



MY MONSTER  
MY CHOICE

THE MATCH PROGRAM  
BOOK 5

RENA MARKS

# MY MONSTER, MY CHOICE

THE MATCH PROGRAM

BOOK FIVE

RENA MARKS



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# MY MONSTER, MY CHOICE

RENA MARKS

**A second chance at love. But one that I thwart because everyone should have a choice.**

Welcome to Book 5!

In the city of Eden, a parcel of land not under Earth's government, I meet a man. Elex is a Captain of the King's Guard, the clan of Adroki from the planet Pimeon. They are here to protect women while we recover from a patriarchal government recently overthrown.

Unfortunately, I have a child who will always need my care. And the Adroki? Their goal is to find mates to procreate with. While I might have liked that once, my choice was taken away long ago, and I have to set him free.



From the first day I laid eyes on her, I knew she was my mine. I never expected it could happen to me, especially not without the Match Program, and I never thought she would be the mother of my friend's mate. After all those hurdles, one more finally breaks us. After six months of bliss, Christina has decided she has no time to begin a family again, despite being in her thirties.

It's up to me—along with her son, Kenny—to show her otherwise.

**\* *My Monster, My Choice* has been expanded from its shortened 20K version originally released in the I Am The**

**Fire anthology to a full-length version. In the timeline, it falls after book 4, Wanting The Monster, but can be read all by itself. \***

*Trigger warnings: Abuse, abortion, death, and references to suicide, though not detailed, and hopefully done well enough not to rip your heart out. My goal is to tell the heroine's story without too much of a dark depressing angle. The tale begins with a strong heroine and ends with a happily-ever-after.*



# PROLOGUE

**P**lanet Earth, long after World War III:

“CHRISTINA!” DORI HISSES AS I WALK BY THE FRONT DESK. Her face is red, her eyes are wide, flitting back and forth as if she is afraid someone might overhear us talking.

When it’s obvious no one else is in the entryway, she points a shaking finger toward the dining room, currently unused. “You have a visitor.”

After World War III, Earth was visited by an alien race who offered to clean up our planet in exchange for a place to live.

The Britonians would start with our water because they would plant their mother ship in undisclosed depths of the ocean. They’d get to our soil, our air. When they noticed our vastly mismatched sexes due to the trauma of war? They offered the Match Program.

It seemed exciting in the beginning, until the president’s own daughter, Lilaina, was the first to go. Imagine our horror when the news feeds showed her potential alien mate emerge from the portal between our worlds.

He was a monstrosity.

A seven-foot-tall alien, his skin a hideous shade of grayish purple, or he looked that way compared to the First Daughter. His fingers were clawed, and his forearms looked too

muscular to be real. Hell, tendons stood out along the back of his hands, twitching, as if he could barely control the urge to fight. He reeked of power, of danger. Of violence.

But worst of all hit below the waist. Instead of legs, he had a mass of writhing tentacles.

Looking back at those feeds, I would have expected her to run screaming. But she sucked it up and went through with it, heading off to his planet for six months on a trial mating, at the end of which she would return to Earth and tell us all her choice as to whether to stay or go back to him. During those six months, we all debated what she would be like when she returned. Would she be scarred? Would she cower like a kicked puppy? Would she be so emotionally abused she'd need deep therapy to recover? What was she thinking by not backing out when the monster emerged from the bushes that hid the portal and stepped fully into the light of day?

No one expected her to choose to stay. It was the talk of the century.

As soon as she left for his planet, another scandal quickly hit. The president's own fiancée was matched to Lilaina's new brother-in-law. Earth had never had such drama.

Tessa, the second woman, also chose to stay on the planet Pimeon, and Earth women began to see a pattern.

The third match hit. Not a lot of details were given out, but the scandal came when the third maiden returned to Earth to make her decision.

There was none. The mating was annulled. Apparently, the chosen alien had married her sister six months earlier in a mock ceremony and didn't realize the quickie marriage was valid. The sister, Anya, was a dancer, and it wasn't a coincidence that the universe offered me this sign. It was fate.

Because my own daughter, Tera, was a dancer.

I hadn't seen her in six years; President Montgomery had refused to give me her location, saying that the dance troupe was best protected by no one knowing their whereabouts, despite his promises to the contrary during the negotiation of

her contract. But she had managed to come visit recently, only I wasn't here. I've been waiting for a return visit ever since.

I'm hoping by the size of Dori's eyes that Tera has found a way to come back.

"In there," Dori hisses again, waving her hand toward the room with the deliberately closed doors.

I hurry that way, opening the huge double doors and letting them swing shut behind me.

My heart is full, wondering what she'll look like. She'll be beautiful, I know, but this time is the first time I'll see her as a woman instead of a child, the teenager who'd left.

Shock makes my breath huff out of my lungs at what's inside the room. It's not Tera.

It's one of *them*.

The Adroki aliens; this one in the flesh. I've never seen one up close but he's absolutely terrifying.

He's huge, a purplish-gray, writhing bulk of muscles and tentacles. He's gritting his teeth and it makes him look harsh and unsmiling.

I move my gaze up the muscled forearms, over the enormous shoulders and across a powerful, broad chest clothed in a purple and gold uniform. His musculature is similar to humans but much heavier. He's all hard, bulky strength, not an ounce of fat anywhere.

His face has a strong jaw and full lips, but instead of a nose, there's a flat bone and two slits where it should be. The top of his head is smooth and swirled with intricately colored designs. His eyes are much scarier in person than in any vid I've watched. The sclera is yellow with long, horizontal pupils. The iris is a deep shade of black, barely discernible from the depth of his abnormally large, purple pupil.

At the bottom of the uniform, tiny gold chains dangle, merging with the mass of thick tentacles.

"*Maman* Christina Garrett? My name is Captain Elex Neriah Mahogani. I'm here about your *kishren*, Tera and

Kenneth.”

How does this man know of Kenny, much less Tera? “My children? How do you know who my children are? Are you here to threaten me?”

“What? No,” he scowls, his brow wrinkling. “I’m here to share with you how to keep them safe. I just didn’t know, uh, I don’t see how you are Tera’s *maman*. You don’t look old enough.”

That doesn’t clear up much, but I understand his confusion.

“She’s not of my blood. She was six when I married into her family unit.”

He motions me to a couple of chairs and eyeing each other warily, we each pull one out from the table. I sit across from him, watching him grimace as he lowers his body into the chair made for humans. His tentacles splay out uncomfortably, over the arms of the chair. Then he begins.

“I live on the property where Tera does. An annexed land from your government which she can’t normally leave.”

My heart thumps. Is this horrifying creature about to tell me he’s her boyfriend? I don’t like that, not at all, and I’m not sure why.

“She lives in Eden where the very first House of Duty was established.”

That’s where my daughter’s been hidden for six years? A milk farm? The President had told me she would perform with the highest honors. I never expected...a milk farm. The original one, and the oldest.

It’s not what I would call the highest of honors, so I stare in shock, waiting for the joke.

As a benefit to the few men we have left, milk farms were established to keep their seed fresh. It’s to thank them for their service, for protecting women during the third war and losing so many of their lives in the process.

Women basically masturbate a male to completion, encouraging fresh sperm production daily. Our species has a better chance of survival *if horrors like my son aren't produced.*

Except my son isn't a horror at all. He's different, all the residents here are, but he's the greatest gift my husband and first wife could have left me. He is truly an angel, always viewing life as if it's beautiful.

"We have made Eden a better place to live," he says. "We shut down the House of Duty and established a school for midwives instead. In the unused portion of the building, the dance troupe now gives lessons. In fact, Tera is second-in-command, and has merged her human style with the dance of my people."

He smiles slightly and it looks proud and my heart sinks, thinking he's about to ask me for her hand in marriage. And I cannot do that to my child.

"Tera is a favorite among my clan."

*Here it comes.*

"In fact, she is best friends with my brother-in-arms, Captain Relion Liloni. We will all do anything to protect her and unfortunately, her time is nearly up. Her contract as a dancer is about to expire and there is no reason for it to be renewed by your president, given that he isn't receiving payment for the dance performances any longer. Nor is he receiving payment from the milk farm."

Why would that be a problem?

"If her time is up, she'll be released, correct?"

He sighs. "Nothing is ever that simple with your president."

*That I'm aware of, since the man was supposed to keep her safe, let me know where she was, and how she was doing. However, I've only had a few assurances over the years from him, no proof, no visits, no contact whatsoever. The last time he was here, he'd sneered that we'd never insisted on*

visitation in her contract, despite his implication during verbal negotiations that it wouldn't be a problem.

“Tera is determined to make a marriage match to a human. A friend of the president's.”

I start to shake my head before he even finishes the sentence. “No way. My daughter knows what life will be like for her with a late marriage.” A life like mine had been. “She would never do that.”

“She is determined. Relion says he has never met a more stubborn female.”

For the first time, a smile touches my lips. She always was a stubborn little thing. As a child, she couldn't understand why everyone didn't love Kenny the way we did. Why some people acted like Down's syndrome might be contagious and kept their distance.

Elex is staring at my lips, and I shut down my smile, wondering if he thinks I'm an imposter because there are no similarities between me and my daughter.

But she is mine. I fought tooth and nail to keep her and Kenny when I was left a widow.

“We believe the president will come by to see you,” Elex continues. “He'll want to make sure you're present when Tera gets matched. He'll want you to witness her refusal and know that she's going to subject herself to the marriage mart.”

I shake my head again. I have no idea where this alien is coming from. “Tera won't do that. She knows what she's getting into. Besides, she can't be matched. If she lives in Eden, she's not an Earth citizen.” It was in all the news feeds during the return of the third mating that was annulled.

Unless...will her match be so horrible that the marriage mart is a better option?

“We bargained for her to be matched to avoid the marriage,” Elex says. “Your president tricked her into changing her address so he could have control over her fate. She doesn't know. She was so upset when he brought her out here to visit her *kishling*, she changed it without knowing it

would make her a citizen of Earth. When we found out, we came up with the match as an alternative plan. It won't be a stranger that she's matched to. Her best friend that I mentioned? Captain Relion Liloni? He has volunteered. We just need her to accept because it is always a female's choice. In order to keep your president from blackmailing her into a decision he wants, we need you to keep her *kishling* safe. Your other...Kenny. Please change the permissions for his visitors and those who check him out of the facility to Adroki and Britonian only."

My eyebrows about shoot into my hairline. Is he fucking kidding? He wants me to sign permission for my son over to aliens?

"Trust me," he says. "In his fury, the president may send a member of his secret service here to escort your son from the premises. If you are already located in Eden, which is annexed from Earth and considered a neutral territory, he may hold him hostage until Tera does his bidding. You also can be used against her. But we can keep you safe in Eden. We can't keep Kenny safe unless you give us permission."

I'd like to spout off on him, but Tera and I made a pact never to swear. Not because we believe it is a sin, like most women do—there was no one around to force me to raise her with such contrived bull—but because we were afraid Kenny would pick up on it and it would give others more of a reason to call him devil's spawn beyond the shape of his eyes and the herbs that his mother grew.

"I have no reason to trust you, Elex. You're a complete stranger to me. You're telling me my daughter's best friend is one of you, but I have no proof. I haven't seen my child in six years. However, I do know the president and if what you're saying comes to pass—if I get a message from him wanting me to see Tera's ceremony—I'll know you're telling the truth then."

His lips are pressed into a grim line. "I hope it's not too late, Christina," he rumbles.

My belly does a little flop. If I could close my eyes when he utters my name in that dark, deep voice, I swear I might become aroused.

Confusion makes me stand abruptly. “Nice to meet you, Elex. Thank you for the warning regarding my children.”

He holds out his hand and all at once I’m aware that it’s larger than normal. I’m not sure about touching him. It feels like I hesitate forever, staring at his outstretched hand.

But slowly, I reach out and he clasps mine gently.

His skin is warm, which is surprising. I’m not sure what I expected but warmth wasn’t it. I concentrate on the feel of his skin, not the weird feelings fluttering around in my belly. It feels like his skin might be thicker than mine, stronger, and he’s all strength and hardness everywhere.

With large fingers. *Ack, don’t think about how long and thick his fingers are.*

And warmth. *Ack, definitely don’t think about that.*

His big hand completely engulfs mine and for some reason, it feels like I’m protected. Like I’m cherished.

Like I’m not on my own, fighting the world to protect babies that are not biologically mine. To protect babies I can never have.

“Relion will take care of your daughter, Christina,” he rumbles. “And I will take care of you. Please trust me.”

A whoosh of longing that I haven’t felt since I was a teen sweeps through me. It’s like he knows exactly what to say. I want to trust him, despite his strange looks.

I nod once and, almost reluctantly, he lets go of my hand. I think maybe he’s unsure whether or not he convinced me. I want to trust him, but I don’t trust strangers. Not when it comes to protecting my children.

Dori’s eyes are just as huge as they were earlier when we walk out of the dining room, Elex heading toward the front door as I stand near her at the front desk.



“Everything all right?” she asks and I’m sure she wants to know what transpired.

I nod, distracted as I watch him disappear down the front steps. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything,” she agrees readily, without even asking what it is.

“If President Montgomery comes to escort me from the premises, will you enact a permissions retraction for my son that I’d ‘signed’ years ago?” I use air quotes to punctuate my meaning.

“What are you redacting?”

“All humans. If I’m not here, the only people who can remove him are the Adroki and the Britonians. That’s an *if*.”

She nods, speculation narrowing her eyes. Her own child is a resident here, one of Kenny’s friends, so she understands. “Sign a redaction form, and I’ll produce it upon you checking out. You’re sure you won’t leave the premises unknowingly?”

“I won’t. I don’t have any business trips scheduled for the next month and this matter should be taken care of by then.”

Tera’s marriage mart is coming up soon. If this is real, President Montgomery will approach me before then.

“Okay.” A shuffle of paper produces the form we need. “Sign here and backdate it. I promise on my life I’ll only produce it if you leave for any reason.”

I smile at her, and it wobbles with relief that only another mom can understand. “Thanks, Dori.”

CHAPTER  
**ONE**

## CHRISTINA

A week later, I find out the alien was telling the truth. President Montgomery comes by, says he's decided he'll take me to visit Tera but only if I come immediately. Of course, I do and when we arrive, he insists I stay in the car when he gets out at Eden. I'm antsy, because this is my first view of my daughter in years. I can see her—so close and yet so far—standing with a group of other women while a cluster of the tentacled aliens stand across from them in some kind of ceremony. All of the women wear metal collars with a colored stone at the throat, marking them as the troupe, I imagine.

The Britonians stand between the two.

Goddess, she's beautiful. It's almost impossible not to remain hidden. When President Montgomery finally opens the car door, I can't contain myself any longer. I take off at a dead run, skirts swishing, and when she sees me, she runs too.

We meet in the middle, clinging together and swinging with the force of our running. I can't stop kissing her and to their credit, the aliens stop whatever process they're doing while we greet each other.

But the process is exactly what Elex had mentioned.

Tera became a citizen of Earth again by changing her address to the facility where Kenny stays. On top of that, she's told that she's next up in the Match Program. And when she's matched to Relion, her best friend, she's so angry she slaps him right out in the courtyard. We take a ten-minute break to

calm her down, heading indoors, where she admits that she wants a marriage instead of a mating so a wealthy old husband will take care of Kenny.

Sweet child.

While I don't want her to feel horrible that she's been used by the president, I have to tell her that Kenny is well taken care of. That I've been working overtime for six years while living on the grounds. That I can pay his tuition myself, even without the huge discount I'm allowed.

I beg her to take these six months as a vacation and forgive her best friend and thankfully, she agrees. It's only then that I notice the stone at her collar is different from everyone else's. It's lost its color. But there's no time to ask why.

When the portal closes upon Tera and Relion's departure, everyone is in a daze over the drama the recent match had.

"Tera will be fine," Anya says. She's the third mating of our Earth females. Tera had introduced her as the leader of their dance troupe and her best friend. Jaire, comes to stand at her side—the one who had been annulled from her sister during the third mating because he'd married Anya. He's wearing the same uniform as the others, a purple silk that almost matches his skin tone, with gold threading and buttons. A sword is strapped to his back and there's a belt at his waist with sheaths for knives that fit between his tentacles. He's obviously in love with her since his tentacles reach for her constantly.

"She may be angry with Relion for not letting her marry, but she loves him. I wish you could have seen them together before all this," Anya says.

"They really are perfect for each other," Sydney says.

All the other girls nod their heads.

I smile shakily because it's just what I need. Reassurance that my baby girl will be fine. There's so much relief to hear that this is a love match. I couldn't stand the thought that Elex might have been interested in my daughter.

I would have supported it if she loved him, of course. But I'm secretly relieved he's not with her.

Then he approaches. Just like before, a zing of awareness hits my midsection at the same time his delicious scent fills my nose. Cologne? He's gorgeous and familiar, like an old friend, even though I've only met him once before. His skin color isn't as dark as Jaire's and his eyes aren't as light. Jaire's have a ring of light gold around the iris.

Elex's are dark, purple pupils that seem to glow, but surrounded by dark, jet-black irises. Sexy. Focused on me. He holds out his hand for me to shake and I extend mine into it for the second touch I've ever shared with the man.

He's staring at me like he's never going to let me go.

"Welcome to Eden, Christina," he murmurs, and his deep, exotic accent sends a curl of desire into my belly.

Wow. I thought he was strange when I first saw him, but the strangeness is no longer apparent. Perhaps because there are so many other Adroki here, he's no longer the odd man out. In any case, now it's just heat and power. Strength and... sex appeal. I haven't felt drawn to a single man since I was a teenager and now, I'm drawn to a strange alien.

"Thank you."

"Thank you for trusting me."

He was right. So right. Of course, I hadn't known that until President Montgomery pulled up at the gates two hours ago. I'd glanced at Dori before I left and saw her slipping to the file cabinet to enact the paperwork we'd agreed upon to keep Kenny safe in my absence.

I glance toward President Montgomery. He's busy arguing with the Britonian who leads the Match Program.

"Please allow me to keep you safe now that Relion is keeping Tera safe," Elex says softly. I'm not sure exactly what he's asking but it seems to be important. "Trust me?"

"I do."

A smile cuts across his face and for a moment, I'm breathless. He's utterly gorgeous, wicked and sexy. I'd love to get to know this man some more.

"Christina!" President Montgomery barks. "We're leaving."

Without breaking eye contact, Elex calls out. "No, she's not."

Montgomery marches our way but doesn't get too close. His secret service flank him on either side. "Step aside, Captain Mahogani. I'm sure Christina wants to get back to her son."

A gasp escapes me and Elex's gaze studies my lips where they've opened slightly. I'm not sure how the president can make such an innocent statement sound like a threat, but he manages.

"She'll see her son shortly," Elex says. "He's on his way right now, along with their bags." Then he turns to me. "I hope it's okay that we packed your things. I instructed them to take the utmost care."

"Her son?" Montgomery barks. "You can't just remove a citizen from a specialized facility. Especially one such as *him*. Who do you think you are?"

Elex turns to him. "His guardian." He narrows his eyes. "I have interest in his mother, and her permission to remove him from his facility. Oh, look. There he is now," his voice drops to a lower volume. "On the neutral territory of the annexed land of Eden. Both will be staying here until Tera returns to make her decision," he says to Montgomery.

Just beyond the gates, an alien spaceship hovers and slowly lowers onto the landing port near the building. It's the same type of vehicle that Elex used when he first visited me. As we watch, it lowers to the ground, and settles noiselessly before the door starts to open.

Elex turns to me. "Since Tera changed her address, I think you might feel comfortable doing the same?"

I nod, smiling at his subtle hint. Tera changing her address is what trapped her into Earth's citizenship. I'll need to forgo mine to avoid the president's wrath.

"Mum!" Kenny jumps from the pod as soon as the door lifts and runs toward me on his short legs. He hugs me with both arms tight around my middle, then looks up into my face. "Where my brother, Ree? An' Terr."

The president's eyes narrow as he realizes that Kenny knows Relion. And suddenly I'm very, very glad that Elex brought Kenny to me where we're safe from him for the next six months.

"Hey, little male," Elex says softly. "I'm Elex, Ree's friend, along with Jaire, here." He gestures to Anya's mate. "We're going to take good care of you and your *maman* until he and Tera return, okay?"

"Okay, I lika that," Kenny says.

"Would you like to come with me to start fixing lunch?" Anya asks Kenny. "I'm Tera's best friend. She's like my own sister."

Kenny lights up. "You knowa my sister? You lika Terr?"

"I love her." Her voice is soft and sure as she holds out a hand to him.

He takes it, twining his fingers carefully with hers. "I can makka girrrl cheese."

She leads him into the house, away from what's happening.

Her mate stays and I'm aware he's staying silent, but back-up protection from the president.

"Are you sure about this, Christina?" President Montgomery says. "If you stay on this land, I can't keep you safe."

His voice drips with malice and I'm angry. So angry that I had ten minutes alone with my daughter after six years of silence. That this man made promises to us that he never kept.

And now he has the nerve to talk about his protection? “I don’t need your protection, President Montgomery. I have Elex.”

His lip curls in disgust. “Like mother, like daughter, I see.”

But Elex? He holds his hand out to me, palm up. When I place my fingertips in his, he lifts it and gently kisses my hand. More butterflies swish around in my belly.

“I will make every dream of yours come true, Christina,” Elex says and the utter conviction in his voice leaves me quaking at the knees. He truly believes he can give me the world.

“I will return to the facility and make sure your people had the proper permission to retrieve her son,” Montgomery barks to Mikhail. “If it is not complete, I expect that boy to be returned immediately.”

Whereupon I will be forced to leave Eden also, because I can’t leave my son unprotected.

But Mikhail smiles serenely and nods. “Of course, sir.”

His calm defuses the president’s temper. Montgomery storms off toward his limo. Elex doesn’t let go of my hand as the men in suits all pile in and the car takes off. He’s holding my hand, right there in front of everyone.

Another alien dressed in a uniform approaches us.

“You’re a little young to be Tera’s *maman*, aren’t you?” he asks.

“Bugger off, Haze,” Elex says smoothly. “She’s mine.”

I can’t help the sugary sweetness that flows through my veins at his words.

“Picked the ugliest asshole of the lot,” the other mutters as he wanders off, Jaire laughing as he leaves with him.

Elex just smiles, making my lips curl.

“Your president was surprised,” Elex says. “Your friend? Doris?”

“Dori.”



“Yes. She said to tell you that when the president picked you up, he checked the permissions slip to make sure nothing had changed. Of course, it hadn’t yet. Until she saw you leave with him, and then she changed them.”

“You don’t think that’ll put her in danger, do you?” I ask, biting my lip.

“We have the Britonians heading there now. They’re asking if anyone would like to join a new facility—like your old one—here in Eden that we’ve built. I imagine several will jump ship, including your friend.”

“I’ll be able to work there? At the new place?” I ask eagerly. Maybe ... maybe in six months I won’t have to leave at all.

Elex smiles at me. “That’s the plan, Christina. In the meantime, I’ve built a small home for you.”

“You built?”

“Well, I had some members of my clan come over to help. The goal was to get it up as quickly as possible to provide a home for you and Kenny in the hopes you would stay.”

“Anya mentioned that I might stay in Tera’s bedroom during our break from the ceremony.”

“Yes. That is also a possibility. But the dancers’ house isn’t conducive to privacy with as many of us who stroll in and out.” His hand reaches out and tucks my loose hair behind my ear. I’d released the knot on top of my head and my hair falls in waves around my face.

“Do you think I need privacy?” My voice is amused.

“I hope you’ll want privacy.” His eyes darken and his head lowers to mine. My breath catches as he comes near. His lips hover right over mine. “May I?” he asks, and I can feel his warm breath. He smells like spearmint.

“Yes. Please.”

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

## ELEX

**S**he said yes.

I haven't been able to get this female off my mind for an entire week. Since the first moment I laid eyes on her.

Goddess, the look on her face when she'd entered the dining room of the facility where her son had stayed. She glowed, the way a female does when she's expecting. A smile stretched from ear to ear and her strange human eyes bubbled with happiness.

I knew from that point forward that I wanted her to look at *me* that way. Every day, for the rest of our lives. Because this female, this glorious, vibrant human female will one day be mine. I've never felt anything more sure in my life.

That look of pure unadulterated love across her face quickly changed when her eyes fell upon me.

And now, a week later, she gives me permission to kiss her.

Ever so slowly, I drop my head, giving her time to change her mind. But instead, her arms wrap around my neck like she's not going to let go.

This feels right. I know, deep inside, that this is the place I'm meant to be.

My lips touch hers and it feels like an explosion of taste, want, need. She's delicate and floral and so sure of herself.

The confidence of a self-assured, strong human woman. There's never been such a turn-on.

I lock my mouth to hers and as much as I'd like to try to be gentle, raw primal need takes over. All of my senses flare, splayed open before her. I pry her lips apart and plunder her mouth, tasting her, our tongues dueling for control, my tentacles wrapping around her.

She's panting with need. She hides nothing.

This is a grown female. Ripe, lush beauty, sultry heat, inner strength. She knows what she wants and refuses to deny her needs. She wants me just as much as I do her. I want her breasts mashed against me, her nipples poking stiffly into my chest.

I grip her hips, pulling her close as her hands rove over the muscles of my chest, my shoulders, my biceps and finally her arms lock around my neck as if she'll hold me to her forever. I'm about to lift her to wrap her legs around my waist, grind my pelvis to her wet warmth when I remember we're out in the yard.

Reluctantly, I lift my head from hers when a throat clears.

Christina looks dazed as if she doesn't know why I stopped and damn if that doesn't make me want to growl at the newcomer and go back to kissing my mate.

*My mate.*

My inner beast realizes what the modern male does not. This female is mine.

"Mikhail," I acknowledge. "Meet Christina, Tera's *maman*."

Christina pinkens, and while the sweet taste of embarrassment wafts from her skin, she holds herself together as if kissing me is natural.

I'm well aware that on this planet, it's not.

I let my tentacles slowly unwind from her as she turns to shake the Britonian's hand.

"Christina," he murmurs. "So nice to finally meet the woman who raised Tera. You did a remarkable job."

“Thank you,” she says. “But she was an amazing child.”

He smiles smoothly. “And yet you’re doing just as an incredible job with Kenny.”

She grins, showing her jest. “Well, that one has been my trial.”

Mikhail smiles. “I see you are in good hands here. Elex will take you to your new home. We’ll be back tomorrow by noon to set up in the auditorium in the main house. I have a call scheduled with Juris, the king of the Adroki. I’m sure Tera will be there and you and Kenny can speak with her if you wish.”

“I would love to!” Christina says.

“I’m sure everyone has reassured you that she and Relion are fine, but I know it must have been hard to see how upset she was. This will give you a chance to see for yourself that she and Relion really are best friends. And in six months, you’ll see her in person.”

“In six months, she has to choose to stay there or suffer here, though.” A slightly acrid taste of worry floods her.

“Things have a way of working out,” Mikhail says. “Lilaina is working on a plan. Captain Relion is a member of the King’s Guard. Just as Jaire is. Eden is a neutral territory, annexed from Earth by the president himself. Since Anya can’t leave, Jaire is stationed here. I’m sure we’ll find a way to work it out, so Tera is safe here in Eden while Relion serves here. It’s all semantics,” he says, and while it’s much more complicated than he’s making it seem, I know he’s trying to set her at ease. He doesn’t want her to worry for her entire six lunar cycles.

“Thank you for letting me know about the call tomorrow,” Christina says. “I’ll be there.”

Mikhail inclines his head. “I will leave you to get to know your own mate.”

He turns and walks away, leaving a baffled Christina staring after him.

“Mate?” she says.

“Don’t worry about that,” I tell her. “Let’s just get to know each other, yes?”

“I didn’t—I mean, we didn’t agree to anything. There was no ceremony or anything like that.”

Poor mate sounds confused like she’s reasoning with herself.

“You didn’t trick yourself into the unknown by accepting my kiss, Christina.” I grin gently at her. “Mikhail was just planting the seed.”

“But...but...”

“A mate is just a way of saying you’re mine. I’m yours. We don’t follow an official marriage ceremony like you do on your planet.”

“So this doesn’t have anything to do with the Match Program?”

I shake my head. “No.”

A sense of relief floods through her and I tilt my head, wondering about that. Does she fear the mating? The program? Perhaps it will set her at ease to visit Tera tomorrow.

“I’d like to be your liaison while you live here in Eden. Let me?” I offer because I sense that she will be much more amenable to a relaxed relationship.

She nods.

“But rest assured. I think you are the most beautiful female on the planet. I want nothing more than to get to know you.” I take her hand and kiss it.

Her lips part as I kiss her hand and I know she feels it also—this deep, magnetic pull between us. The sexual awareness.

“Come, beautiful. Let me take you to lunch.”

