



ALIEN PROTECTOR'S MATE



FATED MATES OF THE
WINGED BARBARIANS

M E L I S S A
E M E R A L D

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For Vivi, who never expressed any interest in reading romance with non-human heroes, but read my story and cheered me on anyway. If I haven't traumatized you already, don't worry, there's still time - and I have plenty of story ideas!

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Chapter 1

RYNN

I'm up to my elbows in frizikki guts when Aloryk approaches me. Though I may be leader of my tribe, everyone must bloody their hands and feathers for our Goddesses.

“High Spear Rynn,” he says, greeting me with the deference afforded to a Protector Chief of the Trixikka.

I give a grunt of acknowledgment, allowing him to raise his lowered head as I reach into my recent kill, ridding the frizikki carcass of the creature's poisoned offal. The twin day-moons as well as their sun-cousins are high in the sky and soon, I will need to offer this meat to the Temple as part of my tribute.

“I come to seek permission to make an offering to the Goddesses.”

Glancing up at him, I look Aloryk over, my hands still busy, moving on to skinning the beast. Aloryk is one of my younger Protector-Warriors, still untried in any fighting, though he takes his role as Protector as seriously as any Trixikka ought to. “You have extra meat you wish to add to our offerings today, Aloryk?” I ask, wiping my life-stone blade on the hide at my hip. “Or perhaps a particularly fine flight feather?”

Aloryk's skin-stars pulse, particularly those over his heart. His wings are tucked in tight and his tail flicks wildly behind him. I know what it was he wishes to offer up to the Goddesses.

Dipping my bloody hands into a bowl of water, I clean the frizikki from my skin and sigh. “It is important that any young the Goddesses gift to us are of good, strong Protector blood, you understand that, don't you? Our tribe must thrive and our sons must be able to grow to replace us and protect our females.”

“Yes, High Spear,” he says, going utterly still.

Goddess-damn me and my soft heart. Aloryk may be untried, but he had done exceptionally well in his training. I could allow him this, couldn't I? "Do you have any life-stones to offer? And a seed pot?" I ask him, relenting.

Aloryk's face splits into a wide grin. "Yes, High Spear!"

I grunt. "Best go fill your pot now then, Aloryk," I say, drying my hands on some soft hide. "The tribe gathers at the Temple soon."

Our Temple is unlike anything else in our lands. Except, that is, its twin at the base of High Spear Zarikko's mountain. Ours, at the foot of my tribe's mountain, is as white and smooth as a Zokki-bird's egg.

On days after a four-moon night, we make offerings to the Temple Goddesses, Goddesses who keep our females safe inside.

My tribe parts, allowing me access to the Temple and the front of our gathering as I approach.

Mavyx, my Second Spear gives a single, solemn nod of his head, his golden eyes tracking me only briefly before going back to the wilds of our lands that embrace our tribe's mountain. Mavyx is a Protector, through-and-through, and exactly what our people need as a Second Spear. I know, without a doubt, that he would lay down his life if it meant keeping our females inside the temple safe and unharmed.

I stand before my tribe, our Temple at my back as I look out upon my people. Our Protectors, care-givers, craftsmen and sons. "Brothers," I address them all, my people going as silent as a hunter's wingbeat. "Today we give thanks to our Goddesses and provide nourishment to our females and daughters," I say, the words loud and practiced. "First, those of you who have made a seed-offering within the past few ceremonies, please come forward."

Together, many males move closer, forming an arc around the Temple, Mavyx, and myself. Many of the males

come with even more of our many-colored life-stones, believing that the more they give the Goddesses, the more favorably a female will look upon their seed offering, and perhaps grant them a son of their own. One by one, I incline my head at each Protector, allowing him to approach and press his palm to the odd black shape at the side of the Temple. More often than not, we are met with silence. Even so, we give our shining, precious life-stones, placing them in a large hollow that appears only when the Goddesses are willing to receive our tributes.

So far, nothing. None of the approaching Protectors have fathered new young within the Temple. Some will stand and repeat this whole ceremony, again and again, hoping for a favorable result each time.

Finally, the last Protector approaches, and the Goddesses answer. Hyx, a good, noble Protector presses his hand to the Temple wall and something stirs from inside, small lights appearing as if the Temple itself has skin-stars too. The tribe stills and we watch the little moon drift out from deep inside the hollow. This is how the Goddesses address us. I do not know if the spinning, glowing ball of light is their true form or the only one they deem to show us, but I am grateful for its presence, nonetheless.

“Tribe member,” the little moon says, addressing Hyx.

The Protector spreads his wings as he bows his head, his skin-stars pulsing with excitement. “Yes, my Goddess,” he says, eyes closed and tail flicking behind him.

“A female within has accepted your seed-offering.” Hyx puffs his chest with pride. “This day, you have fathered a daughter.”

The Protector’s skin-stars dim before he catches himself. Crossing one palm over his chest, Hyx bows his head once more. “She will be protected,” he calls out, the rest of the tribe echoing the words of our people as one. *“She will be protected.”*

The remainder of the ceremony continues without further gifts of sons or daughters. After telling the tribe to

leave their seed-offerings if they wish to, I approach Hyx as he makes his way to the back of our gathering. He is so lost in thought, his skin-stars twinkling at his temples and over his heart, that I forgive the way he almost forgets to greet me as his High Spear. “Congratulations.” I grasp him firmly by the shoulder. “It is your first?”

Hyx seemed still too stunned to speak. Instead, he simply nods.

“You have bred a strong Trixikka daughter, I am sure of it.”

“Thank you, High Spear,” he says, staring dumbly. I chuckle, but this will not do. I cannot have warriors consumed with awe over daughters they will never hold.

“Well, go make a new life-stone blade in her name,” I tell him. “May you wield it to protect her, our females, and all our future daughters.”

Shaking his head, Hyx seems to find his way out of his stupor. “Yes, High Spear,” he says before hurrying away to honor his daughter. No doubt if I see him tomorrow, he’ll wear a daughter-band around his tail and will have clipped his best flight feather in her name too.

Our Elders say that fathering young heightens a warrior’s instincts to protect. It’s something I imagine experiencing often, though I haven’t made frequent seed-offering of my own since becoming High Spear. The lengths I’d go to already to protect my tribe and Temple are exhausting.

Chapter 2

SERENA

Honestly, if I thought I was ever going to get abducted in the middle of the night, wearing nothing but a ratty old t-shirt and sleep shorts, my first guess would have been one of my creepier clients as a cam girl. Not aliens. I didn't even believe in aliens.

Well, I sure as shit do now!

One of the horrible hulking gray creatures prods me with a long stick that has some sort of electrical current zinging through the end of it. Stinging heat shoots up the side of my ribs making me arch, trying to get away from the source. In all honesty, the thing reminds me of a cattle prod and the allusion to cattle doesn't end there. We're in a huge domed arena of some sort, there are wood chips on the floor and I can't help but feel like the other girls and I are being herded. Some of the gray aliens are trying to wake up the girls still crumpled on the floor - whether from sleep or fear, I don't know.

That's how I woke up too. One minute I'd been drifting off to the land of slumber, safe in the knowledge that I'd earned enough for this month's rent by doing some *very* unladylike things on camera for a client. And the next, I'm being prodded awake by a hideous creature with pallid gray skin, a hunched back, a pig-like snout, and what appear to be tusks.

"What is happening?!" a short, blond girl stumbles forward and grabs hold of my arm as she tries to avoid one of the creature's cattle prods. "Where are we?!"

Clutching her arm in response, all I can do is shake my head. "I don't know. But it's not good." She worries her lip, her grip on me tightening as wide hazel eyes take in as much as she can. There are so many women here and we're sectioned off in groups with thick metal bars while the alien creatures lumber around, trying to wake up those still on the floor. Above us, the huge, domed ceiling is made from crudely

welded metal. Lower down on the walls, there are circular windows like port holes on a ship and beyond them is nothing but black, dotted with stars and swirling, clustered colors. Is that what a nebula is? I don't know. Anything space related is beyond me - none of it ever felt *real*. Well, it's real now and all I do know is it's hot as hell in here and the whimperings, cries, and shouts of hurt and scared women echo in my ears.

One of the gray things nearby calls out to his buddy as he stands over a girl collapsed into the fetal position. He makes a gurgling sort of bark and prods her with his electric stick before repeating the God-awful noise. Two more creatures lumber over, sticks in hand and they all have a go at shocking her as she lay there on the floor, yelping in pain.

"*Hey! Stop doing that!*" Another woman yells, storming over, her sleek dark ponytail swinging as she advances. She looks like an angry thundercloud - even while dressed in her button-up hot-pink pajamas. The blond beside me shivers as we watch *pink-PJs* slap the thick, knobbly skin of one of the gray creatures. "Leave her alone, you ugly-ass-mother-fucker!"

The gray creature whirls. This isn't going to end well. My self-preservation wars with my instinct to jump in. The creature - alien - whatever he is, yells something angrily at Pink-PJs and takes a step forward. I take a step forward too but Blondie clutches me tighter. "*Don't,*" she whispers, but it's too late, I slip from her grip and march right up to the fray until I'm between the alien and Pink-PJs.

"Whoa! Whoa!" I say, holding my hands up in what I hope translates universally as '*I come in peace*'. Big-Gray-and-Ugly only glares down at me, the end of his electric shock-stick sizzling in warning. "We can help!" I offer. Big-Gray stares at me with disdain. "We can help," I try again, taking a deep breath and brushing past the alien, hoping beyond hope that those shock sticks won't be turned on me now. "Come on," I murmur to the puddle of a girl on the sawdust floor. "They're just going to keep hurting you until you get up. Come on." Reaching down, I hook my arms around her and heft her upwards.

“I don’t want to be here,” she whimpers.

Pink-PJs joins me, shouldering the girl’s weight at her other side. “I don’t think we have a choice.”

Eventually, our section of around thirty women is gathered into one area. Two women had refused to get up off the floor and had been carried off elsewhere. I hope to God they’ll be alright, but if I were a gambling woman, I’d say the odds of that are low. “Why do you think we’re here?” the woman we’d helped off of the floor asks. Looking around, I can’t help thinking that this set-up is similar to the livestock markets my uncle had taken me to when he’d had the hair-brained idea to start farming goats. I decided to hold my tongue on that conclusion though.

“I don’t know,” I answered instead. “But my name’s Serena and if we work together somehow, maybe we can get out of this and back to Earth.”

I offered my hand out to shake to the nearest women who were listening.

“Alana,” said Pink-PJs with a sharp nod of her head.

“Gwen,” answered Blondie.

The mousy-haired woman who had needed to be helped from the floor shook off mine and Alana’s help, holding her own weight now, although still a bit wobbly. “Tessa,” she said, taking my hand to shake.

A tall, leggy redhead wearing a baby-blue, silky two-piece sleep set turns and grabs my hand. “Chastity Charm,” she added. “Whatever you guys are planning, I want in.”

All the nearby women look at me expectantly. Shit. Do I need to come up with a plan now? Licking my lips I open my mouth to speak unknown words.

“Hold on a minute,” Alana thankfully interrupts. “What do you mean, ‘back to Earth’?”

“What do you think that is out there?” I say, gesturing to the port-hole-like windows above us. “And those gray

dudes with the cattle prods. I don't know about you but I've never seen those explained on any nature documentary back home."

Alana folds her arms. Someone nearby begins to cry.

"But-..." Gwen flounders, "aliens don't exist!"

"They do now and the sooner we can all get over that fact, the faster we can come up with a plan." I look each woman in the eye, some of them giving me shaky nods. Others in our little herded group have started turning around to listen too. "Look, there's more of us than there are of them," I jerk my chin over at one of the gray guards. "Maybe we can take a hostage. Demand to be taken back home?"

"They don't speak any language I know," Alana says. "How will we communicate our demands?"

I shake my head. "I... I don't know! I'm open to other ideas, but we need to come up with something!"

Just then, a loud buzzer sounds and the ground begins to move. We all grab hold of each other while the floor of the dome seems to rotate slowly until our caged-off segment stops right where a gate on the outer edge opens with a metallic scrape and clang. Our gray guards advance on us, threatening with their sizzling electric sticks until, as a group, we're herded toward the now-open gate. This can't be good.

My companions and I are not-so-gently urged into a new room - a new dome - only this time, our sawdust-covered area is a pit, and all around us, high on a balcony, are other beings peering down. Now I know how those goats felt back at the livestock market.

Creatures of all sorts assess us from their lofty perches up on that balcony. Some have huge, bulbous heads, some have beaks, others have horns, and some with too many eyes to count - all of which are looking us up and down. Our group huddles together. It must be that natural instinct to believe the 'safety in numbers' rhetoric because I'm grasping onto the nearest women just as much as the rest of them. Our heads swivel this way and that, all of us craning our necks to see the

horrific group up above. There's whimpering coming from within our huddle and out of the corner of my eye, I see someone faint.

"And if we could all settle down now for bidding to commence," comes a voice on a loudspeaker.

Bidding? Shit, shit, shit, *shit!*

"Are we being fucking auctioned off?!" I hear someone say from behind me. The incredulity in her voice might have been amusing because - duh - yes we are being fucking auctioned off. Auctioned off like cattle. What took you so long to get with the program?! Except, it's not amusing. Not at all. It's real.

Beside me, Gwen tugs on my arm. "Why was that voice speaking English?"

I have no idea. And I'm about to tell Gwen just that when Chastity gasps at my other side. "Where did you get that shot from?! That's-... I fucking hate the paparazzi!" she squeals, stomping her fluffy-slipper-covered foot into the sawdust beneath us.

Following her gaze up, up, up I see a large screen floating in mid-air above the pit. The image flickers a little but continues to bob gently up and down as it slowly rotates, making sure all the aliens above us can see the huge, hovering photograph of Chastity clearly drunk off her face, falling out of a nightclub with crimson lipstick smeared and her lovely red hair plastered to her sweaty skin.

"I don't think a bad photograph is a priority right now," someone hisses at her. "They're selling you off to the highest bidder!"

At that, Chastity shrieks in outrage and breaks away from our little herd, bending and hobbling as she removes one slipper, then the other. "Over my dead body!" she declares, hurling her slippers up at our bidding audience. One of them lands back in the pit. The other manages to whack a hulking, orange-scaled beast, who had been too engrossed in the

pamphlet held in his clawed hand to see it coming. Chastity reaches for the slipper that landed in the sawdust.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I call out, making the redhead whirl around.

“Do you have a better one?!”

“Lot number EF1255671. A human female of 27 years-” the loudspeaker announces.

“I’m 24!” Chastity protests up into the air.

“2.8 zikrons in height and of good breeding health.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Tessa murmurs, moving closer and casting her wide-eyed gaze around as if an escape route was about to open up any minute now.

Chastity throws her slipper again. This time, it’s caught by a green tentacled individual who proceeds to lick it and then leer down at her. He makes a chirping noise and raises a paddle with odd squiggly characters displayed on it.

“I don’t think that was a good idea, Chastity!” I say, moving forward to grab her and bring her back into the fold of our huddle.

“They want to *breed me*. Did you hear that?!” she looks at us all, the color drained from her face. “What else can I do? Maybe if I misbehave enough, no one will buy me?”

“I think Tentacles McGee already made a bid,” I tell her.

“Besides,” Alana cuts in, putting a hand on the redhead’s arm, “we’re being treated like livestock here. What happens to livestock that doesn’t sell?”

Chastity’s brows knit together. “I don’t know,” she splutters, “I don’t know anything about farms. They get treated well and taken back home?” she says with so much forced hope in her voice, it hurts to hear it. Looking around us, she watches as we all slowly shake our heads.

“They get taken out back and shot in the head.”

Chapter 3

SERENA

One by one, we're bid on. Some of the bidders, I don't see. I only heard their odd noises from the shadows and the auctioneer's approval of their bid. Occasionally, there were numbers spoken in English, along with a metric I didn't recognize. When it comes to my turn, the screen floating high above us rotates to show the picture I use on social media to drum up business for my cam work; my chestnut hair nicely tousled to one side, makeup artfully done and wearing virginal white lingerie and fluffy angel wings strapped to my back to complete the look. It was one of my personas - the one where a lot of my clients liked to think I was some dumb innocent girl that they manage to corrupt. Like they, and they alone had managed to talk me into doing things for them in front of the camera. There was a sinister edge to it really, when you think about it.

A member of the crowd up above places a bid and I whirl to try and get a look at him. It's the one who bought Chastity too. The one who looks like a giant grasshopper or praying mantis or something. His buggy eyes were hard to track but I knew he wasn't looking at me, here, down in the pit. He was busy reading whatever the squiggles on the screen next to my photograph said and then consulting something in his hand - some sort of tablet device.

He seems pleased with his purchase. I, on the other hand, am wondering how best to perform self-defense against a... *giant bug*.

After what seems like both an eternity *and* not long enough, our herd of women is being threatened by the gray guards and their cattle prods again. We are separated. I'm assuming we're being grouped together by order of who purchased us. Thankfully, Chastity, Gwen, Tessa, Alana, and I - along with four other girls - were bought by the same buyer. For what, I do not know, but there are a lot of us. Did he get us... *wholesale*? What are his plans for us? Are we going to be sold on individually? And for what purpose? What do bug

people even eat anyway because I sure as shit hope it's not humans and we've just been bought as wholesale ingredients for his space-restaurant or something.

I need to calm the fuck down.

We're in a smaller, caged-off holding area when I feel the need to bend at the waist, bracing my hands on my knees, and begin to breathe deeply. My hair falls like a curtain around my face and sways toward the sawdust floor. All I can see are the wood shavings and my bare toes. My toenails are painted with the peach varnish one of my clients had sent to me. He had wanted to watch me paint it on... with my tits out, of course. Normally lowering my head and concentrating on my breathing helped to calm me down. Right now, I can just feel myself getting unbearably hot and the whooshing sound of my pulse in my ears is getting louder and louder.

"You ok, Serena?" Tessa crouches beside me to ask.

About as ok as someone can be when they're all set to be bug-people food. Or a bug person's breeder.

That thought alone makes me want to vomit. Maybe that explains all the sawdust.

"I'm fine," I lie. "Just need a breather, you know?" Pulling back the curtain of my hair reveals Tessa to me. All I can offer her is a weak smile.

Tessa worries her lip. "Do you think we could jump him? The one who bought us?"

Just then, the gate to our holding pen opens with a metallic clang. Four gray guards grunt in their guttural language at us before prodding the air in the direction they want us to move. *Oh goodie*, we're being herded again.

We're boarded onto what I assume is a spaceship roughly the size of a large removal van. It's not white or silver and disc-shaped like all the 'flying saucers' and UFOs I've seen in the movies, but black and sleek, and shaped more like an organic creature similar to a beetle, complete with iridescent plates here and there. Alana is the first in our line up the ramp with me following along behind. Still, our buggy-

buyer hasn't emerged so our gray guards encourage us up the ramp with painful prods of those awful shock sticks.

Alana sucks in a sharp breath when she first enters the belly of the ship. And peering around her, I see it too. We aren't the only human women bug-man has been buying. Only these others don't seem to be awake.

Lining one wall is what I could only imagine are described as 'pods'. They're lit up from within in a bright, eerie blue light and full of some sort of liquid. A metal, silver band encases both the top and bottom of each cylindrical pod and features flashing lights twinkling on and off in both red and green. But inside... inside each pod is a woman. Six of them. They float lifelessly like some sort of oddly beautiful but macabre art installation, with eyes serenely closed and their hair and sleepwear slowly floating ethereally around them.

Someone behind us yelps when our guards are tired of waiting for the rest of us to board. Prompted to shuffle inside, I can barely take my eyes off the eerie illuminated sleeping women. I don't even bat an eye when one tusked gray monster shoves me down into a seat - apparently one of many that lines the wall opposite the pods. What does get my attention though, is the way a metal collar clamps around my neck once all of us are seated. Gasps, yelps, pleas, and scrambling hands are met with deaf ears as our guards disappear from the ship, their heavy footfalls clonking down the metal ramp as they go back to their other duties at that awful auction.

I'm breathing fast again, fingers trying to pry open the jaws of my collar as it holds me fast in place on my seat. Someone is crying. I think it's Tessa but I can't turn my head enough to see any of the girls at my side. I'm forced to watch the floating women, sleeping in their watery pods. "Calm your breathing, Serena," Alana says from beside me, her voice even with a hint of authority.

"Calm my breathing?! How do you expect me to be calm when-

“Hyperventilating and having a panic attack isn’t going to help anything. *Breathe*. We’re in this together. You were the one who said we needed a plan, remember? How can we plan anything if we’re all panicking? *Breathe*,” she repeats, reaching over to take my hand. I grasp it tight. “We need clear heads.”

She’s right. She’s right, she’s right, she’s right. Ok, breathe. Just concentrate on that. In, hold, out, hold. Close my eyes.

Alana helps by slowly lifting our joined hands on every inhale and lowering them on the exhale. Somewhere along the line, I grabbed hold of the hand of the person on the other side too. After a while, the only sound is our breathing as our hands rise and fall. Nothing else. No floating girls, no auction, no aliens.

Until the one who just bought us boards his ship to survey his new purchase.

Since I can’t turn my head, I don’t see him until he manages to walk the entirety of our line of seats. He’s tall this close-up, with huge buggy eyes and antennae that twitch atop his head. He wears long, richly embroidered robes that sweep the floor as he walks and poking out of them at his front are two sets of praying mantis-like arms. His thin neck is dripping in necklaces, layered one after the other with sparking jewels and precious-looking metals. “Greetings, human females,” he says, though I don’t see a mouth so much as two sets of mandibles working as he talks, one smaller than the other. “You will be pleased to hear that you have been acquired by the esteemed Mama Z’rykby.” Two of his mantis hands start rubbing together as he looks at us expectantly.

The silence is stifling as he watches us, waiting.

Chastity clears her throat. “Err... thank you, Mama Kirby. But, honestly, I think there’s been a mistake. We all need to be-”

Buggy raises one insect-like hand to silence her. “I am not Mama Z’rykby. I am Z’irri. I am lucky enough to call Mama Z’rykby my wife. And it is clear you do not know your

own luck. You are all fortuitous enough to join her menagerie of pets.”

“Pets?” someone asks meekly.

Z’irri makes some clicking, whirring noises and nods his head. “Oh, yes. Mama will take good care of you before finding you a suitable place at the side of a wealthy mate. You see, Mama’s breeding agency is unlike any others. She has an incredible soft spot for her pets and only wishes to place them with the best of the best males. Males who can provide financially for them and are well versed on human care.”

Breeding agency? Fuck. That.

Z’irri continues, seemingly completely unaware of the mental meltdowns that are undoubtedly happening in the mind of every one of Mama’s new ‘pets’. “It’s why I travel so far to the Krixitazza quadrant to get you for her!” He leans back proudly, one set of his hands holding onto the lapels of his gold and green robes. “This auction station is one of the most thorough. Their cataloging system is second-to-none. I was able to carefully pick the most ethically sourced humans so Mama’s conscience can remain clear. She does so hate to see you poor creatures suffering.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I butt in, holding up a hand. “What do you mean by ‘ethically sourced’? I was taken against my will, in my sleep. That doesn’t feel particularly ethical to me.”

A murmured chorus of agreement meets my ears.

Z’irri clears his throat. “That may be the case, but together with the information the auction station provides in their catalog of lots, Mama and I cross-referenced your social networking score with your willingness score to hand-pick the most ethical pets for Mama’s agency. For example,” he moves closer to me, removing some sort of tablet from the folds of his robes and starts scrolling, “lot number EF998748, you had a low social networking score. No dependant children. No attached mate. And no living relatives that appear frequently on your ‘social medias’.” Z’irri had actually used air quotes with his buggy little hands for that last part. But air quotes or not, ouch - that hurt.

“But what do you mean by ‘willingness,’ Alana asks. “None of us are willing.”

“Ah, that is where you are wrong!” Z’irri answers happily, his antennae twitching this way and that excitedly. “lot number EF998748 sells her company on a site called... ahh...” he scrolls and scrolls until he finds the information. “Ah! Here it is! A service called ‘Busty Camz 24/7.’” My face begins to flame. “So, you see, she is already very willing.”

“I do cam work to make rent and you think that means I want to... to be *bred by an alien*?!”

“What about me?!” Gwen pipes up. “Serena doesn’t deserve to be here just because she does... stuff on camera... but I don’t do anything like that! Why am I here?”

“And me!”

“Me too! I’ve never even sent nudes to anyone!”

Z’irri chuckles like we are all little children asking juvenile questions as he taps here and there on his tablet screen. “Lot EF887052, you are signed up to fairytaledconnections.com, and lot EF887611, you dabbled with something called ‘Soles Bared’.”

”*Fairytaledconnections* is a *dating* site,” Gwen hisses. “And one I didn’t even sign myself up for! My work colleagues were trying to help me meet someone new!”

Z’irri only nods his head, antennae bobbing with the movement. “Yes! An agency! Just like Mama Z’rykby’s!” He seems rather pleased with himself as he tucks his tablet away back into the confines of his robes before he scratches on a mandible. “Except, Mama will take much better care of you, I’m sure. She’ll find a better match than this ‘Kurt-likes-skirt’ male the Earth agency found for you. Why, just three solar-turns ago, one of her pets landed herself a Nibrelean prince! What do you say to that?”

From the movement Z’irri makes, I can only presume he’s rocking back on his heels, awaiting some sort of awed response from his new little human pets. But because of his luxurious, flowing green and gold robes, I couldn’t quite tell. I

couldn't even guess what his legs would look like or how many of them he might have. To say his proclamation was met with crickets seemed a fitting choice for my mind to make, considering there was a six-foot relative of the Earth insect standing right in front of me.

"That sounds... very impressive," I say, the words not sounding my own. "We are truly very lucky to be sought out by Mama Z-" What was her name? "Uh..."

"Mama Z'rykby," Alana supplies beside me, her hand taking up mine again with a little squeeze. Good. She got it. If we act complacent, docile, and happy with our lot, perhaps buggy will let his guard down at some point.

Z'irri rubs his little, insect-y clawed hands together gleefully. "Excellent," he chirps. "Mama will be pleased to welcome you to the agency! Now, let's get out of this station before my docking fee increases."

"I don't know," Chastity whispers from somewhere to my right. "Going along with all this is all fine and dandy until someone's expected to suck grasshopper dick."

"Hopefully we can figure something out before it comes to that," I hiss back. "But, for now, we need to stay in his good books. We need to make him think we're harmless and that there's no way we would try to escape."

Chastity seems to think on it for a few more seconds and, apparently deciding my plan was the best we've got, changes the subject rather abruptly. "So," she says, blowing out a breath, "fess up. Who sells pictures of their feet? Buggy said one of us used 'Soles Bared' and if that's not a play on words for foot fetishists, then I'll be very disappointed."

A beat or two of silence before Alana answers, shifting in her seat next to me. "I have very aesthetically pleasing feet and I needed money to help me through law school."

Chastity is the first to burst out laughing - the kind of laugh that starts with a snort because she's been trying to hold it in. We all have, to be honest. Maybe we're a little delirious

as we sit here, restrained to our seats by the neck while flying through deepest space and giggling like schoolgirls. The laughter fades just as quickly as it had erupted, the mood suddenly sobering.

“I made more money with my feet than I ever did waiting tables,” Alana whispers, her voice a little broken and raw. I grasp her hand and hold on tightly again.

As far as I can tell, we’ve been traveling through space for the best part of an hour now, though the movement from the ship is impossibly smooth. If I turn my head as far as I possibly can - which is hardly any at all - I can just about make out some sort of lit-up cockpit from the corner of my eye, and along with it, the only windows available in this small, beetle-shaped spaceship.

I try not to strain myself to look too often. The thought of zooming past stars and planets makes my stomach feel like it’s dropped out. But I can’t stop looking. All these millennia, humankind has looked up at the night skies, at stars burning brightly millions of miles away, and wondered what was out there.

It turns out, what’s out here is a bunch of jerks.

“Hey, Z’irri,” Chastity calls out like she’s addressing an Earth-based app and not our insectoid captor. “How come you speak English?”

Z’irri turns in his captain’s chair to face us. “I have a translator implant. I will be able to communicate with anyone who speaks any of the known languages.”

“Why didn’t the big gray guys have translators fitted?” I ask, curious.

“The T’rishini from the auction station? Their owners probably do not care to spare them the expense. Besides, they are a race that prefers to talk with force, not with words.”

I have a few sore spots to confirm that.

After a second or two, I give Z’irri my brightest smile, “I am so happy that we can talk with you, though, Z’irri.”

He seems pleased by my simpering words and turns back around to face the cockpit.

”*Kiss-ass*,” someone whispers jokingly.

“As long as I don’t have to *actually* kiss his buggy butt, I don’t care how much I have to suck up to him,” I hiss back, trying to adjust the way I’m sitting in this damned uncomfortable seat.

“Where is Mama Z’rykby’s agency based?” Alana calls out to Z’irri, trying to cover our whispering.

“Never mind that,” Z’irri answers, frantically pressing buttons and checking monitors. “Looks like we need to make an unscheduled stop at...” his screens zoom here and there, expanding and whizzing, bouncing from what I can only think must be coordinate to coordinate until he finds what he’s looking for. “A-ha!” Z’irri exclaims, “here, this conservation island on planet G36229 should do the trick!”

There’s a sharp swooping in my gut and it feels like we’re careening to one side, and *fast*. “What’s happening?!” Gwen yelps. We’re all holding hands again.

“The authorities have been spotted in the area and closing in on our intended path. The safest bet would be to land for a semi-solar turn so as not to be detected and give them a chance to move on without detecting us.”

“Why, is keeping humans as pets illegal, Z’irri?” Chastity pointedly asks.

The buggy alien only throws a glance over the shoulder of his captain’s chair. “Of course not,” he chuckles to himself, “it’s just that I declared this ship a wreckage after a particularly nasty crash two Torkii Sun rotations ago to avoid the hefty taxation charges. They won’t be pleased to see it flying.”

“Uh, no judgment here and all, buggy,” Chastity says, practically having to shout over the noises of our acceleration, “but is it really a good time to start saying things like ‘wreckage’ and ‘particularly nasty crash’ when we’re currently hurtling at light-speed toward an alien planet!?”

My insides feel like they've liquified and I have to shut my eyes, trying to focus on the hands I hold at either side of me. Someone starts chanting a prayer and although I've never really put much stock into it, I do too. Z'irri shouts something over the din and I crack an eye open to see him buckle himself securely into his seat. Behind him, the view of the planet nears through the windows.

Planet G-whatever-he-called-it is hot as hell! From what I can tell by craning my neck, we've landed in a clearing, surrounded by what I think is thick jungle. We landed only about ten minutes ago and even Z'irri is complaining about the humidity. The air is thick with heat and the constant hum of jungle insects outside, added to occasionally by the call of some sort of bird. I presume it's bird noises anyway. What do I know about this planet?

We've been sitting here, restricted to our seats by our collars, with nothing to do but stew in our fear. Now and again, someone will sniffle, and I know they're trying not to wail out loud. I feel the same. There are hushed whispers up at the other end of our row of seats - where girls named Bea, Skye, Dove, and Sophia sit. I can't hear what they're saying. Are they planning something? Have they noticed something we could use to out-wit our new buggy-overlord? I don't know. And I'm not one to wait for others to figure things out for me either. I need to come up with something. If only we could get free of our seats.

"Z'irri?" I tentatively ask, eyeing him and his drooping, unhappy-looking antennae. The whispering stops and the silence in the ship has me swallowing thickly. "Any chance we could be let out for a bathroom break?"

"A bathroom break?" he echoes, mandibles moving as he speaks.

"Yeah. To... You know. Expel... fluids?"

Z'irri tuts to himself. "You can wait. I'm not risking runaways."

“You can trust us!” Chastity supplies. “It would be awfully nice of you to let us stretch our legs. Very ethical.”

I can just imagine her batting those thick eyelashes of hers at him.

“Besides,” Alana adds, “you won’t want us to have accidents. Human waste can be so messy and sometimes we just can’t hold it- *oops!*”

“What are you doing?!” Z’irri exclaims, jumping up onto his chair and waving his multiple insectoid arms. “Don’t- *Don’t do that there!* Who is going to clean up your expelled liquids?! Is it toxic?! Oh, my stars! Here!” He fumbles inside his robes for his little screen, taps a few buttons, and seconds later all our collars click open, freeing our now rather sweaty necks. Beside our row of seats, the door slides open with a whoosh. “Go do your business outside! Shoo! *Shoo!*”

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” Chastity mumbles as we all stand and make our way outside. My eyes meet with Alana’s before quickly glancing down to where her hot pink button-down pajamas now have a delightful wet patch. ‘*Thank you,*’ I mouth to her, catching her blush before turning and following the others emptying out of the ship.

Outside, the air seems even closer and all around us is thick jungle foliage, only not all of it is green. Some leaves are as black as night and others an eggplant sort of purple with bright pink veining running through it. Below my bare feet, the feather-soft grass is bone-white. In the sky hangs two suns, one smaller than the other, and, looming low, two ghostly moons huddled together as well. “Well, Toto, I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore,” I say to myself as I try to get my bearings and take stock of the situation.

”*What’s the plan?!*” Chastity sidles up to me and hisses. “We can’t escape here. This place is like the deepest, darkest Amazon rainforest on steroids. How would any of us survive? Who knows what lurks out there?” She scans our surroundings and shivers despite the heat.

“I was a Girl Scout,” says Gwen who had moved closer to me and Chastity. “I bet a lot of Earth wilderness survival

stuff can transfer over to other planets.”

Just then, a frog-like creature jumps into the clearing right in front of us. It looks exactly like one of those multi-colored rainforest frogs I’d seen in nature shows... except, maybe a bit... *off*. Like someone had stepped on it or something, making its eyes bulge out of its head just a bit too much.

“Brightly colored. That means it’s poisonous,” Gwen says, informing us with a nod of authority, right before the little froggy opens its mouth and belches out a flame that scorches a patch of white grass. Gwen, Chastity, and I all yelp, leaping backward, away from the fire-frog while it munches on the over-cooked vegetation.

“Ok, Girl Scout, remember anything about flaming frogs from your wilderness survival training?” Chastity teases, hands on her hips, her silk sleep top riding up. Gwen screws up her nose. This is ridiculous.

“We don’t have to escape here,” I interject. “I’ll admit it did cross my mind but seeing it now, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” As if to punctuate my sentiment, fire-froggy jumps forward and belch-fries another patch of grass before chowing down. “But we can still use this to our advantage. He’s let us out to pee, so that’s what we’re going to do. We’ll do our business and go trotting back like good little human pets.” Chastity’s brow furrows at that as I continue. “We need to make him believe we’re loyal and obedient so he loosens the reins for the right time for us to-”

The land rumbles beneath our feet and then stops. Little flame-thrower-froggy hops back into the thick of the jungle before the ground groans once more. My eyes search out the other women’s as if any of them hold the answer.

“The insects have stopped making noise,” Gwen points out in a whisper.

They have.

All around us, it’s deathly quiet.

“What is taking you females so long?” Z’irri says irritably, his robes swaying as he stomps down the ramp of his ship. The moment whatever kind of buggy insect legs he has under all that fabric hits the ground, all hell breaks loose.

Directly beneath him, the dirt, grass, and roots crumble, making way for something huge that erupts from the earth. It all happens so fast and it’s only the shriek and the blur of his robes as Z’irri’s launched into the sky that tells me he had been standing at exactly the wrong place at the wrong time. The thing that emerges from the ground has teeth. Many, *many* rows of teeth. It’s also long and pink like a worm. But huge. Huge and... and currently shaking Z’irri about like a ragdoll, Oh, *fuck!*

There are screams all around me. From the corner of my eye, I see Alana’s hot pink pajamas disappear as she flees into the jungle. Others are doing the same. The body of the worm-monster crashes down, crushing the front half of Z’irri’s untaxed ship, and then raises up again, flicking its head so that its jaws could get a better hold on its prey.

Fuck. This. I’m out of here.

Z’irri screams again and I run. I run. I run. *I run.*

I run until I can’t hear anything anymore, until I’m not even sure which way I came from, until my feet are bloody and I don’t know how many times I’ve almost twisted my ankle over protruding roots or a patch of rocky terrain. I run until my lungs feel like they’re going to *burst*.

I run until I can’t run anymore.

Chapter 4

SERENA

I've not started crying at least. I'm dirty, sweaty, sore all over, oh, and lost in a hostile alien jungle too. I need to find the other girls. Pronto.

Standing from my spot at the base of a tree with smooth, black bark, I cup my mouth with my hands. "*Chastity?!?*" The jungle insects around me go quiet for a beat or two of heart-thumping silence. I do not like that. What I like even less is that I get no answer. "*Alana?!?*" I try next, and again the jungle falls silent directly after my call. I like it even less this time.

Alright. I can't stay here. I need to find the others. Brushing off my dirty butt, I start to walk, shouting the girl's names as I go and hearing those deafening silences directly after each time.

I try shouting their names fast. I try shouting them with a beat in between. For my own rapidly depleting sanity I throw in a "*Yoo-hoo!*" and a whistle for good measure.

"Come on guys, this isn't funny!" I whine loudly into the jungle, passing another tree with huge, shiny red leaves as big as I am. "We need to find each other."

I'm starting to question if I'm wandering in circles when I see a forked tree wrapped in swampy-looking vines that seems far too familiar for me to dismiss. *Shit*. Have I been here before? Should I have marked my way somehow? Is that what Good little Girl Scout Gwen is doing? Maybe that would be a good idea. Maybe it would leave a trail that the others could find too. But what can I use? I don't have anything to score the tree bark or anything to make other kinds of markings on it either. The jungle floor is a no-go, it's just piles and piles of decaying forest debris.

Suddenly, the loud hum of the insects dies down and within that silence, my heart leaps up to my throat. I wait. The

noise of the jungle normally comes back a few seconds after I've shouted someone's name.

It remains quiet.

The downy hairs on the back of my neck start to tingle.

A twig snaps somewhere behind me. I whirl to see what made the noise, but there's nothing but the silent alien jungle. "Chastity?" I venture, though my voice is the quietest it's been since my search started.

A pause and then my own voice comes back to me like an echo. "*Chastity?*" it says, only that's not me calling her name and I'm fairly certain that's not an echo either. My heart stops. There has to be an explanation. One of the others maybe? Or perhaps I brushed past some psychedelic plant that is making me hallucinate sounds?

Because that's my voice.

But I'm not talking.

"H-hello?" I venture.

The same beats of silence. Too long for it to be an actual echo.

"*H-hello?*" the voice in the jungle mimics back at me. Goosebumps rise on my arms.

"*Who's there?!*"

A rustling of leaves draws my attention and I see a dark figure lower from a branch while hanging upside down. Bright orange eyes find mine and a wide mouth moves as the creature says my words back at me, "*who's there?!*" only, the movement of its mouth doesn't match the words it mimics. The effect is... unsettling. My breath hitches in my throat and my heart stutters to a stop as the creature's head rotates to see me properly while still hanging from its branch.

"Please be a friendly... *thing*," I whisper.

