against my leg, "but is the jungle eating the light from my flashlight too?"

"It isn't just you." Maxx powered on his communicator bracelet, which emitted a soft orange glow. "Come on. We need to hurry."

We started forward, Maxx and Miekil taking the lead to clear a path with their towering height and hulking muscles.

It was certainly a strange sight. Two aliens—enemies, no less—walking through the jungle, side-by-side.

I couldn't keep a smile from blooming across my face. This was great progress.

I liked Miekil, and my feelings for Maxx were too powerful and new to put into words right then, but I enjoyed them working together far more than I did when they were threatening to kill each other.

While they forged a path, I shined my light around, searching for anything that shouldn't be here, but the glow from my flashlight was steadily shrinking.

Then Miekil stopped. Maxx did too, so suddenly I ran into his back, lips first.

“Oops. Wish I could say I was sorry about that. Why are we sto—”

Without tearing his gaze away from whatever he saw, Maxx reached back and hauled me to his side.

“Look.” He pointed to a small clearing on the right.

I did look, but what I saw took several moments to register.

“It's a shopping cart.” I huffed a disbelieving breath. “Um, why is there a shopping cart?”

The jungle had adopted it and made it its own with creeping vines coiling in and out of the rusted metal holes, nearly camouflaging it. But the basic shape was still there.

“Was that the cause of that guy's scream from earlier?” I asked. “Was he just as shocked as us?”

Maxx nodded slowly. “I've read that some humans fear shopping carts. Gouwuchepobia.”



I opened my mouth to laugh, but he sure didn't look like he was joking. "Wait, that's a real thing?"

Miekil scrubbed a hand down his green face. "Or it's a murderous shopping cart, and it killed the man."

Maxx shot him a withering look. "It's not a competition for weirdest theory."

"Theorizing is how shit gets done," Miekil fired back, his fists flexing.

Ah, there was the mutual hostility I hadn't missed. Their tolerating had lasted all of three minutes.

"Okay, relax," I said, situating myself between them once again. "So finding a shopping cart in the middle of the jungle wasn't on any of our reality TV Bingo cards. Big deal. Let's just keep our heads while we still have light. But give me one second first."

"Nera." Maxx flashed out his hand to stop me, but I easily dodged it and slipped around Miekil on the way to the cart.

I highly doubted it was murderous, but I aimed my gun at it anyway. Nera wasn't stupid. Nera had never experimented with drugs. But Nera did occasionally refer to herself in the third person when she thought she might be hallucinating.

Because the plastic part stretching across the cart's handle—once bright yellow but now chipped and cracked and faded gray with time—read SmartStart.

The very same grocery store Nera used to shop at on Earth.

“Maxx?” I croaked.

He was there in an instant, my anchor in this swell of unease. “What is it?”

I gazed up at him, my fingers absently tracing the worn letters. “This is my store.”

“What do you mean?” he asked gently.

“The store I used to shop at with—” My voice broke off before I could say her name.

Lucy. My daughter.

And Rain, my Faid caregiver for Lucy.

Nodding, he stroked my back, but I didn’t think either of us understood what was happening here.

“Maybe there’s a store nearby? Someone took a shopping cart for a leisurely stroll through the jungle?” I tried to reason, but it was no use.

This made zero sense.

“Abandoned?” Miekil reached out a finger and poked it like it might bite him. “Or brought here. But what are the odds that it would come from your store light-years away?”

“Too great.” Which was why I slipped off my hellish, demons-in-disguise heels, tossed them inside, and began prodding the cart free of the jungle’s viny teeth.

To make sense of it. In the light of day rather than a dying flashlight and the meager glow from Maxx’s communicator bracelet.

It was so caught in the leafy underbrush that Maxx and Miekil had to help me. Somehow, it was still sturdy enough to move and didn't disintegrate under all that rust.

Then, when it was finally free, I curled my fingers around the handle like I had hundreds of times before on Earth and pushed it. While Maxx and Miekil continued to clear the way, I followed. The cart moved surprisingly easily with no protesting squeaks, like it wanted to find out what was deeper in the jungle too.

This was all completely normal, right?

“Oh, I'm just a grown-ass woman,” I began to sing, “living in a rude planet's custody. Your TV show makes me barefoot, while all I have is a stolen cart's company. Oh, I'm just a grown-ass woman. Something, something that rhymes with custody. Oh, remedy!”

Maxx turned then, a bright grin on his face and a chuckle I didn't need to hear because it bubbled warmth into my soul.

I shrugged. “I just made that up.”

“I never would've guessed.” His grin grew impossibly bigger, lighting up those lavender eyes like so many stars.

“Want to know what my remedy is?” I asked, arching a brow.

His gaze shuttered with heat. “I'm dying to know.”

I pointed to him, tapping my finger in the air, and gave him the gushiest smile I could muster for full transparency.

“Same, Nera.” He laughed again, and this time I felt its power right between my legs.

That was Maxx for you. Filling up all my holes. Literally. Figuratively. Sometimes both at the same time.

Miekil cleared his throat loudly. “Can we please get back to stealing a stolen, murderous cart from the jungle so I can go back to uselessly calling out for a dead man?”

Oh, was that what he’d been doing? “Of course.”

We continued along—minus my singing, much to everyone’s disappointment, I’m sure.

Then Maxx stopped again, the light from his communicator bracelet cast upward toward a giant leaf. On it crawled the fluffiest, cutest red caterpillar I’d ever seen.

I squealed, as I did every time I saw something fuzzy and cute. Even Major, Lucy’s cat, who I’d been adamant about not adopting until I’d quickly caved. It had been love at first tail swish and then the resulting ignoring me for hours.

“Do you want to keep it?” Maxx asked.

“This is his home.” I shook my head, only a wobble really. Yeah, I wasn’t convinced either. “There could be any number of dangerous things here though. Like spaceship explosions that seem to have never happened.”

“And the terrified screams,” he added.

I grinned. “Don’t forget the random, definitely murderous shopping carts from planet Earth.”

“Okay, buddy, it’s unanimous. You’re being rehomed for your own safety.” With the gentlest care for someone of his size, Maxx inched the caterpillar from his leaf onto his finger, a sweet smile on his face.

My heart melted a little more for this alien king.

I found a similarly sized leaf on the ground that I hoped the caterpillar would find acceptable and handed it to Maxx. He transferred the cutey-pie onto the leaf and then laid it inside my shopping cart.

“Think there’s a two-for-one special, or no?” I asked.

“Probably shouldn’t push your luck while caterpillar shopping, but you never know,” he said with a wink.

I pulled him in for a kiss. I couldn’t help myself. I’d wanted to climb him like a stripper pole since this morning.

Apparently, I wasn’t alone in that thought process because his mouth devoured mine, and then demanded more.

I gasped into Maxx’s kisses as he wrapped me up even closer to him, his fingers kneading my ass. His thick cock pulsed against me, and his two kaxxui, his magical sexual serpents, strained and flicked toward my soaked center.

My body begged for every single part of him. I could practically see my desire for him sparking from my skin like mini fireworks, electrifying the air with the promise for more.

“I could take you right here,” he growled against my mouth.

I turned my head slightly so he could claim my neck with his tongue, and from this angle, the jungle gave way to the beach a short distance away. Closer to the shore, lights glowed, similar to those in the beach house's backyard.

“We’re almost there,” I moaned as I arched into his expert touch. “A little farther.”

But then I found Miekil wasn’t here with us.

I pulled away in a panic. “Where’s Miekil?”

Maxx tilted my head farther back to nibble at my bottom lip, his purple eyes fevered with need. “He said, and I quote, ‘Okay, I’m done with you two,’ and left. He’ll keep lookout at the edge of the jungle.”

So it was just us. A grown-ass woman, her purple alien lover, her caterpillar pet, and her shopping cart.

Really, what more could a girl want?

# Chapter Six

## Maxx

CAMERA DRONES HAD THE gall to almost follow us into the honeymoon bungalow, the one on the far right. They quickly learned just how welcome they were when I slammed the door on them.

Then I did a brief sweep of the inside, just to be sure, stepping all over the rose petals scattered everywhere and ducking under the strings of twinkling lights. We were alone.

Finally.

Time to take full advantage.

The lights caught on Nera's perfect smile, aimed directly at me, and lit her up even more. Just looking at her spun me about so much that I hardly knew which direction was up.

"You're beautiful, Nera," I said simply, taking a long, lingering trip down her supple body with my eyes.

"No need to butter me up." Shaking her head, she took a step toward me. "I'm already yours, remember?"



Mine. Impossibly, exquisitely mine.

But for how long? How long until she found out what I really am?

I flexed my hands at my sides. Never. She could never find out, and I would spend every waking hour making sure she didn't so she would remain *mine*.

“You are.” My hearts beat toward her, closing the distance between us before my feet did. Her nearness, her scent, the way she gazed up at me stirred everything inside me alive. I reached out and stroked her between her legs, the fabric of her dress coming away drenched. “All mine.”

She arched into my touch, her plump lips parting on a moan. “I was just kidding about you not buttering me up. I like it when you do.”

“Oh, I know. I don't ever plan on stopping buttering you up,” I said, increasing the pressure between her thighs.

With my free hand, I speared my fingers into the back of her hair, tilted her head, and captured her mouth with mine.

The force of the kiss knocked her back hard into the closed door. If I hurt her, she didn't show it, which was good because I couldn't help myself. Not with her arousal soaking my fingers, the sweet scent of it drugging my mind.

While my hips ground against her and she gasped into my kisses, I freed her of the top of her dress and the little scrap of her bra and filled my hands with her perfect breasts.

Then, out of nowhere, a thought struck. An important one.

“Nera,” I groaned at the slide of her tongue over my lower lip. “I have to tell you something.”

“Nope.” She worked her hand between us and palmed my pulsing cock through my too-tight pants.

I groaned as I dove into her mouth again, my hips violently riding her strokes. “I might forget it.”

“Uh-huh. So glad we had this great talk.” Then she wrapped both her legs around my waist, causing the rest of her dress to fall to the floor and baring the rest of her.

All of her. Naked. Wanting. So, *so* ready.

And I wondered what the fuxx I was doing with my life wasting so much time.

I quickly ridded myself of my pants and sank inside her with one thrust. No kaxxui to warm her up.

She took all of me in without complaint, and it was as though my inner beast was unleashed. I couldn’t control my need for her. Couldn’t get enough of her gasps or her moans.

This was raw and untamed just like Nera. Her breasts bounced into my face as I thrust fast and hard, and I buried my face into them to lick and suck and taste. One of my kaxxui slipped inside of her to stroke us both, and the other played and teased with her clit.

I think I might have howled.

Or maybe that was Nera, with my name tearing from her kiss-swollen lips as she came apart in my arms.

I quickly followed her over the edge. I would follow her anywhere.

My orgasm bolted down my spine, my hips pistoning in an almost frantic beat as I climaxed inside of her. A growl I hardly recognized as mine ripped free from my throat while I rode the high of being with this woman.

Then I immediately took her again against the door, hardly slowing, unable to ever get enough of this beautiful star.

And then I took her again in the bed.

When I was finally sated—for now—Nera wrapped herself around me and slept in the rose-petaled bed. While I continued to hold her close, I checked my communicator for messages from Axxel.

His latest one read, *So, you're just going to ignore your High Sword because you're too famous now? Cool, cool.*

I rolled my eyes and chuckled. I probably should keep him better updated, but I'd have to choose my words carefully in case Nera somehow overheard. He would not be happy to hear about Emjay's attack, but he'd be relieved to know that I'd hidden the weapon.

I'd deal with Axxel later. First, a king's feast from the spread of food the show had laid out for us.

When Nera finally woke the next morning, I was emerging from the closet with a machete...as you do from any closet on this planet, apparently.

“You’ll be happy to know,” I told her, “or maybe you’ll be just as confused as I am, that machetes aren’t in short supply here. Just search through all the sex toys at the top of any closet.”

“Okay...weird. But good to know.” She stretched her arms up over her head, which slipped the red satin sheet from her nipples.

Groaning, I stalked toward her, summoned by her nipples’ spell over me. She laughed when I crawled between her legs and then released a sexy sigh when I sucked one into my mouth. It took one stroke of my scaled tongue to harden it, eliciting a long shudder from Nera. I peaked the other too, rolling it under my palm and arching her off the bed closer to me.

“I love what you do to me, Maxx,” she said, breathless.

“It’s nothing compared to what you do to me.” I licked and sucked my way up to her neck, kissed her fluttering pulse, and smoothed her bedhead hair.

Not to tame it but just to touch it.

“Lies. You drive me absolutely...wild.” She moaned then when my fingers found her drenched heat, and her swollen clit throbbed against my flicking, swirling thumb.

I loved her like this, loved when she craved me as much as I craved her. Unbidden, that craving shoved against the flat of her stomach with a slow roll of my hips. My kaxxui slipped free almost immediately for yet another round, their forked

tongues flicking, their bodies sliding up and down my rigid length to harden me to near painful.

They often jerked me off like that, but I knew the only way I'd be fully satisfied was if I was inside Nera. Right fuxxing now.

I groaned at the feel of her body as I shed my pants. I shuddered when I sucked her lower lip into my mouth while my kaxxui slid into her to ready her for me. I saw stars when I finally sank into her.

So. Slowly. Taking my time rather than the carnal, beastly fuxxing we'd done last night.

We fit together so well, but joined as we were, this still wasn't close enough. For both of us. We clung to each other, Nera's hands tangled in my hair and one of mine wrapped tightly around her hips to thrust myself in deeper.

I wanted all of her to be mine, again and again and again. I wanted to worship at her altar for an eternity. I wanted my hearts to stop fuxxing clenching when she wasn't by my side.

She came apart in my arms then with a sexy cry that I consumed with my kiss. Her muscles locked powerfully around me, milking my own orgasm to the surface until it ripped through me with the force of a thousand exploding suns.

After we came down from our highs, with plenty of aftershocks and deep, searing kisses, we held to each other as

the morning sun began to blaze around the edges of the satin curtains.

We were both quiet, perfectly content in the comfortable silence, when we both stiffened at the faintest sound at the front door.

Our gazes locked. Questions buzzed between us.

Putting my finger to her lips, I pulled out, crawled off of her, and stepped to the floor with silent feet. Without even realizing it, I'd set my newfound machete on the table when I'd been cast under Nera's nipple spell. I picked it up, my gaze stuck to the door—and what lay on the floor in front of it.

A leaf.

As big as the ones in the jungle. Did Miekil bring this?

Silently, Nera sat up and watched me, clutching the sheet to her chest. From her vantage, I doubted she could see the leaf.

As I drew closer, it looked like words were scratched on it, most likely with a white rock.

*Earth Space Fleet is here.*

Well, yes. I already knew that. They were the whole reason I couldn't let the weapon be delivered here—because of their war against the Faid.

A sharp knock came from the other side of the door.

Wait. Earth Space Fleet was *here* here? Did they somehow know what I really was?

Dread trickled down into the pit of my stomach. Slowly, I turned to Nera.

Oh. Fuuuuuxx.

# Chapter Seven



## Nera

WHEN MAXX TURNED TO me with a big leaf in his hands and his purple eyes as wide as I'd ever seen them, I just about swallowed my own tongue.

But then he pointed to the front door and turned the leaf so I could read it.

*Earth Space Fleet is here.*

Wait, they were here? As in right now?

Forget about swallowing my tongue, and let's skip right to my epitaph. *Here lies Nera Cotrobin. She always knew this day would come because she didn't forward that email to ten friends back in sixth grade and has regretted it ever since.*

Holding my breath, I scooted toward the black-patterned satin curtains above the bed and parted them with my pinky finger.

Outside the front door, dressed from head to toe in Earth Space Fleet battle gear, stood Lieutenant Avery.

*The* Lieutenant Avery, the one I was supposed to deliver the package to. The one who'd cursed my mother when I told her I couldn't land my spaceship.

"This is bad," I hissed to Maxx as I scrambled off the bed and took most of the covers with me in an effort to keep myself covered. "This is so fucking bad, Maxx. We can't be seen together."

"Except by the billions of viewers on *Alien Love Island*?" He tilted his head slightly and cocked an eyebrow, a look that would be damn sexy at any other time, but now was just frustrating.

"I took you prisoner aboard my ship," I hissed, searching the bungalow for my dress.

Ah, there it was, draped over the shopping cart with my friend the caterpillar inside happily crawling over his big leaf.

"Right, and then we were both kidnapped and brought here." He nodded slowly. "I remember this because I was there too."

"Yeah, but I don't know if Avery knows that. She's fighting a war here, somewhere, so I doubt there's much time for reality TV. All I know is that I was supposed to deliver that mystery package to her, and I couldn't get here. But now I'm here. Make sense?"

"Uh-huh." His eyes narrowed. "So what are you proposing?"

I stepped into the dress, forgoing the bra for now since it did very little with this dress anyway. “That you hide in the closet so I can talk to her and find out what’s happening here.”

“*Hide?*” His eyes blew wide as he crossed his arms, making all his muscles flex and bulge. “You want me to hide like a coward?”

“No, I want you to hide like my secret lover while I get some information out of her.”

He ticked his gaze over my face, searching, and I could practically hear the buzzing of his thoughts even with near-deaf ears. “What will you tell her about the package you don’t have?”

“Easy. I’ll say I stashed it somewhere. Talking to her could help us figure out why the hell we’re here.” I waved him toward the closet. “Please?”

“Fine,” he said through gritted teeth and stepped into the large walk-in closet.

“Maybe there’s more machetes in there to make you happy.” I pushed the shopping cart in after him, blew him a kiss, and then shut the door on him.

Was I so gaga over him that I hadn’t noticed his carefully worded question about the package? I mean...yes, I was gaga over him, but I’d still noticed.

Was I now wondering if he had maybe found it and stashed it somewhere? Why yes. Yes, I was.

I opened the door to Lieutenant Avery, cool and calm like I had every right to look like a hooker about to do the walk of shame and reeking of sex and sin. “What a nice surprise, Lieutenant.”

Her jaw dropped when she saw me, and she took her sweet, *sweet* time vacationing her eyes all over me. Then she got lost at my cleavage, and oh my fucking god, we were going to be here all day.

Clearing my throat as loud as I could, I ducked down and led her back to the more puritan land of my face. “There we go. Much better. Now, why are you here?”