I don’t let go of the hand I’m holding, the hand I just kissed. No, I keep it clasped gently in my right hand, across

my body, as I steer her with my left hand at the small of her back toward the main house.

The first thing we hear is Kenny's laughter. The little male sounds happy here.

"Mum! Mum," he calls out. "Jaire...he tella me we can see Terr tomorrow! An' a Ree, too. But see her ona phone." He holds his hand up to his ear, mimicking a phone device, I imagine.

"Yes, baby," Christina says in her smooth, sultry voice. "We'll have to get to bed early so we can be back here tomorrow for the visit."

"I wakka up early, mum," he says in a bragging voice. "Always."

She winces and whispers to me. "Sometimes it would be nice if he'd sleep in. Just once."

"Christina! Over here," Anya says, where she sits at a table with Daphne, Sydney, and Lyssa.

I scowl at Anya because there is just one chair—enough room for Christina. She snickers, knowing full well she's cockblocked me, as she looks down at her soup and sandwich.

"I will get you a plate," I tell Christina as I hold the chair out for her to sit.

She sits gracefully and I scoot her to the table, ignoring the wide mouth of Sydney.

"Eat fast," I hiss at Sydney, ignoring the scamp as she rolls her eyes at me. The youngest member of the dance troupe and I have bonded over watching romance bloom for others.

I head to the kitchen to get a sandwich for Christina and heap a bowl full of the soup gently simmering on the stove. Taking a small plate, I load some fruit onto it. Then I pause. She may be hungry. I add another sandwich to the plate.

"What's your *maman* drink?" I ask her son, who is at the counter assembling sandwiches for Elizabeth to flip onto the grill.

“Mum likka tea,” he says, scrunching his nose.

“Lemon? Sugar?”

“Lemon,” he agrees and shakes his head when I point to the sugar. “Mum not likka that.”

I stick a spoon into the soup and a fork into the fruit.

The boy giggles like he thinks I’m not going to be able to carry everything. But my front tentacles are quite nimble, and I pick up the drink and plate of fruit with those, then use my hands for the sandwich and soup.

“Wow.” The little male looks impressed, and I wink at him as I carry everything away.

“Here you go.” I place the plates in front of her.

“Oh, thank you! You didn’t have to do that,” she says.

“Of course, I do. You’re hungry and we can’t have that.” I tuck her hair behind her ear. “Enjoy.”

I head back into the kitchen to where her son is.

“This one’s mine an’ yours,” he says, stacking ham and cheese carefully onto bread. The sandwiches are larger than the others, double deckers.

“Do you think we can eat all that?” I ask.

“Yes!” he says. “We’s big strong guys who like our veggies.”

I’m not sure where the veggies are in the sandwich.

“So, you likka my mum?” he asks, eyes on the sandwiches he prepares.

“So much,” I answer truthfully.

“Why?”

“When I first saw her, I felt like someone punched me in the gut. I thought she was the most beautiful female I’ve ever seen. I love that she’s tough. She’s strong. I want to take care of her and keep her safe. And,” I conclude, wriggling my tentacles, “I can give her lots of hugs.”



He presses his fingers to his mouth as he giggles. “An’ you likka my bruther? Ree?”

“He’s my best friend.” Best is probably pushing it, but I’m sure Relion thinks we’re close.

“You likka kids? Even if they sometimes stinky?” Kenny scowls.

“Yeah, I like *kishren*. Sometimes the stinky ones.”

“Okay.” He turns to Rebecca. “Here, ‘Becksa.”

Carefully, he scoots the plate with the two double decker sandwiches her way. Rebecca smiles and expertly flips them onto the sizzling grill with a pat of butter.

“Let’s make our bowls,” I say.

“Okay. I only likka little soup.”

Probably because his sandwich is monster-sized. I fill a bowl halfway, earning his approval.

“Make sure you get some fruit,” Rebecca says to him. “Relion says he wants you big and strong.” She winks at me.

“Yeah, I already knows that,” Kenny says. “Elex, you wanna same fruit as me?”

“I’m sure I’ll like whatever you do,” I agree, reaching for the plates Rebecca has flipped out for us.

“You wanna drinka pop, Elex?”

“Nah. I’ll save my pop for dinner. I’ll drink water for lunch.”

“Yeah, thatsa what I was gonna say too,” Kenny agrees.

I snort. I’m sure he asked if I wanted the sugary soft drink because he thought I’d say yes.

We head to the dining room and I seat him in a chair someone placed across from his *maman*, setting down his plate and drink. Then I hiss at Sydney, who sits next to Christina. “Scram.”

She rolls her eyes and grabs a chair alongside the wall, vacating her spot so I may sit next to Christina. I set my plate

down along with my drink and a piece of pie I brought for her.

“So, Christina,” Sydney drawls, looking at me. “You single?”

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

## CHRISTINA

“Um, yes.” I avoid looking at Elex when I answer because I don’t want to make it obvious. It’s more than clear why I didn’t want to send Tera off to marry an alien.

I’m interested in this alien.

He makes my heart flutter, my breath quicken, and my palms dampen. I ache to touch him, to hold his hand, to sit on his lap. And from the way he constantly strokes me, even going so far as to wrap a tentacle around my ankle like he just *needs* my touch, he feels the same.

I’m not sure what I did to get so lucky that the feeling is mutual between us.

“How do you know the president?” Anya asks.

This house is filled with beautiful women, from the fresh-faced teen popping her gum to Anya, who sits across from me, serene and graceful. It appears President Montgomery was collecting dolls for a dollhouse.

“He was friends with my ex-husband. When Lyle died, President Montgomery helped me to enter Tera in the dance program here.”

One of the younger girls snorts and now that I see the program, I realize we were duped.

“We were led to believe it was a prime opportunity. She was paid well,” I say.

I leave out the fact that all of her money went to Kenny's care, especially with my son here. He may not be paying attention, but you never know what his little ears will pick up.

"You married Tera's father when she was just a little girl?"

My mouth curls up with the memory. "Yes. A scrawny thing, full of fire. Five years old, about to be six, was clever as a whip, and hadn't had any schooling. That was my job."

"I'll bet she was a fast learner," Anya says.

"Oh yes," I agree. "She excelled."

"And what of your own family?" Anya asks.

"I have two brothers, both married, they've broken all the rules. Each only has one wife." And that's how I was supposed to live my life, with Carlton. "So did my father, however, his was because of necessity. In the beginning he didn't have the funds for a second wife, and as our wealth grew over time, he hadn't bothered to look for another. I imagine it was coming or perhaps it's already come to pass."

"You don't know? Don't keep in touch with them?" Anya asks.

"No." I keep my answers short because what can I say? That I have a shameful secret? That I was given to Tera's father to get rid of the problem that I was?

Besides, the marriage wasn't so bad. It was short term, just a few years, and then I was left a widow with two beautiful babies. All mine to raise how I saw fit. I could never have done that if Kenny's mother hadn't died in childbirth, followed by the death of Lyle and Sheila shortly thereafter. Thankfully I couldn't be pushed into another marriage. Not with two children in my keep.

"Well, I think you'll like your house," Anya says. "Elex had a lot of detail put into it. It's one of the finest. And we've reserved two of the houses next to it for Kenny's immediate friends."

"I thought Dori could pick first," Elex says.

"She'll love that."

“Elex, you staying at Christina’s house tonight? Someone needs to bring her and Kenny back for the conference call in the morning,” Sydney says, and they all take it in stride that we’re already a couple.

“Oh, yay. A sleepover!” Kenny yells, making a fist as his arm shoots straight up in the air.

“If it’s all right with you,” Elex says softly, turning his head toward mine so his words are for my ears only. “There’s a guest bedroom.”

I appreciate that he’s keeping it between us, so I’m not embarrassed or don’t feel obligated. It’s sweet and not at all like what I’m used to. As a woman in a male dominated society, there is no awareness of needing to watch a woman’s feelings. If a man wants a woman, he pursues in any way he wants because it’s rare for a woman to turn anyone down. No matter how many of us end up in marriages with more than one wife, we all strive to be the one who can make a man decide he only wants her.

Sad, really.

I was never that way. I knew I would be the only one in Carlton—my first love’s—life. When he passed, I knew I’d never have another love like that. I didn’t need to please any man and that taught me I didn’t have to pretend that I wasn’t hurt.

After Carlton, I never had those feelings again. Not until now.

When lunch is done, we offer to help with the dishes but three of the dancers are on clean-up duty because they take turns. Not to mention, usually one of the Adroki males ends up pairing with a girl to clean alongside her. They make it fun. It eases some of my concern over Tera being here.

Kenny loves to sweep and mop, so they hand him a bucket and let him go to town. He’s in second heaven, cleaning sections of the floors and drying them carefully so no one slips. I know that on any other day, he’ll ask to be allowed to

clean the baseboards and everyone's mouths will drop. That's another one of my son's favorite chores.

When my kids were growing up, we made cleaning fun. We made it a daily occurrence. And I taught them that if they didn't have a partner to clean with—again, I was interested in changing the unfortunate pairings we were thrust into—that it was meditative to do something simple and mundane like cleaning baseboards or windows. That getting the job done as perfectly as possible was its own reward and reflected your own character.

One thing that shows with Kenny's character is the ability to adapt to new situations. My boy can fit in wherever he goes. He had a hard time when he first started at his Academy, but that was because there were too many changes—Tera leaving home, me leaving our home. It made sense for me to move there once I was able to get a job on the premises.

After lunch, Elex takes us both on a walk to show us the grounds. There is open acreage, plotted for farmland. Elex tells us it was wasted space until Tera came up with the idea to use the empty fields. He shows us the original milk farm, now used as a school of dance shared with the midwifery classes held by the Britonians on the other side of the building. For some strange reason, combining the two very different schools made the entire concept boom. Women are on a waiting list for the chance to try one or both of the schools.

Elex doesn't need to try to bond with Kenny. There's an openness between them that speaks of getting to know each other. My son mimics Elex's movements, taking my hand when Elex does. The three of us tramp through the open trails hand in hand and nothing feels awkward or forced.

It's amazing, like Kenny and I knew Elex all our lives. Like I didn't meet Elex a week ago and Kenny didn't meet him just today.

There is such a thing as love at first sight. I know because I fell in love with my daughter the first time I saw the little elfin face grinning with the missing front tooth like she'd been waiting her whole life for me to appear. I fell in love with my

son the first moment he opened his mouth, took his first breath, and screamed bloody murder at the world he'd been born into. I fell in love with Carlton the first day we moved into their neighborhood, and I played mudcakes with him.

And I fell in love with Elex the first time I saw the terrifying figure he imposed, even if I didn't realize it. All I knew is how my stomach churned at the thought of him asking for Tera's hand. And how great my relief was that it wasn't him.

"Lookka, momma. Thas leminy balm." Kenny points to a plant.

"We can make salads."

"Itta bring lots of bees."

Bees were almost non-existent now. The Britonians had brought in the *mingae*, a sort of hummingbird insect to replace them. "Bees are important. What's lemon balm good for?" I ask him, just to remind him.

"Moods! Good for relaxin'."

"Smart boy," I praise.

"You're amazing," Elex says to him and Kenny beams. Looking at the two of them, I fall even more in love.

But it's that night after we've had dinner between the three of us, and built our fort on the floor of the den that it hits me. When we've crawled into sleeping bags with a film dancing across the ceiling. When Kenny's soft snores fill the night that I look over his head to Elex to find him watching me with his heart in his eyes.

I stare right back, letting him see every emotion on my face. Tomorrow isn't the guest room for him.

While such thoughts should give me dreams about new love and maybe desire and sex, the dream I have is more of a memory. A time when my babies were little.

Kenny was just born, his skin still wet, while Loretta demanded her son. I rubbed his tiny arms and legs briskly, wanting to delay the inevitable.



The baby didn't look like his mother. He didn't look like his father. He had unique features all his own. Features I recognized from a woman's child in our old town. A little girl so sweet...but Loretta, nor Lyle, would ever notice the marking of an angel. All they would see is the waste of a male child.

"Bring him to me, stupid wretch," Loretta hissed.

From the open doorway, Sheila bustled in. Tera peeked into the doorway behind her, thankfully she was smart enough to keep out.

I wrapped his little body in the soft blue blanket, covered his little head with a stocking cap to keep him warm, and cooed softly to him, chanting over and over. "Don't be afraid, little man. You are beautiful. You are special. You are loved."

I placed him on her lap.

The wide-eyed baby looked startled, his eyes rounder than they should be for a newborn.

Loretta's shrieks filled the room, making the baby howl at the top of his lungs. "What did you do?" she yelled between sobs.

"What? I didn't do anything!"

Surely, she couldn't think he was born this way because of his birthing?

"What were you chanting, witch?" Loretta snarled. "Bespelled my husband into taking you in when we didn't want a third wife, disrupting our happy family, and now you bespelled our firstborn son too?" Her voice raised on another scream.

"Happy family?" I ask, bewildered.

She and Sheila hated each other's guts. In fact, it had been Sheila's job to be second wife, to be the magnanimous one in the household, but instead she stole all of Lyle's attentions and bragged about being the first to produce a child.

Loretta had viciously argued that bringing a girl child into the household was worthless. In front of little Tera, no less.

And Sheila? She never defended her little girl.

“Witch! Witch!” she screamed, pointing a long-nailed finger at me. Rather witch-like herself. Of course, she could afford long nails. There was little that she did around the house. “You’re jealous because your own womb remains dry! No seed will take in you unless it’s that of a devil spawn.”

“I’ll go get Lyle,” Sheila hissed, and raced out of the room.

Loretta stared at me as soon as Sheila left. The horrid, horrid woman must see something in my face because her expression turns calculating, an ugly smile stretching her chapped lips.

“Maybe there was a reason you were offered as third wife, eh? Maybe things don’t work as they seem.” Her eyes dropped to my belly. She laughed maniacally, in the throes of a hysterical fit, as she stared down at her son.

I snatched the baby up from Loretta’s lap, afraid she’d purposely toss him to the floor. Loretta cupped her hands over her face, sobbing hysterically.

“What the hell will I do with that?” she shrieked, clutching the empty blanket he’d lain in and flinging it from her.

And a sinking feeling hits my gut when I realized I’d guessed correctly.

I hushed the baby in my arms, rocking him, but it was hard for him to stop crying with such carrying on happening.

A little hand tugged at my skirts. “Mutha Chwisthina? Is he scared too?”

Little Tera usually called me Momma Christina, when the other two weren’t present, but mother when they were. Smart as a whip, this child.

“Oh, baby girl.” I sat in a chair and used my other arm to pull her close, kissing her little cheek. “It’s just too noisy in here for him. But he’ll be fine. See how beautiful he is?”

I lay him on my lap and to my surprise—despite his mother’s shrieks in the air—he calmed.

But then Lyle and Sheila burst in.

“She did something to him!” Loretta wailed. “She marked my son!”

Lyle’s lips tightened, tired of being the go-between, the referee between his wives. No doubt he’d have gotten rid of me, payment from my father and Gary be damned, but it was convenient to have someone care for the girl-child he didn’t want to bother with.

That no one wanted to bother with.

Plus, for as much as Loretta and Sheila sniped, they were able to relax with me doing all the household work. They even got along better with someone else to focus their hatred on.

Lyle knew this. His wives must have fought constantly before I’d ever arrived.

He took one look at the baby and swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. I could see the emotions flit across his face.

Disgust. Disappointment. Another child he didn’t want to bother with. Then he looked at me.

A new emotion crossed his face as he took in my form.

Oh, God.

He was disappointed in the child from Sheila, even though she pleased him to no end in the bedroom. He was more disappointed in the son from Loretta. Maybe I could produce a child he’d take.

Except that could never happen. And it wouldn’t be long until Loretta mentioned it.

But then Sheila screamed. “Loretta!”

Loretta’s wails stopped as she slumped down in the bed, her face as white as the sheets.

“Get the doctor!” Lyle barked to Sheila, and she wailed as she lifted her skirts to flee the room.

I kissed the top of Tera's head and stood, easing her into the vacated seat to keep her out of the way, then gently deposited the baby into the bassinet next to the chair. I quickly made my way to Loretta, using two fingers to check her neck.

Nothing.

My own pulse raced through me. Surely, I couldn't find hers because of my panic? Carefully, so Lyle wouldn't get the same idea the others would jump to, I placed one shaking finger under her nostrils to feel, instead of cupping my hand around her nose and mouth to be sure.

I couldn't feel air.

She had no pulse, no breath.

Shocked, I looked up at him. His face was placid. Expressionless.

He knew.

Sheila and Loretta had a screaming match once, when I was first married in. Loretta fought tooth and nail for her place as first wife, but Sheila had bragged that she was the one to bring in healthy babies. That with Loretta's weaker disposition, she shouldn't be allowed to try.

But Loretta got pregnant anyway. Deliberately.

To be fair, I never saw anything weak about her. A vicious woman, her tone as cold as the biting wind, she could asphyxiate you with a glare.

When the doctor burst in—he lived just two doors down, but Lyle hadn't wanted to pay him to deliver their son—he took one look at Lyle and calmly, methodically, went to work. There was no rush. No sense of urgency. He was just here to do a job.

A mediocre job.

Like most things do, it dawned on me suddenly that both Lyle and the doctor thought this might be a way to bring some peace to our dramatic household. One less wife to bicker with.

Lyle Garrett had chosen his first wife for the second time in his life.

A shiver ran through me.

Males stuck together in this world. Why did females fight each other? But then I remember the woman doctor at the hospital where I recovered. She'd patted my hand after the surgery, two of her nurses with her. She'd told me that there were countless women who couldn't conceive after the wars. That I never had to tell anyone of my surgery. The way she'd stressed anyone, I knew she meant because I was young enough to marry. That I could trick a man into a good marriage, maybe be first wife.

Is that what Loretta had done? Did Lyle find out after the marriage that she shouldn't have children? Was she okay with not having them as long as she was first wife, but the fights with Sheila became so much to handle, she decided to do it against the doctor's advisement?

Then the nurses stepped in, telling me Dr. Elizabeth Minert was the best in the industry. That I would have no scar to mark my body. That as long as I pretended to need a week off to bleed each month, no one need ever know.

Lyle and the doctor begin whispering and I don't want to know what they talked about. Hurriedly, I pushed the bassinet out of the room, holding Tera's little hand anchored onto it so she wouldn't have to witness what was happening to Loretta. Sheila, the ever-neglectful natural mother that she was, didn't even bother to deal with her daughter, she just wailed at the foot of Loretta's bed, carrying on as if they'd been best friends.

"Momma Chwisthina." Her fingers, so small in mine, felt like a balm to my soul. She had a wonderful vocabulary, this smart little girl, but the recent loss of her two front teeth caused the most adorable lisp that I would never forget.

"Yes, sweet one?" I tapped the tip of her precious nose.

"He's a beautiful baby bwother. Whath's his name?"

"I don't think he has one yet, my love."

“Maybe Mutha Lowetta will give him one when she wakes?” Tera peered into the room where the doctor was lifting the sheet over Loretta’s face.

Casually, I angled her away.

“Your brother likes you,” I said. “See how he quiets and watches you? He knows you’re special to him. He already knows you’re his big sister and he loves you.”

Footsteps echoed briskly on the polished floors, stopping a few feet from us.

“Let me see this one,” Dr. Brown said, the fuzzy wispy hair on the top of his head flapping under the ceiling fan of the parlor. His no-nonsense tone and his brusque demeanor set Tera to bristle.

I pulled her onto my lap to calm her as the doctor unwrapped the baby, pulling his tiny arms and feet. The cooler air made him cry as the doctor performed his tests.

Tera’s little brows knit together and she jumped off my lap, pushing the doctor with all her might, making him look down at her in surprise.

“Tera,” I said weakly.

She’d already gotten to the bassinet, covering her brother with his blankets, holding his little hand in hers, and his tears quieted as he watched her with those large, round eyes.

Lyle escorted the sobbing Sheila from the room.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

## ELEX

“Christina. Wake up, sweet.”

She'd been mumbling, calling out Tera's name, and Kenny's. I was afraid she'd wake the youngling between us, but he seemed intent to snore.

Her eyes snap open. “Elex.”

“Yes.” It fills my heart with pride to know she thought of me immediately upon waking. When she'd begun to thrash and moan, I'd stepped behind the sofa, coming around to her side, even moving my zippered sleeping nest close so I could cuddle her.

“You were dreaming. I didn't want you to wake Kenny,” I whisper.

“Thank you,” she says, her sleepy eyes focused on my face like she's not quite sure if she's still dreaming.

“Want to talk about it?” I don't want to push her to speak about uncomfortable subjects, but I want to learn everything about this female. I want to bask in what has made her so strong, so different from the rest. Not that the other humans aren't strong. But they seem to have to realize their strength when pushed into a corner. Christina is already there.

Has she already been pushed into having no other choice?

I find I have to tamp down the growl that threatens to erupt.

“Kenny's birth,” Christina says. “It was wonderful and yet horrible at the same time. His birth mother had died, but that



was just one of the awful things that happened.”

“Go on,” I urge.

“She hated me. Both of the wives did. Loretta birthed Kenny, Sheila birthed Tera. When Loretta saw Kenny’s features, she screamed at me. Called me horrible things like witch.”

“What is that?”

“An evil person who can weave spells for harm. Do black magic. Not everyone believes it’s real. It’s mostly said to cast aspersions on that person. To make others fear or hate them.”

“And she called you this why?” I can feel myself bristle, but I mask it from her, because she is so gentle, so wise, she seems above petty anger. Jealousy, which these other two females felt for her.

“She wanted to blame me for the way Kenny was born. His condition is different from the majority of others, and our society looks down at anyone who is different. She didn’t want to take the blame for having what she considered a substandard son. It’s sad, really. She never got to know how perfect he is. How loving. How amazing and loyal. How much he’s learned, even with the standards of learning against him. Learning is structured for individuals whose minds work differently. But he still adapted and learned, even through all that. I’m so proud of him.”

“That’s what love does. The bond between you, your son, and your daughter can be felt.”

She nods, thinking a moment, before her eyes refocus on my face.

She reaches out and cups my jaw and I melt under her touch, turning my face to press a kiss to the center of her palm.

“Then she died. Turns out, she’d been hiding a secret, not uncommon with human women. She had a weak heart. The doctor had advised her against pregnancy. But she could feel herself losing the battle between herself and Tera’s mom, Sheila, for first wife. She thought having the shot at a child,

with a fifty percent chance it could be a son, might tip the scales in her favor.”

*...not uncommon with human women.* Does Christina also hold a secret?

“After she died,” she continues, her voice even quieter so Kenny doesn’t hear. But the little male softly snores. “The doctor asked Lyle what the baby’s name should be. I’d like to think Lyle was grief-stricken. I’d like to think he was put on the spot. But that wasn’t the case.”

She pauses and we both listen for Kenny’s breath, making sure it’s even.

“So, what did he say?”

“He said whatever. He didn’t care. Then he turned to me and said, ‘Handle it, Christina.’ Handle it. Like Kenny was a problem. That set the tone.”

“And you made it better.”

She blinks. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I can see the three of you huddled together. You, with Tera on your lap, and Kenny in hers, your arms holding them both safe and close, discussing what to call him.”

She huffs a soft breath of laughter. “That’s exactly what happened. I asked Tera what he looked like and she said a Kenny. And maybe if he was feeling fancy, he could up it to Kenneth. Which is about the only word she could pronounce correctly since she was missing her *twoo fwont teeth*. So Kenneth Michael Garrett he became.”

I snicker softly, and we both freeze when Kenny calls out, “Nuh, uh, Terr! You owe me two grapes and I givva you the blueberry.” Then the little male farts, turns over, and snores.

“It seems talking in one’s sleep runs in the family,” I drawl, and Christina buries her face in my chest, her shoulders shaking in silent laughter.

She laughs harder when I say, “And I hope the gas does not.”



Morning brings about a leisurely breakfast before we usher Kenny off for his shower. The entire time we escort him up his stairs, he tells us about his friend who refuses to use soap when they bathe. I fight back my laughter as he describes the stink from the child who plays in dirt and collects worms, describing the dirt under his nails in such detail I have to wonder if the friend is him.

While Christina showers, I help him pick out his clothing, and while he gets dressed, I head off to use the shower.

This time when we walk to the main building for the teleconference with Tera and Relion, we look like a family. Like a year has passed overnight. I hold Christina's hand, no need to fear that I'll scare her away with my intensity. Not anymore, it's obvious she feels the same. Kenny skips ahead, leaving me with his beautiful *maman*. When we reach the main building, we enter through the side doors that used to lead to the dancers' stage. Now the room has been repurposed to house large meetings.

The Britonians have already set up and one comes to take Kenny in hand, sharing with him how to enter the center circle to show up in the hologram between Earth and Pimeon.

I sit back with Christina, studying her as she takes everything in. I'm aware the technology is off the charts for Earthlings, but Christina's intelligent enough to take everything in stride.

"Have you mated since the loss of Tera's father?" I ask suddenly. How has it never occurred to me that this amazing female might have someone waiting in the wings?

"No." Her smile is bright. "I'm totally, completely free. How about you? Any mates back on your own planet?"

“No. There is no one that waits for me. No one that holds my interest except for a beautiful, albeit strange-looking, Earthling.”

It brings a burst of laughter from her—the sound rich and fulfilling and curling my own lips.

“I’m sure it must be odd to watch us walk on two legs.”

I nod, even though it’s teasing. “I wonder how you remain balanced enough to remain upright.”

“Is that why you hold my hand?” she teases, then pouts and the sight of that full upper lip makes me want to suck it between my teeth. “I thought it was because you liked me.”

“I might,” I drawl. “I need more kisses to make sure.”

“You kissed me yesterday,” she reminds.

“Ahh, precious. It was but once.”

“What’s holding you back?”

“I didn’t want to shock your youngling,” I admit.

“What do you think he’ll do if he sees you kiss me?”

I cock my head to the side. “Giggle?”

It brings a smile to her lips. “Cheer,” she counters.

I huff a bark of laughter. “Shall we wager?” Either way, I figure I win. I still get the sweet kiss from Christina.

“Hmm. What do you have to offer, my gambling Adroki?”

Such words shouldn’t make such a longing roll through me. But she called me hers. I would offer this female the world on a platter.

“I might agree to anything you wish for an entire night. I’d be at your beck and call.”

She narrows her eyes. “That sounds interesting. I can command you at will?”

My tentacle, brushing up the bare skin of her arm where I fling it across the back of her chair, tastes the pheromones that erupt in a sweet burst from her skin.

Sudden, heady arousal.

“Anything,” I say, emphasizing the word so she understands of what I speak. Then I lean closer to her, my words for her ears alone. “You may command me to use my mouth. My tongue. My tentacles, in any way that you wish. I would worship you, Christina. If you would let me.”

“It doesn’t seem fair that I would just command you to do my bidding, though,” she says, her tongue darting out to wet her luscious lips.

“If I win the wager, I won’t throw away the chance to command you to do wicked, dirty things to me.”

She grins. “Game on, Adroki. I almost feel bad for you. It’s like taking candy from a baby.”

*But, oh, Christina. Do you not see that it’s me who wins?*

I reach up and brush a lock of hair, tucking it behind her strange human appendage that she listens from. The ear. Hers is delicate and furred like a flower. She wears the lobes pierced and tiny pieces of glass adorn the studs.

I shall offer her diamonds. I shall steal a pair of this strange jewelry, affix the largest diamonds I own, and replace them in her drawers. The diamonds will be so big, they will cover her lobes. They will draw attention to the beauty of her face.

They will mark my need to possess her.

I lower my head to hers and my thumb brushes the slender line of her jaw as I cup her neck. I angle our heads to where our mouths meet and lock.

A small sigh of contentment erupts from her. I part her lips, tasting her, stroking against her tongue with my own. She’s just as eager and the knowledge makes my cock harden beneath my *nevra*, the plate that covers it. She will be an exciting partner in bed. There is no pretense with Christina. No confusion. No misplaced guilt.

She is a female in charge of her own life. Not a victim, no matter how hard President Montgomery tries to lock her under

his thumb.

With me in her corner, he may as well give up.

“Woohoo!” Kenny yells. “My momma isa kissing Elex!” I grin against her mouth before pulling away and we turn our heads toward him just in time to see him make strange arm movements, wiggling his fingers as he spells out. “K. I. S. S. Spells kiss!”

When my gaze averts to Christina, I find her looking at me. There are snickers all around us, and even a few clap as Kenny takes a bow like a seasoned performer. There is no embarrassment in her gaze, no regret, nothing I would expect from a human female.

“I win, Adroki. Did you see the arm movements? *That* was a cheer.”

I blink. Aggressive female. Much more of a turn-on than that should be.

She leans in and deposits a small kiss to my lips. “I shall take it easy on you.”