The creature's mouth pulls into a smile - a smile that looks too wide and too full of sharp, yellow teeth. Limb after limb, the decidedly not-friendly thing drops gracefully from

the tree while its head seemingly stays in place - a move so unsettling to watch, I start backing up, my back hitting a tree. The creature stands at its full height on its two hind limbs. It's taller than me and if I saw its silhouette from afar, I might be forgiven for mistaking it for a human man. Except this isn't a human man. It's... it's like someone tasked Tim Burton to design a scary as fuck alien chimpanzee.

Nightmare-chimp starts stalking forward, its too-long arms swinging at its sides.

"No, no, no," I whisper, sliding to the side of the tree I'm currently backed against and stumbling further backward.

"No, no, no," demon-chimp whispers back, its creepy smile still in place.

Oh, *fuck* this. I'm about to turn and bolt, hoping beyond hope that I could outrun that... *thing*, when in a flurry of feathers, something huge drops from the sky, landing directly on my advancing nightmare. It must be a bird of prey. The creepy creature shrieks and all I see are ink-black wings as the chimp tries to struggle out of its grasp. *Flap, flap, crunch*. A pained yowl echoes throughout the jungle. This bird must be huge! The wingspan alone is about twice as long as I am tall, if not more. Each beat of its monstrous, dark wings sends a powerful gust of air my way, pressing me further back against the trunk of a tree. Feathers fly as the chimp fights back but the bird must finally make the killing move because the scuffle ends abruptly with a sickening crunch and from beneath the mass of black wings, a demon-chimp limb falls slack against the rotting leaves of the jungle floor.

The wings rise and fall as the bird breathes hard after its well-earned kill. From within the carnage of the fight, I see a black lion-like tail flick, so perhaps the killer-monkey isn't dead after all... or the bird has a tail?

What am I doing? I shouldn't still be here, wondering about the anatomy of different alien species! I need to high-tail it out of here and find the others!

Keeping an eye on the mass of feathers and the now dead demon-chimp, I blindly shift my bare foot, ready to

silently creep away before the monster-bird sees me and decides I look tastier than its recent kill. Managing to shuffle around the trunk of the tree, I decide it's now or never and start to sprint on aching and cut-up feet.

I don't get far. The wind is knocked right out of me as I'm tackled to the ground with a thud from something big leaping onto me from behind. I scream as I go down. "*No!*" My attempt to scramble back up again is thwarted by being pinned down. The monster-bird surrounds me with its onyx wings of death and I'm reminded of all those awful aliens back at the auction - at how many different varieties of threat they all posed. "*Please don't eat me! Please don't eat me! Please don't eat me!*" I chant to myself. My doom says something to me from above. Its voice is deep and surprisingly un-squawk-like for a massive alien bird but the words are still foreign. It repeats its alien words, the tone sounding like a demand. At least it's not eating me. Not yet anyway. Maybe it will fly off with me in its talons to rip into my flesh and feed me to its monster-bird-babies.

Using my arms to shield my face, my forehead currently pressed to the rotting earth, I stay as still and as small as possible. Maybe it'll get bored and leave me alone. But moments pass and peeking to the side, all I can still see is a curtain of dark feathers trapping me from my escape. The predator above me murmurs its words again, softer, this time, its breath ghosting across the back of my sweaty neck.

It hasn't eaten me yet. That's one positive. And perhaps this will mean my death, but I turn to look up at my would-be-killer.

There is no flesh-tearing hooked beak. There are no talons. Above me, pinning me down... is a man.

Sort of.

Our eyes meet and the air leaves my lungs again. The man loosens the pressure he's using to keep me still, allowing me just enough movement to turn fully around so that I'm now on my back, staring up at... *him*. He's bare-chested. He's bare-chested with wings. A quick glance down his impressively

sculpted body tells me he is at least wearing some sort of loin cloth - *thank God* - but nothing else. My eyes dart quickly back up to the... bird-man.

“Um, h-hi,” I say lamely.

He just stares back at me, unmoving.

With my heart in my mouth, I try to shimmy out from under him. “I’m just gonna...” His grip on my hip tightens and he... *growls*.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, help me! I stop trying to move away instantly. “Ok, *nice* scary bird-man, please *don’t* eat me.”

He says nothing. No more of that strange, deep voice, speaking in his melodic alien language. Instead, he tilts his head, his bright turquoise eyes assessing me, looking me over like he’s never seen anything like me before. He probably hasn’t. I’m just a sweaty, dirty, covered in cuts and bruises, totally wingless woman. But for some reason, this bird-man seems fascinated. I hope with every fiber of my being that he’s not trying to figure out if I’m edible. Something wraps around my ankle unexpectedly. I squeak, jerking my leg away which only makes whatever’s wrapped around it hold on more securely and Mr. Bird-Man growl in warning again. I chance a glance down between our bodies to my foot and - *yep* - that’s a tail. He has a tail. *Of course* he has a tail. Why wouldn’t he? Part of me feels like laughing hysterically but all I can do is lay here while this huge, winged alien sates his curiosity about little ol’ wingless, tailless, human me.

So, we stare at each other. And soon I start to notice something in the dim shade of the cocoon of his massive wings; little lights are fading in and out of brightness in here. They’re all different luminous colors - pink, blue, purple, and green. At first, I think they’re fireflies, but then I notice they’re not in the space between me and the alien- they’re *on* him. They’re coming *from* him. On his skin and the ends of each feather of his wings, tiny little lights are pulsing in and out of brightness like he was some sort of child’s night light. Or a lit-up circuit board. Or... *I don’t know* - I’ve never met anyone who had fairy lights under their skin!

Tentatively, the twinkly bird-man lifts a hand, slowly moving it toward my face. I pull away at first but that curiosity never dulls from his eyes as he reaches out and cradles my jaw. Those little lights flash up his fingers at the touch and I watch them travel north of his hand, racing up his muscled arm like loads of little shooting stars glittering across the night sky. Bird-man ignores the tiny lights and turns my face this way and that before murmuring something. His big, warm hand slips gently down to my throat, his thumb sweeping back and forth in a surprisingly tender caress. The thick swallow I make beneath his touch stills his thumb's strokes. Lights all over his body and wings begin to burn brightly.

Ok. So, I'm... making friends? I think. I *think* he's a friendly, scary bird-man? But when he starts sniffing at the air between us and leaning in to sniff harder, I can't lie and say my pulse doesn't go up a notch or two. All I can do is pray that I don't smell like his next meal.

Getting closer and closer, he presses his nose to the side of my face and rumbles something low into my skin that has my goosebumps rising all over again - but in a different way. Urgh. This is no time to start getting horny notions, Serena! What is wrong with me? He might look like a Greek God sculpted from marble, have cool wings, and can light up like a Christmas tree, but he is definitely an alien. And, judging by how easily he was able to dispatch that nightmare-chimp, a pretty dangerous one, too.

Taking a deep drag of air through his nose, bird-man nuzzles at the side of my neck, muttering something else utterly lost on me. This is all getting a little *too* familiar now, what with my neck being a big ol' 'on switch' in terms of erogenous zones. My hands slowly, blindly reach out to his chest, palms meeting hard, warm muscle. I intended to try to push him away, but with the contact, a pulse of light radiates from my touch and twinkles out all across his body and wings.

And... and bird-guy starts making a noise from deep within his chest... a sort of... rumbling purr? And holy shit, I can feel the reverberations through my palms. Pulling away only seems to turn that purr into a growl. My new feathered

friend uses one of his huge hands to press both my palms back on his skin. He seems rather pleased by the contact, giving a little grunt into the side of my throat and swiping my skin with his tongue.

Oh, *fuck*.

The alien's mouth moves down to my collarbone and then back up over my shoulder, alternating between tasting my skin with warm, wet licks of his tongue and eager sniffs of his nose like he can't get enough of my horrible sweaty scent. He starts moving down my arm, gently nipping at the inside of my elbow making me jolt out of my stupor. "Ok, Gomez Addams," I say, finally trying to push him away. "You seem cool and all, but we only just met and I usually at least know a guy's name before we get to the fun part, you know?"

My yammering and gentle pushes seem to do the trick. Bird-guy stops - whatever the hell it was he was doing - and looks up at me with brows drawn together. He looks... vulnerable. And now that I'm half convinced he doesn't intend to fly me off to tear me to pieces and eat me, I notice how chiseled and handsome his face is. He's big compared to the average human and those proportions are reflected on his face too. His face is almost passable as human, but his eyes are a tad bigger and a little further apart. And there's no way any human could naturally have such brightly colored turquoise eyes. His lips are full and his jawline is strong. His hair is as dark as his wings and not quite neatly cut but soft-looking.

Those little skin lights are busily twinkling at both his temples and I can't help but think that means Mr. Feathers here has some thoughts he's currently working through. I almost want to laugh at that. Instead, I reach up and stroke a single finger down his temple and over his cheek, those little sparkly lights following my movement as I do.

He says something to me in his native tongue.

"I wish I knew what you were saying, big guy," I tell him, offering a smile.

He answers, his rumbling voice deep and melodious but the words are utterly lost on me. The little lights on his

skin dance all over and then converge to the area over his upper chest, the sparks pulsing and throbbing there and seeming to get brighter and brighter like a supernova. Looking down at his own chest, the alien man's eyes widen and suddenly he's no longer on top of me, no longer caging me in with his huge, black wings.

I blink at the quick influx of daylight to my eyes and sit up to see Mr. Feathers crouching at my feet. It sounds like he's demanding something when he speaks, gesturing to his lit-up chest and then back at me.

“Hey, buddy, I have nothing to do with... whatever is going on with your skin. That's all on you.”

He makes a whining sound at that and I can only deduce he's just as frustrated as I am not to be able to communicate. At my ankle, I feel his tail tighten the hold he still has on me. “Do you think you could let me go?” I ask, leaning over and tapping at his black velvet-covered tail.

Instead of doing that, the oddly handsome bird-man seems to take it as an invitation to inspect my foot, lifting it first with his tail and then cradling it ever so carefully in his warm hands. I wince at the movement. My feet are pretty cut up from all my running and stumbling through the jungle. Inspecting my injuries, the bird-man's brows knit together in concern. He hisses out a one-syllable word that sounds suspiciously like a curse and before I can tell him it's not all that bad, he grabs me, launching us both into the sky with powerful beats of his huge wings.

Chapter 5

RYNN

I cannot believe it. The creature I saved from the mimyckah scum is... *a female*. She is not like me. She is wingless, tailless, small, and incredibly soft to my touch. She is not from any Trixikka tribe - how could she be? She is *a female!* Not one locked behind the protection of a Temple. And not only that... but I think she has lit my heart-stars.

It is something of legend now. Something no tribe member will have living memory of. But in the many bellies of the sacred Eyrie Caves, there are writings and drawings of such a thing. Writings and drawings of my people - my people who used to live as one tribe, males *and* females. *Together!* That was before the Punishing Sickness. The disease the Goddesses spread through Trixikka females to punish our males for how they had treated them. Now, our females live safe behind the walls of our temple and we swear to protect them in payment for the atrocities our male ancestors committed many generations ago.

But this female - *this* female here, in my arms, clinging to me so tightly as I fly and shrieking obscenely loud noises of what I can only guess is joy - she is behind no Temple wall. She is here. She has ignited my heart-stars. She is *mine*.

I twirl in the air with sheer glee. Never have I felt such a feeling. A female. A real female, here in my arms! My odd little female must feel the same happiness that I do, for she yells and holds me tightly, those oddly appealing mounds on her chest pressing into my frame. Tucking my wings in and leaning, I aim for my tribe at the foot of the mountain. Together, we dive through the air, hurtling faster and faster toward my people. The males I am tasked to lead will surely be as pleased to hear of this blessing from the Goddesses as I am.

Landing at the outskirts of our dwellings, I reluctantly release my female. Her legs wobble when her feet meet the ground and I curse myself all over again. She is injured and I

had not noticed before. I, High Spear Rynn, had not protected this female from injury. A shadow of shame clouds my heart, but I will get her to the healers as soon as possible. “Come, little-light,” I tell her, gently taking her elbow to guide her in the correct direction. Instead, my female yanks away from me and shoves me square in the chest while speaking in her nonsense words.

”*Dontyoueverdothatagain!*” she yells. It is clear she is vexed with me for some unknown reason but I must admit she is quite adorable in this state. “*Iwanttostayfirmlyontheground! Doyouhearmeyoufeatherbrainedidiot!*” she continues, gesturing to her feet and then shoving me again. Goddess! This female is glorious.

“Yes. Your feet,” I say to her slowly. “We will go to the healers now and all will be well.”

“High Spear?” A voice calls from between two of the huts. It is my Second Spear, Mavyx. “Is all well?”

As he rounds the wall of the hut, my little-light yelps, and leaps behind me, making me chuckle. She is flighty, but she will learn that nothing will harm her now that I have her. As it is proclaimed in the words of our people; *she will be protected.*

“All is well, Mavyx,” I tell him, smiling. His brows quirk and he leans to try and see what had slipped behind me just now. I shift out of the way to allow him a better view. My little-light’s eyes are big and round as she looks from him to me and back again.

”*Goddess,*” Mavyx exclaims, slack-jawed. “What is it?”

I smile proudly. “A female.”

“It... it cannot be. What is she doing out here? Outside the Temple?”

I shake my head. “I do not know these answers, brother. But look,” I gesture to my chest, where my heart-stars are alight and have remained ignited ever since my little-light coaxed them out.

Mavyx sways where he stands, staring at my chest - staring at the skin-stars that will never dim because they know I have found her - my mate. *“Impossible,”* he mutters, his skin stars pulsing at his temples.

“And yet here you witness it.”

“But-”

My patience wears thin. “Do you dishonor your High Spear by questioning his heart?”

“No, my High Spear,” he says, straightening his spine and averting his eyes. I will let it pass. Mavyx is a good, loyal Second Spear and an excellent Protector. My people have never laid eyes upon a female before, much less one who is the mate of their High Spear.

“Go. Find a healer and bring him to my dwelling,” I say, issuing a dismissal and turning back to my little-light. Mavyx does not immediately move to carry out my orders, but it is fine. The shock of this discovery will take some time for the whole tribe to overcome.

Lifting my female into my arms jolts out a string of new nonsense words from her. *“IfyoustartflyingagainImgonnapluckyoulikeaturkey!”*

“Hush, my little-light,” I tell her, carrying her the rest of the way to my dwelling. Mine is the largest hut in the tribe as is befitting my title of High Spear. As I walk, I cannot help but think how fragile females are now that I can see one with my very own eyes. She is small, and where a Protector’s body is lean and hard with powerful muscle, hers is beautifully soft, luscious, and precious beyond measure. Perhaps that is what those soft mounds on her chest are for? Protection of some kind? It turns my stomach to think of how my ancestors would clip the wings of their Trixikka females. Perhaps that is why the Goddesses have gifted me with a flightless female; to remind us of our ancestor’s sins so that we might do better. “You have roused my heart-stars,” I tell her in a tone as soft as I can manage. “You are mine to protect and have nothing to fear from this day onward.”

Once inside my dwelling, the female seems to calm. I let her down from my arms and she instantly begins to inspect the place. I allow her. None of my Protectors, nor the rest of my tribe would dare openly examine the dwelling of their High Spear, but she is female, and she inspires this odd yearning inside me to impress her. I, too, now look around my space, inherited to me by my father, who was High Spear before me. The hut is large and has everything a Protector would need. Does it have everything a female will need? I confess I do not know. I have been taught very little about females, only that they are precious beyond measure. Now that I can see one, touch her and scent her, I know these teachings to be true beyond all doubt.

I watch as the female approaches my nest. I have chosen the softest of frizikki hides and leaves from the Hizazzi plant to build it, as well as incorporated as many of my own feathers as possible of course. My scent is strongest there and I feel the oddest sense of trepidation as she inspects it. If she should reject this nest, if she should deem it not worthy, somehow, I know I will feel the blow of rejection keenly. My Goddess-given female turns back toward me and I find myself inhaling deeply, puffing up my chest and widening my wings as though I, too, am part of her scrutiny.

”Nicediggs,” she says in her nonsense tongue. *“Doyousleepinthishugeassnest?”*

I do not know what she is saying. Something about her tone makes it sound like a question, but I cannot be sure and I do not know what it is she is asking. Why would the Goddesses give me a female I cannot understand? It makes no sense at all, and yet, who am I to question the will of the Goddesses?

“You will be happy here,” I tell her, though she frowns in response. I find myself frowning too. “I... will learn what makes you happy... somehow.”

She smiles, though there’s no knowing behind it. She is just as clueless about my words as I am about hers. Her beautiful smile vanishes as quickly as a karrakarra flower traps its prey and she makes a perplexing ‘oooo’ noise as she hurries

past me over to my collection of life-stones. The wall she rushes to is lined with my trunks. Some house my weapons, some my hides, and one, encrusted with chips of life-stone too small to be considered for offerings, holds all items I have collected that are meant for the Goddesses of the Temple.

”*I’ve never seen a gemstone like this,*” my female says, running a dainty finger over the shards of multi-colored life-stone, awakening them with her touch. “*They glow!*” she gasps.

Goddess, I wish I knew what she was saying.

Crouching on my haunches beside her, I drape one wing around her back. She stiffens and looks over her shoulder at my offering of protection and comfort warily. My tail flicks behind me and I lift my wing slightly so as not to touch her. I must tread carefully with my little-light, it seems. She is almost as skittish as a frizikki. “Inside here,” I say to her carefully, reaching to open up my trunk, “I keep everything I will need for offerings to the Temple.” The lid opens and my female gives me another little gasp at what she sees. It is a noise I must confess affects me in unexpected ways. My chest constricts and my skin-stars race down my abdomen, leading to my awakening cock. “Life-stones, unused seed pots, and my most handsome feathers,” I tell her to try and distract myself from the tightening at my groin. Her little hand goes to touch one of the larger life-stones before pausing in mid-air. She looks to me, asking for my permission. I happily grant it. All that I have is now hers.

My female seems to watch in awe as one by one, her fingers pass over each life-stone, awakening the light from within with her touch. When her hand reaches my stash of feathers, I cannot help but hold my breath, hoping beyond hope that she does not find them lacking. Holding up a large flight feather for her inspection she comments her nonsense tongue and then runs a finger up and down the side, right from the downy barbs up to the very tip. I swear I feel the sensation trickle down both my wings as I watch her do such a thing and cannot fight the shudder that travels down my spine. The feather’s stars ignite at her touch and she makes that enticing gasping sound again. It makes me want to... I do not know

what it makes me want to do... but it makes me want to do it so very much.

“My High Spear?” comes a voice from outside my hut - the healer I had asked Mavyx to fetch. Standing, I answer, permitting him to enter. My female stands too, staying close as the Elder healer enters. “*Oh, my feathers!*” he exclaims, seeing my little-light for the first time. “So, it is true then? A female has been brought to the tribe?”

I stand tall, breathing deeply to expand my chest, showing off my newly ignited heart-stars. The healer notices them, his eyes widening. “As you can see, Elder, I tell no untruths. The Goddesses have gifted the tribe with a female and you must heal her.” I gesture to her feet.

The Elder looks wary. “My High Spear,” he says, clutching his woven basket of healing utensils and salves as his skin-stars work manically at his temples. “She is... I have never healed a female before. I do not know if her body works the same as our tribe. And what’s more, she is wingless and tailless. She has no stars from what I can tell. I do not know-”

”*Enough,*” I bite out through gritted teeth. My female flinches beside me. I start wrapping my tail around her thigh for comfort but she soon brushes it away. I try to ignore the sting her refusal gives me and turn back to the healer. “You will heal her,” I tell him. “There may be differences, but those are things you will have to learn, Elder. I will not have my female suffering.”

“Yes, High Spear,” he says, swallowing thickly before turning to my little-light and asking her to be seated on my nest.

Chapter 6

SERENA

The older bird-guy was talking to me but as usual, I had no idea what was being said. The younger, handsome idiot who had scared me half to death by flying me here responds, and then leaves, fetching a wooden bucket filled with water. Then, through a series of gestures and soft-sounding words that I can't understand, he urges me to sit on the huge ass nest thing and dip my feet into the water. The cool feeling on my cut-up feet is divine, making me close my eyes and sigh with relief. When I open my eyes again, both bird-men are staring, their bright, blinking eyes making a study of me. The handsome one's body lights are going crazy and there's a particularly bright trickle of lights zooming over the angular cut of his hip-bones and down his taut abdomen until they disappear beneath his loincloth.

Do not think about following those lights with your tongue. *Do not* think of following those lights with your tongue. *God damn it*, Serena!

I look away abruptly from both bird-men, but especially the one who seems to literally be having a disco in his pants. One of them - I assume the older one, who's kneeling at my feet - reaches into the water and gently pulls one foot from the bucket. His movements pause and I hear a sniffing sort of sound. When I look back, both men look like confused bloodhounds scenting the air before their focus zeroes in on me. There's a murmured conversation between them and the old dude gets to work on my feet but the handsome one remains standing, staring intently at me with those turquoise eyes of his.

"Thank you," I offer the man who had patched up my feet with some form of tingly salve. He nods as he stands, saying something but we both know there's no understanding between us. Still, I hope he can sense that I'm grateful. The ointment he had rubbed into my skin had an oily texture but felt like it was helping and now, both feet were wrapped in thin material. In the time it had taken the old man to tend to

my feet, day had turned to night and the noise of the surrounding jungle seems to get louder. The other girls are out there. In the dark. On a strange and dangerous planet. “You have to help my friends,” I say to the handsome one who had saved me from that demon-chimp earlier today. “They’re out there and... and they don’t have anyone to help them.”

He answers, but of course, it means nothing to me. How can I make him understand?

The older bird-man leaves after bowing his head in deference to the younger one. The gesture makes me think that perhaps the handsome bird-man is some sort of leader. The other alien - the huge one we had seen not long after landing here had acted the same way too.

I try to stand but that effort is quickly thwarted by my bird-man who gently urges me to remain seated with a warm hand on my shoulder, those lights zinging up his arm at the contact again. “Okay, I’ll stay off my feet,” I tell him as he crouches down in front of me, the apex of his tucked-in wings looming high above him, the feathers at the bottom now draped on the floor.

He says a word that sounds like ‘reeeeen’ as he lays his hand over his chest. “Reeeen.... reeeen.”

I think he’s trying to tell me his name. “Reeeen?” I say, trying to mimic the word, prompting him to correct me, though it sounds exactly the same as I’m saying it, to be honest. “Reeen?... Rin?” It’s close, I think but the way his alien tongue murmurs his name, drawing out the sounds makes it seem like there are hidden syllables in there somewhere. “R-Rahynn?... Rynn?” His smile is dazzling as he nods and pats his chest, repeating that word over and over. “Rynn? Your name is Rynn? Sounds the same to me, big guy, but if it makes you happy,” I chuckle. Then he gestures to me. “Oh! Serena!” I tell him. “My name is Serena.”

Rynn’s brows draw together. “Mwy... nam-”

“No, no, no,” I shake my head at him and place my hand on his hard chest, a billion lights exploding across his skin from the touch. God, why is this alien man so damn

pretty? “Rynn,” I say, repeating his name and then moving my hand to my chest. “Serena... *Ser-ree-nah*.”

”*Zah... ree... nah... Zah-reenah... Zahreenah.*”

“Close enough,” I smile at him, nodding.

“Zahreenah,” he repeats, seemingly trying my name out on his tongue. “*Zahreenah.*”

My grin only widens because Rynn seems mighty pleased with himself for mastering my name. He starts babbling away in his language though and I’m utterly lost. “Urgh. I wish I knew what you were saying,” I tell him, but all he does is take my hand and place it back over his chest where his little lights are clustered the thickest and repeats his name.

“Rynn,” he says, “Rynn, Zahreenah.”

The intensity of his bright turquoise gaze is enough to make my breath hitch. “This is all very nice but I need to find the others,” I whisper to him.

“Rynn, Zahreenah,” he repeats, that tail of his curling around my ankle again. “Zahreenah, Rynn.” Then, he stands, leans down to scoop me up in his strong arms, and positions me to lie down on his huge pile of leaves and feathers. I go to sit up but I’m gently pushed back down and he says something that sounds like ‘*tikkytikky*’ before he lays down next to me and drapes one huge wing over my body like a big, feathery blanket. Have I just been put to bed?

“Tikkytikky, Zahreenah,” he says, momentarily closing his eyes before they pop back open again.

I guess ‘tikkytikky’ means sleep? “*You tikkytikky,*” I tell him, huffing. “I’ll be over here worrying about my friends all lost and alone in the jungle of death out there.”

But even as I lay here, stewing, I know there’s nothing I can do right now. I’m exhausted. And the guy that might be able to help them doesn’t even know what I’m saying. If only I could find a way of telling him there are more of us out there.

“Tikkytikky, Zahreenah,” Rynn urges beside me, making me roll my eyes before begrudgingly closing them.

“Alright Mr. Twinkle-Feathers, I’ll tikkytikky. Happy?”

The tail still wrapped around my ankle gives a little squeeze and that purring noise starts up again, drowning out the din from the surrounding jungle. Exhaustion coupled with the lulling rumbling from the big feathery guy’s chest soon has my protests to sleep floating away. Soon, I feel myself falling, falling, falling into sleep’s embrace. In my dreams I see my mom - my mom who left me with a kindly neighbor at the tender age of ten, but instead of running off with another man like in reality, this dream-mom was ripped away from me by a huge gray monster and thrust into the auction pit where an audience of demon-chimps jump up and down in their seats, whooping and screaming for her. Then the killer-worm erupts from the sawdust-coated ground, catching her in its rows and rows of needle-sharp teeth.

Chapter 7

RYNN

When I dream, I dream of Zahreenah. When I wake, she is still beside me, breathing deeply. Sometime in the night, she has crept closer, and now, here in the weak light of a one-sun morning, her little nose is almost pressed to my chest, she is that close. Her breaths fan across my skin, igniting skin-stars where the sensation tickles. I regret that I must wake her, she looks so peaceful. But wake her, I must. The tribe will need to see the gift we have been bestowed, and I must give thanks to the Goddesses of our Temple.

I remove my wing from around her. Zahreenah seems to react by trying to burrow into my heart-stars like a fluffy tahaaxi burrows into the ground. “*Zahreenah*,” I say, trying to gently coax her from her slumber. I am not used to being so soft with others. I am a Trixikka High Spear. I train and lead my tribe’s flock of Protectors, working with the fiercest of hunters and fighters. But something in my gut tells me I cannot bark orders at my little-light. “*Zahreenah*,” I try again, jostling her by the shoulder. She mumbles some of her nonsense words and tries to do her burrowing trick again. I am not used to having my requests denied and it might be annoying if it weren’t so adorable. “*Zahreenah*, you must awake. You will meet my people and we must give thanks to the Goddesses.”

I watch as her eyes open blearily and she jolts away from me once she realizes how close she had crept in her sleep. I chuckle as her cheeks almost glow pink. Mumbling something unintelligible, she then stands and makes jerky little movements, hopping from one bandaged foot to the other. “Your feet,” I gesture, concerned. They should be healed by now.

”*Igottagopeereallybad!*” she tells me. “*Pee?... Pee?...*” Zahreena says, indicating to the juncture of her legs, where her cock would be if she were male. I have not allowed myself to wonder what lay beneath her clothes there instead, but apparently, it is important this morning. “*Pee?!...*”

Usethebathroom?!" she says, continuing her hopping and hand gestures. Suddenly, it dawns on me.

"You wish to use the latrine? Come, I will show you."

My Zahreenah is clearly very unhappy with the latrine. I do not know why. It was moved here only last four-moon and the smell is still tolerable. This site has another good twenty days until we will need to fill it in and dig a new one in at a new site. I stand guard outside while she relieves herself. We are a little way from the tribe village and no mimyckah would dare come this close to our mountain, but keeping vigilant is part of our Protector training and I have much new responsibility now that I have a female outside of the Temple to protect.

When Zahreenah is done, she emerges looking relieved and gives me a tentative smile. "*Itsnomatchforindoorplumbing,*" she says, "*butitwilldo.*" I match her smile and beckon her to follow, leading us back to the center of the village to meet the many males of my tribe.

As we weave through the huts, males come out to watch us - watch *her*. All are curious beyond measure. My flock of Protectors, the care-givers, the tribe's sons, the builders, weavers, hunters, healers - *everyone*. None have ever seen a female with their own eyes before. Until now.

"It cannot be true."

"A blessing from the Goddesses."

"Maybe they will gift the tribe with more females?"

"I didn't believe it when I heard!"

Murmurings follow behind us from all around.

"Look! High Spear Rynn's heart-stars!"

I cannot help but puff up my chest with pride. Zahreenah steps closer to me and I wrap a wing around her instinctively as we near the clearing at the heart of my village for gatherings and celebrations.

“My people!” I call out, turning to the whole tribe. “I am sure you have all heard the news by now and are curious indeed. Today marks a new era for us. Perhaps, in the future, more females will come to our tribe. We may well have mothers, sisters, daughters, and mates among us again.”

“Is it true?” someone - a young, untrained Protector - calls out, “Is it true that she has ignited your heart-stars?”

I grin, holding my arms out wide. “It is what you see on me, is it not?”

The youth looks bashful but I do not begrudge him his question. None of us have ever witnessed this before.

“Her name is Zahreenah,” I call out.

My people offer the customary fist to their chest, a gesture of respectful greeting, and then recite her name as one. “*Zahreenah.*”

”*Ooooooki,*” Zahreenah laughs, but something about the tone of it is off. “*Notcreeyatall.*”

Perhaps it is meeting the whole tribe at once. Perhaps it is the intensity of our curiosity. But instinct tells me Zahreenah is not happy. I’m about to lead her away, back to my hut when Mavyx speaks from the crowd.

“My High Spear, have you considered that the female has been sent to us as a test?”

My body stills but my wings flare as if sensing some form of threat. “A test?”

“Yes,” he says, watching my little-light beside me. “Perhaps you are meant to give her back?”

“Give her back?!” I ask, my feathers ruffling and my tail slipping around one of Zahreenah’s calves.

“Forgive me, my High Spear but it has played on my mind,” Mavyx continues, unfazed by my obvious discomfort. It is part of why I chose him as my Second Spear. He was never afraid to challenge me when it mattered. Perhaps I may come to regret admiring that attribute. “The females of our ancestors were wiped out as punishment. Punishment for the

male's mistreatment and greed. They had clipped the female's wings so that they could not leave the Eyrie Caves high above us. They could not soar, they could not travel to other tribes, and they could not live a full Trixikka life. Instead, they were trapped up there, serving their unworthy males. What if your female was sent to you to test our greed generations on? What if the Goddesses want to see if you would offer her back to the Temple's safety?"

I feel sick. Truly, and utterly sick at the thought. And yet, my tribe watches me expectantly. I open my mouth, ready to challenge Mavyx's suggestion - to swallow it, chew it up and spit it back down at his feet.

But I can't.

I look at Zahreenah. Her eyes still scanning our gathering. If the Goddesses sent the sickness out to her because of my greed-

I could not ever bear that.

Chapter 8

SERENA

Rynn had led me through the little village of rudimentary stone huts, their roofs topped with interweaving leaves. Each hut seemed to house a more than curious winged inhabitant and it isn't until we reach a little clearing at the foot of the looming sandy-colored mountain that I realize I'd seen no women among them. Not one. My first, horrible, horrible thought is that they're being kept somewhere, like chained dogs in a kennel, but I dismiss that notion almost as soon as it arises. Rynn hasn't tried to chain me and it's probably the whole *just-got-auctioned-off-to-be-a-human-pet* experience talking. My second thought was that maybe this is a segregated society and the women have their own little village somewhere and the two only meet when little baby bird-people need to....hatch?

Either way, it was clear I was quite the anomaly during their normal morning schedule, and *man* - they could not stop gawking at me! Not that I'm a stranger to being gawked at. It's just that the type of gawking is different. What I'm personally used to is the kind where I'm alone, safe in my bedroom, and said gawker is on the other end of a camera and an internet connection. *Oh*, and they've normally paid for the privilege too.

But these guys take it to another level.

Rynn must sense my unease and wraps one of his huge, soft wings around me. And God help me but I lean into it. Something about him makes me feel safe after the past day I've had. Feeling safe is like gold dust.

Only now something has shifted. The huge guy I'd met last night when Rynn and I first landed had been spouting a lot of his pretty alien words and whatever he said had changed something somehow. Rynn seems tense as he leads me closer to the mountain, winding around the base of it, passing more of his people - huge, hulking men who seem to be strategically placed along a path, up high on crags of rock or in huge trees.

Some stand like sentries with spears. Some hide in the shadows but melt into the morning light when we approach so that they, too, can get their fix of gawking. Rynn speaks to none of them but I notice a few join the villagers who are following us, whispering furiously while watching me walk with their leader.

Once we round one final rocky outcrop I come to a complete stop. In front of us is... well, I can only describe it as a UFO. It's a God-damned UFO if ever I saw one. The shape of the thing is disc-like, though fatter through the middle like someone took a perfectly round sphere, but squished it a bit and then embedded the bottom of it into the earth. The outside is pristine white, smooth, and shiny. It looks so out of place on this primitive planet of jungle, rocky mountains, and bird-men in loincloths. Could this be my ticket back home? Maybe, maybe not. But either way, I need to find the other girls before I get into that thing.

Halting, I touch Rynn's arm, sending those lights shooting up his arm again. He looks at me, a solemn expression on his face. "I can't leave without the others," I say, shaking my head. "I know you can't understand me, but I-"

Rynn gathers me into his arms, crushing me to his chest. He's all hard muscle beneath my cheek but he is warm and his scent is like some alien version of cinnamon and woodsmoke. Murmuring his deep, melodic foreign words to me, I catch my name in there somewhere but cannot help but be distracted by the way I can feel his voice rumbling beneath the press of my cheek. Or how he's wrapped his huge inky wings around us both, cocooning me in comfortable darkness, dotted with the little lights on his feathers, making it feel like I'm being hugged by the sky at night.

"Rynn, what is it?" I ask, peeling away from him slightly, "What's the matter?"

He answers, but we both know talking is useless. Taking my face in his big hands, Rynn stares at me and the expression is so mournful, it kind of makes me want to cheer him somehow. Like, I don't know... make him a sandwich and tell him everything will be ok. That's what old Adeline used to

do for me whenever I got sad about my mom leaving, she'd make me a grilled cheese, sit me down at her tiny kitchen table, and braid my hair while I ate, telling me that everything will be alright because somehow, God has a plan.

Well, God might want to rethink this one because in the past twenty-four hours or so, nothing about this plan has made any damn sense.

The brightest glow in this little feather cocoon comes from the lights at Rynn's chest. And in here, they're kind of giving an eerie up-light, illuminating his sad features from below. Leaning down, he gently rests his forehead on mine and closes his eyes.

This... feels like a goodbye.

Is it a goodbye? If this spaceship can fly, maybe he's thinking of putting me on it.

Or... this is a primitive species of alien, right? *Fuck*, I hope he's not thinking of sacrificing me to his feathery alien Gods because that would round off this being abducted experience *super well*.

"*Zahreenah*," Rynn sighs like a prayer and before I know what I've done, my lips press to his.

Rynn stills and I pull away quickly. I'm not even really sure why I'd done it. It had just felt right in the moment. Sure, this guy saved me from being demon-chimp food, had my injuries healed, and let me use part of his body as a blanket last night, but we don't even speak the same language.

And he's an alien, Serena, don't forget that little tidbit.

Rynn's eyes have gone almost comically wide after my little impromptu kiss and for a second or two, I wonder if I've just made a bird-man faux-pas. But then, Rynn lifts his fingers to brush against his lips before reaching to touch mine too. He looks so in awe that I can't help but giggle.

From outside our little sectioned-off world of wings, one of the other bird-men says something to Rynn, causing his pretty mouth to turn down and his tail to twitch against my leg. Tucking his onyx wings back, sunlight floods my eyes. Rynn

has a grim expression on his face as he gestures for me to approach the big UFO thing with him. Behind us, it seems like the whole village has followed. The air is thick with tension. Everyone looks concerned.

Oh boy, I *really* hope I'm not about to be sacrificed.

The closer we get to the big, white ship thing, the more I see that we're heading toward a small, upright rectangular black section on its outer wall, making it look a bit like a TV screen when switched off. Rynn stops in front of the screen and takes a deep breath. His eyes close and his wings sag behind him. What is happening?! His tail finds my ankle again and he offers his palm up to the black rectangle. A light looks as though it travels up the press of his hand, scanning him and then a small hollow appears beside the screen, and... a floating ball of light bobs out slowly.

"High Spear Rynn," a female voice says, the ball of light glowing brighter with each word spoken. Little sparks whiz around the ball like a tiny, high-speed solar system.

I gasp. "*Holy shit*, what-... You speak English?!" Little sparks whizz around the ball like a tiny, high-speed solar system but it doesn't answer me. Instead, it seems to wait, bobbing up and down in mid-air as Rynn starts to speak again, telling the ball something.

Rynn's words end and there's a long, tense silence before the ball of light answers. "Thank you. There is no need for you to return the female to us, High Spear Rynn," it tells him. Are they talking about me? "We only ask that more offerings are made."

The weight that seems to lift from Rynn is palpable. Behind us, the rest of the bird-men and... bird-boys, start murmuring. When I look back at... '*High Spear*' Rynn, there's a huge smile on his face and such a light in his eyes that I know he had not wanted to '*return me*' to... the ball of light people. He advances on me like he's about to scoop me up in one of those bone-tight hugs again and I have to stop him.

"Whoa, whoa, there, big fella," I say, hand out, stopping him. "Why can I understand the ball of light thingy?"

Rynn looks at me, confused and I know it's pointless asking him anything. So I turn to the only thing on this planet that I've heard speak English since that earthworm from hell ate Mr. Buggy. "Hey, you," I say, tapping on the ball. The bird-men behind me gasp. And not in a good way. "Uh... *sorry*," I cringe. Rynn gives me a concerned look but I try again. "Hello, people inside the floaty ball of light, *uh*... could you.... maybe.... tell me what's going on? And why can I understand you?" The ball floats and bobs, the little sparks of light whizzing around and around. "Please?"

"You are a human female," the ball of light says, "and you find yourself on planet G36229. You are currently among one tribe of native winged 'Trixikka', a noble species who have inhabited these lands for millennia. And you can understand us because... we are deities and deem it so."

Ok... that last bit seemed... *nevermind*. But who am I to question a floating ball of light? I'm just so relieved to be able to talk to someone!

"Ok, um... could you please help me? Can you tell Rynn that there are more human women out there? They're alone in the jungle and they need help."

The ball of floating deities or whatever they are, seem to take a moment to decide before they repeat my words. I'm about to tell them, no, they need to tell Rynn in *his* language when he tenses beside me, and the whole village of bird-men burst into action.

Duh, Serena, whatever these 'Gods' are using to translate probably works like Z'irri's translator did.

Rynn grabs me by the shoulders and searches my face as he asks me something.

"High Spear Rynn wishes to ascertain how many females remain in the forest," the ball supplies.

I take the time to mentally count. "Uh, eight! Tell him there are eight girls out there who need help and more in these weird pod things!"

After Rynn receives the information, he seems to shift effortlessly into being the commanding leader of his people, barking orders at guys carrying spears and calling for someone to bring a belt laden with daggers that he then straps low on his hips. All around us, his men take to the sky, beating their huge wings and disappearing fast to do their leader's bidding. Finally, Rynn calls over two of his biggest men. The lights on their skin seem to be pulsing with excitement. Rynn issues some form of order, gesturing to them and then to me. He then pauses, softening to stroke along my jaw and murmur something before he launches himself into the air, sending a powerful gust of wind to whirl my hair about with the flapping of his jet-black wings.

