

FATED MATES
OF HEAVEN
BOOK 2

CLAIMED BY THE PRINCE

A SCIFI ALIEN ROMANCE

ELENA STARR

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Pronunciation Guide, in no particular order

All “ch” sounds pronounced like the Hebrew chet

Jameth — Jah-meth

Hahl — Hol

Ehla — Ay-lah

Desena — Deh-seh-na

Rochul — Roh-chool

Muhl — Mool

Kitwatch — Kih-twatch

Meohl — Meh-ol

Mechol — Meh-chol

Kehia — Ke-hee-a

Pruhleth — Proo-leth

Meleth — Meh-leth

Icheli — Ee-chelee

Fethrola — Fey-thro-la

Zuhl — Zool

Waicha — Wy-cha

Wai — Wy

Hesana — He-sa-na

Shekoi — Sheh-koh-ee

Kekes — Keh-kehs

Merithe — Mer-ee-theh

Khol — Ch-ol

Zurg — Zur-g (hard G)

Zurges — Zur-gess (hard G)

Lechethe — Leh-cheh-theh

Nechohl — Neh-chol

Echoul — Eh-chool

Shecacha — She-ca—cha

Koio — Koy-ee-oh

Chapter One

Wren

My fingers close around my coffee cup and I chance a glance at my watch. It's dead. Right. I forgot walking excessively drains the smartwatch's battery fast, so I slip out my phone once I'm outside.

Relief washes over me. I have 30 minutes before Luna's arrival, then an hour before Emily and Ron even get back to Earth from Hogar. With all the dust that accumulated while they were gone, they'll probably have a lot of cleaning to do before they come and—

Oh. Nevermind. I always forget Emily's got magic powers.

It's hard to imagine aliens cleaning. Even with powers.

It's hard to imagine Emily as *an alien*, but she's definitely not fully human. The powers and the alien baby prove it.

It's hard to imagine *Ron* as an alien. Especially a warrior alien who was supposed to be called Wrohl. I shiver, knots twisting my stomach at the thought of the war he and Emily almost had to fight.

The fact that they thought they were heading into war still haunts my nightmares, and it has for the last several nights. It's why I've been walking so much. Spending hours watching Doctor Who while using my walking pad so I'll at least have aliens in my brain when they come by.

Every time I think of it too strongly, I have to sit down. My knees buckle as I hit the park bench, taking deep breaths.

This shouldn't be a big deal. They stayed with me for three months, and sometimes I'd walk into the living room and find a white tiger on the floor instead of Ron on the sofa. And some mornings, Emily's skin would literally be glowing because that's what happens when you're having an alien baby with a guy from Hogar, apparently.

But life became so normal after they moved out, and *especially* after they went off to Hogar for 6 months, so it's hard to get back into it.

Ron looks human—albeit huge and muscular—and so do Emily and the baby, so when FaceTiming them they could just be in another country. The communication is so clean and easy, and even their house is believably Earthly.

After taking a sip of coffee, I bite the skin around my thumb nail and stop myself. That's absolutely not a habit I want to get back into when I'm worried or stressed or anticipating something. Besides, most of my new hobbies involve using my hands, so I can't risk digit injuries.

My knees bounce. I check my phone. Has it really only been two minutes?

I'd better get inside. My living room is littered with crafts I need to hide before guests come.

As I push myself to my feet, I collide with something as hard and large as a brick wall. Hot coffee splashes my chest and shirt, drops running from my collarbone into my cleavage.

Worse, there's a huge coffee stain on the brick wall, which appears to be wearing a snowy white shirt.

“Shit! Shit, I'm sorry!” I yelp.

Now would be a great time for Emily to announce she's back from Hogar early and come magically clean this mess. I push my shoulders forward, grimacing as coffee seeps further into my clothes.

When I look at the stranger, guilt and nerves penetrate me.

“That's alright,” he chuckles, smiling. “I think having somebody pour something on you by mistake is a rite of passage. It's never happened to me before, but my friend said if I walked outside enough here, it would happen eventually.”

His teeth are so white. Especially against the darkness of his facial hair, which is slightly scruffy. The hair on his head is messy, but it somehow looks perfect. Like he's one of those

guys who spends hours trying to get the “I woke up like this” look.

And he’s so handsome I’m not sure if I’m looking at a normal person or at one of those influencers online. You know, one of the really hot ones who’ve been on one of those reality TV shows for hot people who walk around being hot and then build brands off being hot and mildly famous and also, hot.

“That doesn’t stop me from being sorry,” I say, and my voice comes out as barely more than a breath. “I ... I’ll pay for your laundry.”

I grit my teeth. My heart hammers in a way that makes me feel sick.

We haven’t moved. I’m still inches from an enormous stranger. His bulk is Ron-like, but he’s probably not an alien. *Probably*. He’s like one of those guys you see at the gym lifting, like, hundreds of pounds without breaking a sweat.

All with a charming smile that makes me feel even worse.

And I’m a total mess. Looking on the bright side, at least I’m dressed nicely. But of course, my white polka-dot blouse has developed a large brown stain that’s probably gotten onto my bra, too. At least there’s no chance anyone will see *that*.

“It’s not my shirt. So it’s not my problem.” The dark-haired handsome-hot-super-muscular-super-intimidating stranger smiles at me. “I borrowed it from a friend because I don’t have a lot of local clothes. And that friend’s mate—I mean, wife—can take this out with a little magic. She can clean up any problem. Including yours, though I’m sure you won’t want to wait an hour or two before you change out of that.”

My skin prickles.

He said *mate*.

“You’re with them.” My mouth is dry. You’re ...” This feels completely stupid. My heart is hammering so fast it might make my body start hopping. “You’re an alien,” I hiss, and the man laughs.

“I’m a friend of Ron’s and Emily’s. I’ve wanted to visit Earth for years, and in the last, oh, year and a half, more than ever.”

Names spin through my head. This can’t be Kalo because I’ve seen her on camera, and she looks like an Earth woman but taller. It’s not Kim; she’s a woman, too. It could be Muhl? He stayed with Ron and Emily once, but I’ve never seen him. I just know he’s as well-built as Ron and has dark hair.

He can’t be Jameth, because Jameth is too busy for breaks, for which I’m extremely thankful; Jameth is the one Ron and Emily insist is my “fated mate” like they are for each other. And they’re no more fated mates with each other than I am with my toaster.

I literally watched those two fall in love like normal people when we were just teenagers and Ron didn’t know he was an alien because his memory had been wiped. That’s not fate.

Every time I scoffed at them calling some alien dude my fated mate, they just laughed and exchanged a glance. From how they described how you’re meant to feel about your fated mate, I would know if this was mine. Or is it only the dude who can feel it first? Shoot. I don’t remember.

And I don’t care because that’s all BS.

“Well ...” We’re still standing so close. Maybe it’s a social thing with them. I step to the side, and he moves with me, mirroring my direction. When I step back, he doesn’t get closer again.

“I’m sorry for intruding,” says the alien before I can speak. “I wasn’t stalking you or anything. But Ron and Emily told me about coffee, and I’ve been dying to try it for a year, and they told me about this coffee place they visit on Earth, and since I got here early, I thought I’d go. They gave me directions and everything. And then I saw you.”

Is the color draining from my face right now? It feels like it. It’s taking a lot of effort to keep my eyes on his face.

My head is on a total break from men after what my ex did. But my body wants to jump into bed with this guy.

“How did you know who I was?” I ask.

I clear my throat, then cringe. I haven’t even asked him his name, so he might think I’m rude. Unless his species don’t do that.

*Please don’t be Jameth. You’re Muhl. **You’re Muhl.***

“You’re very striking,” the alien drawls. “Easy to identify from afar. In a good way.”

My cheeks heat and I look away from him, trying not to smile.

“Not as striking as you are,” I murmur. “But I guess humans might be striking to your people. How would I know, right?”

I laugh, looking into eyes so strikingly green that they’re mesmerizing.

“Oh!” His eyes widen, and his mouth drops open a little. His lips are plump in a way that makes me want to touch them. “Forgive me. I completely forgot to introduce myself with all the coffee stuff going on. I think I got more well-acquainted with coffee than I planned to, but I should be getting acquainted with *you*.”

He glances at the stain on his shirt. I want to hang my head in shame. Somehow this feels worse than spilling coffee on a human stranger.

Gah. How weird is it that I have to differentiate?

“That’s okay.” I force myself to look at him again. Does he know that I look like an idiot right now, or do his species have a totally different concept of that? “I’m Wren, but you probably knew that.”

“Yes. Yes, I did know. I’m ...” He hesitates, then smiles. He has such a nice smile. One that makes me feel reassured that I’m not being a total idiot. “I was going to introduce myself by my warrior and prince name, but I don’t think Ron

and Emily gave it to you, and it wouldn't be fair to mislead you. I'm Jameth. Prince Elder of Hogar."

The world is no longer moving at a normal speed. I might throw up.

It's him. It's the guy. And I cover my mouth like a fool because I don't know what they told him. Did they tell him they've been messing with me and saying he's my mate?

Is he actually my mate?

No, of course he's not. That's completely stupid.

"Nice to meet you." I'd shake his hand but I don't know if his species do that. "Listen—let me apologize for ruining the shirt. Let me buy you a coffee. I'm going to need a new one, anyway."

Jameth's eyes flush with something I can't identify.

"You don't have to do that, Wren," he says, then shakes his head. "But I know it's customary on Earth to be polite and accept an offer like that when it's extended. It's the same on Hogar. So I'll allow your apology to be buying me a coffee since I don't need you to launder my shirt."

I try to smile at him. Try to make it normal. I think I'm failing, and he does seem to know a little about here, so he might know how abysmal this meeting is.

"Right. This way, then." I gesture across the street, and as I walk, he's not far behind.

By the end of this encounter, my clothing might be stuck to my skin with nervous sweat, even though I've got no reason to be nervous. He's *not* my mate. Probably.

And even if this guy saw my picture, is into me, and decided he wants to be my mate, it's not like I have to get with him, is it? My break from men has been serving me well, and I'm perfectly happy for it to continue.

As long as my body cooperates.

Chapter Two

Jameth

The smells are unnatural. Grass mingles with something foul coming from the ugly vehicles, and the people have a distinctly human aroma. A heavy, hot scent stems from the coffee stain, too.

And then there's something sweet. Sweet like fruit. It hits when the wind blows Wren's long red-orange hair in my direction.

My head swims when I enter the establishment selling coffee. I follow Wren to the counter.

"What'll you have?" she asks.

There are so many options. Something called *Mocha* has syllables that remind me of the lost Hogari language. She orders it upon my request.

Ron gave me a card to buy things with, but Wren paying is her apology.

She doesn't need to be sorry. She doesn't need to be anything but perfectly content all the time. Content in my company, my arms, and my bed.

All in time. I must be patient, even though looking at her side profile makes me want to run my tongue along her sharp jaw and take her somewhere private to officially form our mate bond right now.

When she hands me the coffee, I wince after the first sip.

"Too hot?" says Wren.

"Bitter."

Wren laughs. There is nervousness to it, and I can smell fear on her skin.

"Let me fix that. Give it back for a sec?"

I hand it over. She gets back in line and pays a woman to squirt something in my drink. She returns to where I wait and

says, “Try that. I added vanilla syrup.”

The next time I drink, my senses are flooded with something entirely new. The bitterness is detectable, but not overpowering. The sweetness makes up for it.

“Ron was correct,” I tell her. “That syrup is better than coffee. Our taste buds really don’t do well with bitter.”

She gestures for us to leave. I can’t read her face, but I want to. I want to know what every expression means.

She looks at the ground as we cross the street filled with vehicles. *Cars*, they’re called here.

“That’s weird.” She folds her arms. “I mean— No. Sorry. I’ll stop talking.”

She directs us back to the bench where we met, which is in a little grassy area between two sets of buildings. Buildings here are so uniform and plain. Earlier I yearned to stare and explore their structure, but now I only have eyes for my mate.

My mate I can’t claim. Because she’s human. And they don’t know anything about fated mates.

“Never stop talking,” is the most I can say to display my affection. “Please. I don’t want you to be nervous. Ron has told me a lot about Earth and about the people he knew here.”

The scent of her fear decreases. Over the hum of traffic, her heavily beating heart serves as a background to our conversation.

“You’ll think I’m crazy,” she says.

“You are from a world of people who know little about other worlds, and here I am, an alien to you. I will think you’re normal. Perhaps I’ll think you’re smart. Please, share your thoughts.”

“Well ...” Her tone is delicate. “You mentioned not doing well with bitter, and I get that, because a lot of people here don’t like bitter, either. But then I got all these thoughts about whether it’s a normal thing or whether it’s a species thing, like, caused by where you’re from. Because you’re an alien. An

alien. An actual space alien. Well, not space. You're from a planet like everyone else, but you're not from *this planet*."

I tilt my head as her fear grows stronger than ever. Her planet has stories about aliens. Myths and preconceived notions about little green men. I'm not sure if they're offensive or amusing.

"Are you afraid I'm going to abduct you?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

That makes her more fearful still. It breaks my heart to know she's not comfortable.

"To be clear, I am joking," I add. "I know you don't think I'm going to abduct you. Or at least I hope so. I'm not sure how much Ron told you. If he told you about that stray katah I abducted as a child, then you might be wary. But katahs are *pets*. And I took good care of Leaf."

Her laughter is full of relief. "God, alien *pets*." Her curtain of orange-red hair obscures her face as she shakes her head. "I'm sitting here next to an alien. An actual alien!"

There's something adorable about the wonder in her eyes. Her voice is still infused with fear, but it doesn't seem to be actual terror. It's more like fear of the unknown mingled with curiosity.

I shouldn't have come alone, but I could not wait an hour longer. And I'm pleased I didn't.

"If it makes you feel better, that's how it is with me, too." I take a moment to look around again. Almost nothing is familiar here. "For example, the smells here are different. The architecture. And your hair. We don't have red hair on Hogar."

That is what stands out most of all. My hand raises as if to touch it, but I pull my fingers into a fist. "Sorry," I tell her as I lower my hand. "It's hard to control myself. It's just so beautiful."

I gaze at the softness of her features. Apart from her hair, she could be any woman on Hogar. Her eyes are blue, vivid as the skies on Klem. Her face is shaped like a heart. Pale skin goes well with the vividness of her hair, and she almost looks

delicate, like she isn't made with the same muscle and bone as the rest of my people and hers.

Despite how much she looks like my people, I'm staring into the face of an alien woman. Sitting on a bench that was not made on the planet I grew up on. Underneath a different sky, which at night, will show me different stars.

"*You* are so beautiful," I whisper, and I mean her very existence here as well as her looks.

I yearn to take in the rest of her shape, but I force myself to concentrate only on her face.

Her cheeks redden. "I try."

I chuckle nervously, worrying I'll scare her off. My eyes are devoted to taking in her form.

"I was always called pretty," she continues, looking down at her hands. It looks like she's been picking or nipping the skin of her thumb. "Guys seem to like me because of my hair. There's this weird stereotype that women with red hair are promiscuous. And guys, well, they seem to believe it and think flattery will get me to, well, you know."

My muscles tense. Promiscuous based on the color of her hair? How pathetic. But then again, Ron tells me there's a lot of hatred on this planet based on appearance, sex, and who people are born to love. It sickens me.

As does the thought of men trying to take advantage of my mate based on a stereotype.

"That's disgusting." My words come through gritted teeth. "If there are any men who disrespect you based on the color of your hair in the future, feel free to let me know. I promise you won't recognize their faces after I'm done with them."

She quickly turns to look at me, hair moving fast in the wind. The sweet fruity scent of it hits me like a fist.

"That's alright. I mean, I've gotten pretty good at brushing people off."

My lips curl into a smile. Of course she's feisty. My mate would have to be. Even though she's nervous around me, I like that she's strong otherwise. She appears tense now.

"Good." My muscles relax. "I'm sorry if I've alarmed you. I just ... I feel the need to be ..."

Any word I use could scare her off. Earth customs are so different to ours. And I don't know what she knows.

"Protective," is the only word I end up saying, because it's the truth, and it still feels wrong. "It's just ... I've been told things about you. And, well, I like what I know."

The worry disappears from her eyes. When she appears happy again, the rest of the world blurs. Something about her joy feels familiar even though she's entirely new to me.

She doesn't know how long I've been waiting for this day. Fighting to fix my planet to make it safe enough for me to leave.

"I've heard nothing about you," Wren admits, "except that you're some kind of leader. And," she says, adding an eyeroll, "Ron and Emily have tried to tell me you're some kind of mate of mine. If you can believe the ridiculousness."

My chest suddenly feels lighter.

"Ron and Emily are correct. I'm not sure how it works or why it happens, but some mates are designated by fate, especially for warriors and Chosen Ones. And it just so happens that you're mine. It's why I came here."

Her attempt at a smile vanishes.

"You came here for me?"

"Yes. To ask for an opportunity to get to know you, and to ask you to visit Hogar. Ron and Emily were going to ask you to visit with them in six months, but I don't have that long to stay."

I regret each word because I'm going to scare her off. How could I not?

“I don’t believe in the mate thing, Jameth. No offense. I saw Ron and Emily fall for each other. You can’t tell me that’s fate.”

How lucky they were.

“Theirs is a complex story,” I reply, “and they did fall for each other naturally, but they were fated, too. That was just hidden from them by the ancient. If you would allow me, I can prove to you that mate bonds are real. I just need your hand.”

With a sigh, she presents her hand. I take it. The touch of her skin on mine is electric, and I surge with warmth. I need to hold it close to me forever. To kiss her skin, drag my lips up her arm to her neck, to her face, take her and—

But I can’t. All I can do is press her palm to my face and breathe out deeply, reaching out to make her feel what I’m feeling. We haven’t mated yet, so we can’t connect deeply, but there is enough in the bond to make her feel *something*.

I’m not sure what she’s going to feel, but I know it’ll be strong enough to show her I’m not lying.

The skin of my face tingles. She snatches her hand back, clutching it to her chest. Her eyes are wide.

“Shit,” she breathes. “You weren’t kidding. The mate thing ... is real.”

My chest is heaving from our touch. My cheeks still tingle, like a current struck both of us while her hand was there. The coffee in my hand becomes uncomfortably hot, and the bench too hard, and the world too noisy.

After a moment, everything focuses around her.

“I’m not asking you for anything specific other than to give me a chance,” I say. “And I’m not asking you right now to say you’ll come home with me, but I do ask that you make an effort to get to know me. Please.”

Wren stands up sharply. The coffee in her hand shakes a little, so I rise with her, trying not to stand too close this time.

No matter how badly I want her close to me.

“Come back to my apartment.” Her words come out in a tumble. “And we can talk. I can’t do this in public. I can’t.”

With a nod, I accept her request, then ask her to lead the way.

She has not flat out rejected me, and that’s a positive. So I’ll walk however long I need to on this alien planet to hear what my mate has to say somewhere she feels safe.

Chapter Three

Wren

Time isn't real.

Life isn't real.

Nothing is real.

I felt it. He put my hand on his face, and I felt his undying, unbroken, unconditional love for me. A power stronger than himself. A connection he didn't ask for but that he's grateful for. And I felt a spark of it in me, too, for him.

A spark in me that vanished when I stopped touching him, but there's no denying it was real.

As real as the animalistic yearning in him to take me right here, right now, for the world to see.

My heart doesn't calm as I enter my apartment building across the street. I'm slightly ahead, but I feel his eyes on me. Or maybe I'm imagining it.

Our elevator journey passes in silence, and every time I look at him, it's painfully obvious he's just stopped looking at me. Like he doesn't want to be caught. I stare at the swell of his chest, his breathing careful. His throat bobs hard with every swallow, and he's almost as tense as I am.

And he's *gorgeous*. Gorgeous in a way that's rare, and in a way that makes me want to press myself against him and never step away.

Once we get to my door, I finally speak.

"I'm just going to change. You can sit down and make yourself comfortable. Any friend of Ron and Emily's is a friend of mine. And a mate, apparently."

A chuckle stops me in my tracks when I turn to go.

"I'm not sure any friend of theirs is a mate of yours. That's just me."

My cheeks flush again as I attempt an awkward laugh and dart into my room. My mirror shows me I look like an absolute idiot. My mind is so messed up that I try to unbutton my shirt with the hand still holding my nearly-full coffee cup, almost spilling it down myself again.

By the time I'm changed—now wearing black, just in case—my head is clearer, and I enter my living room to find a literal alien walking around it and gazing at my things. He's still holding his coffee in two large hands.

Hands he wants to put on my body. Hands I would *let* him put on my body.

He's looking at the pictures on my bookshelf.

"You have a very nice home," he says, and I freeze because he hasn't turned around. "Sorry. I take it from the pause in your breathing that my attentive hearing has startled you. I like your hair like this."

He turns to me, pointing at the picture he was looking at. One where my hair is pulled back with curled pieces framing my face. A picture Emily, Luna and I took the night Emily escaped her ex-boyfriend.

Her ex-boyfriend who was apparently an alien and manipulating her into getting with her current alien boyfriend. Or something like that.

It freaks me out to think about her ex. Like, he got *deep* deep into character. A dangerous job with a lot of drama. Being an asshole by using Earth religion as an excuse to stop touching Emily. And controlling tenancies that eventually drove her away right before she was *abducted by freaking aliens*.

But not all aliens are like him. Jameth isn't even from that guy's planet. He's from Ron's, and Ron is nothing but good.

And that guy wasn't hot like Jameth either. Or intoxicating.

"Thank you." I avoid his gaze. "Sorry about the mess. I've been getting into crafts lately because I've had all this free

time. I recently started my own freelance writing agency, so I've got considerably less to do."

Jameth's eyebrows raise. "You write stories?"

"No. I write stupid B2B content for businesses. Well, I wrote it, hated it, started an agency where I find clients and assign them to writers, and now all I do is business management for an hour or two a day. And the rest of the time, I craft."

When I sit on my couch I feel like I'm not supposed to. He joins me, leaning back into it with a smile.

"We don't have seats like these where I'm from," he says. "All of our leisure seating is against the wall to hold the cushions up. They save space that way."

I survey him. I can't fathom what kind of place he lives in. My mind goes to ships and metal and full-on sci-fi scenes, but that's stupid. Ron and Emily live in a normal-looking house. Kind of.

"What's it like where you live?"

Jameth's face creases. "Somewhere not very pleasant right now, unfortunately. I live in what we call an allotment, but I think you would call it an apartment. It's in my workplace. I'll be moving soon because work has finally died down a little, enough for me to move out of the House of Elders. I'd love to show it to you, though. It has light decor like your place. I think you'd like it."

He's so eager. Every so often, his gaze flickers down, then back up, like he's forcing himself to stay looking at my face. Much like I am with him.

I turn my body away from him, because if I keep facing him, I'll inch closer and closer until I do something I regret.

"Listen, about this mate thing. I understand you may not be willing to jump into the arms of the first alien that looks your way." He puts his hand on my knee as he speaks, and I freeze. "I don't want to pressure you. But I'm sorry to tell you that nothing is going to make the mate bond go away."

My throat is tight. I don't know whether it'd be best to have known about this in advance or be kept in the dark.

Though technically I did know. I just didn't believe. Not until the hottest guy on the planet ended up on my couch, staring into my eyes, telling me once more that he's my mate.

I want to put my hand on his, but I can't give him false hope that I feel what I know he feels.

"All I can promise is that I'll try to get to know you." I search my brain for anything I know about him and land on his introduction. "You said you're a prince?"

He smiles like me remembering this little thing about him has made his entire year.

"Yes, Prince Elder. The rest of our elders left or were asked to leave their positions because they couldn't handle the uproar of our people. It was left to the warriors destined for the war that didn't happen to take their place. I am the head of the Elders Council, making me the Prince Elder."

"You don't look old."

Leaning forward, he places his coffee cup on the table, right on the coaster. His hand finally leaves my knee so he can fold his hands in his lap.

Why oh why is he wearing jeans that fit so snugly? They wrap around his obviously muscular thighs in a way that makes me want to whimper.

"Elder is about status, not age. It used to be about age, but that has changed over the last century. Having a bunch of old people running society doesn't work because things change, and sometimes, older people don't keep up with changing society."

"Ron and Emily never said you were the Prince Elder."

"I asked them not to talk about me too much. I wanted you to get to know me yourself. And as Ron has always been wonderful to me, he and his lovely mate obliged."

I search my brain for anything they told me about him. Only one thing comes to mind.

“Ron said you’re one of his oldest friends.”

“Yes.” Jameth smiles. “When we were children, he saved me from a creature he likened to a giant snake. I didn’t see it among the trees, but Ron did. When it went to attack me, Ron grabbed a stick and stabbed it through the roof of its mouth and knocked it out. Without him, I wouldn’t be here to meet you. So I owe him everything.”

His eyes shine with emotion, and I want to put my hand on his knee in comfort. This time I don’t resist that urge, touching him lightly, and it makes me tense up because now I don’t want to lift my hand off again.

“Well, I’m glad you survived that,” I say.

He nods. Gosh, his eyes. They’re so *bright*. And now we’re inside and away from the ambient smells of nature, I’m almost overwhelmed by the strong, warm scent coming from him. It’s sharp and hot, and I want to get closer.

I take my hand off his leg.

“What is this?”

His eyes are on my wrist, which now is visible. He staring right at the little moon and star on it. I present it to him. Gently, he takes my wrist in one hand. The first two fingers of his other hand run over my tattoo.

“A drawing? On your skin? Is it a birthmark?”

I press my lips together. His fascination is somehow adorable, and it’s probably a good sign that I’m finding my alleged mate adorable.

Not alleged. He *is* my mate.

“No. On Earth, there are these machines that can inject ink into your skin deep enough for it to stay there forever. The moon represents my friend Luna, and the star represents Emily, and I guess, Ron. It was a star Emily always wished on, but it turned out to be a ship watching her for her entire life.”

“People get drawings on their skin here?”

I nod. “Of things they love and that are meaningful to them. And also to stand out a little, I guess. To have something on them that makes them unique. Something that nobody else has, or very few other people have. There are some common tattoo designs, but I prefer the unique ones. Although mine is probably more common than unique.”

He strokes it again, and a shiver runs through me. His touch is so gentle for a man with such large hands. I wonder what else he can do with them.

“I like your skin art, Wren,” Jameth murmurs, then places my hand down. “I like that it’s unique. You’re more unique than any person I’ve ever seen. Well, apart from perhaps the other warriors, who all have something unique about them.”

I raise my hand to my chest, pressing my wrist against it. For some reason, it feels comforting to place it near my heart.

“You have something unique about you?” I ask.

Jameth shifts in his seat. His large, muscular body moves so gracefully. He stretches an arm over the back of the couch and smiles.

“A little. I have one modification that was supposed to prepare me for battle and serve as a built-in weapon. At least that’s what they told me. To make the lies seem more genuine. Although, I guess they believed the lies, too.” His lips curl down.

I can’t imagine what he went through, being raised his whole life as a warrior only to be told the war was never going to happen.

I curl my legs under me, turning to face him a little. His arm overlaps my position. He looks like he’s studying me.

I study him, too, though I’m not sure what I’m learning. I can’t see anything all that unique about him, but it could be hidden like Ron’s ability to turn into a tiger.

“What unique thing did they give you?” I ask, and much to my surprise, a wicked smirk overtakes his expression.

“I think I’ve frightened you enough with this whole mate revelation thing, Wren. We should wait until we know each other a little better before I show you what makes me unique.”

From that smirk, my ridiculous mind goes to obscene things like him having 10 nipples or two dicks or a huge phallic tail or something.

Shaking those thoughts away, I take a deep breath and resign myself to the fact that I am going to have to get to know him a little better, because like it or not, we are connected.

And luckily, I don’t dislike that fact.

Chapter Four

Wren

Talking to Jameth feels like talking to an old friend. He'd probably say that's the mate bond. Ron and Emily blame everything on the mate bond.

They may have a point. The more I sit here and giggle with him like an idiot, the more I want to touch him, feel his lips brushing mine, my throat, and between my—

A knock on the door pulls me from my wicked thoughts, and relief and disappointment mix together and fill me like I'm a cocktail shaker.

It's Luna, and she immediately wants to read tarot for Jameth. When she read it for Ron it was apparently fascinating.

The pressure is taken off me a little as she pulls him into conversation. Then, an hour later, Ron, Emily, and Clementine show up, and all focus is on how big the baby has gotten.

Even though I'm with my friends, I'm painfully aware of Jameth at every moment. How he looks at me every time he's not speaking to someone. How he smiles at me almost every time he looks.

When we pile into Emily's new car, which seats eight, he insists on sitting next to me, and I don't object. His leg brushes mine and makes my skin flush even though the air-conditioning is on.

The nanny, Kalo, is setting up the nursery at Ron and Emily's. She's going to watch the baby while we go out for an Earth activity Ron has missed and Jameth's excited to try. Kalo would prefer to start exploring Earth television while the baby sleeps.

I've been looking forward to this all week: bowling. The only sport I've ever been good at.

Jameth's mouth practically hangs open as he stares around the alley. Bright colors and falling pins flood my

senses, so I can't imagine what it's like for him.

"Earth is a very noisy planet, isn't it?" he asks me, and I smile at him.

"Largely, yes. But there are quiet and tranquil places I think you'd like."

"You think I'd like them?" His eyes light up.

"Well, I think most people would like them." My cheeks heat. "I'm not trying to presume I know you or anything."

He's still smiling as we get our bowling shoes even though there's only one pair in his size, and he has to share them with Ron. He seems as fascinated by them as he is by me.

Everything is new to him here. I wonder if I'd be so interested in my surroundings if I were to visit another planet.

Only two other groups bowl alongside us. One is a father and daughter. The other is a group of four, and the men are almost as large as Jameth and Ron and louder than the falling pins.

Ron goes first, knocks down half his pins, and Emily throws her arms around his neck to celebrate with him. They share a kiss. Next to me, Jameth stiffens. I know he wants that with me.

Emily doesn't bowl that well, but Ron still has a series of cheek kisses for her anyway. Then it's my turn—I get a split. When Jameth asks if it's possible to knock over both pins, it gets me so flustered that I throw a gutter ball.

"Right. So I just do what you guys did?" asks Jameth, rising as I finish my turn.

Our shoulders brush as we pass, and I immediately tense up. Brushing against him makes me want to giggle like a school girl, like walking past your crush in the corridor.

It's all physical, and I'm worried it's going to cloud my judgment going forward.

“Yeah. Just grab a ball,” I say. “You could probably handle one of the heavy ones, then shove your fingers in the holes.”

Jameth chooses a large green ball that reminds me of his eyes. I stifle a giggle as he attempts to shove three actual fingers in the holes. Shaking my head, I approach and place my hand on top of his. Touching his skin makes my heart feel like it’s swelling with the need for more.

This close to him, his warm masculine scent is overwhelming.

“No. No, like this,” I mutter. “I should’ve said put two fingers and a thumb in the holes.”

Jameth rearranges the way he’s holding the ball, then looks at me for approval. I nod, then turn, afraid I’ll blush again. I’ve never been much of a blusher, but my body is betraying me today.

“And I pull my arm back, swing it forward, and let go, right?” he asks.

I glance at Ron and Emily. They’re exchanging knowing looks.

“Let me show you exactly how I do it,” I relent. “That way, you’ll at least beat them, even if you probably won’t beat me.”

Jameth scoffs. “I’m a warrior and a fantastic sportsman back on Hogar. There’s nobody I can’t beat at anything. But since you’re beautiful and my mate, I’ll pretend to be worse than I am and let you win.”

I roll my eyes. As I move up behind him, I can’t see the lane. I press right up against him and lean to the side so I can see around him. I’m level with his shoulder blades. As I direct his arm back and propel it forward, the ball flies, hits the lane, goes down the middle, and he gets a strike.

“Beginner’s luck,” I insist.

When I step away from Jameth, I feel too hot even though it was cool when we walked in.

“If you say so,” says Jameth with a deep chuckle.

Very quickly, he shows me it wasn't just beginner's luck. I swear, his body gets into the exact position every time that it was in the first time he threw the ball. He throws strike after strike, one split, then one gutter ball when the people in the next lane get particularly loud and distract him.

I take his immediate success as an insult to my bowling abilities. This isn't a group bowling session anymore; it's a competition between me and Jameth, and every time one of us does well, we grin and glare at the other in triumph.

It's like we've been friends for years. We even start making faces at each other, then purposefully banging against each other as we cross paths when my turn ends and his begins.

My pushing against him is less about false intimidation and more about scratching an itch to be near him. An itch I need to ignore so I don't lead him on, but I can't help giving in every time.

Our game is so enjoyable that we can even ignore the increasingly rowdy group in the next lane, who all appear abysmal at bowling. One straight up throws the ball from their chest down onto the lane and it bounces into our gutter. One keeps dropping the ball, and another throws it sideways so it bounces into our lane.

Jameth keeps frowning at them. I tell him, “This isn't normal. They might be drunk.”

He rolls his eyes. “Of course.”

Ron and Emily are far behind us, and they start cheering for us as we play. After a few cheers, the group in the next lane start mocking them.

I've just about had it with that group, and I'm ready to tell them to knock it off as soon as the next guy throws his ball. He swings sideways, the ball leaves his hand, then flies straight into Jameth's knee.