“Oh, make me suffer,” I growl.

“Okay, we’re about ready to make contact,” Mikhail says and Kenny scrambles to find a seat.

I snag him with a tentacle and pull him onto my lap. This is the life, my boy on my lap and my mate against my side, the knowledge that we will come together in her bed tonight on both of our minds.

I also notice that Christina has been distracted from the worry she showed over her daughter being carted away from her so quickly. She hadn’t seen her *kish* in six planet rotations and had just a few brief minutes with her, enough to witness Tera’s anger with being tricked into mating Relion. While the rest of us knew the love between the two of them is real, Christina did not. In addition to that, she has a *maman’s* natural worry for her own *kish*, no matter the age.

But as soon as Mikhail’s business is finished and he brings Tera and Relion to the hologram, I can feel Christina relax. It’s

obvious that Tera and Relion have made up and are again full bloom in love with each other. His tentacles wrap around her the way they always did before and both are smiling, despite the tears that roll down her cheeks as she sees her *maman* and *kishling* safe and sound in Eden with the rest of us.

Even though I do not need to make the promise, I still vow right there and then to always keep these two safe. I pull them to me as they leave the hologram space and wrap them in the comfort of my tentacles too.

I don't even mind the knowing grins from the other dancers and Britonians. The entire group is nosy.

But the dancers love Christina, as they should. They pull her to them, no doubt reassuring her again that Tera and Relion love each other.

And probably teasing her over our kiss.

"Iffa you and my momma likka each other, you gonna be my pappy?" Kenny asks.

"If your *maman* will have me, I would love that," I tell him, and assume pappy is a favorable term for a parent.

"Are you a good one?"

"Definitely. One of the best."

"You gotta other girrrlfriends too?" His nose scrunches like girls are disgusting.

I wink at him. "Lots of other females want me. I'm a catch. But I only have eyes for your *maman*."

"Why?"

I turn his head toward where she stands with the dance troupe, fitting in like a rare gem among the other jewels. I drop my cheek to his where I peer over his shoulder.

"See that? She is the most beautiful female in the world."

"Yes. She's is."

"And even though she's already that beautiful, watch when she smiles."

We wait, watching as Sydney says something in her dry tone, and Christina sparkles with laughter.

There it is, her entire face lights up, just the way I saw her for the first time when she thought it was Tera waiting in the dining room that day.

“Magic,” I whisper. “That look that comes over her face when she smiles? That’s love. That’s all the love inside your maman just bubbling over, bursting to get out and make the rest of the world as beautiful as she is.”

“Yes,” he agrees, his little face studying her some more. “I luvva her. And I luvva Terr.”

“You were a very lucky little male,” I tell him. “To have both of those females in your family. You grew up very loved, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Yessa, I did.”

Then he turns slightly and presses a chubby finger to my lips. “An’a when I’s grows up, Ima gonna be just like you. Hansom. An’ strong. An’a daddy.”

My heart threatens to burst. “My boy.”

He twists fully and arms wrap around my neck as he presses a kiss to my cheek.

I rub his little back, aware that he needs love. He is just an adorable, loveable *kish*.

“You gonna love me if I’s not too smart in school?” he whispers.

I snort and tickle his side. “You’re never going to be not smart in school. So yes, I will always love you. Sneaky male.”

“Uh, huh. Mr. Pichito? He ya say I’m a dummy when I droppa my book.”

“Well, he might know,” I agree, ignoring the slowly heating burn in the pit of my belly. “It takes one to know one. Where is he now?”

I will string him from the trees.



“Oh, he all gone. He gotta fired. My momma come to work at my school, and she yell at Mr. Pichito and file charges.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. An’ then the school find stuff in Mr. Pichito’s room. An’ they gotta call da police. I thinka he a stealer.”

“Then he probably sits in jail. If he doesn’t, I’m going to make sure he does. And just so you know, if anyone ever calls you a name, you come to me.”

His grin stretches wide. “I willa, sir!”

He snuggles to my chest, just like his *maman* does, and I stroke his back until Christina returns.

“Hey, guys,” she says softly, her eyes glued to us as she approaches. “Jaire just told me he got word that Dori and her daughter, Irene, arrived. You want to go see them?”

“Yess!” Kenny jumps up with excitement. “Come on, Elex! You gonna love Uween. She wanna my best fwends. ‘Cept she’s a girl. But that’s okay, ‘cause she gotta vagina. ‘Cept she can’t pee standing up.” He shrugs. “She gotta sit to pee and thatsa sad.”

CHAPTER  
**FIVE**

## CHRISTINA

“Dori!” I embrace my friend where she stands on the front porch, Adroki males carrying her belongings into the house that is to the right of mine.

“Uween! You see Sushi at the park?” Kenny says to her daughter.

“Yah, Kenny. You wanna go play?”

“I dunno. Maybe more fwends will come? I shoulda watch for Sammy. For Jinny.”

“Ok, but what if she learns how to swing higher than you and me, Kinny?” For emphasis, she pokes her chest first, then his.

But just then Susie rolls into the yard. “Kenny! You here too!”

“Yay, Sushi. Now you canna come see my room,” Kenny says.

“My room first,” little Irene says. “I have a pink one.”

All three kids scramble inside the house, leaving us staring after them.

“Dori, you remember Elex?”

“I do,” she says, holding out her hand for him to shake. “Thanks for making this happen.”

He inclines his head, a purple blush marking his cheeks.

“This is a dream come true,” Dori says. “I can’t believe it.”

“Who else is coming?”

Her smile is bright, and her eyes shine with sudden wetness. “All of our crowd. Susie’s parents aren’t here yet, but they let me bring her while they pack up. Sammy’s are. So are Jenny’s.”

“When do Connor and Sean get here?”

“Tomorrow. They want to wait so they can be sure to get all their belongings from the school without any ramification.”

Connor and Sean have a more difficult way of life. While rights to alternate lifestyles has never gone away, after the third war, laws changed. Same sex marriage was again deemed illegal. Even though individual hook-ups weren’t frowned upon, a man was still expected to wed a female to spread his seed. But Connor and Sean both refused to take wives. When an anonymous child was left in the state’s care because of the way he was born, they adopted him and named him Simon. He has a brother now, Aaron.

“We may as well get the permissions out of the way,” Dori says. “I already have Susie here. Kenny’s going to ask to spend the night. I know it’s your first night in the new house all alone. Do you want time to yourself to finish unpacking? Or do you want Kenny there for company?” Dori asks.

“I’m okay with him staying if you’re up to having three. I can take them tomorrow night if you want some unpacking time. Or I can even come help you put stuff away.”

She waves her hand at me. “You have your own stuff to put away. Don’t worry about it. Besides, I have three kids over. I might have to use them for a couple of hours to help unpack the kitchen stuff.”

“Don’t worry about preparing dinner,” Elex says. “I know the dancers from the main house are bringing meals out to the families who are settling in.”

“See that? Even more perfect,” Dori says.

“Isn’t he?” I can’t help the glow in my eyes.

She has a small smirk like she knew this would happen all along but of course she didn't. I'm glad that like attracts like. That my clan, my people, all have open minds. That they don't discriminate and aren't small minded. Of course, most of us have been on the receiving end of people believing our kids were cursed, or worse, contagious, so we're conscious of it. But I'm glad that for once I can let my guard down. That I don't have to fight and claw my way through life because it seems like I have to defend every person I love. Before I learned how to fight, I lost loved ones. My fiancé and my brothers. Carlton, I lost by death, both brothers I had taken by circumstance. After my marriage, my new husband didn't allow me to reach out to them.

I never want to go back there again. I never want to lose anyone, not again. So, I've been unconsciously fighting through life and now, in this annexed land called Eden, I can stop and breathe for just a moment.

I can love without reservation.

And I'm going to love hard and love long.

"That's it, Dori," one of the Adroki males says. "You want to come inside and tell us where to put all the furniture?"

"Don't feel like you have to decide right away," Elex says. "You can have them move something to one spot and have them move it across the room if you want to see how it looks there."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Dori says, eyes huge.

"We're a lot stronger than humans," Elex says. "Look at them. They've hardly broken a sweat." He indicates the movers with a chin nod. The goofy aliens take a step apart from each other and begin to pose like bodybuilders in a competition.

"It's no problem," the first mover says to her, scowling at the guys behind him and making them sober up. "Really."

"Well, if you're sure." Then she winks at me and I'm sure she's going to have them re-arrange stuff just so she can watch

them move. It's not hard to stare at the muscles that flex so easily.

Next to me, Elex growls. He looks adorably jealous, glaring at the movers who still pose, their chests various shades of purple gleaming with a hint of sweat.

"Come on, handsome," I say, winking at him. "I'll let you move my furniture around."

Just like that, his expression clears.

We ignore the sniggers behind us as we head to my house.

As soon as we enter, we can hear Kenny and his friends upstairs putting things away. They must've escaped from Dori's back door and headed to our house. Elex and I pop our heads in to check on them.

"Mum, we gonna goback outta theirs houses too," Kenny says, his speech slurred with excitement. "All day, back and forth."

"Yah, we's gonna spend an hour putting away his toys and then we gonna go do mine, then we gonna go do Suz's," Irene says.

"We have big plans," Susie says.

"Okay, but you remember the rules. A grownup has to know where the three of you are so make sure you say hi when you pop into someone's house."

"Oh, yeah, I tole them, mum. An' is so polite!" he agrees. His mood is so great, he pops up and kisses me, then hugs Elex around the waist.

"Me and Elex will be in the kitchen putting away stuff," I say.

As Elex and I head out, Kenny calls out again. "Mum, you gotta biiig bed. We don' even need the third room and bed for *pap*—for Elex. He's can share your big one."

I freeze in place and look back over my shoulder. My son is grinning huge, then goes back to opening a box like nothing is wrong. The other kids cheer when they see the contents.

Elex nudges me with a tentacle. “Let him have his moment, beautiful.”

Acceptance. Both Elex and my son. I’m not sure how my life changed so drastically in a short week, but I consider myself the luckiest woman on the planet.

Next to my daughter, at least. Who seems to have found her own happily-ever-after. I have six months to catch up. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if she came home to find we were also a happy couple?

We work companionably in the kitchen, me sneaking peeks at his muscled biceps as he works. He breaks down the boxes and says he’ll return them to the moving trucks but will keep a couple large ones for Kenny. The thought makes me smile. It doesn’t matter how much technology people have—how much freedom, how many toys—kids will be kids. A cardboard box inspires imagination and is the finest toy around.

The fact that Elex realizes that is even more amazing. He’s the perfect man.

Suddenly I’m yanked to him with a tentacle that snakes around my waist. “What’s that look on your face for?”

“I had this image of you building a fort with Kenny,” I admit softly. It made me all gushy inside.

“I can see that too, love,” he says with the same gushy smile I must have had on my face. He drops his head and deposits a kiss onto the tip of my nose. For a couple of minutes we stay like that, wrapped in each other’s arms, just sort of swaying in the moment without music.

“You and I will be great together,” he murmurs.

CHAPTER  
**SIX**



## ELEX

**N**ot sure how I can tell this gorgeous woman she's definitely, irrevocably my one-and-only mate, but it doesn't appear it'll be hard. She's on board with me.

We're comfortable with each other. We have the same thoughts, hopes, and dreams. I know we'll have a rough patch or two—all the Earth females seem to have one where they don't believe they're worthy of being loved unconditionally. I'm not sure what Christina's will be yet, though more than likely it will be something tied into their crooked President Montgomery.

I intend to keep her happy in Eden until Tera's decision in six lunar cycles. I have six of them to make sure Christina also wants to stay in Eden, realizes she's my mate and that we can live happily ever after too.

"Mum, we going to Uween's," Kenny yells as they head out the front door. I caught him peeking into the kitchen and giggling when he saw us wrapped in each other's arms. Pretty sure he and his friends will purposely make themselves scarce.

"So," Christina drawls. "I hate to be that person...but you know you owe me."

My hearts speed at the implication.

"Oh, do be that person," I say, not minding in the least. "Kitchen's all cleared up. How about if we go upstairs and put together your bedrooms? We might even make it to the guest room by the time we're done." I drop a little kiss to her adorable human appendage, the tip of which turns up.

“All right, good sir,” she says. “Follow me.”

She leads me up the stairs playfully slapping at my tentacles as I try to reach for the delectable round bottom that swishes as she walks. Just the idea of chasing her up the stairs makes something primal inside me roar. She teases, first lifting her skirt high enough to walk, then high enough for me to see the lacy underthings beneath it.

Blood pounds inside me, rushing straight to my cock. There has never been a more gorgeous female on this planet or my own. As soon as we step into her bedroom, she flings her dress over her head, standing before me in skimpy garments that I can see through. She smiles coyly, aware of how hard I am, of how much she turns me on.

“Command me,” I whisper and if my voice is a little pleading, so be it.

She taps a finger to her cheek. “What would you like to see first?” she asks. “Boobs or snatch?”

*Snatch?* This is slang for her cunt. If possible, more blood rushes to my cock. And honestly, I can’t decide which I want to see first. I can barely speak I’m gritting my teeth so hard.

“Cunt,” I say.

“Boobs, then. Take off my bra.” Her voice is commanding, a complete turn-on.

When I reach out with my hands, she slaps them down. “Uh, uh, baby. With your teeth.”

*Fuck.*

I lean over her and lick a trail from underneath her ear, down the side of her neck, across the front of her chest and down her sternum between her teats. With one sharp bite, I clip the delicate fabric between my teeth, and it falls away.

A shiver runs through her, making her gorgeous, tear-shaped teats bounce. Her nipples are hard peaks, the areolas a large, round circle of matching pink.

I latch onto one and she tosses her head back and moans.

“Elex,” she whispers throatily. “So hot. Your mouth is so deliciously hot.”

I release the tip of her breast and then lave the stiff, brownish-pink nipple. It peaks outward magnificently, and I turn my attention to the other.

“Enough,” she commands. “Lick down lower on my body.”

My cock is so hard, there is no way to keep it inside. It has long ago extruded and slices through the air, stiff and heavy like an iron rod. My balls tingle and I tamp down the excitement.

Lovingly I lick the underside of her breast, rimming the crease until I get to the center of her body and then trail my tongue down. She’s breathing hard, her trembling stomach giving small shivers beneath my chest. Using my front two tentacles, I spread her creamy thighs as I move lower.

Pressing a kiss to her inner thigh, the skin smooth beneath my lips, I trail my wet tongue down the center.

A burst of her musk hits my senses. She wants me just as badly as I want her. As much as I am trying not to come, I have every desire splayed out on her bed before me.

I study her cunt. She has a darker tuft of hair that I nuzzle my face into, and delicate folds of pink flesh glisten. She gasps when I part her folds with my fingers.

“I’m going to lick up one side and then down the other,” I decide. “I want to taste your sweetness. Then I will suck on your clit. I have suckers on the tips of my tentacles to latch onto your teats and suck the tips at the same time.”

She shivers and thrusts her hips at me, a little involuntary movement she can’t seem to help. Her fingers clench the bedsheets, her knuckles whitened.

“I want my mouth latched onto you as you come, Christina,” I breathe, my hot breath blowing across her sensitive sex. “I want to feel your climax clench around me, taste the juices of your orgasm.”

“Yes, yes, Elex. I want that.”

“Will you let me slide a tentacle inside you, love?”

“Yes,” she moans.

I delicately part her lips with my fingers and slide the tip of my appendage in. A flood of her pheromones rushes over me, hot, wet, concentrated with lust. Slowly I penetrate her, feeling the inner walls of her cunt clench me tight, fighting the urge to think this will soon be my cock squeezed and milked.

She’s drenched in her own juices and gives a guttural cry as I fill her up. I corkscrew my appendage back and forth and she tightens around it.

Another tentacle finds the puckered rim just below and I use the blunt end to tap, tap, tap it in even, rhythmic strokes. Her eyes widen, showing her dilated pupils.

“Eat me,” she snarls, completely lost in her lust.

I dip my head and latch onto her entire cunt, sliding my tongue through her folds, groaning against her quivering flesh. It doesn’t take her long to come when I suck her clit into my mouth.

She explodes.

It takes every ounce of strength I’ve got not to grind my aching cock into the bed and come with her. She’s gripping my tentacle with her hot, wet cunt, waves of orgasm rolling over it. Her clit is throbbing, she’s gasping, then screaming my name.

Mine.

“Elex! God, baby. God.”

I lap her juices gently as she comes down from her high and let my tentacles drop away, giving her a brief respite.

I stroke the silky-smooth insides of her thighs and make my way back up her body, stroking and licking the newness of my female.

“No need for more foreplay, baby,” she says. “I’m still horny for you. I want you to fuck me, make me yours.”

“Christina,” I groan.

I’m so hard for her, my body as lubed as hers is. Between the two of us, we’re a hot, squelching mess.

I wind my tentacles around her ankles and gently bend her legs up and out, splaying her pretty cunt for me. Then I take my cock in my hand and rub it through her slit, letting her feel the heat between us.

“God, yes.”

She quivers as I part her folds with the head of my cock. Stars explode behind my eyes and I have to grit my teeth to keep from coming. There’s an ancient, rampant need within me that’s only aware of one thing. Her hot, wet, tight sheath.

Deeper. I need to sink deeper into the warm recesses of her cunt. Gripping her hips, I draw back before shoving back into her tight sex, feeling each swollen bulge of my cock as the first enters, then the second, and the third.

She’s loving every inch of me that I give her. Her legs tighten around my waist, locking me to her as if she can’t get enough.

“Christina,” I rasp, bending to lick her nipple.

“Elex,” she moans. “So good, baby. Don’t stop.”

“You’re mine, Christina,” I rasp, just to make sure she knows. “You’re forever mine.”

I allow her no time to catch her breath. I grind my hips, forcing her to take my full cock, the length, my bulges, working my hips like a dance between her thighs, feeling our combined slick as it mixes and permeates the air with the fresh scent of us.

Then I pull back, her cries of pleasure filling my ears, and thrust back into her warm, welcoming cunt.

I’ve been a patient man with this female. But I’ve needed her for far too long, dreaming of my friend’s mother, and too many times I’ve woken with seed dried on my tentacles from fucking the sheets.

The tension inside me is released as I shove us into mutual orgasms, again and again.

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**

## CHRISTINA

**B**est sex of my life. Granted, I've only been with two other men and Lyle was a one-grunt, roll-over-and-sleep kind of guy.

Sex with Carlton, my first love, was amazing. It was hormones and sneaking and exploring forbidden, naughty passions together. Sex with Elex—he's a man. There's a world of difference between now and then. It's explosive and satisfying and awesome.

And now, there's nothing held back. This is the most amazing time of my life. I love waking up next to him, I love having breakfast with him and Kenny.

Sometimes we build forts late at night. Sometimes we have Kenny's friends over.

Today Elex has Jaire and Haze over to help him. They're working in the backyard, building me an herb garden with raised boxes. They know what mint is, although they call it a weed, and snicker that I'll plant it in a box to prevent its spread. I refuse to acknowledge that it is indeed a weed.

"Lemonade and cookies," I call out, making my way to the patio table.

"Just in time." Elex smiles and jumps up, giving me a kiss on the cheek before he takes the guys inside the back porch. There's a laundry room just inside where they can wash their hands. I really am a lucky woman that he thought of such fine details for my home.



He also thought to provide both Adroki-style chairs and human chairs to sit on.

“Christina, are you sure you won’t dump the ugly Adroki and take up with me instead? I have to return to Pimeon for a three-cycle stint. You’d be able to visit your daughter.”

I grin at his teasing. “That’s tempting, Haze.”

“Or you could stay with me and be here when Tera returns from her honeymoon,” Elex counters, stroking my arm comfortably. “This fool lives with his *maman*.”

Jaire starts laughing and Haze chuckles too.

“She’s a fine cook,” Haze says. “Besides, she’s lonely.”

“She’s asked you to move out several times,” Jaire points out.

“I know, but she doesn’t really mean it.” Haze smiles.

Jaire rolls his eyes and I stand behind Elex, looping my arms around his neck as I bend to whisper in his ear. Er... where his ear should be.

“I like that you’re working so hard out here, getting all shiny.” Gah, is that my voice? The whisper sounds husky... throaty and sexy. By the way he squirms in his seat, Elex thinks so too.

He tugs on my arm, bringing me down to his lap. God, when his arms wrap around me, I just want to purr like a cat.

“Make sure you tell my daughter hi when you return to Pimeon,” I say.

“I will.” Haze grins, watching as Elex strokes my arms. “I’ll have to go to their hut for dinner. My *maman* doesn’t cook for me every night.”

“They’re in love,” Elex chides. “They’re not going to want you over for dinner.”

“You’re lucky you’re here for so long,” Haze says. “Got a double stint?”

“Yes. I’m covering Relion’s so he can spend his six lunar cycles at home.”

“Then will you have to return?” I ask.

“A date hasn’t been set yet. But yes, when he and Tera return, I’ll need to head back at some point.”

I already feel like I miss him. “Let’s make it a great six months, then.”

“Feel like having a party tonight at the main house?” Jaire asks. “We’ll need to send Haze off with a blast. We can do those little round patties in the bread. Along with the dicks.”

My eyebrows shoot up to my hairline. “Do you mean burgers? And brats?”

Jaire falters. “We’re not eating dick?”

“Who told you that?”

“Sydney and Rebecca,” he grumbles. “I should have known. There was too much giggling involved, but since those two are so young and giggle all the time anyway, I didn’t think anything of it.”

I can feel the laughter where it rumbles up from Elex’s chest.

“Fuck, man,” Haze grumbles. “Do you know how much I avoided the dicks? Just to find out they’re not and I’ve been missing out all this time?”

I can’t help but giggle too. “Well, now you can have plenty.”

“One day,” Haze says. “One day we’re going to get those brats to Pimeon. And we’ll be merciless.”

“I’ve got just the thing,” Jaire says. “Make sure you spread the word that you have two Earth younglings fighting for your attention. And how dreary it is. How one day they may be punished and sent to Pimeon.”

Haze chuckles. “Imagine if they were to show attention to another male. He’d go running a mile, thinking he was encroaching on a captain’s territory.”

The men go deathly quiet.

“You’ve decided?” Jaire says.

Haze sighs. “If Henryon agrees to try for captain, I agreed I would too.”

Elex starts laughing. “And neither of you admitted it to Juris? You’re letting him continue trying to find ways to sweeten the pot to entice you?”

“Well, there are a lot of dinners at the castle.” Haze scowls, like this says it all. “Parties. Lilaina is talking about putting together a coronation if more than one agrees to try. I figure she means me and Henryon.”

“You can’t pass up on that,” Elex agrees and the men snicker some more.

“What shall I bring tonight?” I ask Jaire. “Potato salad? Beans? Watermelon?”

“I’m sure anything will be appreciated,” he says. “Shall we say about five? That gives us time to invite any stragglers from the school. The more people who become comfortable with our community, the better.”

“Five works. I’m just a hop, skip, and jump away.”

With those words, I kiss Elex’s cheek and move off his lap, heading into the kitchen to start my potato salad. The earlier I make it, the more time it has to let the flavors mingle. Maybe I’ll make a macaroni salad too.

“Christina,” Jaire calls through the back window, his face pressed up to the screen. “Invite Dori too. All of Kenny’s friends. We’ll just go all out. And when Haze leaves, my *maman* will step through the other side of the portal. She’ll love getting to know all of you.”

I nod, suddenly the happiest I’ve ever been. Everything is absolutely perfect here. A home. A job. All my friends. New friends.

Soon, my daughter.

What could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

## CHRISTINA

“Christina! What did you bring?” Without waiting for a response, Sydney peers into my bowl of potato salad, the bowl Elex is carrying of macaroni salad, and the fruit salad Kenny carries.

“Hmm. That one looks the best. Did you help make it?” she asks Kenny.

“Yah! An’ mum an’ Elex helped. Kinda.” His eyes dart to us to see if we’re listening to him take all the credit.

Sydney laughs, carting him toward the buffet table to put the bowl down, then takes him to where the other dancers are. One by one, they greet him with hugs and my son glows.

“He’s happy here,” Elex comments.

“We both are. It’s a wonderful place.”

“It wasn’t always,” he says. “When we first arrived, Jaire—clumsy fool that he is—killed Anya.”

I gasp, unable to discern if he’s joking.

But he grins. “Corbin, the Britonian medic, was able to get air into her and get her heart pumping again. It was an accident—no one realized the metal collars the females wore tightened when they passed a laser at the front of the house.”

A shiver runs down my spine. I could have lost my daughter so easily when President Montgomery promised she’d be safe. He is such an evil liar.

“Things weren’t as they seemed,” he says softly. “They were forced to dance to earn food.”

My breathing feels labored. Anya approaches, Jaire not far from her side. He takes the bowls from us and takes them to the table.

“We were able to cheat where we could, though,” Anya says. “We started to save seeds to see what we could grow. Of course, over the years when Eric found out, he started to cut fresh produce out of our staples to punish us.”

“You can’t remove the collars?”

“No.” Anya shakes her head. “A few dancers died trying to escape. We tried to get the collars off them when we buried them, but they’d melded into their skin.”

God, what had my daughter gone through?

“Only Tera is free now, I guess you could say. Her collar had turned off when her contract expired. I imagine the Britonians will try to remove it there while she’s on Pimeon,” Anya continues.

“Where are the lasers?” I ask, panicked that one of them could still die if they moved too close.

“Oh, we’ve deactivated them,” Anya says. “The Britonians gave us a device to put in the house.”

Relief washes through me. “So, you’re at least safe.”

“We are. We’ve been safe since the Adroki arrived,” Anya says, smiling at Jaire as he rejoins her. He kisses her lightly on the lips.

They really love each other.

“It’s how Relion and Tera were too,” Elex says softly. “We knew he loved her. We knew she loved him. She just wouldn’t accept it because she was determined to marry an Earther male.”

“It makes me so angry,” I say. “All of Eric Montgomery’s trickery. He was taking her credits to pay for Kenny’s tuition without telling her I worked there. I had a discount and could

afford to keep him enrolled. There was no reason for her to be here.”

“He’s a bastard,” Anya agrees. “But Tera will have the last laugh. Those Britonians, along with Juris and Lilaina, will come up with a plan to keep her here. And keep her with her mate.”

“How did they manage to keep you two together when Jaire was matched to your sister?” I ask.

Anya grins. “Well, that was mostly an accident. Lilaina performed a marriage ceremony and since she’s titled First Lady here on Earth, it became a legally binding contract. When Jaire returned, he had a loophole and was able to kick my sister to the curb.”

“It still took me a lot of begging and pleading for forgiveness,” Jaire says.

“Any idea what happened to Portia?” Elex asks, a frown on his brow like it just occurred to him.

“None whatsoever,” Jaire says.

“Maybe she went back home.” Anya shrugs. “She wasn’t there the last time Jaire and I made a visit, but things might have settled down enough by now.” Then she turns to us. “I think Tera’s going to be so surprised to find you and Elex together. I can hardly wait.”

Elex pulls me close and presses a kiss to my hair. From a few feet away, we can hear Kenny.

“Ohs, they kiss all da time now.” A little giggle.

“Let’s go grab the chairs,” Jaire says to Elex, looking across the field. A group of humans are heading over, Dori in the group.

As the two men leave, Anya turns to me. “I can’t wait for Jaire’s mom to get here. We call her *maman*. She’s going to love you and Dori so much. I’m glad you had a friend all these years.”

I smile softly. “Me too. The other parents of Kenny’s friends are pretty great too. We’re all a bunch of misfits who

happened to find each other.”

“Just like me and the girls,” Anya says, rolling her eyes as Sydney shoves a grape into Elizabeth’s mouth and Kenny laughs.

“I love that they’ve accepted my son.”

“He’s Tera’s brother,” Anya says simply. “That makes him our brother. And while I’d like to call you mom, you’re way too young.”

“I’m going to love being called dad,” Elex grins. “As soon as Relion comes back.”

He and Jaire start laughing as they unfold the chairs.

“I’m really glad things have turned out the way they did,” Anya says to me, eyeing the two males as they wave to the newcomers to take a seat.

And it’s later, when everyone is satiated and relaxed, when the kids are playing and giggling, when Elex is sitting at my side as I visit with Dori, when Anya’s husband stands to speak.

“Well, our favorite dancers aren’t here,” he says, making his way to the middle of their dance area where lights hang from a tree. “But Anya and I can show you a little of what they do.”

When they perform, it’s the most beautiful, haunting dance I’ve ever seen. At the end, we clap and more Adroki males come out, asking women to dance. Dori leaves for the dance area with one and Elex holds his hand out to me.

I slide mine into his palm as he leads me out to the crowded dance floor. The music is softer now, and we sway in place. His arms feel so good around me, and I never want this moment to end.