It was clear that Rynn had ordered these two feather-brains to be my guards while he and the others search for the missing human women. At least, that's why I think they're staying close, albeit from a safe distance. I'd tried to smile and talk to them through gestures but they'd only blinked at me, those lights at their temples working overtime.

I decide to try my luck with the only thing that I know can be an interpreter of sorts. The talking ball of light had retreated into the hollow of the spaceship when the commotion of the search party was happening. Somehow, I will need to coax it out again. Offering my hand up to the black screen like I'd seen Rynn do, I watch as my palm gets scanned. And then, nothing. Pulling back, I blink at where the hollow used to be. Glancing over my shoulder I can tell Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum will be no help so I try once more. "Come on, I need your help," I say out loud as my hand gets scanned once more. "*Please.*"

There's silence and then a soft whirring before the hollow appears again and with it, the talking-ball-God-thing. "Please," I say to it, "is there any way that I can communicate with the..." what had it called them? "... the Trix-... the Trixa-"

"The Trixikka," the little floaty God supplies in that same woman's voice as before.

“Yes, thank you. I’m stuck here with them and we need to be able to talk.”

The ball bobs and whizzes for what feels like an eternity. “We can gift you with the technology to be able to communicate with the Trixikka,” it says, “but it will come at a cost.”

Well, it’s not really a ‘gift’ then, is it?

I swallow the remark and instead ask, “what is the price?”

“Offerings.”

“I... I don’t have anything to offer.”

Beside me, one of my guards seems to be brave enough to approach. He offers a fist to his chest in greeting, I think, and then turns to the spinning ball of light to say something in his native tongue, the tail behind him flicking.

“... That will be acceptable,” the ball answers him.

“What? What will be acceptable?”

The sparks flying around the ball crackle. “The Trixikka warrior has proposed that he provide an offering in your stead. The technology you seek will be delivered once he has completed his promise.”

I reach out and touch the bird-man’s arm, watching his lights zing up his arm. “Thank you!” I tell him earnestly before turning back to ask, “can you ask him his name, please?”

The one named Aloryk - the bird-man who had offered to help me - had hurried away to get his ‘offering’. I really, really hope it’s not a dead animal. Or worse, a live one that will need to be slaughtered to appease the spinny-ball-of-light-God. Thankfully, he is not long. The other guard who was left with me had looked so incredibly antsy at being left as my sole carer, it was almost comical.

Aloryk returns, carrying with him a clay pot with a lid. Honestly, it looks similar in shape to an urn you might keep someone's ashes inside and I hope to all the little spinny-ball-Gods out there that that's not the case. On the outside, the pot is decorated with symbols that I can't figure out. Aloryk hands his pot over to me, the lights on his cheeks glowing brighter and it makes me wonder if it's related to blushing. The melon-sized pot fills my hands and as I hold it, Aloryk reaches across and lifts the lid for me to inspect its contents. Inside, the pot is filled with a milky substance that reminds me of something unmentionable, except this stuff has flecks of iridescence that reminds me of those stones Rynn keeps in his trunk - the ones that had looked like opals on steroids. Maybe this stuff came from wherever those fancy rocks came from. Either way, I make sure to smile widely at Aloryk in thanks. "It's pretty," I say though I know he doesn't understand what I'm saying. Despite the language barrier, the sentiment seems to translate as Aloryk's chest puffs up with what looks like pride when he replaces the lid on the pot. "Thank you," I tell him before turning back to the big spaceship to summon the spinny-ball-God again.

A few moments after placing Aloryk's offering into the hollow and watching it disappear, the hollow appears again and at first glance, I think it is empty, but there, on a small, white shiny square are two, small dots. "The larger of the two translators is to be placed directly behind the earlobe," spinny-ball-God tells me as she bobs up and down. "The smaller fixes to the underside of your tongue. Please install this one first."

"Alright," I answer, scooping both translators up into my palm. How can something so tiny do such an amazing thing? "And this will work? I'll be able to understand Rynn *and* speak his language."

"You will not be speaking Trixikka, however, the device beneath your tongue will alter your language to those listening."

"Amazing," I mutter, marveling at the dots in my hand. Balancing the smallest one on my finger, I lift it to my mouth guiding it under my tongue. Instantly, the thing attaches. The

sensation is a weird one. I can't tell if it's penetrated my tongue somehow, though it seems thoroughly embedded and there is no pain. Taking the other, larger translator, I offer it similarly; balanced on my pointer finger and guiding it to the instructed location behind my earlobe. This one attaches instantly too, except this time there is the distinct sensation of something penetrating my skin, making me gasp. Then, it quickly feels like cold liquid is leaking into the site of the attachment and rapidly coating the inside of my skull.

I look at Aloryk, suddenly worried that I've made a mistake. His eyes are wide and I see him reach for me even as the corners of the world darken and I start to collapse.

Chapter 9

RYNN

I cannot believe it! There are *more* females! My Protectors are in such high spirits now, it seems they might soar straight into the twin suns. Currently, I am high above the eastern edge of our territory, any further, and I will encroach on High Spear Zarriko's skies. Though the females do not know that, and they may have already stumbled that way.

Or been carried off by a band of mimyckah.

No, I must not think that way. Nor must I start listing the dangers of my land that the females might encounter. My Protectors and I will find them. This I know.

I am anxious to return to my Zahreenah but it must wait. This must have been what she has been trying to tell me all along; that other females require our help. And there I was, busy being awed by her and wondering what it was she had done when she had put her mouth to my mouth. I can almost still feel her on my lips. It was a brief experience, but an exhilarating one. I hope to make many mouth-on-mouths with Zahreenah once we have returned her companions to her.

It takes almost half a day when I see Mavyx dive into the forest not too far in the distance. I beat my wings, speeding over to where I believe I saw him disappear into the canopies below. He returns to the sky, and when he does, he is not alone.

In his arms is another, flightless, tailless creature - a female. This one has darker skin than that of my Zahreenah and her hair is as black as Trixikka feathers. She wears cloth the same color as a nectar berry flower but is limp in Mavyx's arms. "Is she..." I do not wish to utter the word. My Second Spear gently shifts her in his arms, prompting a groan to escape her lips. "Quick brother, we must get her back and take her to the healers!"

On swift wings and winds, we fly, our mountain looming closer. Mavyx clutches the female close as he flies.

She does not respond in any way. “I do not like this, brother,” he says, racing faster back to the tribe.

I must agree. What kind of Protectors are we if we allow such a thing to happen? Will this displease the Goddesses? Shame floods my bones. They may not have wanted Zahreenah returned to them this day, but what if a day comes, like so many generations before mine, when the Goddesses cast their judgment on my tribe and find our care of our females lacking?

I will not let such a thing happen. Deep within my heart, I know we can be better than my ancestors. And that belief is not born through fear of judgment, but because now I have met a female, seen one with my very eyes, and know what it is to have one slumbering in my nest beside me. I know, I would do anything - *anything* - to keep from mistreating her.

When we land in the center of the village, the scene is chaotic. I spot one healer hurrying from the hut used to store dried herbs and other useful items. Opening my mouth to issue the command, I am bested by my Second Spear.

“You! Hurry. This female needs attention!”

Mavyx sounds as desperate as I feel.

“I... I do not know how to treat a female. I’ve never... *none* of us have ever-”

“You *will* treat this female, healer,” I tell the male, my wings rising and my tail flicking in warning. “We will not fail to protect her because we did not try.”

The healer’s eyes go wide before he bows his head. “Yes, my High Spear.”

“I will stay with this one,” Mavyx offers, eyes still fixed on the female in his arms.

Grunting in agreement, I spread my wings. “I will find Zahreenah and have her brought to the new female. If this one wakes, she will want to see a face of her own kind.”

Flying from the center of the village and around the mountain to the Temple where I left Zahreenah takes but a few beats of my wings. But when I reach my destination I encounter a sight so horrific, I almost fall from the sky.

“Zahreenah!” I yell, hurtling toward her figure, laying limply upon the grass. “*Zahreenah!*”

I do not know what I am doing as I land directly over her with a clumsy thud, my wings thrust over her as if to shield her fragile body from some outside threat. “*What happened to her?!*” I growl, gathering my female in my arms. Aloryk and Zynnik were the Protectors I had trusted with my mate’s care. Had that been a mistake? Have they failed to protect the most precious thing in this life?

“She asked favor of the Goddesses,” Aloryk answers. “I gave my offering in her stead-”

“You gave my mate your seed?!” I demand, tearing my eyes from Zareenah’s sleeping form to challenge the audacity of the young male.

“No!” he is quick to correct me. “No! I gave my offering to the Goddesses in return for your female’s requested gift.”

“You left her side to fill your pot and this is what happened?”

“No! No, High Spear Rynn. Please, she only fell when she used the... the... *trans-late-or*.”

I do not know of any ‘trans-late-tor’. All I know is that my mate lay limply in my arms and my heart aches so keenly I cannot stand it. “If the healers cannot fix this, I’ll have your wings,” I bark at my Protectors.

“Don’t be so hard on them,” a croaky, broken-sounding voice whispers up at me. My gaze drops and I’m met with Zahreenah’s open eyes - eyes the same shade of gray as skies before rainfall.

”*Zahreenah*,” I say with a breath. “Zahreenah, you wake!” For a moment I hold her tighter before pulling away

again. “You are not speaking your nonsense words.” Have I lost my senses?

“Nonsense?” she says, smiling up at me. “I’ll have you know, Mr. Twinkle-Feathers, that I’ve never spoken nonsense a day in my life!”

“How can this be?” I ask, helping her to her feet. “You are speaking Trixikka words.”

Zahreenah dusts off her behind and smooths her hair. “I asked your spinny-ball-God thing for a translator,” she tells me, looking for all the world like a youngling who was proud of their first flight. “And now we can talk. Nifty, huh?”

I cannot stop the spread of the widest smile I have ever worn. “I do not know what this ‘nifty’ means. But, I am very pleased to understand you better.” I am even still grinning when I ask, “Mr. Twinkle-Feathers?”

“I should think that’s self-explanatory,” Zahreenah responds with a smirk. However, the lightness fades from her face as quickly as the storms come when she sees something over my shoulder. “They’re coming back,” she gasps. “Have they found anyone?”

Turning, I too, can see a small band of my Protectors returning to the village. Within their midst, two carry something in their arms. One, no doubt one of Zahreenah’s kind is fighting her rescuer like a wild zaleeva cat. The other is still. Far too still.

Chapter 10

SERENA

They've found some of the girls! My heart leaps to my throat when I first see the bird-men returning. Rynn flies me back to the heart of the village when he tells me his second-in-command had also rescued someone from the jungle depths.

Chastity is the first to land, screaming and throwing fists at the Trixikka who carries her. She lets out a yelp when she sees me and hurries on over to wrap her arms around me in a tight embrace, no doubt as pleased as I had been to make it out of that jungle alive.

Alana and one of the quiet girls I hadn't spoken to - Bea, I think she said her name was - were a different story though. Some of Rynn's people were doing all they could to try and coax them back to health, but they were either overcome with exhaustion or worse. I pray that they will pull through.

"You've been here, surrounded by all these tall, dark and feathery guys all this time?" Chastity asks once she's finally convinced that the Trixikka were friends and not foe.

"Not the whole time. I was turned around in that scary jungle for quite a while," I say as we sit beside the fire lit outside the healer's hut. Trixikka males approach us somewhat warily now and again, offering different foods and drink. "I didn't experience it at night though."

Chastity's jaw tightens as she stares into the flames. "That place is full of..." she shudders, "... *things*. Unimaginable things." She's quiet for a while and it makes me wonder what she's reliving. But instead of elaborating, it seems she mentally switches lanes in her mind, a bright and curious expression sweeping across her features when she turns to me and asks, "so, you and the big boss-man, huh?"

I blink back at her. "Huh?"

Chastity takes a sip of water from the hollowed wooden cup she'd been given. She eyes Rynn across the fire,

still giving orders to his men to continue the search for the others through the night. “Don’t tell me you haven’t considered it? These bird-guys are incredibly easy on the eye and that one saved your life. I’d say you owe him a handy at the very least.”

I gape at her. We’re stranded on an alien planet - a wholly primitive one, from what I can tell - with no hope for any kind of friendly rescue, and her mind goes straight to the gutter? “He’s... he’s a different *species*, Chastity!” I say, praying that I can play off the heat in my cheeks as a reaction from the nearby blazing fire. It’s certainly not from trying to convince myself that I, too, have noticed that our feathery saviors are all delicious-looking snacks. No way.

Her answer to that is to lift one shoulder in a shrug and pop a piece of bright purple fruit into her mouth. She catches the eye of the Trixikka who had brought us the food and gives him a sultry smile. The lights on his bare chest race down his abs to disappear into his loincloth. “Oh, *come on*,” she says, turning back to me, “these guys beat any of the aliens we’ve met so far in the looks department.”

I shake my head and look away, catching the attention of Rynn, the fire between us, embers twirling into the early evening air as the firewood pops and crackles. The rippling heat distorts his features a little from where I’m sitting but I see those lights on his chest start to pulse and burn brighter. “Just because they’re hot, it doesn’t mean you have to sleep with them, you know?” I say, voice quieter than I had intended and eyes still fixed on Rynn.

Chastity chuckles beside me. “Are you telling *me* or *yourself*?”

Rolling my eyes, I tear my gaze away from Rynn. “Let’s just concentrate on finding the other girls safe and sound before we start fucking our way through the locals, shall we?”

Chastity snorts in agreement and mulls over which piece of food to try next. There’s a small gathering of Trixikka standing not too far off, all very intently invested in watching

her make her choice. “Speaking of girls,” she says, picking up a piece of something wrapped in a steamed leaf and giving it a sniff, “where are the alien women? So far all I’ve seen is a whole lot of man-meat flying around here. Not that I’m complaining.”

Chastity is right. I still didn’t know what the deal with the Trixikka women is and sitting here, waiting around for either Alana or Bea to wake up is driving me to distraction. I need to do something. *Anything*.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, approaching Rynn after making sure Chastity is ok with me leaving her side for a while. Turns out she is more than happy, with a string of curious Trixikka admirers growing by the second.

“Of course,” Rynn says, ducking his head.

“Where are all your women?”

He sucks in a breath and wets his full lips before speaking. “Many, many generations ago, the males of my people did not treat their females with kindness. And so, they were taken away from them.” He watches me, his features a little guarded.

“I don’t understand.”

Rynn rubs at his chiseled jaw, faintly smiling to himself as he looks me up and down, contemplating something. “It may be easier if I were to show you, little-light.”

I wrinkle my nose at that. I’m not the one whose skin is lit up like a DJ booth at a nightclub. “More flying?” I am *not* a fan.

Rynn nods. “To the Eyrie Caves. There is only one way to get there. Flight. Why do you not enjoy the air?”

“Oh, don’t know,” I say, waving a hand. “Maybe because the chance of falling hundreds of feet to a brain-splating doom is, you know, *quite* terrifying.”

Rynn simply holds out his big hand. “I will never let you fall, Zahreenah.” His turquoise eyes gleam as his intense

gaze demands all my attention. “*Never.*”

RYNN

We do not visit the Eyrie Caves often. They are a reminder of how Trixikka used to live. We would be housed up here, at the top of our mountain, nesting in the clouds. Our males would launch into flight daily, soaring through the skies, and hunting the jungles below to provide for their tribe. But our females were forced into a wing-clipping practice - a tradition that should have been stopped generations before our Goddesses turned our hand. The females and young would be left behind at the Eyrie Caves with no means to leave the mountain.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be used to that,” my Zahreenah tells me as we land at the mouth of the mother cave.

“I can hold you tighter on the descent if you wish?” The thought is a tantalizing one. The press of her soft, curvy body against mine serves as a reminder of how different we are. Not just in wings and tail, but because she is a *female*. She is *life*. All of us, born from her kind.

Zahreenah makes an amused noise from her nose and then mutters something I do not hear.

Bringing her deeper into the huge maw of the cave, I open my wings, the stars on my feathers illuminating the sandy-stone wall. “Here,” I tell her, indicating where some of the many wall etchings begin. I watch as Zahreenah steps closer, her adorable little brow scrunching as she tries to make out the drawings and writings first made here, many generations ago.

“*I can read it!*” she gasps, tracing a finger over the written word of my ancestors. “The Punishment,” she reads aloud.

I nod my head. “Your... trans-late-tor gift from the Goddesses is truly remarkable.”

Around the words are depictions of dead or dying females. I squint, realizing that the drawings have the Trixikka figures sporting mounds on their chests, just like the

mesmerizing ones my Zahreenah has. Though they do not have her starless skin, wingless back, or *fascinating* tailless rump. “We did not treat our females kindly,” I say, turning back to the etchings. “Their wings were clipped and they were imprisoned here in the Eyrie Caves. The Goddesses witnessed our disgrace and saw fit to punish us by sending a sickness, taking our females from us,” I explain, moving on to the next area where the drawings continued. This section read ‘The Salvation’. “With only males to our tribe, our future seemed lost. We prayed and prayed for salvation. We swore we would right our wrongs. I have heard stories that some even tore all their feathers from their wings to try and appease the Goddesses. And one day, they sent their answer.”

Zahreenah’s face is rapt with attention as she studies the ancient etchings on the wall. I flare my wings further, giving her more light, and touch my fingertips to the drawing of one of the temples. “One day, the Temples arrived. My ancestors knew they were an answer from the Goddesses and so we brought our offerings of meat, feathers, and life-stone straight to the strange temple, and one day, they spoke to us, told us to make offerings of our seed and in return, our females inside will choose whether we are worthy to bear children for.” I watch as Zahreenah strokes a finger down a depiction of the first son to ever be delivered from the Temple.”

“Hold up,” she says, pausing to look up at me. “Offerings of your seed?... Of your...?”

She is making a gesture to where my cock lay beneath my loincloth and I must confess, it is a struggle to not excite the skin-stars that will race toward the current focus of her attention. “Yes,” I tell her, not sure why the subject should feel anything but ordinary. “We fill our seed pot and give it to the Goddesses for our females within the temple to accept or reject.”

Zahreenah’s nose scrunches adorably. “So that sparkly stuff Aloryk gave me was his-... Oh, my God! You guys have glittery jizz?”

“If I am understanding your trans-late-tor correctly, yes, our seed is flecked with life.” Zahreenah’s lips press

together like she is trying to hold in her amusement. The expression is both curious and adorable. “What is it?”

“Nothing!” she says, though I do not suspect it is nothing. Nevertheless, she turns back to the etchings on the cave wall. “Are you sure that it’s Goddesses inside that... *Temple?*” she asks, tracing the rough shape with her fingertips.

“Goddesses, and our females. What else might it be? What else could give us sons?”

She does not answer but continues on, studying the drawn scene in front of her, the light from my skin-stars illuminating her soft face in a soft green glow. “There’s more than one?” she asks, finding the other depictions of Temples.

“Yes, two others. Once, our people were of one tribe. We all lived here in the Elder Caves. After The Punishment and when the Goddesses deemed us worthy of salvation, they sent three Temples. One to the foot of each mountain on our island. Our tribe separated into three, each choosing a High Spear to lead them and to serve the Temples. Fortune did not smile upon one of the tribes. Their Temple was overrun and destroyed by a band of mimyckah. The other two are ours and High Spear Zarriko’s to protect.”

Zahreenah touches the depiction of one mimyckah, the deadly creatures that can echo any sound they hear. “*Demon-chimps*” she mutters to herself before turning swiftly, eyes bright as she asks, “there is another tribe? Could they help find the others?”

My stomach twists. The longer the Trixikka people have lived in separate tribes, the more territorial we have naturally become. Never have I heard of one tribe asking aid of the other and rarely do our tribes mix. Sometimes, hunting parties will cross paths but we generally try to stay separate. They have their Temple of females to protect, and we have ours. An inner war wages within me but I quell it as best I can. Yes, I cannot deny, I would like to find all of Zahreenah’s fellow females and keep them safe within my tribe. Goddess knows my Protectors are keen to find more females to perhaps

ignite their own heart-stars. But Zarriko will claim any females his people find.

Should that mean they should not be found, though? Absolutely not.

These females are defenseless against the wild of the forest and I would slumber more easily in my nest knowing they are being protected by the Trixikka, even if not by my own tribe's Protectors. "We will see about sending word to High Spear Zarriko," I say, swallowing the knot in my throat, adding, "I'm sure he will be keen to aid the search."

Try as I may, I cannot help the way my jaw tightens at the thought.

Chapter 11

SERENA

When we return to the village from the caves high up on the mountain, both Bea and Alana have woken. “They are weak and must drink the broth,” one of the older Trixikka males tells me. “This one refuses.” He indicates to Bea.

“I told her they’re the good guys,” Chastity sighs beside me, helping to feed Alana.

Looking around, I notice the small hut is crammed with Trixikka muscle and feathers. Tails flicking, anxiously. “I think it might be best if us human girls had some space.”

Nothing.

The men are utterly transfixed, obviously curious to see the new arrivals. “You heard my female,” Rynn’s voice echoes with authority (*my* female?). “Get out.” When all the other bird-men file out, some giving us mournful glances as they go, Rynn is left standing in the corner.

“You too, twinkles,” I tell him, standing to try to talk face-to-face though failing miserably. I have to crane my neck just to look up at him.

Rynn leans down to look me in the eye. His are sparkling like a turquoise tropical sea. “I do not like these names you give me,” he says, though there’s a shade of amusement in his tone, his tail coming to wrap around my calf. So strange that I’m used to the feel of that now. “And I am High Spear,” he says. “I do not take orders.”

“Well, now you do, *Your High Speariness.*”

Rynn tilts his chin as he regards me, his tail giving a little squeeze before he swaggers from the hut, a smirk threatening at the corners of his mouth.

Chastity’s eyes are alight when I turn to face the girls. “Don’t *you* start,” I snap, coming to sit beside Bea.

“Start what? Start mentioning how that huge hunk of muscle and wings wants you to ruffle his feathers?” Her brows

dance comically and I cannot help the inelegant snort that leaves me.

Ignoring Chastity's thinly veiled innuendo, I turn to Bea and urge her to sip the bowl of broth. Her brown eyes flick from me to Alana and then to Chastity. "You need it," I tell her, pushing the little wooden bowl closer.

"What if they spiked it with something?"

"I don't think that's likely. They want to help."

"They're aliens," she says, and that appears to be that. Her expression shutters and it looks like she melts away to somewhere within herself. Somewhere dark.

"They might be aliens, but they're nothing like those horrible ones from the auction, or Z'irri either. They have been kind and respectful. They're out there right now, searching the jungle for the others. They nursed you and Alana and they healed my injured feet too. These are the good guys."

She searches my face after I'm done making my defense of the Trixikka, her expression a little more open than it had been before. "What if they want repayment for that kindness?"

I open my mouth to answer but Chastity beats me to it. "Oh, I can think of a few ways to repay their kindness."

I roll my eyes and Alana snorts weakly into her bowl of broth, but Bea isn't seeing the humorous side. "What if they demand that kind of thing?"

"Drink the broth while I explain why I don't think that's likely," I say, shoving the bowl into her hands and not starting to elaborate until I witness her take at least three sips.

I tell the girls about the caves. About the drawings on the walls and the story Rynn had told me. They sit in silence as they listen, the only light coming from the flickering of the fire outside, warm, amber fire-glow flooding in through the open door and small window.

"So... they've never seen a woman before?" Alana asks weakly, "Like... *ever*?"

“No.” I shake my head. “Not before us, I guess.”

”*Man*, these guys are gonna lose it when they find out about blow jobs,” chastity adds, rather unhelpfully. “Unless, they’re already blowing each other,” she amends, “which... you know.... *hot*.”

“Maybe,” I say, shrugging, “But I’m not sure they have any sexual sort of culture apart from... you know... jizzing in a pot and offering it to their weird temple periodically.” Turning back to Bea, I’m thankful to see she’s drunk most of the broth. “So I don’t think demanding that sort of thing has entered their minds.”

Bea takes the last two sips from the bowl and then hands it back to me, empty. “What about when they do find out about-...” she gestures to Chastity, hinting at her rather unhelpful comment before. “What happens when they realize what they could have if they forced us?”

Blinking at her, I reach across to cover her hand in mine. “I won’t let that happen, Bea. Rynn wouldn’t let that happen.” I don’t know how I know that but I do. Thinking for a moment or two, I add, “I’ll talk to him. Explain that nothing should be taken from us that isn’t freely given. No close proximity, no touches, no kisses-”

”*No blow jobs*,” Chastity butts in. I glare at her, which seems to douse the humor in her expression.

Turning back to Bea, I give her hand a squeeze. “Everything will be alright. You’ll see.”

“So you have a plan? To get us back home?”

No. Not at all.

“I’m working on it.”

RYNN

I stand guard outside the female’s healing hut. Mavyx had been about to re-enter to see the darker-skinned one whom he had saved from the jungle but I sent him back out to join the search. I need every tribe member I have in the skies,

searching for those females. The Trixikka may be the fiercest of species, but we are not the only predator out there.

I'm lost in thoughts of the past few days' miraculous experiences when Zahreenah steps out of the hut to speak with me. She has that blaze behind her eyes like she had when she'd given me - *a High Spear* - orders. It confuses me that I took pleasure from her earlier defiance. If one of my Protectors had spoken to me like that, I'd have taken it as a challenge and we would have taken to the skies for me to rip him apart, feathers and blood.

"Can I talk to you?" she asks, firelight dancing in her hair and reflected in her eyes.

"Always."

The smile she gifts me is a small one. "You need to tell your guys to back off." I frown at that. "I get that they're curious and we're grateful for being rescued and healed and all but..." Zahreenah pauses to take a deep sigh. "We've all been through something... *pretty bad* and some of the women are worried the Trixikka's friendly curiosity will soon turn... forceful."

I do not understand. What is it that my Zahreenah went through? Being lost in the forest? My confusion must be clear on my face because she does not hesitate to elaborate.

"Look, I understand it's all very exciting seeing women for the first time..." she pauses, movement on the other side of the fire having caught her attention. Two of my people stand there, watching us and our exchange, one care-giver and a youngling Protector's son under his care. It begins to become a little clearer as to why Zahreenah and the other females are uncomfortable. To us, they are a boon, a reason for excitement. To them, we are different and perhaps overbearingly curious. Barking at the bystanders to be on their way, I turn back to my little-light who nods absentmindedly to herself. "Can you please issue some commands to your men?"

"Of course." My tribe wouldn't dare disobey an order from their High Spear.

“Ok,” she starts, holding up a finger, “First, no crowding around the human women. This is all very new to us too and we don’t need to be gawked at. Second, no-one is to touch them without their consent. They’re worried that with so many men and so few women, they will be forced to do things they do not want to do.”

“You have my word that no Trixikka will harm you or your friends. We live to protect our females. It has been our primary purpose since The Salvation.”

She gives me a look I cannot decipher. It is a soft look. No one has looked at me like that in a long long while. “I know it is, big guy, but some of us would just like to be reassured that...” she pauses muttering to herself, “...*how do I put this?*... That nothing that is not freely given is forcibly taken. Like touches and kisses and such.”

”*Kisses?*” I ask, eyeing that deeper color staining her cheeks. I do not know this word. “Is that the mouth-on-mouth you gifted to me before the Temple?” The memory is a treasured one. It stirs my blood in ways I’ve never before experienced. My gaze is fixed upon that sweet, soft little female mouth of hers as she nods. “No Trixikka male will force these things upon you, my little-light. This, I promise you.”

She nods before her nose scrunches adorably. “Why do you keep calling me that?”

Reaching to take her hand, I pause. After just being told that touches are a gift and not so freely given, I change tact and place my palm on my chest, directly above my heart-stars. “Because of these,” I tell her. “You ignited my heart-stars. You are my mate.”

“I’m your what, now?” She blinks at me in rapid succession.

“My mate. For generations, we went without the company of females, but before that, before The Punishment, we were paired by our heart-stars. Bonded as one.”

She looks at me, wide-eyed, her beautiful little *'kissing'* mouth hung open. "I... I need to get back to the others," she tells me, gesturing over her shoulder back at the hut. And just like that, she is gone once again.

I feel her absence even though she is only on the other side of the stone wall. All night, I wait for her to emerge and return with me to our nest.

And yet she does not appear.

Chapter 12

SERENA

“So, you two are what? Married?” Chastity asks, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Together, the four of us had shared the two ‘nest’ thingies in the healing hut to sleep on last night and this morning, two Trixikka had tentatively come in to give us more fresh fruit and drinking water - under the watchful eye of Rynn who stood there, his arms crossed over his massive chest as he monitored their very brief interactions with us.

You’ve got to hand it to the guy, he doesn’t do things by half.

“No, we’re not married.” What an absurd idea. Though it reminds me I do need to talk to him about this. I need to understand fully what it means in his culture and what it means to *him* specifically. I like him. Like, I like him a whole lot, considering we’ve known each other barely over forty-eight hours now. But the sincerity I see in those beautiful turquoise eyes when he talks to me is kind of irresistible. *‘Beware a charming man with pretty eyes,’* old Adeline used to tell me, *‘he’ll charm the panties off more girls than you can count with those eyes of his.’*

Well, Adeline, this particular guy wouldn’t know what to do once said panties were charmed off, so I don’t think we have any worries there. Though, it does make me wonder if there’s some primal, instinctual knowledge buried deep somewhere beneath all those feathers and talk of *Goddesses* and *heart-stars*. Would he know how to handle a woman who wanted him?

It would be fun to teach him if he doesn’t.

I shake my head of the notion and pop a piece of the bright purple fruit into my mouth. The texture is like watermelon, but the flavor is so much more sugary and intense. “I think it’s kind of sweet,” Alana offers as she attempts to finger-comb her hair.

“It’s not sweet,” I refute, standing and brushing any dirt off my butt with my hands. “Just because I made his fairy lights start to twinkle, it doesn’t mean he owns me.”

Chastity raises a brow. “Maybe it means *you* own *him* now. That could be a whole lot of fun.”

Huffing, I leave the hut only to find Rynn standing outside. Has he been here all night? He stands there, tall and broad, his spine straight like a sentry and a spear in his hand. The muscle in his jaw ticks a time or two before he finally looks at me. “You deny our Goddess-given bond? You deny my heart-stars?” he asks, hitting his chest with his palm. Oh lord, he heard all that?

”Rynn,” I start, pausing a moment or two with my mouth opening and closing like a fish drowning on air. How to explain? “We don’t even *know* each other.” I offer lamely, though the point is valid. You can’t just claim that someone you met as recently as two days ago is your mate. Whatever *that* means. Though, I feel I have a fairly good idea.

He turns, angling his body to face me fully and takes the few steps between us, his tail flicking like an agitated cat behind him. We’re so close now that I’m forced to crane my neck to look up at his face instead of the expanse of muscled chest directly in my eye-line. His little skin lights are dancing at his temples. “I know you, *in here*,” he says, gesturing with that hand over his heart again. “And I know it will take time, but your heart-stars will ignite for me too. I will make sure of it.”

There’s a thickness as I swallow. My eyes drop but get drawn to that cluster of stars that pulses over his heart like a swarm of fireflies or a swirling nebula. “I don’t have heart-stars,” I tell him, my voice quieter than it had been before.

“You do,” Rynn tells me, laying his warm palm flat on my chest. “*In here*.”

The next few hours are spent waiting to hear if any more of the human women have been found. Unfortunately,

that endeavor seems to be fruitless today. God, I hope they're alright. I swallow hard, remembering how Gwen had clung onto me like a safety blanket back at that horrible auction station. Instead of sitting around while we wait, the girls and I take to exploring the Trixikka's village, the eyes of its people as constant a presence as that mountain looming over us. Rynn follows close behind, offering warning growls to any of his men who look a little too long.

Throughout the morning, we met all manner of Trixikka. We learned that Rynn, as the tribe's 'High Spear' is the leader of their people as a whole, and Mavyx, as his 'Second Spear' is primarily in charge of their warrior-type men whom they refer to as 'Protectors'. Most of those are currently out searching, so we got to meet the other members of the tribe. Care-giving of their sons seems to fall to those who aren't labeled as 'Protectors', and within that group, there are other jobs as well; weavers, masons, hunters - even a potter of sorts. The hut we arrive at is home to an older Trixikka male, his once jet-black wing feathers looking a little duller in color and his hair peppered with gray. He was gracious enough to let us see that his hut was filled with shelves housing tons and tons of those 'seed pots' Rynn told me about. It had been the only time Bea was tempted to wander away from me and the other girls to marvel at the decorations covering the old man's work.

I hadn't pointed out to her what those pots were going to be used for.

It's midmorning when Chastity asks where she could get a translator like mine. It makes sense, I suppose. Much less hassle than me having to interpret everything for them. Once I explained to Rynn and he in turn told his people that their assistance would be needed, there was no small amount of Trixikka males falling over themselves to help my friends.

"Thanks, honey," Chastity tells the young, eager Protector who had volunteered his 'offering' in exchange for her translator up at the temple. She gingerly accepts his heavy-looking seed-pot, an amused look on her face.

“Bodily fluids as a form of currency is a new one on me,” Alana adds, taking the recently filled seed pot from another male. Mavyx stands behind her and frowns. The disapproving look sends the male retreating a step or two.

Bea, bless her, looks like she absolutely *does not* want to be holding what she’s holding.

We stand there awkwardly a second or two after the girls receive their special gifts of alien bird-man jizz before it’s Chastity that lifts the lid on her seed pot and gasps. “*It’s sparkly!*”

The others cannot resist a peek after that and all four of us try desperately not to fall into fits of giggles. The gift-bearers look on curiously enough that I feel the need to reassure them. “They are grateful and... impressed by your offering,” I tell them. That seems to do the trick. The Trixikka males visibly puff with pride, wide smiles on their handsome faces.

This time, the temple demands more than just one pot of special bird-man baby-batter per set of translator tech. It’s not the first time I’ve questioned this space-ship-shaped ‘*temple*’ and the ‘*Goddesses*’ behind it, but what kind of deity increases the price of their generosity? Thankfully, it is not a problem, not with how many Trixikka seem willing to help us out.

More pots of magical man-juice procured, and the temple gives us the goods.

“I fainted when I put the ear one on,” I tell the girls. “Maybe you should lie down.”

“Does it hurt?” Bea asks, examining her translator chips warily.

I shake my head but Mavyx interrupts before I can elaborate. “Tell them they should not be lying in the dirt and grass,” he says, eyeing Alana sitting on the ground, readying herself to lay back and install her translator.

“They’ll faint.”

He apparently has other ideas. Alana squeaks as he bends, sweeping her up into his arms, bridal style. “I will carry her,” he says, broaching no argument. “Explain to her,” he tells me gruffly. God, this guy is stubborn.

“Um,” I say dumbly, looking at the stony-faced alien man cradling Alana in his arms. “He doesn’t want you getting dirty on the ground?”

“So, what,” she says, brows scrunched, “he wants me to faint in his arms?”

All I can do is nod. I guess so? Chastity squeals happily and then goes to pick out her own personal Trixikka fainting couch. She chooses Aloryk who, in turn, seems utterly delighted to have her in his arms.

“I’m fine here on the ground,” Bea says at my feet. I frown at that but understand and decide to sit down next to her. Rynn tenses watching me.

One-by-one, the girls put on their little translator dots, first under the tongue and then behind the ear. And, just like me, they seem to lose consciousness. They’re not for the count for too long though. Alana, being the first to brave the ordeal, comes around before the others. Mavyx puts her on her feet as she requests, but promptly scoops her up again when she’s a little wobbly on her legs. “I *can* walk,” she protests but he doesn’t seem to listen, instead he turns to Rynn.

“High Spear, this one is in need of sustenance,” he says, his expression hard and unyielding, his tail flicking by his ankles. “I will take her back to the village for meat and water.”

Rynn waves a hand and nods his head and the next thing I know, Mavyx launches into the air, ripping a squeak of surprise from Alana as she scrambles to get a grip around Mavyx’s shoulders.

We stand there, Rynn, a handful of his men, two unconscious girls, and I, watching as Mavyx flies swiftly around the giant mountain when one of Rynn’s Protectors comes soaring to us from over the jungle. “High Spear! High

Spear!” he pants having just landed, his huge wing still splayed wide.

“Have you found the others?” I ask, almost tripping forward as I stand up from sitting beside Bea.

The Trixikka Protector blinks at me, his skin lights twinkling at his temples as he glances swiftly between Rynn and I.

Rynn lifts his jaw. “Answer Zahreenah’s question,” he says in a tone that stirs something in me that really should be left un-stirred right about now.

“No, I am sorry,” the Trixikka answers. “We have not found the others but we have spotted Tryk approaching the village.”

Rynn lets out a long, slow breath. “Of all the times-” he pauses to take in Chastity still limp in Aloryk’s arms and Bea laid out down on the ground. The word he bites out does not translate but I know a curse word when I hear one. “*Hold her*,” he orders the newcomer, indicating to Bea. “Surround the females.”

“Hold on a minute, she doesn’t want to be held. We should respect her wish-”

“She will be more protected in the arms of a Trixikka,” Rynn says. “I need to go into the forest to try and intercept the Shadow Wing coming to visit us.”

Reaching out, I lay a hand on Rynn’s forearm. His skin is warm, the muscles corded and tight beneath my fingers. Those little stars of his dance at my touch, zinging up his arm and over his shoulder as if I’d just set off a blazing firework. “Wait. What is a ‘*Shadow Wing*?’” Considering the brief experience I’ve had with the other species on this planet, Rynn’s concern is worrying.

“An outcast,” Aloryk answers for me, earning a glare from his High Spear.

“A ‘*Shadow Wing*’ is a Trixikka of no tribe,” Rynn says, turning to me. “He is a male who has committed sins

against Tribe and Temple. It is a danger to keep a male such as this in the village, so he is banished to the forests.”

“Ok...” I say. That makes sense, I guess. “Why are they called *Shadow Wings*?” Because honestly, that sounds badass.

“Because of our forced ability to stay hidden in the shadows,” comes a velvet-smooth voice from the nearby jungle tree line. Instantly, Rynn and the others go on high alert, spears gripped and daggers withdrawn from their belts. “When we are banished from the tribe, we are forced to consume the sap from the Girri tree. It blackens our skin-stars helping us to stay hidden in the depths of the jungle,” the voice continues. “And it marks us as traitors of the tribe.”

Desperately, everyone scans the tree line. I do too, but I can't see where the voice is coming from until the owner steps forward into the clearing around the temple. He is Trixikka. Tall, muscular, and broad-shouldered, sporting those huge, onyx-black wings and the tail too. Except where Rynn's skin is speckled with glowing lights, this alien's markings seem to fade like shadows instead of bioluminescence. At least, that's what it looks like until Rynn blocks my view, standing right in front of me, no doubt to shield me from this newcomer.

”*Tryk*,” he says in greeting. Rynn's wings flare wider as the Shadow Wing approaches. “If you start dropping in on us unannounced like this, I will have to revoke that privilege,” he growls. “And I know you wish to keep in contact with your brother.”

