



Theirs to Crave

*Aliens of Doluna: Book 1*

Rowan Merrick

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# DEDICATION

*To my beautiful wife, Marlana. I am blessed beyond words  
to have you in my life. You are my rock and my inspiration.  
This is my love letter. Zhai vailah.*

# AUTHOR NOTE

This book is intended for a mature audience and contains explicit content. **This content includes, but is not limited to:** depictions of mental health struggles, episodes of PTSD, experiences of trauma both foreign and domestic, discussion of infertility, exploration of grief, death, and non-vanilla intimate activities. *For a more complete listing, please see the author's website: [www.rowanmerrick.com](http://www.rowanmerrick.com)*

There are multiple languages represented within this story. Alien languages are italicized and contextually explained, with a Glossary provided at the end of the book. The Spanish used is neither translated nor italicized, as it is as normal as English to the main character, and readily accessible via a simple internet search.

# CHAPTER 1

## ESTRELLA

“**Y**ou’re never picking the restaurant again, hermano.” I rubbed my growling stomach as Mariano merged onto the freeway.

He scoffed.

“Nuh-uh. Dragging me all the way out here for some bougie nonsense that barely qualified as food. Best restaurant in the state, my ass.” My head thudded against the seat and I slumped in abject misery. “Foam and gold leaf on a speck of steak pretending to be a meal. Now you’re broke, I’m starving, and there’s not a drive thru for miles.”

“It’s not my fault,” Mariano wheedled, laughing. “The reviews were amazing. It has Michelin stars!” He shook his finger at me. “You liked that green sauce, admit it. Come on, it wasn’t *that* bad.” He grinned boyishly at me, dark hair falling over his forehead.

I rolled my eyes. “Fool, that look hasn’t worked on me since we were six. And it *was* that bad. The bill was more than my monthly utilities, I’m hungrier now than I was when we got there, and the waiter wouldn’t stop staring at my tits.” I crossed my arms, pushing said tits against the neckline of my shirt. They were big enough that I couldn’t hide them if I tried, so I didn’t bother. I didn’t blame the man for noticing. I was hot. Soft and round with curves on my curves, I had warm brown skin like my mamá, my dad’s killer dimples, and wavy black hair. But since the only time the waiter had met my eyes was when he sneeringly corrected my pronunciation of some gastronomic “masterpiece”, his attention had felt anything but good.

Mariano furrowed his eyebrows, nostrils flaring. “Pendejo. I should’ve punched him.”

“Pfft,” I disagreed. The last thing this night needed was a trip to jail.

“Ok, fine. You win, it was awful.” He rolled his eyes at my triumphant laugh. “Tell you what, I’ll come over in the morning and make chilaquiles. You don’t have plans, right?”

Seriously? I was thirty-two, divorced, childless, and spending Friday night with my brother. My wild weekend plans included sleeping in and shopping online for clothes I couldn’t afford. “Deal. You’re still buying me a burger, though.” I tapped at my phone, looking for the nearest drive thru, then paused. “Wait, I thought you were going away with Renée this weekend?”

He winced.

Twisting in my seat, I glared at him. “Mariano Julian Alfonso Parker, what did you do?”

“Why’d I have to do anything?” he blustered. “You’re my sister, Estrella! You’re supposed to be on my side! ¿La familia primero, no?”

“I know you did something because we *are* familia, cabrón! I know you! Renée’s crazy about you. She’s been putting together dream boards for your wedding for months. So, I ask again, *what* did you do?”

He groaned dramatically and ignored me, hand firm on the top of the wheel as he slouched in his seat.

I waited, staring at him.

He turned on the radio.

I turned it off.

He made a frustrated noise in his throat, and I bit back a smile. He was so easy.

“I don’t want to tell you,” he said, shooting me a glance from under furrowed brows.

I arched my eyebrow and said nothing. Loudly.

“Argh!” he gritted out. “She started talking about babies, ok?”

My stomach plummeted, as if the bottom had dropped out of the car and I was dragged beneath the tires. I forced myself to breathe. “Is she. . .are you. . .?” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“No!” Mariano whipped his head around, dark eyes meeting mine before he returned them to the road. “No, she’s not pregnant. Dammit, this is why I didn’t want to say anything.” He drummed his fingers on the wheel.

“So, what’s the problem?” Keeping my voice steady took all my will, but I made it happen. This wasn’t about me. “I thought you wanted kids?”

“I don’t know,” he waffled. “They were always just. . .something that happened later. Marriage, kids, a house, all that stuff. But when Renée started talking about *our* kids. . .I realized I didn’t want it. Not with her, at least.” He grimaced and shoved a hand through his hair. “I care for her. But I don’t—I don’t love her. I, ah, blurted it out without thinking.” He made a pathetic attempt at a chuckle. “She’s not real happy with me right now.”

“Wait,” I said, holding up my hand. “So, how did this go? Renée says, ‘Hey, we’re not getting any younger. Let’s have babies.’ And you say. . .?”

“But I don’t love you,” he confirmed glumly.

“¡No mames!” I gasped.

“I couldn’t help it!” Mariano said. “I didn’t mean to hurt her, I just. . .,” he trailed off. “It hit me all of a sudden that I was with her because it was easy, not because I couldn’t live without her.”

I winced, thankful he was looking at the road and not at me.

“She’s a great person, but she’s not *mi cielo*, Estrella. I want what Dad and Mamá had. What Nana and Tata had. And Renée deserves that too.”

He fell silent, hands clenching and flexing repeatedly on the wheel.



My hand was cupping my stomach, though I didn't remember moving it. I clenched it into a fist and punched him in the arm. "She's probably cursing you as we speak—and I don't blame her. Idiot." I let him stew in his guilt for a few minutes, then relented. "You'll find your person. You're a good man. When you remember to pull your head out of your ass."

He reached over and tweaked my hair, leaving his arm stretched across the seat behind me. I sighed, flipping my hair and straightening my bangs. We drove like that for a few minutes, the lights from passing cars briefly illuminating our troubled faces.

"You'll find your person, too." Mariano said into the quiet. He raised his voice, talking over my disagreeing snort. "Drake was a fucking asshole. You're worth five of him."

I viciously silenced the echo of my ex-husband's snarky voice that hissed I *was* five of him. Weak-assed bastard didn't get to talk to me like that, especially in my own head.

"I mean it," Mariano insisted. "You're gorgeous, funny, and sweet as hell. Can't help it, being my twin." I groaned at that, and he grinned. "Some smart dude is going to take one look at you and drag you to church, then keep you pregnant and in the kitchen where you belong."

"A la verga!" I spluttered, biting my cheeks as he roared with laughter. Only my brother would think misogyny was a good choice for comforting someone. The fact that it worked probably said something about me, but I didn't feel like unpacking it. "Renée's too good for you—" I'd just started my loving insult when lights speared through the windshield, stadium bright and pointed straight at us. I screamed, slapping my hands onto the dash as my body braced for impact.

Mariano bit off a curse and jerked the wheel to the right, trying to avoid what had to be a semi-truck barreling towards us.

We careened off the road, gravel and dirt spraying, and abruptly slammed to a stop. The car rocked. Outside, everything was still and quiet. Inside, our breaths rasped over

the roar of my pounding heart and the rumble of the engine. What the hell just happened?

My hands fluttered over my chest, my legs, reassuring myself I was still in one piece. “¿Estás bien? Where the hell did that truck come from?”

“Fuck, I don’t even know where it went! I’m ok, though. You?” He twisted the key in the ignition, the silence making my ears pop as he turned towards me and slapped the overhead light.

“I’m going to be sore tomorrow,” I groaned, rotating my neck gingerly as my eyes searched the night. Every muscle in my body had locked, expecting to be flattened like a bug on a windshield, and now they ached and twitched, trying to recalibrate. “But I’m ok. Good reflexes.” We shared a strained smile.

Movement flickered in the darkness behind Mariano, but before I could do more than squint, his door burst open.

Arms clamped around him—so many arms, strange in a way my brain couldn’t process—and I shouted, lunging towards him. My seatbelt brought me up short. I fumbled at it, panic making my vision darken and our mingled shouts sound far away. Air rushed at my back, and I’d just begun to twist, wanting to face whatever was coming for me, when pain exploded at the base of my skull. The last thing I saw before darkness descended was my brother’s rage filled grimace as he fought to get to me, hand outstretched.



A rank smell hit my nose, and I grunted, sluggishly lifting my arm to cover my face. The reek crawled down the back of my throat, squatting there like a toad. God, that was nasty. Like an uncleaned porta potty after a weekend festival, baking in the sun next to the food carts’ dumpster.

“I need a shower,” I mumbled.

*“Hsstch zzklit, irrsk tz bzzit’ka gretzak herrtza! Gizztek sa svet kezz tz hrritz!”* The hissing sounds were loud, vibrating against the inside of my skull like swarming bees. Really big bees. Great Dane sized bees. What the hell were the neighbors doing now?

“Escúchame, pendejos. I don’t know what the fuck you’re saying, but you’re not getting near us with that shit.”

Wait. That was Mariano. Why was he in my room? And why was he so mad? He sounded mean as hell.

I spasmed fully awake as memories cascaded over me. Being run off the road. All those *arms*. Mariano and I being dragged from the car. Pain. My breaths came short and choppy as I scrambled into a crouch, stiff muscles screaming at the movement. I tried to look everywhere at once, unable to focus.

I finally realized what I was seeing and my lungs seized.

We were in a grimy room with one closed metal door on the far side. Raised panels protruded from the walls, with metal platforms splattered with smears and rivulets of things I refused to think about set in the corners. Screens hung above them, flickering with incomprehensible symbols, but I only spared them a glance. My attention was on the three creatures whose hulking forms filled the center of the room.

Aliens.

Monsters.

I bit back a scream and tasted blood. They had four spindly arms each, but I knew from experience those arms were strong as steel, not weak or delicate. They were huge, eight or nine feet tall and almost as long. Their bodies lacked any softness, swampy gray skin stretched over hard, vaguely insectoid lower halves held up by four wiry legs. The one on the left had a ring of six glittering eyes above its wide, lipless maw, but the other two had too many to count. My stomach turned, nausea making me woozy.

“M-Mariano?” I felt like I was moving in slow motion, my lips taking endless heartbeats to shape his name. My throat was so tight I was surprised any sound came out at all.

“¡Gracias a Dios, hermana! I thought these fuckers had killed you! How bad are you hurt?” Mariano’s voice was strained and shaking, but he didn’t turn around. He stood between me and the aliens, radiating menace as they waved their arms and spoke again in their strange, buzzing, hissing language.

Hurt? My head was foggy, but I concentrated and my body came online with a symphony of pain. Shit, I was hurt. I was also missing my clothes, I realized with squirming horror. Mariano and I both wore only strange gray tank top style tunics. But— “I’ll be ok.”

Mariano grunted, the sound calling me a liar.

“Mira, my head’s killing me, my ribs hurt, something’s wrong with my wrist, and I’m basically naked. But I don’t think anything’s broken and I don’t have a concussion.” *Probably*, I added silently. Not like we could do anything about it if I was wrong.

“No concussion, my ass,” he snorted. “You’ve been out for at least ten minutes.”

The closest alien lunged towards us, brandishing something in its lower hands.

Mariano yelled, jumping into its path. For a moment he held his own, but another alien darted around—shockingly fast for its size—and picked him up, all four arms holding him tight as he cursed and struggled.

The third scuttled towards me, legs bent and body low to the ground. It stretched out its arms, hissing, “*Hhhhssshhhhttttcchhh.*”

I lurched to my feet, stumbling as everything spun around me. The alien jerked forward, but I dodged to the side and plowed gracelessly into the alien holding the mystery object. It could have been a med scanner from one of the old sci-fi shows, if it had been crossed with a gun and a nest of snakes. Whatever the fuck it was, it wouldn’t be good news for us. I grabbed for it, kicking the alien’s skinny legs and hoping they were a weak point.

They weren't. It ignored my barefooted attempts and used its upper hands to peel mine off the snake gun. One of the others grabbed me from behind, lifting me clear off the ground by my hair and neck.

I screamed as new agony exploded in my head and tears burst from my eyes, only to be met by bruising, suffocating burning at my throat. I clawed at the hands around my neck as my vision started to dim. Mariano's shouts cut off abruptly, and I gurgled out a moan. Please let him be alive. Oh, Dios mío, please let us both survive this.

*"Ssstt, Xteechh. Ch st'st'ix bzzit hshhhtch,"* the alien holding the snake gun buzzed, twisting its head to unsettling angles. The alien strangling me hissed a reply, and I collapsed, gasping, to the floor.

I tried to curl into a ball, but the damned alien grabbed me again, wrapping its hands around my upper arms in a punishing grip. It squeezed them, pushing my elbows together, and hauled me up. My shoulders screamed as they were forced to carry the weight of my whole body. I kicked, frantic to break free. The pain was indescribable. I stopped struggling and hung there, bombarded by agony.

I craned my neck, keening as I caught sight of Mariano. He was limp, his body bloody as the third alien heaved him onto one of the platforms. It pressed the snake gun to my brother's neck. There was a sharp hiss, Mariano's body convulsed, and then he was still.

I kicked again, oblivious to the agony, and called his name, but he didn't twitch.

The alien adjusted a couple things on the snake gun and shot him again, first in the side, then the thigh. Mariano never moved. I couldn't see him breathing.

A fine trembling took over my body. My eyes were dry and burning, fixed on his face as if I could force it to animate.

I was vaguely aware of the aliens buzzing and moving around the room, but I couldn't look away from my brother, still and crumpled on the dirty platform. I felt like I'd been

shattered into a million pieces, none of them great enough to function. One piece of me floated above my body, numb. Another piece tunneled into Mariano's body, willing his eyes to flicker and his chest to rise. More pieces were just throbbing pain. And one desperate piece was insisting this was all a hallucination, that we'd been in an accident and would wake up in an ambulance.

My teeth jolted together as I was dropped onto the other platform, my skull cracking against the metal. Something cold pressed against my neck and lightning shot through me. The shards of my consciousness slammed back together as my body locked in a helpless, convulsive arch. It was agony. The wave began to wane, and I tried to roll, to protect myself from the next two shots, but uncaring hands pinned my arms and legs. The shot to my side had nausea rolling through me as my stomach and intestines pulsed. Clammy sweat broke out over my body. The shot to my thigh sent numbness radiating outward, paralyzing me. I couldn't even close my eyes. Hot tears leaked down the sides of my face as I scrabbled inside the cage of my own body.

Helpless, I listened to the aliens hissing and buzzing as they moved around the room. There were noises I couldn't place, then one of the ugly gray fuckers loomed over me. My vision swam as it lifted my head by my hair and clamped something around my neck. It was heavy. Cold. Metallic. A fucking collar. These damned aliens had put a collar on me! ¡Como un maldito perro!

It moved out of my sight, then there was a mechanical hiss and their scuttling footsteps faded into the distance. Finally, all was silent save for the sound of my broken heart beating against my ribs.

I don't know how long I lay there before my eyelid twitched, and I realized I could blink. It felt like scraping my eyes with sandpaper. I blinked again, trying to force my eyes to lubricate themselves. Slowly—painfully slowly—I regained control of my body. Dios mío, everything hurt. My head was a kaleidoscope of pain, my shoulders and back screamed

whenever I breathed, my wrist felt like it'd been run over, and my whole body throbbed along with my heartbeat.

When I could move my neck, I turned my head to see Mariano. I couldn't tell if he was breathing. He had to be. He just had to be.

A few minutes later I managed to lift my right hand, muscles trembling with the effort, to the collar around my neck. It felt like smooth metal, no seams or buckles that I could find. Pulling on it did nothing. I groaned and tried to sit up. I failed. I dragged myself to the edge of the platform, sucked in a breath, and rolled to the ground.

When the pain cleared enough I could move again, I rolled onto my front. Using a modified army crawl with my injured left arm tucked against my chest, I crossed the eight or so feet separating me from Mariano's platform.

By the time I got there, I'd gained enough control to consider climbing up. I pushed into a sitting position and lost a lot of that confidence in the wave of dizziness that followed. I gritted my teeth. It took everything I had, and in the end I was sweaty and shaking, but I managed to haul myself up beside my twin.

I pressed my good hand to his chest, the relief at feeling it moving so strong I almost threw up. For long moments I sagged against him, reciting half-forgotten novenas in desperate gratitude. Eventually, I pushed up and tried to pull off his collar. After some searching I found the tiny seams that joined the two halves, but other than breaking another nail I made no progress. I gave up and wedged myself into the corner, pressing my aching shoulders into the cold wall. I held Mariano's hand with my good one, and tried not to think. I had to watch over him. I couldn't afford to spiral.

I was alive. Mariano was alive. Whatever the fuck was going on, that was enough for now. My body needed rest. If I was very lucky, I'd wake up in my own bed and this would just be a wild story I'd tell him over breakfast.

# CHAPTER 2

## ESTRELLA

Something moved.

I woke already in motion, fists raised, crouched over Mariano protectively. Except. . .he wasn't there. What the hell?

A slow clap made me look up. I blinked, trying to clear the fog and adrenaline. Mariano was facing me on the platform, sitting awkwardly with his bare legs crossed under the short shift he wore. ¡Ay, chingado! This nightmare *was* real.

“Very fierce, Estrella. I’m touched.” The split in his lip made my brother’s grin crooked, but his eyes were dark and tumultuous as they searched my face. His jaw flexed as he took in the collar around my neck, and by the time he’d cataloged the cuts and bruises covering my body, he was visibly trembling with anger. “What the fuck happened?”

“Don’t yell at me, you ass.” Annoying as he was, the sound of his familiar voice speaking lyrical Spanish rather than the incomprehensible alien buzzing was a balm to my soul. I rubbed my neck and winced. Fucking ow. “I thought they’d killed you.” My voice broke. Some of Mariano’s aggression deflated, and I sat back down, tugging on the hem of my shirt. “Now I kinda wish they had.”

He snorted and slid in next to me, clasping my hand in his.

His grip was tight enough it hurt, but I squeezed back just as hard, needing the reassurance. I leaned my head against the wall and closed my eyes. At least we were together.

“Will you please tell me what happened?” Mariano squeezed out, the effort to not yell making his voice tight.

I sighed. “The aliens—” Fuck, that felt bizarre to say out loud. I coughed and tried again. “They shot us with something from that snake gun thing. I don’t know what. Three times



each: neck, side, thigh.” I pointed to the perfectly round red mark on his thigh and his jaw clenched. “The first two hurt like hell. The last one was some kind of paralytic. I couldn’t even blink for the longest time after. They put the collars on us. . .then they left.”

I stopped talking, and he waited for long heartbeats before blowing out a frustrated breath.

“That’s not all of it,” he said flatly. “Tell me the rest. You’re covered in blood and bruises that weren’t there before. Dime.”

I groaned and muttered, “It was stupid. I went after the snake gun thing. I thought it might be a weapon, maybe I could use it against them, no? And like I said, I thought you were dead, so what did I have to lose?”

He grunted angrily.

“Whatever. Obviously, three massive aliens had no problem dealing with my short, round ass. I got a little beat up in the process. But that’s all,” I finished, shrugging before I remembered how messed up my shoulders were. Fucking ow, again.

“They didn’t. . .” he hesitated, a flush rising on his cheekbones. “I mean, you weren’t. . .” He tapered off, his eyes darting from my face to my lap and back again.

“I wasn’t probed,” I replied dryly.

“Jesus, Estrella.” If he’d had pearls, he would have clutched them, but his shoulders relaxed. When he spoke again, his voice was so low I had to strain to hear. “It should have been me.”

“What?” I twisted, but he wouldn’t meet my eyes, staring fixedly at his knees instead. “What are you talking about? You have some secret desire to be probed?”

He grunted and turned his head away.

I bounced my foot impatiently.

“I’m your brother,” he burst out. “I’m supposed to protect you, not the other way around.”

“Oh, don’t you come at me with that machismo bullshit. We look out for *each other*. And how the hell do you think you got knocked out in the first place? Huh? Oh, right, protecting me! Pendejo.” I pulled my hand from his and threw it in the air, exasperated.

“Estrella. . .” he warned, puffing himself up so he loomed beside me.

“Tch.”

“You’re such a bitch,” he complained, collapsing against the wall.

I could tell he’d heard me at least a little, though, and I smiled inwardly. My stomach growled, reminding me we’d never gotten that burger. . .last night? Yesterday? “How long do you think they’ll keep us here?” I couldn’t force myself to ask what I really wanted to know; what they were going to *do* with us. Saying it out loud would unlock the “what if” floodgates for sure.

He turned his head, his expression set. “I don’t know. But when they come back, I’m in charge.”

I focused on my aching, swollen left wrist. I could move the hand, so it wasn’t broken, but it was sprained for sure. And my manicure was a mess. A shame. I’d just gotten it done.

Mariano glared at me. “Estrella! You hear me? *I am in charge.*”

I sighed dramatically, stretching it out, and spoke in a voice devoid of emotion. “Si, te entiendo. You’re the maaaaan.” I’d do what I’d do, and we both knew it, but he settled back, satisfied. Pride was a funny thing.



My ass was numb. Again. I pulled myself from the dissociative fugue I’d been hiding in and lifted a hip, releasing the suction-like hold my cheeks had on the metal platform. The stupid tank dress tunic thing was long enough to cover the important bits, but short enough it rode up when I sat down. I

shuddered, thinking about what kinds of extraterrestrial ick were touching my panty-less lady parts. Definitely time to get up.

I'd been on high alert for a while after we'd woken up, jumping at every sound—real or imagined. That had lasted about an hour before my body ran out of adrenaline and I crashed. I just wanted to curl up and sleep until this madness sorted itself out.

Mariano insisted that we had to be ready to make our escape whenever the alien assholes came back, and he'd bullied me into walking around so I didn't stiffen up. Actually, he'd wanted me to do a whole ass exercise routine with him, but I flatly refused. Bouts of walking between panic attacks was our compromise.

I complained the whole time, as was my sisterly right. But it actually did help, so I dragged myself up and slogged a figure eight path across the room. I'd never hurt so much, in so many places. Between the head and the hunger, nausea rolled through me in waves. My left wrist was swollen to the size of my ankle, my shoulders felt like someone was stabbing me anytime I moved my arms, and the weight of the collar around my neck made it impossible to forget the bruises that bloomed beneath it. On top of all that, I had to pee.

Mariano and I had searched the room, trying to open the panels in the walls, the door, poking the screens to see if they did anything. We'd even tried mimicking the alien's hisses in case something was voice activated. Nothing worked. We utterly failed to find weapons, convenient trash chutes, or toilets. If something didn't change in the next hour, I was going to have to pee in the corner. Wouldn't that be the cherry on top of this shit sundae?

*Thud! Thud! Thud!*

I flinched at each pound of Mariano's fists against the door. For all that we were twins, we processed things very differently. I ping-ponged between blessed numbness and screaming panic that had me sobbing in the corner as my brain

trapped me with darker and darker visions of our future.  
Mariano. . .got mad.

He was just as beat up as I was, but he'd been working out like he was a movie villain locked in solitary and dreaming of vengeance. He was one huge ball of manic determination. But eventually he got tired and had moved on to yelling.

“Your mothers would be ashamed of you!” *Thud!* “Fucking cockroaches!” *Thud! Thud!* “Let us out or get back here and fight me, cabrones!” *Thud-thump.*

I looked up at the new noise. Mariano had collapsed against the door, chest heaving. “You done?” I asked.

He jerked his head to one side in non-answer, then scrubbed his hands over his face roughly. He was getting stubble already. Insult on top of injury for my always clean-shaven brother.

“I hate fucking waiting,” he muttered, the apology he couldn't say in the glance he shot me.

“I know, but—” I clamped my mouth shut. I'd been about to say, “it could be worse.” Idiot. It's like I'd never seen a horror movie in my life. I strained my ears, listening for some new monster come to torment us.

I'd just started to breathe again when I caught it. A tapping, scratching sound from the other side of the door.

Mariano shot to his feet, backing me away and taking up a fighting pose in the center of the room.

Electricity exploded through my body. I lost control of my muscles and fell to the floor, jerking. Mariano lay in front of me in a fetal position, lighting crackling at his neck. It was the collars. Pinche aliens put us in goddamn shock collars!

Through the agony, I registered the whirl of the door opening before I was dragged from the room. I bumped over a series of metal walkways in blurry corridors, unable to do more than grunt at the painful indignity before I was unceremoniously tossed into a cell. Mariano landed beside me with a curse. There was a clang and sort of snicking buzz, then

I floated in a brief euphoria of relief as the collar mercifully became inert metal once more.

“I told you this was all a mistake,” said a man with a Boston accent. “See, babe? These stupid aliens were trying to abduct cows.” Someone gasped and hissed something too quietly for me to hear, and the man gave a mean, blustery laugh. “Oh, come on. It was a joke. I’m just trying to lighten the mood.”

“Don’t.” That voice was low and smooth, masculine.

“Ass,” said a woman, her contralto voice dripping with disgust and a hint of an accent.

Tired and hurt as I was, I refused to register the dig. These people spoke English. I could understand them. We weren’t alone. That was enough to celebrate.

Mariano didn’t agree. He shot to his feet, head swiveling as he glared, looking for the asshole who’d spoken first.

I pushed up more slowly, gingerly kneeling on the cold metal. No way was I putting my bare ass more places than I had to. This place smelled just as bad as the last room, if not worse. My eyes finally figured out how to focus, and I immediately wanted to close them again.

We were in a freaking dungeon. Or a prison, maybe? It was one big metal room with six cells separated by some kind of heavy metal mesh that kind of . . . wavered? They shimmered, like heat waves coming off the pavement in summer. One of the cells looked like a bomb had gone off inside it—its door a twisted and mangled mess. Intermittent sparks arced from the jagged edges, and beyond that was the only exit I could see, the door we’d been dragged through.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to keep my breathing from carrying me into panic. I couldn’t decide whether I was relieved or disappointed that Mariano and I were alone in our cell, looking at the four occupied cages around us.

The cell on our left held a man who could have been twenty or fifty, his features holding that ageless beauty some people

were blessed with. He looked Korean to me, with a scattering of freckles over his high cheekbones that hinted at something else. Our eyes met, and he tipped his head, somber sympathy written across his face.

On our right was another solo occupant, this one a tall woman with impressive muscles covered in tattoos. She was light-skinned but surprisingly tanned for a redhead, and her long curly hair was pulled back in a thick braid. She caught my gaze wandering over her biceps and winked, giving me a little wave.

My face spasmed into an awkward expression that probably looked like I'd been smacked on the ass by a bug zapper, and I jerked my eyes away. Awesome first impression. Apparently, these aliens only abducted hot people. Which was flattering, I guess. Not that I was ready to think any friendly thoughts about our abusive hosts.

The cell directly across from us held a man and a woman, and it was obvious from a glance that this was the man who'd made that lovely "joke". He was tall, fit, white, with a goatee and an obviously expensive haircut. He had a smirk on his face and a stick up his ass, "big man on campus" vibes radiating off of him like rays from a shitty sun. Mariano was focused on him like a laser. A small blonde woman was curled up on the floor as far away from him as she could get, her arms wrapped around the knees she hugged to her chest.

"You have something to say about my sister?" Mariano asked. The snarl in his voice told the other man that "yes" would be a very bad answer.

My gaze slipped to the last cell. It was packed. Four people stood within, staring at us. They weren't human.

Boston showed his teeth in an insincere smile. "No, no, man. I didn't mean anything by it. Just a joke, right?" He laughed like he was hilarious, and my brother clenched his fists.

These aliens were short. I was five foot three, and I was pretty sure I'd be taller than the tallest of them. They were huddled together, so it was hard to make out details, but they

stood upright on two legs, had two arms each, and were completely hairless. Their skin was varying shades of blues and purples, their bodies compact and graceful, like gymnasts. Oh, and they had tails. Thick, muscular tails like a gecko or a lizard. I couldn't look away from their large, unblinking silver eyes. Slit pupils were all that broke the argent field, splitting them vertically with no whites to be seen.

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Logan.” The redhead huffed, turning her back on the man's cage and facing us. Behind her, Logan's face reddened and he flipped her off, but the woman with him said something that had him hissing at her instead. The Amazon continued, her southern accented voice softening. “I'm Ria. What are your names?”

“I'm Estrella,” I said into the silence that followed. My brother was glaring even harder at Logan, and I kept being distracted by the four aliens in the corner. “This is Mariano, my brother.”

Ria nodded. “That's Shane on the other side of you, and you've met Logan.” She sneered his name. “In there with him is Cassandra.”

“And them?” I asked, tilting my head towards the aliens I couldn't stop staring at. They stared back, clear intelligence shining from their bright eyes.

“We've been calling them the Indigo Girls, for obvious reasons,” Shane said behind me. I shivered. His voice was delicious, velvety and rich. “They don't speak any language we can understand, but as far as we've been able to figure, their names are Ilya,” the shortest one bobbed their delicate Tiffany blue head and made a trilling noise, “Salat,” another head bob and a coo from the deepest purple one, “Yin,” the indigo and gray alien inclined their head with dignity, “and Therry.” The final alien, whose coloring was a mix of lilac and mauve with touches of sapphire, gave us a little wave.

I waved back, and Mariano did too, finally distracted from his death glare by the opportunity to meet aliens. I stood up, tugging down my tunic. “I'd say it was nice to meet you, but. . .” I waved at the room of cages.

Shane's lips curved appreciatively, a lock of hair falling over his forehead.

Someone that dirty had no right being so attractive. Everyone was visibly grungy, sporting bruises and cuts. Some of their bruises had faded to sickly greens and yellows, I noted, with a hitch in my breath.

"Yes, hi, hello." Mariano cut in. "Not to be a dick, but does anyone know what the hell is going on here? Any plans to get free? 'Cause I'd love to sit and bullshit with you all—seriously, I'll bring the tequila—but I'd really rather be wearing pants. And not in a cage," he finished between gritted teeth.

"You've been here the longest," Ria said, gesturing at Shane.

He shifted, crossing his arms over his chest. "Unfortunately, we don't know much. We only see the bugs when they bring in new people. You two were in another room before this? Got injected with some stuff, then brought here a while later?" He thrust a hand through his hair with a sigh when we nodded. "Same story for all of us. I figure it was inoculations, trackers, or both."

I winced at the possibilities those ideas conjured up, and he dropped his chin in grim agreement.

"Are we still on Earth?" Mariano asked.

I held my breath, fearing the answer.

"I think so," Ria answered quickly. "It doesn't feel like we've moved."

Dizzy relief washed over me, and I swayed. I reached out a hand to Mariano, catching and holding his as he did the same. "H—how long have you all been here?" I managed. My voice was a whisper, but either the others had no problems hearing me over the uneven thrum of the engines, or they knew what we'd ask next.

"I've been here seven days," said Shane. "Give or take. We don't exactly have clocks. I don't know how long the Indigo



Girls were here before that. Ria's been here five, and Cassandra and Logan just got here yesterday."

"That's since we were thrown in these cages," Ria added, her voice dry and tense. "So, add a day for the full abduction experience."

"Fuck." Mariano said what we were all thinking. He dropped my hand and paced, a frustrated grunt bursting from him when the cage wall brought him up short. "But they have to let us out sometimes, right? Take us somewhere to shit, at least?"

My empty stomach cramped. "Or feed us?"

"Of course, she asks about the food." Logan muttered, his voice dripping with disgust.

Mariano whipped around to face him, but I tapped his arm and shook my head. There was nothing either of them could do except yell, and that wasn't going to do any of us any good. If we got out of this, I'd happily cheer my brother on as he kicked the pathetic fucker's ass. Not that anything Logan said could really hurt me. I didn't give two shits what some random white boy thought of me. That didn't mean I'd let it slide.

Shane flicked a glare at Logan but didn't give him any more energy than that. "Ah, no." His expression grew uncomfortable, and he rubbed the back of his neck. "See the two bowl-shaped things on the back wall?"

I hadn't, and I turned, my stomach sinking as I took in the vaguely urinal-esque protrusions.

"The one on the left with the nozzle above it is where they feed us."

Wait, what? I stared at the crusty basin. It rose a foot and a half above the floor, with a stubby L-shaped pipe about two feet above that. Its end flared into a kind of nozzle. There was a drain in the basin too small to fit a finger in. It didn't look clean. At all.

"Time is hard to track here, but it seems like they feed us about once a day," Shane finished, his voice pained.

“Feed us. . .what, exactly?” I asked, morbid curiosity taking over as my mind flailed and my stomach revolted at the idea of eating anything from *that*.

There was an uncomfortably long pause. Finally, Ria cleared her throat. “Think of it as a protein shake. Whatever it is, none of us have died from it, and honestly, I’ve had protein shakes that tasted worse.”

I shuddered. I wanted to say I’d die before I ate some weird slop from a nasty trough, but I knew it’d be a lie. Disgusting as the idea was, I wanted to live. I wanted to go home. My eyes wandered over the second basin, which was similar but with a lower, narrower nozzle and a four-inch mesh grate set into the bottom. Horror shot through me. “No.”

“We won’t look,” Shane promised.

“Mierda,” muttered Mariano.



Using the basins had been—if anything—more awful than I’d expected. Everyone pretended not to see, hear, or smell anything, but we all knew it was a polite lie. I’d cried as my bladder emptied, squeaked when the nozzle thing turned out to be a sort of ice-water-dispensing bidet, and burned with embarrassment as I did a little bouncing shake thing to dry off—longing for toilet paper.

The “protein shake” was chalky and mostly flavorless, and even as hungry as I was, I couldn’t force myself to eat much of it. We weren’t provided straws or cups, and our only access to water was from the bidet, so eating was yet another exercise in humiliation—and filth. I was getting a very clear picture of why this ship smelled so bad. Our alien hosts didn’t seem to believe in personal autonomy *or* hygiene. Along with tacos and leggings, a week-long shower was very high on my post-abduction wish list.

“So, what’s the deal with the walls?” Mariano asked.

I blinked, disoriented. Trying to climb out of the pit of cyclic dread I'd been spinning in, I looked at the weirdly shimmery grid blankly. Each bar was about a half inch thick, with the spaces between them only big enough to fit a finger or two—not that I'd try. I'd brushed against one of those walls earlier and it had sucked as bad as the collar zap.

“Do they ever turn them off?” My brother persisted. “What about when they bring in new people?”

“Ah. No.” Shane shook his head. “They have this remote control—”

“Maybe you can overload them,” Logan shot out. “Give it a try. Just grab on and don't let go.”

“You first,” Mariano gritted back, baring his teeth in a mockery of a smile.

“You're all taking this ‘abducted by aliens’ thing pretty well.” I spoke louder than necessary, craning my neck to make eye contact with the others deliberately. Cassandra met my eyes, mouthed an apology, and pushed up to talk quietly with Logan. I couldn't hear what they said, but their body language was heartbreakingly familiar. Him, pushing into her space on the balls of his feet, his movements sharp and alarming. Her, bending, making herself smaller, hands open and conciliatory.

“Pot, kettle,” said Ria, snorting.

Worried as I was, I still warmed at the implied praise. I smiled shyly at the tall, imposing woman.

“I lost my shit for a good couple days,” Ria admitted. “And those two were a mess when they got here.”

*I'd be a mess if I was trapped alone with Logan, too, I thought.*

“Shane here is too cool to freak out like us mere mortals,” she added with a cheeky grin.

He smiled a Mona Lisa smile, but his watchful attention stayed on Cassandra and Logan's cage. Only when the other man threw his hands up and stomped to the back corner did he shift his eyes back to us. “We need to be calm if we're going

to take advantage of any opportunities to escape.” He caught my hopeful inhale and grimaced. “Not that there’s been any yet.”

“Do you think there will be?” Cassandra asked, her voice small and brittle.

“Yes,” Shane answered.

She didn’t seem to hear him as she stared at nothing, twisting her fingers in her shift.

My brother strode to the front of our cage, drawing her gaze. “We’ll find a way, Mariposa,” he said firmly. “We’re getting out of this.”

Cassandra searched his face and finally nodded, going to sit near the aliens’ cage. The dark purple one—Salat—joined her. The two of them seemed to have formed some kind of bond.

I stared at Mariano. Less than a day with the girl and he was giving her nicknames. Hopeless. I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back, hissing at him in Spanish. “Are you crazy, hermano? She has a man. Don’t be stupid.”

He growled and raked his hands through his hair. “Her man is an ass.”

“But he’s *her* ass, idiot. She’s *not* your butterfly. Leave it alone.”

He scowled and paced away, muttering under his breath. Stomping back to me, he folded his arms over his chest and spoke through gritted teeth. “It’s not like that.”

“What’s not?” I asked, matching his pose.

He sighed and lowered his arms. “I’m not. . . I don’t think of her that way. Not. . .romantically.” He ignored my disbelieving snort and looked away, saying, “She reminds me of you.”

I stopped mid eyeroll, searching his gaze. Truth. Oh, brother mine. My shitshow of a marriage left scars on more than just me. I stepped close, hugging him. After a second, his arms came around me and we stood together. I was bruised all to hell and it hurt, but I didn’t let go, and neither did he.

“I thought you two were related.”

Logan’s sleazy insinuation was an unwelcome intrusion, and my back straightened as I glared at the asshole. Mariano spun, fists tight. If the cages hadn’t been in the way, Logan would have been a lot bloodier.

“Hey, I’m not judging.” Logan held out his hands, his tone mocking. “Me, I’d have to be a lot more desperate, but that’s on you, man.” He laughed, the sound harsh in the otherwise silent room.

We all stared at him. Even the Indigo Girls picked up on the tension. Mariano stalked up to the side of the cage closest to Logan and said, clearly and slowly but with a punch like each word was fired from a gun, “Chinga tu madre.”

Logan flinched. It was a small movement, just around the eyes, but I saw it. He stepped forward immediately, snarling an insult, but Cassandra stepped in front of him.

She raised her hands and tilted her head back, looking him in the eye. “Give it up, Logan. If we manage to survive this, get a therapist. Until then, just stop.”

I wanted to cheer so hard. Mariano’s little butterfly was bursting out of her cocoon. But I bit my tongue, watching Logan’s clenched fists tremble at his sides.

Ria whooped in encouragement and Cassandra gave her a small smile, but her focus stayed locked on Logan, who took a slow step closer.

I scrambled for something to say to diffuse the situation, so fixated on the danger that when Logan stumbled, I didn’t immediately understand what had happened. Then the loud mechanical noise of an engine cycling hit my ears, and the world lurched to the side. I barely caught myself before I hit the electrified wall of the cage.

The Indigo Girls wrapped around each other in a tight huddle, looking at us with a deep sorrow and sympathy that needed no translation.

I finally realized what was happening. The ship was moving. It was leaving Earth. *We* were leaving Earth. We were

lost.

# CHAPTER 3

## *ESTRELLA*

Dear Reader,

The following chapter contains on-page depictions of domestic violence, sexual assault, body horror, homophobia, and death. If you'd prefer not to read these things in full detail, skip to the next chapter, which will begin with a summary.

**T**he cell wall shimmered in front of my face. My hair crackled and waved in the noxious air, forced on end by the hazy electrical field.

I'd thought I hurt before. I'd been wrong.

Blood trickled from my nose, pooling on the floor beneath my cheek. We'd either left the planet by plowing *through* it, or the aliens really needed to fix the shocks on this flying junk heap. Take-off had shaken the ship like a dog with a rat, knocking me on my ass and sending Mariano and I crashing over each other. We'd slammed into the electrified wall separating us from Shane, the fiery agony of it making me seize and scream. Blood filled my mouth as my teeth snapped shut, cutting into my tongue.

The ship jolted again. We careened across the cell, slamming into another wall of lightning.

My stomach tried to teleport out of my body along with the rest of my internal organs. I choked, blood bursting from my mouth in a fine spray, as light and sound warped around me.

After that...nothing made sense.

Now, I was lying on my side, queasy, my skin sizzling with static, feeling like I'd been beaten by an entire football team. The floor beneath me vibrated with a low hum, broken now and then with random pauses. I strained, instinctively trying to find a pattern. I couldn't. It was torturous. Every time the

vibration paused it felt like my heart did too, only to leap into my throat, racing, when the hum returned.

“Estrella?”

It took a second, but my name finally penetrated the fog. I twisted my head and found Mariano lying a few feet away, flat on his back. Our eyes met, and I opened my mouth. No sound came out.

I coughed, swallowed, and finally rasped out, “Estoy aqui.” My throat was raw. I wondered idly if I’d been screaming. Like everything else, it didn’t seem to matter one way or another.

“Gracias a Dios,” he choked out, then turned his face away to stare blankly at the ceiling. I pretended not to see the shiny tracks trailing across his temples. His fists clenched and stretched, clenched and stretched, over and over.

I focused on the movement, letting everything else fade away.

Open.

Close.

The engines stuttered again, and I forced myself to breathe.

Open.

Close.

I distantly registered the sounds of the others talking, and a part of me knew I should check in, see if anyone was seriously hurt, but I just lay there, my lungs following each spread of my brother’s fingers.

“I’m getting us out,” Mariano whispered. At first I thought he was talking to himself, but then he turned his head to look at me. “I don’t know how. But I will. We’re not dying in a cage. I swear it.”

I blinked rapidly, trying to keep the burn in my eyes from pouring down my cheeks. I wanted to look away, to crawl back into that place where nothing mattered, but he held me



there. My teeth clamped onto my lip, my throat aching with the hopeless wails I held in.

Mariano pushed up onto his side, staring fixedly into my eyes. His face was rock hard. “Lo juro, mi hermana.”

All the things I wouldn’t—couldn’t—say battered at me, fighting to pry my jaws open. Instead, I closed my eyes and nodded. I would try to believe it.

“This is all your fault.” Logan’s vicious snarl was jagged like broken glass, a menacing hiss that cut through our little bubble and carved past the dissonant hum of the engine.

My gaze shot up to find his white-knuckled hands gripping Cassandra’s upper arms, his snarling face inches from hers. She curled her body away, pushing against him, but he held her fast.

“You stupid bitch,” he hissed. “You can’t do anything right, can you? Just can’t help yourself. Batting your eyelashes at my mother, embarrassing me in public.” His voice rose, becoming a high, whiny falsetto. “Oh no, Marge, I think Logan’s had too much to drink! I should drive, don’t you think?!” He shook her roughly, dropping back into that ugly growl. “Always sticking your damned nose into my business. Ruining my fucking life.”

“No, Logan, I—”

He cut her off. “You’re fucking worthless. *Worse* than worthless. Do you think we’d be here if I’d been driving? No!” He was shouting now, his face red and wild. “*I’m* not incompetent, unlike *you!*”

Cassandra’s toes barely touched the ground now, her feet flailing for purchase as silent tears ran down her face.

“Hey, man. Just breathe, she—”

“Let her go, asshole, or I swear—”

“Logan! Stop!”

“You don’t want to do this—”

He didn’t seem to hear our shouts, abuse spewing from his mouth like pus from an abscess.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trembling. My stomach was a roiling mess and my legs twitched, wanting to run. Every cell in my body strained to go to her, to help, but at the same time, all I wanted was to get away, to hide. I could do neither. I could only witness and beg for it to stop.

“You know,” Logan mused, icy disdain slipping over his expression in a lightning-fast mood swing that sent a chill up my spine. “I only kept you around because your father was a senior partner.” He pulled her closer and brushed the hair from her face in a cruel imitation of care, his fingers digging into her chin when she tried to pull away.

His eyes were feverish with excitement as he cooed at her. “Can’t upset Daddy’s *precious little princess*. But that doesn’t matter now, thanks to *you*. So, I guess this mess isn’t a complete loss.”

Logan ate at her face—punching her with his mouth in an act that had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with power. Cassandra tore her face away, choking, and he snatched her back, his fingers tangled in her hair.

His teeth shone with wild laughter when she whimpered, struggling. The smile stayed in place as he licked his lips and softly murmured, “I’m not stopping when you cry this time. I’m not stopping at all.”

Mariano—who’d been pacing like a tiger along the front of our cell, muttering threats under his breath—lost it. He screamed at Logan, flashes of electricity shooting out with each pound of his fists against the cage door. The acrid scent of ozone and burning flesh filled the air, but my brother didn’t so much as flinch.

Logan’s head whipped to him, and the smirk that twisted his lips grew darker. Without warning, he spun Cassandra around, jerking her back to his front when she stumbled. “What’s wrong? Do you like the little bitch? She’s not really up to my standards, but anything’s gotta beat fucking your sister.”

The others were shouting too, beating at the walls in a shower of sparks and wretched distress.

I stood still, staring at Cassandra. Her face was pale, wet with tears, her eyes large and blank. She'd gone somewhere else. I recognized it all too well. I curled my hands into fists, feeling my nails cut into my palms, and prayed that wherever she'd gone was better than here.

In the next cage, the Indigo Girls were crouched, unearthly still, glowing eyes fixed on Logan and Cassandra.

“Tell you what,” Logan taunted. “I’m a generous guy. Let me show you what you’re missing.” The asshole jerked up Cassandra’s tunic, exposing her completely.

She twisted, trying to cover herself, panic forcing awareness back into her eyes.

Logan caught her arms, pinning them behind her back with one hand as he wrapped his other arm around her neck, holding her tunic high. Mocking insults fell from his lips between excited, panting breaths, and he humped her, jerky and rough. All the time, he stared at Mariano.

Cold sweat slicked my whole body as nausea rolled through my gut. I swallowed convulsively and grabbed the back of Mariano’s tunic. I saw my hand move, saw the fingers grip the cloth, but I felt nothing, heard nothing over the thundering of my blood in my ears.

Mariano turned on me, snarling. He saw my face and blanched. With a monumental effort visible in his clenching jaw and twitching muscles, he pulled himself under control. He allowed me to pull him back from the door, but his burning eyes remained on Logan even as he took my hand in his.

The other man sneered and tightened the arm around Cassandra’s neck, rubbing his cheek against hers as her face reddened and she kicked, desperately fighting for air.

Mariano sank to his knees, his eyes fixed on Cassandra’s panicked face as prayers and curses fell from his lips. His hold on my hand was tight enough that no blood flowed between us.

My throat was too dry for speech and my eyes burned—I was too afraid to blink, terribly sure that if I did, the reality I’d

find when I opened them would be even worse.

Shane was still as a statue in the center of his cage, fists clenched, staring at Logan with death in his eyes.

Ria was so close to the cell wall between her and Cassandra that it sparked when she breathed. She didn't seem to notice. She recited a litany of softly voiced threats, the soothing violence surreal on top of the depravity of the scene.

The Indigo Girls moved. Slowly, imperceptibly, they formed a single row facing Logan and Cassandra, bodies tight with ready tension.

Logan loosened his grip, nuzzling Cassandra's hair and grunting when she flinched. His next words were so low I could barely hear them. "Such a disappointment. Why do I even keep you around? Oh, that's right. You're not a bad little cocksucker, are you?"

He shoved two fingers roughly into her mouth and smiled as she gagged. "I'll make you a deal. Get on your knees. Prove you're worth something, and I might let you live. You know what happens when you displease me."

Cassandra's body shook with the force of his thrust against her ass, but all the life had drained out of her as he spoke. She hung limp from his grasp, unresponsive, prepared to endure the unendurable.

I wanted to kill Logan. Rip through the walls and beat him to death with my bare hands.

"No?" Logan taunted when Cassandra didn't move. "You want to bleed, then? Fine by me."

A furious noise burst from Ria, her cell wall bursting with lightning as she slammed her arms against it. "Let her go, you sick fuck!"

"Aw, look, babe!" Logan crowed triumphantly. "Somebody cares about you after all. Too bad it's another bitch. Hey, maybe that's your problem. Maybe you're a little homo." He laughed and groped her breasts, his touch leaving red marks on her pale skin.

Cassandra didn't react.

Logan growled and shook her.

Her head snapped back and forth, but she didn't cry out or fight.

"Fuck this," he snarled. "They want you so bad, they can have you."

He shoved her, and I held my breath as she fell to her knees, her expression hidden by the fall of hair from her lowered head.

Logan's face spasmed into a rictus of rage. He wrapped her hair around his fist, pulling her head up, and hissed, "Go on, then, they're waiting."

I saw her eyes before the door became an explosion of light—they were wide, terrified, and fully aware. Then I saw nothing, my eyes seared by the brightness of the lightning storm that was burning her alive.

She screamed. We screamed. It went on forever. *Dios mío, make it stop.*

When the baleful light flickered and died, revealing her body slumped on the ground, it took me a few seconds to realize Logan was screaming, too.

He was scrabbling against the ground in the center of the cell, fingers bloody as he tried to dig through the floor. There was something wrong with his back. The tunic was burned away, and his back . . . bubbled. The skin was gone in some places, raw and red in others. I saw bone. Other things pulsed nauseatingly beneath the wreckage of his flesh. He howled, his screams high and jagged.

My gaze whipped to the next cage. The Indigo girls were now standing in a loose formation. As I watched, the center figure—Yin—licked their lips with a black tongue and nodded once, decisively.

"Holy shit." Mariano's voice was high with shock. "They spit acid?!"

"It seems so," replied Shane hollowly.

“Cassandra?” Ria kept her velvety voice low as she crouched at the edge of her cell. “Cassandra, can you hear me?”

I held my breath, my eyes and ears straining for any sign of life from the fallen woman.

“Hear you.”

The weak, muffled words felt like rain in the desert. My breath rushed out in a ragged moan, and I collapsed to my knees on the floor. Mariano pressed his side to mine, letting me follow the pattern of his slowing breaths.

“Thank god,” Ria sighed, slumping.

Cassandra tried to push herself up but fell back with a cry. Slowly, gingerly, she rolled onto one hip and stared at Logan.

His cries had quieted to grunts, and as we watched, his thrashing turned into jerking spasms until—finally—he stilled. Cassandra continued to watch him for a handful of breaths, then silently rolled onto her back.

“What happened?” Her voice was distant, the hollowness sharing only a vague curiosity.

Ria cleared her throat. “Apparently, the Indigo Girls are badass acid spitting warriors.” The humor in her tone was forced, but I appreciated the effort.

“How badly are you hurt? Can you stand?” Shane asked.

“Give her a damn second,” Ria snapped.

“I’d love to,” he replied evenly. “I’m concerned that Logan won’t. If he’s still alive, he needs to be immobilized while he’s down.”

Ria’s fists clenched, but she dipped her chin, pacified.

Cassandra grunted and painfully got to all fours. She’d only shuffled forward two steps when she hissed and reared back.

“Mariposa!” Mariano cried.

“I’m okay,” Cassandra said, shaking her right hand. “A few drops of the acid missed him, is all.” She continued forward

more carefully, muttering, “More’s the pity,” under her breath.

“Is he breathing?” Shane’s voice was steady, its normal beauty strangled by tension.

Cassandra leaned to check, but jerked away as Logan seized, his body ratcheting up and slamming back onto the floor. His head made a sickening sound as it hit the filthy metal. Blood arced from his nose with the next spasm. He seized once more, and was still.

“Not now,” Cassandra whispered. “He can’t hurt me. Not anymore.” She crawled away and curled up with her back to us, shaking with sobs.

None of us tried to talk.

I sat in a state of numb timelessness. I was aware of my mind’s frantic spinning, but disconnected from it. After an eternity, I became aware of Mariano’s warm callouses against my cold fingers. I felt the metal floor gritty beneath my bare legs. I smelled the sourness of fear sweat drying on my skin. Gradually, piece by piece, I folded back into my body.

My breathing must have changed, because Mariano squeezed my fingers, his support silent but unquestionable.

Cassandra forced herself to her feet, moving like every breath hurt. She faced the Indigo Girls with her head high, then touched her palms together and bowed.

Ria—who was closest to her—gasped. “Oh, honey,” she mourned.

Cassandra flinched but didn’t look away from her alien saviors. She met each of their silvery gazes, and when Yin stepped forward, Cassandra bowed again, pressing a hand to her heart. “Thank you,” she said with solemn gratitude.

Yin returned the gesture, the replying trill soft and sad.

When the Indigo Girls retreated to sit huddled together, Cassandra turned to us.

She was covered in wounds. The fresh red bruises ringing her neck and arms were bad enough, but it was the burns that made my heart stumble. They covered half of her face, angry

and red. More crosshatched down her arms, over her thighs, and disappeared beneath her scorched tunic.

“Mariposa,” Mariano whispered.

A succession of dull thuds rang from Shane’s cell. He’d split his knuckles open at this rate.

Cassandra raised her chin. “I’ll live.” Her eyes flickered to Logan’s mangled body, and she didn’t have to say the rest.

“You will,” I confirmed. Secretly, I worried about infection. This place was filthy, and burns were so hard to heal. But she’d survived abduction and assault. Surely she could survive this too.

She nodded and curled back onto her side, as far from Logan’s body as she could get. She made no noise as she wept.



# CHAPTER 4

## *ESTRELLA*

### *Chapter 3 Summary*

Estrella wakes, bloody and hurting, after being knocked around the electrified cell during a very rough exit of Earth's atmosphere. Mariano swears he'll get them out, that they won't die in a cage. Logan loses it, takes his fear out on Cass, not for the first time. She ends up burned from forced exposure to the cell wall. We discover the Quoosalk can spit acid when Yin melts Logan's back, after which he dies. Cass thanks the Quoosalk for their aid, cries. Everyone is traumatized.

**T**he bugs must have been monitoring us somehow, because two of them came in before too long and dragged Logan's body away. They did so quickly and without fuss, which I was thankful for since the fucking cowards activated our collars before they even opened the door.

Although, given that we now knew the Indigo Girls were reptilian assassins, the bugs' caution made some sense.

Nah, fuck that, and fuck them.

After a couple "days", roughly estimated by the delivery of our delightful protein shakes, Cassandra started talking again. Her wounds weren't healing very well, and she cried often, but everyone understood.

We all cried sometimes.

After a couple of embarrassing breakdowns, we established a system. Three knocks in succession meant we pretended not to see, hear, or smell anything from that person until they knocked again. It mostly worked. The illusion of privacy was better than nothing at all.

The pinche bichos didn't believe in day to night cycles—or beds of any kind—and we couldn't ever really relax, so sleep was rough and hard to come by. For our own sanity more than

anything, we agreed that the “protein shakes” were dinner, after which we had quiet time until “morning”, which was whenever our bladders dragged us off the floor.

It had been twenty-two days since we left Earth.

I used a wet finger to mark the days on the grimy back wall of our cell, the only one that wasn't electrified. None of us could bring ourselves to drink from the almost-bidets, but we'd all broken down and used them for general washing. Still, my skin itched and crawled for want of a bath. Thankfully, the only bugs on the ship were the ones who'd captured us, so nothing else crawled on me.

The poor Indigo Girls were struggling. Their colorful skin dried out quickly, so they used the tunics they otherwise didn't bother with as sponges, turning their cell into a rustic communal bath once or twice a day.

My desire for a shower with hot water and soap grew by the hour.

There were a lot of hours.

Mostly, we spent them talking. Learning to communicate with the Indigo Girls took a lot of time, but we were motivated, and it wasn't as if we had other things to do. Every other conversation topic became painfully depressing, sooner or later.

We figured out quickly that learning their language wasn't going to work. Their long black tongues were hyper-mobile, and they could vibrate their throats at different frequencies at the same time. The language was beautifully layered and harmonic, but our human mouths just couldn't replicate it. The words we approximated—like their names and the name of their species, the Quoosalk—bore only a basic resemblance to their originals.

Shane was a singer. He had a very good ear, and he spent several memorable hours coaching us until we managed a passable version of “hello” in concert. The Quoosalk were thrilled.

I taught them a few words in Spanish, just to see how their trilling voices would sound. I'd never heard my language sound lovelier. We mostly stuck to English, though, since Ria and Cassandra spoke very little Spanish, and Shane didn't speak it at all.

There was a lot of miming in the beginning, which was hysterical and frustrating in turns. But as our understanding grew, their personalities emerged, and soon they were less "aliens" and more "people".

We had a stumbling block when it came to gender. The Quoosalk didn't identify as either male or female, and it took a while to realize they *understood* the concept, they just didn't *embody* it. The closest we could come to their pronouns was "xe/xem/xyr", which we used to refer to xem individually. Our attempts to pronounce their word for a group of Quoosalk sent them into cascades of laughter—apparently our mangled version sounded a lot like "asshole" to them—so we compromised on "they/them" rather than insult them constantly.

Of all the Quoosalk, Yin seemed to be the oldest. The others were respectfully deferential to xem in a way that made my heart ache, missing my Nana and Tata. Xe was dignified, thoughtful, and kind, but I never forgot that xe could also liquify people with xyr spit.

Little Ilya was the youngest, and Yin's child. Xe was shy and quiet, with a clear soprano voice so pure it broke your heart. When Ilya's blue head lifted in song, nothing else existed. Xyr voice was so shockingly exquisite, it caused a minor interspecies incident.

Shane had taken to performing for us—sometimes his own pieces, sometimes covers. I even cajoled him into singing Tom Jones, to the groaning laughter of the others. When we knew the songs, we sang along. It was a comfort. One day, about halfway through "Hallelujah", Ilya joined in. Xe didn't try to sing the words, but wove xyr voice through ours in breath-stealing harmonies. It was so stunningly gorgeous that the rest of us stopped singing completely.

It took some frantic gesturing and reassurances before the Quoosalk were convinced we weren't offended. When Ilya realized our silence had been a compliment, xyr Tiffany blue skin flushed magenta with pleasure.

With the Quoosalk's accompaniment, our concerts became infinitely more impressive.

Salat was astonishingly brilliant. Xe and Cassandra had grown close and often sat together on either side of the cell wall, sometimes talking and other times just being in each other's company. Together, they were responsible for a huge part of bridging our communication gap.

A more surprising pairing was Therry and Mariano. Therry was beautiful, with bright coloring and a fluid way of moving that made me think of dancing. Something sensual. Salsa, maybe. Or bachata. But xe had the same impossible sense of humor as my brother, and that idiot had jumped headfirst into making a fool of himself—and occasionally me—to make xem laugh. Therry was kind enough to return the favor.

Mariano wasn't doing well in captivity. He was a high-energy person, always moving, always doing. Growing up, I'd been happy to spend an afternoon watching movies or playing cards with my Nana. Mariano would last fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, then he'd fidget and pester until he got permission to go play outside.

Ria was the same, and the two of them started doing calisthenics together as soon as their bruises healed enough to let them. They'd jog laps and compete for who could do the most pushups, and other body-punishing exercises. The rest of us got stiff and bored and would often join them, but less competitively. Cassandra—who told us she preferred to be called Cass—tried to do yoga but gave up. Without leggings or walls, it was just too embarrassing.

Cass was slow to open up. Not because she didn't trust us, I didn't think, but because she wasn't used to having people who'd listen to her. Back home, the only people she'd had were the asshole who would not be named—who she never spoke about—and her father, who was. . .distant. When she

told us about her dream to pursue art rather than the more “practical, appropriate” marketing she’d been steered towards, it was with a flinching hesitancy that said she was waiting for us to shoot her down.

Our support caught her flat-footed.

Mariano continued to call her Mariposa, and she never once questioned it. Sometimes, when he referred to her that way she got the strangest smile—wobbly and sad, but with a determined lift of her chin. I was pretty sure she didn’t ask because she understood and was trying her best to crawl out of her cocoon.

Ria was about as different from Cass as you could get. A foot taller, muscular even after almost a month in a cell with no real food or exercise, tattooed, and loud. She came from a huge, close-knit family that ran a sustainability-focused construction company. The whole clan had moved from Tennessee to California for the business—of which she was a foreman. She was blunt, open, and had the dirtiest sense of humor. Even Mariano blushed at a few of her jokes.

Shane’s humor was just as wicked, but more sly. Subtle, where Ria was bold. The two of them gave me flutters that were deeply inappropriate given our current situation. He was an interesting man. Quiet, contained, smart, he considered each word before speaking. But there was turbulence under that calm facade. He never raised his voice, never raged, but the knuckles of his fists had bled on the back wall more than once.

He’d also, in all the time we’d been on the ship, grown only a faint, rather fashionable goatee. This made Mariano wild with jealousy, as he was convinced his own modest but fuller beard was reaching mountain man territory. His rants about it were good for a few minutes’ amusement, although I’d smacked him more than once when he wouldn’t stop scratching the new growth.

I was familiar with emotional intimacy. My family was close, and they’d always been the center of my world. It was just Mariano and me now, but we put their pictures on the

ofrenda every year, and I carried their love with me always. Even so, the depth of the bonds that grew between the nine of us in such a short time were surprising.

I suppose they shouldn't have been. We had nothing to do but bare our souls to each other. Small talk felt so pointless when all the day-to-day minutia had been ripped away.

So, we spoke of deeper things. Family, friends, lovers. Dreams, places we'd been, things we'd done. Food, comforts, home.

In the still moments, we stood witness to each other's darkness. Our fears, old hurts and insecurities, the wounds we tried to ignore so we could get through the day to day, they all came bubbling up with nothing to hold them at bay.

Eventually, even those wells dried up. When that happened, the silence could stretch for hours. But it inevitably gave way to the one topic we always returned to: what was going to happen to us.



“Probably safe to say we're not headed for an intergalactic butcher shop,” Ria said, wiping her face. We'd just finished our twenty-third “dinner”, such as it was. “After a month of eating this crap we probably taste awful.”

“*Qwrr?*” asked Yin, tilting xyr head inquisitively.

The Quoosalk language was complex, but we'd figured out a handful of words. “*Qwrr*” was “what”, and probably the one we heard most often. We couldn't share in their language, but we could give them space to speak it, and we tried to do it as much as possible.

We might never see our peoples again. We had to keep them alive somehow.

Ria grimaced apologetically, her eyebrows furrowing as she worked to translate her thoughts into words the Quoosalk would understand. “We're not to be food,” she tried, shrugging. “Or the bugs would give us better food.”

Ilya giggled that particular *tsk-tsk-tsk* laugh the Quoosalk shared, then covered xyr face with both hands when xe burped. Mortified, xe slunk to the back of the cell and began wetting the tunics for their nightly bath.

Yin smiled briefly at the younger Quoosalk—a small smile that didn't show xyr small, pointed teeth—and nodded. “We not food,” xe agreed. “We are for. . .to be looked at?”

I puzzled over that for a moment. We'd come a long way in our communication, but more complex ideas were difficult to convey. “Do you mean, the aliens look at us. . .for curiosity?”

Yin bobbed xyr head and stretched, humming gratefully as Ilya ran the wet cloth across xyr back.

I nibbled my lip, considering. “Like a zoo, maybe? Or for science?” I slanted a look at Mariano, grinning. “What are the odds we get out of this *without* being probed, do you think?”

He rolled his eyes and punched me in the arm.

My respite from affectionate brotherly abuse had only lasted as long as my bruises.

“I'm more worried about being dissected,” he grumped. Without waiting to be asked, he translated for the Quoosalk. “I fear the aliens will cut us open.”

Therry paused with xyr arm outstretched, lilac skin shimmering with water, and winked at him.

Winking was a new skill for the Quoosalk. I was still adjusting to the strangeness of it, since they didn't have eyelids like we humans did. Theirs moved horizontally and came from beneath their skin. We called them nictitating membranes on Earth. Thank you, late night documentary binges, for that bit of trivia.

Therry ran the cloth over xyr shoulder and said mildly, “No fear. I make safe.”

“I also fear this,” Shane said from his reclined position on the floor.

Therry studied him for a long moment, then bent to moisten xyr tail. “You make you safe.”

Shane burst out laughing, the happy sound bouncing off the dungeon walls.

Therry meekly endured an obvious tongue lashing on manners from Yin, then offered Shane a saccharine apology that lasted only until Yin huffed and turned to bathe xyr child. When xe wasn't looking Therry winked at my brother again, grinning.

Mariano postured and strutted for our entertainment, but I noticed how he watched the brightly colored Quoosalk. Confusion darkened his eyes even as a flush darkened his cheeks.

Interesting.

"I fear aliens. . .mate us. Make. . .different. . .us." Ilya's voice trembled, and xe hugged xyr tail, curling into a tiny ball of anxiety.

Yin dropped the cloth and wrapped xyr arms around Ilya, crooning comfort.

"No." Ria's voice was sure and firm. When wide silver eyes met hers, she gentled her tone. "No, Ilya. We are not many enough. And if we were for mating, why family?" Ria waved to Ilya and Yin, then Mariano and me. "No mating."

Ilya let out a shaky breath and relaxed, though xyr tail still twisted in unrest. The other Quoosalk gathered around, cuddling together, and Yin inclined xyr head gratefully to Ria.

We all knew she'd been talking out of her ass. There was no telling what the aliens wanted us for. But however the Quoosalk figured ages, I clocked Ilya at maybe sixteen. Wordlessly, we'd agreed to protect xem as much as we could.

Cass had been talking quietly with Salat, but she cleared her throat, her eyes darting between Ria and me. "Have you noticed that we—none of us—have had a period? Salat says the Quoosalk don't menstruate, but I was due about a week after we got here."

I'd been trying not to think about it. I was thankful not to be dealing with a no-pants, no-shower period, and desperately



ostriching about the why. Stress could do that, right? Not much was more stressful than being abducted by aliens.

“I’ve never been super consistent,” Ria said, shrugging. “But it is weird. You think there might have been some kind of suppressant in the shots they gave us?”

The thought chilled me. Nothing good could come from the bugs controlling our reproductive systems. What if it wasn’t reversible? A la verga, what if it *was*?

I was beginning to hyperventilate, my mind overcome by horrifying scenarios, when Shane started singing. His eyes were dark and teasing, his smirk inviting me to share in the joke. My panic attack choked off into morbid giggles as Shane serenaded us with the iconic chorus of R.E.M.’s *It’s the End of the World as We Know It*.

Mariano threw an arm over my shoulder and swayed us to the beat, his singing loud and wildly animated. His fingers trembled, matching the shaking of my voice, but we smiled, and laughed, and sang.

Ria joined in on the air guitar, and by the time the next chorus rolled around Cass was dancing, the Quoosalk cuddle puddle was bouncing to the rhythm, and we were shouting, tears running down our cheeks, daring the universe to say fucking anything.

We were going to be fine. All nine of us. Together. No matter what.



“Estrella!”

Mariano’s urgent voice jerked me out of a very pleasant dream of bubble baths and sexy half-naked people bringing me all my favorite things. I scrunched up my nose and burrowed deeper into the crook of my elbow.

“Can you hear that? Something’s going on.”

His continued pestering banished the last of my dream eye-candy. I rolled over, blowing my unruly bangs out of my face,

glare ready. Then I heard it. The uneven hum of the engine had changed. It now had a rumbling growl that cycled rhythmically, growing until my teeth shook with it, then dropping off only to grow again.

I started trembling. No, the *ship* was trembling. My eyes shot to the Quoosalk's cell, finding them in a grim huddle. "What's happening?"

"We go to new world." Salat's voice snapped with tension, underlaid with a hissing growl. Ilya whimpered and buried xyr head against Yin's chest.

Cass's eyes were wide pools of dread in her pale face. Ria muttered a steady stream of colorful curses, bouncing on her toes and stretching like she was about to step into the ring. Shane's body was tight with tension as braced himself against the back wall. He blew out a long breath, smacked both palms against the metal hard enough that mine stung in sympathy, and sank down, grim faced, his arm wrapped around the food nozzle.

I copied him, and the others moved to do the same. Mariano slid in beside me and bared his teeth in a smile.

"Please ensure your seats and tray tables are in their upright and locked positions as we prepare for arrival. We are expecting some turbulence on descent." His bright, playful voice shook with ferocity. "Thank you for flying Abduction Air. We know you have choices when you fly—oh wait, no, you don't. As always, if you see your pilots on the way out—" Mariano's face darkened, his jaw flexing. "Fuck them up."

"You heard the man," I said, bracing myself. "It's going to be a bumpy ride. Hold on tight."

"See y'all on the other side," Ria promised.

"Word choice, Ria, jeez," Cass muttered.

Yin lifted xyr head. "Be strong. We are together."

"Together." The word came from nine throats: some human, some not, all family.

The withered thing in my heart that was hope unfurled a single frond. Then the ship lurched and I slammed face first into the wall. Of course. My bruises had finally healed.

Landing was just as awful as liftoff, it turned out. Although, having an anchor point so we weren't bouncing around on the electric walls was a distinct improvement. Bless the Quoosalk for that suggestion.

I was feeling a bit smug at how well we were doing, so inevitably that's when everything went to shit.

The lights flickered and died, plunging us into darkness so complete I couldn't even see Mariano beside me. My ears popped in rapid succession as it felt like we fell ten stories, the rushing, lifting sensation in my gut making me grit my teeth. I'd always hated it. Mariano had been wild about roller coasters when we were younger. I'd gone to the fair with him—but only for elotes and flirting.

“¿Es neta?”

I snapped back to the present at Mariano's disbelieving cry in the silence.

Silence?

The constant, aggravating, thrumming sound of the ship's engine. . .was gone. I held my breath, praying for it to return, but if God was listening, he didn't answer my prayers. My head grew dizzy and I fought back the urge to throw up, swallowing in an effort to push down the organs that seemed to have taken up permanent residence in my throat. Woozily, I wondered if gods were galaxy specific. Maybe we weren't in his sector anymore.

The ship shuddered. A harsh metallic wail battered my ears and I braced myself for impact, feeling Mariano curl around me. My temple cracked against the pipe, but I ignored the new pain as the engine roared to sputtering life. We crashed into the floor—I hadn't realized we'd been hovering just above it—and the sick sensation of falling died on impact.

A few seconds later, the lights flickered on—a dim amber rather than the relentless bright white they'd been before.

For a moment, I hoped.

Then the engines died again—taking the lights with them—and this time they didn't come back.

The ship shook and groaned around us; every sound magnified by the darkness. I felt desperately heavy, as if someone had strapped bricks to every part of my body. I couldn't draw in enough air to scream. The pressure weighed me down until I sank to the floor, collapsing on my back. I dragged in a shallow breath. That was a bit better.

“Lay down,” I squeezed out, fighting to be heard over the shrieking of the ship peeling apart around us. “The pressure is less.” I didn't say, *not that it matters, because we're fucking crashing*, but I thought it.

Groans were the only replies I got. There was a thud next to me, then Mariano's hand found mine, gripping it tightly. His voice rasped from the darkness.

“Esto no es el fin, Estrella.”

The metal screeching became a roar, saving me from replying. I squeezed his hand and let myself sob—the thundering was so loud not even I could hear my cries.

The impact came without warning. We flew through the air, slamming violently against the walls. Thankfully, they weren't electrified anymore, but that didn't keep the air from being filled with screams as we caromed across the surface of this new planet.

I crashed into the ceiling flat on my back, my chest heaving as I tried to draw in a breath from lungs that felt like they'd collapsed. The metal beside my head tore, peeling away like a cat food can, and I rolled, blinking at the dusky light that seemed painfully bright to my wide, shocked eyes.

An eternity of pain later, the ship rocked to a halt. The quiet was shocking. Around me, people moaned, and metal hissed and clanged—but my battered ears heard it all as if through a wad of cotton. I smelled smoke, hot metal, burned plastic, and something else. . .rain?

A terrible, ululating scream tore through my fuzzy contemplations.

I rolled into a crouch, my heart thundering as I searched for the source of the sound. My eyes landed on Yin, and I fell back in horror.

Xe stood hunched over a small, crumpled blue figure, keening as if xyr world had ended.

*No, no, por favor ¡No!*

# CHAPTER 5

## *ESTRELLA*

Ilya's death eclipsed any relief we might have felt at our miraculous survival. The question of "what happens next" echoed through the ruined dungeon like the taunts of an evil ghost, but shock held us by the throats, and we couldn't speak of the future. In hushed voices, we confirmed only that no one else was badly hurt.

Then we held vigil.

Yin rocked xyr child's body, xyr song of grief broken and endless. Salat and Therry flanked xem, statue still, their throats pulsing in a mournful chorus.

Tears ran unheeded down my face as I knelt. I prayed that Ilya would find xyr way to xyr ancestors. I grieved for Yin. And I feared for the rest of us, the dread so large and encompassing that I couldn't find the edges of it.

Mariano's rage wouldn't let him be still. He climbed the cell wall to the jagged gash in the ceiling, looking for a way out. But it was too narrow, and all he got for his efforts was a new assortment of bloody scrapes.