“You know you’re mine?” Elex whispers softly. “There’s no other who makes me feel like you do. I love your daughter, I love your son, and I want him to be mine.”

“I think he already feels like he’s yours.”



His arms tighten around me with his emotion. God, the strength in his biceps. It feels like he shields me from the world and I never before knew I needed shielding. His arms are where I want to be.

“Kenny’s sleeping over at Simon and Aaron’s tonight,” I whisper. “They’re having a boy’s night. Sleeping bags in the backyard.”

“So it’s just you and I alone in the house, sweetness?”

“It is.” Deliberately, I press myself against him. “And I thought I’d do a little bit of exploring, if you don’t mind.”

“What kind?”

“I wouldn’t mind having a sexy man splayed out flat on the bed underneath me.”

“I wouldn’t mind that either.” He catches himself. “Wait. I mean...”

I laugh softly. “You wouldn’t mind being that sexy man?”

“Yes, I meant that,” he says, huffing lightly. “Naughty female. You get my thoughts all in a fluster.”

When line dancing lessons start, the kids join us and it’s so much fun that it’s easy to start yawning at midnight, when curfew is mandated for outside Earth. While Eden doesn’t have to follow the same rules, a lot of humans are used to it and begin to head home.

Elex and I both kiss Kenny goodbye, and Sean and Connor take the boys home. Sean winks and says they’ll probably play until two or three tomorrow.

God, my life is so perfect. I think of all those early years, working myself to the bone, just to have Tera gush about how good the meal was, Loretta and Sheila gripe about eating trailer park food, Lyle grunt in response yet clean his plate, and then, exhausted, clean up afterward while everyone else retired to the sitting room.

The highlight of my day being the tiny girl sitting up on the counter while I washed dishes. And when Sheila barked at her to go to bed?

I'd call it a night, relieved that it was Sheila who was favored for Lyle's bed, with Loretta fighting for her share of equal nights, and head to mine to collapse.

Only to find a wee, grinning little urchin warming my sheets. Oh, those nights of cuddling that sweet little body against me, listening to the baby-sweet snores. That made the marriage all the worth it. That made the abrupt turn my life made worth it.

"May I walk you home, beautiful?" Elex asks as the last chair is put away.

Anya and Jaire retired a half hour earlier, his tentacles roving shamelessly all over her. Mostly, the ones who are left are the Adroki males setting things back in place. The dishes have long been loaded into the household dishwasher, which was replaced to have a much higher capacity.

"Only if I can walk you home also."

Something primal flares in his eyes as I deliberately call it his home too.

There's a warm breeze in the air as we head back through the fields. The first project given to the kids in school was to paint large rocks with glow-paint and to line the path so it's easy to make your way. Even at that, I don't think it's hard for the Adroki to see in the dark. We're walking leisurely, hand in hand, tension brimming between us.

I'm going to have hot sex with this man.

As soon as we enter the house, the air feels like it's crackling with need. It's suddenly quiet between us, like there's no need for words.

The snap of the deadbolt sounds hard as it clicks into place.

Elex's nostrils flare. "Get undressed, sweet."

My belly swoops.

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

## CHRISTINA

I turn to head up the stairs and I swear I can feel him prowling right behind me, sense his eyes on my hips as they sway. A tight coil of desire pools in my belly, heavy with wanton lust.

Everything inside me flares to life.

I enter the bedroom, Elex right on my heels, brushing my hair forward over one shoulder. He scrapes his teeth along the tendon of my neck, warm breath heating my skin and making goosebumps run along my flesh.

“Not naked yet? Push me, Christina, and I’ll lose control. I’ll rip the fabric off your body.”

I huff a laugh because he sounds so tortured. Suddenly I’m aware that in this darkened room, with the curtains not blocking all the moonlight, the mirror to my dresser is across from us. It’s a new thing, these mirrors. Another wonderful insight Elex had added to my house.

My nipples are pebbled, poking through the thin fabric of my dress. I run my palm along the front of my breasts and near my ear, the man growls.

God, he’s so primal and everything about him—his growls, the sound of his grunt when he comes, the way his pupils dilate when he looks at me, the feel of his bulging muscles stretched over me as he thrusts into me again and again—he makes me embarrassingly, soaking wet. Even now, I feel the slick covering the lips of my pussy and running down my thighs.

“Do it again,” he grates.

I touch my breasts again, the flat of my hand roving over my breasts.

“Now show me skin.”

My hands tremble as they come up to the buttons along my sundress, slowing loosening the first, then the second, and the third. By the time I get to the fifth, there’s a gap of skin showing down the front of my chest, almost down to my navel. A soft, flat belly, one that’s never been stretched, but I don’t think Elex minds as his tongue swipes along the spot where my neck meets my shoulder.

Like he can’t help himself, he tugs one side of my dress open so my breast pops free, and then groans like he’s never seen the sight.

This time when I touch myself, I pull my nipple, elongating it, tugging it between my thumb and index.

“Fuck, Christina.”

Under my skirt, between my legs, a tentacle slides up my ankle, my inner leg, and I moan at the smooth sensation of the tip, where three tiny suction cups press together in a sucking motion, sliding into my slick.

“You taste delicious, my mate,” he purrs and shock jolts through me. He can taste through those suction cups? No wonder the aliens are always reaching for their mates.

“May I?” His tentacle waits at my entrance.

Instead of responding, I spread my stance. His eyes flare and ever so slowly, I feel him inch inside.

God. The head of his cock feels wondrous, with those giant bulges. But his tentacle feels just as amazing in a different way. It’s more precise, like an extra-long finger. It fills, and swells. It touches every nook and cranny inside me and bring pleasure to spots I can’t find, much less reach, myself.

His hands wrap around my waist and finish unbuttoning my dress. When he’s done, the dress parts, showing a six-inch

flash of naked body. All the important parts, to the pussy I tidied in the shower this morning to the purple appendage twisting in and out of me.

It's erotic.

When his hand, such a different color from my own skin, snakes down my body, his finger finds my slit.

"So wet," he breathes into my ear, licking my lobe.

He circles my clit and it's swollen and sensitized. The slide of his finger brushes against the swollen gland, making me moan. I'm on fire, I can't catch my breath, and my body's super-sensitive, flying out of control.

I *belong* to this man. He *owns* me. He makes me feel things I'd never guess I was capable of feeling.

"Elex," I gasp.

"Yes, *kessia*. Let your sexy body come for me."

His finger presses down on my clit and it's hot and hard and everything seizes.

"Elex!" Waves of pleasure race through every cell of my being, my limbs, my core. My heart is pounding as I ride out the climax, my breasts heaving as I suck oxygen into my lungs

He groans. "Yes, love. Gush for me and I'll lap it up."

That's when I notice I'm wetter than I ever was before. But his words, his filthy words, make me hotter.

His claws lightly scrape over my shoulders as he tugs my dress down, pooling it on the floor.

He lifts me into his arms and makes his way to our bed. He settles me onto it reverently, like I'm a goddess to be worshipped, then keeps my gaze locked to his as he bends my knees and spreads my legs.

Cool air washes the juncture of my thighs. His broad shoulders settle between them, he mutters something in a foreign language that sounds like a guttural curse, inhales deeply, and starts licking.

And God, it feels amazing. He loves it, loves me where it's intimate and wet and by the time he cleans me up, I'm almost teetering on the edge again.

When he crawls up over me, his cock poised at my pussy, I wrap my legs around his waist.

"Yes?" he asks, and his accent curls my insides.

"Yes. Please yes."

I feel each inch as he sinks into me, especially because he pauses as each bulge along his cock enters, letting me adjust to his size, his unique shape.

He groans in my ear.

His breath is hot as he drags it down my neck, trails it over my chest to suck on my nipple. The heat from his mouth and the suction pulls from a spot deep inside my core.

"Faster, Elex, baby. Please. Fuck me."

Finally, the man gives me what I want. He withdraws from me, making me whimper a protest, and then plunges right in, filling me completely. I arch my back, feeling every glorious inch of him where he rubs against the walls of my channel.

"You feel so fucking good," he growls. "You fit me like a glove. Like we're meant to be. Like you were made for me."

A shiver runs down my spine.

He pulls out again, and thrusts back in, his hips moving in sensual, slow circles, grinding into me so deep I can feel the intense connection making us one. I love each minute of it, every stroke, every grunt, every lick of his tongue like he can't get enough of the taste of my tongue.

And then his mouth is on mine, and he's sucking my tongue, and he tastes like the man I love.

*I love him.*

The sudden realization makes me explode, my sheath squeezing his cock so hard, he growls in my ear, bucks wildly and a burst of liquid floods my sheath. Ripples of pleasure skitter across my flesh, raising goosebumps as I explode.

God, I love him.

He draws the comforter over us and pulls me onto his chest, sealing our racing heartbeats together.

“You are the perfect female,” he says, pressing kisses to the top of my head. “I have no idea how I went throughout my life without you.”

“You’re the perfect male,” I respond, tightening my arms around his waist, twining my legs with his tentacles. “So glad we met.”

Sudden weariness hits as I settle onto his chest.

It feels like home as I close my eyes and settle into my never-ending dreams.



Carlton approaches me from across the field, where we used to meet. I know who it is, there’s no doubt about it. When I reach him and hug him tight, he feels different than I remember. More of a man than a boy; his arms stronger, longer. Like somehow my mind has him confused with the man I know today.

They’re the hugs that Elex gives me when I’m awake.

“I missed you so much,” I murmur, feeling him press a kiss to my hair.

“I know. Wasn’t feeling well. But look, one year left. One more year until I come of age, receive my marriage stipend, and you’re my wife.” He squeezes me tight. “We can move away from here.”

“I can’t wait.”

My house has been so tense lately, with mother and father arguing behind closed doors. The cold, angry silence in every room of the house. They had an arrangement too, once. Father



agreed to only take one wife if mother would have him. She was—and still is—one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. Father had to have her. Mother agreed. They were happy for a long time, until father began to make good money. We bought some farmland and moved to a new neighborhood where I met Carlton. Mother became friends with his mom, though his mother died when we were still young.

But for some reason, instead of my parents being happy with more money, they grew discontent. My brothers moved out of the home as soon as they were able, both taking wives. Carlton and I would do the same.

“Are you feeling better today?” I ask.

“Much.” He bends his head and kisses me lightly. “Just a bug that kept hanging on. It’s gone now.”

“I’m glad. Mother sent you something.” I dig through the basket looped over my arm, scrunching my nose. Apple cinnamon muffins this time. Mother knows I hate cinnamon.

“Aww, Teena. She sent something you don’t like again? We each could have had one.”

I shrug, though to be fair, the way she consistently forgets I don’t like the spice gets to me. My brother Bobby doesn’t like blueberries and whenever she makes blueberry muffins, she makes a separate batch of banana for him. But this isn’t about me. This is about Carlton and I should be grateful that mother cared enough about him being sick to bake him her special muffins. She’s not usually so considerate.

“It’s all right. You’ve been sick. You just enjoy.” I kiss him again because I can’t help myself. But the kiss is better than it’s ever been, at least from what I remember, and I moan.

I’ve really missed him so much and while part of me knows this is a dream, I still find comfort in being able to hold him again.

But as we kiss, Carlton starts to fade away, his image crumbling like dust, even though I frantically hold on.

“No, wait. Don’t go! Not yet!”

“Christina, my love, wake up. Wake up, beautiful.” A soft kiss touches my forehead.

When I open my eyes, I find Elex right on top of me, and my hands are clawed, clutching his arms like he’s going to disappear. I shudder as I inhale deeply, then force myself to relax my fingers.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” I rub at his shoulders, trying to smooth away the marks my fingernails made.

“Pfft. You didn’t hurt me, love. Bad dream?”

“In a way. Good and bad.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“It was my first love, Carlton.”

His brow furrows. “Your mate?”

“No, not Tera’s father. He was Lyle Garrett. No, this was the man I was supposed to marry. The man I wanted to marry. Carlton Faillon. He died before he came of age and I...well, I was a year older and had missed my first season waiting for him. I ended up being third wife to Lyle because...I guess I just needed to get away from the memories of Carlton’s death.”

“I am so sorry, Christina.”

“Thank you. It was a long time ago. I think being happy tonight with you reminded me of being happy with Carlton. But I noticed one thing in the dream—he was so young. And maybe I was too, though I couldn’t see myself. Then he started to disappear, and I wasn’t ready to let him go.” I realize how awful that sounds, to tell a lover that I can’t let another go. “I mean, he’s been gone a long time now.”

“I understand,” he says simply. “Never apologize for loving someone. It makes you who you are. You love big and everyone who basks in your love benefits from it.”

This man is absolutely perfect. This man, I could love.

CHAPTER  
TEN

## ELEX

Six Earth months fly by at the speed of light.

I was looking forward to the arrival of Tera and Relion because with their return, it cements the relationship between Christina and me. Unfortunately, we didn't get to tell them right away. From the moment Tera emerged from the portal, there was unexpected drama. She was swollen with their first *kish*.

Her choke collar—which we, along with the Brits, suspected was alien technology—had deactivated with the pregnancy and not with the end of her contract like we'd assumed. It was a call signal to a race of aliens who didn't belong to the alliance that the Britonians and we do. The Leondratsins.

President Eric Montgomery promised them the *kish*. What he didn't count on was the *kishling* carried by the humans were also half Adroki and our species is protected under the Interplanetary Alliance of Protected Planets, or IAPP.

In the Leondratsins' fury, they dragged the president off as payment for the collars he'd accepted so long ago. He was promised a slow, painful, horrific death.

After the shocking incident, we all gathered at the main house for one of our usual barbecue get-togethers, though this time isn't a joyous occasion. The crowds are split into tiny groups, some people explaining to the others of the community what had happened.

Some of the females, like my mate, are just in shock, along with my boy, Kenny. He hasn't left my lap since the incident. I continually stroke his back and he tries to hide when his little shoulders tremble. The Britonians remain, along with the Adroki who escorted Tera and Relion through the portal. The medic, Calbin, is in the middle of injecting each dancer with a dose of pregnancy hormones, which kills the parasitic collars. They have decided to surgically remove the collars once they are dead.

We also discovered the whereabouts of Anya's sister, Portia, who had disappeared after Jaire refused the mateship with her. She had been kept by the president and had shown up in a choke collar also.

Lilaina approaches our group. "I imagine since we're all going to have to figure out what happens next, we're going to need more room than you all have here. Why don't we get the collars removed and all head to the Presidential House to stay? We'll have a big ole slumber party. Kenny? You ever stay in the Presidential House?" she asks.

"No." He shakes his head seriously. "No, ma'ham. I don't thinkaso. Did I, mum?"

Christina shakes her head.

Lilaina grins. "Then it'll be a treat for sure. You want to invite your friends?"

His face lights up. "There's Uween! An' there's Jinny. Sammy. Sushi." He turns and points to Relion. "Ree! You know Sushi, right?" He goes on without a pause. "An' Simon, an' Aaron, Wose—but sometimes she kindas a lil stinky so's she hasta taka shower first. Just a lil bit. Smells like worms... and vanilla." He shrugs. "Poor gril tries."

Lilaina laughs. Hell, we all chuckle.

"It's good to be home," Relion says. "I missed this crazy little planet."

Tera turns in his lap. "Have I ever thanked you for tricking me with the whole 'teaching me to flirt' scam?"

He snorts. “It wasn’t a scam.” He puffs his chest out. “Best teacher ever. I was a catch. Every female in the Adroki clan wanted me at one point. So well qualified to teach others.”

“At one point, I believe it was only Elex’s *maman* that wanted you,” Stratek says wryly, his arm looped casually over his sister-in-mate, Lilaina.

A few of the males laugh at the insult to me, and I huff in mock embarrassment.

“Well, it was my honor to make her happy for a few hours,” Ree teases, the fool basking at being the center of attention.

“But payback’s a bitch,” I say, clear enough to break the news to everyone who hasn’t been present to witness the development between me and Christina. “Now who’s *your* daddy?”

I casually bring Christina’s hand up to kiss. Her face turns beet red from the attention, but she smiles happily.

Both Relion’s and Tera’s jaws drop.

Kenny, cuddled in my lap, giggles at their expressions, then points at their open mouths, and laughs harder.

“Holy fuck,” Relion says as if he finally realizes he was so focused on Tera he never noticed I had interest in her *maman*. He is not the brightest of males. If the poor fool had more intelligence, it might not have taken him so long to catch Tera.

“Hollifuckk,” Kenny repeats, and I quickly cover a tentacle across his mouth before his *maman* can chastise him.

“Don’t copy your big brother,” I say to Kenny. “He’s bad to the bone.”

Kenny laughs some more, so I bounce my boy on my lap, so grateful to hear some happiness from him after the horrific events we’ve all been through. Calbin makes his way to each dancer, checking the choke collars to see how the stones deactivate with the death of the parasite.

“I hear Henyon is arriving,” Jaire says. “Word is you’re due next to return home.”

I grunt acknowledgment, but Christina looks up. “You’re leaving?”

“Just for a short while,” I soothe my mate. “I was granted a shorter stint for this first return.”

“No!” Kenny calls out. “I don’t wanna him to go.” His little arms squeeze me tight.

“Kenny, Elex doesn’t live here—” Christina says.

“I donna care! He need to stay here, safe with me and you, mum.”

“Hey, come here, baby brother,” Tera says, scooting out of Relion’s lap and back into her own chair, holding her arms wide. Kenny crawls onto her lap, mindful of her swollen belly, and curls his head onto her shoulder. Next to her, Relion rubs his back.

“Kenny,” I say, my heart cracking. “I’m big and strong. A captain of the King’s Guard. I’m safe on my planet, I assure you.”

“If you go, somesings might change,” Kenny says. “Might be ugly girrrls on your planet. I want you and my mum to stay together.”

What goes through this little male’s mind? “Do you think I’m that much of a catch that other females are waiting on my planet then?”

“Uh huh. You is very handsome.”

“I promise to always come back to you and your *maman*.”

“If we send back a message that you’re wooing your mate, maybe we can put it off for a few more lunar cycles,” Jaire whispers to me. “But then you may not get the shorter stint.”

“Yesss,” Kenny says, perking up. “Let’s do that.”

“Hey! No listening to the grownups when they whisper,” Jaire says sternly, and then winks.

Little Kenny looks up at his sister. “Terr, you think I’ma be a grrreat uncle?”

“The best,” she promises.

“Uncle Kenneth Garrett. I lika it.”

“I do too, little love,” she whispers, rocking her brother.

I think the problem isn’t as much as Kenny worries over me as it was that he missed his *kishling*. Maybe still the fear over seeing the president dragged off by the vicious—and ugly—Leondratsins.

I squeeze Christina’s hand and while she’s looking at her *kishren* with her heart in her eyes, there’s something else there. It’s in the way she unconsciously nibbles her lip.

Something else worries my mate. Perhaps she too has fear over knowing there are much more vicious aliens in the world. Maybe she worries that I’ll forget her when I leave.

I might have made a mistake in thinking that Christina would see how perfect the last six lunar cycles were with us mated. Was it too much? Was she going through the motions, expecting the ball to drop?

Is she worried about her younglings? Us? Does she fear our relationship standing on its own without needing to fend off the president? All I can do is warily feel things out.

“You have great *kishren*,” I murmur.

“I know. I’ve been blessed.”

For a moment she looks saddened. So perhaps this new problem does have to do with Tera and Kenny.

“You know, if Christina gets pregnant, your *kish* would have a niece or nephew older than her,” Daphne says to me.

Christina freezes at the seemingly harmless words. Everyone else chuckles and I force myself to relax my worry over her and stroke her back. Does she think I might not be comfortable with that?

“It should be fun in school. Relion’s son—announcing he’s come to pick up his uncle from the playground after school,” Lyssa says.

Another round of snickers.



“I’m still waiting for Relion to call Elex daddy,” Anya teases.

“Not happening,” Relion growls, as everyone chuckles with laughter.

“Aww, come on, *son*,” I say. “They’re just messing with you.”

Everyone laughs harder at Relion’s glare, including Tera who turns his head toward her and deposits a kiss on his mouth.

“It’s okay, babe,” Tera murmurs. “In a couple years, our child will call Elex grandpappy.”

I can’t help the smile that stretches from ear to ear. “But I don’t mind that.”

From Christina’s pale face, I suddenly know what the problem is.

My mate doesn’t want *kish*.

CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

## CHRISTINA

“It’s okay, babe,” Tera murmurs cheekily to Relion. “In a couple years, our child will call Elex grandpappy.”

“But I don’t mind that.” Elex’s grin is huge. He obviously wants his own children. My heart sinks, suddenly as cold and heavy as stone.

He squeezes my hand and I smile at him, trying to pretend everything is normal but the truth is I’m kind of numb at the turn of events. Why didn’t I think of this? Everyone assumes Elex and I will soon get pregnant along with Tera and Relion...and no one knows I can’t have babies of my own.

I’m not sure why it never dawned on me that he would want children—of course the Adroki are on Earth to find mates to procreate with. That’s the whole point of the Match Program. Elex is going to want one of his own...and as much as I want to, I can’t give him that. I can’t give him that because of the horrible event that led me to marry Tera’s father. The event that creeps into my memory, despite the laughter and bubbling joy around me as people try to release the tension from President Montgomery’s capture and the close call we all had. People so desperately want to return to happier thoughts when tragedy strikes, unlike me, who returns to darker thoughts when happiness hits.

“Christina! Get up from that bed this instant!” My father stands in the doorway, watching me with panicked eyes. My mother peers from behind him.

I groan, my body shivering with chills as I clutch my belly. It should feel empty—they made me abort the baby. It was for the best, I know that. I have to know that; there's no other choice. I should feel relieved that I won't have to live with the stigma of being a loose woman anymore. No one will know. But instead, I'm being punished. I'm bleeding, and shivering, and so weak my heart pounds at the barest amount of exertion, like even trying to stand.

Father's rigid at the foot of the bed, his face white. It's not anger, though he blusters as though it is. No, it's fear. I think he can see how clammy my skin is, how my hair is plastered to my head, my face wrenched in pain.

He pulls the sheet down and mother gasps. I'm lying in a puddle of wet—bright red, thick blood. Fresh blood.

“We have to call the doctor,” she says.

“We can't,” he grits. “We'll get her into the car. Take her to the hospital two towns over.”

“We can't both leave,” mother says. “What will people think? They'll know why we're leaving.”

“You can't lift her by yourself,” he scowls. “Besides, what will you say?”

“Take Gary,” she decides.

Carlton's father. It's he and my own father who paid for the abortion, splitting it equally since the baby was mine and Carlton's.

To the man who wasn't even a doctor.

“Go call him,” father says. “I'll put her in the backseat. Tell him we'll be at his place in ten minutes, to wait out in the field and to hop into the car. She'll be lying down so no one should see.”

It didn't even feel like they cared if I lived or died. They were just concerned that someone might know.

But what did I expect? They didn't care if my baby died.

And yet, something deep down inside me knew it was for the best. I couldn't raise a baby on my own and have a favorable outcome. It wasn't just my life I was ruining, but his too. Fatherless, disowned by his family, a mother who would have to whore herself out on the streets. My brothers might feed me, take me in, but it would hurt their thriving business if we were to get caught on their property. And how could one hide a toddler in the attic? In the basement?

A month earlier I'd been so happy. I'd told Carlton to get well soon. He'd had one of his episodes—the illness had come quickly, and harder within the last year. Stomach incidents that left him vomiting uncontrollably, his skin growing pale and wan. I'd told him we'd get married on the day he turned nineteen, and that we were going to have a baby. We'd have to fudge a couple months off the birthdate and say he came early. Or maybe have him in another town and stay away for a month—pretend he was big for his age. But it was manageable. He'd smiled at me, ecstatic with the news, said we were going to be so happy.

The next morning, he was gone.

I didn't have time to get used to the shock of his death because he'd blurted out on his deathbed that I was carrying his child. His father kept me away while he was dying.

“Mom? Mom, you okay?” Tera asks.

I jerk back to the present.

“Yes,” I breathe. “I can't wait to be a grandma. He or she can call me anything their little heart wants.”

Tera gives me the most loving smile and takes my hand. My fingers feel icy cold, but she kisses them and holds them to her lap as if warming me up.

And the conversation is changed.

So is my heart. I love Elex so much and I know I have to lose him, just like I lost Carlton. It's not in my cards to have a loving relationship. A loving husband, a loving mate. I'm lucky I had the one lousy marriage I did have. Those are the hands fate dealt me.

I'll enjoy one last month with him. When he has to return to Pimeon, I'll break it gently.

I'll tell him we need a break.

What I don't count on is Kenny. Somehow, the little man senses what's going on and clings to Elex. He tells me how strong he is. How big. How wonderful.

He's referred to him as Pappy Elex, which I've hushed countless times, afraid Elex will hear it. The last thing I need is for Elex to think we're going to be a family.

We can't be a family. Not now that I know the Adroki are here for procreation, and I can never give him that. He's better off with one of the dancers.

Part of me feels weepy and stressed. Elex leaves at the end of the month, and I have to come up with a plan to break things off.



***Elex:***

I love watching her sleep. Her face is relaxed and she's a cuddler. A lock of hair falls over her forehead and as I brush it away, the scent of lavender in bloom wafts up as if reaching for me.

Christina always smells of Earth flowers and the herbs she cultivates. I wonder if we lived on Pimeon, would she smell like *de'flodia*? Of *marishnia*? The sweet, citrusy bloom of the *tshorag* tree?

I think so. The delicate female attracts sweet scents, even when she's surrounded by herbal remedies.

And I was wrong, so wrong. I thought with the President's death—or what we refer to as his death, since it's inevitable now—that the rough patch human females go through would

dissipate immediately since there was no one left to blackmail her. To threaten her. To make her feel worthless.

I was so very wrong.

There's something else going on, something my mate is hiding from me. I'm sure she doesn't want *kish*, but she pretends everything is all right. It's apparent in the way she waits for the deadline that's swiftly approaching—my time up on Earth.

In the meantime, I made sure to volunteer for construction of the new traveling port. The physical labor will get me my choice of the next job—and I choose Earth. I will return in the next six lunar cycles and will be able to remain the entire rotation on Earth. However, I can also test the equipment and can visit this planet once each lunar cycle. I will still see the first few months of my grandkish's growth. I can visit Kenny and Christina monthly.

And I will allow Christina to pretend she can fight me while I figure out what is going on with her.

CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**



## CHRISTINA

**T**ry as I might, I can't find a decent fight to pick with him. When I'm grumpy, the infuriating man is understanding. He picks up after himself, he helps clean the house, and he loves Kenny. He plays with him and gently teaches him to be the young man he'll be soon enough.

I'm getting more and more desperate.

He leaves for Pimeon today and I'm trying to ease into breaking things off. I've been short tempered with him, laying beside him in bed without touching, even though we wake up tangled as usual.

Except for this morning. The smell of pancakes wafts up the stairs. Seriously, one more fault against the man. Who lets a woman sleep in and feeds her son when he's about to leave for his own planet?

I throw on a robe to stumble down the stairs.

"There she is," Kenny says. "Goo' mornin', bootiful."

"Good morning, my mate," Elex says, making me frown. I'm about to send him off as a single man and he calls me his mate?

"Your son understands I'll be leaving today. He's ready," Elex says and Kenny nods.

"Terr and Ree gonna be there. And I gotta take care of you, mum. 'Til pappy—uh, 'til Elex comes back."

I'll have to pretend not to hear his slip. Elex has spent his own time getting my son prepared to accept his leave. Giving

him a job to do to keep him busy. To take care of his mother.

“An’ I okay because I knows you’s *mated*.” Kenny says the word in a sing-song tone. “You love her,” he says, pointing to Elex, who smiles and nods.

Oh, God. My son is attached to this man, as much as I am. What am I going to do.

“Kinny! Kinny! It’s me, Suzee.” Susie screams from the back porch.

“Sushi!” Kenny’s eyes grow wide as he screams at the top of his lungs. “Sushi! My momma gonna get married! Ima gonna have a steppappy!” In his excitement, he scrambles from the barstool, his fingers waving wildly in the air, as he runs to the back porch, babbling all the way.

“I’ll be leaving at noon,” Elex says softly, and he knows. He knows I want to break up, I feel it in my gut.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry to bring it up now, just when you have to go back. But...um...well, it’s not quite working anymore. Not like I thought it would. I need to focus on my son, and he’s way too emotionally involved—”

“Christina. What has brought this on?” His words seem perfunctory.

“Nothing. I mean, there’s not a cataclysmic event. It’s just not working,” I repeat lamely.

I’ve never seen an angry Adroki but there’s no missing the clipped jaw, the ticking vein in his neck. Maybe he did think he was going to leave without me bringing it up.

“Lie.”

“Arrogant much?” I ask.