“High Spear,” I hear this ‘Tryk’ guy say, acknowledging Rynn. “But seeing as your Protectors, as well as Zarikko's, are patrolling the skies almost constantly, I thought I'd come and offer my aid. Either there is a great threat in the jungle, or, like me, you've found something rather curious. Judging by the way you seem to be trying to hide something from me, I suspect the latter. ” The muscles in Rynn's shoulders bunch and his biceps flex. Trying to spy over the guy's frame is futile, he's so tall and with his wings splayed, it's almost impossible even on my toes. So instead, I duck and peek out from beneath his feathered wing. The

visitor's eyes meet mine immediately. "Ah," Tryk says with a grin. "*Hello*, curious creature."

Rynn begins to growl in warning, but I'm too preoccupied with what Tryk had said before. "What did you find?" I ask, stepping out from behind my big, feathered protector.

Tryk's eyes dart all over me, his brow slowly scrunching in confusion before smoothing again. "Nothing like you."

I go to take another step forward but am stopped by Rynn's tail wrapping around my ankle, giving a little tug for me to stay back. I look up at him, watching the slow swallow and the shake of his head. Is this guy really that dangerous? What 'sin' did he commit?

"After all this time you still think I would harm one of you?"

None of the Trixikka move a muscle, Rynn least of all. Just standing beside him, I can feel the tension coiled in his body like a cobra ready to strike if needed. The air is thick with this masculine, alien stand-off bullshit and I'm about to ask more. What the hell this Tryk guy is meant to have done to deserve such a welcome? When the man himself sighs and grabs at the blades tucked into his belt. Rynn begins to drop into a defensive stance and lets loose a low snarl, his onyx wings flaring impossibly wide. He pauses when Tryk holds up his black daggers in a show of submission and throws them down, the blades embedding into the white-grassed earth with a swift '*thunk*' noise each time. Bending at the waist, Tryk bows, his arms and wings splayed wide and low. "High Spear, I mean no harm. You know this."

Rynn grunts in response, which I suppose is the best that Tryk is going to get out of him at the moment. "If you overstep with my mate or any of the females—"

"*Females?*" Tryk's expression brightens, the inky dark markings on his body fluttering all over, like a swarm of passing shadows as he looks at me again, those eyes assessing me more closely. "It cannot be."

Somewhere behind us, one of the unconscious girls starts to wake, making a small, self-pitying type of noise. Tryk seems to disregard all warnings from his High Spear and moves forward, pushing one Trixikka male out of the way to get a better look. The guards surround him instantly, daggers drawn and spears pointed at his huge frame.

The waking girl is Chastity, her pale skin contrasting against Aloryk's deep tan and her red hair spilling over his arm where he carries her oh so carefully. "*Tryk,*" Rynn warns through gritted teeth. One of the spear bearers growls and pushes the sharp tip of his spear into Tryk's shoulder. A trickle of blood dribbles down his bicep.

He doesn't react at all.

Chastity mumbles something and turns her head, her big blue eyes blinking up and coming face-to-face with the Shadow Wing. Tryk's breath hitches audibly.

"You're..." she scans the newcomer's face. "You're *new,*" Chastity says, trying to get down and stand up but having to deal with Aloryk's tight, protective and unyielding hold.

Tryk's blackened skin stars are dancing at his temples as he swallows thickly. "As are you, little creature."

The sing of a blade cuts through the air and before I can blink, Rynn has maneuvered closer and holds an opal-looking dagger at our visitor's throat. This time, it's Chastity who gasps, but I feel like I can't breathe watching the whole ordeal. "I told you *not* to overstep, *Shadow Wing,*" he hisses. "Tell us of what you found in the jungle, visit with your brother and *leave.*"

Chapter 13

RYNN

Tryk's presence is worrying. It is our way that grave sins are punished by banishment. After all, a Trixikka cannot nourish his body with rotten fylli fruit, and so it is that a tribe cannot flourish with rotten people. But Tryk... *Tryk* is a special case. His sin is grave, yes - committed many rain seasons ago now. And yet his story of the events have remained unchanged since that day that he was found with Trixikka blood on his hands.

I have been lenient in my banishment of him. The way of my people say that once a tribe member is tarnished as a Shadow Wing, they can never again approach the tribe. They are meant to live out their remaining days in solitary, only knowing the jungle for their home and family. Many do not last.

But something in me had believed Tryk when he'd told of why he had murdered his kin, and so I allow him his visits, as long as they stay short and infrequent. He often brings kills to feed his younger, lame-winged brother, or life-stones for others to give as Temple offerings on his behalf. It doesn't change what he has done, or what he is. He is a Shadow Wing, most likely slowly being driven to madness living alone in that vast and violent forest. I do not trust him around my tribe, and certainly do not trust him around our females.

My wing wraps protectively around my mate as together we watch Tryk fly off to the village to visit with his brother. I jerk my chin at two of my Protectors to follow him to make sure he does as instructed. Before he left, he had told us of his finding; some strange, huge carcass like never seen before. Something that looked as though it had been brought down by a rare and terrifying burrot worm. Even Trixikka do not go hunting for these creatures.

"I think it's the ship that brought us here," my Zahreenah says, huddling closer. She is shivering and that will not do. I tuck her small frame in closer with both arm and

wing, my tail wrapping around her too. I do not know this 'ship' she speaks of. She was brought here because the Goddesses willed it for me and my tribe. "They stole us from our beds and sold us to be breeding stock like cattle," she continues, her words hushed, eyes now watching as my Protectors see to the waking female's needs, making sure she is not too weak to stand and offering her food and water. I cannot help the growl Zahreenah's words ignite in me.

"Who did this to you, little-light?" I ask, rubbing my hand up and down her arm. "I will *gut* the male who has upset my mate."

Her eyes are unfocused when she answers. "He's dead now."

"Good," I grunt.

"But there were more of us on that ship. Some were awake like me and the others. But there were more. In pods... sleeping."

Sleeping? This makes no sense. From what Tryk has told us, this 'ship' was attacked by a burrot worm. How anyone could remain sleeping during that, I do not know. And besides, there have already been two full turns of the twin suns. If the females have not awoken by now, I fear they may never. Still, I order a clutch of males to instruct Tryk to lead them to this strange carcass he has found. If the females are still there, sleeping, we will wake them and welcome them to the tribe as we have Zahreenah and her companions. If they are unable to wake, we will honor them and mourn their loss, burying them in the shadow of our great mountain.

But for now, I will focus my efforts on caring for the females we have. Those that have now fitted their trans-late-tors wake and are now blessedly much better understood by me and my people. There is still much to be done. There are still females lost out there in the wilds of the forest and Zarriko will need to be spoken with. As loathed as I am to admit it, I would rather his males find and claim a female, than she be left to the dangers of the jungle. But tonight, I will feed our females. We have had three fresh frizikki kills which have

been roasting over flame for hours. Some of our care-givers have taken our sons to the fylli trees to harvest the ripest, juiciest fruits, and some of the elders will bring their fermented drinks. There is still much to do, but this night my people and my mate will celebrate.

I make sure that Zahreenah is seated beside me when we gather around the fire. The celebration starts with the sons of our tribe singing a traditional song honoring their mothers, safe and protected in the Temple, followed by some of the youngest sons making a show of how well their wings are coming in. Many of them simply running and jumping, barely hovering with frantic beats of their little feathers but a few manage to actually *fly*, swooping wide over the gathering, making us all clap and laugh. Zahreenah leans into me to tell me the younglings' displays are 'cute' and I find myself reaching for a lock of her hair to twirl with my fingers as I tell her, "do not let the sons hear you call them '*cute*', my little-light. They are fierce Trixikka Protectors in training." She grins at me, the warm glow from the fire making her smile all the more enchanting. "You know, the sons late to take wing are normally the fiercest, most loyal, and highly skilled in protection." I want to give that lock of her rich brown hair a playful tug. My instincts tell me she would react favorably to this gesture, I do not know why, or where these instincts come from. But I am reminded of how concerned these females are with unwanted touches and drop the hair from where it is wrapped around my finger.

Zahreenah watches me release her and pull away. There's an expression in those eyes I cannot place before that smile of hers returns and she begins teasing me. "The fiercest, huh?" I nod sagely. "Does that mean you were 'late to take wing' when *you* were little, oh mighty High Spear?"

Sucking in a breath, I am ready to answer her, but instead, I hear Mavyx snort close by. "He was," the traitor interrupts, a small but sly smile on his face. "Rynn hated to be outdone in anything, but he was among the last in our flock to take flight when we were younglings."

I shrug, lifting a cup of fermented juice to my lips. “You cannot rush perfection.” Those nearest to us either guffaw or try to stifle their laughter. My pride is not wounded by this. My tribe knows who I am and I feel their love and respect for it daily. Mavyx tells the truth of it however, I was among the last to take flight in our clutch of younglings in training. But I am assured that I could beat almost all of my Protectors in a test of speed on the wing now I am grown. “Come now,” I say, grinning at my Second Spear and dearest friend. “Do not attempt to embarrass me in front of my mate. We both know I could fly circles around you once I got the hang of it.”

“Aye,” he says, eyeing me and my Zahreenah sitting beside me. “Aye, you could.” I do not miss the way his gaze slips to the female named ‘*Ah-lanah*’. Perhaps my Second Spear imagines his own heart-stars igniting for her. I hope that for him. I hope that for as many of the males around me as possible.

When the meat is brought over, I offer a small bite to my mate. She eyes the morsel warily. frizikki meat is juicy and tender, especially when roasted over a spit for the majority of the day like this has been. Normally, the herbs and spices used to flavor the meats are reserved for honoring the Temple females gifting the tribe with a son, but now, we have more to celebrate. And females to impress. “It is good,” I tell her, moving the meat closer with grease slowly dripping down my fingers. I expect her to take it with her own hand, but instead, she nods and offers her slightly open mouth. My hand moves of its own volition and it’s as though the celebration around us, the fire, the land, the very forest whose leafy fingers constantly search to take hold of our village - it’s as though all of that pauses, all of it takes an inhale of breath, absolutely everything stops and ceases to exist. *Everything*. Everything, except the feel of Zahreenah’s hot little mouth closing in around my fingers, her soft, wet tongue swiping at my skin.

Her pretty eyes slide shut and the noise of appreciation she makes from her throat almost sends me feral. “That is good,” she says, her eyes popping open again. She reaches for

more meat but I am faster, tearing a bigger hunk from the frizikki and holding it to her lips.

“*Do that again,*” I command, feeling almost desperate. “I will feed you, my mate, if you do exactly as you just did.”

Zahreenah looks at me shyly. “I can feed myself.”

Ducking, I shift closer, my wing arching around Zahreenah’s back. “Do not make me beg, little-light,” I murmur, the general sounds of celebration around us drowning out my voice to all others. “My Protectors may look at me differently if they have to witness that.” The fire crackles and pops as we stare at one another. I can scarcely breathe with my mate so close. Eventually, she relents, wrapping her tiny hand around my wrist with a sly smile on her lips before guiding my offering to her perfect little mouth.

My cock has never before been this hard.

“What if I *want* you to beg?” she asks, an alluring twinkle in her eyes. “What would you do then, *High Spear?*”

Clearing my throat, I re-adjust my loin covering. “Are all females as mischievous as mine?”

Zahreenah shrugs with a grin, leaning over to tear some meat from the plate before us. “Why? Want to trade me in for a different one?” I catch her wrist before she has the chance to eat her food.

“Never,” I tell her, bringing her small, soft hand to my mouth and savoring the opportunity to flick my tongue across her fingers as I snatch the frizikki meat from her grasp. And I mean it. Zahreenah is meant to be mine. She will come to see it this way too. My eyes never leave hers, though my little-light’s gaze seems fixed upon my mouth as I chew. Is she reminded of her mouth-on-mouth gift? Her ‘kisses’?

“My High Spear?” Mavyx prompts, breaking the spell my mate and I had been under. My tribe are looking to me with full, untouched meals before them. They wish me to start the feast, not sit there and watch while I feed my mate.

Normally, I would stand to start a feast, though if I were to do that now, the evidence of my hardened cock would

be on full display for all to see. Instead, I raise a cup and remain seated while I address my people; the Protectors, the sons, the care-givers, the craftsmen, and now our females too. My wings flare wide but my tail remains at Zahreenah's back where she sits beside me. "Over the past few days, the Goddesses have blessed our people beyond measure." Around me, murmurs of agreement mingle with the popping of the fire at the center of our gathering. "We still have much work to do. We will find the other females, and we will welcome them to our tribe where they will be cared for and protected." Standing Protectors begin thumping the bottom of their spears into the earth in agreement. "So, I call upon you to eat. Feast this night and gather your strength. Our females will need us strong and capable this next day, and all of the days that chase it." A cheer erupts as I tuck my wings back in and my tribe begins to feast on the meats and fruits provided. I, too, am tempted to tear into a frizikki joint, but am far, far more tempted to return to feeding my mate. I'm about to do just that when I realize she is distracted, looking around at our gathering with surprised eyes. I look too, although I am not aware of anything amiss. All I see is my people eating. My attention is pulled to my other side by a laugh. A female laugh.

It is from the one they call 'Chaz-Titi'. "*Fuck!*" she exclaims, "If you guys eat pussy the way you all chow down on your food, then I'd say we've been abandoned on the right alien planet!"

My Zahreenah laughs at this. Though she covers her mouth and quickly tries to control her amusement. I wish she would not. She is most alluring when she laughs, though I do not understand the humor she partakes in. I look around, seeing only my Protectors and tribespeople eating as they normally would. It is a quick and messy affair, we tear into meat with swift efficiency. Perhaps this is not how it is done where my Zahreenah hails from. "What is this... *pu-say* you speak of?" I ask Chaz-Titi, reaching over to grab myself a leg of frizikki to tear into with my teeth. Grease drips down my chin but I have no care for cleaning myself until I am done with the task of eating. "It is some delicacy, no?"

Chaz-Titi grins at my question but her eyes stay fixed upon my mate beside me. “Oh, I’m sure Serena can get you all clued up on that topic, big guy,” she says, laughing and doing something strange by briefly closing one of her eyes.

”*Chastity*,” my Zahreenah hisses, her eyes huge as she stares down her companion. Some form of silent communication transpires between them, but I am unsure of what is being said. It is a secret, then, this *‘pu-say’*? And the eating of it is important. Perhaps it is some form of ritual from the female’s homelands? A mating ritual? Yes, this must be it. I study my mate as she eats, her eyes averted and trained upon the food she so delicately picks at. Does she have some secret *‘pu-say’* for me to eat? I would gladly do so if she does. If it is important to her culture. If it means me proving myself worthy of being her mate, I will gladly devour all the *‘pu-say’* she has to offer me.

But... *how* do I get her to offer it to me?

I continue to eat while thinking. Thinking, and watching my little-light. Eventually, I wipe the grease from my mouth and cleanse my fingers in one of the nearby clay bowls of water placed there for that purpose. “Will you, my mate?” I ask quietly, leaning into her. “Will you teach me the things that are of importance to you?” She looks up at me, her eyes so green, they resemble the deep lagoons at the heart of the jungle. She has no skin stars to dance at her delicate temples, but from the way her eyes dart between mine and then down to my mouth, she is thinking of the many things she might teach me. “I am very willing to learn,” I tell her, my voice lower and deeper than even I’ve ever heard it before.

“Is that so?”

Only three, short and simple words. Oh, but how they stir me. How is this done? How is it that my mate can say three innocent words in a way that makes my cock ache for her? I want to do much with this female. I want to do *everything*. I scan her face, not even sure of what it is my body is urging me to do. More mouth-on-mouth - her ‘kissing’ as she calls it? Yes, that would be thrilling. There is more. I am sure of it. My mind is unaware of the details but my body

knows... *something*. There is some echo within me that sings of how my ancestors touched their females. How they cared for them, fed them, slept with them in their arms and so much more. The firelight dances in my Zahreenah's eyes and I want to ask her to show me. *Show me*. Show me all the ways she wants me to care for her. I will learn them all. "Will you share my nest tonight?" The words come from my mouth without much thought.

She looks... bashful. Her gaze drops to her hands before she tucks some of that lovely soft brown hair behind one ear. "I think that would be unwise, Rynn."

Just my name on her lips makes me want to groan like a fledgling Protector spilling into his seed pot for the very first time. "I think it would be very wise," I tell her, reaching forward and tucking her hair behind the other ear to match. "I can protect you better when you are at my side, always." Zahreenah makes a funny little snort-laugh at that and rolls her eyes, though I do not think she is upset with me. I hope not, at least, for it is true.

"We'll talk about this later," she tells me, rising from her place beside me with a pat on my shoulder. I watch as she makes her way over to where her companions stand talking after being nourished by their meals. Occasionally, the females pause long enough to glance around at all the Trixikka whose attention is either still on their food or utterly devoted to the four females. I stand and reach for my spear, butting the bottom of it onto a nearby sitting rock. Giving those Trixikka whose attention I manage to distract from the females a pointed look, they have the grace to look ashamed for how they went against my warning about staring and making the females uncomfortable.

"I still do not like this, High Spear," Mavyx says, coming to stand with me, his muscular arms crossed over the broad planes of his chest.

I resettle my wings behind me. My Second Spear is a good male. He is fair in his command of my Protectors and perhaps the best fighter among them. He is also a cautious

male. Many times this has served him well. “Brother?” I say, inviting him to lay bare his concerns.

“The females...” his words trail off as he watches our new clutch of females.

“You... do not like them?”

Mavyx huffs and shifts on his feet, his eyes finding the darker-skinned female, Ah-lanah. “I did not say that. I... they are-... they are soft and delicate and... they... *jiggle* when they move. Their bodies are so unlike ours. There are... curves and roundness. It is... almost hypnotizing and far too distracting.”

“This is a bad thing?” I ask, my gaze finding that fascinating tailless rump of Zahreenah’s.

”*Rynn*,” my friend says, gaining my attention back. The concern I see in his eyes is deeper than that of enticing curves and the way the female’s bodies *‘jiggle’*. “We have females outside of the Temple to protect now. They are more vulnerable than I ever guessed they might be. Do not tell me you are not concerned. All of my males are wishing for their heart-stars to light - to take a mate, as you have. They are not focused on protecting Tribe and Temple any longer.”

I grunt, nodding. “The female’s presence is new. A novelty. Our Protectors will remember themselves when seeing the softness of a female becomes normal to them.” I pray to the Goddesses that this is true. “But to be sure, increase their training. Remind them that no one will be blessed with a mate if the tribe cannot keep these females safe.” Just saying the words forms a knot in the pit of my gut.

Chapter 14

SERENA

Just like the night before, Rynn keeps guard outside our hut. It makes me start to wonder how little sleep this guy can function on. When we wake, he allows a trio of Trixikka into the hut to bring us food to eat, water to drink, and a wooden basin filled with more water for us to wash up. What I would give for a shower, soap, and shampoo right about now... and deodorant and clean clothes since I'm still in my oversized ratty t-shirt and sleep shorts from when I was abducted. The four of us pick at the food and wash up in relative quiet, some of that fermented drink from last night having left my head a little foggy. Much of the fruit and meat is left untouched.

Surprisingly, it's Bea who breaks the silence. "He guarded us last night again," she says meekly, nodding toward the small window where some of Rynn's muscled shoulder and dark wing can be seen outside. "Like he did the other night."

"Looks like 'king of the bird-men' wants a taste of Serena's *delicacy*," as he put it last night." Chastity comments as she wipes a wet rag of thin leather over her arms. Alana snickers half-heartedly but I notice Bea's cheeks color as she averts her eyes, pretending to be more concerned with washing her legs and feet. She's uncomfortable with Chastity's brand of humor, that's clear enough and I can't blame her. We've been abducted from our home planet and abandoned on an alien one. Is this really the time for sex jokes?

"*Chastity*," I warn, widening my eyes and tilting my head in Bea's obviously uncomfortable direction when I have her attention.

She wets her lips and apologizes. "Sorry... I... *shit*," Chastity throws the rag down into the basin of water, making a sloshing noise. "If I don't joke about all this fucked up stuff that's happening to us... if I let myself stop and reflect on it,

I'm gonna end up curled into a ball, crying in the corner, you know?"

Bea looks up and everything is quiet for a moment. Alana and I exchange glances. "I..." Bea starts, fiddling with the cotton of her pajamas. "I can understand that."

Chastity reaches for the rag again, dragging it along the back of her neck. "My therapist said it seems to be my go-to defense mechanism. Shit, it's how I managed to have a career in porn and stay sane."

"You were in porn?" Alana asks, but honestly, I can see it. You have to develop some kind of tougher skin working in the adult industry and maybe humor is part of hers. I frown to myself, not willing to analyze what's been part of my self-defense arsenal all these years.

Chastity grins. "Ladies, you are talking to Chastity Charm, the star of titles such as, 'Little Redhead Riding Good', 'Ginger's School of Misbehaving Girls' and let's not forget the blockbuster that was 'Busty Redheads 3; Return of the Titties'."

For a second or two, none of us make a peep until someone - I'm not sure who - lets loose a God-awful snort-laugh and before I know it, we're all cackling like mad. It feels so utterly wonderful to do something as familiar as laughing. To find amusement in all of the shit we've been through in the past few days.

When we've washed up enough, we step out from our little 'girls only' hut and I don't fail to notice Chastity giving Bea's hand a comforting little squeeze and a smile. Only we're stopped in our tracks two steps outside. Rynn is leaning a shoulder against the stone of our hut. He kicks off from the wall when he sees us. "Offerings," he explains, coming to stand next to me as we all look down at the collection of around twenty-to-thirty clay pots. "For you, females."

"That doesn't mean what I think it means, does it?" I ask, turning my head toward him but still surveying the array of pots, those pretty stones, and a few feathers here and there.

Honestly, it looks like the Trixikka have laid out some sort of altar for us.

“None are for you, do not worry,” he says, folding his muscled arms across his broad chest. “I’d shred the wings of any who dared make an offering to my mate.”

Chastity finally says what we’re all thinking. Very loudly. “Why is there a pile of jizz jars outside our hut?”

“The eligible males of my tribe have left you offerings,” Rynn explains. Or rather, doesn’t. There are a few of those males hovering around now, trying to covertly watch for the other girl’s reactions to their ‘gifts’. Rynn notices them and makes a warning grunting sound accompanied by an agitated flick of his tail so they begrudgingly melt away behind a nearby hut.

Crouching, my fingers find a small bundle of feathers tied together with some kind of dried vine. I pick it up and stand, stroking my fingers over the still glowing, but slightly dulled lights on the tips. These glow a pistachio sort of green at the moment. “But what exactly do the males expect us to do with... their *stuff*?”

Rynn’s eyes are glued to my hands as they idly play with the feathers. “They do not expect *you* to do anything with their seed.” He says, intent gaze not once roaming from my hands, the tufted tip of his black tail twitching as he watches. “You are *my* mate. An offering made to you by anyone but me would be a direct challenge to their High Spear.” Finally, it seems he cannot take it any longer as he extends a wing and grunts as he yanks out two perfectly fine feathers, their tips glowing aqua blue. Swiftly, he snatches the feathers I’d been idly toying with and shoves his own into my hands instead. “The males give *the other* females their seed and gifts in the hope that they will accept their offerings and in turn, give them healthy younglings,” he says, completely ignoring the fact that he’d just had a mild fit over me touching some other bird-man’s feathers.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Alana says, one hand on her stomach. “Not for us. We can’t accept these... offerings.”

Rynn's nose scrunches adorably before he schools his features. "The males will be disappointed, but your choice to accept their offerings is your own."

Chastity crouches, picking up one of those cool, glowing stones. The ones that look like the most amazing opal you've ever seen. "Can we keep these though?"

"Anything that pleases you is yours," Rynn tells her, jerking his chin at the collection before us. Chastity grins and then eyes the beefcake Trixikka Protectors that seem to not be able to keep away - even after their High Spear's warning. I can just imagine what it is she's about to say next considering Rynn's offer, but instead, we are interrupted by the arrival of Tryk, accompanied by Rynn's men who had gone with him last night to see the ship's wreckage. All of us ladies stand straight and take a step back as the enormous dark wings of the Trixikka beat rapidly, slowing their flight for them to land in the small clear area nearby. For huge, muscled men with wingspans at least twice their height, they handle themselves with almost mesmerizing grace.

Blinking as the gusts of wind from their landing blow my hair about, I don't miss the way Rynn steps closer and slightly in front of me, shielding 'his mate' from possible danger. Honestly, I'm still not sure about this 'mate' business, and I'll need to talk to him about it, but I can't deny the way my feminism flies out the window, leaving room for that tell-tell tingling sensation down low when Rynn's chest puffs up and his biceps flex in a show of dominance.

"High Spear," Tryk offers him a nod before his eyes find Chastity straight away. "*Females*," he says, bowing deeply before straightening back up again and puffing up his chest.

"What have you to report?" Rynn barks at his men, ignoring the Shadow Wing.

After a more detailed description of the 'carcass' is retold, it's clear to me and the other girls that this is indeed the ship we'd been brought here on. The girls in the pods were nowhere to be seen according to the Trixikka Protector who

had ventured into ‘the belly of the beast’. They did, however, say that there was evidence of a band of ‘mimyckah’ in the area, which I think is the demon-chimp thing that Rynn saved me from when he rescued me from the depths of the jungle that very first day.

“The site is firmly within Zarriko’s territory, High Spear,” the Trixikka scout reports.

Rynn considers this with his hands stroking his jaw. “I will visit the carcass this day,” he says. “I would like to see it for myself and I have plans to meet with Zarriko to discuss patrols for the other missing females.”

“I will come with you,” I tell him. All Trixikka tribesmen turn to look at me, and a myriad of skin-stars burst to life as they all assess me. Honestly, it’s like witnessing a firework display, except instead of a night sky backdrop, the lights sparkle against broad pectorals, rock-hard abs, and flexing biceps. Fuck, I need to calm down and stop ogling him. “There might be something useful in the ship that only a human will recognize. Things we can use here in the village,” I add, focusing on Rynn.

“No.”

It’s the only word Rynn seems to want to offer.

”No?”

I watch as he goes to walk away only to quickly circle right back to me. “I will not be putting you, or any females in danger, Zahreenah. The forest is full of dangers.”

“But you’ll be there,” I argue. “And you said I’d be safest at your side. Besides, when you go to this other tribe. What if they’ve already saved some of the girls? How will you talk to them? They might not have figured out the translator thing. I can talk to them, convince them to come back here with us.”

With that promise hanging in the air, some of Rynn’s men shift on their feet, watching and waiting for their High Spear’s decision and clearly hoping for a certain outcome. Rynn stares at me stonily and I see it, I see the realization

behind those eyes that I could ask for *anything* and he'd give it. Within reason. A frustrated growl rumbles from his chest and his tail flicks back and forth before he finally bites out a quick, "Fine!" His huge wings ruffle, stretching out and then resettle on his back. "But you will stay close to me at all times, do you hear, my little-light? I do not want to have to chase you down like prey."

Something screwy flips in my brain. "Oh, I don't know, that sounds kinda fun, don't you think?"

What am I saying?!

I'm only vaguely aware of one of the girls -*probably Chastity*- snorting, trying to hold in her laughter. Had I really just said that? Out loud? In front of these people? It's odd - this sudden embarrassment I feel. I'm used to saying the filthiest of things for my clients on the other side of a camera. This feels different.

But when I see how Rynn's pupils are blown wide and his chest rises and falls with more effort than usual, I know he caught my drift. My very horny drift. *Fuck*, get a grip, Serena! "When are we going?" I squeak, trying to divert attention away from my obvious flirtations with the big, bird-man.

"I will feed you," Rynn says, voice gruff and delicious. "Then we leave."

"I've already eaten with the others," I protest.

"I will feed you," is all Rynn answers, before tugging me away, throwing a rather curt dismissal at Tryk over his shoulder, letting the Shadow Wing know he's overstayed his welcome.

He leads me to the largest of the huts in his village - the one I had slept in that very first night when it was just him and I. "Sit," he demands, gesturing to his nest before he goes to one corner where a platter is awaiting us on top of one of his wooden trunks. Bringing the food over to me, he kneels, lowering his massive frame so that we are at least eye level again. Picking a blue-ish looking berry, the High Spear of this

alien tribe holds it up to my lips, his expression expectant as he waits for me to comply.

“I can feed myself, you know.”

“I know,” he says, not dropping his insistence with the berry.

Huffing, I roll my eyes and take the fruit, the flavor bursting on my tongue, sweet and a little bit tart. So good is the taste that a groan of pleasure slips from my throat.

Before I can even think, Rynn has another berry in his grip, holding it gently against my lips, begging for entry. “Do that again... please.” Those little skin-stars are racing down his chest. Down, down, down they go, over his sculpted stomach and hips, disappearing into the band of his loincloth. His loincloth looks decidedly tented - tented by something huge.

“How much do you want me to eat before we can go?” I ask, swiftly averting my eyes and reaching for more meat and fruit to distract myself.

“Enough until you are sated, my little mate,” he tells me. “If you will force me to fly you into dangerous places, then at least let me care for you in this way.”

It’s an odd feeling, to be cared for so intently. No one else ever has. Not even old Adeline. Don’t get me wrong, she did her best. But sometimes things would slip out of her mouth that would remind me of the hardship my mother dumped on her. And so I sit, and I eat, tucking Rynn’s gifted feathers behind my ear to make use of both hands so I can tear the cold meat a little more delicately. Rynn stares at those feathers for a good long while. Once he’s satisfied that I’m well-fed, we move out to find Mavyx ready to hear his High Spear’s command.

Before leaving, Rynn assigns three hulking Protectors to watch over Alana, Chastity, and Bea specifically. Chastity looks positively gleeful at having been given her own personal muscular bodyguard. Bea, on the other hand, looks a little worried as she eyes one of the assigned Trixikka - the one with

horrible facial and body scars and a leather patch over one eye. I don't blame her. He is imposing.

“Come, my mate,” Rynn says as I'm waving goodbye to my friends, before he bends, swooping me into his hold, carrying me bridal-style in his strong arms.

I'm proud that I manage to suppress my little yelp. “You better not drop me!” I hiss, trying to appear unfazed to the girls watching nearby.

“Never,” he vows. “Zahreenah.” At my name, I finally meet his bright turquoise eyes. “I will *never* drop you.”

And I believe him.

Chapter 15

SERENA

I'm not sure how long it takes us to fly to the site of the ship. All I know is, it takes far too long. Right at the beginning of the journey, I decide it's best to keep my eyes firmly shut with my face pressed into the side of Rynn's warm neck - just in case I get a glimpse of just how high up we are and decide to barf. By the time we land in the small clearing, my arms ache from holding onto him with a death grip and my legs wobble when I try to support myself. One of the Trixikka guards accompanying us grins at me as I'm thanking all the deities I can think of for being back on terra-firma. "It was an enjoyable flight, was it not?" he teases with a boyish grin. I kind of want to tell him to fuck off.

Instead, Rynn's tail curls around my waist possessively. "With my mate in my arms? It was the best flight I've had in all my memory."

I roll my eyes at that. For a guy who up until a few days ago had never seen a woman in the flesh, he sure is a smooth-talker when he wants to be.

We approach the wrecked ship, the Trixikka holding out their spears in a defensive stance as though the thing might attack them at any given moment. Rynn makes me stay back while his men surround it. I begin to protest, but stop completely when I see a snake-like creature slither out from a gash torn into the side of the ship. It is bright pink in color and forked, with a head on each end where its body splits into two. The Trixikka give it a wide berth, but pay the double-headed pink snake no mind once it's slithered up into the branches of a nearby tree. It's after that, that I think, nope - these guys are all too welcome to go exploring ahead of me. With a short, sharp whistle and a jerk of his head, Rynn somehow communicates with two of his men to come and guard me closely as he is first to step foot inside the ship. Once he deems it safe, his face appears from the doorway, beckoning me inside with him.

I'd happily have lived out my life without ever seeing this ship again. The memory of being held captive, constrained in our chairs as the huge bug-guy, Z'irri calmly explained that we were to be sold as breeding stock is not one I'd like to hang onto. But if any of the pod girls are still here, or there's something in this slaver's ship that could make our lives easier here on planet-bird-man, I have to take a look.

All the Trixikka still brandish their spears as we stand in the belly of the small ship. They look around, fascinated but broadcasting a thick feeling of wariness about everything they see. The space feels so much smaller than it had done before, which I suppose can't be helped when the people you're with are huge, seven-foot, muscled men with wings and flicking tails. Glancing at the row of seats we girls had been strapped to, the memory of gripping each other's hands for dear life invades my mind and I turn my back to them sharply, now facing the wall where once there were sleeping girls, floating in those awful pods. Now, there are none. None at all. "Do you really think those... *things* took the girls?" I ask, staring at the empty wall. If they have, they've taken the pods and all.

From the corner of my eye, I'm aware of Rynn watching me and then turning his attention to the empty wall I'm currently consumed with. "There are mimyckah prints and their scent is strong here," he says, watching me closely.

"What will they do with them?" I ask, shuddering inside when remembering how the mimyckah I'd encountered had looked like he'd wanted to devour me - and not in a good way.

I feel the warmth of Rynn's approach before I spy him coming closer from the corner of my eye. His skin-stars are twinkling and the soft feathers of his wing brush against the back of my arm. "I do not know," he tells me honestly. "I cannot imagine it would be anything good. But we will find them, I promise you that. My Protectors and those of Zarriko's tribe. We will not stop until we find your friends."

Looking at him now, with those intense turquoise eyes, a lump forms in my throat. He's so, so sincere in what he tells me it's almost a jolt to the system to hear it. Instead of

standing here, letting his warm, calloused hand skim down the skin of my arm like I see him raise his hand to do, I turn quickly to face the ship's control panel and steel myself, sniffing hard. Rynn's too good and I'm learning that he makes me feel a little off-balance sometimes. I don't deserve his goodness.

The control panel for the ship is a plethora of buttons, dials, and sliders, all arranged in front of two, oversized, plush leather chairs. I wonder if this thing could still fly. It's doubtful. That burrot worm thing smashed most of the front of it and nothing will be secure enough now to venture into space. So much for trying to fly this thing back to earth. Not that that particular hair-brained idea had ever been a possibility. How would we even find our way back? Who knows how much fuel this thing has left in the tank and what it even runs on. All that, plus the knowledge that there are bigger, scarier aliens than I'd ever imagined out there and they apparently think nothing at all of using human women as breeding stock. I glance at Rynn as he slides into the other pilot's chair beside me, looking immeasurably uncomfortable and absolutely baffled by the console. No, I'll stick to the alien I know, thank you very much.

Pushing buttons at random, somehow I manage to get something to power up, a central screen coming to life, and a few select sections of the console lighting up. Rynn hisses in surprise, his hand going to the belt of daggers at his waist. "*It's fine,*" I tell him, my hand going to his knee.

"The beast awakes," he says, unsheathing a blade and gripping it tightly. "I do not trust it."

He sniffs the air, his skin-stars going manic at his temples as he glances around for any kind of danger. On the screen at the center of the console, there are symbols with writing beneath each one. It takes me a moment to realize I can actually read them. I hadn't expected that. But of course, the new translator I have tackled the Trixikka written word, why wouldn't it also translate... whatever this is too?

There are on-screen sections for flight paths, communications, ship manuals, emergency medical manuals,

radio transitions, ship logs, species cultural notes, and loads more. Trying the communications tab, I manage to bring up a list of incoming and outgoing messages. Curious, I click the most recent.

At once, there is a loud voice and a ghostly image of the head and shoulders of a bug-person floating right in front of us. Rynn wastes no time at all, his strong arm jutting out, thrusting his dagger straight through the eye of the intruder while simultaneously moving to grab me. Except, it's not an intruder. Rynn's blade goes straight through the bug-person's face and then keeps on going, clattering to the console when he drops it, presumably to haul me over his shoulder and high-tail it out of here. "Did you pick up my special order?" the floating head and shoulders ask. The Trixikka behind us raise their spears in defense.

"Wait, wait, *Rynn*," I say, pulling him back and stopping him from grabbing me. "It's not real, *look*."

He does.

"Yes, my love," responds an unseen person, though I know whom that voice belongs to instantly. Z'irri. So the bug-person currently projected in front of me must be Mama Z'rykby. "I have the encrypted files of what I am ensured are the most popular earth songs and even managed to barter for some extra of that choc-o-lit, your current favorite is so fond of."

"*Oh!*" Mama Z'rykby claps happily, her beetle-y wings flaring with excitement. "Jess-ee-ca will be so pleased! As will all the others. We do not want them to get too homesick. Clients will not pay for sad females. These earth songs will help them."

"*Zahreenah*," Rynn breathes, "what *is* this?" He looks utterly transfixed by the floating head and shoulders.

"It's a hologram, I think."

I smile, watching him tentatively reach out, his fingertips moving straight through Mama Z'rykby's shoulder. He then pulls away sharply, his Trixikka males murmuring

behind us. “It is hideous,” he says, his skin-stars twinkling all over him, his body still deciding if it should be in flight or fight mode, no doubt.

I can’t help but laugh at his comment though. He’s not wrong. Mama Z’rykby looks just like a larger version of Z’irri. Huge bulbous buggy eyes and moving mandibles.

“Make sure to only purchase the females I indicated on the catalog,” Mama Z’rykby orders her husband - her husband who is now worm food. “We just sold four and the agency needs fresh stock but we have to think of our ethical branding. When does the auction start?”

I’ve had enough. With a tap on the screen, the image of Mama Z’rykby minimizes down, getting sucked back into a small black marble-looking thing, set just above the screen. The Trixikka and I are silent for a while and all I can hear echoing inside my skull are the words ‘ethical branding’. It still makes me sick to think this alien thinks anything she’s doing is even remotely ethical.

Chapter 16

RYNN

My Zahreenah is quiet for the majority of our time inside the strange carcass. She explains to us that through some unknown magic, the creature we had seen and heard was actually like that of the cave drawings, except the carcass is able to bring the drawing to life. I do not like it one bit. Everything I learn about this thing - this place - only makes me mistrust it even more. Even if it did bring my Zahreenah to me. My mate's mood only seems to be lifted when we unearth a small amount of food from her homelands. Something called choc-o-lyt. She clutches in her delicate little hands and beams at me before inhaling the scent of this choc-o-lyt and promising that all the females back at the tribe will be happy at our find. I am pleased to hear this. Keeping our females happy comes second only to their safety.

Carrying my mate as we fly is no task at all. In fact, it is a pleasure I have never known. The way she grips me so tightly, her face pressed into my neck calls to me in some ancient way. As a Trixikka, I'd always felt the natural duty to protect, to keep our tribe and Temple from harm, but with this precious female actually in my arms? I'd pluck my plumage bald before I let any harm come to my Zahreenah.

So, when some of Zarriko's males approach our party, meeting us in flight, I squeeze her tighter as they eye my mate. "I, High Spear Rynn, travel here this day to speak with High Spear Zarriko," I tell them, my wings beating behind me to keep Zahreenah and I hovering high above the jungle below. The males exchange a look and then continue to keep their gaze fixed on my mate in my arms as they nod before turning, leading the way back to their village. It is good that they do not oppose this meeting. If a band of mimyckah scum have stolen females, we will need all the aid Zarriko's tribe has to offer.