The only warning that the next stage of our nightmare had come was a high electrical buzzing.

I slammed to the ground, my back arching as every muscle contracted from the load the collar sent through me. The surge didn't last long, but try as I might, I couldn't move except in jerky twitches. Through the watery veil of pain, I caught enough flashes to know the others were also down.

A sharp grinding sound assaulted my ears, then the scratching, tapping sound of the bugs' feet. I saw sparks from the corner of my eye and twisted in time to see Shane dragged from his cell.

More sparks, then Mariano was pulled away. I shouted and reached for him, but one of the bug's feet slammed onto my forearm, pinning me in place. Agony radiated from the spot.

I sobbed when the pressure finally released, only to cry out again when I was roughly lifted and carried a few jolting steps. The bug tossed me carelessly onto the groaning heap that was my brother and Shane. More sparks flew, and I twisted in time to see one of the bugs lasering through the door of Ria's cell. Another bug loomed above us, pointing a small gray device in our direction.

Ria came hurtling towards us, and I curled my body to catch her. Damn, the woman was solid.

One after another, they piled us together. If we spoke or moved, we were electrocuted. So, we stayed still, twitching with aftershocks. Waiting.

The fantasy I had of the bugs writhing in a puddle of acid Quoosalk spit withered and died as each of their limp bodies joined the pile—ugly rubber-like muzzles strapped to their faces. Our captors ignored Ilya completely. Xe looked so small, lying there alone in the dirty cell, my heart broke for a second time.

“Anybody hurt bad?” Shane asked, his voice barely more than a breath.

The bugs—only two of them—were having some kind of argument, waving their spindly arms and hissing at each other. They were each loaded down with packs and strange devices, probably everything they could salvage from this wreck.

“I'll live.” Ria winced, horrified by the clearly automatic answer, and her eyes flickered to Yin.

Xe wasn't listening. Xyr world held only grief, and Ilya.

Salat shook xyr head, silver eyes dark with sorrow.

I tested my left arm, already swollen and bruised where the pinche bicho stomped on me. Moving it hurt like hell, but I could do it. “Nothing that won't heal.”

The others reported the same, and I blew out a breath. A jangling in my chest eased the slightest amount.

Ria spoke without moving her lips. “Did you see the gray box? The one that bug kept pointing at us?”

“They both have one,” Shane confirmed. “Strapped to their upper left forearms. Think they control the collars?”

“Yes,” hissed Mariano. “And I think they’re directional. If we scatter, I don’t think they can get all of us.”

“Divide and conquer it is, then,” Ria whispered grimly.

Cass asked a question, but I wasn’t listening anymore. My eyes kept straying back to Ilya’s still, small body. A heavy pressure settled on my chest. Moving painfully slowly to avoid the bugs’ attention, I reached for Yin’s hand, stilling when my fingers brushed xyr’s.

I didn’t think xe’d noticed, but after a few seconds xyr hand turned, the fingers curling around mine. Yin’s shattered silver gaze didn’t shift from xyr fallen child.

“We will return, Abuele. For Ilya.” No one should have to see their child die. Over the years of longing and trying for one of my own, the fear of loss often crawled out of the night to torment me—usually in the waiting weeks before that little pink line failed, yet again, to appear. Seeing the devastation wracking Yin now, I knew my imaginings fell far short of the unbearable reality.

At Ilya’s name, Yin finally looked away, searching my gaze. Slowly, xe nodded. We leaned against each other, silently watching over Ilya.

I let the memories wash over me. Xyr sweet devotion to Yin. The charming giggle that always made xem blush. The look of peace on xyr face when xe sang, transforming the miserable dungeon into a small slice of heaven. Such a senseless loss. My soul wept.

A burst of angry hissing clicks jerked my attention to the bugs, and icy rage encased the pain. I shook with wrath as my vision darkened and my breath came in fast, uneven bursts. The bugs were having a bad day. I was going to make it worse.



I didn't know where the hell we were, what was coming next, or how we could even take the fuckers down, but we would. No way was Ilya rotting in this nasty heap. Any opportunity for escape—I was taking it. Any distraction, any opening that might give us a chance to turn the tables—I was taking it.

One way or another, we were coming back. And these assholes were going to suffer.



We'd crashed into a fucking jungle. In the middle of the night. During pinche *monsoon season*. I blinked rapidly, but even without the torrent of rain filling my eyes, there wasn't anything to see. Just looming shapes in the dark, hot night.

One of the bugs chittered angrily, shoving me forward.

I fell to my knees in the sucking mud and cried out as something hard found my shin, no doubt giving me yet another bruise.

"I got you." Ria's firm hand curved around my elbow, steadying me as I struggled to my feet.

There was a scuffle behind me. I pushed aside my dripping, overgrown bangs and squinted, finding Mariano facing off with the bug that had pushed me. Shane and Cass held him back, talking fast and low.

The bug raised the arm with the collar remote threateningly, hissing and gesturing for us to continue.

"Mariano!" I snapped, trying to sound authoritative instead of terrified. "Vamos. Ahora no es el momento." Then, when he didn't move, I pinched the back of his arm, twisting. "I'm fine. Don't be a fucking idiot."

Mariano snarled a curse and whirled to me. Ria backed up, hands raised, and let him steer me towards the rest of the group.

The Quoosalk waited, the ominous shadow of the other bug looming behind them. Salat and Therry nodded, and we continued our miserable march through the alien jungle. Yin,

between them, didn't seem to register anything, robotically following the others' lead.

Only two bugs flanked us. I was bitterly glad that they too had suffered a loss, although I doubted I'd be satisfied until all the slaving assholes were dead. Preferably, after experiencing a lot of pain.

About five minutes later—an eternity when you were walking barefoot through a dark, stormy jungle—we broke through into a small open space. The front bug stopped, lowered itself to the ground with a grunt, and waved at us. Tentatively, we sat as well. Nobody got electrocuted, so that must've been the right move.

I tipped my head back and let the rain sluice over me, pretending it was a shower while I caught my breath. It hadn't been a long walk, but the conditions plus the month of inactivity made it a struggle. Also, I suspected that gravity was stronger on this planet. I felt heavy, and after a month on the Alien Shake Diet I figured I was probably the lightest I'd been since my wedding—if not as fit.

It was a small comfort that—as miserable as we were—the bugs were more so. They'd been stumbling and grunting even more than I'd been, and some of their chittering hisses sounded a lot like curses. The ship—while filthy—had always been cold and dry, and it had *felt* like Earth. Poor buggy babies weren't enjoying this surprise stop.

Good. I hoped they slipped in the mud and choked on it.

A thunderous boom shook the air, and light flashed behind my closed lids. A second crash illuminated the world, searing a split-second image into my wide, shocked eyes.

Red. I didn't see any of the familiar greens and browns of Earth: this jungle was red. I strained my eyes, hoping for another bolt, sure my imagination was running away with me.

But no, I could see the bugs where they squatted, hissing at each other and shaking strange devices with every appearance of frustration. I could see the massive, wide-leaved trees that speared into the sky on the other side of the clearing. Colors

blended together in the twilight haze, but it was a blend of red, orange, and purple unlike anything I'd ever seen.

Was it dawn? I looked up, and my heart stopped. A fine trembling started in my fingertips, and I clenched them into fists to stop the spread. It wasn't the sun that rose, brightening the sky.

The moon was full and huge, so near it felt like I could trace the unfamiliar patterns on its surface with a finger. Below it, the second, smaller moon was a mere crescent surrounded by billowing clouds.

"Aahngh." The strangled sound that came out of my throat had no resemblance to any word I knew. But I had to say something, had to know if I'd lost it completely or if the others would see what I saw.

"You don't see that every day," Ria said after a long moment of silence.

"Beautiful," Cass breathed.

"We're a very long way from Kansas." That was Shane, his cool tone more forced than usual.

Mariano said nothing, only stared at the pair of shining celestial bodies with lost eyes.

Therry spoke my feelings exactly.

"Fuck."

Nope. Not going to think about it. What moons? I didn't know nothing about anything. Determinedly, I ignored the nausea and the spinning in my head and set about finger combing my sodden hair as well as I could. Between the bangs—grown to that perfectly horrid length where they were always in my eyes but not long enough to tuck behind an ear—and the curls forming into massive knots, it was a hot mess. There was no telling how long this break would last, and I wasn't wasting it on a panic attack if I could help it.

I braided my semi-untangled hair into a thick hank, then tipped my head back. The rain was warm, but it soothed my scream-torn throat. I rubbed at my skin, watching with

satisfaction as layers of filth were carried away by the downpour. It stung—I was covered in scratches and cuts—but it was better than letting them fester. Concern nipped at me, and I bit my lip as I looked at Cass’s inflamed burns.

We talked quietly, mostly discussing—and rejecting—a handful of increasingly wild ideas of how to kill the bugs and somehow survive.

For their part, the bugs seemed to be having a disagreement on what to do next. One kept motioning in the direction we’d been going and hissing, while the other folded two of their arms and chittered. The second bug finally threw all four of their arms up and flicked them at the first, who grunted in satisfaction and pushed to its feet.

I sighed. “Looks like break time’s over.” My legs had fallen asleep, and I stumbled as I stood, catching myself on the raised root of a giant tree. Cass bent to help me up, and we both stared at the absurdly cute furry face watching us with inquisitive yellow eyes from the shadows of the fern-like plant growing at the base of the tree.

Its face was slightly smaller than mine, and delicate, with elegantly pointed ears protruding from sodden braids. In the low light I couldn’t tell what color it was—besides the eyes that fluoresced like a cat’s—but its eyes and ears looked too large for its fine-boned face. Oh, no. Was it. . .a child?

A tiny voice in the back of my head told me this was exactly the kind of distraction we needed. Let the bugs worry about this new threat, or possible acquisition, and disappear into the jungle while they were busy.

As discreetly as I could, I flicked my fingers in a shooing motion, widening my eyes to try to get my point across.

The alien child tilted their head, ears twitching, and took a step forward.

Cass made a frightened face and pushed the air, shaking her head minutely.

I rolled my eyes towards the bugs and back, then snarled, swiping at the air with my hands curled into claws.

The child stopped, crouching, and flattened their ears, baring small, sharp teeth.

“You guys okay?” Mariano’s concerned voice was accompanied by the squelches of his approach, and I glanced over my shoulder. When I looked back, the child was gone.

Cass and I shared a glance as we joined the others.

“We have a problem,” I whispered. “There’s at least one alien out there. . .and I think it’s a child.”

Yin’s head snapped up, xyr clouded eyes fixing on me with deadly intensity.

“How do you know it isn’t just some alien critter?” Shane asked.

“I don’t know of any animals—on Earth at least—that braid their hair,” answered Cass, rubbing her arms as if she was cold.

“I tried to get them to run—” I started, but Mariano interrupted me, his voice strained.

“I don’t think it worked.”

A break in the storm let me see the clearing with awful clarity. My furry little friend crouched on a branch not ten feet above the bugs, brandishing something in one raised fist. Moonlight glinted off bared teeth, then the clouds rolled back in and dropped us once more into shadowy darkness.

“We have to—” I don’t know what I was going to suggest we do, but I was cut off by a squeaky roar. The hulking shadows of the bugs exploded into movement, the air full of churning, snarling, and hissing.

“Scatter!” Shane shouted, and darted into the trees to our left, Ria hot on his heels.

Mariano grabbed my hand and we bolted to the right. We ran, pushing through the mud and heavy undergrowth. He tripped over something and dragged me with him. I caught myself with my injured arm, grimacing at the pain. Deep in the mud, my fist closed over a rock the size of a grapefruit. I pulled it out, hefting it in my good hand.

Mariano rolled to his feet, carrying a long black branch, and we bared our teeth at each other. I heard an unfamiliar wail, Cass's shout, and the muffled hissing growls of the Quoosalk—then they cut off, replaced by the familiar sound of crackling electricity. My brother and I rushed towards the sound—which was kind of stupid in retrospect—but whatever god was in charge of this planet smiled on us, because we burst out of the bushes behind the bug. It didn't hear us through the downpour, all its attention on Cass and Salat writhing at its feet.

Mariano didn't hesitate. He shot forward, swinging the branch like a bat. He hit one of its back legs—hard—and kept going, launching himself onto the thing's beetle-like lower body. It reared beneath him, but he clung on, wrapping his arm around its neck.

The monstrosity's three free arms flailed, trying to knock Mariano off without losing control of Cass and Salat. My brother tucked himself against its back and brought the branch up, locking his elbows around either end and heaving with a wild yell.

Lightning flashed, and I saw all three of its arms rise and grab onto Mariano's branch, the fourth—with that damned gray box—outstretched.

I was running, the rock held high in both hands, before doubt had a chance to break through the adrenaline. I brought the rock down with all the rage, fear, and grief that had been building up in me since I woke up in their nasty ass ship. It hit! The box crunched and sizzled, but the collars stayed on. I screamed and smashed it again, ignoring the pain. Die! Die, you evil box!

The remote broke, pieces flying off in every direction, and Cass and Salat's collars finally went dark. Yes! I whooped, then gurgled as the bug's arm took me across my stomach, landing me on my ass. I rolled, covering my head.

I hadn't noticed when the rain had stopped, maybe while we'd run, but now the sky broke open, hammering water into the little clearing as lightning flashed above, illuminating the

battlefield like a strobe light. Ria flew through the air, crashed into a tree, and disappeared into the bushes below. The bug that had thrown her spun, stomped, and Shane fell with a pained yell.

It would crush him, and I was too far away to do anything. Mierda, this was all wrong!

But it didn't. It stalked in the other direction. I squinted past the rain blurring my vision. Yin and Therry crouched near the tree line, a small shadow curled up behind them. The child! Ay, Dios, the child was hurt. Now that I was paying attention, I could hear the keening, a ululating cry that mixed with the pounding rain.

I ran. Behind me, Mariano shouted, and I winced at the heavy thump that followed. Por favor que no le pase nada. I hesitated, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Cass and Salat sprinting towards him, so I kept going.

My legs burned and the clearing stretched as wide as a football field. Therry darted to the side, trying to draw the bug away, but it continued inexorably forward. Yin twisted to scoop up the child, but the bug raised its arm and xe collapsed, scrabbling at the ground.

Therry launched onto the bug's back, graceful as a martial artist, and wrapped xemself around it, biting and clawing. It reared up, and finally I was there. I smashed my rock into its joints, hitting the places its legs met its body, trying to bring it down.

Shane appeared out of the rain, stabbing at the thing's abdomen with a stick as blood and mud ran down his face. His teeth were bared in a grimace. He thrust the gnarled branch as if it were a spear, the bug screeched, and when Shane drew the stick back, it was coated in green liquid. He snarled and lunged, driving his weapon deeper into the wound.

Therry screamed behind xyr muzzle, the sound vicious and exultant, and I looked up to see the second remote split beneath xyr claws. Yin slumped to the ground. *Get up. Please, Abuele, please get up.* Behind xem the child was crawling

away, pulling themselves along by their arms, but the bug kept advancing. We weren't doing enough damage!

I dropped the rock and grabbed one of the straps crisscrossing its abdomen. I hauled on it, digging my feet into the mud as I fought for leverage. It couldn't have the child. No more children would die today.

The child shrieked as the bug lifted it into the air, its small hands clawing at the gray hide with desperate swipes.

"No!" I screamed, and latched onto the bug's rear left leg, throwing my whole body weight against the joint. It stumbled. Then Ria's hands closed over one of its straps—*she was alive, thank God*—and she *heaved*. Her muscles bunched, and the bug thudded to the ground. Shane darted in, stabbing the torso he could now reach.

"The child," Ria gritted out, straining. "I've got this."

I dodged around Shane's makeshift spear, sobbing as I pushed my body beyond its limits, and reached the child just in time to catch them as they tumbled into my arms. Light burst behind my eyes and I fell to one knee. They might be a child, but their body was dense and almost as tall as mine.

The bug screeched and I jerked back, dragging the child with me. The dense furry body shuddered, and they clung to me, whimpering. "It's okay," I panted, knowing they couldn't understand me, but needing to offer comfort somehow. "You'll be okay. I have you."

"¡Aguas!"

I jerked my head up at Mariano's panicked shout and saw the other bug barreling towards us. I tried to run, but the child's weight made it hard to lift my legs. I slipped in the mud churned up by the fight.

We fell. Desperately I wrapped myself around the child, feeling them shaking with fear, and covered their body with mine. For a split second, all I heard was shouting, then pain exploded in my back. The agony was a living thing, blocking out the world around me. I curled tighter around the child in my arms and prayed. *Por favor, Dios. Salvar al niño.*



# CHAPTER 6

## LITHA

I bolted upright. My heart raced, loud in the echoing silence that followed. . . whatever that had been. I held my breath along with the rest of the jungle, waiting, but could hear only the storm outside. The crashing boom that had ripped me from sleep didn't come again.

Revik was poised beside me, his pale eyes glowing and ears twitching with alarm. Zaf—who'd been curled at my back—had rolled to sprawl on his, squinting blearily through the messy strands of his long white fur.

“That wasn't thunder,” I said.

Revik bared his teeth in grim agreement. We streaked outside, him a step behind, spear in hand. Zaf pushed up, padding to the nook where Svixa must somehow still sleep.

The noise had come from a distance, and without a word Revik and I leapt for the nearest tree, claws out, and headed to the canopy. Pride warmed me as we crested together. Learning to compensate for my missing arm had taken time, but whether I ran on three limbs or four, I was a warrior to be respected.

I pinned my ears as a torrent of rain pelted us. My fur slicked to my body, a layer of protection that kept my skin dry, but even that wouldn't last long if I didn't find some shelter.

Lightning flashed, blindingly bright, and I crouched into the embrace of the leaves. When my vision cleared, I stared at the massive swath of oily darkness streaking into the sky halfway between us and the mountains. My eyes shot to the looming peaks, and I let out a shaky breath. They were still and quiet. *Thank the spirits. May they stay asleep.*

“Is Svixa up there with you?” Zaf called out, his sleep-roughened voice tight with concern.

Dread spread through me as I stared towards the column of smoke. I met Revik's gaze, and the horror on his face told me he'd come to the same conclusion.

Svixa was staying with us until the next storm break. She was a bright and curious child, and with two new babies in the den, my sister and her mates were struggling to keep her entertained through the long rainy days. She'd climbed all over Zaf when we'd visited last, questions falling from her mouth so fast she barely breathed. He'd announced—tail twitching with playfulness—that her mother needed a particular tea, so Svixa would have to learn to make it. Then he'd laughed, scooped her up, and brought her home. The branches had been singing with her laughter for the past three days.

Now she was gone.

Revik and I dove back into the trees, calling her name. The trees around our home were as familiar as our own faces, and it didn't take long to confirm our fears. We were silent as we dropped to the ground and stalked to where Zaf waited by the banked fire, uncaring of the water that streamed from us onto the floor.

“There's a column of smoke—like nothing I've seen before—off towards the mountain,” I said. Curiosity flashed in Zaf's eyes before melting back into somber focus. If he hadn't been worried about Svixa, he would have been halfway to the dark smear by now. “I think she is that way.” I'd only caught hints of her trail, the rain having washed most of it away, but I was sure enough not to consider searching anywhere else.

Zaf closed his eyes and pulled at his ears in distress, cursing.

Revik's tail brushed across each of us as he stalked into the den and went about gathering our supplies. We would go after her. And we would find out what burned so hot that the storm didn't drown it.

But first, I wrapped Zaf in my embrace, forcing a purr past my fear-tightened throat. His healer's heart gave him strength, but it bled whenever one of his was hurt. My love would

blame himself for this. Svixa's parents had warned us she'd been sneaking out to explore. She must have been out and seen whatever had happened. That would be too much temptation for one curious child to resist.

Foreheads touching, we shared breath until his heartbeat steadied. Zaf rubbed my wet cheek with his perfect one, then together we strode inside.

Our travel packs, spears, and knives were laid out for us. Revik flexed and twisted, settling his gear firmly into place.

"We must find her," he rumbled. His claws—fully extended—curved at his sides as his tail lashed behind him.

"We will," I swore, running my hand comfortingly over his chest. I let it rest for a moment on the blaze of pale fur so shocking on his sleek black form—its color such a light purple it seemed silver in all but full sunlight—then reached for my pack. I glanced at Zaf. "One of us must go to the village. They need to know what we do—and prepare for whatever may come."

Zaf hesitated.

Revik would go after Svixa. I fought back a growl of frustration that we didn't know more of what we faced. Did the child need healing? Or defending?

"I will go," Zaf decided. "But I won't stay. Be safe, I will follow soon." His movements were sharp with tension as he embraced each of us, then turned to go. He was halfway to the door when Revik spoke, stopping him.

"Go to Kurz, let him carry the news. Saytireka will want to keep you safe in the village." Revik's lip curled when he spoke our matriarch's name, and Zaf chuffed in exasperated agreement.

His mother was protective of her children. Especially Zaf, who she'd decided should lead the village after her. His refusal only made her more determined.

I adjusted the strap across my chest and watched Zaf's pale, lithe form disappear into the rain battered night. Revik had altered my weapons harness so that it sat securely, allowing

me easy access with my single arm, and I wore it with pride. Whatever awaited us, I was as prepared as I could be.

Moments later, Revik and I were running along the wide branches of the jungle towards the strange smoke and Svixa.

*Spirits, let us find her alive.*

Uncertainty nipped at my heels, pushing me to greater speed, but I held myself back. Whatever was ahead, I would need my strength. So, I kept my pace steady, slipping only occasionally on the wet bark, with Revik a dark shadow beside me. Overhead, sky fire flashed. I gritted my teeth. Whoever's doom the sky foretold—and I was grimly certain someone would die this night—it would not be Svixa.

Revik's shoulder brushed mine as his body bunched, then soared to the next tree, captivating and deadly.

It wouldn't be him, either. I wouldn't allow it.



We didn't find Svixa at the source of the smoke.

What we did find. . . I had no words for. Some kind of massive rock that—from the damage to the trees—had fallen from the sky, ablaze. *Creatures* had come from the rock, their scent and tracks unfamiliar. They traveled on the ground, leaving a trail of trampled plants as clear as a river.

Revik and I leapt above the creatures' path, searching for a small furry body among the dark, sodden leaves.

I caught a hint of Svixa's scent and moved faster, every sense alert. She'd been through here not long ago.

Unfamiliar cries rang through the night. I gripped the branch beneath me with my claws and stilled, swiveling my ears as I tracked the sounds. Ahead. Not far. The open area before the *tonkar* trees.

“I will circle around,” Revik growled. “Be cautious, *sha*—”

Svixa screamed.

It was a scream of pain—choked off and replaced by the cry of warning and need. Revik leapt away. I flew through the trees, but it felt like a lifetime before the clearing spread before me.

*Creatures* filled the space. I couldn't see Svixa, although I could hear her cry for help still.

I took in the scene in a glance, my spear in hand. Two large creatures—lacking fur or scales on their oddly shaped bodies and thin, rigid limbs—were battling with several smaller creatures. More children? A few could almost be Svestrix, but they stood on two legs instead of the tiny tails that extended behind them. The others had strange patches of fur slicked to their bodies, and no tails at all.

Shock stilled me. Several of the patchy creatures had engorged chests, a sign of recent birthing. Not children, then. But although I searched desperately, I saw no sign of kits or Svixa.

One of the large gray creatures stomped on the patchy body curled at its feet. I gripped my spear tighter, my muscles twitching with the need to protect the almost-child. I didn't know the reason for this conflict, and I had to find Svixa.

The small creature cried out and fell to the side, exposing—Svixa! The patchy creature moved jerkily, clearly in pain and just as clearly no warrior. It rolled to wrap itself more completely around Svixa, taking the blow from the gray foot that stomped towards my sister's daughter.

I didn't need to see any more.

I sprung, spear raised, and landed on the enemy's back. My lower claws dug in as I thrust, but my spear glanced off of something and left only a small furrow across the thick gray hide.

Revik's roar told me he'd joined the battle. It was joined by shocked cries and the agonized scream of the other enemy, but I didn't turn my attention from the one I fought.

I dropped my spear and sank my claws deep, holding firm as it bucked and twisted beneath me. It reached back, swiping

at me with one of its hands. I caught it in my mouth and bit down, hard. The creature's blood was bitter, but its wail of pain was sweet.

It pulled the arm away and I let it, twisting up to bury my teeth in its neck instead. Acrid blood poured down my chest and was washed away by the rain, but I only clamped my jaws tighter. My teeth hit something hard—more like a plate than a bone—and broke through with a satisfying crunch.

The creature beneath me shrieked and flailed, but its head bounced limply, and blood poured from the wound I worried with my teeth. It stumbled, and I rode it to the ground, only pulling back to spit out the foul blood when it stopped pumping out of the still creature.

Revik was on his back beneath the other enemy, tearing at its underbelly with all four sets of claws. Some of the small creatures were helping, stabbing at it with sticks and pelting it with rocks. Others had fallen and lay on the ground beneath the pounding rain.

As I watched, Revik tore the second enemy open, ripping away a chunk of leathery gray flesh. He rolled to the side as it crashed to the ground, but not fast enough to avoid the torrent of blood and other things that soaked him. Thank the Spirits for the storm. If that mess dried in his fur, we'd be days picking it out.

The small creatures whooped, raising their weapons in celebration, but my attention was all for the one curled around Svixa. Neither had moved.

“Svixa!” I cried, bounding to them.

“L—Litha?” Her voice quavered, uncertain, but then she pushed at the body wrapped around her, crying my name.

The patchy creature jerked, twisting to crouch protectively in front of Svixa, arms outstretched, and small flat teeth bared. Approval rippled through me. Her eyes—dark and wide in a peculiar but lovely round face—met mine, and her face went slack. Beneath the strange garment slicked to her body by the

rain, she was heavily engorged, and my concern for the missing kits grew.

Svixa reached a hand towards me, and the patchy one moved back, slowly, her dark gaze flicking from Svixa to me.

“I tried to go to the trees, Litha!” Svixa babbled as I dropped to my knees beside her. She struggled to sit, and I placed my hand on her chest, stilling her. “The big ones were hurting them, but when I tried to help, they hurt me, and I couldn’t climb!”

“Kshh, little one. You’re safe now. I have you. Stay still. Zaf will be here soon to help.” I pet her head, smoothing back her braids and rubbing her ears as I murmured soothingly. I scooted close and hummed as her breaths began to grow even. Her shoulder was misshapen, most likely out of place. And one of her legs was obviously broken, twisted and swollen below the knee.

But she was alive. I let my gratitude flow to the spirits, conscious all the time of many eyes on me. But the small creatures didn’t advance, only huddled together, watching, so I focused on Svixa.

A heavy weight settled next to us, and I looked up, meeting Revik’s feral eyes. He hovered, conflicted. The sky had paused in its relentless attack, and his fur was thick with oily green blood and chunkier bits that made my nose wrinkle with their caustic scent.

Svixa solved his hesitation, crying out and reaching for him. He lunged, wrapping us both in his arms and rumbling thanks into my fur.

I watched the small beings from under my lashes. I didn’t understand any of the quiet words they shared, but watching them care for each other confirmed that small and strange as they were—these were people, not creatures. The enemies had worn packs strapped to their bulky bodies, and the small ones went through them, growing visibly excited when they found knives.

My tail flicked, but they made no move our way. Instead, they used the knives to cut muzzle coverings from the Svestrix-like small ones. They left the body coverings that the patchy ones wore, and the ugly necklaces that weighed heavily around all of their necks. Strange.

“Svixa. What are the rules for exploring?” Revik asked, his voice stern and unyielding.

“Always tell someone before I go. . .” she dragged out, not meeting his eyes.

“And?”

She sighed. “Never outside the village without an adult.”

“And?” he pushed, pointedly flicking his ears as thunder boomed overhead.

“No going out in a storm unless it’s an emergency. But it was! They were in danger!” Her voice was indignant, but her ears flattened and she ducked her head at his steady, unblinking look.

“You didn’t know that when you left the den. Were you in danger then?” He was implacable, and when she slowly shook her head, he huffed. “What will you do next time?”

Svixa thought for a moment. “I’ll wake my parents so we can go together!”

Revik narrowed his eyes, lip curling.

Svixa sighed. “I’ll wake my parents and stay in the den where it’s *safe*.” She rubbed her cheek against each of us, apology shining in her eyes.. “I’m sorry. Did you get hurt?”

We assured her we had not. Sky fire danced above us, and the rain returned. I turned my attention to the strangers gathered across from us and watched the mud and blood slide off their small forms. I’d feared that the patchy ones suffered from some disease that robbed them of their fur, but now I saw the distinct patterning and thought they might be that way naturally.

The one who’d protected Svixa stood beside another who shared her golden skin and dark fur, and I tipped my head



curiously. Even among her own kind she was unique, short but sumptuously cushioned.

“They fell from the sky,” Svixa said, her voice rapt. “The large ones were cruel to them. They hit them and hurt them with sky fire trapped in their necklaces. I followed them from the sky rock. The large ones were bad. These ones were kind to me.” Her words tumbled over each other as she rushed to see her new friends safe.

A shiver ran up my spine, lifting the fur there. I pushed down the urge to shape the warding against death. Creatures from the sky or no, I would judge them by their actions, not superstition. I ran my hand over Svixa’s ears and chuffed. “We owe them a great debt.”

Zaf dropped to the ground beside us and cast a glance burning with curiosity over the strangers. His eyes lingered on Svixa’s protector, then roved over Revik and I, looking for wounds. Finding none, he settled in to care for Svixa, his light tone masking real concern.

I rose, slowly, watching the strangers for signs of fear or aggression. They watched me back, tense but calm, so I stepped closer. They were around Svixa’s height, some shorter, some taller, but looking at them now, their proportions felt mature. Their actions, too, were not those of children. When the closest was just beyond the reach of my arm, I dropped into a squat to keep from looming over them.

The group of beings rippled, then one of the Svestrix-like people stepped forward. They bent gracefully from the waist; their hands pressed together in front of their chest. Their eyes glowed with star shine, beautiful and ominous.

Hoping it was a gesture of greeting, I copied them, my one hand open over my heart.

They dipped their head, seemingly satisfied, and lowered one arm, leaving the other matching mine.

“Yin,” they said, tapping their chest with the hand that rested there. “Yin,” they repeated, then gestured towards me and turned their hand palm up, waiting.

Ah! I tipped my head at them and said, “Yin.”

They dipped, cooing something encouraging.

I gestured to the others. “Yin?”

They shook their head, named themselves again, and then the others.

The one who’d protected Svixa was called Estrayuh. I silently repeated the name, finding it pleasing. Fitting that this woman would have a name so similar to that of our people. Estrayuh. Teterayuh. Kin.

Some of their names were stranger, with sounds my mouth struggled to form. In particular, Estrayuh’s sibling—I assumed them to be siblings, they had the same coloring and were close without the intimacy of lovers—had a name I could not wrap my lips around.

“Litha,” I shared, pointing to myself. Then, pausing to allow each to nod at the strangers, “Revik, Zafett, Svixa.” I indicated all of us with a single motion. “Teterayuh.”

Yin’s starlight eyes gleamed.

Their language was strange and hard to pronounce, but I learned that their people were called Kyusalk, while the patchy ones were called Hyunan. They only snarled when asked about the enemy, but I understood that whoever they’d been, there weren’t any more lurking in the jungle.

Behind me Svixa whimpered, Zaf murmured, and Revik stood guard over them both, silently supporting whatever decision I made. I considered the strangers. They didn’t seem dangerous. They’d been ferocious in battle, but not particularly skilled. And they were all wounded, though none seemed mortally damaged. They reeked of fear and foulness, but I smelled neither anger nor deceit.

We needed to get Svixa back to the den. I looked to the sky. Being this long in the open was making me twitchy. We needed shelter. The strangers needed healing, cleansing, rest. Probably food and as well. We would see that they got all they needed, but it would not balance out the great debt we owed them.

But first.

I paced carefully forward, tail and ears up to show goodwill. Stopping before Estrayuh, I repeated the greeting gesture, holding her gaze. Her eyes were fascinating. The night sky in reverse, they were spots of darkness in a pale field. Her pupils were *round* of all things, and as I watched, they grew until the warmer color that surrounded them was only a thin ring. Mesmerizing.

She tugged at the bottom of the strange garment all the Humans wore, then bent, returning my greeting. She stumbled slightly, and I reached out to steady her.

Soft. She was furless, but her flesh was so supple. My fingers squeezed, feeling the give, then I pulled my hand away. *No petting without permission*, I chastised myself.

Her sibling with the impossible name said something in a worried voice, but Estrayuh responded without taking her eyes from me, and he settled.

I focused on my purpose. A purr of sympathy vibrated low in my chest as I noticed the shorn fur over her forehead. Spirits, how much had she suffered? I let my gaze linger on her engorged chest, then exaggerated my movements as I looked into the jungle around us. My ears were quirked inquisitively when I met her eyes again.

The expression on her face was. . .strange. Her mouth was open, showing off those small, flat teeth, and the tiny patches of fur above her eyes had lifted, almost joining her head fur.

I tried again, tracing my hand in front of my own, smaller breast, mimicking the outline of hers swollen with milk, and then lower, describing a belly full with child.

This time her expression was all too easy to recognize. That was definitely anger. Oh, no.

# CHAPTER 7

## ESTRELLA

¿Qué chingados? Am I really being fat shamed by an alien?  
Now?!

I thrust out my chin. The effect was slightly ruined when I tried to cross my arms and winced, but I recovered and fisted my less-wounded hand on one very rounded hip instead. Savior or not, Litha could kiss my fat ass if they thought I'd put up with that kind of shit.

A picture of what that might look like flashed into my overtaxed brain, and heat rushed to my cheeks. I was getting delirious. Too much stress. *Back to sanity land, Estrella*, I urged myself, then had to swallow a laugh. No part of this scenario—bloody, battered, recently emancipated, and standing in an alien jungle—had any resemblance to sanity. I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to ground myself.

Litha's eyes widened, and they took a quick step back.

Ha. Some things didn't need words.

My alien savior turned adversary tilted their head, cat-like ears flicking, and crept forward. When I only watched them warily, Litha drew in a deep breath and raised an arm to try again.

I squinted. Litha only had the one arm. The other aliens—could I call them aliens when we were on their planet? Didn't that make *us* the aliens?—had two arms each. Whether it was congenital or from an injury, it certainly hadn't slowed them down any.

I blinked past the hazy memory of Litha leaping at me, bug blood thick on their snarling face.

What I wouldn't give for a flashlight. The rain had let up for the moment, but it was still so dark that all I could make out were impressions. Size. Shape. They were big. Not fat—I

scowled harder—but tall. Standing upright, Litha towered over me by several feet.

The clouds parted. Moonlight shimmered on Litha's wet fur, which was. . .purple? Their long tail flicked behind them like an anxious cat's, and I couldn't look away from the hypnotic movement.

Litha made a noise, almost a coo, and touched their hand to their chest.

That hand had four fingers, including the thumb. And claws—although I remembered them being larger before. During the battle.

I watched the hand slide lower, my eyes widening as it cupped a small but definite breast, then ran across Litha's flat stomach. I swallowed. Okay, *that* got a reaction. Setting that aside to freak out over later.

Claws sliced through the air between us, then Litha reached out, careful not to touch me as she outlined the more generous curve of my chest. My eyebrows furrowed and I tilted my head as she bent her arm in an awkward "C" shape, making an exaggerated show of looking around while. . .chirping?

It was weirdly adorable, but I had no idea what the hell she was trying to convey. When I just followed her gaze, Litha growled in frustration.

Her teeth were just as big as I remembered.

"*Vavailesha! Itsook ha 'vavailesha setal?*" Litha asked, pointing to me, Ria, and Cass, then spreading her fingers and indicating the jungle around us. Her tail whipped behind her.

"Uh, Estrella?" Cass panted a little—probably from pain and shock—but amusement was clear in her voice. "I think—I think Litha is asking about babies."

I whipped my head around to stare at her and stumbled again. Pinche head wound. I caught myself, blinking stupidly.

"THEY WANT US TO HAVE BABIES?" Ok, that could have come out better.

“Ah, no. I don’t think so.” Cass was having trouble holding back the laughter now. “I think she’s asking *if we* have babies. Because, you know,” she waved at her chest, “our boobs. At a guess, their women only look like us when they’re nursing.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again, ignoring Mariano’s muffled snorts. Immature idiot. You’d think he’d never heard the word “boobs” before.

I could feel the weight of Litha’s gaze on me, and my insides squirmed. At least she wasn’t being fatphobic? Jesus, this was embarrassing. I forced myself to turn back and meet her bright, intent gaze. How was I going to explain this?

“Baby?” I finally asked, holding my arms as if rocking an infant. Sudden comprehension hit me, and I could have slapped myself for not understanding.

Litha’s eyes brightened, and she surged forward until she was only a foot away. She tilted her head, her eyes softening as she brushed a finger over my forearm.

I shivered.

“*Vailesha, het,*” she said, her voice a quiet purr of concern. “*Itsook ha ’vailesha set, Estrayuh?*”

I couldn’t look away, even as heat prickled behind my eyes. I shook my head and spoke slowly. “No babies.” I crossed my arms gingerly over my stomach. “No *vay-lesh-uh.*” I stumbled over the unfamiliar word, then moving jerkily, I smooshed my breasts together and blurted out, “Just a human woman with boobs.”

Muffled groans and laughter came from behind me at that, and I flushed.

Litha’s eyes lingered on the mile of cleavage pushing out the top of my tunic, then narrowed in concentration when I awkwardly dropped my hands.

“*Litha, het,*” she pronounced, pointing to herself.

I nodded.

“*Ix Litha,*” she continued, pointing to me. “*Estrayuh, het.*”

A lightbulb went off. I nodded so hard my teeth clacked together as I pointed to myself and repeated, “Estrella, yes, *het*.” Then I mimicked holding a baby again, shaking my head as I said, “No baby. *Icks vay-lesh-uh*.”

“*Set ray*,” Litha breathed, relief clear in her relaxed posture.

One of the others prowled over, moving on all four limbs like a massive alien tiger. Or maybe a panther, since this one—the other one who’d joined in the battle—was almost completely black. Revik, that was their name.

Revik crouched beside Litha, and I took the opportunity to compare them. She was taller by about a foot, but Revik was that much wider. Going by Litha’s boobs and Revik’s lack thereof, I was guessing they weren’t genderless like the Quoosalk, and until we learned how—and if—they assigned genders, I was going with “he” for Revik. His features were blunter, his chest boobless but wide. He would have caused a riot at Muscle Beach. And not because he was an alien.

His body rippled with muscles, all covered with inky black fur that was short and sleek, like a Doberman. Litha’s fur was lighter, although I couldn’t tell the exact shade of purple between the wet and the low light, and long enough to hang in wavy, dripping strands. They both had longer fur on their heads, like hair, that they wore in a variety of braids.

“*Thiral ar laytuh, sh’irra. A’shavailata thiret sook*.” Revik rumbled in a bass so deep it was hard to hear.

My eyes bounced between them as Litha nodded agreement.

Revik’s gaze, so pale a yellow it glowed against his black fur, cataloged each of us in turn. He snorted out a breath and addressed Litha again, his tone grumpy. “*Aida naisal eh a’shalaytuh, ixet?*”

“*Ayelet garev sy a’shavailata*.”

Whatever Litha said made Revik’s attention lock onto me, and I instinctively flinched, then firmed my spine.

Without looking away, Revik stood and stalked to me, not stopping until I had to crane my neck to maintain eye contact.

Dios mío, he had to be seven feet tall. My eyes flickered down his body, then flew back to his face.

The muscles weren't the only big things on Revik. Not that I was looking. That bulge was as big as my head and covered in fur like the rest of him. What all did he have going on in there? Definitely not looking.

*Stop looking, Estrella.*

Apparently deciding I'd been intimidated enough—although probably not in the way he thought—Revik sank fluidly in a crouch. For such a big, muscley alien man, he was very graceful.

With our faces so close, the eye contact was even more intense, and my mouth went dry. He cupped my shoulders in his huge, clawed, four-fingered hands. My eyelids squeezed shut, and I braced myself, but his touch was exquisitely gentle.

His forehead pressed against mine. My eyes popped open, but all I saw was the darkness of his fur. Then he. . . purred.

*“Relyat, Estrayuh.”* Revik's voice was a low growl, but I didn't feel any anger from him. I struggled to focus past the hypnotic purring.

After a moment, I hesitantly questioned, *“Relyat?”*

When Revik stepped back I was shaky with relief. Perversely, I also wanted to grab him and ask him to never stop doing whatever that had been. That purr was like one of those mall massage chairs, but for my heart.

Litha bowed, hand on her chest, in the now recognizable gratitude gesture. *“Relyat,”* she said, and I understood. But why was Revik thanking me?

*“Het. . .”* I said, repeating the word and gesture together. Then I shrugged and held my hands up, trying to portray confusion. *“But why. . .?”*

*“Svixa,”* was all Revik said.

I didn't know what to say to that. On the one hand, gratitude from the only people we knew on this planet was good, right? But I didn't feel like I'd done that much. We'd *all*



fought. *They'd* killed the bugs. I'd mostly been a distraction, really.

Besides, what was I supposed to do? Just watch as a child was hurt?

I looked around at the others, uncomfortable with being the center of the Teterayuh's attention. No one came to my rescue. Mariano coughed something into his hand I ignored with the ease of long practice, and Shane circled his hand gracefully, encouraging me to continue.

Wasn't that always the way?

"Svixa. . .*vay-lesh-uh*," I tried to explain. "Humans, Quoosalk. . .*icks vay-lesh-uh*." I shrugged uncomfortably and muttered, "Of course we tried to help."

Revik's eyes warmed. "Hellt?" he attempted.

He didn't quite get the "P" sound, but I nodded anyway. They seemed to have trouble with "M" as well, but then, I probably sounded like a toddler to them. Understanding each other was the important part right now.

He grunted, satisfied. "Hyunan, Kyusalk, hellt Svixa." He cupped my shoulders again, leaning down until his breath was warm on the rain-slicked skin of my face. "Teterayuh hellt Hyunan, Kyusalk. *K'kheer sal*."

Litha let out a chuffing warble I couldn't identify. Laughter? Horror? But Revik ignored it, inhaling and exhaling in a slow, even rhythm.

My breaths automatically shifted to sync with his, and he straightened, looking satisfied. When he looked to Litha, though, his ears pinned back. Was that. . .embarrassment?

I tried to wrangle my fuzzy brain into cooperation. *Ka kheer sol*, I repeated silently. Revik had stomped back to Svixa and the pale-furred one, Zafett, a clear indication that he wasn't interested in answering questions, but I'd remember. *Ka kheer sol*. It felt important.

Zafett called for Litha, and with a look that swept over all of us, she turned and loped back to the others.

“Guess we know who their favorite is,” Ria said, winking at me.

“Estrella y los extraterrestres sentados en un árbol, b-e-s-á-n-d-o-s-e!” Mariano sang. He was just as cheerfully annoying as ever, but something was off.

“Shut up,” I muttered, watching him with narrowed eyes.

The rain chose that moment to start up again. Yin tilted xyr head back, eyes closed, and basked. A low, happy hum came from Therry and Salat as they did the same.

The bugs hadn’t liked this planet with its high humidity and heat, but the Quoosalk were thriving. I knew they’d been uncomfortable on the ship, but I hadn’t realized how much the cold, dry conditions affected them. Now, even with the loss of Ilya weighing on them, they moved with an effortless quickness that sometimes had me blinking, trying to keep up.

Svixa waved at us from a carrier strapped to Revik’s broad back as he disappeared into the trees. I waved back, unable to not smile at her adorable, pitiful face. She looked like a drowned kitten.

Litha and Zaffet returned to our group. Taller than Revik but shorter than Litha, Zaffet was built more like a swimmer than a gym god. His pale fur was long and darkened at the tips like a Siamese cat. His body stood out in the darkness, and yeah. He might be built like an anime heartthrob, but some parts of his body wouldn’t have been out of place on Revik’s massive frame. The white, slicked down fur really. . .highlighted things.

“It’s like a wet t-shirt contest,” Ria whispered.

I bit my lips, trying not to laugh. Wicked woman.

He stepped forward, curiosity burning in his eyes. He practically vibrated as he took in every detail of our bedraggled appearances. We were just as strange to them as they were to us, I figured. If not more, since we’d had time to get used to the idea of aliens.

“*Relyat*,” he said, addressing all of us to my relief. When he bowed, the graceful sway of that long body was poetry.

“Hyunan, Kyusalk, *eh a’shalaytuh aratal tch rai?*” He gestured as he spoke, his hands spreading to indicate the eight of us, then to his chest and back towards the ship, and finally encompassing himself and Litha. He paused, clearly awaiting a response.

I spoke without turning my head, afraid to give any impression of rejection. “Thoughts on what he said?”

There were a few opinions, but Yin silenced everyone with xyr pronouncement.

“No matter,” xe said, stepping forward and nodding to Zaffet and Litha. “Take what offered. Be grateful.”



Trudging through the jungle without shoes or lights wasn’t any more fun a second time. Although, remembering that all the bugs were dead and their ship a smoking ruin helped the frustration when I stepped on a pointy rock or tripped on a root.

Which I did. A lot.

The pounding, jittery adrenaline from the crash and the fight drained out of me as we slogged through the thick, wet foliage. I was left feeling empty and exhausted. Every step took all my concentration. I was worn out, clumsy, and couldn’t see for shit.

I think we all were suffering, because no one tried to talk. We just followed the person in front of us and kept on.

The weather had gotten worse. Before, the trees provided some relief. Now, the rain sheeted down so hard and fast, we could have been standing in a field for all the good they did. Lightning crashed, the booming thunderclaps rolling over one another. The storm was getting closer.

I slipped on the uneven ground and stayed down, breathing hard. The mud was soft here, and it was tempting to just curl up and stay. The storm would stop eventually. Or something

would eat me. Either way, I wasn't seeing much of a downside.

The pound of rain on my back stopped abruptly. Around me, it continued, as if someone had covered me with an umbrella. A hand touched my shoulder. I looked up, using a forearm to scoop the tangled, sodden mess of hair from my face.

Litha hovered there, sheltering me, and when I met her eyes she chirped an inquisitive sound. "Estrella, *seh lit?*"

I shook my head, not understanding the question.

She growled, her eyes narrowed in thought. "Hellt?" she tried, shifting back to offer me her hand.

I blinked against the water streaming into my face. Wiping off as much of the mud as I could, I took her hand. It closed around mine completely.

I expected her to help me to my feet, but when she tugged, I popped out of the mud like a cork from champagne, slamming into her with a *whoomph*.

Litha made a startled sound and wrapped her arm around me, keeping me from falling back onto my ass.

I felt like a puzzle piece slipping perfectly into place. Her long arm enfolded me, tucking me against her without any sign of effort. Wet as she was, she still radiated heat, and I wanted to curl into it and let her carry me like a baby. After everything that had happened, suddenly being swamped with this inexplicable feeling of *safety* brought everything inside me to a screeching halt, and all I could do was hold on and tremble.

"Hermana?"

Mariano's worried voice pulled me back, and I tensed. Litha set me back on my feet, and I pulled self-consciously at my tunic. "I'm okay," I told Mariano. "Just tripped." And then, shyly, I looked up at Litha. "*Relyat.*"

"*Sahvon,*" she replied, nodding.

The others had stopped too and were gathered around us in a ragged circle. Before I could dive too far down the “oh, god, everyone was watching us” rabbit hole, Zaffet—who’d been leading our little convoy—pulled aside a giant-leafed bush and flourished his hand at the bit of jungle he’d revealed.

“*Hyunan la Kyusalk, a’ashalaytuh,*” he announced, as if he was introducing us to someone.

At first, all I could see was more jungle. Then I caught a shimmer of light through the pouring rain, and my heart leapt.

We moved forward eagerly, and the closer we got the more excited I became. A fire blazed cheerfully in the center of what looked to be a round hut, the shapes of furniture scattered around it visible through the open walls. Shelter!

Dios mío, all I wanted was to be dry. After a month of praying for a bath, I was now being punished by the shower that wouldn’t end. If the Teterayuh would let us curl up next to the fire and sleep, I’d be grateful forever. If they were willing to feed us. . .well, there wasn’t much I wouldn’t do for that.

A flash of lightning cast the world in sharp relief, and I gaped. It wasn’t *just* a hut. It was part of the jungle. The conical roof was supported by a ring of living trees at least twenty feet across, their branches forming a woven lattice at the eaves. On the far side of the fire, between two of the trees, a doorway hinted at a second space, its opening covered by a hanging cloth.

“¡Qué chido!” I breathed. Mariano grunted in agreement. I grabbed his hand, and together he, I, our new family, and the Teterayuh jogged forward, exhaustion briefly pushed aside by the promise of that fire.



The eight of us huddled together, dripping on the floor, watching as the Teterayuh pattered about. I didn’t see Svixa, but guessed she was sleeping in the other room. We didn’t talk much—too tired for that, and what would we say? None of us

had answers for the questions that were our future. As for me, I couldn't take my eyes off our hosts.

In the flickering firelight, with no rain to blur my vision, I could finally see more than vague shapes. Their eyes were large and set wide in their faces, and although they were all yellow, no two pairs were alike.

Revik's eyes were so pale they were almost white around the vertical slit of his pupils. That brightness radiated outwards, as if they'd been struck by lightning. Zafett's eyes were rounder, darker, a rich buttercup yellow with speckles of some darker color. They looked freckled. It was weirdly adorable. Litha had honey eyes: clover in the middle, darkening to buckwheat at the edges.

Ha. All those mornings carrying bags for Nana and Tata at the farmer's market were paying off.

Their faces were. . .not exactly catlike. But not human, either. They had muzzles—and all those teeth—but the proportion wasn't right for a big cat. Too tall. And they didn't have the cute pink nose, or the whiskers. Their upper lips were much like a big cat's, split down the center and furred like the rest of their faces. But their lower lips—

I ran my tongue over mine, watching the firelight glint off the curve of Revik's mouth as he spoke to Zafett. It looked. . .nice.

Their ears were utterly catlike, mobile and expressive. Zafett's ears were long and pointed, with a tuft at the end like a lynx. Revik's were shorter, rounder, and Litha's somewhere in between. They were set high on their heads, although not as high as those headbands people wore back home, and poked out past their hair.

I kept staring at their bodies, and I was beginning to feel like a perv. But I was fascinated by the way they moved. I'd gone to the zoo a few times as a kid, and they moved like the chimpanzees had—easily shifting from standing upright, to crouching, to walking on all fours.

Litha shrugged, slipping off her weapon harness, and our eyes met. I looked away quickly, staring fixedly into the fire. Which was also, coincidentally, why my cheeks were hot. No other reason.

Yin shifted, backing away from the fire, and concern distracted me from my embarrassment. I was loving getting dry, but the Quoosalk needed to stay hydrated.

I looked around, finding a nook farther away from the fire, layered with cushions.

“Litha?” I called. When she looked over, ears quirked curiously, I pointed to the cushions and pretended to sit. “*Het?*”

She nodded with a welcoming sweep of her hand.

“*Relyat,*” I replied with a smile, and cupped my hand around Yin’s elbow. “Come sit, Abuele.”

Yin patted my fingers and allowed me to lead xem to the cushions, Salat and Therry following close behind. The elder sat with a long sigh, xyr head lowering as the others curled around xem.

My chest ached.

“We’ll go back for xem,” I promised. “For Ilya. We’re free. We won’t leave xem there.”

Yin met my eyes, and xyrs were wet with unshed tears. Xe nodded. “Yes. We are all free.”

“And we’re together. Whatever happens. Family,” Shane vowed.

Voices rose in agreement, but my brother only stared into the fire, his fists clenched at his sides. I furrowed my brow, stepping in his direction, but Zafett’s voice interrupted me.

“Zaffet hellt?” He held up a bundle that looked a lot like bandages and a small ceramic pot and nodded towards the doorway. His buttercup eyes rested on Cass with concern, but at Revik’s rumbled comment they swung to land on me.

What? Why me?

“*Estrayuh?*” he coaxed. “Zafett hellt?”

“Go on,” Cass encouraged. “Don’t want to upset our hosts. I’m fine to wait my turn.”

“Yeah, gotta make sure you’re not bleeding internally or growing some weird alien fungus,” Ria cut in.

“Thanks for that,” I snorted. “Something new to worry about.” I stepped towards Zafett, but Mariano stopped me with a hand on my arm. I raised an eyebrow at him.

He dropped it immediately, the closed off expression shifting to a brightly false smile. “Have fun playing doctor,” was all he said, winking.

I ducked beneath the cloth Zafett held up, worry for my brother mixing with trepidation. I didn’t really think Zafett would hurt me—none of the Teterayuh had been aggressive towards us—but the constant barrage of *newness* had worn me down. I was burned out. I just wanted to sleep, and every new discovery, fascinating though they were, made me feel shakier, more brittle.

I didn’t want to shatter.

There was another fire here, smaller and set into a raised hearth. It left the shadows thick around the edges of the room, so I couldn’t get a good grasp of how big the space was. It was mostly open, with a loosely woven lattice wall to one side. As we passed it, I peered through and sighed, seeing Svixa sleeping peacefully, curled on a giant pillow.

Zafett stopped by the fire and set the bandages and pot next to several other items lined up on its edge. With his ears tipped forward in a way I read as friendly, he pointed down at his feet.

His feet had thumbs.

I blinked, and blinked again, but there they were. He shifted on his feet-hands and the toes flexed. I nearly lost it, but laughing hysterically at our host was *definitely* rude. And besides, his feet weren’t the problem, I was just loopy as hell.



Belatedly, I realized he was pointing at a stack of furs. My eyes flew to his.

“Hellt,” Zafett said, nodding encouragingly as he crouched and patted the furs.

Lay down. That made sense. Sure. I could do that.

I hesitated, then—tugging on my tunic in a vain attempt to stretch it a few inches—laid down. I couldn’t relax, my eyes and thighs squeezed shut. My fingers trembled as I gripped the ragged hem of my only protection, pulling it taut.

I could feel my breasts spilling out of the top, shaking as my breathing grew choppy. The flickering firelight was replaced with cold tables and pain, and a tear carved a wet path into my hair.

It was followed by another, and another. I don’t know how long I lay there, trapped in memories, but eventually I heard the snap of the fire. I dug mental fingers into it, listening hard. Fire was good. Hot, not cold like—I savagely jerked my thoughts back before I tumbled into the oubliette again.

I heard rustling, then something settled over me.

My eyes popped open. Zafett was hovering above, shifting from foot to foot, concern clear in every tense line of his body.

I lifted my head, looking down. A length of fabric covered me from shoulders to knees. It was textured, soft and rough at the same time. Like raw silk, kind of. I’d tried on a pair of raw silk pants one time at some hoity-toity boutique for fat women with lots of money and no taste. They made my fupa look like a balloon.

I blinked and let my head fall back to the furs.

He’d covered me.

It felt like my brain was struggling to reboot, and I just kept getting error messages.

Careful not to dislodge it, I slid my arms out and hugged the cloth to my chest, where gratitude swelled. I wiped my face messily on my shoulder, sniffing. Ugh, the water helped, but I needed to find some soap, pronto.

*“Relyat,”* I whispered to Zafett.

He nodded, but some indefinable wall had come between us. My tear-thickened voice and wobbly smile must not have been very convincing.

He sat and reached for my foot, hesitating when his fingers hovered a few inches away. *“Het?”* he asked, not meeting my eyes. I agreed, and he carefully lifted my foot. He ran his fingers over it—feeling the bones, I thought—before competently cleaning it, applying salve from the pot, and wrapping it with strips of cloth.

He moved up my body this way, skipping over my hips. He ran his hands over my stomach through the cloth, looking at me only enough to see if I flinched, then moved on to my arms.

Since he wouldn't look at me, I watched him. His eyes were narrowed in concentration as he gently pressed and rotated my arm, and the firelight made the yellow seem deeper, richer. His fur had dried to a shining white, short on his face, chest, and hands, flowing and silky everywhere else. His markings weren't brown or black, but a gorgeous red. Old Hollywood starlet lipstick red.

It decorated his hands, his feet, and the tips of his hair and tail like he'd dipped them in henna. It covered his delicately carved muzzle, swirled up his cheekbones, and circled his eyes. His ears, mostly white, were tipped in the barest hint of crimson, as if they were blushing.

I flinched at something he did to my arm, but I couldn't look away.

He was beautiful.

# CHAPTER 8

## ZAF

Estrayuh paused at the entrance of our den, her bicolored eyes wide as she looked around. What did she think of it? Was it as intriguing to her as she was to me? Was I? I burned to learn everything about her—where she came from, who her people were, what her life was like, how she and her people had gotten here.

The old songs told of hideous people from beyond the stars, people who brought death and left families weeping. I could believe the enemy creatures to be those people. None of the bodies in that clearing had been children of *lenailot*, and they had brought violence and terror with them.

But Estrayuh. . .she was not hideous. Her people were strange, yes. With no fur or scales to guard their soft flesh, no claws or fangs to bring down prey, and no tail or gripping feet to move through the trees. And they were small, and poorly furred. But their vulnerability and unexpected strength gave them a grace that went beyond the physical.

Especially Estrayuh. Svixa had spoken of how the Hyunan protected her, had tried to save her, even though she was already a captive of the enemies.

The fact that Estrayuh's physical form—while different—was just as attractive as her spirit was making it difficult to concentrate. Her body was full and lush, with all the glorious curves of a mother ripe with kits. Litha's tail had flicked with amusement when she caught me watching the small Hyunan. She was all too familiar with my fascination—although we had not chosen to try for kits, she was not above begging me to breed her when she wanted to see me utterly feral.

I'd seen how my mate's eyes lingered on the other woman, though. Brave and beautiful was a tempting combination.

Estrayuh's eyes finally settled on me. I pointed to the furs, inviting her to lie down. Svixa was sleeping in the nook where I cared for those who needed longer healing, but I'd arranged everything I thought I might need by the fire.

Those intriguing eyes dropped, widened, and the oddest expression came over her face. She wouldn't urinate in the den, would she? But no, the expression disappeared, and she looked back at me.

I knelt, patting the furs. Perhaps she didn't understand what I wanted her to do? "*Hellt*," I said, trying and failing to reproduce the popping sound at the end.

She fidgeted, and I watched in fascination as she took her bottom lip between those small, flat teeth. What did biting your own mouth mean?

Finally, she knelt, then scooted her legs around to sit on her tailless rear.

I tried not to notice how her flesh jiggled, but I was not successful. Her head fur fell forward, the short strands above her eyes drawing my attention. Did that mean the same thing among her people as it did among the Teterayuh? I moved my head, feeling the comforting brush of my mating braids against my cheek.

She leaned back, stretching out her legs, and I caught a glimpse between them. Oh, spirits. I bit back a whimper, looking away as she pulled the cloth firmly down.

The sight was seared in my memory, however. Thighs that looked softer than our best cushion and just as tempting to sink into. A familiar delta, plump and covered in fur the same dark shade as that on her head. My fingers flexed, aching to pet it. Would it be coarse? Or soft?

How like us were these Hyunans? They were not so different in shape, although their limbs were odd. Their legs were so long—and straight, like arms—that they walked only upright, slow and with bellies exposed. I wondered at their feet, so narrow, flat, and useless looking.

How similar were we in the places I could not see? Were their bones like ours? Their organs? Their. . .sexes?

My gaze slipped down her body again—half admiring, half with a healer’s curiosity. I tilted my head. She did have fur! Just a fine sprinkling, darker and thicker in some places, so fine I only saw the sparkle of firelight on the strands in others. It was oddly charming.

The acrid sting of fear made my nose wrinkle. I stilled. With horror, I realized that while I’d been fantasizing, Estrayuh was terrified. She held her body so tightly she trembled, and tears fell from her closed eyes.

I snarled at myself silently—not wanting to scare her any more than I already had. How could I be so thoughtless? I had no right to call myself a healer. Too busy lusting after her like a *khot* in rut to notice she was in distress. I couldn’t even ask her what was wrong!

Panic tickled at me, but I shoved it down with the ease of long practice. I had to think. She hadn’t been frightened when we’d come into the den, then she laid down. . .

Oh, spirits. No.

I looked at her hands, fisted in the cloth. Covering her sex. Guarding it from *me*, I realized, and recoiled. Sickened, I sank my claws into my thighs and thought back over the last few moments. I’d seen her hide herself, hadn’t I? *And thought nothing of it*, I hissed at myself viciously.

I’d been too flagrant with my interest, an interest she obviously didn’t return—and why would she? We were supposed to be sheltering these people, helping them. Not demanding. . .what she clearly thought I’d brought her here for. And if she’d recently lost her mate. . .

I wanted to howl my remorse, to beg her forgiveness. I could do neither. I had to show her she was safe, that I wasn’t trying to mate her against her will.

I looked around wildly. My gaze snagged on the drying cloths hanging by the door, and in a breath, I’d snapped one open and lowered it gently over Estrayuh’s body. My heart

pounded in my chest as I crouched next to her, alert and watchful.

Slowly, her breath steadied. The slip of tears into her head fur stopped. A moment later, her eyes opened and met mine.

The white parts were tinged with pink now, and the berries at their centers were dark and shimmered wetly. I hated that I was the reason she cried. She clutched the cloth to herself, as if afraid I might leap upon her and snatch it away.

I lowered my eyes, shame bowing my body.

“Thank you.”

Her voice was rough with tears, and I winced. Being thanked for *not* violating her was like a spear to the gut. I nodded, unable to force the word “*sahvon*” from my lips. My honor wasn’t anywhere near this den tonight.

I flicked a glance at her, testing her reaction, only to still with shock. She was smiling at me. With such a flat face, the expression was not quite the same, but it was recognizable. Her forgiveness humbled me.

I hovered my hand over her flat little foot covered in cuts. “Zafett *hellit*?” If she said no, I would get Litha. She’d learned enough healing from me to—

Estrayuh nodded.

If it would not have terrified her all over again, I would have laid myself at her feet and thanked her for her kindness. Instead, I tended her wounds.

I was careful not to startle her, and soon I sank into the space I always went to when I healed. I was fascinated by the differences between her Hyunan body and that of a Teterayuh—or even a Svestrix—and my heart wept at the evidence of all that she’d suffered.

Still, a part of me noted the softness of her skin, the decadent give of it under my touch. I breathed evenly, settling my spirit and hers, only to draw in the warm musky scent that rose from her as the heat of the fire banished the last of the rain.

As Estrayuh's tension faded, her scent deepened. Internally, I rolled in it, even as I continued my work—healing and learning her body.

I hummed soothingly as I ran my fingers over the angry swelling on her left forearm. It was hot to the touch, and hard, but the bones didn't feel broken. She flinched, and I inhaled, checking for pain or fear. There was pain there, but not too much, along with the barest hint of. . . desire?

My eyes shot up and tangled with hers. The appreciation in them needed no translation.

Now I was really confused.



I sprawled over Revik's wide chest, taking comfort in the play of his fingers through my fur. Svixa had woken not long ago, frightened, and Litha had joined her on the other cushion. They both slept now, their soft breaths a sweet note beneath the pound of rain overhead.

While I'd treated the strangers' wounds—which were many—Revik and Litha had set out a simple meal of fruit, seeds, and smoked meat. The gratitude our guests showed over such basic hospitality—when woven together with the history of abuse on their bodies—told a story that hurt me to think about.

None of their injuries seemed life-threatening, although the burns tracing the flesh of Cass—the pale-furred Hyunan—concerned me. They covered much of her body, and many places were hot with wound sickness. I could only hope our medicines helped, and did not harm them.

Several of them had become frightened when they entered the den. Not for the reason Estrayuh had—I squirmed uncomfortably in renewed shame and confusion—but seemingly from being within walls. Without a word, Revik had gathered all the cushions and furs from the den, turning the lounging area into a nest big enough for all of them to share.

I smiled and rubbed my cheek against his chest, nipping him lovingly.

“What was that for?” he purred, voice low to keep from waking Svixa. His hand slid up my back, the fingers spreading through my braids to cup the base of my skull.

“Because you are you, and your thoughtfulness makes me love you more every day,” I whispered back.

He didn’t answer, but wrapped his other arm around me, turning us onto our sides and tangling our legs and tails together as his heart sped, matching the thrum of his purr. I hid a smile against his chest. He was so soft inside, my big strong mate.

Sleep pulled at my body, but my thoughts spun in every direction, keeping me awake. I felt as if I was being buffeted by winds of curiosity and excitement, while also being drenched in a rain of unease. I’d lost my assurance that these strangers were also children of *lenailot*. They knew nothing of our languages, nothing of our food, our homes. We’d had to show them how to open a *soru* fruit!

But although they came from the sky—as death does—and were strange enough that I could believe they came from beyond the stars, I could not believe that they brought darkness with them. What little time we’d spent together had proved them to be caring, selfless, and strong. There were those in the village who would not accept them, but I would support Revik’s claim of kinship.

My mother would not be pleased.

When the storm passed, we would have to take them to the village—if we didn’t have visitors before then. Svixa’s parents would be frantic after hearing from Kurz, and the elders would have many questions. We would have to learn as much as possible to answer their concerns.

The fear I’d pushed aside rose within me, slashing at me with fiery claws. I clenched my jaw, trying not to wake anyone as I struggled to deal with what *hadn’t* happened.

I should have known better than to bother.



Revik rolled again, pressing me into the cushion with his weight and purring deep in his chest where it made almost no sound, but went straight to my muscles.

I went lax and stopped fighting the emotions. Held safe, I let them flow through me.

“We could have lost her, Revik. Or Litha.” The *again* was unspoken, but rang loudly between us. “I could have lost you.”

His purring stuttered, and his claws bit into my sides. I flinched, and he forced himself to relax, smoothing his hands over the small hurts in apology. “We didn’t. They are both safe. I am here.”

I lay quiet beneath him, listening to the steady throb of his heart and willing mine to slow. But my thoughts raced—too fast even for me to understand.

Revik grunted and pushed himself up. “Roll over.”

I flicked an ear at him, but did so, then groaned as his strong fingers kneaded the knotted muscles along my shoulders. He chuckled and worked his way down my back. When I was a limp puddle, he pulled me into the curve of his body, linked our tails, and rubbed his cheek on my head.

“Go to sleep, *shirratoum*. Everyone is safe. Tomorrow comes soon enough.”

With a last whispered thanks to the spirits for keeping my family—old and new—whole, I did.

# CHAPTER 9

## *ESTRELLA*

**D**id it ever stop raining on this planet? Grey light pushed at my stubbornly closed eyelids—so it must be morning—and still it rained. If it didn't let up soon, we were going to be washed away, trees and all.

I groaned and rolled over, burying my face in a pillow to block out the light. Exhausted as I was, I'd slept like crap. Terrors had chased me when I closed my eyes, leaving me sweaty and searching for lights in the darkness when the thunder shook me awake. Once, my dream self had woken in my parents' house—laughter and the scent of Fabuloso in the air. Waking from that. . . had been worse.

I inhaled, nuzzling the pillows sleepily. It wasn't lavender, but whatever they filled these cushions with smelled fantastic. Spicy and earthy, like cardamom and something else. Hay? No, sweetgrass. After a month of eau de unwashed bodies, fear sweat, and shit, I couldn't get enough.

"Estrella?" Cass whispered.

I twisted my face to the side, squinting at her through the tangle of my hair.

"Did I wake you?"

"No," I said through a yawn. "What's up?"

"Oh, good," she replied, distantly.

I had the feeling I could have said, "Yes, you woke me. I was dreaming about making out with Tom the cartoon cat while Walter Mercado chased Jerry around, flapping his sequined cape," and her reaction would have been the same.

She was lying on her back, staring at the ceiling, but the look on her face said she wasn't seeing anything. My eyes had

begun to drift closed again when she finally said, “We’re not going home, are we?”

My sleepiness fled. I swallowed, trying to force down the fist clenched in my throat so I could breathe. “I don’t think so.”

She caught her breath on a sob and nodded woodenly. Our hands met and held.

There was a soft curse and a rustle, then Ria’s arm snaked over from Cass’s other side. She found our joined hands and spanned them both with her callused fingers.

“Scoot over,” Mariano muttered from behind me.

“I’m coming in too,” said Shane.

In moments, we were all cuddled together. Silently, the Quosalk crawled on top of the puppy pile, laying over us like weighted blankets. No one spoke. I sniffled. Then I sobbed, each tear raw and bitter. We clung to each other, our shared grief pouring out with every shaking gasp.

After what felt like a lifetime, I ran out of tears. I floated in a haze as my frantic, ragged breaths slowly evened out. One by one, we all fell silent. My head felt swollen and hot, my body heavy. That strange almost-numbness that comes before the blood rushes back into a limb that’s gone to sleep.

“I have to pee,” Ria announced.

I snorted a surprised laugh, then groaned and squeezed my thighs together. “Mierda, me too.”

“Me three,” came Shane’s raspy voice. He cleared his throat and said with customer service brightness, “Time to greet the day, everyone! Let’s see what kind of bathrooms they’ve got on this planet.”

Mariano grumbled, and the normalcy of it settled something panicky in my chest.

“Bright morning, Abuele,” I murmured, offering Yin a hand. I liked the Quosalk version of “good morning”. On the ship, it had been hard to claim any morning as “good”, but

“bright” was a guarantee. Now, it felt like it fit. A new phrase for a new life.

Yin took my hand, although xe didn’t put any weight on it as xe rose and patted my fingers. “Bright morning, Estrella.” Xe was looking better, as were the other Quoosalk. Their coloring was brighter, although I’d noticed some rough patches that worried me. But Yin’s eyes were dull, and xe spoke rarely. Most of xem was still at the crashed ship, with Ilya.

Therry’s eyes met mine, and I saw my worry reflected in their silvery depths before xe turned away and wrapped an arm around Yin.

I ran my fingers over the soft, nubby texture of the cloth Zafett had given me. I’d used it as a blanket last night. It hadn’t been cold, but I hadn’t wanted to let it go, like a toddler with their favorite teddy. It was a little embarrassing, how attached I was to it. I’d actually gotten jealous when I saw he’d given cloths to the others as well.

The morning light showed it to be a soft turquoise color with a woven border of salmon pink. Not really my colors. If I’d been picking in a shop, I’d have gone for the brick red one Cass got. But I wouldn’t trade it for anything. I chewed on my lip, holding it out. Should be long enough.

It was. It wrapped neatly around my hips with enough left over to tie it sarong-style, and I instantly felt more comfortable. Didn’t look too bad, I thought, twisting to look myself over. Better than the pants it reminded me of, anyway. And now I could sit without getting dirt where dirt should never go.

“Anybody know how to fold one of these into something. . .less skirt like?” Ria asked, holding up her cloth. The expression on her face said she didn’t hold out a lot of hope in that direction.

“I can do a couple types of tops,” Cass offered. “But turning it into jeans is beyond me.”

“Figures.”

Cass laughed, the sound cutting off with a hiss as she brought her face back to neutral. She'd closed her eyes, and when she opened them to find us all watching her with concern, she gave us a tiny, reassuring smile. "I'm okay, guys. The ointment Zafett used seems to be helping."

"I'm glad," Shane said, but the muscles in his jaw were tight. If he'd been able to, I think he would have resurrected Logan just so he could kill him himself.

I'd have helped.

Svixa's excited voice made me turn, my lips lifting at the happy, incomprehensible chatter. Instead of the child I expected, I was greeted with an eyeful of fur-covered abs. Freaking washboard abs. My gaze trailed up. . .and up. . .to a pair of buttercup yellow eyes.

Zafett had been beautiful by firelight. In the full light of day? I could do nothing but stare. We'd crashed on the planet of cat supermodels. Giant cat supermodels. My attention drifted downwards. *Proportionate* giant cat supermodels.

"*Kezhai!*" Svixa cried, her outthrust hand interrupting my ogling.

Automatically, I took it, and looked up to see her peeking over Zafett's shoulder. She pulled me with her as Zafett walked the two steps to the fire and set her down carefully beside it. It was significantly more than two steps for me, and I trotted beside them like a Chihuahua trying to keep up with a Great Dane.