Despite his deep and manly voice, Ron screams almost as high as Emily. Emily lunges at the group with her hand

outstretched as if she's about to use her powers but thinks better of it, and I'm screaming incomprehensible nonsense along the lines of, "You stupid, drunken idiots!"

Jameth is holding his leg up. I rush to his side and throw my arm around his back, heart pounding. His leg has to be broken. Shattered. Yet he's just got gritted teeth and isn't screaming.

"Are you okay?" my voice shakes as I put one hand on his arm, squeezing it comfortingly.

"I'm tougher than a human, but fuck, it hurts." He grunts his words through a clenched jaw. "It hasn't broken the bone or anything, but that's going to leave a horrible bruise and I'll be limping for a while."

Staff have come over to kick the group of troublemakers out. One staff member catches my eye and says, "Do you need me to call an ambulance? Or are you driving?"

I look at Jameth, feeling protective. Earth physicians *can't* get their hands on him.

"He has a prosthetic leg," I say, "but it hit right where the leg attaches to the end of his stump. Can we get some ice?"

The staff member nods. Despite his pain, Jameth laughs while half-hopping to the concession stand with my arm still around his back.

"Smart and beautiful," he says.

When I get the ice, I keep my arm around him even though there's no possible way I'm supporting his weight right now. It just feels like the right thing to do. If he falls, he'll crush me.

"We'll go outside. Come on." I steer him toward the exit.

Luckily, the door is right on the side of a building, and there's an alleyway we can hide in close by.

When he pulls up his jeans, I can't help but admire how muscular his calf is. The ball hit just below the knee, and there's already a huge bruise blooming. I crouch and press the

ice to it. A hiss escapes from between his teeth. I can tell he's holding back how much pain he's in.

I'm overly warm from being so close to him. My face is level with an area I don't want to think about, so I bend my head further to avoid it.

"How does it feel?" I ask.

"Like I got hit in the leg by a ball as hard as a boulder."

Although he chuckles, I feel nothing but guilt. He came here for me and got hurt. And if I hadn't gotten competitive, leading to Ron and Emily cheering, those assholes would never have targeted us and hurt him.

Tears well in my stupid eyes. I let my mate get hurt. The man who loves me unconditionally. Not only can I not love him back, but now I'm the reason he's been harmed.

"So much for a fun first visit to Earth," I mumble, trying to blink the tears back.

"No, it was fun. Sometimes fun just ends in pain."

I lift the ice and hiss. His bruise looks worse, and his leg is really swollen. My neck is starting to hurt, so I'm forced to look up at him. He's gazing down at me like he's in love. He *is* in love.

When I break eye contact, my eyes land on the crotch of his snug grey jeans. I have to press my lips together and look away, because despite the situation, my body responds to the proximity of my face to his, um, *very prominent* bulge.

He inhales deeply. I bow my head again even though it hurts.

Footsteps scuffle nearby, so I move to hide his leg. They approach, probably heading up the alley to the streets at the end of it. Before I know what's happening, I'm shoved onto my back, Jameth yells, and when I stand up, somebody's on top of him.

It's one of the people from the group of four. I shriek, ready to pull him off Jameth, but Jameth is more than capable and rolls so he's the one on top. A man and woman run past

me and jump onto Jameth's back. Someone grabs me from behind, but I kick them in the shin and escape their grasp.

It's not difficult to get the woman who grabbed me into a headlock, punch her in the throat, knock her to the ground and smack her head against the concrete just hard enough so she passes out but won't die.

If she's concussed, that's not my problem.

Now for the two on top of Jameth.

The man is punching Jameth in the face from behind. The woman is on Jameth's legs. Jameth is easily able to knock the man to the ground and pin him there while I give the woman the same treatment as I gave the first. The one that initially attacked Jameth out here is unconscious.

Jameth points a bulky watch-like thing at the guy he's pinning. There's a quick whirring sound, and then the person seems to be frozen in place. He drags the other bodies to that person, flashes them all with the watch thing, then rises. The conscious man can't seem to move.

"What the fuck?" I breathe.

Jameth is no longer paying me the attention he's been giving me all day. Instead, he's checking the group's pockets. He mutters something I can't hear as he tosses cards onto the ground, then finds some kind of weird device that he breaks in two and drops on top of the foursome.

"They're not from Earth. I can smell it now we're away from all the crap wafting in there. They're from my planet, and their ID cards confirm it."

He's shaking. I can't tell if he's afraid or in pain. He hobbles back to the wall and leans against it, picking up the ice to put back against his bruise.

"What, like there's an invasion or something?" I ask, starting to feel nauseous enough to be dizzy.

"No. Not an invasion on Earth—an invasion on *me*. Things aren't good back on Hogar, Wren. There are some people who don't believe the truth and hate me for it. And

others who wish to overtake me and reform the planet in their vision.” His free hand presses over his eyes. “I should’ve known. Should’ve known that coming here would put you in danger. I can’t protect you here. I’m out in the open and exposed. But on Hogar, not a soul could get to you.”

I feel like he’s going to ask me to go back with him. Guilt courses through me at the fact that I don’t want to say yes, but I don’t want him to go back without me, either. I don’t want to lose contact with him. I want to ...

I don’t know what I want.

“You were good,” he says, and I look up at him. “Very good.”

“I took karate as a kid and watch self defense videos online. Karate is a martial art. A fighting art.”

Jameth nods. “You train like a warrior even though you’re not one.” He flashes me a grin.

“It made me feel powerful and fit. I never thought it would be useful, but apparently, it is. To protect my *mate*.”

I’m half joking when I say it, and I feel like a fool. But he stops grinning at me, his eyes shining with joy.

I could feel it, and I know it more now. This mate thing really means a lot to him.

“I wish you would come to Hogar, Wren. Even if just for a visit. Even if just for a *week*. I’d really love for you to see it. And I know your friends would, too.”

I wrap my arms around myself. Going to another planet for a week is something that sounds impossible. Something that I should say no to. And yet, if it’s only for a week, how is it different from a vacation?

“Give me the rest of your visit to think about it, okay?” I ask, face creasing as guilt hits me again.

I expect disappointment, but instead, Jameth just smiles.

“For you, I would allow the rest of my life to think about it.”

Chapter Five

Wren

His limp worsens as he hobbles to the car. He takes the back row alone, stretching his leg across it. I sit in the middle row. Looking back at him, he seems to be in more pain than he let me see earlier.

I call Emily and tell her what happened, and only minutes later, she and Ron are out with us. Ron's driving, and Emily gets in the middle row alongside me, stretching back to look at Jameth. Jameth hasn't said anything since the attack, and my mind bursts with questions mixed with worry about him.

"Let me see," says Emily.

Jameth pulls up the leg of his jeans again, wincing. Even though he's had ice on it, his leg swells more than ever. Emily hovers a hand over his leg, and before my eyes, it heals. A pang of jealousy scorches through me. I should be able to do that for him. *I'm* his mate.

Why am I suddenly so obsessed with this mate thing?

"The situation on Hogar is worse than we thought, isn't it?" says Ron, and Jameth nods.

"What is the situation?" I ask, because I feel like I have a right to know if I'm supposed to be this guy's mate. It's not exactly safe for me to be his mate if there are people out there trying to harm him.

Jameth's face is grave as he shifts to sit normally. I'm hit with an urge to climb through the car like a little kid so I can sit next to him. I refrain.

"Most of Hogar's citizens were pleased that the war isn't real and that they won't have to train their children to be warriors and pass on the warrior legacy," says Jameth calmly. "Although we are a warrior race, we also have normal lives. Most people fight battles for controlled fun, ending with no actual fatalities. They want it to be a hobby, not a life for their descendants."

I await the “but.” After a few blinks at him, he continues. He can’t meet my eye.

“But our planet is a big one, connected, and united. Not like yours. While billions of your 8-billion strong planet are disconnected from each other, some living with no contact to the outside world, it’s not like that for us at all. I have heard that specific nations on your planet war. And it’s usually contained. But with how connected our planet is, when one area wars, another easily gets involved. And it spreads rapidly.”

“Like the world wars,” says Ron for my benefit.

Ice water trickles through my veins instead of blood. Having another world war has always been one of my biggest fears.

“It’s not as bad as it was,” says Jameth. “Very quickly, the Elders Council put that to rest before they left or were pushed out. Compromises were made, so it’s not a full on war.

“But rebel groups across cities, thousands strong, millions in some cases, still aim to fight,” says Jameth. “Fight each other, and fight me and city leaders. Most of those groups, luckily, have opted to leave the planet to start independent group-on-group wars with groups on other planets. But many remain and wish to take me down, take over, and turn us into the true warrior race we were meant to be.”

I feel like I’m moving at double the speed the car is, thoughts liquid in my brain.

“So the government is being attacked?” I ask.

“Yes. Physically. Luckily, we have the majority on our side, and the leaders in cities where rebellions have sprouted are helping keep the groups at bay. Rebels are being arrested and held every day. There are only a few very strong groups left, and we just met four members of one of the strongest. And I’m not sure what exactly we’re meant to do to track down the rest of the rebels and have them subdued. Especially since new sub-groups crop up every day.”

My liquid thoughts turn into cogs instead, and the cogs begin turning.

“Well, what are you doing so far?” I ask.

“Waiting for a rebellion to break out, sending people in, and stopping it in its tracks. It’s all we can do.”

“Are there no ways to detect areas where a rebellion might break out? Stopping it before it happens and before people can get hurt?”

Jameth shrugs. “I don’t know of any. We’ve been a peaceful planet among ourselves. We never needed anything like this. We don’t have things that Ron and Emily warned me of on your planet. No crimes for the sake of crimes. No murder for the sake of murder. The only fighting we do is organized and never ends badly, and people don’t harm others just because they can. Only our army fights truly, and that’s always off-world and to help other civilizations with their wars. We are not equipped to deal with any of this.”

The spark that’s been in his eyes looking at me all day is almost gone.

“What you need is undercover people.” I stretch to grip his knee. “People visiting communities to learn their values. People infiltrating places rebellions might start once you figure out a way to detect when they might start.”

Screw it. I’m getting up on my knees to look back at him more easily as I talk. “If possible, let women use their powers to detect ... I don’t know. Overall energies or moods? Send people places that seem less than peaceful, have them see what’s going on.

“Take it from someone who lives on a planet where there are large areas that are allegedly peaceful. When you pack that many people somewhere, even if they all share the same values, there are bound to be a handful of rebels. Ones that’ll commit crimes. Ones that’ll stir up trouble and change the people’s thinking.

“It’s very, very easy to sway the way people think if you have a convincing argument. And some people will go along

with things just because they think it'll be fun or they think it's amusing to defy authority."

Emily and I exchange a look. She presses her lips together.

"We know it all too well on Earth," says Emily. "And although customs are different on Hogar and the people do have better attitudes toward a peaceful existence, I do think a big blow like this can stir up trouble and make people start thinking differently. Questioning things. And sometimes questioning things can be dangerous, especially when you're questioning the purpose of peace after you find out your leaders have been lying to you your whole life."

When I look at Jameth again, he's almost smiling. His eyes are wide, and our spark is back. *His* spark. His spark for me. Not *our* spark.

His hope is returning. Oh, it makes my heart soar to see him like that.

That's a weird feeling. I barely know him.

"You would be incredibly useful on Hogar, Wren. And you, Emily, though I know you don't want to get involved."

Emily winces. "I just want a normal life. It's all I've ever wanted. I'm tired of having to fight to exist."

Jameth nods, turning to me again.

"I'm used to some problem-solving," I say, giving him a little shrug. "I've been solving my own *and* everyone else's problems my entire life, pretty much. And I really like detective books. And mysteries."

Jameth reaches forward to put his hand on mine where it rests along the top of my seat.

"You deserve to have somebody solve your problems instead."

I shake my head. "That's just not how I work."

"She has always been very uptight," says Emily, and I roll my eyes at her.

“I did warn you,” adds Ron, “just before what I thought would be the battle. That you have your work cut out for you with Wren.”

I give him a glare jokingly. It’s hard for me to believe he told Jameth about me at all, and that he and Emily were telling the truth about this mate thing.

“When are you going back?” I ask.

Jameth’s face falls. “Unfortunately, though Ron and Emily can stay, I only have a day here before my people need me back. I planned to spend it trying to convince you of my devotion to you and get you to at least come back for a visit. But instead, we talk of work, even here.”

I slip my hand from under his. He had a day. He thought he would convince me of the strength of our bond in a *day*. A bond I’ve only just started to believe in.

I do like him, though. He seems to be a nice person. Respectful. And he’s hot as hell on top of it, meaning he’d probably be the kind of guy I’d go for if he wasn’t an alien who told me I was his fated mate.

“You said I could come for a week?” I say softly.

“Yes.”

“I think I could do a week. Actually, I think I can help you quite a lot in a week.”

“I need all the help I can get,” Jameth replies gravely. “Muhl is helping the people of Pifa, and many other warriors are working in the prisons. Most of my people are fighters and are not able to run things. And none of us have even had the ideas that you have had. We’re not built for it. You must look down on us for that.”

I shake my head. “No. You said you’re not built for it. And you certainly seem open to the ideas I’ve given you. A good leader *is* open to change and help when they need it.”

Jameth shrugs. “My father was incompetent. He could handle his job as gatekeeper—deploying ships and such—but he was not good in his battle strategy planning job, and I had

to be strategic when I took over. Now, I guess I must learn to be strategic in different ways.”

He speaks like a man who’s accepted his fate. If he can do that, then perhaps I ought to be a woman who accepts mine.

“A week,” I say. “I’ll come for a week.”

“Are you sure?” asks Emily.

“I could use a vacation,” I decide. “If it’s just a week and the travel times aren’t long, how is it any different from going out of town for a week? I can come for a week, help you change what you’re doing to try and stop the rebellions before they happen, and we’ll go from there.”

Emily squeezes my leg lightly. She wears a soft smile, but it’s nothing compared to how Jameth looks.

Jameth looks as though I’ve just accepted his wedding proposal, cured him of a deadly disease, built him a home after a decade of homelessness, and taken 8 bullets for him all in the same day.

“I wanted to show you Hogar and prove to you that I’m worthy in that week,” says Jameth, and although his face shows nothing but joy, his tone is dejected. “Not *work*.”

“We can do both.”

Oh, I don’t care how dumb this looks. I clamber out of my seat and climb into the back row, putting my hand on his leg. It doesn’t matter that he might take this as a romantic gesture or that I’ve just made myself look like a fool in front of my friends. There’s something pulling me to help him, and I can’t bear to hear his disappointment, no matter what it’s about.

Jameth puts his hand on top of mine, lacing our fingers together. I don’t pull away, nor do I want to. There’s something nice about his large hand wrapping mine up.

My heart begins to beat with a mixture of excitement and nerves, my stomach bubbling in a way that should make me feel uncomfortable. Instead, it sends electricity through me that I really like.

The conversation distracted me from my attraction for long enough to make my decision with a clear mind.

I just hope I can keep it clear going forward, because I'm already starting to get a little hot and bothered again.

Chapter Six

Wren

I feel a little sick as I walk aboard a ship that's apparently invisible to everyone but me. Oh, and Jameth, of course.

This is it. I'm going to a literal other planet.

The ship is built into the side of a building in my city that's always been an apartment complex. But apparently, it's uninhabited, and every floor is a ship dock for aliens.

"Oh yeah, your government knows all about us, and there are places like this all over the world," says Jameth, as if it's the most normal thing on Earth.

I step out of the elevator onto what's apparently a ship. I'm expecting all silver and high-tech controls, but Jameth tells me that's only in the cockpit as he leads me down a corridor flanked by silver walls, rolling my suitcase behind him.

After the corridor, we enter what could be an apartment living room. There's a backless couch against one wall, a little dining area with stools, and a kitchenette. A woman who looks about 60 by Earth standards rises from the couch.

The woman lights up as Jameth enters the room.

"Prince Hahl," she states. "You found your mate. The beautiful Wren?"

The woman looks pretty much human. She has long white hair down her back, very blue eyes, and is wearing a see-through shirt that Emily warned me most Hogar women wear. It's paired with tight black pants.

I'm staring at an actual alien woman right now, and she has extended both of her hands to me. Her sleeves flare at the end, like they're filled with air from elbow to wrist.

"On Earth, it is one hand, you extend it sideways, and then you grip hands and shake up and down a couple of times before releasing," says Jameth.

“Oh—let me just—”

“It’s alright,” I cut across her.

I present my hands, and she grips them from above, curling our fingers together as she offers me a small, shy smile. Then she withdraws her hands and turns them the opposite way, so I repeat the gesture with her.

How cool is that? I just did the alien equivalent of a handshake!

Jameth lets out an appreciative hum beside me, and his hand briefly touches the small of my back before pulling away. He’s always so careful to pull away soon after a touch.

He was respectful and kept his distance last night, shaking hands with me very formally before I left Ron and Emily’s, but he always stands so close to me. He’s a looming presence, and I’m starting to feel naked if he’s not by my side.

“It’s a pleasure to have you,” says the woman. “I’m Ehla. I work at the House of Elders. I’m here to keep leader-line communications open between Hogar and Earth while Prince Hahl is on his visit. And Prince Elder, I’m afraid there’s a call to take immediately. It’s Desena. She won’t tell me what it’s about.”

Jameth groans. He sounds like a man being called back into the office after finally getting home for the evening.

“Put her on,” he says.

Jameth places my bag against a wall near the kitchen area, then follows Ehla deeper into the room. Ehla taps the wall across from the couch, and it lights up like a screen for a good 6 feet in width. After a few more taps, another woman appears on the wall-screen.

This woman is younger, with jet black hair, small, sharp eyes, and a face like you might see on a runway model.

I must be imagining this, but her skin has a slightly blue tinge.

Actually, I’m probably not imagining that, am I?

“Prince Hahl,” she greets, staring out into the living room. I keep my distance, a few feet away from where the screen ends. “Good. You haven’t run into them.”

“Run into who?”

“The invaders. We just got word that rebels from Hesana have escaped to Earth to come after you and take you on while you’re vulnerable.”

Jameth scoffs. When he folds his arms, his muscles bulge and make his scoff appear even more nonchalant.

“They weren’t very good at it. I took them out yesterday. Froze them, bound them, and cloaked them so that only people who know they’re there can find them. I planned on alerting you as soon as I returned so you could collect them. I logged their location. I’ll send it to you now.”

So that’s what he did. He never explained. As he does something on his watch, I let out a gentle breath.

“Wow.”

Jameth turns. He chuckles. “That impresses you?”

“Who’s there?” asks the woman on the screen.

When Jameth looks at me, he seems excited to show me off to yet another person. He puts his hand on my shoulder as I approach. I like his touch, as silly as that is. I step even closer to him.

“Desena, this is Wren. The mate I told you about. She’s going to come to see Hogar and consider the implications of our mate bond. She also has many incredible ideas to help us detect rebellions before they begin and squash them before they can cause pain.”

A thick, black eyebrow arches above Desena’s eye. “Oh good. *Earth* ideas.” For a moment I think there’s distaste in her tone, but she quickly adds, “I once met a woman called Kim who was traveling with someone from Slyth Etrude, and she spoke such good things about Earth, where she was from. Spoke of the good and intelligent things that your primitive species have done.”

It feels like a blow.

“Primitive?” I ask.

“Well, not primitive.” It’s weird how aliens have the same facial expressions as us. I can tell Desena is thinking hard about her next words. “I mean, primitive compared to us. You’re at the level we were at millions of years ago. This is unimportant now—I have work to do. I look forward to your arrival, and I hope we’ll be good friends. And apparently, good at working together, mate of Prince Hahl. Goodbye now.”

I open my mouth to say goodbye, but the woman vanishes and the wall becomes a wall once more.

I turn to Jameth. “Are we really primitive?”

Jameth nods. “Primitive by our standards isn’t a bad thing like it is by yours. Your location in the solar system and the universe makes it very impressive that you’ve gotten as far as you have with welcoming aliens onto your planet and even venturing into space yourself. Ron says you landed on your moon?”

“Yes. Yes, we have.” That makes me feel a little proud. “We did it once, many years ago. And this guy called Elon who bought a space company plans on doing it again within the next decade or something? I don’t know. I stopped paying attention to what he does after he bought Twitter.”

“Twitter?” says Jameth. A crease appears between his brows, and I have the urge to smooth it out with my finger. “Like a bird or something? That stopped you from caring about him? Was it an endangered species that he’s mistreating?”

I tilt my head. How sweet that he cares. I want to put my hand on his arm, but I stop myself. If I do that, our conversation won’t remain light.

He’s *inches* from me.

“No, Jameth. Twitter is a thing where you can talk to people from all over the world and send your thoughts out into this little space for other people to read or to ignore. You can access it on a phone or computer.”

His face lights up, and he takes my arm, steering us toward the couch. Feeling him direct me like that sends a wave of slight arousal through me that I have to ignore.

“It sounds like the liminal space page we use to contact old friends we attended school with and update them on our lives,” says Jameth.

“Actually, that sounds more like Facebook.”

A gentle chuckle comes from the side. I turn. I forgot Ehlā was here.

“Don’t mind me,” she says. She opens her mouth to speak, but a beep in her pocket pulls her away. She groans. “Prince Hahl, when you have a minute, I’d like to speak with you. But Desena has just given me a task to complete, if you’ll excuse me. Enjoy the rest of your flight.”

Jameth gives her a nod, thanks her, and she walks away. He sinks down into the couch, adjusting the way his jeans sit on his thighs. He’s still wearing clothes from Earth.

I wonder if I’ll be expected to dress like I’m from Hogar when I arrive. I wouldn’t be opposed to it, but I’m worried about seeing Jameth in Hogar attire.

Men on Hogar are near-shirtless all the time. And if seeing him with his clothes *on* keeps getting me hot, how can I stand him with them off?

Like now, he’s just sitting there with his legs spread wide. There’s a yearning in the pit of my stomach that tells me my body wants to fuck him though my head wants to be clear.

Jameth pats the seat next to him. I perch on the edge of it, but as he shifts to allow me more room, I sit back against the cushions and turn to face him. He smiles, and his nostrils twitch slightly.

I press my thighs together in the hopes I can ignore my now active arousal.

“Chat to me before I’m pulled away by work again,” he says. “It seems that even on this trip, I can’t escape work. When all I want to do is focus on you.”

His eyes wander down my body as I tighten it and try to ignore what it's doing. I'm very aware of how close we are to each other even though we don't need to be.

The journey to Hogar is six hours long, and I bite my lip, thinking that a lot can happen in that time. Especially between me and a man who adores me and smells so good that it's making it hard to focus.

But I've made it this far without losing control, and I can manage six hours alone.

Anyway, there's a lot to talk about. Even though as my eyes settle on the exposed inches of chest where his top buttons are undone, I want to undo a couple more.

Chapter Seven

Jameth

“You know, I used to be like you at the start of my career.”

Career. We don’t use that word, but I have heard Emily use it.

“Unable to escape work?” I ask.

“Yes. It was horrible.” Wren’s brows drop, and she begins to talk. She tells me of abysmally low pay and lots of work that hurt her mind. Of terrible people she had to tolerate, and of how they all expected her to deal with everyone else’s shortcomings.

She trails off and shakes her head, like these memories disturb her. I would very much like to make it so she never has to work again.

“I don’t think we should be working now, though,” she tells me. “We’re on this really nice, luxurious ship, and I don’t think people should work under these conditions. I think luxury is something to be enjoyed.”

I feel my face light up. “I agree. Have you had much luxury?”

If she hasn’t, I’ll give it to her. Her nose twitches as she adjusts her position, and she wipes her face. There’s still a hair hanging on her nose that she missed, so I wipe it off for her.

Her skin is warm under my touch. I move closer to her, and she doesn’t move away.

“I’ve had a little luxury.” Her heart rate is elevated, but she’s talking normally. “Since I became prolific in my career and started being able to afford it. Now when I take trips I fly business class, and I don’t let myself work when I do. There’s this guy I watch on YouTube who always works during flights even though he’s literally obsessed with flights and business class luxuries and stuff. I could never.”

Nothing this woman says makes any sense to me. It's like when Ron and Emily tried to explain the concept of bowling. Nonsensical, new, but welcome all the same.

I could listen to her talk for years. Even though I'm constantly fighting the urge to put hair behind her ear, touch her soft cheek, or ask her if she would like to wear Hogar clothing.

"You're going to need to explain what a flight is and what business class is."

She does, and I like the sound of it. A luxury in the sky, just like this.

And then, unprompted, she tells me of her first time flying that way. She compares it to something called economy, and her eyes shine with joy when she talks about how she expected maybe a little more leg room but instead got what she likens to "five-star treatment." Being treated well seems to make her extremely happy.

And every time I respond, she continues as if she's telling a story. She details the first time she did various things, all major upgrades to her life. Her first time living somewhere that was not a boarding school or a restrictive household she didn't like. Her first time being allowed to see a man her mother didn't pick out for her, which ended in disaster that makes me clench my fists. Her first time being allowed to buy her own clothes, and then, her first time able to afford clothes she very much liked.

With every experience shared, she turns her body more toward mine. I scent the heavy but sweet smell of her arousal every time I sympathetically place my hand on her knee or tilt my head to become more engaged in her as she speaks.

She trusts me with information from her past. And she's attracted to me even though she crosses her legs every time she feels something between them.

It's going better than I could have hoped.

And yet there's so much more to learn not just about her, but all these things on Earth she mentions. TV shows and

places to shop. Vacation stops and technology devices.

I know so little, but I know enough to hopefully win her heart in a way she might be used to.

“I really, really would like to spend some time on Earth one day to learn about all the media and your customs.” I lean slightly more into the cushions, turning my body more toward her. Her knee gently touches mine.

I really am glad Earth clothing is as tight as Hogar clothing, but it’s not helping me with staying in control.

Although I love hearing her speak, I’d love nothing more than to press my lips against hers and see where we go from there.

“Well, you seem to know a decent amount already,” says Wren.

“From Ron and Emily,” I say. “And it is all fascinating and very strange. The strangest thing they told me about was Earth dating.”

When Wren’s eyebrows raise, I can’t tell fully if she’s nervous or curious or both.

“What’s strange about it?” she asks, her voice soft.

“Well, it being so man-focused for one,” I tell her. “With fated mates, it is a very man-focused thing. The man often has to win over his mate, at least with our people. But with non-fated mates, it’s not man-focused. There is no power imbalance there. But on Earth, it’s the man who asks the woman to go out to these fancy restaurants, and the pair have to dress up, and they aren’t allowed to be themselves and speak their minds fully. And they have to go on three dates before they—”

I cut off. Her eyes have widened. Once I stop speaking, she calms. The way she stirs tells me she’s aroused again before the scent hits.

“Have sex,” says Wren. She’s biting her lip. She does that a lot. Does she know it makes her look even more desirable?

“Yes.” My throat feels very tight.

“Well, I’m not sure how true that rule is.”

Her arms fold across her chest, settling right below her bosom. They create such a gentle curve under her tight T-shirt. I think of the softness, wanting to feel that under my palms.

“I mean, I went on five dates with a guy and never had sex with him,” she recalls. “But also, I’ve had sex on the first date. And I’ve had sex after no date, too.” After a pause, she frowns at her lap. “Maybe the stereotypes are true. I do seem promiscuous.”

I want to destroy the people who hurt her with these foolish presumptions that led her to this thought.

“You are not promiscuous. You’re a confident woman who enjoys sex. And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

All the better for you to one day enjoy it with me.

I have to look away from her. If her cheeks warm with blood one more time, I’ll press my lips against them just to feel the heat rushing there because of me.

She shifts so her knee is no longer touching mine, and she appears to be clenching her legs together harder than ever.

“Actually, I don’t enjoy sex at all.”

Her words make me look back at her, puzzled.

“I’ve never liked it,” she continues. “I mean, I can *want* it, and I can think the guy I’m with is hot as hell. But it’s never *good*. It’s only good when I fantasize.”

My eyes shut. *Fantasize*. As I did about her all night. I replayed our meeting. After our spills, she removed her shirt in the street and allowed me to lick her clean. I could even do it without syrup because the sweetness of her skin made up for all the coffee’s bitterness.

I pull myself out of the memory when my cock begins to respond to it. With how light these jeans are, she’d see it swell instantly.

Did she see it swell in that alleyway after bowling when her face was so close to me there?

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” I tell her, trying to keep calm. “Because you are honestly very, very beautiful. And I’m not saying it just because you’re my mate. Objectively, you are a very beautiful woman for my species, and I hear, for yours. And you deserve to be worshiped in a way that makes sex one of the most enjoyable activities a person can do.”

I’d worship her in the bedroom all day if I could. And I have with other women, but once I learned I had a fated mate, my past encounters lost meaning and pale in comparison to what I’m anticipating with my mate. If she’ll have me.

I need to make her want me. I need to make her want me *without* closing her legs and denying herself those thoughts until her arousal disappears.

Even if she were not my mate, I think I’d like her. Because of her beauty and intelligence. And how she seems to care for me and has opened herself up to me. And how yesterday, when I was injured, she took care of me.

“I wish I liked it,” she says, and I can smell nerves on her. Nerves mixed with arousal again. Arousal in anticipation of what she could one day have? “I want to like it. But maybe I’ve only been with guys who aren’t good at it. Or maybe I just never liked them enough to make it great.”

Could these men not make her climax? Or did they simply not treat her with the respect she deserves?

I would follow her every command, respond to her lightest movements, and spend years between her legs if she needed that to feel good.

And I’d spend years listening to her talk if it made her happy, as she seems to be now.

Or she *was*, until she began talking of past partners’ sexual shortcomings.

“You deserve a mate who can change that,” is all I can say.

“I’m sure I do,” says Wren, and then she turns from me. Her body curls in on itself, like she’s ashamed.

I reach for her shoulder and pull her back to look at me, not forcefully. She doesn't flinch or resist, and instead turns with curiosity.

“The shortcomings of your past partners are not your fault,” I tell her sternly. “And if you lacked a connection with them, felt reservations, or simply weren't as attracted to them as you could've been, then it's not your fault, either. I know better than anyone that you can't always control how you feel. And I hope one day you get to be with somebody who does make you feel more than just enough arousal to lead to sex. You should be with someone who makes you crave it, and then, who lives up to what you fantasize about.”

Does she crave it now, or is her body just responding to me because she finds me attractive? Her arousal is so heavy in the air.

She studies me, head tilted. Once, I think I see her eyes dart to look at my lips. I have to part them and try to resist licking them. The nerves are reaching out to hers, begging for her to reciprocate my desires. Every nerve in them is telling me to kiss her.

Instead, I just take my hand and press it lightly to her cheek. Kind of like the way I put hers to mine when I was showing her the mate bond.

My chest swells with hope when I realize our connection has let me feel the slightest twinge of her emotions. It's not much, but I can tell she likes me. She trusts me. She may even feel some kind of affection for me already, even if it's just for my words.

“I've never met anyone like you before,” she says, and it comes out in a whisper. “Especially not a man. Men like you on Earth are rare, if they exist at all.”

“Maybe that's why your mate is from a different planet, then. Because the men on Earth just don't deserve you.”

I brush my thumb across her cheek without thinking, and she puts her hand on my wrist. Her palm is moist, and her grip

is soft. I want her hand to explore me further, but I'll never force it.

Her eyes drop again. I know she's staring at my lips. And then they move lower still, but I don't do anything to hide how I'm growing hard in my Earth jeans. My muscles are clenched like I'm ready to fight because I'm trying so desperately to hold back.

Her hand slides a little further up my arm as her breath quickens. Her eyes move back up, but they don't go higher than my lips.

I can't stop myself from licking my lips, and I could swear she's leaning in. But I won't move. The first move must be hers.

“Prince Hahl?”

I grit my teeth and hold back a swear as Ehla's voice enters the room and Wren pulls away from me as if she's afraid to get caught. I turn, facing Ehla, who wears an apologetic expression.

“Desena said to tell you in person that a ship for the rebels on Earth has been deployed,” she says. “And she hopes that your mate isn't attacked on Hogar as you were attacked on Earth. She wanted me to remind you how vulnerable human mates can be, and she said she'd hate for anything to happen to yours and hurt you, too.”

I nod stiffly. I'm aware of how vulnerable my Wren will be on Hogar, but I don't plan on letting anyone near her but me and those in the House of Elders.

“Thank you, Ehla,” I say lightly. “And you said you wanted to speak to me?”

I'm hoping she says she can't now, and I get my wish. Desena is waiting for her to return to the call. Once she's gone, I turn back to Wren, but she's facing away and looking at her hands in her lap. The moment has passed.

That's no matter. I'll prove myself better than Earth men 50 times a day if it gets me close to kissing her once more.

I just hope I didn't imagine her leaning in.

Chapter Eight

Wren

By the end of our six-hour journey, Jameth has at least three TV shows I like that he wants to watch on Earth, he knows half of what I got up to at boarding school, I've almost kissed him twice, and I'm up to date on some other developments on Hogar. He also told me about a survival style TV show he watched as a child, then told me of shows similar to Earth sitcoms.

It's clear he wants to display as many similarities between our planets as possible in an attempt to put me at ease.

The journey to Hogar is usually a five-hour trip, but it takes an extra hour to get through security above the planet.

There's nothing we have to do, but I stay on my best behavior the entire time we're apparently going through various checks.

Jameth keeps reassuring me that everything is going to be fine, but he knows I'm on edge.

My legs shake as I step out onto the roof of the House of Elders. Jameth walks behind me with my bag.