We land in a clearing just outside Zarriko's village. His home is situated at the base of a mountain, just as it is with mine, for this is where the Goddesses chose to place a Temple.

I estimate that Zarriko's village is a little smaller than mine, with fewer males. The territorial heart that beats in my chest acknowledges that this is good. Fewer males mean less need for the females new to our land. Perhaps it is selfish, but I wish for my own males to experience what I have with my Zahreenah.

Some of Zarriko's elders and care-givers on the fringes of the village spot us as we land. They rise from where they had been peacefully sitting and quickly usher their sons away into the safety of their huts. News of our arrival quickly echoes through the village and it is not long before we are surrounded by Zarriko's Protectors and watched warily by a clutch of on-lookers.

"Why have you traveled here, High Spear Rynn?" Zarriko asks when he comes to face us in the clearing. He is older than me in years but no less fierce. He flares his wings wide, a warning to me and mine. "It has long been the way of our people to keep our tribes separate."

"Can you let me down?" my Zahreenah whispers. "Rynn?" I hold her tighter to my chest.

"The Goddesses have blessed our people," I call out to the High Spear, my voice booming in the clearing, all too aware of the eyes upon us - upon my mate. "But I think you know that. I think you know that there are females on our lands again and I hope... I hope you will help us by-"

"*Tessa!*" Zahreenah squeals loudly in my arms, desperately wriggling and writhing until I let her down. My heart leaps and my instincts urge me to pounce on her and not let her leave my side. But, across the clearing, from behind some of Zarriko's Protectors, I see another female - a female shoving the Trixikka males out of her way so she can run toward us. Her hair is a dull color and her frame is a touch shorter than my Zahreenah's. The Protectors of this tribe are just as tense as I and my brothers as we watch the two females hurl themselves at one another, reaching for an embrace while simultaneously babbling words so fast, I cannot follow the nonsense conversation. It takes me a moment or so to realize that Zarriko's female is not speaking in my tongue at all. Not

like our females can. They must not have asked their Temple for the magical trans-late-tors.

It is not long after Zahreenah is reunited with this other female, that two more shove their way into the clearing and run toward my mate for their own embraces with her. They all chirp happily but then one begins to weep and a few of Zarriko's Protectors look uneasy, shifting on their feet and gripping their spears.

"Why does your female upset ours, Rynn?" Zarriko's voice echoes across the clearing. One of his Protectors takes a step forward beside him. He is a huge male with scars of battle with many mimyckah all across his chest and shoulders. I know little of Zarriko's tribe, but I have heard tales of this one. His name is Jaryk and he is fierce in his protection of his temple and downright deadly as a hunter, but unable to utter a single word. Somehow, his silence makes for a more menacing presence and whenever my tribe have come across him in the skies or jungle alike, we keep our distance. I've heard tales that the Goddesses took his tongue for speaking ill of them or that he only cares for killing mimyckah so never bothered himself with learning to speak.

He seems very concerned with the females now though.

Before I even deign to give a response to Zarriko's accusation over the weeping females, my mate shouts back. "Those are happy tears!" she says, wiping at her friend's cheek as they all wear matching bright, beaming smiles. Zarriko's people all react with surprise at her use of the Trixikka language. "Right, Gwen?" Zahreenah asks, hugging her friend tighter, oblivious that she has just shocked all these fully grown, fighting males.

The small female, the one my mate refers to as 'Gwen' turns and addresses Jaryk. "*Itsfine*," she tells him in her nonsense words, "*Imfine... Imhappy*." She smiles and nods - her expression at odds with the tears still rolling down her soft-looking cheeks. Jaryk grunts but does not return to Zarriko's side. In fact, when he notes that I begin moving forward toward the group of females, he mirrors my steps,

reaching them before I do. “*Its alright,*” the one called Gwen says, a little laughter in her voice as she turns to pat Jaryk on the arm, sending his skin-stars reeling up his straining bicep.

Zahreenah’s eyes go from Gwen to Jaryk before she sticks out her hand. “Hello, I’m Zahreenah,” she tells him. “Nice to meet you.” I know my mate expects the Trixikka male to respond to her strange gesture, but I am not sure how he is meant to do so. When Jaryk only stares at her outstretched hand, her friend, Gwen huddles closer to him, squeezing his arm and saying something I do not understand.

“How is it that your female speaks our tongue?” Zarriko asks as he approaches. “We have yet to understand a single word and here she stands-”

“*Here she stands,* able to understand everything you’re saying, *Mr,*” my Zahreenah says, placing her hands on her lovely rounded hips. “So if you have a question *about me,* I kindly ask that you direct it *to me,* and not Rynn, thank you very much.” I cannot help but grin at such a little creature acting so fiercely toward a Trixikka male, and a High Spear no less. Something swells within my chest and I know without checking that my heart-stars are pulsing and dancing on my skin.

Zarriko narrows his eyes. It’s a small gesture, but one directed at my mate and I do not take it lightly. I can feel my tail begin to flick behind me and I hold my wings away from my body a little. If he so much as disrespects my Zahreenah, I’ll -

“Very well, little female,” he says, eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiles. “You are very welcome to my tribe and village.”

My hand finds Zahreenah’s shoulder. “My mate and I thank you, High Spear Zarriko,” I tell him, my tone deliberate. I do not miss the way his eyes slide down to my chest where no doubt, my heart-stars shine for all to see.

“So it *is* possible,” Zarriko muses aloud, all his tribesmen now marveling at the evidence of the bond I share with my female.

Chapter 17

SERENA

Some of the girls are here! Tessa, Gwen, and Skye! The joy I felt at seeing the faces of people whom I'd known only very briefly before the worm attack is baffling. Although a lot of what has happened to us can be described as exactly that, I suppose. I might even chalk up my escalated delight to having shared an utterly bizarre experience with these girls. Maybe experiencing these events together has forced some kind of bond. Or maybe I'm just giddy to see more human faces.

After a tense first meeting, the other High Spear, Zarriko, seems to warm to at least Rynn and I and invites us to meet with him in his hut for a bit of privacy. Before we all enter though, a shriek pierces the air and every Trixikka in the vicinity goes on high alert, producing spears and blades, ready to protect the girl whose scream still seems to echo through Zarriko's village.

But when I look, I see no danger. Only Skye hugging one of Rynn's warriors, her arms holding him tight and her cheek pressed into his bare chest. The Trixikka himself looks as though he doesn't know what to do in her embrace, his skin-stars racing all over the place, even after she releases him with a squeal and shouts to the others, "they have chocolate! *Real chocolate!*"

It takes a moment or two, but the other Trixikka gradually come to realize that there is no threat amongst them and they lower their weapons. Instead, they watch as Gwen, Skye, and Tessa nibble a bit of the sweet treat and moan in delight. I bite my lip to keep the grin from forming on my face because the girls are oblivious to the utterly rapt audience they have surrounding them as the seven-foot bird-men encircle the three girls, skin-stars bursting to life all over their bodies as their tails flick behind them. I think the two alien suns could fall clean out of the sky right now and not one of these guys would notice.

“Thank you so much!” Skye beams at the alien she had been embracing just moments ago. He nods eagerly in response as if he understands her before his hand disappears into his hide satchel, searching for more of the chocolate we found on the ship.

“Whoa, hold on now,” I say, stepping forward to halt his rummaging. “We need to save some for the girls back home. It’s not fair to give it all away.”

The Trixikka looks at me and then to Skye and I can almost hear the cogs whirring in his handsome alien head. He’s still stunned by that hug and he wants another.

“Do not make my mate repeat herself,” Rynn growls from behind me, sending a shiver down my spine.

In the end, Rynn’s Protector - one of the big, warrior aliens - relents. Though not without wearing a look on his face not too dissimilar to a kicked puppy.

Finally, we can follow Zarriko as he leads us to his hut to talk. The girls come with us too, as well as two of Rynn’s men and two of Zarriko’s - including the scary-looking one who is far too interested in every little breath Gwen takes. Although the High Spear’s hut is the largest in the village, it doesn’t seem to cater all that well to a group gathering. Rynn’s men and those of Zarriko’s remain standing, their muscular arms folded as they stay on the fringes of this meeting, keeping a watchful eye on one another. We, on the other hand, are invited to sit, both Trixikka High Spear’s wings spreading a little so their feathers don’t crumple on the compacted dirt floor. Tessa, Gwen, and Skye take a seat on the ground too but before I am able to follow suit, Rynn’s strong hands maneuver me so that when I sit, my butt is in his cross-legged lap, my side pulled tightly against his large chest. Skye manages to stifle her giggle at watching us.

“I can sit on my own,” I protest. I’m not a child, after all.

Rynn arranges me so that my legs are to the side. “I do not want you to.”

That shouldn't start a little flutter in my tummy, but it does. My eyes meet with some of the girls', but I look away quickly, my cheeks heating. God, what must they think?

Talk surrounds the important task of finding the remaining girls; Dove and Sophia, as well as those that were sleeping in the pods. Luckily, both tribe leaders agree on this and its importance. Quickly, an agreement is forged to have the forests patrolled constantly and those evil demon-chimp, 'mimyckah' things tracked. I find myself grinning up at Rynn when it's decided the tribesmen will be working together. His lips twitch ever so slightly back at me and he pulls my body more tightly into his as if trying to tuck me away safely into himself. The thought makes me feel strange; warm. I'm not used to that. The feeling only intensifies when his velvet black tail wraps around my waist.

After it's explained how I'm able to communicate with Rynn and the other Trixikka, Zarriko sends for one of his men to approach their own temple to beg for more translators for the other girls. "I congratulate you on your matehood," Zarriko says, nodding to me sitting in Rynn's lap. "I hope for many more mated pairings amongst our tribes." The High Spear's eyes slip to Gwen, and then to that scary-looking hulk of a Trixikka male standing directly behind her.

"It is something we must discuss," Rynn's words resonate through me, his voice so deep and soothing, I almost don't register the topic of conversation. "My males must have the chance to meet with your females. They must be given the chance for their heart-stars to ignite."

The Trixikka behind Gwen shifts on his feet.

"As must my males be permitted to meet with your females, Rynn."

Zarriko's expression is absolute. I can feel Rynn's frame still against me as both sides of this meeting eye each other until Rynn finally relents, his head bowing a little as he says, "of course." The tip of his tail flicks against the small of my back once, twice, three times. "The female who ignites a male's stars must decide which tribe she will reside in."

Suddenly, the conversation hits me square in the chest. “Wait, are we not taking Gwen, Tessa, and Skye back with us?” For some reason, that’s what I’d assumed. At my words, the huge, scary-looking Trixikka’s hand went for the hilt of his dagger, and the warning growl that Rynn lets out echoes in my ribs as he holds me impossibly tight.

Gwen, bless her, looks around, wide-eyed. “We’re... we’re ok here,” she squeaks. “At least I am. These guys have been really nice to us and it will be even better when we get our translators.” She turns to me, giving an encouraging smile. “You should come live here with us, Serena. Everyone’s been real friendly-”

Rynn’s growl hitches up a notch and I swear, if he holds me any tighter, he’s going to break something. “It’s ok, it’s ok,” I tell him, stroking his arm. “I’m staying with you. I’m not going anywhere.” Without thinking, my hand starts stroking his tail where it’s banded around my waist instead of the skin of his arm. Rynn’s growl dies in his throat and he looks down at me, his eyes blazing with something I can’t read.

For a long moment, it feels like it’s just me and him. But then, Rynn swallows thickly and addresses the other High Spear in the room. “The females will decide with which tribe they will live,” he tells him, his voice full of authority. “The females will choose, always. The mated males may move between tribes, depending on their female’s preference.”

The older Trixikka gives Rynn a long look, his gaze then taking in the Trixikka Protectors staying close to the walls but hanging on the two tribe leader’s every exchanged word. “This is acceptable,” he agrees with a grunt before gesturing for food and drink to be brought in to share with us. Within seconds, the tension around the group eases. The girls chatter in low voices and some amount of small talk passes between the two different tribes.

After a little while, Rynn shifts where he sits and there’s an unmistakable, large swelling poking at the side of my butt and hip. Placing a strong, warm hand at the nape of my neck to hold me still, Rynn ducks his head to whisper, his

words feeling hot against my ear. “Your little hand on my tail is rather distracting, my mate.”

Looking down, I see that I’d continued to pet his tail without noticing. Jolting my touch away, I mumble an apology, my cheeks flaming hot. God, is that some sort of sexual come-on to these guys? Did I just do the equivalent of patting his upper thigh? Or worse?

“Normally, I would not mind,” Rynn continues to murmur in my ear. “But soon we will need to depart and standing like a green-male with a lively cock beneath my cloth, eager to fill his first seed pot would not do well for me.”

I can’t help but giggle at that. And I won’t deny that being enveloped by the strong arms of this massive Trixikka male is turning me on a little. Not to mention how easily I seem to be able to affect him too. “Is there anything I can do to *help*?” I ask, purposefully wiggling in his lap - that purpose being to rub against the big guy’s huge erection.

Rynn lets out a quiet groan and buries his face into the hair behind my ear, his grip on the back of my neck tightening. “You are a wicked female,” he tells me, which only makes me giggle more.

“Well, you’re the one who decided I should sit in your lap.”

His muscled arms give me a squeeze. “I do not regret it.”

Somehow, Rynn manages to gain control over ‘not-so-little’ Rynn, and the meeting with Zarriko concludes with many agreements being made. The first and most important is that both tribes will work together to search for the missing girls. The second - something that seems to be quite important to the Trixikka - that should their little ‘heart-stars’ start twinkling for one of the women, it’s the girl’s choice as to which tribe she remains in and this will mean that Rynn will have to welcome her mate into his tribe or vice versa. The third - which sounded a little ridiculous to me - was that the

males must be given equal opportunity to spend time with the girls to try and ignite their heart-stars. This means that periodically, the tribes will meet to... well, I'm not sure exactly what it is that they're going to do but they really are hung up on this heart-stars business. I told Rynn that this whole 'mates' thing doesn't mean much to us humans and the males should prepare to be rejected even if they think they've found their 'fated mate' or whatever other nonsense they believe.

He was quiet after that.

After a reluctant goodbye to Tessa, Gwen, and Skye, one of Zarriko's men hurries forward. "High Spear," he says, addressing his chief. "Our offerings at the Temple have been accepted. We have the trans-late-tors!"

When we leave the other tribe, we leave them with much excitement at finally being able to communicate with each other. I remind them once more that it's likely they will faint but will wake soon after. I don't miss the way Gwen steps closer to the huge Trixikka she seems to take comfort in and that he has eyes for absolutely nothing else but her.

Rynn continues to be quiet as we fly back home, me in his arms once more. Even with my heart pounding a mile a minute in my chest, I decide to be brave and peel my face away from the safety of the crook of his neck. The evening is setting in and the skies begin to dim. The two, strange moons loom over us, hanging heavy between the stars. Below us lay miles and miles of thick jungle and that knot in my stomach tightens when I think of those missing girls. How are we going to find them? Surviving in the wild of a planet that we understand, with creatures and plants that we might recognize is brutal enough. But here? If they're still out there... I don't know if they're still alive or not, and fuck if that doesn't bring the reality of our situation racing back home to me. I tighten my hold around Rynn's neck, his strong, powerful wings beating slow and then gliding on a breeze before he repeats the motion. God, am I grateful he found me amongst all the nightmares currently below us.

“Do not fear,” he tells me, voice low and calm. “I will never drop you, Zahreenah.”

“I know.”

And I do. I think. Old Adeline once told me when I was a teen going through one casual boyfriend after another, that one day I’d have to force myself to trust one of these boys to love me and not leave me for something better like my mother did. It had stung at the time. But the truth often does. I find myself looking up at Rynn as he carries me. *Really* looking at him. He’s been nothing but kind and sincere with me since he rescued me. “I trust you,” I tell him, my voice coming out a little more hoarse than I’d intended.

Our eyes meet and his gaze is so piercing, it makes my tummy flip. “*Zahreenah*,” he breathes, and I know he’s going to ask about what I’d said regarding this whole ‘mates’ business. His body language has practically screamed his worry about it out loud, what with his twitching tail and those stars going crazy at his temples as he mulls it over in his head.

“High Spear Rynn,” we’re interrupted by one of our flying companions. “*Look*. The moonflies are out tonight.”

Rynn’s grip on me tightens as he agilely halts our forward trajectory to hover in mid-air with capable beats of his impressive wings. His men mirror him and I look around until I see what the Trixikka had been talking about. Down below, in amongst the dark of the thick jungle are pockets of bluish light. “Moonflies?” I ask, though I could guess that they might be like fireflies back home maybe? They seem to congregate together to create small areas where their glow is brightest.

Rynn grunts. “Yes. They gather where they feel safest. At the smallest hint of a predator, they will extinguish their light. Trixikka young are taught to find them if they are ever in the forest and unable to fly to safety. Stay quiet, stay still. If you can see the moonflies’ light, then you are more likely to stay safe until the rise of the twin suns, for they will indicate if something else lurks nearby..” He gives a whistle and jerks his head to his men and then to the three pockets of light down below. Altogether, they swoop downward at a break-neck

speed and one-by-one they head for the gatherings of moonflies, their glow dying as the Trixikka get close. “My males will search the areas for females in case they are using the moonflies for safety.”

We hover there with me in Rynn’s arms for what seems like an eternity, the only sound being the beat of his enormous wings. “I don’t think the girls would know to use the moonflies’ light as protection,” I say quietly.

“Maybe not, but it is worth checking.”

We do not find any other missing women. When we land, the dark of night has swallowed the mountain, the village, and the jungle surrounding us all. “You can let me down now,” I tell Rynn, giving his lit-up pectoral a playful shove. His feet have been on the ground for almost a whole minute and still, he hasn’t stopped holding me. “Your arms must be aching after carrying me all that way.”

“Never,” he says and I don’t miss the way his biceps flex as if trying to prove a point - a big, stupid, manly point. It’s only when Chastity is hurrying out of the girls-only hut to come and greet us that he reluctantly relents and sets my feet on the ground.

”*Oh, my God,*” Chastity starts. “Guess what happened while you were away!” I purse my lips, readying to ask what she’s talking about but Chastity is quick to answer my unasked query. “The grumpy one got the twinkles for Alana!”

My confusion must be all over my face because she shakes her head at me as if amused that I can’t understand her. “The grumpy one, you know, the one who always looks like he’s got a wasp up his ass? M-...Max something...” Chastity finally looks up at Rynn beside me. “What’s his name?”

“Mavyx,” he says gruffly. “My Second Spear is Mavyx. What has hap-”

“Right! Yeah, him! So Alana was saying that it would be a good idea if we can *all* go to the ship site some time and he overheard and would just not have it, so they started

bickering like an old married couple. He was all *'it is too dangerous for females to venture into the jungle'* or some garbage and-”

“And he was correct,” Rynn says with a look on his face that brokers no argument. “Females are safer here, where there is a whole village of Trixikka caring for you and protecting you.”

Chastity holds up a single finger to him. “Ok, first of all, don’t speak over me, *featherbrains*. Secondly, are y’all not hearing what I’m saying? Alana and Mavyx... his heart-twinkles or whatever they’re called... his chest’s all lit up like the fourth of July!”

“What?!” I ask, the breath whooshing out of me like a gust of wind. Beside me, Rynn is still before he curses and mutters something about going to speak with his Second Spear.

Chapter 18

SERENA

All three girls are pleased to hear the other tribe have found Tessa, Gwen, and Skye and that they have agreed to help us in searching for the others. There's even a squeal or two when I produce the remaining chocolate we'd found on the ship. Alana doesn't seem to want to talk about Mavyx at all. I get it. Sort of. This 'mates' thing is so important to the Trixikka. To them, their heart-stars lighting up for a girl is like divine intervention or some shit. It's like the universe is saying '*that one! that's the one for you, buddy!*' but that just doesn't hold with me. It's probably some biological chemical reaction like how your brain releases dopamine when you see your celebrity crush on the TV. Well, nature is meant to pump a mom's body full of powerful 'love drug' brain chemicals to trick her into that maternal instinct, but it never stopped mine from ditching me. This is the same. And it's probably happening to me too somehow. My stupid body *is* reacting to Rynn, I can't deny that. Even now, I'm curled up on one of the nests with Alana, but my mind is acutely aware of the fact that he's stationed himself outside our hut again. Does this guy ever sleep? If I sit up and look out the paneless window, I can see the arch of his dark, folded wing and the opal point of the spear in his grip.

"What else did the ship's computer say it had?" Alana whispers to me in the dark. She wiggles a little closer, her hands tucked beneath her head.

Out of all the girls, Alana seems the most interested in what we found out there. "I don't know," I murmur, rather unhelpfully. She's looking at me with wide, dark eyes, the light from one of this planet's moons reflecting in them. "Um... there were ship logs, communications--"

"Was there a database of information about this planet do you think?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. Why?"

She's quiet for a moment. "It might be useful to know about the flora and fauna here."

Shifting on the nest built from a frame of sticks and lined with hides and feathers, I blink back at her. The Trixikka have inhabited these lands for God knows how long. Surely they know everything there is to know about the animals and plants here. "You could ask any of the Trixikka... or the temple thing?"

"I tried the temple. It didn't answer me and Mavyx wouldn't give me any privacy to keep asking what I really wanted to ask." What she really wanted to ask? The moonlight catches on Alana's frown as I wonder what that might be. "Do you trust it, though? Whatever's inside the temple?"

No, not really. I mean, it gave us our translators, but the white egg object looks decidedly un-temple-like to me. But apparently, little Trixikka baby boys come out of there so what do I know?

"Could you try and convince Rynn to let us go to the ship?" she asks, wrangling the whispered conversation back to her original topic. "Or at least me, if the others don't want to go. Maybe we could get a communication out for someone to come and rescue us from this planet? Like an intergalactic mayday?"

Glancing over the slope of her shoulder, I can see Chastity and Bea fast asleep in their nest, breathing heavy and slow in their slumber. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Even if we can figure out how to work the communication system, how do we know who we'll be talking to? It might be the same guys that wanted to sell us off to be breeders." Alana takes a sharp inhale like she's remembering our previous fate. "There's God knows how many different types of aliens out there. How do we know we'll contact the good guys... if there even *are* good guys out there?" No, I don't think sending out a distress call to the corners of the universe for just about anyone to pick up is a good idea. Alana knows this too. In fact, from the little we've gotten to know each other, I'd say Alana's smarter than most of us. So why the questions now? Is it because of the mate thing? Because of Mavyx? "You know

he would never force you to do anything, right?” I ask, reaching over and touching her arm. “The Trixikka may think these heart-star things are a big deal but they-”

“No, no. I know he wouldn’t. I don’t think he likes me very much anyway. That’s... that’s not why I want to go to the ship. I-” Lifting her dark head, Alana looks over at the other nest, ensuring both girls are still sleeping before glancing over at the window to look at Rynn too. Finally, her gaze meets mine again and she wriggles even closer, her voice dropping so incredibly low, I have to strain to hear it. “I... there’s a chance I might be pregnant.”

If I’d thought that being abducted and then stranded on a primitive jungle planet was stressful enough, I sure as hell thought again when Alana confessed that she might be going through all that *plus* a possible pregnancy.

God, I feel for her. I really do. She had been in love with her boyfriend, she’d told me last night in whispers no louder than a night-time breeze. They’d not been actively trying to start a family but hadn’t been all that careful either. Alana cursed herself for being so stupid and I could tell she was fighting back a whole flood of tears when she’d said there were at least three very recent occasions where protection hadn’t been used, that her boyfriend had told her a romanticized story about how happy he’d be if they accidentally made a baby. She’d also told me about how, on the day before her abduction from Earth, she’d found him with his dick in the pretty intern at his office and Alana had cried herself to sleep that night.

She’s wary of almost every option available to her. She doesn’t want to let the Trixikka know of her predicament. “*You saw the... ‘offerings’ they gave us. They want to knock us up with their babies. Theirs. Well, if my period doesn’t show up, my baby is none of theirs. What if it’s like in the animal kingdom where a male lion kills the cubs that aren’t his?*”

“*I don’t think these guys are baby killers,*” I’d tried to reassure her.

“I don’t think they’ve ever had the chance to be before. They get given a baby boy from that temple thing and they’re told it’s theirs. This time, they’ll know my wingless, tailless child belongs to none of them.”

I understand her trepidation. She’d gone on to explain that if she could find information on the flora of this planet, maybe she could find some sort of jungle Plan B. Or failing that, something for the pain of childbirth. There’s got to be some herb or something that will help.

Fuck, I don’t even want to think of the pain she might endure. I know next to nothing about pregnancy and labor. And we’re all the way out here in the middle of nowhere, on a strange planet with no hospitals, no doctors or midwives in sight! The thought makes me pause. Maybe one of the other girls has knowledge that neither I nor Alana does? Maybe, if Alana *is* pregnant, they could help. Chastity was a porn star and I think Bea said she worked at a school. I’ll have to remember to ask Gwen, Skye, and Tessa what they did back on Earth.

Her period is not late yet - she thinks. She’s not regular. But I’ve never spent a whole night wishing so damn hard for someone to get a visit from Aunt Flo. Just as I’m sure Alana did too.

I eye the Trixikka who I know is one of the village healers. He’s currently mashing leaves into a well-worn hollow of a large rock with a smaller, smoother one - sort of like a large, crude mortar and pestle. I doubt that the healers in this village have any knowledge of pregnancy and childbirth, though they might know what herbs can help with pain.

Alana was right though. If there’s information in that ship’s computer, or even if there’s medical stuff that I’d missed when I’d looked around, it’s worth going back there to check. Rynn has deemed another trip to the ship unnecessary, but unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on how you look at it) for him, Alana was right about something else too; I’m pretty sure I know how to persuade him.

Maybe there's a small pang of guilt deep down in my gut for what I intend to do, but I've been using my body to get what I want from guys for a long time now. Normally, it's just their money. Normally, I don't give a shit about them. Normally, I don't even like the guys.

I like Rynn though. I like him a whole lot. And somehow that makes what I'm willing to do both better *and* worse.

He's never far away from me. Even now, my skin prickles with awareness of his gaze as the girls and I sit around the fire, trying to fashion scraps of hides into something we could wear. Lord knows we need to give our already stinky abduction PJs a break. It soon becomes evident that Bea's far better than all of us at clothing construction since she's the happiest I've ever seen her *and* she's already made herself a halter-top of sorts. She uses the most delicate hide she can find out of the bundle we've been gifted by many a Trixikka, as well as some form of plant fibers, woven and twisted together to make twine. "Can you make me one like that?" I ask her, standing. "If you don't mind?" She quickly agrees and beams up at me as I say my thanks. There's a small group of three Trixikka standing not far behind her, fascinated by everything she's doing. Bea is oblivious to them or has simply decided to pay them no mind. I smile at that and head toward where Rynn stands with five of his men, discussing search parties.

His bright turquoise gaze burns into me as I approach. He's meant to be listening to what his men are telling him of the ground they have covered in their searches, but it doesn't look like a single word is penetrating that handsome head of his, what with his whole attention rapt at mapping my approach rather than anything else. Mavyx stands beside him, stealing glances at Alana, his heart-stars fluttering just like Rynn's are doing too. Both of their tails jerk back and forth and the male who had been discussing search parties with them stops mid-sentence, realizing that nothing he's saying is being listened to. He bows his head at my arrival and murmurs something to his High Spear about returning at a more opportune time to discuss plans. Rynn merely responds with a grunt, his eyes practically glued to me. The Trixikka disperse,

including Mavyx, though he doesn't go far, merely crouching in the shade of a hut, picking up a branch and fishing out one of his opal-like blades to begin whittling a sharpened point on one end, all the while that tail of his flicking against the dry ground.

"You wished to see me, my mate?" Rynn asks. I tear my focus away from Mavyx and his glances at Alana to look at him and hesitate for a second. Alana had asked for me to try and convince Rynn to take us to the ship again - had suggested I could sweet talk my way into getting whatever I want out of this guy. And, standing here, looking at him now and how those little lights on his skin seem to twinkle in anticipation of my nearness, I don't doubt that she's right.

"When was the last time you slept?" I ask him, the word blurring out. "You're always guarding our hut. I never see you sleep."

One corner of his mouth twitches up into a smile. "There are more important things to me than rest. My mate's safety will not be compromised for the sake of sleep."

"That... doesn't sound healthy. Everyone needs sleep."

"Trixikka are used to hunting excursions and patrols lasting days. We are able to keep our wits about us without a wink of sleep during these times." His grin is possibly the sexiest thing I've ever seen and I realize; I don't *just* want to butter up Rynn for the sake of manipulation - my girl-parts want me to do all sorts of naughty things with this huge, winged, alien guy. "You need not concern yourself, Zahreenah," he says, "I am a strong, fit Trixikka male and my primary aim is to keep you safe."

"That's too bad," I say, reaching over and taking one of his massive hands in both of mine. His huge mitt is calloused and swamps both of mine - of course it does - his hands are size proportionate with his seven-foot, sculpted muscular body. Other things are size-proportionate too, from what I've felt and glimpsed whenever that loincloth of his has sported a happy-tent.

Rynn's eyes fall to where I have his hand in my grasp. Little lights dancing up his wrist and forearm, and even more of them racing down his chest to disappear toward his groin. "Too... *bad?*" he repeats my words with more than a hint of confusion.

"Yeah," I shrug, "I didn't sleep all that well last night and thought we could go take a nap in your nest."

Chapter 19

RYNN

I do not know what a ‘nap’ is, but my Zahreenah is offering me one, so I will take it gladly. Plus, she mentioned my nest and my heart-stars practically thrum with the thought of taking her there and holding her like I did that very first night. I do not know why it excites me so much, this offer of a ‘nap’, but one thing I do know, is after spending time in my arms, my scent will be all over her and this pleases me greatly.

After instructing Mavyx to speak with the Protectors, passing on my instructions as to which areas of the forest I would like the search parties to cover today, I tell him my mate is in need of me and that I am not to be disturbed. He merely grunts, his eyes fixing upon the darker-haired female, the one who ignited his own heart-stars. I do not understand Mavyx’s hesitation with his mate, but I do know he worries that the Goddesses could take the females away as quickly as they gifted them to us.

I will never let that happen. Not with my Zahreenah. I do not care how the Goddesses choose to punish me for it, but they will never take her from my arms.

Zahreenah leads us back to my hut, one of her dainty little hands in mine. I can’t help but marvel at the sight of it and I hardly notice anything apart from her delicate palm pressed to mine and our fingers entwined as we walk. This female could be leading me to the jaws of a burrot worm and I don’t think I would have noticed.

Thankfully, it is not a burrot worm we find ourselves facing, but my nest. I frown at it as we stand there. I haven’t rested here in a few nights and had I known my Zahreenah would want to make use of it, I would have preened my wings and gathered more feathers to increase the softness and my scent. It does not seem to bother my mate though. She climbs in and lays down, scooting back to allow space for me and pats the hides and feathers for me to join her. I do so gladly. I face my mate, my frame larger than her female form, making my

body curl around hers. My tail seems to have a mind of its own as it wraps around her calf making Zahreenah giggle. I think I like this ‘nap’.

“You enjoy doing that, don’t you?” she says, sounding amused.

“Yes,” I answer honestly. She is my mate, and some long-buried instinct of mine tells me that I should take every opportunity that presents itself to hold her - to show her and all the other males that she is mine. “Do you *not* like it?”

Zahreenah looks up at me, her smile more magnificent in my eyes than the waking of the twin suns. “I’m just not used to it,” she says. “It’s kinda cute though.” Cute? I do not consider anything about myself to be deemed ‘cute’, but Zahreenah is smiling so it cannot be a bad thing. “Guys back home don’t have tails... or wings... or lights all over their skin.” I bite back the urge to growl. I do not like to think of other males my mate might have shared her time with. Did she let them hold her? Did she take ‘naps’ with them? “Guys back home sucked,” she chuckles.

I am quiet for a time, not sure what she means. Is that another part of the mating ritual for her people? To suck? What must I suck? I will gladly do it, just as I would gladly eat the sacred ‘pu-say’ whatever that is - possibly a juicy fruit or a certain dish prepared by the female herself. Whatever it is, I will *devour* it. I bite my lip, thinking, wondering if I should offer to suck whatever she wants me to suck. My eyes drop to those curious curves on her chest. Are they for sucking? The thought makes my cock twitch with interest.

“These lights on the inside of your wings are so pretty,” my mate tells me, interrupting my thoughts of sucking as she reaches up, over my shoulder to stroke a finger through my dark feathers. The sensation makes me want to shudder in delight. It’s like a delicious little tickle and if she carries on doing it, my cock is likely to get as hard as a life-stone very soon. I do not know how my Zahreenah would react to my cock standing to attention, ready to spill into a seed-pot though. The smart thing to do would be to pull away.

Turns out, I'm not as smart as I once thought. Not when it comes to my Zahreenah and her touches.

I open my wing for her, arching it over us both so that the underside looks like a star-heavy night sky above us. She looks up at me, her cheeks stained pink. "This is cozy," she says, wiggling closer. I like that. How do I get her to wiggle closer still? Can I put my arm around her frame like I had that first night? But she had warned that females only like invited touches. She'd also warned that females might well reject their mate. I swallow back the quiet whine in my throat as my tail releases Zahreenah's calf. She frowns at me. "What did you do that for?"

"I... you must forgive me, Zahreenah," I sigh. "Long ago, perhaps my people knew how to please their females, to keep them happy, but that knowledge has left us through generations. I do not know what you want. I do not know what a nap is, or if I should touch you, or what you wish for me to suck, or when you will offer me the sacred pu-say. I do not know a lot of things about females. I-"

Zahreenah's frame is shaking beside me. Have I upset my mate? *Fuck*, that is the last thing that I ever wanted to do. She buries her face into my chest and I am at a loss for how to remedy the situation.

An adorable little snorting sound comes out of her and she looks up at me, a huge smile on her pretty, female face. My plummeting heart suddenly catches on an updraft and begins to soar. I did not upset her? "Did you just-..." she cannot seem to finish her words she's giggling so much, a sight that makes my chest tighten. "Did you just call my pussy *sacred*?!"

I do not know how to react. I only know that I want her to continue to be as happy as she is now, giggling in my nest. "I... *did*. Is that bad? Is it not something sacred I should eat?"

"*Oh, boy!*" she snorts again and rolls to her back, slinging an arm over her eyes.

"I will gladly eat it," I tell her, quickly. "Whenever you deem to offer it to me. I will eat it as many times as you wish."

Zahreenah snort-laughs a few moments more before moving her arm away so that I may see her beautiful eyes again. “You guys really don’t know much about girls, huh?” I shake my head and she gives me a wry grin. “Want me to teach you a few things?” I nod, agreeing so swiftly, I must resemble the green-male I once was, so eager to learn my spear-skills when I came of age. “First,” she says, reaching up and tracing the stars on my feathers above us with a single finger, “you can wrap your tail around my leg if you like.” I do so promptly, enjoying the feeling of being connected with her. “It’s important to tell your men that not every girl likes the same thing, but I personally, like your little tail wrapped-”

”*Little?*” I splutter a bit. Never has any part of my form been called ‘little’ before. Perhaps I need to groom the tufted end more often so my tail can be luscious and full, to my mate’s liking.

Zahreenah rolls her eyes with a smile on her face and mumbles, “*some things are still the same, I see,*” to herself before looking up at me again. “The point is, *I* like it when you do that. But other girls might not like it if a Trixikka does the same to her.”

I nod, considering this. “Females are more complicated than I’d originally thought.” My Zahreenah shakes her head at me, but she has a twinkle in her eye and a beautiful smile on her face. “May I ask a question?” I enquire, holding my breath, my eyes dropping to the source of my continued confusion. My mate nods her head. “What are...” I gesture to those lovely swellings on her chest, “...*these?*”

An adorable little snort escapes her again. “My tits?”

“Teeets?” I say, trying out the word on my tongue. I have never heard of such a thing.

My Zahreenah seems to puff up her chest, her ‘teets’ jutting out proudly beneath the cloth she wears. “Yeah, tits. Or, breasts, I should call them. I’ve been told they’re my best attribute,” she grins, waggling her brows in a teasing manner. “I practically make living with my tits.”

Now I'm even more confused, but highly intrigued. "How? What do they do?"

Zahreenah laughs and takes my hand, fitting it over one of her lovely 'teets'.

And I almost spill my seed then and there.

Sucking in a breath, I find myself stilling, the soft but heavy weight in my palm. I have never felt pleasure in holding something before. Well, besides my cock. But this? This warm softness filling my palm? Fuck, it's making me tent my cloth almost painfully.

"They don't *do* anything per se," Zahreenah continues as if she hasn't just gifted me permission to touch her. "But guys back home would pay me money to see 'em so yeah, they pay their own way," she chuckles.

I almost don't hear her words, I'm so transfixed with her 'breast' in my hand. But then I do. A growl releases from my throat. "I'll gut them with my spear," I grunt, my hand moving a little with my words, and *fuck*, her breast jiggles a little against my touch with the movement. The sensation has me mesmerized.

Zahreenah laughs. "Why?"

I'm not entirely sure why either. Only that something inside me screams that they did not deserve to lay their eyes on my lovely Zahreenah, let alone her bared 'teets'. I do not care if they made her offerings, I do not care if they won the privilege through battle. She is mine and I'm coming to see that I have rather territorial feelings when it comes to my little-light.

Zahreenah shifts closer, her chest pushing more securely into my palm and I cannot help the groan that slips out of me. She's looking at me like she wants to do that mouth-on-mouth 'kissing' again and I would love nothing more than to please her in that way. Even if it means I might very well spill my seed in my cloth.

"Well, how about you take me and Alana out to the ship again, and maybe I'll let you do more than see my tits?"

All I do is blink for a while, her words sinking into my head like a heavy foot on mossy ground. “What do you mean?” I ask, my hand still cupping her beautiful flesh.

Zahreenah wiggles closer, her nose almost brushing mine. Like this, I can count the flecks of gold amongst the green of her eyes. “I could teach you things,” she whispers, “Pleasurable things. I just need you to-”

I yank my hand away as if singed by fire. “You want me to risk your safety? You want to... *exchange* my touches for something you want?” It was a manipulation. This whole ‘nap’ thing was a way to change my mind about allowing the females to return to the ship carcass. Zahreenah knows I don’t want them to go back out there. She also knows that I want to touch her and hold her more than almost anything in the world. She didn’t invite me to this ‘nap’ out of wanting my touches. She did it to get something out of me.

I pull away, my tail unraveling from around her calf and my wing settling at my back. Goddess damn me, but pulling away from my mate is quite possibly the hardest thing I have ever done. What she’s done has stung me though. I thought that when we were gifted with females, and I a mate, the difficulty would be in keeping them protected with no temple to shield them. I never imagined they might play tricks on males - that *she* might play tricks on *me*.

Chapter 20

SERENA

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuckity*-fuck! I was not subtle *at all* in trying to persuade Rynn. I've never had to be before. All my customers already know I'm in it just for the money. *They know* that I'm going to try and flush every single dollar I can out of them. They're aware of the situation and where we stand with each other right from the first click on my site. Rynn, though? *Shit*, I feel really bad for trying to manipulate him.