“Captain, I—” She smoothed her too-tight blonde bun that practically peeled her features to the sides of her face and screamed headache city. “McCauliffe swore he saw you outside last night. I didn’t believe him, but I thought I’d check it out for myself. I thought your ship wouldn’t land.”

“It wouldn’t, but I have my ways of getting to where I need to be.” Like being kidnapped and deposited there, which she didn’t seem to know about. “What’s the situation here?”

She shook her head and pressed her lips into a grim line. “Faid everywhere. This place is like a mecca for them for some reason. They’re violent. Unpredictable. Same as always. Do you have the delivery for me?”

“It’s somewhere safe, not here.”

“Are you...hiding here?” Her icy-blue gaze skipped past me inside the bungalow, and I had to fight the urge to block her

view.

Wouldn't want to appear suspicious, would I?

"I am hiding here. Since I've landed on this planet, I've nearly been poisoned, I've been bitten by snakes, and forced to do things I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy." Like wear heels. Like get my whole body waxed.

*Shudder.*

Her jaw dropped. "Forced by whom? Poisoned by whom? The Faid?"

"No."

"Then who?"

"I wish I knew," I said, shrugging, but I did know who. Partly, at least, and they would likely be arriving within the hour to spit shine me all over again. Time to get things moving. "This delivery, Lieutenant. This thing that's so important for the war. Tell me what it does."

"Can't. It's classified."

"I risked my life over and over to protect it, almost as soon as I had it in my hands. I deserve to know."

Obviously, I knew I didn't deserve shit because them's the breaks, man, when you're a part of Earth Space Fleet. But maybe Avery would take some pity on me. Maybe if I flashed her a little more boob or more leg or something?

Wouldn't hurt to try.

I revealed more of both, which for some reason, she took as an invitation to come right on into the bungalow, all while giving me a look like I would be living rent-free in her dreams tonight.

Damn it. Too late to kick her out now. With a grimace, I shut the door.

She paced back and forth in front of the closet several times, wringing her hands before she answered. "I'm not the one who's telling you this, okay?"

"Of course." I sank onto the edge of the bed, waiting, watching her mouth carefully so I didn't miss a thing.

"Earth's entire military funded it. It's a weapon, you see, to hunt down Faid. They're sneaky lately, often wearing masks or sunglasses to cover their creepy, slow-blinking eyes. And sometimes they don't speak at all to hide their irregular speech patterns. Sometimes it's impossible to know who's a Faid and who's not before it's too late."

She stopped then and looked at me, her belief in the war etched into the soft lines fanning from the corners of her blue eyes and the determined set of her jaw. "Your delivery shows the exact location of the Faid, and who they are. It points an orange dot right at them. Its accuracy is one hundred percent. Its range is intergalactic."

I nodded slowly as I stood. "It's a game changer. A weapon to capture all Faid."

“It could end the Faid War almost immediately,” she said, her excitement almost palpable. “Will you go get it and bring it to me?”

“Yes, of course,” I lied, smooth as melted butter, “but I’ll need some time. Where are you stationed?”

“Down quite a ways to the east, location 12456. You’ll need shoes, Captain. Battle gear. It’s *not* safe out there.”

“I’ll have it covered.” I waved a hand dismissively at my gorgeous dress. “This is just for blending in with the locals.”

She blinked at me. “I haven’t seen any locals. What do they look like?”

“Like they’re blending in too.” Uh, sure. Good answer, Nera. With my hands on her shoulders, I hurried her toward the door. “I’ll meet up with you later, Avery.”

“Sounds good.” Outside the door, she turned. “It’s great to see another familiar, trustworthy face.”

She wasn’t talking to my face though. Yep, she said that straight to my boobs.

“I’ll do that,” I said as I shut the door in *her* face.

Wait, what? I’d do what now? My brain had bailed on that conversation a long time ago, and I didn’t even know the words I was spewing anymore.

I did, however, know the exact words I wanted to spew at a certain alien king who’d seriously damaged my calm since the day I met him.

Fuming, I wrenched open the closet door. “The Xenox are supposed to be *helping* the humans in this war.”

He stepped out, uncoiling his towering height and stacks of muscles from the confines within. His narrowed purple eyes blazed a warning I didn’t plan on heeding. “We *are* helping you.”

“But you’re *not*. You tried to steal it from me, remember? Tell me why.”

He lifted his chin, a stubborn, scaled column of silence.

“Swear to god, Maxx,” I said through gritted teeth and jabbed a finger at his face, “if you don’t start talking, I’m leaving.”

I let the meaning of those words, the heavy weight behind them, swing like a pendulum between us. He knew what I meant. Obviously I couldn’t leave the planet or the show, but I could leave this bungalow. And him.

Poisoned barbs pierced my heart at the thought, exploding into a riot of pain, but secrecy and lies were my hard limits. And helping the Faid? Forget about it.

Thoughts and emotions warred across Maxx’s face, none of which I could read.

Finally, he said, “The Xenox...made another deal.”

“With the Faid?” I was shouting now, and I didn’t even care.

He knew. He knew my history with the Faid, how one of them had destroyed me in one single night.



Tears scorched the backs of my eyes until they burned down my cheeks. My lips trembled as he slowly moved toward me, his expression tortured.

“No.” He reached out and squeezed my shoulders gently. “No, not with the Faid, Nera. With the Bishops.”

“The giant *bug* aliens?” With tears coating my voice, my disgust with that species sounded amplified inside my own head.

“Yes, the...giant bug aliens.” Still squeezing my shoulder with one hand, he pinched the bridge of his nose with the other. “They manufacture and sell weapons. The humans need weapons to win their wars. Our deal with the Bishops was to prolong the Faid War as long as possible so that they would become richer. I have the contracts to prove it.” Seeming reluctant, he released me, a storm of emotions raging in those lavender hues. “I didn’t tell you, Nera, because the Xenox and the humans are supposed to be allies.”

“Then why make that deal in the first place?” I snapped. “What do *you* get out of it?”

He turned away, but not so much that I couldn’t see the intense grief pinching the corners of his eyes, not so much that I couldn’t see his next words leaving his mouth. “The Bishops are the only ones with the technology advanced enough to help me. We’re helping them in exchange for them helping me investigate who murdered my wife.”

A great sigh heaved from my lungs, but it wasn’t relief. It was resistance to the tight, painful metal cage erected inside

my chest.

Maxx had one too, made from grief and tears and memories, the exact same as mine.

I wanted to go to him, hug him, help him. Still, though...

“You should have told me,” I whispered.

He nodded without looking me in the eyes and then stalked toward the bed where he sank down onto it. Heaviness clouded the air around him. “I’m sorry.”

I opened my mouth to say, “It’s okay,” but I closed it because was it okay? If he’d kept that truth from me, were there other things he was keeping to himself?

“Do you know where this weapon is?” I asked instead.

Studying me closely, he spread out his hands as he leaned his elbows on his knees. “Axxel says it’s not on your ship. I assume whoever kidnapped us has it.”

“But why? Why not just steal the weapon and leave you and me alone?” I blew out a long, weighted breath. “Do you think it was the Bishops who stole it and kidnapped us?”

He shrugged. “They’re stealthy. They are bugs after all.”

I shuddered. “Gross.”

“But snakes don’t disgust you?” A half smile cupped his perfect lips.

“Snakes I can handle, except for those who slip between my legs uninvited during a swim at sea and bite me.”

He arched a brow. “Am *I* still invited between your legs?”

“That depends.” I narrowed my eyes at him, wishing I could see the inner workings of his mind. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

His face shuttered again, going dark and unreadable, but in the next second, he whipped his head toward the front door.

“What?” I whispered.

“Someone’s here,” he mouthed to me as he moved toward the curtain over the bed.

Shit. Avery again for another dose of boob ogling?

Maxx flicked the curtain open with a long finger and then visibly relaxed his tense shoulders. “Your style team.”

He went to open the door to the flurry of energetic distractions, and that right there, my friends, paired with his non-answer, told me everything I needed to know.

Maxx was definitely still hiding something from me.

# Chapter Eight

## Maxx

ALL THAT ABOUT HELPING the Bishops so they'd help me? Most of it was based on a true story.

The Bishops had come to me with an offer to draw out the Faid War as sort of a double agent—help the humans *and* help them.

I'd refused, despite what I'd told Nera. My loyalty was to the Xenox. Always. And the humans by default, since they provided the Xenox with wives in exchange for aiding their hunt against the Faid.

But everything else I'd said to Nera was a lie.

I could still taste the sour mess those words had left behind, trying to choke me so I'd shut the fuck up.

I wasn't proud of what I'd done. In fact, I hated myself so intensely that I wished molting was an actual thing Xenox did just so I could cleanse myself of this awful feeling. Who in the goddess's name lied about their dead wife? Who lied to the woman who had grown my hearts so big that they were

steadily crushing the rest of my body and I was too lost in her to care?

Me.

I'd lied, and that made me a monster. A deeply selfish one who only wanted one thing. Fuxx the consequences. Fuxx the rest of the universe.

Fuxx. Me.

I didn't even wish to roll back time and swallow those lies before I'd said them aloud. No, I would do the exact same thing again. And again. Because they'd stopped Nera's tears.

I'd discovered right then that I would walk through fire, suffer a thousand days under a thousand suns, and raze entire planets to the ground if it meant she wouldn't cry.

Because when she did, it broke something irreparable inside me. She'd shed too many tears, more than anyone should bear. Enough was enough.

She deserved happiness now, and if I could bring her a fraction of what she gave me, then I would do anything to keep it that way.

Anything, including keeping her from the truth about me.

Did I truly believe all this, or were these just the mad ramblings of a selfish Xenox king who was acting with his hearts, not his fuxxed-up head?

After Nera's style team whisked her away, I contacted Axxel. He'd set me straight. Laugh in my face and call me a

pigeon-eating tosser, but...

Yes, that was probably all he'd do.

Because of Nera's expert mechanical wizardry, Axxel's slightly orange holographic face soon appeared in my communicator's viewscreen.

"What's this?" He pulled himself off the floor of Nera's ship's brig to his full height, looking a little tired but otherwise in good health. "Is it truly you? It's been so long that I almost forgot you existed."

"Funny, Axxel," I said without a trace of humor. "Listen—"

"But you'll be happy to know I didn't forget *you* existed because Nera's crew has supplied me with stellar reading materials, all about you." From behind his back, he brandished holographic magazines, the kind with astonishing headlines like "Are Black Holes the Secret Ingredient to the Perfect Spaghetti Sauce?" and "You Can Own This Planet for a \$1—Just Provide Your Bank Account Number!" and "Sexiest Alien Ever?" next to...my picture.

*"What?"*

"Yeah. Crazy." Axxel's eyes widened as he flipped through one of the magazines. "Even crazier is that you didn't tell me your favorite food ever is mango-pinecone salad with the frosted flakes of your enemies' dried blood sprinkled over it. This feels like something I should know."

*"What?"*

“Yeah. Crazy,” he said again, shaking his head. “The only part about you they got right is that you can’t keep your eyes off of Nera Cotrobin, ‘the enigmatic Earth Space Fleet captain who apparently has run out of Fs to give and who is gradually thawing underneath the hungry heat of His Majesty’s stare.’” He made a gagging sound and tossed the holographic magazine to his feet. “Sorry, but I can’t read any more about your hungry heat.”

I groaned. “Thank the goddess for that.”

“You look troubled, Maxx. Did you run out of pinecones?”

“Someone tried to kill me the night before last.”

Any good humor left on his face dissolved in half a second. He was the very definition of loyal.

“Who?” he demanded, his jaw pulsing with the steady grind of his teeth.

“A contestant on the show named Emjay.”

“The one who mysteriously went home in the dead of night?”

“You’re watching the show?” I asked incredulously.

“The whole universe is watching, Maxx. Now, what happened? Obviously, you’re fine and she’s gone, but is she *gone gone*?”

I nodded. “Self-defense.”

“An assassin?”



“She said she wasn’t.” I gave him a meaningful look, trying to convey everything I could without the use of certain words. You never could tell who might be listening in, especially aboard Nera’s ship. “And I believed her.”

Axxel’s expression went grim, and I could tell that my message had been received. That she’d tried to kill me because of what I was, not who I was. That she knew I was a Faid.

His mouth opened and closed several times, likely filled with questions he wanted to ask but couldn’t.

“You’re safe now?” he finally said.

“For the moment.”

“And Nera?”

“Someone tried to poison her the same night.”

“Are you—? Baxxadulifexxprezarpoxenoxx,” he shouted.

It wasn’t often we took our goddess’s name in vain, but sometimes there was no other way to express our emotions. I’d done it plenty of times myself. Still, I pounded my chest in reverence to Her in case She struck my High Sword down.

He did too, obviously thinking the exact same thing. “What in the absolute fuxx is happening there, Maxx?”

“If I knew that, I wouldn’t be here.”

He blew out a steadying breath. “Her crew is worried about her. Apparently, her cat is so pissed she’s gone, he’s hiding in the air vents again.”

I sighed, feeling suddenly exhausted. “Any good news? Any at all?”

“Yeah, actually. I mean...maybe?”

“Let me hear it.”

“I heard her crew talking outside the brig door, which they do a lot. It’s like they think I’m not going to eavesdrop even though I’m *right* here.”

“Axxel. Focus.”

“Right. Her engineer—Mosely, the big guy—figured out where that email address on her *Alien Love Island* contract originated. You’ll never guess where.”

“Try me.”

“Klio-3, Maxx,” he said. “The exact same planet you’re currently stranded on. Someone there sent Nera’s signed contract into the show.”

I flicked my gaze to the rusted shopping cart sitting in the middle of the bungalow closet. The cart from the grocery store on Earth.

*This is my store. The store I used to shop at with—* she’d said, but I could easily fill in the gaps.

With Lucy and Rain.

“Maxx?” Axxel asked, his voice seeming far away.

The shopping cart. The email address. It was too big of a coincidence.

“Xenox to Maxx. Whooo-hooo.”

Rain had fled Earth after... Well, after she did what she did.

“I’ll just go out on a limb and say our conversation is over since you’re now in la-la land. Good?”

Was Rain *here*?

More importantly, was she *still* here?

## Chapter Nine

# Rain

ACCESSING MEMORY 030501 CODE: 010184 \ \* \* \* \* \* \*

\* \* System flux: 8 sksk sldk

Memory accessed:

“I’m afraid, Rain.” Nera said it so matter-of-factly that I could almost assume she was talking to the flickering TV, its volume muted.

“Afraid...of what?”

She held the sleeping, bundled-up newborn closer to her and shifted uncomfortably so her back rested against the couch’s cushion. “Everything.”

I brushed some imaginary lint off the couch and sat next to her. When I first arrived at the house a week ago, Nera had described her cleaning habits as “chaotic evil” and “there appears to have been a struggle.” There were piles of laundry, piles of dishes, piles of everything imaginable, even piles of shovels.

“You never know how many dead bodies you’re going to have to bury at night,” Nera had said with a giant grin while rubbing her swollen belly. “Geez, Rain. Catch up.”

The house was spotless when she came back from the hospital earlier today, and I’d kept it that way for her and Lucy. And Mike, I suppose, who was upstairs sleeping.

Now, I trailed a delicate finger over Lucy’s velvety-soft cheek. “Everything...like what?”

“Being a mother. The responsibility. I can barely handle the whole adulting thing with just myself. Before I got pregnant, I used to eat nothing but pretzels, for god’s sake. What if I can’t give her everything she needs? Or what if I give her too much? Or what if she becomes the bully at school, and everyone hates me because my daughter is the devil incarnate?”

She heaved a breath, and I put a gentle hand on her shoulder to try to ease her worry.

“Nera. My programming...says this...is normal,” I told her. “You...love her. That’s all...you need.”

It was unquestionably true. I never really knew what love looked like, up close and personal, until I saw Nera smile down at her baby with her shining big brown eyes. That was love, unconditional and infinite in its strength.

“Thanks, Rain,” Nera said softly.

“Of...course.”

We sat in silence for a moment, then Nera rested her head on my shoulder.

This show of trust and warmth coursed pleasant energy over my artificial neurons. I was where I was meant to be, with Nera and little Lucy.

And that was the beginning of the three of us ///Error///—  
together.

///Error///

(((((((((((hurt))))))))))

Memory 030501 Code: 010184\ \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* System flux:  
8 sksk sldk.

Memory terminated. \*\*\*

# Chapter Ten



## Nera

“WELCOME TO EPISODE THREE of *Alien Love Island*, the show that gets hotter if you lick your screens.” Pete winked into the closest camera drone with a heavily made-up eye to cover the bruise Maxx had given him. “Trust me on this, baby.”

I groaned. I couldn't help it, and it drew a lot of sneers and dirty looks from my fellow female contestants.

Except June next to me, who patted my leg. “Learn to bottle those feelings up like the rest of us, number three.”

I peered closer at the one-eyed alien. “Number three?”

“Third place. I'm in second.” At my non-reaction, she looked down her nose incredulously at me. “Do you even know what you're doing here?”

“No, I don't. I never signed up for this shit.”

Her eye widened.

Pete stepped his bulge closer directly into my line of sight. “Ladies, ladies, mind sharing with the rest of the class about what’s so important that you can’t listen to your most excellent host explain the next game?”

And suddenly I was transported back to my days in military school where I always got into trouble. Every day. No matter what. Especially for breathing wrong.

“I...was just telling June here that this dress has snack holes.” I opened up a little pocket at the side of the sparkly champagne-colored dress which I’d stuffed full of M&Ms—courtesy of Oreos and Smiths who were starting to spoil me—plucked one out, and popped it into my mouth. “See?”

Lucy had coined the phrase, or maybe she didn’t, but it had always made me laugh. A sharp pang splintered down my heart at the thought of her laughing and twirling and showing off her snack hole pockets in the pants she’d outgrow in like, a month.

“Did you just say...snack holes?” Pete moved in closer.

Then he immediately backed off with his hands raised, his worried gaze aimed at the male contestant side of the stage.

Specifically at the imposing Xenox king who’d stood and looked like he wanted to rip Pete’s throat out.

June was mid laugh. So was everyone else, contestants and crew alike, except for Maxx, Pete, and me.

“What?” I said, tapping June on the shoulder. “What did he say?”