It feels like a dream. The sky is more turquoise than blue, but the clouds look like Earth ones. There's a moon visible by day, and it's smaller than Earth's. As Jameth touches my arm, he tells me there's another, but right now it's only visible at night.

The building has a wide, cream stone roof. Other rooftops go down in layers that get wider from the top down, like each floor of this building is smaller than the last. On the trip, Jameth told me there are a lot of people who work here, but the elders all work on the top floor with housing there for the prince when he needs to stay in the building.

Two curved staircases sit on the edge of the roof, leading down to the next layer of rooftop. Jameth offers his arm, and I stare at it.

“I hear people on Earth do this.”

My fingers remember how his forearm feels beneath them. Linking him feels even better. I could get used to it.

I’m distinctly aware of the tense muscles rippling under his thin shirt. We walk in silence with Ehla behind us, and I try to take in my surroundings further. There are great gardens below. Surrounding us, the city is mostly full of cream, square buildings. Each has a round slot of land surrounding it.

There are separate roads for vehicles and people. Aliens, actual aliens, mill along some roads, while roads elevated above the buildings have sleek black curved things speeding along them.

“Prince Elder, don’t you think you should change before entering?” Ehla asks from behind us.

I vaguely recall that Emily said people on Hogar can’t wear white because it was the ancients’ color.

Jameth scoffs. “The last ancient was evil and the rest are long dead. I’ll wear whatever I please.”

There’s something hot about how assertive he can be between bouts of sweetness.

We head for large frosted glass doors. They open at a wave of Jameth’s hand. I stare at his fingers while his hand is raised, and my brain is doing all kinds of things to get me to touch them. I hold myself back.

He has *very* nice hands, and I hate that I’m picturing them on my body right now. It’s not remotely the time.

Before us is a glistening-white room with untextured walls and floor. There’s a long white table with rounded ends in the middle of the room, surrounded by white stools. To the left, a waterfall display. To the right, plants surrounding an archway.

A metal and stone curved stairs leads up to a balcony where there’s another room with frosted glass doors and windows.

“Welcome to the House of Elders,” says Jameth. “My allotment is upstairs. That’s where you’ll be staying.”

“I’ll leave you now,” says Ehla. “To attend to my work. Please enjoy your stay, Queen Wren.”

“The mate of the Prince Elder is referred to as the queen,” says Jameth, before I have to ask. “I think she’s getting a little ahead of herself, as we haven’t cemented our bond yet. So, what do you think?”

Jameth sweeps a hand toward the stairs, so I head for that.

“It’s stunning,” I call over my shoulder as he follows.

The doors on the balcony lead into a living area not unlike the one on the ship, and there’s another doorway that must lead to the outside, as natural light pours in. The living area is furnished in a way that’s both familiar and not. Objects seem to have similar functions to Earth things, but they don’t have the same design.

There’s no television, no windows, and no familiar knickknacks, but there are *things* on shelves that might be knickknack-adjacent. There’s also something that has to be an alien version of an easel.

Despite the lack of windows, the white walls are practically glowing and don’t make the place feel boxed-in.

“It’s a lot smaller than I’m used to,” says Jameth. “Much smaller than the house I grew up in.”

“Where did you grow up? It must’ve been somewhere really grand.”

I move toward the couch because it looks like velvet, and when I touch it, the fabric is even softer than I expected.

“My father and all the generations before him were trained as battle strategists for other planets’ wars and the one that turned out to be a sham. My mother was a person who wore expensive clothes in pictures and had them published in print. Her side of the family is descended from elders, but they bowed out some time ago. So yes, I’m used to grand. You saw Ron and Emily’s house in pictures, yes? Mine was larger.”

Ron and Emily's house looks like a celebrity mansion in Hollywood. For Jameth, I'm picturing a castle.

I don't want to sit on the couch uninvited, but I guess since I'm Jameth's mate, I'm welcome to do whatever makes me comfortable. Just as I sit, there's a knock on the door, and whoever it is doesn't bother waiting before entering.

It's the woman from the screen. Desena.

"Prince," she greets Jameth. "Human mate," she adds, giving me a nod. "I'm glad you're back."

I rise as a sign of respect, and it's a good thing I do, because Desena extends her hands the way Ehla did. I complete the alien handshake and yelp a little as something pricks my finger. Desena hisses.

"Sorry!" she holds up her hand, showing me a ring. "I forgot. There's a loose gem on the back of this. It pricks me when I make a fist, too."

"That's alright," I say, looking down at my hand. I can see where I was pricked, but it's not bleeding or anything.

"I wanted to tell you in person that your attackers have been captured and imprisoned," says Desena, addressing Jameth. "We had a ship above Earth's moon for emergencies. They've been collected on that one." She turns to me. "If I had known you were coming, human mate, I would have arranged something. But the Prince Elder keeps to himself. He doesn't like telling anyone anything."

"Thank you," I reply. "My name is Wren."

"Interesting." She tilts her head. "Wren is the name of the sun goddess in the Kachamo religion people of Hogar used to follow eons ago. Pretty." She studies me a moment, her gaze flickering between Jameth and I. Subtly, she sniffs. I recall her species have superior senses, and I wonder if I smell bad, as Jameth keeps sniffing too. "I'll leave you alone. Prince. And Wren."

"Thank you, Desena." When Jameth speaks, I can tell he really is grateful for the update.

Once we're alone again, I sit. The couch is harder than I'm used to, as was the one on the ship. We ended up moving to the softer seats at the table on our journey here. It must be a Hogar thing.

"I love how you've picked up on our greeting custom so quickly." Jameth sits next to me and his knee bumps mine.

We don't need to sit so close, but I enjoy it. His warmth is comforting, and I feel it even when we're not touching. His closeness still makes me a little nervous, but, like, in a good way.

"There's so much I'd love to show you," Jameth sighs. "So many places I'd like to take you, but it's only possible to visit many of them once we can be sure every area on this planet is safe."

I tilt my head as I gaze at him. He carries stress in his brow, and I once again want to smooth it out. Is it me that wants to touch him so often, or is the mate bond forcing me to feel things I wouldn't usually feel?

Part of me wants to get closer to him and link my arm through his in comfort. Part of me wants to touch his face to see how his skin feels under my finger tips, then under my lips.

I don't spend a lot of time with such beautiful men, and it's hard to know how I'd react under normal circumstances.

"Well, that's partly what I'm here for," I say, and I put my hand on his knee to settle my urges a little. "And to make it safer for you to stay longer on Earth."

He's so big. Masculine. I've always liked my men large and typically manly, so I have to remove my hand soon after I touch him. I don't want to slide it up his thigh without meaning to. Or squeeze his knee without thinking. Or get closer like we're dating, when we're ...

What are we? I'm not sure.

"You would welcome me on Earth?" he asks

“Of course. This mate thing is obviously important to you, and I have a spare bedroom. You’re more than welcome.”

“I was thinking I would stay with Ron and Emily. But if you’re offering—”

Will my skin ever stop flushing? I feel like a fool, and his devilish smirk is making it worse.

“Oh!” he says suddenly. “Oh—I don’t have a spare bedroom. There’s only one bed.” Before I can react, he adds, “But I will sleep in here if that’s what you prefer.”

I nod. I was ready to panic, and now ... well, I don’t know. There’s something thrilling about the thought of him sleeping next to me, I have to admit. But I think that would take things too far, too fast.

Before I met him I was on a break from men. One that was serving me well after the last guy I was with. Me and my vibrator got along just fine without mediocre sex, and my conversations with Luna and Emily made up for the mediocre conversation I got in every relationship I’ve ever been in.

But now my body wants Jameth instead of my vibrator, and I’ve talked to him today like I’ve known him my whole life.

“I can see you’re lost in thought.” He picks up my hand, and I don’t stop him. When I don’t have time to overthink, it’s easy to be here with him. “And I understand there’s a lot to think about. If you need some time before we begin doing activities here, I’ll understand.”

He squeezes my hand, and I squeeze his back.

“It’s just ... weird. I’ve realized I’m totally free here,” I say. “No work. No responsibilities. I have this weird urge to check on work, because I haven’t gone a day without working for as long as I can remember. And it’s so bizarre to think I’m not even on Earth right now. I don’t even miss it yet.”

I look at the backs of his hands and wonder what it would be like to brush my lips against his fingers. Maybe he’d run his fingertips over my lips and let me suck on his long, thick fingers in place of his—

“I’d be open to living in a split between Hogar and Earth,” says Jameth. “If we do mate some day. So you won’t need to miss Earth, as you’ll never leave it permanently.”

“You say ‘if’ like this mate thing isn’t something you *need*.” I await his response, but he says nothing, so I explain. “I could feel that you need me. I’m not just some silly crush or someone you’re attracted to. I’m someone you feel incomplete without, and it’s baffling to me because you barely know me.”

When he reaches for my other hand, I don’t stop him. “It’s not fair that I feel so connected to someone I don’t know, I understand that. But fate happens for a reason, and if we were not compatible, we wouldn’t be fated mates. This has been studied for thousands of years. I can promise you that.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Here,” says Jameth, giving me a little sigh. “Let me show you my bedroom and give you some place to store your clothes so they don’t get all creased. And if you do ever want to try the local attire, I have some set aside, just in case.”

As he’s rising, I stand with him. He drops one of my hands but keeps hold of the other as he leads me down a corridor of doors. One is open, showing me a kitchen, and another open one shows me what’s obviously an office, until finally he leads me to one of the last two.

The bedroom has a bed in the corner, longer and wider than any I’ve ever seen. The outside edge is curved.

Plump pillows and a fur blanket cover the bed, and I have half a mind to dive into it because I’ve never seen something so comfortable-looking in my life. At a wave of Jameth’s hand, one of the walls retracts and shows me a closet full of unfamiliar clothing items. There’s already an area empty and waiting.

“You were so sure I’d come back with you, weren’t you?”

“Quite, yes,” he says, squeezing my hand. “I’ll leave you alone to unpack, and I’ll go start researching some safe places to take you that I think you’ll enjoy.”

Before he leaves, he raises my hand to his lips and brushes them across my knuckles. When he lets go, my skin misses his touch.

He was so certain I'd come back. And frankly, after that bond I felt from him, I'm not surprised. I'd be a horrible person not to at least give him a chance after feeling how desperately he needs me.

I may not need him, but he makes me comfortable, and I'd like to do things to him that I don't want to do to my friends. But that's not going to be enough for him; he needs me to be open, vulnerable, and ready for a *relationship*. A lifelong one.

The last time I was vulnerable, it didn't end well. And even though I know it can't be that way with Jameth, a part of me fears a painful ending anyway.

Chapter Nine

Wren

By the time I finish unpacking, I've pushed my feelings aside to think about the other reason I'm here: helping Jameth and his people learn tactics they've never had to think of before.

As soon as I'm back in the living room, I request a pen and paper or some kind of video recording device. He supplies the latter. I stand and begin spewing every strategy that passed through my mind since our conversation yesterday. I don't know how helpful any of it is.

When I finally take a deep breath, my head is aching, but I feel like I said everything I can think of. I turn off the recording device only to be met by applause.

Jameth squeezes my shoulders from behind, so close his chest touches my back. I automatically lean back into his touch and force myself to take a step forward. I might be *too* comfortable with him already.

"You don't know how helpful this all is," Jameth says.

When his hands drop, I want to press further back against him and stay there. Maybe have his arms wrap around me so I can shiver under his touch. Then he'd bend to press his lips to my neck from behind, and—

"If I come up with anything else, I'll let you know," I say. Deep breaths and distraction make those thoughts slip to the back of my mind.

"And now the time for work is done," says Jameth.

Jameth moves so quietly when he steps around to face me. When he reaches to take my hand, I don't stop him.

I don't know what we are. Me giving him a chance might be like me agreeing to date him or something in his mind. And I guess that's kind of what this is.

Except there's been no date. We skipped to the part where we're more than friends but not quite together.

“I thought of the first thing I want to show you while you were talking,” says Jameth, gesturing me down the corridor. “As a nod to our first meeting, I’d like to show you the thing we have that’s closest to coffee. It gives you energy as they say coffee does, but it’s naturally sweet. No need for syrups.”

We enter the kitchen. The work surfaces are totally smooth with rounded edges, a semi-circle of counters curling around one half of the room. There’s a table with backless chairs, and everything is white. I wonder if the color has something to do with the ancients’ color being white. Like the decor has to honor them.

The cabinets have sliding doors that go up and down. Mugs have handles with finger grips on them and are wider at the bottom than they are at the top.

Jameth grabs some kind of powder and something that looks like water, then pulls out a machine not much different from an espresso one. He doesn’t talk as he makes the drink, humming lightly instead.

When he finishes, holding two identical mugs as white as the decor, he smiles at me.

“Would you like to see the outdoor balcony?”

When I nod, he gestures with his head. When we reach the balcony, I’m faced with the same view I got when I arrived. It’s a little sunnier now, and its heat feels like it’s coming through a filter. Like it’s direct, but it’s not hot enough for me to sweat.

Below and off to the left, I spy a small pool with a fenced in area and a building resembling a pool house. I think about dipping my toes in the water and curl them in my shoes. Then I think about seeing Jameth soaking wet and almost naked in that water and curl them for a different reason.

Jameth and I sit at a small square table. I’m not sure how much I like the lack of backs on seats, but I make an effort not to slouch.

“Well?” Jameth slides a mug to me.

I take a sip. The liquid is hot, sweet, and like an unfamiliar fruit. It's also quite thick.

"What's it made of?" I ask.

"Powdered shecacha. A very powerful fruit used for keeping people with head injuries awake, but when powdered down with koio and water added, it gives a simple burst of energy and provides an interesting beverage to have throughout the day that isn't water. All together, it's called shekoi."

I'm not sure why I asked, but I'm glad I did. There's so much to learn about this place, but there's something more important to focus on.

"Jameth?" I ask gently. "What is it exactly that you want from me over this week?"

The sun unlocks new shades in his hair, deep browns that you wouldn't think were there. There are some in his beard, too, which he runs a hand over as he thinks.

Why is him touching his own face so attractive? I have to grit my teeth and ignore how I want to just stare at him and never stop.

"I just want you to give me a chance to show you what life could be like here with me if you choose to take me as your mate." He reaches across the table to put his hand on top of mine. "I would do this for you every morning. Make whatever drink you choose, bring it out here to you as you watch the sunrise. Or just watch the birds in the sky if you wake up later in the day. I will attend to your every need. It's my duty as your mate." He squeezes my hand. "I will take care of you."

That sounds nice. Being taken care of.

"That sounds unbalanced."

"Well, you would take care of me too," he adds. "It would be equal. You would want to take care of me after forming the mate bond. And it seems that yesterday, you already wanted to care for me. Any feelings of affection you develop for me will be heightened if we mate. Once a fated woman mates, it's as

though she has known her mate for her entire life, and loved him every second.”

Something about his words sends a chill through me. Back a few years ago when I was still interested in finding a partner to be with forever, those words were the kind of cutesy stuff I read online. I liked seeing pretty words in sweet pictures on Pinterest. I loved inspirational lovey-dovey quote accounts on Twitter, or whatever that space guy’s calling it these days.

I always wanted the kind of love I watched in movies and TV shows. But now I feel distanced from it.

“I’m not comfortable with my feelings being changed,” I say, then wince because that’s totally stupid. Emily told me that was how she felt before mating, only to give in because she knew it was inevitable and the man she was with seemed nice enough to let herself care deeply for.

“And that is okay,” says Jameth, nodding. I have to admire his patience. “But I would at least like to know there’s a chance for us. Even the smallest chance.”

Of course there’s a chance. It’s why I’m here. He should know.

He’s so devoted to me, and I don’t feel like I deserve it, but if I told him that, he’d say I did. And if I told him he didn’t know me, he’d ask me questions and use my answers to find reasons I deserve this. Because no matter what, he’ll always find a reason for me to deserve this.

And if I deserve it unconditionally, then so does he.

As I gaze upon him tilting his head, the softness in his eyes contrasts the hard, rugged exterior. Once again, attraction to him floods me. At least we’ve got that part down. His nostrils twitch. They twitch almost every time I feel the slightest hint of arousal.

Can he smell it?

“I wouldn’t be here if there wasn’t a chance,” I reassure him. “Look at it this way. If this was, like, two or three years ago and I saw you in a bar, I would find you incredibly

attractive and keep glancing at you in the hopes that you might look up and notice me. If you didn't, I'd approach you and ask if you were busy. I'd try to initiate talking, even if I just wanted one night with you."

His body stiffens. "You've done that?"

I nod. "It's how I ended up with the man who ended up putting me off men." I know he won't judge me for anything I say, so I add, "Who went on to fuck someone else."

Jameth's stool scrapes as he lunges in his seat, then quickly tightens up and puts his hands on the table.

"I have no patience for people who display infidelity," he growls. "To hurt someone you claim to love, or at least care about in some way, and to tire of them in pursuit of someone else, is one of the most twisted things you can do. If you truly love someone, you will never do that to them. You will do everything you can to keep your love alive, even if you're not fated. I would never do anything like that to you. If there's anything I say that you believe, let it be that."

My teeth touch my bottom lip, but I don't bite because I think I'll do it too hard. His words are things that I've thought over and over again. Things I feel crazy for thinking.

When Luna spoke of how disgusting infidelity is, I barely believed her. When Emily echoed her, and then Ron did too, I didn't fully believe them, either. I thought they were just saying what I wanted to hear.

The passion in Jameth's voice tells me that he believes everything he says. And finally, I realize. I realize how sick it was that someone who told me he loved me went on to hurt me.

Nobody decent does that.

"I know," I say, at long last. "And it's not that I don't trust you, because you seem trustworthy so far. It's just that after him—and he's not the first person who's done that to me—I swore off men indefinitely. I shut off that side of my life, and those feelings don't seem ready to return. It's like they're

asleep and cursed to stay that way, and I don't know what will break that curse."

Jameth looks me dead in the eyes and doesn't miss a beat when he says, "I will do everything I can to wake those feelings and break that curse for you, Wren. Not for me. For *you*. So you can feel the love you deserve."

Chapter Ten

Wren

I should've savored my moment of peace. Once inside, a cacophony sounds from below.

When I follow Jameth, cautious, I spy a group of people staring up at me. Desena is among them, and seems to be trying to usher them out of the building, her voice commanding.

“They just arrived. It’s her first time here. Don’t bother them. The prince needs a break, too.”

Jameth glances over his shoulder at me. “They won’t go. Not until they meet you.”

I give a nod and follow him down the stairs. At once, I meet seven people who work on different floors. One, like Desena, has slightly blue-tinted skin.

The group won’t rest until I agree to take a tour of the building. By the end of it, I know what department is on each of the 10 floors below the House of Elders. My hands are warm from all the alien handshakes I’ve done, and my face hurts from smiling cordially.

When the group finally leaves us, Jameth says, “They seem to like you. And you’re doing well communicating with them. The perfect amount of formality and warmth.”

I’m pleased he’s impressed by me.

“Well, they’re nice. I guess it’s good to know what’s going on in the building I’m staying in, but I’m more interested in getting to know you instead.”

Jameth was quiet on the tour, but he was always at my side. Several times he touched my lower back, and once he drew my hair back when entering a room that required it to be tied up.

These touches should make me nervous, because he’s still almost a stranger, but they don’t. Each one draws me to him

more, and I spent most of the tour wanting to be alone with him.

“You didn’t have any other plans, did you?” I ask when we begin making our way back to the House of Elders. “That they messed up?”

Jameth shakes his head gently. “I was thinking a stroll in the gardens, but we can do that any time. My main plan is one I talked to your friends about last night. And as we enter evening, I think it’s about time to get started.”

I check my watch before realizing I never charged it yesterday, and I’m not sure it would work here anyway. Do these people have the same 24 hours cycles?

“We have 25 hours in the day,” says Jameth, as if reading my mind. “And the difference between here and Earth is two hours based on our respective statuses of spinning on our axis. So when we left Earth at 7, we were actually leaving at 9 for here. We arrived at three, and it’s five now. The time we usually dine. Dining will take us up to the evening activity I have planned, and then you can sleep when you’re tired.”

“How long do you sleep for? I usually average seven hours, and many humans sleep for more than eight.”

“Well, seven hours is exactly what I need for optimal functioning.” He grins at me. “Something else we have in common. Now, dinner?”

I haven’t had anything since early in our journey here, and I brought that stuff from Earth. What’s coming up is anybody’s guess.

“Dinner,” I agree, and I allow Jameth to lead me.

He leads me to the center of the ground floor where a risen white pad sits in the middle of the ground.

Jameth offers his arm, which I take as we step onto the pad. The air surrounding us ripples when he waves his hand, becoming blurry. The pad begins to rise. When the pad reaches halfway between the ground and the high ceiling, there’s a knocking sound, a pause, then a beep.

A circle of ceiling rises above us, allowing us up to the next floor. The circle of ceiling gets out of our way, slides beneath us, and re-takes its spot on the floor once we pass. This happens on every floor.

It's the coolest elevator-like thing I've ever been on, although the lack of walls makes me nervous. I cling to Jameth for the whole ride, wrapping both of my arms around one of his.

Being close to him makes me feel safer. Like he'll catch me if I fall. At the same time, spending a long time touching him makes me feel like I'm in danger of losing control of myself and putting my lips on his biceps while my hands rest on his forearm.

"Now, for dinner, I have many menus," he says once we enter his living room. "Emily helped me pick out the ones serving things most similar to what you have on Earth. They're in there."

He points at a handle close to the floor in his living room. I push it up gently, revealing a closet built into the wall. A range of menus face me on a shelf at my eye level.

It's like he's prepared his home for me even though he didn't know I'd come back with him. When I glance over my shoulder, he's staring at me with a soft smile like every move I make makes him love me more.

It's unusual to be this adored when I'm not even doing anything interesting. And I could get used to it.

We end up choosing a place that sells actual Earth-like noodles made of something like flour, covered in a sauce made of unfamiliar spices. Jameth describes the flavors to me, along with a description of what the ingredients look like in case we have the same things on Earth. One of them is most definitely garlic, and another has to be powder made of onions.

It takes 10 minutes for our order to arrive carried by a little flying robot that taps on the balcony doors. The smell of it confirms this sauce contains an alien-grown version of onion and garlic.

As we dine together, I watch Jameth carefully. The cutlery is Earth-like, though the thing resembling a fork has only three prongs and no curve.

Shortly after we begin, he plays music that seems to come out of the walls. It sounds like smooth jazz played on steel drums and some kind of instrument resembling a more sonorous saxophone.

We don't talk much, but I find we don't need to. I simply enjoy the company, and once we're done, Jameth is quick to clean up.

“Now that's out of the way, I'd like to get on to what I have planned for the evening. It's something I think will be familiar to you as someone who's been on dates on Earth.”

I was right, then. That is what he wants. Dating me. It feels like a good way to get me to warm to him, although I already have.

I like this man. He's nice, patient, and undeniably complimentary. Though I don't know much about him as a person, I feel like I'm going to enjoy learning more.

He's someone I could see myself dating if he were a normal human man. Hell, a few years ago I would've gone out with him based on attraction alone.

As Jameth busies himself at the cabinet built into the wall, I sit on the edge of the sofa, watching. He still looks so good in the Earth outfit, but I wonder what he's going to wear tomorrow. I don't doubt that he'll switch to the fashions from his planet, and I look forward to that with every second that passes.

It's not hard to imagine what's under his clothes, but seeing it might just drive me over the edge. And I can't let that happen, because I know having sex with him will fully cement our mate bond. And I'm not ready for that.

No matter how much I want to groan as my arousal peaks along with my curiosity about our evening activity.

The shelf above the menus holds a bunch of thin square things. They're are about as thin as DVDs or CDs. He plucks

one from them then hands it to me.

“Press this against the wall opposite the couch,” he says. “I’ll be right back. Don’t wave your hands at the wall or you might switch on some setting I can’t figure out how to turn off. Once, I stretched, and I accidentally put my movie into ancient Elkonitsi. I couldn’t find the settings menu to switch it back.”

We’ll be watching a movie? Wow. He really is going all out to try and make this like an Earth date, and I admire him for that. Even though the comment about language makes me wonder how we’re communicating right now. Maybe there’s a universal translator somewhere, or maybe by some miracle, our planets evolved the same language.

I’m not sure I care enough to ask about it.

Once he leaves, I do as he asked and the screen lights up. What’s undeniably a menu like you’d find after inserting a DVD appears.

I keep my hands firmly by my side and return to the couch, settling back on it. I shift a little, trying to get comfortable. I can’t imagine sitting on this for long without needing to move around, because it’s so hard that my ass is going to go numb at some point.

Upon his return, Jameth is carrying a clear bowl of nut-like things and glasses of pale yellow liquid. They look like stemless wine glasses but with a bumpy, patterned surface.

“Kekes, a cross between the hogi nut and melekia berry, and a glass of merithe. All traditionally paired with movies watched in the middle of the day. But since dates mainly take place in the evening on Earth, that’s why we’re doing it now.”

Jameth joins me on the couch and takes a moment to get comfortable. He lays his arm along the cushions, stretching it behind me. There’s enough space between us that our legs don’t touch, but I close that gap until we sit knee to knee. Hand gestures begin the movie, and I hope it’s loud enough to drown out the excessive beating of my heart.

What follows is two hours of something that’s unmistakably a romantic comedy, but it’s about fated mates. It

turns tragic halfway through as one mate has amnesia that impacts her mate bond, and I actually almost cry.

Luckily, like similar movies on Earth, it has a happy ending. I almost happy-cry at that, too, and Jameth grins, leaning toward the screen almost unconsciously.

When it's over, I'm a little sleepy, and I have lots of questions about what happened to the main character's sister, who was also said to have a fated mate that she would have to "journey to find."

"There is a sequel," says Jameth. "We can watch it if you like."

I nod eagerly despite my sleepiness. Jameth lets out a deep chuckle, removes the thing from the wall with a gesture, and places another one there.

While he's up, he heads over to some shelves and presses a button on a round thing that reminds me of an Alexa echo dot. A sweet scent with a purple tint radiates from it.

I've had to shift my position five times, and I do so again. When Jameth sits, he doesn't try to put distance between us. His arm ended up around my shoulders about 30 minutes ago, and he puts it there again. I nestle into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

After a few moments, I slide one hand onto his chest. He's hot underneath my palm, and he smells so amazing that it floods my senses more than the purple mist does.

He doesn't feel like a stranger to me. It feels more like we've been dating for weeks.

I nudge him and whisper, "As far as dates go, this one is going very well."

His face lights up. "I'm glad. I think you can see from the media I'm showing you, but dates on Hogar usually involve more talking."

"Oh, they can on Earth, too. But they can also involve this. We'll have time for talking dates during the rest of the week, right?"

He nods, then we settle again. He rests his head against mine, and everything in my body tells me to fully put my arms around him. For once, I listen to it.

My eyelids grow heavy as the movie goes on and the mist continues to permeate the air. I ask about the mist during a montage in the movie, and Jameth tells me it's one that actually helps keep you alert.

"I saw you were getting sleepy," he says. "It has been a long day of travel and new things."

By the end of the movie I'm falling asleep despite Jameth's best efforts at keeping me up with little nudges and chuckles. He walks me to the bedroom, shows me the bathroom, and tells me he'll see me in the morning.

My back is pressed against the bedroom door, and I feel like a girl coming home from a date, heading back to her apartment. He's less than a foot from me, staring down at me in the half darkness.

A kiss might make him think I want more than I do, although I yearn to see how his lips feel against mine. I allow myself a soft kiss on his cheek, and the skin there is so hot I don't want to move away from him.

"The couch is hard and unpleasant," I say before giving myself the chance to filter my urges. "And the bed is big. I don't see why we can't share it if we just put a pillow between us. You certainly have enough of them."

Jameth takes my hand and brushes his lips against my knuckles. "I will behave myself. I'll be a perfect gentleman. Anything to get you to like me for me and not just because I'm your mate."

I know we barely talked this evening, but after the gesture he made and how nice it is to just be silent in his company, I have a feeling it's not going to be hard to grow my affection for him.

And when I prepare to sleep, it is quite nice to meet his eyes over the top of the fluffy white pillow between us, his face the last thing in my mind before I fall asleep.

Chapter Eleven

Wren

The pillow beneath me is warmer and harder than I remember it being. I'm not ready to get up yet, so I move a little, snuggling into it before I realize it's moving.

My eyes snap open. All I see is the grey shirt I vaguely remember Jameth putting on before bed. It feels like silk but looks like cotton.

Right underneath my cheek, which lays on his chest. And my arm, which lays across him.

I enjoy the proximity, but I can't let him find out about it.

As I become more aware of my body's position, I realize I have a leg thrown over him. There's something hard underneath my thigh as it rests just below his hips.

He's hard. And that makes everything worse, because I don't know if he's hard because of my proximity or because he's dreaming about something sexy.

The pillow that was between this is nowhere to be found.

I manage to get my arm and head off of him, but since my leg is over such a sensitive part, it's going to be more difficult. I try to lift my leg away from the sizeable bulge pressing into it. Jameth stirs in his sleep, then turns onto his side. His face ends up inches from mine.

That hardness is now sandwiched between us, making my breath hitch. It's been so long since I felt something like this that my body wants to respond to it with vigor. I don't understand why my body is always so eager for sex when my mind wants anything but.

Except for once in my life, my mind and body are in alignment. And they shouldn't be, as this is too soon.

Just as I go to move back, his eyelids slide open and he smiles.

“Morning,” he greets me, as if this proximity is typical.

“Morning,” I whisper.

I’m still afraid to move in case I accidentally brush against it. Something tells me he has no problem with our position, even as he rolls back and we separate. When he pushes himself up, I sit with him, wrapping my arms around my knees.

His head tilts back, stretching his long, thick neck. Soon his arms raise, and I have to avert my eyes as everything about the look of his biceps turns me on.

It occurs to me that I’m sitting in bed with a strange man who has an erection. And it’s not even a strange man that I fucked last night.

It’s a minute before I remember how close to him I felt last night, which feels more like a dream than reality.

“How did you sleep?” he asks.

Somehow, though he’s been sleeping on it all night and clearly moving around a lot, his hair looks perfect. I want to run my fingers through its thickness.

I want to run my fingers over something else I’m hoping is thick. And I know he would let me do both.

“Well,” I reply. “And you?”

A dreamy smile comes over him. “I had the most wonderful dream that a beautiful woman moved around so much she knocked the pillow between us to the end of the bed and ended up lying on top of me. And I respected her sleep so much that when I woke up in the night, I didn’t dare move her in case I disturbed her.”

“Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to.” My heart is in my throat.

“Please. You’re more than welcome to do that any time.” He nudges me, almost playfully, and it makes me relax

a little. “You’re more than welcome to do anything to me, Wren. Because there’s a lot you already do to me without knowing it.”

“Oh, I think I know it.” I quickly cover my mouth and try to keep my eyes from wandering to his crotch.

His eyes move down my body, like he’s trying to see if I’ve woken aroused, too. I have, but it’s not like he’s going to see it.

“Yes, I guess you do.” He pauses. “And I know what I do to you, too. Even if you say you don’t like sex.”

I freeze. “What?”

“My species. You know we can smell certain things. Arousal is one of them.”

I can’t look in his eyes. He’s known every time I’ve been aroused around him? I want to bury my face in the missing pillow and scream.

He must think I’m desperate for it. And admittedly, it has been a few days since my last solo session, and I didn’t bring any toys with me because I assumed I wouldn’t have much time alone.

Maybe I am desperate. Maybe that’s what’s getting me so hot around him. Yet deep down, I know that’s not true.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of, you know.” He puts his hand on my knee. “First of all, I know I’m extremely attractive. Second of all, you’ve been without men for a long time, and though I’m sure you had fun by yourself, the body can crave the touch of another person even if past experiences show that a stranger’s touch doesn’t lead to much pleasure. Oh, and the mate bond does have something to do with it, too.”

My eyebrows drop. “In what way?”

“Even before forming the bond, it has some influence on the woman. Just being near me causes heightened arousal, like your body is pushing you to form the mate bond.”

So my body wants me to fuck him for more reasons than I thought. And I just can't take that risk.

I tighten up again, surveying him. He is still hard, and I flinch when my eyes land on that part of him. Pictures of his cock burst into my mind, showing me a few examples of what it might look like. A deep breath doesn't push them out no matter how much I try to think of something else.

My body wants that cock, and right now, my brain doesn't know what it wants. It just knows that I'm technically dating this guy, but I can't fuck him, because if I fuck him, I'll enter into something I'm not ready for.

"And having sex forms the bond, right?" I ask, just to see if I have all the facts. "Like, even if I don't mentally choose to form the bond, it's a sex thing. It will form no matter what if we fuck."

"Yes," says Jameth, very matter-of-factly. "Not just any sex act. My cock would have to be inside you." His finger trails down my thigh to press into my abdomen. "As soon as our sexual fluids mix, the bond begins to fully form, and the bond is complete when I come inside you."

A shiver passes through me when I think of him climaxing inside me. That was the part of sex I actually did like as it made me feel something. I'm not sure what.

He laughs softly as my arousal grows stronger, and he sniffs. And now I know what he's sniffing.

"Wonderful," I murmur.

So I can't have the cock that insists upon living in my head rent-free.