I *mean* something to him. Or at least, I do right now. Maybe his heart-twinkles will stop twinkling one day? Who knows? But the fact of the matter is, I tried to use his attraction to me to manipulate him and it wasn't fair. Poor guy was so elated just to touch my boob, too. His expression had gone from the boy who'd got everything he'd ever wanted for Christmas, to a kicked puppy in the blink of an eye. He'd left me there in his nest not long after that and I feel awful.

I'd brought him here to his hut on the pretense of taking a nap. Of course, I hadn't planned on doing any sleeping. I'd imagined doing a number of things but none of them involved getting some shut-eye. And now, laying alone in Rynn's nest-bed, not only do I feel guilty but I feel disappointed that I didn't get to show him all the fun things a girl can do with a male like him.

The two Trixikka Protectors Rynn must have instructed to guard me once he'd left stand to attention when I poke my head out of the doorway. They're straight-spined and set-jawed, each thumping the butt of their spears into the dirt ground twice as if in greeting. "High Spear Rynn has given us the honor of being your personal Protectors, my High Spearess," one of them tells me.

I blink at that. High Spearess? I'm not so sure about that. "You can call me Serena." Neither of them say a word, but they do exchange a look with each other. "Where is Rynn?" I need to apologize and make it up to him somehow.

Maybe I should just explain that we need to check out the information the ship's computer might hold. Doing that without explaining and outing Alana's predicament will be tricky, but it's better than manipulating him.

“The High Spear is training with his Protectors.”

I look up at my two guards, squinting. “Can you take me to him?”

The training area happens to be a short flight away, on the banks of a river. Being held by someone other than Rynn as we fly feels odd. Rynn is locked in battle when we land, his focus on the younger Protector he was so deftly besting in hand-to-hand combat. He'd been circling, clashing together, and then shouting out commands to his trainee, advising on how to better handle himself against a foe. I'd been so mesmerized, I hadn't let go of the Protector who had flown me here, my body still cradled in his arms. Had I thought that Rynn's sole focus had been on his sparring opponent? “Zatiryk, if you don't put my mate down, I swear on tribe and Temple I'll rip your limbs from their sockets!” he growls, menacingly, his eyes not leaving his trainee as they circle one another. I guess he noticed me after all.

Zatiryk promptly drops me, clearly fearing for his life expectancy. He and my other designated Protector take a couple of healthy steps away from me for good measure.

In the small clearing surrounding the banks of the river stand fifteen or so of Rynn's Protectors. Rynn is giving his instructions to his opponent, telling him how best to face those horrible mimyckah while others watch and listen. The air is thick with that masculine scent of sweat and testosterone, the like of which you'll find at a bro-infested gym. Only, this smells more pleasant somehow.

There's a gleam of perspiration on most of the men here. They must have all had turns sparring. Rynn is no different and although I'm now used to him and the other Trixikka being completely shirtless the whole time, the primal way he holds himself now, ready to attack or defend stirs

something low in my belly. I stand, watching as Rynn's opponent leaps forward, making a grab for his High Spear's arms. Rynn deftly manages to outmaneuver his sparring partner and with a few grunts and a quick evasive move, ends up turning the Trixikka around with his arm around his neck in a choke-hold, one wing tucked against his back and the other splayed out awkwardly as he struggles to break free. A few black feathers float down to the ground, casualties from their scrap. "You give away your intentions too easily," Rynn says in a calm voice, still holding onto the younger Protector. "I can read you as easily as the Elder's teachings scribed onto the walls of the Eyrie Caves." Rynn lets him go, sweat gleaming on his muscled chest. He eyes the small crowd of trainees, gaze quickly dancing over where I stand. Ouch. I guess I deserve that. "None of you will be trusted to protect our females until each of you can best me!" he bellows, rolling his shoulders and neck before dropping into a crouching stance of challenge. "Come on, *next*."

More than half the Trixikka do not, in fact, best Rynn. A few of them do, but he doesn't make it easy for them. I must have been here close to two hours, watching him wrestle, punch, choke, shove, trip with his tail, and intimidate with his wings. Most concede to him, ending their session damp and panting. It was quite the watch if I'm honest. I must be as basic as they come because something about witnessing my Rynn fight all these guys? Yeah, my girl-parts liked the sight very much.

Once their High Spear dismisses them, the Trixikka turn to the river, wading into the waters to cool off and wash the sweat from their skin. Rynn approaches me, his breathing still heavy from exertion. I try not to ogle his bulging muscles or the sheen of sweat glistening on them. I fail. "I left two males to see to your protection at the village," he says, jerking his chin at me, his intense gaze briefly flicking over to where my guards stand a safe distance away. There's a small cut to his lip where one of his opponents managed to get a swing to land (he hadn't lasted long after that).

"I wanted to see you," I tell him. "I asked them to bring me here."

He grunts, turquoise blue eyes flicking momentarily toward the two Trixikka he'd instructed to care for me. "Zatiryk held you in his arms."

"How else was I going to get here?" Rynn's quiet at that, his gaze fixed on where he winds strips of thin hide around his knuckles. I can't help but put my hands on my hips. We need to talk, not sulk. "Rynn, I asked them to bring me to you to apologize." His eyes lift to mine so I continue. "I tried to use my body to manipulate you and that was wrong of me. I knew you wanted to touch me and I thought if I offered you that, you'd give me what I want-"

"I would give you anything, Zahreenah," he says, interrupting. "I would give you everything I have, anything at all in these lands. *Anything*. As long as it pleases you."

My lips press together and I will away the odd, hot sensation I can feel welling up inside me. "I know." Because I do know that. Don't I? That's how it feels, anyway. "I know," I say again, more softly this time.

"But I cannot put you or the other females in harm's way. The mimyckah are out there and they had been in that area - had taken the sleeping females. We need to concentrate on getting those females back, not flying more females into the thick of the jungle."

What he's saying makes absolute sense. Finding the remaining girls is a priority. But what about Alana? What about the possibility of her pregnancy? I bite my lip and nod my head. "I agree with everything you've just said."

"Good, then you'll agree not to-"

"Do you trust me?"

Rynn's mouth clamps shut, his breath huffing from his nose. A muscle ticks in his jaw and for a moment, I wonder if maybe he doesn't trust me at all. Until finally, he tells me in a low, rumbling voice, "yes, my little-light. I trust you."

My heart feels like it just had a jump-start. Nodding my head again, I step closer, reaching out to take his massive hand in mine. "One of the other girls has a secret."

“Ah-lanah. Mavyx’s mate. You wanted me to take you and Ah-lanah back to the ship carcass in exchange for baring your... *teets to me.*”

Well, fuck. Nothing gets past this guy, does it? I swallow and can already feel a deepening blush creeping across my cheeks. “Yes. Alana has a secret,” I say, feeling wary that I’m about to let too much slip. “It’s *her* secret to tell or not. But she told me. And she needs to go back to that ship to check a few things out on the computer. I can’t tell you what she revealed to me, but can you trust me when I tell you that I believe her secret is worth the risk?”

Rynn’s eyes scan my face. I hold my breath. For some reason, it feels infinitely important to me that he trusts me, that he believes in my judgment and that he would support me even without knowing the whole truth - even after I tried to manipulate him. His thick fingers twitch in my hands and slowly, he nods. “Yes, my mate. I will trust you in this,” he says, eyes dropping to where I grip his hand tighter. “I will ensure that you and Ah-lanah will get a chance to visit the ship carcass again.”

“Thank you!”

“You will only be carried by me, though, little-light,” he says, sternly, pointing a finger at me. “No other males are permitted to fly my mate halfway across the skies-”

I cannot help it. I cut off his instructions with a hug, the side of my face pressing into his chest and my palms sandwiched between the muscles of his shoulders and the soft underside of his giant wings. Not long after, I feel Rynn’s arms and tail wrap around me in return. “Thank you,” I whisper into his skin. He’s still a little sweaty, but I don’t care. If I crack an eye open, I can see the skin-stars on his chest going absolutely crazy. “I really am sorry, about before.”

“All is forgiven,” Rynn murmurs into the crown of my head, one big hand stroking my hair.

My reverie at being held in Rynn’s big, strong arms is interrupted when I hear some splashing and remember about the other Trixikka, gathered here on the banks of the river.

Most are standing in the river, water around thigh-deep, their wings spread wide while they bend to scoop up the water to splash over their chests. Some have waded in further, dunking themselves completely in the middle of the river where I assume the water runs deepest. They then move away until the water only laps at their waists, their wings splayed out, droplets rolling off their beautiful inky feathers before they give their wings a shake and then tuck them neatly at their backs.

“Can I bathe in the river?” I ask, almost salivating at the thought. Ever since we got stranded here I’ve had to make do with a basin of water and a washcloth. Rynn nods, an amused smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

Leading me a little away from where the other Trixikka wash the sweat from their skin, Rynn holds my hand, steadying me as I negotiate the larger rocks at the river bank. I wade in, all too eager to experience a level of cleanliness that I’ve only dreamed of since being abducted in my sleep. The water is calm and ever so clear. Light from the two suns high in the sky almost blinding as it bounces off the deceptively still waters. I’m only up to my knees when Rynn shouts my name behind me. I turn, but as I do so, I catch sight of something large and dark in the water. My first thought is an alligator and my blood runs cold. A shadow covers me from behind and the dark shape in the water quickly changes direction, swiftly swimming away with merely a small, startled ripple to the river’s surface. “What *was* that?!”

“Dentixxi” Rynn answers, his voice so close and his breathing a little labored. “A type of long-snouted predator fish.” Turning, I see that the shadow that covers me belongs to Rynn. He stands there, so close behind me, his wings splayed out in their entirety, the full span enormous.

“Was it going to attack me?”

“I think so,” he says, swallowing thickly. “Trixikka do not normally concern ourselves with them. They do not like our scents or our large shadows on the water. I hadn’t thought of how small you are or how one might take an interest in you.

I will stay close while you bathe. Nothing will dare approach while I am here.”

Even though I believe him, I can't help but scan the water for any further hidden dangers. It's hard to make out with the sunlight bouncing off the calm ripples. A little further downriver, the other Trixikka continue to wash while chatting idly. I'd love to dunk my whole body into the water and finally rinse away the grime that has built up on my skin and hair over the past few days. I watch them for a few more moments and then turn to Rynn. He's observing me closely as he always seems to do. "I'd really like to wash properly," I admit. "You know... get right under the water?"

"You can. The dentixxi will not return. I am here."

I give him a smile and glance quickly at the other Trixikka. "My nightshirt and shorts will get wet. I could take them off, but-" Rynn follows my brief glances back at his men and understands quickly about my need for privacy. Without saying a word, his huge dark wings fold around me, creating a space where it feels like only he and I exist, the stars on his feathers twinkling slowly around me as though I'm being embraced by a nighttime sky.

"You may bathe now, my Zahreenah," he tells me, his voice low and raspy. "It is only you and I here in my wings." Chewing on my lip, I reach for the hem of my nightshirt. Rynn stops me with one hand on my arm. "Only if you wish to," he says. "Not... for anything else." I bite back the guilt threatening to bubble up. No, this isn't manipulation this time. I really, really want to be intimate with this huge, winged alien. He's been nothing but sweet to me and I'd be a bare-faced liar if I didn't admit that he is hot as fuck. I nod my head and he releases my arm, though his tail sneaks around under the water to wrap around my ankle like a tether. Then, just like that, I take off my nightshirt. Funny, how it feels like I've taken my clothes off for men a million times before, but this - *this* feels different.

Rynn gently takes the crumpled shirt from my hands and drapes it over his shoulder. I wrinkle my nose at that. "That's dirty."

“I do not care.” And it really seems like he doesn’t. His eyes are glued to my chest. “Those are... *beyond* magnificent,” he says, voice reverent and expression so awe-struck, I cannot help but chuckle. Rynn then helps to steady me, offering a firm hand to hold while I step out of my sleep shorts, careful to avoid the water. Those end up slung over his muscled shoulder too.

And here I am. Standing naked in front of this man who looks at me like all his birthdays have just come at once. I’ve had men jerk off watching me, practically drooling at the screen where they watch my image. But it’s never like this. It never makes me feel warm and tingly inside like Rynn does. Even now, even with him being every bit the apex predator of these lands, Rynn makes me feel safe. I don’t know if I’ve ever had that feeling before. “Can... can we move further into the water?” I say, looking up into those eyes that hold so much longing that it makes my heart skip a beat or two. He doesn’t respond with words, only nods, his eyes trying to soak up as much of me as he possibly can. I begin to walk back slowly, Rynn moving along with me, bringing our little cocoon of star-flecked wings with us. Once the cool waters of the river hit around about my waist I stop. “You sure those nasty fish things won’t get us here?”

His throat bobs and he shakes his head, his voice hoarse when he says, “no... nothing will harm you. *Ever.*”

That’s quite the promise. But somehow, I think he means it.

Rynn’s gaze is burning a trail down my skin. He wants to look at all of me, all at once. He wants to devour me. That’s how it feels when he’s taking me in. And it’s not like I’m not used to men wanting to see me naked. Men *are* men after all. But Rynn... all I see in his eyes when he looks me over is a need to *worship*.

It’s just because he’s never seen a naked woman before, I tell myself. I need to keep that in mind before I fall headlong into that burning stare of his turquoise eyes. As much as I want to believe in the ideal of this gorgeous man wanting *me* and *only me* forever, I -

My eyes fall to the bright cluster of illuminated skin-stars twinkling over his heart. It's just a biological reaction - some biochemical change. The guy has these little lights all over his big, damn body. And right now, I can't help but notice that they are going *haywire* all over the place. A small giggle escapes my lips. "Your skin-stars-" I say, pointing them out on his chest, his arms, racing down his taut abs. "Why are they going crazy?" His glorious body looks like a carnival right now. A fun one.

Rynn doesn't even bother to look down at himself, his gaze so firmly locked on me it makes me feel like I might melt and get swept away by the gentle river water. In answer to my question, he simply says, "*you.*"

"Me?"

Rynn nods, his breathing deep and deliberate. "*Bathe, Zahreenah,*" he tells me, gentle command in his tone. "For if you don't..."

"If I don't... *What?*" Oh, consider my interest very fucking *piqued*. I wonder what the best ride at this carnival is?

His pretty mouth snaps shut and he swallows thickly. "I... I wish to honor the request that no female shall be touched without invitation."

Oh, man. *This guy.*

Despite being stood in deep, cooling waters, my temperature feels like it rockets sky high, and my lips? They're grinning like I'm the cat that got the damn cream. Bending my knees, I dunk myself underwater, if for nothing but to cool off the suddenly scorching sensation racing through my body. Rynn doesn't move an inch. His tail is still wrapped around my ankle and it dawns on me that if it weren't him tethering me like this, it might as well feel like a manacle around my limb, keeping me in place. But it *is* Rynn, and so the gesture feels more like a steady hold than anything else.

Slowly, I let my head rise from the water, but still keep my shoulders submerged. The sight of him looking down at me with my head level with a certain part of his anatomy has

my lower belly fluttering. “What about females touching Trixikka males? What are the rules about that?”

His gaze is heated as he rasps, “I do not speak for all my tribe, but I am *yours* to touch as you wish, my Zahreenah.”

My heart starts beating wildly in my chest. What *is* this guy doing to me? Obviously, I’m no prude. I’ve done plenty of dirty things both in my job as a cam girl and with partners for my own sexual gratification. But the thought of reaching out and touching Rynn right now has me so ridiculously excited I feel a little light-headed. Slowly, my hands move under the water, pressing lightly to the solid muscles of his thighs and I don’t miss how above me, Rynn sucks in a sharp breath. “So you don’t mind this?” I ask, admittedly teasing him a little as my hands gently stroke up and down his strong thighs, my motions getting higher and higher.

It seems as though Rynn can hardly speak, so he shakes his head, his eyes fluttering shut and a choked sort of noise leaves his throat. I feel a tremor run through the muscles of his powerful legs and notice his wings shuddering around us. This guy might actually explode if I touched his cock. The thought is a powerful one, but I’m reminded that rushing into things with Rynn is probably not the best way to go. Softly, softly, catchy alien cock, and all that. So, I stand to my full height again, letting the water run down my torso and being fully prepared for the way Rynn’s eyes pop open, his attention on my body with his pupils blown wide. “Do you want to touch me, Rynn?” I ask. I’d meant for my voice to be deep and sultry, but I couldn’t help the words coming out a little hoarse and needy. I want his touch. I *need* his touch. There’s time for teasing and playing later, but I had to literally tell this guy what tits were not a few hours ago because the only thing he’d known about them was that he’d liked them. He still does, judging by the way his tongue swipes at his lips as he stares at my chest.

Rynn still doesn’t talk, only nods his head emphatically as though I might snatch away the offer to touch me any moment now. I reach forward and take one of his huge hands, fitting it over my breast, then I take the other and do the same.

Rynn sucks in a breath... and just stands there, holding my tits. Another giggle bursts from me. "You can sort of... knead them or stroke them. That feels nice," I tell him, placing my hands over his to guide him. And he does just that, squeezing me oh so gently, his massive, warm hands feeling so good cradling my breasts, sending tingles southward. The sound that comes from Rynn might be described as a broken-off whine, his focus intent on his own ministrations as his chest visibly rises and falls directly in front of me.

My eyes flutter closed. I've always liked my breasts being played with during foreplay and sex but normally guys end up grabbing me a little too roughly or kneading them far too hard. Rynn's gentle exploration is just right and I can feel myself getting more and more turned on.

"Your nipples are getting hard," Rynn says, making me open my eyes and smile up at him.

"That means I like what you're doing."

He grunts and continues to gently knead my flesh, sending goosebumps all over my skin. "I like what I'm doing too."

I bite back another giggle at that. "There's more that you will probably like," I tell him, taking one of his big hands and guiding it down, down, down my body, Rynn's eyes widening as he tracks the descent of his touch to between my legs. "Do you want to touch me here, Rynn?"

He lets out a hiss at first contact, his fingers gently brushing against my pussy. But the sound quickly morphs into that growl that had rumbled from his chest when he'd first found me deep in the forest, after he'd savagely killed that mimyckah and then pounced on me and scented me like a wild animal. The sound is low and should be menacing I think, but all I know is that I'm excited to hear him growl like that, like a beast. "Do you like that?" I ask him, "do you like touching me there?"

"Show me... show me how to best touch you here," he grits out through his teeth like he's holding back from a great temptation.

I am that great temptation to him, I realize. God, I love that. I love that he's teetering on the edge of insanity for me. And as wicked as it sounds, I kind of want to give him a little push. "Here," I tell him, guiding his thick, searching fingers to my pussy and then up to my clit, my breath hitching at the contact. "You feel that?" He grunts in acknowledgment, his breathing now labored. "That little bump is very important to a female's pleasure. If you touch that the right way, it will most likely make me come."

"Come?" his brows quirk together though his focus is still below the water where his hand is doing some very important exploring. "Come where?"

I let out a chuckle, smirking at the way the skin-stars at his temples are twinkling manically. "No. I won't go anywhere. It will-" I suck in a breath. While I'd been talking, Rynn's big fingers had been playing experimentally with my clit and he'd just struck gold by rubbing in a single, tight circle *just* right.

His eyes instantly dart to mine and he freezes. "Did I hurt you, my mate?"

"No! No, I-... that was good," I tell him, my hand urging him to continue his exploration of my body. "Like I was saying, if you get it right, I'll... it will feel for me like it feels for you when you... *spill your seed*."

He groans, the feathers shivering as his wings shudder around us. "I want to give that pleasure to you," he tells me, fervently. "I want you to spill your female seed into my hand and someday, we might join our seed in one pot and create a youngling together-"

Wait. What? "Whoa, whoa, *whoa*," I say, my hand coming up to rest on the solid bicep of his arm that's currently delving into the water between my legs. He stills his movements just as I'd wanted him to, and I take a breath. Never had I thought that I'd have to give a grown man - a grown man who up until a second ago was carefully stroking my clit - the birds and the bees talk. "Is that how you think

babies are made? Body fluids mixed together in one of those seed pots you guys have?”

His brows draw together, and his growling suddenly stops. “Is it not?”

I shake my head with a smile. “No, baby.” I’m not quite sure where the term of endearment came from. Snaking my hand back down to where his fingers are still paused on my clit, I guide him further down my sex. “First,” I say, almost in a whisper, “your cock goes here.” Rynn licks his lips, his gaze intent and scorching, but I’m not sure he fully understands as his fingers stay at my entrance. “Push inside me, baby.” At that, his eyes widen as I put pressure on his knuckle and bear down, urging a single thick digit to slip inside me.

Rynn makes a strangled sound before the purr in his chest starts to rev up. “*Zahreenah*,” he rasps, my name coming out in a rushed exhale. “This-... you would... you would take my cock... *here*?”

I nod my head and holding his wrist, guide that single thick penetrating finger slowly in and out, squeezing my muscles around the digit too. Rynn’s groan of realization is so base, so animalistic I think he’s on the verge of lifting me up and positioning me on his cock to test out this new knowledge he’s just acquired. The mental image of his strong arms lifting me and just fucking me right here in the river with his men not so far away does something to my insides, causing a small moan to slip from my lips. Rynn slowly finger-fucking me in exploration as he purrs deeply isn’t helping either.

“I cannot imagine how good that would feel,” he grits out, “would it... would it bring you pleasure also?” His voice is so hoarse but laced with so much hope, I can’t help myself. My hands reach for him, moving his loincloth out of the way to reveal his very eager, very large, and surprisingly beautiful cock. I don’t know why I’m surprised that he has skin-stars here too. I can see them, just beneath the surface of the water, dotting and twinkling up his impressive shaft in lined patterns, leaving the crown bare of twinkles and jutting out of the water. I wrap both hands around him, finding him hot and hard and...

ringed with ridges beneath the warm skin. Oh, that's-... that would feel-... *fuck!*

Rynn hisses and stills completely at my touch, that soft purr pausing momentarily before returning with vigor making me feel even more bold. "Yes, it would feel *very* good," I tell him, stroking up and down his cock. The girth of him is so thick, my fingers barely meet where I hold him, but I feel those ridges ringing his length. "With an impressive cock like yours," I murmur, "I imagine you'd fill my pussy so very nicely."

"*I want that,*" Rynn says in a quick, strangled voice, his eyes screwed up tight as he holds his breath. "I want to fill you, my mate." His eyes pop open and find mine, the desire burning so bright in him that it only serves to excite me even more. "Will you let me have you?"

"*Maybe,*" I tease, my hands still working his huge cock. Honestly, I've never had sex with a guy as big and as impressive as Rynn and the thought is equal parts daunting and thrilling. "You would have to prepare my body to take you first. Just like how you got my nipples all hard, you would need to get my pussy nice and wet for you."

Rynn swallows. "*This,*" he starts, slowly thrusting his finger in and out of me for emphasis, "is your pu-say, yes?" I nod a little dumbly. "And me... *eating* it would make it wet?"

I can't help the grin on my lips. "Licking, kissing and a little sucking would do the trick, yeah. And, uh... you can call it my *cunt*." I'll never admit to it, but filthy words just *do it* for me and if I'm going to be doing dirty things with my alien, I don't want to be on the verge of giggles every time he tries to say the word pussy.

"*Zahreenah,*" he breathes, screwing his eyes shut again as I continue to play with his cock. "I would very much like to do that...I... I want to put my mouth on any part of your body that you would allow. Let me... let me eat your cunt, my mate. Please-" *Fuck!* The way he grits out those dirty words as I touch him is just delicious. Rynn begins panting and I can't help but hasten the pace of my strokes. He groans and

shudders in pleasure. “*Zahreenah*, I-” Oh, I know where this is headed. He might be a mighty warrior alien, leader of his tribe, and fierce apex predator of this planet, but Rynn is a virgin. A big, powerful, sexy as fuck virgin, who makes me feel like he thinks of me as a blessing from his Goddesses. I’m not used to that feeling and the sensation is a heady one. He would probably let me do *anything* to him and he’d still make sure that whatever he did with my body was something I wanted.

“It’s ok, baby,” I coo at this huge alien warrior. His touches on my body have stilled now and I think maybe the sensation of having my hands on his cock might be a bit too much for him. “You can come, Rynn,” I tell him softly, my hands picking up speed, the upper one giving the tip of him a little squeeze each time it passes over it, his cock-head straining out of the water making every movement of mine cause a rhythmic sloshing sound. His face looks strained, the muscles in his jaw working and it dawns on me that maybe he doesn’t want this to end so quickly. So, I slow. And then I lean impossibly closer and whisper, “spill your seed for your mate.”

And *that* seems to do the trick.

Rynn finishes with a loud snarl, his cock pulsing in my hands and his body tensing as he paints my stomach and chest with his cum. And... it just *keeps* coming. I’ve never seen a guy come so much or so hard. I can now believe that these Trixikka males are capable of filling those seed pots in one session. I’m practically covered. And it’s sparkly, which kind of makes me want to laugh. But Rynn’s looking at me so very earnestly, panting as he comes down from his high, cock still twitching beneath my touch. “*Zahreenah*,” he whimpers, “*please* teach me to give you pleasure like that.”

Chapter 21

RYNN

I am in a daze like no other. Never have I felt such a feeling. First, My Zahreenah allows me to see her magnificent body. Truly, the Goddesses have blessed the males that get to look upon their females. I already knew that the bodies of our females were distracting, enticing, and mesmerizing to look at, but once they shed their coverings? A naked female could bring even the most savage Trixikka Protector to his knees. Her teets are all at once, soft, full, and heavy. They feel so good in my hands. And when her pink nipples tighten and harden it apparently means I have pleased my mate with my touches too. Then, she allowed me to touch her sacred cunt and my head must have emptied of all thoughts at that exact moment because never had I imagined touching someone to be so exciting. She is not just anyone though, she is my mate, and touching her and being touched *by* her has given me more pleasure than I think I have ever experienced in my entire life.

Even now, as I meet with my tribesmen, my head is still filled with the sensations of having her soft female hands around my cock and the image of her covered in my seed. Distantly, I wonder if I should feel shame that the sight inflames me so very much? Zahreenah hadn't seemed to mind, but she *had* dipped back down into the waters and washed my seed and my scent from her skin fairly quickly. The revelation my mate revealed had stunned me - that she would take my cock actually into her body, into that sacred place between her legs where my finger had met with an incredibly snug, soft warmth? Just the thought of feeling that sensation around my cock is enough to make me hard. And I do not want to get hard when I'm meant to be meeting with the tribe.

But then I'm reminded of how my Zahreenah had reached up on her toes to place a swift 'kiss' to my cheek once we were out of the water and she had her coverings on again, shielding those wonderful teets from my view. She'd promised to share my nest with me this night. I cannot wait. I plan to put my mouth on her as many times as she'll allow me to. And

after she had explained that sons and daughters are not made from mixing seed in a pot, but a female allowing a male to spill his seed actually *inside* her sacred cunt, I've been able to think of little else since.

“High Spear,” Aloryk says with a bowed head, pulling me from my tantalizing thoughts of filling my Zahreenah with my seed. He hands me a lit torch and walks beside me as I near the others of my tribe gathered in the clearing before the temple.

“Where is Mavyx?” I grunt, my tail flicking behind me. As my Second Spear, he is normally the one to stand by my side at meetings such as this.

Aloryk grins with all the excitement of a young Protector. “He is with the females. He wanted to watch over his mate.”

I frown at that. Before leaving the village, I had instructed a more than healthy number of capable Protectors to remain, overseeing the safety of the females. I've no time to ponder it further however, as I near the gathering, my tribe greet me with the rhythmic thudding of their spears butting into the ground. Coming to a stop, I stand in front of my tribe and spread my wings wide to usher their silence and command their attention. I do not miss the way some of my males eye my heart-stars with longing on their features. Perhaps their time will come. I hope for as many of my males to experience the happiness of finding their mate as possible.

“My people,” I say in greeting, “by now, most of you will have heard the news from our visit with Zarriko's tribe. They have found three females and like us, continue to hunt for the two remaining as well as the sleeping females.” There's a murmur amongst the males but they quieten when I begin to talk again. “After scouting the area of a strange beast's carcass, we have reason to believe that mimyckah have taken the sleeping females.” Many of the males before me curl their lips back, baring their teeth, grips tightening on their spears and tails swatting back and forth behind them with agitation. I take the opportunity to fold my wings at my back, a show of non-concern. “We will find them, and we will destroy the

mimyckah who dare touch these females who have been sent to us by our Goddesses.” I scan the faces looking back at me. I see determination and a lust to spill mimyckah blood. Good, I will need that eagerness in the days to come. “Also, I have entered into an agreement with High Spear Zarriko. Both our great tribes now protect females not of our Temples. I have been granted a mate, a gift I will treasure dearly for the remainder of my days. I hope for as many of you to experience this gift for yourselves, as does Zarriko with his tribe. We have agreed that our two tribes must meet on the morn of a four-moon night. This will give you all the chance to spend time with Zarriko’s tribe’s females to see if your heart-stars might ignite.” There are excited murmurs after learning this, the bloodlust for the mimyckah all but forgotten.

“Will this mean that High Spear Zarriko’s males will meet with our females also?” someone asks from amongst the crowd.

I suck in a breath. “Yes.”

*“But they are **our** females!”*

“I do not like this.”

“Tribes do not mix!”

“If one of them dares touch one of our females, I’ll-”

”**ENOUGH!**” I growl, my previously relaxed wings flaring wide again and my tail jerking from side to side. “We are a proud tribe,” I tell them, slowly taking my time to look many of my males directly in the eye. “And never in living memory have our two tribes mixed. But we are also a fair tribe. My brothers, all Trixikka of this land have been given the gift of hope. Do *not* squander it with selfish notions. If one of us angers High Spear Zarriko or his Protectors, they may refuse the meetings. You may lose your chance to find your mate should she be one of the females already found by their tribe!” Looking around, I can see reason has settled the gathering. They understand what it is they must do. They may not like it, but they understand.

“And what if one of them claims one of *our* females? What if their heart-stars ignite?”

“The female will decide where she would like to live,” I tell them. “If the female wants to move tribes to be with her mate, then so be it. If the opposite is true, then we will welcome a new brother to our tribe. This is fair. This is what was agreed between two High Spears.” The crowd of males look resigned. Not entirely happy, but resigned. I watch as they slowly begin talking amongst themselves, the first of the twin suns setting behind our mountain.

Just when I think I am done with my duty to my tribe and I can retreat to my nest, back to my Zahreenah, a voice from the gathering calls out. “What if the female does not want the male to move tribes for her?” The gathering goes deathly quiet. “There are rumors that females may reject their mate, even when she has lit his heart-stars?”

My throat feels tight just hearing the words and I find myself swallowing roughly. I cannot lie to my tribe. And it is better they are prepared, should something like this ever happen. Please, Goddesses, do not let such a thing happen to any Trixikka male, I pray. I know my heart could not stand it should it happen to me. “It is true,” I say without preamble. The clearing is so quiet, I can hear the soft chirping of the jumping bugs in the longer grasses. “As far as I understand, *choice* is very important to our new females. They do not instantly feel the bond of the heart-stars. They want to be able to choose their male... or choose not to be with a male. And every one of you will allow them their choices. Understood?”

“How can we make them feel that bond?” It’s Alloryk who asks this time. He stands at the front of the gathering and I see the worry in his eyes.

“You please her. You make her *choose you*.”

The gathering lasts much longer than I had intended. Males from all stations in my tribe were keen to learn how to catch the eyes of the females, how to please them, how to make them choose. I respond as honestly as I can, and mostly

leave my tribe with promises to find out, rather than actual answers for them this night.

When I pass the female's hut, Mavyx is stationed outside, along with two others, though they seem to have been instructed to keep their distance as my Second Spear stands directly in front of the entrance to the hut, his strong arms crossed over his chest. I cannot help but shake my head at the sight. "You were missed at the meeting," I comment. He only grunts.

I raise my brows at that. I know his mate is in there. I know he is still confused about the strength of the bond he feels for her already. But I am his High Spear. "Apologies," he says, catching my expression and uncrossing his arms. "I felt that-..." he swallows, abandoning whatever excuse he'd been about to spew. "I'd wanted to remain to see to it that the females were properly protected." He'd wanted to stay close to his mate. I know the feeling.

Nodding my head, I drop the subject and scent the air. My Zahreenah is not in there. A momentary fear grips my heart.

"She is in your hut," Mavyx reveals, calming my panic. "Said she wanted to sleep in your nest."

Goddess, but I like hearing that. I can practically feel my skin-stars racing all over my body in anticipation. My Second Spear's expression is guarded. Likely, he is jealous and I do not blame him. I hope that he will grow close with his mate and put the confusion in his mind to rest, but right now, I do not have time to console my friend. I have a mate of my own waiting for me in my nest and I mean for her to show me all the ways in which I can bring pleasure to her. This night, she will find me a more than willing trainee, learning how best to please her sacred cunt.

The six Trixikka standing guard outside my hut are quickly dismissed. They scatter like a herd of startled frizikki once I bark at them to leave. Rounding the doorway, I'm hit with a sight so beautiful, it steals the breath from my chest. My Zahreenah sits up on my nest, eyes a little sleepy looking

but a slow smile spreads across her pretty mouth. “Did I wake you?” I ask, stepping forward.

“You did, but I don’t mind.” She reaches out for me to join her and *Goddess damn me*, if that doesn’t make my heart beat three times faster.

Swiftly, I move to the nest, settling my body close beside hers. My Zahreenah is smaller than I. All the females are. It briefly makes me wonder how other males she has encountered in her past measure up to my Trixikka build. They must not have been impressive males, I tell myself, or they would have been able to protect their females from being taken from their homes. Impressive, or not, I am so much larger than my mate and the place she’d explained she would take my cock - her cunt - seemed a tight fit for just my single finger let alone my -

My mate giggles and turns to face me more fully, igniting the rumbling purr in my chest. I like her here in my arms, and I enjoy the sound of her laughter. “I love these little lights,” she says, reaching up to stroke the tip of her finger down my temple. “They always let me know when you’re thinking hard... what are you thinking of, Rynn?”

Her eyes are so big and round in the dim of the evening. Somehow, it makes my mate seem even more vulnerable and for the first time, I somewhat understand my ancestors who had wanted to keep their females high up, in the safety of the Eyrie Caves. “I am thinking of your cunt,” I tell her, an answer which seems to inspire more giggles.

“So *honest*,” Zahreenah laughs.

“Should I be any other way?”

My mate shakes her head and trails her finger over my temple again. “No.” That fingertip of hers travels down my cheek to trace over my lips before dropping down my jaw, neck, and shoulder. Such a simple, gentle act, and it leaves me almost trembling, my purr beginning to thunder. My tail spirals around my mate’s calf and holds on tight. “What would you like to do with me tonight, *High Spear*?”

“Anything... *Everything*.” My voice is not my own. It comes out rough and thin all at once, like some thief had stolen it away. I’m gazing into the eyes of that thief right now and I couldn’t be happier.

“Everything?” she chuckles, the sound warm and low. “Well, there are some things we can’t do.” My mate worries her lip with her little teeth before continuing. “You can’t-... I want to *do things* with you, Rynn, but we can’t afford for you to... *spill your seed* inside me. Alright?”

Because we will make a youngling that way. I consider this for a moment. Just the very thought of filling my mate with my seed has my cock aching with need, twin that with the image of my little-light cradling young of our own has my heart giving a painful lurch of longing in my chest. I want that. I’d not made frequent seed offerings to the Temple purely because when I have a son, I know I would step down from my role as High Spear. My father hadn’t done that, and my care as a youngling had been split between four or five different elders and care-givers from the tribe. They all did their best for me. But they weren’t my father. He’d always had to think of the tribe first, as any High Spear should. When I was a youth, I’d often felt guilty for wishing he would put me first instead. And so, my seed offerings to the Temple had been sparse.

But now? With my Zahreenah? There’s an instinctual urge in my body, roaring that I should offer my seed to my mate as often as the waking hours would allow, and then even more once the twin suns have set.

She... does not want that though. That is what she is telling me now, and I will respect it, no matter how the thought of my cock being buried deep in the warm embrace of her cunt as I spill is making me a little light-headed to think of. “You do not want younglings,” I say, clarifying and nodding my head. Honestly, this is all so new to me that I need to make sure I understand her correctly. “You do not want me to fill your cunt with my seed because you do not want sons.” A thought hits me and I realize it might not be just sons that I might one day hold in my arms. “... or daughters.”

Daughters... Fuck. My mate could give me daughters. A whole clutch of them. The thought makes my heart swell. But Zahreenah is being clear with me now. She does not want that. Not yet. “Your cunt is sacred and I will not misuse it,” I vow, laying a palm over my heart-stars.

She flushes a deeper color here in the dark, and I know, if there were daylight in my hut, the stain on her cheeks would be the prettiest of pinks, the same shade of ripe, sticky, nectar berries. “I... well, I... not...” she huffs and mutters to herself, “*I should have never taught you that word.*”

Hooking a finger under her chin, I tilt her face up to meet mine. *Goddesses*, but her scent is *too good* right now, it’s making my mouth water. “There are many things I wish you to teach me this night, Zahreenah,” I tell her. “Filling you with my seed can wait -” I had planned on also saying ‘*or never happen at all*’, the choice is hers of course, as it always will be. But my little mate couldn’t wait for me to finish my words. Her lips are on mine for some of her mouth-on-mouth ‘kissing’ and all other thoughts leave my head instantly with the groan rumbling from the back of my throat. She shifts us, maneuvering us as one so that I end up on top of her as my tongue explores her hot, sweet, little mouth. I try to keep my mind present. Again, I’m aware that I am much larger than her, and if I don’t hold my weight above her, I’d crush my mate. My forearms bracket her head and I don’t miss the way my Zahreenah seems to like touching my biceps, her soft, delicate female hands exploring my upper arms, shoulders, and chest as we continue our kissing. I cannot help but flex my Protector’s muscles under her touch. She hums into my mouth, her legs coming up to wrap around my hips, pulling me down on her, pressing our bodies closer. My cock is as hard and unyielding as a life-stone blade and currently, it is nestled tight against her precious cunt. Is there anything in all the lands more pleasurable than this? Her hips buck against mine and I can’t help but groan into her mouth. It feels like I’m going to spill right here and now and my Zahreenah has only just started with her teachings. My mate starts to grind against my cock and I realize she is simulating what it might be like to be

buried inside her, how we might move together as one, joining our bodies and claiming one another.

“Your skin-stars are going crazy again,” she whispers, eyes half-lidded as her hands skim up and down my shoulders as well as my chest. I don’t doubt it. I don’t need to look at myself to see it. It’s her. She’s doing this to my skin-stars just like she had before at the river. She sets me *alight*.

And I couldn’t be happier about that.

”Zahreenah,” I whisper, resting my forehead on hers. My eyes close but I allow her to grind against me, guiding my answering movements. She’s slow. Something in me is roaring to speed up, to buck my hips into hers, to push my cock into her cunt and succumb to the frenzy I can sense bubbling beneath my skin. I feel like a wild creature from the deepest parts of the jungle, something all teeth and claws and... *need*. “*Teach me*,” I plead, voice strained and desperate as I grind my cock against my mate. I have to ask. If I don’t ask, if she doesn’t guide me, I might become that beast prowling just below the surface. “Teach me to pleasure my mate.”

“What are your instincts telling you to do?” Zahreenah asks, her breaths coming out in little pants as our hips continue to move, continue to slowly grind, continue to spark embers of pleasure centering there.