“Your royal boyfriend said for Pete to keep away from all your snack holes.”

I snorted a laugh at the ridiculousness of it all, which caught the attention of my “royal boyfriend.” The way those amethyst eyes raked over me was a physical caress that pebbled goose bumps over my arms and chased a tremble deep into my lower stomach.

He could look at me like I was the embodiment of sex and sin and the center of his universe all he wanted.

But it wouldn’t change that I was still mad at him for not telling me the truth sooner.

Still, even he deserved a treat from my snack hole.

I tossed him an M&M underhanded. He easily caught it, and with his eyes on me, he slowly snaked out his scaled purple tongue where he then placed the candy. He chewed, his jaw muscles pulsing and clenching and gyrating.

There was something so sensual about it all that mouths dropped open, legs parted, and chests heaved. And that was just Pete.

Just kidding. That wasn’t Pete. That was all me.

Before Maxx sank back down in his hoverchair, he winked.

I might have melted a little. Damn me and my stupid lustful hormones.

Then I offered one to everyone else, but no one took me up on my selfless offer.

Grimacing, Miekil shook his horned head at me and patted his naked, bricklike abs. “I’m trying to cut back on food from holes.”

I shrugged. “Your loss.”

“This is without a doubt the strangest show I’ve ever hosted,” Pete muttered to no one in particular.

“Careful, Pete,” I told him. “It could probably get stranger. Best not to jinx yourself and the rest of us by default.”

He grinned then, a real one this time, or as real as I’d ever seen on him. “Let’s focus on a different type of hole for this next game. No, you sexy perverts, not the types of holes I know you’re thinking about, but the ones inside of each of you, and your favorite person here on *Alien Love Island* who helps fill it up.

“Now, I’m sure you’ve all seen the various art supplies behind me on the table. Your job is to draw your favorite person here, or the person you’d most like to be matched with. If our audience picked the same person you drew, you are automatically saved from the next episode’s elimination. Questions, comments, or cookies from various snack holes?”

He paused for dramatic effect, and to fill more time in the forty-four minute episode, and when no one said anything, he bellowed, “Begin!”

I hauled myself up to the table and grabbed some holographic paper and a box of Crayola magic e-markers, while Maxx, with a secret smile on his face, took some acrylic

paints, a brush, and a holographic easel. There was no way I could do his chiseled features, chin dimple, and shimmery purple scales any justice with my customary stick-figure drawings.

Which was fine. I planned to use this time watching my fellow contestants as well as the crew. Was one of them an assassin like Emjay? Maybe one of them stole Bling's dagger during the first episode? Did one of them poison my food or write the note on the leaf in the game called Baggage Between Buns that blamed me for starting the Faid War?

I had no idea, but a way to whittle the list of suspects down was to see which hand, or in some cases hands, they preferred. Why? Because the Ts in the note from Baggage Between Buns were written by a left-handed writer.

*This contestant was directly involved in the start of the Faid War.*

The Ts had cross-strokes from right to left, which is common for left-handed people. It's not some kind of miracle that I know this. It's because *I* am left-handed, and I do it too.

Maxx was right-handed, not that I suspected him, but it was hard not to notice his gorgeous, slightly broody look of concentration at each brushstroke. I couldn't help the grin that broke over my face because I had a hunch he was painting me. Unless of course he wasn't because he was mad at me for being mad at him.

Ah, relationships. I was so unpracticed at them that it was laughable.

Anyway, as far as I could tell, I was the only left-handed contestant, not surprising since only about fifteen percent of the universe were lefties. Pete was also a righty, as were Smitha and Oreo. The crew was a little harder to study since they weren't doing art, but I did spot one spiky-haired female human carrying wires in her left hand.

So, obviously that made her guilty, right? Yeah, probably not.

“Only one minute left!” Pete shouted.

Ignoring him, I looked out to the beacon on the cliffside, the one Maxx and I never made it to, the one that pulsed light from the top. The more I stared at it, the more I realized it wasn't pulsing regularly but in a rhythm all its own.

Weird.

What was it for? What else was up there with it? Klio-3 natives?

“Thirty seconds!” Pete called.

Quickly, I drew my masterpiece.

When Pete came to collect it, he rolled his eyes. “Really, Captain?”

“Really, Pete?” I fired back. “I've made great progress on two puzzles instead of spending my time doing arts and crafts. Both puzzles have shown me a lot more about the people here and the island itself than some stupid picture. How is this”—I waved the holographic paper at him—“supposed to help us get to know each other and find love on this show?”

“Hey, I didn’t come up with this,” he said, lifting his hands. “What do you want me to do?”

“You’re the host. You have *all* the power. Will the producer stop you if you turn this show into *The Hunger Games* if it means more ratings?”

He stared at me blankly. “What’s *The Hunger Games*?”

I forgave his reading sin as soon as he said it. Not everyone had read the great YA classic from over six hundred years ago. I’d read and reported on that one for my Military Strategies 101 class since it was the only book I could find that didn’t put me to sleep. After that, I was hooked.

I’d never read *Twilight* though. Probably shouldn’t let that slip to Maxx.

“*The Hunger Games* is a book about a fight to the death until there’s one person left standing,” I explained to Pete.

His eyes widened so much that white ringed all the way around them. “Did you fall and hit your head, Captain? You do know this is a *dating* show, right?”

“All I’m saying is the viewers are going to stop watching if we continue to draw stupid pictures of each other. They want drama. They want action. I want to figure out who’s capable of poisoning me. You put certain stressors on people, and they’ll show you *exactly* what they’re capable of, *and* if they’re worthy of love.”

Pete rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I see your point... How about more stress but no fight to the death?”

“Mmm, that depends on if I find out who tried to poison me because there definitely will be a fight to the death. But don’t worry. I’ll bury the body under endangered plants so it’s illegal to dig it up.” I hiked up an eyebrow. “All it means is more ratings.”

Pete grinned and stuck out his hand for me to shake. “More ratings mean more ladies. I’ll see what I can do.”

“You’re gross, Pete. I think I like you.” I shook his hand and sealed the deal.

“I like you too”—he gasped and whipped his head around—“*but not like that.*”

A nervous laugh tripped out of him, and he slowly backed away with his hands up. Behind him, on the other side of the stage, sat Maxx. He leaned forward with his elbows on the knees of his pants, chin tucked down, and spearing two holes through Pete with his lethal, electric stare.

I waved to catch his eye and to prove I was still his, no matter who I talked to. To put it mildly, this royal man was overprotective when it came to little ol’ me. Not that I minded all that much.

His gaze softened the longer he lingered on me, spilling warmth through my veins and stuttering my pulse. It was a little unnerving how just one look from him could make me feel so alive. Needed. Worshipped.

It was addicting. *He* was addicting.



“Now, let’s see who here is a Michelangelo wannabe,” Pete announced and began showing the contestants’ artwork on the viewscreen.

Yep, this was boring. Even the crewmembers were falling asleep.

“...and last but certainly not least on the female side,” Pete was saying, “is Captain Nera. Let’s see who she drew as her favorite person here.”

My drawing appeared on the holographic viewscreen above his head. Snickers erupted.

“It appears to be a red caterpillar...” Pete announced, faking confusion with his wrinkled forehead. “Your favorite person here is a caterpillar?”

“Well, yes. That’s one of the only things I know how to draw...somewhat...other than stick figures.” Although from here, my caterpillar sort of looked like a smiling red horse. Hey, it was a rush job. “But look to the right of the caterpillar.”

“At the huge purple X?” Pete asked.

I smiled over at Maxx who was already, or still, watching me with a damn sexy grin twitching his lips. That kind of grin was just unfair. Nothing should be that devious and sweet at the same time.

“I take it that’s supposed to be Maxx. Now let’s see if he chose you.” Pete pointed at the viewscreen where another picture appeared next to mine.

Only this one was a hundred times better. It was a painting of my face, the likeness startlingly real but also better, if that made sense. My crooked smile, my cartoon-big eyes, my pointy nose which I'd been self-conscious about since I was ten, but all of it looked flattering. Sunlight marbled my skin and the jungle around me, and there on one giant leaf, spotlighted in its own sunbeam, was the little furry caterpillar we'd rescued.

The way I smiled down at the caterpillar in reality was likely the same as I did in this...this masterpiece. With surprise and wonder.

I turned to Maxx again, my heart swelling to near bursting. This was quite possibly the sweetest, most meaningful thing anyone had ever done for me.

Because I couldn't help myself, I launched out of my hoverchair and across the stage toward him. He met me halfway and pulled me into the most breathtaking, searing kiss we'd shared yet. Our tongues tasted. Our breaths twined into one.

My body responded instantly, forgetting all about the innocent bystanders and the millions of viewers with virgin eyes, as I manic-sploded all over him in an attempt to get even closer.

He must've forgotten too when he groaned low in his throat, likely summoning puddles of liquid heat from women, men, and everything in between throughout the four corners of the universe.

His hand skimmed over my ass and rocked me into his hard cock. He found out just how ridiculously short my sparkly dress was when he traced his long fingers over the backs of my thighs and then flirted them between where he surely felt my own liquid heat and my lack of underwear.

This time, his groan turned into a predatory growl that nearly vibrated an orgasm right out of me.

But then Pete tapped us both on the shoulders.

Reluctantly, we pulled apart, our chests heaving, my mind swirling.

“Hate to interrupt the near conquering of the pink fortress, but would you *look* at *this*?” He pointed up to the viewscreen.

Above our two pictures we’d created of each other was a percentage—99.99.

“Those who voted for you two to stay were also asked who your best match on the show was. That percentage is the number who voted for your better half. They also sent in comments about you two like ‘Their chemistry is off the charts!’ and ‘My screen steams up whenever they look at each other!’” Pete slowly ticked his gaze between us. “Now, I know what *I* think about you two crazy kids, but what are your thoughts about being matched together by our audience?”

Maxx, his eyes never leaving me, trailed his fingers down my arm to my wrist, dazzling every nerve with his touch. “Whether she trusts me or not, I tend to agree with the audience.”

“Ohhhh, *spicy*.” Pete turned to me. “And you, Captain Nera? What do you think about the match?”

I took Maxx’s hand to try to contain the power he had over me. It didn’t help.

“I think that my trust issues stem from being tricked into thinking that raisin cookies are chocolate chip cookies from a very early age.” Shrugging, I grinned up at Maxx. “But since I’ve already taken a bite out of this one, I might as well see if I trust him enough to like his flavor anyway.”

Pete whistled low. “She’s taken a *bite*, ladies and gentlemen. We’ve got a praying mantis on the show.”

Maxx looked at me quizzically. “Am I the raisin cookie or the chocolate chip cookie in this scenario?”

“Well...” I shot him a mischievous grin. “I’ll probably have to taste a little more to find out.”

“I can make that happen.” Pure sin and lust rolled off of him, vibrating the air with its intensity, as he caught my chin between his forefinger and thumb. “Trust me.”

# Chapter Eleven

## Maxx

THIS WOMAN MIGHT BE the death of me. Every dress her style team wrapped her up in was more enticing than the last, and I couldn't keep my hands or my eyes to myself.

I didn't want to take bites out of her; I wanted to devour her with torturously slow nibbles and long, languid licks until she came apart in my mouth.

Whether she trusted me or not.

And I suppose whether I was a chocolate chip cookie or not.

“And cut!” Pete announced.

“Pete, we're in the middle of a shoot,” a crewmember told him. “You can't just cut whenever you want to.”

“I gotta take a piss,” Pete told him. “I'm the host, and what I say goes. Break for four hours.”

Another crewmember gasped. “That's gonna be some piss.”

On his way to the platform steps, Pete threw a bold wink at Nera, caught me glaring, and rocketed himself into a full-on

sprint. Nera chuckled as she watched him go.

“Something I should know?” I asked, noting their secret handshake earlier.

“Just that we agreed on no more art projects. Not that I didn’t appreciate yours.” She smiled then, and I swear it lit up my entire soul. “It’s perfect.”

“The moment was perfect.” I plucked it free from the viewscreen, shook some of the orange holographic cubes off of it, and handed it to her. “The sunlight, the caterpillar, your smile...” I grazed her mouth, gently parting her lips with my thumb just so I could feel more of their soft plumpness. “There’s no forgetting it. Ever.”

She glanced down at the painting, awe brightening her face the longer she studied it, and shook her head. “Is that painting how you really see me?”

“There’s no other way to see you, Nera.” I brought up my other hand to trace her face. It was like my body, my entire being, magnetized toward her, so I always had to be touching her. Memorizing her every curve in order to better worship her. “You’re the single most beautiful thing I’ve laid eyes on in years who isn’t related to me.”

She smiled into the palm of my hand and then pressed a kiss to it. “Want to take a walk with me?”

“Only if there’s a bed where we’re walking,” I growled against her mouth and then followed with a long, lingering kiss.

“Since when do we need a bed?” she asked breathlessly.

“Fair point. But I have plans. Big plans.”

“Oh? How big are we talking here?” Her hips rocked once against my throbbing cock, and the scent of her arousal shook all of my senses.

“As big as you can take,” I groaned, palming her ass. “Your arousal... It’s stunning.”

“I’ve never had anyone compliment my arousal before.” She skimmed her lips over mine in a mockery of a kiss. “But thanks.”

“Um, hey,” Smitha called from the beach below the platform, “try not to mess up our girl too much because, I mean, *look* at her.”

“I am,” I said simply with a glance thrown her way. “Always.”

Nera gave her an awkward wave. “We’ll behave ourselves.”

“Yeah, I don’t believe that for a second,” Smitha muttered, but I don’t think Nera caught that.

I couldn’t wait any longer. Swiftly, I took Nera’s hand and started for the jungle wall.

Before we disappeared inside, two sharp raps on the platform wood sounded behind me. I half turned to see the Killian, one of his brows raised in a silent question: Did we need him to come help push a random shopping cart?



I guessed that's what he was asking anyway. That, or did we need a bodyguard. Fuxx if I knew or cared, not with Nera wrapped around me the way she was while kissing her way across my chest.

So I shook my head at him. Pretty sure I didn't need help with this. Thanxx though.

As soon as the thick jungle wall closed behind us, sealing us within its privacy, I laid out Nera on the leaf-covered ground to feast on her. Her hunger matched mine and flared bright in her eyes when she yanked her dress up past her hips. The patches of sunlight that penetrated the green canopy above sparkled on the wet dew coating the curls between her thighs and leaking down her creamy skin.

The sweet, addictive scent of her arousal, the sight of her bared like this freed my sexual serpents. They jerked and tugged at my aching cock to ease some of the pressure while I tasted what was mine.

With our gazes locked, I bowed between her legs and revered her with the flat of my tongue first.

"Mmmm," I growled inside of her. "Fuxxing divine."

Her back arched off the ground, and she rolled her hips toward my face, seeking more. And I gave it to her. All of myself and more since her soft cries and moans were music for my ears.

She twined her hands into my hair and smoothed it away so she could watch me bring her to the brink and then over, again

and again. She came in my mouth countless times, and I drank my fill of her while my tongue teased and stroked her clit.

And all the while my kaxxui jerked me off. From the inside of my pants, they'd undid my zipper for me so I could spill my seed underneath me. I lifted my pelvis from the jungle floor and rode that pleasure high as I feasted from Nera. They licked and sucked and coiled their bodies around my cock and rubbed, syncing my orgasms with Nera's.

But like always, that soon wasn't enough. I needed to be inside her. Whether by my own hand or my kaxxui, nothing compared to being inside this beautiful star.

I rose up her devastatingly perfect body, and as I did, I shoved her dress and bra up over her breasts and head so she lay completely bare to me.

"Do you trust me?" I asked, my voice raspy, fevered with need.

She ran her fingers through my hair and smiled. "Right now? Yes."

Those words broke me apart and filled me up at the same time. I didn't deserve her trust, but I had it, and that was something I vowed to always treasure.

My kaxxui ridded me of the rest of my pants, stroking and teasing my throbbing, already saturated cock as they did. With a loud groan, I shifted my hips closer to Nera's center.

She looked on at the spectacle, wetting her upper lip with her tongue, her big brown eyes growing impossibly brighter

with need. “I didn’t know they took care of you like that too.”

“Not like you do.” I rolled my hips into her again so my cock teased her entrance and my kaxxui’s tongues flicked over her clit. “If they do something you don’t like, tell me, all right? They’re about as desperate for you as I am.”

She melted underneath me as they both slipped inside her to stretch her for me. But then at my silent command, one snaked back out and wound a tantalizing path down her glistening folds toward her ass.

I sank into her, filling her all the way up until my aching balls met her skin. Then, I moved, each stroke thrumming pleasure to every single nerve. She matched my rhythm with her bucking hips, and then in a move I didn’t see coming, she flipped me over so I lay on my back.

She chuckled as she read the obvious surprise from my face, but it soon morphed into moans as she took everything she needed from my body.

And I gave it all to her.

She threw her head back as her body writhed on top of mine, her full breasts bouncing as she sped her pace. I took them both in my hands, kneading them, hardening the perfect buds under the rough pads of my thumbs.

All the while, my kaxxui played with her too. One stroked both her and me inside of her, and the other was perfectly content to fuxx her ass.

And given how she was riding me, with her eyes glazed over in complete bliss, with our combined juices flowing freely down her inner thighs, she loved all of it.

I sent the silent command to the kaxxui in her ass to ready her there for me. Not now, but later, when she was ready.

We had time. We weren't going anywhere, at least for the next few days.

The thought thickened my cock even more, and I sat up to grab her hips and grind her against me even harder. When I drew one of her pointed nipples into my mouth and sucked it with my scaled tongue, a loud cry escaped her.

“Oh...my...god...” she screamed. “Maxx.”

Her orgasm crashed down on her, and her inner walls clamped down so hard that I came with her with a beastly shout as I pumped even faster inside her. The intensity of it zipped stars across my vision.

“M’Nera, m’xoxxl, m’pullxxra stexxa,” I panted out.

Still joined, I rested my forehead against hers, our heavy breaths mingling.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“My Nera, my heaven, my beautiful star.”

Her eyes sank closed as she let my words wash over her, and the faintest trace of wetness formed underneath her lashes.

“No one’s ever said that to me after sex before.”

“You’ve been having sex with the wrong people, then,” I told her while I kissed the moisture away, even as jealousy flared.