"You know," he says gently, "if you ever did want someone to give you the pleasure your body craves, I am always around to do it." His words make me look at him. "Without forming the mate bond, of course. Respecting your boundaries. Humans do that when dating, don't they? They do all kinds of sex acts."

"But they do it on the third date," I say.

“And you told me you don’t always adhere to that custom. And as a matter of fact, I’ve given plenty of women pleasure after our first and second encounters. Not just our third.”

Picturing him with other women creates a paradox inside me. I don’t like the thought of him being with someone who isn’t me, as it’s me he’s trying to show his devotion to. At the same time, thinking about him pleasuring other women, getting their backs to arch and moans to escape their lips ...

I wonder how it works with them. What coming inside someone who isn’t your fated mate will do. And as I think of him coming inside me again, I’m starting to need him, not just want him.

My muscles are still tense, but I force myself to stretch my legs out. Now they are not hiding my chest, he can probably see my hard nipples through my shirt. And I don’t even care.

“What would you do to pleasure me?” I ask. “If we were two humans on Earth, or even if I was one of those women from your past, and I let you into my apartment after we had a date ... what would you do to me if you couldn’t fuck me?”

“Exactly what you deserve.” Jameth pushes himself a lot higher, turning his body to face me. He’s still rock hard, and I can see the entire outline of his thick cock through his light grey pants. “I would use my tongue on you, and fill you with my fingers, and not stop until I have you gasping for air because you think the pleasure will surely kill you. I would make you writhe underneath me until your climax became so strong it hurt, and then I would keep going while you came down from it and do it over and over again if you asked.”

I picture myself beneath him, wrapping my thighs around his head.

“And what will you do if you can’t pleasure me, just like all the guys I’ve been with before?”

“Well, that I can only show, not tell.”

I want to take time to go over it all in my head. Weigh the pros versus the cons of allowing him to satisfy the urge burning away between my legs.

But I'm here, aren't I? Meaning this is practically inevitable.

“Do it then. If you're as good as you think you are.”

I expect joy in his eyes like I've been seeing every time I affirm his feelings for me. Instead, they hold nothing but wickedness.

Part of me thinks I imagined our almost-kiss on the ship over here. And the tension I felt when I was so close to his bulge while icing his leg. Hell, part of me still thinks last night was a dream, because there's no way I watched two alien movies while cuddling a guy I barely know.

But as he pushes himself up and looks at me like he's the hunter and I'm the fox, I push those thoughts to the back of my mind and await what's to come with a mixture of nerves and excited anticipation.

Chapter Twelve

Wren

Jameth's hands are on my thighs within seconds, gently nudging them apart. I feel exposed even though I have pajama pants on.

Last night it felt like I had a lot of control. I set the boundaries. I made the rules. We had barriers between us in the form of daytime clothing and planetary novelty. This morning, I woke up draped on top of him, I felt his arousal and he can smell mine, and now there's nothing stopping us from giving into our urges. It's not like there'll be any consequences, right?

I slide down the bed a little to make it easier for him to climb over me. I expect him to go between my legs at once, but instead, his face hovers over mine. I think he's going to kiss me, hard and hot and passionate. However, when his lips lay themselves on mine, the kiss is chaste.

I lick my lips. I want more, but he doesn't give it. Instead, he makes his way down my neck.

"We slept late," he murmurs into the area between my neck and shoulder. "So I'll make this quick."

"I don't usually come very quickly." I try to keep my breathing even.

"I promise you I'm going to change that. At least when I *want* you to come quickly."

I allow my eyes to close as he pulls my shirt up to below my breasts. His lips press their way down my rib cage, and already, the muscles in my legs are clenching. I've had men kiss me here before, and it's never been anything spectacular. Now, my body comes alive. In fact, I'd like him to touch higher, but I settle for rubbing my nipples through my shirt. The fabric provides extra friction that I really like.

He repeats the treatment on the other side of my rib cage and abdomen until he reaches the waistband of my

pajama pants. He drags them off me like he hates them being there, then throws them across the room.

He moves further south, and with every inch he gets closer to my waiting heat, my breath comes just slightly more rapidly.

“Incredible,” he whispers, hot breath hitting my exposed warmth. “Your hair is even real here.” His finger trails down the single line of hair I leave when grooming.

“Do you like it?” I ask, suddenly feeling vulnerable. “Guys have often asked me if I have red hair down there as well as on my head. Like they want to know if my hair is natural.”

He runs his finger over it again, only this time his finger goes a little lower, into my slit, to the hood of my clit.

“Those men should not be asking such things of my mate,” he growls. “What my mate has between her legs is my business and mine alone.”

Then he’s done talking. I manage to lock eyes with him once as he glances up at me from between my legs, then his tongue darts out and I’m lost.

What the fuck.

I’ve had men go down on me before, doing gymnastics with their tongues, forming a seal around my clit with their lips. It felt nice, but not something I’d particularly care to repeat.

The first touch of Jameth’s tongue against that sensitive spot, however, makes me buck my hips up into his face as a shock courses through my body.

As his tongue continues its work, his hands slide up my thighs, then up to my waist. Holding me in place as I begin to wriggle beneath him, moving up into his face when I need more pressure.

When I get aroused, I don’t get wet fast. It usually takes some time to be saturated, but I can already feel slickness in my folds. Slickness his tongue darts to taste.

He lets out a soft sigh and says, “I’ve wanted to taste you since I first laid eyes on you. You don’t know what it took to hold back.”

I want to tell him it took a lot for me to hold back too, but no words come out. Just a gentle moan as my back arches as he adds a finger into the mix, running from my waist to my thigh, and between my legs, teasing my entrance.

His lips encircle my clit. My head begins to feel light as he continues his work, thrusting a finger in and out of me. He knows exactly where to curl it. With a moment or two of experimenting, he figures out what amount of pressure to apply on my clit while he curls his fingertip against my G spot.

Every nerve in my body tells me this is what I’ve been waiting for my entire life.

I don’t know if it’s the mate bond, superior skills, or the quick buildup of attraction to him over the past couple of days. I don’t even care. I just know that I need him to add a second finger, and when he does, it’s like he’s reading my mind.

Time no longer works. There is just him and this eternal fog that makes thoughts difficult, but feelings amplified. My legs squeeze around his head like a vice, but he doesn’t seem to care.

He whispers things every so often. I can’t make them out, and often they’re drowned by my own gasps and groans as my hands knot up in the sheets, then one in his hair.

I press his head deeper into me as two fingers curl against the right spot inside me. His tongue moves down to my entrance then back up again to focus solely on my clit.

He’s delivering sensations I’ve only ever gotten with my vibrator on the highest setting after 30 minutes of a warmup. Doing things to my body that I yearn and whimper for when I’m trying to get off, but that never seem to come.

For all I know, it’s been 30 minutes or an hour. Perhaps it’s just been seconds. A shiver runs through my body, and I feel like my muscles will begin snapping with the tension in

them that I can't seem to release. The pleasure is so intense that it hurts, but the agony is sweet.

As I feel the familiar buildup, I grab hold of both sides of his head and say, "Fuck. Jameth. Jameth, I'm so—"

A low growl escapes him before I can finish the sentence, and then I'm there, right at the top, my back arching and body moving without my consent as I ride the waves of pleasure.

He doesn't stop as I come. I climax harder and for longer than I ever have.

Even when I come down from it, limp and unable to move, he's still there. Still going, and somehow, the pressure is building again inside me until I come again only seconds later. This time my throat tightens, only opening when I reach the top of the orgasm and I let out a long, strained cry because I can't imagine how I'm going to survive this.

Only then does he pull back. His fingers slide out of me, warmth moves away from between my legs, and I can't move.

Vaguely, I feel his shape next to me. I turn my head. He's gazing at me with that same smirk he had before giving me pleasure.

I hope he gives me a few minutes to recover if he expects reciprocation.

"I'm going to make you shekoi," Jameth says softly, pushing away hair that's stuck to my forehead. "You recover. Take your time meeting me."

I literally can't move. He presses a kiss to my forehead before he leaves, and when I try to sit up I feel sick.

Something about that man is different, and I don't know if it's the mate bond or what. But now I know that more than ever, I am committed to making this work.

Chapter Thirteen

Jameth

I can't get a moment's peace. Thoughts come incoherently in my joy. I gave her pleasure. Pleasure she claims to never have had with another man. Admittedly I feared I wouldn't be able to get her there as quickly as I did, but she came twice, rapidly, and barely 10 minutes passed.

Now I know I can pleasure my mate, the only thing I worried about since our arrival has been put to bed.

Now I need to worry about work, because once more, Desena enters my allotment without knocking, telling me I need to come down at once.

I groan, facing her. "I just woke up. I've yet to shower. And I believe it's generally seen as disrespectful to interrupt your prince in his private quarters, especially when he's not dressed."

And when the taste of his mate lingers on his lips. I lick them, wondering just how long I can put off drinking shekoi so I can keep this taste with me for longer.

"You're only the Prince Elder by default," says Desena sharply. "And unfortunately, in our current climate, you don't get the courtesy of having set working hours. I need you now."

"My mate needs me."

"She's waited all her life. I'm sure she can wait another 10 minutes."

I hold myself back from making a cutting comment. I can't become one of those men who becomes rude to others just because he has a mate.

Both our heads turn as soft and uneven footsteps make their way towards us, and Wren enters the kitchen. Her hair is a mess, face pink with heat and lingering pleasure, and I can still smell the hot aroma of her climax lingering inside the pajama pants she's put back on.

“Your mate looks fine to me,” says Desena. “Your people, however, need you.”

“What’s going on?” asks Wren, her voice breathy.

“A problem,” replies Desena.

She almost pushes her way past Wren in the doorway, but Wren moves aside just in time. If she had hit against my mate, I’m not sure what would have happened. It probably wouldn’t have been pretty.

I look at Wren, her eyes wide, curious, and losing all her pleasure.

“Do you mind waiting a few minutes before shekoi?” I ask.

Wren nods, so I follow Desena after I kiss Wren’s cheek. But instead of waiting behind, she follows.

By the time I reach the stairs, Desena is at the bottom. Ehla stands next to her, raising a hand but averting her eyes when she spots me.

“Prince Elder?” she asks. “When you have a moment, I was wondering if I could—”

“When *you* have a moment I’m afraid, Ehla,” says Desena. “I need you to go back to my allotment and check if any messages have arrived.”

Ehla nods meekly. “Excuse me, Prince. Queen.”

I’m in no mood to sit down for a meeting, but luckily, I don’t need to. Desena is quick to get to the point, activating the screen on the wall we face. Krukl, one of the warriors I’ve deployed in Hesana just in case anything bad happens there, appears. He appears to be hiding in a bathroom.

“There’s a group that’s been meeting on Moichio street three times a week under guise of a book club. They’re a rebel alliance,” he breathes. “They plan on attacking the Capital Building before moving on to do the same in every city they can. They plan to strike next week.”

Wren gasps. I don't smell fear, but excitement. When I turn, she's smiling.

"My tactic is working already?" she asks.

"Indeed." Desena smiles at her. For Desena, the smile is practically warm. "We had our people deployed in the largest cities investigate any regular meeting of a group larger than three. Krukl informed me he got into one last night when he overheard two people using code words that sounded suspicious. So, what do we do?"

She addresses the last part to me.

"We question them."

"People lie."

"Persuade them to speak the truth through bribery?"

"I have a suggestion," says Wren, and I turn to her eagerly.

"Anything," I say.

"Emily told us there's magic on Earth. My friend Luna started doing some digging when she found out there was magic there, and she found several magical communities she believes will be very helpful to the regular people of Earth. Especially the ones who have truth potions. She knows how to contact them, and I'm sure she'd be more than willing to put you in contact with them and get you a truth potion that you could use on the people you need to question. Earth could be an ally to you and your people who aren't trying to rebel."

She sounds like she can't quite believe what she's saying. This doesn't surprise me. I know from speaking to Ron and Emily that previously, Emily, Wren, Luna, and the people they know were part of what is called the Known World on Earth. The place has no magic, no supernatural, and definitely no aliens.

It seems their dalliance with aliens has brought them closer to the Unknown World, a community hidden on Earth that apparently does have all these things. Monsters and magic and things that are normal to us here.

“I need your friend’s contact information,” says Desena.

“Of course.”

Desena gestures Wren forward, and it seems I’m no longer needed. I just pre-sign the forms I’ll need to deploy ships to Earth, then plan to take my mate away so we can ready ourselves for the day.

“Try not to need me,” I tell Desena.

Once free, I continue making drinks for Wren and I, and she moves to bring hers into the shower with her.

“But you’ll get it full of water!” I exclaim.

“Not if I leave it on the shelves next to the shower,” she says. “And every few minutes, I can just stick my head out to drink some of it.”

I smile at her. Who am I to question my mate and her quirks? I’m looking forward to getting to know many more of them.

Though maybe that’s not a quirk, and instead, something they regularly do on Earth. Either way, I can’t wait to find out.

Bringing her here has been nothing but positive. We’ve never pre-identified a threat before, and now we have a way to force people to tell the truth so we’ll never punish anybody innocent.

She will make an invaluable queen. Even if she only lives here half the year.

When Wren exits the shower, the scent of her arousal and climax are gone. I make it my goal to smell them again as soon as possible.

“What’s the plan for today, then?” she says.

She’s wearing Earth clothing, but it shows off her shape well. The shirt is low and exposes her whole collarbone with cutouts at the shoulders. It tucks in to a tight skirt showing off most of the creamy skin of her thighs. The thighs I was between and will be between again as soon as I can.

That's what I would dedicate today to if I could, but she needs to fall in love with me and not just in love with my sexual skills.

"When I get out of the shower, I'd like to take you for a walk if that's alright," I say, and she nods. "I can't ever express enough how incredible you are for helping us so much so quickly."

Wren shrugs. "If I'm to spend time here, I want it to be safe." She approaches the table and kisses my cheek. "And a walk sounds wonderful."

As I leave the kitchen, I touch my face where she kissed me. She is reciprocating. She is opening up to me. And as I climax with her face in my head in the shower, I'm certain that one day, even if it's not this week, I will come inside her and make our bond official.

She's exploring my ornament collection when I enter the living room after my shower, pleased to be back in Hogar clothing. The exposed skin and light fabric is good for the strong Hogar sun.

I don't imagine it when her eyes move from my face all the way down my body and back up again. I even flex my muscles to give her more of a show, but she doesn't mention it.

"I think you'll like the gardens." I offer her my arm. "Part of them are like that little grassy area where we met, but the benches don't have backs and there is no coffee in sight."

"I hope the benches are more comfortable than your couch."

I laugh. "Not really. We don't tend to sit for long periods of time on Hogar. Traditionally, movies are watched while sitting in swings, but Ron says our swings look like something called sex swings on Earth and that it might put you off."

She laughs like it's no big deal, but as we head for the descent pad, the slightest whiff of arousal hits me again.

Maybe I *should* have asked that we spend the day in the bedroom.

Once out in the garden, the fresh air is welcome despite the early day warmth. Wren's fingers curl against my bicep as we walk with linked arms. I'd like to have her hands clutching my muscles as I fuck her instead.

A small wind catches us as I direct her left, to the grassy area with the berry bushes and benches. Her hair blows against me, and I reach out for it automatically. The sun overhead brings out a deep orange hue in it, and I mutter, "Incredible."

She glances at me. "You really like my hair that much?"

"I like all of you that much, but your hair is very unique, and I'm not sure I'll ever stop being fascinated by it." I shake my head. "It is literally orange. A color not found in people here. A color only found in the rarest flowers and even rarer fruit." I smile. "Why do you call it red hair?"

Wren shrugs. "I don't know. It's called a lot of things. Red. Copper. Ginger."

"Ginger?"

"Ginger is a spice that's kind of orange in color."

Earth spices. Something I'm eager to explore, but not as eager as I am to explore her.

"I believe you told me that you had a unique thing that not many people on Hogar have," she adds, as we pass through a little gate into a circular garden filled with pieces of equipment children like to play on.

I try not to grin. I wonder if she'd like it. She seems to like looking at me, so if she were to find out there's more of me to admire, she'd like that, too.

"Are you sure you want to know about it?" I bump against her hip playfully. "Or better yet, see it?"

"Well, you've seen a lot of me. I think it's only fair that I see whatever you're hiding."

I chuckle. She is right, and I would show it to her eventually. Even if she never wants me to use it the way I like using it best.

“I would just like to tell you that I wasn’t born with it,” I pre-face. “I was genetically modified, and I’m supposed to use it as a weapon. Just another one of the tricks that was implemented to make the upcoming war seem like it is really going to happen, I guess.”

“What, you’ve got, like, a weapon on your body or something?”

“Yes, actually. Do you still want to see it?”

When she nods, I redirect our path. This isn’t the kind of thing I want to show her outdoors.

We had for the pool area, then enter the shelter people usually change in. It’s not very large, but there’s plenty of room for the two of us, and natural light comes in through the clouded glass.

“This is your last chance to back out,” I say.

“Please. I’m more than ready.”

I admire her bravery, and I don’t doubt her one bit.

I turn, undoing my pants a little. Just so they come below the base of my spine. I don’t want to overwhelm her, so I morph slowly.

A gasp escapes her as a heavy weight tugs at the end of my back and I curl my tail up. I turn around, keeping it raised.

“Oh my gosh.” She takes a step forward, bending a little to look at it. My tail is long and flesh-colored at the base, darkening as it goes along until it ends in a rounded, flared black tip.

“It can be strong as stone and sharp as and knife and is intended to hurt people when I whip it at them,” I say. “As well as help keep enemies away from my back.”

“It’s ...” She’s frowning at it. I would expect more surprise from someone who’s never seen a person with a tail before. I know for a fact humans on Earth don’t have them.

“The top looks a little ...” She giggles, covering her mouth. “Sorry. I shouldn’t say.”

“No, please. Speak your mind.”

“Well, it looks like a dick.”

Both her hands cover her mouth again as she peeks out at me, her face reddening.

“That hasn’t gone unnoticed by previous people I’ve been with, I can assure you.” I fold my arms. “And they have used it for that purpose.”

“What, even though it’s a weapon?”

I shrug. “Unless I tense it, it has about the same consistency as an erect penis. You can touch it if you like.”

Her hands lower. I can tell she’s nervous even before I smell it. But after she swallows, she reaches out and places a hand on the tip of my tail. I grit my teeth and try not to react too strongly. When not tensed, it’s full of nerve endings to remind me to keep it safe. She drags a finger along it, which I have to admit is pleasurable even outside of a sexual context.

“You know,” she says quietly, “if you’d shown me that this morning, I might have let you use it instead of your fingers.” She grins at me, her face nothing but mischievous.

I can’t tell if she’s joking.

“Do you think it would have added to your pleasure?”

She nods. “I think so. It may have made me feel ... I don’t know, fuller. But you managed to give me plenty of pleasure without it anyway.”

I already knew that, but her confirming it makes me smile so wide that I think I could laugh. I allow my tail to drop and I retract it and allow it to disappear.

“Well, then that part of my life’s purpose is already complete,” I tell her, reaching to take her hand, which she allows. “And I’ll do everything I can to make sure the rest of my life’s purpose is complete, too. I will show you that I am worthy of being your mate.”

I let go of her hand and lead her back out into the fresh air, fixing my pants as we go. At first I think she’s not going to

reply, but then she softly says, “I don’t doubt that one bit.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jameth

She didn't reject my tail. Even women on Hogar have rejected me for my tail. It feels like Wren is too good to be true.

When we finally reach the benches I told her of, she glances around and asks, "Why are all the garden sections circular?"

"It looks good from above, and it allows us to pack different things closer together with little blocks of privacy in between them where people can dry their clothing outside, sit for a moment's peace, and plant greenery that enhances our planet's clean atmosphere."

She nods. I will explain everything that seems like an oddity on this planet to her even if it takes me years.

"I will say this." She slides a hand off her leg and onto the bench next to mine. "I think having a tail is a lot weirder than having hair that's orange or red."

My eyebrows raise, and I think she may be rejecting me after all, but she's smiling. When she giggles, I know she's joking.

"Yes. Yes, come to think of it, I think your hair color is more normal. I mean, some people here have a blue tinge to their skin if they come from colder areas, and that's quite rare. Not as unique as red hair, but not seen very often. Most of our people have tanned skin to dark brown skin."

"Oh! So Desena is from somewhere colder?"

"Yes. Yes, the north and south of our planet are covered in ice. The rest has a temperate climate, hot in some seasons."

Her hand gets so close to mine that our pinkie fingers are touching. I lace all of our fingers together, and she doesn't pull away. I'm starting to think she never will.

"I like learning about this place," she tells the ground, like she can't meet my eyes while complimenting the place

I'm from. "It's easy to get distracted by it, though. When I should be learning about you."

She gazes up at me. Her eyes are happy, and the nerves I felt from her when we first met are long gone. Everything in my body tells me to take her face in my free hand and kiss her.

What's stopping me? As my hand cradles her jaw, I lean in—

"Good news!"

A growl rumbles deep in my chest. I swear, if Desena keeps interrupting us I'll end up making people think I have a wild animal trapped inside me like Ron.

"Yes?" I say, barely hiding my irritation as I'm forced to turn away from kissing my mate.

"I handled the majority of the morning's meetings quickly in the time you've been out here. There'll be no more for you to deal with today or tomorrow."

I rescind all my irritation at her. "Thank you, Desena. I don't know what I'd do without you." I squeeze my mate's hand. All the more time to spend with her. "Desena is the one who encouraged me to go to Earth and got things stable enough for me to spend some time away from Hogar," I add.

I have been cold to Desena lately, and I need to show her that I do appreciate what she's done.

"I'm only sorry I couldn't secure the planet's borders," says Desena, glancing between Wren and I. "But we have trading to do, and you simply can't stop the joyriders when they want to go up an orbit the planet for a while. Not with how much hard work it takes to get their ships. The rebels must have taken advantage of one of those situations."

"You did your best," I say.

"And I just need one more thing from you." Desena almost looks like she's going to laugh, anticipating my groan. "I just need you to sign off on sending fleets out to Pifa for further peace offerings. It will need to be large enough to

accommodate people in case any of the warriors we sent there previously for peace offerings wish to return today.”

With a sigh, I resign myself to a few more minutes of work today. Desena has brought the papers out with her, and I don't even read what I'm signing. When she finally leaves, Wren says, “I think maybe she's the one who deserves the day off. She seems to be working hard.”

“She doesn't take days off,” I say. “She says she feels like she has to work hard or she's not doing enough in life.”

A gentle hiss escapes my mate. “I used to be like that. Working all the time. I almost drove myself insane at one point. I worked such long hours on my couch that I'd just go to sleep there and continue as soon as I woke up. Back when I was first starting out as a freelance writer.”

Freelance. I should ask about that another time.

“I will do everything in my power to make sure you're never like that again,” I swear to her, gazing deep into her eyes. She looks like she believes me.

After a quick glance around, I note that we are alone, and I don't think Desena is coming back. Finally, I can face my mate again and lean in. She moves with me, her lips pressing against mine first. the kiss is soft and careful, but as I slipp my hand around the back of her head, she parts her lips further for me and we melt together.

I bask in her taste. Her lips are almost as sweet as her pussy, but it's a much milder taste and not heavy like the juices of her arousal.

One of her hands lays upon my thigh as she pulls herself closer to me. I let go of her hand to push against her back, wanting her body against mine. I need to feel as much of her as I can, and hold her small, fragile human form and wrap her up in my arms forever.

But she won't allow that yet, so I allow us to part.

We hold hands again. They rest on my knee.

“Thanks to my new business, I don’t think I’ll ever have to work as hard as I used to,” she says softly, as if no kiss interrupted our conversation. “And I’d like to keep running that business I worked so hard to build. Is it possible to work on an Earth business from here?”

“Yes. Communications between planets are easy when you connect to our systems.”

“Great. Well, then, I’m open to splitting time between here and Earth if we form the mate bond, and I’d like to work even though I know you can support me.”

“So you’ve yet to decide if you want to be my mate? I mean, officially?”

Wren’s face creases, and I’m hit with a pang of disappointment. Even after the pleasure I showed her this morning, the passion of our kiss, and everything I’m doing for her, it’s not enough to convince her fully.

“If we put yes and no on opposite ends of a line, I’m far closer to yes and I am to no. I’m still not fully at yes. But I feel like I will be at some point.”

“And what do you think will get you there?”

Wren shrugs. “I don’t know. I just know that I like you, but I don’t know how long it’ll take for me to fall in love with you. Because on Earth, people can go months before they fall in love, and I don’t have the patience to wait around for months wondering if I’m going to fall in love and have my life completely changed. So I know that when that scale gets to yes, it will be sooner rather than later. I’ll know in my heart when I feel ready to consider falling in love with you properly. I just need to know ...”

She shakes her head, frowning at the ground. I’m not sure she knows what it will take for her to agree to form the mate bond and become one with me as our destiny dictates for us.

“If it helps you make a decision,” I say, “I’m showing you the real me and I want to get to know the real you. And I’ll never deceive you or do anything that would make it harder for you to reach a decision.”

If anything, I want to know what will make it easier for her. Another session in the bedroom? Another night with movies on the couch? Me performing strange tricks and impossible feats to show her that I'm willing to do anything for her to be mine?

Every moment that she is not in my arms, resting easy against my chest, is a moment I feel I'm disappointing her and not doing enough.

"I know. I understand that. And I really, really appreciate it," she says.

When she squeezes my hand, I think it's supposed to be encouraging, but all I feel is a deep yearning to take her other hand, then kiss her again, and not stop just at her lips.

With a weary sigh, I pull myself to my feet, knowing we won't be mating today, but also knowing I can at least show her the kind of ecstasy she can expect when we do mate.

"I'd like to check that the correct ships were deployed one final time, and then, if you want, we can have a repeat of this morning," I tell her, holding her hand.

My muscles are tight from trying to hold back at every moment, and I'm starting to get a headache from my wondering if there's anything sparking between us.

Wren's eyes light up, and pride swells in my chest.

"I'd love to," she declares, hopping onto her feet before I stand, and when we head back inside, I'm not sure which one of us is more eager to get to the bedroom.

At least I can pleasure her better than any other man she's been with.

Chapter Fifteen

Wren

I know saying I won't form the bond yet must hurt him, yet he still wants to give me pleasure. I find myself naked and writhing beneath him again, his tongue slipping in and out of my entrance while his thumb circles my clit.

He doesn't use his tail during the session. Maybe I have to ask for it, or perhaps he doesn't think I'm ready for that yet. But when I come with three fingers inside me and another three pressing and rubbing my clit, I can't seem to find the words to ask for more.

He's already figured out what my body responds to, and he seems determined to do it over and over again until I come in record time.

After our stroll, he makes me come three times. *Three*. He remains fully dressed, glistening chest visible, hard cock bulging through tight pants. I feel every muscle when he lays himself against me, grazing my skin with his lips. I taste myself on his mouth and wonder what it's like on his superior tastebuds.

By the time we finish, I can barely keep my eyes open. I wake what feels like hours later, but it's daylight when I stretch out and walk with shaky legs to the bathroom, then out to the living room.

Jameth stands in the corner and is painting with a canvas on the alien easel. My breath catches when I realize he's painting me.

"That's incredible." I put my hand on his back. "Where did you learn to paint like that?"

"I'm not sure, really." Jameth turns, cupping my face with one hand. "I just practiced and figured it out as I went, I think. And I get better with each project. I've been painting as long as I can remember, and drawing, and sometimes sculpting."

My neck hurts from gazing up at him so often, so I look past him to the painting of me. I'm smiling, and my hair flies up behind me. I must have burned myself into his memory, because it's as accurate as a reflection.

"So, that's why you're so good with your hands," I say, trying to fight a smirk. A shiver runs through me at the memory of what he just put me through in the bedroom. "Now can you explain why you're so good with your tongue?"

Said tongue darts out to wet his lower lip.

"Dedication to my craft with all the women I pleased but didn't love."

His mouth opens a little, and he stretches that tongue in a way that makes me laugh. The feeling of it on my body flashes in my mind again, and a yearning for him begins to build in the pit of my stomach. But we can't spend all of our time in bed.

"I feel I should reciprocate somehow. I thought you were going to ask me to at some point."

"No. You don't have to reciprocate. I just wanted to make you feel good and show you how much I care."

I do want to reciprocate, but maybe not today. He's barely given me a chance to think about his body and the things I could do to it. I have always liked giving, even though with other men it wasn't something I'd seek out to do. With Jameth, though ...

I gaze at him, imagine my lips on him, on his chest, on the cock I have felt but yet to see ...

I think I'd like that.

"But now is not the time for reciprocation." He turns to place his paintbrush down. "Now, unfortunately, there's something I have to do. Apparently, Desena wasn't entirely honest this morning. We have to venture off. I'm needed in the second capital because I have to approve some decisions they've made, and they may need a signature in person. It's too close to teleport to, but we can drive. I'd love for you to come."

“Just tell me what I need to bring, and I’ll be there.”

Ten minutes later, we’re on the first floor in a large parking garage I was shown on my tour. They don’t call it a parking garage, but it’s full of strange vehicles like the ones I saw on the risen roads.

Jameth has decided to take a black shiny thing resembling a motorcycle, but sleeker.

“You sit in front so you can see in front of you for safety,” he says, as he hands me a thick, black thing that looks like a collar. “When you put that on, it creates a shield around your head.”

Part of me is tempted to make a BDSM joke, but I don’t know if his species do that. Oh, that’s not a thought I want to have in my head when I’m about to get on a vehicle that might vibrate underneath me with him pressed up against my back.

I climb astride the bike and find the seat comfortable. My breath catches as he gets on behind me. His long arms easily reach the handles despite having me in front of him.

With him pressed so close, I imagine him whispering in my ear and pulling my hair over one shoulder before he decides to take me from behind. Shivering, I push that thought away. I can’t let the scent of my arousal distract him. Plus, it’s probably not a good idea for me to be distracted on this thing, either.

The door of the parking garage closes behind us, and we speed off, go around the building, then head down a tree-lined lane toward tall metal gates. From there we take a left up a slope until we’re on one of those risen roads, heading along it behind alien car-like objects.

These things are practically highways, but I can’t ask much about where we’re going because the wind roars in my ears and makes us need to yell to communicate, which I don’t like. My hair whips back against him, but he’s so tall that it’s not in his face.

Our speed makes me a little nervous, and I barely have time to look at the assortment of unusual buildings mainly

below me before they pass in a blur.

Eventually, we begin to slope down. There are fewer vehicles here, and three roads branch out from the end of the slope. We take the one that nobody else seems to be taking right now, briefly stopping for Jameth to flash his watch at some kind of gate. The gate slides open and lets us continue on our way.

I'm less nervous here because there are no other motorists? But we don't slow. Leaning back against Jameth, I think I could get used to traveling like this. Feeling him behind me, steering us between big alien cities.

And I enjoy having him behind me in general, the heat of him more intense than the sun overhead.

The ride is so smooth that I could almost fall asleep once my nerves pass and we enter an area flanked by thick trees with almost black barks and twisting branches. I spy a couple of animals between them. One looks kind of like a sabertooth tiger, rubbing itself along the tree. Jameth shouts over the muffled sound of the wind, "Harmless." He does the same when I spy something large with tall, spindly legs and a small, cat-like body.

The road curves, taking us into a thicker area of trees. The light dims as the trees arch over top of us, and the leaves above rustle with the force of our speed. Some kind of animal cries from overhead, and we have to stop twice to let what looks like a giant green pigeon cross our path.

The blackness of the trees is almost eerie and reminds me a little of the forest in Snow White, but I'm loving it. At least the trees don't have faces, and they don't move.

When a thick black branch slithers in my direction, however, I'm proved wrong. Until I realize the branch has opened a pair of bright red eyes. I scream for Jameth to stop as the branch opens a mouth, displaying a full two rows of fangs.

The bike skids off to the left and comes to a stop as we tumble to the ground.

"Wren!" Jameth cries. "It's a—RUN—it's a—"

He pushes me behind him. At first I can't see why because my head is spinning from our sudden stop, then I notice the branch-looking creature has come toward us.

And it's about the size of a tree.

An enormous thick, black body slithers along the ground, towering over both of us. It gets skinnier as it goes up toward its snake-like head. It could swallow us together without a struggle.

"These aren't supposed to—" Jameth runs and pulls me to hide behind a tree. "They were all captured or killed. They don't live in the forests any more. Just in captivity."

A terrible crunching sound comes from the left. The creature has its jaws wrapped around a tree and seems to be trying to uproot it to look for us.

"Is that the—"

"Finally!" hisses Jameth. I haven't been looking at him, but he's staring at his watch. "I knew I still had this setting."

A bright light shoots out of Jameth's watch and snaps against the creature, but it seems to reflect off the tough, apparently metallic black skin, and fly back at us. We duck just in time.

"Run!" Jameth commands. "I'll find you. Just get out of here."

I want to run. I want to save myself. But my legs refuse to take me.

A jet of light shoots out at the snake thing again, and this time it squeals before the light bounces off its skin. It rears up, turning. Something thick and black smashes through the branches above our heads, then thunders to the ground.

The thud shakes us and we both fall to the mossy forest floor. When I roll onto my back, I'm seconds from death. It's lunging for me.

Jameth lands on top of me, knocking all the wind out of my body. He rolls us to the side as the thing strikes the ground.

He shoots it with the watch again, says an alien swear loudly, then pulls us to our feet.

“Run!” he whines.

“No!”