My instincts? I want to push into her, I want to taste every inch of her beautiful star-less skin, I want her to be as consumed with me as I am with her. Are any of these things right? Are any of these things what she wants? I hope so. “I want to please you,” I rasp. “I want to...” my words turn choked and ragged, “... I want to put my mouth all over you.”

“You can do that,” my Zahreenah tells me, her voice small, delicate, and *Goddesses*, it only serves to remind me of how precious a gift I have under me right now. She blinks those pretty eyes up at me and turns her head, stroking a finger down the skin of her throat, starting directly beneath her ear. “I like being kissed here.”

Instruction. I am grateful for it. If I fuck this up, she might never let me touch her again. I swoop upon her like I

were pouncing upon my prey, my lips issuing admittedly sloppy, enthusiastic mouth-on-skin-kisses. She giggles in my arms, a sound that makes something bloom in my chest. “Slow down, baby.”

“Sorry,” I murmur into her neck, doing as she instructs. She smells *so good* here, I can’t help but press my nose into her, inhaling her scent and darting my tongue out to lick at her, unsure if this is what I am meant to do, but not being able to help myself. From the way her back arches up into me and the little gasp my mate lets slip, I do not think it was a bad thing.

Zahreenah’s hands grip my hair like she wants to hold me in place, her head tipping back, allowing me more of her skin to explore. *Fuck*, but just the fact that she bares her throat to me has my cock unimaginably hard. I am a feared predator of my lands, and here, in my arms is this little female willingly putting herself in the most vulnerable of positions. Tentatively, I explore her throat, testing her gently with a scrape of my teeth. She shudders, her breath hitching and her grip on my hair tightening. My growl rumbles low, pleased beyond words at how my female reacts to my touches. I feel the delicious ‘*mmm*’ noise beneath my lips as it leaves my mate’s throat and she rewards me with a “that’s good, baby,” and a fervent roll of her hips against mine.

Next, she releases my hair and I miss the tug of her little hands instantly. But the loss is all forgotten when my Zahreenah reaches down to rid herself of her coverings. I stare down at her - at *all* of her. She has made herself even more vulnerable for me. The realization makes me salivate.

I will not allow her to regret it, I vow to myself, trying to calm the racing blood in my veins, urging me to take her now - take her as she explained it is done.

But by all the Goddesses, my female’s body is the closest thing to the Promised Lands that any Trixikka has ever seen. The Promised Lands, where our honorable and fierce ancestors’ spirits are rewarded with an eternity of enjoyment and pleasure - and I am being given this bounty now? It is too good to be believed. Perhaps I have already died and do not know it.

Whether I believe it or not, I cannot stop my hands from greedily filling themselves with her magnificent breasts. Dead or not, I know I will never have enough of touching her special curves, both these here on her chest and the soft swells of her hips as well as that tantalizing tailless rump of hers. She's so fucking adorable, unexplainably, I itch to bite her. Not hard, but not gently either. I don't want to hurt her, and I don't think biting is part of any matehood ritual, so I try to redirect the excited energy coursing within me into kneading and stroking her wonderful teets the way she had shown me down at the river. My mate's nipples are taut and pebbled, begging for more attention. I test them, stroking a thumb over one, then the other, constantly watching Zahreenah for a reaction, trying to gauge if my actions are welcomed or not. Her head lolls to the side, that pleased-sounding noise coming from her throat again and I understand I have done well enough. Good. It pleases me immensely to be able to play with my mate's body in a way that is agreeable to her. I watch as her own little hand comes up to pluck at her nipple, gently pinching and tugging, letting it go, and then rolling it between her fingertips. I could do that. My mouth waters at the prospect and a new idea forms. Batting away her hand, I easily keep it at bay by pinning her by the wrist to my nest beneath us, just as I duck my head and cover her needy little nipple with my mouth. "*Rynn!*" she calls my name in such a way that I know I'm doing something right. In truth, I don't think I needed the affirmation, the wild beast prowling beneath the surface of my skin seems to know instinctively what to do. But, I will concede, hearing my name on her lips like that? That's something I want to hear again - as many times as possible.

I gently suck her nipple into my mouth, mimicking the play of her fingers. The beast inside me is pleased and I can't help but let a groan slip from my lips at how readily my mate responds to me. A purr starts in my chest as I swipe my tongue over her tight little nipple and then treat the other to the same attention. But I want more. I want to taste all of her, but especially the source of that tempting scent - the scent that is getting stronger with every touch, every grind of our hips. I want to feast on her sacred cunt. I release her nipple from my mouth, more than pleased to see both peaks stiff and wet. My

Zahreenah looks at me with eyes like deep, dark pools, her beautiful lips parted as we stare at one another. “May I perform mouth-on-cunt-kissing now?” I ask, not recognizing the voice as my own. She licks her lips and nods and I find myself trailing a path of sloppy kisses down her front, as eager as a green-male presenting his first offering to Temple. *Slow*, Rynn, I tell myself. She’d told me to slow and here I am racing to get my head between her legs. If only my tribe could see that their mighty High Spear is so easily riled by his mate, so easily made undone by this little female. But then, the thought of sharing this moment with anyone else has my purr deepening into a growl, as though tribe members had stepped foot inside my hut and I need to gut them with my spear. I nip my Zhareenah’s soft belly gently with my teeth and flare my wings wide over her. She is mine and I will not share her. My mate’s hands thread through my feathers, making me shudder in pleasure. She widens her legs as I descend and I find myself staring at what awaits me between them.

Chapter 22

SERENA

For an agonizing second or two too long, Rynn just... *stares* at my pussy. I'm about to shut my legs again - a notion that should make me laugh considering the amount of times I've laid, legs splayed wide, while I fucked myself with toys for the camera. But this feels different. Everything feels different with Rynn. And it's not just because everything is new for him, either. Rynn's a Virgin with a capital 'V', for sure, but the way he makes me feel? No other man has come close to that.

Time ticks by so slowly with his gaze firmly locked between my thighs and the horrifying thought that maybe this is all too much for him flits through my head... maybe he's turned off by that part of my anatomy? He's never seen a vagina before so maybe he's grossed out or-

That's all forgotten rather quickly when Rynn groans and dives on me like a starving man who's just shown up at the all-you-can-eat buffet. I yelp, but it quickly morphs into a moan as I feel the heat of his mouth on my pussy and the slick slide of his tongue down there. He groans again, devouring me, hands gently pushing at my thighs to open me up even further. "*Zahreenah,*" he moans between *wonderful* swipes of his *wonderful* tongue. "*My delicious Zahreenah.*"

Warmth spreads up from my pussy and down to my toes. All I can do is hold on tightly to his outstretched wings as he laps at me, groaning like I'm his new favorite flavor. His tongue swipes over my clit making my breath hitch. It doesn't go unnoticed. Rynn is either reading my body like an instruction manual or he remembers what I told him about treating my clit like a secret button to get me off. He kisses, licks, and gently sucks on me, eyes that were closed in rapture open brightly, gaze locked on mine, watching my every panted breath. "*Mmmm, Rynn...*" I moan, undulating my hips beneath his hold. The growl he emits into my pussy has me feeling like I have little tingles all over my body, just like my Rynn's skin-stars. It doesn't take long and I'm reaching, reaching, reaching

for that summit before the big drop, the swoop and loop-de-loop of an orgasm. I'm calling his name, I think, my head rolling from side to side. How can a guy who's never even seen a pussy before now be *so damn good* at this? Fuck. His wings are shaking and he's groaning into my flesh and if I wasn't experiencing the sheer bliss I am right now, I'd wonder who was enjoying this more, me or him? I convulse as I come, my toes curling, my stomach tightening, I'm gripping anything I can for dear life - his feathers, his hair. I just need to hold on.

When I come back to myself, Rynn is lazily licking and nuzzling between my legs, his eyes half-lidded and still watching me. "I want to do this always," he tells me, looking as sated as I feel right now.

"Come up here."

He rises, leaving my pussy with a swift peck, eager to follow my instruction before pausing and glancing down at himself. Rynn takes off his loincloth. "I have made a mess with my seed," he tells me, using the thin hide to wipe himself down.

I cannot help but stare at his huge, still rock-hard cock, his skin stars down there racing up and down his thick length like a damn firework display. "You already came?... From eating me out?" Oh, shit. I could tell he was enjoying himself down there, but I hadn't realized just how much.

Rynn nods, casually throwing his now-soiled loincloth to the other side of his hut. "Yes," he admits, "your taste... watching my female enjoy herself. I defy any male not to spill his seed."

I'm momentarily stunned, unsure of what to say. All I know is that I've never had a guy be so honest and unashamed about what he likes, even if it leads to premature ejaculation. "Come here," I urge again, coming to my senses and realizing I need this man. I need him right now.

He kisses me like he senses that need. And I suspect he feels it too. I suspect my desperation is echoed in him as he answers my hungry kisses with his tongue in my mouth, and his hands trying to touch all of me, all at once. I've never been

a shrinking violet in the bedroom by any means, but the fact that Rynn is willing to be guided - *wants* to be guided - makes me even more bold. “On your back,” I tell him, breaking away from our kisses. He blinks at me, looking a little dazed. “On your back, High Spear.” When still he doesn’t move, I give his huge chest a shove. The guy is pure muscle and 100% predator. My push doesn’t even make him budge an inch. He moves though, for me. I push him again and there’s a grin on his stupid handsome lips as he flops on his back like my shoving had made any impact at all. His wings are still splayed wide beneath him, the tips curling up around us at our sides as I rise to straddle his now completely naked body. And what a body it is. I take the time to just look my fill of him. He’s so gentle with me that it’s easy to forget what this dangerous body can do.

And Rynn’s looking up at me too, a brightness to his eyes I’ve not noticed before. “What will you do with me, mate?” he rasps, throat bobbing with his swallow. My attention catches on one of his feathers floating down from above. I watch it land on his chest, the inky black of it still shining with the three little blue stars at its tip.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I tell him, lifting my body to lean forward and take that feather of his. Rynn’s eyes are honed in on my every move like a predator biding its time observing its prey, waiting to pounce. His hardness had been pressed against my backside, but I’d moved just enough for it to now strain along Rynn’s taut lower abdomen. And when I seat myself back down...

My big, powerful predator sucks in a breath that hisses over his teeth. “Your... *cunt*,” he says, voice strained like he’s holding back one of those toe-curling groans of his. “It-it is... *so soft and warm and... dripping with your nectar... Zahreenah.*”

I slide myself slowly forward and back against his length, idly playing with his feather, trailing it over my breasts and down my stomach while Rynn watches me raptly. His heart-stars are pulsing so bright, but all over his body, those little lights are going crazy here in the dim of his nest. “I’m

wet down there because my man got me all excited,” I tell him.

And that seems to do something for my guy because the next thing I know, his hands grip my thighs on either side of him as his huge wings shudder and spurt after spurt of cum coats Rynn’s stomach and chest. I’m stunned momentarily. I hadn’t realized he was ready to go again so soon after coming the last time and I can’t help the chuckle I let slip as he’s catching his breath. “Again?”

“You feel too good against me,” Rynn pants, a big, muscular arm slung over his eyes like he’s just run a marathon. He removes his arm to look at me when he must feel that I’ve reached for my nightshirt to wipe away his cum from his skin. “You do not need to -”

“You can wash it for me,” I tell him with a grin. “Besides, I can’t brace myself on your chest if you’re all sticky... unless-” I look down between my legs, sliding my wetness up and down his twitching length one more time. “Unless you’re done for the night?” He doesn’t feel done, he’s still hard as a rock. But then again, he’s come twice, and most guys-

My thoughts are broken off by a growl and I yelp as Rynn flips us so that I’m on my back with him over me again. “I will never be *done* with you, little-light,” he says, sliding his hard cock through my slick pussy. “Show me what I must do to please my mate.”

Reaching down, I grasp his length in my hand, placing the head of him at my entrance. “Go slow, baby,” I tell him. Rynn sucks in a breath and begins to push forward. He breaches my pussy and I welcome the sting of the stretch. We both watch as he slowly pushes and pulls, sinking a little deeper each time. I know he must be fascinated having never seen this before, but for my part, I can’t seem to look away either. He’s *so big*. And he’s making me feel *so full*. I go a little dizzy watching him stretch me, his thick shaft coming away coated with my arousal when he withdraws only to push back in again, lights and delicious ridges and all. My head falls back with a whimper and instantly Rynn pauses to look at me.

His arms are straining where he holds himself above my body, the veins becoming prominent and his wings shaking behind him.

Those skin-stars of his dance by his temples again. “Am I hurting you?” he whispers, voice low and harsh. “I will stop if I am hurting you, Zahreenah.”

“No, ” I choke. “Don’t stop.”

It takes a while, but when he’s fully seated inside me, Rynn shudders all over, like his body doesn’t know what to do with the new sensations he’s experiencing. His eyes are screwed shut and his skin-stars race up and down his abdomen to where we’re joined. “*This-*” his voice breaks off in a groan when I experimentally move against him. “This isn’t right,” he says, shaking his head. His eyes are still closed as he starts slowly gliding in and out of me, the stretch and his ridges feeling *amazing*. “Nothing should feel *this* good. This is - *Goddess* -” he chokes, opening his eyes and burning his turquoise gaze directly into me. “You are a *Goddess*, Zahreenah, I’m sorry... I-... I have to-” His thrusts start picking up, jostling me beneath him and making me whine. Rynn only growls, starting to move faster, *harder*. “You are *my* Goddess,” he snarls, his thick fingers sinking into my hair and gripping some in his fist as though he means to pin me to his bed while he takes me. “*Mine*.”

My back arches and I make the horniest God-damn noise that’s ever left my throat - and, as someone who made a living mewling like a cat in heat for paying clients, that’s saying something. But Rynn is big and powerful, and somehow manages to reverently worship my body *and* pound me into his nest at the same time. It doesn’t matter that he’s a big ol’ virgin. It doesn’t matter that he’s not even my species. It doesn’t even matter when he starts to lose his rhythm, his thrusts becoming desperate and erratic. I love every generous, thick inch my guy gives me.

Just as I think I’m on the cusp of something delicious, Rynn pants my name in a strained breath, his wings stiffening and spreading wide, that tail of his tightening around my calf. He pulls out of me so abruptly I almost wail at the loss. His

hot cum splashes over my chest, accompanied by the sexiest, guttural groan I think I've ever heard. For a brief moment, I'm disappointed he wasn't still inside me when he'd done that - when he'd jerked and grunted his release. I was about to tip over the edge, and we could have soared together. So stupid. I'd asked him not to, and to his credit, my big, virgin alien complied, despite this being his first time and, judging by his skin-stars, he was off-the-charts excited about it too. No, admittedly, the thought of Rynn losing all control and filling me up does turn me on, but I need to get a damn grip! I don't know if our species are compatible biologically. All I know is that I want to do that again, and often. And, judging by the way Rynn is looking at me like he's just seen Jesus, so does he.

"*Zahreenah*," he says, panting, hands stroking up and down my inner thighs, sending tingles in their wake. "You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

I'm about to tell him that of course he thinks that; I'm covered in his cum. Typical man. I guess some things remain the same, no matter what galaxy you're in. But then he dips his thumb into his sparkly seed, swirling it along the skin of my quivering belly. Scooping more, Rynn presses the pad of that now-slick thumb over my clit to begin rubbing in circles and my head completely empties of all other thoughts as he works me up again.

Chapter 23

RYNN

I have been as close to the Promised Land as any Trixikka whose heart still beats a Protector's rhythm in his chest has ever been. My Zahreenah took me there when she welcomed my cock into her divine body. Into that sweet, delicious 'cunt' of hers. I have never felt bliss like it and as soon as it was done, I wanted to experience it again and again. Last night, my Zahreenah had let me clean my seed from her, and hold her, indulging me in more of her mouth-on-mouth kissing. I enjoy her mouth-on-mouth very much, but soon, I was begging my little-light to allow me the pleasure of mouth-on-cunt kissing again. To my delight, she granted it, but was visibly tired once she'd shouted my name and gripped onto my hair, rubbing her sweet, slick flesh against my eager tongue. I had wanted to experience the feel of her warmth around my cock again, but my mate needed sleep, so I'd tucked her tiny frame against mine, curling around her feeling more content than I ever have.

When the twin suns were starting to rise, the daylight young and spilling into my hut, I awoke to Zahreenah putting her little female mouth on my neck, making me shudder with swipes of her tongue and grazes of her blunt teeth. She pushed me onto my back and I, mighty High Spear of my tribe that I am, was rendered powerless against her. My mate had expressed a desire to 'ride me' and I hadn't known what that meant initially.

I soon came to understand.

And I would happily be utterly powerless for my mate again and again.

We had washed each other with my basin of water and Zahreenah put on a covering that one of the other females had fashioned for her, since hers was still filthy with my seed. I had never spilled my seed on anything but an offering pot before - had never felt the urge to. I have many urges now and told my mate so. She gives me a smile that I have not seen

before. One just for me, with eyes twinkling full of promise. If it were up to me, I'd drag her back to my nest and we'd feel that bliss together again. But I am High Spear, and there are still more females out there in need of protection.

We approach the female's hut together and I like the way my Zahreenah places her soft little female hand into my larger, rougher one. It is an effort not to watch her as we walk and it's a wonder I don't walk straight through the tribe's fire. I feel like I'm soaring with exhilarating winds whipping past my feathers, even with my feet still on solid ground.

The severe expression on my Second Spear's face does a good job of grounding me as we near. He nods in greeting to both me and my mate, wasting no time in stepping aside to allow my little-light to enter the hut with the other females. Zahreenah squeezes my hand once, twice, and then lets it go, leaving me with a soft smile before she enters the hut. After a beat or two, Mavyx clears his throat. "News from Zarriko's tribe has traveled here this day." That straightens my spine and surely wipes the mate-induced grin from my face. "They found another female. Or rather, she found them if the report is true. Zarriko's messenger told us this one is called 'Dove'... *and* that they have lost her again."

"Lost her?"

Mavyx grunts and nods. "She came from the forest, seemingly unharmed and well-fed. Just walked right up to a tribe member. Zarriko's people gave her the trans-late-tor and a few days after that, she... disappeared."

I blow out a long breath. What exactly does that mean? Was she taken by a group of mimyckah? A shadow-wing? Those possibilities light a fire in my belly, a snarl threatening to break free. How dare anyone endanger a female?! And how dare Zarriko's tribe allow this to happen. In the past I've thought scornful thoughts about the males of Zahreenah's home, knowing they allowed their females to be taken. I thought them weakling, unworthy males to have lost these precious creatures. But now, even the protection of a Trixikka tribe isn't enough to keep them safe? My skin blazes with a need to barrel into the female's hut and curl my arms, tail, and

wings right around my mate. I would rip the lungs right from the chest of any male or creature who tried to take her from me.

“It is unsettling knowledge,” Mavyx grunts, shaking me out of my current thoughts, but not cooling the need one little bit. By the way he eyes the entrance to that hut, with his mate inside too, I know he feels the same. Inside, I can hear the females chatting happily. Something about someone being a ‘nurse’ and that being helpful. I do not know what it means, but it is pleasing to our females, so I am glad. “I fear we are neglecting our Temple, and the Goddesses are punishing us for it.”

Again, my Second Spear steals my attention away from the females inside the hut. I say nothing, urging him to continue.

“With this female disappearing, they are showing us that what they give, they can just as quickly take away,” he says. “The females are a gift. But since the day they were gifted to us, we have not made offerings. Our male’s everyday focus has been on the females.” He gestures to the growing collection of seed pots, collecting outside the female’s hut. Practically the whole tribe continues to leave their offerings in the hopes that a female will accept him and ignite his heart-stars. He is right. Soon, we will run out of clay to make pots, by the looks of things.

High laughter rings out from inside the female’s hut, a temptation too great for both me and my Second Spear to deny. Temporarily, we abandon talks of Temples and offerings and just stand, wing-to-wing, listening to the wonderful sound of happy females. The noise is only slightly less alluring than the sound of my mate screaming my name while I tongue and suckle that fleshy bud nestled at the top of her pu-say. I do not say this to Mavyx, though. It would only draw out that sour mood of his since his female has not let him lick her cunt yet.

“I will call for the tribe to make offerings to the Temple,” I tell him, my eyes still trained on the hut. His are too, and from the corner of my vision, I see him slowly release a breath, his broad chest deflating a little like he’d been

holding his breath awaiting my response. Perhaps he thought I would not care for the Temple now that I have my female? It would be an incorrect assumption, but then again, he knows that my offerings to the Temple were sparse even before I was gifted with my very own mate. “We will let the Goddesses know we are thankful for our gifts,” I tell him, my lips curling into a grin. Mavyx nods though he doesn’t return the smile. “You should go,” I say, clapping him on the shoulder, “get some rest.” He’s been standing guard here all night. Protecting the females including his mate that I know still confuses him. He’s been doing that, while I’ve been shown that the Promised Lands lay between my female’s thighs.

Mavyx shakes his head, ready to argue. It’s what I would’ve done so it doesn’t come as a surprise, but I shoot him down with a raised brow. “Your High Spear wishes to stand guard over the females before they come out for their food, Mavyx,” I tell him, teasingly. “Don’t make me beat your ass in a sparring match over this.”

He grunts, a barely-there smile ghosting his lips. “As if you could.” With one last glance at the female’s hut, he turns and leaves, though I notice he doesn’t go in the direction of his hut, instead he takes a few steps away and then launches into the air. No doubt, to circle the village, using the skies as a vantage point to protect from above. I shake my head. But then again, it’s probably what I would’ve done too.

Moving to a nearby cache of weaponry, I select a life-stone spear and dagger, tucking the latter into my belt. Then, I settle into my guarding stance. It will not be long until the females have finished talking and laughing and soon, their little bellies will rumble for food. And my males will nourish them. I am definitely planning on my Zahreenah allowing me to feed her. Just the mere thought of her gingerly taking food into her soft little female mouth from my hand is making me hard. I adjust myself, trying to hide my excitement the best I can when I hear a small part of the conversation inside the hut.

“Are you going to try and signal for help when you go back to the ship?” It’s the scared one - the one who still does not fully trust any Trixikka males - Bea. I do not know what it

is the females need help with. Whatever it is, I'm sure none of my males would dream of declining- "*Maybe someone could come and take us all home.*" The blood in my veins must surely freeze. Take the females home? Take my Zahreenah home? Away from these lands? Away from me?

I hold my breath, waiting for someone to shoot down this preposterous notion of my female being taken away from me. My wings flare and my grip tightens on my spear as though some foe might come storming out from the underbrush of the jungle surrounding my village, intent on taking my mate away from me.

Instead, all I hear is my Zahreenah.

"*Yeah, Bea,*" she says quietly - so quietly, I almost miss it. Although the words are somehow also loud enough to echo around in my skull at the same time. "Maybe we can try and get home again."

Chapter 24

SERENA

The placating lie I'd told Bea tasted bitter in my mouth as soon as the words were ushered. Her eyes had been so full of hope when she'd asked if we were going to try and send for help when we go back to the ship, it almost hurt to meet her gaze. I shouldn't have gotten her hopes up, not really. I'm sure deep down, she's aware that we're royally fucked where rescue is concerned. If we send out a signal, there's no telling who might pick it up. And from what little we gleaned from Z'irri, the wider universe out there is *not* kind to human females. But there she had been, so very hopeful as she looked between Alana and I after her question was out. Alana had nodded profusely and I was again keenly aware of how desperate she was to keep her secret. If Bea thinks we're going to see about sending out an intergalactic S.O.S., then let her, I suppose. It's a bit like a magician's sleight of hand, making you look in one direction when he's slipping a card out of his pocket in the other.

If I thought we had any kind of chance of being rescued from this jungle planet, would I risk sending out a signal for help? For the others, maybe, though I think the Trixikka would hate me for it. Would *I* also want to be rescued? I don't think so. Not right now, anyway. I'm not convinced that what Rynn says he feels for me is anything more than a biological reaction to seeing someone with tits for the first time, even if he might call it fate, or love, or mates. Whatever. But God damn, he makes me want to believe him. The way he'd made me feel last night? The way he had no experience, no expertise, no familiarity with what we were doing with each other, and yet somehow wound me up so tight and then made me explode and melt? That was unnaturally good.

Why would anyone want to go back to crappy old Earth when you can get dicked down like *that* on the regular here on Planet Bird-Man?... that's what I tell myself anyway - that I'm high on post-amazing-sex-endorphins and thinking

with my pussy. There's no way that I'd turn down the chance to go back home because I have *feelings* for Rynn. None.

It's all a moot point anyway. We're not going back to Earth. Ever. Not that there was anything back there for me.

As we walk from the girl's hut out to where the Trixikka have prepared food for us, I give Alana's hand a squeeze and offer a smile. News from the other tribe had come, and where I'd been horrified to hear Dove was both found and then disappeared again, the news that one of the other girls, Tessa, had been a nurse back on Earth brought a small amount of relief. If we can't find any information in the ship's database that could help Alana... If she is indeed pregnant and will need to give birth on this jungle planet... she's going to need all the help she can get.

I'm reminded of her other fear. The fear of a Trixikka not taking kindly to her having a child that wasn't fathered by one of them. One Trixikka in particular might, anyway. Glancing around, I don't see Mavyx anywhere. Chastity had teased Alana about the fact that he'd stood guard over their hut all night. Maybe the stern-looking Trixikka had gone to finally get some sleep.

Come to think of missing Trixikka males... where is Rynn? A group of six or seven winged healers, carers, and craftsmen lay out fruits and meats for us as we sit on the floor around the fire. Some other, larger-built males who must either be part of Rynn's legion of 'Protectors' or his huntsmen come forward, offering even more food to us.

"We should probably ask if we can help them prepare food or something soon," Bea says as she takes in the platters before us. "Or something else useful to the village." Being continuously waited on hand and foot clearly made her feel a little guilty.

"We can do that," I tell her, patting her leg.

"Fuck that!" Chastity laughs, plucking one of the small, pink berries and popping it in her mouth. "These guys want to treat us like Queens, I say we let them." She's already eyeing a group of three burly guys standing by with spears in

hand and wicked-looking opal daggers strapped to their hips like they're expecting to do battle in our name at any moment now. One grin from Chastity in their direction has them puffing up their chests enough that I almost want to laugh. They don't even notice when a huge shadow swoops over our little breakfast gathering.

One second I'm amused at the three Trixikka trying to impress Chastity, the next the ground almost shakes with the force in which another male slams down into the ground from above. I gasp, watching the huge male straighten, blocking the view of the three lesser males behind him. It's Rynn. *My Rynn*. Holy hell, is he magnificent with his huge dark wings spread wide. He rolls his neck, tucking his feathers in behind himself, and then glances over his shoulder at his men. "I could have been anyone," he chastises them, "and you idiots let me get close to our females. Do not let that *ever* happen again," he snarls. The three Trixikka murmur their apologies to their High Spear, only allowing a few very quick glances back at Chastity.

Rynn stalks toward me, the fire between us blazing in his eyes.

"You know, you're a real party pooper, chief," Chastity huffs after realizing her audience is now too afraid to pay her much attention. I can only imagine the type of party she was envisioning happening with the three of those muscle-clad males and if my cheeks weren't already heated from the nearby cookfire, they are now.

My Rynn ignores her jibe. Instead, he sits beside me, his legs crossed, and then leans over, his hands coming to both my sides. "My female does not sit in the dirt," he declares before lifting me. I let slip a small yelp, clutching onto him as he settles me across his lap, his huge, dark wings arching around us slightly and his tail wrapping around my waist.

Before I have time to tell him he's being ridiculous, Rynn snatches a yellow, plum-like fruit and takes a bite. Inside the flesh is white and juicy. He offers me the now more manageable bite and I reach for it with my hand. He pulls away, shaking his head, pressing the sweet, succulent fruit to

my lips. He wants to feed me. Why does that make my girl-parts start fluttering? Tentatively, I part my lips to allow the morsel inside. Rynn begins to let out a rumbling purr and I can feel the vibrations all along my side where I'm pressed against his chest. This purr of his reminds me of how he was post-sex last night, keeping me tucked against his body at all times. The memory makes me feel warm. He does not pull his fingers away from my mouth straight away, even after I have taken the fruit and swiped my tongue across his thumb. "*Eat*, my mate," he tells me, finally reaching for a new mouthful to feed me. "I will care for you, always. You will never need for anything while you are with me."

"Hot damn!" Chastity near whoops. "Which one of you beefcakes is gonna feed me like that?" she laughs.

I snicker and crane my neck to get a look at the scrambling Trixikka so very eager to please my friend. But Rynn draws his massive wings closed around us, enveloping us both in the twinkling night sky painted across his feathers. "You will stay here with me," he says and I assume he means he wants my full attention. He always has my attention. He doesn't have to ask. That's just the way it naturally is.

"Ok," I tell him, stroking a path up and down his forearm and bicep, watching the flutter of skin-stars in the wake of my touch like twinkling ripples in calm waters.

Reaching outside the curtain of ink-black feathers, Rynn brings a whole platter inside our little 'den'. "*Eat*," he says softly. "I can provide you with many foods, my Zahreenah."

I do so in silence, picking a piece of fruit and then a hunk of cooked meat. All the while, Rynn watches my every single move, every single breath in this little space of ours he's created. It's a little uncomfortable being watched so intently when I'm doing something so mundane. I'm used to being watched while doing 'other' things, but this? This feels odd to me. To try and break the tension simmering beneath my skin, I pick up a berry and offer it to Rynn's mouth instead of my own. His brow quirks but he takes the fruit, his huge hand coming up to grip my wrist before I can pull away. I watch as

his tongue licks at my fingers, remembering how that tongue had felt on my clit. He's chewing on the berry and still clutching my wrist before he swallows and asks, "do you feel it, my mate? What you are to me? What we are to each other?"

I swallow, not sure how to properly answer him. I have doubts. But all those doubts are based on human experiences. And Rynn isn't human.

I want to believe him.

I want to believe him *so fucking bad*.

"Zahreenah," he breathes out when I take too long to answer. He bends forward, gently resting his forehead on mine and closing his eyes. "I will do *anything* to keep you," he whispers and something inside me jolts. Isn't that what I've always longed for? My own damn mother practically threw me away like yesterday's trash. Men before Rynn have always wanted me only for as long as I entertain them in the bedroom, but never longer. And I was fine with that. But I've never felt as *wanted* as Rynn makes me feel.

I stare hard at his heart-stars as though watching them long enough would reveal any lie they might hold.

"Tell me what I must do to keep you, little-light?"

What must he do? What does he mean? God, I don't know. Does he seriously want an answer to that? No one has ever bothered sticking around for me, let alone for me to ask any other demands of them. Rynn's eyes open and whatever he sees in my face makes him change tact, like he's just realized the tension in this little star-flecked feathery world he's created is too heavy.

"My people-" he pauses and swallows thickly. "The other males. They wish to know how to impress a female of their own. I told them I would ask you."

It's not what he meant, I know that, but being the coward that I am, I take the way out he throws me and choose levity over honesty. "That thing you did with your mouth last night is a good start," I tell him, smiling and tapping my finger

on his lips. “Ladies are always impressed by a guy who does that so enthusiastically.”

Rynn holds me tighter, his turquoise eyes honed in on my mouth now. “I will tell the tribe they must learn these skills,” he says distantly.

I laugh, ready to tell him it’s not as easy as all that when our private little bubble abruptly pops. “High Spear,” Someone - a Trixikka male says from the world outside my guy’s wings. Rynn growls before he straightens and folds his feathers back behind himself. The Trixikka male looks warily at us both before clearing his throat and continuing with his report. “The tribe is ready to travel to the Temple at your request, High Spear.”

Apparently, this temple business is a big deal to the Trixikka. Rynn had explained as he flew me from the village site to where the odd white egg lay nestled into the foot of the mountain. They believe that all good fortune happens because of the deities that they think are inside. And maybe they’re right. What do I know? I’ve never been particularly religious or felt the presence of any kind of God. If I ever had, I’d probably get mad and ask them ‘*Why?*’

But I’m not about to shit on anyone else’s faith just because *I* think the weird spaceship-looking thing is sketchy as hell.

Every one of Rynn’s tribe and the human girls are gathered here and Rynn stands proud at the center of it. He insists that I stand here right beside him, too. “My people!” he says, his voice booming, causing a hush to settle over the group. His wings flair wide behind us both and it’s so easy to just sense the beautiful power in them without even glancing over my shoulder. He grips my hand in his larger, warmer one, addressing everyone else, but I know he’s so keenly aware of me standing beside him, just as I could never deny his presence either. Forget worshipping whatever lies beyond the temple walls - my Rynn makes my blood sing. All I need is him. “Protectors, care-givers, hunters, healers, craftsmales,

and of course-” he pauses to bow his head at Alana, Chastity, and Bea, “- precious females.” All the while, his tail cords around my knee for everyone to see. I find I don’t really care. “This day, we must give thanks to the Goddesses for the bountiful blessings they have gifted to us. Please, bring forth your offerings.”

One-by-one, the Trixikka bring forward collections of those beautiful opal-like ‘life-stones’, soft animal hides, cured meat, and those seed pots they’re so fond of. I don’t miss the way one or two of the males eye the women when carrying their jars of the sparkly stuff, as if debating on whether they want to lay their offering in the hollow that’s appeared in the side of the temple, or at the feet of one of the girls.

Mavyx, standing beside Rynn as his Second Spear clears his throat, prompting the males to scurry up and present their ‘jizz pot’ to the temple instead. One of the girls stifles a giggle and I just know without looking that it’s Chastity. Mavyx leans in to murmur to Rynn. “The offerings are not as bountiful as usual.”

“The offerings are fine,” Rynn dismisses under his breath, tightening his grip on me with both hand and tail. There’s a tension there, but I’m not sure what that’s all about.

The spinning, floating orb comes out from another recently appeared hollow in the side of the temple and hovers a good eight feet off the ground. “Thank you, Trixikka, for your offerings this day,” a monotone, female voice says, the ball glowing brightly in time with the words. The crowd of Trixikka duck their heads in reverence and, inexplicably, I find myself doing the same. I might have issues believing in a higher power, but I can see why the Trixikka would look at this... *thing* in awe and treat it with respect. And... Well, I don’t want to offend them.

I jolt when the whole tribe chants as one, “*she will be protected!*” Rynn peers at me from the corner of his eye as he straightens from his bow.

“Those of you who have made a seed-offering in the past few ceremonies, please come forward,” he says,

addressing the crowd again. A group of around fifteen males line up and I watch in fascination as they take turns to press their hands to the small black patch on the wall of the temple. Some of them seem torn between throwing longing glances at the girls as they wait, and concentrating on the temple before them. All of them are nervous as hell when it's their turn to step up and offer their palm, though. I hold my breath with each of them, though I'm not sure what for. Rynn says that sometimes, the tribe is blessed with a new son at these ceremonies. But I'll believe it when I see it.

“What happens to the baby girls?” I ask Rynn once the ceremony is over. The skies are turning heavy and gray as the Trixikka continue to leave the little clearing on wing. A few of the larger of Rynn's Protectors almost square off with each other for the privilege to carry a woman back to the village, but one barked command from their High Spear and they fall in line.

“They remain within the temple, with the other females,” he answers, then jerks his chin toward one of the older Trixikka, a man with a pleasant smile who although his role is clearly that of a carer, was still built solidly with muscle, like all members of the tribe. Perhaps he was once one of the fierce Protectors when he was a younger male? Now, he re-braids a young boy's long hair to keep it from his eyes when they fly back home. “You see the golden bands he wears on his tail?” My eyes drop and I see two thick cuffs around the middle of the man's tail. “They are each for a daughter he has fathered and will never hold. As well as wearing a daughter-band, fathers of female younglings will provide more food to the temple to nourish their daughter's bellies, and clip their flight feathers when they first learn of their births.”

“Clip their flight feathers?”

“Yes,” he nods, a rumble of thunder splitting the sky above us. “So that we are reminded of the sins of our ancestors. We - ” Rynn pauses and frowns to himself, ruffling one of those massive hands of his through his hair. “We promised to never again clip a female's wings,” he says, his voice rushing out with a huff. “And so we ground ourselves

instead. The feathers grow back, but we do this to honor our daughters.”

Something melancholic shadows his expression and I have to ask. “Do... *you* have a daughter in there?” Something that suspiciously tastes like jealousy rises at the thought, which is so utterly stupid and selfish of me, I know, but I can’t help it. Rynn has had a life before me, just like I have, I have to remind myself. And even if he does have a daughter behind those temple walls, she’s not a result of a relationship. I know all of this, but it doesn’t stop the twisty-feeling low in my belly.

One corner of his mouth twists up in a mirthless grin. “Do I wear a daughter-band, mate?” His tail flicks around in front of my face, the soft black tuft on the tip tickling my nose until I’m forced to huff and push it away. He laughs. It’s a soft sound that speaks of other things on his mind. I want to know what those other things are, but before I can ask, another roll of thunder seems to rumble from directly above us. It’s so loud, I feel it in my gut, and the heavens open, the heavy skies finally bursting.

I yelp at the sudden downpour, moving to cling to Rynn, hooking my arms around his toned waist. The fat raindrops are almost warm but they’re coming down at a phenomenal rate. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised; we are in the middle of a rainforest, after all. “We should go back to the village,” I squeak.

“You do not like the rains?” he asks, angling his big, inky wing to be used as my own personal umbrella. It’s surprisingly effective too. The droplets just roll right off his feathers.

“Do you?!”

“I like them well enough,” he says, turning his head skyward and closing his eyes before wrapping that tail of his around my thigh. I’m coming to enjoy the possessiveness of that damn tail. “I like them even more now that I know they make you hold me like this.”

I huff and swat at his stupid, sexy abs. He doesn't even flinch. Of course. He does laugh though, and I peek up at him from my shelter under his wing. His head is still tilted upward and he's utterly soaked already, his dark hair dripping, and those droplets racing down his neck, his chest, his stomach. He looks like a model from one of those fancy fragrance commercials who mysteriously emerges from a waterfall or something. "Maybe the rain isn't so bad," I mumble to myself, tracking one particular droplet of water as it journeys between his hard pecs and then in the bumps and valleys of his stomach muscles before it meets the band of his loincloth. When I look back up, Rynn is staring at me with a fierce fire behind his eyes that almost takes my breath away. His hair is utterly soaked, the sopping strands now falling forward. It's positively criminal that he looks so good and not at all like a drowned rat.

"I will shelter you from all that you fear, my Zahreenah," he tells me earnestly. "And give only pleasure and joy."

I huddle closer to his big body, my lip twitching into a smile that I bury into his slowly twinkling skin. I know he means every word he says. And I... I believe him. How can I not? How can I deny the way he makes me feel? Or the sincerity in his words? I'm about to tell him just that; that I know he'll protect me and I feel safe with him. My body, and my heart. But the big guy doesn't give me a chance. He hauls me into his arms, lifting me so effortlessly and gracefully, I feel a little stupid when I yelp and flail initially. My arms find their way around his neck and my legs wrap around his waist and Rynn just... holds me there, one huge hand cupping my ass, and the other supporting my back. The rain is getting me now, too, and it's not as bad as I thought it might be - not quite like a hot shower, and not like the freezing rain I'm used to back home. Somewhere in the middle.