She looked surprisingly alright this morning. Kids are like that, though. Even alien ones. I was pretty sure from the way her leg was wrapped and Zafett was carrying her around that it was broken, but it didn't seem to dampen her mood. I tried to keep up with her stream of chatter, but I only kind of knew one or two words in the language, so mostly I listened and tried not to be too obvious as I looked around for anything that might be related to a toilet. At this point, I'd happily squat behind a tree—as long as it didn't offend our hosts.

The others wandered over, and they played the game of introductions with Svixa. I kept looking at the door but saw no sign of Revik or Litha. Maybe they were sleeping in? They'd earned it, after last night.

I squirmed, shifting from foot to foot.

Zafett touched my shoulder. "*Ray seh?*" he asked, crouching to look at me with worried eyes.

I shrugged, shaking my head. Those were not words I knew.

"*Ereh elith?*" he tried again. He lightly touched my bandaged feet and groaned; his face twisted as if in agony.

"Oh. *Icks.*" I wasn't in much pain at all, actually. Whatever he'd smeared on my cuts must have had numbing stuff in it. . .or it was magic. Either seemed equally likely at this point. My face burned as I tried to think of a dignified way to tell him I was desperate to piss.

A la mierda. I cupped a hand over my abdomen. Then, squeezing my eyes shut against the humiliation, I moved it down while making a *psssss* sound. Mariano choked on a laugh behind me, and I twisted around, stabbing him with a glare that promised retribution.

Zafett's hand brushed lightly over my shoulder again. I peeked at him out of the corner of my eye. His tail was high and waving, and I got the impression he was biting back amusement. Svixa was unabashedly giggling. I felt a smile curl my lips despite myself. With great dignity—although his tail still waved—he showed us to a set of sturdy, high walled clay bowls on a low shelf near the edge of the covered area.

A few minutes of mostly mimed instruction later, my bladder was finally empty. I ducked out into the rain to empty and rinse the basin in the small nearby stream as Zafett had demonstrated.

I jogged back, not wanting to get completely soaked. Everything bounced and jiggled, and I cursed the bugs for stealing my bra. But I was too relieved by my empty bladder—not to mention still giddy over the upgrade from prisoner to

honored guest—to put too much energy into it, so I was grinning when I got back to the shelter.

*A palapa*, I decided, as I caught my breath and wrung my hair out onto the lush, wine-colored moss that grew all around the shelter. It reminded me of my uncle's home in Yelapa, with its round shape and pointed, leafy roof.

“Bracing, isn't it?” Ria laughed. There weren't enough bowls for all of us, so we'd gone in groups. Now, they sat with Svixa, drying off by the fire. Next to Ria, Salat crouched, staring fixedly at something. Ria followed xyr gaze and paled. “Oh, shit.”

My arms were still raised, squeezing the dripping mass of my hair, as I froze and turned to see what frightened them.

It was Zafett. He was on all fours, staring at. . .me. There was a predatory light in his eyes, in the flared nostrils, in the way he held his body low to the ground as his claws flexed, digging into the adobe-like floor.

Then I couldn't see anything but Mariano's back. I blinked as heat rushed through me, pounding in my ears and pooling confusingly in lower places. My brother postured like a wrestler, protecting me, and I pressed my hands to my chest as I fought the suicidal urge to slap him away. I didn't know if Zafett wanted to literally eat me. . .or eat me in another way. . .and *not* knowing *shouldn't* turn me on.

This was it. My survival instinct was broken. Worn away to nothing. I was doomed.

Slightly damp cloth settled around my shoulders, and I grabbed it reflexively.

“Borrow this until you dry off, hmm?” Shane gave me a squeeze when I leaned into him. “You're too sexy for your own good.”

Understanding hit me. Talk about a wet t-shirt contest. Jesus.

Holding the edges tight over my chest, I pushed up onto my tiptoes, peering over Mariano's shoulder.

Zafett's ears were tipped back in the way I was pretty sure meant embarrassment, and he'd retreated to sit dejectedly on the far side of the palapa. No longer any kind of threat, he looked like a puppy that had been smacked on the nose.

I pushed Mariano, who grunted, but didn't budge.

"Mueve, idiota."

No response.

"Estrella, come join us," Cass's voice was chipper, but her body was tense and her eyes skittered back and forth between my brother and Zafett. "We're learning vocabulary with Svixa."

"I'll be right there!" I called out with forced brightness. Then I pinched Mariano in the back of the arm, hard. "Let it go, fool," I hissed. "Look at him. You scared him off. Not to mention upset Cass."

I stomped to our impromptu classroom muttering about bullies under my breath, Shane chuckling beside me. Mariano took another second to flex before following, stopping twice in the handful of steps to stare back at Zafett, who flinched.

Yin slanted me a look of amusement as xe scooted over, giving me room beside xem.

"Don't you start," I grumbled, trying to get my legs to fold without hurting or flashing anyone. But I was glad to see that sparkle back, even if it was at my expense.

Xe trilled a quiet laugh and patted my knee.

Playing "What's this?" with Svixa was interesting, but my attention kept straying to Zafett, who kept himself occupied on the other side of the palapa. I wanted to ask him questions too—and not only to hear his gorgeous, thrumming tenor voice some more.

When Revik and Litha didn't emerge, I finally asked Svixa about them. Her explanation was confusing and involved a lot of miming, but eventually I understood that they were out in the storm somewhere, not sleeping snug in their bed.



From our game of charades, my best guess for what they were doing was swimming. . .but that didn't make any sense.

Thunder crashed overhead and kept rolling, a barrage of sound that stopped everything until we could hear again. I wanted to ask Zafett if the others going out had anything to do with us. I wanted to see his face, see if he was worried.

But both Mariano and Shane were firmly seated between him and the rest of us, and shook their heads at me when I looked his way too long.

Men were idiots.

A particularly strong gust of wind spattered my back with rain, and I shivered in the muggy heat. Wherever Litha and Revik were, whatever they were doing, I hoped they were okay.

# CHAPTER 10

## REVIK

“**R**ek!” I cursed through gritted teeth, gripping the head biting my thigh.

Litha’s laughter filtered through the rain, and my ears flattened even further. My spear slipped cleanly beneath the skull of the *shej*, and the water around me calmed. Snarling, I pried its teeth loose, tossing the long slippery body into the basket on my back.

I shifted, testing the weight. Enough. The storm would pass in a day or two, and we would hunt more than. Not for *shej*, though. Disgustedly, I scrubbed water into the bites scattered over my legs. It did little to stop the stinging, and I grimaced. No more *shej*. Not for a long while.

I hadn’t had to suffer through a storm hunt since I first moved from my parents’ den. But we weren’t prepared for eight extra mouths—not even small ones—so here I was.

Svixa’s screams for help echoed through my mind as I slogged towards shore, and again I saw the strangers fighting the much larger, stronger creatures. Wounded, but not beaten.

What were a few bites and some rain in comparison to that?

I stepped into the trees, shaking off some of the wet as they sheltered me from the worst of the downpour. I slanted a look at Litha as she dropped down next to me, eyes dancing.

“Good hunt, *sha’vail*?” she purred.

I grunted.

She laughed and turned, presenting me with her basket. My mouth watered at the sight of pale *susuela* berries, anticipating the burst of sharpness. Beneath them, the basket was heavy with ripe *soru* fruit, Svixa’s favorite. My nose wrinkled as I

tied the straps, securing her basket for the return run to the den.

“*Lellek?*” I complained, having seen a flash of yellow roots peeking from beneath the *soru*.

“*Lellek,*” she huffed, flicking an ear. “It will help the wounded regain their strength.” Then she turned, saw my face, and grinned. “Don’t worry, you’re strong enough already. You don’t have to eat it.”

I snorted and nipped her chin, but when I turned to let her secure my basket, I flexed, just a little. The lingering caress of her hand and the intimate brush of her body along mine were my reward. Following her strong, agile body as it raced through the storm-lashed trees, I smiled.

My mates—both of them—were so much more than I’d ever dreamed of. I would never be worthy of them, not of their openness of spirit, their grace, or their clever minds. But I would honor them, and I would willingly brave every storm to prove how grateful I was that they chose to entwine their lives with mine.

I pushed harder, closing the gap between Litha and I. Running in the rain was dangerous. The trees could be treacherously slick, and the wind gusts were unpredictable. But we didn’t slow our pace.

Zaf waited for us at the den, along with Svixa and the strangers. Amused anticipation warmed my chest. Knowing Zaf, they were all half in love with him already.



Something was wrong.

I set my basket down, turning to help Litha with hers even as my gaze swept the *err’laytuh*. Zaf sat alone, his discomfort obvious as he hid his gaze from mine.

I watched him with narrowed eyes as Svixa called out an excited greeting, echoed by a ragged chorus from the

strangers. Whatever else had happened, they'd been learning our language. Good.

I listened to Litha's reply as I slicked my hands down my body, shedding water into the moss. Not as effective as our drying cloths, but they brought comfort to the Hyunans, who seemed embarrassed by their lack of body fur.

It was strange, their fur pattern. But there was something appealing in the way their bare flesh shone in the light. How would it look painted, in the Svestrix way? My eyelids drooped as I envisioned sweeping strokes of red, gold, and blue following the curves of warm brown skin.

Zaf continued to ignore me.

Out of patience, I stalked over. Crouching beside him, I rubbed my cheek against his shoulder and purred.

He turned his face away.

"Zaf..." I growled.

At my warning he tensed, but stubbornly kept silent.

I pounced, caging him in as he fell back with a grunt. His wide, startled eyes finally met mine. I held them, leaning in close, and lowered my voice to a purr.

"Talk to me, *sh'irra*. What happened?"

His eyes slid to the side, and I nuzzled his cheek. Finally, he sighed.

"I lost control."

Disbelief made my purr still in my chest. I twisted to look at him.

"I did," Zaf insisted. Shame twisted his features. "I frightened them. Frightened. . .her." He breathed the last, and Litha's ears tipped our way, listening from her place near the fire.

Now that he was talking, I slipped to the side, running my fingers through his fur as I waited for the rest. There must be some misunderstanding. I knew my love, and he would never act in a shameful way.

“I desire Estrayuh,” Zaf admitted in a rush. “She is so kind, and her body is so. . .She came in from the stream, she was wet, her cloths were—she was—” He shook his head violently and started again. “It doesn’t matter. I should never have—”

I reared back, staring at him in disbelief.

“I didn’t touch her!” my love cried. Then his face fell. “But I frightened her. The Hyunan men had to defend her. From me!” He wailed the last word, his head grinding against the floor.

My ears twitched in amusement as I relaxed. I flicked a glance at Litha, who huffed and nodded before turning her attention back to the strangers.

“You did not touch her?” I confirmed, proud of the evenness of my tone. Not a hint of a chuckle.

Zaf shook his head miserably.

“You did not chase her?”

He slitted his eyes open to glare at me as he shook his head.

I kept my face and voice solemn, although if he could have seen my tail, he would have known my lie. He was so cute when he pouted. “You did not expose your sex to her?”

“Revik!”

I caught the hand that tried to push me away, pressing against Zaf as my voice dropped to an intimate rumble. “I’m only trying to understand, *sha’vail*.” I nipped his ear, licking away the sting. “What did you do that was so terrible?”

He was silent for a long while, then the tension seeped from his body.

“I may have overreacted,” he admitted with some embarrassment.

I rested my head against my fist and looked at him.

“My desire for her does not bother you?” Zaf asked hesitantly, searching my face.

“Of course not,” I huffed. “But we must act with caution. Their mating habits may not be like ours.”

“And she will need time,” he said thoughtfully. “More than her body needs healing, I think.”

“If you’re done,” Litha called, sounding amused. “I think you’re unsettling the strangers. And the *shej* needs seeing to, or our evening meal will not impress our guests.”

I grunted and pushed myself onto all fours. Cleaning *shej* was not as onerous as catching them, but cuddling my mate was a much more enjoyable activity. Zaf’s hand shot up, tangling in my head fur. I stilled, looking down at him.

““We’?” he questioned.

The fingers in my fur tightened when I said nothing.

Estrayuh was watching us from her seat by the fire, those unusual eyes hiding behind thick lashes and a fringe of dark fur. Our gazes met, and she flinched, but didn’t look away.

Brave little thing.

I let myself explore her body. The soft, curving lines were pleasing. Generous. She was staring back at me boldly when my eyes rose again, and the brightness in those brown orbs lit an ember in my gut. I blinked, slowly, and returned my attention to Zaf.

“We,” I confirmed.

I soaked in his delighted laughter like a flower opening to the sun. Giving him a quick nip, I got to my feet. I’d flipped open the basket and was just reaching for my knife when I heard a grunt that sounded like pain. And Estrayuh.

She was moving her head oddly, twisting it in all directions, with a grimace on her face that bared small flat teeth. As she did this, she played with her strange necklace, lifting it and rubbing the flesh beneath.

I remembered—with dawning horror—Svixa telling us that the enemies had attacked the strangers with those necklaces. Somehow, they’d trapped lightning in the things, and called it out at will. I’d forgotten. We all must have, in the rush to see

everyone safe. I'd thought perhaps they were a sign of kinship, a familial marker, since they all wore one. But no. They were an imposition, something used against them by the enemy. Something that pained them still.

Incensed that I'd allowed my new kin to suffer in my own den, I strode to her. Too late, I realized I was both growling and brandishing a knife.

Estrayuh scuttled backward—which was both unnerving to watch and interesting, as there was a fair bit of bouncing—and I stilled.

With carefully exaggerated movements, I laid the knife on the floor while maintaining careful eye contact. Keeping my body low, I shaped my hands into a ring around my own neck.

Her face fur scrunched together, but she stopped fleeing, tilting her head to watch me curiously. She was indeed courageous.

“Hurt?” I asked. *Rek*, she probably had no idea what I was saying.

But her hands rose, touching her own necklace, and she nodded.

I tried to remember what words I knew she knew. “Yes?” I asked, patting my neck where the ring would lie. “Or no?” I jerked my hands apart, as if tearing the thing in two.

Estrayuh was on her feet so fast I barely caught her as she stumbled forward. She needed to take better care. Her feet were wounded, even if Zaf's healing kept her from feeling the pain.

“No!” She cried, shaking her head so hard her fur whipped across her face. “Hurt!” She was pulling at the ring hard enough I worried she might damage herself further.

I placed a hand over hers to hold her still, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

“Kshh, Estrayuh. I will *hellt*.” The word calmed her, and she looked at me with such hope and gratitude I felt as tall as

the mountains. I would *gnaw* the things off—even if it broke all my teeth—for a look like that.

Zaf and Litha crowded in beside me as Svixa explained what we were trying to do with a mix of hand motions and simple words. Together, we looked the awful thing over. It was smooth, like the rock we made our knives from, but darker and without any markings from tools or shaping. It was rounded, as if it had been sculpted from clay, but it was hard and cold like no clay I'd ever felt. Not even the *iztek* we built our dens on was so hard.

“Do you think there is lightning inside, still?” Zaf asked, curiosity tangling with worry in his voice.

“Perhaps,” Litha answered. “They might be connected to the storm, somehow. We might be safer waiting until it passes to try to remove them.”

“No. We do it now.” Estrayuh's flesh was raw and bruised, and I could smell her panic. I would not stand by while my kin suffered.

My mates nodded. Wisest choice or not, our honor would stand for nothing else.

Litha traced a fine crevice with a claw tip, turning the ring gently to confirm there was a matching crack opposite the first.

Zaf tried to pry the halves apart, but the crack was too small. His claws slipped. But his healer's hands were quick and sure, and though Estrayuh gasped, he didn't so much as scratch her.

Still, it had been too close.

I grunted. “Zaf, hold her fur.”

He bundled the dark length in his hands, and I nodded to Litha, who moved behind Estrayuh. She braced herself and took hold of the back of the ring. I did the same in front, locking eyes with the small Hyunan woman. I could feel her pulse pounding against the backs of my fingers.



I set my feet and *pulled*. My muscles bunched, and I snarled. With a painful screech and a small spark, the ring tore in two. I tossed the broken half aside, catching Estrayuh as she slumped.

She let out a noise that had me fighting to keep my cock in its sheath as her warm, round body pressed against mine. I set her on her feet and backed away before I embarrassed myself.

Litha curled a hand around the other woman's waist, cooing softly as Zaf looked over the ring of painful looking marks around her neck.

I shook my head. This tiny Hyunan had all three of us jumping to please her. If the others had the same powers, loosing them on the village would be interesting indeed.

Zaf smoothed salve onto the worst of the wounds and Estrayuh moaned again. I turned away, anger and desire warring within me. I hated that I'd allowed her pain to continue, but if she kept making those sounds. . .

The other strangers were all standing now, fairly buzzing with excitement. I jerked my head at them.

One by one, they came forward. Together, my mates and I removed each of the rings without incident, cleaning and soothing the wounds they left behind.

I waved away their gratitude. When they were all freed of the tools of the enemy—which Litha and Zaf gathered to bring with us to the village—I returned to the abandoned *shej*. The strangers' bodies needed food to heal.

I felt Estrayuh's eyes on me several times, but when I looked up, her gaze would dart away. By the time the savory aroma of roasting *shej* and *lellek* filled the air, my tail lashed with agitation.

# CHAPTER 11

## ESTRELLA

“Am I hallucinating right now?” I asked, sniffing the air as my stomach rumbled.

“If you are, I’m right there with you,” Ria said.

“Salmon,” Shane moaned, sounding almost orgasmic. “Damn, that smells good.”

The Quoosalk were focused on the cooking fire with laser precision. Therry’s black tongue flicked out as if tasting the air, and xe made a breathless sound.

Mariano—who’d never been a big fan of seafood, unlike me—was paying more attention to Therry than the delicious smells. He caught me watching him and flushed as he shifted his gaze to Svixa.

We’d spent the day learning vocabulary with the adorable child—then with Litha when she and Revik returned from gathering food.

I’d felt stupid when they came back with baskets of food. Of course, that’s what they’d been doing. It wasn’t as if they had a walk-in refrigerator stocked and waiting to feed eight extra people. Then I’d felt terrible that they’d had to go out in the storm for our sake.

But they showed no signs of resentment, so I tried to set the worry aside and just be grateful.

We’d shared a couple meals now. That first one was a blur, but everything since had been delicious. Simple dried meats, fruits, berries, and nuts. Simple, but alien.

My favorite so far was the *soru*. The melon looked confusingly like a blue butternut squash, but the flesh inside was tender, juicy, and delicately sweet. I just thought it tasted

*good*, but Cass and Shane—our resident food snobs—agreed it had a flavor between lychee and apricot.

But judging by the smell, whatever Zafett was cooking was going to push it to second place. When Revik had pulled the first one out of his basket, I'd felt a bit faint. Some kind of monster eel, easily three feet long and wider than my hand, with jagged, deep-sea teeth, and spines. Now that they were skinned and roasting, though? My mouth watered.

As though he felt my gaze on him, Zafett looked up from his cooking. My anticipation must have been clear—even to an alien—because he smiled, and his tail rose gracefully to wave behind him.

He really was just unbelievably gorgeous.

He'd finally stopped pouting, for which I was grateful. If Revik hadn't snapped him out of it, I'd have. . . every thought in my head stopped, remembering *how* Revik had snapped him out of it. My body whimpered.

I was officially confused. Last night, I'd thought Litha and Revik were partners. But the way Revik's body had moved over Zafett. . . the way he'd bitten him. . . the way he'd *purred*? That had *not* looked platonic.

Were they. . . polyamorous aliens? My gaze darted between the three of them, cooking together with companionable ease. I forgot how to breathe. That meant—they might—ay, Dios mío, I wasn't strong enough to think about what all that might mean.

A small hand patted my chest, and I remembered to inhale.

Yin was seated cross-legged beside me, and xe patted her lap. When I raised an eyebrow, xe touched my hair and patted xyr lap again.

I felt awkward and a little clumsy as I shifted around. But when my head was cradled in xyr lap, xe started to croon softly, and relaxation washed over me like the tide. My thoughts quieted with every pass of gentle fingers over my head, and I floated in that timeless place between waking and sleep, where there are no expectations, no questions.

Yin's hand stilled.

I blinked as the sounds around me grew distinct. The fire snapped and hissed against the endless fall of rain, and I realized the conversations around me had stopped.

"Food is ready," Yin murmured.

Oh. Oh! I rolled to my feet, squeezing Yin's hand as I helped xem up. "Thank you, Abuele."

Xe squeezed my hand, tugging until I leaned down to look xem in the eyes.

"We choose how to live. We do not have to choose today."

I blinked rapidly as I kissed xem on the cheek, feeling the satiny softness of ultra-fine scales beneath my lips.

We squeezed in around the low table where the Teterayuh took their meals. It was piled high with steaming chunks of eel-salmon, juicy blue *soru* melon, piles of small white berries resembling blueberries—but in bunches like grapes—and what looked for all the world like yellow carrots.

I looked around the very full table and was struck by uncertainty. Breakfast and lunch had just been us and Svixa, since Revik and Litha were out and the menfolk were busy being idiots. Mariano and Shane had calmed down after Zafett had helped get our collars off. Good thing, too. They'd been about ten minutes away from hearing what I'd thought of their behavior.

But now that all three adult Teterayuh were seated around the table with us, things felt more. . . formal. The others felt it too, because no one made a move to start eating.

"Litha. . ." I said, trying to pick the words I needed from the Teterayuh language-soup that filled my head after a day of new vocabulary. "*Zay jore*. . . then *ra jore*? Or. . . *zay la ra jore*?" That was supposed to be, "You eat, then I eat? Or you and I eat?" but by the confused look on her face I was pretty sure I'd fucked it up somehow.

Understanding widened her eyes, and she reached for a bunch of berries, pulling them apart to offer me half. "*Zhai la*

*ra,*” she confirmed. *You and I. “Algot joaral.”*

Okay. I was pretty sure that meant “we eat together”. I was also pretty sure they conjugated their verbs, like in Spanish, but hadn’t figured out the details yet.

Hesitantly, I pulled off one of the berries, encouraged when she did the same. It burst between my teeth, sharp and sour, and my jaw clenched reflexively. After the initial shock, I chewed, delighted. They were a good sour, like lemons or sour candy.

The ice broken, everyone dug in. The Teterayuh ate family style, mostly with their hands. The eel-salmon was served in a big shallow clay dish with several large shells—like clam shells but bigger than my fist—next to it, and I waited impatiently for one of them to take some.

After demolishing a pound of the sour berries, Revik reached out a long arm and scooped up a chunk of the delicious-smelling meat. He used one of the shells, which he placed in front of himself. Then he tore off a piece with two claws—I almost drooled as I watched the tender flesh fall apart beneath his slightest touch—and ate it with every sign of enjoyment.

I was breathing in the fragrant steam, holding my own shell filled with eel-salmon, before he even finished chewing. It was hot enough to burn my fingers, but that didn’t stop me. My eyes fluttered shut as the flavors exploded on my tongue. The meat was tender, buttery, and rich. It wasn’t quite salmon, but damn if I didn’t like this better.

I bit back a moan, not wanting to look like I was trying to star in a porno, and chewed slowly, savoring every second. This was definitely my new favorite alien food.

I must not have been very successful in hiding my pleasure, because when I opened my eyes, everyone was looking at me. I squirmed.

“It’s really good,” I said defensively, as Ria snickered and Cass hid a smile behind her hand. Turning to the Teterayuh, I tried, “*Edda es ray.*”

Svixa giggled, so my attempt to say “it’s good” must have missed the mark. But I got my point across, because Zafett scooped another piece onto my shell and smiled at me.

I barely noticed all the teeth.

Yin and the other Quoosalk fell on the meat in a very dignified feeding frenzy, confirming my suspicion that they were more carnivorous by preference. They ate so much their bellies stuck out and their eyelids half-closed in expressions of bliss.

I took another delicious bite and caught Revik watching me. His eyes, so pale in his dark face, were uncanny, and I shivered. I began to panic under his stare and smiled, awkwardly.

His eyes narrowed.

My mind raced. What could I have done to offend him? The bite of eel-salmon in my mouth suddenly felt like lead. Before he’d done the pounce and purr maneuver on Zafett, he’d been the one to haul in the eel-salmon. I swallowed with effort, and I tried another smile.

“*Relyat, Revik,*” I said sincerely. Then, using one of the few Teterayuh phrases I was confident in, I asked, “What is it called?”

His eyes narrowed impossibly further, neon slits in the inky fur. He exhaled sharply through his nose and turned away, reclining on one arm and munching from a sprig of the sour berries while he steadfastly ignored everyone.

Okaaay. The muscles in his abdomen flexed under his sleek black pelt as he reached for more food, and I looked away quickly.

“*Shej.*”

I blinked at Litha.

She held up a piece of the eel-salmon and repeated, “*Shej.*” Then she offered me one of the carrot things, saying, “*Lellek.*”

I sniffed it suspiciously. It didn't smell like much of anything to me, and I couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing. I had a contentious relationship with vegetables.

I nibbled the end and—at first—was pleasantly surprised. It was a little sweet, kind of like jicama. Then bitterness hit the back of my throat, and I gagged.

I forced myself to swallow what was in my mouth, but pushed away the rest, shaking my head firmly. “*Icks.*”

“*Joarit, ray set sy zhai,*” Litha insisted, pushing it back.

I frowned at her. Her tone sounded like every lecture of “eat it, it's good for you” I'd ever gotten. But that nasty thing would have to make me immortal before I put any more in my mouth. Maybe not even then.

Litha sighed, and I heard a deep, muffled chuckle. Following the sound, I caught Revik rubbing his jaw. I squinted. He was laughing at me, the jerk.

Zafett's ears flicked, betraying his amusement, but all he said was, “*Svixa, joarit va lallek. Iltet ayn zhai tol.*”

I watched in horrified fascination as Svixa ate a whole nasty carrot thing in two quick bites, then did the same with a second one before sticking out a surprisingly long black tongue and making a hacking noise of distaste. She bit into the *soru* melon Litha tossed her with relish.

“It's not bad, actually,” Ria said, munching.

I gaped at her.

“What? I like bitter.”

Shane tried a bite, but immediately put the *lallek* down, betrayal in the curl of his lip. “You like black licorice, don't you?”

Ria just laughed and made “yum” sounds as she chewed.

Beside her, Cass picked halfheartedly at her *shej*. She, like Mariano, had been quiet today.

I replied to something Therry said, but my attention was on my brother and his butterfly. I figured we were all one straw

from nervous breakdowns, with everything that we'd been through. But after that shit with Logan. . .

I was worried about her.

And it was never a good thing when my brother stopped playing. He got all in his head and started acting like a pendejo. Doing stupid shit like blaming himself for things he had no control over, and threatening our only friends on a strange planet.

I needed to get him alone and bully him into talking.

My mouth wanted to keep eating, but after a month of shitty alien shakes I was full—and sleepy with it—all too soon. My eyelids were heavy, and I yawned. It was still light out, but it felt so late. Probably the lack of sleep combined with the all-day crash course in Teterayuh 101. Not to mention the whole, “abducted by aliens” thing.

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, I half woke, cozy and wrapped in my favorite faux fur blanket. Something was vibrating, and I patted around, trying to find the toy I must have left on.

The vibration increased—I must have bumped the button—and I gave up. It was soothing, anyway. I would just charge it when I got up.

The bed shifted beneath me. *Just a small quake*, I thought muzzily. A hand ran soothingly down my back, and I blinked, suddenly awake.

“*Ivresk*,” Zafett whispered apologetically from behind Litha.

Litha, who I was cuddling like she was my own personal teddy bear. Litha, who was *purring* as she held me.

I couldn't move. This was more embarrassing than drooling on a stranger on the bus. I'd climbed all over her. And she just. . . *let me*.

Litha's hand rubbed gentle circles on my back. It felt fantastic. *She* felt fantastic. Her body was strong and gently curved beneath the soft fur, and it felt so good to be held.



*I was still in her lap.*

I scrambled to get up. For a brief moment, her arm tightened. Then she held it wide, allowing me to crawl free.

She was leaning back to back with Zafett, I saw, feeling my embarrassment climb to new heights. *Way to be an imposition.*

Litha stretched, her body forming a sinuous arc, and the flush in my cheeks got hotter. And lower. Her fur was silky, long enough to show a bit of wave in places, and a lovely deep lilac. Thick stripes of a darker tone wrapped around her sides and covered her legs like knee socks.

As her chest rose, it caught the firelight, gleaming warmly. I caught a hint of pebbled nipple and tore my gaze away.

Feverishly, I tried to remember how to say, “I’m sorry.” Then I mentally slapped myself. “*Ivresk, Litha,*” I mumbled into my chest.

Her claw tip pressed lightly against my chin, tipping my head up until I met her eyes.

“*Ix thirit.*” She refused my apology with a soft shake of her head. “*Zhai khezah.*”

I tried not to read too much into it, which was hard to do when she held me hostage with her eyes. The Teterayuh were a physically affectionate people. I’d seen that. So, when she said I was welcome, that’s all she meant, right? Just normal platonic cuddling.

My racing heartbeat disagreed.

Everyone else was bedded down in the nest of pillows we’d shared the night before, and I crept that way. “Uh, so, I should let you get to bed. Sorry, again. I’m just—I’m going to go to bed too. Good night, you guys. Thanks. . .for the cuddles?”

Litha and Zafett tilted their heads, not understanding a word of my babbling, but that was fine. I wasn’t making a whole lot of sense anyway. I waved, and with several concerned looks over their shoulders, they ducked into the bedroom.

I blew out a breath and made my way towards the nest, freezing when Mariano rolled to face me.

He looked me over closely, searching my eyes with a serious expression I couldn't read, then rolled back over without a word. His stiff back shouted, "Don't talk to me."

Pendejo was lucky I was worn the fuck out. We *were* going to talk—and soon.

But not tonight. I untied my sarong and crawled into the cushions between Cass and Ria, pulling it up over my shoulders.

"Have a nice snuggle?" Ria whispered.

Damn it, I could hear her grinning.

"Yes, thank you," I responded primly. Then I poked her in the side. "What were you thinking, leaving me like that? You're supposed to have my back!"

She snorted. "You looked comfy. And she wasn't complaining." Ria shrugged. "Besides, we need them to like us. I say, flirt away, honey. Bat those big, pretty eyes at them and let them cuddle you all they want. If they want in your pants, they'll probably keep helping us."

"Quiet, Machiavelli." Cass's voice was sleepy. "Plot later. Sleep now."

Ria chuckled. Minutes later, only the sounds of breathing and the constant drip, drip, drip of the rain could be heard.

I lay there, staring at the flickering shadows dancing on the ceiling, for what felt like a very long time. Ria's words had made my stomach knot and twist. Was that what everyone thought? That I was flirting on purpose, as some kind of survival technique? *Was* that what I was doing? I didn't think so—hadn't realized I was flirting at all—but maybe on some level? I didn't want to be that person.

But what were the odds of me having real, genuine chemistry with every adult I'd met on this planet? I'd had a lifetime on Earth and I'd never had this immediate, visceral reaction to one person, let alone three. So. . .maybe?

Subconsciously? Jesus, they were giant freaking aliens, and I hadn't even blinked.

I tried to keep my breathing even, but every inhale and exhale felt like dragging my lungs over broken glass. I curled into a tight ball, burying my face in the sweet smelling cushion to muffle my ragged pants. Thoughts chased each other through my mind, pulling darkness with them.

I didn't notice when I finally slipped into unconsciousness.

# CHAPTER 12

## LITHA

Revik pulled me close as I crawled onto the sleeping cushion. Zaf cuddled against my back, and when my fingers bumped his as I stroked down Revik's firm stomach, we wove them together. Their touch, their closeness, settled me.

Estrayuh had seemed to find a similar peace earlier. I'd been surprised when—half asleep—she'd snuggled into me, but when I'd wrapped my arm around her and felt her tension flow away, I couldn't stop the purr that rose.

I had frustratingly little understanding of the strangers' ways. Estrayuh's upset upon waking had been obvious, but I didn't know *why*. The reactions of the others were equally confusing. From most of them, I'd scented amusement, happiness, and even a hint of sorrow. Her brother had not been pleased—for reasons I didn't understand—but he'd bowed to the others' wills and left her with me.

We'd made good progress today, with Svixa's help, and could communicate basic things with the strangers. But I was impatient. I wanted to understand *them*, their hearts and histories, beyond the simple ability to know when they needed food, or to relieve themselves.

"I think the storm will pass tomorrow," Zaf murmured.

Revik's chest vibrated with his grunt.

The patter of rain through the trees had been lightening, the pauses between gusts growing longer. I thought of what waited for us beneath clear skies, and my expression grew grim.

"Saytireka will not be pleased we made the strangers kin."

Revik sneered, and Zaf's hand on mine flexed as he let our mate feel his claws.

“No,” he agreed. “But she won’t deny the bond. Her pride will not allow her to do less than the Svestrix did in a similar situation.”

The stump of my arm ached. Purring rose from either side of me as my mates scented my distress, and Revik’s tail wrapped sinuously around mine. I sank into them, allowing their warmth to return those memories to the past.

“My mother will come around,” Zaf crooned, nuzzling me. “She would have offered kinship herself, if she’d been there that night. It is having the choice made for her that will chafe.”

“It’s what she might do while her pride is stung that I worry about,” I answered. “There are decisions to be made that cannot wait. Wherever the strangers came from, they will be with us at least until the end of *ilot va’regnev*. Journeying through the storms is too dangerous, and if their home was near, we would know of them.”

“They will need somewhere to live. . .” Zaf said thoughtfully.

“Not with us.”

I huffed at Revik’s quick refusal, and he chuckled, squeezing us both.

“Not all of them, *sh’irirra*. They are too many.”

He was right. I knew he was. The food we’d gathered this morning wouldn’t be enough to feed us all through tomorrow. Whether the storm had passed or not, we’d have to go out again, and every time we went out under raging skies we courted danger.

“One of the unmated dens?” I suggested, though regret curled in my chest. “There are two empty in the village. Their care and teaching could be spread among many, then.”

“A good solution,” Zaf said thoughtfully. “What they’ve gone through has left them heart-hurt. It would be best if they could remain together, I think.” I felt his sudden grin against my fur. “Svixa’s going to cry when we tell her she can’t take them all back to her den. She hasn’t complained once about her wounds—too busy chatting.”

“She’s not the only one fascinated by them,” Revik purred. “By one of them, anyway.”

I grinned at him, but Zaf grew still against my back. When the silence grew heavy, I shimmied around until I could see his face.

Zaf’s ears were pinned back in embarrassment, and he did not meet my eyes.

“*Sha ’vail?*”

His jaw firmed, and finally he looked at me. There was a passionate mix of fear, love, and defiance in his beautiful face, and my breath caught.

“I desire Estrayuh.”

I waited for him to continue, but he was silent, his body tense.

Revik grunted. “As do I. And Litha. Estrayuh is brave and kind, and although her furless body is strange, it is pleasing.”

I slanted him a look over my shoulder.

“I know how you look when you want someone,” he rumbled.

I stretched to nip his jaw. Smug, impertinent man. Then I rubbed him with my cheek because he was right, after all.

Zaf’s voice was hesitant. “It doesn’t. . .bother you?”

“No,” I said, turning back and pulling him closer. “Desire is a part of life. Why the concern now? You had no such fears when you met and desired Revik after we’d been mated almost a season cycle.”

Zaf purred at the memory, and Revik cast his hand tenderly down his back, enclosing us both in his strong embrace. Our sweet, sensitive mate was silent for a moment, thinking.

“Something is. . .different with Estrayuh. She does something to me. I lose control when I am around her. Me!” His voice rose as he spoke, but when Svixa snuffled he lowered it to a whisper. “I frighten her. And I worry that you,” he moved his gaze earnestly between Revik and I, “might

think I want you less, if I am aroused by someone so different. I don't!"

"Kshhh," I soothed, running my fingers through his head fur to knead his scalp. "Of course not. Estrayuh is frightened much of the time, *sha'vail*. She is heart-hurt, as you said. I do not think she fears *us*. However strong your reaction to her is, would you press your interest if she rejected you in any way?"

Zaf growled a negative, his fingers flexing against my hip.

"Then be at peace. Estrayuh has proven her ability to make her feelings known." I grinned, remembering her stubborn refusal to eat perfectly good *lellek*. "Now," I continued, rolling back to lean against Revik. "Do you desire me less because I am not as strong as Revik?" I ran my hand along my thigh. "You've said how you love my fur, do you find Revik's less appealing because it is shorter and darker? Should we pluck our bodies until we are smooth as a Hyunan?"

Zaf muffled a laugh, shaking his head. "Am I being foolish?"

"No." The thrumming timbre in Revik's voice made my eyes slide half-shut with pleasure. "You're being thoughtful. As always. It's why I love you."

Zaf rubbed against him, purring. Then he draped himself across us, smirking as he posed languidly. "I thought you loved me for my body," he teased.

I landed among the cushions with a soft *oomph* as Revik twisted, his bulky frame moving with unbelievable swiftness. He pounced on our teasing mate, running one big hand down Zaf's lean, sculpted form. Revik's eyes followed hungrily, watching Zaf's fur shimmer as his breathing grew faster.

"I would love you if you were squat as a *raysheel* and bald as the Svestrix," Rev murmured, cupping Zaf's cheek tenderly. Then he dropped down, circling his hips against the other man as he whispered, "But I do enjoy your gorgeous body."

"And I yours," Zaf panted. His neck arched with a silent moan, and he rolled his head to face me. "And yours."

“We are uncommonly beautiful, it is true,” I hummed, resting my cheek on my fist as I watched them move together.

He laughed, the happy sound turning dark and hungry as his clever fingers made Revik arch, baring his teeth.

Revik snarled soundlessly and flipped Zaf over, giving his perky ass a squeeze before brushing his hand along Zaf’s long tail and settling it over his shoulder. He reached for the pot of *tov* next to our sleeping cushion, coating his fingers in the slippery gel as he rocked his hips, grinding against Zaf.

Zaf moaned, biting into the soft cloth to muffle his moans.

“Let me show you what your body does to me, *shirratoum*. Show you how much you make me want you.”

I squeezed my thighs together as I drank them in, feeling myself growing slippery with want. *Rek*, they were hot.

Revik’s glistening fingers slipped between their bodies, and Zaf keened, a high breathless moan of pleasure.

“Mm-mm,” Revik hummed, giving Zaf a chastising nibble. “You must be quiet. Svixa needs her rest, and we wouldn’t want to wake the strangers. Imagine what they might think, seeing us like this.”

Zaf bucked, the scent of his desire overwhelming.

Revik’s grin was wild as his eyes landed hotly on me. He closed his hand over Zaf’s head fur, lifting his face, and murmured, “Litha, *sha’vail*, come help our mate be quiet. He needs something to do with his mouth.”

Zaf was whispering, “Yes, yes, yes,” under his breath as I scooted up, giving him a place between my thighs. I closed my eyes for the barest instant when his talented tongue split my petals, shivering ecstasy blocking out everything else.

Then his teeth sank into my thigh, and I forced my eyes open enough to watch the two bodies—one dark, one light—dance.

Revik’s muscles flexed as Zaf arched. They moved—rolling, gripping, pushing—so beautiful together I could have come from just watching.



Zaf had no intention of letting that happen, though. His tongue pushed into me, sliding deeper and deeper until the tip touched the spot that made me pant and shake.

I swallowed a cry of pleasure and the three of us moved as one, reaching our peaks again and again with whispered words of love.

When our bodies were limp and exhausted, we sprawled across the cushion, letting the pounding of our hearts slow as sweat cooled in our fur.

Drowsiness was heavy on my limbs when Zaf spoke.

“I want to offer courtship to Estrayuh.”

“She needs time,” I reminded him gently.

“To heal, and to understand what I offer her,” he agreed. “I will not rush her. And I will respect whatever answer she gives. I just want. . .”

“Her,” Revik finished.

Zaf nodded.

“When she is ready, then.” Revik’s voice was a soothing murmur. “We will tell her of our interest.”

“Yes?” Zaf’s eyes held a brimming hope when he looked at me. Mated though we were, there was no need for all of us to pursue Estrayuh if we didn’t all desire her. But my mate was a romantic. And likely already fantasizing about the things we could do to each other with another body added to the mix.

“Yes,” I answered, brushing his cheek with mine. “Let’s hope our little Hyunan finds us as intriguing as we do her.”

# CHAPTER 13

## *ESTRELLA*

I woke to silence. Well, not exactly. Mariano was snoring, Salat was making a sort of huffing, snuffling noise, and in the distance some alien critter called out with an eerie whooo-ck-ck-ck. But the rain—our constant companion since the crash—had stopped.

I pushed to my elbows and peered outside. It didn't feel like I'd slept long enough for it to be morning already, but it must be, because I could clearly see Cass sitting alone by the stream, knees hugged to her chest.

Concern—and my bladder—had me padding over to join her.

I didn't think about what was making the weird noise in the woods.

I definitely didn't wonder if it had big teeth or an interest in exotic meats.

After I'd used the stream, I sat gingerly beside Cass. She didn't turn away, so I leaned my shoulder against hers. The knot of worry in my chest loosened a little when she shifted, letting her body rest against mine.

"Can't sleep?" I asked. I kept my voice low. It was a rare thing, to have privacy.

Cass shook her head.

We sat that way for a while, listening to the little stream.

When Cass finally spoke, her voice was dreamy. "I was going to leave him, you know. I'd made plans, been seeing a therapist. I had a job and apartment waiting for me in Arizona."

I looked at her, seeing the tremble in her fingers before she clenched them into fists.

“I didn’t tell anyone. Not after the last time.”

A breeze smelling of ozone and earth blew a strand of her hair onto her cheek. It stayed, caught by the wetness glistening there. Her face was still and smooth as a porcelain doll’s, though her voice quivered under the strain of her emotions.

“Arizona was going to be my second chance. A fresh start. No more impossible expectations. No more eyes scrutinizing my every move. No father telling me to ‘stop complaining and do my duty’ or that ‘all relationships have problems’ when Loga—when he—”

The mask shattered. Pain wreathed her face and flooded from Cass’s eyes, but the only sound was the rush of her labored breathing.

I pulled her shaking body into my arms, and we clung to each other. I knew those tears. The ones you learned to shed silently, because the person who’d caused them was lying next to you, and if they caught you crying, it would only get worse. I knew the shame of it, the fear. The hopelessness.

I never thought I was “the kind of person” who got into abusive relationships. Everyone said it started at home, and my family wasn’t like that. Loud and invasive at times, but always with love.

But my parents died. And then my grandparents. It had just been Mariano and me, and. . . I’d been lost. Drake had seemed like everything I could have asked for: handsome, a good job, stable. I’d thought he loved me.

I’d been so wrong. And it had taken me too long to claw myself out of the pit he dragged me into.

I held Cass while she cried, gritting my teeth against my own looming memories, and thanked God that Yin had killed that bastard Logan.

Cass sniffled and winced, dabbing at her cheeks with a corner of her sarong. The burns on her face were finally beginning to heal, but the salt probably still stung like a bitch.

*Burn in hell, cabrón. I hope you fucking suffer.*

“A brand-new planet *is* about as fresh a start as you can get,” I offered, testing a smile.

Cass snorted. “I guess so.” Her mouth tipped up, and she giggled.

“But maybe next time you could shoot for somewhere with indoor plumbing?” I suggested, catching a whiff of myself.

Her giggles grew, then she was wheezing, clamping her hands over her mouth to hold in the delirious sounds.

She said something—I could barely understand her through the snickering—but it might have been, “That *would* be fresher.”

I started to laugh too, and we collapsed together, shushing each other and cackling.

Eventually, we settled down. She snorted as we worked to catch our breaths and almost started the cycle all over, but we managed to pull it together. Miraculously, no one popped their head out of the palapa to see what was causing the ruckus.

Cass flopped onto her back, looking up into the sky with a small, peaceful smile on her face.

I was smiling too. I always felt clean after a good cry. Sort of scrubbed out, emotionally.

“They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

I followed her gaze, freezing under the glare of two angry moons.

The quiet emptiness turned into a vacuum, locking me in place and stealing the air from my lungs. I couldn’t look away.

Two moons.

It wasn’t morning. I was a fucking idiot.

Two. Moons.

They were growing, swelling until they were all I could see.

Two. *Fucking*. Moons!

“Estrella?”

I closed my eyes, but they were still there, branded on my eyelids.

“Hey, hey. Breathe with me, ok? In...out...in...”

Vaguely, I became aware of my hand rising and falling. Cass held it pressed to her chest as she breathed deeply. The movement was hypnotic, and I focused on it. Gradually, the sickening sensation of spinning faded, and I blinked.

“There you are. What can you see?”

Cass’s voice was soothing, but her words made no sense.

“Five things you can see, Estrella. Can you see me?”

I nodded, trying to force my brain to focus. My vision wavered and jumped as I tried to find something recognizable. “You,” I said, my voice a croak. “The palapa. Stream. Uhhh, trees?”

“Good. Excellent. What can you feel?”

I stumbled through my answer, my hand gripping hers like a lifeline. What I could hear came easier, and by the time I was registering my “haven’t brushed my teeth in a month” mouth flavor, I’d mostly stopped shaking.

I let out a slow breath and squeezed her hand. “Therapy, huh?”

“So much therapy,” Cass agreed, her face sympathetic.

I arched my back, feeling like I’d wrestled a bear. Pinche anxiety attacks wiped me out.

“Can I ask what brought that on?” Cass asked. “It’s okay to say no.”

I poked the dirt, feeling it gritty against my fingertips. “It’s stupid.” Cass made a disagreeing sound, and I sighed, steadying myself. “The moons. I used to watch documentaries sometimes, at night when I couldn’t sleep. A lot of serial killers—”

Cass snorted again, quieter this time.

“But other stuff too. Animals, food. Space.” My fingers tripped over a root, and I brushed the dirt away, following it. “Mars has two moons; did you know that? And this place is red,” I tapped a waxy leaf, making it bounce. “But the pictures that robot took didn’t look anything like this.”

I chewed on my lip until I tasted blood. “We’re so far from home, Cass. Unimaginably far. When I see those moons—” My chest tightened and I forced myself to take long, slow breaths. “It’s like they’re screaming at me, ‘You’re never going home!’ Everything I knew, everything I loved, hell, everything I hated. Gone. Lost forever.”

I wiped my fingers off and ground the heels of my hands into my eyes. “Tonta, like I said. I know all that already.”

“It’s not stupid.” Cass’s voice was solemn. “No eres estúpida. All this—” She waved to the sky, then flapped her hand, making me smile, just a little. “I’d be more worried about you if you weren’t freaking out.”

I sniffled one last time and looked over my shoulder with exaggerated movements. “You mean like Mr. Cool As A Cucumber Shane? Or All Jokes No Fear Ria? You’re right. They’re probably going to snap and kill us all.”

Cass grinned at me as heavy drops began to splatter from the sky. “Until they do, let’s get some more sleep. I have a feeling things aren’t going to calm down for a little while.”

We helped each other up and hurried towards the palapa as the rain came down with more intention. As we snuggled back into our nest with the others, I whispered, “What do you think the chances are that they have therapists on this planet?”

Cass’s body shook with quiet laughter.

I drifted to sleep, smiling.



In the morning—really the morning, this time—I felt like one gaping, raw wound. As if every nerve had been pulled from my body to wave in the air, exposed.

The straps of my top rubbed my shoulders, and I wanted to go after them with a knife. Shane said something nice about my body, and I wanted to bury myself in the cushions until I disappeared. Mariano said *nothing*, and *not* screaming at him took a monumental effort.

The rain continued, but as if it recognized my delicate state, its fall was soft. Gentle, even.

I decided to help with breakfast—it being the lesser of two evils. Talking was pretty much guaranteed to be a disaster in my current mood. Cooking—for me—was only slightly less likely to end in tragedy, but since the Teterayuh seemed to stick to raw or already smoked food in the morning, I figured I couldn't do too much damage.

I cut myself. Just a slice across my palm, but it bled pretty good. With all my other cuts and bruises, I barely noticed. But it caused a slight panic among our hosts.

I hadn't been paying close attention—too busy fantasizing about the chilaquiles Mariano had promised me a lifetime ago—and my knife slipped. In my defense, the rind of the *soru* was hard, and neither the knives we'd stolen from the bugs nor the ones the Teterayuh had were built for human hands.

Afterward, I was “encouraged” to rest next to Yin by a very grumpy Revik, while Zafett hovered nearby with his magic ointment. I'd glared at Litha—who was laughing, so rude—then proceeded to pout.

Xe wasn't interested in talking either, so we formed a little island of quiet amidst the conversations eddying around the palapa.

I spent my time drilling holes in Mariano with my eyes. He pretended to pay attention to this morning's episode of See and Say, but there was definitely something wrong in that fool's head. I was hoping if I glared hard enough the wrongness would fall out.

Yin spent xyr time staring into the jungle.

We weren't going to be able to put off the trip back to the ship—and Ilya—for much longer. Storm or not, alone or not,

Yin would go to xyr child soon.

Svixa was quizzing her star pupils—Salat and Shane—on their Teterayuh over the remains of our breakfast, when she suddenly went still, her eyes fixed on the misty jungle and her ears quivering.

“*T’tonset!*” she cried. Zafett kept her from leaping onto her broken leg with a hand on her shoulder, but she made a mewling sound deep in her throat and strained, hand outstretched.

The rest of us exchanged confused looks. Litha and Revik got to their feet, their faces serious before they turned to face the trees, their backs to us.

Five Teterayuh dropped to the ground just outside the palapa, their bodies steaming from exertion. The two in the middle glanced around only long enough to see us, still and seated, before rushing to Svixa.

They wrapped her in their arms, murmuring soothingly as our cheerful teacher melted into a wounded child, crying and squirming as she held them tight.

Her parents, I guessed. Her fathers, going by the prominent bulges that had whipped by at eye level as I sat, frozen. Curiosity about that flitted through my mind, but I set that aside in favor of watching the other three Teterayuh, who stood tensely alert, facing off with Revik and Litha.

The newcomers were listening to Litha, but watching us. The weight of their attention didn’t give me a good feeling.

Since I only understood one word out of twenty, I watched them back. The one on the left was stocky, like a slightly taller and less ripped version of Revik. His fur was tan and almost. . .fluffy? It was tipped in coral, and thick bands of white ringed his tail. Adorable, really. The array of weapons strapped to his body—not to mention the “ready to pounce at any moment” stance—were somewhat less cute.

The one on the right was tall, like Litha. Were women larger in general among the Teterayuh? Her fur was short and dense looking. The other Teterayuh I’d met all had markings



of some kind: Revik had a blaze in the center of his chest, Zafett had points like a Siamese cat, and Litha had subtle stripes that ran the length of her back. This Teterayuh's fur was unmarked, but also the most eye-catching. Her coloring split evenly down the middle, a pale smoky gray on one side and a purple a few shades deeper than Litha on the other. Even her eyes were different. A sunburst radiated from the center on the gray side, while the eye surrounded by violet fur was an even mustard yellow.

She, too, wore multiple weapons and crouched with an aura of watchful readiness.

The middle Teterayuh was between the other two in height, his fur medium length, orange with dark brown feet. It wasn't the soft orangey blond of a Earth cat, but bright, saturated. The effect was cartoonish. He wasn't cute or funny, though. The weight of his glare made me recoil as if he'd shoved me.

But none of them reached for a weapon—or bared their teeth—as they listened to Litha's recounting of our meeting with focused intensity. Both Svixa and Zafett cut in occasionally, adding to the story. Revik nodded twice, but otherwise was an immovable, silent wall at Litha's side.

At one point, all the newcomers started talking at once, swiping their hands over their heads as if swatting away cobwebs or bugs. The only word I understood was “*vath*”, but I had no idea why the sky would upset them so much.

Litha spoke quickly, and their postures relaxed by degrees. Orange Boy's aggression lowered, but hostility radiated from him as he continued to run his eyes over us, upper lip trembling. Finally, the other two exchanged a long look, and the bi-colored woman nodded.

The fluffy tan Teterayuh transformed completely. Suddenly relaxed and cheerful, he swept Revik up in an embrace the big grumpy bastard returned with surprising affection.

Yin's fingers trembled, and I let out a gusty sigh. Surely if they were going to kick us out there would be less hugging? At some point we'd all reached out, catching each other's

hands as we waited on the judgment of these new aliens. Now, relief rippled through us like rings on the water.

Litha and the other woman exchanged a more reserved but still friendly greeting, briefly touching foreheads. Orange Boy nodded to her but didn't move any closer, his eyes staying warily on us.

Was he afraid of us? Really?! What did he think we were going to do, smack him on the nose with a newspaper? I fought the inappropriate urge to roll my eyes.

Zafett and the two men moved forward, also sharing greetings. Svixa's dads murmured gratefully as they pressed foreheads with Revik and Litha. Svixa herself—effortlessly carried in one of her fathers' arms—chattered expansively. From what I could gather, she felt Litha's story was missing some dramatic flair.

Then everyone's eyes turned to us.

I'd never felt tinier in my life than right then, sitting on my ass on the ground with eight giant aliens looming over me. It wasn't a comfy feeling.

I stood, feeling the others rise as well. That was marginally better. I groped for something to say, but every Teterayuh word I'd learned flew out of my head in a single instant.

*"Kezhai,"* greeted Shane.

I echoed him along with the others, shooting him a thankful look out of the corner of my eye.

*"Kezhai, tetezha'a,"* said the fluffy, tan Teterayuh man. His tone was friendly, and his eyes sparkled.

The man was a walking, talking, golden retriever. One who could flip a switch and kill you, maybe, but still. I could feel my lips curving just from his presence.

*"Relyat yulkal sy Svixa reshatal. Kurz sah ritsah."* He pressed his hand to his chest.

*Thank you, something something, Svixa, something something. My name is Kurz.* Okay, not doing too bad so far. I nodded.

“*Kaloi edda ritset*,” he continued, with a hand on the bicolored woman’s shoulder.

Svixa’s fathers were Arlan and Tonkal, and Orange Boy—who only grunted when I politely greeted him—was Arvel. We introduced ourselves, and I held very still as a succession of furry foreheads brushed against mine.

I felt eyes on me as I blew out a breath full of tension and looked up into a neon stare. Self-conscious under the weight of Revik’s attention, I rubbed my feet together. *Yes, I know I’m a great big chicken. Don’t rub it in.*

“*Sethital. Rai chal nais eh a’sharalaytuh. Va teteraila sy zhai liyetal.*” Kurz said with an expansive gesture, inviting us into the jungle.

My panicked gaze shot back to Revik, then bounced to Litha and Zafett. The only word I’d understood had been “*sethital*”, or “come”. I didn’t want to go with the murderous golden retriever, not without them. Especially not with Orange Boy Arvel breathing down my back.

Revik grunted a few words to the newcomers, who settled into the easy squats I was beginning to recognize as the Teterayuh equivalent of leaning against a table. They watched avidly as Zafett moved to kneel before us.

“*Teterayuh*,” he said, waving his hand to indicate the newcomers, “*shev itsyk.*” He pointed in the direction Kurz and the others had come from.

Between his hand motions and the pieced-together Teterayuh that probably sounded like he was talking to a two-year-old, I got the picture. They wanted to take us to their. . .village? City? I didn’t know what to expect from the place the rest of the Teterayuh lived.

Zafett and the others would come with us. The amount of relief I felt at that news was overwhelming.

“Time to go to town, y’all. Better be on our best behavior.” Ria smiled, big, and happy, and just a little dangerous.

“No.” Yin stepped forward, back straight. “*Ix.*”

I watched xyr tail lash and prayed fervently. *Please, Abuele. Don't melt anybody.*

Yin walked to Svixa and her dads, who stiffened briefly but watched her with curiosity. Yin reached out and took the hand Svixa offered. "Child," xe said in Teterayuh. With xyr other hand, Yin lightly touched the arm of the nearest man. "Arlan child."

Yin wrapped both arms around xyrself, shrinking inward, and my heart broke all over again. I curled an arm around her shoulder, glancing over when my hand met Therry's. The family had all moved forward as one, and now stood united around Yin.

"Yin child Ilya," Yin rasped out, xyr voice breaking on Ilya's name. "Ilya—" Xyr mouth snapped shut, and xe pointed shakily in the direction of the crashed ship. "Yin go."

The Teterayuh's eyes widened.

Tonkal hissed and let out a rapid stream of angry sounding Teterayuh until Litha cut him off. Her eyes were mournful as she knelt before Yin, placing her hand on my Abuele's chest and leaning down until their foreheads touched. I didn't need to understand the words she spoke to know their meaning. "I'm so sorry for your loss," sounds the same regardless of language.

I watched understanding replace the anger and fear in the eyes of the others until it became too much, and I let my lids slip shut.

*"Aral eh Ilya."* Revik stated, his commanding tone leaving no room for discussion. *"Ka, tetezha'a naisaer eh va ralaytuh. Arit. Jipit va teteraila."*

We were going back to bury Ilya. Finally.

# CHAPTER 14

## ESTRELLA

**W**e left fifteen minutes later. Kurz, Kaloi, and Arvel went one way, escorting Svixa and her dads, and we went the other. I wasn't sure what all Revik had said to them, but I thought the plan was to go to the village after Ilya's funeral.

Being at the mercy of people you couldn't understand—all the while crossing your fingers that they had your best interests at heart—sucked. I'd have let some nasty worm crawl into my ear if it meant I'd understand what the fuck the Teterayuh were saying.

Litha, Zafett, and Revik had been unbelievably wonderful. In the day and a half we'd been here—wait, surely it had been longer than that? But no. We'd crashed in the middle of the night and been here one night since then. The days felt so long, and not only because they were full of *new*. Were there more hours in a day here? *Of course, there are*, I mocked myself silently. *It's not as if Earth was the blueprint for some planet galaxies away. We're just lucky we can breathe the air and eat the food.*

I frowned, ducking under a magenta fern frond that I'd learned to avoid—its edges were jagged and sharp. What had I been thinking about? *Mi mente empezaba a divagar*. Not even my thoughts wanted to get where we were going.

I slapped my forehead, then winced and shook my head at the questioning glances that drew. The Teterayuh! I'd been thinking about how wonderful they were.

When they'd appeared out of the storm that first night and saved us from the bugs, they'd seemed like giant furry superheroes. Slightly terrifying superheroes, but then, most superheroes were, if you thought about it.

Everything they'd done since had reinforced those feelings of awe and gratitude. Secretly, I hoped to discover a tiny little flaw or two as I got to know them better. I wasn't a nice enough person to hang out with living saints. I could be snarky, petty, and selfish. None of which I personally considered flaws, but I was willing to admit they weren't *nice*.

Zafett paused ahead, ears flicking as he listened. A beam of sunlight broke through the trees, illuminating him in a shimmering halo.

*Please be a fallen angel*, I thought, sacrilegiously. Not *evil*, but a little. . .tarnished. Enough that my messed-up ass—and my family—could find a place here. Not that I had any intention of judging the rest of the Teterayuh based off of the few I'd met. I was inclined to think positively of them, but Arvel's glaring encouraged me to be wary.

The rain started out as a soft drizzle, but by the time my legs were burning from exertion, the only wetness on my skin was sweat.

My feet had been throbbing since we stepped out of the palapa. Zafett treated us all with another dose of his magic ointment before we left, bandaging our feet for the journey, but there was just no way to make tromping through the jungle on already sliced up feet anything but awful.

No one was in the mood to chat. Going back to the ship was bringing back things none of us wanted to remember, and the closer we got, the sadder I felt.

Not even my first clear view of the planet that was our new home distracted me from the creeping grief. Which was a testament to my ability to wallow, because the jungle was truly extraordinary.

Massive trees surrounded us, though they had little in common with the familiar giants of the redwood. They rose on legs that would have taken both Mariano and I to reach around, living columns that stretched into the air ten or fifteen feet before coming together to form enormous super trees. The branches that spread from the jungle giants were solid enough they didn't move as the Teterayuh ran along them, and they

twisted and wove around each other in a latticework so complex it was impossible to see where one tree ended and another began.

It was breathtaking. A tropical cathedral whose beauty put stone and stained glass to shame. I pushed aside a low-hanging vine, inhaling the heady, sweet perfume of its flowers.

I felt so small, as though I'd eaten from the wrong side of the mushroom. Everything was *larger* than it felt like it should be. Even the blossoms trailing from the vines overhead were so huge I couldn't span them with both hands.

The Teterayuh led us through the jungle, towering over us like Miss Clavel with her brood of schoolgirls. They stayed constantly on the move—alert and watchful—one taking point, one following behind, and one ranging above in the high road, as I decided to call it. Every so often, at some signal I didn't recognize, they switched.

Revik and Litha moved through the forest like ghosts, all but invisible as they slipped between black branches and deep purple shadows.

Zafett glowed as if a spotlight followed him at all times.

I knew we neared the crashed ship before I saw or smelled anything—not that I was likely to smell anything over the flowers, wet earth, and body odor that filled my nose—because the alien critters I heard but never saw were suddenly silent.

The ship was smaller than I remembered. In my mind, it had taken on the size of a city-killing flying saucer. In reality, it was the size of one of those houses they built in the suburbs. The ones that doctors named Chad bought for their blonde wives and two kids. The kind of house with a formal dining room, two living rooms, a TV room, and a pool in the back.

Imagining the bugs in khakis and cardigans, bitching about the president of the HOA helped with some of the shakes.

Yin wouldn't let us help get Ilya out. Xe and the other Quoosalk disappeared into the mangled wreck, leaving us in the oppressive silence.

Mariano stared at the ship with fists clenched, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“Hey,” I said softly, bumping him with my shoulder.

He stepped away and folded his arms over his chest.

*I will not start a fight at a funeral.*

I sucked my teeth, so he knew he'd be answering for his bullshittery later, and turned away with a huff.

Between the hike and the humidity, I was a sweaty mess. I lifted my hair, sighing at the small relief as a breeze whispered through the heavy wet strands clinging to my neck. My spine popped, and I leaned into the stretch, arching my back.

Someone whimpered.

I looked around, concerned, but no one was actively crying. Zafett was hunched over and pointedly looking everywhere *but* at me, though.

I straightened slowly, narrowing my eyes. Had he. . .? Testing out the theory, I turned and bent at the waist, fingers pressing my thighs and calves in a much-needed massage.

It was a strangled groan this time. I peeked and caught Zafett in the same “ready to pounce” position that had so ruffled the boys’ feathers that first day.

Oh, yeah. He was checking me out, all right.

“Naughty,” Ria whispered.

I straightened with a little more slink than absolutely necessary, keeping my face turned towards her with an effort. “Complaining?” I asked, hands on my hips.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, angel.” She winked. Then her eyes focused beyond me, and the wickedly appreciative glint faded.

I turned, feeling the weight of grief settle onto my chest once more as I watched the procession of Quoosalk pick their way from the wreckage, burdened by Ilya’s small body.





My memories of the funeral itself were hazy, brief moments that my overwhelmed mind allowed to linger.

The three Quoosalk carrying Ilya's body with reverent care.

Revik's eyes searching the sky as Litha refused to allow us to enter the clearing Yin chose as Ilya's burial place.

The three small trunks that formed the cradle we finally laid xyr body to rest in, and the flash of claws as the Teterayuh dug into the dark soil.

Glossy red leaves wrapping around Ilya's body, turning the grave into a pool of blood on which white blossoms floated like macabre lilies.

Dark, gritty dirt caked under my fingernails.

Yin lying motionless on the freshly turned soil, tears rolling down xyr scales.

Shane's voice, thick with emotion as he sang a low, sad rendition of "Over the Rainbow".

Sorrow.



My arm was asleep. I couldn't feel my hip either, but my knees and the small of my back ached enough that I was sure it would be sore as hell too. I hadn't slept—my eyes were hot from staring at nothing—but it felt like I was waking up, foggy and slow.

The others were beginning to stir in that mysterious synchronicity that happens sometimes, and the whispers of their movements grounded me.

I blinked, trying to find a spare drop of moisture to ease the scratchiness, and my wandering stare fell on Litha.

She, Zafett, and Revik had kept themselves apart while we mourned Ilya—helping, but not interfering. She didn't smile now, didn't move at all, but I felt drawn to her. I was halfway to my feet before I realized what I was doing, moving on an instinctual need to feel safe.

Somehow, I knew if I went to her—went to them—they'd hold me, and nothing could hurt me in their arms.

Yin's hand landed on my knee, and I stopped thinking about myself.

“Come, Abuele. Let me help you up,” I murmured. It felt strange to speak, as if we'd been laying on Ilya's grave for years, not the hours it had probably been.

Yin closed xyr eyes for a long moment. Xe looked muted, their scales bleached out to old denim rather than the vibrant indigo I was used to. When Yin rose, putting real weight on the hand I offered, xe moved with a stiff, aching slowness.

Burying xyr child had aged Yin.

But Yin's silver eyes were clear and steady when xe looked up, and xyr head tipped with dignity towards the Teterayuh. “*Relyat*. It is time. We go.”

Salat and Therry fell into step beside Yin as we again began our march through the jungle. We were still quiet, still somber, but the pall hanging over us had lifted. Ilya was resting now, free of the cage that had stolen xyr life.

I slipped back, moving to Mariano's side. He looked at me for a split second, then focused on the ground directly in front of his feet. I let it pass. I could be patient.

Gradually, I slowed my pace, letting distance grow between us and the others. Revik, prowling behind us, tilted his head in question, but I waved him off.

My brother wouldn't talk about his *feelings* if anyone else could hear him, and the pendejo clearly had things to get off his chest. He'd barely said a word since the fight. He hadn't even sung with us at the funeral. Enough was enough.

Time to poke the bear and see what happened.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I hissed in Spanish. A paragon of sensitivity, that was me.

“We just left a funeral,” he gritted back, glaring. At least he was making eye contact. It was a step in the right direction. “Have some respect.”

“You have some respect, cabrón! Using a funeral as an excuse. Shameful. We both know something’s eating at you. Talk.”

“Jesus Christ!” he burst out. When heads turned towards us, he lowered his voice to a hiss, still speaking in rapid Spanish. “What the fuck do you expect? Am I supposed to prance around, singing a happy little tune? Things are shit, if you hadn’t noticed.”

I ran my tongue around my teeth, then pursed my lips. “I don’t know, I guess I expect you to act like a grown ass man instead of a petulant child. But if you want to be a little bitch, I’m not going to stop you. Come see me if you want to pull your head out of your ass.”

I stomped ahead, ignoring his muttering. I knew my brother. He couldn’t handle not having the last word. He’d be talking to me soon.

He lasted half an hour. He hung back during the walk and was sullen and withdrawn when we took a break. We were continuing our trek when he stopped me, his hand on my arm.

I raised an eyebrow at him coolly.

“Don’t bust my balls, hermana.”

I snorted, but waved the others on, walking beside him until there was enough distance for a quiet conversation. Tension radiated from Mariano, and I bit back the questions I wanted to ask. This would go better if he started it.

“Lo siento.”

The words were so quiet, I thought I’d imagined them at first. “Qué?”

“Fallé. Lo siento mucho.” My brother turned his head, but not before I saw the tears falling down his cheeks. He pushed his hands up his face, wiping them away, and gripped his hair in both fists. Still in Spanish, he choked out, “This is all my fault.”

I grabbed his arms, prying his fingers loose before he snatched himself bald. “¡No mames! ¿De qué hablas? Look at

me, Mariano.”

He refused, squeezing his eyes shut with his head twisted away.

“Mariano Julian Alfonso Parker, if you don’t tell me what’s going on in that big stupid head of yours, I’m going to pee on you while you sleep.”

His nostrils flared, but he kept his teeth stubbornly clenched.

“Every night, asshole.” I pinched the back of his bicep, twisting until he yelped. We glared at each other, and I didn’t back down. “Háblame.”

He dropped his gaze, but finally the words came out. “I promised to get us out. To get us home.” He’d started slow, the words dragging out of him, but they sped with his breathing until they blended together. “I failed. Now we’re never going to go back. We’re never—you’ll never—” He snapped his mouth shut, grimacing as if the words he didn’t say were bitter on his tongue.

*Madre de Dios, save me from macho idiots.*

“Are we in a cage, hermano?” I paused long enough for him to open his mouth, then continued, louder. “Do you see a cage anywhere? No, you do not. Why is that?” I pretended to think about it, then widened my eyes and filled my voice with saccharine amazement. “Ay, it’s because we’re free! *As you promised.*”

He turned his back on me, and I threw my arms up in frustration. “What else could you have done? Single handedly hijacked the *spaceship*? Flown us back to Earth? Did you get your *spaceship flying license* and not tell me about it?!”

“I’m supposed to protect you!” he shouted, getting in my face. His chest was heaving, and his eyes. . .his eyes were full of torment that had had years to grow.

My heart cracked. I didn’t let it show, though, as I pushed back into his space, poking him. “You don’t get to do that. It’s not your fault shit happens. Not your fault we were abducted. Not your fault I married an asshole. You’re not fucking God.”

“Ayyyyy...” he muttered, lip curling.

“Fuck you,” I spat. “You could have died. Almost did—*protecting me*. We’re supposed to take care of *each other*, cabrón. I don’t need you to rescue me like a fucking princess in a tower. I need you to be here with me.”

I was breathing hard now, tears I refused to spill burning behind my eyes. “This shit—all of it—I can’t even wrap my head around it most of the time. We’ve lost everything. I can’t lose you too.”

My face was suddenly smooshed into his chest. I wrinkled my nose at the sweaty brother cooties, but my arms were just as tight around him as his were around me.

“I’m sorry.” Mariano mumbled into my hair. Then he dragged in a breath. “You don’t think I could’ve—”

“No!” I kicked him in the shin. Ow. I needed to get some shoes. “You did everything you could. I’m proud of you. Mamá would be proud of you.”

His heart was racing as he squeezed me tight, and I coughed.

“Now get off me, fool. You need a shower—yesterday.”

He twisted, laughing like an idiot as he tried to push my face into his armpit.

I gagged, loudly and with much drama, as I pushed him away. We bickered and teased as we worked to catch up with the others, and I’d never been so happy to be annoyed by my own brother.

I caught the glint of Revik’s pale eyes in the trees as we walked—he’d stayed back during my little “intervention” with Mariano—and the look in them made me stumble.

Hot. His eyes blazed like a torch. I had no idea why, or what he was thinking, but I couldn’t move until he blinked and leapt to another branch. Sweat broke out all over my body that had nothing to do with the heat or humidity, and I shuddered.

What the fuck was going on with this day? It was just one thing after another.

I needed a nap, a shot, and an orgasm. Preferably not in that order.

# CHAPTER 15

## ESTRELLA

What I got was new blisters and a painful rash on my inner thighs.

I'd begun to dread the visit to the village as we walked. I was exhausted. Emotionally, physically, I was ready for a damned nap—not more adventures in diplomacy meets charades.

I was trudging along, feeling the same timeless, brainless ennui that settles in during grid-locked traffic, when a gasp brought me back to the moment. I'd been staring blankly at Ria's backside—which was a pretty great view, to be honest—but what spread out before us put even her sweet cheeks to shame.

“Madre de Dios. Estamos en el cielo.” Mariano put words to my awestruck thoughts.

An oasis lay before us. Steaming, stone lined pools waterfalled down an incline, draining into a burbling stream. Vines thick with flowers trailed from a circle of tree legs, enclosing the hot spring in an intimate bower. It wasn't until I felt the cushiony give of moss beneath my feet that I realized I stood next to the lowest pool.

Its steam kissed my face, the scent rich with minerals but lacking the rotten-egg whiff of hot springs back on Earth.

I turned disbelieving eyes on the Teterayuh. “I thought—weren't we going to the village? Ah. . .*ar ralaytuh?*”

Litha tilted her head, and her soulful eyes slipped to Yin and back. She nodded. “*Araer eh va ralaytuh. Oi va sethitzik.*”

*Sethitzik* was morning. We would go to the village in the morning. Relief rushed through me; the wave so strong I swayed.

Litha's hand cupped my waist, steadying me.

*"Khezatal eh a'javuh, tetezha'a."* Zafett kept his voice low as he gestured invitingly towards the pools. *"Zha'a javatal. Airet keshal."*

My eyebrows furrowed. I got that we were supposed to get into the water—and I was *so* for that—but I hadn't actually understood much of what he *said*. There might have been something about sleep? I glanced at Litha.

*"Javit,"* she said, nodding towards the pools. Her eyes lingered on Yin once more, their brightness dimming with sympathy. She touched my chest, palm flat over my heart. *"Keshit."*

My outstretched fingers didn't span the back of her hand, but I held it there, bowing my head over our joined hands. *"Relyat,"* I whispered.