I’m not much use here, but I’m not leaving him alone.

The thing lunches again, its head low to the ground. It seems to be trying to get around him so it can get to me.

Jameth shoots it again and ducks, both hands in front of him. I hear a rustle before I notice him pulling down the top of his pants.

I walk backward and my heel hits a root, sending me stumbling onto my back. The thing has jet black narrow pupils that briefly flare when it locks eyes with me, its jaw falling open.

As I stare into its eyes, I have a feeling this thing wants *me* for some reason. It doesn’t just want random prey. Out of the two of us, it has chosen me.

A shriek pierces the air as the red eyes on the snake-like head blaze wide. Then a moment later, the thing falls to the side. Jameth steps over the body. His tail curls toward him and he wipes it off with his shirt sleeve.

His tail was strong enough to cut through skin that literally bounced an attack back at us?

My heartbeat is in my ears, my body throbs from hitting the ground a few times, and I feel like I might throw up.

“*Khol*,” breathes Jameth. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “Are you?” My voice cracks.

“I’m fine. My tail is tough enough to get through even the thickest-skinned creatures when I harden it. Why didn’t you run?” He takes my shoulders, shaking me gently.

I shake my head. “I couldn’t leave you. It didn’t feel right. Even though I couldn’t do anything, I didn’t want to leave you alone with that thing.”

Jameth groans, and then his arms close around me. He's pulling me into his chest, and my dizziness subsides, nausea ebbing away. My arms wrap around him, too, squeezing him with as much force as I have in my body. He's safe. I didn't have to lose him.

We are okay.

"I can't imagine what I would do if I lost you," he whispers into my hair, stroking me like he's trying to soothe me, but there's too much adrenaline in me for it to work. "My mate. *My mate.*"

Mate. And that's what he is to me, too. He is my mate, even if I haven't made that bond. He is my mate, and I almost lost him. How much would it have hurt if we had made the bond before we got into trouble?

I don't want to know, because the thought sickens me now. Enough for me to reach up and grab him, pulling his lips to meet mine because I need to kiss him before we continue on our way.

I need to feel his lips on mine a second time, tangle my fingers in the back of his hair, and feel his beard scratching against my face.

He responds with such vigor that he lifts me off my feet, and as we begin to stumble through the trees, I don't want to let go of him.

Chapter Sixteen

Wren

I've never kissed him with such desperation before. I barely initiated any past encounters as it was, despite our close calls.

I can't tell if I'm grateful that he saved my life, afraid that I would lose him, or both.

I know one thing: the fear of losing him was stronger than I expected of a man I barely know.

Maybe it's because he's my only way off this planet because I know nobody else here. Or at least, even if Desena or Ehla can help me, Jameth is my only way back to them.

But I don't think that's true. I think it's him. I don't want to lose him because he's *him*.

I pull him into me, yearning for the entirety of him. But the mate bond still looms, threatening to change how I feel and put thoughts in my head I'm not sure are 100% there yet. If they are there, they're not as strong as the mate bond will make them.

I want to feel him inside me, but that's not an option. At least not in the way I'm used to with human men.

"I don't understand why it did that," he breathes into my neck, his voice heavy as he kisses down to my collarbone. "It doesn't usually target one person. It usually goes after whoever is closest. It usually—"

"Stop," I groan.

With his body pressed close to mine, I feel the swell of his cock against me, hot and prominent even through our clothing.

"Is there a lot of stuff like that here?" I manage to choke out. I'm shaking, and I'm sure only half is with pleasure.

"No. Absolutely not. That was an anomaly. Let me just—"

I groan as he pushes himself away from me, staring down at that watch thing that seems to have so many features. He scans the woods, and after a moment, he says, “That is the only lifeform like it here.” He nods down of the barely visible body of the black snake thing.

That’s good enough for me. In seconds, I pull him into me again. I kiss his cheekbones, his jaw, his temple and the corners of his lips. Like I can’t get enough of him. Strangely, the hair of his beard is as soft as the hair on his head. His jawbone is hard beneath it.

He saved me. My mate saved me. My mate that’s mine and only mine to claim.

And I will claim him. I will make him mine, even though I’m not committing in the way he would expect.

A lot of his weight is against me as I lie back in the moss and dirt. My leg moves to wrap around his waist, pressing his hard bulge between my legs as I rock against it. I kiss his neck above me and reach for the buttons of his shirt where they begin well below chest level.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Celebrating.” I swallow hard. “You know, celebrating being alive. Do we have time?”

His initial surprise turns into a devilish smirk that’s in line with my thoughts.

“Of course we have time. I am the Prince Elder. The Prince Elder can do what he wants when he wants whether it makes him late for his engagements or not.”

That is also good enough for me.

His hands move to my arms, pulling me up into a sitting position so I can undress him better. His hands search for the button of my jeans. Soon we’re both undressed, our clothes somewhere behind us.

I grip his bicep with one hand and wrap my other arm around his lower back. He’s all hard muscle, and the heat of him is overwhelming.

We're on our knees before I can look at him fully and take in the body I've been imagining. I run my hand over the chiseled abs I could slightly see through the dark-tinted fabric of his mostly see-through shirt.

And his cock swells before me, heavy and as big as the rest of him, bigger than any man I've ever seen. It makes me clench, my tongue darting out to wet my lips. Cocks have never looked appealing to me before, but I want his. In my hands, and my mouth, and inside me. The latter can't happen, so I press myself low and take his heavy length in my hand.

There's a lot of weight to it that makes me quiver in anticipation as I lean forward and press my lips to the tip. A groan escapes him, as his hand moves to grab hold of my hair and keep my head in place as I tease his tip.

"You have no idea," he breathes, "the things that does to me, Wren. To feel my mate pleasure me ... To feel ..."

I pull back a moment to look up at him. His eyes are closed, and it seems to be taking a lot of effort for him to keep his breathing steady. His eyes blink open.

"I'll stand for you," he tells me roughly. "To make it easy."

His breathing is labored and his legs visibly shake as he pushes himself up. Now that I'm upright on my knees, I can grab his hips and return my mouth to his tip.

I've never been complimented on my blowjob skills before, but every noise that escapes his lips makes up for it. He keeps leaning back, and we end up with him against a tree. My knees drag through the dirt as I move with him.

With every suck and gentle lick, my body tells me I need more. The cool air whistles between the trees and hurts my aroused nipples but does nothing to cool the hot, wet heat between my legs that needs his fingers.

Is it really turning me on this much to pleasure him? And can this simple action actually have him softly murmuring my name as he moans and leans his head back against the black bark?

I go in for another lick, but his hand tightens in my hair and guides my head away from him.

“What’s wrong?”

His expression is strained. “I can’t. I can’t let you continue. Because I’m close.”

I smirk. “Isn’t that the point?”

He sighs with a shake of his head. “Traditionally, when mates are first intimate, the man comes inside the woman. And I’ve always liked tradition.”

I hang my head. So I can’t even make him come?

“I want it,” I admit, “really, really badly. My body does, anyway.”

“But not your head? Or your heart?”

“I really, really want to want it. I want to need it in every way possible. But I’m not ready. Not for that.” I draw myself up, pressing my body against his. The heat of his bare chest against my breasts does nothing to calm the achingly erect nipples that need to be touched. “But I do want you in some capacity. As much as you can give me without ... that.”

As his eyes darken, I know what’s in his head. It’s exactly what’s in mine.

His arms are around me in an instant, hands gripping my thigh as he drags my leg up his side. His cock presses against my heat as he pulls me up and I hiss at the friction. My arms land around his neck and I grip his hair, arms sandwiched between his head and the tree bark.

He’s holding me against him, moving me up and down so my clit is constantly against his cock, but below the head.

It feels like his lips are everywhere, on my mouth and neck and jaw and behind my ear like he’s tasting every inch of my skin he can get. Something snakes at my side; something soft and nothing like a hand. I can feel his hands, and they’re under my legs to hold me against him, constantly giving my swollen clit the pleasure it needs.

That something else joins in, sliding up between us, rubbing against my folds. Something thick and phallic and *him*.

With every soft moan that escapes my lips, I hardly recognize myself. Both my responses and my needs are new to me.

The tip of his thick tail presses against my entrance, and he pauses kissing below my ear to whisper, “Is this what you want, Wren? Is this what your body needs?”

I pull back just enough to look into his eyes. “Not just my body. My heart and my head, too.”

His tail plunges into me, and I almost fall out of his arms with the intensity of the sensation filling me.

It doesn't feel like a cock despite its similar shape and texture. First of all, it's bigger than any human man I've been with, though not quite as big as the cock he's rubbing me up and down against. Second of all, his tail has a texture that I couldn't detect with my eyes but that I definitely feel dragging against my walls. His tail curls inside me, and something bordering a scream escapes me as he drags it over my G spot.

When he smirks, I can tell he knows exactly what he's doing.

“Women of my species don't have that special part inside them that makes it feel good,” he says. “Their loss, really. But I've done plenty of research on how exactly to pleasure a human woman inside and out.”

He does that thing with his tail again, and I can't even answer.

My head falls against him and I'm limp as he moves. He is entirely responsible for moving me up and down his shaft while he slowly thrusts his tail as deep as it will go before he pulls it out again to the tip.

When he groans and his cock throbs between us, he shifts his position so he can support me with one hand. The other reaches for my clit, pleasuring it with his fingers instead of his

shaft. I wonder how close he is to coming, because it already feels like I'm on the edge.

With each exhale, I feel my sensitive walls grip him stronger, tightening and throbbing around his tail. Despite me not touching his cock anymore, he groans.

I wonder how the sensation on his tail compares to what he feels on his cock.

“Are you close, Wren?” he groans into me. “Because I don't know how long I can last with you getting such pleasure from me. It's a fight to keep myself from the edge of climax.”

I just shut my eyes and nod.

When he switches to shallow strokes, I think my body will break from its need the climax, and I'm so tense on my climb to the edge that it hurts. When I finally get there, I go limp in his arms and his tail slips out of me at once. As my core clenches around nothing and my clit throbs against his hand, I try to breathe deeply and come down so I can get my legs back on the ground.

On shaky legs, I stand before him, watching his heaving chest as he looks like he was on the edge with me. I stand on tiptoe to pull his face toward me and give him a soft kiss.

“You are everything I want,” Jameth whispers, and I look down. Knowing I can't give myself to him the way he needs me to is starting to hurt me, and I think that's a good sign.

“I think you could be everything I want, too,” I tell him, taking his hand and squeezing it. “Just give me a little while longer.”

When I look up at him, he nods, and though his eyes are disappointed, he doesn't look sad. I start to smile, but something between a hiss and a screech behind me stops me.

It takes a moment to register it among all the twisted black trees, but I see it just before it comes for me: a thick black tail lashing out. A snake thing that was unconscious but not dead.

When I scream, my throat is raw, and terror replaces all the pleasure in my body. Jameth pushes me to the ground, and I curse myself for giving into pleasure when we should've been getting the hell away from the monster that's determined to ruin my day.

Chapter Seventeen

Jameth

I should have checked its body. Should have made sure my tail penetrated the crel layer of its skin; the part that, when struck, sends its own venom to its heart that stops it beating. It seems all I managed to do was get through to the melioa instead, knocking it out temporarily until its venom was processed by its system. How could I be such a fool? Especially since this isn't my first time dealing with a parohl.

Strangely, it dodges me, lunging instead for Wren. It's uncharacteristic. I swing out with my tail, wincing. I'm sensitive from having it inside my mate.

My tail usually feels almost nothing when tensed. But it feels more than it would if I hadn't just had it inside someone.

This parohl seems to have tougher skin than average, and a stupid thought comes to me that it could be a peparohl, a long-extinct genetically modified mutation that can be trained, is tougher than average, and is harder to kill.

But that's impossible.

"Jameth!" Wren chokes out while cowering behind a tree that the parohl is so desperately trying to get around. "Watch out for its tail!"

I/at the skin of the body, but it's wriggling so much I can't get in deep. I call, "Try to get back to the vehicle we were traveling on! I'll try to take it deeper into the woods—try to kill it—"

I don't know why I think she'll listen to me. She didn't run last time, and I don't hear her footsteps now.

I don't hear much of anything but the blood rushing in my ears with every slash of my tail through the parohl's hard flesh. I wish it wasn't so large and dark so I could see where my tail penetrated each time, getting through to the same place again and again.

With a groan, I blast it with my watch, but that does nothing but bounce off. As the parohl opens its jaws, I send a blast directly into the soft flesh inside its mouth. The parohl emits a scream and falls backwards, writhing in agony.

While it's down, I blast it again every time it's mouth opens while I hack away with my tail at the closest part of it.

Layer by layer, I get through its skin until I get to the creel. Blood pumps from it, and its venom is sent straight to its heart.

With a deep breath, I turn to the tree Wren is hiding behind and say, "Okay. Now it's actually dead."

She runs into my open arms.

I've encountered a lot of sticky situations in my life, and I've never been this afraid. I've never had something I want to protect more than myself, and having it now is petrifying.

I swallow. It seems I've lost my ability to speak.

"Come on," she says. "Let's find our clothes and get out of here. I'm sure the people in the second capital are expecting you."

I nod, some of the fog in my mind clearing.

I'm not sure I'm in the right state of mind to speak once I'm dressed and back on the airrider. With Wren in front of me, I wish I could steer this thing with one hand and wrap one arm around her waist. I must keep us safe forever. The attack on my planet was far worse than the attack I sustained on hers. That can't happen again.

I keep her by my side while I deal with my duties in Hesana. She quickly adapts to their version of our common greeting—the same type of hand cupping but with the arms crossed over each other. She makes small talk, she smiles, she tells them that she's close to truly becoming my mate, and as we leave on our near-silent journey, she relaxes against me as she did early in the day.

I finally started to calm, and when we take a break to stop for water when we get back into my city, I call ahead and let

Desena know what happened in the forest. She will need to send teams to search the woods for similar threats.

When I finally step back into the House of Elders, it feels like a week has passed in a day. My legs are shaky from riding, arms aching from my muscles being so tense as I hold my mate to my side. I can barely remember what I had planned for tonight, but I know I need to sit down, take my mate in my arms, and—

“You are an idiot!” Desena’s shriek rings through my ears and she dashes towards us the second the ascension pad reaches my floor. “You should have called me the minute that thing attacked. You should have run, you shouldn’t have tried to fight, it’s much too—”

“In all respect, Desena, you weren’t there.” The sharp voice that responds to her belongs to Wren. “He didn’t have time to call you. We would’ve been kill if he tried.”

Desena’s blazing eyes switch from me to Wren. She looks like she’s about to spit the same abuse at my mate, but she catches herself before she does.

“Parohli are notoriously slow,” she spits. “I should have been told right after the attack happened. Not 10 minutes before you arrived back here. Who knows how many of them are in that forest? How many other people who travel the Kehia road are in danger?”

“It’s dead, Desena, and I scanned that forest. There’s nothing there.” I knot my arms, glancing down at Wren by my side. She’s seething. “Before you say it, yeah, I probably should have scanned it before taking that road. But the parohli have been out of the wooded areas for years, so I thought I was safe. It’s not my fault if the former elders let their guard down and allowed those things to make their way back into our forests.”

Desena’s face twitches, lip curling. I’m too tired for this. My emotions have boiled inside me, but none are dominant enough to stop my head feeling entirely muddled.

“You should have taken the mechol road,” Desena snaps. “It’s much safer.”

“Should’ve, would’ve, could’ve.” I’ve never heard this phrase before, but Wren says it with such venom that it almost takes me by surprise. “This isn’t his fault, and nobody got hurt. He’s been through enough. Why are you yelling at him?”

Wren places her small body in front of mine, and I want to tell her to stand down. This is not her fight. Yet I’m enjoying her defending me too much to say anything.

“He could have easily—”

“And yet he’s fine.” When Wren throws some hair over her shoulder, the scent of the fruity shampoo she brought with her is strong in my nostrils, as strong as the emotion finally making itself dominant inside me: adoration. Joy that this is my mate and that she is defending me.

“He—”

“He chose whatever route he chose for a reason,” replies Wren before Desena can speak, her tone much calmer now.

“It’s faster,” I add.

“Exactly. He’s not even supposed to be working. So of course he was going to choose the faster route.”

Desena looks between us. Her lip is still curled, but after a beat, she sighs in defeat.

“I’ll get a team out to search the woods for eggs. The eggs are undetectable by kitwatch until hatched,” she mutters, then pushes past us and leaves.

It’s the first time Wren and I have been alone and not traveling in hours.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say.

Wren steps away from me so she can look up at me without straining her neck.

“You’re her prince. The only elder on the council. You’re her boss, and you’re the one who’s doing everything you can

to make this planet safe enough for her and everyone else to live on. She doesn't get to speak to you like that."

Anticipation and excitement scatter through my chest. She sounds so commanding, so sure of herself. Like a queen.

"Desena has never been one to follow the rules," I say. "It's part of how she got the job in the first place. Come on. Let's get into my allotment and lock the door before she can come bother us again."

Wren's smile is the definition of perfection.

Once we're in my allotment and I make sure every door is locked, she wanders over to the couch and sits, leaning back against the cushions as she watches me cross the room at a slower pace.

"Thank you," she says, and I tilt my head. "For saving me today, I mean. Twice."

"That's not something you need to thank me for." I perch next to her, close enough to make sure I can nudge her knee with mine. "First of all, anyone with the ability to save the person they were with would do it because it's common decency. But most of all, it's my job to protect you. You're my mate. Besides, you helped me when I was attacked on Earth, and just now, come to think of it."

Her small, shy smile is such a contrast to the bold and sharp words she spoke just minutes ago. I reach for her face to cup it in my hand just so I can stare into her eyes.

"I'm sorry we've had to spend so much of our time together traveling, both to get here and now today. I want to spend my time showing you how devoted to you I am, yet all I've had to do is work, and apparently, almost die."

Her face creases, and I want to apologize for my words, but she's on her knees and grabbing my face before I can. Each time she kisses me it feels like an achievement unmatched, and I wrap my arms around her, letting her press herself against me. I don't need to pull her in.

"I wish you would let me pleasure you," she whispers against my lips. "Even though it's not tradition. I want to make

you feel good even if I can't give myself to you as your mate yet."

I want her to make me feel good, too. So badly. Just her proximity, her pressing herself against me, has got my cock straining against my pants, aching for the touch of her hand or lips again.

But I'm afraid that if I let myself come for her once without taking her as my mate first, it might break my heart.

"Let me take you somewhere," I breathe against her. "To show you fine dining on Hogar and properly thank you for defending me against Desena. Nobody has ever stood up to her before, and it's not in my nature to be harsh to people who work under me."

She presses a kiss to my cheek. Then another. Then she's back on my lips.

"I'd rather stay here to thank you again for saving me."

When she presses harder against me, I imagine getting to lay her down on this couch and taste her like I did this morning, or plunge my tail into her like I did this afternoon.

But the ache in my chest contradicts the yearning of my body, and I'm forced to shake my head.

"I'll pleasure you later," I promise her, "but I'm actually starving."

She lets out a laugh as she moves back and sits normally. It doesn't do much to stop the aching in my chest. If anything, it makes it hurt more that she doesn't love me as I love her yet.

"Alright. How should I dress?" she asks. "In traditional Hogar clothing so I don't stick out like a sore thumb?"

I don't know what thrills me more: the fact that I may see her in traditional Hogar formal attire or the fact that she's used a silly combination of words that I've never heard before.

"You can do whatever you like as long as you explain what that phrase means."

When I stand up, the joy on her face doesn't dull the ache
in my heart, but it does help me ignore it.

At least for now.

Chapter Eighteen

Wren

I've never had such a successful date. We went to a rooftop restaurant surrounded by plants climbing poles that lead to a false ceiling. The ceiling replicates starlight. Having the stars above but a bright evening around me feels a little surreal.

I recognize almost none of the dishes and learn people don't consume living things on this planet. But most of all, I learn that I really, really like Jameth.

He tells me stories from his childhood, and I feel like I'm talking to an old friend. He describes growing up rich and his shock when he learned that not everyone was as wealthy as him. He was upset that not everybody got to have their own living quarters as a child inside a larger house, then deeply hurt when he found out there were some people who could barely afford to live at all.

"But wealth inequality was eradicated when I was about 12," he adds, "and it hasn't come back since. That's one of the main things I want to ensure now that I'm on the council."

We talk about how he got into art and his favorite things about it. We discuss his family and how they'll be so excited to meet me. He tells me of a city he'd like to take me to one day because he thinks I'd look good against the flowers there.

In turn, I share stories of my time at boarding school and briefly mention a childhood I no longer wish to remember.

"So the second your parents got money, they sent you to a school you had to live in?" Jameth asks, irritation evident.

"It was preferable to living with them," I said. "They were really controlling and made me miserable anyway."

I learn there's no dessert on Hogar, and Jameth is intrigued by the premise. When the rest of the outside becomes as dark as the false ceiling, we leave with me linking Jameth's arm. I lean into him as we return to that vehicle he brought us

here on. As we ride, my sheer Hogar-style formal dress flies up behind me, the jewels on the back of it clicking in the wind.

A gentle glow emits from the House of Elders, and I'm really hoping it just turned all the lights on automatically when it got dark outside. I know my thinking is wishful when Jameth says an unfamiliar word the way one might utter a swear.

He shoves the door open and we find the table surrounded by people: Desena, Ehla, and an older gentleman I don't recognize.

"Prince Elder!" cries Ehla, rising at once. "Oh, I'm so pleased we caught you. There's something I wanted to tell you, I've been meaning to—"

"Leave him alone, Ehla," Desena snaps. "He's had a long, hard day and he's clearly trying to bond with his mate. None of what we are discussing now concerns him. That's what these notes are for."

Next to me, Jameth groans. I'm just pleased to see that Desena has finally shown a little respect for her prince.

"But it's very—"

"If it was urgent, we'd have called him to the meeting," says Desena. Her eyes are dark and tired, and I wonder if she ever takes a break. "It's nothing, Prince Hahl. We were just discussing who we'll be sending out on what missions to where, and we needed a place to meet. We were all in the area, and there are no set hours for using the House of Elders, so—"

"Just keep it down," Jameth says wearily. "And I'll go over your notes tomorrow. Good to see you, Rochul. You belong at that table, and I'm saddened every time you say you don't want to return."

The older man gives Jameth a tight smile and bows his head. Jameth's large hand wraps around mine, and he pulls me toward the stairs.

"I wish we'd taken the stairs up the back of the building," Jameth sighs. "Maybe we'd have taken so long that we missed them."

So our nice evening has definitely come to an end, then. I thought it would end with us entering his allotment, sitting down on the couch, and continuing our conversation. Maybe kissing in between talking about the success of the night.

It seems all the joy our bonding brought him has left him.

Once we enter his allotment, I drag him toward the couch.

“It’s not your problem tonight.” I take his other hand, walking backwards so I can look into his eyes. “Like Desena said. If it was urgent, they would’ve pulled you away from me. But instead, I get to have you all to myself.”

I bring my hands to his lips so I can kiss his soft, strong fingers.. That draws a gentle smile out of him, and he does the same to me. He doesn’t stop with just a single kiss, though. He turns my hand over and presses his lips into my palm, so warm even though my hands aren’t particularly cold. He lays further kisses up my wrist, then stops before my tattoo, gazing down at it.

“You must be the most unique person on this planet with this drawing on your skin and your flame-colored hair,” he says quietly. “There are always people from other planets visiting here all the time for vacations and business, yet you outshine all of them.”

My skin flushes. That seems to make him chuckle, so I don’t attempt to look away to hide my bashfulness.

His flattery makes me feel things I never thought I would get to feel. I’ve been complimented before, called beautiful, pretty, sexy, fun, and endearing. But he is the only one that has ever made my heart stir.

I close the distance between us, not stopping until my body is against his. The warmth of his form envelops me even though he doesn’t put his arms around me the way he usually does. When I lean in, he doesn’t bow to meet my lips. Instead, he winces.

“I can’t tonight,” he says. “Not with them down there.”

Disappointment hits me hard in the chest, and my chin tilts down. It would have been the perfect end to a perfect night.

I want to repeat what we did in the forest, but this time, I want it slower and without the terrifying ending.

“Wren.” There’s strain in his voice as he pushes hair behind my ear. “I don’t want to disappoint you. I want nothing more than for you to be happy every moment I can make you so. I just ... unless it’s a special circumstance, I don’t think I can do it with them down there.”

A special circumstance. I know exactly what he means by that. As I see the sadness in his eyes, I’m almost tempted to say yes.

I mean, what would be so wrong about it? He’s protected me, done everything he can to make me feel good, and seems to feel genuinely remorseful that his work keeps interrupting my time here.

And I just know if I go back to Earth and meet another man, I’ll constantly compare that man to him.

Hell, I wouldn’t even let myself consider being with another man knowing I have a fated mate here pining for me.

I do like him. Very much. It literally feels like my heart is glowing with affection, and all I want to do is kiss him and make him feel better.

There’s such deep sadness in his eyes that my kiss might take away. But he keeps glancing over his shoulder at the doors, and I know he’d be distracted.

Tonight is not the night to seal the bond.

“That’s okay, then.” I slip my hands out of his and I’m not sure what to do next. The day’s been long and I should feel tired, but I don’t feel much like sleeping.

A gentle sigh sounds from behind me, and his hand touches my shoulder.

“No. Screw it. Who am I to deny my mate pleasure?”

I grin, but there's no spark in his eyes. They looked defeated. I want to show him that I genuinely don't care that there are people working downstairs, and he's just given me the opportunity to do that.

This time when I move into him, his arms close around me. He meets my kiss, deepening it instantly as his hands grip the back of my head. When I raise my legs, he catches me so I've got them around his waist. Our bodies are pressed together, and though the night is warm, I feel myself grow hotter with a mixture of need for him and genuine enjoyment of doing this.

The back of my dress hangs behind me, the front of it sandwiched between us. Thank goodness traditional Hogar formal attire has deep slits in the sides. I see nothing but occasional glimpses of his face when I open my eyes, but he's walking, then my back hits something soft as I land on the bed.

He towers over me, undressing before laying himself against me and shoving the bottom of my dress up to my hips.

"You deserve to feel good every night," he whispers onto my lips. "As your mate, I should worship you with my cock, my fingers, and my tongue, whenever you need me to. But tonight, I'll use the closest thing I can use that resembles my cock."

I'm so close to asking for the real thing. But even doing this, he's not fully himself. I don't want his memories of forming our bond to be tainted.

"When we form that bond, whenever that happens, I will worship you with my body, too," I whisper. It fills me with anticipation of what the future holds.

The only problem is that I said *when* we mate, and that look of melancholy in his eyes didn't change.

He doesn't let his sadness stop him, and the yearning has grown too strong between my legs to let it stop me, either. I'm already dripping wet for him.

My arousal coats his fingers the second he rubs them up my slit to pleasure my swollen flesh. Moments later, the tip of his phallic tail teases my entrance, circling it with tiny movements that are surprisingly precise for such a large appendage.

When he enters me, my head pushes back into the feather-soft pillow, hands gripping the fur-lined sheets. When I can, I reach to take hold of his body, gripping either side of his torso as he begins to thrust. He's humping the air, his cock hanging hard and thick between us.

I want to touch it. I want to make him come, even if it's not inside me tonight. But I'll hold back out of respect for his enjoyment of tradition.

It's hard to keep my eyes open, so I just give into the pleasure. After a few minutes his presence over me disappears, but the tail slowly thrusting into me doesn't. His mouth replaces his fingers on my clit, tongue strong as it darts over that sensitive nub that's making my breath hitch.

When I come, it's with a cry of his name. He's been silent throughout.

It's several seconds before I'm able to open my eyes with a clear head. When I do, he's sitting up, folding the clothes he discarded earlier.

"I'm going to go see if I can order something similar to one of the desserts you told me about from Earth. I'll leave you alone while you get ready for bed," he says. I watch the muscles of his back stretch as he stands up and rolls his shoulders back. "I really enjoy pleasuring you, you know. And I would do it all day if you asked."

I long to ask why his smile is sad, but he's gone before I get the chance. I try to sit up, then fall back again, breathless. My orgasm was so strong that it's dizzying when I try to move, so I just clutch at the sheets when I feel something dig into my heart.

I can't let my mate be upset, and I know it's about the meeting downstairs, but somehow I feel like it's my fault. I

failed him, yet he's done nothing but serve me to the best of his abilities.

I'm not sure I deserve him.

Chapter Nineteen

Jameth

I wake before my mate, finding that she has ended up in my arms during the night. It's a good thing I removed my kitwatch before bed, otherwise it would be digging into her neck.

She placed no pillow next to her before she fell asleep, and she was still asleep by the time I came to tell her some lechethe had arrived, which sounds similar to the cake and ice cream she has from Earth. It's a flavored ice served with cream and what's essentially cake, but the cake is made of cheese. She says they have cheese on Earth, but she'd probably find cake made of soft cheese ridiculous.

And I think she'd smile remembering our conversation last night about how we do have what Earth calls dairy, but it's cruelty-free and ethically taken from meohl, which are nothing like the cows she described.

I breathe her scent in deep. I want to wake up with her in my arms every morning, but the week is passing by fast, and I'm not sure we'll ever have a day without interruption.

Every hour we spend without my work getting in the way is a blessing. I want every hour to be like those hours for the rest of our lives. I never wanted to be the Prince Elder; it simply fell on me to take this job when the former elders were judged unfit to be Prince Elder and other key workers told me I was more than capable of handling it.

I leave my mate a note when I take a shower and dress, hoping my refrigerator preserved last night's "dessert" well. Voices sound from below, their tones somewhat celebratory. How I hate living where I work. And I definitely hate the curiosity that brings me downstairs.

"Prince Hahl!" Desena declares, eyes wide and bright. It's nice to hear that she is actually calling me by my title. Titles don't matter to me, but the lack of respect when she doesn't use them does. "I was just coming to tell you. Our

mission to Earth was a success. We have acquired 100 vials of truth potion. There are two six-hour doses in every vial.”

Truth potion. That’s something the women of our species have never been able to make. Hell, it’s a rare gift that mated (and therefore, powered) women can get people to tell the truth using their powers in the first place.

Icheli is the closest thing we have to truth potions, a serum that makes you so suggestible that you do whatever anyone asks. Unfortunately, it’s so rare even the ancient drink collections in the House of Elders and my allotment don’t contain it.

“Is that all?” I ask.

“Actually—” begins Ehla.

“Yes, Ehla. That is all. He should have one day unbothered.” Desena’s words are sharp as she glances at Ehla.

Ehla doesn’t have a very important role in our governing bodies, so I’m sure what she has to say isn’t urgent. I should find out what she has to say eventually, but right now, my priority is getting up to Wren. I must continue to prove my worth to her.

When I get back upstairs, she’s in the kitchen brewing shekoi. There are two cups in front of her, and her eyes light up as she sees me. When she crosses the room, I don’t hesitate to let her kiss me.

“What’s going on?”

“The truth potions you suggested have been acquired.” I curse myself for speaking so formally. “They ... What’s that thing Emily said once? The phrase? They *scored* some truth potion.”

Wren giggles. “I like when you try to speak Earth to me. It’s adorable.”

She adores me? No. She finds something I do adorable. That’s not the same thing.

“For you, I would try to speak in any lingo you like.”

She bites her lip. “I’m sorry I fell asleep last night. I just ... I guess I was more tired than I thought I was, and I swear I’ve never come that hard. Your tail is magic.”

“Mated women are magic,” I correct her in jest, then grin as she laughs. “As are the potions that are apparently going to help us draw truth out of the rebels.”

“Listen ...” Her tone has turned serious.

I wonder if she’s finally going to talk to me about powers. She knows Emily unlocked powers within herself when she mated with Ron.

What she says next isn’t about the magic at all. I’m not really sure she cares about it.

“I want to do something for you.” She reaches for my hands, squeezing them. I love the ease at which she touches me now. “I know you can’t come without being inside me, but there’s this sex thing they do on Earth called edging. It’s where you deny yourself an orgasm to make it stronger when you eventually do come. But I’ve also heard of variations where you bring yourself to the edge, and then you hold back, and then you just stop. Right before orgasm. You can still feel all the pleasure leading up to it, but—”

She cuts off at the look on my face.

“I’d love nothing more for you to reciprocate, Wren, but you don’t need to.” I take a deep breath. “And maybe I would have said yes early yesterday, and I definitely would have said yes to you doing anything for me before that. But it’s getting harder to be intimate with you.”

Her eyes widen. For the first time since the day of our meeting, fear hangs between us. I didn’t even smell fear on her yesterday when we were literally attacked by a monster. My rejection is what she is afraid of, and that gives me some hope.

“Why?”

“Because not being mated to you is actually hurting me physically.” I can feel a sob in my chest that wants to come out. I don’t want to cry, but the emotions are heavy within me and they want to escape somehow. “It feels like there’s

something digging deep into my heart every time I do something intimate with you without you being my mate. I adore pleasuring you. It fuels me. But I just need a break until it stops hurting me.”

I shut my eyes. I can't bear to see the disappointment I know will be on her face. Instead, she squeezes my hand gently.

“I understand.” She squeezes my hand again, and I'm still afraid to look at her. “But ...” She sighs. “What if I told you that I think I might be ready to make the bond? I didn't want to last night, because you seemed so upset and I didn't want to ruin it for you. But what if I said I was ready?”