His intense turquoise gaze burns into me and then drops to my lips. "I would like mouth-on-mouth-kissing now, my mate," he growls, the tail that slipped free from around my thigh when he lifted me, now lashing wildly behind him.

“In the rain?” I ask, a little breathlessly.

Rynn nods, eyes caught on my mouth as he leans forward. “And then, I would like some mouth-on-cunt-kissing.”

He doesn't even allow me my gasp, instead swallowing it when his mouth claims mine fiercely as he clutches me tighter to his hard, muscled body. Something about the rain beating down on both of us intensifies the kiss until I feel positively dizzy with Rynn's possession of my mouth. His kiss this time is utterly feral and I am not mad about it one bit. If he set me on my feet now, I'm sure I'd be as wobbly as a newborn deer.

Rynn doesn't set me on my feet though. In fact, it seems like that's the last thing he wants to do as he turns with me in his arms, never breaking our kiss while he strides forward a few paces, and then, my back meets with something smooth, cool, and wet. I gasp into his mouth. Rynn's pushing me up against his temple like it's nothing and thoroughly - *thoroughly* - continues to make out with me as though his life depends on it. It's not *my* deity behind these walls, and I'm still kind of suspicious of the whole thing, but surely this is sacrilegious? “The temple?” is all I manage to squeak out between kisses, Rynn's hands doing a fine job of distracting me as he cups and squeezes both my butt and my breast at once while his hips still pin me in place.

“Let the Goddesses see how I relish my gift,” he growls into the hinge of my jaw, nipping me lightly and sending little zings of pleasure down my spine. “Let them see how grateful I am.” His mouth moves lower and all I can do is clutch at his wet hair and moan. *Fuck!* This man has a wonderful mouth. Suddenly, his hands hook under my thighs and he lifts me higher against the smooth, curved wall at my back. I let out a little squeal of surprise and flail for something to hold onto while Rynn guides my legs over his powerful shoulders, both his hands cradling my ass. He notices my unsteadiness and stretches both wings skyward so at least I have something to grip. And now, I'm sheltered from the rain once more, the shade his dark wings cast making those

glowing lights on his feathers seem celestial again. “Let *you* see too,” Rynn mutters into my flesh. “Let you see how I take care of you, my little-light.”

All around me, the rain still beats down upon the temple walls and I’m still completely soaked through. But I don’t care. Not when I’m with Rynn. Still, I have to ask. “Won’t the Goddesses be...” my breath hitches as he nuzzles my mound over my wet sleep shorts. “...*mmh*... won’t they be offended? Us doing this?”

Rynn’s eyes meet mine, a confused look on his face. “Offended?” he huffs. “How could anyone be offended by cunt-kissing? You have only taught me of it recently and already I know it is the most sacred of acts.” My head falls back with a breathy chuckle. This guy. “No,” he says, mouthing at me, the heat from his breath and tongue seeping through my sleep shorts *right* at the most delicious spot, making me whimper and want to grind against his attentions. “The Goddesses gave you to me so that I may worship you like this, my mate. I am a capable male. I can take care of all your needs, my Zahreenah. You will see.” With that, he snakes a hand up, pushes my sleep shorts aside, and groans as he takes a long lick with a hot, flat tongue.

All coherent thought flies from my mind.

“Oh, God! *Rynn*,” I almost sob, gripping onto him tightly, his big dark wings still shielding me from most of the rain as he holds me up on his shoulders and feasts between my legs.

The whole time, Rynn’s eyes only leave mine to flutter closed when it looks like he’s caught up in his own bliss. I never knew a guy could get off so much on going down on his girl, but this one certainly does. And when one of his strong hands leaves my ass and I’m pretty sure the rhythmic movements of his shoulder indicate that he’s jerking off while he eats me out - well, it only confirms my suspicions. Also, I find *that* idea so incredibly hot that I come quick and damn hard not long after I figure out what he’s doing.

I'm still panting, utterly soaked from the rain, and utterly rung out from an incredible orgasm when my Rynn murmurs a quiet "take me with you when you go, my mate," into the inside of my thigh.

Rynn nuzzles me again and my hand absentmindedly lowers to twine my fingers into his wet hair, the rain beating down on my hand as I do. But, then his words sink in. "Rynn," I ask, giving his hair a little tug for him to look at me. Through the small gap between his wings, I can see his tail flicking wildly behind him. "What are you talking about?" I say when his bright turquoise eyes find mine. I cup his face and he leans into the touch. "I'm not going anywhere, baby."

His jaw clenches beneath my touch. "You do not have to lie to me, Zahreenah. I will not clip your wings if you wish to fly, but *please*... let me come with you."

I don't know what the hell he's talking about and it must show on my face.

"You and Ah-lanah," he says, elaborating. "You told the one called Bea that you would ask the stars for help. That someone would come and take you from Trixikka lands to deliver you back to your home."

A knot forms in my throat. He thought I was leaving him? "No, *no*. We're not doing that." Reaching down, I cradle his handsome face in both my hands, kind of wishing I didn't have my legs wrapped around his head right now. "Put me down?" I ask so that we can have a proper talk.

Rynn only shakes his head, his skin-stars shimmering furiously at his temples. "No."

"No?"

"No."

I make a huffing noise and teasingly kick my heel into his back between his wings. "Put me down," I try again. Just when I think he's about to comply, Rynn only unwraps my legs from around his head and lets me slip down his body some of the way, so that we are now face-to-face. It's better, but he's still got me pinned. Now *I'm* shaking my head.

“Ridiculous man,” I gently chide. I can feel a big grin threatening my lips though. Stroking his cheek, I think about what he said. “You... would come with me? If I wanted to go? If I found a way to go back to Earth?” Rynn nods, his intense gaze taking my breath away. “But... your tribe...”

“They will find a new High Spear,” he shrugs. “They would be fine and I would miss them. But now I know what it is to have you, my Zahreenah - I fear I would be a broken male should you be taken from me.”

Broken? My heart gives a lurch. I feel like I might be broken without him too. The rain still hammers down on the Temple and I watch the droplets dribble down the tanned skin at the side of Rynn’s neck as he swallows thickly. “I’m not going anywhere, I promise you.”

Watching as his eyes flutter closed, his head bowing forward to rest gently on mine, Rynn lets out a breath of relief. “This is good,” he says after a long while of nothing but our embrace and the rain around us. He opens his eyes again, a spark returning to them even if rainwater drips from his lashes. “I have never flown as high as the stars and I do not know what creatures are out there I will need to defend you from.”

From what I’ve learned - a lot.

“Would you really leave your tribe for me?” I ask. I have to. I’ve never had *anyone* in my life have anything close to this sort of devotion for me.

Rynn nods. “There is nothing for me if I do not have you.”

An ugly sort of sob leaves me and I pull him in for the wettest, most frantic and inelegant kiss I’ve ever experienced. And I wouldn’t change a thing. I feel so light, so giddy and yet my chest feels so tight - like my heart actually *hurts* for the amount of love contained within it right now. “I love you,” I tell him between presses of our lips and then again, pulling away because I’ve never told anyone those words and I need to see him when I say them. I need him to know that I trust him with those words, my heart, my everything. “I love you, Rynn.”

I can feel myself beaming at him like a loon. But I don't care, because he's beaming right back with a warm purr vibrating in his chest between us. And, as if this stupid, wonderful alien planet saw our smiles and wanted to smile right back, the rain stops abruptly, and the clouds part just as quickly as they'd appeared.

Rynn rests his forehead on mine again. "I love you, too, my mate."

Chapter 25

RYNN

My Zahreenah has given me the greatest gift a male could ever hope to receive. She has declared her love for me, she has declared herself my mate, she has declared herself utterly mine as I am hers. I am overcome with the realization. I knew my own feelings on the matter, but somehow, those feelings are only intensified now that I have knowledge that hers are a match with mine. To think of it, that this glorious, magnificent female holds such affection for *me*? I am lightheaded at the prospect and I am sure I am grinning and strutting around the village this day like a cock-proud young Protector. I do not care. Zahreenah welcomed me into the Promised Lands of her cunt again last night and judging by the moans and ferocious scratches she left on my back and shoulders, she welcomed my cock rather gladly. I cannot wait to do that again, and many, many more things with my mate.

For now, patrol shifts have changed as we still search for the missing females. Zarriko has sent word that he is yet to find the sleeping females or the two who were like my Zahreenah and awake - including the one they call 'Dove' whom he had and then lost. This troubles me. The jungles of our lands are not forgiving, especially for our new fragile females. As soon as this thought enters my mind, I catch the tail-end of Ah-lanah and Mavyx's bickering. She jabs a finger into his chest, shouts something about a 'controlling ass-hole', and storms away like a menacing cloud of thunder. Fragile indeed. I snicker to myself. Most of the females are not docile at all - my mate certainly isn't when in my nest. But they still have the tribe's protection, forever and always. My poor Second Spear looks torn as he watches Ah-lanah go with a furious scowl on his face, though his heart-stars dance on his skin for his mate. They will find their way with each other, of this, I am sure.

"High Spear," Aloryk calls me as he approaches. He is full of spirit this morning, his smile wide when he comes to stop before me, spear in hand and tail swaying back and forth.

He bows and then continues to grin. “You have found the secret to the females, it seems.”

I do not know what it is he speaks of, so I simply raise a brow.

“You...” his smile falters ever so slightly and he looks hesitant. “The sounds coming from your hut this last night, I... we did not know what those sounds meant. None of the Trixikka did. But Chaz-Titti explained to us that they were sounds of a good time. Of a very good time. That females make these sounds when they are pleased with their males. I congratulate you, High Spear on this, and I would like to know how it is done, so that one day, should the Goddesses bless me with a female of my own, she will sing my name, as our High Spearess sang yours this last night.”

A surge of male pride shoots through me. Yes, I did please my female, and it seems the tribe is aware of this now too. I cannot help my smile when I remember how my mate had writhed and jerked with pleasure when I'd enjoyed tasting her.

Aloryk leans in, lowering his voice a little. “Can you share the secret, High Spear? We are all keen to learn the ways of our females and how best to please them.”

Yes, I suppose they are. Especially with our plans to meet with High Spear Zarriko's tribe where every Trixikka male will be keen to see if his heart-stars will ignite. I look at him, considering, but I am in an exceptionally good mood this day, so I lean in to speak. “There are many pleasant rituals to master when it comes to these females,” I tell him. “One of the most important ones seems to be an act named ‘cunt-kissing’.” Aloryk nods with eager interest as I continue to explain the basics of what I have learned.

After meeting with the elders, coordinating the next day's search and hunting parties as well as talking with the tribe's care-givers about their recent needs for the sons, I am more than ready to hold my mate and make use of my mouth on her delicious body so that I might taste her pleasure again.

”Rynn,” she giggles into my mouth as I claim hers as soon as I find her near the fire with the other females. Her delicate hands rest on my shoulders for balance as she leans up on the tips of her toes to better receive my kiss. I groan at the feel of her against me and how different she is to me - her soft, plentiful curves pressed to my Protector’s body. Goddess, I need to bury my cock inside her right now.

With those pleasant thoughts in my mind, I break our mouth-on-mouth-kissing to growl, “you’re coming with me now, little-light,” and bend to lift her swiftly up so that I may carry her over my shoulder like she were my hunter’s prize. And what a prize my Zahreenah is. She yelps and wriggles, grasping at my feathers as I walk, ignoring tribesmember’s stares as I take her back to our hut. Zahreenah is laughing despite her struggles and this makes me smile. I give her beautiful tailless rear a firm tap with my hand and her struggles cease instantly with a little gasp. Interesting.

“Rynn, put me down,” she commands.

I do not.

“Rynn, I need to talk to you.”

“You can talk to me as I carry you to my nest, my mate,” I tell her, “and then you may continue talking to me while I am enjoying my favored meal of cunt-kissing.”

”*Oh, my God, Rynn!*” my Zahreenah hisses. “Keep it down when saying things like that!” she says, her little fists twisting rather uncomfortably in my feathers now.

I reach up with my tail and use it to wrap around her small wrists, binding them together as I walk. Let’s save her feather-pulling for when we are well and truly in the throes of pleasure, shall we? When we are like that together, I wouldn’t care if she plucked me of all my plumage if it means she is enjoying herself with me.

My hut has never felt so far away as it does now. Not with how my mate calls me something called a ‘caveman’ and follows it up with a breathy little laugh. Finally, when we reach our home, I unbound her wrists from my tail and place

her back on her feet, quickly capturing her mouth with mine, lest she forgets just how much I want her in this moment. In every moment, truly, but I have been a patient male for the past few hours, busying myself with matters of the tribe. Surely my Zahreenah will take pity on me and allow me to perform the cunt-kissing that I so crave.

She has turned me to madness, this female.

My little-light pulls away but I am pleased to note she is panting and needy, her little hands grasping at me and her back arching into my frame. “Wait-wait-wait,” she says breathily. I bend my larger frame right over her, eager to reach everything she might offer me. My mouth falls to beneath her jaw, following the soft and deliciously scented skin there. I cannot help myself, I nip her lightly with my teeth. My Zahreenah likes that and she moans before cursing to herself. “Rynn, I still need to talk to you,” she says, the words whiney even as she tilts her head to gift me more access to her throat.

“So talk, my little female,” I rasp into her skin, my tail coming up to curl around the top of Zahreenah’s beautifully soft thigh. The tufted tip rests against her covered cunt. I swipe it side to side slowly, noting the sudden inhale she takes.

When I change the movement to a sharp flicking, my mate groans, her hands gripping tightly in my hair. “Oh God, you play dirty, baby,” she tells me, her voice dipping into that husky tone that makes my cock surge. That voice is for me. *Only me.* And I love it.

This time when we join, Zahreenah grins and asks if I want to ‘fuck her from behind’. I do not know what this means but I am more than willing. Even more so, when my mate drops to her hands and knees in my nest, arching her beautiful tailless rump upward and presenting her cunt to me as she smiles over her shoulder. Every new angle that I see my Zahreenah from I think is my favorite and this is no exception. I take her like this, surprised at how she cries out and begs for me to thrust harder, be rougher.

Afterward - after Zahreenah near sobbed my name and I’ve cleaned my seed from all over her lovely round rear and

back, she is tucked into my side and drawing idle patterns on the skin of my chest, her fingertip tracing little paths from one glowing heart-star to the next. “I did not know it could be done that way,” I tell her, still a little dazed. She chuckles and nuzzles closer to me. “Did I hurt you, my mate?” The thought has gnawed at me ever since I spent my seed on her. “I gripped your body very tightly in my hands and I could not stop myself from pounding into your sweet little cunt, it felt too good, but if I-”

“Oh my God, Rynn! *Shh!*” Zahreenah commands, her hand blindly coming up to cover my mouth. She laughs and shakes her head, looking up at me now. “No, you didn’t hurt me. I asked you to go harder, remember? I liked it.”

I find myself relaxing after that. Perhaps, my female is not so delicate and fragile, I think to myself, a smile curling my lips. “You will have to teach me all the ways we can do that,” I tell her, my tail twining around her ankle as I press her close to my side and bury my nose into her rich brown hair. “I am more than willing to learn.”

Zahreenah chuckles and swats at my chest. “I bet you are.” She goes back to tracing over my heart-stars as their dancing and twinkling start to slow to a contented lazy pulse beneath her touch. “And although that was a pleasurable distraction, I still need to talk to you.”

“Talk to me, my mate,” I say softly, squeezing her gently. “Tell me anything and everything.”

Zahreenah settles her cheek on my chest. “We still need to go to the ship.” I am still at that, only to remind myself that my mate has promised me she is not trying to leave these lands - to leave *me*. I allow myself to breathe again and Zahreenah continues, “Alana... Alana needs to go there. There might be information that she needs pretty badly.”

“What information is it she needs? Our Elders and Healers have deep wells of knowledge, perhaps they can-”

“No.” Her interruption is quiet but resolute. “No, what she needs is-...”

Zahreenah is quiet for a time before she moves, leaning up on her elbows so that her beautiful face hovers over mine, her hair falling on either side of my head. “It’s the secret I told you she has. The one I can’t explain to you?” she says, her eyes flicking between both of mine. She swallows before continuing, “I can’t betray her to tell you. You said you trusted me with this. Do you still?”

My Zahreenah looks so worried and I do not like it. Reaching up, I cradle her face in my hands. She is so small and yet strong and loyal. And she worries over this ‘secret’ her friend has told her. “I will take you and Ah-lanah to the ship carcass,” I tell her. “You do not need to tell me this secret belonging to another female. I do not care to learn of it. I only care that you are worried over it.”

My mate’s eyes grow soft and I cannot help the purr that starts up in my chest as she looks down at me. “You’re not going to force me to tell you?”

I shake my head. “I trust that you are handling it, and that you will tell me if you think I should know.”

The mouth-on-mouth kissing my mate gives me in that moment is so fierce, it is like she is trying to claim me, body and spirit. I do not know what I have done to be deserving of such a claiming, but I welcome it wholeheartedly.

Chapter 26

SERENA

Mavyx is not happy with Rynn's decision to take me and Alana to the ship. Still, he insists on coming too and it's clear that even though they can't seem to stop bickering, he cannot stand to leave her alone for too long either. It's almost comical the way he insists on carrying her while we fly - threatening to snap the neck of any other male who dares offer to take Alana in his stead - since she doesn't seem too keen on him either. Even now, they fly in silence behind Rynn and I, pointedly not looking at one another.

It takes near enough half a day to reach the abandoned, broken ship and even though it has only been days since I was last here, the thing looks even worse than it had done before - dirtier, and even more wrecked, like the jungle is trying to break it apart and dismantle it for daring to land here. There was even some sort of creeping vine traveling up one side and crawling into a busted-out window. The vine's leaves are thin and white like the grasses in this area, making the plant itself resemble thick cobwebs. I reach out to touch it in awe. How fast does this stuff grow if it's already made its way inside the ship? But my Rynn stops me with a hand on my wrist. "Do not touch the Friendly Vine," he says, shaking his head.

"Friendly Vine?"

"If it is disturbed, it will release something in the air to make us all very relaxed. Too relaxed. It will then creep along to find you and wrap you in its embrace and keep you sleeping. Eventually, you will breathe in so much of its relaxing air that you will never wake."

"That doesn't sound too friendly," I shudder.

Rynn grunts. "I do not know where the name came from. I only know to stay away. Its presence here is a good sign that no predator has made a den of your 'ship' though. But I will check, just in case."

I nod my head as Rynn gives Mavyx a meaningful look, communicating with one another so effectively without the use of words; Rynn is to go inside and check, and Mavyx is to stay out here and guard Alana and I. The Second Spear's eyes instantly begin to scan the tree line surrounding the clearing as my mate disappears into the wreckage.

Once the coast is clear, Alana and I step inside, being careful not to go anywhere near the ghostly white Friendly Vine. We seat ourselves in the little cockpit area and I turn on the screen with a tap of my finger. "What is it that you need that you simply must endanger yourselves for, anyway?" Mavyx asks, crossing his arms over his massive chest with a huff.

Alana swivels in her pilot chair to face him and I can tell she is ready to start another argument with the guy. I throw a look at Rynn, hoping we have some sort of silent communication connection too.

Thankfully, he gets it straight away. "Come," he barks, jerking his head at his Second Spear. "We must keep watch outside while the females search for their information." I give my man a grateful smile as he follows Mavyx outside.

After what seems like hours of scouring the information we find on the screen, not sure of what we're looking for, we find only two slightly promising leads. Two different plants that we think are native to this planet that have been recorded as having some form of contraceptive properties. It is the longest of long shots but we'll take it. Obviously, contraception should be taken before two people 'do the do', but short of finding something labeled as 'Alien Plan B' in this database, I think Alana is down to try anything.

According to what we read on screen, this planet and its flora and fauna have been explored and documented in the past but are now protected under an intergalactic conservation act and Z'irri shouldn't have landed us here at all.

I can't say I'm mad about that though. Not now I have Rynn.

“I need your help,” Alana demands as she stands in the doorway to the spaceship, calling to the two Trixikka outside. They follow her inside and she wastes no time getting to the point. “I need these plants. Do you know where to find them?” she asks, pushing a button on the screen that projects a 3D hologram of the specimens in question.

“Why do you need such a thing?” Mavyx grunts, side-eyeing his mate.

Alana huffs and pushes past him. “Fine! I’ll go into the jungle and find them myself!”

That makes him bristle, and before I know it, the big Trixikka is stomping down the ramp after his female, his feathers quite literally ruffled. I watch them bicker for a moment or two before Mavyx throws his hands up and storms over to the tree line on one side of the clearing, Alana trotting along behind. When I look back at Rynn, he is already watching me, a soft smile on his face. “What?” I ask, amused.

He shakes his head as though clearing himself from pleasantly lazy thoughts. “Did you find what you seek, my mate?”

“Maybe,” I tell him, chewing my lip. If this long-shot of a plan doesn’t work - if Alana definitely *is* pregnant and there’s no stopping a baby from coming, I will tell him (with Alana’s permission, of course). I can understand her trepidation about the Trixikka, but I know in my heart that my Rynn would make it right for her if I asked him to. If I asked him to order Mavyx to just *deal* with it; your mate has a baby that’s not yours - get over it. He would. He would protect Alana’s child because it’s the right thing to do. I suck in a breath and turn in my seat to face him. “I did find something interesting though.” Alana has stomped off into the forest to go and find both contraceptive plants but something I read about one of them caught my eye - apparently the more reliable of the two.

“Oh?” Rynn asks, sliding into the seat beside me.

I press a few buttons, bringing up the hologram of the first plant we found in the database. “Do you know this

plant?” The leaves are large and colored a beautiful emerald green so deep, they’re almost black but with looping veins of bright neon pink.

“Yes, I have seen it in the forests.”

I give him a wry grin. “Well, according to this-” I point to a wall of text that most likely looks like utter nonsense to my Trixikka - and would look the same to me, if it weren’t for my translator, “- this plant has powerful contraceptive properties. It says here, when ingested regularly by the male of any species, his sperm becomes dormant until effects wear off.”

Rynn looks at me blankly.

I lean in. “If you were to eat this plant and then-” my hands make a gesture as if willing him to catch on. He doesn’t of course. “If we were to have sex, you wouldn’t be able to get me pregnant,” I pause, wondering if he knows the meaning of my words. “You wouldn’t be able to... *put a baby in me*... It would be safe... I think.”

Rynn blinks. Once, twice. “Are you saying, my mate... that if I eat this-” he waves a big hand at the slowly rotating 3D image of the plant, “- you will let me spend my seed inside your sacred cunt?”

I snort-laugh, he looks so awed by the idea. “Ok, first off, you need to stop calling it that. And secondly...” for some reason, my heart hammers in my chest as he looks at me like that. I swallow. “...Well, yeah.”

Rynn leaps to his feet and gets perhaps three steps away before he’s whirling back to grab me and haul me over his shoulder again. “*Rynn!*” I squeal. “What are you doing?!”

“We must find this plant immediately.”

I can’t help but laugh at that.

It isn’t until we are out of the ship that he halts in his steps and puts me down, ducking his head to meet my eye. “You are sure, my little-light? A plant would do that?”

“I think so, yeah. I mean... that’s what the database states. Says it’s pretty powerful too, but there’s always a chance it could fail.”

Rynn’s big, warm hands glide all the way from my shoulders, down my arms to take hold of my hands. God, I love the feel of him, even just the smallest of comforting touches. “And if it fails, my mate? I know you do not want younglings just yet and I do not want to press you-”

“If it fails, it fails,” I say, smiling brightly up at him. “I know you’ll be with me no matter what happens.” My heart feels light with the possibilities for our future and I can see Rynn feels it too - that together, we could do that. We could have a family and everything would be ok. Reaching up, I curl my hand around the back of his neck and urge him to lean down. I love that he comes so willingly. With my big winged alien lightly pressing his forehead to mine, we both close our eyes. “I know you’re not going anywhere,” I whisper.

“Never, my mate,” Rynn answers, swaying us gently. “You have me until the end of my days under the twin suns.” I open my eyes and he’s already looking at me, those turquoise eyes of his *so* intense. His voice is hoarse as he adds. “And even after that.”

Forever and ever, then.

I like the sound of that.

We walk together into the thick of the jungle, my hand nestled safely within his. It only takes around twenty minutes or so, but when Rynn finds a small crop of bushes featuring the very same leaves we’d seen in the hologram, he promptly yanks a handful off in his fist, and shoves them in his mouth, chewing them down like an animal, all while his gaze stays firmly locked on me. Honestly, it’s enough to make me giggle.

“How much of this plant should I consume?” he mumbles around his mouthful, then swallows it down with a wince. “Just the leaves? The stems? The roots too? I will eat it all.”

I shake my head, smiling. “I don’t know.”

Rynn tears another leaf from the bush and shoves it in his mouth, his eyes drop down my body leisurely as his chewing slows. I watch him swallow and prowl toward me, morphing from eager playfulness to focused predator within the blink of an eye. “When will you allow me to fill you, little mate?”

I lick my lips. Rynn tracks the movement, a gleam in his eye that makes me shiver... and get ideas. “You’ll have to catch me first,” I say, taking a step back as Rynn stalks forward. His skin-stars pulse all over his huge body and the end of his tail twitches. He likes the idea of chasing me, I think. Good. I like it too.

“You think you could escape me, my mate?”

I cock my head and smirk, taking another backward step. “No... but it would be fun if you let me try.”

“It is dangerous out there,” he counters, moving forward. He’s not wrong, but he’s not telling me no, either.

“*You’re* the most dangerous thing in this jungle,” I say, arching a brow, watching how Rynn’s big hands flex at his sides. “Do you like the idea of hunting me down, *mate*?” I ask, a thrill shooting up my spine at the way he audibly sucks in a sharp breath. I take another step back and this time he doesn’t follow. “What will you do when you catch me, I wonder?” Even from here, I can see Rynn’s pupils are dilated, like his very being - his biology - is preparing him for the hunt. Taking another step backward brings my foot down on a dry twig, making it snap under my weight. Rynn’s eyes dart down quickly before they’re back on my face and he crouches down, looking ready to pounce. I eye the bunched muscles I can see at his shoulders now, and how tightly he tucks in his gorgeous ink-black wings. My heart is hammering a mile a minute inside my chest but it feels good - exciting - like I’m about to board a rollercoaster. “Close your eyes and count to twenty.”

Rynn blinks, a small crease forming between his brows that makes me chuckle and shake my head. “You’ll catch me before I even have a chance if you don’t give me a head start.”

“You do not have a chance either way, my mate,” he tells me, eyes still tracking every small backward step I continue to take. “I am Trixikka, I am a High Spear, and most of all, I could scent your arousal from a thousand wingbeats away. No amount of counting will help you. Do not even begin to think I will not catch you, my little prey.”

This jungle is humid already, but *fuck*, I feel a different kind of heat simmering just beneath my skin. “Oh, I’m counting on it, big guy. Now close your eyes and count.”

Rynn lets out a small huff from his nose but follows my instructions.

I turn, and I *run*.

My feet take me as fast as I can go, flying over fallen leaves and leaping over roots. The Trixikka, concerned with our ‘fragile female feet’, have insisted on fashioning these soft little booties of sorts for us and I’m grateful for them now, considering how cut up I was after the last time I sprinted through this jungle.

Though this time couldn’t feel any more different from that first frantic dash. Back then, I’d feared being caught. Now, I can’t wait.

I keep going until I can no longer hear Rynn counting and pause, my breathing labored and my heart pounding in the cage of my ribs. I spin around, trying to get a glimpse of my mate chasing after me.

Nothing.

I turn in a circle again, more slowly this time, in case I’ve missed something before. All I see are the strange alien trees and plants. I can’t even hear him coming for me, there’s only the calling of birds and the chirping of insects.

Until there isn’t.

The jungle falls deadly silent around me and a tendril of fear creeps into my bones. Something dangerous is close. What if there’s something else out there and I’ve just run away from the safety of Rynn and into its territory? I swallow and start to blindly back up.

“Shall I count again, little female?” Rynn’s voice purrs from somewhere nearby. My head turns this way and that, trying to glimpse where he is. I have no idea. I can’t see him anywhere. But the fear that had crept in begins to thaw now that I know the big, dangerous thing I could practically feel stalking me is him and not something else. “You are making this too easy for me, little prey,” he says, and it’s only when I realize his voice sounds elevated that I remember - *look up*, Serena! Your man can fly!

Frantically, I scan the canopy above me. From the corner of my eye, I catch movement - something falling from the darkest tree. The one with huge, black leaves. Before my brain can catch up with me, Rynn is there, straightening from a crouched position, a glint in his eye and a taunting smile on his beautiful lips. He looks like he might just want to eat me - like he knows he’s going to catch me, and that when he does, I’ll be at his mercy. I can feel the flush on my cheeks deepening at the thought. Rynn’s nostrils flare and I wonder if he can really scent my arousal like he said he could. “Do you always toy with your prey like this?” I ask, taking a step backward.

Rynn’s eyes track my movements but he doesn’t move except to slowly shake his head. “All this is reserved just for you, my Zahreenah.” His huge body drops into a crouch again, his eyes trained on me and every muscle in his body coiled tightly, ready to spring forward. “*Run*, little prey,” he commands, “let me chase you.”

I turn and flee.

I run, and run, and run again, pumping my arms and legs as fast as I can, dodging trees and leaping over huge, creeping roots. I can hear Rynn’s quick footfalls right behind me, making me want to squeal. Just as I’m about to turn my head, adrenaline coursing through my veins at the thought of how close behind me he must be, something large, muscled and feathery tackles me to the ground. I brace myself for the impact but land on a bed of spongy-soft, bright orange-colored moss and for a split second, I wonder if Rynn had planned that. Had he chased me this way? Herded me and waited until the right moment to pounce to ensure a soft landing?

I don't get a chance to think twice about it. Rynn's big chest pins me down and his hands are quick and desperate as he grabs at me, panting in my ear, even though I know he hadn't physically taxed himself as I did. "You caught me," I whimper, arching my back, and pushing my butt up into his crotch. I can feel his huge cock pressed into the back of my thigh. Rynn growls and begins yanking my sleep shorts down.

"Tell me no," he hisses with need into my ear. "Tell me no, and this stops, little-light."

Well, I'm not going to do that.

I arch my hips even further, begging him with my body. "I think you hunted your prey fair and square," I pant, rubbing my ass back against him. "You should take what you want."

I'm so fucking wet right now that when I feel the blunt of Rynn's huge cock press against me, it takes one swift, grunted thrust from him and he's buried deep inside my pussy. "*Umh... fuck,*" Rynn growls above me, gliding his cock out and then shoving it back in with a force that makes my breath hitch in my throat. "Is this what you wanted from me, little prey?" his raspy voice rumbles in my ear, his breathing a little stilted from fucking me. I whimper again, pressing my cheek to the ground. Rynn rests his weight on his forearms on either side of my head and I watch as his thick fingers dig into the moss, prominent veins snaking up from his hand over his arms as he strains above me. The skin-stars that I love are going absolutely crazy all over his body as he pounds me into the forest floor.

And I fucking love it.

"*Fuck,* I would chase this cunt all over Trixikka lands and beyond," Rynn pants, one huge hand dropping down to place a firm grip on my hip, holding me in place as he continues to take me exactly as he wants to - exactly as *I* want him to. "Will you let me fill you with seed, little prey?"

I can feel my orgasm building and clamp my muscles down on Rynn's cock as he slides in and out of me, making his thrusts lose rhythm. Rynn groans loudly in my ear so I do it

again. “Is that a yes?” he asks, hot breath panting above me. “I will not be able to hold my seed for much longer,” he leans down to whisper. “I would like to make an offering to your cunt.”

I know he’s only just eaten the mysterious contraceptive plant a few minutes ago. *I know* we’re not certain how long it will take to work. And I *also* know Sensible-Serena has left the building, leaving Horny-Serena in charge when I nod my head and whimper, one of my hands snaking beneath my body to touch my clit.

Rynn growls and pushes my hand away. “This is mine.” And, *oh, God*, it feels good to have him play with me while he fucks me. His big, thick fingers move as quickly as they can in tight circles over my clit while still being trapped beneath both our bodies. I can feel myself getting more and more taut. There’s a tension in my body like an arrow drawing back on the string of a bow, getting ready to fly.

“*Rynn*,” I plead, reaching back to grab onto the back of his neck, right before I feel that arrow loose, soaring through the air.

Rynn roars above me, his hips bucking wildly before he stiffens and lets out a long, satisfied groan while still pumping into my pussy.

It’s not long until I feel the telltale trickle of warm wetness seeping from where Rynn’s still lazily fucking me that Sensible-Serena casually wanders back into the building to take back the reigns from irresponsible Horny-Serena.

A prickle of fear grips me, but then Rynn starts to nuzzle my ear and the side of my neck. “*Zahreenah*,” he hums my name, the sound dripping with satisfaction and happiness. “My *Zahreenah*.” His tail wraps around my ankle and somehow, that prickle of fear just... blows away like a feather on the breeze.

“*Rynn*?” I ask. He answers with a sleepy sort of grunt. He’s going to have to get off of me soon, his weight is getting heavier the more relaxed he’s getting. And besides, his cock is

still securely nestled inside me. “What...” I start, “what happens if I fall pregnant?... If we just made a baby?”

Rynn lifts his head. “What happens?” he asks, sounding perplexed. I turn to see him as best I can. “Then I will be the luckiest male that ever flew the skies or walked these lands. That is what happens.”

His answer makes me feel warm in so many different ways. Warm and... safe. My future is safe with Rynn. Even on this primitive planet. Even if he’s the most dangerous predator in these lands.

He’s my Rynn. And I feel safe.

He presses a kiss to the crown of my head before shifting, lifting his weight from my back, and then slowly easing his thick cock out of me. I feel the loss instantly. Something else I feel is the flood of his ‘offering’ coating my inner thighs and the moss beneath me.

I move to get up when a quick, strong hand at the small of my back pushes me back down. “Rynn, what the hell?” I glance over my shoulder at him but he’s still not letting me up.

He’s staring between my legs. I can feel more of his cum trickle out of me and hear the intake of breath he makes. “This sight is...” he trails off, unable to find the right word but clearly transfixed, one hand pinning me down, the other slowly stroking his glistening cock. He shakes his head and positions himself over me again. “I would like to make another offering.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Alana and Mavyx will be waiting-”

“Ah-lanah and Mavyx can wait for their High Spear to have his female as many times as he wants,” he purrs, nuzzling me again before whispering, “I like how your cunt looks when you are full of my seed.”

I chuckle, warming up to the idea when Rynn starts peppering my shoulder with kisses and nips of his teeth. I’m about to arch up into him, offering my mate my body again when he stops. My heart beats once, twice, three times and

above me, Rynn seems to have stopped breathing altogether. I feel his finger trace the curve of my neck from behind my ear and down to my shoulder. It makes me want to purr like a contented kitty or... well, like a Trixikka, but before I can do anything at all, Rynn's hands are on me again, abruptly flipping me over onto my back. Blinking up at him, I see his eyes frantically searching over every part of me and then lifting the hem of my night shirt right up to my chin, exposing my breasts. "Rynn!" I know he likes my boobs, but he never just paws at me like this. Well... except for just now when he caught me after our game of chase but -

"*Zahreenah*," he breathes, eyes wide with awe as he stares at my chest. I know I have nice tits and he's kind of obsessed but this is ridiculous. "Your heart-stars."

Wait. My-... my what-now?

Well, I'll be damned. I've heard of someone having that 'just fucked glow' where they're all happy and full of post-orgasm dopamine or whatever, but it turns out, letting my Trixikka mate finish inside me, *literally* made me glow.

I had skin-stars. Like... all over. They were beautiful with the way they rippled up and down my body and twinkled brightly wherever Rynn touched me. I had heart-stars too. It was strange, it was like I could feel them.

They'd only lasted maybe ten or twenty minutes but I'd loved seeing them on my skin. Rynn had too. He'd wanted to chase every one of my skin-stars with his lips and tongue, but all too soon, we heard Mavyx and Alana calling for us from the clearing with the ship. Rynn flew me back to meet them with the biggest, dopiest grin on his face. He looked so elated that Mavyx started to get annoyed. Rynn didn't seem to mind though, not with the way I'd whispered in his ear about letting him put stars on my skin again tonight.

While Rynn and I had played our game of predator and prey, Mavyx had apparently harvested several hide bundles worth of the two plants Alana and I had found on the database. Though he didn't seem to understand why they were needed,

Alana had played taskmistress and ordered him to pick as much as he and Rynn could fly back with. Of course, the huge, brooding Trixikka had complied.

“Are you two done fucking?” Alana asks, already chewing on a few leaves. “Because I’m tired and want to go back.”

Rynn slings a muscled arm around my shoulders. “I will never *‘be done fucking’* my mate,” he says, his tail curling around my waist. I snort and shove him away. He doesn’t even sway.

“What are you talking about?” Mavyx grunts as he eyes Rynn and I. It occurs to me then, that we might need to give the *‘birds and the bees talk’* to the rest of the Trixikka if Rynn hasn’t already. Does Mavyx even know what his High Spear has been up to all this time? My mate pulls me into him, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. It’s a really sweet gesture that makes my insides melt a bit. That is, until I see the muscle in Mavyx’s clenched jaw tick as he watches us and then glances at Alana. “Ah-lanah is tired,” he snaps, “she is in need of a nest. We must go.”

Alana only rolls her eyes at him and munches on more of those leaves. Her eyes then narrow as she gives me and my man a suspicious once-over. “*That* good, huh?” she asks, waving her bundle of leaves between Rynn and I.

I bite my lip, trying to stop the spread of what must be the world’s biggest smile. “Better.”

“*Daaamn, ok,*” Alana nods, her brows high. “I respect it, I respect it.”

“Respect *what*, female?” Mavyx huffs, folding his huge arms over his chest.

“They’ve just got that loved-up glow. Don’t bust a vein trying to understand, Mav.”

Mavyx’s arms fall to his side as he flusters to answer. “It is Mav-yx, or better yet, *Second Spear*. And I will not be busting anything.”

They continue to bicker all while Mavyx loads himself up as best he can with as many of the wrapped bundles of leaves while keeping his arms free to carry Alana.

Rynn leans into me, dipping his voice low. “Do we have a ‘loved-up glow’, my mate?”

He’s grinning wickedly when my eyes meet with his piercing turquoise ones. “I don’t know what we have,” I tell him, handing over a bundle of the harvested leaves to be secured to Rynn’s loincloth using strips of hide. “But I hope it lasts forever and ever.”

“It will,” he tells me.

There are lots of things I don’t know. I don’t know if we’ll ever find Dove and Sophia. I don’t know if we’ll ever recover the pod girls from the mimyckah. I don’t know if my mom ever regretted abandoning her little girl.

But I know one thing.

Rynn has my heart, and I have his.

The End

Want more of Serena and Rynn?

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About The Author

Melissa Emerald



Melissa lives in the south of England with her two kiddos, two kitties... oh, and her husband as well. When she's not dreaming up deliciously spicy and swoony romance tales, she's wishing she could finish whatever it is she's doing that's distracting her from that - and get right back to it! Exploring her creativity in her stories has helped tremendously with her mental health and the fact that she can share them with so many people is just the best thing ever!

Please do get in touch - I'd love to hear from you!