In a heartbeat, he’s around the counter and in my face.

And being so close to him, feeling the warmth of his skin, the rasp of his voice, he’s right. It’s all a lie. But it’s a lie for his own sake. He has the chance to have his own babies. I can’t keep that from him.

For the smallest moment, I'm saddened, wondering if my son would have been wonderful too. Even without his father. I think he would have. He would have had Carlton's genes and my rearing.

A rearing that might have been more difficult under my parents' roof. Maybe one of my married brothers might have taken us in.

But my son would never have had a normal life. Now that I look back at Carlton's upbringing—I saw him through a child's eyes back when I loved him, overlooking so many things because of that love. He had issues he had to overcome, just as we all do. He couldn't stand up to people. He was bullied by his father, ever since his mother passed. Would that have rubbed off and he might have bullied our son?

Who knows? While I will always love and mourn the child I lost, something intuitive down inside me knows it was the best outcome for the time. While I hate and refuse to accept that realization, it comforts me at the same time for the horrible choice I made.

I forgive my father and my almost father-in-law. Given time and without the shock of Carlton's death, it's with great sadness and regret to know I would have made the choice myself. I would have come up with the credits to go to a hospital and had it done without the infection that took my uterus.

A choice that should not affect the man I love.

His mouth takes mine, hard and punishing and there's something sick and broke inside me because I love it.

When he pulls away, triumphant with my uncontrolled response, I deliver the killing blow.

“How could I not physically want you? You know my body and I know yours. But emotionally it's over. Don't come back unless it's just a quick fuck. And don't expect this pussy to remain exclusively yours during your absence.”

His hand comes around my neck, the larger size of it feels like it wraps around completely. My heart is pounding inside

my chest—he’s so fucking powerful, he could snap my head off with one squeeze. And yet there’s no fear within me, not for myself.

Elex leans close, his breath brushing the wisps of hair from my cheek. “Do you really wish to cause so many deaths? I will kill any male who touches you, my mate.”

I open my mouth, about to argue that I’m not his mate when his mouth descends on mine.

“Now smile for our boy, Christina.”

Harsh, punishing lips take mine in a hard kiss until I push him away, my hands flat on his chest.

“Mum? Whatsa wrong?”

I whirl around. My son is holding up two ties, one in purple and one in gold. The ties match Elex’s uniform.

“Nothing, baby. Elex and I are just talking before he heads out to the portal.”

“Ain’t you gonna get dressed?” Kenny’s clever eye looks me up and down.

Elex’s strong forearm snakes around my waist and pulls me back against him, then presses a kiss to the top of my head.

“Your *maman* is sad about me leaving. She may wear her pajamas to the send-off if she wishes.”

Kenny’s face breaks into a grin. “Is okay, mum. Elex said he be back before we knows it. An’ he’s can visit every month. We stilla gonna see him.” His little gaze sharpens. “You still... you still *mates*?”

“Of course,” Elex and I both say together.

“Okay.” His smile is back full force. “Then no other womans gonna look at Elex ‘cause he already taken, right?”

“That’s right,” Elex agrees, his voice carrying over my head. “Now, maybe your *maman* can decide if she’s going to dress or not, and I’ll help you pick which tie?”

He swats my ass, leaving a sharp sting, and I glare over my shoulder at him as Kenny agrees.

I head up the stairs, leaving the two of them discussing ties. So Elex will be back to visit? I'll have to make sure we're busy when those days arrive. Sooner or later, he'll see that distance was for the best.

Everything happens for a reason, especially when it's out of our control. The universe gives us signs—the first one was that he lives on another planet, for gosh sakes. The second was that he wants kids and I already have my own family. We're at two completely different points in our lives.

A quick shower and dress later, the bedroom door opens and a brooding Elex stands in the doorway of the bathroom, watching me brush out my hair.

“Kenny is in the backyard catching butterflies as he waits for us.”

He looks resigned to the fact that he knew the breakup was coming. Perhaps I was better than I thought during those fights he would shut down.

“Why?” he asks.

“I need to focus on my son. I don't want anything else right now. Kenny will be with me the rest of my life and I need to remember that.”

“You're still young. You might want more—”

“No.” I cut him off before he can make the painful statement. “I won't want more. I raised a daughter. I'm raising a son, though he'll never be gone. My life is totally complete.”

“How do you want to play this?” he says, and he looks so forlorn, I almost go back on my plan.

But I love him. I love him so damn much and I can't give him what he deserves. His own babies.

“We can stay friends,” I say softly, easing the pain as much as I can. “If you should meet someone in the meantime, I'll understand and wish the very best for you.” Lie. I'll probably wish she'd fall on her face and lose all her front teeth.

Ugh. But then she'd be better at sucking his dick.

And that makes rage fly through me at the thought of some other bimbo on his dick.

"I won't," he says. "I'll never be glad for anyone else."

I sigh. "I can try to slowly prepare Kenny that we're just friends if you can help me ease him into it."

"I will do everything in my power to keep him from being hurt, Christina. I love him." Elex moves in so quickly, he's almost a blur, but I hold my hands out, keeping him away. Reminding him that this is how things must be.

"Will you keep our status quiet? Let Kenny assume we're still a couple?"

"Mated. Your son calls us mated." His voice is nearly a growl. "And I assume everyone else also? Our friends? Our family?"

Oh, my. How tangled the web becomes. I'll also have to work on detangling those strings. Letting everyone slowly become aware that we're not as close as they thought. That we were casually dating for nine months. So casual. And then when he returns home, maybe we can just slowly go our separate ways.

"Yes," I whisper. "We'll do it slowly."

"And what do I get out of this, Christina? For my mate deciding she's no longer mine?"

Even though I know we're alone, I look around the small bathroom. "Elex, please. I'm not yours."

"Every inch of you belongs to me. But I will promise you this. I will stop asking you to be mine and agree to pretending we are mates until you can figure things out on your end."

"Okay." I agree readily because isn't this what I wanted?

"And I promise not to kill any male that enters your bed. As long as you keep males out of your bed."

I suck in a deep inhalation, then give a short nod. I have no intentions of allowing anyone into my bed anyway.

“So come, sweet. Come and see me off. Let’s pretend for our friends and family.”

He seems a little too okay with this and for a brief second, I wonder if I’m missing something. But he takes me by the hand and leads me downstairs, through the back door.

Instead of taking my hand like he normally does when the three of us walk, Kenny jumps up and clutches Elex’s other hand. My heart sinks the tiniest bit.

This might be harder than I thought.

“You gonna be gone long, Elex?” Kenny asks, biting his lip.

“Not too long,” Elex murmurs. “It might seem like that at first. But I can send you postcards. And sometimes I can visit with the hologram conference. And sometimes I’ll be on Earth for a short time, so I can even call you on the phone.”

“I likka that.”

“And I’ll need you to take care of your *maman* while I’m gone. Remind her to eat her veggies.”

“An’ not drinkka pop. Momma bad about that.” Kenny gives me side eye and I snort, wondering if he thinks he’s fooling anyone.

By the time we cut across the field, there’s a small gathering of people to see Elex off. I clutch his hand, then loosen my grip when I realize I should be blasé. I shouldn’t have such tight features like I want to cry.

Like this is the end.

As much as I want him to find a nice girl to mate with and move on to having dozens of babies, I absolutely hate it too.

“Elex,” Mikhail says. “Ready to leave? It’s L’inél coming through on your echo-trace portal, though it’ll take a few.”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Not to worry. We’ll take care of them,” Jaire says, his eyes dropping to me and Kenny.

“I know you will, brother.”

Relion hugs Elex. “You got this. Work hard and time will fly by.”

Tera gives him a hug, her arms coming around his middle and I almost scoff at remembering how I first thought he was interested in my daughter. How far we’ve come since then.

“When you come back, it’ll seem like you never left,” she says.

Kenny is sniffing as he’s squeezing Elex and everyone’s wiping their eyes. God, I should have done this sooner. I shouldn’t have let Kenny grow so attached.

I shouldn’t have fallen in love.

Something Elex whispers to my son has Kenny drying his eyes and nodding, a happier expression on his face like he was just given hope.

Elex turns to me. He sweeps me into his arms and his forehead comes down to mine.

“I will always be here, Christina. Say the word and I will be at your beck and call. Until then, my love...”

His mouth comes down on mine and I give up fighting my feelings. Our tongues meet and we’re giving each other lazy, languid strokes, feeding each other the love that we feel. Each person wanting the other to have it all.

I think I hear some sighs from the others who watch.

Elex finally pulls away and says, “I love you. I will always love you.”

Part of me wrestles with knowing it’s for the show. Part of me tamps down the instant glee that makes my belly swoon.

Part of me doesn’t want to lie.

So I bring my hand up to his face and whisper, “I love you too.”

His hand covers mine and I feel Kenny step up, inserting his smaller hand into my other. Then Elex takes a step



backward, and the wind and lights from all the different realities in the portal carry him away, leaving my hand outstretched in the air.

My last image was of his face locked with mine.

When the portal dies down again, before the next wave of the echo return fires up, Kenny squeezes himself against me.

“He be backka soon, mum.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

## CHRISTINA

**S**ix months later...

“MOMMA! TELLA ME THE STORY.”

I know which one my son wants to hear. “Once upon a time, our planet nearly destroyed itself with the third world war. We lost three fourths of our people all at once and yet the danger wasn’t over. We’d poisoned our land, our air, our water. The remaining people would starve if we couldn’t grow food and drink fresh water. So, everyone who was left combined into one government to make better decisions, but it was hard. So hard. Decades later, we still struggled, with many failed projects behind us. But one thing that changed for the better? We no longer fought each other for looking different because over the years, our skin color merged. Our features combined. We were one race, not several. The human race. Man still struggled to find something to hate, those less fortunate, those who want change. In the meantime, the Britonians had left their planet with a dying sun. They reached an agreement with Earth to clean our water first, in exchange for a place to live. They parked their giant ships right there, hidden in the bottom of the ocean—”

“But they weren’t done.”

“No. They cleaned our air next and then our soil.”

“Then they grew distracted!”

I hide a smile. It seems he knows the story by heart. “Yes. They saw that women outnumbered men and so they proposed our women being matched to other species. You see, they’d stayed on another planet once.”

“It wassa called Pim-eyon. Like Eeyore, but with a pim.”

“It was called Pimeon,” I agree. “And the first woman to leave for a match was the president’s own daughter. The First Daughter.”

“An’ a she fallin love and they hava little baby!” My excited son wraps his arms together as if he holds one.

“It was successful.” I smile. “They fell in love and now have three babies. A firstborn son and twin girls.”

“*Kishes*. An’ then the other girl hada baby too, an’ itsa boy.”

“Yes. Tessa was the second woman, she mated their brother. She gave birth to a baby boy.”

“With tentacles.”

“Yes. The better able to swim with.” I tickle his legs, making him laugh.

That is one of the small-minded fears groups of opposing humans have, the purebred groups who want to keep our bloodlines strong. They think that legs are being stamped out of existence in exchange for tentacles. I’ve never heard such ridiculousness, but then again, I’m more open-minded than most. I’ve had to protect my son from others for being born different. Once they used to say his “disease” might spread. That one day we would all wake up with a touch of Down’s syndrome if those affected were allowed to procreate.

“All three of the children born have tentacles.”

“I likka them.”

“Now, go on and play, you scamp. Git. I have my gardening to do.”

“But momma! Where Pappy Elex?”

He asks daily.

“Don’t call him that.” I hush Kenny and look around the back yard to make sure no one heard what he called Elex. It’s so improper. He grins, the movement crinkling at the corners of his eyes.

The little shit. He knows it. He knows exactly what he’s doing.

“You know good and well Elex had to go to Pimeon for a while. He does live there, you know.”

“I know. An’ he lives in Eden too,” he says, eyes narrowed like he dares me to argue.

“Baby boy,” I say, grasping his hands. It breaks my heart that Kenny loves him so, nearly as much as I do. But we can never have Elex. “I know you miss him. I do. But Elex is a captain in the King’s Guard and has to go back to work there sometimes. I’ll let you know as soon as he comes, okay?”

And I pray that Elex will be more receptive to breaking up now that he’s had some forced distance between us, because each time he called, each time he messaged that he’d be in town, I managed to miss it, though Kenny was able. If not, he’ll be kind and continue to pretend for my son’s sake.

“Jaire an’ Ree liv here.”

“Yes, sweetie. But they’re both married. Mated.”

I can feel he’s angry with me for my answers and has no way to express it.

“Kenny, I love you. I know you love Elex.” I bend and pluck a dandelion that has seeded. “But sometimes things have to find a way on their own.” I blow the seeds, scattering them in the breeze.

His eyes grow big as saucers, and I wonder what the little man is thinking. “Okay, mum,” he says and then a huge, heart-melting grin scrunches up his little face.

God, I love this child.

Both of my children.

When I agreed to be third wife in the marriage of Lyle Garrett, who already had two wives at the time, Loretta and Sheila, I knew I'd be an instant third mother. Maybe that was why I was okay with the arrangement during those dark days that I can barely remember now. The family already had one child, Tera, who had been born to Sheila. How such a hateful bitch bore a sweet baby, I'll never know. But Tera is as good as gold. Everything she does is selfless.

As soon as I saw that beautiful little girl, I knew she was mine. She was just a skinny six-year-old and small for her age. She'd blossom with a bit of doting but nobody in our household would show her any attention.

She was a girl. She was a throwaway. No one wanted girls, our planet was already overrun with females.

Two years later, Loretta became pregnant, and it was a boy. Immediately Loretta's status in the household rose. Oh, she was first wife and all, but it was obvious that Sheila was Lyle's favorite. Though it was before my time, I suspected it was because she bore him a child, even though Tera was considered worthless. I watched Tera's value fall even more when Loretta's condition was announced.

But Kenny was born with obvious characteristics of Down's syndrome and was immediately rejected by his mother and father. Sheila didn't even have the lady balls to stand up for an innocent newborn. The only one that did was my little Tera. She was a fierce little force to be reckoned with, even standing up to the doctor who callously looked him over when Loretta died. Two throwaway children were my blessing—a gift to make up for the loss of my own.

Loretta hemorrhaged the day her baby was born, and Sheila later claimed it was a broken heart. Sheila always saw what she wanted and often twisted the truth to suit her needs. She didn't say much more than that because we were all aware of Loretta claiming that I'd "done" something during the birth to cause him to be born that way. Maybe Sheila thought I had some kind of hidden powers. She didn't want Lyle to marry me, for sure, but she sure as hell didn't complain when I did the cooking and her laundry. Being third wife was hell, but I

still didn't wish death on any of them. Not Loretta, and not Lyle and Sheila two years later.

It was why I tried to keep Tera from making the same mistake. She was determined to enter the marriage mart, knowing her choices were men looking for a last wife. I couldn't bear that for her. Thankfully, she listened and mated Relion. Especially since she was already pregnant at the time, moody as can be, and none of us realized it.

"Here, take this basil and rosemary to Tera's. You know what to do with it?"

"Blow the rosemurry in the door, mum." He rolls his eyes dramatically.

I smack him lightly on the nose with the sprig. "That's cinnamon, dove. At the start of each month."

"Oops." He scrunches his little freckled nose, then his face clears. "I hang it up on the door?"

I'm about to congratulate him for remembering when he blows it.

"Then when Ree and Terr stand under the door, he hafta kiss her!" He gives a shy little giggle, and his fingers cover his mouth on the word *kiss*, and I can't help but laugh too.

"That's mistletoe, goof." I swat his behind. "Just take Tera the herbs. They're for cooking anyway."

A strange look roves across his face. "He's here."

"Who's here, baby?"

But the curious moment is over, and he runs off excitedly. "I taka my sister the herbs, mum. And I kiss baby Telilah for you." The tail end of his sentence rises in a sing-song. The back screen door slams shut, cutting off his frantic babbling.

Crazy kid.

Yet it sounds like he's still babbling excitedly to himself. I can't make out the words but eventually his voice grows fainter. And I continue to cut my herbs. By the time I gather my basket and head toward the back door, a large, purple man

blocks the doorway. The wind is knocked right out of my lungs.

I missed him so much.

He's wearing the purple and gold uniform today...just like he had the first time I met him a year or so ago. Just like he had the last time I saw him six months ago. He looks just as handsome as he did then.

"Elex." His name whispers from my lips.

I must be imagining him. He can't be here. He's not supposed to be back yet. Last I heard, he'd taken on another position but would let us know when he returned, just like he let us know when he called or visited.

And I avoided him.

But it's just been six months. Right? Quickly I mentally count the months I could never forget. The Adroki usually take three-month work stints on Earth, but maybe that was bargained for when President Eric Montgomery ruled, and he's long gone now. Lilaina, as the new First Lady, is the one making the interplanetary decisions now. From what I understand, they sign up for various projects knowing the length of time each one will have beforehand.

"Miss me?" The dark, deep voice uncurls a wanton need deep inside me.

I raise my chin and lie through my teeth. "No. Were you gone?"

"You know damn good and well I was gone," he growls. "Come and kiss me."

"No," I gasp, clutching at my breast the way a sensible woman should. But none of that matters to him as he pulls me to him with two tentacles that wrap around my waist.

"Are you crazy?" I snap, my palms flat on his rock-hard chest as I try to push him away.

"Crazy fer you!" Kenny giggles behind him and I freeze.



Dammit, my son never left. He must have gotten caught by Elex at the front door.

“Kiss me, precious,” Elex whispers, bending his head. “Your curious son watches.”

I can't help the moan that escapes me when his lips touch mine. Because this was our agreement after our affair ended six months ago. As long as he stopped pushing me for a relationship with him, I would agree to pretend.

For Kenny's sake.

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

## CHRISTINA

**K**enny's giggle echoes out the front door as he actually leaves this time, his little heart full with the proof that I surely am paired with Elex.

That bastard knew just what he was doing when he tricked me into coming inside.

I push him away with my hands on his chest. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

He backs away, his tentacles trailing after him, retracting as they wind gracefully away from me and back into his own space. "You said a pretense for Kenny in exchange for me no longer asking you to be mine. Does a pretense not include kissing you?"

"I meant a casual relationship! Some dating. We'd hang out together during outdoor functions, barbecues, and the like. Until Kenny matured enough to deal with us splitting up."

A slow grin pulls at his lips as his brow clears. "Well. You probably should have made that clearer, my mate."

I deliberately glance around him to where Kenny no longer stands and spring the full force of my sarcasm on him. "You don't get to call me that right now, baby cakes. I'm only your mate when Kenny's present."

I realize my mistake when he grins broadly at what he considers a love term. *Baby cakes*. Tera used to teach the Adroki that food items could be considered endearments, so my sarcasm is lost.

Scowling, I walk by him, snatching a tentacle when he reaches out for me, and lead him straight out the front door. When we're both standing on the front stoop of my house, I spin around in one smooth move and head back inside, letting the door bang behind me. The last thing I see over my shoulder is his stupidly grinning face as I engage the lock.

Butterflies skitter around my midsection because...Elex is back. Tonight is an outdoor party...and Elex is back.

Of course, I should have known the party was set to welcome him home. I never paid attention and should have asked why we were having a party. Maybe everyone assumed I knew. If I had, I'd have come up with an excuse not to attend. Maybe that's why they didn't tell me.

As it is, I can't help but take extra care when getting ready that evening. Thankfully, Tera tossed Kenny in the shower at her house so all he has to do is change into fresh clothes before we make the trek through the back trails to get to the main house where the dancers live.

"Mum, here's Uweena an' Sushi. Ima go play, okay?"

"Alright, but you know the rules?"

"Yes." He rolls his eyes. "We jus' going ta swing." Peering out the window, he eyes the small playground the Adroki made last summer. Not only does it have a common swing set, but there are small swings shaped like spaceships, propelled by pushing the pedals with the feet. It's well suited for his shorter legs; he loves it.

From the park, my friend Dori waves, so I know it's okay. She's outside knitting while Irene swings and I know she'll keep an eye on them all. I wave back and then head off to find my new grandbaby. I make the short trek through the open fields to the main lodge.

"Christina! Did you see Elex is back?" Jaire's mother, Lampia, hurries to my side. She spends more time here in Eden than on her own planet, wanting to be near her son and daughter-in-law, Anya. Not that I mind, she's a sweet woman. She loves to teach Kenny to cook, and she and I get along

great, despite our age difference. We have being mothers in common.

But she seems to think Elex is one of her sons. She's taken to playing matchmaker and I love her to death, but I can't tell her why I'm not the one for him.

"I saw him," I say quietly. "He came by the house." *And I locked him out.*

"He came back early for a reason, you know. He brought a team of recruits to Earth. He is to train them, and they will travel to the smaller areas, introducing themselves and getting people used to us. It will relieve the mated couples like Jaire and Relion from doing such chores in addition to establishing the farms on Eden."

"I'm glad he had a noble reason for returning," I murmur. "Work. He's an important man, a captain. Hopefully he'll get special commendation for volunteering for more time away from home. And since he's not mated, I guess it's easier to focus on one's career, hmm?"

"Oh, but..." Lampia looks a little perplexed, like that wasn't at all how she wanted the conversation to go. But I smile easily at her as Anya waves me over, then mumble an excuse. "I have to go see your adorable granddaughter." I give my friend a quick hug, dismissing myself quickly as another approaches her. I make my way across the yard to where Anya has arrived.

"Oh, look at that precious dress!" I coo.

Jayna, Jaire and Anya's daughter, is six months younger than my own grandchild. The sweet baby girls have been proclaimed best friends by Kenny. The dress she has on is an adorable little sack dress the Adroki use, with a hem that has draws that can be tied like a bag around their tentacles. It teaches them control. Right now, Anya has it hiked up, so her baby's tentacles are everywhere.

"Did you see Elex is back?" Anya asks, handing Jayna to me.

Jaire and Anya listened to Kenny's advice in naming their kish but did not want the name *Janya*, Kenny's version, to rhyme with Anya, so they gave it a slight variation. Kenny is still proud. He believes baby-naming is his thing.

The baby automatically winds her tentacles around my waist as her fists reach for my hair. I inhale her sweet scent as I press a kiss onto her bald little head. My heart melts when she gurgles at me. I love this baby so much.

Anya's waiting for a response, though. I'm beginning to think this is a conspiracy. I try a different tactic than the one I used with Lampia. "Your mother-in-law just told me. I'm glad he's able to focus his time on new recruits."

But Anya is more forward than Lampia. "He volunteered because he wants to be around you and Kenny."

Well...shit. I look up at her blankly. "And we are dating," I remind her.

"By now you should be a happily mated *couple*. Not dating. Just like the rest of us."

Her. My daughter.

"I have a son to think about. I need to take things slow. Make sure they'll work," I say vaguely.

Her face softens. "Oh, sweetie, they'll work. You have no idea how dedicated, how focused Adroki males are." Then she leans in. "And you have no idea how much that man loves you."

Oh. Butterflies flit around in my belly, a feeling I haven't had since I was a teenager. I smile at her and it's more genuine. But then I convince myself that the butterflies are anxiety, dread for the pickle I've gotten myself into because I plunged into this relationship without thinking it through.

Behind Anya, Jaire approaches, his arms coming around her belly and her entire face lights up as he whispers into her ear. She blushes and I immediately know what he whispered.

"I'll take Jayna over to Lampia," I offer.

That does it. Anya can go off with her mate for some alone-time while everyone is distracted, and she'll think Lampia will be able to talk to me about Elex.

"Thank you," she mouths, and then giggles as Jaire pulls her by the hand.

I head back to Lampia, who's standing talking with two of the dancers, Elizabeth and Rebecca.

"Anya wanted me to bring Jayna to you," I say, handing her the baby as her face lights up.

Elizabeth is another story, though. "Gross! Those two just did it this morning. Woke up the entire house with Anya's moaning."

Rebecca brings the back of her hand to her forehead and closes her eyes in an expression mimicking a Victorian maiden's ecstasy.

Lampia looks proud, pleased as punch. "I think my son is an excellent lover." She really has no human modesty.

"Or maybe Anya's just horny from years of repression," Rebecca mutters. "Maybe if you moved back into the house, they wouldn't do it so often."

Elizabeth laughs, bumping her shoulder with hers in agreement.

There's a sparkle in Lampia's eyes that makes me giggle. "But that's why I moved out. It was such a noisy house with all that midnight moaning. And you two are young. How much sleep could you possibly need?"

I laugh as I wave and back away.

I find Tera and Relion sitting in the middle of a crowd and head that way, determined to get to my grandbaby.

And my stomach drops when I see Relion's seated next to Elex—with Telilah in his arms.

God didn't prepare me for this. The man with bulging biceps and defined abs with a delicate baby in his arms. The baby he calls his granddaughter. The sight makes me melt.

Tera grins broadly. “Surprise! Did you see Elex is back?”

“I saw,” I say casually, trying not to snap at the hundredth time I’ve heard that phrase. I lean in casually. “Hi, pretty girl,” I coo to the baby as Telilah gurgles, raising a hand to my cheek.

Tera frowns, confused, and looks between me and Elex. She expected more out of me, clearly.

“Kiss me, beautiful,” Elex says lightly, and only I hear the thread of challenge in his voice.

I smile charmingly, noticing when Tera’s face clears, and then lean in to give him a small peck over Telilah’s head.

When his tentacle brushes up my ankle, I can’t help but linger over his lips.

“I missed you,” he whispers in his low, raspy voice.

“Ditto, my love.” Mostly, I add that title for Tera’s benefit, but because it’s true I sink all my heartfelt emotions into it.

At the last moment, I feel his tentacle brush up the bare skin of my leg, tasting my truth.

And he knows. He knows I want him; I need him. I’m crazy about him.

He’s going to wonder why I continue to push him away.



CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

## CHRISTINA

“Here, Christina,” Relion says, holding out a chair and placing it next to Elex so I can sit near the baby. I smile at my son-in-law. He’s finally dropped the *maman* from my name. Considering he’s my age, it felt a bit odd.

“Would you like to see your *néka*, beautiful girl?” Elex murmurs into Telilah’s little ear, kissing the shell of it softly.

My heart melts and I scoot closer to him, not even minding when his tentacles come around me, nestling me to him. It feels just like the old days and while I expected awkwardness between us, there is none. He leans in and places our precious grandbaby in my lap.

“Hi, sweetie,” I say softly.

She looks so much like Tera. She has lilac skin, though, and tentacles like Relion. She’s bald as a turnip and has the Adroki designs that mark her little skull and I’m not sure if that means she’ll grow hair like a human or if she’ll just remain with the markings like the Adroki.

I inhale her baby scent and a piece of my heart breaks and heals at the same time. I wonder what my baby might have looked like. Would he have smelled this sweet? Cooed so perfectly? Sucked his fingers like he couldn’t get enough?

She curls a tentacle around Elex’s large finger, and I can’t help but sigh and settle my head into the crook of his shoulder because I’m so lovestruck.

How I wish things were different. I wish he didn't want children, so I didn't have to keep pushing him away. But he deserves this and just because I can no longer have any doesn't mean he should be kept from enjoying them.

Relion takes Tera off to dance, knowing their baby girl is safe and sound, fed and happy.

"How old are you, Christina?" Elex asks. He knows, so I'm not sure why he's asking, but I answer anyway.

"Just turned thirty-seven."

"Odd that you could have a *kish*, and she could be younger than your own *grandkish*," he says.

I can't help but smile, but then I wipe it away. "Except I don't want any," I say. "I've raised mine, remember? And Kenny—well, Kenny will be with me for the rest of his life."

His voice is right in my ear when he says, "Perhaps it was that way in the past, my love. But you are no longer a single mother raising two *kish* on her own. You have an entire community now. I see all the dancers making sure he doesn't have too much candy, reminding him how to treat others, teaching him dance, showing him how to garden."

Just then, Kenny's laughter rings out, followed by a bark of laughter by Jaire, who picks him up for a piggy-back ride.

He's right. Kenny is much more independent now. He's much happier, is no longer prone to tantrums because he wants his sister. But I can't share with Elex the real reason why I don't want kids.

Instead, I smile sadly and rub my cheek onto his shoulder. He's wonderfully built—all hard, bulging muscle. Warm skin. He smells like smoky campfire and sweet baby, mixed with the fresh underlying scent of his soap. Sexy, sexy alien man. Things were so good between us during the six months before Tera and Relion returned from their trial mating period. Until I realized a relationship meant everyone expected more.

"You know that I would give you anything you wish?" he rumbles.

“I know.” And because I can’t help myself, I turn my head slightly and kiss the bare skin of his arm. God, I missed him.

I wish I could give him what he wants.

“Kenny asked me to spend the night. Said we could build a fort.”

If we were a real couple, no one would blink at him staying the night. Staying every night. He used to stay with us six months ago, before Relion and Tera returned home. Relion used to stay with Tera way before they’d mated. Eden was a bit less reserved than the rest of Earth, but we were all catching up now that the President is gone. He’d ruled with an iron fist.