"Why do they keep telling us to sleep?" Ria asked.

"I think—" I started, but had to clear my throat before I could continue. "I think they're trying to tell us to rest our hearts. They're not taking us to the other Teterayuh until tomorrow."

Silence.

"Well, damn." Ria chuckled, but it sounded wet. "These aliens are smooth as hell."

Yin gestured to Zafett, and he knelt before xem. Xe took his head in xyr small hands, pressing their foreheads together for a long moment. Then, without a word, xe and the other Quoosalk slipped into the lowest pool. They let out blissful-sounding hums before sinking below the surface.

I stepped back, letting go of Litha's hand with regret. Something niggled at me, and I squinted into the trees. "Revik?" I asked, trying to remember when I'd seen him last.

*"Edun,"* Litha said. *Food.*

Oh. Well, at least it wasn't raining this time.



I untied my sarong, then hesitated. The tunic needed to be washed as badly as I did, but neither it nor I would get clean if I kept it on. “Turn around, Mariano.”

“You turn around,” he snapped back, indignant.

I sighed. “Just do it. You too, Shane.”

Shane turned his back without complaint, pulling off his tunic as he went.

It was hypocritical of me, but I watched. His back was long and leanly muscled, with a phoenix tattooed in sweeping lines up his spine.

Mariano noticed the direction of my stare and opened his mouth—probably to call me out.

Suddenly, I missed mopey Mariano.

Cass and Ria stepped up to flank me, arms crossed over their chests, and he rolled his eyes. “Really?”

“Yes,” Cass said firmly.

He turned around, muttering, and after a moment Litha and Zafett did the same.

Smart and sweet was a pretty unbeatable combination.

The girls and I exchanged a few glances, agreeing to leave the lower, larger pool to the Quoosalk, Shane, and Mariano. I hadn’t shared a bath with my brother since we were kids, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.

The water was blissfully hot. It stung as it hit my cuts—I sucked in a breath at the burn on my chafed inner thighs—but the sting quickly faded. The heat soaked into my sore muscles, and I dropped to the bottom, the constant pressure from the planet’s gravity slipping away. The feel of the water against my itchy scalp was damned near orgasmic.

Mariano was right. This was heaven.

I snuck a peek at the lower pool. Just to check on the Quoosalk, I promised myself. They were floating, their translucent eyelids closed in pleasure, moving through the water with lazy swishes of their tails.

Shane rose, biceps flexing as he slicked his hair back from his face. My eyes followed the stream of water down his body with . . . artistic appreciation. Yeah.

Bruises in a rainbow of colors marred his skin, and his stomach had more fashion model hollowness than I generally preferred, but he was a pleasure to look at. Sleek and toned, he had the kind of body that would look amazing in a suit. Maybe just slacks and a vest, I fantasized. Open, to show off the horizontal scars that marked his chest below each pectoral.

He caught me mooning and winked, twirling his finger in the air.

I gave him the privacy I'd demanded for myself, but not without one last, lingering look. I didn't want to think anything positive about the bugs that had stolen us—may they suffer for all eternity—but damn. They had good taste.

A clay pot appeared on the stone lip of the pool. I noticed for the first time that these weren't natural pools. They were organically shaped, and had stones set into them so they blended seamlessly, but they were made out of the same almost-concrete, almost-adobe material that the floors of their home were made from.

Zafett crouched between the two pools, his eyes averted. He tapped the pot. "*Setkuh. Setkuh shirra javet.*" He moved his hands over his body in small circles, as if he was washing.

Then he indicated one of the clumps of tall, purple grass that grew among the moss at the water's edge. Pulling out a blade, he chewed it, then dug a small hole in the dirt with his finger and spit it out. "*Rethi a 'aith javet,*" Zafett announced, baring large, sharp white teeth with a purr as his tongue ran over them.

Big teeth. Long tongue. Long, agile tongue. What would that purr feel like if he—

No! Clean thoughts! I'd been dreaming of a bath the whole time I'd been trapped on that pinche spaceship, and now that it was happening, I was going to savor it. I was *not* going to be distracted by my shameless libido.

Ria reached past me, dipping her fingers into the pot, and her breast brushed my arm.

*Dios, why are you punishing me?*

The *setkuh* soap didn't foam, but it cut through the layers of grime coating my skin and left my hair miserably tangled, but squeaky clean. It had a mild scent that was lightly citrusy—not lemon, something more floral. Grapefruit, maybe.

I wouldn't have cared if it smelled like tuna casserole, it felt so good to be clean.

It took three scrubblings before my tunic stopped feeling grimy, and then another after I used it to scour the months' worth of ick off my body. I washed and washed until my arms ached. Then I hung it over a branch and floated, letting the gloriously hot water turn me into jelly. By the time I finally dragged myself out of the pool, my tunic was dry.

The walk back to the palapa was blessedly short. I smelled the delicious aroma of *shej* first, and when I pushed aside the huge, red-violet leaves to see Revik putting the last dish on a table full of food, I almost fell to my knees and asked him to marry me.

We piled into our sleeping nest as soon as we finished eating, by mutual agreement. It had been a long day.

Clean, warm, with a belly full of delicious food and no ghost hovering at the edge of my conscience—I slept well for the first time in what felt like forever.



“Bright morning, all. Come. We eat.”

“Bright morning, Abuele,” I grumbled, yawning into my sweetly scented pillow. I would never be a morning person.

Eventually my sense of obligation won over my desire to stay cozily where I was, and I rolled over. Today we'd meet the rest of the Teterayuh. I had no idea what would happen after that. *It'll be fine*, I told myself unconvincingly.

I took a deep breath as I blinked the sleep out of my eyes, and just about swallowed my tongue.

I'd gotten used to the weapon harnesses the Teterayuh wore. They were kinda hot, but obviously built for function.

What Revik wore now—as he lounged by the fire eating berries like a goddamned French girl—had only one purpose that I could see.

It was fucking fetish gear. Fancy, gorgeous, elaborate fetish gear. The all-black chest harness emphasized his pecs and the sweep of his shoulders, the leather straps adorned by thinner, woven strips and set with shimmering stones. It bisected the bright blaze on his chest, the distinction somehow making him look even more massive. More leather wrapped around his rock-hard thighs, doing fucking nothing but drawing my eye to the bulge between them.

*Well, hello, Daddy.*

I grew lightheaded, and abruptly remembered how to breathe when laughter broke out at the low dining table. My bitch-ass family hooted, finding my plight hysterical.

“Are you alright?” Cass asked. The giggles sort of took away from the concern her words implied.

“You want us to fan you, or something? You're looking kinda faint.” Ria didn't even pretend she wasn't enjoying herself immensely.

“I thought you'd be happy, sis. You've always loved Folsom.” Mariano crossed his wrists in front of himself as if they were bound in cuffs and posed like a pinup, lips pursed and eyelashes flapping.

Traitors. I glared at them indiscriminately, and when I shoved Mariano to make room for myself at the table, I wasn't gentle about it.

He just collapsed against Therry, both of them laughing like loons.

I snuck a peek back at Revik, only to find that he'd been joined by Zafett, who wore a similar set of fuck-me straps, his

in shades of deep teal that were a stunning contrast to the white and brick red of his fur. Matching beads were strung through his hair, which cascaded loose down his back—except for three braids at his temple. Thankfully, they both appeared to be ignoring the antics of my used-to-be loved ones.

Looking around, I found Litha coming back from the stream, and whimpered. Her pewter gray harness wrapped up her arm then dipped low beneath the opposite breast, an asymmetrical design that belonged on the cover of a magazine. It was studded with stones the same golden color of her eyes.

I wanted to roll on my back, kicking my feet and wailing like a two-year-old. They were too hot. It wasn't fair. The movies said aliens had squat little bodies and big heads. Nobody prepared me for *this*.

Somehow, I managed to make it through breakfast without self-combusting or killing anyone. Que era un milagro. I did smack Mariano, but that was just a normal Tuesday occurrence.

Huh. Days of the week didn't really mean anything anymore. How did the Teterayuh track time? I'd have to remember to ask, when there were more words between us.

After breakfast—none of us ate much, too caught up in worries about the future—Zafett checked and rebandaged our feet while Revik and Litha washed the old bandages, hanging them to dry around the outside of the palapa.

Zafett kept flaring his nostrils as he tended to my feet, making me squirmingly anxious that they stank. I sniffed them unobtrusively when he moved on to Shane—with more speed than seemed necessary—but all I picked up was the ointment he'd applied.

I wiggled around, trying to get a better whiff and look casual at the same time. Nothing. I gave up and sat cross-legged, deciding to try taming my hair instead.

That's when I smelled it. Pero, no. Qué pena!

I snapped my thighs together and tried to think pure thoughts. It didn't help. My reaction to their new kinky

wardrobes was all too apparent. Mortifying.

I snuck a glance to where Big Daddy Revik was strapping a knife over his fuck-me straps, and my embarrassment faded. Really, I was lucky I wasn't drooling. Not from my mouth, at least. And I hadn't thrown myself onto the ground, begging them to take me.

Yet.

Compared to that feat, the walk to the village was pretty anticlimactic.

The Teterayuh waiting for us—standing in groups and peering from the branches—were anything but. I stared, and eyes in every shade of yellow peered back.

There were some with long, draping fur in shades of pink and red, others with fur as short as Revik's in purple, white, and brown. I had to squint to pick out some of the Teterayuh, their patterns making them blend seamlessly with their surroundings. Others were as bright and shocking as tropical birds.

They were all huge.

Like my three, they wore. . . accessories. Harnesses, arm bands, strings of stones winking from their necks and hair. Nothing that I'd qualify as "clothing". Jungle dungeon chic was very *in* among the Teterayuh.

And when did I start calling them "my three"?

The three Teterayuh warriors who'd come with Svixa's fathers—Kurz, Kaloi, and Arvel, my memory supplied—stepped forward. They flanked a group of older-looking Teterayuh, their fur fading to pale, silvery iridescence.

The woman in the center bore a striking resemblance to Zafett—same sculpted jaw, lean, graceful body, and snow-like fur—although hers deepened to a silvery lilac rather than red. Her jewelry was particularly elaborate, the craftsmanship clear in the swirls of beads that cascaded into sparkling waterfalls of fringe.

A more casually dressed Teterayuh placed a three-legged stool on the ground beside her, helping another settle the tiniest Teterayuh woman I'd seen comfortably upon it. After exchanging affectionate caresses, they stepped back, moving to join the others in the trees.

The Teterayuh women were taller in general than their bulge-having compatriots. Like Litha, most stood around eight feet. This woman might have been six, six and a half feet tall if she'd stood upright. But her legs were still, small, and thin. On her stool, we might have seen eye to eye.

Her fur was fluffy, a rusty red liberally speckled with silver, and utterly buried beneath a mountain of accessories. If the first woman's jewelry was Cartier, this woman was wearing vintage costume. She reminded me of my kindergarten teacher, who wore every piece of macaroni and craft paper bling we made her with cheery pride.

I liked her immediately.

On the silver woman's other side was a slim man with an unassuming air, his medium length burgundy fur almost completely unadorned. He was as average as a seven and half foot tall alien could be, but his large, liquid eyes—Zafett's eyes—watched us with keen intelligence.

Zafett broke our stare-down, stepping forward to exchange cheek-rubbing greetings with the three Teterayuh. Side by side, the similarities between him and the woman I assumed to be their leader were even more apparent.

¡A poco! Zafett was alien royalty. Wide eyed, I looked to see if the others were as floored as I was.

Mariano was gaping like a fish. Painfully conscious of all the eyes on us, I elbowed him. "Shut your mouth."

"Woo, Estrella my love, you've got great taste in alien boyfriends." Ria shot me a thumbs up along with a huge grin, but the whites of her eyes were showing all the way around as she peered into the jungle around us.

"Mmhmm," agreed Shane. "Way to go, catching the prince's eye."

“You make her sound so mercenary!” Cass whispered.

Shane winked and bumped her with his shoulder. Cass shook her head repressively, but she was fighting a smile.

“Alright, if they’re gonna stare, let’s give them something to look at,” Mariano said, throwing an arm around Therry with a big, cocky smile. He posed, flexing and playing to the crowd.

Therry stilled for a split second, xyr eyes darting between Mariano’s hand on xyr shoulder and his face. Then, arching sinuously, Therry played along, letting the light play over xyr colorful scales.

I scoffed, but I stood a little taller.

Litha and Revik were to our right. Litha’s tail twitched, like an angry cat, and Revik was stoic, his arms crossed over his wide chest. I’d expected Litha to be the one to act as our go-between, since she’d seemed to be nominally in charge, but I supposed if Zafett was the leader’s son it made sense for him to do it.

Not that I thought he’d do a bad job. He seemed very intelligent, and certainly kind, and we all felt better after his healing. And I was defending myself to myself, which was ridiculous. I needed to focus.

It was hard, though. I couldn’t hear a word of the conversation between Zafett and the village leaders, and my mind kept trying to come up with what they *might* be saying. Not a single scenario was good for us.

I looked at Litha and Revik again. They seemed to have no problem hearing a quiet conversation fifty feet away.

I added “superior hearing” to the list of Teterayuh traits I’d been compiling, right next to “superior strength, speed, size, chompiness, and ability to not freak out when shit went sideways and aliens showed up on their doorstep”.

I fidgeted, my heartbeat growing louder in my head as Zafett and the others spoke. Their eyes kept sliding over us, and I so badly wanted to know what they were thinking and



saying. . .while also wanting to disappear and never have to speak to anyone, ever again.

Finally, Zafett stepped aside. He moved to stand between our two groups, angled to face us both.

“*Hyunan, Kyusalk, iyil essital eh Saytireka, naiset ata ralaytuh.*” Zafett’s words were clear, his voice raised to reach everyone gathered around us. The white-furred woman stepped forward with regal elegance.

*Ralaytuh* was village, I was pretty sure. And *naiset* was mother. So. . .matriarch? It fit. I bobbed, my bow morphing halfway through into something that wanted to be a curtsy.

“*Iyil essital ikten eh Tareth,*” Zafett continued. Tareth, the quiet burgundy furred Teterayuh, nodded. “*La Aksha, teteraila ata a’sharalaytuh.*” The “small” ginger woman grinned hugely, showing off a mouthful of truly impressive teeth.

I smiled back, trying not to look as intimidated as I felt. Between the teeth and not knowing what was being said—I thought her name was Aksha, but I wasn’t certain—I felt like a fish flopping on the shore.

“*Yin Kyusalkata, Estrayuh Hyunanata, zha’a naisatal eh rai,*” Saytireka pronounced, spreading her hands wide and motioning us forward.

Shit, was that *my* name?

Oh, no. I was a ball of anxiety, not a diplomat. My chest burned as black crept at the edges of my vision, and I stumbled back. Shane caught me by the shoulders, pulling me into his firmly muscled body. He was so hot against my suddenly chilled flesh.

His hand spread over my ribs, sliding beneath my freely hanging breasts to pull me closer. My thoughts scattered, and I gasped.

“There you go, gorgeous. Breathe for me.” Shane whispered the words into my hair, cuddling his body around mine.

I exhaled, shuddering.

“Very good. Again. . .” His chest rose and fell against my back, and my eyelids drooped as I relaxed into his embrace, following his lead effortlessly.

Wait. What?

I straightened, spluttering. “You—did you just *flirt* me out of a panic attack?!” I could feel him shaking with laughter.

“It worked, didn’t it?” He gave me a squeeze, his touch affectionate rather than sensual, as it had been a moment before. “Go get ‘em, tiger.”

“You’re a menace, Shane Yun,” I muttered, but when I stepped to where Yin waited for me, it was with a pinch of confidence. Together, Yin and I walked toward Saytireka and the other village leaders.

Just a small meeting of species. Only the fate of our entire family on our heads. No pressure.

I couldn’t read Saytireka’s expression. Her face was so like Zafett’s, but there was a distance there I’d never seen from him. I suddenly realized—with full body horror—that he, *his mother*, Litha, and Revik had all just watched me get groped by Shane.

Por favor, Dios, let the ground open up and swallow me whole.

Not that there was anything between Zafett and I. Or Revik or Litha, for that matter. I snuck a peek at Zafett, but he was looking at the ground, his claws slicing gouges in the thick moss.

I took a deep breath and squeezed Yin’s hand. The telenovela that was my make-believe almost-love life would have to wait. We needed to figure out how to get the Teterayuh to let us stay, because I was pretty certain we’d be dead in a week if we tried to rough it on our own. Somehow, I doubted the Teterayuh strapped themselves with weapons because this was a “safe” jungle.

Saytireka spoke at some length. Going by her tone and the musical flow of her words, it was a lovely speech.

I understood none of it.

After some back and forth translations with Zafett—who still wouldn't look at me—Yin and I came to the conclusion that Saytireka was offering to let us stay in the village.

I bit my lip and snuck a glance at my—not my three. At the three Teterayuh who'd rescued us.

“*Het. Relyat,*” I said, firming my spine and squeezing Yin's hand. *Yes. Thank you.* I tried to look dignified, calling on the memory of my Mamá to hold my head high. My little family needed me. Together, we'd make it through whatever came our way.

Together.

# CHAPTER 16

## ZAF

“Come, my child. Bring your sky people. We have prepared a feast. We will eat and speak.”

My mother turned without waiting for a response and strode towards the village. My father nodded to Estrayuh and Yin before following in her wake. He would wait and watch before forming an opinion, as was his way, but at least he wasn't obviously hostile. Unlike my mother.

She hid it with all the right words and empty smiles, but I knew her.

“Look at her tail twitch!” Aksha cackled. She knew my mother as well. I knelt by her side, submitting to an ear rub as if I was still a child. “You did well, Zafett. You and your mates.”

I bowed my head in thanks.

“Now go gather up our new kin. I want to harass your mother some more.” Aksha tugged my head fur, then flexed her fingers with anticipation.

I grinned into her beaming face as her mates gathered her up. “Let me sit beside you, elder. Teach me your ways.”

“As if you needed to be taught,” she scoffed, waving me away.

I looked around, and the smile fell from my face. “Sky people”, my mother called the strangers. I could see the impact the name had on my friends and family. They hung back, watching the small, weaponless strangers with trepidation, many of them making the sign to ward off death.

As Arvel had, the *ka'vek*.

There were no children in the crowd. Not even Svixa, who by all rights should have been among those welcoming the

strangers to our family, since it was her life they'd saved.

I relaxed my jaw with effort. In time, they would see that the strangers were no more bringers of death than any other person. We had named them kin, and our honor would see that they were accepted. I had faith that their own actions would see them embraced. Eventually.

Probably, with no help from my mother.

“Go...village...now?” Yin asked.

Saytireka had met us just out of sight of the village heart—unwilling to let the strangers enter the *erralaytuh* without seeing for herself that they posed no threat.

*A reasonable precaution*, I begrudgingly allowed.

“Yes. Eat. Talk.” I examined the strangers—although I didn't allow my eyes to linger on Estrayuh or Shane. The snarling aggression I'd felt watching them embrace had been...uncomfortable. “Possessive” was not a trait I'd thought to own, and not one I wanted.

The people standing before me now bore little resemblance to the bedraggled group we'd led to our den. My chest warmed. They'd recovered much in our care. Taking them to the *javuh* last night had been the right choice—no one should have to deal with my mother in the state they'd been in.

I'd noticed their nervousness growing on the painfully slow trek to the village, but had been helpless to do or say anything to relieve their worries. Now, having been invited to stay, they peered towards the village with new excitement.

My own concerns had only grown.

“Saytireka's hiding something,” Revik grunted as we escorted the strangers past our lingering people. They watched us, stares intent.

I grimaced.

“When is she not?” Litha's tone was dry, her eyes serious. Still, she found an encouraging smile for our new kin as she pulled back a fragrant growth of *akath* and nodded for them to precede us.

Their gasps and open appreciation warmed me. I tried to see the village heart as they might, as if I hadn't made myself known to every leaf and twig when I was a kit.

It was large. Large enough to contain the central fire—and several more cooking fires—with room for the whole village to comfortably gather. The roof of the *erralaytuh* rose so high that the three tallest among us could not reach the peak if they stood atop one another.

The strangers wouldn't know the paintings spiraling up the trunks of the *zhazhalouk* told the history of our people. Or that it was the images of our honored dead who watched us from the branches above. From their wide eyes and awed whispers, it was clear they recognized the beauty, if not the meaning.

It was also clear—as they eased closer to one another—that facing so many Teterayuh was as intimidating for them as staring down an ambush of *va'grev*. Estrayuh was biting her mouth again, and despite intentions to keep my distance, I found myself moving to her side.

“Yin! ‘Strayuh! Welcome! We are kin now!”

At Svixa's ebullient cry, I jerked to a stop.

Smiles broke over the strangers' faces as Svixa waved—urging her mother to walk faster. When they drew near enough, Selka knelt, her eyes glistening. She locked gazes with each of the strangers in turn as she thanked them for saving her child, swearing her own oath of kinship and aid.

She rose, moving to embrace her sister as her mates Arlan and Tonkal came forward. They each cuddled a baby, and they introduced little Arlanesh and Sion to their new kin with pride. Hesitance forgotten, the strangers gathered around, cooing and laughing as tiny, furred fingers batted the air.

Seated at the far end of the *erralaytuh*, my mother scowled.

Revik's arm slid around my waist.

“They're helpless to resist the little ones, just like the rest of us.” Litha smiled beside her beaming sister; voice raised to spread through the *erralaytuh*.

“Come, sit with us,” Svixa coaxed. “Fathers roasted *ikfrit*, and Mother made *casa* cakes to welcome you to the family! Come, come!”

My mouth watered. Svixa’s mother, Selka, was one of the best cooks in the village, and her *casa* cakes were always perfect: crispy on the outside, chewy on the inside, with just the right amount of sweetness. Even better than Revik’s, not that I’d tell him so.

Estrayuh glanced at us, the fur patches over her eyes lifted high.

I knew I should tell her to go, but I couldn’t bring myself to. I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and drag her back to the den. I didn’t want to return without her, and I especially didn’t want to play whatever game my mother had concocted.

“Yes, go,” Litha answered, smoothly filling the silence. “We, there,” she added, indicating the space left for us next to my parents and the elders.

I tried to look happy and unconcerned as they were led across the *erralaytuh*, and I must have been successful because after a few glances over their shoulders, the strangers’ steps grew more confident, and their backs straightened.

I turned, catching the familiar scent of smoke and crushed berries an instant before Indaro landed against my back, squeezing me tight.

“You really got her going this time, brother,” she laughed, her eyes sparkling as they traced the strangers’ path. “You must tell me everything.” She pressed her forehead to each of my mates’, murmuring, “*Kezhai*, Litha. *Kezhai*, Revik. Your bravery honors us. Thank the spirits you weren’t injured.”

She peppered us with questions as we made our way to the table, pausing only for us to exchange greetings with our other fathers, Falk and Zirrast. That done, she started again, without pausing to give us time to answer.

Falk pushed a platter of *casa* cakes in my direction, winking. Indaro was always like this when she fixed on a new story. It was best to wait her out rather than try to interrupt.

I pricked a steaming *casa* cake with a claw, moaning at the first bite. It was almost too hot to eat, and I sucked in air to cool my burning tongue even as I snapped up the rest of the cake. Perfect.

“I’ve decided to share my den with one of the strangers,” my sister announced.

I choked.

“Do you not think any will choose me?” Indaro asked, offended.

Revik was a wall of tension beside me, his eyes fixed on my mother. I could tell she felt the weight of our stares, but she only flicked an ear as she made a show of listening to Aksha.

“What are you talking about?” Litha asked, anger resonating beneath the perfect neutrality of her voice.

Before Indaro could answer, Saytireka stood and called for attention.

“Today we welcome *tetevath’a*, sky people, into our village. You all have heard the story, that it was by their actions—and the will of the spirits—that Svixa’s life was spared.” Muttering mixed with a chorus of thanks followed, and she waited until all were silent before continuing.

“We know very little of the *tetevath’a*. Perhaps they will stay only until the end of *ilot va’regnev*, when the sky becomes clear once more. While they are here, they will share the rights and responsibilities of any other Teterayuh.”

More muttering met that pronouncement. My hands were fisted on my mate’s thighs, probably pulling their fur painfully, but neither complained.

“My son tells me that the *tetevath’a* know nothing of our land or our trees, nothing of our tongue or the dangers that surround us. It will fall to us to teach them, and to provide for them until they learn.”

My heart pounded in my chest, but I saw with relief that many of my kin smiled at that, chuffing their readiness and



nodding to Estrayuh and the others—all of whom listened with wide, uncomprehending eyes.

“Let all who are willing to accept a *tevath’a* into their den come to the center of our circle,” Saytireka invited with a graceful sweep of her hand.

Several people stood immediately, obviously having had time to come to their decision before this gathering.

Litha’s thigh flexed beneath my hand, but when I squeezed, she settled, twitching with frustration. If she said anything, this would become an argument between her and Saytireka, and we couldn’t allow the *tetezha’a* to suffer for my mother’s petty jealousy.

“What is this, mother?” I asked, standing to face her.

“This is us caring for the new kin *your mate* gifted us with. They cannot stay with you, *shavailata*. It is too much for one family to bear—feeding and teaching them all.”

I ground my teeth together. I didn’t disagree, but spirits did I want to shout at her. She wouldn’t even say Revik’s name, and that lip curl when she spoke of him—as if he’d shat on the sleeping cushions rather than proven himself a Teterayuh of worth, *again*—made me incandescent with rage.

“It pleases me,” I forced through clenched jaws, “to see you honoring the gift *Revik* has given us. Such selfless bravery as the *tetezha’a* have shown will undoubtedly strengthen our people.”

My mother’s eyes narrowed, hearing my chastisement in the emphasis I put on the names.

“Could they not stay in one of the unmated dens?” Frustration burned in me as I voiced Litha’s suggestion, soothed very little by her caress on my ankle. I hated that she was made smaller because of these games Saytireka forced us to play.

I drew in a breath, reaching for peace. Between my mother’s plotting and the strange beast that had awoken when I met Estrayuh, it was a struggle.

“It must be frightening, to be surrounded by so much that is unknown. I believe our new kin would prefer to stay together. The unmated den near the *raysheel* hut is empty, and well within the village, so their care could still be spread among many.”

The elders looked thoughtful, but my mother shook her head.

“I am sympathetic to their situation,” she said.

Revik snorted.

“But,” she continued as if she hadn’t heard him. “If they are to learn what they must, they will need to truly live among us. It is to no one’s benefit to turn them into burdens, separate from the rest of us, their *kin*.”

The murmurs of agreement were louder following this pronouncement, and the glint of victory in my mother’s eye said she knew she’d won.

I could say nothing. If I opened my mouth, I would regret anything that emerged.

“As you think best, *Ralaytuh Naiset*,” Litha said meekly. Her hand was rigid around my ankle, the press of her claws furious.

I met Estrella’s worried eyes beneath the fringe of shorn hair. How to explain this?

“The choice will be theirs.” I didn’t turn away, though my words were directed at Saytireka. I tried to put assurance I didn’t feel into my eyes. “I will explain to the *tetezha’a* what we ask of them. Anyone willing to open their den, form a line.”

Kurz stood. “How many *tetezha’a* will be joining each den?”

“One,” Saytireka answered. “Unless any of them are mated?”

My eyes flickered behind Estrayuh to Shane, but I shook my head. “I do not believe so.”

“Then it shall be so. My son has spoken.”

The satisfaction in her voice made my tail twitch as I crossed to kneel by Estrayuh and her kin, my mates at my side. *Rek*, I was out of sorts. I knew better than to rise to my mother’s bait. It only encouraged her stubborn insistence that I should lead our people, closing her ears to my refusal.

Communicating to the *tetezha ’a* that they would be separated was. . .complicated.

Their reaction—when they finally understood—was as cooperative as I expected.

Their outright refusal slowly shifted to begrudging acceptance when we explained that although they would not share the same den, they would not be kept from each other.

The sheen of tears in Estrayuh’s eyes made me wish—for the very first time—that I’d accepted my mother’s chosen path. If I was next in line to lead the village, my protests would carry more weight.

I stood, facing the line of volunteers. Meeting each of their eyes in turn, I gave them the words I wished I could give the *tetezha ’a*. “These people are our kin, sworn and witnessed. They are not to be caged or kept. They are not enemies or children. They may gather and travel as they wish, like any other *Lenvang Sounga Teterayuh*, and they hold the same rights of choice and refusal.”

“Of course, child of mine who does not wish to lead our people,” Saytireka purred with a small, sharp smile.

I bit back a hiss.

The *tetezha ’a* rose, embracing each other with brittle desperation. From over Estrayuh’s head, her brother glared. She said something, and he veiled his strange round eyes, but the vibrating anger didn’t leave his posture.

Revik walked away.

I stilled. Had I upset him?

He didn’t go far. Placing himself at the end of the line, Revik crossed his arms over the chest encasing his beautiful

heart and lifted his chin.

I floated to him, falling to my knees at his side to nuzzle his hip. Litha pressed against his back and tangled her fingers in my head fur. We did not need to speak. We were of one mind.

I watched Estrayuh. She and her kin were talking quietly as they looked over the line of Teterayuh before them.

*Choose us*, I urged silently. Her eyes met mine, widened, and trailed slowly upward before skittering away.

*Don't be afraid, Little Star. We will catch you.*

*Choose us.*

# CHAPTER 17

## ESTRELLA

“Dibs.” It was as much a squeak as a word, and heat rushed to my cheeks as Ria snorted. I chanced another look at the three Teterayuh who’d rescued us, only to gulp and look away again. What the hell was that pose? They looked like a poster for an eighties sci-fi adventure film, complete with the sexy woman—or Zafett, in this case—wrapped around the impossibly muscled hero’s leg. Litha, looming behind them like a freaking Amazon, took the image to a whole different level.

*It did things to me.*

I wiped my cheeks and blew out an unsteady breath. Turning to the others, I forced myself to deal with what was happening.

Shock, worry, and abject terror warred with flickers of curiosity and dull resignation in the eyes that looked back at me. Every one of those emotions jostled inside me—alongside a healthy dose of “What the fuck did you expect?”

I’d wanted to believe we’d find some kind of alien halfway house in the village where we could all stay together. But from what I’d seen, there were less than two hundred people living in this village. Two hundred people who were obviously, deeply connected to one another. It showed in everything they did. They wouldn’t need a goddamn halfway house. If someone needed help, there would be people ready to offer it—just as Litha, Revik, and Zafett had done for my family.

I reached out my hands. Cass took one, Yin the other, and we came together fiercely. My brother surrounded us with his arms, our little pod shifting until we all clung to each other.

“We’re going to be okay,” I whispered.

Cass's hair rubbed my cheek as she nodded, jerkily. I squeezed her hand.

"Anything bad happens, we tell each other. Agreed?" Shane demanded.

"Asap," Ria added.

Everyone murmured their agreement.

"This is it, huh?" Cass cleared the wobble from her throat and continued. "This is when our new lives start."

"Time to fly, Mariposa."

Mariano said the words so quietly I wasn't sure he meant her to hear them, but her glancing smile said she had.

"Always family," Yin said solemnly. "Always together, inside."

"Always," Salat and Therry echoed in unison.

With a final squeeze, we broke apart and faced the line of Teterayuh. If we were going to do this, there was no point in waiting. I'd only stew and get more nervous.

I lifted my chin, met the only familiar yellow eyes in the crowd, and walked to them. Mariano's hand dropped from my shoulder at the very last moment, and I felt the loss in my chest, as if a rubber band had snapped.

Zafett rose as I drew near, his eyes wide and surprised.

I stopped in front of them, nodded once, and said, "*Het.*"

Suddenly, a sense of claustrophobia washed over me, like being boxed in by semis on the freeway. My three surrounded me, so tall, so close. Zafett said something to which his mother replied, sounding amused.

I peeked out from between big furry bodies, watching as the other Teterayuh stepped forward—some alone, some in groups—and. . . auditioned? I couldn't think of any other way to explain it.

Oops. I guess I jumped the gun.



I sat on my new bed, aching with loneliness. I hadn't hurt like this since I'd thought the bugs had killed Mariano. But he'd lived, and we'd gathered up our little family—a buffer against fear and uncertainty. Without them, I was adrift.

I pressed a hand into the cushion—which was more like one of those giant bean bags than a mattress, really—and closed my eyes, inhaling the sweet, spicy scent that rose from it. *Don't be a baby. No crying. You're a goddamned adult. You've been living on your own for years now.*

Ignoring the voice that said this was a hell of a different situation than being a homesick twenty-year-old—because that might be right, but it wasn't fucking *helpful*—I fought for some semblance of composure.

“Estrayuh?”

Litha hovered at the entrance of my “room”, Zafett and Revik squeezed in close behind her. She sounded so concerned, so kind, and my vision swam with the tears I'd been forcing back.

“Lo siento,” I said. It came out wet and choppy, and though I knew they couldn't understand, emotions overwhelmed my brain and flowed out my mouth in a river of Spanish. “I'm not upset, not with you. I'm overwhelmed, and scared, and God, this is all so *much*. We were abducted by fucking *aliens*! We could have died! I thought—I was so afraid Mariano had. . .”

I gasped in a breath, shaking, and swiped fingers over my wet cheeks. The three Teterayuh had crept closer, but I barely registered their movement. “As if that wasn't enough, we had to stand there and *watch* as Logan the douchebag tried to rape poor Cass. We couldn't do *anything*! Then he got fucking *melted*!” I laughed, the sound tinged with hysteria. “I'm not sad he's dead, but. . .*shit*! I've never seen a body *look* like that. Watched someone *die* like that. It was just—horrible.”

I shuddered, and an arm slipped around my back. When I leaned into it, bodies pressed gently all around me. I

desperately wanted to stop talking, but the words forced themselves from my throat.

“Then there was the crash—God, I’ve never been so scared in my life—and. . .Ilya. . .” I gasped, but the air had turned to razor blades. Every breath sliced at me with fresh agony.

“Xe was so young. So innocent. Xe should’ve—It should’ve been. . .Fuck! I wish we could kill those damned bugs all over again! They didn’t suffer enough the first time.”

“Kshhh,” Litha whispered, her hand stroking my back.

I closed my eyes, letting the Teterayuh’s purrs soothe the sharpest of my edges.

“Thank you for killing them. And for taking us—taking me—in.” My fingers wove through Zafett’s silky fur, and I watched the strands slip and curl with detached fascination. “It would be easier if you weren’t so nice. God, that sounds terrible. It just. . .feels wrong to be happy.” I bared my teeth in something too manic to be a smile. “And isn’t that fucked up? I am one broken bitch. Have been for a while, honestly. This was just the icing on the cake.”

“And here you all are, being so kind, and thoughtful, and generous, and sexy. . .as if I wasn’t a neurotic nobody with more issues than fucking Penthouse. You bring me into your home and I cry all over you.” My hand fisted in Zafett’s fur, and distantly I registered his grunt and the tensing of his muscles. Revik’s chest was pressed to my cheek, and I buried my face against him, feeling the most out-of-place urge to giggle as his purr tickled my nose.

“I should be feeling bad for everyone back home who’ll never know what happened to us. Should be mourning the fact I’ll never get to put flowers on my family’s graves again. Never sleep in the house my Tata built. Fuck, it’ll probably be torn down and replaced by apartments. My whole life, Mariano’s life, gone forever.”

I groaned and smooshed my face into Revik harder. Maybe if I muffled the words enough, I wouldn’t have to admit I was saying them.



“I’m scared to be alone again. I don’t—I can’t—I’m bad at being alone.” Last time I’d felt this adrift, I married a man who’d poisoned my whole life. I’d thought he was wonderful, too.

I wouldn’t survive finding that kind of evil in these people.

The admissions finally dried up, leaving me a drained husk, sprawled over their laps like a starlet from a silent film. Hands petted my hair and soothing voices spoke unintelligible words.

I felt like an asshole.

“*Ivresk*,” I muttered. It was weak, as apologies went, but I didn’t have the words to explain myself. I snorted. Not that anything I’d have said in Spanish *or* English would have made it better.

“*Ix, Estrayuh. Lit seh. Ilatal.*” Zafett refused my apology with such tenderness that I almost started crying again.

No, I was going to cry again. Shit.

I sat up, and it was harder than it should have been to pull away from their warm bodies. I forced a smile. “*Relyat. Kesh?*”

It was less of a question and more of a suggestion. I didn’t know if I could sleep, as ramped up as I was, but I wasn’t going to force them to endure my weeping any longer.

The Teterayuh moved away reluctantly. Probably afraid I was going to freak out again. I’d just let the grimace of a smile fall from my face when Zafett turned back.

“*Eh Naryanuh aral oi va sethitzik?*”

It took my exhausted brain a second to shift gears. *Naryanuh* was the closest the Teterayuh could come to Mariano, *aral* was one of the forms of go, and *sethitzik* was morning. . .

“Si! Yes! *Het!*” I stumbled through all the languages I knew in my excitement, and Zafett smiled, some of the tightness leaving his posture as he nodded and joined Litha on their bed.

Revik moved to let him pass, staring at me for a long moment with those neon eyes before following without a word.

I sympathized. It was hard to find out the stray you'd taken in had way more problems than you expected. Fingers crossed he didn't throw me out if the vet bills got too high.

I didn't sleep much. I cried some more, and I stared into the night. I tried to convince myself that this situation wasn't so bad by reminding myself of the not great things from home: bills, long workdays, shitty exes, internet dating. But that was depressing, and in the end I just cried some more.

If the filling of this cushion wasn't waterproof, it was going to be a problem.



“You look like hell. What, do your new roomies snore? Or did they keep you up in. . .other ways?” Mariano waggled his eyebrows, leering.

“Shut your mouth.” Why the hell had I been so excited to see this ass? “I could ask you the same thing. You pay extra for the baggage you're packing?” I asked, tapping under my eye with a smirk. “Don't tell me, you found Kurz's stash of alien porno mags? You better not hide your used socks in *his* laundry.”

“That was seventeen years ago! I was fourteen! Let it goooo,” Mariano groaned, a red flush high on his cheeks.

“Never.” I waved my hands imperiously, demanding a hug. At the last moment, I stopped him. “Wait, is it safe? I just remembered there aren't any socks on this planet.”

“Very funny.” Mariano rolled his eyes and snagged me with his arms, holding me tight for a long second before straightening. “How long was the walk? These trees are so fucking big, I'm having a hard time getting my bearings.”

I wasn't great with time, especially without a clock, but the consensus had been that our slog to the village had taken about

an hour and a half. According to the map my three had drawn with berries at breakfast, our place and my brother's new place with Kurz were about the same distance from the village, and only half that far from each other. The hot springs, I'd been happy to see, were even closer.

"Maybe forty minutes? We stopped for a couple breaks." I wasn't used to walking everywhere, and I was increasingly convinced gravity was higher on this planet. Stronger? Whatever the right phrase was, it was harder than it should have been to pick my feet up, and I wore out fast.

The Teterayuh had strapped the big baskets they used to haul food onto their backs before we headed out, and around our third stop I got the feeling Revik was tempted to toss me in just to speed up the process.

I probably would've let him. I was sore as hell, and sweating had never been my favorite pastime. Especially without deodorant.

"Not bad. Next time we'll come visit you. I want to learn my way around." Mariano was watching the Teterayuh—who were debating the plan for the day—with an unreadable expression on his face.

No, he was watching *Kurz*. The fluffy tan colored Teterayuh laughed, flinging an arm over Revik's shoulder, and my brother's eyebrows lowered.

"Hey, what's up? Is the Murder Puppy secretly a dick? Do I need to smack him? I will."

"What? No, no. He's good." Mariano waved dismissively, then his head snapped in my direction. "Murder Puppy? Jesus, Estrella. I'm just trying to figure these people out. Your three are together, right?"

My insides did a little dance at the phrasing, but I tried to look thoughtful as I nodded. They shared a bed and were pretty cozy, so. . .

Mariano jerked his chin at the group of aliens heading our way, apparently having come to a decision about the plan. Kurz had dropped his arm, but he and Revik were close

enough their fur brushed as they walked. “So, just friends? Or is this a free love situation?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, the question aimed at myself as much as him. Kurz was cute, but he made me want to pet his head, not his. . . other parts.

Mariano just grunted.

When Revik and Kurz disappeared into the jungle together, we watched them until there was nothing more to see like the gente metiches we were.

“*Estrayuh, Naryanuh, sethit. Zha’a iltal aylat ays.*” Litha beckoned us to follow, the tilt of her head showing uncertainty.

I felt a pang of. . . regret? Shame? Whatever it was, it didn’t feel good. I’d been trying for some safe distance after last night, as that seemed like the smartest move. Give me some space to think.

I hated it. Going by the confused, walking on eggshells way Litha and Zafett had been acting this morning, they didn’t like it either. Revik—as always—was silent and watchful.

Fuck it.

I trotted over, taking Litha and Zafett’s hands in mine and smiling brightly up at them. Life was short. I’d rather be dumb and happy than smart and lonely.

They blinked down at me, surprised. Then Zafett ducked his head, giving me the sweetest smile as he squeezed my hand gently in his.

Litha chuffed and stepped away, but before I could feel anything but surprise she’d rearranged us, putting Zafett and I on her left. She twisted, took my hand again, and set it on her tail. When my eyes shot to hers she smiled, patted my hand, and reached up to tap the spear rising over her shoulder.

*Ohhhh.* Of course, with only one arm she’d want it free to grab a weapon. I hadn’t thought about it—both because I wasn’t used to *needing* a weapon on the day to day, and because I tended to forget she only *had* one arm.

Shyly, I petted her tail. It was thick enough I couldn't close my fingers around it—a thought that made me giggle like a teenager—and solid muscle beneath the plush fur.

“*Ray?*” I asked. The Teterayuh word for good was one of my most frequently used, along with *het/yes*, *ix/no*, *relyat/thank you*, and *ix ilatah/I don't understand*.

“*Het ray, Estrayuh,*” Litha answered in a husky tone that made me shiver.

The three of us started deeper into the jungle. It was only when Mariano cleared his throat that I remembered—with some embarrassment—that he was there. He jogged around Zafett to peer at me with raised eyebrows.

“Do you even know where you're going? What you're doing?” There was a weight to his words that made it clear he was asking about more than this moment.

I chose to ignore his unspoken question. “We're gathering food.” I spoke with haughty certainty, although I was guessing at best. The only bits I'd understood of Litha's initial statement had been *come* and—I thought—*teach you*. But it made sense, what with the baskets and the lack of refrigeration.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered.

When we got to the patch of bushes thick with sour *susuela* berries, I gave him a smug, triumphant smile.

I'd wondered why the Teterayuh'd split up the way they had. It felt kind of patriarchal, with the manly men presumably hunting while Litha and sweet, gorgeous Zafett picked berries with us. But that wasn't the vibe I'd gotten from them otherwise. I still didn't know how or if they figured gender, but besides the Teterayuh without crotch bulges having vowel sounds on the ends of their names, I hadn't seen any sign of “women's work” at play.

As we worked, I decided it had been a fully practical decision. Unlike grumpy Revik, Litha was an amazing teacher. I didn't have a frame of reference, but she and Zafett were amazingly knowledgeable—even when they were sharing that knowledge without words.

She showed us how to tell the berries were ripe, how to cut the bunches so more would grow, and how much to harvest before moving to another plant.

Zafett showed us a pretty blue speckling that was apparently bad, how to remove the affected parts, and what to do with them so they wouldn't spread.

By the time Revik and Kurz came back, we'd collected what seemed like a week's worth of groceries, my brain was fuller than the baskets, and Mariano was so bored he was trying to braid rope out of strips of stringy orange moss.

Kurz started pulling carcasses out of his basket and Mariano was right at his side, watching him clean them with one hundred times more focus than he'd shown to Jungle Gardening 101.

We sat around the palapa sharing lunch—thinly sliced roasted strips of some critter that was delicious, but I had *not* wanted to eat. It looked like a Guinea Pig. A bright yellow Guinea Pig. It was upsettingly adorable.

But I was hungry, and Kurz put some spices on it that smelled amazing, so I apologized to the poor thing and ate it anyway.

The Teterayuh didn't exclude us, but they gave Mariano and I room to talk. If I hadn't already decided to stop distancing myself from them, that kindness would have made the decision for me.

"This is damn good," Mariano said, sucking savory juices from his thumb. "But you know what it needs? Tortillas, lime, and cilantro. Un poco de salsa picante?" He kissed his fingers in culinary bliss.

"Don't talk to me about tortillas. It's too soon. The loss is too big."

He rolled his eyes at my dramatics, then looked thoughtful. "Tortillas are pretty simple. I bet we could find something on this planet to substitute for the masa. Maybe not the same, but probably better than those 'low carb hacks' people were pushing for a while." He gave me a sly look. "Or at least, I

could. You'd probably burn down the palapa or poison someone."

I scratched my eyebrow with my middle finger, rolling my tongue over my teeth.

Mariano looked pointedly at my hand, still wrapped in bandages from when I'd cut myself trying to open a *soru* fruit.

"Oh, shut up."

He snickered and stuffed his face with more poor Guinea Pig. My eyes caught on the yellow pelt hanging from the eaves behind him, and I sat back with a wince.

"How do you think the others are doing?" I tried to keep the worry from my tone, but Mariano knew me better than that. He bumped his knee against mine, leaving our legs touching, and leaned back on his palms.

"They're gonna be okay. Kurz says another storm's coming, but when it passes we can go to the village together." He smiled crookedly. "You saw how close their houses were. They're probably driving their host families crazy, popping in and out."

I nodded, chewing my lip. Shane had come up with the term "host families" during the incredibly awkward audition process that I'd flown past with blissful ignorance. The Teterayuh had each spoken briefly, then played an inscrutable game of show and tell with assorted items: tools, bowls, food, weapons, cloth.

Since I'd made my choice before the pageant started, I mostly listened to the tone of each of their voices, watching their body language for signs of anything. . .off. Using my hypervigilance for good.

There were a couple of people that set off my radar, and I'd shaken my head subtly at Mariano when they stepped back into line. Relief flowed through me when I saw his lips move and the others nod.

Mariano had settled on Kurz almost as fast as I'd chosen my three. I thought it was because Kurz and Revik seemed to be friends, which might mean we'd get to see each other more

often. But he might just have liked his fluffy, ringed tail. Or his weapons. I'd noticed his eyes lingering on them.

I'd been ready to bring my Abuele with me—whether the Teterayuh liked it or not—if xe hadn't felt good about any of the other options, but Yin had chosen Aksha and her partners, Jaiz and Lefkuh. I hadn't gotten to see much of Jaiz or Lefkuh, but I liked Aksha, and trusted her instinctively. She was a hoot. I had a feeling that their house was going to turn into the alien version of *The Golden Girls*.

Once everyone had chosen, we'd all gone on a little tour of the village. Other than Mariano and me, only Shane ended up choosing someone who lived outside. He and Indaro, who had to be Zafett's sister, lived on the opposite side from us. Everyone else was easy walking distance from the massive central gathering area, which was a relief.

“Kurz says, huh? Since when is your Teterayuh so good?”

“It's good enough. Maybe you just suck at reading *body language*.” Mariano shimmied his shoulders, his laughter turning to snorts when I rolled my eyes.

I reached for something to nibble on, hesitating over the Guinea Pig—which was called *khot*, but would probably always be Guinea Pig to me—and plucking a bunch of *susuela* berries instead. Speaking of body language. . .

I leaned forward, catching Revik's eye, and offered the tart berries to him. I'd noticed he liked them, and food was about as universal a love language as I could think of.

He tilted his head, one ear flicking, and trailed his gaze from mine down to my hand. Rather than taking some or all of what I offered with his hand, as I expected, he leaned slowly forward, eyes locked on me, and unfurled a long, black tongue.

With toe-curling precision, he plucked four berries from the bunch without lifting a finger. Revik chewed, swallowed, and *grinned* at me. I almost swallowed my own tongue. The black tip flicked out, almost too fast to see, and he licked the pad of my thumb.



*“Mmm, ray. Relyat.”*

I pulled my hand back, cradling it against my chest over the pounding of my heart. My mouth was too dry to speak, so I just nodded, jerkily.

Body language, in-fucking-deed. Rated E for Explicit.

# CHAPTER 18

## *REVIK*

I inhaled, tasting the scent of Estrayuh's desire on my tongue. I didn't know what made the little Hyunan decide to be so bold, but rek, I liked it. I liked the way she looked at me now, too, all quivery and wide eyed. My eyes slitted as a low rumble started in my chest.

Kurz's tail whacked me on the nose. I sneezed. Snarling, I bared my teeth at him.

He tilted his head, and I followed his gaze to find Estrayuh's brother halfway to his feet and glaring at me.

My respect for him grew as he held my stare, only backing down when Estrayuh tugged at his cloth and hissed something in the liquid language the two of them shared.

They argued, but Estrayuh must have won because she turned back to me, apologizing, as her brother crossed his arms over his chest and glowered.

I looked between them, trying to understand the conflict. According to Kurz, Naryanuh wasn't opposed to physical intimacy, so why this reaction to his sister exploring the same?

Estrayuh pushed the fringe of her head fur from her eyes and frowned.

My chest tightened. I'd hoped her people's traditions were different from ours. But if she'd lost her mate as recently as told by those short strands, then I had an answer to her brother's protectiveness. If someone tried to take advantage of my sibling's heart-hurt, I would tear their throat out.

A glance at my stricken mates confirmed that they'd had the same thought.

There was no more flirtation as we cleaned up from the meal and split the day's collection. When that was done,

Estrayuh went to give water at the stream, and I faced Naryanuh.

“I understand,” I said. I let my eyes speak of my respect and my unwillingness to harm his sister.

After a long moment, he nodded, and the pressing cloud of his disapproval lifted.

Estrayuh looked between us suspiciously when she returned, but I kept my eyes on the basket straps I’d already tightened, and she gradually relaxed. She was laughing and teasing her brother as we prepared to leave.

His voice was light as he embraced her, but over her head his eyes bore into me, the warning clear.

I held his stare until I turned away, only letting the smile spread over my face when I was fully out of sight. As I ranged through the branches, making sure no danger awaited, my amusement faded. His clawless ferocity was admirable.

Being the reason he bared his teeth was less so.



The first drops of rain splattered onto my fur, and I tensed, my tail lashing as I watched the slow progress of the people below me.

We needed to get to the den. I didn’t trust the way the air felt. I leapt higher, crouching in the lee of the canopy as I scanned the sky. Nothing. But the clouds, low and heavy with the storm, could hide much.

I bounded down the tree, moving fast. My instincts were screaming. Death rode the air today. I wouldn’t allow it to be any of ours.

“We must run.”

Litha was already nodding as I dropped to the ground beside her. Even Estrayuh was jumpy, although I didn’t know if she felt the danger or simply reacted to our tension.

Zaf didn't waste time questioning or explaining. He scooped Estrella into his arms and stretched his long legs towards the den.

My mate was the best of us.

Thunder roared overhead as we ran. The fur on my back rose, shivering tingles rushing over my body. With only that much warning, I threw myself to the side, plowing into my mates and taking us all to the ground as sky fire raged through the air where we'd just been.

The storm's rage tore through the tree above us, scorching and snapping. Great limbs crashed down, and I rolled, grunting as one punched into my back. We'd probably have to replace the basket after that blow.

I pushed up, and my mates scrambled, sprinting as soon as they got their feet beneath them. Estrayuh's panicked face peered at me from over Zaf's shoulder, but there was no time to comfort her. She would have to wait until we were safe in the den and out of this storm.

Litha and Zaf tore through a gap in the trees. We were close now.

They were almost to the other side when I felt the air move, the shifting pressure that came before destruction.

"*Va'grev!*" I shouted as my knife flashed. The heavy, unwieldy basket fell away, and I leapt forward, pulling my spear as I charged. "Go!"

Zaf was a pale streak as he sped to the shelter of the trees, Estrayuh's dark head fur trailing in his wake. He wasn't fast enough.

Deadlier than sky fire, a *va'grev* plummeted from the sky, its talons spread for the kill.

Zaf threw himself to the side, skidding and flipping over the uneven ground, his body curled protectively around Estrayuh.

The beast's rage filled screech tore at my ears. It slammed to the ground, its great head swiveling, ribbons snapping, as it

searched for its prey.

Litha sprang. She ran up the *va'grev's* foreleg and vaulted onto its neck, gripping its scaly hide with her feet as she brought her spear down into its eye.

I bared my teeth in ferocious delight and launched myself at the beast's side. It buffeted me with a massive wing, knocking me to the ground, but I rolled and went at it again, both hands gripped around the haft of my spear. It sank deep. I roared with triumph and twisted, pulling it out only to stab it again. I had to get past the bone.

The *va'grev's* ribbons whipped through the air, slapping and slicing. One wrapped around my neck, flinging me to the ground. My spear fell just out of reach, and I was pulling myself towards it before my lungs remembered how to pull in air.

Estrayuh's angry, terrified shout cut through the battle haze. My head snapped up as my hand closed around my spear, bitter fear coating my tongue.

The little Hyunan crouched in front of Zaf's crumpled body, face to face with the *va'grev*. Estrayuh's flat teeth were bared, my mate's knife gripped in both her hands.

Litha was nowhere to be seen.

Time stopped.

Then Zaf struggled upright unsteadily, shaking his head. Blood matted the fur beneath his ear and dripped down his neck.

The *va'grev* swayed, fixated. One of its ribbons shot towards Zaf, but the beast recoiled, screeching, as Estrayuh slashed with her now bloody knife.

A basket crashed into the *va'grev's* nose. It reared, wings outstretched, and I attacked.

I saw a flash of violet, then I tore into the beast's wings with my claws. Running was no longer an option. It had locked onto Zaf's blood. We couldn't lead it back to the den. We had to drive it away.

On the other side of the beast, Litha screamed.

There was a snarled curse, then it was the *va 'grev* that screamed.

Blood sprayed as I tore a long strip from the leathery flesh. The beast flailed, massive body bucking and ribbons slashing. I went flying. I flipped, digging furrows in the dirt as I slid to a stop, and tensed to spring. But the *va 'grev* had had enough. It spun and disappeared into the sky with two beats of its damaged wings.

“Zafett? Zafett hurt?” Estrayuh was running her hands over my mate, fingers fluttering like leaves in the wind. The bloody knife lay abandoned beside her.

Litha—who was also bloody, though I couldn’t tell how much was hers and how much the beast’s—crouched beside them. “Can you run, *sha 'vail*?”

Zaf nodded, but his pupils had widened until they were almost as round as Estrayuh’s.

Litha caught my gaze and placed her hand on Zaf’s shoulder, her eyes flickering between me and the little Hyunan. I nodded.

“Zaf will live, Estrayuh. Do not fear,” Litha said, “We must go to the den now.”

Estrayuh stared at her hands, dark with Zaf’s blood, and made no sign that she’d heard.

I wiped Zaf’s knife on my fur and gave it back, cupping my hand around the uninjured side of his head and breathing him in for a moment.

He leaned heavily on Litha, but they were making good time as they disappeared into the trees.

Estrayuh still didn’t move.

I scooped her up gently and ran towards the den, keeping my strides smooth. I didn’t know if she was injured, there hadn’t been time to check.

She curled against me, soft and still, though her breathing remained steady. I liked the weight of her. She felt good in my arms.

I felt a tug and looked down to find her small fingers laced through my fur, her fist tight against my chest. A fine trembling spread from her hand until she shook against me.

I ran faster, my chest reverberating as I tried to comfort her the only way I could.



The spirits had been kind. Our injuries were minor, with Zaf's head and a slash across Litha's back being the worst. Estrayuh had only a few new bruises. Nothing I'd suffered was worth mentioning.

The storm descended upon us while we ate—a light meal of seeds and dried meat, since the food we'd gathered was now scattered through the jungle. We needed more food and a soak, but first—sleep.

Estrayuh had been quiet since we returned, hidden somewhere inside herself. Had the *va'grev's* attack reminded her of how she'd lost her mate? Mates? I watched her worry her lip with her teeth as she searched the darkness beyond the *err'laytuh*, and frowned.

"I don't think she should be alone tonight," Zaf said, giving voice to my thoughts.

"No," Litha agreed.

"She was fierce, was she not?" he asked, admiringly.

I thought of her holding his knife, so large she'd had to use both hands and still it shook—and imagined her pulling it to stand over him when he fell. "A Little Star indeed," I murmured. Zaf's ears flattened with embarrassment, and I chuffed. "It is a fitting name you have given her. She may be small, but she is bright, and beautiful, and a bringer of death—" I nipped Zaf when he growled a protest. "To any who threaten those she chooses to protect."

He settled back, looking pleased.

“Her heart is great,” Litha murmured.

“But her body untrained,” I said, watching Estrayuh’s strange round eyes search the darkness. “I would change that.” I did not like to see her frightened.

Estrayuh yawned, and I rose, holding out my hand.

Circles of night sky blinked at me.

“Come. You need sleep. We will keep you safe.” I wasn’t sure how much Estrayuh understood, but her palm kissed mine and she came willingly into the *s’klaytuh*.

She hesitated when I nudged her towards our sleeping cushion, but when Zaf laid back and held out his arms to her, she gave a little gasp and fell into him.

His purr was so loud it could have been heard in the village.

Litha slipped in on her other side, her purr a quiet thrum of contentment. I set myself at Zaf’s back, one arm pillowing his head, the other slung over Litha—carefully not touching Estrayuh. Comfort was one thing. I would not make her feel pressured again.

I listened as one by one their breathing shifted, evening into the patterns of sleep.

I had come too close to losing them today.

I would keep watch for a little while longer.



# CHAPTER 19

## ESTRELLA

I awoke with a start, my heart hammering in my chest as the memory of being burned to a crisp by a fire-breathing cartoon dragon lounging on a hoard of golden Guinea Pigs faded into mist.

“*Kshh, Estrayuh,*” Zafett murmured, brushing a finger over my cheek as he untangled himself and rose without any of the unsteadiness he’d shown the night before. “*Keshit.*”

I mumbled something into the pillow, my eyes already closed, and his chuckle followed him out.

Revik and Litha must have gotten up earlier, because I was alone on the giant cushion. Rolling over, I stared at the ceiling.

We’d been attacked by a dragon. *A dragon!* There were *pinche dragones* on this planet! If I hadn’t been pissing myself with terror, it would have been fucking amazing. The creature had been resplendent, in an Escorting You To Your Imminent Death sort of way.

As big as a damned bus, with a wingspan that blocked out the sky, it somehow hadn’t been bulky. Its four legs were almost delicate, until you got to the huge freaking talons. They’d been black as obsidian and as long as my arm.

Its body was long and sinuous, ending in a frill similar to its wings that flared open and closed.

The head was just as full of sharp teeth as I would have expected—if I’d ever considered something as outrageous as *alien dragons*—and the scale-covered gray hide shimmered like an oil slick.

The tentacles had been a surprise.

They’d twisted and snapped around its neck and down its chest, more than I could count. I didn’t know what to call them

besides tentacles, but they'd only vaguely resembled the legs of an octopus—which I'd always thought were kind of cute—in that they were twisty and prehensile. More than anything, the *va'grev's* tentacles looked like chain whips from some gore-soaked anime: flat, serrated, and mind-bendingly scary.

If the damned things spat fire, I would lose my shit. I'd never leave the house again. Breakfast in bed and chamber pots forever.

The muffled sounds of conversation slipped in from outside, and I rubbed my hands over my face. Offended by the rough treatment, my bangs poked me in the eye.

I had to do something about them. Maybe I could try that face-framing hack where you twist them all together and one of the Teterayuh could saw them off with a knife. I usually went for a blunt bang, but if they kept getting in my face, I was going to end up running into a tree or chopping all my hair off. Possibly both.

I also had to stop procrastinating and go help with breakfast.

New planet, same bullshit. Just day after day of my anxiety making me act like an idiot, followed by embarrassment as I apologized—again.

I'd been okay during the fight. Handled myself pretty well, I thought. I'd found a weapon and *used it*. For just a minute, I felt like a badass.

Then the adrenaline disappeared, and I'd turned into a mushroom. Revik had to carry me home! I hadn't even been hurt, unlike him. He had a couple of nasty gashes on his side. I'd just been overwhelmed. The dragon, the blood. . .it had all been too much on top of everything else, and I'd gone fully offline. *Really pulling my weight as a roommate so far.*

I was trying hard not to think of what happened after as “pity cuddles”.

I groaned and pushed to my feet. Hiding in bed all day wouldn't improve their opinions of me any.

“*Sethitzikay*,” I mumbled, stumbling over the Teterayuh word for “good morning” only slightly on my way to empty my bladder.

The greetings they called back sounded perfectly casual—not as if they were trying to figure out how to exchange me for a less-damaged alien pet—but we would see.

It turned out my help wasn’t needed. Since our groceries hadn’t made it home, breakfast looked to be leftovers scraped together from the cupboard. Little piles of nuts, seeds, and dried meat were laid out on the table, around which Litha, Zafett, and Revik lounged, sipping from steaming cups of tea.

I hid a grimace as Litha poured another, placing it on the table between her and Zafett with a welcoming pat. The stuff tasted like hot grass. The three of them drank it with every sign of enjoyment, and Litha had looked so distressed when I gagged on my first mouthful that I’d choked down a cup every day since.

I threw it back like it was tequila, focusing on the memory of my favorite iced caramel mocha with every fiber of my being. Blegh.

“*Lit ereh, Estrayuh?*” Zafett asked, swiveling to face me. He leaned in, his eyes tracing over every inch of me.

In the process, he’d raised one knee, effectively caging me between him, Litha, and the table. My heart increased its tempo.

“Uh. . .” I swallowed and tried again. “*Ix. Ray sah*. I’m just a little sore,” I continued, having used up my Teterayuh vocabulary. I rubbed my shoulder. “But that’s normal, at this point. *Lit ereh?*” He’d been hurt in the *va ’grev* attack, all three of them had. I’d been too out of it to see how badly last night, and now their wounds were hidden by fur and bandages.

“*Ray anet*,” Zafett said, tapping the side of his head with a smile.

His face grew serious, and my anxiety picked up. *Please don’t ask me to go.*

Zafett placed one hand on my chest—his long fingers reaching from shoulder to shoulder—and slid the other into my hair, holding my head. Gently, he pressed our foreheads together and let out a long, uneven breath. “*Relyat, Lelesha. Arask set reka.*”

Ohhh, wow. I didn’t know what he was thanking me for, but whatever it was, I wanted to do it again and again if it meant he’d keep holding me and talking in that low, sexy voice.

“*S—sahvon,*” I stuttered. If this man didn’t get his hand out of my hair soon, I was going to jump him. I hadn’t been with anyone but myself since my divorce, and that had been more than a year ago. I was happy for the relief some of the others had been able to find aboard the ship, but with Mariano in the cell with me, it was just too weird. There’d been no privacy since, so I was wound up tighter than a frat boy at the end of No Nut November.

He pulled back enough to look into my eyes, and the emotion shining from their speckled depths stopped my lusty thoughts in their tracks. I forgot to breathe.

Maybe my turning into a mushroom didn’t matter to him quite so much as I’d thought.

Impulsively, I rose to my knees and threw my arms around his shoulders, hugging him tight. “I was so worried,” I whispered into Zafett’s silky fur. “Don’t get hurt again.”

His fingers flexed against my head, and the oddest purr broke from his chest. It was rhythmic, rising and falling in intensity.

Belatedly, I realized his hand had slipped when I pounced on him and now cupped my breast. His purr cycled again, and my nipple hardened, pressing into his palm. I sucked in a gasping breath, my back arching without conscious intent.

Then I was sitting flat on my ass, rock hard nipples wailing for more touch. Zafett was somehow on the other side of the table, pressed to Revik’s side, and staring intently into a steaming cup of grass water.

Litha coughed lightly. “*Veseh ar eh va javuh, Estrayuh?*”

I had to ask her to repeat herself. I probably wouldn't have understood if she'd been speaking perfect Spanish, as wrapped up as I was in trying to figure out what the hell just happened. Finally, the word *javuh* broke through my confusion, and I looked questioningly at the rain pouring from the eaves of the palapa. It seemed like an odd time to take a bath.

“*Hellt tch lit,*” Litha answered, her finger brushing one of my more colorful bruises with a feather touch.

My eyes fell to the bandage on the side of her neck, and then further to the one wrapped around her thigh. Was that a dark spot forming?

I nodded. If she thought it would help with the pain, I wasn't going to argue. If I hadn't been with them, slowing them down, they probably wouldn't be wounded at all.



Revik stepped beneath the sheltering arms of the tree enclosing the hot spring, and the sound of pounding rain faded into white noise. I slid from his hold, focusing on straightening my skirt to hide the flaming heat in my cheeks. He'd picked me up without a word as soon as we headed out, clearly having decided I'd put us all in enough danger for one day. Embarrassed as I was, I hadn't been able to ignore the smooth bunching of his muscles, or the feel of them rock hard and hot around me as he ran through the storm, taking the brunt of it on his back.

Having no more excuse to hide my face, I glanced up and stared. The storm had transformed the *javuh*. Steam rose from the pools in languid curls, forming an intimate oasis walled by cascades of sheeting rain. Blue flowers dripped from vines, emitting a soft radiance that reflected off the shifting water in a constant, magical play of light. It was spellbinding.

My companions were unmoved by the glory surrounding us. Zafett was unpacking the basket he'd brought along, and

Revik was already in the largest pool, arms outstretched with a look of blissful relaxation on his face.

I fingered my sarong nervously. I should just strip. The Teterayuh were naked all the time, it wasn't as if they'd care.

My fingers clenched into a fist around the fabric. I wouldn't lie to myself. It was the possibility of them *not* caring that made me hesitate. Modesty kept me covered around the other humans—I'd learned a long time ago that getting naked in mixed company was risky if you didn't intend to follow through with what people assumed would come next.

But now? It was vanity. And a little bit of rejection sensitivity. If I was going to strip in front of these people, I damned well wanted their eyes locked on me and reflecting *all kinds* of thoughts. Drooling would also be acceptable.

If they looked at me with “ham sandwich at a gas station” level enthusiasm, I'd never recover.

“*Sethit, Lelesha. Zharouk seh.*” Litha beckoned, posed at the edge of the pool. From the water below her, Zafett and Revik watched me.

That was the second time today they'd used that word, “*lelesha*”, like it was my name. Had I earned a nickname? I really hoped it wasn't Teterayuh for Helpless Mushroom.

I blew out a sharp breath. Untying the knot at my hip, I let the sarong drop. My pulse pounded as I watched for their reactions from under my lashes.

¡A huevo! Fuck a stale sandwich, they were staring at me like I was a feast, and they hadn't eaten in days.

Sensual pride straightened my spine, and my movements were fluid as I drew the tunic up into my fingers. Crossing my arms in front of me, I pulled it off my head, making sure to bounce my boobs for maximum effect.

There was a splash, a grunt, and when I glanced over again Zafett was perched in Revik's lap, straining against the arm banded across his chest. Revik's other hand was gripping the ledge of the pool, claws fully extended.

Litha was exquisitely still. I couldn't even see her breathing. The only thing that moved were her eyes, and they licked me all over.

Ohhhh, this was dangerous *and* stupid.

It felt fantastic.

I flipped my hair and bent to pick up my dropped sarong. It was a little awkward, since I was also arching my back and squeezing my boobs together with my elbows, but the strangled moan from the pool made it worth it.

When I rose, Litha was mere inches away. She let her gaze trail leisurely down my body. Humming, she raised her eyes to mine.

“*Toum seh, Estrayuh,*” she whispered.

I couldn't look away from her dark honey eyes. Helplessly, I followed her into the pool—a part of me amazed that she backed in without slipping, tripping, or breaking eye contact, another part wishing I knew what *toum seh* meant—letting her position me on a ledge like an eager puppet.

Yep, dangerous and stupid. I was too horny for femme fatale games.

We soaked for a while, none of us talking. My muscles relaxed, aches loosening, but my tension just ratcheted higher. The damned Teterayuh kept *petting* each other. Sweet, simple caresses, nothing overtly sexual. Nothing I hadn't seen every day since we got here—they were a physically affectionate people.

But after their reaction to my little strip show, I was feeling *stimulated*, and watching languid fingers trailing over wet, glistening bodies had me squirming. What would they do, I wondered, if I slipped a hand below the water, and. . .

Okay! Time for a distraction.

I flailed about for something to focus on. A strand of my hair caught my eye, curling in the eddying water. Grasping it—literally and figuratively—with both hands, I started picking out the knots.

My hair—which had been my crowning glory—was in pretty bad shape. It needed a trim and a full wash day routine with the heavy-duty hair mask, and that was just to start. The curl pattern was a mess. It was frizzy from the humidity. And with only my fingers, I couldn't keep it untangled to save my life. I thought longingly of my wide toothed comb, diffuser, and the painstakingly collected army of sweet-smelling products that had filled my bathroom back home.

“*Khah hellt?*” Zafett asked, huskily.

Was he really offering to help me untangle my hair? I looked up, and my jaw dropped. He was holding a *comb*! A real comb, carved from deep jade-colored wood, and a pair of clay pots. I nodded so hard my face jiggled. “*Het! Het! Relyat!*”

I reached out, but he pulled the comb away. I tried again, and he swatted my hand with his tail. “What the hell, Zafett?”

“*Ra hellt,*” he growled, emphasizing the first word. “*I help.*” He looked offended, wildly enough.

“Ookay. . .” My eyebrows furrowed, but I dropped my hands. How was this supposed to work?

Zafett nodded, satisfied. He set the glorious comb on the rim between our pool and the one above, then plucked me out of the water as if I weighed nothing at all, setting me back down in the higher pool.

“Zafett!” I cried, laughing.

He grinned, his tail high, and tilted his head to the side.

Litha climbed up beside me and turned around, leaning her head on the rim of the pool. Revik began unbraiding her hair with swift, practiced fingers, and the lightbulb went off.

I flipped around so fast the water sloshed, moaning unashamedly when Zafett started massaging my scalp.

His fingers paused for a split second, then he spoiled me.

I'd appreciated their shiny, silky fur. And last night, in their bed, I'd noticed how *good* they smelled. I hadn't really thought about what that might mean as far as bathing went.



The Teterayuh were serious about self-care.

Zafett slathered my hair with something that smelled like guava with a hint of freshly cut lumber before carefully working the knots and tangles free and combing it thoroughly. After rinsing, he washed it with *setkuh* soap, then did the guava wood and comb routine again before rinsing it a final time.

I wrapped a soft curl around my finger, wonder and gratitude making me feel like I was glowing.

There was some shifting around, then Zafett was beside me with Litha's fingers massaging his scalp. I turned to find Revik below, arms outstretched.

*Whatever you want, Daddy.*

I held mine out, and he picked me up as easily as Zafett had, setting me next to him. I sat there, bemused, as he wove a complex arrangement of braids into my wet hair.

*"Litha la Zafett sh'irirra setal."*

Revik spoke quietly, but I started, pulled out of the half-trance I'd fallen into.

I tried to gather the misty threads of my thoughts. What had he said? *Litha and Zafett*, yes, and *setal* was a form of *to be*. . .Litha and Zafett are. . .what?

*"Ix ilatah,"* I said. What did *sh'irirra* mean?

*"Litha, Zafett, Revik, irirra,"* he said after a moment's thought.

Okay, the three of them were something. The "sh" at the beginning of the word was possessive, from what I'd figured out. So, they were his. . .oh! Was that their word for partner?

*"Estrayuh la Naryanuh, kakal. Zafett la Indaro, kakal. Ilateh?"*

I bounced, excited. *"Het!"* Mariano and I, like Zafett and Indaro, were siblings. *Kakal*. Litha, Zafett, and Revik were partners—maybe mates? Might as well embrace the whole alien experience. They were mates. *Irirra*.

“*Ray.*”

Revik fell silent after that, and my enthusiasm at learning more Teterayuh faded into confusion. Why had he brought it up? Did he think I was pushing into their relationship? For all I knew, mutual bathing could be a mates-only activity. If so, he needed to talk to Zafett, not me. For that matter, I wasn't the one with their fingers in their not-mate's hair.

My temper was beginning to simmer when he finally spoke again.