The thought of her with another man who was likely unworthy of her, who might or might not have known what kind of rare pearl he held in his arms, fused my lungs together with rage and made it much harder to breathe.

She kissed me then and put my body and mind at ease. She was mine. All mine. And I flatly refused to fuxx that up.

Sometime later, we reluctantly released each other, unjoined our bodies, and rose.

“Did you mess me up?” she asked, her voice teasing.

I crooked a finger under her chin and leaned down to kiss her plump bottom lip. “Your cheeks are flushed, but you look properly sated. For now.”

“Properly sated,” she said with a laugh. “I feel as limp as a rag doll. Think Space Fleet will notice I’ve just been properly sated by my royal Xenoxx prisoner?”

I froze mid hiking up my pants. “What?”

“I’m going to go deliver the weapon I don’t have to them, only I’ll tell them it got stolen while I scope things out. I figure I have an hour, maybe an hour and a half.” She shrugged as she picked up her dress from the jungle floor and brushed a few small leaves from it. “That’s plenty of time.”

“You’re going now?” I turned away from her under the guise of fastening my belt, but really, I couldn’t let her see the

war of emotions that were surely battling over my face. “What do you think they’ll do when you tell them you don’t have the weapon?”

“I’m sure there will be screaming, some threats of maiming, and surely some disses about my mom.” She grinned. “But if I turn my head just so, I won’t be able to hear any of it.”

I grunted, taking entirely too long to belt my pants.

“You don’t have to worry about me telling them that you’re here too or that you’re the reason I smell like sex.” She came up to me and smoothed her hand up my arm. “It’s a good idea that you don’t come with me though.”

“Negative, Captain.”

“You *are* coming with me?”

I nodded. “What I was trying to tell you last night during a rare moment of clarity when—”

“When I was kissing you senseless while pressed against the bungalow door.” She grinned salaciously. “I remember.”

“The crewmember Umo sent out to look for Emjay came back. She found video footage of Emjay coming out of the same bungalow we stayed in last night. So she went there too and found this.” I untied the makeshift scabbard/handkerchief for my machete that hung at my side from a belt loop and shook it out to show her the Earth Space Fleet emblem.

Her big eyes widened. “But...she tried to kill you. Space Fleet and assassins don’t go together. That’s not what we do.”

Tension puckered her forehead as she paced away from me, still gloriously naked, but then she swung back.

“Wait, which crewmember? Black, spiky hair? Left-handed?”

“Black, spiky hair, yes. I don’t know which hand she favors.” I narrowed my eyes. “Why?”

“The Baggage Between Buns note on the leaf about me was written by a left-handed person.”

Left-handed? Before I got sidetracked again by her nudity or how she knew that detail, I continued.

“Nera, there’s something else. Something I just learned this morning after you left with Smitha and Oreo. I talked to Axxel. Your engineer found out about the email address that sent in your *Alien Love Island* contract. Its IP address is right here on Klio-3.”

She jerked back at that bit of news. “Well. If that isn’t the biggest coincidence ever.”

“Nera, listen. I might be making connections that aren’t truly there, but you found a shopping cart in the jungle from the store on Earth you used to shop at.” I reached out and squeezed her shoulder gently with the hope of giving her strength. “With Rain.”

She gasped as if the name itself had struck her. “What,” she whispered.

“It’s just a theory. A loose one I cobbled together from nothing.”

“She’s...here?” She backed away from me, her eyes alight with tears and memories and pain.

So much pain.

“Maybe not,” I rushed to assure her.

When it came to Rain, I didn’t quite know what to think, what to feel. She’d saved my life, yet she’d taken another’s. Not by choice though, according to her often incoherent ramblings.

She was the one who reached out to me after the failed cloning experiments I’d spent billions on. The Xenox needed their king, their leader.

And because of my father and my eldest brother before me, I knew there was a high probability I wouldn’t be the king for long if I didn’t come up with a solution soon.

Which was why I answered Rain’s email about inserting Faid technology into the clone’s head.

*My clone’s head.*

“The music I heard...” Nera muttered, rubbing her ears. “I have to tell Space Fleet.”

“I’m coming with you.” My tone left little room for argument, but I wasn’t so sure she’d heard me anyway.

If I went with her, we’d be heading straight into a figurative wild buxxens’ den though.

Filled with people who wouldn’t hesitate to kill me if they knew what I really was.



# Chapter Twelve

# Rain

EMAIL DATE: 4/1/2637

To: CaptainofStars&MotherofLucy@email.com

From: SANO@universe.com

Subject: Snacks After Naps, Okay?

Status: Undeliverable

Reason: Inbox full

XYOUPR

UMAREG

LYCGNZ

PINERA

IAYQTS

DBATIX

# Chapter Thirteen

## Nera

WE WALKED ALONG THE beach in comfortable silence, me with my own thoughts eating up all my energy, Maxx with his.

I hadn't allowed myself to think about Rain in quite some time. I wasn't sure I was ready to either. Still, if she was here and I ran into her...

Well, I wouldn't hesitate to kill her. And then I would throw up. Or maybe throw up and then kill her. Decisions, decisions, but only because the mere thought of her coursed acid into my gut.

After a while, Maxx dropped my hand, and when I turned to him ready to protest, he started speaking. "Doesn't it bother you that I'm on two sides of the Faid War?"

"No," I said simply.

"Why?" He leaned in to read me, to understand me, so I turned to let him try. He'd need a lot of luck, a plate of tacos, and probably some elbow grease to do that though.

“You have your reasons. In your shoes, I’m sure I’d do the same,” I told him.

“In my shoes, you wouldn’t have the same experiences with the Faid that you’ve had.”

“Your shoes are doing the exact same things mine are—fighting for those we love. You’re fighting for the Xenox and the memory of your wife. If that puts you on two different sides of a war, I can’t, and won’t, blame you for that.” I reached up and tried to smooth away the worry from his face. “Not even a little bit. I respect the hell out of your shoes.”

“Same, Nera.” A brief smile flitted over his mouth as he took my hand again and squeezed. “Same.”

“Even though I’m barefoot and can’t stand wearing heels?”

He nodded solemnly. “Even though.”

After a few more steps in silence, I came to a halt in the sand. “We’re here.”

“What?”

“Space Fleet headquarters on Klio-3.”

“But...there’s nothing here except us.” His brow furrowed at our beachy surroundings, empty except for the surf and sand, and then he snapped his lightning eyes to mine again. “Are you seeing things I’m not? Should I be worried?”

I chuckled. “Avery said to head east to location 12456. It’s a Space Fleet code. She skipped the three, which means that’s the most important number. It refers to the third land formation

from the bungalow.” I pointed out to the little islet in the middle of the sea, the third one I’d seen, the only land formation around for miles in this direction. “Headquarters is below us. They always are.”

His sexy chin dimple deepened when his jaw dropped. “I’ve always been a fan of maps and coordinates and finding locations. Always. But to provide a specific location with code is...”

“Harder on the brain to remember all that junk? Yup.” I nodded and jerked my head toward the sandy ground underneath our feet. “Are you coming?”

He crossed his arms as he continued studying our surroundings. “Genius.”

“Fine. Are you coming, *genius*?” I grinned, kind of loving it when I could surprise him with my mad skills.

Or Space Fleet’s mad skills. I sure as hell hadn’t come up with that code.

He shook his head. “I better sit this one out. My presence will raise too many questions and slow you down.”

“Good point. We have about an hour and fifteen before we have to ‘participate fully and with the utmost enthusiasm’ in the show. This should only take a few minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting in the jungle.” He stepped in closer and speared his fingers through my hair, his thumb tracing my cheek. “If you need anything—”

“You. I need you.” With my hand on his scaled chest, I breathed all of him in. “I’ll be back before I need anything else. I promise.”

He kissed me then, a single peck that had more meaning and feeling behind it than all my other kisses with other men combined. He nodded once and then sauntered toward the jungle, the machete in his makeshift handkerchief/scabbard swinging at his side.

I tried not to enjoy the show of all those muscles flexing, of all those sunlit halos shimmering over his scales, but damn it was hard. The Xenox was too stunning for my own good.

Even with our morning and afternoon filled with unbelievable sex, I still couldn’t get enough of the alien king.

He was as good a reason to hurry as any.

After tracing my toes through the warm sand to find the outline of the trapdoor, I quickly cleared it off and opened it without a creak. Sweat and the chemical, plastic-y smell of bureaucratic red tape wafted out. A metal ladder led about thirty feet below to a well-lit tunnel.

I left my heels in the sand and started the climb down, pulling the trapdoor closed behind me. A large glowing red button was affixed to the underside of it, and one press of my thumb sent a shudder over the top to shift the sand back and hide the door once again.

Space Fleet spared no expense when it came to war.

The lower I sank, the more people and shadows I saw moving through headquarters. A bolt of panic lit up my throat, but I swallowed it back down. I belonged here.

So why did it feel like I didn't? My sparkly dress? That I'd come here without the weapon? The fact that my employer might have been involved somehow with Maxx's assassin?

I leaped the rest of the way to the earthy ground and discovered two narrow hallways branching off from the one I was in and a small side room behind me. Pipes and wire mesh stretched down the carved-out walls and ceiling for support.

A crowd of boisterous males crossed the intersection, heading straight and away from me. Still too close though. Alarms blared inside my head, and I rushed into the side room to keep hidden.

Stupid. I was being so stupid. There was no reason to be afraid. I'd been putting groups of males in their place since day one of military school when I throat-punched one and threatened to castrate the others.

With my fingernails.

In the dead of night on some unknown date in the future.

While they were strapped to the steel slab in my dungeon.

The one I'd throat-punched had told me to bend over after stealing my e-pencil and purposefully dropping it, and the others had laughed.

After my show of violence and threats, they never messed with me again, thanks in part to my dad who'd taught me at an



early age how to throw a punch, and my mom who'd taught me to take no shit from boys.

Ah, memories. I'd been fourteen then and maybe a tad extra.

Afterward, the superintendent of the school, one of the few adults I'd actually kind of liked other than my parents, had said, "Nera Cotrobin, comin' in hot!"

It felt like I was coming in hot now too. But why was I freaking the fuck out? Was it my bare feet? The lack of a uniform?

The small side room was actually a small medical bay to treat injuries that couldn't wait right after arrival. Inside a few drawers were fresh uniforms.

Jackpot.

As fast as I could, I changed into a too-big Space Fleet uniform complete with combat boots. Much, much better than heels. Oh my god, my feet were practically sighing.

I stashed the dress and then, feeling much more like myself, went in search of Avery.

It took exactly one left turn to find her.

"Captain!" She waved at the end of a long, crowded hallway, her slicked-back blonde hair shining in the fluorescents.

We pushed and shoved and practically traded spit with others on our way closer to each other.

“Quick, in here.” She pushed open a door and ushered me inside a small office with holographic maps of Klio-3 decorating the walls and desk. “You came at the right time.”

“I did?”

“We’re getting ready to do another assault on the Faid which is why everyone’s so loud and vibrating.”

“Oh, I didn’t hear them,” I said, peering closer at one of the maps. “Is this accurate?”

“Well...yeah. It’s Klio-3.” She waved at a topographical one to my right. “See all the pointy rock formations that contributed to your landing problems?”

How could I forget? “But...where’s the ocean and beaches and the jungle?”

Avery stared at me for a moment. “Captain, Klio-3 doesn’t have *any* of that. It’s rocks and more rocks.”

“The sand between my toes would disagree with you. You came to the bungalow this morning to see me. The bungalow that you got to by crossing a beach and then a tiny bridge over the ocean. Don’t you remember?”

“Captain, I saw you this morning in a shack on a rocky cliffside.” She tilted her head and studied me like I’d just sprouted tiny doll heads all over my face. “Are you feeling all right?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. Never better.” I offered her a fake smile while simultaneously balling my hands into fists.

Because everything wasn't fine. How could our realities be so different when we were on the same planet? It made no sense.

"Anyway." She took a step toward me and held out her hand, still with a cautionary 'this bitch be crazy' shadow in her eyes. "You came here to give me the weapon?"

"Right. About that." I shook my head of the rocky versus beach clusterfuck to focus on the oops, I lied clusterfuck. "I don't actually have it."

Avery blinked. "But you said—"

"I know what I said. When I went back to the place I stashed it, it was gone. Poof. Without a trace."

Avery pushed back on her cheeks, already pulled too tightly by her bun, while her jaw gritted down her poor teeth. "Well, where the fuck did you hide it, Captain? Right outside the bungalow you keep talking about that doesn't exist?"

"Sure, *right* outside the bungalow," I said without missing a beat. "I even put blinking neon arrows and signs next to it that read *Free Beer and Weapons*. You know, like any normal person would when they're trying to hide something."

Avery fumed, so much that little sparks glinted menacingly behind her icy-blue eyes. "Your sarcasm and complete ineptitude make me think you don't give two *shits* about the Faid War."

My calm meter shifted from zero to Karen in seconds. She thought I didn't give a shit about the Faid War?

I took a single step toward her, my gaze narrowing, my patience splintering. “Careful, Lieutenant.”

She turned, a scream of rage bellowing out of her as she swept everything from the desk and then stormed out. She might’ve said a few more choice words to me on her way, but too bad I couldn’t hear them.

And by too bad, I mean goooood.

Welp, my work here was done. As I left, I didn’t bother cleaning up the evidence of Avery’s tantrum. You break it, you buy it.

In the hall, I came upon a small group of men ahead. One of them looked so familiar that the sight of him hesitated my mad dash back into Maxx’s waiting arms.

He stopped too, his eyes narrowing. “Nera?”

A chill scraped up my back. My lungs seized.

It was my ex-husband, Mike. Yep, the same one from whom I stole his ship and half his crew.

But worse was the sudden realization that dropped a ton of steel into my gut—*he* was left-handed.

# Chapter Fourteen

## Nera

FUCK, FUCK, FUCK ME sideways with a rusted chainsaw.

“Mike,” I said, all sharp smiles and an even sharper edge to my voice. “Fancy seeing you here.”

The other men he was with strode on by, side-eying me with barely contained scorn that lingered several beats past uncomfortable.

Mike’s long legs carried him closer quickly, and he looked every bit older, and more, than the last time I’d seen him ten years ago. Quite a bit of gray salted his short dark hair even though he was only in his mid-thirties.

He didn’t seem at all surprised to see me. His hazel eyes scoured my face with a frigid blast of judgement and then down to my ill-fitting, nonregulation Space Fleet uniform and up again.

“Are you wearing makeup?”

After ten years, those were the first words out of his mouth. Not “Hi, how are you?” or “Gee, it’s great to see you” or

“How about that sports ball team that I know you don’t care about?”

I nodded slowly. “I am, yeah. So?”

He canted his head just slightly, one of his many looks of disapproval written across his face. “You know Earth Space Fleet’s feelings about makeup.”

“You mean I know *your* feelings about makeup. What I do with my face has nothing to do with you. Thanks so much for not shattering my illusions of what any conversation with you post-divorce might be like. Now kindly go fuck yourself.” I sidestepped him to leave, but he snatched my wrist with bruising force and hauled me toward Avery’s office.

Panic lit a fuse inside me. I dug in my heels, tried to peel his fingers from me, but it was no use.

He’d never laid a hand on me. Not ever.

But I’d never stolen his spaceship either.

He threw me in front of him into the office, and I stumbled and tripped my way over Avery’s mess into the middle of the room. Panting, I whirled on him.

He closed the door behind us and locked it, his face the epitome of calm and control, which was so much more frightening than the alternative. “Where’s my ship? Is it here?”

“No,” I told him, deciding on the truth this time. “The landing gear—”

“You kidnapped my crew.”

“And yet not one of them complained. You can’t kidnap someone if they come willingly.”

“You made me look like a fool.”

“No, I didn’t.” I laughed, a real good belly-shaking one. “You did that all by yourself.”

He went silent and cold for a long moment, and I had to wonder what I ever saw in him. He was good-looking, sure, but he was too bossy. And distant. Sometimes so far away mentally that I’d often catch him checking out other women.

Maybe someone he thought he could control more easily than me. By the time he found out I wouldn’t bend under his thumb, I was already pregnant. Whether he cheated or not, I didn’t know. Even while we were married, a part of me didn’t care.

“We’re not leaving this room until you tell me where my ship is,” he finally said.

I crossed my arms and shrugged, like I had all the time in the world. “Don’t you have a war to go fight?”

His eyes widened infinitesimally. “*You* have a war to go fight. Or did the fumes from all of your face paint make you forget? Who are you trying to impress anyway?”

An acidic burn split down my nerves and gathered into my fists.

“Of course I didn’t forget,” I snapped. “That’s a hell of a thing for you to say to me. Now stop acting like a child and get out of my way.”



When he didn't move from the door, I charged toward him.

I bumped him sideways, or tried to, but he was all speed and muscle. He shoved me into the nearby wall with his forearm braced across my chest.

My head bounced hard. The air funneled from my lungs as I met his arctic gaze.

“Where's my ship, Nera?”

“You can't keep me in here. What would Space Fleet say if they knew their favorite captain was a giant fucking asshole who locked his ex-wife in a room?” I smiled wickedly. “And then got his ass beat?”

Swiftly, I kicked the back of his knee hard with my right foot, making him stumble away from the door. I lunged to unlock it, my fingers grasping at the knob, but he recovered too soon.

He wrenched me away, his arms bound around my waist. I swung my feet wildly through the air to try to connect with the fucker, but then I was airborne for a hot second.

Hot because rage boiled up inside of me when I glimpsed what he'd thrown me at.

The desk.

Oh, hell no. I rolled deftly midair and kept rolling when I hit the desk with a thud. On the other side, I landed on my feet tucked in a vibrating, fuming crouch.

Then, I rose, slowly, meeting his intense glare on the other side of the desk with one of my own.

“You were my worst mistake,” I told him through gritted teeth.

“Tell me where it is, and I’ll let you leave.”

“I already did. It’s not here.”

Once again, he was between me and the door. The now unlocked door. Time to turn the tables, both figuratively and literally.

Using all my muscle, I tipped the desk over into him. He lunged backward out of the way, and with him momentarily distracted, I ran for the door.

He grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. I cried out in pain, but I quickly recovered and attempted to flip him over my shoulder. He used his agility to spin out of the maneuver, but I landed a well-placed kick to his side anyway for shits and giggles.

Then, once again, I ran for the door.

His breath breezed through my hair from right behind me. His fingers grasped at the back of my waistband.

And then I remembered something from when we were married.

Something that could help me get out of here. Something that could bend him under *my* thumb.

Instead of going through the door, I went up it. Two light steps hit the heavy wood, and then I was spinning myself into a roundhouse kick targeted at one of his kidneys.

My aim was true. He stumbled sideways with a loud groan.

When I landed, I spun around to his back, reached into his waistband, and found exactly what I was looking for. Two small, holstered daggers he always kept hidden in case of emergency.

He spun to stop me, but it was too late, both for him and his balls.

I held the twin blades between his legs, primed for maiming if he so much as breathed wrong. “Good to know some things never change.”

His jaw muscles pulsed with anger. He practically shook with it. “You’ve been training with Mosely, I see.”

“What else do you think I’ve been doing the last ten years?”

Faster than I could process, he unsheathed a long, curved blade from his side holster and pressed the cold edge against my cheek. “Not grieving our daughter obviously.”

His words punched a hole right through me. I shrank back, a terrible sting slicing across my cheek as I did so even though he held the blade steady, but the sharp pain was nothing compared to his implications.

“You have no right to say that to me.” My voice came out shaky and thin. I didn’t have to hear myself to know that. Tears brimmed and tumbled over, mixing with the blood

trickling from the cut on my face. “Grieving is all I’ve been doing. All I will *ever* do.”

He stayed silent, immobile, completely unaffected by my outpouring of emotion.

“I’m leaving this room.” I switched one dagger to the other hand so I could reach behind me and open the unlocked door. A blast of cool air breezed over my skin, offering a taste of something other than sweat and a destroyed marriage. “And I sure wouldn’t try to stop me if I were you.”

“The daggers,” he said through gritted teeth. “They stay.”

“No.” Slowly, leaving the daggers firmly cupping his balls for the time being, I took a single step back. My gaze remained locked on his blade in case he did something nasty with it. “The daggers most definitely are not.”

“They were my grandmother’s,” he spat.

“She called you a brat at your own wedding.”

His hazel eyes flashed wickedly. “That’s nothing compared to what she called you.”

“I’d be careful who you choose to have a pissing contest with, Mike.” I took another slow step back, dropping the blades from between his legs. “Next time you might not have anything to piss with.”

Another step backward brought me into the hallway where a host of my superiors, and Avery, were currently marching toward me.

Yep, now was as good a time as any to skedaddle.

I hightailed it down the rest of that hallway, not at a sprint like I wanted, but still at a good clip. If they were calling after me, I sure couldn't hear them.

After rounding the next corner into the short hall with the ladder, I checked to see I was alone and then took off toward the exit. Away from Mike and Avery and everyone else with their endless questions I was sick of not answering.

Before my escape, I dove into the little room, grabbed my dress, and shoved it down into my shirt. It was too pretty to leave crumpled underground. Besides, Oreo would poke my eyes out if I left it here.

I took the ladder two rungs at a time, feeling like I was climbing at a crawl as the sour taste of panic coated my tongue. Why did it feel like I was running away from Earth Space Fleet for good? Because I'd fucked up the package delivery beyond measure? Because they might be mixed up with an assassin like Emjay, and that didn't sit right with me? Because of Maxx? I wasn't exactly sure of the reason, but I did know I wasn't the same person who agreed to make the delivery that I was now.

Did that make me a traitor?

No, because I still believed in the Faid War.

At the top of the ladder, I shoved my thumb into the button that scraped the sand from over the door and then opened it, all

without looking behind me. Nothing like pretending the problem doesn't exist if I can't see it, right?

Another tap on the button gave me a ten-second lead time to get out before it shut again. As soon as my boots hit the sand, I grabbed my high heels and sprinted toward the jungle. Toward Maxx.

Just in case, I risked several glances over my shoulder. No one was there. Yet.

“Maxx,” I shouted as I drew closer. “Ma—”

My voice died in my throat when he stepped out from behind the trees.

A red sticky wet film soaked him from the crown of his head, over the purple scales on his bare chest, and down to his shoes.

Blood, I realized.

Struck silent, I gazed up into his eyes, fierce but growing softer the longer he looked at me, until they landed on the cut on my face.

“Are you all right?” we both asked at the same time.

“You first, Nera,” he said gently, reaching for the wound on my cheek and then reeling back again without touching it. “Did someone do this to you?”

“I... I had a run-in with my ex-husband,” I admitted.

The change to Maxx's demeanor happened instantly. His lightning eyes flared with brutality. His mouth twisted into a

furious line. His muscles stiffened and coiled.

He was an apex predator about to unleash on his prey.

I'd be scared to death if I didn't know he'd never, ever hurt me.

He pulled his machete from the makeshift scabbard hanging from his belt and started forward to the trapdoor.

"No, Maxx," I begged, swinging around in front of him. "You can't just go in there."

"What does he look like?" He easily pivoted around me and continued his charge forward.

"Nothing. He looks like nothing." I skirted around him again and planted my hands on his rock-hard pecs in a weak attempt to stop him. "Please. He's not worth it."

He didn't stop of course, and now my boots were sliding backward across the sand with the unstoppable force of him. My hands were sliding too, all over the blood that coated him.

"Is this yours?" I asked, horrified. "What happened?"

He continued to shove forward; I continued to slide backward uselessly across the sand.

Not stopping his forward progress, his gaze flickered with pain and malice as he looked at my cut again. "He hurt you, Nera."

"I had two daggers pressed against his balls. He had a knife to my face and then said something to make me—"

"He *hurt* you, Nera. Why are you making excuses for him?"

“I’m...” I pulled away from him and stopped, my eyes stinging something awful.

Damn it all to hell. He was right.

Maxx stopped too and gazed down at me, the picture of blood-coated patience and kindness the longer he stared.

“You can’t kill the father of my child,” I finally said, my voice cracking in two.

“But he gets to hurt the mother of *his* child?” He slowly shook his head and palmed my hip to draw me closer to him. Then his scaled fingers caressed my back as he untucked my Space Fleet shirt, ripped off the bottom hem of it, and pressed the fabric gently to the cut on my cheek.

I took a deep, shaky breath and then released it. “I stole his spaceship and half his crew. I would be mad at me too. He’s never laid a hand, or a knife, on me before.”

“The ship was Earth Space Fleet’s, *not* his,” he corrected. “His actions aren’t excused, nor will they ever be. You deserve a thousand times better, Nera. A million times better.”

My heart overflowed then, and so did my tears. I couldn’t stop them, but Maxx did, gently wiping them away with a clean corner of someone else’s shirt.

“Thank you, Maxx.” I gave him a teary smile, one I hoped could convey to him what him being here meant to me.

He smiled too, so warm and perfect. “You’re welcome.”



We lost ourselves for a moment in each other, at peace in our silence and our closeness. I breathed in his leather and spice scent, so much better than freshly signed divorce papers could ever be. I could live the rest of my life right here, rooted to this spot, and be completely happy.

Minus all the blood.

I blinked down at my hands, smeared red from touching him. “So, are you going to tell me what happened to you, or are you going to make me guess?”

“Right. That.” He heaved a long breath. “Would you believe me if I said I found myself in someone’s snack hole?”

# Chapter Fifteen

# Maxx

## (FIFTEEN MINUTES EARLIER)

“ANY UPDATES?” I ASKED Axxel via my communicator.

While I watched Nera open Earth Space Fleet’s trapdoor in the sand, I stood near the edge of the jungle, mostly hidden by the overgrown flora.

“You mean other than being locked inside your girlfriend’s brig?” He shook his head on the holographic viewscreen, biting back a barely contained grin. “Not...really? I did get a visit from Nera’s cat though. It came in during the middle of the night through the air vent and nearly gave me a hearts attack when the metal vent cover fell to the ground. No idea how he undid the screws on the outside. Anyway, he just wanted a quick snuggle.”

I lifted my eyebrow at him, my attention shifting between him and Nera who was beginning her climb down into the bunker. “I didn’t peg you for a snuggler.”

“Yeah, well, lock me up in a brig for too long with anything cute and soft and purring, and you never know what’s going to

happen.”

“Good to know. I’ll alert all the females in the universe about this,” I told him, only paying him a quarter of my attention now.

Nera closed the trapdoor behind her, and then moments later, the sand around the metal square rolled and sifted to cover it back up. Neat trick.

With her back in her world, and me in this one, my chest cleaved apart. It wasn’t just that she was no longer by my side. It was like she’d once again joined the other side of the Faid War, even though she’d never left that side.

It was also that I didn’t trust Earth Space Fleet. What would they do to her if they found out her association to me and what I really was?

“Anyone try to kill you today?” Axxel asked casually.

“No. The day is still young though.”

“Maxx.”

“What?”

“Are you shrinking?”

I snapped my gaze to his to be sure he wasn’t joking—he wasn’t—and then to my surroundings. The large, leafy trees seemed to be...growing.

But then I looked down at my feet, now completely covered by the bright-orange sand I’d been standing on top of. Just a

circle of it in the middle of the usual white color and surrounded on all sides by leafy green.

And the sand was steadily climbing toward my knees.

I sucked in a shocked breath. “Not shrinking. Sinking.”

“Are you serious? *Quicksand*? It exists?”

“Yes, I’m fuxxing serious.” Why did he sound way too excited by this?

I’d sunk three-quarters of the way up my thighs by then. Squirming and kicking seemed to sink me faster. I grasped for the edge of the caved-in circle, where the orange sand met the white, but the edge was too far away to reach. For more arm length, I took out my machete—or I tried to. All but the hilt had vanished under the sand, but it wouldn’t budge from my homemade scabbard even though it should have.

Normal rules for how things worked obviously did not apply here.

“Well...well, grab *hold* of something,” Axxel sputtered. “Get out of there.”

“Genius advice, only it’s not working,” I snapped through gritted teeth.

Just then, beyond the cover of trees, Earth Space Fleet’s trapdoor opened. My scales rippled with hope, which sank me even faster.

Nera could get me out though. She could do anything.

Except it wasn’t Nera.

One officer leaped out onto the sand, dressed in full military battle gear with guns and other weapons strapped everywhere, and then more flooded out after her. Without waiting for the rest of their comrades climbing up, they advanced toward the jungle.

Toward me.

A Faid.

Of course they didn't know that. But even if they saw me, the king of Xenox, here on Klio-3 and caught in quicksand, they would certainly ask too many questions.

"Maxx, talk to me." Panic seeped into Axxel's voice. "Are you looking for a way out, or are you really just standing there like an idiot right now?"

"Earth Space Fleet is here," I muttered.

"Yeah, I *know* that," Axxel fired back. "Focus on your current situation, Maxx."

"No, I mean. They. Are. Here. They're coming right for me."

"Then yell for help."

I shook my head. "I can't let them know I'm here. They kill Faid."

"Only ones who *look* and *speak* like Faid. Maxx!" he shouted. "*I will not watch you die again.*"

The emotion, the volume, the heartbreak in his voice pulled me up short. Not literally though because the sand was

creeping up past my shoulders.

I'd destroyed him the day I died in the explosion with my wife, which was why he'd worked tirelessly to bring me back as a Faid clone of myself. When I'd—awakened? Was reborn?—however you want to put it, he'd hugged me to him with tears streaming down his face.

I would never forget that. And I would forever owe him my life.

Even now, he watched in horror from the viewscreen while I sank even lower.

“I can't risk it,” I said as the sand crawled up over my chin. “I won't.”

Even though the alternative could be death? I couldn't move. Couldn't lift my legs. Couldn't risk Nera finding out what I was if I called out to Earth Space Fleet.

Footsteps pounded closer, almost right on top of me. Dread chased a shudder down my back. Whatever happened, I had seconds to say what needed to be said. I opened my mouth. Whether to call for help anyway or to save my last words for Axxel, I didn't know until the words fell out.

“I love you, brother,” I said in a rush. “Tell Roxxanne and Nera I lo—”

I never got to finish. My head sank under. My arms, caught over my head, couldn't budge, but my fingers could. I snatched off my communicator from my wrist and tossed it as

far as I could so Axxel wouldn't have to see any more of my death, and so Nera would know where to find my body.

Then my arms sank too, completely covered in quicksand.

The rest of me was also sinking down, down toward my death, only it was even faster now. It wouldn't be long until my lungs demanded a breath.

But wait a second.

My arms. They'd moved to my sides.

I snapped open my eyes and immediately regretted it. Sand gritted its way under my lashes and scraped over my corneas, so much that I was unprepared for what happened next.

A sharp landing that rattled muscle and bone and my poor, confused brain.

I sucked in lungful of air. So now I could move and breathe. Things were really looking up, other than whole beaches of sand in my eyes.

Seconds later, orange quicksand pelted down from above. I did my best to shield my face from it, and after it quit falling, it only came up to my knees.

I'd fallen through much more than that. Strange.

I blinked upward. Jungle leaves taunted me from high above, swaying happily about seventy feet above my head. No sign of Earth Space Fleet. They must have skirted around the gaping hole in the ground. Smart of them.



Next to my left knee, lying in the wavy patterns of sand, was my communicator. I bent to retrieve it, hoping against hope it wasn't broken.

“Axxel.” My throat sounded like it had a whole beach inside it too.

His holographic face appeared, stunned to the point of almost comical, but I sure wasn't laughing. “*Maxx?* What the *fuxx*, man? Is there a reason you made me feel *all* of my feelings in the span of two minutes? Geez. My hearts can't take that shit. Are you all right? Where are you? I'm going to kill you the next time I see you. Please know that. But really, *are you all right?*”

“Other than my present situation, I'm fine. I'm at the bottom of a deep hole.” After I strapped the communicator back to my wrist, I angled the viewscreen up so he could see how deep it was.

He gulped. “Oh. That's much better than death.” Another gulp. “Isn't it?”

Movement to my right locked me in place much better than the sand burying me up to my knees. A long, sharp pincer scooped its way out of the sandy wall about a quarter of the way up from the ground.

Big. Too big. The teeth inside the pincer's shiny black surface were the same bright orange as the sand, but I could definitely still see how jagged and razor-sharp they were.

“I'm not alone,” I muttered to Axxel.

“Oh. Good. Please tell me it’s a friendly face checking on you? A Nera face?”

A second pincer joined the first, scooping out a bigger hole in the wall.

While stepping my legs out of the confines of the sand, I reached for my machete. “I don’t see a face yet, but I seriously doubt it’s friendly.”

“Ask it. Maybe it just wants to snuggle.”

I turned the viewscreen so he could see the thing emerging too, now with a long snout tipped with mandibles that looked sharp enough to pierce steel.

A sound came out of Axxel that I’d never heard before, a cross between a shriek and a squeak and maybe even a little bit of a quack for good measure.

“Okay...” he breathed. “No snuggling, then. Tell it who you are and how many battles you’ve fought.”

Two legs slipped out on either side of its pincers, both ending in claws. Black eyes atop its thorax swiveled toward me, too many to count, every one of them marking me as prey.

“Axxel,” I whispered, raising my machete.

“What?”

“You’re not helping.”

“You don’t think it can be reasoned with, but I talked you out of dying, didn’t I? Think about that, Maxx.”

“Later.” I gripped the machete tighter, bracing myself for the impending attack.

The rest of the alien bug thing emerged and scurried down the wall with its lightning-quick eight legs. It was huge, though not as big as the Bishop alien race. Bishops were greedy and preferred fighting wars behind the scenes.

This guy was greedy and preferred fighting wars inside its own snack hole.

The creature lunged, its mandibles snapping menacingly.

Obviously there was nowhere else I could go, nothing else to do but attack.

I dodged it, narrowly avoiding its razor-sharp claws in the confined space.

“Fuxx, that thing is huge,” Axxel said. “What if you can’t kill it?”

“Not helping, Axxel.” I swung the machete with all my might, striking the bug’s exoskeleton and leaving a deep gash.

Clicking its mandibles and pincers rapidly, the alien bug charged once again. This time I was ready. I sidestepped the thing’s attack and drove my machete into its side, eliciting a horrible screeching noise.

It was wounded, but it wasn’t done yet. It reared back, unleashing a cloud of orange noxious gas that made me cough and choke. Oh, that was bad. It smelled like piss and onions and sour puxxyweed from Xenoxx, all rolled into one. It tasted even worse.

“Watch out!” Axxel yelled.

Too late—the thing was upon me once again.

A claw pinned down my shoe, puncturing through it but not piercing my scaled foot. Through the fading gas, it reached its mandibles up toward my face and cracked them together loudly.

I hacked and slashed with my machete, striking the alien’s limbs and thorax. The creature, undaunted, continued to attack, but I was too fast. I managed to dodge most of the creature’s blows, striking it repeatedly with my machete.

How was this thing not dead yet? It was oozing crimson blood from its dents all over its exoskeleton. Even its screeches were dying, but not the thing itself.

“Oh no! You *can’t* kill it,” Axxel shouted. “I was right.”

“Still. Not. Helping.”

Time for a new plan of attack. Without a head, it couldn’t see me. At least, I hoped.

We circled around each other, two stubborn beings who refused to give up.

Then, I saw my opening and seized it. With a fierce warrior cry, I plunged my machete deep into the creature’s neck, attempting to behead it.

It stilled instantly.

“Yes!” Axxel yelled, pumping his fists into the air on the viewscreen. “Do it again!”

Breathless and exhausted, I staggered back and leaned against the sandy wall for support. “That’s enough. For today.”

“But really though,” Axxel said, quickly sobering. “More could come. You need to get out of there.”

“Right.” I hefted myself away from the wall and peered upwards. “Any ideas?”

“Uh, wait for Nera to rescue you?”

Movement came from another part of the sand wall. Another creature? I wasn’t planning to stay here and find out.

“No more waiting,” I growled. “I don’t think I’ll be alone for too much longer.”

“Fuxx, okay. What about chimney climbing?”

“What?”

“I learned about it a long time ago back when... Well, back when Rain announced she wanted to climb a mountain. I sort of did a deep dive into the whole climbing thing.”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t have mountains on Xenox. They’re really tall and are often covered in snow, but you can still climb them.”