I’m feeling generous and full of baby love, so I whisper, “So are you staying?”

His bicep tenses below my cheek before he rumbles out, “Already have my bags moved in.”

That was what he was doing earlier when I’d locked him out of the house.

I’m a shrew because that tensing of his bicep means he’s waiting for me to spew vitriol.

Instead, I focus on Telilah. “She’s the most beautiful baby ever, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Elex says, and I feel his lips press to the top of my head. “But rumors around Earth say that your legs will get stamped out. That all children are being born with tentacles.”

“I’d heard that,” I say softly.

“It’s what your president was spewing. It raised a lot of concern and scared people. Now we have to visit communities, soothe the fear.”

“Why do we care? It’s not like anyone is chopping off our legs to replace them with tentacles. Our children are being born to adapt. I always wondered why Earth was seventy percent water. We just polluted it. But maybe we might have evolved to swim with tentacles too, had we cherished our oceans.”

“People are afraid of change,” Elex says. “They refuse to just accept that sometimes things are different and it’s okay. Like Kenny. He’s perfect. I wouldn’t have him any other way.”

That makes my heart melt. “Really?”

“Really. The way he giggles right before he teases, letting you know it’s coming. The way he gets so excited he wiggles his hands and fingers.”

I smile at the image his words conjure. “Tera and I had a hard time not laughing constantly when he’d pull his antics. He was angry with me once when I’d first enrolled him in his school. They called us for a meeting. Tera and I showed up, panicked at what he could have possibly done. The principal told me, with a straight face, he refused to remove his hat.”

“His hat?”

I nod, lifting my head from his shoulder. “Except he didn’t wear a hat. I remember looking at Tera so confused. Then the principal opened the door to her office to show Kenny sitting there, wearing a pair of black panties on his head.”

His loud laughter is exactly what I expect, but Telilah looks at him in alarm, and then smiles when he reaches for her and spreads her out to our combined laps.

“And instead of taking Kenny to task, somehow Tera and I ended up arguing over whose panties they were.”

“Whose were they?”

I giggle. He definitely belongs with us. No one else would care, but our crazy little family finds that obnoxious detail important.

“Mine,” I sigh. “He was angry with me, after all. And more mortifying was me asking the principal if they were at least clean.” I squeeze my eyes shut with the memory and after a while, laugh along with Elex’s rolling chuckles.

“Did he go home that day?”

“Oh, yeah. His choice was to take off the hat or go home. He refused. We brought him home and wrested the damn

panties from his head, where he cursed us out, calling us names from the food items in the fridge.”

“I thought those were love terms?” He frowns in confusion.

Yes, Tera had used endearments for Relion like Kenny used to.

“They are. He was calling us the stuff he didn’t like. Avocado face. Tuna turnip. Beet butt.” I giggle at the memory. “Rumors were that avocado is good for the face. Can you imagine that food was once so plentiful, women used to waste it on their skin?” I chuckle again.

“He called me eggplant pudding when I left,” Elex says, his voice a little hopeful.

“That one could go either way,” I deadpan.

He gives a snort. “Lie. That kid loves me.” He takes Telilah, sitting her up so her jaw rests on his thumb and forefinger facing me. It gives me time to coo, and laugh with her as her hands jerk out, trying to clasp my fingers.

“Okay, we’re back,” Tera says, Relion’s arm around her. “We’ll take her so you two can go dance.”

“Careful with my grandkish, son,” Elex says grandly to Relion as he scoops her up to hand her to her father.

Relion scowls. He hates when Elex refers to himself as his stepfather, considering they’re the same age. Or Elex might even be a year or two younger. It never fails to set me and Tera into a flurry of giggles when they argue over it.

“Quit calling my daughter your grandkish.”

“She is my grandkish.”

“Then quit calling me your son.”

“Stepson is such a mouthful to say.”

“Come on,” I say to Elex, grabbing his arm to pull him to the dance area.

“Does this mean you won’t call me dad?” Elex calls over his shoulder, ignoring Relion’s outstretched middle finger.

I hide my giggle because I don’t think the Adroki even use the term dad. They know the human term *who’s your daddy*, though. I still remember the look on Relion’s face when Elex had uttered it to him, breaking the news of our relationship.

“Stop teasing him,” I chastise.

“Why, beautiful? I get teased too.” His lower lips juts out as the tip of a front tentacle runs across my clavicle and slides down to the neckline of my dress, telling me this time he means *tease* in a different way. I could slap it away, the way I normally do, but I don’t. Instead, I look him in the eye as if daring him and feel it slip farther down my cleavage.

His breathing hitches and his pupils dilate as he stares into my eyes. “I want to make you feel good tonight. No strings attached. Let me love you.”

Then it’s my turn for my breathing to hitch.

Did he use the “L” word? Does he know what that means? Did he mean it like it’s supposed to mean? No, English isn’t his first language. They all had translators in the beginning, and like a text-to-speech function, it slowly taught them the conversion. Many, including Elex, have their devices removed now.

He simply means it as making love. Not that he loves me.

Who could love a broken woman?

He must see something in my face. “You are all I have thought about since meeting you one year ago. I crave your touch, your laughter, your kiss.”

I am a broken woman because I can’t hear any more. I seal my lips to his...willingly. Just to quiet the words.

“No strings,” I murmur when I pull back. “Or it remains just once.”

Used to be, we’d have to explain the human phrase. Now the Adroki have been cultured to our human slang and he’ll know what it means.

“Give me the night and tomorrow we can go on as previously scheduled? A pretense for the son we both love? The daughter? The grandkish?” he whispers.

Put that way, it makes me sound so selfish. But a pretense is all I have to offer.

“It’s all I can give you.”

“Then I will take it, Christina.” His lips hungrily seek mine and I’m so glad he won’t push me for the reason of why I refuse more.



CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

## CHRISTINA

**W**e bring Kenny and two of his friends home to spend the night. We listen to their excited plans to stay up all night, settle them on the living room floor with blankets and pillows and play a vid, the images strolling across the ceiling.

Elex and I flee to the kitchen where we could keep an eye on them, but the air feels like it's brimming with sexual tension between us. He sits across the small table from me, casually sipping tea and caressing my leg with a tentacle. We're not flirting, not teasing. We're just biding our time because we both know it's going to happen.

All three kids are asleep within twenty minutes, and it's lights out.

We tiptoe in, turn on the night light to the bathroom, and turn off the vid that dances across the ceiling.

He pulls me up against him, friction between us as he slides me down his body. Elex searches my face as if he wants to see if I'm ready for this. Satisfied with the results, he takes my hand and leads me to my bedroom, closing the door with a soft snick.

He dims the light and looks expectantly at me. "I haven't seen you in a long time, my love. I've missed you."

"No strings," I remind him with a shaky voice, so he won't use such beautiful words like *my love*.

His smile curls so sexily when he pulls me toward him.

“No strings,” he agrees and I kind of feel like he’s appeasing me.

Sex with Carlton, my only other lover, was sneaky. New. Exciting. Forbidden. The urge died with him.

Now sex with Elex—all those feelings are brought to the surface again. From the moment I met him, I felt a zing of arousal. A zing that never really went away, even after the first time we made love, and I swore it would never happen again.

“Let go, my love,” he murmurs. “No strings attached. Just you and me tonight.”

He’s right. I can have this moment. Tonight, Elex is all mine.

“All right...my mate,” I say softly, because it’s just for tonight. Tonight, I can let go and tomorrow go back to the way things should be. Apparently I didn’t learn my lesson in the last horrendous six months.

The expression that roves over his face is one I’ll never forget.

“Christina,” he says thickly, desperation tingeing his voice. The deep rasp sends heat shooting down my core. “Let me undress you.”

I nod. His fingers reach for the hem of my tank top, and I lift my arms straight up so he can bring it over my head. Then he reaches for the clasp between my breasts.

I’m glad—and sad—that I gave up wearing corsets years ago. They were a horribly uncomfortable undergarment, yet sexy at the same time. I might have to grab a couple for special occasions. My breathing quickens when I imagine the look on his face when he sees how the corset will deepen my cleavage.

When the clasp pops free, he takes a moment to stare at my breasts. I feel like a goddess when he reverently reaches out, skimming his touch up the undersides and over to the shoulder straps to drag them over my arms. The sharp claws on his hands scratch gently along my flesh, marking me as his.

“Give me a moment to retract my claws,” he says.

“No,” I breathe.

He looks into my eyes and gets it; I want him to be himself. He doesn't always have to behave as if I'm a porcelain doll about to break.

He drops down, his tentacles spreading out magnificently, and lines up with my waist. He tugs my skirt down my hips and I lift a foot at a time to step out. He tosses the discarded skirt onto a chair behind me.

His face is lined up with my pussy. He steams his breath into the fabric of my panties and wet warmth spreads over my mound. My sigh escapes me and ends on a throaty moan. His claws slice through the fabric like it's tissue paper and the pieces fall into his waiting hand.

“These are now mine,” he growls, balling them into his fist. He brings them up to his nostrils, breathes deeply, and stuffs them into the pocket of his shirt.

He lifts my leg and sets it on top of one of his bent tentacles, propping me up and open. Very gently, he spreads my lips. It feels naughty and filthy to be spread open for him.

“I love looking at you. The colors. The delicate whorls of flesh. Your scent is divine. And the slickness of your essence.” A tentacle darts out and runs up my slit and the touch nearly buckles my knees.

The same tentacle comes to his mouth, and he sucks the tip clean.

“Elex,” I whisper.

“Say my name when you're coming on my tongue,” he says and clamps his face to my sex.

Hot, wanton need floods me from the heat of his mouth. God, it's been so long since I was with him like this. An entire year. I've missed him so much. His tentacles wrap around my thighs, strap around my ass like a cage, pulling me relentlessly toward him as he plunders my pussy with his tongue. He's bringing me to a quick, thunderous release, his lips kissing me,

his tongue teasing me, his fingers pushing inside me. When I'm on the verge of exploding, my need dripping down his fingers, my swollen sheath clenching him so tight, he pulls back.

“Say you're my mate. Say you're mine.”

Passion makes me admit to my feelings. “I'm yours. You're mine.”

His mouth sucks my clit in rhythmic pulls, and I explode, waves of pleasure coursing through me. “Elex!”

My knees buckle, my legs quivering, but he supports me.

“Perfect, my love,” he growls and effortlessly picks me up, carrying me to the bed.

His tentacles grasp my wrists and my ankles, stretching me wide as he strokes my body again, his mouth taking my nipples. Sensation erupts everywhere—soothing caresses of my arms, my legs, my calves, my ankles.

Achingly empty, I clench and release my sex repeatedly as if I can stave off the desire as he continues to make me whimper for him. I'm dripping with need and in a smooth, continuous motion, he rubs his tentacles in my wetness, over and over, stroking along my lips. I'm about to beg him to fill me when he lifts his head from my breast, and a look of ecstasy roves over his face.

He's tasting me. Not just my sex...but my *emotions*.

The look across his face is everything, like he's the desert and I'm a glass of water. Like he's a sinner and I'm a goddess. Because I can't stand that he looks at me with such reverence, I reach down for his slippery cock and squeeze the shaft. When he shudders with pleasure, I demand, “Fill me. Fuck me.”

He snarls as his hips lift, the tentacles still writhing around me, enveloping my thighs, my ankles, one gliding round and round my clit before slapping lightly, and I catch the sight of his monstrous, shiny cock, all purple and swollen hard. The head is large and bulbous and along the shaft are two more great round bulges as big as the head and I know from the sex

we had before that I can feel every inch of those giant balls inside my channel. I can feel when they stretch my lips as they plunder in and out when he's ramming me full up to the hilt.

His cock, hot, hard, and slippery with his natural lubrication, slides against my body, along my slit like a warm iron rod as thick as a forearm, sliding back and forth. His hands lift my ass to rock against him, teasing me and building my need so I'm roughly gliding along his shaft. I can't help but writhe against his hot flesh, my pussy still clenching because his tentacle still sucks my clit, bringing me frustratingly close to orgasm before it drops off and leaves me hanging, perilously close to coming but not quite pushing me over the edge.

"Elex, please," I beg. "Make me come."

"Greedy girl. I just swallowed your orgasm." The pleased lilt in his voice doesn't escape my notice. He loves that he can bring me so much pleasure.

He shifts the angle of his hips so the head of his cock is at my entrance and plunders into me. I'm so wet, so swollen; I feel like I grip his huge cock like a glove.

He finds a rhythm, moving in and out of me fast and deep.

Pleasure crashes into me in wave after wave of euphoria, speeding down my veins, rolling through every cell, sparking nerve ending of my being. I continue to chase the spiral, sailing higher, coming down, and jerking upward again as I hear him mutter my name into my ear.

I quiver when warm liquid fills me and he groans, his body convulsing as he comes. His mouth crashes down on mine as he swallows another orgasm.

God, I've missed this man.

CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

## ELEX

This fresh, beautiful morning means a whistle in my voice and a skip to my step. I left my beautiful mate exhausted in our bed as soon as I heard the whisperings from the living room.

Last night she collapsed in my arms, sated and exhausted after hours of loving. She was well and truly fucked. She will not forget me anytime soon, even if she tries.

Again.

I gather the *kishren*, hushing them into silence, and take them over to the dance hall to feed them breakfast without waking Christina. As soon as they finish eating, I walk them to their school where Dori works this morning. Times are much more relaxed now that we moved the school into Eden. Christina and Dori rotate morning and afternoon shifts with each other. Today is not a school day but the two of them voluntarily open for a few hours to allow the parents a break from chasing after their offspring. It is a daycare, I guess.

After dropping them off, I head to Relion's. We have plans to train the new recruits from Pimeon on how to appear non-threatening to humans. Except Relion is not waiting for me on the porch. Instead, I'm cornered by his mate already sitting there, sipping her coffee, waiting for me with narrowed eyes. Telilah sits on her lap, bundled so only her sweet face shows. Tera sets her mug on a table, far from the *kish's* reach.

With a sigh, I join her.

"What's going on with you and mom?" Tera asks.



“What do you mean?” I ask warily.

“Something is off.”

I shrug. “I’m just here to see if your mate still wishes to head out and round up the newbies with me.”

“He’s already left. Mumbled that you and he had plans. Probably trying to avoid this conversation with me too.”

“Why are you asking me and not your *maman*?” I scowl, trying to thwart her.

“Because she avoids me when you’re around. When you’re not around she avoids conversation about you. I used to think it hurt her to hear about you when she missed you so. But why does she avoid me now that you’re back?”

“Perhaps her time is taken up with me.”

“That’s my point,” she says softly. “That’s how it should be. Yet your relationship isn’t progressing. She’s not excited about mating. Not excited about marriage. She’s complacent in leaving things as they are. Casually dating?”

“Why do you believe there should be rules upon a relationship?”

“I don’t. But I sense something is off, Elex. Don’t bullshit me. My mother avoids this conversation, Relion avoids this conversation, and you do too. I want to know what’s going on because, dammit, this is my mom.”

“Your mother and I are fine, Tera. I love her just the way she is.”

The sadness in her face alarms me. It sends gut-wrenching terror like I’ve never faced into my midsection. “I’ve never heard her say that about you.”

I suck in a breath. “Then perhaps that is your answer. She does not feel the same about me as I do her.” My voice is soft because it is how I am beginning to feel. I knew Christina was mine from the moment I saw her. But a year later? I’m beginning to wonder if she feels the same. I have no doubt that I pleasure her. That she craves my lovemaking. But if she

doesn't admit her feelings to her own daughter, perhaps they really aren't there.

Tera shakes her head. "That's not it, Elex. I don't have any doubts that she loves you. None whatsoever. There's something else that holds her back."

"Maybe she is just against marriage because she was in your family unit and was left alone."

"Has she ever told you how she feels about children?"

I think back. It wasn't an issue once. Until I asked her point-blank after much teasing from the others about how time was ticking. But I can't share with Tera about the fight between me and Christina. "She once said she does not want any. That she raised hers and is done."

"I'd be fine with that," Tera says, "if it were true. But as a child, I remember her crying. She wanted more children. What has changed?"

I shrug. "I would think that Kenny is a handful? But she has more help here than she ever did as a single parent."

"Again, I'm fine with her not wanting children. But do you see how she's torn sometimes with Telilah? She's sad and overjoyed at the same time? It's not just because Telilah's her grandbaby. She's the same way with Jayna."

I narrow my eyes, remembering instances with my mate and the other *kish*. "You are right. But why would she state she does not want *kishren* if she does?" For a brief moment, the thought crosses my mind that perhaps she does not want *mine*—little hybrids with tentacles. But no, that cannot be the case either. She was irate about Earthlings protesting that their species legs would become tentacles over time. She has no aversion to Telilah or Jayna.

"She's still of childbearing years, so it's not an age factor," Tera says. "I will get to the bottom of it before our family dinner tonight."

"Whatever it is, be gentle with her," I warn. "I do not want any tears to fall from her beautiful eyes."

Tera breaks into a huge smile. “I promise, Pappy Elex.”

I scowl at her impudence and then bend down to kiss Telilah, balanced on Tera’s lap. The sweet *kish* reaches for me and I’m sure she thinks I’m heading to see Relion and can come along for the ride.

“Nice try, little button,” Tera says to her. “But you and I are going to see *grammaman* later.”

Immediately I remember how lovely Christina looked splayed against the crumpled sheets, the silk tucked around her breasts, her shapely leg jutting out. I love that it is my last memory of her.

“So I can get to the bottom of what’s going on,” Tera continues, winking at me.

I nod. If anyone can figure out what is in Christina’s head, it is Tera.

“What time do you think you will get there? I left her resting.” I do not want to share that her mother is exhausted from lovemaking.

Her smile is wicked. “Not too soon, then. Dinner’s at six. I’ll head over there, maybe three or four, and help her cook.”

“Relion and I will be done by five. If not, we will wait to give you and Christina time to enjoy each other’s company.”

“Tell Ree to dress up. We don’t get many opportunities.”

“I will make sure he’s pretty.”

She grins. “Thanks, Elex.”

Relion is at the building we use to teach, the other recruits straggling in. The day inches by and I’m sure it’s because of my need to see Christina again. Perhaps I should not have left her sleeping. Perhaps I should have woken her for a kiss before I left.

Finally, the others look ready to depart and we make plans to visit the next town over in a couple more days.

Relion looks antsy and says he must leave, though it is still early afternoon. He reminds me that they are invited to

Christina's tonight for the "Sunday dinner" and that he must head out early to help get Telilah ready. I'm not sure if he's looking for a reason to leave early or if he's reminding me that I should be present for dinner. As if I would forget any time my skittish mate gives me.

I laugh and let him head out early, reminding him we are not to show up until six, and not telling the fool that his mate is long gone. He thinks he will get home to them but will sit at home by himself until it is time to head to our house. He will wish he stayed with us instead. That is grand payment for him not warning me that his mate waited for me this morning.

When I finish with the males, I walk to the playground where I'm sure Kenny will be. Dori told me earlier she would make sure someone was there with him. Sure enough, he's taking fencing lessons from Jaire.

"Pappy Elex!" he says, then covers his mouth with his hand. "Oops. Momma tole me notta call you that."

"I don't mind," I say, cuddling him close to me.

He grins up at me. "I wanna you to be."

"I know, little male. Perhaps one day. But if not, know that I love you." I tweak his nose appendage. "You are always mine, right in here." I tap his chest over his heart.

"But I still wanna tell my fwends you'ra my pappy. My fwend, Uween, hasa pappy in heaven, but Sammy don't. An' Sammy has a brudder and that's not fair. I wanna brudder too, like Telilah but a boy. Ima call him Testicle."

"What was that?" Jaire cuts in, horror in his voice.

I'm not quite sure what I heard, either. Kenny has a hard time pronouncing his words and unfortunately, he talks fast on top of it.

"Testicle."

It's clear as a bell.

"That's what I thought I heard," Jaire mutters.

“Because Telilah is so coot, and she gonna wanna unkel named Testicle.”

“Why are we naming Elex’s son after his balls?” Jaire asks calmly.

“Ohh!” Kenny covers his mouth as he gives a little giggle. “You said balls.”

“You said testicle.”

“Itsa name! ‘Cuz my brudder gonna have these.” He picks up one of my tentacles and strokes it like one might pet a kitty.

“Tentacle!” Jaire says, completely appalled. “Not testicle!”

Kenny starts laughing as he realizes his error and it’s completely infectious. I join in, and then Jaire does.

I’m trying to explain to Kenny that naming his brother Testicle—or Tentacle, as the case may be—would be the equivalent of calling a child Arm or Leg. But I’m wheezing and wiping my eyes, and Kenny’s little face is red and every time I say Testicle, he bursts out laughing again.

Then Jaire does, and somehow all three of us are laying in the rubber pellets the playground is covered with, staring at the sky and giggling.

Down the tree-covered walkway, I can hear soft footsteps.

“Kenny, what are you doing—oh,” Christina says, taking in Jaire and me.

“Mum! We’s just being guys,” Kenny says, giggles again, and looks between Jaire and me like we have a secret among us.

“Well, it’s Sunday and you have to come shower before our family dinner.”

“I’ve got him, love,” I tell her, and watch her eyes soften at the word. I can’t help but commend myself for that one. Pretty sure she was going to try to go back to erecting walls between us, but one word tore them down. “Go enjoy time with Tera and Telilah. I’ll make sure we get cleaned up and presentable before dinner.” Kenny has clean clothing scattered throughout

every home in Eden. It seems the entire troupe takes care of my boy, whether or not I'm here.

“I can't ask you—”

Before she can finish her sentence, I jump up and stride to her. Her voice falters as I lock my hand around the back of her neck and lean in. I touch my mouth to hers to shut her up. To remind her that I am the mate she does not claim. To remind her that I love Kenny also. I kiss her breathless before pulling away.

“Well, okay, if you're sure—”

“Go enjoy a few hours with Tera and Telilah,” I say, and then because I can't help myself, I kiss her again. “I got Kenny. Relion's at home and I'll send him a message to meet us at six.”

The stubborn woman melts against me, and now I know Christina loves me. That she craves my touch. That there is another reason for her to keep herself from me. I will figure it out.

“An' Pappy Elex said he'll shower me, Mum,” Kenny says, trying to be helpful...but then I realize the stinker is waiting for her to tell him not to refer to me as Pappy.

She frowns at him, but I nip her bottom lip. “I told him he can call me that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Don't worry so much.” I kiss her again and then push her off with a swat to her round little behind. I love that body part humans have.

“Okay, fellas let's spar,” Kenny says, bouncing up with his rubber sword and swishing it through the air.

“Testicle,” Jaire whispers, and Kenny and I break into another fit of giggles.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

## ELEX

“**Y**ou got the flowers for your *maman*?” I ask Kenny.

“Yep,” he drawls, and points to the bundle sitting on the rail of the porch. He straightens the strange human tie he borrowed from Tera’s drawers. It’s a hideous shade of scarlet-pink in a strange shiny material but I imagine he likes it.

“And remember to tell your *kishling* she looks lovely. Tera needs to hear that these days.”

“Even if she don’t? ‘Coz sometimes she smells stinky like baby milk.” He scrunches his adorable human nose.

“Especially then.”

He sighs. “Okay. I tella her she pretty then.”

We’re standing on the porch so long, Relion comes up to meet us.

I smile widely at him. “How was your afternoon off? Did you rest up with all your *alone* time?”

Alone time is our code for masturbation.

He snorts. “I had some quality alone time, yes. Would much rather have had my mate for cuddle time.” He winks at Kenny.

“She was busy with her *maman*,” I say.

He scowls. “Someone could have told me to stay at work.”



“But then I would not have had the afternoon with your brother.” I wink at Kenny, which sends him into a fit of giggles.

Relion tugs Kenny’s ear. “I’ll invite you over to spend the night so your *maman* and Elex have some cuddle time.”

“Oooh.” Kenny can’t help but giggle behind his fingers. “Okay. And at your house, I watch Baby Telilah so you and Terr get cuddle time too.”

Relion has the grace to look sheepish. “That was just once,” he mutters.

“Twice,” Kenny deadpans.

I look down my nose at Relion. “I believe Kenneth, son. You always were a little selfish.”

“I don’t like you being my stepdaddy,” Relion grumbles.

“He can be your step *pappy*, Ree,” Kenny says helpfully. “Thasa different word.”

Relion tousles Kenny’s hair. “I’ll think about it, buddy.”

I reach up and straighten Kenny’s hair that I brushed carefully earlier, then run the tips of my fingers over his eyebrows to smooth them. I don’t understand the grooming of the hair humans do but I imagine all the strands must stay in place until the females see it. Then he can mess it to his heart’s content.

“I think you have to lick it,” Relion says helpfully.

“We’s not cats,” Kenny says, giving him side-eye.

Relion shrugs just as Tera opens the door.

“Love muffin!” he says, jumping ahead of me and Kenny to kiss his mate. You’d think he’d been away for three lunar cycles instead of a couple of hours.

Kenny makes a gagging motion and I elbow him, but then roll my eyes to show him I understand and that those two are disgusting.

“Isa good thing their baby is so coot,” he says.

“Goddess blesses the goofy,” I agree.

“Where issa Telilah?” he demands, stepping inside.

“In here, baby boy,” Christina calls and Kenny and I leave the two lovebirds kissing at the front door.

In the kitchen, Christina is putting Telilah in a highchair, giggling because the baby keeps winding her tentacles around her arms like she wants to be carried.

“Aww, sweet baby. I canna hold her for you, mum.”

“Alright, sweetie,” Christina says, lifting Telilah back out of the chair.

“Thisa is fer you,” Kenny says, slapping the bouquet of flowers toward his *maman*. “An’ you look lovely. Oh, wait. No, you don’t. It’s Tera. Terr!” he yells out over his shoulder. “You do! You look lovely like a cupcake.”

She giggles as she and Relion step into the dining area, his tentacles wound around her. “Thank you, Kenny.”

Christina’s eyes are sparkling with happiness, and she does indeed look lovely having her entire family around her. I feel honored to be included, but I want so much more. I want her to know and accept she’s mine and that my place is always with her. She takes the flowers, setting them on the table while she motions for him to sit so she can set Telilah in his lap.

“Thank you for the gorgeous flowers,” she says, leaning over to kiss his cheek. She runs her finger along his hairline and rubs her finger and thumb together thoughtfully. “You look very handsome.”

His cheeks turn pink. “Aww, mum. You’s the best mommy.”

She smiles, picks up the bouquet of flowers, turns, and takes me in, her eyes roving over me hungrily.

I show her the bottle of wine I brought. It’s her favorite from our Adroki collection.

“Oh, thank you, baby.” She lifts herself onto her tiptoes to kiss me. My tentacles wrap around her, and I can taste her

contentment. She's on happiness overload.

Behind us, I can hear Telilah gurgling, Kenny's soft murmurings, Tera and Relion's whisperings and soft lip smacks.

I want this every day. I want my mate by my side every day. "I love you," I remind her, and smack her bottom. I will tell her every single day until it sinks in. I do not care that she doesn't say it back. I will be sure to tell her in front of others so she can't argue.

She smiles and gives me one more peck, then heads to the kitchen to get the food. I follow her and reach for wineglasses, then open the wine.

"You take this, love," I tell her when she's about to lift the platters of covered food. "I'll grab the heavy stuff."

She shoots me a grateful smile as we take all the food into the dining room to set on the table.

Relion takes his hands off Tera long enough to pull the wine from Christina's grasp and pour. "Take a load off your feet, *maman*," he tells her with a smile. It always makes the girls giggle when he calls her that.

"No, Telilah. You can't grab with you testic—I mean, tentacles," Kenny says, pushing his silverware further from her reach.

"Baby girl," Tera warns. "Mind your manners or it's tie them up or head to the highchair for you. And you like sitting in Uncle Kenny's lap, right?"

Telilah blows a raspberry and then giggles. *Kish*—or at least our *kish* with tentacles—normally wear a long shirt with a string that closes like a bag at the bottom called a *marniek*. It teaches them to control their appendages and manners, since they can't grab everything in sight. Because the days are still warm, she has been allowed leeway.

I fix Kenny's plate and set it across from him, and hand Telilah a fist-sized biscuit to gnaw on.

“Thank yew,” Kenny says, and I can’t help but pat his head, then take a napkin to wipe my fingers.

“I love your hair,” Christina tells him carefully, and Tera gives his hair a side-eye.

“Thank yew, mum. Pappy Elex did it with a lil bit of bacon grease. An’ my eyebrows too.”

“Bacon grease?” Christina asks.

“His eyebrows?” Tera’s have shot up to her hairline and I falter for a second. Is that not a human grooming procedure? I look to Relion for the answer.