“*Estrayuh...irirra eras?*”

His voice was the softest I'd ever heard it, and my temper deflated like a popped balloon. I turned to face him, tugging my hair out of his hands.

“*Ix ilatah,*” I said slowly. He couldn't be asking me if I had a mate. . . could he? I mean, Shane and I flirted, but there wasn't anything there. And I liked looking at Ria, but there was even less between us, romantically speaking. Did he think I wouldn't have said something when they split us up if I'd been married to one of the others?

His eyes were soulful as he brushed my bangs from my eyes. “*Siven. Oi a'laytuh.*” He gestured upward, past the tree that sheltered us. “*Irirra eras?*”

I dropped my gaze, twisting my hands together under the water. It seemed wrong to think about Drake here. As if just the memory of him could poison the beauty of this moment, this place. These people.

“*Estrayuh?*” Revik prompted, so gently a tear slipped down my cheek.

I nodded.

The silence lay heavy for a long moment. Then five arms wrapped around me, warm wet bodies surrounding me, holding me safe. They purred, softly, rocking me as I cried at the painful contrast between these beautiful souls and the man who'd sworn before God to love and care for me, to be the father of my children—only to leave me bleeding and alone.

# CHAPTER 20

## ZAF

I moved quietly, careful not to wake Estrayuh. I'd noticed she preferred to sleep longer than we did, and it was as nothing to see to her needs in this way. I liked a slow, quiet morning myself.

I added two pots of healing salve to my sack—noting I'd have to make more soon, since we had soft-skinned Hyunans among us—and snuck a peek at the Little Star who'd fallen into our hands.

For such a tiny thing, she took up a lot of space when she slept. She sprawled, arms and legs outflung, a look of utter peace on her face.

I wanted to slip beneath her and let her spread herself over me, rather than the cushion. *Around me.*

My teeth clenched and I turned, ducking through the doorway into the *err'laytuh*. This violent need for her was only getting worse. Finding out she was in mourning should have lessened the pull, but my sorrow at her pain only made me long to comfort her. . .as well as fuck her.

I settled across the fire from my mates and sorted through my pack, mindful to not forget anything. Healing salve for the rest of the *tetezha'a*, purification leaves in case Cass's wound sickness hadn't improved, a fresh batch of the oil for Aksha's pain, and a special salve to sooth Selka's breasts—swollen and tender from nursing. Good.

I hoped to return with more cloths for Estrayuh. Initially, I'd found it odd that the Hyunans covered their bodies. After watching her bare herself at the *javuh*, I understood. All that exposed flesh was grippingly sensual. In contrast, the patch of fur between her legs was. . .

I'd needed Revik to stop me from bending her over and finding out just what that fur hid.

I was shamefully certain that if she went into the village bare, there would be a trail of people needing healing in her wake. Which would be uncomfortable, as I'd have been the one to injure them in the first place.

So, yes. She needed more cloths.

This last storm had been ferocious but short. We were nearing the end of *ilot va 'regnev*. We would come into *ilot va 'heth* before the end of this moon, I thought. After the *va 'grev* attack and the discovery-laden visit to the *javuh*, yesterday's calm had been a welcome relief. Today, Estrayuh and I would go to the village while Revik and Litha gathered food to replace what we'd lost.

I hoped Estrayuh would be pleased. She was so strong, it humbled me. I would have understood if she'd stayed curled in the cushions for a moon after everything she'd gone through—of which I knew only a little. Instead, she worked tirelessly to learn our ways, to help *us*, and somehow found the will to smile through it all.

But in the night, when she thought us asleep, she cried.

I hadn't been sleeping much—too restless from the torment of having my loves so close, but being unable to sate myself in them.

The first night Estrayuh had slept in our den, we'd thought nothing of it. Among the Teterayuh, sex was something to celebrate and enjoy. I feared that wasn't the case for Hyunans. She hadn't said a word, but the scent of her discomfort had ridden the air like smoke from a fire.

My eyes followed the languid sweep of Litha's body, a whimper pushing at my throat. She stretched, arching her back in a graceful curve, and my need grew into a snarling beast beneath my skin.

A smile played at the corners of her mouth as she tipped her head to the side, exposing the biteable length of her neck.

Revik watched me—his eyes glittering hotly from beneath lowered lids—as he leaned in, accepting her invitation with a graze of his teeth.

Litha purred, pressing against his mouth.

My sex hardened in a dizzying rush, the tip pushing from my sheath. I growled and threw my pack to the side. My mates were wise. This morning could be spent in more pleasurable ways.

I prowled up their bodies, nuzzling as I went, saturating my fur in the scent of their mingled desire. My mouth watered. Revik's swollen sheath was hot in my hand, and I grinned at his curse even as my tongue slipped out, eager to taste.

Litha held her legs teasingly closed. I nuzzled between them, growling my demand that she spread for me.

“Litha?” Estrella's voice floated from the den, husky with sleep.

I smothered my groan against Litha's abdomen, which shook with laughter.

With a sharp bite that shared her frustrated need, she slipped out from under me, caressing Revik and I with her tail as she padded into the *s'klaytuh* to see what our *Lelesha* needed.

I flopped onto my back—my cock already halfway out of its sheath—and pouted.

Revik drove to his feet, his nostrils flaring as he stared down at me. My cock jerked. He was massive. Feral. He didn't say a word, just turned and strode into the trees, ass flexing and tail twitching in invitation.

I blinked at the spot where he'd been until enough blood made it to my brain for a thought to rise. I raced after him.

It wasn't comfortable to run this aroused. But *rek*, I needed him. I needed him now—

He crashed into me.

I landed with my back against a tree, grunting, my hands already stroking greedily over his straining muscles. My body rolled against him. I wanted his touch everywhere.

His rich, spicy scent filled my nose, and I sank my teeth into his shoulder, preening as he bucked against me.

Revik fisted his hands in the fur at the back of my head and pulled.

I gasped, arching, presenting him with my throat. When he snarled and closed his teeth around my neck, I shuddered and went limp.

Revik's snarl turned into a purr. He ran one big hand down my back, pressing our groins together even as he pushed my shoulders into the bark of the tree, pinning me.

"Revik!" I wailed, my hips bucking, as he kneaded the sensitive spot at the root of my tail with his claws.

He chuckled against my neck, dark and full of promise.

My mind was scrambled from lust, but rebellion sparked. He was too controlled. I didn't want that. I wanted him drowning with me.

I dragged my claws down his ribs, slowly, one hand gripping his delectable ass as the other circled and tugged on his tail.

A growl ripped out of him, and he ground against me.

I panted, my hips pumping with jerky, needy little thrusts as his fat cock pushed out of his sheath to rub against mine. I needed to feel it stretching me.

"Fuck me, Revik," I whined. "Please, please—ah! Please!"

"Kshh, only if you're quiet," he purred in my ear. "Can you be quiet for me, *shakath*?"

I clamped my teeth together and nodded furiously, my hips pumping in a steady rhythm. Our cocks were dripping now, slippery wetness soaking our fur.

Revik laughed, low, and dragged his tongue up my throat. "Good. Now turn around. Estrayuh will be wondering where

we went.”

My cock throbbed, and I twisted around eagerly. Gripping the tree with my claws, I swept my tail up, arching my back. Revik’s hungry growl fed my pride, and I flexed my hips—tempting him, demanding that he take me.

His hard hand landed on my ass. The moan was halfway out of my throat before I swallowed it back. Revik’s fingers gripped my cheek, spreading me, as he hissed, “So fucking beautiful.”

There was a juicy snapping sound, then the familiar scent of *ovtuh* reached my nose. Love and lust shivered through me with the knowledge that my mate had chosen his ambush location with exactly this scenario in mind.

The *ovtuh*’s cool slickness pressed against my ass. I relaxed, letting Revik push the fleshy leaf deep, and squeezed as he pulled it back. His grunt was a little breathless. I grinned, smug.

Then he was on me, and my mouth dropped open on a shocked gasp.

The tapered head of his cock slipped into me easily, but then Revik stopped, refusing to give me the girth of him. I would have growled, but he wrenched my head back at the same time his other hand clamped around my desperate cock. The sound that came out of my throat was a high, whining, breathless thing.

“Bad boy, you promised to be quiet,” Revik murmured, playing his fingers over the sensitive nodes that ran the length of my shaft. “I’ll just have to help you.”

His tail pressed against my mouth, and I opened for him, spreading wide as he gagged me with it.

“If you bite,” he whispered, as his cock pushed into me, unstoppable, making my ass burn and sing. “I’ll only fuck you harder.”

I panted around his tail, forcing my body to relax. The sensation of him inside me was so intense I wanted to clench and thrust, to fuck myself on his cock. But he was thick

enough that if I did that, I'd tear myself. So I held quiveringly still as the proof of my pleasure spilled down Revik's hand in a steady stream.

When his hips finally ground against my ass I let out a long, muffled moan and circled my hips, reveling in the stretch as ecstasy flooded me.

Revik's hand glided over my cock, making wet noises like a burbling stream from all the fluid I was pumping out. Each stroke was long, twisting around me from root to tip, and I couldn't help but buck into his touch.

He snarled, his grip tightening as he used my shaft to haul me against him before starting a rhythm with his hand and cock that had me clawing deep gashes in the tree I clung to.

Revik grunted with each stroke, his face pressed tight to my neck as his chest thrummed against my back.

He felt so fucking good. Knew just how to touch, just how to—oh, fuck!

I was gasping, trying to hold my breath, desperate to stave off the orgasm that was bearing down on me. I didn't want him to ever stop fucking me.

Revik flicked a claw tip across the sensitive underside of my cock, and it was as if I'd been struck by sky fire.

I screamed, tasting blood in my mouth as I bit down, and bucked against him hard enough I knocked him back a full step.

"Fuck, yes," Revik snarled, and slammed me back into the tree, his fist wrapped tight around my cock as he hammered my ass with sharp, fast thrusts.

"Come for me, *shakath*." His words ground out of him, distorted from the rumble of his purr. "Give me your pleasure."

It wound around me, pulsing, stealing my vision. An unsteady moan purred from my throat as the pressure at the base of my cock expanded, growing with every heavy, slick thrust of Revik's thickness in my ass.



“That’s it,” Revik praised, his hips snapping against me with more force. “Fuck, I love your ass. I’m going to fill you up. Leave you dripping. Let everyone in the village know how much my mate pleases me.”

I exploded. Ecstasy surged through me, bright flashes of light that grew and grew until the sensations coalesced, gushing out in hot streams that splattered against my stomach.

Revik muffled his roar against my back, driving deep, and I moaned as he swelled impossibly thicker inside me. The pulsing heat of his climax drove aftershocks through my sensitized body, stealing my vision.

Eventually, the waves of pleasure faded.

Revik murmured softly, nuzzling my back with gentle, worshipful affection as he petted my cheek with his battered tail.

I drew in a deep, satisfied breath and stretched, purring.

“You were not very quiet.”

I chuffed a laugh, then yelped as Revik spun me around. I stumbled, my eyes widening as he knelt and ran his hands up my thighs.

“Estrayuh probably heard you,” he said, baring his teeth in a wicked grin when I whimpered. “I should punish you,” he mused, and trailed his claws through the wet fur covering my sheath.

My cock twitched. If he did that, Estrayuh and I might not make it to the village today.

“But seeing her kin will make her happy. And knowing you will feel my cock with every step you take makes *me* happy.” He grinned, the sweet, boyish smile so few got to see. “But you can’t escort her like this.”

Revik’s tongue licked a hot line across my spent cock. He hummed. “Let me clean you up.”

When he’d lapped up all the evidence of my pleasure, I was fully erect once more with my hands buried in his head fur. He nipped my hip, and I regretfully lowered my arms.

Revik stood in a single, fluid movement, his head tilted at a cocky angle. “This, you carry with you,” he said, slapping my cum-filled ass. “Go. I’m going to wash up. Tell Litha to meet me at the river, the *tsalen* need thinning.” Without waiting for a reply, Revik bounded off.

I planted my hands on my hips, looked down at my stubbornly waving cock, and sighed. *If I walk very slowly back to the den, perhaps it will go down before I terrify Estrayuh out of her mind?*

How were the others who’d taken in the *tetezha’a* doing, I wondered. Were all of our new kin so embarrassed by intimacy? Or was Estrayuh’s reaction related to the loss of her mate?

If they all reacted so poorly to witnessing sex, life in the village would be uncomfortable. For their sakes, I hoped the discomfort was a peculiarity of Estrayuh’s grief. Saytireka would be insufferable if she thought they were trying to keep us from mating.

I picked up my pace. No need to delay further, since my problem had disappeared as soon as I thought of my mother.

# CHAPTER 21

## ESTRELLA

I winced and sucked in a breath, raising a foot piteously. It was a masterful performance. I even sold it with a little hop and a whimper.

Zafett hovered beside me, a low sound of concern vibrating in his throat.

Inside, I was so smug I might burst. Outside, I leaned against his supporting hand and let him see me smile, bravely.

My feet did hurt. The extra wraps Litha'd wound around them had helped, for about five minutes. The pain wasn't why I limped, though.

He'd been ignoring me. Litha had been weirdly distant, too. Revik hadn't even stuck around long enough to not talk to me—he'd been gone before I got up.

It was pissing me off.

This hot, cold, hot, cold thing they had going wasn't working for me. Yesterday had been amazing. Even the attack the day before—which had been fucking horrific in the moment—made me tingly to think about. The way they'd *moved*. It had been brutal, and beautiful, and it hit some cave woman part of me that said, *Ug. Strong warriors keep safe. Make strong babies. Mate now.*

This morning I'd woken up and decided to give them a little treat, since they'd been so wonderful. I'd needed Litha's help because I was not a crafty girl, but now?

I looked good. And neither he nor Litha had spared me a fucking glance. I'd stripped *naked* in front of Litha, and she'd *averted her eyes!*

I wouldn't stand for it.

We'd trimmed my tunic and cut a slit up the center so I could tie it beneath my boobs. It didn't give me the anti-gravity support of my prized \$80 bras, but it was worlds better than nothing at all, and my cleavage was popping.

Litha found me a rope to use as a belt, and my skirt now hit just above my knee, flashing a satisfying amount of jiggle thigh when I walked. I'd have to do something about the chub rub soon, but the shorter length had the unexpected benefit of catching on less jungle crap as we hiked.

The braids Revik had woven into my hair were all different sizes, twisting around each other and the mass of my hair he'd left loose. I didn't have a mirror to check, but it felt good. A quick trip of my fingers ensured nothing was too wild after my less-than-restful sleep.

I'd wanted them to react to my new look the way I'd done when I saw them in their fancy dungeon gear. Instead, they avoided me like I'd started using crap as lotion.

Hurt and confusion fanned my anger, bringing my petty side to fiery life.

"*Lit,*" I moaned breathily, twisting so my breast pressed against Zafett's arm.

He made a strangled noise, and my cheeks hurt from fighting a smile of triumph. I knew he wanted me, damn it.

I should probably feel bad for pushing him. There might be a good reason the three of them kept putting walls up between us. Like, maybe they were sane.

Or maybe their relationship wasn't open to new partners.

Mierda. Now I did feel bad. I'd been "the other woman" for a while when I was a wee baby eighteen-year-old, and I'd promised myself never again. I wasn't about to break that promise.

I was just so *frustrated*.

I sighed. Patting Zafett's arm, I continued walking in the general direction I thought the village was, abandoning my limp. But I wasn't a saint, and I couldn't stop myself from

swaying my hips with each step. The pause before he caught up with me was a salve to my wounded ego.

He stayed close for the rest of the trip to the village.

My petty heart was grimly satisfied every time he snuck a confused look my way. *Sucks to not know what the fuck is going on, doesn't it?*



“Damn, sugar! If I’d’a known we were dressing up today. . .well, I wouldn’t have done anything different. But, ooh, mama! Look at you!” Ria whistled.

I cocked a hip, preening. That was more like it.

Zafett muttered something about going to help people and took off. I tried not to feel abandoned. I was surrounded by my family, after all. That’s what I’d wanted, right? No Mariano yet, though I was sure he’d be here soon. We’d agreed to visit as soon as the storm broke.

“Bright morning, Estrella!”

I shook off my funk and returned Yin’s hug. Being embraced by my Abuele was cozy, like being snuggled into a blanket. A scratchy blanket. I frowned. Xyr skin—usually soft as a snake’s—was rough and dry. Was xe sick? Did the Quoosalk molt?

“How go—” my Abuele started, then hissed. Xyr silvery eyes fixed on my shoulder, where a fresh bruise bloomed.

“What happen?!”

The others fell silent, their stares heavy.

“Oh, that. They have dragons on this planet. Did you know?”



They had not known, and they had many—very loud—questions. It felt just like home.

Yin hustled me onto a cushion by the nearest fire. Unlike the others snapping beneath the massive roof of the *erralaytuh*—the village center—this one was markedly empty.

For all their demands for answers, no one seemed inclined to be quiet and let me talk. I was about to shut them down, but Yin did it for me with a single, disapproving hiss. Halfway through the story of the *va'grev* attack I had to start over, because Mariano showed up and had a hissy fit.

“That’s fucking wild!” Ria said, eyes bright with excitement.

“¡No me digas! It was *terrifying*.”

Cass closed her hand over mine. “I’m glad you’re all okay.”

“Me too. But enough about me, tell me everything. What are your families like? Are you being treated well?”

Therry broke into a huge smile. Xe’d chosen a gay couple who’d turned out to have twin girls—somewhere in the toddler age range—and was getting along with them fantastically. The three of them were learning Teterayuh together.

My neck prickled, and I looked around as I nodded and laughed along with Therry’s stories of toddlers who could climb on the ceiling. At one of the other fires, a group of three Teterayuh I didn’t recognize were obviously talking about us. When my gaze fell on them, they hissed and made that strange “brushing off cobwebs” gesture. One even spit!

I spotted Orange Boy among another group who were also glowering at us, but he didn’t move when we locked eyes. He just stared, unblinking. Creepy.

Shane finished telling us about the Teterayuh’s written language—his new roommate Indaro was some kind of writer, or maybe a historian—and I leaned in.

“Are you guys seeing how some of them are watching us?” I asked. It was instinctual to keep my voice quiet, even though none of them spoke English. “Did something happen? Not everybody seemed to be Team Alien when we got here, but this seems. . .worse.”

“Nothing happened that I know of.” Ria grimaced, shrugging. “But, yeah, I think it’s worse. They haven’t done anything but glare and do that weird head brushing thing, though, as far as I know.”

“Some Teterayuh not friendly,” Salat murmured. “Not friendly Teterayuh name us ‘*tetevath’a*’. Friendly Teterayuh name us ‘*tetezha’a*’. But do not know what means.”

“Your mother-in-law isn’t our biggest fan,” added Shane.

“My *what?!?*”

Shane slid his eyes to the side, drawing my attention to where Saytireka and Zafett stood, apparently mid-argument. He must have finished his rounds. “*Lover Boy’s* mom. Our fearless leader.”

“She’s not my mother-in-law!”

“She’s not her mother-in-law!”

Mariano and I spoke at the same time. If I was embarrassed, though, he was offended. Angry, even.

I scowled at him. He wasn’t going to get back on his ridiculous “they’re assholes for flirting with you because you can’t say no” soapbox from the other day, was he? I’d been an inch from smacking him then, and as keyed up as I was, if he tried me now I’d smother him with a cushion.

I *wanted* them to flirt with me. Whether or not they had any real interest in that direction seemed to be up in the air, but the idea that they’d hold shelter and protection over my head if I didn’t fuck them? That was just ridiculous. There was something wrong with his brain, that he could think that after everything they’d done for us.

“We’re just roommates,” I muttered, grumpy it was the truth.

“Riiight. . .” Shane dragged the word out, disbelief written across his face.

“*Estrayuh, tetezha’a, sethital.*” Zafett called out as he crossed the distance between us. Saytireka—I noticed with sinking dread—followed not far behind.

I pretended not to notice Shane winking at me—or Ria’s absurd kissy face.

I couldn’t ignore Mariano’s scowl, and “accidentally” stepped on his foot as I got up.

I didn’t understand a word of Zafett’s explanation of where he was taking us, but I didn’t want to make waves in front of his mother, so I just nodded and followed where he led.

“This is where Roosa does her weaving,” Cass said, startled. She’d been pretty withdrawn, and the hint of animation in her voice was good to hear. “She’s one of the women I’m living with, the one with the pink feet. She brought me here yesterday.”

The building was made up of a wide palapa in front with two enclosed rooms behind. A recognizable loom took up one side of the palapa, and a bunch of huge clay pots filled the other. They had to be three or four feet tall. I didn’t think I could reach all the way across some of them.

“*Kezhai, tetezha’a,*” Roosa greeted, stepping out from the left room. “*Saytireka, Zafett, kezhai.*” Her body had more padding than Litha’s warrior leanness, the sense of softness enhanced by deep cream fur and dusty pink feet. Roosa’s posture was relaxed, welcoming. She had the kind of energy that felt like warm cookies fresh out of the oven.

I was glad. Cass deserved kindness. The shadows were still too tall in her eyes.

She let out a stream of Teterayuh, beckoning us to follow her into the room she’d just exited. Inside, we found a couple long tables and a wall of shelves full of yarn and other more mysterious things. On the tables were stacks of cloths like the ones Zafett had given us in a rainbow of colors. A few had patterns worked through them, but most were solid with assorted borders.

Roosa gestured between us and the stacks of fabric, nodding encouragingly.

“For...us?” I asked.



She said something that sounded positive and offered a folded square of pale blue to Cass.

My wide eyes flew to Zafett, who was watching me with a waiting stillness. He'd done this. Figured out we'd want more clothes and made it happen.

"*Relyat*," Cass murmured, taking the blue cloth. It matched her eyes, I noticed absently. Pretty.

The Quoosalk settled themselves into a comfortable nook out of the way, chatting quietly, happy to be together.

The others started poking through the fabric.

"I've only seen flat cloth here—did you see anything like needles when she showed you around, Cass?" Ria asked. She laughed a little, self-consciously. "I'm really not a skirt girl. If we could figure out some pants. . .oh, man. *Pockets*. If you can make pants with pockets happen, I will kiss you full on the mouth."

Cass blushed. Actually, she turned bright tomato red all the way up to her hairline, and Mariano didn't lose a second before he started in with the teasing.

My avaricious little soul itched to get in there and pick out some new clothes. I had some ideas about a top wrap, if I could find something longer and narrower.

But my back itched with the weight of Saytireka's watching eyes, and the fear of doing something "wrong" in front of her kept me rooted to the spot. I chewed my lip, trying desperately to see behind me without turning my head.

Finally, I forced myself to move. I didn't look at her, although I checked my peripheral so hard I might have strained something. I touched Zafett on the arm, trying not to read into it when he tensed.

"*Relyat, Zafett.*"

After a long hesitation, he placed his hand over mine lightly. "*Sahvon, Estrayuh. Sethit. Yekit.*" Zafett lead me to a stack of cloths I hadn't noticed before. It was smaller and had been set aside on an otherwise empty table.

He hadn't called me *Lelesha* all day. How could I miss the sound of it so much when I didn't even know what it meant?

“*Vahseh?*” he asked, almost bashful.

I really looked at the fabric. It was all shades of dark red: maroon, burgundy, and wine. My favorite color. How had he even known? “Like it? Zafett, I *love* it!”

I was too overwhelmed with soft, fuzzy feelings to translate into Teterayuh, but I figured the giant hug I gave him would be answer enough.

For a split second, Zafett purred, hugging me back.

Then he backed away, almost stumbling, and hurried to Cass. He spoke quickly, each word sharply defined. “*Sethit? Zafett hellt.*”

I was still blinking as his tail disappeared out the doorway, Cass in tow.

An ache started in the center of my chest. I tried and failed to breathe it away as I looked over the fabric he'd set aside for me. I was feeling more and more like I was pushing myself where I wasn't wanted. *Desired* and *wanted* weren't the same, after all.

I picked three, figuring that gave me two outfits if I—or most likely Litha—could origami a top out of them. Although it was cuter now, I really wanted to set my current top on fire. It was the principle of the thing.

One of the maroon cloths even had uneven bands of salmon pink woven through it, making it coordinate with the one Zafett had given me first. I fully intended to wear that one until it started to fall apart, then hang it on the wall of my room.

By the time I'd made my selections, I felt like bugs were crawling all over me. I fought the urge to flip around and scream, “What are you looking at?! What is your problem?!” at Saytireka.

Teeth clenched, I took my new clothes and joined the Quoosalk, who made polite noises about the pretty colors.

Mariano leaned against the wall behind me with the look on his face that said he was thinking deep thoughts. Every now and again I caught him looking at Therry, and his expression would darken further.

*You might be on your own with this one, mi hermano. I'm not doing so well in the "relating with aliens" category at the moment.*

Yin told us about the home xe shared with Aksha and her mates. It sounded peaceful. Apparently, Aksha enjoyed a game played with small, cup-shaped pottery pieces and pebbles. She'd been teaching Yin to play. Xe tried explaining it, but I'd never had the attention span for gaming, so I was pretty lost. Still. . .

"I'm happy it's a good place, Abuele," I told xem.

Xe patted my hand. Xyr skin wasn't just dry, there were cracks forming in places. I looked, and the other Quoosalk were in the same state.

"Abuele, does this hurt?" I asked, hovering a finger over one of the larger cracks.

Xe bobbed xyr head noncommittally. That was a yes.

"Is it normal? Will it pass?"

"No. . ." Yin paused, searching for words to explain. "Skin too dry. Need. . .*different* wet."

Different wet? Like. . .lotion? The Teterayuh had conditioner, maybe that would work? Or Zafett's magic ointment? If he ever talked to me again, I'd ask him.



He *didn't* talk to me when he came back with Cass—whose burn marks were looking much better—but I dragged him over and showed him Yin's cracking skin anyway. He could have his little snit later.

Zafett looked the Quoosalk over thoroughly, his expression serious. Then he had was sounded like a very polite argument

with Saytireka that ended when he sent Roosa out for. . .something.

He'd brought enough of his ointment to allow us to get a good coating on the worst spots, and by the time we were done with that, Roosa had returned with a smaller Teterayuh in tow.

The new girl didn't look at us. From her, the avoidance didn't feel antagonistic, as it had from the other Teterayuh. I got the feeling this girl—who I thought to be a teenager—was just shy.

Her name was Aretoi. She'd brought a clay pot containing something that smelled like heaven: woody and spicy, with a hint of something darker. Earthier. Almost amber.

At Zafett's urging, the Quoosalk covered themselves in the stuff.

They used every bit of it, to my disappointment. I'd wanted to try some too. It smelled so good. But the relief on their faces made it impossible to feel any kind of way but happy.



We stayed through lunch.

Svixa and her family joined us, and the younger girl soon pulled Aretoi out of her shell. It would have been a lovely visit, if Saytireka hadn't been watching us the whole time as if we were grenades without pins. And if other suspicious-eyed Teterayuh hadn't accreted around her, not-so-coincidentally forming a barrier between us and the rest of the village.

I kept waiting for the pitchforks, or for them to break out in a song and dance routine from West Side Story. The closest they came was when more than half of them had done the weird overhead hand flap—in unison.

Whatever was going on there worried me. But the most immediate part of my attention was on Zafett, whose behavior had only gotten weirder.

He stationed himself behind me at lunch. He didn't try to join any of the conversations happening around us, and only

gave Revik-short responses when spoken to.

If I talked to anyone for any length of time, though, he'd start growling. At one point Shane offered me something that looked like a pink succulent arrowhead, and Zafett knocked it from his hand.

The hopeless romantic tucked deep inside me wanted to believe he was jealous. But I was glumly sure that I'd fucked up. I'd been too pushy. Too aggressive. I'd crossed some line, and Zafett—sweet, protective Zafett—was now defending everyone else from the possibility of my unwanted attentions.

Feeling about two inches tall, I picked at my food until enough people were done that I wouldn't have to deal with questions about why we were leaving so soon.

Mariano—who'd been low-key moody all day—jumped at the idea of going home, and we said our goodbyes.

There was some sort of tension between him and Kurz, but he wouldn't talk about it, and I was too upset to push, so the four of us walked mostly in silence.

Even so, when he and Kurz split off towards their house, the atmosphere darkened.

When we finally got home, I waved off Litha's greeting—Revik was still nowhere to be found—and marched straight to the alcove that served as my room, throwing myself on the bed.

The tears started before I stopped bouncing.

# CHAPTER 22

## LITHA

My ears twitched, and I looked up with a welcoming sweep of my tail.

I'd been waiting for Zaf and Estrayuh's return with all the patience of a child waiting for their *casa* cake to cool enough to eat. I should have been relaxed—Revik and I had worked each other to exhaustion by the river—and I was, but the lesson I'd prepared for Estrayuh was on one of my passions. I couldn't wait to show it to her.

"*Kezhai*—" I snapped my teeth shut as the little Hyunan stalked into the den. She didn't pause or look my way, only flapped a hand as she disappeared. My eyes arrowed to Zaf, who stood rigid, his tail quivering with stress.

"What happened?"

"Oh, spirits, everything went wrong! I am a beast. I should go stay with my sister. I am not safe to be around Estrayuh. I try—but when she is sad, I'm overcome with the urge to *hunt* her. I imagine licking the tears from her cheeks as she squirms beneath me." The words burst out of him, fast and ragged, but barely above a whisper. They could have been a scream for the amount of heartbroken intensity that rang through them. He curled inwards, hiding his face from me, both hands pulling at his head fur.

"I try to hide it, but I fear she knows. The way she looks at me, *sha'vail*, as if she's peering into my thoughts and cannot comprehend what she sees. As if she needed more to contend with, after all she's been through." Each word was a slice, contempt for himself tearing him bloody.

I stood.

"My *mother* could see it. She accused Estrayuh of preying on my mind, somehow, and told me I should remove her from

our den. When I asked her why I would send a known danger to the den of one of our kin, she had no answer. She's been stirring people up, feeding into the "death comes from the sky" superstitions—as if the sun and rain didn't also come from the sky. She tried to prevent them from gathering! They are too much of a *threat* when they are not separated." He took a moment from his self-abuse to growl at the memory of Saytireka's foolishness. "Revik was right, that's the real reason she would not let them stay in the unmated den." He shook his head, too absorbed in his rant to notice my slow advance.

"I reminded her—loudly—that the strangers were kin, and had to be treated the same as any other Teterayuh. To confine them when they have harmed no one would be a betrayal such that the other villages would break from us. The threat of war with the Outer Kin silenced the rumblings, but more will come. They are sitting in fear."

Zaf was pacing now, his tail cutting wildly through the air behind him.

I moved the cushions into a pile, clearing a wide space next to the fire.

"I was so distracted by my mother's schemes that I didn't even notice the Kyusalk's illness."

I paused, still in a crouch, and tipped an ear in a question he didn't see.

"They had cracks in their skin as long as my finger! They were in pain, and I didn't notice. Some great healer I am. Saytireka tried to refuse to arrange a trade meet—of course—but I insisted. We went through half our supply of the *Svestrix tonsa*, and they will need more."

I huffed. Saytireka was digging deeper into stubborn pride, and something would have to be done about her soon. But she was not the problem I was concerned with in that moment.

"Lie down." Zaf just blinked at me, so I pointed at the clear space beside me and repeated, "Down."

The rigidity left his body, and he collapsed as if he'd been struck.

I laid myself over him—anchoring him with my weight—and purred, breathing slowly and evenly until his chest and mine moved in unison.

“Did anything else happen?” He wouldn’t be able to think clearly until he’d purged the bitter poison his mind sometimes filled him with.

Zaf’s tone was softer now, sorrowful. “I behaved badly at the midday meal. Growled at anyone who looked at Estrayuh, like a *rekvang ikfrit* over its kill. Shane tried to feed her some *lapa*, and I struck his hand, as if I had some claim over her. As if she could not make her own decisions about whose offers to accept. She is so angry with me; she didn’t even look at me during the walk back to the den. I deserve her anger.”

“Hmm.” I held my silence—except for my purr—until one by one, his muscles softened beneath me. When I spoke, it was gently. “May I share my thoughts?”

Some of Zaf’s tension returned, but I nuzzled him until he relaxed, and nodded.

“You prevented your mother’s fear from dishonoring the village and protected our new kin. Not a small feat, *shirravail*.”

He twisted his head, searching my face, and I let him see the truth in my eyes.

“You did your duty as a healer, both by seeing to the Kyusalk’s ailment, and by ensuring that they will have what they need to thrive. How is Cass?” He hadn’t mentioned the burn marked Hyunan, so I thought it likely she was responding well to his healing. When the darkness took hold of him like this, he could not see his own accomplishments.

“. . .much improved,” Zaf admitted. “All but one of the spots of wound-sickness have healed, and I believe that will improve soon.”

“We are all blessed to have you as our healer.”

His ears flattened, and he nuzzled me, pleased. He was silent for a while, and I let him think.



“You truly believe so?” he asked, his fingers moving aimlessly in the fur covering my hips, seeking comfort.

“I do.”

“But—about Estrayuh—”

“I think it’s unwise to assume we know her thoughts. She might be upset over your protectiveness—if so, you will apologize, and knowing her feelings will help you control yourself.” My voice was uncompromising. I knew my mate, even if he doubted himself. He might be experiencing something new, but who he was at his core had not changed.

“It’s also possible she’s upset about something else. Something she and her kin spoke of. Or—” I nipped his ear, because I knew him well, “she might be upset because you ignored her.”

“I didn’t—” he started, then a pained expression scrunched his nose. “I might have. She might think I was, at least.”

I chuffed. I knew well the frustration of watching him pull into himself when the darkness in his mind hissed cruelty. “I will speak to her. Go. The *atlak* by the flat stone pile is ripe, and I heard you muttering about making more healing salve.” I rubbed my cheek along his, then pressed our foreheads together, breathing him in. “You are a good man, *shavail*. Allow the truth of that to bring you peace.”

His arms wrapped around me tight.

I let him get one foot onto the moss before I spoke again, growling this time. “You’re also *my* man. If you try to leave this den—leave me—I will hunt *you*, and do much worse than lick your tears when I catch you.”

Zaf laughed, startled, then fell silent as his face sharpened with the promise of desire. He nodded, gravely.

I watched his tail swish with pride as he leapt into the trees, and smiled.

Now, to find out what had actually upset Estrayuh.

I slipped past the door hanging and stopped as if I’d run face first into a tree. My nostrils flared, and I tipped my head

back, swallowing the moan that tried to rise.

The scent of Estrayuh's pleasure saturated the *s'klaytuh*, musky and rich. I wanted to lick the air. But sorrow wove itself through the mouthwatering perfume, reminding me of my purpose.

There had been no movement at my entrance, and she wasn't anywhere I could see, so stepping quietly, I peered around the lattice partition into her sleeping nook.

Estrayuh lay curled on her front, one arm folded beneath her cheek. The other cheek was striped with the remnants of tears. *Oh, little one.*

I was stepping back, not wanting to wake her, when she stirred. I stilled.

"Litha? *Iz thaat yoo?*" Estrayuh sat up, rubbing her hands over her face and muttering, "*Noht lyk shees goeeng tu uhnderstand yoo, ihdeeot.*"

She didn't sound happy. "If you want to sleep more, that's fine," I offered. "I will go."

Estrayuh shook her head. "No sleep. What need? Cook?" She pushed to her feet and smiled, the curve of her mouth making no difference to the dull sheen in her eyes.

"Need to talk," I said, motioning for her to sit again. Perhaps she would feel more comfortable here, in her sleeping place.

Emotions flickered over her face too fast for me to read, and her scent was a wash of stress, but she sat, tucking her shorter bottom covering around her as she did so.

It had been sweet torture, helping her this morning. The memory of her weeping as she mourned her lost mate had barely been enough to keep my touches those of a friend rather than the lover I longed to be.

"Why?" I asked, trailing the back of one finger down the path her tear had carved.

She sucked in a breath, her eyes darting like a trapped animal's.

I settled back, curving my spine, trying to be less intimidating. She was so small in comparison, it was difficult. Perhaps if I lay down?

“I’m sorry.”

I tilted my head. What could she possibly be apologizing for? Zaf hadn’t mentioned anything, and I’d certainly noticed nothing.

“I . . . *pooshed*,” she said, extending the palms of her hands towards me. Her scent now was bitter with shame. “Litha, Zafett, Revik, mates. I . . . no mate.” She hung her head. “*Aye misuhnderstood. Aye thot*. . . I’m sorry.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, carefully. It didn’t seem like she was talking about the loss of her mate, but something she felt she’d done wrong. I just couldn’t think what that might be. Not understanding her language or her culture was a misery.

“*Meeyairda*.” Estrayuh’s eyes closed, and an expression of pain wrinkled her face. “I . . .” She arched her back, presenting her chest, and leaned towards me, running a hand down my arm.

I swallowed, shock and arousal holding me in place.

Then—as suddenly as before—she pulled back, closing in on herself with her fists balled in her lap.

I had to strain to understand her next words, thick as they were with fresh tears.

“I’m sorry. I understand—bad. Estrella no mate. Litha, Zafett, Revik mates.”

Understanding hit me. She thought her interest in us—I felt a thrill at the confirmation—was unwanted. That we were angry with her, perhaps, because of it? But why. . .

*Oh. Well, fuck.*

“No. Not bad, Estrayuh.” I wiped the tear from her cheek, crooning. “I want you.” I let my gaze wander over her body, not hiding how she affected me. My tongue licked at the corner of my mouth, and I inhaled the scent of her desire. I didn’t try to throttle the purr that started.

“I very much want you. Zaf and Revik want you.” I lifted her hand—which was limp as she stared at me, wide eyed—and placed it on my thigh, my purr getting louder when her fingers flexed.

“But, your heart is hurt,” I murmured, touching her chest where I could feel its pounding. “We can wait. It is an honor to know you, Little Star. I would not disrespect you for want of your body.” I blew out a breath at myself. Such poetic sentiments were not helpful in making her understand.

“Heart-hurt.” I simplified, with a gentle press against her chest. Then I lifted her hand from my leg and set it back in her lap. “Not now.”

I could see the thoughts racing through her eyes—once so strange, but now just hers. Estrayuh’s eyes. Beautiful.

“Okay. Now, heart-hurt. No.” Each word was distinct, as if she was discovering them as she spoke. She looked up at me through her lashes, shyly, and made a rolling gesture with her hand. “Later, no heart-hurt. Yes?”

I leaned close, pressing our foreheads together. She smelled so good, hope and desire replacing the shame and sorrow. The thrumming in my chest was so loud I barely heard my reply.

“Yes, Estrayuh. *Yes.*”

# CHAPTER 23

## ESTRELLA

“No—yes. Good. Over now. Under. Under. Good!”  
Litha’s words whispered against my ear, making my nipples tighten. Is it later enough, yet? It’d been—what? Half an hour? A freaking *lifetime* when it was filled with long touches and sexily cooed praise.

Apparently, this afternoon’s activity was Basket Weaving 101. Litha had showed me the basics, then arranged herself behind me, guiding me as I tried. It was like that scene from *Ghost*, but instead of Patrick Swayze, I had an eight-foot-tall fuzzy purple alien with a tail and killer eyes.

If I hadn’t released some steam earlier, I would have self-combusted and ruined our fledgling understanding by humping her.

Upset as I’d been, as soon as I realized I was alone for the first time since my abduction, I couldn’t keep my hand from reaching beneath my skirt. I’d come fast and hard, but I’d still ached with dissatisfaction. The looming threat of someone coming in and seeing what I was doing—plus some sensitivity because I’d gone pretty hard without a break or lube—left me dizzy in the wake of my second orgasm.

As soon as the pleasure started to fade, though, the emotions rolled back over me, and I’d shut down.

Now—not an hour since our “let’s not do anything we’ll regret, there’s no rush” conversation—the tension was spooling up in my center once more, making me hypersensitive and tingly.

“Good, Lelesha, yes.” Litha guided my hand, tugging the reed I was weaving into place so it curved, shaping the top of my basket.

Ayyyy, mami. I wasn't going to be able to move from this spot, or everybody was going to see my slut puddle.

Now that I'd agreed to slow down, let myself deal with the bullshit trauma of being abducted by pinche *aliens*, the brat in me was going wild. I might need and appreciate the care my three were showing me, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

I bit my cheeks, glad Litha couldn't see my undoubtedly red face as I cackled internally. Somehow, my lucky ass had stumbled into a Mommy and not one, but *two* Daddies!

Thinking of this enforced celibacy period as part of a kink dynamic made it weirdly easier to deal with. Not that I wouldn't still fuck with them, of course. My pride wouldn't let me sit quietly while they nobly sacrificed themselves for my benefit. Especially since the only one *not* getting laid in this scenario was *me*.

Maybe next time I rubbed one out, I'd wait until we were all in there together.

I sat back, looking at my masterpiece of a basket. It was lopsided, had several weird bumps and holes, and overall looked like it had been run over by a truck.

"It's good." Litha actually sounded serious.

I snorted.

Her chest shook with laughter as she reached forward and scooped the basket up.

Ugly as it was, there was a little glow of warmth in my chest as I watched her set it proudly on the top shelf in the kitchen area.

We were putting away the remaining basket making supplies in the bedroom when I really *looked* at the walls. I'd seen them before, enough to notice that they were woven and complex, but I hadn't really inspected them.

My shock must have been deeper than I thought, because they were worth a second, and even a third glance. Each panel was unique and richly complex. Fingers of the living tree were woven around bundled grasses, rope in a rainbow of warm

shades, reeds, and other things I couldn't identify. They weren't just walls, they were art.

Wonderingly, I ran my fingers across one, following a curving line of purple grass twisted into a coil. The other homes I'd seen hadn't been this elaborate. Kurz's place was almost Nordic in its simplicity. Some of the treehouses in the village were more decorated, but not like *this*.

"You like them?"

My Teterayuh vocabulary was growing by the day, and I'd even started thinking in it sometimes. But with my attention caught by the masterpieces that made up our home, I responded automatically. "No me gustan, me encantan. ¡Son muy bellas!"

I finally dragged my eyes away to find Litha watching me intently. There was such a weight to her stare. I looked from the intricately woven walls to her, and my eyes widened. "Did you make?"

She nodded.

"Yes! I like them!" I took her hand in mine, pressing it to my cheek in amazement. There wasn't a chance in hell I'd ever be able to make something half that nice. I could have a lifetime of practice and I still wouldn't come close.

I'd seen the scars beneath the fur, so I knew Litha had been born with two arms. I didn't know if that had changed before or after she'd made these, but she could have had eight arms like an octopus, and I still would have been utterly blown away.

"Thank you, Lelesha." Pleasure deepened her voice. Her tail wrapped gently around the back of my knee, petting.

Muffled thuds from outside announced someone's arrival, and with a smile Litha turned and ducked beneath the door curtain.

I lingered—admiring the beautiful lines of the woven art wall—but when I realized I was avoiding whoever was out there, I sighed and followed.

I didn't think it was possible, but Zaf looked more uncomfortable than I felt. His fur was actually standing up, a line of tension waving at his back like an anxious flag.

I walked straight to him, buried my face in his stomach, and wrapped my arms around his waist.

He twitched and made a guttural, startled sound. But when he bent, returning the embrace, his purr was thunderous.

"I no understand, in village. I understand now," I whispered, knowing his keen ears would hear just fine. "I'm sorry."

I was a little glad my vocabulary was so limited. Any other apology I could have given would have been dangerously close to a lie. I wasn't sorry I'd teased him. And I wasn't sorry he'd been upset. *I'd* been upset, so it only seemed fair. I still wasn't entirely sure what all the growling had been about, but it'd made me feel like shit, and though I was willing to forgive him. . .nothing said I couldn't torture him a little bit. After all, it would be scientifically important to discover whether or not the Teterayuh could experience blue balls.

"No, Lelesha." Zafett hummed. The stroke of his hand down my hair and along the curve of my spine took a lot of the spark out of my revenge plans. "I hurt you. I'm sorry."

Aw, maaan. "Eres tan dulce," I muttered, nuzzling his abs—freaking washboard abs—beneath the soft fur. How was I supposed to hold onto a mad when he was so. . .*nice*?!



Zafett was pulling the last bits of dinner from the fire when Revik finally sauntered into the palapa. I crossed my arms, cautious. I'd made my peace with the others, but I wasn't sure where Revik and I stood. He wasn't exactly communicative on the best day.

Today—he'd been gone so long, longer than any day since I'd been here. And he'd left without saying good morning, or having breakfast. After the epic misunderstandings of the day,



my emotions were one throbbing bruise and I didn't *want* any more turmoil. But it was hard not to feel like he was avoiding me. . .and that sucked.

He unstrapped his packs and grunted something that might have been “smells good” as he went to rub cheeks with the others. Litha spoke to him as they greeted each other—too fast and quiet for me to hear—and when he lifted his head, he looked right at me.

I tried not to squirm.

“Good. . .hunt?” I asked, dying for something to shift his focus. He was so intense, and I could never make out what he was thinking. Sometimes he did things like braid my hair or try to kill me with that tongue thing. Other times he glared, and growled, and acted like my existence wasn't worth noticing.

Some other day, I would have found the mystery delicious. I was a sucker for dramatic tension. But today I was fragile, and the uncertainty felt like a threat.

He nodded, those uncanny bright eyes telling me nothing, and took three long steps back to his haul. He selected a smallish sack, lifting out a mess of leather and rope. Revik offered the bundle to me, his big hands hiding most of it from my view.

“Ahhh. . .” My face spasmed as I tried to figure out what the hell it was without looking ungrateful.

Revik's head pulled back like I'd slapped him. His eyes narrowed to slits as he snorted out an unhappy breath and turned away, taking the mysterious straps with him.

*Smooth, Estrella.* I caught him by the tail. Not ideal, but it was drooping low behind him, and I couldn't reach anything else since I was sitting and he was a freaking giant. Short people problems.

“I'm sorry. Please?” His fur was so sleek. I couldn't help the lingering stroke I gave his tail before extending my hands—palms up—for my gift. Whatever it was.

Revik's head whipped around. Finally—his eyes still narrowed in suspicion—he crouched.

Cradled in his broad palms was a stone knife in a leather sheath. The sheath was attached to some kind of harness—and although I couldn't tell from looking how it was meant to be worn—it was beautiful. The sheath and harness were rich black leather, the handle wrap and trimming worked throughout a vibrant red.

The knife was just my size.

My shaking fingers fit around the buttery leather grip with ease. The blade—when I pulled it free—was as long as my hand from wrist to fingertip. It was carved from the same semi-transparent obsidian-like stone all the Teterayuh's knives were, but when I turned it, the knife shone like a bottle of Coke in the sun. The others I'd seen ranged from a milky gray to charcoal.

I looked from the knife to Revik, unable to close my mouth or form a single word.

A slow smile showed me a hint of sharp teeth. He ran a fingertip down the blade, then—looking deeply into my eyes—caressed ever so gently across the upper curve of my cheek. “*Toum lez ha'alta.*”

I'm pretty sure pink cartoon hearts were dancing over my head. I wasn't a big enough person to feel bad about the grumpy things I'd thought about him throughout the day—my abandonment trauma needed a “goodbye” in the morning at the very least and I'd long since made peace with that—but since he'd busted his alien ass to not only bring home groceries, but also *make me a knife that matched my Goddamn eyes*, I could forgive him this time.

“Thank you,” I said, looking up at him through my eyelashes. I wanted to cuddle the knife and Revik both, but I was a little afraid I'd end up bloody. Speaking of—I sheathed the blade, looking between Revik's wide, weapon-bedecked chest and the collection of straps attached to my new shiny stabby. To my eye, great big boobs and the Teterayuh method of knife wearing didn't seem super compatible.

Revik huffed, eyes sparkling, and took the harness. After a little fiddling—during which I stayed perfectly still, trying not to breathe or suck in my stomach as his heat and spicy, earthy scent surrounded me—he had it tied securely at my hip. What I’d thought had been several straps turned out to be one long belt that circled my waist twice.

It felt. . . sexy. The wrap emphasized my tummy and waist in a way I’d never have had the nerve to do back on Earth, confident as I was. So many people didn’t recognize beauty when it walked past them, but were happy to make their ignorance my problem. It was exhausting.

Revik’s hand wrapped around my thigh. My thoughts sizzled into a puff of steam, gone in an instant.

He growled, tugging, and I widened my stance jerkily, staring down at his head. Revik was so close I could feel his breath through my skirt. *He slipped his hand between my thighs.*

I wobbled, bracing myself with a fist in his hair. *Oh, fuck, oh fuck.*

His fur was velvety soft against my inner thighs, and I didn’t waste a single brain cell acknowledging the sting from my chub rub as I trembled, focused on his smallest movement.

Revik’s big hands worked between my legs, bumping against me, spreading me further. I bit back a whimper. We’d all *just* agreed to put a hold on the flirting. . . but a little orgasm between friends was okay, right?

Something tightened around my thigh, the sensation making my eyes flutter closed. Then Revik pulled back, grunting, and they popped back open.

A pair of straps connected the sheath to my thigh now, wrapping around with the ends hanging on the outside of my knee. My emotions were playing tug-of-war in my chest. On the one hand: hot. On the other: Revik’s berry-picking tongue was *so close* to where I wept to feel it that I might actually die.

“Uhhh, good.” I forced the words past the horny battle being waged in my chest, and they came out breathy. “Thank

you, Revik.”

His hands closed around the backs of my thighs, and he swayed closer. His nostrils flared as he inhaled, his clawed fingers pressing into my soft flesh.

“Thank you,” he purred.

*Splloosh.*

Revik’s head tilted. His fingers tightened, pulling my legs apart more, and a low growl rolled out of him. “Estrayuh hurt?” His eyes jumped to mine as Zafett and Litha made sounds of alarm behind us. “What hurt?”

Zafett pushed Revik to the side, taking his place in front of me. I covered my face with a hand as he lifted my skirt, getting a closer look at my reddened inner thighs.

“Estrayuh?” Litha’s fingers curled around my palm, tugging.

I sighed and met her concerned gaze. “Not bad hurt.” I didn’t have the words to explain the effects of thick thighs, friction, and jungle humidity, so I patted Zafett’s hand away and rubbed my thighs together, wincing with a little extra drama.

Understanding lit Zafett’s warm yellow eyes. A stream of complex Teterayuh later, Litha relaxed and Revik strode into the bedroom.

Zafett pulled my attention back to him with a touch on my thigh. He rubbed his hands together, jerkily, making them catch and drag against each other. “Bad, hurt,” he said, shaking his head. He dipped a finger into the glossy purple pot Revik held out and rubbed his hands together again. This time the movement was smooth, easy, and he smiled. “Good. No hurt.”

A low thrum came from Revik, who curved his hand down Zafett’s back, cupping his ass. “Very good.”

Oh! *Ohhh.* That was a picture for the spank bank.

Zafett’s ears flattened, and his tail curled around Revik’s leg in a silky caress as he handed me the pot. “*Tov.* Hellt. Stop

hurt.”

Alien lube as a treatment for chub rub? Why not? It wasn't even the weirdest thing I'd tried this week.

# CHAPTER 24

## ESTRELLA

**T**ov was magic. We could make a killing with it back on Earth. Sell it at all the fatty boutiques and sex shops under a sign that said, “Great for chub rub *and* butt stuff!”

The sore, swollen redness had disappeared completely in two days, and now—after walking almost an hour—I could’ve been wearing leggings as far as my thighs were concerned.

If they used this stuff for lube, they could fuck for days without getting sore.

I snuck a peek at Zafett, moving with feline grace beside me. My eyes dipped to the mysterious and very large, furred bulge between his legs. *Tov* might just be enough to let me take whatever he was packing without being torn in half.

I thought of Revik, somewhere high in the trees above. . .then I thought of both of them. At the same time. That would probably be too much for even *tov* to handle, but what a way to go.

“Close now,” Litha said, smiling as she helped me over a huge, twisting root.

“Thank you.” I peered around her. The path ahead was pretty uneven. Shyly, I reached for the base of her tail, watching her face to make sure it was okay. She’d been the one to initiate the alternative to handholding, but it made me fluttery every time. It just felt so intimate.

She purred and curled the end of her tail around my calf, leading me onward.

How far away was the Svestrix village? My stomach roiled at the idea of meeting more Teterayuh. Would they welcome us? Or would they watch us with suspicion like Saytireka and

the rest of the cobweb-brushers? That would make for a very uncomfortable shopping excursion.

It would be worth it as long as we got more of the lotion that made my Abuele feel better. Even if they ran us out of town with torches and pitchforks.

Litha looked back at me, concerned, and I forced my fingers to relax. The rest of my body took a few more breaths.

These new people—the Svestrix—would be friendly and welcoming. They'd load us up with a truckload of sweet-smelling lotion, and everything would be great.

I snorted. As if anything ever went that smoothly. Especially recently.

Revik dropped down beside Zafett, sandwiching the two of us between himself and Litha. Zafett was fast as lightning, and my fighting lessons were going. . . well, not horrible. But Revik and Litha were the muscle in our little group. They had a habit of putting themselves between Zafett or I and any danger—the Teterayuh version of walking on the car side of the sidewalk.

It made me tingly. On the one hand, the protectiveness was very sexy. On the other, I knew they expected and trusted me to take care of myself—even though I'd proven to occasionally transform into a mushroom—and that was sexy in a whole different way. The little girl inside me was all gooey with delight at the same time my feminism was punching the air, which was a nice but altogether unfamiliar combination.

“Here, Estrayuh.” Zafett broke into my thoughts with a smile, pulling aside a thick, draping magenta vine.

“Thank yo—” My throat snapped closed, biting off my words.

The Svestrix weren't another village of Teterayuh. They weren't Teterayuh at all.

They were *giant assed snake people! ¡Pinche serpientes!*

Litha yelped, jerked to a stop by the vise-like grip of my hand on her tail.

I couldn't take my eyes off the. . .what would they be called on Earth? There was something. . .nagas! That was it! They were completely scaled, with Teterayuh-sized upper bodies—vaguely humanoid except for the complete lack of hair or ears—elongated faces, and spines that moved. . .

Well, like snakes. From the hips down, though, it was all serpent. I couldn't wrap my mind around the length of their tails. . .lower bodies. . .snake bits? Whatever they were, they were long as hell, and my brain threw an error message. All I got was: miles. Miles of snakey snake bits.

Madre de Dios, were they aliens too? Not-from-this-planet kind of aliens, like us?!

The more I looked—and I'd been staring long enough for real rudeness at this point—the more I thought not. They *fit* here. They and the Teterayuh matched the hugeness of the plants, and the bright colors of their scales felt right in this red rainbow jungle.

“Estrayuh?”

The urgency in Zafett's voice told me it wasn't the first time he'd called my name, and I finally blinked as his face filled my vision, blocking out the gente serpientes.

“Not Teterayuh,” I blurted, thoughtlessly.

“No. . .Svestrix.” Zafett tilted his head, ears flicking in confusion.

“I no understand. . .” I lifted my hands, waving them aimlessly as I searched for the words. Finally, I gave up and wiggled like a snake, hissing. *Please, God, don't let anyone else have seen that.*

His eyes widened, and I had to fight back a nervous giggle. He looked so alarmed; I half expected him to jump in the air like those videos of cats when they see cucumbers. Wait, didn't the cats jump because they thought the cucumbers were snakes? Apparently alien felines didn't share the same aversion.



“Ahhhh!” Zafett said something more, but my growing vocabulary couldn’t keep up.

“Svestrix safe,” Litha assured, caressing me with her tail.

I realized I still had a death grip on it and relaxed, petting her back apologetically.

I drew in a couple deep breaths, scrambling to reset my expectations. I hadn’t planned on meeting a whole-assed new species today. A new village had been stressful enough, but here we were. Time to stop causing a scene. I pasted on a brave face and nodded.

Revik stepped back, giving us room to pass. Gratitude swelled in me. He’d placed himself as a wall between us and the Svestrix, giving me privacy for my little what the fuck moment.

“*Relyat*,” I murmured, squeezing his arm. Jesus, he was such a hardbody.

He dipped his head, looking almost. . .proud?

“Estrella! Did you know about the snake people? I about shit myself!” Mariano jogged towards us, looking over his shoulder furtively.

“Screamed like a bitch,” Ria confirmed, following at a saunter.

I’d been so fixated on the Svestrix, I hadn’t even registered there was anyone else in the glade formed by the legs of the *zhazhalouk* trees. It was packed.

Six Svestrix took up the far side. Four Teterayuh ranged nearby, and between the two groups—looking like halflings among elves—sat my little family. They waved, then got back to inspecting the array of pots and other items set before them.

“Not surprising,” I said, distracted. What was in the pots? How long *were* the Svestrix’s tails? Did they have fangs? Did they constrict? For all I knew, they shot lasers from their fingertips. “You’re afraid of snakes.”

“I am not!” Mariano said, his voice raised in outrage.

I finally looked at him. “Remember that garter snake that slithered over your foot when we were ten? You screamed so loud Tata thought you were being murdered. Then there was that rattlesnake last year when you were biking—it was twenty feet away, but you panicked and rode into a ravine. Broke your leg, remember? Oh, and—”

“All right, all right!” He clamped a hand over my mouth, only to pull away with a grimace when I licked it. “You’re mean *and* nasty.”

“And I have an excellent memory, thank you very much.”

Ria chuckled. “They’ve been nothing but hospitable. Nicer than some folk from the village, to tell the truth.” She pursed her lips, rolling her eyes to the side.

I grimaced, then smoothed out my expression. All four of the Teterayuh were from the pro-Saytireka/anti-alien contingent, with Arvel leading the pack. He didn’t seem to like the Svestrix any more than he liked us, going by the generosity of his glares.

“Hey, Litha. Revik. Zafett,” Ria said, nodding at each with a smile. Mariano begrudgingly followed suit.

“*Kezhai*, Ria. Naryanuh.” Litha led us forward, greeting the other Teterayuh coolly.

Mariano and Ria fell in beside me, him tense, her moving with a casual slouch. If she’d had pockets, her hands would have been in them. She looked to be a second from whistling.

“You’re taking this pretty well,” I whispered.

“Eh.” Ria shrugged. “This is, what? Alien species number four? It’s old hat by now.”

“If you say so,” I scoffed. It could be species twenty-four and I’m pretty sure I’d still freak out.

“Hold on, where’d you get the knife?” Alien nagas weren’t enough to raise her heart rate, but one little knife had her sounding positively covetous.

“Revik made it for me.” I caressed the smooth, rounded pommel, unable to keep a cat-in-the-cream smile from curling

my lips.

“Aw, man. That is so romantic!” She inspected me closely. “Maybe I can make something like that for the knife I took from the bugs. The thigh strap action is sexy as hell, and practical too.”

“Be careful with it,” Mariano deadpanned, shooting me a look from the corner of his eye. “If you chop off a finger in an alien jungle, you lose it in real life.”

“Cute.” I rolled my eyes.

One of the Svestrix came forward at our approach, the deep green markings on her white scaled body shifting with each sinuous motion. She moved through a shaft of sunlight, and everywhere it touched shimmered with a pale-yellow iridescence.

“Gorgeous,” Ria breathed.

I agreed completely.

Litha met the Svestrix woman, and they gripped each other’s shoulders, tipping their heads in an embrace that held formality and genuine warmth. After a second, the Svestrix woman moved her left hand, cupping the stump of Litha’s missing arm with meaningful solemnity.

They exchanged a few words I couldn’t hear, then the other woman laughed, pulling Litha close for a real hug.

That answered one question. They definitely had fangs. But now I had more questions. What exactly was their relationship? Was this woman involved in Litha losing her arm? If so, how? They were awfully friendly for her to be responsible in any way.

Zafett nudged me forward, and Litha turned, making room for me at her side. She introduced me to the Svestrix woman using my full Teterayuh name—Estrayuh Hyunanata.

“*Kezhai*, Estrayuh. I am Kashka. *Sy h’elith ivresk.*” Kashka coiled her tail, lowering herself until I could meet her eyes without craning my neck. They were mesmerizing. Like the Teterayuh, she had vertical slit pupils, but the large round eyes

they sat in were a pale metallic green that seemed to swirl, catching and reflecting light in dizzying fractals.

I stared, entranced.

Her pupils expanded, and she moved closer, filling my vision with the otherworldly shimmer.

A hand covered my face, killing the connection abruptly. Revik's low voice rumbled against my back and I sagged, breathing through my instinctive flight response.

The Svestrix woman replied, sounding amused.

Revik turned my head, putting us face to face. "With Svestrix," he said, staring fixedly in my eyes and shaking his head, "no look and look." He lowered his gaze to my cheek. "Yes, look," he continued, meeting my eyes briefly before focusing more generally on my face.

"To Svestrix, look and look means. . ." One of Revik's hands slipped into my hair, while the other curved down to cup my butt, pulling me close. He purred, lowering his face to my neck. "Want."

Yes. Want. I wanted more of that. I arched my back, reveling in the squeeze of his fingers and the solid breadth of his chest. Then I was wobbling, bereft, as he set me back on my feet.

"Understand?" he asked, his tail flicking wildly behind him.

I did. I even appreciated the warning—although I could think of about fifty less awkward ways we could have had this conversation—but that didn't keep me from recognizing the smugness that radiated from him. Revik knew exactly how he affected me, and the cabrón *liked* it.

I swayed into him, pressing my boobs against his chest as I wrapped my arms around his neck. He tensed. I pretended I didn't notice as I rubbed my jaw across his, whispering, "*Het. Relyat, Revik.*"

He was frozen, his purr rolling like thunder, when I turned back to Kashka.

*Two can play that game, my man.*

I glanced only briefly at her dancing eyes—this alien flirting habit was really getting out of control—and got the impression she was trying not to laugh.

She rolled out a stream of Teterayuh, most of which I didn't understand. Her voice was lovely, warm and raspy like an old-school blues singer, tinged with a sibilant accent. The few words I understood were “sorry”, “help”, and “welcome”. Since my three stood easy beside me, I followed suit, nodding when it felt appropriate and smiling when she did.

“Sit,” she said, waving towards my family, who'd been watching our exchange with avid eyes. “We trade.”

Mariano, Ria, and I joined the others while Revik unstrapped the basket of goods we'd brought, adding it to a pile of things that must have come from the village. I hugged Yin and Cass, noting with relief that they'd both healed considerably since I saw them last. The few spots of infection on Cass's burns were gone, and Yin's fine scales were no longer dull and splitting.

“Feeling better?” I asked, holding my Abuele's hand.

Xe squeezed my fingers. “Yes, thank you. Zafett is kind. You chose well.”

“I haven't—I mean—” I peeked at Zafett, who must have heard his name, because he was looking our way. My cheeks heated. “He is kind,” I mumbled.

“When he's not snarling at anyone who looks at you.” Ria chuckled.

“That was a misunderstanding.”

Shane leaned in, propping himself up on one arm so his muscles flexed. A lock of dark hair fell over his forehead as he spoke in an intimate whisper, so close I felt the warmth of his breath on my shoulder. “Care to test that theory?”

I winced as Zafett growled, a low and surprisingly mean sound. But it was a sleekly black-furred arm that pushed between us.

Revik surrounded me for a moment before dropping some kind of dried fungus in my lap and returning to his spot. In the process, he shoved Shane back a solid foot.

The meddling fool laughed silently to himself, splaying his fingers in a gesture that said clearly, “I rest my case.”

Whatever.

I sniffed the hard, dry thing Revik had given me, hiding my smile and the warm glow their jealousy lit in my chest. It smelled. . .dusty? Not unclean, just dry and old, like something from an antique shop.

I hoped it wasn't food. I didn't want to insult the giant snake people, but nothing about this thing was appetizing.

Kashka picked up another one of the dried mushroom balls, mimed dipping it in something, and buffed it over her gleaming scales.

Oh, hell yes. Delicious lotion *and* alien loofah? The Svestrix were the best.

My excitement must have been obvious, because Litha chuckled. “Yes, *ex iltal ves*,” she said, running a hand down my arm.

One of the other Svestrix, this one a bit smaller and more muted in color—a pretty rust with gray stripes—gathered an armful of the loofahs, adding them to a collection of pots set aside from the rest.

That must be our shopping cart. I'd guess the pots were full of lotion—what had Zafett called it?

“*Tonsa*?” I asked, pointing to the pots.

Kashka nodded.

I held up the loofah. “What?”

“*Eshek*.”

*Eshek* and *tonsa*, the newest additions to my alien spa collection. I was going to be so soft and smell so good. It was *over* for my three.

They'd also brought little baskets of shimmering, brightly colored pigments, which Cass, Salat, and I were very excited about, although for different reasons. Cass and Salat wanted to use them for art. My mind went straight to makeup. The Svestrix painted *their* bodies with the stuff, so I figured it was probably safe.

There were a few more things—things they'd brought for the Teterayuh—and I let my attention wander.

I didn't get the oppressive sense of disapproval and suspicion from the Svestrix that Saytireka and her cobweb-brushers gave off, but there was a reserve there. Some sort of bond obviously existed between Kashka and Litha, and to a lesser extent Revik and Zafett, but the other Svestrix were wary. Arvel and the other three Teterayuh edged towards hostile.

I took note—if there was tension between the two peoples, it would be good to know. Although, knowing Litha liked them and Arvel didn't was enough for me to take the Svestrix's side.

The Teterayuh and Svestrix repeated the process with the things we'd brought, and negotiations began in earnest. Bizarrely, Arvel pushed forward—after silently hate-fucking us all with his eyes throughout the whole process—and tried to take over. Litha shut him down with a single, mildly voiced phrase that had him slinking back, his tail actually tucked between his legs.

None of the negotiations meant anything to me. My vocabulary wasn't built with trade in mind, and no one seemed to expect my input. I touched Zaf's arm and tipped my head. He nodded, and my family and I scooted to the side. His tail brushed across my back, making me shiver.

We'd been on this planet three weeks, and things were starting to settle down. We were still learning a lot, obviously, and every day was full of adjustments, but it was so nice to see my family begin to creep out of crisis mode.

Cass was working with Roosa and the other weavers to figure out clothes for us and experimenting with painting on

leather. She was still quiet, but she didn't flinch as often, and her infrequent smiles were bright as the sun.

Salat had chosen Svixa's family, and xe was thriving in the busy household. Between Svixa and the babies, xe had very little opportunity to be lonely. Xe joined Cass for painting each afternoon while the niños took siestas.

Ria was completely fascinated by the Teterayuh method of creating the concrete like substance they used for flooring, hearths, and built-in shelving. Apparently, it involved collecting the urine of some strange blue deer-pig called a *raysheel*, and mixing it with a bunch of other stuff. She'd go off at a moment's notice about the beauty of the process—meanwhile I was trying not to think about there being pee in the floors and counters.

Therry's foster family also had a couple of kids, girl twins named Varoi and Reeya. Twins were the norm rather than the exception among the Teterayuh, which was odd but nice to think about. They were maybe four, as far as human development went, but Teterayuh children were a lot more physically independent than human kids. From xyr stories, the whole village spent a fair amount of time coaxing them down from places they'd climbed without knowing how to get out of.

Yin had found a set of kindred spirits in Aksha and her mates. They got along fantastically, but I could see the loss of Ilya weighed on xem still.

Did the Teterayuh have pets? I hadn't seen any, but I hadn't spent all that much time in the village. Yin could use a pet. I'd have to ask on the way home.

Shane was a font of all the knowledge he'd acquired. Indaro, Zafett's sister—his twin—was the village's historian, and most of her food needs were provided by others, leaving them a lot of time for lessons.

There was something going on there. Shane got kind of squirrely when he talked about her. Either he was hiding that they didn't actually get along, or he had a crush on her. If she was anything like her brother, I was guessing the latter.



Mariano. . .was being weird. Which was actually reassuring. He never could get out of his own way, emotionally speaking. He was actively avoiding Therry—to the point that when Therry went to sit by him, he got up and moved to the other side of our group, leaving xem looking lost and bewildered.

He'd sort himself out eventually. If it went on too long, I'd smack him around until he told me what was bothering him, and remind him not to be an idiot. It usually worked.

If only my own shit was ever that easy to manage.

Now, all we had to do was figure out what stick Saytireka had shoved up her ass about us and convince half the village we weren't going to murder them in their beds, and life would be golden.

“What about you, Estrella?” Ria asked.

“What about me, what?” I responded brilliantly.

“Pay attention, fool.” Mariano rolled his eyes. “If you could bring anything from Earth, what would it be?”

“Air conditioning,” I answered without thinking. “Tortillas. A bra. Indoor plumbing. The internet. Grilled cheese with béchamel.” *My favorite vibrator, butt plug, and nipple clamps.*

“Oh, man. I used to go to this food truck that made the best fucking grilled cheeses.” Ria moaned, licking her lips.

Kashka's head turned, her green eyes on the redhead as her tongue flicked out, tasting the air curiously.

“What do you say? We fix up the bug's ship and start an import/export business? The first and only trade line between Earth and. . .” Mariano furrowed his eyebrows. “What's the name of this planet, anyhow?”

“There isn't one,” Shane answered. “Indaro seemed to think the idea of something so large needing a name was silly.”

“Well, they don't have to use it, but I'd like to have something to call this place,” Mariano said.

My mind provided a slew of unhelpful options. Fur and Fang. Giant World. Hotel California: Extraterrestrial Edition. Meow-Hiss.

“The Teterayuh word for “here” is *salyk*,” Shane suggested. “It’s basic, but. . .”

“Yeah, but then there’s no difference between *this spot* and *this planet*,” said Ria.

“We need a word specific to here,” Cass mused. “Maybe something about the red leaves?”

“Sanguine would tie into our somewhat bloody introduction,” Shane said.

“Doluna,” I said, my throat tight.

Shane looked at me, eyebrows raised.

Cass was the first to understand, her hand closing over mine with shared memories. “Dos lunas,” she murmured. “Two moons.”

“Ooh, I like it!” said Ria.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Mariano crowed. “Now that we’re here, Doluna is going to be the power planet of the galaxy.”

“Power planet?” Therry asked, head tipped in confusion.

“It’s. . .there was this famous couple on Earth. . .people put their names together. . .never mind.” Mariano stumbled over his words, his gaze flicking to Therry and just as quickly away. He turned to me, cracking a bright smile. “It’s a good name. Doluna. Home to cats, snakes, dragons, and us.”

“Dragons not know what they’re in for,” Yin said, somberly.

I paused, unsure how xe meant it.

Yin lifted xyr chin regally, then hissed, fingers curled into claws for the full effect. Xyr eyes sparkled with humor.

“Poor dragons!” I laughed, secretly horrified at the idea of my Abuele facing off with one of the terrifying *va ’grev*. Acid

spitting badass or not, I'd much rather xe live the rest of xyr hopefully long life in peace and safety.

Zafett appeared beside me, offering his hand.

The Teterayuh and Svestrix must have finished their negotiations while we talked. Now, everything was packed away, and I craned my neck, watching with awe as the huge bodies of the Svestrix slipped into the trees like they were weightless.

“Go home, Estrayuh?” Zafett asked, when I didn't move.

“Yes,” I said, putting my hand in his. Home. Doluna. He helped me to my feet, where I was immediately surrounded by the warm bodies of Litha and Revik.

Home.

# CHAPTER 25

## ESTRELLA

The soft padding of feet woke me, and I blinked my eyes open in time to see Litha's flowing tail slip out the doorway. The light that seeped around the door hanging was weak, so I yawned and snuggled back into the cushion. Not morning yet. She probably just had to pee.

Sleep eluded me. I kept thinking about the day before.

Not about the surprising existence of giant snake people, that would have been entirely too rational. Instead, a constant slideshow of little moments flitted through my thoughts, keeping me awake.

The satisfaction in Litha's posture as she'd led me through the jungle. The way her ass had flexed, brushing against the backs of my fingers with each step.

Zafett's growl when Shane had gotten flirty, and my own seed of jealousy watching Litha and Kashka embrace.

Revik keeping me from an embarrassing cultural faux pas—while also turning it to his own advantage, the cad. Him scooping me up halfway home when I began to flag, cradling me in his arms like I was a treasure.

The way they'd cared for me, attending to my wants and needs without a hint of resentment. Like it was a pleasure, rather than a burden.

As they always did.

It occurred to me that it was very quiet in the bedroom. My three tended to purr in their sleep, which was both unbelievably adorable and about as soothing as a white noise machine. But there was no thrum now, and no breathing either. Did they *all* have to pee? Or was it later than I'd thought?