Every muscle in my body tenses. I think through last night to see if she was giving me the signals that she was ready. All she did was allow me to pleasure her, then tell me that when we mated, she would like to do the same to me.

She said ... *when*.

Last night, she had already decided that we were definitely going to do it some day.

“You said when,” I whisper.

“I did. I did say when. I added that ‘whenever we do it’ thing so you wouldn't think I wanted to do it last night, because I wasn't going to do it if I thought you were sad. But I did say when. I am going to form that bond, Jameth. And I'm starting to think doing it sooner rather than later is the most logical choice.”

I know she doesn't have advanced hearing like mine, and I can usually tune out the sounds of people's heartbeats and their breathing and their subtle movements. But never have I heard anything moving as quickly as my heart right now. When I listen for hers, it's beating just as fast.

There are no words to describe what I feel. It feels like my whole life's purpose is about to be fulfilled, and honestly, that's not far from the truth.

I feel like I was told of her existence on the day of my birth, and I've spent every day since digging through snow

trying to find her. But she's just a single speck of the most beautiful see-through jewel, smaller than even the tiniest snowflake.

I didn't know her until just days ago, and I wasn't told of her existence until a year and a half ago, but I feel as though I've gone through my whole life loving her. The idea of her. The idea of my mate.

As I pick her up in my arms and kiss her with more passion than I ever have, I thank the universe for bringing her to me. In return, I shall spend my whole life serving her.

Chapter Twenty

Wren

Such terror has never coursed through my veins, but if I can't do this brave, then I'll do it scared. Everything in the world melts away when I'm in Jameth's arms, and that's all that matters.

I'm already yearning for him, like my body is constantly primed to form this bond. The excitement in my heart feels like my body is rewarding me for finally letting it do what it's been craving since meeting him.

We stumble back through the allotment much like we did last night, only there's something less passionate and more fierce about it. My shoulder collides with the doorframe, Jameth trips over his own feet as he picks me up, and his grip on me is so hard it almost hurts.

But what hurts the most is how I need to do this so badly I can hardly breathe.

When we reach the bedroom, I waste no time pulling off the robe I put on to venture into the kitchen. I lay naked and ready beneath him, back arching and chest heaving.

Every ounce of me is filled with need for him that makes the fear feel okay. My eyes slide over his toned body as he pulls off his shirt, revealing the details of him, then he shoves his pants down with more urgency than I've ever seen.

Within seconds, he's on top of me again, his hot breath over my lips. His hands are on my thighs, my hips move up against his, and his hard cock presses against me. And this time, I get to have it inside me.

"Are you sure you want this?" He stares down at me, giving me one last chance to back out. I'm not sure how he's so restrained, because he looks so tense he might explode.

"Just do it," I beg. "Fuck me. Make me your mate."

Saying that last thing sends a shiver through me, but I won't let that make me back down.

He presses up against me, cock between us and sliding against my folds. I rock my hips, spreading my legs even wider, more than ready and willing. Once he gets up against me, I lock my ankles around his back so he can't pull away again.

His hand wraps around the base of his cock. I reach out to run my thumb over the tip, but there's no delaying this. He has craved this for so long. Longer than I've known he existed. When he positions himself and pushes into me, I don't have time to worry that he so large that he won't fit, because he's already filling me, making my eyes widen and my body become limp as my walls clamp down around him, taking all the strength I have.

I've never felt this full. And as his tough hands knead my flesh while he begins to rock his hips, I've never felt this claimed, either.

He makes me feel like I'm his and his alone.

My brain turns off as my body takes over, instinctively rocking against his. He lets out soft grunts as our flesh slaps together, like he's trying to come inside me and fill me up as quickly as he possibly can to truly, truly make me his.

I reach to cradle his head against me as his forehead bows to meet mine, and the intensity of it almost makes my ears pop as I feel his hot face close to me. At a sound like shattering glass, I wonder if it's the barrier between us being broken, allowing us to fully become mates.

Jameth stops thrusting. "Did you hear that?"

It takes me a moment to realize the shattering sound wasn't in my head. Now I'm terrified for an entirely different reason.

Jameth scrambles off me and dashes out of the bedroom naked. I get to my feet and look around for my robe. My head can't seem to recognize it for a moment.

"Don't follow!" he barks from down the hall, and I'm so disoriented that I obey.

There are footsteps out there, and more than just Jameth's. He lets out a roar of, "Hey!" and I cover my mouth.

I'm debating whether or not I should follow, when shattering glass makes me turn again. Rainbow beams shoot across the room from the shattered window fragments on the floor, but heavy boots crush the glass into dust as a huge man rushes toward me and his arms wrap around me before I can escape.

He made one deadly mistake; he grabbed my jaw, thumb on my lower lip, allowing me to bite down hard on him. Even though my mouth fills with blood, he doesn't move. Not until there's a chunk of flesh in my mouth. He pulls his hands away, screaming and flailing as blood spurts out of him.

I must look like a demon in a horror film as I smile at my achievement, his blood trickling down my chin.

I spit the flesh on the ground and make a run for it, feet smacking hard against the smooth floor. Jameth is locked in combat with another man. The door to the allotment opens, and I feel like I've been seen and have nowhere to run. A feral roar comes from behind me. I lunge for the handle just above the floor, pushing up the door to the closet where Jameth keeps his DVDs.

Inside, there's another handle that allows the door to open sideways. I push the door open just enough to peak out, feeling like somehow being in here will protect me.

I feel like I can't move. The door of the allotment slides open, and Ehla runs in only to immediately cower in the corner, shaking. The man who attacked me leaps onto Jameth's back, and it fills me with such rage that I burst out of my hiding spot and throw myself onto him, teeth sinking down into his shoulder, my arms reaching around so I can scratch at his eyes.

Though he writhes and shouts, I cling to him like I'm trying to win money for staying the longest on a mechanical bull until I'm sure I've blinded him. His blood tastes strong and tangy.

As he flails without eyes, I let myself drop and throw myself at his front until he hits the ground. Before he can get up, I push my full weight onto his chest and smack his head against the ground like I did to those attackers on Earth. Except I don't care if this one dies.

Jameth has got the other guy pinned to the ground, but my almost-mate seems to be struggling. I sit on the guy's legs so he can move less, but he's bigger than Jameth. Bigger than anyone I've ever seen. Veins bulge in his shoulders, and his eyes look like they're popping out of his head as he screams.

"I told you to—" starts Jameth.

"I wasn't going to leave you," I snap.

More footsteps sound and I'm ready to throw myself onto whoever tries to attack my almost-mate, but it's Desena holding a watch like the one Jameth usually wears. A high-pitched whir fills the room before the man under Jameth turns to dust, and the one behind me becomes rigid.

A sob comes from the corner as I stand and Jameth climbs up next to me. As I turn to face Ehla, Desena takes her into her arms.

"It's okay, mother," Desena says softly. "They're gone." When she turns to Jameth, she's all business. "Are there more?"

"No." Jameth wipes his bloody lip on the back of his hand. His cheek is swollen. His shoulders are covered in scratches. "Who were—how did they—"

"They're from Hesana," says Desena. "I recognize them because they're some of the people we've just started investigating. That's partly what last night's meeting was about. They must have followed you back here and figured out a way into the grounds."

My head throbs. These rebels felt like distant threats, but now they've actually come to fight us. Not just in protest, but as an actual attack. I reach for Jameth and wrap my arms around one of his.

“Take Ehlā somewhere safe, and alert everyone here that we’ve been infiltrated,” says Jameth. “I’ll place the emergency measures on my allotment and the House of Elders.”

Desena nods, pulling Ehlā along with her. Once the women are gone, Jameth grabs my head and forcefully kisses my forehead.

“You shouldn’t have done that. He was so much bigger than you, and—”

“And he bleeds just like a human and tastes much the same.” I grimace. “I’m going to need to brush my teeth. Can I do that while these emergency measures are being done?”

Jameth nods. Before I can leave, he pulls me back by the wrist and kisses my forehead hard again.

I’m feeling sick, and not because I tasted the blood of one of my almost-mate’s enemies. But because I could’ve easily been taken away from my mate, and he from me.

All the fear in me is gone now, adrenaline replacing it, and I run to the bathroom to scrub the taste of filth from my tongue.

I need Jameth to be mine before something like that happens again. I’ve wasted enough time not being bonded to him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Wren

The moment my hands and mouth feel clean, I dash back to the living room. The broken windows have already been fixed, and there's a gentle blue glow on the walls.

"Nobody is getting through that from the outside," says Jameth, tapping the repaired glass. It ripples soundlessly. "Not without being electrocuted."

The place seems clean, and both bodies are gone. The adrenaline in me is fading now, but there's a new sensation replacing it. *Need*. Not like the need I had for Jameth earlier, but a new need.

I need to be his. And I need him to be mine.

"So we're safe?"

"Yes." He faces me. "As long as we stay in here, we're safe. Nobody but Desena, Ehla, and Rochul—a former elder who sometimes helps out—can get into the House of Elders now. And I sent a message asking not to be disturbed."

I gaze at his bare wrist. The watch he usually wears still isn't on it, but I think he should put it back on. I don't know what it does, but it seems to be a lot. And if it's anything like Desena's, we need it.

When we're not totally safe again, that is. Now, I just cross the room and land in his arms when I jump at him, my arms around his neck.

His hands grip me against him, holding me up so I have no fear of falling. Our lips move together like we've been kissing for years. He feels safe and familiar, and all of my fear of forming the bond has gone.

This has to happen. I want to feel what he feels for me, because hurting him is wounding me deeper than I ever could've imagined.

I push against him to get back on my feet, pulling him with me. One hand leads him, and I untie my robe with the other, shedding it as I go. When we reach the couch, I turn us. It may not be comfortable for long movies, but it's fine for this.

As soon as he sits, I'm in his lap. He's still naked, and I can't tell if the sheen on his skin is from the exertion of the fighting or what we were doing before it.

His eyes are on mine as I pull back, my hands on his face. His cheek is swollen, but his lip isn't bleeding, and it's clearly not so painful that he can't kiss.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

He nods. "That's nothing. I experienced worse while training. Are *you*?"

I answer by kissing him and pressing my chest against his. He leans back against the cushions, arms sliding around me, and we're done talking.

Heat is already building between our bodies, and his cock beneath me is hardening fast. He's as ready for me as I am for him, like there was no break between our encounters.

I rise enough for him to position himself under me, and when I sink down, I'm filled again. But this time, he fills me with nothing but pleasure. No fear. No more overthinking as I anchor my hands on his shoulders and begin to ride.

This is how it's supposed to be when you have a mate. Simple. No pressure. All fate, no questions.

His hips buck up into me even though I'm riding him, his body coming to meet mine. The long, deep strokes become shallow. The head of his cock catches my G spot. It makes me explode with sensations deep and rich, and my clit throbs like someone's been rubbing on it for an hour and I'm close to orgasm.

I feel him in my abdomen, under my palms, and between my legs. Even though the places we are physically connecting are few, it feels like the entirety of his soul is surrounding me now. He's the air I breathe, and I never want this tank of

oxygen to run out. It feels right, like putting this off was stupid of me and I should apologize for it.

As my teeth grit, I begin chasing not just my orgasm, but his. Our mating. His cock throbbing inside me draws a moan from my lips. His scent swells around me as I fall against his neck. The scent that overwhelmed me that first day, the one that's all natural. It's warm, and it's comforting, and it's him. And despite all the danger, it makes me feel safe. Because as long as we're together when we get through everything that happens, I will always be safe.

As our pace quickens, I fall back. My hair tickles my back, and one of his hands grabs hold of it while the other one is around my waist keeping me steady. Nearing my peak, I can barely breathe. My body no longer needs oxygen as long as he keeps pulsing inside me, close to the edge with me.

"Wren," he whispers, "come for me. I want you to come for me while we form our bond. Show me it feels as good for you as it does for me."

Is there any doubt that I'll come for him? And from penetration alone. A few strokes later, the tension builds fast, then crashes over. I become limp as my walls clench around him, the deep throbbing of his cock heightening the sensation. I feel so tight that I might explode.

And then there's heat. Heat filling me, deep inside me, pumping as he climaxes with me. We form our bond, finally becoming mates officially. Just as fate intended. Every time I think he's finished coming, there's more, dripping out of me around his cock and pooling between our bodies.

I don't want him to stop filling me; every last ounce that he pumps into me feels like another claim on my body and I'm sure, when my head clears, on my soul.

I'm forced to stop moving, and his hips stop moving with me. I can't catch my breath, but the burn in my lungs and the residual pleasure rolling through my body feels so good. My heart swells, and I wait for the wave of affection.

My eyes land on his. His eyes are glassy, dazed, staring at me as if I'm the center of his universe.

“My mate,” he whispers. “Oh, my mate. I love you. *I love you.*”

I wait for the words to spill eagerly from my lips, but they don't come. I say them anyway, but I feel distant from it. He softening inside me, his smile bright and skin flushed, but I don't feel that rush of affection I'm waiting for. The one Emily told me she felt for a stranger before she knew her mate was her long-lost love.

Instead, all I feel is cold distance, and I need to climb off his lap because the chill has made me nauseous.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Wren

My head still throbs even though I've calmed down, showered, and dressed. My thoughts don't form words, just uncomfortable feelings. I want to love him. I want to feel a rush of affection like I've never felt before. Feel like a bride on her wedding day knowing she's found the one she was always meant to be with. Feel like that same bride 100 years later staring at her husband across from her, knowing she made the right choice when she said yes to his proposal.

But if anything, I feel less for him than I did before. The affection I felt seems tainted, and now he's just some guy I've fucked and let down while he consults with Desena in the House of Elders.

"Maybe it takes longer sometimes," Emily says encouragingly through my phone. "Ron and I bonded a lot before I agreed to seal the mate bond back when I thought he was a stranger. He calmed me down while I was panicking on an alien planet, stopped my fears even though I was experiencing my worst nightmare, and tried to get me to be vulnerable in ways that I wouldn't let myself be after Seeley."

"And I helped Jameth fight off an attack, he saved my life here, and we helped each other out again literally right before forming the mate bond!" My voice escapes in a whine and I hate how pathetic I sound.

Emily's brows drop. "Did he say anything that made you feel ... I don't know. Genuinely romantically attracted to him? Before you mated? Or did you decide to mate with feelings of pure friendship?"

I roll back my shoulders and search my head for answers. The things I felt for Jameth were things I would feel for a friend. I wanted to protect and care for him as I do for many of my friends. But I have a lot of friends, and not once would I ever consider doing something that would bond me to them

forever. I'll make friendship bracelets, but I won't give in to some fate-designated mate bond.

There are some guys I've dated I think may have caused me to give into some fate-designated bond if they asked me to, and they were nowhere near as wonderful as Jameth even though I knew them longer.

"It's definitely romantic." I'm sure of that more than I'm sure of anything.

Emily is still frowning. I stare at the phone in desperation, then look over my shoulder, but Jameth doesn't seem to be coming up any time soon. Is that shocking considering what we just went through?

"I can ask Ron when he comes back," says Emily, her face strained. "I don't want to call him now. He's at a mommy and me class because he's disgusted that it's just for mothers and that there are so few places for dads to bond with their children on Earth. Hell, he's disgusted by how Earth seems to view fathers as distant and lazy in general."

See? That's what I want. That cute little laugh and smile that overcame her when talking about her mate. Like she's been plunged into a pool of pure love and adoration like a giggly teenager having her first crush.

Why can't I have that?

All I can say is, "Thanks. Yeah. Asking him what he knows when he's back could be helpful."

We change the subject a little, but it brings me no joy. It would usually make me smile and clutch my heart to hear about how Emily's daughter, Clem, has learned a new word from TV and it keeps coming out in a British accent. But I fake my smiles, just as I need to fake my affection for the man I should now be in love with.

Footsteps approach my door, and a gentle knock surprises me. I answer. Desena has her hands folded in front of her. She looks grim at first, but then she inhales.

"You have mated," she says with a gentle laugh. "Wow. I've been smelling that brink-of-mating scent on Jameth since

before he left, but on you it's all new. Despite everything, you've done it. You formed the bond."

Her smile looks so white against the blue tinge of her skin. Her eyes are tired, though, like she wants to be happy for me but is too exhausted by her work.

Kind of like how I want to feel joy at the fact that I mated, but I'm too exhausted by not knowing what the fuck is going on.

"Is everything alright?" I ask.

"Yes. Everything is fine. Jameth wanted me to tell you he went to speak to the security on the gate personally."

I don't really like how she keeps calling him Jameth. That's his *name* name. Not his title name. People he works with should call him by his title name even if they don't add his title to it.

"I appreciate that." I bite my lip. I can't let my mixed up thoughts stop me from extending niceties. "I hope those suggestions I gave you all when I arrived work out soon, because you really, really deserve a day off. All of you." I pause, trying not to get wrapped up in my own thoughts. "Is Ehla okay?"

"She's fine. She was startled." Desena folds her arms tightly. "She's taking the rest of the day off."

"Did I hear right when you called her 'mother?'"

"Yes. I try not to at work. It's unprofessional."

Her eyes keep moving up and down my body. Like she's trying to see if there's something new in me, like I've changed. Should I be different? Should I be standing around and gushing over my new mate? Or brimming with some kind of newfound power?

I am supposed to have powers now that I've mated, but I don't know the first thing about them. I was so focused on trying to love the man I was supposed to mate with that there was no time for me to learn about what's supposed to happen to me after we formed the bond.

“Not everyone is going to be pleased that we’ve got a new queen,” says Desena, when she finally settles on looking at my eyes again. Her chin tilts up, pushing an air of authority over me. “But if you’re going to be our queen, you’re going to have to start dressing in traditional Hogar clothing, and you’re going to have to start working on how you’re going to introduce yourself to the people who do want you. And you will need to know how to protect yourself from those who don’t. There were other queens people wanted, you know.”

I look down. I don’t know much about how the last Elders Council departed, or who their previous prince was and if he had a queen, but if the people of Hogar are anything like the people of Earth, I’m sure there’ll be a lot of opinions on my new position.

Especially because I’m human.

“I’ll talk to Jameth about clothing,” I say, feeling a little meek. I want him back. Maybe him being around will help me stop feeling so distant from how much I adored him earlier today.

“Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have things to do,” says Desena.

She heads for the stairs without saying goodbye. I wait until she’s half way down the steps before closing the door.

I start pacing, not sure if I should call Emily back to ask if she knows anything about the elders thing or what I should do.

For the first time since arriving here, I really feel like an alien. And that’s the opposite of what I should feel now that I’m mated to their prince.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jameth

I should care that work is distracting me, but I don't. I'm a mated man. Newly mated, not even an hour on from the joyous moment I got to claim my mate, fill her with my seed, and begin our future together.

There is much to be discussed, of course. We'll have to discuss how long to spend on Hogar versus Earth. If she wants to go back to Earth, I can join her when it's safe for me to leave Hogar. If she wants to extend her visit a little, but not stay until I can leave, then we can discuss that, too.

And there's the question of what kind of house we should look for here and on Earth. How many children we will have—two is customary—and whether or not she's going to take on the traditional queenly duties or be a silent watcher as the last two queens were, which I think may be more her style.

But she'd also make such an incredible leader. And if I'm going to be forced to lead, it would be nice to have someone by my side who's going through the same thing.

When I return to my allotment, I freeze in my tracks. I can see the details of her curved waist and high, beautiful breasts through the sheer clothing she wears, which is traditional of women's attire on Hogar.

She must have taken it from my closet.

"You look ..." There aren't enough words on any planet to describe the beauty that stands before me. I imagine it's what the first person to ever see a sunrise saw.

"You knew my size." She folds her arms as she looks me up and down. "I never asked you how you knew my size with the formal wear. But I'm curious. This fits so perfectly."

"I asked Emily before I came to get you. Do you like it?"

She glances down at herself. "I feel very exposed."

There is something off about her tone. “Does that make you uncomfortable?”

“No!” She rushes forward to take hold of my hand. “It’s just new. Everything is new. I look amazing, I’m just not used to it.”

I squeeze her hand. “I promise I’ll guide you through every new thing here just as you will guide me through everything that is new to me on your planet. We have a lifetime to get used to each other’s respective homelands.”

“Yes. Yes, a lifetime.”

And now I know that thought must bring her as much joy as it brings me. To know there will always be someone by her side to love and protect her.

“Now,” I declare, leading her to the door, “I want to take you somewhere very special. We only have about an hour, as there’s something that needs to be done after.”

The place I’m taking her is the nicest daytime dining establishment in the city. The walls are made of clear gems, and it is situated in the middle of a man-made garden area floating in the middle of a lake. It’s deep into this city’s center.

But there’s one thing I have to do after it, and my mood is elevated too high for me to be annoyed by it.

“Let me guess. You have to do something about the attack we just went through?”

Her smile is slightly strained. All this work must tire her. This is supposed to be a break, yet the stream of responsibilities is endless when we should be celebrating.

“It’s just one mission.” I squeeze her hand. “A quick excursion for a meeting in Waicha. You don’t have to come, but you’re welcome to. It’s far enough away to teleport to.”

Part of me wants her by my side at all times, but another part wants her to stay behind as I think of how the journey to my last out-of-city mission went.

“I think I’m actually going to seek out Ehla or another woman who works around the House of Elders so I can learn

more about the powers thing,” says my mate, and my chest swells with pride. “Maybe I’ll call Emily. Oh, and I know there’s a mind connection thing that can happen once you mate with someone, so I might want to start learning about that.”

I’m so pleased that she’s interested in learning about this. My joy is physically painful as my body wants to explode with it.

“Yes. The mind connection,” I tell her. “We can discuss it on the way to the place I’d like to take you.”

She is so responsive to my suggestion and allows me to lead her to where we keep our vehicles. Today, I choose one that can drive itself, and we sit in the back seat. We are inside, so the rushing wind won’t stop us from speaking.

“What is the mind connection?” she continues the conversation as if we never paused it to begin our journey.

“Well, it allows us to communicate without speaking,” I say. “I was able to give you a teaser of it on Earth when I showed you our bond, but I can’t show you much more than what I’m feeling until I allow my mind to be open to you, and yours to me.”

The engine starts almost silently. The tinted windows give us a darkened view of the area around us as we begin to drive out the back entrance of the building’s allotted area.

“And how do I open my mind to you?”

I chuckle. “It’s instinctive, and you have to learn it. Usually a mate’s mind is wide open from the time of their first bond, and it’s the man who has to avoid going into his female’s mind. But yours is closed. That’s rare, and I like the mysteriousness of it.”

We hold hands between us on the cushy seat, and I squeeze hers as her skin flushes.

“Why is it always the man that has the advantage?”

I roll my eyes at the one-sidedness of it all. “I wish I knew.”

Our journey is swift, and we discuss her potential powers a little while I force myself to stay out of her mind.

As we are distracted by her first view of the dining establishment and being seated, I reach out to her a little, probing into her mind at the edges. I get nothing from her but numbness, but I'm not sure the numbness is a block. I think she's just feeling numb right now, and I want to cradle her in my arms and kiss that numbness away to replace it with joy.

I can understand why she feels a little distanced from herself. There is much to discuss as I acknowledged, and I'm sure she has a lot to think about as someone who never thought she'd be destined for a life like this.

I will keep trying every so often to feel what she's feeling, though, because I want to feel her love for me radiating from her. It would bring me so much pleasure.

Once we order, we can converse again. I tell her of the city I'll be visiting and how it has the largest telescope in our world. I describe how you can easily see the moon and the red city so large and tall it looks like a mountain. The fact that it's visible to the naked eye surprises her.

"That sounds nice," she says quietly, glancing at her wrist. "I can't imagine looking at a moon that doesn't look like *the* moon. Earth's moon. All grey and plain and boring."

To help her, I draw ours on a napkin using the red sauce from my dish as ink and the brown stains from my drink as the base for the rest of the moon. We have yet to sky gaze here by night, and I make a note to show her our stars and moon as soon as I can.

"Maybe a redesigned version of that would be a nice second ink drawing for your other wrist," I say, eyes twinkling. "So you will have a moon that represents both your planets."

I don't enjoy how the feeling of numbness from her increases, so I swiftly avoid talking about this place being another home and start talking about her friends instead.

I keep it light as we continue our quick date. I have avoided telling her all the things deep in my heart. I long to tell her about how excited I am that she will now be by my side forever, be the mother of my children, and be the person I turn to every morning and night.

I don't tell her how painfully beautiful she is, how she looks so good in casual Hogar clothing, and how all I want to do for the rest of the day is to throw this mission aside and pull her into my chest, holding her there while I tell her of what a traditional Hogar life is like.

But I don't. I allow her to explain her work in detail, talk about how she met Emily and Luna, and talk about the "cringeworthy haircuts" she had in her youth. In turn, I explain a mishap where I got into Echoul fashion, which is very unlike normal Hogar fashion and made me look like an idiot.

The numbness in her mind is replaced by a small amount of joy during our conversation, and she rests her head on my shoulder as we return to my allotment. Or, as it stands now, *our* allotment.

I want more moments like this with her. Small outings where we can just chat about our lives and, in the future when we know each other inside and out, about our respective days if we don't spend every minute of them together.

It's nothing grand. It's just *nice*.

But what's not nice is how I have to teleport away only moments after we return from the outing.

"I want you back in one piece," she says sternly. "Alright? No giant snake attacks."

I give her the respectful nod people usually give their boss.

"No giant snake attacks. I'll be back before you know it."

I make sure to inhale the scent of our mating still on her skin as I pull her into a deep kiss. Despite the slight sadness on her, her arousal peaks with our kiss and lingers when we part.

“Good luck speaking to a woman.” I squeeze both of her hands, excited for her to learn as much about her newfound powers as possible. “Desena is probably a little too overwhelmed with work, but Ehla may be around. She’s probably in the garden somewhere. If I know her, she won’t be far even though she’s been given the rest of the day off.”

Wren thanks me. She keeps thanking me and watches me as I leave, waving to me the way I always imagined my mate would wave me off each morning I had to work.

But there’s something in her eyes, a strange distance like she’s exhausted. She must just be overwhelmed. I *have* to tell myself she’s overwhelmed. I don’t have room to worry about my mate until I get this ridiculous mission out of the way, and then I’ll do everything I can to make her comfortable once more.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Wren

The fact that I miss him is a good sign, and the fact I keep feeling compelled to touch him, comfort him, and the likes helps, too. I'm worried while he's away, and I'd rather be by his side.

Now the initial shock of not feeling what I thought I'd feel has passed, I realize there's been no change in my feelings whatsoever. The cold distance is just my spiraling thoughts. I still care for him, but it's more like the way I'd care for a man in the early weeks and months of dating.

And I don't love him. I don't think I do, anyway.

I take 20 minutes or so to explore his home when he's gone, which he suggested I do when we were on the way back from our date. He has a lot of knickknacks and some family photographs on shelves, and there are a few books inside the table in the middle of the room.

One of the cabinets in the kitchen contains a variety of rare and aged drinks, which he told me to help myself to when we were on the way back from the restaurant. He seemed thrilled that he had them, saying, "The last Prince Elder told me about them. He's not supposed to have his own secret stash, and the other elders know nothing about it. Actually, he never did open any of the bottles. He says the last Prince Elder before him told him about them, and they were unopened even then."

He spent the next 10 minutes telling me about all these rare drinks that only the elders could source and afford and that were stored inside the table in the House of Elders. I was amused then, and still am now, at the Prince Elder having his own secret supply.

I select a dust-covered bottle containing purple liquid called Zuhl, which tastes almost exactly like a brownie, and a few minutes after drinking it, I notice a slight pain I've had since our attack earlier has gone.

When I go back to read the label, I discover it says it's a slow release healing serum as well as an enjoyable drink. It tackles physical ailments quickly and gets to work on slow acting poisons and toxins in a matter of hours. Adrenaline and fear can make it work on toxins and poisons faster.

No wonder some past Prince Elder had a secret stash of this stuff. Maybe they knew it was only a matter of time before their position was attacked.

Beverages on this planet are fascinating, as are the other things I find in the cabinets of his kitchen.

After my exploration, I try calling Emily, but her phone is busy. I expected that considering how long she's been away from Earth and how many people she has to visit. Her father, her brother, her friend Josie. I guess I'll have to speak to someone here about my troubles with the bond.

When I venture out to look for a woman—preferably Ehla, as Desena intimidates me a little—it's not long before I find one. Desena is on her own in the House of Elders, pacing around the table and occasionally groaning.

“Is everything alright?”

Desena turns to look at me with venom in her eyes.

“Your tactics aren't working,” she snaps. “I just found out that two of our undercover agents have been thrown out of their groups, and one of them has been trying to infiltrate what's actually a role-playing group. I should've known Earth tactics wouldn't work.”

I deflate a little. I would most definitely rather speak to Ehla right now. Hell, I'd rather speak to a stranger.

“I'm sorry,” I say, my voice shaking a little. “It was just a suggestion. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. Honestly.”

Desena rolls her eyes. All the kindness she's displayed up until this point seems miles away. I step closer to her, and she folds her arms across her chest.

“It's not your fault,” she mutters. “It's your mate's. Any prince who lets an Earthling advise his people has no business

being a prince. He should know how primitive your species are. This is on *him*.”

A ball of defensiveness the size of a planet forms in my gut. I spit, “This isn’t his fault. You can’t blame him. None of you know how to handle things like this because it’s not normal for your people. It’s nobody’s fault. He’s doing the best he can.”

“Typical.” Desena peers at me and holds her hands up. “Go ahead. Unleash the rest.”

Her eyes looked dead like she’s annoyed and exhausted by what I’ve said already. But I have nothing more to say. I won’t have her be awful about Jameth, but what does she think I’m going to do? Attack her?

As my eyes dart from side to side while thinking about what I should do, her hands drop.

“What, no epic speech about how you’ll defend your mate to the death and will have me fired for speaking ill of him?” Her head twists like she’s thinking, and her eyes settle on me again. “You did mate, didn’t you? I didn’t imagine that? You have formed that bond?”

I have to take long, careful breaths to keep from panicking. Is it that obvious that something has gone wrong?

“We did.” My mouth is dry, and she begins to approach, her face holding none of her previous irritation. “Is something wrong with me?” My voice comes out strained.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Her hands press to her chest as she closes the distance between us. “It hasn’t happened, has it? The pull of the bond. The part that’s supposed to change you. You don’t feel it.”

After her anger at me and then at Jameth, she’s possibly one of the last people I want to know this. But her concern seems so genuine, and I’m not sure how well I could lie in this situation.

“My feelings toward him haven’t changed at all from before I decided to form the bond.”

With a groan, Desena takes hold of my hands and squeezes. “This is rare. Exceptionally rare. But I know something that can help. There’s this place, a place where healers work. Healers for the mate bond.”

Relief washes over me so much that I feel physically cold.

“Do you think we could go? Before Jameth gets back? I don’t want him to know anything went wrong with me. It would hurt him too much.”

Should I be embarrassed? I wish I knew enough about this society to tell. Desena doesn’t seem judgmental. She just nods and shakes my arm lightly.

“I’ll take you there right now. It isn’t far, and it shouldn’t take long. Everything will go according to plan between you and your mate after this, trust me. And once everything goes according to plan, I think this planet will be much better off because it’ll have leaders that are more than a match for running it.”

I can’t tell if she regrets calling Jameth unworthy or if she’s just saying this to make me feel better, but I don’t really care. As she heads for the door, I allow her to pull me along with her, and my heart pounds with excitement and nerves.

We will get this fixed. I will feel what I’m meant to feel for my mate. I won’t hurt him anymore, and I’ll finally feel worthy of him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jameth

I've missed traveling around my planet using teleportation. I used to be able to go to any city in any nation for any reason I pleased, but I'm restrained by the title I hold now.

The beauty of Waicha is unmatched on Hogar. Everything is excessively large, and the buildings and streets are laid out in squares instead of circles and curves.

Driving around this city is illegal. All transportation is underground, and you have to drive around the outside of the city if you want to travel beyond it.

But most importantly, the air here is scented like Wai, a sweet purple flower that grows in rural areas and is manufactured by flower designers in cities. But here, it grows on every tree and the grass is a subset of it, so the area is constantly perfumed.

The people here are so productive and friendly because the aroma is known for its relaxing and mood-boosting qualities. It's unsurprising that there have been no rebels here and that this place is home to one of the largest and calmest prisons full of rebels from other nations.

I visited Waicha a lot in my youth. I mean, I'm still young, but I mean five and six years ago before we began preparing hard for the upcoming non-existent war. I'd come to paint. I frequently took women I was seeing at the time so I could paint them in the lush purple grasses.

I want to take Wren here. The purple will go well with her hair, and the sweet scent is so pleasant that it reminds me of her.

As I walk the path, I detour by one of the picking areas so I can take some flowers home for her. I pin them to my shirt to make sure they won't be crushed in one of my pockets. One day I'll have time to come here again. One day when the chaos

ends and I can return to running this planet the way it's supposed to be run.

Although, that in itself is a full-time job that is mostly being outsourced to city leaders right now. I'm not looking forward to taking that task on once there are no more rebellions for me to be in charge of stopping.

I never wanted to be this. I just wanted to be the gatekeeper to help the Chosen Ones, be a warrior in the war, then live a blissful life of leisure with my mate. Maybe pursue a passion and support her in hers.

I pass the multicolored buildings of the shopping district, receiving many stares and lots of overenthusiastic waves. I take photographs with several citizens and sign a couple of hands and papers.