He shrugs helplessly as if saying he’s never paid attention.

“Yup,” Kenny drawls.

“Good job,” Christina says softly and my attention snaps back to her. She’s staring at me with the softest expression on her lovely face and I can’t help but lean in to kiss her lips. The feel of her small hands on my shoulders as she lovingly traces my muscles makes me clench them tightly as I remember her touch on my naked flesh.

Her tongue on my skin.

I pull her chair out to help her sit and then take my seat next to her to enjoy our little family.

“Is that the...sash to my kimono?” Tera asks Kenny.

“Yess,” he drawls. “You said I could borrow a tie. Pappy Elex tied it.”

Tera sighs and Christina smiles, looking down at her plate.

“Mikhail’s coming tomorrow,” Tera says. “Jaire says they’re offering medical care at the midwife center, so we’re shutting down classes. Mom, you should get checked out.”

“Perhaps.” Does Christina’s vague response sound a bit stressed? I clasp her hand, mostly to distract her so I can wrap a tentacle around her waist. I just need the barest amount of skin to press my sucker against...

She shifts and I touch bare skin, followed by a taste of dread and anxiety.

Why would seeing Mikhail's medic cause her nervousness?

"If you want, I will go with you," I whisper, and her anxiety increases tenfold. I take another tactic. "Or if you'd rather, we can play hooky."

Her levels drop immediately, and her scent is sweet again, with just the barest hint of a leftover bitter flavor from the lingering shame.

"Whichever," she says.

Lie. I taste the sickly sweetness, and I narrow my eyes, aware she is lying.

"If we get time, fine. But I'd much rather spend the day with you, handsome." Truth. Clean, pure, rich.

My mate is afraid of the medic, Calbin, who is not a stranger to these lands. He has visited Eden many times. He delivered her own *grandkish* because he, Mikhail, and their mate Mindy were here visiting when Tera went into labor.

Suddenly it dawns on me.

Christina is so loving with *kishren*. Not just our granddaughter, but with all *kish*, including Jaire and Anya's. But she insists she does not want any. I know that is a lie.

She insists she does not want a real relationship with me, and I know that is a lie.

My beautiful, gorgeous mate feels lesser because she can't have *kishren*, and she doesn't want to admit it for some reason.

Something brings her shame. That is a scent I know well. Earth females have been in oppression for so long, it is a common pheromone among the species.

After dinner, Relion and I clean the kitchen while our mates retire with the *kishren* to the living area.

"Did you catch the look on her face when Tera mentioned the Britonians' visit?" Relion asks under his breath.

“No,” I admit. “Because I was too busy tasting her emotions.”

“I don’t blame you,” he says.

It is a common practice for our species, but humans balk at what they consider an invasion of their privacy.

“I think she can’t have *kishren*.”

He stares at me.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Something just occurred to me. Tera mentioned last night that her *maman* was the last wife. But she is so young, she was younger than Tera when she married. Why was she relegated to last? Perhaps you are right. She cannot have *kishren* and was forced to marry into a family to care for the already established young.”

“We grew close during the six months while you and Tera were in Pimeon,” I admit. “And she pulled away shortly after you returned. I was baffled. But now that I think back—that night people were teasing that our *kishren* could be the same age. That Tera and her *maman* could be gestating together.”

“I remember,” he says. “She became quieter as the night wore on.”

I nod and we finish drying the glassware in silence.

“I don’t think Tera knows,” he says.

“It’s possible no one knows. Not since the deaths of Christina’s mates.”

As if he knows what I’m feeling, he squeezes my shoulder. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, Elex.”

CHAPTER  
NINETEEN

## CHRISTINA

“Well, buddy, you going to come spend the night with us?” Relion asks, pulling Kenny onto his lap for a cuddle.

“Yes, Ree! Even when Telly gets too tired to play and goes to sleep, I wanna watch Gladyator Planet ‘cuz mum doesn’t let me.”

Good Lord. He loves that shoot-em-up-with-laser-guns show but gives me a headache with the volume he feels necessary to watch it at.

“Kenneth Michael, you better not be waking the neighbors with that show cranked up to blasting at their house,” I warn.

“I promise, mum. They hava sweet lil kishi anyway an’ Telly needs her sleep. Can I go sleep over?” He looks up at me and puckers.

Because I can’t resist his sweet little lips, even when he’s buttering me up, I kiss him. “Okay, but you be good and get back home before noon.”

“Okay,” he says happily. “I even shower, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree.

Relion is talking to Elex and even with their teasing each other over the stepdaddy issue, I’m glad they’re good friends. I knew it was a shock to find out about us when they returned home from their mating trial period.

Elex is kissing Telilah while Relion takes her from Tera’s arms, and Tera takes Kenny’s hand for the short walk. I kiss



my granddaughter, hug Relion, and then hug Tera and Kenny.

“Have fun,” Tera whispers into my ear and I stiffen when Kenny giggles on the other side.

It suddenly occurs to me that Elex and I will be alone. It seemed so natural that it hadn't occurred to me that this was planned.

Elex curls a tentacle around my waist as he ruffles Kenny's bacon-flavored hair. As we wave them off, Elex stands behind me, pulling my body back into his.

“Uween!” Kenny screams at our neighbor's house. “Ima goin' to Terr's house tonight! I see you tomorrow!”

I gasp at his bullhorn voice but Elex just chuckles. “Alone now, my love. And I have you in my arms. What would you like to do?” He buries his face in my neck.

I take too long to answer.

“You can tell me no, *my mate*. But I know what I would like to do.” He presses kisses to the throbbing pulse in my neck.

Those two little words. Desire pools in my belly for him, thick and heady and needy.

I don't answer him, but I don't need to. I turn in his arms and start to unbutton his shirt, right there on the porch.

But he wants consent and covers my hands with his. “Yes, Christina?”

“Yes.” I lunge for him, my hands seeking to touch the hard muscled lines of his body, my lips aching for the pressure of his kiss. “Elex...”

“I know, my love. I know.” He presses his mouth to me and his tongue sweeps against mine. Somehow, he's maneuvering us both inside and managing to close the door behind him, then picks me up, bridal style.

My hands are roving over his chest, his shoulders, his neck. His muscles, his beautifully hard *sculpted* muscles,

twitch beneath my touch and I like to imagine that it's me alone that can pull this reaction.

“What do you want?” he whispers. “What can I give you?”

He gives me everything. It's I who cannot give him anything. “I just want you,” I whisper.

“I want you too,” he says, his hand fingering my nipple and gently squeezing. I suck in a breath at the sensation. His words sound so much more meaningful.

He carries me into our bedroom and spreads me onto the bed, untying the sundress until it drops onto the floor next to us. His eyes are rapt on my body, studying every curve, every goosebump that ripples, with irreverent attention.

His gaze trails over my breasts, my puckered nipples, my waist. When he gets to my sex, his eyes sharpen and stare.

“My beautiful mate.” His words are so reverent, I almost believe them. I want to desperately believe them. “Open for me.”

I bend my knees and let me legs drop open, feeling the pull of my pussy as it unfurls. He groans and the sound is raw and primal.

“I've *ached* for you,” he rasps. “Long, sleepless nights on a planet with just me fucking my bedsheets.”

I'm so glad to know that he never found anyone else.

His mouth immediately latches onto my nipple, sucking my flesh into the wet warmth, rhythmically using pressing sucks until I squirm at the deep pulls that feel like they're turning me inside out with need. When he releases my nipple with a pop, I arch my back and twist until he takes the other one. He smiles as he bends to kiss its twin.

My whole body is on fire. It floods my veins, traveling down to my limbs, but especially down to my core. I drip with need for him and when his fingers delicately part my folds, he hisses at the instant slickness he must feel because his tentacles part, his *nevra* slides open, and his cock immediately extrudes.

He grips his shiny, dark purple cock, the head bulging and tight. Slowly he strokes it, the sensitive bulges of his cock darkening. His nostrils flare as if he can smell my instant heated arousal.

“One taste,” he says, his nostrils flaring, as he bends his head while keeping his gaze on me.

A strangled cry tears from my throat as his warm, wet tongue licks up my entire slit. My toes curl and I clutch the bedsheets at the wonderful, wicked sensation.

I love this. I love this man.

A rough groan rumbles from his throat. “Need this. I need to have you come on my tongue, need to know I can please you.”

His tongue is merciless, flicking my aching clit with vigor, lapping up my slit to catch my essence, punishing me with quick, hard movements to suddenly slow, languid softness that threatens to tip my control by the wayside.

My back arches, my knees splay further apart than I thought possible, and my pussy—wanton slut that she is—seeks his wicked, *delightful* mouth.

There’s a throbbing deep inside me, a steady building up of the pleasure I can only find with this man. When he rubs his lips lightly over the top of my clitoris, pulling it gently, rockets explode behind my clenched eyelids. My body shudders, my breathing hitches and a tentacle *plunges* inside me, pounding me with quick, powerful thrusts. I’m wet and swollen and he’s thrusting, in and out in quick succession, making the beginnings of an orgasm race throughout me.

I whimper at the sensations, drawing my knees up to my chest, watching his head between my legs, feeling that pounding thrusting of his tentacle inside me and my hips are bucking against his face.

Then I’m writhing on his tongue, screaming his name as the climax peaks, thrusting me into the moon, the stars... space.

His resounding groan vibrates my flesh.

When everything slows, my breathing is ragged and deep.

“So fucking delicious,” he snarls, softly lapping at my slickness.

A bit of bluish-purple wetness on my thigh tells me he couldn't help but come a little bit too.

He's still hard as a rock as he strokes his thick cock again, lifting himself with one arm, and presses his bulging erection to my opening.

“In a minute,” I gasp.

His heavy ridged brow lifts.

“I really, really want your cock in my mouth.”

“Christina,” he groans. “I don't have the strength—”

“Please, baby. Just a taste of you.”

He sighs like he's being put out, then crawls up alongside me on the bed, spreading his tentacles out all around me. One lies across my breasts, one wraps my waist, one cups my sex, as if he can't bear to see my nakedness at the same time his cock is in my mouth. Like he knows the little control he has will be lost with the visual of me.

I lean up to gaze at the magnificent cock he has. It seems even larger from this angle, bobbing against his hard abdomen. The round head looks as big as my fist, but I know it can't be that large because it fits perfectly inside me. His shaft is engorged, and the next swollen bulge glistens with arousal, tiny beads of pleasure race under his skin like jutting veins. The third bulge isn't any less impressive and I know the space between the bulges is ultra-sensitive for him.

So I lick there first, swiping my tongue between the head and first bulge.

He hisses at my touch, and his eyes burn as he looks down at me, making me ache all over again like I didn't just come all over his face.

I lick the head of his cock like he's a lollipop, getting the sweet taste of him. I suck at the tip, the small opening at his

cock and he groans, his broad shoulders quivering at my touch.

He allows me to suck the head of his cock into my mouth, stroking the base of him as I bob greedily on him, before he reluctantly pulls away. “I cannot wait any longer, Christina,” he growls, his tentacles unraveling from my body. “I have to have my cock deep inside you. I have to fuck you.”

He strokes his cock just once, then presses it against my splayed open legs, where my pussy tries to suck him in.

“Please,” I gasp, rocking my hips toward him, trying to get more into me.

He surges forward with his huge cock, burying the first, then the second and third bulges inside me with one thrust because I’m already wet and loose. “Good?”

“Mmm, yes.” I love the feeling of him entering me, over and over, my pussy squeezing him. He stretches me perfectly and his lubrication slides and mixes wonderfully with my own. It’s like we’re made for each other.

I’m hypersensitive, feeling every single bulge of his cock, the slap of his balls against my bottom and then when the tip of his tentacle slides over my puckered rim, I freeze.

I can feel my eyes widen as I look up into his face—on his, there’s a look of adoration, of lust, of...sin—and I know what I want. “Do it,” I whisper and the tip of his tentacle presses in the barest inch.

I arch my back; the feeling is wondrous. I’m full and stretched in the naughtiest of places, all at once.

“More?”

“Yes,” I grit, unsure of what I’m asking. More penetration? Faster movements? A thicker piece?

He gives it all to me and at the same time pinches my nipples. His tentacles are pulsing as they slide deep and all at once there’s too much sensation.

“Oh, holy hell,” I keen, and topple over the edge. The rippling starts immediately, and he growls as my pussy grips

his cock in the throes of my climax. My orgasm quakes; it thunders throughout my body and I cry out as everything tightens around him.

I can feel him come, ejaculating his seed, giving me everything, so messy and wonderful, and he fills me until I overflow. Warmth dribbling down my thighs, bathing us both. His tentacle slowly pulls from me, and he turns us both onto our sides, still joined by his cock. His arm is under my head, and we stare into each other's eyes.

"I will always love you," he says. "You don't have to feel the same. You don't ever have to be more than what we have right here, right now. I just want you to know." When he leans down to kiss me softly, I want to say it so bad. I don't want to disappoint him. I don't want him to think he's unloved. We usually say *I love you* in front of other people, like it's a show for their benefit.

When his cock slips from me, he pulls me close, wrapping me in his arms. As his breathing going rhythmically deep, and I know he's asleep, I finally whisper, "I love you too."

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

## CHRISTINA

“**Y**ou never told me what life was like before you married father,” Tera says. “Though, I’m glad you got to experience life before him and after him. You’re beautiful and so wickedly strong. Now that I’m an adult, it makes me realize how young you were when you went through all that.”

We’re sitting in the yard, sharing the giant porch swing Elex and Relion built when I mentioned we had one at our old house. I’ve got sweet Jayna sleeping in my arms and Tera’s feeding Telilah. From where we sit, we can watch Kenny on the playground with Sammy and Susie.

Most of the Adroki and Anya left early this morning to meet with members of smaller communities, which is how I got Jayna for the day. Now that Lilaina is in charge, she’s decided the best course of action is to dispel the humans’ fears of the Adroki who live in Eden by getting people used to their looks. Several of their people from other clans still wish to find human mates. It’s a sound plan. I know I fell in love with Elex once I got used to his looks. I know Tera did with Relion. As did Anya with Jaire, whose sleeping baby I’m holding in my arms.

Telilah is lazily nursing from Tera’s breast, staring up at her mother adoringly. The sight of my baby feeding her own baby leaves me all warm and bubbly inside. How I wish I’d had the chance to experience that bonding between a mother and her infant, but it just wasn’t meant to be for me.



“You know I fell in love with the boy next door? Carlton Faillion. We were inseparable since I was five. Everyone knew we’d wind up together. Would marry.”

“I’m sorry he died before you could,” Tera murmurs. That part of the story she knows. She’s an adult now. I wonder if I should share with her the rest.

All except for my reason for keeping Elex at bay. The fact that I can no longer have any.

“When Carlton died, I was pregnant.”

Tera’s gasp startles Telilah, who gives a sharp cry of protest at her mother’s movement, and then curls her tiny fist against Tera’s breast and continues to suckle.

“Oh, my god, mom. What happened? Did you lose it?”

“No,” I say softly. “It was aborted.”

Shocked silence fills the air.

“I’m so sorry,” Tera says at last. “I know what an awful decision that must have been. You were all alone, grieving, shamed. I wish I’d have been there for you.”

Her hand reaches out for mine and I grip it for a minute, then bring it up to kiss. I appreciate that she supports me through the decision. “Thank you. And it probably was a choice I would have made, for those very reasons you stated. But I couldn’t come to grips with the loss—with the choice—because I didn’t get to make it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The choice was made for me. By my father and Carlton’s.”

“They forced you to have an abortion?”

I nod. “And it wasn’t legal. They shipped me off to a man to have it done and”—this is the part I can’t tell her, the fact that I lost my uterus because of that route to keep it under the table— “well, I almost died. I was hospitalized and they were afraid the scandal would come out. Both men would be jailed. So, Carlton’s father asked your father to marry me. That my

depression was because I'd suffered an accident. Cover up what really happened, basically."

"That's why you were so young," Tera whispers. "My father was your father's age."

I nod. "Which is why I didn't want you to enter the marriage mart instead of being matched to the Adroki. I knew what was in store for you."

She squeezes my hand as we continue to rock. "I'm glad you convinced me to mate with Ree," she says. "I loved him even then, although I was angry with him tricking me. And of course, I was already carrying this little one." She smiles down at Telilah, who grins, loses the nipple, finds it, and then resumes feeding.

"When are you going to wean her?" I ask.

"Soon. She's already lost interest in feeding and wants more table food. But I miss it. I want to have another. I'm going to check with Calbin when he arrives to see when I ovulate next, if you'd like to come."

Again, the usual anxiety hits me at the mention of his name. I can't bear to tell anyone why, especially Tera. Part of me knows I shouldn't feel ashamed but another part of me just is. "We'll see," I murmur, hoping Relion will be around and will take her instead.

"Was my father at least kind to you?" she asks.

I snort. "Your father wasn't kind to *you*," I remind her. "But it wasn't so bad. I missed my two brothers, but they'd both married and had gone off on their own. And I had a beautiful little girl to focus on. You were the light of my life."

"I remember playing with you. You were never too busy for me and now that I'm an adult, I think back to all the chores you must have had. You were always busy, setting me to play on the counter next to you while you chopped vegetables for dinner. Giving me a piggy-back while you vacuumed."

I laugh at the memories. "Good thing you were a scrawny thing."

“I never thanked you for being such a great mom.”

I smile at her. “I never thanked you for being such a wonderful daughter.”

“You know I’d do anything for you, right?” There’s a strange tone to her voice but I smile at her because I do know that.

“Ditto.”

We continue rocking as Telilah’s eyes grow heavy and she starts to fall asleep. I stroke Jayna’s baby-soft arm and imagine she’s the son I never had. As usual, my heart melts when I hold her. Would my son have been so perfect? I remember holding Kenny like this, in those early days when he was bottle fed. A lot of times, I didn’t have the time to cuddle him properly though. That’s a regret I carry still.

“Where are they now?”

“Who?” I ask, distracted with my memories.

“Your father. Carlton’s father.”

Ahh. “They still live in the same town.”

“Where we grew up? And I never met them? Even when you were left widowed and alone?”

“They washed their hands of me when they handed me off to your father,” I say. “I haven’t seen or heard of them since.”

“What about your brothers?”

“Two. Very unusual for a household. It put my father in high demand, which is why he didn’t want to lose his status in the community for the scandal. Which is why his business skyrocketed and he made a lot of money, moving us into a new community.” Yet the one daughter he had shamed him, the way women always would. “Funny thing is, a man gets kudos when boys are born. And a man gets kudos when they perform a miracle and turn out three children from one woman. But a woman gets the slack if she’s unable to have any, even if it’s with the same man.” I shrug. “In either case, Bobby and Jimmy were also forced to drop contact with me. I was, well, I wasn’t considered a scarlet woman. That’s defined as a woman

who has sex with more than one man. But while my father tried to tell people I was married off because of my depression over losing Carlton, I think most guessed about the pregnancy.”

“And when the baby never materialized?”

I shrug. “I’m sure many suspected but no one was foolish enough to voice their thoughts. The backlash is horrendous if you’re wrong. In any case, I’m sure he wouldn’t have wanted my brothers to be tainted with the scandal, so I understood their distance.”

“A woman’s life is difficult,” Tera says. “I wonder if it’s always been this way?”

“I think it probably has been. I think we just never realized it before. Like we were given scraps way back when and we were grateful for them.”

She cackles. “Like they gave us the right to vote and probably told us who to vote for.”

“Exactly.” I laugh with her. “Be glad we were born in modern times, I guess. I heard centuries ago women were burned at the stake for studying herbs and midwifery. Now look at where we are. The Adroki are teaching us those lost skills all over again.”

“I can’t believe we ever lost them. You know the Britonians uncovered ancient books in the Presidential House? The world was pretty different when it was well populated before the third world war.”

“I hope the contents of the books will be made available.”

“Oh, they will. Some are medical records being returned to the families. I guess the president wanted those to blackmail people one day.”

I gasp. “Are you kidding?”

“No. If you attended some of the Britonian functions,” she chides, “you’d hear Mikhail share his plans. He’s going to scan the books into digital form and everyone on the planet will have access.”

“That’s wonderful.” I probably should get over my fear and go visit the Britonians. It’s not like Mikhail’s third, the medic Calbin, will be waiting to pounce on little ole me with a scanner in hand. He’s got much better things to do.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**

## CHRISTINA

When the weekend comes, I don't have to worry about Tera dragging me with her to see the medic. Relion and Kenny go with her, and it gives me time with Elex. Time I know I shouldn't take, but I justify it as one last romp before I try to distance things again.

Maybe explain a little more this time. Tell him that I love having him around but that I'm just not ready to mate. Beg him to pretend for the sake of my son. I know Elex loves Kenny and would be willing to do that for us.

God, I'm so tired of this. Why can't I just have him? Why can't I just admit to him that I can't give him what he needs? Maybe I should. Maybe he'll understand and work with me if he realizes I can't give him babies. I think I knew this all along, but I didn't want to go this route. I didn't want to force Elex to make a stand. To choose me or his future.

I'm a nervous wreck, my mind skittering back and forth.

He's calm as we hike about the property, like he senses I need some mental space. When he brings me round to the back where the midwifery school sits, then mentions the luncheon that the Britonians have set up, my heart immediately clamors in my chest.

"Where are we going?" Even to my ears, my voice sounds shrill and out of control.

"We're just visiting with Mikhail, Mindy, and Calbin. Tera, Relion, and Kenny are there. They brought some food to share with everyone. That's all." His brow raises at my reaction.

“It’s not often that Britonian females leave the compound. This will be the one chance you have at meeting their mate.”

“I—uh—well, they’re busy right now. Giving exams to women.”

“I know. That won’t stop them from talking to us. They set aside time to eat. Besides, we’ll get to see Tera and Kenny, hear her news as to whether another little one will be feasible.”

I don’t want to step foot in the building. I’m quaking with fear, sweat beading on the back of my neck, afraid they’ll all try to talk me into a medical exam while I’m there. Like the wonderful man he is, Elex notices.

“Relax, my love. No one is forcing you to have an exam,” he says softly.

*What?*

“Why would you think I think that?” I bluff.

“I know, Christina.”

My gaze cuts from the building to him. “What?”

“I know you can’t have *kish*.”

There’s a roaring in my ears and I can feel the blood pooling to my feet. “How do you know?” My voice drags out in a hoarse whisper.

He shrugs. “You just confirmed it.”

My stomach sinks and I stare at him in raw agony.

“But I don’t care,” he says, reaching for the back of my neck to pull me toward him and kissing me hard. “You are a proud *maman* to Tera and Kenny and our family is already complete. We will love and protect any *kishren* that Tera and Relion have besides Telilah. You don’t ever have to be ashamed of yourself for what you can and cannot do.”

“I had a pregnancy terminated, Elex.”

He shrugs. “I’m sure it was a decision you reached that was for the best at the time.”



“It resulted in me not being able to carry another. That’s my punishment.”

He looks at me in puzzled confusion. “Do you really believe that? Why does the Goddess give us the right to make choices if we are punished for making them?” He pulls me to him and presses his forehead to mine. “Christina, I love you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you in that dining room. It doesn’t matter to me if we have more *kishren* or not. Our lives are full.”

“But you don’t have any of your own, and your species is here to procreate. To find wives...mates...to have children. I can’t give you that, even if I wanted to.”

“I’m sorry.” He takes my hand and looks down into my eyes. “But I still feel that you’re flawless, you’re beautiful, you’re amazing, and so fucking strong, I am honored to be in your presence. I am honored that you *allow* me to be in your presence, that you’ve allowed me in your bed.” He kisses me again. “Beautiful. Sexy. Vibrant female. Maybe a little young for me, but I can pretend you’re another few years older since you already have an adult daughter.”

I snort a laugh, but it’s quivery and unsure. “Elex. I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I was so scared.”

“Of what, my love? All I want is for you to be mine. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“I didn’t want you to feel sorry for me and I didn’t want you to be disappointed that I can never give you your own *kishren*.”

“I can never be disappointed in you, Christina. I love you, now and forever. Now, wipe those weepy eyes, sweet. Come inside and we’ll relax with our friends.”

Somehow now that my big secret is revealed, a rush of calm washes over me. Elex knows and he still loves me. I’m not sure what I was so terrified about, but I can still feel the emotions inside me, quivery and unsure. Brittle. Ready to snap like a stressed rubber band.

Inside the breakroom Mikhail sits with his mate, Mindy. I'm introduced to her first. Calbin, is making a plate from the buffet table. Tera is standing with Relion near the window, and Kenny is sitting with Mikhail, Telilah on his lap.

"Welcome, Christina," Calbin calls out. "Would you like a plate?" There's a kind look in his eyes and I wonder if he knows I've avoided him for over a year now.

"No, we were just hiking," I say. "I'll just have something to drink for now."

He pours me a glass of fruit punch and hands it to me while Elex heads to Tera and Relion. Somehow, I'm standing with the person I've avoided. While the panic is still there, it's unavoidable after so much time, at least it's dissipating.

"I haven't seen you in a long time," Calbin says. "Since the night we removed the choke collars from the dancers."

"I seem to miss all your visits," I say, and even to my ears, it rings false.

"I've noticed," he says drily. "Tera seems to be in my office frequently. Your daughter has a lot of questions regarding future pregnancies."

"Yes. She told me she's interested in having another."

"Yes. But that's not what she's asking about. I can discuss it with you because it concerns you and a...situation."

Does Tera suspect the same way Elex did? Is Calbin about to ask me to reveal my medical history?

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves, reminding myself that I felt better once Elex knew. I can stop the pain that this secret causes me by banishing its power. By deflating it. "What does she want to know?" I ask warily.

"Medical records were found in the Presidential House library. We can only assume the president kept them to blackmail individuals one day. Your name was included because you nearly died. Tera has pieced together that it was because of your abortion the year you married her father. The term *hysterectomy* was also in the records."

I freeze. They all know. How long have they known?

Calbin motions to Elex, and immediately Elex returns, banding his arm around me, lending support, even as Tera and Relion watch from the distance.

“If you do not wish to have this conversation, we will tell them it is none of anyone’s concern,” Calbin says softly. “I’m sorry the records were discovered and revealed before we realized the individuals were still alive. Most of the time, records kept are old and the people have long since passed.”

But I’m tired of hiding and feeling ashamed. My only mistake was not insisting on the two men sending me to the city to have it done correctly in the first place. I could have agreed to a marriage—any marriage—and then, with a husband’s permission, had the legal procedure performed.

“It is all your decision, my love,” Elex says, his tentacles winding around my waist as if supporting me while I make it. I wrap my arm around him and curl my head onto his muscled shoulder.

“Let’s just get it out in the open. No more hiding. No more worrying myself sick.”

Both men smile at me like I just invented sliced bread.

They walk me to where everyone else is—my entire family, a softly smiling Mikhail and his beautiful wife—and everyone stops speaking.

Instead of joining his two mates, Calbin stays on my other side, he and Elex given me unspoken support.

“I understand you all found out some information about me. It is true and it’s why I’ve avoided medical exams. I didn’t want to be found out because I’m so ashamed, even though I know I have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s just years—a culture of suppressing women, I guess. Elex, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you from the beginning when someone first started to tease us about having children, but I didn’t know how so instead I pretended I didn’t want any.”

“Do you?” Mikhail asks softly. I’m not sure why he’s asking. Surely he knows what hysterectomy means.

“I do. But I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?” Tera asks, looking at Mikhail. “She’s still young. Why can’t you do something like those Leondratsin aliens do? Implant a baby somewhere. An artificial womb? Anything. I’m sure technology is much more advanced with your race.”

“Most babies—human and Adroki, anyway—don’t thrive in artificial wombs,” Mikhail says softly. “Their emotions can be stunted; some born that way lack empathy. The Leondratsins can do it because their babies are mixed with various DNA, are mostly parasitic, and sometimes the humans are simply surrogates.”

Calbin turns to me. “Which is another point. It doesn’t mean you can’t have a child, Christina. We can fertilize one of your eggs with Elex’s sperm and implant it in another. A surrogate willing to carry one for you.”

“I’d be honored,” Tera says before he’s even done talking. “Especially after our previous conversation.”

I gasp. “I can’t ask that of you!”

Relion laughs. “We were here asking Mikhail and Calbin if Tera was well enough to carry two *kishren*, like Lilaina did. Mikhail just said Calbin can implant two in a womb at the same time. Ours and yours.”

My beautiful, stubborn, amazing daughter smiles. “And you didn’t ask, mom. You don’t need to.”

“Yeah, mum,” Kenny agrees. “You’s didn’t.” And then, like he can’t contain his excitement, he wriggles his hands until his uncontrollable spirit fingers wave in the air. “Ima gonna be another brother! An’ I hava pappy!”