I got up, stretching and wrapping my knife around my hip as had become habit. Revik didn't like it when I went out unarmed.

My fingers had just brushed the door hanging when I heard the first moan.

I clapped a hand over my mouth, spun, and pressed against the wall, straining my ears.

Another moan, deeper this time.

¡Carajo! Dios mío, they weren't.

They were.

My breath was hot against my fingers. I squeezed my thighs together, clenching my pelvic muscles hard as I listened to the wet sounds of friction outside. My core quivered, the wave radiating up my spine, making me arch.

Someone snarled. I froze. There was the rushing, scraping sound of running, then a gasp—Litha, I thought, my nipples hardening—followed by a pair of growls.

I remembered Zafett's reaction to me that first day, when I thought he might eat me. Remembered the flash of Revik's claws as he pinned him after. Felt my body rise at the memory of Litha's strength as she hauled me up.

My fingers trembled as I pulled out my knife. The blade was so sharp. I sucked in a breath as I dragged the point up my thigh, knowing I'd be covered in red welts when this was over, and not caring.

The growls were farther away now. I held my breath, not wanting to miss a single sound. My head started to spin and I closed my eyes, imagining it was me running through the jungle, the three of them hunting me.

*A choked noise, a thud, and a long, unsteady moan.*

They'd catch me. Surround me until I could see nothing but them, feel nothing but their need. Pick me up and crush me between them, their hands gripping, claws piercing.

I ran the knife over the sensitive skin of my belly, drawing in a sharp breath at the sting. I twisted the knife, pressing hard enough to feel the tip bite against my skin.

With my other hand, I yanked up the fabric of my top, freeing my breasts. I cupped one, pushing it against my chest as I rubbed the nipple between my fingers. I wanted them to be crushed against Revik's hard chest—or maybe the bark of a tree as one of them fucked me from behind.

*“Yes, yes, rek, just like that.”*

Litha's voice was breathless, and I bit back a moan. I slid down the wall, collapsing with my legs spread, knees up. My knife clattered to the floor as I plunged two fingers into my weeping cunt. I brought them to my mouth, lapping at them, imagining burying my head between Litha's thighs.

My hips were pumping, desperate for satisfaction. My skirt had ridden up. I'd probably have a friction burn on my ass. I'd make Zafett rub *tov* on it. Tempt him into fucking it, too. I squeezed my breast roughly, arching, and ground my hips harder.

*Litha. “R'arevang rek, Zaf? R'iskeh tch hahz? R'aiseh va'vaillesha?”*

*Zafett, snarling. Wet, pounding noises in a fast rhythm, a baseline to his grunts and Litha's moans.*

Three fingers weren't enough. I curled my body, trying to get deeper, but my damned fingers were too short. Lightning shot up my spine as I circled them over my clit. I was so swollen and sensitive, the sensation rocked through me. But as good as that felt, my pussy was an aching, throbbing mess, so empty it hurt.

*A roar. Deep enough it had to be Revik. He and Zafett grunting as Litha keened.*

I scrabbled blindly, finding my knife blade-first. I hissed. My fingers were slippery with blood and my own wetness, but I gripped the hilt and shoved it between my legs.

This was a bad fucking idea.

The pommel was cold and hard, shocking against the heat of me, but it warmed quickly. I couldn't stop the groan of relief as my pussy ate it up, clenching around the rigid length with bruising intensity.

*Moans and wet, slapping noises coming faster, louder.*

I wanted to pound the knife into my cunt to the beat of their fucking, but the single brain cell I had that wasn't focused on coming screamed "NO!", so I wedged a finger in beside the hilt, pushing, needing that hard round tip to smash against my g-spot.

Revik and Zafett loomed over me in my head, huge cocks standing out obscenely from their furry bodies, and I forced in a second finger, biting my lip at the burn.

My jaw clamped down and I tasted blood as fireworks went off in my cunt. That was it, that was fucking it. I pushed with my fingers, grinding the knife into that beautiful spot. My ass made wet slapping sounds against the floor as my hips pumped.

So close, fuck, I was almost there.

*Revik's voice, raspy and coming in hard, staccato grunts.*  
*"Sal arvang era Estrayuh lez etha yoongak. Rek ekatesha. Yek het jipet a'sharits."*

The orgasm plowed into me, the explosion echoed by my three's cries, their shouts of pleasure in the shape of *my name*.

Every muscle in my body tightened. My pussy pulsed, squeezing my fingers against the hilt of the knife, and my legs snapped shut. The pain from the blade cutting into my thighs blended with the ecstasy rolling through me, but I didn't have a single fuck to give about any damage I might be doing in that moment. It felt too good.

A lifetime later, my body finally collapsed. An occasional aftershock made me quiver as I sprawled against the wall, quickly growing sticky.

I looked down at myself. My top was rucked up into my armpits, red scratches covered me like Sharpie doodles, my knife—the leather handle soaked almost black—lay

abandoned between my spread legs, and blood slowly trickled from a mess of cuts on my thighs.

I felt fantastic.

That orgasm was the best I'd had in years.

I debated cleaning up, trying to pretend like nothing happened. I decided against it. Even if I'd had a way to hide the cuts, I *wanted* them to see what listening to them had done to me.

Litha, Zafett, and Revik were the best people I'd ever met. They treated me better than anyone ever had, and had—day by day, action by action—healed a lot of the wounds my ex and life had left on my heart.

They'd been right to put a hold on things before. The time had allowed me to breathe and start the path towards recovery.

But I was ready now. The next time they fucked, I was going to be there in more than spirit. I was going to find out what their fur hid from me and unleash all this pent up *want* that was driving me insane.

I pushed up into a more flattering pose, pulling my top off and setting it aside. My gaze—beneath lowered lashes—was fixed on the doorway as I listened for footsteps and delicately licked my knife clean.

They ought to know up front that I was a freak.



# CHAPTER 26

## ZAF

I rested my head against Litha's neck, shaking like the crest of an ikfrit as my pounding heart slowly steadied. I was limp, drained, my head fuzzy like I'd downed an overripe a'hoiv on an empty stomach. Revik's hand cupped the back of my neck, connecting the three of us, and I worked up the energy for a weak, trembling purr.

Litha arched, stretching, and laughed at my indignant grumble. "We can't stay here, *sha'vail*. Estrayuh will wake soon. Besides, I need to wash before your *ahz* dries in my fur."

I slipped my hand between her thighs, playing my fingers through the wetness there, and reached farther to find the evidence of Revik's passion dripping down her crack. My mouth watered. "I can clean you up."

Revik chuckled, the sound almost masking Litha's eager moan. His fingers pushed mine out of the way, and at my whine he slicked them wetly over my lower lip.

"Don't pout. Your tongue is too skilled. If you start that, we'd never stop. Go to Estrayuh. I think she would welcome you, if you were to crawl in beside her." He grinned over Litha's shoulder, flicking my ear. "Cuddle and rest. We'll clean up and begin the morning meal."

That was too good an offer to refuse. I nipped his fingers, slid my jaw against Litha's in a lingering caress, and we parted ways.

I walked back to the den—a shorter distance than usual, since my mates had ambushed me when I'd sought to pleasure myself—and basked in the loose, warm feeling that came from complete satisfaction. A dozy snuggle wrapped in Estrayuh's softness sounded almost too good after the morning I'd already enjoyed.

Blood.

The purr that had started as I imagined her small fingers playing in my fur died in my chest.

I covered the *err 'laytuh* in two leaping strides. Had something come into the den and hurt her? With us so close? I would never forgive myself if she was badly injured. If she—

I snarled and shoved the fears aside, ripping past the door hanging. My nose finally identified the second scent I'd ignored in the rush of fear and rage, and I stumbled to a halt, stunned.

Arousal. Thick, heady, and intoxicating.

I swayed, searching the dimness of her nook beyond the screen. She wasn't there.

“Good morning, Zafett.”

I whipped around. At the sight of Estrella, bloody and bare, her legs spread and chin lifted, my body collapsed. At the same time, it tried to leap forward, and I ended up in an ungainly sprawl at her feet, every bit of my focus locked on the glistening, swollen paradise between her blood-smeared thighs.

A low growl trembled in my throat as my claws scored furrows in the floor. My gaze flew to hers, my teeth bared in a snarl. I didn't recognize my own voice, guttural with need.

“Tell me no, *Lelesha*.”

Estrayuh's head turned slowly side to side.

I gulped, closing my eyes against the strangling urge to devour her. A rustle of movement made me open them again. Every glimpse of her tore at my control, but I couldn't stop myself from looking. She was too beautiful.

Estrayuh spread her legs wider, arching, those glorious breasts overflowing her hands as she offered them to me. “I no say no,” she said, her half-lidded eyes dark on mine.

I didn't remember moving, but my hands were full of her plushness with her legs draped over my arms before the words

faded from the air. This close, her scent filled my head, pushing out any thoughts beside lick, taste, feel, mate. I kneaded her ass, letting her feel my claws. She clearly didn't mind a little sharpness.

She gasped, the sound shivering into a groan as she melted in my arms.

I dragged my tongue from her knee to the crease where her thigh met her body, laving the wounds she'd made. Her blood was sweet enough I had to fight back the urge to bite, hungry for a bigger taste.

Her sex was different than I was used to, but recognizable enough. Below the small patch of fur, her outer petals were fat, plump and delicious, a perfect cushion for the rough fucking I was desperate to give her. The inner ones were barely ruffled and still, but the opening they protected and the wetness that glistened on them were achingly familiar.

I flattened my tongue, drawing it in one long stroke up the length of her slit. *Rek*, her taste! If she'd let me, I'd lick her every day.

Her petals gave beneath the press of my lapping tongue, just as decadently soft as the rest of her.

Estrayuh hummed, petting my head, but some of the urgency had left her.

Unacceptable.

If her petals weren't her pleasure point, perhaps her channel was more sensitive. I circled the tip of my tongue around her opening and was rewarded by a small pulse and her fingers tightening in my head-fur.

That was more like it. I firmed my tongue, pressing against her swollen tissues. My cock throbbed at the idea of this tight little hole squeezing around me.

*"Oh, fuk, yoar tungs soh lahng!"* Estrayuh panted, her hips rising, pushing my tongue deeper. *"Soh thik, and—oh gahd!"*

I smirked internally, increasing the frequency of my purr until she shouted again. I reached the end of her as soon as I

should have expected, given her size, and flexed my tongue, licking and stretching her.

Estrayuh clamped down, gifting me with a hot surge of wetness as she twisted in my hold.

The scent of fresh blood blossomed in the air as I tightened my fingers, keeping her in place. Her inner walls tugged at me as I pulled my tongue back, and we both groaned when I pushed deep again.

I fucked her with my tongue, my cock dripping freely on the floor at the taste and feel of her, at the breathless noises she made, and the sensual quivering of her body in my hands.

*“Oh fuk, oh fuk, oh fuk,”* she chanted. I glanced up, arrested by the sight of her massaging her own breasts, pulling and squeezing the nipples.

One of her hands slid down, two fingers slipping into the upper split of her petals and rubbing. The volume of her cries increased, and a pulsing spasm tightened her cunt—forcing me to grunt with effort as I pushed my tongue past the constriction.

*“Zafett!”* she cried, trembling.

I pulled my tongue free, coating my mouth with her arousal before swallowing. Fucking delicious.

*“You can call me Zaf,”* I purred, chuckling when she wailed and grabbed my head-fur, pulling sharply.

My eyes slitted with pleasure at the sting, but I resisted. I wanted to know what she’d rubbed that had given her such pleasure.

Scooting forward, I curled my arm, spreading her petals with two fingers, careful not to catch a claw. I had too much I wanted to do with her sweet little cunt to bloody it so soon.

They parted, revealing a . . .nipple? I tilted my head, briefly distracted. Surely Hyunans didn’t nurse from their sexes. How would they hold the kit?

No. This was something else. I flicked my tongue across it, gently. Testing.

Estrayuh froze. She didn't even breathe as she stared down at me, her fists locked in my head fur.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, please!”

I licked it again, a little firmer this time, letting my tongue drag across it.

Estrayuh moaned, low and throaty, the sound saturated with bliss.

That's the reaction I was looking for. I settled in, learning how she liked her little bud touched, following her reactions until she was a squirming, sobbing, dripping mess.

Without warning, I filled her cunt with my tongue again, thrusting in a fast, steady rhythm. It took a couple tries, but I curled my tongue so the upper part rode her bud, while the lower part continued to fuck her.

Then I purred.

“Zaf!” My name turned into a wail as Estrayuh's body tightened. Her voice rose to a peak, breaking into helpless whimpers as her cunt fluttered and gushed around my tongue.

My purr was half growl as I lapped up every drop, my cock so hard and aching that even the brush of my fur was a torment.

Eventually, she collapsed, slapping at my head weakly.

I stopped licking and rested my head on her soft belly as I'd yearned to do for so long, pride and gratitude glowing in my chest as her breathing slowly steadied.

Her flesh was smooth, her taste rich, her scent intoxicating. My leaking, pounding cock ate at my peace, demanding satisfaction. Estrayuh let out a shuddering sigh, undulating against me with a happy murmur, and I could take no more.

I reared up, rising above her on my knees. My cock was so hard it smacked me in the stomach, and I snarled.

Estrayuh's mouth dropped open. “*Holee shit, Zaf. Yore dik is eenormus! And, fuk. Stuhded?!?*”

I didn't know what she said, but my name—paired with the renewed wave of arousal that hit my nose—let me know she liked what she saw.

The faintest hint of fear wove through the lust, and a sudden urge to snap my teeth gripped me. Would she run? Cry when I caught her? Tremble when I bent her over and—

I shook myself, shuddering. Such thoughts weren't like me. I was an honorable man. I would take no more than she offered.

My eyes roamed over her body—small but irresistibly lush—as I moved over her.

Her hand stopped me, searing into my chest. I froze.

Estrella's eyes were fixed on my cock, and she was biting her mouth again. That was a sign of nervousness, I'd finally figured out.

She pushed, and I reluctantly returned to my knees. Honor, I reminded myself. Her choice was paramount. I braced myself, preparing to back away.

“I want taste,” Estrayuh said, not looking up. Her little pink tongue slicked out hungrily.

“Yes!” I gasped, my voice ragged with relief. Whatever she wanted.

She knelt, wrapping one hand around the base of my shaft. The difference in our sizes was made glaringly apparent as her fingers didn't come close to touching, and my empathy for her concern grew.

It didn't stop me from wanting to feel her stretched around my cock, though.

Estrayuh's fingers traced ever so lightly over my nodes, her expression wondering. Hyunan men didn't have them, I knew. I'd seen them at the *javuh*, and their sexes were smooth—if shockingly exposed.

I gritted my teeth. Her tentative touch sent shivers up my spine, my fur rising in their wake. If she kept up this torment, my eyes would cross.

Suddenly, she looked up at me. Her fingers tightened and moved up my length, rolling over my nodes with firm pressure.

“*Rek!*” I snorted, my jaw locked, and bucked into her hold. The sight of my arousal spattered on Estrayuh’s magnificent breasts made me thrust again, groaning.

“*Oooo, sehnsitiv,*” she murmured. “*Vairée nais.*” Estrayuh ran a finger through the puddle decorating her chest, licking it clean. Her eyes widened.

“Taste good!” She darted forward, her tiny tongue lapping at my cock as she hummed in pleasure.

My hands flailed, and finally I cupped her head, staring down at her with my chest heaving. Her tongue was short, but her little hands milked my cock, sending pleasure washing over me.

It was good she liked my taste. If she kept that up, I was going to come. Cover her in my *ahz*. Rub it into her flesh until she was saturated, so even without the mating braid all would know she was mine.

“*REK!*” I shouted, looking down at where her lips were stretched wide around the head of my cock. She swirled her tongue around me, flicking the underside, and my opinion of the little pink thing shot upwards.

Flat teeth were wonderful. I loved her flat teeth.

Estrayuh sucked, her hands never stopping, and my eyes rolled back in my head. She pushed forward, taking me deeper. Her mouth was scorching. She was going to suck my spirit out, and in that moment I could think of no reason to complain.

My fingers clenched, pulling her closer.

Estrayuh choked, coughing, her lower teeth scraping against me. Tears swelled in her eyes, one slipping down her round cheek.

My cock jerked, spitting, and I fiercely strangled the urge to thrust again.

That is, until Estrayuh slapped a hand on my ass, pulling.

I rocked my hips—carefully—but she pulled harder, a guttural noise of displeasure deep in her throat.

Harder I could do. My hips snapped forward until the tip kissed the back of her throat. Half my cock was buried in her hot mouth, the other half squeezed by her hands, and the sensation was indescribable.

Estrayuh's throat tightened around the head of my cock as she gagged, tears rolling freely down her face.

I spread the wetness with my thumb, pulling back just enough for her to drag in a breath.

“Again,” I snarled, slamming back in. She thrashed—wet, muffled whimpers vibrating against me in time with the working of her throat—but the scent of her enjoyment was so strong it stung my nostrils.

I thrust again. Again. The climax smashed into me, setting my blood afire. Through the blinding ecstasy, I remembered to pull back, spending the last of my *ahz* on Estrayuh's breasts.

She coughed, gasping moans falling from her swollen lips as her hand flashed between her legs. I scooped her up, one hand gripping her ass, the other massaging a slick breast. My tongue ran across her cheek, tasting her tears.

“So beautiful, *Lelesha*,” I whispered in her ear. “So delicious. Every part of you.”

She sobbed, sucking in ragged gasps, chasing her pleasure with mounting desperation.

I had her on her back in an instant, legs spread wide around my hips. She tensed, but I didn't plan to fuck her. She'd need more opening up before I could—not that I would, without permission.

I purred, grinding my still half-hard cock against her slippery folds, focusing the pressure at the top where her bud hid.

Estrayuh keened, her hips rocking. Her arms wrapped around me as a heavy shudder wracked her body, then she



went limp, her breathing hard but even.

I rolled—not wanting to crush her—and pulled her on top of me instead, running my hands up and down her back.

“Your version of cuddling is very interesting,” Litha said.

I twitched, placing a staying hand on Estrayuh when she tried to move, and craned my neck to see the doorway.

Both Litha and Revik were framed within it, their eyes burning with lust and their tails waving with amusement.

“Very *active*,” Revik agreed.

“Active cuddling is my new favorite,” I stated blandly.

Estrella peeked up at me nervously, and I smiled, nuzzling her.

“Morning meal can wait, I think.” Litha’s voice had grown husky. “Healing and a visit to the *javuh* first.” She knelt, caressing first my cheek then Estrayuh’s. “We will talk there. About what comes next.”

She didn’t miss Estrayuh’s sudden tension. “Good talk, *Lelesha*. No fear.”

“I’ll get your pack,” Revik said. “You bring Estrayuh. I doubt she can walk, after that.”

# CHAPTER 27

## ESTRELLA

I sucked in a breath, flinching as the hot water of the javuh swirled around my sliced-up thighs. Mierda, that stung. Using a knife as a sex toy was not my brightest moment. Then again. . .

I watched Zaf slick his hair back—his lean, graceful muscles clearly outlined by wet fur—and remembered his tongue filling me better than any human man’s dick ever had. Felt the soreness in my throat where he’d fucked me raw.

Actually, the Danger Dildo might have been the *best* idea I’d ever had.

My cuts had just stopped stinging when Litha and Revik joined us. They didn’t bring out the bathing supplies, and they didn’t unbraid their hair. Nobody spoke.

I looked between the three of them, nerves starting to tremble in my chest. Litha’d said this was going to be a good talk, and the three of them had told me being together was something they all wanted. Was that not something they agreed on anymore? Litha and Revik had watched Zaf and I for a while, I was pretty sure, but they’d kept their distance. Were they upset we hadn’t waited for them? Or. . .maybe they didn’t approve of kinky knife shit.

Kinda hypocritical for people with knives growing out of their fingers.

I gripped the ledge I sat on, fingers digging in painfully as my thoughts spun.

Three sets of nostrils flared. Then I was snuggled into Zaf’s lap as he purred and pet my hair.

“No need fear, *Lelesha*.”

I nodded against his chest, breathing deep and dragging out every exhale. *Trust*, I reminded myself. They'd done everything to earn it.

Stretching up, I tugged at Zaf's neck until he bent his head. Kissing a Teterayuh wasn't so different from kissing someone with a big moustache, it turned out. His lower lip was full and smooth, the upper firmer, flatter, and sheathed in a fine layer of fur. I'd never kissed someone whose facial hair was so soft, though.

He stayed completely still until I pulled back. I bit my lip, dropping my gaze, and said, "Thank you, Zaf." Calling him by the shortened version of his name sent a rush of pleasure to my cheeks. He'd said I could, but I'd only ever heard Litha and Revik use it, and I watched for their reactions.

Litha slipped through the water, her ears tipped curiously. She didn't *look* offended. A hand cupped my shoulder, the thumb caressing. Revik's.

So far, so good.

"What is?" Zaf asked, touching my mouth, then his.

"A kiss. It's. . . affection. For friends, family—" I tapped my cheek, then brushed my lips across his furred jaw. "For mates —" My fingers traced his lower lip, and I flushed. "Sometimes more."

"Do you want to be our mate, Estrayuh?" Litha's voice was even, her eyes burning.

My eyebrows furrowed, my mouth opening and closing like a fish as I searched for words without success. Hadn't we talked about this? What part of seducing Zaf in an epic and bloody fashion made them question my interest?

Revik's hold on my shoulder tightened minutely, drawing my attention.

"I want you," he said. His hand roved down my side, cupped my ass for a breath-stealing moment, and trailed down my face to rest over my pounding heart. "All of you. Want for friend. For mate."

Revik ducked his head, glowing eyes piercing me. “You have choice. Am I *levayuh*? *Lev'rasha*? Or may I *ervah* you?”

I sagged, relief making my bones weak. The “where are we going” conversation was several steps of magnitude better than the “we changed our minds” conversation. And honestly, I hadn’t considered that we had options, since we were already living together and everything. But—

“I no understand. *Levayuh*? *Lev'rasha*? *Ervah*?”

Litha shrugged. “To be *levayuh* is. . .same. You, person. We, people. Sometimes, we *rek*.”

*Rek* meant fuck. Nobody’d had to explain that bit of vocabulary to me. The context was very clear. But as much as I wanted to be absolutely wrecked by these three, sex wasn’t all I needed.

“*Lev'rasha* is more.” She moved her fingers from her heart to mine. “More here. But less than mate. If you go—we stay. Mates stay together. *Tethyrital*.” Her hand rose to the two braids at her temple, stroking.

*Tethyr* was the word they used for braid, but I couldn’t see how that fit here—ay! She was saying that mates’ lives were braided together, becoming one.

My heart melted.

I looked between the three of them, at the two matching braids they wore. Those braids were always the same—although they rebraided them for each other with a reverence that really should have been a clue—never changing with their hairstyles. A lightbulb blinked to life, flickering pathetically.

“Mate braids?” I asked, then curled my lips in, dying to take back the question. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud. It felt so obvious now. They were going to think I was an idiot.

Litha nodded, her eyes darkening with. . .sorrow?

Zaf brushed my bangs from my forehead, his touch tender. “When mate die?” he asked, gently. “When you taken?”

The fuck?

My brain was moving at the speed of old-school dial up. Finally, I put two and two together. If I'd had a desk to smack my head against, I would have given myself a concussion.

The Teterayuh braided the front of their hair when they mated. Most likely, they cut the braid off when their mate died. They must have taken one look at my bangs and thought, widow.

Suddenly, their hesitation to move forward romantically took on a lot more weight, and I took three dizzy steps closer to love.

“My mate no die,” I blurted out, jerking upright. I almost fell off Zaf’s lap and splashed around, regaining my balance. Looking between them, I saw the moment they reached the wrong conclusion. My damned troublesome bangs tickled my eyes as I shook my head.

“I no lose mate.” I spoke firmly, each word chosen with care. This was important. “Humans no do mate braids. Humans do rings.” I inscribed the shape of a wedding ring with my fingertip. Drawing in a steadying breath, I admitted, “I had mate. Drake. Drake was. . .bad. Bad to me.”

I shoved at the memories, fighting to stay in the present. Zaf, Litha, and Revik were here. They wanted me. Respected me. Some asshole light years away didn’t get to take that away. I raised my chin and continued with a smile that was more a baring of teeth.

“I say no. No mate. No hurt me. But Drake no die. Qué pena.” I muttered the last, bitterly.

Then I had the most wonderful thought. My divorce had gotten pretty messy. It’d spilled out everywhere until Mariano and some of his friends had a little “talk” with Drake.

During our marriage, he’d kept the truth of his twisted nature private. In public, he was charming, the model husband. It was only when we were alone that the vile shit pile of his personality came out.

That changed when I left. Not being able to control me broke something in his brain. By the time the bruises from

Mariano's "talk" healed and he finally slunk back to his big, empty house, even his closest friends had stopped talking to him.

It had been awful. But in the end, it was worth the stares and comments at the bodega. Worth the sympathy cards from coworkers. Worth the cost of the damned lawyers—to no longer be living in a secret hell.

Now, he was probably living in a very public one. Given all that had happened, he was likely suspect number one in our disappearances. He might even go to jail for it, pobrecito.

I hoped he never knew a moment of peace, and all his problems had my name.

Revik snarled with such rage I knew he'd have killed Drake if the cabrón had been within reach.

Impetuously, I kissed him. His fur wasn't as silky soft as Zaf's. It was sleek, but almost rough as my mouth rubbed against it, like wet velvet.

Revik grunted in surprise, his lips parting.

I couldn't help myself. My tongue slipped out, turning the kiss from a simple thank you to something deeper. Something hotter. I tasted the seam between his lips—one smooth, one furry—moaning when he parted them.

He was a hell of a fast learner. He cupped my head in his big hand, lips moving against mine as he sank down, pressing his thrumming chest against my breasts. My nipples hardened, the heavy velvet brush of his fur unbelievably sensual.

In my mouth, his tongue was a hot wave, muscular and agile. It twined around mine, tugging, sliding, licking.

My clit throbbed, demanding the same treatment.

I pulled back, gasping, and clapped a hand to my mouth.

Revik's jaw dropped in a wolfish grin. That long black tongue rolled out, slowly licking my blood from the dagger point of his tooth.

Okay, there were reasons the Teterayuh didn't kiss. I squirmed in Zaf's lap, feeling the bulge beneath my ass that was significantly harder than it'd been a few minutes before—not to mention the sting of my shredded inner thighs—and knew I'd be making out with them anyways, every chance I got.

Was Zaf's magic ointment safe for oral use?

"To hurt mate—" Litha shook her head, her expression fierce. She cupped my cheek, bringing her forehead to mine and murmuring something that sounded like a vow. Or a curse.

"You have choice," she whispered, repeating Revik's words. "But understand. I want to *evrah* you. I want to be good mate for you. Want you to be our *Lelesha*. We no hurt you."

Litha grinned suddenly, the happy, wicked expression startling against the searing intensity of her gaze. She trailed her hand down my neck, making me shiver, and spread her fingers over my chest. "No hurt here." Her smile widened—showing her own mouthful of sharp teeth—and her voice gained a husky edge. "Little hurts. . . other places."

I whimpered. How, was a mystery. I'd just melted into a puddle of horny goo, so I shouldn't have been able to make a sound.

I closed my eyes. It took a few long breaths before I managed to form myself into a facsimile of a functional person, but even though I cleared my throat, my voice came out wobbly and weak.

"Please. What is *ervah*?"

Zaf chuckled, giving me a little cuddle that I soaked up shamelessly. "Before choose mate, Teterayuh *erval*. Bring food. Gifts."

He said some more things I only caught a few words of, but I got the picture. Courting. They wanted to court me, and—if I agreed—make me their mate.

My insides—especially the slutty parts—stood up and danced. I tried to think past the *fiesta de baile*. I knew what I

*wanted*, but sometimes what I wanted turned out to be pretty bad for me. And it wasn't just my happiness on the line. Saytireka's pinched, watchful face pushed into my mind. What would the other Teterayuh think? Could this hurt my family's future?

I didn't know what the long-term plans were for us fosterlings. Maybe when we'd learned enough to be self-sufficient they'd release us to live on our own. In a few years Mariano and I could be sharing a treehouse two doors down from our Abuele, bickering about chores and scaring the local wildlife with impromptu classic eighties concerts.

The Teterayuh didn't all trust us. An image of Saytireka popped into my head, Arvel's creepy stare looming behind her. There was no way either of them would approve of me marrying into the clan.

But I saw the cobweb-brushing less and less, and some of the Teterayuh who wouldn't make eye contact when we'd arrived were actually friendly now. There was an old man who helped take care of the babies—I'd met him while visiting Svixa—who used to hiss if I came within five feet of him. Last time I was in the village, he sat beside me at lunch and didn't even flinch.

Plus, I'd caught more than a few lingering glances directed towards other members of my family. The shift from fosterlings to in-laws might be inevitable.

I curled a lock of hair around my finger, imagining three braids hanging from my temple. Thought of sleeping each night between three purring bodies. Growing fluent in Teterayuh and having long, deep conversations, cuddled together by the fire.

There was so much uncertainty with this new life. I didn't know enough about my options to even begin to formulate goals, and unlike some of the others, I hadn't discovered a "job" I was called to.

I'd never been career oriented. My life goals were to be happy, loved, and secure. To make my family proud.



I'd wanted to be a mother. Everything else was just a means to an end.

Drake had done a lot to kill that dream and being abducted had delivered the final blow. I wasn't getting pregnant with either of the human men on this planet, and I was pretty sure kittens were out of the picture—biologically speaking.

Even if there had been a compatible sperm donor available, I hadn't had a period in months. Whatever the *pinche bichos* did to me, it seemed to have shut down the baby factory.

So. New life goals. Be happy, loved, and secure. Why did that feel like the lowest of bars, yet astronomically out of reach?

“Estrayuh?”

Crap. I had to get out of my head. I blinked. “No want to be *levayuh*. Want more.”

The weight of their eyes was too much. I followed the swirling pattern of the water, trying to locate my suddenly absent spine.

Desiring them was effortless. I'd tried not to and failed. Wanting to be wanted by them was painfully easy. Actually using my fucking words and *asking* for what I wanted was hard as hell.

“I want you to court me. I want. . . I want all.” I whispered the words into my tits. It figured I'd crash land on the planet of thoughtful, consent-minded aliens. My anxiety brain longed for chest-beating alien warriors who'd just cart me off and lock me in a bedroom, not make me *think*, or be *vulnerable*.

“*Lelesha*.” Litha's voice was a seductive purr, irresistible. Her hand slipped around my neck, three fingers tunneling beneath my hair as her thumb slid along my jaw. I met her warm golden eyes, and she dipped her head down until her mouth brushed against mine. “You honor us.”

The salt of my tears mixed with her kiss, all fantasies of brutes carting me off forgotten. Her reverence was a benediction, its light seeping into my cracked and broken places.

I sniffed, leaning back against Zaf's chest. Revik spread a big hand over my thigh, the kneading motion almost imperceptible.

"What means, *Lelesha*?" I asked, huskily. We had more we should probably talk about, but if he kept that up, I was going to run out of "good girl" real fast.

"Small lights in sky are *lelel*," Zaf answered, rubbing his jaw over my head. "*Lelel* are. . .*il sethital sivenex. Toum*. You come like *lel*." He swooped his hand down, like something falling, catching the imaginary thing with a snap. "Our *lel*. But little. *Lelesha*."

Little Star. What were the odds? I laughed.

"Why laugh? You no like?" Revik asked, a bit of a growl in his rumbly voice.

Sensitive brute.

"I like." I petted his hand, feeling it relax on my thigh, and turned so he could see my smiling face. "Know what Estrella means?" He shook his head, and my smile widened. "Star. *Lel*."

Revik's eyes widened, and he grinned. "*A'shalel*," he murmured, running his thumb along the crease where my fupa met my thigh. I shivered.

"Our star" had never sounded so sexy.

"Hungry, *Lelesha*?" Zaf whispered in my ear.

I nodded, unable to tear my gaze from Revik's. My tongue slicked over my lower lip. Would he taste as good as Zaf had?

Fuck, what about Litha? I still didn't even know what her pussy looked like. My hand groped blindly, finding her thigh and sliding upward.

Litha intercepted my caress, nuzzling the backs of my fingers.

"Come," Zaf commanded.

I was fucking trying to. If they'd just line up on the edge of the pool—my very own alien tasting flight—and let me

explore, we'd *all* come.

“We feed you.”

Yes, yes, that's exactly what I wanted.

Revik and Litha pushed up, levering themselves out of the water, and Zaf followed, carrying me with him.

He lifted me high, pressed tight to his chest.

I yelped, gripping the wet fur covering his shoulder with both fists as he started running. I fell forward over his back, disgruntled. Between bouncing strides, I yelled, “Not want. . . *food*. . . in my mouth! *Rek!*”

Their laughter rolled through the jungle.

Zaf's hand came down on my ass, sending a sharp crack of sensation down to my toes. My pussy clenched. Brat mode activated, I braced myself against his back with one arm and reached down with the other. My slap wasn't as loud, thanks to the fur, but his affronted sound made me giggle.

He growled playfully, flicking me on the back of the head with his tail as his hand—still cupping my butt—tightened.

Dizzy joy filled me.

Silly, feral, sensitive Zaf. Thoughtful, poetic, sensual Litha. Broody, tender, bossy Revik. All mine. This was going to be so much fun.

Here's praying I didn't fuck it up.

# CHAPTER 28

## REVIK

“I need your help.”

Naryanuh stared at me, *aibrows* bunched together, looking just like his sister. She'd worn the same expression at the end of the morning meal, when Litha'd shaken her head at Estrayuh's suggestion we continue the sexual exploration she and Zaf had started.

“*Wayt, wayt, wayt, oll aye doo iz wayt!*” our little Hyunan had wailed, collapsing into the cushions. She'd shaken one tiny, clawless finger, and snarled, “*Yore saydists, thahts wut yoo arr. Yoo theenk its funny too mayk maye ohvarees bloo az soru.*”

Her words had been incomprehensible, but her feelings were obvious. I'd fought to hold back my laughter as I'd offered her a juicy bite of *soru*. She'd shoved it away as if it were moldy *lellek*, a disgusted pout pushing out her lower lip. When I prowled over her, caging her with my body, her expression had shifted—eyes going wide as that sweet little mouth parted.

“We've made promises. People are expecting us.”

“But before—” she'd whined.

“No.” Desire had been pumping from her, and I'd had to have a little taste. The flesh of her throat was tender, the pulse beneath a tempting flutter. “I will not be satisfied by a quick mating, *Lelesha*. Not in any way. I need to soak in your cries of pleasure and whimpers of pain. See you come apart, pinned between the three of us.”

Estrayuh had made a high, wavering noise. “*Fukk, Revik. Jeezus. Ohkai.*” She'd craned her neck, catching Zaf's heated stare, and continued in Teterayuh. “We go. You carry me. We go fast. Come home. Fast.”

“What you want?” Naryanuh demanded belligerently, shattering the memory.

My lip curled before I controlled myself. This was my *Lelesha*’s brother. I was asking for his aid. Snarling at him because I’d rather be balls deep in his sister than talking to him wouldn’t get me what I wanted in either case.

Kurz laughed, his dancing eyes missing none of my struggles. He clapped me on the shoulder, cupped the back of Naryanuh’s neck with significantly more gentleness, and strolled away towards the village food stores, a brace of *ikfrit* bumping against his back.

Naryanuh’s eyes followed him, one side of his mouth curled up.

Curiosity pinged, momentarily distracting me. The last time we hunted together, Kurz shared his confusion about the distance that had grown between the two men. Something had shifted in Naryanuh, and my friend was concerned he’d offended him—perhaps broken an unknown Hyunan rule of behavior.

Whatever had risen between them seemed to be gone now, and I was glad to see it. After everything Kurz had endured last season cycle, it was good to hear him laugh with his heart behind it again.

Estrayuh’s brother turned back to me, his face growing stony as he crossed his arms over his chest.

I didn’t blink. Saytireka’s disapproval bore sharper teeth, and I’d long since learned to stand my ground against her.

Besides, it was easier this way. Since I would not earn his esteem, I need not worry about diplomatic maneuvering. I kept my voice flat.

“I desire Estrayuh for my mate.”

“No.” Naryanuh’s refusal was just as blunt.

I folded my arms, mirroring his stance, and held his gaze. “You want to protect your sister. I respect that. But it is her choice, not yours.”

His head tilted. There was a pause as he seemed to work through my words, then he jerked his chin up, sharply. “Did Estrella agree to *ervang*?”

My ears flicked in surprise. Things must be going very well between him and Kurz, for Naryanuh to be familiar with courtship.

“Yes.” I raised my chin, pride warm in my chest. “She honors me. Litha and Zaf, also.”

His jaw tightened.

I waited, outwardly stoic. Inwardly, claws raked me with the need to shake him until he told me what I wanted to know. Rushing Naryanuh wouldn’t help. He needed to make up his own mind.

Across the *erralaytuh*, Litha, Estrayuh, Roosa, and Cass huddled together, looking over something with interest. Svixa bounced beside them, her still healing leg outstretched.

My ears tipped forward affectionately. I’d seen Estrayuh’s growing tension as we neared the village, known she worried about people’s reactions to the news of our *ervang*. Litha and Zaf had, as well, but since we all knew the fears were well-founded, there was little we could do to comfort her.

Svixa’s excited response to the embrace we’d shared before parting ways at the edge of the *erralaytuh* had done much to return the brightness to my *Lelesha*’s eyes again.

As I watched, Litha’s tail twined around Estrayuh’s leg, golden flesh gleaming through the cascade of silky purple fur.

My eyelids lowered as pride and satisfaction rumbled in my chest. Mine.

Almost.

I shifted my gaze back to Naryanuh. He was watching me, an expression I couldn’t read twisting his lips. When our eyes met he blew out a breath and finally—reluctantly—nodded.

“What you want?”



I was alight with ideas. The tool Naryanuh described was fairly simple—not to mention clever. Several ways something like that could be used had flown immediately to mind, but experimenting would come later. For now, I would focus on bringing a piece of Estrayuh’s lost home to her new life. Here. With us.

Figuring out what to use for the mix would be the hardest part. From what I could understand, it was a mash, like the *casa* cakes. But not knowing what it was meant to taste like. . .

A flicker of white and red caught my eye and I turned, eager to ask Zaf’s opinion.

My mate was deep in conversation with Aretoi, the shy girl animated as she only ever was when she talked of their shared passion—medicinal plants. She was growing into a skilled healer under Zaf’s encouraging eye.

The astringent scent of numbing oil made my nose wrinkle. They must have just come from Aksha’s den. Out of all the storm-touched, she felt the press of the Spirits’ wrath most sharply—the painful swelling of her joints increasing with each deluge until she hardly resembled herself, and split her days between her sleeping cushion and the *javuh*. It was good we approached *ilot va’heth*, the dry season. Aksha took pride in the responsibility placed upon her—and we were all safer thanks to the storm-touched’s ability to predict when we needed to take shelter in our dens—but I did not like to think of her suffering.

Zaf stopped as if a *va’grev* had appeared in the middle of the *erralaytuh*.

Alarmed, I followed his gaze and groaned, my sheath suddenly feeling too tight.

Estrayuh was bent over, inspecting a pair of strange things strapped to her feet. Her wide, delectable ass pressed against the cloth covering her. My lust-filled eyes traced every bump

and curve, remembering the sight of her splayed open and glistening.

I would have her like this—bent over, with no cloth to hide behind.

Estrayuh stood, did a sort of bouncy dance that added jiggling flesh to my fantasy, and squealed. She threw her arms around Cass—who laughed and hugged her back—then turned and did the same to Litha.

With Litha squatting, they were nearly the same height. Estrayuh took advantage, pressing close-mouthed *kissehs* all over her face.

Litha's eyes were mere slits as she tilted her head to give Estrayuh better access, cupping her hand over the plump ass I dreamed of fucking.

Zaf appeared at their side, greeting them with slow, possessive caresses that swept the length of their spines.

I looked around and found Aretoi standing alone, looking bemused where Zaf must have abandoned her. My grin faded when I looked back to my mates and found Arvel lurking nearby, his attention fixed on them.

I stepped forward, growling low. There was a look in his eyes I didn't like.

Zaf's head lifted at the sound, and he followed my gaze to Arvel. As Estrayuh bent, excitedly showing Litha her feet, Zaf bared his teeth in a silent snarl at the unpleasant man, snapping them to get his attention.

Arvel jerked, blanched, and spun away, his hand flying in the gesture to ward off death.

I was striding forward, needing to nuzzle Zaf for his fierceness, when Saytireka's horrified face caught my attention. My ears flattened. Perhaps we should not have come to the village after all.

Saytireka stared at my mates and our *Lelesha*—her expression shifting to the self-righteous determination I was so familiar with. She started towards them, but I was faster.



I took two running strides and leapt, landing lightly on my feet in front of her. Her angry hiss brushed past me as I straightened, shaking my head.

“Move. I wish to speak to my son,” Saytireka snapped.

“But does he wish to hear you?” I kept my tone mildly curious, my muscles loose but ready.

She drew to her full height, looming over me with outrage snapping in her eyes.

I flicked my tail, unimpressed.

“This is your fault,” Saytireka hissed, jerking her chin towards Zaf, Litha, and Estrayuh. “You brought the *tetevath’a* into our village. You claimed them as kin. They bring death in their wake, and you invited them into your den. Into *my son’s* den!”

I snorted. “What death? There have been no deaths in the village since the *tetezha’a* came.”

She bared her teeth at me.

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “I did claim them as kin, as honor demanded. As did you. You gave them the same rights as any other Teterayuh, *Ralaytuh Naiset*.” I bit out the last two words, her title tasting like ash in my mouth. “We Teterayuh do not need your permission to choose a mate.”

“Clearly,” she sneered, looking me up and down.

My lip wanted to curl, but I forced myself to smile instead. It was a slow, sensuous smile. I played my tongue along my teeth as I said nothing, letting my scent and expression tell her I was very satisfied by my chosen mate—her son.

“Revik?” Litha called. Her tail whipped as she glared at Saytireka, belying the lightness of her tone. “Are you ready? Estrayuh wants to try out her new *shooz*.”

Worried brown eyes peeked from behind her, where Estrayuh stood, arms wrapped around herself.

“Yes,” I said, meeting Satireka’s eyes before deliberately turning my back. “I’m done. Let’s go.”

“Goodbye, Mother.” Zaf’s words were barely more than snapping teeth, and he walked away without waiting for a response.

My hope that he’d been too focused on Estrayuh to pay attention to Saytireka clearly hadn’t borne fruit.

Litha stared Saytireka down until the older woman turned—with offended dignity—and walked away. Then her eyes moved to me and softened. She pressed her forehead to mine, and I breathed her in, replacing the bitter smoke of irritation with the warmth of her scent.

Estrayuh’s fingers brushed my arm, a silent question.

Murmuring my thanks to Litha, I bent and rubbed Estrayuh’s knuckles across my jaw.

“Let’s go home,” I said.

“Find Zaf,” she agreed, and led the way out of the shelter of the *erralaytuh*. I chuffed, catching up with her in a single stride, Litha moving to her other side.

No one spoke.

When we were clear of the village, Estrayuh took my hand, wrapping her little fingers around two of mine. A moment later, her other hand closed around the base of Litha’s tail.

My mate met my eyes above our Little Star’s head, a familiar banked anger lighting her eyes. Something would have to be done about Saytireka soon. Much as we disliked each other, and as often as I disagreed with her choices, I had to admit that she was—or at least had been—a decent *Ralaytuh Naiset*. She was overbearing, and proud, and resisted change, but she truly cared for our people and did her best to see them safe and happy.

That had changed. Her distrust of the *tetezha’a*—who were also now our people—had poisoned her mind, and that poison would spread throughout the village if it wasn’t dealt with.

My teeth ground together as my jaw clenched. Deliberately, I blew out a long breath, curling my fingers gently around Estrayuh’s small hand. *We could all use a cuddle when we got*

*back to the den*, I thought. *And a nap*. Fighting with Saytireka was exhausting.

I looked down at Estrayuh's pensive face, watching her absentmindedly petting Litha's tail while my mate's arousal scent gradually bloomed around us.

It would be a moment before Zaf was ready for more "active cuddling". My love's temper burned hot, when it burned at all. But the run home would help, as would comfort and sleep.

Afterwards...

If everyone agreed, I wanted to find out how loud Estrayuh could scream.

# CHAPTER 29

## ESTRELLA

Well. That was fucking awful.

I was cursed. That was the only explanation. Every time something good happened, the chancla of fate flew in and knocked me on my ass.

I finally made some progress with the aliens I was half in love—and all the way in lust—with, only for them to twatblock me because they were too fucking *perfect*, and they *kept their promises*.

I hadn't wanted to go to the village. First, I looked like I'd rolled into a ravine full of blackberry bushes. There would be questions and answering them would be awkward. But more so, this thing between Revik, Litha, Zaf, and I? It felt new and tremblingly vulnerable. I wanted to cradle it close, keep it safe next to my heart. With the stares from the cobweb-brushers, the village didn't feel safe.

I'd felt tentative hope when we'd been greeted by Svixa's giddy cry of "Strayuh! I want hug too!" That kid was pure sunshine. Every time I saw her I was filled with gratitude, joy, and a bittersweet longing.

Explaining the lingering effects of Danger Dildo had been as uncomfortable as expected, but Cass's face had been priceless. When she surprised me with the shoes she'd secretly been working on, I'd been walking on clouds.

In actuality, I was walking on thick leather soles attached to moderately ugly sandals, but after a month of going barefoot, I was so happy I could cry.

Then came Saytireka.

I hadn't been able to hear the conversation between her and Revik, but it was a safe bet that nothing she'd had to say had been good. If her expression hadn't given it away, the fact that

my three had gone from happy to murderous in about two seconds would have been a clue. Right alongside the singeing smell of my hair burning as she tried to incinerate me with her eyes.

So now, instead of the four of us running home to bang like happy bunnies, I was trudging along between two silent giants, while Zaf was who knows where.

I stopped, tugging on Revik and Litha until they did too. They looked down, silent questions tilting their ears.

“Why Saytireka not like me?” I asked in a rush. If I understood, maybe I could work out some of the snarky meanness that bubbled in my gut before we found Zaf. Saytireka was a bitch, but she was still his mom. It wouldn’t be right to rant about my hurt feelings to him.

Litha winced and looked away, her ears pinning back.

Revik crouched, bringing us eye to eye, and touched my chest lightly. “Not you, Estrayuh.”

Well, that was bullshit. “Because. . . I am human?”

“No,” he said, at the same time Litha said, “Yes.”

I looked between them; eyebrows raised.

Litha sighed. “Saytireka fears change. Fears. . .different. You are change.” She caressed my cheek, her eyes warming. “Good change.”

Revik huffed. “Saytireka sees you—sees enemy. I and Litha, also. She thinks we hold Zaf—keep him from being *Ralaytuh Tonset*.”

“*Ralaytuh Ton*—” Oh, right. Prince Zafett, heir to the village throne. But why would being mated to us keep him from taking his place? Saytireka had three mates and two children, so it wasn’t like the position was reserved for virgins. “Do we?” I asked, searching his gaze.

“No.” He snorted. “Zaf no want to be *Ralaytuh Tonset*. Zaf happy as healer.”

Then why. . .? I threw up my arms, frustrated. Zaf was wonderful. His twin, Indaro, was a delight. Their fathers—Tareth, Falk, and Zirrast—hadn't shown any of the judgement Saytireka wore like armor. Why was she such a bitch?!

“She loves Zaf,” Litha said, gently. “She fears he will not be happy.”

“She fears *you*,” Revik countered in the tone of an old argument. “Fears you will be *Ralaytuh Naiset* and not her.”

Litha's jaw tightened.

She'd be a good matriarch. She understood people and thought about their needs. We recognized that and instinctively trusted her. I was biased, sure, but I'd seen how she interacted with the Svestrix, how the others in the village looked to her. She was a natural leader.

“Do you want to be *Ralaytuh Naiset*?” I asked.

A conflicted barrage of expressions twisted her features, and she took a step back. “We need go to Zaf.”

Revik and I exchanged a speaking look as she was swallowed up by the jungle.

“Saytireka's a *cabrón*,” I announced, sneering.

“. . .*Cabrón*?” he repeated, carefully shaping the word.

Teterayuh mouths were built differently from humans'. Their tongues were magic, but their upper lips weren't very mobile, so sounds that required significant lip movement were difficult and foreign to them. *Ooh*, *oh*, and *ee* took serious work, as did anything with the letters *F*, *M*, *P*, or *W*. Hence Mariano coming out as Naryanuh.

A hard *B* was another sound they struggled with. It tended to come out as more of a *V*, which was both comfortably familiar and perfect pronunciation in this case.

“Sí, una *cabrón*,” I confirmed.

“What means?”

“A. . .not nice person. A person who no think.”

“*Saytireka cabrón het ha,*” he said, testingly. I nodded, and he looked positively gleeful.

I bit my cheek, holding back a laugh. There was a one-hundred percent chance he was going to say that to Saytireka’s face, and I really hoped I was there when he did.

“We say *ka ’vek,*” Revik volunteered.

We grinned at each other, in perfect accord.

He held his arms out, tilting his head towards the den. “We go?”

I nodded. The trees flew by as I snuggled in his arms. Shoes were great, but I could feel a blister starting already. Besides, I just wanted to go home and give Zaf the biggest hug. And maybe a blow job. We deserved it, after dealing with his *ka ’vek* of a mother.



We found Zaf on his side in the big bed, Litha facing him. He didn’t move as Revik set me down, although Litha raised her head, honey eyes somber.

Come to think of it, a nap did sound good.

I moved quietly to the bed, hesitating for the barest second as dark thoughts reared unwanted heads. *What if he’d changed his mind about being with me? Decided I was too much trouble? What if he turned away?*

Litha leaned back slightly, offering me the space between them, and I blew out a breath. Placing my hands and knees carefully so I didn’t wake Zaf up, I crawled up the cushion and cuddled against her. *You need to try harder, Anxiety Brain, I mocked internally. With Litha, Revik, and now me, I’m beginning to suspect Zaf’s type starts and ends with “pisses Saytireka off”.*

The cushion dipped as Revik slipped in behind Zaf, and I rolled against him.

Zaf wasn’t asleep.

His body was a solid line of quivering tension, each muscle clenched tight. At my touch, his arm snapped out, his hand gripping my ass and jerking me upward. At the same time, he rolled, putting me beneath him, burying his face in my belly. His growl was deep and vicious.

I craned my neck, staring down at him wide-eyed. Not asleep. Not sad. Everything I thought I understood about this moment smashed into tiny shards that sparkled prettily as they fell around me.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, tentatively. I reached to pet his hair, snatching my hand back when he reared up.

Litha and Revik were very still on either side of me, but I couldn’t look away to see if they were as lost as I was.

“It’s *not* okay,” Zaf snarled.

Wooo, he was seriously pissed off.

His hands slammed down on either side of my head, claws piercing the fabric with a ripping, popping sound that made me flinch.

“Zaf. . .” Litha said warningly, her fingers wrapping around his wrist.

“I choose you,” Zaf bit out, each word hitting my ears like a punch. “*I* choose you.”

He hissed a long string of Teterayuh, but I wasn’t listening. I was too busy drowning beneath the panicked rush of adrenaline that had my body trying to turn itself inside out.

*This is Zaf, my conscious mind babbled desperately. He’d never hurt me. He’s not like that. He’s just upset. He’d never—*

But the wounded part of me remembered saying those words before. Remembered how wrong I’d been. I closed my eyes, turning my face to the side as I strained to draw in a breath. All the air had been sucked out of the room, and my lungs were screaming.

“Zaf!” Litha barked.



Then I was weightless, touched only by the cushion beneath me. Bits of something fluffy stuck out from the tears Zaf's claws had made, tickling my temple. Finally, I could breathe, though the warm, humid air slashed at my lungs like frozen knives.

“*Rek*. I—I'm sorry.”

Zaf's horrified whisper released the paralysis that had locked me in place. I pushed up on arms that felt like overcooked noodles, grateful for Litha's supportive hand on my back.

Zaf was pressed against the far wall, his tail coiled around his leg so tightly it was almost invisible across the distance.

Revik crouched just past the foot of the bed, and for a moment I thought he'd thrown Zaf off me. But a fuzzy memory rose up of Zaf pushing *himself* away, of him falling and scrambling in his rush.

Panic was still thick and sour in my throat, and even though my heart broke at the pain in his eyes, the last thing I wanted to do was comfort Zaf. He'd scared me so bad.

“I go. I'm sorry. *Rek*, Estrayuh, I'm sorry.” Zaf slunk towards the doorway, shame radiating from every hair on his big alien body.

A montage of the future cascaded through my mind in a single instant. Zaf, leaving. Litha and Revik comforting me. Becoming their broken, taped-together toy, always handled with care. The tiny death of Zaf shoving down that feral, primal side that I knew frightened and upset him. Distance and pain infecting our home. Maybe we'd get back together, but things would always be tentative between us. Maybe he'd just—not come home one day. “Save us” from his corrupting influence.

Fuck. That.

Fuck that, and fuck Drake. Fuck PTSD, fuck those damned bugs and their nasty-ass ship, and fuck noble, self-sacrificing idiots.

“Stop!” I couldn’t growl like a Teterayuh, but the mom voice I used to keep Mariano out of trouble worked just fucking fine. I stomped to Zaf, anger giving me the strength fear had stolen.

He crouched, trying to make himself as small as possible as he stared at me with wide, confused eyes.

Perfect.

I reached out, grabbed an ear, and pivoted. Dragging him—yelping—back to the bed, I pointed imperiously until he took a seat next to Litha. I glared at Revik until he joined them, all three still as statues and watching me like I was a hissing snake.

“Don’t you fucking dare try that shit with me again.” I forced myself to speak slowly, to find enough Teterayuh among the cussing to be understood. I needed them to hear this. “If we have a goddamned problem, we talk about it. We deal with it. You don’t get to leave!” I snapped, poking Zaf in the chest. “The same goes for you,” my finger stabbed towards Litha, “and you!”

Revik grunted at my jab.

“I’m messed up. I’ve got baggage. You *know* that! You said you want me anyways. That means you have to fucking *deal with it*. I’m going to freak out sometimes. I need to know you’ll still be here when I calm down.” My voice broke, and the anger flooded out of me. I cupped Zaf’s jaw, pulling our faces together as I tried to control my breathing.

“I love it when you’re growly and fierce and brutal. I love that you want me so much you can’t control yourself. I just need to know what’s going on. You caught me off guard.” I tipped my head back, meeting his pretty flower eyes.

“I’m not scared of you, Zaf. I know you won’t hurt me. It’s just. . . memories. I get lost, sometimes.”

His arms rose slowly. When I leaned into him, he wrapped them around me, exhaling raggedly.

“I’m sorry. Kshh, no,” he murmured, rubbing my back until I relaxed again. “I’m sorry you fear. Sorry I no stay. Sorry I no

understand.” He was silent for a moment, holding me. “How can I *hellt*? When you fear?”

“Hold me,” I said, a small smile flitting across my face when he snuggled me closer. “Talk. Stay.” My smile grew and warmed as Litha and Revik cuddled close, surrounding me with their grounding solidness.

“How *hellt* make no fear?” Litha asked, her voice a caress so gentle I shivered.

I paused, chewing my lip. My triggers were. . .inconsistent. A lot depended on how I was feeling overall—whether I was tired, happy, sad, horny. I couldn’t just say, “Don’t do *this*,” because things that triggered me when I was down were hot as hell when I was up.

“Look at eyes, before,” Revik murmured.

My gaze shot to his. He sank a hand in my hair, arching my neck and baring his teeth in a growling purr. I made a small noise in the back of my throat, lost in his neon stare.

“Eyes say yes,” he said. His nostrils flared. “Scent says now.”

“Yes!” I nodded as much as I could with his hand fisted in my hair, my insides squirming with pleasure when he didn’t move an inch.

“Yes, that!”

# CHAPTER 30

## ESTRELLA

Revik chuckled, trailing his hand down my back as he prowled around me.

I shivered.

Zaf didn't move, his hands still on my hips, ears flickering back and forth with his uncertain thoughts.

"Please, Zaf," I said, lifting my arms to tug him closer. "I want this." The muscles of his jaw bunched beneath my lips as I kissed a line to his neck, nuzzling into the warm, silky fur. "I need this." It was the truth. I needed to soak in the connection between us. Needed to reassure my catastrophizing brain that we were okay—that I hadn't ruined everything by not being "perfect".

Litha closed her hand over Zaf's, letting her fingers caress my hip.

I tilted my head, gazing at her as she moved his hand to the knot holding my skirt in place. My lips parted at the molten look in her eyes. It wasn't fair that they were all so fucking hot, and I only had one body. I wanted to tackle all three of them at the same time.

My gaze trailed down Litha's body as Zaf and Revik carefully undressed me, lingering on the shadowy vee where her thighs met. I licked my lips, remembering Zaf's salty-sweet taste. Burying my head between those thighs was *very* high on my priorities list.

The tail ends of my top fell open, the fabric over my breasts held in place by their heavy weight. Revik's clawed finger slipped between the cloth and the nape of my neck, dragging it down my spine. I arched, gasping, my nipples hardening in a tingling rush from the friction.

Zaf groaned. No longer hesitant, his fingers flew. In moments, I landed on my back in the center of the bed, naked and grinning.

I posed, my tongue riding the edge of my teeth, heavy-lidded eyes daring the three aliens looming over me to do their worst.

Revik made a rough, hungry sound, falling to his knees beside me. His tongue drew a hot line up the center of my body—searing me from belly to throat. He cupped my breast, testing the weight of it, and gave a low purr of approval as he wrapped his tongue around my nipple.

Dios mío, he was plucking it like a *susuela* berry!

“Oh, oh, oh,” I moaned, pleasure coursing through me with each tug. That was so good, it felt *amazing*, it—

“Fuck!” There were tongues everywhere—twining around my nipples, licking, bumping, and coiling over each other. My eyes squeezed tight at the overload of sensation, but I forced them open, whimpering at the sight that greeted me. Zaf, Litha, and Revik were hunched above me, their unbelievably long tongues shiny and wet as they slithered and slipped over me like the tentacles of some monster. Litha and Zaf’s tongues met—licking against each other in the hottest, most bizarre makeout session I’d ever seen—and the thought that I *should* find it unsettling popped up long enough to die a fast, quiet death.

Revik’s hand fisted in Zaf’s hair, pulling, arching his neck in a graceful curve that begged to be bitten. Zaf gasped, breaking off the kiss, his weight pressing against my legs as he sagged between us.

“Down,” Revik instructed, pulling harder. “I want to taste our *Lelesha* on your tongue.” His chuckle was rough as Zaf and I bumped against each other, him crawling down my body in a rush, me almost dislocating my hips, fighting to open my legs as wide as possible.

Zaf thrust his tongue into me, thick as a cock and ten times as agile.

I screamed, bucking against him, only to snarl when he pulled back, leaving me suddenly empty. The anger melted away as Revik's tongue lashed against Zaf's, licking and sucking my wetness from its length.

"Mmm, good," he purred. "More. *Edda tonit seyla va 'sunga, shakath.*"

Zaf grunted and lowered his head, his tongue battering my pussy with waves of pleasure.

Litha and Revik made love to my breasts and each other with single-minded determination. Their hands cupped me, massaging, flicking my nipples between hot licks of their tongues, not giving me a second to catch my breath.

I flailed, desperately trying to hold on to reality as I careened towards an orgasm that reared up out of nowhere. Something filled my palm, and I gripped it, only realizing what it was when Revik groaned, bucking into my hand. Jesus, he was fucking huge!

I mapped him with desperate strokes as my other hand squeezed Litha's thigh. It was hard to concentrate as I bucked and squealed under the vibrating assault of Zaf's tongue on—and in—my spasming cunt, but the pieces came together into an unbelievable whole.

Studded, like Zaf, with firm round nubs that concentrated at the base, spiraling up his length. He wasn't as long as Zaf—which still put him in league with the biggest human dicks I'd had the pleasure of fucking—but he was so goddamned thick my jaw ached preemptively. His cock swelled, thicker in the middle, tapered at the tip, and I just knew that if I could get it inside me, he'd grind my g-spot to pulsing, sloppy ecstasy.

As if he read my thoughts, Zaf's tongue twisted inside me, coiling, thickening, pressing against that high, sensitive spot, and the orgasm crashed over me.

I screamed, gushing, my body rolling against his mouth like a wave. My left hand clamped onto Revik's cock, hot precum splattering my wrist as he jerked, biting off a curse.

“Yes, Estrayuh, *rek. Ix toum, Lelesha.*” Litha murmured the words between licks, her voice throaty with need. She shifted, widening her stance as she pressed her hand to my abdomen, holding me in place.

My channel clamped down, trapping Zaf’s tongue, and I moaned. I reached for Litha—not sure if I wanted her to stop or push harder—and my hand delved between her legs. She was blisteringly hot, so wet my fingers slipped right in, enveloped by unimaginable softness.

Her fingers flexed, sharp and sudden, as Zaf folded his tongue, pressing the vibrating hump hard against my clit.

I keened, pleasure cycling from my breasts to my pussy and back again, building on itself until it was all I felt, all I knew, all that I was.

Slowly—achingly slowly—the blinding light of my second climax faded, and I collapsed back into my body, lax and warm.

Five hands petted me, gently caressing every inch of my skin. Three tongues lapped, tasting my sweat, sipping at my release.

I stretched, floating in the perfect post-orgasm quiet. My fingers spread, encountering slippery heat—one side hard, the other sinfully soft. I stroked, lazily, a hazy smile curling my lips at my lovers’ gasps.

Litha’s pussy...licked me.

I stilled; the misty afterglow burned away in an instant.

It happened again. A sinuous, gentle caress along my suddenly extra-sensitive fingertip. Holy fucking shit.

I sat up, batting away the hands and nuzzling mouths. My attention was fixed on Litha, but I spared a glance to the boys, pointing imperiously between Revik’s mouth and Zaf’s straining cock. He’d eaten me so good, he deserved a reward.

For such a bossy, dominant man, Revik took direction surprisingly well. He flipped Zaf onto his back beside me,

lifted the long, pale legs over his wide shoulders, and set in to worship him from asshole to tip.

Zaf groaned, his body twisting, clearly enjoying himself.

Any other time, I would have watched. Maybe masturbated. Hell, I would have fucked my fingers pruney. The two of them together were hot as shit, and something about Revik in a position of supplication hit all sorts of happy buttons.

But I had Litha. And she and I were due some one-on-one time.

I pushed her onto her back beside Zaf. She didn't resist, her eyes warm and curious on mine. At least, they were until I straddled her, then they flared with heat. My inner thighs wailed at the stretch, but she steadied me with a hand on my hip and the press of her tail against my lower back. My short-legged ass was going to have to take up alien pilates or something, fucking about with these giants.

I leaned down, planting my hands on either side of her head, and kissed her. My hair fell around us, a wavy curtain that made the moment into something intimate—private, even with the boys moaning and moving next to us.

I nibbled her full lower lip, rolling my body against hers. My crotch only reached her stomach, but her purr and silky fur turned each move into shuddering decadence.

I was dying to introduce myself to Litha's cunt—whether that involved shaking its hand or giving it a kiss—but I wasn't going to rush. I felt like I'd been lusting after her gorgeous warrior's body and quiet, kind confidence for a lifetime. Now that she was here, letting me do whatever I wanted, I was going to savor every second.

I kissed my way down her neck, biting the long curve. She moaned louder, and her hand let go of my breast to cup the back of my head. Farther down, farther, and my lips brushed against a hard nipple.

Litha sucked in a breath, holding it as her hand trembled.

I rolled my eyes up, meeting her gaze as I explored the gentle curves of her breasts with both hands, exhaling heat



onto one puckered nipple. Otherwise, I carefully avoided touching the sensitive tips.

They'd collectively tortured me over these past weeks, so a little turnabout seemed fair.

When she was squirming, and the hand on the back of my head grew insistent, I leaned in, opened my mouth wide, and sank my teeth into the meat of her breast. Her nipple pushed insistently at my tongue, and I laved the velvety point, plucking, tugging and squeezing the other with my fingers.

Claws pricked my scalp, and Litha moaned, arching.

I moved between her nipples, lapping and sucking, her little sounds making me burn like tequila straight to the bloodstream.

*"Rek, het toum,"* Zaf whispered raggedly.

I looked up to find him staring at Litha and I. Revik was still on his stomach, but he'd twisted around—his head on Zaf's thigh—eyes blazing as he watched.

I pushed Litha back, following her down and nuzzling her ribs, running my hands along the firm sweep of her waist. I arched my back more than necessary, presenting a fine view of my ass, but otherwise ignored Zaf and Revik. They could watch if they wanted—I liked being appreciated as much as the next girl—but this was between me and Litha.

She grunted when I slipped lower, kissing across her hipbone.

I wanted to spread her open, see what alien playland she had between her legs. My mouth watered, desperate to find out what she tasted like.

Nobody was stopping me this time, so I did just that.

Her thighs parted, knees pulling back, baring her center to my wondering eyes.

She didn't have folds or lips, so much as . . . petals. They were ruffled, surprisingly delicate-looking, and they *moved*, rippling with the liquid grace of an underwater plant.

I traced my finger along the edge of one lavender petal where it blushed a pretty pink, and Litha's hips left the ground. I did it again, on the other side, and her sex fluttered, hugging my finger.

Litha pushed up onto her elbow, watching me explore. Her face held a vulnerability that I didn't see in her often, and I was reminded of that first night, when she'd been so confused and concerned about my boobs and the phantom infants.

"Bonita," I murmured, caressing her undulating folds. She was slippery with desire, and I raised wet fingers to my lips, moaning at her taste. Musky, almost spicy, with that indescribable salty-sweet *pussy* flavor that had haunted my dreams since college. "Deliciosa."

I remembered how Zaf had focused on my labia this morning, and how surprised he'd been to find my clit. Not in that "I thought it was a myth" way of some dudes, but a real, honest, "I didn't know they came in that model" way.

Her fur was a sensuous brush against my arms as I slid them beneath her thighs, getting comfortable.

She tasted even better direct from the source.

Our moans blended together as I licked, running my tongue between her dancing petals. They licked me back, curling, caressing, blurring the line between "eating pussy" and "making out" until it disappeared, and my world narrowed to wet, slurping, slippery heat.

Above me, Litha wailed. Her hips pumped, and I rode the wave, my hands holding her tight as I drank her down.

Sweat and cum dripped down my neck, tracing a cooling path between my breasts. I shivered and pulled back, dropping kisses on her mound between heavy, panting breaths. Slowly, the black spots that swam before my eyes faded.

"*Lelesha*," Litha whispered reverently.

I rolled my head to the side, letting my gaze trail up her body until I met her eyes. They shone so brightly they almost—no! Holy shit, they were glowing!

Litha gathered my hair into her hand and tugged. Fascinated, I rose obediently, crawling up her body until we were face to face. Her honey eyes were lit as if the sun shone through them. *So beautiful.*

She rubbed her jaw against mine in a Teterayuh kiss, then held me close, forehead to forehead. “Thank you,” she murmured.

I kissed her in the human way and licked my lips. “My pleasure.”

Litha laughed. Her hand ran up and down my back as if she couldn’t stop touching me, and the emotional rush at being *needed* like that was almost as good a high as the orgasms.

Almost.

She nudged my jaw with her tail, and I saw Revik and Zaf kneeling beside us, thighs spread wide, stroking each other. Their eyes were fixed on us.

All the spit in my mouth dried up. Awe, fear, horniness, and aesthetic appreciation warred in me, the cocktail leaving me breathless and with an embarrassingly wet pussy.

Zaf’s cock had to be near to a foot long. I’d held it hand over hand that morning, and I’d have needed a third hand to get to the tip. It stood straight and proud, like a marble column. The smooth lines were broken only by a spiral of flesh-covered bumps, each the size of my fingertip. The head was a deep blood red, fading to orange, and finally the palest pink at the base.

Revik’s was closer to nine inches, which was still enough to make my cervix beg for mercy.

But, ¡A la verga! He was even thicker than I thought. The stroke of Zaf’s hand up and down his monstrous shaft was hypnotic. *His* fingers barely touched at the widest spot!

I had serious doubts about being able to take that thing. Anywhere.

My competitive spirit kicked in. I *could* do it. Start with oral. Not the violent throat-fucking I’d indulged in with Zaf—

Revik would knock all my teeth out for sure—but if I concentrated on the head and used my hands on the rest, it would still be good.

Unlike the blunt, mushroom-shaped tip of a standard human peen, their dicks tapered, narrowing to a fleshy point. Come to think of it, there was probably a mushroom shaped like that too, but I wasn't a fungus aficionado, so fuck if I knew what it was called.

I was pretty sure my ass was out of the question. But with enough prep and stretching, I could take him. On one memorable occasion while Drake was off on “business”, I'd fucked myself with two of my girthier toys at the same time. I'd been sore as hell after, but God, it had been worth it.

“I want to see them fuck you,” Litha whispered in my ear.

“Oh, god,” I moaned, my eyes fluttering closed as my mind supplied an incredibly detailed vision of me, pinned between Zaf and Revik, their cocks chasing each other in and out of my body while Litha played with her pretty purple cunt.

Uncertainty dragged my gaze back to Revik's monster cock, and I chewed my lip. It *was* beautiful. Black as his fur at the base, the thick middle was a deep indigo violet, while the tip—and the bumps I just knew would feel like orgasmic firecrackers sliding in and out of me—were flushed with rosy red. It was just also damn near the size of a fucking football.

Revik must have seen my hesitation, because he reached out a long, four-fingered hand, and gently touched my cheek. Then his expression shifted, growing stern. He pointed from Zaf to me in a mimicry of my earlier command and said, “*Rek.*”

Okay, yeah, that wasn't a hardship. *Not at all.* But—I lifted my chin and pointed between him and Litha. “*Rek!*”

Litha's chest shook with silent laughter, then we were all scrambling to get into position.

I'd intended to lie down next to her, but in response to something she said Zaf plucked me up and turned me around, posing me like a doll until I was on all fours, Litha's breath

making me shiver as it kissed the sopping wet lips of my pussy.

Sixty-nining was out of the question. I could reach Litha's slit with my hand, but definitely not with my mouth.

Revik knelt between her legs, sliding his hands up her thighs and pushing them apart before dipping low and running his tongue through her petals, his eyes hot on mine.

I whimpered. Sixty-nine was an overrated position anyways.

A tongue slithered into my cunt.

I groaned, arching my back and letting my weight rest on Litha, my cheek on her belly. Our bodies rode together as Zaf and Revik tongue-fucked us, the pleasure rising slower this time. It built, lick by lick, until I was sweaty and panting, my vision blurry.

"Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me," I chanted, unsure if I spoke in Teterayuh, Spanish, or English. I needed to feel that stretch. Needed to hear Zaf grunting as he fucked my cunt the way he'd fucked my face. Needed to see Litha split wide around Revik's girth. Needed us all, together.

Zaf's tongue stilled its slow thrusting, stopping with the tip just inside me, and something nudged my opening.

¡No mames! His tongue wasn't so long he could fuck me *while* he licked me, was it?!

"Oh my god!" I squeaked, as *Litha's* tongue licked along the line where Zaf and I met.

She purred throatily, dragging her tongue through my wetness again before narrowing her tongue to a point and wiggling it at my entrance.

I widened my legs as far as I could, breathing out through my mouth as I forced my trembling muscles to relax.

"Yes. . .yes. . .yes," I moaned with each gentle push of Litha's tongue. My mind spun. I wanted both of them inside me. Wanted all three of them inside me. If I asked real nice, would Revik tongue my ass? Or maybe—

“Fuuuck!” I screamed, as my pussy stretched and Litha’s tongue pushed in, sliding along Zaf’s length. I gasped, then my head was jerked back and Revik’s cock filled it, hot and slick with need.

He didn’t try to go deep, and I couldn’t do much more than stick out my tongue for him to rub against as my cunt spasmed around the pair of tongues stretching it wide. He didn’t seem to mind, words I didn’t understand falling in a dark rush from his lips as he painted my face with his weeping cock, smearing his delicious fluids across my tongue, lips, and cheeks.