I ground my teeth together until they ached, still searching for escape options. “I know what a mountain is, Axxel, but this is no mountain.”

“Well, no, but...”

An idea dawned, a really, really stupid one. Maybe.  
“Physics.”

“Physics Mountain?”

“Physics, the study of matter and energy.” I stared up at the seventy feet above me. “I’m going to run up this hole.”

Axxel snorted. “Okay, Maxx,” His sarcasm dial cranked so hard that it broke. “You do that.”

So I did. Couldn’t hurt to try anyway.

Blowing out a quick breath of air, I leaped toward one side of the wall. As soon as my foot landed on the wall, I poured on a burst of speed. I kept going, faster and faster, around and around.

And it was working. Each step I took against the wall was higher than the last. The sandy walls held shockingly well, though I guess they had to in order to make the hole in the first place.

I couldn’t slow down though, not even when pincers burst through the wall ahead of me. I used them as temporary footholds. Thanks, stinky alien bug.

My lungs burned. My hearts thrashed, but already, I inhaled the salty sea breeze rather than noxious gas. It rustled through the jungle’s trees, just feet away now.

Almost there.

Then, there was no more wall to run up.

I collapsed next to the hole and lay there, catching my breath, and reevaluating all of my life's choices because I never wanted to do that again.

“Holy shit, Maxx.” Axxel said, sounding as out of breath as I was.

On the viewscreen, he lay on the brig's floor with his eyes closed and looking like he'd aged a whole century.

“Centripetal force,” I said between breaths. “Next time, do a deep dive into *that*.”

“Yeah, I'm gonna hang up on you.” He threw a hand to his forehead like a damsel in distress. “You're too much for my emotions to deal with right now.”

I chuckled, then chuckled harder when he didn't hang up on me.

He cracked open one eye and asked, “You good?”

At the sound of running feet, I turned my head. It was Nera dressed in military garb, racing away from Earth Space Fleet. She kept glancing backward like she'd just stolen all of their valuable secrets.

Quickly, I jumped to my feet. “I'm much better now.”

# Chapter Sixteen



## Nera

AFTER MAXX TOLD ME about his ordeal, I took a leaf from the jungle floor and wiped his hand of all the blood just so I could hold it.

“Moral of the story, watch out for bright-orange sand circles and get better at science.” I nodded. “Got it.”

He laughed then, such an intoxicating sound that warmed my heart every time I heard it. “That about sums it up, yes.”

We started through the jungle then and back toward the stage, hand in hand, both of us sweeping our gazes for anything circular or orange or otherwise shifty.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” I told him.

“I’m glad you’re okay too.”

“Let’s try to have a normal rest of the day, just you and me and Pete and the rest of the contestants and the millions of people watching, okay?”

He smiled down at me, and I could practically feel it caressing my face. “I think that’s about as normal as we can get here.”

In the next nano-second, his smile evaporated, he whirled, and his hand flashed to the hilt of his machete. His whole body flexed, and tension vibrated the surrounding air.

I turned to face behind us too. “What?”

“I heard something,” he whispered. “A sharp snap of something like someone’s following us.”

We waited for something else to happen. Anything else. Maybe a panda bear offering us tequila shots and some fully loaded nachos. Seriously, what else could this jungle throw at us?

“Do you get the feeling that maybe we shouldn’t be walking through this jungle anymore?” I whispered when, unfortunately, there was no such panda sighting. “Maybe it’s trying to tell us this.”

“Maybe so,” Maxx muttered, his lightning-bolt eyes shifting over every detail of our surroundings. “But I like to make the same mistakes again and again, just to be sure.”

Trying to stifle a laugh, I bumped him with my shoulder. “Sounds like I’m wearing off on you.”

“Or I’m wearing off on you.” He tore his attention from the jungle to me, the corners of his lips curling. “How do we tell either way?”

“Kissing, probably. A lot more kissing.” I nodded, the decision final. “After we take showers of course.”

He hiked up an eyebrow as we continued onward, deeper into the jungle. “Just kissing?”

“Are you crazy? Absolutely not.”

Grinning, he reached out and joined our hands again, the simple touch like heated quicksilver through my veins. “You had me worried for a second.”

My whole body blushed at the way he was looking at me, at the throbbing ache between my thighs his words promised to ease. Even though I’d come more times here on Klio-3 than I had in my entire thirty-three years, even though we’d fucked almost all afternoon, I still could *not* get enough of him.

He lit my whole world on fire with just the deep, velvety sound of his voice. One touch, and I’d cordially invite him to fuck me senseless. One look, and I’d bow before my Xenox king and suck the scales off his cock. Reverently, of course.

But I needed to gird my loins for a second.

“Maxx, I...” How to say this without coming across as too nosey? “The more I get to know you, the more I feel like I also know your wife. What was she like? I mean, if you’re comfortable telling me. But feel free to tell me to fuck off. Or both, even. The choice is yours, and I—”

*Shut it now, Nera. Oh my god.*

His expression turned contemplative as he stared straight ahead, but I could still see the sadness around his eyes and

delicately pinching his mouth. He went silent for such a long time that I felt like an idiot for asking.

“Her name was Bexx,” he finally began. “She was betrothed to my older brother by my father shortly before they both died.”

I sucked in a breath. That’s not what I was expecting at all. “They *both* died? Your dad and your brother?”

He nodded once. “They were in two different places, both killed on the same day.”

My mouth dropped open as tears pricked my eyes, and I squeezed his hand tighter in mine. How terrible that must have been for him.

“My brother died right before a battle with the Killians while he was poring over strategy maps. He took a sniper’s bullet from a Killian.” He pushed out a short laugh, but there was no humor in it. “I still use those maps even though they’re covered in my brother’s blood. I can’t bring myself to get rid of them.”

I shook my head and whisked away a stray tear, not knowing what else to do or say.

“My father was poisoned while dining at his favorite restaurant on Mars, The Hard Red Rock Cafe. He was meeting with a doctor who did gene therapy to help the Xenoxx procreate more females. The doctor was killed as well. No one ever took responsibility for their murders, but I’m sure it was the Killians that time too.”

There was so much raw hurt and vitriol in his voice that it was no wonder he'd tried to attack Miekil as soon as he saw him. But if I'd learned anything about Miekil since I'd been here, it was that he cared. About me. About Maxx even, but especially about proving to Maxx that not all Killians were cold-blooded murderers.

“Bexx was devastated. My father was basically her father too, and she loved Caxxic, my brother, probably more than he deserved. When we married, she stepped into her role as queen with more ease and grace than I did as king. She was kind, while all I thought about was vengeance.”

“Did you get it?” I asked gently. “Vengeance, I mean?”

A pause, then, “Not in the typical sense, no.”

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but I let it slide.

“Bexx was a brilliant war strategist. She preferred reading about that topic than talking to anyone, except for those she cared most deeply about. She was slow to trust me, even slower to love me because I sure didn't make that easy for her.” He heaved a breath, then added softly, “Until it *was* easy.”

My whole being broke for him. Everything he'd lost—from those he'd loved, to the Xenox's ongoing fight just to keep existing—would've brought most everyone to their knees in defeat. Still though, he continued fighting, even when nearly killed by a naked reality show contestant.

The amount of courage and strength and conviction he had blossomed something inside my salty, scarred heart. Admiration, sure, but also something deeper and more alive than I ever thought possible.

Love.

Was it possible that I was falling in love with Maxx, king of the Xenoxx? After the short amount of time I'd known him, which was—I couldn't even math that up right now, but... yeah. I was definitely falling in love with Maxx.

The realization flooded more tears down my cheeks, and I quickly brushed them away, but not before Maxx noticed.

“Hey.” He pulled us to a stop and gently caught my tears with his scaled thumb. “I’m sorry. I should’ve spared you some of the details.”

“No,” I said on an unexpected sob. “I’m just so sorry, Maxx. So sorry. I want to hug you so badly, but you need a shower first.”

His eyebrows drew downward over his worried, pained eyes, and his mouth parted slightly on a short breath. It was the same face he made every time I cried, which was a lot lately. A face like each of my tears was a gut punch to his soul.

“I’m sorry I hurt you, Nera.”

Why did he say it like hurting me would be the worst thing to happen in all of existence? The way he cared so much about my feelings only made me love him more.

“You didn’t,” I assured him, sniffing. “I feel your pain, and it’s a lot. No one should have to carry all that by themselves.”

He smiled then, faint but beautiful, and cradled my face with his large hand. “And yet, I no longer feel like I’m carrying it alone. You don’t have to either. Please know that. I’m here for you always, my beautiful star.”

I nodded, sinking my eyes shut at the healing power of his sweet words. Ever since we’d been dropped here, together, I felt safer, more confident to lower my towering walls, and dared to really *feel* again. My heartache. My happy memories. My ability to love.

All because of him.

None of this I could say out loud at the moment because of the emotions wedged in my throat, but I hoped he could see it on my teary, snot-covered face.

Or he could see it later. Later would be better.

We started forward again without joining hands because he stopped to hold a large leafy frond out of my way. Smiling, I passed both him and the frond, my fingers almost immediately seeking his.

Seconds passed, and I slowed my steps and waved my empty hand to where he should’ve been right behind me.

Only there was no one there to take it.

I whirled, my heart launching into my throat. “Maxx?”

The sea breeze whispering through the jungle was my only answer. The frond he'd held for me swayed a little harder a few feet away as though he'd just released it and then...what? Vanished?

There was no sign of him anywhere. Had he fallen into another snack hole?

“Maxx?” I drew Mike’s—*my*—twin daggers from inside my pants pockets and slowly retraced my steps.

Worry chewed gaping holes through my nerves. My lungs stuck together with my next several breaths.

With the tip of my dagger, I moved the frond aside—and gasped. Not because he wasn’t there but because red and yellow flowers rained down from the tops of the trees. Flowers with sticky seed-looking things sprouting from the centers. Flowers that shimmered and undulated in a strange dance through the air.

Ohhh, pretty, but also...sleepy?

My knees buckled, right before a black bag was swept over my head.



# Chapter Seventeen

# Rain

ACCESSING MEMORY 03296 CODE: 010507 \ \* \* \* \* \* \*

\* \* System flux: 8 sksk sldk

Memory accessed:

“Weekend breakfasts are my favorite!” Lucy shouted, pumping her little fists into the air.

Nera knelt next to her at the table with a wet dishrag, her eyes widening. “I think you mean breakfast explosions, Lucy Goosey. How do you have syrup on the *back* of your hair? Never mind. Into the tub you go.”

Lucy threw back her head with an overdramatic groan. “Again?”

“Yes, again,” Nera said, scooping her up in her arms.

As they neared me at the kitchen sink, Lucy leaned toward me with syrup-covered lips. “I wanna kiss my Rainy-Poo.”

My chest felt strangely bubbly at that, so light and buoyant, as it always did whenever Lucy and Nera were around.

Reminded of the soapy bubbles in the sink, I collected a handful and blew Lucy a kiss, which landed some of the bubbles on her nose.

She squealed in delight, crossing her eyes a little to see her nose, which made Nera howl with laughter.

“That’s your raincheck for kissing your Rainy-Poo,” Nera said as she hauled her off to the bathroom. “We’ll be right back, Rainy-Poo.”

I laughed, the sound less and less mechanical the more I used it. Which was a lot around those two.

(((((((((((hurt))))))))))

Were other Faid as lucky as I was? Were they in homes so full of warmth and love and laughter that they felt they might burst?

Because it was every day for me, this overwhelming, beautiful feeling.

(((((((((((hurt))))))))))

While Nera bathed her, Lucy launched into what Nera called her theme song, “Snacks After Naps, Okay?” Nera sang too, both of them at the top of their lungs.

I just laughed while I finished up the dishes, so much that my eyes began to rain tears.

///*Error*///  
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(((((((((((hurt))))))))))

Memory 03296 Code: 010507 \ \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* System flux:  
8 sksk sldk.

Memory terminated. \*\*\*

# Chapter Eighteen

## Maxx

I AWOKE WITH A start. A club tipped with thorns beat against the inside of my skull, and I groaned my displeasure.

“Nera.” Her name scraped from my lips, my voice as dry and parched as they were.

I licked them, the scales on my tongue snagging slightly on something covering my face. Fabric, I realized. A bag over my whole head.

My memory was fuzzy, but I remembered sticky flowers falling from the sky. And someone sneaking up behind me...

What the fuxx was going on here?

A growl rumbling low in my chest, I tore the bag from my head, flung it to the ground, and readied myself for an attack or an escape. Whichever came first.

Only I might as well have kept the bag on my head. The room—or wherever I was—was pitch-black. Xenox had excellent eyesight, but no matter how many times I blinked, there was still nothing at all to see.

The softest of exhales came from next to me, and from that sound alone, I knew it was Nera.

I leaped out of my chair and dropped to my knees in front of her, already pulling off the bag over her head. “Nera? Are you all right?”

“Maxx?”

“Yes, it’s me.” Then I realized that without seeing my lips move, she might not hear me.

In darkness this complete, she was both deaf *and* blind.

Blind myself, I reached out toward her face. Once I made contact with what felt like her ear, she grasped my hand with both of hers, running her fingers all over my scales just to be sure it was really me.

“Oh, thank god. The flowers in the jungle got us, Maxx. This is why we can’t have nice things.”

I huffed out a laugh, wanting to reassure her somehow in the dark, so I moved her hand to my smile.

She sighed her relief, and I kissed the tips of her fingers before reluctantly pulling away. I needed to figure out where we were, how to get out, and most importantly who was about to die a violent death for bringing us here.

Something else shifted farther away, like the rustle of fabric. Then a breathy exhale came from somewhere else.

We were definitely not alone here.

I swiped my hand toward my makeshift scabbard and machete. Gone. I would bet Nera's weapons were gone too.

"Who's here?" I demanded, eliciting a whimper from nearby.

Someone else cleared their throat. "Maxx. It's Miekil. Follow the sound of my voice."

The Killian? Why the fuxx was he here? Unless... Was this all part of the show? Pete following Nera's advice to make *Alien Love Island* more interesting?

I'd gut the fool from fun-sized dick to sternum and toss his carcass into the sea for fish food.

"I can hear you hesitating all the way over here," the Killian said. "If I wanted you dead, you would be. Believe me."

I flexed my hands and glared into the darkness. "Put your pox-covered fist in that hole you call a mouth, Killian."

"Please, can someone just turn on the lights?" another voice asked.

"Bling? Is that you?" the Killian asked.

"And Judge. Hi, everyone. So nice to be kidnapped with all of you."

Judge was an Akark, a species of lizard aliens. That was about all I knew. Well, that and his obsession for cumming all over walls, windows, and doors.

Goddess, I wished I didn't know that.



I followed the sounds of all of their voices and slowly made my way across the room with my hands up in case I crashed into anything or anyone. Since I never touched any walls, wherever we were must've been fairly large, especially since our voices echoed a little.

“So we have me, Maxx, Bling, and Judge,” the Killian said. “Is anyone else in here?”

“Nera,” I answered.

“Nera?” Bling asked. “Where? Why hasn't she said anything?”

“She can't hear you unless she can see your lips moving,” the Killian jumped in.

“Oh,” Bling said softly.

“And how do you know that, Killian?” I growled out.

“It didn't take a genius to figure out. You always turn toward her when you speak. Always, whether you're talking directly to her or not. And she didn't react to things I said when I wasn't facing her.”

My scales bristled. Was he paying as much attention to the other contestants as he was Nera and me?

Somehow, I knew the answer was yes. The fuxxing bastard didn't miss much.

“You're almost here,” he said. “I can hear your teeth grinding to the point of cracking. Careful of the table behind me.”

Too late, my hip nudged into it, squeaking it across the floor.

The others gasped.

“What was that?” Bling hissed.

The Killian chuckled. “His clumsy Highness ran into the table I just warned him about.”

I brushed off the jab, deciding instead to focus on the situation at hand. “Did you search the table?”

“That’s what I was doing until everyone else woke up.”

“And did you find anything?” I prompted.

A pause, then, “No.”

I narrowed my eyes at him in the dark, instantly sensing the lie. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Later,” he muttered, for my ears only.

There was so much I already didn’t like about this. But sure, yes, let’s go ahead and add more shit to the pile with untold secrets.

As I hissed a frustrated breath through my teeth, my fingers brushed something on the table. Something hard and plastic—and with a switch.

I flicked it and drowned the Killian’s green face with light.

Wincing, he threw up his hand to block it. “Do you mind?”

I instantly beamed the light toward Nera who was now rising from her chair, her gaze aimed over her shoulder and

flicking around at all of us.

“What is this place?” she asked.

Bling offered her a half smile as she made her way toward Nera, her high heels clicking across the floor. “We’re still trying to figure that out ourselves.”

“While we’re being filmed.” Judge gestured one knobby finger to the camera drones hovering above us, perfectly silent and still. “Smile, everybody.”

No one else but him did. Obviously. We weren’t all camera drone whores.

“Look,” the Killian said from behind me. “There are enough lights for everyone.”

Sure enough, farther down the table, lay a whole pile of flashlights. Just lights and nothing else. I picked up two more and then crossed toward Nera and Bling while the room gradually lit with each flashlight switch.

The room was large, bigger than I’d imagined when I crossed it, the walls, floor, and ceiling painted in nothing but black. There were no doors or windows, at least that I could see.

“Okay, but this still doesn’t answer what this place is,” Nera said, searching her light over one wall in particular. “Did we all wake up here after a flower attack and a bag over our heads?”

The four of us nodded.

She huffed a loud breath. “Well, damn. This is my fault, then. I told Pete to liven things up, but I had no idea the piss wizard would have this in mind.”

I angled myself between her and everyone else, putting a carefully precise note of warning into my next few words. “No one’s blaming you, Nera.”

The unspoken “or else” was a given.

“That’s fair,” Judge said, shrugging one green-scaled shoulder. “But are we not going to address why you’re covered in blood and why Nera has an Earth Space Fleet uniform on all of a sudden?”

The two of us just looked at him until he nodded slowly.

“Also fair,” he said. “So how are we going to get out of here?”

Nera brought her light closer to the wall she’d been transfixed with. “Feel for any seams in the walls to indicate a hidden door.”

While the other three did as instructed, I came up behind her and placed my hand on the small of her back. Even while preoccupied, she instantly responded to my touch, arching and stretching to feel more.