Elex smiles and pulls Kenny toward us for a family hug. When Kenny squirms away, Elex cups my jaw. “If you do not want *kish*, that is okay too, my mate. It is your choice.”

My smile is huge. “Anything for you, Pappy Elex.” And then my smile grows dreamy as I think about the baby I missed. “Anything for me.”

His smile grows just as wide as he realizes my choice.  
“You’re sure, beautiful?”

“I love you, Elex Neriah Mahogani. I would love to have your babies.”

# EPILOGUE

## ONE YEAR LATER

**L**iam Jamek Elex is perfect. A month after his birth, in which he shared a womb with his nephew, Jonas, I can finally hold him without bursting into tears.

I used to stare at him and just cry like a crazy person.

During the in vitro procedure, Calbin froze more eggs in case we'd like to try again. Anya said she and Jaire would like another in a few years' time and would be fine with a double implantation.

My dear friend Dori offered her womb.

Lampia offered hers, though she admitted it's a bit dusty.

About every one of the dancers offered, even though none of them besides Anya and Tera have ever been through a pregnancy.

My heart is so full with the way women band together now in our new way of life—correcting the wrongs doled to us for decades. Possibly longer. We've finally learned to stick up for each other, much the way men did throughout the ages.

The memory of Doctor Brown and Lyle during Loretta's death comes to mind. That connected look between the men, the *knowing* of what would benefit each other in the long run.

At the expense of women.

“My *kish* will have his *maman's* strength,” Elex says, and his tentacles brush over the baby in my lap. Our son. Our beautiful, perfect son.

Kenny is a bit miffed with the name Liam and glares at Elex and Jaire every time he says it. The two Adroki males—and obviously now Relion, since he grins broadly—have a secret shared among them.

“Don’t be *testy*, Kenny,” Jaire says, and all four of them break into Kenny-like giggles. My son laughs so hard his face is red as Jaire and Relion take him off to wrestle on the lawn, making him scream *uncle*, which he absolutely loves doing.

“He is utterly perfect,” Tera says, staring at her own son. “I wonder if the boys will mind sharing a birthday?”

“Nah,” I decide. “They’re going to be best friends and they’ll love it. They’ll share a cake and everything.”

“They’re here,” Elex says, his eyes narrowing to the road down the path where dust is kicked up by the horse-drawn carriage. Not everyone on Earth can afford a car and certainly not a limo like the president used to cavort around in.

Even though my brothers do well, they prefer the old ways. So, it’s a carriage for Bobby and Jimmy. My first meeting with them in over fifteen years.

“Are you nervous?” Elex asks, his hand tightening on my shoulder.

I can’t believe he thinks I’m strong. He’s the one who gives me strength.

“A little. I’m glad you’re all here.”

The carriage stops and Kenny wants to race to it, but he’s held back by Jaire. Ever protective. I never have to worry about my son with the Adroki.

The two men step down and as they approach, I recognize them easily, even though we’re all older.

“Bobby. Jimmy.” My brothers’ names fall from my lips as I stand, handing Liam to Elex.

They were men when I left, both older than me. But fifteen years has fully matured each of my brothers, bringing hard angles to their faces, sharper lines.



“It’s Robert and James now,” Bobby says with that familiar twinkle in his eye, reaching out for a hug, then passing me to Jimmy.

“Unkel Bob. Unkel Jimminiminy,” Kenny says, and then giggles behind his hand.

I motion to him. “My son, Kenny.”

Kenny waves.

“This is my daughter, Tera.”

Tera also waves, still seated with Jonas in a blanket.

Bobby and Jimmy take the empty chairs on the porch while I sit back down and Elex hands me our blanket-wrapped son.

“This is my youngest son, Liam.” I prop the baby up so they can see his adorable purple face.

“He’s beautiful. They all are,” Jimmy says.

“If you wish to call us Bobby and Jimmy, I guess it’s okay,” Bobby says. “We’ll continue to call you tiny Teena.”

Kenny giggles, sitting on the steps of the front porch. “Becuzza my momma so small and coot?”

Jimmy smiles. “Yeah. She’s always been small and cute. But tough.”

“I had two older brothers to thank for that.”

I introduce everyone else and Elex stands to shake their hands. I don’t miss the way my brothers take in the sight of his tentacles, which they can’t see on the wrapped baby. They might have thought his skin color was a trick of the light.

We’re from one of the smaller towns and I can’t imagine they’ve seen any of the Adroki in person. And this is a test, I guess. I’d like to see if they turned out at all like father.

Bobby clears his throat. “I’m sorry, Teena. I wish we had stood up to father and called you a long time ago before we lost contact. Fifteen years is a long time to go without family. We’d looked for you, you know. But you moved away when

you became widowed, and no one had any idea where you'd gone."

"You did?" My lips quiver with the words because I had no idea.

"Yes, baby girl," Jimmy says, and the childhood nickname makes me laugh. It's what I call my own children. "It brought me and Rob—Bobby—so much closer. Because every weekend we got together and researched what could have happened to you. Where you could be. We taught our children stories about the three of us growing up so they would all know their aunt as well as we did."

I suck in a deep breath and blink my glassy eyes. "I do Sunday dinners too! It's important to me that we all see each other now. That you get to know my children. My mate. My friends."

"How—" Jimmy cuts off, confused as he gestures toward Liam.

Apparently, during those weekend researches, they found out about my hysterectomy too. My secret should never have had so much power to rule my life, considering how many people knew about it.

"Tera carried him for me," I whisper, with a look toward my daughter and a smile between the two of us. "You knew?"

"Not right away." Bobby's face is grim. "We thought you married because of your depression over Carlton. Father told us it was a business arrangement with Gary's friend to keep you occupied...that you would be caretaker for the children. It wasn't until we wanted to contact you and discovered you'd moved away that we confronted him."

Jimmy speaks up. "He'd told us you were hospitalized because you'd tried to end your own life. That we had to leave you alone so you wouldn't attempt suicide again."

I gasp. "That isn't true."

"No, we found out years later that you had complications from an abortion." Bobby seems to have a hard time saying it.

“I’m sorry. We failed you. Father admitted they made you have one.”

“I was so angry with both men at the time,” I said. “But honestly, if I had been in a better place mentally, I’d have insisted upon it anyway. It just wouldn’t have been a hatchet job.”

“If I’d have been a better brother, I’d have paid more attention and would have taken you to a larger city for the other procedure when you decided,” Bobby says. He shakes his head. “I can’t believe it’s taboo to have one—illegal—yet the wealthy have access to a similar procedure under a different name.”

“You were a newlywed,” I reminded him, then remember his own wife. “Don’t feel guilty. How is Emma?”

“She’s fine. Sends her love and hopes to see you soon,” he says.

“When we confronted father a few years after you’d been widowed, he admitted that he knew you’d moved. It didn’t make sense to either of us that you left town and that everyone was so concerned about your suicide attempt, but no one contacted you after being widowed that we forced the issue. Father tried to blame it on Gary Faillion—you know about the bad blood between them, right?” Jimmy asks.

“No.” I shake my head vehemently, my eyes wide at this news. They weren’t enemies when I lived at home, obviously, since the two banded together.

Bobby cuts in. “Mother left father for Gary.”

“What?!” My mother and Carlton’s father? I can’t believe it. My mother wasn’t a loving woman by any means. She thought Carlton’s family beneath us, though she’d been friends with his mother for a brief moment before she sickened and died. Even when they were friends, it was obvious that they weren’t close, though. It was more of an obligation.

“In any case,” Bobby says, “father tried to blame him. Gary blamed father. Mother pretended not to know anything,

but neither of us believed her. That was when we searched for you and couldn't find you. It was like you disappeared."

"Tera was living in Eden here by then, dancing for President Montgomery who'd assured us it was a legitimate business. His arrangement with Tera was to pay for Kenny to attend the special education facilities. I had no contact with my daughter in six years. If I had, we'd have found out that the president was paying a discounted price for Kenny's tuition since I worked there and lived on the premises, and he was using my benefits. The money he saved should have gone to Tera."

"So that's why we couldn't find you." Jimmy narrows his eyes. "When we threatened to put ads in the newsfeeds, both father and Gary confessed. They knew they would both be jailed for the abortion. Even in their hatred of each other—all three of them because by then, mother had it with Gary—the three banded together and bade us to drop the search."

"It was for the best," I murmur. "Where are they now?"

"Prison...and otherwise," Jimmy says hollowly. "Are you sure you want to know the ugliness?"

I nod. I need to have closure over that part of my life.

"Carlton's death wasn't an illness," Jimmy says softly. "Mother did it, poisoning him over a span of months."

I can't help the gasp that escapes me, faintly hearing Tera's gasp to the right of me. Elex's hand caresses my shoulder, giving me comfort.

"How?" I croak, knowing the answer even as I ask, and not knowing why I ask because I don't want to believe what I suspect.

"The baked goods."

"The muffins I used to take him." God, no wonder they always contained cinnamon. She knew I wouldn't eat any and he'd have my share. My breath comes in shallow, quick spurts. God, I helped poison him by faithfully bringing that basket of baked goods whenever I could.

“She knew he was going to ask for your hand in marriage and father was going to agree. But she and Gary were already having an affair, and she wouldn’t be able to leave if you married Carlton. The scandal of an incestuous family. She ended the threat to her own future.”

A family with married ties is considered a family, no matter the blood relation to all. Her relationship with Carlton’s father would be deemed illegal and both would be jailed to prevent future related offspring in a law enacted by President Montgomery.

“Was Gary in on it?” I ask, my voice thready, not sure if I want to know the answer. Could a father kill his own son?

Robert shrugs. “He claims he didn’t know. But it’s awfully convenient that he didn’t want Carlton’s son born. If the baby had been, again, he and mother couldn’t have gotten together, not with a tie between our families. Mother later claimed that she thought he was a different person until she divorced father and married Gary, then his true colors showed.”

“So mother went to prison for Carlton’s murder?”

He nods. “And father killed Gary. He tried to call it self-defense, wanted Jimmy to represent him during the trial. But his motive was revenge. Not for his daughter, as he claimed, because that was when we discovered about the hysterectomy he signed for, saying he saved your life. But”—Bobby clears his throat— “I’m sorry, Teena. The hysterectomy wasn’t a lifesaving procedure. You were bleeding and had an infection, yes. The hospital recommended rest, antibiotics, and internal stitches before more invasive procedures. But father chose the more extreme hysterectomy. We believe it was to force you into marriage with Lyle Garrett, to get you out of the picture and to keep you quiet. To hide his involvement in the abortion. No, his motive for killing Gary was anger over the affair when he realized he’d been duped by the two.”

Wow, this was too much to take in. Not the betrayal by my parents, because I’d faced that. But that Carlton didn’t have to die if not for my parents.

“We began looking for you despite father’s demands to let sleeping dogs lie. It didn’t add up. We believed him when he said your mental state was fractured, that someone from your old life might trigger another relapse. Another suicide attempt. You see, we still believed the suicide story, we just thought it was compounded by Carlton’s death and the abortion by then. But after all this came out, well, then we couldn’t find you. Despite that, we had a lead, and told him we were going to discuss it with President Montgomery as soon as we could get an appointment. Then father killed himself.”

Tera gasps, covering her mouth. We’re all quiet for a moment as the new information sinks in. “What was your lead?” she finally asks.

Bobby turns to her. “There really wasn’t one. We were baffled by his suicide. There’s obviously a connection there somewhere with father not wanting us to go that route, but President Montgomery never gave us any time or appointment to speak with him. He put us off for years.”

“He was making money off Tera,” I say. “He knew where I was, but he didn’t even tell her. He’d agreed that I would be able to see her, but once she was taken away, he never let me know where she was until Elex visited me right before her twenty-third birthday. A year and a half ago. I didn’t see my daughter for six years.”

“Father must’ve known,” Bobby says. “He must have known where you were, where Tera was, all this time.”

“There’s one last thing,” Jimmy says. “Carlton’s mother died when he was a child. Do you remember?”

I nod.

“We found out that she and mother were childhood friends. Did you know?”

I stare at him in shock before shaking my head. “No. I remember they were friends for a brief time when we first moved there, but it wasn’t anything close. More like a fake friendship for appearances, and then Beverly got sick.”

There was no indication that mother and Beverly knew each other before we moved there. I wonder if that was why we moved to that city? I was as clueless as I'd been during the news that she and Carlton's father had taken up together. Mother hated their entire family. Or had she simply wanted what Beverly had?

"His mother died of a stomach illness. Vomited everything she ate until she wasted away to nothing. Sound familiar?"

"Poison?" I whisper. "Like Carlton?"

Jimmy shrugs. "We'll never know."

But I'm sure we're all thinking the same thing. Mother could carry a grudge. If a childhood friend wronged her, would she kill her off and move in on her husband, despite having her own, no matter who or what stood in her way?

Apparently.

Robert cuts in. "Enough of the ugly news. Now, let's talk about us. We're so happy to finally find you. I have two daughters, Jimmy has one. I can't wait to tell Missy and Katie you have a newborn...and two adults." He winks at Kenny, who puffs out his chest. "Maybe we can start having monthly dinners to introduce everyone? Or more often if you all want. It's important for family to get to know each other."

I'm nodding frantically, my eyes welling up with tears. I have nieces. Sisters-in-law in addition to my family here in Eden. Meeting Elex was the best thing that ever happened to me.

"We'd really like to get to know our brother-in-law," Robert says, stepping forward to clasp Elex on the shoulder. "Thank you for taking care of our little sister."

"She's my heart and soul," Elex says softly.

He accepts a hug from Jimmy, who's always been a shameless hugger. Then I stand, so proud of my mate I could burst.

His arm comes around me and Liam, and I lean in to give the man a kiss. "You once promised to make every dream of

mine come true. You did, a hundred times over. I love you with my whole heart, Captain Elex Neriah Mahogani.”

“My love, I’m not sure what I did to deserve you, but I thank the Goddess every single day for you, my two sons, my daughter”—he winks at Relion— “And my new son-in-law. Come to daddy, boy.” He pats his lap.

Relion scowls, but Kenny’s spontaneous giggles make us all burst into laughter.

The End~



Thank you so much for reading!

I hope everyone enjoyed *My Monster, My Choice*. This was originally a 20K standalone story in the Match Program series written for a charity anthology called *I Am The Fire*. If you purchased it, thank you so much for supporting!

When the rights reverted back to me, I decided to expand the story full length, which turned out to be a much harder task than I’d envisioned.

Christina was present for a couple of life-changing scenes that happened in *Wanting The Monster* (book 4, Tera’s story) and I didn’t want to re-write the exact same scenes from another person’s POV. Most of you already read the dramatic scene of the president being dragged off Earth by the Leondratsins. It also changed the timeline of this book by expanding it because I had a gap missing. And one last problem? Expanding the story makes the content of Christina’s life tragic and heart-breaking. I couldn’t bear it! I hope I did her story justice and left you all with the feeling that she overcame her loss, that it made her into the strong woman who raised two children as her own, that perhaps Carlton’s baby was magically reborn as Liam, and that Carlton is living his



best life ever in the afterlife with his mother, who loved him completely and only put up with Christina's mother because her son loved Christina from the first moment he saw her and decided to play mud cakes with her.

I know abortion is a controversial topic. I hope this story shares what it's like when a person can't choose, when a person is forced to live with a choice, when a person has to live with regret, and when a person's choice is taken away and they feel like they had no choice. And let's not forget the women who chose and it's the best decision for them at that point in their lives. I hope that we realize that decisions people make are their own and we can love them anyway no matter which route they take. We have one life to live and do it to the best of our ability, right?

Sorry about bringing death into a romance novel! Again, know that Carlton is happy in heaven with his mother, and looks down at Christina with affection, even sending their son down to them to be raised as Liam. Sometimes when we write these side characters with tragic lives, we have no idea they're going to become their own books one day. My bad!

Thank you all for the reviews you left me on Book 6, *My Matched Monster*, the story between River and Tiran. They bring a smile to my face and sometimes inspire me to write more. I appreciate **M** reviewing that River would rather take punishment than marry that "gross" man. I'm glad I expressed his grossness properly enough to give you a visual! **Arabella** hoped that Tiran's brothers might find love. Thank you, **Chantelle**, for also wondering. I've been inspired to write book 7, in which Bronan is getting his mate.

**Enthusiastic Jane** was disappointed that the cult River came from wasn't disbanded. I wrestle with wrapping things up too neatly, especially because we never know if someone else needs to come from the cult or needs to revisit the place in future books.

**Deniescia** couldn't find book 5 (little late, but here it is!) and I understand the confusion since this was released in an anthology. I had to wait for those rights to revert to expand the story and publish. I'm most active on FB so if you ever have a

question, please send me a friend request and I'll respond (eventually) via messenger. I'm a bit slower on my author page since the new changes with Meta. You can also comment on one of my TikTok vids and I'll answer any questions.

And thank you for reviewing from other countries, **Godness** from the UK, and **Jay** from Australia!! I appreciate each and every one of you!

If you haven't read book 6, find My Matched Monster here:

[My Book](#)

Hugs,

Rena

<https://renamarks.com/links/>

# THE MATCH PROGRAM

## RENA MARKS

### **Catch up with books 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 6!**

The gorgeous species called Britonians had left their planet with a dying sun. They reached an agreement with Earth to clean up our ruined planet with their modern technology in exchange for a new place to live. If it were up to women, we'd allow them to live just to look at them. The Brits are amazing, gold skin, tall and muscular, like avenging angels. Like alien Greek gods.

When they hear that most of our men died in the third World War, leaving the sexes vastly mismatched, they offer to begin a Match Program with a distant planet in need of females. It will be completely professional, personality-matching, compatibility, and the possibility of procreation. Plus, the human females will have a guaranteed choice after six months: Remain with your alien mate or come home to Earth.

None of us expected the gorgeous alien species to introduce us to horrifying monsters.

- Book 1—Matched To The Monster—Juris & Lilaina's story
- Book 2—Matched To The Monster, Too—Stratek & Tessa's story
- Book 3—Wanted By The Monster—Jaire & Anya's story
- Book 4—Wanting The Monster—Relion & Tessa's story

- Book 5—My Monster, My Choice—Christina & Elex's story
- Book 6—My Matched Monster— River & Tiran's story
- Book 7—The Monster's Bride—Bronan & Isabel's story

**Z EARN**

## STRANDED WITH AN ALIEN, A SCI-FI HOLIDAY TAIL

**A mysterious alien planet celebrates their own version of merry holidays. Their wonderful gift-giving idea? Earth ladies as stocking stuffers.**

**Alyssa:** As one of the few female Earthians who works in space, I'm not about to give up my career for marriage and babies. I scorn the idiots who created the podcast "Earth Girls Are Horny." Unfortunately, they've gone viral in a whole new way, calling unwanted attention from galaxies far, far away. The planet Thropian is one secretive and unknown planet who are paying big money to have a bride shipped in a pod to drop down in time for their holiday games. And our horny Earth girls? The volunteers are a mile long, even when it's unknown what the mysterious Thropians look like.

Just not me. No, my job is to test the pod before the actual prize is sent. I'll earn a boatload of money for *not* being a bride.

**Zearn:** A mate is the last thing on my mind, especially one from a dismal planet who offer themselves to complete strangers as prizes. The utter arrogance is astounding. But when a female lands in the danger zone of our competitive Twelve Days of Cheneca, I'm dispatched as the lead hunter to track her down, and to keep her safe. I do not expect a female who is as much a warrior as me.

A female who is worthy of me. A prize who marries me in the traditional way during the celebrations of our holidays.

With her mouth.

*\* This book is part of the Stranded With An Alien shared world.*



# MADDIE MINE

## BOULDER BEAR SHIFTERS

**She's on the run from a monster.**

**But I'm here to protect her.**

**No one ever expected me to fail.**

Maddie had a plan to run away from her ex-husband. She never expected to leave late and have to stay at a small mountain lodge last minute. She didn't expect the owner to be sexy and grumpy—or to shift into a bear right before her eyes. Now that she did see it, though, he isn't going to let her go. But this time, being held captive has a completely different meaning. He's caring and protective and she doesn't want to run. This time, she's found a family.

Until the life she ran from threatens to invade. Can the bears protect her? Or will she pay the price for daring to leave?

Boulder Bear Shifters – [Maddie Mine](#)

# MY ALIEN BABY

RENA MARKS, A. BLAKE

**Ivory Bellows fell down a well.**

**Ivory Bellows woke up in hell.**

**Better listen to the big blue giant, zip your lip, and hush.**

**Better not drool over his son who makes you blush.**

Imagine if you were a giant, fifteen-foot alien from another planet and found a strange being unconscious in a foreign object...a flying pod. The creature is tiny enough to be a child and you'd have such a big heart, you'd want to adopt this poor orphaned child, right?

Only...what if the full-grown human you found didn't know she was your child? What if she thought she was your dinner instead?

The Raza are a people full of honor, faith, and family. Especially Havak of the Jaha clan. His first yun is of his heart, not his blood. But when his mate dies and his beloved yun goes off into the world to study other people and languages, the Creators give him a second chance at life. He happens upon a strange little yun of a species unlike anything he's ever seen.

A strange, five-fingered species.

When the yun wakes and screams, he gives her a bub-bub, wraps her in a pu-pu, and packs her in his sket to bring home.

His huge heart is filled with love for his second adopted yun.

Ivory Bellows wakes up in a strange land filled with blue giants. They threaten her in their strange language, shove a plug in her mouth to keep her quiet and take her home to fatten her up. And marinate her. They must marinate her when she sleeps, because she's swollen and always needs to pee.

Oh, God. She's dinner. It's only a matter of time until they decide when.

But when a hot new alien arrives, the only way she can keep sane is to pretend he's her husband and she's his wife and everything is hunky-dory fine.

Thank God this new arrival, Iik, doesn't know her language.

Yet.

# SPACE BABIES

## THE PURPLE PEOPLE SERIES

An antiquated ship, rotating through the galaxy of a deserted planet, bears immediate investigation.

Helian Six boards the abandoned vessel to find the long-lost inhabitants in a state of stasis. But the systems are failing, and half a dozen have woken up. The planet below shows long dead bodies, poisoned by the scum of space, a species known as Gorgians.

Strangely, the few who have awakened are much smaller than their planetary predecessors. And not very intelligent. Determined to believe the cute, tiny beings are not pets, the crew of Helian Six decide to train the small warriors to defend the planet. They become the laughingstock of patrol, however, after they commit and realize it will take twenty-two cycles to “rear” the inhabitants.

So they do what any intelligent males would do. Kidnap teachers. And if the females can’t manage to avert their eyes from their buff physiques, well, score!

- Book 1—Space Babies
- Book 2—Baby Soldiers In Space
- Book 3—Baby Butterfly Kisses
- Book 4—Titi
- Book 5—Rock-A-Bye Babies In Space

# XENO SAPIENS

Futuristic earth finds alien DNA and creates a new species of hybrids in hidden labs. It's up to two small females to teach these beings they're worthy, and beautiful, and loved...and to save them from mankind.

My name is Dr. Robyn Saraven. Earth has changed greatly in recent years, the governments of the world merging into one united front, the Global Government. Disease, starvation, and prejudice have been eradicated from our existence, and it appears our growth as spiritual beings is finally on track.

But the discovery of alien DNA pairs a prestigious research facility with our government to create new beings. Suddenly our spiritual growth is halted when mankind plays God. Like old Earth, our modern-day world has to deal with prejudice, corruption, and greed.

Or was it always there, lurking beneath the surface?

- Book 1—Xeno Sapiens
- Book 2—Earth-Ground
- Book 3—Siren
- Book 4—Beast's Beauty
- Book 5—Almost Human
- Book 6—Forbidden Touches
- Book 7—Coveting Ava
- Book 8—For Everly
- Book 9—Assassin's Mate
- Book 10—Sextet
- Book 11—Tempting Tempest



- Book 12—Falling For Trance
- Book 13—Damaged Goods
- Book 14—Alien's Bride
- Book 15—Dual Lives
- Book 16—Reson's Lesson
- Book 17—A Mate For Max
- Book 18—Dragon's Mate
- Book 19—Fated

# ALIEN STOLEN

Rena Marks

Our world is different from anything we've ever known. Years ago, aliens came to live among us. They claim to be the good guys, and yet every day, humans go missing—never to be heard from again.

Sian and her family resist the leadership of the new regime, along with dozens of other factions across the world. However, without electricity, they're at a loss as to how to communicate with each other to band together for strength in numbers. For that reason, they fight alone. When her father and best friend are captured by the military, she pretends to be a pleasure worker to infiltrate the base. Unbeknownst to her, a pleasure worker *has* been summoned to service a new breed of alien—one with a known weakness. Sex drains his strength.

None of the militia realizes that when a Nisibian comes across his mate, he doesn't lose his power...but instead transfers it to her.

Drunk on the power of being a female Rambo, Sian decides to steal the massive alien for herself. This much power at her fingertips could tip the scales in the resistance fight for humans.

# ABDUCTED

## BOOK 1 IN THE BLUE BARBARIAN SERIES

Alien abductions are real.

I was the third female awakened aboard the spacecraft that specialized in kidnapping females. Their mission? To sell us to other galaxies.

Human female Numbers One and Two didn't make it, but I was lucky. I was able to comprehend the instruction from Drakar, a caged abductee from the planet Blaedonia. I live only because of his warning to me not to fight the aliens who have me on the table. Together, we formulate a plan for escape for both us and the ten other unawakened Earthlings.

Lucky for Drakar, the spaceship crash-lands back on his planet. Unlucky for the Earthlings, we'll never be able to travel back home.

We'll have to learn to adapt.

- Book 1—Abducted
- Book 2—Stranded
- Book 3—Taken
- Book 4—Captive
- Book 5—Stolen
- Book 6—Betrayed

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

## A TWO-BOOK SERIES

The Sirian galaxy has blown itself up during a war that mimicked that of the destruction of her own planet, Terra. No stranger to slavery, Arian has escaped from the planet Zeta where she's been raised to breed royalty.

The Artificial Intelligence is a collective unit from the Sirian Planet B. They'd warned the leaders that a civil war would destroy the galaxy to no avail. In order to escape being destroyed along with the rest, they inserted their intelligence into the computer system.

Imagine Arian's surprise when she encounters a huge piece of chipped planet, which her computer claims to have ancient Sirian artifacts buried in its hollowed core.

Nothing can possibly be alive. The contamination gases from the nuclear war have destroyed everything in sight. But Arian is a scavenger, and these are ancient artifacts...

Unfortunately, her hacked computer never tells her the artifacts are actually metal skeletons whose bodies need to be grown into dangerously hot men.

# STARGAZER SERIES

In 1692, a starship carrying volunteers arrived on planet Earth near a small town called Salem, Massachusetts. The long journey across many light years caused the female inhabitants aboard drastic memory loss. It was already known when they would arrive on Earth, they would have no memories of who and what they really were. They would be as helpless as newborn lambs.

The goal was to breed with Earthlings, to prevent their own race from dying out. If it was successful, years later more Stargazers would be sent to co-exist with the humans on Planet Earth.

But alas—the females were slaughtered.

- Book 1—**The Hunter**
- *Dante and Kele*
- Book 2 —**The Enforcer**
- *Diamond and Felicia*
- Book 3 —**The Defender**
- *Hayze and Cassio*
- Book 4 —**The Protector**
- *Neo and Jessie*
- Book 5 —**The Guardian**
- *Vesta and Bay*
- Book 6 —**The Destroyer**
- *Jace and Mia*

# UNTITLED

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# ALSO BY RENA MARKS

**Genetically Altered Humans Series:** Xeno Sapiens, Earth-Ground, Siren, Beast's Beauty, Almost Human, Forbidden Touches, Coveting Ava, For Everly, Assassin's Mate, Sextet, Tempting Tempest, Falling For Trance, Damaged Goods, Alien's Bride, Dual Lives, Reson's Lesson, A Mate For Max, Dragon's Mate, Fated

My Alien Baby

**The Matched Program:** Matched to the Monster, Matched to the Monster, Too, Wanted By The Monster, Wanting The Monster

Alien Stolen

Born Again

Magic Gems

**Wanton Sins Series:** Demonic Passions, Demonic Pleasures, Demonic Power

Shared By Wolves

Enticing Fate

**SuperNatural Sharing Series:** Forgotten Kisses, Remembered Kisses, Whispered Kisses

Kiss Me Before I Die

**Stargazer Series:** The Hunter, The Enforcer, The Defender, The Protector, The Guardian, The Destroyer

**Blue Barbarian Series:** Abducted, Stranded, Taken, Captive, Stolen, Betrayed

**The AI Series:** Artificial Intelligence, Serepto's Story

**Purple People Series:** Space Babies, Baby Soldiers In Space, Baby Butterfly Kisses, Titi, Baby Butterfly Kisses

Chasing Violet—written with C.L. Scholey