“*Edda rek, Zaf. Anet!*” Revik gasped, jerking back to kneel between Litha’s legs. “*Anet!*” he snarled again, and plowed his massive cock—shiny with my spit—to the hilt in Litha’s cunt.

Her hips snapped up, the pink edges of her petals flushed dark. She moaned, her tongue slipping free, and pressed her face against my inner thigh.

Zaf’s tongue retreated too, but I was only empty long enough for a single, shuddering spasm before his cock pushed inside. I tensed without meaning to, anticipating the burn as he slammed home as Revik had, but it didn’t come. Instead, his entrance was steady, slow, and fucking exquisite.

He was wide enough it was a stretch, but I was soaked to my knees and their tongue fucking had done its job.

I buried my face in Litha’s flat stomach, muffling my shout as the first nubs forced their way past my tightly stretched entrance, each one sending a snap of electric pleasure through me. Nothing had ever felt so fucking good.

His cock kept going and going, filling me, ruining me. An eternity later, the heavy, half-pain, half-pleasure sensation of him pushing against my cervix brought my head up, gasping.

Zaf groaned, a rush of curses or prayers spilling from him. He pulsed his hips, grinding against the deepest parts of me, and a gush of wetness squeezed out around him.

Litha made a surprised sound, then her tongue lashed wildly, slurping up my juices.

I dug my toes into the cushion, panting, and pushed forward. “Oh, oh, oh, fuuuck,” I muttered, as I dragged myself a few inches off the alien cock skewering me. Gripping Litha’s waist, I drove myself back.

I didn’t have breath to scream. My mouth opened, but nothing came out. My wide eyes locked on Revik’s as my pussy tried to clamp around Zaf’s cock. Zaf shouted, his claws biting into my hips, as Revik bared his teeth.

He snapped his hips back, then drove them forward, the impact reverberating through Litha to me. He did it again. Again. Again!

Zaf reared back, his cock slamming into me with Revik’s next thrust.

Litha and I screamed, writhing.

They fucked us together. The world narrowed to that room, that bed, our bodies moving in quivering, shuddering unison. Litha’s teeth sank into my thigh. I buried mine in her side.

The orgasms crashed over me, one after the other, blending together into a delirious rush of indescribable ecstasy.

Zaf gripped my ass cheek with one hand, fisting my hair with the other, dragging me back and forth on his hammering cock like I was a fuck doll.

“*Rek, sah sethvang,*” he grunted, and bowed, curving his body over mine. His teeth pierced my shoulder as heat exploded, bathing my swollen cunt in his cream.

My pussy clenched so hard it hurt, the orgasm darkening my vision. I heard Revik snarling, felt Litha tremble beneath me, then Zaf’s hips snapped forward one more time, and my consciousness fled.



I drifted in and out of awareness, my body tingling with aftershocks. Someone moved me, settling me next to Litha. We cuddled together, our breathing ragged. Cool, soothing

wetness stroked over me. A warm body laid itself against my back, purring. Short fur. Revik.

We slept.



# CHAPTER 31

## LITHA

Estrayuh buried her face in the stand of akath fronds, drawing in the scent and exhaling with a blissful sigh. I'd heard the sound a lot in the days since she'd come to our bed, and my tail curled with desire every time.

"I love the way this smells," she said, almost moaning. "Like *karduhmom* and *sweet'graas*." She sniffed again, then sneezed as the feathery fronds tickled her nose.

I chuckled, swatting her butt with my tail when she huffed in mock offense. The *akath* stalks snapped easily, and Estrayuh and I worked in companionable silence, adding to the soft, fragrant pile in the basket on my back.

It had been fifteen days since that first, passionate mating. Sating our desires seemed only to make them burn brighter, and we had spent much of that time in the den, feeding the fire.

We'd shredded our sleeping cushion beyond use on the fourth day. After that, we'd been more careful, but last night we'd conspired to drive Zaf wild. With me riding him onto Revik's cock while Estrayuh soaked his face with her climax, we'd succeeded, and the cushion hadn't survived.

He and Revik had taken the shreds of both covers—freshly washed—to the village, prepared to beg Roosa and the weavers for a replacement. To beg, and to brag. We'd all been more than a little smug since Estrayuh accepted our *ervang*. It had only gotten worse when she shared her body with us.

"We should go to the next bush," Estrayuh said, when half the mature fronds were left.

I nodded, pleased. She had taken well to tending the jungle plants, but it had taken longer for her confidence to match her skill.

At the next bush, she snapped off a frond, brushing it against her cheek thoughtfully as she glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Yes?” I asked, returning the sideways glance with an amused flick of my ear.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.” I turned to her, giving her my full attention. Her Teterayuh had gotten much better—and we’d learned a scattering of words in the two Hyunan languages she spoke—but more complicated subjects still took concentration to decipher.

“I’ve heard Revik call Zaf *shakath* a few times. That’s ‘*my akath*’, right? Or is it something else?” The golden skin over her cheeks darkened as the scent of arousal tempted my nose. “He only seems to use it when we’re. . .in bed.”

“Yes, that’s right,” I confirmed, the barest hint of a purr starting in my chest. “It’s a love name, like *Lelesha*. Revik’s first village takes the journey of a semi-moon to reach, and the *akath* doesn’t grow there. When he and Zaf were first dancing around each other, he called him *akath* as a compliment to his beauty and sweet scent.” I drew a finger along the feathery fronds—as soft and beautifully colored as Zaf’s fur—and hummed at the fragrance it released.

“That’s sweet,” Estrayuh murmured. “But—”

“Later, it changed to *shakath* when Revik learned how good it felt to sink into him.”

Her lips disappeared into her mouth, her eyes widening as desire bloomed in the air around us.

A memory from last night surfaced. Zaf, on top of me, beautiful cock slid deep, Estrayuh’s fingers slick with *tov* as she watched Revik work himself into our mate with slow, rolling thrusts.

By the look on her face, her mind had followed a similar path.

The basket on my back shifted, reminding me of our purpose, and I sighed. I leaned down, nuzzling her jaw. Unable to resist the softness of her skin, I trailed my hand down her arm, moving her hand to the base of my tail—the sensitive place I now thought of as her spot.

“Come,” I invited. “There is a large growth of *akath* not far from here. We can gather the rest of what we need, then have a rest.”

“That sounds wonderful,” Estrayuh said, her throaty voice telling me we had the same idea about what that “rest” would include.



“This is a lot more work than going to a *matress stoar*,” Estrella said, plopping onto her butt with a sigh.

“A *matress stoar*?” I asked as I shook the basket, settling the collected *akath*. With the two loads we’d already taken back to the den, it should be enough. I sat, resting my back against a stone, purring when Estrayuh immediately crawled over to lay atop me.

“*Matress* is our word for sleeping cushion,” she murmured, wiggling. Happy with her position, she relaxed and lay still.

I concentrated on keeping my breathing even and my claws to myself. There would be time for gripping and panting—a peaceful moment like this was just as pleasurable, in its own way.

“On *erth*, when I needed a new *matress*, I would go to a *stoar*—a trading place—and exchange *muhnee* for one. The . . . trade people would take it to my den, take away the old one, and *vwalah!*” She made a blossoming motion with her fingers, spreading them wide before letting them rest on my chest again.

“Hmm. Simple.” I played with a curl of her head fur, considering her words. “What is *muhnee*? A food? A medicine?” From her stories, she’d traded it for everything.

Estrayuh snorted. “No. Nothing like that. It’s. . .hard to explain. It isn’t anything, really. Not anything useful.” She thought for a moment.

“Say you are trading with the Svestrix. Trading for something large, or for something you will make later. You place a rock in the trading pile to stand in its place. That’s *muhnee*. It’s just. . .something you trade for other things.”

I blinked, my ears swiveling. “You made this *muhnee* every day? And traded it for the things you actually needed?” I closed my mouth, not wanting to offend her. There must be reasons for such perplexing backwardness. I didn’t know enough to make a judgement.

“Yeah.” Estrayuh giggled and pinched my side. “*Erth* is complicated. Life there is very different from life here.”

Embarrassment flushed through me, followed by worry.

“Do you miss it? Your life on *Erth*?”

Estrayuh didn’t answer. I looked down at her, concerned.

“Yes.”

My heart cracked.

“And no. I miss some things. I had some good friends, people I’d known all my life. I miss waking up in the *hows* my Tata built. It hurts to know I’ll never visit the graves of my family again. It’s like. . .like I lost them a second time. Like even their memories are far away now.”

Estrayuh rubbed her cheek against my chest—wiping away tears, I thought. I wrapped my arm around her, thrumming a low, comforting purr. She sniffled and placed a soft kiss between my breasts.

“But there were bad things too. A lot of things I don’t miss at all. Mostly, I’m angry I didn’t get a choice.”

“I understand,” I said.

She scooted up, bracing herself on my shoulders so we were face to face. “I would stay. Now. If I had the choice to go back to *Erth*, I wouldn’t.”

“No?” I couldn’t help the hopefulness in my voice.

“No,” Estrayuh said, kissing me softly. “You are here. You, Zaf, and Revik. I would miss you more than all the *lugzoorees Erth* could offer.”

I slid my hand up her back—she was so achingly soft to the touch. I would have to be careful the next time I traded with Kashka. She’d triple her price if she knew how much pleasure we all got from pampering Estrayuh with her *eshek* and *tonsa*.

My fingers cupped her head, bringing her close for a long *kiss*. Nuzzling across her cheek, I drew my tongue up the side of her neck where she was particularly sensitive, delighting in her shiver.

“Such sweet words deserve a reward,” I purred into her adorably round ear.

“I’m glad you think so,” she murmured. A wide grin split her face, and she waggled her *aibrows* at me. “Because I have something I’ve been wanting to do for a while now.”

Estrayuh scooted down my body, pushing my thighs apart and settling herself on her stomach between them with a look of intense anticipation on her face.

I gazed down at her, bemused. My plan had called for a reversal of our positions, but I wasn’t going to argue when she looked at me that way. Although, this was definitely something she’d done before—

“Mmmm.” I sank my claws into the ground, keeping me upright as my hips rolled against her clever little mouth.

She didn’t just lick me, she took my petals into her mouth, sucking and tugging. She slid them between her fingers—the smooth touch of her furless skin unbelievably sensuous.

I moaned again, my breath already ragged from the pleasure coursing through me. She covered her teeth with her lips and—sucking a petal deep into her mouth—*chewed* on me! My spine arched and my cunt clamped down, exquisitely painful spasms racking me as my body demanded it be filled.

Estrayuh grunted, plunging her tongue into my cunt. She made muffled, hungry sounds as she pressed into me, stretching her tongue as far as she could.

It was far enough to feel fucking wonderful. At the same time, it was the most brutal torment, dangling what I needed just out of reach. She could keep me on the edge of orgasm doing this—and had. The last time, she'd driven me to frantic, desperate begging before she finally relented and fucked me into a delirium with my ceramic toy.

We didn't have a toy with us today. I whined, spreading my legs wider and twisting my hips.

She pumped her tongue in and out, teasing me, making my channel clamp on nothing again and again. I growled. If leaving me unsatisfied was the new thing she wanted to try, I was going to be very displeased.

She pulled back, her face shining with my juices. Her eyes snared me, burning with hunger.

“What—ungh,” I started to ask, my words breaking off as she pushed two fingers inside me. She pumped them once before adding a third, and my eyelids fluttered, my vision narrowing to slits.

“Yesss,” I moaned, my fingers sinking deeper into the soft moss as I rocked into her thrusts. This was a benefit of her clawlessness I hadn't anticipated, but thoroughly enjoyed. Delight rippled through me, the pleasure building with each stroke.

My tail curled up without my conscious thought, pressing against the back of her head. If she'd just suck on my petals, I'd come. I was so close.

Estrayuh's lips curled in a wicked smile, triumph glowing in her eyes as she resisted my nudge.

“Ready for more?” she asked.

I nodded, staring at her mouth.

She licked her lips, slowly. “I think you need more of something else,” she breathed, and pushed her small, fourth

finger into my cunt with the other three.

I groaned.

She twisted her hand, fingers pressed tightly together inside me, the sensation bringing me shudderingly closer to orgasm.

“Still more, I think,” Estrayuh panted, her eyes fixed on the spot where our bodies met.

She folded her thumb into the embrace of her fingers, pressing forward with her whole hand.

Little whines came from my throat with every breath as all the places deep inside that had ached with emptiness were suddenly filled. My cunt rippled. My petals danced. The rest of my body was locked in place, ecstasy leaving no room for distraction.

“Almost enough.”

My eyes widened. What else could she—

Her hand *moved* inside me. Her fingers curled, forming into a fist, thicker than any cock or toy I’d had so deep.

She pulsed her arm, the movement so small it should have been insignificant.

My cunt exploded. Sensation slammed through me, arching my spine like I’d been struck by sky fire. My head cracked painfully against the stone I leaned against, but I barely noticed.

*“Thatsit baybee, fukk thatsoh hawt. Kum ahl ovur maye haand.”*

Estrayuh’s passionate words, incomprehensible but dripping with lust, pushed me over the edge. I screamed, my release a hot flood that dripped onto the ground beneath me.

Estrayuh grunted as I clamped around her hand, stilling that maddening pulse.

When I’d calmed enough to only shudder through the occasional aftershock, I lowered my gaze to hers. Alarm and anticipation curled through me at the look on her face.

“*Trayneeng weels off, baybee,*” she purred.

I opened my mouth to ask what that meant, but she dropped her head, sucking my petals into her mouth like she was starving and they were her only sustenance. At the same time, she pulled her fist back, snapping it forward, fucking me with ruthless intensity.

My eyelids peeled wide open, but I saw nothing. All I could feel was Estrayuh’s hand, forcing its way past my spasming walls again and again. Her mouth, licking and sucking my most sensitive tissues.

The orgasm speared through me—sharp, intense, and unending.

I was still coming when the world went dark.



“Unconscious, hmm?” Zaf’s voice bubbled with amusement, underscored by heat.

Estrayuh, cradled in his arms, made a proud, happy sound of confirmation.

Revik shot me a laughing glance, but I could tell by the way his stance widened and grew uneven that he, too, was intrigued by the story of our *Lelesha*’s hidden talent. Running in such a state was. . .hard.

There was a flash of color from above, and I quickly glanced at Estrayuh. Her eyes were closed as she played those madness-inducing fingers through the fur on Zaf’s chest, a look of perfect contentment on her face.

Good. I wanted this to be a surprise.

We reached the last branch of the sweeping *zhazhalouk* tree, leaping from it across a small stream and dashing through the grove of *tonset* trees. Almost there.

“Keep your eyes closed, *Lelesha,*” I coaxed. “Until we say to open them.”



Her lips puckered, her *aibrows* furrowing in a mock frown, but she did as I asked.

Zaf grinned at me, his tail a happy banner waving high behind him.

We stopped just out of view of the glade, waiting for Revik to scout ahead. At his relaxed chuff, we followed, entering the color-drenched clearing as if stepping from the waking world into a dream.

Zaf and I stilled for a moment in greeting, then joined Revik, arranging ourselves in a comfortable pile with Estrayuh at our center.

“Are you going to tell me why we’re out here, on the ground, when we have a *braand noo* sleeping cushion back in the den?” she asked, playfully.

“Impatient,” Revik purred, nipping her knuckles in gentle rebuke.

“Open your eyes and see,” Zaf urged.

Estrayuh’s lashes fluttered up. Surprise rounded her mouth, her gaze climbed, and I watched with awe as the dancing spirits above reflected in the night sky of her eyes.

A tear traced a shimmering path down her cheek. Zaf caught it with his thumb, purring a gentle question.

“It’s so beautiful,” Estrayuh whispered.

Long moments later, she let out a shaky sigh and rolled her head to the side, finally looking away from the colors filling the night sky. “What do you call it?”

“Them,” I corrected, drawing a finger down her nose so she’d scrunch it up and smile. “The *vath ’lenesta*. Sky Dancers.”

“*Vath ’lenesta*,” she repeated. “I love that. On *Erth*, we call them *uhroaruhz*.”

“You have *vath ’lenesta* on *Erth*?” Zaf asked.

Over Estrayuh’s head, he, Revik, and I exchanged a look. They knew why I’d wanted to bring Estrayuh out tonight, and

learning this was a hopeful sign.

“Yes,” she said, then shrugged one shoulder. “I’ve never seen them, though. You can’t, where I lived. I’d only ever seen *pikchoors* until now.”

I chose my words with care. “The Teterayuh believe the *vath’lenesta* to be the spirits of our honorable dead. They watch us, weeping at our pain and celebrating our joy. They dance,” I held out my hand, turning it within the play of light, “to show their pride for all that we are.”

Estrayuh’s wide gaze shimmered with emotion, the memory of our earlier conversation large in their depths.

“We cannot see them all the time.” Zaf’s voice was husky. “Only when the storms are quiet and the moons dark. But always, they are there.”

“Your family dances, *Lelesha*. Look. They dance for you.” Revik’s words rang with quiet confidence.

Estrayuh’s face crumpled, and she wept. She burrowed into us, clinging and shaking.

We held her, silent but for our purrs, witnessing her grief.

“Thank you,” she said thickly when the storm of tears trickled to an end. “This—I can’t tell you what this means to me. How much it means to me.”

My throat ached with the need to tell her how much *she* meant to me, but I clenched my teeth, nuzzling her instead. She might return my feelings, she might not. Now, when any confessions would be inextricably mixed with gratitude and pain, was not the time to find out.

“If the *vath’lenesta* are your honorable dead,” Estrayuh said, wiping her cheeks. “Where do your dishonorable dead go?”

“All dead go to the sky,” Zaf answered. “They are judged by the spirits of those who came before—who have watched them and seen into their hearts. Those who lived with honor, who protected and brought light to those around them, join the

dance. Those who act without honor. . .” He trailed off, wincing.

“Are cast into the darkness.” Revik said, without pause. “They are the teeth in the storm. The hunger in the belly of the *va ’grev*. Cut off from the light, they cannot see us, and seek only more death—hoping to fill the void of their loneliness.”

Estrayuh was suddenly tense, looking at the sky with anxious terror rather than wonder. “Should we get under the trees? What if a *va ’grev* comes?”

“Kshh, no,” I soothed. “The *va ’grev*’s danger is highest in the day, and in the storm. The light of the spirits hurts them, making them slow and confused. They don’t hunt on nights like this one. We are safe.”

Slowly, she relaxed, only to bolt upright, spinning around to crouch, facing us, tiny fists on her hips.

“*Wayt wuhn fukkin sekuhnd!*” she snarled. “*Eye dohnt fukkin beeleev this.*”

I was still as stone, waiting for some sign of what caused her anger. Internally, I sighed in relief as she switched back to Teterayuh.

“Is that why Saytireka and the others hate us? Why they call us *tetevath ’a?! Sky people?! They think we’re some kind of—what, evil spirits—*”

She flexed the first two fingers on each hand in a strange gesture that meant nothing to me. The sneer was easy to read, though.

“Do they think we came down here to *kill them?! Us?!?*” She held her arms out, displaying her small, soft, delicious body, then waved her hands at us, her expression outraged. She must have read the answer on our faces, because she let out a deep sound of disgust and flopped onto her back. She threw her arms up, covering her face.

“*Meeyairda day veeduh.*”

I glared at Revik, my tail twitching in panicked aggravation. “Do something!” I hissed, too quietly for

Estrayuh to hear over her continued muttering.

Revik folded his arms, expression unrelenting. “She needed to know.”

I bared my teeth. She did, and if I’d realized how much she *hadn’t* known, I would have explained earlier. But that wasn’t the point. Tonight was supposed to be a gift. It was supposed to be romantic. I’d wanted her to feel understood and cared for.

Not so overcome with despair that she cast herself onto the ground, cursing.

I turned pleading eyes to Zaf, who was shifting his weight from foot to foot, distraught.

“Would you like to hear how Litha lost her arm and won my mother’s wrath?” he blurted out. Immediately, he realized what he’d said and ducked his head, avoiding my eyes.

Estrayuh’s angry stream had stopped as if a hand had clamped her mouth shut. I looked down, my ears pinned back in embarrassment, and attempted a smile.

She squinted at me, then shifted her focus to Zaf. “I know what you’re doing. But I really, really want to know, so I’m allowing it.” Estrayuh knee-walked to Revik, plopped into his lap, and folded her arms—the pair matched in stubbornness, if not in size.

“Tell me,” she demanded.

I sighed and stretched out on my back. No point in trying to influence the conversation. Revik and Zaf insisted on attributing some great noble heroics to my actions—when really they were no more than anyone would have done in the same situation. I just happened to be the one there at the time.

Our people had fled the mountains’ fire only four generations ago, taking refuge deep in the jungle. Those ancestors had made their way to the great rivers, looking for new places to make their homes. They’d found the Svestrix, who—though comparatively few in number—were great warriors and knew the jungle in ways our ancestors had not.

That first generation had seen many people—Teterayuh and Svestrix—go to the sky.

By the time I was wandering into the Svestrix territory as a young, cocky, *ka'vek*, our peoples had not seen battle since my parents were kits.

I'd strolled blithely past the territorial markers, too intent on finding the perfect shade of reeds to match our new mate's eyes to care that I trespassed. When I'd stumbled across a Svestrix man fighting a *va'grev* for his life and that of his baby, who wailed from a nearby root hollow, I could not walk away. No one with a heart could have.

I shifted uncomfortably.

The babe had survived, but the man hadn't, and I'd been badly wounded. His mate—Kashka—found us and nursed me back to health. I'd been sick with wound-fever, and she'd been mad with grief, so I'd laid in her den most of a semi-moon.

It was to be expected that we'd form a bond under such circumstances, not exceptional.

It was natural that our friendship and the experience we shared had brought our people closer, so that instead of uneasy truce, we enjoyed trade and a tentative alliance.

It was just unfortunate that Saytireka chose to see all this as a challenge, rather than an opportunity.

“Litha.” Estrayuh's voice, thick with emotion. Her soft hand touched my cheek.

I turned my head, meeting her watery eyes.

She seemed to struggle for words, finally giving a little sob and simply pressing her forehead to mine. Hot tears dripped onto my cheeks.

I cupped the back of her head, inhaling her moist, ragged breaths, and heard all the things she didn't say.

I wanted to tell her I wasn't what she thought. That I was only a person, like any other. I wanted to tell her she'd done the same as I, in a similar situation, only I was a warrior—

trained, armed, and blooded—while she was small and defenseless. Her bravery was so much greater than mine.

But I said none of those things. I was a selfish person. Much as I disagreed with my mates' devotion, I craved it. I would work to be the person they thought me to be.

Besides, those things weren't entirely true. Estrayuh was small in stature, yes, but if she had someone to protect, her ferocity was as great as any warrior's.

I rubbed my cheek along hers, elation filling me as I realized her scent had shifted, weaving in hints of mine, Zaf's, and Revik's.

“Let us go home, my brave warrior,” I murmured. “I want to hold and be held, and sleep in the bed we made.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Yes,” Zaf agreed, helping her to her feet.

“Always,” Revik swore, his big arms trembling as he wrapped them around us all.

# CHAPTER 32

## REVIK

**M**ovement in the darkness. My body tightened, but I held myself still and slitted my eyes open.

No threat rose in the quiet of our den, only Estrayuh's bare ass, pretty slit winking as she picked her way on hands and knees from the tangle of limbs spread across the bed cushion.

Delicious.

Finally free, she padded outside, thighs squeezed together.

I chuffed, amused, and rolled onto my back.

A moment later I pushed to my feet and stalked silently after her. I was awake, and so was she. Might as well see if she was willing to help me work off some stress.

Last night's conversation had me jumping at shadows. I didn't like thinking about the days so soon after our mating, when Litha had gone missing. Didn't like remembering how Zaf had pulled into himself. How he'd refused to eat or speak, had stood still and unresponsive to any comfort I tried to offer. Didn't like to think about the terrible things I'd screamed at Saytireka when he collapsed from exhaustion and heartbreak, and *still* she refused to allow us to enter the Svestrix's lands—or even ask for their aid.

I'd never been able to forget the towering rage in Saytireka's eyes when I'd returned to the village, Litha in my arms and Kashka at my side. She would not let me forget.

Estrayuh knelt by the stream, washing her hands. I scuffed my feet. She tensed slightly, then saw me and relaxed, smiling through a yawn.

I smiled back, approval warm in my chest. A handful of days ago, she'd have been blithely unaware of a sound so

quiet.

“You’re up early,” Estrayuh said, accepting the hand I offered and rising to wrap her arms around my waist.

“Mmm. Come with me.” Sudden arousal bloomed in the air, and I chuckled. “I intend to fight, Estrayuh, not fuck. Although. . .if you do well, I could be convinced.”

“You could, could you?” she purred, arching to rub her generous breasts across my sheath. My reaction was obvious, and she smirked up at me, triumph glittering beneath long lashes.

I slid one hand beneath the sleep-tangled weight of her head fur, the other under her ass, and lifted her to my chest. Three strides, and I had her back against a tree, legs spread wide around my hips. I loomed over her, muscles taut, gritting my teeth with the effort of keeping my aching cock in its sheath.

“Be very sure of the game you play, Estrayuh,” I growled, grinding my hips against her. Her expression went lax with desire and I bared my teeth, tongue flicking out to taste the pulse pounding in her neck. “I’m in no mood to lose, and when I win, your submission and this pretty little pussy will be mine.”

I squeezed her ass, pulling her tighter against me, loving the way she filled my hand. Some parts of her were just my size. Her cunt would be too, I was sure of it. I understood her concerns. My cock was thick, even among my own people. But the four of us had been rutting like a pack of *khot* for days, and I’d seen how she stretched around Zaf’s sizeable shaft. Felt her give under the press of my tongue.

She could take me. And she *would*, if not today, someday soon. I’d seen the signs, her wordless cues of readiness. Zaf thought I was brain scrambled for resisting her, but after seeing fear in her eyes directed at me, I’d made my decision to wait until she *demanded* my cock.

That decision felt as solid as a cloud this morning, compared to the need to know she was *mine*. That she trusted me to keep her safe, in spirit and body.



I lowered her gently to the ground and stepped back, my hands flexing. “Choose. Follow me, or go back to the den.” Estrayuh’s eyes flickered, and I controlled my need to take and take and take long enough to caress her cheek softly. “It is not a choice between yes and no, *Lelesha*. Only a question of when and how.”

I waited long enough to see her nod, and strode into the jungle. I kept to the ground, moving slowly, leaving a path for her to follow. My ears swiveled, straining for the sounds of her footsteps. Disappointment was a kick to the gut when I heard them, moving *away*.



“You’re not serious.” Estrayuh planted her hands on her hips and stared at me. “You really want to fight? Now?!”

“Of course,” I said, mildly. “I told you as much.”

“But—the submission! The fucking! I brought *tov!*” she wailed.

I fought not to smile and continued stretching, basking under the caress of her gaze. She’d get rewarded for that, clever little thing. She’d gone back to the den only long enough to grab the pot from beside the sleeping cushion—and strap on her *shooz* and the large cloth tied at one shoulder that she called her *hows’dres*—before rushing after me.

“What happened to—” she lowered her voice to a deep rumble, “*that pretty little pussy is mine, Estrayuh. I’m going to crack you open like a soru, Estrayuh. Make you crawl on your knees and beg for my cock, Estrayuh!*”

I pounced, cushioning her head with my hand as I took her to the ground. My chest shook with silent laughter.

“I don’t remember saying all that,” I murmured. “I like the idea of you begging, though.”

“Gahh!”

“I said I’d win your submission, and I will. Feel you hot and wet around my cock as my battle prize.”

Estrayuh stopped slapping at my chest and peered up at me, eyes wide.

She looked so adorably hopeful. Affection swelled in my chest and I leaned in, nuzzling her. “You will be mine, *Lelesha*. Now get on your feet. If you can make it to that *tonset* tree,” I flicked my ear at the twisting trunk three body lengths away, “I’ll let you ride my tongue before I—what was it you said? Split you open like a *soru*.”

Estrayuh snorted a laugh, teeth nibbling her lower lip as she pushed up onto her elbows. “What happens if I don’t make it?”

“You’ll feel my hand on your ass until you’re sore, dripping, and begging for my cock,” I growled.

“C—can I just give up now?”

“Yes. But you only get this,” I let my cock push from my sheath and gave it a long, twisting stroke, “if you really try to win.”

She bolted.

I crouched, forcing my cock to retract as I watched her progress. When she’d crossed half the distance to the *tonset* tree, I bounded forward, scooped her up, and tossed her over my shoulder.

She kicked, pounding her feet ineffectively against my chest.

I swatted her and took a step away from the tree. She knew better.

Estrayuh squealed and bucked. Her *hows’dres* had slipped to the side, leaving her ass bare, and it took all my will not to run my tongue between her thighs and lap up the arousal I smelled so clearly.

“You’re not trying,” I chided.

“You’re *distracting!*” Estrayuh snarled.

“Were you expecting a calm, peaceful attack?”

In response, Estrayuh clamped both hands around the base of my tail and wrenched it sharply upward.

Agony shot through my spine. I dropped to my knees, roaring.

Estrayuh pushed out of my hold, spun on her heel without pausing, and ran.

My lips curled into a snarl as I shot after her, excitement and pride pumping through me. She hadn't held back—that had really fucking hurt.

I snagged the flapping end of her *hows'dres* and yanked, pulling her off her feet.

She rolled into the fall, just as I'd shown her.

I hauled harder, a predatory grin slashing across my face when the cloth tore. I tossed it aside and stilled, transfixed by the sight of her—bare, soft, and quivering. She rolled onto her back, thighs parting, and—

Pain exploded in my nose.

Estrayuh wriggled, dragging herself out from under me. Blindly, I lashed out, my hand landing on her ankle and holding her tight. She reared around, trying for my nose again, but I ducked and her hard little fist glanced harmlessly off the side of my head.

I caught her arms, pinning them with one hand and tangling her legs with mine. I wrapped my other hand around her neck and snarled, feeling a trickle of blood trail from my nose.

She snarled back.

I was so fucking proud.

I checked her eyes, looking for fear, but found only fierceness. Inhaling, I drew in an intoxicating mix of battle rush, arousal, blood, and sweat—not a hint of bitter terror.

“Mine,” I growled. “I. Win.”

Estrayuh arched against my hold and ground her mouth against mine, her teeth sinking into my lip. A smear of red decorated her mouth when she dropped her head back, and I

watched—thoroughly enamored—as a pleased, coy smile curled her bloody lips. “Yours,” she purred. “*I win.*”

My cock pushed out of my sheath so fast it hurt. I pressed my forehead to hers, my purr roaring, and silently thanked the spirits for blessing me yet again.

“On your knees,” I whispered, and licked my blood from her mouth.

I sat back on my haunches, watching as she rose to face me, legs folded beneath her, back straight, hands flat on her thighs. Her chin was proudly high, her eyes lowered, and a small smile played around the corners of her mouth.

She moved with precise care, positioning herself with a significance that spoke of ritual. My *Lelesha* had done this before.

“Beautiful,” I purred. My claw drew the faintest line down the center of her body, a rosy stripe from neck to navel. Her golden skin—bare but for sprinklings of fur—showed every touch. She would wear the painting of this claiming for days.

I brought my hand lower, tracing a path from thigh to knee.

Wordlessly, she spread her legs, exposing the sheen of wetness on their soft, dimpled interiors. Her hands remained loose and relaxed, but her breasts shivered with every quick breath.

Estrayuh’s belly rested on her thighs, hiding her core from my hungry eyes. Higher, her breasts hung, full and tempting like the ripest of fruits.

I flicked my claws across a fat brown nipple, purring with satisfaction as it tightened further, lengthening, the flesh around it pebbling. I repeated the action on her other breast, speeding up, alternating, until her hands curled into fists on her thighs and she panted uncontrollably.

But she stayed on her knees, the scent of her arousal so thick in the air I could barely breathe.

“So pretty, *Lelesha*. But not exactly what I had in mind.” I swiped my tail under the somewhat shredded cloth of her

*hows'dres*, spreading it on the ground in front of her.

“Hands,” I said, patting the edge nearest me.

When she was on her hands and knees I circled her slowly, brushing away the streaks of dirt our wrestling had left on her skin. Dirt, but no blood. Satisfaction purred through me. I never wanted to put a mark on her that wasn't a memory of pleasure.

I stopped behind her. I couldn't help but fill my hands with the cheeks of her ass. I massaged the lush curves and parted her with my thumbs, baring her most intimate flesh to my eyes. She was slick with desire, gleaming with it from her tiny winking asshole all the way down to her knees.

“Oh, *Lelesha*, I love how you shine for me,” I murmured.

One at a time, I gently lifted each of her knees, brushing them off before spreading the cloth beneath them.

She was too low to fuck from this angle. A fantasy rippled to life—a dream for the future.

*Zaf, on his back. Estrayuh on top of him, pussy raised high for my thrusts. Feeling his cock rub against mine as he pumped into her ass. Litha, on all fours like Estrayuh was now, muffling the little Hyunan's screams with her cunt.*

I grunted, excitement dripping onto her wide, welcoming curves. I rubbed it in, slipping my hands through her dripping folds, coating her ass in a shimmering mix of our fluids.

My fingers curled around her neck, guiding her down until her upper body rested on her folded arms, back arched, ass and sex presented with delectable openness. She widened her stance without having to be told, and I purred my approval.

*Smack!*

I brought my hand down on her ass with more sound than force, my cock throbbing at her little whimper. Another slap on the other cheek as I watched my handprint appear on her flesh, flushing the same deep pink as her glistening petals.

There were definite benefits to having no fur.

I rained swats onto her ass and thighs, varying the pressure but keeping it light, until she was whining, pushing back into my strokes.

It was time.

I gripped her hot, sensitive cheeks, squeezing, letting her feel the prick of my claws. She groaned, canting her hips up in entreaty.

“Whose are you, Estrayuh?” I purred, flexing my fingers.

She muttered something unintelligible, her face buried in her arms.

*Crack!*

I laid my palm across the lower curve of her ass with some force, watching it jiggle with a fascination that was edging into obsession.

“I didn’t hear you,” I said, and struck the same spot on the other side. “Tell me again. Whose are you, Estrayuh?”

“Yours!” she cried, arching her neck and panting.

“That’s right,” I purred. I licked a slow trail up her inner thigh, flicking my tongue away just before I reached her lips.

She whined.

“Whose ass is this?” Two strikes in quick succession this time, centered on her cheeks.

“Yours!” Estrayuh shouted. “*Fukk, Dadee!*”

I paused, tilting my head. She’d called me that before—and been both embarrassed and aroused as she’d refused to tell me what it meant.

“Yes,” I murmured, scratching swirling designs into her hips and outer thighs.

She writhed, moaning.

I braced myself on my elbow, wrapping my hand around Estrayuh’s throat, and growled into her ear.

“Whose cunt is this?”

*Slap!*

Her pussy squelched as I ground my palm against it, rubbing in the sting.

Estrayuh's hips jerked wildly, every breath coming out as a moan.

I tightened my fingers around her neck—just a little—and snarled low, my hand thudding wetly against her swollen folds with each word. “Whose. Cunt. Is. This. Estrayuh?!”

“YOURS!” she wailed, sobbing.

I flipped her onto her back, towering over her as I reached for the *tov*. My cock was so swollen the nodes barely protruded, and for this part I wanted her to feel only pleasure.

I curled my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her up slightly, and offered her the pot.

“Prepare us, *Lelesha*.”

Estrayuh's fingers shook as she fumbled with the lid.

I watched her through half-lidded eyes, gliding my thumb along the tender curve of her jaw. I hissed as her slippery hands wrapped around me, my fingers tightening. My cock wept at her touch, my hips snapped forward, and I pushed my thumb into her mouth, growling as she opened for me, lips shining.

She curled her tongue, lapping against my claw as her small hands pumped my length.

“Enough,” I rasped. “Your turn.”

Estrayuh whined, but at the flex of my claws she reluctantly pulled her hands from my cock, dipping two fingers into the pot of *tov*. I pulled my thumb from her sweet mouth, supporting her back as she curled and brought them to the little hole I was about to stretch wide.

“More.”

She went back with three fingers, her eyes squeezing shut as she pushed the *tov* deep.

“Good,” I murmured over the squelching sounds.  
“Enough.”

“Yes, yes, please, D—Revik! Please fuck me!” Estrayuh whined, hands frantically pulling me down as I laid her back.

I wrapped her head-fur around my fist. “You will tell me if you hurt,” I growled, biting back a groan as the luscious heat of her kissed the head of my cock. “*Dadee* takes care of what’s his.”

Estrayuh’s eyes flew open. I enjoyed her shock for a bare instant before her eyelids fluttered, her mouth opening wide on a soundless scream as I slid inside her.

“*Rek*, you’re so tight,” I grunted. I slid my arm under her thigh, spreading her wider, my claws sinking into the soft flesh of her side as I desperately sought control. She’d barely taken more than the head, but I was so ready, and she felt so good.

I rocked my hips back.

Estrayuh wriggled, trying to follow.

My eyes crossed as her sheath flexed around me, almost forcing me out. I tightened my hand in her head-fur. “Relax,” I hissed.

She whined.

Her cunt felt like a molten fist as I pushed back in, a little deeper this time.

“*Fukkkkk!*” Estrayuh panted. She throbbed around me, her muscles twitching as they stretched, but she blew out a long, uneven breath and the pressure eased slightly.

“Good girl,” I purred, and pulsed my hips, fucking her with just the tip of my cock.

A heavy shudder rippled through her.

I groaned, pushing deeper. She was so fucking soft. So wet. And the noises she made! She was built for pleasure, and I would see that her life was full of it.

“Oh, *gawd*, Revik, I—” Estrayuh whimpered, as the widest part of my cock pressed against her opening. Her hips



wiggled, and she gasped.

“Look at me.”

Estrayuh’s eyes blinked open, and she focused on me with visible effort.

“*Mine,*” I growled, and drove my hips forward.

Her pupils flared, eclipsing the brown, and her body spasmed, locking tight.

I shouted, my purr rattling my bones as she strangled my cock.

“*Yesyesyesyes, ohfukk, ohfukk, hnnggggg, FUKK!*” Estrayuh babbled, her hips snapping back and forth in tiny, sharp jerks.

I let go. I battered her, never pulling out, grinding deep again and again. Her pussy flooded, squeezing, slurping, gobbling my cock as she came. We were soaked in her pleasure, hot drops of it splattering with every slap of our groins.

“So. Fucking. Good,” I grunted. “My hot little cunt.”

“*Oh gawd,*” Estrayuh keened, bucking against me.

“*Rek,* that’s it,” I swore. I tightened, curling into her, and dragged my hips back. We groaned together as the fat bulge of my cock pulled free of her clinging sheath. Baring my teeth, I slammed home, shouting as fire shot up my spine.

Estrayuh screamed.

I thrust again, feeling her gush around me.

One more explosive thrust, and I roared as pulse after pulse of ecstasy rushed through me. It clawed me to the bone and filled me to overflowing. Buried to the heart in my *Lelesha*, I trembled. Every pulse of my cock was met by a spasm from her fluttering channel.

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her close, and sank my teeth into the plump curve of her breast as each greedy twist of her hips forced my *ahz* past the tight plug of my cock, drenching us both.

Marking her.

Claiming her.

Making her mine.

# CHAPTER 33

## ESTRELLA

**H**oly fucking *Dominant Daddy*, I thought muzzily, overwhelmed by the cacophony of throbbing, shocking sensations.

My head swam. My tit ached. My ass stung, hot and swollen like I'd sat on a beehive. And my poor, pleasure-drunk pussy just kept squeezing, trying to come to terms with the fire hose jammed inside it. I was a goddamned slip and slide from the waist down.

I'd fantasized about this moment *a lot* over the past weeks—hot, filthy daydreams that left me squirming and red in the face—but none of them had prepared me for finally being the center of Revik's attention.

For finally having him inside me.

My g-spot was going to be singing a ballad in praise of his fat-assed cock for all of eternity, accompanied by my clit on the guitar, strummed to wild abandon by his fucking nubs.

Revik groaned, sagging. His dick—still half-hard—popped out of me, sending a shock wave through my abused insides that squeezed out a flood of cum.

I whimpered, helplessly riding the twitching aftershocks as I felt him dripping down my ass. It was the hottest fucking thing, but I sighed internally, thinking about how squishy and sticky I was going to be when I cooled off. At least he'd been thoughtful enough to put a cloth down, so I was lying in a slut puddle and not a muddy slut wallow.

Pretty sure my house dress was ruined, though.

Revik rolled, taking me with him. My eyes grew heavy as I sprawled on top of him, his purr better than any vibrating bed in a shitty by-the-hour motel. His hands petted over me—

soothing, caressing—until I was half-asleep, boneless with bliss.

“Tell me about *Dadee, Lelesha*.”

My shoulders tensed at his quiet words.

“Kshh,” he soothed, kneading them gently.

I blew out a breath, fighting down a jangle of nerves. It was a fair question, and not the first time he’d asked about it. I didn’t have much shame around my sexuality, but this was an area I’d hadn’t explored much. Never explored at all, really, outside of fantasy.

I’d said, “Yes, Daddy,” teasingly one time to Drake, when he’d been rushing me to leave a party early. He’d laughed and teased back in front of our friends, but when we got home. . .it was the first time he’d truly frightened me.

But this was nothing like that.

“It’s. . .it means different things,” I said into his chest. This was hard already, eye contact would turn me into a mushroom for sure.

He purred encouragingly, petting me with soft, unhurried strokes.

“The way I mean it—” I bit my lip, trying to find the words to explain the complex *feeling* I had when I looked at him and thought: Daddy. “Daddy is someone who protects me. Keeps me safe. Who wants what’s best for me, and will see that I get it, even if it’s not what I want at the time. Someone who wants *me*, and who I want just as bad.”

Revik’s hands stilled. His purr shot up about ten decibels.

I giggled into his fur, dizzy with relief as the bulge pressing against my belly suddenly doubled in size.

“And I am *Dadee* to you, *Lelesha*?” he rumbled.

I nodded, cheeks blazing, but he touched my chin with a finger, lifting my face until I finally met his eyes. They glowed, bright and hot as the sun.

“Yes,” I breathed, transfixed.

“Good girl.”

I flailed for a handhold as he hoisted me onto his shoulder and drove to his feet in a single, smooth movement. He strode forward in a distance-eating lope that didn't falter as he bent, scooping up the *tov* and my ruined dress with his free hand, his other clamped over my thighs.

“Revik!” I yelped.

“I'm *Dadee* now,” he said, smugness lacing the words. “And *Dadee* says you need to soak. You're going to be sore. We will stop by the den and ask Litha and Zaf to gather food and meet us at the *javuh*. Then, when you're less sore, we will practice fighting again.”

I gaped at the flexing muscles of his back—my naked, wet, no doubt swollen ass out for the world to see. “What, right now?!”

“Yes. If we wait, you will get stiff.”

“I—But—”

“It's important that I keep you safe, *Lelesha*. You must be able to defend yourself.”

I pouted, relenting. Of course, he'd have to go and be all sweet so I couldn't stay mad at him.

“You can't run away if there's danger,” Revik continued. “You're too slow. And you can't climb.”

“Jerk!” I gasped, pinching his side. I took it back. I could stay mad at him just fine.

“And you smell so fucking good—any untrained *ka'vek* could follow your trail, even if they were asleep,” Revik went on, doggedly insistent on making his point.

Awww. Okay, now I was back to being happy with him.

“If someone touches you without your permission, I will kill them. Or Litha will. Zaf prefers not to end the lives of others, but to keep you safe, he would send many spirits to the sky. But we might not always be there, so you need to know how to hurt them, so *they* can't hurt *you*.”

I sputtered, but my feral little heart warmed, and Revik nuzzled my hip—apparently quite pleased by the idea of me maiming some faceless threat.



“Pass me the *lellek*, would you, Estrella?”

I handed it over, grimacing as I watched Ria scoop up a big portion. She made a happy “yum” sound as she chewed, and my lip curled involuntarily.

Litha popped a piece in her mouth like it was some bitter, revolting excuse for popcorn, and I stuck out my tongue. No more kisses for her. Not until she’d done something to clean the icky taste from her mouth.

“Safe to say you’re not bringing roasted *lellek* as your contribution to the festival, then?” Cass bit her cheeks, fighting a grin.

“Definitely.” I snorted. “Wait, what festival?”

“The one the village is holding to celebrate the coming dry season?” Shane supplied, raising an eyebrow. “The event everyone’s been talking about for the last two storm breaks?”

I blinked and turned to my three. They looked remarkably nonplussed for such big, strong alien types. Zaf’s ears disappeared into his hair, he was so embarrassed.

“Of course, we always gather to celebrate the beginning of *ilot va’heth*, the dry season. And I was aware an *Athulenvang* approached. I just hadn’t. . . I was. . .” His chagrined gaze slid from my face, catching on my breasts and heating before dropping to his lap.

Ria coughed in a fruitless attempt to hide her laughter.

I patted Zaf’s thigh, leaving it there as I smiled beatifically at my family. “We’ve been a little preoccupied. Please, fill us in.” I began drawing delicate, swirling lines through the soft fur covering Zaf’s bulge with my pinky—firming my grip on his thigh when he twitched. *Stay*, said the look I shot him out of the corner of my eye.

Zaf trembled, his sex swelling and hardening beneath the teasing brush of my smallest finger.

I was definitely going to pay for this later. I shifted, anticipation rising.

“Aksha and the other storm-touched say *ilot va’regnev* will end soon. We will endure one, perhaps two more.” Yin’s tail-tip flicked, betraying xyr amusement at my antics.

“Where is Aksha?” I asked. The tiny Teterayuh with a giant personality was notably absent from her usual place at the next table. As was Saytireka, come to think of it. Which explained why I was in such a good mood.

“She hurts today. She and her mates remained in the den,” Yin answered.

“Is she alright?”

“Aksha will persist,” Yin assured me, empathy in xyr expression. “I will tell her of your concern.”

Litha’s tail swept across the small of my back. “We always gather with the *Kheertha* at the start of *ilot va’heth*, at one village or another. This season cycle, all will come here, to *Lenvang Sounga*, to celebrate. More will come—and the celebration will last many days longer—since it will also fall over an *Athulenvang*. It will be our honor and duty to host them, though they will bring food and gifts to share.”

I held up a hand. “Hold on, I’m confused.”

Litha took it, brushing her thumb across my knuckles, her ears pricked forward attentively.

I kissed her. I couldn’t help it. She was so damned cute.

“Who are the *Kheertha*? More. . .different people, like the *Svestrix*?”

“No.” Litha shook her head. “*Kheer-tha*. Outer Kin.”

Cass leaned over. “The *Kheertha* are Teterayuh who’ve moved to other villages. Roosa’s son Atson lives in a village a few days’ travel from here, and they’re all so excited he and his mates are coming.”

“Also, the villages with whom we’ve sworn kinship,” Indaro added from her seat beside Shane.

“Okay. . .” *Lenvang Sounga*—literally Dancing Water, which I thought was lovely—was the Teterayuh phrase for waterfall. My three had taken me to see the falls the village was named for a few storm breaks ago. But— “What’s an *Athulenvang*?”

“When both *Lenailot* and *Levailata* are dark, it is the time of the *Athulenvang*,” Revik said.

I waited a beat, turning to look at him when he didn’t continue. He was half out of his seat, upper lip wrinkled in a threatening snarl, his gaze fixed on something across the *erralaytuh*. The thick plait of my hair thwapped against my shoulder as I whipped my head around, expecting. . .I didn’t know what. Some horrifying danger.

It was just Arvel. His ears were pinned, his chin out belligerently. He held steady under Revik’s glare for a bare second before dropping his gaze to his clenched fists.

I looked back at Revik. What the fuck had brought that on? My protective, deadly Daddy settled down slowly, his tail flicking in sharp, angry motions. He didn’t take his eyes from the unpleasant man. He also didn’t continue his explanation.

Litha took over gracefully. “During an *Athulenvang*, the *vath’lenesta* come closer, shine brighter. We dance with them for three days and nights. We tell them of our lives, and we tell the stories of theirs. It is the time we hold mating ceremonies —”

I warmed, my eyes skittering away.

“And when we come together to make our young.”

I blinked. Had I heard that wrong? I squinted, but all the Teterayuh at our table were calm as cucumbers, while the human members of my family looked like someone had come through and popped us all on the ass with a bug zapper. The Quoosalk just nodded, perfectly accepting.

“What do you mean—” I began.



Saytireka's voice rang out from the edge of the *erralaytuh*, cutting through the lunchtime conversation like a knife. "My people, I bring sorrowful news. One of our elders has gone to the sky."

My horrified gaze clashed with Yin's, as around us the Teterayuh murmured variations of "honor on their name" and "brightly may they shine" while making the cobweb-brushing warding against death.

No. Not Aksha. She was too full of life. Yin couldn't lose someone else so soon.

Our hands met and held. Yin's fingers felt brittle, the tightness of xyr grip made of desperation rather than the whipcord strength I was used to. On my Abuele's other side, Salat and Therry were tense, ready to catch xem if xe fell.

Zaf rose. "Who, Mother?" His tail whipped with a second, unspoken question. "And why didn't you send for me?"

"Sezan," Saytireka answered, her voice hollow.

She grieved, I realized with some surprise. I hadn't thought her cold heart capable of it. Then the name hit me, and I sagged. Not Aksha. Gracias a Dios.

The relief was so strong my head spun. Hard on its heels came shame, slithering around my stomach. I breathed through my nose and squeezed Yin's fingers back before releasing them.

I couldn't remember who Sezan was. The name was familiar, but I couldn't put a face to it. I wracked my brain, trying to remember, as conversation swirled around me. Funeral plans.

I got a vague sense memory of tiny flailing fists and discomfort. A few seconds later, it finally came to me. The old man who helped with the babies! The one who used to hiss at me. More disquieting layers of emotions piled onto the relief, shame, and sorrow roiling around in my guts.

Zaf lowered himself gingerly to sit beside me again, looking as if he'd aged ten years in the last five minutes. He and Sezan hadn't been close—as far as I knew—but he'd have

known him his whole life, and he took his responsibility for the health and well-being of his people deeply to heart. Even when there was nothing he could have done.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, reaching up to massage the base of his skull where his tension liked to sit. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Saytireka glaring at us, but I ignored her in favor of comforting Zaf.

“Thank you, *Lelesha*.” He pressed his forehead to mine, sharing a long, deep breath.

The meal continued, albeit more subdued than before. Saytireka seemed to be transmuting her grief into anger, and I tried not to fidget underneath the weight of her oppressive disapproval.

The patches of sky visible through the soaring trees grew dark as we finished eating, and the after-meal cleanup was done quickly, without the chatter and singing that usually accompanied it.

Zaf gathered Aretoi, the two of them leaving to bring supplies to Sezan’s den. He’d outlived his mates, but his two children—grown and with families of their own—lived in the village. They were “holding a *tchessev*”—which I understood to be some kind of vigil—and preparing his body to be “sent back to the sky” via a funeral pyre, as was the Teterayuh way.

My morbid little heart was desperately curious about what all was involved in a *tchessev*, but it didn’t feel like the right time to ask. Later, when we were alone in the den, it would be different. Litha’s description of the *Athulenvang* had surprised me with its similarities to Día de los Muertos, and I wanted to know more about how the Teterayuh interacted with death. Especially since in the eyes of *some* Teterayuh, *we were* angels of death.

I glanced at Saytireka’s table, where Arvel nodded like a bobblehead on a taxi dash to everything our illustrious matriarch said, and rolled my eyes.

I was also curious on a practical level. In this heat and humidity, a body would start to decompose very quickly—and

yet everyone had seemed unsurprised that the funeral wouldn't be held for several days. The Teterayuh were very hygienic and had sensitive noses, so there was probably something clever built into the ritual of the *tchessev* to replace a morgue fridge, and I really wanted to know what it was. Not that I wanted to need that knowledge. Ever.

The *erralaytuh* emptied quickly as people left to finish final tasks before the looming storm broke. Soon, only three tables were occupied. Ours—with me, Revik, Litha, Mariano, Kurz, and Yin, who stared into the distance at something only xe could see. Saytireka's—where she was joined by Zaf's fathers and the brown-nosing toad, Arvel; and a final table where five elders sat, quietly talking amongst themselves.

“Walk home together?” Mariano asked. We'd gotten into the habit of taking a route between our houses, only splitting off for the last quarter or so of the journey.

“Sí,” I muttered, glancing up surreptitiously. Saytireka was *still* glaring. Jesus. “I'm ready to go as soon as Zaf gets back.”

“You and me both.”

“Abuele, can we help you back to your den?” I touched the back of Yin's hand gently, and the translucent eyelids shuttered across xyr distant, silvery eyes.

“No, thank you child. I will sit with you a little longer and make my way on my own when you leave.”

“Are you sure?” I pressed. “I can—”

“I am sure.” Yin's gaze sharpened as it fell on Saytireka's table, xyr words gentle, but final.

I let out a sigh of relief when Zaf dropped from the trees and strode towards us. Smiling at the hand Revik offered, I leaned against him as we all rose to our feet.

“Healer Zafett,” called a quavery voice.

Zaf turned, bowing his head. “Elders,” he greeted the group of Teterayuh making their way towards us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Saytireka stand and start this way also. *Sigh*. So much for the hope for a clean getaway.

“Do Arla and Sekan hold the *tchessev* alone?” a tall, slim woman asked, her sandy fur shot through with silver.

“Today, yes. Following tomorrow’s sunrise, they welcome any who wish to join.”

Approving murmurs met that announcement. A stooped man with purple ringing his tail laid a hand on Zaf’s arm. “Will you dance at the funeral? Sezan loved your dancing.”

“Of course,” Zaf said, bending to brush his forehead across the older man’s.

“Sezan was the best dancer in the village, when he was younger,” Litha told me quietly.

“As Zaf is now,” said Revik.

Zaf’s ears tipped back, and he turned a shy smile on Revik as the group of elders continued on. “There are others with more grace,” he demurred. “But I thank you. Would you dance with me, *Lelesha*, if I taught you the way?” Zaf asked, running his thumb over my cheek.

I opened my mouth to say yes, even though normally dancing was something I reserved for bars—and then only after several drinks—but Saytireka’s smooth voice interrupted me.

“I do not think that a good idea, my son.”

Zaf bristled. “And why is that, my mother?”

“It would be best if the *tetevath’a* did not join us for the funeral.”

He just blinked at her. After a stunned moment, Zaf sputtered, “Why? Does Sezan not deserve to have all voices raised in his honor?”

“Not the voices of his killers!” Saytireka snarled, her poise ripping away with a shocking suddenness.

“Mother! Sezan saw forty-three season cycles! He died peacefully in his sleep! How could you possibly think—” Zaf threw his hands into the air, frustration radiating from him like heat from a fire.

“Exactly!” Saytireka snapped. “Forty-three season cycles, and not a sign of illness. Then *she* sits next to him,” Saytireka stabbed a long, clawed finger towards me, “and now his children have no father. I warned you—I warned you the *tetevath’a* would bring death with them, but you didn’t listen.”

I recoiled, backing into Revik, who cupped my shoulders with big, warm hands, his body vibrating with tension against my back.

“This is madness, mother.” Zaf breathed deeply, trying to keep his tone even as his tail was a rigid line of rage at his back. “Estrayuh didn’t kill anyone. She can’t kill with a touch, none of the *tetezha’a* can.”

I concentrated, and my eyes didn’t so much as twitch in Yin’s direction. Deadly spit was probably just as bad, and although none of the Quoosalk would kill someone without cause. . .this would be a really awkward time for that exciting bit of trivia to come out.

Saytireka sneered. “She is poison. They all are. You do not see it, because she has infected your mind. See how she’s turned you against me, your own mother! It is my duty as *Ralaytuh Naiset* to protect the people of this village, and I will do so, even if they do not realize they need protecting. I will not allow Sezan’s spirit to be dishonored.”

“*Sha’vail*—” Tareth inserted in a soothing, “talk them down off a ledge” voice, placing his hand on his mate’s shoulder. Beside him, Zaf’s other fathers—Falk and Zirrast—looked horrified. Arvel, on Saytireka’s other side, wore an expression of righteous triumph. Deeply unsettling excitement flared his nostrils.

I looked away, shuddering.

“No, *sh’irra*, this needs to be said,” Saytireka insisted. “I have been silent too long.”

“You haven’t been silent at all!” Zaf exploded. “You’ve done nothing but insult and undermine the *tetezha’a*, me, my mates, anyone who doesn’t agree with you! You’re so convinced you’re right, nothing—not even the truth right in

front of you—makes any difference. But this is taking it too far, mother.”

Litha wrapped her hand around his wrist, stopping him before he took another step towards Saytireka.

I felt like I should be terrified. On some level, I was. If we couldn't smooth this over—I was pretty sure the consequence for murder was death. I didn't want to die. I didn't want things to be harder for my family, and Saytireka unleashed would be very bad for them. Worst case scenario looked like all of us dead, or maybe me dead and everyone else kicked out—which would just be a slower death sentence.

But not even my accomplished anxiety brain could make me spiral right now. The echoing chant of, “This bitch is crazy” drowned everything else out.

Movement at the corner of my eye drew my attention. Kurz stood behind Mariano in a mirror of Revik and I, but whereas Revik's hold was comforting as he tried to keep himself from pouncing on Saytireka—Kurz's arm muscles bulged as he strained to keep my brother in place.

“Murder is a serious accusation,” Litha inserted, her voice level. “One not to be made without certainty. Estrayuh sat next to Sezan days ago. I assure you; she has been closer to us for much longer, and yet we all stand before you, quite alive. It is a deep heart-hurt, when one of our elders passes. I understand. I feel it too. But we must be careful with our words. Some things cannot be unsaid, and once said, have consequences that will be hard to stop.”

Saytireka's focus shifted to Litha like a shark who'd scented blood in the water.

“*We* must do nothing. *We* are not *Relaytuh Naiset*, Litha. *I* am. And it's a very good thing. You are selfish and rash. A good leader thinks of her people first, and sometimes that means sacrificing personal happiness for their sake. You almost started a war the first time you thought you knew better than I, and now death walks among us because you desired her in your bed. If you were *Relaytuh Naiset*, you would lead a village of the dead.”

“¡Son mamadas!” I didn’t realize I’d spoken out loud until everyone looked at me. Mariano made a choked, wheezing sound. I had the sudden urge to pee and run away, but I caught a flicker of pain in Litha’s sweet honey eyes, and my jaw firmed. Some of Saytireka’s arrows had hit their marks, and that would not fucking do.

“The only selfish person here is you, Saytireka,” I spat. I wanted to march up to her, get in her face, but the bitch was eight feet tall and would slap me into next week. I settled on planting my fists on my hips and jutting my chin at her, safe in Revik’s embrace. “You don’t care about what’s best for your people, you only care about what’s best for *you*. What *you* want! Do you know what the difference is between you and Litha? She brings peace to the people around her. Safety. You only bring judgement.”

Litha was staring at me, mouth agape. She spun—faster than I could track—and caught Arvel mid-lunge. She swiped at him, an open-handed slap with her whole body behind it, and he flew back, landing in an unmoving sprawl several feet away.

“We are leaving.” Revik’s voice snapped with viciously contained rage. “We will return for the funeral. All of us. If you speak such insults again, I will forget you are my mate’s mother. If your *creature* tries to touch our *Lelesha* again, I will help him find the death he seeks.”

Zaf looked from Arvel, who still hadn’t moved, to his mother. Without a word, he walked away.

Saytireka thrust a hand towards him, but her mates held her back, whispering furiously.

Revik shook his head. “You’re a *cabrón*, Saytireka. You push and push. Zafett is a forgiving man. But you will push him too far, and you will lose him.” His voice dropped to a growl. “I am not a forgiving man. Do not continue to push me.”

Just before we passed the tree line and out of sight, I looked back, meeting my Abuele’s eyes. Xe nodded, somberly, then xe was gone.



“Mi hermana, did I just hear Revik call Saytireka a cabrón, then threaten to kill her?” Mariano sounded amazed, and not out of breath at all as he jogged beside us.

I smiled weakly, my head spinning. Now that I was away from the immediate danger and what-the-fuckery, panic sloshed and stabbed my insides, making my fingers tingle.

“Yes,” Revik answered for me, scooping me up like a baby without breaking stride. He sounded absurdly smug over the still simmering anger.

“¡A huevo!” my brother crowed, cracking his knuckles. “I’m in. Her and that fucker Arvel.”

Kurz made a growling sound of agreement as he loped beside him. Zaf had broken into a run once he’d passed the tree line, and we hurried to catch up.

“Don’t be a fool,” I snapped. “This is a fucking disaster. Did you see Saytireka’s face? ¿Dios mío, qué he hecho?” My lungs wouldn’t work. I could only gasp tiny breaths. “She’s going to kill me. Kill all of us. Fuck! Shit! ¡Mierda! Maybe if I leave she’ll calm down and let the rest of you stay.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’d die.” Mariano snorted.

“She would not,” Revik countered, rubbing his chin over the top of my head. “We’d chase her and bring her back to the den.”

I gasped—the oxygen a blessed relief even through the shock—as I was snatched from Revik’s arms. My back landed against a tree with a thud, then Litha was pressed against me, pinning me in place, her whole body vibrating with the intensity of her purr.

Her mouth came down like a punch. I saw stars as my head smacked against the rough bark of the tree, and fireworks as she ground herself against me, her mouth working mine with desperate hunger. I whined, and Litha ripped her mouth away,



breathing hard. She glared into my eyes, still plastered against me.

“You will not run. You will not challenge Saytireka again.”

I scowled. “I will do what I have to.”

“No.” Litha’s head darted forward, and tiny flares of pain sparked on my shoulder. “*We* do what we have to. Together.”

“You bit me!”

“You liked it,” Revik smirked, eyelids drooping with his heavy inhale.

Okay, rude.

“Together, Estrayuh. Promise me.” Litha demanded.

Apparently, fear made her extra bossy. Noted. I sighed. I didn’t really want to go anywhere—not that I had anywhere to go. I just didn’t want anything horrible to happen because of me.

“Together,” I promised.

“Good girl,” she purred, licking the small red marks she’d left on my shoulder.

I squirmed, glaring over her shoulder at Revik. He winked at me, the gossipy bastard.

“You know, it’s kind of creepy, that you can smell me like that. Like I stink, or something. Don’t you think so?” I raised my eyebrows at Mariano, folding my arms over my chest when Litha set me back on my feet.

My brother held up his hands. “No, no, no. Don’t drag me into this. Not after what I just had to watch. Jesus, Estrella. You’re my sister.”

I sucked my teeth. So much for solidarity.

“Why not use a scent blocker?” Kurz asked helpfully.

“A what?” I was the very soul of eloquence.

“A scent blocker. It’s a powder. We use it when we’re hunting prey with keen senses, and when we go to battle. It

masks all but the most intense scents.” He spoke casually, like this was common knowledge.

I rounded on Revik and Litha. “Why haven’t you told me about this?”

“Why would we?” Revik countered. “You smell delicious, *Lelesha*.” He shrugged, as if that answered the question completely.

“If it bothers you, we can get you some.” Litha’s voice dripped with reluctance, and her eyes were wide and pleading when she crouched to look at me.

I dropped my arms, nuzzling her nose in a bunny kiss. “No, it’s fine.” It was actually pretty hot. Most of the time.

We caught up to Zaf not long after. He’d stopped and was waiting for us, brimming with apologies I refused to accept. Every time I told him it wasn’t his fault; he found a new way to take the blame. Finally, Mariano lost his patience and asked for some privacy, shooing them all off.

I exchanged kisses with my three, knowing they wouldn’t go far, and watched—open mouthed—as Kurz pulled Mariano close, nuzzling him, before leaping into the trees and out of sight.

That had *not* been a platonic embrace. And Mariano had absolutely reciprocated it.

“So, what do you think Saytireka’s going to do now?” my brother asked, as if nothing had happened.

“Ay, I don’t think so. What was that?!” I flapped a hand between his face and the tree Kurz had disappeared up.

Mariano sighed and moved towards home, sounding like the most put-upon man to ever walk the Earth. Or Doluna.

“Mariano Julian Alfonso Parker, are you *dating* the *Murder Puppy*?!” I bounced after him, pinching the back of his arm with my knuckles.

“Ow! Jesus, Estrella! Yes!” Mariano jerked his arm away, then scrubbed his hands over his face and groaned. “No. Fuck, I don’t know what we’re doing.”

“You’re doing something.” I jiggled my eyebrows. “The man kissed you, and you kissed him back. It didn’t look like the first time, either.”

“It wasn’t a kiss,” Mariano grumbled.

“It was the Teterayuh equivalent to a kiss, and you know it. Don’t be a baby.”

“Fiiiine. Yes. We’ve ‘kissed’ before.” He held up a hand. “Do *not* ask for details, I’m not gonna tell you anything.”

“First, ew. Second, what I was going to ask was—how long has this been going on?”

Mariano thrust a hand through his hair, shrugging. “It’s. . . complicated. It just sort of happened. We haven’t like, sat down and talked about our *intentions* or anything.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such a dude sometimes.”

“I’m a dude all the time, baby.”

“Ew, again.”

We walked quietly for a few seconds. I glanced over at him. He was handsome—not that I’d tell him so, his ego didn’t need the help. He looked just like our Tata had when he was young. And like our Tata, he kept his real emotions hidden deep. Oh, he laughed and teased and got angry, but what he felt he kept to himself.

“I didn’t know you were into men, hermano” I said softly.

His dark eyes looked into me for a long moment, then he shook his head. “I didn’t either.”

I stepped closer, so our arms brushed as we walked. The silence stretched as I thought about him and Kurz. I could see it.

“Are you happy?”

Mariano shrugged, paused, and shrugged again. “I don’t know. I think, maybe, I could be? We have a lot in common.”

“That’s nice. I’m glad,” I said, and meant it.

Mariano smiled.

“You know, I kinda thought there might be something between you and Therry,” I mused. At his wordless glare, I shrugged. “If you say so.”

He smacked aside a drooping fern with more force than necessary. Uh-huh. Sure. Nothing bothering him on that front at all.

After a minute or so of pouting, he shot me a glance from the corner of his eye.

“What about you? Are you happy?”

I didn’t have to think about my answer. “Yes. Happier than I’ve ever been. Happier than I thought I could be. After Drake. . .I lost myself. I was just surviving. Here, I feel like I’m me again. Like life’s worth living again. Even with all the bullshit with Saytireka and the whole “abducted by aliens” fiasco—I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Mariano’s hand wrapped around mine, fingers gripping tight. “I’m sorry I didn’t see what was going on with that asshole sooner. I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

“I didn’t want you to know.” I squeezed his fingers. “No secrets between us.”

His mouth curled. “No secrets.” Then he grew solemn, and he squeezed my fingers back. “You would have been a great mom.”

I blinked back the heat that rose in my eyes. The familiar ache rose. . .and faded. There, but not the raw, shredded thing it had once been. Huh. When had that happened? “Thank you.”

“You love them, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I sucked my lower lip into my mouth, feeling the dopey grin stretching my cheeks. It was the first time I’d said it out loud, the first time I’d really allowed myself to admit it.

“I don’t care how big they are. If they hurt you, I’ll kill them.”

“I love you too.”

# CHAPTER 34

## ESTRELLA

“Tell me,” I wheedled. Grabbing Revik’s hand to smooch his arm between my boobs, I batted my eyelashes, pouting for good measure.

He chuffed, shook his head, and swatted me on the ass with his tail.

“Daaaddy...” I whined. “Please?”

Litha laughed.

Zaf groaned. “Do not start that, my *Lelesha*. I don’t want to dance in Sezan’s memory with my waving cock as my partner.”

I snorted a laugh, but stopped trying to squeeze the information out of Revik with my tits. He’d been acting sneaky, taking an extra long time when he went out on “chores”, distracting me with sex when I asked questions.

I didn’t mind that part so much. I still needed a soak after he reamed me out with that fat cock of his, but it felt so fucking good every time—I wasn’t about to complain.

Then, on the way home from our last disastrous and oh-so-dramatic visit to the village, he and Mariano had disappeared—*together!* And neither of them would say a damned word about why.

I was dying of curiosity.

I was also twitchy with an overload of stress and desperate for a distraction. Today had dawned bright and clear, the world sparkling after the brutal barrage of the last storm, and we were headed to a funeral.

I had no idea what we were walking into. Would I be facing a firing squad for “murdering” the old man with the power of my *death aura*? Would I find my family rounded up and

awaiting trial? Or would there just be more glaring from Saytireka and her creepy sidekick?

“It will be alright,” Litha murmured. It was almost spooky, how well-attuned we were becoming. “Saytireka will see reason. She’s not a bad person. Look at Zaf and Indaro. She has a good heart—she’s just listening to her fear instead.”

I stretched my lips into something like a smile, rubbing my palms over my hips. I wanted to ask what criteria we were judging her on, if not her actions. Wanted to shout that sometimes good people were good *despite* their parents, not because of them. I ground my teeth together, holding back the snarling need to ask, “Will you still say she’s *good at heart* after she kills me?”

But that wasn’t fair. Litha didn’t mean all that. She was trying to put on a brave face. We were all worried about what today would bring. She and Revik were strapped for bear, bristling with weapons like we were going to war rather than a funeral in our own village. And she knew Saytireka better than I did—by a lifetime. Maybe she was right.

God, I hoped she was right.

A horde of chubby blue creatures the size of German Shepherds burst from the bushes, streaked past us—flowing around our legs like water—and disappeared into the jungle without a sound.

“Huh.” I blinked, craning my head to see the thrashing leaves settle in their wake. That *had* just happened.

Tsalot bounded after them, skidding to a halt just in time to keep from plowing into me. Right around six feet tall—like his twin sister Aretoi—Tsalot was normally sweet and gangly, like a puppy who hadn’t grown into his feet yet. Now, he was a hair from panic.

“Tsalot!” Revik barked, catching him by the shoulders. “Breathe. What’s going on?”

The teenager sucked in a lungful of air, nodding jerkily. “The river by the *raysheel* pits flooded. I was out feeding them, and all this water just—rushed in. No warning! Two of

them d-drowned, and more were trampled, and the water kept coming, and Mother told me to run. She's there, by herself, and I was just trying to catch the *raysheel*, but they're so *fast* —" he broke off into hiccupping sobs.

Revik pulled him into a hug, cupping the back of the young man's head and purring as he and Litha shared a lightning-fast conversation with only their eyes.

Litha nodded and moved to us, talking quietly as Revik calmed Tsalot.

"We must go help," she said. "With everyone on the way to the funeral, Lecha could still be fighting the river alone. The stores of dry herbs and dyes are next to the *raysheel* pits. With more hands, moving them to safety will not take long—but we must go quickly."

"Go," I urged. I would slow them down, and we all knew it. "Help Lecha."

Lecha was funny and kind, and she and her mate Talayuh had been very good to Ria. I tried not to speculate about why Ria hadn't been with her and Tsalot, tending the *raysheel*. *She probably went ahead to the funeral with Talayuh and Aretoi*, the hopeful part of my brain suggested.

*Or Saytireka snatched her up and is waiting for us to wander in so we can all go on trial*, the larger, more cynical part rebutted.

*Tsalot didn't scream "Murderer!" when he saw us*, Hopeful Me argued, doggedly.

Cynical Me snorted. *He's in shock. He probably didn't even notice we're here.*

"¡Cállate!" I hissed.

Litha flicked her ears, unsure.

"Go." I mentally shook myself. "Zaf will stay with me. Right?"

Zaf nodded, curving a hand around my hip.

“Please stay here. Do not go to the funeral without us. We will be back soon. Yes?” Litha rose to her full height, staring down at me as she waited for my answer.

I murmured my agreement and stretched up for a kiss.

Revik sent a much calmer Tsalot off with the admonition to take to the trees and “guide, not chase” the *raysheel*, then came over for his own kisses.

After purring reassurance at our admonitions to be safe, they were gone.

I walked into Zaf’s embrace, feeling some of the jittery tension melt away as I was surrounded by his warmth.

“Come, I want to show you something.” Zaf slid his hands down my arms, tugging playfully at my fingers.

“Litha asked us to wait here,” I protested, an answering smile curling my lips.