“You’ve done this kind of thing before?” I asked.

“Well, yeah.” Her brown eyes sparkled when she gazed up at me. “Escape rooms back on Earth. My dad and I were champs. Have you ever done one?”

“I try not to make it a habit of trapping myself when I don’t have to.”

She shrugged. “You’re missing out.”

“Mmmm, am I though?”

She grinned, but it froze to her face in the next moment when the wall underneath her fingertips popped open. “I got it.”

That instantly drew the attention of everybody else. They gathered around while Nera pulled the secret door open. Ahead, a short hallway of floor-to-ceiling mirrors that turned left blinded us with reflections of all our lights. Quickly, we shined them down at our feet and blinked the starry echoes from our eyes.

“We’re really going in there?” Bling whispered.

The Killian side-eyed her. “You’re not suggesting we stay in here, are you?”

“No, I just...” She swallowed thickly. “It’s very narrow.”

“I’ll lead,” Nera said, her voice nothing but confidence. “Grab hands or shirt sleeves or whatever so we can stay together.”

She took my hand and started through the doorway, expecting us all to follow her command, but I gently yanked her right back.

“*I*ll lead, Nera.” I was already bringing up a finger to shush her rebuttal. “Only because I can hear.”

The reminder clenched her lips together under my finger, but they were so plump and warm that maybe I should shush her more often. Oh, she'd *hate* that. Just as much as someone questioning her ability to lead. Which I wasn't. At all.

Still, the fire burning in her eyes stirred my cock awake. Whether angry or not, she could turn me on with the ease of a flashlight.

"Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all," she said through clenched teeth. "I am learning *so* much about my fellow contestants right now, like which of us demands to be the manly leader at all times because a female surely can't do it."

"I only want to protect you," I told her, skimming my fingers over her deep scowl. "That's all."

"Are we going or what?" Judge asked.

The Killian crossed his arms and leaned casually against the doorframe, one green eyebrow peaked. "No, I think they're just going to argue about who has more authority—a Space Fleet captain or the Xenox king. You know, because *that's* what's important right now."

"Okay, okay." Nera waved me ahead, reluctance written clearly all over her face. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," I assured her, even about the massive hard-on I now sported.

Good thing I was leading with my dick...thought no intelligent man or alien ever.

With the end of my flashlight, I adjusted myself through my pants. My kaxxui took that as an invitation to come out and play and heighten my arousal by flickering their forked tongues up and down my shaft while they stroked it with their bodies.

My breaths quickened, but I tried to swallow them all back. If it weren't for the others, I'd shove into Nera with one thrust and get lost with her. Together. Screw our escape, quite literally.

No, I needed to stay focused, which was almost impossible with Nera's heat right behind me, but I shut down my overwhelming need for her. Reluctantly, my kaxxui slithered back into the sides of my Adonis belt, and my cock went from rock-hard to...well, still rock-hard.

"What about the others?" Bling asked. "Where do you think they are? Is it just us in here because we're so lucky?"

"Maybe they have it worse than we do," the Killian said from all the way in the back of our train.

"Are you always such an optimist?" she asked.

"Only in mirror mazes, apparently."

"It feels like we're walking in circles," Nera said softly behind me. "With the mirrors and our reflections, everything looks exactly the same."

She was right. Not so lucky for me, though, I'd had some experience with mazes.

I half turned toward her and angled the light so it shone on my face for her to read my lips. “Notice my right elbow?”

“Yeah.” She frowned as she ticked her gaze to it, skimming across the mirrored wall as we continued onward. “Why?”

“You follow one wall with touch for long enough, and you’ll eventually get out,” I explained. “I learned that the hard way. The Killians live in a system of intricate caves that are designed to make enemies lost.”

“Not just enemies,” the Killian called. “Food too. And stragglers who just happen inside. But the way out is easy. Our cave exits are always on the north, so just look for the light-blue moss that grows on the north side of all the rocks. Not the yellow moss, but the light-blue. You’ll find the exit that way.”

My brain scratched, and I came to an abrupt halt that ran Nera straight into my side. I blinked hard at the Killian, the shock of his words unfurling deep within me.

He’d said it so casually, this great secret that no one in Xenox history had ever known or figured out before. And he didn’t even look guilty about it, or like he hadn’t meant to say that out loud, or like it was some kind of psychological warfare hinted at by a calculated twist of his stupid mouth.

No, he didn’t look like any of those things. He simply stared at me over the heads of the others, every single green feature controlled.

“Are you fuxxing with me right now?” I demanded in a tone that made both Bling and Judge flinch. “*Why* would you tell



me that?”

“To get you to trust me, obviously,” he said. “And so you’ll tell me what you’re hiding in the upstairs bathroom of the beach house.”

My breath rasped out in a choked grunt. Everything inside of me froze. My hearts stalled and then beat in triple time toward Nera who was looking back and forth between us.

Had she heard him? Because if she had, she was too smart to not realize *exactly* what I was hiding. From her. From the Killian. From everyone.

A wrinkle formed between her brows, and the piles of questions in her eyes grew larger the longer she stared.

Had she heard him or not?

“Attention, contestants,” someone said, from everywhere all at once, and with the obvious use of a deep and disturbing voice transposer. “You’re running out of time. The next room is *so* drams, *much* like. In it, you’ll either play the hungry games...or die a very unsexy death. The clock is ticking.”

A faux horrific laugh followed and then some e-cig hacking and coughing for good measure.

I already knew what happened next though.

I was going to kill Pete more than once.

Just as soon as I killed the Killian.

# Chapter Nineteen

## Nera

OKAY, SO CALL ME crazy, but I was a little impressed with Pete. And blasted to the past to Saturday afternoons when I lived for Dad's invitations to go into town for a little father/daughter escapism.

I couldn't get enough of escape rooms, but mostly, I couldn't get enough of my dad. I sure missed him, especially now, 870 million light-years away from Earth.

After Maxx repeated Pete's announcement to me, and then as a group, we made one more right turn, we found ourselves in a tiny room filled with human hands. As in a whole thirty-foot-tall wall of them, jutting outward from the wrist, and spaced equally apart.

"I give Pete a C for creativity," I announced while absently poking one hand's middle finger.

It was made out of rubber, but it felt oddly like real flesh. The number seven was written across its palm in red ink. They all had different numbers written across their palms.

“No.” Backing away, Bling shivered and wrapped her impressively long arms around her three boobs and the rest of herself. “A C for creepy.”

With his lizard-like hands on his stick-thin waist, Judge looked around the strange room with his oversized black eyes. “I typed my college thesis paper on a waffle maker, and *I* got a better grade than Pete. It just goes to show you that life finds a way.”

Yeah, I had no idea what he was talking about either. And why was my hand so sticky and wet after holding his?

Maxx and Miekil were ignoring all of us, across the room from me, and arguing like two warrior enemies about to trade blows.

I sighed. At least they were being quiet about it, but whatever Miekil had said to him in the mirrored hall had really ruffled Maxx’s scales. I’d never seen him shoot fiery daggers from his eyes quite like that before.

I’d ask him about it later though. Right now, we had bigger issues.

“So what do we do?” Bling asked, studying one of two tables in the room.

Judge pointed to a very old-fashioned digital countdown clock on the corner of one table. “Whatever it is, it looks like we have nineteen minutes to figure it out.”

From next to the clock, Bling eyed a tray of two differently sized glass vials. One read five ounces, and the other read

three ounces. They sat between a scale that read *Four Ounces Only!* (*X, Y*) and a small jug of water.

Bling picked up the jug and shook it. “Thirsty?”

“Probably shouldn’t drink that,” Judge told her.

“That’s why I was offering it to you,” she muttered with a roll of her eyes.

“Is it me, or is this room getting smaller?” Judge asked.

Still poking the fleshy finger, I turned back to the wall of hands toward the obvious gap between the top of the wall and the high ceiling. Drones hovered there while they recorded us.

I turned toward everybody else to point this gap out to them, but my hand slipped a little. Then, fleshy fingers clasped around mine.

I shrieked and yanked back, cupping my hand to my chest like I’d just been burned.

Maxx was at my side in an instant, his argument with Miekil forgotten. He whirled me toward him and roved his panicked eyes and fingers over my cheeks, my arms, and even my hair. “What? What is it?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, my face flushing at my overreaction. “The number seven hand closed around mine. It startled me, is all.”

Still holding me to him, he turned his gaze to the wall of hands. “They’re real?”

“No,” I said and pointed at the gap above the wall. “But I think they’re our way up and over and out.”

“And here I thought holding hands with you all was ew.” Judge, standing to the right of Maxx’s bulk, moved across the tiny room, leaving a sticky, drippy film behind on the lower part of the hand wall.

Okay, what *was* that? And for the love all that’s holy, why were his damn pants wet too, especially in the crotch area?

You know what? Never mind.

“So how does this work?” Miekil asked, crossing into my line of sight, his gaze stuck on the wall. “We use the hands as hand and footholds?”

He reached out and pressed down on one. It fell away from his grip and bent its wrist backward to flop uselessly against the wall. If that hand were real, the wrist would definitely be broken. Seconds later, it lurched back to perpendicular with the wall once again.

“No, only some of them are hand and footholds.” I angled myself toward my fellow contestants, my growing excitement rushing every word out in a torrent. “That’s why the hands are numbered. We have to find the pattern so we can climb up.”

“Or they’ll drop us thirty feet down.” Judge rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head. “Sounds... fun.”

“Does anyone else hear running water?” Bling asked, eyeing the walls.

Everyone nodded. Everyone but me, since I still couldn't hear jack.

Maxx gestured to the clock with fifteen minutes remaining. "I suggest we get started."

"Start looking for a pattern or a clue or a..." I totally forgot what I was going to say when I spotted a heart-shaped box on the table opposite the water vials. "Is that...chocolate?"

Nobody was listening to me though. Maxx and Miekil were now arguing about the wall of hands and pressing on all of them while Judge and Bling studied the individual vials.

Too soon, I made it to the chocolate table. And by too soon, I meant I took fewer steps than I anticipated to get there. Not like oh darn, I made it to the chocolate table too soon. Never that.

But seriously, *was* the room shrinking?

I lifted the lid of the heart-shaped box and found a note.

*Tasty galaxies,*

*Dark chocolate chips of space dust,*

*Cosmic bakery.*

"Yeah, I'm not trying one of your probably poisoned cosmic chocolates that look so, *so* good." I boxed them up again just so I wouldn't have to look at them. "Nice try though."

Something bumped me from behind, so I turned and found Bling and Judge. Still at the water vial table. *Not* still across the room from me.

Even though the walls didn't appear to be moving inward, they definitely were.

“Shit,” I yelled. “Five seven five. Five seven five!”

Everyone whirled, all eyes growing as they took in the shrinking room. We were standing in the middle of a six-foot by six-foot square. For now.

“What?” Judge asked, his voice squeaking higher. “Five seven five?”

“The chocolate haiku. The number of syllables per line.” I waved my hands at the water vials. “Quick. Your turn!”

“Five seven five,” Maxx repeated, finding the matching numbered hands on the wall. “Got them. What's next?”

“This is a water-pouring puzzle from Earth's medieval times,” Bling rushed to explain, holding vials in each hand. “Also *Die Hard With a Vengeance*. The movie? With Bruce Willis?”

“Are you having a stroke right now?” Judge demanded, waving his hands. “I don't know any of the words coming out of your mouth.”

I could barely focus on what she was saying because I was practically wrapped around her now, so I jumped up onto the haiku chocolate table, the wild tempo of my pulse lighting my nerves like a flame to a fuse.

The two of them followed my lead onto their own table, and where the three of us once stood, our tables collided. Instead of a loud crash—or maybe including; I sure as hell couldn't



hear it—orange holographic pixel squares exploded outward like a chainsaw was chewing through steel.

“The *numbers*, Bling,” Maxx demanded in a shout.

Miekil narrowed his eyes at the non-moving, but likely still moving, walls. “Or we’ll be holding a lot more than each other’s hands.”

“I ain’t touching nobody’s rando body parts.” Judge leaped from the table toward them and began scaling the wall, first with the number five hand, then seven, then five.

“Five, zero, two, three, two, zero, zero, two, five, two, four, three,” Bling spouted.

Wow. I had no idea if she was just shouting numbers off the top of her head or if that was really the answer to the puzzle.

When she caught me staring, she said, “I’ll explain later if we’re not crushed to death.”

“Yeah. Okay. Good idea.” I nodded.

By that time, Judge was already to the gap high in the wall.

“Bling, you’re next,” Maxx ordered. “Let’s go.”

We had to dance a little jig through little flying holographic squares for her and her three big boobs to get around me. Maxx and Miekil, with their muscly bulk, were practically kissing.

Four feet by four feet and shrinking.

“Attent—, cont—ants,” Pete started again over the loudspeaker, but I couldn’t make out the rest of what he was

saying.

But then, Judge was at the top of the gap with a thick rope in his hands and a wicked glimmer shining brightly in his oversized eyes. Instead of tossing the rope down to Bling to help her climb, he chucked it to the other side and then leaped, vanishing behind the thirty-foot wall.

Everybody else froze, including Bling about halfway up, seeming to catch what I'd missed Pete saying.

Then the hands supporting Bling's weight bent backwards. Bling plummeted.

Maxx and Miekil rushed to catch her.

I moved out of the way, my shoulder blades hitting the back wall, once again too soon.

A three-by-three room was all we had left.

Bling landed safely in their arms, her eyes screwed up tightly. Poor thing.

Miekil quickly sent her back to climbing while Maxx waved me forward.

"Pete promised the first person out a seven-course meal if they helped the others out," he quickly explained, his purple eyes flashing with menace. "And 10,000 credits if they didn't."

I gaped at him, even as I started climbing. "Judge took the credits. That's really low."

I didn't catch what Maxx said after that, but I was sure it wasn't complimentary.

As fast as I could, I scrambled up after Bling. Would *Alien Love Island* really crush us until we were dead? What kind of show would it be if they killed the contestants off?

*We'd be replaced*, I answered myself, *just like what would happen if we were voted off*.

Would anyone even really care?

Maxx would, most definitely. I glanced down and was unsurprised—and yet completely shaken down to my roots at the same time—to see the room had shrunk to two by two.

Maxx jabbed his finger toward the hand wall and yelled something at Miekil.

He was sending Miekil up before himself. His worst enemy, but also one of his only allies on this planet.

My heart swelled and kicked around my ribs painfully, feeling like it was also slowly being squeezed.

Reluctantly, Miekil started upward and met my gaze with his vibrant green eyes. Something within them showed just how stricken he was with Maxx's selflessness as I was.

Above me, Bling made it to the top and then disappeared over it. Seconds later, she dropped the thick rope over to this side, her eyes saucer-wide as she stared down the narrowing shaft.

“Hurry, Nera,” she said, her mouth trembling as she reached down a hand.

I already had plenty, but I took hers anyway. As I swung myself over the top of the wall, I found no sign of Judge. All I saw was a metal platform which hovered over dark, choppy water. Tied to the platform was a little yellow raft with four oars. That was all I could make out up here.

When I turned back, my lungs fused together in a panic. The walls were squeezing in on Miekil’s wide shoulders as he scaled upward. I couldn’t even see Maxx behind him.

My movements feeling jerky and too slow, I grabbed one of Miekil’s horns to help him up, beyond caring if that was some kind of rude faux pas. Bling took the other, and we hauled him over onto the platform with us.

Then I turned back for Maxx, who was only a little over halfway up.

“Maxx.” My voice broke, same as my heart, while the walls closed in on the man I loved. “Keep going. Think really, *really* skinny thoughts.”

A strange wheezing sound escaped him when he reached for the next correctly numbered hand up. “Can’t...laugh...”

“The show won’t kill him,” Miekil assured me from my left. “Just thinking about what the rest of the Xenoxx warriors will do to Umo if their king dies makes even *my* asshole pucker.”

I gripped the ledge so tightly that my knuckles ached. “The show’s sure not going to make it easy for him either.”

Miekil nodded. “Where’s some lube when you need it?”

“Judge can spray lube from his wrists as sort of a defense mechanism to mark his territory.” Bling jerked her thumb over her shoulder, supposedly in the direction he’d gone. “Like Spiderman’s webs, but not. The Akarks call it *binny ha*, which roughly translates to crotch mucus.”

Miekil blinked at her over my head. “No one needed to know that, Bling.”

“I’m just saying.” She held up her hands as if defending herself for knowing stuff. “Some bodies make great lube naturally.”

I nodded slowly. “Well, I’m currently as dusty as a beaver down there because I’m clenched too tightly, and I’m no Spiderwoman, so...”

Miekil shot me a horrified look. “I didn’t need to know that either. Maxx, *please*. Can you speed things up?”

“All this talk...about puckered assholes...and crotch mucus...and Nera’s dusty beaver...” Huffing and puffing upward through the barely foot-wide shaft, Maxx finally reached the point where the three of us could help haul him the rest of the way. “You really know how to get me out of my least favorite hole of the day fast. And I’ve been in a lot.”

It was only when he was planted right next to me, free of any walls about to crush his beautiful everything, did I allow my relief to flood through me so hard that it weakened my

knees. I threw my arms around him and squeezed, a different kind of force crushing us together.

He breathed against my neck, kissed me there, and then murmured against my skin, “I would climb a thousand walls in a thousand universes just to be in your arms, my beautiful star.”

I felt it more than heard it, and I soaked those words deeply into my heart.

“Least favorite hole?” Bling asked Miekil, her eyebrow cocked. “How many holes have you been in?”

“Okay, no one needs to know *anything* more about that either.” Miekil scrubbed his hand down his face and shook his head. “Trust me.”

# Chapter Twenty

## Maxx

HE KNEW. HE FUXxing knew.

The goddess-damned pigeon licker didn't miss anything when it came to every blink, every thought, every breath I had.

But he didn't know exactly what I'd hidden, or where within the bathroom. All he'd heard was me in there "not making normal bathroom sounds." His words. I'd gotten that out of him in the shrinking escape room. Why he listened so closely to my "bathroom sounds," I will never know.

The point is he knew I was hiding something even though I'd completely blown off the idea as preposterous.

"In case you haven't noticed," I'd told him, at that point not realizing the walls were crushing in on us, "there are machetes in the tops of the beach house's closets. I was seeing what other weapons might be around so I'm prepared for the next time someone tries to kill me."