This is how life should be in every area on our planet. It's a shame that without the relaxing scents constantly wafting over them, these people might no longer be as peaceful as the rest of the planet has always been.

The House of High is in the center of the city in a large rectangular plot. The gate guards allow me in, and I use my kitwatch to photograph some of the trees on the winding path. They're blooming with yellow flowers that don't usually come naturally with Wai. Wren would look good photographed or painted in front of them, too.

It takes quite some time to reach the front door of the tall, pointed building with jewel-encrusted beige and yellow walls. The guards flanking its door let me in, and the Secretary of Visitation lowers her brows when she sees me.

"Prince Elder." Her hands fold in front of her. "We weren't expecting you. Is everything alright? Has something happened?"

"Well, yes," I mutter, somewhat bitterly despite the relaxation still deep in my bones, "but that's not why I'm here. My underling told me Pruhleth asked to see me? Something about volunteers from his staff wanting to help us with our new tactic of infiltrating suspected rebel groups?"

The woman, whose name tag says Meleth, holds up a finger and turns from me, heading for the couch in the corner. She pulls a file from the shelf beneath it, sits, and flicks through the pages.

While she's busy, I take time to admire the architecture. Everything is smooth and bold, but not obnoxiously bright and almost glowing like my allotment in the House of Elders. It's more sandy and simple with decorations in bright colors. The stone has a creamy, swirling texture that appears when the blocks are forged.

"There's nothing about this in the books." Meleth approaches and hands me the book to check for myself. The last appointment was yesterday evening with Druhol, and the next is this afternoon with Eliaeth. Business as usual."

"But my underling, Desena Kich, told me she received an urgent call and said that I was in the book."

Meleth's face pales slightly, her eyes widening. "I'm sorry. If I missed the call, or if I'm mistaken, or if I haven't checked the books correctly—"

I shake my head. "No, don't be worried." I give the woman a look up and down. "You are a Nechohl, aren't you?"

Meleth nods. It would be very unusual for a city leader to employ a non-Nechohl as his Secretary of Visitation. Although most Hogar people have infinite, perfect memories, the Nechohl have the fastest-acting and least-confuseable of them all. There's no way she forgot the appointment.

"Maybe I heard her wrong," I mutter. "Maybe it's a different book I'm in. I don't know. Is it possible to see Pruhleth now anyway?"

Relief warms Meleth's skin as she nods and beckons for me to follow. We approach the staircase that moves on its own, twisting as it rises to get us to the second floor. I've only been here twice since becoming Prince Elder, and the novelty of the grandeur is already wearing off. How unfortunate.

At least I know I have Wren at home who will never fail to excite me. I hope that'll be a comfort to her in her new life.

I hate that I had to leave her when she's clearly experiencing some stress right now.

Pruhleth's office takes up the entire third floor. The walls are gold and laid with purple jewels in an octagonal pattern. When he answers the door of his inner office where he does his private work, he seems just as surprised to see me as Meleth.

"Prince Hahl." He gives me a deep, respectful nod. "Is something wrong? Has something happened?"

There's concern deep in his strong blue eyes, the well-lined skin of his face tightening with worry.

"My underling said you wanted to see me?" I query, but my hands want to twitch with nerves.

"I never made any call to your underling today, or any time recently." The long sleeves of his purple-tinted sheer wrap sway as he folds his arms. "Unless she called and I forgot about it?"

"No, she was adamant that you called her. She wouldn't call you. She's trying not to bother me unless other people say they need me."

My head is starting to feel weird. Am I going insane here? Am I the one mistaken? No. I heard what Desena said exactly as she said it.

"I haven't been in contact in days. Everything is going fine here." Worry replaces the twinkle that's usually present in Pruhleth's eyes.

"So you're not looking to help with our infiltration tactic?"

Pruhleth gently moves his head, exchanging a glance with his secretary.

"I don't understand. I was unaware we were engaging in any new tactics with anything." Pruhleth leans forward, his long beard tickling the floor as he gets closer to me. He drops his voice to a whisper. "What does this infiltration tactic refer to?"

It feels like my heart wants to pound, but the insufferable fog of Wai, strong even indoors, isn't letting it. I just shake my head and hold up my hand.

“There's some kind of mistake. Maybe she called it something different. I don't know. I'll ... I'll just go and talk to my underling to work this out.”

I think of Wren. How unfortunate it is that I might have to leave again on another mission. Was I not listening to Desena clearly?

I give a quick apology and goodbye as I take the stairs, then walk with my head down all the way out of the building, then through the city. I have to brush off people who want to give me gifts and ask me for photographs, breathing quickening as I move closer and closer to the city line.

When I get beyond the barrier that will allow me to teleport—there's no teleporting allowed inside the city—I realize I'm in full-blown panic mode.

It's probably nothing. Probably a mistake. But my skin is crawling in such a way that I can barely stay still as I input my desired location and hit the button that will take me where I need to go.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Wren

Desena takes me to an underground facility. We traveled a little out of the city to get here. There are no buildings within view, and the ground is desert-like. It's nothing like the forest-strewn area Jameth and I traveled through before.

"It won't be long now," Desena promises, squeezing my shoulders gently. She's become so kind since she heard of my problem. "We'll be able to get this fast-tracked because a former elder works here. A nice retirement after being forced to leave his old position, don't you think?"

I feel bad for a moment because my mate is now the Prince Elder. Why would a former elder want to help me? But I remind myself that apart from the rebels, the people of Hogar are peaceful. This isn't Earth. Nobody here would hurt me.

No light penetrates once we descend into the facility. The walls are almost black and appear to be made of rough metal. We head down a corridor and pass through a door that needs to be opened with a hand gesture. It's shudders shut behind us, leading us into another corridor that branches off in two directions. We head left, go down a few more steps, then reach a wide, open room with a desk.

I recognize the man at the desk. He was at the meeting Jameth and I returned to the night of our date. He's wearing a fancy red robe over his clothing, and he looks good for a guy who's physically older. The skin around his eyes and neck tell me he must be at least physically 60 to 65 if people here age like people do on Earth, but he has the body of a much younger and more built-up man.

"Desena," he greets warmly, rising with his palms up. Desena places her hands down on them. "And here we have ..." His eyebrows lift as his nostrils twitch. "Our new queen. I see our prince has claimed his mate after all."

I roll my shoulders back, trying to look as impressive as the title should make me feel.

“Actually, that’s what we’re here about.” There are two stools in front of the desk. Desena takes one, and at the former elder’s gesture, I take the other. “There seems to be a problem with our new queen’s bond to her prince. Her feelings haven’t influenced her the way they should have, and as a mated woman myself, I can’t feel any power exuding from her the way I can with other mated females. I can sense that she has it, but I can’t detect a hint that it’s awoken.”

My gaze drops to my lap. My teeth desperately want to sink into the skin on the side of my thumb and start nibbling in my anxiety, but I can’t allow myself such a weakness in front of this company.

“Can I take your hand for a moment?” the former elder’s tone is kind, so I let him take my hand and squeeze it. “Oh, yes. Yes, that is strange.”

He lets my hand go, but I have a feeling he’s not done with it. After looking in a drawer, he takes out something like a large metal bracelet, which he places around my wrist. He puts a second on my other wrist and takes my hand again.

“Oh. interesting. I thought this would amplify your bond to see why your mind might be stopping you from feeling what you should be feeling, but there doesn’t seem to be much of a bond there at all. You have the powers buried deep, you have the mind connection that should already be active on both sides, but without the feelings that come with the bond, you can’t use either. That’s not normal.”

I jerk my hands away from him in my fear.

“So I’m an anomaly? I’m not Jameth’s right mate or something?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all!” The former elder’s shock at my response is written across his creased brow. “My dear, you are his fated mate, and you made the right choice in meeting with him. But it appears ...” He doesn’t look at me, but I can see the strain on his profile. “Somebody is trying to sabotage you. The only way to stop the feelings that come with a fated mate bond from forming is to infuse one of the mates with a solution of Fethrohla, which blocks the receptors

in their body from being influenced by powers they don't fully understand. Somebody doesn't want you and Prince Hahl to be together."

I feel sick. It's like I've been poisoned. I think of the takeout, the restaurants, and that drink I didn't read the label of before drinking. I start panicking over potentially doing this to myself, and I'm only calmed when I remember I didn't have any of that drink until *after* we tried to seal the mate bond.

"Why would someone do that?" I try not to sound too whiny.

"Most likely, it was done by somebody who doesn't think the prince is worthy. Someone who wants to destroy his mate bond to show the people the man they follow can't even do the most basic thing right: keeping his mate."

I put my head in my hands, bracelets heavy on my wrists. They disgust me. They've shown me that I've been tainted. How have I been tainted!?

"How is it administered?" I ask.

"Through a prick in the skin, usually," says the former elder.

My mind goes back to the attack from just before we tried to form the bond. I didn't feel a prick, just pressure. I came out of it sore but with no wounds.

"I don't understand." My head is heavy now as I lean forward, elbows on the desk. "Your people are peaceful. Who would try to do this other than the rebels? I know it wasn't them, because I would have felt it, and I didn't."

The only people who touched me have been those at the House of Elders. Oh, and those in that other city that I've forgotten the name of. I felt nothing there, either.

"It only takes the tiniest prick, and it only has to go through the first couple layers of skin," says Desena. "A sharp corner on a piece of jewelry could do it."

I glance between the two people so much more knowledgeable than me.

“I still don’t understand who ...”

But I can’t finish the sentence. Instead, a petrifying thought keeps me in my seat even as the former elder begins to speak.

“Maybe,” the former elder croons, “the person who did this is ... I don’t know. Let’s say it’s someone whose father was an elder kicked off the council. He didn’t want to leave, but, when he did, he wanted to leave his place to his daughter. The daughter that city leaders deemed unqualified. Just as her father was deemed unqualified to be the Prince Elder.”

I rise from my stool. I think I know the answer to my next question. I’m sick with worry, and I scan the area around me but I don’t know how to leave. I can’t even tell what part of the wall is a door now.

“What daughter?” I say, my voice strangely calm.

“Me,” says Desena, and everything goes black as something thumps against my back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jameth

Screaming stops the moment I teleport in. Desena is here, as is her father. I'm still a little disoriented from the perfumes that slowed me. My journey took much longer than it should have because my body didn't want to move quickly.

I look around the room again, then my heart almost stands still. Ehla is on the ground, unconscious, with blood running down her face. The glass in the windows has been smashed, and the door doesn't seem to want to close.

"I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do!" Desena shouts, dashing towards me. "I went out for five minutes. Five minutes to stretch my legs, but when I came back, the protections were down, and everything was broken. Mother was unconscious, and I called father to help. You're the prince. Do something."

She throws all of it at me so quickly that it takes me a moment to register what she said.

"Wren," I say. I pull away from Desena, who has gripped my arms, to shout up the stairs. "Wren!"

"I can't believe this happened!" Rochul is angry. He's always been a very angry man. It's part of what made him unqualified to be Prince Elder, prompting me to take over. "On your watch. I can't believe you let somebody infiltrate this facility. This has never happened before in the entire history of our species."

I'm upstairs. The protections up here are down, too, and what glass was left in my windows is scattered all over the floor. The cushions from my couch are on the ground, and one of them is smeared with blood. I inhale. It smells too much like fear in here. It almost reminds me of the gag fear scent I bought one Warriors Day as a prank to get my parents back for a prank they pulled on me.

The windows in the bedroom are smashed, too. The bathroom is untouched, and there's broken glass in the kitchen and a knife on the floor.

My mate tried to defend herself with a weapon. I should have done more to make sure she knew how to use her powers to defend herself with those.

How many came for her? I can't smell that over the fear. I can't even smell her through it, and the fear is much stronger than the nervousness I have smelled on her skin before.

Rochul is still yelling, but I can't hear him.

"You should never have gone!" his voice is piercing when I finally start paying attention to him. "You left us alone after an attack? Really?"

"I had to," I snap back in his face. "Desena assured me it was safe to leave. She said Pruhleth had called and asked me to come as soon as possible. That I was already in the book."

Rochul's nostrils flare as he stares at me. "In the 'book' is a code name the rebels have been using to communicate when they have made an attack official. The term Pruhleth and his secretary use is '*books*.' Because it must be in both her book and his! Books! Plural!"

Rochul's eyes are practically popping out of his head. He looks like he wants me dead, and frankly, I don't blame him.

My mate has been taken. And it's my fault. It was my responsibility to know the incorrect term had been used and that the call Desena told me about was false. It's not her job to know the difference between 'book' and 'books' and other silly terms like that, but it is mine.

And my mate is paying for my incompetence.

"Do you know who came and where they were from?" It feels like part of my soul is being ripped into as I speak. "Why have they taken my mate? I need her. She needs me. She doesn't know this place, and even if she did ..."

My head throbs, and nothing makes sense. My legs shake, but I can't sit down. This doesn't feel real. A few days

ago, Emily told me about this thing that happens to her when she becomes aware that she is dreaming while she's dreaming. She taught me how to tell. I pinch my nose to see if I can breathe through it, but I can't. And that means I'm not dreaming.

I'm just living a nightmare.

Rochul's words are swimming in and out of focus, and I'm not sure my lungs are functioning properly anymore.

"Foolish, pathetic," he says. "To leave your mate alone here, knowing she's human, vulnerable, and exactly what the rebels would use to hurt you. You can't go looking for her. It's definitely a trap."

I shove the former elder hard. "Are you insane? Of course I'm going to look for her! I don't care if it's a trap. Maybe you don't understand how it feels because your mate wasn't picked out for you by fate. But if I don't go looking for her, I will not survive."

I push past him. I don't know where I'm going when I reach the bottom of the stairs, and I pause to try and make a plan. Ehla is stirring, and I want to help her, but I don't have time. But I also don't know where to start planning my mate's rescue. I reach out with my mind, reaching for Wren wherever she may be, and all I get is panic.

"I had to go," I say shakily, telling it to myself more than Rochul and Desena now. "My people needed me. Everything was safe. We were locked down. *My people needed me.* I was doing my duty."

"And now your mate is missing and you can't even get through to her because she doesn't love you," says Rochul, in tones of triumph, and everything in me freezes.

"What do you mean she doesn't love me?" I bark.

He wavers a moment. "Well, it's obvious. If she loved you, she would have gone on that mission with you. You stupid boy." One of his hands wraps around my arm so hard it hurts. I heave myself from his grasp.

“Not just that,” Desena adds quickly. “Women can tell these things. A mated woman can recognize when something is wrong in another woman’s mate bond.”

I stare at her. “That’s not true. I studied fated mate bonds extensively, along with regular mate bonds. So I could teach it to my mate when we made our bond complete.”

And this is all a distraction. Because my mate is out there, and I need to find her, but the more I try to reach out to her in my head, the less I get through.

“Nonsense!” says Desena, her voice high. “There’s a lot you can’t learn from books, Jameth. There’s a lot you can only learn by experiencing it.”

I stare between Desena and her father. None of this is relevant. It doesn’t matter if they think she doesn’t love me, which is literally impossible unless she’s been poisoned with Fethrohla, which I know for a fact she hasn’t, because she hasn’t been around anyone who would do that.

They are just trying to delay me from rescuing my mate because they think it’s a trap. And I understand that they care for me, or they at least don’t want me to die because I am their leader, but I will walk into any trap to rescue the woman I love.

I would do anything to save her, even if it means I’ll die in the process.

“Desena, please excuse us,” says Rochul behind me as I look around, scanning for clues.

My eyes land on Ehla. Maybe I can find the scent of who knocked her out and follow it. Before I can get close, Rochul steps into my path.

“I need to speak to the prince alone about what it is my council would have done in a situation like this,” he says, glancing at Desena over my shoulder.

Footsteps tell me Desena leaves, and I don’t care to see where she goes. I don’t even want to look at the man with his hand on me right now. The only clue that may be here is more important, and I keep my eyes on her.

Ehla has awoken. She lays on the ground, silent, barely breathing. Her finger is on her lips. When I frown, her brows knit together as she looks toward her mate.

Rochul begins to speak, but I don't listen. He's talking *at* me, not *to* me. Ehla keeps her finger on her lips and points to her mate, then she drags her finger across her throat.

Before I can respond I realize I'm outnumbered with Desena lingering on the stairs somewhere behind me.

But I don't need to do anything. As Ehla raises her arm, a stool flies across the room and hits Rochul in the head. He thuds to the floor, unconscious.

Another thump tells me Desena has fallen before I can turn around to see her reaction.

Ehla dashes up to me and grabs me by the wrists. Her wide, fearful eyes are desperate, and when I inhale, I can smell no scent but that of everyone in this room.

"I've been trying to tell you this since before we came here," Ehla says hurriedly, "I don't know how much time we have—look at this."

Ehla grabs the ballooning lower sleeve of her shirt that, come to think of it, seems to be a new fashion choice for her. Her clothing is usually tighter and more traditional.

She pulls up her shirt sleeve to reveal a needle attached to a vial of purple liquid digging into her wrist. On the other side, the liquid going into her is green. New smells permeate the air.

"Essence of wai," I whisper in reference to the purple. "Someone's been subduing you? Your mate?"

She nods heavily. "Yes. For months. Him and her. I've been fighting against it." She looks as though it's hurting her to tell me this. "And the green is essence of icheli, which makes you suggestible. A high enough dose forces you to do whatever anyone asks when they ask you to do it. Fighting against that is more challenging."

Her breathing is swift, and tears well up in her eyes as she grips me.

“They are not your allies, Prince Elder. My mate wants your job, and my daughter wants to be his second-in-command. And they are willing to kill you to get what they want.”

I glance back at the pair on the ground. “They could’ve easily killed me. Poisoned me. Smothered me in my sleep—”

“But those things are too obvious and they can’t make those look like the attacks they’ve been orchestrating,” Ehla groans. “They stopped the rebels months ago. Every attack you’ve encountered, both on Earth and since your return, has been an attempt to sabotage you and your mate from getting together. They hoped they could make it look like you were attacked and killed on Earth, but since your return, they have wanted to take out your mate instead to make you seem unworthy and, in the end, to drive you into madness that kills you.

“They want it to seem like the rebels are rejecting you for having a human mate, and when they kill her, it will break you.”

I already feel half insane knowing that my mate has been captured. I can barely feel the pain because every cell in my body is on edge, burning. Desperate to get to her. It’s a challenge to believe Ehla’s words, but that green liquid running into her veins will force her to tell me the truth if it truly is essence of icheli.

“Tell me the truth, Ehla. Please.”

When I grab her forearm and bring her wrist close to me, the icheli’s scent is unmistakable. And, unlike the scent of fear in my allotment, this can’t be manufactured.

“They’ve taken your mate to the old facility where they used to build ships,” says Ehla. Someone stirs behind me, and she lets out a squeak. “Go now. I’ll try to stall them. You don’t have long. They have technology that you don’t. And they have more allies than you think.”

Knowing where my mate is gets rid of some of the panic, but it quickly reignites when I realize this can’t possibly be as

easy as I think it will be.

This is obviously a trap, and I now know that Rochul's revelation that my mate doesn't love me was intended to make me more likely to rebel against him and run off to find her, wherever she is.

Could they really have been planning this all along?

"Thank you," I blurt, and all Ehla does is nod and tell me to go.

I take off at full speed out the door.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wren

The heavy metal bracelets now have a chain between them that with all my strength I can't break.

I throw myself against the door so hard I can practically feel the bruises forming.

I need to warn Jameth. I don't know what specifically they're going to do to him, but I know it's nothing good, and that it involves me.

If I can escape and run into one person who can get a message to him before I'm caught and dragged back here, that'll be enough for me.

The image of him returning to find me missing rips my heart in two. It'll kill him to know I'm in danger, but for all I know, he's in a worse predicament.

Tears sting my eyes and blur the dark cell around me. If there are any guards listening to me through the walls, they are not responding to my pleas.

There's a physical ache in my chest that I can't shake every time I think of Jameth. I'd rather be locked up with him than without him.

A door squeaks as it opens somewhere to the right. I run to the bars that separate my cell from another.

"Please," I whimper. "Please. I can convince him to step down if you'll just let him be safe. Let *us* be safe. I can convince him to come back to Earth with me forever, and you can do whatever you want."

A masked, cloaked tall and slim person comes into view and hands me a metal bottle through the bars of the adjacent cell.

"Water so you don't die," they say in a venomous voice. "We need you alive. We need him to feel your suffering."

I want to slap it out of the guard's hands, but I take it anyway. I don't know how much Jameth can feel from me, but I try to force my thoughts at him. It feels like they're hitting a brick wall and remain inside my brain.

The masked person turns away from me and says, "Bring him back. Limit his water intake. I'm tired of bringing him to the bathroom so often."

Hope fills me. Have they captured Jameth, too? I need to tell him how sorry I am that I was distant with him on our date. I'm not sure he even noticed, but I feel compelled to apologize anyway.

I need to tell him that somebody has blocked me from loving him.

Although, I do feel some love for him. I'm not sure if it's the love that should come with the mate bond or if I developed it on my own.

The man who shuffles into the cell is not Jameth. The dark-haired, scruffy faced, well-built alien is forced to his knees. In the dim light, I can already see he has the kind of charming face that makes you immediately compelled to trust someone even if you don't know them.

The man looks up well sliding off his handcuffs, which clang against the metal ground.

"You're human," he breathes in greeting, his throat hoarse. Has he been screaming as much as me? "You're his mate, aren't you? Jameth's mate. The one Ron and Emily told me about."

I place the bottle down so I can grip the bars. "You know Ron and Emily?"

"Yeah. I grew up with Ron and Jameth, and I stayed with Ron and Emily a couple of times. They let me stay in their house for a while when they left for Earth, but I was kidnapped shortly after. I can't even remember how long I've been here."

"Not long," I say. "The days have all blended together in my head, so I'm not sure how long you've been here

specifically. But less than a week.”

The man I now know to be Muhl looks weak. He pushes himself up to meet me at the bars. He places his hands a couple of inches above mine. I stare up at him. How can this towering mass of muscle and fierceness be a prisoner like me?

“What’s it like out there?” he asks.

I shrug. “Everything seems normal. There are these rebels that keep attacking Jameth, and he’s working with this woman called Desena. And her mother. I don’t know if her mother is in on this, but her father definitely is. He’s a former elder.”

“Rochul,” says Muhl. “Yeah. He’s the one who locked me up in here.” His face creases. “He was an awful man. Awful. Before my family lost their status, my father had to work with him a lot. My father always said that guy was the biggest idiot he’d ever laid eyes on, but angry. And an angry idiot is a dangerous idiot.”

I glance toward my door, then back at Muhl. If he’s been in here days, how long are they going to keep me?

“Do you know anything about this place?”

Muhl nods. “Yeah. I hear the guards talking when they take me out to the bathroom. Apparently, it’s a prison they’ve made to stop anyone who tries to protest against the new way Rochul and his allies want to run this planet. Most of the guards are women, and they’re using their powers to stop anyone from Hogar getting in or out, apart from the leaders. And most of the leaders’ allies are from Pifa. That means the women have to drop the shields less often.”

I press my head against the bars.

“Some of the people who want to change how your planet works are people from the planet you were supposed to go to war with?”

“Yeah, exactly.” Muhl grimaces. “Apparently, a lot of their people want revenge on ours. That doesn’t surprise me. About half this place is housing them, and the other half is the prison.”

I groan. “What the hell do they want to do with the planet?”

Muhl shrugs. “I don’t know, but it can’t be good. Not from what I heard Rochul saying.”

“What was he saying?”

“Well, I didn’t hear much. I only got to pass him and eavesdrop once. I purposefully blocked one of the nearest toilets with paper,” he says, grinning. The joy fades fast. “So they had to take me to the bathroom near his office. He was ranting about his master plan to separate the people in cities and give each one their own power to try to pit them against each other to make separate armies. And there was something about building a wall to separate the different species in all the cities.”

“People from different cities are different species?”

“Sorta. People from different locations across the planet have a slightly different genetic makeup. And I think Rochul once the women to use their powers to trap people with a certain genetic make up within certain walls or something. This place, trapping people based on their overall species, is like a rehearsal for that. I think I heard them use that word, anyway.”

Muhl’s brow furrows. He goes quiet, his eyes somewhat glassy. For a moment, I worry he’s going to keel over from malnourishment or something. Instead, he comes out of his daze looking slightly enlightened.

“People are trapped in here based on species. But you’re human.”

I glance back at the door.

“They wouldn’t be that stupid,” I conclude. “I’m partly from Hogar, kind of, right? Fated mates from Earth have people from your planet way back in their lineage. There’s enough Hogar in me to trap me. There has to be.”

Muhl’s face falls. “Yeah, true. Rochul is stupid, but I don’t think he’s *that* stupid.”

Just in case Muhl has a point, I get closer to the door. There's no handle. I try the hand gesture Desena used on it, but it doesn't do anything. My eyes burn with tears again, but I blink them away before I returned to the bars separating the two cells.

"Too much Hogar in me, I guess." I fold my arms.

I want to walk away, slide down the wall, and bury my face in my hands. But I can't admit defeat, and I can't let the only other person with me think I'm weak.

I have bitten chunks out of people who attacked us. I have smashed heads against floors. I wasn't weak then, and I won't be now.

Shutting my eyes, I reach out to Jameth again, but those walls are still keeping all my thoughts inside my brain.

I try to press my hands over my eyes, but the chain between my wrists bangs against my face.

"Oh, hold on a minute," says Muhl.

He turns from me, heading over to a piece of black wall. He slaps it, and something clatters to the ground, which he carries over. He reaches between my bars with his tongue between his teeth, ramming the shard into the joining area on one of my shackles. It comes free. He does the same to the other, and I rub my wrists.

"Did that on my first day," says Muhl with a small grin, then turns from me. "I hit the shackles against the wall until a piece chipped off. This metal isn't very strong on its own. It's scrap, really. My mother works with metal. So I know a thing or two about it."

Removing the shackles on my wrists has done nothing for releasing the shackle in my brain that's stopping me from getting to Jameth. My mate. Who I think I love.

"We need a plan," I tell Muhl, not ready to give up yet. "Maybe we can ask to go to the bathroom at the same time and overpower them."

“Remember, the guards are women. They’ve got powers that can take us down in a heartbeat.” His eyes obtain a spark. “But I can smell that you’ve mated, so you should have—”

“Desena did something to me that stopped the mate bond from forming properly. I’m not sure I have powers. I can’t even hear my mate’s thoughts. Hell, I don’t even know if he knows I’m trapped here.

Muhl winces. “Well, we’ll think of something.”

“Maybe.”

His face has fallen. Mine is not far behind. I wrap my arms around myself and begin to pace, thinking hard. I shake my hand like that’s gonna make my powers magically show up, but it does nothing. I give my hand a little flourish, but nothing happens then, either.

As I pace, I spy a red button next to the door. “What’s this?”

“You press that when you need water or to go to the bathroom or something. They can’t hear us unless one of us presses our call button.”

I keep pacing, swirling my hands around like a moron as if some bright light is going to shoot out of them. I’ve seen Emily do stuff with her powers, and that does happen. I’ve seen her clean up the clutter behind her by waving her hand in its general direction.

I flourish my hand again, but nothing happens. And again. And again. And again—

Click.

I freeze. My palms aren’t glowing, and I don’t feel any different. There’s a small light cracking in from the doors ahead of me, and I run to shut them before anyone notices. I dash to Muhl.

“Did you unlock that?” his eyes are wide and awe-filled. “Can you do that again? At mine?”

I don’t know, but I try anyway, thrusting my hand through the bars to flourish my hand at his doors. I think it might be

similar to the flourish Desena used when coming in.

“I don’t understand,” I mutter. “That didn’t work when I tried it before.”

“You had the cuffs on. Maybe that was just a little much too Hogar on you? And now that they’re off, the human aspect of you is more dominant?”

It seems too easy.

Muhl points to his door, so I head for mine. I’m half expecting to be knocked out by a guard the moment I get out there, but if I am, I’ll just try escaping again until I managed to knock the guard out first.

My fingers press into the crack that appeared between my doors, and they slide open easily.

“There are no guards out there,” I whisper.

“Seriously?”

Muhl approaches his door. I step out through mine. He joins me in a large, empty chamber full of corridor openings.

“I don’t understand,” I whisper.

“You don’t have to,” says Muhl. “Just be thankful you’re so human. More human than Hogar.”

I know it’s in vain, but I send thoughts to Jameth. Then I pick a corridor at random and go, Muhl’s footsteps behind me.

“Listen,” he says in a low voice, “I don’t think I’m going to be able to get out of here. Because it’s designed to keep people from Hogar inside the building, or maybe just inside specific rooms. I’m not sure. But if you can get out, then at least I’ll have hope.”

It doesn’t feel right to leave him behind, but I may have no choice, so I nod.

Every room we enter is deserted. I try to keep my footsteps as light as possible. I think we may be lost, and I don’t know if I enter the same room or corridor multiple times. Muhl sniffs, but he says they have some kind of scent-blocking magic on the place. He can’t tell where we’ve been,

and he doesn't know if probable cells we pass are full or empty.

After what feels like an age of wandering around, Muhl swears. I turn.

"We must be getting close," he says. "I can't go any further. Look." He raises his fist and slams it against the air, which glows white. "Must be a failsafe in case we do manage to escape. Can't get by."

I look back at him. I want to think that there must be another way out, but I already know there isn't.

"You go," he says. "As long as you're out, will both be fine."

"Thank you." Thanking him doesn't feel like enough even though I only met him a few minutes ago.

"No. Thank *you*. Tell Jameth I said hi."

I smile. Jameth. I'm going to see him again, and that warms my heart even as I'm forced to turn away from my fellow escapee and head down another corridor, then up a few steps.

A large chamber looms before me. There's another corridor directly across from me, and the chamber ahead seems empty, so I step into it.

Just as Rochul steps out of the corridor opposite me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Wren

He's impossibly fast. The moment I try to run, his arms close around me from behind. Just seconds ago he was in the corridor on the other side of the chamber.

"Stupid girl," he mutters into my hair, and I pull my head away from him so hard it hurts my neck. "My daughter is a fool. She told me that as long as you were mated, you would have too much Hogar in you to escape. It seems she forgot the dampening effects she administered. I, however, I'm not so foolish. And, as an Earthling, I knew you would be far too stupid to see your easy-escape was a trap."

I struggle against him, kicking back against his shins. It does nothing.

"Where's Jameth?" I spit.

"Heading right into a trap, obviously. I let it slip that I know you don't love him. I let our little plot unravel. He'll be captured by the time he gets here, and hopefully, he'll be half mad knowing you're in such distress."

I hold my head up. "I can communicate with him in my mind," I pant. He's got an arm around my throat and it's making it hard to breathe. "He knows my cell is not bad."

"Oh, shut up," Rochul grumbles. "He doesn't know anything. My daughter saw to that. It'll be days before the feth wears off and you can finally feel everything that's been held back from you so far." I can hear the smirk in his voice. "Anyway, you're destined for a fate much worse than that cell."

He's hauling me somewhere, and he's so strong that I can't move. And at least in combat, he is not as stupid as Muhl's father thinks; his hands are now nowhere near my mouth, and his grip is around my waist with my arms pinned to my sides. When I suck in my abdomen, he holds me tighter.

“Worse than a cell that doesn’t even have a place for me to sit?” I ask.

A throaty chuckle escapes him. “Yes, of course. You see, I’ve been studying Earth ever since I found out the new set of warriors’ mates are from there. I found out when I took my ship for a joyride beyond the allowed boundaries and found the ancient was still alive and learned of his true purpose. And during my research, I discovered something very fun captors sometimes do to their prisoners.”

An involuntary shriek escapes me as he quickens his pace. I’m too close to him to get my legs up near his crotch to kick it.

We enter a room not far from the place he captured me, and he doesn’t let go as he takes a metal key off the wall with his lips and plunges it into a lock at his mouth level.

He has planned for this well. What else is he planning that his allies don’t know about?

A large, metal chair sits in the middle of the room with chains by the feet. A table to the left is strewn with mediaeval-looking instruments.

He’s going to torture me.

Something on par with a maniacal villainous laugh escapes him. He finally puts me down in the chair, pinning my legs with his knees. His hands crush my arms to the arms of the chair.

“There are a few antidotes to the little bond-numbing serum you were given,” he croons, his breath warm on my face. “If you were to see your mate tortured, the effects of the bond would grow so strong that they’d beat out any dampening effects. But I don’t think we’ll get that far. Your mate isn’t here yet, so you will be the one tortured first. Besides, I’m not sure I can torture him without drawing too much attention to the pattern of his wounds.”

He pauses, staring into my face. He’s enjoying this even though I’m barely moving and refuse to let my face display weakness.

“The only other antidote is a delightful little drink called Zuhl,” he adds delicately. “And that hasn’t been sold in decades. I took the only bottle from the House of Elders when I left. I’ll be injecting it once you’re in agony. I want your mate to feel your pain only when it’s at its peak.”

I grit my teeth, trying to pull my arms out of his grasp. He’s too strong, and the stench of his breath is turning my stomach and making me feel weaker.

“He’ll kill you,” I spit. “He’ll kill you before you have a chance to break him or torture him or do what ever you have planned.”

“Let him try,” Rochul snarls. “If he doesn’t go insane from feeling your pain first, then there will be a nice set of traps in store for him that’ll bring him to the brink of death. Even if he gets through the regular course, he will not escape what’s waiting for him at the end.