“It’s not far. You’ll like it, I promise.”

I laughed and stopped pretending I could resist him. We walked for a very short while—my idea of how long a walk was had changed dramatically since finding myself on Doluna, but even in the good old drive-everywhere days, I wouldn’t have considered it more than a stroll—and Zaf stopped dramatically before a thick wall of leafy vines that blocked the way forward.

I inhaled deeply, my eyes fluttering shut in pleasure. As part of his courtship, Zaf had been taking me on a flower tour of Doluna. Back on Earth, I used to grab lunch at this amazing taco truck in the next parking lot over, and eat in the rose garden a block away. I’d never once said I liked flowers, but Zaf had noticed. He’d shown me glowing flowers, flowers that dripped shimmering drops of pink honey-water, flowers with teeth, and flowers with buds bigger than my head. I’d loved them all.

But these. . .they smelled *familiar*. The scent summoned others from my memories: melting wax, sweet bread, my Nana’s perfume, tequila. It was so strong, so exact, that I was surprised when my eyes opened and I didn’t see candlelight



dancing on brilliant orange rounds made of a million ruffled petals.

I stared at the riot of dahlia-like blooms, each one creamy white darkening to deep indigo in the center. Their leaves were glossy magenta, long, twisting, and narrow.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled the sweet, spicy scent of marigolds. Of home.

“*Lelesha?*” There was a rustle as Zaf knelt before me. His thumb was soft across my cheek, wiping away a tear I didn’t remember crying.

I cupped his hand in mine and pressed my face into it, breathing deep. “I’m okay. They’re beautiful. What are they called?”

“*A’auna*. Why do you cry, Estrayuh?”

“Can we sit?” A moment later, Zaf was arranging me comfortably on his lap. I drew in a breath saturated with the scent of flor de muerto and tried to think of how to explain everything that the flower *meant*, rather than simply what it was.

“In my village, we have something similar to an *Athulenvang*, I think.” Different villages was how we’d explained the differences between Mariano and my Mexican heritage and the more mixed American upbringing of the rest of our human family. “We believe the spirits of our dead come back to visit us once a season-cycle, on Día de los Muertos. There is a celebration that lasts two days, filled with special food, dancing, and family. We set up ofrendas with images of our family who have passed, and their favorite food and drink.”

Zaf listened intently, his hand still on my knee.

“We light candles—tiny fires—to welcome the spirits. To help guide the spirits to their ofrendas, we cover them in a particular flower. They’re about this big,” I shaped a circle with my hand about two-thirds the size of the *a’auna* surrounding us, “and bright orange. But they smell. . .” I inhaled deeply, humming, “exactly like these.”

“I had no idea,” Zaf said, brushing his forehead against mine. “I meant only to bring you pleasure in the *a’aina’s* beauty, it humbles me that you found so much more.” He hesitated. “Would you like to—”

A scream echoed through the jungle.

It was clouded by distance, and cut off sharply, leaving only pulsing silence. But it sounded like—

“Tsalot?!” Zaf called, voice raised to carry through the trees.

No response.

I scrambled off his lap, pushing at him. “Go! Go! Help him!”

“I can’t leave you alone,” he ground out, tormented.

“You can, and you will,” I snapped. “Everyone is at the funeral. I’m safe. I have my knife. Litha and Revik will be back soon. Tsalot is a *child*, Zaf! He wouldn’t cry out like that if he wasn’t hurt. I won’t forgive you if you don’t go. Go!”

Zaf snatched me against his chest, squeezing so tight my ribs groaned. He kissed me, growled a curse, and ripped himself away, disappearing into the branches overhead in a flash.

I stumbled and fell onto my ass with an undignified grunt.

Although I still wasn’t sure if my God could hear me in whatever galaxy this was, I closed my eyes, and I prayed. I prayed for Tsalot’s safe return to his family. I prayed for my loves to come back to me, whole and undamaged. I prayed for Saytireka’s understanding—or, if that was too much of a miracle to ask—for her silence. I prayed for a future.

Gradually, as I inhaled a familiar perfume on an alien planet, a sense of peace spread through me. I lay back, feeling like Alice with the flowers nodding overhead, and basked in the unexpected surety I felt. Things *would* be okay. My family and I would be safe. My loves would be safe.

My loves. Mis amores.

I had to tell them. I was pretty sure they were waiting for me to say it—or maybe to accept their courtship, which might be the same to the Teterayuh—because they wore their feelings on their nonexistent sleeves. I knew they loved me. They shouted it from the rooftops with every thoughtful, sweet, wonderful, caring, filthy thing they did. They just didn't say the words.

I loved them so much, sometimes it didn't feel real.

Six months ago, I was working my boring office job for an hourly wage that was three years behind on the annual cost of living raise, and doing everything I could to turn off my brain during my off hours.

A year before that, I was hiding in a closet, hugging my cell phone, Mariano's cursing and the sound of a racing engine in one ear, Drake's slurred, angry shouting and pounding fists in the other.

It felt like three different lives.

In a lot of ways, I didn't feel like the same person who'd cowered in that closet. She was still in me—she popped out at the worst times—but she wasn't who I was anymore. Drake had cut and cut and cut at me until I was just raw, bleeding stumps.

I lifted a hand, tracing my fingers over the big, splashy petals proud above me.

My loves had given me room to bloom.

I had to show them how much they meant to me.

I could make a spectacle of it, do the dramatic romance moment in front of the whole village. They liked to show me off, and it would be a fun change. I could get Shane to provide a soundtrack, even.

No. It should be private. Intimate. At home, or maybe at the bathing pools. Just the four of us, whispering love and promises.

And after all, it was probably best if Saytireka had a chance to cool down before she made a "public statement".

Zaf could tell her. He'd enjoy that.

What did a Teterayuh mating look like, anyways? Litha mentioned a ceremony, but would it be anything like a wedding? Or do they just braid each other's hair and call it a day?

At the very least, I wanted some of those *casa* cakes and a wedding night to remember. I had three holes, three partners, and a pot full of *tov*. I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate becoming theirs, forever.

"Where are your guards, little Hyunan?"

I jerked. Arvel prowled across the branches above me, his claws glinting with each flex of his fingers. It felt weirdly and uncomfortably sexual to be laying beneath him, even with ten feet between us. I scuttled to the side, bumping into a tree leg and using it to push myself upright.

"They're not my guards. And they'll be back any moment." *Please let that be true*, I prayed.

He dropped to the ground, his stare never wavering. The memory of his attempted attack a few days ago snapped like a threat between us. Slowly, he straightened.

"I was wrong."

What? I stopped, frozen, the breath halfway out of my lungs. That wasn't anything I expected him to say.

"The last time we met, I wasn't thinking clearly. I shouldn't have leapt at you as I did."

The tension stretched, vibrating like a cable about to snap. I waited for the "I'm sorry" part of his apology, the "I'll never do anything like that again". It never came. He just stood there, staring at me. In a way, it was almost comforting. If he'd suddenly become *not* an asshole, I would worry I'd slipped into an alternative dimension.

I couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't a lie or an insult, so I just nodded. My muscles were so tight, the small movement took monumental effort, as though I moved a mountain rather than only my head.

Arvel took a step towards me.

I sank back, the rough bark of the tree scraping my side as I put it partially between us. “Shouldn’t you be at the funeral?”

Arvel stopped, his claws kneading the ground restlessly. “The *Ralaytuh Naiset* sent me to look for her son. Imagine my surprise to have found only you, instead.”

There was something weird about how he always referred to Saytireka by her title. Worshipful. It was so out of place among the generally egalitarian Teterayuh that it made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

“Ah. . .I’ll go get him.” I backed up more, until the tree hid me from his view, and spun. I had no idea where Zaf was. Wandering off into the jungle on my own was stupid as hell.

I rushed forward. He could yell at me all he wanted. I was not hanging out with creepy fucking Arvel a second longer.

The only warning I got was a rush of air against my sweat-dampened back. Then pain exploded in the back of my skull, and I tasted dirt and blood as I fell to the ground. Distantly, I heard Arvel muttering something, but I couldn’t do more than twitch, curling protectively into myself.

The spicy scent of marigolds disappeared. Was I having a stroke?

I dragged myself onto my stomach, trying to crawl away.

Arvel’s clawed foot plowed into my gut, knocking me over. He grabbed me, throwing me over his shoulder. I landed roughly, my teeth snapping together, and more blood filled my mouth.

My head roared like cymbals crashing and the world went dark.



Mierda, what was that fucking smell? I wrinkled my nose and my head throbbed. A killer migraine pounded through it,

sending nausea squirming from my stomach up my throat. I swallowed, my tongue feeling too big for my mouth.

Goddamn, I felt like shit.

I shifted, trying to relieve the pressure in my skull, but there was something wrong with the ground. It was hard. Very hard, and very smooth. Cold.

Oh, fuck no.

My surprised jerk sent sharp pain spearing through me in half a dozen places, and I squinted through tearing eyes.

The dark, grimy walls of the bugs' ship surrounded me, illuminated only by weak sunlight streaming through the gashes carved in the hull by the crash. My breaths came in rapid, panicked gasps, fear overriding the pain as I scrambled to my feet, swaying, trying to focus my blurry vision enough to find a way out.

“Oh, good. You're awake. Time to go home, *Little Star*.”

# CHAPTER 35

## LITHA

Revik and I ran through the branches, pushed to greater speed by an urgency that had been growing steadily since we'd left Estrayuh and Zaf. Dealing with the flooded area had taken longer than we'd hoped. Lecha had been stubbornly insistent that we dig a channel to encourage the waters to recede—and had almost drowned when she'd gotten washed into one of the raysheel pits in the process. I'd fished her out, but with my arm holding her unconscious body out of the water, I couldn't swim. Revik had pulled us both to dry land.

Moving the dry stores out of danger hadn't taken long, nor had seeing Lecha safely to her den to recover, but every moment had felt like an eternity as my heart wailed to return to our vulnerable loves.

Neither were helpless, but they were also not warriors. Their hearts hurt when they were forced to violence, and I would much rather carry that burden for them. I truly believed Saytireka would not go forward with her accusations—had she intended to, she would have made them while the rest of our people remained so they could bear witness. But if I was wrong. . . I put on another burst of speed, Revik matching it beside me.

My ears pricked forward as we neared where Tsalot and the *raysheel* had run across our path. I heard nothing. Perhaps they'd fallen asleep. The two of them did like their naps.

Revik and I dropped from the trees, but we were not faced with a sleep-soft Estrayuh sprawled over a blissful Zaf. They were nowhere to be seen.

Revik inhaled, grunted, and turned sharply to the left.

Together we followed their mingled scent trail. As we neared the *a'auna* glade, my tail flicked with abashed

amusement at my own worry. I should have guessed Zaf would take her there.

But when the glade opened before us, it was silent and empty.

Revik growled.

I felt like snarling too, but I pushed it down. We didn't need anger now. We needed to find our loves.

I caressed the bright blaze of pale fur on his chest and pressed my forehead to his for a moment, then we broke apart and began searching for any sign that might tell us what happened.

There was a hollow where they'd sat for a while. I tilted my head. The scents split, Estrayuh's becoming muddy and faint, while Zaf's—

“He went this way, through the trees,” Revik said, his tail lashing. He didn't need to say anything else. We took to the branches. Zaf's scent—sharp with anxiety—pricked at us until we were running, our bodies stretching in tandem.

Estrayuh was uneasy in the trees. Zaf wouldn't have taken her this way if he'd had any other choice. If he *hadn't* taken her. . . No. That was not a thought I'd allow to root.

A noise ahead. Zaf's scent, and another's. He was coming this way.

“Zaf!” I called out, relief almost making me stumble.

“Litha?” There was a rustle, then Zaf came into view, leaping to crouch gracefully on a nearby branch.

Tsalot clung to his back, the tall boy wrapped around him with both legs and one arm. He whimpered softly as they landed, his body held tight.

*Other arm is probably broken*, I thought.

“Where is Estrayuh?” Revik demanded.

“She wasn't among the *a'auna*?” He shook his head, frustrated at the obvious answer. “Tsalot fell. We heard him cry out. Estrayuh insisted I go to him.”



“I’m sorry,” the boy said. “I should have been more careful.”

Zaf patted his arm, but his mind remained focused on Estrayuh. “She promised to wait.”

“You left her alone?” Revik’s voice whipped out, jagged with a snarl.

“Revik!” I hissed, as both Zaf and Tsalot winced, guilt lowering their ears.

He growled, pacing away to swipe deep gouges down a tree trunk. Prowling back, he pressed his forehead to our mate’s, and then to Tsalot’s. “I’m sorry. I spoke without thought. You are not to blame for what happened.”

“What *has* happened?” I thought aloud.

“Could. . .could a *va ’grev* have. . .” The boy trailed off, looking deeply uncomfortable.

“No, we would have seen the destruction of its attack,” Revik said. “Would have scented it.”

Unless Estrayuh had left the glade and been attacked elsewhere. . .but that didn’t explain how her scent disappeared.

A terrible suspicion grew within me, wrapping tendrils around my heart and squeezing. I forced calm into my voice. “One of her kin must have found her,” I suggested, the smile I gave Tsalot brittle and false on my mouth. “She’s probably waiting for us at the *lenvang sounga*. We should go. She will be worried, as will your mother.”

I twisted, leapt, and streaked towards our gathered kin, leaving behind the disbelieving faces of my mates and Tsalot’s relieved one.

A few moments later, Zaf and Revik caught up with me. From their grimly determined expressions, I was fairly certain we’d come to the same conclusion.

*Someone* had found Estrayuh. Someone had taken her. It had been planned—they’d used a scent blocker to hide their identity and to keep us from following. That was why her trail just stopped.

Saytireka was behind this. I knew it. I just didn't know to what extent—or what her plan was. Spirits, please let us not be too late. Let her not have gone that far into the darkness.

I glanced at Zaf, whose eyes were narrow slits burning with rage and pain, and terror pushed me to greater speed. He would not survive such a betrayal by his own mother.

I would not lose two mates this day.



“Tsalot!” Talayuh ran to us, Aretoi hard on her heels.

Questions rained around us as the boy slipped from Zaf's back, displaying a hastily splinted arm, but I ignored them all, my focus on Saytireka.

She stood with her mates, Sezan's children and their families grouped around them. She looked annoyed and slightly concerned as she took in Tsalot's injury, but no shame or smugness showed in her expression or bearing.

Estrayuh was not there. My eyes combed her kin, who were gathered to one side, but that faintest of hopes flickered and died.

Yin tilted xyr head, starlight eyes growing cold. The elder stood, spoke a single sentence, and every *tetezha'a* head swiveled in our direction.

“Estrayuh has been taken,” Zaf bit out, striding to Saytireka. “Tell me you had no part in it, mother.”

We had indeed come to the same conclusion. Revik and I followed, flanking him. The *tetezha'a* joined us, fury pumping out of them.

They had such strength. Such goodness. How could Saytireka not see it?

“Tell me you didn't.” Zaf's voice trembled, and my heart broke.

“I have no idea of what you speak,” Saytireka snapped. “How dare you disrespect Sezan's memory with these wild

accusations?”

“Wild accu—She was *taken*, mother! If not by you, who?”

Saytireka waved a hand dismissively. “She probably just wandered off. Thoughtless. Arvel will find her. Now, we have an elder to sing to the sky. Sekan, if you’re ready—”

Sezan’s son looked between Saytireka and my mate, unsure. Revik’s low growl fixed him in place.

“Where is Arvel?”

She didn’t answer, so Zaf repeated the question. Saytireka sighed. “I sent him out to look for you. You were expected, and you were late. He will find your little. . .*Hyunan*.”

“He did find her,” Zaf whispered, horror-stricken. “He found her alone, and he took her.”

“Don’t be ridiculous—” Saytireka started, the first trace of unease flickering in her eyes.

“He *took* her! You called her a poison, mother, but it’s your sickness that caused this! You dripped fear and hatred in his ears, and he acted on it. Did you do anything after he attacked her last time?” He scoffed at the guilt that flashed across her face, the sound harsh and painful. “Of course not.”

Zaf pushed forward, his face a mere handspan from hers, and spoke in a vicious whisper. “Any harm he does to her is yours to bear. You have dishonored the family with your grasping selfishness. I am ashamed to be your son.”

Saytireka swayed as if she’d been struck. Her mates caught her, their expressions grim.

Tareth stepped forward, placing a hand on Zaf’s shoulder. “That is enough. Go. Find your *Lelesha*. We will ask the spirits to watch over her and keep her safe.”

Zaf nodded, once, jerkily, and turned his back on his mother.

I looked around at our people. Some wore shame in their eyes. Many were shocked. But as I watched, horrified outrage

shifted to determination. They would stand with us. I met the gazes of Sekan and Arla in turn. They nodded.

“If you would join the search, remain here. The rest of you, please, go to the pyre. Our elder awaits your songs.” I lowered my gaze to my *Lelesha*’s kin as the first spark kindled to life, urgency pushing me to run, hunt, find her. But Arvel could have taken her anywhere. We needed to cover more ground than I could alone.

“Where would he take her?” Yin demanded with a predatory fierceness that matched my own.

“I don’t know,” I hissed, frustration clawing the air around me.

“Not toward the Svestrix,” Zaf interjected. “He hates them as much as he hates Estrayuh.”

I nodded, turning to Revik with a question on my lips. He wasn’t there.

“This is taking too long! We need to find her!” Mariano said.

My spirit growled, agreeing with him. I held up a hand, calming them both. Thirty or so people stood around Zaf and I. Speaking quickly and firmly, I split them into parties, assigning each an area. I expected Yin to remain once he was satisfied with the plan, but the elder streaked out beside Indaro without hesitation.

It felt like seasons had passed since we stepped into that glade and found it empty, but the shadows hadn’t moved and my muscles were still warm from our run.

When Zaf and I stood alone but for Mariano and Kurz, I raised my head and inhaled, letting the scents speak to me. I spun to the left and plunged into the jungle.

Mariano sprinted beside me, fists clenched. “Do you know where we’re going?”

“Following Revik,” I answered shortly, and leapt into the trees, chasing in my mate’s path. Zaf was a pale shadow beside me, the two of us quickly outpacing Estrayuh’s Hyunan

brother. That was fine. Kurz would stay with him and keep them on our trail.

We had to get to Estrayuh. Had to protect her.

When she was safe, I'd pluck the fur from Revik's uncommunicative hide for going after her alone.

# CHAPTER 36

## ESTRELLA

“Time to go home, *Little Star*.” Arvel sneered.

I whipped around, the world lurching sickeningly at the abrupt motion, and hissed as my back bumped into the cold wall. I wanted to scream at him to never call me that again, but the *hijo de puta* would only do it more.

*Do not antagonize the creep. Scream later. Live now.*

“What the fuck are you doing?” Okay, not the most chill response. But, *mierda!* This was the second time I’d been abducted and woken up on this nasty-ass ship! Was it too much to ask for a little originality?

“You won’t harm any more of my people, *tevath’a*. Your darkness will not spread. I will see to it,” Arvel said. His eyes shone with a fanatical light.

“So—what? You think you can send me back? Like a defective coffee pot?” A hysterical giggle burst out of me. I gulped, biting it back, and waved my arms. “Look around you. This ship isn’t going anywhere.”

“I can,” he hissed. His claws scraped across the metal floor with a painful screech. “You go back to the sky today. My people will know peace again.”

The delusion I’d been desperately clinging to—that Arvel had some goal that didn’t include killing me—popped like a soap bubble. I plunged into an icy ocean of terror, my body shaking, my mind blank. I didn’t want to die. I was just starting to live again.

“You won’t.” It was a strangled whisper. “Revik will kill you.”

Arvel snarled and lunged, trapping me against the wall. “He will *try*. I do not fear him, or Litha.” His teeth snapped on her

name, biting it off as if the taste of it in his mouth was repulsive. “And without your darkness poisoning them, they will come to understand. They will *thank* me.”

He said the last in a whisper, his breath hot on my neck. I twisted my head to the side, swallowing a sob. Any one of my loves would tear him apart, and he knew it. If they came for him together, not even the memory of him would survive. That’s why he’d waited until I was alone, the coward.

He’d even taken my knife. My hip felt wrong without it, as if a part of my body had been carved off.

“I am stronger than them, stronger than Zafett. They fell to your temptation, but I will not.” He was panting now, excited. “It was clever of you to take the son of the *Ralaytuh Naiset*. She is wise, and she sees you for the danger you are, but her love for her son is so great, she cannot bear to hurt his heart—even to save him.”

The snort came out unbidden. I couldn’t help it. For half a second, I thought it was some twisted mind game, but no. The deranged fuckwit was completely serious.

Arvel’s hand clamped around my neck, dragging me up the wall. I choked, my feet flailing for purchase, and he pushed into me, his body crushing me against the unforgiving metal wall.

“It is my honor to take that burden for her,” he purred.

The bulge digging into my fupa hardened, twitching. Oh, hell no.

I didn’t know if he was turned on by me, the idea of killing me, or some fantasy about Saytireka simpering with gratitude when he trotted back to her with my head, but it didn’t fucking matter. I shuddered in revulsion.

Bucking, I beat at him with my fists, clawing at his hand around my throat. I forgot every lesson Revik taught me and every self-defense class I’d sat through back on Earth. My only thought was to get away from him.

He grunted, surprised.

My vision swam, dark splotches fading in and out. I bucked again, my head cracking against the wall, the pain of it snapping my teeth shut. They cut into my tongue, and I tasted copper.

“Your powers don’t work on me,” Arvel taunted. “And your protectors aren’t here. You are weak. Pathetic.”

I spat the mouthful of blood into his face, baring my teeth in a gory smile as it dripped into his eyes.

He dropped me, cursing.

Darting forward, I plowed my fist into his junk. Weak, my ass.

Arvel howled and swiped at me, but it went wide as he stumbled, half blinded by my blood. He curled in on himself, groaning, twisting to shield his beleaguered balls from any more attacks.

I grabbed his tail in both hands, heaving upwards with the force of my entire body. Something crunched, he screamed, and I ran.

The room we were in had two hallways leading from it, one on either side. I had a split second to make a decision, and I bolted past him through the hall on the left. It didn’t spill me out into the familiar warmth of the jungle, and I cursed.

My feet slapped the metal floor. I sucked in ragged breaths, my chest aching, unable to hear anything over the thunderous pounding in my head. Had to get away. Had to hide. My loves would come for me. They would. I just had to survive.

I passed a door. Closed. I tripped over something in the murky darkness, stumbled, and slapped at the panel outside the next door. No response—it stayed dark and the door didn’t budge. I slammed my fist into it, whimpering.

Behind me, Arvel snarled, his claws scraping on the floor.

I ran, bounced around a corner, and sobbed at the sight of an open door, dim light spilling from within. I took in the room all at once. Filthy-looking web nest things lined the room, each one more than ten feet across. The desiccated



corpse of the third bug lay sprawled in a heap to one side, blood dried dark and sticky in splatters around it. A wall of shelves blocked part of the room from sight, piles of crap spilling out like it'd been ransacked. In the far corner, a ragged tear split from the ceiling to halfway down the wall, narrow, but wide enough to let light in.

Wide enough to let me out. Fuck, yes!

I took a single step towards freedom. The screech of Arvel's claws against metal and the thud of his big body careening around the corner stopped me in my tracks. Shit, no time! I spun, sprinting for the shelves. There had to be something I could use—

My hand closed around the grip of the snake gun. *Please fucking work*, I prayed, spinning to face the doorway. I saw Arvel's eyes, glowing in the shadowy hall, then a rush of movement as he pounced, slamming me back against the shelves. My fingers spasmed, and then there was nothing.

# CHAPTER 37

## REVIK

**T**hat motherless fucking *ka'vek!* Arvel would not see another sunrise. I would kill him for this. If he hurt her. . . I snarled, my heart roaring with rage.

I'd gut him and pull out his insides while he screamed.

I leapt, gripping the branch only long enough to push off again, leaves blurring as I streaked past. The only thing that mattered was the next step, the next leap, my race to the sky rock that had brought Estrayuh to us unstoppable.

Guilt gnawed at me. I should have killed Arvel when he'd attacked Estrayuh before. But Litha'd taken care of it, and I'd thought that would be enough. He'd always been a miserable ass. I hadn't thought he was a suicidal one.

I'd heard his mutterings in the village. Superstitious, paranoid ramblings. When I'd confronted him—after he'd stared too long at Estrayuh one day—he'd hissed through the blood running from his nose that if I “had any honor left,” I'd “take her to that forsaken sky rock and never look back.”

I was a fool. Too proud, too complacent. And now Estrayuh paid the price.

I wanted to roar—to release some of the fear and fury eating me from within, but I was close now. I didn't want to panic Arvel into doing something irreversible.

I needed stealth. Needed to kill him fast and hold Estrayuh in my arms. Needed to tell her *Dadee* was sorry for not protecting her better.

My mates would be angry with me for leaving without speaking to them. But I would rather deal with their anger than Estrayuh's death. If I was right about where Arvel had taken her, but too late. . . I'd never forgive myself.

I caught a hint of her scent. Just the barest trace, but unmistakably my *Lelesha*. I forced another burst of speed from my already straining muscles, shooting forward, only to roll, scrambling, bouncing off a tree trunk and clawing the branches in my rush to turn around. When I finally came to a stop, panting, I stared down at the small figure stomping through the bushes beneath me, streaked with blood, her fists tight as they swung by her sides.

“*Lelesha!*” I pounced, diverting myself at the last moment so I landed in front of—rather than on top of—her.

“Revik!”

Estrayuh threw herself at me, her body shaking. I scooped her up, falling to my knees. My purr was almost as loud as the thanks I sent to the spirits.

“I knew you’d come for me,” she whispered.

I curled around her, trembling, unable to speak. Just that easily, I was forgiven. I didn’t deserve her faith, but I’d do my best to protect her now.

“Always, *sha’vail*.” She drew in a sharp breath, and reluctantly I set her on her feet, cupping her cheeks in my hands as I searched her eyes. “Where is Arvel, Estrayuh?”

She nuzzled my palm for a moment with a peculiar little smile on her face, then sighed and met my gaze. “He’s back on the *shihp*—the sky rock. He’s not going anywhere.”

My tail twitched. I gentled my voice. “Is he dead?”

“No—well, I don’t think so,” Estrayuh said. “I’m pretty sure he was breathing when I left.”

I grunted, sitting back on my haunches and looking her over. Blood streaked her in several places. It had dripped from her mouth at some point, drying in flaking rivulets. Her soft, beautiful neck was ruddy from rough handling. Her knife was missing, harness and all. I would get it back. She held herself like moving hurt, but she didn’t limp, nothing seemed broken, and her now-familiar round irises remained the same size.

“I will kill him.”

She nodded. “I know. I told him you would.”

I purred and pressed my forehead to hers, sharing a long, deep breath. “I cannot leave you alone. Will you come with me?”

“Where are the others?” Estrayuh asked, but she was already raising her arms to twine around my neck.

I cuddled her close, treasuring the comforting weight of her—real, solid, and alive. It was a few moments before I could speak, and then my words came out rough. “They follow. They aren’t far behind.” And they wouldn’t be. I knew my loves. They’d be hard on my trail. The corner of my mouth lifted. “Zaf was screaming at Saytireka for endangering you with her selfishness, and I thought it might take a while, so I went ahead.”

Her eyes widened. “He was?”

“Mmhm.” I rubbed my cheek across her head, affection and relief swamping me at her wicked little grin. I kept my pace steady, trusting her assurance that Arvel was not a danger at the moment. Gradually, the trembles that wracked her body grew smaller, came slower, and her breathing lost the echoes of tears.

“Will you tell me what happened, *Lelesha*?” My voice was barely above a whisper.

She nodded against my chest, and although tension seeped back into her muscles, she didn’t shake. “Zaf went to help Tsalot—”

“The boy is fine,” I soothed, when she jerked, her eyes going wide with concern. “A broken arm. He will heal.”

Estrayuh blew out a breath, settling back into my embrace. I adjusted her position slightly, and she patted my arm, drawing patterns in the fur as she continued.

“Arvel showed up. He said Saytireka sent him to find Zaf.”

I grunted, acknowledging the confirmation of Saytireka’s claim.

“He apologized for trying to attack me—sort of. But he makes me uncomfortable, and I didn’t want to be alone with him.”

My lip quivered in a silent snarl. She’d never be alone with him again.

“I tried to leave, to find Zaf, but he must have hit me from behind. I woke up in the sh—sky rock with this,” she turned her head away, lifting the fur there to show a sizeable bump beneath, “and without my knife.”

“Honorless coward,” I growled, unable to stay quiet.

“Agreed,” Estrayuh said, letting her head fur cascade around her shoulders and tilting her chin defiantly. Her pulse fluttered in her neck, betraying the turmoil she refused to show.

When Arvel was dead and she was snug in our den, the three of us would wrap her in our love and hold her while she wept and raged. For now, I held her and listened with as much restraint as I could manage while she told me of Arvel’s ranting, and how she took him down with no knife, claws, or teeth. A fully trained warrior.

I had never been so proud in my life as I was of her in that moment.

At the same time, I wanted to insist that she never go anywhere without Litha, Zaf, or I ever again. And maybe not leave the den at all for a season-cycle or two.

“So, Arvel can feel, see, and hear, but not move?” I asked. The idea was horrifying, but I couldn’t find a drop of pity in my heart for the other man. He had earned this suffering. “How long does this last?”

Estrayuh lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. I was hurt pretty bad when the bugs used it on me, and I passed out.”

I bared my teeth, holding her tighter. My *Lelesha* had been hurt too much, by too many. It stopped now.

She’d been growing steadily more tense as we came closer to the sky rock, and as I set her down gently in front of the

gaping maw that was its entrance, she swayed on her feet, eyes wide and staring.

“I can’t go in there again,” she whispered. “I can’t.”

My need to watch the last breath leave Arvel’s body was all-consuming. I needed to know he would never hurt my love again. Needed to know I hadn’t failed her completely.

I picked her up, strode to a nearby tree that offered a wide view of the sky rock, and leaned against it, cradling her head to my chest so she didn’t have to look at the cursed thing.

“We will wait here until the others come,” I promised. “You never have to go in there again. Never, Estrayuh.”

I held her, purring and stroking her back as her tears wet my fur and broke my heart. The storm passed quickly—there would be others, I knew, that would rage longer and harder—and she rolled her eyes up to look at me.

“Thank you, Revik.”

“Do not thank me.” It came out harsher than I intended, and I cupped her cheek, nuzzling her until she relaxed again. “You have nothing to thank me for, Estrayuh. I didn’t protect you. I was not there when you needed me. I am supposed to be your *Dadee*. It was my honor to take care of you, and I failed.” I had to force the words out, each one carrying a bloody chunk of my spirit. But she deserved the truth. It was the least she deserved.

“*Sone oonas mamadas.*” Estrayuh’s voice was incredulous. She pushed upright, and I dropped my arms, freeing her.

Whatever recriminations she laid on my back, I would carry. Her anger was warranted. I would not make such mistakes again, and eventually, I would earn her trust again—

She flicked me on the nose.

My eyes snapped open.

She did it again!

“No! *Bahd kittee!*” Estrayuh gripped my chin with her strong little fingers and glared into my eyes. “You listen to me,

and you listen well. You did *not* fail. You taught me how to protect *myself*, and I fucking *did*! I felt you with me every moment. I knew you would come for me, and you *did*, because you are the best fucking *Dadee* a girl could possibly have!”

She kissed me, a hard press of her mouth to mine, and when she pulled back her eyes were glassy. “*Tay ahmo, ideeyotuh.*”

“Tell me you understand.” Estrayuh shook my chin.

I actually didn’t understand that last bit. But the rest had arrowed straight through me, piercing me, setting me free. As fierce as my *Lelesha* looked just then, I was more than a little concerned that any answer other than “yes” would end with me being punched in the dick just like Arvel.

“I understand,” I murmured, slipping my arms around her once more. She released her death grip on my chin and I dipped forward, nuzzling her cheek. “I am so proud of you,” I whispered into her ear. “I hate that you feared. Hate that you hurt. But I’m so grateful you are mine.”

“Estrayuh!”

“*Lelesha!*”

“*Hairmana!*”

Estrayuh smiled at me, soft cheeks creasing with adoration, as our loves, her brother, and my best friend surrounded us, frantic with worry and buzzing with questions.

It was bliss.

Now, to kill a *ka'vek*.

# CHAPTER 38

## ZAF

Arvel's limp, unresponsive body fell to the ground with a satisfying thud. In my arms, Estrayuh hissed and looked away.

"I thought you said you only hit him the once," Naryanuh challenged, looking down at the rather abused form with a raised *aibrow*. "*Juhnk puhnch*'d him and pulled his tail, you said."

"He made me angry," Estrayuh huffed, scrubbing at a speck of blood on her hand with pointed concentration.

I chuckled, but inside my teeth snapped and bit, desperate to tear into flesh and release some of the pressure fear had wrapped around me.

Revik snarled, his lips pulled back displaying the full length of his gnashing teeth, and flexed his claws. His murderous glare was fixed on Arvel, whose still form pumped out waves of fear-reek.

"We can't kill him now," Litha cautioned.

"Why not?" Revik and Naryanuh growled in unison.

Estrayuh giggled.

"He must be taken back to the village," my practical mate explained. Her eyes hardened to glittering stones. "All must know what happens to those who allow fear and superstition to strip them of honor."

A high, formless whimper seeped from between Arvel's unmoving lips.

Revik's tail whipped, but he nodded his acceptance.

Mariano sneered and kicked the prone man, turning away with a huff when Kurz laid a hand on his shoulder.



“I don’t want to go,” Estrayuh blurted out.

We all looked at her, surprised.

“I’m not asking you to spare him,” she muttered, not meeting our eyes. “I just don’t want to watch. Don’t want to deal with—with people.” Her gaze flicked to mine and back down. “I know that’s weak. But I—”

“Kshh,” I soothed. “It’s not weak. You’ve been through much on this day. Would you like me to take you back to the den?”

Estrayuh nodded, biting her lip.

I rose, holding her tight. Truthfully, I was relieved. It would be better not to speak to my mother again until I’d had time to reassure myself Estrayuh was safe and well. She was in my arms, traces of her sweet scent trickling past the fading scent blocker, but still my anxiety tore at me like a snarling beast. If it ripped its way free and lashed out at Saytireka, I could do something I would regret for eternity.

One by one, the others came forward, enfolding Estrayuh in their love and murmuring words of gratitude. Revik cupped the back of my neck, pressing our foreheads together as Naryanuh spoke quietly with his sister.

“Keep her safe, *sha’vail*,” my mate commanded, his voice rough with emotion.

A shudder rippled through me, my arms tightening around Estrayuh. Blowing out a breath, I nodded, gentling my hold with deliberate care.

Revik huffed. “Not from *you*. Our fierce star will not thank you for that.” He nipped my jaw, winked at Estrayuh, and sauntered off, throwing Arvel over his shoulder with no care for the other man’s comfort.

Litha shook her head and followed. Mariano and Kurz shared a brief embrace, then Mariano jogged to catch up to my mates, while Kurz leapt into the trees and streaked off. He would go to the other search parties and bring them the happy news.

“Let’s go home,” Estrayuh said, caressing my jaw.

I ground my teeth, fighting for control. Home. I would take her to the den, somehow find the strength to cleanse her without pinning her to the floor and filling her with my *ahz* until it ran like a river down her thighs and all memory of Arvel’s filthy hands upon her was washed away, then guard her sleep until my mates returned.

Nodding, I settled her weight more evenly in my arms and loped away. I felt her eyes on me as we traveled. Looking down, I managed a small smile before the bloodstains on her face made my claws flex, and I focused on the path ahead once more.

She sighed.

“*Yoo noh, eye wuz uhtak’t toodai,*” Estrayuh muttered in incomprehensible *Eenglish*. “*Buht this iz thuh sekund taym eye’v had too plai thairuhpist. Yood theenk thaht if sumbudee wuz goeeng too bee up in thair feelz uhbowt this buhlshit, it’d bee mee. Dam aileeyens ahr luhkee thuh seks iz so gud.*”

We continued in strained silence for a little while longer, then Estrayuh made a sucking noise.

“Ouch!” I yelped, as she twisted my nipple like she was trying to rip it from my body. “What the fuck?”

“Why are you hiding from me?” she demanded, twisting hard in the other direction.

“Ow, ow, ow! Stop!” I hollowed my chest when she finally released my throbbing nipple, wishing I had a hand free to cover it with. “I’m not hiding. I’m right here.”

“Ha! Your *body* is right here,” Estrayuh scoffed. She touched her fingers to my chest, then stretched up to tap my forehead. “But here and here, you’re farther away than my old home.”

I winced.

“Talk to me.” Her voice softened.

I hesitated, but she just waited, petting my chest fur. Finally, I relented.

“I have. . .urges.” My tail flicked, showing my anxiety. I didn’t want to talk about this at all, let alone *now*, but I couldn’t lie to her, even with my silence. “I didn’t before—before I met you.” Her fingers stilled, and I rushed on. “I’m not blaming you! It just is. When I’m around you, I feel hunger—terrible hunger. And the things I crave. . .” I snarled and tipped my head back as my cock pulsed in its sheath.

“Something inside me is desperate to do things to you that shock me to think about. To make you cry, and bleed, and scream.” I hung my head, turning away from her, as shame sat bitter on my tongue.

“Okay.”

My ears flattened, sprang up, and flattened again. Surely I’d misheard.

“What?”

“I said—okay. Yes.” Estrayuh’s voice was patient. “I’d like to talk through some limits, and establish a *saifwurd*, but yes. I’m open to crying, bleeding, and screaming.”

I stopped walking. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Looking down at the beautiful, soft woman in my arms, I *didn’t* believe it. I lowered her to her feet with ruthless gentleness and took a step back, crouching, feeling my claws slide in and out as my hands flexed restlessly.

“I don’t think you understand,” I said, choosing my words with care, hating myself with each one. “I want to run you to ground. Feel your flesh split beneath my claws as you scream and writhe beneath me. Wrap my hand around your throat and feel your cunt clamp around me as you fight for air. I want to keep you tied up in the *s’klaytuh* and fuck you over and over, filling you with my *ahz*, until you’re round with my babies. I want you to cry and beg me to stop so I can lap up your tears and fuck you harder. I want to carve my name into your flesh so all will know you’re mine.”

I closed my eyes, cursing myself. I couldn’t bear to see horror in my *Lelesha’s* eyes. If she even was my *Lelesha* after

that. I held my breath, every muscle in my body locked tight to keep from trembling—or pouncing.

The silence was heavy. Finally, there was a rustling sound, then soft footsteps. Estrayuh’s fingers slicked across my lower lip.

“Breathe, Zaf.”

My lungs worked. Shock and arousal slammed into me and my tongue darted out, lapping at the delicious taste of Estrayuh’s juices sweet on my lips. My eyes snapped open, treating me to the vision of my perfect, unbelievable love standing bare before me, her cloths abandoned on the jungle floor.

“No wounds that will take more than your salve and a double handful of days to heal, no to the throat for today because it’s pretty sore, but yes once it’s better, and if we’re carving your name in my flesh, I want Revik and Litha’s too, and I want all of you to have mine. Somehow.” Her voice was low and breathy, her nipples standing stiff and proud from her sumptuous breasts.

Estrayuh bit her lip, looking away for a moment before meeting my eyes again, the vulnerability in them bringing me to my knees. “I don’t think I can have babies. If we even could. . .I—I’m sorry.”

I reached for her, bowing my head in desperate gratitude when she came easily to my embrace. “Never apologize for what you cannot control,” I rumbled, my purr blurring the words. “If you could, but chose not to, I would say the same. I don’t want to *force* you.” My ears flattened in embarrassment, “I just want to. . .breed you.”

Estrayuh whimpered, her body arching into mine. My cock had pushed free of its sheath when I’d tasted her slick heat on my lips, and it throbbed with exquisite torment as it nudged against the give of her belly. I groaned.

“You have to stop that. I have no control, and this is not the time. You’re hurt. Heart-hurt and body-hurt. You need rest and comfort, not—more mauling.”

“This is the perfect time,” Estrayuh panted. “I’m alive, Zaf. Help me believe it.”

The thread holding me to reason snapped. I grabbed her thighs, hauling her off her feet, and slammed her down onto my cock. *Rek!* She was so hot, so unbelievably tight.

A scream tore from her arched neck as her channel flexed and strained around me.

I wanted to feel that scream vibrate against my teeth. I snarled, rage blazing anew at the bruises ringing her quivering flesh. Never again would she suffer touch against her will. Never.

I snapped my hips forward, grunting as the head of my cock crashed into the deepest part of her spasming channel.

Estrayuh’s legs kicked, her body hunching as she tried to take more.

I ground against her, vision lost to the haze of bliss as her fiery cunt massaged and squeezed my shaft, sending shuddering jolts of pleasure through my compressed nodes. Something tickled at my memory. Something she’d said. . .

“What is a *saifwurd*?” I growled as my fingers flexed, desperate to grip her tight and pound my way to sweet oblivion. But if my *Lelesha* wanted one of these *saifwurds*, I’d get her one.

My love made a strange sound—somehow a wail, a sob, and a laugh all at once. “A little late, but okay,” she choked out. She pressed her face to my chest, continuing between gasping breaths as she squirmed, speared on my cock. “A *saifwurd* is something I say when I really need you to stop. So I can cry, ‘No!’, and you—oh *gawd*—” Estrayuh broke off, shuddering, as I ground against her, purring. “And you can know I don’t mean it. Zaf!”

I snarled an open-mouthed grin at her shout, my tongue twined tight around a juicy nipple. I tugged, pulling free with a snap that made her breast jiggle. “Good. I like this. Tell me your *saifwurd*.” Her acceptance—and the way she was

creaming around my cock—made it hard to remember why I’d fought letting go. I decided not to try.

“Uhhh, *lellek*?”

My tail waved, amused, and I dropped my chin. “If you say *lellek*, I stop,” I agreed. Gritting my teeth, I pulled free of her perfect cunt and put her on her feet. Dropping into a crouch, I snapped my teeth as I flexed my claws against the jungle floor.

“Now run, little prey.”

Estrayuh yelped, spun, and ran.

My muscles shivered as I held myself in place, relishing the sight of her ass bouncing as she fled from me. I wouldn’t let her run far. She was hurt and tired. But I wanted her heart pounding, wanted to taste her arousal spiced with fear.

She disappeared behind a screen of heavy vines and I plunged through the thick foliage after her, growling and making as much noise as a rampaging *va ’grev*.

Five bounding strides later, I coiled to leap, blood pumping with anticipation, when she whipped an arm out, caught a tree in passing, and spun around it. Her tiny feet pounded the ground as she hurtled through a wall of purple leaves, headed in a totally different direction.

I snarled, leapt, bounced off two trees, and sprang after her, running on all fours as I ate up the distance between us.

Clever prey.

I caught a glimpse of a fallen tree ahead and bared my teeth. That would do nicely. I vaulted into the branches, sinking my claws in, and pushed into a long dive, twisting at the last moment to land directly in her path.

Estrayuh squeaked and tried to stop, but she was running too hard and only managed to stumble as she plowed into me.

Roaring with triumph, I caught her in my arms and carried her—hissing and spitting—to the fallen tree. Estrayuh’s breath *oofed* out as I tossed her over it on her stomach. Not giving her time to scramble away, I curled over her, surrounding her,

sinking my teeth into her shoulder at the same time I drove my cock deep into her dripping slit.

My roar was muffled by her blood-smeared flesh, but hers ripped out of her throat, raw and wild. She dragged in a breath, and it punched out of her on a grunt as I thrust again. Fast, hard, relentless, I pounded her against the mossy bark.

Estrayuh's grunts blurred together as I fucked her faster, until it was a single, ululating cry. She took every stroke, her feet flailing for purchase as she fought—not to get away—but to fuck me back.

She was so hot. So soft, melting and squeezing around me. Rippling with every driving thrust of my hips against her ass. My *Lelesha*, my perfect beauty, my delectable prey.

I sank my claws into her hips, lifting her higher, and threw my head back, snarling, as the last of my length sank into her. The fiery grip of her pussy closed over the sensitive nodes at my base, my tip burrowed deep, and I ground against her as my cock bucked and spat, filling her with my *ahz*.

Estrayuh moaned in short, sharp bursts. With each one, her cunt flexed, milking me.

It was fucking perfection. But I wanted more.

I pulled out of her, still hard, and flipped her onto her back. Cupping her head carefully, I maneuvered her to a spot with a thick layer of moss and cursed Arvel's spirit to ten lifetimes of darkness.

Then I dropped to my knees.

Pushing her thighs wide, I purred at the sight of her puffy lips, open and dripping. I sank the tips of all eight claws into the meaty upper parts of her thighs, baring my teeth as her petals parted, gaping, showing me her needy little hole splattered with my claim and the swollen bud above it.

I had hunted, and now I would feast.

I flicked my tongue across her bud, reveling in the grip of her hands in my head fur as she cursed. Slowing my movements, I increased the intensity of my purr.

Estrayuh moaned, her body undulating with a sensuality that held me enthralled. Her scent mixed with mine, awash with need. It made my head spin.

I dragged my claws across her thighs, the scent of fresh, bright blood making the beast inside me roar.

Estrayuh's fingers tightened in my head fur as she arched high, letting out a long moan.

My purr was so loud now it drowned out the sounds of the jungle around us—but I was too consumed by my prey to worry about becoming someone else's.

She quivered, her bud throbbing, holding me in place as her hips danced. I snarled and leaned into her as Estrayuh took her pleasure from my vibrating tongue.

When her fingers relaxed, I sat back on my haunches. I drew my claws down her thighs to her knees, then trailed them up the quivering flesh between her legs, leaving red scratches on the gleaming, golden flesh smeared with milky splatters.

“You look beautiful covered in my *ahz*,” I growled. “But that's not where I fucking put it.”

I lashed my tongue up Estrayuh's thigh, collecting my *ahz*, and plunged it deep in her slippery hole. Curling it so it dragged along the spot I'd found that made her gush like a *lenvang sounga* if I rubbed it just right, I pulled my tongue out, lapped up more of my *ahz*, and fed it to her hungry cunt.

“*Oh, fukk!*” Estrayuh wailed, pulsing around my tongue.

The feel of her—always wet and hot—so slick and sloppy drove me wild. My claws sank deep, my tongue pumped, and I lost myself to the selfish ecstasy of feeling her, hearing her, smelling her come again and again.

Estrayuh's legs spasmed, knocking me aside. I snarled, pinning her in place so she couldn't interfere with my feast. Then I finally heard what she was saying.

She'd been chanting “*oh fukk*” and “*oh gawd*” in between the screams and whimpers, but now she gasped, sobbing.



“Stop! Please, too much, *oh gawd*,” she cried. “Please, please, please, no more. No more!”

For a moment I paused, horrified. Then I rushed to my feet, caught her legs over my forearms, and drove my cock deep into her spasming cunt.

No *lellek*, no stop.

*Slam! Slam! Slam!* I plunged into her hard and fast, my strokes relentless. Estrayuh’s cries were wordless now, high, broken sounds that turned into grunts every time I bottomed out. I bent forward, gathering her tears on my tongue like precious berries. The movement spread her legs wider, and I tilted my hips, grinding against her tender bud with each downward stroke.

Estrayuh spasmed. I caught her head just before it slammed into the tree. Her eyes snapped wide, unfocused and staring, then rolled back into her head. She fell limp—everywhere except her flooding, squeezing cunt.

I groaned, laid a hand on her belly, and pushed deep, filling it with my devotion.

# CHAPTER 39

## *ESTRELLA*

I curled into the bed cushion, sore, but feeling very much like the cat that got the cream. I was definitely over being abducted. Twice was more than enough for one lifetime. But since that's what it'd taken to get Zaf to finally let his freak flag fly, well. . . I wasn't going to thank Arvel. Fuck that. But I couldn't be too upset about it, either. Especially since things had worked out—from my perspective, at least.

That scene with Zaf had been so fucking hot. When he'd tongue-fucked his cum back into me. . . I pressed my thighs together as my pussy clenched. Coming until I passed out had been pretty excellent stress relief, too. I desperately hoped Litha and Revik would take Zaf's accomplishment as a challenge, the way Zaf and Revik had when I'd managed it with Litha.

But, more than the orgasms, I treasured the trust Zaf had shown me. I'd known he was holding back, of course. And even why. He was a good man who prided himself on his kindness and empathy. A healer. Wanting to tear me up had thrown him for a loop. Getting turned on by it had been even worse.

I was more than happy to reassure him—as often as needed—that his desires were perfectly okay with my kinky ass.

He padded in on big, silent feet, finally finished with his security sweep—the second since we'd gotten to the den. After he'd fucked me half to death, he'd carried me home, stopping only to tenderly wash me at the river before tucking me into bed and going out to make sure no monsters lurked in waiting.

I rolled, holding my arms out to him, a smile playing about the corners of my mouth as I felt slickness drip down my ass. Zaf had washed my body thoroughly, removing all traces of

dirt and blood. . .except for between my thighs. He'd insisted I keep them pressed tightly together, even growled at me when I spread my legs a little to keep from falling on my ass in the river.

I'd put my foot down, telling him that this whole breeding kink thing was super hot, but I wasn't about to get a UTI. He'd "compromised" by "allowing" me to take a piss, rinsing me gently, and warning me that if I opened my legs again before he gave me permission, he was going to tie them shut.

It was tempting to spread them now, to get him riled up and find out what Teterayuh-style bondage looked like, but a fine trembling had started in my fingers. I'd put it off with the sex, but I was sliding towards an adrenaline crash, and more than anything, I wanted a cuddle.

Zaf slipped into bed, rolling me on top of him as he preferred. Normally, I'd crook one leg up and he'd pet my thigh until we fell asleep. This time, he cradled me between his legs, wrapping both them and his arms around me and holding me close.

My entire being exhaled. I'd just started to drift off when his whisper reached my ears.

"You don't think less of me?"

"Of course not," I mumbled into his chest.

"You're not. . .frightened of me?" he pressed, after a long moment of silence that had me nodding off again.

I sighed, rolling my head up to look at him. "Zaf, baby, I'm about to fall asleep on you. You don't scare me. You make me feel safe. And very wanted."

His eyes warmed, like sunshine breaking through the clouds.

I reached up with one finger and booped him on the nose. "I fucked myself with a knife to get your attention, silly man. What exactly made you think I was a delicate flower?"

He grinned and flicked me back with the tip of his long tongue. "Well, you do have beautiful petals. . ."

I groaned, dropping my face back onto my warm, purring pillow. “Hush,” I muttered. “Sleep now.”

My pillow shook, his arms snuggling me close.

Exhaustion slipped over me, pulling me gently but relentlessly downward.

“Thank the spirits you’re safe, my *Lelesha*,” Zaf whispered just before my awareness flickered and faded completely. “Thank the spirits.”



I jerked, trying in vain to catch a glimpse of the nameless, faceless monster that pursued me. I could hear it, hissing in the darkness. Could feel it getting closer, so close—too close—but I could see nothing.

“*Kshh, Lelesha. Zharouk seh. Rai set ek’ka.*”

It took my mind a second to claw itself free of the nightmare and translate Litha’s comforting murmur. “*Shh, Little Star. You’re safe. It’s only us.*”

I let out a shaky sigh and opened my eyes. I still lay on Zaf’s chest—which was now decorated by a drool spot. Awesome. Litha’s arm curled over me from the left, and Revik’s big hand cupped a hip from my right.

They were back.

“Is it done?”

Revik’s fingers tightened. “Yes,” he growled. “He is dead.”

I didn’t have to ask if he’d been the one to do it. I cupped his jaw, wishing I had a tail to pet him with.

“Everyone in the village knows of his dishonor.” Litha said with grim satisfaction. “The poison wore off by the time our people returned from the funeral, and under Saytireka’s questioning, he admitted everything. What he had planned, and why.” She rubbed her cheek against Zaf’s. “Saytireka denounced him. Sentenced him to a silent funeral.”

“In front of all?” Zaf’s eyes were wide, a desperate, flinching hope flickering in them.

“And commanded that your sister put it in the records,” Litha confirmed. “She denounced herself also, for her part in seeding the hate that festered in his heart.”

Zaf looked straight up, blinking rapidly, his eyes shimmering under a veil of tears.

I kissed his chest. I didn’t know what a silent funeral meant, culturally. And I didn’t know what consequences there would be for Saytireka. But it meant something to Zaf, and both Litha and Revik were content. It was enough for now.

I pushed up into a sitting position, kneeling and waiting until my three rose—their movements unsure—to join me.

“I need to thank you.” I held up a hand to stall their immediate refusals. “No, I do. Please let me finish.” It made my stomach cramp, but I met each of their eyes in turn. “When Arvel took me—even before—I didn’t doubt you’d protect me. That you’d do whatever you had to, to take care of me.”

Revik purred, and my lips curved.

“I never questioned it. Because it’s what you do, who you are. I see how much you love me every day—see how much you love each other, your family, your people, your home. It’s in everything you do. It’s who you are. I’m so thankful to have found you. So thankful you chose me.” All three of them were purring, edging closer to me on the bed. I laughed, a breathy, watery sound.

“I’ve been planning how to tell you this. I need you to know it’s not the near-death experience talking.”

They were all but vibrating now, three sets of glowing yellow eyes locked on me with unwavering intensity.

“I love you. I love you so much. I love how you care for each other, and for me. I love that I never feel less-than when I’m with you. I love *who I am* when I’m with you. I never want to be parted from any of you again.”

I swiped the tears from my cheeks, and the bad thoughts with them. They wouldn't sully this moment.

"I want to be your mate. I want to wear your braids, to wear your names in my flesh. Please say you'll be mine."

Arms enfolded me. I buzzed from the strength of their purrs.

"Yes, *Lelesha*," Litha whispered. Her fur brushed across my cheek, velvet soft, then her lips pressed against mine. "I am already yours. I have been since that first night, when you found peace in my arms. *Zhai vailah*, Estrayuh."

"I love you too," I murmured between kisses. "Te amo, Litha."

"Our names in her flesh?" Revik asked, sotto voce.

"I'll explain later." Zaf laid a finger under my chin, turning my face to his. "If you walked away from me right now, I would still be yours forever, *sha'vail*. *Sh'irra*. My mate. *Zhai vailah*."

Our kiss was wet with my tears. I didn't wipe them away this time. These were born of pure happiness.

With a reverent murmur, Zaf turned my head once more, bringing me face to face with Revik. He watched me, a considering look gleaming in his bright eyes.

I bit my lip.

"*Tay ahmo, Lelesha?*" he asked, his flicking tail telling me very clearly he remembered that my previous declaration of love had come between me calling him a "bad kitty" and an "idiot".

I put some pout in the bite, tilting my head to look up at him through my lashes. "Te amo, Daddy."

Revik growled and scooped me up, big hand flexing on my ass as he pulled me close.

"I would lose my honor for you, *Lelesha*. I am not so good a person as Zaf. There is no walking away from us. You are mine, and I am yours. *Zhai vailah*. *Zhai iltah vail silot*."

I would love him forever, too. I pressed my mouth to his in a kiss that started hard and fast, but as Litha and Zaf slid close, their hands caressing us both, it slowed, becoming a sensual slip of fur, flesh, and tongues.

The four of our bodies moved together in perfect, unhurried harmony. I sighed into long, drugging kisses, and shivered at the brush of silky fur against my sensitive flesh. I didn't climb to orgasm—instead it spread through me, tingling and warm, like a hot cup of champurrado on a cold morning.

I lost myself in them. Litha's strong, beautiful body rose before me, nipples hard and sweet under my tongue. Her petals were slick as they danced with my fingers, and we both opened to the advance of Zaf's beautiful cock with glorious welcome. The bumps along his shaft nudged my circling fingers, and my core pulsed as each one slipped into Litha's clinging heat.

She pulled me closer with a shuddering moan, her hips sliding forward and back like waves on the shore as she kissed me.

I rocked with her, my swollen lips slipping over Revik's girth, drenching him in my and Zaf's essences. Time disappeared as I moved with the rhythm of the tide, feeling myself stretch and retreat, enveloping a little more of him each time.

When our hips ground together and I could get no fuller, I arched, circling, spiraling into the wash of bliss.

Revik and Zaf became the ocean, Litha and I swelling and cresting as we rode its waves.

The constant flex of pleasure blurred my vision, turning our bed into a soft-focus island surrounded by darkness. Hazy images filtered through the wash of sensation. Litha's face, slack with arousal. Revik's tail, coiled around Zaf's, their legs tangled beneath us.

Murmured words of love fell around me in a gentle rain, and my heart swelled. Emotion-drenched ecstasy poured into

me. I could hold no more, but still it came, rushing over and through me—body and soul.

Litha wrapped her arm around my waist, supporting, as the pleasure spilled out of me.

“Yes, my love. So beautiful. Shine for us, Little Star. Shine so bright.”

I didn't want to be alone in the night sky.

I caressed her petals, running my fingers down to trace the spot where she and Zaf met. Whimpering through the waves of pleasure, I pushed down with my hips, rolling them in tight little circles as Revik pulsed deep inside.

Golden light from three sets of glowing eyes pushed aside the darkness as one by one, my loves—my mates—slipped over that peak, moaning their completion.

“We shine. . .together,” I gasped, and followed.



# CHAPTER 40

## *ESTRELLA*

A week later, I sat listening to the rain, my eyes closed, enjoying the tug and stroke of Litha braiding my hair. She'd chosen a complex design—the bulk of my curls woven into a thick braid that wrapped around my head like a crown, with smaller braids twisted around it. She held the whole thing in place with polished thorns we'd made together just for that purpose.

I'd done her hair first, and although much simpler, she wore the single fishtail braid with pride.

Zaf and Revik had also chosen simplicity, and had dropped nuzzling kisses on each of our cheeks as they went out to make the midday meal some time ago. We'd skipped breakfast by general consensus, enjoying a long, lazy morning dozing, talking, and cuddling instead.

As a result, I was blissfully happy. And starving.

Blissfully happy was fast becoming the norm. It was a daily struggle not to fret about when the other shoe would drop and ruin everything, but most days I won the battle. Telling myself I prepaid for this joy by surviving my shitty ex and forced trip on Bug-Alien Intergalactic Airlines helped. Telling my stupid catastrophizing anxiety brain to kick rocks and let me be happy helped less, but was satisfying, so I did that too.

We were all nervous about what would happen when we went to the village next. The first couple days after the Arvel Incident, I'd bounced back and forth between crying, dissociating, and bouts of giddiness that left me exhausted. My mates had stayed with me—holding me and giving me space as needed. Then the storm had come, bringing with it peace. A pressure I hadn't realized had been weighing on me lifted, and free from my own expectations of how I “should” heal and how I “should” present myself to the people in the village, I

finally began to process the latest in this series of unimaginable life changes.

The storm-touched in the village had predicted this would be the last squall of the season, and a big one at that. I didn't know if their connection was psychic or stemmed from close study, but those who suffered from the arthritis-like ailment had an uncanny ability to predict weather patterns.

So, I had a few more days before I had to face the village. And hopefully by that time, people would be too concerned with preparations for the *Athulenvang* to spend their time whispering about me. That reminded me—

“Are we going to have a mating ceremony at the *Athulenvang*?” I asked, tilting my head in response to Litha's gentle tug. In the eyes of the Teterayuh, we were mated as soon as we all consented to it. But rituals were important.

“I would like to,” Litha said, putting the final touches on my hair. Moving around me, she lounged, chin resting on her fist as her tail curled around my ankle. “Will you tell me about the mating ceremony of your people?”

I thought of my and Drake's magazine-perfect English garden wedding, so different from the all-day affair full of devotion and family I'd always dreamed of.

“Uh, it varies a lot.”

Litha's ears flicked, her nostrils fluttering with her inhale, and her honey eyes darkened.

Impossible to hide the sads from mates who could literally smell it on you.

“Are there things you'd like to include?” she asked delicately.

“I want my family there.”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“And food. Lots of food.”

“A feast. All your favorites. No *lellek*.” Litha winked.

“Music! And. . .” I trailed off, swallowing past the bittersweet press of emotion. “I’d like to set up an ofrenda. For my parents and grandparents.”

Litha pushed herself up, touching her forehead to mine. “*Zhai vailah*. Yes. It will be done.” Zaf’s voice called from outside, and Litha smiled, kissing me. “I’d like to talk more about the *Deeya day los Mwairtos* you’ve spoken of. And any other things your people hold sacred. I cannot return you to your people, but I will do what I can to help you and your kin to find happiness here, *sha ’vail*.” She brushed soft fingers over my heart.

“But now, your meal is ready. And we shouldn’t keep them waiting.”

For the first time, I recognized the excitement in her posture. Anticipation glowed in her eyes as she stood, offering me her hand.

I took it, following the path of her waving tail as she led me outside. Something was definitely going on.

Zaf and Revik crouched between us and the table, blocking it from view. As one, they stepped aside, revealing a platter of roasted meat in some kind of sauce, a bowl of minced. . .something, and in the place of honor, my sad, lopsided little basket, full of steaming, purple—

“Tortillas?!”

My mates grinned, all three of them puffing out their chests like great big peacocks.

I didn’t sit so much as I collapsed by the table. The tortilla was hot in my hand, and I moved automatically, rolling it between my palms. I took a bite and froze, lips trembling. A tear slipped down my cheek as I chewed.

“Estrayuh?”

It didn’t taste exactly like the tortillas I grew up on. A little sweeter, almost like plátanos. And the texture was just a little meatier, although that could have been because they were thicker than I was used to. But it was definitely a *tortilla*.

“How?” I sniffled, taking a second, bigger bite.

“I went to Naryanuh,” Revik said, slowly, his eyes searching mine. “I asked for his help making you a courting gift. I wanted to bring you something good from your old home. *Sha’lelesha*, do you like it?”

“I fucking love it!” I wailed.

His ears snapped up and he laughed, suddenly at ease.

“We meant to give it to you earlier,” Zaf interjected, rubbing the back of his neck self-consciously. “*Before* you accepted us as your mates.”

I giggled, rolling another tortilla.

“But it took a while to find something that would work for the *masa*,” Zaf pronounced the *M* carefully, “and longer before our efforts met Naryanuh’s approval.”

“You all worked on this? Together? And Mariano helped?” My eyes bounced from one to the other, wide with disbelief. Absentmindedly, I tore off a bit of tortilla and pinched up some of the meat. Flavor burst in my mouth. Oh, fuck, that was good.

Litha nodded. “Revik carved the *torteeyuhdoro*, I devised the *heenges*, Zaf figured out we could use *inret* to make the *masa*, and we all practiced making the tiny flat cakes.”

“You did what?!” I demanded, staring at Revik.

He turned, lifting a device from the kitchen shelves and setting it in front of me.

It bore a striking resemblance to my Nana’s antique wooden press, which made sense. That’s probably what Mariano had described when Revik asked him about it. This was the goth version, though, carved from the green-black wood of Doluna trees.

“If I didn’t already love you three more than I thought possible, this would have gotten me there,” I admitted, to a round of purring chuckles.

We ate. The three of them were unbearably smug throughout, watching me gorge myself. When I couldn't eat another bite, I leaned against Zaf, patting my belly happily.

"I can't believe you did all this and I had no idea." I stroked Revik's tail where it lay across my legs. "I especially can't believe you got Mariano to agree to it."

"He loves you," Revik said simply. He shrugged. "And I helped him with something too."

"Really? What?"

Revik shrugged again.

I sat up, intrigued. "Did you make him his own tortilladora?"

"No," he snorted. "I offered, but Kurz almost bit my head off."

"Reeeally? Interesting." Murder Puppy was a bit territorial, it appeared. "And you won't tell me what you did?"

He gave me a look through narrowed eyes.

That was fine, I'd bully it out of Mariano. Now that my love life was sorted, I had energy to help him fix the mess he'd made of his. Not that I had any intention of messing with him and Kurz. The two of them were great together. But I'd seen the confused, longing looks Therry sent him when we visited the village. And I'd seen the tormented ones he wore when he thought no one was looking. If he didn't sort that out, it would get messy.

The last thing we needed was a dramatic love triangle moment in the middle of dinner.

"Are you happy, Estrayuh? Here, with us?" Litha's voice was a caress, making me shiver with remembered pleasure.

I stretched across Zaf to kiss her, anchored by Revik's hand on my thigh.

"There's nowhere I'd rather be."

*The End*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was, and is, a love letter to my wife Marlena. She was my inspiration for Estrella, and my compass for the world of the book. I hope you love her as much as I do.

To my family: I pinkie promise I've learned my lesson, and I ~~won't set myself~~ will really try not to set any more deadlines like I did with this book. I'm sincerely grateful you didn't disown me during the months of my hermitage in the writer cave.

A special thank you to my husband, who was a huge help in creating the world of Doluna, and also in getting me out of writing slumps when I was too stubborn to admit I was stuck. I'd still be staring at that damned unmoving cursor if it weren't for you, babe.

# TETERAYUH GLOSSARY

**A'hoyv** (Uh-hoyv): A fruit similar to coconut. When left to ferment, the juice is highly alcoholic

**Ahz** (ah-z): Cum/semen

**Akath** (ah-kaath): Plant with sweet-smelling red fronds used to stuff cushions

**Anet** (ah-net): Now

**Ar** (aar): To go

**Athulenvang** (ah-thoo-LEHN-vang): A sacred time when both moons are dark and the auroras highly visible

**Casa** (cah-saa): Sweet root vegetable with a flavor similar to red bean paste

**Edun** (eh-doon): Food

**Ek'ka** (ehk-kaa): Only

**Elith** (eh-leeth): Pain

**Erralaytuh** (arr-uh-LAY-tuh): Communal space of the village

**Err'laytuh** (arr-LAY-tuh): Communal space of the den

**Erv** (arrv): To court, romantically. Precursor to mating

**Eshek** (eh-shek): Dried fungus used to exfoliate

**Het** (het): Yes

**Ikfrit** (ihk-frit): Game animal similar to a quail the size of a medium dog

**Ilateh?** (ih-LAT-ay): Do you understand?

**Ilot va'heth** (ih-lawt vaa-heth): The dry season

**Ilot va'regnev** (ih-lawt vaa-REG-nev): The storm season

**Irra** (ee-raa): Mate

**Irirra** (ih-REE-raa): Mates

**Ivresk** (ihv-resk): Sorry/apologies

**Ix** (ihks): No

**Ix ilatah** (ihks ih-LAH-taa): I don't understand

**Ix thirit** (ihks thirr-it): Not needed. Response to I'm sorry

**Iztek** (ihz-tek): Substance used for building, similar to a cross between adobe and concrete

**Javuh** (jah-vuh): Bathing pool

**Jore** (jorr): To eat

**Kakal** (kah-kaal): Siblings

**Ka'vek** (kah-vek): Idiot/asshole

**Kesh** (kesh): To sleep

**Kezhai** (kezh-eye): Greetings

**Kheer** (keer): Kin. Both born and sworn.

**Kheertha** (keer-thaa): Outer Kin. Allied villages as well as family living elsewhere.

**Khot** (kaht): Game animal similar to an extra large Guinea Pig, bright yellow

**Laytuh** (lay-tuh): Den/home

**Lelesha** (leh-LESH-aa): Little star. Used as an endearment for Estrella

**Lellek** (leh-lek): Bitter carrot-like vegetable

**Lenailot** (leh-NAY-lot): Mother moon, the larger of the two moons of Doluna

**Lenvang souna** (len-vang soon-gaa): Waterfall

**Levailata** (leh-vayl-AH-taa): Child moon, the smaller of the two moons of Doluna

**Levaya** (leh-VAY-aa): A lover, physical relationship

**Lev'rasha** (lehv-rah-shaa): A lover, physical and emotional relationship

**Lit** (liht): Hurt



**Naiset** (nay-set): Mother

**Ovtuh** (ov-tuh): A succulent whose leaves are filled with viscous liquid

**Ralaytuh** (raa-LAY-tuh): Village

**Ralaytuh Naiset** (raa-LAY-tuh nay-set): Village Mother/Matriarch

**Ralaytuh Tonset** (raa-LAY-tuh ton-set): Village Father/Patriarch

**Ray** (ray): Good/okay

**Raysheel** (ray-sheel): Tapir-like animal, blue fur, domesticated

**Rek** (rek): Fuck

**Rekvang** (rek-vang): Fucking

**Relyat** (rel-yat): Thank you

**Rethi** (reh-thee): Grass chewed to clean teeth

**Sahvon** (saa-von): My honor/you're welcome

**Seth** (seth): To come

**Sethitzik** (seth-IT-zik): Morning

**Setkuh** (set-kuh): Soap/shampoo

**Shakath** (shaa-kath): My akath. Used as an endearment for Zaf.

**Sha'vail** (shaa-vayl): My love

**Shavailata** (shaa-VAYL-ataa): My child

**Shej** (shehj): Eel-like fish, venomous

**Sh'irra** (sh-irr-aa): My mate

**Shirravail** (shirr-RAH-vayl): My beloved mate

**Sh'irirra** (sh-irr-IRR-aa): My mates

**Shirratoum** (shirr-RAA-toom): My beautiful mate

**S'klaytuh** (s-klay-tuh): Personal space of the den/bedroom

**Soru** (soh-roo): Melon shaped like a blue butternut squash

**Susuela** (soo-SWAY-laa): White berries, very tart

**Svestrix** (svehs-triks): Other local sentient species

**Teraila** (tə-RAY-laa): elder

**Teterayuh** (teh-tə-RAY-uh): People. Used as a term for the species

**Tetevath'a** (teh-tə-VAATH-aa): Sky People. Used as a derogatory title

**Tetezha'a** (teh-tə-ZHAH-aa): Other People. Non-derogatory, includes all species and allegiances

**Tethyr** (teh-theer): To braid/bind

**Tonsa** (ton-saa): Lotion made by the Svestrix

**Toom** (toom): Beautiful

**Tov** (tohv): Lube made from the ovtuh plant. Anti-inflammatory

**T'tonset** (t-ton-set): Fathers

**Va'grev** (vaa-grev): Dragon-like predator

**Vahs** (vaas): To like/approve

**Vailesha** (vay-LESH-aa): Baby

**Vath'lenesta** (vath-leh-NES-taa): Sky Dancers/aurora

**Zharouk** (zhaa-rook): Safe

**Zhazhalouk** (zhaa-ZHAA-look): Large trees in which the Teterayuh build their homes

# BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

## [Tentacles And Teeth](#)

Katarina was only looking for one night.

An evening of no-strings fun with someone who knew what they were doing and wasn't afraid of getting a little wild. One look at the gorgeous bartender with the midnight skin and waving tentacles, and she knew she needed to feel all those... appendages wrapped around her before the night was out. Lucky for her, the bartender was a woman who went after what she wanted, and oh, did she want.

More wasn't on the table.

But when Katarina wakes up the next morning not only still desperate to touch her, but also talk to her, she's forced to reevaluate. Maybe a relationship wouldn't be so bad?

Especially a naked werewolf before coffee.

Running into her maybe-more-than-a-one-night-stand's roommate in the hall was yet another thing she wasn't prepared for. It might have helped if she wasn't still reeling from the night before. Or if he hadn't been completely nude. Or so...sexy. She wasn't in the market for one relationship, much less two. But they were both so tempting...

Can she finish her plate? Or did she bite off more than she can chew?

In this novella you will find:

Tentacles (put to various uses)

Size/stretching

Knotting

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Sharp teeth and claws

And more...

Consorting with Monsters is a series of standalone spicy novellas set in the same world as the upcoming Cairn Riders Series. True love isn't guaranteed; but every couple, throuple, or collective will have a monstrous good time and finish (several times) Happy For Now.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rowan Merrick spends her days chasing around her three partners, the tiny demon they created, and their pet hellhound. Frequently the victim of her own curiosity, her previous careers include theater, costuming, and construction. Education was set to be her next goal, however her delicate artistic temperament ran up against the American school system and, well...she writes monster smut now. When not writing or Momming, she can be found enjoying the beautiful forests of the Pacific Northwest where she lives, gaming on her custom Beauty and the Beast PC, or curled up with a good book.

Her mind is full of books clamoring to be written: tales of wholesome, respectful, filthy love featuring people and monsters of all shapes, sizes, colors, and abilities. More are definitely to come.

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