He'd crossed his arms and studied me closely. Too closely. "You didn't find anything though."



He said it as a statement of fact, not a question, likely because he already knew the answer. The pigeon-livered dolt.

“No.” I’d stepped up to him then so he could read me nice and clear. “Now stop stalking me to the bathroom.”

He’d grinned a little too sharply. “Keep your enemies close, am I right?”

“Yeah, spoken like a real pervert.”

That had made him laugh.

With him, though, he often blurred the lines between enemy and...acquaintance? Definitely not friend. Possibly an ally, at least here on Klio-3. Maybe even a traitor to his own Killian race for giving up the secret about the light-blue moss growing in the caves on his home world.

Anyway, that was when Nera had shrieked at the wall hand grabbing her, and now the four of us were climbing into the rickety yellow boat that had already nearly capsized twice.

“Big guys on either side to balance the weight,” Nera ordered.

“How much do you want to bet Judge took the nicer, bigger boat?” the Killian asked. “Because he sure as hell didn’t swim out of here.”

“I don’t think he could have.” I pointed into the darkness toward the roaring water, having left my flashlight in the shrinking room. “I’m pretty sure that’s a waterfall. A big one from the sound of it.”

Bling's navy-colored, cat-like eyes blew wide. "What? We're going down it?"

I nodded. "And probably into some rapids."

"With no life jackets?" she asked.

The Killian pointed to the hovering drones. "Life jackets aren't sexy and don't make for good TV."

"Well, neither does death. The probability of surviving a waterfall decreases exponentially without life jackets, and that's without the height of the falls variable." She shook her head hard. "We might be doomed."

Maybe so, but Nera sure didn't look it. She sat on the edge of her seat next to me, her muscles working as she sluiced her oar through the water in time with mine. Her dark, loose waves fluttered around her stunning face and the shoulders of her Space Fleet uniform. Her perfect, pouty lips were set in a determined line while she faced ahead, ready for anything, like always.

That right there was one of the reasons I admired her. One of the *many* reasons.

I grinned at her, which she caught out of the corner of her eye. She smiled and stopped rowing long enough to blow me a kiss, and I felt it everywhere, just like I felt *her* everywhere.

She was consuming me in the best way possible, blurring us together until we became one. Better than one. She held my next breath in her palm with the delicacy of a rare pearl.

Sappy thoughts from a brutal warrior king, but there they were, all bleeding out from my hearts for this woman.

“What is the probability of survival?” the Killian was asking Bling from the front.

“I-I don’t know all the variables,” she said, her voice cracking. “I can’t even see ahead of us.”

“Best guess,” he prompted.

“One in a crap ton chance of survival.”

“And what’s a crap ton?”

She threw up one hand, the other white-knuckling her oar. “I don’t know. A crap ton. A lot.”

He reached out and gently stroked her cheek with his fingertips. “I love it when you talk math to me.”

She sucked in a breath as she stared at him rather than at what dangers lurked ahead, her lips parted and a blush staining her cheeks.

A master of distraction, that Killian. He’d taken her worries completely by surprise, stalled them, and replaced them with desire, all within seconds. Even I had to admit I was impressed.

“Here it comes,” Nera shouted over the rush of the falls. “Get ready!”

Ahead, the choppy water curved sharply downward. On the other side of it, cavernous cave walls needled with stalactites and stalagmites yawned open like a monster’s maw.

Time slowed at the top of the curve, or maybe we did. But we hung there for too long, balanced on a precipice, neither tipping nor daring to breathe. We simply existed in this snapshot of time, and for some reason it reminded me of right before my first kiss with Nera. Before we took the plunge and lost ourselves in the unknown.

It had been so worth it.

Part of me had already fallen for her; the other part poised on the edge, resistant to drowning in her, but unable to breathe without her.

Now, we plummeted down, down, down, freefalling for so long that my stomach scrambled itself into my head. Bling shrieked. The Killian pumped his oar in the air with both hands. Nera and I just laughed.

Then the boat slapped hard against the water. From the force of the landing, the four of us lost our seating and slipped and slid to quickly get it back so we could row ourselves out of the fall's turbulent currents.

We dug in with our oars, and it was only then that I realized how bright it was. The sun beat down on the ocean waves and crested them with opalescent pearls that both blinded and mesmerized me.

We were outside. We'd escaped from whatever hellhole we'd been in.

The four of us cheered.

I turned to see what exactly we'd just come out of—and laughed. Behind us, a giant cornucopia sat in the water and spat out a waterfall that was at least a thirty-foot drop to the sea below.

Nera chuckled too while she looked on in wonder. Shimmering water droplets clung to her golden skin and fastened her loose-fitting Earth Space Fleet uniform snugly to all of her delicious curves. With her dark hair cascading down her back and crowned with the sun, she took my breath away.

“Oh my god, Pete,” she said, shaking her head. “Way to take my idea literally.”

“Yeah, I’m still going to murder him,” the Killian promised, and with the sharp edge in his voice, I believed him.

We angled the boat toward shore about twenty meters away where—surprise, surprise—a whole crowd waited. Maybe even Pete, though I had to imagine he was too busy crapping his pants. He had to know we were coming and that we'd be pissed.

“Don’t forget about Judge,” Bling said. “I don’t appreciate nearly falling to my death because of some greedy asshole, so if you’re going to kill him too, you’ll have to get in line.”

“So there will be lots of murdering today,” Nera said with a nod and then shot a glance at me. “Guess we better get back, but...maybe go easy on Pete. His heart was in the right place.”

“He almost killed you with his idea, Nera. He almost killed all of us.” I gripped my oar so tightly that it creaked, a clear

promise it would snap in half if I didn't ease up, so I did.

“At this point, who hasn't?”

I groaned. “Well, I can't argue with that.”

Bling turned in her seat at the front so Nera could read her lips. “Welcome to *Alien Love Island's* first ever Hunger Games. If finding love doesn't kill you, the island definitely will.”

“There's the perfect tagline for the show.” The Killian grinned at her, and a current of radiant energy connected their gazes, so powerful in its grip that neither of them looked away.

Nera and I shared a look and smiled. She'd noticed too, no doubt. Our current was better than theirs, shocking in its intensity and pulling us together more and more with every second.

“So, Bling, how did you solve that water puzzle?” Nera asked.

“Oh. Right. Those numbers I said were x-y coordinates. That's why the scale read X, Y. The coordinates were basically what each vial is holding at a particular moment to get exactly four ounces of water inside one of them.

“There was a three-ounce vial, a five-ounce vial, and the jug of water. I filled the five-ounce vial and used it to fill the three-ounce vial, leaving two ounces in the five-ounce vial...”

She went on and on, but my attention was once again taken by the beautiful star at my side I would never get tired of looking at.

“Damn, that’s hot,” the Killian said to Bling when she finished.

She giggled.

Nera’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “Umm, I think I’m going to have to see it in slow-mo to understand it during a time when we’re not all about to die.”

“Movie night!” Bling bounced up and down in her seat, making her ample chest bounce too, which definitely caught the Killian’s attention. “I can show you *Die Hard With a Vengeance* so you can see how they did it. We can pop some popcorn and open a couple bottles of champagne to celebrate not dying.”

Nera nodded. “Love. We could do it at the honeymoon bungalow so I can check on my favorite caterpillar.”

“Let’s do it,” I agreed. “I’ve never seen that movie.”

“Me neither.” With considerable effort, the Killian dragged his eyes off Bling’s chest, looking half drugged from the three-breasted trance he was just in. “I’m in.”

“Good,” she breathed. “It’s a date. It’s a double date.”

Smiling widely, Nera looked off in the distance toward the cliffside with the pulsing beacon on top of it. I knew her well enough to know exactly what she was thinking.

But first? Sweet, sweet revenge.

We were close enough to shore now, so the Killian and I hopped out and hauled the boat in. No sign of Pete, but there

stood Judge in the middle of the crowd, looking smug and victorious and very, very punchable.

“Your weapons are on the table,” someone called to us.

Sure enough, a few feet up from the shoreline, a table covered from end to end in gleaming weapons beckoned us closer.

“Those are *all* ours?” the Killian asked, sounding as bewildered as I was.

“Some are the second group’s too,” a crewmember told us. “They’re still not back yet.”

“It’s almost as if everyone knows how dangerous this planet is,” Nera deadpanned.

As soon as we helped our ladies from the boat, they made a beeline for the weapon table. The Killian and I skipped the weapons for now and strode toward Judge without a word.

He saw us coming.

The crowd instantly guessed our target and parted around him as though he’d just caught an infectious disease.

Nervous laughter tripped out of his mouth. “So glad you made it, guys. Um, I can explain. There’s a reason I took the money. You see, my grandMOTHER—”

The Killian was flanking to one side, and I took the other, both of us hauling the little fuxxer between us from under his armpits.



“Can’t we talk about this?” he shouted. “I’ll give you the credits if you just let me go. All of it, I swear.”

He kicked his twerpy legs out at us as we carried him out to sea. Where were we going? Who the hell knows? But wronging us, slowing our escape, sure steered me in directions I never thought I’d go. With others I never thought I’d go *with*.

I shot a glance at the Killian. He seemed to be enjoying himself too.

“Please, I’ll do anything,” Judge begged. “You can have *all* my money. Every cent of it.”

“This isn’t about money, you arrogant dick clown,” I growled. “It’s about your lack of honor. It’s about screwing us over without a second thought to our safety or any consequences.”

The Killian nodded. “Basically, you suck.”

“Okay. All Right. I suck.” He stopped squirming and peered up at us with his enormous black eyes. “Can you let me go now?”

The Killian cocked his eyebrows at me over the little Akark’s squirming head. I shrugged, and we tossed him into the ocean a few feet in front of us.

He came up sputtering. “I-Is that it? Can I go now?”

“Not quite.” The Killian reared back with his meaty fist and punched him in the face. “That’s for making Bling fall.”

“And this...” I slowly advanced on him. “This is for cumming with your *binny ha* all over *my* woman’s shirt sleeve, the back of it so she wouldn’t notice. Because *I* sure noticed.”

He flinched and held up his hands to shield his bloodied face as though I were going to hit him, but I would do no such thing. No, this would hurt much worse.

I grabbed him by the balls. “No more cumming on women period unless they’ve given you permission. Do you hear me?”

“Oh god. M-message received. Please.”

Warmth washed over my hand as I released him. “Did you just piss yourself?”

Instead of answering, he started crying.

“Okay,” the Killian said, backing away, “I think his day has been ruined worse than ours now.”

“Seems so,” I agreed.

We made our way back to shore with several camera drones trailing behind. Good. I hoped they plastered Judge’s snot-covered face all over the airwaves and embarrassed him for an eternity.

I found Nera right away, and we gravitated toward each other with the speed and force of a great cosmic collision. We clung to one another, needing the other as much as oxygen. She fit so perfectly against me, even though she was so much smaller than I was, that it was like we were made for each other.

We were imperfect pieces that had reached across the stars just to fit together.

I could go on holding her forever like this.

Eventually, she pulled away, brushed her cheek, and peered up at me from underneath wet lashes. “You plus me plus a boat plus a beacon. What do you think? We could be back before movie night if we go straight there and back again.”

“No stops?” I asked, pressing a kiss to the top of her sun-warmed hair. “Not even at our favorite waterfall?”

“I mean...we could probably squeeze in one stop.” She placed both palms on my chest, her smile too frail and shaky to last. “But I...I need to tell you something too.”

“Okay. We’ll have time.” I trailed my fingers along her jaw and down the long column of her neck. Any excuse to touch her, feel all of her, since I could never get enough. “Everything all right?”

“Yes.” She grinned then, a shimmering collection of the universe’s light. “Now it is.”

I nodded. “Give me five minutes first?”

“Is this about Pete?” she asked, wincing.

“Maybe. Five minutes is all I need.” I leaned down to kiss her, just one taste, though I craved so much more.

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

She nodded, and I released her to set out for the beach house, scanning for a certain pair of watchful eyes as I did so. The Killian was busy talking to Bling, but I didn't doubt for a second he would notice me anyway.

After swiping my trusty machete and Space Fleet handkerchief from the weapons table and securing them both to my belt loop, I flagged the closest crewmember down. "The Killian—Miekil," I corrected, "said he'd help you guys clean up the cornucopia. Bling too."

"Oooookay," she said, darting her eyes back and forth like she had no clue what I was talking about.

"The green guy. Use those muscles of his to your advantage. He said he'll help with whatever you need." I gave her a half smile. "*You* specifically."

Her whole face turned crimson. "Oooookay."

She sounded much more sure of herself as she skipped off in his direction. Whatever it took to keep him preoccupied while I removed the weapon from the upstairs bathroom and put it...where?

Where was safe around here? Or should I just keep it there?

Better to check on it anyway.

Since it was closer, I angled toward the backyard pool area of the house. No sounds drifted from within, so hopefully no one was here.

I hurried around the pool to the sliding glass door, opened it, and listened. Still quiet. Good. The fewer people who knew I

was here, the better.

Halfway up the steps to the second floor, a shadow moved along the wall. Certainly not mine since I wasn't that high up yet. I stopped, frozen, while I listened so hard that my ears hummed. A prickle dashed up the back of my neck, and I whirled.

What stood on the bottom step stopped my hearts dead.

An Earth Space Fleet officer. He was pointing the weapon right at me. The weapon I'd hidden in the bathroom.

*Fuxx.*

An orange dot appeared in the center of the weapon, and I knew without looking down at myself that it was targeting me as a Faid. The enemy.

He pulled out a gun and aimed that at me too.

“Don't even think about moving, you goddamn Faid,” he spat.

From my periphery, the shadow from above moved in closer behind me. Another gun clicked right next to my head.

One machete. Two guns. Those were not good odds.

I was surrounded. There was nowhere I could go on this narrow staircase.

And all I could think about was that I'd have to break my promise to Nera.

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Nera

GIVEN THAT THE SKY had now bloomed with vibrant colors, I'd say it had been more than five minutes since Maxx left me. The beach had long ago cleared, some of the crewmembers and even some of the contestants going to help tear down the cornucopia.

Not me though. I had a date with a hot alien king, during which I planned to tell him exactly how I felt about him.

Only he wasn't here. I didn't even know where to go look for him, because like a jackass—like a *trusting* jackass—I hadn't asked him where he was going.

What if he'd fallen into another snack hole or walked through another sticky flower rainstorm?

I sighed wearily, kicking my feet in the sand. Obviously I could just do this tomorrow. Or I could be done with it in ten minutes flat to see what that beacon was all about and why it mimicked the rhythm of the song that was literally inside my head.

I'd finally figured that out on the boat as we'd rowed toward shore.

The beacon was thisclose.

Was it stupid even considering going anywhere by myself on this planet? You betcha.

Was I going to do it anyway? Yeah, probably.

Life's not about perfection, right? It's about consistency.

And I'm consistently a dumbass.

I would be on the lookout for Maxx on the beach the whole time though. If I couldn't find him when I got back, I'd sound the love island alarm.

My god, my flimsy plans are flimsy.

Rather than do all this hemming and hawing, I could've been there by now, so before I had a chance to change my mind, I pushed the boat back into the snake-infested water. As soon as I saw one of those bitey fuckers slithering too close, I hopped in.

Every third row of the oar, I looked back at the beach.

Still empty. Where *was* he?

Worry for him surged me to the cliffside even faster, and I was there within minutes. A dirt trail led up a gently sloping incline that wound around the cliff, which was good since I didn't want to scale a sheer rock wall.

One scaled wall was enough for today, thanks.



By the time I made it to the top, I was huffing and puffing, but it was so worth it. The view from up here took my breath away. The sparkling sea, painted with the swirling colors of the sunset, stretched outward to the curve of the planet where water melted into sky.

Other than this single cliff, there wasn't a natural rock formation in sight, despite what Lieutenant Avery insisted. Depending on who you asked, this planet looked very different.

How though? How could it be both a rocky planet and a beachy/jungle island planet at the same time?

To my right lay stone ruins of an ancient-looking building. Part of it had been devoured by the jungle with tree roots and vines twisting through the walls and what was left of the ceiling.

Jutting out from the top of it stood the pulsing beacon. A cobblestone walkway lined with high, arched columns led to a short set of stairs and a stone door that leaned precariously to the left.

And behind me lay the beach. Still empty.

My stomach clenched at what that could mean. Call it woman's intuition or whatever, but I sensed something was wrong. With Maxx...but maybe here too.

I drew my daggers, forced a breath, and hurried down the cobblestone path to the door. There was no way I could lift the huge slab of stone out of my way, so I crawled underneath it.

When I stood upright within the ruins, I jerked to a stop. Blinked. Rebooted my brain, but what I saw still didn't compute.

This was my living room on Earth. Minus the jungle vines and the crumbling walls and ceiling, but this was it.

*Exactly* it, right down to the scruffy gray couch parked in front of the blank TV with the violet accent wall behind it. The glass mosaic Earth Space Fleet coasters on the coffee table. The fancy hurricane candle holders on the fireplace mantel, now with tree roots shoving through it, that my mom got me for a wedding present. All of the pictures of Lucy...

Here. On planet Klio-3.

A sound came out of me that I'd never made before, a combo of a screech and a hiss and a wail, before I swallowed it back down. Quickly, I rubbed my sleeves across my face and then saw that I wasn't alone.

My brain had skipped over her sitting on the couch because I couldn't accept it. Couldn't believe it.

"Rain." I said it like a guttural accusation, the bitter taste of her name making me gag.

My knuckles cracked when I tightened my grip on my daggers.

She had already turned to look at me from the couch, her silky blonde hair stained with the sky's colors seeping in from the giant hole in the ceiling. Her blue eyes shone brightly with unshed tears.

“Nera,” she said gently, “we have much to discuss.”



Don't miss book 3, [Loved by the Alien King!](#)

## About Author

Lindsey R. Loucks is a former school librarian living in rural Kansas. When she's not discussing books with anyone who will listen, she's dreaming up her own stories. Eventually her brain gives out, and she'll play hide and seek with her cat, put herself in a chocolate-induced coma, or watch scary movies alone in the dark to re-energize.

Check out Lindsey's website at [www.lindseyloucks.com](http://www.lindseyloucks.com).