“Once he’s locked up somewhere with your mangled, murdered body, that will surely push him fully into madness. Then we’ll release him and show the public he’s an unfit leader who can neither protect his mate nor be trusted to be mentally stable after his mate’s death.”

I feel like someone has poured gasoline into my blood and ignited it. The images he just made my mind conjure make me want to tear him limb from limb, and I will do the same to anybody who tries to harm my mate.

He is mine. He is not to be touched.

Screams rip through my lips, and before I know what I’m doing, I’ve lunged forward and smashed my head against Rochul’s. He stumbles back. I barely feel the pain where I’ve hit him, and if I’m bleeding, I can’t feel that either.

My body surges with adrenaline.

I force my legs to carry me behind the stumbling Rochul and press my arm against his throat, pulling him down on top of me. His bulk could crush me, but I wrap my arms and legs around him while he tries to prise my hand from his throat.

Despite how easily he has overpowered me up until now, he can't pull my grasp from his neck with me in my feral state.

When his nails dig into my arm, my teeth dig into the side of his neck from behind. He lets out a guttural cry, but I keep biting down. When his hand comes up to grab the area beside the wound, I bite that, too. Something crunches between my teeth, and I spit out a finger.

My legs around him allow me to find the soft spot between his thighs. I dig my heels in as hard as I can. How lucky for me that men from this planet have the same weak spot as men from mine.

He rolls us, but I'm still on his back. Somehow, he has enough strength to stand. I drop from where I cling to him, then throw myself against him as a deadweight. He lands on the floor spreadeagled beneath me, but there's no time for him to move before I grab hold of his head and smash it against the metal ground.

He is no longer moving. But then again, the creature that attacked Jameth and I was no longer moving and it was still a threat, so I smash his head again. And again. And again. Until blood soaks the floor and my hands.

I just killed a man and I don't even care. And I will kill again to get to my mate.

Maybe that was a torture tactic. Maybe he wanted to drive me to insanity and be killed by the traps he's got set out for Jameth, but I don't care. My head explodes with *Jameth, I'm coming to you. Jameth, I'm okay*. I don't even notice if the walls in my brain are still up as I burst out of the room and run. Sweat pours down my back, and everything I touch becomes stained with Rochul's blood.

If I find Desena, I'll be happy to kill her too. Because nobody keeps me from my mate.

Maybe it was the Zuhl some genius Prince Elder hid away, its effects sped up by my fear and the adrenaline coursing through my body like a hot knife cutting through

Styrofoam. Or maybe this ferociousness was inside me all along. I'm not sure I care which is the truth.

I don't know where I'm going, but I tear down corridor after corridor, not caring who crosses my path because I'm ready for them.

Nothing can keep Jameth and I apart, and I will get to tell him I love him.

This time, I'll mean it.

Chapter Thirty

Jameth

The doors are open and there's a stairs to enter the facility. I will defeat whatever trap separates me from my mate.

I have blocked my mind from distractions since leaving the House of Elders. I have no time to think through my betrayal, nor do I even have time to ponder my mate and her lack of love for me. I am only focused on the present moment.

Occasionally, a thought breaks through, her voice echoing in my mind. Telling me that she is okay, and that she can get through this herself and come to me. I know she's tough, but I can't believe the fantasy my brain has generated to try and keep me calm.

This place is built like a maze. And it appears deserted. I can't get into some of the rooms along my path as I search for Wren, and there's a strange buzz of electricity on the walls like some kind of power holds this place together. I assume they have women here who are using their powers on the walls.

They could have found a way to keep me out. Used a spell to stop men from entering, or perhaps stop life from getting in here entirely. So they wanted me here.

I pass through corridors and go down steps. There are doors on my path, but they won't open. Some corridors appear to be closed off, so I know they are leading me right into the trap they've set. I reach a clearing kind of area with a desk which smell strongly of Rochul and Desena.

And fear.

Human fear.

Wren's fear.

I follow her scent toward a corridor they've left open to me. As I near it, a door slams closed in front of me and I swear, banging against it.

Off to the left, a door slides open to reveal another corridor. There's something sinister about how it feels staring at me, and something weirdly familiar, too.

This entire place is familiar, like I've seen it in some horror movie. I have watched documentaries about the ships they used to build here, but that was on the surface. This is where they used to store parts, and—

Oh. They used to film a TV show here. A survival game. How ironic that now, I'm the one that has to survive, and it's no longer a game.

As soon as I'm in the sinister corridor, the lights begin to flicker and something growls high above me. When the lights stop flickering, the world is dim.

I can see nothing in my path, so my only choice is to keep going.

I've taken a single step forward before my path is cut across by flames that burst from the ground. If I hadn't paused, I probably would have been standing where those flames erupted from.

Get out, echoes in my head. It makes me sick to my stomach that the voice of my own fear sounds like the voice of my mate.

I have my kitwatch on, but most of its functions aren't working. I can't spray through the flames, so I'm done for.

As an idea occurs to me, I whip out my tail and harden it so it feels no pain, then I use it to try and flatten the flames. It doesn't work, but whipping it very fast fans a small gap through the middle of the fire for me to leap through.

It takes three more attempts to get through three more instances of flames in the corridor, and then I'm in a chamber that is literally moving.

Entrances move around the room, and colors pop before my eyes, bright and almost blinding.

Wren's voice echoes through my head, crying that she's lost. No, that *I* am lost. My mind just wants me to hear her to

try and comfort itself. The thought is accompanied by an aggressive burst of her love for me.

Love for me she doesn't have because of *them*. We may both be dead before I can actually feel her loving me.

No. We won't be.

Because I think I'm starting to understand this place. The more I ground myself in it, the more the memories of this place come to me.

I try to sniff to see if that helps, and there is a distinct aroma of old, almost failing technology. It fills almost the entire room, but occasionally, the scent wavers. After several minutes of dizzying colors and moving doors, I can pinpoint which door doesn't have that smell. I run through the single real door the moment it appears.

I've seen these tricks before, and if memory serves me right, I won't like the ending. I watched it in a survival game show as a child. People would have to survive a dangerous obstacle course to win money at the end. It didn't originate on my planet, but we did make a version of it.

And I think this is where it was filmed. I was literally talking to Wren about this show just days ago on our journey from Earth to Hogar while trying to tell her about similarities between our planets.

Once through the real door, I'm in an inconspicuous room that seems to be without danger. The walls begin closing in when I reach the middle.

This room smells ancient. That's no surprise. I only saw this show because my parents had many episodes saved up. It finished airing when they were children.

I doubt Rochul knows I've seen the show, so his traps are much easier for me to get through than he thinks.

As the walls grow spikes and continue to approach me, I search the ceiling for a darker patch. As soon as I spy it, I run to the spikes and use them as a kind of climbing wall. Some of the spikes are shorter than others, and there is a perfect path

through them where none are long enough to cut me while I put my hands and feet on others.

I wonder if Rochul thinks I'll be able to survive all the traps and face a worse fate at the end, or if he's activated them all just in case I do manage to survive the first few.

As soon as the walls move in enough to reach that spot on the ceiling, I throw my torso up through it. I pull my legs through it just in time.

I'm surrounded by complete darkness, and I don't remember this ever happening in the show. Up here, the room usually begins to flood. I smell no water, but I do know that sound.

Fire suddenly illuminates the walls, trapping the growling creatures in with me because they won't pass the flames—zurges.

Killer creatures manufactured to torture prisoners on Klem and kill them at random if they venture out at night.

There must be at least 10 of them, closing around me in a circle. One of them is armed. Luckily these creatures are stupid, can't bend, and can't move very fast, so I'm easily able to dodge most of the arrows that the armed one fires at me. An arrow skims my shoulder, but I can ignore the blood and pain.

I begin punching out at random to knock the things down because they find it very hard to get back up. It allows me to get past some of them, but I can't find a door to escape.

Don't be afraid, pierces through my mind. At least my mate's voice in my head is encouraging this time, so I take a breath and take out a couple more zurges. One lands a punch on my jaw that knocks me to the ground, but I'm able to kick it whilst still laying down. My jaw is already swelling. For bags of dead flesh, zurges are strangely strong.

I back up against a wall as the group approach, but I find I can still keep walking back as no metal comes into contact with me.

The walls are not real. The fire is floating. I collect some fallen arrows and duck under the floating torches. Once I'm

under them, they raised to allow the zurges to pass.

A zurg's rotting arms grabbed me around the neck as it jumps on my back. I shake it off and stab it with one of the fallen arrows.

I begin to walk backwards so I can see when one is primed to attack me.

The armed one dances back and forth alongside the line of zurges heading for me. I manage to dodge the arrows easily, stabbing zurg after zurg as they begin to pile up and clamber over each other to get to me. The corridor is narrowing, but they aren't smart enough to realize, so they fall into a clump on the floor instead.

Soon I'm walking so crouched that my knees are hitting my chin, but most of the zurges are either dead or can't get up. I clutch my last arrow in case one manages to approach.

One more growl creeps up on me, and I wince. An arrow flies past my head and skims my ear as I tilt my head to the side. My shoulders are brushing the sides of the walls now, so the only space is the air on either side of my head.

The armed zurg has not ducked. It has compressed, somehow. I grimace as its stench overwhelms me. The entire creature is now about the height of its bow. It holds its loaded arrow steady, dead black eyes boring into mine.

I've had to duck my head so low that it's tucked between my knees, and I can barely walk backwards like this. My shoulders are still squished against the walls on each side.

There is no place for that arrow to go but straight into me.

The creak of the bow's string tells me death is imminent, and I whisper in my head: *I'm sorry. Sorry, Wren, that I failed you. I thought I could beat the trap, but in the end, it was too much for me.*

Maybe she'll hear it if they haven't already killed her. I won't live long enough to find out if she gets the message. And I'll never get to feel her real love for me.

The twang of the string tells me I'm less than a second from death, but somehow I'm still alive. I'm able to open my eyes and twist my head in a way that I can see there's an arrow suspended in midair, and I freeze. It slowly turns on its vertical axis to face the opposite direction. It flies back into the creature that released it, deep enough to hit the tiny, shriveled brain in the back of its head.

The zurg drops down dead.

"It may have been too much for you, but it wasn't too much for me," says Wren. And this time it's not in my head.

My head was not mimicking her voice; I could hear her thinking at me. Or somebody was mimicking her and sending me those thoughts, somehow. Either one is plausible.

I have no room to turn, but she presses up against me from behind. I half fear this might be another trick. Despite that, I inhale her scent and focus on the sensation of her against me, because this might be my last chance to feel this. Real or not.

Chapter Thirty-One

Wren

I can feel it. Every beat of my heart is another burst of love for him. Yes, it sounds completely ridiculous, but you would have to feel it to understand it.

We may barely know each other, but I know enough to know he wouldn't hurt me, will always support me and protect me, and just risked his life to get back to me.

He's kind, warm, and honest, and I can feel the absolute purity of his thoughts. None of his feelings are tainted by lies and deceit, and as I breathe him in, his scent almost knocks me out. It's stronger than ever, and the walls around us begin to retreat enough to let us stand.

"I'm so sorry." Jameth's voice is hoarse as we rise to our full heights. He turns around, wrapping me up in his arms, and I'm content to stay there. "This was supposed to be a fun and relaxing trip. None of this was ever supposed to happen. I just wanted you to see my world and grow to like me enough to form the mate bond. I didn't want this. None of us deserve this."

A warm tear drips onto the top of my head as I push myself into his chest.

"None of it is your fault." I breathe him in again when I'm done speaking. I'm getting used to his new smell, which is much the same as it was before but so much stronger. I feel stronger, too. "I know you had nothing but good intentions. But we have a lifetime for you to show me them again, and for me to show you mine."

Tears sting my eyes, and I finally let them fall. I couldn't let myself cry when I thought I'd never see him again, but now that we are united, the joy can't be kept in me.

We part, but only long enough for him to kiss me, pulling me into him the way he always has and always will.

I can't deny there was a connection between us from before I even knew he was my mate. One that got me blushing and feeling stupid the moment I spilled coffee on him. One that made me nervous and feel compelled to protect him even when I'd only known him a couple of hours.

There's something about Jameth that's just *right*. I was stupid not to see it sooner.

It's weird, but I don't feel that different now that the barriers are broken and the bond is secured. I just feel a slightly accelerated version of what I already did.

"I understand if you never want to come back to this planet again."

Jameth squeezes my hand and tugs me along the way I watched him come while forcing myself to see his thoughts. Somehow, I'm able to get rid of all the completed traps. I'm not sure how I use my powers. They happen with intention on an almost subconscious level. I just wish the images of him suffering would leave my mind, but I'm not powerful enough for that.

"I want to go wherever you go." I squeeze his hand. "I don't want to be apart from you, so I would like to stay here longer, then come here again when I need to. But I also want to go back to Earth. Sooner rather than later if that's possible. I want us to be somewhere familiar and safe for the start of our life together. But I do want to come back."

"I'll pack my bags tonight and we'll be on Earth by morning."

I can feel how strongly he means it. The spark of excitement in him regarding getting to visit an alien planet is actually quite adorable.

He takes a breath in and winces. "I can't smell much here. But I can feel that there is some kind of power in these walls."

"I can probably break it," I tell him. "And if I can't, I can leave. Despite our bond, I'm more human than anything else that lingers on me. I can escape and find people who can help

us break out. Nobody from Hogar can escape, and if you didn't run into her, Desena is still around here somewhere.”

Jameth grumbles. “I can't wait to seek revenge on her.”

I smile, and once the pictures of himself getting revenge on her leave his head, I tell him about meeting Muhl and how this place houses people from Pifa.

Jameth groans. “Delightful. Yet another challenge to face.”

“It'll be easier if we face it together.”

I'm right. Every time we encounter a guard, my powers are a match for them. And I have Jameth, who is far stronger physically. I'm able to hold them off and protect him while he knocks every guard from both Hogar and Pifa unconscious with his watch. His watch wasn't working at first, but my powers fixed that.

We find Muhl wandering the halls of the unguarded area full of cells. I break the scent-blocking spell so the men can sniff out which cells contain prisoners from Hogar.

On the way to the exit, Jameth subdues every person I freeze with my powers, and we lead a line of prisoners through the exit now that the guards who were enchanting the walls are unconscious.

We don't run into Desena, but I tell my mate everything her father said.

“He moves fast,” says Jameth, when I inform him that he was able to catch me escaping my cell, probably not long after he spoke to Jameth back at the House of Elders.

“He got his short-range teleporter from Pifa,” Muhl explains.

Jameth groans, and I see in his mind how much he does not want to deal with the ridiculousness of this entire situation. I see how he never even wanted to be the Prince Elder even more clearly in his mind.

We stand in the middle of a desert-like area, the group of former prisoners muttering amongst themselves. Many are

huddled together and seem to know each other. They don't look much different from humans, and they don't seem to act that differently, either.

Our cultures may be very different, and our women may not have powers, but I can easily see how people from Earth and Hogar are compatible.

"I was undersecretary to the leader of Hesena," a man tells me while Jameth and Muhl talk amongst themselves for a moment. "I'm sure the city will be more than willing to help. And more than able."

"My parents work under Pruhleth of Wai," says another.

As Jameth and Muhl break apart, more and more of the former prisoners come forward with helpful connections.

I don't know if I'm imagining the waves of adoration coming from this group or if my powers make me extra sensitive to emotions, but I don't care. I appreciate it either way.

"I'm more than willing to gather a group, talk to my connections on Pifa, and do whatever is needed to get this mess resolved," says Muhl. "I'll deal with anything that you don't want to."

"Are you sure about that, Muhl?" asks Jameth, then shakes his head. "Of course you're sure. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it? To grow up and be on the Elder's Council?"

Muhl nods eagerly. "I mean, I always thought I'd be terrible at it, but it was a far-fetched dream I had as a child." He smiles gently, looking slightly embarrassed. "Clearly my attempt to help the people of Pifa hasn't gone very well since some of them have turned against us, so maybe helping my own people will be better. I can start as soon as you need me to. I'll contact my family. Most of them are experienced leaders. It shouldn't be too hard to get them back into those roles. It might even help us restore our name."

Discussions make our long journey on foot feel short. When we reach the House of Elders, Jameth arranges passage

for everyone to get home safely. Desena is nowhere to be found on the grounds, so Jameth and Muhl arrange for the building to be evacuated and the people to be hidden.

“And we will return to Earth tonight,” Jameth promises, “because Muhl is going to take my spot and become interim, and possibly permanent, Prince Elder depending on how things go back here.”

Muhl is the only one who stayed and came up to Jameth’s allotment with us. He somehow looks exhausted and strong at the same time.

“It’s clearly a very demanding job, and I’ve only been here to see it for a few days,” I say.

“Yeah, I’m up for it.” Muhl shrugs. “Between warrior training in my youth, and the manual labor job I had to do to survive from the ages of 20 to 23, I’m well used to hard work. Besides, I’d like to make something of myself properly before I get to go and claim my mate. I want to be as impressive as yours.”

He puts his hand on Jameth’s shoulder, and Jameth laughs.

“You always were impressive, Muhl,” says Jameth.

The work ethic of the Hogar people is admirable. Jameth delayed finding me to help his people, and now Muhl is doing the same? Now that I’ve formed my bond with Jameth, I can’t imagine staying away from my mate for that long.

When I say that to Muhl, he says, “I’ve gone my whole life without my mate. What’s a while longer? She deserves a safe space to visit me on. And our people deserve a safe place to live, and multiple leaders to help them stay that way.”

Jameth bows his head. “I wish I did more in my time as Prince Elder. But I did my best and what I felt was my duty as a key person in the false war, you know?”

I wrapped my arms around Jameth while Muhl gives a sympathetic nod.

“I’m going to make this planet a place Luna can be proud of,” says Muhl with finality in his tone, and it makes me pause.

“Luna?”

“That’s the name I was told when I was told I had a fated mate. When the old elders would get messages about fated mates from the divine, that was all they’d tell us warriors.”

The divine? Great. Another thing I don’t know about this planet. Another thing I get to learn.

“I think I know her,” I tell him. “I mean, one of my best friends was Ron’s fated mate. And I’m Jameth’s, so it would make sense that my other best friend, Luna, is yours.”

The light that sparks in Muhl’s eyes wipes out all the tiredness that was in them. I end up showing him a picture of Luna on my phone, and we find the equipment that will allow my phone to connect to their technology so he can save and print some pictures to stare at.

“It has to be her,” he says. “Something about her just makes me sure.”

Yesterday I would have questioned that, but having felt what I feel for my mate now, I’m done doubting things.

When we finally bid Muhl goodbye, he’s still holding a picture of Luna close to his heart. Jameth and I teleport to a city called Waicha, and the heavy scent of the purple flowers perfuming the city instantly relaxes me.

Jameth says he’s sorry that we can’t use the ship from the House of Elders for security reasons, but I don’t care. As long as we get to leave, I’m happy.

As soon as we find the bedrooms on the ship, I pull Jameth to the bed. I’m not sure if I want to fuck him or just lay on his chest and fall asleep. Honestly, both sound tempting, but I’m so tired that sleep takes me first. He has no objections in his thoughts or his actions as he pulls me into his arms and my mind goes quiet.

In the morning we'll be back safe on Earth, and I'll have a brand-new mate to take home and drive insane with my ridiculous crafting, boring business, excessive walking on my walking pad, and slight addiction to the coffee place across the street.

But I already know he loves coffee syrup, and he certainly loves me, so I don't think any of that is going to be a problem.

Epilogue

Wren

“That’s bullshit! You can’t expect me to believe that the positions of the planets in your solar system at the time I was born on my planet, billions of light years away, can define anything about my personality!”

Jameth’s fist slams on the table as he winces horribly. I’m trying not to laugh. The poor guy is so unfamiliar with tattoos that he keeps forgetting he got one today and putting too much pressure on that arm.

He got Hogar’s moon and a little wren bird on his wrist flying through a ring laid with a few stars. He says the latter represents the cosmos that separated us before we met. He designed it himself.

I also have new ink on my formally ink free wrist: Hogar’s moon and the star of Hahllos, which his warrior name was named for.

“Your birth chart told me he’d react like that,” Luna says lightly. “Typical Aquarius.”

Jameth narrows his eyes at her and grumbles, stalking across the room to where I sit making a blanket for Emily’s second baby. I’d love to tell him that Luna doesn’t actually believe in birth charts or the zodiac despite her spiritual nature, but seeing his irritation is too cute.

I put down my needles and stare at Jameth as he picks up his phone to Google if Luna is right. I like seeing him get all hot and bothered because he goes all pouty and it’s adorable.

It’s difficult to imagine the word “adorable” being used to describe a man who’s currently getting me all hot and bothered by wearing a low V-neck shirt, but somehow he manages to be both cute and smoking hot at the same time.

“Right, ship’s booked.” Ron claps his hands together as he enters the room. “We’re heading back to Hogar tomorrow. Are you two sure you don’t want to come?” He looks over at Jameth and I.

The thought of returning to Hogar is tempting. I want to meet Jameth's in person parents and see how Muhl is doing running the place. But I'm onboarding two new writers, I'm still looking for someone to help me with my new Etsy shop, and we're right in the middle of a new season of Doctor Who with a brand new Doctor, which Jameth is obsessed with. There's no way he's going to give up watching that the second it airs. Hell, he asked me if we can move to the country it's made in so we can watch it live sooner.

"Maybe in a couple of weeks," says Jameth, chewing his bottom lip. "I'm kind of ... invested in something right now."

"I'm open to going as soon as things are settled in both of my businesses," I add.

"Look at you." Emily giggles. "Running two whole businesses. And you were technically the queen of an entire planet for a couple of hours. I'm so proud."

Emily rises from where she's playing with her toddler so she can come to squeeze me around the shoulders.

"I bet it was in her birth chart," Jameth replies sarcastically, shooting Luna a sharp glance.

"That's for me to know and you to aggressively Google to find out," replies Luna, an impish smile appearing on her lips.

I'm going to miss this. All of us gathering in Ron and Emily's house like a little family.

We *are* a family. Kind of. Emily and Luna have always been my family, as they've always treated me better than my actual blood relatives did. And their mates grew up with my mate in a similar fashion.

We've always been connected. Three women from Earth and three men from Hogar, bound by fate.

Thinking about the impossibility of it all still makes me a little uncomfortable, I must admit. I frown down at my knees, but my mate puts his hand on my leg before I can

become overwhelmed by the discomfort that has hit me on and off since everything that happened on Hogar.

“Come on,” Jameth says gently, “I think we need to go and be alone for a few minutes. Let’s get some coffee.”

We hold hands as we head out to our new car. Jameth asks to drive. He’s surprisingly good and it, even though it took him a very, very long time to find a car he doesn’t find ugly. We ended up with a Mustang, which I’m not mad at. With the wealth he took from Hogar, he can afford it. His family have *money money*.

We park in my spot near my apartment and walk hand in hand to the bench where we met. I sit on it to breathe in the nature as he heads to the coffee place to order for both of us. It’s going to be really hard to leave this place and go back to Hogar, but then I remember the stunning circular areas and that one city full of the purple plant that’s like lavender on steroids, and I feel a slight pang of homesickness for a place I have yet to call home.

I pull my cardigan around me, tilting my head as I watch innocent people pass. It’s so weird knowing they know nothing of aliens when my life is practically dominated by them.

As I people-watch, a dog breaks free from its owner’s grasp and runs out into the street. I jump to my feet and scream, shooting my arm out to try and subtly give it super speed to cross the road before cars can get it, then I freeze it in place. It stand on the grass obediently, secured there by my power, wagging its tail.

The owner gets to the dog as I take a few steps forward to see it closer. It seems totally unharmed. The owner puts the wiggling, beautiful dog-baby back into its harness, and I do a little something to make sure it can’t escape its harness again.

Heart pounding, I turn around and immediately collide with a brick wall wearing a V-neck shirt. Two cups of coffee immediately spill down my front.

“Fuck!” I groan.

“Khol!” shouts Jameth.

I step back, coffee dripping down my chest, watching the stains seep into my mate’s shirt too.

After a moment we lock eyes, and then we just start to laugh. And we must sound insane, but we can’t seem to stop.

“Screw it,” says Jameth, shaking his head. “I can’t be bothered going to get more. They didn’t have the syrup I liked anyway, so I had to get hazelnut, which I’m not the biggest fan of. Do you want to go inside and change?”

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“They put something weird in my coffee!” I pout. I pour the rest into the grass. Something shiny falls out of the cup, so I crouch down to locate it.

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It is.

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We passed a store window full of engagement rings with huge diamonds just the other day. He asked me if I liked them, but I told him I found the big diamonds ugly and preferred more subtle jewelery.

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“What ...” I look at him, and he’s grinning. “What would you have done if I’d just tossed the cup!?”

Jameth scoffs. “I know you always take them apart and clean both parts before recycling these cups. You would have seen the ring.”

I press my hands to my face and become aware that I’m still holding the ring. I pull back and stare at it. It’s the perfect ring. Literally perfect in every way.

“Well, risk of you tossing this aside, what do you think? Do you want to do the whole Earth marriage thing?”

I stare at him. Stupidly, the first thing that comes out is, “But I haven’t even met your parents in person yet!”

He looks like he’s trying not to laugh.

“You always did like to put off the inevitable,” he sighs, putting an arm around me as he steers me away from the bench. “Excuse me for not getting down on one knee to ask the question, but the grass is damp, and I don’t want to look like I’m begging. It’s a very weird tradition, getting down on one knee. But I do like the ring part.”

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I don't even care. Because as silly as that is, it's the sweetest thing ever. And our little collision just made it even better.

When I finally stop laughing, I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him hard, jumping to wrap my legs around his waist for good measure.

The strangers passing by probably look on at us, disgusted at our PDA. Good. Let them be annoyed by it, because right now, I want to be the most obnoxious newly engaged woman there has ever been.

"I love you," I mumble against my mate's lips. "I love you. *I love you.*"

I don't want to stop saying it. I never want to stop saying it. And he says it back in my head because he doesn't want to pull away from our kiss.

I push myself away from him and pull him in the direction of where we parked, giggling like a child.

"I'll just use my powers to clean us," I paint. "We need to go and tell everyone. *Now.*"

Jameth is as overjoyed as I am, and his laughter is just as sweet.

Once I'm back in the car, I quickly clean us off. I haven't used my powers much since being back on Earth. I prefer to do things the human way, which Jameth says is one of his favorite quirks of mine.

We hold hands while he keeps one on the wheel and I keep staring at the ring on my finger. I'm engaged. I've done the human mating thing as well as the Hogar one. And when we get married, that will be forming the bond.

My knees bounce restlessly on the journey back to our friends, and I try to think through what I'm going to say to them when I get in. They already knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with this man, but now I've got a ring to prove it.

And as I glance at Jameth's hand on the wheel, eyes lingering on the fresh tattoo on his wrist, I realize that the ring dotted with stars that the bird is flying through isn't just any "That's bullshit! You can't expect me to believe that the positions of the planets in your solar system at the time I was born on my planet, billions of lightyears away, can define anything about my personality!"

Jameth's fist slams on the table as he winces horribly. I'm trying not to laugh. The poor guy is so unfamiliar with tattoos that he keeps forgetting he got one today and putting too much pressure on that arm.

He got Hogar's moon and a little wren bird on his wrist flying through a ring laid with a few stars. He says the latter represents the cosmos that separated us before we met. He designed it himself.

I also have new ink on my formally ink-free wrist: Hogar's moon and the star of Hahllos, which his warrior name was named for.

"Your birth chart told me he'd react like that," Luna says lightly. "Typical Aquarius."

Jameth narrows his eyes at her and grumbles, stalking across the room to where I sit making a blanket for Emily's second baby. I'd love to tell him that Luna doesn't actually believe in birth charts or the zodiac despite her spiritual nature, but seeing his irritation is too cute.

I put down my needles and stare at Jameth as he picks up his phone to Google if Luna is right. I like seeing him get all hot and bothered because he goes all pouty and it's adorable.

It's difficult to imagine the word "adorable" being used to describe a man who's currently getting me all hot and bothered by wearing a low V-neck shirt, but somehow he manages to be both cute and smoking hot at the same time.

"Right, ship's booked." Ron claps his hands together as he enters the room. "We're heading back to Hogar tomorrow. Are you two sure you don't want to come?" He looks over at Jameth and I.

The thought of returning to Hogar is tempting. I want to meet Jameth's parents in person and see how Muhl is doing running the place. But I'm onboarding two new writers, I'm still looking for someone to help me with my new Etsy shop, and we're right in the middle of a new season of Doctor Who with a brand new Doctor, who Jameth is obsessed with. There's no way he's going to give up watching that the second it airs. Hell, he asked me if we can move to the country it's made in so we can watch it live sooner.

"Maybe in a couple of weeks," says Jameth, chewing his bottom lip. "I'm kind of ... invested in something right now."

"I'm open to going as soon as things are settled in both of my businesses," I add.

"Look at you." Emily giggles. "Running two whole businesses. And you were technically the queen of an entire planet for a couple of hours. I'm so proud."

Emily rises from where she's playing with her toddler so she can come to squeeze me around the shoulders.

"I bet it was in her birth chart," Jameth replies sarcastically, shooting Luna a sharp glance.

"That's for me to know and you to aggressively Google to find out," replies Luna, an impish smile appearing on her lips.

I'm going to miss this. All of us gathering in Ron and Emily's house like a little family.

We *are* a family. Kind of. Emily and Luna have always been my family, as they've always treated me better than my actual blood relatives did. And their mates grew up with my mate in a similar fashion.

We've always been connected. Three women from Earth and three men from Hogar, bound by fate.

Thinking about the impossibility of it all still makes me a little uncomfortable, I must admit. I frown down at my knees, but my mate puts his hand on my leg before I can become overwhelmed by the discomfort that has hit me on and off since everything that happened on Hogar.

“Come on,” Jameth says gently, “I think we need to go and be alone for a few minutes. Let’s get some coffee.”

We hold hands as we head out to our new car. Jameth asks to drive. He’s surprisingly good at it, even though it took him a very, very long time to find a car he doesn’t find ugly. We ended up with a Mustang, which I’m not mad at. With the wealth he took from Hogar, he can afford it. His family have *money money*.

We park in my spot near my apartment and walk hand in hand to the bench where we met. I sit on it to breathe in the nature as he heads to the coffee place to order for both of us. It’s going to be really hard to leave this place and go back to Hogar, but then I remember the stunning circular areas and that one city full of the purple plant that’s like lavender on steroids, and I feel a slight pang of homesickness for a place I have yet to call home.

I pull my cardigan around me, tilting my head as I watch innocent people pass. It’s so weird knowing they know nothing of aliens when my life is practically dominated by them.

As I people-watch, a dog breaks free from its owner’s grasp and runs out into the street. I jump to my feet and scream, shooting my arm out to try and subtly give it super speed to cross the road before cars can get it, then I freeze it in place. It stands on the grass obediently, secured there by my power, wagging its tail.

The owner gets to the dog as I take a few steps forward to see it closer. It seems totally unharmed. The owner puts the wiggling, beautiful dog-baby back into its harness, and I do a little something to make sure it can’t escape its harness again.

Heart pounding, I turn around and immediately collide with a brick wall wearing a V-neck shirt. Two cups of coffee immediately spill down my front.

“Fuck!” I groan.

“Khol!” shouts Jameth.

I step back, coffee dripping down my chest, watching the stains seep into my mate's shirt too.

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And as I glance at Jameth’s hand on the wheel, eyes lingering on the fresh tattoo on his wrist, I realize that the ring dotted with stars that the bird is flying through isn’t just any old circle with gem-like stars. It’s my engagement ring.

I pick up Jameth’s free hand and kiss the back of it, holding it to my face, then to my heart. old circle with gem-like

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* * *

Want to see the scene where they mate from Jameth's perspective? Sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

Books In This Series

Fated Mates of Hogar

Three great warriors of Hogar have been blessed by the divine: they have been given fated mates and tasked with finding them after the War of Wars is fought.

Wrohl is the lucky man who has been united with his mate by the elders. The shape-shifting alien and his human mate, Emily, are thrust together on an empty planet, Wrohl with his memories wiped and Emily not quite sure she's awake.

Hahl, promised to Prince Elder after the war's failure, must go to Earth and claim his mate, Wren, in person. As rebels try to tear him and his mate apart, he has to do everything in his power to get her to agree to seal the mate bond.

Finally, Muhl, a man who has recently pulled his family out of disgrace, will get to find his mate. Luna is, luckily, eager to find him, too, after seeing her two best friends find and fall in love with their smoking hot alien men.

Claimed by the Warrior: A SciFi Alien Romance

One moment I was asleep and finally safe. Now there's a shapeshifting alien telling me I'm his mate in the middle of an unearthly forest.

The alien says we're not safe here and we need to escape to Earth. Oh, and he also says I'm his "mate." As if!

He also says if we mate, I'll fall in love with him. But I can't fall in love with a stranger. No matter how much I want to get my hands on that obnoxiously attractive body of his, I can't let him claim me.

My desire for this man grows by the hour, but I'm afraid it'll change me if I give in. Plus, if we mate, I may never see home again.

There are monsters here, a cryptic enemy, and cave paintings depicting a possible inter-planet war that has something to do with me.

As much as I don't want to, mating with this warrior seems inevitable, and it's looking like the war is, too.